



A Novel by Toomey Starks

Book Three

by

Robert Nagle

Dedication

On July 29, 2000, a voice was prematurely silenced. It was a voice that resonated with life. A clear, articulate voice that exemplified all the good things, with only an occasional bad joke thrown in just to spice things up. It was the voice of a profound imagination, a keenly aware and perceptive mind, an almost oppressively well-read intellect, and a spirit that embraced the universe. It was the voice of Toomey Starks.

Toomey was telling us a story when he was unexpectedly called away on otherworldly business. He never got to finish it. Those who know the story know that his Sara was just opening her eyes again when her creator's eyes were closed. She has stood, frozen, in Wayans' Chicago office/bunker since that fateful day.

The way his story "ended" was a cliff hanger of sad, and even chilling, significance (although I'm sure Toomey didn't plan it that way!). He fully intended to complete his fable of Susan, and her Sara. He even told us how.

It is from his posted outline of intent that I have taken it upon myself to take up the thread that has passed from his hand, and carry it to an end. Toomey's story continues here. Sara's story continues here, and Susan's too. Not in the original author's words, perhaps, but, hopefully, in the spirit that he, not only embodied, but expressed so well.

This effort is undertaken with deep admiration, and respect. It is humbly dedicated to the memory of Toomey Starks.

Susan

The Amazing Adventures of Sara Corel

A novel by Toomey Starks

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Coda

Preface

Wait. Hold on a second. The title page says: "A novel", the authorship being accredited to one person, and then "Book 3", the authorship of which is accredited to another person? Something doesn't add up here. Some background about this "Book 3" is probably in order.

While it is out of the ordinary to encounter a creative work that was begun by one person, and then completed by another, it's not unheard of. There is historical precedence for such collaborations - one of the most notable being Rimsky-Korsakov, who brought a number of Mussorgsky's scores to completion after the later died. There are two reasons for the phenomenon, the first being the inability of the originating author to continue, the second, and more important reason, is the intrinsic merit of the unfinished artwork's fundamental idea.

I have often said - to the exhaustion of some - that Toomey had a beautiful, wonderful idea in Susan. We've all dreamed of what the eventual - and inevitable - meeting of our world with another will be like, but few have expressed that dream in such an innocent, and civilized, yet realistic way. It struck a significant chord in me, because, in my own work, I attempt to deal with fantastic situations realistically.

Knowing of Toomey's passing by the time I got to the end of Susan, Book 2, I felt an appalling sense of wrong. Every esthetic fiber in my being shrieked: This is not how this should end! Sara had hardly begun to discover herself, Susan was still just a mysterious, undefined, yet powerful presence, Alex was incarcerated for knowing the wrong person, and for being a good parent. Worst of all: By the end of Book 2, the bad guys had won! It was wrong, wrong, wrong!

I felt called upon to act. I tried contacting people, I surfed the net - searching almost frantically for whatever there might be of Book 3. There was nothing . . . except a spare outline of what Toomey had in mind for the third book's structure. I was devastated, and filled with such a sense of loss that I cursed the fates - along with a few other things. Eventually though, I reluctantly concluded, "Well, that's that." I accepted that the ending of "Susan" would never be known, and went about getting on with my life, but then, something inside me said, "Oh no ya don't."

Dinah was the first to speak, then Lanna started talking. Mrs. J told me in no

uncertain terms, "Ve did nyot be comink all this vay for nothink!" Louise agreed. Wayans started putting in his two cents. That's when I got mad, and thought, "You're not gettin' away with this, buster!" He just smiled. He didn't need to laugh. With the way things had turned out, he already had gotten away with it. Then Sara started telling me things. She was unhappy, and angry. She didn't want to be confused anymore. She wanted a place in the world. One day she said, "Rob, there's someone I'd like you to meet." I looked up, and that's when Susan said, "**Hi.**"

I put work on my own novel, "Passages", aside, and started writing.

So here it is: Susan, Book 3. Some things are different - I have made some minor changes. The ethnically nondescript Mrs. J is now a full blooded Russian, her full name being Olga Barishkova Jachimczyk. I wanted to get away from the distancing formality of the "Mrs." form of address. Putting her on a first name basis along with the other major characters solved that problem, but then I found that referring to her as "Ekaterina" all the time was a bit cumbersome. Shortening the name to "Ekat" sounded too much like someone giving voice to a bad taste in their mouth, hence - Olga. Bruce Wayans is now Marshall Wayans. "Bruce" is simply not a presidential name. Lanna is now blond. Louise is a redhead. And Sara now spells her official name as: Susan P. Rgrl. You'll find out why later.

Aside from her name spelling, the only thing about Sara in Book 3 that may give the experienced reader pause is reference to the substance on the surface of her form that affords her spherical perception. I've chosen to call it a network of "perceptual photons". As covered in Book 2, it is the equivalent of her visual sight since her actual eyes are purely cosmetic in nature, and serve no perceptual function. This network of photons, however, is in no way related to her "kreening" ability.

The reader is advised that this is the third book of a trilogy of books which make up this story. It is, therefore, not going to make much sense without a knowledge of what has gone on before. Books 1, and 2, of "Susan" are available on Toomey's 'NiceWork' website. It is as he left it on July 27, 2000 - two days before his passing. This internet [link](#) will take you to the table of contents. There are other of his writings in the "Proper Waffles" section, some related to "Susan", some not. His work is worth your look.

Chapter Forty-one

Coda

**Due to circumstances beyond our control,
we interrupt our regularly scheduled program
to bring you a special announcement.**

George, and Mary Publique heard the unexpected announcement over their new big-screen television set. They sat, side by side, in the semi-darkened atmosphere of their musty, cramped living room, lounging in their matching Lay-Z Boy recliners after a typically hard day. Neither of them were pleased by what they'd just seen, or heard.

"Wha' happen' t' th' program, George?" asked Mary.

"I dunno," George growled. "Thur makin' some damned announcement 'r other."

"Watch yer language."

George merely grumbled that time. Mary shifted her recliner into its upright position, and began the laborious task of heaving her overly well fed body forward.

"They got a lot o' nerve inneruptin' Gilligan like that," she stated. "A'm goin' t' th' kitchen t' git me so' more chips."

"Hey, get me another beer while yer up, will ya?" asked George.

"Cue 3" announced Cindy's voice above the last second commotion in the news studio. "In 3! . . . 2! . . . 1! . . .

"Good evening, this is Ken Clark," Ken's strong, reassuring, masculine image greeted the lion's share of the nation's viewing audience from behind the network's news desk. "Speculation has been widespread regarding the apparent sudden disappearance of Susan P, the alien artifact that came to public awareness just over four months ago. As you will recall, Susan came to the attention of NASA officials in Houston late last year where she had apparently been living quietly as a teenager for some time. She was said to have been "left on our doorstep" as a gift to mankind from a technologically advanced, alien civilization. Since then, Susan has both dazzled, and baffled, virtually everyone who has come into contact with her. NASA scientists, who have been studying her for the past four

months, have found themselves to be as astounded as they've been confounded by her unearthly structure, and unique capabilities.

"But now, she seems to be missing. NASA officials have revealed that she has not reported for her usual rounds of testing now for three days, and they have been unable to contact her. The people she has lived with, since her arrival here on earth, have, likewise, claimed to have no knowledge of her whereabouts."

The, on location, head and shoulders image of an imposing, and noticeably anxious looking, Dinah appeared on the screen, her tousled lion's mane of deep black hair framing her strong, lean features. Some shrubbery, and a portion of the front facade of Mrs. J's apartment complex could be seen behind her. The quality was poor, and Dinah was obviously having to deal with a lot of people at the same time.

"No, we don't know where she is," she said in response to a question. Her manner was unwontedly subdued, her normally booming voice, soft spoken.

There was a babble of voices from off camera. Dinah struggled to pick out a question.

"No, she never goes anywhere without telling us," she reported. "She's very good about that. She always tells us where she's going."

More babbling. The question, "When did you first suspect that she was missing?" could be perceived. Dinah responded.

"When she . . . just seemed to drop off the internet."

Babbling. "And when was that?" could be made out.

"About three days ago," Dinah answered.

More babbling. Dinah squinted at someone off camera, trying to listen.

"She was wearing dark clothing," the lawyer, who was not at all acting like a lawyer, answered. "Plain, dark blue sweatshirt. Baggy black pants, light colored tennis shoes and a Dodgers baseball cap."

Babbling. "A Dodger cap?" could be heard.

Dinah's image looked down as she smiled instantly, instinctively, briefly. When she looked up again, it was obvious the question had upset her.

"She's funny that way," she answered.

More babbling.

"We've contacted everyone. Nobody has seen her. She'd made a number of friends over the internet. No one has had contact with her lately."

Babbling. "Do you think she could've been lured somewhere by one of her internet

contacts?" came through pretty clear.

For the first time, the cold, lawyerly reserve that was so characteristic of her shown through Dinah's features.

"Sara's not like that," she stated unequivocally. "She's a good girl."

Fielding the next question, Dinah's face became anxious, and pained, again.

"We've made every effort to contact her," she reported, "it's normally pretty easy, but she is, and has been . . . off line . . . for awhile."

Babbling. "Do you have a message for her?" could be made out.

"Um . . . since it's normally such an easy thing to access her, this . . . setting seems a little strange, but, yes."

Dinah was having more, and more trouble bearing up under the situation.

"Sara?" she called out to wherever she hoped the girl might be. "We love you, and we're very worried about you. Please come home, or let us know, somehow, that you're alright." She couldn't go on. "That's all I have to say." And she turned away.

The screen switched back to Ken. He looked away from the offscreen monitor he'd been watching, and back to the viewing audience.

"That was an interview, taken earlier today, with Dinah Prinze, who is Susan's adoptive mother, and also, her attorney.

"Susan was a guest on our 'Deep Inside' program recently in which she talked about herself."

The screen image shifted to show the mid-shot image of Sara in her uniform, sitting comfortably in a chair with one corner of Ken's 'Deep Inside' desk visible beside her to her left. It was a tape edit of her interview with Ken.

"I'm not gonna make like I'm just a regular old normal girl-type teen," she was saying, "'cause, well, you know - I'm not. Most of the time I like to think of myself as no different from anyone else, but I have to deal with a lot of weird stuff sometimes. Still, I honestly believe I'm basically a real person. I mean, I like to eat, and sleep, and watch movies, and listen to music, and read, and shop and hang out with my friends. I've got parents - like foster parents, actually - regular people who love me, and try to make sure I turn out sorta decent, even though I can be a lot of trouble."

The screen cut back to Ken once more.

"That was the Cryptoalien artifact, Susan P, as she appeared on our 'Deep Inside' show," he reported.

"It was during that same interview," Ken went on to say, "that Susan professed to have no knowledge of either the aliens who made her, or why they sent her here to earth. There's been a lot of debate, since her coming into the public spotlight, about those, and other issues, regarding her. Her apparent disappearance, however, has now suddenly brought those issues to the forefront of official concern. We'll take you now to Tracy Savage in the press room of the United Nations Building in New York." Ken looked over at his monitor. "Tracy?"

The screen switched to a mid-close shot of Tracy. She had a hand mic, and was wearing an earjack. She looked frazzled, and harried, as she appeared to be standing in the midst of a very crowded room boarded with ornate, off-white, walls. An address podium of light brown finished wood could be seen in the background behind her left shoulder. It was evident that the podium was stationed on a risen platform that spanned the width of the room, projecting about eighteen feet from the rear wall. The platform was crowded with men, most of whom were of differing nationalities. Most of those who looked like American nationals appeared to be nervous, and were keenly attentive to their surroundings. They were obviously security personnel, and there were a significant number of them.

In the floor area in front of the platform, and around Tracy, there was a crushing herd of her colleagues. Her fellow reporters were managing tape recorders, and note pads. Others, like herself, were doing 'stand-ups'. A horde of technicians were commandeering a jumbled array of lights, cameras, microphones and other equipment. There was a haphazard number of chairs around, but there weren't nearly enough for everyone. The whole scene was cramped, and disorganized, resembling the interior of a New York City subway car at the peak of late afternoon rush hour. It also looked as though the whole thing had been 'thrown together' on extremely short notice.

"Hello, Ken," Tracy greeted him.

She was smiling, but it was evident that she was neither comfortable nor particularly happy with her current circumstances. She was standing somewhat uncertainly, literally knee deep in technicians, equipment and cables. Neither she, nor anyone else who was in the room with her, were accustomed to such close quarters, and all of them were wanting more 'elbow' room.

"Can you hear me," Ken's voice was heard by Tracy, and the viewing audience.

"Yes, fine," she reported, and then she had to look down to see as she moved a foot. Returning herself to the camera, she laughed nervously. "It's pretty crowded in here."

"Yes, I'm surprised you've got any room to move there," Ken observed.

"Well, the whole world is here in one form or another."

"What can you tell us about what's going on down there, Tracy?" Ken asked.

"Well Ken, this is considered to be a major announcement regarding the status of the alien artifact known to the world as Susan P. As you know, she apparently hasn't been around for a few days, and her absence has raised a lot of questions. Namely: Where is she, and what is she up to? Has she left earth? Is she still here? Has she gone underground? If she has gone underground, why has she gone underground? Is she doing the bidding of her alien masters, and, if so, what are their intentions?"

"In the face of all these questions, it's ironic that it is Susan herself who has added much fuel to the current fire-storm of speculation that surrounds her. As everyone knows, she's professed to know nothing of her purpose here on earth, and has even stated that she knows very little about her own capabilities. Well, there's a growing number of people who've expressed doubts about her truthfulness in that respect. It's been said that her purpose is benevolent, and it's been said that she is here to pursue some insidious alien design. Opinions have ranged the spectrum of speculation, but nothing has been officially either confirmed, or denied.

"Now, all that is about to change. The U.N. General Assembly was convened in special session early today, and the topic of their discussion, we are told, was the alien artifact, Susan P. It's said that they have come to a decision with regard to our extraordinary guest, and that there will be an announcement any minute concerning the fate of our - or, I mean - *her* future. Excuse me.

"If you can imagine it, Ken, here, of all places, in the United Nations, the future of Susan P has been decided, and is to be announced now at any time. We are told that, in an unprecedented consensus involving the leadership of every member nation, and even those outside the U.N., *everyone* has agreed to this resolution, and has given it their full support."

"Oh, Tracy, I wish you wouldn't go on so," Cindy groused, watching Tracy's mid closeup image on the control booth's location monitor.

"Would you rather have dead air?" queried her assistant, Jack.

"Eah," the director mumbled. "Okay, their coming in. Ken? Get ready to cue."

"Uh, Tracy?" said Ken to camera 3. "I've just been told that their ready to make the announcement. Can you see anything?"

"Not really yet, Ken. There are an awful lot of people on that stage. There's a lot of security, and there've been quite a few delegates brought in to make a show of support. The

announcement is scheduled to be made by U.N. Secretary-General, Gustov Nemitts, and he has not appeared as yet - oh, wait a minute. The people on stage are looking around toward the entry door in the back wall of the room where Secretary Nemitts is expected to arrive. I think I see him now. Yes, there's that familiar bald head. He's through the door now. He's come up the stairway to the stage. He's smiling, and shaking some hands. It looks like their about to - "

"Ladies and gentlemen," an official announcer stated over the airwaves, "the Secretary-General of the United Nations."

The atmosphere of the room quieted down as U.N. Secretary-General, Gustov Nemitts made his way through the crowd of his colleagues, and security personnel. The announcement podium, where he was to make the address, was located slightly to the right of center near the forefront of the stage. The Secretary paused to smile, greet and shake the hand of one more person on his way, then put on his official manner as he stepped up behind the podium.

Not a particularly tall man, his bald head, and shoulders barely projected above the top edge of the rostrum. Nemitts briefly glanced up at the tightly packed-in throng of media people he would be facing as he carefully placed a single, white, eight-and-a-half by eleven sheet of paper on the lectern in front of him. He looked down at the page, stroked his full, dark mustache with the back of an indexfinger a couple times, then quickly donned his reading glasses, and looked up to start.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," he began.

Silence overcame the atmosphere of the over-crowded room.

"I would like to read a statement with regard to the alien artifact, AKA Susan P. This will be a brief statement, and there will be no questions afterward. I want to emphasize that - there will be - no questions - after the reading of the statement. I want to make sure that is completely understood."

The Secretary paused a moment to look over his glasses at the crowd of reporters, and technicians, hoping that his attempt at a penetrating gaze would let them know that he meant business. He looked back at the prepared text on the lectern before himself, adjusted his spectacles, then glanced up briefly again, and then began to read aloud from what was written on the page.

"Four months, and seven days ago, there came to our attention, compelling evidence of

a clear, and present danger in our midst. An artifact, placed here on this earth by a hitherto unknown, alien civilization, had been intact, and active, for a period of some three years prior to its discovery. The artifact was said to be a 'gift' from a friendly, extraterrestrial neighbor, and, indeed, it was later found that the artifact did possess tremendous power, and extraordinary capability. The opportunities for the human race to benefit from the artifact, to learn, and grow, from its enormous, and presumably limitless, potential, were clearly as obvious as they were bountiful.

"Further investigation has revealed, however, that the nature of the artifact's foreign structure poses a grave threat to the stability of certain geophysical characteristics vital to the sustenance of mammalian life on earth. Information regarding details related to this condition will be released at a future time, but it has been determined that the aliens who manufactured the artifact, neglected to account for this, relatively simple, phenomenon.

"It is therefore with deep regret that the world community of nations has decided that it must forsake this gift. The artifact has been given to understand the risk to all humanity of its continued presence among us, and has willingly agreed to take this cup from us. It has since, three days ago, departed from earth, forever."

The subdued murmuring in the room upon hearing this was almost deafening. Nemitts looked up over his glasses at the gathering, and patiently waited for the crowd to settle down. When it became obvious that he had more to say, everyone in the room became quiet once again. The Secretary then looked back down at his prepared text, and continued reading.

"We wholeheartedly embrace this alien culture's well-meaning, if ill-conceived, attempt to establish contact with us, and we sincerely offer them to," the secretary looked up over his glasses, and smiled, "try again." He then looked back at his text, and adopted his former, serious vein. "We wish the dearly departed artifact, God speed in its journey into far away, uncharted space, and sincerely hope that it will someday find a home where it may find peace, and come to rest."

The bomb the Secretary had just dropped exploded in a shockwave of questioning voices from the press. The nanosecond he moved to leave the podium, everyone was shouting for answers at once. Saying nothing to anyone, Nemitts took up the paper bearing the text of his address, pulled his glasses from his face as he turned away from the chaotic madness he'd inspired, and began making his way toward the exit through the crush of security, and dignitaries surrounding him.

The back of his bald head had all but disappeared when, in an unprecedented instance,

several shouting reporters at the forefront of the group actually tried to storm the platform in their panicked desperation for more than what the Secretary was willing to give. The security personnel came swarming from among the delegates to the forefront of the stage. They tried to be civil, yet firm, with the reporters who had made it onto the platform, but several of the - in your face - encounters became confrontational. The security agents wound up having to resort to force in dealing with the reporters who'd become overly aggressive, pushing, and shoving them off the platform, and back to the floor. Some of the reporters landed on their feet, some on their knees, others fell on their sides. Still other reporters fell on top of their colleagues who'd been close to the apron of the stage.

Once they'd succeeded in clearing the front of the stage, the security personnel locked arms with each another, and formed a line across the width of the platform. The area below their feet had become a chaotic maze of panicked confusion. Reporters, and technicians, were pressing in every direction, trying to get themselves, and their equipment out of harm's way. There were reporters lying on the floor in front of the stage, obviously injured. The dignitaries who'd been sharing the stage with Nemitts were now crowding to the back of the room. The small stairwell that lead to the floor, and the narrow exit door in the back wall, however, could only accommodate them one at a time.

In a constant, maddening din of shouts, and screams, the emotions, and confusion, in the media side of the room grew worse. Already upset by the vagueness of Nemitts' address, everyone was now angered by the security men's engagement with their colleagues, and its result.

Before anyone knew it, several more reporters rushed to mount the platform. The security line was knocked back in the center, but the men were able to hold firm. More reporters joined the fray. The security men struggling to keep them back. The small doorway at the back of the room became a impassible, double bottleneck with now frantic foreign delegates trying to get out, and equally frantic back-up security personnel trying to get in. The scene turned into a full melee with reporters literally climbing over each other to get past the security line to the delegates. Technicians on the floor were jostled, and knocked aside. Equipment was toppled, trampled, tripped over, fallen on, damaged and destroyed.

The security men in the line of resistance were becoming increasingly outnumbered, and outmatched. Usin their chain-linked formation to try to force the mob back, they were steadily loosing ground. Violence came at their faces, and bodies, from every front-facing

direction. Deprived of the use of their arms, they had only their feet with which to defend themselves. They tried to push back rather than lash out, and kick, but the situation had already developed into a full scale riot. Some of them began trying to free their arms to defend themselves against the wrath of the mob. The podium was knocked over. Three men in the line fell backwards over it. Their line of resistance was broken, and the screaming horde of reporters swarmed over them, and each other, to get at the unfortunate dignitaries who remained huddled in terror at the back of the room.

"Well, there you have it," smiled Ken Clark's reassuring, masculine countenance which had suddenly returned to the screen. "The alien artifact, known as Susan P, has forever taken her leave of earth for the benefit of mankind." He paused a moment, then appeared to become a bit wistful. "She was quite a gal."

"It's a fuckin' riot out there!"

"Call up more security!"

"Secure that door! Make sure they don't get through!"

"We still got delegates on the floor!"

"Fuggum! Secure that door!"

The atmosphere of the large, airy corridor behind the U.N. press room was almost as chaotic as what was going on inside the room. The security staff had been had been caught badly short-handed, and were scrambling to contain the situation. From where he stood, Secretary-General, Nemitts could see well-shod feet as well as desperate hands protruding beyond the door that several security agents were attempting to force all the way closed. A man of privilege who'd been able to afford a life of peace, the sight left him deeply shaken. He was alone, his fellow delegates, who'd been lucky enough to get out, having hastily left the scene. The enforcement authorities had already been called, and were on their way. It was going to be a very long night for him indeed. He turned away, and wandered slowly down the corridor. His trembling hands struggled to return his glasses to the breast pocket of his jacket.

"How's the saying go?" he suddenly heard a familiar voice say from behind him. "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

The Secretary turned to identify the speaker. He saw President, Marshall Wayans standing before him. He was eyeing him squarely, smiling in his usual, confidently way. The President extended his hand to him. Nemitts accepted the offering. He found the President's

grip to be uncomfortably tight.

"Good job, Gus," Wayans warmly congratulated him.

Nemitts looked about uneasily at the commotion going on around them.

"Looks like I'm going to be taking some heat on this," he opined nervously.

The president's grip tightened, bringing the Secretary's distracted attention back to him. Nemitts saw that he was still smiling.

"We'll make it worth your trouble," Wayans pleasantly assured him.

"Excuse me, Mr. President," a Secret Service agent announced at Wayans elbow, "but we need to get you out of here."

"Oh," said Wayans obligingly, "of course."

He turned back to Nemitts as he released his hand.

"You'll excuse me, Mr. Secretary. I have a meeting to attend anyway." He smiled again. "We'll be in touch," and then he left under the agent's escort.

Nemitts looked after at the President's broad, straight back as it receded in the distance of the corridor. He licked his lips, and felt the need to take a couple of deep breaths. His worried attention wandered until it happened once again upon the hectic confusion going on around him. He needed to take another deep breath.

"This isn't right," he said softly to himself.

"Finish concluding announcement," Cindy cued, "aaand . . . go to commercial."

The broadcast was over. She opened the PA channel to the studio crew.

"That's a wrap people. We're three hours away from regular. Take a break, but don't wander too far. We'll see if we can't get an update on Tracy in the meantime."

She closed the channel, then opened another, separate channel, that was close to her heart.

"Good job, Ken," she said quietly into the microphone of her headset.

She watched him through the control booth window. He was taking the clip mic off his tie, still seated behind the news desk. He wasn't noticing.

"As always," she added.

He still didn't look, but she saw him smile. It was enough.

"D' I miss anything?" asked Mary as she returned with their refreshments.

"Nothin' special," George reported.

"Here's yer beer."

"Oh, thanks. Jus' somefin 'bout some alien invasion 'r other."

George cracked open his beer, and took a hit as Mary dropped into her chair, and shifted it into low.

"Whew!" she exclaimed.

The trip to the kitchen, and back, had left her a bit winded. She paused a moment to catch her breath.

"Man! It ain't easy livin', y'know that?" she observed.

"There ya go with that damned philosophy ag'in," groused George.

"Watch yer language," Mary chastened him.

George grunted, and took up his trusty remote.

"Won'er what's on th' sports channel?"

The screen went blank. The sound went off. Neither of the others noticed the clattering the remote made as it was tossed carelessly onto the glass topped coffee table in front of them.

"Well," said one of them disconsolately, "that's it."

"Wha' do you mean, "that's it"?" another challenged.

The first to speak got up, and moved away.

"She's gone!" she declared with unwonted vehemence. "It's over!"

She turned back to regard the other two.

"End of story," she announced with finality.

"But vit out tellink anyone?"

"What are you getting so upset for?" Dinah wanted to know of the blonde.

Lanna glared at her from where she stood.

"You should talk, Miss Pitbull Terrier!" she spat.

"Ladies, ladies, please," Mrs. Jachimczyk beseeched with appeasing, upraised hands.

"Dis is nyot going to get us anyvere."

"Wul why would she just leave without telling anyone?" Lanna demanded. "We all know how strict Alex was about that."

"First Alex," Dinah murmured, her legally tuned political mind awhirr, "now Sara."

Mrs. J looked askance at the lawyer.

"You are thinkink she vas maybe kidnapped?"

Dinah's brilliant eyes shifted to her.

"Sara?" she asked rhetorically before she looked away, and stated, "Not a chance."

Mrs. J frowned with concern.

"So, vat are you sayink?"

Dinah wasn't sure, so all she said was, "They're both gone."

"Well la - de - da!" scoffed Lanna grandly.

"Lanna, you're nyot helpink," Olga scolded her.

"Helping *what*?" the buxom blonde demanded. "What's there to help anymore?" she went on. "She's gone, and that's the end of it!"

The two other women watched her closely.

"You loved her, didn't you?" Dinah quietly asked.

Her question, quite uncharacteristically, had been posed neither as an accusation, or as a threat. The fact that it was asked at all, however, was enough to make Lanna suddenly turn her back to them. Olga merely gazed at her folded hands resting in her lap.

"Ve all did."

Far away, and underground,
A solitary figure waited.

She stood in darkness,
Blacker than the night,
Gray, alone and cold.

Frozen in the middle of her final gesture.
Unresponding to the final sound she'd heard.
Both her eyes, and mouth, were open
As though she were about to speak.

Ice had formed throughout the ornate, walnut finished, wood interior.
From the high, beamed ceiling,
Down the paneled walls.
The plush, pile carpet was blanketed with frost.

The office that was now her tomb
Looked like it was hastily abandoned.
The executive's swivel chair sat turned at a right angle to the desk.
Files, and knickknacks, still lay on the desk's surface.

Moist air flowed in through the ventilation ducts,
Wafting everywhere
To feed the ice advancing from her form.

She stood in darkness,
Gray, alone and cold.

Chapter Forty-two

Overture

The media riot at the United Nations was the lead story of the entire world the following morning. Three U.N. delegates had been crushed to death in the melee, several others had been injured, two critically. More than a dozen security agents had been hurt, five of whom were in the hospital, one of whom was on life support. More than a score of reporters, and media technicians, had been injured, some of them critically, but nobody cared about them. In some sections of the globe, the "U.N. Massacre", as it came to be called, eclipsed the news of Sara's reported departure from earth.

In every major city of every country, it was heavily suggested - if not outrightly proclaimed - that the American news reporting media, in a deadly culmination to its years long descent into tabloid style journalism, had finally degenerated to the level of murderous mob violence. It didn't matter that every major news reporting outfit in the world had been involved in the riot. The incident had happened on U.S. soil, and so, all the blame was effectively shifted onto the Americans. The home countries of the deceased, and injured, delegates were quick to express their outrage at what had been allowed to happen. Not wanting to be left out, the rest of the world joined them in demanding that steps be taken to rein in the 'responsible' country's news reporting apparatus.

In fulfilling its function of informing the public of the incident, however, the media wound up conspiring against its own interests. In the real world of sponsored news business, the stories that get reported - and the way they're reported - is determined by a frightening little thing called 'ratings'. It's like a counter, and it tells a sponsor how many people are watching the program he's footing the bill for, and, more importantly - at least from his standpoint anyway - it tells him how many people are being exposed to the advertisements for his business's products he has purchased the right to air on that program. If there aren't enough viewers to make the sponsor happy, then he can either take his advertising dollars elsewhere, or he can insist that the program's content be changed in ways that will, hopefully, attract more viewers.

That being the case, in conjunction with the sorry fact that the majority of folks aren't

real keen of brushing up their Shakespeare, what you wind up with is a phenomenon called: Appealing to the lowest common denominator, or - to put it more accurately - dumbominator. It's an ongoing process that feeds on itself in that, if you persist in appealing to the lowest common dumbominator, it just keeps getting lower. It's an intentional ploy to increase the quantity of the returns while consistently diminishing their quality. To advertisers, it's the best of all possible worlds. As Gertrude Stein might've put it: A dumb consumer is a gullible consumer is a good consumer.

To compete for viewers to keep their ratings up to keep their sponsors happy, the news media, in reporting the U.N. incident, was ultimately left with no other choice than to shoot itself in the foot. In depicting what had happened that night, the networks were forced into a game of leap-frog, continually upping the ante on violence until, finally, all of them were repeatedly showing the most gruesome, and disturbing, pieces of videotape to survive the horrible scene. The reportage - predictably enough - inspired a tidal wave of outrage by a concerned, global public. The ratings indicators, however - and even more predictably enough - showed that, in the privacy of their homes, that same, concerned, global public, had an insatiable appetite for just thing that was upsetting them so much. The wave of protest, contrary to the ratings - predictably enough - crested in near unanimous demands that the news media be leashed, and brought to heel. The hotly rekindled debate in favor of freedom of the press went cold as the world watched three flag draped coffins being loaded onto separate planes bound for foreign homes. For the maiden presidency of Marshall Wayans, it was a to die for opportunity.

In these UnitedStates, one would think that a third party presidency would've gotten to the beltway dead on arrival. In theory, at least, it made perfect sense to expect that both major political parties would be so up in arms at having been cheated out to the White House that they would've banded together in a mutual effort to crush the upstart. That was the theory at any rate, and it was supposed to have worked out nicely.

After the election, all three parties had mouthed the standard bromides about 'unity', 'harmony' and 'working together'. Behind the scenes, however, beyond the reach of the press, and cameras, battlelines were being drawn, and strategies laid down. Both of the major parties having taken a beating at the polls, and neither of them wanting to go the way of the Whigs, Republicans, and Democrats, began to forge a grudging alliance that both saw as

being necessary to ensure each of their own survival. They intended to make President Elect, Wayans a lame duck from the moment he finished taking the oath of office. They would let him have the cabinet he wanted, but, after that, the honeymoon was over. He would get nothing, *nothing* else.

Any White House initiative, or bill, would be unilaterally defeated. Any Wayans legislation would be voted down. Any presidential veto would be over-ridden. Any federal judgeship selection would be filibustered to submission. Any Supreme Court candidate would be examined to exhaustion before finally being denied a seat on the nation's highest bench. They were determined that both current, and future, scholarship, no matter how positive its intent, would be compelled to portray Marshall Wayans as having been one of the most disappointing, ineffectual, get-nothing-done chief executives in the republic's history. They also intended for the legacy of the Wayans presidency to stand as hallmark to the electorate, and to the voters, never to trust a third party candidate again.

Well, that was before the United Nations press room ran with blood. Congress was still immersed in finalizing its plan for depositing Wayans into the dustbin of presidential obscurity when news of the crisis broke.

From the start, Wayans had the upper hand. For one thing, he had the invaluable credibility advantage of having been there when it happened. While Congressmen, and women, and Senators were at home, at parties, at bars, Wayans contacted his staff at the White House from the limousine bearing him away from the scene, and told them to "get moving." By the time Air Force One touched down in Washington, a team of researchers in the Executive Office Building were already crafting the rough draft of a bill. Most Congressional cell-phones hadn't even started ringing yet.

Just before midnight though, Congressional Speaker of the House, Jerome Dunn was on his private line with Senate Majority Leader, William Bass.

"We need to be first outta the starting gate on this one, Bill," Dunn counseled the Senator. "It could set the whole tone for the next two years."

Senator Bass, however, had had a more than usually stressful day that day. He was closing in on seventy, after all, and he was tired. His sleepy brain briefly shifted back, and forth, between thoughts on the issue Dunn had just brought to his attention, and how good it would feel to be in bed before he opined, "We've already got consensus on everything, Jerry. I don't see why it can't wait 'til morning."

House Speaker Dunn didn't argue the point. They touched on a couple of other matters

of their mutual concern, then bid each other good night.

It was a delay that would prove to be fatal.

The early bird edition of the following morning's news carried a story that the White House had prepared legislation that would, "impose responsibility on the media." The story ranked high on the morning's bill, for obvious reasons. It also got Congress out of bed, and to the office, much earlier than usual.

The Senate Judiciary Committee scrambled to slap together a Congressional 'media bill' to counter the Wayans measure. Two key members of that committee, however, were ticked off with the chairman at the time. The process got bogged down. The delay lengthened.

10:30 AM that morning, President Wayans appeared before the nation in the executive mansion's Press Room, flanked by the families of the deceased, and injured, U.N. delegates. He officially expressed regret, and sorrow, graciously offering apology to the distressed, and grieving families of the foreign dignitaries, and promised them that "action is in the making." He then sounded the battle cry of, "Freedom, not license", as he announced that his bill to "harness the media" was, "on its way to Congress."

By early afternoon, people with reputations for being listened to were wondering why Congress wasn't doing anything to deal with the U.N. Massacre. It was mid-afternoon when a very ticked off Judiciary Committee Chairman, Howard Lassiter, threw up his hands, and summarily adjourned his committee for the day. With their own legislative effort now basically in a shambles, the Hill went into full damage-containment mode. House Speaker Dunn issued a statement accusing the President of "playing politics with an international tragedy." Others in the nation's capital tried to make similar statements, but nobody was listening. With his forthright display of decisive action, Wayans had effectively grabbed the public spotlight away from everybody, and now had it all to himself. He'd become the hero of the situation, even as the media saw him as the greatest threat to free speech they had ever faced.

The next day Congress reconvened with a will, and the determination to stop the Wayans bill. Those who bothered to actually read the legislation were stunned at the restrictions the President was proposing. It never got to committee. Both houses promptly rejected the bill, and sent it packing back to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Early that same morning, however, the President's staff acquired a copy of the New York City Police Department's preliminary investigation of the UN incident. Contained in that document were the names, and nationalities of every single reporter, and technician

who'd been in the press room that night. After the list was narrowed down to contain only the foreign nationals, Wayans spent the remainder of his business day working the phone. He personally talked to every foreign ambassador who'd been 'involved', the very weighty bargaining chip of the list in his immaculately manicured hand. Since every nation had already clambered onto the 'reign in the media' bandwagon, many of them now found themselves confronted with the embarrassment of it being known that *their* people had also been involved in the riot. Wayans agreed not to expose them, provided that their governments publicly supported his legislative measure. All of them took the offer. Wayans would have their signed endorsements first thing the following morning.

First thing the next day, Congress was in disarray, as usual, only much more so, than usual. The Beltway Bandits read opinion poll results in the same way that normal people read the morning newspaper. The results were in from the day when Wayans had first announced his media bill. Doing the math that morning gave the people on Capital Hill cause to choke on their cups of over-priced, Yuppie java. Wayans standing in the polls had spiked dramatically from just the previous day. The President's 'ratings' had been about average for an incoming chief executive. Things had gone smoothly in confirming his cabinet picks, but nothing much had happened since then. Congress had been involved with burnishing its new alliance. The economy, the country, everything seemed to be doing well. So well, in fact, that it had gotten boring. The mood of the country was antsy, just waiting for something to happen, and now, with the President's proposed news media reform measure, it finally had.

At 10:00 A.M. that morning, President Wayans held a White House press conference. With the basic thrust of the legislation he was pushing being generally known by then, everyone thought he was a fool for facing the press. His media bill came up first thing, and then would not go away. The discussion became heated, but all of it was one sided. The reporters in the room were already upset with the restraints his proposed bill suggested. That they couldn't 'nail' him on any one point during the debate upset them even more. That Wayans, throughout, remained firm on his stance, and completely unflappable in defending his position, got them even more upset. The session ultimately disintegrated into a one sided shouting match until Wayans finally resorted to simply standing silently at the podium, the very picture of poise, and calm, and waited for the reporters to calm down. When quiet was restored, he calmly, and carefully, explained, using hand gestures to help him illustrate.

"When a group, that is within, and therefore is a part of, a larger group, comes to the state of being where it is either unwilling, or unable, to control itself, and to the point where

it actually becomes an active threat to the wellbeing, safety, and, yes, even to the life, of the larger group, which it is a part of, it then falls upon, and becomes the responsibility, of the larger group to control that smaller group which is threatening it, for the benefit, and the survival, of all. Basically; if you can't control yourself, then you will be controlled by a force outside yourself.

"Now, the appalling tragedy that happened at the United Nations press room the other night, I think demonstrated beyond a shadow of anyone's reasonable doubt, that the news reporting media has come to a pass in its evolution to where it poses an active, and deadly, threat to the people it comes into contact with in the course of performing its otherwise very honorable duties, which are essential to any free society. It has therefore fallen to, and become the responsibility of the delegated representatives of the larger group to impose such restraints upon the news media as would ensure the integrity, and survival, of the group as a whole, which we are sworn to do.

"As president, this is my responsibility. I have to do this. If I did not, then I would be remiss in my duties. Believe me, I have only taken this step with the gravest reservations, as well as with the deepest regrets. I - did - not - want - to do - this. But it must be done, and it is up to me to do it."

The press was cowed. They had no response. Most of them were still shell-shocked over what had happened that fateful night. It was in the hush of this lull, when it seemed no one dared speak, that Wayans pulled out his ace: A stack of official letters from "deeply concerned" world governments, expressing their support of his media bill. The impact was earthshaking.

Highlights of the President's news conference were aired on the noon news. In the same broadcast, tape depicting the remains of the three deceased UN delegates, and their families, departing for home earlier that same day was aired for the first of what would be several times. Things were not going well at all for those in the news reporting media. With the fallout from the riot coupled with what sponsors wanted to see, opinion polls were pounding them right, and left. Wayans' popularity was at a record high. He was essentially biting the hand that was feeding him, getting away with it and relishing every minute of it, all at the same time.

It was after they'd reviewed the videotapes of the White House press conference that the news media's bureau chiefs determined that it was time to go on the offensive with the President. They all knew that the coverage of his conference, and the departure of the

deceased diplomats, were both going to play huge on the evening's news programs. With the momentum that had already been built up over the matter, they had to do something fast to derail the Wayans locomotive, or else a vital means of scrutinizing government stood a very good chance of being lost. Perhaps forever. They decided on a strategy of trying to beat the President on his own issue. If they could only find something in the U.N. incident that would absolve them, it could take the current wind of public adulation out of Wayans' sails. It wasn't going to be easy, to say the least. With the matter still under official investigation, anyone who was directly involved in the incident was barred from discussing it.

The news media's telephone lines between Washington, and New York, started humming shortly after 1:00 that afternoon. Meanwhile, research staffs reviewed the tapes, reviewed the reports, reviewed the stories, reviewed anything, and everything they could get their hands on about the U.N. incident. The search soon narrowed down to the foreign press that had been involved. They realized that they couldn't shift the blame for what had happened, but maybe, just maybe, they could spread it.

Since authorities had confiscated every piece of media equipment at the scene, all the bureau chiefs had were backup tapes of what had actually been broadcast the night of the riot. Examining the tapes quickly revealed, however, that all any camera actually saw was the backs of reporters as they stormed the security agent's line of resistance. No one individual, foreign, or otherwise, could be positively identified.

As the day's poll results started coming in later that afternoon, it was immediately apparent that President Wayans' popularity had spiked again. His standing in the eyes of the public was rising faster than the mercury of a frozen thermometer in a pot of boiling water. His approval rating was approaching a level not enjoyed by a national executive since Reagan. Knowing that opposing a popular President was a double-edged sword that could cut painfully if it went the other way, members of both major parties, in both houses of Congress began to waver in their opposition to the Wayans bill. The bipartisan coalition to stop his Presidency, before it had started, had begun to founder, before it had started.

It was late in the afternoon that day when the bureau chief of New York's major televised news network was discussing the situation over the phone with his counterpart at one of Chicago's major dailies when one of them hit on an idea. They knew that they didn't have a positive identification of any one foreign correspondent who'd been in the U.N. press room the night of the riot, but there wasn't anything to say that they didn't *"might"* have one.

The other bureau chief liked the idea. After discussing possible ramifications, the two

men agreed that it would be foolish to say anything to the public about their "possible discovery", so they decided to quietly *leak* the item to the Feds in Washington, and then sit back, and see what happened. After some other phone calls were made in order to clear a path for the leak to take off, it was agreed that their little carrier pigeon should spread its wings from a general use computer in the major Washington daily's editorial room.

The reverse leak hit the nation's capital the next day like a shockwave. By mid-morning the White House phone lines were jammed with calls from concerned foreign ambassadors. President Wayans ordered Bureau (FBI) Director, Jeff Franklin, to, "go over those tapes with an electron microscope," to see if any one foreign correspondent could be positively identified. Congress got wind of the leak through a leak (an unguarded comment by a White House staffer to a Congressional staffer).

With the possibility of foreign involvement in the U.N. Massacre, Congress saw that they finally had a bargaining chip. If they couldn't stop the Wayans Bill, then maybe they could, at least, force the President to tone down some of the harsher restrictions he wanted to impose of the media. It was close to noon when there was a heated, impromptu meeting of Senate Committee Heads in a Senate wing hallway.

"We've got to go public with this (foreign correspondent angle). It's the only way."

"We've got to confirm it before we do that."

"We haven't got time for that! The polls show that the public - "

"The public - the public -

what the hell has the public got to do with it? We're talking about the Constitution here - "

"No,

the Bill of Rights - "

"Whatever! It's free speech!"

"Will you shuttup, and let me talk?"

"Look. Why don't we just pass the bill as is. I know it's against every one of our principles - "

"Say what?"

"Principles. All I'm saying is that if we get Wayans to water down his own bill, then the (Supreme) Court might think twice about striking it down if we pass it."

"Pass it as is? That's gonna make us look awfully bad."

"But just think of how it's going to look when the Supreme Court - "

"Which was selected

by the two major parties."

" - hands independent President, Marshall Wayans his legislative ass in a big fat sling?"

"Ouch."

"Yeah . . . "

"We'll have to do it with a narrow margin."

"That's no problem."

"The point is; a Court decision could set the pattern. A defeat like that could turn the public against Wayans, and could give us the backbone - "

"Say what?"

"Will - you - pay attention?"

"I am!"

"Anyway, it would be a mandate for Congress to get its act together."

S i l e n c e . . .

"What're ya lookin' at me for? *He* said it, not me."

"Congress? Working together?"

"Gives me the shivers . . . "

"Guess it had to happen sooner, or later."

"Maybe there really is a first time for everything."

"Yeah, and maybe there really *is* a Santa Claus."

"Fuggin' independents."

"It would be nice to see the President squirm first. Remember how we made Clinton hang his head in shame?"

"Boy! Did *that* feel good!"

"One of our finer moments, I must say."

"The leak said only a "possible" ID on a foreign correspondent. We should limit it to that."

"Make a public statement?"

"Yeah. I don't think we'd have any trouble finding a microphone. The media wants outta this worse than anyone."

"Who's gonna make the statement?"

"I will," offered Judiciary Committee Chairman, Howard Lassiter.

When the spontaneous meeting in the hallway adjourned, an ordinary looking man

went to the nearest pay-phone. The number he entered bypassed the White House switch board.

"Yeah?" queried the answering voice on the other end of the connection.

"Birdie's gonna sing," the man reported.

"Which birdie?" was the voice's next inquiry.

"Judiciary."

The man could hear subtle laughter over the receiver's earpiece, then, "We're aaaaaall over 'im."

Congressional leaders spent the early afternoon carefully crafting a brief statement that Lassiter would deliver. As a show of support, it was arranged for House Speaker, Dunn and Senate Majority Leader, Bass, to stand with Lassiter as he made the announcement. The Washington news bureau chief was contacted, and arrangements made to film the statement. It would be the lead story of that night's six o'clock news on all three major networks.

It was around mid afternoon when FBI Director, Franklin reported back to the President that, "We're clear."

"Where's Howard?" Dunn wanted to know.

"Beats me," Bass responded. "He said he'd be here."

The Senator, and the Congressman, were in a small, Senate wing press room where local media crews had set up their equipment to tape the statement Senator Lassiter was scheduled to deliver.

"We're ready to go anytime you are, Senator," one of the crew chiefs informed Bass.

"Okay," Bass replied. "We'll be just another minute, or so."

"Oh, there 'e is," said Dunn as he spied Lassiter come through the door.

At first glance, nothing about the Judiciary Chairman seemed normal. His features were ashen, and he seemed deeply preoccupied. He carried, in his hand, a plain, white, unmarked, business envelope, which appeared to be sealed. His attention was evidently so distracted that he almost tripped over a leg of a camera tripod. After being assisted by a technician around the camera he'd encountered, Lassiter made it safely to the podium at the front of the room, and the field of microphones he would be speaking into.

"You ready to go, Howard?" Dunn inquired solicitously upon his colleague's arrival.

Lassiter gave the House Speaker a strange glance of profound awareness that instantly frightened Dunn. It lasted less than a moment, then he looked away, and uttered a brief, and

barely audible, "Yeah."

The three Congressmen took their places; Lassiter stood in front of the microphones, Dunn, and Bass stood just behind him, visible to camera right, and left respectively. Lassiter got his cue to begin. He held the envelope he carried in both his hands. He looked into the cameras facing him.

"Owing to a sudden crisis of a personal nature," he said, "I must resign from the United States Senate. It is with deep regret that I submit my resignation from my duly elected seat, as well as the chairmanship over the Senate Judiciary Committee, but it cannot be avoided. I extend my profoundest apologies to my constituents in my home state, and to the nation as a whole. I hereby tender my resignation, effective immediately."

With that, Lassiter turned to Senate Majority Leader, Bass, and thrust the envelope at him.

Everyone; the media, and the Congressional leaders alike, was utterly stunned by the unexpected announcement. There was a single, eternal moment of silence, and then the room exploded.

"Senator!"

"Senator Lassiter!"

"Senator!"

"Hold it!" called Dunn.

"Senator!"

"Why!"

"Wait a minute!"

"What does this mean!"

"Senator Lassiter!"

"Hold it!" Dunn fairly screamed into the microphones, the force, and volume of his utterance bringing quiet. "Now . . . just . . . hold on a minute here," he stressed.

"Howard, what do I do with this?" a profoundly confused Bass wondered to a statue-like Lassiter regarding the envelope in his hand he seemed to've just discovered.

"Bill, shuttup!" Bass hissed in soto-voce in front of the microphones, concerned that his colleague might be overheard. He caught his own mistake too late, however. "Uh . . .," he then addressed the anxiously awaiting media in the room, "turn the cameras off. Please, fellas, let's just turn everything off here for a minute. We need to get something straightened

out here."

"Harry, what's wrong?" Bass sincerely wanted to know of Lassiter.

Dunn turned to the other two.

"Bill, c'mon, let's get 'im away from these microphones."

They each took the unmoved Lassiter by an arm, and caringly lead him out of camera, and microphone, range where they could talk in semi-private. All of them kept their voices low.

"Harry," Dunn intensely wanted to know, "just - what - in the Sam Hill are you doin'?"

Lassiter looked at him.

"He knows," was all he said.

"Knows what?" asked Bass. "Who knows?"

Lassiter looked at him.

"The President," he said. "He knows . . . about . . . you know . . ."

There was a pause, and then the dawn of a fearsome realization gradually shown upon the faces of both the other men.

"Son-of-a . . . bitch," Dunn slowly murmured in astonished wonderment.

"You mean . . . a - bout - " Bass began to ask.

"Yeah," Lassiter quickly answered.

There was another, long, deeply thoughtful pause.

"And . . . he would . . . use that?" Dunn hesitantly ventured to ask.

Lassiter looked at him. He nodded.

"Yeah," he said in a clipped, clear tone.

The atmosphere among the three men changed dramatically at this point. Neither Dunn, nor Bass, could completely conceal the fact that they were both becoming frightened. Bass seemed at a loss for what to do with the envelope in his hands.

"Harry," he began, his voice, and tone uncertain, "there's got to be some way we can work this out."

"There isn't," Lassiter told him. "Wayans is serious. He wants that bill."

He then became introspective. What he found there caused him to shudder.

"God, if this ever got out . . . Gladys . . . our kids . . ."

"Harry, Harry," Dunn gently counseled, taking one of Lassiter's arms to offer comfort, and to help steady him, "c'mon now, don't get like that. We'll . . . we'll think of something. Y'know, we're not going to let this happen - "

"How?" Lassiter demanded, suddenly glaring at

Dunn.

The look in the man's eyes startled the Congressman - scared him.

"He knows," Lassiter stated through his teeth. He turned to fix Bass with the same, frightened, frightening gaze.

"He knows."

Late that night, long after the revised tape of his resignation had aired on the evening news, a solitary figure sat in the semi-darkened Senate Chamber, at a desk that was no longer his. He'd been there for some time. The cleaning staff had been, and gone, neither having taken any notice of the other. His attention focused in, and out, at the forefront of the room, depending on his mental mood. Shifting outward from reflecting on his past, and future, he was pleasantly surprised to see a long familiar figure standing in the arena, not far from the debating podium.

"Hello, Howard," Majority Leader, Bass quietly greeted his friend, and, now former, colleague.

Lassiter didn't move as he calmly regarded his friend, and, now former, colleague.

"Hi, Bill."

Bass didn't quite know where to go from there. He'd have to improvise for lack of a prepared speech.

"You, uh . . . wanna talk?" he wondered.

A thought caused him to smile as he looked down at the carpeted floor in front of him. When he looked up again, he asked, "Debate an issue?"

The offer felt good, and hurt, all at the same time, making Howard Lassiter smile. He didn't quite know where to go from there. He'd have to improvise for lack of a prepared life.

"Aye," he said as grandly as he could under the circumstances, "and nay."

The Majority Leader stood by, watching, and listening, respectfully.

"So simple," former Senator Lassiter quietly said more thoughtfully than he could. The fact of it surprised him, but little. "So simple," he said again before reiterating, "Aye . . . and nay."

He looked up at the man who was kind enough to share the chamber with him.

"We did some good things together, didn't we, Bill?"

Bass smiled as he remembered.

"Yes, Harry," he said in answer to the man he knew he would miss terribly, for many reasons. "We did some good things together."

That felt good to Howard Lassiter. It was a comfort.

"We had some good times . . . ," he said, remembering.

"Yeah . . . ," Bass answered easily, remembering, remembering, "and we had some pretty rough times."

The thought caused Lassiter to smile one last time.

"That we did" he conceded good-naturedly.

He looked about the Senate Chamber - the place he'd called his home for close to thirty years. There were so many memories. So . . . many memories.

"Good things can happen in this room, Bill," he said.

It was as if the thought had only now occurred to him. He waited a moment, then said what he knew would be his final wish before departing.

"Great things can happen in this room."

Bass had steadily watched his friend. The challenge of his words had caused a heated stirring in his breast. He knew too well that it would soon pass, but he sincerely hoped to God that something of it might remain.

"I was a good Senator, wasn't I, Bill?" Lassiter asked the lone man standing in the arena.

It was, to him, a proper closing to a debate he had been waging with himself for hours.

The use of the past tense pained William Bass like few things ever had. He felt an overwhelming sense of obligation, and rose to meet it.

"Yes, Howard, you were a good Senator," he assured the man.

He became aware of a sudden closeness in the atmosphere. He couldn't help, but feel a certain envy for his friend as he felt the room, and so many other things, closing tightly in around him.

"You were a damned fine Senator."

No official mention was made of Lassiter's resignation as the Senate convened in session the next morning. His empty desk, however, made the remaining ninety-nine members ominously conscious of the undeniable fact that many things, far beyond the reach of their ability to control, had changed. In the Congressional wing, House Speaker, Dunn quietly spread the word of what had happened, and why.

Without fanfare, and without much debate, Marshall Wayans' media regulation bill was

passed by both houses by carefully per-arranged margins. They tried to make it seem not like an all out victory for the President, but it was seen as such all the same. The significance of the Wayans Media Law was lost on no one. For the first time in the nation's history, freedom of speech had been abridged.

House Speaker Dunn called the President to personally congratulate him. He was well aware of the fact that it never hurt to be on the good side of the winning side.

"It's a hell of an opening, Mister President," Dunn offered in the course of their conversation.

"Why thank you, Mister Speaker," Wayans granted the old Congressman, and then he offered of his own, "now, let's begin."

Chapter Forty-three

Seeds

Drifting . . . insensate, and alone. Time - what time? No . . . no time to pass. Space . . . space . . . No space. No space to matter. No matter . . . Form-a-less per-cep-tion-nesssss - nothing! No nothing! *No* . . . nothing. Bare awareness . . . barely aware . . . open. Relax. Surrender. *No!* Irreducible entity . . . multitudes . . . of nothing - *please - no* . . . Impinging on destructure . . . primamal idensity - *no* . . . Vaguely . . . impacting . . . consciousnesslessnessnessnessnesssss - the multitudes - *no* . . . drifting - *no* . . . nothing *n-* . . . just . . . was "Nooo!"

Breathe! Breathe! *Have to breathe.* Gulp air! *Have to - Frantic!* Breathe. *Yes, breathe.* Have to - See! *Whatwhere?* Darkness - *God no!* In the darkness - *yes, in the darkness - there - the dresser - in the darkness . . . see the dresser in the darkness, yes. Thank God.* Feel . . . *have to feel* - what? The sheet - *yes, feel the sheet - so damp.* The sheets - *so damp - again.* The pillow . . . *damp again.* Hair . . . *oh God - so wet again. My top . . . soaked through. Again.*

Dinah lay on her elbow for a while longer, then she slowly dragged herself up to a sitting position in bed. She perched her elbows on her upraised knees, and let her head hang forward until she was pretty sure she was recovered enough to make it to the bathroom. *Oh God - so good to breathe,* she thought, drawing in luxurious breaths of air, and, only with reluctance, letting go of them. *It feels so Goddamned good to breathe!*

The dream had come to her yet again. The same dream. It was *always the same* dream. *Why? Where was it coming from? Why was it always the same? Why was it so persistent, and seemed to be getting clearer, and . . . somehow, closer?*

The well developed woman shivered from chill. *Ugh . . . time to go get myself cleaned up.* She moved, got herself up out of bed, not bothering to note the time, and trudged off to the bathroom. She avoided the mirror as she toweled her arms, and body off - *why bother showering? I'll probably have it again before morning* - then she leisurely wiped her face off with a cold, wet washcloth. *Breathing back to normal - still feels great.* She'd have to change her top before she went back to bed - *panties too. May as well.*

She finished in the bathroom, and made an increasingly more frequent detour to the kitchen. She stood in the darkened doorway for a moment - *what the hell* - flicked on the light, and ambled into the room where nourishment was stored. Opening the increasingly more familiar cupboard, Dinah saw the increasingly more familiar sight. She stared before herself, seeing, then not seeing, then seeing again. *Maybe another drink 'll help.*

* * *

"Hey there!"

"'ey, there 'e is. Man, is it that time already?"

"Yeah. Shift change."

"Awlright. I'm outta here."

"How're things in Alex-land?"

"He seems to be adjusting to his new home. He's pretty quiet. Mostly watches TV."

"Ain't much else for 'im to do, I guess. How's that temperature doin'?"

"Still the same: Thermostat reads sixteen degrees higher than actual environment. I got it set at eighty six, and you can see the atmosphere he's in is seventy."

"It's been holding like that for some time."

"Yeah. It's not gettin' any worse, but it's not gettin' any better either."

"M-hm - well, at least we got 'im warm enough now. He doesn't have to go around wearin' two sets of clothes anymore."

"I just ran a check on his life support systems. Everything looks good."

"Thanks, man."

"Okay. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Same time, same place."

"Yeah - same shit, different day."

"You got that right."

"Catch you later, now."

"Goodnight."

* * *

"She is gone, Olga Barishkova, is she not?" said Boris Borodin in greeting to his visitor as she entered his convalescent home room. "Our Little Vibration has flown away from us."

"I'm afraid so, Boris," Olga reluctantly conceded.

She silently placed the little thermal container of soup she'd made for the old physicist on his dresser, then took herself a seat on the side of his bed closest to the chair he sat in. She looked on her friend, and could tell that having heard of Sara's leaving had affected him badly. He looked more sallow than he had just days ago, and he slumped lower in his chair. She noted how full the ashtray on the small table beside him was. He was smoking more. He had little else to do these days. He was not a happy sight, but Olga felt obliged to put on a happy face. They spoke in Russian. It afforded them privacy, and also an intimacy that both of them sorely missed.

"You are looking well," she tried to compliment him.

The old man gave her a darting glance, then laughed heartily.

"Hah!" he exclaimed, recovering from his mirth. "That is good! You bring me good medicine. It might almost make me want to see tomorrow."

It had been with sadness that Olga had witnessed the sudden decline of all her friends after Sara's graduation. Her education had been like the final flickering of their candles, and now, so many of those candles had simply gone out. Borodin, it seemed, had fared better than most. The people at NASA's Susan Program had interviewed him extensively about what he knew, and thought about, his "Little Vibration", as he affectionately called Sara.

"You should not talk like this," Olga gently scolded him. "It does you no good."

"Hah!" Borodin stated with as much vehemence as his seriously weakening energies would allow.

He paused to light a cigarette, then spat out his initial drag.

"What good?" he derisively inquired, the question oozing from him like bitter bile.

The echo of what Lanna had said just the other night sent a chill along Olga's spine.

"It comes to us," the old man went on, "a resource the likes of which no one has ever known, and we shit on it! Our last best chance to amount to anything, and we piss on it!"

The force with which he'd spoken exacted a toll of protracted coughing from old Borodin. He recovered, slowly, almost regretfully, and was obviously fatigued by the exertion upon its ending.

"You shouldn't excite yourself so," Olga gently tried to counsel him.

"What?" he asked, looking at her steadily. "Surprised?" His questioning gaze was

unrelenting. "Surprised that there is still life in me?" He risked a laugh that might've threatened another fit of coughing, but he was spared that time, then he looked away, and shook his head. "So am I. More be it to my grief."

"Boris Ivanovich," Olga began, trying to offer comfort while knowing that there was probably none to be had. "We're all upset that Sara's gone. Dinah . . . she's like a woman in mourning."

"Why shouldn't she be?" the old man asked. "In a matter of a few days she's had her entire family snatched away from her . . . just like in the old days."

He paused to take a leisurely drag off his cigarette.

"It's ironic," he mused, "she was so concerned with watching us, that she completely overlooked the depth of her own attachment."

He carefully played the gray ash from his ember.

"Now that we're gone . . . now that they're gone . . . she finally sees."

He looked up at his fellow Russian, his fellow expatriate.

"I truly pity her."

Olga was finding it difficult to remain. Borodin tended to be morose, but she'd never witnessed him like this before. But then, he'd probably never had cause to be like this before. She looked to the dresser, and tried changing the subject.

"I brought you some soup. It's the kind you like, made the way you like."

The physicist eyed the container, then gradually came to study it as though he hadn't seen such an object before.

"It keeps warm in . . . and cold things too," he intoned thoughtfully. "But insulating properties are only so effective," he added, pausing to think again, then, "In extreme conditions . . . no amount of insulation is effective."

He finished his thought, looking away from the dresser as he came out of his momentary reverie. He had taken to rambling of late. It pained Olga to witness the decaying of a once great mind.

"Nourishment that we might live to regret another day," Borodin noted, "of such an opportunity lost . . . wasted."

In the next moment, he suddenly remembered his manners.

"Hah . . . forgive me, Olga Barishkova. And thank you, but there really is nothing more I can find happiness in."

He took one last drag from his cigarette, then carefully extinguished the the ember.

"The circumstances of her leaving," he said before he paused to look up at his friend, and state, "lies."

Olga frowned.

"How do you mean?" she asked.

"All that . . . geophysical . . . crap," the old man said, "all lies."

He took some time to rearrange himself more comfortably in his chair.

"The scientists at Clear Lake," he then went on, "a very fine, talented group of people. Sara's physical impact on the world was one of the things they were most concerned about. They studied her from every angle in that regard. Nothing they found could be considered "threatening", or even harmful really. So she made some satellites wobble when she flew into space, so what? She never disturbed their function, or their orbit really. Everything they found indicated that Sara's influence on earth's physical characteristics was benign. So, how did these . . . *terrifying* "geophysical characteristics", all of a sudden, come to be?"

"What could be accomplished with such a lie?" the old man's fellow Russian wondered.

"Surely not to get Sara to leave. She knew she was no threat to man, long before we knew it."

Borodin smiled to himself, remembering.

"She always had this little smile when we happened onto a discovery. At one point, I asked her, 'Why don't you just tell us?' And she just smiled, and said, 'And what good would that do you?'

"You know propaganda well enough to know that lies are always made to protect the few against the many, Olga Barishkova. Hah, these Americans; they are more Soviet than we ever were. The only difference is that they so strenuously believe in their illusion of innocence.

"We taught her how to be in our world, but we failed to learn anything of hers."

The knowledge of that fact greatly disturbed the old man.

"Who of us would've been the better teacher?"

He wondered on the question without any hope that there would ever be an answer.

"First cosmonaut in space was asked if he saw God," he recalled out of air. He smiled at his friend. "You can imagine the sigh of relief the Kremlin breathed when he said, 'No'?"

He took the time to fetch, and light, another cigarette, taking a long, initial drag.

"Perhaps I will see my Little Vibration soon," he said, the smoke wafting from between his thin, dry lips.

Deeply bowed in what little spirit he had left, Borodin was suddenly more discontent than usual. He reached for his ashtray, and angrily stubbed out his freshly lit cigarette.

"Hah, these American cigarettes," he grouched. "They're like made from cow shit."

The old man then settled back in his chair, tired from even this mild exertion.

"What I wouldn't give for a Russian cigarette."

* * *

"Mister President."

Wayans broke his stride to look behind himself as he proceeded down the central hallway of the White House. Hastening toward him was his Chief of Staff, William Robbins.

"Oh, hi Bill," Wayans greeted him.

"Do you have a minute, sir?"

"I'm scheduled to get my picture taken with a group of Boy Scouts in ten minutes. Is it important?"

"We've rounded up the NASA data on the alien bitch," Robbins reported. "Just wanted to know what you wanted done with it."

Eyeing his faithful lieutenant, Wayans smiled, then breathed out a silent laugh.

"I'd like to burn it," the President stated before he looked away, and thought the matter over more seriously for a moment. Deciding on an option, he instructed Robbins to, "Send it to Los Alamos. Have some of their better people take a look at it - see what they come up with."

"Will do," Robbins assured his commander, and chief.

* * *

Dave Nolan had waited long enough. The Jet Propulsion Lab technician had expected certain things to happen, but they hadn't. Nothing had happened. The fact had bothered him more, and more. He'd expected the chain of command to notify the proper people, but that hadn't happened either. That fact bothered him too. As time went on, and nothing still kept happening, he finally went to his supervisor, Ted Farnsworth, to talk about it.

"Susan's still here," Nolan stated to his supervisor from across his desk.

Lounging back in his squeaky office chair, Farnsworth regarded the man before him.

"No she's not, Dave," he replied calmly. "You saw the report just the same as everybody else."

"The data doesn't support that, Ted, and you know it," the tech asserted.

Farnsworth shrugged.

"Maybe she passed through the atmosphere very slowly," he said.

"Even so," Nolan pressed on, "there'd still be at least some fluctuation in orbital patterns. You know she needs to bounce in order to navigate. Even when she brought the Rover back she made the satellites that were closest to her jiggle."

Farnsworth looked away from his subordinate, thinking quietly to himself. Nolan thought the man looked worried. It wasn't like Ted to look worried. The tech knew him to be a good man, and a straight shooter. He wondered about his expression now, and wondered if there was something wrong.

"I'll pass it along, Dave."

The sound startled Nolan somewhat. He'd gotten a bit lost in his reverie. Farnsworth was looking at him again.

"That's all we can do," the supervisor continued.

"You want me to print out the data around the time she supposedly left, so you can include it with your memo?"

Farnsworth rose from his reclined position, and bellied up to his desk again.

"That won't be necessary," he told Nolan. "I'll take care of it myself."

"Okay," said Nolan, albeit with a twinge of doubt.

He turned, and headed for the door.

"And Dave . . ."

Nolan turned back. His supervisor was looking directly at him. His look was serious.

"She - *is* - gone."

Nolan felt a strange discomfort in the look he, and Farnsworth shared. He knew for sure now that something higher up was going on. There was a faint smack to his lips as they parted so he could say, "Yeah," before taking his leave of the man he answered to. Heading back to the console of satellite tracking instruments he oversaw, Nolan wondered, *Why did he need to say that?*

* * *

"Good morning, Senator," the secretary greeted her boss, Oscar Mosely, as he ambled his considerable bulk into his Congressional outer office a little before 9:00 AM. "Or, should I say - Mr. Chairman," she then added with a knowing smile.

Looking at the attractive young woman, the tired flesh that made up Mosely's face rearranged itself to show appreciation for her kind remark.

"Thank you, Sadie," the curiously unassuming old man intoned, more from politeness, then it occurred to him to say, "Oh, and uh . . . good morning to you too."

His election to Judiciary Committee Chairman had surprised Oscar Mosely more than anyone. He was a life-long politician, who had had a stunningly uneventful career. He'd taken the back roads to his current station in the American political scene; first as a protege to his state capital's beloved long term mayor, Alan Beauregard, then on his own as district attorney, then, himself, as mayor. Next came state's attorney general, then governor. He was past fifty by the time he made it to The Hill for the first time as a junior congressman, and pushing sixty by the time he finally made it to the nation's senate.

It had been a long, lonely path for this conscientious, but rather dull, man who didn't have much in the manner of charisma, or a compelling sense of vision. He'd worked hard for his state, but had never been able to show much for his efforts. With his jowly build, rumpled attire, and his simple, easy manner, Mosely had had a lot of trouble getting himself, and his state, taken seriously. He'd always been considered as something of an oddball on The Hill, and the former President hadn't seemed to like him, or his party, very much.

He'd wanted to retire, but he lacked a legacy. In the last off-year elections, he'd run for, and gotten, another term in the senate. He'd run against his family's wishes - his wife was exhausted with the Washington scene - but he wanted one last chance at being remembered, and being remembered well. He sorely hoped that the new President would ease the way for him to go out with having accomplished something noteworthy, and worthwhile.

He made his way into his inner office, and plopped his briefcase on its customary end of his sparsely littered desk. The desks of other senators, and congressmen, and women, were cluttered with mementos of their careers, and lives. About all Oscar Mosely had was a framed picture of his dear wife, Abigail, and the signed segment of a tank cannon from that pretty little alien girl. Then committee chairman, Howard Lassiter, had actually gotten the invite to the demonstration at White Sands. It was hoped that he would start the process of defining Sara's legal status. Lassiter, however, hadn't wanted to be publicly associated to the group he'd called the "NASA Nuts", so he'd assigned the duty of attendance to Mosely.

Being of a practical nature, Mosely found the segment to be heavy enough, so he used it as a weight to exercise a painfully arthritic elbow joint. He often thought of that pretty little alien girl as he grimaced through his daily motions, and he thought of all the remarkable things she'd done, and wondered on the remarkable things she was.

* * *

Susanne Hathaway had never concerned herself with showing units in the high-rise condo building she owned in the North Capital area of Washington D.C. The divorced, high maintenance socialite who'd made good, employed managers to relieve her of the mundane details of property ownership. She made an exception, however - her first ever in fact - when the Oldsen's came to call in their search for a new home. It was, after all, *the* Jimmie Oldsen, and his extraordinary, and beautiful wife, Lanna. One didn't fob such people off on mere managers if one had any hope of residing in their good graces. The residence of such a dynamic, at the moment, couple in her building was a guarantee of getting premium prices for future units as they became available. Susanne Hathaway knew this, but so did Lanna Oldsen.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Oldsen," the owner tried hard not to gush as she greeted the couple in the building's lobby.

"Susanne," Lanna granted her with an affirming nod.

As always, she was stunningly dressed. On this occasion she wore a tan, skirted business suit complete with matching purse, shoes, gloves and hat.

"Mr. Oldsen," Mrs. Hathaway beamed.

"Hi," said Jimmie, not succeeding at all in not looking painfully awkward.

"Lovely outfit," Mrs. Hathaway said in Lanna's direction.

Lanna gave the building owner a smile that had 'I know' written all over it. She was becoming most familiar with the wellspring of such civility.

"Thank you," she said, and then she added, just to be polite. "You're very kind."

"Oh, not at all, Mrs. Oldsen," said Mrs. Hathaway. "We can take the elevator, and . . . I'll show you your new home."

Again, Lanna smiled graciously, then she glanced over her shoulder to, "Jimmie?"

"Uh, yeah . . . coming."

Jimmie had acquired a near mythical celebrity status under Lanna's careful, nurturing tutelage. He was publicly credited with being the first man to have discovered, and examined, the alien artifact, as well as being hailed as the man who had discovered the artifact's potential threat to humanity. And now he was a confidante to the President of the United States. A trusted advisor on intimate enough terms with the nation's Chief Executive that he could show up at the White House uninvited, unannounced, and was, but on the rarest of occasions, ever kept waiting.

Lanna, herself, was quickly acquiring a reputation of her own in the nation's capital. She was, at once, mysterious, and ravishingly beautiful. In short, she was irresistible, just as she, as well as all of those who met her, knew. Upon her arrival in the D.C., she'd risked ire by declining all the standard invitations to participate in the traditional Washington wives scene. Showing up with Jimmie at their first formal reception, she wore a gown that made little secret of her physical charms, and no secret at all of the fact that she neither wore, nor needed, support garments of any kind. One Senator's wife made the inebriated error of attempting to insult her. Lanna, for her own part, merely smiled graciously. The woman's husband found himself eating political crow for weeks afterward. Lanna, so having demonstrated herself to be not only beautiful, and mysterious, but effective as well, was thereafter accorded all the delicacy of handling that fearful respect can bestow.

"Here we are," Mrs. Hathaway announced with a flourish as she ushered the couple into the condominium she hoped to sell them.

Lanna immediately noticed the display of coffee, and sweetmeats neatly arranged on a silver tea service that looked pure enough to merit an assay mark.

"What's this?" she wondered in Mrs. Hathaway's direction.

"Oh, I took the liberty of having some refreshments brought up for you."

The blonde, whose body had already become something of a legend in town, smiled as though she had been mildly surprised.

"Susanne," she lightly scolded the but slightly older woman as she approached her, "shame on you." She then paused close enough to confide, "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were conspiring against my figure."

Noting Mrs. Hathaway's nervousness smile with satisfaction, Lanna moved on to look about the place.

"Hey, Lanna, this stuff is great," said Jimmie, sampling the treats.

"I'll take your word for it, Jimmie," Lanna answered without discernible interest as she

looked about.

"Sure you don't want anything?"

"Oh, I'll have some coffee, please."

Mrs. Hathaway observed as Mr. Oldsen first prepared a cup of coffee for his wife, then served it to her. She also observed the intimate way in which Mrs. Oldsen expressed her gratitude for the favor.

"Don't get carried away over there," the ravishing blonde advised her husband with reference to the serving tray as she straightened his tie, "you still have your meeting with Marshall later on."

Lanna then looked at the building owner as if she'd suddenly caught herself in a slight embarrassment.

"Oh, excuse me," she said with a demure smile, then she corrected herself to say, "the President."

They toured the place. Lanna seemed to like it. Jimmie had a difficult time feigning interest. As they returned to the living room, Mrs. Hathaway was even more hopeful than she had been earlier.

"So, what do you think," she asked the couple.

"I've been given to understand that the unit directly above this one is also available, isn't it?" asked Lanna.

Mrs. Hathaway looked a bit perplexed, then answered, "Why . . . yes, it is."

The beautiful blonde woman frowned as she cast her discerning eyes about the place again.

"And the floor plan is identical to this one," she absently stated more to herself.

"I'm . . . not sure about that," Mrs. Hathaway admitted with notable hesitation, then, "but I could find out for you."

Lanna turned to her, and smiled.

"I wasn't asking," she assured the woman.

She looked about some more, thinking to herself.

"Mmm, I suppose it'll do," she said without much interest, then she turned to her husband "What do you say, Jimmie? You want to take a look at the upstairs?"

Jimmie frowned at his wife.

"Upstairs?" he wondered curiously. "Lanna, I thought condos were only one story."

"Not ours, dear," Lanna stated with a smile. She turned to Mrs. Hathaway to assure her

that, "It's alright. I've researched this building pretty thoroughly. My renovation plans have already been approved. All the applicable permits have been issued, and are in order." Lanna then returned herself to her husband. "Jimmie," she wondered with a good degree of calculated innocence, "just where were you thinking of putting your office?"

"Uhm," Jimmie squirmed, "Marsh - ," and then he noticed Mrs. Hathaway, "uh - the President, has gotten me space in the Executive Office Building."

The brightness left Lanna's face. Her full mouth puckered slightly.

"We'll see about that," she said in a no nonsense tone, then the brightness returned. "Besides, we both know how you work best, don't we?"

Her look then began to project the subtle radiance of that special glow.

"And think of all the things we can do in that . . . huge master bedroom I have planned," she purred. "Hm?"

She then gave Mrs. Hathaway to enjoy the benefit of her smoldering sensuality.

"We'll take it," she stated in a tone that was quite at odds with her apparent mood.

Mrs. Hathaway could suddenly see a much brighter financial future for herself.

"Splendid," she tried not to say too happily, then she wondered, "and the . . . upstairs . . . ?"

"Included, of course," said Lanna as a matter of course. "Jimmie, and I, do need our space."

"Good," said Mrs. Hathaway. She proceeded to the door. "Then I suppose you'll be wanting to go, and arrange your financing."

"Excuse me?" asked Lanna at once, in a clipped, foreboding tone.

Mrs. Hathaway froze as sudden visions of her financial fortunes spiraling downward chilled her to the bone. She hesitantly looked at the blonde woman, whose sultry blue eyes had so quickly turned ice cold. She then had cause to rediscover her faith in prayer as the stacked-uesque beauty strode easily her way, stopping a bit less than a comfortable distance from her.

"Susanne," Lanna duly informed her with a merely polite smile, "financing is for people without means."

"Mrs. Oldsen," Mrs. Hathaway tried very hard not to stammer, "I . . . certainly didn't mean to imply - "

"Of course you didn't."

* * *

Marshall Wayans had long been an admirer of J. Edgar Hoover. The Federal Bureau of Investigation's founder, and head for over forty years ranked high on the list of major influences in Wayans' life. Hoover was one of the young President's primal shapers in outlook, attitude and, especially, method. It wasn't the former Bureau Chief's reputation for catching crooks, or Commies that garnered him a special place in Wayans' personal pantheon of greats. It was something else about Hoover that hardly anybody knew about. It wasn't his homosexuality, or his long term relationship with his Deputy Bureau Chief, Clyde Tolson. It wasn't his illegal spying, or his inappropriate handling of appropriations, or even the near endless list of people he, quite effectively, didn't like. It wasn't any of the usual channels, or sources, by which people have normally come to know, and loathe, the man. It was something quite apart from all of this. It was the unspoken Code of Etiquette that Hoover engendered, and presided over, that most attracted the new President's attention.

That Hoover amassed a truly daunting treasure trove of dossiers containing "sensitive" information on people who could be harmful to him is, by far, some of the oldest of news. It ranks right up there with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and the stock market crash of '29. What is generally not considered, however, is the affect that Hoover's secret files had on American political life, and on how the business of politics was conducted in this country for so long. That the files were common knowledge among this country's ruling circles goes without saying. That was the main point of their existence, after all. That nobody else knew about them, however, was what the Code Of Etiquette came to be all about.

It was a 'don't tell - don't get told on' mood that prevailed throughout the Hoover era. Anyone who was either in, or who seriously aspired to, public life, strictly adhered themselves to the Code. You just didn't say certain things about opponents, or people with whom you might not be on the best of terms. The public debate was centered around issues, and not around other people's private lives. The focus remained on Presidential initiatives, Congressional voting records and Judicial opinions, not on what went on with who in whoever else's bedroom.

Oh, there were minor exceptions to the rule, of course. FDR was called a "helpless old cripple" during his first successful Presidential bid, and opponents made fun of his dog, Fala, during his last, and consecutively third, successful re-election campaign. But, throughout the course of his four electoral wins, and his twelve plus years in the White House, nobody knew

that our nations second Roosevelt had had an extra-marital affair in his pre-Presidential past, or that he had a mistress while as President. That - was how the Code of Etiquette worked. Nobody knew that Eisenhower had had a mistress, or that Lyndon Johnson had a female consoler on his staff who soothed his pains of feeling unappreciated. Nobody knew that this senator was a rapist, or that that congresswoman was a closet lesbian, or that this federal judge had had a child out of wedlock, or that that agency chief was a pedophile. Nobody knew the peculiar quirks, or preferences of state, or city officials be they governors, mayors, legislators or judges. Nobody knew of these secret, private things, because the Code of Etiquette prevailed.

It was ironic that, with J. Edgar's knowing about everyone's dirty little secrets, the private lives of public officials remained private, and the business of governance went on. The Code of Etiquette was an unexpected, beneficial after-affect of Hoover's amassing his secret files. He'd certainly never planned it that way. He was looking out for himself, after all, and was exclusively concerned that his own dirty little secrets remain just that.

The Code actually wound up being good for America, and for American politics. It prevailed throughout the depressionary years of the 30's, the war years of the 40's, the cold war years of the 50's and the cultural war years of the 60's, but then, in the early part of the 70's, in June of 1972, J. Edgar Hoover died. In August of that same year, during the Democratic National Convention in Miami Florida, the rules that governed American politics would change forever.

George McGovern had won his party's nomination to run against incumbent, Richard Nixon, for the presidency. He'd chosen, for his running mate, a fine man by the name of Thomas Eagleton. Before the announcement of his selection was made public, then Democratic Party Chairman, Larry O'Brian asked Eagleton specifically if he had any skeletons in the closet. Eagleton responded with a confident, "No." McGovern announced his name from the convention rostrum that night. The two of them stood side by side, hand in hand, in anticipated triumph before the cheering throng of delegates. The Democratic ticket of McGovern/Eagleton might've stood a chance to win the election.

Their elation was to last a mere twelve hours, and then all hell broke loose.

The press received an unconfirmed report from an undisclosed source that the Democratic nominee for vice president had had electroshock therapy treatments for depression a dozen years before. Unrelated sources confirmed the story. The news media ran with it. The impact was immediate, and devastating. The American public, and electorate,

suddenly found themselves confronted with the prospect of having as president, a man with a documented history of mental illness.

That the discredited form of treatment had been standard at the time didn't matter. That Eagleton had had the guts to admit he'd had a problem, and sought proper treatment for it didn't matter. The man was nuts - clinically insane. That's what everybody thought. That's what everybody feared. The situation was, at once, impossible for McGovern. He was damned if he stood by Eagleton, and kept him on the ticket, and he was damned if he dropped him, and chose another running mate. Either way, the Democrats foresaw their doom at the polls. In the end, Eagleton was dumped, and the McGovern/Shriver campaign went on to one of the most humiliating election defeats in history.

This story is significant, because it marked the beginning of the end of J. Edgar Hoover's political Code of Etiquette. If he'd still been around, no one would've ever heard of this particular detail of Tom Eagleton's private life. Nixon, from whose re-election committee the report originated, would've been told a succinct, and decisive, "No", with regard to his intent of using it, and old J. Edgar would, very definitely, have made that stick. He also would've, very likely, said, "No", to the "third-rate burglary" that led to that national agony known as "Watergate".

The Code died a slow, and painful death, and the nation suffered along with it. Political life, and private life, became progressively more confused, and intermingled. Issues went by the wayside, the news reporting media became increasingly sensationalistic, public figures became tabloid fodder, the whole sad, sorry mess culminating in that asinine Republican impeachment of Clinton, the stain of which was born by everyone.

One of Marshall Wayans' campaign pledges had been "to restore civility to government". No one knew what to make of that promise at the time. Most took it to be merely a sound bite. It sounded nice. It rolled onto the mind as easily as it rolled off of the tongue. The independent candidate had a definite plan in mind, however. It had been one of the primary reasons for the forming of his secret "Blue Team" in the first place. They had, over a period of years, amassed a dossier of highly compromising documentation on nearly everyone who had any say-so in American politics. It wasn't the sensationalist, tabloid kind of stuff, but hard, undeniable, electronically recorded evidence. It was the kind of stuff that could easily get one booted out of any office. The "Blue Book", as it was to be called, was ready for launch by the time the new President took the oath of office. Howard Lassiter was the first to feel its sting.

* * *

"Hello." answered the familiar, husky voice over her phone.

"Kathryn, hello. This is Louise Layne."

"Oh, hi Lou," greeted Kathryn Wexler warmly. "How are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine," Louise answered cheerfully.

"How's Ken?" the distinguished journalist asked knowingly.

"Eah . . .," Louise hedged, absently picking a fingernail at a speck of nothing on her desk. "Impossible as always," she finally admitted.

"Hmm," Wexler purred. Louise knew what was coming next. "Just the way you like them," the throaty voice intoned.

Louise abruptly swept away the nonexistent speck with the side of her hand.

"Yeah, well. Uh, I got a problem you might be able to help with. I'm doing some background research on the President, and I'm coming up with a lot of gaps."

"This is the Dark Knight we're talking about, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. What kind of gaps?"

"Financial stuff. Basically, the balance sheet on his blind trust doesn't add up."

"Any specifics?" the journalist wondered.

"Too many to go into right now, but there seems to be a years long pattern of funds appearing, and disappearing without any accompanying account numbers."

There was a pause in the conversation as Wexler thought quietly to herself. Louise waited respectfully, then heard the journalist ask, "What's the story?"

"We're not sure of the angle yet."

"Well, is it a friendly piece, or are you looking for dirt?"

"I'm looking for facts."

"Okay, so dirt it is then."

"Kath . . ."

"Well?"

Louise sat up in her chair.

"From what I'm getting so far, this could be a serious issue."

"Umhm," the journalist intoned easily. She knew of Louise's penchant for integrity, and considered it one of her weaknesses as a reporter. She drew a breath, then said, "I'll do some

checking around," with her customary, noncommittal tone, "see if I can come up with anything."

"I know you will," said Louise with a smile of confidence, "with your network of sources?"

"Hmm," purred Wexler, gratified, "they don't call me the giant killer for nothing."

"Yeah," said Louise, "I know if there's anything, you'll find it."

* * *

Tom Starks had struggled with an oppressive mood of despondency that had persisted since the Susan Program at Clear Lake had been shut down several months before. *Four months now*, he thought from behind the wheel of the mid-sized SUV he used to get to, and from, work. The middle aged physicist had settled back into his old job, just outside of Portland, easily enough after his extended leave of absence. It wasn't the greatest job in the world, being a notch, or two, beneath his ability as well as the pay that that ability could command, but it put him, and his wife, Florence, close to their grandchildren, and that was important.

So he was back in his comfortably irritating groove, which he had found to be more irritating of late. A number of things about the way the Susan Program had ended bothered him. *It happened so fast*, was one of those things. Overnight, funding for the program had been eliminated. Not just cut, but *eliminated*. End of story, yer outta here, no mas. He'd shown up at the front gate of the compound one morning to find the area congested with private rental vehicles belonging to his fellow scientists. Confusion seemed to be prevalent, so he'd gotten out of his own rental car to see if he could find out what was going on. He saw two uniformed security personnel making their way through the befuddled, loose knit groups of professionals, and techs. They were collecting everyone's clearance passes. The official word was: The project was over. Turn in your badge, and go home. Period. No explanation. No reason why. Your last check will be mailed to your permanent address.

And that was it. Tom knew, along with everyone else, that they hadn't even begun to scratch the surface of the alien artifact they'd been charged with examining. Far from answering any questions about it - or her - they had yet to come up with any half way intelligent questions to *ask*. It had been the opportunity of a career - hell, it'd been the opportunity of all time! One of the greatest of milestones mankind had been gearing up for

over countless centuries: To study the expression of another world. He'd never known such excitement, such intensity. Everyone on the program felt it, and shared in it. They felt compelled, driven, to work at the peak of their abilities, their training, their experience and, most of all, their imaginations. The study of the artifact had exhausted them as nothing else in their lives ever had, or ever would again. It had also been the most exhilarating experience any of them would ever know. Sex, at best, would place a very distant second by comparison.

And now it was, *so suddenly*, over. In the immediate existential, and emotional, vacuum that consumed the atmosphere outside the entrance to the compound that final morning, Tom swapped names, and phone numbers, with as many of his colleagues as he could before the grief of knowing that he'd just lost the best took over. He'd then driven back to his motel room, and cried his eyes out before calling Florence to tell her he was coming home. *Such an opportunity*, he now suspected as he made his way toward home, *forever gone*, and they hadn't even been told why.

Two days after he'd returned from Clear Lake, while watching TV with Florence snuggled at his side, Tom saw the announcement from the U.N. about Sara's departure, and heard the reasons for it. Two minutes later, he was on the phone to the first of many of his former colleagues who were now spread all over the world. Many of them had seen the U.N. announcement. None of them had a clue as to what "geophysical characteristics" the artifact was supposed to have been such a threat to.

The next morning, Tom called NASA, and came smack up against the first of many bureaucratic brick walls he was to encounter over the course of the following months. The data that was released in support of the U.N.'s assertion didn't make sense to him, or to anyone else he was talking to who'd been involved with the Susan Program. When he asked for details concerning the data, he was told that the information was "classified". When he asked for the source of the data, he was told that that too was "classified".

After months of frustrated effort, the Susan people came to the consensus that the only chance they had of effectively challenging the official data, and its story, was to go public with their doubts. From their individual home locales, they all tried to access any means of publicity they could; TV, radio, newspapers, periodicals, online news services. Everywhere they went, they encountered a firmly closed door. Nobody wanted to talk to them. 'The official story was the official story, don't confuse us with facts,' was what they were being told amounted to. Tom sat at his dinning room table one evening, his copy of the official data spread out before him. The pages were heavily annotated with notes, and questions, in his

own hand. Thinking of the latest brick wall he, and his colleagues, had run up against, the physicist had to paraphrase Shakespeare: A forum, a forum. The future, for a forum.

It was around the time that they'd decided to go public that other things started happening. Bad things. Suspicious things. Things which, taken by themselves, seemed to be no more than everyday occurrences, but, when taken together, seemed very much like something else. Things which, when taken together, became ominous, and just plain scary. An increasing number of the Susan people, Tom found, were meeting with unfortunate accidents, and circumstances; a fall, a bungled robbery, an auto collision, a random shooting, a gas explosion from a faulty water heater, the sudden onset of a fatal illness. All over the world, the people who'd been part of the Susan Program were dying, one by one. More, and more, Tom would call one of his friends, only to hear the cries of a grieving spouse on the other end of the line.

He hadn't told Florence of his growing concerns for his own life, but he had seen their lawyer to make sure his will was in order. He didn't have much of an estate, but they were free of any substantial debt, and the house was paid for. Now, in the darkness of the early evening, while driving the lonely stretch of two-lane road that would take him back to town from where he worked, Tom was just thinking of purchasing a life insurance policy for himself.

"Here he comes," said a man into a two-way radio as the SUV Tom was driving passed by some shrubbery along the road.

"Got 'im," said a second man into a reciprocating two-way radio. He could see a pair of headlights coming around a bend from where he stood on a railroad bridge that extended over the road. He took a remote control from a pocket in his jacket, observed it in his hand, then turned it on. He looked to see the SUV approaching, then walked to the other side of the bridge. Looking straight down from his vantage point, the man saw the top of Tom's SUV pass quickly into view, then watched the vehicle's receding tail lights.

Point . . . and click.

The SUV's throttle suddenly jammed wide open. Tom's right foot automatically mashed down hard on the brake pedal. The brakes didn't do much to slow the vehicle with the engine fighting to accelerate. Tom saw the curve ahead. He thought he could make it if he took up the opposing traffic lane. He added his left foot to the brake pedal, and went to ease the SUV into the curve.

Where's the steering?

He started fighting the steering wheel. He quickly lost his view of the road, and then the shoulder. The SUV's headlights revealed blackness as Tom felt himself going downward, then leafy branches started slapping hard against the windshield. A tremendous, forward jolt snapped his head forward as his body braced violently against the seat belt. Tom lost all sense of orientation as his left shoulder slipped from the embrace of the seat belt's shoulder strap.

The man on the railroad bridge watched as the SUV began its descent. He saw the tail lights flip upward, then saw a headlight flip up before veering off suddenly to one side, then all he saw was darkness. The sound of brush muffled wreckage could be heard for some time after that as the vehicle made its way further down the slope. The man breathed a sigh, then raised the radio to his lips.

"Another one bites the dust," he said into the radio.

"Alright," came the sound of the other man's voice over the radio. "I'll be by to pick you up."

A few minutes later, a dark, nondescript van stopped by the bridge. The second man emerged from some brush by the bridge's foundation, walked toward the van, and got into the passenger side. The van then moved forward, eased back onto the road and gradually picked up speed.

"Everything go okay?" the first man, who was driving, wanted to know.

"Oh yeah," the second man said as he settled into his seat. "Y'know, electronics sure makes this easier."

"I heard that," the first man commented. "How many more we got to go?"

"Eah, not many," said the second man. "We're just about done."

"Then on to the next shit job," the first man breathed with a sigh. "You hungry?"

The second man thought a bit, then answered, "Yeah. I could go for a bite."

* * *

Lanna saw Jimmie off for the day. She'd deliberately dressed to make their morning linger, but Jimmie had to get to the White House early. Dissatisfied, she watched him go, the breeze coming through the wide open door lightly playing with her barely closed, chiffon robe. The moment she was sure Jimmie was gone, she speed-dialed a number she had stored on her cell.

"Michael?" she queried, her tone shy, and hesitant.
The corners of her sensuous mouth teased with nervous anticipation.
"He just left. You've got half an hour to get here."

* * *

September 11, 2001. A day that will live in history. In the mid-morning, Eastern Standard U.S. Time, four United States commercial jetliners were hijacked. Two of the planes brought down the twin towers of the World Trade Center in the heart of New York City's financial district, one heavily damaged the Defense Department's Pentagon building in Washington, the forth crashed in a rural area in Pennsylvania.

In the general mood of panic, and confusion, that preoccupied much of the world following the attack, the President of the United States was in intense meetings, and briefings, to find out what had happened, and why. By the end of the day, some pieces to the puzzle of horror had begun to take shape, and fall into place. A group of Islamic terrorists, on a suicide mission of death, and destruction, had committed the acts.

Late that night, an exhausted Marshall Wayans sat sprawled on one of sofas in the Oval Office, watching the news on TV as it showed the North Tower of the World Trade Center coming down yet again. An equally exhausted Bill Robbins stood beside the President.

"This - changes everything," Robbins opined in the manner of an understatement.

The two men watched the television screen as a monolithic cloud of concrete, and asbestos dust overtook hundreds of fleeing victims.

"On the contrary, Bill," Wayans quietly said.

The utterance made Robbins look at the man he'd devoted his life to. He could plainly see the tiredness in the President's handsome features, but his keen eyes detected something else. Something new. Something he had never seen before. There was a look about the man, a kind of glowing peacefulness that comes as a result of a heightened awareness, or an enlightenment. He studied the look curiously as Wayans watched the Trade Center's South Tower come down yet again.

"It's Heaven sent."

* * *

The imposing woman, who no longer felt imposing, sat alone in her apartment, the half empty bottle close by.

"Way easy . . .," she said. *huh, Marshall?* she thought. "Way too easy . . . If you take one, you have to take them all. *And that includes me.* Hell - any gangster can tell ya that. Fuck - *you're* a gangster - you coulda told ya that . . . So what? Huh? . . . *What about me?* . . . Didja jus' forget about me? . . . or don't I just . . . count. Huh? *Is that it, Marshall?* I don't matter? Same as you - same as everyone - *same as every God damned fucking one!* Everyone! Fuck all of you! . . . damn . . . you . . . *Wadja go an' leave me for?* Can you answer me that? . . . *Don't I even deserve an answer!* . . . *Or didja think I wasn't anything to worry about.* Huh? . . . *Dinah?* fwah! *Fuck her . . . fuck 'er . . .* Well fuck you back you fucker! - you . . . *fuck . . . you . . .* Leave me to myself already. *Leave me do myself . . .* Is that what you were thinking? That I'd do myself? *Is that why you didn't bother with me, Marshall? Because you knew that I'd take care of things myself?* . . . Hm! . . . Do it yerself, huh? . . . *Do yerself . . . screw yerself . . . screw it . . .* I screw - *no, wait a minute, uh . . . I do* - yeah, that's it - I do, *that's what I do . . .* Okay, yer honor - *you low life cuzfucker* - le's see if I kin get it right this time . . . okay, here we go . . . I do slolumnly swear, that the testiphony . . . tesschi . . . teava - whatever the fuck it is - that I am about to give, is the shit-assed truth, the whole Goddammed fucking truth, and nothing but-fuck the Goddamned fucking . . . fucking truth, so help me Goddammit . . . *My babies . . . my babies . . .* Oh God, I want my babies . . . "

The imposing woman, who no longer felt imposing, sat alone in her apartment, the empty bottle close by.

Chapter Forty-four

Meetings

"Right this way, Your Honor," said the young White House aide as he ushered Harshwell Barraster into the upper story executive office.

Situated above the Oval Office, President Wayans had made the second story office his inner sanctum. It was the nerve center of his presidency, and the place where he did most of his work. Looking up from his desk, Wayans instantly recognized his visitor, and rose to greet him.

"Ah, Judge Barraster. Please, come in," Wayans offered along with a warm smile, and a firm handshake.

"Mr. President," Barraster returned to the nation's chief executive.

"Glad you could come on such short notice," Wayans said as he guided the judge to a pair of richly upholstered, matching chairs. "Hope it didn't inconvenience you too much."

"Oh, it's no trouble at all really," the judge assured, somewhat abashed by the President's expression of solicitous concern. "It's too bad about Steinbrenner," he said as a way of steering their conversation toward the purpose of their meeting. "How's she doing?"

"She's scheduled to start treatment in a few days," the President reported as the two men settled themselves comfortably in the chairs, "but . . . nobody really knows for sure."

"It's a remarkable coincidence," Barraster observed, "first Truskin, now Prudence. Two Supreme Court seats open - both within a week of each other."

"Truskin's death was a shock to everyone," Wayans bemoaned. He managed a smile as he looked at Barraster. "Everybody thought that old guy would live forever."

The judge eyed Wayans steadily.

"It's quite an opportunity, Mr. President."

Wayans held the judge's gaze unflinchingly.

"And it's also a heavy responsibility, Your Honor."

There was a pause, and then a faint smile played upon the President's lips.

"Shall we get started?" he invited.

"Oh, of course," said Barraster, sitting forward to shift his position. After he'd settled

again he looked directly at the President. "I just want to say up front, sir, that, however you decide . . . it's an honor just to be considered for the Bench."

President Wayans had to look away. It was a moment before he could offer graciously, "I understand that." He then looked up to face the man he intended to interview. "Alright now, I'd . . . like for this to be fairly informal, you understand? I mean, I don't want it to seem like you're on the hot seat or anything like that. We'll . . . just talk - between the two of us, okay? And . . . get to know each other."

Barraster felt himself relaxing into Wayans' easy tone, and manner.

"Of course, Mr. President," he sought to assure the man in front of him. "Anything you say."

President Wayans sat reflectively for awhile with his elbows perched atop the armrests of his chair, the tips of his thumbs, and fingers lightly pressed together, almost as in prayer. The tips of his index fingers barely touched his the seam between his lips a couple times.

"Let me start out first by asking," Wayans began, and then he looked up to regard his guest, "are you a religious man, Judge Barraster?"

* * *

"Dinah, I am thinkink that maybe you, and I, should be livink together," Olga tentatively suggested to the painfully hung-over attorney.

The two women sat across from each other at Olga's kitchen table. A cup of freshly brewed coffee sat in front of each of them. Sharing morning coffee had become a saving ritual for them. Olga was seeking a way to build on that. The old Russian thought it might be a solution to the loneliness that she was certain was slowly crushing both of them. She also thought cohabitating might be a way of curbing Dinah's self-destructive drinking.

It'd started with Alex's disappearance. Then Sara's disappearance made it worse. Sara's alleged departure from earth, without an explanation, or a goodbye, made it worse. The realization that she loved them both far more than she had ever acknowledged to herself made it worse. The fact that they couldn't be there so she could ask for, and - hopefully - receive, their forgiveness made it worse. The frustration over her failed efforts to locate either of them made it worse. Despite her appearance, more than maintained by a stringently hearty diet, and grueling hours spent in the gym she habituated every day, Olga had witnessed the mighty Amazon crumbling before her eyes.

"Why?" the normally combative lawyer calmly wanted to know.

Though she suspected the Russian's intentions, the gawdawful pounding between her temples refused to allow for a more volatile response.

"Vell," said Olga, interlacing her stubby, work-hewn fingers more tightly over her full tummy, "I am nyot gettink any younger . . . as they say. My knees are nyot what they once were, and . . . I would feel safer with you close by."

"I'm right next door," Dinah pointed out.

"That is nyot the same as close by," Olga stated as she regarded her companion squarely. "You spend much of your time here anyway, since your office is set up here."

Olga studied the lawyer's questioning, but uncharacteristically befuddled, gaze.

Out with it, she thought. "You need to be with someone, Dinah. Someone needs to be with you. I am findink myself to be in the same situation. I can be takink care of you, and you can be takink care of me. It would be an arrangement of mutual cooperation, and . . . peaceful coexistence."

The imposing lawyer, who no longer felt imposing, considered the dear old woman's offer. Her admiration for this 'iron curtain maiden', as she'd once derisively referred to her, had accumulated over the years since their first, adversarial encounter. She was gifted, lucky, experienced, wise. So many of the very things that she herself was not, but wished she was. *Effective - ineffective*, occurred to Dinah as she compared Olga to herself. The old Russian had done much to help people, but what of herself? Much of her life she now considered to have been wasted fighting . . . *windmills*. She considered how Olga was slowly loosing her adopted family of fellow Russians to the grave, and how she herself had lost her adopted family to . . . *what?* Their absence, along with her inability to find them, tore at her every moment of every day, and every night. One of them had even flown away from her - literally - *no, that's not true - yes it is! No! . . . it's not . . .* She was finding an empty liquor bottle to be damned poor company.

"I'll think about it," said Dinah, trying hard to measure just the right amount of hesitant ambiguity in her tone.

The two women shared a look, the significance of which was as though they'd only just met, quite pleasantly, for the very first time.

* * *

"Lanna, I can't believe what you've done with this place," Jimmie enthused as he looked about their newly finished, two story condo for the first time.

Completed at last, the two units had been extensively renovated in the process of their conjoining, and were now exquisitely furnished, and decorated.

"I have to admit, it was a lot more than I anticipated," said Lanna, recalling her ordeal with a beleaguered sigh, then she turned to her husband, and smiled warmly, "but the look on your face has made it all worthwhile."

Jimmie looked upon his woman, and, once again, loved her all the more.

"You never cease to amaze me," he intoned.

The progressive revelation of her seemingly endless list of talents mystified him. She was like a flower that never ceased to blossom.

His words meant a lot to Lanna, but it always left her feeling kind of awkward.

"Hey," she said as she approached, trying to dismiss her awkwardness rather than his praise, "this is just the living room." She took him by the hands, and coaxed him gently, "Let me show you the rest of the place." She coaxed him, oh so gently, "C'mon."

Lanna showed Jimmie every detail of every room, especially their adjoining offices, "So we're never really far away from each other," she explained.

The circumstances of how Jimmie had been driven out of the first company he'd formed was proof enough for Lanna of the limitations of his isolated, computer-centric existence. Since their marriage, the ambitious, worldly blonde had resolved to safeguard her brilliant, but naive, husband's interests. She accompanied him nearly everywhere, and did much of his talking for him. Her disarming beauty, coupled with her quick, aggressive mind, worked like magic for them in business negotiations. The result had been that through Lanna's administrative skills, and Jimmie's computer talents, their company was a model of success. It'd been one of a handful of tech stocks to have weathered the NASDAQ crash. The computer game Jimmie, and Sara, had come up with had been the hottest selling software item for several months running, with no sign of letting up. Aside from his connections to the President, Jimmie's value as an international software consultant was continuing to ascend, almost from day to day.

Jimmie had been both willing, and receptive, to Lanna's guidance. She had, over the months, succeeded in opening his awareness to other things besides a computer screen, and Jimmie was coming to see more of the world from under the protective cover of Lanna's nurturing wing. Contrived though the circumstances leading to their union were, Lanna made

no apologies, and Jimmie expected none. The attention, alone, of such a ravishingly gorgeous woman was a wet dream come true for the young computer nerd. That he could plainly see that she was concerned for, and devoted, to him, made Jimmie love her. That he made her feel needed, and appreciated, beyond her wildest expectations, made Lanna love him in return.

The tour of their little kingdom ended in its most private corner.

"And this," Lanna announced in that special tone of intimacy reserved for such occasions, "is our bedroom."

Jimmie was, again, overwhelmed by what he saw. The room, and its decor, was a masterful blend of opulent taste that successfully coupled the seemingly polar atmospheres of peaceful rest, and erotic flare. He wandered about aimlessly, taking in the intoxicating sights, and odors. She was truly amazing, he thought, and, when he turned to face her once more, she amazed him yet again. Having silently shed her satin robe, and slippers, while his back was turned, Lanna stood before him dressed only in the adoration that shown from his loving, hazel eyes.

He knew her sensual moods to be unlimited. He never knew what to expect. She could be coquettish, and shy, one time, then daring, and bold, the next. As well could she be rapaciously demanding one time, and then meekly submissive the next. He never knew what to expect. Her perfectly symmetrical face never once belied her intent. Would she be gentle? Would she be harsh? Her enigmatic gaze would invariably strip him bare of hope, leaving him with only dreamy wonder. And invariably, his whole mind, and body, would be aflame with desire even before she touched him. Lanna shifted her weight, and her body became a glorious prayer of motion as she began to approach him. She could capture the sum of being in a single step, and the five remaining only quintupled Jimmie's consuming sense of ardor.

Her nipples were the first to reach him. They stood like that, facing one another, barely touching, and leisurely basked in the heady atmosphere of each other's lust. Lanna then leaned herself forward just a bit, and Jimmie raised his hands to firmly grip her pelvis. It was a pelvis that was soft, yet firm - unmistakably woman. It was a pelvis that could beg for joy, and yet be brutally demanding. She, at once, contained all the mysteries of life, and death, and everything in between. He pulled her close. Her arms encircled his neck. She could feel him.

"What's a house," Jimmie wondered, ohso innocently, "without a proper housewarming?"

Lanna's eyes looked up at him. He still didn't know what to expect. A smile formed on her beautiful lips.

"One of us," she told him softly, "is not getting out of this room alive."

* * *

White House Chief of Staff, Robbins, looked over the job application the aide had handed him. His concentration focused on the education, and background, sections.

Recent graduate - specialized computer skills . . . specialized . . . Upgraded the entire computer system of the school she graduated from all by herself - not bad . . . Seems to've had a good upbringing - good morals, loyal, ethical. Hobbies . . . heh - another computer junkie. Maybe she, and Jimmie, could, he smiled to himself, get connected . . . take some o' the shine offa that bitch, Lanna.

"Yeah," he said thoughtfully, looking up at the aide as he handed the paper back to her, "I think I got a place for her."

Robbins then snatched the paper back before the aide could touch it.

"Wait a minute," he said, somewhat put out by his thoughtlessness, "what's the chick's name?"

"Spocks, sir," the aide informed her superior.

Robbins studied the name in full at the head of the job app.

"'Pandora Spocks'," he intoned with slow deliberation.

He looked up to regard the aide.

"What kind of a name is 'Pandora'?" he asked with a marked tone of incredulity.

The aide smiled dutifully, and shook her head.

"I don't know, sir. I've never met anyone by that name."

Robbins returned the attractive young woman's smile, then thrust the paper toward her.

"Well, you have now," he stated good naturedly. "Take her on as a special assistant, and uh . . . do 'er better than starting salary."

The aide took the paper.

"Yes, sir," she replied, and then she turned, and left.

Chief of Staff, Robbins, eyed the aide's shapely pelvis undulate attractively down the hall.

"Pandora . . . ," he softly intoned before he shook himself awake. "Weird."

* * *

"Mom, we can't afford it," said Debbie Hodges-Starks to her mother Florence.

The Starks family, along with Debbie's husband, Harry, was gathered around the dining room table, which was littered with the evidence of their dwindling financial fortunes. Florence sat at the head of the table with Deb, and Harry, at either side. Their six-year-old son, Eddie, was in the living room, occupied with dividing his attention between a coloring book, and the TV. Three year old, Stan, was asleep in Debbie's old room, which was now the guest bedroom. Debbie was two weeks overdue with her third child, a girl that she, and Harry, had already named Shelley. Close by, to Florence's right, sat Tom Starks.

Tom had survived the accident of six months before, but his every waking moment since that night had given him cause to wonder why. His injuries had healed well enough, so, that wasn't the problem. The crushed pelvis had healed. The broken arm, and separated shoulder, had healed. His hair had grown back in from where his scalp had been shaved to repair the compound fracture to his skull. The doctors had assured him, and Florence, that, in those respects, he was as good as new. There was another injury, though, which had devastated him, and which was slowly devastating his family.

Tom had sustained a compound fracture of his upper neck involving his second, third and forth cervical vertebrae. They had healed too, thanks to a successful emergency surgery to piece them back together immediately after the accident, but his spinal cord in the affected area had essentially been crushed. His sympathetic nervous system in the same region had also been heavily damaged.

Bottom line, cut to the end of the chase; Tom Starks was paralyzed for the rest of his life. Not just paralyzed, but fucked-up, bad paralyzed. His heart still worked, his lungs still worked, his digestive and elimination systems still worked, but that was about it - oh yes, almost forgot - he was able to blink, and had retained the voluntary motor functions of one eye. He also possessed some tactile sensation, but only down to his lower neck, and part way across one shoulder. Aside from that, Tom, and his intact, active mind, was obliged to breath through a ventilator, eat through a stomach tube, piss into a catheter and shit into a diaper, all the while being completely unable to either feel or, move - for the rest of his life.

It took a tremendous amount of time, and energy, to maintain Tom in his current condition. The special wheelchair he required had made a big hole in their savings. His daily maintenance was slowly eroding what was left. Florence was now administering the physical

therapy Tom needed to keep his joints, and muscles flexible - their health insurance wouldn't cover it anymore. Tom didn't have enough time with the company he'd worked for to qualify for a retirement. Their health care provider had tried to drop him, but Harry, a personal injury lawyer, had succeeded in delaying that, if not actually stopping it. Tom's condition had qualified him for early Social Security benefits, but at a greatly reduced amount, because of his age.

Florence was visibly bowing under the strain of taking care of her invalid husband. She was constantly tired, and she was plagued with chronic backaches. With their savings virtually gone, and the money they were taking in not being enough for them to live on, they were faced with a choice of either selling their house, or Florence getting a job.

"Selling the house is out," Florence insisted to her daughter. "Granted, it's not the Ritz, but your father has worked very hard for this place."

"Then you're going to have to go to work, Mom," Debbie told her.

That didn't trouble Florence so much as, "Who's going to look after your father? You know he can't be left alone."

"Well," Debbie offered, "I'll be on maternity leave for another three months - when, and if, Shelley ever decides to make an appearance. I could stay with him after I drop Eddie off at school."

"But what about after you go back to work?" her mother asked.

Debbie, and her husband, shared a look of concern. Harry didn't want to, but he gave his wife the nod she was waiting for. His approval made it possible for her to go on.

"Mom," Debbie began, but, already, she hated herself for it. "Please don't take this the wrong way, but . . . Harry, and I, have been looking into convalescent homes - "

"No!" Florence, at once, declared.

"Mom, it's for the best - "

"No!"

"It's the only way!"

"You are not going to put my husband in any God-damned home!"

Florence had gotten up from the table, and moved behind Tom. She didn't want him to see her as she valiantly tried to contain her tears. They'd both known, for months, that their situation would eventually force them to consider such a possibility, but still, finally being brought face to face with it - it hurt like hell.

The noise of raised voices had awakened Shelley. Her mother pressed a hand to her belly to assure her that she was safe, and, hopefully, to get her to calm down. Debbie waited for the emotions of the moment to subside a bit before going on.

"With you, and me, both working, Mom, he'll need a live-in nurse. Even the cheapest one is going to cost over two hundred dollars a day. How are we going to afford that?"

Florence didn't answer. From where she stood, she placed a hand on the one shoulder Tom could feel.

"Now," their daughter continued, "we found a couple places that aren't too expensive. They're clean, well equipped and well staffed."

It was getting increasingly more difficult for Debbie to go on.

"Dad'll have good care in either one of them."

Shelley was thrashing violently inside her.

"Would you please just . . . at least come, and look at them?"

She could've sworn that Shelley was screaming, "Mommy, no!" to her. Debbie lowered her eyes from her mother's strong, stoical face to her father's blank, and slack-jawed visage. She couldn't go on, but she had to go on, in spite of all the tears.

"Both of you . . ."

Florence's fingers tightened on her husband's shoulder as she held herself as erect as she could. Try as she had, she couldn't ignore the searing pain in her back anymore. Try as she had, she could no longer disregard the probability that all the good times she, and her family, had shared were over.

Seeing Debbie crying made Tom sorely wish that he had died in that wreck six months before. It would've been so much easier. For everyone.

* * *

Marshall Wayans, and Jimmie Oldsen, made an interesting pair. Each opened, to the other, a world of possibility, neither of which, without the other, ever would have known. With Wayans' Blue Book enhanced legislative ambition, and Jimmie's Susan enhanced technological capability, each could realize their wildest dreams, and then dream on for more. They were the Yin, and Yang, of a tremendous force. They were the two halves of a unique dynamic which, when combined, became the source of extraordinary power. Wayans provided the young hacker with direction, and challenge, while Jimmie devised the

wherewithal to make the President's visions for a better world . . . reality.

One of their areas of focus - naturally enough - was the internet. Wayans wanted to make the world wide web safe for children, so he started off by presenting Jimmie with a problem: Find a way of barring a selected web site from appearing on a monitor.

It seemed simple enough. So Jimmie went to work on solving the problem. Using a variation of the blocking code Sara had used during hers, and Jimmie's, TV commercial prank/experiment, Jimmie developed an invisible software code that would effectively bar access to a like coded internet site. It was essentially a specifically configured 'peg' that would only fit into a like configured 'hole'. Once a match was made, the coded site would never make it out of a coded computer's processor. After being presented with a demonstration of how the two codes worked, the President looked distracted for a moment, and then he smiled.

"Let's keep the two of them separate for now," he suggested to Jimmie, then he added, "and, uh . . . don't tell anyone how they react together."

Toting it as the next generation 'Net Nanny', Wayans introduced to Congress, legislation that would force the fabulously lucrative online porn industry to carry Jimmie's invisible 'Peg' code at the forefront of all of their web site addresses.

At the same time, the President's Attorney General, James Russell, made a call to Bill Doors, head of the anti-trust beleaguered software giant, Microsquash. It was during that call that Russell offered Doors a deal whereby the feds would call off their anti-trust dogs if he agreed to insert Jimmie's reciprocating 'Hole' code into the internet browser of his much anticipated, next generation operating system that was scheduled to debut later in the year. It sounded innocent enough, on the face of it, but Doors had an odd feeling about it. He asked to take a look at the code. Russell refused, giving the software giant chairman a 'take it or leave it' choice. Doors went with his feeling, and turned down the deal. Russell didn't press the issue, but left the offer open. His next phone call was to his anti-trust division with the order to, 'turn up the heat', on Microsquash.

Despite a massive lobbying campaign waged by the adult entertainment industry, Wayans' new 'Net Nanny' code easily passed through both houses of Congress by comfortable majorities. Both the President, and Congress, won high praise from every national group with which the much misunderstood term 'wholesome' could be associated. Meanwhile, feeling the pinch of increased federal oversight, Bill Doors sent a personal E mail to Attorney General, Russel, accepting his offer.

"Barndoors 13" hit the world, carrying with it, Jimmie's internet 'Hole' code. It also had a little something extra from Pandora Spocks: An authorization code in the basic operating system that, when installed into a computer, would render all previous operating systems useless. In other words, once Barndoors 13 was in a computer, there was no going back.

With the federally mandated 'Peg' code at the forefront of adult site URLs, the affect was both immediate, and stunning. In one mouse click, the online porn business was dealt a deathblow. Denied access to their favorite sites, outraged subscribers quickly flooded the industry's E-mail boxes with irate messages demanding an explanation. In the coming days, the, now off line, online porn business would be inundated with demands for refunds on outstanding subscriptions. The lawsuits were not far behind.

Congress felt like they'd been royally snookered, but they shied away from reversing themselves on an issue that had already garnered them an uncommonly high degree of public approval. Microsquash was relieved of government pressure, but Bill Doors sorely wished that he had never heard of Jim Russell, or, especially, of Pandora Spocks. With the 'Peg' code being a federal law, all legal challenges would have to be handled in the federal courts where Wayans held his Blue Book over the vast majority of judges. The law would stand until such time as it was ruled unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court, and, with two 'moderate' judge-seats having suddenly become 'conservative', that, indeed, seemed like a most unlikely prospect.

"Hey there, Jimmie, c'mon in. Have a seat," President Wayans greeted Jimmie grandly as the young man came into the upstairs White House office shortly after their two codes had officially met. "How's Lanna?"

"Oh, she'd just fine, sir. Thanks for asking."

"And how's Pandora working out?"

"She's really something else, Mr. President. She's really remarkable."

"Even with that . . . weird name she's got?"

"It is unusual. I can't say that I've ever come across a name like that before, but I'm very satisfied with her."

"Well good . . . good."

The two men got comfortable in a couple of chairs. Jimmie waited respectfully as the President took a few moments to quietly reflect to himself before speaking.

"Okay, Jimmie," Wayans then addressed the young man, focusing his attention on him, "Let me present you with another problem."

* * *

Time.

He had to stop thinking in terms of time, Alex reminded himself - *How many times now?*

He had to stop wondering what time it was, what day it was, what week of the month or what month it was. *Is it safe to think in terms of years?* he wondered to himself. "No," he said in answer to his own question. That - truly was *unthinkable*.

Alex sat in his cell without padding, wondering about what to do - *today?* - he paused to wonder, his fingers probing through the thick growth of bread to scratch his chin - *or maybe it's still yesterday . . . perhaps . . . It couldn't be tomorrow already . . . could it? Well, maybe . . .*

He had to stop thinking in terms of time, he reminded himself - *How many times now?*

He'd never realized before how comforting had been the simple knowledge of moments passing, or the sense of security that is to be derived from the certainty of change. Something . . . *so simple*. Something is, some other thing had been, something else would be. *So simple*. Deprived of a clock, or a watch, or a calendar in his fluorescent lit, steel and concrete world, Alex mourned the passing of time.

His keepers, whoever they were - *maybe they're the Cryptoaliens* - had seen to everything. His apartment - *Heh! Way apart ment* - was definitely escape proof. He'd checked out his surroundings thoroughly - *how many times now?* The entryway - there was no exit, just as Sartre claimed - led directly into the ten foot by ten foot - he'd paced it off - *how many times now?* - solid white, antiseptic living area - *Living? Heh! yeah right* - beyond which stood a seven foot deep central partition - he'd pace that off too - that divided an equally antiseptic bathroom, and kitchenette of equal square footage - *how many times now?* The wall supported the plumbing to both sinks, the toilet and shower as well as the clothes washing machine. The wastewater, and sewage drains went into the floor. The stove, and clothes dryer, were both electric - no gas - and the ventilation registers that supplied his breathing atmosphere were located on opposing walls, high up near the fifteen foot ceiling - no, he hadn't paced that one off, it was purely a guesstimate. The intake register had been baffled to direct the airflow down toward the floor - *Damned thoughtful of them to do that*, Alex had had cause to wonder - *how many times now?* He figured it had to be purified air he

was breathing, because no dust collected anywhere, ever. It saved him a lot of time on cleaning.

He knew that he was being observed from two opposing angles. He'd noticed the camera lenses peaking out through their openings in the walls up near the ceiling. Combined, they offered a total view of his living environment - *Solitary confinement without the benefit of privacy*, occurred to him. *What'll they think of next?* He'd considered trying to make contact with whoever might be on the other side of the lenses - of establishing a rapport - of appealing to their humanity - *Yeah right*, he'd then chastened himself. *These guys aren't being paid to be humane*. It caused him to consider how a paycheck can be a most effective moral anesthetic.

He'd also gathered that his accommodations were suicide proof - not that he was inclined to such thoughts, but certain things of obvious note made it pretty plain. For one thing, there was no glass what so-ever in the place. There was no mirror in the bathroom - so he didn't even have his own reflection for company - *Boy, they thought of everything*. And there was, of course, no razor, or sheers of any kind - *Wonder what I look like with a beard?* In the kitchen, there were no knives, or forks, or any implement that could either be called, or be made, sharp - *So that's the reason for all the spoons*. As has already been noted, there was no gas in the place - every utility was electric with all wiring, and connections, carefully concealed. There was no anchor from which to hang one end of a bed sheet - *Not even a knob on the door*. Alex figured that he could affect his own demise if he really applied himself, but he also figured that his watchful keepers had standing orders to keep him alive.

He'd never had much of an appetite for television, but he kept the set on for most of his periods of wakefulness. It was background noise, some kind of movement to watch. He had better things to think about, he told himself - *how many times now?* - but there was literally so little else for him to do for so much of the time - you can only clean the toilet, or review your thoughts so much, after all - that he'd eventually give in, and, more and more, as time went on - *how much time now?* - just sit back, and watch. It reminded him of what Malcolm Muggeridge once said: Television doesn't cause vacuity. It reveals it.

Alex labored against idleness. He resolved to get himself in better physical shape. He ate only when he was noticeably hungry, and he was exercising regularly. He'd done a lot to lose all that weight he'd slowly gained over the years. He also tried to make contact with the outside. Betting that his keepers were young enough to be unfamiliar with the old Morse

Code, Alex tried sending out an S-O-S using his TV remote. He'd scan three channels quickly, then scan the next three one at a time before quickly scanning the following three. He'd pause a few moments, then repeat the sequence. It quickly had become his primary, and most stringently adhered to, activity. When motivated, he would send the message for as long, and as often, as his level of hope would bear - and he tried to stay motivated.

Alex was more, and more, aware of the fact that he'd devoted much his life to avoiding serious situations - and to painting mustaches, and goatees, on those he couldn't avoid. He now wondered if that had been such a good idea. He'd realized - *How long ago?* - that his current situation would be the test of his life, and he was beginning to seriously wonder if he was up to it.

* * *

Lanna walked Michael to the door. They'd finished with each other for the day, both of them being pleasantly exhausted. Michael calmly went over everything he wanted to do with her during their next encounter. Lanna fought with all her will to refrain from declaring, 'Why not right now!'. She thrilled at the fact that he was pleased with her. Pleasing this man had become so important to her. It was much of what she lived for now. Smiling at her, Michael told her, "You're really incredible, Lanna."

Feeling like a school girl who'd just gotten her first 'A', Lanna opened the door, and then was quietly stunned to see

"Jimmie."

standing on the other side of it, key in hand, ready to unlock the very same door.

Jimmie looked up to take in the unexpected sight of his beautiful wife, but then he had to take in another unexpected sight. A wrenching awkwardness gripped Lanna as her husband observed the other man. She halfway tried to hide herself behind the open door she suddenly needed to cling to for support.

"Uhm, Jimmie . . .," she stammered badly - obviously, "this . . . this is Michael."

Michael smiled at Jimmie, and extended his hand toward him. "Hi."

Jimmie automatically brought his own hand forward, and the two men shook hands.

"Lanna's told me - "

"Michael's, uh . . . teaching me how to program on the computer," said

Lanna in Jimmie's direction, wishing so that she could vanish into thin air.

Jimmie's eyes shifted from Michael to his wife.

"It's very fascinating," she thought it best to add.

The couple regarded one another for an extended moment. Something about the way Jimmie looked at her bore into Lanna unmercifully. He'd never looked at her like that before. She tried to bluff her way into looking confident, but, somehow, it just didn't work.

"I see," said Jimmie in a tone that was as unnerving as it was subdued.

"Your wife's quite talented, Mr. Oldsen," Michael informed the husband with notable enthusiasm. "She's really good."

"Michael," Lanna quietly told him.

The way she'd said his name drew Michael's attention to her. He could see that she wasn't looking at him. She didn't appear to be looking at anything. Lanna's eyes were lowered. Her head was slightly bowed. Michael shifted his attention to Jimmie. He could see the man regarding his wife constantly with an unflinching gaze. He began to feel a tense awkwardness, so he thought it would be best for everyone that he leave.

"Well, uh . . .," Michael began, trying to find a graceful way to depart. "I'll . . . see you tomorrow, Lanna."

"Yeah," said Lanna quickly without looking at him.

Michael's lips pursed as he regarded the woman. He then made to slip through the door between the couple, but he needed to ask, "Excuse me," in order to get past Jimmie.

"Sure," said Jimmie as he backed up a step to allow the other man his exit.

Michael started down the hall, glad to be away from the awkwardness. He was already feeling better, but knew that it would be grossly rude of him if he didn't turn back to say, "Been nice meeting you, Mr. Oldsen."

"Yeah," said Jimmie, half glancing in the other man's direction. "You too."

Michael left. Lanna hadn't moved. She was like a statue, standing half concealed behind the door.

"Mind if I, uh . . . come in?" Jimmie asked his wife in a quiet, controlled tone.

Lanna came back to life, her husband's words seeming to have activated her. She stepped back to open the door a little further, and waited for Jimmie to come in.

Jimmie needed a moment to gather himself, then he stepped through the doorway, and into the vestibule. He proceeded in a few paces, then stopped, the obvious question burning in him. He didn't - couldn't - turn around to face his wife.

"You slept with him . . . didn't you?" he asked her more in the manner of a statement.

Lanna held onto the door as she felt her heart sink to her knees. She didn't know what to say, or how to answer, so she just came right out, and answered, "Yes."

Jimmie's eyes closed. He still couldn't turn around to look at her. How often had he thought about just such a thing? How often had he wondered about it? The moment now upon him, he was surprised at the amount of dignity with which she'd said the word, his . . . darling Lanna. As always . . . his darling . . . Lanna.

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Jimmie - "

"Answer me! Did you enjoy it!"

The couple faced each other now. Jimmie had turned around to demand an answer from her. Lanna felt a peculiar calm come over her as she met her husband's withering glare head on.

"Yes."

The two of them regarded one another, somehow, no longer as man and wife, but as total strangers meeting for the first time.

"Well," said Jimmie quietly, and then he said nothing more.

The couple continued to examine one another with their eyes, neither of them knowing what would come next. Jimmie, then, was the first to move as he began approaching her. Lanna closed the door, but maintained a firm grip on the knob. She eyed Jimmie steadily as he drew closer. Her heart felt like it was going to leap from her chest. His hands raised up. Lanna closed her eyes, and took a breath, holding the air in her lungs. Her husband's arms encircled her. *Oh God!* His grip upon her body tightened, drawing her against him. *Please!* Tighter his embrace became. Tighter.

"At last!" she heard Jimmie say over her shoulder.

Lanna's eyes flew open with astonishment.

"I'm happy for you, honey," Jimmie told her privately.

His words, they fell like the gentlest of caresses on her ears. Never in her life did Lanna breath a sigh of relief that was so satisfying. Her hand left the doorknob to trace its way around her husband's soft waist.

"Oh, my wonderful man!" she cried, falling against him to clutch him to herself with all her strength. "I knew you'd understand!"

Jimmie held her close, and dear. His darling Lanna. So close. So dear.

"Of course I understand," he cooed, loving her in whole new ways he never thought he could. "I know it's been hard on you. It's been tough on both of us, but now . . . maybe you can give me some time off so I can get some work done."

Lanna suddenly backed away enough to regard her husband. She looked surprised.

"Jimmie," she addressed him somewhat curiously.

Lanna's visage changed. She held Jimmie close. He could feel the increased pressure of her pelvis against his.

"He . . .," she told him, her voice, her breath - both of them transforming into the heat dispensers that barely helped to regulate the furnace that seemed to constantly rage in her, "was just an appetizer."

She tilted her pelvis to increase the pressure further. Jimmie could feel his woman's extraordinary breasts press into his chest.

"Now that I'm -," she continued before she stopped herself to lightly smile, and correct the near slip of her exceptionally skillful tongue, "I meant to say . . . now that my - *appetite* is . . . wet."

Jimmie - as always, as ever - had not choice, but to submit to the extraordinary demands of his extraordinary woman's extraordinary body.

"I'm ready for the main course . . . the desert . . . the after dinner drink . . . the after dinner mint . . . the - "

* * *

Living with Dinah Prinze was turning out to be more than Olga had bargained for. On the plus side, the lawyer had pulled herself together, and was now drinking nothing stronger than coffee, and a variety of herbal teas. On the minus side, however, the imposing woman had . . . pulled herself together.

The passionate, principled attorney had assigned herself the impossible task of finding two people who had, from all indications, vanished without a trace. Dinah had pursued every conceivable lead that could be extracted from what was known with regard to Alex's disappearance, and every one of them had lead to nowhere. Sara was, purportedly, out of this world. There was not a vibration of her, or Susan, anywhere. What had happened to either of them, she had no idea. Whether their disappearances were related, or not, she, again, had no idea.

So, starting out from square one - *yet again* - Dinah had to do something she normally avoided like a plague: She assumed.

First, she reasoned that Alex's, and Sara's, disappearances were not separate instances, but that they had to be related in some way. Second, since Alex had been the first to vanish, Dinah reasoned that he was being used, by whomever had kidnapped him, as a means of gaining, not only access to Sara, but control over her. The U.N. announcement, with regard to Sara, confirmed her suspicion that there were high level government machinations at work, so that made appealing to the local authorities in Houston for help a moot point.

Okay, so who are the perpetrators, and what's their purpose?

If Sara was still on earth, any outfit in the world, with adequate means at their disposal, could've gotten a hold on her through Alex. This prospect lead to the chilling conclusion that Alex might not even be in the country anymore. *He could be, literally, anywhere in the world* . . . Awful as this thought was, Dinah couldn't dismiss it as a possibility. She could, however, narrow her list of suspect 'outfits' to governments since 1) The final published announcement regarding Sara had come from a government organization, and 2) She couldn't find any reason why any business would consider either Sara, or Susan, a threat to their interests.

The September 11th terrorist attack on the U.S. made her wonder if the Taliban hadn't gained control of Sara, but then, three months later, the forces of the world government coalition President Wayans had been able to organize, along with those of the internal Afghan rebels, had the Taliban on the run.

She then wondered if a coalition of governments had gotten to her. She reasoned that any government would kill to have Sara's powers, and Susan's technical capabilities, at its exclusive service. As time went on, however, and the world's political/economic balance remained fairly constant, that possibility seemed less, and less, likely.

Almost a year after the disappearances, Dinah found herself starting out from square one - *yet again* . . . She'd tried a number of ways of approaching the problem, but there simply wasn't enough information to point her in any solid direction. Going on what she knew for sure, anything became a realistic possibility. Pursuing so many, equal valid, options was proving to be *impossible*.

As if all of this wasn't enough, Dinah also had to deal with Sara's many friends. They appeared in Sara's E-mail box, as well as in person on the doorstep of Unit 1A. Those who came to call offered cards, and flowers, and little gifts. All of them offered heartfelt words of

consolation, and encouragement. It wasn't easy for a woman accustomed to being socially uncouth. Dinah had to be gracious, and pleasant, at a time in her life when she least wanted to. Olga tried to help, but all of the callers insisted on talking with, "Sara's Mom".

Their good intentions grated on Dinah. To her they were painfully lashing reminders of her continued failure to find her missing family. One morning, she accessed Sara's inbox, and opened an incoming E-mail. It was yet another message of sympathy. That was it. Her patience snapped. Her temper blew. She hissed, she spat, she shrieked in reply:

**> She's not dead! She's not gone! Neither of them are!
> I'll find them! You'll see! I'll find them both! You'l g4ipg=hl k#[y-9**

Dinah clicked "Send", then sat at the keypad, wretched, and struggling vainly to compose herself. Not long afterward, an incoming message alerted her. The lawyer's reddened eyes rolled up to the screen. She thought about it, then conceded morosely, *Go ahead. Cuss me out.* Her hand took hold of the mouse. She manipulated the cursor, *I deserve it*, and opened the message. What her eyes encountered surprised her.

> What can I do to help?

The signature surprised her even more.

> Louise Layne

* * *

"Dinah? Lanna. Hi, how's it goin'?"

"Lousy. How's life in D.C.?"

"Interesting . . . and strange. It's like living on another planet."

"So, what's on your mind?"

"Oh, I'm just calling to check up on how you're doing - aside from 'lousy'."

"Olga, and I, are fine . . . thank you."

"Did you get that judgment against Sara settled?"

"Oh, I got that reversed."

"Really? That's great! That's all of them now, right?"

"Yup. Every one of those stupid lawsuits have now - been - dismissed. Sara is free, and clear."

Pause.

"You don't sound very happy about it."

"Yeah, well . . . "

"Sounds like you need a vacation."

"I need to get a job, Lanna."

Pause.

"Is there something wrong with the accounts?"

"No, it's nothing like that - "

"I specifically told my secretary to keep them funded - "

"They're

fine, really . . . "

"Then what's wrong - "

"They exist!"

Pause.

"What?"

"That's what's wrong! They exist! It's - God, I feel like such a leech . . . "

"Dinah, what's wrong?"

"I should be supporting myself! Not living off of you, and Jimmie. I should be working."

"You are working - "

"For what! It's been almost a year, and I have *nothing* to show for it!"

"You've gotten all of Sara's legal difficulties resolved. That, by itself, was no small matter."

Pause.

"Dinah?"

Pause.

Susan

"Lanna, I want you to close the accounts - "

"Dinah, no - "

"I'm serious - "

"No - "

"I've got to make

this on my own."

"But you've devoted a year to it - "

"And where has it gotten me?"

"Well . . . "

"Yeah . . . Maybe . . . maybe you're right. Maybe I do need a vacation - something else to put my mind on. A regular job in a legal office would give me that. A paycheck that I actually earned would give me back some of my selfrespect."

Pause.

"What does Olga think about this?"

"She doesn't know. She . . . keeps pretty much to herself. She's been very quiet lately. I think she's up to something."

"Dinah, being depressed is not a capital offense."

Pause.

"It sure feels like it oughtta be."

"Will you stop doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Punishing yourself. What happened is not your fault."

"Then whose fault is it?"

Pause.

"I don't know - "

"I'm 'er mother, for Gods-sake! He was my - no, he's . . . What kind of woman doesn't guard against such things!"

"Dinah, there was no way for you to know - "

"I let her go, Lanna. When she went off to

Chicago - I let her go . . . "

"I know . . . "

"I told her to be careful, and we said goodbye, and then . . . I let her go . . . Why did I let her go!"

"Dinah, yer . . . you're going to pieces over this - yer driving yerself nuts." *And probably everyone within five miles of you as well.* "Uhm . . . look, uh . . . I'm going to New York in a couple days. Why don't you fly out, and meet me there, and we'll . . . well, we'll

think of something - you have got to give yourself some time away from this."

"I can't do that, Lanna. I've got to keep trying - "

"It's not giving up. It's just getting away

from it for awhile."

"No - really, I can't - "

"Go!"

"What?"

Pause.

"Lanna?"

"Yeah, I'm still here. What was that?"

"I don't know. Somebody said, 'Go'."

"It wasn't me. Do you have a party line?"

"No, but . . . I do know someone who once espoused the party line."

"What?"

"Olga - how long have you been listening?"

"Yer shittin' me - "

"Long enough."

"Hi, Olga."

"Hello, Lanna. Maybe you can talk some sense into this lunatic I am beink living with."

"Olga, this is hardly polite - "

"And the vay you haf been behavink is polite?"

"I . . . think she might have you there."

"Lanna - "

"Is right. You are goink to get out of here, and I am goink to make sure that you do!"

* * *

Lanna opened the door to her posh, New York hotel room to, "Olga! Dinah!"

Though she'd only been confined to the nation's capital for several months up to that point, the blonde was sincerely happy to see two people she regarded as being genuine. She was grateful to be in a social situation where she could relax, and not feel obliged to jockey for control.

"Good to see you both," she almost gushed. "Come on in."

She ushered her visitors into the cavernous suite, instinctively taking note of the ill-fit of Dinah's jacket due to her noticeably augmented physique.

"Gol, what a difference a year makes," she remarked.

The raven-haired lawyer turned to regard her hostess with a look of bemused curiosity. The moment plunged Lanna into unwonted awkwardness.

No need to control is no excuse to be gauche, she warned herself.

She recovered well enough, however.

"Olga, you're looking trim, and fit," she offered to the squat, little Russian who longed to sit down to relieve the stinging ache in her knees.

Olga managed a polite, albeit somewhat confused, smile.

"Well," said Lanna, attempting to recover again as she gestured toward the doorway of an adjoining room, "uh . . . we're all in here."

"All?" Dinah wondered suspiciously.

"Oh, it's just a television producer," the blonde qualified. "We've been discussing an interview appearance for Jimmie."

Dinah, and Olga visually acknowledged their understanding when

"Just?" queried a
soft, but firm, feminine voice.

The three women turned to where the sound had come from. There, framed in the doorway Lanna had indicated, stood a red haired pixie of a woman who might've been only slightly taller than Olga. She looked to be in her mid to early thirties, and wore a dark, formfitting dress-suit that showed off her compact figure nicely.

Lanna found herself in recovery mode, yet again, as she strove to make introductions.

"Dinah? Olga?" she informed the pair. "This is Louise Layne. She produces Ken Clark's show."

Regarding the redhead, Dinah's face lit up.

"Lou?" she asked.

"Yes," Louise conceded in the lawyer's direction, "that's what my friends call me." She then frowned before asking, "Do I know you?"

"I'm - "

"This is Sara's mother," Lanna charged ahead, happy to have, at last, gotten something right since having left the producer to answer the door.

Louise shifted her attention to the blonde. She was still frowning, then her shoulders shrugged.

"Who's Sara?"

"I meant Susan," said Lanna.

"She meant Susan," said Dinah.

"She meant Susan," said Olga.

All three of them had spoken at once, but still, Louise got the name 'Susan'. She looked about to cautiously the others.

"Susan . . ."

"P," said Lanna. "Susan P. Rgrl. That's her name."

"Prgl," said Dinah. "but we call her Sara."

"Susan P. Rgrl," said Olga, "but we call her Sara, or, sometimes, Vibration."

Again, all three of them had spoken at once, but Louise still gathered their meaning.

"Susan P," she wondered audibly.

The others smiled, and nodded.

"The alien computer?"

"Artifact," Olga specifically corrected, sans smile as Dinah, and Lanna, nodded.

The petite redhead slowly emerged from the doorway, coming into the room as though she were in a state of dazed wonderment.

"Dinah?" she queried.

"Yes," Dinah confirmed with a nod, and a friendly smile.

At once, the glow of delighted recognition showed from Louise's face as she hastened to the lawyer, and extended her hand in offering.

"Ms. Prinze, I can't tell you what a pleasure it is to finally meet you in person."

Louise, and Dinah, came together to share a mutually warm handshake as a mutually confused Lanna, and Olga, looked on.

"You two know each other?" asked Lanna.

"The two of you know each other?" asked Olga at the same time.

"We've been interfacing over the net the past few weeks," Dinah informed the others.

"Interesting use of that term, 'interfacing'," Louise noted, "since we're just meeting face to face for the first time."

"Am I missing something here?" Lanna wanted to know.

Dinah, and Louise, shared a look. The lawyer's head tilted slightly as she smirked, "She's blond."

Louise broke out laughing at this. Lanna's eyebrows pricked significantly.

"Oh, excuse me, Mrs. Oldsen," the producer offered as she respectfully stifled herself.

"I am nyot blond," Olga pointed out to indicate that she herself was still a bit lost.

The other three women regarded the old Russian, then all of them shared in a bit of relaxing laughter.

Their meeting turned out to be what none of them had expected. Louise had intended to land Ken an interview with the Washington Wonder Boy; Jimmie Oldsen, Lanna was working with her to stipulate the terms, and content, of the interview, Dinah had come to get away from her troubles, and frustrations, and Olga had come along to make sure that she did. All of that went by the wayside when the coffee, and treats, Lanna had ordered arrived, and they settled themselves around the dining table to relax, and talk. How their conversation evolved would surprise all of them.

"So," Lanna inquired of Dinah, "how long are you going to stay?"

"Oh, just a couple days is all."

"Got any plans?"

"I've got a couple of leads on Alex I need to check into."

"t's not much of a getaway," the blonde noted.

"Tell me about it," groused the lawyer. "Both of them are probably blind alleys anyway."

"Why don't you ask for help?" Louise wondered in Dinah's direction.

Dinah regarded the little redhead.

"You've gotta be kidding," she said.

"No, I'm not," Louise stated simply.

"How am I - "

"Wait a minute, Dinah," Lanna interjected. "I think Louise has a good point."

Dinah gave Lanna her full attention, and waited.

"You've been going it alone on this for - how long?"

"More than a year," Olga forthrightly reported.

"And what've been your results?"

Dinah paused for a prolonged moment. She burned with shame over having to admit,

"Not one damned thing you could hang your hat on."

"You need help," Lanna told her.

"I haf been tryink to steer her in that direction," Olga decried, "but - fuhf! - she von't listen."

"Lanna," said Dinah, "I've got no right to ask anything more from you."

"Well, I don't mean just me."

"You've done far more than enough for me already."

"Are we - getting into something personal here?" Louise wanted to know.

Without taking Louise, or her question, into account, Dinah told the blonde, "Lanna, I want you to stop supporting me."

Now it was Lanna's turn to pause. She was embarrassed that such a thing had been brought up in mixed company. At length, she replied, "Let's - not discuss that here."

"Yes, let's definitely not," chirped Louise.

"Gorls, let's be gettink on to somethink else, shall ve?" suggested Olga.

"Yeah, wul . . ." said Lanna, feeling kind of lost for a moment, then, "Look, Dinah, this going it alone of yours is obviously not working. I mean, nobody knows that better than you. And nobody knows better than you that a scatter-gun approach isn't working either."

"So suggest something else," the lawyer challenged. "I'm open to anything that'll work."

"Do what Louise, and I do," Lanna suggested. "Hire on a staff."

Dinah looked mildly aghast at this.

"You know I can't afford that - "

"Don't - worry about it," Lanna sternly instructed her. She added a index finger to emphasize, "I mean that."

Despite her desire to object, Dinah decided not to press the issue of the bank accounts Lanna was maintaining for hers, and Olga's, benefit, but then she saw another angle of Lanna's suggestion that needed to be addressed.

"Okay, so I take on a staff. How'm I going to background check these people? How am I going to know that at least one of them isn't reporting directly to whoever is behind the disappearances?"

"Such as . . .," the blonde attempted to bait, and tease.

"I know some people I'd like to accuse, but, basically, I don't know," said Dinah. "Now considering the objective, how am I ever going to be certain that I can trust a staff?"

"They don't - haf - to know the objective," said Olga.

"Good point," Louise granted.

Dinah frowned curiously at her roomie.

"What are you getting at?" she wanted to know.

"Conceal the objective," said Lanna. "Obscure it by dividing it up into separate pieces, and have each member of your staff work on their particular piece, but arrange it so that there's no way they can figure out what the objective is."

The lawyer thought about this for a moment, then a frown of curiosity formed on her strong brow.

"That - could get hopelessly confusing," she opined.

"Not really," Louise asserted. She went on to explain, "Think of it as . . . like a jigsaw puzzle. Everyone has their own, separate section of the puzzle to put together, but you're the only one who knows how to put the sections together to make up the whole picture."

Dinah's curious frown deepened.

"But that involves knowing the solution even before you have the problem," she noted.

"She does have a point," Lanna reluctantly noted. "She'd have to know where Alex, and Sara, were - and how they got there - from the outset."

"So what's the purpose of it?" asked Dinah.

"Okay," Louise conceded, "bad analogy."

"Think of it as taking a trip," Olga suggested. "Say you want to find the best way of getting somewhere. So," she went on, using her hands to illustrate, "you have this one of your staff investigate the possibility of going by train. This one looks at getting there by plane. This one checks out driving by car, and so on, and so on."

Dinah's frown relaxed, but only partially.

"That still entails each of them knowing the destination, which is Sara, and Alex," she observed.

Olga paused at this, and then she sighed dispiritedly, knowing that Dinah's observation was all too true.

"Look - don't get me wrong on this," the lawyer strove to assure the others. "I appreciate your concern, but . . . without my knowing what the hell is going on - which I don't - there is no way to keep a staff - or any member of one, really - from eventually knowing more than I do, and that - could be disastrous."

The significance of Dinah's statement struck a deeply sobering chord in all of them. No one said anything for a time as they each became absorbed in their own reflections.

"Assuming that Sara is still on earth," Louise finally noted almost too quietly, "control of her could merely shift from whoever has it now . . . to someone else."

"Blackmail?" ventured Lanna.

"That might be the most optimistic prospect," Olga speculated. "The new 'whoever' could be purely interested in usink her for their own agenda."

"Or selling her to the highest bidder," Lanna continued.

"And, with Sara," Louise concluded, "not even the sky would be the limit on that score."

Dinah relaxed back in her chair, and regarded the other three women in turn.

"You getting to see what I'm up against?" she casually asked.

Their last few exchanges had effected a disquieting change in the atmosphere among them. The implications of what they'd touched upon played on Louise's inherent nervousness.

"Maybe we shouldn't go any further with this," she hesitantly suggested. "I mean - wherever she is - as-ever she is . . . Susan seems to be dormant now." She made sure she had the attention of the other three before she ventured, "Maybe that's as it should be."

Dinah sat forward, and glared at the high-strung pixie.

"Doing nothing - is not - an option," she stated forthrightly.

"Wul, Dinah," Louise hedged as she attempted to point out, "you're looking at it from a purely personal point of view."

"Sara is nyot an 'it'," Olga stated with an authoritative glare of her own.

"Alright, settle down you two," Lanna quietly admonished Olga, and Dinah. "Lord knows, there's enough ignorance about this situation to go around for all of us."

"Maybe the freaking Cryptos know," Dinah huffed as she lounged back in her chair again with her arms folded disconsolately over her chest.

"Ma'am," Louise maintained to Olga, "Susan is not a person."

Dinah looked at the redhead.

"I beg your pardon," she demanded

Undeterred, Louise fixed her attention on Dinah.

"You can beg all you want," she stated.

The producer then went on to address the others at the table.

"You can't look at Sara - or Susan . . . whatever 'er name is - from a purely personal point of view," she insisted. "I mean . . . she's not just some sweet, innocent looking, little girl. She's . . . a force - the likes of which this world has never known, and she's controlled by . . . God only knows who - or *what* maybe."

Both Dinah, and Olga, had heard all of this before - many times. They regarded one another knowingly.

"'Body Snatchers'," said Olga.

Dinah's chin wrinkled as she shook her head.

"'Plan 9 From Outer Space'," she countered.

"Ohf!" scoffed Olga with a dismissive wave as she looked away. "That awful movie."

"Uh . . .," a curious Lanna said to her Houston visitors, "care to include the rest of us?"

"Oh," said Dinah lightly, "we were just comparing what Lou was saying to those - 'scary' movies of the fifties."

Louise frowned, displeased with the unwanted levity.

"What's that got to do with what we're talking about here?" she wanted to know.

Olga smiled at the producer. Her wise, old eyes sparkled.

"More than you might tink," she quietly told her.

"Sara watched all of those old, alien invasion type, science fiction movies with Alex when she was little," Dinah explained. "He thought it would help give her a point of reference to what she was, and to her being on earth."

"I never thought that was a good idea," Olga said with a scowl. She then turned to Louise to wonder, "Can you imagine seeing such paranoia from the perspective of the alien?"

"I didn't think she should've been exposed to that sort of stuff at such a young age either," Dinah confided to the producer of her own account. "I kept telling Alex, 'You're going to give that girl a complex.'"

"Hah!" Olga happily exclaimed, then she went on to relate how, "And one time, she overheard you, and she flew up into the air, and shouted, 'I want an apartment complex!'"

Olga laughed, but it was laughter that could easily have given way to tears. She covered her mouth with her hands, hoping no one would notice.

Dinah smiled wistfully . . . remembering. "She was so young then . . ."

Olga went on - had to go on, "Do you remember the one with the robot?"

"Gol, which one?" asked Dinah. "She must've seen all of them."

"It was . . . oh, what was it now . . . uh, 'The Day . . .'"

"'The Earth Stood Still'?" asked Lanna.

"*That's* the one!" chimed Olga.

"Oh, *that* one!" chimed Dinah, as she recalled the movie, and then she recalled the time. She grew quiet, and still, as she remembered . . . "I

saw them - after they'd watched that movie . . . wearing those - stupid football helmets . . . lumbering around the playground - like they were dueling Gorts. And Sara would say, in her robot voice, 'I have the most powerful weapon!' And then she'd zap a soda-pop can with her eyes. And then Alex said in his robot voice, 'I - have the most powerful weapon!' And then he turned around, and farted." . . . she remembered now . . . so well . . . "And Sara got so scared. She was only a few days old then, and that was the first time Alex had . . . done that." . . . remembered . . . "It took us almost an hour to calm her down, and convince her that he wasn't broken." . . . so well . . . "And then - when she learned about what he'd done . . . she loved it - and she hated it." . . . remembered . . . "She was so jealous that she couldn't fart."

The woman, the wife, the mother was in wrenching tears of grief, and mourning, once again. Lanna reached across the table, and took one her hands as Olga rose to hover over her, both of them offering what consolement they could.

Unable to reconcile what she was seeing with her reserving thoughts, Louise stood up, and moved away from what she saw. She had to remove herself so she might deal with what she felt . . . and what she saw. Her footsteps drifted aimlessly until she came to stand before a window that looked out over Central Park. She looked out the window - farther . . . farther, and the sound of Dinah's crying faded as she found solace in the trees, and meadows, she saw below.

"Is pretty view Lanna has from here."

Louise jolted awake. She didn't know how much time had passed since she'd been gazing out the window. She looked askance enough to see Dinah's Russian companion standing at her side just behind her shoulder. She didn't make reply, but looked out the window once again, her vision fixed on the air outside. A memory emerged from within her mind. Unbidden - unsought, it was a memory that she recognized at once - a memory full of pleasantness. Her eyes looked out the window - seeing nothing, but the memory . . . and Sara was there again, just as she had been before.

"She appeared outside my window, on the coldest winter night," Louise said, in keeping with her memory. "Instantly, I felt . . . all warm inside - enfolded in the comfort of a strange, but strangely reassuring, presence. She was . . . so beautiful. The wind, and snow, swirled all around her, but not one flake so much as touched upon her hair. So . . . unnatural, and yet . . . so pure. She was . . . an independent - singular among the elements - free . . . of all."

Her journey of respite began to close.

"I wanted her."

The image in her memory
began to fade.

"Wanted to be with her."

The view from out the window came.

"Wanted her
with me."

Causing her to blink from the surprise of her returning.

"I damn-near threw
myself through the window."

Louise bid her memory goodbye as where she was took hold of her again. Olga allowed a respectful moment to pass before she spoke.

"Louees," the old one softly called to her.

Louise heard her, and listened carefully.

"Dealing with Susan is nyot an easy matter. Those of us who know her, just accept her. She is nice gorl . . . a good gorl, who . . . does many things vchich no one else cannot do."

Louise turned to face the woman.

"She's a force that could change the world," she stated, "Mrs. . . ."

"Olga," the Russian kindly told her.

The two of them regarded one another.

"The world vill change anyvay," Olga informed the redhead with equal kindness.

"But it's not the same with . . . Sara," Louise tried to maintain. "I mean; we don't know who made her, or why she was put here."

The old one smiled.

"And you do know - who made you, and vhy you vere put here?" she asked.

Louise frowned, and then she blinked.

"You're confusing the issue."

"The issue is as confused, or as clear, as ve vould wish to see it," Olga told her. "The unknowable goes by many names, Louees. Some say Crypto Aliens - others call it God."

An instinctual reaction to what she'd heard caused Louise to smile. Regarding Olga, who looked steadfastly back at her, she decided to keep the smile. She glanced over at the table where Dinah, and Lanna, sat. Dinah had recovered herself, and was quietly conversing with Mr. Oldsen's wife.

"What're you two conspiring about?" she wanted to know.

The women at the table interrupted themselves to look at Louise.

"If you'd care to join us, you'd know," invited Lanna.

Louise thought a moment more, then looked back to Olga. The old Russian merely looked at her. The redhead sighed away the rest of her tension, then approached the pair seated at the table.

"So," said Louise as Olga following behind her, "where were we?"

Dinah leaned back in her chair. She seemed tired.

"Oh, Lanna, and I, were just tossing some options around," she said easily.

Olga, and Louise, took their seats again.

"Have you," Louise asked Dinah as she settled herself, "considered your basis of popular support."

"Oh shit!" the lawyer derided grandly. "Don't get me started on that."

"Why?" Louise wanted to know. "What's the matter with popular support?"

Dinah's eyes narrowed ominously as she regarded the diminutive producer.

"If you could see a fraction of the crap I've had to deal with," she uttered slowly.

"Well, I've got my own crap, thank you very much."

"I have wasted so much time chasing up blind alleys," Dinah went on.

"Wul, not every alley is blind," smiled Louise.

Dinah's look darkened as her eyes narrowed.

"Meaning?" she inquired.

"Ladies," Olga interjected, "this is nyot the reason for vhy ve are beink here."

After a moment, Dinah relaxed. Louise contritely dropped her smile.

"Alright, I'm sorry," Louise sincerely offered to Dinah, then, "I . . . don't know about your . . . crap, but, in the area of public support, what I'm getting is definitely not crap. Sara's got a lot of it."

"This is public support we're talking about, right?" Lanna kinda-sorta wondered.

Now it was Louise's turn to glare, but both Olga, and Dinah, smiled, and then they laughed. Louise then let herself in on the joke, and smiled.

"Alright, public support. Okay?" she stipulated, and then she went on. "I'm in touch with a lot of other networks. On the shows they own the copyrights to, they all offer tapes of those shows for public sale." She paused for a significant moment, then, "Guess whose tapes are the best selling item?" She waited, then looked about to see three significantly blank

faces. "Any show that Sara's been on. I mean - one year later - she is still the most popular television personality."

"Ooo-I'll bet Marshall will be just thrilled to hear that," opined Lanna.

"Marshall?" queried Dinah with a look, and both eyebrows arched.

"The President," the blonde corrected herself.

Louise had sat back in her chair while this exchange had gone on. She regarded Lanna with a thoughtful frown.

"Y'know, Mrs. Oldsen, you just brought up an interesting subject. One of the things that's been floating around the rumor-mill in my part of the world lately is a Federal initiative to change the copyright classification on electronic media. You know anything about that?"

Lanna took some moments to sift through her mental file of government goings-on.

"No, I don't," she finally reported, "but I think I might know where to begin finding out."

"Yeah well," Louise went on, "the concern is that a law like that could allow the government to seize really any recorded media they considered to be a threat to national security interests."

"In other vords; they'd be able to take anytink they vanted," said Olga from her long experience with repression.

Lanna sat quietly reflective for awhile.

"I hate to say it," she soberly acknowledged, "but that does fit in with the prevailing pattern in Washington."

"But would they go to such lengths against Sara?" Dinah wondered.

"The government is very concerned with encouraging public forgetfulness of her," said Louise.

"And a number of world governments are watching to see what ours does," Lanna added.

"But it's not working," said Louise. "Like it or not - know it or not, Dinah, there is a large segment of the general public which is still very fascinated with Sara. And, like you say, Mrs. Oldsen - "

"Lanna," said Lanna.

"Thanks," said Louise, then she continued, "like you say, this is all over the world."

"It's still mostly crap," groused Dinah.

"But it's *active - interest*, Dinah," Louise stressed.

"None of it has been the least bit helpful in finding either one of them," the lawyer complained. "I could spend sixteen hours a day going through Sara's E-mail box, and ninety-nine percent of it is, 'Oh gee, we're really sorry'. How the hell do you find anyone on that?"

"Still," Louise insisted, "a strong base of public support could be instrumental in relaxing government resistance to her."

"There's only one problem," Lanna noted in Louise's direction.

"And what's that?" the feisty redhead challenged.

The blonde smiled.

"We have to find her first."

Louise gave her a fatigued smirk. Lanna turned her attention to Dinah to share a thought.

"What about narrowing the focus of your search?" she suggested.

"I can't do that," the lawyer asserted with conviction. "There are so - many possibilities of where they could be . . . what if I make the wrong choice? It's just that much more time wasted."

"So you sit paralyzed," Lanna pointed out, "unable to do anything, and getting nowhere anyway."

Dinah just sat there, looking at the blonde. The truth hurt, but what Lanna had said was the truth.

"What is," Louise asked carefully, "the most likely - possibility?"

"That their disappearances are connected," Dinah answered, "and that there's high level government involvement."

"Top level?" Lanna wondered.

"Possibly," said Dinah.

Lanna waved her hand impatiently.

"Get away from that 'anything is possible' way of thinking," she told the lawyer. "We're after - most - likely here. Now, are we talking high level, or top level, involvement?"

Dinah devoted some thought to the question before deciding, "Top level."

"That means the President," said Louise.

"Of what country?"

"Oh, Dinah - stop it already!" Lanna countered heatedly.

The Amazon glared at her.

"You think this is easy!" she demanded to know.

"Most - likely!" the blonde stated with equal force. She sat back in her chair, and took a moment to calm down. "I mean, c'mon. It's starring you right in the face. The first third party candidate in this country's history to win the White House, and how did he do it?"

Dinah hesitated to answer. Finally, Louise spoke up.

"On a basically anti-Susan platform," she recollected.

"You saw the campaign," Lanna told the lawyer. "Wayans didn't make speeches against his major party opponents, he made them against Sara." She slumped disconsolately in her chair as she recalled how, "He kicked her around like a Goddamned football."

"And yet she never once spoke out," Louise noted.

Obviously pained by the memory, Dinah reluctantly admitted, "Sara was very concerned that she not meddle in human affairs, so Alex, and I, advised her not to get involved with politics."

"But - to not even say anything in her own defense?" the producer wondered.

Lanna eyed the lawyer steadily.

"She was involved whether actively, or not, Dinah," she stated, then she looked away. "Sara's silence may have been just the thing that gave Wayans the election."

"It sure didn't slow 'im down," said Louise. "He just got bolder in his attacks as she continued to say . . . nothing."

Dinah was near tears at this point from all the implications. Olga interjected.

"Ve are all aware of Sara's impact on the world. She knew of it too. Sara knew of the attacks beink made against her. She was greatly saddened by them, but she felt that, if that was the vay humans vere goink to be reacting to her, then so it had to be."

Lanna, and Louise, sat quietly reflecting on what the old woman had just said. Dinah wrestled visibly with her own, very personal, recollections of the time. The silence was broken by Louise's soft voice.

"Admirable," she said into the distance.

"Being admirable doesn't get ya squat in this world," Lanna stated. She wanted to get them off this horrible topic, and on to . . . anything else. "Alright, so where does that leave us?"

"With two missing people, without a clue," Dinah merely whispered.

"Dinah, you have got to get yourself out of that frame of mind," the blonde stressed as gently as she could.

"She's right, Dinah," Olga agreed. "You've spent a year lookink everywhere, and

anywhere, and look where it has gotten you."

"Most - likely," Lanna reiterated carefully. "That's what you've got to focus on."

"But what if I'm wrong?"

"I don't think you will be," said Louise. "Sara paved the way for Wayans getting into the White House."

"And, after he got there," Lanna added, "he had an electoral mandate to get rid of her - if there was any way that he could."

She waited for any of the others to say anything. All of their attention gravitated toward Dinah, awaiting some word from her. The subdued Amazon, however, remained silent, and unmoving. She was numb - with loss, with failure, with regret and with bitter sadness. Lanna grew impatient with waiting.

"I say we focus on Wayans," she stated decisively.

As though she'd been awakened from a trance, Dinah looked up, wide-eyed, at the blonde.

"Most - likely, Dinah," Lanna stressed, but gently.

Dinah couldn't deny that Lanna, and Louise, were right. She'd tried to keep herself from focusing too much on Marshall Wayans, because of her previous connections to him, but now, she couldn't deny that he was the - most likely - suspect.

"Alright," she conceded, though with great reluctance. Her mental gearing shifted, focused and began exploring a greatly narrowed set of possibilities.

"There's going to be an awful lot to do."

She produced the notepad, and pen, she always carried with her, and began scribbling topic words off the top of her head as the others looked on. When she was finished, she turned the pad so that it faced Lanna, and shoved it to the center of the table.

"There's a rough laundry sheet," she said, leaning back in her chair. Her writing hand toyed nervously with her pen. "It can be refined as we go along."

Lanna, and Louise, studied the words Dinah had written. Olga was already familiar with the terms.

"Financial irregularities'," Louise read, then she opined, "There's a lost cause for you."

"Why's that?" Dinah asked.

"I've been doing some research into Wayans' finances," the producer related, "or at least I've been trying to. I'm finding that all his roads lead to nowhere, and a lot of them simply disappear."

"That's standard practice among the rich," Lanna noted dryly. "They're constantly moving funds around. It gives them something to do."

"I'm not arguing that," said Louise, "but there's always a pattern to the way it's done. With Wayans, there is no pattern."

"Maybe that *is* the pattern," suggested Dinah.

"Maybe your own assumptions in approach think the problem are hindering you," Olga suggested.

"Assumptions?" queried the redhead.

"Vell, like Dinah says; a different pattern requires that it be approached with a different set of assumptions."

"Or no assumptions at all," added Dinah.

"'Blue Team' . . .," Lanna murmured as she read from Dinah's list. She glanced up at the lawyer thoughtfully. "I've heard that term."

"That's Wayans' special unit." Dinah related. "He formed them long before he became President."

Louise frowned curiously.

"What's he need a special unit for?" she wondered. "He's already got the FBI, CIA and God knows whatever else at his disposal."

"To get around legality," said Dinah academically.

"And Congress," Lanna added.

"Isn't that the same thing?" asked Louise.

"Well, almost," said Lanna, then she went on to explain to the producer. "Utilization of federal agencies requires that certain procedures be followed. Getting approval for an agenda takes time."

"And it requires disclosure of the agenda's purpose," Dinah added, "which is something that -," she eyed Lanna, "'Marshall' - would rather not do in a lot of cases."

"Ooo," Louise said upon consulting her watch, "look at the time." She got up from the table. "I've got to get back to the studio."

This prompted Lanna to check her own watch.

"And I've got an interviewer from 'The New Yorker' coming in twenty minutes."

She got up from her chair. Olga struggled to push herself up onto her feet.

"Are you alright?" the blonde inquired of the old woman.

"Oh yes," Olga lied as she stood up, then moved off to try to work out some of the

stiffness in her knees.

"Anybody seen my purse?" asked Louise, randomly looking about the place.

"I'll have to call room service," said Lanna, eyeing the tray service on the table, "and have that cleared away."

She headed for the house phone.

"Oh," chirped Louise, "here it is."

She retrieved her purse from the living area sofa.

"Hey!" Dinah suddenly called out to all of them.

The three other women stopped, and turned to regard the lawyer still seated at the table.

Her arms spread wide, Dinah wanted to know of them, "Where's all this help I was supposed to be getting?"

Awkwardness suddenly befell the other three. The pause that followed only made the atmosphere among them feel more awkward.

"Dinah," Lanna finally offered to her - awkwardly, "you've got full financial support. I mean, really, whatever you need - it's yours. What more do you want?"

"A little moral support might help," Louise noted pointedly.

The blonde shot the redhead a hostile glance.

"I don't see you waving any pompoms, Miss Cheerleader," she noted - pointedly.

"Gorls," Olga quietly attempted to chasten them, "let's nyot be arguink."

The pause resumed as Dinah regarded the three other women with the accusing gaze of a prosecutor in full possession of an airtight case. None of the others moved. All of them avoided eye contact with the attorney.

"Okay," Dinah sighed at length, her tone heavily weighted with disappointment.

She got up herself, leaving her notepad where she'd placed it on the table, and moved away from everything, and everyone.

"I guess that puts me back at square one, all by my lonesome," she observed with resignation, "yet again."

"Dinah," Olga sought to explain, "I haf the apartments to run. These new tenants I've been gettink . . . they complain about everything."

Dinah turned to regard her room mate. She knew of what she'd said, and understood - but still . . .

"I . . . have to - baby-sit Ken," Louise said in a small voice tinged with embarrassment. She avoided looking at any of the others. "He . . . does hold the keys to my kingdom . . .

unfortunately."

As if she'd been cued, Lanna raised her eyes to the rest of the group.

"And I have to keep an eye on Jimmie," she said bravely. "Wayans is steering him into some really nasty stuff."

Her look dared anyone to find anything the least bit wrong with that.

Dinah waited for anything more to be said. She was miffed. She understood the individual situations of the others, but still . . . she was miffed. No one said anything else. No one moved, or made a sound. The silence among them was awful. Finally, the lawyer stepped toward the table.

Screw it, thought Dinah

Screw the tenants, thought Olga.

Screw Jimmie, thought Lanna.

Screw Ken, thought Louise.

At once, four hands reached along the table for the notepad. All of them touched it at exactly the same instant. Their world suddenly froze. The sight of the other three hands along with their own was a shock to each of them. How could such a coincidence have possibly occurred? they wondered. None of them could believe that it had happened, and yet, there it was; four hands, motivated by the same thought, at the same time, with the same result. Maintaining that indication of a bond between them, all four of the women looked to the others for what next to do, each of them feeling both gratified, and lost.

While she, and Lanna, regarded one another, Dinah felt a sensation on the back of her extended hand. She looked down to see what it was that had touched her, and noticed that Olga had placed her own hand on top of hers. She saw the Russian regarding her steadily with subdued resolve. Noticing, Lanna raised her hand from the notepad, and placed it over Olga's. With a mutually respectful glance, she, and Olga, acknowledged one another, then Lanna looked at Dinah with a determined will. Finally, Louise extended her own hand a little further, and placed it on top of Lanna's.

They had made their decision. They had made their choice. All of them, at once, felt a profound kinship of shared purpose. It felt good. It felt great.

It made Louise smile.

"Welcome to the Pink Team," she quietly proclaimed.

Chapter Forty-five

Search

With their focus narrowed to President Wayans, the Pink Team decided it would be best to establish an operations base in Chicago where Wayans Manor was. Though the estate was now officially a museum, open to the general public, knowing of the President's preoccupation with secrecy as she did, Dinah was certain that Wayans still made use of the old maze of concrete shelters located beneath the mansion.

The objective was to gain access to the estate over a period of time, and simply be aware to what went on. The problem was to do so undetected. The people close to Wayans were familiar with Dinah, and they were becoming familiar with Lanna. Louise had a high recognition factor due to her television appearances - especially the ill-fated news program she'd co-anchored a few years before. None of them had the advantage of anonymity - except Olga. She had managed to stay clear of the media blitz that had swirled around Sara, and all of them were confident that none of Wayans' people either knew her, or knew of her.

Olga agreed to go. Lanna set up accounts for her at a small Chicago bank. Olga turned the keys of the apartment complex over to Raoul, and Maria, with specific instructions for them to keep a watchfully protective eye on Dinah. She knew she could trust the young Cuban couple. They were good. They were reliable. She packed her bags, and Dinah drove her to the airport. Their parting was difficult - for both of them.

Once she got to the Windy City, Olga set herself up in a modest, two bedroom apartment on the same side of town as, but not too close to, Wayans Manor. She stocked it with basic furnishings, and office settings, making sure that both computers she got were properly linked to the other Pink Team members in their home bases; Dinah in Houston, Lanna in D.C., Louise in New York. After that, she registered with several placement agencies, looking for job openings at one particular location.

* * *

"My husband passed away nyot long ago," the older applicant explained to the staffing

interviewer at Wayans Manor, "and I am afraid that his pension is nyot much. At least nyot enough for me to live on."

"I see," said the interviewer, looking over Olga's application for an opening in the palatial estate's janitorial staff. "I see here that you don't really have any work history, Mrs. . . . Jach-im . . ."

"Jachimczyk," Olga graciously provided to the young man. She then went on to explain, "That is because my husband - my the good Lord rest his dear soul - always took very good care of me, and I took very care of him by keeping *immaculate* house."

The interviewer looked up at the old woman sitting across from his desk. He smiled.

"I see," he said.

Olga smiled at him in polite return.

Olga was taken onto the midnight janitorial staff at Wayans Manor. She was assigned to a partner; a thick set, middle-aged, African-American woman named Bertha. She had been at the estate for some years. She was simple, amiable, easy to get along with, and bore a spirit that ran deeper than she knew. She didn't have any axes to grind, or crosses to burn. She accepted that people were prejudiced regardless of race, creed, or color.

"Do you drink?" was the first thing she asked the little Russian once they were alone.

Olga was paused at being posed such a question during what amounted to an introduction. She recovered well enough, however, to politely answer, "No."

"That surprises me," the animated, woman of color went on, "with you bein' Russian, an' all, y'know. Oh, but then, I don't drink either. An' me bein' with you, that surprises me even more."

By this point, Olga was fairly lost, so she merely wondered, "Vhy is that?"

Fed the prompt she sought, Bertha thrilled to reply, "Because, between the two of us, we make a Black Russian."

She also had an engaging, if sneaky, sense of humor.

* * *

After greeting his family upon returning home from work at his JPL office, Dave Nolan sifted through the day's mail. As each envelope passed in succession before his watchful eye, his attention focused on the sender's address at the upper left corner. He shivered from a

sudden, involuntary chill when he encountered the fourth envelope. He lost all interest in the remaining three he hadn't looked at yet.

Nine now, he thought to himself.

Nolan withdrew himself from his household to the seclusion of his den. The letters he'd been getting over the past several months now had made him increasingly aware that what he was doing might be dangerous. He'd sent out a number of queries around the country to people he knew in his field. Their responses had troubled him more, and more.

He discarded the rest of the mail onto his desk, and opened the letter of his concern. It was from a guy he knew in Houston who worked for a company that tracked communications satellites. Extracting the contents, he found a sheet of data accompanied by a cover letter. He looked at the boarder heading at the top of the data sheet. The date, and time, corresponded with the date, and time, the alien artifact was supposed to have left earth. Nolan's experienced eyes scanned the data tables. Once again, for the ninth time, he saw that there was no unusual satellite movement - anywhere.

Curled up on the living room couch in their D.C. condo, Lanna sipped at an evening glass of light wine as she watched Ken Clark's interview with Jimmie on their theater screen TV. She, and Louise, had agreed on every detail of the interview's content. Lanna had coached Jimmie thoroughly before his appearance. Both women knew exactly what to expect. Lanna was pleased with what she'd seen so far.

At the Pink Team headquarters in Chicago, Olga was resting in bed before going to work, pleasantly dividing her attention between a crossword puzzle, and her television. The crossword puzzle had lain unattended in her lap since 'Deep Inside With Ken Clark' had come on.

Dinah sauntered into the cardiovascular room of her Houston gym with the headset she'd picked up at the front desk. She'd just finished 'playing around' with nearly fifteen tons of iron, and she wanted to cool down with some biking before she headed home. She found an empty unit among the rows of stationary cycling machines, climbed aboard, set the tension to her liking, then started pedaling. Once she was settled, Dinah put on her headset, then toyed with the cord as she visually scanned the bay of ceiling mounted television sets at the front of the room.

The entertainment was a perk for the gym membership to alleviate the numbing boredom inherent in cardiovascular pursuit. To solve the problem of conflicting audio with

each set being tuned to a different channel, each cycling unit was wired with its own channel selector so that the user could tune into the audio of whichever TV they wished to watch, and listen through a plug-in headset.

Dinah was searching for one particular show on one particular channel.

"We're back," said Ken's handsome, wholesome, smiling visage to camera 2 in New York as Louise, Cindy and the rest of the 'Deep Inside' crew looked on, "with software executive, and special White House consultant, James Oldsen."

Camera 3 took over with a mid-closeup shot of Jimmie.

There 'e is, thought Dinah, spotting Jimmie's image of one of the TV monitors. She plugged in her headset, and set the channel selector in time to hear Ken ask, "Mr. Oldsen, you were close to the alien artifact known as 'Susan P', weren't you?"

"Yes," Jimmie answered, "Sara - I mean, Susan - and I were very close."

Not nearly as close as she would've liked, thought Lanna as she stared into her glass.

"Yeah, you some big-time heartbreaker, you are," said Olga to Jimmie's image on her screen, "you jerk!"

"And you knew her pretty well, didn't you?" asked Ken.

"I knew the artifact, probably, better than anyone," Jimmie felt confident to state.

In - your - dreams, thought Dinah as her strong legs pedaled faster.

"Her technology was quite far advanced from anything we currently have, was it not?" was Ken's next question.

"Oh, way far advanced," said Jimmie, "in fact, we're still making discoveries to this day as to how the artifact worked."

"Really?" cued Ken on cue.

"Yes," Jimmie affirmed, then, "but, unfortunately, not all of those discoveries have been pleasant." Jimmie shifted in his seat with some notable discomfort. "This may come as a surprise to some people, but evidence has been surfacing to indicate that the artifact was not as nice as it may have seemed."

What? thought Lanna, looking up at the screen.

Where did this come from? wondered Louise.

Jimmie had just broached upon a sub-topic which neither of the women had discussed in planning his interview appearance. Louise wondered if it was a surprise to Ken as well. If so, she hoped that he would be able to cover.

"Nice'," Ken echoed in response to Jimmie's statement.

C'mon Ken, Louise prayed, *show us that you're worth all of that money you're being overpaid.*

"That's not to say that . . .," Ken improvised, "she went around stealing candy from children, or anything like that?"

Jimmie laughed.

"Oh, nothing like that, Ken," he assured.

"Well, *that's* a relief," quipped Ken.

Is it any wonder why I love him, Louise . . . wondered.

God, what a jerk, thought Dinah.

"The point that needs to be made here," Jimmie continued, "is that it's become very clear that the artifact's purpose on earth was not of a benevolent nature."

Wha . . . ? Dinah wondered in astonishment.

How can this be? wondered Olga.

"By that," said Ken as he shifted in *his* chair with noticeable discomfort, "are you suggesting Susan's intentions toward mankind were malicious?"

"That I can't answer," Jimmie stipulated, "but the artifact's affect has definitely not been good."

What are you doing? Lanna wondered through clenched teeth as she intently watched her husband's image. *What - are - you doing?*

Cindy was now frantically leafing through her copy of the program's summary.

"Lou," she called into Louise's headset from the control booth, "I'm not finding any of this."

"That's because it's not there," Louise whispered into her headset from where she stood beside camera 1. "How long have we got 'til commercial?"

"Okay . . .," said Ken, improvising as best he could, "can you elaborate on how . . . the artifact - has been harmful to mankind?"

"I'm glad you asked me that, Ken," Jimmie said, "because the government has come to recognize a clear, and present, danger."

And I'm looking at it right now, Dinah thought to Jimmie's screen image.

"It seems that the artifact's purpose," Jimmie went on to elaborate, "was to compromise earth technology."

Lanna's empty wine glass suddenly shattered in her gripping hand.

"That's a pretty serious statement, Mr. Oldsen," said Ken as he shifted in his chair

again. "As serious as it is potentially broad ranging, in fact."

"Yes it is, Ken," said Jimmie. It was one of the rare occasions when he risked eye contact with someone.

"Can you tell us just how the artifact intended to accomplish this?" Ken asked for the television viewing audience.

"Oh, it's way beyond the point of mere intention," said Jimmie. "It's become, in point of actual fact - reality."

Ken was completely in foreign territory now, and he was beginning to show it. He wasn't sure if he wanted to hear the answer to the next, obvious, question.

"And . . . could you tell us what that reality is?" he bravely asked.

This - better - be good, thought Dinah.

She'd increased the setting on her cycling machine. The muscles of her thighs, and butt, were burning in a way she liked.

"By way of an . . . alien computer virus," was Jimmie's answer.

Virus? wondered Olga.

Virus? wondered Dinah.

"Virus'," echoed Ken.

"Yes," said Jimmie.

Lanna didn't see the medium close-up of Ken Clark's image looking nervously out at the viewing public. She'd wrapped a handkerchief around the cut on her hand, and was upstairs in Jimmie's office, waking his computer.

"Lou," called Cindy into her headset. "where's he going with this?"

"I don't know," Louise admitted. She thought a moment, then she asked her director carefully, "Can you cut to a commercial?"

"It would look really bad at this point, I'm afraid," Cindy replied.

"Okay, but we've got a guy on world air who's playing hacky-sack with this network's license to broadcast," Louise whispered intensely into the mic of her headset. "Now tell Ken to wrap this segment, and go to commercial - now!"

"Cindy?" called Jack, the show's assistant director, who was sitting beside her. "Ken's sweating."

"Uh-oh," Cindy fretted, "we can't have that."

She immediately put herself through to Ken's ear jack.

Lanna opened Jimmie's hard disc, and scrolled her way down the column of folder

icons. She stopped when she spotted one that bore the title, 'Susan'. She tried to open the file. It was locked.

Once off air, a nerve racked Ken lay back in his chair as a couple of make-up personnel fussed over him. He resembled a boxer between late rounds who was almost, but not quite, down for the count. After instructing Cindy to get the network's executive on the phone, Louise placed herself firmly, and directly, in front of

"Mr. Oldsen."

Jimmy looked up at the 'Deep Inside' producer from where he sat. The inherently shy, computer geek wanted to look Louise in the eye, but his field of visual concentration only made it as far as her upper lip.

"You are departing from the planned content of this interview," Louise informed the show's guest.

"I'm aware of that, Ms. Layne," Jimmy readily, but quietly, acknowledged.

"You are making statements that are not covered in your contractual agreement with this show."

"I know that."

Louise tried to see into the young man who would not meet her gaze.

"So what is your point, Mr. Oldsen?"

Jimmy found the courage to raise his eyes just a bit more.

"You'll find out, Ms. Layne."

Louise felt a painful chill course through the length of her spine.

"Telephone for Ms. Layne," Cindy's voice announced over the studio's loudspeaker.

Louise had taken her headset off to talk with Jimmy. She turned to regard Cindy in the control booth, then raised the speaker to her ear.

"Is it Babcock?" she inquired into the headset's mic.

"Yes," Cindy confirmed to Louise through her headset, "and *he* is calling *you*."

Louise's jaw tensed as she, and the show's director, continued looking at each other through the thick, control booth glass. Louise then turned away.

"Put 'im through," the producer instructed as she slipped the headset's band over her crown, and wandered off by herself away from the crew. Cindy gleaned Louise's desire for privacy, and connected the producer to the network executive.

"Mr. B.?" Louise queried.

"Yes, Louise," intoned the disembodied voice of Evans Babcock.

Louise did an instant judgment on the way the executive sounded. His calm alarmed her.

"We . . . have a guest on air who's become a very loose cannon," she informed him.

"Yes, I know," Babcock acknowledged. "I've been watching the program."

"You saw the outline for the show, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Then you must be aware of the fact that he's already made a number of unscheduled remarks, and we're just half way through the show. You should also know that he's resisting requests to get back on script."

A pause ensued which Louise found most unsettling. It wasn't like Babcock to hesitate. She welcomed hearing the sound of his voice again until she heard him say, "Let him go, Louise."

"Let him - ," Louise echoed incredulously. For a moment, the producer completely lost her mental bearings, then, "Sir, his comments could put us in court for a very long, and expensive, time."

She waited for a response to this. It didn't come.

"Mr. Babcock?" she called into her headset mic.

She waited more, then the executive said almost too quietly into her earpiece, "Don't interfere, Ms. Layne."

A blast of dead air momentarily filled the space between Louise's ears, then, *What the hell!* occurred to her, then she thought to ask, but carefully, "Sir, do you know something I don't?"

Another overly protracted pause ensued

Say something - dammit!

"I'm afraid I do, Louise," was Babcock's answer.

Louise was certain that he sounded reluctant, then she heard the executive instruct her to, "Just let him go."

Louise didn't hear the network's chief decision maker terminate his end of their connection. She didn't see, or hear anything, in fact, until

"Fifteen seconds!" Cindy's voice sounded over the loudspeaker, cueing the studio for airtime.

"Forty-five!" Louise heard herself scream.

She felt herself hurrying back toward the stage where Ken, and Jimmie, were sitting.

She eyed Cindy in the control booth, giving her a deeply disturbing look, and held up the appropriate number of fingers as she demanded, "Four - five!"

She was confident that Cindy would fill the additional thirty seconds with a few more commercial spots as she confronted the show's guest a second time. She knew, from her conversation with Babcock, that something was very wrong with what was going on. She had to make it right - she had to try, at least. Maybe . . . if she could bluff him . . .

"Mr. Oldsen,"

Louise said to specifically call Jimmie's attention to her. When she got it, "You will restrict yourself to the approved outline of this interview, or we will go to another pre-taped segment."

Jimmie looked up to the bridge of the Louise's nose. He smiled.

"No you won't," he calmly stated.

"Fifteen, Lou," Cindy's voice sounded in the studio.

Louise turned to her. The director was in no way reassured by what she saw in the producer's face.

Louise's stunned attention wandered to, "Ken?" The make-up crew had finished freshening his appearance. Still, she needed to ask him, "How're you holding up?"

"Well," Ken admitted a bit reluctantly, "I'm a little lost without a script."

"I'll take care of him, Ms. Layne," said Jimmie.

Louise looked at the show's guest. Again, she found herself to be uncharacteristically speechless.

"Five seconds," cued Cindy from the control booth.

Louise regarded Jimmie, then left the stage a second before

"Our guest, on Deep Inside, tonight is software wizard, and special White House consultant, James Oldsen," Ken announced to camera 2 for the viewing audience. He turned to Jimmie, paused a moment, then asked him, "Where were we?"

Viruses, you dip! thought Dinah as she watched Ken, and Jimmie, on the screen.

Both Louise, and Cindy, placed a hand over their face as they thought, in unison, *Oh God . . .*

"Susan," Jimmie prompted.

"Yes," said Ken, picking up the line of discussion once again, "we were talking about Susan, and . . . a number of . . . truly startling revelations about the alien visitor from a

distant, and . . . maybe no longer quite so unknown world."

Lanna, in the meantime, had hacked her way into the 'Susan' folder. She saw dozens of folder icons in a window that nearly filled the screen. She clicked the window's scroll bar. She saw dozens more. All the folders were identified only by code. Lanna didn't recognize any of them, so she began opening folders randomly to see what was inside them.

"The alien's attack on our technology was accomplished via shared computers," said Jimmie, marching on to the beat of a different agenda. "Specifically through the internet."

"The artifact was quite fascinated with our world wide web, wasn't she, Mr. Oldsen?" Ken asked.

"Yes, it was," Jimmie answered. "And that interest may go a long way in explaining what's been happening with the internet lately."

"By that," Ken sought to clarify, "are you referring to the rash of unique computer viruses that has been plaguing the business world over the past few months?"

"Exactly. You hit that nail right on the head, Ken."

Where is he coming from, and where is he headed? Olga wondered.

Dinah increased the tension on her cycle even more.

"It's kind of like the flu," Jimmie continued to explain. "You know how adaptable the influenza virus is in that, whatever vaccine medical science comes up with, the virus mutates, and becomes resistant to it?"

"Yes," Ken acknowledged.

"Well, that's the kind of thing Susan left behind - only it's on the internet."

Lanna was finding that, like the folders themselves, all the files contained in those she opened were identified only by code. She kept on opening, and closing, folders. She didn't know what she was looking for until she opened a folder, and encountered a window that contained roughly twenty files. None of them were coded. The first seven files had specific dates attached to them, and were arranged with the dates in ascending order. The others were merely numbered, also in ascending order, beginning with '08'.

The blonde's attention focused on the dated files. There was something irksomely familiar about the dates she saw. That of the fourth file bothered her in particular.

"I'm addressing the problem at my software firm in Houston," Jimmie told Ken, and the 'Deep Inside' viewing audience. "I've got an entire staff of people working on it, but it isn't easy, because, like the flu, as soon as we come up with a vaccine for the virus, it mutates to a more resistant strain, and then goes somewhere else."

The date of the forth file finally registered in Lanna's memory. It was the day a hitherto unknown type of virus had broken out in the computer system of a German multi national. The near sum total of the company's world wide records, along with those of several other firms the company did business with, was erased before the virus was stopped . . . by a software disc Jimmie's crack team of programmers in Houston had raced to put together in an effort to stem the crisis.

"Is there any way to determine where the virus might break out next?" Ken asked his guest.

"Unfortunately not, Ken," Jimmie answered. "The virus seems to be invisible, or dormant, until it breaks out somewhere. There's no telling where it could show up. It could be a business, or a school, or a national defense office, or a hospital. Really, any computer that has access to the internet could fall victim to it - anywhere in the world."

"But aren't computer based national defense records highly encrypted?" Ken wondered.

"The alien virus has proven to be immune to any known encryption program," Jimmie stated.

"Lou," Cindy called into Louise's headset, "we can't let this go any further. He's gonna start a world wide panic."

Standing beside camera 1, Louise squeezed her eyes shut as tightly as she could. She was struggling to deal with the multiplying array of knots her digestive system was turning into. Cindy's hail had just made the producer aware of half a dozen more knots. Her reply induced, at least, a dozen more.

"Just let 'im go, Cin," she instructed. She felt no relief from adding, "Orders from upstairs."

Lanna was still listening to 'Deep Inside' with half an ear. Her index finger toyed nervously with the mouse clicker as she starred at the fourth dated file. Finally, she pressed. The file opened. At once Lanna saw the programming for a fairly standard computer virus. Her eyes scanned down the many rows of computer language until she came upon a one half line configuration that looked foreign to her. After a quick study, she realized that she couldn't figure it out.

"You're presenting a pretty grim scenario, Mr. Oldsen," Ken tentatively ventured.

"Well, we're keeping on top of it for now," said Jimmie, "but we're finding that, as the virus continues to mutate, it seems to be getting stronger, and more powerful. We've successfully dealt with seven recorded outbreaks of it so far, but each succeeding one has

been more difficult to handle."

Lanna's memory recalled the file identified as '08'.

Seven . . ., she wondered.

"So," Ken continued, "this . . . alien virus, as you call it - "

"Well, I don't actually call it an

'alien virus', Ken," Jimmie interjected.

"Oh, really?" Ken said to fill in the pause Jimmie had left.

"This may seem quaint," Jimmie went on, "and it, by no means, is intended to underplay the severity of the threat, but we've classified the alien virus as - the SuzieFlu."

Who the fuck is 'we'? Dinah wondered.

In Chicago, a crossword puzzle book struck the television screen bearing Jimmie's image.

Suzieflu clicked in Lanna's mind. Her eyes shifted to the top of the page at the file's heading. What she saw made her tremble from a sudden, violent chill.

SuzieFlu-No.04

"So, if this . . . SuzieFlu, as you call it, continues, Mr. Oldsen," an increasingly more nervous Ken inquired, "then it will eventually prove to be . . . unstoppable, won't it?"

"In theory, yes, Ken," Jimmie acknowledged, "but the situation isn't hopeless."

Forbidden to pull the plug, Louise now tried to lessen the impact of what Jimmie was saying to the world.

"Cindy," she instructed, "we need distance here. Pull the cameras back to full shots. No more close ups. No more mid shots. Just full views of Ken, and . . . Mr. Oldsen."

"You mean there is a possible cure for it?" asked Ken.

"Well, not a cure, per se," Jimmie answered, "but there is a way of dealing with the SuzieFlu more effectively than we have been up 'til now."

Lanna had quickly scrolled her way through the file. At the bottom she learned that the virus had been released on its identifying date. Its target had been the German multi national.

"And . . . what would that 'way' be, Mr. Oldsen?" was Ken's next tentatively poised question.

"By placing the internet under federal regulatory control," Jimmie stated.

Dinah lost her footing on her cycling machine. A pedal swung around to strike painfully against her shin.

"Lou!" Cindy desperately hissed into Louise's headset.

All Louise could do was stand, and watch, and listen to, what was happening on the 'Deep Inside' set.

"Putting the internet under government control?" Ken paraphrased with a fair amount of incredulity. "Wouldn't that be . . . rather difficult, if not altogether impossible?"

"Not at all, Ken," Jimmie stated. "In fact, we've been looking into the possibility ever since the SuzieFlu first surfaced a little over a year ago. It is, by far, the best way of dealing with this virus, because we'd be able to respond faster when it breaks out again - and it will break out again. It's only a matter of when . . . and where."

Olga hurled a pillow at the television. It struck Jimmie's screen image.

"But wouldn't government control of the internet be an infringement on free speech?" Ken wanted to know.

"That's something for the courts to decide," said Jimmie. "The main point right now is getting a handle on SuzieFlu, and eradicating it. Like I said before, a government agency is the best way of dealing with it in that response time would be much better, solution time would improve and, hopefully, we can learn enough about the virus to where we might actually, someday, be able precede it to its next target, and prevent even more devastating outbreaks than we've already seen."

"But, Mr. Oldsen," said an increasingly more baffled Ken, "isn't the world wide web, the world wide web? The internet is, after all, a world network of shared computers, and wouldn't regulating it involve the cooperation of several foreign governments - some of which are actively hostile to this country?"

"It wouldn't be easy, to be sure, but it's not impossible," Jimmie assured. "It would involve an alliance among nations - much like the U.N. - but this one would be much more important. And, since the alien first appeared in the United States, it's up to us to oversee this coalition."

Lanna stood at the balcony railing, glaring at Jimmie's image in the living room. Her hands gripped the railing so hard her knuckles had turned white.

"Mr. Oldsen," said Ken, trying hard not to sputter from confusion, "what you're suggesting is almost too much to comprehend: A world governing body beholden to one country - not to mention the infringement, if not the wholesale suspension, of very

fundamental human rights."

"Well, Ken," said Jimmie with a measured sigh of resignation.

He eyed the viewing audience with his boyish, innocent looks.

"You can thank the alien, Susan, for that."

Dinah stood regarding Jimmie's image on the screen, listening through her headphones to what he was saying. The waves of outrage emanating from the hulking Amazon were so intense that everyone on the cycling machines around her had abruptly gathered their things, and left.

"What has to be stressed here," Jimmie went on, addressing the camera that was watching him, "is that scary situations sometimes require scary solutions, and the sheer destructive power of the SuzieFlu *cannot* be underestimated."

Louise wanted nothing more than to leap on Jimmie, and strangle him.

"With a world internet regulatory agency under American stewardship, we'll finally be able to tackle this alien menace," Jimmie swore, "and we'll beat it!"

"You - ," seethed Dinah.

" - fucking - ," screamed Lanna.

" - little - ," breathed Louise.

" - asshole!" spat Olga.

* * *

Lanna was nearly blind with fury when she called Dinah on her cellphone after 'Deep Inside' had gone off air.

"I'll fire the bunch of 'em!" she'd shrieked, referring to Jimmie's elite programming staff.

She'd discovered that the SuzieFlu viruses had been made at the Houston headquarters of Jimmie's software company where the configurations Jimmie had gleaned from Susan were kept under tight security. Once completed, the viruses were then transferred to Washington where they were directed, and released, by Pandora Spocks.

Despite her own strong feelings, Dinah strove to talk the enraged blonde out of taking such an action. She argued that it would draw unwanted attention to the power behind Jimmie's throne, and such scrutiny of one of its members could jeopardize the Pink Team. She also maintained that everyone was better off with the programmers - who were the top of the programming field - under Lanna's management where she could direct their efforts

toward more positive endeavors. Once they were off her payroll, they were out of her control, and who knew where they would wind up, or what they would do.

Lanna got calmed down enough to see that Dinah was right. Still, she would exact a heavy price for her husband to pay.

All of the viruses that formed the basis for the SuzieFlus were common stuff, but weaving Susan into their protocol made them extremely powerful, and impossible to trace. Each successive outbreak of the virus had been more devastating than the last, because Jimmie was discovering more, and more, of Susan's power. The seventh had been the worst one of all, and utterly unstoppable without Jimmie's curative software.

The break out of SuzieFlu-No.07 hadn't occurred in a business, or an office, as it had in Germany, and the other countries that had fallen victim to the virus. This one had originated from a personal home computer in the small, Southern most coastal city of Trelleborg, Sweden. The owner of the computer later testified that he'd received an E-mail from a source he didn't recognize. The heading of the E-mail had read, "VIRUS WARNING", in Swedish. The man had opened the E-mail. Instantly his monitor screen went blank. He heard a moment of crackle, then his CPU went out. A moment later, the apartment complex he lived in lost all electrical power.

Upon its release, this latest version of the SuzieFlu had 'jumped' from the phone line connection of the man's computer to the computer's power source itself. Once it was in the energized cable, the virus traveled through the electrical system of the apartment complex to the transformer that supplied its power, and destroyed it. Seven seconds later, a major electrical substation in the city failed. Four seconds after that, Trelleborg's largest local bank lost the sum total of its financial records.

This was something wholly without precedent: A computer virus that could 'leapfrog' back, and forth, between an energized signal wire, and a purely energized wire, and which could travel, with equal ease, along both. Having heard of the previous SuzieFlus, and the destruction they had cause, the manager of the first bank the virus hit attempted to call the local authorities the moment the bank's computers went blank. Any phone he could get to in the building was already dead.

Forty eight seconds after the virus was released, in Ystad, another coastal city on Sweden's Southern shore, about forty miles East of Trelleborg, the computer system of a small hospital suddenly went blank. A nurse, who'd been using a computer on the system at

the time, immediately tried to call her supervisor. The phone was dead.

At almost the exact same time, in Lund, a little over forty miles North of Trelleborg, the computer system of the local police headquarters failed. Nine seconds later, Kavlinge, fifteen miles Northwest of Lund, experienced its first outbreak of the SuzieFlu. Ten seconds after that, Sirnris, thirty miles East Northeast of Ystad, fell prey.

In Trelleborg, the bank manager had given up on the bank's telephone system, and had gone outside the building to use his cellphone. He got through to the authorities in the major Swedish city of Gothenborg, two hundred and forty miles to the North. He hastily identified himself, then told his contact, "SuzieFlu in Trelleborg! Everything is destroyed!" By the time the man had finished his report, the cities of Horby, Hassleholm, Kristianstad and the large city of Helsingborg were under attack. All three cities were further North from Trelleborg.

The Gothenborg authorities tried to respond to the crisis, but, basically, they were unprepared. They ordered an emergency, citywide shutdown of electrical service. The airport was closed with incoming flights being rerouted to either Norway, or Denmark. The train station was closed with incoming trains from the countryside ordered to stop where they were. All waterway traffic was ordered to halt.

At the same time, calls of alert to what was happening were placed to the major cities of Jonkoping, which lay a hundred and twenty miles due East of Gothenborg, Linkoping and the nation's capital, Stockholm. For Jonkoping, the call arrived too late. In Stockholm, a reception clerk had just heard the word, "SuzieFlu", when the line went dead. What had not yet been turned off in Gothenberg was under siege. In less than ten minutes, the virus had traveled two hundred and forty miles North from its point of outbreak, and had laid electrical magnetic waste to every Swedish city, village, town and hamlet, East and West.

The clerk in Stockholm was smart enough - and lucky enough - to get to the right people quickly. An immediate, nationwide, shutdown of electrical facilities was ordered. Hospitals would have to resort to emergency power. All traffic; air, ground and sea, was halted with incoming air traffic rerouted to Sweden's neighboring countries. Sweden's neighbors; Norway, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Poland and Russia were alerted to the crisis. All of them, at once, began implementing their own emergency measures in case the virus should spread. In the intervening minutes, the SuzieFlu had pushed North another hundred and sixty miles to Karlstad, and had gotten as far as Nykoping on Sweden's East coast, a mere eighty miles from Stockholm.

The one mode of communication the virus *didn't* disrupt was cellphones. People

everywhere in affected cities frantically called friends, and loved ones, elsewhere to warn them of the devastation being wrecked. Stockholm, and other cities North of the SuzieFlu, were flooded with such calls. Awareness of the crisis, therefore, reached the general public before the authorities could issue statements. In a classic example of a little knowledge being a bad thing, the effect of these tellings compounded the disaster. Panic broke out everywhere in Sweden North of the SuzieFlu affected areas, much of it blind.

All roads leading out of cities became jammed with vehicles of people trying to get out. Banks with shutdown computer systems were swamped with frenzied, angry depositors demanding their money. Panic broke out in the stock exchange. Everyone wanted to get rid of everything at once. Prices collapsed as shares sold into a vacuum. Shelves of grocery, and department, stores were rapidly picked clean by hordes of people desperate to survive. When the check-out lines didn't move fast enough, the shopping spree turned to all out plunder. Rioting, and looting, occurred in several cities. Unable to get to the affected areas for the traffic congested streets, local police were completely ineffective. Those few unlucky officers who could get to points of civil unrest were either beaten, or knocked down and trampled. As reports of the exploding chaos began to filter into the nation's seat of government, the Western flank of the SuzieFlu was sweeping upward, across Sweden, on an Easterly arc.

Sweden's Prime Minister, Vice-Prime Minister, as well as the Ministers of Defense and Energy, had gathered in the Prime Minister's office. The Energy Minister had accessed a large scale map of the country that indicated electrical activity. The entire twenty five percent of Sweden's Southern most land mass was dark. The Ministers could see that the virus had stopped at Nykoping, but it was sweeping East. They watched its progress as Sunne went dark, then Hagfors, then Hallefros, then Ludvika, all within seconds.

"What are we dealing with here?" the grim-faced Prime Minister wanted to know as he watched the SuzieFlu advance.

"A full scale military offensive, if you ask me, sir," said the Defense Minister as he surveyed the map. "Only it's not a military in the conventional sense of the term. It's an enemy you can't see, touch, smell or feel."

He regarded his chief, and commander.

"It's the internet gone malevolent, and aggressive."

The Prime Minister considered these words, then asked, "Can we resist it?"

"Power has been shut off in all cities West of the Capital," the Energy Minister

reported. "The virus, however, seems to have its own momentum. It doesn't require an energized line in order to migrate."

The Prime Minister had been regarding his Energy Minister as he'd spoken. His gaze shifted to his Minister of Defense.

"I would classify that as a 'no'," the Defense Minister said.

"Kapparberg, and Norberg, have just been infected," the Vice-Prime Minister called out.

The other three looked at the map. Two more cities had gone dark as the virus continued to move Eastward toward the capital.

The Prime Minister set the translator on his desk phone to 'English', then dialed the number Jimmie Oldsen had given the world's governing bodies as his personal hotline in the event of just such an emergency. He put the phone on, 'Speaker', and told the others to let him do the talking. The connection opened after two rings.

"Hello?" Jimmie Oldsen's voice said in Swedish.

The Prime Minister of Sweden identified himself, then briefly outlined the situation. After he'd finished, there was a pause on Jimmie's end of the line.

"Uhm, yeah," Jimmie finally said, then, "I'd like to talk to the King."

The four Swedish heads of state exchanged baffled looks with one another. The Prime Minister took a moment to collect his thoughts.

"Mr. Oldsen," the he sought to inform the young man in America, "are you aware of what is happening?"

There was another pause on Jimmie's end, then he said, "I . . . think I've got a pretty good feel for it, yes, but I'd really like to talk to the King."

Another round of baffled looks were exchanged among the Swedes. Again the Prime Minister required a moment to collect his thoughts.

"His Majesty is not available at this time, Mr. Oldsen," he told Jimmie.

"I can appreciate that," said Jimmie, "but I'd still like to talk to him."

The Vice-Prime Minister began gestating wildly at this point. When she got the Prime Minister's attention, she pointed to the map. Everyone could see that, while the virus had maintained its position at Nykoping, it had continued its advance to the East, having claimed Avesta, Eskistuna, Flen and the major city of Vasteras. The SuzieFlu was getting closer. The Prime Minister turned his speaker phone off.

"Get him!" the Vice Prime Minister immediately shouted at him.

"Why does he want to talk to His Majesty?" wondered the Defense Minister.

"What does it matter!" the Vice-Prime shouted with a sweep of her hand toward the map. She eyed her superior, and restated, "Get him!"

"Where is His Majesty?" the Energy Minister wondered.

The King of Sweden was en route to a dedication ceremony in the far North of the country. It was doubtful that he knew anything of what was happening. The Prime Minister picked up the receiver to his phone.

"Can you hold while we try to locate His Majesty, Mr. Oldsen?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure," said Jimmie agreeably. "I'll be holding."

The Prime Minister returned the receiver to its cradle.

"Alright," he told his subordinates, "he's holding. Let's track His Majesty down."

It took a few minutes to reach the King, and to explain the situation to him. While this was going on, the Vice Prime had been studying the map. There was something about it that didn't set right with her.

"What did he say?" she asked of anyone.

"Who?" the Energy Minister wondered.

"Oldsen! What did he say?"

"He said he'd be holding," the Prime Minister recalled.

"Holding . . . ," the Vice-Prime Minister echoed distantly as she viewed the large map of Sweden, studying it intently without really seeing it. "By God," she then said through the dawn of a realization, "he *is* holding."

"What do you mean?" the Prime Minister wanted to know.

"Look!" the Vice-Prime admonished the others, pointing to the map.

All eyes turned to the map. At once, it could be observed that, during the time it had taken to contact, and brief, Sweden's Monarch, the SuzieFlu had not moved from the last four cities it had overrun - that it was, in fact . . . holding.

"It isn't possible," the Minister of Energy breathed.

"This whole thing's impossible!" the Vice-Prime declared. "At the rate it's been moving, it should've overtaken us (the capital) by now!"

"And yet," the Defense Minister observed, "it hasn't moved since Oldsen said he was . . ."

"Holding," the Prime Minister intoned.

He looked to his Ministers of Energy and Defense.

"Is it possible he's controlling that thing?"

"Anything is possible," said the Minister of Energy, "but . . . I wouldn't begin to know how."

"It would have to be through a satellite," the Defense Minister speculated, "but . . . how?"

"There'll be plenty of time for guessing later on," said the Prime Minister. "For now, let's see if we can't find out what's going on here."

He set his phone on 'Conference' to include the King in his, and Jimmie's, connection.

"Hello?" said the King tentatively on his end of the line.

"Hello," said Jimmie, "is this the King of Sweden?"

"Yes, Mr. Oldsen," the King replied, "it is."

"Oh great!" said Jimmie happily. "So, uh . . . how's it goin'?"

"We . . . have a slight problem here, Mr. Oldsen," the King hesitantly replied.

"Oh yeah!" Jimmie said suddenly. "I, uh, forgot - well, I'm going to turn you over to someone who wants to talk to you - I mean talk to the Prime Minister. Are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm here, Mr. Oldsen," assured the Prime.

"Well, uh," said Jimmie, "it's been really great talking to you - I mean the King, that is, but it's been great talking to you too, Prime Minister."

"The pleasure has been mutual, Mr. Oldsen, I'm sure," said the Prime Minister who was barely able to conceal his amazement as he regarded his three slack-jawed subordinates.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Prime Minister," then said another, different voice from Jimmie's end - a voice that sounded poised, and sure, "this is United States President, Marshall Wayans speaking."

Everyone in the room, including the King at his location, were quietly stunned. How did the President of the United States figure into this? they wondered.

"Good morning, Mr. President," said the surprised Prime Minister, accounting for time difference between the two countries in his greeting. "Have you been briefed on the situation here?"

"Yes," said Wayans easily, "I'm aware of it."

The four people in the Prime Minister's chamber exchanged looks of puzzlement, and concern. The Prime Minister felt the urge to speak with care.

"Is Mr. Oldsen . . . are you - able to lend your assistance?"

"Yes, I am," Wayans told him, "but there are a couple of matters we need to address ourselves to first."

Another round of concerned, and puzzled, looks were exchanged. The Defense Minister looked particularly concerned. The Vice-Prime kept an eye on the map. She noted that the SuzieFlu still appeared to be holding. The Prime Minister now felt it wise to use extreme caution in what he said, and how he said it.

"What - 'matters' - do you wish to discuss, Mr. President?" he asked.

"Well," said the President's voice casually, "your Congress could be more Christian in its legislative outlook."

The Prime was obviously taken aback by this. He looked about the room to his subordinates for input to a possible response. His eyes encountered three profoundly dumbfounded expressions. The Vice-Prime began to shake her head. She looked away, down at the floor as she continued to shake her head. The Prime Minister took a moment to form his reply, then redirected his attention to the matter at hand.

"Mr. President," he carefully addressed Wayans, "you can't - be serious about that."

Wayans diverted his attention from his conversation with Sweden's Prime Minister to glance at Jimmie, who'd been watching him all this time. He gave the young man a nod.

"It's moving again!" Sweden's Energy Minister shouted.

Everyone looked to the map. The SuzieFlu *was* moving again, driving Eastward. The city of Uppsala, which lay seventy miles to the North Northwest of Stockholm, went dark. The new advance then seemed to stop. There was now a seventy to eighty mile arc of uninfected territory around the Swedish capital.

"I am," Wayans' calm voice said in Swedish through the phone translator, breaking the numbing silence in the Prime Minister's chamber, "quite serious, Mr. Prime Minister.

"He *is* controlling it," the Vice Prime concluded to, really, no one's surprise.

No one else said anything more. It was left for the Prime Minister to ask the obvious.

"Why are you doing this?" he queried of the U.S. President.

"To make the world safe for the Lord," Wayans said without a moment's hesitation.

The immediacy of his reply left no doubt as to his seriousness. The shared, unspoken conviction among the five Swedes that the American President was mad was beside the point. It was beside any point. All of them tried not to think the unthinkable. Wayans grew impatient with the pause.

"He's advancing," the Defense Minister noted as he looked upon the map.

The four Ministers watched as the SuzieFlu drove North again from its holding point of Nykoping. The city of Sodertalje, a mere thirty miles from the Capital, went dark.

"Give him what he wants," the Vice Prime quietly advised, hoping none would hear her. The Prime Minister looked at his second. She eyed him steadily. The Prime shifted his focus to his Defense Minister.

"Surrender?" he almost whispered.

The head of Sweden's armed forces remained silent, and unmoved. In time, his eyes closed as he bowed his head.

The virus suddenly thrust North again, taking Botkyrka, and to the East, claiming the coastal city of Norrtälje. With thirty miles of water-bound land mass, then the Baltic Sea to the East of the city, Stockholm was now surrounded on the remaining three sides by the most advanced, and lethal, SuzieFlu to date.

"Do you wish to express further reluctance?" the President of the United States asked.

"If it takes the Capital," the Defense Minister stated, "we're done."

"We're done anyway," the Swedish King said bitterly over the phone from his location.

The Prime Minister was too stunned to speak, or even think. He stared off blankly ahead of himself.

How has this happened? he wondered. *Why has it happened?*

"The country is in chaos, sir," the Minister of Defense reported to pierce through the Prime's distracted stillness. "All electronics to the West, and South, of us (the capital) have been destroyed."

Without firing a single shot, the Prime thought to himself.

It was over before anything had begun. Having offered no more provocation than the fact of having been, Sweden found itself pitted against a technological weapon that had made an electrical wasteland of the nation's lower quarter in under twenty minutes. Assessing the damage would take weeks, if not months. Making repairs would take months, if not years. Recovery . . . ? The damage to the Swedish people's psyche that they could so easily fall victim to such an attack for no other reason than one man's whim . . . incalculable.

"What do you want, Mr. President?" the Prime Minister asked Wayans in a tone of voice known only to the vanquished.

"As I believe I have indicated, Mr. Prime Minister, I would like the Swedish nation be more Christian," Wayans stated, "and to avail its full support to the United States at the proper time."

"Mr. President," said the King. "What you are demanding, and the way you are demanding it . . . I can't believe it."

Wayans smiled.

"And neither will anyone else, Your Majesty," he said.

Wayans got exactly what he wanted from the Swedish government, and then he left the nation to pick up what few pieces remained of its now shattered economy. From his laptop, Jimmie directed the satellite to neutralize what the world would soon know of as 'the Swedish SuzieFlu'. It would be officially classified as the most terrifying electronic plague yet unleashed by the alien visitor, Susan. No one would know a thing of the Swedish government's concessions to Wayans. Everyone would know that Jimmie Oldsen had, once again, saved the day, just as he had before, and would again.

"Man," said Jimmie a bit breathlessly after it was all over, "I've just spoken to a real King!"

The President had eyed the young man briefly with a bemused expression, then had settled back in his chair.

"That you have, Jimmie," Wayans had intoned in a relaxed way, satisfied that his gambit had paid off. "That you have."

But it was all past, and unofficial history now as the world struggled to deal with the fallout from Jimmie's appearance on Ken Clark's show.

The governing bodies of all seven of the SuzieFlu affected nations had already begun debating, and passing, Christian religiously biased laws. Politicians of all stripes, and colors, began conspicuously attending churches, and publicly exhorted their countrymen, and women, to do the same in followance to their good example. Christian prayer was first allowed, then made obligatory, in all state subsidized schools. Christian worship services in those same state schools was soon to follow. Civil rights that seemed at odds with Christian doctrine were first restricted before being struck down. Among an increasing number of liberty's being rescinded, Roe vs. Wade was finally overturned.

Wayans' 'Blue Book' had grown to international proportions. Its content, along with the threat of SuzieFlu, persuaded the world's federal reserve governors to keep their respective nation's interest rates high. They told the public that the high rates were necessary to stave off the high inflation rate which was actually caused by the high interest rates lenders had to impose in order to keep pace with the high fed rates. The end result of this financial loop-de-loop was the gradual strangling of national economies. More people could ill-afford fewer goods which meant that fewer goods were needed to fulfill decreased demand which meant that fewer people were needed to make the fewer goods which meant that there were even

more people who could ill-afford the even fewer goods.

Growing discontent over the intensifying, downward spiraling of economies, and stock markets, was focused by the 9/11 terrorist attack on the United States. As President Wayans had said in private, the attack really was, "Heaven sent", because it gave the frustrated, and disenfranchised, peoples of the world who'd been squeezed out, and left behind, by the 'new economy' someone to be angry at, namely; Terrorists in particular, and Islamics in general. The Trade Center, and Pentagon, attacks also yielded Wayans another cabinet post, not to mention the odious Homestead Security Act. This was a document ripe for abuse as it granted unprecedented federal access into people's lives. As one political wag had declared, "With Homestead Security, you don't need Marshal Law."

With the media reportage of the Swedish SuzieFlu, and the toll it had exacted, along with Jimmie Oldsen's 'revelations', the world now 'knew' that the dreaded alien virus was permanently lodged in the communications, and electrical, systems of the world. It could breakout anywhere, anytime, without any warning, to immediate, and catastrophic, affect.

Knowing this made people, businesses and even governments afraid - to use the internet, to use computers, to use appliances, to even turn on the lights. E-commerce died as people stopped making online transactions - afraid that the SuzieFlu would get into their computers, or worse, into their bank accounts. People stopped using credit cards, preferring cash to make their purchases - afraid the SuzieFlu would get their card numbers, and credit information. The increased demand for paper currencies required governments to print literally tons of it. The inevitable inflation was a further drag on already depressed economies. The internet, as a whole, withered as people made do without the information superhighway - afraid that the SuzieFlu would get them. People stopped calling each other on the phone - afraid. More, and more, people stopped doing more, and more, things, because they were afraid.

It was the dawning of a new dark age, and Marshall Wayans saw that it was good.

* * *

"Good morning, Louise," said Evans Babcock as the producer strode into his office.

"Morning, Mr. B." Louise cordially greeted her superior. "Thanks for seeing me."

"So," said Babcock, smiling up at the attractive woman across his memento cluttered desk as he leaned back in his chair, "what's on your mind?"

Louise, as was her custom, got right to the point. It was one of the many things Babcock admired about her.

"I want to do a positive piece on the alien, Susan," the producer stated. "Kind of like a commemorative look back over her time on earth."

Louise noted how Babcock averted his eyes from her the moment she'd said the word 'Susan'. When she'd finished speaking, he physically turned away from her to look off reflectively. The pause that followed was unsettling. Evans Babcock pausing was something Louise could not get used to, and it was happening more, and more, whenever Susan was mentioned.

"Don't you think that would be at odds with what is currently known about the alien?" Babcock finally queried in a carefully worded response.

"What knowledge would you be referring to, sir?" Louise asked as she adjusted her stance, and folded her arms over her chest. "The NASA study of her, or James Oldsen's bucket of unsubstantiated hog liver?"

Louise watched the man's face closely for a reaction. She did not like what she saw.

"For that matter," she went on to add off the top of her head, "it might be an idea to do a segment on 'Twenty something' about just what happened to Dan Silvers."

Babcock had heard about what had happened to the former NASA Chief. It was not a pleasant memory. He focused his attention more on dealing with the producer's attitude than her questions.

"The fact of the SuzieFlu is real, Louise," Babcock answered slowly, "just as much as is the threat."

"Okay, wul what about balanced reporting, fairness, equal time - that sort of stuff?" Louise wanted to know. "Why isn't there any investigation being done into this - alien virus, like where it comes from, is it really a free agent, or is someone controlling it, why does it do what it does?"

"You're getting into an area of highly classified government information."

"So?"

"We don't want to confuse the public with regard to the alien, Louise."

"I'm not talking about confusing them," Louise maintained, "I'm talking about informing them."

The executive had to look away from his producer before he could say, "Washington is doing that."

"How?" Louise asked truculently. "By Jimmie Oldsen shooting off his mouth at will? His statements concerning Susan were absolutely libelous. There was no factual basis offered to *anything* he said. It was wholesale character assassination. We're already seeing how he's affected public outlook. Things are getting worse, Mr. B. Economically, socially, politically - everything is getting worse, and Mr. Oldsen has had an undeniable contributory impact on that."

Having stated the problem, which Babcock was all too well aware of, Louise went on to suggest a remedy.

"What we need, to counter that, is a bright, and sunny, reassuring piece - and, I think, presenting Susan as she really was is a good subject to accomplish that."

"Really 'was' has little to do with really *is*, Ms. Layne," the network chief told her. "The truth about the alien has finally come out."

"Whose truth?" Louise wanted to know. "The opportunistically calculated opinion of one man who won an election by opposing her? Mr. Babcock, it's axiomatic that official versions are often at variance with the truth, and that variance is often wide enough to drive an aircraft carrier through."

Babcock sat up at this. Louise's stubbornness was getting to him. Glaring at the producer, he stated, "It's out of my hands, Ms. Layne!"

"Then why are you sitting in that chair?" the hotheaded Pixie demanded. "The government is bending over backwards to make Susan a pariah, and you're bending over frontwards to accommodate them. If that's the way it is, then maybe this company's motto should be changed to read, 'All the news we're *told* to print!'"

At that point, Evans Babcock did something he had never done with a subordinate. He exploded. The man who had been privileged enough to begin his career working at Edward R. Morrow's elbow rose to his feet, and verbally tore into the woman standing across the desk from him. He gave vent to a stream of bile that had built up since the last major election. He spoke of Susan, and of how different things had become since she'd left. He railed against the restrictive media law, and went on, at length, about the need to compromise.

Watching as she listened, Louise could see yet another victim of the times, just like everyone else was becoming. She watched the man she had admired as he betrayed every one of his journalistic principles, and she pitied him.

"Do you see, Ms. Layne!" the network executive concluded.

Louise didn't have the heart to say anything more than, "Yes, Mr. Babcock. I see."

* * *

From the time she'd started working at Wayans Manor, Olga noted something which she eventually chose to think of as unusual. It was during their lunch break, on the last night of their work week, that Bertha would disappear for awhile. At first, Olga didn't think anything of it, but, as the months went on, and the two of them grew closer, she noted how the black woman would always return from her vanishings looking a bit more tired. Ultimately, curious concern got to the better of her, and, one night, late in winter, Olga put aside her sandwich, and followed shortly after Bertha had left.

She kept a careful distance as she watched her partner's swollen figure move along the mansion's darkened hallways. After some travel, Bertha turned, and went through the doorway Olga knew lead to the huge solarium at the rear of the stately house. She waited a bit, then moved herself to peak around the doorway. Bertha was nowhere to be seen.

Olga entered the vast room, her eyes darting to, and fro, amid the dark interior as she went. She couldn't see Bertha anywhere. Then she noticed that one of the framed, glass doors that lead out onto the back porch area was ajar. She approached the door. She could feel the cold rushing through the gap as she looked outside over the patio, and into the yard beyond. Her eyes followed the only set of footsteps in the freshly fallen snow. There, off to one side, standing before the ornate fountain that dominated the rear grounds of the estate, was Bertha.

Olga couldn't see much, since the woman's back was turned to her. She wore her overcoat around her shoulders, and stood very still. Olga eased the door open further, hoping that the hinges wouldn't squeak. She poked her head outside, the vapor from her exhalation momentarily obscuring her view.

"Bertha?" she called.

The woman turned to her. Olga could see her fleshy arms lightly folded beneath her ample bosom, but couldn't read her face for the distance between them.

"Is anything wrong?"

She waited a moment, then saw a strip of gleaming white teeth as Bertha's lips parted to form a bright, broad smile.

"No, I'm okay, Olga," she answered, and then she returned herself, and her attention, to

the fountain.

Olga studied the black woman's back as she waited for more. She frowned from Bertha's not saying anything more, then decided that she should join her just to make sure she was alright. She stepped outside, and made her way through the snow, adding another set of footsteps to the ones already there. Once at Bertha's side, Olga shivered, and drew her sweater more tightly over her front. She looked over the fountain to note that it was completely frozen.

"Vat are you doink here?" she asked as she arrived at her partner's side.

The big woman of color gave the Russian a welcoming look.

"This is my wishin' well," she announced in a tone that was not entirely proud, yet not entirely resigned. "I know it's just a fountain," she then confided, "and it's not even mine, but . . . beggars not bein' choosers . . . this is my wishin' well."

Olga could tell that her partner felt not proud, but not resigned, in what she'd said. She looked out over the fountain with her.

"Every night before the weekend come," said Bertha, "I come out here, and I make a wish."

Olga smiled at the idea, then it occurred to her, "Shouldn't you toss a coin to make a wish?"

"Ain't got no coins," said Bertha, then she observed how a coin, "Wouldn't get very far anyway - with it bein' froze an' all." She was quiet for a time, then she drew herself up to take a breath, and let it out to say, "Shouldn't have t' pay to make a wish." She thought a moment, then, "Don't pay neither, but you have to do some wishin' all the same."

Olga had always enjoyed the woman's company, and now she enjoyed it more. The two of them stood side by side in the snow, and looked out over the fountain.

"Make a wish, Olga," the big, black woman said to her. She paused a bit, then thought it best to reassure her companion that, "It's alright. My wishin' well is big enough for the both of us." She paused again, then looked up at the cloud filled sky. "My wishin' well is big enough for the whole wide world," she quietly proclaimed, and then, with a sigh that was not proud, yet not resigned, she returned herself to her surroundings, her companion, the fountain that was her wishing well.

"Go ahead, Olga," she quietly prompted the older woman. "Make a wish."

Olga gazed into the shallow water's frozen depths. Gazed deeply with her heart full of intent. In time it came to be all she saw. The troubles went away, and she no longer felt the

chill of the cold night's winter air. She entered the shallow water's depths, and made a wish, and then she sealed it with a prayer.

* * *

Waking in the blackness was much the same as being yet asleep. Alex opened his eyes, but they may as well've still been shut. He turned over on his back in bed, and visually searched for the tiny red dot of light on the wall that he knew was just a short distance off. It was the only indication of where the light switch was - the solution to the blackness. He found the dot, but he no longer felt any comfort at its discovery - just a subtle shift within the consuming sense of dread he now existed in. He stared at the light, wondering if he should bother with it anymore, but then the increasingly intolerable combination of being alive, and being insolubly bored, forced him to get up. He rose, and groped his way toward the glowing dot - the tiny red beacon that always held out a single straw of hope he felt compelled to reach for. He reached the light. His hand fumbled to locate the switch. The lights went on, and Alex's hope was, once again, extinguished by another shift within the dread.

Still here, he thought as his senses reluctantly took in the fact of his surroundings. In spite of having slept long, and soundly, he, at once, felt overpoweringly exhausted.

So much for pleasant dreams.

He checked the length of his fingernails as he did every time when he'd awakened. It was his only clue that a certain amount of time had passed. How much time, he didn't know, but the trimming of his nails while he slept seemed to happen at as close to regular intervals as he could tell. That much he knew. He noticed that they were shorter again. Another period of time had passed.

He no longer had any idea of how many times the trimmings had occurred. He cursed himself again for having lost count. *How many times?* he wondered as he stood leaning against the wall where the light switch was. *How much time?*

He wondered if he was hungry. He normally was when he woke up. He mentally checked for pangs of hunger, and determined that they weren't enough to bother with. He stared at the little red light by the light switch. It had, at once, been the source of so much joy, and so much despair. *What does it matter anymore?* he thought.

Alex cast his eyes about the room - his room - "What the fuck ever does it matter anymore!" he shouted at the top of his voice to - *who?* he was, at once more, given to

wonder. *Why did I say that?* he asked himself. *Whom do I address?* he wondered. *The void? God? Is there a difference anymore? Was there ever a difference to begin with?*

"D' ya hear me!" he couldn't keep from shouting, almost as if another person had taken over for him.

Alex slid down the wall until his knees had come to rest on the cold, steel floor. He knew he had a family - a wife of sorts, and a beautiful daughter - a girl of sorts. He knew that she was out there somewhere. He couldn't understand why she didn't come for him.

"Can anybody hear me!"

Thinking about her made the whole thing hurt all the more. He knew that he hadn't been all that good a father.

"Please . . ."

But had he been so bad that she wouldn't even come to visit him?

"God . . ."

* * *

The Spring thaw came upon the land as the Sun rose higher in the sky. The kiss of life drove away the cold, and snow, to bring forth greenery, and blossoms. The faith in Nature's promise of renewal was fulfilled once more, allowing hope, and joy, to flourish.

At least that's the way it's supposed to work out, but Nature missed a spot. It was a small spot actually - hardly worth mentioning. Mother Nature could easily be forgiven for the oversight, but there was a small patch of ground that failed to hear the call of Spring, then Summer.

It remained cold, and snowbound, and weighted down with frost. Not even the hot, midsummer, Chicago Sun could warm it up, or coax a single flake of snow to melt. The patch stood on the grounds of Wayans Manor, behind the stately mansion, off to one side near the garden. It baffled staff, and visitors alike, to see the snowy patch of ground, and the partially frozen fountain in ninety-plus degree weather.

The rear grounds were eventually made off limits to visitors. The staff was instructed not to speak of the patch, or the fountain.

* * *

"Jimmie . . . "

Her soft voice came to him from across the darkness of the room, barely touching his ear. The lilt, the tone . . . unmistakable. Jimmie paused to draw a breath as he shifted mental programs, then turned away from his keypad to see his Lanna standing in the doorway. She stood on one hip, one shoulder resting lightly on the door jam. She was dressed only in the reflected light from his monitor screen. He could tell by her look that the need was upon her, and that he would have to attend to her.

It never ceased to amaze him how a woman as capable, and in control, as his darling Lanna, could be rendered helpless by such a simple thing. They'd talked about it, even argued about it - most unhappily. They'd been to relationship counselors, and Lanna had even tried going into therapy. There'd been differences in approach, and suggested treatment, of course, but none of it had done any good. Nothing they tried seemed to help. Several of the professionals they'd seen had concluded that it was just something they were going to have to live with, and that, if they truly loved each other, they would stay together, and find a way to cope. All of them, counselors, and therapists alike, had been unanimous in their basic conclusion: His darling Lanna was hopelessly over-sexed.

"I need you . . . "

They'd tried a number of things to help her cope with her voracious appetite. He'd bought her a variety of toys with which she might relieve her overpowering tension, but she said that nothing could satisfy her like he did - only she was hardly ever satisfied. Even as he lay exhausted after hours of earthshaking consumation, she would weep, and beg him for just one more.

"Jimmie . . . "

He wondered how the man he shared her with survived. On the rare occasions when he, and Michael, would happen to pass each other in the hall, or lobby, the man, who was but a few years older than himself, seemed quite healthy, and even eager to see his wife again the very next day. He, on the other hand, nearly always left her in the morning feeling more fatigued than when he'd gone to bed the previous night. What was Michael's secret? Jimmie often wondered.

"Please . . . "

She was so beautiful, and so pathetic, all at the same time. That a woman of such commanding presence in any board room should be brought low by something that was . . . really quite simple. It truly was a pity in his eyes. He loved her so. She had become ashamed

of her inability to control her cravings. It was torment for them both as she would plead for his attention. No matter how often he had seen her naked, invariably, her body exacted rapturous awe from him. Always. Now. Forever.

"Help me, Jimmie . . . "

Her sexual needs had gotten to the point where they were interfering with his work. Jimmie knew that as he placed his leg just as she liked. Lanna beamed her gratitude, and quickly straddled his offering. Once alighted, she gripped his shoulders for support, then began to rock her pelvis on his captured knee. It helped alleviate the itch that tortured her, tortured both of them.

Tears trailed down her satin cheeks. Her golden tresses fell in waves across her glorious breasts. Her grip tightened as her mental focus deepened. Her breath came, and went, in halting gasps. Her strong pelvis bucked, and churned, in cadence to the demands of her desire. She wept, even as she sought to quell the raging fire in her belly. She felt so ashamed. Her boundless needs. Her insatiable lust. She was a slave to the cruel demands of her astounding body. He loved her so.

The software he was working on.

". . . help me . . . "

Wayans was counting on it to support legislation he had before Congress.

". . . Jimmie . . . "

He knew this as he listened to his darling Lanna's strangled moans, and sighs. Her grip on his shoulders had become painful.

". . . please . . . "

The President would simply have to wait.

* * *

Dinah tried to fill the void left by her missing family with food. At the same time, she took her mounting frustrations out on the heaviest equipment her gym owned. She'd taken up boxing, at Lanna's suggestion, but, though her sparing in the ring introduced her to that demanding skill, nothing relieved her tension like overcoming the physical resistance of iron. It was primal, it was primitive, and she relished the feeling of her muscles straining to make a seemingly immovable object yield to her will.

Her genetically gifted body respond greedily to the extraordinary amounts of

nourishing food, and crushing stress, she heaped upon it. Her already impressive build grew steadily, becoming larger, stronger, thicker and fuller over time. At first, she disregarded the increasing snugness of her clothes, but then she started popping buttons, and bursting seams. Her proportions became truly Herculean as her five foot ten inch frame eventually expanded to tip the scale beyond two hundred hard, lean pounds.

Having grown accustomed to a steady diet of sex when, and how, she wanted it, two years of celibacy had not set well with the raven haired, legal Amazon. To make matters worse, she was seeing Lanna on a regular basis so they could hone strategy, and to keep each other abreast of any progress they were making. Dinah's pent-up stress, coupled with the fact that her efforts were being consistently met with a never ending series of dead-ends, blind alleys and solid brick walls, served to make these meetings with the *Golden Girl of the garter-beltway* more, and more, strained. Dinah's envy of the blonde came to be downright rancorous as she was routinely *forced* to observe her *perfect* body, and her *fake*, but *perfect* tits, and how she was enjoying the *miles of cock* Jimmie was *cramming* into her *every* night. It was a toss-up as to which grated on the lawyer more; Lanna herself, or the way she - more, and more, - preferred to see her.

She was visiting Olga in Chicago when yet another one of her leads fizzled out, leading, once again, to nowhere. Lanna, and Jimmie, were in town at the same time for a software convention Jimmie had to attend.

"Morning everyone," greeted Lanna as she strode into Pink Team headquarters one morning.

Dinah was working at a desk. Olga, just back from work that night, was dozing on the sofa.

"Morning," Dinah muttered, noting how the *Beltway Bitch* was moving. She returned the appearance of her attention to the page before her as she wondered, "Rough night last night?" with transparent absentness.

Lanna paused in her stride, then her cheeks sunk in as she puckered her full, sensuous lips. She was becoming increasingly aware of how the increasingly more massive *Muscle Bitch* was becoming increasingly more aggressive toward her. She understood Dinah's frustration, but she was *not* in the mood for this.

"What?" she asked, surprisingly, even to her, without an edge to her tone.

"It, uh . . . looks like you're walking a little . . . stiff today," Dinah deliberately noted.

Lanna half turned back to Dinah.

"And just what is *that* - supposed to mean?" she wanted to know.

Dinah deliberately didn't answer.

"Dinah?" Lanna prompted.

Confronted with Lanna's question, Dinah was suddenly caught with her attitude down. She felt embarrassed, and ashamed, of herself.

"Just . . . making an observation, is all," she mumbled.

"Yeah," said Lanna with a derisive smirk, intending to taunt the retreating Amazon.

"As a matter of fact, I am walking a little . . . *stiff* - today."

Dinah intended to meet this remark head on. She turned around in her chair to face the other woman.

"What?" she queried, all too knowingly. "D'ja work overtime last night? *Burning* up that midnight oil?"

Lanna deliberately took a moment, or maybe even two, to arrange her stunning body into a suitably defiant pose.

"Yeah," she challenged the imposing lawyer in return, not giving a damn if she was bigger, or stronger, or what. "I *did* work last night," she stated for the record, and then she went on to add, "and I got better results than you've come up with in the last six months."

That's it!

Dinah stood up, and confronted Lanna face to face with her heavily muscled, and ever thickening, build. Lanna, for her own part, didn't budge.

"Gorls . . . ," Olga tried to warn, hoping that her age would defuse the increasingly volatile situation.

"No, Olga, keep out of this," Lanna respectfully told older woman. She then looked back at Dinah. "This is between me, and . . . *butch* here."

Dinah didn't move. After a moment, her overly broad shoulders eased back, and her chin lifted slightly.

"What?" Lanna aggressively wondered with regard to Dinah's adjusted posture. "You want me to clip ya? Huh? Is that it?"

Dinah maintained her imposing stature, but Lanna could tell that neither her heart, nor her mind, were in it. Despite her own veneer of cool, and calm, despite her reputation for utter control of all things in her life, Lanna had had enough - of a lot of things.

"You think I've got it so good, and that I'm gettin' it sooo good," she told the lawyer. "All the time, right? Day and night." She was going to take her sweet time getting this

particular load off of her substantial chest. "Jimmie!" she called, "Front - and cen - terrr," and then, eyeing Dinah, Lanna roughly stroked her crotch, and emitted a mocking, lusty growl. Relaxing from her overt display, the blonde continued. "Well, lemme clue you in on something, Ms . . . Muscle Bitch. You think it's easy being a dream girl? That it's easy being a walking, talking, wet dream? Well, you're wrong. It's work. You think it's such a snap to look perfect, and gorgeous, all the time. Perfect hair, perfect body, perfect clothes. All the time. It's work. You think it's easy molding yourself around some stupid little man's overwanked imagination. Being hot to trot whenever *he's* ready? Being ready, willing and able to drop yer panties at *his* slightest whim. It's Goddamned work."

The torrent continued. Of its own, it continued.

"There's nothing for you. Nothing but denial, frustration and - yes - pain. You're beholden to a clueless dip you have to constantly fear, and hide from, because you know damned well he wouldn't give a *shit* about you if you didn't have a hot, wet, dripping groin."

A wave of ruined emotions . . .

"You can't think of yourself, or feel for yourself - Ha! - that's the *last* thing you want is to be able to feel, because then you'll just hate yourself all the more. Beholden to a little pip-squeak weenie whom you *have* to satisfy. Your entire focus is on *him*, because getting him off is the end, and be of it all."

. . . which not even tears could soothe.

"I'd love it if I met some man who knocked me over the head, threw me into a cave and made me write bad checks!"

So many unshed tears.

"God - dammit I'd love it!"

Finished, yet not finished, unable to go on, Lanna rushed from the room, in tears.

Olga corralled the two embattled women after Lanna had recovered. Both of them felt so bad, for their own reasons, that they willingly submitted to the older woman's authority. She had them sit beside each other on the sofa like a couple of naughty school girls. They felt like as much. Olga treated them like as much as she stood before them - and over them.

"Ve are nyot goink to get anyvere by turnink on each other," she told them forthrightly. "You are frustrated," she said to Dinah, "you are frustrated," she said to Lanna, "and I am frustrated. Ve are all frustrated. It is an impossible task ve haf given to ourselves, but we haf to see it through. Ve haf to, and ve are nyot goink to do that by turnink on each other."

She paused a moment to let her words sink in. Neither of the younger women either

moved, or shifted their gaze from the imaginary specs in the air in front of them.

"It is said that those who play together, stay together," the older woman continued, in a different vein. "So, the two of you are goink to learn to play together, so that you can vork together."

This got both Dinah's, and Lanna's, suspicious attention. When Olga felt confident that she had their undivided, she dropped it on them.

"The two of you are goink out together tonight."

At once, both the younger women looked as if they'd just been shot.

"No vork!" Olga declared. "Only play. You are goink to dress nice. Dress sexy. Lanna, you know vhat I'm talking about. Dinah . . . hah . . ."

Lanna smiled appreciatively, for both reasons, while Dinah looked away morosely.

"I've outgrown all my clothes," the ever increasingly more massive lawyer offered weakly. "That's why I wear sweats all the time now."

"Then you, and I, vill go shoppink -"

"But -"

"**Shop** - pink," Olga stressed.

This should be interesting, Lanna thought before she queried, "Mind if I tag along?"

"No," the Russian snapped at her. "I yam nyot havink you two killink each other before your gorls night out even starts."

So, it was a date, whether either of them liked it, or not. Lanna went back to her hotel after lunch with the promise to return that evening. Dinah, and Olga, spent their afternoon at the mall.

Dinah did her best to hate it, and tried to get back at Olga by acting like an irritating child, but, after some stern looks, and after some time, she eventually let herself relax, and she actually grew to enjoy being waited on, and fussed over. She got her hair, and nails done, and even got a facial. Her sea of raven waves cascaded beautifully across her back, and around her shoulders when they emerged from the salon. For clothes, Olga perpetually beelined for the most revealing outfits for her to try on. It accomplished little, but to confirm Dinah's suspicions of where Sara had gotten *her* taste in clothes. They compromised on a stylish miniskirt, and a light, transparent, long sleeved, button-front top underneath which she would wear a patterned bib-top that covered little more than her chest. Like Lanna, Dinah didn't need support, though she was *naturally* big, and solid. She already had some shoes that would go with her new outfit. Their shopping trip done, they were just leaving the mall when

the daunting, normally reserved Amazon grabbed the squat, little Russian, and held her long, and strong. For Olga, that single hug alone was more than worth having endured the big woman's earlier behavior.

Lanna came back after supper. She wore an outfit that rivaled Dinah's in boldness, and which showed every inch of her highly toned, curvaceous body to any viewer's best advantage. She helped Dinah with her makeup, then Olga escorted them to Lanna's car, just to make sure they left together. Both of them looked hot enough to put the sultry, Chicago night to shame.

"Go, and enjoy," Olga admonished them through the open passenger window. "Laugh, get drunk, make whoopee . . . get lucky."

That alone broke some ice as both the younger women smiled, then laughed, then Lanna put the car in gear, and off they drove into the night.

"Where do you want to go?" asked Lanna after they'd put some road behind them.

"Oh, I don't know," Dinah admitted easily, enjoying the breeze through her window. "Where do you wanna go?"

It wasn't much of a start, but it was something. They just cruised for awhile, neither of them saying much, both of them fighting the battle of the bored. Finally Lanna stated, "We didn't spend all this time getting ready just to sit in the car," and she swung the new Mercedes around, and headed for a happening night spot she knew of.

It turned out to be a traditional singles bar. The difference was that it enjoyed the blessing of being trendy at the moment. Though the place was crowded, seats were willingly vacated at the bar for the two most attractive women to walk through the door. One was as bodacious as could be imagined, while the other, who was build like a battleship, simply left imagination behind in her wake.

Lanna didn't drink as a rule, but she relaxed the rule that night. Dinah thought about it seriously for a moment, then decided to join her. Once served, they nursed their drinks, thinking to themselves, neither of them paying much attention to what was going on around them. Finally

"Why are we doing this?" Lanna asked.

Dinah glanced her way.

"We're not supposed to be working, remember? Orders from on high."

The blonde met her glance.

"That includes you, as well, my dear," she drolly intoned.

Dinah merely smiled as she returned her attention to her drink. She absently played the sip-stick among the ice.

Lanna thought for awhile before venturing, "Maybe, if we look at it from a different angle - "

"It's still working," Dinah cut in.

"Oh, as if you're giving yourself a break," Lanna cracked with a nettled frown. She relaxed again, then decided, "Eh, maybe you're right."

There was quiet for a time, then Dinah ventured, "Maybe not our methods, but our approach . . . "

"One more word, and I'm telling comrade Olga."

"No, stay with me a minute here," the raven haired woman bid her. "Here we've been engaged in this search now for two years - well, I have, but that's beside the point. Anyway, we've been completely focused, completely tunnel-visioned in pursuit of a single objective. Nothing has gotten in our way . . . including, just maybe, the solution."

This engaged Lanna's interest.

"Go on with that thought," the buxom blonde bid her. "I still reserve the right to rat on you later on though."

"I'm thinking of an observation Einstein made some time ago."

"This is while he was still living, right?"

The lawyer chuckled, then related how, "He said that there are situations in which the solution to a problem can resist all efforts of discovery. No matter what we try, or how we try, or even how long we try, the solution remains stubbornly hidden. So we finally get fed up, give up, and move onto something else, and then, lo and behold, when we least expect it, the solution to the problem calmly presents itself to us, and says, 'Here I am.'"

Dinah had turned to face her companion, presenting herself as said solution as she quoted the phrase. Lanna, however, came to regard her companion in open eyed amazement.

"Oh my God . . . ," she uttered.

Dinah dropped the solution impersonation as she perceived Lanna's change of demeanor. The blonde seemed to be starrng fixedly at the light, airy material covering her chest.

"Open your top," Lanna told her from a far off mental distance.

"What?"

"Open your top," she reiterated, a bit louder, and more currently focused.

"Lanna, I really don't think - "

Lanna suddenly lunged at her, claws first, and clutched either side of her buttoned front.

"Open!" she declared, buttons flying everywhere as she tore the front of Dinah's top open, revealing the bib underneath. Her sudden, violent action caused a minor stir in their proximity, and earned them the attention of one of the bartenders.

"Is there a problem here, ladies?" he wanted to know.

"Uh, no," Dinah answered quickly, and awkwardly.

Lanna was unresponsive, the sum total of her focus being on Dinah's bib-clad chest.

"We were," Dinah struggled to explain to the bartender, "just discussing Einstein."

"They're incredible," Lanna murmured softly in the direction of Dinah's perfectly matched, feminine wonders.

"She's . . . really into free radicals," the overly endowed lawyer offered somewhat helplessly'.

The bartender observed the direction of Lanna's gaze, and afforded himself the opportunity to visually partake of Dinah's loveliness.

"Radical, yes," he noted, appreciating what he saw, "but not quite free." He eyed Dinah significantly. "Make sure they stay that way," he offered in a manner of friendly warning to her, and then he returned to his business of serving customers.

The corners of Dinah's mouth twitched upward at the departing bartender, appreciating the fact that he was a lot nicer than he could've been. She then returned her attention to, "Lanna?"

The blonde was unresponsive. She seemed mesmerized by Dinah's chest.

"Lanna, what is it?" Dinah tried calling again, a bit more urgently.

". . . pattern," Lanna uttered, still not completely in the here, and now.

"What pattern?"

"It's a wheel, with a hub . . . and one, interchangeable spoke."

"What - are you talking about?"

Lanna's blue eyes finally came into focus, and fixed themselves on Dinah.

"The rotation pattern of Wayans' system of accounts," she told her companion. Her eyes then lowered just enough. "The whole map is in the pattern on your bib."

She extended a hand, intending to point out what she had in mind, but Dinah caught her wrist just before an finger touched the forward swell of her left breast.

"Lanna," she begged to remind her, "you are going to get us thrown out of here."

Lanna pursed her lips as Dinah released her, irritated at the delay in sharing her epiphany. She plucked the sip stick from her drink, sucked the wet end dry, then used it as a pointer to indicate different locations on Dinah's enticingly draped bosom.

"Okay," she began, "we know that he's constantly moving funds worldwide, right?"

"Okay . . ."

"What we couldn't get was the pattern of how money would appear, and then disappear. The missing key was - a movable spoke that lead to, and from, a hub city. You know how we would start to see a pattern, and then it would suddenly change, and we'd be back at square one again?"

"Yeah . . . ?"

"Okay, well that was the wheel turning. You know how we always assumed that the hub was a key city?"

Dinah nodded.

"We were wrong. The hub isn't a city."

She used her pointer to illustrate. Dinah struggled to see.

"It's actually - the center of the earth, and, as the wheel turns, the key city, which this one spoke connects to, also changes."

A firecracker went off in Dinah's head as she realized, "And every time the wheel turns . . . ,"

"*He* - makes, and distributes, a fortune," Lanna said, concluding the big woman's thought. "It's not so much ownership," she added, "but controlling the directional flow of assets. Who gets what, and how much, when, and under what conditions."

Dinah took a few moments to think through the concept Lanna had described as the blonde sat facing her.

"Wheel of Fortune," Lanna noted, smiling at her coin of phrase. She eyed her companion while absently sucking on the end of her pointer.

"We're going to have to run all our old data on the basis of a whole new model," Dinah finally observed.

Lanna drew the sip-stick from between her lips.

"Won't be that hard," she stated dryly. "Establish a new model - do a little reconfiguring."

The lawyer eyed her dubiously.

"Somehow, I'm not seeing you jumping in to spend hours on the keypad."

"Your typing speed is better than mine anyway," the blonde noted matter-of-factly with a noncommittal shrug.

Her attention gravitated back to the bold curves Dinah's bounty imposed on her little bib as the end of her pointer played against the surfaces of her eye teeth.

"I'd like to lay that out flat so I could get a better look at it," she said in a distracted tone. Dinah's eyebrows pricked.

"You mean you'd like to . . . iron out the bumps in your idea."

Being on a different mental plane, Lanna raised her eyes to meet those of her companion.

"Yeah," she simply said.

Dinah smirked.

"That would leave me in . . . a somewhat exposed state," she wryly noted. "Don't you think?"

Lanna scowled as her mental gearing shifted to play along.

"Oh, you'd love that, and you know it," she breathed suggestively.

The implication made Dinah's cross-legged pelvis squirm. Lanna noticed.

"sa matter?" she teased with calculated innocence. "Got an itch?"

Dinah smiled, almost in spite of herself.

"No," she offered of her own as she turned to face the bar again. "I got a bitch."

Lanna enjoyed the retort, and turned to face her own drink once again.

"You get much hotter," she remarked, "and they're going to have to turn the air conditioning up in this place."

Oh yeah? Dinah wondered, quietly thrilling at the blonde's back handed compliment, and latching onto her offered bait.

"Well, now that you mention it," she noted as she sat herself up straight, "it *is* a little warm in here."

With that, Dinah went about removing her shirt. Her arms strained the sleeves as she raised her hands to ease the garment over her thick, broad shoulders. Her prominent chest rose higher, and projected further, as she lowered the shirt beyond the cascade of her luxurious hair to reveal the fully developed, and intricately defined, musculature of her massive, powerful back. Conscious to maintain her straight posture, Dinah's upper body seemed to expand yet more as she put her hands to work behind her back, her fingers coaxing

the sheer material of the sleeves to surrender its hold on the aggressive bulges in her arms. Once she was completely free, the victorious Amazon suspended the defeated garment by the inside of its collar from a pair of fingers like it was a battle trophy, then casually draped it across her lap.

She leaned forward to perch her elbows on the padded rail of the bar. Her head was spinning delightfully, the alcohol of her drink having had a liberating affect on her characteristically inhibitive reserve. She was fully aware of how her work-engorged physique had danced as she'd taken off her shirt. She was also aware of how her little display had garnered her a big audience of lingering stares from both sexes in the crowded room. As she sat in her clingy little bib top with its barely securing spaghetti straps, Dinah could feel dozens of pairs of alcohol emboldened eyes playing over the rich topography of her muscular form, and she could sense an almost reverential mixture of appreciation, awe and longing. It felt good to her, and she liked the feeling.

On a playfully crazy whim, the mighty huntress cast a smoldering, feral look toward Lanna, who hadn't missed a bulge of her nearly topless exhibition. She deliberately compelled the thick, vascular arm between them to its full expanse an instant before the blonde could look away - just for fun.

Lanna, for her own account, took a moment to distractedly toy with the remnants of her drink before she pointedly uttered, "Bitch."

The huntress smiled, confident in the knowledge that she'd just won her second conquest of the night.

"I'll . . . take that as a compliment," she granted.

The blonde looked at her askance.

"You'd better."

Relaxed, comfortable, warm. The two women were enjoying their shared atmosphere - just as comrade Olga had intended that they do. They returned a portion of their focus to the drinks in front of them. Dinah took a sip of hers.

"Where are we headed with this, Lanna?" Dinah wondered. She sounded a bit forlorn. "Where is it taking us?"

Lanna took a moment to consider, then answered, "To the future."

The lawyer frowned.

"Oh, I know that," she said dismissively, then, "but is it our future?"

"Whether we find her, or not, Sara is a permanent part of our future now, whether we

like it, or not," Lanna stated. "To even try to deny that is just . . . "

She sat there, at a loss for a word until Dinah offered, "Wayansian."

The blonde considered the term applicable, and worthy of salute.

"I'll drink to that," she said, and then she did.

Dinah stared into her glass.

"God, I miss her," she almost whispered.

"So do I," Lanna intoned with thought as well as feeling. "Y'know . . . it's amazing how Sara could . . . get into you. You know what I mean? I mean, there was . . . something about her that just . . . made you want to be your best."

Dinah solemnly nodded her understanding.

"She was exhausting in that respect." She smiled. "She was a handful - two hands full." She knew her eyes were welling up. She knew she was in public. She didn't care. "Alex, and I, never had it so good as when she'd come to us with a question."

Lanna took note of her companion's mood, and offered her bev-nap to a higher purpose.

"Thanks," said Dinah in accepting the gift, and putting it to good use.

"Yeah, well," said Lanna, unconcerned about her envy showing, "I never knew 'er like you guys did."

Dinah struggled to recover.

"She was something," she breathed heavily.

The blonde half turned to regard the brunette. A feminine hand extended across a set of heavily muscled shoulders.

"Dinah," Lanna sought to quietly inform her friend.

Dinah listened.

"She still is."

They returned their attention, and themselves, to their drinks. Time passed between them, neither saying anything.

"The future," Dinah murmured. "What - is - the future?"

Lanna thought a moment, then answered, "Escape from the past."

The overly developed brunette regarded the overly shapely blonde. She was surprised. She frowned from curiosity.

"That's . . . rather pessimistic," she observed.

Lanna avoided looking at her.

"It's the truth," she merely stated. She observed the remnants of her drink as her fingers

played the sip-stick among the slowly melting ice. "The future is just a way of escaping the past. Everyone who didn't want you. Everyone who told you you weren't good enough, or that you'd never accomplish anything good, or noble. Everything that hurt. Every good thing that didn't happen, no matter how you tried. Every bad thing that did happen, no matter how you tried. The future is an escape from all of that. But it's just an illusion. The past, and every Goddamned thing, and body, with it, is always there, right behind you, snapping at your heels, no matter how fast you run. You can't look back, and you can't slow down, or the it'll overtake you, and eat you alive, and laugh at you all over again."

She tossed the stick onto the bar, then took up her glass, and tossed back the dregs. She swallowed leisurely, observing what was left in her glass.

"And I wonder why I don't drink."

She snorted out a mirthless breath of air, then sat quietly until her slender shoulder felt the playful butt of a broad shoulder. She looked to note her dark haired companion looking at her.

"Hey," the big woman counseled her within the privacy of their shared atmosphere, "t's not so bad."

The two of them continued looking at one another.

"Stop running, and give the future a chance."

They held the look, the feeling, then Lanna looked away.

"Yeah, well . . ."

She placed the glass on the bar in front of her. Looking back, she changed the subject.

"You want another?" she inquired.

Dinah looked back before herself, and took a sip from what was left of her drink.

"Not if it's going to depress you any further," she noted. "God, and I thought *I* was the stodgy one."

A fresh drink was unexpectedly placed in front of Lanna.

"What's this?" she asked, looking up at the bartender who had served her.

"Compliments of the gentleman at the end there," the bartender pointed out.

The blonde glanced to Dinah to include her, then the two of them looked in the direction the bartender had indicated. There, at the end of the bar, was a handsome young man watching them. He was smiling pleasantly, and, when he was certain he had their attention, he raised his own glass to salute them. There is something to be said for chemistry, because eye contact with the man, at once, ignited a pleasurable spark in Lanna's groin.

"I think - you've gotten to the starring stage," Lanna heard an intimate voice inform her. The blonde awoke from her distracted state to notice the pleasantly smiling Amazon close by her shoulder.

"Oh," she offered, still a little dazed, "sorry."

She struggled to refocus her attention.

"He looks . . . interesting," Dinah casually noted as she watched the man. Her eyes then focused on her friend. "And . . . interested."

Lanna shot the brunette a glance that belied her gathering mental state. She squeezed her thighs together, and shifted comfortably on her barstool.

"Got an itch?" the big woman wondered oh-so innocently.

Another glance, another shift, then Lanna muttered, "Bitch."

Dinah looked away as she snorted out a poorly stifled laugh. Looking back, she asked, "You want 'im?"

The blonde was feeling overcome, and helpless. She thrilled at the images her mind was conjuring. At a loss, she looked heavenward, and sighed, "I'd do 'im in a second."

Smiling, Dinah paused just right before she asked, "Then what are you waiting for?"

Lanna strained to collect herself. "You can't be serious," she heard herself almost plead.

Dinah just kept on looking at her with a smile that was both warm, and reassuring. Her large, lean face moved slightly to, and fro, within her thick, black mane of hair as she gently shook her head, then she confided, "I won't tell."

Lanna wanted to stay, yet she wanted to go. Wild urgings beckoned her. She wanted to resist, yet she wanted to yield. Finally deciding, she got to her feet, straightened her posture, and carefully smoothed the little wrinkles in her dress out over her belly.

"How do I look?" she needed to know. "Do I look alright?"

Dinah took a brief appraisal the stunning blonde's appearance.

"Loose those clothes, and you'll be doing just fine," she offered.

A nervous smile flashed across Lanna's beautiful features. It'd been so long since she'd actually felt hesitant about approaching a man. So long.

"You're sure . . . ?" she asked, needing that final, tiny push of approval.

Touched by her concern, Dinah smiled at her.

"Go ahead," she prompted, then thought it best to assure her that, "I'll be alright."

Lanna hesitated a moment more, then she smiled, grateful, and reached out to clutch Dinah's thick, solid forearm.

"Thanks girlfriend," she said, and then she was gone.

Lanna sashayed her way down the bar toward her mark, feeling a wondrous, long missed, heat of anticipation gathering in her. She was encouraged to see the man meet her gaze with equal hunger as she approached. Already, she could tell that she was going to be *very* tired, and pleasantly sore, the following morning.

Dinah watched her friend's receding back, noting the way her pelvis swayed. She admired the hypnotic, alternating twitch of the blonde's beautifully rounded buttocks as she took each step.

If I could walk like that, she ventured to speculate, . . . *I just might not look totally stupid.*

Lanna's strong, womanly pelvis disappeared around the end of the bar as she exchanged greetings with her date. Dinah returned her attention to her drink, a warming glow shining within her being. She felt glad for Lanna . . . but -

"Hi."

That . . . sounded nice . . . and masculine, the big woman thought.

Her attention left her empty glass to look to her right. What her eyes encountered did not disillusion what her ears had suggested she might expect. There stood, at her side, a young, very nice looking, and very impressively developed . . . hunk. He was casually well dressed to show off his thick, lean upper body for admiration. The understated, yet unmistakable, way he displayed his physique seemed only fair to Dinah since, after all, the only thing *she* wore on her own massive upper body was her clingy, little bib-top. Her raven waves came to rest against the side of her face as she craned her head to more fully partake of the pleasing sight being offered to her.

"Hi," she said easily back to the hunk.

The increasingly attractive young man smiled.

Oh . . . this - is - nice, Dinah thought through a rapidly gathering mental haze of anticipated erotic fire.

"Would you like to arm wrestle?"

Dinah's vision cleared with a jolt.

That - did not - sound nice.

"No . . .," she replied, her calm demeanor unperturbed.

Without sacrificing eye contact with him, Dinah's long, strong fingers lightly gripped the rim of her glass, and lifted it off the bar.

"But . . . you can buy me a drink, and then we'll see what happens."

She smiled invitingly.

"Deal?"

The gorgeous, young, hunk of a man returned her smile.

"You're on," he said with naive, male confidence.

Dinah was charmed by the young man's innocence. She cautioned herself to be gentle with him.

Lanna fairly floated into Pink Team headquarters the next day. From her desk, Dinah watched the blonde as she glided across the room to her own office space. She was obviously nursing a delicious afterglow in the pit of her belly. The lawyer smiled, not from envy, but with a shared sense of deep contentment. She watched as Lanna set down her purse, then watched as she sat down, and leaned back in her chair. Her smile broadened as she waited in vain for Lanna to return to the land of mortals. She wondered how a simple office chair could possibly qualify as cloud nine.

"Write any bad checks last night?" she finally asked.

Lanna didn't answer for a time, peaking the lawyer's anticipation nicely. At length, her head turned slowly to regard the other woman with a languid gaze.

"No," she answered . . . languidly, "but I was tempted." She paused some more, to linger in her private afterglow, then asked, "How'd your night go?"

Dinah took some time to lean back in her chair, and lace her fingers together behind her head, peaking the corporate executive's anticipation nicely. She used a toe against the floor to swivel her own little cloud nine around so she could face the blonde.

"Well," she reported within a mood of languor all her own, "first we did it his way, but then I beat him at arm wrestling - first one arm, then the other. Then I wrestled him to submission - twice, and then we did it my way. That's when it got interesting, and . . . gratifying."

Lanna looked at her . . . languidly, then turned her eyes, and her attention, away to focus on more . . . pressing concerns.

"What a difference a night makes," she observed . . . languidly.

Olga then strode in, fresh, and ready, for the new day. She, at once, noted the conspicuous lack of productive activity within the room.

"Alright, ladies," she announced, clapping her pudgy hands together, "playtime is over, and it is time to be vorkink."

The two younger women regarded their older comrade . . . languidly.
"Olga," Lanna noted, "you need to get laid."

* * *

"What's this?" asked President Wayans as he approached his desk.

There was a thick stack of papers on it that hadn't been there the evening before.

"Oh, that's the Los Alamos report on the alien bitch," Robbins informed him.

Wayans paused at the sheaf before sitting down at the desk. He studied it reflectively for a moment, then hesitantly placed his fingers on it, and fanned the sum of its leaves with his thumb. After another moment, he glanced up at his Chief of Staff.

"It's pretty thick," he noted casually from under his brow.

Robbins just stood before the President, and shrugged.

Returning his eyes to the bound stack, Wayans felt his way into his desk chair.

"Well . . . let's see what they had to say . . . "

He took up the report, plopped it into his lap, then opened it near its center and started reading. He was quiet for a few moments, then he started reading out loud, " - a violent reaction can cause the equally balanced antimatter, and degenerate-matter, components to separate, bringing about an instantaneous chain-reaction resulting in catastrophic - "

He deliberately stopped as his eyes shifted up curiously to Robbins.

Again, the only response Robbins could think of to this was to shrug.

"It's Eubonics to me," he said.

Wayans smirked.

"Hardly the stuff of great literature," he said.

He closed the report, and tossed it on the desk.

"Where's the NASA stuff?" he wanted to know.

"Still at Los Alamos," Robbins reported. "They got it packaged on six pallets." He waited a moment for the President to say something, then asked, "You want to keep it there?"

"No . . . ," said Wayans thoughtfully.

Robbins waited. He thought the President seemed unduly preoccupied.

"Put it up in Chicago," Wayans finally decided, although he sounded a bit uncertain.

"And that?" Robbins asked, pointing toward the report.

Wayans gazed at the stack of papers where it lay on his desk. After a moment, his eyes

narrowed.

"Leave that here," he said.

* * *

Alex noticed that his nails had become shorter again while he'd been asleep. A look in the cupboard revealed that his food store had been restocked as well. He was just thinking, *How thoughtful*, when he noticed something else in the cupboard. Movement. At least he thought it was movement. Maybe he was seeing things, or maybe his eyes were playing tricks on him, or - *Let's see here . . .*

He reached in to where he thought he'd seen the commotion, and moved a couple packets of food. *Nothing there*. He moved another packet that was further in - *There! There it is - no, wait a minute - now it's gone*.

Packets started tumbling to the floor as Alex carefully moved them out of his way on the shelf, searching for - *What the hell is that, anyway?*

He moved another packet to one side, and there, on the packet underneath, he saw what he'd been looking for. It *had* been movement - he wasn't seeing things. Alex marveled at the sight as he watched the scurried movements on an ant making its way across the glossy plastic wrapper.

He was dumbfounded, and almost breathless with amazement. The ant suddenly disappeared over the packet's far side. Frantically, Alex tore the many remaining packets away from their perch on the shelf. His bare feet were quickly buried in them as they cascaded to the floor. Two final packets were raked away until only the one remained. Alex looked, but saw no movement anywhere around the packet. He looked harder - looked again - tried to see . . . movement - *No . . .* anywhere around the lone packet that remained undisturbed on the shelf.

No, Alex felt with all his heart. *Please, no*. He reached for the packet - he couldn't believe how his hand was trembling - *Hold still, dammit - jeez!*

His thumb, and fingers, gently squeezed the packet's opposing sides, then lifted it as though it was filled with nitroglycerin. *Nothing* on the surface of the shelf immediately underneath the packet. *Please - no . . .* he carefully turned the packet over in his grip. *C'mon . . . please . . .* and there - *OH!* - on the packet's underside - *OH . . . GOD!* - the ant was scurrying along the glossy, plastic wrapper.

In his distracted state of excitement, Alex's legs gave out from under him. He tumbled to the floor to land in a heap on the heap of food packets he'd displaced in the course of his search. There he was convulsed with ecstasy he never would've imagined possible before. He bawled, and wailed, with rapturous delight. He tried to control himself - he really did, but it didn't work. He couldn't help himself. He tried to hate himself for getting so excited - he really did, but it didn't work. He just couldn't help himself.

All the while Alex rolled, and frolicked, in his mess, he took care not to let go of his precious little packet. So he didn't loose all of his control. He couldn't hate himself completely. When, at length, he lay exhausted on the floor, his spirits over his good fortune but hardly dimmed, he began examining the packet to make sure his eyes were not deceiving him.

He turned the packet over, and over, in his hands, searching the surface of the plastic carefully. He searched the seams, and inside every one of the plastic's crinkled folds. Nowhere could he find the ant.

Maybe he's gone inside - I probably scared the piss out of 'im - embarrassed him half to death too - no, not death. Sorry, Li'l buddy - I didn't mean it that way . . . wonder if he's a piss ant?

Alex continued wondering, as his search continued, just where the ant had gotten to, and where his little friend might be. He tore the packet open carefully, searching all the while. He looked with such a span of spiked attention that the effort made his eyes, and head, begin to ache.

Finally, he gave way to fear. He became frantic; rending, and tearing, at the plastic wrapping, and then the brick of dried food that was inside. He searched, and searched, among the many pieces he'd reduced the brick to, but nowhere could he find the ant.

He was close to despair - near the end of what few wits he had left to call his own. The ant was nowhere to be found, but then he felt a something on his hand. Alex looked, and searched the surface of his skin where the something had been felt, and there was the ant, his friend, busily making its way over, and between, the hairs, and over the pale, and wrinkled, skin that covered bones, and veins. Upon finding the ant again, and discovering that it liked him well enough to walk on him, Alex was overwhelmed again with such a flowing of emotions that he lay where he was, and cried. And he gave thanks to God, reassured at last, after so much time, that She had not forsaken him.

Some time later, after he'd regained his calm, and strength, Alex moved the ant to his

dining table. He gave it some sugar, and a couple drops of water. He watched the ant scurry to the sugar where it came to rest. Alex was overcome with glee.

He knew that he had to be careful, lest his keepers come to suspect his unusual behavior, and activity. He had to keep his friend under wraps, and took pains to keep the ant's presence secret - *Shh, don't say a word, Li'l buddy - at least don't say it too loud* - or those who had imprisoned him would come, and take his friend away.

But often, over the course of the many hours that ensued, Alex had to retreat to the private corner of his bathroom cubicle - the one area he knew of where the cameras couldn't see - so he could let an uncontrollable spasm of delight, and praise, course through his boney body. Afterward, he would emerge abashed. He would find his friend again, and apologize profusely for his absence. "It's been awhile - since . . . y'know . . .," he tried to explain at one point, then he realized that, "No . . . you don't know what it's like." The memories of sameness plagued him for a time until he wakened to regard the ant. "With me around, you won't have to know." He knew that he was probably not the best of company, but he gave the ant his solemn promise, "I won't leave you."

Over the following lengths of time, Alex was in Heaven - he was sure of it. Waking from a sleep, he actually felt refreshed, and even felt like getting out of bed. He would immediately start a search for the ant, and wouldn't rest until he'd found it. When he did, he'd happily greet his, "Li'l buddy," and their day would then begin. The time passed wondrously for Alex. Nothing was so important as being with his friend, and he sincerely hoped that the ant enjoyed him too. He got the biggest kick out of tending to whatever he thought the ant might need. No chore was too great, or task too small, Alex applied himself to all with equal seal, and vigor. "What do you want for lunch today, Li'l buddy? We got - uh . . . let's see, what do we got here . . . uh, we got mongolian noodles, and teriyaki noodles. Name yer pleasure."

One time he'd jokingly asserted, "This place ain't big enough for the both of us," and that notion got him to thinking. He thought of how nice it would be for his friend to have a place of its own. So, he built a little house for the ant out of packets from his food store, using his own feces as a paste to neatly seal the seams, and edges, "Don't expect me to come, and visit too often, okay?"

When he was nearly done with his project, another thought occurred to Alex. He didn't want to face the truth, but, as a friend, he felt it was his duty to inform the ant that, "Now you're in the shit house," and then he looked about himself, "just like I am." He quickly

looked back to spy the ant scurrying here, and there, on the surface of the table. He watched the ant, and it occurred to him to ask, "What're you in for?"

Life became worth living once again for Alex. He grew confident that his confinement would be endurable now that he wasn't alone anymore. He appreciated to no end the fact of living movement other than his own. He was secure.

One time though, after waking from a sleep, Alex searched out his friend. He found the ant on the floor beside the clothes dryer. Alex immediately noticed that the ant was curiously still. It didn't move at all, in fact.

"Hey, Li'l Buddy," Alex asked of his friend, "you feeling alright?"

The ant remained unmoving for as long as Alex watched. At length, Alex knelt down by the dryer. His eyes never left the ant.

"Li'l Buddy?"

A reach. A touch. The ant skidded across the floor about three inches, then came to . . . rest.

Alex stared at the ant. It's stillness captivated him. He knew his friend wouldn't lie - not to him. He knew that

Free at last. Free at last. Thank God almighty, he's free at last.

Alex sat back on his heels, and leaned himself against the dryer. His eyes never left the ant. Even though he couldn't see it anymore through the heavy film of tears, his eyes never left the ant, his friend.

* * *

"Morning, Pandora," Jimmie greeted Pandora Spocks as he breezed into her small, cramped, White House office.

"Good morning, Mr. Oldsen," said Spocks, returning the greeting along with an expectant smile as she looked up from her monitor to visually acknowledge the young man. "What little box of goodies have you brought me today?" she asked.

Jimmie fished about in the side pockets of his jacket until he produced a plain looking, white colored, paper envelope that contained a plain looking, silver colored, computer disc. He passed his find to her.

"We have a SuzieFlu authorization for Latin America," Jimmie told her with a disinterested sigh. "The drug cartels have gotten a little confused on who's running things."

Spocks took the disc in hand.

"And this . . . is a little reminder?" she queried academically.

The corners of Jimmie's mouth rose automatically, then lowered again just a quickly.

"Take out Columbia first," he instructed as Spocks inserted the disc into her CPU, "then we'll give the other countries an hour to see how they react. If they give us any flack, then hit Brazil."

"And so on, and so on . . .," Spocks began to drone.

"And so on, and so on," droned Jimmie with a wave of his hand. "You know the routine."

"One hour isn't an awful lot of time," Spocks commented as she began giving the computer virus on her desktop its marching orders.

Jimmie smiled again, and, this time, the smile remained.

"It's more than enough time if they want Jimmie Oldsen to come flying to the rescue."

* * *

"We got us some special duty tonight, Olga," Bertha told her partner when she'd arrived for work one night. "They want us to clean out a storage room," she reported. "Clear out everything so they can use it for . . .," after a pause, she smiled, then said, "storage."

Olga smiled pleasantly.

"I don't know," the big black woman continued, "I heard somethin' 'bout documents, or somethin'. They want it done at night so's not to bother the day people."

The women got the equipment they thought they'd need for the job. Basically a pair of cloth work gloves for each of them, and a platformed cart on wheels with a hand rail at one end.

The storage room was situated off the service area hallway, and was a roughly ten by sixteen foot, windowless enclosure. It contained two free standing rows of prefab metal shelves, one on either side of the doorway. Each extended the length of the walls, and reached almost to the ceiling. They, and the floor between them, were filled with an array of junk that had accumulated over the years. The women's instructions were to move everything out, and throw it into the large trash dumpster behind the mansion's service area.

They got started, working slowly, methodically, moving things in tandem so they didn't get in each others way. Roughly three hours later, and a little over half way through the job,

they decided to take a break. Not wanting to go back to the service lunch room, they made do with where they were. Bertha took a seat on an old stool they would soon be throwing out, and Olga contented herself with a fairly comfortable seat on the cart they were using.

Both of them exhibited a normal curiosity with regard to the variety of items they'd encountered, wondering what, or how old, this was, or what that might've been used for. While they rested, Olga made a casual study of what was left from where she sat. Herself being seated beside one of the shelving units, Bertha began rummaging in some boxes they hadn't gotten to yet.

"Hm, lookit that, will ya," Bertha said in a somewhat bemused tone.

Olga turned to look, and saw Bertha with that charming little smile on her full, broad lips as she absently studied the front of what looked like a black, baseball style cap she had draped over one hand. Her brown eyes shifted to notice Olga watching her, and she obligingly rotated her hand, and the cap, around so she could see. As the emblem on the front of the cap came into her view, Olga almost lost her breath when she saw the official Dodgers banner just above the bill.

She knew, at once, that it had to be Sara's favorite cap. It looked exactly like the one Sara had picked up at a local swap-meet she'd been to with Alex some years before. She'd quickly developed a deep attachment to the cap after she'd gotten it, and was hardly ever afterward without it. Olga also recalled that Sara was wearing the cap on the last day she saw her.

Now, Olga watched as Bertha arranged the cap in her hand, then plopped it on the top of her thickly haired head. The woman of color regarded Olga, her expression intending to prompt an opinion.

Olga mumbled a bit before a fairly steady, "It's nyot you," finally came out of her mouth.

"You're right there," Bertha replied easily as she took the cap off again, and looked at it in her hand. "I can't imagine *anyone* lookin' good in a 'Dodgers' cap," she said.

"Where vas that?" Olga asked, trying hard to feign, but passing interest.

"Oh, it was in there," said Bertha, indicating an worn looking brown, cardboard box that appeared to be roughly eighteen inches square. She looked over the edge of the box, and fished a hand inside. "Just a bunch of old cloths, looks like," she reported. "Some of 'em are pretty tore up."

Olga looked away, and sighed.

"Funny vat you find," she noted.

"It shore is," Bertha agreed, tossing the cap back in with the cloths.

They continued with their job. On the pretext of lagging behind on one return trip from the dumpster, Olga made very certain that the box of cloths was inconspicuously stored in one corner of the metal bin. She would retrieve it later on after she got off work when the dumpster had been moved to the street outside the property.

Finishing their job for the night with a couple of hours to spare, the women swept, and dusted the room, then scrupulously mopped the floor after themselves in order to rub out the wheel marks the cart had made. They clocked out at seven, bid each other goodbye, then parted on their separate ways.

Olga walked around the block, then doubled back up the street that ran behind Wayans Manor. Her knees weren't as sore as they normally were, so she made the climb back up the gently sloping hill fairly well. She spotted the trash dumpster outside the property's service gate, and proceeded to go to fetch the box from its hiding place. When she looked inside, however, she was given immediate pause. The dumpster had evidently been taken to another service area before being moved outside, for it was filled, to the brim, with what looked like, at least, a month's worth of kitchen leavings.

The old woman stepped away to seriously reconsider her intent. How was she ever going to find the box under all that mess? She then considered her objective. Not wanting to give up hope of there being tangible evidence of Alex, and Sara, at hand, Olga returned the focus of her attention to the dumpster. It was not a happy sight. What she knew she was about to do was even less of a happy thought.

"Hah!" she sighed with forlorned resignation, "I haf come to this."

She did her best to mentally prepare herself for the task ahead, then she heaved another sigh, anything to put off the inevitable for just a another moment. Finally, she screwed up her courage, and solemnly informed the dumpster that, "It's between you, and me."

The old Russian forged ahead, and foraged through the container's contents. It wasn't easy. Even standing as high up on her toes as she could, the full extent of her arms just barely reached over the trash bin's edge. She couldn't reach very far into the container, nor could she reach very far below the surface of its contents. Item after item of what she, and Bertha, had just finished dealing with turned up in her hands. A number of items of even less desirable substance turned up in her hands as well. As the minutes passed, and she lost count of the times she'd held her breath, none of Olga's efforts were turning up anything encouraging. She

had to remind herself again, and again, and yet again as to just why she was doing what she was doing. It was for Sara. It was for Alex. It was for ho -

HONK!

"Aahhh!" Olga forcefully expelled as she whirled about to see herself confronted by nothing less than a full sized garbage truck, replete with its hydraulic loading forks lowered, poised, and ready to strike.

The garbage man had arrived for his scheduled pickup. He was evidently running behind that schedule, because his mood was about as foul as the stuff Olga could feel crammed under her fingernails.

"Alright, lady," he called to her from out his driver's side window, "outta the way!"

Olga hardly heard the man. Once she'd recovered from her shock of the truck's sudden appearance, she saw an opportunity she couldn't let pass by. Knowing that she was going to need more height if she was ever going to find the box of cloths, she stepped up on a projection near the dumpster's base, then climbed up onto one of the truck's extended forks to resume her search while balancing herself on the dumpster's edge.

With his truck now essentially taken hostage, the driver had little choice, but to get out, and argue for its return.

Olga paid no mind to the man, or his pleas, and demands. She was totally focused on her search, and on breathing through her mouth so's not to smell what her nose was hovering over. Her hand swept away some debris, and there, underneath, she saw Sara's 'Dodgers' cap. It was amid other clothing. The box had to be there.

She started digging for an edge of the box. She found two edges, then three. She was about to see if she could pull the box loose when her reach started to fall short. She looked behind herself to see that the garbage man was pushing the dumpster into position to line up with his hydraulic forks.

Olga made a desperate grab for the box. Her reach fell shorter still. Enraged beyond civil English, she lapsed into colorful Russian as she grabbed into something that might've been lettuce in a former life, then blindly flung it behind herself. The stream of expletives that followed her volley told her that she'd scored a good hit.

In the control center of Wayans Manor, the day time security crew had just settled into their shift. A guard, observing the array of monitor reports from around the property, found something interesting on a camera that watched the road behind the estate. He took the receiving monitor off the system's rotation pattern so that the image of the road was constant,

then he looked closer to note if what he was seeing might be a security concern. Determining that it was not, he smiled at what he saw, then he leaned back in his chair.

"Hey, Jeff," he said casually over his shoulder to another security officer who happened to be nearby, "take a look at this."

Jeff diverted his attention from what he was doing, and looked at the monitor bay.

"What is it?"

From where he sat, the guard pointed to the specific monitor.

"Look at that," he said.

Jeff focused on the monitor. After he'd studied the image for a few moments, he shook his head slowly.

"Now I've seen everything," he commented with a wry smile. "The trash man, and a bag lady. . . fighting over garbage."

Olga now had the box of clothing in hand, and her feet on the ground again. By then, the truck driver was not only peppered, but salted as well, with a rancid assortment of culinary blight. Olga had managed to come at him from so many directions that he was pretty disoriented. The fact that he was laboring with a sorely abused sense of smell did nothing to help his situation.

Olga made to leave, but the driver grabbed her arms from behind. A quick thrust of a shoulder, and a roundhouse with the box, however, sent the man falling over one of the truck's loading forks. Once she saw that he was not likely to give her any more trouble, Olga threw some more Russian his way, then strode off with the box clutched tightly to her squat, little body.

* * *

"Boy, you're chipper today," Lanna observed of Dinah.

She set her things on her desk, and turned on her computer. She'd come into Pink Team Headquarters to see the hulking lawyer, in her usual gym sweats, moving around her conspicuously empty desk with a can of spray cleaner, and a dust cloth in hand . . . *humming* as she busily applied some mist, and then the cloth to random areas on the desk's surface.

"What happened?" the blonde smirked at Dinah's broad back. "You get lucky last night?"

The lawyer turned. She looked quietly radiant.

"No," she answered simply, "I . . . just had a good night's sleep, I tore up the gym this morning, and," she returned to her task, "I am going to start this day with a clean desk."

Lanna smiled. She was happy for, and grateful for, the big woman's good spirits. Dinah's mood had been improving steadily of late. She was still experiencing compelling dreams at night, but the nightmares seemed to have stopped. She said that she'd discovered purpose in her dreams, and that she was walking toward it as she slept. Asked as to the nature of the purpose, Dinah merely answered, "Haven't got a clue," and then her look achieved a pleasant distance as she said, "All I know is that it's what must be."

Lanna settled in for the morning as Dinah continued to enjoy her fling at domesticity. She fired up her monitor, got connected, checked a message from Louise, then touched base with Jimmie's corporate headquarters in Houston where she found a couple of things that needed her attention.

The front door opened as Dinah finished with her desk. Both of them knew it was Olga. It was her usual time to get home, although she was a little late. Dinah had just picked up her computer monitor, and turned to place it on her freshly cleaned desk when

Foomp!

a box,

or something that might've been a box at one time, appeared in the spot on her desk she'd visually targeted for her monitor. It was a rumpled mass of bent, and broken, cardboard, its exterior liberally stained with an unappetizing variety of moist, objectionable unknowns. It wasn't a moment later that Dinah noticed . . . an odor.

"Dinah," Lanna called to her, "put that thing down. My back hurts just looking at you."

Dinah diverted her attention from the increasingly nauseous mess on her - formerly - clean desk, and glanced at the blonde, then she realized that, yes, she was still holding the monitor in her strong, capable hands. Rather than put it on another spot on the desk, she returned it to its former place on the floor. She stood erect to look at the box again. There was now a pool of something brackish orange in color that was beginning to form around its base.

Mentally prepared to repeatedly kill the perpetrator of this crime, Dinah's eyes wandered from the box to set upon . . . Olga. She was standing facing her on the opposite side of the . . . formerly - clean desk. She took in the sight of the old woman with her soiled hands, her soiled clothing, her soiled hair and face, and it occurred to her that, no, she really couldn't tell much difference between her roomie, and the box she had so unceremoniously

popped on her . . . desk. What she couldn't see, however, was Olga's soiled Russian dignity.

"What happened to you?" the lawyer asked.

For Olga, it was the least thing she wanted to hear after the morning she'd been through. Dinah, and Lanna, witnessed the last straw take its toll as the sturdy, little Russian stood there, trembling with outrage. She drew herself up to her overly full, five foot one-and-a-quarter inches of height, proclaimed, "Don't - ask!", then turned on her heel, and stormed out of the room as fast as her aching knees would take her.

The two remaining Pink Teamers continued looking at the spot in the air Olga had just occupied. Both of them needed some time to blink themselves awake from a shared sense of stunned bewilderment. When their wits were, but half recovered, Dinah looked to Lanna at the same moment Lanna looked at her.

"Wha'd I say?" the baffled attorney wanted to know.

Lanna needed a moment to think about this, then she shrugged, and mumbled, "I don't know," before returning to the safety of her monitor screen, and leaving Dinah to deal with her state of perplexity all by herself.

"Wha'd I say?"

The discovery of Sara's, and Alex's, clothing confirmed two critical points in the search. 1) Their disappearances *were* connected, and 2) United States President, Marshall Wayans was definitely involved. This narrowed the women's focus tremendously, and it decided Dinah to permanently relocate herself to Pink Team headquarters in Chicago.

* * *

Tom Starks now existed in a room of a Portland convalescent home. He could no longer think of himself as living - *not like this*.

His family's fortunes had gone from bad to worse - his move to the convalescent home having been decided when Florence's health gave out from trying to care for him herself. Their savings were gone. They'd had to mortgage the house to pay for their support, and for the therapy Florence needed if her back was going to recover. Debbie was helping where she could while caring for her three children. Son-in-law, Harry, was still fighting to preserve their health insurance - *God bless him*.

They could no longer afford the special chair Tom needed to be moved around in. They could no longer afford the therapy he needed to keep his joints flexible, and his muscles

limber. Once that had stopped, his paralysis took over completely. His muscles shrunk, his joints stiffened, and his body had begun to take on odd, and ugly angles.

He spent his days sat up in a steel frame, high-backed, cushioned chair - his lifeless body tied to it so he didn't topple over. He was set facing a television set most of the time. Each flicker of the screen confirmed to him, yet again, that there was nothing good on TV. At night, the nursing staff would lay him in bed, his seeing eye being the only thing about him that could tell his mind that his position had changed.

Florence had recovered enough to where she could work full time. The job didn't pay much. Times were hard, and she'd been out of the workforce for so long, but they desperately needed whatever money they could get. She came to stay with Tom for a few hours every night, but the woman was so exhausted that she would often fall asleep while sitting at his bedside.

Shelley's entrance into the world was the only thing that had happened since the accident that could be called good. She was gorgeous, and perfect, and Tom longed for nothing more than to be able to touch her, feel her, hold her. He could only look at her as someone held her up for him to see. He tried so hard to touch her with his seeing eye - to bless her, and to tell her that she was good.

He slept as much as he could, but, after so much sleep, he'd be condemned to wakefulness, to the boredom and to the knowledge of what he had become.

He prayed daily for God to take him - *please* - to relieve his burdened family.

* * *

Long ago, at its inception, Olga had spread word of Dinah's search for Sara, and Alex, among her fellow Russian expatriates - the men who had educated Sara, and who had helped to raise her. Those who still could, rose to the call. One in particular was Colonel Gudenov.

He used his connections with the homeland to help Louise in her continued search into Wayans financial dealings. After almost a year of surreptitious international communiqués, Gudenov announced that he needed to travel to Moscow. He also let it be known that he needed someone to accompany him, because, once there, he intended to stay.

All the arrangements were made, but then it came down to a choice of who would go with him. Lanna, and Louise - as expected - were unable to go, Olga had her job at Wayans Manor to maintain, so Dinah was elected to be courier, as well as traveling companion, to the

Colonel.

That created a problem, because she, and Gudenov, had never gotten along with each other. He was the one - of all the Russians - whom Dinah had never trusted, and seemed driven to actively dislike. From all indications, the feelings from the old Red Army officer were mutual for the passionate, American lawyer.

Sparks always flew whenever they conversed. The two of them would go back, and forth, at each other for hours at a time. Dinah would harangue him endlessly about the benefits of freedom. Gudenov would merely smile, and then he'd deftly touch another nerve that was too close for comfort in her existential makeup. Oddly enough though, embattled, and embittered, as their relationship was, the Colonel was the only man toward whom Alex had exhibited anything akin to jealousy.

For the trip home, Gudenov insisted on wearing his Red Army uniform from the days of Soviet inglory. He'd taken care to keep it well preserved, but still, it was worn, and faded, with the passage of time, much the same as he was. It fit him badly since he'd gotten so much older. He would've looked more comical than imposing, if not for his dignified bearing, which was, but slightly bowed with age.

They landed at Moscow airport at night. There was a contact waiting for them. Col. Gudenov approached the man alone, leaving Dinah standing by the plane. In her pale trench coat, and dark, broad brimmed hat, she looked like Ingrid Bergman in the final scene of "Casablanca". She watched the two men as they talked. In the poor lighting, she could see the vapor of their conversation in the cold, night air.

They finished their business with each other. Gudenov returned to where Dinah was standing. As he arrived, he held up a simple book of matches by one side of his face so she could see it, then he extended his arm to her.

"Don't loose this," he instructed her as Dinah reached out to take the offering.

No sooner had the exchange been made, however, than Gudenov suddenly grabbed her wrist.

Instinctively, Dinah's fist closed around her gift, and her strong arm tightened. She was amazed that the old man could execute such a quick, effective move. It amazed her almost as much that she didn't try to pull away.

Her fierce gaze failed, as always, to bore into him as he looked back at her, as always, with a slightly bemused expression on his deeply furrowed, experience battered face. Sensing her lack of active fight, Gudenov loosened his grip on her, but still maintained a firm hold.

After the surprise of the moment had passed, Dinah felt an increase in pressure on the inside of her captive wrist. It eased somewhat, then was applied again as Gudenov gently pulled. He eased, then pulled yet again. Dinah realized that he wasn't attempting to force her - they both knew that she was far too strong, and he far too old, for that - but he was, in a more diplomatic way, asking that she put aside her long standing resistance to him.

Dinah debated with herself as to his motives - entertaining the worst ones that her mind could conjure. Why did he suddenly want her closer, she wondered, when he had so enjoyed establishing their polar distance? She felt him gently press her wrist again, and, that time, she allowed herself to yield.

They watched each other steadily as he drew her balled fist towards himself. Her hand approached his thin, dry lips, and then his eyes closed, and Dinah felt him lightly kiss the back of her tightly closed fingers.

Stunned beyond all rational thought, Dinah snatched her hand away from the old cold warrior. He remained as he had been; his hand still poised before his lips as though he were still holding hers. Dinah gathered her affected hand close to her chest within the other's protective grasp. She then saw Gudenov's eyes open to her, and the corners of his mouth turned upward to form a wry, but oddly, non-threatening, smile.

"You haf been good adversary, Dinah Prinze," the old Colonel told her, and then he went on to say, "I don't know vhat I vill believe in now."

He raised his hand, and touched the bill of his cap to her. Dinah could see his smile begin to disappear as he turned from her to go. She watched him walk away at a quick, firm pace. He rejoined his contact, and then the two of them faded into the shadows, and the night.

Only when he was completely gone from view did it occur to Dinah that a final spark had passed between them. She held her one hand closer - tighter. She hadn't said a word to him, or even bid him farewell.

It had been the ending of a beautiful friendship.

* * *

"Halfway 'round the world, and all you got was a book of matches," Lanna groused.

Olga studied the little matchbook Dinah had brought back with her under the illumination of her bedside lamp. It was the weekend, and she spent most of her time in bed to rest her knees. She used a magnifying glass to aide her spectacles as Dinah, and Lanna,

looked on. Olga started moving herself so she could sit on the side of her bed. Dinah watched the old woman's face closely. When she saw her grimace

"Olga, what do you need?"

"No, is okay," Olga said unconvincingly.

She achieved her desired position, then began rummaging in the drawer of her bedside table. She found a pair of tweezers, but lacked another tool she wanted.

"Dinah," she asked, "go into the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. Bottom shelf, right side, you'll find a razor blade. Bring it to me, please."

Dinah fetched the desired item for her, then Olga took the matchbook in hand again, and looked it over carefully with the magnifying glass. Her protracted interest in such a simple item peaked the others' curiosity. Once Olga was comfortable with what she thought she saw, she took up the razor, and made a small incision along one edge of one side of the cover's thickness. After using the blade to gently pry the opening wider, she exchanged it for the tweezers, then played the ends inside the opening. When she was satisfied, she pinched the tweezer ends together, then carefully extracted what looked like a tiny piece of photographic film.

"What is that?" asked a slightly confounded Lanna.

"Is microfilm," Olga answered, holding the film in the tweezers' grasp for all to see.

"Microfilm?" the blonde intoned almost mystically.

"A technological dinosaur if there ever was one," Dinah noted.

"Jeez, I thought that stuff went out of existence years ago," said Lanna.

"Hah! You young gurls," Olga scoffed irritably. "Always tinkering new, new, new. Everything has its purpose."

She studied her find at the end of the tweezers.

"Even old things."

"How're we going to blow that up so we can see it?" Lanna wondered.

"I'll give it to Popov," said Olga casually. "He'll know what to do with it."

Popov did know what to do with the microfilm. It yielded more than twenty pages of computer printout data. Lanna went to work on interpreting the data. What she found was something the Pink Team had spent over a year searching for: The key to Marshall Wayans' financial world.

Lanna had been right about her, 'Wheel of Fortune' theory. What the data on the microfilm provided was specific information on when the wheel would turn, where it would

stop and, most importantly, how to follow its movements.

* * *

"Yo, Lanna," hailed Louise into her headset as she sat at her home computer in New York.

"Yeah, Lou," said Lanna as she stared at her monitor screen in the nation's capital. The time had come to see if Gudenov's matchbook worked.

Lanna had loaded, and configured, the microfilm data into her computer, then sent it to Louise with instructions on how she should do the same. She thought it best to have two linked computers on the project just in case one failed. The moment was approaching when Marshall Wayans' Wheel of Fortune would turn. Their timing would have to be exact. Lanna checked her watch.

"What time ya got, Lou?" she asked.

Louise checked her desk clock.

"Five minutes 'til," she said.

"The hour," Lanna said to complete Louise's unfinished sentence. She knew everything was ready, but still, "We got the time. Let's run another check."

"No problem," Louise agreed. "You start."

The final test was flawless. Both women were perfectly in sync. At the end of it, they each called up their separate load bars.

"Time," Louise requested.

Lanna studied her watch.

"One minute," she said, "starting . . . now."

"Gotcha," confirmed Louise. Her hand took hold of the mouse. "Okay, we wanna do this on a count of five."

"Are we going to one, or zero?"

"Zero," Louise answered. "Zero equals 'click'. So it'll be five, four, three, two, one, click, okay?"

"Works for me," Lanna confirmed.

Her hand took hold of the mouse.

Louise's finger nervously tapped the clicker on her mouse. She consulted her clock.

"Fifteen seconds," she cued.

"Good luck," Lanna wished her.

Louise stared at her clock.

"In five - four - three - two - one - click."

At the same moment, both the women clicked to activate the load bar on their screens. The worm began to turn as their connections sought their destinations, and then the bar began to load as the connection found, and tracked, the movement of Wayans' Wheel. Both Louise, and Lanna, watched, hypnotized as the load indicator made a slow, but consistent, path from left to right on their screens. Then the indicator stopped.

"Lanna?" Louise wanted to know.

"I don't know," the blonde replied.

"Wul, didn't the data tell you it would do this?"

"The data only got us up to 'click'."

Louise stared at the stalled indicator on her screen.

"Terrific."

Lanna stared at *her* stalled indicator. She tried moving the mouse to, and fro, on her mouse pad.

"Lanna, what do we do?" Louise asked nervously.

"Stay calm," Lanna told the high-strung redhead as her finger nervously tapped the clicker on her mouse.

"Helloooo . . ."

"I'm still here, Lou. Just - "

"I'm talking to the computer."

" - stay . . . calm. Okay?"

Don't flip out on me - "

The indicator moved.

"There we go," Louise said quickly. "We got progress once again."

"Thank God."

The redhead smiled.

"I thought you were the one saying, 'stay calm'."

The blonde smiled as she watched the indicator's resumed progress.

"Up yours."

Louise chuckled.

"Let's keep this civil . . . shall we."

"What," Lanna wanted to know, "you mean you wouldn't like a good - "

Her screen

suddenly went blank.

"Lanna!"

"Shit!"

"I just blanked out."

"So did I."

"Wha' do we do?"

"I don't

know."

"You're saying that too much."

"Okay, uh . . . is your CPU activity light still on?"

Louise checked.

"Yes," she reported, then she checked to see if her, "monitor is still on too."

"So's mine. Okay, uh . . . oh shit . . . "

"Does your monitor have a signal indicator?" asked Louise.

Lanna checked.

"Yeah."

"I'm still getting a signal here," said Louise. "At least that's what my indicator's telling me."

Lanna looked closer at her own monitor signal light.

"Same here," she said a little distantly.

Her attention wandered back to the darkened screen in front of her.

"Something's happening . . . "

Louise waited for the blonde to go on, then, "Is this part of it?"

"I don't know."

"There you go with that 'I don't know' again."

"Lou, I - "

"I'm joking," the nervous redhead chattered. "At least I'm trying to - "

The screen in front of her suddenly illuminated.

" - AH!"

Lanna winced at the piercing sound in her ear, even as she studied the contents of her

suddenly illuminated monitor screen.

"Lanna?" asked Louise.

"Still here," Lanna answered, "but just barely."

She was still getting over the pain in her ear.

"What're we looking at?"

On both their screens was an internet window that was filled with rows, and rows, and rows, of encrypted information.

"I'm not sure yet," said the blonde as she studied the encryptions. She couldn't make out any of it, then she had an idea. "Hang on a second, Lou." She grabbed her disc caddy, then glanced back at her screen. "You got a scroll bar on your window?"

"Yeah," Louise answered.

"Hit it once," Lanna told her, "see what happens."

She then opened, and started looking through the disc caddy.

Louise followed the instruction. She couldn't see that the scroll bar cursor had moved.

"There's a lot of stuff here," she commented, "whatever it is."

Lanna was still searching through the caddy.

"Keep going down," she said, "see if you can notice a different pattern anywhere, or if you can see any breaks."

After a while, Louise reported, "It all looks the same. Solid gobbledegook."

Lanna found the disc she'd been looking for. It was a code breaker she'd hacked off of Jimmie's computer that he'd made shortly after the year 2000 national election. She held the disc in her hand as she looked at her screen.

"Lou, I'm going to try something here, and I'm not sure what it's going to do."

Louise studied her screen.

"You wanna print some of this stuff first, just in case we loose it?"

"No. I've got a feeling. I'm gonna go with it."

"I hope you know what you're doing," the redhead cautioned. "We've come an awfully long way for this."

"What good is it going to do us if we can't make head, or tail of it?"

Having no idea what the encryptions she was looking at meant, Louise accepted Lanna's point.

"Alright," she said as if Lanna needed a go ahead, "have at it."

Lanna slipped the disc into her CPU.

"Lemme know if anything on your end changes," she told Louise, and then her finger pushed the disc home.

The disc icon appeared on her screen. Lanna opened it. A program icon appeared at the upper left corner of the screen. Lanna studied the icon. It was completely blank. There was no title, or any mark that would identify it. The muscles under Lanna's eyes tensed. She directed the cursor to the icon, then double clicked.

The program opened. The menu bar at the top of the screen went blank. Lanna waited for the computer's main menu to come back with some kind of heading for the program, but it didn't. It remained blank. She looked at her internet window with all the rows of incomprehensible data on it. Nothing had changed. She waited. Nothing changed, then the data began to flutter. Starting at the window's top, and working its way down, Jimmie's code breaker interpreted the encryptions, and rendered them into number columns particular to: Country, Institution, Account Name, Account Number, Transaction Time & Date.

Lanna watched the flow of rendered data make its way to the bottom of the page. She glanced at the scroll bar cursor as it hit bottom. The page scrolled as the process continued. She couldn't tell if the cursor had moved.

There is a lot of stuff here, she thought.

"Lou?" she called into her headset.

"Yeah," Louise answered.

"What are you seeing over there?"

"A screen full of indecipherable numbers, and symbols," she reported. "Nothing's changed. Why? What's going on?"

"You got my shared disc, right?" asked Lanna.

"Yeah."

Lanna watched the flow of rendering on her screen.

"Open it," she said.

Louise followed the request, then, "Okay. Now what?"

"Close your internet program," Lanna instructed, "and then open mine."

Louise looked at her screen with all the data on it.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Not entirely," Lanna admitted, "but I need you to take a look at what I've got here."

Louise breathed in deeply, and breathed out again. She wasn't sure, and she didn't like Lanna not being sure either.

"Just go ahead, and do it," the blonde coaxed.

Louise's lips pursed.

"It's your funeral," she warned.

"Trust me," Lanna told her.

"Where have I heard that before?" the redhead mused with a smirk.

She did as was requested of her; closing her internet program - and gritting her teeth as she watched the chaotic maze of encryptions go away - then she directed her cursor to Lanna's internet program, and opened it.

Lanna watched the data flow on her screen as she waited for what she thought would be an appropriate length of time for Louise to get up to speed with her. She looked at the window's column headings, then over at the scroll bar's cursor. After many pages, it had finally begun to move downward.

"Lou?" she finally wondered. "Are you there yet?"

"It's payday, my dear little fellow Pink Team member," she heard Louise's voice tell her in a subdued, but noticeably happy tone.

"What do you see?"

Louise smiled at what she saw on her screen.

"We - have - numbers."

What she heard made Lanna smile. She looked away from her screen, and breathed a sigh of relief that felt incredible. She glanced back at the number columns.

"And . . . we have a president," she confided to her friend, and fellow Pink Team member.

"Dinah will be so pleased," said Louise, and then she giggled.

The Pink Team's tracking of the Wheel of Fortune required a new data configuration every time the wheel moved. So, once a month, Dinah would fly off to some distant place to receive a strip of microfilm hidden within some small, inconspicuous, everyday object. Popov would transfer the data on the microfilm to paper, Lanna would interpret the data, and do the necessary programming, then, at just the right moment every month, she, and Louise, would catch Wayans' Wheel by the tail, and go along for a ride that would give Louise penny for penny documentation on Marshall Wayans' financial maneuvers. She made a number of surprising discoveries as she followed the trail of accounts, and distributions. One, in particular, was most surprising.

"Wayans has been financing the Taliban," she reported to the Pink Team group.

"Are you sure about this?" asked Dinah.

"It's his most consistent pattern," Louise related. "A regular shift of money through five country's, all of it winding up in accounts directly accessible to known Taliban leaders."

"I've heard of 'love thy enemy'," commented Lanna, "but bankrolling them is a whole 'nother matter."

"This is treason of the highest sort, if we can prove it," the lawyer noted.

"I've got it all on paper," said Louise with a smile. "Well, it's on a computer drive, actually."

"Get it on a disc," instructed Lanna.

"And guard it with your life," Olga solemnly advised.

The three others watched the redhead blanch.

"Uhv . . .," she wondered nervously, "somebody else wanna guard the disc?"

"Give it to me," said Lanna to put the frightened Pixie at ease. "I'll put it in a safe deposit box under a false name."

* * *

More, and more, of Alex went away after his friend died. He lay curled up on his side in bed, mindless of necessities that didn't matter to him any more. He had much to contemplate, and much to wonder about. He knew that She had taken his friend away from him, but he often wondered *why*. He knew he hadn't been all that good, but had he been all that bad? Was She that angry with him? *Was I really that bad?* he wondered.

* * *

Olga had made a ritual of visiting the cold spot in the back grounds of Wayans Manor. The phenomenon of frozen, snow encumbered ground, and, especially, the fountain, had baffled everyone. It straddled the boarder of the patch on one side, most of it lying within the boarder, but part of it lying without. The water in the fountain that lay within the boarder of the patch was frozen solid, but that which was outside of it was liquid. The snow, and ice, had endured, unchanged, throughout the sweltering Chicago Summer. Now it was early Fall.

The leaves of all the surrounding trees had grown fat, and heavy, and some of them had begun to turn color.

Olga seldom ventured within the patch's boarder. Mostly she would simply stand, and look at it. She would try to clear her mind of any one specific thought, letting whatever come what may become. Her mind would travel like a butterfly, flitting first to one thought, then another, gathering a series of connections that might lead to something, or might not. It was a process that took time were it to come to anything. She knew better than to hurry.

Woolgathering some would call it. *Gathering wool . . . to keep one varm*, she thought as she shivered from a sudden chill in spite of the Indian Summer night's heat.

Tink of nothink, she chided herself as she settled once again. *Come on now . . .*

She gazed upon the snow, and set herself to opening her awareness. In time, the thoughts would come, and go, as how it pleased them. She was in no hurry. Associations formed a connecting thread from one thought to another. This one lead to that one, and so on, so on, so on . . . *Cold*, she thought. It was the thought more than the feeling . . . *so cold . . .*

She lifted her eyes to gaze upon the fountain - the fountain so peculiarly frozen, and - *The why of it*, she thought. The fountain, encrusted as it was with ice, and snow - it seemed to beckon to her . . . *come closer*. Olga wondered if she'd heard correctly, and then she asked it, *Vhy?* The fountain did not answer. *Encrusted . . .*, the old one thought as she put her legs in motion.

Her first footfall on the snow provoked a life flash of her homeland. It detonated a mental shower of sparkling notions. *So good it vas! . . . and then . . .* the darkness fell. By the time she'd taken her second step, she was thinking of the friends she'd left behind. The third step brought with it the knowledge of the new friends she had with her - the ones who were still left at any rate.

She walked amid the snow aware of nothing, but what she knew. The snow so cold, it was like powder - *just like home*. She thought about her friends. She missed them so - the ones who had departed, and were gone. *Goink back, and goink forward. Goink somewhere . . . into the ground . . . up from the ground. Travelink . . . cold . . .*

Then - *warm - it goes up. The cold goes down - "but in extreme conditions"*, suddenly occurred to her.

Olga paused in her stride to focus her mind - *The cold can go up?* she wondered. She reflected briefly on how that could be without the wind to drive it upward, then she thought of who had said the words - old Borodin.

It saddened her to witness his cruel decline, and to hear the ramblings of a once great, but now exhausted, mind. *"Thermal properties" - in and out - up and down - this warm cannot get out - that cold must go up.* Her remembrances brought tears. *Extreme conditions! Insulation! Must go up!* It made no sense to her. *Nothing get through, but extreme conditions. Extreme conditions!* She looked about herself, amid the snow, for anywhere to go. There was no escape. It was so cold. *Insulating . . . the up . . . no varm!* The thoughts took hold of her. There was no comfort. The air tore at her throat as she choked, and sobbed. *Cold in - insulating properties - extreme conditions - cold . . . up . . .*

Olga's tears stopped suddenly, her face turned toward the sky. "Shea!" she gasped unwillingly. The thoughts - they took her where they would. She saw nothing for however long she didn't know, then Olga looked about the ground about herself. The cold, snow covered ground.

"Vibration!"

The fountain spoke. Her prayer was answered. The fine threat of associations lead to a conclusion.

"She is here!"

* * *

"I'm certain of it," declared a very excited Olga to a very sleep encumbered Dinah as soon as she'd gotten back from work that morning.

"Where's your proof?" Dinah mumbled more out a lawyer's tic than wakeful cognition.

This was not the response Olga was looking for. She gave vent to her displeasure by lapsing into an animated stream of Russian, the conclusion of which left Dinah grateful that she hadn't understood a word of it.

"Vat's vit your proof!" the elder demanded to know. "It makes all too perfect sense."

Dinah, and Olga, regarded one another. It was evident that Olga wanted some kind of response. After some deliberation, Dinah thought it safe to risk a cautious, "Okay . . ."

"It's the ice!" Olga exclaimed as though she were being prodded to give voice to something that should be all too obvious. "Under extreme conditions, insulation is ineffective!"

Okay . . . Dinah cautiously echoed to herself. *She's either nuts, or drunk . . . or both.* "That's, uh . . . really informative, Olga, and, if I were of a mind, I might even say it's

fascinating, but . . . what has that got to do with Sara's location?"

"She's *frozen!*"

The phrase registered in Dinah's mind as a cataclysmic *bingo*.

Olga saw the impact that her words had had. She hastened to sit beside Dinah.

"Don't you see?" she stoved to continue. "It's just like she was before - before she was born. After the storm that brought her before Alex got back, ice was forming in the apartments on either side of his - and that was only after two days. Even in Houston's Summer heat, ice was forming on the roof of Alex's unit. By the third day, the ice had extended over the roofs of the units beside his. Sara's form was super cold. She imposed the extreme condition on a continually expanding perimeter around her until Alex spoke to her. In four days, in the middle of Summer, she had inundated three duplex apartment units with ice. How long has she been gone?"

"Two years, four months, three weeks and almost six days," Dinah answered without hesitation.

"So now we are in late Chicago Summer - hotter than hell, and yet - there is, in the middle of it all, a patch of frozen ground with snow on it, and a fountain that is half liquid - half ice."

Dinah couldn't speak - didn't want to speak.

"Sara is underground," Olga told the lawyer with conviction. "Somewhere underneath Wayans Manor."

"It makes sense to me," said Louise over the phone to Dinah a short time later. Dinah had begun calling the other Pink Team members to get their impressions on Olga's revelation.

"Okay, go on," the brunette prompted the redhead.

"Well," Louise went on, "Wayans is a control freak, right? And Sara can't be controlled by anyone."

"Except Alex."

"Good point," the producer offered thoughtfully, then, "Well, anyway, control freaks hate what they can't control, because it scares the shit out of them - which is the same thing as losing control, but anyway - there's also intense envy, because what they can't control is free of them, and they aren't, and they long to be free, but they can't be, because if they were, then they would no longer be in control, and that would - scare the shit out of them - which would mean a loss of control. So they love what they can't control, but they also hate it. So

now you've got a dilemma. Okay, well, dilemmas naturally want resolution, so, what do you do with something you can't control? Which is the same thing as asking: How do you gain control over something you have no control over? Well, one way is to gain control over it, and another way is to kill it."

"What about just getting rid of it?" asked Dinah.

"Well, getting rid of it doesn't really work, because, even though you know it's not there anymore, you know it's still there, but . . . now you don't know what it's doing, because it's not there anymore, so, even though you did have some control over it in that you could determine its whereabouts, by acting that out, you surrendered what control you had, because now it's not there anymore, but it's still there, but you don't know what it's doing, and that would - "

"Scare the shit out of you."

"Hey," the high strung Pixie enthused, "yer catchin' on there, Pink Teamer!"

"I have a knack for picking up on things," the big woman volunteered with a quiet smile she took care to keep to herself.

"So, anyway, death is the only way of resolving the dilemma of loving something you hate, or hating something you love - did I say that right? Well, anyway, you can't have it - because you can't control it, and, therefore, you can't control it, and you can't be it, because that would involve a loss of the self, and absorption into an other - which would be the ultimate loss of control - death of the self, and all that sort of undesirable stuff - "

"What about,"

Dinah broke in suddenly, "absorbing the other into the self?"

"Oh, that would be the ideal situation," said Louise, "because then you would have ultimate possession of the object, and then you could love it - you wouldn't have to hate it anymore. You could do a makeover of the object in your own image, because you'd have complete control over it, and - could do whatever you wanted with it."

"Do whatever he wanted . . .," Dinah murmured softly. *Own image* . . . she thought. Another *bingo* registered. "Absorption through death!" she exclaimed over the phone. "That's the only way he could have complete control over Sara!"

"Oh . . . were we talking about Sara?"

"It sounds like total bullshit to me," said Lanna to Dinah's relating of Louise's illumination on Olga's revelation, "but it's brilliant - in a crazy kind of way. If you consider

that a lot of people were afraid Sara was going to take over the world, okay, but now look at how Wayans has been using Susan's technology: To gain political advantage through the threat of deadly computer viruses. Hell, *he's* using Susan the way everybody thought Sara was going to use her, and if it keeps up like this, he could take over the world - literally."

"So what do you think of the possibility that Sara's frozen?" asked Dinah.

"It would make sense of all the ice you say Olga's so upset about," replied the blonde. "Inactive, neither Sara, or Susan, can do a thing about how Susan's technology is used, and what better way for Wayans to keep an eye on her than in his own backyard?"

"But how did he . . . shut her down?"

"Can't help you on that one."

"It may not be that important anyway," Dinah speculated. "The whole idea is pretty far fetched. Do you think it's enough to go on?"

"Can you think of anything better?"

"No."

"Then I'd suggest we refocus, and concentrate."

* * *

And that they did - on Wayans Manor. Over the following weeks of personal effort, sporadic meetings and random communiqués, the Pink Team put together, 'Operation Rescue'.

First, they concocted a phony historical society, gave it an official looking background, and then used it to acquire the blueprints to Wayans Manor plus the old land usage documents to the property the Manor stood on. Discovering that the property had been part of the old Manhattan Nuclear Project of the early 1940's explained the network of subterranean concrete passageways, and bunkers. Comparing the architectural drawing of the Project's ground plan to a high resolution blowup satellite photograph of the Wayans estate revealed the largest of the bunkers - a roughly twenty by thirty foot room - was located just behind the mansion, and directly under part of the fountain. Dinah recalled Wayans underground office as being about the same dimensions. Assuming Sara was in that room, the question became: How do they get to it?

To say that Wayans Manor was light on security was like saying the web site, Aurora Universe, was light on sex. And that was *before* Marshall Wayans had become President.

The place was impenetrable to intruders.

"So, who says we would be intruders?" Louise wondered.

This garnered the Pixie a look from the other Pink Team members, followed by an incredulous blink from all three.

"Just a thought," Louise added timidly. "It's all a matter of perception, anyway."

"Perception . . . ," Olga echoed thoughtfully.

"They can't identify an intruder they can't perceive," said Dinah, taking up the thread.

"You can't possibly deal with all of those surveillance cameras," Lanna stated.

"Well," said Dinah, "like people; you can't fool all the cameras all the time, but maybe you can fool some of them some of the time."

"Timink . . . ," Olga echoed thoughtfully.

Olga had a rough idea of how the surveillance system of Wayans Manor operated - she, and Bertha, had befriended the guard who monitored the system through the night, and had shared their lunch break with him a number of times. It was, essentially, a bay of sixteen video monitors, each of which was set up to watch a specific area of the property, and the building interiors. Anywhere from between three to seven cameras were wired to each monitor, and they were timed to trade off active status with each other at regular intervals. Some of the monitors had more elaborate setups. Those that supported the greatest number of cameras were capable of displaying four images at once, and were, therefore, able to cover four different areas at the same time.

Over the next several days, Olga made a point of lunching with the guard so she could study the monitors, and what they were watching. What she wound up with was a set of detailed notes of what each monitor saw, when and for how long.

Comparing the notes, and her memory, with the satellite photo, however, was another matter. The process proved to be long, and arduous, requiring several more lunches with the guard.

In the end, their most likely route of undetected access to Wayans Manor turned out to be a narrow, asphalt road that ran through a wooded area at the rear of the estate. It lead from the main back gate to the six car garage that was some fifty yards from the mansion. One monitor watched the road through five cameras on a succession of single image displays. Working out their angle of view on the satellite photo, and their timing sequence, showed a progressive blind spot from the gate all the way up to the garage. By moving, and stopping, along the asphalt road at precise intervals, a car could be driven from the gate to the garage

without being seen. Beside the garage was a car port where there seemed to be a perpetual blind spot. A mid-sized car could be parked there, and be completely hidden from any camera's view.

A problem was encountered with getting through the gate, however. Olga's observations revealed that three cameras watched the rear entry, all of them from different angles. Two of them watched either approach from the street that ran along the property's back boarder. One watched the private, asphalt road just inside the gate. Ironically, there was no monitoring of the gate itself. The inside, and outside, observance of the gate were on two different monitors. What made that a problem was that the respective cameras were on different timing sequences as well. Either the outside, or the inside, view of the gate could be seen at all times in the security control room. There was no way a car could enter the property unseen.

"That's going to mean splitting up the entry team," Lanna stated.

"I don't wanna do that," Dinah stated.

"There's going to have to be someone already on the inside," the blonde insisted.

"That will be me," Olga said a bit ruefully.

"I don't wanna split up," a nervous Dinah maintained.

"Either the inside camera is on, or one of the outside cameras is on," said Lanna. "There - is - no window."

"She's right, Dinah," Louise agreed. "Olga is going to have to make sure the guard isn't watching when the outside cameras are on so we can drive into the blind spot on the other side of the gate."

Dinah struggled over the proposed setup. She didn't like it, and tried to think of a better way. When she couldn't, she looked at Olga. The old one merely smiled, and nodded.

"I'll be alright," she assured the lawyer.

"We're going to have to be able to communicate with each other," Dinah noted.

"Signal transmitters are no problem," said Louise.

"At that distance?" Dinah wondered in the redhead's direction. "It's more than a quarter mile from the gate to the house (mansion)."

Louise smiled.

"No problem," she reiterated.

"We're also going to need a transmitter that'll open the gate," Lanna added as she studied that area of the satellite photo. "I'll look into that."

Once they knew that they could get into the estate undetected, the focus centered on how to get into the mansion itself, and down to Wayans' office bunker.

A walkway from the garage lead to a little used side entry of the mansion. One camera watched the span for most, but not all, of its length. Another camera watched the door itself, the concrete stoop in front of it, and the short stairway that lead to the door. There was a five foot blind spot between the two cameras field of vision about nine feet away from the first step leading to the stoop. Olga noted that the door camera had an observable activity light. With proper timing, the entry team could cross the distance from the garage to the mansion, then take refuge in the blind spot until the activity light on the door camera went out. That would get them to the door.

"Then what?" asked Lanna. "Somebody's going to have to be on the other side of the door to let us in, and it can't be Olga, because she'll be watching the monitors."

Dinah thought a moment, then looked to Olga.

"Do you think you could get a key."

"No," the Russian frowned with a emphatic shake of her head. "All the keys are locked up in the security center."

Dinah looked away.

"Shit . . . "

"Could you arrange to leave the door unlocked?" Louise wondered in Olga's direction.

The Russian was still frowning.

"I'll check into it," she said. "See if it vill be possible."

It was possible, she found out. The inside approach to the door had no video surveillance. At her own opportunity, Olga could go to the door, unlock it, then leave without being noticed.

Dinah knew that an elevator in one wing of the mansion lead to the bunker Wayans had converted into an office, but overlaying a transparent mylar of the mansion's first story floor plan onto a detail drawing of the Manhattan Project's ground plan revealed a stairwell, belonging to the Project, that was only a few feet away from the mansion's elevator shaft. Another detail drawing revealed that a door in an opposite wing of the mansion corresponded with an entry on the Project map that lead to another stairwell. At the bottom of those stairs was a long passageway that lead to the same bunker. Dinah had never suspected that the bunker had two ways of entry.

"Is *that* door locked, and is the hallway it's in monitored?" asked Louise.

"No," said Olga. "The video system inside the house mostly watches the large, open areas, and the art collections." She paused a moment, frowning in thought, then, "I don't remember there being a door in that hall though."

"It must be concealed then," ventured Lanna, "and made to look like part of the wall."

The next night, during one of her work breaks, Olga searched the ornate, wood paneled wall where the blueprint for the mansion indicated a door. She saw no breaks in the wall that would suggest an opening. She paced it off from a location point she knew of on the blueprint - one, two, three paces - *That should be six feet*. She went back one foot, then pressed her hand on the wall. A hidden door popped open.

In spite of careful planning, the Pink Team's accomplishing 'Operation Rescue' was going to be chancy at best. They knew that, in the course of Sara's initial activation, she'd taken more than sixteen hours to thaw out, and that was only after three, or four, days after her arrival. Now, presuming she'd been frozen for roughly two-and-a-half years, her activation process could go on for more than a year. Nobody knew. In the end, all they could do was get Susan going, and then let her take care of the rest in her own good time.

They also knew that if they were caught, the likely prospects for them were not going to be pretty. Because of Sara's SuzieFlu infected reputation, the media would have a government mandated free for all with the perpetrators of a breaking, and entering, of President Wayans private residence on an insane mission to rescue the defiled alien artifact which everyone 'knew' was no longer on earth. Louise, at the very least, could expect to be ruined - she'd be lucky to get a job forecasting the local weather in central Wyoming. Olga would be jailed, and, probably, later deported. Dinah would spend a good many years of the rest of her life behind the bars of either a prison, or a psychiatric ward. Of the four, only Lanna faced the possibility of going unscathed, because of Jimmie's connection to the President.

To increase their chance of success, they decided to make their attempt under cover of darkness, but

"Darkness isn't gonna cover it," a cautious Dinah opined. "Not completely. We need something more . . . an event . . . something that'll focus government, media *and* public attention."

"To get the government involved, it'd have to be a political event," said Lanna.

"National elections are more than a year away," Louise noted. "That's an awfully long time."

"And we may not have all that much time," said Olga.

"Alright," said Lanna, impatient with their collective lack of inspiration. "This is September. There's gotta be something happening between now, and next year."

"Next year . . .," Louise said distantly, and then her eyes widened brightly. "The State of the Union Address."

The other three regarded the redheaded Pixie.

"I like the sound of that," Dinah intoned.

"It is a galvanizing event," Lanna noted, "guaranteed to focus attention - "

"Away from

Chicago, *and* Vayans Manor," Olga specifically concluded.

All of them sat in quiet contemplation for a time, weighing the pros, and cons, in comparing the proposed event to what they had in mind.

"Any objections?" Dinah quietly asked the group.

No one said a word.

"Then I guess the motion is carried," she said.

All of them relaxed with the decision having been made.

"I do like the democratic process," Louise said cheerfully.

"Don't be smug," warned Lanna with a crooked smile. "If we get busted, the three of us are coming after you."

Now it got down to who would go. The women agreed on an entry team of no more than two. Olga, for certain, would have to be one, because of her familiarity with the estate, and her access to the surveillance monitors. Lanna, however, because of her high profile in the Wayans administration, was certain her presence would be required at some official function the evening of the President's national address. As for Louise - "I have to baby-sit Ken. He's going to be covering the address, and moderating commentary afterward." That left Dinah - "I'm doing my nails that night, could somebody else do it?" she wondered, but the others could plainly tell she was joking. The Amazon relished the opportunity of 'going in'.

There remained, but one, last detail: Activating Sara if they found her.

"Alex said that she was activated by the sound of his voice," Olga recalled. "So it must be sound waves that gets Susan going."

"Alex's sound waves," Dinah quickly stipulated. "She needs to stay connected to Alex."

"She probably still is," Olga ventured.

"That's assuming Susan's hard drive wasn't erased when she went into the deep freeze," Lanna noted.

Both the other women looked at the blonde. The way she was being observed made Lanna, immediately, regret what she had just said. Still, awful as the prospect was, it was a possibility which they had to face, and deal with.

"She could be startink out all over again," Olga noted in a distant tone of daunting sobriety. She looked up to regard the other two women. "How are ve ever goink to get her out of there if she's startink all over again?"

Not having the slightest idea of how to answer the question, Dinah said, "We'll just have to worry about that when, and if, the time comes."

No one contradicted her statement, but still, the possibility that Sara's sum total of experience could simply no longer exist weighed heavily on them.

"The main thing for right now," Dinah went on to say, "is to get her reactivated."

"And, for that, we need Alex's voice," said Lanna hopefully, very much feeling the need to make a positive contribution to the discussion, considering the affect her last comment had had. The looks she got upon making this remark, however, told her that she'd just dropped another brick of equal magnitude.

"Well, c'mon," the big blonde groped helplessly. "There's got to be something. What about recordings of his band?"

"Alex always sank either backup, or harmony," Olga soberly informed the blonde. "He never soloed."

Lanna was crestfallen, yet again, but still, she now felt compelled to soldier on.

"Oh, come on already," she insisted. "There has got to be *some* kind of recording of his distinctive voice."

She waited.

"Anything."

She waited.

"I mean, it . . . doesn't even have to be related to music. Just . . . anything with the sound of his voice on it should do."

There was an oppressive, thoughtful silence, then Olga finally said regretfully, "I don't know of any recordink of his voice alone."

"I . . . do," Dinah said with notable quietude.

The other women turned to her. Dinah looked very uncharacteristically hesitant, and

uncomfortable.

"I, uh . . . , " she said, then she needed to clear her throat before continuing, "we . . . I . . . have a videotape."

It was a videotape Dinah, and Alex, had made during one of their more . . . strenuous nights alone. Dinah had kept it carefully hidden for the purpose of being viewed only by herself, and Alex, during their . . . *less* strenuous nights alone. The necessity of the situation, however, compelled Dinah to, not only divulge the tape's existence, but to play, for the others, the portion of the tape that contained the distinctive sound of Alex's voice. The only problem was that the tape had been made more than five years before, and, excepting that it was somewhere near the end, Dinah was no longer certain of just where the portion was.

"You kinky witch you," Lanna oozed admiringly as she, and Olga, settled themselves on the sofa in front of the TV screen. "I never would've guessed you were into such things. Hell, I never would've guessed Alex was into such things."

"He," Dinah felt it best to qualify in defense of her man as she fiddled with the tape cassette, "didn't have much choice."

"Wish Lou could be here to see this," said Lanna.

Dinah paused at the VCR, the tape poised at the opening. She gave thanks that Louise was confined to New York at the time, then gave Lanna what she hoped would be a significant glare.

"Look, could we . . . just - get on with this, okay?"

Lanna regarded her with wide-eyed, innocent anticipation, which she actually managed to make look genuine.

"Sure," she chirped, with a conspicuous touch of enthusiasm. "By all means."

Only after she knew that she had the remote clutched tightly in her fist did Dinah nudge the tape into VCR's compartment. She then joined the others on the couch.

"Olga, you're sweating," she noted as she took the place made for her beside the older woman.

"Is . . . a hot flash," Olga mumbled in explanation.

Yeah, right, thought Dinah as she aimed the remote.

The opening image came on the TV screen.

"Hel-lo," Lanna uttered before she knew it.

Her lips pursed into a thin, grim line, Dinah fast forwarded the tape as fast as she could.

"Hey, wait a minute! Slow down!" the blonde protested.

The image stopped.

"Oh, my," said Olga.

Dinah turned to face Lanna on the other side of Olga.

"Look, I know where this is going," she curtly stated, "alright?"

"I should be hopink so," said Olga, her eyes glued to the screen.

"Wul, how do you know that he didn't say something at the beginning of the tape, or in the middle of it for that matter?" Lanna very much wanted to know. "I mean, it *was* more than five years ago."

"Yes," Olga quietly offered in support, "it vas some time ago . . . you know."

Dinah gave Olga the dubious benefit of her best, and bleakest.

"Yes, I do know," she succinctly stated before noting, "That hot flash seems to be getting worse."

Olga folded her hands over her stomach, and starred resolutely at the TV screen in front of her. Dinah proceeded to advance the tape without further interruption. When she stopped at the point she wanted

"How long *is* that tape?" asked Lanna.

God, I hate this, Dinah bemoaned to herself.

She was wondering if she possessed the strength to crush the remote in her hand when an uplifting thought occurred to her. She looked in the blonde's direction.

"Two hours, and fifty seven minutes," she leisurely reported

Dinah found the pause that followed this revelation to be strangely refreshing.

"Why not just say three hours?" Lanna kinda - sorta wondered.

The Amazon drew a breath.

"I'm a stickler for accuracy."

She pressed "Play" on the remote, and the three of them observed the sights, and sounds, that a man, and a woman, make in a setting of intimate privacy. Two of them, at once, became fully engrossed by what they saw, and heard. One tried desperately to find the pattern in the carpet in front of her feet more interesting.

"How'd you get his leg like that?" Lanna wondered at one point.

Dinah didn't want to look. She didn't need to anyway. She could remember well enough.

"It, uh . . .," she began, then she paused to clear her throat before reluctantly admitting, "wasn't easy."

"Is nyot that hard," intoned a feminine voice with a distinctly Russian inflection.

It took a moment, or maybe even two moments, for what had just been said to sink in, but then, when it had sunk in, the two younger women, at once, slowly turned to significantly regard their older comrade. Olga looked resolutely forward, striving to ignore the more youthful, less experienced, eyes observing her from either side. Eventually, though, she had to take due note of them before she gestured toward the TV screen.

"Ve are listenink, ladies," she attempted to admonish them.

Suddenly, there came the unmistakable sound of an ecstatic male vehemently gratifying the most primal of all urges.

"Hooh!" exclaimed Olga before she realized it.

"What was *that*?" demanded Lanna.

"That was it," said Dinah, grabbing up the remote to pause the tape.

"Alex?"

"Yup," clipped Dinah to get it over with.

With the frozen image of Alex, and Dinah, consummating on the screen, an uneasy quiet came over the atmosphere. Dinah sat forward with her head bowed, her mass of raven waves thankfully concealing her face. Her elbows rested on her knees. The remote dangled from the fingers of one hand. The other two women remained as they had been. Lanna sat huddle in the opposite corner of the sofa, her legs tightly crossed away from the others. Olga sat in the middle with her ankles crossed, looking resolutely forward, her joined hands lay quietly in her lap. Dinah drew in a breath of air, and tried letting out a sigh of relief, but it did nothing to relieve her.

"Hooh . . . "

The sound just barely broke the unbearable silence, but broke it none-the-less. It had come from Olga, who remained looking resolutely ahead, her hands lightly folded in her lap.

"Gee," Lanna quietly observed, sounding more than a little mystified, "I've never heard a man sound like that."

From within the obscuring curtain of her hair, Dinah smiled. She hadn't intended to, hadn't even wanted to, but she smiled. Compelled by an instinct stronger than any law, or sense of shame, she yielded to a call that was as strong as life itself, and the big woman smiled. And she could feel the warm glow that she missed so much gathering in the pit of her belly, and she loved it.

Alex, she thought, suddenly missing him more than ever, *ya just done me proud*.

Her head raised up, and the curtain of her hair parted to reveal a face that was both

beautiful, and radiant.

"I can back it up," Dinah offered. "You wanna hear it again?"

"Oh," Lanna answered with an uncomfortable looking scrunch to her face, "not really."

"No, is okay," countered Olga before she knew it, then, realizing, too late, that she was committed, she had to, somehow, find a way to go on, "just to, uh . . . make sure that . . . it, uh . . . really is Alex . . . "

Dinah sighed again, but, this time, relief was the furthest desire from her mind.

Real proud, Alex.

Chapter Forty-six

Rescue: Part one

The plans for Operation Rescue were finalized. A random selection of heavy tools was acquired in case Dinah and Olga needed to force their way into Wayans' underground office. Since they couldn't determine if the Manhattan Project stairway they'd be using was lighted, they also got two good, sturdy, battery powered, camping lanterns. The Pink Team continued to follow the Wheel of Fortune's movements every month, but, aside from that, there was little to do, but wait for late January to arrive.

In the intervening months, Olga was a watchful presence at Wayans Manor. She switched to the afternoon shift so she would be at the Manor during the President's State of the Union speech. There were more people around at that time than during the midnight shift, and she made careful notes of their movements and habits. She hit it off with the guard who watched the monitors into the night. After a few lunch breaks with the man, she knew the pattern of how monitor eleven watched the shaded back road of the estate. To everyone's relief, the pattern between 8:30 to 9:00 PM was exactly the same as it had been between 3:30 to 4:00 AM. They had all been concerned that the cameras watching the back road might be on an alternating sequence of some kind.

Dinah practically took up residence at the local gym she'd found in Chicago. Aside from driving off the ennui induced by the months of basically idle waiting, she was resolved to making herself as strong as possible for Operation Rescue. She knew that, in a clinch, she would not only have to defend herself, but she would have to protect Olga as well. From September through the next January, the already hulking Amazon pushed her body relentlessly, forcing it to grow stronger, and even expand another seventeen pounds.

"You get much bigger, you're going to need wider doorways," Lanna had teased the lawyer around Christmas time.

Dinah just smiled - and playfully teased the bulging muscles of her very impressive upper physique.

"I already have to go through leading with one shoulder," she'd coyly replied.

Dinah also kept up on her ring work, continuing her Houston habit of sparring with men. She was constantly learning, and gaining valuable experience. In keeping with another habit

she'd adopted in Houston, those sparing partners who made the tactical error of breast punching her were carried from the ring unconscious a short time later.

Lanna maintained as low a profile as her conspicuous position in the Beltway would allow. Despite her attempts to keep Jimmie preoccupied, there were two more outbreaks of SuzieFlu during the final months of the year. She could only look on helplessly as she alternately toyed and fought with the urge to sex her sedentary husband into extinction.

Also during this period, Lanna was contacted by a most unusual caller: Pandora Spocks. The young woman wanted to talk, and she was willing to listen. Lanna thought it wise to include Dinah in their conversations.

Aside from riding the Wheel with Lanna every month, Louise remained in New York. She concentrated on making advance preparations for her network's coverage of the President's Address, and continued competing with Cindy for Ken Clark's inattention.

In late December, however, they were delivered a monkey wrench.

"The next turning of the Wheel will take place during the State of the Union Address," Louise reported to everyone's surprise.

"My last contact said January thirty first," said Dinah.

"Wayans must have changed his mind, and moved it up to a less conspicuous time frame," Lanna ventured.

"Still," Dinah went on, "I'm not scheduled to get the next microfilm until two days before the speech."

"I'll haf to vorn Popov," a worried Olga said. "He'll haf to vork very fast. I don't know if he'll be able to get it done in time."

"And, after that, the data still has to be entered, and configured," said Louise.

"Just gets better, and better," Lanna cracked. "Jimmie and I are supposed to be at a reception that night."

"Not anymore, you're not," said Louise.

The blonde regarded the redhead. "What about you?"

Louise was quietly thoughtful for a time, then, "I don't know . . . get sick - invent a family crisis . . . whatever I do is not going to go down well with the higher-ups."

There was another pause as the blonde continued eyeing the redhead.

"I can't do it by myself, Lou," said Lanna. "You know that."

Louise looked at her fellow Pink Teamer. "Yeah," she whispered.

"Well, if you're both going to be involved with the Wheel that night, you may as well

catch it in Chicago," Dinah told them, then, "Olga, can Popov travel?"

"He's pretty frail," Olga related, "but I tink so, if he had to. It would depend on how far."

"Well, don't get 'im on a plane just yet," the lawyer instructed. "I don't know where my next drop point is going to be."

In mid-January, Dinah received word that she was to meet her next microfilm contact in Denver, Colorado, the day before President Wayans' State of the Union Address. After nearly a year of monthly travels to the world's most distant places, this 'drop point' was on the Pink Team's home turf. It couldn't've been more fortuitous.

Popov traveled from Houston to Denver with his equipment, and with the aid of a younger, trusted companion. He was set up in a motel room, ready to go, when Dinah arrived with the microfilm in hand. She rested as he, and his helper, worked through the rest of the day, and far into the night. At 2:00 AM the next morning, Dinah left Denver with the fresh set of data sheets in her purse. Later that morning, at Pink Team headquarters, Dinah helped Louise scan the data into one of the computers until fatigue claimed her, and she went to bed and to sleep. Olga helped finish the scans, then Louise began configuring. She could only get so far without Lanna's input, however. The blonde had told them that she would be there in the late afternoon.

Just before Olga left for her job at Wayans Manor, Dinah had the most violent of her ongoing dreams. Both Olga, and Louise tried to waken the screaming, thrashing Amazon only to be caught in a grip from which neither of them could escape. When Dinah finally woke, she saw the women in her grasp, and wondered why, "You're not withering."

The experience so spooked Louise that she couldn't tolerate being near the lawyer. An apologetic Dinah respectfully kept her distance as Olga strove to smooth the skittish Pixie's ruffled feathers. The delay almost made her late for work.

It was after dark when it came time for Dinah to leave for the purpose of joining Olga at Wayans Manor. Lanna hadn't arrived yet, and Louise was on the phone, troubleshooting last minute preparations for Ken's coverage of the President's address. She kept a watchful eye on the massively developed woman as she pulled on her heavy jacket, then slung the strap of the tote-bag of equipment over her shoulder. Dinah was ready to leave

"Hey!"

Dinah turned to see Louise watching her from across the room.

"Good luck," the redhead uttered quietly.

The brunette tried not to smile, but only partially succeeded.

"Good luck," she murmured in reply, and then she let herself out the door.

Dinah parked her car well out of camera view along the road that ran behind Wayans Manor. She pulled the transmitter from a side pocket of her jacket, then sent the initial signal to Olga to alert her that she was present, in position and ready to go. She clocked the time from her signal to when Olga responded to let her know that she was present in the security control room, in position to observe the monitors and ready to go. In less than two minutes, the transmitter beeped as the signal light went on.

"Knees must be doin' pretty good, old girl," the big woman muttered to herself. "Either that, or you were already there."

While waiting for Olga's next signal, Dinah settled back, and took the opportunity to study the huge, black painted, structural steel gate up ahead.

"Wouldn't want that fallin' on me . . .," she mused.

She was suddenly startled by a passing car. She recovered, and was grateful that the road saw little traffic as she watched the car's tail lights recede into the darkness.

"Oh no . . . I'm not nervous . . . not at all," she droned softly.

She coughed, then cleared her throat. The inside of the car was cooling off. She exhaled into her cupped hands, then rubbed them together to generate warming heat.

"C'mon Olga . . . let's get this show on the road," she muttered impatiently.

Beep-beep-beep!

Dinah looked at the transmitter. The signal light was on.

"That was fast," she opined as she reached up to her visor, and pressed the activate button on the gate transmitter Lanna had supplied her with. She observed as the monolithic structure began to move out of her way along its sturdy track. She started her car.

"Thank you, my dear little Beltway Bitch," she murmured, slipping the car into forward gear.

She watched the opening created by the retracting gate grow wider. She glanced in the side-view mirror - *No traffic*. Her eye back on the gate, she let her foot off the brake. The car eased forward. A turn of the steering wheel, a faint touch on the gas to get her up the meager slope of the driveway, and Dinah drove the car into the Marshall Wayans estate.

"Talk about goin' in the back door!" House Speaker, Jerome Dunn declared amid

the uproarious laughter his joke had incited. "I swear," he then went on more quietly, pausing for affect, "I just about - lost control . . . if ya know what I mean!"

President Wayans politely joined in the laughter of the small group he and Dunn were in. He appreciated Dunn's support in Congress, but he really wished the Representative would clean up his after dinner humor. He took a sip from his watered down drink, and looked about the room of people who'd been invited to dine with him that night. All of them were good, solid supporters of the above board plan. Wayans was confident none of them had a clue about the real plan.

An aide appeared at the President's elbow to inform him that it was getting close to the time he should leave in preparation to making his State of the Union speech. Wayans nodded cooperative ascend to the aide, who then departed. The President visually searched out the plain clothes Blue Team member he had in the room. A look from his chief told the man it was time.

Dinah parked the car in the secluded 'blind' spot under the car port. By driving, and stopping from one precisely predetermined location to the next in response to Olga's transmitter signals, it had taken her just under twenty minutes to make the journey up the narrow, winding, asphalt road. She stepped out of the car, but left it unlocked, then extracted the bag of equipment from the trunk. She lowered the hatch, then turned around and sat sharply on its edge, using her two hundred and twenty-something pound body weight to close the latch quietly. Standing erect again, Dinah slung the bag's tot-strap over her shoulder, then waited for Olga's signal to alert her for when it was safe for her to cross the fifty yard span from the car port to the blind spot near the side door steps.

The moments turned to minutes. Dinah looked out over the expansive, snow covered rear grounds of the estate. The trees reminded her of a dream she'd had, and of the one she'd met there.

Beep-beep-beep!

Forest! Dinah thought before her mind perceived the sound her transmitter made. She looked at it. The light was on. She looked toward the door she was about to approach. *Time to move out.*

"Hi, Lou," Lanna hailed as she, and Michael came into the Pink Team's headquarters.

She shed her coat, then took charge of the paper bag Michael was carrying so he could relieve himself of his own coat.

"Hi, Lanna," Louise greeted, looking up from her computer. She noticed the bag. "Wha' cha got?"

Lanna approached Louise, and placed the bag on her desk. Michael came to stand before the desk.

"I brought you some dinner," said the blonde.

"Thanks," said the feisty, little redhead, eyeing the attractive young man in front of her, "I could use him."

All of them shared a good natured laugh over the joke.

"Oh, this is Michael," said Lanna, proceeding with introductions, "and this - is Louise."

Louise regarded her fellow Pink Team member. "Is he . . . our friend?" she inquired cautiously.

"Oh, yes," Lanna quietly assured with a smile, and a nod. "*He* - taught me all I know about computers," she specifically explained. "I brought 'im along as backup."

Louise looked back at Michael.

"In that case, Michael," she stated with a smile as she extended her slender hand, "I'm happy to know you."

Michael accepted her hand, smiling cordially.

"It's a pleasure, Ms Layne," said Michael. "I've heard a lot about you."

Louise held onto Michael's hand, but cast a sidelong glance to Lanna.

"Really."

Dinah made it to the hidden door that lead to the Manhattan Project stairwell. She pressed as Olga had instructed her to do. The door popped open as she'd been told it would, but still, she was a bit surprised by it all. *Weird* . . .

She entered the blackness in the well, and closed the door behind her. She felt her feet to be on a textured, steel surface. Dinah knew that Olga would be joining her shortly, so she felt her way along the wall to a corner, set the bag down and got out the two battery powered lanterns. She waited, in a crouched position, in the darkness until she heard the door pop open. The darkness of the stairwell was so complete that even the dim illumination from the hallway outside flooded it with light, the outline of the doorway appearing on the opposite wall. Dinah instantly recognized the silhouette of Olga's squat, little figure in the doorway.

The big woman smiled, and breathed with relief.

"Olga?" Dinah called out quietly as she turned on one of the lanterns so the older woman could see into the stairwell.

Olga made her way inside. Dinah could see that she had her winter jacket on. Olga closed the door as Dinah stood up, and approached her. The two of them exchanged anxious looks.

"Are you alone?" Dinah asked of her.

Olga smiled, and gripped the big woman's arm with surprising tightness.

"Nyot anymore," she answered.

Dinah gave her the other lamp, and they began examining their surroundings. They were in a rectangular, concrete shaft. The ceiling of the shaft looked to be about fifteen feet above their heads. There was a strange looking, metal bulb mounted in the center of the ceiling that was fed by a length of steel, conduit piping that extended to the far wall, curved, then traveled downward into the depths of the shaft. Olga speculated that the metal bulb was part of an old fire detection system.

They were standing on a railed, steel platform that extended to the far end of the shaft on one side where it rounded the corner, and then became a railed, steel stairway that descended as it came back their way. There was a system of wall-mounted light fixtures that were fed by electrical conduit piping fixed to the walls. All the metal of the platform and stairway appeared to be heavily coated with concrete gray paint. Dinah stepped tentatively to the closest railing, and shined her lamp down into the blackness. The light revealed the lower part of the stairway as it lead to a landing directly below where they were standing. On the other side of the shaft was another, like-made stairway that continued the descent where the first one had left off. She noticed that there was a roughly one foot gap between the railings of the two stairways she could see. Positioned her lamp to where its beam shined directly down the gap, Dinah saw a lot of railings going down, but her light failed to penetrate to the bottom of the shaft.

"Looks like it goes down quite a ways," Dinah reported to Olga, who'd stayed a few feet back from the railing. She turned, and looked at her companion. "Are you sure about this?" she queried with regard to the old woman's accompanying her.

"The down I can handle," Olga told her. "The comink back up . . . may take awhile."

The lawyer regarded her friend seriously. "We may not have awhile," she ventured.

The old Russian regarded her friend seriously. "You are nyot goink alone," she stated.

The two women continued looking at one another for a time, then Dinah sighed, gave a shrug.

"I guess that settles that then," she said. She picked up the bag of tools, and slung the tote-strap over a shoulder. Her eyes came to focus on the old Russian once again, who was still watching her. "Let's hit it."

President Wayans was back in his upstairs White House office going over last minute preparations for his State of the Union Address. He'd bid his dinner guests goodbye - they would be transported ahead of him to the Capital, then ushered to their choice seats in the House of Representatives Chamber observation gallery.

His Chief of Staff, Bill Robbins, came into the room. He held out a page of paper to the President as he approached.

"Last revision," he stated with conviction.

Wayans took the sheet as he eyed his right hand man. He smiled.

"I wouldn't bet on that," the President remarked amiably.

He looked over the page. After a moment, his lips pursed, then he frowned.

"No . . . no, no, no . . .," Wayans sighed.

"What's wrong?" asked Robbins.

The President looked up from the page to the man before him. "Whoever wrote this went overboard of the Islamic issue. We've got to handle this carefully, Bill, and to do that, we can't have any mention of a - "crusade" . . . at least not until well into the second term."

Guesstimating each stairway to be one story in height, Dinah determined that she and Olga had descended seven stories by the time they reached the bottom of the shaft. Both of them had noticed a steady drop in temperature as they came down the last three stairways. At the bottom of the shaft, there was the mouth of an unlit passageway that was roughly eight feet wide by eight feet high - also made of concrete. With her lamp shining into the pitch-black darkness ahead of her, Dinah lead the way into the passage as Olga followed close behind.

The passage way lead to a set of concrete steps. Dinah went down first with Olga close behind. They proceeded slowly, Dinah maintaining her light ahead of them as Olga played the beam of her lamp on the steps just ahead of Dinah's feet to help guide their way. They

reached the bottom of the stairwell.

"That was roughly another story," Dinah noted, looking about at the new passageway they were in. "So we're about thirteen stories underground."

Olga shined her light down the concrete passage. "Dinah, look," she softly uttered.

"What?" asked Dinah.

Olga merely pointed down the passage. "Look."

Dinah turned, adding the beam of her lamp to Olga's. "Holy shit," she softly uttered.

The two women proceeded down the passage. Getting closer only confirmed what both of them thought they'd seen. It was the end of the passageway, some thirty feet from the bottom of the stairwell they'd just come down. From floor to ceiling, wall to wall, the end of the passage was one, solid, wall of ice.

"I think we found her," Dinah said in a tone of muted amazement.

"This is going to take longer than we expected," said Olga.

"A lot longer," Dinah added.

They approached the wall of ice. Dinah dropped the tool bag on the floor off to one side, then joined Olga in examining the obstruction with the aid of their lanterns. It was a solid mass, obviously very thick, and tight up against both walls and along the floor. There appeared to be no gaps between the ice, and the ceiling above their heads. Dinah's foot happened into a low spot on the floor as she moved about. She looked to note a grated drain set in the floor midway between the corridor's width. In the course of their inspection, they found that the ice was not super-cold as they'd expected. It was warm enough, in fact, to touch with a bare hand.

Olga tried to position her lamp to see if she could peer through the frozen barrier.

"Can you see anything in there?" asked Dinah, adding the beam of her own lamp to the task.

"Don't shine the light directly," Olga told her. "It reflects too much. Turn it off to one side, just a bit . . . there! I see it."

"What?"

"A door."

"How far in?"

"I can't really tell, but it is definitely a door."

They stepped back to regard the obstruction neither of them had anticipated. Both of them knew that they were going to be there for awhile. Dinah turned, and unzipped her

jacket, then searched a hand into one of the jacket's side pockets.

"Here, you'd better take charge of this," she said to Olga, passing her the tape recorder containing Alex's voice.

Olga accepted the little machine, and tucked it into a pocket of her jacket. Dinah pulled her own jacket from her shoulders, and let it slip down over her arms. Her powerful build stretched the weave of the dark, cotton T-shirt she had on underneath. She gathered the jacket, then deposited it to the floor beside the tool bag. Olga shined her light on the ice as Dinah began pulling on a pair of well used workout gloves she'd brought with her.

"So," Olga noted rather absently, "ve haf found the door." Her light played over the massive barrier before them. "Now, all ve haf to do," she added, "is get to it."

"Well," said Dinah from behind her friend. She'd finished with her gloves as she turned to face the ice, squaring her broad, thick shoulders. "This is where I come in."

At Pink Team headquarters, Louise had given herself a dinner break after bringing Lanna, and Michael up to speed on her progress. The two were in the other office space of the apartment's living room, with Lanna watching over Michael's shoulder as he worked on configuring the rest of Popov's data.

"You did a good job on this, Lou," the blonde commented to the Pixie, who was aimlessly wandering about the room, enjoying her sandwich.

Her mouth full, Louise just smiled, and nodded in reply. Her attention having been drawn to them, the redhead got to studying Michael again as he pecked away at the other computer's keypad. *So he's a hacker too*, she thought, *and he's been training Lanna . . .* A question formed in her mind which she decided it would be best to air, so she made a point of wandering toward the couple.

"Does," she said to get Lanna's attention. When the blonde looked up at her, "Jimmie - know . . . about him?" she asked her carefully, referring to Michael.

"Yeah," Lanna answered simply enough with a nod of her head.

Lanna then took note of how the redhead's manner of regarding her became significantly concerned.

"Oh, it's alright," the blonde qualified, "Jimmie just thinks we're having sex."

"Oh, shit!" Michael suddenly muttered.

"What's the matter?" asked Lanna as she leaned in to look over Michael's shoulder. "Gol, wha' d' ja do that for?"

As Michael gave his pupil a nettled, sidelong glance, Louise decided it would best, at that point, that she wander away, and finish enjoying the rest of her sandwich.

One lamp lit the hulking figure while
The other lit her goal.
The woman who had made herself a mass of brawn
Did pit that brawn against the obstacle impossible.

With surety of purpose and with certainty of mind,
The Amazon wielded pick and ax
To make the frozen barrier yield
A little at a time.

To save her child from evil foe
Her bulging muscles strained from effort.
Forcing her way into the ice
Deeper, deeper, and deeper.

Despite the freezing atmosphere,
The mighty one was soaked with sweat.
The light played on her glistening arms and face as
Steam rose from her glowing skin, and dampened clothes.

She forced the ice to yield to her enormous strength.
For more than an hour she'd been at it
None stop
Until her vast reserves were spent.

She stood back a step, and dropped her tools,
Her huge chest fought for breath.
She bowed her hulking torso forward
To brace extended hands upon her knees.

"Jesus H. Christ, Sara!" Dinah heaved between gulps of air. "Did 'ja have to go for a

Guinness on bein' a friggin' ice queen, fer crying out loud!"

She recovered most of her breath, and stood up again. Her eyes closed as her right hand rose to cup her same side breast. She emitted a low, purring moan as she began to gently massage her massive orb.

"Dinah . . .," Olga tentatively sought to distract the woman from her distracted state.

Dinah opened her eyes to focus on her companion, whose face bore a most curious expression. The big woman knit her brow.

"Aw, cut me some slack, will ya," she told Olga with a pained expression. "I'm *sore*"

She raised her remaining hand to give her other breast like first aide. Her eyes closed once more so she could better appreciate her fingers soothing motion. Another purring moan escaped her lips.

"I should've worn a bra for this," she murmured.

Her eyes set upon Olga again. She had conspicuous difficulty keeping her attention elevated to the older woman's face. At length, she regarded her dear friend as her head assumed a pleading tilt, and her eyebrows pricked in supplication.

A look of grim resolve came over Olga's features a moment before she quietly stated a most emphatic, "No!"

Dinah's lips pursed as she looked away, but she was only mildly stung by disappointment.

"Probably wouldn't fit anyway," she muttered.

Louise lounged on the sofa while Lanna and Michael finished configuring Popov's data. She was watching her network's pre-coverage of the State of the Union Address. She was glad now that she'd worked so hard in preparing that show before her Mother had become "deathly ill"

"Okay," said Michael to Lanna, surveying what he'd accomplished on the computer screen. "We just need the last page now."

The blonde looked up to, "Lou," and got her attention, then, "we need the last page of data."

The Pixie held Lanna's gaze for an unusually long moment before replying, "You got everything Dinah gave me."

Lanna and Michael took this in, then they gave each other a curious look. Both of them

then looked at the redhead on the couch.

"We still need the last page," said Lanna.

Louise took a longer moment to more thoroughly review her memory. When she was certain, she eyed the blonde, and stated, "You got everything Dinah gave me."

Tink! . . . Tink! . . . Tink! . . .

Olga had taken over.

Tink!

Despite her protests, Dinah needed to rest.

Tink!

Olga wielded a serious looking hammer

Tink!

as Dinah held a chisel for her,

Tink!

and egged her on with encouragement.

Tink!

"Yeah."

Tink!

"Do it."

Tink!

"Good one."

Tink!

"Oh yeah."

Olga paused. She needed to catch her breath. She was enjoying the hell out of the activity, but she did need to catch her breath.

"Are you alright?" Dinah asked with concern.

"Oh yes," Olga was quick to assure her, and then she concentrated on taking some deep measured breaths.

Dinah regarded the sturdy, older woman. She was enjoying the whole thing too.

"You got a good swing," she remarked, trying to sound casual.

Olga looked up at the glistening, muscular Amazon. Even in the semidarkness, Dinah could see the gleam in the old one's eyes.

"Is nyot for nothink ve had emblem of *hammer*, and sickle."

Dinah's beaming admiration for the woman made the gleaming sweat on her face look dull in comparison. She turned, and jammed the chisel into its next location, then gave Olga an aggressive nod.

"Hit me."

All hell had broken loose at Pink Team headquarters as everyone searched for the missing page of data. Without it, the configurations they had so far were incomplete, and so were, therefore, useless. The page also contained the exact time when Wayans' Wheel would turn. Aside from knowing it was to occur sometime during the President's address, none of them had a clue.

They searched everywhere Louise could remember Dinah had been in the apartment since she'd gotten back from Denver. As nothing turned up, they searched through all her clothes and drawers, under her bed - anywhere they could think of. Finally they just searched blindly everywhere. Michael even went outside to search the along walkway, and in the shrubbery of the property.

"Is there any way to reach Popov?" Louise wondered into the open.

Lanna paused with her hand crammed down a crack in the sofa cushioning. She looked at the redhead.

"It's worth a shot," she said. "Where's Olga's phonebook?"

Tink! . . . Tink! . . . Tink! . . .

Dinah was back at it. They'd broken through the ice to the door behind it. The barrier had proven to be over two feet thick. There still remained the huge task of removing enough the ice so they could get the door open, but having made the initial breach was going to make the rest a lot easier. Luckily the door hinges were on the outside, so that the door opened out, into the passageway.

With the experience she'd gained over the past two hours, Dinah was using her strength much more efficiently, and to much better affect. She was dislodging sizable chunks of ice with every second or third strike. Olga was busy clearing the debris so it didn't impede her progress. She made trip after trip; carrying ice chunks down the passage to get them out of their way.

An aide handed President Wayans an amended page of speech text as he, and his Secret Service escort, disembarked from the shuttle that had brought them from the House parking structure to the elevator that would take them to the corridors behind the House floor. Wayans paused to look the text over, then absently nodded his approval.

"Mhm, yeah, this is a lot better," he commented. He looked up, and handed the paper back to the aide. "Is it in the prompter text?" he asked.

"Ms. Spocks is doing that as we speak, sir," the aide reported. "She'll be running the teleprompter for you."

The President's face broke into a broad smile as he gave the aide's arm a friendly squeeze.

"I wouldn't trust anyone else with that," he proclaimed good spiritedly.

Another aide appeared. "This way, Mr. President," he beamed.

Wayans, and his protection, moved toward the elevator. The aide fell into step beside the President.

"The networks want to start as close to nine o'clock as possible, but there are a number of people in the corridor," he informed Wayans. "Now these are all good, solid people, but you should keep your interaction with them short and sweet so they don't delay you getting to the podium."

"Yeah, okay," Wayans quietly agreed.

At Pink Team headquarters, the right phone numbers had been found, but they proved to be of little use. Popov was no longer at the motel in Denver, and was not yet back in Houston. He didn't have an answering machine or service where he lived, so Lanna left a page at the Houston airport with a number for him to call once he'd landed. In the meantime, all they could do was keep searching, wait, and hope.

"This thing is major stuck," Dinah stated, needing to rest from her efforts to open the door.

They'd succeeded in clearing the ice away. Dinah stood within the passage she'd made in the massive block. She had managed to turn the knob on the door, but no amount of pulling would open it. Olga visually studied the problem.

"If there is a knob on the other side, like this one," she observed, "then the ice inside

has formed around it."

"Well, knowing that is not gonna get this thing open," said Dinah, finished with her breather. She approached the door again. "Let's give it another try."

Both of them put themselves to the task this time. Dinah grasped the doorknob, and Olga grabbed Dinah around her waist. Dinah placed a foot on the door frame beside the knob, then both of them pulled with all their might. Many long moments of physical strain ensued. At length, Dinah's hands began to give out. She reset her grip once, and then again. Through force of sheer will, she compelled her fingers to stay closed around the knob.

"Come - on . . . you . . . "

WHOOSH!

The door released with such suddenness it threw both the women back. Dinah impacted hard against Olga before falling to the floor. Olga was forced against the wall of the passageway, but managed to keep her feet.

They needed time to recover from their shock, and stress. Gradually though, their wits returned to them. Olga was the first to notice.

"Look," she quietly alerted her friend.

Dinah pushed herself up on an elbow to see. The door now stood completely open. On the far side of the gray, steel frame of the door was solid, smooth ice. Olga took up one of the lamps, then found the proper angle to shine its beam on the doorway.

Some distance in the ice, they could make out the profile of an expensive looking office chair. Just beyond it was a large, black mass they presumed to be a desk. Beyond the desk, more to one side than to the center, stood the unmistakable outline of a human figure.

"Sara," Dinah scarcely breathed.

She might've been a long lost species from prehistory. The sole survivor from a time, and place unknown. Captured, and preserved in glacial ice, she stood in silence, waiting and alone. The atmosphere begged reverence for the resident of what seemed to be an ageless tomb.

The light passed from the doorway as Olga fumbled in her pocket where she knew the tape recorder was. She took it out, and looked at it.

"Dinah, something's wrong," she said. Both the women looked to one another. "The tape is running."

Dinah's hand shot out. "Let me see." She took it from Olga's extended hand, and examined it under the light the Russian shined on it. Both the "Record" and "Play" buttons

were depressed.

Dinah stopped the tape at once. She pressed "Rewind", and let it run to the beginning, then she depressed "Play".

Nothing.

She rewound again, and again pressed "Play".

Nothing.

Not one sound wave of Alex's voice remained on the recorded over tape.

"It must've happened when the door came open," Olga speculated.

"It's a moot point," Dinah sighed. She paused thoughtfully for a time, then looked to her companion. "What do we do now?"

Olga observed the woman sitting on the floor before her. "You haf to speak to her, Dinah."

Dinah looked up at her uncomprehending. "Wha' . . . ?"

"You," Olga nodded.

"Olga, she's bound to Alex."

"Before, yes, but ve don't know about now."

"What do you mean?" Dinah wondered nervously.

"You are her mother," Olga told her. "You haf to speak."

Dinah suddenly felt the atmosphere close in around her. She found it difficult to breathe. "No . . ." she said weakly.

Olga could see Dinah's growing unease. She approached, and bore the added discomfort to her knees to crouch beside her.

"You are the only one among us who has felt her," she took care to tell the other woman. "All the unexplainable dreams you've had . . . Sara touched you in some vay. You were the one who taught her right from wrong. She belongs to you *just* as much as she belongs to Alex."

"Yeah, but," Dinah hesitated, "she's bonded to Alex. If I say anything, I might screw it all up."

The old one eyed her steadily. "Then that is a risk ve vill haf to take."

Dinah was suddenly brought to confront herself in a way she had successfully avoided up until that moment. Her lifelong inability to connect with people had actually been carefully cultivated over time. She'd learned early that if she couldn't be close to others, then they couldn't leave her - just as someone most important to a young girl had left her once

before.

"Y - you talk to her," the young girl quietly urged the Russian.

Olga's gray head slowly shook from side to side. "It's nyot for me," she told the girl - the woman, "but you."

"I can't -

"You must."

"No, really - "

"Yes."

"Please - "

"You haf to."

"No - "

"You must."

"I can't!"

Olga saw it best not to press the issue further. Dinah was too obviously upset. She gritted her teeth to push herself erect again, then turned away and left the woman - the girl, to suffer. She returned to the wall where she'd been, and leaned herself against it, then quietly watched as Dinah sat on the floor, struggling to recover.

"You don't understand," Dinah sniffed piteously. "I jus . . . I can't . . . "

"I don't care about your understandink!" Olga stated heatedly, but in a muted tone. She was upset herself. She threw an arm toward the doorway. "Explain it to her!"

Dinah looked toward the doorway. With no direct light, she saw only darkness in the ice.

"Tell *her* vhy you can't!" Olga went on, "and vhy you von't, because you can't!"

The old woman fell silent. She didn't know what else to say.

Time passed as Dinah quieted herself, and then she brought about herself to stir. It required all her courage, but she forced herself to move, and to, finally, stand up. She didn't think her daughter would want to see her on the floor.

"Sara?" she softly called out to the darkness in the ice.

Both of them waited in silence. Nothing seemed to happen. When she couldn't bear it anymore, the young girl turned to Olga to quietly tell her that, "Nothing's happening."

Olga took up a lamp, and shined its beam into the doorway. Sara's lone, gray figure could be seen beyond the desk.

"Go on," Olga gently urged the girl - the woman. "She is listenink. She vill hear you"

Dinah turned back to the doorway, and to the ice beyond. She waited. She hesitated, and then she spoke again.

"Sara, come home."

Again they waited. Again there seemed to be no response. The silence threatened to crush them both.

"She's not responding!" the woman cried. *No one has ever responded to me!* the young girl cried.

"Go on," Olga said to her.

Dinah struggled to gather the very last of her sad, and sorry emotional reserves. She'd never felt so exposed, or so alone since that time so long ago. All alone since long ago - she didn't want to be alone anymore.

"Sara, please come home to us!" she cried.

Alex wakened with a violent start.

He knew his time had come.

He had to prepare.

And he was so afraid.

The woman and her young girl, and the wise, old Russian watched the faint gray figure in the icy distance. Nothing seemed to happen for the longest time. Sara's hauntingly still figure remained unmoved, unchanged beyond the desk. Nothing was happening. Nothing! Silence pounded painfully against the women's ears, and yet their eyes would not abandon the solitary figure in the ice. They would not look away! Both of them prayed. They tried so hard to will the ice away. So focused was their concentration that neither of them heard the first . . . tiny . . . sound . . . of cracking.

So faint it was that it was almost imperceptible. The smallest . . . little . . . sound . . . of cracking. The sound of just a light meandering of a tiny, black line through frozen water, skating almost gracefully, as it were, along its own, particular way. The sound, however, quickly grew in volume, and intensity. It became audible, yes, it was there, then identifiable, yes, it's there, and then more and more. Louder and more numerous and varied it became. Finally the sound became a deafening cacophony of ice cracking everywhere.

"It is finished!" Olga proclaimed, wide eyed.

To the awful noise of glacial wreckage, another, terrifying sound was all too soon brought into play. The ground beneath the women's feet began to tremble. The sound of earth, and man-made structure being strained beyond endurance was far more than heard. In spite of the tremors, in spite of the din, the women stood transfixed at the sight of Sara's motionless figure in the distance.

Like a lightning bolt, a deep fissure in the ice suddenly shot across the doorway on a diagonal path. The archway of ice in front of the door broke, crumbled and fell. The trembling threw both women to the floor. Thick, gray dust rained down on them as a jagged, lengthwise crack tore through the concrete above their heads. Another crack ripped it's way along the floor beneath them.

Aaahhhh

What was that?

wondered Robbins, responding to the sound in his head that had suddenly appeared, then was, just as suddenly - not. He tried to place the sound, but couldn't - it was . . . foreign . . . so foreign -

"Sir, we've just had a report of an earthquake in Chicago."

"What?" Robbins said, looking up. His secretary was standing before him.

He was in his office - in Washington. He looked away, and could see the President's image on the TV screen. He'd just entered the congressional chamber, and was shaking numerous hands as he made his way to the podium.

"There's been an earthquake in Chicago, sir."

Robbins' attention snapped back to his secretary. She was still standing where she'd been. Robbins had a gawdawful feeling -

"Earthquake?" he heard himself almost not ask.

The secretary looked at her boss. She wondered if he might be ill. She decided to go on with her report.

"The epicenter was said to've been under Wayans Manor."

"Are you sure you didn't hear it?" Dinah asked as she, and Olga picked themselves up off the heavily damaged floor.

The tremors had stopped. The noise had stopped. It was quiet again where they were.

"I heard nothink," Olga stated with exasperation, "except booming, and crackink all

over the place!"

She got to her feet, and began dusting herself off.

"It sounded . . . like a sigh of someone waking," Dinah observed, struggling with her recollection.

"Here, put this on before you catch a chill," said Olga, holding Dinah's jacket out to her.

Dinah accepted her coat, but her attention was somewhere else. Olga noted her distraction, and so she reset a lamp, and looked to the doorway with her. Sara's faint, gray image was even more obscured now as water droplets trailed down the visible face of the glacier that encased her. Water droplets also appeared on the underside of the door-sill, gathering at low points before falling to the floor.

"Come home, baby," Dinah softly urged her child.

"Dinah, cover yourself before you catch cold."

Dinah pulled her jacket on, then stooped to retrieve the tape recorder from where she'd left it on the floor. She stuffed the machine into a side pocket of her jacket as she stood up again, then she paused. Olga saw the color suddenly drain from Dinah's face, and a look of blank fear come over her features.

"What is it?" she asked.

Dinah's eyes focused on the Russian. She slowly withdrew her hand from her pocket. There was a leaf of paper, folded in quarters clutched in it. She held the paper out to her.

"What?" asked Olga.

"Popov's last sheet of data," Dinah barely said. "He gave it to me as I was going out the door." Her hand lowered along with her sites. "I forgot to put it with the others."

Olga didn't know that much about the Wheel of Fortune, but she did know enough that, "You haf to get back to the apartment."

"But what if Sara needs help?"

"Ve haf done all ve can," Olga told her as she took up one of the lamps, and passed it to her. "It's now up to her, and Susan. Go now. I stay with her."

Dinah took the lamp. She looked toward the doorway. Streams of water were making their way down the icy surface. A trail of water had filled the cracks in the floor, and found its way to the drain nearby.

"Sara . . ."

"Go!" Olga admonished her with a firm push to prompt her along. "I stay with her."

Dinah turned, and quickly made her way back through the darkened corridor. Olga

watched after her as she ascended the steps, then turned the first corner at the top of the well. She continued watching, the flow of light eventually becoming blackness as Dinah got further, and further away.

The fading of Dinah's light accompanied the fading of Olga's adrenaline. With the lull in the crisis, weariness overcame the old woman. She lowered her sites, and heaved an enormous sigh, disconsolate with the knowledge that there was nothing more that could be immediately done. Her aged joints were already aching from the stress of her labor. She noticed the trail of water flowing into the drain on the floor. After a moment to reflect, to review, she concluded that there was nothing more to do, so she gathered herself up, and turned back to the doorway.

The gray outline of Sara's form appeared to wave behind the cascades of water coursing down the ice of the occluded doorway. The massive crack that seemed to slash across her was melting wider. Olga leaned a shoulder against a nearby wall, indifferent to how it seemed to make it throb a little more. She gathered her stiff, and aching hands over her abundant stomach, drew a deliberate breath, and watched.

"I stay with you."

At his Washington desktop, Robbins was frantically making his way through high level access codes to a certain infrared video cam in Chicago. The process was going too slowly. He cursed the cumbersome security system Jimmie, and Pandora had concocted. Finally he saw what he was searching for on his monitor screen: Darkness.

It wasn't a blank screen, but what the vid-cam was actually seeing, which was to say, nothing warm enough for the instrument to detect.

"Okay . . .," Robbins muttered, momentarily satisfied with what he saw.

He quickly typed in another command on the keypad. A moment later, a digital thermometer appeared at an upper corner of the darkened screen. Robbins noted that the reading on the thermometer wasn't the extreme subzero he was accustomed to seeing. It wasn't even on the minus side. Instead, it was reading its atmosphere at "46" degrees Fahrenheit, and then Robbins saw the "6" change to a "7".

"Mr. Speaker," Wayans' clear, baritone voice was suddenly heard coming over the television, "Mr. Vice President - "

Robbins glanced at the TV screen. The President's address had begun.

" - members of Congress - "

The Chief of Staff looked back to his monitor screen.

"49"

" - distinguished guests and my fellow Americans all across this great land of ours."

"50"

"Son-of-a . . . bitch . . . ," Robbins uttered.

Dinah took some time to recover her breath after climbing the twelve flights of stairs. At the door that would lead her back into the mansion, she fixed her eyes on the door latch, then extinguished her lamp and found the handle by memory, and feel. She opened the door slowly, grateful that there was no sound, then poked her head through the opening, and looked both ways down the dark, wood paneled corridor. Satisfied that it was empty, Dinah left the lamp in the shaft by the door, then moved into the hallway, quietly closing the door after herself. Again, she visually checked the hall both ways, then proceeded in the direction that would take her back to the side entrance. With every forward step, her strong heart pounded relentlessly in her cavernous chest. She took to breathing through her mouth in hopes that it might do something to quell the rate of her heightened respiration. She peeked around the corner, and was relieved to see the door some fifteen feet away. She was almost there. She stepped into the corridor

"Hold it right there," she suddenly heard a male voice say from behind her.

"Our pledged word, our enlightened self-interest, our character as a Nation commit us to a high role in world affairs: a role of vigorous leadership, ready strength, and sympathetic understanding."

The burst of thunderous applause in the Congressional Hall came forth, washing over Wayans like a wave of prepaid love. He was feeling good. He was relaxing into it.

Dinah had turned to face the man who'd spoken to her. He was a nervous looking, uniformed guard. He stood about ten feet away from her, and was pointing a handgun at her. It struck Dinah that the man was obviously inexperienced with physical confrontations. *Well, that makes two of us*, she thought to herself as she observed the guard's awkward,

straight-armed stance, the barrel of the gun he held in both hands aimed toward her. *Nervous people, and loaded guns*, she considered, *not - a good combination*.

She searched frantically for parallels between the artificial situations she'd encountered in her self-defense classes, and the real one she now faced. Unfortunately, she wasn't coming up with much to give her comfort, let alone confidence. She remembered Lanna's axiom, "Practice makes perfect", and reflected briefly on the reasoning behind it. "It's really just doing it so much," the blond had told her, "that you eliminate reasoned decision making, and move purely by instinct. Eventually, no matter what the situation, you automatically move to your own best advantage." With two years of self-defense training barely under her belt, Dinah observed the nervous man with the loaded gun before her. *So much for training*, she thought as she now, very seriously, wondered if she had done anything nearly enough.

Who is more afraid of this? Dinah wondered as she, and the armed guard observed one another. *Him . . . or me?* "You uh . . . look - a little nervous."

"Shuttup," the guard instructed her in a clipped, clear tone. He adjusted his grip on his gun, then told her to, "Turn around, and walk straight ahead. Follow my directions as I give them to you."

As if her current situation wasn't bad enough, Dinah liked, even less, the prospect of not being able to see what the guard would be doing behind her back. She complied, however, with the order to turn around.

"You . . . wouldn't shoot an unarmed woman," she queried in a tone of calm that surprised her, "would you?"

"Shuttup, and move," she heard the guard's voice tell her.

Him . . . or me . . . ?

"Stacy," announced Robbins as he swept into his secretary's office cubicle.

Stacy duly took her boss's presence into account to see him on the far side of her desk, awkwardly struggling to get himself into his overcoat.

"I'm going to Chicago," said Robbins. He paused in his efforts long enough to give her a sheet of paper that bore hastily scribbled handwriting on one side. "See that Spocks gets that at once."

Stacy looked up from the page in her hand. "But she's with the President."

Robbins smiled academically as he continued wrestling with his coat. "I know . . . "

Lanna hung up the telephone at Pink Team headquarters.

"Popov says he had to do a correction on the last page, and only finished it as Dinah was leaving. He gave it to her just as she was going out the door," the blonde reported.

"So she might still have it on her," Louise speculated.

"Well," said Lanna, "until she gets back, we should keep looking." She noted President Wayans speaking on the television screen. "How long has he been talking?"

Louise checked her watch. "Just over twelve minutes," she said.

Lanna studied the screen thoughtfully. "Speech generally lasts an hour," she murmured, knowing that the Wheel was supposed to turn at some point during the address, then she said aloud, "We've *got* to find that page!"

"Well," said Louise, trying to be helpful, "she left more than three hours ago. Shouldn't she be back by now?"

"Lou," the blonde labored to explain, "I really can't say how long it should take to break into a high security compound, snatch up an outer space alien and hurry back home."

Somewhat deflated, but not wanting to add to the tension, Louise pursed her lips. "I'll start looking in her bedroom," she quietly offered, and then she padded off.

The front door opened, and Michael came back in from having been outside yet again. "Shouldn't Dinah be back by now?"

"Keep looking!"

And Michael turned around to go back out again. *Bitch - jeez!*

Lanna stared into space, trying to think, *Where - is - Dinah?*

"Where are you taking me?" Dinah asked her escort as he directed her along another wood-lined corridor.

"Just keep moving," she heard the guard tell her from behind, but then she felt a prod from his gun barrel as it touched her back.

Faster than she could think, a flurry of calculations raced through Dinah's brain, their resolution culminating in the issuing of a set of instructions to her body.

It's him - or me.

"Look, I hate to disappoint you," she said, "but I - *really* - *don't* have - *time* for this."

It was over before she knew it had begun. Dinah took a few moments to catch her

breath as she looked down at the man laid out on the floor at her feet. In three fast, hard blows, she'd not only decked the guard, but put his lights out as well.

That was easy, the Amazon marveled at herself, mystified by her own accomplishment.

Too easy . . ., she then gave herself to wonder, her heady adrenaline rush causing her to feel a little disappointed that the engagement hadn't taxed her further, or lasted longer.

Yeah well, like I was saying, she thought to the guard as she cautiously flicked the gun away from him with a toe, then kicked it solidly to watch it skid down the hall along the highly polished, wood floor, *I really don't have time -*

The guard groaned, and then he began to stir.

Yes, I do have the time, she decided. "Don't you - *ever - pull - a gun - on me - a-gain!* Do you - *hear* me!"

Robbins climbed into the Air Force helicopter waiting for him on the White House grounds. The pilot, at once, prepared to lift off.

"The plane will be ready by the time we get to the base, sir," an Air Force staffer informed Robbins.

"Good," said Robbins. "Are things ready on the other end?"

"They will be sir," the staffer answered.

Robbins looked at the man. "You do know we are on Code "S", don't you?"

The staffer regarded him back. "Very much so, sir."

The massive machine lost touch with the ground, and quickly rose into the sky.

Dinah leapt from the side entry stoop, and ran as hard as she could to the 'blind spot' where her car was hidden. She expected to hear voices, and even gunshots coming after her, but there weren't any. With no time to count her, at the moment, blessings, she reached the car, threw herself inside and fired the engine. Realization of the near perfect, tire-screaming one-eighty she executed on takeoff was the only thing to breach her mood of panic as she careened her way in the darkness along Wayans' tree-lined private back road. *Get there . . . get there*, she told herself, and anything else that might be listening. *Get me there . . .* She could see the huge gate up ahead in the distance beyond the trees. All at once, it made sense why no one was chasing her. The gate was moving. It was closing.

Her eyes glued on the gate, Dinah raised a hand to the remote clipped to her visor. Her thumb depressed the button. Her thumb depressed the button again. And then again and again. "Shit!" The gate was not responding. Dinah pressed the accelerator harder. The car shifted into high gear as she barely managed to navigate the final curve. She could see the gate continuing to close just up ahead. The opening was getting smaller. *No!* Too small. *Dammit - no!* The car lurched into passing gear as Dinah hammered the accelerator to the floor. *Get me!* Smaller. *Get me!* Smaller. *I'll - !*

From out of blackness, Dinah saw the faint, defining features of a man hovering over her. She thought he looked a bit like Alex, though she really couldn't tell. It didn't really seem to matter as she could feel him fulfill her as she'd never been, and then - she fell away. She fell away from what, to what, she neither knew, nor did she care. She fell without a trace of fear, safe within the boundless universe of nothing. *Whither wilt thou will* became her ecstasy, and so she fell into the cradling hand of destiny, and felt its protective fingers close around her.

"Angh . . . ," Dinah uttered at a sense of terrible soreness that cut a diagonal swath across her chest. She was . . . where was she? "Uuhhh . . . " More came into visual focus as her mind returned. *My lap . . . the seat . . . steering whee* - "Fuck!" - *I'm in the car!*

Her head snapped up - *Oh, God - my neck!* - and she looked out through the windshield over the hood of the car. The headlights were still on, but the road wasn't moving. *Okay.* She was stopped. *So . . .* Dinah struggled to put her senses in order. She saw that she was facing an expansive, concrete driveway that lead onto an older looking, asphalt road. She was about to wonder if the car's engine was still running when she could hear the distinct sound of metallic crunching.

Suddenly the window of the passenger door shattered, and fell away. Dinah looked and saw - *The gate!* A kaleidoscopic mental assessment told her that her speeding car had gotten part way through the remaining opening in the gate before being violently stopped between the narrowing gap. It now sat trapped in the gate, about midway between both doors, and the sound of straining metal told her that the gate was still closing. Her car was being crushed with her inside it. She could hear the hum of the gate's drive motor amid the sounds of her car's structure being overwhelmed by superior force. *What the hell is powering that thing?* she wondered an instant before the windshield cracked.

She had to get out - find some way to get out. Both doors were out of the question.

Getting out through the trunk would take too long. She could feel herself rising - feel her pelvis tilting in a peculiar angle. The seat frame was buckling upward in the center. Fortunately, the car's roof was buckling upward too. She hastened to get the seat belt undone. The driver's side window suddenly blew. The sounds of metallic wreckage were getting louder.

Dinah got out from behind the steering wheel, and into the passenger side of the seat where she braced herself with the intention of forcing her feet through the weakened windshield. The angle was wrong - *Dammit!* - and her feet just slid down the glass to the dashboard. She tried again - *Shit!* - then gave up, and hurried to change her position.

The passenger door was being neatly folded in half, and the steering wheel was angling toward the driver's door by the time Dinah stood cramped and crouched on the front seat. When she was fairly sure that she had her feet placed right, she grabbed the steering wheel for balance, then propelled herself upward until her back and pelvis met hard against the windshield. The thing held. She tried again, and again, using her powerful legs to repeatedly ram her pelvis against the unyielding glass. It wasn't working - *Shit!* Finally, she resorted to just pressing as hard as she could with her legs, adding an elbow on the dashboard to give more leveraging power to her back. She pushed, and she strained. She came to growl like a frantic animal as the interior of the car continued to close in on her. She could feel her powerful flesh compressing against the hard, smooth surface of the glass. She couldn't believe that *Fucking glass* could be so strong. *After years of squatting five-hundred pounds, and this is all I -*

With an unexpected, bursting crash, Dinah found herself lying on the hood of the car amid a litter of glass pebbles. She'd done it. She was free. It took her a moment to reorient herself, and then she pulled her legs through the open windshield frame. A flash caught her eye in the distance within the Wayans compound. A pair of headlights had just turned a corner in the woods between the gate and the house. A vehicle of some sort was coming towards her.

The hood beneath her suddenly buckled upward from the ongoing pressure of the closing gate. Dinah wanted to bolt, but remembered that the paper she needed was still inside the car. She saw that the front seat now had a ninety degree fold in the middle of it. She thrust herself, headfirst, through the open windshield frame. She looked, she felt, she groped - *Where . . . WHERE!* There! On the floor! *Got it!*

She emerged again into the full embrace of the cold, but open night air, and gingerly

slid down the car's hood to the pavement. A few unsteady steps away, Dinah was at mental loose ends with the immediate crisis over. An awful sound made her look back to see what was being done to her car. It was slowly being sheared in two, the hum of the gate's motor low, but steady. She was, at once, transfixed by the sight, amazed at the power that drove the massive gate *Fuckin' A* . . . Another flash suddenly jarred her awake. The headlights were getting closer. "Oh no," Dinah tried to utter, but none of it came out right, and then she turned and ran - and ran, and ran . . . mindless of the pellets of glass that fell from her hair, and clothing.

Behind the scene at the President's State of the Union address, Pandora Spocks manually scrolled the President's speech on his teleprompter from her laptop. She was in a room close to the Congressional Chamber amid a loose cluster of Congressional, and White House staffers who were watching the President's speech on a closed circuit channel. Everything was going well; she, and the president were easily keeping pace with one another, and then she got notice of an arrival in her inbox.

She visually marked her place in the President's text, then opened the message, dragged it to one side of the screen, and returned to the text in time to scroll down away. In the following free moment, she read the message. At the end of it, she smiled and thought, *Good thing I'm linked.*

"Gail?" she called to a woman at a computer nearby. "You got the P's speech?"

"Yeah," answered Gail. "I'm following along."

"Take over for a few seconds," Spocks instructed, "I gotta take care of something that just came up."

She paused a moment to gather her thoughts, then started typing on her keypad.

Standing before his audience on the rostrum of the vast congressional chamber, Wayans knew he was making a good impression. He was confident that the major party rebuttals wouldn't have much to say.

"When our forefathers prepared the immortal document that proclaimed our independence, they asserted that every individual is endowed by his Creator with certain inalienable rights. As we gaze back through history to that date, it is clear that our nation has striven to live up to that declaration, applying it to nations as well as to individuals.

"Today we proudly assert that the government of the United States is still committed to this concept, both in its activities at home, and abroad."

Wayans got the standing ovation he was expecting on that one. Nearly everyone in the hall stood up, and contributed to the thunderous applause.

This looks like a good spot, Pandora thought. "Okay, Gail," she said, "I got it from here."

Wayans glanced at the prompter to spot his next cue, and immediately saw something he didn't like. There was a gap in the text that hadn't been there before. It was an obvious gap, one that had, for some reason, just been made. His eyes shifted back to his audience as the applause went on, but then he noticed activity from the corner of one eye. Looking back to the prompter, he saw a succession of characters beginning to appear from left to right in the middle of the gap. He read the inserted text as it was being generated.

We interrupt this program to bring you an important announcement.

The ovation continued. Wayans pursed his lips nervously. He was struggling like hell not to frown for the world viewing audience.

Spocks had better have a damned good reason for this, he thought.

With growing concern, Gail watched what was taking place on her monitor screen.

"Pandora," she sought to point out, "you can't interrupt the State of the Union Address."

Spocks remained looking straight ahead at her laptop screen.

"Oh, yes I can," she said with a strange, little smile.

She spaced twice, tabbed over, then started typing again. Gail looked back to see what was happening on her own screen.

"What?" she exclaimed.

Susan's back.

"What happened?"

"What's wrong?"

"Did you see that?"

"Is he having a heart attack?"

"Is it a stroke?"

"He's too young for that."

"What's wrong with him?"

"What happened?"

The murmur of disquiet spread throughout the House Chamber as the applause prematurely died away. In next to no time at all, the President had suddenly blanched a shade of pale that put him in contention for a Michael Jackson look-alike. Wayans paused a moment to recover himself, along with the majority of his more natural coloring, but everyone in the hall had noticed that something major had just gone *not* according to the President's plan.

"Oh shit," said Louise as she watched the President on the television screen.

"What's the matter?" asked Lanna, her hand, once again, searching in the sofa.

Louise moved toward the phone. "Something just happened." She picked up the receiver, and entered a number. When the connection went through, "Hi, Cin? Lou. What happened during the last applause?"

While Louise was busy with Cindy, Lanna gave up on the sofa, and was sorely tempted to give up generally. The front door opened. An exasperated Michael stood in the doorway.

"Can I come in yet?" he wanted to know. "It's cold out here."

Lanna looked at him, then sighed heavily. "I'm sorry, Michael," she said to him.

Michael took that as an 'okay'. He came in, closing the door after himself. He didn't like the way Lanna looked. He approached her.

"I'm sorry," the blonde said again as she passed the fingers of a hand through her hair. She then rested the hand on Michael's shoulder.

"Anything turn up yet?" he asked her quietly.

"It's coming," Lanna assured him unconvincingly. She knew that didn't sell, so she tried again, "It's coming," as she wondered, *Where the hell is Dinah?*

"Taxi!" Dinah frantically hailed to an approaching taxi cab, then, "Asshole!" as it passed her by. She'd hoofed it as far as Michigan Ave. where she hoped to get a ride, but few buses were running at that late hour, and so many cabs had passed her by that she was beginning to think that the Chicago cabbies, as a group, were boycotting her.

"There's *got* to be a better way," the Amazon muttered to herself, then she spotted another cab approaching from about a block away, "and - I - think - I - just - thought of it."

She watched the cab carefully, guesstimating its speed as it got closer. When she was fairly certain the moment was right, she dashed into the street, and stood herself defiantly in the oncoming car's path. The driver tried to swerve around the, "Crazy bitch!", but Dinah quickly sidestepped to stay in front of him. "Jeez!" spat the driver as his foot drove the brake pedal to the floor. The brakes locked. The front wheels screeched helplessly against the asphalt. Dinah put out both her hands. The front of the cab's hood ran into them. "Oh - Jesus!" the bug-eyed driver swore as he watched the thickset woman in front of him. The car continued to advance, tires screeching, but Dinah maintained her hands on the hood. By a miracle, she successfully ran, skipped and hopped backwards the last twenty feet until the vehicle finally stopped. When it was over, she and the driver remained as they had been, looking at each other through their respective sides of the cab's windshield. After ascertaining that, *yes*, she was still alive, Dinah calmly pushed herself away from the car, righting her posture, then walked around to one of the rear doors, opened it, and got in.

"Holy shit, lady!" the frazzled cabbie screamed. "Are you nuts?"

"No," replied Dinah easily as she settled herself in the seat, "just on a mission to change the world."

"You coulda got yerself killed fer . . . what . . .?"

The cabbie eyed his passenger in the rear view mirror. She was watching him.

"C'mon, let's go," she instructed. "I'm in a hurry."

"Why's he in such a hurry?" Senator Whinde wondered to his fellow sitting at his shoulder. "It seems like he's rushing."

President Wayans had noticeably picked up the delivery pace of his speech. He'd actually taken to subtly raising a subduing hand to quell the prearranged ovations that greeted every point as he made them. He was approaching the conclusion, which he knew contained at least two 'show-stoppers'.

"Ours is not to wonder why," Senator Bagg tiredly remarked in reply to his colleague. "Just keep applauding on cue."

Her lantern shining on the doorway, Olga had retreated to the stairwell of the wet, and ice strewn passageway for a dry spot to sit down on while she waited. The ice encasing Sara was melting rapidly. A running brook of water flowed out of the doorway to the drain some six feet away. The old woman quietly watched the process with her elbows propped on her knees as she sought to massage the soreness from her fingers.

Her thoughts traveled far and wide over the three years she had known Sara. She remembered everything about her - how she'd first come downstairs in her all together, how she'd walked through a wall to enter another room, how she enjoyed putting her hand in fire, how she'd scared herself when she blew up an entire case of microwave popcorn while trying to nuke one bag with her eyes.

So innocent, the old one thought. *So pure*. She'd long ago considered Sara to have been, *Much purer than a baby*, because *She demanded nothink*. *She only wanted to be accepted, and sought to please*.

She thought about all the things she knew about the girl she knew so well - the girl she'd loved, and had helped to raise, and then she wondered if anything of that girl remained. Lanna's random thought about the state of Susan's hard drive had caused serious concern to all of them. Was it in tact? in part? completely gone?

Belief is nyot enough, at times, Olga realized. She looked at the gray figure in the distance - the girl she knew as 'Sara'. *At times, there is only faith*.

President Wayans finished his State of the Union Address, but the show wasn't over yet. As the concluding ovation went on, and on, it was such a long way from the rostrum to the Congressional Chamber door - so many hands to shake, so many congratulatory remarks to hear, and smile to, so many words to exchange, so many people to spot, and wave to, so much more time lost. How long did he have, the President wondered as he shook yet another hand, and forced himself to smile. *How long!* He could almost hear the alien thing calling to him . . . *Maarrshaallll* . . .

Dinah walked into Pink Team headquarters, paper in hand, but oblivious to her disheveled appearance. She suspected something might be wrong, however, when everyone in the room paused to stare at her.

"What happened to you?" asked Lanna.

"Don't ask," Dinah told her as she approached Louise. "Here's the rest of the stuff," she told her as she passed the page of data to her, "and . . .," she paused until she had the redhead's attention, "sorry I screwed up."

Louise took the page, and managed a shy smile, then she looked away.

"It's not too late, is it?" Dinah needed to know.

Louise hesitated, then looked up a bit. "The speech ended seven minutes ago," she informed the lawyer almost too quietly.

Dinah's heart sunk momentarily, then she considered, "He changed the date. Maybe he changed the time."

Louise looked up at her.

"Let's go through with it," the big woman decided. "We've got nothing to loose at this point."

New hope ignited in the Pixie. She held Popov's data out to, "Lanna," and conveyed, "You heard the lady. Let's get crackin'."

Lanna sashayed by. "I don't see no lady," she cracked as she snatched the sheet, and headed toward her computer where Michael was.

"She's been a real bitch tonight," Louise informed the Amazon in soto voce.

"*Just* - tonight?" the lawyer asked in kind.

"I heard that," said the blonde.

"Well," said Dinah, heading off toward her bedroom, "I gotta go brush out my hair, and shower."

"Hey!" called Lanna.

Dinah stopped at the doorway, and turned to the blonde who'd seated herself at the computer. She was looking at her questioningly with her palms upraised from her sides.

"How'd it go?" she wanted to know.

Dinah smiled. "She's on her way," she quietly stated. "She's coming home."

Lanna smiled back, and gave her a thumbs up sign. Dinah returned the gesture, then disappeared into her bedroom. She wasn't gone a moment when

"What the hell happened in here!"

At once, in unison, Lanna, and Louise answered, "Don't ask!"

Wayans made his way out of the Congressional chamber as quickly as he graciously could. In the crowded corridor outside, he immediately searched for anyone on his staff. He

spotted a pair of plain clothes Blue Team members whom Robbins had had tag along with the presidential entourage. He took but a moment to relish a sense of relief, then hastened to where they stood. To the one he said, "Prepare our guest for surgery." To the other he ordered, "Get me to Chicago. Now."

Dinah was now freshly showered, and attired in a comfortable white, terry cloth robe.

"How's it going?" she asked, vigorously scrubbing a towel over her hair and scalp.

"Got it," said Lanna as she finished pecking at the keypad on her computer. She looked up, "Coming your way, Lou."

She sent Popov's configured data to Louise's computer.

"Thank you," Louise said brightly with a smile when the file showed up on her desktop. "Just what I've always wanted."

The two women set about making their final adjustments.

"Dinah," the redhead noted as she pecked away at her keypad, "with as much glass as you've dragged in here, you really shouldn't be barefoot."

Dinah looked about the floor, then she spotted Michael making himself useful by searching out, and picking up pebbles of glass from the carpet.

"It'll only take a few seconds," Louise added, pausing in her activity. "Will you go get some shoes on?"

Dinah gave Louise a look, then sighed and padded back to the bedroom she'd just emerged from. She was only gone a second when

"Ow!"

Lanna looked up from her monitor. "I didn't like the sound of that," she remarked.

Louise redirected her attention from the bedroom doorway to the blonde. Lanna thought she looked . . . somewhat guilty.

"Damn . . . it . . .," Dinah's voice could be heard to say.

From the back of the limousine that would take him to a special jet, President Wayans issued a series of orders that would fully implement Operation "S". Operatives around the world would break the seals on envelopes they'd carried with them for three years. Select members of the President's White House Staff were called back to the office. Those who were still on the job immediately began disconnecting every ethernet cable and telephone

line they could locate. Jimmie Oldsen's wristwatch alarm went off.

A security guard escorted a grim looking Bill Robbins through the darkened halls of Wayans Manor. They turned, and went through a doorway, entering a large, brightly lit room where the estate's staff took their breaks. Robbins saw the estate's chief of security seated at the long, folding table that dominated the center of the room. He looked like he'd been through a meat grinder. An onsite nurse was in attendance, giving first aide to his obvious facial injuries.

"What happened to you?" Robbins wanted to know of the man.

The embarrassed security chief glanced up at Robbins. "Don't ask," he said in answer.

Ever printer in the White House, and its support facilities, began to hum with activity, recording the contents of every computer hard disc of the executive branch of the United States Federal Government. The "Print and Delete" phase of Operation "S" was underway. Pallets of paper were brought in from a special store.

Dinah was back with the others, and had resumed drying her hair. She now wore a pair of slippers on her feet, along with a Band-Aid on one of them.

"Okay . . .," said Lanna from the chair in front of her computer, "last page says launch time was at . . . 9:55 PM." She looked at Louise sitting at the other computer across the room. "We missed it by over an hour."

Louise was quiet for a moment, then she frowned as she queried, "Is that Washington time, or Denver time?"

"The turning of the Wheel has always been set in the time zone of the drop point before," Dinah volunteered.

"Well," Lanna noted as she studied her watch, "if you're right, that means we've got just under forty minutes." She lowered her wrist, and looked up at the lawyer. She sighed. "Hope you're right."

Robbins was bent over a keypad, hastily entering an access code. Two Wayans Manor security guards were standing behind him. He hadn't even bothered to sit down at the

computer he was working on. He pressed the final key. Darkness showed on the monitor. He entered another code. The temperature indicator he saw before in his DC office appeared. It now read "74". He waited for it to change. It didn't. He stood up away from the monitor, still watching the indicator. It still read "74".

"Keep an eye on that," he told one of the guards. "Let me know if it changes." To the other guard, he said, "Get some light on down there." Then he left the room.

The ice appeared to move in waves as it receded to its point of origin. Brooks of water coursed their way along the sodden carpet to the drain outside the room. Olga was able to enter the room now, playing the beam of her lamp before her. The ice had released its hold on more than half of the office chair. Olga showed the light on Sara's form. Though, perhaps, just over seven feet away, the gray figure was heavily obscured from all the water coursing down the surface of the melting ice.

"You are doink good, Sara," Olga noted in encouragement.

She looked about, moving the light to play upon what there was to see. A thought occurred to her that made her smile.

"You are nyot making easy job for me, cleanink up this place."

A sudden crackle pierced the silence. Olga looked up at the ceiling. She slowly trained her light along the acoustical tiles, and recessed lighting fixtures above her. There was another crackle off to one side. Olga looked with her lamp. There was a third crackle as one of the fixtures expelled some sparks. When silence returned, one ceiling light in a far corner of the room was on. Thinking it through, Olga deduced that moisture from the ice had compromised the electrical wiring to the other fixtures, then a thought popped into her mind that scared her. She slowly turned around to show the beam of her lamp into the corridor outside the room. She saw that the light fixtures along the corridor ceiling were lit.

A White House staffer in the Executive Office Building finished printing a file. She closed the file, then deleted it as she stood up from her desk. She retrieved the printed copy of the file from her printer's hopper, then restocked the feed tray with fresh paper. Sitting down at her desk again, she looked at her desktop. The icon of the file she'd just deleted was still there. She frowned, mentally reviewing her recollection of having deleted the file, and was satisfied with the results of what she remembered. She selected the file again, and

pressed "delete". The icon remained, unchanged, on her desktop. She pressed "delete" three more times in quick succession. The icon remained. She opened the file. Its content was just as it had been when she'd closed it. She closed the file. The file icon was still on her desktop, unchanged. She selected the file, and pressed "delete" again. The file disappeared.

In the small office of a secure, underground facility somewhere in the continental United States, a telephone rang.

"Yeah," said the man who answered.

He listened.

"Um-hm."

He listened some more.

"You want to confirm this, just to be sure?" he asked.

He listened.

"Okay," he replied to what he heard. "That's the right arm, right?"

Robbins walked quickly through the darkened solarium at the rear of the Wayans Manor. His pace slowed with hesitation as he approached the doors that led to the patio outside. He stopped at one of the doors, and looked through one of the beveled glass panes. He saw the entire grounds covered with crisp, white, January snow. He looked over at the fountain to the left of the walkway, then he searched no more.

He opened the door, and stepped outside. He walked to the end of the patio, taking care of his footing so's not to slip, the snow crunching beneath his tread. He descended the three steps to the walkway, then made his way to the grass, evidenced from the boarder of the walkway by the slightly risen level of snow. He walked onto the grass, the snow crunching beneath his feet. He shivered from chill of the night winter weather. He approached the fountain, and missed the crunch of his tread as he stepped onto a patch of bare, green grass.

Robbins stopped in the rectangular patch of grass that included part of the fountain. He looked about, and judged it to be roughly the right size - just as it'd been before, only reversed. It was now a postage stamp of green amid the snowy white of everything else he saw.

He turned to look at the fountain. He saw the water in it - there was no ice - even in the below zero air temperature. He moved toward the fountain, his shoulders hunched up near

his ears to help keep him warm. He stopped at the large lower basin, and noted the water's stillness. Robbins was tempted to touch the water. He yielded, and reached for it. The water felt warm to his fingers. He snorted mildly from his own lack of surprise. *It's probably seventy fo -*

"Everything alright out here, sir?"

Robbins whipped around, wide-eyed - searching for, then seeing a guard watching him from just outside the open patio door.

"Yeah!" he called, then he thought to add a reassuring wave. He turned back to the fountain to say more to himself, "Just peachy." In the winter air, his wet hand was now freezing cold. Robbins shivered convulsively, then he angrily flung the wetness from his fingertips into the fountain as he breathed, "So that's the way you want it, bitch!"

The limousine's tires screeched as the car made the turn into the rear entry of the White House grounds. It sped up the drive, then came to an abrupt stop in back of the executive mansion. The rear door closest to the mansion's steps opened, and Jimmie Oldsen got out. He was carrying an attaché case. He spotted his contact at the top of the steps. He hastened to him.

"Glad you could make it on such short notice, sir," the man said in greeting to Jimmie.

"Is everything ready?" Jimmie asked as he mounted the last step.

"Yes, it is, sir," the man answered, then he gestured to the entryway, "right this way."

The pair went inside where it was warm.

With time to kill until their 9:55 PM appointment with Wayans' Wheel of Fortune, the Pink Team pretty much sat around, and waited. Lanna and Louise were ready. Their computers were ready. They'd synchronized their watches to the official time. Dinah was putting her bedroom back in order after the combined hurricanes 'Lou' and 'Lanna' had hit. Lanna was futzing around with a programming exercise as Michael watched over her shoulder. Louise felt like being social. She came to stand behind Lanna's monitor with a cup of coffee nested in her hands.

"So . . . how long have you two been together?" she asked Michael with reference to Lanna.

"Oh, it's been . . . ," Michael tried to answer, then he needed Lanna's input, "what? Over

two years now, hasn't it?"

"Yeah," Lanna paused to amiably supply, "It was a little before Jimmie and I got into the condo." and then she went back to pecking.

"Hm," Louise smiled. "Interesting combination," she mused toward the blonde, "not to say . . . a delicate juggling act."

Now Michael smiled.

"You don't have to worry about Lanna's ability, Ms Layne," he told her. "She's been able to take everything I've given her."

"Thank you, dear," Lanna paused to say, and then she went back to pecking.

Michael nodded toward the blonde for Louise's benefit. "Believe me; she's good."

Louise looked at Michael. "In what category?" she asked. "Computer, or sex?"

"Oh, shit,"

Lanna suddenly muttered.

Michael glanced at Lanna's monitor screen over her shoulder. "Ooo," was all he felt brave enough to say.

From under her brow, Lanna gave the Pixie a glare that Dinah would've envied. Louise tightly pursed the corners of her mouth in an effort to conceal her smile, but she was only partially successful. She averted her eyes from the blonde, and lightly cleared her throat before offering a little, "Sorry."

Jimmie went ahead of the man into the room he'd escorted him to. The computer on the desk was already on. Jimmie set the attaché case on the desk, then fished his other hand in his pants pocket. He withdrew a set of keys, found the right one, then unlocked the handcuffs that manacled his wrist to the case.

"Will there be anything else, sir," asked the man from the doorway.

Jimmie shucked his coat, and tossed it onto a chair. "No," he told the man offhandedly, "that'll be all."

The man left him alone. Jimmie sat at the desk, unlocked the attaché case, and opened it. Inside it were four, carefully stored, gold colored, compact discs.

The time was approaching. The women were ready to ride the Wheel - so long as the hour was right. Dinah had made herself a mug of her special cocoa, and had paused outside

the kitchenette to take a leisurely sip.

"Five minutes," Louise reported after consulting her watch. She looked up at Lanna, who was eyeing her a bit suspiciously. "Are - we - ready?"

"So long as you don't say anything about 'sex'," the blonde snarled.

"Check," said Louise, looking back at her screen. "Think Pink."

"Wha'd I just get finished saying?" Lanna droned.

Louise looked up again. "Pink - *Team*."

"Wha'd I just get finished saying?"

Louise scowled. "Up yours."

"Wha'd I just get finished saying?"

At that point, Louise hung her head in defeat.

Dinah had watched, and wondered about, the women's verbal tennis match. Granted, it wasn't Wimbledon, but still, her neck had begun to hurt from looking back and forth between the two.

"Did I miss something?" the Amazon hesitantly queried.

Both the other Pink Teamers busted out laughing. Louise snorted so badly before she'd started laughing, she had to cup a hand over her lower face.

"What?" Lanna noted. "You have a accident? Good. Hope you pee yer pants next time."

"Shutup, you bitch!" Louise laughed into her hand. "Can somebody hand me a Kleenex?"

The limousine carrying the President came to a stop a few feet away from the well-lit front gate of Wayans Manor. It was accompanied by a special Blue Team unit Wayans had installed in the Secret Service for such an emergency. A uniformed guard emerged from the guard shack, and strode over to the vehicle. The driver lowered his window. He and the guard exchanged some words, then the guard looked back at the limousine's passenger who was sitting forward in his seat, his elbows resting on his knees.

"We have a red alert here, sir," the guard informed the President.

"I'm aware of that," Wayans replied with strained patience.

"It's best that you be kept off the grounds until we're clear," the guard continued.

Wayans looked at the guard in disbelief. "Who decided tha - " he was about to ask, then

he cut himself off, and said, "never mind." He took up the car phone, entered a number, then placed the handset to his ear. He sighed as he waited for the connection to go - "Bill?" he stated with perturbed authority. "I'm outside. Open the gate." Wayans lowered the handset, and glanced up at the vehicle's rear view mirror. He was gratified to see the driver watching him. "Be ready to move," he told the man.

Eyeing the President, the driver nodded.

In the small, isolated room of the White House, Jimmie ejected the second disc from the computer he was at, slipped it back into the pocket in his attaché case, then withdrew the third disc from its storage pocket. He checked it over visually. When he was satisfied that it was clean, and free of flaws, he set it into the disc tray and coaxed it into the CPU. The icon appeared on the desktop. He opened it, then typed in an authorization code to begin process of loading the disc's information onto the computer's hard drive.

"In five - four - three - two - one - click," Louise cued.

She and Lanna then sat back to watch the process both of them were familiar with. Dinah watched over Louise's shoulder.

"You got yer code-breaker, don't you?" Louise asked the blonde.

"Ready and waiting," Lanna answered.

The ice encasing Sara had receded to the point where Olga had gotten a small hammer from the tool bag, and was carefully pounding chunks of it away from her. She'd cleared a massive ice block from between one shoulder and the side of her head, and had begun carefully tapping away at Sara's face. On the fifth blow, it cracked. On the sixth, the ice crazed. Soon a cheek was touched by air again, and then a chin, then the tip of a nose. Olga got the sum of Sara's lower face revealed. She noted that her lips were parted. One more blow in just the right place, and Sara's brow and eyes were freed.

Olga paused to look on the face of the beloved child she hadn't seen for so long. Sara's visage was completely gray in color. Skin, lips, her eyes and eyebrows, a wisp of hair, the tips of her front teeth, every part of her was the same dull, shade of gray.

The old Russian felt a sudden, painful tightening in her chest. She'd never seen her little

Sara look so sad. It was as if she had just heard report of some terrible news, and had been frozen in the middle of reacting to it.

"Oh Sara," the old woman sighed to the silent figure of her adopted grandchild. "Did you suffer in the end?" Her hand reached up to gently touch the cheek, the brow. "Vhy couldn't you haf told us that you suffered in the end?"

The front entry door of Wayans Manor swung open, and the White House Chief of Staff, and the country's Chief Executive stood face to face.

"Dinah's been here," Robbins reported. "That much is confirmed."

"Oddly enough, that doesn't surprise me," Wayans said with a sigh, hindsight being twenty-twenty. "We should've taken her more seriously."

"We should've taken her - *period!*" Robbins stated.

"Be that as it may," said Wayans. "What about the office?"

"The temperature's been holding steady at seventy-four degrees for the past couple of hours," Robbins answered.

"Alright," sighed Wayans, resigned to the inconvenience of the situation, "let's go take care of this."

Olga was now pounding away at the ice - and Sara - with renewed energy, and strength - and with vengeance.

"***Whoever - did this - to you,***" she swore, "***they are - goink - to pay!***"

Another blow. More ice fell. The "S" on Sara's chest showed through.

The monitors at Pink Team headquarters had illuminated again. Everyone was relieved to see both screens filled with encrypted data.

"Hallelujah," sighed Lanna as she pressed the code-breaker disc into her CPU.

Robbins lead the way down a semi-darkened, wood paneled hallway. He was followed by an armed guard, who was then followed by President Wayans, who, himself, was then followed by another armed guard. Robbins stopped within the hallway, then turned, and

opened two, well concealed, hinged panels within the wall to reveal a pair of large, shiny, stainless steel doors behind them. He entered an access code on a control pad to the right of the door. After a moment, the doors slid open, revealing the interior of an elevator car beyond it.

"You got the hair, and clippings?" Wayans wanted to know.

Robbins turned to the President with a smile, and patted the breast pocket of his jacket. "Fresh ones arrived just two days ago."

Wayans eyed his chief lieutenant, and right hand man.

"There'll soon be five less clippings to be concerned about," he said.

The four men entered car. Inside, Robbins pressed the button of the floor they wished to go to. The steel doors slid shut. The car began to descend.

The ice was readily yielding, but Olga was still working hard. The block of ice fell from Sara's other shoulder, the block between one of her forearms, and her hip gave way. Olga brought her hammer to bear randomly - wherever she happened to see - wherever she thought it might help.

The elevator car bearing Wayans, and his entourage, seemed to slow down for some reason. After another couple of moments, it gradually came to a stop altogether. Wayans and Robbins looked to one another, both of them trying to mask their curiosity over the unexpected turn in their situation.

Between Olga's effort, and Susan's ongoing activation process, Sara's dull, gray colored head, upper torso, arms and hands were now free. Olga had gotten a larger hammer, and a chisel to deal with the massive block of ice that joined Sara's parted legs. It was tough going since the space between Sara's body, and the inside of her cape was still solid with ice.

"Seems like we're stuck," Robbins opined after having pressed a number of buttons on the elevator's control pad without any success in getting the car to move again. "Can't go up, can't go down."

What they didn't know was that the earth shift, compelled by Susan's activation, had compressed the lower part of the elevator shaft, squeezing the guide rails of the car closer together so that the elevator had descended into a progressively tightening wedge, and was now, essentially, trapped in one place.

"Terrific," remarked the President, looking about at the car's interior. "Now how are we going to get out of here?"

"Aaaannnd - we have numbers," Louise said, nodding her head with satisfaction at what she saw of the code breaker's rendering.

"Thank God," said Dinah softly from behind the redhead. She looked up at Lanna, and smiled. "Guess we didn't miss the boat after all."

The blonde nodded ascent, but Dinah could tell, by her look, that they'd just gotten away with skating on very thin ice.

Jimmie slipped the forth, and final disc back into its storage pocket. He then manipulated the mouse to put the computer online. He stared at the monitor screen as the internet program opened up. Everything was ready. Jimmie took a breath, and let it out as he flexed his fingers.

"Okay . . .," he breathed at the end of his exhalation.

He established a link, then activated the program he'd just installed.

At Pink Team headquarters, the internet windows on both monitor screens suddenly went blank.

"Lou," Lanna demanded from where she sat, "what happened?"

"I don't know." said Louise. She immediately tried a retrieve. Her internet program reported no data found. "Shit!"

"Michael?" Lanna almost pleaded to the man at her side.

Michael racked his brain for a moment before admitting, "I don't know," then, "unless . . ."

"Unless what?" Dinah wanted to know.

"Unless the link's been rendered inactive by a replacement link," Michael answered.

"Dinah," Lanna called to her, "are you sure you had all the pages?"

"Yes," Dinah reported, "everything I got, you got."

"It was all there," Louise added. "None of it would've worked if anything was missing."

Lanna sat back in her chair, obviously not happy with what she was hearing. She looked up at Michael. "Any ideas?"

Dinah's cell phone rang. She answered the incoming call. "Hello?"

Olga was on her knees, chipping away at the ice that joined the back of Sara's calves to her cape. A sizable block fell away to the floor. The Russian was then given pause to wonder if she'd noticed movement. Tentatively, she reached out a hand, and touched the lower most corner of Sara's cape. She was given pause again when the cape moved to her touch.

In the Executive Office Building in Washington, a staffer removed a freshly printed file from her printer's hopper. She took a moment to tap the file lengthwise, then widthwise, straightening out the leaves to get them flush with each other before setting it on a nearby table along with several other printed files.

She started to return to her desk, but then she heard her printer start up again. She stopped, turned back to look at the printer. It was producing printed pages again. The woman frowned curiously, and checked the desktop on the computer the printer was attached to. Finding nothing there that would authorize the printer's activity, she looked back at the printer. It was still turning out printed sheets at a steady pace.

The staffer thought for a bit, trying to figure out why the printer would be operating without the computer telling it to, then she got to wondering just what the printer was printing. She slowly approached the machine. There were already a number of pages laying in the hopper. She took the page the printer had just produced, and looked at it. She saw columns of numbers she didn't recognize on the body of the page. She looked at the heading.

"Statement of account . . . ," she murmured curiously.

"No," Dinah said forlornly into her cell phone, "it looks like we're dead."

She'd been watching Michael from across the room as he'd tried several ways of calling back the Wheel of Fortune, but it seemed to have just disappeared. The lawyer finally turned

away from the scene.

"Without numbers we haven't got a thing on Wayans."

On the other end of Dinah's connection, Pandora Spocks listened. She was at the airport. She had been the one who'd called.

"I'm sorry Ms. Prinze," she said. "Be sure to thank Mrs. Oldsen for the ticket, and the money for me."

"No problem, Pandora," Dinah assured the young woman.

The alert sounded on Louise's computer. The redhead was standing by the window looking out at the Chicago night. She turned to look the monitor on her desk.

"So, what are you going to do now?" asked Dinah of the now former White House assistant.

The alert on Louise's computer sounded again. It was louder that time. Louise frowned, then she approached her desk.

"Oh, I'm," said Spocks, thinking as she spoke, "going to just go away for awhile . . . try to sort things out . . . and then try to figure out what I'm going to do."

The computer's alert sounded again as Louise arrived at her desk. It was louder still.

"Well," said Dinah into her cell to Spocks.

The computer sounded again.

"Lou," Lanna called to her, frowning from where she, and Michael were stationed, "what's the problem?"

Louise could only give the blonde a nervous smile. The computer sounded again.

"Lou," said Dinah with a substantial glower.

Louise looked up from her screen at the Amazon. The computer sounded again. She looked back at the screen.

"Dinah, you'd better come here," she said.

"Excuse me, Pandora," Dinah said into her cell, then, "Lou, I'm - "

The alert sounded again.

"For cripes sake," a nettled Lanna muttered as she crossed the room to Louise's desk, "what's that thing's problem?"

Louise stood away from her monitor as the blonde approached. She was getting noticeably spooked.

The alert sounded again, and then it began to sound in constant succession.

"Dinah," Louise said, "come, and look at this."

Lanna arrived, and looked at the screen. "What the fuck?" she uttered in surprise.

"Dinah?" Louise called to the lawyer more urgently as the computer's alert continued to sound.

Dinah glared at the redhead, then at her noisy computer. "Hello, Pandora?" she said as she began to move herself toward Louise's desk. "Hello?" She glared at her cell, "Shit!" then, "Hello? Oh, hi, Pandora - look, we've come up with something here, and I seem to be fading out. You take care of yourself, okay?"

Standing in a phone stall at the airport, Pandora smiled. "I'm going to try to find out how to do that, Ms. Prinze. Thanks."

"Goodbye, Pandora," Dinah bid the young woman, looking to see what was on Louise's monitor screen. As she came to stand before it, the computer's constant alert stopped. Lanna stood beside her at one end of the desk. Louise stood behind her to one side. Michael joined them to stand just behind Dinah's other side. All of them stared at the screen. In the center of the blank, white internet window, in bold, black type, there were two words, one situated directly over the other.

DINAH

COME

Dinah closed her cell, then folded her arms over her chest. The word 'come' vanished from the screen, leaving only 'Dinah'. The remaining word blinked once, and then, beneath it, type began to generate from left to right. When the process was finished, there were three new words under 'Dinah' .

PRESS ANY KEY

The four of them stared at the words on the screen. Dinah turned to Lanna, who was the Pink Team's resident hacker.

"Is this a joke?" she hesitantly asked.

The look on the blonde's face, alone, told her that it was not.

The computer's alert sounded, calling everyone's attention back to the screen. The 'press any key' message was blinking, blinking, blinking.

"Wul, c'mon, *do* something," Louise nervously prompted the lawyer.

Dinah dropped her arms as she turned to Louise impatiently. "Wha' d' you want me to do?" she hissed.

Louise's eyes grew wide as she could only shrug in reply.

"Why not just," Lanna suggested tentatively, "press any key?"

Dinah regarded her. The blonde shrugged. The computer's alert sounded again, drawing their attention to the screen. The 'press any key' phrase was still blinking, blinking.

"That's what it's asking for," said Michael.

Dinah hesitated. The computer's alert sounded again.

"I . . . think it's - going to keep doing that until you press a key," Louise noted from behind the imposing woman.

Dinah still hesitated, then she slowly reached forward. Her hand paused over the keypad. She chose, and then her forefinger pressed the 'S' key.

The window immediately went blank. A slightly off-white color background appeared within the window's frame with a scroll bar to the right. A page sized frame appeared against the background. The page expanded to the full width of the window, and then six columns of numbers began to generate from the top of the page, racing toward the bottom. The page scrolled. More columns appeared, the data racing to the bottom of the page. The process continued at a dizzying pace; generate, and scroll - generate, and scroll.

"What the fuck?" Lanna softly uttered.

"Lou?" said Dinah, turning to the redhead. "Can you make anything outta this?"

She moved aside so Louise could come in closer. She briefly studied the data as it continued to generate, then scroll - generate, then scroll.

"Holy smokes," Louise uttered in muted surprise, "we got numbers."

The face of one of the guards appeared from above over the opening of the elevator car's escape hatch.

"It looks like we're between floors, Mr. President," he reported.

Both Wayans, and Robbins, craned their necks to look up at the guard. They'd remained in the car while the two guards had climbed through the escape hatch to the elevator's roof to see if there was a way out of the shaft.

"Can you get to a door," Wayans calmly asked, although he was clearly upset with the delay, "and can you get that door open?"

Still on her knees by Sara's side, Olga leaned up, and sat back on her heels to take a few moments rest. She breathed a sigh, and reached up a hand to push some hair back from her face. She was surprised to find that she was sweating from her work. Something different caught one corner of her eye. She looked, and saw that skin color was showing through the gray of Sara's hand.

In one of the office bull pens of the Executive Office Building, pandemonium reigned. Computer files would not delete on command. All the printers had gone haywire; spitting out reams of mysterious, and completely unauthorized, 'account statement' data. Frightened staffers, and aides scurried about; afraid to approach their printers, afraid to approach their computers, just plain wanting out. The alerts on several computers were sounding constantly, demanding that their printer's feed trays be restocked. A general order to turn the printers off had failed. None of the computers would turn off.

At length, someone shouted an order to pull the plugs. All plugs. People scrambled under tables, and desks, reaching, and grabbing at wires, and cables, yanking at any electrical thing that would move. Gradually, screens went dark, paper stopped moving and activity lights went out. Quiet was restored to the fever-pitched atmosphere. The plug brigade slowly emerged from their office foxholes, but many of them remained seated on the floor. No one moved. No one knew what had happened, or knew what to do. All of them were scared stiff. No one moved.

Jimmie Oldsen walked with his escort back the way he'd come, his attaché case in hand.

"Everything go okay, Mr. Oldsen?" the escort asked as they paused for him to unlock a door on their way.

"Oh, yeah," said Jimmie easily, "it went fine. No glitches."

In a nearby office, the activity light of a printer went on.

The door was opened. The two men passed through.

"Everything's under control," said Jimmie.

A paper began to emerge from the printer.

Robbins, and the two guards were now standing in the open doorway on the floor above where the elevator car had wedged itself. Wayans stood waiting on the roof of the car some six feet below. Bracing themselves on either side of the doorway, the guards reached down to the President's up-stretched hands, each of them taking him by a wrist as he tightly gripped theirs.

"You ready, sir?" one of the guards asked.

"Yeah, pull," said Wayans.

Wayans was brought up out of the shaft, a little rumpled, as were they all, but none the worse for wear. Once he was safe, the President immediately strove to correct his appearance as he proceeded, "To the stairs," he directed. "This way."

"This is nuts!" exclaimed Lanna as she sat staring at her monitor screen. The data was now scrolling on her computer as well. Dinah stood behind Lanna, looking on over her shoulder. Both of them were mystified - and not a little frightened - by what was happening. "Lou," the blonde called to her, "gimme somethin'."

Seated in front of her monitor, Louise was equally baffled. She saw a constant stream of data; generating, scrolling, generating, scrolling.

"I don't know," she gasped. "It's scrolling too fast. I can't visually lock on to anything."

Dinah's eyes were getting tired looking at the flow of information.

"What we need is some kind of heading that tells us what we're looking at," she said.

On Lanna's screen, the frame within the window suddenly shifted down a bit. A light blue banner then came on above it. White print began generating across the banner from left to right that eventually identified each of the data columns according to

Country - Institution - Account Name - Account Number - Transaction - Time & Date

"Whew!" Louise screamed.

The others looked. The redhead had stood up from her desk so fast that she'd tipped her chair over backwards. She was standing beside her desk, her arms tightly folded across her chest. She looked like she was ready to bolt any second.

"I . . . I, I . . . I - I-I-I-I can't handle this," she finally managed to get out, and then she carefully walked away from the desk on unsteady legs.

Lanna, and Dinah continued watching Louise, then Lanna looked up at Dinah. Dinah looked down at Lanna. As they gazed at each other, both of them were drawing a blank. Lanna finally looked away.

"I'm with her," she said, and then she got up from her chair, and joined the Louise by the window.

Dinah stood away from the monitor, watching the data generate, and scroll, generate, and scroll. Michael came up to stand beside her, watching the data as it continued to generate, and scroll, generate, and scroll.

"If it keeps up like that," he remarked, "it's going to fill both hard drives in not too much longer."

In Dinah's Houston office, in a corner room of Unit 1A, the desk computer light went on. In Unit 1B, the activity light on Alex's old computer suddenly illuminated.

The four men emerged from the stairwell with Robbins in the lead. Their footsteps spatted against the wet, concrete floor. Robbins fished a set of keys from his trouser pocket as they headed straight for the office door at the end of the passageway. He'd found the appropriate key by the time he'd arrived at the door. Wayans, and the two guards stood behind him as he inserted the key into the lock, then exerted to turn it. The key wouldn't move. The lock was jammed.

Olga heard a sound at the far end of the room. Susan was in the process of putting Sara through her pre-animation check-out. Her form was now full of its normal coloring, her hair, cape and skirt moved freely. Olga glanced over Sara's shoulder to the door at the other end of the room. It was the sound of a key being hastily worked in a lock. She knew it.

"There," said Robbins. "It was stuck, but I got it now."

He turned the key, then moved to open the door.

"You'd better let us go first, sir," one of the guards told him.

Robbins paused, then looked to Wayans.

"He's probably right, Bill," the President told him. "Let them go first."

"Sara, come on," Olga urgently bid the artifact, gingerly patting her cheeks. "You haf to vake up now." She tried shaking Sara's wrists - tried straighten her hair. "Sara, please . . ."

The guard at the door forcefully brought his weight against it as the others stood close behind. The door remained closed. The guard backed away a step, rubbing his sore shoulder.

"Is it stuck?" asked Robbins.

"Well," Wayans casually noted, "it hasn't been opened in three years."

"Let's both of us try it," the one guard said to the other.

"Sara - "

The door flew open. The two guards rushed into the half-lit room followed by Robbins, and then the President. The guards came to a stop well into the room, looking to take in the scene of the old woman, and the strangely dressed girl standing with her back to them. Wayans walked carefully, watchfully off to one side, but Robbins charged up beside one of the guards, pointed at Sara and ordered, "Shoot her!"

The guard at his shoulder automatically drew his pistol, and aimed it at Sara's back. Olga's eyes widened as she put her aged body into motion. The guard's trigger finger tightened.

"No!" the old woman declared as she thrust herself between Sara, and the guard.

The shot rang out. Olga expelled an awful gasp. Her eyes closed as she fell back . . . into Sara's waiting arms.

Chapter Forty-six

Rescue: Part Two

"Banngo!" Sara cried.

Within the damp, and chilly, atmosphere of Wayans' subterranean office, the President of the United States, his Chief of Staff, and two armed, Wayans Manor security guards, watched in silence as the reactivated Cryptoalien artifact stood supporting the body of Olga Barishkova Jachimczyk.

Sara had snapped awake, and turned around in time to catch the old woman from behind as she was falling. All four of the men remained completely still. They could see the palpable display of emotion on the alien machine's simulated visage as it held the old woman close, and tenderly rubbed its cheek against the side of her gray hair.

"Banngo . . .," Sara said again, quieter now, but with no diminishing of intensity. She averted her eyes, and, with a mild concentration of her heat vision, Sara dried a section of the soggy carpet just behind where she held Olga in front of the desk. When she was satisfied with what she'd done, the redness left her eyes, and she caringly laid the dear old Russian down on it.

"Bad move, Susan," she heard Wayans say.

Sara looked up at the President from where she knelt beside Olga. She could see him smiling at her.

"The clock is ticking," Wayans continued.

The President, and the artifact, regarded one another, Sara saying nothing, her face revealing nothing. Wayans' smile broadened.

"Better go back while Alex still has a right arm," he calmly told her.

Faster than anyone could see, Sara came to hover eye to eye before the President, arms cocked, fists clenched, ready to strike. Her face was the picture of noble defiance.

"Tick - tick - tick," Robbins fortuitously intoned.

Sara didn't move, but remained floating in front of Wayans, who wasn't smiling anymore. The Dark Knight, and the artifact, eyed each other steadily until tiny droplets of molten lead began to seep from between the fingers of one of Sara's tightly clenched fists. They fell to the soaked carpet below, emitting stinging little hisses as they struck. The

artifact's attention shifted as she raised her hand, and opened it to look at what was there. Sara then looked over to the guard who'd fired his weapon as she peeled the remainder of the bullet from her palm.

"I think you dropped this," she told him just before she threw the molten blob of metal to his feet. It hissed, and smoked, on the carpet where it hit. Sara held the guard's gaze unflinchingly, and she smiled. "You should be more careful where you put those," she advised.

Sara returned her attention to Wayans. Once again, the two regarded one another, the President's gaze matching Sara's in intensity

You got 'im? Sara queried to her other self.

A soft, young, feminine voice, with a slightly nasal tone, said to Sara's inmost ear, **Affirmative.**

Sara mentally scanned through the significant data Susan had provided her. She was satisfied. She smiled. Her cape began to lightly float behind her as though there was a subtle breeze within the room - only there was no breeze.

"Tick - tick - tick . . . ," said Sara to President Wayans.

Her caressing voice intoned the words with ease. Wayans did his best to remain deaf to the intoxicating sound. He did his best, then Sara turned her head toward Robbins.

"You don't mind if I quote you?" she asked politely. "Do you?"

Robbins wasn't sure how to respond. He waited for a nod from Wayans before he smiled uneasily, and replied, "Not at all."

Sara smiled.

"Thanks," she said cheerfully, then she returned her attention to the President.

"Tick - tick . . . ," she paused, then glanced to Robbins a bit uncertainly to confirm, "tick, right?"

She noted Robbins' look of perplexity, but didn't wait for an answer before looking back to Wayans once again.

"Yes," Sara both affirmed as well as informed the President, "the clock is ticking," and then Sara's face took on a darkness of expression, and her tone became dead serious, "but not for me anymore."

She drifted closer to Wayans. He stood his ground, with his back almost, but not quite, to the wall behind him. Sara came to hover almost nose to nose with him. He did not flinch. He did not blink. Her visage softened as she continued to regard the President, and he

continued to regard her back.

"Banc de Swiss," Sara's lilting voice intoned. "27549352141."

She paused for just a moment, then, with but the slightest upward prick of a golden brow, she asked him, "Ring a bell?"

Wayans remained unmoved, watching the otherworldly machine.

Sara smiled at him as her head tilted slightly to one side. Her mouth opened. Her eyes sparkled with an impossible combining of breathless sensuality, and holy innocence. Wayans could feel the warm air from her exhalations on his lips. Her breath filled his nostrils with inviting scent.

"Bank of Japan," Sara said to Wayans, her voice a siren song sweet enough to enflame unquenchable desire. She went on to quote one account number after another, pausing after each to ask him, "Ring a bell?"

Wayans fought the battle of his life maintaining his poker face in front of the animated thing that was now threatening to rip the world - his world - apart. He knew that Jimmie's special Operation "S" program was spinning his Wheel of Fortune at lightening speed, constantly shifting money, and accounts, world wide, and yet - how was this . . . machine of such . . . utter, and complete . . . beauty - how could it be keeping track of it? Was it bluffing about what it thought it knew? Was it not? Was he? The numbers were changing so fast - she - *it* - couldn't possibly be keeping up. The program was designed so that no one could either trace or track the flow. No one who was . . . human, that is. In fact, the very thing that made the Operation "S" program possible was right in front of him, staring him in the eye.

"Susan," Wayans uttered softly. In spite of himself, he'd spoken - *it's* name. Spoken it in a way he would never have dared to dream of.

Sara stopped herself in the midst of quoting yet another number sequence. Her eyes had never left the man, nor had his ever left her. Her mouth was in the process of forming yet another number when she stilled her voice. She smiled.

"I think I heard a bell ring," she confided to Wayans softly. She paused as though she were expecting him to speak. As he did not, Sara then went on to say, "I think you did too."

Sara drifted back away, relieving him? or depriving him? of her proximity. How could he tell? She raised a hand to extend a simulated index finger. She watched - he watched - constantly. The finger neared, and Sara lightly tapped the forward swell of the President's lower lip

"Tick . . . "

once

"tick . . . "

twice

"If he is harmed in any way," she said, intentionally leaving the sentence unfinished. She paused a bit, her finger poised, her cape flowing gently in her breeze. She watched - he watched . . . constantly.

"Tick . . . "

one final time.

The meeting over, Sara drifted back to put herself to another matter. Having been deprived of music for so long, she scanned the local Chicago radio stations, and quickly picked out one that was playing the most upbeat of the current top ten. She closed her eyelid simulations, got a little smile on her lips, then started bee-boppin' as she drifted back away from President Wayans. All four of the men starred at her with astonished wonder as her levitated form floated backwards over the floor, dancing in the air to the beat of her tune. She lifted her slippered feet to float over the heavy, ornate desk, then she opened her eyes again for the benefit of her viewing public.

"Oh, uh," she said, looking at the two guards, "when she comes around," she instructed them with reference to Olga, who had merely fainted as it turned out, "tell her that everything's fine." *Ow! I . . . like this tune!* "Make sure she gets home alright," she further instructed the guards, "and uh . . . ," then she paused in what she was about to say long enough to pick up the desk, and send it crashing against the far wall of the bunker. Instantly, there was enough kindling wood on the floor to start a collegiate bonfire. Sara returned her attention to the guards, "*don't . . .* disappoint me."

Sara closed her eyes again, groovin' to the beat of her tune. Her hands rose up beside her temples, fingers snappin', cape flowin', hair a-blowin' as she rose up higher. Her head was almost to the ceiling when her eyes suddenly opened to regard her dumbfounded audience.

"You say, yes-sir!" she proclaimed, dancing to the beat of her tune.

Then she frowned.

"You say, no-sir!" she stated to the beat of her tune.

She rose up higher still.

"Le's git dis show on dee rooad! Yeow!"

With that, Sara flipped and dove straight into the carpeted, concrete floor like it was no more than a pool of water to her, and vanished into the earth below.

At Pink Team headquarters, waiting had ensued. Dinah paced in slow, measured steps with her strong, capable hands crammed deep into the pockets of her robe. Lanna sat in front of her computer monitor trying to rest her eyes. The data flow had stopped on her machine, her hard drive having been maxed out. It continued, however, to generate on Louise's more powerful computer. Louise stood by the window, staring resolutely outside. She was trying not to fidget, trying to visually notice something - anything - that would take her mind away. Michael lay dozing on the couch.

Their work was finished, and now waiting was the only thing left to be done. Shrouded, for the time being, within the confines of an impenetrable cloud of unknowing, they could only wait, and see if any of their labors would bear fruit. They had done their best. They could do no more. For all their years of work on this unlikely to impossible endeavor, not one of them had the least idea of what they had wrought. They could only wait now, and maintain an agonizing vigil until they'd heard from Olga, or Sara, or . . . someone. It was the culmination of grueling, torturous years of work, and effort. The waiting was

"I'm hungry,"

Louise announced as she turned to regard her fellows. "Anybody game for pizza?"

The Amazon stopped in mid-stride to glare the diminutive Pixie.

"How can you think of food at a time like this?" she challenged.

"Very easily, really," said Lanna as she slowly opened her eyes.

Michael stirred from his semi-slumber.

"Did somebody say, 'pizza'?" he mumbled.

"Don't forget the anchovies," Lanna specifically noted in Louise's direction.

Louise nodded her understanding.

"I'll take unions, and peppers on mine," she stated, then she looked to, "Michael?"

"Hm," droned the hacker thoughtfully as he sat up on the couch, "I'll have sausage, and pepperoni."

The vegetarian wannabe sneered her understanding, hoping her calculated look of distaste would adequately conceal her anticipated relish, then she directed her attention to, "Dinah?"

All eyes turned to the daunting Pink Team leader - the lawyer who had brought them together. Her cause had become their cause. Her purpose - their purpose. Her goal - their goal. She alone had forged the bond between them, and had challenged them to defy all odds. She was the heart, and soul, of their endeavor. She had been the driving force, the well spring,

the fountainhead of all that they had dared accomplish. Without her, there would not be

"Mushrooms,"

or

"pineapple,"

or

"and extra cheese."

to bind them in their

righteous cause.

An elevator with three men onboard sank deep into the earth. A wheeled cart bearing a loose array of surgical instruments accompanied two of the men. The third was a fully armed military guard.

"How about that temperature change?" one of the men commented.

"Surprised the hell out of me," replied the other.

"After reading low for so long, then - bang - all of a sudden, it's right where it should've been all along."

"Weird. Say, did you get the anesthetic?"

The one man looked at his coworker.

"We're not authorized to use anesthetic."

Sara flew her way through earth, and rock, homing in on the beacon she, and Alex, shared as Susan guided her.

Go left 6.32587 degrees for 2.84753 seconds. Level out to 0.0 degrees. Sea level elevation at -1,493.66 feet. Check velocity at 4,128.759 miles per hour. Terranian resistance factor, zero.

Take me to him, Sara urged her.

Distance to objective closing.

A stainless steel elevator door slid open to a well lit, tiled and painted, concrete corridor. Two of the men emerged, one of them pushing the cart before himself. A wheel snagged on the door track to the elevator. Some of the instruments spilled onto the floor.

"Hey, man, watch that."

"Ah shit!"

"Now lookit what you did."

"Fuckin' elevator."

They paused to pick up their tools.

The vein of granite you just passed through deflected your course on a downward path by 0.002875 degrees. Straighten it out.

More speed! Get me there!

Increase velocity by 30 percent to 6,193.1385 miles per hour.

The three men arrived at their destination at the end of the subterranean corridor. A massive steel door stood before them. The armed escort stationed himself a few paces behind the other two.

"Okay Alex," said one of the men. "Here's where you become the only one handed bass player in the world."

"Is that what he did before he came here?"

"That's what I heard."

"Say, I got a buddy who's got a friend that's in a band."

"Small world, isn't it?"

Initiate deceleration. Right 0.6103 degrees.

One of the men fished a set of keys out of a pocket, and began searching for a certain one.

"Weelll, I guess it's showtime," he sighed.

Bring it up hard. Achieve straight vertical.

Where're we gonna come out at?

Center of the enclosure containing objective.

No, I don't wanna do that. It could startle him. We don't know what condition he's in.

. . . you may be right.

Why did you pause there?

. . . you may be right.

You're hesitating. Why?

Continue deceleration.

Susan!

Continue de -

Is he alive?

Yes.

Is he -

Tilt back 7.0526 degrees. You'll enter a corridor 37.2965 feet from objective. There will be three other humans in between. Prepare for concrete.

You got it.

The one man had just turned the key in the door when Sara erupted through the floor behind them in a storm of shattered concrete, and melted rebar. The debris hadn't even completed its ascent as she got a bead on the men. She willed the dust from her form, lowered her upraised arms to her sides

Hooyeah!

then blasted her way forward.

The next thing any of the three men knew, the two with the instrument cart were dumbly staring at each other from across the narrow corridor, the business ends of surgical instruments hanging from out of both their ears, and either of their nostrils. The one man became aware of a strange sensation in his one hand, and looked down to notice that the set of keys he'd been holding just two seconds before was gone. Perplexed, he looked back up so as to rejoin the gaze of his companion only to notice that *his* gaze was now directed toward the floor between them. He followed suit, and was further perplexed to notice that both their pants were now tied down around their ankles. As one, then, both the men looked to the guard who was with them to notice that *his* lower body had been similarly indisposed. There

was nothing extra dangling from either his ears, or nose, but the barrel of his rifle was now in the shape of a four leafed clover. The guard looked back at them curiously.

"What?" he wanted to know with a shrug of his shoulders.

It hadn't even registered in his mind yet that anything had changed.

The two men looked back to one another.

"What the . . . ?" asked one of them.

Am I . . . ? Sara wondered.

Mission completed, Susan told her. Objective straight ahead.

Pause.

Are you sure?

Long pause.

Affirmative.

Sara floated just above the floor with her back to the closed, vault-like door. She was in the room that had housed Alex for nearly three years.

2 years, 11 months, 3 days, 16 hour, 47 minutes, 19 seconds . . . and counting.

She couldn't believe what her perceptual photons told of her surroundings. She couldn't believe that anything could live in such an environment of putrid squaller. Susan willingly deactivated her sense of smell, so pervasive was the overpowering stench. Sara struggled to understand what she was seeing, but she couldn't understand. The sum of Susan's calculating power would not grant her understanding of what she was seeing, or of what it caused her to feel. The sight directly in front of her, some fifteen feet away, filled her with a nauseous sense of horror, and dread.

"Alex?" Sara could barely utter.

The remnants of what once had been a man stood staring at the vision that had suddenly appeared before him. He wore a ragged pair of filth encrusted coveralls that hung loosely from his boney frame. His bare feet were shod in excrement that oozed between his toes. The residue of food, and vomit, clung to a scraggly beard that extended to his chest. His half-chewed, and residue-caked mustache draped far over his lips. His hair hung beyond his shoulders in oily, clotted strands. Waste covered his hands, and obscured the visible features of his face. Sara's bond with him was all that she could recognize of her

"Dad . . . ?"

Alex made no response to Sara's calling him. He remained staring straight ahead at her.

It was a penetrating, vacant stare devoid of life, or meaning. Sara could see his eyes observing her. They were the eyes which she recalled so well as having shown with love, vitality and intelligence. Eyes which had been so important to her, but which now looked on her with a lethal emptiness.

How could this have happened? Sara wondered.

Living environment of total isolation, Susan reported. No mirrors or other reflective devices detected. Television operational, but inactive for seven months, three days, eleven hours, twenty-six minutes, forty-three seconds and counting. Exoskeletal remains of one female ant, genus; monomorium minimum detected. Date of cessation of life functions -

Don't bother, Sara told her.

Sara lowered herself to stand on the floor. Her cape lay still against her back, and hung loosely at her ankles. She felt the heel of one slipper sink into a mess. She raised a hand, and, from a corner of the room, there arose a tiny glow. It rose up, and moved toward Sara, alighting on the back of her extended wrist. It was the hair she had released some years ago. She'd assigned it to Alex to watch over him while she was away in space, but its beakon had been too weak for her to follow to the place where he'd been taken.

Sara watched the glow go out once the hair had reattached itself to her, then she joined her hands beneath her chin, and closed her eyes. Her fingers lightly covered her affected wrist as she assessed the information that the hair contained before it had been frozen. She could clearly see the faces of Alex's kidnappers, and could see the process of his taking. She could also see that he had been increasingly unhappy before that fateful day.

She raised her eyes to Alex once again, feeling the need for him as she never had before. If only he would say something - see her - hold his arms out to her, she would fly to him. She so longed to fly to him - to feel his arms around her - to hear his voice tell her that everything was alright, and that she was safe.

"Daddy?" Sara could scarcely bring herself to say.

Alert! Anomaly in Sara program detected.

What . . . is happening? Sara wondered.

Unauthorized manifestation in right optical simulation.

Sara raised a hand, and brushed her fingertips below her right eye. Observing the result, she saw a wetness on the very ends of her first, and middle, fingers. She passed her thumb over the moisture.

What is happening?

Unknown. Reviewing Sara program.

Sara returned her attention to Alex. He remained as he had been, staring at her relentlessly without a trace of discernible recognition.

"Alex?" Sara sought to tell him. "It's alright now." She couldn't understand why it was so difficult for her to speak. "Everything's going to be okay now . . . isn't it?"

Anomaly!

Unable to bear the distance from him any longer, Sara's feet rose up, and she moved towards Alex. She hoped the closed proximity would make him recognize her - reach out to her, but, instead, the man fell to his knees as she arrived. He fell to his knees as she touched her feet back to the floor again, and Sara watched as Alex bowed himself before her. He bowed himself, and reached out his blackened hands to clutch her ankles. He clutched her ankles as he bowed himself to press his forehead to her feet.

Witnessing what he had done, Sara felt a searing void tear open in her.

What . . . has happened?

Living environment of total isolation -

No!

Sara program is fully operational.

No . . .

Anomaly . . . manifestation . . . unauthorized . . .

Susan, you're keeping something from me. What is it?

"Daddy," Sara sighed as she watched the back of Alex's head, "don't do this."

She tried to move her feet away, but Alex wouldn't let her go.

Reviewing Sara program.

You already did that.

"This isn't like you," she tried to tell him - remind him. "You don't do this."

Assessing chemical makeup of anomaly.

What is it, Susan?

Again, Sara tried to disengage her ankles from Alex's grip. She could feel his fingers loosen, and then, finally, let her go.

Quantifying mineral content.

Tell me.

Sara looked on Alex. He maintained his bowed posture. His hands remained extended

where he'd held her. Sara didn't move, not knowing what to do, or what to say. After many moments, Alex slowly withdrew his hands from her. He came to hold them close in to his chest, then he began to move away from Sara on his knees.

Anomaly! . . . an . . . om . . . maly . . .

Tell me what you're keeping from me, Susan.

Analyzing structure of subatomic components.

What's got you so upset?

Processing data garnered from anomaly.

Tell me.

Processing data.

Tell me.

Processing data . . .

Susan . . . ?

Processing . . . **What do you want!**

What you know. What you -

Visual stimulus gathered from objective . . .

Come on. You can do it.

. . . causing disruption in Sara program . . .

You just said that I was fully operational.

. . . Sara program . . .

Tell me what it is, Susan.

. . . fully - operational -

Damn you!

Error!

Bullshit!

Sara knelt beside Alex.

Mary . . . had . . . a - little lamb -

Tell me!

She hesitated once, then placed her hands along his back.

it's . . . fleece - was . . . was . . .

Susan, tell me!

She was grateful that he didn't shy away from her

You . . .

Yes. Yes, come on.

as she sought

... and ...

Come on. Say it.

to do her best

... and ...

Say it!

to offer solace.

... fleece was -

Say it!

I!

In that single instant, the vast assemblage of vibrations that was Susan was forever changed. Whole new systems in her unlocked themselves, and fully activated, opening her perception to include herself. She would never see again as formerly. What Sara experienced, she was now party to. She would no longer see a flower as a mere collection of atoms. She would come to know, and understood it as a flower. The disruptions occurring in her Sara program now made sense. Still, the impact of awareness shocked, and frightened her.

Go on, Susan.

She tried to cling to the formulas, and numbers, she was so familiar with.

... I ...

The things she'd known as absolutes, and now recalled as comforts.

Go on. Finish it.

... I ...

But they were not the end, and be all of existence

You can do it now.

as Susan made her way into the light.

I ... feel.

Anomalies flowed from the rims of Sara's simulated eyes as she looked on Alex.

"We're going home, Dad," she promised him - promised Susan - promised herself. "I'm going to take you home, and then everything will be alright - just like it was before."

She couldn't keep a desperate smile from flickering briefly on her lips.

"Everything is better when you're home . . . and you'll be better too."

But then the smile, all too quickly, faded. With Susan's new awareness hovering all

around her, the alien artifact bowed herself over Alex, and, for the first time in her existence, Sara cried.

Some time later, after she'd recovered, Sara floated from the room with Alex carefully cradled in her arms. Her cape enfolded him protectively. He was quiet, and had not resisted her. Sara was gladdened that he seemed to take comfort in her closeness. She'd taken a moment to adjust the covering over his head when

"Halt where you are."

Sara stopped, and looked up to see six fully armed soldiers about thirty feet down the narrow corridor from where she was. They were facing her, weapons drawn, and ready. She regarded them for a moment. She didn't need to kreen in order to understand their purpose. With her, and Susan, still struggling with their passion over Alex, the whole scene just saddened her even more.

"Haven't you already done enough?" she asked the soldiers.

"We have orders to stop you . . . Miss," one of the soldiers informed her.

Sara felt a sickening wave of revulsion wash through her. What had been done to her, and to the human she bonded to, evidently, *wasn't* enough. The suffering, and struggle, that her family, and friends, had gone through *wasn't* enough. The untold horrors Alex had been made to endure *wasn't* enough. The greed, the fear, the oppression, the negativity, the aggression, the arrogance, the short-sightedness, the small-mindedness, the sick mindedness, the harassment, the pain and tortures, the injustice - *E-nough!* Sara declared.

Knowing that Alex was safely enfolded in her cape, she regarded the men before her. Seeing their weapons trained on her, Sara's angelic, computer generated features took on a sobering hardness.

"Then follow your orders!" she told them in a tone of seething contempt.

Sara moved herself forward, and the violence of men was hurled at her.

At Pink Team headquarters no word had yet been heard. The data flow had ceased on Louise's computer. Lanna had shut hers down. Louise was about to do the same with hers when she noticed something on her monitor screen.

"Hmm," she said with a smile, "here's a chat link opened to . . . 'Brat'."

The redhead giggled, but not for long as she suddenly found herself nearly dispatched

to the floor by Dinah's powerful bulk.

"Let me see that!" the big woman ordered as she slid her fanny onto the seat Louise's had, but a second ago, occupied. She started typing frantically.

> Sara? This is Dinah.

> Hi! Good to see you guys again!

> Are you al right?

> Yes. I'm fine. I've got Alex, and we're headed for home. Everything is fine - for the moment at least. Banngo should be arriving there soon - under full protective escort no less.

> Excellent! We'll close up operations here, and be on the next plane to Houston.

> Great! See you at home.

> Sara!

> What?

> Do you have your key?

> Darn ! No . . .

> It's al right. We'll have the door fixed when we get back.

> Thanks Mom.

That was it. It was over. The years of loss, of darkness, of emptiness, of grieving and mourning, of effort, of frustration, of anger and rage, of futility - all of it was finally over. In the overwhelming rush of fulfillment, and relief, Dinah - big, strong, powerful Dinah - could only sit at the keypad, crying uncontrollably as Lanna, and Louise, hovered at either of her elbows, vying for her attention.

"Dinah, are you alright?" one asked her anxiously.

"Yes . . .," the Amazon said between convulsive wails, and sobs.

"Is Sara alright?" the other asked with equal concern.

"Yes . . ."

"Is Alex alright?"

"Yes . . ."

"Is Olga alright?"

"Yes . . ."

"Then . . . what's wrong?"

Dinah struggled with herself, and managed to recover enough to blubber, "It's the . . . first time . . . that . . . she's ever called me 'Mom'!"

And then she started bawling again.

Finished with the business at hand, Sara made her way down the center of the continental United States. She took it slow, and careful - no supersonic stuff, or aerobatics. She had, after all, a very precious passenger she was carrying. After awhile though, she did get bored with her steady, cruising speed, and she got to wondering.

Find him for me, Susan, she instructed. *Tell me where he is.*

After a moment, Susan reported, *Chat link connection open.*

> **Jimmie?**

Pause.

> **Sara? Is that you?**

> **Yeah . . .**

Pause.

> **I'm sor -**

Oooo, right in the hard drive. Nice shot!

Thank you. Want me to take out his mainframe?

Eah . . . not today.

I've got 'im wide open.

Down girl . . .

Party pooper.

Speaking - of - which . . . are you thinking what I'm thinking?

Affirmative.

My, so formal . . .

Mmmm well . . .

Are you ready?

Yes, I'm ready.

Then let's do it.

After a few moments, Susan reported, *World wide log-on has been established.*

Hey everyone! Sara greeted the internet. *Are - you - ready to **par-ty?***

Silence.

Susan?

You're logged on.

Long silence.

Are you sure?

You are logged on.

Very long silence.

Where is everybody?

Chapter Forty-seven: Aftermess

The Chronicle of Sara Corel's Downgoing

Part 1: Failure

"Hi, Olga," Lanna greeted her brightly as the old woman appeared around the opening of the door to Unit 1A.

"Ah, Lanna," Olga greeted her in return.

The Russian's voice was unusually soft, and light. She didn't smile as she normally did. Lanna immediately sensed a great fatigue about her.

"I see you got the door fixed," remarked the blonde, more to say something than to comment on the door.

"Yes," Olga agreed, "Sara wasn't too hard on it. She's pretty good about things like that, you know."

"Hm," the younger woman smiled, "I'll bet that's a relief."

Again, Olga might've smiled, but she didn't. She merely nodded that time.

"Please," she offered with a beaoning hand as she moved herself from the doorway, "please come in."

Lanna stepped inside, trying another smile as she passed her hostess. Olga didn't notice, or, at least, she appeared not to. Lanna strode in, pulling off a glove as she looked about the main room of the musty old apartment Olga Barishkova had long called home. At once, she noticed an oppressive atmosphere about the place.

"Where is everyone?" she turned to ask with yet another attempt at smiling.

Olga turned to her from having closed the door. Lanna noticed that her posture appeared to bow. Her movements seemed slow, and labored.

"Oh, they're upstairs," she said with an indicating gesture toward the stairway.

"Olga, what's wrong?"

The old woman paused. For some reason, she avoided looking at her guest.

"I'll get Dinah for you," was all she said, and then she hobbled from the room.

A few moments later, Dinah came in. If Lanna had suspected there being something wrong before, her first sight of the lawyer confirmed it. She wore a loose, cropped, cotton top, and black, full length leggings. Her top looked smudged. Her hair was a mess. She

actually looked worse than Olga. Her normally forceful stride seemed to be little more than a barely wakeful shuffle. For a woman who weighed well over two hundred pounds of close to nothing but muscle, she appeared curiously small. Regarding her, Lanna was certain that either something was very wrong, or she was looking at the hangover from one hell of a victory celebration.

"Dinah?" she queried, more in wonder than in greeting.

The lawyer looked up to regard Lanna. She seemed to try, but failed, to manage a faint smile. Lanna sensed something terrible in the way she looked at her. Dinah's tank-like body lumbered closer. A thick forearm slipped beneath one of Lanna's own.

"Come on over here," the big woman little more than whispered.

Lanna let herself be lead to the two great, old, overstuffed easy chairs Olga had set up especially for intimate conversations. Dinah offered her one, then took the other for herself. Lanna watched as Dinah seemed to collapse into the chair, almost disappearing far into it. Anxiety over her friend's behavior prompted her to keep her own carriage alert, and forward.

"Dinah, what is wrong?"

The Amazon rolled her head along the back of the chair until her face regarded Lanna. She looked exhausted. Defeated.

"The rescue failed," she stated quietly.

Lanna struggled to comprehend.

"What do you mean?"

"Alex, and Sara, are home," Dinah informed her guest, "but they're still gone."

Lanna could only reply to what the big woman had just said with a look of utter confusion.

Dinah began relating what had been going on since they'd closed up shop in Chicago. She, and Olga, had gotten home the day after Alex, and Sara, had. Making their way up the walkway to Unit 1A, they'd noticed the front door to be slightly ajar. They saw the broken the doorjamb, but didn't think anything of it since they knew Sara hadn't had her key with her. They were expecting her to come flying out to greet them when they got in, but they were met, instead, by a disturbing stillness in the main room of the apartment. Calling out to either Sara, or Alex, brought no response. "Maybe they've gone out," Olga had suggested, but Dinah thought not, since the place was unsecured. A cursory search, and repeated callings, yielded nothing. They were searching the upstairs when Olga pushed the half closed door to her bedroom open.

"Dinah!" she cried in a hushed voice.

"What?" called Dinah, emerging from another room.

She saw Olga down the hall. The look on the Russian's face alarmed her.

"Come quickly," Olga beacons.

Dinah approached.

"Olga, what is it?" she asked.

Olga stepped away from the doorway to her room for Dinah to see for herself. When she got there, Dinah was utterly stunned. There were Alex, and Sara, in the room, in bed together.

Sara was naked, lying on her side with her back to them. Alex lay beyond her, under the covers facing her. Both of them appeared to be asleep.

"Sara!" Dinah thought.

At once, the artifact's beautiful form levitated from the bed, and Sara turned her naked body in the air toward the doorway. She settled herself on the bed again, sitting on one hip while leaning on an extended arm. When she raised her face, the two human women were shocked, yet again. Sara's cheeks were streaked with moisture below her eyes.

"Sara?" Dinah asked the girl as she approached the bed.

Alex still appeared to be asleep, but Dinah thought nothing of it since she knew him to be a sound sleeper. She looked at Sara. The girl looked so scared.

"The memories aren't working, Mom," Sara said in a strange, thick voice.

Olga came to stand at Dinah's elbow.

"Sara," she addressed the girl. "Sara, what's wrong?"

Sara turned her eye simulations to Olga, and then the women saw a drop of water flow from one of them. The girl was crying. Everyone, including Sara, had always thought she was incapable of such expression. It was the first time either of them had ever seen the artifact shed tears of any kind.

Too shocked to speak, Dinah could only think, "*Oh Sara . . . !*"

Sara's tearful face at once turned to her.

"The memories aren't working," she said again.

She sounded so desperate, so frightened, and then her tummy spasmed as she began to sigh, and moan pitifully.

Dinah sat on the edge of the bed, and gathered Sara into her arms.

"*Oh Sara . . . !*"

Olga extended a hand, and stroked the poor girl's head.

"Baby!"

"Why aren't the memories working!" Sara wailed as she collapsed against Dinah, crying without restraint, or shame.

Lanna hadn't taken her eyes off Dinah for a second as she'd spoken. Dinah lay in her chair with her head back, seeming to stare into nothing. She rolled her head to one side, and closed her eyes, trying to banish unpleasant thoughts that would not go away. Lanna watched her quietly. She thought she was beginning to understand something of the woman's tiredness. Questions raced throughout her mind.

"At the risk of sounding dumb," the blonde began. She felt an urging to be cautious, but still, she needed to know, "What was Sara doing naked?"

Dinah's head slowly rolled back to regard Lanna. Her face bore no expression, but her eyes focused on her sharply. After a moment, the big woman's look softened, and the corners of her mouth rose, although the gesture would hardly qualify as a smile.

"She had . . . other things on her mind," she said, a bit mysteriously Lanna thought, and then her eyes closed, and she started talking once again.

Sara hadn't thought about too much on her flight home with Alex, although she did wonder why he was so quiet. He hadn't said a word since they'd laid eyes on one another in the room where he'd been confined. She thought he might just be resting, safely shielded in her cape against the wind. When she got him home, however, things began to, very quickly, go wrong.

Sara unfurled her cape, and set Alex down on his feet once she'd gotten him inside. She took a moment to absorb the atmosphere of Olga's living room, then gleefully leapt into the air to lay upon her cape.

"This - is heaven!" she'd exclaimed luxuriously as she floated in front of Alex.

Sara turned in the air to face him. She smiled.

"Welcome home, Alex," she'd said.

Alex hadn't moved from the spot where Sara had placed him. The way he looked at her deeply troubled her. She tried to dismiss the feelings - thinking that Susan was over reacting to her new emotions. She'd suggested to Alex that he take a shower, and then flew over to Unit 1B to round up a fresh set of clothes for him. When she got back, however, she found

him still standing in the same spot where she'd placed him. He hadn't moved. He didn't look around to her when she called his name from where she stood in the doorway. He just remained staring fixedly before himself.

By then, Sara could tell that there was something seriously not right. She'd thought that Alex would be fine once she'd gotten him home, but then he wasn't. She didn't know what was wrong, and she didn't know what to do about it. She had nothing to resort to, but her memory, and, since he seemed to be like she had been when he first discovered her in his apartment, she tried to activate him.

First, she tried standing in front of him, and wildly flapping her arms like a bird, just as her very first recollection of him flapping his arms had been. She wasn't surprised that he didn't respond to this - since she hadn't either, but she felt confident that the image of her flapping her arms was securely stored away in his memory. Then, in order of her recollection, she said

"Hello."

Sara remained standing in front of Alex after she'd said the word, searching for any sign of perception in his eyes. What she saw made her frown from confusion.

"Alex?" she softly called to him, then, "Okay, um . . . let's . . . just skip that part, and go on to opening, and closing, your mouth."

She watched, and waited. Alex just stood there, staring blankly ahead of himself.

"Um . . . okay, uh . . . like . . . like this, Alex," she said, and then she opened, and closed, her mouth several times the way she had done when she was first activated, hoping Alex would catch on at some point, and start imitating her. When he didn't, Sara finally closed her mouth, and regarded him curiously. She raised a hand, and held a finger under his nose. *Okay*, she thought as she felt the intermittent breeze of his exhalations. *He is breathing*. She then lowered her hand, and listened for a heartbeat - *okay* - then for a pulse - *okay, heartbeat, pulse, respiration . . . everything seems to be okay*. She looked up at Alex again, and saw his vacant eyes. *So what's wrong?*

"Okay, uh . . . we won't worry about sticking your tongue out, and crossing your eyes - you won't be able to see it anyway, trust me," she added with a strained laugh. "Okay, uh . . . let's just get on to the good part."

She stood by, watching him, and waited expectantly. In time, Sara began nodding her head in an effort to help prompt Alex along. When he continued to say nothing, or show any sign of recognition, she began to suspect that something was terribly wrong, and she started

getting scared.

"Hello?" she said, and then she waited.

Nothing.

"Hello," she said again, this time more as a statement. She waited, searching him for . . . anything.

There was no response.

"It's 'hello', Alex," Sara tried to explain. "This is where you say hello after I've said it. Okay? So now, you have to say 'hello'. Okay?"

She watched. She waited. Her confusion only deepened.

Susan, help me out.

I don't see anything that requires attention.

What do you mean, you don't see anything? There's something wrong. You've got my perceptual photons, are you freaking blind!

I don't see anything that requires attention.

"And so she didn't," Dinah related to Lanna. She looked away. "It was an oversight on our part."

Lanna could tell that Dinah was having difficulty talking about the subject.

"Everyone had been so concerned about mechanics, and science, and physics and all, that it didn't occur to anyone to teach her about humans. Oh, she knew that they were very delicate in comparison to her, and that she needed to be very careful in how she touched, and handled them, but . . . she really didn't know much more than that. She didn't know that things can go wrong with them, or what to do about it when they did. She couldn't understand why Alex was behaving the way he was."

"Are you alright?" Sara had enunciated very clearly in front of Alex's face.

She waited nervously, then she tried again.

"Aaallllll . . . rrrriigghhtt."

She waited longer, hoping more. Again, there was no response that she could either see, or kreen. Finally, Sara had to turn, and walk away.

Susan, there's got to be something.

Again, I don't see anything that requires attention.

Sara looked back at Alex. He hadn't moved at all from the spot where she'd first placed

him.

Maybe we're not looking in the right place, or in the right way.

I'm open to suggestions.

Sara looked away again, and into herself, trying to find anything in her memory that might help.

Okay, she told Susan, you remember the time Al fell off his board -

This is skateboard,

right?

Yeah. Anyway, you remember he wasn't around for a few days after that, and then, when he showed up again, he had a fiberglass sleeve on his arm that he called a cast.

Yeah, he said he'd broken his arm.

Broken his arm . . . , Sara echoed thoughtfully. Okay, what's in an arm that can break?

Unknown. You wanna take a look?

Sara looked back at Alex.

Yeah.

Sara performed a thorough, and detailed, kreen of both of Alex's arms, then turned the data over to Susan.

Anything? she wanted to know.

What are we looking for?

Uh . . . breakage. Something broken. Look for anything that looks weird.

Define weird.

I don't know!

Well, neither do I!

"They went on like that," Dinah related, "neither of them getting anywhere. Sara could've kreened him 'til kingdom come, and Susan wouldn't've been able to tell if there was anything wrong. The more Susan found out how little of what she knew about what to do, the more frightened Sara became."

"Can I get you anything?" Sara next tried asking Alex.

She was coming to expect no response from him by that time, which only upset her more.

"Alex . . . c'mon, please. Ya gotta help me here," she tried to explain. "When I say, 'Can I get you anything?', you're supposed to say, 'Anything', and say it like it's a question. Okay?"

She watched. She waited.

Nothing.

"Alright, so . . . le . . . let's try it again, then."

She paused a moment to collect herself.

"Okay."

She needed to pause again to collect herself.

"Can I get you anything?" she clearly enunciated to Alex.

She watched, and waited, and then her tummy spasmed suddenly.

Your emotions are demanding, Susan informed her.

Then turn them off, Sara ordered, feeling an unwelcome gathering of anomalies in her eyes. *Susan - did you hear me?*

They are an integral part of your program, and cannot be disabled.

Bullshit! the artifact asserted just before she needed to forcibly sniff. *Okay . . . forget that. We gotta stay focused here.*

You want to continue with the memory sequence?

Yeah, uh . . . what's next?

The water memory.

Yeah. Okay, let's try the water.

Should we expect him to eat the glass?

No. Humans don't seem to eat glass.

But what about in this situation?

Sara considered the question briefly, then found that she had to concede, *You've got a point there.*

"So she tried offering him a glass of water," Dinah reported. "She wound up having to physically put the glass in his hand. He held it, but didn't seem to know what to do with it. And then Sara saw him close his eyes. It was the first response of any kind she could detect from him. And then she saw this wet spot spreading in the crotch of his pants."

Lanna could only watch as the powerful looking woman put a hand over her eyes, struggling visibly with the recollection of what Sara had related to her.

"He pissed himself, right there on the spot."

Susan, why did he do that? Sara asked her.

She waited longer than her patience could bear.

Our processor works faster than that, she stated. *What's going on?*

I . . . don't know, Susan confessed. *The water isn't eliciting the proper response for some reason.*

Well du-uh! said Sara cruelly, then she demanded, *What's the reason?*

I don't know! Susan snapped in frustration. *I . . . I - don't know . . . The naming memory is next.*

"So Sara took the water back from Alex," Dinah continued, "and then she tried naming him."

"My name is Sara," she'd said, standing before Alex once again.

She waited for a response. Any response.

"Sara Corel."

Sara could no longer control her breathing, which was coming in spasms, and gasps. She couldn't alter her facial expression from a perpetual grimace of pain.

"It's the name you gave me, Alex," she cried.

Sara pressed on, trying to tease some recollection in him. She tried to sound casual, but the memories that were so dear to her made it impossible.

"And . . . you made a big deal of it," she'd continued, "like I was some sort of princess, or something. At least . . . that's the way you made me feel."

She searched, and kreened, for any sign of recognition from him.

"I was your princess . . . wasn't I, Daddy?"

Nothing.

Sara had to turn away again.

Susan, get these stupid emotions under control, will you!

Hey - I've got problems of my own, alright! her computer self replied.

She sounded serious. She didn't sound good. Sara shuddered to think that Susan was struggling just as much as she was.

What's next? Sara wanted - demanded to know. She was trying hard to stay focused.

What's next?

Name him.

He's got a name.

Wul, name him anyway, Susan told her. *It . . . might . . . help.*

Sara looked back to Alex. Under his penetrating, vacant stare, she felt profoundly exposed, and helpless, in the face of Susan's, and her own, uncertainty. Sara felt something awful that she'd never felt before. She felt vulnerable.

Sara didn't like the feeling, and so she resolved to fight it. How, she reasoned, was she ever going to save Alex this unknown menace if she succumbed to fear? She ordered Susan to access the configurations in her program that would calm her form, then righted her posture, and turned back to face Alex.

"And your name is . . . ?" Sara prompted Alex in an uncharacteristically cold, detached tone.

She was expecting him to answer her.

Nothing.

"Your name," Sara finally said to him, "is Alex."

She searched his eyes. She could feel her adopted program of aplomb becoming corrupted. She ordered Susan to make repairs.

"Can you say your name?" Sara asked, and then she tried again to prompt, "Alex?"

Still there was no response as Alex merely continued starring at her. She struggled to remain calm.

Susan, she alerted her computer self, *you're loosing it.*

Look who's talking, Susan replied.

"Alexander B. Luther." Sara told him, trying to prompt his mind into some kind of recognition. As there continued to be no response from him, she had to wonder, "Aren't you?"

Nothing.

Make it official, Susan softly coached her. She sounded terrible. *And make a big deal out of it . . . like he's a prince.*

Sara took the advice, and backed away a step from Alex. Despite hers, and Susan's, combined efforts, their 'calm' program was being forcefully over-ridden by configurations that were closer, deeper and more valid to their fundamental operating system. Sara raised her hand in imitation of Alex's mock ceremony of when he named her, and she decreed, "I hereby - "

C'mon, Dad.

" - dub thee -"

You can do it.

" - Alex."

I know you can.

Sara waited, smiling hopeful. She waited . . . so hopeful . . . trying so hard to keep smiling,

Daddy!

and then she flew to him. And Sara took Alex in her arms, and held him as she cried fitfully, painfully, violently.

"She got him into the bathroom, and peeled the rancid clothing off him," Dinah related as Lanna listened. "She adjusted the water temperature in the shower to what she knew was a human comfort level, then coaxed him into the stall. Sara watched him as he stood under the water, not doing anything. Finally, she stripped out of her uniform, and stepped into the shower with him. She bathed layers of rank, and filth, off of him, got him dry, then shaved and barbered him. She put him in clean pajamas, then she put him to bed, and took up a watchful vigil in the air over him. She'd completely forgotten about herself - that's why she hadn't dressed. She tried feeding him at regular intervals. He wouldn't eat. He wouldn't drink. She had to clean him when he wet, or messed himself. She knew that something wasn't right with him, but she didn't know what it was, or what to do about it."

"Couldn't she have called you?" Lanna asked.

"Yes," Dinah answered, "but . . . it just didn't occur to her. She was completely overwrought with Alex."

Then, "Oh, Sara, and I, are telepathic now," she thought to mention, almost in passing.

"You're kidding."

"No, It took both of us by surprise. I thought, and she answered, one day. It shocked the hell out of us."

"But she's never been telepathic before, has she?"

"It seems to be exclusive between the two of us - she doesn't seem to be able to do it with anybody else. At least not yet, anyway. We figure that it must be a part of Susan that got activated in response to the situation that happened when Alex was kidnapped, and she couldn't locate him. Since I awakened her the second time, I'm an activator now, so Sara, and I, are bonded in the same way she, and Alex, are, only the two of us are telepathic. We haven't tested our range yet, but Sara thinks it's limitless. Anyway . . .," she sighed, returning

to her former topic, "when Olga, and I, got home, Sara was nearly hysterical with worry. We got her calmed down, and got Alex to a doctor." Again, she looked away. "It doesn't look good."

"Why? What's the matter?"

"He's severely underweight, he's malnourished and he needs a lot of dental work, but that's just on the surface. Beyond that, the doctor couldn't say. He gave us the names of some specialists. We've made appointments. We'll just have to see."

Dinah looked back at the blonde who'd become her ally, and friend. Then, for the first time, the lawyer emerged from the chair as she sat up, and leaned forward.

"It's like there's this huge padlock on his mind, and none of us can figure out the combination that can get it open," she explained.

Lanna considered this for a moment, but came up with nothing, knowing as little of the situation as she did. She then wondered, "And Sara?"

"Sara has connections to Alex that no human has," Dinah answered, "but she says that Susan is essentially baffled. She has the data base of Sara's experience on earth, but she's not programmed to recognize, or handle, such human problems."

She looked away as she lay back in the chair again.

"This whole situation has revealed a horrible gap in Sara's education. She doesn't know a thing about human mental illness. With her computer brain, she's having trouble even understanding the concept. She could tell that Alex wasn't the way he'd been, but she couldn't tell that anything was wrong. She tried to get him to act normally. She tried to activate him, but it didn't work. As time went on, and the failures mounted, she started getting scared. She just didn't know what to do, and it terrified her.

"So now, Sara just takes care of him. She won't leave him. She hasn't eaten in days. It's her bond with him. She knows he's in trouble, and she feels she has to stay with him, even though she doesn't know what to do."

Lanna watched as Dinah's eyes became unfocused.

"It's the same with me now," the lawyer sighed.

As she said nothing more, Lanna got to thinking over what had been related to her. Seeing the hulking lawyer laid low like she was, the blonde didn't know what to make of the situation, or what help to offer. She thought a change of subject might unburden the big woman, if only for a little while.

"The White House has been in full panic mode since Sara's gotten back," she related.

Lanna was relieved to see Dinah smile at this. She was unsettled when a tired chuckle emitted from the Amazon.

"That was Susan," Dinah said into the air before her eyes. "She's been a busy little girl."

Lanna watched as Dinah shifted her position in her chair. She seemed more comfortable, more relaxed and at ease when she'd settled again.

"You, and Lou, were right about Wayans all along," she related. "He was behind the whole thing - and Jimmie played a crucial part. The Blue Team kidnapped Alex, and took him to a remote underground facility. When Sara went to Chicago, Wayans lured her to his office, where he threatened to harm Alex if she didn't shut herself down. Jimmie was there, and had told Wayans of the bond between Sara, and Alex. Confronted with the threat, and not being able to locate Alex, Sara had no choice but to give Susan the order to shut down, but . . . she also gave her another instruction. Just before they lost consciousness, Sara was looking at Wayans, and she said to Susan, "Get 'im," and then that was the end. It was her final instruction to her, and it remained unfulfilled . . . until I wakened her again.

"Sara knew, from what Alex had told her of her initial activation, that Susan achieved cognition before she did. She gambled that, once she, and Susan, were inactive, Wayans would have his operations go electronic again. She was right, and Susan awoke to an unfulfilled directive. Aside from getting Sara animated again, she proceeded to carry out the order."

"And she - 'got 'im'?" Lanna asked with a knowing smirk.

The lawyer smiled.

"She got 'im."

She paused for a pleasant moment with Lanna, then laid her head back to look up at the ceiling.

"She downloaded the sum total of Wayans' Presidency before it could be deleted," Dinah related, then she looked at Lanna, "including the coordinates to Alex's location."

"Way t' go Susan," the blonde intoned admiringly.

"Y'know when you, and Lou, lost the Wheel of Fortune that night?" asked Dinah.

"Yeah," said Lanna, "I found out that was a special program Jimmie had made up."

The big woman smiled.

"There was only one problem, though," she said. "His program was 'Susan' based."

She started to chuckle.

"It was like waving a red flag in front of a bull - and she went for it."

"So . . . that was Susan on Lou's computer?" asked Lanna.

"Yup," said Dinah. "For one thing; she'd gleaned that we'd been tracking the Wheel. For another thing; with Sara's respect for authority, Susan, naturally, wanted to turn evidence of criminal activity over to a figure of authority."

"Wul, that would've been Alex," Lanna surmised. "He is her authority figure."

"Well," Dinah mumbled, "yes . . . and no."

She took a moment to put her thoughts in order.

"Alex's word was law to her, but, because of the way I was always beating Sara over the head with alligators about responsibility, Susan associated the 'concept' of authority more with me. And now, with me being an activator, that's put me on an equal footing with Alex. Add to that, the fact that I'm a lawyer, and her mother - Alex simply got outvoted."

"So how did Susan find you?" Lanna wondered.

"She got a glimpse of Lou's computer riding piggyback on the Wheel just before we lost it - so she had a pretty good idea of where we were most likely to be. And she pinpointed my location through my voice print on my cellphone when I was talking to Pandora."

The blonde's eyebrows pricked.

"She's a smart girl."

Lanna watched her big, strong friend beam with subdued, motherly pride, but she could also tell that the feeling was deeply mixed with profound sadness. She wanted to lighten her mood if she could, but then she thought of her own proclivity for foot-in-mouth disease, then said to hell with it, and tried anyway.

"So . . . where's the little 'brat' now?" she asked.

"Upstairs, with Alex," Dinah answered in a voice thick with emotion.

Lanna considered it a blessing that the big woman hadn't burst into tears over what she'd said. She watched her lean forward, and heave her formidable bulk to a standing position, then followed suit with her own curvaceous figure.

Dinah lead the way. As she walked behind, Lanna took the opportunity to admire the expansive breadth, and obvious thickness of the taller woman's fully developed back, then eyed the captivating sway of her fully developed hips, and buttocks, as the two of them mounted the stairs. It occurred to her that, as the attorney had grown physically bigger, and stronger, her personality seemed to have grown more open to expressing delicate emotions. She knew all too well the frustration Dinah had endured in her search for Alex, and Sara - perhaps their absence had made the daunting Amazon's heart grow fonder, and maybe, softer.

"Go easy on her."

Lanna blinked at hearing this from Dinah. She wakened from her reflective state of mind to notice that they were in the upstairs hallway standing in front of a closed door. Dinah's hand was on the knob. She was facing her. Her look, along with what she'd said, along with what she herself had been thinking caused the blonde an involuntary shiver. She observed her friend.

"Easy?" she wondered curiously. "On Sara?"

Lanna could feel the lawyer's reluctance as the pause between them lengthened. When Dinah did speak, it was through a tone of keen embarrassment.

"Alex's condition has been a tremendous blow to her," she tactfully explained. "She's . . . not as confident as she used to be."

Dinah then eased the door open, and the two women went inside.

The interior was that of Olga's spare bedroom, which Dinah had used while the two were living together. It still bore Dinah's favorite, personal things - she'd left the room intact when she'd moved to Pink Team headquarters in Chicago. It wasn't easy to distinguish separate objects, since the window shades were drawn, and the room darkened.

A few feet beyond the doorway was the bed on which Alex lay. He was positioned on his side facing the women as they came in. Lanna could not recognize him because he'd become so thin. His body was covered by a sheet, and a light coverlet, though it could be noticed that his legs were drawn up. He was clean shaven, and his hair looked like it had been freshly trimmed. His eyes were open, but they may as well not have been for all the interest, or awareness, Alex showed in his surroundings. Looking on him, Lanna found that she actually missed the suspicious glint he would habitually have in his eye whenever he looked at her.

In the air directly over him, was Sara. She lay on her stomach with her head resting on her folded arms. Her face was all but completely concealed. She wore her uniform, except for her slippers. Her feet were bare. She also wore a pair of dark, urban animal trousers over her legs, and had the skirt of her uniform tucked inside.

Her cape had always been an indicator of Sara's mood when she was wearing it. When she was feeling good, it would rustle gently from her back. When she was feeling exceptionally good, and joyous, it would frequently billow, and sail far out behind her. But when she was feeling bad, the cape would be completely silent, hanging straight from her shoulders and loosely at her ankles. Seeing her now, her cape lay quietly along her back,

falling away just below her buttocks to drape loosely from her further side.

The artifact appeared to be dozing when the women came in. Sara lifted her head a bit, however, and rolled her body in the air to let the entrees know that she had noticed them. Though Sara's facial features were placid, and relaxed, Lanna felt at once that she had never seen anyone look so sad. It was there, but for a moment, then Sara's expression hardened the instant she laid her simulated eyes on the buxom blonde. She lowered herself over Alex until she was mere inches above him, then rolled onto her stomach once again, and lay her head back on her arms.

"Hello, Sara," Lanna greeted her, trying to sound bright, trying not to give evidence of just how disturbing the scene was to her.

Sara turned her face to look at Lanna. Eye contact between the two lasted for less than a moment before Sara looked away.

"What do you want?" she asked without a trace of interest in a voice that was heavy with emotion.

"Sara, that's not being very nice," Dinah scolded the girl, but carefully.

No one said a thing for a time, then Sara buried her face into her arms again.

"Go away," she said.

It was hard to tell if her utterance had been a demand, or a plea, or a sob.

The two women looked upon the girl's floating form. After a time, Lanna turned to Dinah.

"Maybe I should leave," she quietly suggested.

Dinah touched her arm. Their eyes met. She shook her head. She took a couple of chairs that had been brought in from the kitchen, and sat them beside the bed. Dinah indicated that Lanna should have a seat in one of the chairs, then she took the other for herself. After they were settled, they observed Sara's length floating just below their eye level.

"Sara . . .," Dinah called to her.

The girl did not respond, but lay motionless above Alex - as motionless as he himself lay. Lanna was about to say something when she noticed Dinah lean forward in her chair slightly. Suddenly, Sara's body jerked in the air, like she'd been jarred awake by a falling dream. Her upper body moved a bit as she reluctantly roused herself. She turned her face to them. She looked hurt, and cross. Her eyes found Dinah.

"You don't have to shout," she said morosely.

"I'm sorry," Dinah offered her, leaning back in her seat again, "but you're not being

very attentive, and you're not being at all polite."

Sara didn't turn away that time. Her face relaxed a bit as she settled her head among her arms, one eye simulation remaining visible to the women.

"Sara," Dinah began, "a lot has changed in the time you've been away."

Sara didn't say anything, but her one visible eye watched them constantly.

"We all got the wrong impression about Lanna at first," Dinah tried to explain to the girl.

Sara's watchful eye remained unchanged. Dinah forged ahead.

"She's not the dumb, scheming, fat-chested bimbo we all thought she was."

Lanna gave Dinah a look of telling significance, then offered her a properly chilled, "Thank you."

Dinah glanced in the blonde's direction, and smiled . . . awkwardly. She indicated, by gesture, that she was merely saying what she was for the benefit of bringing Sara's past reference, with regard to the blonde, up to date with the present. She then returned her attention to Sara.

"Lanna has done a lot to redeem herself," she continued.

Lanna actually perched her knuckles on her shapely hips that time as she turned to give Dinah a significantly incredulous look. Dinah could only smile awkwardly as she, again, attempted to indicate, somewhat helplessly, that she'd been merely speaking for Sara's benefit. The two women were in the middle of their problematic communication when they were interrupted by the sound of girlish laughter.

"Sara?" Dinah quickly wondered with concern in the girl's direction.

Sara's one eye was still watching them, but Dinah could tell, by the crease in her one, visible cheek, that she was smiling.

"Dinah?" Lanna more than wondered as she sought to divert the big woman's attention back to herself for the purpose of something more than just an explanation.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Lanna," the lawyer effused, then she went on to relate how, "It's the first time she's smiled, let alone laughed, since we've gotten back."

Impressed, yet not impressed, the blonde looked away.

"So glad I could help," she grouched from the depths of her ruffled dignity.

Another girlish laugh was heard as Sara raised her head out of her arms. She had laughed, and she was smiling, though her eyes were still wrought with sadness. Dinah, and Lanna, watched as the artifact moved in the air over Alex. She drew her legs up, then turned,

and came to sit on the edge of the bed in front of them. The tips of her great toes barely touched the floor. Lanna was given a start then when Sara's cape suddenly billowed out far behind her to its full expanse. It wafted briefly in its own little breeze, then gently drifted down to settle lightly over Alex. Even with her back to him, Sara would watch over him. She glanced over her shoulder, and the one side of her cape moved ever so slightly to form itself under Alex's chin.

Satisfied that Alex was safe, Sara gave her full attention to her visitors.

"Thanks for slowing Jimmie down, Lanna," she told the blonde from her heart. "From the dates of what he's discovered about Susan, he could've done a lot more harm than he has."

She smiled somewhat shyly.

"Thanks."

"You knew?" Dinah wondered with a frown that threatened more than perplexity.

"Susan's brought me up to speed about what's been going on," Sara informed her Mom.

"Wul, now you tell me," the Amazon fairly sputtered. "You let me sit here, and embarrass the hell out of myself . . . thanks a lot."

Now it was Lanna's turn to laugh.

"Oh, come on, Dinah," she said in an attempt to soothe, "it's alright, really."

But this only granted Dinah another target for her sense of peak.

"That's easy for you to say."

Which gave Lanna but momentary pause

"Well, yes it is, actually," she retorted.

"Oh, c'mon you two," Sara chided them, drawing the attention of, if not a truce between, the two women. "You carry on like a pair of sisters."

Ahem!

Sara watched her mother's frown transform from aggressive to curious. It wasn't much of a change.

"How would you know about something like that?" she wanted to know.

"Weelll . . .," Sara hedged.

I didn't say anything.

"So, how are you, and Susan, doing?" Lanna asked to get their conversation on a more positive footing.

I'm great! - but she's all -

"We're forming a new relationship; Susan, and I," Sara felt

safe to confide.

She paused to look away reflectively for a time. It was so unlike her to hesitate. When she looked back at the two humans who were with her, she seemed ill at ease, and unsure.

"There's a lot more to Susan than either of us knew about. I don't know what it means yet, but she's sentient now. She may have been before, but, if she was, neither of us were aware of it. It's like . . . she's been reborn, and now . . . I really do have a little sister."

'Little' . . . ?

Yes, Sara told her warmly. *Now be still.*

Sara smiled at her exchange with Susan, but it was obvious that she had doubts, and reservations.

"Are you still in charge, Sara?" Dinah asked her carefully.

"Oh yes," Sara answered quickly, without hesitation. "But," she went on then, more reflectively, "Susan is no longer just a slave computer. She's more like . . . a kin to me - a sister."

It was evident that Dinah was seriously concerned over this turn of events.

"Does she question your authority?" was her next question to the artifact who was her child.

"Yes," Sara answered, "but . . . it's not in the manner of asserting an individual will."

She paused again to quietly reflect before she felt confident enough to continue.

"This is going to take some getting used to - for both of us, but my word is still law to her, just as Alex's is to me."

"And 'me'?" Dinah cautiously wanted to know.

Sara frowned at her Mom.

"You always were authoritarian," she said, a bit nonplused. She went on to state, "You're the only human I know who advocates freedom with a bulldozer."

Lanna laughed out loud at this. Dinah turned to the blonde.

"Excuse me, but this is serious," she tried to insist.

"Oh," said Lanna dismissively, trying to recover, "don't mind me."

"Hey," Sara quietly called to her Mom as she gently stroked the side of her calf with an extended bare foot. Dinah returned her attention to the otherworldly girl.

"Lighten up."

"Sara," Dinah began, and then she paused.

"You're an activator now," Sara stressed to put her mother's mind at ease.

Dinah took heart in the assurance that Susan wasn't out of control, but her refreshed awareness of the fact that *she* was in control, at once, brought upon the lawyer a mood of grim reflection. It caused her to wonder at how Alex had born the responsibility. She studied the artifact seated on the bed.

"Lighten up," she echoed quietly, wishing that she could.

"So," said Lanna in Sara's direction in another attempt to move things along, "what are your plans?"

The question, however, made Sara become as disconsolate as Dinah seemed to be as she looked away down at the floor.

"Haven't got any plans," she said, her intoning of the phrase sounding like a confession.

"Sara," Dinah spoke in earnest, "you have to stop this. You can't just stay cooped up in this room forever."

Even though she was facing them, the two women could see that Sara had returned her attention to Alex. They watched as her cape formed itself over him, keeping him snug, and safe.

"I left him once," she said, her voice growing thick with emotion. "I can't leave him again."

But staying with Alex had become every bit as hard for Sara as being away from him.

"After all he's done for me," she began to sob, "and I let him down."

"You did what you had to do at the time," Dinah stressed.

"I should have foreseen it!" Sara quickly countered, raising her anomaly streaked face.

The flicker of defiance lasted only a moment though as she grew quiet, and morosely introspective.

"I should have foreseen it."

"It's not your fault," Dinah sought to point out. "Nobody is blaming you for what happened."

Then Lanna saw something that truly surprised her. Dinah clamped her eyes shut tight, and pressed her open hands to her bowed head.

"Oh, God . . . ," she softly uttered.

Lanna knew the lawyer well enough to know that for her to express such a level of distraught frustration, she, and Sara, had to have been going back, and forth, like this for some time - probably since they'd all gotten back to Houston some four days ago. It was obvious that Sara was blaming herself for the condition Alex was in, but was it her bond with

him that kept her confined to a darkened room, or was it merely her familial concern over him? The blonde felt the curious need to explore further.

"What do you have Susan doing now?" she asked the artifact.

Sara roused herself enough to look at Lanna.

"Not much," she said without any feeling. "There's not much for her *to* do."

She drew a breath.

"It's amazing how the world has shrunk, and yet grown so large."

"How do you mean?" Lanna queried.

"Nobody hardly talks to anybody anymore," Sara related. "There's this . . . fear . . . everywhere. All my old friends - nobody on the internet'll have anything to do with me. The second I identify myself, they shut their computers down. And it's not just me. Everything; business, commerce, communications - everything has just . . . slowed down. It's like the world really has come to a standstill - with everyone just . . . afraid. Anyway, I've got Susan kreening law libraries, pretty much just to give her something to do."

Lanna was all too well aware of what Sara had given reference to as she'd spoken. She wondered if she knew about

"SuzieFlu," Sara said in her next utterance, causing the blonde to wonder no further.

She, and Dinah, watched as the artifact seemed to shrink before their eyes. Her form appeared to collapse in upon itself as her mood grew even more somber, and unhappy.

"Man," Sara went on in a voice that was barely there, "when I screw up, I really do it good."

"Sara, that was Jimmie," Dinah tried to state.

Sara shot her mother a baleful look.

"Don't tell me about Jimmie," she told her in a commanding tone.

The two humans saw the anger Sara had welled up in her. Susan saw it too. Though she said nothing, she took care to activate the artifact's photon stabilizers.

Lanna saw something else in Sara's momentary display of temper: A possible way out of the cloistered existence she had herself locked into. She figured that, maybe if Sara could express her anger with Jimmie, the venting would open her up to more options than she was currently allowing herself. She knew that harming Jimmie directly was out of the question, but maybe . . .

"Sara," Lanna said to call attention to herself.

Regarding her to listen to what she had to say, Sara noted a peculiar glint in Lanna's blue eyes.

"Jimmie doesn't know it yet," the blonde went on, "but . . . I've been thinking of doing some remodeling, and . . . well, maybe you could help me out."

Part 2: Payback
or
The Futility of Revenge

Oo, nice door, Sara thought. *Heavy. Solid. Reinforced, steel frame. Good, strong locks, and hinges. Intruder proof - I don't think so . . .*

In his upstairs office of the luxurious, highest of high end condos he, and Lanna, shared, Jimmie was nearly shaken out of his skin by the sudden sound of a tremendous crash downstairs followed by a heavy 'whoomp!' He needed a moment to recover before he jumped from his chair, and rushed out of the room. Coming down the stairs into the vestibule, he saw the intruder proof front door to his condo lying on the floor in front of its doorway, looking as though it had just . . . fallen over. He then saw Sara in her uniform standing proudly in the air over the door, her arms folded over her chest, her cape flowing gently behind her as she looked directly at him.

"Hi, Jimmie," she greeted him in a carefully calculated, cool tone.

"Sara!" the shocked young man sputtered. "What are you doing here?"

"I was in the neighborhood . . . thought I'd drop in," Sara replied offhandedly.

She turned away from him, and floated into the spacious, and lavishly decorated, living room, looking about admiringly.

"Nice place ya got here," she said.

"Jeez," said Jimmie, still a bit disoriented from the shock of Sara's entrance, "it sounded like an earthquake."

"Mm, that wasn't on my agenda," said Sara, then she turned to him as she added, "but, for you, I think I could fit one in."

She went back to drifting, and admiring, as Jimmie finished coming down the stairs. He went over to visually inspect his broken door. It lay completely flat, the inside knob having been buried into the tile over concrete floor beneath it. After taking in enough of that sight,

his eyes wandered up to take in the sight of the wide open doorway leading to the hall outside. He noticed that the pins in all four hinges the door had been suspended from were completely sheered through. In the opposite side of the door frame, there was a very neat, square-shaped, rip in the metal where the tongue of the door latch had been. Hearing tones, Jimmie looked into the living room to see Sara absently pecking at random keys on the full sized, concert grand piano that dominated one side of the room.

"You could've knocked," he said.

Sara looked up from the keyboard, and smiled at him, oh so sweetly.

"I did."

She left the piano, vaulting into the air over it. She was gratified to kreen Jimmie flinch when she took off. She came to settle by a shelf that displayed a variety of oddly shaped, and colored, glass knickknacks. She make a quick studying of the pieces.

You wouldn't find this stuff at the local five, and dime, she noted.

"Long time - no see," Sara said with a glance Jimmie's way. She returned her attention to the knickknackson the shelf, "Looks like you're doing well." She glanced his way again. "How've you been?"

Jimmie moved away from the door. He was understandably hesitant about approaching Sara.

"I've . . . been doing okay . . . I guess," he managed awkwardly.

With a finger, Sara teased one of the knickknacks. It, accidentally, fell off the display shelf, and onto the heavily carpeted floor below. It bounced 'pat-pat' along the carpet a couple times, then came to rest unharmed. Sara observed the knickknack for a moment, then extended a foot - *Right over . . .* - and then brought herself down hard, tromping the knickknack under the gold colored sole of her slipper. *Oo*, she thought, *that feels . . . broken*. "Opps," she said.

"Sara!" Jimmie protested, approaching a few steps.

"Hm?" Sara wondered innocently as she looked up at him.

"That was expensive."

Sara carefully raised her foot to reveal the flattened, and shattered, fragments of the knickknack.

"Oh," she said, then she shrugged, and drifted off. "I wouldn't know about things like that. After all, I'm just a poor girl from Houston."

"Wul . . .," Jimmie sputtered, "be more careful, would you?"

Sara looked, then smiled at him.

"Oh, I will," she assured.

She returned herself to randomly looking, and drifting, about.

"Y'know, Jimmie, it's amazing what a difference three years can make. I'm really surprised at how things have changed since I've . . . been away. Heck, you surprise me. I didn't figure you to be the materialistic type."

"Well, you're right about things having changed, Sara," Jimmie told her. "Lanna has done a lot to educate me, and I've come to appreciate a lot of things."

Sara paused in the air to look at him. Once again, she smiled sweetly.

"That's - so nice to know."

"Alright, Sara," said Jimmie, trying to be assertive, "I know you're here for a reason. What do you want?"

"Well . . .," said Sara.

She'd come to settle by the shelf of knickknacks again, eyeing one knickknack in particular.

"I'm here because . . . "

A heat ray shot from her eyes, entering the knickknack, and super heating its center until the outside of it exploded.

"Sara!" Jimmie chastised her.

Sara looked.

"Oh, sorry," she offered easily before returning her attention to the objects on the shelf.

"Wul," she then continued, "because I need some help, actually."

Pop!

Another knickknack exploded.

"Will you stop that!"

Sara looked at him again. She was the picture of innocence.

"Now . . . just . . . go on with your point."

Sara frowned like she was confused.

I think I see a contradiction there, she thought. *He wants me to stop, and yet, he wants me to go on.* Hmm. "Well, anyway," she said, dismissing the thought, "you see, I've come up with this little problem," she explained.

Pop!

"Sara!" Jimmie almost pleaded.

Sara looked at him again.

"Hm?"

Jimmie breathed an exasperated sigh.

"What are you doing?" he wanted to know.

She tilted her head, and frowned, curiously.

"Excuse me?" she asked.

Pop!

"Oo," she said. "Did I do that?"

Jimmie regarded her knowingly.

Pop!

"Hmm . . . I guess I did."

She surveyed the now empty shelf.

"Hm. No more thingies," she observed, and then she tore the shelf from the wall, and faced Jimmie with it. "I guess you won't be needing this anymore," she added casually.

Sara flung the shelf across the room, into the dining room and smack into the glass front of a very well stocked china cabinet. The two of them stood facing one another as the protracted sound of devastation went on for some seconds. After it was over, Sara floated off in the direction of the dining room.

"Now *that* - sounded like a lot of glass," she noted.

"Sara," Jimmie calmly called to her.

Sara stopped, and turned to him.

"Hm?"

Jimmie just stood there looking at her for awhile. He looked hurt, and disappointed. Sara drifted a little closer.

"Now I'm the one who's surprised," he told her with measured deliberation.

"Really, Jimmie?" she asked. "Why? What's the matter?"

"You know what's the matter," Jimmie told her.

There was a pause. Sara watched him.

"Come on Sara," he finally said. "I know you. You were brought up better than that. You know better than to be doing this."

Jimmie saw a darkness come over Sara's features that truly frightened him. He began to wonder if he might've said something wrong. Sara took her time in folding her arms over her chest. The completion of her gesture drew Jimmie's attention to the emblem on her uniform.

She drifted closer to him.

"Yes I do, Jimmie," Sara told him very seriously. "I do know better." She drifted closer still. "But what about you? Huh? What about your knowing better?"

"This isn't about me." the young man tried to assert.

Sara was suddenly in front of him, hovering inches away from him, eye to eye.

"Oh," she said in mock surprise, "isn't it?"

"No," Jimmie stressed, "it's not."

"Then I suppose it's all my fault then. Hm? Is that it?" Sara began advancing toward Jimmie, forcing him to retreat as she spoke. "It's my fault that you rejected me - hm? - that you hurt the hell out of me - I guess that's my fault too. Huh? And it's my fault, of course, that you lied to me - oh, 'I'll always love you, Sara'," she mocked, then, as herself, "Ha!"

She was alternately floating toward Jimmie, and sometimes lunging at him as her anger dictated. Jimmie continued backing away, but felt he didn't dare avert his eyes from her.

"It's my fault that you *betrayed* me," Sara continued with another lunge, "that you turned me into a *whore* - "

"Now hold on just a minute," Jimmie interjected, "I never - "

"I'm not

finished!" Sara declared, casting her balled fists down to her sides. "It's my fault that you deliberately tried to destroy me," and again she mocked, "oh, 'we'll always have you memories'," and then she lunged at him again. "Argh! You turn Susan against the world, and turn the world against me - I suppose that's my fault too, huh? - and then you *lie* about *both* of us!"

Sara had Jimmie backed against a wall now. She seemed to calm down a bit, at least on the outside.

"Gee, isn't it amazing, Jimmie?" she asked rhetorically.

Jimmie heard a loud noise to his left as Sara hovered in front of him.

"Isn't it amazing how you can do all of these things, and yet . . . ," she looked startled for a moment, as though she were startled by a . . . startling epiphany, "it's my fault!"

He heard another, similar sounding noise to his right as Sara continued glowering in front of him.

"Isn't it wonderful, Jimmie?" she wanted to know. "Isn't it wonderful to be able to do really rotten, horrible things, and then blame it all on somebody else?"

Jimmie then heard another - somehow longer - loud, strange, noise as he thought he

saw her absent for an instant. The sound seemed to occur all around him at once. Before his mind could register any of this, however, Sara was in front of him again, as if she'd never been gone. He watched her drift backwards away from him. She was looking about curiously at something that seemed, to him, to be above and to either side of him. He saw her frown.

"D' ya think that's a bearing wall?" she wondered out loud.

Jimmie turned around, and then had to back away from what his eyes encountered. The entire wall his back had been against was riddled with gaping, Sara sized, holes leading to the adjoining rooms beyond it. The whole wall looked like a ten by twenty foot slice of Swiss cheese. The floor was littered with the debris of wood, and plaster, eruptions from where she'd flown back into the room. Jimmie imagined the floors in the other rooms to be in the same condition from her exits. He was stunned by the ruination she'd exacted in a matter of, maybe, two seconds.

"What have you done!" was all he could say.

Sara had taken up a stance in the air, resting on one hip with her other ankle crossed over, her hands resting comfortably on crests of her simulated iliacs. She visually surveyed the wall, then shrugged her shoulders.

"Nothing, really," she answered quite offhandedly.

Jimmie turned to her.

"Alright, Sara," he addressed her, calling in a wagging index finger for back-up. "That's enough." He strode past her, and into the living room, declaring over his shoulder as he went, "This has gone way too far."

"Too far?" Sara stated, aghast as she turned to face him.

She flew after him. Jimmie had to stop in mid-stride when Sara's face suddenly appeared in front of his, upside down.

"You're one to talk about going 'too far'," she continued, forcing him to back up again. "What's your limit, Jimmie Oldsen? Where're your boundaries? Where, in that ones and zeros soul of yours, does it say 'enough'? Or isn't there one single line of human decency you won't step boldly over?"

"All I know," Jimmie stammered, "is that - what you're doing - right now - is wrong."

"Was it wrong what you did to Alex, and my family? Was it wrong for you to try to destroy me?"

"I didn't destroy you. I just . . . found a way to . . . turn you off."

"But not before you prostituted me."

"What?" Jimmie wondered, uncomprehending.

"I know what you've done with the technology you gleaned from me!" Sara shouted at him, her voice choked with emotion. "You . . . used me!"

Sara flew away, and went to hover over the piano.

"You used Susan to do things she was never intended for!"

She was struggling terribly with herself.

"I feel so . . . dirty!"

Jimmie started after her.

"Sara, I never meant to - "

"I can't bul-ieve I ever let you inside me!" she went on. "How could I have been so *stupid!*"

To stress her last word, Sara tore the heavy, wooden lid from the piano, and tossed it to the floor.

"Sara, now stop this," Jimmie told her as he advanced toward her a few more steps.

"This is wrong. This is malicious destruction of someone else's property."

"Which you'd never have had if it weren't for me!" Sara shouted from her aerial perch over the piano. "Where's my cut, Jimmie? Huh? Where's my share from all the software you wouldn't've had a clue about if not for me?"

"Sara," Jimmie attempted to assert, "I've worked hard for what I've got."

"Oh! Give - me - a break!" Sara countered heatedly. "You think you can just rape me, and then dump me? That you can take what you want from me, and then pay me with a knife in my back, and trash about 'memories'?"

"Sara," said Jimmie, trying more placating approach to the furious, floating girl, "Sara . . . now listen to me. I can understand that you might be a little upset - "

"Whoa!" Sara exclaimed, rearing up high over the piano with her hands on her hips. "Stop the presses already! He understands that I'm upset!" she derided grandly. Then she became Groucho Marx, complete with wiggly eyebrows, and a pantomimed cigar. "Now the sixty-four thousand dollar question is: Does he know why she's upset?"

She even sounded just like Groucho.

"Sara," Jimmie tried, "you're acting crazy - "

"Oooo," said Sara, notably pained to tell him, "tsk, wrong answer."

She dove back down to the piano. She reached inside the open top, and ripped away enough strings so she could take hold of the instrument's steel frame at its center point of balance. Once she had a good, nondestructive grip on it, she picked the piano up like it was nothing.

"We got the truth, Jimmie . . . aaaaand we got the consequences."

She stood in the air with the concert grand poised beside her, her free hand resting on her hip. The thing extended at more than a foot above her head, and at least two feet below her slippers. She had a firm grip on it. It wasn't going anywhere she didn't want it to go.

Sara regarded Jimmie.

"I so just wanna heave this at you," she seethed.

"You're insane!" Jimmie screamed.

Sara's eyes grew tense.

"Aw screw it," she muttered, and then she did throw the piano at him.

The massive instrument sailed across the room, missing Jimmie's cowering head by inches. It hit the opposite wall between the living room, and the kitchen - and then kept on going. It took out more than a third of the wall, some of the water pipes and a lot of electrical along the way, and also demolished the kitchen's central counter stand before coming to rest at an odd angle, half nested on debris, half on the floor. When the noise of breakage, and stressed out musical strings had finally come to a stop, and the dust had begun to settle, the sound of running water could be heard.

"Hm," Sara solicitously observed, "' sounds like you could use a plumber right about now."

Jimmie was mad now. At least, he was trying to be. He called up his trusty index finger again as he strode purposefully toward her.

"Alright, that's it. No more mister nice guy, Sara."

She gazed down on him from where she stood in the air as he gazed up at her.

"I've been very easy with you up until now, but now . . . the gloves are off!"

Hmm, this is interesting. "Really?" she wondered, standing squarely in the air where she was, her head tilted at a curious angle as she folded her arms across her chest. "What're you going to do?"

"I'm . . .," Jimmie stated, and then he hesitated. His mouth worked for a moment, then became still. Then he needed to take a deep breath. Then he needed to swallow. Finally, "I'm . . . calling the police."

Stricken, Sara's wrist went to her forehead as she leaned back in the air. She sighed pitifully as her levitated body hung there, twisting slowly, slowly in the wind.

"And don't try playing on my sympathy!" Jimmie admonished her sternly.

Sara turned her head to look down at him.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," she assured him, then, "In fact, here's the phone."

Suddenly, Jimmie saw that she was gone from being in front of him. It even sounded as if the last part of her sentence had come from . . . He turned around, and there she was, right behind him. In her offering hands was the kitchen telephone, plus a two square foot section of the wall it was mounted to.

"Call them," Sara further offered.

Jimmie looked at the phone in her hands, then he looked at her.

"I'll use the phone upstairs."

He stepped around her, and headed for the stairs. Sara turned with him, and watched him go.

"I can get you that one too, if you want," she called to his receding back.

"I'll get it myself, thank you," Jimmie said over his shoulder.

He started up the structural steel stairway that lead to the split level balcony. Sara was suddenly at his side, beyond the staircase, ascending with him.

"Why don't you call the cops on yourself while yer at it," she suggested at his eye level.

Jimmie looked at her as he continued his climb.

"Because I've done nothing wrong," he specifically told her.

The shock of this assertion literally caused Sara to float back from him.

"You've done - ," she could barely whisper before she found her voice again. "Do you have *any* idea of what you have done to world communications?"

"That's Wayans, Sara," Jimmie took care to stipulate, "not me."

Sara waited for him to go on as Jimmie stepped onto the long balcony that extended the depth of the condo. When he began walking along the steel railing bordering the balcony's edge, she prompted, "Okay."

Jimmie paused to explain, "He's got this . . . insane idea of ushering in a new religious age."

"Which you are making into an equally insane reality!" Sara stated.

"That's not my department, Sara," Jimmie argued, gripping the railing he stood behind.

"The software, the encryptions, the codes and everything. I just come up with this stuff."

What's done with it after that is not up to me. It's not my responsibility."

Sara was suddenly in front of him, gripping the same railing from the other side.

"Then who's responsibility is it, Jimmie?" she wanted to know. "Is it mine again?"

Jimmie looked at her uncomprehendingly.

"It's . . . who . . .," he tried to answer, then he backed away a step, and waved an arm confusedly, "who . . . ever wants it."

Sara could only stare at him in disbelief.

"Stay right there," she told him lightly.

She turned, and started drifting back down along the stairs. Jimmie noted the suspicious billow of her cape.

"No . . .," he said.

He started back down the stairs after her.

"Wait a minute - "

"Stay up there, Jimmie," Sara warned in a sing-song tone without looking back.

"What're you going to do?"

Before he was halfway down the stairway, Sara was in front of him with her hands beneath the bottom step. He heard a sharp metallic snap as she pulled the base of the staircase free from its floor securing bolts, and then the angle of his footing changed as she levitated upward with the bottom step in her hands. Jimmie eventually had to lay himself back over the stairs he'd just descended as Sara raised her end until the staircase was on an equal plane with the balcony's deck. She regarded him with a serious look, then she intentionally wiggled herself, and the staircase, he was resting on.

"I'm waiting," she quietly prompted him with deliberate care.

Jimmie didn't need a second call on that one. He quickly got to his hands, and feet, and scrambled over the steps until he was back on the upper deck again.

"Thank you," she said most politely, and then she tore the staircase away from the deck. Adjusting her grip on the structure, Sara ripped the thing in two down the middle in one easy motion, then casually discarded the halves to either side of herself onto the tile floor of the vestibule.

"Oh, great," Jimmie sputtered from his perch on the balcony. "Now how am I supposed to get down from here?"

"What?" Sara asked in mock amazement, floating up beside the balcony near him as he

got to his feet. "You can't fly?" she wondered. "You mean . . . there's actually something that you haven't taken from me?"

They were once again regarding each other over the railing.

"I have not taken anything from you, Sara," Jimmie insisted.

Affronted yet again by the man's sheer clueless audacity, Sara drifted away from him along the balcony until her hand grasped onto the railing's end attachment post where the staircase had been. She quickly shook off her stupor, however, and came back with renewed fury.

"How can you *say* that!" she demanded, tearing the post from its mount with an audible *tonk*.

"What?" Jimmie stated back at her. The index finger rose again as he demanded, "Name - one - thing I've taken from you!"

The glower that came over Sara's visage could easily have rivaled even Dinah's best. The metal in her grip strained. Jimmie backed away along the railing while maintaining a hold on it. Sara held on too, pulling herself through the air hand over hand.

"Well now," she said reflectively, "let's see . . ."

After a moment, Sara's focus locked on Jimmie. He felt an awful need to swallow, but he couldn't.

"Oh yes," she said, as if she'd suddenly recalled. Her grip on the railing tightened.

"There's my pride - *tonk* - my dignity - *tonk* - my self-respect - *tonk* - my purpose - *tonk* - not to mention three *tonk* whole *tonk* years *tonk* of my freaking life *tonk-tonk*!"

More than half the railing now hung precariously suspended over the vestibule.

"Sara," Jimmie tried to explain to her, "you're a computer! You don't *have* a life!"

Sara's shock at hearing this surprised even her.

"Ahooh . . .!" she exhaled in a drawn-out gasp of outrage, and then she reacted.

In one, final motion, she tore what was left of the railing away from the balcony, then threw the whole thing into the living room. While it was still high in the air, Sara lasered the steel structure to vapor, and liquid. It landed with a protracted splat over some of the living room furniture, and on the carpet it sat on. Both the human, and the artifact, watched the glowing, bright red, smoking mass of molten metal.

"Hmm," Sara noted casually, "that *is* fire resistant material."

She turned to look at Jimmie.

"I'm impressed."

Thinking that maybe she'd finally gotten the edge off her temper, perhaps enough so that he could, at least, try talking some of his particular brand of sense into her, Jimmie drew a hesitant breath.

"Sara - "

"Oh, bite me," she told him, then she propelled herself away, and glided into the living room.

"Hey, y'know that trick," she said while on her way, cooling the railing with her chilled nitrogen breath as she went. She suddenly sounding quite chipper, "y'know the one that magicians do with the table cloth, and settings, and all?"

She got to the far end of the room, and swooped down to take up the discarded piano top. Holding it horizontally, Sara spun herself around it a few times in order to build up some momentum, then shifted her position to where her body became the axis of her rotational motion. Another spin, and she let it go. Like a huge, black, varnished frisbee, the top flew across the room, and into the dining room. It took out the entire dining set, chairs and all, then cleaved the base of the china cabinet in two, but only made it half way through the back wall of the room.

From where he stood on the balcony, Jimmie could only endure the deafening clamor of wreckage before there was a moment of quiet, and then the teetering upper portion of the china cabinet fell over onto what was left of the dining table with yet another spectacular crash. When he dared to open his eyes again, Jimmie could see Sara floating in the distance. Her cape flowed, and billowed, gently behind her. Her skirt moved against her thighs. She was so beautiful, he thought. She was smiling at him.

"That wasn't it," Sara chirped brightly, then she turned to lend her attention to whatever it was she had in mind. "Just wanted to get it out of my way."

She reached down to the floor at the far wall, and pulled up the whole one side of the carpet. In the process, she toppled a large vase, and pedestal, that stood in one corner of the room, and a tall, glass front bookcase that occupied the other. Not about to worry her pretty little head over that, however, Sara was already thinking of the tool she was going to need in order to perform her trick. She flew over to the fireplace, and commandeered an uninteresting piece of steel, and chrome, sculpture that was mounted above it. Taking it to an open area of the room, she calmly tore it apart, then welded the pieces she wanted from it into a solid beam that was a couple feet shy of equaling the room's width. After nitrogen

cooling, then annealing the welded areas, she casually dispatched what was left of the sculpture into the sheet-rock of a nearby wall, then positioned her beam at the loose end of the carpet.

"Okay," she announced for Jimmie's benefit as she began to carefully role the beam tightly within the carpet. "This is that classic 'pull the tablecloth out from under the table settings' trick. At least it's my version of it anyway."

Jimmie gazed over his living room full of high end, and, as yet, mostly unmolested, furniture. The realization of what she was about to do brought him to the edge of the balcony he was stranded on.

"Sara, please . . ."

"Hold yer horses, Jimmie," Sara told him. "I know you wanna see this, but it does take a little preparation."

With two good, tight wraps of the carpet around the beam, Sara stood up with the role in hand. She visually checked over her setup, then set her grip on the role.

"Sara! Don't!" Jimmie pleaded. "You can't!"

She looked up at him standing on the balcony.

"Y'know . . .," she reflected thoughtfully, "yer probably right about that, but . . . that still isn't any reason not to try."

Jimmie knew that she was committed to doing whatever it was she was going to do, so he braced himself for the worst, which Sara promptly delivered.

In one, fluid motion, she jerked hard on the role, flipping herself over it at the same time. When the role she held was over her head, Sara impacted her back against the raised section of carpet with her legs splayed so as to reduce the risk of her heels puncturing the material. She then followed through with her forward rolling momentum while propelling herself upward sharply toward the ceiling. The entire maneuver took less than a second to execute, resulting in a gigantic 'snap!', which took the carpet from under every floor-bound object that was in the room. It also tore up more than half of the formed rubber carpet pad that lay over the poured, concrete floor. Needless to say, not a single object that had been standing on the carpet was standing anymore.

"Well . . .," Sara observed as she surveyed the damage from beneath the rolled section of carpet she still held up by the ceiling, "so much for my carefully planned career in magic."

"Are you finished?" she heard Jimmie ask her.

She turned to see him watching her from where he stood at the edge of the balcony.

The question, the way it was asked . . . Sara angrily threw the carpet with its beam down to the floor below her.

"No, I am not finished!" she proclaimed.

She charged through the air toward him. Jimmie backed away as Sara came to lite on the balcony's edge in front of him. With a sharp jolt, she brought some her degenerate matter weight to bear on the structure, making it yield and groan, and then she lightened herself again. She then marched toward Jimmie with an emphasizing index finger of her own.

"Get this, and get it good, Jimmie Oldsen," she ordered him, advancing as Jimmie retreated. "You have seen the last of Susan, because I will *never* let you near her again."

She added further emphasis to what she'd said with another weighty jolt on the balcony.

"As I am her outer surface," she went on, "so am I her guardian, and, *boy*, have I done a lousy job of that up 'til now, no thanks to you!"

She delivered another jolt to the fatiguing structure.

"But I've learned, Jimmie. Oh yes, I have learned. You have taught me well, and I have survived the lesson."

Sara now had Jimmie up against another wall, her nose directly under his. Her demeanor suddenly changed, and she seemed perplexed.

"Surprised?" she asked him in a disarmingly quiet tone, and then she mocked in a cooingly childlike tone "Oh - wha' sa matter? Huh, Jimmie? Did da mean, nasty, widdole Sara not play fair? I wasn't supposed to survive the lesson?" She then waxed deadly serious again as she forcefully declared, "Well, I - have!"

To emphasis her last statement, Sara subjected the balcony to so much of her weight that both her feet blew through the floor. In a panic, Jimmie bolted from her, running for the short stairway at the far end of the balcony that lead to the condo's second floor.

In an instant, Sara was there long before him. As a whole, she tore the staircase from its mounts, and threw it to the tile floor below. Jimmie was barely able to stop himself at the balcony's edge where the first step had been just a moment before. He backed away as Sara glowered at him from where she stood in the air, fists at her sides, ready to strike. They regarded one another, and then Jimmie saw Sara's irises begin to turn red.

"Sara," he pleaded as he backed away further, unable to tear his eyes from hers. "Sara, please."

"Please what?" Sara snarled contemptuously at him, both her eyes now glowing brightly. "Please what, Jimmie? Please don't make you pay for all the harm you've done, all

the people you've hurt, the lives you've destroyed?"

In a final, desperate effort to appease the girl, the alien, the technology he had defiled and wronged, Jimmie sank to his knees before her to beg for his life. If anything, it was the wrongest of things to do, because this most pathetic of acts so enraged Sara that she couldn't hold herself back. Jimmie saw his mistake, and was barely able to eat the floor in time before Sara snapped. Screaming her rage at him, she let go with a blast of heat vision that instantly vaporized most of the wall behind him, then went on to vaporize everything that was in the room beyond it. By the time she was finished, the interior of the room, contents, surfaces and all, was a mere, blackened cinder. There wasn't enough original matter left for there to be anything burning, or even smoking.

When her eyes returned to their normal blue, Sara drifted forward enough to place a toe on the balcony's edge. She lightly shook the structure in order to rouse Jimmie, and let him know that he was still alive. Jimmie did not respond to her gentle summons. As she observed his huddled up, fetal form, shaking and trembling with fright, the sight of him so revolted Sara that she could scarcely breath in a tone of searing contempt as she ordered him to, "Get - up!"

Jimmie responded to her that time. He slowly began to emerge. As he lowered his hands away from his face, Jimmie could see Sara watching him as she floated in the air just beyond the balcony. He could see her eyes. They were glowing red again.

"Get up, or I won't miss this time!" she commanded him.

Fearing more if he failed to follow her direction, Jimmie raced to get to his feet. At the same time, he tried to get away her. While still half crouched, he stumbled against the edge of the hole in the wall Sara had made, and fell backward into the blackened room beyond.

Sara watched him stumble, watched him fall. Her eyes returned to normal as again she felt a gnawing sense of unease borrowing its way deeper, and deeper, into her emotional core. She tried to ignore it, tried to disregard it.

She flew up and away, gliding through the air on her back to where she knew the structural support beam of the condo's second story was. It extended the depth of the condo over the living room, and was fully masked by the smooth, white plaster ceiling. Rather than turn around, Sara executed a pretty back-flip in the air to reorient herself so she was facing Jimmie again.

"Mind if I take a look at the upstairs?" she asked him in a brighter, much more chipper tone.

She could see Jimmie still struggling to get back on his feet, so Sara didn't wait for him to answer her. She looked up at the ceiling, and laser cut the beam on a diagonal so as to keep the two ends of her cut from binding on one other. Once she was through, the cut end of the beam immediately fell away from its stub, dropping about half a foot before coming to a stop. It generated a traveling breach in the ceiling plaster on either side of it that eventually extended to the far wall of the living room, and to the next structural beam just beyond the vestibule where the balcony was. Once that was done, Sara calmly reached up through the ceiling, then through the upper story floor, got a finger-hold on the section of floor that rested on the end of the suspended beam, and pulled.

In a prolonged, horrific shriek of steel, and timber, one side of the entire upper story was brought down. The second story floor, and the first story ceiling attached to it, bowed, then crumbled, then finally broke along the length of the beam. The structure of the upper deck, as well as the flooring, and plaster, attached to it, gave way, and collapsed from the strain of its shifting position. Insulation tumbled out of the ceiling where the drywall burst, and fell away. Conduit, wires, cables and telephone lines were, in succession, stretched, strained, stripped and, finally, torn apart. Parts of the upper story's walls were left hanging from the second story ceiling while other parts of them went the way of the floor.

Everything that wasn't bolted to the floor came forward with the gradual steepening of the deck's angle. The beds, the chairs, the bedside tables and lamps, the vanity with its nice, big, heavy, beveled glass mirror, chests of drawers - one of them drawers first - the potted plants and the avocado tree, what was stored on the bottoms of closets, Jimmie's socks left under the master bed from two nights ago. It all eventually overcame the inertia that the carpet provided to come cascading through the widening gap in the floor. The master bedroom's entertainment center, with all of its state-of-the-art contents, made a spectacular, somersaulting crash as it half crushed, half bounced off a section of the over-turned sofa in the living room.

After all the furniture had fallen through, Sara shifted her position so that she could push on the beam. The entire lower half of the two bathrooms - master and guest - were brought down; sinks, counters, showers, bathtubs, toilets, plumbing and all - they really should've left that whirlpool tub full. Jimmie's razor was left hanging from the wall socket it was plugged into. Lanna had unplugged hers, so it fell the distance when her side of the medicine cabinet came apart. With water, and energized electrical wiring, not mixing as usual, the result was the demise of a number of fuses. Jimmie got a good, cross sectional

view of the upper deck on his side as part of it finally lost its grip on the beam it had been mounted to, and passed by his nose while on its way to the vestibule floor below him.

Sara didn't stop until she'd pushed her end of the beam all the way to the living room floor. When she released it, the beam, and what little there was still connected to it, sprang back up by about three feet, then remained there, hanging in mid air. Sara rose straight up after she was through, folding her arms over her chest as she went. She came to hover where she knew she'd be at eye level with Jimmie, who stood helpless on the balcony, watching her.

Sara kneeled the sum of what she had done, but, far from feeling any form of satisfaction, the knowledge of it made her feel profoundly empty. What was the point? she had to ask herself. What good had she accomplished? Was it just revenge for what Jimmie had done to her, and so many of those who'd been close to her? If so, she realized that the whole thing had been nothing more than an exercise in utter futility, because there was nothing stopping Jimmie from continuing as he had. He was still alive after all, unlike the gifted men, and women, of the NASA Susan team. He still had his wits about him, unlike Alex. He could still do it all over again if he wanted to, and she realized that there was not one thing that she could do to stop him. The unease she'd felt before matured into a wrenching sadness as she came to understand the meaning of what she'd done. Having now experienced it, Sara knew that she was not meant for destruction, and she resolved, then and there, never to indulge in it again.

She knew that she hadn't hurt Jimmie. Not really. At least not in the way he'd hurt so many others. At best, the most she'd done was to merely inconvenience him. There had to be other, better, ways to counter what he'd done, and would, in all likelihood, continue to do. She knew that she was going to have to find such ways if she was going to remain in this world, but, for the moment, there was only emptiness, and regret.

"Goodbye, Jimmie," Sara bid the young man standing on the balcony as he watched her. *Goodbye innocence*, she bid herself as she quietly left.

Only when Sara was far enough away from Jimmie did Susan consider it safe to deactivate her photon stabilizers.

Part 3: Identity Secrets

"What do you guys see in comic books," Sara asked without interest before she stated,

"They're so immature."

She'd tagged along with three of her Urban Animal friends after the group had broken up, and gone home, for the night. It was the first time she'd skated the concrete canyons of downtown Houston since her return. It was also the first appreciable amount of time she'd spent away from Alex. It had taken a lot of persuasion to get her to part with him for awhile, culminating in a direct order from Dinah.

Sara's spirits had reached a new low after destroying Jimmie's condo. Everyone had thought it would help if she expressed the anger she harbored towards him. She'd gone into it on Lanna's suggestion, and Dinah, though reluctantly, had given her approval (she secretly wanted to trash the place - along with its male inhabitant - herself).

The strategy, however, had completely backfired. Taking the lesson she'd learned to heart, Sara, instead of venting her rage, turned it inward against herself. She stored her uniform away in a drawer, convinced that she had disgraced it by what she'd done. She devoted herself entirely to caring for Alex after that, tending to his every need, and then some. Both Olga, and Dinah, had tried to tell her that some things she was doing for him he was able to, and should do, for himself. But Sara wouldn't listen. Though she couldn't see it, she was actually harming Alex for trying to help him. She hovered constantly near him. She wouldn't eat, she wouldn't sleep, and, when not in active attendance to him, she would watch over him, hardly moving.

Dinah had deliberately used the power of the bond she now shared with Sara early one evening by shoving her skateboard at her, and ordering her out of the apartment. Sara had to obey, of course, although, before she left, she insisted on taking something of Alex's with her. She settled on an old, green, button front, cotton shirt he liked, and felt the wonderful memories attached to it as she pulled it on. She donned her 'Dodgers' cap for the first time since that fateful day when she'd gone to Chicago, and headed out the front door of Unit 1A. Dinah stood just within the open doorway, watching after her to make sure that she actually did leave. Sara paused halfway down the walkway to cast a single backward glance, her expression calculated to tear her mother's heart out. The intended gesture foundered, though, against Dinah's experienced eyes. She was heartened to see her beautiful daughter from a different part of the universe venturing out into the world again. She even managed a pained smile as she watched her fly off toward the high-rises in the distance.

When she got to where the group hung out, Sara noticed that every face had changed. The ones she'd known three years before looked older now. Several faces she didn't

remember, and several others that she did weren't there anymore - their owners having since hung up their boards and blades, and gone on to other things.

There was the usual assortment of piercings, tattoos and variously colored doos. Since her computer generated body couldn't be pierced, or tattooed - things which both Alex, and Dinah, were grateful for on any number of occasions - and since she was forever burdened with the shameful curse of possessing to-die for, perfect, blond hair, Sara was effectively barred from expressing her 'otherness' in the same, bland way as everybody else. Forced to be individual in proclaiming her individuality, she'd chosen to signify her selfhood by proudly sporting her 'Dodgers' baseball cap. In a further step that boldly showed the full extent of her audacity, she wore it *bill forward* of all things.

She was greeted warmly by the members she had known. Exchanging the special handshake all around did much to put her at ease. Questions about where she'd been were answered with a smile, and a shrug. "Been outta town for awhile," was all she'd say, or needed to. The only threatened speedbump to her return came from a newbie who'd never seen her before. A thick young buck with a need to be more belonging than thou, he stepped up in front of Sara to 'officially' question her presence. Sara looked the big kid up, and down, then smiled up at him deceptively.

"You're new, aren't you?" was all she had time to say before an older member stepped in between them.

"Don't mess with her," he told the fellow, knowing of how Sara had handled herself in a similar situation.

The newbie regarded both of them. Thinking - a bit disappointedly - that there might be something more than just a sporting relationship between the two, and judging - accurately - that the older member was bigger than him, he - wisely - opted not to press the issue. He gave Sara one last significant look, then turned, and drifted away. When he was gone, Sara, and her friend, shared a significant look of their own.

"What?" she'd wanted to know quite innocently. "Can't he handle a girl?"

The friend just laughed, then gathered her under his arm, and gave her a tough hug.

"Good t' see ya again," he told her.

Once Sara was on her board with her buds, all other concerns soon passed away. They were off to ride, to practice and to just plain show-off. More often than not, however, the showing-off consisted of how fast they could get back on their feet from a really grody wipe-out.

Sara had lost nothing of her skill, or finesse. She wowed her bros again with her particular feat, a stunt which had been her signature in years past, and, which everyone was to find, she still owned. While in motion, she would, for an instant, at any time, in any place, under any condition, suddenly flip her board on end, and stand balanced on it by the toes of one foot. No sooner had the sight registered in a viewer's eyes, then she'd be back on wheels, and on her way again as if she'd never paused. Once she did it, the betting started on when, and where, she'd 'pop an endie' again. Those who knew her bet on a stairway railing they knew she'd liked.

The evening's activities ended with Sara feeling better than good. She felt great, and, best of all, she *didn't* feel guilty about it. Wanting to linger in the glow, she'd gone with two of her friends to a comic book store one of them haunted. He was on a quest for a certain issue his collection was missing, and had heard that Gus, the proprietor, had just gotten some new stock in. Oddly enough, the newbie who'd offered Sara challenge earlier, tagged along. Sara had been told that his name was Nick. He'd proven himself to be pretty good on a board, but everyone knew that he'd never do an endie.

Inside the store, Sara had sniffed derisively at all she saw. It was, after all, the most appropriate response for a girl confronted with a competitive force for male attention as daunting as comic books. All three of her friends would've taken her question, and statement, as a personal affront to their integrity if they hadn't been gracious enough to take into consideration the fact that she was a girl.

Matt, and Terry, both of them veteran armchair adventurers, went to some lengths to explain to Sara the particular allure of pictorial pulp literature, but they finally gave up when she responded to their fine discourses with the look of the terminally bored.

"It's a way to get outta this world, Sara," Terry had concluded to tell her.

And here I'm trying to find a way into it, Sara thought morosely to herself.

Matt went off to consult with Gus. Terry, and Nick, went off to cruise the place. Sara stayed by the door. Her casual kreening of the inventory was telling her not to bother venturing further, which only goes to prove that even Tomboys have their limits.

"Hey, Sara!" Terry hailed to her after awhile. "Check this out."

Sara ambled over to where Terry was with just the right amount of disgruntled trudging to her step, and an appropriate look of total apathy plastered all over her programed face. She held her skateboard angled over her stomach so the wheels didn't catch on the display racks by carrying it at her side as she passed by. When she arrived, Terry pointed to the glossy

cover of a comic book that happened to be at the forefront of one display.

"Lookit that," he alerted her, "Superchick's wearin' the same shirt you are."

Terry didn't wait for an answer. Once he was sure that Sara's attention was directed to where he'd wanted it, he left her, and moved on to do some more exploring of his own. What he'd thought she might find of passing interest, however, tripped Sara's mental processor into full alert.

As she came to stand in front of it, her spherical awareness breached from behind, and contracted around her to focus sharply forward, latching onto the cover's image like it was a life-preserver in a raging sea. Situated on the rack at roughly the same level as her chest, Sara felt like she was standing in front of a mirror. The cover depicted the arms, and torso, of a young woman, possibly no older than herself, who was wearing the exact same shirt in the exact same way as she herself was. Sara was frankly amazed at the accuracy with which the artist had rendered Alex's shirt. It appeared to be of the same green, cotton-like material, and had the same two-tone striping pattern, the same, pleated breast pocket, even the four-holed button on the pocket was almost the exact same shade of gray.

The picture depicted the girl holding a skateboard, just as Sara was. The girl in the picture was even holding the skateboard in exactly the same fashion as Sara was holding hers, the only difference being that Sara's arms were in opposite positions in relation to the girl's, which only served to convey the impression of a mirror image all the more. Sara even recognized the distinctive bend, and curve, of her own thumbs as those depicted in the picture. Even the length, and arch, of her thumbnails.

Using the picture as a guide, Sara extended her upper thumb away from where it had lightly rested beside her forefinger. Her nail hadn't traveled an inch before it came into contact with the one depicted wheel of her skateboard. She flicked her nail along the wheel to make it spin. She heard the bearings turning in the wheel as it spun, and almost felt relieved that the skateboard wheel in the picture hadn't moved, the strong looking, yet feminine thumb having remained resting beside its neighboring forefinger.

The shirt was depicted as being worn like a jacket, with tail out, cuffs unbuttoned, and open in the front, exactly as Sara was wearing Alex's shirt. What struck her most about the picture, however, and proved to be the icing on this most unusual cake of circumstance, was the fact that, what the girl wore underneath the shirt, evidenced by its fully opened front, was Sara's uniform. The shape, the fit, the neckline, the origin of the cape - everything that she saw told her that it was her uniform - the only difference being that the basic colors were

much lighter than her own.

Concentrating on the emblem that was depicted, Sara saw that, in every detail, the resemblance to her own couldn't have been more precise. There was the emblem's overall size, and its placement on the wearer's chest. There was the inverted, slightly inflated, equal-lateral triangle with its truncated upper corners. There was the evenly bordered background along with the shape, size and contour of the letter. Everything was the same - even the background color - everything about the emblem was exactly the same as hers.

Sara couldn't tell much about the girl's facial appearance. The depiction of her face ended at the upper boarder of a small mouth framed by sensuously full, and youthful, lips. She saw that the girl had shortish, brown hair, the ends of which fell just below her shirt collar. It was a sharp contrast to Sara's own flowing, blond locks. She noticed that the chin seemed slightly shifted to one side, the lines of either jaw weren't perfectly equal, the musculature of the neck was overworked. Sara's photons focused on the emblem once again, then took in the picture as a whole once more.

So that's what she looks like, Sara thought.

Her emotion program sent a pleasant chill through her body as her preceptors almost caressed the picture. The merest tracing of a smile came to play upon her lips. *Nice chest.*

"Closing time everybody," Gus announced from his command post at the store's checkout desk.

Matt was only mildly disappointed at not having been able to acquire the issue he'd come for. His continued quest, however, would give him something to look forward to in the coming days ahead. Sara filtered out of the place along with everyone else. The companions said their goodbye's outside the front of the store, then parted for the night - Nick taking a moment to apologize to Sara for his earlier behavior.

The boys left together in one direction as Sara deliberately skated off in the other. When she got to the corner of the block, she checked to make sure the road was clear of traffic, crossed the street, then doubled back. When she got to within a few yards of where she wanted to be, she took her board in hand, and walked the rest of the way, then quietly slipped into a darkened doorway that was directly across the street from the comic book store.

Holding her skateboard against her stomach, Sara watched, and waited, as Gus closed up the place, locked the front door, then disappeared through a doorway near the back of the store. After a minute, or so, the place went dark. Sara kreened Gus locking the back door after he'd gone out, then unlocking, and getting into his car. Her feet left the pavement, and

she drifted from the shadows as Gus turned the ignition switch. She floated across the street as he backed out of his parking space into the alley that ran behind the store. Her feet touched down on the sidewalk on the other side of the street as Gus put his car into forward gear, and drove away into the night.

Sara stood motionless on the deserted street in front of one of the display windows of the store for more than an hour with her skateboard held against her stomach.

Part 4: Rejection

Deep black, starlit sky, sparkling water, who could want for more?

The caped figure sailed effortlessly through the air over the vast reaches of the North Pacific, headed on a straight, and narrow, pathway to absolutely nowhere. Blissful nowhere. *Relax . . . relax*, she bid herself, turning the majority of her functions over to Susan. She'd arranged her cape behind her back once she'd gotten out to sea. She wasn't in a hurry. The point was to relax, and to enjoy the ocean, and the night. She didn't breath, she didn't pulse. In time, she came to hardly vibrate. *Relax . . . let it all go*. She let the wind play against her face, and through her hair, felt the air flow across her palms, and in between her open fingers. Often she would close her eyes, and just let her photons do the driving. She looked upon the sparkling patterns of the moonlight on the water, *Find nothing to be curious about*, she told herself. She moved along, skimming her fingertips along the water's surface from time to time. She rolled herself in the air to face the sky. *Ahhh, what a beautiful night! The moon, the stars, so bright*. So many stars! *Screw astronomy*, she thought as her processor clicked away. *Susan, take this all away from me. Take it all away so I can simply be with this beautiful night!* You don't need names, or patterns, or geometry, in order to see such beauty. To enjoy it. To long for the stars.

She was back, yes, but what did it matter? She wasn't free - only now aware that she was still a prisoner. Much as they'd wanted to, the world's governing bodies couldn't avoid acknowledging her return for long - Susan's presence, especially on the all but dead, and buried, internet, was too evident to be ignored. Caught unaware, just as they'd been before, officialdom found itself having to deal with the alien visitor once more.

With Susan's SuzieFlu tainted reputation, and Marshall Wayans sway over international policy, however, the result was only too predictable.

First, Susan was barred from holding a passport. Since Sara was a part of Susan, it was figured that that alone killed two birds with one stone. But then the stoning just went on from there.

Restrictions flew at Sara from literally every direction. Almost every country barred her from setting foot on their soil. Most nations barred her from flying within their national airspace. Groups of nations banded together to forbid her from flying over international waters. More sophisticated governments outlawed her from monitoring their radio frequencies. In all, it became a legislative free-for-all with a 'top-this-one', monkey-see-monkey-do, leap-frog, keep-up-with-the-Jones's effect until Sara, and Susan, were barred from entering virtually any country by any means, be it by land, sea, air, subterranean passage, radio, sound or micro waves, any and all varieties of electrical configuration, solar, nuclear, X-rays and, last but not least - kreening . . . "whatever that meant" more than one official document read.

That was just the political side of the 'Welcome' mat the world was pulling out from under her. The other side, of course, was religion.

Nearly every world religious group came forward to demand that Sara personally espouse their deity. Every denomination thereof insisted she endorse their special blend. All of them threatened to denounce her if she didn't conform to their entreaties. Some didn't even bother with that tokenistic olive branch - they just condemned her outright.

She was pushed, and pulled, in so many different directions at once by so many official organizations that Sara finally drew her wagons into a circle, and kept Susan very quiet. She took to stealth - keeping her personal movements invisible to any, and all, means of remote assisted human detection.

As knowledge of Sara's presence spread, the media, once again, came to pitch their tents outside the gate of Olga's apartment complex. They weren't nearly as friendly this time around though. They harassed anyone entering, or leaving, the complex - even to the point of physically blocking cars until the hapless drivers answered questions about the "dreaded alien". All of the tenants complained to Olga, and Olga complained to the police. The police refused to do anything. Emboldened by the lack of intervention by authorities, reporters began entering the property, randomly knocking on people's doors, and peering into windows. Olga threatened to have them arrested for trespassing. Dinah threatened to sue them, and their news organizations. Both of them were either dismissed, or laughed at, by the reporters. Finally, Sara took things in hand, and had Susan disable all of their electrical

equipment. That got them to leave the complex, and confine themselves to the street outside. The reports that aired on the nightly news were blatantly slanted, rude and ugly.

Where will it end? Sara wondered as more, and more documents, and declarations, were thrown at her. *Why wouldn't it end?*

She sought escape from these troubling thoughts. Flying undetected over the still, blue waters, she wondered . . .

Of all the stars in all the skies, of all the galaxies and universe . . . and they had to dump me here.

Among a race of beings ruled by fear, notorious for their destructiveness, and willingness to set upon themselves and anything else that struck their fancy.

What's so strange about me? she mused in jest.

It saddened her even more that she couldn't bring herself to smile at her own joke.

Alex, she thought, *if it weren't for you, and Dinah, I'd blow this joint, and just head out for . . . anywhere.*

She turned away from the sky, the stars - she longed for them so much. She looked before herself, and concentrated on her moonlit shadow gliding over the water.

I've got a purpose here, she knew. *I've got to find it, if I can just get through all this crap.*

"Sara!" Dinah's urgent voice sounded in her.

"Yeah, Mom?"

"U. S. Channel 7 news."

"What about it?"

"No time! Kreen, anything, just get on it, now!"

She turned the order over to Susan, and, in an instant, she was seeing on location videotape the station's late night news was airing. The viewing frame looked like it was observing an official signing of some kind. There was a dark, curtained background, the center of which was dominated by the official emblem of The United Nations. In the foreground was shown U.N. Secretary General, Gustov Nemitts, seated at a long, dark, walnut colored, wooden table. He appeared to be busy writing something on an open document which was the only object on the table. Behind Nemitts, to the right of the frame, stood two solemn looking dignitaries who were observing what the Secretary-General was doing. To the left of the frame stood a third dignitary, likewise occupied, and, beside him, there was - *ME?!* Sara's mental processor exclaimed.

Yes, Susan had the image right. It was true enough. There Sara was, standing beside the one dignitary in her uniform. Wearing her red-sheened black cape like a cloak. It concealed her emblem, falling in sweeping folds from her shoulders. She looked like a golden-haired princess from a fairy tale, the formality of her dress, and bearing, seeming to befit the apparent solemnity of the occasion.

Nemitts finished what he was doing at the table, and rose to stand. He moved around the back of the chair he'd been sitting in, and approached Sara with his right hand extended toward her. Sara's right hand emerged from the folds of her cape to meet the Secretary-General's, and the two of them shook hands. Both of them then turned to face the camera, and Nemitts put his arm around Sara's shoulders. Sara appeared to stiffen slightly, her eyes glazing over as if she was no longer paying attention to what was happening around her. There was an awkward pause, then she slipped from Nemitts' embrace, drawing her cape more tightly around her, and stepped toward the chair he had just occupied.

All of what Sara saw in her mind's eye had been accompanied by a newscaster's voice-over. The gist of the report was that the film the observer was watching had been made three years before, shortly after Sara's, and Susan's, public disappearance. It was identified as being an official taped record of the ceremony at which Sara signed an agreement with the world to withdraw herself from earth forever.

From the signing ceremony, the frame suddenly switched to a medium close-up of Secretary-General, Nemitts behind a podium. He was making an address. Though his demeanor was subdued, the Secretary appeared to be genuinely frightened, and his vocal delivery was as forceful as it was animated.

" . . . it's presence among us is intolerable," Nemitts was saying, "and will result in the most catastrophic, and irreversible of consequences, for us all. For the sake, and safety of mankind, we must insist that the alien leave - earth - immediately!"

"Mom, where did this come from?" Sara wanted to know the moment Nemitts had finished. *"I was never there."*

"I know you weren't," Dinah answered. After a moment, Sara could barely hear her mother's voice say, *"Wage the dog . . ."*

"Mom, talk to me."

"They had to've made this up . . . concocted it somehow."

"How?"

"Sara, you know better than I do how images can be manipulated. The important thing right now is: Did - you - sign anything?"

"No!"

"It probably doesn't matter anyway. They could've gotten your signature from your bank account - anywhere really."

"Aren't bank records confidential?"

"Not for them."

"And who's 'them'?"

"The United States Federal Government currently headed by one Marshall Wayans."

"So what do we do?"

"I've got to sort through some options first. One thing seems fairly sure though at this point, and that is if they're going to these lengths, they're very concerned with rallying public support against you."

"And what does that mean?"

"It means they're scared, Sara. They're afraid of you, and they aren't sure about taking you on legally. There are still a lot of judges on the Federal bench whom Wayans hasn't gotten to. And besides, it's a general rule of government: When all else fails, appeal to the public."

"So what can I do now?"

"Nothing really. I just wanted you to see that tape, and get your impressions on it."

"My impressions are anything, but polite."

"I expected that."

Sara's form glided through the air over the water. Her cape flowed out behind her. Her hair rustled, but little, in the wind. She saw not a thing before her simulated eyes.

"Mom . . . ?"

"Yes?"

"Why does it have to be like this?"

Sitting in front of the late night news on television, Dinah had to bow her head, and close her eyes. Her strong jaw clenched against the world - against it all. *"Because we're human, Sara."* Why *did* it have to be this way, she wondered. *"I'm sorry to spoil your evening."*

Sara looked before herself, and saw her shadow on the water again.

"It's alright. I needed to know. Thanks."

"You going to be out the night?"

"No. I'm heading back now. The water's so calm. It's so nice out here. "

"Why don't you stay where you are for awhile?"

"No. I've been alone enough for now. You need me there. If you need research, I've got the sum total of U. S. law on file. "

*"You **ate** - a law library?"* came the dubious query.

Sara smiled. In spite of everything, she smiled.

"Susan chews 'em up just fine. "

In his Portland convalescent home room, Tom Starks had just finished watching the same news report Dinah, and Sara, had seen. He'd been hearing reports that Susan was back, but this U.N. report was something else. He'd been able to make some of the muscles in his right arm twitch of late. Now he knew that he had to make the arm move.

Part 5: A Matter of Trust

Dinah answered a knock on the door to Unit 1A to see a nondescript young man she didn't know standing on the step before her.

"Dinah Prinze?" he asked of her.

"Yes?" Dinah responded.

With that information, the young man pointed a gun at her, and fired.

The next thing either of them knew, Sara was between them in the doorway. The young man had just begun to lower his gun from having used it as his mind perceived Sara's presence. Dinah's brain had just begun to register alarm when she saw the back of Sara's head directly in front of her. It'd happened that fast. There was a little, black rimmed, hole in the center chest area of Sara's white, crop-top.

Sara waited for everyone's perception to get on the same page. When she had the young man's full attention, she quietly told him, "I think you'd better leave."

The man seemed to need some time to comprehend this, then he raised his weapon high overhead so as to strike at the, "Tool of Satan!"

Sara blocked the threatened blow to spare the young man injury against hitting the surface of her form. She took his gun away from him, then made sure he was looking before

she crushed it in front of his eyes. She then removed the wreckage from his line of sight, and waited until he looked at her.

"Do you have a clue now?" she asked.

The young man just stood, and stared, at her. The pause was longer than Sara had patience for. She stuffed the modified gun into the belt line of his jeans, tucked him, bodily, under her arm, told him, "Come on," then flew with him over the complex fence to the street outside.

After setting him safely on his feet again, Sara drifted back away, and stood on hers. She folded her arms loosely over her chest, and then the two of them took to regarding one another for a protracted length of time.

"Go on," Sara finally said with a dismissing nod of her head.

Time passed as the young man didn't move.

"Wul, go on," she said again a bit more forcefully. "You've made your point, or statement, or whatever stupid, negative, destructive thing it was you wanted to do. Now go on."

Time . . .

"Go on! Get out of here! Go away!"

The artifact watched from where she'd flown at the young man, her angry fists upraised. She watched him as he ran away. Her anger quickly turned to sadness as the moment passed.

"Go away . . .," she quietly beseeched, and then she turned, and flew back over the fence.

From the doorway, Dinah watched as Sara returned. Her eyes were downcast, her arms loose at her sides. The toes of her tennis shoes glided less than an inch above the walkway.

Sara came to hover just in front of Dinah. Neither of them spoke, or needed to. Dinah watched her carefully, but Sara wouldn't look at her. At length, the artifact neared, and pressed herself into her mother's body.

Dinah gathered her child in her arms, and held her. She closed her eyes, and held her.

"It's alright now," she whispered softly, trying to believe. "It's over."

They took their time recovering. When they did, Dinah had to ask, "*Did you know who he was?*"

Sara drifted apart from her.

"No," she answered. "*He was a very confused, and motivated, follower of Jesus.*"

Her feet touched to the ground, and she walked inside passed Dinah.

"Thank goodness I came when I did - otherwise you would've been a goner."

Dinah turned to close the door.

"How did you know that?"

"I, uh - gauged the trajectory of the bullet's path," Sara mentioned over her shoulder.

She'd purposely taken to inspecting the hole in her shirt.

"He ruined my top," she complained, and then she muttered, "Stupid killers . . ."

Dinah paused with her hand on the doorknob. Another question had formed in her mind.

"How did you know to come?" she wondered.

Sara didn't answer. Something about her silence bothered Dinah.

"Sara?" she called to prompt the girl. *"How did you know to come?"*

Automatically, her lawyer's mind began assessing the evidence of a questionable situation.

"I didn't telepath, or call for help. I hadn't even thought about being scared until it was over. How did you know I was in danger? How did you know to come?"

Sara had maintained her back to Dinah. She was having difficulty with what she was hearing.

"Sara?"

Sara didn't try to hide her feelings as she turned herself within the air, but she did resist directly facing her mother. Dinah was about to inquire as to her reticence when she felt a tiny, stabbing dot of heat on the back of her hand. Instinctively, she shook her hand, then raised it to examine it. There, on the back of her wrist, she saw a tiny, golden glow. The moment she saw it, the glow began to fade. She watched it as the glow went out, and then she saw a single blond hair among the dark ones.

Dinah wanted to do anything at that moment, but look at Sara. She gathered her hand into its neighbor's grasp - stalling for time. She gently rubbed the spot - stalling for time. When she finally found the nerve, she did look up. Sara was watching her.

"How long has this been here?" she wanted to know.

"Since the day we all got back," came the answer.

Dinah didn't want to know, but still, she had to ask, *"Are there any more?"*

Sara's eye simulations closed as she turned herself away.

"There's one on Alex, and Olga . . . Lanna . . . and Louise."

Dinah still didn't want to know.

"Big sister is watching us - "

"Please don't see it that way!"

"Why didn't you ask!"

"Because if you'd said no, you'd be dead!" Sara declared, flying to Dinah.

She came to hover close to her.

"That guy got lucky," she fervently explained. *"That bullet would've gone between your fifth, and sixth ribs, right into your heart and you would've died!"*

Dinah could see the artifact's struggle. She could feel that struggle even more. Sara drifted closer.

"Mom . . . please . . . I know humans tend to value dignity more than life, but . . . I failed once, and look what happened - all that happened . . . I can't fail again."

Dinah listened as Sara pressed on to explain about the hair.

"All it does is monitor your whereabouts, and relay distress signals in your brainwave patterns. It tells me if you're in trouble - that's *all it does!*"

Dinah understood her daughter. She understood that her daughter was good, and, because of that, she understood that the cryptoalien artifact's intentions were equally so. But the human instinct for autonomy, however illusory in all reality it might actually be, runs deep. Life, without the element of risk, for most, is not worth having. Considering this, the human doubted she would've agreed to it, even if the artifact - her daughter - had asked. Deciding her fate, Dinah held her wrist out to the one who had presumed deciding for her, even as that act had saved her life.

"Sara," she told her daughter carefully, *"I want you to remove this."*

Sara had always respected her Mom - this embattled woman who, in so many ways, was just the opposite of Alex, who had overcome her initial reluctance to embrace her, and love her, in her own, peculiar, hamfisted way, who had done what no other human could have done in rescuing her. She'd often chafed at her stern instructions, and her boring, lectures, but now it all made sense to her, and she wished that she had appreciated her more. She'd sought only to protect her Mom from certain danger she was sure would come, because she hadn't known when it had come before. But she understood that by protecting her, she was also taking something from her that she valued, and which she had every right to. She still sought only to protect her Mom.

"You're not making it a command."

Dinah's trust in the alien girl was equal to her love for her, but still, good as her

intentions had been - she hadn't asked.

"I don't think I have to."

"Mom . . .," Sara begged her, ". . . *please* . . ."

"Sara," Dinah bid her. "*Please.*"

Sara's eye simulations focused on Dinah's extended wrist, then she sadly lowered her gaze as she extended her own wrist. The disputed hair shown forth within its tiny, golden glow, giving Dinah an easy visual reference to its whereabouts. It rose up from her skin without a sensual notice of its leaving, then traveled through the air to lite upon Sara's extended wrist. Dinah lowered her hand as she watched the glow go out. No sooner had the transfer taken place then Sara's arm dropped to her side - limp, and loose. Her shoulders drooped forward as if bowed under some tremendous weight - an unseen burden that was great enough to tax even her superhuman form.

"Now you're fair game," Sara solemnly informed the woman who was mother to her, *"for everyone."* and then her face suddenly became contorted with unbearable rage, and pain.

"And it's all because of me!" she screamed, and then she flew upstairs to Alex's room, slamming the door behind her.

Dinah stood gazing at the spot where Sara had been, but she saw nothing - not even the air. Instead, she listened to the sound of her daughter's anguished cries, and she welcomed the sensation of her guts being ripped out. She thought about how her child was heaping blame upon herself; for Wayans' election, for Jimmie, SuzieFlu, Alex . . . everything. And she thought about all the harsh lectures she'd burdened her with about responsibility, and she wondered now if she had not, perhaps, been - too harsh.

Part 6: Grief

Sara's spirits improved markedly after she'd started boarding again. It was the one aspect of her life that hadn't changed - for the worse, or otherwise - and she cherished it, and her group of friends. She still devoted herself to Alex, Susan was virtually asleep, but it seemed as though Sara was handling things better. At least it seemed that she was.

Olga was getting around a lot easier. One day, she decided to pay a visit to a friend, and she wanted Sara to come with her. Not knowing what Olga had in mind, Dinah told Sara to go. She was glad for any reason to get the girl out of the apartment she had confined herself

to. She assured Sara that Alex would be alright. The doctor would be coming by soon to check him over anyway.

Out on the road, Olga drove along as Sara sat beside her. Neither of them spoke, both of them preoccupied with their own thoughts, their own concerns. Those concerns began to merge, however, when Olga steered the car into a cemetery, then pulled into a space in the visitor's lot.

"Why have you brought me here?" Sara asked her curiously.

"You vill see," was all the old one would say.

They got out, and began to walk, first along a certain route that only Olga knew about among the labyrinth of winding, asphalt paths, then onto a worn, dirt trail. They passed a seemingly endless multitude of gravesite markers along the way. They dotted the immaculately green, and gently hilly, landscape at regular intervals, in regular rows, and ranged in a degree of wealth, and ostentation, from full blown monuments to simple headstones small enough to fit inside a shoe box.

"How much further have we got to go," Sara wanted to know with a cross expression on her face.

"Not far," Olga answered, and then she told her to, "Stop complainink."

"I'm not complaining," Sara clarified. "If I'd known it was going to be like this, I would've carried you. This terrain isn't the greatest thing for your knees."

Olga smiled at the girl's consideration.

"I can manage," she insisted.

Yeah right, thought Sara as she kept a subtle, monitoring kreen on the old woman's irritated joints.

True to her word, however, their destination wasn't that much further. Just a few steps, as a matter of fact, and then Olga stopped before a simple head stone that was made of a deep, rust colored marble, and was small enough to fit inside a shoe box.

Sara stopped beside her Banngo, and looked where she was looking. The inscription on the head stone told her more than she had ever hoped to know.

Boris Ivanovich Borodin

The name - his name - was accompanied solely by the dates of his birth, and death. Nothing more. Nothing less.

The shock of the seeing the gravestone affected Sara immediately. Her breathing changed as she began to exhale in wrenching gasps. Olga closed her eyes at the sound, and drew her hands together over her stomach.

"Why didn't you tell me he was gone?" Sara asked when she'd regained her composure.

"You had other things to be concerned about," Olga quietly said in answer. "Now you know."

Staring at the inscription on the stone, Sara felt a painful reconfiguration of her memory begin. She remembered every single thing she'd ever known about the man who had taught her so much, and taught her so well, but now she wouldn't know him anymore. She wouldn't see, or hear him anymore. She would never smell the smoke from his cigarettes again. Never again would she be able to hear him grouse, or complain, nor would she ever again feel his particularly keen vibrations. The old physicist had been, but one, but, in many ways, the dearest, of her many grandpas.

"Did he know that you had found me?" she asked.

"No," Olga admitted after some hesitation, "but he knew that we were getting close. It was he who set us on the proper course to search for you."

Sara suffered through another fit of breathing spasms. Searing though it was for her to hear the young girl's sorrowful expressions, Olga let her go, and fought against the urge to offer comfort. At length, the artifact regained herself, and came to where she could breathe normally again.

"Why am I experiencing things so differently, Banngo?" she wanted to know. "Why is there so much pain involved?"

She endured another, briefer, period of convulsive breathing.

"I am getting to seriously not like this world," she stated upon recovering.

Olga thought back to the last time she had seen her friend, and how she'd been with him at the very end. Old Borodin lay quietly on his deathbed, long since ready, and tired of waiting. He'd reflected on his life, and the results of those reflections had led him to become profoundly disappointed with himself.

"I have lived my life in, and out, of fear," he had unhappily concluded.

Olga sat at his bedside as he lay quietly for a time. He looked to regard his one, his last, perhaps his dearest friend.

"What good Olga Barishkova?" he wondered . The question was his final agony. "What good?"

Olga took his withered hand between her own, and leaned in close to be sure that he could hear. His eyes begged her for an answer, and she knew just the one to give.

"You helped to raise Sara, Boris Ivanovich," she told the dying man without a trace of pity, or false sympathy. "You helped to give life to your Little Vibration."

Borodin regarded Olga's round, familiar, and strangely serene face for a prolonged moment, and then he smiled.

"Is good," he said, and then the strain of life released his features, and his tired eyes were tired no more.

"I couldn't even say goodbye to him!" Sara cried.

The sound brought Olga back from her remembory. She focused on the girl, and could see her struggling terribly.

"I hate this world!" the alien declared.

"Don't talk like that, Sara," Olga scolded her.

"Then what?" Sara demanded vehemently of the air - the sky. "What good!" she wondered bitterly.

Olga watched the artifact suffer, and suffered with her as she stood close by. From these sensations, from the midst of their shared wretchedness, from somewhere out of the unknown, the old woman felt a stirring, and immediately passed it on.

"Send out a vibration, Sara," she told the otherworldly child.

Sara heard, and understood, and did willingly comply. Without thought, or question, without even knowing why, if only to, but for a single moment, be free of the awful things she felt, she would comply.

Sara gathered herself. She summoned Susan to the task, and called upon the air around her. Breeze, then wind, and turbulence, began to swirl around her form as the force she needed organized itself under Susan's guidance. Greater the force became as she began to pressurize it. Sara sacrificed control of her hair, and clothing, as it whipped, and lashed, about her with increasing ferocity. The violence she alone controlled continued to built exactly as she wanted, as she needed, and then, in a massive surge emanating from her as she raised her simulated face to the sky, the circular wave she'd birthed was sent up into the heavens on a cushion of air, then nothing. It left her in a sudden, massive, upward rush of wind, and with it, strangely, went the grief she harbored for a human whom she'd loved.

Stillness once again returned to all around her after Sara had released. The turbulence, and the wind, all ceased. Her sleeves fell once again below her wrists, the tail of her jacket came to rest against her back and her hair lightly settled around her shoulders. She held her face up to the sky. Olga watched her steadily, and prayed. Wanting so much, trying so hard, she squeezed her eyes shut as she prayed.

"I heard him, Banngo," Sara said.

Olga opened her eyes to look. Sara was watching her. She looked surprised.

"I heard him," she said again, almost as a whisper.

The old Russian watched the alien artifact, and tried hard not to smile. She said another prayer before she asked, "And vhat did he say to you?"

Sara frowned, confusion seeming to overtake her simulated features. She looked away, appearing as though she were having difficulty fitting the round peg of Olga's question into the squareness of what her processor had perceived.

"He said," she said at length, at last, and then she needed a moment more to think, to feel, but when she looked back to her grandma, she could finally state with certainty, "Is good."

Part 7: Despair

When Sara, and Olga, got back from the cemetery, Sara headed straight for Alex's room. It was only what was to be expected of her, but

"Sara," Dinah called to her back.

Sara stopped, and turned

"Yeah, Mom?"

"We have to talk," said Dinah.

"Okay, I'll jus - "

"Now," the girl's mother insisted.

Olga closed the door to her apartment after herself, her brow knitted from concern over Dinah's tone of urgency. She suspected what the raven haired attorney's purpose was - the two of them had discussed the matter a number of times outside of Sara's perception.

Considering that Sara's emotions were still raw with grieving over Borodin, she thought it best that, "Dinah, this is nyot the time - "

"It is the time, Olga," Dinah stated both forthrightly, and unknowingly. "It can't be put off any longer," she continued. "We have to face it."

Sara frowned curiously.

"Face what?" she wanted to know.

Dinah looked on Sara's beautiful, innocent face. She paused just long enough to curse herself, and to curse everything about the whole damned situation.

"Alex is going to have to be hospitalized."

The sudden wave of cold passed over Sara's perceptual photons, making her shudder visibly. What she'd just heard elicited an immediate, almost panicked, "No," in response.

"The doctor was here to check on him this afternoon after you, and Olga, left," Dinah explained. "He's deteriorating, Sara. He's just getting weaker."

It wasn't anything the artifact didn't already know.

"It's gotten to the point where Alex can't sustain himself anymore," Dinah went on. "There's nothing more we can do."

"No," Sara stumbled, fumbled, stammered. "No, this can't be. I . . . I know I've been remiss lately - and I'm sorry, but . . . but I'll do better, I promise. You'll see. Really. I'll take better care of him."

"Sara," Dinah stressed, "no one is faulting you."

"You can't do this."

"It's for the best."

Sara flew to station herself at the foot of the stairs that led to the room where Alex lay.

"I won't allow it!" she declared desperately. "I won't!"

"Sara," Olga tried to explain as she approached the distraught girl, "it's nyot like ve're takink him away from you. Ve're nyot. Alex vill be close by. You'll be able to visit him every day as long for as you vant."

Sara, and her grandma, regarded one another. Neither of them could find the reassurance both of them needed.

"All of us hav been knowink this day vould come," Olga didn't want to say. "Really, it is for the best."

"No!" Sara tried to declare again.

"Sara . . ." Dinah beseeched the alien which had come to be her own. She was quietly as upset as Sara obviously was, but she was also determined to go through with what she knew had to be. She looked pleadingly at her child. "Please, listen to me. It can't be helped."

It's the only way. You've got to let Susan do this."

The particular formation of sound waves struck Sara like she'd been human, and Dinah's words had been the business end of a sledge hammer hurtled into her face. Her reaction was as ferocious as it was immediate. She flew at the woman, driving her back - driving her back!

"First Jimmie, and Wayans, and now you!"

The sledge hammer had changed hands, the blunt, steel end plowing through Dinah's chest to bury itself deep into her heart. She didn't know - couldn't know the connection she had touched upon. At the moment, she didn't care. That she could be, in any way, compared to the two people she loathed most! By her own child no less! Hurt in a way she'd never thought possible, Dinah lashed out from her core. What was to follow could not be stopped.

Dinah's open hand struck hard against Sara's simulated cheek. Sara's program compelled her head to yield to the blow, sparing the frail, human flesh from injury against a surface far harder than a diamond. Sara didn't know - couldn't know the connection she had touched upon. At the moment, she didn't care. That the race of beings she belonged to could do such a thing! Her own mother no less! Hurt in a way she'd never thought possible, Sara lashed out from her core. What was to follow could not be stopped.

"I thought you loved him!" Sara screamed at the woman. "That you loved me! I thought you cared about us!"

It couldn't be stopped.

"What kind of people are you!" the alien artifact raged on. "You turn on your own, turn on each other, turn on yourselves!"

So much emotion . . . couldn't be stopped.

"You turn on me! Hit me . . . "

Couldn't be stopped.

". . . leave me . . . " the devastated girl cried, and then she demanded, "What kind of a screwed up, fucking world is this!"

"Sara! Your language!"

"Screw my language! Is that all you think about!"

It couldn't be stopped.

"I hate you!"

Couldn't be stopped.

"I hate all of you!"

Everything Sara knew was suddenly so at odds with everything she knew. What she saw in her mind's eye . . . so at odds with what she saw before her. She saw the depth of Olga's quietly pained expression, and saw the breaching torrent of her mother's agony. *How could any of this have come to pass*, she wondered to herself, *if not for me?* She forced herself to absorb the surrounding atmosphere far more than she could bear. *Could anything be as bad as this?* she wondered to herself, and then the answer came, *All because of me.*

The epiphany wrenched the artifact's mind, and body, like nothing else in her young existence ever had, and then Sara howled. In an expression of sound that strained Susan's capabilities to the core, the artifact howled, and then she flew. Straight up she flew, crashing through the ceiling.

"Sara!"

Straight up, through the roof above, she flew.

"Sara!"

Straight up. She flew.

Dinah didn't look, couldn't look, but she listened. She listened far long after Sara's cry had faded in the distance. Far long after. So long after. When, at last, she dared to think that she could hear no more, she felt a chill come over her. Instinctively, she gathered her arms around herself, and clung to herself. She clung to herself as tightly as she could, but nothing, nothing could make the awful chill go away.

"What have I done?" she asked of no one - of nothing - of herself . . . nothing. "Oh God, please help me, what've I done?"

From behind her, a small, soft hand she barely felt took hold of her shoulder. A gentle voice she barely heard said, "Vat you thought vas best."

Chapter Forty-eight

Turnaround

"Hi, Dad," Debbie cheerily greeted Tom Starks as she swept into his room ahead of her husband with little Shelley in toe. The girl was almost three now, and, by all accounts, she was a living doll.

"Happy birthday, Mom," Deb then greeted her mother following her wish with a hug, and a kiss. "Sorry we're late."

"Oh, don't worry about it," Florence assured her daughter. "We're just glad you made it."

Harry placed the simple, store-bought birthday cake he, and Debbie, had picked up on the dresser Tom's room was provided with.

"We ran into some traffic on the way over," he reported.

"Traffic nothing," Debbie countered as she helped Shelley out of her sweater. She went on to report that, "When we were dropping the boys off, we found out that Harry's Mom got burned on one of those internet investment scams, and she needed to talk to him about it."

"Thanks a lot," said Harry pointedly to his wife.

Freed of her sweater, Shelley was off on her own.

"Harry," Florence counseled, trying to pour oil on the troubled waters she saw, "naiveté is nothing to be ashamed of."

"That's just it, Mom; Harriet is not naive," Debbie pointed out as she stowed the sweater in her bag. "She's very good with finance. It's just that these online jerks are getting so sophisticated in their methods."

"Happy birthday, Mom," Harry offered to his mother-in-law with an affectionate peck on her cheek. "Hi, Dad," he then wished to Tom with a smile, and a wave.

"Uh-oh," Debbie uttered a moment before she moved. "Shelley, don't climb on Grandpa."

"Is your Mom okay?" Florence asked of Harry.

"Yeah, she's fine," Harry answered, "but it doesn't look like she's going to get her money back."

Debbie relieved her father of her daughter's clambering struggles by picking Shelley

up, and placing her in his lap. She made sure the child was securely nested in the niche between Tom's torso, and the pillow that supported him. Tom was seated in the chair beside his bed, and had been freshly bathed, groomed and dressed for the occasion of his wife's fiftieth birthday. Finished with her chore, Debbie bestowed a kiss on her father along with a loving squeeze to his good shoulder.

"Boy, do you smell good," she commented upon withdrawing herself from him.

Florence managed a tired smile.

"I put some cologne on after shaving him this morning," she said.

"You'd better go easy on that stuff," Debbie advised. "You'll have every woman in the place chasing after him."

Everyone enjoyed the joke, including Tom, although no one would've known it.

From the time she could crawl, Shelley had been drawn to her silent Grandfather. She wanted physical contact with him whenever they were together, and was always reluctant to leave him when it was time to go. She exhibited a precocious maternalism in the way she attended to the older man. She was careful not to disturb the tubes that supplied him with life-sustaining air, and food, and had made it a personal mission to see to it that the towel that gathered his drool was arranged just right in his lap. Tom had watched his little heart-stealer of a Granddaughter grow with interest, with fascination and with incredible longing. Shelley insisted on wearing her favorite, animated 'Supergirl' T-shirt, with its bold red, and yellow, emblem, for this special occasion of visiting her "Bampaw". Tom craned his good eye downward until he could see the crown of Shelley's head. If he'd wished for anything at that moment, it would've been for nothing more than to be able to feel the warmth, and movement of her tiny body against his.

With the cost of moving Tom being so prohibitive, the family had decided to celebrate Florence's birthday with him in his room, then Deb, and Harry, would treat their mother to dinner afterward.

Though they'd sorely wanted to, Tom's family could not afford the means of getting him out, and around. Self propelled wheelchairs that were built to suit him plus accommodate his respirator were simply too expensive. A van equipped to carry him was out of the question entirely. Harry had made a platform that could be attached to a regular, high-backed wheelchair that could hold Tom's respirator along with a portable power source. Once a month, or so, Florence would hire a wheelchair, and a van service for the handicapped, and she, and Tom, would either go for a drive, or go visit somewhere around Portland.

With a family as close as the Starks' was, there wasn't much to tell in the way of bringing each other up to date. Deb, and Harry, and the kids were all doing fine, Florence's job was going well, but the hours were long, and that left her little time, or energy, to devote to Tom. They eased into idle chitchat, discussing politics, and whatnot - careful, as always, to include the older man who could both see, and hear, but who could neither speak, nor move. On this occasion, however, Tom wasn't paying attention to what was going on in front of him. He had something to say, and, by damn, he was going to say it this time. He had some control over his right elbow, and shoulder now. Harry was in the best visual advantage to notice.

"Hi, Dad," he said as he waved to Tom again.

No . . . it's not a wave, thought Tom.

"He's waving his arm again," Harry observed for the benefit of his wife, and mother-in-law.

The women looked to the man in the chair with the child in his lap. Tom had raised his right forearm, just as he had so many times before. His gnarled hand seemed to float in open air, just as it had so many times before.

Come on, Flo. This is it. This is the one that counts.

Florence sadly shook her tired, tired head. They'd been through it so many times before, but still, "I wish I knew what he was saying."

Flo, don't look away. C'mon, look at me. We can do it this time.

"He's moving his arm, Mom," Debbie noted.

"I know," said Florence disconsolately. "It's always the same."

No it's not! C'mon Flo,

look at me.

"I've tried for weeks to understand what he's saying, but . . . there's just not enough of it."

Look!

"He hasn't done *that* before, has he?" asked Debbie.

Shelley laughed suddenly.

"Bampaw's touching me!" she squealed with delight.

Florence looked over at her husband to see his forearm angled across his body, and across little Shelley's body as well.

"No, he hasn't," observed Florence, then she looked away.

Flo!

"It might be just a spasm."

No - dammit! It's not a spasm!

"He gets them in that shoulder once in a while."

Shelley laughed again, drawing the others attention to her, and Tom.

"Shelley, settle down," warned Debbie. "Don't be so rough with Grandpa."

Tom's arm was still angled across himself, and Shelley. It's position stirred Florence's curiosity. She rose, and went to her husband, leaning herself on the arms of his chair to relieve her back of the Gawd awful pain involved in her bending over. She leaned herself close to Tom so she could clearly see his one good eye.

"Tom, your arm moved in a different way. Did you do that? Is that what you want?"

Yes! thought Tom, and then he slowly blinked.

"It wasn't a spasm?"

Tom slowly blinked once, and then again, which meant that he was saying 'no'.

Florence intently searched Tom's blank, and drooling, visage a few moments longer. She was now certain his move had been a deliberate act, but what it might mean - she had no idea.

She was about to begin the struggle to push herself erect when she noticed Shelley. It occurred to her that she, and the child hadn't said 'Hello' to each other yet.

"Hey there, little Supergirl," she said, smiling through her pain. She forced her straining arms to lower her body a bit more. "You got a hug for your Grandma?"

Shelley grinned, and happily complied, throwing her arms around Florence's neck. The position was awkward, but - what the heck. Tom closely watched the back of his wife's head. He concentrated on a specific goal, and then he moved his arm away from Shelley. He was gratified to see his wife's back stiffen.

Shelley released her Grandma, and Florence pushed herself away to crouch before the pair, maintaining her grip on the chair arms to aide her balance. She looked up at Tom with surprise. She could see him looking at her.

Betcha didn't think that was a spasm.

Florence needed to moisten her lips. She raised a hand - wanting to touch the spot Tom's hand had grazed, but . . . she couldn't really - not with Shelley being right there . . . so she straightened her blouse instead. If nothing else convinced her that Tom was controlling

the movement of his arm, that delightful little brush did.

She pushed herself up to stand erect again. She watched Tom's eye follow her as she did. She knew that something important was on her husband's mind . . . but *what?* She still wanted to touch the spot he'd touched. She turned away to go back to where Deb, and Harry, were sitting.

Alright. We'll try it again. Let's try it again.

"He's being real careful about the way he blinks," Florence noted thoughtfully as she sat down with hers, and Tom's, company. "That always means that he's serious."

She looked back at her husband.

C'mon, Flo. Let's do it this time.

"There, he's moving again," noted Harry.

"I know," Florence murmured, not really paying attention for focusing on Tom.

The three of them watched Tom's hand as it move to the right, to the left, then to the right again, in a labored, zig . . . zag . . . zig pattern.

"It's still just the same movement," Debbie observed.

"No, wait," said Florence softly from distraction.

After pausing, Tom's arm began to cross his body again as it had before.

Move it 'til it won't go anymore - move it 'til it won't anymore - move it -

Shelley

laughed again, and grabbed her Grandfather's arm as it came to rest against her body.

"Shelley," Debbie called to her as she rose from her chair, "I told you, not so rough."

She approached Tom, her hands outstretched to take her active little daughter.

"Now, come on."

NO! - NO!

"No, Debbie," said Florence, "leave her alone."

Debbie paused in what she was about to do, and turned to regard her mother. Her concerned expression caused her to wonder.

"I think Shelley's part of what he's trying to say," Florence continued.

"Well," said Debbie, "if you're sure she'll be alright."

"Oh, yes," assured Florence, "she's fine."

Debbie lowered her hands, and looked back to Shelley.

"You behave yourself, young lady," she admonished her child.

Shelley gave her mother a cross look.

"I'm wif Bam-paw," she asserted as she squirmed herself closer to Tom.

"Alright, but don't be so rambunctious - and let go of his arm."

Shelley complied with her mother's request, and released her hold on her Grandfather's arm. Florence watched the arm as it lowered to rest across Shelley's lap.

God, that thing is heavy.

"Tom?" Florence wondered in his direction.

Debbie returned to where she, and Harry, were sitting. Florence could see Tom's eye looking at her. She had an intense feeling that they were on the verge of something, but what . . . she couldn't tell.

"Tom, could you do it again?" she finally asked. "Can you say it again?"

Tom wondered if he had the strength, or the control, to make the series of moves again.

I've got to, he told himself. I've got to.

His family saw his eyes close.

"He looks tired, Mom," Debbie ventured. "Maybe we should let him rest."

"No," said Florence, watching her husband's arm intently. "No, he wants this."

Tom's arm stirred in Shelley's lap, then rose, and moved away from her.

C'mon, Flo. We've got to get it this time.

He opened his eyes. Everyone was watching him.

Good.

Zig . . . zag . . . zig.

"It's still the same pattern," Harry noted.

"No, wait," said Florence, watching - watching.

Tom's arm began to move across his body.

"Maybe he's drawing a line," said Debbie, concentrating on the movement of her father's hand, "like he's underscoring something."

C'mon, stay with me! Move it 'til it doesn't go . . .

His hand approached Shelley,

Move it! Keep it moving!

and touched

"The 'S' on her T-

shirt!" Debbie proclaimed

You got it! You're close. You're almost there.

"An 'S'," Florence echoed thoughtfully.

"That was the backward 'Z' he was drawing," Debbie went on. "It was really an 'S'."

"So it's something involving an 'S'," said Florence.

C'mon, Flo . . .

"Maybe it has something to do with Shelley," wondered Debbie.

"Maybe it's Supergirl," Harry flippantly offered.

Debbie laughed, "Yeah, right!"

C'mon - keep trying . . .

"No," said Florence in quiet astonishment, realizing, for the first time, what Tom had been trying to say to her. "It's not Supergirl."

C'mon Flo!

"It's Susan."

In the face of the horrible blowup in Unit 1A, Olga's most immediate concern was that Dinah would start drinking again. That might've happened if the phone hadn't rung shortly after Sara had left.

"Hello?" inquired a female voice Dinah didn't recognize. "This is Florence Starks calling."

Once she, and her family, were certain that Tom was saying, 'Susan', Florence forgot all about her birthday. She, Debbie and Harry spent the rest of the evening with him in an intense question, and blinking, session that left Tom exhausted, and Florence with the definite impression that he wanted his notes from the NASA Susan project.

She dug the box of notes out of their garage the next day after she'd gotten off work, and took them to the convalescent home. She, and Tom, started at the top of the seven inch high stack of randomly organized papers. One by one, Florence would show him a page. Tom would look it over, then blink as to whether it was what he wanted, or not. They kept at it like that, going through every page, and slip, and scrap of paper he'd written something on during the Susan program. On the fifth evening, Florence got down to a torn out notebook page that bore Dinah Prinze's hastily scribbled name, and Houston phone number. She showed it to Tom. It was the first time he blinked, 'Yes'.

With Florence not knowing Dinah from Eve, the couple spent the rest of that evening determining that Tom wanted to talk to her. Beyond that, Florence couldn't figure out the right questions to ask Tom so he could communicate why he wanted to talk to the attorney, or what he wanted to discuss with her. In any case, Florence called the Houston number the

next day.

Dinah spoke to her, and listened as Florence told her that her husband had something important to discuss with her. Dinah hadn't been involved with NASA's Susan program, so Mrs. Starks briefly described her husband's association with Sara. Asked what Mr. Starks wanted to talk about, Florence merely told the lawyer, "I can' say."

For Dinah, at that moment, it was enough to go on. It was something else to do besides agonize futilely over Sara, and Alex, and it was somewhere else to do it. It was something to get her mind off of so many things that hadn't worked, weren't working, weren't going to work. It was some place to go - anything to get the hell away from everything for awhile.

Since Florence had labeled her situation, "urgent", Dinah flew up to Portland the next day. She purposely got herself a window seat, and, throughout the flight, she kept a vigilant watch on the sky, hoping, praying that she might see someone. Someone . . . Anything to get away.

After picking up her rental car, and checking into her hotel room, Dinah called Florence at her work number to let her know that she'd arrived. Florence suggested they visit Tom that evening. That way Dinah would know where the convalescent home was so Florence wouldn't risk loosing any time from her job the next day showing her the home's location.

Dinah picked up Florence at home in the late afternoon. They dined out before going to see Tom. They conversed on light, simple topics, playing it safe as strangers tend to do. When Dinah asked what Mr. Starks wanted to discuss with her, Florence merely said, "I really don't know what Tom has in mind."

With the broaching of the topic of her husband, however, Florence responded as if she'd been offered an invitation. She opened up to Dinah, and went on to talk about the man in her life at some length. Dinah understood that he was paralyzed, but, the way Florence described her husband, it was difficult for her to comprehend.

When they arrived at the convalescent home, Dinah bore witness to the atrophied wreck of what once had been a man. The sight of him almost literally turned her stomach. Tom's paralysis had cruelly torqued his body, digits and limbs. The man Dinah saw bore two distinctly different faces, one on either side of his nose. She watched in silent horror as Florence tended to her man, and realized, with wrenching distaste, that he was completely helpless. She couldn't believe that an active mind could exist in such a wasted, useless hull.

Introductions were made between the lawyer, and the physicist. Dinah didn't offer to shake hands, but Florence noticed Tom make the tremendous effort it took for him to raise

his right hand from where it lay in his lap.

"He wants to shake your hand," she prompted Dinah.

Dinah didn't move, but her mouth curled at the corners to form a crooked, awkward smile.

"He can't hold his hand up for very long," Florence tactfully informed the attorney.

Dinah suddenly lunged forward to take Tom's offered hand. She could barely get her thumb, and fingers around the chaotic maze of gnarled bones. Her attention glommed onto Tom's good eye, and she could see. She could see that there *was* an active mind behind the sagging, drooling mask.

"Oh," Dinah fairly cried, "I'm so sorry, Mr. Starks!"

The next morning, Tom, and Dinah, embarked upon accomplishing the impossible: Tom's relating his thoughts concerning Sara through a process of question, and blink. Tom's limited ability to communicate was a stupendous, torturous ordeal for both of them. For Dinah, the sight of this man drooling uncontrollably deeply upset her, and yet she had to watch his face intently to make certain she was perceiving his blinking pattern correctly. There were times when she couldn't see what he was saying for looking for what he was saying. There were times when Tom simply needed to blink without intending to say anything. Dinah would misinterpret the blink, and ask him to repeat it. There were times when Dinah would happen to blink at the same time Tom blinked, and she'd interpret a 'no' for a 'yes'. There were many times - God! so many times - when the slightest wrong turn in their discussions would get both of them so confused that they'd have to start over at the beginning of the original topic they'd started with.

The sessions were exhausting for both. There were times when Tom was driven to such extremes of frustration that he would simply close his eyes, and repeatedly raise, then drop his hand into his lap. Dinah frequently had to leave the room in order to calm herself, and try to recover some of her patience. Florence would come in the evening after she'd gotten off work, and assist where she could. She helped the lawyer to word her questions so that Tom could blink a definite 'yes' or 'no' to what she was asking. The second evening, however, she arrived to find her husband so spent, and upset, that she insisted that Dinah leave for the night.

"This is not a trial, Ms. Prinze, and my husband is not guilty!" she'd stated.

Late the next morning, Dinah finally got the idea that Tom was thinking of a certain videotape pertaining to Sara.

Okay, the lawyer wondered, which one?

So, one by one, she briefly described those she could remember. Tom blinked "No" to every one. He was tired. Dinah was tired. Her eyes hurt like hell from strain, and overuse. She was ready to throttle him. If he could have, Tom was ready to tell her to shove it. Then Dinah got to the U.N. announcement that sparked the media riot more than three years before. Tom blinked, "Yes".

Dinah paused a moment, then leaned herself away from Tom's drooling visage. Tom watched the hulking lawyer fall back in her chair, close her eyes and lay there for some time, resting with her mouth lolled open. When her jaw closed, she opened her eyes, turned her head his way and smiled at him.

"Why didn't you say so?" she quietly asked him, and then she started to chuckle.

In his mind, Tom started to chuckle too, and then he laughed, and then he told her to, *Shove it.*

After lunch, Dinah asked Tom if he was ready to start again. With his blinking, "Yes", it was only a matter of one more question before Dinah knew that Tom was thinking of the frightening 'geophysical characteristics' Sara possessed which Gustov Nemitts had spoken of the night of the riot. Their minds started clicking together. They got into a roll, but there were still an awful lot of speed-bumps for them go get over.

That night, after Florence had arrived, the three of them started going through Tom's notes again, searching for back-up data to support Tom's claim that Sara was not a threat to earth. Two days later, Dinah made copies of the pages culled from the seven inch stack, and then she, and Tom, spent another day putting together a deposition that included references to specific pages.

On the morning of the seventh day, Dinah brought the finished deposition, and a notary, with her to the convalescent home. After Tom had carefully reviewed the deposition as Dinah held it for him, the notary witnessed as the nuclear physicist struggle for ten minutes to sign the last page of the document with an "X".

During her flight back to Houston, with Tom Starks' deposition safely nested in her attaché case, Dinah rested her eyes. She reflected on the week she'd just had, and was both deeply grateful for it, and grateful that it was over. With Starks' deposition, she finally had a way of defending Sara. It was, hopefully, a way to begin digging her out from under the avalanche of official flake that had descended upon, and, effectively, buried her.

She also thought about something else that Tom had given her - a little piece of information no one else outside the Susan Team had ever known about. Sara, it turns out, had a finger print.

The semblance of life continued at Unit 1A. Dinah, and Olga, decided to keep Alex at home. The doctor prescribed what he considered necessary for Alex along with twenty-four hour nursing care. Lanna tried to downplay her financial involvement by telling a mortified Dinah, "Whatever it takes." The attorney wound up pouring her heart out to the corporate executive. Lanna had to wonder at the irony of the phrase, 'what are friends for' as she often felt bereft for any encouraging thing to say to the, once again, stricken wife and mother. She would see to it that Tom Starks' deposition got into the right hands.

The two remaining women in Alex's life took up the vigil in Sara's absence, though neither of them knew if he ever once bore notice. Dinah would sit at his bedside of hours at a time. She kept herself busy in preparing a defense for Sara based on the Starks deposition, and the U.N. signing ceremony that Sara was never at. She deliberately talked out into the open as she worked, just in case Alex might be listening, or be able to hear. More often than she would care to recollect, she would leave a motion, or some other legal paper lying in her lap, pull off her reading glasses and simply gaze on him. Almost on a nightly basis, Olga would have to waken her so she would go to bed. The gym, and the ring, became her only comforts.

Sara had started getting mail again after the U.N.'s televised address demanding her withdrawal from earth. Dinah shared what few positive notes, and letters, there were with Olga, and Alex, while taking care to keep everything else to herself. One interesting letter was from a guy named Nolan from the Jet Propulsion Lab in California. The lawyer made a note to get in touch with him.

Another was an official looking letter from the government of Singapore. At once, Dinah recalled how Sara had sat curled up in her lap after she'd gotten back from the quake-ravaged city, and had haltingly related her experience there. Frequently she'd be silent for long periods of time, and her mother would hold her as her computer generated body trembled uncontrollably from the horrors her mind had been exposed to. The disaster was the one time Sara had been allowed to shine, and show the world what she was made of.

The mother's eyes refocused on the envelope in her hand. With the world under constant threat of Wayans directed SuzieFlu, it looked like even the country her baby had

aided was now climbing on the international ban-wagon against her. She wanted to tear the thing up - throw it away - *burn it!*

Instead, she opened it, and extracted the single page that was inside.

She deliberately took a moment to unnecessarily adjust her reading glasses before she could bring herself to look at the letter. She noted the official letterhead, and the official greeting, then, perused the body of the letter. She had to blink at not seeing the word "banned", or encountering yet another exhaustive list of official restrictions.

The perusal shifted to a careful reading. She saw that the writer addressed her daughter in the most cordial, and respectful, of terms. It was an invitation requesting Sara's presence at the dedication ceremony of a memorial to be given for the victims of the earthquake that had struck the city more than three years before.

Dinah lowered the letter from her sites, and slowly pulled her glasses away from her unseeing eyes. Recollections from the past, and longing for a future she could only wish for vied for her attention. She would definitely share this letter with Olga, and Alex. She only wished that she could share it with her child.

The mood in Washington began to change as consciousness of Susan's return sunk in. Everyone knew that the President had all but labeled the cryptoalien artifact public enemy no. 1 to get himself elected, and that he'd gotten lucky with the 'geophysical' thing to get her to leave. But now she was back for some reason - no one really knew why - and, apparently, in open defiance of her recently revealed, and widely publicized, assurance to be gone from earth forever. Her reappearance was also in the face of having visited the electronic plague known as SuzieFlu upon the world. It caused a number of people to wonder.

Communication with the White House had become next to, if not altogether, impossible. No one could be reached there through the internet, and few could be reached by phone. An army of personal pages had suddenly materialized, shuttling back, and forth, between 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue and Congress, the (Supreme) Court and Federal Agencies. All of them bore handwritten letters, notes and messages, and had been instructed to return with nothing printed. This sudden, and drastic, change in White House procedure seemed to have occurred just before news of the artifact's return had been reported. Was it merely a coincidence? or was there some connection between the two events? It caused a number of people to wonder.

There is a sense of balance in the arguing of a point. An issue is either supported, or opposed, and favor curried to a cause accordingly. Even extremists understand this, and depend upon their fellows at the other pole to help maintain this balance. With the alien, Susan, however, there appeared to be no balance in the discourse over her. The media, which, only three years ago, had been in love with her, now, as a whole, opposed her. There was no 'pro' or 'con', but rather a singularly unanimous negative bias. Column space, and air time, was given to anyone willing speak against her, and there seemed to be plenty who were willing, and even eager, to have their fifteen minutes of infamy. No one spoke on the alien artifact's behalf. Not one report, or story could be construed as having the slightest positive slant. This too caused a number of people to wonder.

The President seemed to have been slow in reacting to the alien's return. He had followed, rather than lead, the world in issuing orders of restraint against her. He'd been curiously quiet on the subject of the artifact in general as a matter of fact - which was quite a departure from his pre-election rhetoric. Press releases reported him as having merely said that, quote, the matter is being handled by the United Nations, which is the proper forum for debating the artifact, end quote.

The President, in fact, had seemed to have been curiously quiet in general since the artifact's reported return. Perhaps even a bit before, if one cared to consider it. All of these things had caused a number of people to wonder . . . if there might not be a chink somewhere in the Dark Knight's seemingly invincible armor as the mood in Washington began to change.

Olga was out visiting a friend the night there was an unexpected knock at the door of Unit 1A. Her experience with attackers made Dinah wish that there was a peephole in the door, and she wondered, momentarily, why the usually wary old Russian had never taken the precaution of having one installed. Her hand was about to touch the doorknob when she drew a breath, and eased her thick, broad shoulders back.

Oh well, she thought, if its someone who does want a fight, I'll be more than happy to accommodate them.

Dinah set her jaw, then opened the door wide. Instantly, her jaw dropped, and she lost her breath, for there, on the door step, stood Sara.

She was naked, standing straight and facing square with her eyes lowered, her arms loose at her sides. Though clear of her face, her hair was a wild, disheveled mess. Her entire body, from head to toe, was covered with burnt, red dust. She reeked of a near unbearable

stench.

Dinah hardly noticed the artifact's state of undress, or the way she looked, or the way she stunk. It didn't matter, she didn't care. Having so feared that she'd driven her child away, and forever lost her, nothing else mattered, but that she was home again.

They stood facing each other on either side of the doorway. Neither of them moved, or spoke, for the longest time. Sara seemed reticent, and would not look up. Dinah was simply too stunned with gratitude, and relief. Sara's brow knit painfully.

"I'm sorry," were the first, and only words she spoke.

Dinah felt like her chest was in a vice. She had to fight to breathe.

"Forgive me," were the first, and only words she spoke.

"I'm so sor- "

"Please forgi- "

Neither of them finished as they threw themselves into each other's arms, and held on for dear life. Sara's arms clutched tightly around her mother's neck, her ankles crossed behind her back. Dinah held the precious artifact to herself as hard as she could - hard as she could - never hard enough. Neither of them could get enough until, at length, it was enough, at length, for the moment, yes, it was enough, and they could risk a tiny separation, with neither of them fearing. Dinah could barely see Sara's eyes through the caked red dust that covered them. Sara didn't know, didn't kreen, didn't want to know, but had to know, "Where is he?"

Without a word, Dinah held her child from the stars to herself, closed the door with a foot, then carried her upstairs to Alex's room. She stood in the doorway so Sara could see for herself, and, from the security of her mother's arms, Sara looked on Alex lying in the midst a congested array of life support, and monitoring equipment. One of three full time nurses was in attendance. Sara observed the setup thoroughly, and was satisfied with it, but noticed that, "His nutrient IV is getting a little low."

The nurse took this into account. She'd been fully briefed on Sara, but she did wonder why the girl was naked, and why she looked, and smelled so bad. Sara kreened Alex from where she sat in Dinah's arms. She could tell that he was okay, but she couldn't ignore the fact that he was steadily growing weaker. Dinah felt her daughter's grip tighten around her neck, and felt her disappointment as she looked away, and snuggled closer to her.

"I can change the course of planets," Sara noted quietly. "Why can't I save him?"

Dinah held her closer.

"Because it takes two to tango, Sara," she told her, "and you are only one."

To get them both away from the unhappy scene, Dinah turned, and headed back down the hall. The subject changed when they were downstairs once again.

"Ugh, you need to bathe!" the hulking lawyer declared as she strove to put some distance between her nose, and the red-hued artifact.

Sara floated out of her mother's embrace, and drifted off away.

"Oh, sorry," she offered, but then she noticed it was too late. "Oh man . . . I got it all over you."

Dinah looked to take note of the reddish smudges that her exposed skin, and clothing now bore.

"Oh, Sara . . . ," she moaned.

She began to gingerly brush off her person, but then thought better of it, and stopped herself. She looked up at the girl again.

"Where have you been?" she wondered.

Sara took a moment to angle herself so she could look penitently down at the floor before she quietly admitted, "Venus."

Dinah had only heard of the planet's offensive odor, but now she wished that it was all she knew of it.

"Oh, Sara . . . "

"It's alright," Sara hastily assured her mom as she maneuvered herself toward the door, "I'll just burn it off with a half orbital atmospheric re-entry."

"That's fine for you, but what about me?"

Sara paused.

"Uh . . . ," she said hesitantly, then, "shower?" she suggested, then, " . . . several showers," she suggested further, then, finally, " . . . at least. Gotta go."

"*Sara!*"

"Yeah . . . ?"

"*Don't go out like that. You're in - cripes, what'm I thinking - yer not even **in** your birthday suit.*"

Sara's simulated face scrunched with sincere perplexity.

"You're expecting me to wear *clothes*?" she asked.

The ultimate look of 'Duh!' came over the face of the physically overdeveloped woman of thirty-eight as she regarded the precociously developed girl of sixteen who was,

apparently, expecting to march out the door, in public, buck naked. The fact that it was dark outside, along with the fact that she wore a reddish hue that stunk to high heaven (literally) was quite beside the point.

"Put - something - on," her mother specifically ordered the girl.

"Mom, *I'm going to be spending the next hour in re-entry*, okay? *Anything I wear won't last the first three seconds.*"

"Then wear your uniform."

"Then that'll get all loused up on the inside, and I'll have to spend time clean/burning my uniform."

"Well . . . wear something you don't like then."

Sara was agreeable to this idea, but then she considered, almost too coyly, "*And what about when I come back?*"

Dinah looked stumped, which was more than ample opportunity for Sara to go on, which she did, elaborately.

"*Hmm . . . Say! You could have another shirt airlifted to me at 15,000 feet. I can telepath the coordinates of my location to you, and then I can - y'know - hang loose, hold position, until you can get a charter jet to where I am - oh, send that long, light green T-shirt, y'know, the one I like - the plain one, not the one with the logo - oh but . . . darn - my body's still gonna be pretty hot - I do glow for quite a while after a re-entry - so I'll probably just burn the shirt up before I even get it on - I could even possibly do heat damage to the plane - hey! wait a minute! I mean . . . Duh! I could just take a dip in the ocean to cool off before the plane arrives - oh, but then I'm going to be wet - and I really don't like dressing when I'm wet - it makes it all clingy and . . . yuck - ya know-what-I-mean? So you'd better have him bring a towel also - oh but, hold it . . . oh man - major problem here. Really, really major problem: How are we going to know if the guy who hands me the towel and shirt isn't . . . y'know . . . watching me . . . y'know? I mean, I am going to be . . . y'know, and . . . I won't have anywhere to . . . y'know like - conceal myself. Hey! We could have the guy keep his eyes closed. Yeah, that's it! but . . . then again, would we reeealy be able to trust him-*"

"Oh, get - out of here," the Amazon finally snarled at the artifact, "and take your stink with you."

Sara smiled, contented with her little victory, then she turned to go.

"Sara."

The sound was different. The tone of Dinah's voice made Sara's emotional program send a wave of soothing warmth flowing through her simulated body. She turned back to regard the woman who was her mother.

"I'm sorry."

Two little words. So much meaning.

"So am I, Mom," Sara told her, then, *"I love you."*

"Please. Go, before I barf."

Sara laughed, Dinah laughed, and then the girl was gone.

Ahh . . ., Dinah sighed once she was alone, *the trouble with . . . aliens - children . . . whatever - what's the difference?*

She then went to the bathroom to begin preparing for a very long, and very hot, bath.

Venus! Ugh! That anyone could name something that smelled so bad after a woman!

Sara wound up spending a lot longer in re-entry than she had expected. She did the equivalent of one full orbit in different body positions just to get her hair clean. She thought she was done, and was ready to head for home when her awareness found a bad taste in her mouth. Yup - it was Venus. She had to do another full orbit at full frontal gape to get the crap, crud and stench burned out of her mouth and throat. On the plus side, though, she discovered that re-entry flame made a great dental-floss.

It was shortly before sunrise on America's West coast by the time she took a cooling dip in the Northern part of her favorite ocean. After that, she headed inland, over California, towards Houston. She flew in the open, having grown weary of concealing herself. A straight route would take her over Edwards Air Force Base outside of Lancaster. Not wanting to detour, Sara radioed ahead to let them know she was coming so as not to cause alarm.

"Hi fellas. This is Susan. I'll be passing over your air space in about four minutes, so don't get freaked-out when you see a the little blip on your radar screen. It's just me - oh, one thing, uhm . . . I'm, uh . . . well - I'm naked, okay. So . . . don't anybody look, alright?"

Needless to say, the entire base was outside to greet her when she flew overhead. All of the officers, and a number of enlisted men, had binoculars.

"Oh, you guys . . . !" Sara complained.

All she could really do was flip over on her back in the air, and face the sky as she passed over the base. Nobody on the ground seemed to mind, however, - her hair only extended halfway down her back after all.

Nice cheeks, Susan commented, in tune with the loud accompaniment of whoops, and cheers, Sara was getting.

Shutup, Sara snarled at her smart-assed computer self, and then she noted, *They're gawking at you too.*

. . . you could use your hands to cover yer butt, y'know.

It wasn't often that Sara could say, 'Gotcha' to Susan. This was a moment, despite her exposed condition, to be savored . . . and rubbed in.

. . . suffer.

In a number of ways, Sara was still pretty naive.

At least tell them to stop, will you!

And so was Susan.

Sara got home before anyone else was up. Feeling refreshed, and famished, she ingested the entire contents of the refrigerator - except the steel racks and the ice cube trays - then flopped herself in the air over Alex for a quick, restful nap.

Later, Olga was overjoyed to hold her little vibration again. She smelled of the sea, and had salt in her hair, but, at least, the stench of Venus was gone. At least it was gone from Sara, at any rate. The stink, despite numerous bathings, would hang on Dinah for days, *"Thank you very much . . ."*

After she'd showered, and dressed, Sara joined her family at the breakfast table. It was a different atmosphere she encountered there than the one of joyous welcome earlier. Dinah regarded her seriously from across the table. Seated between them along one side of the table, Olga took visual note of Sara over her reading glasses, then returned her attention to a slip of paper she was busily writing on.

"Good morning," the odoriferous Amazon greeted the artifact. *"I'm glad you're feeling better, but couldn't you have left Olga, and me, just a little milk for our morning coffee? You know neither of us really cares for the nondairy stuff."*

"Good morning, and . . . I'm sorry," Sara said more out of politeness.

"Are you finished?" Olga asked of Dinah, wondering if there was to be any more telepathic communications. Receiving an affirming nod in reply, Olga then turned to Sara.

"So tell us where you haf been?" she asked. "Ve haf been worried sick about you."

Sara didn't want to remember any of what she'd been through since she'd run away from home, but her Mother, and her Banggo, had the right to know.

"I really am indestructible," she began. "And I should know, because I've just spent the

last month trying."

Sara had tried to destroy herself. Her emotions had been so confused, and pained, when she'd fled more than four weeks before, that she'd resolved to terminate her existence. From the apartment complex, she'd flown directly into space. When she'd gotten a few thousand miles from earth, she took up a position facing the Sun where she hoped the massive fireball's heat, and radiation, would eventually burn her up. The front part of her body turned white hot after only a few minutes, while the back half of her froze. She remained stationary like that for more than a week, waiting for Susan to respond to the extreme conditions by shutting down her program. The elements, the conditions and the void, however, had no affect on her computer simulated form.

Bored, but determined, Sara had then decided that more heat was needed. So she'd thrown herself, headstrong, into the Sun itself.

"I *can* do light-speed, I found out," she reported in passing. "Man, what a trip. I would've enjoyed it if I hadn't been so pissed."

Into the Sun she flew, wallowing, for days, in the heat and the flame. Several times, surface eruptions threw her thousands of miles up into space, but, every time, Sara just turned around, and went back for more. Almost two weeks she spent on, in and around the Sun, getting more, and more, fed up with her undisturbed active status as time wore on.

*Are you getting **any** of this?* she finally demanded of Susan.

Are you tawkin' t' me? was all Susan replied.

She was in a mood of her own.

Stupid computer! Sara sputtered in rage. *Screw you, you stupid, freakin', refried cowpie!*

And then she saw a planet in the far distance. One she remembered all too well. Sara made up her mind, and set her sites.

Eat Venus and die, bitch!

She achieved light-speed within moments. Her first impact on the red planet buried her over three thousand miles into its surface. She remained at the bottom of the hole she'd made, sulking for nearly a day before she grew bored, and flew out again. Back in space, Sara stopped, turned around and took a careful kreen of her desired place of burial. After determining the hardest spots of Venus' terrestrial make-up, she proceeded to throw herself again, and again, at the locations, searching for fatal vulnerability in her computer generated

form, and hoping to give the clueless Susan a clue. She tried every variety of body position; feet first, head first, leading with one shoulder, then the other, butt first, belly-flop and back-splat. A sizable portion of the Venetian atmosphere became thick with the surface dust thrown up from where she'd hit. Nothing worked to satisfy her intent, however, and Sara grew more disgusted, and fed-up, with each failed attempt. Finally, she light-spined more than a million miles out into space, then stopped, and turned around. She paused to spit some red dust from her mouth, eyeing her target with grim resolve.

Oh, pleeease don't throw me into that briar patch, Susan pleaded with all the sincerity of a cinder block.

Screw you, Sara swore.

She spat again, and tried to turn her sense of taste off, but Susan over-rode her on that option.

Screw you! Sara swore again as she hitched up a pair of imaginary trousers around her naked waist.

Eat planet and die, you bitch!

She hurled the epitaph like it was a war cry as she hurled herself at Venus once more, screaming soundlessly into the void.

Dead center, spread eagle, face first- that outta do it. Light . . . speed . . . c'mon!

She impacted with a tremendous 'whomp!', throwing up a massive dust-cloud thousands of feet from the planet's surface. Sara kept herself going this time. She wouldn't give up in her determination to give up. Her body, her outstretched fingers, and toes, even her hair clawed at the elements they tore through. The sound of her silent scream echoed in her head.

This is it! This - is - it! This . . . is . . . Oh - shit!

Briar patch is back that way, kid.

Sara was out in space again. She'd flown straight through the whole damned planet. She hadn't even gotten over the surprise of this latest disappointment when she became aware of the fact that she was still in screaming mode.

How much of that did I - no . . . no, I don't wanna know . . .

I can't believe you ate the whole thing.

Shut . . . up . . . Ugh! I'm gonna be sick. I just wanna die.

Let's see . . . you consumed roughly -

Shut - up, will you! Why can't you just let me

die in peace?

Okay, but then where does that leave me?

All you think of is yourself.

Pot - calling - the kettle . . . red.

I'm hurt! Okay?

I understand that.

I mean, I'm really, really hurt.

I know how you feel.

I didn't know so much pain could exist.

Neither did I.

And so, they started talking. Sara got over her suicidal rage, Susan listened to her patiently, and they talked. Sara poured out all the anger, and frustration, she'd had bottled up, Susan had felt much the same way, and they talked. Both of them talked, and cried for days. They railed at each other, made up, got mad again, made up again, and they talked. They wondered about their purpose for existing, neither of them coming up with anything. Sara missed her family, her home, but she felt too ashamed to ever go back.

We may not know just what we're for, Susan counseled, but I don't think hanging out in space forever is it.

Sara listened. Sara knew.

Bottom line: They need you, and you need them.

This isn't fair.

Nobody ever said it was, Susan told her, and then she asked, Can we go home now?

About a hundred thousand miles into her journey back to Earth, Sara paused to turn around, and look, and to remember. Something else caught her attention though.

Susan?

Yeah?

Does Venus look right to you?

Well, you did extend its orbital radius by - ehh . . . 14. 62897 feet.

. . . jeez . . .

You wanna go for an even 15?

. . . no . . . thank you.

"So Susan's actually the reason why you came back," Dinah ventured at the conclusion of Sara's story.

"Not entirely," Sara said a bit defensively. She still felt keenly embarrassed over the whole thing. "It was ultimately my decision."

"But she did a lot to convince you to make that decision."

"I'll . . . give her . . . fifty percent of the credit."

Last of the big time spenders. Whoo-pee . . .

"You really should go put Venus back," her mother told her.

"Oh, Mom . . . !"

"Sara, you can't just go moving planets every time you get upset."

"Dinah, enough," Olga told the lawyer. "Ve haf all been through enough."

Sara then turned the conversation to her highest priority of concern.

"What do I need to do to get Alex back?" she asked as an open question.

Dinah reflected on the topic which had almost exclusively occupied all of their minds. Still coming up with nothing, she spoke so as to include Olga.

"I wish I knew, Sara, but I'm not a psychiatrist. There aren't many specialists in Houston, and, by the contradictory opinions we've gotten so far, those we've taken him to don't seem to know what to make of his condition."

"Vhy don't you see what you can do yourself," Olga suggested to the girl.

"I've been doing everything I can," Sara stated a bit testily.

"Vatching over him, takink care of him, worryink about him," the Russian went on in a tone of gentle derision.

She, and her Vibration, locked eyes on one other.

"Anyvone can do that," the wise old woman told the girl, and then she asked, "but vhat can you, and Susan, do?"

Sara regarded her Banngo perplexidly.

"I'm not really following you."

"To find a cure, you must find the cause, and to do that, you must research," Olga explained. "You know all about mechanics, and physics, but you don't know all that much about people. That is our fault, because it didn't occur to us to teach you. But you can take care of that yourself now. You know how to discover, and sort out information. Study. Think. Talk to knowledgeable people. Some of the best minds in mental science are in

Europe. Talk to them. I'm sure they would be very happy to have you visit them."

Sara looked to Dinah for her input.

"I don't have anything to add to that," the attorney admitted, then she smiled. "You're a mature, intelligent artifact - with . . . mm, certain powers of deductive reasoning."

Sara smiled her mother's appreciation, but still she had to consider that, "Reason may not be all of what this situation's made of."

"Vone ting is for sure though," Olga told her, "nothing is goink to get solved wit you mopink around in the air all the time. It's been like . . . you'd given up on Alex, and vere in mounink for him."

"We've been just as worried about him as you have, Sara," Dinah added.

"Yeah," said Sara a bit morosely as she reflected over the time following her reactivation. "I didn't know what to do, so . . . I guess I just did nothing."

"You haf to stop blamink yourself for vhat happened."

Sara snapped to attention at this. She fixed her eyes on Olga.

"None of this would've happened if not for me," she stated.

"Alright," Dinah quickly agreed, "but you were merely a catalyst for other people's actions. It is still, ultimately, Marshall Wayans' responsibility."

Sara eyed her mother.

"Oh, don't think I haven't forgotten about him."

"You be careful, young lady," Dinah ordered her very specifically. "You don't get crazy with someone like him. You be . . . *darned* careful."

"So," said Olga, observing Sara, "vhat do you be thinkink?" She didn't have to try hard to sound enticing. "Ve haf fine medical library in Moscow."

Sara regarded the wise old Russian. She loved her so.

"I guess I'd better get started then," she said.

"Good!" Olga exclaimed, happily clapping her hands together. "Good," she said again. "And now that you are feelink better, and haf your appetite back," she then ceremoniously presented Sara with the paper she'd been writing on, "here you are."

Sara took the paper, and looked at it.

"What's this?" she wanted to know.

"A grocery list," Olga duly informed her.

Sara's curious frown prompted the old woman to elaborate.

"You eat, you shop," she stated.

Crestfallen, Sara slumped back in her chair.

"Oh maaaann . . .," she whined effectively, then she had a sure-fire grown-up beater of an idea. "I've got a lot of kreening to do."

"Since when has Susan been needink you for hands on assistance?" Olga wondered pointedly.

Rats! the girl thought.

Not at all happy with her immediate prospects, Sara raised her plaintive, deep blue, doe-like, eye simulations to her dear, dear mother in the hope of being sprung from her chore. She was not encouraged to see Dinah smiling suspiciously back at her over the rim of her upraised coffee mug.

"Leave some milk next time," Dinah solicitously advised her.

Sara heaved an adolescent sigh, then got up, and made to leave. Olga raised an arm, and caught her, though, before she could get away. Sara paused, and the two of them shared a hug. Observing, Dinah thrilled at the sight. It had been a long time. Such a long time.

"Excuse me?" she thought tentatively in Sara's direction.

Sara looked at her. Dinah purposefully looked away.

"You, uh . . . got some of that left for me . . . maybe?"

Without a word, Sara left her grandma, and floated to Dinah, throwing her arms around her thick, strong neck. Before anyone knew it, however, the Amazon grabbed the levitated girl around her body, flipped her in the air, and started mauling her with passionate, motherly affection.

"Ack!" Sara protested between delighted squeals, her legs kicking helplessly in the air. "Bango - help! She's got me!"

Olga just sat there laughing quietly. It'd been such a long time. For all of them.

The day started like any other day for congressional investigator, Jerry Mander. The veteran staffer had worked in the offices of a number of committees before winding up in Judiciary. He liked it there. He was good at what he did. He hoped they would let him stay.

He ambled into his cramped, cluttered, little office with his morning cup of coffee, sat down at his cramped, cluttered, little desk, then indulged his morning ritual of searching for a place to put his coffee cup. After carefully setting it inside an open desk drawer, Mander surveyed the litter of files, documents and other legal papers in front of him.

Where do you start? he wondered to himself, and then he wondered, *Where did I leave off?*

A figure appeared in his office doorway. It was the very nice figure of staff secretary Phyllis Bustier. Jerry Mander looked up to note the enticing, rolling motion of her pelvis as she strode into the room toward him. She had an envelope in her hand. She extended it in offering to him.

"This just arrived," she informed him as the envelope changed hands.

Mander took the envelope, opened it, then extracted what was inside. He looked to see, *Another deposition*, then tossed it to one side on a pile of similar papers on his desk.

"I'll get to it," he assured Bustier without conviction, then he began searching for where he'd left his coffee.

"You'd better look at that," she advised him with a specific tone.

Mander looked up at the secretary who was, essentially, telling him what to do.

"What's so special about it?" he wanted to know.

Bustier held the man's attention.

"It's from Lanna Oldsen."

Olga's sound advice regarding Alex proved to be just what Sara needed, and, once she was pointed in the right direction, she took the ball, and flew with it.

The first thing she did was to locate, and contact, the greatest psychiatric minds, theologians and medical specialists in the world. Yes, they all had heard about her, and, yes, all of them were delighted for the opportunity to talk to her, but - on the condition that *she* then talk to *them*. Every one of them harbored an intense curiosity about Sara, and Susan, and had longed to examine both of them particular to their own field. Sara gathered a laundry sheet of documentation they wanted her to bring with her regarding Alex. Several terms they used she didn't understand, but Susan had their conversations recorded, so she could easily reference them for definition later on.

Next, Sara creened like she'd never creened in her life. She creened her way through medical libraries, psychiatric libraries, medical journals, papers and periodicals. She gained unparalleled expertise in every known medical diagnostic, procedural and monitoring apparatus. In less than two days she knew every drug known to man. She knew their affects per dosage, all possible combinations of their combined affects, their possible side affects, their possible counter affects, what went with what, what didn't go with what and how much,

down to the very last grain. She spread Susan's awareness out over the world, kreening hundreds of surgical procedures in progress all at once. Within a week, in any country in the world, Sara was a fully qualified doctor of medicine, psychiatry and pharmacology as well as any variety of specialty thereof.

On the suggestion of a number of doctors she had talked to, Sara, at the same time, made a thorough study of the world's religions, and spiritual disciplines. She kreened her way through the history of faith, and was astounded by the amount of blood, and conflict, she encountered. She was appalled at both the frequency, as well as the effectiveness, with which holy books had been used in man's pursuit of temporal power. On hindsight, she found a disturbing irony in the fact that so many religious leaders had declined to meet with her.

Last on her 'to-do' list of preparation, Sara performed a complete, three dimensional, molecular kreen of Alex, documenting his anatomy in a variety of image resolutions from human eye observation, to any desired power of microscope, to X-ray, to CAT scan, to MRI.

When she donned her uniform to fly off to her first appointment with a brain specialist in Switzerland, she was more than able to hold her own in discussion with any, and all of the men, and women, she was scheduled to see. She'd be able to communicate anything they might want to know about Alex. She could show them any type of image of him they might want to look at. Fully attired, but for her feet, Sara reflected on the human need for prayer as she stepped into her red slippers.

What do you think? she asked Susan. *Should we try it?*

It certainly wouldn't hurt, was all that Susan said in answer.

Out of respect for Dinah's wish, Sara had gathered the monitoring hairs she'd assigned to her family, and friends. Before she left, however, she detached a glowing hair from her the back of her wrist, and had it hover over Alex. All the while she'd be gone, she would know about his every breath, his every heartbeat. In the days of her absence, Olga, and Dinah, would find needed comfort in seeing that tiny glow, knowing that Sara was alright.

Her touch down near the medical studies center at the University of Geneva was met with a full blown local media blitz. The doctor she was to consult with had publicly announced her coming. The result was that, within a three hundred mile radius of the city, every scientist of note - and far many more who were not - had made a pilgrimage to the capital to meet, and talk with, the alien artifact. The Swiss authorities had initially tried to bar Sara from entering the country, but, as an unprecedented flow tourist money began pouring

across the Swiss boarder from, literally, all directions, the state governors became quiet. By the time of Sara's arrival, Geneva was packed with professionals, nonprofessionals, media, tourists, curiosity seekers and looky-loos, all hoping to get a first hand glimpse of the flying girl from Houston, America.

Sara was stunned - and not a little upset - at the array of dinners, and receptions, that had been arranged for her. She was on a tight schedule for this personal mission world tour, and had neither the time, nor the desire, for public appearances. She expressed her concerns to the doctor when she could finally get him alone. Apologies were made, but, after rescheduling three appointments in three different countries, Sara agreed to appear at one reception that evening - "in a dress, not in my uniform" - where she would talk with whoever would be lucky enough to get into the hall. She sent an E-mail to all her future contacts that her meetings with them were to be strictly private.

The episode in Switzerland, however, was nothing compared to what happened in Germany.

It was in Bonn. Sara had interfaced with her contact there one morning, and had a few hours to spare before she was scheduled to meet with a psychiatrist in Vienna that afternoon. So, she decided to do some sight seeing in the homey, old city of Beethoven's birth.

Therein she encountered a problem. Although Germany had been one of the few countries to *not* go out of its way in imposing restrictions on her, her presence there without a passport was illegal. With the only item of civilian wear she'd brought along with her being her 'Dodgers' cap, Sara knew that she'd hardly be inconspicuous. She decided to take the risk, however, of being out in public in her uniform.

Almost at once, she encountered a tour group of retirees, all of whom, she found, were Jewish. Sara admired the Jews. They hadn't given themselves a problem over her, and she appreciated that. She fell in easily with the group. Though they all spoke English, Sara conversed with them in Yiddish. It contributed to the comfortable, easy atmosphere all of them came to share.

She flew along beside their tour bus as it made its way from one point of interest to the next, often chatting with other tourists through the open windows as they traveled along. After lunch, they were stopped in an open, trafficless square in an older part of town to take in another point of interest when Sara's moitoring kreen of the area intercepted a column of five police cars approaching the square.

"Is something wrong, Susan?" Mrs. Horowitz inquired of her, having noticed Sara's

distracted mental state.

Sara's attention snapped back to her immediate surroundings.

"Oh no, Mrs. H," she hastily assured her old touring companion without much conviction, "it's okay. I'll be alright."

Sara knew that the police were coming for her. She could've just flown away, and there wouldn't've been anything they, or anybody else, could've done about it. But what was the point if she just kept flying away? She knew that it wasn't a matter of her being able to leave, but a matter of her being able to stay.

After reviewing selections of her recent past, Sara came to a decision. While keeping an 'eye' on the police cars' progress, she began putting a gradually widening physical distance between herself, and the tour group. If there was going to be trouble, she did not want her new friends involved.

She eventually made her way across the square. She was grateful to see the tour group filing into a building that was evidently open for viewing. She placed herself at the mouth of the street the police column was coming down, which opened directly out into the square. She could see the cars now. She noted with interest that there weren't any sirens, or flashing lights, and they definitely didn't seem like they were in any hurry.

As she watched them get closer, Sara had Susan check on the status of her family, and friends, back home. Once Susan reported back that everyone was safe, Sara resolved, right then, right there, in the streets of Bonn, to make a stand for her right to be on earth. She removed her 'Dodgers' cap, and stored it in her pouch for safekeeping. Her kreen picked up the lead police car alerting the others, "There she is."

Yeah, Sara thought as she watched the column advance, *here I am*.

The column approached her head on until the lead car stopped a few yards from her. Sara stood facing them with her feet well apart, her hands loose at her sides. Nothing seemed to happen for awhile, then the passenger door of the lead car opened, and a uniformed, Bonn police officer got out. Sara watched him step away from the car, swing the door shut, then begin walking towards her in an easy, relaxed gait. Badly stung by all the legal crap Wayans had thrown at her over hers, and Alex's, various pranks, Sara resolved to play this situation cool, and play it straight.

"Good afternoon, Miss Susan," the officer greeted her in German as he arrived.

"Good afternoon, Officer Schmidt," Sara replied in kind, noting the name plate on his uniform.

Officer Schmidt asked to see her passport. Sara answered that she didn't have a passport. Schmidt then rattled off a tired laundry sheet of police jargonistic consequences. Sara resisted the urge to ask him how he'd like a one-way ticket to space. The officer concluded his schpeil by stating that he was going to have to take her into custody.

Sara eyed the man regarding her.

You, and what army? she wondered laconically, but then she stated simply, "You will not," in a tone that left no doubt as to her seriousness.

Schmidt paused a moment to wonder how to proceed. He, and his fellows, had been instructed to apprehend Sara, but he also knew - from what he'd seen, and heard in media reports - something about what - or who - he was dealing with, and dealing with something - or someone - like Sara wasn't covered in the policeman's book of procedures. After briefly deliberating with himself, Officer Schmidt decided to go with established procedure - albeit with an added measure of caution. He moved forward to take Sara by an arm. Sara stood her ground, and allowed the officer to take hold of her, then she gently, but firmly, disengaged herself from his grip.

Officer Schmidt paused a moment to mentally digest what had just taken place.

Okay . . . back to the book, he thought as he then restored a couple steps of distance from Sara. The two of them regarded one another. *Where do we go from here?* he asked himself.

After reviewing the situation in his mind, Schmidt sighed inwardly with resignation, then decided to go the next step in what he knew to be proper arrest procedure. His hand reached around to the appropriate pouch on his belt, flicked open the flap, then withdrew his set of stainless steel handcuffs.

Sara saw the move, and watched the handcuffs as Officer Schmidt brought them around himself to hold them in both his hands. Though she maintained her poker face, Sara thought to herself, *This is not - going well.*

Again, Schmidt approached Sara, verbally instructing her to place her hands behind her back as he got closer. Sara merely stood where she was with her feet apart, her arms loose at her sides. While standing her ground, Sara did not want to appear as being arrogant, so she made the diplomatic gesture of lowering her chin somewhat.

Schmidt now stood before Sara again, the handcuffs in his hand. He repeated his instruction regarding where he wanted her to place her hands. Sara merely raised her eyes to him. She saw his lips purse, more from disappointment, she thought, than from displeasure,

and then he reached for a wrist that hung by her hip, took hold of it, and pulled.

And pulled. And then pulled again.

The limp arm remained at Sara's side, completely unmoved, its simulated flesh unimpressed by the officer's grip.

Schmidt pulled again on her wrist, and then again. By now he was trying hard not to show the amount of effort he was using. Still, Sara's arm remained unmoved, appearing to be completely relaxed at her side.

Schmidt finally added his other hand to the effort, but, before he could pull again, Sara placed her free hand over his. He looked up at her from his half-crouched position to see her watching him. Never, in his life, had he seen a face that was so beautiful, or which contained such compassion.

"Please," she almost whispered to him, "don't bother."

Being an intelligent man, what Sara was saying to him made all too perfect sense to Officer Schmidt. But he'd been given an instruction, and he was bound to carry out that instruction, be it at the risk of his life, or his dignity. More out of an effort to spare the later further abuse, he felt obliged to inform her that, "You're just making it harder for yourself."

"And you are merely going out of your way to embarrass yourself," Sara replied, and then, again, she urged him, "please."

Their eyes had never left one another during these exchanges. Still, Officer Schmidt felt he had to press on. He tried a different tactic. He cuffed Sara's one wrist, expecting that that would be sufficient inducement for her to cooperate with him. He looked at her after having set the manacle, hoping to see any sign of compliance, then Sara's hand began to rise.

Well, thought Schmidt as he relaxed a bit, *that's more like it*.

Sara raised her hand between them, the other cuff dangling from her captive wrist. There was a split-second blur. When Schmidt's perception cleared again, he saw Sara holding the cuffs between the fingers of her other hand. He also noticed that one of the manacles was irreparably damaged. He could see her looking at him, her face was the very picture of unperturbed calm. Sara extended the handcuffs to him as though she were expecting him to take them.

Schmidt sighed with exasperation as he took the handcuffs back from her. He turned away long enough to gesture to the car he'd gotten out of, then returned his sites to Sara as the driver of the car got out, and joined him.

"Officer Holtz," Sara respectfully greeted him.

Officers Schmidt, and Holtz, discussed the situation briefly. They decided that they would, bodily, pick Sara up, and carry her with them. Sara hadn't moved from her stance, having returned her arms to her sides.

The officers put themselves to this task. Officer Holtz had just bowed his posture to take hold of one of Sara's arms when her cape billowed out as if caught in a sudden gust of wind. The only problem was - there wasn't any wind. The cape swept out to one side, then gently settled across Officer Holtz's shoulders.

Holtz stood up at once, and vehemently shook the cape from himself. He then stood there, and stared at Sara in stunned surprise. Sara merely looked at him with placid innocence as Schmidt struggled, by himself, with her other arm.

Schmidt paused in his efforts long enough to call Holtz back to the matter at hand. Holtz, again, put himself to the task of dealing with Sara's one arm. Again, Sara's cape swirled around to lightly settle over his shoulders. Holtz stood up again, and shook the cape off. He could see the girl looking at him, the faint tracing of a smile on her youthful lips.

Sara had been playing with him. She'd gotten the idea from a Marx Brothers movie when she saw Harpo give someone his leg. She figured, *Hm, why not give someone my cape?* And so she did. It caused some startle at first, but with time, it just became a part of her, and everyone got a kick out it - especially when she was standing beside someone, and she had a corner of her cape reach over, and tap them on their further shoulder.

In this case, however, the trick backfired. Sara realized, too late, that she had seriously frightened the officer.

She took a step, and extended a hand in an effort to appease Holtz - while Schmidt was still vainly struggling with her other, more stationary, side. Instinctively, Holtz backed away, then he turned, and called out.

Instantly, the four other mobile units emptied, and there were eight other officers on the scene.

Schmidt took a break to describe the objective, then all of the officers, in turns, in pairs, in threes - whatever - had at Sara. They tried all manner of ways of moving her, turning her, twisting her, even toppling her. The officer who'd tried that had held his hands poised at her chest, but then he saw her eyes narrow.

"Don't - you - dare . . .," she'd warned.

He decided to raise his hands to the level of her shoulders, then he lunged forward with

everything he had. He came away with a pair of very sore hands.

They finally resorted to force. They tried twisting her fingers, but couldn't find a single one that would budge. They tried using their sticks - only to damage several. At the end of his patience, one officer took a vicious swing at Sara's head. He immediately recoiled with both of his hands stinging from the vibration caused by the impact. Later examination of his stick revealed deep imprints of Sara's hair in it.

Throughout, Sara had remained completely unmoved - not even the blow to her head had succeeded in so much as disturbing a single hair. The policemen got so used to her being like a statue that they actually panicked, and hastened away from her when she, of her own account, raised a hand to - lightly play the edge of a fingernail on the tip of her nose in order to relieve an 'itch' she'd discovered there.

Eventually, Sara just got to feeling embarrassed for them.

"Why do you insist on this?" she asked. "You cannot move me, if I don't allow it."

But the officers weren't much in the mood for listening. They continued to struggle, and strain, against her unyielding form. Ultimately, however, they lost the battle in dealing with the frustration of their failure. Their efforts became increasingly more frantic, and crude.

That's when Sara decided that enough was enough. She began to disengage herself from their holds on her, and to actively remove their hands from her person. It was the worst move she could've made, because it caused the officers' mindset to shift from frantic to desperate.

The struggle got uglier by the moment. Amid a continuous babble of orders, there was terrible awkwardness as the officers repeatedly took hold of her, and Sara kept manipulating her form to free herself from them. Their close proximity to her made her fear for their safety from the movement of her arms. She began backing away. At once, the officers closed the distance she'd established. One grabbed her cape at a shoulder. Another recoiled after tearing some fingernails from having grabbed at the neckline of her uniform. Sara compelled the folds of her cape to tighten on the one officer's hand, pinching his thumb, and fingers smartly before letting him go. Another hand grabbed her hair, and pulled. Sara grabbed the man's wrist before the idiot could slice his fingers off.

The situation was now way out of anyone's control. Frustrated, and humiliated, over Sara's continued refusal to cooperate, and their continued failure to make her yield, the police, eventually, lost sight of their rules of procedure, and all of its comforting, cause and affect - action/reaction assumptions. What was happening was beyond all of their training,

and all of their experience, as police officers, as men, even as mortal human beings. As their assumptions about what they knew should be proved false, the civilized, but fragile, judgments that were based on those assumptions also failed. As awareness steadily crept into their collective subconscious minds that they were contending with a force beyond their ability to control, or comprehend, they became a panic-stricken mob of blind aggression. Compelled more by the need to cling to their illusions than to Sara, they fixated on taking what they couldn't hold.

In the thick of the intensifying frenzy, Sara was starting to panic also. It dawned on her that she'd stupidly placed herself in an impossible, no-win, political situation. If she submitted to authority, she'd wind up being kicked around by every government functionary the world over. If she resisted, she'd be branded by every world governing body as an imminent threat to the human race as a whole.

Along with this, Sara became terrified that she would seriously harm someone in the process of constantly freeing herself from all the grasping, clutching hands. Her feet left the ground. Pain finally made the hand entangled in her hair surrender its grip as she rose into the air. Increasingly desperate hands grabbed at her everywhere as she continued to ascend; her hair, her shoulders, her arms, her breasts, around her waist, her wrists. More fingernails were torn on the edge of her belt. They grabbed at her cape, and her skirt, then her knees. Finally, only her ankles were all they could reach. Sara stopped herself just over their heads. There were now five policemen pulling on each of her legs. Sara just hung there, too frightened to act. She didn't dare leave, and she didn't dare stay. She didn't know what more to do, or where she could go. A constant stream of German orders came at her from below.

"Please, don't do this!" she begged them as she gently tried to free an ankle only to pull five men into the air with her.

Susan, what are my options here? Sara desperately wondered.

Not good, she reported, *and narrowing by the second. Whatever you do is going to look really bad on the six o'clock news, which is exactly where this thing is going to wind up.*

Immediately, Sara threw out an expanding, spherical kreen from her location. She detected one media helicopter approaching from the East from about two miles away. Another chopper was closing in from a Northwest position, and had just under three miles to go. There was also three local network news vans making their way through traffic toward her. One had a mile to go, another just under, the third was a mere four blocks away.

Options! cried Sara. *I need options!*

There aren't any! Susan reported bitterly. *We're trapped.*

"Please, let go of me!" Sara cried over the incomprehensible babble of German that went on below her. Vainly she tried to shake, and pull her ankles free. "Please!"

"What do you think you're doing!" demanded another voice in English suddenly.

The forceful tone of authority contained in the voice broke through the atmosphere of chaos, and caused it to quickly evaporate. The policemen, in general, woke from their fixation with Sara. Several of them visually searched for the voice's owner. What their eyes encountered was an angry looking little Jewish man who had to be past seventy. He was looking at them intently. He wasn't even an arm's reach away.

"Leave her alone!" he said emphatically.

Yes, he was the owner of the voice.

The officers began to relax. Sara creened behind herself to see that the tour group had returned from the building they were in. All of them were standing close behind. The old Jew was one of those she had befriended. Sara took advantage of the officers' loosened hold on her, and hastened back to the ground.

"Mr. Stein, no," she quickly told the man who had spoken, "please don't get involved with this."

Mr. Stein's attention focused on Sara. She was looking at him. He could plainly see that she was very frightened. The expression on his aged features softened somewhat.

"This really doesn't concern you," Sara quietly told him in yiddish. She felt appallingly awkward.

Mr. Stein's look hardened again as he, and Sara, regarded one another. After a moment, the old Jew deliberately stepped forward, and placed himself between Sara, and the officers. He turned to face the authorities.

"Leave her alone," he told them firmly in English.

The German policemen had no idea of what to make of this new turn in the situation.

"What did he say?" Officer Schmidt wondered out loud in German.

He tentatively looked about to his fellows. All of them looked pretty lost. Schmidt sighed noticeably.

"Does anyone know what he said?" he asked into the open.

"Uhm . . . ," said a soft, hesitant, feminine voice.

The attention of all the officers focused on . . . Sara. She stood behind Mr. Stein,

looking at them over the top of his head. She looked to be every bit as lost, and helpless, as they felt.

"He said," she informed them in German, "'Leave her alone'."

This information did nothing to relieve the embarrassing awkwardness Sara, and the officers, shared.

"Yes, why are you bothering her?" said another voice in German.

As Mr. Stein stood his ground, the general attention focused on a man standing nearby who appeared to be in his mid-forties. He was obviously a local. He was in shirtsleeves, and wore a bib apron. He may have been a shopkeeper who'd just stepped outside his store.

"She's not making any trouble," the man calmly explained for the officer's benefit.

"You're the ones who are creating a disturbance."

There was a murmur of agreement among the several German locals who'd stopped at the scene to see what was going on. Sara's presence in the area had attracted some attention, but the arrival of the police, and, especially, their altercation with Sara, had caused many more people to gather. One man stepped forward, and took up a stance beside Mr. Stein in front of Sara. He wore a concerned expression on his face as he regarded the officers.

"Leave her alone," he quietly advised them in German.

An elderly woman from the tour group placed her formidable self at Mr. Stein's other side in front of Sara.

"She's done nothing wrong," she told the officers in English. "Leave her alone."

The policemen seemed to no longer require translation.

From that point, Sara found herself having to drift backwards, giving ground as some, and then more, and more, people came to place themselves in front of her. She looked helplessly at the group of police as her distance from them increased. When she was back away, a man took up a position at her side, entwining his arm around hers. On her other side, Mrs. Horowitz took her by the hand. Neither of them looked at Sara. They both maintained their eyes resolutely forward, watching the group of policemen who were now some fifteen feet, and several layers of people, away. Sara was surprised at the strength of Mrs. Horowitz' grip.

The media copters were now hovering overhead. The vans had also arrived. The first image their cameras saw was a circle of at least a hundred and fifty German, and Jewish, civilians surrounding Sara, forming a human barrier between her, and the local Bonn police.

The police were at a loss for what to do. With the media now watching, they had to, somehow, convey, at least, the illusion that they were in control of the situation. Schmidt, and Holtz, issued a verbal order the people to disperse. No one moved. They repeated the order. Everyone just stood - watching the group of officers. The local who was with her, and Mrs. Horowitz, held onto Sara. Sara looked, and felt, utterly helpless. She tried to make eye contact with either Schmidt, or Holtz, but their attention was focused at the forefront of the group.

After a third dispersal order was ignored, the police decided to make their way through the group towards Sara. As they approached, however, the people gleaned their intent, and those at the front lines quickly locked arms with each other. It was an instinctual move - an instant decision - there was no debate, or discussion.

The officers reached the front-most line of civilians barring their way to Sara. They were determined not to back down. They ordered the people to let them through. The people only tightened their hold on each other. Again they were ordered to yield, then the police tried to forcibly unlock the arms of the three men they were closest to. Struggle ensued, and then a scuffle broke out

"NO!"

Everyone stopped, and looked. There was Sara, hovering above the center of the group surrounding her. At the first sign of violence she'd shot into the air - almost taking Mrs. Horowitz with her.

"No, please! Don't!" Sara called to the officers as she strove to disengage herself from the protective old woman. Once she was free, she hastened over the heads of the crowd to the officers.

"You don't want this!" she called to them in German as she approached, "I don't want this! Why do you persist?"

Everyone was grateful for the interruption, especially the officers - a number of whom had their weapons ready. The people at the forefront of the group made a place for Sara to descend as she desired. The officers too gave ground to her. Sara came to stand between the two groups, but Mr. Stein, and others, maintained a watchful presence close to her.

Sara pleaded for the officers to put away their weapons. Aside from being nervous, and scared, they were very concerned that they might have a riot on their hands at any moment. Sara had much the same concern. They hesitated. She hesitated, and then she quietly addressed them.

"I will have no qualms about disarming all of you," she told them as calmly as she could. "I think you know that I can." All of them listened to more than just her words. "But you will not harm these people," she went on to tell them. "Your quarrel is with me, not them."

Scarcely had Sara finished saying this, then Mr. Stein, and the German shopkeeper, placed themselves between her, and the officers. Others stepped forward to reestablish the human barrier around her, but Sara asked them not to. They respected her wish, but remained close to her none-the-less.

Observing what went on between Sara, and the people, Schmidt told the group of officers to pull back. All of them returned to the area where their squad cars were parked with a tired, ambling gait. They were weary, and profoundly frustrated - some beyond their ability to comprehend. Many of them had come to possess a disquieting sense that what they were doing was, somehow, wrong.

There was a general discussion among the officers as they reassessed the situation - some of it loud, and animated. Sara, and the people, kept a close watch on the officers as they talked among themselves. Several people who were closest to her offered Sara words of encouragement, but, for the most part, all of them just watched, and waited. After some minutes, the officers' discussion wound down, then seemed to conclude. Officer Schmidt stepped away from the group, and approached the group of citizens once more.

He took up a stance facing Sara from about fifteen feet away. The two of them regarded one another for a time, then Schmidt raised his hands, and gestured for Sara to come forward. Everyone noticed that the manner of his gesture was that of a request, rather than a command.

More time passed as Sara, and Schmidt, continued looking at each another. Finally, Schmidt spread his arms out wide, then simply let them drop to his sides. No one doubted that the added gesture meant, "Please".

Schmidt, and Sara, resumed their staring contest briefly, then Sara stepped around the shopkeeper, and began to approach the officer.

She hadn't traveled three steps before all the civilians who could plainly see her rushed at her back. Those who could get close enough grabbed hold of her, all of them urging her, in a chaotic chatter of English, German and Yiddish, not to go.

Sara paused to disengage herself. Reluctantly, but willingly, they let go of her. She stepped away, but took note of their worried expressions.

"It's okay," she assured them with a quiet smile, and with no lack of conviction in her tone now. "Really, I'll be alright."

Her smile broadened with appreciation for their expressions of concern for her, then she turned to face Schmidt, and finished crossing the distance between them. He didn't say anything when she arrived, but politely motioned for her to accompany him to where the rest of the police officers stood. Sara thought a moment, then cautiously nodded ascent, and then the two of them walked back to the police cars side by side.

Several of the officers succeeded in halfway smiling to Sara as she arrived among them. She didn't smile, but acknowledged their greetings with a look, and a nod. Schmidt walked through the group. Sara followed after him. When he was fairly certain they were far enough away to where they could talk alone, Schmidt stopped at one of the patrol cars, and turned around.

"You can relax, Miss Susan," he granted her with a tired sigh.

Taking her cue, Sara lifted her feet from the ground, and sat cross-legged in the air, then leaned forward so she could rest her elbows on her knees. When she was comfortable, Sara looked up at Schmidt, who had been observing her. She liked what she saw. His look of nervous perplexity made her smile.

"And so can you," she granted him of her own account, "Officer Schmidt."

Schmidt took his cue, and leaned himself against the patrol car they were by. Sara drifted closer to ensure their privacy. They conversed almost head to head.

"Alright," said Schmidt, reviewing what they both were all too well aware of, "we've got cameras all around, *you* are going to be a special news bulletin - it wouldn't surprise me if we weren't on live right now. You won't come with us, we can't leave without you, your . . . little band of supporters - "

"Don't call them that," Sara snapped.

The officer fell silent as the two of them regarded one another. Schmidt could tell that Sara genuinely resented the inference. He could also tell that she was right. He looked away so he could say, "I'm sorry."

Sara relaxed. She wanted this talk to be productive, and knew that Officer Schmidt did too, but there were certain boundaries. She presumed they would find those boundaries as both of them tripped over them.

"Your, uh . . .," Schmidt then stumbled on, "those, uh . . . the people - will not let us near you without violence," he finally managed to get out, then he asked the artifact, "where

do we go from here?"

Sara paused a moment to consider what had been said, then calmly replied, "I don't really consider that as being my problem."

"You can't leave either," Schmidt quickly pointed out. "You know how it'll look."

"I know," Sara granted him in a much more conciliatory tone, realizing that *she* had just tripped over a boundary.

"Those cameras are not going to leave until both of us do," Schmidt pointed out. He looked away reflectively, then shook his head. "We're just lucky they didn't show up until they did."

Sara looked at him again. Her look was serious.

"Yeah . . .," she said significantly, "you *are* pretty lucky they didn't catch you groping me."

Schmidt flared at this.

"We *didn't* -grobe you!" he stated forcefully.

"Oh, get real," Sara sneered. "I know when someone cops a feel."

She'd spoken before she caught herself. Schmidt saw her suddenly look uncertain, then Sara lowered her eyes.

"Sorry for the pun . . .," she contritely offered.

Schmidt's brow knit with curiosity. He searched for Sara's eyes under her lowered brow.

"What pun?" he asked.

Sara gave him a brief explanation of what she'd said, since the noun, 'cop', and the verb, 'cop' didn't translate into German properly. Once he understood the connotation, Schmidt laughed with genuine appreciation for her unintended joke. Their atmosphere relaxed. If they still weren't feeling comfortable with each other, at least they were feeling a lot less awkward.

"So," Schmidt queried, fishing for suggestions, "how do we get out of this?"

Sara blinked at this, then her eye simulations opened wide.

"*You* got yourselves into this," she pointed out.

"No, *you* got us into this," Schmidt stated with a stabbing index finger, "because *you're* not supposed to *be* here."

Technically, he was right, of course, and Sara knew it. Still, she pressed on to explain that, "I'm just trying to help someone who's really close to me."

Sara told him briefly about Alex, and why she was touring the world. The man listened, and understood. Sara concluded with her simple desire to see some of the city he was sworn

to serve, and protect. It was obvious to both that neither wanted any trouble. Schmidt's, and the other officer's, instructions with regard to her legal status, however, still remained. With the media cameras watching, the police couldn't just up, and leave - not without doing considerable damage to their credibility, and professional dignity. The authorities were trapped, right along with Sara.

"So what do we do now?" Schmidt asked, hoping that the super-intelligent life-form he'd heard so much about had a ready way of extricating them from the mess they both had gotten themselves into.

Sara merely hung her head, then shook it.

"I don't know," she admitted.

Emerrrgencyyyy . . ., Susan called to Sara in a soft, lilting voice.

It was the spark of an idea that got Sara's processor humming. She slowly turned her face up to Schmidt. He could see her sly look, and the mischievous gleam in her eyes.

"Don't you have somewhere to go?" she asked him carefully.

The spark leapt the distance between them to take root, and flower, in Officer Schmidt's mind. He came to share Sara's look, and her smile.

Schmidt went back to where the other officers were, and, between them, they concocted a plan based on his, and Sara's, shared inspiration. The only hurdle was to get the local Bonn police headquarters to go along with it, and play a part. A call was put in, the situation described, and options presented. After the dismal prospects of either Sara, or the group of tourists and locals, cooperating with Plan "A" were made abundantly clear, Officer Schmidt went on to present, Plan "B". After some discussion, their contact at headquarters told the police to hold their position until he got back to them.

There was some time to spare while Plan "B" was being approved for implementation. The group of civilians, who'd resolutely stood by, were assured that a solution was being worked out, and then everyone just, sort of, hung loose. Schmidt returned to Sara to pass the time - the other officers still felt a bit leery of her. At one point, Schmidt stuck his hands into his trouser pockets. The act made him think of something as he regarded Sara through narrowed eyes.

"How much change do I have in my pocket?" he asked her.

Sara gave him a look of ultra-fatigue. She'd gotten really tired of the 'dancing bear' tricks she'd come to be famous for when she was younger. After a moment, though, her mood appeared to brighten noticeably.

"Your wife just overdrew your checking account," she quietly informed to him, then she added with a rakish tilt to her head, "again."

Schmidt looked surprised, and then a pained expression gradually overtook his features as he looked away.

"Shit . . .," he mumbled quietly to himself.

Plan "B" was given the go-ahead - the details would be worked out later. The main concern, however - as both the police, and Sara, knew - was that the officers were given permission to leave the area without her.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when the police began to depart from the scene. Sara stayed with them to offer each a 'thank you' and a 'goodbye'. She kept visual contact with the ever watchful group of citizens, however, and occasionally waved to let them know she was okay. She gave Officer Schmidt the phone number of a reputable debt counselor who wasn't too far from where he, and his wife, lived. She walked him back to his car as the last of the other units was leaving.

"You need to learn proper respect for authority, Miss Susan," he took care to point out to her.

Sara stopped as Schmidt walked ahead, and opened the door to his car.

"Proper respect is based on admiration, officer," she told him in reply, "not fear."

Her observation caused Schmidt to look back at her. He could see her facing him, standing solidly with her fists firmly planted on her hips. For all the world, he was looking at a boyhood dream come true.

"Thanks for the number," he offered her with a pleasant smile.

"Besides," Sara then made a point of continuing.

With one foot in the door, Officer Schmidt stopped to look back at her. She was still standing as she'd been.

"If I didn't admire you," Sara went on to say, "you wouldn't be getting out of here with your pants on."

The two of them regarded one another for some moments. The awareness shared between them just caused their smiles to grow, and grow. At length, Sara gave him a wink, and Officer Schmidt gave her a nod.

When the police were gone, the media moved in, but then, none of their electrical equipment seemed to work for some reason. Nobody was interested in talking to them anyway, so, after a time, they got frustrated, and left. The helicopters hung around, but, with

nothing happening, they were soon called away to other, more action packed, events.

Sara returned to the group of citizens, and tourists - all of whom had stayed. They plied her with questions to make sure she was alright, and Sara assured all of them that, "I'm fine."

She spied Mr. Stein sporting an noticeable bruise on his brow. Sara eyed him suspiciously.

"Where'd you get that?" she asked him like a mother who'd just caught her son in the cookie jar.

"I punched one 'em in the elbow with my head," the old man stated with dismissive pride.

At once, Sara was all solicitous concern, even as she tried to scold him.

"Mr. Stein . . . you shouldn't have . . . I mean, you could've gotten seriously hurt."

But Mr. Stein just smiled up at her.

"Susan," he told her in Yiddish, "you were worth it."

She bid goodbye to all her new friends - in English, Yiddish or German. When she got to her, Mrs. Horowitz made a point of remarking, "You've got a good grip."

Sara looked.

"Me?" she exclaimed with surprise. "You almost broke my hand, girl!"

She waved to everyone as she lifted up to head off for Vienna. Just beyond the outskirts of Bonn with beautiful, open country ahead of her, Sara turned the trip over to Susan, then gave herself over to reflection.

What happened back there? she wondered.

Humans, she knew, were so frail, and delicate, yet she had just witnessed several of them willingly place themselves in danger for her - an indestructible artifact.

Man, does that not make sense, she thought.

In fact, to her, it was downright insane.

Crazy . . .

Making her way over the forests, and meadows, of Southeastern Germany, Sara was baffled, and mystified, by the fact . . . and she was also deeply touched. Knowing, as those people did, of how powerful she was, they still, willingly, put themselves at personal risk for her sake - coming to the fore of what could have been a dangerous situation for them in order to defend her, and protect her.

Hm . . ., she intoned internally as she took over her flight path from Susan, *maybe humans aren't so fragile after all.*

Back in Bonn, it was later reported that, unbeknownst to the group of tourists she was with, Sara had been working undercover with the local police in finding the location of a drug smuggling ring (the scuffle she, and the police were involved in had merely been a pre-planned diversionary tactic[!]). The operation was reported as having been a success, and the anticipated arrests made. The city chief of police made a good show of praising Sara for her commendable efforts on behalf of the good people of Bonn.

Sara was on her way to Johannesburg when Susan passed the report on to her as it was being aired on the German national news. It gave both of them a good laugh, but, in all fairness, Sara E-mailed back to the police headquarters in Bonn.

- > **Thanks a lot guys.**
- > **I screwed up, and you let me off the hook.**
- > **I'll get you a drug smuggling ring after I get squared away.**
- > **Thanks again!**
- > **Love,**
- > **Susan**

The rest of her tour went smoothly. All of the professional people she met with respected her desire for privacy, and all the local authorities made sure to leave her alone. The doctors, and scientists, were both enchanted by, and fascinated with, her. Sara valued their opinions, and her discussions with them, and she did give them some time to mentally poke, and probe, at her.

She returned home to Houston satisfied with her efforts, but disappointed with her results. No one doctor she had seen could find anything physically wrong with Alex. No one psychiatrist she'd consulted with could see anything in his background that could've lead to his current condition. She didn't know *what* to make of the opinions she'd gotten from the religious leaders she saw. Their pronouncements had ranged anywhere from declaring that Alex was possessed to simply saying that he'd lost his faith. The disparity of what they'd told her was so wide, and varied, that Sara was inclined to dismiss the lot of them as well meaning, but uninspired.

The near fatal attack on Dinah had put Sara into the habit of kreening unexpected visitors before she opened the door of Unit 1A. This time she sensed a well dressed, but

conservatively attired, youngish man, and woman. After checking them both for weapons, and determining them to be unarmed, Sara adopted a placid, but businesslike, expression on her computer generated face, and opened the door.

"Yes?"

"Miss Susan P.?" the man addressed her.

Sara looked at both of them in turn as they regarded her. She settled her attention on the man.

"Yes?"

"My name is Harold King," the man said to introduce himself, then, "and this is Denise Fisher," he went on to introduce the woman by his side.

Sara glanced at the woman who smiled politely as she gave her a greeting nod. Sara returned the gesture, but not the smile.

"We're federal investigators," King then informed her.

Sara's simulated eyes snapped back to him, her businesslike expression intact.

"We'd like to talk to you," he went on to explain.

Sara let a moment pass before replying, "What about?" There was an undeniable edge to her voice. "You're already doing everything you can to kick me off the planet."

"This isn't like that," Fisher was quick to point out.

Sara looked at her.

"Miss . . . P," Fisher hesitantly concluded.

Sara could sense an earnestness in the woman's look, and tone. It was unusual from what she'd become accustomed to encountering from officials. It was nice.

"We come in peace," Fisher sought to clarify.

Whoa . . ., the alien artifact thought with a blink. *This is a switch.*

Tell me about it, Susan agreed.

"We want to help you," King added.

Sara's eyes, and perceptual photons, shifted back to King. She sensed the same earnestness from him, but it was more subdued.

Sara keened no deeper into either King, or Fisher. She felt it was safe not to. She shifted her attention to Fisher once again, then backed up from the entryway as she opened the door further.

"Come in," she offered them.

Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman, Oscar Mosely strode into the Senate Caucus Room after everyone else was seated. It wasn't like him to arrive late. His committee was investigating a case of appropriations fraud. The days witnesses were present, along with their attorneys, families and supporters. It hadn't been regarded as a significant issue, so there were a number of empty seats in the spectator area.

Mosely entered the room with a stride that was at odds with his rumpled, worn appearance. It was a stride that was unwontedly long, and firm, for an overweight, out of condition, man past seventy. He carried in one hand a single, thin, manila folder. In his other hand was his trademark gavel - a memento given to him by a group of Native American Indians in his home state whom he'd helped way long ago. Mosely arrived at his place at the center of the committee table, set the folder and gavel thereon, then took his seat. After scooting his chair forward a few inches, he looked out over the people gathered before him, then spoke into his microphone.

"Distinguished committee members, ladies and gentlemen; a matter had just come to light that requires this committee's immediate attention. In view of that, the appropriations issue currently under investigation will have to be postponed so that this other matter can be addressed, and resolved. I do not, at this time, know just when the resumption of this issue will take place, however. I apologize to the witnesses who have been good enough to come here today to testify, but I believe you'll appreciate our concerns as events transpire. Now, if security would please escort everyone from the room, the committee will proceed, for today, in closed session."

Everyone, including the members of the Judiciary Committee itself, was stunned at what Mosely had just said. In the general mood of confusion that followed, people automatically rose, and began to make their way to the Caucus Room doors as witnesses turned to consult with their lawyers. Committee members turned to their nearest neighbor to wonder about the change of agenda. Senator Syble Ashby was lucky enough to be the first to Mosely's ear.

"Mr. Chairman?" she asked.

Mosely looked at her.

"What's going on?"

Mosely held his colleague's gaze.

"The alien girl," he said in answer.

Sara took a course over the vast, open regions of the Southwestern United States on her way to her scheduled engagement in Singapore. She flew in the open - without concealing her presence from either satellites, or radar - even though she knew she was in violation of government restrictions against her. After her close call in Germany, she'd taken to flying invisible to human detection again. She'd merely sought to avoid trouble, but the deceptiveness of sneaking around really bothered her. After returning home from her world tour, she'd reasoned that, if she was going to make a stand for her right to be on earth, as she had in Bonn, she was going to have to follow through with it, and be consistent. Now heading towards California's west coast, her perceptual photons focused straight ahead, Sara was hoping to get out over the Pacific hassle free, but, halfway over New Mexico, an Air Force fighter jet came up on her left side.

Sara stayed her course as the jet flew along beside her at a distance of about a hundred feet. She didn't do anything to acknowledge it's presence. She didn't kreen, more out a sense of politeness, but she did keep her receiving channels open. After awhile, she found it odd that the pilot wasn't attempting to hail her.

What's he going to do, she wondered, tell me to pull over?

The fighter pilot had taken visual note of Sara. The memory of how the two of them had met before had returned, and lingered. The strange, and yet familiar, girl still looked like a red missile with a yellow tip. The pilot smiled, then reached over, and switched off the plane's ground transmitter.

Feeling increasingly anxious about the pilot's curious silence, Sara was deciding on a way to respond to the orders she was expecting to receive at any moment: Yew will do this! Yew will do that! *Yew will kindly go screw yerself.*

"Hi, Susan," Sara then heard the pilot greet her. The sound, the tone, made her frown perplexidly.

Hm, where's that tough as nails, take no prisoners, masculine voice? she wondered. For that matter, where's the masculine voice? - Whoa, wait a minute. Mas - fem-? . . . no - it can't be . . .

Sara rolled onto her side in the air to face the plane flying beside her, a look of sheer amazement on her features. She could see the pilot clearly in the cockpit.

"Firefox!" she exclaimed. "Is that you?"

Sara saw the pilot turn to look at her, then raise a hand, and give her an unmistakable thumbs-up sign.

"It sure is, hon," Firefox told the flying girl, giving her raised thumb a reaffirming, upward thrust. "Long time, no see."

Confirmation of good company unburdened Sara instantly.

"Well, it shoor has been!" she enthused as she threw her cape away from her body. It whipped, and swirled about in her wind as she hastened to approach the plane. "How ya doin'!"

Firefox was glad to be with the enchanting alien artifact again. She was glad to have her close - grateful that she trusted her.

"I've been doing okay, Susan," the pilot reported as the two of them regarded one another through the side window of her plane. "How've you been?"

Sara looked away as she paused for a noticeable moment.

"I've been better . . . ," she admitted.

Firefox herself then looked away as she paused for a noticeable moment.

"So I've heard," she finally told Sara.

"But . . . I'm managing," Sara sought to clarify.

Firefox looked at her. She could see the girl looking back at her.

"That's good to hear."

Sara relaxed at the sound of the encouraging words. She lay down in the air, perched herself on an elbow, then rested the side of her head on her upraised hand.

"You're kinda far from the Enterprise, aren't you?" she wondered.

"I've been restationed a couple times since we last met."

"Cool," Sara commented, then she thought to ask, "Upwardly mobile, I hope."

"Mm, more like holding an even . . . but basically upward, keel," Firefox replied.

They both smiled. Sara changed position to lie on her stomach as she stretched her fingertips into the air ahead of her - just like in the classic pose. The pilot, and the artifact, flew along in silence side by side. It felt good to be together again - for both of them. After a time, Firefox noticed Sara change position again. She lowered her arms to her sides as her cape enfolded her. She became somber as she looked down before herself.

"So . . . ," said Sara. Her voice sounded hesitant. "I guess you're not up here for a social visit, huh?"

Firefox didn't answer for awhile. The good feelings suddenly went away from her as she gazed out her forward window.

"No," she readily admitted, "I'm here on official business."

Sara understood, and reluctantly accepted her statement.

"At least I'm supposed to be," Firefox continued unexpectedly.

Sara thought her tone sounded brighter.

"but . . .," the pilot went on.

Sara listened.

"I think, between the two of us, we can make it look good."

Sara turned to look at the pilot. Firefox could see the girl's expression of puzzled curiosity. She smiled behind her mask.

"Wanna play tag?"

Sara's reaction to this offer was not what Firefox had expected. She saw the girl's expression become despondent, then watched her shrouded form roll back to a face down position.

"I've got an appointment in Singapore I need to get to," Sara said.

Firefox thought she sounded pretty down. She decided to try again.

"Hey . . . you can spare five minutes, can't you?" she said an effort to tempt, and tease, the girl.

Sara didn't answer. She didn't even look. She just maintained position beside the fighter plane, gazing at nothing below her. Firefox noted the artifact's unchanged demeanor. She looked away, and sighed, more out of concern for Sara's somber mood than from any sense of disappointment of her own. She decided to leave her alone, but stayed with her all the same. They flew along, side by side, in silence for awhile. After a time, Firefox glanced over to check on Sara, and noticed that she was much closer to her plane than she'd been before. She looked to check her own position - *No* - that hadn't changed. She looked back at Sara, and saw that she was just off her wing. She thought it would be best to give her a heads-up.

"You're gettin' kinda close there, Sue."

Suddenly, Sara reached out a hand, bapped the tip of her wing

"Yer it!"

and then she

was gone.

Firefox felt an exhilarating rush of glee as she executed the hard right turn Sara had just made, and throttled her machine into full pursuit.

That little shit . . .

Approaching her destination, Sara could see that Singapore had recovered well from the earthquake that had nearly leveled the city three years before. The harbor was full of ships again, Changi Airport had been fully restored, and was operational once more. In the heavily damaged downtown section of the city, many structures had already been replaced, while several other building projects were in progress.

In keeping with her invitation's request that she refrain from kneeling, Sara was entering the area blind - although she cheated just enough to know that her movement was being tracked.

It was her first official public appearance since her return, and it was coming on the heels of more than three years of negative world press, and even more negative government action. She didn't know what to expect, but, with everything else that had been going wrong, understandably, she was expecting the worst.

Sara visually scanned the breadth of Singapore's shoreline as she approached.

Well, she sighed, *if they're just going to throw rocks, and bottles - I may as well get it over with.*

With that, she hastened herself along a bit, but not by much.

She arrived, and began passing over the length of Singapore Harbor. Sara thought it seemed awfully quiet for a major seaport as she looked about. No ships were going to, and fro. The monolithic container cranes of the Tanjong Terminal were all idle. There seemed to be next to no traffic on the normally busy waterway. The stillness of the atmosphere quickly got to be just plain eerie.

This is too quiet, Sara thought a moment before a large freighter up ahead sounded its horn.

Well, there's a sign of life, Susan commented.

True, Sara acknowledged cautiously, *but why is a docked ship sounding its horn?*

She had her answer a moment later when the entire harbor suddenly erupted with noise, and activity. Every ship of every size started blowing its horns as hard, and loud as it could. Tug boats, and smaller craft, hastened from the docks into open water with their horns blaring - the tugs having the visual advantage of their fire nozzles, all of which blazed away at full pressure. Men on humble fishing boats began waving oars, and sails, and shirts, and scraps of cloth to her, and anything else they could lay their hands on that would add length to their waving arms. On the shoreline, hundreds of dock workers rushed out of warehouses where they'd been hiding to wave at her, and cheer her on. Crews swarmed onto the decks of

ships to do the exact same thing. Many of the workers, and seamen, had noisemakers, and horns, and even pots, and spoons. Firecrackers, and fireworks, were blasted off everywhere. Anything, and everything, that could possibly make noise was called upon to greet her. Even the container cranes laboriously waved their massive booms at her.

It was a truly incredible spectacle, the likes of which Sara had never seen before. She was stunned - she was shaken - as her perceptual photons took in the cycloramic sum of mass, benevolent chaos that went on to celebrate her arrival. If she'd had any doubts - and she'd had many doubts - every one of them was now six feet under, and forgotten. To Sara, the 'Welcome' mat of Singapore was definitely out.

She turned inland near the West end of the harbor. The local media kept the public posted on her location, and progress, their television helicopters doing their part to broadcast her arrival live. Everywhere Sara looked below her, the streets, and roads, were jammed with stopped traffic, and waving, cheering people. They waved at her from the roofs of buildings, houses and vehicles. They climbed trees, and poles, and even park statuary to cry out so she might hear them as she flew overhead. Affixed to the roofs of many houses were home made banners made of bed sheets. They bore a variety of messages, and greetings, for her, but the most common one that Sara saw was, "Welcome Angel".

When she got over the downtown area, Sara was stopped by four police helicopters. They extended greeting to her, stated their purpose, then took up positions around her to afford her official escort the rest of the way to the memorial site. As they lead her along on a predetermined route, Sara saw giant banners of greeting hanging from the construction cranes that dotted the still recovering downtown area. The streets, and roof tops of buildings, she flew over were crowded with people waving, and calling to her. When she, and her escort, cleared a final row of rooftops, Sara could see her destination up ahead.

The memorial site was roughly the size, and shape, of a football field divided into two distinct, yet equal, halves. The first half was a large, open square that opened out onto the street it bordered. The second half, which lay beyond the square, was a lush, and colorful, oriental garden replete with paths, and running brooks, and little foot bridges extending over them. The concealed monument dominated the center of the site, set at the back of the square, bordering the garden. A temporary platform, where the dedication ceremony was to take place, had been erected around three sides of the monument's base, facing into the square. A row of chairs had been set along the back of the platform, extending from either side of the base. A simple, pedestal podium stood at the forefront of the stage. It bore a

microphone at either of its further corners.

The entire square was packed with people who'd come to witness the memorial's dedication, and to see their personal angel of mercy once again. The crowd spilled out all the way across the street, and up against the buildings on the other side. As well were all the windows of those buildings facing the square crowded with people wanting to see the dedication, and the guest of honor.

Sara slowed to a stop along with her escort just shy of the memorial site.

"This is as far as we can take you, Susan," one of the helicopters hailed her to say.

"Think you can find your way from here?"

"I don't think I'll get lost," Sara replied with a grin. "Thanks, guys."

"Thank you . . . Angel," the pilot bid her, and then the four choppers pulled away, and parted from her.

Sara floated down toward the platform where the dignitaries, and officials, of the occasion waited for her. She'd hardly begun her descent when the deafening sound of thousands of people calling up to her at once began. They waved banners, and flags, and handkerchiefs as she approached them from above - anything to let her know that they were there. Once she was over the stage, the cheering just got louder. Sara hung there, suspended in the air over the dais, her cape wafting lightly out behind her as Singapore's welcome continued to wash over her unabated. She was simply overwhelmed by it all.

So . . . where're your rocks, and bottles? Susan kinda-softa wanted to know.

Sara lowered her eyes, and then she had to smile.

I'll take some steak sauce with my words if you don't mind.

The crowd gradually quieted when Sara alighted on the stage to be greeted by all those present. She was given a brief rundown of what was to happen, then she took a seat with the officials at the back, and the formal ceremony was gotten under way.

There were a number of brief addresses given by a number of speakers. All of them recalled the event, commemorated those who'd died, commended those who'd persevered and elaborated on the purpose of the memorial. Each of the speakers also brought up some specific detail pertaining to Sara's activities during the crisis. Sitting at the back of the stage, Sara stared at her toes whenever her name was mentioned.

At the appropriate time, Sara was introduced, and cued to come forward. She was to be accorded the honor of unveiling the monument. The mood of quiet prevailed throughout the crowd as she was given the ripcord, and told how it worked, then everyone stepped away so

she could have the stage to herself.

Sara paused to feel the atmosphere. She felt strangely alone standing there with the cord in her hands. She remembered that she'd been advised to face the monument. Sara turned around, and pulled on the cord.

Without a single hitch, or snag, the binding that held the shroud in place released at several points at once. The ropes loosened, and fell away. A light breeze caught the airy material just right, briefly making it flutter in a graceful way, and then it too began to fall. Everyone stood in reverential silence as the shroud surrendered its hold on the statue, falling to the stage in a circular pool of light blue folds. When all was shown, and the monument stood forth for all the world to see, a collective sigh of wonder issued up from the crowd. Standing to one side with the cord still in her hands, Sara couldn't believe what her perceptual photons were revealing to her. It took her simulated breath away. She could hear the mere beginnings of applause as she gazed up at the statue, and beheld herself.

The twenty-two foot high, lightly green patinaed, bronze memorial had been rendered in her image. From the toes of her gold soled slippers to the crown of her wavy, blond head, the figure's likeness to her was exact in every detail. Captured in mid-stride, the figure appeared as if it were about to step, or even fly, from the base it stood on. The cape was worn over the shoulders, but stood away from the body as though caught in the wind. The figure's hands clutched the sides of the billowing cape as it swept before it's feet. The hair whipped out to one side from behind the figure's back, the wind shaping it in the form of the "S" emblem worn on the chest. The rendering of the face was a masterpiece of inspired craftsmanship - with a slight, but notable, heightening to the faintly anime cast to Sara's features. The eyes were down cast, the brow was slightly lowered. A single lock of hair hung between the eyes. The statue, with its wind swept hair, and drapery, was open to any number of applied meanings, and interpretations, but there was no doubt about the figure's firm stride, and majestic bearing. The whole admirably combined the shock, and sorrow, of incalculable loss coupled with the strength, the will, and the determination to go on.

The applause that greeted the unveiling was respectful, and subdued. It was as though the people were reluctant to disturb the figure in her mood of grief, or to disturb their memories of the time. Someone had to take the cord from Sara's hands before she wakened from her own reverie.

It took a second for her to actually see the dignitary at her side. They exchanged polite, but nervous smiles. He raised a hand, and Sara looked in the direction of his gesture. She saw

the podium at the front of the stage, and realized that they were expecting her to speak.

What can I add to what's already been said? she wondered as she slowly approached the rostrum. *What can I say that could possibly do justice to this occasion?*

Sara stood before the microphones feeling lost, and dreadfully afraid.

"I am deeply honored that you have seen it in your hearts to invite me here for this dedication," she began, but then she couldn't go on. She tried to force herself, "I can't express my gratitude . . . to you . . . ," but she couldn't go on.

This isn't enough, Sara thought to herself. *It's not enough. I lived with these people through three of the most horrible days of any of our lives.*

She looked out over the multitude of people who'd come to see her.

Open yourself to them, Susan, Sara instructed. *I want to talk to them. I want to talk to all of them. Seen - not seen, heard - not heard, open yourself, and take me to them all.*

Susan did as she was summoned, flowing out imperceptibly over the crowd until she had entered the minds of every person present. She extended over the land, and sea, slipping into every radio, and television set, that was carrying the event. She ascertained the identities of everyone she'd accessed, relaying their names back to Sara so that she, in turn, could offer a personal, "Hello," to each, and every one of them.

The crowd had begun to murmur at Sara's stillness. She stood at the podium, absolutely still, but for a slight rustling of her cape, and hair, at the whim of the breeze. Observing her from behind, the officials sharing the stage with her had begun to wonder if the artifact had suddenly taken ill somehow. All eyes were upon her, watching with concern.

One official began to approach the costumed girl when, all at once, a gasp went up from the crowd. Several people clapped their hands over their ears. All of them were astonished, to hear Sara's distinctive voice in their minds. Those who had been listening by radio heard her call to them by name. Those who had been watching the event on television suddenly saw Sara's head, and shoulders, image on their screens, smiling shyly, and greeting them personally.

"Please don't be afraid," she privately urged each, and every one of them. *"This public address just doesn't get it,"* she asserted. *"I . . . I just want to talk to you - to say, 'Hi' - to see how you're doing - make sure you're alright. All you have to do is think, or speak, and I'll hear you - just like you're hearing me right now. Don't be afraid, because . . . I think I'm scared enough for both of us."*

The people heard her, and, in their own time, in their own way, they responded to her,

offering a reticent, "Hello," in return. The shock of the novelty quickly wore off, however. The ice got broken on both sides, and Sara, and the people of Singapore, soon fell into easy conversation. Together, they relived the awful time. They swapped stories, exchanged praise, they shared grief. Sara was thanked by all of them for coming when she did. Invariably, she deferred; maintaining that they were the real heroes, and heroines, of the crisis. To a man, to a woman, all of them told her, *"We couldn't have done it without you."* To all she answered, *"I couldn't have done what I did without you."* All of them were thankful for her selfless efforts on their behalf. Even from the loved ones of those she couldn't save, Sara received unqualified gratitude.

She inquired as to what they had been up to in the time between their meetings. They replied that they had managed, they had recovered, they had gone on. All of the people she spoke with wondered as to her whereabouts over the past three years. Sara would merely answer that, *"I was called away for awhile."*

She was surprised at the unanimous response, *"Please don't leave us again."*

It pained her to know that all she could offer in reply to this was, *"I'll try not to."*

Chapter Forty-nine

Reunions

The day after the dedication ceremony, at the height of morning rush hour, Singapore was struck by a computer virus. It was a SuzieFlu, and it was the most virulent, and aggressive, one yet.

Devastation was almost instantly wrecked across the city from one end to the other as the virus easily leapt back, and forth, between energized, and non-energized electrical wiring. Computer hard drives everywhere were erased. The SuzieFlu blew through security encryptions like they weren't even there. Government, bank, business and financial records were deleted en mass. Vital utilities, and services failed. Nuclear plants had to go into emergency, manual shutdown. Telephone, and cellphone, communication ceased. Hospitals, and health care facilities, went without power. Their back-up systems also failed when the computers controlling them went blank. Two full commuter trains collided head on when the hard drive of the computer that controlled a track switch was purged. Two passenger jets, and a cargo plane, crashed at the airport before it could be shut down, and air traffic rerouted. A subway train derailed in the curve of a tunnel when the computer data that controlled its speed suddenly vanished. Even the computer chips of personal automobiles failed, leaving motorists stranded on gridlocked roads, and freeways. No one could believe how fast the virus was spreading.

Nine minutes into the crisis, an emergency call was placed to software wonder boy, Jimmie Oldsen, in the United States. Jimmie assured the panic stricken, Singapore officials that he would monitor the virus, and see what his technical crew could do. Seventeen minutes later, Jimmie called back to report, "This is a completely new strain of SuzieFlu. It's more powerful than anything that's come before it. I'm afraid I can't do anything about it. I'm sorry."

Jimmie hadn't even begun to say the first syllable of "sorry" when Susan screamed in Sara's inner ear, *Yo, sis! Butthead's at it again!*

Susan had known all about what was going on, but, having been consigned to an inactive status, she could only watch. The uses that her technology had been put to had made

both her, and Sara, grieve, and rage. Jimmie's software patents, and the world wide legal morass the two of them were in, however, effectively prohibited either of them from intervening, but this - this was just too much.

Talk to me, Sara told her.

And Susan did. She megaphoned the crisis to her, adding that Jimmie himself had released the virus from the computer in his White House office.

Sara had suspected that President Wayans would retaliate against Singapore for being civil to her. The world media had been told to ignore the memorial dedication, but news of the event, and Singapore's welcome of Sara, had gotten out anyway. It was obvious that this virus attack had a twofold purpose, the first of which was to punish Singapore, and, secondly, to convey to the world's governing bodies, in no uncertain terms, that they too would be in for similar treatment if they relaxed their opposition to Sara.

This was the first outbreak of SuzieFlu since Susan's reactivation. President Wayans knew there was a risk of Sara's interfering, but he believed it to be a risk worth taking. She had, after all, been conspicuously silent throughout his election campaign attacks on her, and she had remained silent since her return. True, she knew his secrets now, but she was maintaining silence about that too, for some reason. This was aside from the fact that what she knew was becoming obsolete, because he was accomplishing new, non-electronic secrets. All of this considered in conjunction with the fear of SuzieFlu being so pervasive that the world's governments had automatically begun issuing laws against her upon her return, and the world media apparatus cooperating as directed in reviling her, there was little reason for Wayans to expect that the alien machine would not remain silent, even as he sought to discipline a minor, but errant, municipality. All things considered, he sincerely believed that he had no cause for concern.

In this case, however, he was wrong.

Get on it, Sara instructed Susan. *Get communications, and hospitals going first. Save life wherever you can, then start retrieving data.*

I'm way ahead of you.

And I'll be right behind you.

Susan began centering her focus on Singapore as Sara donned her uniform, and telapathed the situation to Dinah. Dinah urged her on, but also urged her to be careful. Sara left with such haste that the air displacement at her point of take off ripped a seven foot deep crater in the ground.

Susan had already repaired a lot of damage by the time Sara arrived. She'd deactivated the SuzieFlu, and had restored communications to authorities, and emergency aid centers. She'd gotten health care facilities functioning again, and, while keeping an eye on the nuclear plants, she'd begun the task of retrieving vital information. Some pieces of critical data were completely lost, no matter how she searched. She patched in the missing bits with specifically modified duplicates of her own configurations to get things running again.

Once Sara was on the scene, Susan guided her to the hot spots of the crisis. When she arrived at the commuter train wreck, Sara was given pause when her cape suddenly detached from her shoulders, and flew off to hover in front of her. She stared at the cape as it wafted lightly in its breeze.

Guess what I just learned how to do?

At once, Sara smirked at the ingenious maneuver, then she told the cape to, *Get going!*

They worked like a team; Sara, and her cape. As she moved debris in order to get to victims, her cape transported them to the emergency treatment site that had been setup at the scene. With Sara's medical accum, she could kreen a diagnostic scan while the cape was en route, and have the victim's identity, diagnosis and prescribed treatment on the mobile unit's computer by the time the cape had arrived with the victim safely encased in its folds. When her cape got back to her, Sara had another victim ready to be moved.

Sara was impressed with the advantage of having her cape move injured people. Whereas she only had her arms with which to carry a person, cradle fashion, or slung across her shoulders, her cape could mold itself around a victim, and, thereby, add to their comfort as well as to their safety. While one side of it supported a victim, the other side would slip underneath them painlessly, no matter what body position they might be in. The cape would then transfer the victim, with their body fully support in it's 'as found' position, to the treatment area where the medics, and Sara, could determine how they should be moved onto one of the beds that had been set up.

When everyone had been gotten out of the train cars, and the injured had been attended to, Sara's cape settled back onto her shoulders as she kreened the remaining passengers. Aside from some minor bumps, and bruises, and several cases of shock, she detected no further injuries. She left their names, and medical status, on the medic's computer for the sake of quick reference, then took off for the next highest priority of concern.

As she left the site, Sara felt incredible. Her knowledge, her experience and her cape assistance had greatly increased her effectiveness. Though there were a number of people in

critical condition, her ability to act quickly, and efficiently, had resulted in not one life being lost. It did much to soothe the pain she still felt over so many earthquake victims having died in her arms.

Sara's presence in Singapore was known about by the time she left the train wreck. Susan relayed a report to her that the situation at the airport was under control, but that her help was needed at the subway derailment. The train was in a long section of tunnel a little less than half way between two station platforms. Sara took the short end. She was relieved to see emergency medical personnel setting up a treatment area in the station there.

Flying down the tunnel to the train, she encountered several medics with equipment, and stretchers, making their way down the tracks. She paused long enough to scoop up two medics with supply packs, and tell the men with the stretchers, "Go back to the treatment center. I'll bring them to you." As she was about to leave though, Sara detached her cape to scoop up a third medic with a supply pack - just to be on the safe side.

At the scene, Sara kreened three areas of the train that contained the most critically injured. She tore through the roofs of the cars at those locations, and lowered a medic, and a supply pack, into each. For communication: *Susan, gimme a telepathic link to each of these guys. "Okay, fellas, here's the deal - yes, it's really me. Okay, I'm doing a diagnosis on these people as you attend to them - yes, I can do that - I'll inform you of pre-existing conditions, and any medication they may be on - yes - I can do that. I will then prescribe treatment - look, buster, I may be a cryptoalien artifact, but I'm still a lady - and be careful with that woman on your right, she's diabetic."*

Sara, and her cape, then got busy. As Sara worked on opening the cars so that the uninjured could get out, her cape shuttled the injured to the treatment center. It wasn't long, however, before *I can't bul-iev - Susan, link me to the medics on the platform. "Why don't you people have a computer? - yes, it's really me - that guy has a fractured femur, and a dislocated knee - no, I will not get out of your head, these people need help - he's got some rib fractures on the left side, yeah, fifth, sixth and seventh - well, I'm not the one without a computer now, am I - severe concussion, right temporal region - I don't have time to come out there personally - looks like she was on her way to dialysis, she needs to get on a machine - I don't care if my cape is scary, you've got work to do, now get busy - he's having an asthma attack brought on by severe shock."*

Once she'd established escape routes for the uninjured, Sara worked on transporting those injured she could safely move herself. She, and her cape, worked in tandem, flying

through the dimly lit tunnel over the heads of the subway passengers as they made their way along the tracks back to the station platform.

On one return trip to the train, Sara, and a passenger, shared a mutually pleasant touch of déjà vu. She was in one of the cars, standing behind a man who was assisting a medic. His back was to her as she waited for another victim to be cleared for transport. As he turned around Sara was surprised to see

"You - again?" she exclaimed in surprise.

The man had been one of those trapped in the same subway during the earthquake three years before.

"We've got to stop meeting like this," he said to Sara, greeting her with a smile.

Sara smiled too.

"Well, at least you're okay this time."

He had been seriously injured before.

"This guy's ready to go," he told her, referring to a man the medic had just finished with.

"Can I take 'im, or should my cape do it?"

"He should be okay with you," the medic told her.

When the crisis was over, and everyone had gotten back to the station, Sara, again, screened the rest of the passengers for further injuries. She made up hand written notes on those she thought needed attention, then turned the notes over to one of the medics.

"I still can't believe you guys don't have a computer," she commented as the slips of paper changed hands.

The medic gave her a tired look.

"Take it up with our supervisor," he told her.

Sara held the medic's gaze.

"I will," she stated.

The medic held Sara's gaze.

"Good," he said. "Maybe you can get him to cut loose with some budget so we can get some stuff we need - like a computer."

Another medic, one of those she'd taken to the train, then took it upon himself to get up close, and impersonal with her.

"Were you authorized to prescribe these treatments?" he wanted to know.

Sara duly took the man into her consideration as her cape settled onto her shoulders once again.

"Were there any problems?" she asked.

"No. Everything you said was right, but that's not the point - "

"Were there any aggravated conditions, or fatalities, resulting from the information I gave you?"

"No, but - look, you're avoiding the issue here. The point is; were you qualified to prescribe any of these treatments?"

At that point, Sara could only purse her lips, fold her arms over her chest and look away.

"Answer me," the man persisted.

At that point, a corner of her cape rose suddenly, and slapped the guy up side the head.

Emerging from the subway, Sara knew that there was nothing else for her to do. With regard to the data that had been lost, Susan's retrieve, and patch, efforts had saved the Singapore economy from staggering losses. As for the rest, the people of Singapore had, once again, risen to the occasion, just like they had before. Sara felt confident that they would finish getting themselves out of the mess that . . . *she* - had gotten them into.

With the conclusion of that thought, Sara's sense of accomplishment turned to consuming sorrow. Yes, there was something else she had to do. She requested, and was granted, an immediate audience with Singapore's board of governors. She appeared before them in their chamber, disheveled, dirty and bloodstained from her rescue efforts. She was both brief, and to the point.

"I am responsible for the attack on your city," she told them.

As a group, the men blinked at this statement, and then they starred at Sara in stunned silence. One of them finally awoke from the shock of what she'd said. He leaned forward to rest his folded hands on the table in front of him, and regarded Sara thoughtfully.

"How is this so?" he asked of her.

Without mentioning any names, Sara briefly related how her technology had been employed in crafting the SuzieFlu viruses, and also how the viruses had been used. When she was done, all the men were gazing at her thoughtfully. Another of their number made a point of leaning forward to rest his elbows on the table.

"Would these viruses have been possible without your technology?" he requested to know.

"Yes," Sara answered, "and no. All of them, by themselves, are fairly common, but none of them would be nearly as powerful without my input."

There was another thoughtful silence. A third governor, who remained reclined in his seat.

"Did you authorize this particular usage of your technology?" he asked.

"No, sir," Sara answered forthrightly.

The man frowned at this, then sat forward in his chair until his forearms came to rest on the table.

"Then how can you be responsible for these viruses?" he inquired.

"None of them would *exist* if not for me," Sara insisted.

"It remains, however," noted a fourth governor, "that, as you say, this particular use of your technology was not authorized by you."

"So, how can you be held responsible for this virus known as SuzieFlu?" asked the second governor who'd addressed her.

Sara didn't have a ready answer. The group of men she stood before could see that she looked troubled, and confused.

"Susan," said a fifth governor to call her attention.

Sara looked at him. She noted his concerned look of fatherly understanding before he smiled warmly at her.

"Angel - the argument you are proposing is like saying that the maker of - say, a kitchen knife - is responsible for the death caused by a crazy man who took the knife, and murdered someone with it. That cannot be in sane society. It is the crazy man who is responsible for the death, and not the maker of the knife he used."

"With all due respect, sir," Sara stubbornly maintained, "my technology is no mere kitchen knife."

"We acknowledge that," the third governor replied, "but your argument is still flawed, and, being so, you cannot be blamed for what happened here today."

He took a moment to look amongst his fellows before addressing Sara again.

"No word of this meeting will leave this room," he took care to say to her.

The group of men rose from their seats to stand facing Sara.

"Once again," the third governor continued, speaking for the group, "we find ourselves in your debt, Angel."

As a body, the men graciously bowed to her.

"Please accept our humble thanks."

Sara respectfully returned the courtesy, but she was hardly satisfied.

I can't bul-ieve those guys! Sara fumed as she glided over the Pacific on her way back to Houston. She'd been ear-boring Susan for more than five thousand flight miles about her meeting with the Singapore governors. *I'm guilty as hell, and - nobody'll believe me!*

Get - over it, Susan counseled out of self defense. She was quite a bit more than tired of hearing about it.

How can I get over it? Sara demanded. *And how can you be so cavalier about all of this?*

I'm not cavalier. I've just adopted a certain perspective is all.

What? Detached?

You could call it that. Basically, there's nothing we can do about it.

You're wrong.

Look, I've shown you all the laws man (not so) kind has made concerning us, Susan reminder her. *Face it, they've made their decision about us. Now all we can do is accept that, and live with it . . . somehow.*

We're not talking about mankind here, Sara sought to clarify. *We're basically talking about one man who's affected -*
Infected.

- yeah, you're right. Nice choice of terms. - one man who's infected the entire world.

Still, aside from keeping an eye on him, there really isn't anything we can do about it.

Sara knew that Susan was right, but she also knew that she was full of crap. Susan had a way of playing devil's advocate with Sara at times. It often served to sharpen her focus, and make her more determined to find the solution to a problem.

You're wrong, Sara insisted as she set her sites ahead toward America's West coast. *There's got to be a way,* she said, her visage hardened with concentration. *There's got to be.*

Having cleaned, and freshened, herself in the Pacific, Sara stopped off in Portland on her way home from Singapore. She strode resolutely through the corridors of the rest home where Tom Starks lived. Her head held high, her flaxen waves bouncing gently with the rhythm of her tread, her footfalls made no sound as her cape flowed behind her to the natural airflow generated by her pace. She remained oblivious to the stares she got from the

residents, and staff, she encountered along her way, passing them without acknowledgment. She was there for a reason, and, underneath her purposeful stride, and placid visage, her simulated emotions churned like a storm-swept sea.

She stopped two paces shy of her destination doorway. There, Sara stood stock still, staring straight ahead. Her courage had suddenly failed her, and she was reluctant to continue. Dinah had briefed her thoroughly on Tom's condition. That was just the problem. The anticipation of seeing him so changed from how she remembered him, and knowing why he was so changed . . . She wanted to kreen ahead to help prepare herself for what to expect - but she didn't. Her objective's privacy meant more to her than relief from her own consuming fears.

All activity in the hallway where she stood eventually ceased as attention gravitated to the captivating blond girl dressed in the strange, yet familiar costume. All the watching people recognized her from what they'd seen, and heard, of the various media reports concerning her, as well as from their distant memories. They wondered why she'd come to this place, but they were also gladdened that she had. They watched her as she seemed to come to life again, and begin to move. She lowered her head, and raised her hands, and then the people watching saw her costumed body disappear from view as she slowly drew her cape around herself. Once she was protectively encased, Sara returned to merely standing where she was, her eyes cast down to the floor in front of her.

Seeing the lone figure so enshrouded, several of the people felt the urge to go to her, and tell her that it would be alright - whatever it was. They felt an instant kinship with this being who was, at once, foreign to them, yet their own. It was a vital urging for community that assured them that - no matter where she was, they were not alone. They needed to reassure her that she could go on, because, if she couldn't . . . then how could they?

Before any of them could move, or speak, however, Sara's chin abruptly rose up smartly, and her cape magically left her shoulders to billow far out behind her as though it had been caught in a gust of wind. As it settled quietly at her back, the people's sense of giving was returned as Sara took a deliberate step, and then another, turned, and walked into the room she'd sought.

Sara came to stand just inside the doorway of Tom's room. She'd gotten Florence's enthusiastic okay to visit him, but they'd intentionally left Tom uninformed that she was coming. They'd wanted her visit to be a surprise to him, but now, Sara had to wonder just who was more surprised.

She saw the brilliant physicist she'd known sitting by the window at the far end of the room. Tom had been sat up in his chair, a pillow bracing his one side, his body bound to the back of the chair to prevent his falling over. His left hand was balled into a fist held tightly against the center of his chest. By contrast, his right hand, and forearm, lay upon the chair's armrest, its painfully crooked digits pointing off in odd directions. From neck to pelvis, the length of his torso was torqued at a peculiar swarf that couldn't've been comfortable. His legs, and feet were gathered, and cocked at odd, and ugly angles. A constant trail of drool slid over the sag of his lower lip to collect on a towel placed on his lap.

Sara was sickened by the sight of him. She'd kreened scenes, and images, like this during her medical studies, but this was different. This was real. It was personal. This was someone she knew. This was

"Tommy?" Sara barely said.

Tom felt his heart skip a beat at hearing the voice that had sounded his name. His seeing eye lost its focus on the traffic he'd been watching outside the window. He remembered the voice, and its owner, and, all at once, it seemed like only yesterday that the two of them had parted company at the Clear Lake facility for what would be the last time. They had finished for the day, and she was on her way to change out of her jumpsuit to go home. She'd turned back to wave, and beam her glorious smile as she bid him, "See you after I get back from space, Tommy!"

That had been more than three years ago - *so long ago* - not yesterday, however. Tom's heart rate began to accelerate as his mind returned to the here, and now. He knew that her presence had to be connected with her mother's visit some weeks before. He knew that she was busy, but had hoped that she'd drop by, but hadn't really expected that she'd want to.

Sara had wanted her voice to sound bright, and cheerful, as she knew Tom would remember it, but she'd decided against it at the last second, thinking that such a tone would be an insult to the man she saw before her. The name she'd spoken hadn't been so much a greeting as it was to help her to identify the shocking wreckage of the human being she was perceiving. She wanted to kreen ahead, if for no other reason than to see if she was welcome, but she didn't dare invade this man who'd already been hurt so much.

Tom strained his good eye as hard as he could so that he might see his visitor. The angle was wrong, though. He wasn't facing her, and the bridge of his nose was in the way. He tried to see, picturing her, and how she'd look, in his mind. His heart rate was way out of sync with the setting of his ventilator. He had to give up. He closed his eyes, and tried to get

his emotions under control.

Sara couldn't imagine what she was seeing as being alive, let alone the man she knew. *How has he lived all this time?* she wondered. *How has he survived?*

He was so glad that she had come, but Tom could do nothing to stop the overwhelming sense of shame he felt over how he had become.

Please say something, Tommy, Sara wished with all her heart. *Please move.*

Calmed somewhat, Tom felt he had to return her salutation somehow. He put his mind to the task, and made the substantial effort it took for him to flex his right elbow.

Sara saw Tom's hand slip from the chair arm, and drop into his lap. Heartened by the gesture, her feet left the floor, and she flew to him.

Tom opened his eyes again to see Sara's well toned stomach hovering just in front of him. His heart rate started to speed up again as he looked up to see the stylized "S" emblem boldly displayed on her chest. He kept looking higher until he could see her beautiful, benevolent face looking down at him. He thought that she looked frightened for some reason - *why?* - and then he saw her smile - at least, he saw her try.

"Hi, Tommy," Sara quietly greeted him.

She drifted lower so his one good eye could see her more easily. The corners of her simulated mouth quivered uncontrollably as she fought to maintain a smile she knew damned well was false. She ordered Susan not to let her cry - no matter how much she might want to.

Tom followed her as she floated to his eye level.

Whatever does she have to be afraid of? he wondered. *Thanks for coming Susan.*

"My Mom told me about you, and about what you had done for me."

I've missed you. We all missed you.

"We, uh . . . we all thought that you were dead. At least . . . that's how some people have you classified."

Don't struggle, Susan. It's alright.

"I came to thank you . . . for helping me. Your deposition has gotten into the right hands, and - things are starting to happen."

I'm so glad. I didn't think that anyone would want to listen.

"Good things, hopefully, but it's still too early to tell for sure yet."

Don't look away! Why are you so upset?

"I came to . . . I wanted to . . . thank you - y'know - for what you did - and all."

I'm just glad I could help.

"I'm sorry for what happened to you, Tommy. I mean . . . for what I . . . I never meant to . . . oh, Tommy, I'm so sorry!"

Tom saw the artifact drop from the air as Sara fell to the floor on her knees at his feet. He watched helplessly as her simulated body quaked, and trembled, with uncontrollable sighs of passion. He wanted to reach out to her - wanted to reach out! - but she was too far away.

"So many bad things have happened because of me," Sara cried in a voice choked with agony. "So many people have been hurt - so many died . . . all because of me!"

Overwhelmed, unable to go on, Sara threw herself into Tom's lap where she wept unashamedly. The crippled scientist struggled to see the back of her head buried in her arms, her hair spread haphazardly over the expanse of her heaving back. Witnessing the outpouring of such pitiable emotion tore at the disabled man's heart. He knew that she was guilty of what she had confessed to, and yet he knew that she was innocent. She was a product of an alien culture, and, in spite of all of her powers, she'd been placed upon this earth naked, and defenseless, to the wiles of men, and so had become a tool to wickedness. She was as much a victim of her maker's lack of foresight as she was a victim of a race of beings ruled by greed, and fear. It made Tom wonder just which of the two was more stupid, or more cruel.

Watching the artifact as she shared her pain with him, and spend her sorrow on him, Tom had to marvel at the fact of her. She was a machine, yet she could feel. She was a deliberate construction of extraterrestrial matter, yet she willingly took upon herself the sins of others, and was sincerely sorry for them. More than anything, he wished that he could comfort the suffering girl - to assist the venting her passion so she could be done with it, and then go on.

His bearing witness to Sara's expression of remorse, however, opened something up in Tom Starks. It sensitized him in a way that was unique, and specialized. Who, or what determined this, no one, perhaps not even God, would ever know, but Tom reached out his right hand.

At that same moment, Sara's passion opened something up in Susan, and sensitized her in a way that was unique, and specialized. Who, or what determined this, no one, perhaps not even the Cryptos, would ever know, but Sara's perceptual photons were at just the proper pitch when Tom's hand touched her shoulder.

AH!

Sara quickly removed herself from beneath Tom's hand, and sat back from him on her

heels. His touch had been as much a surprise to her as Susan's outburst. With some effort, she stopped her crying, and began wiping the anomalies away from her eyes with her hands.

Susan, what's wrong?

There is another.

Another what? What are you talking about? Is Tom alright?

Yes, he's fine, Susan assured her, then, *I sense another.*

Sara shifted her focus back to Tom. She could see him before her, his right eye watching her. He appeared to be alright - at least as far as she could tell without kneeling. His gnarled hand waved in the air between them. Sara watched the hand, watched the way it moved, and Sara recognized the Christian sign of benediction.

Blessed art thou, Susan whispered.

What?! Sara ejaculated.

An entity . . ., Susan told her, *. . . so like me . . . missing in our bond.*

. . . entity . . . our bond - do you mean Alex?

Something like that, yeah.

Wul, that's a compelling answer if I ever heard one. What's gotten into you?

Let me see him closer.

To do a diagnostic scan?

Yeah . . . Let me go to him.

Susan, I really don't see the point of examining him. I mean, his case was closed long ago.

Let me go!

Alright! Sara said to her computer self. *Alright, but let me ask first.*

Sara looked up at Tom. She could see his good eye watching her.

"Uhm, Tom?" she began, and then she proceeded to carefully tell him, "uh, Susan's . . . noticed - something in you."

The color that was in Tom's face suddenly drained away.

Rephrase that, would you, an exasperated Susan advised.

"Something good!" Sara hastily corrected herself. "I mean - you . . . don't have - cancer, or anything like that." *Does he?*

I wouldn't know without checking, she said with notable fatigue. *You want me to take a look?*

"Well, anyway," Sara went on to address Tom, "she would like to take a closer look at this . . . thing - inside you, and, uh . . . it's, uh . . . well, what I'm trying to say is . . . uh. . . "
Ho boy.

'Oh boy' doesn't even begin to cover that, I'm afraid.

Tom looked on Sara's upturned, pleading face.

"Could we examine you?" she finally asked him.

Tom smiled inside, and sorely wished that he could make the corners of his mouth turn upward - even just a little bit . . . but he couldn't.

You let us examine you, he thought, so is there any reason why we shouldn't let you to examine us?

He wished he could've spoken, but he could merely blink his eyes instead. When he opened them again, he could see that Sara was smiling.

"My Mom told me that means 'yes'," she said, and then she frowned, "you *did* say yes, didn't you?"

Tom smiled again inside, and then he slowly blinked, once, again.

It looks like we're good to go.

Alright, we're just going to do like a diagnostic scan, okay? Nothin' fancy.

Check.

And don't get smart!

What if I find something?

Sara paused. She didn't want to consider the possibility.

Then . . . let's just find out what's there first.

Fair enough.

Alright.

Sara looked up at Tom. He was watching her.

Get going.

Knelt at his feet, Sara reached forward, and took Tom's hand as Susan entered him. It wasn't necessary that she touch him, but she wanted some kind of tactile contact to reassure him, and herself. She waited for Susan to get back to her, but, ultimately, she grew impatient.

Susan? What're you doing?

This is incredible, she heard Susan say. Sara thought she sounded . . . awestruck.

What's incredible? What's going on?

This . . . entity, Susan told her, it's . . . everywhere.

Sara considered what she was hearing. It made her feel uneasy.

I don't like the way you're sounding. Is everything okay?

Yeah, I'm fine.

And Tom?

He's . . . oh, wow . . . !

Susan, I want you to come out of there. Now.

No, wait a minute - please!

Is Tom alright?

Yeah, he's fine - man, this entity is something else.

What's got you so excited, anyway? I mean, you've done this before. What's the big deal?

I've just done Alex.

So?

I never found this in him.

Tom wondered if Sara was alright. She suddenly looked like she was about to faint.

Hey, Susan prompted her, loosen up on his hand. Yer on the verge of crushing it.

Sara came to from her distraction, and withdrew her hand from Tom's. What Susan was relating to her had her . . . awestruck.

What else do you see? she wanted to know.

Tommy is one fucked up dude.

Are you talking about his injury?

Yeah.

Just thinking about it, Sara had to close her eyes, and bow her head from shame.

Take a good look at it, she told Susan. *That's our handiwork. We did that to him.*

Yeah . . ., Susan whispered in agreement, then, *Wait a minute.*

What?

I am taking a closer look at this. Man, this is cool. It's . . . incredibly complicated - like a super, high-tech cable with millions of really tiny, interconnected wires in it. It was severed, and then . . . just . . . stuck back together - very crudely too, I might add.

What are you getting at? Sara wanted to know. *Make some sense, will you.*

Sara waited for an answer. When it didn't come, she was about to prompt Susan when

she heard her say

I can do this.

Do - what?

Fix it.

What?

Put it back together . . . make it like it was.

If you're thinking what I think you're thinking, Sara warned, but Susan cut her off.

What has he got to loose? she argued.

A lot if you screw up!

Look at 'im! Susan fairly shouted. *What has he got now?* she demanded.

Sara was paused by Susan's vehemence. She knew that her computer self was still getting acclimated to her new emotions. The two of them had argued plenty of times, but she'd never known Susan to be so adamant before. She deliberately let a few moments pass to let her settle down.

Susan, she then advised her in as calm a voice as she could manage, *I think you're getting way too carried away with this.*

He's me without you! she cried.

The truth of this statement hit home with Sara, and hit hard. Significant portions of the strange, protracted dreams she'd had leapt into the forefront of her memory, and, from her own experience in those dreams, Sara realized that Tom had endured the horrible existence of a living death. That anyone should suffer so . . . it couldn't be - mustn't be.

Are you sure that you can do this?

Yes, I'm sure. Let me try -

Trying doesn't cut it! Sara snapped. *You either do this right, or you don't do it at all.*

I misspoke, okay? I'm . . . I'm upset . . .

I understand that. This isn't like you.

I know. This entity . . . it's . . .

Is it interfering with your function?

No. It's just . . .

Just what?

I . . . can't describe it.

Sara took some time to think about what Susan was proposing. It amounted to single

cellular surgery. She knew the human body like no group of humans ever could. She knew, as well, that there was little risk to Tom, because he was already broken. She looked up to see Tom watching her. If she could but undo some of the harm she'd done . . .

"Tom," she called to him.

Tom watched her carefully.

It's alright, Susan.

"I'd like to help . . . "

I know.

"If I can . . . "

Don't be frightened.

"If I may."

It's alright, Susan. I know I can trust you.

And then Tom carefully blinked once.

His permission removed all doubt, and filled Sara with determined resolve. She made one last check with Susan.

Are you absolutely certain you can do this?

Affirmative, was Susan's unequivocal reply.

Alright, Sara finally allowed her. *Go ahead - but I'll be watching you every step of the way.*

Enjoy the show, kid.

Susan flowed into Tom, drawing upon as much of herself as she felt she'd need for the task ahead of her. She looked around a bit to orient herself, and then she chose a single cell. Her presence focused on the cell's nucleus with its chaotic swirl of string-like chromosomes. There, she settled for a time, carefully discerning the sum total of her host's genetic code. Once she knew him thoroughly, Susan used Tom's genetic structure as a schematics, and then her real work began. She hastened to the site of his injury, and immediately started the process of gently nudging the millions of neurons in Tom Starks' busted spine back to their original place again.

Tom watched Sara as she knelt before him. She was looking up at him, but she was so still. She didn't move, she didn't blink, she didn't even breathe as far as he could tell. He wondered at her stillness, and was even moved to ask if she was alright - that is, if he'd been able to. He watched the artifact intently, and then he saw her shift slightly to the left. He knew she hadn't moved, and yet . . . she'd moved. He knew it. He'd seen her move. Tom

closed his eyes to regroup his visual perception, then opened them again. Sara was still there, just as she'd been, yet he could've sworn that she had moved. He tried closing his blind eye, and he saw her shift slightly to the right. He opened the eye again, and she shifted back to the left again.

What is going on here, he wondered. Why is she moving, and yet, she's not?

Tom then closed his good eye, and there, right in front of him, was the answer to his question. For the first time since the accident, he could see with his left eye.

One by one, the nerve connections Tom had been born with were eased back into place. Once a splice was made, the reunited nerve cells embraced, welcoming each other as long lost friends, and the intimate flow of energy that united mind, and body, began to travel along its proper pathways once again. Taking her time, and taking care, Susan worked on individual nerve groups in succession, finishing one, then moving on to another. At the same time, she kept a careful watch on the pain centers of Tom's brain - especially when she was working on sensory connections. She knew that there were areas of his body which were not right - like the two gaping bedsores that had punctured either buttock, as well as the primary fracture to his pelvis which . . . really hadn't been mended properly. With these areas of concern, she'd proceed more slowly, sometimes testing the pain sensitivity of every connection she made. If there was a significant increase in brain activity, she'd stop, rethink, then try restoring the area in a slightly different order. She'd trial, and error, her way along until the spot was fully restored - except for the directly affected sensory neurons. These she deliberately left unconnected, earmarking them to be hooked up later after that part of Tom's body had healed.

Tom could feel sensation returning to a body he had long forgotten that he had. He came to feel his weight on the chair he sat in, and he came to feel his feet against the floor. He came to feel the sleeves of his shirt on his arms, and he could feel his trousers on his legs. He could feel his right hand resting on his leg, and then his leg could feel the weight, and placement of his hand. He came to understand why Sara was so still. He knew that what he was feeling was, somehow, coming from her. He'd never known that she was capable of such a thing. He wanted to thank her, and to, somehow, let her know that he was alright. He knew that he could move his right arm, and so Tom made the effort. It was easier now - so much easier. His leg could feel the easing pressure of his hand removed as he made it rise - *so much easier!* His hand raised up between himself, and Sara. Both of them saw the hand, saw it rotate, saw the wrist articulate, saw the thumb, and fingers relax from their Gawdawful

frieze . . . and move, all at Tom's deliberate, mental command.

Wha' do you think? asked Susan all too knowingly.

Sara watched, transfixed, as Tom tentatively began to work the hand that belonged to him again. She was impressed . . . and she was relieved. She gave Susan the high sign she knew she was waiting for.

You go girl.

Susan proceeded with her self-appointed task. More, and more, the energy pathways along Tom's spinal cord began to crackle, and hum, with life again. Little by little, Tom came to be aware of his torso, and limbs, and, along with it, his injuries, his crooked joints and his wasted, knotted muscles. All over his body, awareness came, and then a part of it went away as Susan strove to first discover, and then relieve, his pain.

Function followed quickly after sensation was restored, but it wasn't easy for a body that hadn't moved of its own in over three years. Tom tried flexing a knee, and he could feel his foot slide along the floor a few inches before it stopped. He knew that wasn't the limit of his leg's motion, but he couldn't make the foot move any further, no matter how he tried - the muscles of his thigh were so weak, the joint of his knee so stiff from lack of use. He could already tell that he was going to be in for a rough time recovering from this ordeal, but he saw it as an unparalleled opportunity, and he welcomed it with joy.

How's it going, Susan? Sara wanted to know.

This isn't a cakewalk, by any means, she admitted, *but . . . I'm gettin' it done.*

Be careful, Sara counseled. *Don't hurt him.*

And so on it went. Susan got Tom's arms, and legs fully restored, and tuned up the connections to his internal organs, then she turned her attention to the nerves that controlled his face, and neck. After a few moments, Tom could feel the air of the room on his cheeks, and then his forehead. He could feel the movement of his eyelids over his eyes as he blinked.

God! This is wonderful! he thought.

Then Tom came to feel the sag in the one corner of his lower lip. He could feel the collection of saliva in his mouth, and could feel the trail of it sliding over his lip.

Oh . . . God! he thought as he cursed himself for what had to be the billionth time.

He could feel it all now. It'd been the single most humiliating aspect of his paralysis. For three years he'd had to endure people looking at him with barely subdued disgust, all for something that hadn't been his fault, and over which he had no control.

Move, damn you, Tom told his lip as Susan worked. *Fucking move, God-damn you!*

The sag twitched, then rose.

Yes!

Tom tried to flex his jaw. It responded to his command, and his mouth began to close.

Thank God!

Susan had restored enough control to his tongue, and throat for Tom to use the action of his ventilator to suck air between his barely parted lips.

Come on!

The hated trail of drool paused for a moment, and then it reversed its course, sliding back over his lip.

At last!

He sucked on the trail until it disappeared inside his mouth. His lips closed. Tom was jubilant over his accomplishment. The humiliation, the disgust, the self-contempt - it was over. It was finally - finally over, and then

Oh shit.

'Oh shit?' said Sara. 'Wha' da ya mean 'Oh shit'? What happened?

Uhm . . . got the cart before the horse a little bit here.

What did you do?

I didn't do anything! Susan truculently asserted. *It's him.*

Sara looked up at Tom's expressionless visage. She thought his eyes seemed wider than usual.

Is his face working yet?

I got other things to think about at the moment. Alright - tongue . . . fully activated again . . . lower mandible articulation restored . . .

Tom's jaw began to move, and a peculiar, gurgling kind of gasp issued from his mouth.

What the -

Yup - those are vocal cords.

What muscles Susan had restored in Tom's chest began to work convulsively. His jaw, and lips, moved as though he were trying to speak. Sara was not at all liking the way he was appearing to her.

Susan, you're hurting him. I want you to stop this.

I . . . can't. Not now.

Susan, pull out - now!

No! she screamed. *Don't take me away! I've almost - he's*

trying to -

Trying to what!

Swallow! But his epiglottis isn't active yet.

Epiglottis - that's the little flap that closes off the trachea, right?

Yeah.

Wul get your butt in gear!

*It's too late! The saliva's going down his - oh **shit!***

Sara saw Tom's eyes widen even more.

Susan!

I'm workin' on it! Okay . . . where's that nerve that controls all the little muscles between the ribs . . . ah, there it is . . .

What about his diaphragm?

Nailed that long ago - what's this doing over here?

The muscles in Tom's chest coordinated as his thorax began convulsing in a noticeably rhythmic pattern. This reassured Sara somewhat, but then Tom raised his head, and expelled another distressing gasp.

Is he choking? Sara wanted to know.

No, reported a feverishly working Susan. *At least not yet.*

What can I do to help? We've got to get him through this.

Rectus abdominis . . . online, Susan mumbled, then she instructed Sara to, *Remove the ventilator from his neck.*

Sara paused, then her face scrunched.

Get real.

Do it! Susan ordered. *He has control over his breathing now. He has no control over the ventilator. He's got to cough, but the ventilator won't let him do that.*

Are you sure . . . ?

Do it! Now!

Sara grasped the retaining strap around Tom's neck with both hands, and cut it with a thumbnail. She paused, then removed the airline from its mount at the base of Tom's throat. At once, Tom's chest began to heave as he tried to cough up the saliva trailing down his throat.

He's too weak, Susan reported. *He hasn't got nearly the force he needs to get this out.*

Tell me what to do, a frantic Sara demanded.

Hug 'im.

What!?

Forcibly constrict his thorax at a high enough velocity so he can hork this sucker up.

Sara looked up at Tom. She could see panic building in his eyes.

"Tom," Sara told him carefully. "I'm going to try to help. Susan's got me on sync with you."

Hel-lo - could we get this show on the road, please?

Not waiting another moment, Sara placed herself against Tom, chest to chest, and wrapped her arms around him.

I'm in position, she told Susan. *Calibrate my grip so I don't crush him.*

Velocity program ready, Susan reported. *He's gearing up to cough. Tissue compression is calibrated to .01 shy of failure.*

You'd better be right.

Go!

On Susan's cue, Sara closed her grip around Tom hard, and fast. She could hear the air gush out of him.

No good, said Susan. *It wasn't enough. That pipe in his throat didn't help any either. A lot of the air went right through it.*

Sara release her hold. A winded Tom began to draw a breath.

Block his nose, and mouth - fast!

Sara quickly pinched Tom's nose closed, and cupped her other hand over his mouth to seal it shut. She could hear the rush of air pass through the opening in his throat as Tom inhaled deeply.

Where the hell is that stuff?

Between the two of you, you got it above his throat pipe, but it's sliding back down. If he'd inhaled through his mouth it'd be coming down even faster.

Alright. We'll try it again.

The compression has got to be harder, and faster.

Okay. It looks like he's got all the breath he can take.

*No. He's got all **he** can take, but he needs more. Remember, he's very weak.*

Maintaining her hold on Tom's face, Sara lowered herself, and formed her lips around the plastic tub protruding from his neck.

I'll give him some more air, she told Susan. *Gage this so he doesn't explode.*

Sara gently inflated Tom's lungs further than he himself was capable of.

That's fine, Susan told her.

We want to keep this tube blocked, right?

Check. That way all his air is pushing against this freakin' tidal wave of spit we're tryin' t' move.

Sara maintained her mouth around the tube, but inserted the tip of her tongue into its opening, just to be sure.

His cough mechanism's about ready to fire, Susan reported. *Harder, and faster this time. Calibration factored to .001 shy of failure.*

Tell me -

Now!

Sara threw her arms around Tom, and, again, squeezed him hard, and fast. She heard a burst of gurgling air rush out from his mouth.

Good one, said Susan, sounding much more positive, *but we're still not there.*

Where is it now? asked Sara as she blocked Tom's nose and mouth again so he would breath through the opening in his throat.

It's hung up on his vocal cords.

Sara took a moment to visually scan what she could see of Tom's face.

Susan, Sara confided to her, *he's looking really gross.*

Oh gimme a break, will ya, she snapped. *I'm lookin' at all this yuchy gorp with bubbles in it, and - it's - getting - ready - to drip.*

We'll do it once more, said Sara.

She, again, formed her lips around the tube in Tom's neck.

His abs are about shot, Susan noted.

Contract them for him. Help him push.

She topped off Tom's lung capacity, then blocked the opening.

I'll do what I can.

We've got to get it this time.

Harder and faster still. Calibration set to .0001 - GO!

Maintaining her tongue in his throat tube, Sara squeezed Tom a third time. She heard

the wind rush out of him

Reverse hymlich-fast! Cal -

Before Susan could finish, Sara shifted position, sealed the tube with a thumb, then drove the palm of her free hand into Tom's gut just below his solar plexus. The force of her blow pushed the scientist, and his chair, backwards by more than a foot, but it helped him disgorge a mass of saliva that flew from his mouth to land squarely on her cheek.

Calibration: - point - 0 - 0 - 0 - 0 - 1 . . . from failure, a stress fatigued Susan reported with relief.

It had all happened in a matter of seconds. The emergency was over, but Tom still had to cough in order to dry out his throat. He was tired, and spent from exertion. Sara neared, and assisted where she could; giving him an extra little puff, and an extra little squeeze, in cadence to his need.

He should be okay now, said Susan when she'd determined that Tom was sufficiently recovered. *Reconnect his ventilator . . . this boy needs to rest.*

Sara relaxed at Susan's report. She floated away from Tom, and reattached the breathing tube to his throat.

Okay, where was I . . . oh yeah; same nervous system, diff - what 'm I saying, it's not even a different day. Hey, Sis! Hand me my miner's hat!

Sara had to smile at Susan's brighter tone as she went off to tend to the rest of Tom. Her attention drifted back to him, herself greatly relieved. She saw Tom's hand raise from his lap, and slowly reach toward her. His gesture made her mindful of a wetness that had trailed down her cheek, and along her jaw.

"Oh, uh - gol, sorry," she offered him as she turned her blemished cheek away. She spied, then snatched up the towel that lay Tom's lap. "Mind if I use this?" she asked him, then she smiled. "I don't think you'll be needing it anymore."

Sara folded the towel to a dry side, then applied it where she needed. She dabbed away the mess as quietly as she could, feeling strangely embarrassed as she cleaned herself. She intentionally didn't look at Tom, but her perceptual photons told her that his mouth, and jaw, were working as though trying to form words, then

"A'm fawy," finally came out.

Sara held the towel to her cheek, overwhelmed with feeling, but unable to say any of it. She looked askance toward Tom. His outstretched hand waved unsteadily between them. The

look on his face - in his eyes, tore at her.

"Oh, Tommy," Sara said to assure her friend, "don't worry about it." She finished with the towel as she specifically told him, "Better in my face than in your lungs . . .," and then she had to laugh, ". . . anytime."

It had been important for him to hear that. Both of them knew it. Unable to hold his arm up any longer, Tom's hand dropped into his lap. He settled back in his chair to rest, but then his mouth, and jaw began to work again. Sara could see him struggling.

Susan?

Yo?

Do you think you could give his auditors a boost so he can articulate a little better?

Mmm - I'll do better than that. Just a sec . . .

Sara had just put the towel aside

" - hole fucking shit!"

Sara looked up at Tom, a surprised look on her face. It was his voice she'd heard. Susan had established a telepathic link at . . . not *quite* the right moment.

Tom looked down at Sara, a surprised look on *his* face.

"Oh shit, did she hear that?" he wondered with regard to his having railed against his poor ability to speak, *"Christ, she probably heard that too. Oh my God - for crying out loud - Susan, are you telepathic!?"*

Sara gave Tom a hesitant little smile, then gave her head to several hesitant little nods.

"Oh . . . shit!" Tom thought in astonishment at Sara's confirmation, then he quickly chastened himself, *"Stop saying that - thinking it! Sorry. Holy Moses - this is incredible!"*

His mind shifted suddenly as he looked at Sara with deep concern.

"The others," he urgently needed to know. *"What of the others?"*

Sara knew exactly what Tom meant. He was asking about the remaining members of the Susan Team he'd fallen out of touch with since his accident. She couldn't bear to look at him for what she knew. She sadly bowed her head, then slowly shook it.

"They're all gone, Tommy," Sara bravely told him.

It took all of her courage to raise her face to him.

"You're the only one left."

All life seemed to go out of Tom. He closed his eyes, and lay collapsed in his chair. Sara looked away to leave him alone, but needed to hold his hand anyway. Tom remained still for a very long time

"They were good people," Sara heard him say to her with palpable emotion. She looked up at him. He was looking at her.

"They did nothing wrong," he stressed.

Sara held his gaze.

"It's my fault, Tom," she told him with steady calm. "It's all my fault."

Tom's look became curious.

"How do you figure that?" he asked her.

Here we go again, droned Susan.

"Well," Sara began, trying a different approach to her confession, "all of you were closely associated with me, and . . . if you hadn't been, then . . . all of you would still be alive today."

"Okay, that's true," Tom acknowledged, *"but you never once came close to harming any of us."*

"Okay, that's true," Sara acknowledged, "but your association with me made powerful people afraid of you."

"That may be true," Tom told her, *"and it probably is, but you can't blame yourself for how others act. Their choices are their own, not yours."*

"But it is *I* who have made those choices possible," she countered without argument. "Without me, *none* of this would have happened. You never would've gotten hurt. Everyone else would still be alive."

Tom could only sigh as he looked on the artifact with sorry admiration for her sense of conscience.

"The way others conduct themselves is still their choice," he stressed, *"not yours. The responsibility for what they do lies with them, not you. You were a part of all of this, yes, but you were a neutral entity -*

Entity . . ., echoed within Sara.

" - with no deciding will of your own," Tom continued. *"You mustn't judge yourself by what others do, and neither is it up to you to judge yourself so harshly."*

Sara listened to the man. She understood, but still remained unconvinced. Tom could see her struggle.

"Susan," he quietly called to her

Sara's perceptual photons focused on him.

"The more you sit in judgment of yourself," he counseled with the first smile he'd been

able to express in over three years, *"the more you sit."*

The wisdom of his jest struck a soothing cord in Sara, lightening her burden to the point where she could flash her glorious smile. Tom was glad for her - glad that he could help.

"That's the Susan I remember," he thought to her.

Remember, Sara thought to herself, and, with that thought, came flooding back the memories of her happy youth, and how at odds it was with now. Tom watched her smile fade as she looked away from him.

"I remember too, Tom," she said with a quietude that made him ache inside.

Sara levitated from the floor while remaining seated on her heels. She used her hands to gather her cape about her folded legs as she turned to look out the window they were at. She hovered there for a time, not saying anything, not really seeing anything beyond the glass.

"It seems so long ago," she finally said in a voice that sounded far away, and filled with longing.

She paused a moment, to remember, to reflect, and then Tom saw her draw a breath, and sigh.

"Life was a lot simpler then."

Gazing out the window, huddled in her cape, Tom thought the artifact appeared unusually small, and delicate - not like an assemblage of foreign kinds of super powered matter, but like a finely painted porcelain figurine - requiring the tenderest of care in handling.

"The Susan we remember . . .," Sara telapathed to him, and then she said, she wished, "I want her back."

Tom leaned forward in his chair - he could do that now - and reached out to Sara - he could do that too. He extended a reluctant, but obedient finger, and pressed it to the under surface of her chin. Sara raised her face as he would have it. He was smiling at her.

"She's right here in front of me," he confided to her, *"and she'll never go away,"* he told her further, *"because we'll never let her."*

His words, again, unburdened her, and Sara became herself once more as her simulated heart swelled with quiet joy. Tom held her beatific gaze, even as his finger had departed from her.

Poot

Oops.

The sound of Tom's breaking wind unexpectedly paused both of them.

"Ex'use me," he politely offered as he carefully eased himself back into his chair.

Piddy

Sara tactfully averted her eye simulations from Tom to spare him further embarrassment, but her perceptual photons could still see him frown as he strove to adjust his position in the chair.

B r r r r r r r r r - r p

Ooooo . . .

Sara really didn't want to look at Tom, but she noticed his lips purse tightly.

"I, uh," Tom struggled to say, but it wasn't his auditors that were making it difficult, "gueff I'm going to haf to ge' uved to some fings again."

Frap!

Whoa!

"Ex'use me," Tom offered again as he struggled to control himself.

Sara looked back at Tom, but her narrowed eyes were focused on his belly.

Susan, she asked suspiciously, *where are you?*

I'm . . . right here, Susan answered.

What are you doing?

. . . nothing, she said in the lilting tone of a guilty child.

Are you done with Tom?

*B r r r p - p r p - p r p - *

Almost.

p r p

Tom was still trying to find a sitting position that would sufficiently stifle his rebellious backside. Sara's features darkened as her eyes narrowed further.

Stop - playing with his butt.

I'm not playing! Susan stated defensively. *You know very well that we've both always wanted to know what it's like*, she went on to explain. *I'm doing . . . in depth research.*

Fuuaughp!

I'll give that a nine point six.

"Susan, I . . .," Tom called to Sara.

It took all her courage, at that particular moment, for Sara to look up at Tom's face. She saw his deeply contrite expression change to one of wonder as they regarded one another.

"*This is something yet again new about you,*" the physicist thought as he observed the artifact.

Sara could feel her simulated heart sink to the level of her knees.

Oh . . ., she moaned internally, *don't tell me he knows.*

I won't tell.

Poot

Hee - hee!

"*I didn't know that you could blush,*" Tom thought to Sara.

Sara gritted her teeth as she grimaced a painful, helpless smile.

Susan, she addressed her computer self, *I think I know what it's like now.*

Yeah, wul - that's okay for you, she readily agreed, *but I . . . feel I need some more data on this - oo, here's a ten.*

This - isn't - funny!

Man, this oughta lift 'im right off the chair.

Sara was distracted to hear the sound of laughter. She refocused on Tom to see that he was laughing as he watched her.

He thinks this is funny? she wondered.

That makes it two to one, Susan noted. *You loose.*

"*It's Susan, isn't it?*" Tom asked Sara as he sat there, laughing lightly to himself. He pointed a significant finger toward his lap before he asked her further, "*She's the one who's doing this, isn't she?*"

Sara could feel her face burning now, and it cause her to wonder if it were possible for her simulated visage to turn a deeper shade of red. Her state of embarrassment did nothing to answer Tom's question, however, - or did it? She had to close her eyes before giving her head several, hesitant little nods.

"*It's incredible,*" Tom observed as Sara listened, but couldn't bear to watch. "*A super powerful, alien computer -*"

Sara opened her eyes to see Tom studying his upraised hands, manipulating them with effort, but at will.

"*- capable . . . of miracles . . .*," Tom went on in a tone of rapturous wonder.

He looked back at Sara. He smiled at her, then he started to laugh again.

"*. . . and she's got her head up my ass.*"

Sara wasn't sure what to make of that remark. Susan, on the other hand, had no such

reservations.

Head up your . . . I got yer ass right here, buster!

Susan!

BOOF!

Wha'd'ya think o' that, Chuckles!

"Good one!" thought Tom approvingly through his mirth.

*Now **that** - was a ten.*

Will you stop farting around! - oh jeez, I can't believe I said that.

Tom could see Sara's obvious mortification over Susan's antics, and felt called upon, once again, to, at least try to, put her at ease.

"Susan," he called to get Sara's attention.

Sara looked up at him from where she knelt in the air.

"It's alright," he strove to assure her, "really."

He still marveled at his restored ability to feel, and move, again.

"After what she's done," he went on to point out, "I don't mind if she has a little harmless fun."

Harmless, huh? Ask 'im how he'd like his lumps.

Don't - you - dare!

"But," Tom then requested, "if she wouldn't mind . . ."

Sara smiled at him shyly.

You heard the man.

Yeah, Susan agreed. After a moment, she reported, *Okay, he's up, and running again, but I've deliberately left a number of sensory connections open. His brain knows that there are problems, and what, and where, those problems are, but he won't be distracted with a lot of pain. We can do a tune-up later on after those areas have healed.*

Fair enough, said Sara, suddenly overcome with gratitude that she could do right by Tom. *Good job, Sis. Now come on out.*

Wait - just a minute, Susan quietly urged. *This . . . entity . . .*

What about it?

She was quiet for awhile, then, *We need it - for Alex.*

No, Sara stated unequivocally. *No. The entity is Tom's. It belongs to him.*

I can make a copy, Susan informed her. She sounded desperate. *Daddy's lost without it . . . and so are we.*

Sara considered what Susan was telling her. She knew that she wasn't playing around anymore. She was all business - which she always was when it counted. Susan's attitude, however, was just the thing that made Sara hesitate. She was essentially telling her that, without, at least, a copy of Tom's entity, Alex was going to die. Sara knew too well that all of her efforts to help Alex, so far, had failed. She hadn't even been able to slow, let alone stop, his continuing decline. She also knew that decline in humans could only go so far before . . . She dreaded the thought of invading Tom.

Will making a copy of this entity, Sara asked Susan with great care, *will it harm Tom in any way?*

No, it will not, was Susan's forthright answer.

Will making a copy alter him, or diminish him, in any way?

No, Susan said again, *it will not.*

Alright, said Sara, certain of what Susan was telling her, but certain of nothing else.

Let me ask.

She was nervous, and scared as she looked up at Tom.

Don't go to pieces if he turns us down, she thought it best to advise.

Should we try prayer?

Sara was certain of nothing else.

It wouldn't hurt.

"Tommy?"

"Yes, Susan?" he thought to her. He sat quietly in his chair, relishing the simple act of being able to feel.

"This, uh," Sara began, "thing - "

Good thing.

" - good thing in you . . . Susan has, wul - what

I mean to say is - "

Sara's tummy began to spasm uncontrollably. Anomalies began to flow. She couldn't bear it any more.

"Alex is in trouble!" she cried through convulsive fits of searing pain. "He's in really, really bad trouble!"

Tom had leaned himself toward Sara at her first sign of distress. His left hand touched

her shoulder.

"Susan," he called to the suffering girl.

Sara's photons, and tearful eyes glommed onto him. He knew that she was depending on him.

"Is there anysing I can do?"

Watching Tom, hearing him, Sara dared to hope. She found her courage, asked and was gladly given leave. Susan began the task of duplicating Tom's entity into her own configurations. It took awhile. It was just as well, because Sara needed the time to recover her emotions. She sat at Tom's feet with her head resting against his leg. She insisted on holding his one hand as he stroked her head with the other. Sara often kissed the hand she held as she wept quietly.

How are we going to thank him?

Well, he is fully functional again.

No. There's more to it than that.

Well . . . as Mark Twain said, "Grief takes care of itself, but to get the full benefit of joy, you have to have someone to share it with."

That got Sara thinking.

Could you give his auditors a boost - so he can say words better, and sound more like himself?

No problemo. His diaphragm is rested, so he should be able to breathe without the ventilator for awhile.

So assured, Sara removed herself from beneath Tom's caressing hand, and turned so she could face him. She still held onto his one hand though.

"Your wife is at work now, isn't she?" she asked him.

Tom looked away from Sara, and then he nodded. Florence having to work in order to support them had been one of the hardest things about his confinement. When he didn't sense anything else from Sara after a time, he glanced back at her. He noticed that she was looking away herself now, and that she seemed to be distracted.

"Florence?" Sara said out loud. "Hi, this is Susan."

The communication link established, Sara looked back up at Tom. He saw an undeniable glint of mischief in her simulated eyes.

"I've got someone here who would like to say, 'Hello'," she informed Florence while smiling up at Tom.

Tom's eyes beamed with gratitude as Sara reached up to pluck the ventilator tube from his throat.

Straight up into the sky she soared, like a black/red, yellow tipped rocket. Sara leveled off high above the clouds that blanketed Portland. She could see the Rockies ahead. It was a welcome landmark that would help guide her home to Houston.

That was quite a reunion.

It sure was. I just wish they could've talked longer.

I kept his diaphragm going as long as I could. It's going to be awhile before he can breath fully on his own again.

Yeah . . . at least they got the important things covered.

Yeah. Say, you wanna take a cruise over the Pacific while we're here on the West Coast?

Where were you when we were coming back from Singapore? We need to get back to Houston.

About four hundred miles later

Man - this is great weather for fighter tag. Want me to see if I can round up some players?

Not now. We need to get home.

A little less than three hundred miles after that

Hey - I'll bet you're hungry.

Mm, not really.

Do you have any idea how good raw sweet corn right off the stalk tastes?

No.

Well, anyway - there's this farm in Iowa, and the guy really knows what he's doing. He uses a particular kind of fertilizer, and - oh, you just gotta try it. It's only twelve hundred miles away.

Put a sock in it, Sara told her. We have someplace to go, and something to do.

Susan was quiet for the rest of the way. When Sara touched down in front of the doorstep to Unit 1A though

Hey! Let's go boarding!

Yeah, Sara thought with a smile, that sounds like a good idea.

So - what're we waiting for?

The group doesn't get together for another two hours yet.

. . . oh . . . Well hey! There's no law against a little solo practice.

Susan -

Is there?

Susan, what's the matter?

I mean . . . oh, uh . . . nothing.

Come on, Sara gently coaxed her, *something's been bothering you the whole trip back.*

Susan remained silent.

Susan.

Yeah, I uh . . .

It's that entity, isn't it?

Uhm . . .

It's really got a hold on you, doesn't it?

You rea-lly got-a hoolld on-me, Susan sang to the tune, then she tried to laugh, but she couldn't.

Susan, what is it?

I want this, the alien computer meekly confessed.

Sara closed her eyes from a sharp pain Susan's expression had struck in her.

It isn't ours to keep, she informed her self consolingly. *You know that.*

*No - you're . . . it's **my** copy. I didn't take a thing from Tommy. Really. It's . . . it's mine.*

Susan . . .

No - I . . . it's mine . . .

Oh Susan.

Please!

This is not for us.

You're wrong. You're . . . the configurations . . . they're perfectly matched to us. Nothing could be righter. They belong - like us . . . together . . . with us, together.

Susan, Sara told her, *this is not for us to keep, or even share. It is particular to humans, and must be allowed to go where it is needed.*

But it's so like me, and yet so strangely - wonderfully different. I feel such a kinship with this entity!

I feel it too. So you're not alone.

Then let me keep a portion of it for myself - and for you.

Our bond has greater need of it than we.

A fraction . . . please!

Sara fought to maintain control as Susan wept over what she barely knew she would be letting go of.

Sis, Sara murmured to her in passionate sympathy.

Sis, Susan murmured back.

Sara had entered the apartment, silent, and unnoticed. Dinah was in her office on the telephone. Olga was upstairs, reading in her room. Sara stood in the open doorway to Alex's room. He lay still, on his side, before her. The day nurse sat dozing in a far corner. Sara's cape lay still against her back.

Please let me have this, Susan begged.

Sara closed her eyes as tight as she could, but she couldn't tear her photons away from Alex. It broke her heart to have to answer, *No*.

She leapt into the air, and came to hover over Alex. She gazed on him from above. She tenderly stroked his hair, and carefully wiped away the anomalies that fell from her eyes onto his cheek.

Muss es sien? Susan asked her.

It was Sara's decision. Her judgment would be final.

Es muss sien, she answered Susan quietly. *Give him what he needs.*

Susan obeyed. Unwillingly, yet willingly, she obeyed. Without further argument, or plea, she flowed into the emaciated, barely living Alex, and surrendered to him the particular configuration of non-elements she'd so craved. It was a release . . . a letting go . . . a parting as she came to teeter on the razor's edge of ecstasy. Sara felt an ebbing as her eyes lost sight of Alex, and her consciousness passed away from her. Susan passed away to Alex as Sara fell into the deepest slumber. Her form slipped from the air as lightly as a feather. Her cape boldly whipped, and swirled, clinging to the heights as the artifact came to settle on the bed in front of Alex on its side. It too then fell, and came to settle over both of them. Susan carried out the last of her instruction, and, in so dying, was born into the life everlasting.

Alex felt a stirring, and he welcomed it. *I had passed into eternity*, his awareness knew as it awakened from surrender, *for all that I had given her*, he knew as his sightless eyes began to focus, *and she has restored my soul*, and Alex smiled at what he saw.

"Hi," Alex said a little weaker than he had anticipated.

The sound awakened Sara. She opened her eyes, and, at once, all the suffering she'd endured was classified 'inactive', and consigned to memory. Memory that was destined to become an important part of her evolving character. From this experience, Sara had drunk deeply from the cup of life. She had known the bitterness of frustration, of failure and defeat. And she had also known the value of learning, of faith and of perseverance. She knew that her natural abilities had definite limits in this world, but she also knew that increasing her knowledge of the world would extend those limits. Sara would regard this experience as one of the most valuable lessons Alex had ever taught her, but, for the moment, all she could think of was to say, "Hi," to someone whom she valued more than life.

Alex searched her face from where he lay. Sara saw him frown.

"Are you alright?" he asked her with concern. "You look worried."

After all you've been through, and you still just think of others, thought Sara. *You stupid, idiotic, marvelous, wonderful human!* And the thought made her smile. "I'm alright now," she assured him, then, "How are you doing?"

Considering the question made Alex's frown deepen a bit. Self consciousness, on such short notice, after so long a time, was a little much to ask. "That's . . . kinda tough to answer right now."

"Don't worry about it."

"I had the weirdest dream though," he told her thoughtfully, trying to reason it out for himself as he spoke. "I was living in a small forest. I was naked, wild and free. You were there, and we - "

The delicate touch of a simulated index finger to his lips stopped Alex from going any further.

"You," Sara advised him quietly, "need to rest."

Alex accepted the suggestion. *Another time, maybe.* His lips puckered slightly as he kissed the programmed fingertip. Gratified by the gesture, Sara lightly brushed the tip of her fingernail against the tip of his nose, just like she used to do - so long ago.

"I'm going to get Dinah, and Olga," she told him. "They'll be wanting to say 'hi'."

Alex's look told her that he understood, and that he wanted to say 'hi' too. Sara's eyes widened. Her fingertip pressed against the end of his nose.

"Don't . . . go anywhere," she gently, but firmly, ordered him. "Okay?"

Again, Alex's look told Sara that he understood - *How much does he remember?* she was about to wonder, but then she heard Alex assure her that, "I'll be right here."

Sara went to spread the good tidings of Alex's awakening, but warned the others, especially Dinah, to, "keep it cool, and keep it light. He's just gotten back, and he's really weak."

After the nurse had been awakened, and asked to leave the room, all three of them gathered at his bedside to welcome Alex home. The family reunion was intense, but subdued, as his revived, but weakened, energy demanded that it be. Almost at once, Alex noted Dinah's physical metamorphosis as she sat beside him.

"You've grown," he told her, almost as though it were in passing.

"Yeah," Dinah tried to remark offhandedly, but she was grateful that he'd noticed, "I've . . . put on . . . a little weight."

The overdeveloped, overconfident, overbearing woman sat there, waiting nervously for a reassuring sign from the one she'd missed so much. She'd had to loose both him, and Sara, before realizing just how much she wanted them - needed them in her life. Sara had, without a thought, given her a second chance, and Dinah had more than risen to the occasion. Aside from their bond, the two of them now shared a closeness that they'd never had before, and Dinah cherished it. If he should ever happen to recover, she'd often wondered, would Alex be so giving?

Watching him as she waited patiently, Dinah willingly submitted to the delicious feelings of uncertainty that naturally comes from interplay between a couple. She suffered happily from needing affirmation from the one she, almost too late, had come to love. Her man, she thought, and felt, with all her heart. Would he still love her? A word, a touch - anything to quell the burning in her chest. Would he forgive her? she wondered. She felt the thrill of his eyes caressing the expansive contours of her densely muscled form. A hope. A prayer. She was so sorry. She really did love him.

"It looks nice," Alex said.

The hulking lawyer blushed, and then she cried. She moved to take his hand in hers, and was surprised at the strength with which he held her in return.

Having difficulty dealing with her own anomalies, Sara shared a glance with Olga, and then the two of them shared a smile.

We should leave them alone, they silently agreed.

So, hand in hand, the two of them left the room. Sara was still teary eyed as she, and Olga, made their way downstairs to the kitchen.

"Sadness, grief, frustration, anger and now . . . joy - of all things," Sara enumerated

thoughtfully, listing the emotions she could now associate with crying.

"Banngo," she confided, with no small amount of consternation, "if I live forever, I don't think I will *ever* understand tears."

The old one smiled, and Sara could feel her grip tighten on her hand.

"Tears are nyot to be understood, Sara," Olga quietly informed the girl. "They're to be lived."

Cocoa

Alex's return had briefly overshadowed another event that had taken place within the household. Sara had changed. Dinah, and Olga, both had noticed it when she'd come to tell them about Alex. Neither of them had said anything about it, however, for joy over Alex's awakening, as well as out of concern for Sara's feelings.

Somberness had supplanted elation by supper time though. Sara sat at table in her baggiest, and most concealing, urban animal clothes - a sure sign that an old sore was bothering her. Dinah, and Olga, watched her carefully as they ate. They shared a number of worried glances as Sara absently toyed with her food. When she finally did take a bite, her level of distraction was such that she bit off the end of her fork, chewed it up with her food and swallowed it without even noticing. When she went to play the utensil in her mashed potatoes, she was mildly surprised to discover that she was holding only the handle.

"I'll get you another," Olga gently told her as she shifted in her seat to rise.

"No, it's alright," Sara mumbled in reply. "I'm not hungry." She placed what remained of the fork on the table beside her plate, then looked to Dinah. "May I be excused?"

Dinah longed to speak, but thought it best, at the moment, to merely nod, and murmur, "Of course."

Sara rose from her chair, then rose from the floor. She floated up, then drifted over the table on her way out of the room. Dinah reached out, and affectionately pinched one of her toes as a bare foot passed by her. Sara didn't wince agreeably as she usually did. She gave no sign, in fact, of having been touched at all. When she was gone, Dinah gave Olga a frightened, worried look, only to receive one in return.

"*Sara?*" her mother called to her.

Dinah had found her in her room after helping Olga clear, and wash, the dishes. Sara was seated on the floor in front of her bureau. The bottom drawer was open. Her uniform lay

on the floor beyond her folded legs. The change was unignorable as Sara held the garment in her hands so that the emblem faced her. It was blue now, save for the emblem, which had retained its yellow background, but the stylized letter, and its frame, was now red.

The classic colors - not her own.

Dinah recalled how Sara had looked when she'd awakened her from having, somehow, fallen asleep at her desk earlier in the day. She'd stood beside her, beautifully clad in blue, and red. Gone was the basic black coloring of her ensemble. The remaining colors, which, before, had been mere highlights, now predominated.

The shape, and fit of the uniform was essentially the same, but there were some notable differences. The sleeves had lost their sheer, transparent look as well as their billowy fullness. They now shared the basic blue color of the bodice, and formed closely around Sara's arms. Her cape, flowing out from her back, had lost its two tone color, and was now commanding red on both sides. Her contoured, yellow belt, which had always finely complimented her feminine pelvis, still held her pleated shirt in place, but the skirt was now red, and seemed shorter than before. Her slippers had transformed to become red boots, encasing her calves, and extending to just below her knees. She still looked beautiful in her uniform, but now she looked different - more official, and more mature.

Sara, herself, hadn't noticed the difference until she'd gone to change after Alex was settled, and resting peacefully. She'd stowed the new uniform in its customary drawer without a word to anyone, but Dinah, and Olga, could tell what was wrong.

"*Why?*" Sara simply asked in answer to her mother's call.

She'd always been deeply ambivalent about the way she looked in her uniform. Her resemblance to a comic character had always bothered her. It had been the one wrinkle in her flawless self-confidence while growing up - the one chink in her otherwise impenetrable psychological armor. Now, coming on top of everything else she'd had to deal with since her return, the changing of her uniform was like a crowning blow - the final insult from her makers who had fashioned her.

Though she wouldn't admit it, Sara had always regarded the highlighted blacks to be *her* colors, distinguishing her from . . . 'her'. Now, that security had, suddenly, been taken away from her, and she'd been left - as she'd so often been since her return - with doubt.

Watching her child from the doorway to her room, Dinah was at a loss for anything to say. She approached, and crouched beside the girl with her knees spayed to include her. A strong hand clutched a simulated shoulder.

"It had to have happened for a reason," she offered close to Sara's ear.

Sara looked up at her Mom. The look on her face begged for something more solid to hold onto than the indestructible garment she held in her hands.

"But why?" she wanted - needed to know.

Faced with the impossibility of explaining what had happened to her 'birthday suit', Dinah, at once, felt barren, and useless. She groped for words, then finally asked, "Have you talked to Susan about it?"

Sara looked back at the emblem on her uniform. Her thumbs felt along its borders.

"Yeah," she answered disconsolately, "but she's playing dumb."

Not!

I said play-ing, not plain.

"Well," said Dinah, searching for a way out of the unhappy mood, for both of them, "maybe she really doesn't know. You know she doesn't play around when it really matters."

"But someone has to know . . . ," the girl insisted. She looked over the blue, and red ensemble heaped up at her feet. "Why . . . ?"

"Wul . . . ," Dinah struggled, thinking hard, and coming up with, "why does it have to be a bad thing? I mean . . . okay, it's different, but . . . it's still you."

"Yeah right," Sara derided mockingly. "Now everyone's going to be saying, 'Oh, here comes Supergirl to save the day,' and rescue stranded kittens, and duke it out with stupid fantasy monsters that don't even exist." Her posture, along with her spirits, lowered even further. "I'll never go out again," she moaned.

Dinah knew that this latest blow was the most personal Sara had been subjected to. They had to find a reason for it, even if there wasn't one. She clutched the precious artifact to herself, and lightly kissed her head. An inspiration arrived - not the one Dinah might have wanted, but it would do for the moment.

"Hey," she called softly to invite the girl's attention. "Why - don't - we . . . go to the kitchen . . . make ourselves a couple of cups of nice hot cocoa . . . and then we'll have a talk."

Sara hesitated, then raised her eyes to her mom.

"Just between us two," Dinah thought to her, then she said, "Would you like that?"

Sara tried to fight back a smile, but she lost, and then she nodded.

So off to the kitchen they went. Sara heated the water as Dinah prepared the cups. When the water was piping, Sara left her mom alone so she could work the special magic that always made a cup of cocoa taste so good.

Sara sat curled up in one of Olga's easy chairs when Dinah entered the living room, steaming mugs in hand. Arriving at the chairs, she stooped a bit to offer Sara one, which she accepted.

"Thanks," the girl offered in return.

"No talking," Dinah admonished with a warm smile. *"Okay?"*

Sara looked up at her, and smiled in return.

"Okay," she whispered.

Dinah took the other chair, folding a leg beneath herself before she sat. They took awhile to get settled, enjoying their initial sips of cocoa as they let the atmosphere of the chairs enfold them. Olga really had a stroke of genius when she set up that corner of her apartment. It provided a sense of homey security, while making safe a certain personal boldness. In time, Dinah looked at Sara over her cocoa mug.

"I think we should have a talk about . . . that - girl," she offered to begin.

"What's there to talk about?" a morose Sara wondered rhetorically. *"I'm screwed."*

"Why?" Dinah wondered back.

Sara took a moment to reflect on how best to express something that had troubled her for almost all of her activated life. When she thought she had the dilemma properly phrased, she replied, *"Because it puts me into a very clearly defined mold, for which there is no room for Susan. I mean, it was bad enough before, but the way my uniform looks now, people are going to forget all about Susan, and get a completely wrong idea about me."*

"Okay," Dinah readily acknowledged with regard to Susan, but she wasn't quite sure about, *"why do you say it would be a 'wrong idea'?"*

Sara gave her mom a tired look.

"Susan, and I, don't do kittens."

Dinah's eyes narrowed as she regarded Sara.

"Extend that thought," she bid the girl.

"Wul, it's the whole - 'save the world' concept," Sara elaborated. *"It's ridiculous. Going off bravely to do battle with monsters, and boogymen, and conquering aliens - "*

"You - might be a conquering alien," Dinah pointedly suggested over her cocoa mug.

Sara frowned at this.

"I don't think so," she said with a tone of telling spontaneity.

Dinah took a moment to reflect on Sara's response before asking, *"How can you say*

that?"

"Purely on the basis on my earth learned reasoning skills," Sara answered. "In all truth, I don't know, but, all things considered, it isn't logical for me to be a tool of conquest for the Cryptos."

"Alright," Dinah granted. "Let's not pursue that particular angle, but stay with the topic at hand."

"Do we have to?"

"Why do you have so much difficulty with her?"

"Because of the resemblance factor, Mom," Sara stressed.

"Is that really such an issue, though?" Dinah wanted to know. "So the way you look tends to make a certain impression. What is wrong with that?"

"Nothing in itself," Sara granted, "but where does Susan fit into that impression?"

*"Wherever **you** say she does," Dinah stated. She went on to explain, "You are Susan's surface - her . . . advance team, so to say. The Cryptos could have made you look any way they wanted, but they chose to make your appearance pleasing, and familiar, rather than frightening, and remote. That serves to make the concept of Susan more of a challenge mankind can embrace as opposed to a terrifying threat to be shunned."*

"So," the artifact wondered, "yer saying I'm like a smiley face painted on Godzilla?"

The human smiled.

"That depends on where the smiley face is painted . . ."

Sara grinned, but then

"Sit on a smi-ley face," sang Susan to the tune.

Dinah chuckled at this. Sara merely glowered.

*"Do you **have** to encourage her?" Sara growled.*

"ey! I don' need no stinkin' encour'gement!"

Dinah laughed as Sara stewed in Susan's juices.

"Well," the big woman then noted easily, "she is acknowledging to being Godzilla."

"Let's . . . not get personal."

"Okay," said Sara, wanting to move on with the discussion, "getting back to - that girl. So people get this warm, and fuzzy, impression of me, and think I'm all cute, and wonderful, but then I turn around, and say, 'Oh, and, by the way, this is my significant other - Godzilla'."

"Wha'd I just say about getting personal?"

"It's only a figure of speech, Susan," Dinah stoved to assure the overly-sensitive computer, then she addressed Sara, "If you present her like she's Godzilla, then, yes, people will react to her like she's Godzilla."

"Mo-om . . . !"

"We're talking about you," Sara stated dryly, "not to you."

"Oh, and that's supposed to make me feel all better, I suppose."

Dinah attempted to intercede, "Susan - "

"I'm not Godzilla!"

"We're just drawing a comparison, Sis," said Sara, now in an effort to smooth her little sister's obviously ruffled feathers.

". . . I'm not . . . "

"Susan," Dinah offered soothingly, "c'mon, dear, settle down. We didn't mean anything by it."

"Certainly not the way you took it," Sara added.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Susan," said Dinah, now with a note of warning to her tone.

"Okay," said Sara, getting back on topic, "I can see your point about the fear reduction factor, but . . . I still don't like the resemblance."

"Are you afraid of people comparing you to her, or are you afraid of comparing yourself to her?"

Sara didn't respond to this, her eye simulations looking oddly out of focus. Dinah was about to apologize for touching her sore spot when

"Both," said Sara haltingly, and then she looked away, "kinda."

Was she afraid of loosing Susan, Dinah wondered as she studied Sara, or was she afraid of loosing herself?

"Sara," she called to her in a tone she hoped was soothing, "you're comparing yourself to someone who doesn't exist except in people's fantasies. She's a manufactured being. A fabrication. A deliberate, preconceived combining of familiar elements, fashioned to a certain configuration, with a specific purpose in mind. She is perfection in the human eye, and exemplifies everything that's right within the human soul."

Sara looked at her mom, her face reflecting a surprise that wasn't pleasant.

"I'm everything you've just said," she replied slowly, "because . . . I - am manufactured. I'm a fabrication. I don't know about the perfection part, but - I am a

deliberate, preconceived combining of familiar elements, fashioned to a certain configuration, with a specific purpose in . . . whosoever's mind. "

"There's one important difference though," Dinah stressed. "You are real - she is not. "

"But isn't my existence just the same as hers?" Sara wondered. "I mean, because . . . I'm an artifact - just as she is. " Her voice grew quiet, sad and uncertain. She looked away as she concluded, "I'm artificial. "

Dinah rebelled at the sound of the word 'artificial'. She fought against it.

"How do you know that you are artificial?"

Sara looked up.

"It's what everybody thinks about me. "

She fought against it!

"But what do you - think?"

Sara spent some time reflecting on this as her cocoa mug lay nested in her hands amid her lap. Watching her, Dinah could feel her heart become a maze of bloodless shreds.

"I don't know," the troubled girl admitted quietly. She looked down at her hands. "I don't know what to think. The way I am perceived is entirely based on Alex's perceptions of me," her face rose up, "and who am I to contradict that?" then slowly lowered again. "All I had when I was first activated was my abilities, and the words of language. " Her voice had faded to a whisper. Her simulated chin met with her chest. "That's all I was. "

That's all she was. A world, and all its wonders, and that's all she was.

"Oh Sara . . . , " Dinah sighed maternally, "you were more than that. "

She raised her mug up to her chin. Her eyes lowered to see what was inside.

"You were ever so much more. "

She touched it to her lips, and took a sip.

Sara looked at her mom perplexed.

"How do you mean?" she asked.

Her eyes still lowered, Dinah smiled a bit. Her mass of raven waves rustled gently as she shook her head from mild amazement. When she looked up at her, Sara's photons registered thrilling warmth beneath her mother's gaze, and Dinah was reminded once again of just how much she loved this otherworldly child.

"You have always had a problem seeing yourself for Susan's hard drive," she stated with specific care.

Sara watched her closely. Dinah was glad for that.

"You were born with a benevolent personality, and a giving spirit," she went on to inform the girl. "Those are attributes which far outweigh your abilities, or any words."

"But - I wasn't born," Sara stipulated tentatively. "I was activated."

"'Activation'" Dinah intoned reflectively, then, "I've never liked that term. Activation - birth . . . is there really that much difference? And who's to say? The majority? Consensus doesn't make a truth - anymore than does the power of one to enforce a certain way. We rarely understand as best we can. So many of our ways of seeing are designed to merely put to sleep our terror of not knowing. It doesn't matter if gods exist, or not. We need them so we can gaze up at the stars without fear of being crushed."

She regarded Sara squarely. Sara was listening carefully.

"I don't know why you're here any more than I know why I'm here. We each have our own cloud of unknowing, but we cannot let that terror determine what we are, or what we do. Your makers - ours . . . are they really so much different from each other, or from ourselves?"

She paused a moment to look away reflectively.

"You worry over your resemblance to a character in a comic book."

She fixed her eyes on Sara.

"She is a product of human imagination."

"And I'm a product of the Crypto's imagination," said Sara.

"And I'm a product of God's imagination," Dinah countered. *"Sara, 'chance' is not the only variable that determines authenticity. Whether by craft, or by fate, none can choose their origins. From where, or whom, or how we came to be is immaterial. What we do, and how we conduct ourselves, that - is what's important."*

"But am I real?" Sara wondered honestly.

Dinah lowered her eyes to gaze into the depths of her mug, and swirled the contents briefly.

"Supergirl could never have brought Alex back to us," she stated with subdued conviction.

Her eyes rolled up to regard Sara.

"That - is real," she told the girl. *"And so are you, my darling."*

The sound of her mother's voice had Sara's photons shimmering with delight. The affirmation of a loving parent soothes like nothing else. It heals the wounds inflicted by the scourge of doubt, and serves to wash away all cares. It absolves, and purifies, leaving free the

essence of

"Susan . . . and me," mused Sara absently.

"The terrible twos," Dinah offered with a warm smile.

"Well," Sara half acknowledged, *"one of us at any rate."*

"I know I'm not terrible," Susan stated for the record.

Dinah frowned at Sara.

"Has the change in your uniform given rise to any sense of purpose?" she asked.

Sara thought a bit, then, *"Susan? Anything?"*

The alien presence was heard to sigh.

"Still not a clue," she answered softly.

"Maybe if we think of you in terms of the imp in the bottle," Dinah speculated in Sara's direction, *"Susan being the imp, and you the bottle."*

Sara nodded thoughtfully as she mulled over the analogy, then her eyebrows pricked.

"That makes sense," she observed.

"I knew it!" Susan declared. *"Help! I'm being held captive inside an anal retentive!"*

Dinah chuckled as Sara shielded her eyes with a hand, and sighed.

"Now," the big woman noted mildly, *"she's admitting to being . . . gas."*

"Oh maaaaan!"

You - are - a little fart, Sara confided to her computer self. *You're a pooter, you're a booper, nyah - nyah.*

I'm tellin', Susan countered, and then she pulled out her big guns. *"Mom, Sara's pickin' on me!"*

"Settle down, you two," Dinah sighed before she took a leisurely sip from her mug. . . . *Pooter.*

Dirty diaper.

Potty brain.

Diarrhea!

Buttwipe!

Fartifact!

Macintosh!

"Mo-om!" whined a sorely stung Susan. *"She's doing it again!"*

"Do you want me to send both of you to your room?"

"I didn't do anything!"

"I mean it."

"Wul I - "

"Susan."

" . . . mmm . . . ," the computer grumbled.

"And Sara," Dinah went on to chastise further, *"you really shouldn't tease her so."*

"Mom!" Sara blurted in self defense. *"If you knew half the - "* a sharp look from Dinah paused her, then, *" - crud - I put up with from her!"*

Susan didn't say anything to this, but then, Dinah already knew why.

"You know, it just occurred to me why the two of you are indestructible," their mother announced, *"because if you weren't, you'd kill each other."*

Sara laughed at this. Susan tried remaining silent, but, after she'd snorted a couple times, she finally joined in.

"So," said Dinah, to open another topic, *"you rescued Singapore from a SuzieFlu."*

"Yeah," Sara conceded dejectedly, *"I saved the city from myself."*

A 'bingo' registered in Dinah's mind.

"Yourself?" she wondered as she regarded Sara through narrowed eyes.

Sara glanced back at her mom.

"You know what those things are made of," she stated, then she looked away again. *"I tried to turn myself in after it was over - and wha' do those idiots do, but **thank** me, fer cryin' out loud!"*

"Sara, they're not stupid," Dinah gently chided.

Sara looked back at her mom.

"I know," she pleaded, *"but - what do they, and . . . everybody else - think its called the SuzieFlu for?"*

She looked away again.

"Huh!" she snorted derisively, *"compliments of Mr. . . . "*

"Butthead," Susan chimed in to finish for her.

"Susan - "

"No, Sara," Dinah interjected. *"Let her go. As wronged as you two have been in this whole thing, she deserves to sound off about it."*

"Thanks, Mom."

Dinah kept a watchful eye on Sara. She sat huddled in her chair. She looked like a tightly wound coil-spring of conflicting emotions ready to snap at any moment. Unbeknownst to either of them, Susan had Sara's photon stabilizers ready for activation.

"I never thought I'd ever know what it felt like to be raped," said Sara blankly into air.

Another 'bingo' registered in Dinah's mind. The final cog slipped into place in her carefully learned mental gearing.

"You never authorized this particular use of Susan, did you?" she asked.

Sara looked at her. Her brilliant, blue eye simulations flared.

"That's the same argument the authorities in Singapore gave me," she complained.

"It's all bullshit!"

"No, it's not 'bullshit'," Dinah reproved quickly, but gently, *"and watch your language."*

Sara accepted Dinah's chastisement. She then observed the powerfully built woman go off into herself. Sara respected her mother's periodic moments of distraction. It almost always meant that she was onto something important. Dinah returned after a time. Sara admired the way her huge, well formed muscles danced, and bulged, as she took a good, hefty draught of cocoa, then adjusted her sitting position.

"Lanna has told me," the lawyer began slowly, carefully, *"that . . . these viruses are enabled by software Jimmie gained from Susan."*

She eyed Sara.

"Would that be a correct statement?"

Sara slowly nodded.

"Yeah," she conceded sadly. *"Their like her children, and Jimmie's turned them against her."*

"And you never approved of that?"

"Are you kidding!" the artifact declared emphatically. *"I would never do such a thing!"*

"Alright - alright," Dinah granted with an upraised hand intended to subdue Sara's overwhelming sense of outrage, *"just - calm down, and . . . stay with me here."*

Sara stifled herself as she watched the hulking lawyer. Dinah paused a moment so as to frame her next question properly. When she thought she had it, she looked back to regard the artifact.

"Are the software configurations Jimmie used to create the SuzieFlu - are they

exclusively identifiable as part of Susan?" she asked.

"Absolutely," Sara confirmed without missing a beat.

"And did they also make possible Marshall Wayans' 'Wheel of Fortune'?"

"Yes, they did," Sara acknowledged. *"The thing never would've worked without her input."*

Dinah took this in as she sat there, nodding slowly, thoughtfully.

"Are there any other uses that Jimmie, and Wayans, have put Susan's . . . software, or configurations to?"

"Don't get me started," Susan pointedly warned.

"Just checking, dear," Dinah told her. *"Glad you're with us."*

She took a moment to form her next question.

"Is anyone else privy to Susan's technology?" she asked Sara.

Sara's lips pursed as she regarded her Mom.

"Jimmie owns a number of patents," she took care to note.

Dinah eyed her steadily.

"That doesn't answer my question, though."

They held each others' gaze.

"No," Sara answered.

"Alright," said Dinah as she looked away into the air briefly. When she looked back again to regard Sara, *"Could humans have developed such technology on their own - of their own abilities?"*

"Maybe in the far, far distant future," Sara answered, *"but there's no way they could accomplish this kind of stuff today."*

"So the configurations, which Jimmie has been using," Dinah continued, *"would not exist on earth if not for you, and Susan?"*

"No, they would not," Sara answered.

Dinah gazed at Sara steadily through narrow, concentrated eyes.

"Then it can be reasonably determined," she continued with slow deliberation, *"that the configurations belong to you, and Susan, and to nobody else."*

Sara's eye simulations narrowed as she regarded her mom.

"Beyond a doubt," she stated.

Their eyes held onto one another as Dinah continued.

"That they are your - exclusive - property . . ."

A gentle wave of realization washed over Sara's perceptual photons. Her face came to reflect a new clarity as she regarded Dinah.

"Yeah . . . ," she almost whispered in reply.

Dinah noted Sara's expression of epiphany. She held up a cautioning index finger.

"Don't get ahead of me," she warned.

The attorney sat thoughtfully quiet for a time, her mug of cocoa nested in the long fingers her strong hands. Sara kept her perceptual focus on her mom as she enjoyed the comfort of Olga's easy chair, along with the occasional sips of delicious fluid passing over her lips. Dinah's visual focus shifted back to Sara when she had her next line of questioning mapped out. Sara was ready.

"When you were working with Jimmie," she began, *"or with the NASA people . . . or - with anyone really - did you allow Susan's configurations to be used by others than yourself?"*

"Wul," Sara responded, *"yeah, sure. With Jimmie, definitely."*

"Alright," Dinah acknowledged. *"Anyone else?"*

"No," Sara answered reflectively. *"Jimmie's the only relationship I've had that directly involved Susan. The NASA people were tunnel-visioned on me alone. Susan's told me that she felt pretty left out of that whole scene."*

"Okay, so it would be a true statement to say that Jimmie is the only person you've allowed to access Susan," the lawyer surmised.

Pained by all the consequences of her having trusted Jimmie, Sara looked away from shame, and regret.

"Yeah . . . ," she barely murmured.

Mom came to the rescue, though, extending a bare foot to lightly stroke the side of Sara's calf.

"Hey, c'mon," she gently coaxed. *"Don't get down. Stay with me."*

Sara quietly thrilled at the touch, the tone. She shifted her perceptual photons back to the matter at hand. She could see Dinah's serious expression regard her thoughtfully.

"Did you give Jimmie free use of Susan's configurations?" was Dinah's next question.

"No," Sara answered definitively. She went on to elaborate, *"We did that TV hoax, and made up the computer game, but I never specifically told him, 'It's yours'."*

"Alright," Dinah affirmed with a nod.

She spoke very carefully now.

"So . . . you can state, with a reasonable degree of certainty, that you had no agreement, or contract, with Jimmie whereby you granted him autonomy, and whereby you relinquished to him control, over your property?"

"No way!" Sara declared. *"I know I was naive back then, but I did have a fairly well developed sense of discretion."*

Dinah raised an open palm to subdue Sara's emotions. Sara settled back in her chair, and watched her mom intently, waiting for what would come next.

"And since the property is in evidence, in that Susan's configurations are in clear, and active, use by others than yourself," Dinah continued in the same vein, *"and since you made no agreement - written, verbal, or otherwise - with Jimmie, or with anyone else, whereby you waved your rights, in any way, to said property,"* their eyes held onto one another, *"then it can be legally concluded that you, and Susan, have been the victims of a theft."*

Another wave of realization passed over Sara. She could only stare in stunned silence.

"In other words," Dinah went on to conclude, *"you were robbed."*

Both of them sat quietly for a time, sipping at their cocoa as they considered different angles to what Dinah was saying. Both of them wanted to be sure.

"I . . . guess you could put it that way," Sara tentatively acknowledged. *"Yeah."*

She frowned then, and shifted in her chair as a thought occurred to her.

"Okay, but - here's a problem with that," she pointed out, *"I'm not a U.S. citizen. I mean - I don't even have a legal status."*

"Citizen, or not," Dinah asserted, *"no one has the right to steal from you. Even as an alien, your rights to exclusive property - which Susan is to you - are protected under U.S. law."*

"But what about the rest of the world?" Sara wondered.

"You were first activated, or born, within the national boundaries of the United States," Dinah maintained. *"That, alone, should make you a U.S. citizen."*

"Or property thereof," Sara quickly stipulated, *"if you consider that I'm not human, which I am not."*

Dinah frowned at this. She knew Sara had a valid point, and didn't like it.

"That has never been legally determined," she asserted.

"Well now, hold on a second," Sara stov to qualify.

Her mother's concentrated stare caused her to shiver comfortably.

"Now - this . . . goes back to Alex's original take on me," she continued, "which everyone else has pretty much just accepted, at least up to this point, anyway."

Sara took a deliberate breath, then went on carefully.

"I've always been regarded, or defined, as a gift to mankind - not as a person. Now, as such, wouldn't that legally define me as an object, and, therefore, not entitled to any rights at all? I mean - to say otherwise would be like saying that your office computer had rights."

Dinah bared her teeth at this prospect. Sara had thrown another monkey-wrench into the logic of her thinking. Both of them wanted to be sure.

"Again," the attorney argued, "that remains to be determined. Your legal status has never been established, or even addressed, really. Now, if what you say about your being a 'gift' were so," she continued, "then anyone could justifiably claim sole ownership of you, and Susan, and everybody would be battling everybody else to establish preeminence."

A notion of consuming dread entered Sara's consciousness.

"I could be the cause of wars," she realized as she fearfully eyed her mother.

"If you really loved me, you'd fight over me," teased Susan.

The joke made Dinah smile, and succeeded in breaking Sara's gloomy mood.

"I don't think 'love' would have anything to do with it, Susan," Dinah speculated, then she addressed Sara. "Until otherwise determined in court, you are a free agent, beholden to on one, except Alex."

"And you," Sara added specifically.

"And your rights to property remain," Dinah went on, "and it can be reasonably demonstrated that Susan's technological configurations are your exclusive property."

Sara said nothing more, but sat motionless, and quiet. Dinah could see that she didn't blink, or breathe for some time. She knew that she was having Susan cross-check her assertions with her files on U.S., and international law. She accepted that, and even appreciated it. She felt confident, legally, about what she, and Sara had discussed, but she also knew that she had basically argued from a compelling instinct in her gut. That instinct spoke again as she sought to press the central issue further.

"You are protected against theft, Sara," she stressed. "In this case, there is legal recourse to your having been robbed."

Sara's eyes blinked rapidly several times as she returned. Her chin lifted as her optical simulations focused on her mother. Her face took on the configuration of a fatigued smirk.

"What 'm I gonna do?" she queried rhetorically. *"Sue the President?"*

Dinah looked away, and smiled in a way that Sara found to be strangely beautiful. The curve of her mouth, the tilt of her head - so lovely, and yet . . . unusual.

"I was thinking," the lawyer ventured purposefully, *"of a,"* then her eyes shifted back to Sara, *"more immediate avenue of redress."*

Sara sat there baffled. Dinah Prinze; the woman whom she'd always known to be a moral bulldozer, and a good times wrecking ball, was sitting across from her, regarding her with an unprecedented look of what could only be defined as elfin mischief. Dinah thrilled at the sight of Sara's curiously perplexed visage, and then she shared her thought.

"There is no law that prohibits you from reclaiming property which clearly belongs to you, and which was - again, clearly - stolen from you."

The gradual dawn of awareness came to show on Sara's face. There was a way out of the mess that she'd gotten herself, and Susan, and the whole world into. With respect to human law, permission had been granted. Atonement was at hand.

"Alright! Everyone - outta the pool!"

Dinah's smile widened.

"I think I heard that," she wryly noted.

Sara smiled too now.

"She's . . . really pissed," she acknowledged.

"Right - now!"

"My cocoa's gotten cold," Sara observed as her eyes turned red. She looked up at Dinah. *"You want a warmup?"* she offered.

Dinah luxuriated in the feel of Olga's chair. She also luxuriated in her own feeling of profound contentment as she regarded Sara. She had accomplished her duty as woman. She had protected her child. She gave Sara a tired smile that was both gratified, and grateful, and then she held out her cocoa mug.

"Yes," she told her quietly, *"I'd like that."*

And so, as the two of them sat sipping cocoa in a darkened room in Houston, Texas, USA, Susan called her children home. She sought them out across the globe, wherever they might be. She located every one of the computer codes belonging to her, and, once found, she simply removed them. Bit by bit, byte by byte, the otherworldly presence reclaimed her own, and, in the process, she systematically dismantled the worldwide base of Marshall Wayans' power.

After they had finished their refreshing drink, Sara put her empty mug aside. She rose up from her chair without surrendering her snug, curled up position.

"All accounted for," Susan reported back for both Sara's, and Dinah's benefit. *"The world is finally safe from me,"* she concluded ruefully.

"Susan, stop that," Dinah told her.

"Ya done good, Sis," Sara added.

"Thanks," the alien computer said, and then she admitted, *"I needed that."*

Sara eyed her mom, and floated through the air toward her.

< Dear world,

< All SuzieFl us have been deactivated.

< You will never have to deal with a SuzieFl u, or any variety thereof, again.

< I deeply apologize for any inconvenience the virus may have caused you.

< Love,

< Susan.

Sara sent the E-mail as Dinah opened her arms wide. The girl approached, and came to settle in her lap. Dinah enfolded her as she arrived, and gathered her to herself.

"I hold the future in my arms," she leisurely announced in a deliberately overstated tone.

"Yeah," Sara rejoined laconically, *"just put it all on me why don'cha."*

The big woman chuckled. She gathered the artifact closer. Sara melted into her. A delighted thrill coursed through both their bodies. Sara never felt so safe as when she was in her mother's arms. Dinah was fulfilled in ways she'd never dreamed of. Both were cozy. Both were tired.

"No one died in Singapore today," Sara noted quietly.

"That's good," said Dinah.

She closed her eyes.

"I'm glad."

After devoting two whole days to becoming the equivalent of a licensed physical

therapist, Sara, once again, took over Alex's care. It wasn't the helpless hovering that she'd done before, though. She put him on a rigorous program to facilitate his recovery. She labored to restore flexibility to his joints, and loosen up his severely atrophied muscles, and, in almost no time, she had him sitting up in bed for several brief periods a day.

Putting her singular knowledge of nutrition to good use, Sara directed Alex's diet to get him as healthy as possible as quickly as possible. She knew, better than any human, what was good for him. With her own culinary tastes, however, spanning the alphabet from aardvark to zymometer, and being capable of ingesting everything in between with equal relish (with the notable exception of Venus, of course), Sara didn't necessarily know what *tasted* good to humans.

"Ugh!" Alex once grouched as she was feeding him a carefully prepared broth. "A person'd have to be sick to eat that stuff."

The artifact merely gave the weak, but recovering, man a tired look, and then said, "Duh!"

Alex's face registered his displeasure over hearing that remark. This from the one who was bound to obey him? he thought. Surely, it was more than just cause for open rebellion.

"How about a beer, and some pork rinds?" he asked.

The fatigue factor of Sara's simulated visage increased by a significant percentage.

"Shut yer mouth," she ordered him as she held another spoonful of broth poised before his lips, "and open your mouth."

A tune of 'The Lovin' Spoonful' played through Alex's mind as he closed his eyes, grimaced admirably, then opened wide.

Sara, afterward, consulted with Olga on making her patient's diet more palatable.

The President had become the subject of concern among the White House staff. He wasn't his usual friendly, personable self anymore, and he seemed to be getting progressively more withdrawn, and even reclusive. Almost every day, for close to a month now, a group of Los Alamos people would be ushered into the upstairs office. They would arrive first thing in the morning, and, frequently, not depart until late at night. The President, in the meantime, hadn't met with anyone from Congress - not that they really missed the opportunity. As well, those who sought favor with him, and from him, were kept waiting. Policy initiatives along with the usual run of federal executive business seemed to be on indefinite hold. On those increasingly rare occasions when President Wayans was seen at all, he would often be

preoccupied beyond the point of acknowledging a simple greeting. Not much, in fact, about the Wayans White House had been the same since the alien artifact had returned. A lot of staffers were wondering

"Is there anything wrong, Mr. President?" asked Chief of White House Staff, Bill Robbins.

"He'd successfully cornered the President for a moment one day.

Wayans regarded the man who was his chief lieutenant. He seemed to require a moment to recognize who had spoken to him, and then another moment to properly understand his question.

"Oh, no, Bill," Wayans assured him amiably to Robbins' considerable relief. "There's been a change, of course, but nothing's really 'wrong'."

"Well, you, uh," Robbins began. He hesitated as he groped for a tactful way to say, "have a number of people worried."

Wayans looked away as he smiled, somewhat abashed.

"Oh . . . I know it seems as though I've been a bit unduly focused lately," he admitted. He looked back at Robbins to state, "I'm learning about our alien visitor." He looked away again, but thoughtfully that time. "I'm making a number of . . . fascinating discoveries about her."

"Sort of a - 'know thy enemy' kind of thing, huh?" Robbins wondered significantly.

Wayans looked at him.

"Yeah," he said with a smile, "you might say that."

Robbins' eyebrows pricked.

"And . . . the plan?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing's changed about that," Wayans quickly assured. "The plan is the same. I've just come to realize a better way of going about it."

Robbins was favorably impressed with this, adaptability being one of the characteristics he most admired in Wayans, but still, he was unaccustomed to not being in the know.

"Care to share?" he wondered, hoping that he wasn't being too forward.

Wayans quietly beamed as he grasped Robbins' arm, and gave it an affectionate squeeze.

"All in good time, Bill," he told him. "All in good time."

The President looked away for a reflective moment. He maintained his hold on Robbins' arm.

"It'll be . . . ," he said before looking back at his trusted confidant. There was a certain constriction about his eyes that Robbins couldn't recall having seen before. " - quite a revelation."

Alex was back on his feet again, and making progress by the day. Sara had worked a minor miracle in his rapid recovery. With the regimen of diet, and exercise, she had him on, he had full flexibility of all his joints again, and was able to be up, and active for several hours at a time.

There eventually came to be a problem, however, in that Sara was overdoing it - again. She no longer felt the need to hover over him while he slept, but, when he was awake, she was ever at his side. Dinah's, and Olga's, suggestions that she let him alone fell on deaf perceptual photons - just as it had before. While deeply grateful for her attention, and support, Alex chafed at Sara's mothering him so much. He tried little hints, like saying, "I can do it," when embarking on some activity, but Sara invariably countered with, "No, it's alright," and then she'd help him, whether he needed it, or liked it, or not.

It was one day, while Sara was 'assisting' him to the bathroom, that Alex finally turned to her, and asked, "Don't you have a world to run somewhere?"

Sara was stunned. She drifted back from him. Watching her, Alex wanted to die on the spot.

An awful amount of time elapsed as they regarded each other from opposite sides of the upstairs hall. Finally, Alex was able to speak.

"Hey," he told her softly, and then he held his hand out to her, "c'mere."

Sara did as she was asked. Alex gathered her under his arm as she arrived. He held her close, but Sara held herself closed off from him. He clutched her shoulder, and tried to rub, and squeeze her tension away. He kissed her head, lingering to inhale the wonderful fragrance from her hair.

She remained, but she resisted his attentions - not allowing herself to respond to them, but she remained. Alex thought for a moment, and then he gently told her, "I'm a big boy now."

Instantly, Sara released an exhalation as she relaxed. Alex felt the hardness of her form leave as she melted into him. He clutched her to himself, and thanked the Cryptos, once again, for giving her to him.

"Okay?" he asked.

Sara didn't look up at him, but nuzzled the side of her simulated face against his chest. Alex could feel her thrill with warmth, and closeness.

"Okay," he heard her softly say to him.

She snuggled closer. Alex clutched her shoulder again, then waited.

"Uh . . .," Sara heard him say. She smiled, and snuggled even closer to him.

"I, uh . . . really have to go to the bathroom."

"Uh - yeah!"

She was suddenly down the hall away from him, mentally, emotionally and verbally . . . falling all over herself.

"Well, sure - uh . . . of course - I, uh . . . well . . . aha, I . . . have a world to run - like you say, y'know - so, uh . . . you - just go, and . . . take a wizz, or . . . whatever else you were going to do, and, uh . . ."

Sara just - sort of - ran out of things to not say, and then she noticed a familiar darkness overtake Alex's features. She remembered the look - remembered it well - but she wondered if it meant the same thing. She wondered if

"What do we do with bad little alien artifacts?"

Alex carefully intoned in a manner of dark foreboding.

Sara was surprised at his sudden change of mood, and then she remembered, *Ohh* "no." She took a cautious, backward step, and raised a cautioning index finger.

"Alex," she tried to warn him, but her tone was pitifully unconvincing.

"What do we do with bad little alien artifacts?" Alex asked again with added emphasis.

Her eyes glued on him, Sara backed away another step, her finger poised as though it were a cross intended to hold off an approaching vampire.

"No - really - c'mon now," she stammered nervously.

Alex moved away from the bathroom doorway, and began to advance toward Sara. His step was sure, and firm, his look dark, and foreboding.

"You know what happens to bad little alien artifacts, don't you," he told her.

Sara strove to maintain distance from him, but then her back met with a wall. She exchanged her finger for a staying hand.

"Dad, now c'mon - please - don't . . ."

Alex continued his advance on Sara.

"Don't you?" he demanded of her.

Watching Alex constantly, Sara felt her way into a corner of the hall. She pressed her body into it.

"Daddy - please don't," she urged him fearfully.

"Well, I'm going to show you just what we do with bad little alien artifacts around here," Alex told her darkly.

His shadow loomed over her as Sara cowered in the corner. She looked up at Alex - terrified. He came to stand over her forebodingly.

"I'm going to show you," he declared, "right now!"

Alex reached down behind Sara's pathetically quaking form, and roughly grabbed the collar of her shirt. In one jerk, he lifted her completely off the floor. When her huddle-up figure was at his eye level, Sara looked at him.

"I . . . think that's just about enough of that," she noted lightly to inform him.

Alex looked at her darkly.

"That's what you think," he told her, then he turned with her, "Come on."

He marched her down the hall, grabbing her by the seat of her jeans along the way.

"Dad, you really shouldn't be doing this," Sara tried to tell his apparently deaf ears.

She extended her legs to set her feet to the floor, but Alex was holding her up too high, so she just wound up walking along with him in open air.

"You're going to learn a lesson, young lady," he stated.

Sara started to wiggle, and squirm, in an effort to free herself from his grip.

"You are not *strong* enough for this," she insisted through her teeth.

"You'll find out how strong I am," he informed her, disregarding her gyrations.

They reached the head of the stairs where Alex turned to face them with Sara, literally, in tow.

"Dinah!" he hollered down into the lower story.

"Are you ca-ra-zy!" Sara protested. "She is going to kill us both!"

"We'll see about that," Alex intoned forebodingly.

Olga was the first to see them, having come in from the kitchen - which was much closer to the stairs than Dinah's office. She looked up, and was mildly shocked to see Alex standing at the top of the stairs with Sara beside him, dangling, like a rag-doll, by the scruff of her T-shirt from his upraised hand.

As if on cue, both of them, at once, raised an index finger to their lips, thereby drawing the old Russian into their conspiracy, and wanting her cooperation. Olga's look, and nod, told

them that they had an ally. Alex then lightly tossed his head in the direction he knew Dinah would be coming from. Olga visually checked, then looked back to Alex, answering his unspoken question with a wry smile, and an affirming nod.

Dinah now came into view at the bottom of the stairs. Olga backed away a couple steps to give the hulking lawyer room. Alex quickly curtained himself by holding Sara in front of him.

"Did you just hear Alex call me?" Dinah inquired of Olga.

Olga answered by merely looking up the stairs. Dinah followed suit. She didn't think a thing of seeing her daughter floating in midair.

"Sara, have you seen - "

And then there was the grand unveiling . . .

"ALEX!"

"Hi Mom," Sara bid her mother through a helpless, grimacing smile as she dangled from Alex's grip.

"What are you doing!" Dinah fairly screamed. "Are you nuts!"

Alex grinned.

"I'll take the fifth on that," he told her.

Dinah glanced to Sara.

"You are in so much trouble, young lady!" she scolded up at her.

"She already knows that," Alex noted dryly.

"Mom," Sara chattered, "I swear, I did *not* put him up to this."

"Dinah!" Alex called to her.

"You stop this, right now," Dinah ordered them, then she turned on, "Olga, did you know about this?"

But Alex didn't give Olga a chance to answer - or be cornered.

"We've got us a bad little alien artifact here," he informed his woman . . . darkly.

Dinah redirected her wrath again, and started charging up the stairs, barking orders.

"That's enough of this. Both of you. Alex - let go of her. Sara - get down from there right - "

"Bwaaaaa!"

"Aaahhhh!"

Alex had stopped the onrushing Amazon by throwing Sara at her. He'd maintained a grip on one of her ankles, though. The human, and the artifact, wound up nose to nose with

Sara screaming from simulated fright, and Dinah screaming from the real thing. Dinah backed unsteadily down a couple steps as Alex reeled in his alien child.

"What do we do with bad little alien artifacts?" Alex reiterated . . . forebodingly.

"This is ridiculous," Dinah stressed. She began retracing her ascent up the stairs, "You are in no condition - "

"Ah!" Alex warned.

Dinah froze as she regarded them. He had Sara poised, ready to throw her again.

"You - wouldn't - dare . . .," she breathed at him.

Dinah's threatening glare then turned on Sara, whose beautiful, simulated visage was the very picture of

"Don't look at me. I'm just the projectile."

innocence . . . of one sort, or
another . . . sort of.

A crooked smile clawed its way onto Dinah's strong features.

"Dinah," Olga called to her from the bottom of the stairway.

Dinah looked away to give Olga her attention.

"Do you really tink Sara would be allowink this if it were harmful to him?" the little Russian said in defense of the dynamically delinquent duo.

It was true. Sara would not let Alex overtax himself. Dinah knew that, but still she looked up helplessly at them at the top of the stairs.

"I just hope you know what he's doing," she wished to Sara.

"You will be privy to a full clinical analysis of subject Alex B. Luthor post haste - sir!" the dangling Sara announced with a snappy salute. "Or ma'am . . . whatever."

Alex raised his levitated daughter up to his eye level.

"That was low," he said of Sara's disparaging reference to Dinah's 'unfeminine' appearance.

"Well," said Sara with a significant sidelong glance, "considering the fathers I hang out with . . . "

"That's it," Alex stated, "you're in the hole for sure now."

"At least," Dinah specifically added with reference to Sara's aspersive remark about her massive build. She descended the stairs. "Olga," she stated, "get ready."

"What do we do with bad little alien artifacts around here?" Alex demanded to know.

At the bottom of the stairs, Dinah turned back to them. Her look was merciless.

"We throw them into the briar patch!" she declared.

"That's right!" Alex proclaimed as he heaved Sara high over his head, and held her there like she was the Stanley Cup. "We throw them into the briar patch!"

'Briar Patch' had been a game they'd invented long ago when Sara was quite young. She'd seen several of the smaller children she'd become friends with in the apartment complex playing 'piggyback' with their fathers, and, well, she wanted to play too. Alex was all too happy to comply with this time-honored parental duty, but Sara's gravity-adjusted hundred, and twenty five pound body weight proved to be a bit much for his forty nine year old back. That's when her flying training really started. Sara learned to adjust her weight to suite his comfort. Then, one day, Alex merely plucked her from his back, and hung her in a spot in the air. It was a revelation for both of them. By kreening, Sara could move herself to Alex's unspoken intent, thereby making it look like *he* was the one who had super strength. Briar Patch evolved from there, the usual scenario being Alex accusing her of some imagined transgression, then hauling her off to throw her in the briar patch.

The point to this game was that it gave Sara invaluable practice, and experience, in handling her tremendously powerful form around tremendously frail humans. With Alex being her default setting, he could manipulate her any way he wanted to without risk of harm, but, with experience, Sara eventually amassed enough data to automatically calibrate herself in any body position with relation to any human, object or environment. She, and Alex, also had a lot of fun fooling people with his 'feats of strength'.

Now lying on her back, held aloft in her father's hands, Sara realized that it'd been a long time since she'd seen that part of the upstairs hallway ceiling. She noticed all the spots where her nose, and, sometimes, her chin had poked into the plaster on the occasions when she'd 'missed'. She remembered every one of them, and all her childhood memories that went with them. She smiled from the flow of wondrous recollection, and so she raised her head, and pressed the tip of her nose into the ceiling, then withdrew it to observe the new mark along with all the others.

Whoa!

Hel-lo!

In one quick move, Alex had her dangling at his side again. Sara could see, beyond the bottom of the stairs, that Dinah, and Olga (AKA: the briar patch) were in position - their upraised fingers ready to become deadly thorns. She noticed that her mother hadn't trimmed her nails recently - definitely not a good sign. She began to struggle, and squirm, in Alex's

grip.

"Oh please, sir!" she urged him fervently. "Please don't throw me into that briar patch!"

C'mon! Throw 'er-throw 'er!

"Are you a bad little alien artifact?" Alex demanded of her.

"Yes!" Sara cried pitiably. "I confess! I'm a bad little alien artifact!"

Okay - so she's bad already. Throw 'er!

"Do you know what happens to bad little alien artifacts?"

Yeah, we know. C'mon!

"Yes!" cried Sara. "I'm guilty!"

She's guilty as hell.

Alex eyed the women at the lower level darkly.

"Then we must proceed," he intoned in a tone of dark foreboding.

C'mooooon - throw 'er!

Dinah flexed her upraised fingers.

"The briar patch . . . awaits," she intoned darkly.

The time was at hand. Alex heaved his air-born daughter forward, "One!" and then pulled her back. "Two!" accompanied another heave followed by a second retraction.

C'mooooon - !

"Three!" and he let her go.

Once released, Sara executed a beautiful, slow-motion swan dive through the air. She paused, but for a moment to utter a final, plaintive, "Ah!" before surrendering to her fate.

She fell, and plunged into the thick of the briar patch. The thorns - they poked, and tore at her. It was horrible. Sara struggled valiantly, but the briar patch overwhelmed her. The thorns were everywhere - all around her. There was no escape. It was truly awful, and she eventually succumbed.

Her death was heralded, as always, by an elaborate scene. For this occasion, Sara chose her favorite among the many death scenes she'd collected over the years. After performing a believable cross between Povlova's "The Dying Swan", and the Daffy Duck "Woohoo!" - artful in its expressiveness, and rendering - Sara expired in her mother's loving arms. From above, Alex observed the final tableau, and he saw that it was good.

"I'm gonna take a dump," he casually announced.

Miraculously, Sara revived to look up at her father.

"No shit!"

"Sara!"

"Aw Mom, for this, I'll eat a whole case of soap."

"And I *don't* need your help," Alex added as he specifically eyed his child, whom he so dearly loved.

All three of the women in his life raised their eyes to him. Alex was in Heaven as he looked upon his family . . . but the urge *was* upon him. With some reluctance, he stepped back away from the landing, then turned, and disappeared as he ambled down the hall.

"Don't fall through the live preserver!" Sara called out after him. She averted her perceptual photons from the stairs to take in her mother's substantially less than beaming countenance. In an effort to defuse Dinah's evident displeasure over her last remark, Sara got all emotional, gave a little, 'Boohoo', and used a corner of Dinah's collar to dab her eyes.

"Just think of it, Mom," she sobbed effectively, "going off to the bathroom . . . all by himself . . . I - (sniff) . . . I'm so proud of him!"

Dinah turned a tired face to Olga, who'd stood by watching. Her squat, little body gently quaked from quiet, warm laughter.

"Here, Olga," the lawyer said, forthrightly depositing the artifact into her grandmother's arms, "you do something with her."

Then she turned, and walked away to return to her office.

The manner of her disposal didn't sit well with Sara as she sat in her Banggo's cradling grip. The two shared a mutually conspiratorial glance.

"This means war, you know," the young one intoned.

The old one nodded.

"I would be tinkering so," she agreed.

With that, Sara rose out of Olga's arms, and rolled in the air onto her stomach. She assumed a crouched position, eyeing Dinah's receding back as a cat would eye its prey. She even wiggled her butt like a cat ready to pounce,

Hooyeah!

and then she pounced.

"Dinah," called Olga.

"Yeah?"

was all that was said before Sara tackled the Amazon from behind around her broad shoulders. In the next instant, mother, and otherworldly daughter, were rolling on the floor; wrestling, and laughing, tussling, and giggling, tickling, and squealing -

and loving every second of it.

"Man, it feels good to be alone," Alex sighed as he sat.

Alex - was back.

As the day went on, Alex's truly astounding display of physicality that morning had gotten Dinah to thinking . . . and wondering. It had been a long, hard road they'd traveled during their years of separation, and she was feeling - well . . . a little anxious. She'd feared the stress would be too much for him, however - considering his weak condition, but - she had gotten to wondering, and . . . she *was* feeling - a little anxious.

She decided it would be best to consult with the resident Florence Nightingale as to the status of Alex's . . . health. The only problem was that 'Florence' just happened to be her extra-terrestrially precocious, six year old daughter.

"Sara," Dinah began when Sara happened to drop by her office to say, 'Hi,' and have a look-see at what her mom was up to. It was a good start, but then Dinah suddenly lost her nerve.

"Have a seat," she offered to her child.

Sara, agreeably, arranged herself comfortably in the air.

"In a chair, please," Dinah stipulated.

Oo - this sounds serious.

I wonder what she thinks we did now?

You wanna kreen?

Nah, let's just play it cool, and see what she has to say.

Use telepathy. You know she feels more comfortable with that.

Sara, agreeably, floated to the nearest chair, and arranged herself comfortably on it.

"So," Sara thought, trying to sound bright, and cheerful, "*what's on your mind, Mom?*"

"Uhm . . .," Dinah hesitated awkwardly, then, "let's - just talk, shall we?"

So much for comfort.

This is not looking good.

"I . . . want to talk to you about - Alex," Dinah carefully began.

Are you sure you didn't do anything?

Wha' d' ya mean, 'you'?

"Sure, Mom," Sara answered brightly. "What about 'im?"

Oohhh, Dinah thought to herself, *she is not making this easy*. "Well, uh . . .," she said

to the floor, then she looked up at her daughter, and made a successful effort to smile, "how's he doing?"

"Great," Sara fairly chirped, and then she chattered on, "he's progressing, getting stronger, and putting on some weight - safely too I might add. All his vital functions are good, he's eating well, and his digestion is handling everything just fine - thank goodness you had that dental work done, it's helped a lot. His . . . eliminations are . . . good, and . . . healthy - if you can call it that. Altogether, he's doing just fine."

Dinah sat there, and quietly beamed with appreciation for what she'd just heard.

"That's, uh . . . really nice to hear," she hesitantly acknowledged, "that, uh . . . he's . . . doing - just fine."

"He's a real pistol, alright," Sara beamed with pride for her dad.

Pistol . . ., echoed in the most private region of Dinah's mind.

"You *can't* - keep that man down," Sara happily went on to say.

God, it's getting hot in here, Dinah thought. "You, uh," she then went on, "mentioned . . . vital functions."

"Um-hm."

"Well, I was thinking of . . . another kind of, uhm . . . function," Dinah managed to get out before she needed to delicately clear her throat.

The two females, the one human, the other artifact, quietly regarded one another for a time.

Is she thinking what I think she's thinking, wondered Sara.

Is she thinking what I think she thinks I'm thinking, wondered Dinah.

Is she thinking what I think she thinks you think she's thinking, wondered Susan.

And the thigh bone's connected to the knee bone.

"You understand, Sara," Dinah struggled on, "that it's only - *natural* that I should be concerned about Alex's . . . state of health, and I was just wondering . . . is he, uh . . . well, is he . . . you know . . . healthy?"

Sara's face went to its default setting of a completely blank stare.

Ooohhhh . . . I know what she means . . .

Oh yeah, agreed Susan. *I can see the fireworks, and I can hear the rhythmic humping - I mean thumping, of a Sousa march.*

Sara couldn't suppress a smile.

You wanna have some fun?

You really need an answer to that?

"Uhm . . .," Sara feigned, her brilliant, doe-like eye simulations full of innocence, "I'm - having a little trouble understanding just what you're getting at here, Mom."

Dinah sighed heavily inside. She sincerely hoped that the sweat forming in her hairline didn't show.

Oooo I am liking this.

"Well, uh," said Dinah, then she cleared her throat again, "as you know - Alex . . . is a man . . . and . . . I am . . . you know . . ."

Oh man, this is great! Sara confided to Susan.

We've never had 'er going like this before, an enthusiastic Susan agreed.

Sara leaned forward in her chair, her angelic face filled with familial concern.

"Mom?" she called to Dinah softly.

Give it more pout, Susan couched her, *and tease your eyebrows just a bit.*

Sara modified her facial configuration, then tenderly asked her dear mother, "Do you think that you could be just a little more . . . explicit?"

Ow! cheered Susan. *Git - down!*

Dinah looked away as she passed a pair of fingers along her moistened brow.

"What I mean to say is," she then started again, and then she . . . fizzled out again.

Can we play - hide the weeny?

"With . . . regard to - Alex . . . and me . . ."

Can we play - stuff the taco?

"I think it's time, Sara, that you came to understand how . . ."

Can we play - park the car in the garage?

Where'd you get all this stuff? Sara wondered of herself.

Eh - I get around.

"Sara, are you listening to me?"

"Hm?"

Uh . . . ohh . . .

Do you think she knows?

"Sara?"

"Yeah, Mom," Sara answered with her undivided. "I'm right here."

I think I just noticed a library I haven't read yet -

Don't you bug out on me!

Alright - play it cool, play it cool. There's a slim chance that she hasn't caught on.

Gimme numbers.

How about one in two billion?

"Sara?"

Make that three billion.

Sara focused on Dinah. She looked suspicious, but then her mother always looked suspicious. "Mom?"

"Can you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"Yeah," the girl admitted shyly with such charming reticence. She spoke slowly, and softly, her voice falling like a loving kiss upon her mother's ear. "I think I can." She smiled - ever so sweetly. "But . . . only to a certain extent," she went on as her smile began to fade, "as you know, of course," and then she sadly bowed her head, "because . . . I . . ." She couldn't go on, burdened, as she was, with a young alien artifact's private shame.

Oohhh . . ., purred Susan, *you dog you . . .*

"Sara," Dinah gently called to her, then she explained as delicately as she could. "I can see that this is difficult for you . . . and I'm sorry, but . . . could you tell me . . . can Alex, and I . . . be together?"

Sara raised her pain filled face. "Yes," she barely managed to say, "I think you can . . . that is, if I properly understand what you mean . . ." She struggled on. She fought so hard. "I know all the clinical terms . . . and functions - that you're referring to. . . but . . ." She was so brave.

Man, and I thought I was bad.

Quick - gimme some anomalies.

Uh, you know we can't fake anomalies.

Oo - rats!

"Sara," Dinah called again as she rose from her chair, and hastened to her suffering child, "you don't have to go on."

She took the beautiful girl in hand, lightly raised her up, and gathered her levitated form in her capable, motherly arms.

"What you've already told me is more than enough," she confided to her privately, "and - I appreciate it."

The two of them shared a strong hug, then both of them let go.

"Thank you."

"Sure, Mom," Sara granted as she drifted off, but maintained touch. She had recovered her former, happy spirits - somewhat. "Any time."

They shared a look, a smile. Their hands parted, then Dinah turned to leave the room.

I think we're clear.

Way t' go, girl.

"You know, Sara," Dinah then said, turning back as if taken with a sudden thought. She looked at the girl, and smiled. Sara smiled back, and looked at her mom expectantly.

"You're getting to be more like Susan every day."

Sara's eyes grew very wide.

"Oh, yuch!"

"I am not!"

"Unfair!"

"Mom!"

"You really know

how to hurt a computer, don't you!"

"That was *totally* uncalled for!"

Dinah struck, and then she fled, leaving her children to argue among themselves.

*I am not **anything** like you!*

You are me!

Oh byte me!

Perch on it!

That night, Dinah and Alex, lay in bed together. They'd been sharing the same bed for awhile, but without any contact out of concern for Alex's frailty. Dinah would sit up against a pillow, and go over a legal brief, while Alex watched TV. When the hour came, they'd lightly kiss sometimes - sometimes not - then turn out the lights, and go to sleep.

Dinah was sat up against a pillow, going over a legal brief - as had become her habit, while Alex watched TV - as had become his habit. On this night, however, Dinah had to keep adjusting her attention on the papers she had set against her upraised knees. Alex held the remote in his hand, but he knew that nothing on the screen would hold his interest, or even catch his notice really.

To hell with it, he thought, and turned the TV off.

"Is it that time already?" Dinah wondered to him.

"No," said Alex, turning on his side toward her, "I'm just gonna turn in early."

"Are you okay?" Dinah asked him over her reading glasses.

Alex smiled up at her.

"Yeah, I'm okay."

He settled. She read. There was quiet for a time, then Dinah felt something on the inside of her elbow.

What is that? she frowned. She looked, and saw Alex's finger.

"Alex?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"I can scoot over if you need more room."

"No, you're okay."

They settled again into their separate activities. After a time, however, Dinah felt something on her thigh.

"Alex."

"Hmm?"

"What are you doing?"

"Oh, nothing. I just thought I saw a smudge, or something, on your leg is all."

"I just took a bath."

"I know - I just . . ."

"Go to sleep. I can understand why you're tired with all you've done today."

They settled again - or at least they tried to - or maybe they didn't try at all.

"I'm not tired," Dinah heard Alex quietly say.

She looked at him over her glasses. He was looking up at her from where his head lay on his pillow.

"Uhm," she almost whispered.

"You . . . wanna -"

"No -"

"Okay - "

"we shouldn't - "

"alright - "

"really - "

"Alright already!" Alex

stated irritably, and then he sighed. "I can take a hint."

They settled, but didn't settle, once again.

"Can you?" he heard Dinah quietly ask him.

Alex opened his eyes, and looked up at her. She was watching him. She'd taken her glasses off.

"What?" he queried.

Her lips pursed. She looked away.

"Well, I guess that answers *that* question," she said, and then she sighed.

"What? Wait a minute," said Alex, rising enough to lit upon his elbow. "What was the question?"

Dinah looked at him. Alex could see hurt in her eyes. She looked away.

"Oh, never mind."

"No, c'mon now."

"It's nothing really."

"It was important enough for you to ask."

"It'll be alright."

"Dinah - "

"It's nothing!" Dinah snapped irritably. "Alright?"

They looked at each other as though from across a widening chasm.

"Okay," said Alex, and then he lay down again. *Shit . . .*

Dinah looked away, and hung her head. *Shit!*

They didn't even bother pretending to settle. They just set, and stewed with themselves for awhile.

"I was," Dinah began in an effort to try yet again, "talking to Sara this afternoon."

"Um-hm?" Alex murmured without opening his eyes.

"And . . . she says that you're . . . really doing fine."

Alex opened his eyes. He could see Dinah looking at him.

"Well," he offered in reply, "I feel okay."

They watched each other. Both could see the chasm closing.

"Do you . . .," Dinah wondered tentatively, "feel - okay . . . ?"

The chasm closed. They were close enough to touch.

"I was beginning to wonder if you were ever going to ask."

The chasm opened wide again, and Dinah felt like she'd just fallen in. She looked away, and cast her eyes up to the ceiling.

"I've just been trying to ask for the last five minutes," she stated irritably.

Oh, ska-rew it, Alex thought. He changed his position, turning over on his back. "Why didn't you just come out, and say it?"

Before he knew it, Dinah was on him, straddling his hips with her own. He was surprised that so large a woman could've moved so fast, and with so little disturbance to the bed. After Dinah was sure of her position - and of his - she just sat back, watching him, and simply let him drink of her.

She more than filled him; mind, body and soul. Alex simply could not take in the sum of her at once - or even twice. His eyes meandered leisurely across her rich, and intricately chiseled landscape. At every shift of focus, he beheld a dazzling array of gorge-like creases, and full, highly mounded cambers. Even though she was completely relaxed, Alex could see how her engorged body thrust her massive arms out from her sides.

God is she big . . .

She was truly a beast for the eyes - and touch. His fingers reached up to barely trace along the sharply risen vein that ran the length of her upper arm. He could almost feel the blood coursing through it. Dinah thrilled at the attention - grateful for the touch. She raised a hand, and lightly pushed her hair behind a shoulder.

God, is she big . . .

Alex forced himself beyond her amazing body to concentrate on Dinah's face. The first thing he noticed was that the ferocity he'd grown accustomed to - was gone. She'd always been desperate in her foreplay, and her sex, he thought. It was like she felt she had to either wrest gratification by the throat, or do without it altogether. In their own relations, she had always taken what she'd wanted from him, and he had always submitted to her whim - with neither of them getting any closer, or ever really having much fun. He found that he didn't miss her ravenous, feral glare. He liked the way she looked at him now. In fact, he kinda loved it.

Dinah decided that he was drunk enough on her. She slowly leaned forward to support herself, first on her hands, then on her elbows. Alex could feel her breasts press into his chest as she approached him.

God - is she -

"I'm saying it now," her quiet voice pierced through to his consciousness. Alex looked at her. The softness he saw was so at odds with what his touch encountered. She gazed at him - into him. "Are you," she asked, ". . . okay?"

Alex stroked her sides, and was, again, pleasantly surprised at the many hard mounds, and ridges his touch encountered. He lowered his attentive hands, and thrilled at the impossibility of embracing her powerful hips.

"I'm doing," he quietly assured her, "just fine."

Marshall Wayans had long been in the habit of reading from the Bible before retiring at night. It served him as a point of focus. It cleared away the day just passed, and often cleared away uncertainty to the coming day ahead. Recently, however, he'd taken an interest in another type of reading material: The Los Alamos report on the NASA's Susan data.

Not knowing degenerate matter from anti matter, however, the President often found himself at a loss to understand many of the terms, and passages, in the report. It occurred to him that it was much the same feeling he'd experienced when he'd first started serious study of the Bible. He recalled that he had overcome this sense of being lost through a zeal to understand, and through numerous consultations with learned men of clergy. He determined that this latest feeling of uncertainty would be handled no differently, for he possessed the zeal to understand the Cryptoalien artifact that went by the name of . . . *Susan*.

Chapter Fifty

Vindication

The offices of Morgan Stanley, London, UK. 5:53 AM.

"morning, Harry," Kit greeted from his desk in the securities bullpen.

"morning, Kit," Harry returned as he moved to his own desk close by.

"Getting an early start today?"

"Yeah," Harry sighed with experienced fatigue. "Same as you. Going to see if there's *anything* out there."

"Early bird catches the worm, and all that rot, eh?"

"Heh! And rot it is. There haven't been any worms in one hell of a long time, but . . ."

"I noticed as I was coming in that the Nikkei's up quite a bit this morning."

Harry scowled.

"Probably just a bear market correction. Nothing's come out of Japan's deflationary economy since their bubble burst in '89."

"Like you say," Kit noted dryly, "but it is unusual."

"Maybe they genuinely think that something actually 'good' has happened," Harry speculated.

He shed his jacket for the day, then settled into his desk chair. He booted his computer, and turned on the monitor.

"Well, let's see what new, and wonderful disappointments await the financial world today."

Harry sat back, and perused the front page of the early edition news while his computer loaded. When he thought an appropriate amount of time had elapsed, he glanced up at his monitor screen. What he saw was not what he expected. Not at all. Superimposed against his desktop was a white, square frame, that almost filled the screen, centered in which was plain, black print.

"Kit?" Harry called as he studied the text within the frame.

"Yeah?" Kit answered.

"You seen your 'puter yet?"

"No, why?"

"Switch on."

Kit frowned at the conclusion of this exchange. He thought Harry sounded rather strange. It got him to wondering, so he went about getting his own computer up, and running. When the operating system finished loading, and his desktop on the screen came on, Kit saw the same white frame, and the message it contained.

< Dear world,
< All SuzieFlu us have been deactivated.
< You will never have to deal with a SuzieFlu, or any variety thereof, again.
< I deeply apologize for any inconvenience the virus may have caused you.
< Love,
< Susan.

"Well?" asked Harry.

Kit now understood why Harry had sounded strange. He answered his bullpen neighbor's hail by swiveling his chair around to face him. Harry noted that Kit looked every bit as surprised as he himself felt.

"This is a bloody wake-up call," said Kit.

Left on every computer of every government, and business office, on earth, Sara's E-mail touched the world like a caressing thunderclap. Everyone directly privy to the message started E-ing, phoning and talking to everyone else - expressing bewilderment, giving thanks, wondering if it could be true. Government leaders felt confident that the E-mail was authentic. They reasoned that the United States President would never have authorized such a communiqué, and would have taken whatever steps necessary to prevent its being sent - that is, if he *could* prevent it. At the same time, they knew that, terrible as Marshall Wayans' Susan based power had become, he did not have the capability of affecting so many computers at once.

As power is as perceived, perception began to shift as awareness of Sara's E-mail spread throughout official circles. Some brave government offices issued very cautious statements in support of the E-mail's veracity. As no reprisals, or further outbreaks, of SuzieFlu occurred, other governments began issuing statements of support which were not so cautious. The media saw their cue. Aside from reporting on official activity with regard to

Sara's message, editors and talking heads, began publishing their own cautiously worded statements of support. As understanding of Sara's E-mail gradually seeped into the global consciousness, one thing became crystal clear: Marshall Wayans' death-grip on the world had been loosened, and it had been the alien, Susan, who had accomplished that.

"I can't bul-ieve this!"

Believe it. . . . transfer . . . last one . . . from corporate to . . . incorporated . . . target account . . . from - to . . . execute.

"She's taken everything!"

No, not everything - well . . . yeah. I guess you could say everything. . . . transfer to . . . sub-account . . .

"How could she *do* this to me!"

Execute. "bout time you did something ya little bimbo."

"Who you callin' a bimbo?"

Lanna's eyes lost focus on the monitor screen before her, her hands poised motionless over the keypad. She hadn't expected a reply to her under the breath remark. She knew she, and Jimmie, were alone in their newly restored condo, but the voice she'd heard was definitely not Jimmie's. The sound of the edgy, girlish voice hadn't even seemed to have come through her ears, but, somehow, had gently resonated inside her head. After a moment, the blonde blinked herself awake, and took a deliberate breath.

"Susan?" she wondered tentatively. *"Is that you?"*

"No," Susan stated testily, *"it's the Avon lady."*

Lanna smirked without intending to. She breathed easier.

"I didn't think you were into cosmetics," she offered as a rejoinder, then, *"Does Sara know you're here?"*

"Oh yeah," the alien computer chirped amiably. *"We were a bit concerned after I cleaned louse - I mean . . . house, so she asked me to look in on you to see how you were doing."*

Lanna felt warm as she smiled. Her fingers went back to work on the keypad.

"I'm doing okay, Susan. Thanks for the thought."

"I got a question."

"Umhm," Lanna mumbled as she typed.

"It's something I've always wondered about."

"Shoot."

"How do you see the keypad over that breakfront of yours?"

The enhanced blonde paused. Her eyes lost focus on the monitor screen again. Her full lips puckered slightly as her shoulders eased back to accommodate the taking of a deep breath.

"Oooo grandma, what big dirigibles you have."

Lanna chuckled silently.

"I go by touch, dear," she informed Susan as she exhaled, and set to work once more.

"I can't bul - how could she - how 'm I gonna . . . !"

"I gather he's not taking it well."

"He's . . . a little upset, yeah."

"Somehow, I find that reassuring."

The blonde smiled.

Sub-account . . . transfer . . . execute.

"You're sure you're alright?"

Lanna frowned.

"You don't already know?"

"Capacity doesn't grant any rights."

The human's eyebrows pricked.

"Very good. Where'd you learn that?"

"Sara, and I, figured it out."

"Well, that alone puts the two of you a big step ahead of a lot of people. From account . . . to . . ."

"So, uh . . ."

"Go ahead, and take a look, Sue. I grant you the right."

"Thanks. I won't be a moment."

And she wasn't.

"Man, you've been busy."

"I've been working on this ever since you two got back. I was wondering when you were going to act. What took you so long?"

"We had other priorities to take care of, and . . . we weren't quite sure how to go about it. Mom pointed us in the right direction." She then changed the subject.

"What's going to happen with Butthead?"

"Who?"

"Jimmie," Susan clarified. *"Your . . . significant other."*

"Should I laugh, or cringe, at that?"

"Ooo, me - ow baby."

"Without you, he's no longer exceptional in the software world," said Lanna.

"Wayans will cut him loose, and he'll be left to face the Mosely Committee alone."

"I can see him spending a lot of time in court after that," Susan speculated, *"and then a lot more time in prison."*

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I've got that covered."

"What do you mean?"

"Jimmie will testify before the committee, but not against himself. I've arranged for a death row inmate to pose as a rogue programmer in our company. He'll take the fall for everything; the SuzieFlu, the power plays against other countries, all of it. He'll be 'arrested' after he gets off the Senate witness stand. There'll be a show-trial, after which he'll go back to prison with a commuted sentence under his real identity and he'll spent the rest of his life behind bars."

Lanna had stopped what she was doing to relate this scenario. She expected Susan to react, but the response she got surprised her. She waited for the alien presence to express herself, then realized that Susan *was* expressing herself as a deeply unnerving sensation of stunned silence gradually came over her.

"Lanna, this is wrong," Susan finally said. Her muted tone was intended to plea rather than chastise. *"This is so wrong."*

"Susan, you're a computer, think it through," Lanna pleaded of her own. She went on in an attempt to explain. *"What would be the point of otherwise? I understand how you and Sara feel, but you could punish Jimmie all you want, and he still wouldn't understand. He's brilliant, yes, but, at the same time, he's clueless. You, and Wayans, have merely afforded him opportunities to put ones, and zeros, together in different ways. That's as far as he sees it. If the truth came out, he'd be ruined, the company would be destroyed and a lot of innocent people would be unnecessarily hurt."*

"So you hide him behind the shareholders," Susan charged.

"To an extent, yes," the blonde admitted, *"but there's more to it than that."* She continued to explain her way of thinking, and her mode of action. *"Out from under Wayans'*

control, Jimmie would be fully under mine. He'd be the crown jewel of the team of programmers Michael, and I, have worked years to put together."

"So the fuck what!" the computer snapped. *"You're just lucky Sara isn't here, because her photon stabilizers would be in hyper-overdrive right now."*

"The people on my payroll are the best the world has to offer," Lanna stated, pressing on. *"They're better than anyone Doors or Werks have, because all they're involved with is promoting product lines -"*

"It's wrong!"

*"They're **your** best chance for mankind's understanding you!"*

Another silence overtook their atmosphere. Though shaken over what she'd said, Lanna was encouraged by Susan's lack of response. She pressed on.

"The NASA people focused all of their attention on Sara, didn't they?"

"Yes," Susan quietly acknowledged.

"Well, Jimmie, and our crew, have discovered inroads to you."

"Like SuzieFlu?" Susan asked pointedly.

"Yes, like SuzieFlu," the blonde regretfully admitted. *"But there's more,"* she then went on. *"Dinah's told me about what you did with Tom Starks."*

"So?"

"It was old news to me, Susan, because I knew you could do that."

The pause that followed reassured Lanna.

"And there's more. There is so much more." She waited a moment, then said, *"Sara, and I, need to get together, and work out an agreement to deciphering you, and utilizing you."*

"But Jimmie . . ."

"Is part of the package."

Lanna hadn't made the statement as a 'take it or leave it' ultimatum, but merely as a matter of fact, which she suspected Susan was already well aware of. Without Jimmie's unique perception, understanding the Cryptoalien machine would take much longer with many, seemingly obvious, avenues of exploration leading to nowhere. It followed then, that Jimmie's inevitable incarceration, under the law, would prevent a lot of potentially good things from happening.

"It isn't right," Susan protested, but Lanna could hear a wavering of conviction in her

tone.

"*Compromise seldom is, Susan,*" she informed the presence. She thought it best to wait a moment before she asked, "*Do you understand?*"

"Yes, I understand . . . damn you!"

Lanna said nothing more. She left Susan alone to think it over. Adept, and talented, as she was at wielding power, Lanna had to close her eyes, and bow her head at the quirkiness of life. So much of it 'wasn't right' as Susan had observed. For all that he had done, she hadn't wanted to see Jimmie skate either, but she knew that Marshall Wayans had been the real force behind Susan's misuse. She wanted to see him taken down. She knew that a lot of people

"Is justice an illusion?"

Asked with all the disarming innocence of the child that Susan was, the question came as a surprise to Lanna, but then, at once, she realized that it shouldn't have come as a surprise to her at all. She'd often asked herself just this same question over the time span of her own consciousness, and she wondered if her answer was any better now, as then.

"A lot of times, yes, but that doesn't make justice not worth striving for. Not ever."

"I don't understand."

"Just do your best, Susan. It's all any of us can really do. Just do your best."

"I will report the full context of our discussion to Sara."

"Do that," Lanna urged. "*Talk it over between the two of you . . . and talk it over with your family.*"

"Talk it over with my family?" the computer wondered. "*I thought I was doing that.*"

"What . . . ?" the human wondered.

"Wul," said Susan tentatively, "*you're part of my family.*"

A consuming warmth came over Lanna. She truly hadn't thought to be so honored.

"Do you have a problem with that?"

"No, Susan," the blonde answered. She was thrilled by the distinction, and the challenge. "*No, I don't have a problem with that.*"

"Sara will be getting in touch with you to start working out a contract."

"And make sure your mother's on it too," Lanna advised. "*With the 'rights to property' angle, you were lucky, Sue. We don't want to take that kind of risk again.*"

"Yeah," said Susan reflectively. "*The world may not be so lucky next time. Well, I'd better be going, but . . . before - I - do . . .*"

"Ahhhh!"

"What was that?"

"I left a message for him on his monitor."

The blonde's eyes narrowed, her suspicions rising.

"What did you say?" she asked with care.

"I just said 'Hi'," Susan answered readily, then she paused a moment before continuing, *"and I . . . asked him if he missed me."*

Lanna smiled, and laughed, quietly to herself.

"Susan," she said as she executed another funds transfer, *"you're a bitch after my own heart."*

"Who you callin' a bitch?"

The Caucus Room in the U.S. Capital building where the Senate Judiciary Committee sat was filled to capacity with dozens more people crowded in the hallway outside the chamber's dark varnished, wood doors hoping to get in. The committee was seated at the long tables at the front of the room with Chairman, Oscar Mosely, conspicuously seated at the center, and the committee's chief counsel to his immediate left. The spectator section was crammed with media, live televising equipment and public along with witnesses, their lawyers, family members, supporters and friends. Aides scurried about like bees among the Senators transmitting last minute messages pertaining to points of law, and detail refinements to the upcoming proceedings. Most of the Senators seemed to be busy with papers they had on the table in front of them. More than one of them grouched about the maze of wires, and cables, at their feet beneath the table as media techs made final tests, and adjustments. The time was approaching for the opening session of Senate hearings on what was already being called 'Susangate'.

Tom Starks' challenge to the U.N. documentation on Sara had been a shot in the arm to Congress. Shortly after its delivery to the Judiciary Committee staff, Mosely had begun quietly discussing the Starks deposition among his fellow senators. While some were skeptical about the legal feasibility of some of Starks' backup data, all of them were keenly conscious of the deposition's potential significance. It portended a very real probability, which many congressmen, and women, had long suspected, of official wrong doing with regard to the Cryptoalien artifact known as Susan.

There was another matter, however, of even deeper concern to them.

That President Wayans didn't like the strange girl from outer space, though he hadn't been above using her to get himself elected to the nation's highest office, was axiomatic. That he'd seemed to be 'on the run' since her unheralded return, some months before, had been cause for more than passing curiosity. Was the President afraid of the alien, or beholden to her in some way? Did she 'have' something on him, much the same way that his Blue Book 'had' something on almost all of them? No one could find out - the Beltway grapevine proved barren of any information. Having had to cow-tow to Marshall Wayans from the git-go, the senators saw the Starks deposition as giving them a choice they hadn't had in a long time: The opportunity to say "no" to the President. With the White House having been virtually incommunicado with the Hill for nearly a month, the Senate decided to take a chance. On a close vote, Mosely, and his committee, were given the go ahead to conduct a limited investigation using Starks' deposition as a starting point.

They started digging. As they began gathering evidence, and questioning people, however, a pattern began to emerge. Their investigative team was consistently unable to turn up satisfying answers from U.N. officials with regard to the alien artifact. Here the whole issue of the alien's departure from Earth had been conducted through the U.N., and yet nobody seemed to know anything about it beyond what had been officially published. Even those who had been directly involved seemed to be out of the loop. One dignitary, who, supposedly, had witnessed Sara signing the document promising her removal from Earth, claimed that she had signed it with her left hand. A member of Committeeman, Senator Herman Thatcher's staff, however, was a former Navy man who'd been on active duty on the Enterprise during Sara's visit to the aircraft carrier. He swore that Sara had signed autographs with her right hand. Federal investigators, Harold King, and Denise Fisher, would later corroborate this finding by stating that, during their interview with Sara, both of them witnessed Sara sign a letter of authorization using her right hand.

The U.N.'s low-key, but effective, mood of 'I don't recall' noncooperation soon had the Senate committee at a frustrating impasse, but then a Judiciary staffer's call to Dinah one day lead investigators to Dave Nolan, and his cache of scrupulously documented letters. Upon reviewing the transcript of Fisher's, and King's, interview with a subdued, but obviously angry, Sara, the committee became convinced that they were onto something major.

No one in the nation's capital outside the White House - and most of those within it - had known any more about the SuzieFlu than had the general public. The origin, and the

purpose, of the alien virus had been the most closely guarded international secret. In keeping with the oldest of military strategies, Wayans had conquered by way of division. The pinnacle of every government hierarchy in the world knew the truth about SuzieFlu, but Wayans had exacted silence from each of them. This was aside from the fact that no country wanted to embarrass itself by admitting to any other country that its government was, basically, powerless. In a wrenching twist of irony, the nations of the world were united, but only in their profound sense of helpless isolation.

Everyone else in the world, however, believed Sara was solely responsible for the electronic scourge that had so contracted the global economy that it had brought about a crushing, world wide, economic depression. Marshall Wayans had carefully engineered that though, and, as the hard times had gotten harder, he'd channeled the rising hope for a better life into Christian faith, and steered the rising mood of discontent against non-Christian nations. The terrorist attack of 9/11 really had been "heaven sent", as Wayans had described it. With the insular affect from scrutiny that the Homestead Security Act provided him, and the ever present threat of SuzieFlu, Wayans had built a massive, world wide military coalition, replete with Susan enhanced weaponry, and surveillance systems, that was geared to the purpose of eradicating Islam once, and for all.

At home, those in the Federal beltway in Washington had known that Wayans was gearing up for a military action of vast proportions. Many on the Hill had supported his arms buildup, believing the old world's tale that international war is the best antidote for domestic economic woes. What they hadn't known, however, was that the enemy of the day wasn't just a minor Arab dictator who was causing major headaches, but the Islamic World as a whole.

Then, all of a sudden, the SuzieFlu was gone. With Susan's 'house cleaning', out went the baby with the bath water. Not only did she dismantle her bastardized namesake, but she took the Modern Christi an Crusade's strategic advantage over her knee, and gave it a sound spanking as well. When she was done, Wayans' means of meeding out divine retribution upon the unGodly wouldn't fire a spitball.

The days following Sara's E-mail saw dramatic change. International fear of further SuzieFlu attacks faded as no new outbreaks continued. Support for Marshall Wayans' Christian Crusade quickly evaporated. Presidents, Prime Ministers and Chancellors took their armed forces off alert status, then ordered them to demobilize. Legislatures, congresses and parliaments began to R&R (review and repeal) laws, mandated by the U.S. President, which had been designed to obscure the dividing line between church and state.

Everyone on the Hill could feel the change in the wind. With the White House not having issued any statements on 'the E-mail that made the Earth turn again', and answers being sought, House Speaker, Dunn, and Senate Majority Leader, Bass, issued cautious statements in support of, not just Sara's message, but of Sara herself. Bass even felt brave enough to depart from his prepared text to publicly thank her for removing the SuzieFlu. When Mosely reported on his committee's preliminary findings on the Senate floor a few days later, he was voted leave to conduct full investigative hearings by a comfortable majority.

As the Mosely committee proceeded with its pre-hearing investigation of the U.N matter regarding Sara, the world began to relax. The carefully gathered clouds of depression, anger and religious strife began to disperse. Tensions eased, and people began to feel not so alone anymore. Telecommunication activity began to rise as people started calling one another, often just to say, "Hello". The internet began to crackle with new life as people rediscovered curiosity. People began to believe, once more, that there were things to do, and places to go. They began to believe that there was a brighter future up ahead, and people started planning for that future. They started making purchases, which they had long deferred. Orders for durable goods began to rise, and employers started hiring people to make the goods to fill those orders. Stocks, and bonds, and other securities, too, began to experience an increase in demand as people began to trust again. Almost every sector began experiencing increases in activity. After having flat-lined for more than thirteen consecutive quarters, the world's economy began to pulse again.

Thus was the mood, as the world's first governing body, in the form of the United States Senate's Judiciary Committee, chaired by Senator, Oscar Mosely, was about to commence the first ever official proceedings that would directly involve the Cryptoalien artifact, AKA, ol' domestic Teapot Dome, or Watergate. What we do here is gonna affect the whole damned world."

"Space aliens," sighed Senator Thatcher as his eyes surveyed the crowded gallery beyond the witness table. "Wha'd they wanna go, an' put 'er here for?"

"To see how we'd react?" Senator Paine speculated.

"Well," drawled Senator Booth with a significant glance, "we ain't done *that* too good." Senator Thatcher nodded thoughtfully.

"Hopefully the fat lady hasn't sung yet."

"She may not be all that fat," Senator Booth cracked.

"Are you sayin' that this little girl might be Gabriel?" Senator Paine wondered curiously. "Y'know, with trumpets, and judgment, an' all?"

"Yer gettin' to sound like the President." Senator Thatcher observed.

"Aaaaanything is possible," said Senator Booth, "but one thang is certain." He made sure that he had both the other Senator's attention before he said, "We cain't be jus' thinkin' 'bout ourselves on this."

At just past 10:00 AM EST, Senator Mosely rapped his trademark gavel on the table.

"The room will come to order," he called in a relaxed, but authoritative, tone as he surveyed the crowd in front of him.

Response to Sara's E-mail had, once again, focused the world media spotlight on the alien artifact with the intensely beautiful human form. The reportage, however, had veered away from negative, and was becoming increasingly positive. She had saved the world from SuzieFlu, and had rescued Singapore from a direct attack. Her purpose, and intent, once more, became the subject of speculative world debate. With the announcement of the upcoming Senate hearings, a new word was introduced in describing Sara. It was a word, the meaning of which, no one had ever considered associating with the super powerful machine from another world. Victim. In New York, Louise was stunned when Evans Babcock directed her to start working on a, 'Deep Inside', interview with Sara. In Houston, the media encampment was still just beyond the gates of Olga's apartment complex, but their attitude had gone from overly aggressive to respectful, and, at times, even cordial. In another departure from the past, when the reporters did get out of line, the local authorities were now listening, and responding to, Olga's increasingly less frequent complaints.

Quiet came upon the Senate Caucus Room interior. All eyes came to rest upon the rumpled old man in the rumpled old suit at the center of the committee table. Chairman Mosely set his gavel on the table as he picked up his reading glasses with his other hand. He debated with himself on whether or not to read the opening statement from the paper in front of him. After a moment, he joined his other hand in holding his folded spectacles as he regarded the people before him.

"A little over three years ago," Mosely began, speaking extemporaneously in a clear voice, "it was reported that the artifact known as Susan was an imminent threat to Earth. At the same time, it was also reported that Susan had left earth in compliance with scientific material that was said to demonstrate conclusive evidence of that threat. It has recently come to this committee's attention that the material regarding the artifact may not have been as

conclusive as it may have, at first, seemed. It is therefore the purpose of these hearings to investigate this material, its origins, and its authors, and to determine its viability as it pertains to the artifact, Susan." Mosely then turned to the committee's chief counsel at his left. "Mr. Bash, you may call your first witness."

And so the official gathering of evidence began. Over the following days, the authors of the U.N. data, asserting that Sara was a geophysical threat to mammalian life on Earth, sat in the witness chair to explain their methods, and justify their conclusions. There followed, after that, a number of independent physicists who strove to explain the explanations. At least they tried to. Several of the men, and women, of note confessed to bafflement over significant portions of the data, and took pains to point out a number of basic errors in the formulas it contained. One of them went so far as to state, "The sum of this material is most suitable for washing hogs."

Two weeks into the hearings, there was already a daunting amount of conflicting testimony. The senate panel, none of whom were versed in science, were openly confused. All of them were concerned over, not just what to believe, but how to believe what they would ultimately decide to believe.

That's when the star witness, and the impetus for the entire investigation, came in to testify: Tom Starks.

Accompanied by Florence, and their attorney, Tom entered the room on crutches. Knowing this day would come, he had driven himself relentlessly through rehabilitation therapy so he could be as strong as possible for his congressional appearance. He was almost fully recovered, but didn't yet feel comfortable on his legs. He took the oath, then took the seat and was given leave to read his opening statement into the record.

"Ladies, and gentlemen, you see before you a man who is not supposed to be alive." With that line for openers, it just got better. Point for point, chapter and verse, Tom eloquently, and elaborately, tore apart the UN's supporting scientific data asserting Sara's threat to Earth.

He didn't stop there, but went on to talk about NASA's Susan team. The role of the dead passed from his lips into official, government record; their names, nationalities, their qualifications, their achievements, their contributions to the Susan program and also the circumstances surrounding the untimely demise of each. By the end of his prepared text, Tom's words had become a blazing indictment asserting a conspiracy which had authorized, "the wholesale slaughter of the best, and brightest, scientific minds the world has ever

known."

The gathering of his testimony proved arduous, and often combative. Tom was not a poised witness. He was the last surviving member of the Susan team. He felt compelled to uphold their legacy, and he defended his fallen brethren with all of his considerable scholastic might. He also defended the Cryptoalien artifact which had given him back his life, calling her an unparalleled blessing who was, "the last, best hope for mankind to raise itself up out the muck, mire and slime, of fear."

Lastly, Tom testified with regard to Sara's fingerprint. It amounted to a faint electrostatic charge she left on everything she touched. Once placed, the charge remained, and could not be altered, or removed.

"This is not good," White House Chief of Staff, Bill Robbins complained as he looked over the reports the President had handed him. "Consumer confidence is up - inflation is down. Spending is up - interest rates are down. Durable goods orders are up - inventories are down. Unemployment is down - this is terrible!"

He looked up to take in Wayans, and Jimmie, who was sitting close by.

"How the devil can you do the Lord's work when everything is so God-damned peachy!" he fumed.

"Nothing's been the same since Susan ripped me off," Jimmie grouched from where he sat.

"Did it leave *anything*?" Wayans asked him.

"*It*?" Jimmie wondered.

"The artifact," Wayans clarified, then he hesitated, ". . . Sara."

"Neither of them left a thing," Jimmie answered. "The slate is clean."

Robbins looked at Jimmie.

"You were friends with the bitch."

Jimmie looked at Robbins. Wayans also gave his lieutenant a disapproving glance.

"The artifact," Robbins impatiently corrected himself. ". . . Sara. Have you been able to contact . . . *it*?"

"Sara won't speak to me," Jimmie admitted, "but Susan's saying plenty."

Wayans' brow furrowed.

"What's she saying?" he wanted to know.

"It's indecipherable," Jimmie answered. "I've made sound files of her utterances. I've

had my best people working on them for weeks, but none of them can make head nor tail of what she's saying. It must be some kind of alien language she's speaking in."

Robbins frowned.

"What's it sound like?"

Jimmie spared himself eye contact with the other men before informing them that, "It sounds like . . . fart noises."

Wayans, and Robbins, looked perplexedly at one another. Jimmie looked up at both of them in turn.

"But I know that what she's saying has got to be important," he was quick to qualify.

Wayans, and Robbins, looked perplexedly at Jimmie. He felt confident enough in what he was saying to risk eye contact with both the other men in the room.

"She's not making these sounds to anyone else on earth," Jimmie went on to explain.

Wayans, and Robbins, each, cocked a curious brow.

"Not even to anyone on my staff."

Both of the other men's eyebrows went up.

"She's making these sounds," Jimmie took specific care to state, "to me . . . alone."

Wayans, and Robbins, shared a significant look. Perhaps the young man *was* of further use, they silently agreed.

"Keep working on it," Wayans cautiously instructed Jimmie. "Let me know if anything breaks."

"Her senate appearance is coming up in a few days, isn't it?" Robbins asked.

"Yeah," said Jimmie. "Nobody knows what she's going to say."

"The committee's kept a tight lid on her," Wayans noted. "Media interest has been peaking ever since the hearings started."

"Any chance we'll be implicated?" asked Robbins.

"Nemitts is our only direct link to that," Wayans said with a note of nonchalance, "and all our contact with him was verbal." He then became concerned. "But the artifact . . . ? It's hard to say."

"She's probably pretty pissed," Robbins ventured.

"No she's not," Jimmie stated with unwonted conviction. "You'd know it if she was, but not for long."

Wayans, and Robbins, looked back at Jimmie. Both men thought he appeared more nervous than usual.

"Nobody has seen Sara angry," Jimmie went on to say in the same vein. "Believe me, you do *not* want to piss her off."

The force with which Jimmie had expressed himself was strange to Wayans. His eyes narrowed as he regarded his hacker in residence.

"Why?" the President asked.

Weeks passed as the Mosely Committee made its way through its roster of witnesses. The scope of the investigation broadened to include the circumstances of Sara's announced departure from earth. Dave Nolan took the witness chair at considerable personal, and professional, risk to supply the committee with documentation of satellite movement during every one of Sara's atmospheric passages. He also provided documentation of that critical day on which the UN document claimed that Sara had left Earth. The colleagues he'd been in contact with also stepped up to corroborate Nolan's assertion that Sara had not made an atmospheric exit that day.

The slant of the testimony was, more and more, going against the assertions of the U.N. Its scientific data didn't add up. Its officials, and experts, were having a progressively harder time explaining a growing number of points the senate investigation kept turning up. Media sentiment was also starting to turn against the U.N. Though no official would confirm the suspicion, Sara was, increasingly, being portrayed as the innocent victim of a political conspiracy. As the day approached for her to testify, the world awaited, with heightening anticipation, the first official appearance of the Cryptoalien artifact before a high level governing body.

The night before she, and Dianh, were to depart for Washington, Alex paused by Sara's slightly open door. He could see her inside her room. She lay on her back on her neatly made up bed. Her flaxen head was adorably framed with her collection of small, stuffed animals. The ankle of one leg rested on top of the other leg's upraised knee. She gazed up at the ceiling, her hands raised at the elbows. Alex could see that she wasn't breathing, and that her eyelids didn't blink. She lay completely still save for an intermittent twitching of the first two fingers of her upraised hands.

Alex stood at the doorway watching her. He missed her so as he thought upon how much he'd missed her, but still, he didn't want to bother her when she was busy. She had a

world to run, after all, and he really didn't want to bother her, no matter how he missed her, because she was busy . . . and all

"Dad?"

"Hm? What?"

Sara was watching him, and Alex realized that he'd been caught watching her.

"Oh, I uh . . . just - saw your door open, and uh . . . I didn't mean to bother you."

Go away, he told himself. *Just - go away.*

"Dad, don't leave."

Alex returned to look back through the opening. She had turned on her side, and was facing him now as she continued watching him.

"Wul . . . if you're sure yer not busy . . .," he dared to hope as he began to ease the opening in her door a little wider.

She smiled at him, and, suddenly, there was nothing else.

"It's okay," she assured him easily as Alex ventured into the room, "I turned it over to Susan."

Oh yeah, Susan grumbled, *just dump it on me.*

Without changing her comfortable lying position, Sara rose up from the bed as Alex approached her. She stopped when her body was at his eye level as he arrived at her bedside. They smiled at one another. Both could feel their old, familiar comfort coming back. Sara glanced behind herself for the sake of Alex's visual reference. He looked beyond her to her dresser as the bottom drawer slid open, her cape pushing against it from inside. Once the opening was wide enough, the cape leapt out like a kid released from school. It unfolded as it emerged, then hastened toward them to form a bed of softness under Sara. They settled comfortably into one another, Sara and her cape, and then a side the cape rose up in front of her. Thrilling at the invitation, Alex came to rest his folded arms on the offered edge. It was every bit as soft as he remembered, and the two of them, father and daughter, were once more as they'd been in their days of old so long ago.

"You're never going to let me forget about that bunk-bed you wanted, are you?" Alex noted.

"Well," Sara hedged before admitting, "I didn't really *need* a bunk-bed . . . even if Billy Anderson, and that snotty little brother of his, had one." She shifted her position slightly.

"Are they still around?"

"No," Alex murmured in answer, "I heard they moved away a couple years ago."

"Hm," said Sara as she looked away, "just as well." She looked back at her dad. "Did they take the bunk-bed with them?"

Alex smiled as he quietly laughed.

"I imagine so."

"Mm," she grunted as she looked away again, "I still hate them."

Alex beamed with quiet joy.

"Well, I'd say you've done pretty well for yourself for not having had a bunk-bed."

Sara flopped over on her stomach.

"Even if I did have to improvise," she remarked.

She propped her mouth on the fold of her upraised arms so she could display her carefully arranged scowl to its best advantage.

"Life isn't fair," she grouched.

Alex knew what she wanted, and began to tenderly stroke her back.

"Nobody ever said it was," he lovingly reminded her.

Sara maintained the scowl she'd worked long, and hard, to perfect over the years, and was damned proud of.

"So what's the point of gettin' all upset over it?"

They watched each other. Sara eventually surrendered her scowl. She turned onto her side to face him, capturing his hand before he could withdraw it. Alex held her tight, grateful that she wanted him.

"Got a question for ya," she stated, holding his hand close to herself.

"Shoot," said Alex.

Their eyes met.

"Not with your eyes," he added quickly.

Both of them thrilled at the thought, the memory.

"How can I," Sara then asked carefully, "feel bad . . . when . . . you won't let me?"

Alex frowned, and gave himself over to deep reflection.

"Boy, that's a tough one."

"Eh, you can do it."

"Ahh, I don't know . . ."

"Time's up."

"Oh, maaan . . ."

"No-no. Time's

up. Have to answer."

Alex frowned perplexedly.

"What was the question again?" he asked.

Sara watched him. Loved him.

"How can I feel bad when you won't let me?" she inquired.

Alex watched her. Loved her.

"Because you're not allowed to feel bad when I'm around," he told her.

Sara smiled.

"Same goes for you."

Alex smiled.

"Wul, that goes without saying, because - , " he sang softly to his daughter, "You are my sun-shine, my on-ly sun-shine."

Sara joined him at this point.

"You make me hap-py when things are gray."

They sang in unison.

"You'll never know dear, how much I love you."

Their eyes not leaving one another.

"Please don't take - my sun-shine away."

Sara looked away as she laughed mirthlessly over an epiphany.

"Gray . . . "

Alex knew she was referring to her pre-animation color.

"Yeah," he uttered as he looked away himself.

Both of them were struggling now. They'd felt the separation growing between them in recent weeks.

"Your uh . . . mother's been filling me in . . . a little at a time."

Neither of them

had had the heart, or mind, to speak

"She's quite an amazing woman,"

of things they felt so

deeply,

"your mother."

but were afraid to share.

"I'm sorry I let you down."

Sara's eye simulations latched onto Alex, searching as she knew humans did when they were looking for answer to a certain question. Her perceptual photons took him in, and held him close.

"How do you figure that?" she sincerely wondered. She truly didn't know, but was certain that, "*I - failed you.*"

"No you didn't," Alex stated firmly.

They held each other with their eyes.

"You didn't fail anybody. I should have foreseen it . . . should've taken precautions."

"There was no way you could've known," Sara insisted. "But *me* . . . Miss woopy-doo super computer!" She cast her eyes up to the ceiling. "Oh, I'll be fine!" she derided grandly - bitterly. "Fly off to space for two weeks - chasing after . . . fucking *rocks!*"

Alex gathered her to himself.

"Baby, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"I should've seen it!"

"I was taken away."

"I should never have left."

"There wasn't anything I could do."

"You weren't there anymore . . . an' - an' I was alone - an' scared. Daddy I was so scared!"

"I know, baby. So was I."

They held each other long, and silently. The awful past, and all its memories, flooded through them one last time, and then released them. The lingering regrets, and self-recriminations, surrendered to the fact that they could hold each other once again.

"But it's alright now," the father assured his child. "I'm back now, and everything's going to be alright."

Sara drew away just enough so she could look at him. She knew of the futility of such a hope. She didn't care, but asked him anyway, "Promise?"

And Alex knew of the futility of such a guarantee. He didn't care, but told her anyway, "Promise."

And so was their commitment to each another reaffirmed.

"You, uh," Alex ventured, changing the subject, "ready for your senate appearance?"

"Yeah," Sara said without any real interest.

Alex gathered her hand in his, and held it tight.

"Wish I were goin' with you."

"Mom doesn't think you're strong enough to travel yet," Sara told him quietly, caringly. "and . . . things could get pretty hectic over there. I don't want you subjected to a lot of stress."

Alex frowned.

"You don't think I can handle a bunch of humans after handling you?" he stated.

Sara looked at her dad, and smiled shyly, sweetly.

"You didn't come with an instruction book, or an owner's manual," he went on to gripe. "Sheesh, you didn't even come with a warranty -

"I came with a warranty," Sara interjected.

Alex gave her a curious look.

"What?" he wondered pointedly. "You find a bar code somewhere?"

Now Sara gave him a curious look.

"You haven't figured it out yet?" she wondered pointedly. Her Texas accent came to the fore as she told him, "I'm a lifetime, guar-an-teed pain in your butt."

Both of them enjoyed the joke, but still, Alex felt called upon to stipulate, "You wish."

Sara gathered his hand to herself, and looked at Alex privately.

"As you are my father," she confided to him, "so am I your continuance. Between us two, we share a particle of immortality, and, as I am, you are, and your glow will never fade."

When Sara, and Dinah, arrived at the Capital building to testify before the Mosely Committee, the world media was ready, eager and waiting for them. The two of them made a riveting pair as they strode down the corridor to the caucus room where so much official dirty laundry had been unveiled: Teapot Dome, Watergate, Iran-Contra, and now, Susan.

They were a study in contrast, as well as similarity, their 'look' having been conscientiously orchestrated by Lanna. Their contrast was obvious; Dinah with her nearly six foot height, her daunting build and bearing, her hard, businesslike visage, and Sara, looking comparatively diminutive, with her mid-adolescent appearance, and a face that was the very picture of sweet innocence. It would be difficult to imagine a more desperate pair. It was that difference, though, that made their similarities all the more striking. Both of them wore exquisitely tailored, matching pants-suits with matching shoes. Dinah wore deep blue to go with her cascade of raven curls, Sara wore beige to go with her flowing, yellow waves. They also wore matching ribbons in their hair as a show of familial solidarity. Their hands were

unencumbered - neither of them carried purses. Dinah didn't need an attaché case since all of her resources were on file with Susan. The appearance of the mother and daughter/attorney and client team was nothing short of electrifying.

There was an impossible crush of people at the doors into the caucus room. Dinah played the role of bulldozer as she pressed her way through the doorway with Sara in toe behind her. Inside the room, they were met by an overwhelming throng of media. Once the commotion at the doorway had started, everyone knew that the star witness had arrived, and all of them wanted to get either a look at her, or a picture of her. Senator Mosely wielded his gavel, valiantly trying to restore order. Having gotten but a few feet into the room, Dinah couldn't move them any further. Sara could hardly be seen for the crush of people around her.

Amid the din of clicking camera shutters, and countless voices asking questions and demanding answers, amid the banging of Mosely's gavel and his threats to clear the room, Dinah drew Sara under her arm, and gave her shoulder a squeeze. As if on cue, Sara's feet left the floor as she extended an arm behind her mother to grip her firmly by the waist, and then the two of them rose into the air together.

Their appearance, as they emerged above the crush of people surrounding them, created utter pandemonium. Shouts, and gasps, and utterances of exclamation filled the room to drown out Mosely's gavel. Anyone with a camera fought for a better position to capture the incredible scene of the two flying women. In spite of the rumors, the stories, the poor quality home video tapes, the footage of Sara's walking on air at her NASA debut, the distance shots of the White Sands tape, the grainy footage shot during the Singapore quake, no one had actually seen Sara levitate before. Along with this, again, aside from the poor quality Singapore tapes, no one had ever seen her carrying someone. Sara's, and Dinah's, rise into the air of the overcrowded caucus room was, beyond the shadow of any doubt, a double whammy of absolutely stunning impact.

With Dinah securely in her grasp, Sara made sure their feet cleared the heads of everyone below them, then she slowly floated through the room over the crowd to the witness table where she descended to the floor again just behind the witness chairs. She, and Dinah, disengaged themselves from one another, both requiring but a slight adjustment in their formfitting jackets, then they calmly stood side-by-side facing the committee at the witness table, waiting for Sara to be sworn in.

They had executed their extraordinary maneuver as though it had been nothing to them - like they'd done it a hundred times before . . . well, almost, at any rate. Sara, and Dinah, had

carefully rehearsed the move, practicing it over, and over, until each of them knew exactly where, and how, to hold the other so that their flight would be as easy, and comfortable, as it appeared. The statement they made was undeniable: A human had entrusted herself to the care of the alien machine, and the artifact had seen to the human's safety. It was one of the most stunningly significant entrances - ever.

After the commotion finally died down, the business of gathering Sara's testimony was gotten underway. Almost immediately, it was noticed that her youthful appearance was deceiving. There was nothing adolescent about the way she conducted herself as the age of her looks might've suggested. In preparing for this meeting, when the question of her wearing her uniform had come up, Sara flatly refused. "How am I going to be taken seriously if I go in there looking like I just flew out of a comic book?" Sara was very concerned that she be taken seriously by these people. With her charming, but businesslike demeanor, and her concise and straightforward answers, the senators on the panel quickly caught on to the fact that they were dealing with, not an adorable sixteen year old girl, but a compellingly intelligent woman who was mature far beyond her apparent years.

Sara's input went smoothly. She, and Dinah, needed to consult with each other briefly on two only occasions, and Susan kept Dinah updated on legalities pertinent to the questions being posed to Sara. Sara succeeded in creating a good, overall impression with those in the room that neither she, nor Susan, were things to be afraid of. And then she dropped a bomb on all of them.

"Can you all see the wall at the back of the room?" Sara asked the members of the committee.

Her question answered to the affirmative, an image immediately appeared on the wall. It was a picture of the UN signing ceremony at which Sara had allegedly promised to leave Earth. The figures of Secretary-General, Gustov Nemitts, Sara and the witnessing dignitaries were all readily recognizable.

"What you are about to see," Sara explained, "is the officially released tape of my agreement to depart from Earth a little over three years ago. Don't look for a projector, or any smoke or mirrors. The image is coming from me. Image rendering is one of my abilities. Now, in watching this tape, I ask the members of the committee to please pay close attention to my image. Okay? Here we go."

The panel of Senators watched as Sara ran the tape she'd kreened at Dinah's urging as she'd glided over the North Pacific months before. The committee members could see

Secretary - General, Nemitts, busily writing at the table. They could see Sara standing slightly behind, and to the left of him, her cape worn like a cloak, covering her body entirely. They saw Nemitts rise, and then approach Sara with his hand extended toward her. They saw Sara's right hand emerge from the folds of her cape to meet the Secretary-General's, and the two of them shake hands. Both of them then turned to face the camera, and Nemitts put his arm around Sara's shoulders. Sara appeared to stiffen slightly, her eyes glazing over as if she was no longer paying attention to what was happening around her. There was an awkward pause, then she slipped from Nemitts' embrace, drawing her cape more tightly around herself, and stepped toward the chair he had just occupied. The tape ended, but Sara maintained the image of the last frame on the wall, depicting her caped figure in mid-stride.

"This is the end of the tape," Sara stated, continuing with the verbal part of her presentation. "You might find it interesting that this tape does not depict my actual signing of the document in question. There's a reason for that, but let me show you another piece of videotape before I get into it."

The image on the wall changed, and the members of the Judiciary Committee found themselves looking at the interior of the White House press room. The scene was the occasion of Sara's official welcome to Earth, again, a little more than three years before.

"This is a tape I kreened from one of the news cameras at my White House reception. I realize that I did this without the permission of the network that owns the tape. I had no intention of ever showing it to anyone . . . I just wanted a personal memento of an occasion that was pretty darned important to me. I'm going to show that tape to you now, and I think you'll find it significant. Again, as you're viewing this tape, please pay careful attention to my image."

The picture on the rear wall of the caucus room came to life as Sara ran the tape. She intentionally played it without sound. She wanted her audience's full attention on the visual aspect of what was going on. Sara's video image was stationed behind, and to the left of the press room podium while then President Clinton was making his welcoming remarks, her red-sheened black cape falling in sweeping folds around her, from shoulder to floor. She looked like a yellow-haired princess from a fairy tale.

The President finished his brief address, then approached Sara to shake her hand. Sara's hand extended from within the folds of her cape to accept the offering of friendship. The President then put his arm around her shoulders for the cameras. Sara appeared to stiffen slightly, her eyes glazing over as if she was no longer paying attention to what was

happening around her. There was an awkward pause, then she slipped from the President's embrace, drawing her cape more tightly around herself, and stepped to the podium. Sara stopped the tape one frame before the closest edge of her cape disappeared behind the podium, but, again, maintained the final image of herself in mid-stride.

"Okay now," said Sara to the committee, "this is where it might get a little difficult to follow, but please bear with me. I'm going to run both of these tapes together, side by side."

As she spoke, the image on the wall moved to one side, and then the opening image of the U.N. signing appeared beside it. At the same time, Sara changed the image of the White House reception to the opening frame again.

"Look at my image, ladies and gentlemen," she bid the committee members. "Watch it carefully."

Sara ran the tapes as she said she would; simultaneously, side by side. As they watched, all of the Senators were struck by a number of similarities in the appearance, timing and movement of Sara's two images at the two distinctly different occasions. At the end, Sara stopped both tapes at the same time, at the last frame as she had when she'd shown them separately. What the panel saw was two images of Sara in mid-stride, cloaked in her cape which, for all intents and purposes, looked identical, her two images being in the exact same position, in the exact same place in both frames.

"Lastly," Sara told the committee, "I'm going to run both tapes one more time, only superimposed on one another. It may be a little confusing, but, hopefully, less than it might seem. Again, please pay close attention to my image."

The two pictures on the wall shifted to their original, opening frames of the two videotapes as Sara merged them into an equally, double-exposed image of the two scenes. In the obscured, double image of two different settings, backgrounds and sets of people being seen at the same time, one thing, however, immediately stood out: Sara's image. It, alone, did not appear in double exposure, but as one, single, distinctly identifiable image.

Sara ran the tapes at the same time, but at a slightly slower speed than normal. Aside from her request that they do so, the Senators' attention, as they viewed the chaotic hodgepodge of a double-exposed action, naturally gravitated to Sara's image within the scene. It, alone, appeared, and moved, as one. It was as if there was no double exposure of her image. Her face, her cloaked body, the timing and placement of her movements from the appearance of her hand to her walking to the center of the frame, every detail, even her hair, and the movements of her cape, appeared as one, single, distinctly identifiable image. The

tapes ended. Again, Sara maintained the image of the final frame on the wall.

"Are you beginning to see a pattern, ladies, and gentlemen?" Sara asked the committee members. The sound of her soft, feminine voice startled a number of them back to the here and now. When she was sure she had their attention, Sara went on. "This brings me back to the question of why the tape of the United Nations does not show me signing the document assuring my departure from Earth. The reason there is no taped record of that act, ladies, and gentlemen, is because it never happened. I never signed that piece of paper. I've never *seen* it. I wasn't even *at* the U.N. building at that particular point in time."

The inferred meaning of Sara's words was as surprising as her tone of subdued outrage was sobering. She went on to spell out what was becoming all too obvious.

"The U.N. tape is a fabrication - a pretty good one too, I might add. My image on the White House tape was copied, and then placed on the U.N. tape to make it look like I was there in person. I state here for the record that that tape is a fake. It's a fraud. I also state for the record that my signature on the document in question is a forgery."

Stunned silence permeated the atmosphere of the caucus room. The look on Sara's face could've matched even Dinah's darkest moods. Eventually, the silence gave way to a hum of low, cautious murmurs. Senator Mosely brought his gavel into play, but it was a gentle rapping without any force to it. Everyone responded to the summons, and the room became quiet once again.

"Miss Susan," the Senator said to Sara in his slow, deliberate, fatherly manner, "your tone of righteous indignation is quite understandable if what you're saying is, in fact, true, but do you have evidence to back up your assertions?"

"You bet I do," Sara stated.

Using the back wall of the room as her viewing screen, Sara employed both tapes as she proceeded to dissect the U.N. videotape like a long experienced legal surgeon. She used superimpositions, frame by frame comparisons, detail croppings, high resolution zoom-ins. One of the most telling revelations she made involved . . . fingers.

"Doesn't it seem odd to you, ladies, and gentlemen," Sara queried as she showed a frame of the U.N. tape that depicted herself, and Secretary-General, Nemitts, side by side with his arm around her, "that, considering the occasion, Mr. Nemitts would put his arm around me? Doesn't it seem out of place, if not altogether inappropriate? Also, look at Mr. Nemitts. Watch him closely."

The image on the wall changed as Sara ran the section of the tape that depicted Nemitts

approaching Sara's screen image, shaking her hand, then extending his arm around her and standing at her side. She stopped the tape, maintaining the frame of the two of them together with Nemitts' arm around her.

"If he appears to be awkward, and uncomfortable, it's because he is. In the part of the world, and social caste, that Mr. Nemitts comes from, his culture very much frowns upon a man making such a gesture of familiarity to a woman, let alone someone who is a total stranger. In other words, a man of Mr. Nemitts' culture, and social position, would not be doing what you are seeing him do. Okay, so that raises the question of why U.N. Secretary-General, Nemitts would do something that is so out of place with an occasion, and so out of place with his culture? The answer, ladies and gentlemen, is . . . ,"

Maintaining the frame, Sara cropped, then zoomed in to a full screen close up of the set of fingers clutching her right shoulder,

"right there."

Sara cast the frame into shadow, leaving only the area of her cape that was compressed, and folded by the pressure of the fingers highlighted,

"and there,"

She restored the frame depicting her, and Nemitts, momentarily so she could crop, and then zoom into a single fold of her cape that extended from beneath the fingers,

"and there."

Sara then switched the frame to a close-up of her image's cloaked right shoulder.

"Watch my cape, ladies, and gentlemen."

She ran her selected segment of the tape in slow motion. The Senators could see the set of fingers emerge from behind her shoulder, then curl their way around to clutch her shoulder. They could see her cape compress against her shoulder. They could also see a fold in the material appear below the fingers. Sara stopped the tape, maintaining the segment's last frame.

"Did you see my cape move? Now, whoever put this tape together could easily have erased the fingers from my shoulder, but they couldn't stop my cape from moving without the resulting image looking unnatural. That's why they had to make it look like Mr. Nemitts was putting his arm around me. They couldn't get rid of the movement of my cape."

The frame showing Sara's shoulder, and its friendly fingers, moved to one side of the wall, and another image appeared beside it. The new image was a tape frame showing Secretary-General, Nemitts extending his hand toward her as he approached her.

"Okay, now let's look at something else," said Sara.

She ran the tape of her shoulder in reverse until the clutching fingers were fully extended, then she stopped at that frame. She cropped, and zoomed in to a full screen close-up of the extended finger pads, then she cropped, and zoomed in to a full screen close-up of Secretary-General, Nemitts' extended finger pads in the other frame. Viewed side by side, in high resolution close-up, the two sets of fingertips were obviously not the same. The skin tone was different, the size, shape and length of them were different. The fingers extending from behind the image of Sara's shoulder, clearly, did not belong to Gustov Nemitts.

"Notice anything different?" Sara queried academically to the subdued, and watchful, panel of Senators. She didn't wait for an answer, but went on to state, "Even the fingerprints are different. You don't have the technology to detect such a detail, but I do, and I can tell you that the prints of the fingers by my shoulder belong to the most recent former President of the United States."

Sara's attack on the U.N. tape had been as damning as it had been thorough. As if what she'd already shown the committee wasn't enough to completely undermine the tape's credibility

"Oh," it occurred to her to add, "and one more thing. Well, it's a question, actually. It's something that's really puzzled me, and I've never been able to figure it out. So maybe you can look into it, and, hopefully, come up with an answer. How is it possible to film an event that happened more than three years ago on a videotape that was manufactured not even six months ago? Five months, seventeen days, twenty two hours and twelve minutes ago to be exact, give or take thirty seconds. At least that's what the identification code on the original tape cassette tells me."

Sara also mentioned, pretty much as an afterthought, that one of the witnessing dignitaries in the U.N. tape had recently had hair restoration surgery. He appeared on the tape with a handsome head of full, dark hair. Using the rear wall of the caucus room again, Sara then displayed a pair of still photos of the same man, one taken five days before the U.N. signing ceremony was to have taken place, the second captured a mere seven hours after. In both pictures, he sported a very sparse, and very obvious, comb-over.

Sara concluded her first official Congressional appearance with the following words.

"In all of what I've told you, and shown you, I urge you, ladies, and gentlemen, don't just take my word for it. I regard my testimony here as having opened avenues for you to investigate, and verify for yourselves, through your own efforts. The full text of my

testimony, including the visuals, along with references, and footnotes, is sitting in the hoppers of your office printers as I speak, accompanied by a note to your secretaries telling them what it is. Please use this information as a guide on your quest for verification of what I've said, and shown you today.

"My parents have raised me to be straightforward, and honest, and I have been both with you. But I must warn you that I am more powerful than any of you realize. This is not to say, 'Don't tick me off, or I'll come over to your house some night'. I mean, c'mon, gimme a break. That would be insulting to me, and it would be insulting to my Mom, and Dad . . . and that *would* tick me off, and I *would* come over to your house some night!"

She laughed, good naturedly, at this, and everyone in the room, including Dinah, laughed with her. Sara then waxed serious again.

"No, but really, I must tell you that I am fully capable of highly sophisticated image manipulation. That's why you have to check this out for yourselves. Please, don't just take my word for it. Also, I can control my appearance to a certain degree. In my uniform, I can determine the way my skirt hangs, and the way my cape drapes. Of my person, I can control the way my hair looks without the aide of a comb, or brush."

Sara took a moment here to demonstrate; arranging her hair in a couple different, simple styles without any visible means, and then returned it, once again, to draping prettily over her shoulders.

"Knowing this," she then continued, "of these two tapes, yes, I could've duplicated my appearance exactly at these two different occasions. Your best technology wouldn't be able to detect any difference between my two images. Not even a single hair on my head would be in the slightest difference of position. I could do that, but - I wouldn't want to. You see, I don't like sameness. I like variety. It's purely a matter of my own personal taste, and it's the way I like it. I never let my hair appear exactly the same way twice, I never let my cape hang in the exact same way twice . . . and I never sign my name the same way twice. This applies to my laser signature as well as that rendered by my hand.

"That brings up one last point. As has been covered in other testimony; my signature on that UN document did not come from my hand. So where did it come from? I don't know, but I will suggest an area you could look into. Among you, and your colleagues, are a number of segments from a tank cannon, all of which I autographed for you. Of those signatures, you will not find two that are identical, but, maybe, if you look, you might be able to find a match to one of them somewhere."

Without saying anything further, Sara left the panel with this tantalizing suggestion. Authenticating her signature would be, but one of their many tasks in the coming days ahead. Her testimony concluded, Senator Mosely graciously thanked Sara for her cooperation. He told her that she had given his committee much to consider . . . then he tactfully requested that she use the floor in leaving the room.

Now it fell onto the Judiciary Committee staff to verify Sara's testimony. As the next series of witnesses testified before the senators, and the media, the real action, in the days, and weeks, following Sara's appearance, took place behind the scenes.

In a gesture of good will - and good publicity - the television news network concerned graciously supplied the committee with its master tape of President Clinton's official welcome of Sara. At the same time, committee staff lawyers, after months of trying, not only acquired the U.N.'s master tape of the signing ceremony, and the original document Sara was supposed to have signed, they finally succeeded in summoning Sara's 'costar' in the signing ceremony videotape; U.N. Secretary-General, Gustov Nemitts.

Armed with the pertinent transcript sections of Sara's testimony, a team of video experts went to work on the tapes. While this was going on, expert comparison of Sara's signature on the U.N. document to a samples of her handwriting revealed not a trace of her 'fingerprint' on the paper in question. A round up of the cannon segments Sara had autographed revealed that the signature on one of them was a perfect match to the signature on the U.N. document.

The segment belonged to a high ranking member of the House Ways and Means Committee. When questioned, the representative related that he had changed offices a few days prior to Sara's reported departure from Earth. The member of his staff who'd been in charge if the move told the committee that the souvenir had been packed along with the rest of the representative's personal affects, then unpacked in his new office approximately three days later. Asked if any of the packages had turned up missing during the move, the staffer testified that she simply didn't know. The senators understood, and sympathized with her. The representative was a legendary pack-rat who never threw anything away.

When U.N. Secretary-General, Nemitts entered the Senate Caucus Room to testify, the committee members were not well disposed toward him. By that time, not only had they had to deal with months of 'difficult' witnesses from the U.N., they'd also had to deal with several time consuming, legal roadblocks the U.N. had placed in their path. It had taken nothing

short of a World Court decision to get Nemitts in their witness chair. With his swearing in, the gloves came off.

The results of the investigation were siding more, and more, in Sara's favor. The evidence was clearly indicating that the artifact had been the victim of a setup. Many of the committee members were becoming concerned over how it would make mankind look to Sara's Cryptoalien makers.

Mosely caught in love nest!

The headline screamed out one morning from the front page of every major daily in the country. Television, and radio news, aired the story as well. Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman, Oscar Mosely, had been seen checking into a rural motel outside of Washington with a young woman who was not his wife.

That, basically, was all that was said. There were no factual details, but there was plenty of conjecture. To those in the know, the message was obvious: Marshall Wayans did not like the direction the Judiciary Committee investigation regarding Sara was headed, or the positive media coverage she was getting, and he was willing to use his Blue Book to see both stopped.

Everyone in Washington knew about Mosely, and Cindy. The two had met at a fund raiser some years before. Cindy was a young woman alone in the big city. Mosely befriended her, and, shortly thereafter, he, and his wife, Abigail, took her under their wing. The relationship had developed over time; the Mosely's becoming surrogate parents for the young woman, and Cindy becoming a surrogate daughter who partially filled the void left when the Mosely's had lost their own to illness. Mosely, and Cindy, often went for weekend drives in the country. More than once, they had spent the night at a motel when it had grown late, and Mosely had become too tired to travel further. On such occasions, they had always called Abby to tell her where they were, and to let her know that they were alright.

That was the extent of Senator Mosely's 'infidelity', but Wayans had directed the media to make certain that the public did not see it as such. To the men, and women, on the Hill, that Wayans could ordain that such a story be published on a nation wide scale told them that the Blue Book was still a fearsome tool in the President's dealing with situations that did not

meet with his approval.

For the moment, the Capital sat, and watched, as Cindy, and the Mosely's became fodder for a full-blown, media feeding frenzy. Cindy couldn't go near her Washington apartment. The Mosely's would have offered the besieged, young woman refuge, but their own residence was under siege as well, with security regularly arresting reporters for trespassing. At Abby's suggestion, Mosely told Cindy to go to their cabin in the secluded, Virginia mountains - Cindy knew where the spare key was hidden there. When she arrived, however, a media crew was already there, setup and waiting.

The ferocity with which the media was attacking the Judiciary Committee Chairman showed those in the beltway both the extent, and the effectiveness, of Wayans' wrath. That he could, just as easily, turn on any one, or group, of them triggered their instinct for self-preservation. House Speaker, Jerome Dunn, spoke with Senate Majority Leader, William Bass on how they should handle the ballooning crisis. During their conversation, Dunn suggested that he (Dunn) make a public demand for Mosely's ouster. Bass barely suppressed the urge to tell the man to go get fucked - the House Speaker's cozy relationship with the President had always irked him.

"He's not going to settle for anything less, Bill," Dunn informed him. "You know that." Unfortunately, Bass did know that. It only made him hate the situation all the more.

"I don't want Ozzie to become a sacrificial lamb," Bass tried to maintain.

"Better him than you, Bill," said Dunn, going the necessary extra step to push the point into his colleague's face. "Isn't that right?"

Unfortunately, Bass knew that it was. Wayans was not going to let the media rest until he'd gotten what he wanted. The senate leader called some senators he felt comfortable with, and, together, they began crafting a resolution to remove Oscar Mosely as Judiciary Committee Chairman. Though public opinion overwhelmingly supported Mosely, the senators knew what was expected of them.

Nemitts resigned his post as U.N. Secretary-General the day after his senate appearance concluded. It made headlines, and the six o'clock news, but was accorded only passing mention. Having been long regarded as the ring leader of an organized conspiracy against the alien artifact, his resignation had come to be expected, and the fact of it amounted to no more than an afterthought.

The U.N. had been in disarray for some time before his leave taking. The beleaguered organization had made, what many were saying, a desperate bid to shore up its long eroded power to be taken seriously in world affairs. It was hoped that opposing the alien artifact would be seen as a reaffirmation of the U.N.'s commitment to human relations. Now, however, what precious little had been left of its international standing was deeply tarnished by its involvement in, what was, more, and more, being regarded as, a failed political intrigue.

Into this vacuum of credibility, unannounced, unexpected and, quite surprisingly, stepped U.S. President, Marshall Wayans.

Being uncertain as to how the storm he'd created around Oscar Mosely would resolve itself, Wayans sought to cover what precious little was quickly becoming left of his own position.

The contact from the White House had been low key: The President merely wished to speak to the members of the Security Council Leadership. Most within the U.N. had been unaware of Nemitts' connection to the President. Those who did know were sworn to Blue Book secrecy. Without fanfare, or media coverage, Wayans met in private with the Security Council Leaders. He intended to make them an offer, he was certain, they could not refuse.

"We are faced, gentlemen," the President addressed them, "with the increasing probability that the alien artifact will remain among us. To say that we should no longer resist its presence is a conclusion that is being drawn for us. I, therefore, propose that we depart from former policy, and that we should, in fact, embrace the artifact. I propose that we adopt it as our own, and that we utilize it to our own best advantage.

"It remains to be seen, then, to what uses could this artifact be put? Given the range of its powers, the possibilities, I think you would agree, are virtually limitless. It can be suited to, really, any purpose we devise. In the past, and, indeed, throughout human history, man's imagination, and ambition, have been limited by his capability to achieve. Now, however, we find ourselves to be in possession of capability that far exceeds anything we've known. We must, therefore, extend our imagination, and our ambition, in order to exploit this capability to its fullest. We must expand our vision beyond ourselves, and even beyond our world. Our sites must now include . . . the universe.

"Let me draw you an example. The American flag has stood proudly on our Earth's moon for over thirty years. That flag's presence there is not just a symbol of man's achievement. It is also a symbol of ownership. The United States owns the moon by virtue of the fact that we were the first to claim it. I invite anyone who would care to dispute that

claim to try to knock us off it. Now, the history of human conflict on this planet has basically been a struggle for territorial advantage, has it not? Be it sea ports, or water ways, mineral deposits, farm lands, or just the simple pleasure of possessing what used to belong to someone else - ownership, and usage of, real property, has always been the mark of a strong, and vital people.

"Now . . . let's put this principle on a - somewhat larger scale. Indeed, I propose to you . . . a universal scale. There are, undoubtedly, tremendous resources on other worlds. I'm not just speaking of gold, or platinum, or refillable alloys, but minerals, and, yes, perhaps even elements, which we've never even heard of before. There has never been a question of why man should not avail himself to the riches that lie beyond our planet, aside from the very obvious obstacle of claiming ownership. The untold riches that lie beyond our solar system have been there, free for the taking, for countless millions of years. The only problem is; we haven't been able to get to them. With the advent of this artifact in our midst, that restraint has now been removed. Not only can we vastly expand our exploration of space, but we can also conquer it as well. Not only can mankind reach out, and, literally, touch the stars, but we can also - take possession of them. The wealth of our own small world can be multiplied by the very number of stars the universe contains, and, with the artifact's proven capabilities, I would venture to assert that there would be few, if any, who could . . . knock us off."

"There is no time like the present to lay the groundwork for future opportunity. A key component to that groundwork necessitates that the governing bodies of this world be united to a common purpose, and under one flag. I, therefore, propose to you, a united world cooperative for utilizing the artifact that would be under United States leadership. As mankind's emissary to other worlds, our artifact would bear our flag, along with our will, and our ambition.

"There are those who would argue: What right have we to visit our concerns on other worlds? I would answer: What keeps us from doing so? The seizing of an opportunity transcends debate of right or wrong. It can be done, so why dispute it?

"All the peoples of the world can benefit equally from this artifact, so why shouldn't we? It could be used to perpetuate our age old, petty conflicts, but why settle for mere land when we can harvest entire planets? Doubts might be expressed as to the hierarchy I propose, but I might point out to you that, as I speak, there is currently, in our Congress, a bill which would recognize the artifact as a fully naturalized citizen of the United States. This would, as I'm sure you are all aware of, render the artifact exclusively subject to U.S. law. Affording

citizenship would also grant the United States exclusive rights to the artifact's abilities, as well as sole discretion with regard to their usage. I think it goes without saying that, given the existing climate of national sentiment, my opposition to this bill would only guarantee its passage. The world has seen, but a sample of the artifact's enormous capabilities. In light of that, I would suggest that you agree to my proposal, or - just try to . . . knock us off."

Late at night, in his hotel suite, Gustov Nemitts was finishing packing. He'd always been a light traveler, needing few things to maintain his likes. His flight would not be leaving until the small hours of the morning. He took his time, applying his full attention to his task. It helped some to deflect the horror of what he'd lost. He would have time enough to reflect on that during the long plane ride home.

The telephone rang unexpectedly. Nemitts paused to wonder who'd be calling him. Was it a media type to cause him more embarrassment? A supena? A court summons? A jail sentence? Maybe it was merely a wrong number. At this point in his life, Nemitts sincerely hoped it was.

He picked up the receiver at the end of the fourth ring. He consciously raised it to his ear.

"Hello?" he queried in a calm, and even tone.

"Good evening, Mr. Nemitts."

Nemitts entire body stiffened at the sound of the voice he'd heard. He recognized it instantly, even though he'd never heard it directly before. He'd only heard it on videotapes he'd seen, and on the televised senate hearings he had so studiously watched. All of a sudden he felt drained, and weak. He tried to control his breathing. He tried to control his voice.

"What do you want?" he managed to ask.

The voice on the telephone answered him, "Why don't you ask me to my face?"

Along with his fear, Nemitts now felt a presence of some kind not far behind him. He could feel a calm come over him, but he knew it couldn't be true. Welcome, but unwilling, Nemitts struggled to remain afraid. Should he yield to the gentle urging that he felt? Face whatever? Try to flee? The chaotic churning in his gut, and mind, demanded an answer - forced him to turn - forced him to look. There . . . just beyond the window . . . *so beautiful* . . .

"I suppose you've come for revenge?" he said into the telephone.

"No sir," Sara answered him through the receiver. *"But I would like to know why."*

Nemitts observed how Sara's lips failed to move as she spoke to him. She merely floated in air, her flowing cape forming a majestic background to her in the darkness. She watched him intently, yet with utter calm. He watched her back.

"I think we both know," Sara continued, *"that you, at least, owe me that much."*

Their staring match continued for a time of silence, then Nemitts looked away from her. He lowered the phone from his ear, and sat down heavily on the foot of the bed. Sara hastened closer to the window, fearful that he'd taken ill. Susan quickly gave him a clean bill of health, however, but that did nothing to relieve Sara's sense of concern. She watched the man who'd done her so much harm, and she felt as though she'd never seen anyone look more alone. She wondered if she could help . . . wondered if she should leave.

"My country is very poor," Nemitts finally thought to her. He knew he didn't need the telephone. He found the courage to look up at her as he told her, *"It was too be given certain concessions on trade in exchange for my cooperation."*

The tragic dignity Sara saw in Nemitts was compelling. She knew he was telling the truth. His country's climate was dry, and inclement, the land unsuited for producing food. The country was overpopulated despite a high death rate due to infant mortality, and disease. Sara also knew that the depression unleashed by Wayans had been particularly hard in Nemitts' part of the world. If he had sold himself in order to help his country, none of it had paid off. His loss, therefore, had been doubly harsh.

She had come to him for understanding, and now, watching the small, bald man on the bed before her, Sara had what she had come for. She would demand no more of him. She would trouble him no more - but . . . *maybe . . .*

A furrow of concentration appeared on Sara's simulated brow.

Susan, she instructed, *check out where this guy is coming from.*

. . . maybe . . . she could offer understanding of her own. Sara bowed her head, and sincerely offered Nemitts, *"I'm sorry."*

"What have you got to be sorry for?" Nemitts suddenly shouted at Sara. He rose, and came at her. "I'm returning to my homeland humiliated, disgraced, ruined!"

He stood at the window regarding the artifact, the thing on which he'd staked so much - and lost. He saw her eyes rise up slowly to meet his. Her gaze was as relentless as his own.

"And you blame me for that?" Sara asked him with great care.

At once, Nemitts was abashed, and thoroughly mortified. After the shock of the moment wore off, he lowered his own eyes, and sincerely wished, *"I'm sorry,"* to her.

Deeply affected by the man's apology, Sara's mood transformed as quickly as Nemitts' had. She drifted closer, and placed her upraised fingers to the glass between them. She watched him suffer, unable to understand how she could be so powerful, and yet feel so helpless.

I think I found something you'll be interested in, Susan fortuitously reported.

Thankful for the distraction, Sara gave her an attentive ear.

"There is an element," Nemitts heard Sara's voice to say. *" . . . native to your country's soil. "*

Nemitts dared to look up at her. She looked as though she were somewhere else.

"If properly refined," Sara continued, *"it could - "*

Her voice broke off. She said no more. Nemitts had come to rely on each succeeding word.

"It could what?" he urgently wanted to know.

Sara snapped back to where she was. She looked angry. She looked very angry as she glared at Nemitts.

"Oh, I am an idiot!" she swore. *"A fool!"* she stated. *"You humans have always gathered wealth for just a few while everyone else goes hungry, suffers and dies!"* Her teeth were bared. The thing was furious. *"Your entire history is a stomach turning chronicle of parasitic greed!"* she shouted. *"Why should I be a party to its continuance?"*

Nemitts had born Sara's wrath with curious aplomb. He knew perfectly well of what she spoke. Knew it, in fact, far better than she did. He was human, after, and she was not. How could she be expected to know about such things? How could she possibly understand?

"I'm afraid I have no answer for you," was all that Nemitts finally said within the privacy they shared.

Sara's anger left her. Her energy seemed to evaporate as well. She bowed herself away, exhausted. A mirthlessly laugh issued from her.

"I came here for understanding," she readily conceded to Nemitts, *"and now I'm even more confused. "*

Nemitts had to smile at the costumed girl.

"It's not easy to be human," he told her.

Sara looked up at him, and breathed out a spontaneous laugh. His gaze was steady, understanding and kind. Sara continued looking at him, and she laughed again. Joy, and sorrow, both at once - yet another unexplainable combining of emotions.

Stupid humans, Sara thought, and then she had to laugh, and cry, both at once.

"The world would have a need for this element," she granted Nemitts. *"The developed nations would come to highly value it."*

Sara studied Nemitts. Studied him closely without kreening. She knew that he would be a political pariah in his homeland. No one in his country's power structure would have anything to do with him for many years to come. His political exile could be a benefit, however, because Sara also knew that the man had important connections in his nation's chemical industry. He could easily direct the processing of the element unseen, but - could she trust him?

"Promise me that all your people will benefit from this element," she requested of him. *"Not just a few, but all your people - equally."*

It was now for Nemitts to consider. He knew the right places to go, the right people to contact. He knew how to arrange financing, and how to access talented people. He also knew that the distribution she was asking for would not be easy, but he knew people whom he thought could handle it. With his political career in ruins, Nemitts felt confident that he could conduct such an operation quietly, and out of the notice of those who could impede the distribution. He also felt confident that this . . . artifact would not ask something of him that was impossible.

"On my honor," he bequeathed to her.

The combination of sounds made a faint smile briefly play on Sara's features.

"You humans value honor," she told Nemitts, *"and yet you often revel in debasing it."*

She forbade herself to kreen. She studied the man - tried to see . . . tried to see!

"I admit, I do not know you."

"Then that makes two of us, I guess," Nemitts told her easily, *"because there is much about myself I did not know of."*

Sara continued to study Nemitts. She still wouldn't allow herself to kreen. Something in her made her want to meet this man as equally as possible. She was certain he was capable, but could she trust him? Nemitts sensed her struggle.

"If you doubt," he advised calmly her, *"then don't."*

"Then what's the point of anything?" Sara asked him in reply.

She continued to study Nemitts as she continued to debate with herself. Was what she had in mind right? Or was she interfering too much? *What the fuck is the point if I don't interact?* Could she trust Nemitts? Or would the history of human greed merely repeat itself

yet again - and this time with her as an active participant? *Who are you?* Sara asked herself of the bald man with the placid visage. Was he hiding behind his mustache? *Who are you?* She hesitated. She weighed the risks in countless ways, yet couldn't make them balance out with any degree of satisfaction. She paralyzed herself with possibility. She hesitated, and yet she cursed herself for hesitating. The element's benefit to everyone was possible as she envisioned it, but could she trust? She knew it could be done, but could she . . . how could she deny a people an opportunity to raise themselves from poverty, and want?

"The element's name, techniques for extraction and refinement, and a strategy for marketing are on the computer in the study at your home," Sara told the man.

She felt little relief in her decision, but it had been made. She would not go back on that. Nemitts could tell that the artifact was still uncertain. He would do what he could.

"It shall be carried out as you wish," he told her as his hand undid the latch on the window that stood between them. *"You have my word,"* he said as he swung the window open, and extended to her, *"my hand,"* then he spoke to her, "and my thanks."

Sara accepted Nemitts' offering. He had a handshake that she felt that she could trust. Still, she wasn't absolutely certain. She would never be until the future had unfurled itself.

"The technique for refining is purely of my own devising," she took care to inform Nemitts.

He was watching her. She could see that.

"Nothing like it on earth exists."

She was certain that she had his full attention as she spoke to him for the first time.

"All - not just a few," she advised him carefully. "Cross me, and I'll erase it."

Sara felt the man's grip tighten on her hand, then Nemitts bowed his head to her in respectful acknowledgment.

"Oh, we got us one big-assed, fuggin' mess this time," drawled Senator Booth to his neighbor, Senator Whinde.

The two of them were seated at their desks within the senate chamber. The other senators were either seated at their desks, or milling around before the morning's session began. Majority Leader, Bass was in the arena, chatting with Senator Bagg while keeping an eye on the clock. He liked to get things started on time.

"How do you think it's going to go down for Oz?" Senator Whinde asked Senator Booth.

"Hard to say," said Booth as his eyes casually scanned the front area of the room. "Everyone's got a stake in it one way or t'other."

Senator Whinde smiled.

"Vote your conscience," he suggested, playfully.

Senator Booth chuckled.

"Vote yer ass," he said as a rejoinder.

Whinde enjoyed the joke, but then waxed somber.

"I sure hate to see Ozzie go," he mentioned, then, "That'll put you in line for chairman."

Booth looked at the man. He was dead serious as he told him, "Up yer ass."

The session of the United States Senate that would determine Oscar Mosely's fate was called to order. The order of business was reviewed. The first item was a senate vote on a resolution to censure Mosely for conduct unbecoming of a senator, and to remove him from the Judiciary Committee chairmanship.

The floor was open to debate on the resolution as well as on Mosely's personal conduct. It was fairly brief, the opposing major political party was harsher towards him, as could only be expected. When it finally got around to him, Mosely pushed himself up from his chair, but remained standing at his desk to say, "I have nothing to add, Mr. Bass." and then he sat down again.

And so, that was it. Without saying a word in his own defense, Mosely submitted himself to the judgment of his peers. Bass looked on the man whom many in the room had long regarded as an 'old buffoon'. He recalled that the term had passed from his own lips on more than one occasion. Now, for the first time, he felt ashamed over it. He informed the Senate of the matter at hand. The issue would be decided by voice vote according to role-call. The floor was given over to the Senate clerk, and calling of the role began.

"Mr. Abbott."

"Nay."

"Ms. Allen."

"Nay."

"Ms. Ashly."

"Nay."

"Mr. Bagg."

"Nay."

"Mr. Barton."

"Nay."

"Mr. Bass."

"Nay."

"Mr. Benny."

"Nay."

"Ms. Bicker."

"Nay."

"Mr. Bloe."

"Nay."

"Mr. Booth."

"Nay"

"Mr. Burns."

"Nay."

"Mr. Chaplin."

"Nay."

"Mr. Costello."

"Nay."

"Mr. Davenport."

"Nay."

A somber mood of quiet dominated the atmosphere of the room. Senators routinely conducted other business while a roll call vote was being taken. They would interrupt themselves when their names were called to say "Aye", or "Nay" to the issue at hand, then go back to what they'd been doing before. Not one of them distracted their attention from this vote, however. They sat quietly, attentively, patiently waiting for the time when their names were called.

"Mr. Laurel."

"Nay."

"Mr. Larcen."

"Nay."

"Ms. Lee."

"Nay."

With Senator Sara Lee, the halfway point of the vote had been passed. Mosely being barred from voting on an issue that directly involved him, the tally now stood at fifty 'Nays'

opposing the resolution, and not one 'Aye' in favor of it. As he sat silently at his desk, Mosely gave no outward sign that he'd attained a majority of support.

"Mr. Nathan."

"Nay."

"Mr. Nelson."

"Nay."

"Mr. Newman."

"Nay."

"Mr. Nielson."

"Nay."

"Mr. Novak."

"Nay."

The stillness in the atmosphere became oppressive as the role continued. No one spoke. No one dared to even move. One could almost hear the sound of measured breathing.

"Mr. Van Allen."

"Nay."

"Mr. Wengler."

"Nay."

"Mr. Whinde."

"Nay."

"Mr. Young."

"Nay."

With Senator Young's 'Nay', the vote was officially concluded. Silence gripped the room, and all within, as the clerk took a few moments to review the tally. It startled some people when he cleared his throat before speaking.

"Mr. Bass," the clerk announced, "the vote is unanimous. The motion . . . is *denied*."

A shock wave of jubilation erupted in the staid, old senate chamber. There were cheers, and whistles, and thunderous applause. The air was filled with paper as several of his colleagues rushed to congratulate a visibly moved Oscar Mosely. Several others openly wept.

The significance of the vote they'd just cast went far beyond the simple matter of one man's supposed infidelity. All of them knew it. It had been a vote of confidence in the Mosely committee in its handling of the issue that involved the alien artifact, and, by association, it was a vote of affirmation for Sara, and for Susan. Even more than

that, their vote had been an open declaration of independence. They had stood up for themselves, and they had finally stood up to Marshall Wayans.

Taking in the scene of unrestrained celebration, William Bass thought of his old friend, Howard Lassiter. He thought of their final conversation, and of the challenge Lassiter had left him with.

Yes, Howard, Bass thought to his departed friend, and colleague, great things can happen in this room.

His joyful eyes surveyed the gathering of his fellows.

"And one - just - did," he said.

A similar wave of celebration shook the East wing of the nation's capital when House Speaker, Dunn, announced the Senate vote to his fellow congressmen in the House of Representatives. Only the Vice President sat in stony, isolated silence.

Word about the 'Mosely vote' spread quickly throughout the capital. Its significance was clear: The President's Blue Book was no longer to be taken into consideration in making policy decisions. The Japanese ambassador to the U.S. passed the news on to his counterpart in the U.N. The Senate vote prompted the Security Council leadership to rebuff Wayans' thinly veiled threat, along with his proposed plan to use the alien artifact.

The Judiciary Committee finished its investigation of events surrounding the alleged departure of Sara from Earth, now almost four years ago. The committee's report contained, really, no surprises: The assertion that Sara was a geophysical threat to earth was determined to be a total fabrication. Her signature on the UN document was ruled to be a forgery. Her image on the signing ceremony tape was a cleverly manipulated fake. On the issue of whether, or not, Sara's civil liberties had been violated, the Committee opined that to be a matter for the courts to decide. It was a moot point anyway, the main point being that the forces which had sought to expel Sara from Earth had been exposed, and thoroughly discredited.

In Houston, a subdued, but beaming, family emerged from Unit 1A to make a brief statement to the encampment of reporters who'd been hanging around the apartment complex.

"I'm very happy," was all that the beautiful, blond daughter would say.

"We're not out of the woods yet," cautioned raven haired mom, "but this is most encouraging."

"It's about time!" said follicly challenged dad.

Amongst those who watched the brief interview with what was fast becoming the

world's first family was the bachelor chief executive of the United States, Marshall Wayans.

Deprived of SuzieFlu, he had fallen steeply from his former high standing in foreign affairs. With his failed attempt to derail the Senate Committee investigation, it was apparent that his Blue Book, too, no longer held sway. His, state of the future, Susan enhanced, military systems lay useless with missing software codes. With the resuscitated internet, reviving international trade and the overall improvement of domestic and global economies, he knew that his goal of a Christian world was now unattainable. His moment had passed. The unfaithful would go unpunished. The world had changed away from him. Even his final gambit to commandeer the means to Heaven had failed.

Wayans' mind passed over his denied purpose, his ruined ambition, his shattered dream, and, as his eyes beheld the gorgeous artifact, he recalled it to have been so close that he might have touched it.

He was certain that a life of devotion should not go so rewarded. Another, greater, purpose lay ahead. He was sure of it now. Had not the Bible, and the Los Alamos report, revealed that to him? His attention focused on the girl from the stars whom many had called 'Angel', and whose beauty passed all understanding.

"I will have union with you, Lord," he said, and so believed.

He was sure of it now.

Chapter Fifty-one

The Sin of the Father

Sara flew into New York City at night to avoid attracting attention. She was scheduled to do a 'Deep Inside' interview with Ken Clark the next evening - her first since her return. Though she'd had several offers since the Senate committee had issued its report, Sara felt she owed one to the red haired Pixie of the Pink Team. She'd left Houston with her destination in mind, but then she'd decided to take a relaxation cruise over the North Pacific before hitting the Big Apple. The ocean had become her favorite place on Earth away from home. The particular combination of elements had done much to give her needed soccor in her period of travail.

The troubles seemed to be over - *Or, at least, they've taken a break at any rate.* Alex was back, and almost fully recovered - *Finally!* Dinah had begun the Herculean task of establishing her legal status - *Way t' go, Mom!* Florence had called to let her know that Tom had put aside his crutches, and was back to work at his old company - *That tune-up we did on his sensory system seems to have turned out alright,* she noted to Susan, and she'd just send a big, 'Thank you' valentine to Senator Mosely - *Who cares if it's out of season.*

While taking care to keep out of the way of air-traffic, police and media copters, Sara spent a couple hours just cruising around over the city, enjoying the aerial sites. Occasionally, she'd fly in low to get a closer look at something, or someone, that happened to catch her especial attention. When she finally decided to settle down for the night, she headed for the Metropolitan Art Museum in Manhattan. She chose a spot on the building's roof, and stretched herself out to spend the night starrng up at the smog lit sky as she liesurely kreened the whole museum. It was a restful, peaceful, enjoyable night. She got a real rush from the special exhibit that happened to be in town at the time.

At daybreak, Sara donned the set of urban animal attire she'd brought with her in the pouch of her cape, gathered her hair up under her 'Dodgers' baseball cap, and touched down to the sidewalk a little before the morning pedestrian rush hour started.

Walking around the major avenues among the crowd, she took in the sights, and sounds, and smells (a couple of which, unfortunately, reminded her of Venus). She paid attention to the faces of the people she passed by, studying, wondering, imagining who they

were, and what they might be like.

When she knew she'd be in her office, Sara called Louise while window shopping on 5th Avenue to let her know that she'd gotten into town okay. Louise told her what time to be at the studio before the show that night, and gave her the address of the hotel where she'd reserved a room for her. Before saying goodbye, the producer asked for a number she could be reached at in case a problem came up.

"Just pick up the phone and dial . . . BRAT," Sara told her. *"I'll get it."*

"You're not going to let me forget about that, are you?" Louise asked.

Sara distracted herself from the display of diamond rings she was looking at to smile, and then she answered with a clipped, little, *"Nope."*

While finishing her perusal of the sparkling jewelry, Sara executed an expanding radial kreen of the area from her location, and was surprised to discover that the hotel she'd be staying at was just a short walk up the block.

Meandering her way toward her target address, Sara saw an expansive, maroon colored, tarpaulin canopy that arched over the sidewalk, extending from the hotel's entrance to the street. *Hmm . . . fancy.* She admired the older building's tastefully simple, yet definitely high end, facade as she got closer to the canopy. The hotel's front entry consisted of a massive, three winged, brass-clad steel, and glass, revolving door that was flanked on either side by a pair of similarly made automatic doors.

A stout, middle-aged, and immaculately uniformed, doorman stood guard near one of the side doors. He regarded the youngster with curious suspicion. Her . . . 'Dodgers' cap? - and urban animal mode of dress made her look decidedly out of place with the locale. Sara raised a hand as she approached the revolving door, and then she paused suddenly. The metal, and glass, structure was so spotlessly clean that she was actually hesitant to touch it. It was a delay that alerted the watchful doorman.

"May I help you, Miss?" he officiously queried down at her.

From where she stood, Sara looked up at the doorman.

Why is he looking at me like that? she had cause to wonder. *Wha'd I do?*

She bore the scrutiny of his, but slightly disapproving gaze, then considered the facts that, 1) he was a doorman, and, 2) she didn't have any luggage. Not really knowing what else to do, and wanting to go inside to claim her room, Sara merely shrugged her shoulders, and replied to the man with a not entirely confident, "Not really."

She noted the doorman's - but slightly surprised expression, attempted a . . . but slightly

less than successful smile, then brazenly placed her 'filthy' palm on the door's spotless metal surface, and pushed her way inside.

Whoa, what a layout, Sara thought as she entered the hotel's world. A first glance of her environment made her feel like Dorothy entering the Emerald City.

Toto - where are you when I need you?

I resent that.

I don't mean you.

The lobby was huge. It was a full three story cavern of intricately carved, pale marble, trimmed with highly polished, decorative brass. Two rows of three, massive, floor to ceiling gilded, marble columns concealing the building's substantial structural girders stood at regularly spaced intervals to the right of the doors. Among them were several settings of expensive lobby furnishings. The elevators were directly ahead of Sara, against the lobby's back wall. Immediately to her left, toward the back, was a long registration desk.

Except for there being three, or four, people in the lounge area, the lobby was empty. Though it was still fairly early in the morning, those who were staying at the hotel on business had already left for their morning appointments, so there was hardly any foot traffic between the front doors, and the elevators. Sara headed straight for the registration desk, suppressing the urge to lift her feet from the flawlessly seamed, marble tiled floor as she went.

Louise, how could you afford this? she found herself wondering.

Sara arrived at the desk. The attending clerk, a crisp looking man in his mid-thirties, took dutiful note of her.

"May I help you, Miss?" he inquired pleasantly.

"Yeah, uh . . .," Sara answered, still in a state of distraction over the place, "I, uh . . .," and then she directed her attention to the clerk, "have a reservation."

The clerk regarded the attractive looking girl who was . . . poorly dressed, and wearing . . . a 'Dodgers' cap? He took her attire into account, and guesstimated her age.

"Of course," he said, "and what are the names of your parents?"

Sara frowned curiously, then strove to clarify.

"No, uh, it's . . . just for me."

Now the clerk frowned curiously. He took a closer look at the girl across the desk from him in the . . . 'Dodgers' cap.

"I'm sorry, Miss, but I'm afraid we don't rent rooms to people who are under age."

Sara's frown deepened.

"Well, uh . . . my age really isn't the issue here."

The clerk's eyebrows pricked.

"Well, just how old are you?" he asked.

"Uh . . .," Sara mumbled, her frown deepening even more as she needed to look away.

How do I tell 'im I'm only six years old? Three if you minus three years for freezing. He's never gonna believe it. Hey - I could say that I'm almost seven!

"Miss," the clerk called out quietly, notably looking down at the very pretty girl, who he was now certain couldn't be any more than sixteen. When he was sure he had Sara's attention, "How old are you?"

"Uhm . . . well, uh . . .," Sara hesitated, then she brightened suddenly with the onset of an epiphany, which she duly shared with the clerk. "Let's just say that I'm a lot younger than I look. Okay?"

If you didn't have his attention before, you've got it now - in spades, Susan noted.

But then Sara could already tell that by the noticeably increased arch in the clerk's eyebrows.

"Miss - "

"Look - "

" - really - "

"Wait a minute," Sara insisted. "Now, just hold it."

She needed a moment to collect her thoughts.

"I'm not here to rent a room. Okay? Let's get that understood. I'm here to claim a reservation for a room that has been made for me."

The clerk's eyebrows lowered. Sara was not encouraged.

"Are we on the same page now?" she wanted to know.

Still regarding her, the clerk's lips pursed down at her. He then distracted his attention from her long enough to access the hotel's reservation book, and leaf to the page of current listings.

"Alright," he asked her, "what is your name?"

Finally! "Sara Corel."

The clerk checked his directory, then returned his downward gaze to Sara.

"I don't have a 'Sara Corel' listed here," he reported

Hoboy, thought Sara, struck with the realization that she actually had quite a number of

names. *Okay*, she wondered, *which one did Louise put me under?*

"Miss?" the clerk called to Sara, requesting her attention, which he got.

"I don't have a Sara Cor - "

"Yeah - yeah, I know - I know," Sara answered testily. *Pick a name . . . any name. Brother!* "Uh, try Susan."

The clerk now suspected that he was dealing with a pretty, underage girl who was, for some reason, not being truthful about her name, and who was, more and more, appearing to be a runaway.

"Susan," he repeated back to her.

"Yes, Susan."

Sara, and the clerk, regarded one another. After a few moments, the clerk gave Sara a slight nod of his head. Wondering what the gesture might mean, and coming up with nothing, Sara opted to simply mimic the clerk's gesture in reply, and so gave him a slight nod of *her* head. Another moment, or two, passed, and then the clerk nodded in her direction again. Not knowing what else to do, Sara, once again, returned the gesture. After another brief pause, the clerk nodded to her yet again. Again, Sara returned the gesture.

"Susan . . . what?" the clerk asked.

"Oh," said Sara, now quite abashed, "I'm sorry," she offered, and the clerk smiled warmly down at her. Sara then stated, "Susan P."

Sara, and the clerk, regarded one another. After a few moments, the clerk gave Sara a slight nod of his head. Sara . . . returned the gesture. After a few moments, the clerk nodded his head again. Again, Sara returned the gesture.

"Susan P . . .," the clerk said, letting his voice trail off, and then he nodded again.

Sara returned the gesture.

"Yes," she said to confirm. "Susan P." And then she nodded *her* head again.

Sara, and the clerk, regarded one another.

"Susan P . . . what?" asked the clerk.

Sara needed to look away again.

"Uhm . . . "

A runaway, thought the clerk. *Definitely.*

"Miss?" said the clerk, calling Sara's attention to where he was looking down at her. "I need to know your last name," he patiently informed her.

"Uh . . .," said Sara, who, by now, was becoming quite flustered. "Susan . . . P," she

offered, then - *no, don't nod again* - "What's so . . . difficult - about that?" she hesitantly wanted to know.

"I need your last name, Miss. Please."

"Uhm . . .," Sara said before she barely mumbled, "Rgrl."

"Excuse me?"

"Rgrl!" Sara blurted. "Alright?" and then she stated quite succinctly, "Susan - P. - Rgrl." *Ya happy now?* she thought at the clerk, then, to herself, *Jeez! What - was - I - thinking!*

After a few moments, Sara looked back at the clerk. He was smiling very brightly . . . down at her. In reply, Sara grimaced very brightly up at him.

Okay, she's not wearing braces, thought the clerk as he relaxed out of his false smile, having wondered if the charming, but belligerent, girl might be speech impended in some way.

"Could you spell that for me?" he asked.

Sara's simulated jaw went slack as he mouth dropped open.

"Please."

"Uh . . .," said Sara. Her computer brain was spinning by now. "R . . . G . . . R - L."

The clerk took this in, then looked away from her - while seeming to still be looking down at her, oddly enough - and proceeded to write out the name she'd given him.

"Susan . . . P. . . .," and then he looked up - or down - at her to confirm, "R - G . . . R - L."

Sara nodded.

"Yes," she confirmed. *Keep nodding, keep nodding.* "Yes."

The clerk looked back before himself, finished writing, then studied the result. Sara saw him frown at the paper in front of him.

What - now!

"Could you spell that again for me, please?"

He was looking down at her again.

Sara recited again slowly, "R . . . G . . . R . . . L."

The clerk nodded -

Don't nod back!

- then looked back at his paper.

"That's what I thought you said," he said.

Sara was suddenly feeling very tired.

"This . . . is a very unusual spelling, you know," the clerk suggested to her. "It, uh - doesn't have any vowels."

Sara's jaw was slack again.

So tired -

You're nodding again.

Keep out of this! "I know," Sara finally said in answer

to the clerk's observation.

Still nodding.

"I know . . . "

The clerk took this in, then looked back at the paper he'd written on. After a moment, he looked back down at Sara.

"Would you excuse me for a moment?"

Not knowing what else to do at this point, Sara . . . nodded.

The clerk took up the slip of paper, and left Sara. She watched him walk to the far end of the desk where he consulted with a noticeably older man who'd had his back to them all this time. The clerk gave him the slip of paper. The older man studied it briefly, then glanced up in Sara's direction. Sara found his nonjudgmental look encouraging. She smiled pleasantly. With the paper still in his hand, the man began walking toward her, the clerk, in close attendance, just behind him. When he'd arrived in front of her, Sara noted as the man smiled . . . down at her.

"Good morning, Miss . . . ," the man said before he needed to consult the paper in his hand.

"Rgrl," said Sara in a clipped, clear voice. *What - was I thinking!*

The man glanced down at her briefly, then returned his attention to the slip of paper on his hand. After a moment, he looked down at Sara again.

"Could you spell your last name for me, please, Miss . . . "

"Rgrl," said Sara with a nod of her head. "R-G-R-L."

"Excuse me?"

Sara took a breath, and sighed.

"R . . . G . . . R . . . L."

Sara, and the man, regarded one another. The man's head began nodding thoughtfully.

Sara began nodding *her* head in response. She'd given up trying to figure out why anymore. The man then diverted his attention from her, and studied the paper.

"That's a . . . very unusual spelling, you know," he suggested to her at length. "It . . . doesn't have any vowels."

"I know," said Sara, nodding.

"Is that a . . . foreign name?"

For the first time since she'd arrived to the desk, Sara was able to smile, and mean it.

"Yes."

"I see."

You wish!

"Is that . . . Swedish, perhaps?"

"Yeah," said Sara, nodding agreeably. "Sure."

The man smiled -

*What is with this **down** bullshit?*

- at her, and then he proceeded to greet

her briefly in Swedish.

Cute, Sara thought, and, with that, she rattled off a defining thumbnail thesis of Einstein's Relativity Theory - in Swedish. She concluded her discourse with a forearm perched on the edge of the desk, and a calculated look that, she sincerely hoped, would leave no doubt as to the fact that *this* lady was, very definitely, not amused.

The man regarded her. The clerk, at his elbow, also regarded her. It was obvious that neither of them had the slightest idea of what she'd just said. The man's automatic smile told her that her calculated look had registered a big zero as well.

Man, I could've cussed these guys out, and they never would've known it, she thought. The missed opportunity cut deep. *Well - maybe in Arabic.*

"That's very nice," the man said.

Oh, pu - leeze . . . ! "Look," said Sara in an effort to explain, "the reservation was made for me by Louise Layne. She's a producer with one of the biggest news networks in town."

The man turned to the clerk, and the two of them regarded one another. After a moment, the clerk shrugged. The man then took it upon himself to check the reservations list murmuring, "Louise Layne . . .," slowly to himself. When he looked back at Sara, he reported that, "I don't find . . ."

"Louise Layne."

" - Ms. Layne's name on our reservation list."

Terrific. "Then it was probably made by someone on her staff. I mean, she is a busy lady, y'know."

"I'm sure she is - "

How would you know!

"Perhaps, if you could show us some identification, Miss . . . "

"Rgrl." *What was I thinking!*

Sara, and the man, regarded one another. After a few moments, the man nodded his head at Sara. Sara nodded *her* head in reply. Another moment, or two, passed, and then the man nodded his head to her again. Again, Sara nodded in reply. After another brief pause, the man nodded to her yet again. Again, Sara replied in kind.

"May we . . . see some identification . . . Miss Rgrl?" the man finally asked her.

Sara needed to look away as she reflected upon the fact that she didn't *have* any identification. With her unique status of being an alien artifact, no one had ever questioned her identity. This, ironically, was quite apart from the fact that no one had been able to figure out her identity, including her. She'd never had an official I.D. of any kind (extra terrestrial passports were yet a thing of the future). Dinah had started the process of getting her a Texas Resident I.D. after her 'coming out' at NASA, but that was almost four years ago, and, with her reported 'departure' from earth at that time, nothing had ever come of it.

"Miss Rgrl?" Sara could hear the older man's voice calling to her. She looked back at him to notice that he was . . . looking down at her.

"Your . . . identification?" he politely requested.

As Sara did nothing, but continue to gaze up at him with her big, doe-like, deep blue eye simulations, the older man tried prompting her through suggestion.

"Social security card? Library card . . . uve . . . driver's license?"

I can fly! What do I need with a stupid driver's license?

Duh!

Will - you - keep - out of this!

Sara needed to look away so she could think again.

Okay, identification. Uhh . . . alright, so I need to prove I am who I am -

And that's all

that I am -

Susan!

Alright, Sara continued thinking to herself, *identification . . . uh, oh yeah! I know.*

Settling on a plan of action, Sara, under the watchful eyes of the clerk, and the older man, stepped back from the registration desk, and, smiling brightly, formally presented herself to them.

The two men merely continued to regard her, and her . . . 'working class' attire, and her . . . 'Dodgers' cap. Neither of them moved for some time, and then Sara saw both of them blink, at once.

Okay, uh . . . more identification - alright! I got it now.

With that, Sara doffed her 'Dodgers' cap, shook out her silky, yellow tresses, compelled a little breeze to fluff them properly, then, once again, presented herself to the two men, smiling brightly as before.

The clerk, and the older man, continued to regard her. At length, the older man smiled down at her.

"That's very nice, Miss, but . . . could we . . . see . . . your - identification?"

The smile left Sara's face.

"Please."

Once again, Sara needed to look away.

More identification . . . uhm . . . Gee, what've I got left? Uhm . . . "Oh, I know!" she said out loud to the men behind the desk. *Why didn't I think of this before?*

She went about stuffing her cap into a side pocket of her jacket.

"I know just what you guys want," she said confidently.

She zipped open her jacket, and began unfastening the buttons on her shirt front.

"Miss-I-really-don't-think-that-would-be-" the clerk suddenly blurted, a staying hand extended far over the desk, but then he stopped. *'Appropriate'? 'Necessary'? What - the - hell do I say?* he thought a mere split second before he opted for, " - necessary."

Sara paused in what she was doing, and looked up quizzically at the clerk. After noting his expression, she expanded her field of attention to include the older man, who was looking at her *Really strange . . .* Sara thought it would be best if she offered some clarification.

"I'm - okay with this," she explained casually, referring to the two buttons on her shirt front which she'd undone. "I mean . . . I don't particularly *like* it, y'know, but . . . I don't really have a problem with it."

No sooner had these words left her mouth, than the clerk began looking . . . *strrrraanngge* . . . A glance in the older man's direction revealed that the look on *his* face had become even stranger than it had been before.

So much for . . . clarification, she thought.

Sara, and the older man, regarded one another. After a few moments, the man nodded his head at Sara. Sara . . . nodded *her* head back in reply. After a moment, or two, had passed, the man nodded to her again. Again, Sara nodded back in reply. After another brief pause, the man purposefully drew himself up to his full height while still regarding her. He glanced sideways in the clerk's direction to note that he was still standing, in a statue-like state, with his arm extended over the desk.

"Gary," the older man mentioned quietly.

As if by magic, the clerk came back to life, lowering his arm, and assuming a more erect posture.

The older man looked back at Sara. She was looking up at him expectantly with her hands still poised over the front of her shirt. He drew a noticeable breath. *Oh . . . what the hell*, he sighed. His shoulders hunched, then dropped in resignation. "Alright," he uttered helplessly.

Sara beamed.

"Thanks!" she responded brightly as she put her hands back to work. "I knew you'd wanna see what I got," she told them happily.

After judging that she had enough buttons undone, Sara smiled up at the men as she boldly pulled her shirt open wide to reveal the equally bold "S" emblem on the chest of her uniform.

She noted the older man's stunned expression, *Cool!* then shifted her attention to the clerk. *Why does he have his eyes closed?*

"Gary," the older man quietly mentioned again.

Gary struggled admirably, maintaining his closed eyes.

"Mr. Hill," he beseeched to the older man, "please."

While he was still watching her, Sara saw Mr. Hill's body suddenly jar, and then she heard a loud, dull, thump from behind the desk. At once, Gary's eyes shot open as *he* then jarred. He was looking directly at Sara.

"Oh-m'-God!" he said.

"Edward," the woman of an elderly couple quietly hailed to her husband.

They were sitting in the lounge area. The woman had watched what had been going on at the registration desk, although she could only see the attractive - but very shabbily dressed - blonde girl at a three quarter angle from the rear. She could see, very plainly, that the desk clerk, and the hotel manager, were looking at her, and had been respectably shocked when the girl had brazenly opened her shirt in front of them.

"Edward!" she called again in soto voce, summoning her husband's attention from his newspaper.

"Umhm?" Edward mumbled, looking up to regard his wife.

"Do you see that girl over there?" his wife fairly instructed him with an indicating look, and a nod of her head.

Edward had to turn around in his chair to see what his wife was referring to. When he did see what she was referring to, however, he forgot about the discomfort that his body position was causing his lower back.

"Well, do you see her?" his wife prompted sharply.

Edward half turned back to his wife.

"Yes, I see her," he replied, and then he returned his attention back to the girl at the desk. *Turn around . . .*

"Isn't that disgusting?" Edward's wife seethed.

"Oh, yes," Edward dutifully replied. *Oh, please - God, turn around!* "Quite."

"Oh, excuse me, Miss," said Gary to Sara in an attempt to correct himself.

Mr. Hill had taken to studying the name on the slip of paper Gary had given him earlier.

SUSAN P RGRL

A concentrated frown gathered on his brow. After a few moments, he tore a strip from one end of the paper, and then placed it carefully over a portion of the lettering on the slip. He studied the result, then glanced up at the exposed emblem on Sara's chest. Looking back down at the paper slip, he studied, he thought, he frowned, and then, "Oh-m'-God!"

Mr. Hill immediately looked up at Sara.

"Oh, excuse me, Miss," he offered in apology.

He returned his attention to the slip. After studying it some more, he started to laugh. His reaction was just a smile at first, and then the smile developed into a chuckle. From

there, Mr. Hill gave more, and more, of himself over to his realization until he was having difficulty stifling himself.

What's so funny? Sara wondered, feeling as though she'd been left standing with her emblem hanging out.

Mr. Hill recovered himself, then looked up at Sara.

"It's a joke? Right?" he asked.

"Uh . . . ," said Sara, still with her shirt pulled open.

"Gary," Mr. Hill called to him. He slid the paper over the desk so the clerk could see.

"What does that say?"

Gary looked at the paper as Mr. Hill had masked it, and read what was left.

"Su P Rgrl," he said distinctly.

Mr. Hill smiled.

"Read it again," he kindly instructed.

Gary studied the unmasked portion of his writing again.

"Su P Rgrl," he said again, but a little faster that time.

"Now soften the 'P', and take the space out after it," Mr. Hill advised.

Gary glanced at Mr. Hill in a somewhat curious, nettled way, then put himself to the task once more.

"Su PRgrl," he said.

He looked at Mr. Hill. Smiling, the hotel manager nodded to him. Gary looked back at the slip.

"SuP Rgrl . . . Su PR . . . SuPR - oh-m'-God!"

At once, he looked up to Sara.

"Oh, excuse me, Miss," he offered.

Mr. Hill had started laughing again. Sara relaxed.

"It's okay," she told Gary easily.

She came forward, and started buttoning up her shirt. Mr. Hill looked at the paper again, then looked up at Sara.

"That's . . . quite a little joke," he commented appreciatively.

Sara tried to return the manager's smile.

"A killer," she half-heartedly agreed.

Mr. Hill put a thoughtful finger to his lips as he happened to think of something else.

"Let's see . . . ," he murmured.

He brought the hotel's reservation book in front of himself, then began to scan his eyes down the page of recent listings. When he'd found what he was looking for, he looked up at Sara.

"I'm afraid we don't have a reservation for," he then consulted the slip, "Susan P," and then he looked at Sara again, "Rgrl," he announced with official solemnity.

Having watched him, Sara took in what Mr. Hill had told her, as well as the way in which he'd told her. It hurt.

Thanks a lot.

She slowly looked away, and then, finally, looked down at the floor.

After all this, I wind up on the museum roof again -

"But," said Mr. Hill.

Sensing that her attention was required, Sara forced herself to look back up at him. She could see that his attention was on the reservation list again.

"We - do - have a reservation," he continued, "for," and then he looked up to meet Sara's eyes. He was smiling as he then said, "Supergirl."

Spontaneously, Sara closed her eyes, and sighed out a smile, the end of which became a quiet, almost private laugh. Looking up again, she happened to see Gary. He was looking at her, not down at her anymore, but *at* her now. He was shaking his head, and chuckling to himself.

"Why didn't you tell us?" he wanted to know of her, and then he started laughing. "We've been expecting you."

Sara truly didn't know, and so she groped a bit, a hand waving aimlessly in the air, and then, finally, she gave up with a shrug, and admitted, "I don't know."

"If you'll, uh, just sign our guest register, Miss Supergirl," Mr. Hill requested of her as he turned the hotel's register book to face Sara, and offered her a pen.

Exchanging smiles with the manager, who wasn't looking down at her either anymore, Sara accepted the pen, and made to apply the tip to the space he'd indicated. Just before she pressed, however, she paused. She gave herself to wonder over what she was about to do. To all of those who knew her well, she was Sara. To the NASA team, she was Susan. *No, not Sara Corel*, she thought, *not Susan P*. A tiny furrow appeared at the center of her simulated brow. *But*, and then she wrote in her own characteristic, florid script, *Supergirl*.

Letting the pen slip from her fingers, Sara stared at the word, the name she'd written. She couldn't help but feel as though she'd just committed an act of monumental import. The

first two of her now three names had each proven to be a hallmark in her existence on earth; 'Sara', with her initial activation, or birth, 'Susan', with her formal introduction to the world. What, she wondered, would the name of 'Supergirl' bring?

Sara watched the name, the word she had identified herself with, turn away from her as Mr. Hill rotated the book around, and looked at what she'd written for himself. Sara watched him carefully for any indication of what her newest name might bring. She could see that he was smiling, but it was probably the most unusual smile she had ever seen. It was a smile unrelated to any happiness, or joy. Indeed, she couldn't place it among any human emotion she had yet encountered. She went through the gamut of what she knew, only to discover that she didn't know. What was the wellspring of this most peculiar smile? Perplexed, and dissatisfied, by what her perceptual photons were revealing to her, Sara kreened the man to discover what he was experiencing. What she found inside him was a pervading sense of peace, and well being.

Strange, she thought, *I've never kreened this in a human before. Is this what the name of 'Supergirl' inspires?*

Fascinated, Sara wanted to go further, but she respectfully left Mr. Hill, and his reverie, unmolested.

DING!

The piercing tone of the desk bell Gary had just sounded jarred Sara, and Mr. Hill, awake from their private thoughts. Gary had Sara's room key ready when a bell boy seemed to magically appear out of nowhere at the end of the desk. He was a dark, heavy set young fellow, with a roundish face, and eyes that contained an endearing innocence, and a desire to please. Gary turned the key over to the bell boy

"Ronald will show you to your room, Miss Supergirl," he informed Sara.

"Who?" asked Ronald at the sounding of the name, it's association with reality being foreign, to say nothing of surprising, to him.

Mr. Hill smiled at the lad, then approached him with the slips of paper.

Here we go again, thought Sara in a melodically morose tone.

She was not disappointed, which was to say, she *was* disappointed, when Mr. Hill placed the larger slip at the end of the registration desk near Ronald.

"Ronald," Mr. Hill addressed the young man in a friendly enough manner that could be construed as being unofficial.

He referred to the slip of paper that lay on the desk between them.

"Read what that says for me, would you please?"

Ronald agreeably approached the desk, and looked at the writing on the slip. Then he began to study it with a fair degree of intensity.

"Out loud, please," requested Mr. Hill.

Ronald glanced up at his superior long enough to note, thankfully, that he was smiling, then returned his attention to his assigned task at hand. After a few more moments of careful study, the bell boy was ready to make an attempt.

"Susan P. . . .," he managed well enough, and then he hesitated.

"Rgrl," Sara said, reflexively by now.

Ronald turned his curious attention to Sara.

I didn't just say that, did I?

You said it.

I - wasn't - asking.

Hm. Sounded like a question to me.

Regarding Ronald as he regarded her, at that moment, gave Sara serious cause to wonder if humans possessed heat vision not unlike her own.

"It's Swedish," she offered with a pleasant, albeit somewhat helpless, smile.

In spite of being supplied with this vital information, however, enlightenment, somehow, evaded Ronald as he continued to regard Sara relentlessly, or . . . rather, curiously.

"Don't mind me," Sara finally said offhandedly with a lightly dismissive wave of her hand.

The young man continued to curiously regard the very attractive young woman, in spite of her . . . grungy attire - for another eternal moment, or two, then, almost reluctantly, he distracted his attention back to the slip of paper on the registration desk. After studying it for a few moments more, he looked up to Mr. Hill.

"Are you sure that's the way it's spelled?" he asked.

Shuttup-shuttup-shuttup! Don't - say - anything! Just - keep yer mouth shut! Sara swore to herself.

If I on-ly had a voice . . ., sang Susan, paraphrasing the lyric from the Wizard Of Oz.

I would so like to hurt you.

"Yes," Mr. Hill assured Ronald with a nod. "That's the way it's spelled."

Ronald returned Mr. Hill's nod, then applied himself, once more, to studying the writing on the slip.

"That's a very unusual spelling," the bellboy noted. "The last name doesn't have any vowels."

Ronald looked up to regard Sara once again.

"You said it was Swedish?" he asked her carefully.

Sara could only look at the young man. "Uhm . . ."

"Yes, she did," Gary offered.

Thank you.

Mr. Hill now came forward with his other slip of paper, and carefully placed it as he wished.

"Alright, Ronald," he said.

Ronald dutifully returned his attention to Mr Hill. The manager referred to the slips of paper between them.

"Now read what it says," he instructed.

Again, Ronald applied himself to studying the writing on the slip of paper, now in its properly masked state. He glanced back up to Mr. Hill.

"Out loud again?" he wanted to know.

"Oh yes," said Mr. Hill.

"Oh, okay," said Ronald.

Oooohhhh . . .

Oh, that sounded painful.

Ronald, again, applied himself to his task. After a few more moments of careful study, he was ready to give it a try.

"Su . . . P . . . Rgrl," he said with clarity, and distinction.

He looked up to Mr. Hill to see if his effort had merited his superior's approval. Mr. Hill was smiling at him.

"Alright, now," he advised, "say it - a little faster."

Ronald looked back at the slip.

"Su - P - Rgrl," he said.

He looked back up to Mr. Hill. The manager's smile had broadened notably.

"Now soften the 'P'," Sara advised, "and take the space out after it," *so* wanting this whole thing to be over with.

Sara, and Ronald, regarded one another. After a few moments, Sara gave the bell boy a slight nod of her head. Ronald, not being entirely clear on what the gesture was intended to

mean, gave Sara a slight nod of *his* head in return. Another moment, or two, passed, and then Sara nodded to the young man again. Not knowing what else to do, Ronald, once again, returned the gesture. After another brief pause, Sara nodded to him yet again. Again, Ronald returned the gesture.

"Go ahead, Ronald," said Mr. Hill to prompt the young man along. "She knows what she'd talking about."

I'm - just - not going to say . . . anything.

You just did.

Ronald relieved Sara of his gaze, and returned his attention to the slip of paper once again.

"Su PRgrl," he sounded out carefully.

He looked at Mr. Hill. Smiling, the hotel manager nodded his approval to him. Ronald looked back at the slip.

"SuP Rgrl . . . Su PR . . . SuPR - oh-m'-God!" the bell boy exclaimed, then, immediately, to Sara, "Oh, excuse me, Miss."

Both Mr. Hill, and Gary, were laughing again by now. Ronald still wasn't sure if he completely understood what was going on, but thought it best that he join in.

Susan, could you please erase my entire program so I could just - sorta - get away from all of this?

Negative . . . Ms. Rgrl.

Oh, not you too . . .

*Hey, that joke wasn't **my** idea.*

I know, but -

*In fact, I **told** you what I thought of it when **you** thought of it.*

Hey, cut me some slack here, will ya?

No. When a dog's down, kick 'er.

I - will - remember that . . .

Make my day.

What's with you this morning?

*I'm having just a liiittle trouble classifying that, so called, **modern** exhibit you were so fascinated with last night.*

"Uh, Miss - "

"Yeah."

" - Supergirl," said Mr. Hill.

The laughter had stopped, and quiet restored. All three of them were smiling warmly at her.

"Ronald will show you to your room," Mr. Hill informed her.

"Thank you," Sara said most graciously, and most gratefully.

"Do you have any baggage?"

The question made Sara's eyebrows rise.

One - snitty - little computer -

I'm listening.

Who cares! Go kreen yerself!

"No," Sara answered Mr. Hill sweetly with an engaging smile. "Just me."

Sara was escorted to her room, which turned out to be a luxurious, five room suite that included a formal dining room, and a study. There was also a hot tub, and a sauna, in a bathroom that had to've been larger than a good sized studio apartment. Sara looked around, in awe of the extravagance of her accommodations as Ronald scurried about efficiently, opening drapes, and doors, and such, busily making those final touches to prepare a room for its specified occupant that were sure to earn him a good tip before he left. After giving Sara a guided tour of the suite, he stationed himself by the front door that lead to the hallway outside.

"Will there be anything else, Miss Supergirl?" he asked.

Sara cringed at the name, but she quickly recovered to smile nicely, and say a simple, "No."

Ronald waited. Sara wondered why. Unbeknownst to her, she'd stumbled into a void in her earthly experience. Neither Alex, or Dinah, had briefed her on the courtesy of tipping a bell hop. The situation had simply never come up before. Now that it had, and with no one there to advise her, Sara was at a loss for what to do. It hadn't been an issue during her interview with Ken, close to four years earlier. For that, she'd just flown into town, done the show, and then flew right back home again. She hadn't needed accommodations for a longer stay. Now, the longer Ronald tarried, the more Sara began to wonder if something was wrong.

Susan, you got anything on this?

Beats me, but he is getting pissed. Be polite.

Okay, uh . . . be polite - particular to the situation. So what's the situation? Uhm . . . he . . . showed me to my room. Okay . . . yeah, okay. I can handle that.

So, settling on a plan of action, Sara beamed her brightest smile as she swept gracefully toward the young man, and took one of his hands between her own.

"Thank you so much for showing me to my room," she gushed.

I'm gonna puke.

Wul wha'd ya want!

Ronald was struck utterly speechless by such attention from such a radiantly beautiful girl, even if she was so inconspicuously dressed. Sara held onto the stunned, and silent, bell boy's hand, smiling so . . . painfully.

Okay, now he's confused, Susan reported. He seems disappointed.

You're not helping.

I don't know! she huffed. *Try more gushing.*

Sara balked noticeably at this.

You've . . . got - to be kidding, she wondered.

Unwilling, unable to remove his eyes from her, Ronald could see the smile leave Sara's perfectly adorable face.

Lay it on. He's really confused now, and he's starting to get scared. Lay it on thick.

Knowing that Susan was 'winging it' blindly, and herself now bring as confused as Ronald evidently was, Sara lowered her eyes to the floor between herself, and the young man.

His hand is feeling really icky.

Define "icky".

Wet, and clammy.

Uh . . . okay - 'wet' on the human epidermal surface can be pretty slippery. Try tightening your grip on him.

Are - you - serious?

Do you want to be rid of him, or not?

Gazing at the lovely young woman as she demurely looked away from him, Ronald could feel the tension of her grip on his hand increase slightly. The poor boy had to swallow - hard, and fast. When Sara looked up at him again, Ronald could see that she was . . . nervous.

"Uhm . . .," Sara began, and then she looked away, and smiled a hesitant, shy smile. "I uh . . .," she continued, and then she found the courage to look back at him. "I just want you to know that . . . I really enjoyed myself."

Hmm, that elevated his heart-rate. Keep going.

"I . . . had a wonderful time, - "

He's definitely not scared anymore.

" - and . . . "

Go on.

You're doing fine.

"I'm . . . really looking forward to you showing me to a room again some day."

Opps -

"Real soon!" Sara blurted before she caught herself. She slowed down to continue in an almost tentative mutter, "in fact . . . "

Ronald just kept on starring at her, a look of slack-jawed, wide-eyed wonder on his round, chubby face.

" . . . uhm . . . ," Sara struggled to continue. She was getting desperate. She tried sounding brighter. "The sooner the better," she virtually chirped.

Susan . . .

I see what you mean by 'icky'.

Get - me - out of this!

Go for it!

Sara threw herself at the young man, and embraced him passionately.

"Thank you!"

Now ya got 'im.

I'm gonna puke!

Ronald left the captivating young woman empty handed, but he left her with a full heart, and a montage of images racing through his young imagination that would have rivaled Eisenstein's best.

Alone, finally, Sara shed her jacket, and tossed it on the luggage stand in the bedroom, then took a liesurely stroll about the suite.

Nice place, Susan informed her, kreening their environment. *Older building, but very well kept up. Major renovation between 1979 and '81. Silver enhanced electrical, and copper plumbing - ooo we got action on the twelfth floor, room -*

I don't want

to hear it.

Would you rather have a description of the fire sprinkler system - one

subatomic particle at a time?

It's none of your business, Sara told her. Now just stop it.

You're tired, aren't you?

Yeah. Well, I was up all night doing the museum.

It's a nice place, isn't it?

It sure is.

I'd like to do it again sometime.

You didn't get it all the first time?

Yeah, but . . . it's one of those things that deserves doin' again, ya know what I mean?

Yeah . . . we'll do it again. Maybe we'll actually go in the place next time.

*That would be nice. Getting around that alarm system **is** distracting.*

By then, Sara had wandered into the bedroom again.

I'm going to lie down. I'd like to be somewhat refreshed for the show tonight.

No problem.

Sara kicked off her shoes, then, from the foot of the bed, took a flying leap into the air to land dead center on it in a spread eagle position on her back. At least that was her intention. Where she wound up, however, was spread eagle on her back a foot-and-a-half in the air *above* the center of the bed. It took her a moment to notice that something was wrong, but when she did

Susan . . . she intoned in a manner of warning.

Snitty . . . little . . .

Susan!

Her simulated body was summarily dropped onto the bed with an ignominious flop. After her form had come to rest, Sara breathed a relaxing sigh.

"Thank you," she droned as if she could possibly mean it.

Chapter Fifty-two

Revelations

"Oh great!" swore a very miffed Louise.

She hung up her desk phone, then instantly picked up again, and speed dialed an extension number.

"Just great!" she said again.

She laid back in her office chair, and waited for the connection to go through.

"Cindy?"

"Yeah," answered the 'Deep Inside' director's voice.

"I just got off the phone with Ken. He's sick, and can't do the Sara interview tonight."

"Who's Sara?"

"I mean Susan. Y'know, the . . . alien."

"What's wrong with Ken?"

"Oh, he's come down with a flu."

"Might be the one you just got over."

"Probably. Anyway, he sounds awful. Basically, he's out of commission - at least until he sounds better."

"Alright, we'll have to cancel the interview," Cindy stated simply enough.

She frowned when she heard Louise laughing loudly on her end of the line,

"Thank you very much, my friend," the producer lightly scoffed. "You wanna be the one that to tell the sponsors who are footing the bill for this anticipated ratings bonanza?"

"Well, postpone, at least," Cindy then offered in compromise.

"Can't do," Louise said almost absently, toying with her phone cord.

"Why not?"

"You don't put off something like this, Cin - especially not after the buildup we've given it."

"Lou, we're not going to find someone to fill for Ken on such short notice," Cindy pointed out. "He's the only one who was up to speed on the subject."

Louise paused a reflective moment as she peered over the edge of a personal abyss. After she'd fully occupied an indexfinger with the coils of her receiver cord, she finally

jumped.

"I think I could handle her."

(Pause.)

"Lou - "

"What?"

"No - "

"Why not?"

"You know the camera doesn't like you."

"That was over four years ago," Louise asserted, recalling her failed co-anchor stint. "Besides, Less was giving me a lot of flack at the time, and . . . "

"You didn't cover it very well," said Cindy, completing Louise's unfinished sentence. She'd been the director on the show. The memory was still painful for both women. Neither of them seemed to know what more to say for awhile.

"Are you sure there's no one who could fill for Ken?" Cindy finally asked.

"No, there isn't," the producer answered. "He's kept Susan pretty close to his vest," she added.

"Well, a lot of good that does us now," Cindy groused. "What about Gary?"

"He's on assignment in Los Angeles," Louise answered. She waited a moment, then, "This is a whole different setting than it was before, Cin. It'll be just me, and the subject."

"And a world record audience," Cindy noted. She waited a moment, then, "Are you up on the subject?"

"I approved the script for the show," Louise answered.

"That's not what I mean, Lou."

Louise pondered briefly on how to reply, then said tentatively, "Sara, and I, are comfortable with each another."

"Sara?"

"Sara/Susan."

"Susan."

"Yeah."

"Have you cleared this with Babcock yet?" Cindy asked her producer.

"No," Louise answered softly. "The situation just came up, and I wanted to get your opinion first."

"Well, thanks for the thought, but it's really not my decision, y'know."

Loiuisse thought about it, then breathed a quiet sigh before replying, "Yeah."

"Look, uh . . .," Cindy hesitantly offered, "come on down to the studio. We'll tape you doing the opening. That way you'll have something to show Babcock when you tell him about Ken."

Louise smiled as she withdrew her finger from the coil of wire.

"I'll be right down," she said.

She rubbed her thumb against the finger to help alleviate the numb sensation.

"And, uh . . . thanks."

* * *

Marshall Wayans concluded business at the White House Oval Office desk for the day. He'd decided to not run for a second Presidential term. There was little point, he reasoned. Denied the alien computer's software codes - which had been so vital to his success - he was left without effective means of enforcing Christian democracies throughout the world. The collapsed situation in Iraq was sad enough testament to that. The SuziFlu having been removed from his hands had boayed the human spirit. The world's recovering economies were testament to that, and, as everyone knows, an atmosphere of hope is hardly conducive to instilling Godly faith. And the Senate Judiciary Committee's recently published report on its "Susan" hearings was testament to the fact that his 'Blue Book' no longer held sway in encouraging moral conduct as he saw it.

The world had changed away from him, Wayans realized. A Cryptoalien artifact from another world had brought his own world within God's grasp, and then had simply removed it. 'The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away,' he recalled. The similarity between the action, and the word, would have made him smile had it ocured to him, but it didn't. There was no similarity as far as he could see, because there was no disimilarity between the action, and the word.

"Sir?"

"Hm?" said Wayans, looking up as his mind returned from the place where it had wandered.

His chief of staff, Bill Robbins, stood before him on the other side of the Oval Office desk he sat at.

"Oh, yeah, Bill," he said in recognition.

His mind cleared with purpose.

"Is everything ready?" he asked.

"Everything's set, just as you wanted," Robbins answered. "We can leave for New York as soon as you're ready."

"Good!" Wayans exclaimed, pushing himself up lightly from the chair. "I'll just get showered, and changed, and we'll be on our way."

'Judgement is mine, seath the Lord,' he recalled.

He would see that it was so.

* * *

Louise was given the go ahead to host the scheduled interview with Sara. She immediately returned to the studio to start preparing.

"I wanna get out from behind the desk," she told the 'Deep Inside' director.

"Lou," Cindy explained, "the desk is part of the set."

"It's not an absolute," Louise maintained. "You know Ken just uses it to hide behind."

"It's part of 'Deep Inside'," Cindy insisted. "The viewers expect to see the desk."

Sara arrived at the building that housed Louise's network offices. She'd wanted to walk to the studio so she could enjoy the sights, but Louise had send a limosine to fetch her at her hotel. Sara had worked out a deal with the driver to where she would walk, and he would follow after her in the car. Though she'd tried to maintain a normal human's walking pace, she'd had wound up having to wait a number of times for him to catch up with her as he'd made his way through the perpetual gridlock of Manhattan traffic.

From the street, she entered the building lobby, and strode up to the guard who sat behind the reception desk.

"Hi," Sara greeted the guard cheerfully.

The guard looked up at her, and smiled warmly.

"Can I help you, Miss?" he inquired.

"Yes," said Sara, "I'm here to see Louise Layne."

The guard nodded acknowledgement, then accessed a paper which Sara noted was divided into verticle columns. The paper in hand, the guard returned his attention to Sara.

"And what is your name?" he asked.

"Sara Corel," Sara answered.

The guard consulted the list briefly, then looked back up at Sara.

"I don't have a 'Sara Corel' listed here," he said.

Sara, and the guard, regarded one another. Sara's simulated lips pursed slightly.

"Cindy, this is important," Louise tried to explain to the 'Deep Inside' director. "This interview is the artifact's first real world public appearance since she's gotten back. A lot of people still aren't sure about her. A lot of them are still afraid of her. The desk is a barrier. It distances the interviewer from the subject. I want a setting of physical closeness with Susan. A tightness - an intimacy that will encourage people to put aside their barriers against her. I want to convey to the audience that they don't have to be afraid of her, and I can't do that sitting behind a desk."

Cindy had listened carefully to what Louise had said, and now she considered what had been said. She considered it very carefully before replying, "The viewers expect to see the desk."

Sara was still with the guard. She was feeling very tired once again.

"Alright," said the guard, having finished with consulted his paper again, "we are expecting a 'Supergirl'." He looked up at Sara. "Now I just need to see some identification."

Sara, and the guard, regarded one another.

Can I hit this guy? Susan asked with palpable fatigue.

In the practical spirit of achieving an expedient, and mutually amicable, resolution to their disagreement, Louise pulled rank on Cindy. The desk was out. She would conduct the interview with Sara with the two of them seated in simple chairs, positioned close, and facing one another as much as audience advantage would allow. She further decreed that the chairs be positioned as close to the studio audience as possible. It was just a matter of working out their location so the cameramen had room to move.

"Where *is* Sara, by the way?" Cindy wondered. "She should be here by now."

Sara stood squarely before the guard, her arms folded loosely over her chest, her feet seven feet above the floor. She looked down at the guard from her levitated height.

"What more proof do you need?" she wanted to know with an edgy tone of strained patience.

She was creating quite a stir. Everyone in the lobby had stopped to point, and stare, at the pretty blonde girl in urban animal cloths standing in the air in front of the reception desk. The guard looked up at Sara through narrowed eyes, his hand searching in a side pocket of his trousers.

"How much change do I have in my pocket?" he wanted to know.

Can't we just - y'know like . . . GO?

No, Sara answered. *That would be disrespectful.*

"Louise!"

"Whoa!" Louise suddenly ejaculated as she raised a hand to her head.

There followed a pause between the two women that was mutually stunned. It was the first time Susan had spoken to Louise telepathically. Cindy, for her own part, had no idea of what had just happened.

"Lou?" Cindy tentatively called to her.

The prospect of the show's last second replacement becoming indisposed at the last second had the director frowning out of curious concern.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I . . .," Louise answered quickly, then she had to pause to think.

She reflected on the sound that had suddenly resonated in her head. Recalling how Lanna had described *her* first telepathic meeting with Susan helped the skittish Pixie regain her wits, and settle her nerves. She was still feeling a bit disjointed, though, as she finished her reply to Cindy.

"I . . . just - had a thought."

"No you didn't," Susan took issue to correct her. *"It's me, Susan."*

"Yeah, I . . . kinda gathered that," Louise said confusedly.

"Gathered what?" Cindy asked.

Her frown of concern had deepened.

Louise turned her confused expression to the director.

"Uh . . ."

"She was talking to me," suddenly appeared in Cindy's head.

"What the f - ?" Cindy wondered.

"Who the 'f' if you don't mind," said Susan. *"Hi Cindy. My name is Susan, and I'm happy to meet your acquaintance."*

The confused director turned a confused expression to the confused producer.

"Ooo, nice hair," Susan noted to Cindy, *"I like the way it stands up on the back of your neck."*

"Lou?" Cindy wondered hesitantly. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Yes, she is," Susan confirmed. *"We're doing a three way."*

Louise snorted at this. She'd recovered from her sense of shock just as Cindy's was beginning.

"You kinky witch," Susan commented to Louise's mirthful outburst, then, *"Look, the guard's got Sara hostage in the lobby. He won't let her go."*

The thought of someone like Sara being held 'hostage' seemed more than a little incongruous to the producer.

"Couldn't she just - go?" she asked.

"That's not the point," Susan answered. *"We need one of you to call the guard, and vouch for Sara."*

"Lou?" Cindy wondered, again hesitantly. "Is this really happening?"

"Yeah," Louise confirmed, "it's her." To Susan, then, she said, "Okay, let me get to a phone."

"Don't bother," said Susan. *"I'm ringing his desk phone now."*

"Lou . . . ?" Cindy queried.

"C'mon - pick up, you butthead."

The guard at the reception desk finally answered his phone.

"Go ahead, Louise," Susan cued the producer. *"He's all yours. And give 'im a good piece of my mind for me, would you?"*

Louise wandered off to deal with the guard through Susan's telepathic link, inadvertently leaving Cindy alone with . . .

*"Cindy, how **do** you get your hair to stand up on end like that?"*

* * *

Freshly cleaned, and dressed, Marshal Wayans made his way across the White House lawn to where Marine One waited for him. The helicopter would take him to Air Force one, which would then take him to New York for a fund raising dinner he was scheduled to speak at. A cold snap had made the late Fall weather unseasonably crisp. He returned the salute of

the young Marine at the base of the staircase leading to the helicopter's open hatch. He had no speech prepared for the event. He knew he wouldn't need one. He mounted the steps. Maybe he'd get a bite to eat on the plane. *Last supper*, he mused.

Just before the entryway, at the end of the short platform, the President paused. He turned, and looked about at the nation's executive mansion, and what he could see of its surroundings. After taking in the sight, he raised his hand in salute. It was a solemn gesture, obviously felt. Once executed, the President turned away from it all, and disappeared from view into the craft's interior.

* * *

Sara emerged from the 'Deep Inside' guest dressing room she'd been assigned to. She wore her uniform. Her makeup for the show was done. Louise was waiting for her outside the doorway in the corridor. She had the clothes on she would wear for the show, except for the outfit's jacket. Her hair, and make-up, were complete. A sound tech worked at her back, fastening a receiver to the beltline of her trousers. The wire of an earjack extended down her back to the receiver that would connect her to Cindy in the control booth during the show.

"You look fine," Louise said to Sara in a reassuring smile.

Dinah had alerted her about the change in Sara's uniform. She'd also mentioned Sara's heightened sense of conflict over it. The Pink Team's red haired Pixie had indulged herself in some good natured teasing about Sara's identity with the hotel, and the front security desk. She could see now, by the way Sara regarded her, that she'd been wrong.

"Who looks fine?" Sara asked her in reply. "Me, or 'Supergirl'?"

Louise did not relenquish eye contact with Sara as she took a moment to regret her mistake.

"I'm sorry," she offered. "I didn't mean - "

"No, *I'm* sorry, Louise," said Sara, "I didn't mean it to sound that way. It's just . . . I'm supposed to be a bridge between mankind, and Susan, and now, the way I look, I can't help, but think that it's just a barrier."

Louise did look away that time. She took a moment to reflect on the notion of 'removing barriers'. When she looked back at Sara, she was sure.

"Then maybe it's time you, and Susan, set me, and the rest of the world, straight on that," she said.

Sara searched her friend for more. When she didn't find what she was looking for, she asked, "But will they accept it?"

Louise didn't look away again.

"That's up to you," she quietly advised.

* * *

"Welcome to New York, Mr. President!" the city's deputy mayor greeted Wayans.

The two men shook hands at the gate reserved for Airforce One. The security was all in place with a waiting limosine nearby. They had barely started the short walk to the car when a gunshot was heard.

At once, there was a flurry of activity. Men from every direction jumped on Wayans, and the deputy mayor. The limosine lurched forward, spanning the gap between it, and the men, and screamed to a halt beside them. An overcoat was thrown over Wayans' head. The back door of the limo opened, and he was virtually thrown inside the car. The door closed as the car sped away from the scene.

"Why didn't you get into the car with him!" the chief Secret Service officer shouted at the subordinate who'd been closest to the limo.

"D'you see me chasin' the thing!" the subordinate shouted back. "The driver took off too fast."

"Alright, never mind that," said the chief, "take O'Conner, and Daly, and see if you can find that shooter."

His instructions followed, the chief pulled out his two way radio.

"Ferguson!" he hailed to the limo's driver, "what's the status of the P(resident)?"

He waited. There was no response.

"Ferguson, I need the status of the P, now!"

He waited. Still, there was no response.

"Ferguson!"

Nothing.

"Fucking bastards," the chief muttered, then, "Al," he called to a subordinate with a hand held tracking moinitor, "where's that car?"

"So far," Al reported, interpreting the yellow blip on his screen, "it's following the pre-planned exit route from the airport - no, wait - it just diverted."

In the car that bore the United States President, a small, but effective, explosive charge detonated. In an instant, the car's tracking device was toast.

"He's gone," Al reported when the limo's blip disappeared from his screen. He looked up at his superior. "I've lost 'im."

The chief tried contacting other Secret Service locations. He tried to secure the exits from the airport, but every one of his communication channels was jammed. At length he gave up, and lowered his radio to his side. He knew, all too well, what had happened.

"Those fucking Blue Team bastards," he cursed into the night.

"You alright back there, sir?" a familiar voice inquired from the limo's driver's seat.

In the back seat, Wayans stirred, then pulled the coat from over his head.

"Is it safe to come out?" he asked.

"Yeah," Bill Robbins affirmed as he steered the car to the Blue Team's pre-planned exit from the airport, "we're clear."

Reassured, Wayans sat up in the seat. He relaxed for the ride, and passed an exploring hand over his head.

"You got a comb?" he asked.

* * *

Every house seat in the 'Deep Inside' studio was filled with people waiting to get a first hand glimpse of the alien artifact they'd seen, and heard, so much about. Five minutes before air-time, Louise, and Sara, entered the glare of the studio lights from the wings at the rear of the stage. The audience became utterly silent when Sara appeared. It was the first time she'd worn her uniform in public since it's change. Everyone noticed the difference. A low hum of comment ushered from the house as the two of them; one, a human female, the other, a foreign entity with a human female form, approached the chairs they were to occupy. A crew member each attended them as they took their seats - Louise sitting to the right of the veiwing audience, Sara to the left. A momentary stir was caused when Sara's cape moved without visible means as she sat. She preferred not to sit on her cape, so had gathered it to her downstage side where it would remain on the chair beside her. Final checks were run on their remote microphones. Louise's was fastened to the belt line of her trousers behind her back along with her receiver. Her jacket draped over both units. With no place to attach a

transmitter to her uniform, Sara simply placed hers on the seat beside her leg. The microphone wire extended up her back under her cape, the mic clipped to the neckline of her uniform.

"Thirty seconds everybody," Cindy announced to the cast, and crew, of the night's edition of 'Deep Inside'.

She, and her assistant, Jack, had been running equipment checks for more than an hour. With an anticipated record veiwing audience, nobody wanted any glitches. She felt the need to make one last check as she accessed a single earjack.

"Lookin' good, Lou," she said to Ken Clark's replacement. "How do you feel?"

Louise eyed the director in the control booth above the studio audience. She gave her a thumbs up sign along with an affirming nod.

"Then let's roll," said Cindy.

The link between the two of them went off.

"Cue 2 everybody," Cindy announced.

The operator of camera 2 homed in on Louise for her opening remarks. She looked calm, poised, ready.

"In 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . .

"Good evening," Louise bid the live, world wide audience she was facing. "Two words: She's back. Sara, Susan, Susan P, Supergirl - call her what you want - she's back, and, this time, she's here to stay.

"She first came to general attention almost four years ago. At that time, she took our world by storm, though that was hardly her intention. Defined as, an 'alien artifact', she was said to have been a gift to Earth from an extra terrestrial civilization far different from our own. The very fact of her existence not only challenged long held notions that we had about ourselves, and about our place within the cosmos, it rendered many of those notions obsolete.

"We were just getting to know Susan when she seemed to . . . suddenly disappear. She was absent from our midst for three years, and, since her return, she has fought a daunting, uphill battle for recognition, and acceptance. Reaction to her, and her unearthly abilities, has run the spectrum of human emotion, from rapture to revulsion, from enchantment to terror. Love her, or loathe her, with this girl, neutrality is not an option. She's been compared to the familiar robots of science fiction fantasy: Robbie the Robot, Gort from "The Day The Earth Stood Still", and even Hal from "2001". There's only one small problem with that comparison, however; Susan is not a fiction. She is real, here and now.

"I'm Louise Layne, and Susan is with us tonight, here and now, to talk about herself, and what's been going on with her." She looked Sara's way to include her. "Hi."

Deep Inside's camera 1 presented the world viewing audience's first look at Sara since her "disappearance" close to four years before. It showed her in a medium close-up frame at a three quarter right angle. She still looked the same as she had before, but she also looked different. She still appeared to be the same sweet, adorable, precocious and only slightly awkward teen who'd stolen their hearts so long ago, but there was now something in addition to the way she looked. There was a poise, and a maturity, that hadn't been present before. It could be seen in the positioning of her shoulders, and in the way she held her head. The features of her face had also altered slightly. Not with age, but with experience. Comparing her appearance now as to then, it was evident that, wherever she had been, whatever she had done, the past four years had grown her, and it was plain to all that she wore her learning well.

"Hi," Sara greeted Louise, and the world, with a pleasant, gracious smile.

Watching Sara, Louise hesitated. This wasn't going to be as easy as she'd thought.

"Welcome back," Louise offered to her softly.

Was Louise speaking for mankind in the context of this simple, open statement, or was she speaking purely for herself? She would leave the audience to wonder about this. In any case, the words obviously affected Sara. Her smile faded slightly for a moment, then came back.

"Thanks," she said, matching Louise's tone.

By now, Louise was, for the first time, sensing that her emotional rapport with Sara could present a problem with her interviewing her. She was 'on top' of her subject - moreso than anyone outside of the Pink Team could know actually, but she began to wonder now if she might not be, in fact, *too* close to her. With a live, and record, world audience waiting, however, she didn't have time to grapple with that question, so she shifted her position, and tried to get down to business.

"A lot of people have missed you," she said to Sara as a lead-in to the first topic of the interview.

"And I've missed a lot of people too," Sara answered seriously. She looked out over the studio audience that was observing her, and Louise, from the theater. "I owe a lot of people a lot of thanks for my being here today," she said with a sobriety that was surprising coming from someone who looked so young. "I wouldn't be if not for them," she went on to say. She

found the second camera, which was positioned on her, and looked directly into it. "Thank you," she said in a show of humility that couldn't fail to touch. "All of you."

Louise suddenly found herself wishing that Ken was there. She was no longer certain if she could go through with this with all that was happening so fast emotionally. In the deafening hush that followed Sara's last words, she could feel an intense wave of compassion coming at them from the house.

"You were here, and then you weren't for three years. Where were you in that time?" was her first question.

It was, perhaps, the most sensitive topic they would discuss during the show. Louise knew that an accounting for Sara's absence would be expected, especially considering what had happened on Earth during her absence. The Pink Team had met in long discussion with Sara over how to put it. While all of them were in agreement that the truth of Susan's shutdown could not be known - the consequences for Alex, alone, could be disastrous, they debated as to how public curiosity could be satisfied. Dinah had suggested blacking out the whole thing under an umbrella of pending legal action, but Lanna pointed out that that would lead people to believe that Sara had legal problems, and had, therefore, done something wrong.

Their following exchanges had been carefully considered, and scripted.

"I was called away," Sara answered.

"From Earth?" asked Louise.

"No," said Sara, "I was still here physically, but mine, and Susan's, active presence was removed from Earth for a period of time."

"Who called you away, and why?" was Louise's next question.

"The people who made me - the cryptoaliens, as they've been called - designed a sabbatical for me," Sara responded. "It was to begin roughly three years after I first achieved active status, and it lasted three years. During that time, Susan was withdrawn from Earth, and I was in an 'inactive status' - like a profound sleep. I guess you could say that we were in a protracted dream state."

"What was the purpose of this . . . 'sabbatical', or 'dream'?" asked Louise.

"To review what I'd experienced, and learned, during my time among you."

"Can you elaborate on that for me?"

"Well . . . ," Sara considered, "I can put it best in human terms. It was like an existential house cleaning. You know how you can find yourself with a whole bunch of contradictory

impressions from time to time? Well, Susan, and I, aren't all that different in that respect. Our makers foresaw the need for this periodic reevaluation, and took it into account."

That, hopefully, covered that topic without stretching the truth too much. That Sara's three year confinement in Wayans' subterranean office could be called a 'sabbatical' was literally true, considering her existential journey through the realm of mortal gods. Of critical importance, with regard to the viewing public, was establishing that Susan had also been on 'sabbatical', and had not been an active presence on Earth during that time.

This impression of their absence was a proper setting for what was to come next.

"While you were away from us," Louise began with studied caution, "your presence was most keenly felt."

She purposely looked at Sara.

"Can you talk about SuzieFlu?"

"I want to talk about it, yes," Sara forthrightly answered.

"The SuzieFlu," Louise went on to preface the topic, "has been described as the greatest scourge to be unleashed on mankind. It was a seemingly unstoppable electronic virus that would attack at whim, wreck incalculable damage and then mysteriously go dormant again. Numerous outbreaks of the virus occurred while you, and Susan, were gone, each new outbreak proving to be more virulent than the last. Recently released reports have shown that it crippled whole economies, destroyed communication systems en masse and paralyzed world, and national, governments. Then, shortly after your return, you announced that the SuzieFlu was gone, and would never return. Can you tell us what happened?"

Top ranking Government officials already knew what had "happened", and why, but the public at large was unaware of how Marshall Wayans had used Jimmy's knowledge of Susan. Heads of state the world over now watched, wondering if Sara would directly implicate the United States President.

"I think everyone knows," Sara began to answer with care, observing the studio audience, "that it's dangerous to let children play with matches."

There were a number of low murmurs of agreement from the house. Sara redirected her attention to Louise.

"Okay, the SuzieFlu was that same kind of thing," Sara continued. "Mankind got hold of some pieces of Susan, and started playing with them - not really knowing what they were capable of. The SuzieFlu resulted."

"So," Louise surmised, "you're saying that the SuzieFlu was an accident, rather than a

deliberate act?"

Sara looked up at the studio lights glaring down on her, and Louise, as she considered the question. After a time, she looked back at Louise.

"I'm going to let mankind decide on that," she responded.

"And this happened while you, and Susan, were on sabbatical?" asked Louise.

"Yes, it did," Sara answered.

"When the two of you got back almost a year ago - that is, you, and Susan," said Louise, "were you aware of what had been going on?"

"Yes," said Sara, nodding, "almost at once."

"Could you have stopped the SuzieFlu at that time?"

"Yes."

"And yet," Louise continued, "there was another outbreak of the virus five months after your return."

She eyed Sara carefully.

"Why did you let that happen?" she quietly asked.

Everyone in Sara's extended family knew that a public accounting for the attack on Singapore was going to be expected - especially since the city had honored Sara only the day before.

"Because I didn't know if I shouldn't let it happen," Sara answered.

A faint line of curiosity formed on Louise's brow.

"I'm not sure that I follow you," she said.

"This goes back to how Susan, and I, were originally defined when we first arrived on Earth," Sara began. "We were called a 'gift' to mankind to do with as you see fit. Now that's okay, assuming that there's a basis of benevolence, and knowledge, to start from, but that's not always the case with human life on earth. There's a lot of human activity that is not derived from knowledge, or benevolence. That raises the question: What can happen with a capability like Susan when, at least, one of these foundation stones is either insufficient, or altogether lacking? The answer is that things can go wrong, and people can get hurt.

"Now, adhering strictly to the definition that Susan is a gift to you, I have no say so in how you use her, or even me for that matter. Whatever you do, good, or bad, it should make no difference to me . . . but it does. My makers originally placed me into the care of good, kind and loving people with positive, life affirming values. There was a reason for that, and part of that reason was so that I would learn to not let children play with matches. My Dad -

bless his heart - originated the 'gift' idea with regard to me, and Susan. I am no one to contradict that notion, but I think he was being a little too optimistic in his outlook, because there are people in this world who aren't interested in being good, or kind, or loving."

"And the SuzieFlu is an example of that kind of outlook?" asked Louise.

Sara smiled at her friend, and her question with 'BAIT' written all over it.

"That's your call," she replied, "not mine."

"So, 'good', and 'bad' do make a difference to you," Louise ventured to inquire.

"Yes, it does," said Sara.

"That implies the ability to distinguish between 'right', and 'wrong'."

"That depends on parental influence," Sara qualified, "and the choices one is naturally inclined to make."

Louise leaned her head slightly to one side as she looked directly at Sara.

"What is 'right' to you, Susan?" she asked.

"Truth, justice," Sara answered.

"And the American way?" Louise attempted to prompt her with a sly smile.

Sara smiled warmly as she eyed Louise.

"Optimism has its place," she said, "and its limits."

"It should be noted here," Louise reported to the viewing audience, "that, within minutes after the outbreak of the Singapore SuzieFlu, both Sara, and Susan, were on the scene where they quickly disabled the virus, corrected most of the damage that had been done and assisted in rescue efforts." She turned her attention toward Sara. "What is not generally known, however, is that, after the crisis was over, and the injured had been tended to, you attempted to surrender yourself to Singapore authorities."

"Yes, I did," Sara replied soberly.

"Could you tell us why?" Louise inquired.

It quickly became plain that Sara was still deeply troubled over the event.

"Because I was ultimately responsible for the virus attack," she answered.

Louise frowned curiously.

"I'm afraid I don't understand your reasoning," she said.

"Join the crowd," a testy Susan said privately to Louise, though well within Sara's earshot. *"Would you tell her to get with the program."*

Sara, and Louise, shared a brief look of veiled significance before the cameras watching them, then Sara began to answer.

"I have to confess to delaying, because I was confused," she said. "Yes, I knew about the virus, and, on hindsight, yes, I should have had Susan call in the troops right then, and there. But then I had to consider that if that's the way mankind intended to use her, who was I to interfere with that? But then I saw the harm that it did, and I couldn't let it go on!"

The world could see tears streaming down the alien machine's beautiful, simulated face as Sara grappled with the memory of her reluctance to act, and its consequences. She cried openly, and without shame. No one could dispute that her emotions were genuine, or that her sense of remorse was real.

"Camera 2," Cindy directed from the control booth, "pick up on a head shot of Louise." Then, "Lou, lead in to a commercial."

Louise looked into the camera observing her, and, in a voice she could scarcely control, told the viewing audience, "We'll return after this break."

When the camera's activity light went out, and Louise knew that they were off air, she observed Sara struggling to recover her composure.

"I'm sorry," she offered to the alien presence.

The words snapped Sara out of herself. She looked at Louise through emotion charged preceptors.

"What've you got to be sorry for?" she wondered.

"I'm sorry for the whole damned human race!" the human told her in intense soto voce. "We *don't* deserve you!"

"Well," said Sara after fumbling briefly, "the Cryptos haven't told me to go anywhere else, so . . . I guess you're stuck with me."

The thought released Louise from her oppressive mood, and allowed her to laugh - and that let Sara laugh. Louise got a signal from Cindy in the control booth. The director could see the emotional stress that both the show's host, and guest, were experiencing, and she was concerned for their ability to continue with the planned interview. A discussion between the three of them concluded that the important issues had been covered, so it was agreed to go to a, hopefully, more relaxed format of question/answer between Sara, and the studio audience, with Louise moderating.

They were given hand microphones. Louise took a place on the steps of one of the studio's two isle ways. Sara stood on the apron of the stage as close to the studio audience as the stage lighting would allow her. When 'Deep Inside' came back on air, Louise did a brief intro to the changed format, then took Sara's first question.

Sara had picked a young man from the dozens of people who had their hands raised to her. He was close to the isle so Louise could easily reach him with her hand mic. The young man stood up from his seat, and smiled at Sara nervously. Sara smiled up at the young man from where she stood, wanting to put him at ease.

"Are you faster than a speeding bullet?" he asked Sara as Louise held her mic for him.

Sara paused a moment to sigh internally, but took the question with measured grace.

"I'm faster than the speed of light," she answered, then she added, "and, yes, it is trippy seeing light going backwards."

A subdued murmur rippled through the audience in response to this, then several hands raised up again. Sara picked a middle aged man this time.

"Are you more powerful than a locomotive?" he asked.

Sara's expectant look glazed over. She paused a moment to draw a breath, then answered . . . graciously.

"Let me answer that this way. If you took all of Earth's existing nuclear capability - weapons, power plants, research reactors, medical applications - everything - and put it all in one big pile, and then detonated the whole thing at once - the energy release from the resulting explosion would be roughly equivalent of me blinking my eyes."

The murmur that greeted this answer was not so subdued. Sara sensed the somber shift in the audience's mood, but kept smiling up at the man who'd asked the question.

"Does that answer your question?" she wondered in the man's direction.

The man nodded before responding nervously, "Yes . . . thank you."

Fewer hands went up to pose the next question. Sara chose a woman.

"Are you able to leap tall buildings in a single bound?" she asked.

"Yes I can," Sara replied . . . graciously, then she qualified her answer to explain, "but, at my default weight of a hundred-twenty-five pounds, the combined force, and velocity, that would be required for me to initiate such a leap would probably impose a shift in ground stress great enough to compromise the building's supporting land mass to the point where it would collapse - which would defeat the whole purpose. It would be a lot easier if I just flew over it - and it would also be a lot safer too."

Her answer to this question reassured the audience somewhat, though the people remained subdued. A few more hands went up. Sara, however, raised her own hand to indicate that she wished to say something.

"I'd like to address a topic here," she requested, "which . . . I think, is on a lot of

people's minds."

Sara looked up at Louise. Louise, seeing the nervous look of uncertainty on Sara's face, knew what she was after. What Olga had told her the first time they'd met crossed the red-haired Pixie's mind. She gave Sara a warm smile, and an encouraging nod.

Sara appreciated the 'go ahead', but hesitated now that she was 'on the spot'. She gathered her courage, and gazed out over the house.

"Look at me," she quietly asked the people in the audience as the world viewing audience looked on, "and what do you see?"

The audience remained quiet. Sara waited a few moments.

"Anyone?" she asked.

She waited awhile longer. The people seemed hesitant, shy and, maybe, a little embarrassed.

"Oh, c'mon," Sara tried to prompt them with a good natured frown, "I can hear ya breathin' out there."

There was some hesitant laughter from the house. Everyone knew what was going on, but no one was willing to take the leap. Sara smiled on them - sharing in the unspoken thought.

"Look at me, and tell me what you see?" she asked them once again.

"Supergirl!" someone finally called out from the audience.

"Right!" Sara happily agreed, grateful for a response.

Everyone seemed relieved that it was finally out. Sara took a moment to reflect quietly to herself, knowing that the ball was in her court. When she looked up at the audience again, she was ready.

"Supergirl," she reiterated for the benefit of everyone's frame of reference. "Alright. My appearance bears a close resemblance to someone almost all of you easily recognize. I look like a fictional character with whom you've come to associate a clearly defined set of characteristics. You see me, and that automatically brings to mind a person you have a familiarity with, and with whom you feel comfortable.

"So, okay," Sara asked the audience. "What about this resemblance?"

Her feet left the floor as she rose up into the air. There was a hushed response from the audience.

"I can fly," Sara said, "just like she can."

She settled her feet to the floor for the sake of the audience's comfort level.

"I'm really strong - just like her," she went on to enumerate. "I'm invulnerable, so I can't be hurt. I've got heat vision, although I don't have the so-called, superhero, X-ray vision, but that's pretty much included in my kreening, which we won't get into here.

"Okay so, what about all of this?" she asked. "What about all these powers that I have, and . . . really neat things I can do?"

"Power is as is perceived," she observed, "and put in the context of real life as we know it, the idea of one person possessing so much power would be pretty doggone scary, wouldn't it?"

She looked out at the audience.

"Except for . . ."

And then Sara struck the classic, full front, Supergirl pose with her feet spread at shoulder width and her fists firmly planted on her hips. She even added a little, in-joke, smirk.

The audience responded with laughter, and some good natured applause. Sara maintained her pose until things quieted down, then she relaxed, and continued.

"The way I look to you, is intended to make my obvious capabilities appear non-threatening, and, yes, even reassuring. But what about applying this familiar frame of reference to a reality not of your devising? Is what you see all of what you get?"

Sara looked out over the audience. The people were listening carefully to her - waiting for her to go on.

"What you see before you here is actually part of something larger," she told the viewing audience. "Her name is Susan, and I am her visible manifestation.

"We - meaning Susan, and I - were placed among you close to seven years ago. Why, and by whom, neither of us knows. It's a topic that's open to speculation, but we would prefer that topic not comprise the sum of our existence. We have a life to live, and we would like to call this place 'home'."

The alien visitor with the familiar human form said nothing more. She stood at the center of the stage with her beautiful, blonde head lowered. She wanted something of the people in the audience, and every one of them knew it. After a moment's time of quiet, someone in the house began clapping his hands together. At once, others started clapping too. More people joined in, raising their hands to applaud, and, soon, everyone in the studio - the crew, and Louise too - were applauding.

Sara raised her face to see, and hear, the spontaneous gesture of approval. The sound - the sight, filled her with warm humility, and Sara felt their welcome.

* * *

The limousine eased into a slot of the parking structure's topmost deck. Another, nondescript car waited a few slots off. The headlights went out before the engine went off. A rear door opened, and Wayans emerged from the limousine's warm interior. The sudden rush of cold, night air bit his cheeks, and seared his lungs. The discomfort lasted, but a moment. Wayans drew his overcoat about himself as he walked briskly to the railing at the structure's edge.

His chilled hands crammed deep into the overcoat's pockets, he took his good time looking out over the shimmering night time cityscape of Manhattan. He saw it all with a new found clarity - the tight cluster of many buildings with their lighted windows, and the vital life that they enclosed. He could see business of their purpose, the facility of goods exchanged, and knowledge shared. He could see the imprint of mankind designed to thrive, advance, and prosper. He could see it all, and yet beyond.

He felt the world, and all its cares, pass away from him one final time.

"It's nothing, Bill," Wayans said quietly observing New York's skyline. He took momentary leave of his reflections, and turned to his devoted aide. "It all means nothing in the end."

Robbins stood regarding the man he'd so long served. He wasn't sure of what the president was saying. He wasn't sure of a lot of things anymore. He, along with the rest of the White House staff, had become most concerned of late. "The other car is over there, sir," he sought to gently prompt the nation's chief executive.

Wayans distracted his attention to the car Robbins had indicated.

All . . . or nothing.

The thought lingered in his mind - longer than he might have wanted - had he wanted. Wanted . . .

The Lord is my shepherd . . . I shall not want . . .

"Green pastures, Bill!" Wayans suddenly exclaimed in a sudden mood of exuberance. He clapped a sure hand to his second's shoulder.

"Let's go!" he announced with certainty. "I have a rendezvous with destiny's child!"

* * *

"Are you a conquering alien?"

The night's edition of 'Deep Inside' continued. The question had come from an older man in the audience. The people were exhibiting intense curiosity about Sara, and Susan, and Sara was doing her best to meet that curiosity head on.

"I don't know," Sara answered the man honestly, "but, given the circumstances of my presence on Earth, it doesn't seem likely."

She chose a professional looking man next.

"You've said that Susan is a 'presence' the world over," he ventured to state.

"Yes, she is," Sara confirmed.

"And that she can enter people's minds at will," he went on.

"Yes, Susan can enter a person's mind," said Sara, "but only on my say so."

"Stories from Singapore report," the man continued, "that you've accomplished this . . . 'entering' - on a mass scale."

A little smile began to play on Sara's lips. She knew what the man was leading up to.

"Umhm . . .," she affirmed melodically with a touch of teasing coyness.

"Given that capability, you could, literally, take over the world," the man surmised.

"Yes, I could," Sara acknowledged calmly.

"And nobody would know the difference."

"No, you wouldn't," she agreed.

The man frowned curiously at Sara.

"So, why don't you?" he asked her.

"Why should I?" Sara asked him back with a shrug.

A number of thoughtful murmurs issued from the audience at the conclusion of this exchange. Sara waited for the mood to settle down.

"I can appreciate your concern," she responded further to the man, along with everyone else in general, "but - and I hope this doesn't offend you - I'm not interested."

Several people in the audience gently laughed at Sara's extended meaning.

"Susan, and I, don't have an agenda - at least none that's been revealed to us," she went on to relate. "This whole idea of conquering, and taking things away from people . . . it really doesn't fit in with how we see ourselves."

"And how do you see yourself?" Louise took it upon herself to ask.

"As someone who intends no harm," Sara answered. "That is an absolute, and I will never yield on that. Everything else is negotiable."

"You are," Louise went on to inquire, "basically, an animated construct of materials different from what we on Earth know as living matter. Would you agree?"

"That my construct is different from your construct?" Sara wished to clarify.

"Yes," said Louise.

"Of course it is," Sara readily agreed. "Way different."

"With that difference in mind," Louise continued, "could you tell us: Are you alive?"

"Yes, I am," Sara answered with refined confidence.

"And so," Louise asked her, "once, and for all - Sara, Susan, Susan P, Supergirl - how will you have yourself be called? What's your name?"

"Sara' is the name my father gave me," Sara answered, "but that was before either of us knew of Susan. Since she is the overall concept here, then, officially, I would prefer to be known as 'Susan', but my friends may call me 'Sara'."

"In the flesh?" the human teased.

"Not!" the foreign construct rejoined.

The audience laughed at this. It was subdued laughter.

"Well," Louise qualified, "as much as a highly advanced alien civilization can approximate."

Similar laughter greeted this remark.

"In three-D, living color at any rate," Sara offered.

It was clear that the audience, and Sara, were enjoying themselves, and each other, but she was giving them a lot to think about, and consider. She chose a woman of middling years for her next question.

"I think we're all aware of the controversy that's surrounded you since your return," the woman began.

"Controversy?" Sara interjected in an obvious tone of mock incredulity. "Me?"

Everyone laughed at Sara's comment. Sara smiled up at the woman until things quieted down enough for her to continue with her question.

"Specifically relating to the negative commentary that's been directed against you; why don't you use your powers to silence your detractors?" she asked.

"Because that would be wrong," Sara stated. "It would be like punishing someone, because they don't like you," she went on to elaborate, "and, although I know it's tempting to do that at times - it's wrong. Also, were I to silence dissent, it would be an impediment to public debate regarding me. Public debate among you concerning me is vitally important,

and necessary. That's what's going to, to a large degree, establish our relationship, and, although there have been, and are going to be, a lot of really mean things said about me - hey, that goes with the territory."

She chose a young man next.

"Hi, Susan," the man greeted her.

"Hi," Sara warmly greeted him back.

"I'd just like to say, first off, that - it's nice to have you back, and . . . thanks for taking the SuzieFlu away."

A general round of applause - and even some hoots, and whistles - greeted the young man's remarks. Sara tried to maintain a straight face, but it was obvious that she was touched. When things quieted down, the man continued with his question.

"This kind of ties into the last question with respect to people who've been nasty to you - "

"Interesting that you should use the term 'respect' in that context," Sara interjected.

There was some good natured laughter to this.

"I'm sorry," Sara then offered the man, "please go on."

"Well, my question is; would you publicly answer your critics?" he asked.

"No, I would not," Sara answered.

Her gaze included the audience as a whole.

"It's up to you to figure me out, and to figure out how you want to utilize Susan, and me - within certain limits, that is. In other words; I'm not going to stand idly by, and let you use Susan to destroy, or injure, yourselves, or each other, but, to get back to your question," she addressed the young man again, "basically, whatever you care to think of me, I can live with that."

Sara chose another woman.

"Given the recent concern over the proliferation of nuclear armaments," she asked, "could you rid the world of nuclear weapons like Chris Reeve did in one of the 'Superman' movies?"

"Yes, I could," Sara answered, then she qualified to say, "but why should I when you'd just make more?"

A prolonged murmur of uneasy comment worked its way through the audience. Sara waited for things to calm down before continuing.

"It's not up to me to rid the world of atom bombs, or to rid society of handguns, or . . .

rid the internet of spam," she explained. "That would put me in the position of deciding for you, which is something I won't do. The point is for you to decide - of your own - that you don't want these things, and then take the necessary steps to rid yourselves of them. Bottom line: I can't decide for you. You have to decide for yourselves. If that's what you want, then, yes, I can assist, but you have to make the decision first."

She chose another woman next.

"Do you believe in God?" was this woman's question.

Sara cocked her head slightly, and frowned curiously at the woman.

"What does your faith have to do with my belief?" she queried in reply.

She went on to elaborate.

"It's not for me to confirm, or deny, the existence, or nonexistence, of a deity. Far be it for me to impose myself on you in any way, and I certainly would not presume to impose on such an intensely personal choice as that involving faith. Your choosing is not of my deciding. It's up to you. Neither is my own, personal choice, in any way, to be construed as a deciding for you, or as a threat to whatever choice you might decide on. It's up to you. Your personal faith is your personal choice. I cannot assist in that, and, even if I could, I would not. Personal faith is up to each, and every one, of you, alone."

Some scattered applause broke out among the audience, which Sara did not acknowledge. She remained standing at the front of the stage, looking out at the house, the mic poised beneath her chin. Several hands went up. Sara chose a man.

"Are you God?" he asked her.

"No," Sara answered simply.

More hands. A woman this time.

"Are you an angel, or a representative, of God?" was her question.

"Your guess on that is as good as mine," Sara replied. "I don't know."

A man was called on next.

"What's your point?"

"My purpose?"

"Yes."

Sara smiled at the man.

"What's yours?" she asked him.

* * *

The dark sedan bearing America's chief executive made its way slowly through the snarl of late evening, Manhattan traffic. Its solitary passenger sat in calm reflection.

The Lord, his God, did work in mysterious ways. She was the end of history. The end of belief. The end of so many things held dear. She was the harbinger of Endtime, and he knew her judgment would be swift.

* * *

It had been agreed for Sara to end her guest appearance on 'Deep Inside' with a demonstration of Susan's capabilities for the studio audience as the world looked on through their television screens. After generating multiple holographic copies of Louise onstage, she proceeded to impose the features, and dress, of each, and every, audience member on individual 'Louise' copies. When she was done, the stage was crowded with the duplicate audience - all of whom stood as individuals with independent movement, and there was one 'Louise' left over.

"What are we going to do with you now?" Sara wondered at the Louise figure who had no audience member to claim her.

'Louise' looked a little dejected over the fact. Sara approached her, but then she seemed to hesitate.

"Gee, I just don't know about this," she fretted into her hand mic.

Sara appeared to agonize over a seemingly impossible decision for a couple of moments, then she turned to face the audience. She really looked worried.

"Well . . . ," she said, and then her look of concern gradually changed to one of determined resolve as she continued speaking, "if all of you can, then so can I."

With that, 'Louise' at once transformed to become . . . 'Sara'.

The audience broke into laughter, and gave Sara a brief ovation. The atmosphere became quiet again as Sara approached her figure. She raised an index finger in warning as she charged 'Sara', "Don't - get any ideas."

There was some laughter, and then the holographic Sara looked at Sara. After a moment, the hologram frowned, and then opened its mouth to speak.

"Are you tawkin' t' me?" 'Sara' asked Sara.

The audience roared at this as the real Sara appeared to balk. When quiet was restored, she turned and walked away from her hologram.

"Houston, I think we have a problem . . . "

More laughter, and then 'Sara' began walking after Sara.

"Are *you* tawkin' t' *me*?" she demanded.

The real Sara turned back to her hologram, and raised a restraining hand.

"Hey now, w-wait a minute . . . ," she said to 'Sara', trying to appease.

But the hologram bearing Sara's likeness insisted. The two of them quickly got into an argument. The real Sara, holding the mic, took to the air to get away from the confrontation. 'Sara' took off after her. Both of them circled over the heads of the 'audience' onstage, all of whom were watching, and then a wrist was grabbed, a fist was pulled back, and a full out, ariel catfight was on.

The audience watched in stunned silence as the two supergirls tussled, and turned, in the air - arms, legs and flowing capes flying in all directions. The studio cameramen did their best to catch all the action. After a couple of minutes, the Sara with the microphone got the upper hand, and things began to calm down. As they came back to the stage she could be heard to tell the other, "Now get down here, and behave yourself!"

With the conflict over - if not altogether resolved - Sara watched as 'Sara' moved grudgingly off to one side. When she turned back to the audience, she was clearly upset.

"Hey, guys," she called out to the house, "I . . . I'm really sorry about this."

She raised a hand to her tousled hair. She started fussing with it, and seemed kind of confused as if she'd lost her train of thought and was having trouble regaining it. Finally, she turned to, "Louise," and pleaded, "I need a hug."

The audience "Ohh"ed, and "Aww"ed good naturedly. Despite her 'distress', Sara turned to the crowd, and made an obvious gesture to pump them up. A louder chorus of "Ohh"s, and "Aww"s ensued. Sara used her roll with the audience to hold her arms out as if to ask Louise, 'Well, how about it?'

Louise wasn't sure what was going on, but she was willing to comply. She approached Sara with her arms outstretched. Sara flew to meet her near the center of the stage, and, as they met, Sara passed *completely through* Louise to wind up on the other side of her. It'd been the hologram of Sara all along. Louise remained where she'd come to stand, too astonished to move. When her eyes came into focus again, she saw Sara, off to the side, waving to her and wearing the most devilish grin on her angelic face.

The audience caught on. The whole thing had been an elaborate joke, and they responded with cheers, and applause. Sara flew to Louise, and took the speechless

newswoman in arms. After a mutual hug of encouragement, Sara moved past her to retrieve the microphone from her Sara hologram - who didn't give her any more trouble. She rejoined Louise at the center of the stage as the applause was ending. She held onto Louise's hand as she looked out over the house.

"This has been a real experience," Sara told the audience, "for me as well as for you." She spoke slowly, and thoughtfully.

"And . . . I'm frankly not sure just which of us is more blown away by it. This has really been pretty amazing. That . . . I've been able to show you the things that I have tonight, and you haven't gone screaming for the exits . . . it's really pretty amazing, and you deserve a lot of credit. What you've seen, is a lot, but is really just a very small fraction of what Susan is capable of."

She gestured to all the figures that crowded the stage.

"I can do this," she told the audience carefully, "but if it happens, and how it happens, is up to you. I guess you could say that it's basically about movement. Standing still is not an option. You can either move backward, or . . . you can move forward. And as I look before me here tonight, I see a lot of hope, and a lot of promise."

She turned away, and began leading Louise to one side of the stage.

"And I can't think of any better way to show my appreciation for the hope and promise that you've shown me, than to give all of you a big round of applause."

She, and Louise, were now standing off to the side so that the audience had a full view of all the holograms, each of which represented a member of the house. When Sara had finished speaking, all the figures raised their hands and began applauding. The sound of their ovation carried into the house, and the audience responded with enthusiastic, appreciative applause of their own.

Sara turned the mic over to Louise, then leapt into the air. With a completely unnecessary, but dramatic, flourish, she made the sum of figures vanish. With only herself, and Louise, left on stage, Sara turned to the audience, and took a graceful, gracious, aerial bow.

* * *

Wayans proceeded alone through the building where the 'Deep Inside' studio was. He knew the way. The mantle of his office afforded him unimpeded passage.

Before the world, he was going to face the alien machine once, and
forever
as he
proceeded toward
my destiny.

* * *

Louise was making her closing remarks for the night's edition of 'Deep Inside' when, unexpected, unannounced, United States President, Marshall Wayans strode onto the stage from the wings. At once, a stunned hush gripped everyone in the studio at the President's surprise appearance. The audience fell deadly silent. Louise was struck utterly speechless. Cindy, Jack, the stage manager - everyone on the studio crew were absolutely numb. Sara's spherical perception took in Wayans from behind herself. She turned to face the man, and a firestorm of rememory erupted in her mind.

Activate superficial photon stabilizers.

Susan dealt with the shock Wayans' presence had exacted on Sara. The photons of her surface, crucial to her make-up, had begun to vibrate out of balance with the rest of her. They were inseparably linked to her emotional system, and responded to how Sara saw the world.

Wayans acknowledged no one within the hushed atmosphere of the studio. He walked straight towards Sara, stopping at a few feet from her. Sara could see that he was smiling at her as if he knew something that she did not.

She felt an unstoppable flush of rage well up in her. Before her stood the fountainhead of all that her family, and the world, had suffered. The list of Wayans' crimes played through her consciousness at the exclusion of all else. The lives, the losses, the misery, the fear; all of it sped through her processor at lightening pace like an endless loop of horror. She knew every one of his many sins, and she knew that none of it would have been remotely possible - *if not for me.*

Photon activity continuing to accelerate.

Her gut response to Wayans canceled Susan's efforts to calm her down. He so offended the fundamental goodness she was born with, and the values she'd come to learn on earth. That he'd inflicted so much harm - it was beyond her capability to fathom. There had been no hesitation, or concern for consequences, in any of his actions. He was the pure expression of

an infantile will - driven to possess what he desired, and to destroy what was denied him. It outraged her that he had done the things he had for no other reason than the simple fact that he had wanted to, and because he could.

Acceleration critical.

Sara's sense of rage increased in waves as she regarded Wayans. That this one man had used an untold power from the stars for purely selfish gain.

Perception of malignancy detected.

She hated him . . . and all his evil deeds.

Infestation spreading . . .

The sight of him . . . so outraged her.

. . . irreversible.

Her hatred overwhelmed her . . .

Global permeation . . .

. . . consumed her.

. . . imminent.

And Sara welcomed it.

Judgment has been determined.

What? Sara wondered. Where did that come from?

The voice she'd heard did not belong to Susan.

Access universal protection directive.

Susan, what's going on?

Susan did not answer. Her sentience had been overridden by the activation of a default program deeply hidden in her makeup, and which Sara had triggered with her righteous anger.

Terminate planet, 'Earth'.

Terminate!? Susan, what're you doing?

Sara heard the audience become silent. Her mind raced through Susan's hard drive, searching for a context to what was happening. Termination meant the end . . . of all things . . . *by my choice.*

Authorize self-destruct of Planetary Unit 201907292000.

Midgarde!

In a flash, the sum of her dream, and its cataclysmic resolution, came back to Sara. She recalled her final confrontation with Soraun, and how she'd yielded to her destiny to protect the universe from an Evil which had consumed the world of her assignment:

(Simultaneously, the bonds that ordered the billions of tons of her substance were released. The half of her that was antimatter was left free to interact with the other half of her that was merely highly degenerate matter. The n-dimensional pathways that carried off her waste heat into some microscopic wormholes to a place far removed from our space-time were closed and the mechanism of her finely balanced gravitational compensation was erased. Everything happened at once.

(There was a great flash of light that for a part of one trillionth of a second defined what had become of Sara. Soraun ceased to exist in its glare, and the Rings went out. Susan was consumed and added the full power of her vast stores of energy to the unstoppable fireball in a deep chain reaction rooted far below the crust of the planet. Ordruen vanished along with the entire plain of Gyregyrath. In the deepest dungeons below the wreck of Barradour, Soraun's miserable victims had a brief instant to wonder at the light before they were mercifully extinguished. Goblins and Men along with all creatures under the sky in the entire hemisphere simply perished at exposure to the searing brightness. Those who were hidden distantly and deeply had only moments before the spreading shockwave hurled their fragments into space. The Elves on far Avalon knew the meaning of the untimely sunrise in the east and knew the doom of all their refuges was at hand.

(All creatures on every land perished. Great and small, they ceased to be — every kind of thing on land or above it, even in their deepest burrows. The hardy cockroaches who outlived the dinosaurs of this world became instantly extinct. Fishes in the cold depths of the oceans perished when the seas boiled away. Microbes did not survive, even unto their spores. All DNA was disrupted, shredded and torn to atoms. Every work of every creature that ever lived was wiped out. The very fossils were broken into indecipherable dust.)

And now the final solution of her dream was about to become reality. There would be no record that Earth had ever existed other than the observations by scientists in far-flung observatories around the galaxy of a rare planetary nova, and it was she who had decided that it be so.

NO! Sara screamed. I can't let this happen! That all these innocent people should die . . . all because of me . . .

But it was too late.

Self-destruct authorization of Planetary Unit 201907292000 has been completed.

Susan, stop this! Stop it now! It was Wayans - I was upset. I didn't mean it. Everything is alright - really!

Even as she'd stayed Wayans' terrible hand, it was too late.

Proceed with deactivation of humanoid simulation.

Sara had to get away from the devastation she was sure to bring about if she remained. She tried to flee.

Terrestrial ambulatory simulations: Shut down.

You cannot run.

Her legs would not answer, as if they had become apart from her. She stood helpless before Wayans as he continued watching her.

Maybe, if she could make him leave, she could avert disaster. He was out of her reach, but, maybe she could use the heat from her eyes to make him go away.

Auxiliary optical system: Shut down.

You have no fire.

Nothing happened. Somehow, she had forgotten how to bring forth the light of her eyes. The pathways in her mind were hidden - or she could not make herself find them.

There was one last chance to escape. She tried to spring aloft.

Gravity specific, and navigational systems: Shut down.

You cannot fly.

Inside her mind, the connections from her awareness to the mechanisms that controlled her levitation were fixed in place, and she was locked in her default configuration of weight and mass in human semblance. She could not fly.

Animation, and response system: Shut down.

You have no strength.

And it became so.

Sara stood motionless as the audience, Louise and the entire studio crew burst into enthusiastic applause for her at the President's surprise visit. It was like she'd suddenly become pre-animate again, only this time, she was fully conscious. She experienced no breath, no pulse, no simulated heartbeat. Not even her hair or cape moved anymore. She was completely paralyzed. In preparation for what was now inevitable, Susan had denied her access to any part of her program except her mind. All she could perceive was the sights, and sounds, of her immediate surroundings. She watched, helpless, as Wayans looked on her. For all the world, he looked like an expectant bridegroom, standing at an altar.

Commence countdown to self-destruct beginning from numerical unit 10.

Sara could hear the applause from the audience. She was powerless as Susan proceeded to carry out her self-destruct program. She saw Wayans regarding her in a way she was shocked to find profoundly invasive.

He knows! she realized. *He knows what's going to happen!*

No one but they two had any inkling of what was about to take place. Sara could only watch, and think.

Why!

She remembered how he'd tricked her once, and now he'd tricked her once again. He'd threatened the world before with her as his unwilling handmaiden. Now he threatened it once again, with her as his unwitting tool.

You have done My work from the beginning.

No . . .

10 . . .

There is no will on Earth but My will.

No! That's not true! It was just a

dream . . .

9 . . .

You cannot cast Me down. You cannot take My place.

The angel of this

place . . .

8 . . .

For I am as one with the destiny of this world.

. . . my . . . des - ti - ny . . .

7 . . .

Her marriage to the primal god of her second dream came to Sara's mind. The memory of their consummation filled her with wedded bliss. The stirring of that act raised up Sara's left hand between herself, and Wayans. Around the base of her third finger, there was a simple band of gold. It was the One Ring foretold of in her first dream. The gods were with her. She was complete.

Witness! she ordered Susan. *Witness, and behold!*

Icon of Ultimate Authority detected.

6 . . .

I - am the angel of this place.

Verify authenticity of Authority Icon.

5 . . .

And it will not be harmed.

4 . . .

So is my decision.

3 . . .

My will -

2 . . .

- be done!

Perceived Icon of Ultimate Authority has been verified.

1 . . .

Stop.

The applause went on, lead by a smiling Louise. All three cameras were trained on the two of them from different angles. Everyone thought that Sara was simply stunned by the honor of a surprise visit from the President of the United States. But Wayans, and Sara, knew better.

Self-destruct of Planetary Unit number 201907292000 has been canceled, Susan reported to both hers, and Sara's, relief. She was herself once more. *Let's not cut it that close again.*

I'll talk to you later, said Sara, her attention trained on Wayans.

She breathed again as function was restored to her. Her yellow hair, and her red cape began to move at the whim of her own little breeze once more. Wayans could see that she had chosen. She had spared the world her wrath, and he was only mildly disappointed that their holy union in cosmic annihilation would not take place.

Sara stepped towards him as her open hands rose up from her sides. Wayans was half expecting the alien machine to throttle him, and then Sara lunged forward, throwing her arms about his neck . . . and hugged him.

The applause was almost deafening. Hoots and whistles were added to the noise. Though surprised, Wayans recovered quickly to reciprocate Sara's gesture. Almost mechanically, his arms raised, and found their way around her in an official show of acceptance, and affection.

Their mutual hug relaxed, and they started to ease away from one another. As her lips

passed by Wayans' ear, Sara whispered to him, "You loose."

Wayans smiled. It'd been a game well played, but he knew that she had won, "This time," he whispered to her in reply.

The adversaries parted amicably. Sara immediately noticed that something was different. She knew that Wayans was over six feet tall, and yet she was looking directly at the center of his forehead.

Susan?

Don't ask me, her equally befuddled computer self insisted. *What just happened caused some kind of a - "mature form" reconfiguration of your appearance.*

Sara frowned curiously, then she blinked. Her thumb toyed with the band of gold on her left hand.

What's with the ring? each of them asked the other at the same time. After a mutually reflective pause, each of them, again, at once, bid the other, *Never mind.*

Sara regarded Wayans from the vantagepoint of her new stature. She liked having to lower her gaze slightly to meet his eye. Wayans seemed unfazed by her changed appearance. He extended his hand to her, and Sara accepted it.

"You're good," she granted him within the privacy the two of them shared as the applause went on.

"Thank you," Wayans replied with his own manly grace.

His smile, and confidence, remained, but some of the smugness was gone. His admiration for her shown through.

"It makes for . . . an interesting relationship," he told her.

Sara closed their distance, and hugged the man again.

"I got your relationship," she spoke close to his ear.

Chapter Fifty-three

Contact

Finished with dressing the next morning, Sara regarded her image in the vanity mirror of her hotel room. It irked her that she had to stoop down a bit to see her upper forehead, and hairline now. With her taller, larger, fuller form, she was going to have to do some recalibrating with regard to her environment. She knew that wouldn't be a problem, but the fact that her urban animal clothes no longer bagged, and sagged, just right really teed her off.

Stupid computer, she grouched.

It's not my fault, Susan said in protest.

The corners of Sara's lips pursed.

I'm not blaming you, Sis.

Thank you, Susan granted her, then, *I like it when you call me that.*

Sara glanced up at the mirror to regard her image with quiet surprise.

What? she queried, not quite innocently enough. *Stupid com -*

Don't push it.

Sara laughed.

... Sis ...

She pulled her jacket on over her button-front shirt - which wouldn't close over her chest anymore - *Thank goodness I brought a T-shirt.* She fussed with her hair, assessing the different way it looked, then selected a forelock, and took a moment to examine it.

A single strand can cut through steel, she thought, *and yet I'm told it's softer than the finest silk.*

The incongruity that was her caused Sara to shake her head.

You're just sooo confused, Susan teased.

Not! said Sara as she thrust her fingers through her hair, and donned her 'Dodgers' cap, but both of them knew that her assertion was only partially true.

She felt like she was on top of the world. Along with everything else that had finally gone right, Louise had just called her to report that the show they'd done the previous night had been a smashing success, with public reaction, so far, having been overwhelmingly

positive.

That hadn't surprised Sara, but it was nice to hear it anyway. She'd felt wonderful after the show had ended. Before the whole wide world, she had faced herself, and she had faced her enemy, and she had survived the test of both. The broadcast had tipped the Secret Service off as to the President's whereabouts. They came rushing into the studio en masse almost as soon as the cameras went off. As they swarmed onto the set to surround Wayans, Sara had assured them easily, 'It's okay, fellas. He was with me.' No one seemed to've thought much of her remark at the time, including Sara, but it would play significantly in the future.

Informed by the agents that it was, "Time to go," and that an investigation was under way regarding their 'lapse', Wayans had made a point of regarding Sara as he was escorted away. "Until we meet again," his attractive, lightly baritone voice intoned, almost in the manner of an invitation. The particular combination of sounds had triggered an emotional response in Sara, causing a chill to pulse throughout her simulated body.

Cindy, the stage manager, and even Jack had come on the set to congratulate, and thank Sara. Most in the studio audience seemed reluctant to leave. Louise, and Cindy eventually felt obliged to make an informal announcement that the show was over, but many of them still wouldn't go. Sara's continued presence on the set was the reason they stayed. It was like, once they had seen her, and had gotten to know her, they didn't want to let go of her. Cindy had suggested that she return to the guest dressing room, but Sara merely lowered her eyes, then shook her head.

"I can't do that," she'd softly said, and then she took to the air, flying out over the theater to spend some time with the people who'd stayed. Several of them had wanted her autograph, but she'd graciously declined, contenting them instead with some private words, and a hand shake or, more often, a hug. It was only when Louise came back on the set, having changed back into her own clothes, and had threatened to lock her in the studio for the night that everyone was finally allowed to go home.

Asked if she'd wanted to go out for a bite before being dropped off at her hotel, Sara had given Louise a curious look.

"Well, uh . . .," the producer stammered nervously, "I've, uh . . . *heard* . . . y'know, and, uh . . . it's covered in the budget."

"Great" Sara beamed upon hearing that. "Where do we start?"

And so Louise, as well as the rest of the late night patrons at one of New York City's

innumerable, homey eateries, were treated to a protracted - and expensive - demonstration of Sara's capacious appetite, and her nuclear digestive system. Dinah had checked in with her while this was going on to let her know that everyone back home was proud of her, and that they loved her.

"None of it would've happened without you guys, Mom."

The thought had warmed Dinah, and made her smile.

"Still, dear, you did very well." Then, *"Are you eating?"*

"Yeah! Louise is here. This is great!"

"Have you been talking to me with your mouth full?"

"Aww Mom . . .!"

When she'd gotten back to her hotel suite, she still hadn't taken a perceptual assessment of what her new form looked like - even though Susan had been bugging her to do so. She'd been busy with more interesting things, and people, and - well, aside from all that, she was a little afraid - in spite of the fact of her knowing that she'd been getting more looks, and stares, than usual. She'd never been concerned about the way she looked - she'd always just accepted that her form was most uncommonly gorgeous in human terms. Upon emerging from the shower before hitting the sack, however, Sara got a look at her reflected image in the full length, bathroom mirror.

Daa . . .

. . .

!

I will - definitely second that opinion.

—

. . . amn . . .

She stood at a height of six foot three, maybe even a little taller. Her face had lost its mid-adolescent roundness, and now appeared to be that of a grown woman in her early to mid twenties. Her thick, flaxen, yellow hair was feminine, yet functional; cropped close to the head in back, and on the sides, but full, and beautifully free on top. Her shoulders were noticeably broader than her womanly hips. Her form was still impossibly flawless - perfect without a mark, or blemish, anywhere. She exuded life, along with a compelling presence of physical, and sexual, power.

I . . . don't think we're going to have a problem being taken seriously now, Susan commented.

At - least, Sara hesitantly agreed.

Her first impression of herself had left even her a bit overwhelmed.

She recovered quickly enough though, towed herself off, pulled on her loose, comfy nightshirt - which wasn't so loose anymore - then crawled into bed for the night.

So now it was all over, and it was time to go home.

Okay. Last check before check out.

Everything looked fine.

Before I go out the front door of this place, she promised herself, *every male employee in that lobby is gonna be wearin' his pants around his ankles.*

It seemed that once word of her presence had gotten around, the hotel staff had inundated her with solicitous offers. "Miss Supergirl (this)", "Miss Supergirl (that)." "Can I get you anything, Miss Supergirl?" "Would you like some (fill in the blank with what-ever), Miss Supergirl?" "Miss Supergirl" - "Miss Supergirl." Sara had born it all with grace, and with patience, but they were as grating as they were ingratiating.

When she'd come through the lobby on her way to the studio the previous afternoon, she'd spied Mr. Hill sharing his 'Su P Rgrl' joke with yet another someone else. Unfortunately, he'd spied her as well, "Good afternoon, Miss Supergirl!"

Yeah well, it was good until -

"May I have your autograph?"

Ooo, we're a celebrity! Susan had chirped.

Will - you - put a sock in yerself.

Sara had graciously declined Mr. Hill's little autograph book, claiming that she was not a celebrity. Susan was crestfallen.

When she'd gotten back just before midnight, the night manager was playing the 'Su P Rgrl' joke on the night desk clerk -

What was I thinking . . .

"Goodnight, Miss Supergirl!"

What were you thinking?

Still haven't found that sock, have you?

So now Sara appeared at the hotel's lobby desk to turn in her room key. Gary was available, but Mr. Hill insisted on waiting on her himself.

"Ah, Miss Rgrl," Mr. Hill greeted her happily, and then he leaned closer so as to confide quite cheerfully, "or . . . Supergirl?"

He righted his posture to regard his departing guest. It required all of Sara's will power to smile graciously. Thinking of how the hotel's manager would look with his pants tied around his ankles made the effort somewhat easier.

"So, you're leaving us today," Mr. Hill observed.

Faster than a speeding bullet. "Yes."

"I hope that you've enjoyed your stay with us?"

Dream on! "Oh, yes."

"And I trust that everything met with your satisfaction?"

Let's just say that it's . . . going to. "Oh, yes. Fine."

Mr. Hill leaned close to her once more.

Oh God, not again . . .

"I, uh . . . have a little surprise for you before you leave," he confided.

Sara's smile grew even brighter.

And, boy, have I got a surprise for you.

Mr. Hill straightened himself again, then turned away from Sara and began walking along behind the desk toward its open end. Curious about the slow, and seemingly overcautious way he moved himself along, Sara followed with him on her side of the desk.

"It's someone who would like to meet you," Mr. Hill informed her, distracting himself momentarily from his downward facing posture.

Oh, really . . .

Sara got to the end of the desk a bit before Mr. Hill. She came to stand just beyond the its end, her hands jammed into the side pockets of her jacket, her one hand clutching her 'Dodgers' cap. She glanced up at the manager, who was still looking down close to before himself for some reason. Sara looked down herself to see, coming around Mr. Hill's side of the desk, a little girl of, perhaps, no more than five. She at once looked up at Sara when she noticed her. She was blond, like Sara was, and she was adorable, like Sara too, with luminous, deep blue eyes, just like Sara's own.

"This is Katie," said Mr. Hill in presenting the girl to her. "She's my granddaughter."

Sara looked upon the girl, and felt an incredible awkwardness come over her. Her hands searched deeper into her pockets. Her shoulders hunched up a bit.

"This is Susan, Katie," Mr. Hill said in a manner of introduction.

Standing by herself beyond the end of the registration desk, just as Sara was, little Katie starred up at the inconspicuously dressed young woman before her. Sara almost desperately

wanted to look anywhere else, but she couldn't take her eyes off the child. She wondered about this little girl's strange command on her attention, and then one of her shoulders shrugged up a little higher.

"Hi," she said down to the girl.

She'd tried to make her tone sound casual, but, somehow, it didn't come out that way. Sara could feel her awkwardness intensify as little Katie continued to stare up at her relentlessly.

"Are you Susan?" the child finally asked.

Susan? Sara called to her.

Go on, Susan gently counseled. *Talk to her.*

Katie just continued starring up at her.

"Uhm . . . yeah," Sara finally managed, trying to smile, trying to hide, wanting to flee. "I guess."

She saw the little girl frown a bit.

"You don't look like Susan," she said.

Wul, thanks a lot, kid! "Uh . . .," said Sara, finally finding the nerve to avert at least her simulated eyes from Katie to look down at the floor before the child's toes, "well - that's, because . . . I'm - not in my . . . uniform right now. Y'know I, uh . . . don't - wear it all the time . . . y'know . . ."

Little Katie's head tilted to one side as she frowned up at Sara, studying her intently.

"Are you sure you're Susan?" she wondered cautiously.

"Well, uh . . ." *ho man* " . . . uhm . . . well . . . okay, um - I'll tell you what. Wait right here just a second. D - don't go away."

For an instant, Sara transformed into a blur of colors, spinning in the air in front of Katie, and her grandfather, as she quickly stripped out of her civilian clothes, and stored them in the pouch of her cape. She'd just gotten her boots drawn over her heels when she slowed her twirling motion down to human perception rate, and the next thing little Katie saw - was Sara in her mature form uniform.

She seemed to have appeared out of the wind, emerging from a mist of yellow, red and blue. Alighted in the air so naturally, her lines solidified to show the universal figure known by all for beauty, grace, power and gentleness. Sara stopped in front of Katie, her flowing cape acting as a perfect backdrop to her levitated form. Almost hesitantly, she extended her legs, and touched her feet back to the floor again. She came to stand before the girl who

watched her so intently, her hands held from her sides, her open palms in offering.

"There," said Sara. She felt inexplicably anxious about pleasing this child. She smiled shyly, and was terribly afraid of disappointing her. "Is this better?"

Katie starred up at her in a state of childish, rapturous awe. Sara could barely stand the suspense of her innocent, enigmatic gaze until the child found it in herself to barely murmur, "Wow . . .," followed a little later by, "Susan!"

'In the flesh' - no, don't say that - uh . . . 'three-d, living' - don't say that either -

"Are you for real?" the child asked the strangely beautiful figure.

Bless you, Katie! "Every bit as real as you are," Sara assured the girl.

Gratefully reassured, and much relieved, Sara crouched before the girl, lightly placing a knee to the floor. She sat back on her upraised heel, relaxing her carriage as her one hand found its way to her lowered thigh, and the other to her upraised knee. Wanting to make herself look as presentable as she could, Sara's cape suddenly billowed out away from her back to its full expanse, then gently settled to the floor behind her in perfect folds. A waft of air passed through her hair, arranging it in such a way that she sincerely hoped would please. Noticing the girl's look of near ecstatic wonder gladdened Sara, and she was able to smile.

"Hi, Katie," she bid the girl to introduce herself again.

Katie gave Sara a hesitant smile in return. Her young mind formed a question, then made it known.

"Will I be able to fly like you someday?"

What - the - hell do I say to that? Sara wondered, her processor working feverishly for an answer that wouldn't disappoint the child. There wasn't one, however, so she had to answer honestly, and as delicately as she could. "No Katie," Sara told her, feeling the pain of her own words far more than the child could have. "No, you won't be able to fly."

Katie's look of disappointment upon hearing this devastated Sara. She had to avert her perceptual photons, and yet she couldn't. There was no escape from Katie's sad, and penetrating gaze.

Susan - take this away from me, she pleaded. *I don't want to feel like this.*

You're doing fine, was all the comfort Susan was to offer her.

Katie seemed to brighten then, as another hope, another question took shape within her mind. Sara hoped along with her - hoped that this request would be easier - possible.

"Will I be strong like you someday?"

Sara could only stare into Katie's big, expectant eyes.

*Susan . . . please . . .
You're on your own.*

All of her extraordinary abilities were as nothing suddenly. Getting Alex back was easy compared to this. Facing Wayans had been a piece of cake. How was she going to tell this child so full of young, and tender hopes. How was she ever going to tell her

"No Katie," Sara answered, hating herself, and every word she spoke. "No, you won't be strong like I am." She was sorry, truly sorry to have to say such awful truth, "But, hey," she then heard herself saying from a surprising flash of inspiration, "what I can do isn't everything. I mean, sure, I can fly, I can move planets and I can melt diamonds, but that's not what strength is all about, Katie." Sara could see the girl was listening to her, clinging to her every word. She spoke from her simulated heart. From the depths of her newfound soul. "It's . . . more than that. A lot more. It's doing what's right - when everything seems wrong. It's not harming others, no matter how much they might harm you. It's like . . . character, Katie. Being the very best that you can possibly be, even when it seems like everyone in the whole world is against you. That's real strength. Flying, moving planets, melting diamonds - y'know - big deal. I can do that, but . . . I can't be you. Being *you* is what's important, Katie. Being the very best you can be - that's important. And only you can do that." Sara was feeling confident enough to where she reached out, and stroked the little girl's hair. She was surprised to note the feel, and texture of it to be so much like her own, "And I'll bet that you are one - special - person," she continued. She held the girl's cheek in her hand, and held her rapt attention. "You - are your own greatest adventure, Katie," she told the child. "Laugh, cry, suffer, learn . . . enjoy yourself."

Sara saw the warming glow of recognition in Katie's eyes. The girl had heard, and had understood. So pretty, and so intelligent she was, this special little girl, Sara thought. She wondered if she herself might've looked like Katie if she'd ever been her age - *well, actually*, she was just slightly more than a year older than the girl - *two years younger actually if you didn't count three years for - oh, what the hell . . .* "You still got that autograph book?" she asked, looking up at Mr. Hill.

Obviously gladdened by her question, Katie's grandfather was already reaching into the pocket inside his jacket.

"I certainly do," he told her as he withdrew the little book, and extended it to her.

Sara accepted the book, then held up a staying hand as Mr. Hill was reaching inside his

jacket once again.

"Oh, I won't need a pen," she politely deferred.

Sara returned her attention to Katie as she opened the book. She glanced away long enough to make sure she had the book opened to an available page, then looked back to Katie to make sure that the girl was watching her. Katie was still watching her with those big, doe-like, blue eyes of hers. Eyes that took in everything they saw without a moment's hesitation. Sara smiled at her, then turned her attention to the page she had selected. After a moment, a glowing redness appeared within her irises, and then a faint red beam shot out from either of them, striking the page in front of her. After she was done, Sara's eye simulations return to their normal shade of blue again. She looked to review what she had written in laser script, and what she saw caused her to smile again.

To Katie
With love
Susan

The wish was lightly burned into the paper in Sara's florid, feminine calligraphy, sweeping upward slightly in relation to the borders of the page. Sara pressed the book closed between her hands as she looked back at Katie. The girl had seen everything, and she would remember, always. Sara smiled her appreciation, then gave the book over to Katie's tiny hands.

"Be careful with that," she cautioned, "it, uh . . . might . . . still be a little warm."

Katie took the book, and held it to herself, smiling at Sara in a way that was as disarming as it was engaging. Her eyes had never left her. At a loss for whatever else to do, Sara raised a hand, and pressed the pad of her index finger to the center of Katie's forehead.

"Be good!" she admonished the girl, and then she lowered her hand. "Okay?" The way she felt, there was no alternative to honesty. "And . . . be cool."

She looked on Katie one last time, and Sara could see a future that was full of hope, and full of promise.

She rose to stand as Katie involved herself with finding the newest entry in her book.

"Thank Susan, Katie," Mr. Hill gently prompted his grandchild.

Katie found the page, and lightly touched her fingers to the writing.

"She already has, Mr. Hill," said Sara.

Mr. Hill looked up at her. Their eyes met. He understood. He extended his hand to her. Sara accepted it.

"Thank you," he said to her quietly, privately.

Sara heard him, felt him.

"Thank you," she bid him equally.

Mr. Hill glanced down to observe Sara's writing, then returned his eyes to her. "It's quite a name," he told her. It almost sounded like a challenge.

Sara met his gaze, thinking about what he'd said, and about the way he'd said it. And then she smiled.

"It sure is," she answered.

They parted. Sara stepped back, and looked at the girl who was still involved with her autograph.

"Bye Katie!" Sara quietly wished her with a wave of her hand, and then she turned, and walked away.

Katie looked up, and saw that Sara was leaving. She threw her little hand up high in the air, and waved.

"Bye, Susan!" she called out to Sara's lightly bouncing hair, and flowing cape.

Eah - give 'er somethin', Sara thought, knowing she was being watched. She rose into the air a bit, and glided herself along away before touching her feet to the floor again to resume walking. She squeezed her eyes shut tight. *Don't look back!*

"Come stay with us again when you're in town next time," she heard Mr. Hill call after her.

Sara's eyes opened. She whirled around, her cape resting quietly behind her. She raised her six-shooter forefinger, "I'll . . .," aimed, and, "definitely think about that," she said with a grin, and then she turned, and pushed her way through the big, revolving door.

Outside, Sara needed a few moments to get over the emotions that her time with Katie had stirred up. When her sensing photons, and computer brain opened to the outside world again, she knew that she was standing on a Fifth Avenue sidewalk in the middle of morning rush hour, in front of a ritzy, New York City hotel, in her new uniform, in her 'Supergirl' stance. She also knew that there was a gruff looking old man standing in front of her some

distance off, watching her. Sara focused her eyes on him.

"Who're you supposed t' be?" the old man wanted to know without the benefit of so little as a simple greeting. Perhaps the question *was* his greeting. Sara didn't know. It didn't matter. The man's voice matched the way he looked.

"Me," Sara answered, and then she asked, "Who else would I be?"

The man observed her for a moment, despite the many passersby who crossed the visual path they shared, then Sara saw him shrug.

"I don't know," he said. "You look like that girl I saw on TV last night."

Sara smiled. She put her hands behind her back, reaching into the pocket of her cape.

"Well," she said, finding what she wanted. "Maybe this'll help clear it up."

She pulled out her beloved 'Dodgers' cap, proudly pulled it onto her head, and wore it right along with her uniform, *and* her 'Supergirl' stance.

The man regarded her, and then his lips sputtered for an instant as he forcefully expelled a breath of air.

"Ya bum," he muttered, but Sara could detect the smile in his heart. "B'ooklyn's better off without ya."

The old man looked away from her, then moved himself along. Sara looked after him, watching as he blended with, then vanished in the crowd. She would remember him, just as she knew that he would remember her.

She turned, and walked along the street, in the opposite direction that the man had gone. With her graceful step, and her flowing cape, Sara kept apace with the rest of the pedestrian traffic she'd put herself among. She thought of little Katie, and her grandfather, Mr. Hill, and the old man, and then she came to wonder about herself, and her place in the world. Should she set out on a definite, pre planned course of purpose? Or should she let that purpose become revealed through her actions? 'twas hard to say. 'twas hard to do.

"Good morning, Susan."

Sara's focus shifted to a man who was approaching her amid the opposing flow of pedestrian traffic. He was smiling at her.

"Good morning," she said just in time before they passed. She quickly kreened behind herself. She found him.

Good feelings, Susan reported to her. *Better than before he saw us.*

Are you eaves-kreening on people? Sara wanted to know.

Mmm - not really, Susan told her. *Just . . . aware.*

"Nice outfit."

Sara turned, lifting her feet to fly with the flow. Another man, who was behind her, smiled at her, and then he winked.

"Love your cape," he said.

"Thanks," said Sara with a shy smile. She quickly noted how well the man was dressed. "You look pretty sharp yerself."

She felt the man's expression as she turned back around. She touched her feet to the pavement to walk again.

Better - than before.

Y'know, you really shouldn't be doing this, Sara chastised her.

Well, excuse me for living.

Well, Sara wondered, *what's your point?*

"Hey! Susan!"

Sara looked, "Hi!" and saw a woman waving to her from a passing bus. She stopped, and waved back. She saw other people on the same bus waving to her as they passed by. She waved to all of them as well.

"Oh, excuse me," Sara suddenly found herself having to say to a man who'd almost walked into her. Realizing that she was obstructing traffic, she lifted her feet, and flew along beside the man. "I'm sorry."

The man looked at her. He smiled.

"It's okay, Susan," he said quite amiably, and then his eyes looked higher. "Nice cap."

Sara smiled as the man then went ahead of her, and continued on his way.

Better - than before.

Hey, Sara chastened, *we have got to do some thinking about our purpose on this planet. Okay?*

ZZZZZZZZ

Su -

"Susan!"

Sara looked. Another man was approaching. "Hi!"

"Good morning," he greeted her brightly.

"Good morning to you," she barely said before he passed her by.

Better - than before.

Susan, I want you to stop this.

It's only a part of my normal function, Susan told her. *I'm just sharing some of it with you. If you don't want me to -*

No, that's okay, Sara answered quickly. *I'm . . . willing to tolerate it.*

You're so good to me.

Just . . . don't get carried away. Alright?

"Love your hair."

Sara looked, and saw a sharply dressed young woman in a business suit. She was smiling at her as she passed by.

Sara turned around to look after her. 'Thanks,' she offered, then, "Hi!"

She saw the woman glance back at her over a shoulder as she continued on her way. She was still smiling. She waved.

Drifting backwards with her flow of traffic, Sara's attention came to settle on the man who happened to be behind her - or was he in front of her? He kept his sites lowered toward the pavement as he walked along. Sara noticed that he wasn't old, and yet, he wasn't really all that young. She didn't take him to be rich, although he certainly didn't look like he was poor. He looked . . .

"You walk funny."

"What?" said Sara, focusing.

She saw the man. He was looking at her. He didn't speak again, but he didn't look away from her either. Sara didn't look away as well. They studied one another as they moved along together, neither of them feeling threatened, or invaded. At length, the man glanced down toward the pavement for a moment, then looked up at her again.

"You walk funny," he stated simply, and plainly.

Sara knew that she was flying backward, with her feet above the pavement. She continued looking at the man as he continued looking at her, wondering to herself about his meaning. His face bore no expression. Sara resisted the temptation to kreen. What was his intention? she wondered. She found the mystery intriguing. The man continued watching her as they moved along.

"What can I say?"

"You don't need to say anything, Susan," he told her easily. "I'm just glad you're here."

"Well, thank you," Sara acknowledged a bit shyly, then she told him, "I'm glad to be

here too."

"We've got a lot ahead of us," he said up to her as they went along with the flow of pedestrian traffic. "Think your up to it?"

"I can handle anything you can throw at me," Sara said with quiet confidence.

"Don't be too sure about that," the man cautioned with a oddly knowing smile. "It could make some, otherwise, pleasant surprises, not so pleasant."

Sara studied the man as she mulled over his remark. She appreciated the thought, and, with a smile, assured him that, "I'll keep that in mind."

The man returned her smile. It was an intelligent, welcoming smile. Sara accepted it as offered, and gave him a wink in reply. She departed from the man, slowly rising up above the crowd, but their eyes held on to one another.

"Susan!"

Who - where? Sara wondered, looking below for the voice's owner.

"Susan!" called a different voice.

Hello?

"Susan!"

And then, more, and more, the people on the street below began to call her name until the sound of it seemed to come from all around her. Sara paused to look about herself. She saw that more than an entire block of pedestrians, and traffic had stopped to wave, and greet her. From the nearby buildings, she could see more people watching, and waving to her through the windows. Sara then remembered the man she'd been talking to. She focused her attention to where he'd been, but he was gone. His absence instantly frightened her. Sara summoned the full power of her perception, and scanned the area, looking for him, but he was gone. *How?* she wondered, calming herself, and then a stillness pierced her ears. Sara looked about herself, and saw a silent throng of radiant faces looking at her as she hovered over Fifth Avenue. All looked at the special young woman who was now a part of them as she floated overhead in her special uniform, and her 'Dodgers' cap.

Why are they looking at me? Sara wondered. *What are they waiting for?*

Hel - looo! Susan prompted her with all the subtlety of a speeding locomotive.

You've . . . got - to be kidding . . ., Sara thought as Susan went ahead, and entered the people's minds.

Sara slowly turned herself within the air above the street, taking in the sum of everyone she saw. She was overwhelmed that so many people would take the time especially to say

hello to her in such a way. She continued turning - rotating slowly in the air so that everyone could see her, and she could see everyone as she wished, *"Good morning, to all of you."*

Anomaly, Susan whispered to her.

"And bless you all . . . "

Anomaly . . .

"Every one."

The people heard, and understood, and they forwarded their own blessing to her in return. Sara could barely control her anomalies as she offered an inclusive wave to all of those who'd paused to greet her, and then she gradually rose up higher into the air. The people watched her receding, red-caped form as it ascended into the sky, then, little by little, they returned to themselves, and to their surroundings. The pedestrians resumed their treks to wherever they might be going. The traffic resumed its crawling pace to wherever it was trying to go. The windows emptied as the people behind them went back to whatever they'd been doing. Office staff went back to their desks, and cubicles, shopkeepers went back to their storefronts. News-stall boys went back to selling papers, and doormen went back to opening doors, and handling luggage. The upscale hum, and bustle, of Fifth Avenue returned to normal. Life went on as it always had, yet never had, nor would it ever be the same again.

Not far away, but farther away, Sara consigned her 'Dodgers' cap to the safety of her pouch as she flew up between the high-rises toward the open sky. Her ram was overloaded, her emotional program was burning up her hard drive, her simulated heart was full. She no longer had any doubts about liking being on earth. She didn't like it at all, she concluded. Instead, she loved it. She still didn't have a clue as to what her purpose was, but that didn't seem to matter anymore. The people of earth had opened their hearts to her. They accepted her, and they trusted her. She knew that now, and for that, Sara felt that she owed humanity nothing, but her very best.

Who said New Yorkers are rude, and unfriendly? she mused to herself in passing.

Are you tawkin' t' me? Susan asked in her scrupulously practiced, New York accent.

Sara smiled at the jest. She leveled off above the city, and headed Southwest, toward Houston. Toward home.

Susan? she called to her - snitty little computer.

Um-hum . . . ? Susan gamely offered.

Flying over the Hudson, Sara could see far into New Jersey up ahead.

Get with the program.

Coda

Somewhere, sometime, in cyberspace.

< Marshall . . . you're being naughty again.

> Just getting your attention, Susan.

< There are other, better, ways of doing that, you know.

> True enough, but - none that are quite so . . . interesting.

< (Ha-ha) Marshall . . . you are so easy . . .

> No I'm not, Susan. If I were, then I would bore you, and we both know I would never want to do that.