



# Touchstone

William Walling

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Second Edition

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*What thou would'st learn I shall make clear to thee,  
Not weaving subtleties, but simple sooth  
Unfolding as the mouth should speak to friends.  
I am Prometheus, giver of fire to mortals.*

Aeschylus

Prometheus Bound

## ONE Harvest Moon

The slow-paced lunar day was waning, and so was Myron Cromwell.

Wearied by two solid weeks of harvesting, his last chore as project operations manager had been a shutdown inspection of all surface equipment. He parked and depowered the low-slung electric jitney, swung the articulated legs of his pressure-suit around in the seat, and planted his protective overboots in the Sea of Tranquillity's well-trampled dust. Kilometers over the curved, too close horizon, a storied event had taken place when Astronaut Neil Armstrong jumped down from the Lunar Module ladder and laid pristine boot prints in this same, ageless regolith. There were thousands of boot prints now, many made by he himself.

*Too many*, thought Myron wryly.

Having again slightly exceeded the arbitrary hours of surface exposure, he would again be forced to verbally duel the medic on site over the readout in his dosimeter. Calibrated to gauge the efficacy of a pressure-suit's integral shielding, the instrument recorded a wearer's cumulative exposure to radiation. Competitive, prone to argument for its own sake, he would nevertheless plead no contest. The doctor quashed all pleas related to a surface worker's marginal overexposure by reciting a litany of radiation hazards: nausea, fatigue, central nervous system debility, cataracts, hair loss, general physiological deterioration, and a latent pre-cancerous condition.

He paused above the walled ramp leading down to the habitat airlock for a parting survey of the stark, surrounding desolation. Unleavened by atmosphere, sun dazzle all but touching the knife-edge horizon lit the moonscape obliquely, turning the visible portion of the mare's three hundred thousand square kilometers into a sterile, grayscale panorama dappled with inky, elongated shadows, an uninviting vista broken only by the prototype strip-miner's silhouette, and the solar mirror's upper curve.

Nicknamed "Selene's Chariot," the tracked, telerobotic harvester had been shipped piecemeal and reassembled in vacuum. Grinding along at eight or less meters-per-hour, depending on regolith depth and composition, or the type and frequency of obstructions, the ponderous vehicle first-processed regolith into varieties of placid and volatile pay dirt, leaving in its back and forth wake kilometers-long swaths remindful of a sterile plowed field, and raising dust plumes of cycled waste ejected as it churned forward that fell swiftly to rest in Luna's airless, low-gravity.

Off to the south atop a semi-portable pylon, the huge metal mirror programmed to follow the Sun with computer-driven precision reflected concentrated solar energy to the furnace receptor dish atop the Chariot. Its face now turned downward, the mirror and harvester would remain somnolent during the ensuing two weeks of darkness.

Facing away from the blinding, horizontal sunlight, Myron had to reduce the polarization in his faceplate lens. Bathed in sunset flame, the upper Palus Somni escarpment loomed above the intervening horizon. The U.S. Aerospace Forces mass-driver spacecraft launch system installed on the scarp's sheer face gleamed in the last sunlight, a linear, shining caesura angling sharply up the palisade's flank. At sunrise if all went well, a space-to-space drone loaded to less than one-tenth capacity with ultra-precious helium isotope would slingshot up the mass-driver to be injected into unpowered orbit above Mare Crisium. After circling three-quarters of Luna's crater-raddled farside, thrusters would ignite, sending the drone on an automated, three-day trajectory to its destination, low-earth-orbit about an energy-hungry world.

Again if all went well, the drone would rendezvous with a co-orbiting transatmospheric freighter, be taken into the stub-winged carrier's cargo bay and flown to the ground. The less-than-hoped-for quantity of helium-three harvested since the first skimpy deliveries would net Dysart Technologies, Ltd. upward of eighty million new dollars, depending on how far the price would be driven up by a handful of fusion community investors bidding fiercely for product, minus a few kilograms allocated to fuel the company's prototype nuclear fusion system in Nevada. Despite a booming seller's market in the ultra-rare isotope, the remuneration would amount to a pittance compared to the mammoth, multi-gigabuck expenditures DT had poured into the Selene Pilot Project, but *only* if all went well. It was this recurring uncertainty that never failed to generate a twinge of anxiety. To date, all had not gone exactly as scripted, though a turn for better or worse might be in the offing, depending on what sort of fallout fell out in the wake of an imminent visit by three "fact-finding experts" due to arrive from the cloud-draped blue marble decorating Luna's jet black, unfriendly sky.

Myron reflected with mordant sarcasm on the cynical observation of a crewman who had defined an expert as, "Anyone from out of town."

As it often did, the drab moonscape triggered a flashback to his formative years in Wales, when the moribund coal industry had succumbed to worsening climate change effects, and miners were being pink-slipped in droves, a dismal footnote to County Dyfed mine closures. He pictured his younger self picking through the slag heaps with other ragamuffins, scavenging usable coals with which to battle the endless cold in his parents' company-owned clapboard house. Cold and hungry months spotted with power brownouts and blackouts had elapsed while his father schemed and planned, cajoled, threatened, and eventually finagled a family migration to Calgary.

In that bygone era Canada's Northwest Mining Association had boasted a whimsical bumper-sticker invented to combat the bad name coal had earned due to its inescapable carbon-dioxide footprint: IF IT CAN'T BE GROWN, IT'S GOTTA BE MINED! One fond memory hinged on the elation of his father and older brother at the prospect of working in a deep open-pit mine instead of facing the daily hazards of being crushed deep underground, victimized by an explosion and fire, drowned, asphyxiated, or succumbing to Black Lung and a premature exit from an extremely hard existence. Then as now, a miner's routine consisted of monotonous

drudgery peppered with spells of abject terror, a regimen compounded for him and his crew of novice lunar strip-miners by the added threats of explosive decompression and radiation exposure.

A flicker of light high in the jet sky caught his eye. He craned, pressed his head back against the quilted padding of his suit's headpiece. The flare died, and sun glare blotted out the descending ship's glint. Seconds later a quadrate of exhaust plumes erupted brightly, winked out, then burned steadily. The blunt space-to-space vehicle irreverently nicknamed a "boxcar" by USAF personnel slowed its rump-first plunge, slowed further balanced on outboard-cantilevered thrusters, and disappeared beneath the foreshortened horizon.

Myron nudged his chin control, opening the Selene channel safety-monitored by the Palus Somni USAF Command Center, and spoke into the throat mike. "Cromwell, here, habitat. Open your ears, habitat."

Punctuated by a faint dit of static, a lightly accented voice crackled from the headpiece speaker. "Myron, don't tell me you have invented another problem for me to solve?" Alois Francke, once a tenured University of Munich physics professor, and Cromwell made a game batting back and forth jovial insults and malapropisms.

"Not this watch, Doc. Unless I'm hallucinating the high 'n mighty bean-counters Jean-Marie's been sweating out hit the deck a minute ago."

"True," replied Dr. Francke. "I'm the designated meeter-greeter about to head out to the landing site. Yet even for someone as obnoxious as you are, calling to our distinguished visitors 'bean-counters' exceeds the bounds of understatement."

"Nothing," quipped Myron, "exceeds like excess. They may count humongous, king-sized beans, but they're still just beans."

"Curb thy salty tongue," admonished Dr. Francke, "and get thee hence. Jean-Marie wants a word with you before welcoming our guests."

Cromwell grinned. "I'll get back to him soon's I check my appointment book."

"Myron!"

"Steady, Doc. Tell our esteemed director his favorite whipping boy looks forward to another dull séance. Cromwell, out."

Myron descended the shallow-pitched ramp, punched an oversized switch panel with the heel of his gauntlet. The airlock hatch cycled open, admitting him into the evacuated chamber, where he stood patiently, legs apart, arms akimbo, awaiting electrostatic removal of the dust clinging to the suit's buffer garment and insulated overboots. If inhaled within the habitat, sharp-edged, micron-sized particles posed only minor health problems — mainly "hay fever" symptoms — while nanoparticles could lodge in the lungs and induce fibrosis, or occasionally migrate into the bloodstream, where long-term aftereffects could prove more serious.

Pressure came up slowly in the lock chamber. When the light winked green, indicating barometric equivalence in chamber and habitat, he punched in a command. The inner hatch cycled open, and he entered the airlock service compartment's warm, oxy-nitrogen environment. He undogged and opened the faceplate lens, wrinkling his nose at the pressure-suit's legacy: a ghostly whiff of machine oil tainted with a hint of his own perspiration. He unsealed, wriggled with practiced dexterity to doff the cumbersome vacuum gear he had lived in for the better part

of two weeks. Divesting the suit of its buffer garment and protective overboots, he hung the ancillary items separately to await more thorough cleaning and a mandatory safety inspection.

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A watercolor poster gracing the honeycomb-sandwich partition behind the director's utilitarian plastic desk depicted a stylized version of the project logo. Clad in filmy, rippling gossamer, Moon Goddess Selene reared defiantly erect in a golden chariot, blonde hair streaming in the wind, a curling whip held high in one dainty hand, while the other clutched the reins of a matched pair of galloping white Arabians.

Myron sipped black coffee from a squeezebottle, studying the poster with skeptical indifference. He admired the work of an amateur painter among the crewmen, but considered the poster an item of artsy-fartsy dreck. "It's pretty, the Devil said," he quoted, "but is it *art*?"

Jean-Marie Boucher did not look up.

Accustomed to dealing with the director's crusty manner and warm heart, Myron said drily, "Sure hope the half-dressed filly can handle that Ben-Hur rig."

Dark eyes lifted, locked Myron a blinkless gaze. Jean-Marie used his far-from-secret weapon, a Medusa-like stare, to far greater effect than executive bluster.

The silence dragged on, and Myron shifted restively. "Doc Francke," he said, breaking the refractory spell, "told me he was meeting the nosy experts."

The director's chill stare persisted. "La belle Selene," he declared, "commands her steeds with consummate authority, which is more than one can say for the slapdash manner your controllers drive the Chariot. A question of major concern to me is not how you handle your duties, but whether you are able to handle your mouth."

"Aw, no word games. I'm too bushed for banter," pleaded Myron.

"And perhaps too outspoken as well, *pas aussi*?"

Myron uttered a heartfelt, theatrical sigh. "Guilty as charged."

The director's stern gaze persisted, though it dimmed from force four to force three. "I delude myself into believing I am equipped to cope with your impudent tongue and spiny disposition. During the coming visitation, however, those, er . . . sterling attributes will not be tolerated."

"The . . . inquisition?"

"The inquisition," affirmed Boucher. "While our visitors are with us, please keep one singular fact in the forefront of your consciousness at all times. Among the three 'experts' we are about to welcome is a gentleman of *truly* spiny disposition."

"You must mean the U.N. big shot who —"

"No, no," denied Boucher, "Energy Secretary Llancolm and I share an acquaintance dating back to my Quai D'Orsay adventures in the diplomatic corps. Lanny is intelligent, inordinately capable. Unfortunately, his British heritage often deludes strangers into picturing him as the sort of individual a transplanted Welshman like you might consider, well . . . rather stiff."

"A stuffed shirt?"

"Thank you. Yes, 'stuffed shirt' says it nicely. We shall get no static from Lanny; he dispatched with the other gentlemen to act as the designated U.N. watchdog. Do not be duped by

his crusty, muddling through public facade. Be patient, and you will shortly discover what an intelligent, superbly accomplished gentleman he truly is.

"Our second guest, Senator Kyle," continued the director, "while prominent in America is something of an unknown quantity elsewhere, and therefore an unknown hazard. It is futile to try and pre-judge how the senator may evaluate our venture. It therefore behooves us to treat each of his statements, questions and comments, meaningful, astute, simplistic, asinine or whatever, with duly exaggerated caution."

Cromwell dared an impudent grin. "Diplomatically?"

"Oh, most assuredly diplomacy! We shall accord the distinguished American legislator every diplomatic nuance in existence, and shower him with every fawning tribute in the lexicon. Let me remind you of a galling truism. Manifold international schisms have led to the controversy now raging between the respective U.S. and U.N. Leaderships, and the moneyed conventional energy power-bloc led by its lapdog, the Vonex petrochemical cartel. To our misfortune, DT occupies a position squarely in the middle, making it the prime target of heat from all sides. Should U.S. congressional support fail to materialize, the follow-on Selene II and full-blown Prometheus Projects could founder in turbulent waters. The key to winning over Senator Kyle will be to show him more deference and respect than he may deserve."

"Something like drowning a cat in cream?"

The director grudging a blink. "In a manner of speaking one supposes. Pithy aphorisms aside, it is the third inquisitor who justifies extremely wary walking. Upon first acquaintance Vonex International Chairman Reichert may strike you as a kindly, docile, grandfatherly type, a gentleman of the old school who worships his deity of choice each Sabbath, decries loopholes and pays every centime of taxes owed. Nothing could be further from the truth.

"Mssr Reichert's perch at the apex of the conglomerate Vonex octopus," pursued the director drily, "coupled with his demonic unpredictability, wealth, prestige, and behind-the-scenes political influence, permits him to wheel and deal in the loftiest financial circles, where he showcases a single outstanding virtue: his total absence of conscience or humility. With the fate of not only our pilot program, but the immediate future of nuclear fusion technology literally hanging in the balance, think of Mssr Reichert as the most dangerous man alive. Seek Torquemada among the inquisitors, and there is no need to look farther."

"Seek who?"

"No matter," Boucher said quickly.

"If this fatcat's such a bad ass, how'd he get appointed to the snooper team?"

"An informed guess is that more than one palm was well-greased."

Outwardly nonplused, Myron said, "Okay, but why should I want to expose myself to the charms of Mr. Moneybags, or for that matter the other snoopers?"

"Because," declared Jean-Marie, "I've convinced myself of the necessity. Absent yourself during the welcoming amenities if you wish; I know how tired you must be coming off surface duty. During the first inquisitory session, however, I want Alois on hand, prepared to respond to all technical issues that arise, and you standing by to answer every query pertaining to surface operations I may put to you."

Puzzled, Myron said, "Queries *you* may put to me?"

"Precisely," emphasized the director. "Between times you are to sit on your hands and act attentive to the proceedings. Do not interject any of your salty comments, either, or respond directly to questions posed by the inquisitors. Clear, Myron?"

Cromwell grinned. "Not even diplomatic responses?"

The director's underlip curled. "Dedicated operations overseer that you are, have you ever heard the proper definition of a diplomat?"

"No, but my faultless intuition tells me you'll relieve my ignorance."

"So I shall, to the extent a feat of that cosmic magnitude is possible. If a diplomat says yes," explained Boucher, "he means maybe. If he says maybe, he means no, and if he says no, he's no diplomat."

Cromwell chuckled.

"I sincerely hope the gist of my lesson has penetrated."

"Fear not, message received." Cromwell rose and stretched. He yawned gapingly and asked through the yawn if The Stockholder had made the expected last-minute call.

"He may not bother," denied Jean-Marie. "Mssr Dysart does not hold pep talks in high regard, nor stoop to micromanage business affairs. Every facet of the inquisitory sessions will be downlinked in real-time to San Francisco, New York and Geneva so that he and DT's executive committee, as well as the U.N. leadership will appraise the reactions of our visitors to the rationales, justifications, pleas, show-and-tell data and whatever else we lay before the inquisitors. I'm sure the recorded data will then be regurgitated, reviewed, dissected, analyzed, picked to pieces a second, third and perhaps a fourth time, then deposited in varied pigeonholes for action."

Boucher finished with a warning. "No slips-ups will be permitted during the coming sessions! Our visitors *must* depart convinced that we have done, and are doing, our absolute utmost with the tools and skeleton personnel provided by the gentleman jocularly known to we employees as 'The Stockholder.' I want them, with the exception of Mssr Reichert it goes without saying, to depart sympathetic to our problems, cognizant of our accomplishments, and willing or hopefully eager to forward a recommendation for the U.N. to pursue the near- and outlined, long-term goals of nuclear fusion technology. Moreover, I want Lanny and the senator to leave thoroughly dazzled by the first tottering steps we have taken toward . . ."

The intercom's insistent buzz cut short Dr. Boucher's intention to say anything else. He stretched, touched a button. "Yes . . .?"

"Mr. Dysart, voice only, the secure lasercomm channel."

"Thank you." His trust in Myron implicit, Boucher assured himself multilevel encryption firmware was active, and switched the call to speaker. "*Bonjour*, Lyman."

The transmission lag seemed to stretch longer than the usual few seconds. "Hi, Jean-Marie," drawled the multibillionaire. "Dead air time in back 'n forth conversation annoys me worse than a giant hemorrhoid. Let me have my say, and get off the horn. You'll pipe groundside everything that comes down up there, and us bystanders're itching to take a long, hard look and listen."

"Catch is," continued Dysart, "you have to reset everything to square one. Not very many minutes ago we learned of a switcheroo you need to know about. It seems Belkin Reichert was

suddenly taken ill. Maybe *too* suddenly. Appendicitis is the story bruited about in a Vonex news release, but who the hell knows?

"Point is," The Stockholder went on to say, "changing riders this close to mid-stream strikes me as unlikely at best, and weird at worst. Ever since Belkin busted a gut spending beaucoup new dollars to get himself invited on the 'fact-finding' witch hunt, he's been frothing at the mouth over the chance to poop your party with a triple-ration of bellowing, ranting, raving and carpet-chewing. Now a ringer's supposedly been elected to run the errand, Vonex Corporate Chief Counsel Aaron Beebe. I was triply warned to pass along a caveat saying it'd be wise to count your fingers after shaking hands with Beebe. A super-slick sharpie by reputation, he's apparently being groomed to someday step into Reichert's tasseled, custom-lasted Italian loafers.

"As for handling Beebe," concluded Dysart, "or for that matter the other fraud and treachery sniffer, you're on your own. Eve-of-battle speeches only waste breath, sso the bottom line is short and unsweetened: do not, repeat *not*, take a single microgram of guff from Reichert's errand boy. No sass of any kind, not so much as a nuanced slight.

"Okay, Jean-Marie. Hang in there, and tell the number one boy in your stable skulking there in your office to mind his manners with the visitors or I'll shoot the Moon myself and spank him hard. *Adieu, mon ami. Bon chance!*"

"*Au revoir*, Lyman. The director switched off, a shadowy smile tickling the corners of his generous mouth.

Feigning acute indignation, Myron uttered a caustic snort. "Spank me, hah! No way will I bend over for *that*. Not from The Stockholder, or anyone else."

"Should Mssr Dysart withhold the prescribed punishment," drawled Jean-Marie, "I shall be delighted to do the honors myself."

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An hour and twenty-two minutes later Dr. Francke ushered U.N. Energy Secretary Llancolm out of the habitat airlock chamber trailed by an older gentleman Boucher assumed to be Senator Raymond Kyle. Close on the senator's heels was . . .

In the act of stepping forward to greet the visitors, the director froze.

Succumbing to an affliction common among first-time lunar visitors, that is to say less than sure-footed in a gravity field measuring only seventeen percent of what they had known all their lives, Vonex International Board Chairman Belkin Reichert shuffled unsteadily into the habitat.

Caught up in the hypnotic, riveting scrutiny of ice-blue eyes looking distinctly out of place in the portly gentleman's ruddy Santa Claus countenance, Jean-Marie felt like a slice of live bait being sized up by a hungry predator.

## TWO The Stockholder

For all practical purposes a prisoner in his own castle, Lyman Dysart lived and worked in the spacious penthouse crowning forty-story Dysart Tower, the crown jewel in a mixed business-residential district situated between what was once San Francisco's U.S. Army Presidio and Golden Gate Park. Scant difference existed between sections of the penthouse; other than lacking a trio of bedroom suites, a kitchen in which any cordon bleu chef would be proud to work, a

formal dining room, sauna and small gym, the “office” resembled artistically decorated living quarters, not the sort of floorspace ordinarily devoted to the conduct of business.

Of average stature and rugged though commonplace appearance, the husky gentleman a legion of employees had dubbed “The Stockholder” lounged in his uniform — a tailored, belted light tan jumpsuit tan featuring larger than average slash pockets. Concluding the lasercomm call to Luna, he slumped in an armchair, propped bare feet shod in hand-stitched leather sandals on an oblong slate coffee table, and reflected on Reichert’s aborted lunar venture. Recognizing the pointlessness of stewing about the man’s unpredictability, he rose and went to his desk, woke the integral computer display rising from its nest, and resumed reading the article in an elex edition of *Forbes* interrupted by notification of Reichert’s sudden, mysterious illness.

Bylined under a pseudonym, the piece strewn with worn adjectives and unsubtle pejoratives characterized him as and even more radical, crier-in-the-wilderness than his paternal grandfather, who had exhibited “identical sterling qualities” so typical of a selfish, greed-driven tycoon, a gadfly dabbler in high technology he did not fully understand, as well as a grandstanding pseudo-politician.” The poor-mouthings, an old familiar story to Lyman, caused him no more pain or angst than numerous other non-adulatory references to his personal and business attributes, views and practices.

*Yet could anyone, he wondered, possibly come close to matching Grandpa Willem’s reputation?* The tag certainly had been appropriate for Willem Dysart. Never one to assume the conventional role of a retired gentlemen who numbered among America’s foremost industrial giants, during the latter decades of his long, ultra-productive life he had become septuagenarian critic nonpareil of the American political system, not to mention a dispenser of radical politics worthy of the French Reign of Terror.

Not introspective by nature, Lyman wondered in what respect the writer’s sneering critiques were marginally attributable to he himself. He thought about it briefly, and rejected the notion out of hand. Whoever had authored the piece, probably an obscure wordsmith beholden to Belkin Reichert and his petrochemical juggernaut, he had penned a meaningless, fancy-free piece daring to compare he himself to the aged reprobate his paternal grandfather had been, and that was abject nonsense. No one could come within light-years of equaling outspoken, opinionated Grandpa Willem.

Believing himself unaffected by its semi-slandorous rhetoric, Lyman skimmed the final paragraphs, deleted the think-piece. In the act of ordering the computer back to sleep, he hesitated when for some reason the “radical revisionist” label ascribed to he himself continued to gnaw at the limbic edges of his mind.

He revolved the notion analytically, rose and prowled the penthouse along the floor-to-ceiling glasswall, its tinted, multi-pane polycarbonate panels bathed in late afternoon sunlight. Shielding his eyes against the filtered glare, he paused a meter or so from the spot where his father had fallen victim to a sniper’s bullet, bequeathing to his one and only offspring an inheritance of astronomical proportions.

Forty floors below the glasswall, curving, tree-lined Park Presidio Boulevard slashed through a checkerboard of green-bordered parkways separating one portion of a forest studded with lesser structures from a second woodland. Beyond the more distant cushion of pines rimming the rise behind Presidio Park, the orange span of the Golden Gate Bridge arched toward

the Marin headlands partially obscured by late afternoon fog creeping into the bay on little cat feet.

*No, thought Lyman, the summer fog stomps in wearing combat boots, turning San Francisco into what a beloved columnist of yesteryear liked to call The Cool Gray City of Love.*

On impulse, he stepped to the wall safe concealed by the commissioned knockoff of a favorite painting — Picasso's *Femme de L'île de Majorque*. Letting the eyecup sensors read his iris patterns, he commanded the portrait to slide aside, spun the dual combinations, and swung wide the tool-steel door. Withdrawing a plain manila folder, he extracted a yellowed clipping wrapped in a plastic sheath. Plopping down in an armchair, he began reading for the umpteenth time the first sharply opinionated piece penned by Willem Lyman Dysart titled BUREAUCRAZY! Re-reading it had never failed to move him, reviving as it did the warm, fuzzy feeling so well-remembered after each heart-to-heart chat with his grandfather.

Now, however, his attention strayed. The op-ed piece dating from early 2007 was no longer the labor of love it had once been — a tirade echoing the problems of yesteryear, with little if any bearing on the present — had devolved into a treasured memento he meant to preserve, and yet . . .

Impatiently thrusting the prized clipping aside, he returned it to the wall safe.

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Lyman could stop thinking about his grandfather. The youthful scion of a wealthy Bruges family, young Willem and his bride, a Lebanese sculptress, had abandoned the ancestral home early in the third millennium, emigrated to America and acquainted themselves with their new homeland during an extended round of travel. Settling in a Pacific Heights mini-mansion overlooking San Francisco Bay, neither had much good to say about the ringmaster then in charge of what Willem considered, "The clumsy, inefficient American political circus," yet his diatribes had come much later.

The focus of his grandfather's technological inventiveness — energy in its diverse forms, derivations and usages — had driven him to research in depth several potentially innovative, cost-effective means and methods of improving natural energy acquisition and usage. After an incisive review of worldwide fossil fuel reserves driven largely by warnings of climate change enhanced by human activities, he'd concentrated on proven, potentially renewable energy usage alternatives — hybrid autos; electric and compressed-air-driven vehicles; advanced fuel-cell technology; biomass-derived ethanol; diesel from soy; solar, wind and geothermal sources; coal-derived synthetics, et cetera, et al. The first New World patent granted to Dysart Research & Development, Ltd. pertained to a complex automotive carburetion system based upon a principle of physics known as "The enthalpy of vaporization," the energy needed to change a given substance from a liquid into a gas at normal atmospheric pressure. After undergoing several development and design iterations, and exhaustive testing, the ingenious system proved capable of creating an authentic molecular fuel-air vapor, ninety-plus percent of which combusted cleanly, all but eliminating "greenhouse gas" emissions.

When a news release quietly announced the breakthrough, the automobile industry dizzied itself laughing uproariously at the "exorbitant expense" of equipping production runs of millions of vehicles with ultra-complex, costly Dysart Carburetion Systems. The laughter subsided, eventually became reluctant wonderment, and then died in openmouthed amazement

when Dysart-equipped, off-the-shelf hybrid test vehicles of various makes and vintages repeatedly achieved unbelievable miles-per-gallon averages in city driving, and half again as much more cruising the interstates.

Irreverent of authority in all its guises and shapes, Willem Dysart had stubbornly adopted as his watchword the motto of a fictional Northwest lumbering family depicted in a film: "Never give an inch!" Never giving a millimeter, much less "an inch," he had resisted every request to license third-party Dysart Carburetion manufacture, and even more stubbornly ignored manifold petitions to go public with an initial stock offering that would allow investors to participate in his company's resounding success. Tiny Dysart R&D had rapidly quintupled in size, spawning a major manufacturing facility, and later reinventing itself as renamed, privately owned Dysart Technologies, Ltd.

Lyman suppressed a grin. The Dysart brand of mulish stubbornness was a genetic family attribute the *Forbes* writer had failed to emphasize.

Grandpa Willem's ensuing decades had been strewn with products of equal or greater importance and profitability, an advanced hydrogen-oxygen fuel cell station for example vended to power electrical substations serving communities in outlying and remote locales, thus eliminating a need for extensive power transmission lines. Refusing to rest on his laurels and count the money rolling in, Willem had spurred his scientific and engineering staffs to develop successively lucrative products, including a method of duplicating something similar to photosynthesis in the form of an artificial molecule capable of sustaining polarization long enough to react usefully with other molecules. Totally undeterred upon realizing his reach often exceeded the grasp of his expertise, Willem had encouraged his team to discover practical application, and DT had mass-produced super-efficient Synthocell solar panels that revolutionized the direct transfer of raw solar energy to electrical potential.

Sticking to his company's motto, "In the end research will *always* pay for itself," Willem had also recognized the solemn fact that energy in all its forms, including geothermal, derived directly or indirectly from the nearest star, our Sun. Diversifying, he had laboriously screened and hired a cadre of youthful specialists unfettered by preconceived 'facts' and turning them loose in a remote, isolated laboratory. The result of three and one-half years of intensive research and experimentation had been the award of a half-dozen additional lucrative patents and key proprietary processes.

Not until semiretirement had the radical, revisionist phase of old Willem's amazing life come about. When a local community newspaper refused to print the pristine polemic Lyman had just put back in his wall safe, his grandfather had gone through a proxy to quietly purchase the newspaper. By then the billionaire owner of a medium-sized Internet magazine, a technology news service, and a San Francisco television affiliate, he had begun pouring private capital into hard-sell campaigns, going so far as to pay the electronic media and few remaining print dailies to publish his self-syndicated columns. His succeeding vitriolic articles soon began attracting interest from all of the right wrong people.

"Every single one of whom," Willem had raged in print, "are not blind, but refuse to see!" Preaching sermon after sermon, proposing one "outrageous" argument after another, he had advocated not only a national budget balanced by natural laws, but the issuance of debt-free currency as well. He had campaigned for the institution of a carbon tax to hopefully combat and

perhaps even control ongoing climate change. He had harped persistently on what to him was an inarguable fact, namely that with Supreme Court assistance all national elections had degenerated into “auctions” paid for by means of multiple, artfully crafted fundraisers and anonymous campaign contributors, and had steadfastly insisted on federally funded elections as the single logical answer. He had also dared to suggest that any lobbyist who came within fifty feet of a sitting United States Senator or Representative be shot on sight by the Capitol Police, but in the next breath absolved those lobbyists who petitioned congressmen and women *only* if they were legal residents of the target representative’s district.

By turns, Grandpa Willem had worked very hard indeed to antagonize and in fact enrage certain segments of the population, principally the old-money elitists and super-wealthy captains of commerce and industry entirely satisfied with things as they were. On the other hand, he had also become an object of veneration by the great cross-section of less well-to-do Americans, once members of the defunct middle class, who gradually began to view his “radical revisionist” diatribes in a different light, and he himself in a much more beneficent manner. In short, as a reward for his time, trouble and “reckless” expenditures, Old Willem had been ridiculed, investigated, accused of sedition, and consistently pilloried as a rabid, unAmerican idiot by pols, power brokers and a vast assemblage of privileged potentates.

Damned as a head case whose skull was stuffed with money rather than brains, he had lost most battles for the hearts and minds of American taxpayers — no real surprise, all things considered — yet in the end had more or less triumphed in the overall war. Why? Because as payback for all the thought, money and effort expended during his crusades, Willem Lyman Dysart had achieved something truly radical, revisionist, and abjectly revolutionary.

He had induced the badly informed and misinformed American electorate to do some very astute pondering.

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The intercom chimed twice, erasing Lyman’s reverie. He punched a button and lampooned a thick German accent. “Schloggenheimer’s Delicatessen. Hermann schpeaking.”

Immune to The Stockholder’s senseless, quirky sense of humor, Dysart Technologies CEO Benjamin Clay announced that the encrypted lasercomm feed was beginning to come in from Luna.

“Good, Ben. Be downstairs pronto. Any word on Reichert?”

“*Nada*,” replied Clay. “So far, nary a peep. If he did fall victim to appendicitis he’s being treated at home, not in any public or private hospital our people have pulsed. Who knows? If the gods smile, his appendix may burst.”

Dysart grinned. “Not a chance. Belkin’s too mean to allow anything life-threatening to disturb his tranquillity. This sudden illness song and dance smells like just another of his end-runs. Don’t fret. We’ll eventually hear the snapper.”

“That,” said the CEO, “is what I’m fretting about.”

### THREE The Inquisition

Senior Senator from Tennessee Raymond Kyle, three-term Chair of the Judiciary-Civil Committee, was accustomed to taking charge of meetings, caucuses, informal confabs in the

cloakroom, or for that matter Washington dinner parties and soirées. The principal weapons in his arsenal were sharp elbows and a down-home drawl calculated to enhance his image as a shrewd ol' country-boy barrister. Rising from Knoxville back street lawyer to district attorney, and then a bench on the district federal court, later still he had been elected to a post of power and influence on Capitol Hill.

Stifling a belch, the senator patted his ample midriff. "Doctor Bow-cher," he said, purposely mispronouncing the director's surname, "queasiness hit me fairly hard during the gawdawful space ride coming up here. I was hungry enough to eat a plateful of moon rocks, and it didn't sit well t'see these veggie steaks served. Lord knows I'm no vegan, but after choking one down I have to say it wasn't so terrible after all."

Jean-Marie's response was a phlegmatic smile.

Curious about Reichert's continuing aloofness, Kyle cut an inquiring glance at the chairman. In his mid-sixties, the standoffish gigatycoon had contributed little or nothing to the dinner conversation. Eyes on his plate, he had shown little or no interest in either the meal, or the ongoing energy discussion between Dr. Boucher and U.N. Energy Secretary Llancolm.

Not one to be ignored, at the first break in conversation Senator Kyle tried to steer things his way by explaining how the homefolks in his state knew just about all there was to know about energy usage. During the previous century's Great Depression, the Tennessee Valley Authority had constructed thirty-two hydroelectric dams that distributed power across eighty-thousand square miles to seven or eight million people. "TVA," he concluded, "followed up by adding collateral flood control projects, and inland waterways."

Sensing minimal interest in his fellow diners, he changed tack again. "Listen, I'm not bashful about being uninformed, but these, er, BOEs you and Mr. Llancolm have been kicking around are . . . Tell me, how'd barrel-of-oil-equivalence get to be the stored energy yardstick?"

"No mystery, Senator." Boucher asked Llancolm the going rate per barrel.

The U.N. official's gray-shot brows contracted. "Don't quote me, but I believe it rocketed to around two-sixty on this week's European Union Exchange. *If*," he added, leaning on the conditional in his clipped Oxon drawl, "a barrel sweet crude is to be had at any price."

"That sounds awful steep," remarked Kyle.

Llancolm nodded. "Extracting and processing shale oil is frightfully costly as well as environmentally sensitive. The pelagic ocean wells operate under an even stiffer premium. Burdened to the hilt with overhead expenses in either hostile environment, the Siberian and Antarctic fields literally pump liquid gold. If not for once voluminous natural gas reserves, isolated regional coal veins, and a smidgen of recoverable crude in more clement regions of the globe, Selene might well have been funded decades ago. Should've been," he added as an afterthought.

"BOE," mused Kyle. "I know we're here to talk nuke fusion, but suffer me to ask again how BOE got to be the energy yardstick?"

Jean-Marie took the bait willingly, and described BOE as a metric of convenience. A barrel of crude yielded roughly 1,700 kilowatts of thermal energy, roughly the same as that stored in 200 kilograms of coal, or 160-plus cubic meters of natural gas. BOE had gained common usage because it satisfied an average consumer's energy requirement for roughly one

week, quoting an immutable schoolboy formula: population multiplied by energy-use-per-capita equaled the global requirement. He cited the era's sorry label, The Age of Shortages, calling it the illegitimate child of rapidly depleting, nonrenewable energy resources. Yet while the curve representing economically recoverable fossil fuels plunged ever downward, the world population curve continued to soar upward toward the ten-plus billions predicted to inhabit the planet by the century's turn. The curves were slated to reach a crossover point circa 2085.

Dinner concluded, the director summoned Dr. Francke and Operations Manager Cromwell, and convened the first semi-formal meeting in the small conference room next to his cramped office. After introductions all around, Jean-Marie gave a thumbnail account of harvesting techniques, storage and processing procedures, and an indication of what was to come for, with the exception of Secretary Llancolm, a lay audience. He made a conscious effort to wherever possible avoid technical terminology while flashing computerized slides in a large wall-mounted display.

When he concluded, the senator acted bemused. "Some Gee Whiz lecture, Bow-cher!" Cupping a hand behind his ear, he said, "Do I hear the sound of one hand clapping? Take no offense, please, but despite your learned technobabble this costly Selene strip-mining adventure has dug up too damn little pay dirt, too damn late. Shipping home a few grams of special helium when the world's clamoring for metric tonnes won't begin to send the energy disease into remission, let alone effect a cure."

Myron and Dr. Francke exchanged glances.

Eyes bright with challenge, Jean-Marie measured his words. "Senator, you have reinforced the rationale for investing in Selene II, and eventually the full-blown Prometheus Project. This Dysart-funded first phase is what you neglected to call it: a pilot program. Limited monetarily and in personnel, our team has labored very hard indeed to prove feasibility, period. Volume harvesting was never a consideration."

"Senator, let's be fair," declared Secretary Llancolm. Sounding aggrieved, he went on to say that with limited resources at Dr. Boucher's disposal, the pilot program had no intention of trying to satisfy wholesale demand.

"A costly pilot," observed Kyle. "It makes me wonder if mining this special helium is for serious, or just part of DT's fusion hat trick."

"One hopes you appreciate the fact," insisted Llancolm, "that an overabundance of light as well as dark energy exists throughout the universe; the 'hat trick' involves devising a method to efficiently extract it, and Mother Nature has been exceedingly wary of revealing Her secrets. Is it so unreasonable to put a price tag on an essential ingredient of fusion technology not to be found elsewhere?"

Kyle relented only a trifle. "Beg pardon for ruffling your feathers, Mr. Secretary. If you were to pose a rhetorical question like that to the Congress it'd be end of story."

His Latin temper firmly in check, Jean-Marie reminded the senator that "seriously" the entire pilot project was being privately funded by Dysart Technologies.

"Oh, that I know," said Kyle, "only because the Congress allocated U.S. Aerospace Forces a huge bundle of funding to handle the heavy lifting."

“A necessity,” countered the director. “Your ‘costly pilot project,’ however, will undergo a radical increase in funding once agreement is reached on Selene II, and the, uh . . . copilot, crew and passengers will be ushered aboard in order to validate our worthwhile preliminary efforts.”

The senator chuckled. “Easy for you to say. It leads me to believe you’re getting set to hit us with a mile-long Selene II wish list.”

“Oh, not merely a mile-long list!” denied Jean-Marie. “Selene II’s procurement demands stretch much, much longer than a mile. With only the prototype Chariot engaged in strip-mining the mare, we have amply demonstrated —”

“Prototype what?” Kyle wanted to know.

Drawing on his shrinking reserve of patience, Boucher related how the strip-mining vehicle had been dubbed Selene’s Chariot, how others who appreciated the classical allusion now referred to the U.N. Energy Consortium as Helios, its directorate as Hyperion, or Theia. Noting Kyle’s puzzlement, he hastened to add that in Greek myth Selene was the daughter of Hyperion and Theia, sister to the Sun God, Helios.

“That a fact?” Kyle suspiciously.

Chairman Reichert had listened to the exchange without discernible emotion. “And what of Endymion?” he asked quietly.

Surprised to hear any utterance by Reichert, it piqued Secretary Llancolm’s interest, and brought his undergraduate studies at Oxford to the fore. “Ah, of course, Endymion, the handsome shepherd lad with whom Moon Goddess Selene fell madly in love. If memory serves, what ensued was an absurdly different sort of tumble in the hay. Selene lulled the poor lad into eternal sleep, a measure designed to keep him forever at her side.”

Although slow in coming, Reichert’s response did little to soften his air of sublimated antagonism. He directed a meaningful look at Boucher. “Finding a suitable candidate for the role of Endymion might be difficult.”

Jean-Marie blinked, letting Reichert know his message had registered. No one, the portly, apple-cheeked gentleman intimated, had ever lulled *him* to sleep over any issue large or small, nor would anyone ever be allowed to do so.

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“Enough chitchat, gentlemen.” Deciding it time to get down to brass tacks, Senator Kyle assumed the floor on his own initiative. “Listen, I confess to no end of admiration for what Dysart’s doing up here. Bow-cher, you DT folks stepped up to the plate when those who should’ve shouldered some of the burden waffled and bickered and tap-danced all around the thorny issue. Billions of new dollars have been poured into this super-costly pilot program, yet as we speak DT’s earning substantial payback. To date, your company’s licensed the rights to your nuke fusion system to one or more national clients, with a rash of others waiting in the wings to see if the U.S. and U.N. approvals pave the way for a second, helluva lot more costly phase. I suspect soon you’ll be peddling the fusion system from Boston to Beirut, if not from hell to breakfast and spots in between. What troubles those who’ve taken the bit in their teeth and bought in this early is that they might just be, er . . . jumping the gun, you might say.

“Now the three of us,” pursued Kyle earnestly, “went through a real fussy, month-long training ordeal to qualify for playing astronaut, fly up here to see for ourselves exactly what’s

what. Okay, we're here now, duty-bound to try 'n determine if a bet on the hand DT's dealt out is worthwhile, or if it'd be smart to cut bait and start looking elsewhere for an energy solution. We're here to ignore the fancies in favor of pinning down the facts.

"To my misfortune, I don't have a storehouse of technical know-how to lean on," admitted the senator, "which puts me in the dark about the whys and wherefores of this special helium, and why it's the one and only prerequisite to operating DT's nuke fusion system. Think maybe we could begin to peel back the fancy tinsel wrapping and get a peek at the nitty-gritty? I myself have a desperate need to let my colleagues and particularly my constituents know exactly what you've accomplished to date, what you hope to accomplish soon, and arrive at a firm, rational opinion about what must, or must not, come down the pike tomorrow, and all the tomorrows thereafter. Suppose we could hear a short spiel on how this special helium does its job, what it'll take to scoop up more than a few wheelbarrow loads?"

"Delighted to oblige, Senator." Boucher turned to the physicist. "Alois, if you will?"

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Receiving a nod from the director, Myrom manned the computer, bringing up a series of prepared slides to illustrate Dr. Francke's straightforward description of how the atomic nuclei within a plasma were induced to fuse together and release inordinate quantities of the energy that formerly bound the constituents of each nucleus in place. The physicist elaborated on the negative aspects of combining readily obtainable fusible isotopes, and launched a description in lay terms of the manner in which controlled nuclear fusion via Dysart's patented Omega Pinch Process focused on a sidebar of atomic interaction known as "quantum tunneling" which it employed to full advantage.

Francke cited the mutually repulsive electromagnetic forces inherent within positively charged atomic nuclei of readily obtainable deuterium, also known as "heavy hydrogen," and the ultra-rare helium-three isotope, and how they had to be overcome by bringing the nuclei into sufficient proximity to fuse together and release the "strong force" binding in place the positively charged protons of both isotropic nuclei.

Choosing his words, Francke drew a word picture of how a tenuous maelstrom of hyper-excited, magnetically contained plasma — in essence a near-vacuum within the system's containment shell — was induced to reach the extremely high temperatures necessary to ignite and sustain fusion, an event that would not, *could* not, take place until "the final tiny nudge" of quantum tunneling occurred. Stated in the most simplistic terms, the respective, positively-charged nuclei adamantly refused to fuse together until forced into near contact, roughly within one femtometer, one quadrillionth of a meter, at which point the protons within the respective nuclei automatically "tunneled" through what the physicist termed the Coulomb Barrier, overcame mutual electromagnetic repulsion, and instantaneously fused, releasing a truly phenomenal amount of raw energy.

"In discussing this magical Dysart sunburst," suggested Chairman Reichert with acerbic intonation, "it would be provident to keep in mind something the distinguished senator alluded to a moment ago. Dysart has capitalized on his supposedly innovative fusion process by licensing the scientific marvel from Boston to Beirut, or as the distinguished Senator Kyle put it, from hell

to breakfast. Most experts consider this lunar mining adventure the trump card in Dysart's ambitious attempt to create a monopolistic fusion bonanza."

Jean-Marie refused to let the inference go unanswered. "Mssr Reichert, in no way will DT's 'trump card' fractionally approach the volume, or reaped profit, of petrochemical hardware, software, patents and proprietary processes vended for decades by Vonex International."

Miffed by the response, Reichert did not attempt to conceal his irritation. He awarded the director a sharp disapproving glance, looked away quickly.

Secretary Llancolm's shadow smile silently applauded Boucher's retort.

Jean-Marie adroitly changed the subject. "I believe our operations manager is most able to relate prospective Selene II harvesting goals. Myron, if you please."

Outwardly unselfconscious about being called upon, Cromwell began slowly. "Gentlemen, in essence Luna is a gigantic open-pit mine. Four billion-plus years of constant bombardment by everything from micrometeorites to charged particles ejected from the Sun and borne on the solar wind have embedded a spectrum of elements, isotopes and so forth in the pulverized lunar regolith. Some forty percent of harvested pay dirt is oxygen, about twenty percent silicon, twelve percent iron, ten percent —"

"Pulverized what?" interrupted Kyle.

"Regolith, Senator. The dust, sand and gravel making up the lunar soil gardened by eons of perpetual bombardment."

"The ceramic tableware we used at dinner," remarked Jean-Marie, "was Mr. Cromwell's doing. He fashioned the dishes and vessels from regolith fired in a solar kiln, a process devised by he himself."

"Y'don't say!" An expression of wary interest crossed the senator's weathered masculine features. "That really the way of it, Cromwell?"

"Guilty as charged, sir. An interesting project, it got to be more a hobby than anything else. Making use of native materials is certain to become a secondary goal of Selene II, and more so during the endgame Prometheus Project. The entire lunar surface is blanketed in regolith. Think of it as an emporium stocked with useful metals, minerals and gases, all readily obtainable by strip-mining."

The senator sounded suspicious. "Readily, you say? If so, why were the first deliveries of special helium shipped short?"

"Major obstacles," replied Myron, "hinder and inhibit the harvesting, processing and shipping of helium-three. In the lunar highlands, the regolith blanket is deeper, and the upper layers richer in pay helium-three than down here in the mare. The bugaboo is a genuine killer: in the regolith, the harvested helium-three ranges from a low of about one-hundredth of one part-per-million by weight to upwards of consists of helium-three. When it comes on line fully operational, Selene II will field a fleet of mining vehicles and multiple processing facilities, it will mean harvesting slightly less than one hundred million metric tonnes of regolith to process a single tonne of helium-three."

"Holy Jehosephat!" exclaimed the senator. "The ratio is *what?*"

“Pardon me, Senator,” interjected Reichert. “Mightn't it be better to inquire if this miracle substance is really all that essential rather than worrying about the extremely hazy prospect of mining it in quantity?”

“Mssr Reichert,” declared Jean-Marie, “it wounds me to have to tell you helium-three is not merely an essential plasma ingredient. For the time being it is absolutely indispensable.” He signaled for Myron to continue.

“The yield in our pilot program,” said Cromwell, “indicates a projected Selene II harvest slightly exceeding five thousand metric tonnes for every million tonnes processed, not counting collateral benefits automatically deriving from simultaneous strip-mining operations in more than one surface region.” He brought up a new slide on the display. “As this chart depicts, Selene II’s prospective volume harvesting may retrieve only a minute amount of helium-three, but it will also extract more oxygen than can be used, plus tonnes of hydrogen, ordinary helium, nitrogen, carbon and sulfur, in addition to lesser quantities of silicon, iron, calcium, sodium, chromium, manganese, and assorted trace elements.”

Kyle’s brow wrinkled. “Whoa, there! That means someone’s got to right quick figure out a better way to fuel a fusion power plant than with this, er, special helium.”

“Senator,” assured the director, “as we speak an legion of someones is hard at work on that very issue. Dysart Technologies views the current plasma combination as an interim solution, a vital stopgap at best that will replace fossil fuel consumption’s carbon footprint with a totally non-polluting energy source.”

“In other words,” suggested Reichert snidely, “driving the unsuspecting pubic to substitute at enormous expense the untried and unprove for the tried and true.”

Jean-Marie ignored the comment. “Researchers around the globe, particularly our DT ignition team in Nevada, are taking a long, hard look at an improved Omega Pinch process that may employ a combination of deuterium and an isotope of lithium. Unfortunately, helium-three will have to suffice until the viability of more readily obtainable plasma constituents can be established.”

“Should such unlikely, innovative, miraculous ‘viability’ become a Christmas present for humanity,” declared Chairman Reichert, “it will serve nicely to perpetuate Dysart’s current monopoly on the fusion pipe dream he’s trying to sell worldwide.”

The statement earned a refractory grimace from Llancolm. Jean-Marie ignored it.

After a brief, uncomfortable silence, Myron began to discuss the clumsy methods of storing “the superabundance of subsidiary pay dirt.” Selene II, he explained, will be equipped to melt dust in a solar crucible and produce usable metallics, as well as the constituents of cement and concrete. He described how plentiful oxygen would be used as liquid oxidizer in spacecraft propulsion systems, how aluminum, magnesium and titanium would contribute to the local fabrication of ground and space vehicles. He cited the importance of chromium and manganese in the prospective production of various metallic alloys, the use of sodium in caustic compounds, and how carbon and hydrogen could be turned into water and other chemicals compounds.

“Hold it again, Cromwell!” declared Senator Kyle. “Slow down a tad, okay? Your snowstorm’s turning into an arctic blizzard.”

Having heard nothing new, Secretary Llancolm yawned and tapped the back of his hand to his mouth. "Gentlemen, I think we've been exposed to enough elucidation for one session. I for one am looking forward to a night's rest."

"Amen!" Senator Kyle nodded. "I second the motion, Mr. Secretary."

Belkin Reichert rose without a word, and waited with outward patience for his host to show him and the other guests to their utilitarian quarters.

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"Far as I can see," grumped Myron, closeted a half-hour later with the director, "that redneck senator strikes me as the inquisitor we should be worrying about."

Boucher smiled, his shoulder sway thoroughly Gallic. "In choosing the candidate who best fits your less than astute evaluation," he drawled, "you would do well to withhold judgment until Mssr Reichert reaches top form."

It was Myron's turn to shrug.

## FOUR Omega Pinch

The lasercomm lunar transmission concluded in the tower's twentieth-floor chamber. Only The Stockholder and CEO Ben Clay had attended in person, watching and listening in near-total silence, though from time to time Clay, ever the attorney, had hurriedly scribbled notes to himself on a legal pad. DT's Executive Committee, the six executives charged with guiding the company's independent divisions, had observed the proceedings remotely via encrypted satellite laservision. Having viewed the pristine session in real-time, the half-dozen upper management leaders had little to say.

"Belkin's instant recovery from appendicitis is a miracle," said Lyman in answer to Clay's inquiring glance, "but he struck me as being in far from top form."

"He'll warm up," the CEO said confidently. "Wait and see."

His thoughts bouncing from one item of conjecture to another. Lyman rode back up to his penthouse sanctuary. Absently selecting a chilled, cut-glass stein from the stainless-steel refrigerator, he pulled back the tapper's polished wooden handle, took the stein into his "office" quarters and slumped in an armchair facing the glasswall. Ignoring the view, he sipped beer, reflecting on the explanations, observations and critiques voiced by Jean-Marie, his staffers and the three visitors, giving special attention to the verbal and body language reactions of Reichert and Senator Kyle.

Concluding that the session had gone much as he had anticipated, revealing nothing new or unexpected, he stewed a bit longer, and ended up asking himself the same questions that had plagued him for most of a decade. How had he personally decided to take the plunge, buck the odds and dare to put at risk the present and future fiscal health of his DT enterprise by pouring billions upon billions into the Selene Pilot Project? He tried again to convince himself the decision had been based on a presumption that the every-which-way U.S. Congress, not to mention traditionally irresolute United Nations leadership, would endorse the fantastically expensive, multinational follow-on Selene II Program, and eventually urge the public to provide the astronomical funding necessary to pursue the ultra-costly Prometheus Project.

Soul-searching was something he rarely indulged in, yet in this singular instance he was sure his resolve to fund and staff the pilot program had come about due to a mandatory need to demonstrate the viability of his “wild and crazy” objective, and of course to provide proof-positive that quantities of lunar helium-three could be obtained in Luna, without which the immediate future of nuclear fusion technology would be severely jeopardized, or more likely extinguished. At root, however, was a nagging wonder if the crucial decision been solely hubris on his part, or wishful thinking, or simply evidence of the Dysart’s congenital brand of stubbornness?

*No, none of the above*, he told himself. At heart, his motive had been driven by an unquenchable desire to help alleviate the pain of energy-starved global denizens already beset with a degrading environment partly attributable to climate change.

Eventually, as he’d come to know and expect it would, an extract from one of Old Willem’s voluminous notebooks flashed before his mind’s eye. Written when Lyman had been little more than a drooling infant, his grandfather’s jotted notes to himself were a *mélange* of political and technical commentary, plus his habitual method of putting his own thoughts in order. Energy in all forms and utilizations had not been his paternal grandfather’s major interest, merely his lifework, the *raison d’être* of his very existence. Coming across the entry for the first time in his mid-thirties, he’d been so impressed by the message that he’d read over several times, and the current situation made it seem appropriate to sit down and read it once again.

He plunked down the empty stein, went to his desk and woke the computer. Using the current month’s codeword, he brought up the secure notebook folder, and opened the flagged file.

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**Wed. 13 Jan 2010**

**2009 watershed year. New chief exec presides over U.S. mired in severe economic difficulties. Subliminal/overt differences twixt this & previous admin apparent: less secrecy shrouded gov policies, no issue of bad news slyly superseded by hypocritical half-truths/ dissembling propaganda. Appointee competence no longer second to Party loyalty, nor any pseudoscience blather/mindless interpretation real-world events/circumstances. Foresight & diplomacy in foreign policy, not imperial “wag the dog” militarism, “nation building” order of the day.**

**Unmuzzled gov science starts emphasizing in lay terms consequences of human-enhanced climate change, plus talk-talk of reducing greenhouse gas emissions & still keep wheels of civilization turning. Adopt “green” measures the only treat symptoms, however, is not the disease: overpopulation plus conflict w/greedy worldview of elitists/affluents. Minority like self believe corrective action has to be adapting to “inevitable, irreversible” climate change, not vain search for finger-in-the-dike means/methods to forestall, or defeat consequences. Must compromise, use both approaches in proportion.**

**Time passes & de facto symptoms multiply: glaciers recede & “white” polar ice sheets melt, lose ability to reflect energy. Sea level rises as atmosphere/hydrosphere gradually warms, grows more dynamic. Ocean circulation pattern changes affect global weather, hence some regions suffer widespread drought, w/megadrought to come & others**

more frequent/severe storms, including biggies w/devastating cyclonic/anticyclonic rotation.

Sense of impending fear bears close watch lest overreaction to pundits' jeremiads of coming cataclysm be reinforced by media scare festivals tailored to reap superb viewer ratings. Academics, pro talking heads claim taming climatological golem not merely essential, but hypercritical — a truism, but also an egregious error. World must prepare/adapt to lifestyle changes prior to full-blown assault, or else.

More immediate problem rears above longer range global climate threat. Near-future energy needs soon to outstrip dwindling reserves of economically recoverable fossil fuels (operative word "economically") will cause civilization to start withering before full brunt of climate change. Irrefutable scientific evidence disbelieved by sufficient numbers, yet science does not demand "belief," it just is. Dual problems humanity facing won't be overcome lest draconian measures taken to mandate abrupt halt in global population growth & all resources poured into fossil fuel recovery, economical & otherwise, plus reviving, readdressing "insufficient, unreliable, impractical" fusion candidates needed to bolster renewable energy sources.

A sophisticated minority, including self, urges all-out experimentation/capture of long-sought academe/research institution chimera, the elusive key to holiest of holy science grails, the ultimate energy panacea: practical, controlled nuclear fusion.

Chasing this will-o-the-wisp widely & stridently pooh-poohed. Scoffers & nay-sayers urge putting all efforts into wild solar/hydro power systems, mass-produced fission reactors, geothermal/wind-machine power systems, energy derived from oceanic tidal and wave action, and, and, or, or, or . . . ?

Dribbles in bottomless bucket similar to palliative meds to ease pain, not cure affliction. Hodgepodge of proven/partly proven/unproven energy sources will never satisfy ballooning demand. Paradox: energy demand soon to outstrip supply, yet shrinking fossil fuel reserves must somehow account for near-future rationed energy.

Tantalizing hope of fusion breakthrough not only critical, but urgent-plus. Global agencies/entities sponsor spectrum of R&D programs with vigor/dedication, yet sadly results in reams of technical papers & endless talk-talk. Proactive sponsors of ongoing fusion research must shift emphasis to member nations able to afford the stiff tab, perhaps assessment based on % gross domestic product. After century-plus chasing dead-ends/failures/marginal semi-successes, massive collaborative effort vitally needed on scale of advanced version WWII Manhattan Project, or, or, or . . . ?

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*Or what . . . ?* thought Dysart. Ordering the computer back to sleep, he sat down to think. Unfortunately, few had listened to his grandfather's words of wisdom. In late 2037, a significant breakthrough had perked major interest when the innovative MEMO Program at ITER's facility in the Côte d'Azur region of Provence sustained plasma ignition for nearly seven minutes. Loud, deafening cheers went up to the skies, prematurely as it developed, when ITER announced that even if perfected to a point where energy output marginally exceeded energy input severe drawbacks went hand-in-hand with the fusion process, and the cheers diminished to murmurs.

While simplest to achieve with regard to what physicists termed the Lawson criteria — sufficient, sustained thermal excitation to produce a plasma, and consistent magnetic confinement of it — collateral disadvantages accompanied the ITER process, principally the emission of googols of difficult to handle high-energy neutrons causing unwanted secondary reactions. A secondary major problem had to do with *Bremsstrahlung*, the German term for performance-degrading radiative losses incurred during the countless collisions of electrons and ions within the plasma.

Precious years slipped from the calendar, and solving the fusion quandary slipped further toward the abyss as the neutron emission problem, plus *Bremsstrahlung*, tertiary and quaternary complications refused to go away. The maturing U.N. Energy Consortium's scientific brain trust re-sharpened its pencils, subjected the problem to intensely focused scrutiny, issued additional reams of technical papers, engaged in yet more hours of talk-talk, and committed to a fallback combination of fusible isotopes requiring a higher ignition temperature. The proposed aneutronic solution called for an ionized plasma consisting of deuterium, D, an isotope of hydrogen labeled  ${}^2\text{H}$  in scientific notation, plus a true rarity,  ${}^3\text{He}$ , or helium-three, a non-radioactive, extremely scarce isotope of the second lightest natural element.

Induced to fuse together as the electromagnetic strong force binding in place the respective, positively charged — and therefore mutually repellent — nuclei is overcome, the reaction resulted in stable helium,  ${}^4\text{He}$ , or helium-four, and a simultaneous energy release roughly equivalent to 3.7 million electron volts (MeV), plus an odd byproduct, a nucleus consisting of only one proton and zero neutrons known as “protium,” P, and an additional energy release of 14.7 million electron volts, for an approximate 18.4 MeV output that not only exceeds the energy released in the deuterium/tritium fusion reaction, but offers a pair of genuine bonuses according to the promising reaction: very modest neutron emission, and greatly diminished *Bremsstrahlung* losses.

What became apparent at the very start, however, was the monumental dilemma associated with a successful fusion reaction using the optional deuterium + helium-plasma: the extreme rarity of  ${}^3\text{He}$ , a lack all but eliminating any hope of acquiring the necessary volumes.

Gyrating within its toils, the U.N. Energy Consortium unsuccessfully sorted and reviewed and shuffled fallback plasma combinations, then finally and figuratively threw up its learned hands and initiated a second desperate attempt to make viable the more conventional reaction using deuterium + tritium plasma. Obtaining relatively plentiful deuterium posed no problem, while tritium,  ${}^3\text{H}$  in scientific notation, could be produced in fission reactors by bombarding a specific lithium isotope in the manner used to produce fuel for thermonuclear weapons, not to mention also offering a significant bonus: the deuterium/tritium fusion reaction occurred at a lower degree of thermal excitation. This approach had to be reluctantly abandoned a second time. In addition to major neutron emission and *Bremsstrahlung* problems, tritium itself was mildly radioactive, and demanded safe handling procedures.

Despite its extreme rarity, helium-three, a natural product of tritium beta decay, remained an attractive focus of experimentation in that it featured a “helion,” or nucleus, consisting of two protons and but a single neutron, a nucleus that hungered to accept a second neutron and transform itself into basic helium.

Touted as an achievable, reasonable aneutronic solution, experiments using the plasma constituents deuterium and helium-three again received major attention, yet earned only modest successes. The coin's obverse, however, continued to point out, and point up, a possibly insurmountable, inordinately discouraging obstacle. Minute quantities of helium-three formed at less than a glacial rate through tritium beta particle decay, and although the isotope could also be produced in minute quantities within fission reactors, in anything like a practical sense helium-three was so frightfully scarce as to conclusively remove itself from serious consideration as a solution to successful fusion power generation.

*Or was it . . ?* Lyman remembered thinking at the time.

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Tucked into the recesses of his mind ever since first reading Willem's 2010 note to himself had been the visionary prospect achieving practical, controlled nuclear fusion. After privately investigating the published progress of ongoing experimentation at that time, had spoken before the assembled DT Energy Division scientific staff and urged its members to monitor and report on worldwide fusion research and development.

After which the principal focus of interest had narrowed to the so-called MEMO process at ITER — a Latin term meaning “The Way” — where a multinational scientific consortium persisted in achieving serial though temporary successes with a semi-conventional tokamak plasma containment system. Of secondary interest were JET in the UK, where a second-generation Joint European Torus operated as a subscriber to the European Fusion Development Agreement, and at CERN, a particle physics laboratory beneath the French-Swiss border employing an enormous hadron collider in collaboration with the European Union. JET and CERN proved to be of largely scientific interest, as did Japan's JT-60, China's EAST, Russia's T-15, the U.S. PACER, NIF systems, and similar experimental facilities engaged in foreign and domestic programs.

Weary of the stale gag circulating forever within the scientific community, to wit: “The energy of the future is fusion, and always will be,” he'd refused with inherited Dysart stubbornness to dismiss a fervent personal belief that nuclear fusion would one day provide a universal remedy for the global energy quandary.

As time passed, he had grown less and less willing to sit on his hands and pray for some agency, institution or collaborative effort to reach or even *approach* a feasible solution. Wishing to learn firsthand the details of reported temporary successes at ITER, he had used his multibillionaire celebrity status to gain entry, and visited the site in company with Dr. Xiang Lim, the obscure particle physicist he had lured away from Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. Warmly welcomed at the ITER facility in Provence, not far from Marseilles, he and the physicist had toured the facility, and then spent several informative sessions with a cadre of key ITER scientists. Seventy-odd months of intensive trial-and-error effort had resulted in an ultra-complex prototype system that was largely the brainchild of physicist Xiang Lim, who selflessly credited “the team of dedicated geniuses” working under his guidance. Wielding an open checkbook, an even more open mind, as well as considerable political clout — something he resorted to very rarely — Lyman had inveigled an “appropriate,” significant quantity of ultra-precious, all-but-impossible-to-obtain helium-three gleaned from thermonuclear weapons

maintenance. He had then devoted every subsequent waking hour doing whatever was humanly possible to encourage accelerated, refined experimentation and testing at the Nevada facility.

Flying home bursting with enthusiasm, he had quietly begun diverting blocs of Dysart Technologies capital, later augmenting it with substantial sums drawn from his private trusts, to establish a small, selective staff at an isolated research and development facility in the remote reaches of Nevada's Great Basin. Voluminous additional funding funneled into a pair of crash-priority programs had for some time failed to provide worthwhile results, although both proved outrageously expensive, specifically the cryogenic niobium-platinum superconductors designed to induce and sustain magnetic plasma confinement, or the carbon-free maraging steel used to fabricate the experimental Omega Pinch Tokamak — not really a “tokamak” in the original sense, but the Russian term defining a plasma containment shell had become generic.

Achieving intermittent, relatively short-lived success, it had been utterly disheartening to learn that *Bremsstrahlung* — radiative losses due to electromagnetic radiation caused by deceleration of a charged particles when deflected by other charged particles — while nowhere near the high level produced in a deuterium-tritium fusion reaction, were far from minimal. He had nevertheless been encouraged by the fact that on the ledger's positive side the emission of high-energy neutrons amounted to a negligible three-thousandths of one percent of that produced by the other, more easily fueled process. Shielding the device could therefore be reduced to a minimum.

Of equal and perhaps greater long-term significance had been the realization that sustained nuclear fusion would eventually throw wide the door to skirting a nightmare scenario that had plagued environmentalists and politicians for generations: the lack of a safe method to store for literally thousands of years the depleted radioactive waste produced by fission reactors. If and when nuclear fusion systems were brought on line, lethal residues of plutonium and uranium could be treated and rendered harmless, or perhaps atomically tailored via fusion for reuse.

Further on the positive side, Dr. Lim's genius had again come into play when the physicist devised a way to directly convert the energy released by the all-proton nucleus of protium, a byproduct of deuterium/helium-three fusion into electrical potential additively incorporated in the Omega Pinch output, to provide a dramatic rise in efficiency compared to the use of other “heavy ion” plasma constituents.

Dictated by Dr. Lim in a scholarly, understated manner, the press release issued by DT's Energy Division had gone practically unnoticed until it was brought to the attention of startled United Nations officialdom. In short order the entire world sat up and cheered the breakthrough, which electrified the imagination of everyone concerned, and incidentally almost every human being on the planet was either directly or indirectly concerned. After a team of U.N. Energy specialists certified Omega Pinch performance, far louder, more strident cheers went up to the skies.

It was then that the United Nations Organization, the heads of state presiding over the world's industrialized nations, and particularly The Stockholder himself, began looking up at the Moon with new eyes. The upper layers of lunar regolith were known to be rich in an array of substances, including helium-three, and yet . . .

Unfortunately, it was also when the OPEC petroleum barons, in concert with the oil cartel serving them and their fellow purveyors of conventional energy, experienced serious misgivings when informed of the purported advent of applied nuclear fusion power generation. Gross quantities of petrodollars began flowing into a series of well-crafted campaigns aimed at assuring the general public how thoroughly impractical and idiotic was the self-serving “science fiction” daydream of limitless nuclear fusion power generation promulgated by multibillionaire dilettante and confidence man Lyman Dysart, who looked forward to foisting off on an unsuspecting world the fanciful, less than sane “Alice in Wonderland” concept of scooping up quantities of some arcane substance by digging into the eons-old dust blanket covering the cratered surface of Earth’s one and only natural satellite.

## FIVE Prospectus

Two “mornings” later according the digital chronometer in Jean-Marie’s office, only a slim solar sickle protruded above the stark knife-edge horizon of Mare Tranquillitatis. Myron and Dr. Francke joined the inquisitors and Director Boucher for breakfast, and adjourned to the conference room. The operations manager and physicist sat on their hands, outwardly attentive to everything taking place, every nuance of meaning in each spoken word, privately gauging the visitors’ individual reactions to the material being presented.

Aided by a slideshow delineating Selene II’s prospective sequential installation, setup and activation, Jean-Marie ran through the penciled-in schedule. Scaled in lunar biweekly day-night cycles, the chart illustrated prospective benchmarks slated for achievement he ticked off on milestones labeled C1, C2, C3, et cetera, all the way up to C14.

Senator Kyle wanted to know what the “cee” nomenclature signified.

Dr. Francke caught the director’s eye, and received an affirmative nod. In very few words the physicist described a full lunar cycle as coincident with Luna’s synodic period, the interval between one full moon and the next as viewed from Earth. C1, C2, et al, designated lunar milestones during which major and minor arrivals, shipments and associated events were tentatively scheduled to take place, yet with Selene II approval pending a calendar date could not be established for program initiation.

Dr. Boucher reassumed and announced that C1 would see the arrival of a multitask construction crew made up of specialists trained and equipped to work in vacuum. Excavation on an expanded Selene II habitat at the base of the Palus Somni massif would commence near the mass-driver spacecraft launch installation, and USAF Operations Command Center. A crew would arrive on C2 dedicated to assembling and erecting the first greenhouse modules, and offloading an inventory of supplies critical for interim life support. During the subsequent lunar cycle assembly would start on the first of two scaled-down Omega Pinch Fusion Power facilities.

“Although not until,” interjected Reichert, “mammoth American expenditures have been squandered to ship men, equipment and materiel to the Moon.”

Jean-Marie replied, “Mssr Reichert, I hope you will forgive me for correcting that erroneous impression. Only the necessary tokamak elements produced in DT’s Michigan foundry will undergo shipment. The Selene II Master Schedule calls for assembling and equipping both

fusion facilities using native lunar materials. Deuterium is abundant. Helium-three will be cached for local use.”

“Why two nuke power plants?” inquired Kyle. “Won’t one do the job?”

“Mr. Cromwell,” said Jean-Marie, “will be happy to elucidate, Senator.”

“Our pilot program,” explained Myron, “is severely handicapped by the forced shutdown of surface operations during the dark semi-cycle.”

“Why’s that?” questioned Senator Kyle.

“Reflected solar energy powers the Chariot’s . . . That is, powers the strip-miner’s furnace, but sunlight isn’t available during the two weeks of lunar night. Selene II calls for one fusion facility to service nighttime operations down here in the mare, and the other to take care of ongoing harvesting operations atop the Palus Somni escarpment.”

“Up there, too?” The senator sounded surprised.

“Principal Selene II and follow-on Prometheus mining operations” enlightened Myron, “will take place in the lunar highlands, where the regolith is deeper, richer in pay dirt. Prime power sources in both the lowlands and highlands will permit twenty-four-seven mining operations during each full lunar cycle.”

The director continued his prepared lecture, describing how, on C3 the original habitat would be joined to an extensive series of excavated, vacuum-proofed living quarters covered with additional shielding layers of regolith. Prefabricated structural members for additional greenhouse modules were due to arrive during C4, along with a replacement construction crew. At this juncture, the original construction crew — a cadre of Dysart specialists salted with selected U.N. personnel — would rotate home.

Next to arrive would be certain disassemblies and piece parts needed to construct a fleet of smaller, more efficient strip-mining vehicles, the lesser components of which were slated to arrive during the subsequent C5 cycle. Lowland and highland automated storage facilities would be assembled and installed on C9 or C10, depending on potential schedule slippage. Next would come a penultimate shipment consisting of structural parts for several mobile resource transfer modules, and lastly an assortment of lowland storage bins.

Cromwell was interrupted in mid-sentence when a barely audible *pff-ff-tt!* and faint *dink!* sounded overhead.

Senator Kyle’s eyes narrowed. “What was that?”

Jean-Marie directed a meaningful look at Dr. Francke.

“A micrometeor impact,” informed the physicist. “An infrequent fusillade of small particles is the primary reason for shielding the Selene II habitat with additional meters of regolith, and surrounding it with an extensive berm.”

Kyle licked his lips. “You mean a tiny chunk of sky dust smashed through the, uh, shield and nicked the overhead?”

“The particles come in at kilometers-per-second velocities, Senator. Though tiny, they pack enormous kinetic energy.”

“Kinet . . . Lordy! What’ll happen if we’re clobbered by a good-sized hunk?”

“It would . . . make things awkward,” admitted the physicist.

Secretart Llancolm's smirk illustrated his appreciation of Kyle's discomfiture. Outwardly nonplused, Reichert sustained his above-it-all attitude, a tacit admission that anyone of *his* stature was impervious to any form of endangerment. Myron cloaked his secret amusement by studiously examining the currently displayed slide.

"Micrometeor bombardment," added Dr. Francke, more to fill the pregnant silence than through necessity, "isn't the principal reason our crew can access the surface only a specific number of hours cycle, it's radiation exposure. Here in the habitat, we're effectively shielded, but like the ilmenite itself a surface worker clad in vacuum gear was for practical purposes naked to the solar wind. A less likely hazard is the ever-present threat of a solar flare erupting with little or no warning."

"More technobabble," groused the senator. "Rego-this, ill-man-that, then you pile on wind from the Sun, and flares. What the hell is a solar flare? It stumps me to try 'n figure out how you folks know whether you're afoot or on horseback with all this hairy stuff your plate."

The director's dark, expressive eyes hardened, then immediately softened. He de-energizing the computer-driven slide show. His nod cued Dr. Francke.

"Senator," began the physicist, "extracting helium-three embedded in the lunar regolith is our sole reason for being here." He described the lunar dust blanket as unconsolidated residual material overlaying a schist of ancient basaltic rock. Long ago, the Romans had only a naked-eye view of the Moon, and labeled the surrounding dark area 'The Tranquil Sea.' It's actually a basin formed by a gigantic upwelling of lava from the then-molten lunar interior, probably a result the impace of a mountain-sized object. Over the intervening billions of lunar cycles, the mare's surface has been 'gardened,' pulverized into layer upon layer of dust and gravel by a perpetual rain of meteors large and small, particles borne on the solar wind, and cyclical day-night heating and cooling. Over the course of those eons, billions of metric tonnes made up of various placid and volatile substances have been deposited within the ilmenite.

"You're at it again," accused Kyle. "Gardened this, pulverized whatever, and vola-something. Eve get around to using plain words, not just buzz words?"

Dr. Francke backed off, doing his best to clarify the descriptive narrative. "A thin 'wind' of ionized, uh . . . charged particles produced by nuclear fusion deep within the Sun blows constantly through space. Composed of elemental and isotopes, the solar wind has hammered and impregnated the regolith for eons with a relentless rain of substances, including extremely rare helium-three, only a single particle of which blasts from the solar furnace for every hundred million particles of ordinary helium, which accounts for its extreme scarcity locked within ilmenite particles less than fifty microns in size.

"Microns . . . ?" speculated Kyle.

"Particles," assured Dr. Francke, "roughly fifty millionths of a meter in size. Ilmenite, a major constituent of lunar soil, is mostly iron titanate, an opaque, mildly magnetic mineral first discovered in the Ilmen Range of the Ural Mountains, and also occurs in other regions of the globe."

"As I recall," remarked the senator, "Mr. Cromwell mentioned ordinary iron also being plentiful hereabouts."

“In quantity,” assured the physicist. “Iron and much, much more, Senator.” Striving to retain a neutral expression, Francke explained that traces of cobalt were also present, as well as scandium, minor amounts of chlorine, fluorine and a smattering of neon, argon, xenon and other noble gases.

“Whew!” Taken aback by the glib recital, Kyle shifted his gaze to Myron. “I also seem t’reCALL Mr. Cromwell mentioning oxygen. Here I thought the Moon was airless.”

“It is totally absent of oxygen in the free state, Senator. The ‘atmosphere’ above our habitat is a harder vacuum than can be pulled in an earthly laboratory, but the oxygen locked in the regolith has plenty of company, including hydrogen and practically every other element, oxide and isotope. We use solar-powered electrolysis to extract potable water from strip-mined hydrogen and oxygen.”

“Electro . . ? Who thought that up, whatever it is?”

Dr. Francke sounded droll telling the senator how, some time ago, renowned British physicist and chemist Michael Faraday had been credited with developing the process.

Distantly amused, Secretary Llancolm lowered his eyes, while Belkin Reichert’s lips curved in a vitriolic smile. Dr. Boucher smoldered quietly within himself.

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The final question had been answered. The session wound down after Jean-Marie briefly summed it up by describing how the Selene II landings, assemblies, installations and activations were scheduled to culminate sometime during C12, when the program would be fully staffed and prepared and made active, while C13 would see USAF complete updating of the Palus Somni mass-driver spacecraft launch installation. He also mentioned a current event slated to take place shortly after the succeeding sunrise, when a drone carrying the less-than-hoped-for quantity of processed helium-three would slingshot up the mass driver rails and depart earthward.

The director offered to conduct the visitors into the greenhouse module for a glimpse of the surface at sunset, the only sightseeing venture possible. Physically overweight if technically malnourished, the portly senator acted eager to undertake the excursion. It tested Kyle’s agility and equilibrium; his gait irregular, by turns gingerly high-stepping, and then shuffling along flat-footed, he lagged behind the others.

Keeping an eye on the senator’s erratic progress, Myron was torn by conflicting emotions, first hoping the “redneck” would fall on his face, and instinctively tensing to catch the older man when his balance looked shaky. The other visitors had apparently adapted to the sliding strides that simplified moving about under diminished gravity.

The greenhouse module, a semi-cylindrical structure resembling a stretched-out Quonset hut, had been constructed as a surface annex by the pristine groundbreaking crew dispatched to excavate, enclose and vacuum-seal the habitat. Jean-Marie led the way up a shallow-sloping ramp into a cramped chamber, and depressed a rectangular switch panel next to the concave metal hatch. The amber admittance light winked to green, signifying pressure-up on the far side, and the hatch cammed outward. Jean-Marie urged the visitors to step through quickly.

“What’s the rush?” Kyle wanted to know, doing his best to trip over a labyrinth seal embedded in the raised sill.

"Dawdling in the open hatchway is unwise," said Dr. Francke. "Were the greenhouse to suddenly decompress, redundant, fail-safe aneroid switches would slam the hatch closed."

Kyle glanced back apprehensively. He asked what would happen to someone "futzing around" in there.

Francke adroitly dodged the question, adding to Myron's secret delight by assuring Kyle only a meteor strike was liable to cause a breach in the greenhouse.

Louvered shutters anchored along a central, rafter-like overhead spine running the length of the greenhouse supported curved, double-paned windows enclosing the structure on either side. Banks of high-intensity discharge lamps cast flickering, day-bright illumination on row upon row of hydroponic tanks. The air, excessively humid, was laden with carbon dioxide, redolent with an acrid chemical odor.

"Myron," suggested the director, "switch off the lights in the near section, please; and open two sets of shutters?"

Cromwell went to the control panel and punched keys. Two sets of horizontal louvers slowly cranked open, revealing the stark moonscape outside. Solar dazzle had all but vanished from the mare's sharply curved horizon, yet blinding, horizontal sunlight still streamed through the greenhouse.

Senator Kyle shielded his eyes. "Your . . . plant room's not covered with rega . . . With moon dust."

"Sunlight here is raw, unfiltered by atmosphere," explained Jean-Marie, "but without it photosynthesis wouldn't take place. The tinted windows and computer-controlled louvers meter harsh radiant energy during the lunar day, and artificial light takes its place during the dark semi-cycle, when the shutters are closed to inhibit radiating greenhouse warmth into space."

Shading his eyes against the glare, Llancolm appeared fascinated by the visible stretch of mare. "Sunset over the Tranquil Sea," and remarked., "How romantic! What little one can see," he added drily, "makes earthly deserts seem veritable gardens."

*Romantic, and how!* thought Myron, to whom the surface was the enemy, a vast, hostile, airless, potentially lethal dustbin. He hated everything about the greenhouse, the stench, the heavy, humid air, or for that matter the structure itself. A quirky notion to turn topsy-turvy Canada's old Northwest Mining Association slogan flashed into his mind: *If it can't be mined, it's gotta be grown.*

"Mr. Secretary," complimented Kyle, "you said a mouthful. The stretch of nothing much out there looks t'me like the back of beyond God didn't bother finishing." He squinted, and asked Cromwell, "That your Chariot squatting out there not doing much of anything?"

"The strip-miner can operate only eighty-odd percent of the sunlit period, roughly three hundred and eighteen hours of each lunar cycle."

"That so? How many hours in a full cycle?"

"Seven hundred and nine, half of it sunless."

"Okay, you told us why sunshine's needed to run the mining rig, but wasting two weeks of each, uh . . . Cycle sounds t'me like handing back a whopping passle of idle manhours."

"No help for it, Senator." Myron wondered if he should tell it like it was, or add a touch of spin. "The Sun," he said, making up his mind, "is too close to the horizon at dawn, and again near

sunset, for the computer to drive the primary mirror at an acute angle and maintain lock on the strip-miner's furnace receptor dish. The big mirror's off to the northeast; can't see if from this side of the greenhouse."

"Uh-huh." Kyle chewed over Myron's response, and acted as if he'd experienced minor indigestion. "Not exactly what I'd call a cost-effective way to run a mining claim. You saying zip gets done during the two weeks of nighttime?"

"No, just the opposite, Senator. The dark semi-cycle is our busywork time. The surface crewmen take turns redistributing first-process regolith in appropriate storage areas, process and refine pay dirt, take turns tending the greenhouse module, and perform the raft of maintenance and housekeeping duties neglected during the harvesting semi-cycle. Then too follows an exercise regimen to stay in shape for homecoming. Unless your workouts sustain muscle tone, atrophy sneaks up on you living under mild lunar gravity."

Kyle eyed Cromwell, his manner skeptical.

At the director's request, Myron closed the louvers and reenergized the nearest bank of high-intensity discharge lamps. Jean-Marie led the visitors up one row of hydroponic tanks and down the next. "With few exceptions," he told the visitors, "every variety of vegetable, herb, melon or what-have-you can be grown here. To be on the safe side, the tanks harboring essential protein-producers are redundantly duplicated." He asked Dr. Francke to fill in the visitors.

"Scientifically managed, soil-free horticulture in hydroponic or aeroponic mode," informed the physicist, "was established some time ago." He described the principal requirement aside from nutrients: a porous, well aerated wicking substance — inert, uncontaminated regolith in this instance — to act as a substrate material capable of carrying water and nutrients, and anchoring variegated root systems. Sticking to basics for the benefit of Kyle and Reichert, he told the visitors how nutrient salts, nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, calcium and other elements and compounds were slow-dripped into each tank, plus specific trace elements or "micronutrients," a function complicated by differing requirements for each type of plant.

"More than a century ago," he added, "botanists determined that most subjects of horticulture flourished when supplied with more carbon dioxide than nature makes available. Our master computer is programmed to monitor the level here at a mean of four hundred and fifty parts-per-million. The thermostats, humidistats, nutrient injection systems, circulation fans, almost everything else are computer-regulated."

Llancolm had listened attentively. "How about cross-pollination?"

"Mr. Secretary," Francke said with feeling, "you've touched on the dullest, most repetitive, time-consuming task afflicting our exceptionally dull establishment. Without insects, bees, bats, the wind — any type of aid — the onerous task of in cross-pollination falls on our personnel, all of whom dread playing farmhand. It's tedious wandering back and forth between tanks with a mechanical bee . . . a hand-held vibrator, touching each microsporophyll. The circulation fans are turned up during this exercise to help waft pollen about, but it helps very little. There is one positive aspect to lunar agriculture, however: no pests were imported, hence pesticides are passé. A hive of honeybees was slated to arrive cycles ago as an aid to cross-pollination. The insects died in transit, cause unknown."

“Nixing gravity,” observed Senator Kyle, “most likely did ‘em in. Being weightless days on end damn near did *me* in.”

“You have to become resigned to living under microgravity, Senator.” The physicist explained a problem lunar personnel lived with, and might have to live with forever — dietary protein balance. He named soy, lentils, fava beans, rice and other staples as excellent sources of basic protein, but supplements of the eight essential amino acids, especially lysine and tryptophan, were scarce in plants, and had to be resupplied from Earth.

The senator’s yawn amply demonstrates his disinterest.

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The sliding door of the director’s office closed behind Myron. “Tell me,” he said without preamble, “does that bad-tempered fatcat ever sleep?”

Slumped tiredly behind his desk, the director did not look up. “I assume your reference is to Mssr Reichert.”

“Who else? Mr. Moneybags prowls the living quarters at all hours, pussyfoots around, peeks into every nook, cranny and footlocker, and asks one damfool question after another. Dolph said he hung around the rec room and made a nuisance of himself kibitzing a bridge game. How do we keep him from bothering the guys?”

After due deliberation, Jean-Marie said, “We do not. Coach the men to be cordial. He must be treated with utmost respect. Questioning them should do no harm.”

“Don’t be so sure,” warned Myron. “That sucker’s up to something. He pulsed Dolph on the sly, asked where he was from, how long he’d been here, how he liked the work, and wanted to know if he was ready to go home and stop wasting his time. Get that, *wasting* his time? Accusing my straw boss of wasting his time *is* a waste of time. Dolph’s happy as a rooster on a woodpile over the bonus and hazard pay he nets for doing slave duty in our lunar paradise.”

“Were those questions typical?” asked Boucher. “Did any others say he asked about operational details, program insider doings, personality conflicts, et cetera?”

“No, he seemed to be fishing for personal stuff.”

The director’s brow wrinkled. “Best, perhaps, to say nothing, allow him free rein. I would rather have him sniffing about than risk encouraging him to suspect some devious, asinine form of cover-up is afoot.”

Myron grinned. “Keep him in the tent pissing out, not outside pissing in?”

The crudity earned an impatient moue of impatience from the director. “Yes, something like that.”

“What the hell drives tubby, anyhow? What’s his game?”

“Game . . . ?” Boucher drummed close-clipped fingernails on his desk. “Winning is the sole objective of every game. Decades ago, Mssr Reichert allied himself with a covey of authentic bosses, the individuals who run our fair planet from shadowy, high-rise lairs. He has convinced himself his accumulated power, influence, wealth and prestige are guarantees of life eternal. Having already won every game worth playing, he is certian that will continue in perpetuity.”

Myron eyed the director analytically. “If the topic is games,” he said in a different voice, “I’ll speak my mind. Jean-Marie, I know you too well to put any confidence in a genuine, first-class confidence man. The slick way you spritzed the gleesome threesome during today’s

rehearsed dog and pony show left me with a mild case of nerves. You're either playing some off-brand variety of flimflam game yourself, or you mean to keep treating Reichert *sous diplomatie* and hope things work out for the best. Which is it?"

"Devoted colleague," drawled Boucher, "a second lesson in diplomacy may benefit you hugely. To practice the artful craft of diplomacy effectively, a meeting of minds must occur to some degree. Where the unsavory object of our discussion is concerned, however, a meeting of minds is not merely implausible, it is impossible. Negotiating with that less than wholly sane egomaniac would be like jousting with a large, venomous reptile."

Myron leaned close to his superior. "Uh-uh, you're con will never outsmart a fellow con man; not with that simple-minded line. You're running some kind of scam; I know it, can *smell* it. Why not let me in on what kind of tap dance you're doing on Reichert's bald head? Who knows? Maybe I can help."

The director regarded his operations manager levelly. "As you are aware, the American Congress is at this moment . . ." He stopped and appeared to reconsider. "Later perhaps, Myron, at the proper time, but not now. What you suspect as flim-flam is . . . Well, taken in its entirety the current situation has grown too complicated and fluid for a simplistic explanation."

"Fair enough. I'll hang loose till you're ready to uncomplicate things."

When office door slid closed behind his ops manager, Jean-Marie glanced up at the display depicting a magnified image of Earth. A sharply defined shadow curved down across cloud-speckled Europe, eclipsing the Alpine region on the edge of the sunset terminator. He put through an encrypted lasercomm call to Geneva, endured a short wait, and spoke briefly if earnestly with the second gentleman he had pledged himself to serve, United Nations Secretary-General Sir Ian Moorman.

## SIX Carolyn

The little boy persisted, tugging his father's sleeve, pestering him to put down the telephone and come along with him and his mother. Deep in conversation, the man had no choice but to fend off his son's entreaties. His mother shushed the youngster, took him by the hand and led him away. Pausing at the door, she mouthed a silent word, pantomimed her intention to wait for her husband in the tower's basement garage.

Concluding his phone conversation, he exited the office and hurried to the executive express elevator alcove. The compartment plunged downward, slowed and stopped with a slight jar at basement garage level. The doors had just begun rolling apart when the blast's concussion wave slammed him backward.

His muddled faculties returned gradually, his vision cleared slowly but everything looked slightly blurred. Through a slit in the inwardly warped elevator doors, everything in his narrow, hazy field of view was in shambles, the limousine a flaming shell, the woman and child inside . . .

Gone!

Lyman Dysart came awake with a start and sat up in bed, his heart pounding from an adrenaline surge brought on by the recurring nightmare that awakened him less frequently of

late. Dawn glow dimly backlit the damask draperies shrouding the bedchamber's floor-to-ceiling glasswall.

He lay back, waiting for his pulse rate to diminish. Across the king-sized bed, Carolyn slept soundly, the soft insufflation and exhalation of her breathing audible in the stillness. He examined her piquant features, the tousled dark hair spilling across the pillow as if seeing her for the first time. Like himself, she favored sleeping in the buff. Despite the dimness, one rosy aureole peeked at him from beneath a fold of coverlet.

Months earlier, his wife and only child had been taken from him in the most vile and vicious manner imaginable. Once the horror had abated moderately, the grieving had begun, and with it had come an awareness of being perhaps the wealthiest individual in human history who had absolutely nothing. Moping about the penthouse for weeks on end, he'd succumbed to a grief so all-encompassing that it refused to slacken despite prayer, useless counseling and an alcohol binge he could not seem to put behind him. Neglecting business as well as everything else, he had isolated himself and worked very hard indeed to drown the demons of bitterness, mindless rage and despair in distilled spirits for which he had absolutely no taste whatever.

The principal catalyst responsible for his revival had been a trusted friend and confidant, Benjamin Clay, who he was sure also happened to own the most incisive, pragmatic legal mind in existence. The CEO had pulled him out of his remorseful funk on the eve of a Dysart Technologies-sponsored energy convention in Las Vegas. Clay had repeatedly and forcefully urged him to stop feeling sorry for himself and do his utmost to put the past behind him. As a first step toward self-salvation, Ben badgered him unmercifully, demanding that he accept an unwritten obligation to host the convention, or at least put in a brief handshake appearance.

"Smash your goddamn bottle," Clay had cried angrily, "and f'Chrissake get on with your life!"

Lyman rolled his head on the pillow, glanced again at the sleeping woman. His thoughts went back to the day of deliverance in Las Vegas — actually, the night — for it'd been Carolyn who had unknowingly reinforced Clay's urgings in a novel manner. It had been she who had inspired his true recovery, and had jump-started his second life.

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After a brief welcoming speech, and a dismal hour glad-handing everyone he had met or been introduced to among scads of VIPs and technical delegates in the Las Vegas Convention Center, he had moped his way back upstairs to the hotel-casino's grandiose presidential suite. Mired in a deeply depressed state of mind, feeling lonely and dispirited he had slouched about restlessly, and paused despondently before the suite's huge picture window to stare down with unseeing eyes at the gaudy, flickering neon jungle below, yearning to be locked up with his misery in San Francisco.

Aimlessly pacing the deluxe suite later that evening, accumulated despondency and tedium, amplified by the glitzy, sensual Las Vegas atmosphere he cared for not at all had inspired him to stop denying the insistent demands of pent-up biological back pressure and do something he'd never done before, or so much as contemplated. He'd phoned downstairs and given explicit instructions to a youthful, eager-to-please Dysart staffer, telling him to order up the services of

the most nubile, expensive and capable professional woman listed in the hotel-casino's no doubt extensive database.

An hour and twenty-two minutes later a phone call alerted him that a striking young lovely was at that moment stepping into a lobby elevator. Opening the suite's door at the chime, he could not help but ogle the petite young woman standing in the vestibule. No more than three inches above five feet in stature, she wore a stylish, close-fitting gown of shimmering green, spike heels and minimal makeup. Her burning dark eyes awarded him a swift, incurious once-over. A slight frown tightened the cleft between her plucked, contoured brows, messaging him subtly that she was less than impressed by the tailored tan jumpsuit he wore, the open-weave sandals that exposed bare toenails.

"Hi," she said lightly, "I'm Crystal," and stepped past him unconcernedly, then halted in mid-stride when confronted the lavish presidential suite. "Whoo-e-ee! You'd never pass for a high-roller, but you must be one. Even if the sharpies who run this place are handing you full comp, I suppose you can afford my companionship."

"I suppose so," he said, amused by her directness, and stirred as well by the voluptuous figure beneath the green gown, Lyman smiled. "I'm not a roller, high, low or medium. Tell me, do you rent by the hour, the evening, or maybe longer?"

She looked up at him, her expression serene if a touch quizzical. "Two large will keep me here all night, except that means till two, three ayem. Can you live with that?"

Further intrigued by her all-business attitude, Lyman withdrew a silver money clip from the slash pocket of his jumpsuit. Carelessly counting out several hundred dollars more than she had specified, he laid the wad in the palm of Crystal's dainty, manicured hand. "For me," he told her, "all night doesn't end until breakfast."

"Some tip!" Her smile dazzled him. "Breakfast it is. What'll we have? No, forget it; the ham and eggs are on me."

"Fair enough." Lyman stepped to the wet bar and mixed Crystal the gin-and-tonic she had requested, taking only Perrier for himself. In not many minutes what little repartee there was dwindled and died.

Crystal emerged from the suite's extravagant, ebony-and-silver bathroom. "Theloo is so overdecorated I was almost afraid to use it." Marching to the king-size bed beneath a mirrored high-ceiling with an air of total nonchalance, she divested herself of the green gown in one fluid motion, making Lyman aware that nothing had been under the gown except lithe, clear-skinned woman. The act of passion, as well as an encore, while less than seismic, were undertaken with tenderness on his part Crystal seemed to appreciate.

In the morning, minutes after room service came to wheel away the breakfast cart, Carolyn came out of the bedchamber in her green gown, preparing to leave. Lyman courteously held the door for her. On impulse, he asked her real name.

After a slow, over-the-shoulder look, she said, "Does it matter?"

"A silly notion," he admitted. "Do you ever make house calls. If so, I could ring and ask for . . . Well, someone familiar, someone I . . . like."

"Can't hurt; you're sure nice enough, but . . . Yeah, okay. Now and then I'm invited to visit someone at home. If you decide to call this number, ask for Carolyn." She jotted a string of digits on a linen hotel napkin. "Where's home?"

"San Francisco."

"Ouch! A long drive."

"The name is Lyman," he told her. "If you hear from me and agree to come, a private jet will be waiting for you at McCarran International."

"Deluxe round trip, first cabin?"

"Guaranteed in writing, if you wish."

She paused outside the door, looked back and studied him briefly. "So you want someone familiar, someone you . . . like," she said in a tone one of light mockery. "What's to like about me, not counting the obvious?"

"You don't use bad language."

Her insouciant grin made him want her all over again. "Want me to talk dirty, all you have to do is say so."

"No, no. Never, Carolyn! Stay as sweet as you are."

"In this burg," was her parting shot, "that's not always real easy."

Reinvigorated upon his return to San Francisco, Lyman became embroiled in catching up on neglected business. He completely forgot about Carolyn until a month later, when mixed in with some stray papers from the convention he came across the hotel napkin on which she'd scribbled her phone number.

Their second coming together took place in Dysart Tower, surprising both of them. In the wake of coupling, Dysart was conscious of Carolyn eyeing him pensively and asked what was bothering her. Direct as ever, she confessed that for some reason her enthusiastic lovemaking had not been the usual Academy Award performance, and tried to imagine why she had let herself go. "Strange, it hasn't happened before or since, never with a john. I can't begin to guess what makes you special, Lyman. God knows you're no Adonis, but I'll say this: you're some first-rate turn-on, a regular orgasm factory, and don't even know it."

Pleased by the remark, he said, "Remind me to pat myself on the back."

Weeks later, during Carolyn's second visit to Dysart Tower, their coming together turned into idyllic reprises of the first two occasions. Another session in the confessional booth ensued over a stein of beer. "Reason I got into the life," she told him without being asked, "was the student loan for room, board and UNLV tuition. I couldn't stomach the idea of graduating with a high-interest payback monkey on my back."

"Your major subject was . . . ?"

"Fine arts. I know how hoity-toity that sounds. The moonlighting began when a fruitcake professor talked me into posing in the buff for his figure study class. A bull stud who believed himself a second van Gogh got all hot and bothered, and he didn't mince words propositioning me. Since then the money's been outstanding, but Vegas gets to be a stale burg for us locals. What I'm really trying to do is sock enough pennies in the cookie jar to open a boutique."

"What type of boutique? Artsy-fartsy goodies made from giant snail shells, African masks and spears, stylish camel saddles, what . . . ?"

Her laugh tinkled merrily in the penthouse bedchamber. "No, women's wear," she said, and went on to explain her lack of interest in high-fashion couturier specialty items and weird-on-weird fantasies. "I'd aim for one-of-a-kind originals priced in the middle range, maybe someday a line I'd love to try designing myself."

"Sounds like a worthwhile enterprise. How much does your cookie jar need?"

A long, searching look. "You aren't serious, Lyman."

"Try my seriousness on for size, and you won't have to let out the seams. I'm known for being extremely serious about serious matters, and devilishly serious when the mood strikes. Say the word. I can spare a few dimes to set you up."

"That part I believe! You must be rolling in it."

"Drowning in it would be closer to the truth. The newsies hail me as the wealthiest gentleman in the known universe."

"Really?" It was a message that gave Carolyn serious pause. "*The* wealthiest?"

He smiled. "Uh-huh, for all the good it does. Googols of zeroes and ones locked in computer memory are responsible for the reputation. I guess I'm stuck with it."

Carolyn thought it over. "Is it a good rep, or a bad rep?"

"Middling," he said. "Depending on which side of the rep you stand." Electing Carolyn's brand of frankness, he described in very few words his station in life, told of his father's assassination, the violent passing of his wife and only child.

"My God! That's too awful to be true! Did they ever find out who, uh . . . ?"

"No," he said quickly to forestall any further questions. "Nor will they, ever. No point going into the details, except, uh . . ." Using neither embellishment nor any hint of circumlocution, he related how and why certain movers and shakers who belonged to the elite international power and wealth establishment no longer wanted him around. After a thoughtful interlude, he added, "Carolyn, I've gotten to be, well . . . real fond of you. I'd invite you to check out of Vegas and move into the tower, but . . ." He broke off, dreading her reaction.

"You can't mean one *word* of that."

"I hardly ever say anything I don't mean."

"Oh, really? Then why the 'but'? Care to fill in the blank?"

"Just to give you fair warning," he said slowly. "Move in, and you're all of a sudden in danger of sticking your neck in the wringer. That's not an exaggeration, either. Now that you know what happened to my family, living here would expose you to genuine danger. Not make-believe danger, authentic danger."

"Trying to scare me away?"

"Trying," he admitted. "You'd be smart to be scared, too. It's not that I'm in any way reluctant to have you as a roomie, just the opposite. Yet as I told you, it's only fair and proper to explain what you'd be letting yourself in for."

"I don't scare easy," she said. "God, it's tempting! I'd love to quit *The Life*."

"Think it over, take your time." He quickly changed the subject to avoid the embarrassment of an immediate turndown. "Now, about this boutique. Your turn to be serious about what you have in mind. San Francisco may be a smallish big city, yet it's overpopulated with an affluent clientele. A well-run emporium featuring a decent line of women's wear should

attract coveys and squadrons of matrons, businesswomen, all stratas of the opera and cocktail party crowd, and no end of wannabes. You could do very well. How much do you need?"

"Jesus, Lyman! You *do* mean it."

"I most often say what I mean, and mean what I say."

Unselfconscious in her nudity, Carolyn beamed and began jumping up and down on the bed like a schoolgirl. Then she fell on Lyman, hugged and him fiercely.

He grinned. "Careful, don't hurt me."

What happened immediately thereafter was in no way hurtful to either party.

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Staying well behind the scene, Dysart allowed a business acquaintance of Clay's to act as third-party go between and contacted a prominent Bay Area real estate developer, who disdained negotiation upon receiving an offer he would have slashed his wrists rather than refuse. Placing title in the name of a Living Trust, Lyman purchased a two-story building on the opposite side of Park Presidio Boulevard a block and one half west of the tower. The purchase involved bonuses sufficient to persuade the adjacent ground floor business tenants to shred their leases and relocate. After personally reviewing the building's architectural and engineering documents, Lyman ordered the ground floor square-footage joined and renovated to the bare walls and floor.

Bubbling enthusiasm from every pore, Carolyn oversaw the extensive remodeling to suit her taste, but was not told of her patron's second and third enterprises until both projects neared completion. The Stockholder had hashed and rehashed the long-discussed personal risk involved in his comings and goings with Dysart Technologies Security Director Martin Calvo, a former U.S. Treasury Agent charged with protecting The President. Putting their heads together, they evolved a scheme Calvo argued against, but eventually capitulated due to Lyman's insistence.

Working through a different proxy, Lyman became actively involved in every aspect of the project, reviewing civil engineering data and architectural drawings pertaining to Dysart Tower, as well as documentation covering Carolyn's new boutique, the business frontage now embellished with gold-flashed script spelling out *SALON BELLISSIMA*. The express elevator exclusively serving Lyman's penthouse aerie and executive territory on the uppermost floors was taken out of service, and the reworked shaft deepened meters below basement garage level. After persuading Calvo it would unnecessary to consult the authorities, Dysart contracted for a laser-guided tunnel to be bored from the tower's new sub-basement chamber, the work to be effected by crews from different construction companies, with the second crew working from a point directly beneath Carolyn's office in the boutique.

Learning the venture's details drove Calvo to voice a vigorous caveat. "Good, but not good enough. The tower's ground floor is as secure as we can make it, and your penthouse hideaway's tight against anything short of a Gattling gun. Catch is, if anyone happens to infer a connection between you and the, uh . . . young lady, and perhaps learn of the tunnel's existence, it would mean relatively easy access to the tower."

"So what do you suggest, a moat?"

Annoyed, Calvo shook his head. "No, something better than a moat. I want the whole bleeding enchilada, Lyman. I want and all the bells and whistles, deadfalls and other traps, every available security system and device, including round-the-clock mini-cam surveillance, motion

detectors, remotely actuated fail-safe barriers at either terminus with which to seal off your fancy tunnel if a breach does occur.”

Judging Calvo’s suggestions overkill, Lyman argued against them halfheartedly, and ended up green-lighting everything, all the “bells and whistles.” An artfully camouflaged private entrance and exit known to almost no one was built behind a false rear wall in Carolyn’s office, with the work accomplished during the wee hours.

Delighted as a schoolgirl when Lyman finally revealed to her the fruits of his secret labors, she began running back and forth underground in a miniature electric golf cart hand-assembled in the tunnel’s narrow tubular confines. Amused by her energy and focus, Lyman tried to dissuade her from doing the move-in grunt work herself. Forever her own woman, Carolyn brought an ungainly assortment of personal effects and books into the tower one suitcase and cardboard box at a time.

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Carolyn sat up in bed, yawned. “You’re all duded up,” she mumbled, not bothering to cover herself, looking Dysart over with a puzzled, sleepy-eyed expression. “You don’t look like you. What’s the occasion?”

The Stockholder shot his cuffs. “Off to Washington this bright, sunny morning.”

“Business trip?”

“Umm-m-m, sort of.” Not since the tragedy in the basement garage had anyone other than his closest associates seen Dysart “out of uniform.” On this fine fall morning, instead of a belted tan jumpsuit, his bare feet shod in hand-stitched leather sandals, the four-in-hand knot of a navy blue necktie peeked out between the lapels of his conservatively cut, light-gray business suit.

Carolyn’s pert nose wrinkled. “How long?”

“A day, two at most if there’s trouble. Should be back this evening.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Remains to be seen.”

Grunting something that sounded like, “I promise to miss you,” she slid from the bed, ankled nakedly toward the master bathroom.

Sipping black coffee, Lyman was giving only token attention to the morning newscast when the door chime sounded. Scanned by the corridor’s surveillance eye, Benjamin Clay’ distinguished masculine features loomed in the wall-mounted display. Using one of only four electromagnetic keys in existence to unlock the steel-reinforced entry door, the CEO’s first words were, “You didn’t act surprised to see Reichert turn up at the lunar clambake.”

“Not hardly,” admitted Lyman. “He dearly loves to reassure people of his unpredictability. In the long ago and not too far away, before a terminal case of greed and self-importance got the best of him, I sat in on a couple of no-limit poker games at his Long Island mansion. Belkin’s almost as tough to predict as the sunrise.”

“Win much?”

“Ben, really! You know I’m not boastful by nature. Okay, okay! I emptied the chubby gentleman’s wallet. He’s never forgiven me, nor would I want his forgiveness.”

Clay sank into a leather divan. "Now and then," he told The Stockholder, "you work overtime to demonstrate your own unpredictability. But I will say this: as a topnotchk prophet, you are world-class, and I bow to your prescience."

"Which potent prophesies have you in mind?"

"Only last week," declared the other, "you said something was destined to be chiseled in stone. Lo and behold! Yesterday the chisellers got busy. Not one, but *two* Vonex ace lobbyists were arrested and charged with approaching sitting senators."

Lyman chortled. "Belkin's paying for their lack of fancy footwork on the Hill. What's the tab, Ben? What'll the dastardly crimes cost him?"

"First-offenses? Oh, around a hundred thousand each."

"Bah, a gentle pat on the wrist! He can pony up that piddling amount by raiding the Vonex petty cash drawer." Not all of Old Willem's radical, revisionist proposals had been laughingly dismissed. Several of his "outrageous" doctrines and scenarios had caught on with the voting public and taken root, among them federally funded national elections and a stern edict proscribing lobbyists from breathing the same air as United States Senators, both enacted into law despite fearsome opposition.

Clay donned his business face. "Listen, Marty and discussed your visit to Washington. As usual, I advised you to dodge the summons and again, as usual, you ignored the sterling advice because, as usual, you're as stubbornly ultra-paranoid as usual. Why duck out through the silly underground hidey hole you had built? Why not take a helicopter from the roofpark to the airport like a normal human being?"

"Only the paranoid survive," remarked The Stockholder.

"Horsepocky!" Clay's head wagged sadly. "Why'd you let the damned the summons be served in the first place? Reichert and his cronies, plus a few hundred thousand other anti-Dysart crusaders roaming the wild outside your ivory tower, froth at the mouth over the prospect of catching you out in the open where it'd be easier to . . . Sorry, I'm rambling. My question of questions should've been why go at all?"

"A summons is a summons is a summons," said Lyman, mocking the CEO's repetitive repetitions. "Dodging important issues, as usual, often creates yet more problems, but no unusual solutions."

A sour grimace transformed Clay's mature features. In round Shakespearean tones he declaimed, "Quoth the legal counselor thou hast awarded gainful employment, snappy one-liners doth become thee in no way. For years hast thou stuck thine own poor servant with the impossible task of ignoring thy smartass cracks. Go no, do as thou must! Attend the hearing like a good citizen, and as the night follows the day thy astounding talent for speaking first and thinking much later will make you a *sitting duck* for the contempt citation certain to shortly encircle thy mule-stubborn neck."

"Not a chance, Ben."

Clay smacked his lips. "Now where have I heard that before, how many times? Pardon my disagreement, but I seriously doubt if your attitude, general deportment and loose tongue can keep you from enjoying a vacation on the inside looking out. Self-important wisenheimers run these government witch hunts, and they *dearly* love to wield their wands of privilege, especially

in the present instance, when appearing before a committee chaired by distinguished senior Senator from Maryland Edgerin Burton, who's a genuine, foursquare threat to your continuing health and well being. He's chaired the Appropriations Committee forever and a day, and Papal dignity oozes from his pores. He really should be wearing a crown, carrying a scepter."

Dysart grinned. "Yeah, ain't Burtie a beaut! The ritual is ancient as sin itself: the mice never give up trying to bell the cat. It's happened to me before, and as you well know is bound to happen again. But I promise you faithfully that Burtie and his confrères, henchmen and spear-carriers will *not* be interrogating a sacrificial virgin." Lyman set down his coffee mug and gained his feet. "Time to trot."

The CEO offered a nod of resignation. "Just once in your misspent life try doing something reasonable for a change. Why not let Marty drag a smelly red herring across your path to the airport? Have him send out two or three limos on goose chases the legion of watchers and reporters and paparazzi who spend their lives staking out this ivory tower will chase after eagerly. Do it! Toss the hunting and gathering primitives a bone. Give them something to do while you slip away unnoticed."

"Uh-uh, no can do, Ben." His manner uncompromising, Lyman said, "Tinted windows mask whoever's hauled around in a limo. What you suggest would expose the decoy drivers to needless risk." He pulled a custom hairpiece over his close-cropped, reddish blond crewcut, admired his image in the glass and adjusted the wig, patting it down here, smoothing it there, tousling it with his fingers. "Carolyn thinks salt-and-pepper gray locks make me look distingué."

"Shit!" said Benjamin Clay.

"You do, and you'll clean it up," threatened The Stockholder. "Mind the store while I'm gone. I'll call, let you and Marty know when I'm due back." Hatless, toting a slim, hand-tooled leather briefcase, he parted from the CEO with a casual wave.

Boarding the executive express elevator, he rode down to the tower's sub-basement nonstop, seated himself in the mini-golf cart Carolyn had parked coming home from her boutique the previous evening, and grinned. Later in the morning, when leaving for her business da, she would be irked at the need to punch the remote control and summon the conveyance from the tunnel's far terminus.

The electric cart glided the length of the tube, where he abandoned it, climbed the tightly wound spiral stair and emerged in a shoulder-wide corridor tucked behind the false wall of Carolyn's office. Treading lightly, one slow footfall at a time lest an early arriving saleswoman hear movement where no movement should occur, he silently negotiated the narrow hall and peeked through the pinhole lens. No one was to be seen in the alley outside. He depressed a switch panel and a false section of the building's brick exterior retracted inward, forcing him backward.

He stepped down, to casual observers a businessman late for an appointment leaving the alley with purpose, turned into Park Presidio Boulevard and strode briskly back toward Dysart Tower. Hesitating on the sidewalk, as if by chance he hailed a passing cab driven by one of Calvo's security staffers, with a second burly young man riding shotgun.

The taxi slowed at the first toll both on multilevel Bayshore Freeway to let the waypoint sensor read and record the vehicle's license. Dropped off inside the Dysart Hangar on the distant

perimeter of San Francisco International Airport, he rode out with the flight crew in a closed van and was ushered aboard the sleek, white supersonic jet parked on the hardstand.

During the hour-and-forty-minute flight to Washington's Reagan National Airport, he looked over his notes, between times watching the countryside unroll sixty-thousand feet below, and dozing.

## SEVEN The Hearing

Sans salt-and-pepper gray hairpiece, once again clad in a familiar tailored tan jumpsuit and open-weave sandals, the ultra-reclusive multibillionaire created a stir marching into the crowded hearing chamber trailed by a senior partner of the Washington law firm from which CEO Ben Clay had been stolen. Insisting that his former colleague accompany Lyman as stage dressing, Clay had instructed the barrister to keep his tongue well back in his mouth until an occasional break in the questioning occurred, when he was to leave off shuffling meaningless papers, look wise and whisper something — anything — in The Stockholder's ear. Attorney and temporary client seated themselves at a table facing the high, curving bench providing a high, inquisitorial seat for the row of stern committeemen and women.

Clipping a lapel microphone to the collar of his jumpsuit, Lyman nodded and dipped his head pleasantly to the half-dozen still photographers assigned to cover the newsworthy affair inconspicuously crouched beneath the committee bench. He swiveled about, casually scanned the gallery made up of news hounds and hens, spectators and video cameramen. A blip of recognition clicked in his mind. The news release announcing Reichert's purported illness, obviously a ploy meant to confuse the fact that not even gigatycoons could be in two places at the same time, had mentioned his designated replacement on the lunar "fact-finding" mission. Ben Clay had shown Lyman an artfully retouched photo of Vonex Chief Counsel Aaron Beebe, and there the saturnine gentleman was, two rows back, trying to look blasé about being recognized.

Maryland senior Senator Edgerin Burton, Appropriations Committee Chair for most of his second and third terms, brought the session to order by intoning a solemn, "Good morning, Mr. Dysart."

The chamber quieted expectantly.

His smile relaxed, confident, Lyman said, "Good day to you, Senator."

A faint scowl clouded Burton's beetle-browed countenance. "Will you take offense, sir, if I point out that few summoned before us appear in such casual attire?"

"My sincere apologies, Senator." Lyman did his best to sound contrite. "I hadn't realized a congressional dress code was in effect. If so, it might not be a bad idea to speak to your tailor about the, er . . . suit you're wearing."

The salty response drew several indulgent chuckles in the audience.

The Chair was not amused. "Mr. Dysart," intoned Burton, "you were summoned in order to answer questions concerning your corporation's fiscal conduct. Let me warn you beforehand. Flippant responses will not be tolerated."

"Will you take offense, Senator, if I presume to correct you on one point. Dysart Technologies is not a corporation. My company is privately owned. As for flippancy, you have

yet to pose a question, so I assumed we were in the process of becoming better acquainted, and perhaps spoke too freely.”

Lyman responded to a stern look from the bench with a reprise of his friendly, confident smile.

Shuffling papers, Senator Burton busied himself consulting something before him on the bench. He *harrumphed!* and framed his first question, a query pertaining to the gross amount of Dysart Technologies’ capital, rounded to the nearest thousand new dollars, thus far allegedly expended on the lunar Selene Pilot Program, as well as those sums purportedly allocated to sustain operations at DT’s nuclear fusion research and development facility in Nevada, plus engineering, testing, et cetera, et al.

The Stockholder leaned sideways and whispered the score of the previous Sunday’s 49ers football victory to the attorney.

Nodding wisely, the lawyer plucked a sheet of blank paper from the sheaf in front of him, and indicated some a mythical fact or figure. “Congrats, Mr. Dysart!” he hispered. “You’ve done a wonderful job of alienating the entire committee.”

Bent over as if intent on the other’s non sequitur, Lyman straightened. “On advice of counsel, I must explain that the financial data you requested is company-confidential, and is not to be divulged and made public.”

“You refuse to cooperate with the committee, Mr. Dysart?”

“Never anything so harsh and unseemly as a refusal, sir. I’m forced to withhold the information on advice of counsel.”

“Mr. Dysart, is it your desire to be held in contempt?”

“Certainly not, Senator Burton. Please bear with me, if you will. May I ask why the committee requires private information of this nature? As I mentioned, Dysart Technologies is a wholly owned private enterprise, and therefore not subject to the fiscal revelations mandatory for a publicly held enterprise. In light of that fact, on what grounds would it be possible to charge me with anything so heinous as contempt?”

“Mr. Dysart,” said Burton, drawing out the name, “the committee insists upon learning whether the insanely outrageous sums your Energy Division has written off, and will presumably continue to write off in perpetuity, are actual expenses incurred due to initiating and forwarding your company’s extravagant lunar venture, as well as purportedly originating and maintaining nuclear fusion research and development operations. An inordinate quantity of such sums have been repeatedly defined by your accountants and legal staff as deductible under the tax code, possibly to avoid paying an equitable share of taxation on corporate profit.”

Radiating indignation over the accusation, Lyman said stiffly, “Once again, Senator Burton, I’m forced to remind you once again that Dysart Technologies is a private, for-profit business enterprise wholly owned by I myself, and no other. Despite that, you insist upon referring to my company’s earnings as ‘corporate’ profit. Even if DT was a public corporation, shouldn’t the weighty cost-accounting data and taxation fall under the jurisdiction of the IRS, not the Appropriations Committee?”

“That is not for you to decide, sir.”

“Well, I shall nevertheless,” declared Lyman with a pretense of being grossly affronted. “Dysart Technologies now pays, has always paid, and will continue to pay its equitable share of taxes based upon cumulative earnings and or losses incurred by all six independently operating divisions.” He went on to remind the committee that tax relief due to expenditures for what just had been loosely and inaccurately called DT’s ‘extravagant lunar venture,’ plus the extensive R&D efforts, including the construction and testing of the first operational nuclear fusion facility soon to be donated and put on line in Nevada’s Paiute Nation, had been eagerly approved by the IRS at the urgings of both the Congress and White House.

Granting additional tax relief for expenses incurred during the exploratory activities, establishment and ongoing phases of the Selene Pilot Program had been mutually agreed upon due to the beneficial nature of an endeavor funded entirely by DT, its stated objective to demonstrate the practicality of obtaining in Luna very much-in-demand, otherwise unobtainable helium isotope the United Nations Energy Consortium deemed vital to the successful operation of DT’s nuclear fusion system. An identical rationale, he added, applied to the construction and testing of the prototype Omega Pinch Nuclear Fusion System soon to begin operations before being donated en toto to Nevada’s Paiute Nation.

Before the Chair could frame a response, Lyman capped the lengthy speech by saying, “Please try to understand something, Senator Burton. My company does not resort to loopholes in the monstrous, convoluted tax code which have proven so advantageous to other major corporations such as, to choose an example at random, the Vonex International Petrochemical cartel.”

A faint groan from the attorney seated next to Dysart was drowned in a ripple of subdued merriment that ran through the audience. Even the lowliest print and media newsie, and most if not all other attendees, were conversant with the political action committee established by Reichert, and its contribution of time, effort and valuta to Burton’s most recent reelection campaign.

The Chair stirred disquietly, if impotently. In a feeble attempt to make use of ammunition Lyman had furnished gratuitously, Burton drawled, “Speaking of advantage, Mr. Dysart, can you deny that your company’s lunar adventure has taken full advantage of the taxpayer-funded cartage supplied by U.S. Aerospace Forces to transport personnel and equipment, and ship home the oh-so-precious miracle substance supposedly being mined on the Moon by your employees?”

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Lyman decided it time for the gloves to come off. The lapel microphone amplified his dry, derisive chuckle.

“My question was not intended to be amusing, Mr. Dysart.”

“Even so, I’m afraid it tickled my funny bone to hear you ingenuously categorize the remote control transit of drones across nearly four hundred thousand kilometers of vacuum as ‘cartage,’ especially after the Secretary of Defense bent over backward to offer the services of USAF gratis. And unless I’ve been misinformed, the Congress also sanctioned the expenditure in a matter of hours. If the government has changed its mind, or the funding has been earmarked for, let us say barrels of pork rolled to Maryland or some other state, Dysart Technologies will of course listen to a reasonable and proper fee for what you so-colorfully describe as ‘cartage’.”

Livid, Senator Burton glared at the audience, hoping his fixed stare would quell the groundswell of concerted murmurings. He was unsuccessful. “And if,” he said, biting the words short, “such a fee were to be more than Dysart Technologies considered reasonable and proper, what then, Mr. Dysart?”

“Why then, Senator, I imagine shipments would cease by default.”

“You *surely* can’t mean that, sir. Threatening a dire consequence of that nature amounts to blackmail, pure and simple.”

Lyman recoiled as if to avoid personal injury. “You *surely* can’t mean that, Senator. Seriously, were USAF to abrogate its commitment, I assume the United Nations Energy Consortium would eagerly step forward and pick up the tab for, uh . . . ‘carting’ the incredibly scarce, absolutely vital commodity obtainable only in Luna.”

“I’m not certain most committee members share that assumption, Mr. Dysart.”

“Really? Shall we ask them.”

“Mr. Dysart, you were summoned in order to supply acceptable responses, not to dictate the conduct of this hearing.”

Lyman inquired what type of substitute ‘cartage’ the senator had in mind. When no immediate reply was forthcoming, he said, “Mr. Chairman, my CEO and all six members of my company’s executive committee fought my proposal tooth and nail when I brought it to the floor. Individually and collectively, senior management bitterly condemned what they termed my ‘wild and crazy’ notion to invest pluperfectly enormous sums in the Selene Pilot Program.”

“Should that be true, for what possible reason,” demanded Burton in a mocking tone, “would the head of a superlatively affluent company like yours choose to commit ungodly sums to the . . . To a monstrously expensive lunar mining program?”

“The reason is as simple to state and straightforward as a poke in the eye, sir. DT shouldered the staggering financial burden because the pilot project, though desperately needed, was not — *could* not be — funded and undertaken by America, or any other national leadership, or the United Nations Organization itself.”

“So naturally,” was Burton’s snide rejoinder, “on your own, as a matter of selfless idealism, you decided to spend vast amounts of capital to set up and maintain your moon mine as a private enterprise, all the while pursuing other diverse activities as the first steps toward forming self-serving, monopolistic lunar enterprises.”

Unabashed, Lyman hastened to say, “Why, of course, Senator. What, if I may ask, does the committee find reprehensible about an entrepreneurial activity undertaken by private enterprise here, there, anywhere? For that matter, what could be reprehensible about private enterprise of any kind? When time passed and a consensus agreement could not be reached about the means and methods of instituting a lunar mining project considered mandatory by the U.N. hierarchy, DT contracted to privately finance it in its entirety. Billions were spent to excavate, seal and furnish the lunar habitation facility, and a good deal more to develop, fabricate and test the prototype strip-mining vehicle, plus assorted ancillary equipments associated with program operations, and necessary corollary installations.

“DT,” he said forcefully, “has paid through the nose, and will continue to pay, for lunar employee training. Our incremental payroll for vacuum workers in Luna is chockablock with

hazard bonuses, company-paid life and health insurance, and lunar medical and recreational facilities, the latter a necessity to maintain the wellbeing and creature comfort of personnel working under very hazardous conditions. DT also foots the bill for a variety of hidden costs too numerous to mention. I may be backward in some respects, but I fail to catch even a glimmer of how or why anyone could fault our selfless contributions to the future of nuclear fusion technology.”

A sagacious nod from Burton. “Selfless, Mr. Dysart, or self-serving? The committee would like to know precisely how much profit your company hopes to reap from the prospective Selene II Program, if and when such a dubious program should ever be realized.”

“Why, isn’t that obvious, Senator? Dysart Technologies hopes to earn an extremely substantial profit. As you may have heard, avoiding red ink is the goal of all private and publicly owned business enterprises.”

“And are you yourself *quite* certain,” inquired Burton with accusative emphasis, “that in your lexicon ‘profit’ doesn’t translate as a ‘monopoly’?”

“I fear you’ve lost me, Senator. A monopoly on . . . what?”

“A monopoly, sir, on the private, and in your specific case personal, exploitation of lunar natural resources.”

“Ah, now the dawn breaks at last. Near as I’m able to interpret, your statement alludes to a notion that DT might be seeking a government-subsidized monopoly like the cozy arrangement Vonex International, for example, has enjoyed lo these many decades. No such luck, I regret to say. My employees and I are committed to forwarding Selene II, and the downstream Prometheus Project soon to be implemented under U.N. Energy Consortium cognizance.”

“For some reason, Mr. Dysart,” declared Burton, his cheeks burning over the additional reference to Vonex, “you leave the committee less than reassured.”

“It shocks me to hear you say that, sir.”

“You do realize,” declared Burton, “how grossly your reckless, headlong plunge to replace known energy resources with an unproven . . . Your pardon, with an exotic, partially proven technology has alienated the nations and agencies responsible for keeping our world turning energy-wise until, or should I say *if and when* your utopian daydream becomes a reality, or undergoes a miserable demise.”

“What I truly and deeply realize,” said Lyman, his tone of voice resonant, “is that every buggy whip manufacturer in America was forced to declare bankruptcy when mass-produced automobiles became available for sale to the general public. It’s basic human nature for the petroleum-rich nations and the agencies you conveniently neglect to mention resent the soon-to-be-terminal illness afflicting their golden goose, which despite worldwide rationing has wasted away due to the expense retrieval of severely depleted fossil fuel reserves. Nor can they be blamed for harboring such resentment. However that may be, were one to take the long view isn’t it equally disheartening to learn how sorely misplaced their resentment truly is?”

“Ah, Mr. Dysart,” declared the senator, waxing scornfully philosophical, “you cleverly fail to mention the astronomical expense certain to be incurred through the prospective global operation of fusion power plants licensed for construction by the private enterprise under your

sole guidance. According to the figures here before me, your company has already licensed the rights to your patented, possibly fanciful fusion power system to more than one national entity.”

Lyman shrugged. “An open secret,” he admitted. “But you fail to remark on the difference between licensing the rights to our Omega Pinch breakthrough system, plus numerous associated proprietary processes, and actually constructing and putting on line operational fusion facilities. To date, only one build-start has taken place.”

“Hardly surprising,” observed Burton, “when the demand for your magic, er . . . helium compound grossly exceeds the supply. That aside, do you still refuse to advise the committee of the gross sums written-off as tax credits by Dysart Technologies? Most particularly monies associated with the implementation and staffing of a moon mine from which you claim to be scooping up what you also *claim* to be the ultra-scarce substance upon which those patents and proprietary processes are based?”

“On advice of counsel,” said Lyman, “I must again decline to reveal the amount of funding supplied to the varied, ongoing DT programs currently in-house”

“How convenient for you,” accused Burton, “to also avoid mentioning —” “As for the ‘astronomical’ expense you and the committee seem fixated upon,” he pursued, “let me remind you of the phenomenal, ever-increasing overhead cost of —”

“Mr. Chairman,” interrupted Lyman, “please indulge me long enough to point out one single, inarguable unassailable fact. For all practical purposes, controlled nuclear fusion will forever provide a source of limitless, pollution-free energy that may eventually help save humanity from itself.”

Senator Burton rapped his gavel. “Mr. Dysart, we do not have the leisure to —”

“Inject into a necked-down toroidal vacuum chamber,” earnestly continued The Stockholder without pausing for breath, “proportionate, minute quantities of fusible isotopes, and then excite the tenuous mixture electrically while containing it within a strong magnetic field — a necessity, since the flux will instantly cool upon contacting any solid matter — and at a specific degree of excitation an ionized plasma will form. Producing a plasma is quite simple; we do it ourselves each time we switch on an energy-saving fluorescent light or neon bulb.

“Upon achieving supremely elevated plasma temperatures and sustained magnetic confinement,” he added, now on a roll, “googols of respective atomic nuclei overcome the tremendous force binding them in place, fuse together and are instantaneously transformed into other kinds of matter while simultaneously converting most of the formerly binding ‘strong force’ into raw energy. Fusing a single gram of deuterium and helium-three releases energy on the order of nine hundred billion billion ergs. A single erg is insignificant; nine hundred billion billion amounts to a phenomenal energy release.

“As previously stated,” he concluded, “I repeat that controlled nuclear fusion may eventually save we human beings from ourselves. Doomcriers have been out in force for some time, their jeremiads dealing with which catastrophe might do us in first: the ever-more-polluted environment, a super-epidemic, worsening overpopulation problems, the ongoing global climate change nightmare, or the critical energy crunch which has overtaken us.”

Senator Burton rapped his gavel in a firm, rhythmic cadence. “That will do, sir.”

Lyman subsided, his expression sanguine, undefeated, even buoyant. "Correct, Senator. You and the other distinguished ladies and gentlemen making up your committee have listened to enough common sense for one session."

Nudging his seat mate, Dysart cued the attorney, who gathered his meaningless papers and prepared to leave. Unclipping the lapel microphone from his jumpsuit, The Stockholder laid it on the table. "Ladies and gentlemen, unless you mean to keep me here against my will, you must excuse me now. I have a great deal of work to do."

Heavily weighted silence reigned in the hearing chamber as the reclusive billionaire many times over strolled toward the door in leisurely fashion with the stone-faced attorney close at his heels.

## EIGHT The Chinese Box

Jean-Marie Boucher conducted the visitors into the habitat's dormant master control chamber, and turned the final presentation over to Cromwell, who began by pointing out the designated functions of one panel after another installed in the Chariot's command and control console.

Energizing the unit, he brought up a simulation program designed to orient newly arrived surface workers, and also did double-duty as a refresher course for seasoned vacuum hands. A 3-D animation video graphically illustrated the sequential phases of fieldwork. The simulated Resource Transfer Module was depicted pacing the slowly crawling Chariot to recover first-process, unsegregated regolith. Filled to capacity, the conveyance shuttled across the mare to a storage area near the habitat which had been cleared of dust and gravel down to bedrock, and mounds of pay dirt awaited final processing.

Dr. Francke took over, describing the varied extraction processes. He explained how violent suntime and darktime swings in temperature were used to differentiate and separate specific substances. At sunset, the lunar surface resembled an earthly desert, only much more so. Thermal energy rapidly radiated away into space, plunging the meters-in-depth regolith to a worst case of one hundred and twenty-six degrees Kelvin, or approximately minus 230 degrees Fahrenheit. At dawn the temperature swiftly rose until the surface reached approximately the boiling point of water, about 373 degrees Kelvin, or 212 Fahrenheit.

Senator Kyle asked, "Who or what is this . . . Kelvin?"

"A noted mathematician," said Dr. Francke, "who devised the most widely used scientific temperature mensuration scale, where zero degrees equals slightly less than minus two hundred and seventy-three degrees Fahrenheit."

"Another British wiz?" Kyle's head dip silently complimented Secretary Llancolm on his heritage. His reward was a paper-thin smile.

Next to come out, the physicist explained, hydrogen separated at a slightly higher temperature, and then nitrogen, carbon, various oxides and isotopes, and so on up the thermal ladder.

Myron reassumed his role as presenter and ran through the inventory of processed material currently in storage, consecutively bringing up appropriate slides in a large, flat-panel video display. Using a collapsible pointer, he cataloged the means and methods of storage, as well as approximate current volumes.

Reichert remained his stoic, entirely self-contained self; outwardly indifferent, he absorbed the information in silence. Responding to a query from Kyle, Myron cited the rationale for targeting Mare Tranquillitatis rather than Serenitatis, Imbrium, or Procellarum — other “seas” on the lunar surface, only fifty-nine percent of which was visible from Earth. “The preliminary survey report indicated a relatively high proportion of helium-three in this sector’s ilmenite; that, and its proximity to the prospective Palus Somni spacecraft launch system, were the major drivers leading to the U.N. site-planning committee’s recommendation to establish pilot project operations in the lowland mare. “The overriding reason,” he amplified, “was a consensus opinion that it would be much simpler to anchor the spacecraft mass-driver launch rails on the steep Palus Somni’s palisade instead of erecting it out in the flat, open mare.”

Something was apparently troubling the senator. “All well and good, Cromwell. But what Selene II, and the super-costly Prometheus follow-on begin running shy of special helium?”

Dr. Francke fielded the question. “Particulate bombardment of the regolith has gone on for billions and billions of years, Senator. The overall quantity of helium-three locked in the regolith is undefinable, but it occurs across the entire lunar surface, which in area corresponds roughly to that of the African continent. Each cubic meter of regolith contains an unknown quantity of helium-three, so even if the full-blown Prometheus Project were to meet the annual tonnage harvest, decades would pass before the deposits were exhausted. Long before that, I’m sure a viable substitute plasma constituent will be found, perhaps a complementary process as well to take advantage of more readily available fusible isotopes.”

“Decades . . . ?” The senator glanced about the control center. “Sounds like there’s enough special helium to go around. Listen, I suspect we’ve seen and heard everything connected with what you folks are doing. Maybe it’s time to sit us down and fill us in on the Selene II proposal and its thousand-page wish list. I for one am itching to learn how many trillions or quadrillions of new dollars my constituents will have to part with in order to make a worthwhile proposition of the mining claim you’ve staked out in this gawdawful wasteland.”

“Delighted to oblige, Senator. If Mssr Reichert and Secretary Llancolm are agreeable, we shall adjourn to my office.”

“One moment, please.” Reichert forestalled the departure with a rare comment. “Are we to take it for granted that these edifying propaganda sessions staged to glorify Dysart’s lunar madness are being recorded?”

“Assuredly, Mr. Chairman,” said Jean-Marie. “Our encrypted lasercomm link is transmitting real-time audiovisual data to San Francisco, New York and Geneva. U.N. officialdom and DT’s executive committee have watched and listened to every word spoken, seen everything you and these other gentlemen have been shown.”

His manner refractory, Belkin Reichert’s normally placid features segued into an expression of acute distaste. His deep-set eyes of robin’s egg blue clouded ominously, and a hint of frost invaded his diction. “How remarkably thorough. Going to such extreme lengths hardly seems necessary.”

“More than necessary,” put in Secretary Llancolm. “Mandatory, Mr. Reichert. The U.N. Senior Advisory Board, my Consortium associates and Dysart Technologies’ leadership felt it

absolutely essential to track and judge the pace and progress of our meetings. Dr. Boucher has complied with their wishes to the letter.”

His apple-cheeked countenance stolid, Reichert let the director and the other visitors precede him from the rock-walled chamber. Conscious that Myron was shutting down the console, he rose, refused to make eye contact with Cromwell, and exited in a less-than-sure-footed moonwalk.

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Upon returning to San Francisco from the nation’s capital, Lyman instructed the security staffer driving the cab to pull up on Park Presidio Boulevard a block from the boutique. Courting an unnecessary risk, he found the alley alongside Salon Bellissima deserted, electronically keyed open the section of false brickwork, and slipped into the narrow passageway, peeked through the pinhole lens concealed in a fashion poster. Carolyn was alone in her office, talking on the phone. Bypassing the lavatory at the end of the narrow corridor, he made a leisurely return to the tower via the clandestine tunnel.

Having called ahead to let Clay know when he was due to arrive, he found the CEO lounging in the penthouse office. “Congratulations!” hailed Ben, sounding querulous. “You wasted no words antagonizing an entire herd of United States Senators.”

Lyman said cheerfully, “Thanks, Ben. You watched?”

An indignant snort. “I watched and listened until I grew too ill hold up my head.”

“If you’re halfway honest,” declared Lyman, “you’ll admit that practically everyone conscious and breathing is privy to a very badly kept secret: the honorable senior Senator from Maryland has been in Reichert’s hip pocket ever since Belkin and his oil-smeared cronies backed him in that disputed, long-gone Baltimore mayoral race.”

The middle-aged CEO sniffed his displeasure. “Ancient history, Mr. Stockholder, sir. It has naught to do with *your* crime. What baffles me is why you went to such an extreme length to ensure a less than enthusiastic reception to whatever convoluted report the Senate’s errand boy, Kyle, brings home from Luna. Not long ago the House voted to allocate America’s pro rata share of Selene II funding, and it barely squeaked by, but if the illustrious senator from Maryland and his colleagues and co-conspirators manage to sabotage the bill, Selene II’s dead in the water, and you damn well know it. Without a chorus of ‘ayes’ from both sides of the aisle, Selene II and Prometheus go into the toilet, and perhaps your semi-bankrupt company too, as you also damn well know.”

“Quit fretting, Ben. We’ll collar the votes,” said Lyman said with what sounded like more assurance than he might have felt. “You worry too much.”

“Oh, really?” Clay uttered an indignant snort. “Dullard that I am, I thought it was what you pay me to do.”

“Among other things,” said Dysart airily. “Put out any major fires while I baited the committee dragon in its den, or maybe get a heads-up from Jean-Marie?”

“No, way too soon for that. He’s tied-up entertaining three oddly assorted guests. He did call, but what he had to say was of minor . . . Oh, almost forgot one small brushfire that probably deserves your attention. The fusion genius heading up your brain trust in Nevada insists on a face-to-face meet soonest.”

“Xiang Lim . . ? Problems at the site?”

“If so, his note mentioned nothing of that nature.”

“He sent a paper note . . ?”

“A letter delivered by special messenger requesting an ASAP sit-down without fail, and marked urgent, urgent, urgent, underlined twice.”

The news gave Lyman pause. “I’m a touch travel-weary, Ben. Besides, it wouldn’t be wise to show up in Nevada on the eve of the Paiute ceremony.”

“No need for that,” Clay told him. “Lim’s on holiday here in San Fran . . . Well, close by over in Marin. His note tells us he’s been sightseeing with his wife and daughter while staying with a niece and her family in Mill Valley.”

“Why didn’t you say so?”

“Just did,” the CEO told him. “Here’s a thought: why not invite Lim and family to drop by Carolyn’s shop? His Frau could try on fancy gowns and whatnot while Lim sneaks inside the tower same way you just came in from the cold.”

“Not through the tunnel!” denied Dysart.

“Why? Don’t you trust Lim?”

“Implicitly,” replied Lyman, “but Marty’s Rule A, Number One, Prime is that no one except you, Marty and Carolyn are to learn about the medieval monk’s hole in the sub-basement, or the tunnel. None of the construction workers knew the whole story on the dig. Didn’t we spend a bundle helping two sets of constructions supervisors find lucrative employment for key personnel on the other side of the globe? I won’t compromise my comings and goings, *or* Carolyn’s. Let’s stay on the same page about that, Ben.”

After a laconic shrug, Clay assured The stockholder that no one would learn about the underground getaway passage from hi.”

“Instead,” said Lyman, “get word to Lim’s cousin that I —”

“Niece,” corrected Clay.

“Okay, niece. Say I’ll meet her uncle in Carolyn’s office at his convenience, but make it clear that such ‘convenience’ has to be around midday tomorrow. That should work for both of us.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

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Carolyn Lester cracked the door to her office and rapidly surveyed Salon Bellissima’s showroom. Two customers were visible on the floor, one attentive to the pitch of a sales staffer, the other apparently preoccupied by the wares on display. She opened the door wider, hurriedly gestured for Dr. Lim to slip inside.

A *San Francisco Giants* baseball cap perched askew on his head failed to adequately cover the physicist’s overlong mop of dark, graying hair. In what Lyman thought a feeble attempt to pass himself off as just another tourist, he wore a florid red-and-blue Hawaiian shirt, and cutoffs that reached halfway down to his bony ankles. Never one to waste words on formality, Dr. Lim bobbed his head by way of greeting.

Only once before had Dysart seen the Nevada research facility’s guiding light wearing anything but a lab smock or well-tailored business suit. Deciding he’d grossly overdone the

tourist masquerade, he motioned Lim to a chair, sat back and waited for him to unburden himself.

Lim's nervousness was apparent. Too agitated to sit down, he swept the baseball cap from his head, and thanked Dysart for seeing him on such short notice. "I can stay only a minute. They're outside the store, watching me, my family."

"They . . . ?" At a loss, Lyman said, "Who might 'they' be?"

"Security people from the Chinese Embassy. They follow wherever I go."

"Sorry, I won't pretend to understand. I was told you're here on holiday."

Looking even more stricken, the physicist explained that he'd asked his niece to mention a holiday for fear the message might be intercepted. "Two days ago," he announced, "I was summoned to the PRC Embassy in San Francisco and . . . I was given no choice, Mr. Dysart. I'm being sent back to China."

Hearing a front-page news item like that brought Lyman up out of the chair. "Whoa! Back up, Lim. Begin at the beginning. I know you've retained dual citizenship, but what in the name of every star in the sky makes you want to go back to China?"

"It's the last thing I wish to do, Mr. Dysart. I'm being forced to follow their orders. I have close family ties in Hong Kong, and if I should refuse the, uh . . . invitation, it would place my loved ones in dire straits."

"They threatened you with *that*?"

Lim flinched before The Stockholder's flare of naked outrage. "Yes," he admitted, "with that, and other, less ominous entreaties and promises. There is also a second matter I must speak to you about. If I did not hold you and your works in the highest possible esteem, or owe you a debt of gratitude far beyond repayment for what you have done for me, I would not dare to utter another word."

His anger diminishing to a slow simmer, Lyman tried to be placatory. "If doing so causes you serious discomfort, it might be wise to —"

"China," blurted the physicist, purging himself, "intends to construct an Omega Pinch System in Qingdao and put it on line."

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Lyman.

"You have heard only the good news, not the bad, Mr. Dysart. Being not only who they are, but what they believe themselves to be," qualified the physicist, "the leaders of my former homeland refuse to license Omega Pinch. They mean to use me for providing the . . . For supplying the 'blueprint' as it were, and technical direction."

Lyman clapped his hands, startling the physicist. "Lim, what you may not know," he said, buoyantly enthusiastic, "is that you've handed me the most resounding good news I've heard for some time. No, more than just good news; it's a genuine cause *célèbre*."

"Mr. Dysart, h-how . . . can you possibly *mean* that?" stammered the physicist. "The PRC means to cheat you, cheat your company of its rightful —"

"Ahh-h-h, a piddling amount," scoffed Lyman. "Pennies! What encourages me so greatly is that it proves beyond doubt China's mandarins have seen the light. Last year you hosted their high mucky-muck energy commissar — whatever his official title — when that Chinese delegation toured the Nevada site. Isn't that so?"

“Commissar indeed.” An expression of intense distaste distorted Lim’s Sinitic features. “The high and mighty gentleman told me he was impressed beyond words, and impressed he did indeed seem to be, if only with himself. Yet he failed to let slip one word tending to reveal whether his impression of Omega Pinch performance was favorable or otherwise.”

“After what you told me,” said Lyman, “I think that question answers itself.”

Perplexed, Lim twisted the *Giants* baseball cap in his slender fingers. “I fail to comprehend why word of China’s duplicitous thievery can be construed as a happy circumstance. It amazes me to hear you say highjacking your intellectual property is no of great concern. I had imagined terrible anger on your part upon learning how the autocrats who rule China mean to steal what we have worked so long and hard to bring to fruition. I should think what they contemplate would be especially disturbing now, with your company pouring outrageous sums into the lunar recovery of lunar helium-three. Why do you choose to treat joyously a bold, arrogant act of piracy.”

His manner jovial, Lyman said, “Lim, your mind works in the manner of a superbly gifted scientist, nor would I ever have it any other way. Try changing hats for a moment. Try viewing the upshot of what you call ‘bold piracy’ through a politician’s eyes. I know how difficult that may be, but in politics things are seldom black, white or even gray, and rarely quantifiable. The principal reason behind my . . . call it optimism for want of a better term, is that China’s environmental problems, always severe, have steadily grown worse due to accelerating global climate change and unstemmed population growth. What could be a more sensible decision for the mandarins than to incorporate in one of their notorious fifty-year plans a forward-looking scheme aimed at weaning their billions away from the dwindling reserves of fossil fuel, and at the same time helping cleanse China’s polluted air, land and waters? You may think my attitude hopelessly naïve, but I sincerely believe nuclear fusion technology will become the magical touchstone philosophers have dreamed about forever. Fusion is a Promethean gift stolen with your invaluable assistance from the gods. I firmly believe that, and also believe it will eventually solve not only the energy quandary, but many of the world’s civil infrastructure and environmental problems as well.”

Dr. Lim’s brow furrowed. “I must confess, Mr. Dysart, that my poor senses are not able to reconcile your words of wisdom with the crime my former homeland seems willing to commit. What you say may be logical in some cryptic way, yet they make me extremely glad I do not exist in the world of politics and politicians.”

Lyman smiled. “A brave statement. Unfortunately, we all live in the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. The Peoples Republic,” he added, speaking in a more serious vein, “is and has always been a competitive society, and competition between China and America has been healthy and aggressive not only in an economic sense, but in scientific and technological pursuits, the arts, literature, practically every field of human endeavor. Now that the PRC is involving itself in the newborn fusion revolution, how do you suppose their U.N. delegation will vote on Selene II when the General Assembly convenes?”

“Ah, now I see!” exclaimed Lim. “You clear the waters in the manner of a sunburst. Yes, your point is inarguable.” Lim shot a glance at the chronometer on Carolyn’s desk. “I really must go; the embassy watchdogs are not doubt searching for me through the shop’s front window. One

last explanation is in order. I broke a solemn vow by informing you of the theft you have astonished me by accepting so graciously, doing so only because I felt honor-bound to tell you why I'm being coerced into abandoning Dysart Technologies and my work. Informing anyone, you must understand, is something I was sternly counseled not to do, and pledged on my life to refrain from doing."

Lyman said, "Losing your inestimable ability grieves me deeply, Lim. I dread being deprived of your mind, spirit and dedication, yet I fully appreciate your position. Keep in touch if doing so doesn't compromise you or your family in any way. I wish you the very best of everything."

Decades of living and working in the States had Americanized the physicist somewhat, but he retained a cultural aversion to shaking hands. His features mildly contorted, he dipped his head in a sign of respect, awkwardly donned the baseball cap and made as if to open the door.

Dysart arrested his departure. "One last word, my friend. I commissioned the best writer in our Public Relations stable to write an article. When published, I'm confident it will enhance the already high probability that you will become the Nobel laureate in Physics."

Lim flushed. "If such a wondrous honor were to fall to me, my one and only hope will be to prove worthy of the accolade."

"You've already done that ten times over," declared Lyman. "You're more than eminently worthy. Your accomplishments leave nothing more for you to prove."

The physicist rattled something in rapid-fire Mandarin that Dysart took to be a benediction. The office door clicked shut behind him.

The Stockholder stayed rooted behind Carolyn's desk for minutes, fist to chin, deep in thought. He was still pondering Lim's revelations when Carolyn came in and acted surprised to find him still there.

Preoccupied by what had transpired, and leery about how the absence of Lim might cloud DT's ongoing fusion efforts, he kissed Carolyn, told her the meeting had gone well, and exited through the lavatory at the end of a short hallway. His head heavy with thoughts tumbling over one another in his mind, he rode the claustrophobic tunnel leading to the safety and security of Dysart Tower.

## NINE Selene II

His visitors and subordinates seated themselves, and Jean-Marie brought up the first computer slide highlighting Selene II's overall objectives. "The total quantity of helium-three embedded in the lunar regolith is difficult to estimate accurately. As a ratio of substance-converted-to-energy, it is far more plentiful than all remaining, difficult-to-extract reserves of carbon-based fossil fuel. Selene II proposes to harvest, process and ship as many metric tonnes of fusible helium-three as can be recovered within an interim period yet to be established."

The ensuing silence suggested skepticism by the senator, and abject denial of such a "fairy tale" by Reichert.

"The basic goal," continued Boucher, "will be meeting a high percentage of overall program objectives sufficient to pave the way for the full-blown Prometheus Project. In light of that, Selene II's primary goal will be establishing an expanded headquarters base of operations

here in the lowland mare, where the regolith varies in depth from less than one to three or more meters, and overlays a schist of basalt that would make it inordinately difficult, or more likely preclude, the construction of a sufficiently large sublunar base of operations here in the mare.”

Flashing a series of preliminary design sketches and renderings executed by urban planners of the U.N. Economic & Social Council, the director enumerated successive stages of excavating chambers in the nearby Palus Somni massif that would culminate in larger habitat chambers and an adjoining service complex with many meters of rock overhead providing excellent thermal insulation, radiation protection, and an effective meteoroid shield.

A second, equally vital construction phase called for incrementally extending a monorail network that would afford access to distant strip-mining locales. Delving into the long-term plans and administrative facilities needed to accomplish stated project objectives, he cited future milestones related to export planning and the importation of certain consumables and other items not available in Luna. He expounded on logistics requirements, reviewed options pertaining to improved USAF spacecraft launch systems and landing areas, flashed charts and graphs depicting a prospective electrical power distribution grid, and defined the attributes of various command and control functions, including generic software and firmware requirements.

Next came bar-chart projections depicting the accelerated, enhanced processing of extracted materials, the estimated tankage requirements of substances destined for export, and a variety of storage facilities capable of accommodating substances stored for both export as well as lunar usage. He detailed agricultural expansion by way of scattered greenhouses an order of magnitude larger and more productive than the current module. He spoke of the logistics involved in personnel hiring and transport, the concomitant need for adequate medical facilities, and concluded by mentioning the need for dedicated recreation centers and a proposed machine shop facility.

Senator Kyle reacted to this last statement. “Hang on, there, Bow-cher. Why the fancy workshop?”

“Lunar raw materials,” replied Jean-Marie, “particularly metals, will be made available in quantity. By equipping a shop with machine tools, Selene II personnel can produce a spectrum of smaller, simpler-to-fashion items, and thus avoid the expense of shipping them, and the delay while the items are in transit.”

Kyle’s head wagged knowingly. “Hate to say it, but your ambitious song and dance starts to sound like Russian roulette played with an automatic pistol. All it’d take to wipe out the whole super-costly kit and caboodle, along with the investment of of my taxpaying constituents, would be for a large piece of sky junk to come sailing down and make it all go boom.”

“What you infer,” conceded Dr. Boucher, “is conceivable, Senator, yet a very, repeat *very* remote probability.”

Sounding put-upon, as if the prospective monies for Selene II would come out of his personal bank account, Kyle said suspiciously, “I’m not knowledgeable enough on the subject to argue. Now that we’ve heard all the lectures, seen what you and your associates have shown us, I think we’ve a fair handle on the big picture of where you’ve been, and a better ‘n fair idea of where Selene II wants to take you. Lay it on us: how much, and how soon, Bow-cher? How deep do the pockets of my poor, unsuspecting constituents have to be?”

Jean-Marie thumbed the computer's remote controller. A straightforward, easy-to-read bar chart glowed in the display, its vertical ribs graphically depicting incremental funding requirements time-scaled in lunar cycles.

The senator's jaw dropped. "Holy . . . ! Are you serious?"

"Incremental funding, of course," Jean-Marie hastened to say. "The projected figures derive from a tentative master schedule calling for major blocs of funding supplied at specified intervals. Once Selene II gains approval, specific lunar cycle milestones and benchmark dates can be attributed to specific dates. Operations should start sometime between 2089 and 2091."

Reichert's lips warped in an unhealthy parody of humor. "A few trillions here," he said with acidic intonation, "a few trillions there, and before long it adds up to a significant sum."

"Excuse me, Mr. Chairman," drawled Secretary Llancolm. "One should not criticize what one does not understand. Your oblique attempt at jocularly illustrates the fact that it would be criminal not to balance Selene II's cost against the astronomical deficit to be incurred should the program *not* be funded and brought on line."

Visibly incensed, Reichert jumped on the remark with both feet. "Excuse *me*, Mr. Secretary," he retorted, "but one is definitely obligated to criticize when one senses the need. Certain business associates and I have become convinced that Dysart's crime — the U.N.'s crime, were one to equally distribute the blame — amounts to a blind, unswerving insistence upon squandering trillions in shrinking global resources to not only perpetuate, but grossly enhance the lunar madness DT has set in motion under a smokescreen umbrella lofted by the United Nations."

Llancolm's sharp rejoinder, delivered in a pronounce, irritating Oxon drawl, was meant to infuriate the megatycoon, and did its job superbly. "Mr. Chairman, in the late nineteenth century a New York investment banking house dispatched a young accountant to rural Pennsylvania with instructions to look into the report of some black, gooey tar oozing out of the ground, and evaluate the discovery with a view toward what, if anything, might be in it for the firm.

"John D. Rockefeller," asserted Llancolm, "returned to Manhattan with word that absolutely nothing was in it for the firm, shortly thereafter submitted his resignation and founded Standard Oil Company. Is it possible that Vonex International has a similar goal in mind? Tell us, Mr. Chairman, does the gigantic Vonex conglomerate operating under your faultless guidance mean to involve itself in lunar exploitation once the dust settles and Selene II fails to be sanctioned?"

Tightlipped, Reichert said, "Mr. Secretary, I refuse to listen to innuendo of that stripe. Not from you or anyone else."

"Nor will I, Mr. Reichert, allow your doctrine of obfuscation to go unanswered. You mentioned the U.N. 'crime' of endorsing and supporting the selfless contribution Dysart Technologies has made toward the betterment of human society, and blatantly dare to denigrate the current pilot program by referring to it as 'lunar madness.' You might give serious thought to crediting these gentlemen and I with at least minimal intelligence. In your wildest imaginings, what makes you believe we are willing to swallow your innuendo as antiseptic, while you besmirch the energy solution proffered by others as a 'crime'?"

Livid, Reichert was in the act of voicing a sharp rebuttal when Jean-Marie, aware that the inevitable emotional explosion had been ignited, cut off the utterance. "Gentlemen, it may be opportune time to break for lunch."

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Such as they were, the well-wishings and farewells had all been said. Dr. Francke was preparing to escort the homeward bound visitors to the USAF station next to the Palus Somni spacecraft launch site. He commiserated with Senator Kyle, who amused Myron by grousing about the prospect of again being trapped aboard a boxcar in trajectory. "Three more miserable days floating around in a tin can with no clue as to which way's up, which is down."

Alone in the privacy of his office, Jean-Marie was in the act of putting through a lasercomm call to The Stockholder when, as he had suspected, Reichert sought him out in private, stepped inside uninvited, and waited for the pocket door to slide closed behind him. "Dr. Boucher," said the chairman in a subdued, carefully modulated tone of voice, "I judge you a sophisticated gentleman of extraordinary ability and intelligence who by no can be considered the least bit naïve."

"That is most flattering, Mssr Reichert."

"I credit you for doing your duty admirably," added the other. "Yet you must realize why I find it impossible to see any value in subscribing to the grandiose venture so-eloquently attempted to shove down our throats."

"If it pleases you, Mssr Chairman," replied Boucher with null inflection, "I shall pretend to be surprised by that remark."

The gigatycoon sniffed impatiently. "Let's not waste time bandying words. You certainly must appreciate the fact that this fusion foolishness has gone on far too long and expensively for belief. Pressing forward the insanely ambitious tissue of planet-saving moonbeams Dysart and the U.N. have fostered is madness, pure and simple."

"On that score," said the director, "we hold widely divergent opinions. Despite what you choose to term 'too long and expensive,' I am certain the prospective lunar programs will come on line a bit late, perhaps a touch *too* late."

"Wishful thinking!" declared Reichert in his best, most imperious manner. "I have it on excellent authority that a conservative estimate of the total quantity of precious helium isotope in this lunar dust bit totals less than one hundred thousand metric tonnes. What excuses will Dysart and the U.N. invent when their grandiloquent, fiscally and morally bankrupt programs exhaust the supply, and ask forgiveness for thrusting insolvency upon every civilized nation in the globe?"

Jean-Marie's tolerant smile raked the chairman. "Your 'excellent authority' should have done his homework more conscientiously. The published prospectuses for Selene II and Prometheus, quantified by experts, estimates helium-three deposited in the regolith to range from over eight hundred thousand to more than one million metric tonnes."

"That statement, Dr. Boucher, is too absurd for comment!"

"Export during the Selene II phase," said Jean-Marie, "will more than satisfy all demands during the interim, when fusion systems are being constructed and brought on line. Research facilities in either hemisphere are at ths moment redirecting their efforts toward discovering a

method of producing supplementary quantities of helium-three by a process akin to the beta decay of tritium. That is to say, by laser bombardment to create spalling within certain lithium isotopes. If necessary, the lunar supply will be augmented, although by then discovering an alternative, hopefully aeneutronic fusible fuel may obviate the necessity.”

Reichert did not bother to rebut the explanation, probably because he failed to understand it. He nevertheless met the director’s refractory stare with customary boldness. “Ah, but what you perhaps do not know,” he said, delivering each word with precise enunciation, “is that my associates and I are committed to achieving an infinitely more practical solution to the energy dilemma. We mean to supply limitless solar energy as a cure-all for the fast-approaching crisis.”

“A rumor to that effect has indeed surfaced,” conceded Jean-Marie.

“Allow me,” declared the other, his manner lofty, “to confirm that . . . rumor.”

“Of and in itself,” declared Boucher, making it a flat statement, “any increase in solar energy will be welcomed by the hydro, photovoltaic solar, concentrated solar, wind, geothermal, marine and whatever other existing, non-polluting renewable sources, which cannot begin to satisfy present global energy requirements, much less a ballooning future demand. Please try to keep something in mind, Mssr Reichert: DT’s Omega Pinch fusion system is meant to temporarily fill the gap that will widen as fossile fuel consumption declines to zero. Eventually, something far superior to Omega Pinch will evolve.”

“You should be overjoyed,” announced Reichert, “to hear that an elite scientific research team under Vonex guidance has evolved a thoroughly practical means of girdling the Earth with an array of modified Dysart Synthocell solar energy panels. When our project comes to fruition, the company you serve will have earned substantial recompense from our massive investment in basic, off-the-shelf Synthocell panels.”

Deciding Reichert was pontificating mainly to hear himself speak, Jean-Marie let it be known how starkly inconceivable it was for those possessing so much as a slight degree of technical sophistication to imagine a practical exoatmospheric system such as that envisioned by Vonex.”

“In that event,” countered Reichert, his tone one of latent mockery, “permit me to enlighten you. Practicality will evolve from a major technological innovation destined to supply the world with a comprehensive realization of solar energy’s limitless potential. Why should we have need of doubtful, ultra-costly Dysart playthings when a gargantuan fusion furnace burns forever in the sky, and supplies everlasting energy gratis?” Drama implicit in every nuanced statement, he described how Vonex meant to tap the sun’s radiant output “directly, on a truly fantastic scale,” and send to the ground more terawattage than anyone could imagine, enough to replace all other energy needs for eternity.

Miffed and growing angrier by the second to have become a captive audience to the other’s rantings in his own office, not to mention being forced to put up with his overbearing arrogance, Jean-Marie was finding it difficult to keep his Latin temper in check. “You, sir, and your learned associates,” he said slowly, “are to be congratulated for actively sponsoring a technical innovation of that magnitude and scope. Dysart Technologies will of course applaud major third party investment in basic Synthocell acquisition. Vonex International will in that case purchase in one of our principle productin quantity, thereby upping our profits, which will in turn surely excite the economic pundits who report on industry happenings.

“Yet your proposed solution to the overall energy dilemma,” added the director before Reichert could interrupt, “assures me Vonex’s ultimate goal will be to monopolize power regulation and distribution, precisely as it has done in the entire petrochemical field.”

A razor-sharp edge crept into Reichert’s retort. “I have also been assured that your revered ‘Stockholder’ will not shrink from taking advantage of our huge investment, though I suppose you will both consider our farsighted endeavor a good deal less than worthwhile.”

“Oh, absolutely the opposite, Mssr Reichert,” denied Boucher. “As a supplement to nuclear fusion, the fruits of your desire to invest significant sums in our Energy Division will be welcomed. Insofar as DT wishes to reap the cited dividends, please order every Synthocell unit out company is able to produce.”

“Sarcasm does not become you, Mssr Boucher. Capturing solar energy,” insisted the other, “is the way of the future.”

“The future, Mssr Reichert,” said the director a touch more hotly that he intended to, “is a blank sheet upon which anything may be written. Having actively advocated and promoted a desperate need for Selene II and Prometheus, the U.N. intends to make certain whoever writes upon that virginal sheet does so with forethought and integrity. To their immense credit, those charged with guiding the U.N. Organization sustain a vital interest in the way of the future.”

“How idealistic!”

“No, no; not idealism. Since you have broached the subject, shall we examine the brand of ‘idealism’ you and your esteemed associates preach and apparently intend to practice. Your drive to place all of humanity’s energy eggs in the solar energy basket make it abundantly clear that you now are, and will be, content to ignore the negative, potentially dangerous consequences and side-effects associated with the pretentious program you advocate.”

“Really? May I ask what the nature of such postulated negatives and dangerous consequences might be?”

“It seems futile to state the obvious,” said Jean-Marie, “but I shall do so anyhow. The limitless solar energy you claim to be super-efficiently collectible on-orbit may sound to the uninitiated like a viable answer to humanity’s energy ills, whereas in reality it would not begin to bridge the energy abyss. Aside from relegating now-proven nuclear fusion technology to the role of a secondary power source, beaming microwave energy to the ground constitutes a classic zero sum solution. The objective you and your cartel have in mind would allow — no, would reinvigorate — a continuation of biomass processing to produce ethanol, soy for diesel, et cetera, not to mention the ongoing extraction of recoverable fossil fuel residues which still exist. In short, your scheme would not simply fail, it would contribute directly to the anthropogenic effluents of civilization partially responsible for the world’s polluted biosphere, and would continue to accelerate, not retard, global climate change.”

“You exaggerate wildly, but do go on.”

“Gladly.” Boucher carefully framed what he wished to say. “A literal avalanche of negatives attaches itself to the overt clumsiness and coincident lethal hazards involved in the proposed venture. In beaming microwave energy to the ground, you and your associates conveniently overlook the authentic danger it would impose upon aircraft, cities, rural homes, farms, forests, and essentially everyone on the ground.”

Approaching late middle-age, Reichert's fabulous business success had left him a novice when it came to controlling his own volcanic temper. His voice laden with bitter reproach, he said, "Hug every tree in the forest if you wish, Boucher. Save every last whale, polar bear and penguin. My associates and I are able to view matters much more clearly, in an entirely different light."

"Mssr Reichert," was the director's prompt rejoinder, "an age-old maxim has it that one's perspective depends largely upon whose ox is being gored. It pains me say your visionary effort will suffer serious impairment. Your worldview, shared by very few others, amounts to a shortsighted refusal to look one millimeter beyond the rivers and oceans of euros, new dollars, yen, rupees, pesos and renminbi you are certain await you in a treasure trove at the end of the solar energy rainbow."

Reichert's temper flared into incandescence. "Those selfsame euros, new dollars, rupees, pesos and, er, ren —"

"Renminbi," supplied the former French diplomat, "Chinese currency derives its name from the PRC's identity: *Chin Zhonghua Renmin Gonghehuo* in phonetic Mandarin."

Thoroughly enraged by what he took as a slight — being talked down to by someone he thought of as a lesser mortal far beneath his station — Reichert fumed. "In spite of what small-minded men like you may believe," he told the director, "valuta, however labeled, is what makes the world spin on its axis. It amounts to a near-certainty, Mssr Boucher, that once it reaches the Senate floor, and U.N. General Assembly, your fusion bill will be voted-down, killing your demented Selene II and follow-on Prometheus adventures, which will die a sudden death and be consigned not to the lunar dust bin, but the dust bin of history. *Then* we shall see whose worldview is most viable, and most valued."

"Fortunately for those of us who live in the real world," said Jean-Marie, "you and your estimable associates have no vote in the matter."

Barely able to contain himself, Reichert's response was vitriolic. "What we *do* have, my dear sir, are resources that will truly amaze you. Ah, it's pointless to continue this fruitless discussion."

"Totally," agreed Jean-Marie.

The chairman turned on his heel, stumbled unaccustomed to the weak lunar gravity, caught himself and shuffled hurriedly out of the office, barely giving the automatic pocket door time to clear the end of his nose as it retracted.

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Alone in the claustrophobic office, his psyche jarred by the senseless, prickly exchange just concluded, the director felt that trading barbs with the megalomaniac had not been a total a waste of time and energy. It was not difficult to imagine what the chairman would say if told that their heated words had been dispatched earthward, an addendum to the preceding lasercomm transmissions. Worn to a nub after hosting the three oddly assorted visitors, he nevertheless did as promised, and put through an encrypted lasercomm transmission to Geneva. Informed that Sir Ian Moorman was unavailable, he was assured that his message would be delivered promptly when the secretary-general returned.

Disconnecting, he closed his eyes, reflected on the future. Living and working in Luna was no picnic, but Selene II looming on the near horizon promised widespread improvements, not only major advantages in mining operations and residence, but if approved, and he accepted the responsibility of becoming executive director.

Envisioning the stark alternative to Selene II approval caused him to cringe inwardly, rocked by prescient foreknowledge of what would ensue if the mandatory forerunner to the gargantuan Prometheus Project was to be voted down. Eight or ten at a time, their lucrative contracts voided by default, pilot program personnel would ship homeward not because of the cyclical rotation policy, leaving the Chariot, solar mirror and other equipments to rest immobile, dormant in merciless raw sunlight, frozen in starlit vacuum, a spectrum of monuments to human folly.

He himself would sorely miss the sense of accomplishment that went hand in hand with his current position. He would doubtless suffer nostalgic reminders of the incisive discussions with Dr. Francke, the camaraderie during off-duty bull sessions with the technicians and crewmen, or the verbal give and take with dedicated, high-spirited Myron Cromwell. Yet that, he told himself, was looking only at the dark side, and a view he did not care for.

Opening the intercom circuit, he summoned Cromwell.

An audience of one, Myron listened with nulled expression to the director's recapitulation of the recently concluded confrontation by Reichert. Jean-Marie finished with a succinct description of Vonex International's purported scheme to "girdle the Earth with improved Dysart Synthocell photovoltaic panels.

"You're putting me on," said Myron. "That harebrained notion's been kicked around for decades, and dismissed as impractical. Sure you heard the straight skinny from Mr. Moneybags?"

An affirmative nod. "He didn't delve into the details, probably because few if any exist."

"Well, Jesus-my-beads!" exclaimed Myron. "Neither Vonex, DT, nor any other outfit or agency has enough smarts and muscle to pull off a crazy stunt like that."

The director's steady, troubled gaze made Myron suspect his assessment had been less than totally accurate. "Mssr Reichert," declared Jean-Marie, "does not see things as they are, only as they need be in order to satisfy his caprice and convenience. Though reluctant to do so, I believe it needful to unburden myself on a delicate matter about which our Stockholder swore me to secrecy."

"You hinting that the clock's about to strike midnight?" asked Myron.

"Something of that nature. Misinformation games are being played on several levels, in several quarters, by a tawdry though gifted spin-doctors. I have partially convinced myself that Reichert's Synthocell propaganda ploy is another example of petrodollar gamesmanship. Llancolm privately advised me that the U.N. has an exceptionally strong desire to keep the turning wheels-within-wheels hush-hush. You shall be the sole exception to sustaining my vow of silence."

"Your call, Jean-Marie."

The director pursed his lips, regarded the operations manager soberly. "At the conclusion of yesterday's session, Secretary-General Moorman called to inform me that his people have quietly pulsed selected members of the Security Council, and selected, highly placed others — strictly an informal canvass, you understand. The cross-section of member nations appear evenly

divided over Selene II, though Lanny believes his enthusiastic report on our pilot program progress will favorably sway certain number of undecideds. He is also convinced that most members of the U.N. Economic and Social Council lean heavily toward Selene II approval, his rationale being that while ECSOC ordinarily meets but once each year, a special session is scheduled to convene on the eve of the General Assembly vote.

"Sir Ian," continued the director, "sounded reasonably confident that the Selene II Resolution enjoys, at minimum, a fifty percent-plus chance of passage, yet only, it goes without saying, if the U.S. Congress endorses America's share of the overall expenditure; and secondarily, it is needful to say, if Reichert's cartel is less than successful in suborning certain high-ranking officials."

"*Buying votes?*" A grace note of genuine surprise crept into the expostulation. "My, how naughty!" His eyes half-closed in thought, Cromwell looked thoughtful. "What if Mr. Moneybags finds it tough getting his act together in time for, uh . . . Call it the semifinal Senate go-round, and formal vote?"

"It would lay a major obstacle in the path of conventional energy's sacred cause," said Jean-Marie without hesitation. "Not a virtual obstacle, a very weighty one."

"Duly noted." Myron pondered at length. "Here's a notion to chew on. The U.N. vote's slated to take place in a week to ten days, maybe less. Correct?"

"Correct, Immediately after the American Congress sprinkles holy water on the U.S. share of funding, or lets the bill die by shooting it down."

"The three inquisitors," speculated Myron, "will be homeward bound in a few hours. The three-day grace period will evaporate while they're in trajectory."

"A true statement."

"Capping that fact," said Myron, "is another: everything painted with a political tar brush moves at glacial velocity."

"A second truism." Intent upon learning where his ops manager was heading, Boucher rested his elbows on the plastic desk, his quizzical gaze fixed on Myron.

"The bottom line," declared Cromwell, "is easy to read. Our friend Llancolm, that damfool hillbilly senator, and Big Chief Moneybags will have to make their recommendations known quicklike, the instant they hit dirt in Florida."

"Not necessarily," countered the director. "Secure transmissions will allow them to make known their preliminary findings while in trajectory. Reichert himself wouldn't dream of being anywhere but in the Senate gallery to witness the vote in person."

"Sure of that, Jean-Marie?"

"Certain. Not for anything in this world or the next would he miss the triumph of Selene II being defeated. Unfortunately, no practical method of detaining him exists, and even if some way were to be found he'd stage-manage affairs from afar. His so-called 'associates' — read shady politicians, corporate criminals and legions of hangers-on occupying high-rise offices well behind the scene — would never dream of wiping their noses without him sanctioning the move."

Myron ruminated, blinked and smacked his lips. In all innocence, he asked, "Think Mr. Moneybags could learn to breathe vacuum?"

"Myron, please!" exclaimed the director with weary intonation. "Do try and hold your Wild West mentality in check."

"It'd be a terrific plus," argued Myron, "if you'd get real about real-world doings. My way would shut his fat mouth for good, tie his purse strings tight."

"I did not hear that."

"A vacuum bath would be simple to arrange."

"I also refuse to hear that, Myron."

Cromwell reminded himself of the firm, lifelong rule he had instituted: to never, ever perform anything resembling an unlawful act. The resolve to follow the rule had weakened on occasion, but had yet to be broken. Under certain crucial life-or-death situations, however, or when critical circumstances dictated . . .

Hoping to blunt the director's accusative stare, he grinned in disarming fashion. "Aw, I was just sounding off." Outwardly more cheerful than seemed reasonable under the circumstances, he added, "Hey, don't sweat it, Jean-Marie! A chum I once worked with loved to preach that the game was never over till the last out."

Unimpressed by the comforting words, Dr. Boucher dismissed his prior decision to reveal the existence of something vastly more disturbing than Reichert's timely arrival back on the ground in Florida, or for that matter Vonex's prospective solar energy machinations. Despite having made up his mind to hold back, and not disclose what he'd been about to tell Myron, his stony gaze persisted.

## TEN Rumor Mongers

Belted into acceleration couches, the lunar visitors were subjected to an abrupt surge of two and one-half gravities by the USAF boxcar's slingshot passage up the mass-driver launch rails. Successful injection into lunar orbit above Mare Crisium brought with it the equally sudden, breathtaking onset of weightlessness.

After a swing part way around the Moon's crater-raddled farside, the blunt-ended, space-to-space vehicle's thrusters thundered, converting its orbital vector and velocity into a long, computer-programmed trajectory scheduled to terminate, sixty-odd hours later, in low-earth-orbit.

A lackadaisical USAF corporal swam into the compartment and took his time freeing Reichert from the restraint harness securing him to an acceleration couch. The chairman spent the first hour of microgravity in transit lecturing distraught Senator Kyle. Repeatedly denigrating "the fanciful notion" of pouring untold billions into a pipe dream like Selene II, or the gigantic follow-on Prometheus "nightmare," he extolled Vonex International's proposal to grossly expand worldwide access to efficient solar energy, "A proven, far less risky, infinitely more safe and sane global energy future" than could be had by chasing the childish, idealistic fusion daydream advocated by the U.N. Energy Consortium, and forwarded by its "lap dog," Lyman Dysart.

Unfortunately or fortunately, depending on the viewpoint of the lecturer versus that of the listener, Senator Kyle succumbed to nausea induced by the endless fall sensation once again afflicting him. To the disgust of a USAF corporal dispatched to clean up the mess, Kyle lost his dinner and retired to his compartment for the duration.

His messianic urge thwarted and left unfulfilled, Reichert sought to further unburden himself by redirecting his hard-sell anti-Selene II lecture, only to be instantly dissuaded by U.N. Energy Secretary Llancolm's cool, disdainful blue-eyed stare. He abandoned the cause as hopeless, sulked and isolated himself in his own compartment.

Three days of monotonous shipboard freefall elapsed before a steward from the transatmospheric shuttle came aboard and assisted the voyagers in exiting the boxcar through an umbilical tube rigged between the vehicles co-orbiting in stable proximity. One by one, clad in unfamiliar vacuum gear, Llancolm, Senator Kyle and Reichert clumsily pulled themselves hand over hand along a safety line strung into the airlock of a shuttle dispatched by USAF expressly to collect the three dignitaries.

An hour and twenty-six minutes later the transatmospheric craft glided to an unpowered touch-down on the extended runway at Kennedy Space Center, its arrival punctuated by multiple barks from the stub-winged shuttle's landing gear trucks.

No fond goodbyes were said. In the blackest of foul moods, Belkin Reichert ignored the companions on the lunar venture. Eagerly deplaning first, he sought to escape Florida's bath of enervating warmth and humidity quickly. Despite not yet having his ground legs under him, he narrowly escaped a fall hustling down the rolled-up mobile stairs. Striding manfully across the hardstand, chins and dewlap thrust forward as if bent upon exacting stern vengeance, he found the first eligible victim of his red glare, a chauffeur swinging wide the rear door of the limousine sent to carry him into Orlando. Inside the limo, Vonex Chief Counsel Aaron Beebe nodded a silent greeting. A salted veteran at reading the chairman's moods, he considered himself a certified expert when it came to handling the irascible chairman, who wordlessly condemned the attorney for his casual manner, flung his briefcase on the rear-facing seat, clambered in after it, and resigned himself to a short wait while the chauffeur reclaimed his single piece of luggage from the offloading shuttle.

Beebe refrained from doing or saying anything. After a short, pregnant silence, Reichert demanded to know what had taken place during his absence.

"Very little of any significance, Belkin."

"Nothing new from the Dysart investigation?"

Nonplused, Beebe did not bend under the other's unspoken urging to demonstrate subservience. He calmly announced that the Middle East team had run to ground a construction foreman employed by the San Francisco firm once contracted to accomplish assorted Dysart Tower reworks and renovations.

"And," urged Reichert testily.

"The fellow's duties," amplified Beebe, "pertained to overseeing the installation of multiple exterior elevator systems, and reworking a deluxe interior express elevator. According to Kuwait's report, the subject opened up after a bit of, er . . . ungentle persuasion and furnished the names and whereabouts of several former coworkers, including a foreman now working in Indonesia. Our team is following up the lead."

Reichert grunted an expletive. "Amateur Sherlocks who dash about aimlessly on fat expense accounts. Is *that* it, Aaron? The sum total unearthed to date?"

Hoping to mollify the chairman, Beebe said, "He covers his tracks adroitly."

"You don't say! By now," asserted Reichert disdainfully, "I'd prayed for something more substantial. Unfortunately, that conniving bastard is the key. Eliminate the sole owner, and DT's executive council will be forced to go public, allowing us to snap up the initial offering, become majority shareholders, and start assuming control. Then you have my promise that Dysart Technologies will waste no more time and effort on this fusion madness, and reverts to normal, profitable business practices."

"Belkin," complained Beebe, "please remember to whom you are speaking. In my lexicon 'eliminate' is a dangerous term. I've never practiced professionally, yet technically I'm still an officer of the court, and abjectly refuse to be informed of, or involved in, the seamy details of whatever you might wish would happen to Dysart."

"In that case," declared Reichert stridently, "perhaps abandoning your service to Vonex would be worth considering. I will not listen to any namby-pamby prattle about legalisms. You're either with me all the way on this, or you're not. Which is it?"

Outwardly oblivious to the overt threat, Aaron Beebe's head turned slowly. His level gaze collided with the smoldering fire in Reichert's deceptively innocent blue eyes. An unflinching game began to see who would blink first.

Sensing that he might have gone too far, Reichert eventually looked away.

"I could be wrong, of course," drawled Beebe, "but I believe this is the the fourth or fifth time you've hinted at firing me. If you meant what you just said, I'll be delighted to leave all corporate details, including 'legalisms,' in your capable hands." He reached for the door latch, making ready to step out of the limousine.

Reichert clutched his arm. "Oh, don't be so damned sensitive! Losing your invaluable insight and counsel at this critical juncture is the very last thing I need. Forgive my churlishness, Aaron. This meaningless Moon junket has left me terribly frustrated. Who wouldn't be upset after trying to talk sense to that moron of a senator, or struggling to pull the U.N.'s trained monkey down from his tall high-horse. I suppose I took it out on you. Can you bring yourself to overlook my petulance?"

Beebe sniffed his displeasure, settled back against the limo's cushions. "I appreciate what you've been through, but don't imagine you're the only one who feels frustrated. You inquired about the so-called 'investigation.' To date, it's managed to frustrate everyone concerned."

"Of course," Reichert said hastily.

For how many months," inquired Beebe rhetorically, "have we posted watchdogs outside every entrance to Dysart Tower, where surveillance teams have to rotate their vehicles regularly to avoid being marked permanent fixtures on the street, and unanimously swear that neither Dysart nor anyone resembling a double has left the tower on foot, or in one of the limousines they chase all over San Francisco and points north, east and south. Yet there he was on Capitol Hill when our people picked him up wearing a casual tan jumpsuit as if it were all a billionaire could afford, ready to make a mockery of the distinguished committee chairman *and* Senate hearing."

"Umm-m-m, so said the message you sent me in transit." Out of character due to his state of mind, Reichert nevertheless patted the wrist of his principal aide and factotum. "Spend every centime, Aaron. Follow every domestic and overseas lead. We simply *must* discover how the

bastard moves about like a ghost, seldom as that occurs these days. We *have* to learn where he goes, and when, who he visits, and why.”

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After brooding through an interlude of silent introspection, the chairman abruptly switched topics. He inquired about the latest happenings among their OPEC friends. “I assume all eleven member nations are holding their positions.”

Though reluctant to correct the chairman, Beebe knew better than to hold back. “Nine, Belkin. Algeria dropped out of OPEC months ago, and Qatar no longer exists.”

“Um, quite so. It had slipped my mind.”

“As far as we can determine, there has been little indication of wavering, and yet . . .” Not sure how wise it would be, Beebe tried to soften the blow by explaining that Indonesia, Nigeria, Libya, the Emirates and Venezuela had given every indication of staying firmly in bed. “The Middle East producers,” he added, “unanimously pledge solidarity to the agreement you forged, except for . . . It distresses me to be the bearer of unhappy tidings, except . . .”

“Except for what? Spit it out,” insisted Reichert.

“I know what often happens to the messenger, Belkin. Promise me you’ll give heed to the message, and not savage the messenger.”

“That goes without saying.”

Wondering if it could be true, Beebe somberly announced that Saudi Arabia had apparently defected.

“The *Kingdom*?”

“I . . . hadn’t intended to bring it up just yet,” the attorney said reluctantly. “According to a thus far reliable source, the Saudis have . . . Wait, let me put it another way. While you were away, with no warning or fanfare, Prince Whoever, the Resources Minister, allegedly licensed the rights to construct a Dysart nuclear fusion chamber, or whatever the appropriate term. As I said, no formal announcement, but a Kuwaiti insider on our payroll leaked word that the Saudis mean to install a huge coastal seawater desalination facility, and eventually incorporate the prime power source in plans to expand for their huge petroleum depot.”

“Damned lying sand niggers!” Gritting his teeth, Reichert closed his eyes tightly to blot out the duplicitous image forming in his mind’s eye. “Those two-timing royals gave me their pledge of solidarity not once but on three separate occasions. I want you to hustle over there, Aaron. I want you to convince the Resources Minister how wrongheaded it would be to fall for this . . . this fusion mirage that confidence man Dysart and the U.N. clowns are trying to foist off as a cure-all for the world’s ills.”

An unhappy grimace transformed Beebe’s saturnine features. He stared hard at the chairman, a querulous glint in his brown eyes. “Belkin, think about what you just told me. I sincerely hope you will reconsider. You might recall that I am a Jew. How graciously do you think I would be received in Riyadh?”

“Your faith,” said Reichert, “has nothing to do with the matter. You’ll go as my emissary, my alter ego.”

"Please allow me to refute that naïve view," objected Beebe. "My heritage and faith are *precisely* the point. I'd be viewed as some obscure breed of Israeli pawn, and treated accordingly. I'd be fortunate to leave their stinking desert with a whole skin."

"Nonsense! You're an American citizen."

"Belkin, for the love of God *think!*" asserted Beebe, more out of pity than scorn. "I often wonder if you live in anything that resembles the real world. Let me arrange a secure conference call, and you can confront the Resources Minister face-to-face. Some time ago, if I recall, he was plucked from the inexhaustible stable of Saudi princes waiting in the wings to be awarded an important post. He wouldn't dare deny a televised confrontation to someone of *your* stature."

A frown of intense displeasure illustrated Reichert's lack of enthusiasm for the proposal. Instead of inventing a fitting response, he looked out the limo's tinted window, and watched with unseeing eyes as the chauffeur hurried to the rear of the vehicle to stow the single piece of luggage he had carried to Luna in compliance with spacecraft weight and bulk restrictions.

As the knowledge of Saudi treachery sank in, his frown deepened into a scowl. For some reason, the idea of allowing himself to be unnerved by hearing bad news worried him more profoundly than had the news itself.

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"Ben," accused Lyman at the conclusion of their late-morning business huddle, "you didn't mention the unmentionable."

The CEO shrugged. "Rumors are hardly worthy of serious discussion?"

"Uh-uh, don't give me that. No fencing, please. A nebulous rumor it may be," added The Stockholder, "but an implication of potential disaster will cling to it as long as it circulates. Does it still circulate?"

"To some degree, I suppose," admitted Clay, "if not with its former energy." Not certain how accurate his response had been, and equally unsure of how to proceed now that the topic had been broached, he cogitated. "Purposeful or accidental, the rumor has either gradually petered out of its own accord, or been officially quashed. Wild tribes of grifters, drifters and carpetbaggers inhabit the Potomac landscape, and to them political gossip, innuendo and finger pointing go with the territory. Whether there has ever been one gram of substance in the rumor is anyone's guess."

"The cliché about smoke and fire does come to mind, Ben. What I'm beginning to believe *is* certain," said Dysart, "is our lack of a clue about what might be at the root of the rumor, which is worry-making. We'll have to find a way to run it down, learn what if any substance lurks behind it."

"Judging from what our contacts inside the beltway have heard," said Clay for want of anything more concrete, "the K-streeters under indictment for buttonholing senators were actively pushing Reichert's wild and woolly orbital solar energy scheme."

"Is that your conclusion, too," asked Lyman, "or an inference?"

"Just an inference, yet it leads me to an intuitive conclusion. For some time residence-certified lobbyists waving open checkbooks have promoted the Vonex solar energy wares with vim, vigor and vitality. However, if the pair arrested and charged with approaching sitting senators . . ." Clay left the thought unfinished.

“Do me a good turn, Ben,” requested Lyman. “Take off your lawyerly wizard hat for a moment. What’s your personal opinion? Do you really believe anything as raw as what that *Washington Post* op-ed piece hinted at could actually come to pass?”

Looking askance at Lyman, the CEO said, “Ask me again after the Senate votes.”

“Come on, you can do better than that,” insisted Lyman. “Tap-dancing doesn’t become you, not about anything so important to DT’s future health and well being.”

The cleft between Clay’s brows tightened. “Hate to disappoint you, M. Stockholder, sir, but posing unanswerable questions becomes you a good deal less, especially since the answer pertains to a wonderful collection of do-gooders inhabiting the current Congress. Now and then, the distinguished independents, plus very few ‘moderates’ on either side of the aisle, manage to squeeze out a chunk of legislation. Yet that said, their overall machinations puzzle people much, much smarter than I am.”

“If you care to try,” suggested Dysart, “can you clarify that kernel of illogic?”

“Be glad to,” retorted Clay, “if you’ll coach me on how to go about it. These days, with independents a near majority in the upper and lower chambers, it’s questionable if ‘independent’ still carries the hoary connotation it once did, or whether it’s become a synonym for scapegoats, wafflers, flip-floppers and hide-behinders eager to avoid the slings and arrows that keep coming in the direction of major party members. Upon closer examination, the indies are as loaded as either party with ultra-left-and-right-wingers, other blathering radicals of all stripes, and moderates, each of whom cover their butts with a veneer of ‘independency.’ Statistically, the indies caucus with whichever camp strikes their fancy on a specific issue, then vote willy-nilly, sometimes with the denizens on one side of the aisle, sometimes with their opposite numbers.”

“How about The President?” asked Lyman, fishing for something more substantial. “In your view, would he so much as consider signing a prospective bill that includes a prospective rider of the extreme nature suggested in that *Post* article?”

Clay puffed his cheeks, took his time analyzing the question. “Tough to say, awfully tough, Lyman. A lame duck with only a year and a few months to go, his whole administration comes from the dead-and-dying-ducks mold, not just the lame ones. Worse, the current crop of bureaucrats and hangers-on is as middle-of-the-road and semi-competent as any I’ve seen in my lifetime. My gut feeling is that The Man would . . .” The CEO broke off uncertainly.

“He himself isn’t entirely wrongheaded,” put in Lyman. “No paragon of a chief executive, but a first-rate genius compared to some recent White House tenants.”

“True.” After a thoughtful nod, Clay said, “I lean slightly in favor of thinking he’d sign any such law the Congress hung on the sacred hook of national security, which the article also hinted at. If there’s a gram of substance in the rumor, tying it to national security is the only rationale the noble legislators would dare use if they’re seriously serious about sending a measure that radical all the way to the White House.”

“We can’t afford to stall on this,” warned Lyman. “A wait-and-see attitude to gauge wind direction won’t cut it. I’ve a sinking feeling there’s enough smoke for us to start inventing means and methods of evading a potential firestorm, and that will take more than just staying on our toes. We’ll have to be ready to move if any measure that drastic ever threatens to pass.”

“Well, excuse me, Mr. Stockholder, sir,” said Clay with a pretense of ingenuousness. “May I inquire how it might be possible to prepare for such an outrageous turn of the tide, if and when the tide does decided to turn?”

“Deciding what to do,” admitted Lyman, “will take beaucoup skull-sweat and planning. We’ll have to come up with alternative solutions, then pick and choose amongst them if and when it’s time to select a winner. Far as you know, who in our camp has picked up on the rumor, and maybe run with it? The nitty-gritty, I mean.”

“Umm-m-m, offhand,” replied Clay, “I’d say everyone who happened to read the piece. Here on the home front, per your insistence, only we two and Boucher have discussed it openly. Trouble is, a first-class grapevine grows spontaneously every time the capitol’s hallowed halls spring a leak. You can rest easy where Jean-Marie’s concerned; under torture, he wouldn’t let his left hand know it had a mate on the right. Oh, what the hell! Everyone of even minor importance scans the *Post* elux edition and has a raft of others piped into their homes and offices. That alone ensures the fact that the rumor spread like molten glass. Yet when queried the *Post* editors clam up, won’t say what the buzz in the cloakrooms is all about.

“You pegged one aspect of the rumor dead center,” added the CEO. “The notion is outrageous, so much so that I’d be leery about giving it any credence. I suppose we’ll have to keep calling it a rumor for lack of a better term. The way things stand, all we can do is adopt the wait-and-see policy you dislike so much.”

His expression told Clay how little faith Lyman had in a wait-and-see attitude.

The security warning buzzer sounded; Carolyn Lester’s pert profile appeared in the corridor security monitor. She swept into the suite all smiles, her delicate features buoyant. “Hi, guys. Congratulate me! We just finished signing on to furnish a Marie Antoinette-style wedding ensemble for a blushing bride-elect, except this one wouldn’t blush if she was goosed real hard. The order also includes matrimonial regalia for a covey of unblushing bridesmaids. Whopping big bucks go into the till due to our feat of super-salesmanship.”

Lyman bent and kissed Carolyn’s forehead paternally. “Good work, Kiddo! If it weren’t for the whopping big bucks Salon Bellissima is bringing in, we’d be in deep financial yogurt.”

“Comedian!” indicted Carolyn, reprised her sunny smile for Clay’s benefit, and whisked herself away toward the residential section of the penthouse.

“You do realize,” drawled the CEO, “there are times when I fail to see what you see in Carolyn.”

“Myopia,” remarked Dysart, “is curable. Wise up, Ben. Run, don’t walk, to the office of the nearest ophthalmologist.”

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Buoyed by intense thermal wavelets rising from the kilometers-long concrete runway, the sleek hypersonic jet insisted on remaining airborne. The pilot, all too familiar with Riyadh’s desiccated furnace-heat, throttled back the elongated, dart-shaped aircraft, an expensive item from the Royal House of Saud toy chest. The landing gear wheels eventually barked, touching down on the runway at King Khalid International Airport. A drogue chute streaming out behind the empennage popped open, aiding the reverse-thrust of hybrid turbofan-ramjet engines to brake the streaking bird.

One of numerous Saudi princes, the Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources was returning from Europe, where he had given an address at the Vienna headquarters of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. Clad in a dark brown business suit upon disembarking, he donned a pair of designer sunglasses and allowed his entourage to escort him to the limousine that had had been baking on the hardstand for most of an hour awaiting his arrival.

Driven to Tuwaik Palace on Wadi Hanifa in climate-controlled comfort, the minister refreshed himself for an hour until it was time for the scheduled teleconference. Sipping a demitasse of sweet tea, he let his retainers dress him in flowing white robes, a traditional Bedouin *keffiyah* headdress, and soft slippers. The middle-aged, travel-weary beneficiary of an exceptionally comfortable lifestyle, complemented by a Cambridge education, was not looking forward to the coming discourse with the abrasive yet well-connected American VIP. "Has the arrogant fool been contacted?" he inquired in Arabic.

A secure link to New York awaits your pleasure, Highness. "The gentleman's retainer failed to mention an agenda, what it is he wishes to discuss."

"Hmm-m-m, no mystery there," muttered the minister. He marched into the palace communications center, his bearing regal, seated himself in a, brocaded armchair facing a wall-filling video panel, and dipped his head in the direction of a technician.

Chairman Reichert's grandfatherly image brightened to fill the huge, 3-D display. Coached to be on his best behavior, such as it was, the chairman coated his greeting with a sugared pleasantry. "Good afternoon, Highness. I trust you are well."

"Peace be with you, Mr. Chairman. I returned from Europe a short time ago, and the journey left me rather tired. Otherwise I am quite well, thank you. Let me apologize for keeping you from your rest at this late hour in New York. I fear it was unavoidable."

"Not at all, Highness. I was privileged to watch your inspiring speech at OPEC. It is I who should beg indulgence for bothering you at such an inopportune moment. I sincerely appreciate your willingness to speak with me."

"A pleasure always, Mr. Reichert."

Prompted by Aaron Beebe, and further coached by a Vonex public relations executive on not only what to say, but how to say it, Reichert displayed uncharacteristic diffidence. "Please take no offense, Highness, if I broach a somewhat delicate subject."

"Never, sir."

"Rumor has it . . . That is, word circulating in certain quarters," explained the chairman hesitantly, "touches upon a matter I find it extremely difficult to believe. It has been said that your Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources has licensed the rights to construct a Dysart Technologies nuclear fusion system in the Kingdom."

His expression neutral, the minister responded obliquely, "I am able to confirm the existence of such a rumor, Mr. Chairman."

Reichert swallowed the less than subtle put-down without an overt reaction, but his reddened cheeks made it plain how he felt about doing so. "Highness, forgive me for speaking bluntly. Under the circumstances, it would be unseemly for a simple businessman like myself to voice a complaint to a personage of your prominence and stature, but hadn't we mutually agreed that the wisest course for OPEC would be to stand fast on our current policy of future petroleum

production, to be complemented at some future date by the advent of efficient, widespread solar energy utilization, rather than to tempt fate by buying into the fanciful fusion pipe dream fostered by DT and the United Nations Energy Consortium?”

“Concurrence was indeed reached on that issue, Mr. Chairman, nor to the best of my knowledge has the leadership of any OPEC member nation changed its mind.”

“Then, why —?”

“Bear with me, if you will,” interrupted the minister, his manner more brusque than Reichert considered appropriate. “I should like to quote an aphorism credited to a predecessor, the former minister charged with the duties of my office in the early part of our roused century. An iconoclast to the core, he was known to explain on several occasions that the Stone Age did not end due to a shortage of stones.”

Brought up short, Reichert said, “Highness, I’m afraid I don’t —”

“The inference, Mr. Chairman, is that the benighted, semi-human creatures of that prehistoric era managed to capture fire, invent primitive tools and weapons, and survive both predators as well as the passage of time. In short, benighted they might well have been, yet managed to thrive in their own manner, and eventually replaced stone implements and weapons with copper, later bronze, and later still iron. Invention and innovation inevitably result from advanced or revised thinking, processes invariably leading to wider ranging vision that invigorates ambition. We Saudis, like most other peoples, feel duty-bound to keep our eyes fixed on the welfare of not merely we ourselves, but our future generations.”

The heat rose behind Reichert’s eyes. Sounding a shade more testy than he might have intended, he said, “Highness, didn’t we agree that the planet’s economic future rests on the staunch pillars of fossil fuel recovery and distribution, coupled with the huge solar energy program Vonex International intends to shortly implement? You told me as much yourself not long ago.”

“Thank you, sir, for reminding me of my careless words.” The robed prince paused reflectively. “How shall I put this?” he asked himself. “Decades ago, sir, our Gharwar field contained the most voluminous petroleum reserves in existence, and became famous for producing a much sought-after type of light, sweet crude. To the Kingdom’s ultimate misfortune, however, that fame did not survive. The predecessor whose words of wisdom I repeated a moment ago may have been adroit at voicing aphorisms, yet proved himself woefully inept when it came to overseeing the extraction of crude at Gharwar. He dared to sanction the injection of water into the enormous pool as a means of supplying and maintaining subterranean pressure, and of course assisting the crude in floating toward the pool’s surface to ensure more facile and economical extraction. Today, not one drop of crude flows from Gharwar, though an indeterminate quantity is known to still exist.”

“Surely,” objected Reichert, “the Kingdom has access to other reserves.”

“Finite reserves, Mr. Chairman, decidedly finite. For some time our policy has been to maintain strict privacy regarding the estimated quantity of crude still beneath our sands. Yet whatever the amount, it is inarguably finite. We recognize a serious obligation to think of the future, something especially true today, when our fluctuating national economy has been based for not merely decades but lifetimes upon petroleum export. I fear the same rationale also applies to certain other OPEC nations.”

“B-but that is . . .” stammered Reichert, his temper beginning to get the better of him. “Highness, isn’t investing heavily in semi-proven fusion technology at this very early stage of development a form of . . . ? Forgive me, but it does seem like betting on cards that have yet to be dealt. It’s, er . . . betting on the come.”

“The come . . . ? Your allusion escapes me, Mr. Chairman.”

“Sorry, I meant . . . It’s an expression common in poker”

“I do hope you will forgive my lack of comprehension,” remonstrated the prince. “In any event, allow me correct one erroneous impression. What you infer is not the case, Mr. Chairman. Our decision to invest in nuclear fusion technology is a move designed to partially resolve a quandary, and moreover to take what amounts to an undeniably proper step. We feel it mandatory to cover *all* present and future bets, to as you have inferred wager on cards yet to be dealt.”

“B-but hadn’t we decided —?”

“Please allow me to finish, sir. Late last year, the team of experts and consultants dispatched to inspect and evaluate DT’s research and development facility in western America returned glowing accounts of system performance. Our economists were not merely impressed, but staggered, all but rendered speechless by the willingness — nay, the *eagerness* — of the world’s wealthiest individual to invest truly unheard of sums accrued by his wholly owned enterprise, as well as a major portion of his own private capital, to develop, engineer and bring to fruition the ultra-complex Omega Pinch nuclear fusion power system now being marketed. As if that were not sufficient, an additional, thoroughly incredible amount of funding has been committed to the lunar venture aimed at proving the recoverability of a vital, frightfully scarce substance that apparently occurs only on the Moon.

“As for nuclear fusion technology per se,” continued the minister before Reichert could get in a word, “I plead a lack of technical sophistication, and profess only a surface understanding of Dysart’s superb innovation, nor am I able to appreciate the necessity and inordinate expense involved in obtaining an otherwise unavailable helium isotope strip-mining in the distant, hostile lunar environment. Where laying down a bet is concerned, Mr. Chairman, the Kingdom would find it extraordinarily difficult to cover either of the winner-take-all, hold-back-nothing wagers thus far laid down by the gentleman to whom Dysart Technologies is his own private property.”

On the verge of going ballistic, Belkin Reichert decided nothing would be gained by any further discussion. Mildly nauseated by what he had heard and been forced to endure, he sucked in a deep breath, swallowed his monumental pride, all but choking on it, and thanked the Saudi Resources Minister in a strained voice, and the bid him a hasty farewell.

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Once off the air, the thoroughly enraged chairman scooted his castered leather armchair backward, shot to his feet at the head of the long, polished conference table in Vonex International’s paneled, hundredth-floor boardroom. Bellowing, “Miserable sand niggers!” he soundly thumped the conference table, bruising the heel of his hand.

In company with an abbreviated handful of Vonex executives who had willingly lost sleep in order to sit in on the late-night teleconference, Corporate Chief Counsel Aaron Beebe watched in heavy-lidded silence as Reichert bustled out of the high-ceilinged chamber, his

rotund countenance livid, his body language discouraging everyone present to even *think* of hindering his hasty exit, or uttering a word of consolation.

## ELEVEN Gift of the Gods

Lyman's instructions to a talented writer selected from the headquarters public relations pool had been general, not specific. Impressed by the accomplished young wordsmith's efforts on an ad campaign, he had urged writer to graphically describe the multiple boons controlled nuclear fusion had to offer, insisting on a minimum of extravagance, and zero embellishment or glorification. All he had wanted was a cursory glance into the immediate future, an enumeration in lay language of the boons and benefits promised by the newborn technology, with emphasis on the whys and wherefores of how it would shape and change for the better the lives and livelihoods of practically every human being in the globe.

Engrossed in evaluating the monthly financial summary featuring rivers of red ink flowing from his Energy Division, he was scribbling notes on a yellow legal tablet when a soft double-chime from the secure, closed-circuit intercom alerted him to a message.

Maggie, the CEO's executive assistant, had been tasked for some time to screen all personal calls, encrypted or in the clear, to the penthouse. Her efforts were highly prized by Lyman; he had learned to appreciate how adept she was at buffering incoing calls and messages, especially the deft manner in which she accurately judged certain callers and calls of sufficient importance to warrant his immediate attention.

"Mr. Dysart," said Maggie, "you requested to be informed when a certain article was ready for review."

"Right, thanks. Please upload it straightaway."

He woke the computer with a voice command. The thin flat-panel display illuminated and slid up out of its integral nest in the desk. The tract labeled "Approval Draft" had been ignobly titled "Fusion Propaganda Puff" by the writer.

The piece captured his interest before reaching the end of the lead paragraph.

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**Ancient Greek dramatists often relied on a contrived plot device universally frowned upon by contemporary playwrights called *theos ek mekhanes*, more commonly *deus ex machina* in Latin literally — "god from a machine." At the dénouement of one classical play or another, an actor clad in divine attire would appear above the stage and intervene in the dramaturgy to either resolve an otherwise hopeless plot situation, or correct some faulty or perhaps difficult to understood circumstance.**

**A radically different form of intervention is now taking place: the sudden intrusion on the world stage of neither Zeus, Poseidon, nor any other Hellenic deity, but a machine surely touched by a divine hand, a machine destined to fulfill humanity's energy needs throughout the foreseeable future, and beyond. There is no dearth of energy in the universe, you see, nor any hint of such. As usual, however, God in his infinite wisdom has left it to the ingenuity and inventiveness of His earthly creatures to devise a means of trolling the seas and oceans of energy in order to reap the catch, and His children have done so in truly remarkable fashion by devising a machine of such limitless usefulness that**

**its myriad applications defy description, including many as yet undiscovered, although certain to eventually be realized.**

*The kid's good, thought Lyman. Damn good!*

The deeper he plowed into the text, the more he marveled at the near-poetry of style melded with authentic substance, and his enthusiasm doubled. The deft handling of nuclear fusion's complexity struck him as an explication that fell not far short of miraculous. The writer described a tenuous "cloud" one hundred thousand times less dense than the air we breathe, one portion of which consisted of so-called "heavy hydrogen" derived from ordinary methane and elsewhere, the other portion an exotic helium isotope found embedded in sufficient quantity only within the moondust that covers the entire lunar surface, and then explained how such a cloud was transformed when hyper-excited into a plasma of charged particles known as ions and free electrons stripped from the constituent atomic makeup of either fusible substance. When confined by an intense magnetic field within a huge, semi-globular shell smoothly pinched to an accuracy of a few thousandths of a meter, the plasma, itself an excellent conductor of electricity, continuously heated, reheated and re-reheated itself, taking advantage of resistance to the induced electrical current — a phenomenon identical to that causing the nichrome wires in a household toaster glow red — until it reached a level of excitation approaching temperatures at the center of the Sun, whereupon googols of atomic nuclei instantaneously fused together, changed state and liberated raw energy on a scale too mammoth for comprehension.

Delighted, Lyman skimmed to the concluding paragraphs.

**Nuclear fusion technology releasing only ultra-clean byproducts into our endangered environment, will soon become the universal, worldwide source of energy generation. It will provide us with vehicles powered by electrical energy stored within fuel cells, or more exotic processes that will exhaust nothing more harmful than pure water vapor. Mass transportation systems will feature silent-running, magnetically levitated and propelled bullet trains. Human waste, garbage and trash will be broken down into molecular constituents and recycled for further use. Every industrial smokestack will be torn down. Every hydroelectric dam will disappear, with each respective watercourse restored to its natural state. Every fission power reactor will be dismantled, its lethal residue — depleted nuclear fuel — broken down and rendered harmless. Our ground and skies and waters will once again become pollution-free. Unless fusion's evil stepchild, thermonuclear weaponry, overwhelms our innate sense and sensibility and inspires an unspeakable cataclysm, a more idyllic future for everyone lies not far over the horizon.**

**The god bent upon usurping the historic place of fossil fuels on the world stage bears no resemblance to the mythic deity that once gazed down upon sightless Oedipus, not a "god from a machine" in any sense, only the machine itself — a cumbersome, strange looking assemblage of huge cables, monstrous electromagnets and sophisticated ancillary equipments, at its heart a dervish of semi-vacuum burning so furiously that it emulates temperatures reigning at the center of a star, yet gives forth no light at all, yet presumes to light the world in a beneficent glow.**

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The Stockholder grunted a hearty accolade. Ordering the computer to generate a hardcopy, he selected a red Sharpie from the jumble of pens and pencils jammed into the

gargoylesque Toby Jug on his desk, and drew a line with a little curlicue at the end through the writer's caption. After brief reflection, he retitled the piece "A Gift of the Gods," then proceeded to go back through the text sentence by sentence, editing and critiquing it here, slightly changing a word there, making a notation in the margin.

He sat back and admired his handiwork, scanned the marked-up copy into the computer and dispatched it to Clay's executive assistant along with an accompanying notation: "How's this blurb grab you, Ben? I like it better than a whole lot. If you agree, send it to PR and have 'em to fly with it soonest, ASAP."

The CEO called back forty minutes later. "The fusion song and dance you commissioned reads a touch fancy-schmancy for my taste, but the message comes through strong and clear. My one and only reservation is . . . Now don't get sore, Lyman, but is that woolly ration of 'god' stuff really necessary?"

"Hold a grudge against the gods, do you?"

"You know damn well what I mean."

Dysart snickered. "Ben, you thought like a lawyer yesterday, think like one today, and your thought processes won't undergo a significant change tomorrow, next year, or throughout eternity. Is there no poetry in your legalistic soul?"

"Not a whole helluva lot," admitted Clay. "By now you must surely appreciate the fact that we dwellers in the work-a-day lower depths of your ivory tower are often short on leisure. We haven't time to waste on chitchat, or staring out the window and thinking great thoughts. EnerDiv is bleeding new dollars from every pore, and hemorrhaging in terminal fashion from that shining island in the sky you love so very dearly. Frankly, Mr. Stockholder, our bean counters' opinion of you is . . . Hurts me to say it, but they think you're a bobble-headed eccentric at best, at worst a certifiable lunatic. They're all over me like flies, constantly goosing me into slapping Band-Aids on every potentially terminal wound presently emptying DT's bloodstream. What's more, they want it done now, now, now! Sooner, if possible. You tell me the holy-roller article celebrating our fusion Bonanza makes you breathe hard and fast. Fine, so be it! I'm glad! You asked for my reaction, and now you have it."

"Steady, Ben," soothed Dysart. "Don't go all temperish on me. Tell the PR mavens I want a copy of the article shotgunned to every print and media publication that might be willing to run it. I also want a salary hike for the youngster who penned it, and while you're at it tell PR I want him elevated to the position of personal literary doyen, my slave who serves me and only me. I want him available day, night and morning, whenever I may need his services. I'll go see him myself after publication, give him a hefty pat on the back and maybe an extra packet of sweetener in his wallet."

"Consider it done." Clay sounded short.

"One thing more," added Lyman before the CEO could sign off. "I called Marty a few minutes ago, but he's out of his office. Can you send one a gofer to run him down, tell him he's wanted upstairs? We have to put our heads together and dream up a safe passage scenario that will get me to Nevada and back in one piece."

"Nevada . . . ?" questioned Clay. "The R&D site?"

"No, no; the Paiute inauguration ceremony."

"You *still* insist on risking your butt to attend the power plant kickoff?"

"Wouldn't miss it," said The Stockholder, "for all the tea in India."

"Oh, what the hell! It's your stubborn neck," accused Clay. "Lay it on the chopping block if you feel extra-brave, and extra-lucky, not to mention extra-stubborn. I'll see to rounding up Marty, but you'd do well to think twice about trekking over into the wilds of Nevada."

"Marty'd do well to keep me breathing," said Dysart. "Later, Ben."

The flat-panel computer display dimmed, slid back into its nest.

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Thirty-five miles northeast of Reno, the Winnemucca Indian Colony was home to the Northern Paiute and Western Shoshone Tribes. The reservation sprawled across roughly seven hundred hilly square miles of high desert, its centerpiece fifteen-mile-long Pyramid Lake named for a natural, pyramidal rock structure on the eastern shore, beyond it the dry bed of Winnemucca Lake.

Clad in a light tan, summer-weight linen suit, around his "stubborn" neck the delicately striped red and brown tie gifted by Carolyn, Lyman gazed down at the stark landscape unreeling beneath a DT long-range jetcopter.

The aircraft began a shallow descent toward the site, and the lakeshore came in view. Seated beside the gentleman he was sworn to protect even if it meant taking a bullet for him, Martin Calvo raised his voice to be heard over the muted jet roar, the thrash of rotary wings. "Showing up here means bucking the odds, Lyman."

Preoccupied with the drab scenery flowing past below, Dysart's response was slow in coming. "Knock off the Nervous Nellie routine, Marty. Judging from the way my father went down, or the crafty manner used to rig and time that garage bomb, if Reichert and his oil-soaked cronies get to me it'll be through the Sneaky Pete door, not some public event. You mentioned taking out insurance on this junket by sending a half-dozen snoops ahead to sniff out trouble."

A searching look from Calvo. "True," he said, his tone suggesting no more than halfhearted confidence in Dysart's casual dismissal of the risk. "Let's hope we just pay the premium, and don't have a chance to collect the payoff."

"The Paiutes and Shoshones," remarked Lyman, his attention on the terrain outside, "sure homesteaded a bleak stretch of nothing much. They must subsist by selling rocks and sand to each other."

A former Secret Service Agent, and later Homeland Security Undersecretary, Calvo described the Tribe's government-to-government relationship with the feds. In addition to grants, subsidies and corollary services handed out by the Department of Indian Affairs as well as Nevada, the Tribes ran cattle in open rangeland, dry-farmed where possible, sold fishing permits, and owned boating and food concessions at the lake in addition to renting day-use and overnight camping privileges. "Ever stop to think," he concluded, "how plunking down the first operational fusion power system here might be the first step toward killing the Tribe swith kindness?"

"Never crossed my mind," lied Dysart. "They should open a casino, too."

"Yeah, to attract all their coyote customers."

The 'copter approached a landscaped complex of large and small structures, scattered lawns that looked misplaced, a sparse grove of native cottonwoods, and a fountain. To Lyman,

the site resembled an oasis mistakenly set down in scrub-covered high desert. Beyond the reservation, in diminishing perspective, a chain of spindly towers walked away in the direction of Reno bearing the catenary loops of transmission lines dumping fusion-generated megawattage into the regional grid.

Too massive to set down on the administration building's roofpark, the large jetcopter settled toward a bulls-eye helipad next to the parking lot behind the single-story structure. During final descent, Lyman glimpsed the festive scene in the near distance. A sizable crowd had gathered in front of a temporary outdoor stage garlanded with bunting and bouquets of American flags. On the far side, a sea of autos glistened in the sun, plus pair of white media vans equipped with rooftop satellite dishes were parked in tandem along the outlying perimeter road.

The Stockholder's appearance at the center of festivities generated a spontaneous round of applause from the tribal crowd and a number of spectators. Making his way slowly down the receiving line, Lyman shook hands with all ten members of the Paiute, Shoshone Tribal Council, exchanged pleasantries with the U.S. Secretary of the Interior, and senior executives from the Los Alamos and Livermore National Laboratories, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission Vice Chairman. Seated stage center, flanked by the Tribal Councilmen and a half-dozen dignitaries, he tried to look interested in what the longwinded introductory speaker was saying.

Introduced to vigorous applause, Lyman purposely kept his extemporaneous speech short, very much to the point. He lauded the Paiutes and Shoshones for prospering, and for all the hard work they had done to elevate the Tribes' status in Nevada society. He emphasized a fervent hope that revenues from the Pyramid Lake Fusion Center would be used to improve tribal life in general, particularly with respect to education and health services. Wishing the them well, he thanked the Councilmen for inviting him to participate in the inaugural ceremony. In a second round of enthusiastic applause, he was handed a pair of simulated, oversize shears. The symbolic ribbon-cutting drew even greater applause, as well as a chorus of enthusiastic hoots and cries from a scattering of younger Paiutes and Shoshones. Gigawatts had been surging through the transmission lines for the better part of a week, but that was something Lyman felt that the audience did not need to be told.

The applause swelled further in volume, garnished by a choruses of hoots and cries from a scattering of youngsters and juvenile.

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Closeted with attorney Aaron Beebe in his posh Manhattan executive suite, Belkin Reichert glared at the wall-filling video panel. "Look at the grandstanding son-of-a-bitch!" he said contemptuously. "Look at him, Aaron! Larger than life, and a few thousand times richer than Croesus."

Beebe decided to keep his own counsel, but his silence caused Reichert to focus his displeasure on the self-contained attorney, who ranted at length, decrying Dysart's perfidy in attempting to pass off on the unsuspecting general public a futuristic fantasy like nuclear fusion, not to mention granting false largesse to what he called "a tribe of filthy Indians." Punctuating the tirade with a curse, he added, "See there! The bastard is smirking, reveling in self-adulation, posturing like some ribbon-winning schoolboy due to the stage-managed sideshow put on to advertise his infernal power plant. It's enough to make you retch."

"Would you like me to turn it off?" Beebe asked drily.

"No, no; leave be. I'm anxious to learn how far he'll go, waffling and squirming and trying to duck the embarrassing questions the press corps is sure to fire at him. God almighty! A welfare handout to filthy Indians! It's prepackaged insanity, I tell you."

Beebe refused to comment on the chairman's indictment.

"By the way," said Reichert, "how the hell did he get over to Nevada without being spotted leaving his eyesore of a tower?"

"It's an ongoing mystery," admitted the attorney.

"I hate mysteries," Reichert declared forcefully. "I *detest* mysteries; they are nothing more than exotic variations of everyday problems. Mysteries demand solutions."

"I couldn't agree more wholeheartedly."

"We must try harder."

"It isn't as if we're not trying, Belkin. You're at it again," accused Beebe. "You love to take out your frustrations on me. It's become your favorite parlor game."

His expression bilious, Reichert sulked. He studied Lyman Dysart's smiling image with the air of a lepidopterist preparing to pin a particularly hideous insect to his specimen board.

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At the ceremony's conclusion, two lowly print reporters — holdovers from the all but defunct newspaper industry — as well as the media people anxious to confront Dysart before he could slip away, converged on the podium and fawned over him for an excellent reason. Almost never seen in public, he rarely if ever granted any sort of interview. Being ignored by the news corps left the prestigious Secretary of the Interior feeling upstaged. His nose out of joint, the aging cabinet official stalked off the stage, a dignified procession of one.

In an expansive mood, Lyman ignored the hubbub rising from the throats of a dozen or more clamoring newshawks and hens. He calmly surveyed the throng, and gave the nod to a comely brunette crowding close to the stage.

"Mr. Dysart," the woman called, "may I ask a personal question?"

"You just did," said Lyman, drawing titters from the press corps.

Undaunted, the newshen said, "You're often described as an eccentric billionaire. Is that the way you see yourself?"

"Oh, absolutely! I am definitely eccentric. You there." Lyman pointed to a thin-faced young man whose wiggling wrist had been raised in a silent cry to be noticed.

The reporter wanted to know if it was true that DT research and development expenditures, added to the cost of the Pyramid Lake Fusion Center, and especially the enormous sums invested in lunar strip-mining operations, had driven his company into dire financial straits.

"Yes, it's becoming desperate." His cadence solemn, Lyman said, "Seriously, the rumors of DT's fiscal demise have been somewhat exaggerated." Tongue in cheek, he explained that if worst on worst were to prevail it might take two or more years, even a half-decade of profitable business activity to recoup the amount of capital thus far expended on fusion here at home, and in Luna.

A smattering of grins and appreciative chuckles ensued.

"What made you decide," demanded a tall journalist from one of the news services, "to fund and establish the world's first operational fusion power plant on this remote reservation?"

“Several reasons,” said Lyman, his mien turned serious. “For one, Pyramid Lake isn’t too many miles south of our Energy Division research and development facility, and this the prototype system was easily accessible for our team to wring-out by means of extremely thorough testing, and eventually put on line. The fairly short commute for certain key personnel was mandatory until a tribal staff can be brought up to speed.”

He went on to explain how, during preliminary discussions with the Council, a less than rosy picture of life on the reservation had been described. Historically, many disenrollments had occurred among the younger Paiutes and Shoshones, the principal reason high unemployment among the currently enrolled crop that did not portend a sunny future on the reservation for Native American youngsters.

“How did you decide the Paiutes and Shoshones were capable of operating a nuclear power plant without blowing it sky-high?” inquired a misinformed print reporter from the semi-moribund *Reno Gazette-Journal*.

“Neither them nor anyone else,” asserted Lyman, “can initiate a fusion explosion. The Omega Pinch Tokamak in the main building encloses a near-vacuum, a tenuous cloud of supremely excited plasma that will instantly and harmlessly cool upon contacting any form of solid matter.” He recited the qualifications of a Paiute nuclear physicist, a doctoral candidate recently graduated by CalTech, who was being groomed as the facility’s technical director.

“Mr. Dysart,” called someone from the middle of the pack, “ever consider how premature it was to license your company’s design to one or more national governments when there isn’t enough special helium to go around?”

“No,” said Lyman, leaving it at that.

“What if the upcoming Senate vote denies America’s share of funding for the second-phase U.N.-sponsored mining program?”

“What can I tell you?” Lyman lifted his palms shoulder high. “A purely political decision, it’s in the hands of a hoped-for majority of right-thinking senators who’ll vote to forward Selene II and allow a U.N. Vote by the member nations, or be scuppered by wrong-headed politicians.”

A popular network commentator wanted to know if mining the Moon at such phenomenal expense would have to go on forever.

“Emphatically not,” said Dysart. “In my opinion, no more than a decade or two, and perhaps much less. Even as we gather to inaugurate the world’s first operational fusion power system, candidates for a viable, readily available fusible fuel combination are undergoing intense worldwide scrutiny. Our Energy Division team in the facility north of here is hard at work on solving the extremely complex problems associated with the use of other fusion fuel combinations.”

“Mr. Dysart,” inquired a *Scientific American* feature writer, “how does it feel to own a monopoly on fusion technology?”

“It feels wonderful, thank you.”

Less than impressed by the media’s lack of knowledge about what questions to ask, Lyman grew impatient. After curtly fielding several more innocuous queries, he begged off, bringing the session to a close by thanking the newsmen and women for their interest. Graciously

congratulated by representatives of the scientific community, he shook hands with the senior executives from the Los Alamos and Livermore National Labs, and NRC's Vice Chairman.

Making it a point to pay a hasty farewell to those members of the Tribal Council still in attendance, with Marty Calvo running interference he gratefully headed for the jetcopter.

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Calvo stayed on at Pyramid Lake, saying he wanted to pulse his people while the results were fresh in their minds, and glean whatever relevatory snippets of reaction and overheard conversation they had gleaned before, during and after the ceremony.

Reflecting on what had taken place at, Lyman briefly reviewed the inane questions posed by the media corps, and then dozed in the 'copter flying back to the Bay Area. He revived shortly before the aircraft descended to a Marin County helipad on the shore of Richardson Bay. A limousine driven by one of Marty's security staffers, with another riding shotgun, uneventfully crossed the Golden Gate Bridge.

Instructing the driver to pull over to the curb on Park Presidio Boulevard a block or so from Salon Bellissima, Lyman got out and strolled back toward the alley at a leisurely pace. Taken by an impulse, he decided to look in on Carolyn before gaining surreptitious access to the tunnel, and paused on the sidewalk, deliberating the move. Marty would have kittens if and when he learned of the security lapse, but he had done it twice before, and knew he would probably do it again.

Briefcase in hand and hatless, still clad in suit and tie, with dark glasses shielding his eyes and the custom gray hairpiece covering the brush cut his barber deplored, he felt confident that Carolyn's saleswomen would fail to recognize him. Calvo would of course raise a fuss if and when he found out. But, what the hell!

A chic, middle-aged woman of Asian heritage greeted him when he pushed his way through the boutique's heavy glass double-doors. "How may I be of help, sir?"

Her incurious once-over took note of the briefcase he carried, making Lyman believe she thought him a salesman. Carolyn was not on the floor. He asked if it might be possible to speak to the proprietor, and was informed that Ms. Lester had gone out, but was due back shortly. The saleswoman politely inquired if he would care to wait.

Lyman smiled. "Another time. It isn't important."

"May I tell her who called, sir?"

"Oh, just say a friend of a friend." Thanking the woman, he left the shop and headed back toward the mouth of the alley, again halting indecisively. For some reason the prospect of riding back through the claustrophobic tunnel on a balmy afternoon filled with sunshine and cool breezes struck him as repellent. He had always loved the outdoors, but in light of what had happened to his loved ones opportunities to stroll in the open air had for some time been few and far between.

Only a handful of pedestrians were in sight along the curving, tree-shaded thoroughfare. In the near distance, the story by story glasswalls of Dysart Tower reflected blankly. He watched a bubble-enclosed elevator compartment crawl up the tower's flank and slow to a stop outside the twelfth floor, thinking, *Why not?*

Briefcase in hand, his stride jaunty, he reveled at the freedom of ambling toward the district's loftiest high-rise, reached the intersection on the tower's southwest corner, and crossed with the traffic light. Ducking down a side street that flanked the tower's rear, he turned right, lowered his head to make his features as unobtrusive as possible. He went up the steps to the service entrance next to the closed gate of a drive-down ramp leading to the tower's multilevel parking garage. Depressing in a specific sequence an inconspicuously located button, he waited for the door to swing inward, entered and nodded pleasantly to the pair of surprised security staffers posted inside.

In a closed white van parked directly across the street, two men drank lukewarm coffee and discussed the virtues and potential faults of a veteran player acquired to take the place of an injured, physically unable to perform San Francisco 49ers linebacker. Neither watcher bothered to glance at a trio of monitors displaying real-time images of the tower's service entrance and adjacent sidewalks.

In a compact electronic console, a sophisticated video recorder ran twenty-four-seven collecting digital data continuously transmitted to a vacant warehouse in the San Francisco suburb of Daly City.

## TWELVE Controversy

While in no sense rundown, the Dirksen Senate Office Building was beginning to show its age. Slouched in an armchair, a pair of Benjamin Franklin spectacles perched on his bulbous nose, Senator Raymond Kyle looked up from reading a contentious bill currently mired in committee when the door to his spacious, paneled office opened without benefit of a knock.

Irrked by his staff's failure to intercept Maryland senior Senator Edgerin Burton, and do him the basic courtesy of announcing a visitor, Kyle's forced cordiality held a false not of bonhomie. "Well, lookee who's come calling."

"Morning, Ray." Burton closed the door behind him. "Can you a spare minute?"

"Don't see why not. Grab a seat, Ed, and tell me what's on your fertile mind?" Icons of long standing in the same Party, the senior senators allegedly shared similar political agendas. Less known was the fact that they shared a lingering, anything but congenial relationship dating back to coincidental, pristine, six-year terms in office, though most times their sublimated distaste for one another was cloaked under the guise of political professionalism.

"I've been aching to hear your view," declared Burton, "about where the floor debate is taking us."

"Yeah, you aren't alone; works both ways. Want my take straight," asked Kyle, "or with a hefty dash of salt?"

"Straight, no embellishment."

Kyle chuckled. "Always did appreciate a man who likes it dished out the way it is." Waxing philosophic, he said, "Truth be told, I've been bored out of my socks listening to hour after hour of ring-around-the-rosy argument from both sides of the aisle. Up till now, all the talk's netted is a fat goose egg. Amongst the chorus of high-pitched voices, assuming each 'n every opinionated know-it-all will be heard from, I expect we'd get some heated from forty or fifty different points of view."

"You'll hear no dispute there," said Burton. "Any personal feelings about how the, uh . . . ? I'd appreciate hearing your personal opinion about, uh . . . With or without U.N. backing, do you honestly believe Dysart has a prayer of pulling off this lunar fusion debacle, making his fusion daydream a reality?"

Smarting internally at the "debacle" reference, Kyle covered his irritation with a quick reply. "Not real sure what the subject of this quiz might be, Ed."

"I'd welcome your thoughts," said Burton sharply, "about the shotgun wedding of Dysart Technologies and the U.N. Energy Consortium. In your opinion, could this crazy Selene II venture actually prove worthwhile? Yes, or no?"

Senator Kyle tapped a pencil on the desk, as if weighing his response. "Way I see it, we're caught in the jaws of a two-edged vise. Solving the energy crunch dilemma goes hand in glove with reducing climate change effects, and both are coming at us too fast to be dealt with in anything like a conventional manner, nor can either be legislated away. Something's got to change soonest, no two ways about that. Unless we bite down hard on one bullet, and use it t'help shoot down the other, things'll start getting real bad pretty damned soon. This energy quandary harks me back to goings-on early in the past century, when President Roosevelt's National Recovery Act and the WPA workforce he cobbled together helped stifle the Great Depression. His TVA program alone put scads of folks back to eating regular with an expensive but dirt simple tactic: pour all government funds into rebuilding the —"

"Please!" admonished Burton, who'd heard it all before. "Rehashing ancient history is meaningless, Ray. We aren't not talking about sacrificing piddling billions to fund Dysart's pet project, but trillions."

"Tell me something I didn't already know, Ed,"

"Listen," declared Burton, "I value your judgment above all others, Ray. I paid close attention to your preliminary report on the lunar fact-finding trip. You never got past generalities, never implied what sort of overall impression you had received, which way you were leaning. I'd like your forthright opinion about whether you think something genuinely concrete is buried in Dysart's madness, or if he and the U.N. are spinning their wheels with some ulterior motive in mind?"

Kyle reacted sharply. "Spinning their . . . ! I should hope to tell you no wheel spinning's going on up there. Dysart may be the super-rich fatcat of all time, but he's also one very, *very* smart man, and proven it by rounding up a clutch of astute hard-workers who're handling the dirt-under-the-fingernails work up in that gawdawful wasteland. Judging from what I heard and saw, his people are doing a bang-up job. I don't pretend to fully understand why this special helium's so indispensable to nuke fusion, but everything they paraded past us made me feel Dysart's high-paid helpmates are doing their absolute utmost to prove the feasibility of digging up and shipping home the goods harvested up in that miserable dustbin."

It was definitely not what Burton had wanted to hear. His countenance darkened. "Just a fractional amount of . . . goods," he countered weakly. "In fact, hardly any."

"Let's be fair, Ed. Only a smidgen of special helium is up there to begin with, and its mixed in with barrels and bushels of other stuff. Dysart's paying through the nose to send home a teentsy drip in the bucket, but his goal is proving it's worthwhile, not how much can be harvested

with a skeleton crew and limited equipment.” Kyle went on to demonstrate the extent of his acquired knowledge by reciting a moderately skewed version of what he himself had taken away from the lunar experience, hitting only the high spots, then strayed from the topic and began discussing the individuals he had encountered “up there.”

Burton cut him off, asking impatiently, “In that event, which way is the wind blowing, Ray? how do you lean, into the wind, or against it?”

“Ah, now I see. You want to know how I plan to *vote* on the issue,” said Kyle with theatrical intonation. “After tap-dancing all around to the question, you’re finally asking whether I’ll vote to make my poor, unsuspecting constituents cough up their share of the tab for Selene II. Not a straightforward question, not by a long shot.”

“It’s an extremely meaningful question.”

“That you do have right, Senator Burton, sir.”

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Kyle leered at his colleague. Removed his Ben Franklin spectacles, he made a project of breathing on the lenses one at a time, polishing them with a tissue. “More things change,” he said slowly, “more they stay the same. How many times during our years in the Senate have you asked me that very same question, and received that very same answer? You know damn well my vote’ll be guided by the majority views and beliefs of the constituents that keep voting me into office. That legislative philosophy goes for my junior colleague from Memphis, too. Lord knows I’ve beat him about the head and shoulders long and hard enough to make sure he learns to toe the line.”

“For the love of God!” Burton exclaimed indignantly. “Don’t try and sell me that idealistic hogwash. This vitally important issue fairly explodes with complications that make it impossible to pay even token attention to electorate opinion. The fusion bill is of immensely greater importance than the prejudices of the misinformed, or more likely disinformed reflected in maudlin polls, editorials, or what have you.”

“Afraid we’re in razor sharp disagreement there, Ed.”

“I myself,” said Burton, ignoring the other’s response, “have come full circle on the issue. I sincerely believe the answer lies in a ‘nay’ vote coupled with federal subsidies aimed at radically expanding fossil fuel exploration, and the vigorous development of ultra-sophisticated geothermal, wind and solar energy systems. We can’t afford to wager the world’s severely limited resources on a potential lost cause like that being vigorously propounded by that rogue Dysart and the U.N. Energy cabal.”

“Whoa, hoss!” said Kyle. “Talk about complications! I can hardly believe the two-legged complication who’s wandered into my very own office without forewarning. Some time ago you and I worked together hard ginning up legislation aimed at cutting off the water of lobbyists bent on targeting senators, but naturally that law doesn’t apply to insider lobbyists like you, does it, Ed?”

“What a ridiculous thing to say! Ray, you enjoy a hard-earned reputation for fair dealing. It’s only proper for you to hear me out before you —”

“Negative!” His head cocked at a defiant angle, Kyle said, “Now that I know why you’re here, and where you’re coming from, I won’t indulge you to the extent of being what yourself

may think of as 'fair.' Besides, what the hell does fair have to do with anything? I may be a semi-senile old fool in some ways, but repaying a debt to the homefolks who keep me in office comes first, and foremost above other considerations. My one and only doubt centers on the question of whether it's wise to help commit my constituents to cough up the staggering bundle of new dollars needed to jump-start the humongous programs cooked up by Dysart and U.N."

"Ayes from you and your Tennessee colleague," countered Burton, "could easily help drop that staggering bundle of taxpayer new dollars into a bottomless rathole."

"Now there you've got me." Kyle's lips twitched. "I concede the possibility, yet that can also be said about throwing money willy-nilly at this Vonex solar energy boondoggle you're left-handedly trying to persuade me is the gold-plated answer."

Burned by the remark, Burton insisted that the Vonex proposal would be less risky, and in the long run far less expensive to implement, than the glorified, visionary fusion power systems proactively fostered by Dysart and the U.N. consortium.

"Sorry, Ed," drawled Kyle. "Now you're spouting pure, unadulterated horseshit. Pitting one bundle of energy alternatives against the other to oppose the last gasps of fossil fuel combustion, plus who knows how many other iffy, non-renewable energy resource schemes if plain foolish. Nuclear fusion technology is a proven, real-world fact. In plain talk, what you're trying to sell me doesn't begin to add up, and that line will get you nowhere. It can't be an either, or commitment 'cause that just isn't the bone of contention. To be blunt, it isn't the case, *can't* be the case.

"You go back to Reichert's oil-soaked cronies," insisted Kyle, "and tell the lot of 'em to keep on pulling out from underground whatever recoverable fossil fuels're still there. All it'll achieve is to keep on adding to the self-destructive climate change catastrophe we've been giving a helping hand ever since the industrial revolution. We have got to start changing horses before we all get swept away. For all I care, go ahead and vote to help Reichert and his oil barons augment their energy shenanigans with a proposition to collect and send unlimited solar energy to the ground. What harm can it do in the interval between now and a full-blown global fusion energy solution? But if their crazy notion is all there ever is, our children and grandchildren are the one who'll be left sucking hind tit energy-wise."

"Not," objected Burton archly, "if your 'staggering bundle' of taxpayer new dollars is wisely allocated. We'll recoup, Ray. We have to. We'll find other, better, more integrated energy sources."

"If it pleases you keep talking nonsense, go right ahead," invited Kyle. "Just before that highfalutin' Brit, Llancolm, your monied bosom buddy Reichert and I made our pilgrimage to the Moon, I sent gofers out to pulse the scientific community top to bottom, side to side and front to back. Another smaller team spread out from Nashville and found out what they could about which way that wind you have in mind was blowing amongst the homefolks. Shouldn't surprise you to learn the topnotch scientists are behind Dysart and the U.N. damn near to the man and woman, yet on the negative side few voting citizens cotton to the stench of a whopping tax increase. Our straw-poll showed the issue split pretty much down the middle.

"That said," asserted Kyle, "you bust into my office wanting my 'honest opinion' about the fusion bill. Okay, here it is, short 'n sweet: I heavily favor what Dysart and the U.N. are doing.

Why? One very simple reason is that Dysart just handed a pair of Native American Tribe out in the Nevada boondocks a super-expensive, commercial fusion power plant that this second is kicking out gigawatts wholesale. What impressed me even more 'n that is another indisputable, diamond-hard fact of life: a pair of national governments have already licensed the rights to very expensively build and put on line their own Dysart fusion power plants, the first of which is due to break ground shortly in Russia. Makes the bottom line pretty clear to read and understand, doesn't it, Ed? The smart money is riding on Dysart's fusion power system."

"Not all of it," denied Burton heatedly.

"Pains me to say so right to your face, Ed, but that is the lamest damned argument I ever heard come out of your mouth."

Burton fumed. "I hadn't realized how narrow-minded you are," he accused. Still fuming, he added, "One indication of a potential saving grace maychange your mind."

"Oh? What might that be?"

"Everything depends on fallout from the upcoming caucus. If wiser heads prevail, we may be able to push forward the amendment and establish —"

"Hold it! Best not go there, Ed," advised Kyle sternly. "What you were about to say isn't a fit topic of conversation. Right after that op-ed piece showed up in the *Post*, the VP warned us in no uncertain terms to put a lid on it, and keep it on, or else."

"Be reasonable," urged Burton. "Discussing important matters in private is a hoary tradition among —"

"Private!" hooted Kyle. "You more than anyone should know 'privacy' inside the Beltway's a laugh 'n a half. Here in our fair capital the ears in the walls grow ears of their own. What's more, the favorite parlor game in town is scraping dirt out from under the rug and spreading it around as if it was gospel. The VP presides over the Senate as if she holds a mortgage on the Capitol, and as I said she swore us to secrecy, warned us a brick wall would fall on any senator or staffer who dared leak one syllable of what started in the cloakroom as frivolous chatter."

Senator Burton had heard enough. Frowning darkly, he gained his feet in herky-jerky fashion and headed for the door, throwing back over his shoulder a short-bitten, "We shall see."

"Yeah, that we shall, that we shall . . ." Twirling the Ben Franklin spectacles in his fingers, Kyle simmered internally and stared at the closed door of his office. He stirred abruptly, punched the intercom and summoned his chief of staff. When that worthy appeared, he was warned without preamble that if Jesus Christ happened to ride into the outer office on a donkey, and the Second Coming was not announced prior to admitting Him, an invitation would be issued for the chief of staff to begin searching the cold, empty world outside for gainful employment in the private sector.

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"Think it's him?"

"Don't think it is, and don't think it's not. Don't think at all, matter of fact. The name of the game's wait 'n see, see? No need t'be dead certain; suspicious is enough to pass along a heads-up to the honchos in the Big Apple. It's them who'll decide what's what, and what's not."

It was difficult to tell which of the two men in the Daly City warehouse were more intent on the way a youthful graphic artist deftly manipulated the image glowing in a flat-panel display.

Having deleted a pair of yellow-tinted, extra-large shooter sunglasses from the subject's features, he busied himself touching up the eyes and brows, all the while glancing back and forth from the displayed image to a photograph clipped to the free-standing display. "About how long ago," he asked without turning his head, "was this mug shot taken?"

"Years," supplied the balding elder watcher. "Eight, maybe ten, or longer."

The artist grunted something indistinguishable and continued working. His first action had been to delete the subject's wavy gray mane, and then duplicate as best he could the severe, reddish-blond brush cut hairstyle favored by the man in the still photo. "This fix would be a slam-dunk," he muttered, "if the video sequence had caught the guy full face. The far shots nailed him on the sidewalk, but with his chin down on his chest. In the close-ups climbing the steps, he was looking away from the camera."

The balding watcher shrugged. "No help for it, I guess."

"There would be," said the artist, "if I had access to a holographic tank. Then I could, you know, rotate an image, get full frontal symmetry and do the job right."

"Don't sweat the fancy stuff," advised the younger watcher. "Give what y'got to work with your best shot."

"Yeah, yeah; goes without saying," muttered the artist, his fingers dancing over the keyboard. He used the computer's touch-screen feature to make final adjustments to the image, enhanced it and sat back. Assiduously comparing the image to the still pic, he studied one, then the other. He enlarged the revised image twice-size, and scooted his castor chair backward. "Did what I could with only left-profile features to work with. I had to assume symmetry, but that doesn't always work real good."

The balding man leaned forward. He made a critical examination of the artist's work, and said, "Shit!"

"And two is eight," quipped the artist.

"Okay, that does it for you, Rembrandt. Time to smart-mouth your way out the door. Send a bill to the usual address."

"Same check's-in-the-mail P.O. Number as before?"

"Right! Now beat it!"

When he and his companion were alone in the warehouse, the younger man said tentatively, "Near as I can tell, height 'n weight are in the ballpark. Looks real close."

"Close," said his companion, "only counts with horseshoes and hand grenades."

"So what's the story? Do we send it to New York, or shut up and forget about it?"

"I'm thinking," the other told him.

The silence dragged on. The younger man impatiently suggested a coin toss to have done with it. "Heads we're prob'ly damned if we do, tails damned if we don't."

The older man rubbed his balding pate as if stimulating thought. Making up his mind, he said, "Why not? Good a notion as any." Digging in his trouser pocket, he pulled out a new dollar. "Heads we do and get yelled at, tails we don't and maybe get boiled alive." Thumbing the coin into a high, end-over-end arc, he let it ring on the bare concrete floor and roll around in a diminishing spiral. Both men hunched forward, staring down at the coin. The familiar three-

quarter profile of George Washington was reflected in the harsh glare of overhead fluorescent lights.

Reluctant to utter the fateful words, Baldy said, "That settles that. Go ahead, Jimmy; you do the honors. Send it."

"Check." His companion slid into the chair vacated by the graphic artist.

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In Manhattan, Aaron Beebe flushed the toilet, washed and dried his hands and left his private executive washroom. He dropped into the chair behind his desk and resumed reading a featured article in the current elix edition of *Vanity Fair*.

The eloquence of the piece captioned "A Gift of the Gods" impressed him nearly as much after a second reading as it had the first time around. What bothered him most was the distinct impression it left: a nagging, subliminal sense that Vonex International, and more importantly he himself, may have been betting on the wrong horse.

What also struck him as unusual was how seldom an item of unadulterated, science-oriented industrial propaganda found its way into a tony, eclectic online publication like *Vanity Fair*; a periodical invariably jam-packed with graphic high-fashion ads and articles concerning celebrities of one stripe or another, and those who believed themselves members of the world's elite. What, he wondered, could have encouraged the editors to publish such an extremely well-written meld of idealism and pragmatism? In essence, be it superb or mediocre, the piece amounted to a profound, straightforward sales puff on the coming glories and utopian bounties to be offered by controlled nuclear fusion energy systems. Had the widely circulated national magazine run the piece due to Dysart's international prominence, wealth and influence, or could the world's wealthiest individual have perhaps *paid* to have it published.

Either rationale struck him as unlikely, or perhaps improbable, which verged on the absurd. Yet if editorial insight had succumbed to the lure of new dollars, seeing the article in *Vanity Fair* still struck him as most unlikely. The magazine's online readership was largely composed of urban sophisticates, many if not most of whom entertained no more than a passing interest in, or an in-depth understanding of, subject matter as esoteric and arcane as nuclear fusion technology. Yet the writer, obviously on Dysart's payroll, had done a remarkable job of putting before the readers a meat-and-potatoes menu of delicacies destined to be served in the wake of a positive resolution to the political-economic funding controversy on everyone's lips.

Searching further for a viable rationale, Beebe mulled various answers while staring fixedly at the piece's "divine gift" caption glowing in the computer display. Spotted here and there within two brief pages of text were vignette photos of the Native American Nuclear Fusion Center inaugural ceremony, where ever-reclusive Lyman Dysart had once again proven himself fanatically camera-shy. Most likely he had failed to be photographed, yet the absence of an on-the-spot pic might mean he enjoyed enough clout to nix the publication of any pix of himself.

The intercom's soft chime ruptured Beebe's ruminations. Having left instructions that he was not to be disturbed, he responded sharply, "What is it?"

"Mr. Reichert would like to see you in his office at once, sir."

"Ah, at once! Yes, I see. How could I fail to respond to my master's voice in any way except *at once!*"

His executive assistant's chuckle sounded forced.

Beebe took his time answering the summons. Moving in a leisurely manner that would be certain to antagonize the chairman had he known, he lifted his suit jacket from the closet and donned it one slow sleeve at a time. He used the executive express elevator compartment's mirrored wall to adjust the knot in his tie in, and stepped out in the extra-wide, richly carpeted eightieth floor hallway.

A trio of supplicants in the vestibule awaiting an audience with the great man watched enviously as Beebe used his electronic key card to gain admittance to the executive suite's antechamber. He nonchalantly strolled past Reichert's personal affairs director, an attractive middle-aged brunette conversing with a pair of staffers.

"You can go right in, sir," invited Reichert's executive aide unnecessarily.

His first glimpse of the chairman set Beebe's alarm bell jangling. Rosy-cheeked, his deceptively innocent baby-blue eyes bright with enthusiasm, Reichert's imperious manner had deserted him entirely. A gentleman looking far out of character, he acted ready to jump up and down in a paroxysm of jubilation. "I think we may've nailed him, Aaron," he said excitedly. "We have to be certain, however, and I want your opinion."

"Slow down, Belkin. You're alluding to who, why, what, when and where?"

"Why, Lyman Dysart. Who did you think I meant? Just wait until you see what I have to show you." Taking Beebe's elbow with proprietary insistence, he tugged the attorney around his massive freeform desk to confront the glowing video panel. "I know our security director now and then rubs you the wrong way, but Smith does have his uses. He sent these photos less than an hour ago. The surveillance shot is on the left, and the doctored, er . . . rectified image is on the right."

"Surveillance recorded it where," inquired Beebe, "and when?"

"Yesterday afternoon in San Francisco, at the tower's rear service entrance."

"Hmm-m-m . . ." A quick glance was all Beebe had needed to convince himself both depicted subjects were indeed who Reichert thought they might be. Acquainted with the chairman's quirks, foibles and idiosyncrasies, he chose to lead the chairman on, let him decide for himself. Stroking his chin as if deep in thought, he looked back and forth from the reproduced still photo to the computer image. "The gray hair," he surmised, measuring his words, "has to be a wig. The shooter's sunglasses and profile make a definitive assessment difficult, yet after the artist removed them . . . Wait, I should think a more competent graphic artist would have used holographic methods to come up with something greatly superior to this crude effort."

"I'll have that taken care of at once," asserted Reichert.

"Half-hidden features aside," murmured Beebe, "the tan suit jacket is . . ."

"What . . . ?"

"My impression," said Beebe, "is that the subject's tan jacket suffers from unfashionably wide lapels. Moreover, his red-striped tie strikes a familiar chord."

Reacting to the bait, Reichert leaned forward. "The ceremony!" he cried.

"Pardon me, Belkin?"

"We watched it together: the inaugural dog and pony show, the whoop-de-do in Nevada, when the silly bastard foisted off a supposedly operational fusion power station on a tribe of filthy Indians. He was wearing that same suit and tie. It *is* Dysart."

Having spoon fed the other a pounced-upon cue, Beebe's expression of shock and amazement was classic. "Be damned, Belkin! I think you're right, it *is* him."

"Dysart in the flesh," gloated the chairman. "It's not that, but he's out in the open, alone and unattended. We've got him!"

"All we've 'got' actually," remarked the attorney, "is an isolated random sighting."

The chairman subsided. "Oh, you know perfectly well what I meant." Displeased by the other's insensitive remark, he said, "It's a start, and a good one. The next time he hits the street we'll be ready."

"You're at it again," accused Beebe with a pretense of dismay. "Please try to keep something in mind. Time after time I've attempted to impress upon you with very little success on the fact that as an officer of the court I cannot place my professional standing in jeopardy by learning the seamy details of whatever you may or may not have planned for Mr. Dysart." Stepping away from the desk with an air of injury, he moved to leave the lavishly appointed executive suite.

A benign expression leavened Reichert's apple-cheeked countenance. To the other's receding back he said, tongue-in-cheek, "No details, Aaron. Not one single, seamy detail."

His enthusiasm at a peak, the chairman plopped down behind his desk and punched the intercom button. He told his executive assistant to call the saturnine, self-contained individual charged with orchestrating and sustaining Vonex International Corporate Security at a level every bit as high, or in some instances higher, than that practiced by lesser national governments. After issuing the summons, he fidgeted, waiting for a call back on the secure audio-only line.

The phone on his desk eventually buzzed. He snatched up the handset and heard a curt, "Can you make it quick, Mr. Chairman, sir? I'm kind of busy."

"Smitty, you have my sincere vote of gratitude for sending along the surveillance data from San Francisco." Reichert never failed to be excessively polite when dealing directly with Mr. Smith. The middle-aged security chieftain tipped the scales at no more than seventy kilos, but an aura of menace hung about him like smoke from a fire set with green kindling.

"What you were hoping for, was it?"

"Definitely. Affirmative on all counts. Listen, can you break free and . . . ? Perhaps we can get together at your convenience. I'd like to discuss something very important."

"Now?"

"There's never a better time," pontificated Reichert, "than the present time"

"Ten minutes," said Mr. Smith, and broke the connection.

### THIRTEEN Snoopers

Secretary-General Sir Ian Moorman topped a *very* short list of individuals allotted the privilege of contacting Dysart directly on his private, closely guarded landline number, his sole link to the outside world not filtered by Maggie, the CEO's executive assistant.

When the distinctive buzzer sounded, Lyman went to his desk, opened a bottom drawer, noted the call's origin and glanced at the antique, polished-brass shipboard chronometer on his desk. It was evening, shortly after eight in Geneva. He switched the call to the computer and the integral display illuminated rising from its nest. The well-mannered features of Energy Secretary Llancolm appeared standing next to Sir Ian.

"Hullo, Lyman," hailed Moorman. "Have you a moment free to chat?"

"For you anytime, Sir Ian. Hiya, Lanny."

Llancolm lofted a bell-shaped snifter in his splayed fingers. "Cheers, Lyman! How're things over in the colony?"

"Revolutionary!" said The Stockholder.

Moorman chuckled. "We dined in the chalet, our home away from home while I'm vainly trying to cope with official duties. Lanny and I were taking our ease before the fire, indulging in an after-dinner brandy. He conjured a notion to ring you up."

"Always glad to hear from you imperial Britons."

Llancolm's reserved smile was reassuring. "Keeping your head above water?"

"Barely, now and then. What recent scandalous doings amongst the allegedly united nations?"

"As ever," replied the ever-cheerful knight of the realm chaos, has everything under absolutely no control. We've no specific reason for bothering you other than curiosity, Lyman. I've unofficially and repeatedly urged an authoritative contact at New Scotland Yard, in addition to a human ferret now working on behalf of Interpol, to put their heads together and dig into the rumors of coercion and outright bribery purportedly afflicting certain delegates to, er . . . To what you impolitely called the 'alleged' united nations. Sorry to say no concrete results have yet surfaced. Your Congress is due to vote in a matter of days, and we wondered if similar difficulties might also apply to any ongoing investigations instituted across the pond."

"Same dull story here, Sir Ian." Dysart paused to reconsider. "Wait, strike that. My tale's of recent vintage, and possibly a few degrees sorrier. The FBI is overstressed these days, you see; whenever that happens, the Justice Department turns into a typical federal bureaucracy striving to compete with the intel services instead of sharing information. My private request for a quiet, behind the scenes investigation carried next to zero clout, so the chase has gone nowhere, mostly because of repeated hints that digging into the matter might involve devious doings by certain illustrious cabinet officials and legislators."

"Um, same story on this side of the water, I fear," said Moorman. "Regretfully, the opposition employs admirable dexterity to keep its fingerprints off the cookie jar. In an unvoiced corollary to the adage that silence is golden, it might also be said that the conventional energy confederacy, having amassed a golden hoard, is using a portion of it unstintingly to ensure silence about anything connected with its scabrous endeavors."

"Sad, but true, Sir Ian." Lyman cogitated. "That isn't the only obstacle, either. The major quandary centers about what I think of as whistling The Original Investment Blues." He explained how the White House and the Congress were being deluged with public howls over a prospective first-surge pro rata share of taxpayer investment in Selene II, and added, "To our ironic misfortune, the U.S. gross domestic product remains a notch or two higher than most

potential contributor nations, and what's left of our middle-class forever bears the brunt of taxation, so the loudest screams naturally come from median-and-above wage earners. That alone encourages the legislators to worry about keeping their seats if they refuse to pay heed to the public outcry."

"Americans and everyone else," objected Moorman, "surely must realize how incredibly global fusion will enrich their lives when it becomes widely established."

"Sure they know it, but only intellectually," said Dysart. "What's difficult is getting them to put their emotions aside and tradeoff a prolonged fusion future versus an immediate threat to their wallets."

"Um, quite so." Moorman cleared his throat. "Lyman, I can never seem to find the words to adequately credit your inestimable efforts on behalf of all denizens, if only they knew and appreciated it. What you've done, and are doing, is so much more than anyone would have believed possible, not to mention the horrendous added burden you've shouldered by pouring titanic sums into the lunar mining venture, a surreal undertaking to we Europeans. What we simply cannot imagine is why anyone can possibly object to your altruistic devotion to what you deeply and sincerely believe."

"Hear, hear!" chimed in Llancolm, saluting Dysart by lofting his snifter.

"Your kind words are greatly appreciated, dear friends. Yet where blue collar wage-earners and white-collar professionals are concerned, altruism has to take a back seat. It's the initial quantum leap in taxation that sticks in their craw."

"Sticks in their . . . Sorry, afraid you've lost me."

Dysart grinned. "An Americanism, Sir Ian. It's a classic example of Churchill's quip about America and Britain being two nations separated by a common language."

The U.N. officials seemed only distantly amused.

"From my perspective," continued Lyman, "the oil drenched opposition can bribe, lobby and propagandize from here unto eternity, and it will make hardly any difference. For the time being, the immediate key to success lies here in America, and in your upcoming General Assembly vote, as well as, to a lesser degree, OPEC."

"Now there," put in Llancolm, "you've struck a spark on the bright side. OPEC's resolve to hold the line on fossil fuel exploration and production may've weakened."

"Old news," Lyman said dismissively. "Months ago, the Saudi Resources Ministry quietly licensed the rights to our Omega Pinch System."

"Precisely my point," said Llancolm. "Not only that, but a pair of accompanying oddities unrelated to petroleum baron connivance also cropped up. The most recent shipment of helium-three went to auction, turning the bidder circus into a genuine melee. The price per kilogram was literally bid to the skies, mainly due to a surprising stranger who, for reasons of his own, stood up to be counted. The aide who brought the auction results to my attention told me I'd missed something, and she was correct. China bought a few kilos of a substance more precious than diamonds despite seeing the price driven up to a phenomenal bid level. I was greatly surprised to learn of gross Chinese expenditures when the yuan, renminbi — whatever their unit of exchange is called on Thursdays — is devalued. I couldn't imagine why the jolly Peoples Republic was stockpiling the miracle isotope before a use for it existed."

Dysart said, "The mandarins will be needing it shortly, Lanny. Without bothering to procure a license, they quietly pirated our Omega Pinch technology plus associated proprietary processes without saying hello, goodbye, mother may I? or anything else."

"Good Lord! You can't be serious, Lyman."

"What's even worse from my standpoint," added Dysart, "they also pirated my fusion guru, Xiang Lim, who's favored to collect the Nobel Prize in Physics. I count having him snatched away as major damage twice as hurtful as China's technical thievery. Dr. Lim's brilliance and dogged determination were entirely responsible for the ultimate success of Omega Pinch. The mandarins dragging him back to China by hitting him with the lowest of low blows, blackmail."

"Incredible!" Sir Ian sounded genuinely vexed. "I daresay anything that reprehensible far beyond the pale, Lyman. An out-and-out felonious act by any sovereign nation is inconceivable"

"When it comes to doing business," said Dysart with no hint of sarcasm, "there's apparently the right way, the wrong way, and the Chinese way. Now then, Lanny, what was the other oddity you mentioned?"

"Um, yes," said Llancolm. "Rather an addendum to the first: a rumored defection of the petroleum conspiracy's production and export linchpin, Saudi Arabia. If examined closely, Venezuela also shows indications of wavering, and subtle, subterranean indications have given our intel wizards cause to believe Indonesia could eventually follow suit."

"Neither the Saudis, nor any other OPEC member nation," said Lyman, "has ever been accused of being foolish; unfortunately, in my case that also holds true for the Chinese autocracy. The mandarins have apparently taken note of what fusion's moving finger has begun to write. Late last year, they sent over a technical team to witness the prototype Omega Pinch performance at our Nevada facility. The results must have impressed them enough to think about hedging their bets on fusion, which to me is news of sunburst proportions. No amount of coercion, bribery, or anything else could have changed the PRC's collective mind, pun intended. China's smarties decided to join the game, mostly I think because their heavy-duty scientists and senior ideologues are fearful of being left behind the door later on, when helium-three will hopefully be doled out in sufficient quantity to meet the prospective zooming demand."

Moorman digested the information. "What's deeply disturbing to us," he declared, "is picturing the consequences of failure by your Congress to endorse and partially fund Selene II, and of course Prometheus. At best it could bring about a global crisis, at worst a cascade of societal upheavals that could lead to open warfare if and when the 'left-outs' begin madly scrambling for residual fossil fuels at any price . . ."

Moorman fell silent when Dysart's intercom chimed three times in rapid succession, a signal that something of sufficient importance had raised its head to warrant Maggie breaking in on a conversation she was aware of, but had no way to intercept. Four chimes would have signaled an even more critical need to interrupt, and five would have alerted Lyman to an out-and-out emergency.

"Excuse me for a second." Lyman hit the intercom button. "Yes, Mag . . .?"

"A lasercomm transmission from Dr. Boucher, sir." Clay's executive assistant waited for Dysart to tell her what he wanted done with the call.

“Did Jean-Marie mention urgency?”

“No, sir. Nothing of that nature.”

“Explain that I’m in conference, Mag. Tell him I’ll return his call soonest.”

Secretary-General Moorman broke in. “Forgive me, Lyman, but the ladies are summoning us for a rubber of bridge. It’s been wonderful speaking with you. Keep fighting the good fight, eh? Those of us stuck over here promise to struggle with might and main to ensure that your lunar efforts prove worthwhile. Good evening. We’ll continue our discussion another time.”

Dysart spent ten minutes on the secure lasercomm channel speaking to the gentleman he considered his “Man in the Moon,” who related the difficulties Vacuum Crew Training Manager Gerrard Ralphs was having preparing the replacement crew in Florida for lunar duty. Irrked by the intermittent transmission lags, Lyman assured Boucher the problem would be taken care of, said a hasty farewell and signed off

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Locked in Mr. Smith’s stony, unblinking gaze, Reichert did his best to refrain from blinking, or what would have been much worse, looking away. Determined to let the corporate security chief speak first, he returned the other’s opaque visual assault until his own eyes began tearing damply. Realizing he asked too much of himself, he cleared his throat and blinked. “How are things on the security front, Smitty?”

“So-so. You asked to see me pronto. What’s the topic?”

“Dysart,” said Reichert, pronouncing the name as if it designated something unclean.

“What about him?”

“I want the bastard . . . What I mean is . . . We have to vigorously follow up on the surveillance pictures you sent along. I want you to find out why he was out in late afternoon, just after that ridiculous Indian ceremony in Nevada. I want you to find out what he’d been up to, why he’d dared to sneak in through the tower’s back door. I want you to learn who if anyone he’d gone to see, and most of all why he’d let his guard down and had taken to strolling the streets unprotected.”

After a barely perceptible nod, Smith said, “Sure it’s him on video?”

“Positive.”

At last Smith himself blinked. “Okay, I’ll get on it. The team covering the tower’s lobby entrance flat-out missed him, so he must’ve not passed by. I watched the playback two or three times. The mini-cam picked him up coming around the tower’s northwest corner. It leads me to believe he walked east or west along the main drag, turned down the side street and came around to the rear entrance.”

“You’re convinced that was his route?”

“Good an inference as any.”

Determined to take charge, Reichert leaned forward aggressively, hands flat-pressed on the desk, the large diamond pinky ring on his finger sparkling brilliantly. “The most vital item on the agenda will be to neutralize Dysart before the upcoming Senate vote, are we clear on that?”

“Neutralize . . . ? Ambiguity lights up that term, Mr. Chairman, sir. Are you hinting at an action to take him out like we tried to do earlier?”

“Well, I realize that may sound harsh, but —”

“F’Chrissake tell it like it is!” insisted Smith. “I’ve got work to do.”

The chairman clenched his fists, willing himself to hold back the acidic rejoinder on his tongue. “I want the bastard out of the way permanently.”

“Better,” approved the other. Now we’re maybe on the same wavelength.”

“You think he came off the main thoroughfare,” said Reichert, “so chances are he was spotted by someone on the sidewalk. How about having a pair of men pose as policemen and canvass the shops and businesses within reasonable walking distance of the tower?”

“That, Mr. Chairman, sir,” denied Smith, “is a really *bad*, bad idea.”

Although the other had spoken softly, his abject disapproval further irritated Reichert. “Bad,” he demanded to know, “in what way?”

“Spent time in Frisco some years back,” informed Mr. Smith. “All things considered, it’s a smallish city, but classy, and SFPD’s a tightly knit cop fraternity same as in every other burg. Out-of-towners posing as plainclothes dicks would be sticking their necks in the wringer big time.”

“How so? I should think the odds of being caught would be negligible?”

A caustic snort. “No argument, score one for negligible. Even so, it’s a risk no gambler in his right mind would take, and as I’ve told you before pros don’t screw around with man-made odds. Percentages are calculated by juggling and weighing various probabilities, so forget ‘odds.’ My upper-level guys are way too smart to invite doing time over something that harebrained, necessary or not, which by the way it is not. I can round up a half-dozen genuine SFPD dicks with a finger snap. Cops on every police force in the world drool over the baksheesh they earn moonlighting.”

“You really think so?”

“I know so.”

“Then get on it straightaway.”

Smith pushed back his chair. “I’ll punch all the buttons, get things rolling. First we’ll need copies of the doctored pix you’re sure show Dysart for the plainclothes guys to circulate.”

“Fine, Smitty! I’ll take care of that. Keep me posted.”

Halfway to the door, Mr. Smith did not bother with a reply.

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Most of a year had slipped away before Joe Wilson felt comfortable living and working among the thirty-million denizens of Metro Province Jakarta — *Jabotabek* to the natives — with its five *kotas*, or districts. One major drawback to becoming acclimated to life in the thriving metropolis was the perpetual traffic snarl. Few if any drivers battling their way through turgid rivers and streams of vehicles knew or cared about rules of the road, let alone willingly followed any; those who did, despite strict fuel rationing alleviated by a hyperactive black market in homegrown Indonesian petroleum, fought a perpetual, losing battle against swarms of bicycles, motorcycles, trucks, cars, taxis and buses.

Ten months earlier, stepping off a commuter jet at Sukarno–Hatta International Airport, he’d taken a taxi to the hotel near Medan Merdeka Park recommended by his Australian employers. The twelfth-floor window had afforded him a view of the Tugu Monas National

Monument's tip. He had learned later that the soaring marble column topped by a simulated golden flame symbolized Indonesia's undying spirit, and after acquiring a few words and phrases of Javanese and Sudanese from the workmen under his supervision, had laughed uproariously when told the lofting marble column was known locally as long-departed Dictator Sukarno's "Final Erection."

Reporting for work in the high-rise office of the Aussie contractor, he had been assigned to a supervisory slot at an apartment megacomplex under construction on the outskirts of one of the satellite cities ringing Jakarta. Unwittingly renting a car, he had risked his life for a week commuting to the work site, arriving late each morning in a cursing rage. The horrendous traffic snarl had forced a move to less comfortable quarters out beyond the Priok ring road, farther than he had wanted to be from the large Chinese colony's restaurants beyond compare.

With the rising sun only partially lightening the heavy gray overcast, he parked one of the electric runabouts reserved for commute use by construction managers and supervisors. A light rain was fell, but then when wasn't it raining in Indonesia? Noticing the sleek, rain-beaded Mercedes electric sedan parked alongside three other company runabouts, he pulled the hood of his poncho over his head, skirted a muddy pool and hurried across the puddled gravel toward the first in a row of doublewide trailers housing the contractor's on-site offices.

A subcontractor assigned to supervise the rough plumbing crew looked up from a blueprint, and grinned. "What sort of bad-ass stunt you pull now, Joe?"

Wilson yawned. "Too early for riddles."

"A pair of cops in the annex been waiting to talk with you."

"Cops . . . ?"

"Yeah, cops is what the man said." The rough plumbing subcontractor held his snide grin. "Doubt if you'll like the local hoosegow. I heard it sucks. They whip you every hour on the hour, and between times work you over so hard that —"

"You're some comedian!" applauded Wilson. He doffed his poncho, hung it on a coat rack, then filled a mug with scalding black coffee at the urn, carried it to an open doorway and stepped into the adjoining trailer. Expecting to find a pair of wily, streetwise officers from the Jakarta constabulary, he tried not to show surprise upon learn the cops were middle-aged Caucasians.

"Mr. Josephson?" A beefy stranger rose from the nearest folding chair.

"Yeah, once was; I answer to Wilson now," said Joe. "Changed my name all legal and proper in Sydney. Why'd you want to see me?"

"No police business brings us here, Mister, uh . . . Wilson. We'd like to ask a few questions is all."

"Questions . . . Who are you, by the way? How'd you find me?"

The second detective and his partner opened their wallets, allowing Wilson to examine a pair of expertly forged IDs and shields.

Wilson looked, and then looked again. "SFPD . . . ? Stateside cops?"

The wallets were closed, returned to the respective jacket pockets. "Our records indicate that you were once employed by Gollantz Construction, a South San Francisco firm. We've

already spoken to a former Gollantz supervisor now working in Kuwait. He said he'd kept in touch with you, and gave us a steer on where you were located."

"Uh-huh, that'd be Mike Keane. Oops, should've said Larsen, yeah, Mike Larsen. You sure went to lots of trouble to find me."

"Just routine, Mr. Wilson. But why, if we can ask, all the name changes? First Keane becomes Larsen, and now we find out you switched from Josephson to Wilson."

"Four of us bachelors," explained Joe, "signed an agreement to change our names legally if we wanted to cash in on high-paying slots up for grabs Down Under."

"Two others beside you and Mr. Larsen?"

"Right. Old man Gollantz, who's been around about a thousand years, set up cushy billets in Australia for key guys who happened to be single. Each of us got hefty bonuses for agreeing to go along with the name-change gag. Oh, we were handed a longwinded song and dance about the Aussies not wanting the foreigner work permits they'd have to push through traced back to our stateside jobs."

"Why might something like that be necessary?"

"Beats me. None of us thought the routine made sense, but a project manager, me and two other supervisors swallowed the bait whole. Rode the same Qantas flight to Sydney, we did, to be met at Kingston airport and treated like VIPs. I'll say this for the Aussies: they're terrific bosses. Let you do your job without nit-picking, know what I mean? I've been with 'em ever since. Mike and the other pair, too, far as I know."

"I see." The "detectives" exchanged glances. "Mr. Wilson, what can you tell us about the Gollantz project you worked on at Dysart Tower in San Francisco?"

"The blind tunnel job? Some weird gig that was." Puzzled by the unexpected reaction neither "detective" tried to hide, Wilson asked if he'd said anything out of line.

"No, no; not at all, Mr. Wilson. At any time from project start to completion did you personally review any documents required for approval by CalTrans or the San Francisco public works department, whatever its called?"

"Uh-uh, never. But we hardly ever go down that road. Usually we work to blueprints, specs signed-off by management or the responsible architect, civil engineer, whichever technical guru has the say. I'm curious. Why ask about that cockamamie job? There a problem with the tunnel? Cave in, flooding, something not good?"

Again the men posing as detectives exchanged glances. "Pending the results of an ongoing investigation, we're not allowed to discuss the reason. What we'd like from you is a signed deposition attesting to your part in the project like the one supplied by Mr. Keane, uh . . . Sorry, Larsen describing his work on elevator systems."

Wilson's mildly suspicious nod was inspired a sixth sense hinting that things were not exactly as they seemed to be. For want of anything better to say, he admitted that elevator systems were Larsen's specialty. "Will I . . . ? That is, is there a chance I could I be called, made to testify in court?"

"Oh, no," he was assured. "A simple deposition will cover everything that has to do with your efforts."

"If you agree to write the deposition," put in the second "detective, speaking for the first time, "keep one thing in mind: a technical construction report is not necessary, just a brief description, a paragraph or two covering the work you supervised in person. Call it a general overview of what was accomplished, yet something you said just now ago made me wonder why you called it a blind tunnel."

"It was," said Wilson. "We bored so far, with the crew working overtime to hand-wire the re-bar, pour, spray and finish the concrete, and so forth. Once we reached a specific distance from the tower's sub-basement, we got an order to shut down. Me and my guys walked off the job one afternoon and never went back."

"A dead-end tunnel certainly sounds peculiar."

"Couldn't agree more," said Wilson. "Thought so myself, and so did my crew."

"Suppose you could have the deposition ready for us in the morning, Mr. Wilson? We're due to fly out of Jakarta around noon tomorrow."

"Sure. The write-up should be fairly simple. Want me to mail it to you?"

"No, don't bother. We'll swing by and pick it up here, if that's agreeable."

"Okay. If I'm not around, the envelope with my name on it will be on the desk next door in the other trailer."

"Thanks for taking the time to talk to us, Mr. Wilson. You've been very helpful. Sign the deposition with your full legal name. Also, please make a note of your former surname."

Sloshing through the drizzle to the Mercedes sedan, the younger man clapped his hands. "Woo-oo-ie!" he said softly, and slid into the vehicle's passenger seat. "Wait'll the home office gets a whiff of *this* news bulletin."

"And how!" enthused his partner.

∞ ∞ ∞

A pair of genuine SFPD plainclothes detectives moonlighting away from their district paused in the shade of a building to talk things over. Only months short of retirement, the senior detective was feeling decidedly out of sorts. "What say we dump these pix in the nearest storm drain and go have a drink?"

"Not smart," warned his partner. "The lieutenant knows the ex-Fibbie who ponied-up for this gumshoe job, says he's a mean sumbitch nobody'd want to cross."

"Oh, please don't scare me!" pleaded the other sourly. He tugged a sheaf of glossy four-by-six prints from his suit pocket, glanced incuriously at the topmost. It pictured an ordinary looking man with wavy gray hair in a light tan business suit. Frozen in mid-stride, the subject appeared to be strolling nonchalantly, briefcase in hand. "Who's the perp, any idea? What's the rap on him?"

"Search me?" said his partner said. "The lieutenant said our bonuses ride on whether we turn up anyone who spotted the guy. If we do, the payoff's real good."

"What a crock!"

Having canvassed six or eight businesses, including a deli and coffee shop on the other side of Park Presidio Boulevard, the detectives had just emerged from a small brokerage firm after asking the same tired question and receiving the same negative response. They had left a

photo and a card listing their contact data with a studious young broker who promised to show the photo around and inquire if anyone had talked to subject, or glimpsed him in passing.

The soon-to-retire detective stuffed the prints back in his jacket. "So what's the next time-waster on the docket?"

"From where I'm standing," his partner said, "the sign says saloon-something-or-other, a dress shop from what can I see in the window."

The other loosed a brittle laugh. "Salon, not saloon! Don't you wish it was a saloon."

"Hey, get your jollies any way that makes your heart sing. From here, the fancy gold lettering's at a sharp angle."

The detectives hesitated approaching the shop's glass frontage when a sleek electric sedan slowed to a silent stop at the curb; the custom license plate spelled NYSRIDE. The detectives watch the driver hustle to hold open the rear door for an elegantly coifed middle-aged woman in a pale green pantsuit. A string of pearls swung freely from her neck as she bent forward to take took the driver's hand and help her alight from the vehicle.

"Carriage trade," muttered the senior detective.

"Ain't it the truth! With a primo set of wheels for a carriage."

Waiting until the woman had entered the shop, they followed her inside and were greeted cordially by an immaculately groomed blonde woman.

The senior "detective" displayed his ID and shield before going through the usual show the photo and ask the question drill.

"No-o-o," cooed the saleswoman, studying the photo, "I don't recall seeing anyone like him in here. We do have gentlemen visitors now and then, most are with their wives or women friends."

"Understand, Miss. S'pose we could leave a photo with you? When you have a chance, would you mind showing it to the other salespeople, and maybe the proprietor, too? If a light goes on, please ask whoever recognizes the man in the snapshot to call this number right away."

"It's that important?"

"Afraid so, Miss. *Very* important."

"If you gentlemen care to wait, I'll be happy to show it to the owner. It will take only a minute; she's working in the office."

"That'd be great. We surely would appreciate it."

In expressionless anticipation of a null report matching those they'd heard all morning, the detectives listened to the saleswoman's spike heels click on the polished marble floor. Before turning the knob, she tapped softly on a door inconspicuously papered in the same grasscloth pattern as the swirls and fillips covering the shop's tastefully decorated rear wall.

Through the open doorway, the detectives glimpsed a petite, dark-haired young woman working at an upright easel who glanced up, her expression faintly resentful at being disturbed. The saleswoman bent beside her, holding out the photograph, and said something the detectives were too far away to overhear.

The young woman came to her feet in a rush, all but knocking over the easel. After gazing round-eyed at the detectives for a brief instant, she rushed to close the office door.

"Bingo!" said the senior detective.

## FOURTEEN Episodes

Belkin Reichert's deceptively innocent blue eyes widened in amazement. "A tunnel . . ? The SOB sneaks in and out of his miserable tower through a *tunnel*?"

"Appears to be so." Smith's paralytic stare razed the chairman.

Reichert quailed under the visual assault. "I don't believe it."

"Believe as pleases you, Mr. Chairman, sir. Care to hear the rest?"

"The rest of . . ?"

"Rest of the story." In very few words Smith summarized the report from Indonesia, concluding with a terse statement. "The hard-hats rammed a laser-guided bore a hundred and some meters from the tower's deep sub-basement, at which point they were told to quit cold. The supervisor and three straw bosses then legally changed their names in Australia to be eligible for the high-pay jobs the Frisco employer dangled in front of their chops."

"What do name changes that have to do with —?"

"Wise-up, Mr. Chairman, sir! Dysart busted a gut blowing a thick smoke screen over the tunnel job and whatever else came down in and around his glass tower."

The chairman cogitated. "Of what use is a *blind* tunnel to nowhere?"

"Logic," declared Smith, a dollop of impatience creeping into his diction, "says a second set of hard-hats must've bored from the other end and made connections."

"Bored from where?"

"That we've yet to learn. Knowing the tube's start and direction are good clues. There's more," added Smith cryptically."

"More . . ? Smitty, these slow-drip tidbits make my head ache. More *what*?"

"More to the story." Smith opened his briefcase, took out a San Francisco street map and unfolded it. Flattening out the creases with both palms, he indicated the location of Dysart Tower with a forefinger, and traced a westerly diagonal line to an "X" penciled in on the southwest side of curving Park Presidio Boulevard.

Reichert's irritation flared. "Am I to think 'X' marks the spot?"

"Spot on," assured Smith. "It's where the cops who canvassed the area got an extra-sharp reaction to Dysart's pic, assuming it really is Dysart. The woman who runs 'X,' a classy womens' shop, almost lost it when she saw the pic. The report lists only two ways in and out: main entrance on the boulevard, and a posted emergency exit opening on an alley alongside the building. I put both doors under mini-cam surveillance. Once we learn who the proprietor is, where she goes, who she sees, whatever else video lights up for us, I'll start sketching in the first moves."

Reichert chewed his underlip. "However many 'moves' you decide on, each will take time, and we haven't any to lose. It will have to happen fast."

"A short, sweet pearl of wisdom advises us to make haste slowly."

"Forget your philosophical ramblings," insisted Reichert, exasperated by the other's remark. "We're terribly short on hours. Whatever you plan to do *has* to happen quickly. The Senate's due to vote on the fusion bill in a matter of days."

Mr. Smith neatly refolded the street map along its creases, slipped it back in the briefcase. "Meantime," was his parting shot, "I'm sending the premiere fem on our payroll in to scope the dress shop. Tops at nosing around, she'll go over 'X' from top to bottom, and side to side, learn what the other end of the tunnel's all about."

"Good!" Reichert's approving nod came quickly. "Don't lose sight of the most vital necessity. Whatever you decide to do must be done before the Senate . . ."

He broke off, shook his head in annoyance when treated to a rear view of Mr. Smith exiting the plush executive suite without a by-your-leave or backward glance.

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"Lyman," said Martin Calvo, "I wish you'd take this security breach seriously."

Closeted in the penthouse with Carolyn and his two principal confidants, Dysart was leery of stirring the pot. Tired of hearing about his dereliction, he held back the sharp rebuttal on his tongue, although the dark look he awarded Marty spoke volumes.

Curled up on the pillow-strewn sectional, Carolyn regarded her live-in lover and benefactor with a pensive expression. "Better listen to Marty. Cops hardly ever sniff around and flash photos of suspects for no good reason. Proves somebody's a lot more serious than you are, Lyman."

"How do we know," objected The Stockholder, "they were real detectives, not hired muscle posing as cops."

Carolyn rolled her eyes. "I grew up in Vegas, remember? I learned to spot a plainclothes bull from down the block and across the street. That pair, they had 'cop' all but stamped across their foreheads."

"Misrepresenting yourself as a police officer," remarked Calvo, "is a serious offense. I doubt if anyone able to look and act the part would be willing to risk it."

"About time for you to come clean," said Ben Clay. "What the hell drove you to be so careless? How could you ever forget what happened to your father, your family?"

Lyman mentioned what a fine sunny day it had been, what a joy to stroll in the open air after being locked up for weeks on end like some exotic zoo specimen.

"Glad to hear you enjoyed the stroll," said Marty. "It was my fault for letting you fly back from Nevada on your own. I should never have unsnapped your leash."

"Blame games only waste time," said Lyman. "What's done is done, what happened happened. I'm the one who has to live with the evil deed, so drop the bleeding hearts routine. We'll keep our eyes open extra-wide, maintain a low profile till the fusion legislation issue's resolved. Everything's on hold until the Senate votes."

"A low profile might not cut it," said Calvo.

"What are you getting at not, Marty?"

"Things may not be on hold elsewhere." Calvo gestured at the tinted, bulletproof floor-to-ceiling polycarbonate window-wall. "Standing too close to the old wall of tempered, 'bulletproof' crystal made your father a target for some sharpshooter in a helicopter. Much more recently, a thorough, exhaustive investigation failed to come within light-years of determining how and when an explosive charge was planted in the basement garage, let alone turning up the faintest of faint trails lead to the perp. The businessmen you suspect responsible — correctly, in my opinion

— mean business. While keeping that low profile, you might also consider the potential mess that could result from what the military calls collateral damage?”

“Marty, you’ve circled the globe, but haven’t landed,” said Lyman.

“I promise to try and do better. What,” asked Calvo, “if the bad news business types lurking out there in the wild who haven’t given up decide to go for broke and eliminate the tower along with you, me and everyone else?”

“How likely is that?” scoffed The Stockholder.

“Not very, I suppose. But a possibility for any and all, uh . . . businessmen very determined to see the last of you.”

“The notion’s preposterous, Marty.”

Calvo grimaced. “Chances are you’re right, but can we afford to treat it or any other possibility as preposterous? Think back to the way Manhattan’s twin towers were taken down early in the century. The opposition,” he added, “doesn’t play by any rules I’ve been told about.”

“Marty has a point,” said Clay thoughtfully.

Dysart relented. “All right, all right! Enough doomsday crap, people. What none of you are willing to admit is that the blame game is making a comeback. So be it: mea culpa. There, are you satisfied? I accept total responsibility for my thoughtless action, and shall forevermore do penance. Now can we please get on with our lives, or shall we sit here a while longer to cower and weep and whine about my indiscretion?”

Carolyn sat up and rolled to her feet in one fluid motion. She analytically eyed Dysart, one eyebrow elevated, and said, “Lyman, darling, you are some piece of work. I often tell myself a strange, exotic specimen like you *should be* locked up in a zoo.”

“I concur,” said Calvo.

“Second the motion,” chimed the CEO.

Lyman’s jaundiced gaze drifted from one confidant to another, then on to Carolyn. “Judging by the wildlife trapped with me, I *am* locked up in a damn zoo.”

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The caucus began on a note of calm urgency, a result of intuitive determination by the Party leadership to once and for all resolve the important issue, or at least achieve minimal tentative accord within its ranks.

As Senator Kyle had predicted, however, the session soon degenerated into a series of wild and woolly shouting matches, then settled into a heated debates that raged for the best part of an hour before tapering off and eventually dying a slow death by default as in ones and twos and groups the discouraged senators disbursed, overcome by a realization that the atmosphere was in no way conducive to a meaningful discussion of the issue at hand, let alone anything distantly resembling decisive accord.

The junior senator from Tennessee accosted Kyle as he was leaving the caucus chamber. A first-term in his early forties, the much younger man began a valiant plea for his colleague to be reasonable about the goings-on. He managed to utter only a few words of persuasion before the senior senator turned on him angrily.

“What I’ve decided,” declared Kyle, “is that the aim of these proceedings is not only immoral and unrighteous, but just plain *wrong*. Trying to attach this asinine rider to ‘sanitize’ the

fusion funding bill, and maybe, *maybe* lessen the taxpayer screams a mite doesn't violate constitutional law per se, but it sure as hell shreds a few basic principles the Adamsses, Jeffersons and their peers considered self-evident."

"Ray, where's the profit in getting hot?" pleaded the other. "All I'm trying to do is make sure you have a clear picture of what the light at the end of this tunnel really means. There's precedent galore, an arm-long list of prominent examples. You dearly love to hold up the past century's TVA project as a shining example of the government's righteous economic, healing powers in doling out New Deal public works, but I've never heard you mention how TVA grew and blossomed from the root of what was once the lowly Tennessee Electric Power Company."

"Instead of handing me a do-gooder lesson from yesteryear," said Kyle, "look a tad more closely and you'll notice the light at the end of this twisty tunnel we're trying to negotiate shines from the headlamp of a runaway fast freight bearing down on us at one helluva clip. The engineer is a ring-tailed sonuvabitch if ever one there was, and every cattle car and gondola is filled chock-a-block with robber barons bound and determined to make sure things keep going their way, or if they can't manage that to make damn sure there *is* no other way. The sermon you're trying to preach makes me think a few oil cartel lobbyists sneaked up in the dark and whispered in *your* ear."

"Don't be obtuse. Lobbying senators is illegal."

"Oh, really? Do tell!" Kyle oozed sarcasm. "Hooray for the Red, White and Blue. You've reassured me God's in His Heaven, all's right with the world, and none of us has one damn thing to worry about."

"What ruffles your fur," said the other cautiously, "is that the amendment's co-sponsors are urging us to hang the rider on the coat tails of national security."

"Ruffles my fur it certainly does! Hypocrisy of that magnitude rubs me the wrong way doubled and redoubled, especially," emphasized Kyle, "when our loudmouthed brethren neglect to mention, or *refuse* to admit, the whopping difference between what's right and what's wrong. Un-American is what this craziness amounts to."

"Be reasonable, Ray."

"You keep telling me that," retorted Kyle hotly. "When will *you* start being reasonable? While you're working on that trick, back off a hair. Be damned if I need a lecture on reasonableness from an ambitious, wet-behind-the-ears youngster like you."

The junior senator swallowed whatever else he might have intended to say. He turned on his heel and walked away, leaving Senator Kyle to stew in his own juices.

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In brilliant morning sunlight, the slender, well-dressed woman crossing the sidewalk looked as if she might be in her early thirties, with traces of youthful dew still on her. However, once she had pushed her way through the high glass door into Salon Bellissima's fluorescent illumination, her deftly applied makeup lost its ability to conceal evidence of cosmetic makeovers around her eyes and glossed lips. The Asian-American saleswoman noticed the woman arrive in a limousine, a credential that encouraged greeting her with more than usual deference.

Her manner lofty and distant, the customer did not acknowledge the saleswoman's welcoming overture. Pausing to give the shop's rather pedestrian annex a cursory once over, she said, "My dear, an acquaintance urged me to stop by and have a peek at your wares. Only a few dozen items are here on the racks. Is this all the shop has to offer?"

"Oh, not at all, Madam. Only a few selected commercial and consignment items are on display here in the annex. If you care to step into the salon I'll be happy to show you our line of exclusive originals, casual sportswear, signature apparel and accessories."

Ushered through the columned entrance into a high-ceilinged showroom floored in veined travertine marble, where flowering shrubs in sculpted ceramic jardinières were interspersed among stylized mannequins clad in women's wear ranging from chic sports attire to elegant bridal gowns with flowing trains artfully draped across the gleaming floor.

The customer stopped to examine a black, severely cut strapless cocktail dress. "This is rather appealing. May I try it on? The label lists neither size nor brand, only an unfamiliar name, Lester."

"It's an original designed by the proprietor, Ms Lester. Most are priced to include hand-tailoring to a customer's measurements. I'll be happy to check the price."

"Oh, don't bother. If one has to inquire an item's cost, it's rarely affordable." The woman suddenly hunched over, clasping her midsection. The designer handbag slipped from her manicured fingers and thudded to the marble floor with a faint jingle of coins.

"What is it?" inquired the alarmed saleswoman. "Are you ill?"

"It's nothing . . . really. I hate being bothersome, but find myself in desperate need of the ladies room."

"Of course. This way." The saleswoman bent to retrieve the customer's purse.

At her desk, Carolyn was talking on the phone. Hearing a double-tap on the door, she palmed the satellite phone, called "Come," and resumed her conversation.

After showing the customer into an alcove leading to the lavatory, the saleswoman met Carolyn's questioning gaze. Carolyn thumbed off the satellite phone, beckoned her employee to come closer. "This washroom arrangement is idiotic," she said. "Once or twice every day someone asks to use the lavatory, then comes out and gushes about our wonderful line of apparel. Wait for her in the showroom," she instructed. "If you hear her begin jabbering, call my number."

Accustomed to Carolyn's direct, no-nonsense approach to shopkeeping and life in general, the saleswoman nodded and left the office.

When the customer emerged from the alcove she found the proprietor sketching at the easel. Peripheral vision told Carolyn how thoroughly the woman's roving eyes cataloged every item of her surroundings before tentatively saying, "Ms Lester . . . ?"

"Good morning." Carolyn did not look up from the half-finished charcoal sketch. "Find everything you were looking for?"

"Why, yes, thank you. Sorry to break in on you like this. I was told you designed a delightful little cocktail dress that caught my eye."

"Several are on display. Which one had you in mind?"

"The gorgeous black strapless. But you're so young, my dear. How did you ever become such a talented couturier at your tender age?"

Before Carolyn could respond, her satellite phone tinkled a jazzed-up version of the “Shave and a haircut, two bits” jingle. Rising behind the easel, Carolyn plucked the phone from her desk. “Excuse me. I’m expecting an important call.” Carrying the phone to the door, she said, “Hello,” listened for a second or two, then said, “I’m so glad to hear that. Hang on one sec.” Smiling, she held open the door, an unspoken invitation the customer could hardly ignore.

Ignoring the saleswoman waiting outside, the customer walked past her without a glance, made her way out of the showroom and exited Salon Bellissima with what Carolyn, had she witnessed the departure, would have called “her nose in the air.”

Reclining in the climate-controlled electric limousine at the curb, she commanded the glass partition to rise, barring the driver from overhearing anything said in the rear seat. When his head turned inquiringly, she motioned for him to drive on, lifted a phone from her chic designer handbag and punched the tiny keys with the tip of a mauve fingernail. The credit card-sized phone established a connection, but the display remained a random wash of pixels.

“Yeah?” said a thick baritone voice.

“Nada,” the woman replied. “She was too busy to chat. I looked around the shop and office. Nothing remarkable, not a hair out of place.”

“Okay. Scoot on back to L.A. Stan has something for you on the front burner.” The link clicked off.

*Yeah, my L.A.* the woman thought. She watched the street scene flow past with unseeing eyes, glanced up through the limo’s tinted moonroof at the soaring glass façade of Dysart Tower, and uttered a foulness under her breath. She had always liked San Francisco. Being forced to leave the city so quickly was disappointing.

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In Manhattan, Mr. Smith punched the intercom button extra-hard, as if it had offended him. “Ring Reichert’s Gal Friday,” he instructed without preamble. “Tell her to have the chairman call me soonest. Not later, soonest, right away!”

Twenty-two minutes ticked past before Smith’s computer display illuminated. “What is it, Smitty?” Reichert sounded impatient.

“We need to have a crucial sit-down, Mr. Chairman, sir.”

“Very well. Perhaps after I’ve finished with the —”

“No, it won’t keep. Now, now, now!”

“I’m afraid I’m tied up in conference, and won’t be able to —”

“Shitcan your conference! It has to be now, eyeball-to-eyeball. Meet me down in the basement screen-room in five minutes, and come alone.”

“But I can’t simply suspend an important —”

“Do it, Mr. Chairman, sir! You’re the one who’s yelling for instant delivery of a certain item. To live through what I have to say you’ll need a belt, suspenders, both hands and prayer to hold up your pants. Meet me downstairs now, now, now!”

“What’s wrong with my office? It’s expertly debugged every other day, and —”

“No quibbles! The screen-room, or you can forget the hurry up part of you know what.” Smith rang off without another word.

In the sub-basement of the Vonex International high-rise, the walls and ceiling of a concrete bunker were lined with copper screening installed to shield electromagnetic emissions throughout a major portion of the communications spectrum. Smith punched in the access code, inserted his face in the hood to let the sensor scan his iris patterns. Latches clicked; he had to use both hands tugging open the heavy door.

Smith motioned wordlessly, shooing out a pair of technicians working at a bench strewn with electronic test gear. Parking his butt on an unpadded stool, he waited with an air of sublimated impatience for Belkin Reichert to put in an appearance.

Minutes later Reichert looked upset when he came in. Smith swung the door shut, made sure the copper fingers lining the door's four sides meshed with those of the lintel, jamb and sill, and cammed over the locking bar.

"What's gotten into you?" demanded Reichert. "Listen, I don't appreciate being whistled up like some ribbon clerk just because you have a sudden itch to —"

"Sit down, Mr. Chairman, sir. There's a real important question I have to ask, and your answer will be every bit as important, or more so. We're meeting down here 'cause whatever you decide to do has to stay strictly between the two of us, no exceptions."

"I can't imagine what you might want to know that you don't already —"

"Quit imagining, and look me in the eye," asserted Mr. Smith. "Either tell me you're dead serious about wanting Dysart offed, or you're not. It's a straightforward question, and I have to hear a straightforward yes, or no. Which is it?"

As always, Reichert found it difficult to meet the other's icy, semi-hypnotic stare.

"Speak up, Mr. Chairman, sir."

"I shouldn't think it would be necessary for you to —"

"Which?" demanded Smith, the timbre of his gravelly baritone deadened by the forest of anechoic baffles protruding from the screen-room's four walls and ceiling. "Do you or do you not want Dysart to go bye-bye permanently?"

"What," asked Reichert, his manner lofty, defensive, "if I choose not to respond to such an impertinent —?"

"Your call," Smith was quick to say. "Like I told you, I have to learn once and for all how serious you are about getting the deed done. Either tell me in plain language you're committed to sanctioning the guy, and I'll gear up, set things in motion for what I have in mind, or you can waffle and Vonex can look for a new security maven."

"You're threatening to quit?"

"Here and now, on the spot, forevermore."

Thoroughly detesting confrontations, if only on those rare occasions when he was forced to assume the role of confrontee, not confronter, Reichert's substantial willpower kept him locked eyeball-to-eyeball with Smith. He survived the other's dark-eyed gimlet stare, and gritted, "I want the sonuvabitch dead! There, that do it for you?"

"Almost, Mr. Chairman, sir, but not quite. Make it one thousand-percent clear which sonuvabitch you're eager to see go to his reward."

"Why, Lyman Dysart, who did you think I —?"

“Okay, done deal.” Smith took a mini-recorder from his jacket pocket, popped a switch and played back the chairman’s self-indicting statement.

“You *recorded* our conversation?” Reichert was livid.

“Has to do with the law of unintended consequences, Mr. Chairman, sir. I warned you about needing a belt, suspenders, both hands and prayer to hold up your pants. You just gave me a ‘go’ order on a *very* dicey business deal. If things happen to go south, I’ll be on the hook, and now you will too. That’s how it is, how it has to be.”

“Give me that recorder!”

“Sure, here.” Smith handed over the device. “Hit playback and listen to yourself become an accomplice to premeditated murder. I’ll hustle upstairs, clean out my desk.”

“Now just one minute, I’ve no intention of letting you walk away.”

“Not your option,” denied Mr. Smith. “No waffling; this you can’t have both ways. You’re either in it up to your chinny chin, like me, or maybe over your head, also like me, or I’m out.” Smith unbarred the door and made as if to open it.

“Here, take the damn thing back!”

“Sure your mind’s made up?”

“I . . . yes.”

“Good!” In every respect a careful individual, before he pocketed the recorder Mr. Smith checked to make sure Reichert had not slyly erased his self-incriminating statement. “The hard part I’ll handle in person, but with no halfway measures you understand. Need anything while I’m away, talk to my deputy; he knows the score. I’m catching tonight’s redeye to the left-hand coast.”

“The tunnel’s been found?”

“Not yet, but it’s there. Has to be.”

“What do you envision?” asked Reichert, his tone suggesting a reluctance to learn the sanguine details. “Some type of . . . what? A commando raid, or something?”

Smith’s tooth-bared grin resembled the humorless rictus of a predator, and did nothing to soften the intensity of his paralytic gaze. “Mr. Chairman, sir, you’ve seen too many car-chase, shoot ‘em up, blow ‘em to hell movies. What I have in mind is a small, select SWAT team: three topnotch bo’s who’ve done decent work in the past, plus yours truly. I warn you up front: it’ll put a sizable dent in your wallet. Any of that scare you?”

“For this exercise, you have my blessing to spend like there’s no tomorrow.”

“Fine ‘n dandy! That particular notion is what goosed me into having you come clean on record. If the law of unintended consequences happens to get enforced, there may be no tomorrow for either one of us.”

On that somber note Smith exited the screen-room, a man on a mission.

## FIFTEEN Warnings

The Stockholder, singing lustily in the shower, could not hear the intercom chime twice in the master bedroom.

Clad in a sheer negligée, Carolyn was primping, getting ready for breakfast and her business day at Salon Bellissima. The intercom chimed twice again. Reluctant to answer even

when three consecutive chimes sounded much more insistently, she opened the circuit, but did not speak.

“Secure lasercomm transmission from Luna, sir.” A note of urgency put an edge on the voice of the CEO’s executive assistant.

“Hang on, Maggie. I’ll see if can round him up.”

“Please hurry. The caller, a Mr. Cromwell, says it’s important to speak with him.”

“Right.” Carolyn went into the spacious master bathroom, slid back the frosted-glass shower door and found Lyman soaping himself, bellowing an off-key version of a Donizetti aria, *Una furtiva lagrima*, at the top of his lungs.

“Call for you!” she shouted, trying to make herself heard over the hissing multi-spray and Dysart’s faulty rendition of the aria.

His eyes squinched shut against the soap, Lyman said, “Tell ‘em I’ll call back.”

“It’s the Moon, Lyman. Downstairs says it’s urgent.”

“Great, just great! Thanks, Babe.” Dysart sluiced himself off under the spray, banged off the water valve. He groped for the terrycloth beach towel draped over the shower enclosure, wound it around his waist and tucked in the overlapped ends.

Never one to stand on ceremony, he dripped water on the carpet all the way into his living room-office and asked Maggie to put the call through. The self-actuated display illuminated, rising from its nest with Myron Cromwell’s leonine features glowing in the flat-panel screen.

“Well, what’ve we here?” greeted Lyman. “Unless I’m mistaken, it’s Jean-Marie’s favorite whipping boy. How the hell are you, Myron?”

Nothing in the display changed during the elapsed seconds necessary for the lasercomm signal to slice through atmosphere and vacuum and impinge upon the dish above the Mare Tranquillitatis habitat.

A sudden grin transformed Cromwell’s countenance. “Morning to you, Big Bossman. Things’re tolerable, pretty much on track except for the local Bossman. All play and no work during our two weeks of downtime bores Jean-Marie stiff for want of something to keep his head occupied. I think he downed a sleepy pill before corking off. I roused him, and he pretended to listen, but stayed groggy and mumbled for me to get on the horn and fill you in on the stranger than strange call that came in over our private lasercomm circuit. I know you hate waiting through the lags that break up back and forth talk, so give an ear to my spiel, then have your say.”

Myron described the jolt of genuine surprise he’d experienced upon taking a call from none other than U.S. Senator Raymond Kyle, who had tried more than once to get through to DT’s head man in San Francisco, but after being shuffled around from one manager to another had finally been rebuffed by whoever he’d spoken to last. Kyle had not given up; he’d used his clout to wangle permission to make a government lasercomm call to the Palus Somni Command Center, and then sweet-talked the USAF duty officer into patching him through to the habitat.

“The meat and potatoes of his message,” said Myron, “was a stern caveat warning you to begin exercising due diligence and cover DT’s backside prior to the upcoming Senate vote.” Kyle had gone on, according to Cromwell, and explained how a rider he had tabbed “non-germane to the issue and then some” was under serious consideration for attachment to the fusion appropriations bill. If the bill passed House reconciliation and was signed into law, the senator

had said it would amend the living daylights out of Selene II funding bill in a way certain to blow DT sky high.

"Sky high, his *exact* words," stressed Myron. "Catch is, he also said he'd been sworn to secrecy by the Senate party-poopers he's in bed with, and couldn't bring himself to violate the formal oath. Wouldn't say boo about the details of whatever had bugged him enough to fire a warning shot across our bow. I once thought I was wrong about something, and found out later I'd been mistaken. It's happened again. I had Kyle pegged as a redneck know-nothing when he and the other two snoops were here on their fishing expedition. After listening to his spiel and sort of gauging his attitude, the earnest way he came across was . . . Honestly I no longer know what to think, except that he sounded sincere-plus telling me how totally sympathetic he is to what we're doing up here *and* down there in the real world. Said he deeply appreciated what you and the U.N. had on the menu if and when Selene II gets cranked up to pave the way for Prometheus. He also said he couldn't stand seeing DT get shafted after all our good works, and what might be even worse see the whole world get screwed. Not my place to inquire, but I will anyhow. What do you know about the guff Kyle is peddling?"

The transmission lag stretched interminably, lengthening further while Dysart mulled Cromwell's report. At last he said, "A stray rumor is all we have to go on, Myron. Nothing too meaningful, just a hint, a teaser. I personally know zip about the senator, not what moves him, or makes him tick. But after what you've told me I mean to find out. Sounds like he could become an ally, and we've plenty of room for every one of those who shows up.

"At any rate," added Lyman, "he earns a five-star attaboy for all the bother he went through to give us a heads up. Catch is, before we can swallow his caveat some serious homework has to be done to reconcile his warning, and try to fit it into the multisided chess game being played down here. Not to sound mysterious, but the rumor I mentioned floated to the surface in a *Washington Post* opinion editorial and was quickly . . . I guess hushed-up is the most polite term. Nothing you Moonies can do to help, so don't sweat it. Making sense of Kyle's warning will take some deep digging.

"Say hi to Jean-Marie for me," concluded Lyman. "Pass along my order to chuck the sleepy pills and hit the exercise machines. Tough to blame your local Bossman for being at loose ends when two weeks of darkness clamps down, and shuffling papers is all he has to keep himself occupied. Anyhow, I really appreciate the info. The ball's in our court, so hang tough and keep up the good work. Have Jean-Marie call me once he's wide awake. Thanks again, Myron. You get a solid gold star pasted on your shoe — Pardon me, your boot. Till later."

Lyman signed off and slumped back in the chair, his eyes defocused in thought, and let evaporation finish drying him. After a moment he drew a deep breath and popped the intercom button. "Heigh- ho, Maggie. I'll thank you in advance for adding a name to my 'Always Accept Call' list? U.S. Senator Raymond Kyle, K-Y-L-E," instructed The Stockholder. "When you have a minute, look up his office number in Washington, and anything else you can find out about him."

"Right away, Mr. Dysart."

After breakfast, Lyman joined Carolyn in the executive express elevator and rode down with her several floors. The compartment slowed to a smooth stop, the doors rolled apart. He kissed Carolyn goodbye before stepping out into the wide corridor leading to Clay's executive suite.

In the antechamber, Maggie explained that Ben was closeted with Energy Division's CFO, a gentleman from the New York Stock Exchange, and a *Forbes* columnist. She asked if he wanted Ben summoned from the meeting.

"Lord, no!" said Lyman. "Sounds like he's helping the bean-counters tote what little treasure's left in the chest. Leave him to his misery. I'll catch up with him later."

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"Something bothering you, Vince?"

"Uh-huh, for damn sure," said the former mercenary who resembled a carved block of granite not much less than two meters in stature, and technically not microcephalic, although his head was too small in proportion to the rest of him. "You told us this guy Dysart," he said in a not-to-be-argued-with bass voice, "was the richest bloke in creation, right? Sitting up there in his tower, he's bound to be covered by every security setup money can buy, and maybe some real fancy stuff nobody's heard about yet. What you're egging us to do smells like we'd be bouncing along a real bumpy road. Once you nail down how to get into this maybe, might be tunnel you think *may* run under the street 'tween the tower and some shop, what then?"

"Tunnel scares you, does it?" Smith tried to make the query sound casual.

"Makes me double 'n triple leery. No question the payday you're waving in front of us is worth a shot, but that does nothing to zotz a bundle of hairy risks."

"Surprised to hear you feel like that, Vince. No way can it be one-tenth the hazard you faced down earning a paycheck in points east and west, north and south."

"Aw, come on, Smitty. You know damn well combat's a whole different stroke," argued the huge man. "Assault's my game, or once was; it's what I was good at. Pulling off a sneak raid through a tunnel you don't even know for sure is there . . . Well, it just doesn't add up, doesn't have the right feel. What you're figuring to do is like goosing a ghost after sneaking up behind it quiet-like. I'll take a pass."

"Fair enough," conceded Smith. "Head on home, Vince."

"No hard feelings?"

"Hell no, except with girls," said Mr. Smith. "Listen, do me a good turn. Wipe clean everything you've heard and seen here."

"Goes without saying. Thanks for the invite, for thinking of me. Keep me in the book for next time, okay?"

"Count on it," said Smith. "But like I said, make double-sure no one tunes in on our wavelength. If word gets out, you'll hear from me, and you won't like what I say."

"You know better 'n that. So long, guys. Best of luck all around."

Smith and a pair of unsmiling, hard-looking men seated across from him watched the huge former mercenary lumber across the warehouse's less than clean concrete floor. The surveillance team had been hanging back out of earshot. They watched Vince bend to keep from bumping his close-cropped head, undersized head on the lintel exiting the warehouse.

Smith tried to make light of Vince's dereliction. "So we go in as a trio, not a quartet. Either of you have cold feet about that?"

Neither man replied.

Smith added a slice of fresh bait to the hook. "Vince checked out, so you guys are looking at a hefty bonus. The bundle of new dollars doled out for this op gets cut in half instead of three ways. How's that grab you?"

Judging by their pleased expressions, the news apparently grabbed each man in his respective heart and soul, the money belt.

Smith delved into the surveillance results. "Tape tells us the proprietor didn't leave her shop last night. Who knows? Maybe she's the squeeze of some guy in the tower, and runs back and forth through the tunnel. If so, it means an entrance has to be hidden next to or underneath the shop."

Muttered agreements from the hired hands were punctuated by the sound of an auto horn beeping twice outside the warehouse. The segmented overhead door was rolled up, and an unmarked white van was driven inside. The sole occupant, a middle-aged man in a business suit and tie, stepped out of the driver's side, slammed the door and approached the group. "Goods came out okay, Smitty." Withdrawing an envelope from his jacket's inner pocket, he handed it over.

Smith took out the single folded sheet, studied it assiduously. "It'll do."

"You want I should call the graphic arts kid back to doctor it up?"

"No need," denied Smith. "I'll scan it into the computer, use the original as a model to reword it, and make a printout. You can sign as the judge, make the warrant look legal as sin."

"So when do we go in?" asked the other man.

"Just before closing time; tape shows that about seventeen-thirty yesterday." Smith checked his watch. "Sales staff's only two gals leaving together at quitting time, and the front door was locked from inside. Saddle up, suits and ties, IDs, the warrant, weapons, the works. Be ready to roll at seventeen hundred."

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"A surprise? Certainly." Intrigued, the CEO added, "Yet how much faith can we have in Kyle's mysterious warning? Coming out of the blue, chasing it down is the only way to confirm Kyle's credibility, and I warn you it won't be easy."

Lyman massaged his burr-cut cranium. "Hard to slough off warning words from insider like Kyle, especially after he went to all the bother of having the military patch through a lasercomm call to the habitat. I had a quickie background check done on Kyle. Admitted to the Tennessee Bar at a tender age, he was a Knoxville prosecutor, later county district attorney, later still was appointed to the federal bench, and in the Senate for who knows how many terms. I should think those credentials would impress you."

"In some ways." The CEO sounded uncertain. "The pedigree you cited may have once applied to him, not necessarily now. It's really tough to be positively impressed by someone known only through hearsay, and you said that wild man Cromwell once considered him a redneck hillbilly. I've spent my working life dealing with attorneys in singles, pairs and on occasion droves. Some of those experiences made me wish I'd studied dentistry. What did Jean-Marie have to say about the warning?"

"Nothing too incisive," said Dysart, "except how amazed he was to learn how earnest he'd been to get in touch with Selene. We talked it over briefly, and he confessed to having devoted

most of his energy during the visitors' stay toward fending off Reichert's acid-laced hypocrisy, and trying to improve Kyle's understanding of the pilot program's whys and wherefores. What puzzled Jean-Marie more than anything else was why Kyle would take the trouble to hand us a loosely worded caveat tied to an unsubstantiated rumor that floated through Washington a while back."

Clay puffed his cheeks. "I speculated about that, too. Despite what you say, I don't see how his unspecific caveat can encourage us to believe Kyle is on our side."

"I agree, Ben. A snap judgment like that would be a stretch and a half," admitted Dysart. "The man's definitely a Senate fixture, and by reputation a diehard member of the Party tarred Reichert's oil-soaked toadies. Kyle's warning could also be an off-brand political ploy aimed at prompting us to look the other way. Catch is, I can't imagine in which direction the 'other way' might be."

Nodded, the CEO said, "Great minds think alike after all. That stray notion also occurred to me, except the logic of that premise immediately falters. If it was the senator's intent to mislead us, but if so to lead us *where*?"

"All I've been able to come up with," said Lyman, "is a hunch that Kyle's caveat may be an oddball gambit, sort of a scare tactic designed to make us scurry around and redouble our efforts, do everything to convince the public how the robber barons and anti-fusion bureaucrats are in the wrong, and we're in the right."

"Sorry," scoffed Ben, "an equally shaky, off-center theory."

"How so?"

"Aren't we already doing everything possible along those lines?"

"Everything and then some," admitted The Stockholder. "When you think about it, there's zero substance in Kyle's warning, no way to accept it at face value because it lacked a face or anything beneath it, yet I feel leery about ignoring it. We can't afford to discount the warning entirely. One or two contingency plans come to mind."

Clay frowned. "Such as . . .?"

"Now don't get sore, Ben. On this I've decided to keep you out of the loop."

"Shut me out? Why?"

"Because . . ." Lyman performed a snapshot appraisal of the CEO. "Here's a scenario to chew on. Let's say the warning has validity, and the noble legislators end up attaching to the Selene II appropriations bill the 'non-germane rider' Kyle warned us would be very detrimental, if not destructive, to DT. Let's further imagine that the House, where the basic funding bill did pass by a decent margin, managed to reconcile whatever changes may've taken place in the Senate, sends bill-plus-amendment back to the Senate for reconciliation, and eventually it gets signed into law."

"Thus far," accused Clay, "your imagination smacks of overactivity."

"Call it a hyperactivity," said The Stockholder. "My scenario now turns a tad hairier. If and when it comes to pass, I mean to disappear and desert you, leave you under the gun. Maybe on the hot seat would be more like it. At any rate, you'll be left holding the bag and baggage of Dysart Technologies in your deft, legalistic hands."

"Why, in the name of Christ would you want to disappear?"

"The simplistic answer," said Lyman, "is that during the ensuing brouhaha you'd no doubt be subpoenaed and questioned by one congressional witch-hunt committee after another. If that does happen, you'd be able to testify under oath, looking Senator Burton that you hadn't the foggiest notion where I had scampered off to, or why."

"Ridiculous!" declared Clay.

"Sensible," countered The Stockholder.

"I can think of no possible reason for you to go to ground simply to protect me."

"My intention," Lyman said firmly, "has nothing to do with protecting you. Why bother? You can protect yourself better than anyone else in my acquaintance. Yet in the event my scenario is acted out in the real world, I intend to become the little man who isn't there, not to shield and protect you but the interests of Dysart Technologies."

Clay's comprehending nod was slow in coming.

## SIXTEEN Unintended Consequences

The pair of men in business suits entered Salon Bellissima as inconspicuously as it is possible to invade the foreign territory of a women's wear emporium. Carolyn was on the showroom floor, discussing something with a saleswoman. Streetwise to the ways of the world, the flesh and the devil, she made the Mutt and Jeff pair as cops the instant they pushed through the boutique's heavy glass door. Breaking off the conversation in mid-sentence, she abruptly slipped back into her office.

The blonde saleswoman who greeted the "detectives" was shown artfully forged SFPD IDs. Speaking in a monotone to avoid attracting attention from the only customer in the shop, the "detectives" explained wanting to ask the proprietor a few questions. "Should take only a few minutes, Miss."

"Certainly. Let me see if Ms Lester is available." She went to the office door, tapped lightly.

The "detectives" had to display their bogus credentials again for Carolyn's benefit. The taller of the pair wordlessly handed her the doctored document.

"A search warrant?" said Carolyn in disbelief.

"Yes, ma'am. We apologize beforehand for the inconvenience."

"City Hall," announced his partner, "has started an undercover investigation. We're looking into the report of a tunnel running from somewhere down the street to roughly hereabouts. Know anything about it?"

"Why, everything," said Carolyn with customary directness. "I use it myself."

"We kind of figured as much, ma'am. What's at issue here, far as we've been told, has nothing to do with breaking any laws. Municipal construction codes are the issue."

"I see. But why search my establishment?"

"City wants to know why not one permit, safety regulation form, certificate of completion and like that was never filed on the tunnel. Inspector Greene is heading up the investigation. He'd like a quiet word with you while my partner and I do the search. Should take no more than twenty minutes, half-hour, tops."

"All right. Invite the inspector in while I make a quick call."

"We'd appreciate it, ma'am, if you'd wait to use the phone till after you talk with him. Wouldn't be smart to broadcast news of the investigation ahead of time. That's why the inspector thinks it'd be a real bad idea for him to be seen here in your store. This's a preliminary investigation, see? Sort of routine groundwork to scope the overall situation. The inspector, he's worried about maybe cobbling up the whole deal if he questions you wearing his official hat."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Tell the honest truth, Miss, neither do we. But Greene, he calls the shots. Wants to keep things informal for now. He's waiting in a van parked out in the alley.

"The alley . . ? That sure seem peculiar."

"Afraid that's the way it has to come down, ma'am."

"Very well." Carolyn rose behind the desk and lifted her purse from a drawer.

"S'pose you could use the side door, go out that way?"

"The emergency exit's alarmed," said Carolyn.

"You could maybe have someone switch off the alarm."

In Las Vegas, Carolyn had suffered through more than one police hassle. She had been view with suspicion the uncop-like speech and manner of the "detectives" slouched on the other side of her desk. She sat down again, reached under the desk's kneehole and deactivated the emergency door alarm. "Promise me," she requested, "not to tear up the place searching for whatever it is you hope to find?"

"No problem. We'll leave everything like we found it, neat and tidy."

Casting a final uncertain glance at the "detectives," Carolyn left the office.

"Some looker!" remarked the younger of the pair.

"Feisty, too," said his partner. "Always did go for spirit in a gal. Come on, we'll get busy, make it look good." He began opening and closing desk drawers, aimlessly rummaging through the contents.

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Stepping down into the alley, Carolyn discovered the "van" was actually a windowless panel truck parked much too close to the building's brick wall. She had to edge sideways between van and wall to reach the sliding side-door that stood open. It struck her as peculiar for the man in the driver's seat not to be interested enough to turn and look her way.

Her first glimpse of the slim, dapper individual seated in a forward-facing rear seat triggered an instinctive aversion to climbing into the van. A notion to dash back inside the shop flashed through her mind, but the emergency door had click shut behind her; lacking an outside handle, it could be opened only from inside the shop.

"Step in," invited Smith, announcing himself as Inspector Greene. He watched with lizard-lidded fixity as Carolyn settled herself in the opposite, rear-facing seat.

"Whether or not," informed Smith, "evidence turns up connecting you and your place of business with whoever's responsible for having a secret tunnel built. I assure you no charges will be brought against you. I have a few questions, then you can go."

Carolyn was having second thoughts about answering any questions, but it was too late to change her mind. In late afternoon, the rear of the panel truck was dim, and grew dimmer when the man in the driver's seat actuated the automatic side door, and it slid closed with a clunk of

finality. Indistinct in the crepuscular light, Mr. Smith stared at her with baleful intensity, his gelid eyes the texture of dark olives, devoid of life.

Among Carolyn's other accomplishments was a sixth sense acquired in the course of sizing up one customer after another as to their respective intentions. This individual's chill, mesmerizing gaze reminded her of someone in the not so long ago, not so far away whose intentions she'd judged pertained in no way to a commercial sexual interlude. Dashing from the hotel room in semi-panic then, she felt an identical urge to abandon the panel truck. She swallowed a blossoming pang of fear, and decided the individual staring through her as if she were some inanimate object would be told all, with nothing held back.

In a gravel-laden monotone, Smith said, "You can start tell me about the tunnel.

Carolyn willed herself to calmness. "Less than two hundred yards long, it's a tube with round walls, a flat floor. A miniature golf cart lets you trundle back and forth between, uh . . ."

"Your dress shop and . . .?"

"Dysart Tower."

"Who's your connection to the tower? Who do you go to see?"

"Lyman Dysart."

Her inquisitor's surprised blink was his first and only indication of human emotion. "The big guy himself." A low whistle. "I'm impressed. You his girlfriend?"

Carolyn's grip on her purse tightened. "As good a term as any, I suppose."

"You live there in the tower?"

"I . . . yes."

"And you're in love with Dysart?"

"For some reason," she said, "that term always sounds, uh . . . I'm awfully fond of Lyman. He's done so much for me."

"Set you up in business?"

"That, yes, among many other things. Pardon me, Inspector, but what does any of this have to do with a police investigation?"

"Just answer the questions."

The satellite phone in Carolyn's handbag tinkled the "Shave and a haircut, two bits" jingle.

"Leave it be!" Smith lifted his hand. "Let it take a message."

The jingle tinkled twice more, then the phone fell silent. "How and where," asked Smith, "did you happen to meet a prominent, super-rich celeb like Dysart?"

Carolyn didn't hesitate to explain her former occupation in Las Vegas.

"A *working girl*? Jesus! Wonders never *will* cease! Okay, enough chatter. How do you access the tunnel from this end?"

"Through the washroom next to my office."

"Go on."

"While the floor space was being renovated," she said, "before the showroom was set up, I argued with Lyman about locating the one and only lavatory in such an inconvenient place. Our saleswomen and every customer who feels the urge traipses through my office to get to the loo."

Outwardly unfazed, Smith said with more than a hint of sarcasm, "How romantic! Secret tunnels, creepy and passageways! Your boyfriend's seen too many cheap movies. How do you access the tunnel?"

"There are two stalls in the lavatory," said Carolyn. "The widest accomodates a wheelchair. The toilet handle keys a sliding door to a corridor behind the false wall."

"Keys it how?"

"To flush, it's like any other toilet," informed Carolyn. "Push the handle down, and let go. To open the sliding door, you pull the handle up in a sequence."

"What sequence?" asked Smith.

"You heard it alert me to a phone call just now."

Smith blinked a second time. "You mean dit, dah-dah-dah-dah, dit-dit?"

An affirmative nod.

"Sounds unreasonably reasonable. Okay, so you pop the handle up in that sequence, a door slides open, and you go into . . . ?"

"A closet-sized alcove," explained Carolyn. "On the left, a tight spiral stair goes down to tunnel level; turn right, and a corridor runs behind the false rear wall to a section of phony brick exterior opening on the alley. Lyman uses it, but I don't."

"And that," said Smith, "dots every 'i' and crosses every 't'." Rising from the rear seat, he leaned past Carolyn, tapped the driver's shoulder and said, "Go!"

The energized electric vehicle surged to the mouth of the alley, waited for light passing traffic and turned into Park Presidio Boulevard.

Clutching her handbag in a death grip, Carolyn said, "You told me I could go after answering your questions."

"I lie a lot," admitted Mr. Smith.

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The security alarm beneath Martin Calvo's pillow began vibrating energetically, jolting him into wakefulness. He rolled on his side in the darkness, reached under the pillow and disabled the alarm. The bedside clock's phosphorescent numerals rolled over to 03:11.16.

Slipping from beneath the coverlet very slowly, he swung his legs down, felt around on the carpet and inserted his feet in bedroom slippers. Seizing his robe, he left the bedroom stealthily, taking pains not to rouse his sleeping wife.

Not yet all that concerned about the alarm because it had happened twice before. On both occasions, the motion detectors had shrieked a warning due to Carolyn's forgetfulness in neglecting to disable the sophisticated audiovisual security system before traversing the tunnel, but those lapses had not occurred at the witching hour of three ayem.

While riding down to the the thirty-sixth floor in the executive express elevator, he punched in Dysart's private intercom code

Seconds later, the Stockholder mumbled sleepily, "Now what . . . ?"

"I have to know if Carolyn's with you, Lyman?"

"Marty . . . ?" Groggy, by no means fully awake, Dysart said, "No, she's not here. Sometimes she runs errands after work, or stays with friends who —"

“Get down to thirty-six on the double,” urged Calvo. “Either she’s in for a hard spanking or a malfunction’s bilged our security system. Or,” he added in an ominous monotone, “we have some form of I don’t know what on our hands.”

“On my way.”

Seven minutes later, clad like Calvo in a robe and slippers, Dysart let the computer read his iris patterns, punched the cipher code and joined Marty in the Security Center. Closing the door behind him, he stood with his back against and said, “From over here, it looks like the real thing.”

“Hate to say you’re right, but you are.” Preoccupied, Calvo was intently scanning the bank of video panels, his gaze roving from one display to the next, and the next. “By the look of it a three-man team,” he muttered. “Features blackened commando-style, and loaded to the hilt — automatic weapons, what might be satchel charges, and packing other items I can’t quite make out.”

His head cocked attentively, Lyman asked, “What’s that faint popcorn noise?”

“Small arms fire,” Marty told him. “They’re using peashooters to knock out overhead mini-cams as they move along, but what they can’t spot are the tiny, redundant pinhole cams lost in the glare of the lights.”

Having edged past the miniature golf cart parked near the tunnel’s far terminus, where Carolyn had left it, the intruders were making their way on foot, moving forward steadily and cautiously. The trailing rear guard swung around every five or six paces and shot a glance rearward, making sure no one had blocked the escape path, or posed any sort of threat from behind.

“Time to seal off the far end,” suggested Lyman. “Go ahead, box ‘em in.”

“Let’s hold off,” advised Marty, “until they reach the mid-point. It might be just a probe. Let’s see if any backups show up.” As if inspired by the notion, he punched the intercom button. The night watch on duty in the lobby responded promptly. Marty told his staffer to send someone down the street to Salon Bellissima. “Have him drive past and scope the layout, but tell im not to interfere with whatever might be happening.”

“Right, sir. I’ll report soon as he calls back.”

Marty switched off the intercom circuit. “Did you contact Carolyn?”

A negative head shake. “Tried three, four times. Her phone must be off.”

“Don’t care for the sound of that.” Calvo returned his attention to the video panels. An instant later he loosed a hearty, “Whups! I’ll be a son-of-a-bitch!”

“What now?”

“Can’t believe what I saw,” said Calvo. “The smallish guy leading at point just looked up at one of the pinhole cams and potted the mini-cam near it. Even with blackened features he’s a dead ringer for an ex government hard-ass who used to rub me the wrong way. If it’s who I believe it is, he’s an ex-Fibbie the Justice Department cashiered for interrogating a kidnap suspect a touch too vigorously. Grapevine says he’s been working for our Vonex friends quite a while.”

“Killed a suspect?” asked Lyman.

“Not quite,” said Marty. “Worse in a way; turned him into a paraplegic.” He chafed, impatient for the intruders to edge into view in the central video panels at the the tunnel’s approximate midpoint. “Now we shutdown,” he said at last.

Lifting the plastic guard covering sliding switches, Calvo pushed forward the leftmost switch, energizing the more distant of two electric actuator-driven closures. A half-dozen meters from the spiral stairway leading up to Salon Bellissima, on the near side of the parked golf cart, a steel panel guided in slots slid out of the tunnel wall and closed off the tube’s far terminus.

The trailing intruder heard a faint rumble generated by the moving closure and spun around much too late. He began running hard, realized his chance of reaching the panel before it sealed off the tunnel was nil, halted and hurried to rejoin the others.

“Time to find out whether I’ve pegged my man correctly.” Marty keyed the audio circuit and said cordially, “Huh-lo, Smitty. How’re things down there in the hole?”

The point man jerked erect, stopped dead in his tracks.

“Name’s Calvo,” announced Marty. “I was once a T-man. Ring any bells?”

After a brief silence, Smith’s gravelly baritone issued from the Security Center speakers. “Small world and place to hear from a long-lost Treasury Boy Scout.”

“Eagle Scout,” corrected Marty. “Earned my badges the hard way. You have a real easy choice. The smart bet will be to go back down the tunnel to the closure and stack your weapons, explosives and whatever else you’re hauling. Then strip down to your shorts and march back this way empty handed.”

“Kind of chilly down here,” complained Smith, “to mosey around in skivvies.”

“Be smarter to shiver,” advised Calvo, “than elect the alternative. Be simple for me to seal off this end of the tunnel, kill the ventilation system and wait for you three to go tits up. Better still, we could speed up the process by opening a gas valve. Decide!”

“Do all ex-Treasury clowns turn mean in old age?”

“Decide!” repeated Calvo hoarsely. “Last chance, Smitty.”

A pragmatist in every sense of the term, Mr. Smith herded his companions back toward the steel barrier blocking egress at the other end of the tunnel.

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Reduced to their briefs and boots, Mr. Smith and his accomplices turned around one by one per instructions, and backed up toward the sextet of armed security staffers Calvo had summoned. Obediently holding their hands behind them, the mercenaries were handcuffed, taken upstairs and confined in a windowless storage room next to the basement garage. The last to be restrained, Smith was frog-marched into the executive express elevator, escorted up to the thirty-sixth floor Security Center, and pushed into a chair facing Calvo, who decided give the former FBI special agent ample time to stew and think about his mistake before beginning to question him.

Looking even smaller wearing only boxer shorts, Mr. Smith was nevertheless well-muscled. The way he held himself, outwardly unmoved, his wrists cuffed behind his back, forced him to work hard trying to create an impression of being fit as a much younger man. Not inclined to be talkative, outwardly at ease and unintimidated, as if hoping the attention of either would waver his dark eyes shifted constantly from one armed security staffer to the other.

"We have lots of time," remarked Calvo. "You might as well spill now as later."

Smith gave no indication of having heard the suggestion.

Outwardly patience personified, Marty relaxed. After an indefinite period of silence, he sounded bored in saying, "Stonewall until hell freezes over, Smitty. Your above it all routine won't hold up forever. What's to be gained? Why not open up, get it over with?"

There was no response.

Fully intending to wait Smith out, however long it took, Marty's tactic was shattered minutes later when the door to the Security Center swung inward without warning. The Stockholder halted in the doorway, a pistol-grip electrolaser dangling in his right fist. Shooing the security staffers outside with a curt, imperative gesture, he closed the door after them, and leaned his back against it. "Get clear of him, Marty."

"Lyman, it might not be good idea to —"

"Step away!"

Dysart brought up the electrolaser very slowly, aimed it at Smith's bare chest. "I'm going to ask you a direct question," he said. "I want to hear a direct answer."

Smith's frigid gaze collided headlong with the feral rage in Dysart's eyes.

"Where," asked Lyman, struggling to keep his voice level, "is Carolyn Lester?"

Seconds passed in deathly stillness. At last Smith said, "Damned if I know."

Dysart's forefinger tightened on the trigger. The capacitive-discharge cartridge emitted a blooming plasma channel, sending a synthetic lightning bolt crackling along the ionized path.

Gargling something incoherent that was not quite an outcry, Smith writhed upward in the chair, fell forward and collapsed on the carpet, where his writhing gradually turned into squirming. Not a sound escaped the near-naked man's lips. He recovered more quickly than seemed reasonable, grunted from the effort of rolling over. "That thing," he gritted in a lame attempt at flippancy, "beats using . . . a rubber hose."

His movements smooth and economical, The Stockholder removed the electrolaser's spent cartridge, dropped it on the floor and replaced it with a fresh one he took from the deep slash pocket of his jumpsuit. "Several thousand volts didn't turn the trick, so we'll try a few more. Where is Carolyn Lester?"

Hindered by the handcuffs, Smith had difficulty getting his feet under him. When Calvo moved as if to help him rise, Lyman's curt gesture motioned him back.

Smith's responded to a repeat of the question with a vacant stare, an attempt to convince his tormentor that being zapped was of minor inconvenience. Dysart's intractable, dead-eyed stare told him that he had not succeeded. "A good guess," he said, sounding a touch defeated, "is that Reichert's put her on ice. Probably thinks she'd make a great bargaining chip."

Lyman digested the response. "I'll accept that. Now let's find out how much voltage it'll take to encourage you to open up all the way." Not pausing for breath, he asked why an accomplished renegade like Smith had not only agreed to do Reichert's bidding, but had ordered Carolyn Lester kidnapped.

Eyeing the electrolaser's emission bell, Smith licked his lips. "No instructions either way. Hanging on to her was . . . Who knows? Maybe a hot flash by the greedy tub of shit himself. Reichert's two slices short of a sandwich, but he pays well."

“Biting the hand that feeds,” said Dysart, the electrolaser’s focus on Smith’s bare chest, “is typical of someone like you. Now then, with zero voltage the grand prize I’d like to confirm a pet theory, so pay attention.

“I hold Reichert, Vonex International, the petrodollar cartel, the OPEC oil barons and all their well-greased political hirelings responsible for my father’s murder, the deaths of two other members of my immediate family, and the guilt for more than one attempt on my own life. My pet theory has to do with their crusade to make certain my company suddenly finds itself without an owner and is forced to go public, in which event the deranged chairman, his friends, associates, allies and cronies mean to pool their billions, purchase a major block of the initial DT public offering and gain control over the newborn nuclear fusion industry as a complement to their stranglehold on fossil fuel extraction and distribution, petrochemicals, refineries, drilling equipment, plastics, et cetera, et al, and so forth. You built yourself a nest in Reichert’s bailiwick some time ago. What have you heard with regard my pet theory?”

“Tidbits,” admitted Smith, his gaze focused on the electrolaser less than a scant meter from his chest. “As Vonex Corporate Security maven, I sat in on more than one meeting where the takeover was openly discussed. You’ve pegged it on the button, Mr. Dysart, sir. Now I’d appreciate it if you’d do your part to conserve energy.”

Lyman relaxed, letting the electrolaser hang loosely in his hand. Turning to Calvo, he said, “Dump him in the downstairs lockup with the other pair. I want a twenty-four-seven watch posted over them.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“So what comes next?” Smith dared to ask.

“Nothing for you to worry about,” said Lyman coldly, “for the time being. I won’t decide how to dispose of you and the other two until the Senate vote is tallied.” He moved toward the door, hesitated with a hand on the knob. After a few seconds spent contemplating the seated, near-naked, handcuffed would-be assassin, he stepped back and confronted Smith.

Suddenly clutching a handful of the man’s gray-shot dark hair, he cranked the other’s head as far as it would go, slowly bent down and glared at Smith nose to nose. “If the slightest harm comes to Carolyn Lester in any way,” he said, pronouncing each syllable with a clarity of diction, “I will personally, with my own two hands, send you to hell one millimeter at a time over a period of not hours or days, but weeks. Do you take my meaning?”

Smith’s rapid blinks made it obvious that he took Dysart’s meaning to heart.

Martin Calvo watched The Stockholder’s purposeful departure from the Security Center with new eyes, seeing for first time a side of him he could never have imagined.

## SEVENTEEN Corrective Action

Sleep had eluded Lyman for the better part of the night. After twisting and thrashing and pounding the pillow, he had risen more than once to pace the silent, deserted penthouse deep in thought. Waking from a final, fitful doze with a hint of dawn filtering the translucent draperies shrouding the master bedchamber’s east-facing glasswall, he had stared into the semidarkness for another, shorter eternity, his mind ratcheting from one unlikely scenario to another.

There *had* to be a reasonable way to retrieve Carolyn. Yet every option that presented itself held limited appeal, or lacking feasibility and practicality, or both. He knew better than trying to bargain with Reichert; negotiating with the vile, self-centered megalomaniac would be worse than futile. Facing a live electrolaser, the miserable assassin sent by Belkin had mentioned that Carolyn was probably considered a non-person, only an insignificant bargaining chip, an unfeeling lever with which to hopefully pry loose whatever it was he wanted, and Belkin Reichert was known to invariably get whatever it was he happened to want.

Lyman rose and sought his robe. Wandering into the suite's kitchen, he drew open the draperies and brewed himself a pot of coffee. The aroma alone revived him. The first swallows of strong black Arabica French Roast finished the job, burning his tongue but sweeping away the cobwebs obscuring his ability to think clearly — a deficiency he chalked up to the residue of a restless night. Nursing the coffee mug, he perched his butt on a hand-carved stool before the breakfast bar, sipped coffee and watched sunrise turn Golden Gate Park near Ocean Beach a green and golden hue.

Jaw clenched, he bore down on the problem in earnest, his mind churning and hopping from one unlikely prospect to another.

Minutes later the intercom chimed twice. He ignored it. Not long afterward, it chimed three times in rapid succession. Determined to avoid any and all distractions, he again made no move to answer. This early in the day, it had to be Maggie, the CEO's executive assistant, who never failed to arrive before the birds awoke in order to ready Clay's executive suite for the business day. Important or trivial, Lyman told himself, whatever she wished to pass along would have to wait.

His international business prominence and celebrity status were iron-clad guarantees that the police would be galvanized into action the instant he informed the authorities Carolyn Lester had gone missing; the same, only much more so, could be said for FBI Director Ned Barnettler, an acquaintance who would react with twice the stern purpose at the mention of a Justice Department magic word: kidnapping.

Unfortunately, running to law enforcement with the predicament would also ignite a formal investigation that might hinder rather than help recover Carolyn. Alerting the authorities would inspire numbers of serious questions, none of which he cared to answer at the moment, and one or two he would be afraid to answer.

The cops and Fibbies — ex-Treasury Agent Calvo's shorthand term for Bartmettler's people — would insist on learning of the relationship between himself and Carolyn. New would also demand to know in detail the circumstances surrounding her disappearance. No, that wouldn't wash. Bringing the authorities into it this early on meant a formal investigation that could easily create additional problems. There had to be some simpler way, some off-brand scheme designed to quietly pry Carolyn loose from wherever she was being held. He revolved the situation until his thoughts began to circularize, then drew a deep breath that sounded like a sigh in his own ears. The act of refilling the coffee mug also reset his mind to square one.

In the act of pouring, he hesitated when the intercom chimed four times in rapid succession, connoting a message of definite urgency. Muttering irritably under his breath, he carried the mug into the office section of the penthouse, plopped down behind his desk and savagely punched the intercom button. "Yes, Mag?"

“Terribly sorry to bother you this early, sir.” Maggie sounded perturbed. “Going through yesterday’s late mail I came across a handwritten letter addressed to you personally. I hope you’ll forgive me for opening it; the envelope was marked important, with the word underlined twice. It’s from a woman over in Marin who claims to be the niece of Dr. Lim, the gentleman who once headed up your —”

“Say no more, Mag. Forever on your toes, for which I thank very much indeed. I do indeed want read the letter. Can you please have someone bring it upstairs.”

“At once, Mr. Dysart.”

A burly young member of Calvo’s security staff rang the buzzer minutes later. He handed an envelope to Lyman, dipped his head and did everything but salute. Lyman thanked the lad, extracted two folded sheets of stationery and sat down to skim the spidery, handwritten text.

Before departing for China, the esteemed physicist and his niece had apparently evolved a variety of coded communication all their own. The niece wrote that her uncle had e-mailed her three times from Qingdao. The first two messages, no doubt vetted by Chinese censors, had consisted of generalities, with only a few short phrases redacted, and the remainder did nothing more than ask after the wellbeing of she herself, the children, the family and other commonplace matters. However, yesterday’s e-mail written in Mandarin had conveyed a radically different tone upon decipherment.

It seemed Dr. Xiang Lim’s elated masters in Beijing had ceremoniously informed her uncle that he had been selected as Nobel laureate in Physics, with an official announcement slated to be forthcoming in less than a week, on October twelfth. Xiang had written that he was absolutely ecstatic in his new post as technical director of China’s nuclear fusion program in Qingdao, news according to his niece that translated into the fact of being abysmally unhappy in his work, as well as severely depressed over being forced to endure a reprise of his former life in China. Disgusted over his fate as an elite prisoner of the CPR, he had subtly advised his niece that he would willingly do anything to escape. *Anything!*

The letter went on to relate how her uncle had convinced China’s capitalistic Communists that the Nobel award ceremony, a once in a lifetime event, was something he desperately wished to share with his family. Lim had in fact put his foot down, and resolutely insisted that all his close relatives in Hong Kong, other than those too elderly or infirm to travel, would either be allowed to accompany him on the journey to Stockholm, or he would adamantly refuse to go. His niece concluded by stating that the supreme, all-powerful hierarchy had reluctantly agreed to this stern condition.

Lyman had no difficulty recognizing Lim’s cry for help for what it was. Putting the letter aside momentarily, he woke the computer and did some homework on the Nobel Prize — *Nobelpriset* in Swedish — and was in the midst of reading a précis of the whys and wherefores surrounding the award ceremony, when a novel, unorthodox inspiration exploded in his mind.

Overcome by a surge of giddy, tingling enthusiasm, he put the computer back to sleep, dashed into the living quarters, tore the robe from his shoulders, kicked off his slippers, and jumped in the shower. Reveling in the needle-spray freshet, he revolved all aspects of a potential solution to the immediate dilemma of one captive, Carolyn Lester, and secondarily a possible means of effecting the release of a second captive, Dr. Xiang Lim. It struck him as incredibly

ironic that solving both goals involved *another* “captive” who happened to be sitting virtually in front of his nose.

Blinded by the quantity and variety of trees formerly shrouding the forest, he cursed his own dull inability to think while vigorously soaping himself, his mind awl. He became so intrigued by the serendipitous prospect of opening paths to freedom for Carolyn *and* soon-to-be Nobelism Xiang Lim that he forgot to sing.

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Refreshed after a hasty breakfast of buttered scones, grapefruit juice and a mug of fresh coffee, The Stockholder donned a freshly pressed tan jumpsuit, slipped on a pair of well-broken-in leather sandals, and called Calvo, instructing him in no uncertain terms to have Mr. Smith brought upstairs at once, without delay.

“Not smart, Lyman,” warned Marty. “Even without a weapon in hand, that specimen’s a dangerous animal.”

“I want him here in the penthouse, and I want him here now, now, *now*,” insisted Lyman. “Take off the cuffs if he’s still restrained. Don’t fret, I can handle him.”

“Oh, really? I sure as hell hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Skip the lecture,” ordered The Stockholder. “Go round up Smith!”

Awaiting the man’s arrival, Lyman opened a desk drawer, withdrew his large, rarely used commercial checkbook. Taking a pen from the Toby jug, and wrote floridly, added his signature squiggle with a flourish, and put away the checkbook. Lifting the electrolaser from a bottom desk drawer, pressed the self-test stud to check the charge, and laid the device close at hand.

Led by Calvo, a pair of husky staffers holding Smith’s arms escorted him into Lyman’s presence. Marty bent down, reluctantly unlocked and removed the handcuffs, his fixed gaze an unspoken invitation for Smith to do anything rash — *anything* at all. Disconcerted by what he perceived as recklessness, his worried glance raked Dysart.

Ignoring Calvo’s apprehensive manner, Lyman indicated a settee across from an oblong slate coffee table. “Sit!”

Expressionless, outwardly indifferent to whatever might happen next, the slight, muscular individual sank back in the lounge. His air one of absolute composure, he took turns rubbing one wrist chafed by the handcuffs, and then the other.

“Leave us,” instructed Lyman. “We have something to discuss in private.”

“Lyman, be reasonable!” railed Calvo. “You can’t —”

“Don’t argue!” Lyman’s stern dismissal cut short the other’s tirade. “Go!”

The automatic closure swung shut the reinforced, blast-resistant door, and tool-steel deadbolts clicked home. Smith made a blinkless appraisal of the electrolaser. “Private shock treatments, Mr. Dysart, sir?”

“Depends on you,” Lyman said matter-of-factly. “I see they returned your black Ninja outfit.”

“Don’t go anywhere without it, nor my samurai sword and throwing stars.”

Unamused, Lyman said, “Enough chatter. I assume an accomplished thug like you is acquainted with a number of renegades pretty much like yourself.”

“Sure I am. All really nice people.”

"Let me clarify something. I've no use for comic book heroes with superpowers, or bravest of the brave jokers like you who step out of the shadows now and then to prove themselves willing and able to undertake whatever it is they get paid to do."

Puzzled by the turn of conversation, Smith said, "So what?"

"So this. If you were on the outside looking in instead of the inside looking out, how long would it take you to round up an efficient team of . . . I suppose mercenaries is the kindest term I can use?"

"To do what to how many, in which order?"

"To do whatever I'm willing to pay you to do, and get it done fast. In this case, a quickie job, and a second in roughly a month and a half. We'll go into the details later. Right now, tell me how long it would take you to pull together a team of appropriate, competent undesirables?"

Smith remained expressionless, but Lyman could not help sensing the wheels turning behind the other's dark, narrowed eyes. "If the money's right, just long enough to make a few calls. What makes you think I'd work for you?"

"Same reason you worked for Vonex. I pay extremely well, except in this case I can do *better* than that. If you've an itch to be a wealthy mercenary, pick up the check on the coffee table."

Smith lifted the check, turned it over and glanced it in cursory fashion, and then looked again more closely. "A half-mil . . . ? Hefty bundle of scratch, Mr. Dysart, sir. But these days it won't make anyone wealthy. Well off, but not wealthy."

"The check, you'll notice," declared Lyman, "is written against my personal account. Think of it as a cash retainer, payable you'll also notice, to the bearer. I'll expect you to spend much of the five hundred thou rounding up the best, most willing cast of desperate, miserable creatures you think you may need to help scheme, research, lay out and set up the mechanics of the two operations I have in mind. Do both jobs to my total and complete satisfaction, and within an hour exactly ten times that amount will be deposited in whatever account you care to name."

"*Five mil . . . ?*" About to voice acute disbelief, Smith seemed to think better of it. "So me and my desperate, miserable creatures will have to zotz who and how many?"

"No one. As I said, we'll go into the smarmy details at length if and when you decide to accept my magnanimous offer."

"How can I be sure you'll come across at the windup?"

"You can't," said Dysart. "Nor, as I said, will I consider transferring one centime of the specified amount unless and until both undertakings have been accomplished to my total and complete satisfaction. If you're worried about whether or not I'm good for the loot, all I can say is I am quite able to afford the payoff."

A sarcastic snort. "That part I do believe."

"Good. Now shall we get down to business, or would you prefer to go back downstairs to the lockup?"

Despite being a hard hard-case whose refractory nature and coolness under pressure had been proven many times over, Mr. Smith was nevertheless a thoughtful individual. "Going to extremes just to spite Reichert, is that it, Mr. Dysart, sir? Sorry, but I don't see how pulling my services away from Vonex would make you feel better."

“My reasons are my own,” Dysart said. “Work hard, earn the wages of sin, and you can do whatever the hell you please for the rest of your unnatural life. You’ll never go back to Vonex. I can’t imagine anyone with five million tax-free new dollars in his kick realigning his ambitions with a demented slug like Reichert.”

“Me neither.” Smith’s normally stolid features warped in a grimace that was not quite a grin. He lifted and and kissed the check. “Deal out the cards, Mr. Dysart, sir!”

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Lyman nodded curtly and got up. Locking the electrolaser in a desk drawer, he left Smith to his own devices without a word and went into the pantry adjoining the deluxe kitchen. Tugging open a large restaurant-style stainless steel refrigerator, he selected two chilled steins from an upper shelf, filled them from an aluminum pony keg of imported German lager, kneed the refrigerator door shut. Returning to the office, he set the steins on cork coasters bearing the stylized Dysart Technologies logo.

“Ah, suds,” breathed his newest employee. Lifting his stein in salute, Smith said, “Here’s to brand our new friendly partnership, Mr. Dysart, sir.”

“You and I,” assured The Stockholder unequivocally, “will never approach anything that remotely resembles friendship or partnership.” He did, however, raise his stein and click it against Smith’s. “Salud to our business ventures!”

“That I’ll drink to,” said Mr. Smith.

Wiping the beer-foam mustache from his upper lip, Lyman leaned forward earnestly. “We’ll tackle the second task first. How much do you know about nuclear fusion technology?”

A second radical change of topic once again arrested Smith’s thought processes. His eyes flickered uncertainly. “Your fancy, moneymaking power system? Not a whole lot,” he admitted.

Lyman’s head wagged knowingly. “At the moment, a moneymaker it definitely is not. It’s a monstrous money trap I sometimes wish . . . Never mind; we’ll come back to that later. How about the Nobel Prize, you up on that even a tiny little bit?”

Again thrust out of his depth, obviously wondering where Dysart was coming from, Smith was not given to guessing. He proved his resilience by sipping brew, smacking his lips. “Tasty, Mr. Dysart, sir. Listen, I rate myself a better than fair hand with any and all types of weapons or explosives, and absolutely the best at handling guys and gals nobody’d invite for Thanksgiving dinner. But I shy away from scientific jazz, booby prizes, whatever else you peel off the wall and shove at me. As a wild-ass guess, you must mean the dumb peace prize that gets handed out every so often.”

“Close, but no cigar,” said Lyman, “That one’s of a different stripe, and gets awarded in Norway, not . . . Skip it! I’ll sketch out roughly what I want you to do, then you can tell me whether or not it’s doable, and how difficult the doing might be.”

“This’s some great beer!” Smith drained the dregs in his stein. “Fire when ready.”

Lyman described Dr. Xiang Lim, a preeminent nuclear physicist with dual American and Chinese citizenship, as the innovative genius largely responsible for the technical development and design of his company’s nuclear fusion power system. He explained how Lim had been blackmailed, and was being dragged back to China, and had recently been selected as Nobel laureate in physics, with the award ceremony scheduled to be held in the Stockholm Concert Hall

on December tenth, the anniversary of Alfred Nobel's death, adding that the Nobelist would himself be among the honored attendees at a ceremonial banquet held afterward in the Stockholm City Hall.

Listening in silence, Smith had given rapt attention to the recital.

Dysart told him how word smuggled out of China secretly announced Lim's desperate unhappiness at being forced to work for the Chinese autocracy, and how the unhappy scientist was pleading to be freed from involuntary servitude. Lyman told the other Lim had gotten his back up and posed a severe condition to his masters, stating emphatically, with no hint of possible compromise, that he would refuse to participate in the Nobel Award ceremony unless the members of his immediate family were also present on the auspicious occasion. This stern condition apparently had been reluctantly agreed to, if only because China stood to reap a monumental public relations triumph by foisting off as one of their own the winner of the prestigious award.

"So you want this guy sprung." Smith made it a flat statement.

"Not only Dr. Lim, but the relatives who accompany him as well."

The longer Smith revolved the notion, the greater the cleft between his gray-shot brows deepened. "December, you say? Plenty of time to round up a topnotch team, reserve hotel rooms, scope the layout, rehearse the action, set up the exit, fold in the incidentals and whatever else might be needed. Snatching civilians out of a crowd and bundling them out of Sweden sounds fairly straightforward, Mr. Dysart, sir. But it's yanking the prize winner out from under the keepers who'll no doubt be watching your guy's every move could get real sticky. There'll be other snags and snafus; there always are. With only that slim info to go on for now, my off the cuff answer's yeah, it'll be tough but doable. How about the other job, the quickie at the top of your menu?"

"A quickie it has to be," emphasized Lyman. "More than a quickie, really; you might call it an immediate way to engineer some way of bailing out Carolyn Lester."

Smith nodded. "Figured as much. Go on."

Biting his words short, The Stockholder launched a dissertation that lasted most of seven or eight minutes. When he ran dry, the forcefulness of his inquiring, expectant gaze caused his newest employee to throw back his head and laugh aloud. "If I wasn't such a tightwad," he declared, "I'd handle that one free of charge."

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Cruising less than a dozen meters above Manhattan's loftiest high-rise during the wee hours of the following morning, the small, two-place commute helicopter flirted with a forest of soaring structures that transformed midtown into a checkerboard of canyons. Directly ahead of the 'copter, immodestly looming head and shoulders above its nearest neighbors, Vonex International World Headquarters reared into the night sky partially banded with lighted windows.

Togged out in ill-fitting casual wear borrowed from the shortest and leanest member of Calvo's Security staff, Mr. Smith piloted the helicopter himself. Holding the collective loosely, he steadied the aircraft on course, and asked loudly, "All set?"

The shooter signaled thumbs-up. He had taken the sniper rifle from its fitted foam-rubber case and deftly assembled it in flight. Inserting a round in the chamber, he closed the bolt, adjusted the infrared night-vision goggles on the bridge of his nose.

The 'copter slowed its descent upon reaching a point fifty meters distant from and level with the segmented glasswall crowning the high-rise structure's uppermost story. Smith brought the rotary-wing aircraft to a hover, a simple task in the all but nonexistent crosswind. "Close enough?"

"It'll do," replied the shooter.

"Make double-sure it's clean inside," instructed Smith.

"All I'm able t'make out," the shooter told him, "are dim heat blooms, prob'ly from a few night lights that're always on." With the aid of the infrared goggles, he took pains sweeping the length of the expansive, high-ceilinged chamber one last time just to make sure. "Usually," he shouted over the 'copter's low jet roar, the thrash of rotary wings, "janitors and cleaners're out of a building by one, two ayem. It's past three."

"Go for it!" urged Smith. "We have to scoot before traffic control spots us below flyway altitude."

Belted in the seat, the shooter unlatched the passenger door, pushed it part way open with his boot. Rotating his torso, he sighted the rifle at a spot near the center of the inner chamber, an estimated meter above where he guessed floor level might be.

The rifle cracked once, the double-paned center section of glasswall shattered.

The 'copter immediately dipped forward, rose fast and vectored off into the black, hazy sky in the direction of New Jersey.

Three hours later Maggie unlocked the CEO's executive suite. No sooner had the anteroom sensors detected the presence of a warm body and switched on the lights than the communications terminal began emitting insistent buzzes. A pin light on the terminal told her the incoming call was on a rarely used landline. She set down her purse, popped a button and said sweetly, "Good morning, Dysart Technologies."

"Codeword Wanderlust," announced a hoarse male voice. "Pass the word to Dysart ASAP: one if by land, and two if by air." Whoever owned the grating baritone voice said only one more word: "We hit a two bagger."

An indistinct click told Maggie whoever was at the other end had disconnected.

*He had the October codeword*, thought Maggie, puzzled by what she considered the occasional, inane cloak-and-dagger foolishness that now and again tangentially crossed her path. Nevertheless, the caller had verified his legitimacy. Following instructions, she opened the secure intercom link to the penthouse and left The Stockholder a recording of the cryptic message.

Maggie wondered briefly about the call's provenance, who the caller might have been, and the meaning of his mysterious message, then dismissed it entirely and began preparing for the coming business day.

## EIGHTEEN Ultimatum

A certified antique, the gold-plated French telephone occupied a place of honor on the ornate Louis Quinze end table next to Reichert's canopied bed. A symbol of excess, not success, the bed was a genuine museum piece, not an item of furnishing intended for nightly repose. Four posts supporting the canopy were fashioned of polished, hand-crafted walnut swirls alternating with gilded ormolu bands.

To his decorator's dismay at what she considered a total absence of taste, the chairman had haphazardly furnished the remainder of his spacious bedchamber, its high ceiling rimmed with a classic ivory frieze instead customary crown moldings. Genuine antiques and artifacts purchased in Europe, where Reichert had antagonized a surly Greek dealer he suspected of inflating prices simply because of who and what he was, clashed randomly with more pedestrian items, and particularly with a matched pair of heirloom chests of drawers left to him in his skinflint paternal grandfather's last will and testament. Brocade draperies retained by embroidered tie-backs swooped down in perfect folds on either side of arched, two-meter-high windows overlooking Central Park South.

The seldom used French telephone double clang-clanged, causing a manservant busy laying out the chairman's dark gray, custom-tailored suit for the dawning business day to stop what he was doing and gaze in silent inquiry at the clamoring instrument.

Less than a half-dozen people in the world were privileged to know the chairman's ultra-private residence number. Fresh from his bath in a robe and slippers, Reichert could not imagine which intimate associate would bother to call at such an ungodly hour of morning. Impatiently dismissing the *valet de chambre*, he lifted the phone by its polished wooden handle. "Reichert."

"Good day, Belkin."

Taken aback by the warm, friendly timbre of a voice that sounded vaguely familiar, the chairman demanded to know who was calling.

"Lyman Dysart here. How are you this splendid fall morning?"

"Who gave you this number?"

"A wee small birdie. Now pay attention. I have an assignment of extreme importance for you to undertake. It has nothing to do with business, you understand. Nevertheless, it would be wise to closely heed my instructions."

"Instructions! Of all the impertinent —"

"Shut your fat mouth and open your hairy ears! Yesterday," informed Dysart, "I established a trust fund valued at six million new dollars, a portion of which will be the grand prize in an upcoming contest. Each of five contestants was given a retainer of twenty-five thousand new dollars, and without exception every one of them is frothing at the mouth over a chance to claim the grand prize, winner take all."

"How interesting," said Reichert, his diction rimed with frost. "I'm delighted to hear of your beneficence. Now then, what the devil do you mean calling me and —?"

"No, no," denied Lyman. "Forget beneficence. What I have planned for you is the exact opposite of beneficence. The reason I'm calling is . . . Well, to put it bluntly I felt it only fair to warn you in advance of . . . Wait, I doubt if the term 'fair' has ever found its way into your lexicon. No, I'm certain you've no conception whatever of fairness. None! Let me rephrase the . .

. Oh, it doesn't matter. The grand prize will be awarded to the first contestant who succeeds in nailing your chubby ass to the barn door."

The silence in Reichert's bedchamber was deafening. "You dare to threaten *me*?" cried the chairman too loudly for anyone engaged in a telephone conversation.

"No, it's not a threat," assured Dysart. "Think of it as fair advance notice of your imminent demise. You see, I've finished turning the other cheek to the machinations of you and your oil-smudged friends and cronies. I hold you personally responsible for the death of my father, the unconscionable murder of my wife and child, and of far less consequence more than one attempt on my own life, most especially the latest ."

"You'll sewer your billions," declared Reichert, "trying to prove the absurd notion of my complicity in any such —"

"Nor will I try to prove it, or so much as mention it," said Lyman. "In short, though you don't deserve an iota of consideration, I'm giving you fair warning, here and now, with utmost sincerity, that I've had it with you and yours. If Carolyn Lester does not reappear forty-eight hours from the instant I ring off, my five contestants will receive simultaneous 'go' orders, and the hunt will be on."

"Obviously," said Reichert with snide intonation, "you think very highly of the little tart."

"Oh, Belkin! You'll never know how delighted I am to hear that crack," said Lyman. "It more than reinforces my opinion of you, and redoubles my determination to award the grand prize. Unfortunately, it will also cost you twelve hours of breathing, scheming existence. The deadline now advances to thirty-six hours from this moment, roughly two and one half days. Care to try for another dozen life-shortening hours?"

No response was forthcoming. Lyman said, "It sounds like that issue is settled, so let's move on to secondary and tertiary matters. In the course of an intense interrogation verging on lethal measures, the Tiny Tim assassin you sent to do me in gargled and screamed and pleaded for a continued existence. In the end he coughed up the location of a terribly incriminating tape recording it should make you happy to hear was recovered successfully. A voiceprint has confirmed the identity of both the Tiny Tim assassin and you yourself who confessed to a nefarious plot to murder me.

"Lastly but far from leastly, two final items," concluded Lyman. "Early this morning I ordered a calling card left at Vonex World Headquarters to confirm the bona fides of my fair warning. I also had your so-secret residence phone number posted on worldwide Internet blogs and in chat rooms everywhere and anywhere, including a few truly nauseous websites. Your phone will soon be ringing off the hook. Now then, do we understand one another on all counts, Belkin?"

The silence in Reichert's bedchamber grew even more deafening.

"For your sake," concluded Dysart, "I hope you do understand and appreciate what I've told you. Keep one eye on the clock. The axe is poised, and it will begin to descend precisely thirty-six hours from . . . *now*."

A faint click signified the line going dead.

His hand trembling, a reaction due more to raw fury than fright, Chairman Reichert fumbled to cage the instrument in the cradle's gold-plated hooks.

No sooner had he done so than the antique French telephone began clang-clanging insistently.

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Unable to hold back a self-satisfied smirk, Lyman called Smith on the satellite phone he had ordered returned to the would-be assassin. "You are almost," were his first words, "but not quite halfway to becoming five mil richer than you were before sneaking in to try and kill me."

"Always did favor a generous tipper, Mr. Dysart, sir."

"Little imagination is needed," declared Lyman, "to infer that a gentleman of your diversified talents has established an offshore account somewhere."

"Cayman Islands," was the prompt response.

"Excellent choice. Give me the account number and other pertinent data. I promise faithfully to transfer five mil the instant the remainder of our business has been completed."

"Figuring to rob my account, Mr. Dysart, sir?"

Lyman said, "If it proves worthwhile. How much have you socked away?"

"By your standards, a tiny piggy bank half-full of pennies."

"Knock off the pointless jabber," said Lyman. "The banking data, please."

Smith did not hesitate to comply.

"I assume you're prepping for phase two of our business arrangement."

"Ready, willing and whatever else. I'll jump-start the setup long before the forty-eight hour wait winds down."

"That," said Dysart, "is my secondary reason for this call. Forget forty-eight. The wait's shrunk to thirty-six hours. Does the time squeeze create a problem?"

"No way; sooner the better. I'll max the setup, be ready to roll long before the new H hour rolls around."

"Fine!" Lyman said cheerfully. "Keep up the bad work, Smith. Five mil will show up in your account an hour after I shake hands with Dr. Lim, and welcome him and his family to our shores."

"It's a done deal, Mr. Dysart, sir." Smith rang off.

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In a surly, antagonistic frame of mind, seething anger outweighed whatever apprehension Reichert might have felt in the wake of Dysart's outrageous call. He entered his eightieth floor office suite and found Smith's deputy nervously awaiting his arrival.

"Good morning, Mr. Chairman." Displaying sugared diffidence, the pro tem security director said, "I'm afraid there's been a . . . well, an incident in the boardroom, sir. The police were notified. An investigation is under way."

Reichert doffed his cashmere topcoat. "What sort of incident?" he demanded.

Uncomfortable over the need to explain the inexplicable, the other hemmed and hawed and managed to say, "It might be best to . . . I believe you may want to see this for yourself, sir."

"In the boardroom, you say?"

"The boardroom, yes. Here, let me carry your coat; it's chilly upstairs — cold, really. We shut down the climate control system, and alerted the building maintenance contractor. Workmen are standing by, ready to replace a large section of the glasswall once the police finish their —"

"Glasswall . . ? Stop nattering. Did a bird fly into the window?"

"Er, no. Not . . . a bird, Mr. Chairman."

Escorted into the boardroom, Reichert found an NYPD detective seated at the conference table talking on the phone. A second plainclothes detective and two uniformed officers stood around shivering and trying to look busy.

Reichert frowned at sight of the shattered section of dual-pane glasswall. Taking the topcoat from Smith's deputy, he donned it in slow motion, one groping arm at a time. Stumping to the head of the long conference table, he warily poked a forefinger into a walnut-sized tear desecrating the high-backed leather chair in which he was enthroned during board of directors sessions. A deep, jagged gouge marred the polished perfection of the conference table's far end.

"What in the name of God *happened* here?"

The detective lieutenant pocketed his satellite phone and came to stand at Reichert's elbow. "The slug hit the table and probably tumbled, judging from a splintered hole in the wainscot panelling next to the entry doors. First we assumed it was a stray round fired somewhere out in the city. Then one of the officers dug a uranium slug out of the wall down the corridor, so it must have been —"

"Uranium!" Reichert blanched. "A *nuclear* attack . . ?"

"No, no," denied the detective. "Only the military has access to depleted uranium armor-piercing ammunition; it puts the . . . attack in a whole different light. If the room had been occupied, someone could have been seriously injured, or killed."

Struck dumb by what he'd seen and heard, a mute nod was the only response Reichert could muster. *That bastard*, he thought, *had the gall to describe his murderous rampage as leaving a calling card!*

Torn between bewilderment, outrage, and a rabid desire for vengeance, not to mention overpowering, vitriolic scorn for Lyman Dysart, the chairman listened with half an ear as the detective inquired if he knew of anyone who might want to do harm to he himself or the corporation, and whether he could think of any personal enemies, perhaps the animis of a disgruntled ex-employee, someone with a money problem he attributed to Vonex, a participant in an unsavory business dealing, anyone or anything along those lines?

Reichert semi-coherently denied knowledge of any such potential suspects. The detective lieutenant wanted to ask more questions. Evaluating the chairman's condition, he thought better of it, and decided to hold off until later.

Reichert glanced at the boardroom's row of digital wall clocks. An hour and forty minutes had elapsed since Dysart's poisonous call. That meant only thirty-four hours remained until . . . He sucked in a deep breath, choked back the onslaught of near-panic, and stiffened his spine. Reminding himself not only who and what he was, but how diligently he had labored to attain his present pinnacle, he made up his mind not to let fearfulness get the better of him. This assault was obviously no more than a scare tactic, a sly, underhanded gambit with only a single purpose: to intimidate by inspiring fear. Yet no matter how one rationalized his "calling card," a multibillionaire celebrity of Dysart's stature and repute could never be accused of making idle threats. Scare tactic or idle threat, he could not afford to take the bastard's message lightly.

His emotions roiling, Reichert assured himself that not now — *never!* — would he permit himself to feel intimidated by what, in essence, amounted to a crank phone call and a

meaningless gunshot. Yet deep in his heart of hearts he found it impossible to push aside the theoretical, utterly unthinkable notion of being deprived of the life he cherished.

It was this vision of his own demise that frightened Belkin Reichert to the depths of his skewed, conscienceless soul.

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“Madam President,” declared the senator, “I yield three minutes to the distinguished senator from Tennessee.”

Believing it her solemn duty under the circumstances, the Vice President of the United States presided over the Senate in person during the seemingly endless floor debate. Once a tough-minded federal prosecutor herself, she acknowledged the grant of three minutes to Senator Kyle.

The ongoing debate had at first soured, and then incensed Kyle. In the wake of yet another failed cloture vote to terminate debate, one after another colleague on either side of the aisle had droned on for an added eternity, hashing and rehashing the subject, espousing divergent, often mutually exclusive viewpoints and opinions. Only a double handful of senators remained seated, more than one of whom appeared to be dozing. In relays, the remainder had retired to the cloakroom or elsewhere to recharge their batteries, and hopefully resurrect their sensibilities. A few had gone so far as to slip outside the Capitol and indulge in an illegal smoke.

His manner dignified and grave, Kyle stepped to the microphone. Looking up over the Ben Franklin spectacles perched on the end of his nose, his gaze swept the gallery, now deserted due to the interminable closed sessions he thought might continue forever, and gruffly thanked the senator from New Mexico for yielding him an opportunity to be heard. “Madam President, I don’t intend to bore this august body for three whole minutes. I mean to steal no more than fifty or sixty seconds of the Senate’s invaluable time.

“To those of you still in a fully conscious state,” he declared in a tone of unveiled sarcasm, “after lo these endless hours of what some may call ‘debate,’ but which I choose to impolitely call a propaganda campaign aimed at taking a giant step toward socializing private enterprise in these once united States. Throughout my years in government I’ve struggled to maintain integrity, and pride myself as remaining a heretofore loyal member the Party I have loved. But never — not once during those decades — have I witnessed anything quite so low down and fraught with self-serving skullduggery, witlessness and out-and-out thievery you ladies and gentlemen, each duly elected by your trusting constituents, are planning to perpetrate.

“Day after day after day, is session after session of debate,” insisted Kyle, “I’ve watched and listened to you individually and collectively struggle to convince one another how to vote on passage of the extremely crucial bill before us, and which has unfortunately been before us so long it may’ve taken root. In my mind, the outcome is and has always been a foregone conclusion. If passage of the stand-alone fusion funding bill was destined to be the sole outcome of the prospective vote, I would definitely cast a hearty aye, and proudly endorse passage with boundless enthusiasm.

“However,” he continued, “I’m forced to object in the strongest terms to the unswerving determination of what appears to be a majority of you, my peers, who are bent upon attaching to this vital, ultra-necessary item of legislation a rancid, thoroughly infamous rider. If and when the

dastardly act is consummated, it will be a crime duly compounded by the synthetic rationale of laying both bill and notorious amendment on the altar of an equally synthetic, holier-than-thou shrine called 'national security.'

"I myself do not intend to cast either a repugnant aye or a futile nay, not even a vote that affirms my presence, for I will not be present on the hazy, distant, inevitable day when the Senate is finally polled. Never have I been as sorely displeased and disappointed in the members of my own Party, or certain others across the aisle who take pride in referring to themselves as 'independents,' as I am at this moment, on this inauspicious day, in this time of infamy.

"Therefore, as I come before you for the very last time my staff has been instructed to clear out my office. Madam President, I hereby tender my resignation as United States Senator from Tennessee, effective at once."

Stirrings and a scattering of exclamations erupted from the sparse, suddenly wide-awake senators in attendance and traveled about the chamber.

The Vice President rapped her gavel. "Order! The Senate will come to order."

"Having resigned my seat," concluded Kyle, "I am once again a private citizen, and no longer eligible to speak before you, my once-honored, once-honorable fellow senators. That being the case, I apologize for lacking the authority to relinquish the remaining time yielded by my esteemed former colleague."

Heedless of scattered cries and catcalls from the lightly populated floor, Kyle turned away from the microphone. He withdrew an envelope from the inside pocket of his jacket, reached up and laid it on the podium before the solemn Vice President. Dignity wrapped about him like a cloak, he made his way up the center aisle, his stride vigorous as that of a much younger man.

The junior senator from Tennessee made the grave mistake of rushing to arrest Kyle's progress, clutching his former colleague's elbow and tugging him to a halt. "Ray, don't do this! You can't give up your seat. Not now, for God's sake!"

"Best turn me loose," advised Kyle, "if you have further use for that hand."

The Vice President rapped her gavel smartly. "The sergeant at arms will detain the senator. He is not to leave the chamber."

Halting three-quarters of the way up the aisle, Kyle swung about. Standing legs-apart, he stared expectantly at the podium.

"Senator," began the Vice President sternly, "I sincerely hope you have —"

"Your pardon, ma'am," interrupted Kyle. "To my deep regret, I'm no longer qualified to respond to that form of address."

Vexed by the retort, the VP said, "I stand corrected, sir. Before you go, however, it's my sworn duty to remind you of the solemn oath you have taken. Whether private citizen or elected public servant, you have an obligation to remain silent with regard to the bill under debate before this body. You will promise faithfully to not reveal a word about our proceedings."

"Duly noted," said Kyle, a faint smile playing on his lips. Without further adieu, he ignored the last-ditch effort to stay him by the one and only senator from Tennessee, heading up the aisle without a backward glance, walking away from what he had once thought of as his lifework.

Feeling as if a weight had fallen from his shoulders, he took his time strolling around the rotunda, ignoring the appraisal of overtly curious tourists who paused to look him over. Descending the broad Capitol steps one slow riser at a time, Raymond Kyle breathed deeply, inhaling the District of Columbia's sultry air of freedom.

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"Not during business hours," declared Mr. Smith. "Too many comings and goings nix a move then. Has to come off in the dead of night, two, three ayem."

"Sounds chancy," said the the young video man Smith was lecturing.

"Not if you play it smart," counseled Smith. Adopting his soft-sell mode, he told the men at night the garage was a dark, deserted tomb, making what they had to do a piece of cake. "The night guy camps in his cubby, pretends to mind the video surveillance displays and downs mugs of coffee to stay awake. My electronic key'll get you in the service entrance next to the gated drive-in ramp. Ease down the flight of steps, find a spot to hide. Minute the night guy goes upstairs to make his rounds, do as much as you can, then hide and sweat it out for a while, wind things up when he heads back upstairs."

"What if he hears us, turns on the lights?" asked the other man.

"Do your business on the QT, and he won't," assured Smith, "What the hell! When he's in his cubby, breathe open-mouthed for quiet and hunker down behind a set of parked wheels."

"Pasting video eyes that high up won't be easy."

"Easier than you think," Smith told the younger man. "The ribbed concrete overhead's low — two and a half meters or so floor clearance. The little sticky-back pinhole cams have a twenty-hour battery life, and the balloon won't go up for eleven-plus hours. Hit a snag, heist yourself up on a vehicle, or have your buddy here boost you high enough to slap on an eye. But make double-sure each little cam, near and far, looks straight at the elevator bank."

More mature and experienced than his companion, the explosives expert wanted to know if the limousines were locked at night.

"Likely are, yeah," Smith told him. "But so what? No reason to open a parked VIP limos. The target likes a white ride, so hit those first, then the others."

"Overkill, ain't it, to plant a charge under every limo in the garage?"

"It's like taking out an insurance policy," said Smith. "Each Semtex packet's has an alphanumeric ID tag. When a particular limo's driven up to cart away the target, the wireless readout'll show me which packet to key. If I know my Vonex security deputy, and I do, soon's the smoke clears he'll have the garage inspected, and the other charges'll be disarmed."

The explosives man had been reviewing the operation in his mind. He injected a somber note. "Hope the poor fucking driver's insured."

Smith shrugged. "The military calls it collateral damage. I don't like it, and I don't dislike it. It's an incidental job sidebar that's tough to avoid."

When no comment on his funereal statement came forth, Smith clapped his hands. "Okay, saddle-up anytime after midnight, guys. Wear sneakers, and don't forget to wrap the goodies and tools stowed in your backpacks so nothing jingles or rattles. I'll drop you off at, oh, a quarter past two, when the night guy's making his rounds. Be ready to trot, hear?"

Neither man seemed overly enthused about what was in store.

## NINETEEN Nervous Season

Carolyn Lester dealt one card to the Warthog, one to the Spider, and two for herself — a useless six of clubs and an innocuous queen of diamonds. The Warthog's close-set piggish eyes narrowed as he squeezed apart the hand held close to his chest. Carolyn figured him for two pairs, or less; maybe a busted straight or flush.

Preferring the company of one nondescript captor to the other was a no-brainer. Though ranking among the ugliest male specimens of all time, and her former occupation in Las Vegas had thrown her into contact with a number of grotesques, the Warthog was ten times more civil than his companion. His failing in a cards was an absolutely transparent poker face. The skinny one she'd dubbed the Spider, a skeletal individual of few words with no meat on his bones, owned a mercurial temper, and was much harder to read than the Warthog. Leery of betting into the Spider's one-card draw, she hoped to learn how serious he was about his hand by probing, and raised the skimpy pot two new dollars.

The Warthog grumped that his hand looked more like a foot, and tossed in his cards. After due deliberation, the Spider called and raised the pot five new dollars.

Carolyn's instincts told her to raise back. Better judgment prevailed. Resisting temptation she called the raise. The Spider declared his hand grimly, making it sound like a death sentence. "Aces over sixes."

"Trips," said Carolyn. Stinging her emaciated captor with an impudent, self-satisfied grin, she laid three tens on the kitchen table in the nondescript apartment where the oddly assorted pair were gradually going stir crazy watching over her.

Not one facial muscle twitched in the Spider's gaunt visage. He looked away quickly to avoid watching her rake in the pot.

Carolyn yawned. "Getting to be sleepy time, guys. What say we call it a night?"

The Warthog's feeble pretense of indignation fell short. "It's not kosher," he complained, "to take all our hard-earned, then fold up and scoot off to bed."

"That's the way it's done, fellas." Carolyn busied herself stuffing bills in her purse. "Wake me if you two decide to go out on the town, promise?"

"Fat chance!" said the Spider. "Want comp'ny in the bedroom, just say so."

"Fat chance!" echoed Carolyn. "Your boss may have mentioned my former pastime, but I'll bet every dime of my winnings he warned you I wasn't to be touched."

A lascivious smile warped the Warthog's asymmetrical features, making him look semi-human. "Assault with a friendly weapon," he quipped, "don't do no harm."

Carolyn returned the smile. "True. A hot, sudsy bath repairs the damage. But forget harming me. Think about the harm coming your way when the boss finds out."

"How'd he hear about it?" scoffed the Warthog.

"Easy, I'd tell him." With that, Carolyn poured herself a glass of milk from the refrigerator, said, "Nitey night, fellas." She headed for the hall bedroom.

"Kiddo," said the Warthog, arresting her progress, "we don't cotton to hanging out here any more than you. Would it hurt if you was to bend some, and stop treatin' us like stale dog shit?"

Bemused, Carolyn leered at her radically mismatched keepers. “Funny, I never bothered to read the owner’s manual on how to treat kidnappers. All you have to do is unlock the front door, look the other way a few minutes. That’ll solve all our problems.”

“Fat chance!” declared the Spider, doing what he could to wear out the term.

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In late morning, the richly paneled, high-ceilinged boardroom crowning Vonex International World Headquarters was more lightly populated than usual. Few of the absent directors would have admitted it, but Reichert was indignantly aware of how many had begged off due to general uneasiness over the “random,” unexplained shooting incident, with excuses ranging from suddenly remembering a commitment elsewhere to important family duties, or vacations impossible to postpone.

The abbreviated roster of directors present also displayed a sublimated edginess, an emotional uncertainty Reichert was forced to blame himself for ordering a leased patrol helicopter to orbit the building during the meeting. Armed Vonex Security personnel had also been posted in the corridor outside the boardroom, and along the parapet of the building’s chill, windswept roof.

An aging, white-haired fixture who served on the boards of two other major corporations currently had the floor. Droning on in a weak whiskey tenor, he criticized roundaboutly the dilatory report of lost revenue resulting from suspended drilling operations in Marie Byrd Land, east of the region where the Ross Ice Shelf had once covered a portion of the sea. The shutdown, he announced in a monotone, was due to some unspecified illness raging in, “The crew’s comfortable, well-supplied quarters.”

Seated defiantly in a high-backed executive chair that gave off a faint odor of new leather, the chairman reposed at the head of the long, as yet unrepaired conference table. Finding it increasingly difficult to focus on the meeting’s glacial progress, his attention kept straying to a row of pseudo-antique digital wall clocks displaying twenty-four-hour time in selective world capitals. He could not seem to keep himself from glancing back and forth from the wall clocks to the platinum, chip-scale chronometer on his pudgy left wrist. Gifted by a prominent horology executive seeking a business favor, the chronometer’s advertised atomic resonance frequency was advertised as able to maintain millisecond accuracy for a lifetime and more.

He wondered fretfully what “lifetime” might mean if applied to he himself, became distraught and without thinking interrupted the speaker in mid-sentence. “Those wall clocks are off between eleven and fourteen seconds.”

Affronted, the white-haired speaker joined a handful of fellow directors in staring expectantly at the chairman.

Regretting the impulsive outburst, Reichert said, “Sorry, didn’t mean to, er . . .”

A retired academic known for scholarly diction and an acid wit said, “Belkin, pardon me for pointing out how futile it may be to continue. We lack a quorum, and I see nothing on the agenda that won’t keep until our next get together.”

“Oh, safety’s definitely not a problem, I assure you,” the chairman said hastily. “There’s absolutely nothing to be concerned about.”

"My concern," pointed out one of the other directors, "is that you may have attached too much gravity to the peculiar shooting incident. You don't seem yourself today. You've fidgeted ever since we convened. I agree with the professor. It's unlikely that anything too productive will come from discussing the remaining items. Why needlessly prolong the session?"

A senior director chimed in. "I'm forced to echo that suggestion. We might wall abort the session, delete the minutes from record, pretend it never took place?"

Murmurs of concurrence rattled around the conference table.

Aaron Beebe, occasionally invited to sit in and resolve any legal issues that might arise, caught the chairman's eye. He moved his chin up and down a few millimeters.

Looking unhappy, Reichert gave in without further argument, declared the meeting adjourned. Slumped back in the new armchair he half-heartedly acknowledged twords of encouragement uttered by several directors who went out of their way to also offer parting expressions of goodwill. The remaining board members cast curious glances in the chairman's direction as they filed out of the boardroom.

Left alone with chairman, Beebe, the only person to whom Reichert had divulged the details of Dysart's sinister contest, rose and hesitated, then took a seat next to the chairman. "All things considered, I believe it was for the best. No one could help but notice how perturbed you are, too much so to conduct business. Why not go home and relax? Vonex will take care of itself until tomorrow."

"If," Reichert said morosely, "there is a tomorrow."

"Nonsense!" chided Beebe.

Angered by the other's attempt to belittle a threat he considered all too real, the chairman's mood underwent a radical transformation. "Beebe," he said, tight-lipped, sitting up straighter in the chair, "I don't relish hearing trite words of commiseration, nor will I demean myself by hiding at home like some fugitive. I mean to work in my office for the rest of the business day, exactly like every other day. That maniac may try to have me done away with, but I promise you he'll have his work cut out for him."

Ignoring the hollow display of bravado, the counselor weighed his response. "What if he's not trying to frighten you into abandoning your, er . . . What I mean is —"

"I know perfectly well what you mean," blustered Reichert. He pushed back the casted executive chair, surged to his feet. "Tit for tat, isn't that what you're thinking? I must say that among your faults is an abominable habit of subjecting every situation, no matter how crucial, to typically cold, ho-hum! legalistic appraisal. You're one very book-smart gentleman, but consistently and conscientiously you always distance yourself from direct involvement in anyone else's problems, or in my case jeopardy. You never even *think* of taking action yourself, never do anything to actively aid in resolving the important difficulties afflicting your friends and associates."

"I was trying to be helpful, Belkin."

"Really? By making light of the way that bastard set up a contest to see who'd be first to do me in? Tell me what can the rule of law you worship do in the way of solving *my* dilemma?"

Losing patience with the chairman, Beebe asked drily, "Would you have me file a civil action accusing Dysart of being the potential perpetrator of a heinous crime?"

“Sarcasm,” declared the chairman self-righteously, “doesn’t become you, Aaron.”

“In no way could it possibly be more offensive,” retorted the attorney, his temper flaring, “than snapping back at someone who’s offering to help you rationalize your ‘dilemma.’ For once in your life try to think before you speak. What can I or anyone else do that isn’t already being done?”

Meeting the attorney’s steady gaze, Reichert subsided, reverting to despondent self-pity and he sank back into his new executive chair with a woebegone expression.

*He’s impossible!* Thoroughly vexed, Aaron Beebe pushed back his chair and strode from the boardroom in a querulous frame of mind. He thought about his situation in the executive express elevator riding downstairs, then isolated himself in his office, told his executive assistant he was not to be disturbed, and did some astute pondering.

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Alone in the rundown South Bronx walk-up he rented by the week, Mr. Smith’s iron self-control prevented him from indulging in anything as foolish as clock-watching. He devoted casual attention to the split-screen video panels allowing him to monitor activity in the basement garage of Vonex International Headquarters. Although not of the best quality, the images transmitted at various angles from tiny, self-contained mini-cams attached high on the garage’s pillars and ribbed concrete overhead adequately depicted everything that went on in and around the elevator alcove.

Smith’s resolute self-control gradually weakened. He gave and glanced at the digital chronometer on his wrist: 15:13:09. The witching hour would arrive at 15:32:00, thirty-six hours to the minute after Dysart’s early morning call had jarred the chairman into appreciating the difference between theoretical endangerment and a real threat.

Yet no adequate reason obtained to wait until the exact minute rolled around. Smith felt it would be idiotic to pass up an opportunity, and decided H-hour minus a few dozen minutes would have to satisfy the billionaire’s juvenile insistence on fair play; whether it would also satisfy his demand that no bystanders be harmed during the operation remained an open question. By this time indifferent to the precise time of day, he meant to strike the instant the target presented himself, and write *finis* to what was to him a boring if lucrative minor operation.

He watched and waited with outward patience as the seconds passed, paying only token attention to the comings and goings of people and vehicles in the garage. He leaned forward expectantly when the doors rolled apart and exposed the executive express elevator compartment and a man emerged he failed to recognize due to moderate image fuzziness, though definitely not the chairman.

Smith relaxed. Minutes later, his attention again subconsciously drawn to his wristwatch, he was chagrined to think only a few minutes had evaporated since his last peek. It made him realize the Spartan, tightly-held leash on his emotions might be slipping

Determined to keep impulsive behavior at bay, he sat upright, rubbed his eyes, scanned in cursory fashion each video panel in turn, then relaxed completely and let the seconds dribble away at their own pace.

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Across the continent, subconsciously anxious over the prospect of bringing Carolyn home safely, Lyman woke early after another restless night and became a different sort of

clockwatcher. Though refusing to wear a wristwatch, his flippant reason being that he had little interest in learning the time of day, all morning long he tried to work, but found himself keeping one eye on the polished brass shipboard chronometer on his desk, or earlier the hands of a genuine antique, the oak-framed Seth Thomas analog clock on the wall of his study until its barely audible, metronomic tick-tocking regularity had eventually driven him seek refuge in the "office."

With zero appetite for lunch, he moped about and tried to read for a while, but the brass naval chronometer proved so distracting that the displayed electronic text dissolved into strung-together words without a shred of meaning. He uttered an apathetic curse, put the computer to sleep and slumped back in a lounge. Fist to chin, he stared absently at the distant skyline of San Francisco's financial district.

Lost in a deep brown study, the intercom startled him by chiming three times in succession. Anticipating a codeword message from Smith, he eagerly punched the button. "What news of the outside world, Mag?"

"Sorry Lyman, it's only me," announced the CEO, a hint of strain raising the pitch of his resonant baritone. "Senator Kyle insists on speaking with you about a matter of vital importance."

"Kyle . . ? Good, put him on."

"Won't be necessary," said the CEO. "He's here."

"In the City?"

"You might say that. Right this minute he's in the outer office showering dollops of good ol' Southern boy charm on Maggie."

"Well, surprise, surprise!" Lyman spent a second or two digesting the information. "Send him up, Ben. No, as you were; bring him up yourself — just you two, none of Marty's security goons. I want you to sit in on whatever he has to tell us."

"Five minutes," said Ben, and disconnected.

When Kyle came into the penthouse, Lyman's first impression was that Clay had ushered in a shaggy, slightly stooped brown bear masquerading in an elderly gentleman in a conservative dark-gray business suit. He greeted the visitor warmly. "I've looked forward to meeting you, Senator. How are you?"

"Tolerable, Mr. Dysart." Kyle and The Stockholder sized up each other while shaking hands. "Pleasure's entirely mine, believe me," said Kyle. "Words can't do justice to my admiration for all your good works, but these days I'm sorry to say I can no longer be addressed as 'senator.' Ray's the name suits me best."

The unexpected response brought Lyman up short. He said slowly, "I seem to have missed something?"

"Mr. Kyle," informed Clay, "resigned his Senate seat yesterday, Lyman."

"Ray," insisted Kyle. "'Mister' makes me feel like I'm about to be arrested."

Amused, yet also at something of a loss, Lyman managed to say it was a day for surprises in the wilds of northern California. "We hadn't heard a word about your, uh . . . If we're to be on a first name basis, I'm Lyman, and Ben can be addressed in any way you choose. Be forewarned, however; he's also a lawyer, and might sue. He poses as the CEO of our company, but I've always thought to him the job's an avocation."

“More like a hobby,” declared the lawyer in question.

Chuckling, Kyle appraised his fellow attorney in friendly fashion. “Lyman,” he inquired with a twinkle, “aren’t you going to ask why I took the bit in my teeth, and resigned my seat?”

“No, Ray; it wouldn’t be polite. I assume you’ll fill us in when you’re ready.”

“Up till now, there’s been no formal announcement, but if you’re to believe what I came to tell you, you’ve a right to know. The Senate’s gotten itself tied up like a roped calf, and gagged too. The ladies and laddies who were once my respected colleagues are bogged down in an everlasting debate. In short, they’re way too busy wrangling to appreciate how much better off they are now that they’ve rid themselves of the sharpest pebble in their shoes.”

Lyman tried to imagine where the other was coming from, and was unsuccessful. “Here, Ray; come sit down,” he invited. “How about some refreshment? Maybe a beer to wet your whistle while we get better acquainted?”

“Getting better acquainted is my secondary reason for bother you gents. One really good upshot of my resignation was the sense of freedom that hit me flying home to Knoxville. I meant to grab some badly needed shuteye, reacquaint myself with the kids and grandkids, but no sooner did I get there that I realized there’d be damn little slumber or any other relaxation what with the serious business sloshing around in my head that wouldn’t drain away.

“Anyhow, last night I climbed aboard the redeye, then hied myself over here straight from the airport and talked my way into bending your ears in what I truly believe is the best of causes. Before we open a miserable can of worms, a beer sounds great, unless there’s a jug of Tennessee sour-mash sitting around waiting to be sipped.”

Lyman grinned, deciding he liked the former senator’s cut. “The sun has to be over the yardarm somewhere in the world. Sena . . . Sorry, make that Ray, I’m afraid you’ve fallen in with a herd of teetotalers.”

“Drat! A damn shame! Worse ’n a shame; it’s plain uncivilized.”

“I’ll do the honors.” Clay got up and headed for the kitchen pantry.

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The CEO came back into the “office” section of the penthouse awkwardly grasping the handles of three frosted-glass steins. He found Kyle telling The Stockholder about the ecstatic feeling that had washed over him when stepping off the plane in Knoxville, and realizing he was home for good. Downing a long draught of lager, he said, “Um-m-m, that’s somey mighty tasty brew.”

“It’s the real article,” said Lyman, making conversation, “not watered-down American beer. If I’m not mistaken, you met Dr. Francke in our lunar facility.”

“I did indeed. He impressed me as a most astute gentleman.”

“Alois now and then smuggles a few pony kegs over from Munich, but be forewarned: overindulge, and hi-octane German suds will knock you on your tidily.”

As if in acknowledgment, Kyle set his stein on a cork coaster. “Delivering my message,” he said, “takes a clear head, so the messenger had best teetotal, too.” He paused as if made uncomfortable over what he was about to divulge “Gentlemen, it gives me no pleasure to act as the bearer of ill tidings, but I seem to’ve been elected. I don’t fancy myself a know-it-all, yet

intuition says my educated guess is that a cloture vote will take place sometime tomorrow, of the day following.

"If so, it'll once and for all put quietus to the on-going wild and woolly Senate mating dance over the pros and cons of the Selene II funding bill. The yeas and nays will get tallied, most likely sometime after midnight if the inchworm progress of such doings matches my instinctive estimate. I make it a sixty-to-seventy percent probability of passage for the appropriation bill, *and* the gawdawful amendment riding it's back like an eight-thousand-pound gorilla.

"Now despite a rash of peckerheads who've been voted into the Congress," continued Kyle, speaking with a good deal more energy, "the House is stocked with a goodly percentage of fair and honest ladies and gentlemen. Weeks ago, the majority over there, augmented by a passel of independents who side with them more often than not, passed the bare-bones fusion appropriations bill without a hitch. Sad to say, what I think's due to come down in the Senate is a whole different story."

Kyle frowned. "Pains me deeply to have to accuse some of my former colleagues of being bought-and-paid-for by pseudo-lobbyists, and I do use the term loosely, but . . . By the way, Lyman, except for yours truly the loudest screamers opposing the rider come out of your stable."

"We try," admitted Dysart, "to protect our interests."

"Sure, which is a fine 'n dandy thing to do long as said protection sticks to the straight and narrow. Trouble is, these days the Senate majority's a mix of mixed bags, especially among the self-important, self-styled gaggle of 'freethinkers.' The rest of the bunch is made up of barrels of sweet and sour apples, many of whom are dead set against anything and everything, not to mention assorted pimples pledged to Ed Burton's clique who pretend they're loyal members of my very own dear Party.

"Herd instinct," pursued the former senator, smacking his lips emphatically, "stacked atop hefty dashes of honey-money pressure, has goosed the every-which-way Senate majority into putting its two-faced heads together and touting the fusion appropriations bill and rider as the most magnificent hunk of legislation since the Magna Carta. The instant passage is assured, and I'm nearly dead-certain the ayes will have their way, the truly dreadful piece of overall legislation will likely zip through reconciliation in the House and get signed into law. If and when that happens, it'll tear the guts right out of what your company's doing now, and plans to do in the future."

"We've known about the rumor quite some time," put in Ben Clay.

Kyle grimaced. "Now why am I not surprised? That *Washpost* op-ed piece was inspired by a prissy staffer who leaked to a reporter, and quicklike wished he'd never been born. The VP lost no time plugging in a gag order. She explained more 'n once, in no uncertain terms, how the hammers of hell would come down on any senator, staffer — anyone! — who broke ranks and ruptured the hermetic seal she used to encapsulate the *Post's* shaggy dog tale. That's why you haven't heard a peep from any senators lodged under your tentpole; they don't dare shed their integrity by speaking up."

"Are you telling us," inquired Lyman, "you resigned to absolve yourself of an oath of silence?"

Kyle hesitated. "Call it the tertiary reason. First, foremost and above all else, I chucked my seat out of disgust over the way certain colleagues were no longer acting like full-grown, reasoning adults wanting to hang on to at least a smidgen of integrity. Everyone realizes passing the bare-bones bill is an absolute necessity, but the amendment riding its coat tails was wrong before the fact, will be wrong after the fact, and is dead wrong morally, politically and in every other way. If the fusion bill and rider passes the Senate — a strong likelihood in my opinion — and gets vetted by the House — an action I consider a tad more iffy, but still likely — and is signed into law by the President, nuclear fusion technology will be nationalized en toto, in one gulp."

Kyle cocked an eye at The Stockholder. "Our government in all its wisdom means to steal right out from under your nose everything you and your company have worked so long and hard, and expended such an unbelievable amount of capital, to accomplish."

A thick, strangling silence reigned in the Dysart Tower penthouse.

## TWENTY Late Breaking News

Withdrawn and untalkative in the executive express elevator compartment, Reichert was descending with Aaron Beebe, who considered himself an expert when it came to evaluating the chairman's moods. On this occasion, however, he had misjudged the chairman's frame of mind as introspective, when one moment he was actually mired in self-pity, and the next raging inwardly over Dysart's brazen threat to his personal wellbeing.

To his *life*.

Despite being periodically offended by the chairman's irascible, often tyrannical manner, Beebe sought to soothe the troubled gentleman, tentatively offering to accompany him home, perhaps stay there with him to provide comfort.

"Don't fret about me, Aaron! I don't need you or anyone holding my hand."

Less resentful of the rude response than his own failure to accurately diagnose the chairman's emotional state, Beebe tried not to respond defensively. "Belkin, you've urged me — no, *pleaded* with me — to become more directly involved in what you believe to be a life or death situation. I simply thought it might be helpful to —"

"I would never lower myself," insisted Reichert, "to *plead* with anyone."

Beebe refused to let the tsunami of indignation boiling up inside him surface. Instances of the other's autocratic, less than civil conduct flashed through Beebe's mind like sheet lightning, and brought a taste of gall to his palate. He stewed in silence as the elevator compartment fell, deliberated.

Something snapped inside him. Overcome by a sense of vast relief, Beebe punched the Emergency Stop button.

The compartment juddered to a halt between floors.

Reichert's knees buckled slightly. "What the hell are you doing?"

Not mincing words, Beebe preempted a further outburst by speaking slowly, distinctly articulating every syllable. "Belkin, I have had my fill of you *and* Vonex. I promised to see you to your limo, and I shall fulfill the obligation. Then I intend to go straight back upstairs. My letter of resignation will be on your desk in the morning."

Reichert winced. "Oh, that again! Threatening to quit is wearing a bit thin, Aaron." Glaring at the other in his most intimidating fashion, the chairman gradually realized Beebe did not react to the visual assault. As the truth sank in, his belligerent expression segued into one of abject disbelief. "You're not . . ." he faltered. "You aren't serious."

"You are wrong, Belkin."

"Desert me now," warned Reichert, his petulance reborn, "and your stock options will instantly evaporate, not to mention all the other perks."

"Keeping the wolf from my door without your tyrannical help should be easy."

"Tyrannical . . ? What the devil's gotten into you? You know damn well I'm no tyrant. You of all people should appreciate how upset I am just now. If I've spoken to you in an unseemly manner it's because I'm not myself at the moment. For that I apologize."

"My decision," said Beebe, "is irrevocable. Nothing you say or do will cause me to reconsider." Disdaining to exchange another word with the chairman, or even look at him, it was Beebe's turn to act withdrawn, untalkative. He tapped a button; the elevator compartment resumed its downward plunge. Expressionless, indifferent to the other's entreaties, he allowed the pleas Reichert had insisted he would never stoop to utter fall on stone deaf ears.

The executive express elevator compartment grounded with a slight nudge at basement garage level.

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Hoping to let the former senator down easy, The Stockholder said, "I'm afraid what you're suggesting would be counter-productive, Ray."

The remedial action Kyle advocated called for Dysart to directly petition the White House for redress. Lyman's response did not please his visitor.

Sensing that the three-way "What can we do about it?" discussion had gone on far too long, not to mention ranging too far afield for anything meaningful to come of it. To Lyman, the only proposal worthy of consideration had come from Ben Clay, who'd pushed for an all-out, no holds barred propaganda campaign aimed at informing the taxpaying public about what the CEO had described as, "The government's blatant, socialistic assault on private enterprise."

Kyle had of course disagreed. "Take that tack," he'd warned, "and you'll get yourself crucified. Hollering long before you're hurt isn't such a bad notion most times, but screaming foul before the amended bill gets signed into law would be jumping from the pan into the fire."

"How so?" Ben had wanted to know.

At which point Lyman had raised his hand. "Simmer down, both of you."

After a lengthy silence, Kyle said, "Think about it, Ben. The administration spin doctors are good; they'll . They won't waste a second cooking up a doz-dozen easy answers. They're good! They'll twirl the nationalization issue like a bandleader's baton, describe fusion technology as the supreme resource of all time, and therefore not only vital to national security, but far too important to leave in the hands of a huge, private enterprise perched tipsily on the pinnacle of a single owner."

"No one," countered Clay, "not even the administration wisenheimers can refute the fact that it would be a giant, un-American stretch to categorize any privately funded and developed technology as 'vital to national security'."

“Oh, no argument,” said Kyle. “You’re quite correct, yet also very wrong. That rationale applies only from where *we* are right this minute. The Senate majority’s well stocked with independents who’re determined to hang the bill and rider on the sacred national security hook, and won’t hesitate to stamp every dissenting scream as unpatriotic. Yell your righteous head off about the injustice of it all, and it’ll help ease the pain here in Dysart Tower, but the White House owns the bully pulpit. Lame duck or not, The Man will be primed and prompted by experts on a thousand ways to quack loud and long to out-shout every scream of public and political opposition.”

Realizing Clay was preparing to voice a further objection, Lyman decided he had heard enough, and stepped in. “Ray has a point, Ben. My thinking is that the ducks here in our ‘bailiwick’ are neither lame, nor have had their wings clipped. What we’ll do soonest is line them up, put them in order and get them prepped, ready to fly.”

Clay cocked a doubting eye at The Stockholder. “I’m all ears.”

“Right now, while the legislation’s still pending,” said Dysart, “I want EnerDiv’s CFO to assemble an all-inclusive, itemized cost accounting of every new dollar we’ve poured into Sigma Pinch R&D, operational readiness, qualification testing, the Paiute Power Center, et cetera, et al, and I do mean *all-encompassing* — a comprehensive list pertaining to facilities construction, installations, reworks, improvements, salaries, collateral employee benefits, hidden costs, hazard pay for the lunar team, and likewise for each and every centime allocated to the Selene Pilot Project. I want a factual, not theoretical, accountancy of past and current company expenditures on the whole nuclear fusion enchilada — salsa, tortilla chips, cheese and whatever else. I want a single, gigantic cost tote, with special emphasis on monies devoted to establishing and furthering our ongoing lunar efforts.”

“Who-oo-ie!” hooted Kyle. “That’ll be some ring-tailed doozy of a bill of goods to send to the Congress.”

Clay disagreed sharply. “It will be a waste the time and effort, Lyman. On the surface, it does sound like a sensible approach, but look a little deeper. When and if nationalization threatens to actually become the law of the land, all we’d see in return for the reams of cost accounting waste paper would be a tax credit write-off extending a century or two into the future.”

“Amen!” Kyle heartily endorsed the CEO’s conclusion. “Fraid I have to second that, Lyman. Submit a bill for services rendered to the bureaucrats and you’ll be whistlin’ Dixie with no audience beyond the footlights. That’s no guess, either. I happen to know for a fact that handing the Congress an itemized request for compensation toting to maybe a trillion new dollars would generate a belly laugh ‘n a half.”

“No argument,” Lyman surprised his companions by saying. “Our distinguished national leadership wouldn’t even bother to read the outlandish list, let alone stir themselves to find some way of arranging payback. But I have no intention of presenting the monster bill, plus tip, to the government, only to the American public. We’ll run a series of full-page ads in every national publication, Internet site, newspaper and billboard, et cetera, and message with mass mailings. We’ll inform the taxpayers what it will eventually cost *them* if our government of the people, by the people, and whatever else steals our proprietary rights to fusion technology and turns

guidance of the industry over to the selfsame government bureaucrats who have been royally screwing not only Dysart Technologies, but the taxpayers themselves.”

The CEO and former senator exchanged long looks.

“Clever, Lyman! Pretty damn clever!” enthused Kyle. “Except there’s a king-sized drawback. Deciding what’s what on fusion won’t be up to the poor, downtrodden taxpayers. They delegate the resolution of hairy fiscal issues to elected officials like once-upon-a-time me and my former colleagues, who supposedly get voted into the Congress so as to watch the taxpayers’ back, speak up for ‘em and handle hairy issues on their behalf. But many of the noble legislators have a habit of fulfilling an obligation to their constituents only now and then, usually just before election time. Even so, all things considered it’s one helluva fine notion. Not bad, not bad at all.”

Clay nodded. “I’ll join in the applause. At minimum, we’ll beat the gun, make a serious beforehand dent in government propaganda by handing the public a staggering, extremely large and easy-to-justify list of prospective federal expenditures to chew on. But it has to happen ASAP, Lyman, before the amended bill goes through the Congress and is sent to the White House.”

“So why are you just sitting there, Ben? Get on your horse, go pump up the EnerDiv whiz kids and bean counters. Hand the CFO unlimited overtime, say we need the comprehensive data yesterday, and be to fire broadsides in all directions if and when the news of imminent government thievery breaks in the media.”

Gazing benignly at The Stockholder, the CEO performed a sweeping theatrical bow. “To hear is to obey, O Lord and Master.” He thanked Kyle profusely for the heads-up, shook his hand. “Ray, I appreciate what it cost you to break your vow of silence. We’ll do our damndest to make certain you never have cause to regret it.”

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The blast-resistant door to the penthouse swung shut behind Clay. The aging former senator found Dysart studying him analytically.

“Now then, Elder Statesman Kyle,” said Lyman, drama implicit the way he chose to draw out the honorific, “what plans have you made for yourself?”

“Umm-m-m, plans . . .” The billionaire’s appraisal, and abrupt change of subject, gave Kyle pause.

“No one,” said Lyman, “could have expressed our gratitude for what you’ve done for us better than Ben just did. You took the time and trouble to yell ‘fire,’ then flew out her to fill us in with a concrete warning of a potential business catastrophe in the making. Don’t you think this innocent, country bumpkin game you’ve been playing is a shade passé? I peg you as one very smart hombre, so give up trying to hide your light under the proverbial basket?”

Kyle grinned. “I suppose,” he said, sounding sheepish, “it does take one to know one after all. Years ago, as a wet-behind-the-ears young prosecutor I figured that folks tended to open up a lot more readily to someone that had to’ve stumbled out of the turnip patch than some slick-talking city lawyer.”

Admiring the other’s candor, Dysart turned serious. “The road ahead looks bumpy, full of potholes and land mines and damned tough to negotiate. We can use all the navigation help we can get from an insider like you, Ray. Would you feel insulted if I offered you a plum spot on the DT payroll?”

Sounding vaguely suspicious, Kyle said, "Doing what?"

Lyman shrugged. "Meaningful titles are easy to come by, if not necessarily meaningful. How about Dysart Technologies Chief Political Consultant Extraordinaire?"

The former senator grinned, sobered quickly and revolved Lyman's proposal. He was still at it when the intercom chimed four times in rapid succession.

"Uh-oh! Four tinkles sounds like trouble in the wind. Excuse me, Ray." Dysart went to his desk, tapped the intercom button. "What's the latest disaster, Maggie?" He listened for a few seconds, then turned to Kyle. "Ben's Gal Friday fields and filters all my calls. She says you were tracked down by sleuths who pulsed your family in Knoxville. The Vice President's chief of staff insists on speaking with you."

"That lily-livered pipsqueak! Have the call put through if you've a mind to."

Dysart instructed Maggie accordingly. To allow Kyle privacy, he stepped into the residence section of the penthouse. Rumbling overtones of Kyle's rough bass-baritone rose sporadically above the conversational level, the words too faint to make out. When silence prevailed, he returned to the office and was met by Kyle's level, steadfast gaze.

"Lid's off," informed Kyle succinctly. "I gave the self-satisfied buzzard who runs the veep's errands an earful, but no way could I avoid 'fessing up to blowing the whistle on the the Senate chamber shenanigans. A formal news release should hit the street before you can say hello, goodbye, kiss my patootie, anything else."

The Stockholder's only comment was to ask Kyle if he'd like another beer.

His guest yawned into the back of his hand, punctuated the gape with a negative head shake. "Thank you kindly, but I'll take a rain check. Swill any more of your hi-octane supersuds and I may slide under the table. It's about time for me to mosey along, anyhow. Can you aim me in the direction of a decent hotel hereabouts?"

"Forget it!" said Dysart. "There'll be no lonely hotel rooms for DT's Chief Political Consultant Extraordinaire. First I'll have a bite of supper sent up, then you'll be my cherished guest here in the tower. Tomorrow I'll have you flown home, or wherever else you might like to go."

Kyle yawned again. "Right gracious of you. Sounds like I've fallen in with some nice hospitable folks."

"About that," said The Stockholder, "you'd be smart to keep an open mind. I won't quibble about 'hospitable,' but 'nice' doesn't always cut it around here."

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Idly watching the bank of video monitors that made a dumb show of people and vehicles coming and going in and around the basement garage elevator alcove, Smith perked up when the short, down-curved hood of a white electric limousine edged into all but two of the split-screen images. He sat forward in the chair, pressed a fingertip to the touch-screen, keying reception of the minuscule signal generated by the Semtex transponder magnetically attached to the limo's frame beneath the rearmost passenger seats. Alphanumeric code "C4-2" glowed as subtext at the bottom of all six screens.

Lifting a spring-loaded safety cover, he energized a switch labeled with adhesive tape, arming the designated Czechish Semtex 12 package.

A uniformed chauffeur emerged from the elongated vehicle and closed the door hurriedly to preserve interior climate-control. He came around the front bumper and stood ready to open the vehicle's door for the gentleman Smith was all but certain would debouch from the executive express elevator compartment.

"Move! Don't stop there!" muttered Smith, willing the driver to get clear of the vehicle.

As if complying with the unheard command, the chauffeur seemed to react to the beckon or call from someone off-camera, beyond the left edge of an adjacent video panel, and stepped away from the vehicle.

The executive express elevator doors rolled apart.

"Gotcha!" breathed Mr. Smith, bringing down the heel of his right hand on the unguarded C4-2 switch.

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Immune to every plea and argument uttered by the chairman, Aaron Beebe intended to stay in the elevator, watch Reichert depart without a word being spoken, and return directly to his office to write a brief letter of resignation. Ramrod straight, his features frozen, he stood with his back to the compartment's mirrored rear wall, and waited for Reichert to exit.

The elevator doors began rolling apart, but rather than stepping out into the garage the chairman swung about and faced the attorney, his scathing, blue-eyed glare raking his former fair-haired favorite now turned deserter.

The white limousine erupted in a gout of flame, scorching the garage's ribbed concrete overhead. Pellet-sized shrapnel from the enclosed, air-conditioned limo's shattered safety-glass windows and moon roof riddled the surrounding area.

Though mild, the concussion wave pitched Reichert headlong into Aaron Beebe, slamming both into the mirrored rear wall. They went down together in a tangled heap.

Blubbering incoherently, heedless of Beebe's moans or the stinging sensation in his own shoulders and neck, the stunned chairman fumbled to extricate himself from the attorney stretched out beneath him. Slumping back against the compartment's shrapnel-speckled mirror wall, his mouth working in a vain attempt to cry out, his clouded, uncomprehending gaze took in the smoldering electric limousine. Distant shouts and cries evidenced pandemonium out in the garage.

Trembling uncontrollably, his vision wavering, dimming, Reichert sagged on his side, sensing the world around him fade as he fell into a deep well filled with darkness.

When he came around, paramedics in navy blue jumpsuits had tugged him into a sitting position, and were in the process of gently removing his suit jacket. Behind them, the Vonex Deputy Security Director bent forward, hands on knees, peering down at him, anxiety written in every contorted crease of his features.

Recent events and circumstances returned a thin slice at a time. Reichert heard himself mumble something incoherent.

"Easy, sir, just relax," urged a paramedic. "You're going to be fine."

"W-what . . . happened?" stuttered Reichert. His unfocused gaze dropped to the latex-gloved fingers unbuttoning his custom-tailored white percale shirt.

"Later, Mr. Chairman," said Smith's deputy. "They want to check you over, then an ambulance will take you to the hospital."

"Hospital . . ? I don't, uh . . ." The chairman fell silent, frightened by a smeared streak of blood on the mirror wall at his elbow. A small red stain was beginning to congeal on the elevator compartment's carpeted floor. "Aaron, where is he?" Struggling to regain full control of his faculties, he said, "He was . . . here with me."

"An ambulance already took him away, sir. His face was cut up, bleeding. One of the paramedic said he'd be all right except for what might be a serious eye injury."

Cold fury surged through Reichert, to be instantly swept away, replaced by a flood of pure, unadulterated terror. He shuddered convulsively, struck by the inane thought that Dysart's five contestants had shrunk to four. "Aa-aroon," he faltered, "will, uh . . . look debonair wearing an eye patch," and congratulated himself for defying the flush of intense fearfulness with what he hoped had sounded like a show of bravado.

Mr. Smith's former deputy thought it an exceptionally odd remark to come from a first-tier megamogul like the chairman.

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Hours later, resting comfortably in a Lenox Hill Hospital private room, Reichert had been ex-rayed, numerous glass shards had been removed from his shoulders and neck, and his superficial wounds had been treated. Over and over, without surcease, he had relived the nightmare scene in the garage, eventually coming to a firm decision. He asked to be left alone, dismissed a hovering nurse and used the bedside phone, punching in a private Manhattan number. Speaking curtly and briefly, as if exhausted by the exertion, he gave orders, listened briefly and said, "Yes, yes; at once," then disconnected. Leaning back in the canted hospital bed, he closed his eyes and rested.

Three hours and twenty-six minutes after the Manhattan blast, with the local news media iterating, reiterating, re-reiterating and analyzing what little was known about the mysterious bombing incident in the basement garage of Vonex International World Headquarters, the universal postulate being that it could be nothing less than a terrorist attack, when the intensely agitated Warthog dropped off Carolyn Lester on Park Presidio Boulevard, and with a screech of tires careened back into the leisurely flowing traffic, his beady eyes constantly darting from the vehicle's rear-view mirror to the street ahead, and back.

Her step jaunty, high-heels clicking on the sidewalk, designer handbag stuffed with poker winnings swinging in her grasp, Carolyn attracted almost no attention walking into the lobby of Dysart Tower.

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After seeing former Senator Kyle comfortably settled in a bedchamber, Lyman called Smith on the secure satellite phone. Roundly chastising him for the multiple minor injuries reportedly inflicted by the Manhattan blast, he said angrily, "Our contract stated specifically that no bystanders would be hurt. You *guaranteed* it!"

"No help for it, Mr. Dysart, sir." Smith gave no indication of being the least bit contrite. "Nothing too awful, just cuts, bruises, and like that."

"Those cuts and bruises," asserted Dysart, "could jeopardize your payday."

Unfazed by the threat, Smith asked tongue-in-cheek if Dysart meant to welsh on their deal.

"Someone," shot back Lyman, "once remarked that a verbal contract wasn't worth the paper it was written on."

"Sounds like a real sensible guy."

"Oh, what the hell! Five mil was our agreement," said Lyman, further angered by the other's cavalier dismissal of his complaint. "The blood money's yours if and when Carolyn Lester is turned loose unharmed, but not one cent until you conclude the other affair we discussed."

Stony silence persisted in New York.

"Now then," demanded The Stockholder, doubly angry due to the other's above-it-all attitude, "what's being done about the piece of business I just mentioned?"

"Working on it," was Smith's cryptic reply.

About to conclude the conversation with an uncomplimentary reference to Smith's casual regard for the safety of bystanders, the words stuck in Dysart's throat when Carolyn's pert profile appeared in the corridor security monitor. Elated, he cried, "Later," threw down the phone without signing off, then nearly tripped and fell rushing to the entry.

The heavy door swung wide, and Lyman's first words were, "Where the hell have you been? Decide to run away from home, what?"

Carolyn fell into his arms. "I was kidnapped."

"Preposterous!" Embracing her hungrily, he lifted Carolyn off the carpeting, waltzed her around, kissed her passionately. "A likely story. Who'd bother to kidnap a trollop like you?"

"Only wish I knew," she said, a lone tear of joy rolling down her cheek.

Fueled by renewed togetherness, plus a late supper of Chinese food they both consumed with gusto, Lyman reveled in Carolyn's return, and despite the Asian cuisine toasted her reappearance with more than one stein of potent German lager. Their reunion lasted until well past midnight, with Carolyn spinning bits and pieces of "her adventure." She described the Warthog in picturesque detail, but could not bring herself to voice more than a passing reference to the semi-human skeleton dubbed the Spider. "He was so thin," she said, "he'd have to run around in the shower to get wet."

The homecoming excitement ebbed as they grew drowsy. Wondering what the Salon Bellissima saleswomen would think about her disappearance and abrupt reappearance, Carolyn mumbled something that had to do with inventing a story about being suddenly called away by the death of her grandmother in Nevada.

"Odd," accused Lyman. "You never told me you had a family in Vegas."

"Couldn't," she said. "There isn't any. Us orphans learn to deeply and truly love all our make-believe relatives."

"Know exactly how it is," said Lyman, his thought processes skewed by an overload of imported German lager. "As a toddler," said nostalgically, "my imaginary playmate would have nothing to do with me, yet I thought the kid was the greatest. Since then it's been all downhill."

"Poor boy!" Carolyn giggled, patted his cheek fondly.

"I enjoy feeling sorry for myself," he told her. "It eases the pain."

Carolyn giggled again. "It's late; I should get to sleep. In the morning, it'll be back to ridey-riding through your gloomy tunnel to the daily grind."

“My gloomy tunnel’s stoppered tightly on both ends,” he said. “Too many outsiders found out about it, and Marty sealed it off. He’ll assign a limo and driver to take care of your travels.”

The news seemed to revive Carolyn. Meeting Dysart’s unsteady gaze unsteadily, she asked if ‘outsiders’ included the dead-eyed midget who had spirited her away?

“Dead-eyed which . . . ? Come on, be serious. You can do better than that.”

“Oh, I am serious,” she said, her dark eyes filled with latent suspicion. “Cops ever find out who he was, why he did what he did?”

“Not to my knowledge,” lied The Stockholder.

When no further response was forthcoming, Carolyn sensed an evasion and, direct as she was about almost everything, and said it was hard to believe him, but admitted being too tired to pursue the matter, and began nodding off.

Not entirely sure-footed, yet happier than at any time in recent memory, Lyman took her up in his arms and carried her into the master bedchamber.

They slept late, to be awakened in mid-morning by the clamoring intercom’s insistent chiming. When Lyman answered, Clay tersely advised him to light up the computer and scan the elex *Washington Post* morning edition.

The Stockholder did so, and became semi-hypnotized by the banner line filling a quarter of the front page:

## U.S. TO NATIONALIZE NUCLEAR INDUSTRY

### TWENTY-ONE Aftermath

Preparing to leave the penthouse and be driven to Salon Bellissima, Carolyn lifted her purse. Dysart kissed her goodbye at the door, went directly to his desk, opened the secure intercom circuit and told Maggie to hold his calls — *all* his calls, no matter how critical and important to the future of mankind she believed the callers or their messages might be.

He spent the early morning hours surveying media reaction to the threat of prospective nationalization hanging over the fledgling nuclear fusion industry. Nothing he heard or saw surprised him half as much as the polarization prospective government seizure of the adolescent technology had apparently swayed the pundits, news anchors and “expert” talking heads eager to report on or air the divergent, often contradictory views of others. Right-leaning talking heads vented their outrage over the federal government’s “socialistic” takeover of a vital, privately funded enterprise, while certain progressives ranted illogically about the necessity to preserve and enhance American national security, while a grossly uninformed few went awry, misconstruing nuclear fusion as a function of thermonuclear weapons development.

Ben Clay ignored The Stockholder’s instruction to hold all calls. “Lyman,” he announced without preamble, “there’s good news, and bad. EnerDiv’s been up to speed from the get-go on our fusion gamble. They already have minutely detailed, cross-indexed tabs on each and every bundle of new dollars allocated here and in Luna. All the CFO had to do was have his people segregate and collate the data. Want me to have PR begin spreading the astronomical tote to the general public?”

"No, not yet, Ben," denied Dysart. "We'd be stepping on our own privates by cranking out counter-propaganda before the fact. Hold off until, or if and when, the bill passes the Senate and goes back to the House for reconciliation. I'm curious to see what type of first-bounce compromise the reps come up with that could revise and maybe even mitigate the Senate's wayward ways. Timing will be crucial, so let's play it smart and hold back on doing a data dump to tweak the public's new dollar conscience. Then we'll do it again and again if and when the bill and rider lands in the White House."

"Umm-m-m, see where you're coming from." Clay sounded less than totally convinced. "You're thinking our loud screams might influence The Man's decision to sign it, maybe even urge him to exercise the veto."

"Something like that."

"Okay, I'll nag EnerDiv to continuously update the overall tote. We'll be set to disburse the bad tidings whenever you give the word."

"Fine, Ben."

Minutes later, looking spruce and revitalized, Raymond Kyle strolled into the "office" section of the penthouse.

"Rest well?" inquired The Stockholder.

"Like the innocent babe I once was." Kyle's pleased expression faded. "Lyman, I just got off the phone to one of my spies. His gofers pulsed some key people, and the consensus of an admittedly small sampling says the vote should go sixty-something to thirty-something in favor of passage, with maybe a few pussy-footers voting "present," a dodge crafty legislators often use to avoid taking flak from their constituents."

"More or less what you expected?"

"Close." Kyle sounded glum. "The governor probably won't appoint anyone to fill my seat for weeks or even months, but there are some good ol' boys and girls in the Senate. I know it may not be what you want to hear, but word on the Hill says ninety-some senators are on the floor as we speak, most eager to commit the crime, have the dizzy process over and done with."

"Then I suppose we can just about take passage for granted."

A reluctant nod. "I was already near-certain when I chucked my seat."

"In the end," said Lyman, trying not to sound too philosophical, "it's always better to know than not know. But you must be hungry, Ray. I'll have breakfast sent up. What would you like?"

"Naw, don't bother. I figure to grab a cab out front, then tuck in for Danish and coffee at the airport. High time I headed for hearth and home."

"That," denied Lyman emphatically, "is a hassle I will *not* permit." He punched the intercom. "Maggie, if I haven't been lied to you've been privileged to meet Dysart Technologies Chief Political Consultant Extraordinaire Kyle. Uh-huh, uh-huh; I feel the same way, doubled, in spades. He'll be down to see you shortly. Please alert the stand-by air crew. Use my authority to have them gin up a non-stop flight plan to Knoxville, Tennessee, or wherever else Mr. Kyle might wish to go. And make sure the attendant's primed to serve breakfast in flight."

"Right away, Mr. Dysart."

Kyle wagged his head, feigning wonderment. "Now, don't that beat all!" he drawled. "Just think of the decades I wasted as a lowly, bewildered senator."

"Get used to a VIP lifestyle at your peril, Ray. You're going to earn your keep."

"Uh-huh." The garrulous oldster grinned and left the penthouse with a casual farewell wave.

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Dysart pulled up and consulted a firmware-driven computer program listing the Moon's substellar point at any given hack, Zulu Time. Punching in the necessary alphanumeric code, he remotely keyed the appropriate line-of-sight transmitter and put through an encrypted call to the lunar habitat.

Seconds wore by until Boucher's aristocratic leonine countenance appeared in the computer display. "*Bonjour*, Lyman. I see the ugliest of ugly rumors has at last seen daylight, and been confirmed."

Even at the speed of light, Dysart's response took seconds to reach the Moon. "Ugly as things are, the coming days may see them turn a sight uglier. I need you to do something *tout de suite*. With sunrise for you only a dozen or so hours away, put on your official hat and call the Aerospace Forces duty officer at the Palus Somni command center and tell him the upcoming shipment of helium-three will be delayed due to . . . Oh, have Cromwell invent some technical difficulties fairy tale. It's bound to raise a major stink here on the ground, but there's no help for it. We have to learn how the Senate vote goes, then what brand and degree of compromise the House hangs on it. Pray with me for a meaningful roadblock, but no way can we count on that.

"Trouble is," he continued, "failure to ship on schedule is the only ploy I can think of that will halfway make the government sit up and take notice of how far *its* neck sticks out over this nationalization issue. One saving grace is that a delay will reassure the potentates that nefarious, underhanded Dysart Technologies will do its damndest to chop the government neck off at the ankles. If you get an overload of military static from the USAF brass, tell Myron to find a convenient, out of the way place to hide the you-know-what, and plan to keep it there until things simmer down a tad here on the ground, okay?"

The transmission lag dragged on longer than usual, a hiatus Lyman attributed to ever-thoughtful Jean-Marie Boucher letting the potential consequences of his instruction bounce around in his finely tuned Gallic forebrain. "Pardon my bluntness," was his eventual response, "but the tactic you suggest smacks of chopping off not the government's neck, but one's own nose in order to spite one's face."

Certain Boucher would come back with something of that nature, Lyman said, "It wasn't a suggestion, Jean-Marie. What I gave you was a direct order."

"*Je comprends*," said Jean-Marie after the lag, "but if so logic perhaps tinged with intuition also informs me that you mean to suspend shipment for an indefinite period. An exceptionally dangerous move, I warn you, but also concede that it is guaranteed, as you say, to seriously leverage the government into doing some serious thinking on its own. And if wisdom is exercised, it will also provide the administration with an excellent reason to carefully weigh the negative aspects of signing the bill into law. I would also be remiss not to warn you of a dangerous flaw in the prospective scenario you have sketched: daring to spit in the government's eye at this controversial juncture, and in a rude, unmannerly fashion, could easily court disaster."

“Granted on all counts,” admitted Lyman snappishly, impatient over being once again forced to accept the inevitable transmission lag. “My rationale may be too simplistic for a gentleman of your diplomatic nature, but I have to think the powers that be will appreciate the danger *they* will surely face by pulling the fusion rug out from under us, possibly out from under the world at large. We’ll be walking a tightrope in one sense; if it should go slack, a single misstep could easily write finis to all our efforts. But I’ve convinced myself we can count on a huge public outcry once John Q learns of the indecent, enormous sums we’ve already poured, and continue to pour into everything from R&D to the lunar pilot venture under your dedicated guidance. EnerDiv has bundled every dime of cost-accounting expenditure into a staggering compendium, but we’ll hold off on broadcasting the awesome tote until the House and Senate reach some form of compromise, and the bill lands in the Oval Office.

“Secondarily,” said Dysart without pausing for breath, “and strictly on the QT, I want you to notify the captain of the chartered boxcar standing by up there for crew rotation that we may decide to send our people home sooner than the scheduled crew rotation. Ergo, be ready to evacuate the habitat and hustle our people aboard ship within hours after my call. That’s how I insist the matter be handled, Jean-Marie. No ifs, no ands or buts! Dr. Francke and whatever-his-name, the physician, will rotate home with the crewmen. But if you and Cromwell are willing I’d like you both to stay put for an indefinite spell.

“There’s also one last also,” concluded Dysart. “I want you to let slip to USAF a strong hint that the replacement mining crew will not be brought up from Florida until after the Senate vote is tallied and the House has reconciled the legislation. Contact our crew training exec in Florida — his name is Ralphs as I recall — and instruct him to hold off prepping the replacement crew for transit until I personally give the word. I’d call him direct, but I would much rather he heard it through the chain of command. We’ll keep the replacements on full-pay stand by, prepared for quick rotation when the time is right. Hope you’ve got all that.”

After the frustrating lag, Jean-Marie’s transmitted image wore an expression of grave concern. “Lyman, I must be honest. My one and only hope is that you fully appreciate the potential consequences of your prescribed actions. A shipment delay will instantly arouse ire within the Aerospace Forces high command, and extraordinary outrage among those selfsame ‘powers that be’ you yope to hold at bay, particularly Sir Ian, Lanny as well as the rest of the United Nations hierarchy. May I ask if you’ve had any contact with Sir Ian or Lanny since the ugly rumor became an uglier semi-reality?”

“No, not since the lid came off,” admitted Lyman, his impatience with the lag blossoming anew. “I haven’t returned calls from either worthy gentleman, but I plan to soon. I’ll sign off now and let you get busy. In addition to hating these speak and wait back-and-forthings, my plate’s loaded with a raft of other items. Take care of things up there, Jean-Marie. Don’t hesitate to call the instant things look as if they might get out of hand. *Adieu, mon ami*. We’ll talk later.”

Dysart shut down the encrypted lasercomm link, and sat quietly for a moment, deep in thought. Reluctantly opening the intercom circuit, he asked the CEO’s executive assistant if there had been any important calls.

“Only around two dozen, Mr. Dysart,” informed Maggie. At Lyman’s prompting, she read from a list of prominent names and titles. “Mr. Clay asked me to assure every caller neither you nor he was available, but that each call would be returned.”

“You do good work, Mag,” complimented The Stockholder. “Let’s not bother any of the nosy newsies; soft-soaping the media’s a waste of breath. Among the name-dropped, EnergyDep’s a good placeto start. First ring Secretary Schaeffer, please.”

“Yes, sir. At once.”

A former oil company chief executive with lasting ties to Vonex and the international petroleum cartel, elderly Paul Schaeffer’s golden parachute had wafted him down from the metamogul heights and gently deposited him in luxurious retirement comfort. Despite life under the most fortunate circumstances imaginable, he had accepted a prestigious “do nothing” cabinet appointment due to ardent persuasion by influence peddlers from Reichert’s stable who’d pestered the chief executive to nominate nominate.

Schaeffer’s weathered, unsmiling visage jelled in the flat-panel display. “Ah, Mr. Dysart. Thank you for this opportunity to consult with you during what I’m sure can’t be a happy time in your shop. For that, you have my sincere condolences, sir.”

Lyman flashed the most cordial, ingratiating smile in his repertoire. “Good day, Paul. If nationalizing our infant fusion business venture becomes a reality, I’ll be delighted to reciprocate and offer my sincere condolences, but not until agreement has been reached on repaying DT for its enormous investment of time, energy and valuta. How soon may I ask, and perhaps through your venue, do you propose that might occur? You have of course discussed it with the administration.”

Affronted by the blunt nature of Dysart’s left-handed accusation that nationalization was all his fault, Schaeffer’s solemn head shake made his dewlap wiggle-waggle in three-quarter time. “Really, sir! You of all people should be the first to appreciate that compensating your firm for its awesome contribution to fusion research and development doesn’t fall within the purview of DOE. To the best of my knowledge, the subject has not yet arisen, nor been discussed. What you ask is presumptuous in light of the —”

“*Contribution . . . !*” Lyman frowned. “My EnerDiv did not ‘contribute’ to the awesome, successful development of nuclear fusion technology. It was solely *responsible* for it. At first our executive committee considered the program a major risk, yet a gamble that might someday ensure enormous downstream profitability. DOE is your bailiwick, Paul. If and when government seizure of my private enterprise takes place, how can it possibly mean you and your bureaucrats will not be charged with directing all post-nationalization fusion efforts. Aren’t you concerned about the gargantuan cost the taxpaying public will have to bear in order to reimburse DT?”

Schaeffer’s expression underwent a radical change. Looking severely put upon, he said, “Now hear me, Mr. Dysart! Your defiant attitude has no place in the, er . . . You are so *very* wrong to think of nationalization as government ‘seizure.’ That aside, your demand of a hypothetical answer to an equally hypothetical question regarding compensation isn’t merely beside the point, it refers to a matter yet to be resolved, which of course will be entirely out of my hands. Your firm has earned universal acclaim for developing and implementing a

monumental yet radical energy source. But the astounding results of your company's labors are too immensely important to permit any private owner such as yourself to enjoy a monopoly on —"

"Paul," interrupted Lyman, "we'll put any further discussion of the matter until you're able to think of something reasonable to say." He broke the connection.

Returning calls to the White House chief legal counsel, the Vice President's egotistic chief of staff, a prominent California congressman who dealt regularly with Dysart's premiere lobbyist, and the Deputy Secretary of Defense, netted near-identical unsatisfactory results. In each instance, Lyman's disarming smile softened the abrupt way he couched an identical, unanswerable question: when, through what federal venue and under what circumstances would Dysart Technologies be compensated for the unbelievable amount of time, effort and funding it had poured into the development and realization of practical, controlled nuclear fusion technology? In each case he received a near-identical answer, usually paraphrased as, The topic is moot, since such theoretical repayment isn't up to the Vice President, a mere congressman, the Defense Department, or an attorney who happens to be working as a White House staffer.

Assuming he could not tell Moorman anything Sir Ian did not already know, he did not respond to the repeated, insistent U.N. calls. Instead, he had Maggie put through a call to Geneva and inquire if U.N. Energy Secretary Llancolm was available. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, Llancolm apologized, saying the call had caught him on his way out the door to chair 'another infernal meeting.'

"I'm the one who should apologize for not getting back to you, Lanny. It's not like I've been sloughing you off, and certainly not Sir Ian, but due to the —"

"Tut, say no more," urged Llancolm, speaking hurriedly. "I cannot for the life of me imagine why the gentlemen and ladies charged with inventing the laws in our former colony have all gone mad simultaneously. The ongoing embroglio there across the water reminds me of an immortal line Aristophanes wrote two and a half millennia ago: 'Whirl is king, having driven out Zeus.' Despite what just now must be a genuine madhouse in your Cricket pitch, I'm sure you're doing your utmost to retain a level head. Never fear, Lyman. Eventually Zeus will return in triumph"

Lyman grinned. "I can use His help, or that of any other deity you scare up."

"You shall replace Zeus on the throne, I know it! Drat! Sorry, I must run."

"On your way, Lanny," said Dysart. "We'll talk next time I catch a breather. Please pass along my apologies to Sir Ian? I feel bad about not returning his calls?"

"Of course, of course. Until then, eh?" Llancolm rang off.

The Stockholder instructed Maggie to hold off on calling back either the Russian or Saudi licensees of Omega Pinch Nuclear Fusion System rights, nor either of the prospective clients in India and Brazil, where contract negotiations had barely gotten underway. He also instructed her to firmly slough off any and all additional calls from several Chinese officials in Qingdao, Beijing, or elsewhere in the Peoples Republic, and finished by again leaving instructions that he was not to be disturbed for any reason. Going straight to the tapper, he filled a frosted stein with foam-topped German lager and sat down to think — something he believed himself to be very good at.

Chairman Reichert had been stridently lecturing the Vonex board of directors, and his enthusiasm for the subject soon got the better of him, and began feeding on itself. He left his seat at the head of the long conference table, and began parading back and forth in the boardroom.

"Some of you," he declared "have voiced active opposition to the forward-looking corporate plan I strongly advocate, which is troubling. I can't imagine *why* you feel that way. Is it be due to some groundless fear that the House of Representatives might water down the fusion funding bill and amendment?"

He paused, waiting for an answer that never came, then pressed on, softening his lecture until it turned into more of a sermon. "Gentlemen, I confess to *not* sharing any such concern. Pressure exerted in certain reliable quarters is too sharply focused for a significant number of representatives to even *think* of tampering with the bill, nor more specifically the amendment. A straw poll taken among a random cross-section of the representatives indicated a majority totally sympathetic to nationalization."

Pressing on before anyone in his captive audience could speak up, he described the incredibly productive research recently concluded by Vonex, and assured his captive audience that nationalizing vital industries was an established, longtime practice no one could possibly fault. State-owned petroleum producers in Mexico, Venezuela, Indonesia and elsewhere he cited as having wallowed in oil and natural gas revenues for decades, especially Russia's Gazprom and the Saudi Arabian Royals, then derided the Kingdom for being led by "royal camel drovers." He mentioned a number of other prominent examples: Canada's Hydro Quebec power system, the manner in which BBC had taken over British airwaves, how the U.S. Railroad Administration had formed during World War I when effective, timely transport of war materiel and military personnel had become an absolutely vital necessity.

Reaching between a pair of directors, Reichert pounded a chubby fist on the conference table. "Have you gentlemen any idea how insistent the administration has become for this legislation to be enacted. With only a year left in his term, The President naturally speculates about his legacy. Mark me, he will not hesitate for a second to sign the measure into law."

Hopeful that Reichert might at last be wearing down, the deputy chairman said tentatively, "Belkin, your dramatic turnabout baffles many of us. Not long ago you were praying for the Selene II funding bill to die in committee. When that didn't happen, you didn't hesitate to show contempt for any senator who dared endorse it during the contentious, drawn-out floor debate. Now, with passage as likely as not, one would think nationalization is the very *last* thing you desire, yet you come before us today and energetically tout a hope for passage."

Reichert's sermon instantly segued into a polemic. "Ah," he declared wagging a forefinger, "you ignore two very important changes nationalization will bring about. The upcoming U.N. General Assembly vote will never authorize, but kill outright the prospective fairy tale strip-mining lunar programs outrageously promoted by Dysart Technologies and the U.N. Energy Consortium. How do you suppose those powers foolish enough to have jumped the gun and licensed Dysart's magic fusion daydream will feel, particularly a pair of clients in India and Brazil whose governments have apparently leaned blindly toward playing fusion follow-the-leader?"

"My rationale," he added, ticking off the points with a chubby forefinger, "for praying that nationalization becomes a reality consists of only two words: Big Government! Can any of you

begin to imagine what a horrendous mishmash Energy Secretary Schaeffer, his bureaucrats and lawyers will make of the thousand and one complexities associated with directing the disengaged remnants of Dysart's so-called nuclear fusion industry after it gets dumped in their laps? Oh, my! What a delightful circus *that* will be! In the center ring we shall see semi-competent bureaucrats desperately attempting to pry loose the patents and proprietary processes currently glued to Dysart's fanciful fusion junkpile, not to mention the assignment of arcane, diversified tasks like technical consultation and inspection, licensing, marketing, sales and so forth and so on.

"Search for a rancid model of government nationalization and all you need do is look back decades to see what happened when Amtrak assumed the task of passenger railroading. This opportunity is not merely knocking on the Vonex door, it's attempting to beat it down, or crash through it. What is about to be laid before us in truly serendipitous fashion is a once-in-a-lifetime door of opportunity. By charging through that door, we'll be in an excellent position to cash in on the mess our government will inevitably make of the fusion industry, should it actually become an industry. As a fallback position, we shall be able to fill the entrepreneurial gap by funding and forwarding the orbital solar energy program I've prattled about for these many months. Each of you received the prospectus, and by now we directors should be in total agreement: invest a few hundred millions in advanced research and development, and reap billions in revenue awaiting in a pot at the end of the solar energy rainbow."

"Belkin," declared a senior director, "the picture you paint glows brighter than the sun, but I for one would appreciate the chance to review a set of firm facts and figures, not be force-fed the candied generalities we've seen to date. For example, the prospectus I looked through had little or nothing to say about the feasibility of beaming raw solar-energy-based power to the ground."

"A few months of intensive research," insisted Reichert, "should remove any and all feasibility doubts."

"I'm afraid that isn't what I've heard," remarked a solemn former investment banker. "The safety concerns can't be sloughed off, Belkin. The prospectus barely touched on the issue of public endangerment."

The remark forced Reichert to step down from his soap box, retrench and retreat to his chair at the head of the table.

A mild argument ensued between a minority of directors who favored the proposed endeavor, and the majority opposing it, plus few fence-straddlers apparently not on firm ground when it came to stating their opinions.

The session concluded after Reichert forced a vote on the issue, and soon wished he had refrained. The results favored postponing the venture until the Congress either passed or failed to pass the nuclear fusion bill and amendment, and whether or not the legislation was actually signed into law.

Frustrated, Reichert chastised the directors for lacking the business acumen to endorse cashing in on what he kept insisting was a "golden opportunity."

The meeting adjourned on a note of general discontent and dissatisfaction.

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In early evening Carolyn Lester came home carrying a shallow cardboard box filled with cartons of take-out delicacies from an upscale Chinese restaurant on Geary Street, not from

Salon Bellissima. It was a fairly common occurrence; she doted on all types of Asian fare. She and Lyman enjoyed the repast in the “office” section of the penthouse, not the rarely used formal dining room, or the intimate banquette in an alcove adjacent to the kitchen. Carolyn complained between bites about a loud-mouthed dowager who had been unable to make up her mind about which trousseau to order for the bride-elect, her thoroughly cowed elder daughter.

Watching Dysart clumsily spear a chunk of orange chicken, Carolyn broke off her recital of shopkeeping trials and tribulations. “Lyman, won’t you ever learn to use chopsticks like a normal human being?”

“Normal human beings,” he said after swallowing, “refuse to fumble with a pair of handy-dandy bamboo toothpicks on steroids. What’s wrong with knives and forks? We’re here in late twenty-first-century San Francisco, not the Ding-dong Dynasty.”

“Chinese cuisine,” she informed him, “doesn’t taste half as good if you poke at it with metal utensils.”

Lyman uttered a theatrical groan. “Dear alleged kidnap victim, I’ve heard thin theories in my time, but that one will not fly in the existing near-vacuum. Mind if I give plain trencherman tools a whirl?”

“I certainly will mind. Trying to spoil my dinner?”

Lyman laid the chopsticks aside. Favoring his lady love with a stage glower, he said snappishly, “If that’s how it is, I choose to fast.”

“Spoilsport!”

The Stockholder looked startled when the private phone in his desk started buzzing insistently.

“What’s that?” asked Carolyn, hearing the buzzes for the first time.

“My direct private line,” he said. “The number’s known to no one but God, so it must be . . . Nevermind.” He took the old-fashioned handset out of a drawer. “Yes . . . ?”

“It’s me, Lyman,” said Raymond Kyle. “Stand by for a ram! With scattered abstentions and ‘present’ votes, the bill and its never-to-be-sufficiently-damned rider passed the Senate sixty-six-to-twenty-two. I’m told it’s already on its way back to the House for reconciliation. I’m also told the hordes of reps are convening as we speak, and will likely be in session much of the night. Hate to say it, but what’s coming down on the Hill looks anything but rosy for you folks.”

“What,” asked Lyman, a catch in his throat, “do your spies tell you about the likelihood of the House monkeying with it, hopefully deleting the amendment?”

“Most encouraging word I heard,” said Kyle, “was unpromising, and the most discouraging says the bill and rider have a fair to middling chance of sailing through pretty much as is. Afraid I have to go along with that estimate.”

“Uh-huh. Thanks for the heads-up, Ray. Stay on top of it, okay?”

“I’ll track the shenanigans, don’t fret. Hate to say it, but all anybody can do now is sweat it out, play the waiting game and don’t guess about what comes down.”

“Check,” said The Stockholder, who had absolutely no intention of “waiting” one second longer than he believed was absolutely necessary.

It was a different sort of game he now knew without question he *had* to play.

## TWENTY-TWO Getaway Day

Carolyn was anything but a sound sleeper. She had developed a maddening habit of thrashing about when the least bit wakeful, but seldom snored. On this night, however, the exception that proved the rule was apparently being enforced. Lying on his back in the darkness, The Stockholder listened to her even breathing, punctuated intermittently by gurgling throat rattles.

The luminescent digits of the bedside clock rolled over to 03:02. Barefoot and starkers, Lyman gingerly eased from beneath the coverlet a few decimeters at a time, taking care not to make unnecessary waves in the gel-filled hydraulic mattress. He padded silently into his personal dressing room, silently inched the door shut, felt around for the light switch and was momentarily blinded. Squinting, he took down from a high shelf in the walk-in closet an inexpensive plastic suitcase, its contents carefully packed not long after he'd concluded his dealings with Mr. Smith. Opening the suitcase latches, he removed underwear, nondescript self-belted gray trousers, a dark blue denim shirt, and black knee-length socks. He dressed with unhurried, economical movements, slipped his feet into a pair of slightly scuffed black brogans and knelt to tie the laces.

The wig he pulled over his bristly, reddish-blond crew cut was not the sculpted salt and pepper hairpiece usually worn on excursions into the outside world, but a scruffy brown tangle that stamped him as a man who'd lost his comb and was in dire need of a haircut. A bushy, appliquéd mustache and clear-glass spectacles with wire-rims completed the hoped for masquerade.

Stuffing into the suitcase a freshly pressed tan jumpsuit, sandals and other items of normal apparel, he critically inspected his reflection in the full-length mirror, turning left, turning right. The mirrored doppelgänger duplicated his dissatisfied expression when decided the mustache was a bit much, making him look affected and unusual rather than ordinary. Peeling off the mustache, he massaged his upper lip, rubbing away the gummy residue. Something was still lacking, some kind of extra touch that would draw viewers' attention away from his features. He ended up pasting a small Band-aid strip over the mole on his cheek, donned a thigh-length black leather jacket that had seen better days, switched off the light and crept out of the dressing room, suitcase in hand.

Making his way through the dark, silent penthouse, he paused to defeat the nighttime alarm before commanding the heavy, blast-resistant entry door to swing open. Rather than risk video surveillance exposure in the executive express elevator, he took the seldom used fire stair down four flights to the thirty-sixth floor.

A dim nightlight high in a wall sconce barely illuminated the hallway, making it difficult to read the markings on a cipher keypad outside the Security Center. Switching on a pencil flashlight, he punched in the code, removed the spectacles, inserted his face in the hood to let the sensor scan his iris patterns. Dual electric locks clicked open.

Holding the pencil flash in his teeth, he energized the console. A dozen wall-filling video panels displayed static scenes within and without night-shrouded Dysart Tower. Despite sealing off the tunnel at both ends, good old belt-and-suspenders Marty Calvo had left the alarm network energized. Dysart clucked approvingly.

Deactivating appropriate portions of the security net presented few obstacles, but a painstaking search of unfamiliar command and control panel functions was required to chase down the tunnel closure actuators. Lyman kicked himself mentally. On the night Smith and his mercenaries had been trapped in the tube, he had paid only token attention when Marty actuated the steel closures that sealed the tunnel at either terminus. Now he couldn't seem to find the recipe for opening them.

Resorting to the security index, he located the control sequence. Pulling back the sliding knob actuating the nearest closure, he held it until the red line in the readout turned half green, then did likewise for the barrier near Salon Bellissima. He spent another half-minute making sure the video monitoring circuits on the tower's first and thirtieth floors were disabled, but knew it safe to ignore the once secret sub-basement chamber where no surveillance mini-cam had been installed. If night watch personnel in the ground floor lobby were on their toes, a technician would be dispatched to troubleshoot the uncommon, simultaneous outages on not one but two floors. The tech would wonder why, and by whom, the Security Center circuits had been deactivated. In another quarter-hour, the reactivated video surveillance could do no harm.

Shutting down the console, he exited the center hurriedly, trotted to the fire stair and hustled down six flights to the thirtieth floor, where it was safe to board the express elevator unnoticed. By the time the high-speed compartment deposited him in the tower's sub-basement alcove, he no longer felt antsy about making a successful getaway.

The tunnel entrance gaped uninvitingly, a mouth leading into forbidding gloom his pencil flash did little or nothing to alleviate. The ventilation system, inactive for some time, had left the tunnel's dead air suffused with a stale, musty odor. He had to inch along, the back of his head rubbing the curved tunnel wall, to slip past the golf cart Carolyn had parked after using it the last time. He stepped through the half-open western closure, rapidly heeled and toed less than two hundred meters to the other partly open closure, and went past.

The suitcase made an awkward burden ascending the tightly wound spiral stair, likewise when negotiating the shoulder-wide corridor running past the false rear wall of Carolyn's office. He checked the pinhole lens; the alleyway outside lay shrouded in deep night; it looked deserted, judging by what little he could discern in the dim glow of distant streetlights. Depressing a switch panel, he retreated, allowing a narrow section of false brickwork to fold inward.

In the act of stepping down into the alley, he hesitated, clutched the folded-in section imitation brickwork to regain his balance. The pencil flashlight flicked on and off, briefly illuminating a figure huddled against the wall directly beneath the opening. Whoever it was had wrapped himself or herself in a heavy pea coat, its collar turned up around the neck. In the dimness, what looked like a sailor's woolen watch cap was pulled down over the person's ears.

Lyman debated his options. He could close the section of false brickwork and wait for whoever it was to wake up and go somewhere else, or take a chance and ignore the recumbent figure. Too impatient to linger, he stepped down very slowly, cautiously, keyed the brickwork to close and walked out of the alley. Slowing his pace on the night-shrouded thoroughfare, he took out his satellite phone and called for a cab.

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At a quarter-to-six, the expanded, multi-level San Francisco International domestic terminal was lightly populated. A young Latina ticket agent behind the United Airlines counter

boredly watching Lyman approach carrying his suitcase. Sizing him up with an indifferent air, she grudging a soft-spoken, "Mornin', sir."

"Hiya." Dysart set down the suitcase. "Have t'get to New York right quick, Miss. My sister's awful sick. Got anything going east real soon now?"

"A direct commuter flight to JFK at six-fifty," the woman told him. "You could wait for the hypersonic express, get there about the same time. But the fare's higher."

"Commuter'll do."

The young woman tapped the touch-screen display, and consulted it. "Space is available, sir. First Class, or Business?"

"Uh, Business. How much is it one-way?"

After quoting the fare, the young woman asked to see a picture ID. Lyman showed her the driver's license he'd ordered procured across the Bay in the wilds of the Richmond jungle. The young woman used the computer keyboard to generate a ticket, waited for a printout and slipped it into an envelope bearing the airline logo. "Credit or debit, sir?"

"All I got with me's cash I grabbed on my way out," he said, fidgeting as if anxious to be on his way.

The young woman watched him peel bills from a money clip, carefully recounted them herself, and made change. "Want to check the suitcase through? An extra charge."

"Not if it's small enough for carry-on."

"I'm sure it is, yes. Take it with you through the security checkpoint. The coffee shop opens in about ten minutes, sir. Havaniceflight."

"Much obliged, Miss."

Lyman glanced in the direction of the security stalls; only one lonely soul was waiting to go through. Instead of heading that way, he stepped back outside the terminal. An idling early riser ignored him as he strolled along the deserted walkway and set down the suitcase. Selecting a number from the satellite phone's contact list, he tapped the tiny quick-dial button with a fingernail.

After six or seven unanswered rings at the other end, he disconnected and immediately redialed. On the fourth ring a gravelly voice said, "Yeah?"

"How," asked Dysart, "would you like to earn an extra half-mil?"

"Well, if it isn't —"

"No names," Lyman hastened to say. "Answer my question."

"Hardly ever turn down magnanimous offers," admitted Mr. Smith.

"I have to see you today. It's important. Where will you be, the address?"

Smith gave him the data, and Lyman stamped the street and apartment number in memory. "Say, you sure do live the high life. Soon now," he said, adding a grace note of sarcasm, "you'll be able to afford a better neighborhood than the Bronx."

"Don't you dare poke fun at my workplace."

"Says here my flight's due at JFK a few minutes before ten, your time."

"What airline and flight number?" asked Smith. "I'll swing by, pick you up."

Lyman had to glean the information from his boarding pass.

“Hey,” said Smith, “make fun of my Bronx hideaway all you want, but why the hell’s a gent like *you* riding commercial?”

“Point taken.”

Lyman could picture Smith’s accompanying shrug when he said, “See you there,” and rang off.

Dysart stopped at a newsstand on impulse and purchased an elex facsimile of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. He was disappointed when the e-copy turned out to be a bulldog edition that had gone online the previous evening. He uttered an annoyed grunt and dropped the printout in a trash receptacle.

As the coffee shop’s first and only customer, he downed a buttered croissant and a glass of unsweetened grapefruit juice, then dawdled through one coffee refill after another. Feeling grossly over-caffeinated, he visiting the men’s room, then allowed an overweight security officer to confirm the fact that he was not a terrorist carrying a nuclear weapon in the battered plastic suitcase. Checking the vending machine, he purchased a facsimile morning edition *Chronicle*, chose a seat in the boarding concourse.

The front page headline brought him up short:

## HOUSE OVERCOMES FUSION BILL HURDLE

Word that the legislation was ready to sent to the White House evoked a grunt of neither annoyance nor disgust, just sublimated anger.

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“Any idea where he went?” asked Carolyn.”

“If I knew,” said Maggie, “I wouldn’t hesitate to tell you, Carolyn.”

Off to her workday at Salon Bellissima, Carolyn made no effort to conceal her impatience. “You sure he didn’t stop by to see Ben, say where he was going, and why?”

“No-o-o,” cooed Maggie, “not sure he had a chance to do that. I opened the office about six-thirty, and been at the desk ever since.”

Hearing familiar feminine voices filtering through from the antechamber, the CEO cracked the door to the outer office, and listened for a few seconds before interrupting. “If I were you, Carolyn, I wouldn’t fret about him. Like God, he moves in mysterious ways.”

Carolyn wrinkled her nose. “He’s done this before, disappeared without a word to me, anyone?”

“More than once, but it’s been a while.”

“You have no idea where he went, why he sneaked out in the dead of night?”

“To be totally honest,” assured Clay, shading the truth a hair, “This is the first I’ve heard of his unexpected absence.”

“Well, he’ll regret it. He’ll get a piece of my mind when he shows up.” Carolyn pranced out the door, headed downstairs to the waiting limousine.

“Hope she can spare it,” muttered the CEO.

Maggie coughed politely, masking a giggle.

No sooner had the CEO returned to his desk than Martin Calvo put in an appearance. Despite his less than entirely truthful disclaimer, Clay had first learned of Lyman's disappearance earlier from Marty. "Okay, what's the latest?"

"Draw your own conclusions. Shortly after three ayem," informed Calvo, "the night watch sent a tech up to the Security Center. Video surveillance on two floors was deactivated. The console readout showed both tunnel closures open halfway."

Clay's chin bobbed knowingly. "Best for you leave the tunnel open. Our wandering Stockholder may enter as furtively as he departed."

"Yeah, I did," said Calvo. "For him to skip off with things touch and go in the Congress and White House is a touch worry-making. It's not like him to duck and run with a major storm's brewing."

"Think again," said Clay.

Calvo looked sharply at the CEO. "Meaning . . .?"

"He's ducking," enlightened Clay, "but not running. If I know Lyman, he's up to something wild and woolly, purposely making himself unavailable."

"Why the hell would he do that?"

"To avoid having to stand up and provide authoritative answers to authoritarian questions, or respond to authoritarian summonses, attend authoritarian hearings, and otherwise reveal his authoritative position on prospective nationalization."

Calvo frowned. "Give me time to sort through your authoritarian maze."

"In plain language," said Clay, "he's gone and done exactly what he threatened to do, and left me holding a bagful of explosives."

Marty thought it over. "That one I'll decipher at leisure. What now, Ben?"

"Other than pretending to carry on business as usual," said the CEO, "your guess is as good as mine. Maybe better." He cogitated. "My cover-your-ass instincts advise filing a formal missing persons report ASAP, but also tell me to fudge a trifle about the timing of Lyman's vanishing act. There's a captain of detectives we've dealt with in the past, a rock-solid pro, and a gentlemn to boot: all business, with a good head on his shoulders. I'll call him in an hour or two, get things rolling."

"What will an 'authoritarian' missing person's routine accomplish," questioned Calvo, his tone one of light mockery, "other than kicking off a major manhunt and prime-time media feeding frenzy?"

Clay's sarcastic laugh was short on humor. "Oh, maybe we'll put Lyman's picture on every cereal box, urge the feds to issue a nationwide Amber Alert."

Marty was not amused.

"My one and only hope," added the CEO, "is that his disappearing act will keep the authoritarian questions directed my way at an absolute minimum. It may even encourage sundry and diverse authorities of one stripe or another to halfway believe me when I look them in the eye and say I don't have the foggiest notion about where the company's one and only Stockholder has taken himself, and therefore truly lack the authoritative authority to answer their authoritarian questions, or whatever the hell else they authoritatively suggest I hop to it and do."

Calvo shrugged. "Wouldn't want to be in your authoritative shoes, Ben."

“Neither would I,” said Clay.

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Lyman spotted Mr. Smith standing inconspicuously off to one side. Only the man’s dark eyes moved, clicking from one passerby to the next, and the next as he checked the loose stream of figures and faces exiting the JFK terminal. Circling around behind Smith, he tapped the dapper, muscular man’s shoulder. “Greetings.”

No hint of a reaction ruffled Smith’s stolid features. Looking Dysart up and down, his air one of exaggerated indifference. “A panhandler? You get no handout from me, Pal. On your way.”

“Think again,” said Lyman. “I’m the charitable giver, not a destitute taker. Who else would do business with someone like you.”

“Aw, ain’t it the truth.” Smith used his satellite phone to summon the car and driver he had waiting in the short-term parking lot.

The vehicle crawled through traffic, departing JFK via the air hub on Interstate 678, and headed toward the Bronx. In the rear seat beside Smith, Lyman gestured at the driver’s huge wrinkled neck supporting his oversized, balding head, and broke the lengthy silence. “Safe to talk?”

“Safe and sane. Lou’s the invisible man,” informed Smith. “He’s known to say eight or ten words a month. I keep his heart in a jar locked in my safe.”

Lyman continued to dubiously regard what could be seen of the bull-necked, broad-shouldered driver. He explained to Smith that by this time he was undoubtedly listed officially as a missing person.

“Could’ve fooled me,” said Smith. “Despite your screwy ‘let’s pretend’ get-up, trying to hide in plain sight won’t cut it. Best bet will be to hole up in my crummy workplace till we figure out something better.”

“Can’t waste the time. I have to get to the Moon.”

“A long drive,” was Smith’s laconic observation.

“You’re going to help me get to the Moon.”

“Sure I am. To pull in an extra half-mil, I’d carry you on my back if I knew how.”

“Aren’t you going to ask why I want to go to the Moon?”

“Never crossed my mind,” the other said dismissively. “Strictly your business. My gut feeling says it’s because the government’s working overtime to steal the fancy power system invented by this Nobel guy we’ll be busting loose in Sweden. Something also tells me you’re not about to let the politicians get away with playing dirty pool.”

“That can be said,” affirmed Lyman. “So you watch the news. I’m surprised.”

“Why’s surprised?” asked Smith. “I’m a news buff. Where business is concerned, It’s smart to find out what’s coming down in other parts of the forest.”

“That makes a good deal of sense.” Lyman asked how familiar Smith was with Orlando, Florida.”

“Not hardly at all. Years ago, a gal I ran around with dragged me to Disney World. Hated everything about the candy-ass setup, and everyone in it. Specially Captain Hook.”

“Captain . . . Hook?”

“Yeah, you know the drill. The Cap, some hot dog college kid rigged in a pirate mask, droopy mustache, floppy black hat, waltzed up to us clowning around, waving his phony hook, spouting seafaring horseshit.”

“And . . . ?”

“I was all set to kick him in the berries. The gal stopped me, pulled me away.”

“Enough chatter,” Lyman said. “I’ll tell you my story, what I have in mind to do. It’ll help you help me.”

“You’re the paymaster. I’m listening.”

Lyman spoke steadily for six or seven minutes. Smith’s dark eyes narrowed as the lecture matured. He reacted to Dysart’s summation with an indifferent shrug. “As schemes go, it sparkles like a field of diamonds. Catch is, it won’t get you to first base, let alone to the Moon.”

“Why not?”

“Who you are, and what you are, Mr. Dysart, sir, is a solid bottom line that can’t possibly be beat. Either use your clout, or concede the ball game to the opposition. It’s dirt simple.”

“Use it or lose it . . . ? Explain.”

Smith explained.

## TWENTY-THREE Bait and Switch

Grossly offended by the caller’s opening statement, CEO Benjamin Clay frowned in disbelief at his succeeding remark. Barely able to restrain himself, he wanted to tell the Vice President’s chief of staff to perform an impossibly redundant physical act. “Twice, sir,” he said, striving to keep his voice level, “you mentioned the Vice President’s desperate need to speak with Mr. Dysart. Twice I have explained that, while fully appreciative of that desperate need, I am unable to be of assistance. If you wish, I’ll be happy to put you in touch with the San Francisco Police captain of detectives charged with leading the missing persons investigation, and the FBI officials who are doing everything they can to locate Mr. Dysart. The case number on file is —”

“It won’t be necessary, Mr. Clay,” the caller hurried to say. “We’ve already contacted the authorities. The Vice President asked me to impress upon you how vital it will be to put her in contact with Mr. Dysart as soon as humanly possible.”

“A objective I myself and every other Dysart Technologies executive shares wholeheartedly.” *What an ass!* thought Clay. After arrogantly introducing himself, the VP’s errand boy had demonstrated extraordinary hubris with a simpleminded question, asking when Mr. Dysart was expected back.

“But surely,” said the caller, “someone in the front office is qualified to speak for the corporation. If not you, Mr. Clay, perhaps the chairman of the board could supply information on Mr. Dysart’s whereabouts, or at least —”

“Dysart Technologies,” informed the CEO brusquely, doing his best to keep the heat out of his voice, “is a wholly owned private enterprise. As chief executive officer, I’m charged with oversight of all six independently operating divisions. I report directly to Mr. Dysart, but I do not — repeat *not* — enjoy the privilege of speaking for him.”

Silence at the other end of the line. “I . . . see. Forgive me if I’ve offended you in some way, Mr. Clay. The Vice President also wishes to learn your view of the proposed legislation aimed at nationalizing the fusion, uh . . . business.”

“I sincerely hope,” said Ben, “the Vice President will understand why I am unable to respond. I happen to be an attorney licensed to practice in New York and California, and therefore have no choice but to respectfully recuse myself from expressing a personal opinion concerning the government’s proposed takeover of our privately owned enterprise and its associated technology.”

“But you naturally resist such a potential happening?”

“Oh, naturally,” was Clay’s instant rejoinder. “*Very* strongly!”

“Under severe pressure from certain quarters,” said the other, “the White House is hard-pressed to enter into a discussion pertaining to particular aspects of the, er . . . What I hope you understand, Mr. Clay, is how urgently the government wishes to begin negotiations with Mr. Dysart. The President has requested his Vice President to make preliminary overtures that will hopefully lead to productive negotiations. In order to do so, we simply *must* learn Mr. Dysart’s reaction to the prospective—”

“His *reaction* . . . ! *That* I am definitely able to answer,” declared Clay. “Nausea.”

“Pardon me?”

“Mr. Dysart experienced acute nausea when news of the government’s intended thievery flooded the media.”

“Really, Mr. Clay. For you to take that attitude is —”

“Please inform the Vice President that Mr. Dysart became severely nauseated due to the government’s incipient takeover of an innovative technology born in sweat, blood and tears, at enormous expense, in our Energy Division. Tell me truthfully, wouldn’t your stomach turn if those charged with guiding our nation’s fortunes were bent upon stealing *your* personal, private property, and audaciously daring to cloak the proposed theft under the Teflon coating of ‘national security’?”

“That’s hardly an appropriate way to —”

“Oh, it most certainly is! You requested Mr. Dysart’s reaction, and under the present circumstances responding for him seemed entirely proper. By the way, you also brought up the subject of ‘negotiations.’ Tell me, will the government be prepared to negotiate the repayment of the truly gargantuan investment of time, energy and funding Dysart Technologies has invested in the development and active implementation of commercial, controlled nuclear fusion technology?”

“I’m afraid it’s premature to think of going into details like —”

“In that case,” interrupted Clay, losing what little patience he had left, “I fail to see why any further discussion could be of benefit to either of us. Please give the Vice President my very best regards. You might also advise her that in the future if she wishes to contact Dysart Technologies in anything resembling a meaningful way it might be wise for her to call in person. Good day!”

Ending the conversation on that sour note, Ben was glad he’d insisted on using voice-only to field those calls he felt it necessary to take. He eyed with distaste the row of blinking lights on

his desk's multi-channel communications center. Muttering a foul epithet under his breath, he opened the intercom circuit. "Who's up, Mag, who's on deck, and who's in the hole?"

"Carl Blake in EnerDiv says it's urgent to speak with you. Someone from the Treasury Secretary's office is holding on line six, and the Deputy Secretary of Defense is holding on line two. The gentleman who called earlier from the Department of Energy, Mr. Scheaffer, sounded extremely anxious to contact you, and he —"

"Whoa, Maggie!" Clay groaned. "Don't bury me, okay? Put SecDef through first, then Carl in EnerDiv."

"Yes, sir."

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At first Lyman had tried to object, but Mr. Smith had been resolute about bringing Lou along with them on the early morning flight to Orlando. Departing from the airport, the close-mouthed bodyguard, driver, and hammer-of-all-trades had chauffeured the rented limousine forty miles due east along Route 528 "Beeline Expressway" until the road curved south and turned into Beach Causeway A1A, with waters of the Atlantic visible on either side of the long, slender peninsula.

"You sure house the Moon grunts in ritzy quarters," remarked Smith when the Cocoa Beach resort hotel came in view. "Always treat the hired help so good?"

"We try."

"Nix 'try.' I call it proof positive," said Smith, "when guys stashed to mine Moon gold are quartered in a spiffy beachfront watering hole."

"After suspending crew rotation," explained Dysart, "Dr. Boucher had Ralphs move the men here from a Titusville motel."

"This guy Ralphs we're here to see, he mother-hens the moonies, right?"

"He's our ground-training exec," said Lyman, "who by all reports does an excellent job. Dr. Boucher brought him aboard two years ago. We've never met."

"And that other name you used, he hold the moonies hands up there?"

"Dr. Boucher's my Man in the Moon, the director of our pilot mining project," said Lyman. "He sent two thirds of the married crewmen home to sweat-out the standby instead of letting them twiddle their thumbs in Florida. A former French diplomat with a cool stare and an agile, superior mind, Boucher decided the men staying on here might as well live comfortably during a spell of idleness."

The limousine slowed to a halt, waited for oncoming traffic, and swung left into a divided drive. Lou braked the vehicle to a halt beneath the arched porte-cochere entrance of the four-story resort-hotel, its balconied tan façade framed by lofty palms undulating in a gentle sea breeze.

"Lou," said Smith, "hustle to open the door for me, but ignore my friend; we want him seen as a nobody along for the ride. Haul his luggage into the lobby."

"Gotcha." The brutish man stepped out of the limo and did as told, then retrieved Lyman's suitcase, disappointing the bellhop who came forward to relieve him of the burden. Turning the rented electric limousine over to a parking valet with an intimidating, sloe-eyed stare, he trailed his passengers into the lobby; in his huge right hand, the suitcase looked like an outsized lunch box.

Smith announced himself at the desk, adding that he was there to see a guest from Dysart Technologies, Mr. Ralphs.

"Of course, sir. A number of Dysart guests are staying with us at present," volunteered the clerk, checking the register. "May I ask if Mr. Ralphs is expecting you?"

Smith obliquely evaded the question. "We didn't call ahead."

"Here we are, Mr. Gerrard Ralphs is registered in suite 314. Would you like me to ring and see if the gentleman is in?"

"Please do," said Smith. "Say we're here on important company business."

"Certainly, sir." The clerk picked up the desk phone, hesitating with it halfway to his head. "Unless I'm mistaken, Mr. Ralphs is across the lobby, waiting for an elevator."

The doors were rolling closed when Smith turned and caught a glimpse of a medium-to-short individual who owned a mop of iron-gray hair.

Lyman stood mutely aside, the picture of disinterest, not turning his head.

"Would you like me to page Mr. Ralphs, sir?" asked the deskman.

"Don't bother. Wait till he gets upstairs, and then ring his room."

The clerk did as requested, relayed the information furnished by Smith. "Mr. Ralphs invites you to go right up, sir. Suite 314." The thin-faced young deskman glanced at Lyman's doubtful attire and vacant expression, the unshaven stubble on his cheek marred by a band-aid. "Is your, uh, companion . . . ?"

"He's with me," said Smith as if that explained everything. He tilted his head in the driver's direction. Lou lumbered away and an searched for a seat in the spacious lobby large enough to accommodate his massive backside.

An outwardly self-contained gentleman of around sixty summers, Gerrard Ralphs opened the door at the chime. All business, he looked Smith over, then duplicated the deskman's uncertain appraisal of Lyman slouched in the hallway. "What can I do for you gentlemen?"

"A lot," said Smith, and explained his Dysart Technologies connection.

"Ah, by all means come in," The crew training manager evaluated the visitors, but did not invite them to be seated.

"My name is Smith, Mr. Ralphs, and this here is Tomski. I call him that because I can't pronounce his tongue-twister of a Russian name."

Ralphs awarded "Tomski" with a look laden with suspicion. "A Russian . . . ? I don't understand."

"Me neither," said Smith. "Not the details. Got a call late yesterday from San Francisco headquarters telling me to collect Tomski at the Orlando airport and bring him straight here to the hotel. They must've picked my name out of the hat because I happened to be in Orange County on other company business."

"I see," said Ralphs, his expression indicating that he 'saw' next to nothing. "I have no reason to doubt you, Mr. Smith, but to show up out of the blue without —"

"A special messenger toting my credentials is due at the hotel any minute now. I asked the deskman to send him up the instant he appears."

About to voice a rejoinder, Ralphs glanced sharply at "Tomski."

Managing to look stricken, Lyman had taken to standing on one foot, and then the other.

“Something bothering your friend?” asked the crew training manager.

Lyman persisted in his little dance, desperately pointing to his crotch.

Smith followed their rehearsal to the letter. “Uh-oh, my fault. We should’ve stopped along the way, let Tomski go to the john. Okay if he uses your lavatory?”

“Why . . . I suppose so,” said Ralphs uncertainly. “In there, off the bedroom.”

“I’ll show him.”

Alone in the suite’s bathroom, Lyman closed the door, snapped over the lock, set his suitcase on the toilet lid and hurriedly undressed. Peeling the Band-Aid from his cheek, he tore the tangled wig from his head, bathed his face in cold water and seized a hand towel. Using both hands, he smoothed back his reddish-blond crew cut, flung open the suitcase and jammed in the discarded clothing and wig.

Lyman emerged minutes later suitcase in hand, clad in a light tan jumpsuit with overlarge slash pockets, his bare feet shod in open-toed sandals. He allowed the goggle-eyed crew training manager only seconds to look him over. “I’m sure you recognize me, Mr. Ralphs. Please forgive the sideshow; I’ll explain. Jean-Marie has nothing but good to say about you and your training regimen. I regret not having had a chance to compliment your efforts until now.”

Speechless, Gerrard Ralphs sank back in an armchair.

Lyman gestured at the door. “Lock it, chain it, Smith. “Swinging back to confront Ralphs, he said “Easy does it. I apologize again for the charade, but it seemed necessary. I’m badly in need of your help; later we’ll discuss the reason. First, there is something I must make absolutely clear. No one is to know of my presence in Florida, underscore no one! I’m officially a missing person, so you will be the only individual to see me as either ‘Tomski,’ or in a different persona I plan to adopt to leave the hotel. It’s essential that we understand one another on that point. Can you assure me that we do?”

After a dazed nod of acquiescence, the other’s lips parted as if he meant to say something else. His vocal cords were apparently not operating.

“I know you talk to Jean-Marie regularly. I’d like you to get on the lasercomm horn and call Luna.”

“N-now . . . ?” faltered Ralphs.

“At once.”

Visibly shaken, the executive slowly came to his feet. Leading the way into the suite’s bedroom, he folded open the laptop computer resting on an end table, tapped the power switch and brought up the program defining the Moon’s substellar point in Zulu time, and activated the appropriate orbital lasercomm station.

“I, uh . . . sorry, Mr. Dysart. Having you appear blew this month’s codeword out of my mind.” He pulled open a drawer in the end table. “I’ll look it up.”

Lyman shot a cautious glance at Smith. Disreputable character or not, he decided the other could make little or no use of the closely guarded communications codeword. He glibly recited the memorized alphanumeric sequence.

Ralphs obediently punched it into the laptop, keyed the lasercomm transceiver.

Seconds passed in silent watchfulness then Myron Cromwell's lean features appeared in the laptop display. "Hi, Gerry. How's the ground-pounding schoolmaster? Having fun down there amongst the bikini babes, bodybuilders and surfers?"

Ralphs ignored the byplay. "Go collect Jean-Marie. Hurry! It's important."

Nothing in the laptop display changed for seconds until Cromwell's image abruptly vanished. In Cocoa Beach, the three watchers were treated to an unobstructed view of the watercolor poster depicting the pilot project strip-mining logo.

"What kind of goofy graffiti is that?" asked Mr. Smith.

Preoccupied by rehearsing what would come next, Lyman muttered, "Graffito, singular."

Dr. Boucher's dark-eyed visage appeared in the computer display. "What is it, Gerry?"

Dysart had cited brevity as almost as crucial as the message itself. All Ralphs said was, "Someone here wishes to advise you of something extremely important. No names, no chatter. Listen to his message, and we'll get off the air at once."

Lyman took the training manager's place in front of the laptop, and anxiously endured the transmission lag. The instant Boucher recognized who the 'someone' was, his image underwent a radical transformation.

"You have a firm, positive 'go,'" declared The Stockholder, "for immediate crew rotation. Tell the USAF Command Center at once, and get all your people aboard ship ASAP — Alois, the medic, everyone other than Cromwell and you yourself if both of you are willing to stay on. Fill you in later. *Adieu.*"

Bent upon keeping the transmission as brief as possible, Dysart thoughtlessly hit the laptop's power key. Shut-down forced Ralphs to re-start the computer in order to deactivate the satellite lasercomm connection. "Could've been intercepted," he remarked, casting a knowing sidelong glance at Dysart.

"Unlikely, but possible," said Lyman. "The USAF watchdogs are on their toes. It was a very short burst, and I had to take the chance." Turning to Smith, he said, "You've earned you baksheesh ten times over. Fly back to your Bronx hidey-hole and get to work on our other business arrangement. I sincerely appreciate all your bad work. You'll find your reward commensurate with my appreciation. Someday, if we're ever in Florida at the same time, we'll go to Disney World and celebrate our business ventures."

"Can't thank you, Mr. Dysart, sir. I've been dying t'see Disney World again."

"If Captain Hook acts up," said Lyman, tongue in both cheeks, "you'll be free to wreak vengeance. Call it a bonus; I'll pay for the damages."

For only the second time in their brief, unsavory acquaintance Smith actually laughed. "Don't hardly ever do the dirty work myself. If that shark hasn't eaten the rest of Cap by now, I'll sic Lou on him."

"One last item," said Dysart, an ominous note deepening his level baritone voice. "You and Mr. Ralphs are the only individuals here on the ground who know my present whereabouts. If word gets out before I'm ready to let it out, I will come looking for the leaker, and I also guarantee to find him wherever he hides, and however long it takes. We straight on that, Smith?"

"Put your worries to bed," said the other nonchalantly. "Good luck shooting the Moon."

"It's something I'll definitely need," said Lyman. "Show him out if you will, Mr. Ralphs. Don't forget to lock and chain the door."

Having outwardly regained a modicum of self-composure, a slight frown creased the training executive's features after taking care of the assigned task. "Your mighty midget friend," he said, "strikes me as a thug of the first water."

"Friend? Not hardly, Mr. Ralphs. While short-in-stature, he is however a very accomplished thug. I think of him as a tool, Mr. Ralphs, and on occasion disreputable tools are more useful than any others you can name. He showed up when I had a desperate need for his distasteful services," added Lyman with a mock shudder, "but if Smith strikes you as a thug, you don't want to meet his driver."

"Mr. Dysart, what did he mean by wishing you luck, uh, shooting the Moon?"

Lyman checked the cheap wristwatch he hated wearing, unbuckled it off and set it aside. "Drop the 'mister,' Gerry. I answer to Lyman. What say we call room service and have a spot of lunch sent up? You and I have to sit down for a heart-to-heart talk, and we might as well discuss things over sandwiches and a bottle of beer."

## TWENTY-FOUR The Reluctant Astronaut

Aerospace Forces Major General Miles Slosson confronted the crew training manager, his mein one of sublimated belligerence. "Ralphs, are you saying *this* gentleman is a mining expert?" He tried to stare the other down. "Sorry, but Mr. Fiesler doesn't have the look of any 'expert' I've crossed paths with lately. What, if I may ask, does his expertise have to do with your company's lunar project?"

"As I told you, Ernst is a very highly respected mining engineer."

"He is, is he?"

Ralphs feigned frustration over the need to repeat himself. "All I can do is confirm yesterday's flash transmittal announcement of an indefinite delay that will affect the scheduled shipment of helium-three."

"Yes, yes; I know. Boucher's transmittal was copied my command."

"Selene Operations Manager Cromwell, who's also acting as deputy director, has worked closely with Mr. Fiesler in the past. He describes Ernst as the best head in the business to advise him on resolving a serious technical difficulty. He needs Fiesler on-site in the worst way, strongly urges getting him up to Tranquillitatis ASAP."

"Ah, the worst way?" said the general with unveiled sarcasm. "So the hangup's getting pinned on a 'serious technical difficulty.' I've learned to hate buzzwords like technical difficulty worse than sin. They usually cover a multitude of sins or excuses ranging from a lack of goods to ship to a major screwup someone wants swept under the rug. Which is it in this case, Ralphs?"

"Neither, General. Nothing like that."

"Your song and dance starts to sound like a ration of pure, undiluted bullcrap."

"Be fair, sir. Dysart Technologies has always been straight with your command."

"Affirmative," admitted Slosson, "nor would I have it otherwise. But there's a first time for everything." The general turned to Lyman, looked him over. "Ernst Fiesler," he said,

pronouncing the name with skeptical intonation. "I take it you're a German national, Mr. Mining Engineer Fiesler."

"Austrian, sir." Hiding in an improved "costume," Lyman had cleaned himself up, trimmed and combed out the gray-shot wig after shaving with Ralphs' safety razor. He wore an ill-fitting business suit borrowed from a lunar crew-in-training member.

"Employed where," Slosson wanted to know, "by what mining firm?"

"I managed a consulting firm," said Dysart. "For some time now I've worked in western Canada, where years ago Myron Cromwell and I became well acquainted. He is an outstanding, respected mining engineer in his own right, so much so that I cannot begin to guess why he demanded that Mr. Ralphs have me flown here to Florida on a moment's notice so that we could approach you and petition, uh, transportation."

"Umm-m-m." The general was tight-lipped. "Ever been in space?"

"No, sir."

"Oh, great, just wonderful!" His mind working overtime, the general repeated his "Umm-m-m-m," drawing it out as if humming aided in solving problems. He swung back to Ralphs and said candidly. "Weren't you planning to send Fiesler up with your replacement mining crew?"

"Yes, general. Except now we can't wait, sir. The situation in Luna is, well . . . Homebound lunar crew rotation is underway as we speak, but I have to hold the replacements here on the ground until whatever type of hitch is affecting the pilot project is resolved. The home office believes it senseless to have the men sitting around up there with nothing to do. Ernst has to transit solo, by the fastest possible route."

"*Another* novice astronaut!" exclaimed Slosson, half in disgust, half in anger. "Not long ago my best people had to swallow a ration of static while training a trio of politicians we hauled up to Luna. Those three underwent quickie fourteen-day indoctrination like all other novices, which to me is an unfunny joke. All it teaches prospective 'astronauts' to do is maybe, somehow, in some way avoid committing suicide the first time they venture outside wearing vacuum gear. The U.N. bigwig and the senator did fairly well, but the training officer heading up the program complained bitterly about the fat, mouthy, big bucks tycoon named Reichert. The major said he was a gigantic pain in the ass right from the get-go."

The general's remark elicited an impossible to completely suppress chuckle from "Mining Engineer Fiesler."

"Amuses you does it, Ernst?" demanded General Slosson.

"Your pardon, sir," Lyman said meekly. "Mr. Ralphs explained the, uh, nationalization crisis his company's is facing, and mentioned how Mr. Reichert and his petroleum associates were aiding the government drive to take over nuclear fusion."

"Whatever the politicians end up deciding," said Slosson dismissively, "DT's problems are of no concern to me or my command, but I suppose they give you a case of acute heartburn, eh, Ralphs? Sounds like someday fairly soon you may find yourself working for the government."

"Scratch that, General." Ralphs was emphatic. "I'll beg off if an invitation ever comes my way. DT's compensation scale is considerably better than any civil service grade the government could offer, and at my age a major salary cut has zero appeal. If I ever have to make that decision, retirement sounds like the best option."

Slosson nodded knowingly. "On that score you get no argument from me. If military pay is any kind of gauge, you'd become a reasonably well-off pauper." He swung back to Lyman. "Fiesler, how old will you be on your next birthday?"

"Forty-seven, sir."

"Really? I would've guessed younger. A sudden twinkle invaded the general's clear blue eyes. "*Hast du gesund, Herr Fiesler?*" he inquired, his attitude much more genial.

"*Jawohl, Herr General.*"

"*Ganz gut!*" Slosson relaxed a little more. "You do look fit, but I can't say I admire your tailor." The general laid down the pen he'd been toying with. "I'm smart enough to admit that we have a mutual problem, Ralphs. Not yet an emergency, but a serious hangup that may be heading in that direction. I can already feel the heat from high up to get the current shipment off the ground up there. I detest doing something I don't care for even a little bit, but also appreciate the fact that squandering two weeks teaching Ernst, here, how to stay alive in space just won't do."

Slosson ceased thinking aloud, pursed his lips and said, "I'll have to run it past the Pentagon, hopefully sell the brass a bill of goods. Assuming a hurry-up transit will be approved, Herr Fiesler will need to pass a fairly stringent physical. A four-man repair team's slated to go on-orbit Wednesday morning. Ernst can boost with them, but once aboard MilSat the CO will have to play it by ear to find the quickest, most economical lunar transit for him. When he can actually get to work up there will depend on boxcar availability, and of course whether or not the Pentagon agrees."

About to question the "boxcar" reference to stay in character, Lyman let it pass.

"Okay," said the general, "you and Ernst put yourselves on stand-by. Make yourselves available twenty-four-seven, and keep your fingers crossed, too."

"Thank you, General. You have my number at the hotel," said Ralphs. "Call, day or night, sir. We'll be ready."

"You'd sure as hell better be!"

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In early evening someone with a feminine lilt in her voice answered the phone in Raymond Kyle's Knoxville home. "Sure," the woman said brightly, "I'll rustle him up. Can I please tell him who's calling?"

"Oh, a friend of a friend. He gave me the senator's private number."

"Okay, hang on a sec."

The former legislator picked up a minute later. "Kyle here."

"Senator, my name is Ralphs, Gerrard Ralphs. I'm DT's manager of lunar crew training at Kennedy Space Center."

"Howdy, Mr. Ralphs. Something I can help you with?"

"You were a lawyer, sir, former Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee?"

"Guilty as charged, both counts, except I chaired only the civil committee."

"A friend of a friend," said Ralphs, "asked me to inform you as one Dysart employee to another that the first step in lunar crew rotation has begun, bringing home the men who've worked in Luna three full cycles. Another DT employee close to my friend of a friend, someone

you recently met in San Francisco, would like to know how familiar you are with the present status of the Posse Comitatus law.”

Coming out of the blue, the reference gave Kyle pause. Dysart’s unexplained disappearance was all over the media; the identity of the close friend of a friend was obvious. After brief reflection, he said, “Posse Comitatus dates back to the turbulent reconstruction period after the War Between the States. It was meant to restrict the military from directly taking part in an act of search, seizure, arrest or similar action unless authorized by the Constitution or the Congress. In other words, it guarantees ‘hands off’ by the military when it comes to hassling civilians. That do it for you?”

“Definitely,” said Ralphs. “Any significant updates or changes since then?”

“Umm-m-m, not really . . . Wait, a minor one. The statute was amended to modernize the old U.S. Air Force designation, formally changing USAF to designate U.S. Aerospace Forces. No significant difference.”

“Thank you very much, I’ll pass it along. One thing more. How firm a stance do you believe The President will take with regard to signing the fusion funding bill and its stinger of an addendum?”

“I go along with word on the Hill,” replied Kyle without hesitation, “that says he’ll waver, straddle the fence for a spell. The White House phone’s been ringing off the hook, exerting severe pressure on The Man to sign and have done with it. He’s also said to be getting screams from Russia, Saudi Arabia, the U.N. and other assorted states and agencies, all urging him to exercise the veto and avoid the consequences by *not* committing the U.S to take aboard something the government doesn’t fully understand, not to mention the bureacrats’ absence of competence to manage properly.”

“I’ll pass that along, too.”

“Mr. Ralphs,” said Kyle, his inflection droll, “not to be nosy but I catch a whiff of sleight-of-hand chicanery on the part of this fella said to be a close friend of your friend.” The former senator heard a faint chuckle at the other end of the line.

“I’ll also pass that along,” said Ralphs. “To say anything more wouldn’t be a fit topic of conversation.”

“Understand,” said Kyle. “Mr. Ralphs, as one Dysart employee to another I do sincerely wish you the very best of luck, and that goes double for your friend’s friend. Appreciate it if you’d keep me informed.”

“I’ll surely do that, Senator. Thanks again for your help.”

“Happy to oblige.” Caging the handset, Kyle judged Lyman Dysart to be a living wonder who was not about to fade out of the picture anytime soon.

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Ralphs got off the line, his troubled expression posing a silent question. After dutifully relating the information Kyle had furnished, he asked Dysart he planed to make use of the Posse Comitatus enactment.”

“Chances are, never,” said Lyman, “but what harm can come of stockpiling ammunition that may be needed later? Add the situation’s elements up, Gerry. The lunar pilot project is private property en toto, exclusively mine, paid for by DT’s Energy Division, manned

exclusively by DT personnel. USAF established a small lunar base at the foot of the Palus Somni mass-driver launch complex to facilitate the vacuum transfer and cartage of helium-three. Our people deal with the center regularly.”

“Cartage . . . ?” Ralphs questioned the term.

“The silly tag a politico hit me with during a Senate hearing. Getting back to Posse Comitatus, Kyle assures us the statute's intact and in effect, which is all I needed to know. USAF personnel are prohibited by law from the search, seizure, arrest, hassling et cetera of civilians, or invading their private property sans warrant, period.”

“The direction your thinking has taken you is obvious,” said Ralphs. “But will American law hold up in Luna?”

“An excellent question,” replied Dysart matter-of-factly. “It may, then again it may not. If pushed comes to shove and we find ourselves in a corner, Posse Comitatus might be ammunition of sufficient caliber to sic Clay’s stable of legal weenies into defining where and when the law applies. Once lawyers get an urge to bear down, and swing into action, they can tie matters up in the courts six ways from Sunday.” He paused. “Luna is virgin legal territory overripe for contentious argument. Every lawyer I ever butted heads with is a professional pot-stirrer who dotes on poking holes in preconceived ‘givens’ just to see what the fallout looks like. If the interpretation of Posse Comitatus gets as contentious as I think it might, Ben’s cadre of shysters can push through motion after motion, writ after writ, habeas after corpus, maybe threaten to take their beloved arguments all the way to the Supreme Court.”

“Makes sense,” said Ralphs.

“Yes, on the surface anyhow. We shall see what we shall see, eh?” Lyman stretched languidly in an armchair, rotating his neck to work out the kinks. He glanced out the third-floor window. “Lord,” he said with feeling, “what I wouldn’t give for a nice, restful swim in that beautiful pool down there.”

“I can loan you a pair of trunks that may more or less fit,” offered Ralphs.

“Thanks, but no thanks. I’m deathly afraid of sharks.”

“Very few sharks,” said the other, “flipper their way across the beach into the hotel swimming pool.”

“The sharks I fear can’t flipper. No fins, Gerry. Your favorite thug and mine hopefully got me here without being spotted, and I’ve an urgent, super-outstanding reason to keep it that way. Skinning down for a swim would mean dumping Mining Engineer Fiesler, and exposing my precious bod to the eyes of cruising sharks that carry video recorders, cameras and fancy cell-phones.”

Ralphs nodded. “See what you mean.”

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The Stockholder and his host were taking their ease, watching the late evening news. Hearing the network anchor say the White House had not convened the usual extemporaneous press ceremony accompanying the signing an important item of legislation delighted Lyman. The attractive woman also reported a vociferous, nationwide public outcry against nationalization complementing increased overseas pressure from the United Nations, DT’s current and prospective fusion customers, and prominent names throughout the scientific community, all of whom encouraged The President to either veto the bill and its contentious amendment, or

forestall enactment of the legislation with a pocket-veto. In the administration's other ear, lobbyists from the stables of nationalization proponents were loudly urging The Man to either sign the bill, or send it back to the Congress for whatever revisions he might suggest necessary.

*Lord, prayed Lyman, please make him hold off!*

"I doubt if we're hearing the whole story," said Ralphs. "Hanging on to the bill until it expires on its own sounds too easy."

"It would be," agreed Lyman, "yet politically a pocket veto would be a neat temporary solution. I can't see that happening, however, when the Congress and a horde of special interests are working hard to push it through. Reichert's army of wheeler-dealers and confederates won't give ground easily."

The telephone rang, preempting Ralphs in the act of framing a rejoinder. He got up, lifted the receiver. "Yes, this is he." Cupping a hand over the mouthpiece, he said, "General Slosson's aide," and listened intently. His expression underwent a sudden marked change. "Has anything that raw ever been done?"

Ralphs' brow wrinkles deepened as he listened further.. "Uh, yes. Yes, of course. Thank you very much, sir. Please assure the general we'll be there." Groping to cage the telephone, he told Lyman it was all arranged, and added after a pause, "At least in sort of a half-assed way. They want you at Kennedy first thing tomorrow, six ayem sharp, for a top-to-bottom physical wringing-out. You'll go up to MilSat tomorrow afternoon along with a the repair crew you might remember the general —"

"When," inquired Dysart, "will you get around to the 'half-assed' part?"

"The . . . Pentagon," said Ralphs hesitantly. He cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable "The general's aide told me the Aerospaceforces brass went through the usual convolutions, and . . . What the beribboned chests came up with is —"

"No waffling, Gerry. Spill it!"

"They sanctioned a rapid transit from MilSat to circum-lunar orbit . . ." Ralphs paused again as if reluctant to continue, and grudgingly related how Dysart's drone would be collected circum-Luna, and brought to the ground.

"*Drone* . . . ?" Lyman lurched up out of his chair. "They plan on sending me to the Moon in a pilotless *cargo hauler*? That's crazy!"

Sounding sheepish, Ralphs said, "You've yet to hear the crazy part. A drone's sealed cargo bay apparently has ample capacity for a man in vacuum gear, batteries, oxy tanks, food and whatever else. You'll sip water and liquefied food paste through the suit's one-way valves. Likewise, body waste bladders will take care of your personal needs. Catch is, suited-up they'll have to pack you and the gear in suspension if you're to endure the high-gee acceleration, and deceleration at the start and finish of trajectory. Safety shouldn't be a problem; they've never lost a drone in transit."

"Hey, *that's* comforting!"

"The genuine craziness," elaborated Ralphs, "is that the drones are pre-programmed to accelerate during a fairly long burn at between three and one-half and four gravities. Deceleration at the other end won't be quite that hairy."

Lyman swore fulminantly. Popping a fist into his open palm, he said, "The powers that be and working day and night to do me in technically, economically, militarily and all other goddamn ways that cross their miserable, sadistic minds."

## TWENTY-FIVE A Fugitive from Injustice

The President's brisk strides carried him into the West Wing Cabinet Room, his entrance quieting murmurs of hushed conversation among the fifteen assembled officials and a pair of guests who had been directed to attend.

Looking careworn, the chief executive stalked past a flattering portrait of former President Eisenhower next to the window, glancing out at the rose garden as if disdainful of the view, and seated himself aggressively in his personal leather chair, its back slightly higher than the others. Directly across from him, opposite the center of the polished oval table gifted by former President Nixon, the Vice President lowered her gaze, avoiding eye contact with the Commander in Chief.

"I hope all of you," announced chief executive, "appreciate why this spur of the moment get together is necessary. We're being pummeled by screams over potential disruption of the soon-to-be-realized nuclear fusion agreement between Dysart Technologies and the U.N. Energy Consortium, and battered unmercifully by Dysart Technology's Russian and Saudi clients, plus two prospective clients, who demand to know whether their current and prospective investments will go down the drain if they have to deal not with DT, but current and future American administrations."

The President abruptly swiveled around and without pausing addressed a middle-aged, distinguished looking gentleman seated with his back to the row of windows. "Lawrence, you represent our interests in Geneva. What's your take on the U.N. situation as of this hour."

"Mr. President, it's difficult to blame Secretary-General Moorman for being up in arms. He is normally anything but quick to anger, yet he acted more incensed each time he took me aside — rounded on me, actually — and insisted upon learning if serious thought is being given to —"

"Not upsetting the fusion cart," supplied The President, unhappily turning back to the gathering at large. He pinned a tall, saturnine individual in his unrelenting gaze. "Ned, you were summoned this morning in order to hopefully provide input needed to framing a sane, logical response to a very basic question. Has your investigation scared up any trace of Dysart? Any *hint* of his whereabouts? I find it difficult to believe a billionaire celebrity of his prominence is able to vanish into thin air."

Chagrined upon learning his presence would be mandatory at the hastily convened session, FBI Director Ned Barmettler did not hesitate to say, "Unfortunately, Mr. President, the only answer I can give you is negative. Several sightings were reported, yet every one checked out as bogus. All we're sure of is that he hasn't used any of his varied private transportation facilities, appeared in any of his various divisions, visited any banks, withdrawn money from any ATM, or contacted any of the business associates, colleagues or acquaintances interviewed thus far. His CEO in San Francisco is literally at his wits end over the owner's disappearance."

"You've ruled out abduction, anything of that nature?"

“We’ve drawn a total blank,” said Barnettler, “after canvassing every hospital, morgue, and police jurisdiction, not to mention Interpol and other overseas criminal police organizations and intelligence services requesting international aid.”

“In that case,” said The President, “start exercising your imagination, Ned. Put Dysart at the top of your most-wanted list, paste his picture on every billboard and milk carton from coast to coast, do whatever you think it may take to locate the man. A crying need exists to learn his intentions prior to the upcoming negotiations before I can so much as *think* about acting on the toxic legislation that’s burning a hole in my desk. Dysart’s an icon, a legend his legions of employees have the brass to call The Stockholder, which always strikes me as immoral and indecent to begin with. It’s also been suggested that his disappearance might be a purposeful ploy on his part. The man’s locked his empire in a vault, taken the key with him and left behind no one able to speak in his stead. He’s found a hole to hide in, and pulled it in after him.”

His expression rueful, The President subsided. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to get carried away. I realize you’re doing your utmost. Stay on top of the hunt personally, Ned. Find him!. We have a desperate need to establish common ground on which to open negotiations, something more vital than most of you may realize” To the assembled cabinet, he said, “Now then, who else has bad news for me? Paul, anyone . . .?”

Halfway around the long table, Energy Secretary Schaeffer unburdened himself. “I’ve no wish to alarm you unnecessarily, Mr. President, but a middle-management acquaintance in DT’s Energy Division told me in confidence his CFO has tasked a team of accountants and attorneys to constantly review and update a comprehensive list of nuclear fusion expenditures from inception up to and including current efforts here and in the Moon.”

The President had for some time been leery of Schaeffer’s career-long association with the petrochemical industry and its allies, and now, were nationalization to become a reality, Department of Energy’s importance would quintuple, and the elderly appointee’s ambition to see his domain and position balloon was inescapable. He regarded Schaeffer’s statement with latent suspicion, asked why an accounting procedure had raised a red flag.

“What’s disturbing to me,” replied Schaeffer, “is . . . Simply stated, Mr. President, if you decide to sign the bill into law I’m sure Dysart means to broadcast the sums involved to the four winds, inform the taxpaying public what it might someday cost them to recompense DT for its enormous investment.”

“Someone else mentioned that to me,” declared the Treasury Secretary. “I make it an empty scare tactic, Mr. President. You might say it’s the only arguing point Dysart actually has.”

“What level of sums are we talking about?”

“The total,” enlightened Schaeffer, “increases daily, in fact hourly. By now it approaches a significant percentage of the national debt.”

“Mr. President, I doubt whether much weight can be placed on the dollar and cents issue,” consoled SecTreas. “We can always dole out tax credits for the next century and a half to minimize whatever sums may eventually be negotiated.”

“Um, yes . . .” Looking even less happy than when the meeting convened, The President turned to the stern-featured gentleman seated on his left. “John, wisely or unwisely as it may become, the Congress chose to peg the rationale of the funding bill and its infamous rider as a

measure vital to national defense. The country and much the rest of the world is in an uproar over a rationale which ties fusion technology to Homeland Security, DoD and associated intel activities. On the face of it, that certainly does seem a shallow basis for what some are calling the outright theft of a fusion plum the Congress seems determined to pluck from Dysart's remarkably lucrative private grove. What manner of solid evidence can you come up with that will assure the dissenters why nationalization is critical to the nation's present and future security?"

Trying hard not to sound defensive, SecDef haltingly extolled the virtue of seizing government control of a theoretically limitless energy source. He described nuclear fusion's coming role in the facile, economical extraction of hydrogen from methane and other sources to power not only spacecraft propulsion systems, but military ground, air and seaborne vehicles. He lauded the concept of equipping future naval vessels with fusion-power plants, substituting the new technology for antiquated fission reactors, perhaps as well refitting certain seaworthy vessels currently in commission. In the civilian arena, he spoke of desalinating seawater in volume to alleviate desertified farmlands, and provide utility services in the remote military staging areas of war zones. Growing more verbose, his enthusiasm began feeding upon itself.

"Enough, John!" The President lifted his hand to still the outpouring. "I'm afraid you've listed usages readily available for contracted and subcontracted fulfillment by Dysart Technologies. I need something much better, a written justification of the national security angle, and I want it on my desk no later than noon tomorrow. Coordinate with Ed in Homeland Security. No excuses on this, John. I want a very thorough catalog of every reason in the book, every advantage you and your staff can think of, but absolutely no exaggeration of any kind, so take care not to invent any spurious reasons. You and Ed must make sure it's told exactly as it is, period."

"Yes, Mr. President."

The harried chief executive appraised the attendees collectively. "Now then, I would like an earful of sterling counsel from each of you. Give me your considered opinions, pro and con, about what should be done with this fusion albatross the Congress has lovingly hung around my neck." He directed a meaningful look at the Vice President, who upon close inspection seemed frozen into the polished tabletop.

The varied opinions expressed were inconclusive at best, and overtly patronizing at worst. Nothing original or worthy of bearing any type of fruitful resolution to the chief executive's quandary was forthcoming. SecState earned a frigid stare from The President with a remark intimating that it would be a truly magnificent coup for this and all succeeding administrations to have the nuclear fusion bonanza under its thumb.

After all the cabinet members had been heard from, The President leaned forward, rested his elbows on the table, steepled his fingers in a prayerful pose, bowed his head and pondered. Silence reigned for a number of heartbeats.

"We've apparently come full circle," he said at last, "and landed exactly where we took off. Thank you all for hurrying over here on short notice. I mean to take each of your suggestions under advisement."

Swinging around again, the president aimed an accusative forefinger at the FBI director. "Ned," he directed, "find Lyman Dysart for me! Disburse your agents nationwide, canvass the

country door-to-door, dig into every trash heap and look under every manhole cover. Do whatever you think necessary, and *find* him.”

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Pangs of nausea compounded by disorientation assailed Lyman Dysart. Encumbered in a government issue pressure-suit technicians at Kennedy Space Center had nonchalantly sealed him into, and pretended to briefly teach him to use, he felt like the clumsy tyro he was. Woefully inept at handling himself under microgravity, he nevertheless made an effort to do as directed, managing to pull himself hand over hand along the safety line of the umbilical tube connecting the co-orbiting shuttle and the USAF MilSat Space Station.

“Welcome aboard, sir.” A corporal in a loose-fitting blue jumpsuit took hold of “Mining Engineer Fiesler’s” gauntlet to steady him coming through the hatchway. Led swimmingly into a small compartment, Dysart allowed the enlisted man to open his faceplate lens, remove the suit’s headpiece and assist the newcomer in desuited. “We’re surprised to see you, sir. We were expecting the repair crew, but there was no word of a civilian being aboard the shuttle.”

In keeping with his adopted persona, Lyman tried to sound breathlessly unsure of himself, something that required very little acting ability. “Thank you. Being here surprises me much more than you.”

“First timer? Getting used to freefall hits every newbie hard. Only way to get used to handling no-weight is to bite the bullet and sweat it out.” The corporal finished peeling “the old gray-haired gent” out of his vacuum gear. “Lieutenant Commander Chase wants a word with you soon’s you feel more like yourself. Want to rest up a bit, that’s okay. We had three civilians come through not long ago, all fairly antsy when they first came aboard. It wore off in a few hours, and it’ll be like that for you.”

“A lieutenant commander?” inquired Lyman. “A naval officer?”

“Yessir. MilSat’s staffed by a tri-service crew. You’ll like our CO; he’s the best.”

“The absence of up and down, and this neverending queasiness make me . . . I’m sure I’ll feel better shortly, and not keep the commander waiting. First I would like a chance to, uh, pull myself together.”

“No problem. Relax and take it easy. I’ll check on you in a while. Yell if you need a squeezebottle of water, or want to choke down a horse pill that’ll settle your stomach.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that, but I’m sure medication won’t be necessary.”

Alone in the compartment, Lyman clung to an overhead safety bar, sure that apprehension over what might come next had contributed to his gradually receding nausea. The notion of a solitary trajectory to lunar orbit encased in vacuum gear, and worse packed in what Ralphs had termed ‘suspension,’ was enough to make anyone’s stomach turn. It struck him that his disappearance ruse might have been a serious error. He dismissed the notion at once.

The corporal came back sooner than Lyman had anticipated. Hearing the civilian say he felt much more like himself, he ushered him into another, larger compartment.

If not for the gold oak leaves adorning the collar of his blue jumpsuit, and a pocket patch spelling LCDR Chase, Lyman knew he might have mistaken MilSat’s commanding officer for just another crewman.

“I’d ask you to have a seat, Mr. Fiesler,” said officer cordially, “but under microgravity it seems inappropriate. Have you been made comfortable aboard?”

"Indeed, Commander. I also very much enjoyed the ride up here."

"Good," the other said. "General Slosson had your personal data transmitted, including the results of your physical. You appear to be in excellent health, a huge plus all things considered. You also seem more calm, cool and collected than I expected."

"In my mining career," lied Dysart, "I have been involved in more than one incident that demanded remaining calm."

The officer's underlip curled respectfully. "Better still," he said, continuing to evaluate Lyman. "Out here avoiding panic is the most valuable asset one can own."

"My only qualms," said Lyman, "come from the haste prescribed for lunar transit. Thoughts of riding in a pilotless drone are particularly disturbing."

"Oh, that!" scoffed the CO. "Forget it, Mr. Fiesler. I wouldn't ask anyone under my command to do anything I'd refuse to do myself, and certainly no civilian. You had no way of knowing, but I bilged that harebrained notion upon reading the transmittal."

Relief washed through Lyman. What remained of the residual queasiness sloughed away. "Bilged, sir . . . ?" Although the term was familiar, Lyman felt it prudent to question the usage.

Chase smiled. "An old saltwater navy expression for trashing something."

"Oh, I see. You can't imagine," said Lyman with genuine feeling, "how delighted I am to hear the news, and surprised as well. According to General Slosson, the Pentagon had concurred with his request to fly me to the Moon in an unpiloted drone."

"True," said the officer, a touch of whimsy apparent in the way he said it. He went on to explain how armchair brass in comfortable E-Ring offices tended to forget how they gained access to the armchairs. In a more serious vein, he recounted the waxing pressure USAF was enduring over the helium-three delivery delay, and why it was critical to launch the next shipment as close after scheduled date as possible. He informed "Fiesler" that the specialists ascending with him in the shuttle were due to effect inboard and outboard MilSat repairs, but now their assignment had changed. They would first replace a pair of faulty electronic units aboard the boxcar slated to carry a USAF crew to the Moon in roughly seventy hours.

Again Lyman feigned ignorance. "Boxcar . . . ?"

"A common nickname for the blunt-ended birds exclusively used for space-to-space transit." Wearing a self-satisfied expression, Chase went on to relate how he had haggled with the "dirtside brass" over the prospect of injecting into trajectory anyone sealed in a pilotless drone. "After two exchanges, I did get kind of hot about it," he said. "Approval was finally granted to do it my way. The boxcar's black boxes will take only hours to install and re-calibrate. You and a half-dozen personnel rotating to lunar duty should be on your way in ten or twelve hours. Then it'll be roughly three days in trajectory, and touch-down a few hundred meters from the Palus Somni Command Center. My re-routing won't get you there as fast as the brass and politicians would like, but it's the best and safest transit we could arrange."

Lyman heaved a theatrical sigh. "Thank you, Commander. You've made me the happiest man on earth . . . Oh, that doesn't sound quite right in the here and now."

Chase said, "Not while bobbing around in this strung-together collection of tin cans. Enjoy your time aboard, Mr. Fiesler. Ask the corporal to steer you to one of the forward

compartments; the view from there is spectacular. Someone will come collect you when it's time for breakfast, lunch, dinner, whatever's up next. Time of day doesn't mean a whole lot to us."

The CO had been correct. Strapped blindly in an acceleration couch during ascent, orbital injection and maneuvering to rendezvous with MilSat, Lyman was stunned by his first glimpse of the immense, cloud-draped planet rolling slowly beneath him. From orbit, the world looked as if it were "out" in space, not "below" orbiting MilSat.

Fascinated by the globe's cloud-wreathed majesty, he remembered to breathe again. *The CO should mind his choice of words*, he thought. The term "spectacular" paled to insignificance when it came to describing the rumbling planet's majesty. It was a truly incredible panorama, especially when viewed from a godlike perspective.

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The intercom on Benjamin Clay's desk chimed three times. Engaged in earnest conversation with Martin Calvo, the CEO finished what he was saying before opening the circuit. "Yes, Mag?"

His executive assistant surprised him by announcing a call from the office of Vonex International Board Chairman Reichert.

"You're joshing!" Clay refused to accept the call.

"The gentleman is terribly insistent, sir." Maggie sounded troubled. "He claims it to be a matter of life and death."

Ben cast an inquiring glance Calvo's way.

Marty shrugged. "Strange, yet it might prove interesting."

"Damned doubtful," said Clay, not relishing the notion of speaking to Reichert or any of his henchmen. Unable to imagine what could be gained or lost, he said, "Put him through, Maggie. If it's Reichert himself, Marty can help me show the stout, self-important gentleman his place."

The image that jelled in the phone's display, however, was unfamiliar. "Mr. Clay," began Aaron Beebe, "I hope you will forgive my white lie. I was desperate to get in touch with you, so much so that a ruse was necessary." The lean, fine-featured attorney wore rimless spectacles, with the left lens opaqued as a result of his eye injury. "I'm sure you know who I am, sir."

"You, sir," declared Clay, frost riming his diction, "have bulldozed your way into gaining my ear. Now that you have it, what can I do for you that I will no doubt have no intention of doing?"

"You will do yourself a large favor," said Beebe, his sarcasm unalloyed, "by listening instead of talking. You were once a senior partner in one of New York's most prestigious law firms. You should have no trouble understanding that what I'm about to disclose is in the nature of a privileged communication."

"Like any first-year law student.," said the exasperated CEO, "I've heard rumors of certain restrictions pertaining to privileged communications."

"Have I your assurance that this landline is secure?"

"Secure as modern technology can make it. As for listening, why bother when you persist in talking but don't *say* anything? Come to the point, if you have one."

"Are you alone, sir?" inquired Beebe.

"No, sir, I am not along!" said Clay, his exasperation mounting. "Here with me is none other than Security Director Martin Calvo, our answer to the midget assassin your Vonex godfather dispatched to murder Mr. Dysart."

"Bear with me," requested Beebe. "Both of you should be aware that I resigned my position at Vonex immediately after the . . . accident, although I've stayed in contact with more than one former associate. Less than two hours ago, I learned that Reichert's investigators had learned Mr. Dysart's ultimate destination."

Clay sat straighter in his chair. "And where might that be?"

"The Moon," declared Aaron Beebe. "Reichert has convinced himself Mr. Dysart means to hold hostage his entire lunar mining venture and its invaluable product. My Vonex 'godfather,' to borrow your term, has initiated a crash program aimed at stopping him before he can delay or disrupt the nationalization of fusion technology."

## TWENTY-SIX Hare and Hounds

Frustrated by the lack of progress, Belkin Reichert pounded a fist on his desk. "Damn Smith! He's either dead, or he's disappeared precisely when I need him most." The chairman had been out of sorts ever since being informed that Smith's phone number was no longer in service, his e-mail address was invalid, and he was no longer living at his former Manhattan address.

"I suspect he's been done away with," said the interim security director.

"Possibly, though I doubt it. Smitty is a predator," said Reichert, "not a victim." He aggressively requested the latest report.

The other consulted his notes. "A significant item at Kourou CSG in Guiana interested our people, who believed they might have turned up a lead on —"

"What's this . . . CSG?"

The security man's brow wrinkled. "The initials of some French name, sir." Dreading the possible humiliation of mispronouncing the launch site identity, he spelled out, C-e-n-t-r-e S-p-a-t-i-a-l-e G-u-y-a-n-a-i-s. "But after checking it out," he continued, "they confirmed the ship's normal crew complement, plus a pair of French scientists who had undergone astronaut training."

"That's solid information?"

"I believe so, yes. Alcantara on Brazil's east coast," informed the other, "reported no manned flights for the past two weeks, nor any scheduled for months." Running through the rest of the list, he announced it also true at either Hammaguir or San Marco on Africa's opposite coasts, nor were any such launches scheduled at Kagoshima or Tanegashima in Japan. He concluded by announcing that Russia had no manned flights in preparation from either Plesetsk or Baikonur, while as always China was totally secretive about all space ventures.

"And our domestic facilities: Kennedy, Vandenberg, the base out in the Mojave?"

"Edwards is landlocked, Mr. Chairman. Besides, it's used exclusively for aircraft and commercial sightseeing flights — extreme altitude airplane rides. Vandenberg, north of Santa Barbara, is restricted to launching vehicles over the Pacific in a southerly direction, not the equatorial path leading to any of the space stations. It would be unlikely and uneconomical to —"

"Yes, yes, yes," rattled the chairman impatiently. "What about Kennedy, or Cape Canaveral, whatever the big Florida base is called on Wednesdays?"

"It was the first space operations center we contacted. Much like Kourou, the recently launched flight carried replacements up to AISS and —"

"To *where*?"

"The Augmented International Space Station, Mr. Chairman. But that departure took place weeks before Dysart vanished. Checking out the on-board complement disclosed the names of seven veteran astronauts, all of them civilians."

"How about the military side of Kennedy?"

Looking uncomfortable, the other said the investigators in Florida had been brushed off by USAF. "The military keeps their launches and flight personnel under tight wraps, sir."

"Security nonsense!" Reichert made the indictment sound like a curse. "I'll ring Senator Burton, see if he can peel back the wrapping and let us have a peek at the crew rosters. We can't afford to miss any bets. The second you're advised of anything even mildly suspicious, let me know immediately. Should a clue worth following pop up, I'll alert Ned Barmettler, get him and his people involved."

"The FBI Director?"

Reichert nodded. "We've done Ned major favors in the past, and quid pro quo is the man's middle name. We spoke briefly yesterday. He said the White House was all over him like flies, insisting that Dysart be found at *any* cost. We simply must learn what venue Dysart hopes to use getting into space. As you know, I went up there myself not long ago. Training for the ordeal is no piece of cake, let me tell you. It takes two weeks, so we should have time to find him."

"Mr. Chairman, I hope you'll pardon me for reminding you, but . . . Your theory about Dysart trying to reach his lunar property is, well . . . That's all it is, a theory, sir, based entirely on inference and speculation."

"So you might think," replied Reichert tartly. "A major ingredient you had no way of learning about strongly reinforced my . . . 'inferential' speculation. Years ago, that supercilious bastard sat in on more than one of my poker sessions. I know Lyman Dysart's mind and heart. He's daring by nature, and on occasion a risk-taker of the first water that turns into a berserk, go-for-broke madman. I'm certain we're on the right track. He can't be heading anywhere the Moon, mark me! He's desperately trying to get there any way he can."

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Aboard the boxcar in trajectory, "Mining Engineer Ernst Fiesler" gradually became acclimated to the constant, unrelenting freefall sensation. He had unwittingly risked exposure near the end of his first full "day" aboard, when a crewman had asked if he cared to take a sponge bath before retiring. He had accepted the invitation without considering the lack of privacy aboard a spacecraft. His insteps secured in fixed, slipperlike appliances affording stability while bathing under microgravity, he'd been energetically scrubbing his neck and had inadvertently dislodged the gray-streaked "Fiesler" hairpiece. The slip, coupled with his hurried adjustment of the wig, had earned suspicious, sidelong glances from a crewman using the communal lavatory cubicle.

"Call it vanity," he had quipped, forcing a little laugh, grimacing in a fashion suggesting some conspiracy underway. "At my age, I'm afraid baldness is setting in."

“Uh-huh.” His opinion of civilians not all that high among crewmen, the other had finished washing up, keyed a blast of warm air to dry his hands, and exited the lavatory compartment.

Vowing to be more careful, Lyman pulled himself feet-first into a padded sleeping bag attached to the aft bulkhead of the compact cubicle he shared with a crewman whose duty cycle was eight hours on, eight hours off.

As far as he could tell, there was little if anything to do in trajectory other than count the hours. He drifted off wondering what “duties” his designated roommate actually performed during his eight-hour watch.

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Major General Slosson did not attempt to conceal his irritation. Determined to maintain an outwardly cool professional air despite his intense dislike of the aggressive attitude demonstrated by a pair of FBI special agents who insisted on asking the same question over and over again. Unable to do otherwise, he solemnly repeated the familiar mantra consisting of the same answer they had already heard.

“Gentlemen, as I keep telling you launch schedules and military personnel assignments are classified. In order to obtain access to restricted data, as I have explained more than once, you must take up the matter with the Department of Defense. Also, please understand that unless it is amended or revoked, I have no choice but to comply with security regulations of long standing.”

“General,” admonished the more provocative of the pair, “we speak for Director Barmettler on a national security issue of extreme urgency.”

“I am fully aware of that, sir.”

“We were told,” interjected the second FBI agent, whom Slosson had judged to be one of the bureau’s numerous attorneys, “that Senator Burton called and cleared the matter with you.”

“Perhaps he believed he did,” said Slosson. “I tried to impress upon the senator the identical fact I have explained to you gentlemen: classified data is classified. He acted agitated when I assured him that without written approval I did not have the authority to disclose classified information to civilians.”

The lawyerly special agent and his partner exchanged glances. Affronted by Slosson’s obstinate refusal to divulge the information they sought, they said nothing in the way of appreciation for his efforts, nor did they apologize for bothering him, and left his office without another word.

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“Myron, be of good cheer,” said Jean-Marie. “Help is on the way.”

“About time,” mumbled Cromwell, yawning. “Any particular reason for cheerfulness, or are you just trying to save me from suicide?”

“Mssr Ralphs called while you were napping and filled me in on the latest.”

“Uh-huh. As a wild-ass guess,” declared Myron, “current goings-on in the real world probably mean Gerry’s been green-lighted to dispatch the replacement crew.”

“A better than mediocre guess,” said the director, “but no. Try again.”

“Sorry, I’ve run out of guesses.”

"We shall soon be welcoming a surprise visitor," informed Boucher. "A USAF boxcar in trajectory as we speak has aboard a mining expert who has promised to assist you in solving the, ahem! technical problem responsible for delaying the helium-three shipment."

"Well, hoo-ray!" Curious, if not yet thoroughly awake, Myron stared blankly at the director. "Finished talking in riddles? If so, break down and say what you mean."

"According to our esteemed colleague in Florida," said the director, "a highly respected mining engineer named Ernst Fiesler will shortly arrive in our lonely habitat. Gerry said you supposedly knew and admired the gentleman, having once worked with him in Canada."

"You don't say."

"Ah, but I *do* say," insisted Jean-Marie.

Cromwell's puzzlement deepened. "Closest I can come to an 'Ernst' in Calgary," he said after brief reflection, "is Ernie Phillips, a straw-boss who worked hard to drive us worker bees batty. Ernie was no 'mining engineer,' believe me. But it excites me no end to hear someone's coming to help solve a hairy technical problem we don't have. What the hell's going on, Jean-Marie?"

"Wish I knew. Gerry kept the transmission too short for idle conversation. Other than an after-the-fact repeat of Lyman's hasty instruction to get Francke and the other men aboard the boxcar soonest, Ralphs advised me to meet the incoming boxcar at touch-down and bring Mr. Mining Engineer Fiesler directly to the habitat *avec toute la rapidité* so that he can get to work immediately."

"Makes no sense. What's your take on this ditsy business?"

"There's not a clue I can put my finger on," said Boucher. "Feel free to let your overactive imagination run wild, and perhaps tell me what *you* make of it."

Cromwell pondered at length. "Only thing I can come up with is . . . There's no particular reason, but I catch a whiff of our scheming Stockholder buried somewhere in this out-of-bed development. Except it's tougher than a two dollar steak to figure what possible use he could hope to make by sending 'help' our way, especially help from some mining engineer I may know real well, but have never heard of."

"You confirm my own suspicion," Boucher said. "If I know Lyman, in no way would he be inclined to allow the current cross-purposes of DT and the American government deteriorate further without acting in some dramatic fashion, or perhaps some truly radical fashion."

"Uh-huh," said Myron, trying to sound blasé, above it all. "Whoever and whatever this Fiesler turns out to be, with only thee and me rattling around in the habitat a third face will be kind of welcome."

"There is of course that aspect. We shall wait to see what we shall see, eh?"

"Did Gerry mention when our mining savior's due to ground?"

"Ralphs said he was at Kennedy day before yesterday and observed the lift-off. Touch-down here at the landing site will depend on how long our . . . 'savior' had to stay aboard MilSat before securing a ride. Gerry related how earnest and exaggerated he had to make his extreme urgency sales pitch when seeking command approval to dispatch the fellow at Kennedy. The boxcar should arrive in, oh, twenty or thirty hours, give or take. I think you might try convincing

Palus Somni operations we're sitting here on a nest of fire ants, waiting in an extremely anxious state for help to arrive, and possibly obtain an arrival estimate."

Myron yawned again. "I'll pulse the blue suits, see what they have to say."

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Bored with the static shipboard environment during his second "day" in trajectory, Lyman tried to remain inconspicuous, and stay out of everyone's way. The boxcar's close confines, however, made rubbing elbows with crewmen unavoidable. The rankers tended to ignore him unless he asked a question, or made a tentative conversational overture. The two junior officers aboard were generally more cordial, less standoffish than the crewmen.

After what passed for "lunch" — pre-packaged, dry-frozen rations — the first-lieutenant who had assigned Lyman to share quarters with a crewman swam into the compartment, arrested his flight by one-handedly snagging a padded handhold attached to the overhead. "Captain told me to ask if there's anything you need, Mr. Fiesler."

"No, not a thing. Please tell him I appreciate the courtesy, and thank him for inquiring."

"Not a whole lot to do in trajectory," said the officer on a note of mild apology.

"Come to think of it," said Lyman, "I could use one small favor."

"Name it, sir."

"I've spent most of my career," said Dysart, "in coal recovery. But I confess to lacking a detailed knowledge of the methods and processes used in this lunar strip-mining effort I've been called upon advise. Does informative data exist here aboard ship relating to the recovery and processing of ore . . . Pardon me, I should have said nuclear fuel recovery?"

"Files in the database," informed the officer, "cover a mixed bag of miscellaneous data, mostly refresher 'how to' material. Instruction on what to do, and what not to do, during lunar duty, sort of a prep for new hands on what to expect. The index does label one section Selene Pilot Project, but I've never had any reason to open those files. Think that might be what you're looking for?"

"Possibly, Lieutenant. Would you mind showing me how to use a viewer?"

"No problem, sir. Is now a good time?"

"If it isn't too much trouble."

The officer swam ahead, leading Dysart along the companionway freefall safety line to a small compartment housing two fixed-in-place computer terminals. He showed Lyman how to bring up the material in question.

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"Come in, gentlemen." His veneer of professional courtesy wearing thin, General Slosson voiced the invitation stiffly.

The same pair of aggressive FBI men who had visited his office earlier made it a point to remain standing. "General," declared the lawyerly special agent, "at ten o'clock sharp you will receive a very important phone call. Can we put our business on hold until then?"

"If you wish." Slosson glanced at the wall chronometer. "In the meantime, I hope you'll excuse me. Something here requires my attention."

"Certainly, sir."

Exactly eleven minutes later an aide tapped on the door. "Come," said Slosson, folding closed the red-bordered cover on a report he'd been reading.

"FBI Director Barmettler is on the military channel, sir," announced his aide. "Said he was with someone who's very eager to speak with you."

"Very well." *The cavalry's arrived*, thought the general.

However, the image that appeared in the flat-panel display was not the individual Slosson had expected to see. He surged out of his chair as if electrified, came to attention behind his desk.

"Good day, General. I assume you recognize me."

"Of course, Mr. President."

"Are Director Barmettler's agents with you?"

"They are, sir."

"Good. In my capacity as commander-in-chief," The Man said, measuring his words, "I hereby countermand the standing order designating all military flights and personnel classified. This executive directive will apply on a temporary basis, and only in this singular instance, and in none other. Is that perfectly clear, General?"

"Understood, Mr. President."

"Good," repeated The President. "General, I am ordering you to turn over to the FBI agents every shred of evidence and background information on the civilian who may or may not have accompanied what I have been told constituted a repair crew dispatched to MilSat during a recent launch. Is that also perfectly clear?"

"Fully understood, sir."

"Thank you, General Slosson. Your cooperation is appreciated. I'll sign off now, and let you get back to duty. Carry on!"

"It's been a privilege to speak with you, Mr. President."

"Thank you, General. The pleasure was entirely mine." The display panel faded to black.

Slosson sagged into his chair. Staring numbly at the FBI special agents, he muttered, "I credit the Bureau with a truly outstanding virtue. You Fibbies don't screw around arguing with middlemen, you go straight to the top."

Forty minutes later, the man Slosson suspected of being a lawyer said, "Height and weight are on the money." Again comparing the data from "Ernst Fiesler's" USAF physical exam with the visual evidence, a vintage flat-photo of Lyman Dysart imported from the FBI files he asked his partner, "What do you think?"

"Block out the gray hair," said his companion, using the heel of his hand to demonstrate, "and the features match almost to a tee. Could be him."

"I believe it is."

"And I think you're correct," said his partner. "To be on the safe side, we should run the iris patterns and fingerprints through headquarters."

"We will, but it will take time. Doubt if the director will consider it necessary."

General Slosson hung back, fidgeting and fuming, watching and listening. Utterly beside himself, he said, "You're suggesting I was suckered? You really believe the guy who owns the whole bleeding DT empire was posing as this . . . this Fiesler?"

"General, you said Ralphs was the DT executive charged with lunar crew training. The association strongly reinforces the credibility of this graphic evidence."

"But you're not . . . You surely can't mean Fiesler actually *is* Lyman Dysart."

“At the moment, not with one thousand percent certainty, but for our purposes a strong suspicion is enough. Thank you very much, General. We’ll be on our way.”

The instant his office door closed behind the FBI men, Slosson punched the number of Gerrard Ralphs’ hotel suite. Red-faced, steam figuratively venting from his ears, he was breathing heavily, ready to rain buckets on the training manager’s parade.

The phone rang eight times at the other end. No one answered.

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Reichert caged his office telephone with an exultant flourish. “Got him!” he said. “Ned’s people found the son-of-a-bitch stowed away aboard a Moon-bound ship.”

“Congratulations, sir! You had it right all along.”

Visibly ebulliently, the chairman said, “An agreement’s been reached between the White House and DoD. Dysart will be shipped back here on the first available . . . I wonder what in the world Ned meant saying . . . Sounded damned peculiar. Why would anyone in his right mind refer to a spaceship as a boxcar?”

## TWENTY-SEVEN Unmasked

Gerrard Ralphs put through the one and only phone call he was permitted to make at five-twenty in the morning, Florida time. Forced to use a landline to contact DT CEO Benjamin Clay, he had trouble getting through to Maggie, who told him her boss was in conference, and promised to have him call back when the meeting broke up.

“No can do,” objected Ralphs. “I’m in FBI custody, allowed one call only, this one. It’s super-critical for me to speak with Ben ASAP, no ifs, ands or buts.”

Maggie sounded incredulous. “Federal arrest . . . ?”

“Sad but true. They picked me up yesterday, called me ‘a subject of interest’ in an investigation. Give you three guesses who and what’s being investigated, or why.”

“Stay on the line, Mr. Ralphs. I’ll put you on hold and try to summon Ben.”

“Thank you. Best hurry; the feds may cut me off.”

When informed, Clay responded without asking the urgency to be defined. The crew-training manager wasted no words explaining the details of the con game he and The Stockholder had played on Major General Slosson. He described his subsequent detainment in very few words.

“The Moon? He’s actually headed to Luna?”

“Well on his way as we speak. I’ll spell out the details later.”

The congenitally unflappable CEO confronted the situation with customary calmness, and asked Ralphs where he was being held.

“The Orlando FBI office.”

“What have you told them?”

“Name, rank and serial number, period. I clammed up, admitted to nothing except for being sore as hell about the hassle.”

“Perfect, Ralphs! You did exactly right. Have you been charged with violation of a specific federal statute?”

“Negative. Held for questioning is all I was told.”

"Even better," declared Clay. "They can make that stick only long enough for you to be in need of a shave. Sit tight, say nothing. I'll have first-rate legal counsel from my old firm's Tallahassee office there in a matter of hours. What do you think is really the bottom line to holding you? The main reason I'm aware of, but what else, if any?"

"Obvious where the heat originates," said Ralphs. "I overheard one of the agents who brought me in tell his partner General Slosson wanted to have me shot, and Dysart, too, once they drag him back to Florida. I imagine by now you know all about our beloved Stockholder's artful dodger escapade."

"Nothing more than you've told me," said Clay. "The Vice President's obnoxious chief of staff called again early this morning. The arrogant pipsqueak thinks *he's* the VIP. When he started to read me the riot act over Lyman's delinquency, I hung up on him for the second time."

"The powers that be," said Ralphs, "are in a world-class hissy fit over Lyman's fancy footwork. I'm small fry, Ben; they know damn well hauling me in on general principles won't net them anything. Catch is, right now I'm the only dupe artist available for questioning."

"I make that a true summation," said the CEO. "As I said, hang in there for a spell, and don't fret. Say nothing until legal help arrives. I'll call soon's I hang up, set the gears in motion."

Sounding complacent, Ralphs said, "I won't be going anywhere."

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Engrossed in watching a computer-graphics animation depicting the transfer of first-process regolith to an expansive holding area in the open mare cleared of dust and gravel down to bedrock. The accompanying voice-over announced it the area where pay dirt was stored to await separation and segregation. Recognizing the narrator's style, Lyman silently applauded the spirited ops manager's matter-of-fact delivery, judging it a function of his thorough knowledge of the subject. Cromwell's straightforward explanations might have lacked nuance or pertinent digressions, but made the material easy to comprehend for anyone with even a modest technical inclination.

He found it more difficult to follow Dr. Francke's recitation of the complex method that induced volatile and placid pay dirt to separate out during the fluctuating peaks and valleys of intense surface temperature swings from very hot to extreme cold. He heard the hatch open behind him, and assumed one of the crewmen had entered to use the other computer terminal.

"Doing your homework, Mr. Dysart?" inquired the boxcar's commanding officer.

A pang of acute dismay shot through Lyman. Though it seemed futile to carry out the Fiesler pretense, faulty as it now might be, he nevertheless vowed to tough it out. "Yes, sir," he said. "The account of operations is enlightening for someone unfamiliar with lunar mining procedures."

"I'm sure it is." The loose blue jumpsuit worn by the CO was indistinguishable from those of the enlisted men save for parallel silver bars embroidered on either side of the collar. Poised in midair, the fingers of his right hand loosely curled around a padded overhead safety bar, the sharp-eyed captain's fixed stare bored holes in Lyman's pretense. He waited patiently for "Fiesler" to say something meaningful.

After a lengthy silence, Lyman said, "I suppose it's a waste of breath to —"

"A total waste, Mr. Dysart," was the curt response. "Please don't."

Never one given to beating a dead horse, Lyman had no choice but to capitulate. "I hope you appreciate the fact that under the present circumstances the deception was unavoidable for someone in my position."

"I don't pretend to know all the circumstances, sir, but I do appreciate your position. Now it will be necessary for you to appreciate *my* position. In more than a dozen years of service, I have seen very few field or flag officers literally fit to be tied over some screwup, but never, ever one in the killing rage Major General Slosson demonstrated a few minutes ago. His transmission literally burned my ears off."

"That bad?"

"Uh, worse than bad," replied the captain. "Judging by what he had to say, or the fire-breathing way he said it, I doubt if he can be blamed for wanting your scalp."

Although his pulse rate had returned a semblance of normalcy, Lyman refused to do penitence. "Blame the province of God and small children, Captain. I refuse to indulge, and hope you agree. What now? Do I spend the rest of the voyage in the brig?"

"Our boxcar," said the other, "doesn't have the luxury of a brig." Speaking in a clipped, assertive manner, the CO made it abundantly clarified the fact that his orders called for holding the "fugitive" incommunicado for eleven-plus hours until touch-down near the Palus Somni massif. The ship would then undergo the fastest possible turnaround. The officers and men completing their duty cycle would board, and their replacements would take up lunar duty. A return trajectory to MilSat would then be initiated with all due haste.

"General Slosson," concluded the CO, "ordered me to make you aware that the Vice President, several cabinet officials, a flock of other assorted politicians, and he himself, will be eagerly awaiting your boot to touch the ground in Florida."

"Now why doesn't that surprise me?" Furious for with himself for *allowing* himself to be trapped in a no-win, no-escape situation, he angrily swept the gray-shot "Ernst Fiesler" wig from his head, flung it at the bulkhead. "At least I can rid myself of that damned thing."

But the CO stretched out, plucked the tumbling hairpiece out of the air. "I would greatly appreciate it, Mr. Dysart, if you wouldn't do that." He extended the wig for Lyman to retrieve. "Do me a kindness, if you will, and wear the rug few hours more."

"Why bother?"

"Because," said the officer, "the order to return you was for your ears alone. The general insisted that, if at all possible, your true identity be kept from the junior officers and enlisted men. You'll make me the happiest man in space if you'll agree to stay in character until touch-down. And when I'm happy, be assured the general will be happy, too. You agreeable?"

His dejection boundless, Lyman muttered, "Going along with the gag? Yes, I suppose so; you deserve better, but it's all I can do, Captain." Holding the hairpiece at arm's length, he regarded it with a jaundiced air, then submissively pulled it on over his own bristly, reddish-blond crewcut.

"I'll thank you in advance for cooperating, Mr. Dysart." The CO shoved himself away from the safety bar, took his leave.

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"Time to suit-up, truck on over to the landing site," announced Cromwell.

Jean-Marie consulted the bulkhead chronometer. "Wisest for you to take the carryall." He referred to the seldom-used, six-passenger tracked vehicle parked adjacent to the habitat's entrance ramp.

"Why bother cranking up the wagon?" Myron wanted to know. "With only a lone passenger to haul back here, what's wrong with a jitney?"

"The passenger in question," observed Jean-Marie, "is a civilian about whom next to nothing is known, including how adept he may be at staying alive in vacuum gear. Riding in an open jitney would expose his uncertainty for more than an hour."

"Oops! That slipped past me. Okay, the carryall it is. Parting," he crooned on his way out the door, "is such sweet sorrow."

"Try not to get lost," advised the director.

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"Without fail," warned a Marine sergeant in the grounded boxcar's airlock service compartment, "first-timers believe moving around on the surface will be a snap. Some find out they're wrong the hard way." After checking the hose connections of "Mr. Fiesler's" vacuum gear per regulations, the non-com assured himself the life-support backpack was properly seated. "In Florida," he added, "safety regs made 'em suit you up during ascent, which is kosher. Walking on the surface here is a whole different stroke. First hurdle we have to cross is a hurdle."

"A what . . . ?" questioned Lyman.

"A hurdle, no kidding. Coming down arse-end first, a boxcar's thruster exhaust before touch-down blows dust into a low, all-around hill we'll have to climb over."

Feeling light on his feet despite the encumbering suit, Lyman shuffled his boots to make a point. "In gentle gravity, climbing a little hill doesn't sound too difficult."

"Once said so myself," the sergeant told him. "Newbies feel light on their feet, frisky. But till you get your Moon legs under you, your sense of balance is a touch out of kilter. Unless you take slow, careful steps at first, get the feel of it, you could tumble, maybe crack your suit's faceplate lens on a rock. That's not, repeat *not* good."

"I'll watch myself," promised Lyman. In his despondent state, he wondered if a sudden, ugly death by explosive decompression might not be preferable to being hauled back to face the music he definitely did not wish to hear.

Clad in military vacuum gear, the boxcar's CO preceded a pair of enlisted men into the cramped confines of the airlock service compartment. "Mr. Fiesler," the captain said, gauging Dysart's readiness to enter vacuum, "the rollagon sent to pick us up is too small to carry all hands at once. You, the sergeant and this pair will head over and become the first load; the rest of us will follow in successive loads. Sergeant," he instructed, "stay close to Mr. Fiesler. Make sure he gets over the berm safely. The ridge of blown dust is soft, the footing tricky for beginners."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Okay, seal-up you two," the CO told the enlisted men who were standing by.

The sergeant made sure the integral transceiver in "Fiesler's" pressure-suit was set to the USAF frequency also shared by Selene Pilot Project personnel, then showed Lyman how to close and secure the faceplate lens of his headpiece. "To get a response in if someone gets in trouble," he said, his transmitted voice sounding artificial, "we stay on the command center frequency."

The inner airlock hatch cycled open. Nudged by the sergeant, “Mr. Fiesler” followed the two non-coms shuffling inside the chamber. The faint whine of pumps scavenging air could be heard the instant the hatch closed on its seals. Lyman felt the suit balloon around him as pressure fell.

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Myron had parked the carryall alongside the USAF rollagon, between the larger tracked vehicle and the irregular low, all-around berm formed by the descending boxcar’s thrusters. Slouched in the driver’s seat, he peered sideways through the carryall’s transpex bubble. The grounded boxcar’s airlock cycle open, revealing a quartet of figures in white vacuum gear. Curious to learn what the so-called mining engineer was all about, he energized the carryall, gently pushed the joystick forward. The vehicle’s cleated tracks dug into the regolith, churning it ahead several meters until it no longer screened the USAF rollagon’s airlock from the grounded boxcar. He punched in a command; the readout turned from low-pressure gray to black as the carryall’s small, one-man lock’s outer hatch cycled open to vacuum.

Obviously adepts, the first pair of pressure-suited figures emerged from the boxcar, turned cautiously in tandem, grasped the flimsy-looking retractable ladder’s handrails with their gauntlets, and backed down the rungs to plant their overboots in the regolith. Crossing the low berm together without hesitation, they made their way toward the USAF rollagon.

A third pressure-suited figure aped the first descenders, pausing at the foot of the ladder to wait for a fourth figure at the head of the ladder.

A vocal command issued from the carryall’s speakers. “Okay, reach back and grab the handrails on both sides. Now lift one boot, feel below for the ladder’s top rung. That’s it, that’s good; you’re on it square. Now the other boot. I’ll coach you all the way down. Hang on to the handrails, take it slow ‘n easy.”

*The tenderfoot, thought Myron, has to be our new helpmate.*

Both white-suited figures slowly moved away from the grounded spacecraft with one holding the inflated arm of the novice’s pressure-suit.

Myron experienced a twinge of nostalgia. The scene reminded him of his own first, awkward stroll on the lunar surface.

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“I can’t see anything.” Lyman blinked repeatedly, squinting against the raw horizontal sunlight reflected blindingly by the rollagon’s white composite body. The glare made the tracked, elongated vehicle’s faded USAF designation and American flag all but invisible.

“Gotcha, sir,” said the sergeant. “Here, let me turn up the polarization in your faceplate lens. There, better now?”

“Yes, fine. Thanks.”

Firmly clutching the articulated elbow of the newbie’s suit, the sergeant guided “Fiesler” toward the low berm of blown dust. “No sweat stepping up; it’s keeping your balance going down the other side that’ll bite you if you’re careless. Berm isn’t steep, just soft, mushy.”

“I can handle it, Sergeant.”

The non-com helped support Lyman when he cautiously stepped up on the berm. Feeling his boots sink into the loose dust, he balanced momentarily atop the low mound. His eyes widened, his heart skipped a beat. Bathed in harsh sunlight, what at first had appeared to be the

USAF rollagon's forward section was now distinguishable as a second, smaller tracked vehicle parked slightly ahead of the military vehicle. The vertical, gaping maw of its one man airlock stood open, and on the chamber's rear wall, he could barely make out . . .

*The Selene logo!*

Stunned, he stood rooted, balanced precariously atop the berm.

Thinking the novice moonwalker had frozen in place, and was reluctant to chance descending, the sergeant's transmitted voice rang hollowly in the headpiece of Lyman's suit. "Easiest, maybe, if I step down first, give you a hand from there. Okay?"

"Yes, that would, uh . . . Good idea, Sergeant."

The instant the non-com lifted his gauntlet from the arm of Dysart's pressure-suit, The Stockholder used both gauntlets and the shoulder of his suit to violently shove the sergeant, sending him sprawling headlong, stirring a small cloud of regolith. Unfortunately, the resultant of his strenuous push caused Lyman to reel backward and sideways. He staggered, stumbled and fell, landing on the suit's right shoulder, semi-cartwheeled in slow motion under mild lunar gravity, and rolled to a clumsy sprawl, his white pressure-suit clouded by lunar dust.

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"What the hell!"

Myron loosed the surprise cry despite an open communications channel, surging halfway out of the carryall's driver seat. He watched in amazement as the white-suited shover clumsily struggled to get his boots back under him. He rose uncertainly, staggered forward two steps, and then started determinedly bounding in erratic zig-zags, coming directly toward Myron in the carryall.

In his frantic haste, the alleged "mining engineer" stumbled and fell again, rolled over and used both gauntlets to levitate himself semi-erect, and awkwardly scrambled toward the carryall. Kicking up gouts of dust in caused by his awkward haste, and plunged headlong into the carryall's evacuated airlock chamber.

Convinced he had taken aboard some exotic variety of weirdo, Myron ignored the excited voices and jabbering cross-talk that suddenly filled the wireless channel. He had no idea what to expect, and played it safe, hurriedly closing and fastening the faceplate lens of his own pressure-suit. Now ten times more curious than before to learn what brand of craziness the "mining engineer" was bent upon perpetrating, he actuated the airlock control.

As the readout showed the airlock outer hatch cycling shut, a commanding voice more strident than the others erupted from the carryall speakers, drowning out the lesser chatter. "Attention, Selene vehicle! Do not move! Stay parked, that is an order! The fugitive you have taken aboard is under military arrest. Depressurize your airlock at once so that he can be retrieved."

Never one to acknowledge authority, let alone kowtow to it, Myron did not respond, instead waiting impatiently for pressures to equalize between the airlock chamber and the vehicle interior's fifty Pascals. The instant the indicator light winked green, he overrode the interlock sequencer, commanding the inner hatch to cycle open.

Whoever he was, the stranger clad in white government-issue vacuum gear liberally dirtied with moon dust all but fell into the carryall with predictable clumsiness, a single shouted word erupting from the speakers: "Drive!"

“Hold it,” said Myron. “You have some explaining to do before —“

“Drive, damm you!” bellowed the stranger, the strength and timbre of his transmitted shout deafening. Fumbling to open the dust-shrouded faceplate lens of his suit, the newcomer used a thick-fingered gauntlet to snatch the graying hairpiece from his head, and tossed it aside with savage joy. “Drive, Myron!” he yelled. “Do it, or by God you going to get the spanking I once promised you!”

Cromwell blanched. “I’ll be double-damned!” he breathed.

“A likely prospect,” said The Stockholder. “Now move this go-cart or else!”

## TWENTY-EIGHT Besieged

A string of insistent chirps and blinking light on the guarded lasercom panel alerted Maggie to an incoming transmission. The CEO was out of his office at the moment, so she went into the executive suite, checked to make sure multi-level encryption firmware was activated, and answered the call in the usual ambiguous manner. “San Francisco.”

Framed by the headpiece of a dust-laden white pressure-suit, The Stockholder’s features glowed in the display. “Hiya, Mag. Put Ben on right quick.”

Maggie’s hand flew to her throat. “M-Mister Dysart . . ? W-what are you doing on the Moon?”

After the transmission lag, Lyman succinctly explained how with only modest success he was trying to stay out of trouble. “We’ll have unwanted visitors on our doorstep shortly. I have a desperate need to speak with Ben now, now, now!”

Maggie told him Clay was somewhere in the tower, where she didn’t know.

“Page my loafing CEO. Do it, Maggie! Gather a posse, send up a flare, do whatever the hell it takes to run Ben to ground. I’ll leave the channel open at this end. You make double-certain he gets on the air the instant you round him up, okay?”

Maggie said, “I surely will, Mr. Dysart.”

Lyman said, “You do good work, Mag; give yourself a raise. Go find him!”

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When Myron ushered him through the habitat airlock, Lyman had still been in an emotional high, slowly coming down from the adrenaline shock of excitement that left him breathless upon spotting an unanticipated avenue of deliverance. Although he hated being inhibited clad in the clumsy government-issue vacuum gear liberally splotted with moon dust, he had refused to pause long enough for Cromwell to help him desuit, and insisted upon being taken directly to the lasercomm terminal, where he had not wasted a word commenting on Jean-Marie Boucher’s expression of open-mouthed amazement.

Concluding his hasty, unsatisfactory transmission to San Francisco, he demanded to know if there was a quick and easy way to secure the habitat airlock against unwarranted entry.

“Uh-uh, afraid no,” denied Myron. “It’s against company regs to shut out some poor bloke with a near empty air bottle, or facing some other life-and-death fire drill.”

“Let me remind you,” declared Dysart, “that I *am* DT, and hereby rescind the regulation. Now *is* there a simple means of barring the door? Tell me, yes or no?”

Only partially recovered from his amazement over Lyman's unheralded appearance, Jean-Marie uttered a soft chuckle.

Irrked for some reason by the director's amusement, Cromwell demanded to learn what had tickled the director's funny bone.

"Your expression," said Jean-Marie, "was worth twice a paltry thousand words."

Myron ignored the reply. "Short of depowering the habitat," he told Lyman, "or welding the hatch shut, there's no easy way to play keep out."

Lyman digested the response. "Probably doesn't matter. One way or another, the military will find a way to get inside." Looking distinctly unhappy, he stretched his torso, rotated his shoulders and tried to fully extend his arms. "Now, Myron, you can help me get shut of this pneumatic straitjacket if you will."

"Sure," said Myron, "but never, for any reason bad-mouth a pressure-suit; it angers the vacuum gods." After unsealing The Stockholder, he did what he could to shorten and simplify the contortions and wriggles required to free him from the cumbersome vacuum gear. De-suiting left Lyman barefoot, wearing only briefs and an undershirt.

"I'll get you a jumpsuit, some footwear." Jean-Marie slipped out of his office.

"What next?" inquired Cromwell.

"Not a thing until Clay calls back," said Lyman. "In the meantime, aim me at the nearest washroom."

"Go right," instructed Myron, indicating the corridor. "Next to last door on your left. I'll haul your gear back to the airlock service compartment for cleaning."

"Good thought, but wait till later. Right now, watch for Clay and yell the instant he shows up in the display. By the way," said Lyman over his shoulder, "you get a bright, shiny gold star on your boot for being there when you were most needed."

Myron grinned. "Any time."

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Engaged in a lag-riddled, back-and-forth lasercomm conversation with the CEO, Lyman was impatiently waiting for the CEO to respond when the habitat airlock-in-use buzzer sounded. He directed a meaningful look at the ops manager. "Go meet our visitors, Myron. Bring them straight here."

"Right." Cromwell breezed out of the director's office.

In the display panel, Clay's expression underwent a subtle transformation. "Do you honestly believe the rule of law has a chance of holding up in Luna? Why should an American citizen 'residing' in what he insists is his very own private lunar 'domain' be eligible for shielding under Posse Comitatus legislation enacted in the wake of Civil War tribulations? Do I have to say it again, Lyman? Absolutely *no* precedent exists for what you're hoping to put across. Zero!"

"Then it's high time for us to establish precedent," argued Dysart. "You can't disagree that helping to set a precedent is an excellent reason for retaining the expensive herd of legal talents in our DT stable? According to Kyle, the law makes no mention of the locale where armed forces harassment is barred. He also told me . . ."

Lyman broke off. "Ben," he said, "the military knocked on the door; they'll be here in Jean-Marie's office any minute now. I'll leave the channel open, and turn off the display; you can

watch and listen to the proceedings, and feel free to speak up if things get dicey. Do your damndest to persuade whoever USAF dispatched that hauling me away under arrest will be a serious violation of the law. Whatever the outcome, I want you and your legal beagles to put your heads together and file umpteen motions, writs, depositions — every variety of paper roadblock they can invent — to throw in the path of allowing them to drag me out of here. Talk turkey to our media friends, too. Threaten to tie the government's nationalization move in loops of figure eight knots, say we'll take the case all the way to the Supreme Court. Hear me, Ben? I'll shut up now, but you keep your ears open, your eyes peeled."

The Stockholder killed the lasercomm display, shuffled across the narrow office in a less than self-assured moonwalk, and took a seat next Boucher viewable by the omni-directional lasercomm eye.

On his best behavior, Myron ushered the boxcar's pressure-suited commanding officer into the cubicle. Behind the captain, a pair of enlisted men clad in military vacuum gear toted megajoule laser rifles at port arms. The three vacuum-protected figures, plus Cromwell, all but filled the director's cramped office cubicle.

"Mr. Dysart, please suit-up," instructed the captain in a monotone. "You will have to come with us now."

Lyman boldly met the officer's brittle gaze. All that he did "at once" was disdain formalities and go on the offensive. "Military personnel are always welcome in my Selene habitat, except when bearing arms. I do *not*," he said in an uncompromising manner, "allow armed men in my temporary residence."

"Mr. Dysart," said the officer, "attempting to draw me into a discussion would be futile. My orders are specific. You will be conducted to the —"

"Captain, your orders call for you to break the law, an extremely serious matter."

There was a two-beat pause. "Excuse me, sir. Say again, please."

"You and the men with you are here to arrest me, isn't that so?" Lyman did his best to make the query sound casual.

"If you wish to put it that way, the answer is affirmative, Mr. Dysart."

"In that event," said Lyman, "I have a citizen's right to know what particular offense I'm being charged with that would under any circumstances warrant a military arrest. In the commission of what specific crime do I stand accused?"

"A hollow question, sir. You are well aware of the reason. You risked injuring one of my crewmen, a sergeant, while foolishly trying to escape from —"

"All I am well aware of," Lyman more forcefully, "is that my purported offense was and is political. I have neither bent nor broken any federal laws, nor for that matter any military laws. Isn't that so, Captain?"

"It's not for me to say, Mr. Dysart."

"A neat sidestep, sir. Would you mind answering my question?"

"The charge," said the officer, flustered by what to him amounted to meaningless repartee, "will be made clear to you in the command center."

"Then I must warn you of the serious consequences that will ensue if you carry out your orders," said Lyman, his manner solemn. "Arresting me at gun point here in my temporary

residence will constitute an unlawful act that may jeopardize not only your military career, but that of your superiors as well.”

“A specious argument at best,” scoffed the officer. “I’m no lawyer, Mr. Dysart, but I’m sure your objection won’t wash. To the best of my knowledge, neither civilian nor military law prohibits Aerospace Forces in a remote locale from acting to —”

“Posse Comitatus,” enunciated Dysart coldly, bringing the officer up short.

“What did you say?”

Lyman framed his response with care, parsing his words.

One of the enlisted men uneasily shifted the laser weapon in his pressure-suit’s gauntlets.

Looking distinctly uncomfortable, the captain cleared his throat. “I’m aware of the statute, Mr. Dysart; its provisions were taught at the academy. I’m also aware that we happen to be over four hundred thousand kilometers from the nearest courtroom, judge, and jury. Military jurisdiction applies here by default in view of —”

“Not at all,” interjected Lyman. “In a sense, you a pair of armed men are here *inside* my temporary home, and I’m the sole owner of Dysart Technologies, including this habitat, everything in it, and all the facilities and equipments pertaining to the vital, ongoing pilot strip-mining program under Dr. Boucher’s direction. For the moment, this *is* my residence, and it is where I intend to stay. For American citizens, the rule of law applies here, there, everywhere. The military has absolutely no authority to arrest, detain or otherwise harass me in my very own domicile.”

At a loss, indecision was written large in the alternate tightening and relaxation of the captain’s jaw muscles. His hard, challenging stare raked Dysart.

“It might be wise,” suggested Lyman, “to contact your superiors for instructions, Captain. I have no desire to see USAF commit what would be an egregious error.”

One thing could be said for the officer: once he made up his mind, all vestiges of indecision vanished. “Very well, Mr. Dysart. Come with us willingly, and you have my promise that you will not to be forced to board ship, or do anything else against your wishes until an authoritative legal opinion has been rendered. Will that be satisfactory?”

“Rendered by what authority?”

Thinking one of his men had spoken out of turn, the captain’s head snapped around, a prelude to voicing a reprimand.

Lyman preempted the utterance. “Captain, I happened to be speaking with DT Chief Operating Officer Benjamin Clay in San Francisco when you and your men burst into my habitat uninvited. The lasercomm channel is still open.”

Tight-lipped, the captain said, “How convenient for you.”

“You’d be wise to discuss the Posse Comitatus statute with Mr. Clay,” said Lyman. “He’s an accredited member of the New York and California Bar Associations, as well as CEO of my company. He will be happy to explain why USAF would be courting disaster if an unlawful arrest were to take place.”

By no means foolish, the boxcar’s commanding officer obviously decided neither his military grade nor experience equipped him to engage in an extended verbal joust with someone

of Lyman Dysart's stature, or enter into an argument with the CEO of his gigantic international company. He said stiffly, "That will not be necessary."

Gesturing curtly, the captain used his eyes to urge the men under his command to file out of the director's office, direct a final scathing glance at Lyman, and shuffled after them.

Minutes later, grinning from ear to ear, Myron said, "Soldier boys all go home chop-chop, Mister Stockholder, sir."

"Never fear, they'll be back," assured Lyman.

## TWENTY-NINE By Executive Order

Over a span of two hours and seventeen minutes, beginning shortly after the rollagon carrying the boxcar CO and his armed men arrived back at the Palus Somni Command Center, the broadband frequency shared by local USAF personnel and Selene Strip-mining Pilot Project operations became jammed with a strident, unceasing jumble of voices. Lyman and Jean-Marie took turns fending off the military demands, terse warnings and several overt threats. Also heard from were a few upper- and middle-echelon government officials who'd used their clout to insist that lasercomm calls on the military channel be patched through from the command center to the Selene habitat.

During a respite in the ceaseless barrage of chatter, unanswered as well as unanswerable pleas, Lyman asked Myron to turn down the volume. Opening the encrypted lasercomm link to San Francisco, he advised the CEO his assistance was badly needed. "USAF and a doz-dozen civilian bigwigs are banging our ears with identical messages asserting that the only duly constituted law in Luna is the Universal Code of Military Justice. One second after I sign off, please have one of your gofers cue the administration high mucky-mucks by giving them this month's codeword, as well as brief instructions on how to make use of our private lasercomm link. Do it, Ben! The military brass actually has no part to play in resolving this tacky situation, but their verbal inundation is driving us bananas. We can't afford to shut the military out altogether, but neither can they be allowed to tune in on any discussions we may enter into with the administration, if and when such should occur. Got it?"

After the transmission lag Ben said calmly, "Understood, Lyman. Consider it done. Since I have your ear, let me fill you in on the current situation down here. I spoke to a close acquaintance on the bench of the Northern California District Federal Court about the legality of invoking Posse Comitatus in Luna. An eminently qualified dispenser of jurisprudence, she naturally refused to spit back an off-the-cuff answer, but promised to look into it and get back to me ASAP. I also had our legal team file a strongly worded complaint about the recent USAF arrest attempt and . . . Oh, yes; nearly forgot. Your pet wordsmith in PR penned an editorial that's bound to rattle a few cages. Ray Kyle also spoke to a former colleague on the Senate Judiciary Committee about the legality of invoking Posse Comitatus in Luna, and is waiting for a response. Our legal staff's ginning up some juicy additional propaganda, too. Global News Services and other media friendlies will soon be spreading the word far and wide."

"Sounds too good to be true," said Dysart after the lag. He cogitated, asked, "Any hints, rumors about the status of nationalization?" and sweated out the lag.

"Nothing significant," responded Clay in time. "Far as anyone can tell, the bill and its infamous rider are starting to gather dust in the Oval Office."

"Oh, also," said Dysart, "fill me in at once if any major changes take place. I'm beat to a frazzle, dying for some shuteye. We'll talk again later, Ben."

Lyman switched off the lasercomm link, rubbed his eyes and sat quietly for a minute semi-spellbound by a subdued cacophony of command center requests and directives issuing from the habitat speakers. Rousing, he said, "Myron, turn off that damned channel!"

"We're supposed to do that."

"Kill it temporarily. I'm in desperate need of a nap. You and Jean-Marie have to stay alert for any visitors who might wander by and try to bluff their way inside."

"Whatever keeps you smiling, Mr. Stockholder."

"I'm too tired to smile." Physically beat to a nub, his psychic energy at very low ebb, Dysart fell into a bunk in the deserted crew quarters. He slept soundly for three hours and twelve minutes until Jean-Marie roused him by gently shaking his shoulder. "There's a lasercomm call you may want to take, Lyman."

Dysart rolled his legs off the bunk, sat up slowly, knuckled his eyes and asked which particular self-important personage was on the horn.

"A gentleman of preemptive importance."

"The Man himself . . . ?"

A sober nod. "None other. I suspect you've been waiting to hear from him."

"Suspicion confirmed," said Dysart. Reenergized by the news, he gained his feet, and stretched. "Any other important calls while I snoozed?"

"Only a few dozen: the Vice President's impudent chief of staff, Energy Secretary Schaeffer twice, FBI Director Barmettler, the CIA's deputy director for intelligence, Senator Burton and an unending slew other dignitaries. I sloughed them off, thinking it best to let you rest a bit longer. The most vocal of the lot was USAF General Slosson, who demanded that I drag you in front of the lasercomm terminal."

"Can't say I blame him. Treat all callers politely, Jean-Marie?"

"Every bit as diplomatically as the manners of each warranted, with a single exception. Between blandishments and blusterings, Ben managed to wedge in a call. He said Reichert has apparently been badgering USAF unmercifully, demanding to know why you're not on the way back from Luna. His vivid word picture of the seven-alarm fire drill going on in Washington and at all cardinal compass points therefrom was entertaining to say the least. Again, I decided on general principles not to wake you."

"Good work." Dysart yawned again, muttering through the gape, "Sounds like . . . pols ripe for . . . straight talk." Shuffling along the corridor, he dodged into the lavatory cubicle, bathed his face in cold water, toweled off vigorously and rejoined Boucher in the odd form of lunar quick-march he'd only half-learned.

Seating himself at the director's desk, Lyman became disconcerted. The display depicted only a high-backed executive chair framed by the windows of the Oval Office, the covered portico outside and a small slice of sun-shaded lawn. "Mr. President," he began tentatively,

wondering if the chief executive had tired of waiting for him to appear and gone elsewhere. "Please forgive the delay. I'm deeply honored by this opportunity to speak with you."

The transmission lag stretched interminably, keeping him in suspense. At last The President's solemn visage appeared. "Good day, Mr. Dysart. No need apologize, really. I've been anxiously awaiting an opportunity to see if we can find some common ground for resolving our mutual problem. With that in mind, may I ask the nature of the technical difficulty responsible for delaying the scheduled helium-three shipment?"

Sensed a confrontational atmosphere inevitable, Lyman had rehearsed not only what he intended to tell the chief executive, but how he planned to deliver the message by refraining from soft-pedaling any statements and arguments, and instead bluntly laying the facts as he knew them on the line.

"Mr. President, as a businessman I learned long ago that certain problems defy solution and cannot be solved, only managed. I'm afraid the root of the so-called technical difficulty is there in Washington, not up here. Simply stated, it has to do with whether or not you elect to sign the legislation nationalizing nuclear fusion technology, or allow my company to retain what it has struggled and worked so long and hard to achieve, and into which truly extraordinary sums of private capital have been and are being invested."

"I see," declared the president after the lag. "In other words," he said, measuring his words, "pending action on my part you mean to hold hostage the precious, critically needed product of your mining efforts as well as the program currently producing it."

"Precisely, Mr. President. As my personal property, it only seems fair to do so."

"I find it intensely distressing," said The Man, "to think a gentleman of your caliber, wealth and universal acclaim would stoop to blackmail. I expected a higher plane of moral integrity from an esteemed, incredibly important industrialist like you."

"I know exactly how you feel, Mr. President. I fully expected an identical degree moral integrity from the government."

Silence persisted for a longer period than the normal transmission lag. At last The President said, "Dysart Technologies has performed invaluable services of truly inestimable benefit to our nation as well as the world at large. You, of all people should be willing and eager to place the interest of our citizens before even giving thought to privately harboring such resentment over what you apparently consider an affront."

"That, Mr. President," said Lyman, silently cursing the transmission lag, "is what I am doing. Let me be very clear about that. The operative term you just used is 'privately.' My foremost reason for stating my position boldly, in possibly offensive terms, is because the precious substance being mined *is* my private property, owned solely by myself, extracted here in Luna under my overall cognizance at phenomenal company and personal expense. Before giving serious thought to signing the amended fusion funding bill and its noxious rider into law, you might ask yourself this question: What manner of ungodly mishmash would Secretary Schaeffer's Department of Energy make of an essential technology only now emerging from infancy? As a leading bureaucrat in your administration . . . No, sir; please allow me take that back. Mr. Schaeffer in no way fits the template of a typical government bureaucrat. Stated simply, he was formerly the chief executive officer of a major petroleum corporation that functioned as an adjunct, or perhaps a vital part, of the Vonex petrochemical cartel. Unless I've

been misinformed, wasn't it Belkin Reichert himself who urged you to appoint Mr. Schaeffer to the important cabinet post?"

Unaccustomed to taking part in an important dialogue broken by waiting through one tedious, seconds-long transmission hiatus after another, and obviously much less than delighted by Dysart's undiplomatic tone, or the direction in which the billionaire was trying to take their conversation, a frown creased the chief executive's high forehead. "Mr. Dysart, I must assure you that neither the background nor capability of a prominent member of my cabinet is an appropriate topic for discussion. Would it ease your mind if I were to tell you appointed cabinet officials can be asked to resign if and when their performance were to be deemed unsatisfactory?"

Refusing to comment on the chief executive's unsubtle reprimand, Lyman simply said, "I happen to be personally acquainted with Secretary Schaeffer, Mr. President. Among other officials I've spoken with, he became not merely indignant but grossly insulted when I broached the subject of how and when the government meant to recompense Dysart Technologies if and when nationalization were to whisk away everything I and my employees have worked so hard to achieve, and into the development and engineering of which such an unbelievable amount of private and personal capital has been poured. May I ask your thoughts on that subject?"

After the lag, the chief executive's expression had reverted to something closer to neutral. Reluctant to ask the level of sums involved, yet more or less forced to do so, he posed the question haltingly.

Lyman glanced down as if consulting something before him on the director's desk, cleared his throat and stated a figure.

"Really, Mr. Dysart!" The expostulation was laden with intense scorn. "Is it realistic to blithely mention the astronomical sum of your ransom demandas if it were, uh . . . ? Should nationalization become a reality, a means of compensating your company is something that will of course be taken under advisement. You cannot possibly force us to denude the federal treasury as if emptying out pocket change."

"Mr. President," declared Lyman firmly, "I had hoped for a sympathetic understanding of my multiple reasons for being so utterly disheartened by the government's move to swallow whole all the fruits of my company's labors. Your statement leads me to believe you suppose altruism had something to do with our investment of the 'astronomical' sums in question. I'm able to firmly assure you that it did *not*. Dysart Technologies is an entrepreneurial business enterprise. Discovering a crying need, I successfully filled a void by investing in the research and development of a method to achieve controlled, commercial nuclear fusion power generation, emphasis on 'investing' and 'commercial.' In the beginning, I talked myself hoarse persuading our executive committee to fund the extremely expensive, long-range research project that eventually matured not for visionary purposes, but simply to recoup our enormous investment by bringing to market a product that would ensure my company's extended, long-range profitability for a century and more. You might also consider the fact that if programs similar to our earthly and lunar ventures been funded by the federal government the total cost would have risen by several hundred percent."

The transmission lag dragged on for what seemed like endless seconds. When at last he spoke again, the President sounded anything but defeated. "Mr. Dysart, I'm going to humbly

request that you be patient a while longer. Dealing with the serious, extremely complex issues we have barely touched upon will require a great deal of thought and effort to resolve. I'm sure we can reach accord on some form of compromise, yet taking the first step forward will depend upon the result of technical interaction, plus economic consultation, with various scientific and technical advisors, and a number of others. I sincerely hope we can resume this conversation, hopefully within a day or two at very latest. Is that agreeable to you, sir?"

"Entirely, Mr. President. I can't thank you enough for taking time from your busy schedule to speak with me directly."

"My pleasure, Mr. Dysart. Until then . . ." During the inevitable transmission lag, The President's stern image faded to black.

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Lyman rose wearily. "Let's stay off the air a while longer, and get some rest," he told his companions. "Jean-Marie, your eyeballs look like two pee holes in the snow. You fold up first. Myron and I volunteer to mind the store in your absence."

Too heavy-lidded to remark on Dysart's crude assessment of his condition, the took his leave.

Cromwell stroked his stubbled chin. "You pissed-off The Man big time, Mr. Stockholder."

"He's a dyed-in-the-wool politician," said Lyman airily. "He's also a full-grown adult, and I sincerely hope and pray he conducts himself like one. Now that I've acquainted him with a few real-world facts and figures, he knows exactly where both of us stand."

"He's no on-the-spot decider, that's plain to see. What the hell! If he really is a full-grown adult, and thinks like one, why does he need a couple of days consulting with experts to make up his adult mind?"

"Sorry, Myron. The impression I took away from our short, heated verbal exchange is that all three of us just witnessed him making up his mind."

"You're serious?"

The Stockholder did not reply. Staring fixedly at the Selene poster gracing the partition behind Jean-Marie's desk, his silent preoccupation with the amateurish watercolor led Myron to believe he was in the process of making up his *own* mind. At last he stirred, and as if thinking aloud inquired if a spare lasercomm antenna was stored in the habitat.

"A backup? Yeah, I think so," said Myron, mildly jolted by the abrupt change of subject. "The brainiacs who layed out and set up the habitat oversaw completion were concerned about meteor damage to the topside horn, which struck me as a very long longshot indeed, but of course you never know."

"Is there a fast and easy way to rig the spare antenna out of sight of the habitat entrance ramp, and parking area?"

Puzzled, Myron took his time inventing a response. "The spare," he said at last, "could be set up over behind the pay dirt storage piles, with a cable buried in the regolith tied to the feed junction topside the habitat. But what's wrong with the regular horn?"

"Wouldn't the storage area be too far away for decent reception?" asked Lyman.

"No, not really. NEO-to-Luna laser beam divergence is fairly minimal, so —"

"NEO . . . ?"

"Near-earth-orbit," clarified Myron. "In this case," he added, "geosynchronous, and not too near-earth. Adequate send and receive signal strength should be no more than moderately degraded by relocating a horn at that distance. Something on the order of slightly less than five-by-five reception would be my guess."

"How about our transmitter?"

"It's housed over behind the greenhouse module. But there again, why bother? Nothing's gone sour with either it or the topside dish that's been in place since the get-go."

"Nothing's wrong. Not yet, anyhow."

"Then, why are you . . . ? Sorry, I don't follow."

"In addition to presiding over the nation," said Lyman, thinking aloud, "under the Constitution our most recent caller is also commander-in-chief of the armed forces. I'll gladly pay the premium on an insurance policy if the fine print guarantees that America and the rest of the world will keep on seeing and hearing everything that comes down here inside the habitat."

Myron squinted. "You honestly believe The Man might order the storm troopers to come shut down our lasercomm link, drag you away?"

Lyman lifted his hands, palms upward. "Call it a hunch . . . No, more than a hunch. Just before he signed off, I saw something in his eyes, the set of his mouth. To him, the importance of nationalizing fusion, what it will mean to the nation, makes the outcome . . . ." He broke off.

"People in power become accustomed to being in power, Myron. They act like a ball team that will never concede losing until the last out. And people in a position of ultimate power *never* think of losing, or giving up."

"See what you mean." Myron's brows knitted. "Still mean to play the Posse Comitatus wild card?"

Dysart shrugged. "Why not, for whatever good it will do? My primary reason for invoking the law is . . . For all practical purposes, any decision involving a moot point of law can be dragged through the courts forever and a day. Catch is, 'forever' in our case has to last only until fusion's been stolen en toto and turned over to Paul Schaeffer's bureaucrats, or left in my bailiwick."

"I hear you." Myron puffed his cheeks. "Sure hope you're reading this ball of snakes wrongly. Either way, want me to collect the spare horn and start getting it re-rigged."

"No, no; don't run off just yet," said Dysart. "We have plenty of time. More than one council of war will be convened in Washington before anything much happens here. Besides, I've something else in mind, something you're not going like even a tiny, teentsy bit."

Myron said apprehensively, "Such as . . . ?"

Instead of a direct answer, Lyman went off on another tack. "Construction of the habitat had to involve a wide, fairly deep excavation. Do you know how it was accomplished?"

"Blasting," said Cromwell, trying to imagine where The Stockholder's latest change of direction of might lead. "I wasn't here then, but according to the signed-off final report a succession of charges blew an irregular pit in the regolith's tough basalt schist. Then the raw hole was walled, roofed, vacuum-sealed, compartmentalized, had utilities installed, and so forth."

"Don't suppose," mused Dysart, "the construction gang left any explosives laying around."

"Bundles of high-velocity gelignite," Myron told him. "The plastique's inert, safe as church on Sunday until you stick a detonator in it, and stacked in a vacant crew compartment doubling as our storeroom. My surface gang uses a packet now and then to blow apart boulders too big to move, or occasionally outcrops sticking up in the Chariot's path."

Dysart did not give the appearance of listening. In the wake of a pregnant, drawn-out silence, he said, "Here's what I want you to do for me, Myron." He launched into a lengthy, comprehensive explanation.

"Save us, dear Jesus!" Cromwell grew pale. "Tell me you aren't serious."

"You heard right. Will you, or won't you? Decide!"

Shocked, Myron said, "We can't *do* that! If things go over the edge and force you to pull the pin, everything we've done automatically gets reset to square one. It'd mean a whole new start . everything done over from scratch, and the —"

"What's to stop me?" demanded Dysart. "It's my very own personal, private property, isn't it? If you don't feel up to the task, say so and I'll suit-up, do the job myself."

"Jesus Christ!" cried Myron.

Repeatedly invoking the Savior brought a wry twist to Dysart's lips. Drollery personified, he drawled, "Yes, my son . . . ? What troubles you so?"

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Per Dysart's instructions, Myron shut down the lasercomm terminal, disconnected and reinstalled it in the Selene Control Center. He energized the console; only a patchwork of test-pattern lines and geometric figures lit up in the display.

Standing beside the command and control console self-consciously clad in vacuum gear, Myron and Jean-Marie were both on edge. Uncomfortable in the same cumbersome government-issue pressure-suit he'd worn when arriving, Lyman sat in a turned-around chair facing away from the energized console, where a pair of glowing pin lights on the lowermost panel indicated that it was active. For an hour and more the threesome had paid little or no heed to the sporadic chatter coming over the USAF-Selene broadband wireless channel.

The lasercomm display suddenly went dark.

"They're here," Lyman announced with null inflection. "Don't say a word, either of you," he added, a catch in his throat. "Follow my lead. We have to play this by ear."

At Dysart's nod, Myron switched antenna feeds. They waited anxiously through the lag until a moderately degraded image of Benjamin Clay jelled in the high-definition display and inquired, "Is reception adequate?"

"Pretty much as expected," replied Lyman. "Curtain's going up soon, Ben. Stay tuned." He told Myron to depower the display; it went dark again, but for a different reason.

The airlock buzzer sounded. "Jean-Marie," said Lyman, "I'm willing to bet Palus Somni's CO has elected himself to run this thankless errand. As project director, it's only fitting for you to meet him and the other intruders at the airlock."

"As you say." The hesitant, unsure way Boucher shuffled out the door silently illustrated the fact that he had rarely if ever found a need to wear vacuum gear. Minutes later, the director ushered a sober-faced USAF officer in his late forties into the control center trailed by a pair of

figures in white military pressure-suits. Neither enlisted man was armed, inspiring in Lyman a surge of optimism.

“Lieutenant Colonel Bowles,” said Boucher, his accent purposefully more pronounced, “this is Mr. Lyman Dysart.”

The Stockholder said politely. “Welcome to the Selene habitat, Colonel.”

“Thank you, sir. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I will, er . . . It will simplify my mission, but I’m curious about why you and these gentlemen are wearing vacuum gear here inside pressure.” When no response was forthcoming, the colonel cleared his throat and said clearly, distinctly, “Mr. Dysart, by executive order of The President of the United States, I am directed to escort you to the Palus Somni Command Center, where transport has been arranged for your rapid return transit to Florida.”

“Colonel, I very much appreciate The President’s consideration, but I do not wish to return at this time. I intend to remain here in my temporary residence.”

“I had hoped,” Bowles declared woodenly, “you wouldn’t make things more difficult than they already are, Mr. Dysart.” Withdrawing a folded sheet of synthetic vellum from the thigh pouch of his pressure-suit, the lieutenant colonel extended it in his right gauntlet. “If you will, sir, please read this transmitted copy of The President’s executive order.”

Lyman made no move to accept the document.

“I really must insist,” declared the officer, a hint of irritation clouding his diction. “I can see no reason for you to force me to do something I have no desire to do.”

“The President’s executive order,” declared a voice from nowhere, “constitutes prima facie evidence of illegality, and is therefore rendered ineffective, Colonel Bowles. The directive authorizes you to carry out your assigned mission and arrest Mr. Dysart, an action viewed as fraudulent in the eyes of the law.”

Hearing a sourceless voice startled the lieutenant colonel. Myron switched on the lasercomm display; it illuminated, and the features of a gentleman the officer did not recognize appeared.

“My name is Benjamin Clay, Benjamin Clay. In my capacity as CEO of Dysart Technologies, and secondarily as a licensed attorney, I must respectfully remind you of the Posse Comitatus enactment, which strictly prohibits military personnel from conducting search, seizure, arrest or similar acts which tend to interfere with the normal activity of any citizen in his or her private domicile, except when such actions are sanctioned by the Constitution, or an act of the Congress.”

Disconcerted, the officer shot an accusatory glance at the enlisted man standing next to him.

“Sir,” the non-com said defensively, “I clipped the antenna leads per your order.”

Instead of amplifying his earlier statement, Clay added, “Before you do anything rash, Colonel, I should like you to hear what a gentleman here with me in San Francisco has to tell you.”

The image of a thin-faced older man appeared in the display panel. “I’m the president of Global News Services, sir. Per Mr. Clay’s invitation, it is my duty to inform you that via satellite this lasercomm feed from Luna is currently being broadcast live worldwide.”

Clay's image replaced that of the network president. "I strongly advise you to reconsider, sir, and refrain from doing something you and your superiors will with certainty regret."

Lieutenant Colonel Bowles glared at Lyman. "Despite the sideshow you're putting on, Mr. Dysart, I have a duty to perform, and that is exactly what I shall do." He gestured to the enlisted men. "Pull Mr. Dysart up out of that chair. That is a direct order. Carefully check his pressure-suit air supply and corollary utilities, seal the suit and escort him to the —"

"Hold it, Colonel!" Myron's imperious tone arrested the non-coms moving to seize Dysart. "Sir, I assume the term dead-man switch is familiar to you."

Lieutenant Colonel Bowles eyed the operations manager askance. "What did you say?"

"Wireless detonation of the Semtex charges I put in place," said Myron, "depends entirely upon whether or not Mr. Dysart stays seated in that chair. The charges are all armed, electrically tied to redundant pressure-switches under Mr. Dysart's pressure suit."

The only sound in the control room was the soft susurrant of air from the life support louvers. The longer Bowles debated with himself, the longer the standoff dragged on, the more palpable the air of tension in the control room became.

"Colonel," said Lyman, "if you carry out the executive order, defy the law and arrest me by force, it would be wise for you and your men to close and seal your faceplate lenses. If I rise from this chair for any reason, simultaneous explosions will instantly depressurize the habitat, shred the strip-mining vehicle into a jumble of useless hardware, and likewise the solar mirror. The unsegregated piles of accumulated pay dirt in the holding area will be scattered in vacuum."

The lieutenant-colonel's normally stolid features grew livid. "You won't do it!"

"Hopefully, no. But if it does happen, *you* will do it. You will destroy everything we've done here. Under ordinary circumstances I would never remotely consider such a desperate move, but if these men carry out your orders it would be wise to instruct them to close and seal their faceplates."

"You could never bring yourself to sabotage everything you and your company have accomplished," declared the officer.

"Never, of my own free will," admitted Lyman. "But please keep what I said in mind, Colonel Bowles. Each and every one of the enumerated items in jeopardy are my own personal property, and mine alone. I would rather have them gone, and fusion technology temporarily gone with them, than turn them over gratis to the federal government."

Clearly on the fence, Bowles stood ramrod straight in his slack, undistended pressure-suit. Furious, he locked Dysart in a red glare, holding himself in check by main force of will.

A series of wordless dot-and-dash beeps erupted from the control center speakers.

Bowles scowled, thrusting his chin forward aggressively.

"Colonel," said Myron, "I remember just enough Morse to recognize a recall order when I hear it."

Lieutenant Colonel Bowles gritted his teeth, transferred his killing glare on Cromwell. Without another word, his mouth a straight, bloodless line, he motioned for the non-coms to precede him, then wheeled and followed them out of the control chamber.

"*Jean-Marie*," said Lyman almost too softly to be heard, "*veuillez afficher ces messieurs à la porte.*"

When he and Myron were alone, The Stockholder permitted himself a long, heartfelt sigh of relief. Encased in the white, government-issue pressure-suit, he sat there for seconds breathing deeply, then rose from the chair with a total absence of concern.

Myron gasped, lurched forward, stumbling in the bulky vacuum gear. *"I set those charges myself!"*

Emotionally drained, Lyman said, "Sorry, I couldn't . . . I didn't dare take a chance of it happening."

Cromwell shuddered slightly. *"You disarmed the circuit . . . ?"*

A nod of undistilled weariness settled over The Stockholder's countenance. "Not long before the colonel and . . . his men came in, I, uh . . . pulled the plug."

Myron was speechless.

"The cards you're holding," said Lyman slowly, "don't count, Myron. What does counts is convincing whoever's thinking to call your hand you're holding aces full."

His hearttrying to pound a hole in his chest, Myron sucked in huge lungfuls of the control chamber's temperature-controlled, recirculated air. "Mr. . . . Dysart, sir," he faltered, "remind me never to play poker with you."

## Afterword

The impromptu ceremony concluded when Lyman congratulated Dr. Xiang Lim for the third or fourth time, and saw the smiling physicist, his niece and two of Calvo's security staffers assigned to shadow the Nobel laureate off in a DT limousine.

In buoyant spirits, The Stockholder took the express elevator up to the penthouse. Regarded him keenly, Carolyn said, "You look like a canary that just swallowed the cat."

Lyman grinned. "More like the big kahuna who swallowed a whale. Selene II has received U.N. endorsement, Xiang will shortly be working miracles again, your Salon Bellissima emporium's pulling in a modest fortune, and all's right with the world?"

In the act of framing a salty comeback, Carolyn hesitated when the private satellite phone in Lyman's desk began buzzing insistently. Lyman excused himself and opened a drawer. "Yes . . . ?"

"Thanks a bunch, Mr. Dysart, sir." Mr. Smith's ragged baritone was impossible to mistake. "Always loved an extravagant tipper, and no one's ever come *close* to matching your contribution."

"I don't remember," accused Lyman. "giving you my private number."

"Keeping secrets from me is real tough," said Smith.

"No matter; I'll have it changed. You earned your tip twice over. Fine job in Sweden; no fuss, no muss, no repercussions to date. Naturally you'll be a good citizen and pay your share of income tax on the ill-gotten gains."

"Natch!" said Smith. "I figured out how to double the bundle in a year."

"Go for it!" encouraged Lyman. "As I told Carolyn just now, my fusion guru's back where he belongs, America has a gaggle of illegal Asian immigrants it knows nothing about, and the Vonex directors booted your former boss out on his ear, and he's sulking in his Long Island estate. Time for you to get on with your unwholesome life."

"Amen! Listen, some fine sunny day, let's get together at Disney World?"

"What?"

"You know, for old time's sake. We'll find Captain Hook, cut him down to size.

"You're the perfect man for that job. You won't need me. Sic 'em!"

A brittle laugh issued from was. "Bye, Mr. Dysart, sir. It's been fun."

No sooner had Dysart rejoined Carolyn on the divan than the intercom chimed three times. He opened the circuit. "Maggie . . . ?"

"No, it's me." Ben Clay sounded unduly agitated. "Listen, China's Nuclear Fusion Director is holding on the landline. He insists, and I mean *insists*, that we provide technical consultation on specific means and methods of completing and putting on line Qingdao's Omega Pinch System. I've told him half a dozen times DT's unable to comply because the rights to our design haven't been procured. He high-handedly informed me the Peoples Republic did not feel a need to purchase either our design, or the associated proprietary processes."

"You're left-handedly telling me Xiang Lim is already badly missed."

"Apparently. What do you want me to tell him?"

The Stockholder laughed aloud. "Tell him all same no tickee no laundry."