

The Powers That Be

By Frank Clarke

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1 – Prologue

My name is Jory; the last name doesn't matter. The name I go by these days is a lie, and you wouldn't be able to pronounce my real name anyway.

Your name for me is 'alien'. My ancestors were from what you would call Epsilon Indi 2 and, from what my parents told me, it's pretty similar to this planet, enough that you wouldn't find it impossible to live there. Difficult, perhaps, but not impossible. About the same as me living here, I suppose.

I guess that similar environments must tend to produce similar organisms. I've got DNA that's remarkably close to yours although there'll never be 'offspring' (as you call them) of me and a Terran. The reproductive machinery is just too far out of alignment. For one thing, our sexes aren't quite as distinct as yours. That's probably enough.

I also have a very 'humanoid' look: endoskeleton, 1.7m tall, two arms, two legs, all connected in approximately the right spots; most fortunately, five digits on each appendage; articulation almost 100% accurate.

All of this makes it possible for me to hide in plain sight, just what I'm doing now. Just as my parents did for all those years and as my grandparents did before them.

You want to know how we got here, I can tell from the look in your eyes. There was a ship, yes, of course, but that was a long time ago. I don't know if it still exists. My parents didn't know, I think; at least they never admitted to knowing. I think they knew where it had landed, but they never shared that with me. The bottom line is: I don't know anything that you would find useful.

Please don't try to find me. It can't bring you any benefit to do so and it can only bring me harm. I've made arrangements to increase the difficulty of your ever suspecting who I am, even if we're standing face-to-face having a conversation.

I just can't afford to be exposed. Don't ask why! Isn't it obvious? Someday I'll die... all beings eventually do... and I will finally be detected. You see, there's no one left who will see to my body's disposal in the traditional Nosa manner. I'm the last. My funeral, if I get one at all, will be much more like yours than my mother's.

When my father died, my mother and I took care of the arrangements. She showed me what was involved and how to complete the process. Then when my mother died, I was able to do

for her the things a Nosa needs to have done at such a time. Their remains, along with those of all the others, are protected from the coroner's scalpel and the prying eyes of humankind. You will never find them; don't waste your time looking.

But I will have no such protection. No one will hide my corpse. There will be an autopsy.

There will be a mighty fuss over the autopsy when the authorities find out there's been an alien living here undetected... well, *almost* undetected... for all these years.

Hopefully, by then I won't care anymore. Right now I still care. Leave me alone. Please.

2 – The Passing of the Old

A half-kilometer northwest of a two-lane highway between Elkins NM and Roswell stands a withered sandstone outcropping that looks, when the light is just right, very like another more famous monolith, but smaller. Its sides are steep, but there are several good paths that run in switchbacks up the sides, some going almost to the top. On one of these paths is a cave, and in the cave the bodies lie while the dry desert wind drains the moisture from their tissues, mummifying them.

If you were to find the cave... you won't, but *if* you could... you would stare at these corpses in slack-jawed wonder, for they are neither Egyptian pharaohs nor the rulers of the Anasazi from ages past. They are not, as a matter of fact, even human, and you would recognize this almost instantly.

Row on row they lie, each on its own raised platform, some so old the robes that were new when they were first laid here now hang in tatters. Wisps of cobwebs dance in the occasional breeze that enters the cave mouth and exits who-knows-where.

The snakes that frequent these desert places do not like the cave and they will turn away rather than enter. Coyotes unlucky enough to draw near the entrance whine and yelp in confusion before they too, turn and run. They are hunters; they are not accustomed to being prey. Whatever is here, it is none of their business anyway.

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"Don't let him forget, Ania," the old man gasped.

"I won't, Yoram. I promise," she whispered to him. He closed his eyes briefly and gulped. It was all the acknowledgement he could muster.

"You promise, too, Jory" he insisted.

"I won't forget, papa. I promise", Jory assured him.

Without any warning his movements ceased and they knew that he was gone.

"Help me," she instructed her son. They took down from the closet the box containing his burial garments and laid them out in the proper order. Together they undressed his corpse and put those garments aside. They would burn them later and dust his feet with the ashes, following a ritual so old no one, it seemed, could tell when it originated... or why.

Before they dressed him for his final journey, she took the pendant he always wore about his neck and looped it over her own

neck. Jory gave her an odd look as she did so. "He doesn't need it any more," she told him. "I do."

They made a makeshift stretcher of planks found in the basement and tied the shrouded body to it so they could bring it to the car. They put their luggage in the trunk, laid the body on the floor of the back seat and drove away. One or two of their nosier neighbors watched the two loading the car but noticed nothing untoward.

Before they had gone a hundred miles, the blue lights of several police cruisers ahead warned them of a police roadblock. Could the police know of their cargo? How could they know?

"We must hide ourselves," she told the boy. He nodded. He knew what was to be done and he knew how to do it.

Approaching the police cars spaced across the road, they slowed their powder-blue Toyota and pulled to the side of the road as if waiting for something to happen. After a few moments the police officers wandered up the road toward them. Some of them drew their guns. Most just wandered past the car as if it were invisible; one bumped into the fender, moved aside and continued walking up the road. When all of the police had passed by, Jory pulled the car back onto the road and continued driving.

They drove through the night and on through the next day and the next, sharing the driving and stopping only for food and fuel, until they were well into the desert. They now saw very few other vehicles either coming toward them or overtaking them. At mid-afternoon of the third day, Jory's mother turned off the road toward an outcropping of rock. She stopped the car well off the road and hidden behind some boulders and they waited for sundown.

As the darkness crept swiftly across the desert, Jory and his mother carried the corpse up the slope to the mouth of a small cave. In the cool semi-darkness, they laid the shrouded figure next to several others similarly clothed but desiccated and dusty as if they had been here for a very long time. A small fire was soon glowing inside the cave, its flames licking at the last garments the man had worn as a living being. Carefully they collected the ashes and, undoing the bottom of the burial shroud, they massaged the ashes into the man's feet and legs. Then she gave him one last kiss before holding his jaw open to receive the last of the ashes.

"Issir varitasta; kaevar amitasta; partar paritasta," they spoke in unison, paused briefly as if in silent contemplation, then quietly turned and left without another word.

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His mother had called him to her to speak the words he hoped he might never hear, but which he also knew deep down must come

eventually. "I don't think I have much time left, Jory," she told him. Speaking was clearly a struggle for her. "Do you know what to do?" she asked him.

"Yes, mama, I do," he answered. The words almost caught in his throat. He had lived among these humans for far too long, of that he was now certain. He was beginning to think like them and to feel like them.

"And you won't forget?" she prodded. "As you promised your father, so you must promise to me." She turned her head so she could see his eyes. They would tell her the truth of his words.

"I won't forget, mama. I promise," and his eyes told her that he spoke the truth no matter how much it hurt.

"Perhaps we should go on vacation, Jory"

"It's too early, mama, isn't it?"

Jory's mother saw how badly this hurt her son and wished there were something she could do, something she could say, to make his hurt go away. "Maybe a little." She closed her eyes to rest. She would need all of her remaining strength in the little time she had left.

She had grown visibly frailer over the last few weeks, and Jory could see her failing before his very eyes. He dreaded the task that surely lay before him, but there seemed to be nothing he could do to stay it or slow its approach.

In the morning she could barely sit up in bed. Eating had become a chore for both of them, he the feeder, she the fed.

"We must go soon, Jory" she told him.

"No, mama..." Tears welled in his eyes.

"We must," she insisted. "while I can still help you." It was the thought he had rejected time after time these last few weeks. Now she was saying it aloud and he could no longer push it off. He knew that she was right. Alone, he would be immobilized by grief and be unable to go where he must and do what he must.

He packed what he thought might be necessary without consulting her. She was so weak now he was afraid to tax her with even so much as a question. She was no longer capable of driving, so it would fall completely upon him. It might be four days going and another four coming back, maybe more. By afternoon he was as ready as he would ever be. He helped her get dressed, and then helped her to the car. With the front seat almost fully reclined, she was able to rest while Jory drove.

These were good roads, the Interstates. They were smooth and wide and made for a fast trip wherever one was bound, even if it were the desert, and there were many rest areas where one might nap or eat a snack on a trip that could not be delayed by an overnight stop.

Ania, his mother, died peacefully in her sleep late on the second day, but he could not stop for mourning. He had promised, and he would not fail her.

It was late on the third day that Jory spotted the place his parents had called 'Tomb Rock', a sandstone sentinel a half kilometer from the highway across a sandy desert floor spotted with sagebrush and scrub and the very occasional saguaro cactus, the only substantial structure in the shallow valley between one inexplicable ridge and the next. He drove slowly so as not to raise very much dust. This was business that was best carried out without much fanfare. He hid the car, if 'hide' were actually the right word, behind a clump of desert shrubbery in the hope that passers-by would take little or no notice of it. Only one car passed while he watched and the driver was in so much of a hurry that Jory was sure he saw only the road ahead.

He had little of daylight left when he started carrying his mother's remains up the slope. There he removed her living clothes and redressed her in the burial shroud that had been presented to her by the others on her wedding day so many years ago aboard that ship headed for the cool blue planet she never imagined for a moment would be her final resting place. The shroud was almost identical to Yoram's, except for being a little larger, and was made of the same shimmery weave that refracted light like a thin film of oil on shallow water.

The living clothes he burnt in the campfire that was now the cave's only light, and carefully collected the ashes.

Undoing the bottom of the burial shroud, he massaged the ashes into her feet and legs. Then he kissed her one last time before squeezing her jaw open to receive the last of the ashes.

"Issir varitasti; kaevar amitasti; partarim paritasti," he wished her mortal remains through the tears streaming down his face before he, too, quietly turned and left.

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Karl sighted along a flat rock and with the screwdriver blade of his Swiss Army knife made two marks that lined up directly with the flickering light from the cave mouth. A little while later the light of the campfire winked out and they could just barely make out a dim light, perhaps from a flashlight, working its way down the slope and to the car hidden among the low scrub. From their vantage on the northerly ridge they heard its engine turn over, faintly in the distance, and saw its headlights swing toward the road and then toward them as it headed back the way it had come. In the darkness the car passed them by as if they weren't there.

3 – Jory

Jory took her hands from his belt buckle before she could completely undo it. "Because, that's why," he told her with much more than a hint of exasperation in his voice. Her hands immediately wound around his neck. She wasn't going to give up that easily.

"Jory, I don't understand you," she pleaded. "Here I am flinging myself at you and you act like a eunuch. What's a girl got to do to get the right kind of attention from you?" Joyce was clearly hurt; the pout on her face was not the least bit artificial.

"You're the one who's hard to understand," he told her, unwinding her arms from around his neck. "Most girls are delighted to find a man who doesn't grope them at every opportunity. *I'm* the one who has to constantly get *your* hands out of *my* pants. You act like you don't appreciate the wonderful relationship we've got."

"I do," Joyce protested. "I just think we could make it... better."

"All we'll do is ruin a perfect friendship," Jory explained again unwinding Joyce's arms and pinning them to her side. "Now, c'mon, Joyce. Do you want to risk that?"

The anger in her face was unmistakable. She put her arms around his neck again and told him: "I hate you." Then she gave him a most authoritative kiss which he returned. "Now go home," she told him.

"Feel like a movie Saturday?" he asked as he stood in the doorway.

"Sure," she agreed immediately. "Pick one and surprise me."

She was so distraught she was on the verge of 'emotionless', but she'd be damned if she was going to give him up without a fight. *To the death*, she thought; *I'll kill myself before I let him go.*

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The dispatcher handed Jory a ring binder with a large "434" on the cover. Jory headed for the line of trucks, climbed into Unit 434, and began a quick survey of the cargo and the documents that accompanied them. Then he started the engine and began the ritual of the required safety checks. In a few minutes his truck rolled toward the street and he began his morning deliveries.

At one point in the route, Jory had the back door of the truck rolled up to enable him to get a large package out. He had just loaded the package onto a hand truck when his peripheral vision caught a movement. He turned his head barely in time to see a young woman

on a bicycle crash into a fence and be thrown over the handlebars onto the other side. He left the hand truck where it was and rushed to her assistance. She seemed dazed and scratched but otherwise alright. She thanked him and went on her way.

Back at the truck, Jory rolled the back door down and locked it, then rolled the heavy package to the front door of the nearest house, completed the delivery, stowed the hand truck back in its carrier, got back into the truck, and continued his route.

The development faded behind as the road entered a more rural area with houses spread much farther apart. Jory was enjoying being out in reasonably fresh air and pleasant scenery when behind his right ear a mechanical click made him check his rear-view mirror. That was the first time he noticed the two men with guns pointed at his head.

One of them came forward to stand in the area next to the driver; the other stayed in the cargo compartment.

"What do you want?" Jory asked, fearing that he already knew the answer.

"Just keep driving," he was told.

After a few miles of steadily driving away from his designated route, Jory told the thug behind him: "I'm way out of my route-area. If another driver sees this truck, he'll report it."

"Shut up and drive," the thug ordered.

As he drove, Jory grew more and more nervous. Taking the driver along during a robbery, he knew, was a likely prelude to the violent death of the driver. He had a better chance, he was certain, if he didn't let them take him too far from civilization. When he saw a house coming up on the driver's side, he pulled to a stop in front of it.

"What are you doing?" the robber standing next to him demanded. "I told you to drive," and the gun came around to point again at Jory's head. At the same time, a cobra reared to about shoulder height just off to the gunman's left. It was a huge snake, with a hood three or four times as wide as the man had imagined they might be. The snake's tongue slithered in and out, sniffing the air. The gunman stood very still as he tried to decide what to do.

Jory slid open the driver's door and stepped down to the ground. The few seconds that passed then seemed like all of eternity to the petrified robber. He could see his own reflection in the snake's beady eyes, even when the snake turned to examine something else. He knew he was trembling and that the movement might incite the snake to attack, but it was beyond his power to will his body into stillness. The snake's head swung from side to side as it examined all the corners of the truck's cab for threats and only briefly paused as it passed the man standing before it. To his eyes, the snake was all there was. Everything else faded into insignificance before the

gigantic snake's glossy hood. The questions flitted through his mind: shoot or run?

In the end, he knew that the snake was faster than his legs. Perhaps it would not be faster than a bullet. The four shots he fired went through the cobra as if it weren't there at all, striking and killing his partner. Then the snake attacked, wrapping itself around the gunman's wrist and body and neck as he struggled to free himself.

Jory went to the door of the house and knocked. A woman appeared at the screen door, and before she could say a word Jory told her "Call the police." Then he waited.

Within minutes, two police cars rolled to a stop next to the van. Jory pointed to it and called to them: "He's got a gun."

The police approached the van with guns drawn. "Throw your gun out and come out with your hands up." The gun came flying out of the truck, followed by the would-be-robber who looked as if he were never happier to see police in his life.

"Watch out," he told them, "there's a huge snake in there."

The police looked at Jory who simply shrugged his shoulders. One officer, his back pressed against the side of the truck, peered into the darkness. His flashlight swept the area and he reported: "I don't see any snake, but there's a body in there."

Jory opened the roll-up back door to give them more light and they combed the area for the reported snake but found nothing. They removed the body of the dead robber just about the time the FedEx supervisor showed up to survey the damage, which amounted to a few boxes with bullet holes.

The police took Jory aside for questioning. "What about the snake he says almost bit him?" he asked Jory, his pencil poised above a notepad.

"As far as I know, officer," Jory told them, "there's no snake in that truck. He may have thought he saw a snake. He's certainly nervous enough..."

"But you don't have a snake... you're not transporting any snakes..." The officer's quizzical look clearly said "*I don't believe a word you're saying*".

"I carry lots of odd stuff in that truck, but my manifest today doesn't show any live animals at all... and I personally don't own a snake of any sort... except the kind you use to unclog plumbing."

"Then what was he shooting at?" the policeman pressed.

"He and his partner didn't seem to be 100% in agreement on something. Maybe he's just making up the snake as an excuse for shooting his partner."

"OK. Keep yourself available in case we need to ask you anything else."

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"Well, Joyce," Nancy offered with a wicked gleam in her eye, "if you're not getting what you need from Jory, why not dump him and find someone who can give you what you want?"

"I'm not a naif, Nancy," Joyce snapped back. "I've had sex before, and good sex, too. Jory... just being in his arms is almost as good as an orgasm. You simply can't imagine the images that race through my mind when our lips meet... What that boy does to my head..."

"Are they images of Jory?" Nancy prodded.

"No." Joyce snapped back, clearly nonplussed.

"...of somebody else?" Nancy probed again.

"Nancy, they're images of me," Joyce explained. "And feelings... Emotions so strong it's like being swept away in an estrogen hurricane. In a way, I'm half afraid of sex with Jory. It might kill me."

"But what a way to go." Nancy laughed.

"Laugh all you want," Joyce retorted. "It's no joke. I wonder sometimes whether I have some sort of 'death wish'. When Jory finally walks out the door I breathe a sigh of relief that he's refused me again. The sleep I've lost over him is starting to mount up."

"You need to learn to take care of yourself," Nancy challenged.

Joyce smirked at Nancy's suggestion. "Oh, I do, but sometimes it's not enough."

"Well, then," Nancy teased, "maybe I should take this problem off your hands."

"Only if you don't need either of those eyes ever again," Joyce warned her, holding out her 10 neatly manicured fingernails like claws.

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By the time the prison guard got to the cell, the prisoner's screams had started to die down. He was now fully awake and able to comprehend that it had been merely another bad dream, but the shaking of his adrenaline-soaked body would not stop, and his heart was beating so fast he couldn't even count the pulses.

The fear clearly visible in his eyes was not for the great serpent of his dreams, but for the dreams themselves. Sleep would come inevitably and he would dream again and waken screaming again just at the moment the huge cobra, curled tightly around his immobile body, would sink her fangs deep into his face. How long, he wondered, would his heart put up with the abuse these nightmares were giving it, and he hoped it would not be too long.

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Ed Kane lay with his eyes closed and told his psychiatrist the story that he was starting to believe might have been merely a dream.

"We were doing a standard roadblock because of a convenience store robbery a short time prior," he recounted. "Two cars, one motor, five officers. The traffic had been heavy earlier but had slacked off abruptly when we saw a car approaching." He paused. "Of course, we all wait for it to pull up to us, but then the weirdest thing happened: it just disappeared... like it was made out of fog... it just evaporated.

"I asked my partner 'Did you see that?' and he just nodded. Then the five of us walked down the road toward where we last saw the car. It was gone... without a trace. At least... that's what we all think."

"I'm really more interested in what you think, Ed," the psychiatrist told him. "What do you think?"

"I'd like to think it was an hallucination," Ed muttered.

"And you don't?" the psychiatrist offered.

"If it were just me, I would... I might," Ed answered dreamily. "But there were five of us," he challenged. "Is there such a thing as a shared hallucination?"

"Would you feel better if there were?" the doctor asked.

"I..." He waited, thinking. "Maybe," he continued, "because everyone else looks at the videotape of that night and sees stuff that I didn't see. When I look at the playback, all I see is five uniforms walking up the road, then walking back. And everyone who was there that night agrees with me." He turned his head to look at the doctor. "And everyone who wasn't, doesn't."

"And you think that 'shared hallucination' is better than some other alternatives," the doctor comforted him. "That's a natural reaction. Would you feel better if there weren't such a thing as a 'shared hallucination'?"

"I'd feel better if I knew," Ed told him with finality.

"What else do you remember?" the doctor asked.

"Umm... We used these orange traffic cones to mark the stop-area," Ed continued, looking up at the ceiling. "We would always put one in the middle of the lane if we were waiting for cars to arrive, and I'm sure we did that night, too. When we all decided to give up and go back to standing next to our vehicles, I noticed that one cone was toppled, like someone had driven over it. If I had a hallucination, then that's probably what happened."

"You sound disappointed," the doctor suggested. "What's wrong with that theory?"

Ed thought for a long time about that question.

"It's empty," he told the psychiatrist.

"Empty?" the psychiatrist repeated the word to make sure he had heard it correctly. Doing so was also an implicit offer for Ed to elaborate on what he meant.

"There's a big hole... How did this happen? Who made this happen?" Ed asked anxiously. "And why?"

"Let's think about that and we'll discuss it next week." The doctor's notebook closed with a soft 'plop'.

4 — Exposed

The mailboy dropped a pile of envelopes into the 'IN' basket and continued on his way. The secretary finished the task she was doing on the word processor, then reached over and picked up the stack. She flipped through them perfunctorily looking for anything that warranted special attention. The envelope marked 'Eleanor Rayburn — Urgent!' seemed to fit that bill. She walked it over to Eleanor Rayburn's office and placed it in her IN-tray.

NSA Special Operative Eleanor Rayburn entered her office a short time later, got a cup of coffee from the kitchenette, then settled down to handle the morning mail. At the top of the list was the envelope her secretary had singled out for priority processing. She slit the edge of the envelope and poured the contents onto her desk.

The stapled stack of paper had a sticky-note on the front. It said: "Are you still tracking 'hallucination'? — Harriet" She began flipping through the sheets.

The tale on the collection of assorted papers was of one particularly inept armed robber who had, with a partner, attempted to hold up a FedEx truck in East Tennessee. During the course of the robbery, one conspirator shot and killed the other for reasons that were not entirely clear. The survivor claimed that he had actually fired at a huge cobra that had appeared out of nowhere, that the shots had had no serious effect on the reptile, and had, in fact, continued through the snake's body, striking and killing his co-conspirator, that the snake had thereafter coiled around him, constrictor-fashion — *odd for a cobra*, she thought — immobilizing him until the sound of sirens apparently scared it off. The attached police report detailed the extent of the search for the snake, and the conclusion of the officer-in-charge that the story was either an outright lie or an hallucination.

She spun around in her chair and pulled a drawer from a filing cabinet, quickly riffling through the folders until she found the right one. She spread the contents on the desk to review them.

The last of this series was over twelve years old. Several police officers at a roadblock reported seeing an approaching vehicle simply disappear as it rolled toward them, evaporating like mist. The video cameras that were recording the incident revealed that the vehicle had actually pulled to the side of the road, slowed to a stop, and waited until the police wandered down the road to investigate, leaving the roadblock open and unmanned. Then the car continued on its way. None of the officers at the scene were ever thereafter able to see that action on the videotape although everyone else could. It was a clear and unmistakable case of a mass hypnosis. The tape even

showed one officer accidentally bumping into the car he couldn't see, and continuing on his way, an event he claimed to have no memory of and, in fact, could not see on the videotape.

That last was also the best, proving for most who saw it that such things do, indeed, happen. There were, to be fair, still a few skeptics who continued to write it off as an elaborate hoax to which certain members of the police force were accomplices. The officers involved were, for the most part, credible witnesses and most people who heard their story and saw the videotape believed that they had, in fact, been the victims of an illusionist *par excellence*.

The spookiest aspect of this incident, of course, was that the illusion had persistence. Years after the incident the officers still claimed that they could not see on the video monitor action that everyone else saw clearly. Their minds seemed to be permanently blocked from recognizing certain things. It might even be possible that were the same car to drive down the street in front of them they might still be unable to see it.

It goes without saying, further, that the car was never found. It did not fit the description of the car the police were looking for that night, and no one could speculate on how (or if) someone had created such an illusion or why the occupants wanted to avoid contact with the police. Certainly, they would have been waved on without a second thought. Or would they? Eleanor Rayburn began to wonder, now after all these years, whether the officers on duty that night might have seen something worth a second look had the car come much closer.

She pulled the videotape.

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The phone burred softly in Joyce's ear telling her that Jory's phone was ringing. It had done so off and on for all of yesterday and all of today so far. She hung up the phone, picked up her keys and headed for the door. She had some shopping to do and thought she would do it over on Jory's side of town, then check in on him personally when she was through.

When she finally got to Jory's, her car full of grocery bags, she noted that his motorcycle was not in its assigned parking space. She knocked on the property manager's door.

"Have you heard from Jory in unit 8?" she inquired. "He hasn't answered his phone since Wednesday."

"Are you a bill collector?" the property manager asked.

"No, I'm his girlfriend," Joyce offered hopefully.

"Well, he's moved out," the property manager admitted. "Settled all his accounts Tuesday afternoon, loaded a rental truck Tuesday night, and was gone by morning. Sorry."

The look of shock on her face must have been obvious. The property manager felt sorry for her.

"Did you notice what kind of truck it was?" she asked him.

"I think it was a Ryder," the property manager offered.

"Thanks," Joyce responded, still in a daze.

She drove home not knowing whether she was stunned, confused, hurt, or some combination thereof. She called the FedEx office where Jory started his route and inquired of his supervisor, but all the supervisor knew was that Jory had been called out of town on important family business and wouldn't be back until the following week. She didn't bother to tell him that Jory had vacated his apartment.

She started calling Ryder agencies beginning with the ones closest to Jory's apartment. One by one they reported not having rented anything to anyone by that name within the week. When she got to the end of one company's agencies she would start on the next. At the end of the list, no one had any recollection of renting to Jory. She couldn't hold back the tears any longer.

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Wilson Venable never went to conventions. Well, almost never. He had always felt that twenty-five hours of listening to people purge their souls was all the 'business' he wanted to do in a week. Another few days of shop talk with hundreds of other mental health professionals might be more than he could take. He was happy that he had decided to come to this one, however.

Even though Ed Kane, his patient, was willing to consider that he was suffering from delusions, it was the doctor who now thought the delusions might be something more than they appeared to be. Shelburne Webb and he were fraternity brothers and in the same profession, roughly speaking; Webb had lately aligned himself with a very metaphysically-attuned group of his fellows and had turned as well to 'consulting' in the corporate world on mental health issues. None of this sat very well with Venable, but the respect in which he had always held his colleague and brother was, nevertheless, at full strength. He wanted the chance to consult, to pick Shel's brain, on the Kane case, and this convention at which Shelburne Webb was a featured speaker, seemed the perfect opportunity.

Shelburne Webb, for his part, had grown quite accustomed to 'living large' on the proceeds of his work with various corporate clients and normally would have shied away from anything so *pro bono*, but this was a fraternity brother and he *did* recall positive memories.

The two met over cocktails and Wilson Venable proceeded to lay out for his friend, Shelburne Webb, the odd case of Ed Kane.

When he had finished, there was a long, seemingly interminable, pause while Webb absorbed all the implications of the story.

"Do you have the videotape?" he asked Venable.

"No," Venable admitted.

"Can you get it?" Webb pushed.

"Perhaps," Venable mused.

"I'd like to see it," Webb admitted. The interest showed clearly in his eyes.

"I'll see what I can do," Venable suggested encouragingly.

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The phone on Sergeant Crosby's desk rang with the distinctive sound that said 'internal call'. He picked it up on the first ring. "Crosby... Yes, Captain, I'll be right there."

When he arrived at the Watch Captain's office there were two strangers seated, waiting. The Captain introduced them. "These folks are from Washington, Marshall Goodwin and Gary vanZant. They'd like to ask you some questions about the 'cobra' bust from the week before last. Give them whatever they ask for, clear?" Crosby nodded and the Watch Captain left the room.

"Sergeant Crosby," the first began, "we'd like to concentrate as much as possible on your recollections of the truck driver. Tell us whatever you recall about him."

Crosby paused as if thinking, then began: "He was an ordinary guy. I didn't notice anything unusual about him. The only odd thing that even sticks out in my mind is that when we arrived on the scene, he pointed at the truck and said 'He's got a gun'. Not 'They've got guns'. It didn't strike me until much later: he knew there was only one person alive in that truck."

"How is that unusual?" Goodwin prodded.

"When we took his statement at the scene," Crosby explained, "he said he left the truck before the first gunshots. How could he have known there was one alive rather than two... or zero?"

"Are you sure he used exactly those words?"

"I have a clear recollection of expecting a single individual inside the truck — singular rather than plural. I'm very confident he used those words or their equivalent."

"How about the suspect?" Goodwin probed.

"You're not going to get anything out of him," Crosby scoffed. "He's a psychological wreck. I heard he was transferred from the County Jail to Smoky Mountain Regional's Psych Ward. The DA says he'll never stand trial unless we can find at least one doc over there to agree that he's fit to go before a jury. So far none of them will."

"But he has no prior history of mental problems, is that right?" vanZant asked, his pen ready to take notes of whatever impressions Crosby might have.

"That's what I understand," Crosby confirmed. "All of his problems, nightmares mostly, have arisen since this arrest. Mighty peculiar. It sure sounds like a put-up job to me."

"So you still don't believe there was a snake," vanZant pressed him.

"There was no snake," Crosby's voice was very insistent. "We had the truck surrounded by police. They would have seen a snake, especially one the size he described, if it had tried to escape the area. They didn't. We found no snake in the truck, no droppings, no shedding, and it didn't hide behind the panels because we disassembled that truck back at the police garage. There was no snake, Agent..."

"vanZant."

"...Agent vanZant," Crosby finished.

"How about the driver?" Goodwin pressed on.

"He's left town... completely cleared out. We don't know why. He wasn't a suspect."

"...for you," Goodwin finished for him. "He wasn't a suspect for you."

"Is he a suspect for you?" Crosby asked.

"He is now," vanZant confirmed.

"Why is NSA involved in this anyway?" Crosby asked.

The agents looked at each other, then back at Crosby. They both felt that another word from either of them would be one word too many. "Thanks for your cooperation," they told him. This interview was over.

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Shelburne Webb and Wilson Venable watched the videotape playback in silence, saw the five officers walk up the road and past the parked car apparently totally oblivious to it, so oblivious, in fact, that one officer even bumped into the vehicle and just walked around it as if it were a rock. They watched the car drive away while five policemen casually ignored it. They watched the five walk back to their vehicles as if they had seen none of the action on the videotape.

"Fascinating," Shelburne Webb remarked. "Have you tried hypnosis?" he asked.

"No," Venable admitted. "Do you think it might be profitable?"

"Perhaps," Webb mused, stroking his chin. "If the memory is suppressed, it might be important to know how far down it's been

pushed. In the meantime, if you don't mind, I'd like to hang onto this tape. There's someone else I want to have review it."

"OK," Venable agreed. "Let me know if there's anything else I can do."

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Jory's manager at FedEx was happy to be of service, especially for agents of the NSA. He took them down to personnel and had Jory's employment records pulled. They took the picture that was paper-clipped inside the folder and photocopied everything else, especially the sheet that had his fingerprints.

The following morning the FBI report was telephoned in to Marshall Goodwin: the fingerprints were those belonging to June Blaisdell, personnel manager for FedEx Kingsport, the woman who had done the 'work-up' on Jory. Goodwin and vanZant immediately returned to FedEx to confront Jory's manager with the photograph.

"Is this a picture of Jory Albertsen?" they asked.

"Yes, of course," the manager replied confidently.

Their next stop was the police station where they showed the photograph to Sergeant Crosby.

"Is this the man you know as Jory Albertsen?" they asked Crosby.

"No," Crosby looked puzzled. "I have no idea who that person is."

Now the only question was: which answer was the truth?

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Joyce started at the closest Ryder agency to Jory's apartment. She approached the duty agent, a middle-aged woman, and explained her situation.

"The rat got me pregnant and then ran out on me," she lied. "If I could afford to hire a private investigator I wouldn't be doing this myself, but I'm not going to let him get away with dumping me like this. You wouldn't, would you?"

"No, of course not," the agent agreed. "Do you need help with these?"

"Maybe later," Joyce demurred.

Joyce had before her a stack of rental documents, the store's copies, for all the rentals made last Tuesday. It was a long shot, but maybe she'd spot something familiar.

It wasn't very long, actually, before she found what she was looking for: a rental agreement in Jory's name.

"Is there any way for you to find out where this truck was returned?"

"Oh, you found it, did you?" the agent asked, surprise showing clearly in her face. "Let me see..." She looked at the document and picked up the phone, dialed a number and waited. After a short wait she began talking with the Ryder Data Processing Center. She read the truck's inventory number to the person on the other end and asked for its recent rental history. In a moment she had her answer.

"This truck was turned in at the Ryder office on West Wareham in Kansas City, Missouri eight days ago. Does that help?"

"I can't tell you how grateful I am for your help," Joyce gushed.

She dialed Kansas City information and asked for a new telephone listing for Jory Albertsen.

"I don't show a new listing for Jory Albertsen," she was told. "Are you sure of the last name? I have a new listing for Jory Arnold."

Joyce copied it down. That evening, she had her best friend dial the number while she listened on the extension phone.

"Hello?" Jory answered.

"Oh, sorry. Wrong number," and she hung up.

5 – Warmer

Eleanor Rayburn peered over the technician's shoulder as he adjusted the image on the computer screen. "It's real old videotape," he told her, "and the tape itself had been reused many times before this image was laid down. There may not have been much in the way of 'useful image' the day we got it, and that was twelve years ago."

"Well, do the best you can," she encouraged him. "It's all we have left as a clue."

Slowly the picture cleared as the image-resolution program painstakingly tried alternative after alternative selecting each time the most likely guess and fitting it into the overall puzzle.

"It's not a license plate," he said finally. "It's one of those advertising plates that dealers put on cars. It looks like 'Grady Buick' to me."

"Thanks," she told him. "Give me a print of that."

Her next stop was at the FBI where the picture was compared to all known vehicles and it was identified as a 1981 Toyota Corolla. The color swatches for the 1981 Toyota Corolla were pulled to identify the color, which seemed to be 'light blue'.

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The sales manager for Grady Buick shook his head. "Twelve years, you say? Any records we have would be in storage, but twelve years is a long time and this was a used car, too, because we've never carried that make as part of our new car line. Who knows how far back we might have to search to find that information?"

"It's extremely important," Eleanor Rayburn told him. "It's a matter of national security; that's why I'm here and not the FBI."

"But twelve years! You can't even prosecute any criminal activity that happened that far back. The Statute of Limitations..."

"We're not looking to prosecute anyone," she soothed him. "This is just one piece of a long thread of inquiry into something that might affect the safety and security of American citizens world-wide. And we're relying on your voluntary cooperation. Notice that I've come not bearing a subpoena, just my business card. Oh, and by the way, I was never here and this conversation is not taking place. Do you understand?"

"Oh, yes, certainly. I'll call the storage company and have the boxes sent over immediately. Do you want us to search the records or will you?"

"Why don't you let NSA do it," she suggested. "I'd rather not share too much information on what we're looking for, if you catch my drift, especially since it might turn out to be nothing at all."

"Right." He picked up the phone and dialed a number. He instructed the storage company to send all sales records for the four years following 1981.

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Cocktail parties are misnamed, he thought to himself; the cocktails are such a secondary part of the action, they could be dispensed-with altogether and never missed. The real purpose of such get-togethers was exactly what he was about to do: acquire a new business contact and, probably, a new source of revenue.

"Who is that person talking to Phyllis?" Webb asked his hostess.

"Who? Walter Hester?" Joan suggested.

"I suppose," Webb demurred. "Introduce me to him, would you?"

They crossed the room together and Joan expertly inserted herself between Phyllis and her target. "Walter, allow me to introduce Shelburne Webb, one of our oldest and dearest friends. Shelburne, this is Walter Hester. I'm sure you two will have lots of things to talk about." She smiled sweetly and disappeared in a swoosh of organza with Phyllis in tow as the two shook hands.

"What is it you do, Shelburne?" Hester asked.

"I'm a consulting psychologist," Webb admitted. "And you?"

"I'm a project director for FutureScope Corporation," Hester boasted.

"How interesting!" Webb offered. "What sort of projects do you direct?"

"I really can't go into a great deal of detail..." Hester replied, looking around to make sure no one else was party to the conversation. "Confidentiality concerns, you realize... but my current projects largely center around parapsychological and paranormal trends."

"Ah," Shelburne Webb's eyes lit up. "Then we really do have a lot to talk about. I'm currently on a consultation in exactly that arena. Mass hypnosis... or possibly mass hallucination."

"Do tell," Walter Hester's eyebrows rose noticeably. "We're always looking for real-life experiences to add to our reference library. Is this case one you can talk about?"

"I believe I can," Webb teased. "Would FutureScope be interested in discussing it on a fee-basis, do you think?"

"Depending on the nature of the case, possibly," Hester offered. "Let's freshen our drinks and talk a little more, shall we?"

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"It's a Toyota Corolla... recent... not older than 1981. I had this frame blown up because the front license plate seems to have identifiable writing on it."

"What does it say?"

"It looks like 'Goody' or 'Grady'. I can't make out the smaller word."

Hester turned to his research assistant. "Check out every car dealer east of the Mississippi named 'Goody' or 'Grady'. Ask them if this is their plate."

For an astronomical finder's fee paid to Shelburne Webb, FutureScope Corporation had acquired the right to examine this tape closely for a week. If what was on the tape was other than an elaborate hoax, this was proof-positive of the basic assertions for FutureScope's Project Archimedes. If it were true, then someone had beaten them to the punch; someone knew how to perform what they called a 'mind-mask'.

By the following afternoon, one of the researchers had worked her way down to Grady Buick in Kingsport, Tennessee.

"Hi," she began her script, "I'm trying to match a dealer plate from an old photograph. It looks like it might be yours... the word 'Grady' in script rising from left to right with a smaller word, maybe 'Buick' in the lower right. Does that sound like the plates you use?"

"Silver-on-maroon, uh-huh," the sales agent admitted. "We used to use those. We just changed over to a newer design, but I think we may still have some of the old ones around. And, of course, there's thousands of them on cars all over east Tennessee and Virginia."

"Thanks," the researcher told her, "that's exactly what I needed."

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The representative of FutureScope Corporation sat down across from the sales manager. "Thank you for taking the time to see me," he started. "I represent FutureScope Corporation on a matter of extreme delicacy and confidentiality. FutureScope, as you probably know, works on government contracts in the national defense area, so I'm not going to be able to give you much in the way of 'reason' for what I'm about to ask."

The sales manager leaned in closer, his interest clearly piqued. "Go on," he offered.

The rep withdrew a fuzzy picture from his briefcase and laid it on the sales manager's desk.

"We need to find that car," he told him.

The sales manager picked up the picture and examined it closely.

"It's a Toyota Corolla, probably 1981." He paused. "Why do you need to find this car?"

The rep winced and shrugged his shoulders. "If I knew, I probably wouldn't be allowed to tell you."

"Well," the sales manager told him, "I couldn't violate our customer's privacy by making their names available to you, even if you do work in the defense industry. It wouldn't..."

A wrapped block of hundred-dollar bills flopped onto the sales manager's desk with a muffled 'thump'. It looked to be about a quarter-inch thick. The sales manager's eyes were wide as the implication of what he was seeing intruded on his consciousness.

"I could lose my job for giving..." *Thump*. A second block joined the first.

"I'd never work..." *Thump*. A third block joined them. The sales manager looked into the eyes of the FutureScope rep.

"How many do I need to throw?" the rep asked.

"How many can you?" the sales manager probed breathlessly

"Don't get too greedy," the rep warned him. "My instructions are that if you don't agree by my pre-set limit, I pick up my stuff and go home."

"Five more."

The rep smiled and produced five more blocks that he laid next to the other three. The sales manager disappeared into the back room where the files were stored and returned twenty minutes later with two sheets of paper.

"We've only sold two of those as used cars within the past three years," the sales manager informed the rep. "I've been sales manager for five years and I can't recall any others in that time. Further back than that they would have been new cars. Is that good enough?"

"Good enough," the rep assured him. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you." The FutureScope rep put the documents into his briefcase and turned to leave.

"Wait," the sales manager called after him. "I have to know before you go... how much could I have asked for?"

The FutureScope rep paused and thought briefly before answering. If he told the truth — that the price paid was not even a sixth of what FutureScope Corporation had put aside — it would reveal far too much about the value of the information. Best to lie.

"You actually went over the limit, but I have some flexibility. Good thing you didn't ask for much more."

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"This is a very impressive resume, Mr. Albertsen," the head of HR admitted. "If you have some time now, I'd like to have you speak with the operations supervisor. If she agrees, I would like to have you start tomorrow. Is that possible?"

"That would not be a problem," Jory assured him. "I'm currently 'ad-lib', in stage parlance."

The plant manager led him to the operations floor and introduced him to the OpSup as she was called. Jory had a pleasant half-hour conversation with her, after which she believed he had answered all her questions and concerns to her complete satisfaction. Before he left the site he had been photographed for his ID badge and been given instructions as to where and when to report for work. Everyone in the Personnel Department was certain his references had been checked and had come back 'clean as a whistle'. Copious notes in his file related in great detail conversations with former employers that had never actually taken place, but the clerks who had written them would swear under oath that every word was true.

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"Wow, I don't believe it."

"What?"

"I found a second one. A light blue 1981 Toyota Corolla sold to Yoram Albertsen about five months before the cut-off date."

He picked up the phone and dialed Agent Rayburn. When he gave her the details she nearly jumped out of her seat. She copied all the details into her notebook, flagged her partner, and headed for the door.

The address of the Albertsen's, being twelve-plus years old, turned out to be too stale. Mr. Albertsen had fallen ill about that time and had been taken back to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where he later died. Mrs. Albertsen had died a few years later under similar circumstances after being taken back to Iowa for her last days. The son, Jory, moved away shortly after the passing of his parents. Rayburn placed a call to the Linn County Sheriff asking him to check on burial records for the appropriate time period. She had her answer in a few hours: no matching data for Linn County or any surrounding county. If they had died, it wasn't in Iowa. A search of the local papers' obituary columns likewise failed to turn up any death notices, nor were there any local death records on file with the County Coroner or the Health Department.

The only problem with all of this, she thought, was that the absence of records where there ought to be records was the very poorest kind of evidence. As a matter of fact, the complete absence of tangible evidence was exactly equivalent to... the absence of evidence. She had 'a curiosity', but she didn't have a case.

The neighbors could have been mistaken about the time period or about Cedar Rapids or about Iowa or any of a dozen other things, any of which could lead to... apparently missing records.

But the things that tied them all together were the illusions: five police officers on routine traffic duty are mysteriously hypnotized to prevent them seeing the people... or person... who once lived here, and an unlucky robber is mysteriously hypnotized (by the person who once lived here?) to cause him to see a snake that everyone else says wasn't there.

Clearly, this Jory Albertsen is someone to be treated very carefully.

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Of the two Toyota Corollas, one had been re-registered almost immediately in Montana and presumably left the area. The other was registered locally.

FutureScope posted a security detail to watch the house where the owners lived while others rented an apartment nearby with a good view of their quarry. When everything was in place, a survey team was sent in to do a closer inspection. Their knock on the door went unanswered for a long time, then a frail, elderly woman appeared at the door.

"Good morning, ma'am. We're doing a survey of Toyota Corolla owners to gauge their satisfaction with the product at various stages of its life. Do you have a few minutes to answer some questions?"

She opened the door to let them in and led them to the living room where they all took seats.

"Are you the owner of the vehicle?" She acknowledged that she was.

"Your name?" they asked.

"Ania Albertsen."

"How long have you owned this vehicle?", he continued.

"Almost two years," she confirmed.

"Did you buy it new or used?"

"Used."

"How many miles have you driven the vehicle since you bought it?"

She paused a moment to consider. "About 15,000 I think."

"How many drivers are there in this family who regularly use the vehicle?"

"Two," she answered without hesitating.

"Do you follow the manufacturer's recommendations for periodic maintenance?"

"My son handles that," she told them. "I think he's pretty careful about oil changes and tune-ups if that's what you mean.

"Do you use the vehicle mainly for long trips or mainly for short trips?"

Again she hesitated momentarily as if gauging her answer. "Mainly short trips."

"Uh-huh. Have you taken any long trips with the vehicle?"

"One, to New Mexico."

"And how would you rate your overall satisfaction with the vehicle?"

Ania smiled. "Oh, very satisfied," she beamed.

"Thank you for your time, Mrs. Albertsen," the 'interviewer' concluded. "We have a few more questions that pertain mostly to maintenance issues. Is there a good time when we might return and talk to your son?"

"Oh, he's generally home in the evenings," Ania informed them. "You might try back then."

"...And your son's name... ?"

"Jory," she answered.

In their car, the two interviewers compared notes.

"So... There's 'Ania' and there's 'Jory'... where's 'Yoram', the registered owner of the vehicle?"

"Jory could be quite young. Maybe when she said 'two drivers', she meant Yoram and herself."

"The son handles all the maintenance."

"So? How many high school kids do you know who are crazy over cars long before they're able to drive them?"

"Yeah, you're right. OK, let's set up the surveillance."

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Eloise pulled her name plate from the counter and replaced it with the one that said "Closed — Next Teller Please", and took her tray into the reconciliation room.

"Bad day?" Hank asked as she entered and he left.

"Bad enough, but it's over," she replied and she blew a wisp of hair away from her face. Twenty minutes later she realized how hasty she had been. Her tray was 'off' by \$2,583.11, an amount that couldn't easily be a transposition error. She called for assistance and soon had the Head Teller looking over her shoulder double-checking

her work. When her fourth attempt to balance came up short — again — by \$2,583.11 the videotapes of the day's activity were pulled and Eloise, the Head Teller and the bank's Assistant Manager went to the viewing room to try to see what might have happened.

The tape showed 119 customers approaching Eloise's cage for business. Each was logged to a sheet with a description of what seemed to be happening in the way of bank business, whether it was a deposit or withdrawal, and how much money Eloise seemed to be handling with each transaction. Then the log was matched back to the chronological record of the activity at her register whereupon it was discovered that Eloise had only 118 transaction packages. One of her transaction packages was missing. The tape was rewound and started afresh. Now they were looking to see that each customer resulted in a transaction package being stowed in the cashier's drawer and it wasn't long before they found it.

A young, casually dressed man approached Eloise's window and slid a note across to her. She picked up the note, read it, smiled back at the young man, and began counting money. From the 'hundreds' coup she counted off twenty five bills, then four twenties, a few singles and some miscellaneous change and slid the whole back across to the young man who smiled and appeared to say "Thank you" after which he turned and left. No documents entered the bank's files for that transaction, but twenty-five hundred plus dollars left. Eloise struck no keys on her register to record the activity.

"Well, Eloise, what do you make of that?" the Head Teller asked her.

"Make of what?" Eloise asked.

"...That man you gave \$2,500 dollars to..."

"When?" Eloise looked bewildered.

"Didn't you just see it on the tape?"

"What are you talking about?" Her voice was rising as panic set in. She couldn't imagine where they had gotten such a weird idea.

"Roll the tape back and play it for her again," the Assistant Manager instructed.

The tape was backspaced to the incident and play resumed. "...he slides a paper across the counter ...you read it ...you count out money and give it to him ...he leaves."

Eloise was in tears by now. "What are you trying to do to me? There's nothing like that on the tape. Why are you saying these things?"

"Eloise, are you saying we're hallucinating? Both of us?"

And that is how Eloise Carson came to the conclusion that she had gone mad.

The neighbors knew little about the Albertsen family's history. They respected them for being quiet and frugal and for not disturbing the peace of their community, important virtues in this part of the world.

Several neighbors were aware, even if only vaguely, that the husband had passed away recently... a year ago April... during a trip out of state... Iowa, some thought. A devoted son now cared for his aging mother. Good people, no doubt.

Round-the-clock surveillance had already shown that only mother and son lived there. When everyone had settled into a routine, FutureScope Corporation performed what they referred to as 'the last experiment'.

One of the five officers involved in what was now known as 'The Baileyton Incident' supplemented his income with odd jobs during his off-hours. One of these jobs involved cruising through supermarket parking lots and reading license plate numbers into a tape recorder. It was mindless work, but it paid fairly well and it could be done at times when someone with a nine-to-five job would be unavailable. The tape would be turned over to the 'marketing company' which supposedly used the data to track the shopping habits of local residents.

In reality, it did no such thing. The only data they wanted was to know whether or not this person would see a certain license plate.

He never did.

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When Eleanor Rayburn returned to her office the 'message waiting' light was flashing on her phone. She dialed in to her voice mailbox and picked up three messages, the second from Harriet.

"Eleanor, it's Harriet. I have another 'hallucination' lead for you: a bank teller in Kansas City gives a customer twenty-five hundred dollars apparently out of the goodness of her heart then denies being able to see the incident on the videotape. This sounded too, too familiar so I was sure you'd want to know about it right away. I'll hold the information here and you can pick it up at your convenience."

She picked up the phone and dialed the number for Kansas City information and got the DA's telephone number and a straight-through connection.

"Good morning. This is NSA Special Agent Eleanor Rayburn. I'd like to speak with the prosecutor who is handling the case involving a bank teller named Eloise Carson."

"That would be Assistant District Attorney Alan Eipper. May I connect you?"

"Please."

There was a short pause and a soft burring sound to indicate the phone was ringing, then a voice on the line announced: "Alan Eipper."

"Good morning. This is NSA Special Agent Eleanor Rayburn. I'm calling in regard to an incident that has just been brought to my attention regarding one Eloise Carson, a bank teller..."

"Yes, an open-and-shut case," Eipper asserted.

"Possibly," Eleanor offered. "Possibly not. I'd like to fly up to KC to talk with you in greater detail about this particular case."

"Why is NSA interested in a bank teller who passed a handful of cash to an accomplice?" Alan Eipper probed.

"As the name implies," Eleanor responded, "we're concerned with national security. Are you surprised that such a plain vanilla case may have national security implications?"

"Quite frankly, yes," Eipper agreed. "I don't suppose you could explain..."

"Well, perhaps I can tell you something of what concerns us," Eleanor teased, "but not over the phone... company policy. I can be in KC in the morning. Do you think we could get together, say, over breakfast?"

"I'll have my secretary arrange something," Eipper informed her.

"*Quid pro quo*:" Eleanor retorted. "I am most interested in the so-called 'accomplice'. Anything you may have by way of identification would be most helpful."

"I'll see you for breakfast."

6 – Alan Eipper

Alan Eipper rose as the waiter approached with what must be his breakfast guest. She extended her hand as they drew near, and he extended his.

"Eleanor Rayburn," she introduced herself. "Very pleased to meet you."

"Alan Eipper," he responded. "The pleasure is all mine," and he meant it sincerely, for Eleanor Rayburn was disarmingly attractive, her shoulder-length auburn hair glowing softly by the restaurant's faint light and a hint of the oriental... perhaps Finnish... in her vaguely almond-shaped eyes.

They ordered coffee and got straight to the matter at hand.

"Now," Eipper began, "you seem to think this is something more than a bank teller passing money to an accomplice..."

"Yes," Eleanor started excitedly. "Haven't you ever heard the admonition to 'never steal anything small'? Here you have a well-respected individual from a tight-knit community teaming up with somebody no one from the area has ever seen before..."

"How did you know that?" he asked, surprised that she was so well-versed in the details of a case from the middle of nowhere.

"I guessed," she admitted. "This isn't the first case we've seen like this."

"This has happened before." It sounded like a statement but it was really a question.

"Oh... several times." Eleanor's eyebrows were lifted quite high. She herself did not blame him for being surprised. "Through the good graces of various banks and various DA's we keep it out of the papers, but this sort of thing is not what you would call 'rare'."

"Go on," Eipper encouraged her.

"The accomplice is a complete 'unknown'," she continued, leaning in conspiratorially and gesturing with her hands. "The operation comes off in broad daylight, and it's twenty five hundred bucks, for Pete's sake! She might have more than that hidden in a sock someplace. Why would she steal it?"

"To top it all off, you have videotape of the entire day's activity. As a bank employee she had to know she was being videotaped, and now she claims she can't see on the video playback what absolutely everyone else insists is there. You don't find this the least bit odd?"

"Frankly, no. I think she's lying. The videotape doesn't lie." The prosecution rested.

At this point the waiter approached and asked Alan Eipper if he was ready to order. He was; the waiter took his order and began to leave.

"Waiter," he called after him, "aren't you going to take the lady's order?"

The waiter turned to him, looked all around, then asked: "What lady?"

"This lady sitting right here at my table," Eipper answered angrily. *What was the matter with this waiter, he asked himself; is he blind?*

"Sir," the waiter told him, "there's no one at your table but you. Are you expecting someone else?"

Alan had a bewildered look on his face. "Please get the manager and bring him here immediately."

The waiter departed and was back in a moment with the manager. "Is something wrong, sir?" he asked the Kansas City DA.

"Can you see the woman sitting here at this table?" Eipper demanded.

The manager looked slowly around as if searching for something, then back to Alan Eipper. "No, sir. There's no one sitting at this table but you."

Alan Eipper slumped heavily into his chair, his jaw slack, unsure whether he should continue to believe his eyes, which told him that Eleanor Rayburn was sitting there, smiling, when she turned to the waiters: "Thank you, gentlemen. That concludes our demonstration. Waiter, I'll have the Eggs Benedict."

When they had left, Eipper leaned across the table. "It was a setup!" he snarled. "Why?"

Eleanor fluffed her napkin. "I just wanted to demonstrate that it is not always clear to those who are immediately involved just exactly who is who and what is what. You clearly were perplexed at everyone else denying what your eyes told you was the truth. And, yes, it was a setup, but remember how you felt midway through the exercise: you didn't know and you had not a clue how you might resolve the clear and unmistakable discrepancy. Just remember that." Her finger jabbed the air in front of him.

"Now... you know that you are not involved in a conspiracy and so you conclude that Eloise Carson must be, and you continue (falsely, I believe) to conclude that she knows she's involved in a conspiracy and is lying to hide the truth.

"What I'm about to tell you is confidential in the strictest sense of the word: we have solid documentation of instances where people have been victims of mass hypnosis, in one case five police officers were the victims. These people can pass a polygraph so easily you're sure the test must be faulty. We've questioned some of them

under the influence of sodium pentothal, 'truth serum'. These people are not lying, at least as far as we can tell. And lest you misunderstand, they were questioned by the NSA, and our experts are the best in the business... maybe the best there ever was. If they can't pry the truth out of you, it's because it isn't in you to be pried out." She took a long sip of her coffee and paused before continuing.

"I think that's what you're seeing with Eloise Carson. She's been conditioned to reject any suggestion that she gave twenty five hundred dollars to... to this stranger. She doesn't know she did it. More precisely, she knows she *didn't* do it. Nothing you can say, nothing you can do will convince her otherwise.

"The worst part of all this? You'll get a conviction, beyond a doubt; she'll go to jail, her faith in the system completely demolished, and next month it will happen again in Topeka or Boulder or Santa Clara. Prosecuting this case will buy you exactly nothing."

"Are you saying I should just let lawbreakers walk away from their crimes?" Eipper asked, ready for Eleanor to suggest just that.

"No, of course not," Eleanor allowed. "But... who broke the law, and what law was broken? On what charge would you arrest and try a sleepwalker?"

"How do I know you're telling the truth? What's your involvement in this, anyway? Why do you care what happens to Eloise Carson?"

"Why do I care?" She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't, really, beyond some fundamental concern that we don't pick on the easy targets and leave the hard cases for someone braver. I'm much more interested in the stranger who walked away with Eloise Carson's money. Who was he? Where did he come from, and where did he go?"

Alan Eipper finished the thought for her: "...And how did he do to Eloise Carson what you say... what you suspect he did?"

"Well, of course," Eleanor smirked. "That's the first question."

Breakfast arrived. They ate in silence, then went back to the DA's office to view some videotape.

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They watched Jory put the suitcases into the trunk and then help his mother, now clearly struggling to move, into the passenger seat.

The two FutureScope Corporation cars had no trouble keeping them in view as they headed west on the Interstate through Tennessee, Arkansas, Texas, and New Mexico. With two cars trailing the Albertsen vehicle, they could each stop for food, gas, and relief breaks as needed while their partners kept the quarry in sight.

It appeared that only the son was doing any driving and he napped at rest areas along the route several times during the day, but only for short periods. He drove long hours and made good time. By late afternoon of the third day they were on secondary roads in New Mexico. The terrain here was very flat with the occasional high spot that divided the land into pockets, long flat valleys delineated by ridges high enough only to hide the valley beyond. The land itself was little more than desert, vast stretches of waterless sun-baked sand uninhabited save for coyotes and cottontails, divided by a 25-foot wide strip of asphalt that, apart from the rises, was straight as an arrow and flat as a pool table as far as the eye could see. The pursuers thus had to stay well back to avoid being detected, a tactic they discovered had its own perils. Topping a rise some miles behind the Albertsen's Toyota, the pursuers were surprised to see the road ahead completely empty far beyond where the Toyota should have been.

Could they have lost their quarry that easily? Either their target had pulled off the road and was now hidden behind rocks or vegetation, or it had increased speed enough to put it beyond the next ridge, possibly four miles ahead, maybe more. That seemed unlikely, but it had to be verified. One car stayed at the high point while the other raced down into the valley and on toward the next ridge where, with any luck, they might catch sight of Jory and his mother.

It was not to be so. The view from the next ridge was as empty as from the first. Their only hope of reacquiring their target was if that target was still in the valley. They waited, scanning the valley floor with binoculars.

As the sun's disk touched the horizon, the pursuers watched a figure trudge across the hard-packed sand toward a rocky prominence. It was carrying something over its shoulder, and they all guessed correctly that it was his mother's corpse Jory carried.

With full darkness upon them and only a fragment of moon for seeing, the watchers noted the flickering light of a fire emanating from a cave in the sandstone and carefully mapped its position by scratching marks into the sandstone. Beyond doubt, that cave held information critical to the success of Project Archimedes.

Over the course of eleven months various agents of FutureScope had watched the comings and goings of Jory and his mother. Some had even been so bold as to approach them and engage one or the other in innocuous conversation. The one attempt to broach the subject of their strange powers had resulted in proof positive of the existence of such powers: the agents could no longer recall being sent to talk to the Albertsens nor could they any longer rationally discuss the subject of the 'mind-mask'. It was as if they themselves had been 'masked'.

Surveillance teams continued to watch and to monitor while the controllers at FutureScope Corporation discussed ways to safely talk to the Albertsens about a subject they seemed disinclined to discuss, so much so that they would blot the memory of anyone who tried.

Now they had something tangible with which to work: they knew the burial place of the corpse of Ania Albertsen. Perhaps this might provide them with just the tool they needed to pry from Jory the information he had and that they desperately wanted.

Jory's task took him barely more than two hours, then he carefully picked his way down the rocky slope from the cave to the car and drove away.

With no time to check it out personally, the surveillance team used their cell phones to report back to their headquarters what they had seen that night on the New Mexico desert. Two days later, while still following him back to Tennessee, they were joined by a replacement crew and they themselves were flown back to New Mexico to meet with others who had been sent to investigate Tomb Rock. From the same ridge where once they had scratched marks into the sandstone with a knife blade they were able to point directly to Tomb Rock, but when they climbed the slope where Jory had carried his mother's corpse they found no cave. They found tire tracks in the sand where the Toyota had been and they found footprints leading toward the rocks where Jory had walked, but there was nothing on Tomb Rock that any of them would call a cave.

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The team leader did the narration for the combination slide/videotape presentation to Walter Hester to whom they all reported either directly or indirectly.

"This slide shows a map of the general area where the video was taken. The red dot indicates the location of the rock structure where our stake-out team observed the subject carrying a large object over his shoulder...

"As you can see from this video, our survey team did a very thorough job of scanning the entire rock face for any opening where Albertsen might have gained entrance to the interior if, in fact, there is an 'interior'. We found no such opening, and we are at a loss as to where Mr. Albertsen might have hidden the body that he earlier carried up the slope."

"What about that dark area?" Walter Hester asked. "That looks like it might be a cave."

"I don't see what you're referring to," the team leader told him. "Would you mind coming closer and pointing it out on the screen?"

Walter Hester stepped forward and indicated a spot on the television screen. The others gathered around and examined it closely.

"Well," the team leader admitted, "there might be some discoloration of the rock at that point, but I assure you..."

"Discoloration!" Hester bellowed, "It's jet black!"

They each looked from one to the other, exchanging uncertain glances, before turning back to the television to reexamine it.

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"Alright," Alan Eipper agreed, "we'll work this case slowly until it cools. I still can't believe you were able to talk the DA into it. Have you thought of practicing law? You'd be deadly whichever side of the fence you picked."

"And which side do you think I should pick?" she asked him over her shoulder, smirking.

He thought for a moment, already knowing what he believed and wondering whether he should say it. "Defense. You're a natural defense attorney."

"Coming from a prosecutor, I'll take that as a compliment."

"It is a compliment, and a sincere one."

Eleanor Rayburn turned at the curbside and extended her hand. "Alan, I've enjoyed the little time we've had together. It was a real pleasure working with you."

"Eleanor, the pleasure was all mine. Do you often find yourself in Kansas City?"

"I rarely get clear of DC itself," she admitted with a hint of sorrow in her voice. "My usual assignments don't give me much reason to travel and lots of reason to sleep late on weekends. It's a pretty boring life."

"If I ever find myself in DC, should I try to add some variety to it?"

She laughed. "I'd get up early on Saturday for that." She stepped into the waiting cab and gave a small wave as it pulled away.

"You have some very powerful friends," Alan Eipper told Eloise Carson. "You should think of yourself as very fortunate. This is what is going to happen: the case against you will not be dropped... officially, but for all practical purposes you can think of yourself as 'cleared'; your part of this is that you agree this conversation never took place, and you agree to steer clear of further trouble."

"Who are these powerful friends. I'd like to thank them." Eloise's voice and face were expressionless.

"I'm sure you would. They don't want any thanks, and they certainly don't want me making it possible for you to thank them."

"You're not going to tell me," Eloise mused matter-of-factly

"That's right." The tone of the Assistant DA's voice made it very clear that the decision had been made and was irreversible.

"Tell me... Did I really steal that money?"

"There's evidence that you did." Alan Eipper told her.

She put her face in her hands as if she were going to cry, but she didn't. "Am I crazy?" she asked the assistant DA.

"Your friends don't think so. Neither do I."

"So I stole the money, I don't remember stealing it, and I'm not crazy," she summarized.

"That's about it." Eipper confirmed.

"You're crazy," Eloise asserted.

"I'm almost ready to agree with you," Eipper admitted. "In any case, you're free to go. We can go get you processed out if you're ready."

"I've been ready since they slapped the cuffs on me." They started walking down the corridor. "What will I do now?" she asked him. "I'm certain I don't have a job at the bank anymore, and Clermont is such a small town, everyone knows I'm a suspected bank robber. Who'll give a person like that a job?"

"I understand that your powerful friends have also spoken with your boss. You should check with him before making any career decisions."

Eloise was happy to hear that, but she just couldn't manage a smile. Her world had turned upside down and she didn't know why. Then it had righted itself, but she still didn't know why.

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"We have no idea whether this is a dangerous mission or not," he was told, "but we suspect it might be, if for no other reason than you will be unable to see for the duration. Let me show you your 'uniform'."

The helmet, much larger than a deep-sea diver's headpiece, was designed to make it impossible to see. There was no faceplate, no porthole. Three small video cameras faced forward, one faced upward, and two back. Floodlights pointed outward from several points. Inside, a microphone and speakers provided voice communication. A battery pack would keep everything running for twelve minutes in case the power cord trailing behind was cut.

"You'll be in radio contact for the whole trip. The cameras will provide imaging data to the project director who will, in turn, tell you where to move, where to turn, when to come back."

"Wouldn't it be simpler," the volunteer asked, "to just put a faceplate on the thing?"

"I would have thought so, but they didn't ask me for my opinion. Want to try it on?"

The rig was lifted onto his shoulders and the retaining straps adjusted to fit. Its 58 pounds and the trailing umbilicus made Carey feel like a deep-sea diver, but the inability to see anything was giving him odd feelings... almost claustrophobia, he thought. At least, here in the lab, there wasn't much that could happen to him beyond tripping over a misplaced chair. The very faintest glimmer of light slipped through some spot where the helmet's yoke didn't quite press against his chest or his shoulders, so it wasn't completely dark inside the helmet, but it was close enough.

The speaker next to his ear told him: "Turn slightly right... walk forward... a little more right... reach out with your left hand and grab the doorknob... the door opens to your left... walk through and turn left... stop... there's a telephone on the wall to your right... come in closer so I can get a better look. Good.

"How does it feel, Carey?" his controller asked.

"It feels a little close. I don't know if a light inside would help or not."

"You want a night light?" the controller asked incredulously.

"Yeah," Carey confirmed.

The second team was flown to Albuquerque via the corporate jet and then south to the tomb-site by chartered helicopter. The rig was brought part-way up the slope to a staging area where Carey dressed for his mission. His controllers had been carefully kept away from Tomb Rock. In fact, they had strict orders not to approach the site under any circumstances. FutureScope was taking no chances that they might become "contaminated". Across the desert floor, three miles away, they waited in their air conditioned control vehicle and viewed the rock face through their binoculars. The mouth of the cave was as plainly visible to them as it had been to Walter Hester.

The project controllers talked Carey up the slope, telling him where to place his feet so he wouldn't slip. At the mouth of the cave, they commanded him "Carey, turn left."

"Are you kidding?" he asked the controllers, "it's a rock wall here."

"Carey, how can you know that?" they asked.

"Uhhhh.... I don't know, it just is, that's all." Carey felt more and more uneasy as the seconds ticked by.

"Turn left anyway."

He turned to his left and stepped forward into the cave... and shrieked as he fell eighty feet into a forest of jagged quartz crystals. Death was almost instantaneous.

"Carey... Carey... Carey..." they called into the microphones. There was no answer.

"Is the umbilical still attached?" one asked the other.

"I have a good circuit and I'm getting video. We're still connected."

A volunteer went up-slope with a flashlight and a camera following the umbilicus.

"It just ends," he radioed back.

"What do you mean '...it just ends...?'" they asked.

"I mean the cable is lying there like it was cut or something. The end is lying against the rock face," he explained.

"Take a picture of the end of the cable and come back." He snapped several pictures from different angles, then retreated back down the path to the control point at the base.

Back at the van, the controllers looked at the photos. They showed Carey's crumpled form lying about four feet inside the mouth of the cave. There were no indications of physical injury, but the scream they all heard was indicative of a painful death.

"So... it's too dangerous for humans to go inside. What next?"

"Drones... robots... I don't know. We'll need something to go retrieve the body, if nothing else."

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"I've never seen such crap tape in my life."

"Hush," Eleanor urged him. "This is why we pay you the 'big bucks': because you can pull images off crap tape. Spin it."

The day's activity on the banking floor went wheeling past.

"But how can they expect to use this as evidence? Look," the technician begged her. "We've got the best of the best and we can barely pick up any detail!"

"They don't need our kind of detail for evidence. All they need is to be able to convince a jury that the bank robber on the tape is the same as the person at the defense table. We want to know if he brushed his teeth that morning. Spin the tape."

"I'm spinning," he snapped at her. "Keep your shorts on."

"Ooh, Larry, I love it when you talk dirty..."

"Yeah. How far down?"

"1:37pm," Eleanor told him.

"...Right here." The tape slowed to normal speed. A young, casually dressed man approached Eloise's window and slid a note across to her. She picked up the note, read it, smiled back at the young man, and began counting money.

"Him," her finger jabbed at the monitor. "I want his face. Best image you can get. As a matter of fact, I'll take the deluxe package."

"\$369.95?" he teased.

"Yeah, that one." She winked at him and left. He would need time and solitude to do his very best, and she wanted his very, very best.

7 – Kansas City

The twenty-five hundred dollars was enough to keep him going until his first paycheck came through; Jory lived a pretty Spartan existence. His new employer, however, only issued paychecks via EFTS, Electronic Funds Transfer. All employees had to have a bank account into which their paychecks could be deposited.

Jory had never had a bank account before, always relying on local merchants to convert his paychecks into paper money for him. The thought of leaving yet another paper record of his existence and his whereabouts didn't sit well with him at all.

It wasn't all bad, however. Along with his new bank account, he got an ATM card that could be used, they told him, to draw money from his account at machines from coast to coast. That could be very handy. Very handy.

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"This is the best you could do?" Eleanor used her most incredulous tone and held the photograph at arm's length in two fingers as if it were somehow repulsive.

"I told you: the tape is junk. You're lucky I got any sort of recognizable image at all."

"Couldn't you... you know... clean it up a little?" she pleaded.

"That is cleaned up. You should have seen it before I spent my whole weekend making it good enough to show in public. You owe me big time for this one, Eleanor."

"Yeah, I know," she softened. "Thanks. I really do appreciate all the work you put into this. What would you like as a token of my appreciation?"

"Well, if I recall correctly you are noted for your Brownies With Extreme Chocolate. You could make a batch." He winked at her.

"I could do that," she agreed.

"You could give me the recipe."

"I couldn't do that," she told him. "I promised my grandmother it would stay in the family."

"You could marry me and then give me the recipe..." he offered.

"...a 'marriage of convenience'?" Eleanor feigned shock.

"...then a quickie divorce..." he assured her.

"And... between the marriage and the divorce, what?"

"I'm sure we'll think of something," he smiled back at her.

"I can't do it. You know I don't date outside my species. Everyone would talk."

"What do you mean... 'outside your species'...?" He sounded offended.

"I'm an administrator; you're a technoid. You know there's no future for us. Think of the children..."

"They'd be hybrids... probably healthier and sturdier than either of us. They deserve a chance, don't they, Rayburn?"

"Alright, I'll think about it..." She stood up, faced him, and put her fiercest expression on. "...but only if you bring me the face of Jory Albertsen," she screamed. "Out!"

He chuckled and scooted out the door.

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Christine leaned back on the couch as Doug's lips crushed against hers.

"I like it when you go off on one of your trips," she told him. "It seems to make you appreciate me more when you get back."

"Honey, I appreciate you all the time," Doug assured her.

"So... what was it this time?" Christine probed.

"If I were to tell you, you'd think I was nuts," Doug told her.

"Tell me," she whined petulantly.

"What are you, some sort of spy?"

"Yeah," she smirked, "MI-5. Wanna see my ID?" and, with a devilish look in her eyes, she started to unbutton her blouse. He lunged in again and captured her lips with his own. They wrestled playfully on the couch for a few moments before she pushed him away with finality.

"No more until you tell me. My curiosity is killing me."

"Awww, baby..." Doug pleaded.

"Nope." She crossed her arms and turned away.

"OK, but to tell the truth I don't understand most of what I'm about to tell you myself," he began.

"There's this sandstone bluff southwest of Elkins, NM where the company has some research facility, if you can call two semi trailers and a satellite uplink a 'research facility'. I think they use it to test new models of their robots to see how well they perform on slopes and rough terrain." Her eyes closed and she could see the arid landscape in yellows and browns, the sky a deep cobalt blue, here and there a cloud, sometimes wispy, sometimes... rarely... whipped cream castles billowing up and up and up.

"Anyway, a half dozen of us were down there with the latest model. The guys in the semis three miles away control the robot by

radio; we just observe and stand by in case the robot tips itself over, which almost never happens.

"Well, we're watching the robot through our glasses when it goes behind a rock or something and we can't see it anymore. Some of the athletic types run up this same path for exercise every day and they swear there's nothing up there big enough to hide the robot, but it found something big enough to hide it. About five minutes later, it comes back into view and it's dragging a body. The dudes in the semi tell us to run up and check it out while they call the cops. I went up but I couldn't get closer than about twenty feet. He was really ripe. You wouldn't believe how bad it smelled."

"Oh, Doug, that's so awful. I'm so sorry I made you live through that again. Can you forgive me?"

"Oh, that's no big thing. The really bizarre thing is that later, after the body had been bagged and removed by the coroner, me and a few others went up slope with the cops to view the discovery site. You could see the drag marks where the robot had pulled the body along the ground. It looked like it had been pulled right clean through the rock face. I touched the rock face and it was solid as... as a rock. I faced the rock and said 'open, sesame' and then tried 'abracadabra', but it didn't do anything. I keep thinking of that old fairy tale, The Pied Piper of Hamelin, where the piper takes the children through a rock wall and then seals it up so the parents can never come through, and I'm beginning to wonder if there isn't something to it."

"Wow!" was her one-word critique.

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It was months before FutureScope Corporation was able, even with their vast resources, to build a robot vehicle that would do the necessary task. Task number one was: pull Carey's body back into the open. The robot carried enough lighting equipment to illuminate most of the cavern, and this would provide a look into the rest of the cave. Carey's badly decomposed body yielded no information on autopsy. There were no broken bones. There were no indications of hemorrhage. He had just died.

The video taken inside the cave, however, was another story entirely. At least seventy mummified corpses could be counted within the range of the drone's lights.

A furious debate raged within the corridors of FutureScope Corporation over whether to 'acquire' one of the mummies for study... the drone that brought Carey's body out could certainly do so again. In the end, the risk of turning Jory into an enemy, perhaps one bent on vengeance for grave desecration, was thought to be too great for

any benefit that might be obtained from a corpse of uncertain age and condition.

Instead, Tomb Rock became the subject of very quiet but constant surveillance. If there were others who came here to bury their dead FutureScope Corporation wanted to know about them, too.

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Dressed in tan camouflage for a desert operation, the two men slipped out of the car on the side away from the FutureScope semis parked off the road while observers inside those semis watched the driver empty his bladder into the roadside vegetation. The car drove away, leaving the two crouching behind sagebrush, waiting for the fall of night.

A reconnaissance overflight the day before had determined that the FutureScope semis emitted radar signals and had night vision equipment, so this was not going to be easy. The route chosen would minimize the exposure of the two agents to the FutureScope detection equipment.

They carefully picked their way across the desert floor working toward the sandstone monument a scant half-mile away. Occasionally the radar detectors or black-light detectors they wore on their wrists would tremble indicating they had been 'painted', but there were few such warnings to retard their progress. As they climbed the slope, however, they became increasingly more exposed to view despite the moonless desert darkness and the wrist detectors now trembled constantly.

Up slope, their own night-vision equipment let them make out the faint markings of the robot's caterpillar track. They saw and photographed the spot at which the rippled markings turned toward the rock face and ended flush against it as if they actually continued beyond it.

Taking a twig, one of the agents tried to poke the rock wall, but the twig would not penetrate it. Before they left, their assignment and their investigation finished, one of them took a one pence coin and tossed it at the wall. It simply disappeared as it touched the rock, and he filed this fact away in his memory for reporting later.

As they turned down-slope the leader spoke into a device at his collar: "Rescue One, mission complete. Rendezvous in twelve minutes."

At the base, they each began a crouching run toward the road, but they had only gone two hundred yards when shadowy figures arose before them, seemingly out of nowhere. Before they had a chance to react, the silenced pistols aimed at their foreheads had each

delivered their deadly pills and the intruders lay sprawled on the desert floor.

From the east, the sound of rotor blades warned of the arrival of a helicopter. It swept over the area at what would have been tree-top level had there been any trees. No voice called on it to land; no light told it where that should happen. It continued westward into the night.

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The picture was none too good, but it clearly bore little resemblance to the photo in Jory Albertsen's FedEx personnel jacket. She had it faxed to Knoxville for Goodwin and vanZant. They, in turn took it to Jory's FedEx manager who looked at it and pronounced it 'vaguely familiar'. Sgt Crosby drew a blank on it, as did the other officers who were part of the 'cobra bust'.

On a hunch, Marshall Goodwin showed the picture to the woman who had called the police that day. "Oh, yes," she told him, "that's the young man who drove the truck."

Bingo.

"You wanted anything that hinted even slightly at good news," Marshall Goodwin told Eleanor. "Well, here it is: positive ID on the driver by the woman who called the police for him. She didn't hesitate an instant, and she's 100% certain."

"That is good news," she told him. "It's the only 100% certain thing that's associated with the whole file. Thanks, Marshall. Dinner on me next time you're in DC."

"Eleanor, what the hell is happening here?" Goodwin demanded. "One person out of sixteen gives you a positive ID and I can hear champagne corks popping in the background. What about the other fifteen?"

"Marshall, this is all 'need to know' shit, but you're a bright boy and I have no doubt you'll figure it all out given sufficient time," Eleanor began. "I think this guy can do mass-hypnosis... maybe with a snap of his fingers. He's a pro, and he's real, and he wants to keep a low profile. When he meets you, he plants a... what do they call it?... a suggestion in your mind that he doesn't exist or that he's somebody else or that he looks like Tony Curtis. Before you're even aware of what's happening he's disappeared from your memory.

"And it's permanent. Twenty years from now he'll walk right up to you and you won't know him from Adam. He apparently didn't blind the housewife. I don't know why and I don't care. Any hundred-percent ID is good enough for me."

"Eleanor, this is really heavy. Have you shared this up-line?"

"Do I look like I'm crazy?" Eleanor whispered conspiratorially. "I don't have a stitch of evidence to support any of this. If I push this up-line, my career is toast. Marshall, don't you dare say a fucking word about this to anybody, do you hear? You blow my cover on this, Marshall, and I swear I'll skin you alive and nail your carcass to the barn door."

"Hey, Eleanor, do you think I want *my* career over? As far as I'm concerned, you're just one more fruitcake adminodweeb nutcase."

"Thanks, Marshall, I knew I could count on you."

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Tennessee to Missouri, possibly still moving, possibly not. Eleanor asked the Missouri and Kansas Departments of Motor Vehicles for a spin-down of all new driver license applications issued to males since the incident in the bank. NSA's Data Reduction Department fielded the request for any near-matches to the face that had now been positively identified. Four days of searching later, DR reported 'no hits'. Eleanor called for Oklahoma new licenses plus an update on Missouri and Kansas.

Iowa! She had forgotten about Iowa! She called the Iowa DMV and got a similar extract. The manager of DR called her boss to complain and Eleanor soon found herself explaining what she was tracking and why.

"Chief, this is clearly a paranormal phenomenon," she concluded her twenty-minute briefing, "and well within my charter."

"That's not the precise point here, Eleanor. Do you really need all this data reduction?"

"Do you want this guy?" she asked. He nodded. "Then let me do my job."

"How much more DR do you expect?" he asked.

"I'm checking new DLs issued to males for the three weeks following the Eloise Carson incident. How much can I get away with?"

"Are you going to try to do the whole country?" her boss asked.

"If I can get away with it..." she admitted.

"You can't," he said with finality. "Keep it skinny. Make good guesses. Try not to spend NSA's budget single-handedly." He pointed to his door with a 'go and sin no more' look and gesture. Eleanor took the hint.

In the end, she began thinking, it hardly matters. There's no proof he even has a driver's license or would bother to get it renewed. He could just block anyone who looked at it from seeing whatever he didn't want them to see. It probably is a colossal waste of time and money. Still...

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Jory nearly jumped out of his skin when the little fur ball brushed against his leg, then realized it was only a stray cat. She raised her black and white face to him and uttered one short 'mew'. Jory picked her up and flipped her over to check her white-furred belly for fleas and, finding none, popped her onto his shoulder where she remained, contentedly purring.

"Looks like I just became a cat owner," he said to no one in particular. "You need a name," he told her as if she would understand him. He let a thousand random thoughts rip through his mind, rejecting them one by one until...

The Nosa goddess-protector of small animals, Lasimmilas, had a name that when written in the calligraphic Nosa script looked vaguely like a cat. "Lasimmilas," he told her, "that's your name," to which her only reply was another small 'mew'.

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He has to have a telephone, Eleanor thought. Everyone has a telephone. Even people without drivers' licenses have telephones.

She didn't even need the help of the local phone company for this one. NSA's data catalog had a substantial section devoted to intracompany data transfers. Eleanor sent an internal memo to Data Acquisition asking for an extract of new customers from all telephone company files over a four-week period sorted by last name.

Before the day was out she had a reply from DA promising the list within 72 hours. Problem solved.

8 – *Lasimmilas*

He was different, of that there was not a shade of doubt in her mind.

It was more than the odd scent he carried, clearly distinguishing him to her nose from the mass of two-footers she encountered every day. She knew his mind. She knew his thoughts. And when he was close by, she knew the thoughts of those around him. *He* didn't, but *she* did.

She reveled in her cat way in the novelty of seeing the world the way the two-footers saw it, and she became aware for the first time in her 26-month life of 'technology'. She didn't understand it, but she knew the two-footers did, and she knew now that they used it to make their lives easier in many ways.

She knew, too, that she had been named. 'Lasimmilas' he had named her, and she had as clear an image of Lasimmilas as had he.

She didn't know why the two-footers named everything. Cats rarely, if ever, saw any need for names; one cat would know instantly, from the swagger, from the scent, from the aura, whether another were friend or foe. What more was necessary? The only exception they made was for places that they used for trysts. Cat vocabulary was thus extremely short, highly stylized, and indigenous to a geographic area. She was impressed by the vast and colorful array of names the two-footers remembered and used consistently. Not impressed enough to retain many, of course. She discarded most of them instantaneously. Cats have no need for such things.

Jory... that was the name he used for himself... walked only short distances. Whenever he went long distances he rode upon a device: loud and smelly, but fast, much faster than she could run. When he did walk, she would sometimes ride upon him, occasionally draping herself across his shoulders (because he seemed to enjoy it), at other times clinging to the coverings he used on his mostly-furless body. She learned pretty quickly not to bring her claws out too far at such times. She had noticed adverse reactions from other two-footers in times past, but had not understood until she caught the distinct flash of pain from his mind the first time her claws contacted his flesh. Oops...

She had lately taken to paying much more attention to his comings and goings. She had developed a substantial confidence that he would not harm her. That, joined to her natural cat curiosity, was driving her to seek more in the way of thrills. There arose in her an itch to experience the device he rode upon and she had resolved to

find a way to go with him on his next trip to where ever it was he went.

It wasn't long that she had to wait. Jory went somewhere at least every day, so when he started pulling on his coverings she made sure she was close enough to be noticed.

"Good morning, Lasimmilas," he greeted her. She had never understood the odd sounds the two-footers made, but being able to see his thoughts gave meaning to the sounds. She wished she were able to answer him, but she was a cat. She looked up at him and gave a simple 'meow', then crouched and leapt to his shoulder in one smooth motion. He scooped her off and placed her back on the floor. "I can't now," he told her, "I have to go shopping."

Food! Excellent! This was better than she had hoped for. She would find out where he hunted. As he opened the door, she scooted out between his feet and made a dash for the device. As he approached, she jumped up onto it and put her best 'anticipation' expression on her face. She hoped it would be enough.

Jory looked at her, wondering what had gotten into this normally quite reserved animal. He again scooped her off the motorcycle and placed her on the ground. Lasimmilas immediately jumped back up and called his attention to it with a short 'mew'.

"You won't like it," he told her, and she understood. Fair warning. If he could take it, so could she. "Mew!," she acknowledged.

"You can't ride back there. You'll get hurt." He scooped her up again, unzipped his leather jacket and placed her inside, then zipped it back up so that only her head was showing. Suddenly her world was a roar of sound. His thoughts, however, were calm, so she was probably still safe, but she was more frightened than she had ever been in her short cat life. Only the maximum exertion of her will kept her from emptying her bladder.

In a moment they were gone, zipping down the street side by side with other devices, most much larger. Things went by so quickly on either side as they flew down the road that she couldn't concentrate on what she was seeing. And she was getting dizzy. And she was getting sick. She closed her eyes and calmness returned, all except that horrendous roar that blotted every other sound out. She listened to his thoughts. He was enjoying this! When she looked through his eyes she realized that he was paying almost no attention to the side, concentrating almost entirely on the road ahead. Aha! She opened her eyes and looked straight ahead. That was better; at least she wasn't going to throw up in his jacket.

A few moments later Jory brought the device to a stop and dismounted. She hunkered down inside his jacket because his thoughts were of a worry that she would be discovered by... others? Whatever. She knew it wouldn't be good to be discovered.

Jory pushed a wheeled basket in front of him. These two-footers used wheels on everything, Lasimmilas thought. It's a wonder they themselves didn't have wheels. They entered a brightly lit cavern, many two-footers, each pushing a wheeled basket, and around them an entire universe of things... so many that she couldn't even comprehend what it all might be, much less mean.

Jory reached out and pulled something from a shelf and placed it into the cart. She didn't know what it was and his thoughts were no real help. Later when he reached for some small objects she could read his thoughts clearly... 'salmon', the red fish-stuff I like. Then 'tuna and cheese'... ugh! She hissed at it.

"What?," he asked her, "don't like that?" She hissed again, but softly. Mustn't be discovered. He left the Tuna and Cheese and went on to 'plain tuna'. "How about ordinary tuna?" *Mew*. He dropped four cans into the basket.

Smart cat, he thought. She can recognize the labels. It was only then that she realized the objects looked vaguely different. *Ah! Visual names.*

At virtually the same instant, Jory and Lasimmilas noticed a man walking purposefully toward them. Lasimmilas hunkered down a little deeper into Jory's jacket, but it was too late.

"Sir," the manager asked, "is there an animal under your jacket?"

"Umm... it's my cat," Jory admitted.

"I'll have to ask you to leave the store, sir," the manager informed him. "Animals are not permitted on the premises except seeing-eye dogs."

"But she likes to pick out her own food," Jory told him.

"That's ridiculous," the manager scoffed.

"It's true. Watch." Jory grabbed a can of 'Beef Stew for Cats' and Lasimmilas dutifully hissed. He put it back and selected another can of salmon. *Meow*.

"Sir," the store manager told him, "that's simply amazing but it doesn't alter the fact that state law forbids animals in a food store..."

"But they allow guide dogs?" Jory challenged.

"Yes, but..."

"Well, this is a 'guide cat'," Jory asserted.

"Sir," the manager sighed, "the law only recognizes dogs. Not guide-cats. Not guide-snakes. Not guide-horses. Please, sir, leave the store before the Health Department shuts us down. You wouldn't want to see us shut down, would you?"

"Alright. Can I check out?" Jory pleaded.

"I'll check you out personally if you'll just place your guide-cat outside first." The manager ushered them toward the front of the store.

Outside the store, Jory put Lasimmilas atop a newspaper vending machine. "Stay right there," he told her. "Don't move." *Meow.*

She didn't have to wait long. A few minutes later when Jory again exited the store, this time carrying several bags, he found her being petted by several children. These actually had their own wheels that they walked on, just as she had suspected. She didn't particularly care for the two-footed kits, but Jory had told her not to wander off, so she was tolerating them.

"Let's go," he told her, and she made the leap to his shoulder in classic cat-form: one smooth motion.

"Your cat?" a woman, probably the children's mother, asked.

"Yes," Jory admitted.

"She's not wearing a collar. Is she vaccinated?"

"Yes," he lied.

"She should wear the tag from the vet," the woman advised.

"If she wanders off, it could mean the difference between life and death."

The groceries went into the motorcycle's panniers for the trip home; Lasimmilas again slipped inside Jory's jacket, and they were off. Lasimmilas was becoming quite the experienced motorcyclist.

"Damnedest thing I've ever seen..." the assistant manager exclaimed.

"What?" his manager asked.

"A guy had his cat picking out cat food over on aisle eleven."

"Get real!" The manager's expression was of sheer incredulity.

"No joke," the assistant manager insisted. "And when he drove off on his bike, the cat rode inside his jacket. I thought cats were supposed to be too damn independent to train. This one thinks it's a dog... I swear."

"Wow. Let's look at the tape."

They rescued the tape from the surveillance unit and replaced it with a fresh one, then rewound the tape to watch the trained cat. Lasimmilas' performance was stellar.

"You know what we need to do?" the manager offered, "we need to send this to one of those TV 'funny videos' programs. This tape could be worth money."

"You're right," the assistant manager agreed. "It's a good thing I got his license plate number."

Lasimmilas suspected something unpleasant was brewing but couldn't quite understand all the ramifications. The 'other' who had discovered her in Jory's jacket had shown an odd curiosity about Jory's

device, and had, in fact, watched the two of them ride off. If he hadn't been so far off she was sure she would have understood his thoughts much better; at least she had understood clearly when he was standing next to Jory. The two-footers were such an odd bunch... all manner of complicated schemes, none of which made any sense to Lasimmilas, circulated in their heads constantly. Even Jory was like that: worrying about this, worrying about that, trying not to be discovered, planning his escape... from what?

Well, she had discovered where he hunted, not that it would do her any good. It would take her a good part of a day to get there, and an equal slice to get back, she wouldn't know what to pull from the shelves if Jory weren't with her, she couldn't carry much back even if she did, and the two-footers wouldn't allow her to hunt there in any case.

She worried that she might be starting to worry like Jory and, being a cat, didn't see the circularity of the thought.

She worried about the two-footer with the kits whose thoughts were of Lasimmilas dying a horrible death.

Mostly she worried about the two-footer who discovered her and maybe discovered Jory. But he was far away. Perhaps she needn't worry at all.

She slept.

9 – *By A Cat's Whisker*

The talent scout for "Make Me Laugh — Make Me Cry" thought the 'supermarket kitty' video was a sure winner. All he had to do was track down kitty's owner and get his OK to use the clip on the program. No one ever refused... the money worked all the time.

And, like every other business in the world, it was money that enabled them to go places and do things that ordinary folk couldn't. It enabled them, for instance, to turn a license plate into a name and address.

Usually. Not this time.

Their contact on the KCPD got the data on plate TR0178M but it was an old record. The plate hadn't been used for years. A quick check of the last registered owner's address revealed that she had moved to California about the time the plate expired. By whispering in the right ears he got the patrols in the area to keep an eye peeled for the motorcycle with the expired plate. That bike had to come out again sometime, and when it did, they'd find it.

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Within hours the second body washed ashore and, since it, too, had a bullet wound to the head, the coroner moved them up on the schedule.

Two nude Caucasian males in very good physical shape, possibly athletes, in apparent perfect health save only that they were stone cold dead. They had both been shot from close range, certainly no more than four meters; the entry wound appeared to be 9mm or 38-caliber but the slugs had exited and were not in the bodies. Death had occurred on land, judging from the dirt and debris recovered from the scalps. About five hours postmortem the bodies were dumped in the Pecos River where they were found within the day.

Both victims had tattoos behind the left knee that were visible only in UV light. One said '14408' and the other '12020'. Each had a small device implanted under his collarbone. They appeared to be small radio transmitters, possibly locator beacons. Both victims wore camouflage makeup.

Fingerprints were taken and forwarded to the FBI for matching. Finding no 'hits', the FBI passed the prints on to Interpol for processing. When Scotland Yard ran the prints, they were both flagged as 'refer to SAS'. Three days later, Her Majesty's Government

identified the prints as belonging to British citizens and requested expedited return of the bodies.

The bodies went home. The transmitters stayed.

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In three weeks there were 14 Albertsens that got new phones in western Missouri, 12 in eastern Kansas, 6 in eastern Nebraska, and one in Iowa. None of them were 'Jory Albertsen', so he was not using the same name he used in Tennessee; he had certainly changed his first name and perhaps both names. Or he didn't have a phone. Eleanor refused to believe anyone could live without a phone. He must be using an alias.

She would re-examine all the J-anything A-anything listings then cross-match to 'new driver licenses' for the same area. Would he use the same Social Security number? She thought of insurance. Did he have renter's insurance? Would he get a new policy? She filled out a Data Request for 'new insurance applications - apartment renters' for the period.

Another 72 hours.

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General Sir Clyde Thompson-Villiers finished reading the autopsy report on the two SAS soldiers killed in the American desert, then snapped the folder closed angrily.

"Kill them," he told his aide. "Kill them all. Make it gruesome so that their masters know why it happened."

"Sir," his aide pleaded, "this will almost certainly cause an incident..."

"The incident," Sir Clyde almost hissed the word out, "has already happened. The Yanks killed two of our men and didn't file a protest... why? Because whatever is going on at that site is so secret they don't even brief their allies. Incident? I'll show them what an incident looks like. Do it," he ordered. The aide left to begin preparations for another covert op.

Eight days later, Air Canada charter M2047 cruised south-southeast at 33,000 feet on its route from Vancouver to Belize. On a pre-arranged signal, the aft stairway opened far enough to allow a package to fall clear, then slowly closed again.

In the darkness, the black parachute was absolutely invisible. It delivered its payload to the desert floor, a small, tracked vehicle whose first task was to collect its parachute into a chamber where it was chemically dissolved. It did this as it made its way toward the two FutureScope semitrailers that stood guard over Tomb Rock.

Reconnaissance photos had enabled the robot's programmers to know where the fresh air inlets were located and the robot made straight for them. Once on site, a telescoping arm extended to the vents and, from the hose attached, a stream of liquid was squirted into each trailer's ventilating system. Then the machine waited as its internal clock ticked off the time until phase two.

Three hours went by before the machine again roused itself to place two devices, one on the underside of each trailer, affixing them magnetically. By the first light of dawn, it headed for the blacktop road three-quarters of a mile away. As it crawled up the slope to the pavement, a pickup truck topped the rise and headed into the valley, stopping as it pulled abreast of the waiting robot. Two men got out and hefted the machine into the truck's bed, then drove off.

Alarmed by the sudden loss of contact with the listening post, FutureScope Corporation's Walter Hester dispatched a team to tell them their radios had gone out if, indeed, they didn't know that already.

The first gentle knocks got no response, and the violent pounding that followed also went unanswered. As a last resort, the newcomers entered the passcode into the keypad of the first trailer and popped the door open. Beneath the trailer floor, one device signaled the other silently that it had felt footfalls.

Inside the first trailer, the one used as a bunkhouse, were seven corpses. They had died in their sleep of a cause or causes unknown.

The team leader dialed FutureScope headquarters to update Walter Hester and tell him they were about to pop the second trailer. They entered the door code for the second trailer and pulled its door open. Inside were four corpses, looking as if they had simply fallen asleep at their posts. All of the equipment was still functioning as it was intended. Beneath the trailer floor, the second device signaled its partner that it, too, had felt footfalls and together they began a 12-second countdown.

"Mr. Hester, it looks as if they've been poisoned. Everyone is intact. There's no physical damage."

"See if the bodies are still warm," Hester told him, but he never received an answer.

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Patrolman Randy Obarski turned the corner in his cruiser and fell in behind a motorcycle. Force of habit caused him to note the license plate — TR0178M — and glance at the 'hot sheet' lying on the seat beside him. He thumbed the button on the radio and reported his

position and that he was following a motorcycle whose plate matched the hot sheet, then he called for 'wants, warrants, and short DMV' for TR0178M. A moment later Dispatch reported to him that the plate was not current having expired over three years prior.

He turned on his lights.

The motorcycle pulled to the side and stopped. Obarski pulled in behind it and grabbed his citation book. He took a few moments before getting out of his patrol car to begin writing the citation, entering the date and time, the location, and the plate number.

He approached the motorcycle, carefully watching for any signs the driver might be dangerous.

"Sir, may I see your license and registration?" he asked the motorcyclist.

The motorcyclist, who bore an uncanny resemblance to his wife's brother Larry, retrieved a thin wallet from his outer jacket pocket and flipped it open to reveal an FBI identification card. At the same moment, a car pulled alongside and another wallet with another FBI ID card was flashed to him.

"Get lost," the agent in the car told him. "Now!"

"No problem," Obarski told them, and returned to his cruiser, the citation still only partially filled out.

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The name stared back at Eleanor Rayburn from the sheet: Jory Arnold. It was at least worth a try. She phoned the Kansas City office and asked to have a field agent check it out very carefully. Very, very carefully.

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The rental agent grabbed a fresh rental agreement and started filling it out. She wasn't sure why, but she knew she was doing the right thing. Customer Relations were the single most important factor for a small agency office like hers and if a customer didn't leave satisfied, his next rental would be someplace else. Better a free rental now than to lose all future sales. She checked the box for "N/C - C/R": no charge - customer relations. Jory took the keys and left.

By midnight, he was packed and ready, his motorcycle minus the offending license plate neatly stowed inside the truck, the security deposit for his apartment — in cash — in his pocket. When he opened the driver's door to climb into the truck, Lasimmilas beat him to it. In one bound she was in the driver's seat.

"You're not going," Jory told her. She arched her back and hissed. Her claws, almost unused these days, swiped at his hand,

deliberately missing by mere millimeters. Jory flinched from the swipe. "Alright," he relented, "but you're not going to like it."

"Mew." *Fair warning*, she thought. *I'll take my chances.*

He was back in a moment with her litter box, the bag of absorbent material, and several cans of food. Lasimmilas instantly curled up across the dashboard. She was ready.

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The battalion clerk had already started to key in the citation data when she noticed that the form was almost entirely blank. She marked it for 'rework' and pressed on.

When Obarski checked his message box the next morning, he found a note from the clerk with a photocopy of the faulty citation. He took it to the watch commander.

"I don't know how to handle this one, Captain." He handed over the paperwork.

"How come it's not filled out?" the Captain asked.

"The rider showed FBI ID," Obarski started, "and his back-up was right behind him, also with FBI ID. They told me to scram and I did. I figured they were on a case. Then I forgot all about it."

"You had a run-in with the FBI on duty and you forgot about it?" his Captain asked with a note of derision. "Did you have a real busy day or something?" The Captain was obviously not pleased with this.

"Yeah," Obarski shrugged his shoulders, "I guess I must have."

"OK, so why didn't you just mark it?" the Captain asked.

"I didn't want to write 'citee was an FBI agent on stake-out' on a public document," Obarski explained.

"Right," the Captain admitted. "But you could have marked it 'federal government employee on official business'. Write it up that way and send it back through."

"OK." Obarski did not recall that the license plate had been on his hot sheet, nor did he recall why it was there. He slipped the now-completed citation into the battalion clerk's mail slot and promptly forgot about it.

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"Your timing is lousy, you know that?" the property manager told them.

"Why do you say that?" the senior NSA agent asked.

"Because Mr. Arnold moved out just two days ago," he told them. "If you came here two days ago you could have talked to him yourself."

"Has his apartment been rented yet?" the agent asked.

"Not yet. Would you like to see it?"

They nodded in unison and followed the property manager as he left.

The apartment was completely barren. The furniture was gone — the rental company had picked it up the day before; the cabinets were empty; the maintenance man had discarded everything that Jory left behind which wasn't much.

"Did he have a moving company move his stuff?" one of the agents inquired.

"I don't think so," the property manager responded. "I think he had a rental truck."

"Did he tow his car behind it, do you know?"

"Oh, no. Mr. Arnold rides a motorcycle. He probably put it inside the truck with the rest of his stuff."

An FBI team arrived shortly afterward and began to comb the area for clues. Despite the oft-quoted stories to the contrary, NSA and FBI actually worked very well together when there wasn't any politics involved. One team worked through the garbage dumpster looking for anything that might be a clue. That team it was that found a discarded motorcycle license plate, registration stickers badly out-of-date, and brought it to the notice of the agent-in-charge. The plate was 'run' through the Missouri and Kansas DMVs and got one current 'hit': a ticket written a bare three days prior and only entered into the system the morning of their inquiry.

"The property manager said our timing was lousy," the NSA AIC told his FBI counterpart. "Actually, I'd say our timing was impeccable: twelve hours earlier and we would have come up 'empty' on this plate. Now, at least, we know what spooked the suspect."

Eleanor Rayburn called for an 'eyeball' inspection of every truck rental agreement document for the day of the ticket from every rental agency within a 25-mile radius, and asked for special attention to be paid to the location at which the truck was returned.

Patrolman Obarski was interviewed and provided, through the KCPD sketch artist, one more incompatible description of Eleanor's elusive prey.

The seventeen renters who returned their trucks in a distant city were approached and interviewed, all except Cal Arnold who could not be located either in Kansas City or in Sioux Falls SD where the truck was turned in. Sioux Falls police were placed on alert for any motorcycles with license plate discrepancies: 'do not approach, do not apprehend, monitor and report'.

It took four days.

"I'd like to be the one who picks him up, Chief," Eleanor Rayburn pleaded with her boss.

"It's out of the question, Eleanor. This is a field op; you're not trained for it."

She shrugged her shoulders, turned and walked out of the office. *Fine*, she thought to herself. *Fine*.

NSA Agent Crisp used his MasterCard to pay for the rental of the truck, then drove it back to Jory's apartment where he, his partner, and Jory together loaded the contents into the back of the truck. The two agents waved 'goodbye' as Jory drove away, then they got into their car and went to find a decent restaurant. After dinner they returned to the local NSA offices.

They entered the building and went straight to their respective desks. In a moment the station chief was standing between them with a puzzled look on his face.

"Where's the target?" the chief asked.

"Oh," Crisp told him, "he wasn't there. It didn't seem like it would be productive to wait all night."

"What...? Your orders were to pick him up," the chief explained as if they were rookies. "That means: stick around until he does show up, then apprehend him. What's going on here?"

"Well," Crisp went on as if he were half-asleep, "this guy Arnold had a lot of errands to run. He probably won't be back for a long time."

"How do you know that?" The station chief was starting to lose control. "Did you talk to him?"

Crisp looked at McNulty, his partner. McNulty looked at Crisp. McNulty told the station chief: "We just know," as if that would be all the explanation anyone might ever need.

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"How did they find me so damned fast?" Jory asked Lasimmilas, even though he knew she couldn't tell him. As a matter of fact, Lasimmilas knew precisely how 'they' (whoever 'they' were) had found him. They had followed the truck, a feat that Lasimmilas considered nothing short of miraculous. Even to her sensitive nose, all these devices smelled almost exactly alike. And they had been two whole days between their old home and this new one that they just left. To Lasimmilas' reckoning, it would have been three hard weeks if she had been on foot. She was sure they had not been living there that long.

Cats don't usually worry, but Lasimmilas was starting to worry and she didn't like it even a little bit. She knew the things Jory needed to know and she couldn't tell him.

Or could she?

10 – Little Rock

The drive from Sioux Falls to Dallas gave Jory time to think, time that he desperately needed. Someone was hunting him, of that he had no longer any doubt. The arrival of two NSA investigators had clinched it for him. If he were only able to derive even the smallest bit of information from their heads, he would have some information to enable him to plan his next move. Alas, Jory's mind-transfers operated in one direction — outward — which left him with just two critical questions: who? and why?

The kitten that had become so much a part of his life these days slept fitfully on the dashboard of the truck as it rolled southward, every once in a while opening her eyes to look into his own. Jory would occasionally wonder what it was she was thinking, if anything, then push the thought out of his mind to make room for the analysis of his situation that would, he was sure, spell the difference between discovery and anonymity.

For Lasimmilas' part, she mostly ignored the frantic thoughts racing through Jory's mind except that every once in a while she would recognize some concept she had laboriously remembered. She would rouse herself from sleep on those occasions and look at him, hoping for some sort of inspiration that would enable her to tell him that he was having an important thought. Inspiration wasn't her strong suit.

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"Well, damn it, do it again," Eleanor howled at them. "Every truck rental agreement from every agency for a 25-mile radius. At least we know what day the rental happened, so be thankful you won't be scouring a week's-worth of paper." Eleanor slammed the phone down on its cradle. Another golden opportunity pissed away because the local operatives wouldn't (couldn't?) believe the power their target could exert over their minds.

Crisp and McNulty showed every sign of 'contamination': they knew what time they went on station; they knew what time they came off station; they had no memory of anything that happened between those points, except that they did recall having great steaks after it became obvious Jory Antoine wasn't going to show. Pressed for details as to why and when that became obvious, they each reacted as if the question had no meaning, as if it were being asked in a foreign language neither understood.

And that rendered them unusable for any future assignments on this case, according to Eleanor Rayburn, the controlling analyst.

When the truck-rental-agreement paperwork was assembled at the local FBI/NSA offices, there were no 'Jory'-anything, and no J-anything A-anything rentals.

"OK," Eleanor Rayburn agreed, "then he didn't rent the truck. Somebody rented the truck. Investigate them all." A groan went up from the agents clustered around the speakerphone. "Groan all you want," she told them in reply. "Just do it. Eyeball every one of those renters. Anyone who bears even the slightest resemblance to any of the photos and sketches in the packet, I want to hear about."

It was two full days before anyone realized that the Crisp who rented a truck was their very own agent. Crisp, himself, had reviewed some of the paperwork, including his own, and found nothing out of the ordinary.

Contaminated. Thoroughly contaminated.

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"I wonder if they're finding the truck rental paperwork?"

Lasimmilas opened her eyes. She didn't know what paperwork was, but she knew he was getting close to the truth. "Yowr," was as close as she could get to vocalizing her approval.

"There's one sure way to find out," Jory told her. When they rolled through Oklahoma City, Jory had only one thing he wanted to see: a place where he could turn in the truck. Preferably a nice quiet place where he could turn in the truck. And Oklahoma City didn't disappoint him.

On the city map he had purchased Jory carefully marked the locations of all the U-Haul Truck Rental agencies listed in the Yellow Pages, then drove to each in turn until he found one in a low-traffic area of town.

Parking the truck on a quiet side street, he walked the short distance to the rental office, negotiated the rental of a fresh truck of the proper size that he then drove to where he had parked the first truck, and placed them tail-to-tail with each other. This made it easy to transfer his worldly possessions from old to new. In two hours the transfer was complete and Jory turned the original truck in to the same agency. Not surprisingly, no one recognized him as the same person who had mere hours earlier rented a similar truck from them.

He turned east.

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"Oklahoma City" Gunny announced.

"He's on to us," Eleanor responded glumly.

"Just because he stopped short of his stated destination?"

"Yes." The tone of her voice told Gunny there was no sense arguing, but he felt he had to object anyway.

"You're reaching," Gunny scoffed.

"Am I? We'll see. Could he have neutralized all the agents staked out on every possible return point in the DFW Metro area any other way?" The look on Gunny's face was an open admission that her theory was unimpeachable. "Mark my words, Gunny. He knows we're after him. If Crisp and McNulty aren't enough proof, what do you need?"

"Something a little more... concrete."

"Well, maybe some other day. Right now, our quarry is loose in a major city and we don't have clue-number-one where he might be holed up. We might have to take a trip."

But that was not to be. When she approached her boss with her latest plan, his refusal was as quick as it had been the last four times she had offered her services. "Eleanor, you're not a field agent," he said with finality. "Let those who are trained for this kind of op handle it."

"But, chief..."

"Period."

Eleanor turned and left. *Fine*, she thought, *you'll learn, even if it is 'the hard way'.*

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Jory had become quite the expert at finding lodging. Knowing exactly what he needed helped. He always kept a supply of coins — generally fifty dollars worth — that he used in such situations. He would tear through most of it dialing from shopping center pay phones. When he would find the rare available apartment he would mark its location on the freshly-purchased city map and, when he had two or three all in the same part of town, he would drive there in the truck and (almost always) pick one and be able to move in the same day. Yes, he thought, he travels fastest who travels alone.

His new little companion made the process marginally more difficult but Jory had now grown so to like Lasimmilas that he did not begrudge her the extra effort it took to find lodgings for both of them.

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Eleanor Rayburn could not imagine how someone — anyone — could so quickly disappear even in an area as large as Oklahoma City. She envisioned another four-year effort, like the four she had just spent, to pick up his trail again. And when she examined her own

feelings she realized that it was only partly exasperation that he could so easily drop out of sight. The other part was envy.

It had been nearly seven months since Jory whatever-his-name-was-now had given them the slip. Seven months of no leads and no clues. Eleanor thought that if she could drop out of sight that completely she could have her pick of assignments here or anywhere else in the world, for this government or for any other.

It was impossible for anyone to go that deep. She was missing some obvious clue. What was it?

She pulled the file and began re-reading it for what she was sure was the thousandth time, looking for something, anything, that appeared to be too useless to pay any attention to.

The restaurant that Crisp and McNulty went to was one they had never, they said, been to before. Could that have some meaning? The FBI had found an old motorcycle license plate, long expired, that Jory had used on his bike. Where did he find it? How did he come by it? He seemed to gravitate toward duplex and triplex apartments rather than apartment complexes. Why? A complex allows one to be more anonymous, but the higher population may also prove more difficult to handle. Does he need to blot everyone he comes in contact with? A duplex might mean a lessened workload for him. The landlord had said Jory recently acquired a cat. Ah, yes... the TV people who had alerted the police were more interested in the cat... that old license plate had been his undoing. What was he using on that bike now? Did he even still have it?

Did he ever in the past register it? She called the Tennessee Motor Vehicle Department and spoke with a highly-placed liaison. She had Jory's name and address and needed to know whether he had ever registered any motor vehicles. She had the information in five minutes: Jory Albertsen had registered a 1981 Toyota Corolla, a gift from his parents, and later a 1988 Kawasaki motorcycle, and judging from the title-trail had used the first to buy the second.

Using the Vehicle ID number from that record, she requested any current information, any state, and got a single 'hit'.

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As the days turned to weeks and the weeks turned to months, Jory concluded that it had, indeed, been the truck-rental paperwork that had enabled his hunters to locate him. His tactic of stubbing his trail had, apparently, worked flawlessly. The rental clerk whose own credit card had been used to validate the second rental never saw a bill, for Jory had paid in full in cash on arriving in Little Rock. Cash rarely left a noticeable trail.

By living a quiet life and playing by the rules, he thought he might escape notice long enough to begin leading something of a normal life, whatever that was.

His latest job, doing cable TV installations, provided just the kind of low-profile work his intended lifestyle demanded: an ordered and orderly life, days filled with time-consuming if undemanding tasks, a regular paycheck, quiet time at home where he did not need to keep his guard up.

Lasimmilas, who had taken to life indoors with no fussing at all, had in turn become something of a biker-cat. She seemed to be able to read Jory's mind, for every time he would ride for pleasure (as opposed to just going to work) Lasimmilas would be waiting to leap inside his jacket and fly with him down the paths... roads... aboard his 'stinky'. Even though it was an extended unpleasantness to her nose, the thrill of rushing forward at incredible speed was starting to become addictive. And she was getting better at 'keeping a low profile' as Jory would call it: if anyone seemed to be paying too much attention, she would retreat out of sight within his jacket or sweater.

Because of his simple, Spartan lifestyle, Jory's bank balance had grown to a respectable amount, and he had become quite enthralled by the idea of being able to draw money from his account whenever and wherever he felt like it. He now kept a nice, round thousand in cash handy in case he needed to flee on short notice, but he was beginning to think he might not need to be so well-prepared.

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"Listen, Eleanor," Gunny told her, "the Chief is never going to let you drive a field op. Departmental policy won't allow it. You need to adjust your expectations."

"You're wrong, Gunny," she told him, "he will let me... one day. He just needs to suffer enough failures. He needs to learn how ineffectual his regular operatives are against this subject. He needs to despair. He needs to get to the point that anyone who holds out even a flicker of hope will appeal to all of his worst instincts." Gunny smiled. "It would be lots easier if you were part of my unit, Gunny. I wouldn't mind if you were to run the op... as long as I get to go on it."

"So... what are they doing with the newest lead?" Gunny inquired.

"They're soooo stubborn!" Eleanor fumed. "Chief thinks the last op failed because they didn't have enough back-up. I told him back-up had nothing to do with it. He told me to go turn some more leads and to let the field guys run the field ops."

"So they're going to do it again, except bigger?" Gunny asked.

"That's about the size of it." she admitted.

"It could be worse, Eleanor," Gunny consoled her. "At least they're paying you well for tracking him down."

"I know, Gunny," she said. "It's just that I'm running out of time."

"We're all running out of time, Eleanor."

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Lasimmilas felt the first flush of panic race through her little cat body. Even the Rottweiler that cornered her in an alley didn't have her this frightened. There were two sets of thoughts and they were close, oh!, they were so close, and the thoughts said "kill this person" and they meant Jory. And there were others, but not so close, and their thoughts also said "kill".

She ran squalling from room to room trying to warn Jory that terrible danger lurked just beyond the door. The doorbell rang and her panic doubled.

Jory looked at the cat, wondering what might have gotten into her, as he moved toward the portal.

"Who's there?" he asked, but his only answer was the pop-pop-pop-pop of a volley of silenced 9mm slugs perforating the door.

11 – Recovery

Gunny's cell phone purred against his belt. He pulled it and held it to his ear. "Yes?" he opened.

"What's your current status?" It was his supervisor.

Gunny Hayes had only paperwork to wrap up in order to be considered 'finished' with his current case. "I have a few hours of report-polishing and then I'm clear."

"Perfect. I have another assignment for you. Wrap that up as quickly as possible — shelve it if you have to — and let's get you briefed."

In the supervisor's office he listened intently and took notes while an FBI-type ran down the current status. Normally such a case would have been handled by the FBI, but because FutureScope Corporation was a defense contractor, NSA would lead the operation behind the scenes.

"FutureScope Corporation is a defense contractor," the FBI agent began. "They have — they had until yesterday — a low-profile outpost near Clovis NM. It's nothing but a pair of semi-trailers really, but they're packed with some very sophisticated equipment that FutureScope uses to test robot devices they build for the Defense Department.

"Well, early this morning both of those semi-trailers were blown up. Eleven FutureScope employees poisoned overnight, and another six killed when the explosives went off; no survivors. This was clearly not an accident, but at the moment we have no suspects and no motive. We have a Forensic team from Santa Fe on site now doing workups and those results will be made available to you when we have them. I'm here to assure you the Department's full cooperation whichever way you want to run this investigation."

The semi-trailers were parked in the New Mexico desert between Clovis and Roswell. By mid-afternoon Gunny, his FBI counterpart, and Walter Hester were on site to examine the wreckage.

Hester was extremely cooperative, and the initial information gathering went smoothly. FutureScope used this site for testing of small robots because it provided a variety of terrain within a short distance. This crew, he explained, had been sent here to set up for a test series that was to start the following week. Early this morning radio contact had been lost and a second crew was sent to help with the repair of the radio equipment. That crew reported that everyone on site was dead — poisoned, and they, themselves, had only been

on-site for a few minutes when telephone contact was lost. NSA and FBI had, of course, been notified immediately.

Gunny ordered toxicology reports on the stiffs and then stepped to one side to talk privately with the FBI.

"Does this all sound OK to you?" Gunny asked his FBI contact.

"Yeah," the FBI agent nodded. "Why?"

"I don't know. Just a feeling." Gunny did a '360' scanning the terrain, for what he couldn't quite put his finger on.

"Well, the explosives were probably planted recently. Let's scan the area for footprints... try to find out how and maybe when the stuff was delivered."

The FBI AIC departed to get his agents started on the search. Gunny continued looking around slowly. This was very familiar territory to him. Was it coincidence or something more?

Nightfall shut down the search operations. The area was roped off as a crime scene pending the arrival of dawn. The investigating teams found their dinners and their beds in nearby towns.

All but one.

Gunny was glad he brought his insulated sleeping bag. The desert gets very cool very fast when the sun goes down, and the semi-trailers provided little in the way of shelter now that their walls and floors had been tattered by massive explosions. It was even difficult to find a smooth spot to lay the sleeping bag, the flooring was so badly chopped, but he managed. Next to him lay his personal Winchester Model 70, a .22-250 varmint rifle rigged for sniping with a night-vision scope. Gunny closed his eyes and slipped into 'light-sleep mode'.

Shortly after midnight some circuit buried in his brain jostled him awake. The noise it had heard was not a rattlesnake or a coyote. A thin crescent moon gave little light to the desert, but it was enough to let him make out two figures off to the southwest, both seemingly intent on searching the desert floor. He thumbed the safety off the Winchester and, taking careful aim, put one round into the leg of one of the intruders, taking him down. The second shadowy figure hit the dirt facing in the direction of the muzzle flash, unslung his own rifle and prepared to return fire.

Gunny watched his opponent's night-vision equipment switch on and knew that he no longer had a choice or time to think about it. His second shot went through the target's left eye.

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The FBI agents summoned by Gunny's radio took one man into custody and bagged the other's body. Although the prisoner

wouldn't say a word without his attorney, it was fairly simple to get his fingerprints and relay them back to the FBI's Washington headquarters. These, along with a physical description of the man, made matching the prints too easy.

He was Don Wasserman, formerly U.S. Army, now an employee of FutureScope Corporation, with security clearance appropriate for a government contractor, and when he finally agreed to talk it was only to avoid being charged with espionage and sabotage.

"What were you doing out there, Don?" Gunny started.

"We were looking for brass," Wasserman admitted.

"Brass?" the FBI agent asked.

"Yes, 9mm brass," Don explained. "There are supposed to be two 9mm casings in that area. Steve and I were to retrieve them."

"And do what with them?" the FBI agent prompted.

"I don't know," Don admitted.

"Who were you supposed to retrieve them for?" Gunny pressed.

"Walter Hester," Wasserman admitted.

The inquisitor's monitor listening in another room turned and told his subordinate: "Bring Hester in. Have the site crew search the area for expended 9mm brass."

"Do you know why you were sent to get that brass?" Gunny pressed on. Wasserman shook his head. *No*.

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When you know what to look for, finding something can be pretty easy. The site crew located two 9mm shell casings within forty feet of where the men were seen searching, and within ten feet of that they found dried blood, and lots of it. One of the blood samples turned out to be O-positive, boringly common, but the other was B-positive, not nearly as common. Bone shards found nearby were identified as 'probable skull fragments'. Suddenly, the FBI, with their greater criminal investigative experience, was again leading the charge.

"Those floaters last week..." the FBI AIC started, "would anyone like to bet one was O-positive and the other B-positive?" No one seemed to want to bet against that.

"OK, what do we have here?" Gunny started. "Two Brits, probably an insertion team, are shot dead in the New Mexican desert near a quasi-governmental site; their bodies wash up in a river thirty miles away; a few days later that quasi-governmental site is professionally bombed out of existence; when the Feds show up, FutureScope ships in their own team to police the area. What is it

about this site that (a) attracts the attention of one of our allies enough for them to commit espionage and sabotage upon us, and (b) FutureScope Corporation doesn't want to share upstream?

"That has suddenly become our main assignment here. The bombing is of secondary importance. What's behind it all? Is Walter Hester here? Bring him in."

Walter Hester was clearly nervous about the whole affair.

"This has turned out really badly," Hester began in response to the opening question. "I want to be right up front with you on the whole thing. Yes, we knew about the two men killed last week... that was a regrettable accident, but it was legal... except for not turning their bodies over to the authorities. They were on posted property and they were armed. When our security people tried to arrest them, they resisted and shots were fired... the trespassers were killed... accidentally. Later we discovered that they were military." He held out two sets of dog tags to the FBI interrogator. "Not ours. We didn't know what to do and we panicked. We dumped the bodies in the river and hoped for the best."

"So your security team intercepted these intruders and tried to arrest them," Gunny suggested. "They fired on your people. Your people returned fire and killed the intruders. Is that what happened?"

"Yes," Walter Hester answered.

"Was Wasserman part of that security team?" Gunny pressed Hester.

"Yes, and the other who was shot last night," Hester admitted.

"And you've already picked up the intruders' brass," Gunny continued.

"What?" Walter Hester wasn't prepared for that question.

"The brass from the rounds fired by the intruders," Gunny explained. "They fired on your security team; they must have expended brass. You've already picked that up, right?"

"I don't know," Hester admitted.

"Don Wasserman said his instructions were to pick up two — that's a quote — two 9mm casings. There are two dead men, each presumably killed by different bullets. Each was killed by a single shot to the forehead from close range. That's two bullets. Put aside the fact that such precision is rarely accidental. Now your security people are looking for two 9mm casings. Why not three... or seven... or fifteen? Answer: the victims didn't fire their weapons. If they did, you'd be looking for all the brass, not just yours.

"As a matter of fact, we went looking for brass out there and found only two casings," Gunny finished.

"I don't care about their brass," Hester blurted in exasperation. "I'm trying to protect FutureScope."

"You better start thinking about protecting yourself," the FBI agent warned him. "You can start by telling me why this site justifies the use of deadly force without warning."

"What makes you think we didn't warn them?" Hester retorted.

"We know who they were," the FBI agent explained. "They were Special Air Service, the British equivalent of our Rangers, Green Berets, Marine Recon, and SEALs, and your men lived through the meeting. If those SAS had been warned, it would be Wasserman's blood all over the desert and British brass we were picking up. They were ambushed and shot without warning. That's the only way that scene could have played. Talk."

"What can I tell you that won't compromise national security?" Hester began, "This is a top secret operation. Nobody knows more than they absolutely have to know. The robots we test here are vital national security assets. Their protection absolutely does justify deadly force, the same way protecting nuclear warheads does."

Gunny Hayes leaned in and whispered in the ear of the FBI man who stood and followed him outside for a 'conference'.

"He's right, you know," Hayes told him. "The only reason we don't have Marines stationed here is to keep the operation low-profile. We're not going to prosecute anybody from FutureScope for this. Besides, it could have Foreign Relations implications. We're not going to touch him and he knows it. We're also probably beyond our authority now, questioning him on the purposes of the site. Think it's time to back off a little?"

The FBI agent shook his head. "I don't agree. I'm going to push him over the edge. Would you like to watch?"

"It's your party," Hayes told him with a gesture that clearly said "I'm going to let you destroy yourself".

The FBI AIC signaled to a Chavez County Deputy Sheriff standing nearby and the three of them re-entered the trailer that served as their temporary headquarters.

The deputy faced Walter Hester. "You have the right to remain silent. If you give up this right..."

Walter Hester's face went pale as the blood drained from it. "What am I being charged with?" he begged.

"Conspiracy to commit capital murder, two counts. Obstruction of Justice. Tampering. Interference with a criminal investigation. Those are the local charges. There'll be Federal charges as well. FutureScope Corporation is now officially on the shit list. More?"

"Wait..." Hester gasped, "can we deal on this? I think I can make it worth your while."

"You can make it worth my while to do what?" the FBI agent asked.

"To drop these charges... to leave FutureScope alone," Hester offered.

"You think so? This had better be good. Show me."

"I can't show you," Hester told the agent. "I can only show him," indicating Gunny. "Security and reporting structure. How about it?"

The FBI man looked at Gunny. Gunny nodded. "OK." The others slipped outside leaving Gunny and Walter Hester alone.

"There's a cave..." Hester began.

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Lasimmilas' frantic squalling got to Jory's conscious level mid-way through "Who's there?" and he slammed his back against the wall only a millisecond before the first slugs whizzed past his body. Lasimmilas had long since found shelter behind a well-stuffed couch. With a pop-pop-pop, the lock mechanism disintegrated, then the door slammed inward propelled by an agent's foot.

The next thing that happened... it had happened before and Lasimmilas didn't understand it then either... was that she began to see two distinct sets of thoughts.

From Jory's mind, she saw several two-footers enter and crouch over a spot on the living room carpet. From their minds, she saw Jory's lifeless body sprawled in a spreading pool of blood. The image she saw through her own eyes matched Jory's vision. What were the others seeing, and why?

Meanwhile, Jory stood to one side, apparently unseen by anyone in the room save Lasimmilas. The others knelt and stared, unmoving, as if concentrating deeply on the corpse before them. Then one of the others spoke in response to a question planted in his mind by Jory.

"He doesn't look all that dangerous. I wonder why we were ordered to kill him?"

Another explained: "He has some power to control our minds. If we hadn't killed him, he would have hypnotized us and escaped while our minds were blotted. We need to search the house thoroughly."

"How did they even track him down if he can do that?" the first asked.

"The VIN on his motorcycle gave him away. It's the same one he had registered to his name in Tennessee."

Aha! Jory thought; *that's the answer!*

Several of them got up and began to move through the apartment. Each found one of the folded packing boxes that Jory had saved from his last move, unfolded it and began placing items of value or interest into it. As the boxes were filled, they were brought outside and placed into the cars in which they had arrived.

Jory, meanwhile, unseen and unheard by the agents swarming through his apartment, called several truck rental agencies and found two widely spaced agencies of the same company that had the right size vehicle available. He put a 'reserve' on the nearest one.

When the packing was as complete as Jory felt it prudent to do, the agent-in-charge instructed his men: "OK, get that stuff into storage. I'll wait here for the Site Management people." Then Jory, Lasimmilas, and most of the NSA agents left the house, got into and onto their respective vehicles, and headed for the rental agency.

The trick of having the rental clerk use her own credit card and then paying the rental in cash when returning the truck had worked so well before that Jory felt safe using it again. This time, however, he deliberately left the rental clerk's mind clear enough to remember his face if not the fact that her credit card secured the rental.

In a few minutes, the truck was brought forward for him and the NSA operatives began loading boxes through the back hatch 'into storage'. When they were done, Jory and Lasimmilas drove off in the truck, and the others returned to Jory's apartment to report to their agent-in-charge that all the material had been secured. It was only then that the AIC called his base office to report that the subject had been killed. A Site Management team was dispatched immediately.

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He should have killed them, he thought, but perhaps he had done enough. Each of the agents had, all unknowingly, emptied their wallets for him. One of them had been carrying nearly six hundred dollars. It was Jory's now, partial payment for their trying to kill him. They were also carrying pistols, and he had thought of commandeering one just for emergencies, but decided that he had never yet needed one and didn't want to get started now.

He drove to the second agency where he complained that the truck he had been rented on the other side of town was defective. The store manager was anxious to replace the defective vehicle with another in order to maintain good customer relations, and Jory was soon driving away from Little Rock with another untraceable truck. The manager there would recall only that the truck was returned, not that it was exchanged.

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The Site Management team, a euphemism for the 'clean-up crew', arrived expecting to find a mess, but all they saw was an apartment door chopped to pieces by automatic weapons fire.

"Where's the body?" their chief asked.

"Are you blind?" the NSA AIC wanted to know. "He's lying right in front of you."

The clean-up crew exchanged glances. "Any of you see a body?" They all shook their heads side-to-side.

The NSA AIC called one of his men over. "Harry, do you see a body here?"

"Yeah," Harry agreed, "the guy we zapped. He's right there," and he indicated the same spot his chief had pointed to only seconds earlier.

The Site Management team leader was about to call for a supervisor when one walked in, looked around, and demanded of his AIC: "Where's the stiff?"

Although none of them could really believe it, the realization that they had been 'had' slowly crept over them. This was not going to be easily explained.

"OK, where's all the stuff you would normally find in an apartment?" Eleanor demanded. "Underwear, socks, shirts, shoes, slacks, coats... there's nothing like that here, yet we know... damn it, we know he was still here when you arrived. That's why your minds are trashed. He was still here, and now he's gone, and he left with all of you still here contemplating his corpse."

They each looked at her as if she were crazy.

"Everything's just where we found it," one of the agents assured her. "Nothing has been moved or removed."

"Bullshit," Eleanor asserted, "but I know I'll never convince you, so I might as well just let it go." She addressed one of the uncontaminated agents: "Start pulling truck rental agreements, and try not to complain. I'm more tired of this drill than you are."

Absent-mindedly, Eleanor started sliding kitchen drawers open and sliding them shut with just the barest glance to see that nothing had been left. But something had been left. One of the drawers held a note written in a deliberately-childish block printing. It said simply:

The next time you try this, all your men will go home in bags.

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"Do you want me to continue to track him?" Eleanor asked her boss.

"Why wouldn't you? It's your job."

"It's starting to get expensive in terms of agents, isn't it? I mean, we lose a minimum of two agents per operation, sometimes eight or ten the way you insist on running the ops." Her voice had a noticeably sarcastic tone. "And it looks like it could get even more expensive still."

The boss responded in the same tone. "You let me worry about how many agents I'm losing. You pay attention to your job and I'll pay attention to mine, and if you have any complaints about how I'm running this department, perhaps we can schedule a session with the Director so we can all discuss it. If you don't like your job, if you don't like the way I'm doing my job, you can always resign. In fact, I think that would be a very good career move. Is that clear?"

Eleanor got her temper under control just barely in time to avoid what would have been, she knew, the words that ended her NSA career. "Let me know when you want him brought in... when you really want him brought in... when you're really tired of losing agents." She turned and left.

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Jory rolled into El Paso on the day after Christmas and had an apartment five hours later. State and Federal offices would be closed until the following Monday which gave him a few extra days to firm up his plans. He would have to lose the motorcycle, that was certain; the hunters knew its ID number and could track it if he tried to re-register it. He would sell it privately, probably in a distant city, and replace it, probably with a newer one. Or perhaps he should dump it in the desert, and take the loss as a cost of keeping his anonymity. That would be the safer course.

Early in the new year he applied for a new Texas driver's license under the name Jory Annixter, applied for a new Social Security card ('Parents were independently wealthy... all their assets in non-taxable securities... never needed to work until now.')

using a passport that existed only in the mind of the clerk at the SSA office, established a bank account and a long credit history that, again, existed only in the mind of the clerk.

A very little shopping led him to a reasonably priced replacement bike, which he bought. The following day he rented a pick-up truck, put the Kawasaki in the bed, and went for a ride in the desert. With luck, the quiet little ravine in New Mexico would hide his old wheels for a few years. On the trip back, he picked up his new bike at the dealer, returned the truck, and drove home on a new BSA.

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By now, Eleanor Rayburn had been thoroughly disabused of the idea that the city where Jory returned the truck was his destination. He had twice now stubbed his trail and she expected it would be another month or two before she could have all the possible leads checked 'by eyeball, from a distance'.

The search through the truck rental paperwork was made a little easier by Jory's habit of always renting the same size truck. They now pulled only those rental documents that matched his pattern and that made the search much easier albeit riskier; all he had to do now was alter the pattern slightly and they would miss him entirely. She reckoned it was worth the risk.

That, and the fact that he seemed to always use the same first name were the only constants she could see.

12 – Discovery

"What was that name again?" the data clerk asked. *Jory.*

"Here y' go." He handed her a list of eighty-four names, all *Jory*, four of them *Annixter*, all with different Social Security numbers, but three with the same address.

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The knock on the door went unanswered, so he took several small probes from a case and set to work on the lock. In less than a minute he rotated the cylinder and pushed the door open.

Inside, he took several pictures of the living room and several more of the bedroom and two in the kitchen.

Lasimmilas hid under the bed the whole while.

Nelson Furniture Rental quickly identified the pieces as from their line and, more than happy to help the NSA with any reasonable request, lent them a nearly-identical set.

The pieces were on a plane headed for Virginia before the sun went down.

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Eleanor Rayburn rapped lightly on her boss' door. "Chief? Got a minute?"

"Sure, c'mon in. What's up?"

"I think I've found him," she boasted. "And I think I know why we've missed him for so long, too. He changes his name whenever he changes his motor oil. He changes his SSN the way other people change their underwear. He goes through jobs like I go through tissues." As if to emphasize the point, she grabbed one from the box on his desk and sneezed into it. "Our scan programs look for multiple hits across multiple environments. They drop him from the search because there's so little coherent data. I used a finer sieve, and this is what I got." She dropped the sheets onto his desk.

"Well, which one?" the chief asked.

"This one." She put her finger on the three lines that said '3085 N. Piedras St, El Paso, TX'.

"I'll have him picked up..."

She shook her head. "You won't be able to do it. He'll slip through your fingers like quicksilver. Let me do it. I know how."

"You're not a field agent, Eleanor," the chief explained for what he was sure was the thousandth time. "You're not trained for this."

"That's why I have to do it," she answered him for what she was sure was the thousandth time. "Your regular agents will attack this like a conventional problem. It's not a conventional problem, Chief, believe me. If it will make you feel any better, I'll take a field agent with me as back-up, but let me call the play, Chief. Let me run it or we'll lose him again the way we did in Kansas City, the way we did in Cedar Rapids, the way we did in Little Rock, the way we did..."

"I get the picture," the chief surrendered. "You don't have to beat me over the head with it. Alright. Who will you take as back-up?"

"Gunny' Hayes." she told him.

"Good choice," he agreed. "Do it."

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To the techs at the Fabrication Lab, Gunny's request was boringly ordinary: replicate these items with highly-flammable substances, and make them look like twins. It wouldn't even take them the whole day. The hard part was getting the paint to dry.

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"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," she addressed her audience. "I am Eleanor Rayburn, and I will be in charge of this operation from start to finish. This is a mission in which you may be declared 'expendable'. That is why you were asked to volunteer; that is the danger inherent in this mission. If there's anyone here who has a problem with a non-field agent running this op, please leave now and take it up with your supervisor immediately. If you stay, you're in 'til the bitter end." She gave them a minute to decide. All of them stayed.

"The remainder of this meeting is classified Secret, level 7; that is: the Director, the President, and the people in this room are the only ones who will ever know about it. Ever. Is everyone clear on that?" There was a murmur of assent.

"Our mission is to detain if possible and kill if necessary one 'Jory Annixter' who is also known by several other aliases. This person is a positive danger to the security of the United States. He must not be permitted to escape. We are all expendable if necessary to prevent that. Is anyone unclear on that point?" Several shifted uneasily in their seats, but no one objected.

"The plan of attack is as follows." She turned to a large wall chart showing the neighborhood around 3085 N. Piedras. "Evans and

Black will guard the back here. The rest will be positioned in cars here... here... and here. Draw your weapon-of-choice from the armory. Vickers will have a TOW missile in case it becomes necessary." Several of them exchanged looks of wonderment. *How damn dangerous was this guy to rate a TOW missile as back-up?*

"'Gunny' Hayes and I will make the approach. We will be in radio contact with the rest of the team at all times. If the target attempts to leave the building unescorted he is to be killed by any means available. You should execute the operation from your maximum accurate range. Of all those who volunteered, you are the top marksmen, and you are all authorized to be armed with whatever firearms you feel most comfortable with.

"If the target is captured and exits the building with us, make sure you stay clear, and under no circumstances will anyone remove their headsets. Let me restate that so there is no misunderstanding: you will not remove your headset for any reason until the target is secured. Is everyone clear on that?" Another murmur of assent rippled through the small group.

"The trigger word is 'conjure', C-O-N-J-U-R-E, 'conjure'. If either the Gunny or myself speaks that word, blow the house. Make it go away. Make sure nothing is alive inside it before you come near, and above all, do not remove your headsets until you are certain that everything inside, me and the Gunny included, is permanently dead. Raise your hand if you're still with me." Eleven hands went into the air.

"One last thing: should you notice any member of the team remove his or her headset before being instructed to do so, kill that person immediately. Do not wait to find out if they need to scratch their ear; headset off means 'dead'. There are only two people who can issue the order to remove headsets: me... and the Director who will be watching the operation over closed-circuit TV. Don't listen to any other voices telling you to do anything. Me and the Director... period. Everybody got that?" They all indicated they knew what she meant.

"Let's get to work."

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Jory swung the motorcycle into the driveway and slowed to a stop next to the wrought iron railing leading up to the back steps. Lasimmilas, as always, was waiting for him to arrive. He unlocked the back door and carefully locked it behind him when he was inside.

The house... his senses told him it smelled different but this, he knew, was anthropomorphic. Terrans had an exquisite sense of smell, and some of their pets, dogs and cats especially, had even

keener noses. This was not something the Nosa were noted for, but he had lived among Terrans for so long he was beginning to think largely in their terms. When he examined the feeling, he realized it was much more a sense that something was physically out-of-place, but what it was he couldn't guess.

He turned on the TV to get the evening news and set to preparing something for dinner. It was Thursday and this was the night Fred, his next-door neighbor, always came over to play Scrabble, sometimes bringing a friend or two to make the game interesting.

When the doorbell rang he looked at his watch. *Wow*, he thought, *Fred must really be anxious tonight.*

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The driver rang the doorbell before noticing the note stuck between the door and the jamb. Opening it he read: "The door's open. Please swap out the defective pieces and throw the latch as you exit. Thanks, Jory Annixter"

He pushed the door open and signaled for the crew to begin the operation. They were here because some finicky customer insisted the furniture he rented was somehow defective (a combination of bad karma and many negative vibrations coupled with a severely defective aura) and insisted it be replaced, and replaced with 'good' pieces in exactly the same pattern. *Well, let's hope these pieces don't have a bad 'aura'*, he thought inwardly smirking at the daffiness of some people.

They tried to put everything in exactly the same spot, even to making sure the table legs sat in the depressions in the carpet left by the originals. They were good, but they weren't perfect. With this furniture, however, 'close' would be plenty good enough.

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Jory opened the door fully expecting to see Fred and one of his twenty-something consorts, always a redhead, always with a great behind. Instead, he found himself looking into Eleanor Rayburn's soft hazel eyes, and just beyond them, the almost-feminine delicate blue eyes of 'Gunny' Hayes. Both of them wore headsets with boom microphones.

"Yes?" he greeted them.

"Mr. Annixter?" Eleanor flipped open her wallet at shoulder-level. "We're from NSA. We'd like a few words with you, if you don't mind." They both stepped inside and Gunny closed the door behind them. Lasimmilas brushed up against Gunny's leg and gave a small 'mew'.

Jory wished now that he had the power to read minds rather than simply to cloud them, but clouding would have to suffice until he could coordinate his escape. He dropped a veil across their consciousnesses and let one of his prepared illusions play for them while he thought. Eleanor reached down to her belt, inserted a cable from a tape player into a port on her radio's sending unit, and pressed the 'PLAY' button.

She lifted her head and looked straight into his eyes. "I'm afraid we really do have to have all of your attention, Jory. We don't have much time, any of us."

Jory dropped another veil across her mind, but it, too, seemed to have no effect.

"Jory," Gunny spoke to him, "we're not going to let you play your mind-tricks, so please stop. We're here as your friends. It's in your best interest to help us help you. You have no rational alternative to cooperating with us."

Jory felt panic for the first time since he was a teenager. The techniques his family had taught him, techniques that had always worked flawlessly before, never-fail techniques, had just failed.

"I don't understand," he told them with an expression of bewilderment on his face.

"You don't have to understand, Jory. You only have to trust," Eleanor told him. "We're going out the back. There are two men stationed out there to prevent your escape. You need to block their thoughts so that we can all get away from here quickly and safely. Will you do that for us, Jory?"

"Why should I trust you?" he demanded.

"Jory, we're out of time," Eleanor pleaded. "You'll die... we'll all die if you don't cooperate with us. Please, Jory, can't you trust just this once?"

"Maybe it would be better if I died," he spoke to her sadly. "I'm tired of running. I've been running and hiding since I was... I don't even know how old I was when I first came awake."

"You were three if you were a normal Nosa," Eleanor confided. His head snapped up and he looked at her. He stared for just a moment, trying to see. Was it his imagination, or did she have a vaguely non-human look about her?

"Come, Jory," Gunny told him, "it's time to go."

Before he opened the back door, they each dropped veils across Evans and Black. Neither Evans nor Black would ever realize they were watching their quarry escape. The little black and white cat that scooted past them did not even register on their long-term memories. They would never believe that three people walked within inches of them all but invisibly, and since there were no video cameras

covering this area, they would never have to be confronted with evidence to the contrary.

As the three walked slowly away, Eleanor Rayburn dropped her headset and tape player into a nearby trash bin where the tape continued to play its siren song to the NSA team listening to the negotiations.

Lasimmilas leapt into Jory's arms and hung on for the ride.

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"Mr. Annixter, don't try any of your mind-tricks on us. We're ready for them. We've taken precautions you can't possibly know about to prevent you from using them on us, and we have a fool-proof plan to prevent your escape. You have no choice but to accede to our demands." All the NSA agents listened intently to the conversation and silently admired Eleanor Rayburn for her confident delivery.

"Which are...?" Jory demanded.

"We want to know what it is you do, and how you do it," Gunny picked up. "We want you to train others to do it too. You'll be well-treated. In fact, you'll live like a sultan. No more running. No more hiding. No more menial jobs. From now on, you're the teacher, you're the master. We have so much to learn that only you can show us. You're more valuable to us than all the gold in Fort Knox. Do you think we might mistreat such a valuable asset? Or would we be more likely to treat you as well as — or better than — the President?"

"How do I know I can trust you?" Jory asked.

"There's really no need for you to feel the slightest trepidation about this proposition, Mr. Annixter," Eleanor assured him. "This is strictly on the up-and-up. I'm authorized at the highest levels of our government — the very highest levels — to offer you anything you want in exchange for your cooperation. Anything. Name it; it's yours."

"I want to be left alone," was all he said.

"Well, of course, that's one of the things that no one can offer you, isn't it?" Eleanor's voice had grown softer as she tried to help him over this rough spot. "I mean, how could you train us without being surrounded by pupils? Can we get our training by a correspondence course?"

"No, I suppose not," Jory admitted.

"There, you see? 'Being left alone' just isn't one of the options. It couldn't be, could it?" Eleanor was almost cooing at him

"No, I suppose not." Jory sounded really dejected. This was typically a 'bad sign'. All the agents listening held their breaths and crossed their fingers that Eleanor wouldn't clamp up and blow it.

"So, what shall it be, Mr. Annixter? Can I tell my boss that we have a deal?"

"I'll have to think some more about it." Jory sighed.

"What is there to think about?" Gunny offered. "We're offering you the moon and stars. Everything you might ever want is about to be placed within your grasp. What else could there be to think about?"

"To be brutally honest, I'm thinking about how I might kill you," Jory said coldly.

"Why would you want to do that, Jory," Eleanor asked in her softest voice, using his first name for the first time.

"Because you scare the hell out of me," Jory admitted, a note of panic finally creeping into his voice. "I'm frightened enough at this moment to kill. Isn't that awful? I've never killed anyone before. You'll be my first."

"Can you do that?" she asked.

"Let's find out, shall we?" Jory suggested.

"Jory, this isn't necguk...."

"Conjureconjureconjure," Gunny screamed into his mouthpiece.

Across the street, Vickers stepped from the back of a panel truck, raised the TOW missile to his shoulder and squeezed the trigger. The projectile crossed the distance to the house in a fraction of a second, punched through the front door and exploded.

The entire house went up in a fireball like none of them had ever seen before. It was as if the house were packed with incendiaries. Behind the house, Evans and Black had bare seconds to dive for cover before the entire back porch came streaking toward them. Quick action by the Fire Department, placed on stand-by only minutes ahead of the operation, minimized the damage to the houses on either side.

3085 N. Piedras, however, was reduced to ashes. The fire was so intense that virtually nothing in the house was left in a recognizable state. Even some ceramic objects were reduced to splinters. A very few bones were found, but even these were so badly charred it was difficult to determine whose they might have been.

Gunny Hayes and Eleanor Rayburn were quietly honored for their extraordinary courage and devotion to duty. The file on Jory Albertsen was equally quietly closed and transferred to the Director's vault.

Eleanor had many times suggested to her boss that Jory Albertsen might be a once-in-a-lifetime one-of-a-kind. It was a tragedy that the department had lost two good agents and had nothing to show for it, but the nation was safe. They had done their jobs.

13 – Epilogue

"No, Jory, you're not the last," she chuckled. "Did you think we would forget about our family? How could you have thought that? The Nosa do not leave our explorers stranded. But we didn't know where you were. It took us nearly eighty Earth-years just to locate the system and the planet. As soon as we were near enough we could home on the distress beacon, but its signal was heavily muffled by two miles of ocean atop it."

Cerithoss, once known as Eleanor Rayburn, blew sporadically into her simit, trying to pick out the melody of Aitha'Emae, 'The Long Journey Home', but clearly needed more practice. Esmin, who a few days earlier had been known to the world as 'Gunny' Hayes, checked the readiness of the ship and its cargo, 72 mummified Nosa.

"Finding you was the really hard part. Why did you not keep the pendant?" Esmin asked.

"I don't know," Jory admitted. "I suppose it was from spending too much time among the Terrans. They sometimes bury their dead with the deceased's treasures. I thought it was a nice custom. When my father died, my mother took the pendant from him. I thought she wanted it as a remembrance of him. I couldn't bear to separate her from it... thinking like a Terran. Why did my mother never tell me it was a locator?"

"We'll never know." Esmin turned back to his work and Cerithoss finished his thought. "When we found your mother's corpse, we thought we were at the end of our search until Esmin noticed that all the proper rituals seemed to have been carried out. Who but another Nosa would have done that? But for that we would have thought she was the last and gone home.

"You're a good son, Jory, and a good Nosa."

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Ed Kane awoke from his nap. He had had the most unusual dream. He and four other police officers were at a roadblock set up to catch a robber who had just held up a gas station convenience store. They had stopped six cars so far and sent them all on their way, when a powder blue Toyota rolled into view, slowed, and pulled off to the side of the road. Ed knew that for him and all of the others the car had disappeared, but in his dream he could see it was still there, parked on the shoulder. The five police cautiously approached the spot where the car had disappeared, walking blindly past the parked

car and its two... no, three... occupants; someone was lying, unmoving, on the back seat. He wanted to stop and investigate the car, but his mind was so insistent it didn't exist that he was unable to pay any attention to it. He, like all the others, walked right past it and continued up the road. A few moments later the car pulled back onto the road and continued its journey, ignored by one and all, Ed Kane included.

Eloise Carson stopped moving as if she had suddenly become catatonic. The customer standing at her window noticed her glazed-over eyes and her slack expression and became concerned. "Miss, are you alright?" he asked, but Eloise said nothing. Indeed, she had not heard the question; she hadn't heard anything for the last few seconds. Behind the veil that had dropped in front of her consciousness she was reliving a time long ago...

A handsome young man stepped up to her window and slipped a note across to her. The note said '\$2,583.11'.

"Deposit or withdrawal?" Eloise asked.

"Withdrawal."

Eloise began counting money. Finally, she pushed it toward the customer. "Have a great day," she wished him.

"Thanks. May I have the note back?" he asked. Eloise pushed the note through, and the young man took it and the money, turned and walked out of the bank.

The light turned green but Walter Crisp didn't see it. He didn't hear the horns of the cars behind him, either. He was somewhere far, far away, renting a truck for Jory Arnold who... was he supposed to arrest him? He couldn't remember all the details, but the 'feeling' was all wrong. He and McNulty had gone to Jory Arnold's house to wait for him to show up. When he did, Crisp and McNulty arrested him, or tried to. Everything after that was like something out of a bad LSD trip. They couldn't find the handcuffs attached to their belts; they forgot how their guns worked; when Jory Arnold drove away on his motorcycle, they followed him... to a truck rental place.

Jory didn't have his credit cards with him (he said), so Crisp used his to rent the truck Jory needed to complete all the errands he had to do before he could go with them back to their office. When Jory, Crisp, and McNulty parted, Jory returned Crisp's credit card to him and suggested the two agents should get themselves some good steaks. The two agents agreed that was a splendid idea and headed off to the restaurant, promising to return when Jory's errands were complete.

When his mind finally cleared, Crisp was shaking so badly that it didn't matter whether the light was red or green; he wasn't going anywhere in his condition...

Joyce Butler's body was wracked with the most exquisite agony she had ever experienced. In her dream Jory was holding her tightly but otherwise not touching her, and she understood, at last, that the vast waves of erotic joy that swept through her body and her mind were his doing, not hers.

And she understood how. And she understood why. She smiled, recalling the good times she had had in Jory's presence, how he had made her feel more like a woman than she would have believed possible, and she pouted inwardly with the realization that it was gone forever. Well, she had her memories, at least, and that was something. It was an experience she would not have missed for all the... Ha! There was nothing on this earth to which she might compare it.

Jory, where are you? she wondered, *and why do I suddenly know all that I know?* Having asked the question, she also understood that there could be no answer.

Jory leaned back and let the molded sarcophagus swallow him and Lasimmilas. For the first time since his mind had opened as an infant he no longer had to protect himself from the sight of others. In a moment he would be asleep, a sleep so deep that his Terran friends would call it death.

When the ship had accelerated to a high enough speed and slipped across the trans-light discontinuity, it would reawaken them and they would be functional for the remainder of the three year trip until deceleration into the Nosa system, but for now the pain of acceleration sickness had to be combated and this was the only way.

He knew he would not dream; his brain would be otherwise occupied. In days and years to come he would remember his Terran friends and try to forget his enemies. He would remember his parents and his grandparents. He would write their stories, and try to recall the details his grandparents had told him of their parents, so that their tales could become part of the history of the Nosa Exploration.

And who would write his?

And who would write his?

He slept.