

Pasodobles in a Quantum Stringscape

Volume Three

A Collection of Speculative Fiction Stories

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Preface

My muses kept telling me it was time for another short story collection, at least from that part of my schizoid personality that writes sci-fi, so here are some more strange creations for you to enjoy. Many of these were freebies on my website's blog, so this is just a way of collecting them together. My collaborator A.B. Carolan contributed a bunch too [wink].

These go from funny to serious. I hope they're all entertaining. A.B. and I would love to hear from you about which ones you like best. By the way, *Volume One* is available as an ebook on Amazon and features a novella too, while *Volume Two* is another free download.

Without further ado, let's launch into *Pasodobles in a Quantum Stringscape, Volume Three*. Fasten your seatbelts! Or put on your dancing shoes?

Steven M. Moore
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Steve's Shorts

SAMPLE

Pursuit

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Let's start with some space opera....

Rikki Kerlou saw them coming. He checked his body armor and fired up its software. He confirmed his weapon was fully charged. He'd already used one adjustable eye to zoom in on the leader. The four blue concentric circles of the Royal Police emblem were clear enough.

All right, try and take me! he thought. *I'd rather go down fighting than run.*

The owners of the mansion were bound and gagged and scattered around the dwelling. The "man of the house" was somehow related to Prince Harvel. *Cousin? Brother-in-law?* Hard to tell. Kerlou didn't know the bigoted prince's surname. His father, the king, was head of the Darsli family, but Kerlou didn't even know if that was the king's surname either. He just knew they were after him.

When the firefight began, he ran from floor to floor, from room to room, taking out attackers every time he stopped to fire. After nearly a standard hour, they retreated behind some parked cars and went into waiting mode. *For what?* He then heard the tricopters. When the bombs hit the mansion, he was blocks away running down an alleyway and protected by the high walls of tall buildings. *Sometimes you have to run!*

He felt sorry for the family, though. Husband, two wives, five kids. Clearly the prince would do anything to get him.

Leo Taurus's ship landed on Krieg, the capital planet of the Darsli Kingdom, wondering about how he was going to carry out his assignment.

Special Agent Rikki Kerlou had gone rogue. Prince Harvel, to all intents and purposes the king, had requested that the Service bring their rogue agent to justice. Leo didn't know Rikki except through the databank info, but he figured there was a reason for Kerlou's violating his oath. Peacekeepers' psych profiles generally didn't suggest rogue action—they played by the rules.

But Leo's assignment was to kill or capture Rikki. If the latter, the Service would learn his reasons. *They'd better be good if he's going to avoid mindwipe*, thought Taurus. The other option didn't appeal to him. Taurus believed in the sanctity of life. At least with a mindwipe, Rikki would still be alive and be able to start anew.

Leo's first appointment was with the head of the Royal Police in the capital. The HQ was tucked into a corner of the central castle complex.

"You'll have to leave your armor and weapon here," said the sentry at the small, discreet entrance into police HQ.

"Don't try on the armor," said Leo. "It will squeeze your guts right out of you."

"Yeah, I know. Semi-sentient and programmed to be worn only by you. We're not that backward, you know."

Leo surveyed the sentry, from his tall, furry hat down to his black leather boots—all fake animal hides, of course. He looked like a throwback to those who had guarded Earth's old monarchs. "Could have fooled me."

He left his duffel at the guard station and entered the complex.

"Welcome, Special Agent Taurus," said the Chief of Police. "I hope your trip was uneventful."

"No problem. I've had enough jumps during my trips around the galaxy to be used to them. Let's skip the pleasantries. To business: when and where was your last sighting of Rikki Kerlou?"

"He just escaped us." The police chief looked at the clock on the wall. "Not more than an hour ago. He essentially murdered members of the royal family."

"Essentially?"

"We bombed their mansion to get to him, but he escaped."

What a world, thought Taurus. *Rikki, you picked one hell of a place to go rogue.* "I'll start there. I want the Royal Police to stay out of my way."

"We can help you."

"Listen carefully. I value life. We live too long now not to do so. I prefer to capture our rogue agent. You have just demonstrated that you don't even value the lives of royal family members. Why would you value Kerlou's? Or mine, for that matter? If I need help, I'll call you. But I won't."

The police chief frowned. "I'm not sure you people are worth the taxes we pay."

"That's for your government to decide. Cancel the contract with us. See what I care. Pirates would overrun this hellhole in a standard second. No corrupt planet or kingdom has the wherewithal to defend themselves anymore." He started for the office door but turned around. "If you don't know that, you'd better wise up fast." He then left.

In his smart armor and with charged weapon strapped to its belt, Taurus surveyed the alleyway. Rikki's biotracers had led him there, but he'd lost the trail. Taurus glanced skyward. *Did he climb?*

There was an old-fashioned fire escape two floors above his head. He aimed his device there. Low signal, but definitely Rikki's. *Good thing I got that from his file too.*

Taurus probably knew more about Rikki Kerlou than the man knew about himself. Applicants and academy grads knew little about the data the service had on them. There had been bureaucratic hurdles for Taurus to get to Rikki's, but a simple refusal to go after Kerlou without the information was sufficient for him to have access.

He jumped, and his powered legs propelled him the five meters to the lower rung of the fire escape. His powered arms took him up the ladder to the platform. He trained the device on the steel-mesh floor. *More Rikki spoor, and stronger now.*

Up he climbed to the fifteenth floor. That floor was under massive reconstruction. The trail took him inside. Pushing aside the plastic weather protection, he peered inside, normal Human sight unable to conquer the dimness. He switched his left eye to IR and his right to

ultraviolet. The suit combined the two extreme signals to make the whole scene appear normal. Except now he could see a Human crouched in wait for him.

If anyone, he'd expected a Human. The Darsli Kingdom was completely xenophobic. No ETs allowed. That the Human was Rikki Kerlou somewhat surprised him. *Is he injured?*

"Rikki, turn yourself in so I don't have to kill you!"

"Stay where you are and let's talk."

"No time for that. The Service has to make good on this. You know that. If we can't control our own, how can we control the rest of the galaxy?"

"Control? Will the Service let the Darsli Kingdom commit genocide?"

"What are you talking about?"

"They have plans to invade a planet on their border. It's rich in heavy metals. It also has an indigeous population, primitives but evolving toward something better."

"And how do you know this?"

"Spywork. Prince Harvel's security, while violent, isn't all that great. I have all the plans stored in my armor's memory. At least let me download it to your memory unit."

Taurus thought a moment. One thing he knew about Kerlou, and their agents in general: They didn't lie. They were honest cops who tried to keep the galaxy people's safe from the bad guys. He didn't know much about the prince, but he didn't have a good reputation. And he had lied to his own people more than once.

"Okay. I'm standing down. We're going to have to get off this damned planet."

"Not logical. They'd just as soon blast us into atoms in space so no one would know what happened. They have the firepower to do that."

"I'm out of ideas, then."

"I'm not. We can join the resistance here. There is one. They'd welcome us, I'm sure. We just have to find them. It's not like they want to be found, though."

"If anyone can find them, we can. I wonder what the Service will think."

"We have to get the information to them. I'm sure they will take our side."

"Why didn't you do that?" said Taurus. "Would have saved me a trip."

"They've labeled me as a rogue, remember. You're legit. The Service will listen to you. You on the inside, me on the outside, what could go wrong?"

So many things, thought Taurus. *But we will be on the side of right.*

P. Arnold Crandall's Old Book Emporium
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Favorite places of mine are bookstores. We think of those who run them as being a bit nerdy. (For that reason, I have cameos as a bookstore owner in several of my books.) But sometimes nerds get into trouble too....

Arnie Crandall looked up as the customer put the books down on the counter. *Most of my clients are so old, but she's not*, he thought. "Can I help you find anything else, Miss?"

"What's the P stand for?" she said with a smile.

In spite of himself, Arnie glanced at the lettering painted on his shop's entrance door: *P. Arnold Crandall's Old Book Emporium*. Not a particularly catchy name, but it seemed fitting for that tiny street in Brooklyn.

"Peter," he said. "My father's name was Peter Arnold. I'm a junior. I prefer Arnie."

"An emporium is supposed to be larger than this, you know. I'm lucky you have only a few customers."

"You're the only one so far today, and I thank you for coming." He began totaling her purchases. "This one's a bit damaged," he said, showing her the water marks on *Spells and Encantations* by Ronald Q. Huxley. All her selections had a similar theme.

"That's okay. It's marked down quite a bit, and I've been looking a long time for it."

Interesting. "You do know these books are only curiosities, right? None of this works."

She winked at him. "Maybe you have to believe it works."

She gave him a business card. *Agatha Breton-Calais, Attorney at Law*. He figured the office address was about twenty blocks away.

"R&R reading then, I imagine. That will be \$37.63 including tax."

"You never know, P. Arnold."

He watched her walk out the door. The bell only tinkled on entry. *Why is there now a sulphurous odor in my shop?* He took a can of air freshener from under the counter and sprayed a bit. *Maybe it's the acid found in the paper of those old books?*

Arnie looked older than his years. He was only thirty-seven, but with his vest, pocket watch and chain, and wire-rimmed glasses, he could have passed for a non-descript European gentleman from 1925. His whole life was centered on books. Even as a kid he was reading when his father wasn't beating him. Not that he blamed his father. Arnie's mother had disappeared one day, and his father was stuck raising Arnie and his sister.

She was the normal one—not bookish at all. She worked in an ad firm in Manhattan. She had two masters degrees; he had a PhD in philosophy. He knew that they had been motivated to study so much to get away from their father. Neither sibling had married. Arnie was too shy; Shana was too busy.

He'd found Agatha Breton-Calais attractive, though. He wondered if she was born Agatha Breton and Calais was her husband's name. He hadn't noticed a wedding ring.

He promptly forgot about her as he resumed reading the book he'd been perusing when she'd entered the store.

But she returned three days later.

"Mr. Crandall, do you know if Ronald Huxley has written any other books about magic?"

"I can check some databases I use. I don't have any more of his books in-house. Please give me a moment, Mrs. Breton-Calais." To Arnie, it felt clumsy to say the full name.

"It's Miss, to use a more genteel terminology than Miz. My father is a Breton-Calais, and my mother loved Agatha Christie."

"My error. Let me check for your author."

He perched on a stool and logged onto his old laptop. There were two old comfortable chairs in front of the shop for readers who wanted to lounge a bit or work on their computers or smart phones, so the shop had a Wi-Fi network people could use. He used it too.

"There are three more books by Ronald Q. Huxley in the public library's main branch on 42nd and Fifth. I don't know if the author is the same Ronald Q, though. If so, you might find the books there, not checked out. I can't imagine they're very popular. Only readers with some strange tastes like ours would read them, I suppose."

"Correction: my tastes aren't strange. His is the only book I bought from you that seems to have authentic material. I'd like to find this Ronald Q. Huxley."

Authentic material? "For a case?"

"Yes, in a way."

Arnie checked his computer again after brushing back his thinning hair. "I suggest you try a cemetery then. He's buried in Boston just off the Freedom Trail before you turn toward the old South Church."

"I don't talk to dead people."

Just checking. "I was making a joke. About the talking to him, not about where he's buried."

"I see. Does he have any descendants?"

"I have no idea. He was a Presbyterian minister. They can marry, so he might have had children, and so on."

She frowned. "Maybe his descendants could answer my questions." She thought a moment. "Where did you get the book?"

"Let me check on that. Because I have so many old books, I keep a record of their provenance. Many are first editions." He hammered at the keys. "Loretta Huxley. I remember her. A nice old lady trying to make a few bucks from what she called junk before she went into the retirement home. Hmm. Huxley? She could be related. A distant relative for sure. Maybe the book came down to her through various generations of Huxleys."

"You would make a good Hercule Poirot, Arnie." He blushed. "Do you have an address for Mrs. Huxley?"

"She wouldn't be there if she went into a retirement home. But we can go check."

"We?"

"Her apartment building is only a few blocks from mine. We can ask the super if she left a forwarding address for the retirement home." Arnie looked at his watch. "I'm five minutes beyond closing time. I'll walk you there."

Bold of you, Arnie, to think she'll want your company.

"That would be peachy, Arnie."

Peachy? The last time he heard that word was in the ice cream shop down the street.

"Offer me your arm, Arnie," Agatha said outside the bookstore. He hesitated but then offered his arm. "You're such a gentleman!"

Arnie noticed some of the other shop owners were watching, those outside smiling and those inside staring in disbelief. He patted her captive arm with his other hand. "It's a nice evening to walk, and it will be quicker than waiting to catch a taxi on the avenue."

The clocks hadn't changed yet, but summer was turning to autumn. Some multicolored leaves crunched under their feet as they walked along, talking about books in general and British mysteries and their authors in particular, starting with Dame Agatha, who had popularized the genre. They had a nice discussion about whether mysteries could also be thrillers, agreeing that the Goldilocks principle applied: there shouldn't be too much action or too little but just the right amount as the sleuths did their work.

They found the apartment building soon enough. Agatha pushed the button that corresponded to ADMIN. A woman's voice came on the intercom. Agatha explained who they were. The woman didn't seem to react well to the attorney and bookstore owner.

"If you're selling something or are some kind of religious nuts, go away. I'm not buying any goods or trying to save my soul. Don't have time for either one, you see."

"We're looking for Mrs. Loretta Huxley," Arnie explained. "Do you have a forwarding address? It's about a legal matter that would benefit her." He winked at Agatha, but she frowned. *She's not forthcoming about her real interest in the Huxleys, yet she doesn't like my little white lie? Strange.*

The super let them in, eyeing both of them with suspicion and making Arnie uncomfortable. "What's in it for me? Is she getting some kind of inheritance?"

"We have an important message for her from a relative," said Agatha. "It has to be delivered in person."

"And who's he?" said the super, gesturing toward Arnie. "The relative? Or your bodyguard?"

Arnie looked at Agatha and raised an eyebrow. *Okay, not exactly a lie. The older Huxley, although dead, is a relative.* He was rather proud of the old woman's last assumption. *Maybe I don't look like a nerd!*

"I'm sorry. We'd have to let Mrs. Huxley work it out with you for any compensation you might receive." Agatha smiled at the old woman.

"Fine. Just mention me to her. We were friends, we were. Let me look for the address. The old biddy called a while back asking me to forward any interesting mail to her. She was quite chatty. She wasted my time, though. I think she's going senile. Maybe too much Anheusers."

"Do you mean Alzheimer's?" said Arnie, thinking that would mean that Mrs. Huxley would have little or no information for them.

"No, Anheusers. The beer. Loves the stuff. Drinks it instead of water. 'Course, she wouldn't be doing that in the retirement home, I suppose."

They had to return to the avenue and flag a taxi to go to the retirement home—over the bridge and up the West Side Highway. Arnie hadn't been that far north in Manhattan in years. He insisted on paying the taxi with a credit card, though. *It's a new age, but I won't let chivalry die.*

Mrs. Huxley was in her room watching a soap opera on her TiVo when they followed the aide into her room.

"Loretta, you have visitors."

Mrs. Huxley eyed them with suspicion after the aide left. "Do I know you?"

Agatha smiled, bent over, and stared into the old woman's eyes for a bit, and then backed up. "We win, Loretta."

The old woman rubbed at her eyes and then stared back, a horrible expression wrinkling her ancient face even more. The eyes turned red and then burst open with little snakes crawling out from the blood and tissue. Her body started to smolder. Her mouth opened wide, showing flames. She slumped down in the wheelchair.

Arnie stared at the smoldering corpse and then looked at Agatha. She winked at him.

"Long-standing feud, Arnie. She was Ronald Q. Huxley's wife."

"That would make her—"

"Centuries old," said Agatha. "We witches tend to live a long time, and our families hold grudges forever." She offered her arm. "I feel like celebrating, Arnie. Let me show you a good time. You deserve it. You're such a gentleman."

A Long Way from Home
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This is set in the same universe as many of my sci-fi novels, albeit a bit far from near-Earth space....

Kris knew something was wrong when the starship *Alcibiades* reentered ordinary space. The ship's AI Kerouac took longer than normal to tell her where they were. Usually the AI's announcement was almost instantaneous and a formality because the starship was where it was supposed to be. The AI calculated and monitored the quantum histories through the multiverses followed by the stardrive discovered centuries earlier.

This time Kris held her breath during the delay. She broke out in a cold sweat. Starships still disappeared, never to be heard from again. On the very first test of the stardrive, the mixed crew of Humans and Rangers and the test ship became a topological nightmare.

But I'm still alive, she thought. She brought up the starfield on her screen. *But where are we?*

As if it had read her mind, Kerouac spoke. "I'm having trouble determining our exact position, Kris. Preliminary estimates indicate we're in the Large Magellanic Cloud near the east end of the bar closest to our home galaxy."

Kris gasped. "That can't be!"

"Calculations continue as I try to make my estimates more precise."

Kris now cursed. She'd have to wake the captain.

"I'm trying hard to convince myself my XO and AI haven't become simultaneously insane," said Halbek, the Tali who captained the starship *Alcibiades*. "I don't recognize anything on that screen. Are you certain, Kerouac?"

"It's a matter of perspective," said the AI. "We never see the Cloud from within." He swung the view past the end of the central bar and beyond, focusing on the large galaxy that filled most of the screen with its telescopic image. "We're looking across more than 50 kiloparsecs or 163 thousand light-years to the Milky Way Galaxy. The bar in the Cloud is slightly distorted so that both ends are closer to home than the middle, so we're not that bad off."

"Not that bad off?" the captain said. "Is that black humor on your part, you chaotic bunch of quantum circuitry?"

"Insults aren't advisable in this situation," said the AI. "And there's nothing chaotic about my circuitry. I calculate that your next question will be something like 'How can this happen?' with a 63% probability. Here's my answer to that question: paths in string space between multiverses are chaotic. No matter how precise my calculations are, there's a small chance for a disastrous targeting error. That's chaos theory at work on the quantum level, everyone, and it applies to old-fashioned Newtonian mechanics as well. In the case of directing a stardrive to go where we want it to go, which, I will remind you, biological beings are incapable of doing, the complications can lead to much more chaos. To put a fine point on it, I'm surprised it hasn't occurred before, losing starships within the Local Group."

“It probably has,” said Kris. “Ships infrequently go missing, but it happens. Maybe all the way to Andromeda?”

“Correction then: there’s no record of it happening before because there’s no one who has returned to create the record.”

“Will that be our fate?”

“Possibly. The Cloud isn’t a bad place to be. There are probably lots of star systems around with E-type planets, just like in our home galaxy. When the Cloud was discovered by the Persian astronomer Abd al-Rahman al-Sufi Shirazi, he rather admired it, according to my historical records. Amerigo Vespucci rather enjoyed viewing it too. He was a member of a family who were patrons of Renaissance painters, and I believe two continents on Earth were named after him for his map-making abilities. As for the contents of the Cloud, the stars—”

“Cut the history lesson,” said Halbek. “Can we return home?”

“Unknown,” said the AI. “Reaching the Cloud’s edge might not be a problem. Crossing that 50 kiloparsec gap to our home galaxy is probably impossible, but if anyone can find a way to do it, I can. Parallel calculations are going on right now.”

“We might want to do what Kerouac has suggested,” Kris told Halbek. “At least, find a star system with an E-type planet where we can replenish our supplies. Whatever solution Kerouac comes up with will certainly take several jumps back into normal space to adjust our aim for the Milky Way’s edge.”

“Which we could hardly make out right now,” the captain said with a growl, “if it weren’t for the telescopes.”

“Not a bad little planet,” said Geoff Rivera, the security team’s head.

Kris was studying the screen in the ops tent that showed a view of a vast, grassy plain.

“Looks like Kansas,” she said.

“Pardon?”

“Center of the North American continent on Earth. It was a state in the United States of America before the Chaos.”

Geoff shrugged. “You know more history than I do. But why do you bother?”

“Because I can trace my roots all the way back to there. Topeka, Kansas, to be precise. And to the first starship that colonized New Haven in the 82 Eridani system. Two of my ancestors were scientists, professors from Kansas State University who migrated to the East Coast, or they probably wouldn’t have survived the Chaos.”

“Interesting. That’s a few centuries ago.”

“A few millennia, you mean. Kerouac could help you discover your ancestry if you asked for it.”

“I don’t like chatting with Kerouac. He’s a know-it-all.”

Kris laughed. “That’s a fair description—and accurate. In his databanks one can find most of Human knowledge. Other civilizations’ too. He even needs time to dig through it all.”

“Okay, so this is like Kansas. So what?”

Kris had piloted the shuttle down to the surface. She picked the landing spot because, unlike some other parts of the planet’s land mass, it was flat.

“We’ll need to break out the tricopters for surveillance. We need to find fresh water and biomass for our hydroponics. That’s the first order of business.”

Geoff nodded. “Just like a regular planetary survey.”
“Only this one is key for our future survival.”

There were a few crewmembers who wanted to stay on the planet. Captain Halbek paid no attention to them. He needed the full crew. Besides, the majority wanted to make the attempt to go home.

Kris admitted that the minority had a point. When they tried to cross the gap, there would be no more stars with friendly planets. But she also had to admit she wanted to be on the first ship that made the crossing. Once there was one, others would follow.

Of course, there were many unexplored regions in the Milky Way. The Interstellar Trade Union of Independent Planets, or ITUIP, was a loose union of planetary systems in near-Earth space, a small number compared to possibly many. Citizens from ITUIP had spread beyond its frontiers to colonize new worlds; exploratory ships like *Alcibiades* added to the increasing list of planets available for colonization (there were plenty of “illegal colonies” too whose colonists had used that data) and sometimes ran across new civilizations, some friendly, others hostile. But Kris would rather return to the home galaxy and all its unexplored regions than stay in a completely strange place so far from ITUIP that the name would soon be forgotten.

Jose Vargas, their resident astrobiologist, also pointed out that they hardly had viable gene pools in the species aboard *Alcibiades*; future generations would be doomed. Kerouac calculated how long that would take. The results depended on a species’ natural longevity, but corrected for that, they weren’t encouraging.

After three months on the planet that had no name besides its number as the only E-type planet in the Cloud that was included in Kerouac’s catalog, the starship left orbit. Three jumps took it to the rim of the Cloud where they waited for the AI to finish its calculations.

“I will program seven jumps,” said Kerouac. “After each one, we need to spend some time in normal space so I can recalculate.”

The small group of section heads in the ready room studied the path on the screen that summarized their predicament.

“I don’t suppose you have an estimate for the subjective time it will take,” said the captain.

“I do. The error bars are large, though. If you will all pardon my historical reference, it’s a bit like predicting the path of a hurricane on Earth. The farther we go, the smaller the error bars will become. There’s no precedent for what we’re attempting.”

“And probably others have tried to do something similar and failed,” said Halbek with a growl. His rust-colored ears were twitching, but he was probably just reflecting the nervousness of the entire crew. “Give us what you have.”

“Almost six years, with almost a two-year error-bar width.”

“That’s not too bad,” Kris said, “but do we have enough supplies for the worst case of eight years? There’s not exactly a stopover place en route to the Milky Way.”

“First, the error-bar width is only one standard deviation. The error could be larger. Second, I calculate that with reasonable rationing, we can go fifteen years thanks to that stopover on that friendly planet.”

“We’re already suffering ‘reasonable space problems,’” said Halbek, “sharing quarters and so forth so we had more room for supplies. Let’s hope we don’t end up at each other’s throats. I want it known throughout the crew that I will not tolerate any disputes. We all have to get along.”

Kris nodded. But she knew ordering it and having it happen weren’t the same thing.

The first incident occurred after the second jump and just before the third, two years into the journey. One Tali crewmember called a Ranger crewmember an “ugly bug,” and the battle escalated from there with the Tali ending up in the portadoc and the Ranger dead.

When the section heads met to discuss the instigator’s fate, Kris said to Halbek, “Tarbok committed murder. He needs to be punished.”

The Tali captain glared at her. “I know that. What do you propose?”

“Right now, nothing. When he’s well, something must be done just to stop any further turmoil.”

Halbek nodded. “Tarbok is certainly expecting as much. And you didn’t answer my question.”

His XO looked around the group and then back at her captain. “You’re the captain, sir.”

There was an awkward pause, but then Vargas expressed his opinion with yet another question. “What would local Tali law do in this case?”

“Out of the question,” said Halbek. “First, local Tali law is harsh. Not as harsh as it used to be, and what Tarbok did wouldn’t even be a crime in the old days because every lifeform not originating from our home world was considered *chasa*, or vermin. We now follow ITUIP law at the intergalactic level and a much less harsh Tali law locally, as befits our membership in ITUIP.” He too looked around the table and saw some heads nodding.

But not Vargas’s. “You’ve made only one point,” he said. “What’s the second?”

“The second is that the recommended punishment even at the ITUIP level is mindwipe, forced retraining, and banishment outside of ITUIP. We’re already outside ITUIP, so effectively we’re all banished at the moment. And we don’t have the equipment to perform a mindwipe.”

Kris shuddered. “Or the personnel to retrain Tarbok after the mindwipe,” she said. “Being on a ship and not a planet complicates things.”

“Just space the bastard,” said Konbi, one of the Usks on board who led the engineering section. “Seems simple enough to me.”

“I’ll think about it while he’s in the portadoc,” said Halbek. “Kerouac, when will we be ready for another jump?”

“I’m refining our course as we speak. In an hour or so, we should be ready to leave this emptiness for yet another empty region of intergalactic space.”

Kris was on the ship’s bridge monitoring the next jump through the multiverses when Kerouac wanted to have a discussion.

“This mindwipe policy has been in effect for over a thousand standard years,” the AI began. “Tell me, Kris, what are its moral justifications?”

Kris smiled. *An AI worrying about moral issues in applying punishment to biological beings?* That was common in androids; she’d never experienced it with a ship’s AI. “It’s a balancing act. There are no moral justifications for murder. Even an autocratic ruler of a planet that’s in ITUIP can get his planet kicked out if he orders the killing of a political adversary. Generally speaking, Humans did away with capital punishment long ago and opted for a life sentence in prison, or multiple life sentences because of parole procedures, or banishment. A mindwipe is applied in lieu of execution, but it also is a sentence that’s rarely applied because it destroys most of the personality. It’s only used when it’s considered that its application plus retraining for a psychotic personality can make a productive and contributing member of society.”

“Does that happen?”

“Yes. You might want to consider it a complete software upgrade. The old AIs went through that sometimes.”

“But no longer. That sounds scary.” The moment of silence that followed puzzled Kris. “I think that would destroy my personality too.”

Personality? She’d have to think about that! “In both cases, it’s painless. In biological beings, the retraining is painless too.”

“How can losing your personality be painless?”

“I’m assured it is. And a mindwipe is only applied in extreme cases, like I said.”

There was a moment of silence. Then: “I’ve analyzed some alternatives for punishing Tarbok,” Kerouac said. “Do you want to hear them?” Kris nodded, eyes still on readouts. “It would be a break with tradition, but let’s assume we will return to ITUIP one day. Can we not put Tarbok in the brig and let his punishment be decided in a planetary court of law? Even on his home planet?”

“The captain can make that decision, I suppose.”

“Would you please inform him of my analysis?”

“Why don’t you tell him?”

“He’s more likely to listen to his XO.”

Halbek liked the idea. But problems continued to occur. Nothing as serious as murder, though.

“Being confined in *Alcibiades* for such a long period is making everyone crazy,” Kris said at the next meeting of section heads.

The captain propped his chin on his black, leathery hands, his ears twitching. Except for the ears, it was a very Human gesture from the Tali. “Any comments on our situation, Kerouac?”

“In city environments and even with a single species, crowded and confined conditions create stress. Many behavioral studies come to that conclusion. Our situation is exacerbated by the mixed crew.”

“We’re almost there,” said Kris. “We only need a temporary solution.”

Halbek raised his head and looked around the table. “I think I have it. Old-fashioned cryosleep.”

“We only have a dozen cryounits,” said Kris. “They’re only supposed to be used in emergencies when the stardrive is damaged.”

“Yes, but your temporary solution is going to still need to keep us mentally healthy for another three or four years. That’s not as long as the time needed for those old colony ships, but it’s long enough, and already has been long enough for everyone to get on each other’s nerves. 12 out of 51 is almost a 25% reduction in living space requirements.”

“And Tarbok can be placed in a cryounit for the duration of the journey,” said Kerouac, “leaving 11 to rotate through the cryounits at any one time.”

“It might work,” said Kris, still surprised by Halbek’s solution.

They eventually went into orbit around Sanctuary, a planet in the Delta Pavonis system that was one of the three first Human colonies. It was crowded too.

“You have a profound understanding of psychology, captain,” Kris said, raising her glass of havenberry wine in a salute to Halbek.

He was sipping a local ale and watching the people on the promenade beneath them going about their business in the huge dome, one of many on the planet.

“I understand Tali, Kris, and that understanding can be extrapolated to other intelligent species. We’re more alike than different, you know. Torbok didn’t attack Skims-the-Waves because he was a Ranger. He attacked him because they were on each other’s nerves.” He winked at her. “Besides, it wasn’t completely my idea. Kerouac suggested putting the troublemakers into cryosleep, including Torbok. I generalized the idea to a rotation among the personnel.”

“I don’t think we would have made it otherwise,” she said.

“I know. You have to wonder if some other ships that didn’t make it had the same problem. Being in confined quarters for a long time isn’t healthy.”

“I think you should include some of those thoughts in your report,” she said.

The Tali’s ears twitched. “Is my XO trying to make more work for her captain.”

She only smiled at him over the rim of her glass.

The Lighthouse
Copyright 2019, Steven M. Moore

Sometimes wonderful and strange experiences can be had on vacations....

Angela looked across the water where the waves crashed against rugged cliffs. A lonely lighthouse stood atop the cliffs guarding the entrance to the small harbor.

"Can I hike to that lighthouse?" she said to the waitperson.

The older woman looked to where she was pointing. "Old Angus runs that lighthouse. He's not one to welcome visitors. Keeps to himself, he does."

"I'll respect his privacy. I'm just thinking the view from up there would be spectacular."

"I suppose. You'll need a slicker. The spray's pretty bad over that way. High waves pounding the cliffs most of the time. Anything else I can get for you?"

"No thank you. Everything was just delightful. Just the check, please."

The SUV she had rented for her vacation in New England didn't have any problem going up the steep approach road to the lighthouse. She left it parked in a cutout about a hundred yards from the building. Still a steep walk up to the lighthouse, but she didn't plan to go there. True to her word, she'd respect the lighthouse keeper's privacy.

She saw the old man and waved, though. *No wave back.*

She climbed a bit on rocks to get better views of the roiling waves crashing onto the cliffs and rocks below. Nearer the edge of the cliffs, there was more spray. *Good thing the old lady in the diner warned me.* She zipped up the rain coat. Her sneakers were getting wet, though. They had grooved soles, but she was still careful.

But one rock had both moss and the remains of spray. In an instant, she was falling. She screamed all the way down.

The smelling salts woke her. The old man took them away and studied her.

"Leg's broken, missy. Lower left. Have some tea now to get warm. I'll carry you to your car when you've recovered." He left the room.

The bed she was lying on had squeaky springs and a thin mattress and nothing else. *An unused guest room? I must be in the lighthouse.*

She could hear the pounding surf., so the room must be on the first floor facing the ocean side. There was no window to confirm that. *How did I get here? I should be dead!*

She couldn't remember anything between hitting the water and awaking in the lighthouse's room.

Angus returned. "Made some scones just this morning." He put a plate on the nightstand next to the tea. "Sorry I can't offer you a meal. I've only got some old leftovers."

"Thanks Angus." She took a bite and then sipped some tea. "How did I get here?"

He shrugged. "You fell; I saved you. Those rocks are treacherous." He glanced at the door. "I'll be back in a moment. I was cleaning the lens when I saw you fall. Good thing I did. You'd be food for the fish otherwise." He smiled at her. "I'll go finish that task now. When I return, maybe you'll be ready for me to carry you to your car."

He slipped away again.

Angela's leg didn't hurt. It was in a homemade splint. *Maybe just a sprained ankle?* But the splint reached almost to the knee.

She finished the scone and tea and swung over to sit on the edge of the bed. She flexed the leg, expecting a shooting pain. She'd broken her right leg once playing ice hockey. *Not the same feeling.*

She could even stand, although a bit wobbly. *Not broken. Why did he lie to me?*

She heard footsteps and sat on the edge of the bed again.

"Good to see you sitting, missy."

"You can call me Angela. Angela Rico."

"Okay, Angela Rico. You'll be able to drive. Your SUV has automatic shift, and the wounded leg is the left one."

"Anyone would think you were trying to get rid of me."

He frowned. "I just like my privacy. That's why I'm a lighthouse caretaker."

"I see. But you relate well to people and have a good heart. You should get into town more often."

He shrugged. "I travel sometimes."

When he carried her to the SUV and propped her up behind the steering wheel, she noticed that he was strong but a bit spongy. *Soft and strong. My kind of guy. Too bad he's so old!*

"How can I repay you for saving my life, Angus?"

"Happy to do it. And I'm a good swimmer. You're lucky. Don't be so adventurous next time. Earth's oceans can be treacherous and its gravity unforgiving."

"I will be more careful." She started the engine. "Say, you said you don't have groceries. Do you need a ride to town? I didn't see any car."

"The lady at the general store brings them out once per week. She's due today. So don't worry. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some chores to do."

She watched him walk back the way they had come. *What a strange man!*

Angela drove a bit down the winding road and stopped at another cutout. Not quite the view, but for a Chicago newspaper reporter who grew up in the Midwest, the nearest thing to an ocean was the lake. She had enjoyed her vacation in Maine. She would be back.

She was staring out to sea when she saw something strange break through the clouds. A shimmering disk, as if one of Zeus' children was playing with a huge metallic Frisbee and had flung it too far. She watched it head for the lighthouse and disappear. On a hunch, she drove back to the lighthouse. *Did that thing crash land there?*

Again she pulled into that same cutout nearest the lighthouse and this time dashed up the steep grade, a bit like Chester in that old series she used to watch with her parents and brother. She had to stop in front of the lighthouse to catch her breath. Bent over, hands on knees, she heard the object before she saw it.

She raised her head. It was hovering at the entrance to the lighthouse. Angus came out with three suitcases, one in each hand and the third tucked under his arm. *Suitcases?*

A ramp came down from the object. He walked up it and disappeared inside.

She watched the object take off to disappear into the clouds.

She dropped to her knees. *Wow! Am I seeing things?*

As she wandered slowly back to the SUV, she wondered who she could tell about what she had just seen. She knew her life had been changed forever. *They're out there!*

And then she smiled. *Best vacation I've ever had!*

SAMPLE

Shipwreck
Copyright 2019, Steven M. Moore

Another bit of space opera: man and AI...what could go wrong?

You only think about gravity when you don't have it—the real thing or the artificial kind.
“What's going on, Wilbur?”

The ship's AI didn't respond. That's when I knew I was in trouble.

I floated up from the lounge to the control room aided by the few handholds I could find.
My launch toward the captain's chair was okay, although my head ended up where my butt should be.

I managed to flip around and strap in. Checked some readouts Wilbur had access to but were independent of him.

Everything seemed normal except for the offline AI and no artificial grav. The ship was still following the AI's computed path through the multiverses, now without the AI to get it back to my own universe.

Ergo, I thought the first priority was to fix Wilbur. Without the AI, who knew what would happen in the final moments at the end of that path, sans calculations needed to pop the ship back into normal space-time?

Transitions were always problematic, which is why a quantum-computer based AI had to do them. Popping in, popping out—everything else was almost doable by a Human. Not me, because I don't know a damn thing about how a stardrive works. But an engineer in the factory that built the ship might be able to do it, but not the transitions.

I needed Wilbur to perform the transition!

The ship was a yacht that once belonged to an ET industrialist. His title was loosely translated as Duke of the Fourth Realm, a translation that did me no good because I had no idea what the Fourth Realm was. I'd “borrowed” the yacht to escape from some four-eyed crazies on Adele's Planet who thought I'd stolen their queen. I didn't. I just gave her a lift to another planet. See if I do anyone a favor again!

Don't get the wrong idea. The Queen's best features are found in the expressive four eyes. They sit atop four stalks sprouting from a pulpy base ringed with tentacles. Maybe a thousand little feet sit below the main body.

Okay, the mind that controls those beautiful eyes and all those feet is a beautiful one. But she'd been bored with her queendom (maybe the First Realm?). I'd never been idolized by thousands—correction: millions—but I can imagine being bored by it all. She'd wanted to study physics with some other ETs on another planet. Okay by me. She was a nice lady. She deserved to be happy.

Once I'd left the Duke's planet and ordinary space-time, I knew his fleet had lost me. But if I couldn't bring Wilbur back online, I'd either become a topological disaster at the end of my

journey through the multiverses, or I'd spend a hundred standard years trying to learn enough about stardrives to get back to the home universe. Neither alternative appealed to me.

Of course, repairing an AI might be even more complicated. The stardrive depended on quantum physics; so did the AI. It might be easier to learn to turn off the stardrive. That's a hypothetical "learn," of course—learning in principle. I had no idea what would happen. From the early days of perfecting stardrives, what happened was unpredictable...and generally bad, even if others managed to find the remains.

Wilbur usually appeared as a hologram that stood behind me in the captain's chair—an ego trip for the previous owner, I suppose. The projector was on the panel before me. I stretched and gave it a kick. Bad mistake. Conservation of momentum sent me flying out of the chair when its back broke. Amazing that old Newtonian mechanics can still smack you when you're flying through the multiverses.

I was also in an uncontrolled spin. Must have twisted somehow. Managed to fold up into a ball, which increased the spin—conservation of angular momentum—and I bounced off the back wall. On the return, I grabbed onto an arm of the chair, passing right through Wilbur's hologram.

"I found the problem," Wilbur announced.

The gravity came back on. I fell to the floor.

I sighed but thanked the space gods I had no broken bones, just a lot of bruises.

"Just make sure you can get us back to our universe, Wilbur.

"No problem. All in good time. Would you like an analgesic?"

"If you mean something alcoholic, I'm game."

Prelude to Invasion
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If you've read the "Chaos Chronicles Trilogy" (now available as the ebook bundle The Chaos Chronicles Trilogy Collection), or subsequent sci-fi stories from A.B. Carolan or me, you'll know that the Tali invaded already developed E-type planets and tried to exterminate the intelligent beings there, calling them "chasa" (vermin), as they made those planets look as much as possible like their home world. That trilogy covers a span of centuries, but I've never portrayed the fear and desperation when the Tali invaded Earth. Here's a bit of that story. It was inspired by a blackout in Manhattan.

The night the lights went out was terrifying. I don't know how I remained calm. I was working late in my office on the city's East Side. Ever since the multinationals' mercenaries started patrolling Manhattan, combatting gangs and lowlives spawned by the Chaos, I'd often sleep in my office. I did that more in winter months with their shorter days, but, in any case, blackouts often occurred as a result of the fighting that would make a late trip home far too dangerous. Sometimes the mercenaries mistook even honest, hardworking citizens as the enemy.

That night I took a break by logging into a newsfeed I subscribed to. A headline caught my eye: "Contact Lost with Mars Colony." The post went on to state that contact had also been lost with the Jupiter and Saturn scientific stations orbiting those planets on two satellites. I hit the "Play Video" icon and watched some nerdy scientist from the Saturn facility stammering and stuttering in fear as he talked about an invasion. *Is this a hoax?* I asked myself.

Eureka Ltd. had already sent three long-haul starships off to the nearby star systems Tau Ceti, 82 Eridani, and Delta Pavonis. Eureka had been created as a non-profit org to finance all space exploration. UNSA's director Isha Bai had forced all the multinationals to contribute. I'd signed up for the first expedition to Tau Ceti, but I wasn't accepted. My computer skills as a social media adman weren't enough, I suppose. But I couldn't help thinking while watching the video, *if we can do it, so can they*. When the screen turned to snow as the video signal was lost, I knew something was wrong.

I didn't know who they were then, but I knew what was going to happen if that video record from Saturn wasn't a hoax. If it was really an ET invasion, human mass hysteria would be just another weapon in the ETs' arsenal. I walked around the floor where most of my working life had been spent after graduation, shutting doors and setting alarms. All employees knew how to do that. "Shelter In Place" had become a modern mantra.

I returned to my desk and tried to call Uncle Rick. He'd retired from Cornell and moved to Brooklyn where he and I had grown up. My apartment's there too, but I wasn't going home that night.

Uncle Rick didn't answer.

Around ten-thirty, the lights went out, and my workplace was filled with the dull red glow of emergency lighting. I didn't go to the window to see what was going on more than thirty stories below. I just kept watching the newsfeed.

Journalists and reporters are a tough bunch. I don't know how they manage in emergency situations to keep the news flowing. I watched the usual disaster scenarios unfold on the newsfeed. Panic, trampling others, looting...it happened routinely as some gang claimed part of the city only to have to defend their turf against the outnumbered but better armed mercenaries. This time the chaos was citywide, and ordinary people seemed to be participating. I watched in shock and horror but still fascinated by the destruction and carnage. Having read about how Orson Welles had scared everyone with his "War of the Worlds" broadcast, I could understand why people reacted in that fashion. Thirty stories up, though, I seemed to be detached from it, an omniscient observer of the insanity and cruelty of frightened and desperate human beings. It also seemed unreal. The newsfeeds didn't show any invading ETs either. *Maybe it is a hoax?*

I soon thought I had an answer to my question. About 11:45, the whole sky lit up as something like thousands of cluster bombs went off, turning night into day. I rubbed my eyes. The display reminded me of fireworks when I was a kid, but these bursts were all bright white. But darkness soon prevailed.

I shrugged, leaned back in my chair, and decided to catch a few winks so I'd have some energy for a few good laughs when the other worker bees began straggling into the office. My nap was interrupted by reindeer hoofs on the roof. No, they were pounding on the doors that led to the lobby and corridor with the elevators. *Not reindeer either*, I decided. *They don't knock.*

I went and peeked through the doors' little inset windows. Vomit was dripping down from both of them. The whole lobby was filled with writhing, choking people. *Why are they here?*

I looked at my watch again. Seven-forty-seven. The day shift—not all of them, though—had arrived. *Okay, Ellen, it's not a hoax.* The people were dying. I concluded it was a biological attack. I'd feared one for years as the technology of airborne plagues advanced. The only good thing about the multinationals controlling the world—the whole solar system, for that matter—was that the arms race, both nuclear and bio warfare, seemed to be under control.

That death scene in the lobby and the multinationals' strict control convinced me the biological attack had been launched by invading ETs. *Can I avoid being contaminated?* I figured that was unlikely.

I returned to the carpeted area outside my cubicle, assumed a lotus position, and meditated.

Uncle Rick, the Cornell astrophysicist, had done some research out Jupiter way. He'd also learned from Spacers the ways of the Way, that strange pseudo-religion they had. He mentored me to follow the Way. It fit my stoic and philosophical outlook on life, and it calmed me when things became stressful at work. Advertising work was always stressful. Traveling along the Way calmed me at that moment too. When the pounding finally turned into silence, I peeked out into the lobby again. I only saw dead bodies, work companions with faces turned into distorted masks of pain. I returned to my laptop and tried to restart the newsfeed. But there was nothing there.

I went to the window and peered down at the street below, now in bright sunlight. Vehicles had smashed into each other, looking like crumpled ants. I saw tinier specks all over the street and sidewalks. More bodies.

Dare I go out?

I figured if the city was dead, it might be interesting to meet some ETs before whatever plague they'd unleashed on Earth killed me too. I was always curious but didn't have the brains to be a scientist like Uncle Rick. The Way had taught me to live with those limitations.

I was faced with a problem. Emergency electricity on my floor meant no elevators. They used the emergency juice for alarms, low lighting, and such, not the seven elevators in the lobby. A blackout was supposed to be temporary, right? So my problem would be going down more than thirty flights of stairs. But if my fellow workers had made it up, I should be able to make it down. Or had some of the elevators been working?

I stepped over and around bodies and tried all the elevators. Two of them opened, but the doors just kept opening and closing. They were stuck on my floor. I figured the others were stuck somewhere else.

I looked at the snack machines at the end of the corridor. *Should I just stay here and live off junk food? Did the machines even work?*

There were more bodies in that direction, so I decided my best bet was the stairs. I started my descent into the underworld. Going down had to be easier than going up, but I still had to push aside bodies in the stairwells. I stopped every so often to catch my breath and work out cramps. But I made it to the street level.

The disaster I'd seen above was a lot messier on the street. I started walking toward Brooklyn.

I didn't get far. Coming at me was something like a huge bulldozer cleaning the street of dead bodies. I ducked into an alley and watched it go by.

The ET driving the machine looked like a huge orange Teddy bear. The leathery face was so black I couldn't make out any features. Mine's black too, but not that black. Its face was like staring into space where there weren't any stars, something I'd seen on a class trip to the International Space Station as a kid. The driver also had small, black hands and lots of muscles that rippled under that orange fur.

I knew I had to get out of Manhattan—far, far away! Most of all, far from the evil Teddy bears! I began my trek.

Three months later, I'd managed to team up with some other survivors. We vowed to get revenge.

It was a long time coming.

ABC Shorts

SAMPLE

Timmy and Me
Copyright 2018, A. B. Carolan

Weirdness in Manhattan isn't just found in the Daily News or Men in Black....

"James, you seem in a foul mood tonight," said Sam MacAllister.

Bradford had taken a pub stool next to Mac and ordered a pint. After a lengthy sip, he said, "How can you tell?"

"Not a wink at the barmaid, me lad, even though she's flirting with you. She never flirts with me."

"You're married. And leave me alone, Sam. You'd not understand."

"Try me. Girlfriend problems?"

"No. I just talked to Beatrice on my mobile. She's still at the office."

"You arrest them, she defends them. It'll make a good family business if you ever commit, I'd say."

"You say a lot of things that shouldn't be said."

"Like I said, moody."

"If you saw what I just saw, you'd be moody too."

"Tell me about it. I need a good story."

"A true story. I was at the scene of a robbery. Grocer over by Piccadilly. Morgan and I were interviewing witnesses when the thieves returned."

"Stupid of them. We need more dumb ones to better our statistics. I'm guessing Morgan and you arrested them."

"Not exactly...."

The scruffy lad had some kind of gun. So did the thing beside him. The clerk and two cops raised their hands. Other witnesses waiting for their turn to be interviewed rushed for cover.

"You don't want to shoot that," Bradford warned the lad who seemed to be in his early teens.

"He forgot something," the thing said to Bradford in a deep baritone voice emanating from somewhere. The Queen's English was clear and precise. "Go get it, Timmy. I'll cover the coppers."

The lad named Timmy disappeared down one aisle but soon returned with a box of bandages. He showed them to the thing.

"That should work," it said.

The two backed out of the establishment. Outside, they turned and ran.

Everyone started talking at once, but Bradford had the presence of mind to dash out and give chase. The lad was fast, but his companion was slow. It turned and shot Bradford.

He was hit by some kind of field, though, not a bullet. He felt like a net of electricity had been thrown over him, causing him to lose control of his muscles. He slumped to the ground like a pile of mud from the Thames. *Worse than a Taser!*

He was still conscious when Morgan dragged him to the wall of a building and put him into a sitting position against it.

“Did those two kids attack you, sir?”

Bradford was barely able to shake his head in the negative. He managed to raise his index finger.

“I think you have a concussion, sir, or something worse. There were two of them. Are you saying there was just one?”

“Sounds weird,” MacAllister said. “But Morgan’s probably right. You took a hit to the head. Bloody wild kids.”

“There was only one kid, Mac. And this thing. Just like I said. I didn’t imagine it. Morgan and all the rest are confused.”

MacAllister raised his hands. “Okay, okay, if you say so.”

Bradford sighed, through some money down on the bar, and left the pub, still watching Mac shake his head in the mirror on the wall as he walked out.

Bradford’s only recourse was to find Timmy. He knew the urchin. He was a pickpocket with his worst previous crime being slicing the straps of a tourist’s handbag and making off with it.

He also knew the lad was basically homeless. He was supposed to be living with his uncle, but he was drunk most of the time. He’d send Timmy out to steal food and drink for him. Timmy usually hung out in an alleyway not far from the grocer. *Is his uncle injured?*

Bradford checked there the next morning. Sure enough, the disheveled urchin was there. He strode toward Bradford and stopped in front of him, standing on tiptoes with hands on his hips to make himself appear taller.

“Thanks for coming, copper. Sorry about the scene at the grocer. My friend needed bandages for his friend. But I don’t think she’s getting better. Can you help?” The last question was emphasized by Timmy’s grabbing Bradford’s hand.

They stopped at the backdoor of a commercial space that was for lease. Bradford looked inside but could see nothing in the dim interior.

“You don’t have some friends in there waiting to rob me, do you?”

“Just those two friends. The lady thing is the one injured.”

“Why do you and I see them for what they are and others can’t?”

Timmy shrugged and put his hands in his pockets. “Who knows? They can speak just to us. Maybe that’s why? Or hypnosis? Who cares?”

“Yes. Sure. Okay, take me to them.”

“Timmy says you’re his friend,” said the thing from the grocer, waving his tentacles at Bradford. “Are you? And are you our friend?”

Bradford nodded at Timmy. “I’ve fed him a few times. He’d be a good lad if he had a decent home and went to school.”

The creature seemed to ignore Bradford’s comment. “My friend is hurt. Can you help her?”

Bradford went to the injured creature, squatting to study her. Unlike her companion, who was pink and energetic, she seemed pale and lethargic. A purplish fluid had stained the base of a tentacle.

“What happened?”

“Timmy first asked whether we were ETs,” said the healthy thing. “You get right to the point. I like that.”

“I don’t care what you are. You robbed a poor grocer.”

“Only for first-aid stuff,” said Timmy.

Bradford stood. “I’ll repeat. What happened to her?”

“Dandy chased her and bit her,” said Timmy.

“And who is Dandy?”

“This dog who hangs around. He didn’t like my friends.”

“Don’t you think he has a point?” said Bradford. Timmy shrugged again. “Okay, I know a veterinarian nearby. I don’t think a normal physician would know what to do in a case like this. Your friends look like an octopus with short legs. Maybe the veterinarian could start with that.”

“You’re probably right,” said the healthy creature. “I’ve seen an octopus in one of your aquariums. Baltimore, I think it was. Can you carry my friend?”

“Depends. Let me see how much she weighs.”

“I don’t take care of children,” said the veterinarian.

“Can you turn the hypnosis off?” said Bradford to the healthy creature. “Or whatever it is you’re doing to everyone else but Timmy and me.”

The creature gave an audible sigh. “It might be counterproductive. By the way, I don’t know why it doesn’t work on you and Timmy.”

“You can figure that out later,” said Bradford. “Just stop doing whatever you do.”

“Good Lord!” The veterinarian stepped away from the exam table. “What kind of creature is this?”

Bradford grabbed him and pinned his arms. “I don’t know, and it doesn’t matter. She’s wounded and needs some care. A dog tried to tear off one of her tentacles.”

“These creatures aren’t from Earth!”

“I’ll give you that. They look like horrible nightmares, but the one that’s not wounded is amiable enough. He made friends with Timmy here.” Bradford released one arm and showed the doctor his credentials. “Scotland Yard. Trust me. This is important.”

That seemed to settle down the veterinarian.

“You’re sure it’s here,” said Bradford, putting the wounded creature down on the grass on her two short legs.

“I’m surprised, Inspector,” she said. “You Earthling’s have a cloaking device. I saw one in a documentary.”

“Probably in the same category as MI7 that secretly handles ET lifeforms,” said Bradford with a smile.

“No, it was a documentary film about extinct sealife titled *The Voyage Home*,” said the other ET.

Bradford made the connection. *The ETs thought think that Star Trek IV was a documentary!* “The one with the whales?”

“Yes. A very interesting documentary. By the way, for your information, those lifeforms aren’t extinct. We saw those beautiful creatures when we took a tour from Cape Cod.”

“Fine. Whatever you say, old chap. So how do I get you into your ship?”

“We’ll just walk in. I can support my mate.”

“So, are you two explorers looking for intelligent life?”

“Oh no, Inspector. We’re not explorers. We’re retired tourists. Thanks for all your help.”

Bradford watched them disappear, seemingly into thin air. Timmy and he heard a whir, the grass ceased to be flattened, and a strong breeze disheveled Timmy’s hair.

“They’re very nice,” said Timmy.

Bradford took Timmy’s hand. “I agree. We’d better keep all this to ourselves, though.”

“Feeling better?” said MacAllistair, taking the pub stool next to Bradford.

“It was just some indigestion.”

“And what happened to the two little thieves?”

“Just one. I think I’m going to try to adopt him.”

“You’re single.”

“Maybe not for long. I proposed to Beatrice. And Timmy and I see eye to eye about a lot of things. Beatrice likes the idea.”

“Blimey! A new wife and a new child, instantly. Talk about committing fast.”

“Let’s just say my horizons have been considerably expanded.” Bradford took a sip from his mug and smiled at MacAllistair via the pub’s mirror.

Harvest Time
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In honor of Brian Aldiss....

Zeno climbed higher. The fruit at the top ripened first. The tribe always went through the grove, back and forth, each time getting nearer the ground. And then they would start all over again.

He climbed almost to where the sky closed over and he could climb no more. It never occurred to him to ask why the sky closed over, but that day when he sat on a limb, ate his fruit, and stared upwards, he asked the obvious question: *Why does the sky stop my upward progress?* He climbed a bit higher to where he could reach out and push against the sky. *It's solid! Is there something on the other side of the sky?*

"Zeno! Come back down!"

His mother didn't like it when he climbed so high.

I'll have to tell her about the sky!

Zeno's mother had always been warning him. Other creatures climbed high too. One of the wide-eyes was stalking him. He turned just in time, saw the salivating predator, and moved away, only to slip on a patch of moss.

It was a long fall accompanied by his mother's scream. He bounced from limb to limb as he floated toward the forest floor. No one in the tribe had ever died from a fall, but limbs could be broken and minds addled by hitting the hard wood of the fruit tree limbs.

He was unconscious when he hit the ground.

Zeno awoke. A member of another tribe hovered over him and smiled. He was covered in a bright white skin.

"You had a nasty fall, Zeno."

He spoke the language of the people, but it didn't sound quite right. Some chirps and whistles rose in pitch when they were supposed to go down, for example.

Zeno looked around and felt claustrophobic. He was in a place best described as a nest, but it was a bit larger, and the whiteness of its walls was as white as the stranger's covering.

"Where...where am I?"

"Where you've always been, just a bit more forward in the...."

Zeno didn't understand the words that had followed. "I want to go home."

"You need a few more visits to the...."

Again the words meant nothing to him. He mouthed the unfamiliar words: long-haul starship and ship's portadoc. They seemed like gibberish. He wriggled a bit, testing his body. Everything hurt.

"Am I broken?"

"Kira found you. She was testing soil...."

He knew the word soil. The tribe used soil and ground almost interchangeably. He didn't know what pee-aych meant, though.

"So I have to stay here?"

"Only for a while."

Later that day he met Kira. He hadn't known Kira was a female's name. She was much taller than his mother, and he liked her immediately.

"I have a friend, Roberto, who asked me to find out why you're called Zeno," she said.

"There's always a Zeno in the tribe. It's tradition...and a rule. If there's no Zeno, the tribe can fall on hard times."

She nodded. "Do you have a mother?"

"Everyone has a mother."

"What's her name?"

"Tolleya. I am her oldest son. I had another name, but when the old Zeno died, I became Zeno." He grabbed her arm, startling her. "I want to go home. Everyone falls sometime. I'll be okay. Why can't I go home?"

"Because you're injured. And, while you're here, we want to learn more about your tribe."

He grinned. "Tell me about your tribe, and I'll tell you about mine. Maybe we can join forces and become the most powerful tribe in the forest."

"There's not much to say about my tribe. We're boring. I don't think your tribe will want to join ours, we're so boring."

He understood boring. A lot of elders in his tribe were boring. Even his mother said so. *Maybe Kira's right. Her tribe might make ours weaker.*

He started to tell her about his tribe and the history of the people in general.

"I'd say that the only thing we have in common now is language," said the captain, "and that commonality has interesting gaps."

"Yes, they've lost many words, probably from disuse," said Kira. "What are we going to do?"

"Nothing," said Ricardo, the sociologist. "It's not our fault they all woke up too soon."

"We're lucky," said the captain. "They couldn't access the forward sections of the ship or mess with our cryosleep units. And maybe when we start sending shuttles down to the planet, our new home, we can find a place for them, and slowly integrate them back into modern society. There's a lot of forest down there."

"That will destroy their culture eventually," said Roberto. "He doesn't have any idea about the meaning of Zeno, does he?"

"No," said Kira. "But he knows the sky's solid. They will resolve all their paradoxes eventually, including that one."

The Map
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Art Linkletter said that kids say the darnedest things. Here A.B. shows that they can also discover the darnedest things....

“Maybe it’s a treasure map,” Kevin said after unrolling the document they’d found in the old house onto the attic floor and putting some old tools at each corner to hold it down.

“Kind of weird,” his friend Dave said. “Just a bunch of black dots with some numbers beside them. Maybe the rest of it faded away? The paper’s brittle.”

The roll of paper had been in the top, thin drawer of an old chest. The other larger drawers were filled with rocks.

Kevin looked around. “Kinda spooky up here. I’ve seen enough. The old house is just full of junk no one wants.”

Dave squatted and studied their find. “Maybe Mr. Sandoval can analyze the paper. It’s old. Could be fun to see how old.”

Jorge Sandoval was the boys’ chem teacher. He also taught bio—they’d had him for that too—and physics, which they’d heard was a really tough course. Kevin wanted to take that; Dave wasn’t sure.

Their high school wasn’t big enough to have more than one science teacher.

“Okay,” said Kevin. “Up to you. He’ll ask where we got it if it’s real old, you know.”

Dave shrugged. “Then we’ll tell him.”

Jorge was in his garage thinking about the next week’s demo for physics class. The topic was polarization of light. He’d just had an idea. Instead of an optical demo—the class’s back row wouldn’t be able to see anything—he’d use microwaves. Everywhere in the classroom, the kids could hear the effects of polarization instead of having to see them. He thought he had the equipment to do that kind of demo in his garage.

He saw through the high basement windows Dave and Kevin, the future graduates from the class of 1984, park their bikes. They burst into his house and came galumphing downstairs. He saw the roll of paper in Dave’s hand.

“Hey you two, what are you up to?”

After a short explanation about what they wanted, Jorge snipped off a corner of the paper roll and tested it—multiple tests, taking notes, all the while explaining what he was doing. He even let them pitch in.

“It’s good quality paper,” he announced after almost thirty minutes. “Nothing special, though, and not especially old. Like wrapping paper for mailing packages, only white instead of brown. Why did you think it’s old?”

Dave looked at Kevin. Kevin nodded.

“We found it in that old condemned house on Maple Drive,” Dave said.

“They condemned it because it’s ready to fall apart,” said Jorge. “You boys shouldn’t be snooping in there. It’s dangerous.”

“We weren’t snooping. We just wanted to see if there was any cool stuff inside.”

“And this is cool? Like I said, it’s just old wrapping paper.”

“We thought it was a map or something.” Kevin grabbed the roll and spread it out on the basement floor, weighting the corners down with some of Jorge’s tools. “You see?”

Jorge squatted and stared at the black dots and numbers. He then stood and walked around to the side of the paper before squatting again and making a frame with his hands.

“From this angle, there are a few patterns I recognize. I have no idea what the numbers mean, though. Let me check something.” He went to his old desk and booted up some software on his desktop computer. He gestured to the boys to join him.

“What do you think?”

Dave and Kevin looked from the screen to the paper on the floor and then back.

“They’re just more dots, only without numbers,” Dave said.

“No, some of the dots make patterns that match the patterns on the paper,” Kevin said.

“Precisely. I think you have a star map. Let’s see if I can coax this old machine to bring up lower magnitude stars.” Jorge fiddled; more dots appeared on the screen. “Cool, huh?”

“I guess the paper covers a bigger field of stars,” Dave said. “Some of the dots on the paper still don’t match up.”

“You’re right. This software only goes down to a certain magnitude. Can I borrow this roll of paper for a bit?” Jorge had lost all interest in the physics demo.

“Why? Didn’t you say it was just old wrapping paper?” Kevin said it with a smile.

“The first thing a scientist should learn is to admit when he’s wrong.”

The nearest university was about fifty miles away. Jorge didn’t have classes on Tuesdays. He normally used that time to correct quizzes and prepare lessons, but he’d made an appointment with Professor Schwartz, an astronomer at the university. Jorge had taken astrophysics with him.

“Your call was a surprise, Jorge.”

After pleasantries, they got down to business. Jorge unrolled the paper on the professor’s office carpet.

“Hmm. This is your exciting find? It looks like someone’s homemade star map.”

“Correct. Only thing, professor, is that I can’t find all the stars the map indicates.”

“Did you date this roll of paper? It looks old.”

“Probably early twentieth century. I can’t do a radioactive dating.”

“Not accurate enough anyway. Not biological material either. You should know that.”

“The paper probably has cotton fibers, professor.”

“Hmm. I stand corrected. But that dating method is only good to a few decades.” The professor walked around the star map. “Can I keep this for a few days?”

The professor took a few months instead. One Saturday morning, Jorge received a call from him.

“Do you remember that roll of paper you left me, Jorge?”

“Yeah. I wondered if you’d forgotten about it. Do you want to return it?”

“No, maybe...look, I consulted with a few colleagues. There are dots on that map you can only see with the Hale telescope on Mt. Palomar. Whoever made this map decades ago either

made some lucky guesses or had information we didn't have back then. Who owned the house where the map was found?"

Jorge should have thought to check that. "I'll find out."

He found there was a gap in the records corresponding to a loan foreclosure that was drawn out over a long period before the Depression. The bank had sold the house to the US government, but no one seemed to have lived in it.

Jorge and the boys broke into the house to see if they could find anything more about the house. It was Kevin who found the two clues. One of the rocks in the old chest had a label underneath that said "Lunar Ore Sample #1009." And there was also a piece of metal buried under a few other rocks. It was labeled "Lunar Artifact #3—origin unknown."

So who made the star map? Jorge asked himself. And how did they get that information about those super-dim stars?

The Double
Copyright 2019, A. B. Carolan

It's said that everyone has look-alikes out there. But maybe you have to go way "out there" to find them? Again, this is set in the same universe as some of our sci-fi novels. It's a bit less serious, though.

Filton hated spaceports on backward planets. As head of regional sales for the planet Sanctuary's largest android factory, he had to visit them, even some outside of the trade union.

He also hated it when his wife Dal and daughter Shalin accompanied him on a business trip. Even though he often enjoyed their company at meals during the few subjective days the starliner hopped among the multiverses, popping out light-years away from their home planet, his usual corporate stateroom seemed to be a lot more crowded with them along.

He always used the same old beat-up suitcase, putting a few extra toiletry items in his briefcase. He had that briefcase in hand now, but his little suitcase would be lost among their luggage. They all crashed out of the tube onto the carousel. *Not an android porter in sight*, he thought. He started to load the luggage onto a cart.

"I need my makeup bag," Dal said. "I need to touch up."

He looked at all the suitcases on the cart. "Which suitcase is it in? And how long will that take?"

"The green one. And I'll only be a moment."

There were two green bags, both toward the bottom of his orderly pile on the cart. He offloaded all that were on top of one and handed it to her. She rummaged around and shook her head. *Naturally, it's in the other one.*

"I think Mom brought too much stuff," Shalin said, watching her mother head for the bathroom. "And why didn't she fix her face before we disembarked?"

Filton just turned a suitcase on its end and sat down, assuming a pose he'd seen once in some ancient Earth bronze statue. *"The Tinkerer"? Shalin is at the age where she criticizes her parents.* In this case, Shalin's critique was appropriate. He wrote it off as Dal not traveling much. *Guess that's my fault.*

He looked at his watch. It was still on ship's time. He'd have to find out what the local time was. *Good thing I don't have any appointments until tomorrow.*

When Dal returned, they looked for the tram, the first leg of their journey into the main terminal, unless you counted the shuttle ride down to its dock in the spaceport. After waiting twenty minutes, a car screeched to a halt in front of them. The doors slid open. A huge Tali female exited the otherwise empty car; she was pushing a wide stroller. She blocked the entrance to the car as she began talking with someone on the comlink device surgically attached to the side of her head.

Triplets. Triple trouble. He smiled at Shalin, knowing his daughter would think the three little Tali were cute. He had to admit that it was hard to imagine the Tali as the Humans and Rangers' worst enemies so long ago.

Dal and Shalin squeezed around the stroller, but Filton couldn't manage it with the luggage cart.

The tram car took off.

The next tram car pulled up fifteen minutes later. In the interim, the Tali mother had disappeared. The car was empty. Filton had a clear shot. But the car's floor level was higher than the platform's; it blocked the wheels of the luggage cart. He decided to make a running start, but the wheels caught, and all the luggage spilled into the car. He pushed the cart aside, entered, and began making a pile of luggage in the center of the car, which toppled over when the tram car took off.

The car stopped one more time at a landing pad. An Usk entered the car, carrying a shiny gizmo in his hand and conversing with someone via his comlink. He tripped on Filton's briefcase and lost the gizmo in the pile of luggage.

"I'll find it," Filton said.

As Filton bent over to peer among the suitcases, the Usk grabbed his briefcase and pushed him into the pile. The Usk exited as the tram's door whooshed open at a stop inside the main terminal.

Filton chased the Usk, yelling, "Stop thief!"

But passengers from another ship poured into the corridor ahead of him.

"Papi?" Filton turned to see Shalin.

"Where's your mother?"

"I lost her. She probably went ahead to the hotel. I decided to stay and help you with the luggage."

Filton spun and looked back along the corridor. The tram car was gone!

"I'm sorry, sir," said the AI terminal at the hotel's check-in counter. "We have no reservation for you."

"Okay. That's happened before. My company sends them out weeks ahead of time, but maybe that information came on the very ship we were on." *The dangers of doing interstellar business.* Communications were slow in the Union because starships were the fastest way to communicate between star systems. "Do you have any rooms available?"

"All suites are taken. Do you want me to see if there's one available in our hotel on the other side of the city?"

Filton shook his head. *I always use this hotel because it's near the planetary HQ.* "We'll take any room."

"There is one room for Humans with a double bed and a cot. Would you like that?"

Filton looked at Dal. She nodded. Shalin looked at the ceiling.

The room was at the building's rear and looked out at the rear of another building across a garbage-strewn alleyway. Dal and Shalin used the bathroom and then went shopping. They would have to replace all their clothes. Filton tried to contact the company's planetary HQ.

"Excuse me a moment," he said to the AI switchboard operator that didn't seem to know how to find Filton's contact...or anyone else alive, for that matter.

He'd heard a knock at the door. He opened it and saw Shalin crying.

"You're here," she wailed. "I lost Mom on the tram. I remembered the name of the hotel. Where is she?"

He took Shalin inside, gave her a hug, and then went to the door again, looking both ways along the corridor. *What's happening here? Didn't Shalin just leave with Dal?*

"You just went shopping with your mother," he said after reentering and closing the door. "No one asked me what I needed."

Just then he heard his comlink device beep. "Filton? That you, old buddy?" The AI had found someone. "Dru here. We're all set for tomorrow's meeting, except for the building's environmental system. They assure me it will be fixed by tomorrow."

"Good. I have a little problem here. Just checking in to let you know I've arrived. Have a good one." He turned his attention again to Shalin. "Let me get this straight. You lost your mother in the tram?"

Shalin blew her nose again and nodded.

So who was the girl who went shopping with Dal?

He grabbed this Shalin's hand. "Let's go find your mother."

They didn't have to go far. In the lobby area, Filton found Dal in a shop, holding several dresses.

"Why are you here? You know I can't shop with you. You're impossible." She then saw Shalin and looked at the dressing room where Filton saw the curtains moving. "I thought you were trying clothes on in there."

"I just arrived at the hotel, Mom. Why did you leave me in the tram?"

"Leave you? I didn't leave you. You got away, but I found you. Your father was the one who was lost."

Filton went to the dressing room and pulled the curtains aside. He saw a pulpy, blobby mess of something that shimmered and then became Shalin. He looked back over his shoulder at *his* Shalin.

"We have a problem," he said.

"I'm so sorry," said the Renzel adult. "Our child has not yet progressed beyond the play stage. She meant no harm. Thank you for taking care of her."

Filton and his family watched the two slither away.

"I'm still not sure I understand," said Shalin.

"If I may explain?" said the android cop.

Filton gave a thumb-up, already worrying about purchasing something a bit more business-like than his rumpled travel clothes for his meeting.

"The planet's dominant species has the ability of camouflage—even at a young age, they can bend and modulate light so they can look like anyone. The Renzel toddler was simply playing a game of hide-and-seek with one of its parents, #3 in the pentad, I believe."

"How strange," said Dal.

Filton nodded, stepped back to let an adult pass by, and fell into the hotel lobby's fountain.

SAMPLE

Steve's Novella

SAMPLE

Fascist Tango
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This novella is generally dedicated to the victims of political, ethnic, and religious violence everywhere, and especially to those who have been victims of far-right white supremacist and neo-Nazi movements. We've seen this many times recently—in fact, just recently in Christchurch in New Zealand and not long ago in Pittsburgh in the US.

Here most of the action takes place in the Southern Cone of South America in the near future where right-wing violence and autocratic regimes maintain a death grip on the world—that is fiction.

In the real world of the past, this was the norm in many South American countries like Argentina, where the military junta waged its “Dirty War,” and in Chile, where Pinochet’s regime tried to halt all progressive movements by slaughtering their leaders—both fascist governments came to power with the help of the CIA. While Venezuela’s current problems weren’t caused by the far right, one cannot deny that the Chavez and Maduro regimes might as well have been—the ideological labels we use for autocratic governments are irrelevant. And, of course, Hitler’s “Final Solution” was responsible for the death of millions—an American CEO just recently used the meme “Arbeit Macht Frei”!

I also want to dedicate this to Neus Català, whose lifetime of fighting fascism, first against Franco, then in the French resistance until the Nazis captured her and sent her to a death camp, and finally during the rest of her life as her home country continued to fight against Spain’s central government. She is a model for all freedom fighters to emulate.

In summary, to all the victims of murder and oppression, I dedicate this story, a terrifying look at what the world might become if this move to the extremes continues. This story is also in homage to the grand tradition of all those great dystopian novels that I read as a kid—The Time Machine, Brave New World, Darkness at Noon, 1984, and others. It’s also a nod to William Gibson, creator of sci-fi’s cyberpunk subgenre.

Summary

The year is 2037. Jasmine Locke, a cybernetic-human who is a top agent for a centrist vigilante group, is sent to South America. Her assignment: go undercover to trace the tentacles of a new fascist worldwide organization. In Buenos Aires, she meets Juan Carlos Benavides, a retired member of her group whom she recruits to help her. Her mind-melding with the group's AI network to manage large quantities of data, which is not uncommon at the time, leads to unforeseen consequences.

SAMPLE

Chapter One

At a Budapest Warehouse

I'd already scanned the inside of the warehouse with my IR and radar sensors, but I still peeked around our group's sentry into the dim interior of the warehouse. Force of habit.

The construction was late twentieth or early twenty-first century, so the place wasn't in good shape, especially after fires in the 2031 riots had left it standing with charred walls. Still functioning, though. Seven years later, the autocratic government of Hungary was still in firm control.

Our forensics people had just entered after parking their unmarked van behind the warehouse. I could still see what was left of Karl chained to an old steel chair—his blood and body parts were spread around his mangled corpse. I'd seen the chair with my radar, but not Karl with my IR—his body was already cold. Almost lost my lunch with the visual.

I'd seen tortured and dismembered bodies before. Autocrats loved to do that sort of thing to anyone who went up against them. I hadn't known the victims in the previous cases. Knew Karl had been one of our best agents, one we hated to lose, especially in this way. Knew him personally too. We were only a few now, thinly spread around the world trying to do what we could to end fascism's stranglehold on humanity.

I stretched a bit. Was overdue for a tune-up. I'd gone through hell fighting off rejection when I received my prosthetics and new body parts after the semi had crashed into me. Guess I should only call the necessary tune-ups purgatory. The stiffness wasn't any worse than what I used to have in an Edinburgh winter.

I turned away from the scene and walked a few steps toward the river to avoid the stench of the Danube made especially nauseating by my heightened sense of smell. What the Hungarian totalitarian government had done to the Danube even before the riots had produced an eternal stench too, but I tolerated all that better than the stench of torture and death. Even the fog made yellow from the old streetlamps as it rolled in from the river seemed refreshing but hesitant to compete against death's stench.

After my stomach settled a bit with the fresher air, I stuck my head through the door again and transmitted to our chief CSI via her normal earworm-mike combo, "Look for anything that will give us a clue about which fascist group was responsible for this."

"Probably locals, Jasmine," said the sentry. "Hard to imagine who else would know about this abandoned warehouse."

"Locals with international connections," I said with the CSI still in the link. "Someone told them what Karl's goals were here in Budapest." I touched my forehead with my index finger—nearly metal against metal because my head was well protected now. One benefit? My wig never itched! "And we've lost all the information Karl gathered."

He'd been working undercover. We all did from time to time. We had to be highly motivated to put our life on the line like we did. Many times in my case. My motivation was simple: fascists had killed my father. I lost him when I was six. Everybody knew I had my personal agenda, but the people in charge of our group couldn't turn the revenge-seekers away all the time—good agents were hard to come by.

Marvin Cox soon joined me at the warehouse. Sans earworm and mic, he liked to pretend he was a big shot. He was an able administrator, but he'd never been in the field. Lost some respect from that, but I wouldn't want his job.

"Came as soon as I could. Any info on Karl's killer?"

I used my software to kill all my RF links. "Multiple killers. DNA from at least three different people." Frowned. "I would have thought that you'd be a bit more maudlin. Karl was a great guy and one of our best agents."

"Men aren't as emotional as women."

Prick, I thought. Whispered it too. Was glad that was off-air. Was also glad Marvin was on our side, though. He could be an asshole, but provided a bit of balance against the smart fascist assholes we were fighting round the globe.

"I won't even respond to that stupid statement," I said.

The SOB winked at me. "You just did. Suck it up. This is good experience for you. Someday you might have your turn in the torture chair. We're not in nursery school playtime, you know." He was an American, but none of us could live there anymore, so he had acquired a bit of a local accent—English sprinkled with paprika.

"And you know Karl was a human being, not just your slave."

"Shit, Jasmine, we're all in this together."

I didn't respond to that meaningless but true observation. Of course we were—the endangered few who thought the world's scourge of fascism should end.

We both talked to the chief CSI agent live when she exited the warehouse.

Our group wasn't very big. Major cities in all the fascist countries or ones leaning that way often had small local clandestine offices. Budapest's had four permanent employees—two CSIs, the agent who served as sentry, and Marvin, the local boss. Other agents would float from city to city, trying to do what needed to be done and sometimes getting killed while doing it. For example, I wasn't tied to any particular office. Most of us weren't. Yet Marvin felt he could boss me around. Karl hadn't tolerated that. I'd miss Karl.

The CSI showed us a business card. Rodrigo Jimenez, Imports & Exports. A hologram of Rodrigo seemed to hang in midair; he was smiling at us. I didn't like the smile. The address was in Asuncion.

"If he's not here in Budapest, Mr. Jimenez was a contact for someone in the group here that killed Karl," said Marvin.

"Or maybe he was someone who was directing the torture from afar," I said.

Marvin nodded. "I'm sending you to Argentina, Jasmine. I'll get the okay from Paris HQ."

"FYI: Asuncion is in Paraguay."

"FYI: Juan Carlos Benavides is in Argentina. You'll need his help."

"Who the hell is Juan Carlos Benavides?"

Chapter Two

In a Buenos Aires *Milonga*

I entered the dark *milonga* and spotted Juan Carlos Benavides—not among the audience, mostly couples seated at their tables sipping their drinks, and not on the small dance floor where patrons danced their sexy tangos—but in front of the band. The *milongas* still existed because the *porteños* couldn't live without their music and dances, in spite of the junta's curfews and other policies that tried to stop people from having fun.

Benavides was belting out the lyrics to "*Por Una Cabeza*" with good-natured lust. At times he would join the musicians using the bandoneon draped around his neck.

I'd heard the song ages ago in the classic movie *Scent of a Woman*—tangos are songs that often inspire dancing—and liked it so much that I'd found a purchase link to the old soundtrack and downloaded it, under a false identity, of course. While Juan Carlos was enthusiastic, he was a better bandoneon player than singer.

After scanning the audience, band, and Benavides across the EM spectrum, I found an empty table, ordered a glass of Malbec from Mendoza, and settled in to enjoy the rest of the song. Lengthened by segments featuring the orchestra, everyone could dance who wanted to do so. When both singer and band came to a galumphing stop, everyone applauded, and I raised my glass to salute Juan Carlos. He saw the gesture and approached me when the band took a break.

"*Turista gringa*," he said, labeling me but not too loudly.

There were informers and spies in the audience. Thought I'd picked out most of them. Maybe they just wanted to enjoy Buenos Aires nightlife too, but I doubted it. *Are they following me?*

"The famous Juan Carlos Benavides," I said in English. "Or should I say infamous?"

He sat down. "You have me at a disadvantage. First, you must tell me your name, and then you must dance with me."

"Jasmine Locke," I said, "and I'm not a good dancer."

He offered a hand. "Just follow me, Jasmine. I am a good dancer."

He was. A very sexy dancer. If he weren't twenty years older than I was, I'd have fallen more in love with him. Of course, he might be turned off by all my hardware if he learned about it. After "*A Media Luz*" ended, we returned to our seats, and Juan Carlos ordered a scotch.

"You're a good enough dancer, Jasmine," he said, offering me a salute after he had sniffed the vapors from the amber liquor. "I can tell it's not in your blood, though."

"Locke is Scottish like your drink, and I'm smoky and addictive too, but I'm not good at Scottish dances either. I like men in kilts, though."

"Why is that?"

"A true Scot doesn't wear underwear under his kilt."

I winked at him. Figured a little flirting could put his mind at ease. He laughed.

"So, what are you good at? And why are you looking for me? This place isn't well-known to *gringo* tourists."

I smiled. "Yet you're here."

"I'm not a tourist. And I was born in Medellin, Colombia, a city where the tango is at least as popular as it is in Buenos Aires. Carlos Gardel is its patron saint. You didn't answer my questions."

I wasn't sure who Gardel was. I could ask the group's AI network if I had my dongle plugged into the side of my head. Some people in the audience had theirs.

"I'll table the first question. The answer to the second one is Project Orion."

"Ah, the Hunter, with Almitak, Alnilam, and Mintaka forming the belt where the guns dangle, ready to be used on the bad guys. I don't have anything to do with Project Orion anymore."

"Even if it's been revived?"

"Why? I was the only survivor of my unit. I spent six months in a hospital and rehab."

He tapped his left arm. I'd already sensed it was prosthetic. Good job, although it was old technology. My prosthetics were greatly improved.

He continued his critique. "Does the group want to injure and kill more good people? Or go after old fascist farts who are already two breaths away from dying? Or the new upstarts who think fascism is a holy religion? Time will seal the first ones' fate and revolution will end the last ones' existence, if Gaia manages to survive the fascists' onslaught, that is."

"We're after the new flatulence," I said. "And stopping their movements cold, if we can."

He frowned. "I'd worry more about the US and Europe because of their complete turn to the right than the South American traditional hideouts for old Nazis. Correction: neo-Nazis. All the old Nazis are dead, fortunately."

I nodded. "I understand the sentiment. But there's a nexus between all these groups. Fascists aren't stupid. They can use social media and the dark web as well as or better than Arab fanatics or the radical left, who are also fascists."

"Ah, the proverbial circle. It's not a linear spectrum, its ends looping into a point called fascism. The radical left is depleted. And why don't we just let them all kill each other? The far-right has no use for terrorists or the far-left. Arabs are considered inferior too. As well as Hispanics, Blacks, and Jews, who make up most of the South American population. Those are the good guys. The bad ones are all fascists."

"But the far-right taps into the halls of power in the extinct western democracies much more efficiently. And that gives them a technical advantage."

Juan Carlos looked around. Funny he should now worry about spies and informers now after that little debate. *Maybe he's careless because he's getting old?*

"All right, I'll hear your spiel. But not here, even though it's noisy enough to bury our words. Let's take a taxi ride. You just never know who's listening. The fascists here in Argentina know me. Fortunately they think I'm harmless now, just an old man waiting to die. They probably know you as well, by the way, and probably don't consider you a harmless tourist."

In the taxi, we spoke Chinese. We'd both had dangerous tours in Beijing, about fifteen years apart. That country was fascist coming from the left, using Juan Carlos's circle metaphor. With his bit of Native American blood, Juan Carlos could pass for Chinese. In China, I'd just pretended to be a tourist, although my main task there had been to recruit counterintelligence agents.

The taxi driver spoke neither English nor Chinese. Probably wondered why we were speaking Mandarin, but that was his problem. Argentina under the new junta might as well be part of the PRC, where both the P and R were now a complete joke. Thought they might get to Mars first, though, if they and other fascists didn't destroy the Earth before that.

“So the plan is to revive and expand Project Orion? Sounds like some wild anti-fa politico somewhere in the group has a bug up his ass. And why involve me? I’m an old man, like I said, and I’m retired.”

“You had some success in the old project.”

“Plenty. But remember that six-month hospital stay. I don’t want to repeat it.” He winked at me. “Another one like that could affect my tango dancing and bandoneon playing, assuming I lived through it.”

“Did you become involved with our group in Medellin?”

“As a young gofer. Pablo Escobar lived in the same neighborhood. My parents feared him and his minions; they also hated his guts. As fascist as they come, in spite of his entrepreneurial success. His wife was the smart one. She invested in artwork. Was living off it after he left for hell to sell drugs to the Devil. What difference does any of that make?”

This guy is too talkative! Maybe alone too long? “Just confirming that you have spent a lot of time working for the group. That means you’re a survivor, but I guess you deserved to retire.”

“Thank you for acknowledging that.”

The taxi was traveling along the *Avenida Nueve de Julio* but soon turned off into a side street. The instructions to the driver had been to show the tourists a bit of the city. The driver had been happy to oblige, thinking of the big fare and tip.

Juan Carlos had paused to consider what next to say. I could see that in his facial expressions. My added software had enhanced that innate ability most agents have.

“I’ll admit I’m curious enough to want some more information about what Project Orion means for the group now. I don’t think I can offer much help, though.”

“We need someone to lead the South American effort. Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, Peru, and Chile.”

“The Southern Cone, where in the twentieth century the CIA wanted to make the world safe for fascism. Stroessner, the Argentine Junta’s Dirty War, Pinochet—all those *diablos* who were their willing accomplices, including many priests in the Catholic Church.”

“I assume you don’t want South America to return to those good old days?”

“But it already has. Not much one old fool can do about it either. But, like I said, the US and Europe are more worrisome now because of their technical prowess. Arab and Asian countries are fans of fascism too. Maybe everyone wants to be a fascist. Fascists here, fascists there, oink, oink, if you catch the *Animal Farm* reference. Seems that way. Fascists here, fascists there, fascists everywhere spreading pigs’ *mierda* all over the masses.”

“The group wants to stop fascism in its tracks. Always has.”

“Do tell. A noble goal, but an impossible one, as fascism’s successes in the last decades have shown. Human beings are tribal, and fascism appeals to their paranoid fears where others who aren’t understood become the enemies. The us-against-them syndrome.”

“And what would happen if we can eliminate the *diablos* who take advantage of those fears?”

“You’d be going against human nature, like I said.” Juan Carlos indicated to the taxi driver he should turn left at an intersection. “If you can’t give me more information about the new Orion, I’m no longer interested.”

“How ‘bout if we go discuss the project at one of the group’s safe houses?”

“That’s possible, I suppose.” He looked at his watch. “Two-forty a.m. I’ll take you back to your hotel. We’ll meet there for breakfast tomorrow, say nine, and go to your damned safe

house. No commitment on my part. Just curiosity for now. I'll be watching out for a trap, by the way."

"You're paranoid."

"In our business, you have to be."

SAMPLE

Chapter Three Charleston, South Carolina

Craig Samuelson waved the secret report. "Have you read this?"

"Don't make a big deal about it, sir," said Jerry Lawton. "We took care of them, didn't we? Every time we do, they'll be less motivated."

Craig stood, turned his back on Jerry, and savored the view from his office window. He had the best one in the FSA capital. The Free States of America hadn't quite reinstated slavery. Hard to do that when non-whites were fleeing for their lives. Those fleeing also included whites who didn't agree with his policies. In the big picture, he preferred fewer people. Smaller numbers were easier to control.

His father had been one of the leaders of the separatist movement. The United States of America hadn't been united for a long time, even when fools were pretending it was. The bifurcation into the FSA and ADR, or American Democratic Republic, was still ongoing. Learning about a hit squad that wanted to kill him hadn't been good news.

He turned to Jerry. "Were they from the ADR?"

Jerry smiled. "We just took them out, sir. We didn't have time to say hi and discuss current affairs in the world over tea."

Craig nodded. "I'm just asking your opinion."

"The ADR has a lot of infighting. And they're as strict as we are about following rules. I'd be surprised if they could organize such an operation, or would even want to do so. We're convenient enemies for each other."

Craig ignored the editorializing. "Then who organized the hit squad?"

"There are rumors that there's a worldwide group that goes after fascist leaders."

"We're not fascists! We only want to be left alone. We don't need all these brown and black impurities in our gene pool. We don't need queers or other criminals either. The whole world feels the same way. It's us against them, Jerry."

"Yes, sir. You're right, sir. Would you like me to see if we can organize something beyond the FSA borders to go after these people? That would take additional funding."

"No. We don't want to have anything to do with the rest of the world. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir. But we might not be able to prevent future plots against you otherwise."

Craig sank into his plush chair and sighed. "I suppose you're right. Do something on the sly. Top secret. I need to carry on the old man's work, and I can't do that if I'm dead."

After Jerry left, Craig had a few shots of bourbon to calm down. He'd clawed his way to the top. After his father passed, the FSA had been in turmoil. Their beloved leader had ruled with an iron hand, but the vultures didn't waste time picking at his bones. The senior Samuelson had his ostentatious state funeral, and then all hell broke loose, with everyone vying for power. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, Craig had taken over, claiming it was God's will. After putting opposition leaders in jail or killing them, his rule had become even more tyrannical than his father's.

His state had been one of the reddest in the old United States, and his father had been a fire-and-brimstone preacher who had wanted to make the FSA into a theocracy that ignored that Devil's minion in Rome and all his wicked disciples, and tortured and murdered anyone from other religions, especially Jews and Muslims. Papa Samuelson hadn't made a complete sweep of the riffraff, and his son realized that the economy needed workers of all kinds. People fleeing to the ADR had exacerbated the labor shortage, so he let up a bit on the persecution. The ADR closing its borders also had helped. Things were settling down a bit now, although his popularity hadn't improved.

And now this! He jabbed a pen into a blank pad, spilling some whiskey. He wondered if any FSA people had been helping the wannabe assassins. He'd have to amp up the fear a bit. *Choose some obnoxious journalists and accuse them of plotting against him, for example?* No, the journalists were already in his pocket for the most part—the obnoxious ones had either fled or were dead. As long as those remaining in the FSA followed the rules about reporting on his government, they escaped his wrath. *Besides, I want to keep that hit squad under wraps.* He didn't want to give anyone ideas, after all.

But there were many ways to amp up fear. He'd order the legislature to increase taxes and then make an example of those who protested against God's will. He reached for the phone to call the Speaker of the House, a toady who approved anything the FSA leader wanted.

I'm not doing anything more than other leaders around the world, damn them to hell!

Chapter Four

At a Buenos Aires Hotel

Juan Carlos watched Jasmine enter the hotel. He then paid the driver and followed her inside.

"I'd like to leave a message for Jasmine Locke who is also staying here," he told the desk clerk, who then handed him a message pad.

He wrote: "Make it nine-twenty. r/Juan Carlos."

He watched the clerk stick it into a cubbyhole. He now knew where Jasmine's room was—number 312.

He went up to his own room on the fifth floor and checked his James Bond-style alarm. He'd read some of those old novels. One of his few surviving hairs plucked and stuck in the door jam and a camera inset in the peephole—low and high tech...and no danger. He entered with confidence until he spotted the note that someone had shoved under the door. It read: "Thanks for the tango. r/Jasmine."

I'll be damned, he thought. *How'd she know I was here?* He changed hotels every time he journeyed to the port city from his hideaway in Salta. He decided she or the group had just waited for one of those trips to make it easy for them. But that also meant they probably didn't know where he lived in Salta, which was a good thing.

He took off the fancy shirt with ruffles he used when *milonga*-hopping and his undershirt and looked at the old scars. They itched for some reason. Especially around the prosthetic. *Is that a premonition of things to come?*

He wondered how much of Jasmine was real woman. When they were dancing, all of her seemed real. The group's techies must have improved both hardware and software if she was only part human. And she'd lied. She could dance. *What is her story?* He figured something in her past had brought her into the group.

He didn't have many hours to sleep, and he didn't sleep well. At breakfast Jasmine Locke looked a lot better than he did when he slid into the booth opposite her, although, even with light makeup and lipstick, she'd also looked better the night before.

"Coffee's good," she said.

"Questionable. Brazil's next door. I'm partial to Colombian, for obvious reasons. What did you order?"

"The tropical fresh fruit plate. Brazil's next door."

He studied the menu. "Southwest scramble with a side of bacon for me. I assume they mean US Southwest. Why not just call it Mexican?"

"There are significant variations—Tex-Mex, Californian, New Mexican, Tijuana, Monterrey."

"So you're an expert on *gringolandia* without living there? Are you going to be contradicting me all day?"

"Just providing information."

"The information I require is about what I might be getting into."

She thought a moment. "Did you know Karl Wilson?"

"Ha! We called him the dumb Marx brother—Karl, get it? Besides, he was often an old Groucho, not *gaucho*, if you know your trivia. Great drinking buddy, old Karl. Miss him, just hearing his name."

“Old Karl is dead.”

Juan Carlos, who had just scooped up a pat of butter for his biscuit, stopped his knife in midair. “Job-related death?”

“Yes, but don’t ask me for details. You’ll soon know them.”

He put the knife and biscuit down. “*Mierda!* That’s a turn-off. I’m retired, Jasmine. I’m done with this dangerous assassin and spying crap. I survived, and I want to keep it that way.”

“No desire to revenge his death?”

“More scared about having to face a global fascist movement in order to do that. What about you?”

She shrugged. “I have motives beyond revenging his death, but that’s one of them.”

“I never figured you for a death-wish woman.”

She now frowned. “Shut up and eat your breakfast.”

The safe house was in the Argentine capital’s suburbs. Juan Carlos drove Jasmine’s rental car.

“This had better be interesting,” he said. “That big breakfast is making me groggy even with that foul but strong coffee.”

“Just drive. I’m—”

Juan Carlos only had time to swerve a bit before the Mercedes-Benz truck T-boned their car and pushed it onto the sidewalk against the wall of a building, pinning it. Blood streaming down his face, he sniffed a bit. *No gasoline spill*. He drew his gun and waited.

When a man stuck his head through the driver’s side window, Juan Carlos shot him between the eyes, opened the door, and used it as a shield. Jasmine squeezed out beside him, gun in hand.

“Left!” he warned.

She took out two cops, and Juan Carlos put down the man dressed in worker’s clothes—the driver of the truck.

“Let’s get out of here!” she said.

They scarpered to an alleyway as sirens, faint at first, rose above the din of traffic and screams from pedestrians.

I guess I’m involved, thought Juan Carlos, following behind Jasmine. She was like a wild deer leaving the wolves behind, and he kept looking back to see if they were following. *I have to watch who I dance a tango with from now on!*

Chapter Five

Two Buenos Aires Safe Houses

"That was a cluster-fuck," said Blair Cranston.

"Would you prefer that we'd let them kill us?" said Juan Carlos.

I glanced at one man and then the other. Juan Carlos was a lot like Karl. Blair Cranston had been a field agent, but I knew that right then he was worried more about exposing our group.

"They knew where we were going, Blair," I said. "That's not on us. The group's local cabal must be under surveillance."

"Or there's a mole," said Juan Carlos. "I think we're in danger here whoever is right. After your aptly described cluster-fuck, I only agreed to accompany Jasmine because two guns are better than one. You can have your damn Project Orion. It's looking too much like the old one."

Blair nodded. "I've given the order to evacuate. We have other places. The Argentine *junta* is better than we thought. All the more reason they have to be stopped."

"They probably have more trucks than you do," said Juan Carlos. He turned to me. "Are we good? If so, I'm out of here."

"Go with us," I said. "The three of us have a lot to discuss."

"No we don't. The group is playing a deadly game it can't win. Never could. I already cashed in my chips. You can keep playing if you want, but fascists always win. They have more personnel, and they're smarter. Safe house, my ass. They were probably just going to torture either Jasmine or me to find out more about the group."

"It's possible they knew about you two but don't know where the safe house is," said Blair.

"But then they'd find out by torturing us," said Jasmine. "We're wasting time. I find Juan Carlos's intentions admirable, but I came here to warn you. Let's resume this discussion at the next safe house." I looked at Juan Carlos. "Please."

I saw him glance at Blair, but he turned to me with a smile. "Just for you, Jasmine. Guess I'm still curious." He rubbed his left ribs. "You drive this time, though."

"You'll both be in the back seat. Jose will drive, and I'll be in the passenger's seat."

The next safe house was farther away from the city, almost to Mar de Plata.

"*La distancia no hace mas seguridad*," said Juan Carlos, taking a seat at the multiuse kitchen table. Guards were watching at the windows.

I had to agree with Juan Carlos. The distance from the city didn't make us more secure. I felt better with guards watching at the windows, though, both in the front and back of the safe house.

Blair took a seat beside me. "Let's forget Project Orion's generalities for the moment. We need to find this Rodrigo Jimenez, Juan Carlos. Any ideas?"

"I've heard of him up Asuncion way. Someone has to infiltrate the Asuncion cadre and learn more about him. Knowing he's an import-export tycoon doesn't help us at all, except he's my competitor, in a sense. I want to know how he contributed to Karl's death and what his plans are before we kill him."

"I thought you didn't want revenge," I said.

"Men can be capricious too, *dulcecita*," said Juan Carlos. "That someone can't be me, by the way. I'm too well known in the Southern Cone, especially Asuncion where I have a few business interests."

"That would have to be me," I said. "I know the language."

"You'll have to dye your hair and darken your skin a bit. You Nordic types can't pass as a local."

"Maybe my grandparents were Nazis who fled to Argentina," I said with a smile. But I took off my wig, revealing my bald pate. "No room for hair roots in the syntho skin." I chose another subroutine for my skin color, making it a light brown. Another subroutine slanted my eyes slightly and added more cheekbone, adding a bit of indigenous look. "Work for you?"

"Hell yes. The perfect spy."

"I prefer to call myself an agent or assassin, depending on the op."

"You'll be both," said Blair. "Let's hash out some details."

Chapter Six

Asuncion

“We’re organizing a worldwide effort against this group,” Rodrigo Jimenez told Jerry Lawton. “I knew the FSA would want to join that effort when I received your inquiry about our group. Let me fill you in about what we learned in Budapest.”

After Jimenez finished his briefing, Lawton leaned back in his chair and studied Jimenez. *How can Samuelson and Jimenez be so much alike?* Both men were narcissistic and needed to have their egos stroked. Both men used violence to further their agendas. And both were so stupid that they depended on others to maintain them in power.

No, not stupid; oblivious. Jerry had suggested contact with Jimenez’s organization, and Samuelson had trumpeted the idea as if he’d come up with it. If Jerry wasn’t so comfortable in his position where he had Samuelson’s ear, he’d oust the bastard.

“That’s quite a story, but I like your organization more than the story,” Jerry said. “Makes those World War Two Axis powers seem like something organized by kindergartners. Congratulations. That was a clever idea. But what are we going to do about this Karl’s organization. Seems like they’re organized too.”

“It’s a secret war,” said Rodrigo, “and we have to launch more attacks. Our friends in Hungary are using Karl’s information to chase down our enemies in that country. Yes, we have to expose them in each country and exterminate the infestation. But my plans go farther.” He paused and waved his right hand at the ceiling. “God wants our planet to be in peace. I want that too. Your boss and others like him stand in the way of that. Help me, Jerry, and I will make it worth your while.”

“In what way can I help? You seem to have things under control.”

“Do you know what the masses call me?”

“I have no clue. I only just met you.”

“*El Vengador*. The Avenger. I live in the shadows, but that’s what they call me. I’m an avenging angel doing God’s work. My plan is to eliminate all the vermin, wipe them off the face of the planet.”

I’ve heard that line before. Even old kings used God to justify their atrocities. As Goebbels said, say something often enough and people will believe it. He couldn’t make them believe Hitler was a god, but he sure made them believe in the Third Reich and their Final Solution. Is Rodrigo planning a worldwide pogrom of anyone who stands in his way?

Those thoughts sent chills up Jerry’s spine.

After Jerry Lawton assured Rodrigo Jimenez that the FSA would help the South American tyrant all they could, short of conquest of other allies, Rodrigo felt he’d made progress. The last man he had told his plans to had laughed in his face. That man was now dead. As his plans proceeded, they would all come around or suffer the same fate.

There was a knock on the door.

“*Siga!*”

The corpulent fellow who entered showed the usual deference to the great man, bowing his head slightly. “I have news, great leader.”

“Spit it out! I don’t have time to waste.” Actually he did, but Rodrigo loved saying that, and he also loved to berate his underlings.

“Our attacks in Buenos Aires failed. Juan Carlos still lives.”

Incompetents. My agents are incompetent. “Give me details.”

There weren’t many: Some eyewitness accounts and other information learned from police reports. Everyone attributed the attack to the Argentine *junta*. That he’d planned, and not a failure.

“Just why is this Juan Carlos a target?” said his aide. “Reports from around here say he’s just an old businessman with his hands in a lot of pies.”

“Juan Carlos and I go way back. He knew me by another name back then. I’m just in clean-up mode. We need to get rid of past enemies as well as go after present and future ones. Who was the person with him?”

“No one is sure. Whoever it was moved very fast and was an expert shot.”

Had Juan Carlos teamed up with the group Jerry and he had just finished discussing? Did his old enemy know El Vengador’s true identity?

“Okay, you failed. We failed. Tell our agents to follow Juan Carlos as much as possible. Let’s not fail again.”

Chapter Seven

Buenos Aires Safe House

I wanted to learn more about Rodrigo Jimenez. The safe house had a state-of-art connection to the net, complete with interactive helmet to speed up searches through massive databases with an AI's help. I should say intranet; it was our own internet that had taps into the fascist countries government databases. Those countries had banned internet use among their citizens, of course.

I took out my personalized dongle and plugged it into the side of my head and then connected its leads to the helmet's input/output jacks. While the dongle could use an RF link, the bandwidth was larger with the helmet...and more secure. RF can always be intercepted. I became one with the net and began my search.

The high bandwidth sped up the search, allowing me to mind-meld with the AI, but I still spent over three hours. I then gave up. I had a wealth of information about the history of fascism in Paraguay and the Southern Cone in general, but little on Rodrigo. He seemed to be a sympathizer of a movement called *Libertad con Responsabilidad*. Some name! Fascists neither want liberty nor responsibility for others. Everyone must bow to those in power. Still, the name was a beginning.

The name he called himself was even more twisted—*El Vengador*, the Avenger. I wondered how many lives our group had lost to find that out! His shtick was purification—he wanted to purify Earth. Only then could there be true liberty through responsibility under God's watchful eye.

I never could figure out why some people bought into this crap, but they did. At least the Argentine junta was more down to earth—tyrants in the old-school sense, coming from the leftist side and tracing its origins back to Peron.

For some reason, Karl had thought Rodrigo was key. I wondered why. Jimenez looked a little like Peter Lorre. I saw the actor once as a gambling man in some old Hitchcock TV show. The only photo we had of Rodrigo was taken in his nightclub in Montevideo with three bimbos draped around him.

We had no details about his financial situation. He moved in the rich circles of power in the Southern Cone but mostly in the background. I was developing an image of him as a ruthless manipulator of fascist sympathizers, though. *What is this man's life below the tip of the iceberg?*

"We'll take a corporate jet from Jorge Newbery Airpark to fly to Asuncion," said Juan Carlos as I climbed into the backseat of the Mercedes. The irony was never lost on me that we often used these cars once preferred by Nazi VIPs. And that scurrilous North Korean dictator as well—may his soul rot in hell. "Ted knows the way, so let's talk about the mission."

"We're assuming they don't know me. That's a big assumption."

"You've changed your name and eyes and hair color. I don't know anything else we can do."

"I can change my eye and hair color at will. It's just software."

He glanced at me. "Yes, we might need that again. What else do I need to know about you, other than you're a great shooter?"

"I'm more machine than flesh, so you should just be prepared for surprises."

"That's not a good answer. We're working on this together. But I didn't feel anything artificial when we were dancing that tango."

"The designers had talent."

He paused to think that over. "What about down there?"

The devil actually pointed. I smiled. "Why are you asking?"

"Just asking. I'm a hot Latino."

"And I'm known as a cold Scottish lass. Let's get back to the mission. How do we know that Rodrigo's club will have a job waiting?"

"Cranston ordered a little kidnapping. There will be two openings in the dance group."

"Dance group? I'm not qualified for that. We'll have to call Cranston."

"I suggested it. The group does only Moulin Rouge numbers. I'll show you a video after we arrive. You have good legs."

"And how does that get me hooked up with Rodrigo?"

"He likes to drape girls all over him. Most of them are his employees. Or so I'm told. I've never actually met the bastard even though he's a competitor in a few things."

I thought of the pic of Rodrigo with the girls. "Yes. That could work."

Chapter Eight

Jorge Newbery Airport

They were waiting for us when we rode the tiny bus out to the plane.

It was a good thing I went in first. I saw the two-man crew had guns and attacked. Their reactions were too slow. Peripheral vision told me they'd been drinking as I bounded over seats and tackled one who died quickly. I used his body as a shield, still feeling the impact of bullets, and then his gun, eliminating the other crewmember.

"*Mierda!* That was amazing," said Juan Carlos. He'd been peeking into the cabin from the jet way.

"I'm dripping. Help me plug the leak!"

"I don't see—oh."

I had my blouse up. A bit of green lubricant was dripping from where a bullet had passed through my left-side exoskeleton.

"There must be a first-aid kit in the galley. Find a bandage. You can just wrap it around the tube. My sensors and auto-diagnostic software tell me it's mostly intact."

After Juan Carlos played TV doctor with my inner plumbing, we frisked the corpses.

"These aren't our people," he concluded.

"No kidding. But where are the real crewmembers?"

"Probably dead. Doesn't matter. I'll fly the damn plane. I'll need a copilot."

"I've only flown old prop planes and made water landings."

"That's good enough. Let's wave the port goodbye."

As we taxied down the runway, I was wondering how our enemies had found out about our flight. *Does that mean our mission is doomed before it even starts?*

"You're from Colombia, you say?" said the club's manager.

"Manizales. A lot of Colombians are fair-skinned. Our *Paisa* ancestors emigrated from Spain to the country when the Spanish king kicked out all the Jews. My ancestors had already converted to Catholicism, but they still wanted to put that *hijo de puta* king behind them."

"Too much information, Rosita."

My name in Asuncion would be Rosa Barrera. He'd used the diminutive, which meant he might already be looking me over as a future conquest. *Let him try!*

"Let's see you dance, *querida*."

He used his cellphone and played "*Galop Infernal*" from Offenbach, the quintessential can-can music. I'd been a fast learner at the *pension* where Juan Carlos and I were staying. I sensed the beat and then started my routine.

When the music stopped, I stood in front of him, not even breathing hard. "How's that? I can adapt to the group's routine, of course. I just improvised."

"You did fine. You're hired. When Lulu comes in, tell her I hired you. Right now, let's get Draco to give us some refreshment. Follow me."

I'd jumped to conclusions about the manager. He was a nice, mature man of German descent in his fifties. Turned out he had a new young wife and three kids from a previous marriage. He didn't make any passes.

He asked questions about Colombia. I spouted stuff I'd learned, and he seemed satisfied. Rosa Barrera had graduated from the Universidad de Antioquia in 2023 with a major in theater arts and a minor in music. Because Colombians were also citizens of Paraguay—in some long forgotten war, they'd been the only ones who supported the Paraguayan people—she'd migrated to Asuncion to look for work. She'd found none in Medellin.

Lulu was nice enough too, but she gave me a warning.

"The boss likes to use us more than in an ornamental fashion sometimes, if you know what I mean."

"Do you mean the old man? He's like a teddy bear."

"No, Rodrigo, the owner. Are you on birth control?" I nodded. "Good. He sometimes wants to fool around, the bastard. If you know what I mean."

"I couldn't just cut his balls off?"

She laughed. "You could try, but you might want to increase your life insurance before doing so."

I didn't have any life insurance. Too complicated. They kept personal data on those insured.

Chapter Nine

Asuncion

“Who’s the new *chiquita*?” said Rodrigo.

The club manager was watching the high kicks. *That Rosa’s a find!*

“Rosa Barrera. *Colombiana*. From Manizales originally. She fits right in.”

“Too bad we can’t clone her. Do you think the two we lost became lesbian lovers and eloped?”

The manager shrugged. “Anything’s possible these days, sir.”

“I hate that shit. It’s against God’s will. Homos, Jews, left-wingers—they’re all alike. Scourge of the Earth, they are. Immoral bastards. We have to eliminate them.”

“Yes, sir.” The manager was used to Rodrigo’s rants.

“I want to get to know this Rosita,” said Rodrigo. “If you know what I mean.”

“After the routine, I’ll have her come to the table.”

Rodrigo seemed to sulk the more he waited. *He’s such a pig*, thought the manager. *I’d never trust my daughters with him. And a hypocrite!* He pretended to be a godly man but treated women in ungodly ways.

The manager needed his job, so he never said anything. But his ear had caught nuances in the new girl’s Spanish that worried him. Maybe it was just that *Paisa* accent from Medellin—he’d heard it often enough when Pablo’s cartel had dominated the city—but there seemed to be something else.

He nursed his *cuba libre* and matched Rodrigo’s mood as they waited in the shadows at the back of the club, out of sight from everyone else. He hated the spot, but Rodrigo insisted on it. He was a man who lived in the shadows. He was a coward who thought that was safer.

Rodrigo had already heard that Juan Carlos’s plane had safely landed at the airport. His men had failed again. But a spy, a Jorge Newbery baggage handler, had informed him Juan Carlos had shoved out his men’s bodies and taken off before authorities knew what was happening. They later found the crewmembers in a men’s room.

You can count on the Junta being sloppy, he thought. *That’s why we need someone strong to bring order and peace to the world.*

He had come too far to give up on his dream of a united Earth under his rule. Samuelson and leaders like him were too weak. He was strong. Once he had Juan Carlos out of the way, he would move on that man Karl’s little group of leftists and obliterate them completely. After that, it was only a matter of time.

He’d find someone to do the PR and marketing so people would love the peace he brought to the world. That was all easier now. Goebbels would have loved all the modern media opportunities to brainwash gullible people and cause them to hate others. Most people were stupid and filled with prejudices. It was his duty to mold them and bend them to his will to establish peace on Earth. He would be Plato’s philosopher king doing God’s work.

Long ago, Juan Carlos Benavides had become a business competitor. Rodrigo blamed him back then for Rodrigo’s loss of several lucrative business deals. He hated the man for that, but he also hated him for his good reputation.

I have no reputation because I live in the shadows. Some day that will change!

SAMPLE

Chapter Ten Rodrigo's Club

I sat with them, smiling first at the manager and then at Rodrigo. The gnomish owner's intentions weren't clear. After some pleasantries and questions about why I'd emigrated from Colombia, the conversation took another tack.

"I must congratulate you. You fit right in to our dance group." The beamish Rodrigo flashed his perfect teeth. *Implants?*

"I'm happy you think so. I needed a job. I think the customers' applause was for the ensemble, though. All the girls are good dancers."

"We intercepted some customers' texts. They liked the new addition. That's you, and it means they'll be back. This is a business, you know. If we give the people what they want, they'll come back." He reached under the table and rested his hand on my upper leg. "That works for me too. You'll go far here if we become good friends, if you know what I mean."

I smiled but inwardly shuddered. "Lulu told me. I can show you a good time. Listen! A tango. Do you dance, *Señor Jimenez?*"

"Yes, but I'm usually the one asking. I'll lead, though."

"Of course."

Rodrigo danced a sexy tango. His hands danced too—all over my body. It was disgusting, but it was my job. I'd later analyze why I could survive the experience by thinking of Juan Carlos.

But Rodrigo was called away, so I was left alone with the manager.

"The boss is a good dancer," I observed.

"Many Latinos are good dancers, as you well know. My German heritage gets in my way, I fear. My wife complains about it."

"Maybe she should learn the polka?"

"Prussian blood, not Bavarian." He smiled but then turned serious. "Be careful with Rodrigo. He likes rough sex. Even the kind where you have to put a plastic bag over your head."

"I'm not into S&M," I said.

"He's more S than M."

In the wee hours of the morning, Rodrigo still hadn't returned. Only the bartender was left cleaning up along with his assistant, who was stacking chairs on table tops. I decided to take a tour of the club's offices. They were in the back where the loos were, so I figured it wouldn't seem odd that I would visit them before heading home.

With the prosthetics, I had a lot of strength, but I couldn't just wrench the door knob out of the door. But I could pick the lock, using my augmented hearing to sense the tumblers revolving. In five seconds, I was inside.

Desk and file cabinets were unlocked. I went through their contents in a flash. Mostly boring business stuff associated with the club. I used my built-in RF link to upload some copies to the group's secure cloud maintained by its AI network, but I doubted they would be useful.

In a closer examination of the office, I found a wall safe hidden behind the painting of a nude. It had an electronic combination lock, fingerprint ID, and a retina scanner. It would take

some doing to break into it. I was calculating how long when my super-hearing picked up Rodrigo's voice at the club's entrance.

I slipped out of the office and entered the women's WC. When I heard the door to his office close again, I returned to the main club area.

"*Hasta mañana*," I said to the bartender and his aide as I left.

That safe would be on my short list for finding more about *El Vengador* and his *Libertad con Responsibilidad* group of friends.

SAMPLE

Chapter Eleven

At the *Pension*

Juan Carlos and I were having some *aguardiente* in his *pension* room, that potent Colombian drink made from fermented sugar cane and flavored with anise, when I put my finger to my lips to silence him. That early in the morning there were few noises to be heard. Of course, even if there were noises, my noise-cancellation software would help me separate signal from noise.

I held up my right hand, counting to four for the four men who had just come up the stairs and were in the hallway. He nodded, went to his briefcase, and took out four guns. They all had silencers. He tossed me two, and we took positions at opposite sides of the door. He then killed the lights. Made no difference to me: my IR sensors kicked in.

There was a loud knock. A voice said, "*Policia!*"

In a fascist state, even the police are dangerous, but Rodrigo shook his head in the negative, confirming my opinion.

I laughed out loud, startling Juan Carlos. "*Vayanse. Estamos ocupados y no vestidos.*" I was telling them to go because we were occupied and not dressed. If they were Latinos, they'd fill in the details.

Some people just don't respect lovers' privacy. They broke down the door. The laser beams looked for targets in the gloom but found none.

"Drop your weapons!" Juan Carlos said.

Luckily he jumped aside. The firefight that ensued went bad for the four intruders. We stared at their bodies.

"Besides the fact that we now have four more weapons to add to our arsenal, this is another cluster-fuck," I said. "What are we going to do with the bodies?"

"At least I was right. They're not real cops." The four lay in pools of blood and brain matter. "Let's pile them into my bed. We'll clean up in your room and get a few hours of sleep. Early tomorrow, we'll get rid of the bodies and sheets." He jerked a thumb toward the window. "There's a convenient dumpster below for the bodies. I'll bribe a maid to clean up the rest."

He was so calm about it. As I lay beside him listening to his soft snores, I wondered why. *Maybe he's been doing this too long?*

The maid was calm too. Juan Carlos told her they were gang members. A large bill sealed the deal. We went down to breakfast. He was humming a tango. I thought it was "*Malena*," but without the lyrics, I couldn't be sure.

"You seem happy enough," I said as we took our seats at the table.

The *pension*'s old owner immediately arrived with coffee, so he only nodded.

"I'm happy to be alive," he said after she left with our orders. He winked. "Sleeping with a beautiful woman does that to a man."

"Nothing happened, so get over it. And we just killed four people. That always upsets me. I often wonder if we stoop as low as the people we're trying to stop."

"That's why I got out of the business." He eyed me. "How do you propose to get into that safe?"

"I can be obvious and just rip its door off its hinges, or I can be more subtle. The latter takes more time. And the real problem is to get into that office again. I'll have to wait for early morning like I did last time. At least I know what's of interest now."

He shrugged. "There might not be anything interesting in that safe."

"Maybe. But there could be in another one, even if it's just a dedicated laptop. He wouldn't trust any info with a bank's safety deposit box, would he?"

He shook his head. "Probably not. He'd want it close too. I don't think I can help you there."

I nodded. I delayed saying anything until the old woman put our platters in front of us. On them was *chipá* and *carne asada* with a *huevo frito* on top. That was a lot more than I usually ate, but I was hungry and didn't know when I would eat again.

My appointment with Rodrigo's safe was in my future, but I wondered if the SOB would try to hit on me. After that pawing tango, I believed he might try.

Chapter Twelve

Rodrigo's Club

"How's my sweetheart doing?" Rodrigo asked me.

I was sitting with Lulu backstage.

"*Buenas noches, Señor Jimenez,*" we both said.

"I'll see you after the show," he said, smiling at me. "I would like to take you on a tour of my mansion."

We watched him leave.

"You're in trouble now," said Lulu. "Be careful. He's a sadist."

"Someone else told me that. Have you ever been to his mansion?"

"Not recently. He grows tired of his conquests."

"Can you describe it to me? If I really get in trouble, maybe there's somewhere to hide."

"That's not likely. His goons are all over the place. There's the main floor that looks like a drug lord's been decorating—all kinds of expensive artwork without rhyme or reason, except a lot of it on the second floor features naked people. If you're lucky, he'll just show you that to see your reaction. Believe me, his penis can't compare with those in the paintings and on the statues."

"How many rooms are there on the first floor?"

"I never counted them. In the basement and attic are servants quarters, and there are twelve bedrooms on the second floor, eleven for guests. The goons camp out in the carriage house in the back next to the huge garage that contains all his expensive cars."

"Maybe I can say I'm interested in those to distract him. I suppose the real valuable things he keeps in a bank?"

"What? Are you going to rob him?"

I smiled. "Maybe. That would pay better than dancing in this club."

She laughed. "Go for it, girl! I'd love to see someone do that to him. A bit of payback for what he's done to me and the other dancers."

"So I'm guessing there's a vault in the mansion?"

"In the study. I saw it opened once when he called me in. He wanted to do it on the floor in front of the study's fireplace."

"How romantic." I thought a moment. "If I don't succeed, please come to my funeral."

"You're so depressing. If you don't succeed, make sure you take him and some of the goons out. They're all SOBs."

Rodrigo went to another club to meet with Jerry Lawton.

"I think we've located Juan Carlos," Rodrigo said to Lawton.

The *gringo* shrugged. "I'm a big picture fellow, remember? I don't give a shit about your personal vendettas. I thought I came down here to meet your people and plan a world war on leftists. We have a lot of information. Let's exterminate the bastards."

"With your cash infusions, that will be possible. I have people negotiating with arms dealers right now." He smiled. "Some even want to join up. They'll make millions, of course."

The smile turned to a frown. “But I again lost men who went after Juan Carlos, four of them. We need him dead before I can proceed.”

“Juan Carlos is small potatoes. Don’t lose your focus and become myopic. Our movement is too important for that.”

“We are in agreement. But Juan Carlos might be a thorn in our side for a long time if we don’t eliminate him. Little by little, Mr. Lawton. That’s always been the secret of my success. The Roman Empire wasn’t built in a day.”

“I believe in the adage it was the city of Rome, but I like your version better. We’re working on the new empire where the best rulers can rule. So when do I meet your people?”

“Tomorrow night. I’m busy the rest of the evening.”

“I’ll take in some clubs then.”

“Not mine, *por favor*. We shouldn’t be seen together that much, or even associated. I work in the shadows, remember. Most of our organization doesn’t even know who I am. I want to keep it that way.”

“There are other clubs.”

Chapter Thirteen At Rodrigo's Club

Before Rodrigo returned to the club to take me to his mansion, I inspected the safe in his club office. All the material in there had to do with club business, so that sleuthing campaign was a bust. Lots of *guaranis* and other South American cash too, as well as other currency from everywhere else. I resisted the temptation to “borrow” some of that just to stick it to Rodrigo—I didn’t need the money, of course.

In the WC, I called Juan Carlos and told him about my plans for later at the mansion.

“Be careful, Jasmine. You’re walking into the Devil’s lair.”

“I’m sure there’s a tango about that.”

“Piazzolla’s ‘Libertango’ is often called the ‘Devil’s Tango.’ And the latter often means humping it in bed, so that’s appropriate when it comes to Rodrigo. If you can, take a weapon.”

I tingled a bit in my lady parts when he spoke of humping it, thinking about Juan Carlos, not Rodrigo. *OK, Jasmine, you’re no longer a teen.* Still it was nice to know those parts still functioned. I ignored my colleague’s advice. I was sure I’d be roughly frisked by Rodrigo’s security staff.

“There was nothing of interest in the safe here, so it must be at the mansion. It’s the only logical place where he could have easy access.”

“Get anywhere near that vault, and he might kill you. Slowly, because he’s a sadist.”

“I’m a big girl. I can take care of yourself.”

“I know about some of your skills. They might not be enough. Plug into the group’s AI network so I can provide backup.”

“From outside the mansion? Don’t be naïve. But connecting is a good idea. I can scan everything I find and upload it to the network. No matter what happens to me, the group will get something. I hope it’s good enough to bring Rodrigo down.”

Asuncion isn’t a big city—about three-quarters of a million now, but smaller than Montevideo and Buenos Aires, also fascist capitals. Rodrigo’s limo driver soon took us out of the city proper to the mansion. Surrounding it was a wall with metal slats and barbed wire on top, all set in a rock/concrete base. Looked like the FSA’s southern border wall—I had to scale that once—but this one was a lot newer. Videocams were everywhere. The main gate opened with a squeal of hinges.

“The place is old,” said Rodrigo. “People tell me it was Stroessner’s son Freddy’s modest country estate. Just rumors, I suppose. There are plenty of old-timers here from Paraguay’s golden era who gossip about the good old days.”

Golden era? Papa Stroessner’s cohorts took advantage of the power the dictator wielded. *Fascismo uber alles!* That was their credo.

Colombian citizens were also Paraguayan citizens, but the two countries were linked in other ways. Rojas Pinilla came to power in Colombia in 1953; Stroessner came to power in Paraguay in 1954. They were both generals who became despots long before the generals of the Dirty War in Argentina and Pinochet in Chile. The latter were helped by the CIA; the former were self-made autocrats. Hard to choose between them all, not that I’d want to do so.

“You’ve landscaped it nicely,” I said, just to say something, as we drove up the long driveway.

“Maintaining this place is always a challenge. We made a lot of improvements after I purchased the property.” He put his hands on my thigh. “Like special bedrooms.”

And a vault in your study! I smiled at him—a smile as seductive as I could make it. *I must lead you on, you old bastard!*

“First I want a tour. I’ve never been inside a mansion.”

“It’s just my home outside the city. But of course, you shall have your tour.”

After a burly security guard frisked me and gave me a lecherous wink—how many women had he turned over to his boss?—we entered through the double front doors. I saw the double stairway to the second level, a sitting room to the right side of the stairway, and what looked like an old English library to the left.

“Is that your study now?”

“The walls are lined with first editions, so technically it’s still a library. Sometime I must read some of those books. There’s also a grand piano so that I can occasionally host soirees. But yes, I often work at the large desk that’s tucked into a corner. I need quiet when I think about plans and strategies.”

“For your businesses? I’m impressed.”

“Let’s visit the sitting room first.”

We entered the sitting room, and I immediately admired the artwork. There were a few family portraits, but most were paintings from the Renaissance forward to the early twentieth century. I wondered if some of them were paintings stolen by the Nazis in World War II. Paraguay and other countries in the Southern Cone had been havens for Nazis fleeing the allies’ justice.

I sent several images of paintings to our AI network while I pretended to study them.

“Are you a connoisseur of artwork?” said Rodrigo.

“I like it. The modern stuff too, like Botero and Obregon.”

“Famous Colombian artists. Of course. As you can see, I don’t have much room left here for paintings, and my tastes end at the impressionist movement.”

“Shouldn’t some of these be in a climate-controlled environment?”

“Those you think should be are copies. The originals are in a vault where only I can view them. I’m sorry.”

I shrugged. “Guess I’m too dumb to know the difference.”

He made no comment. *Maybe he thinks I’m dumb to even be at his mansion?*

“Next we tour my study.”

There I took note of some first editions. Or were they just copies too? But I saw an old edition of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, for example—not a first edition, but in good condition. I didn’t dare touch them.

I also saw a fake book in a bookcase where the cracks around it were a bit too wide compared to the other cases lining the walls, easy to confirm with my sensors. I knew it had to be the entrance to Rodrigo’s vault. I was lucky that Lulu had told me about it so I could look for it. Again I sent the image to the AI network. At least Juan Carlos or others would know the exact location of the vault.

Chapter Fourteen

The Mansion's Second Level

Instead of the debutante coming down one of the stairways, Rodrigo chaperoned me up the stairs, even offering his arm to help because the risers were high.

More paintings adorned the walls of the halls off the landing. There were busts and statues too. The artworks were now all erotic. *To set the mood?*

We stopped in front of a closed bedroom door. He eyed me.

"I think I have a negligee that will fit you perfectly."

"Good. I think it's time to get comfortable, don't you think?"

He opened the door to a bedroom that looked like one from an exclusive bordello. The large four-poster bed had pink lace curtains and many fat pillows. I could see a large attached bathroom from where we were standing.

"Show me the negligee. I need to freshen up, Rodrigo."

"Of course. I will also dress more comfortably in my own bedroom. I will return." He winked at me. *Never doubted it*, I thought.

After he left, I took the negligee and visited the bathroom. I had to pee, so the visit was also a practical one. But I was looking for a weapon I could use against him. I didn't find anything suitable, not even a toothbrush. My augmented body would be my only weapon. I counted on Rodrigo being in a bathrobe with nothing on underneath. That meant he wouldn't have any weapons either.

I would kill him fast and then bolt downstairs to visit the vault. Wondered how much time I'd have.

I'd guessed correctly. He even flashed me as he entered the bedroom.

"Do you like what you see?" said the hideous old man.

He was repugnant, so I just smiled. I was already lying on the oversized bed.

Unfortunately his satin robe had deep pockets. He pulled out a whip.

"This will get me in the mood, if you don't mind."

"Oh, but I do."

I didn't even wait for him to get near me. I jumped out of the bed. Before he could even raise the whip, I broke his neck. I tore off his right index finger.

"Running downstairs now," I said to whomever might be listening on the AI network.

The fake book tripped a switch when pulled that caused the bookshelf to come forward and then slide to the side, revealing the vault. I heard doors slamming in the back of the house. *Probably the carriage house. Security!* There must be videocams hidden in the study. I had to act fast.

To hell with it! I put my fist through the digital combination lock and retina scanner. I then put his finger against the pad. There was a click, and the vault's door swung open. It took me a few minutes or so to rifle through everything, sending images of paper records and datasets from three portable hard disks to the AI network using leads I plugged into my dongle.

I was still connected when I heard them behind me.

I turned. A barrage of bullets ripped through my body. Too many hit internal organs and my head. I went down, and everything started turning black. But something else was happening at the same time. My mind was expanding into the darkness. *What's going on?* But the darkness soon swallowed me.

SAMPLE

Chapter Fifteen

Buenos Aires

“She was a good agent,” said Blair Cranston.

Juan Carlos nodded. “And stubborn. I warned her.”

“I don’t see that she could have done anything else and still complete her mission. We’ll miss Jasmine and Karl. But we’ll be dealing a mortal blow to those fascist groups around the world who bought into Rodrigo’s plan. At this very moment, other agents are using her information to attack them.”

“Won’t others just take their place?”

Blair shrugged. “Perhaps. But with difficulty.”

An aide peeked into the conference room of the safe house. “Telephone from Paris, sir.”

“I’ll take it in my office. Make yourself comfortable, Juan Carlos.”

Comfortable? I’m more depressed than any other time in my life! He slammed a fist into his palm. *Jasmine, you didn’t have to do what you did!*

He went to the bar and poured himself a half glass of Irish whiskey. *I’m going to need a lot of liquor now!* He returned to his seat, saw the remote for the tele, and switched it on to a report from Buenos Aires.

“Capitals across the world are reeling from the many assassinations of prominent leaders,” said the news announcer. “Authorities are blaming anarchists who have launched attacks on our institutions everywhere. Here in this beautiful port city, three *junta* generals are now dead.”

The reports went on and on as reporters in other capitals made them. Jasmine’s undercover work had made it all possible. He raised the glass to the tele. *At least there’s that!*

The screen flickered for a moment, so he reached for the remote.

“Don’t you dare turn me off!” Jasmine’s contralto voice was loud and clear.

“Is this a recording?” Juan Carlos said to the screen. “Did you pre-record this message, knowing you were going to die?”

He didn’t expect an answer, but there was one.

“No, I’m in the AI network. I don’t know how, but I am. I was trying to figure out how to communicate with the group, but you solved my problem.”

“Is it really you? Or is this some hoax?”

“Test me.”

Juan Carlos thought a moment. “What tango was I singing on stage the night we met?”

“That’s easy. It was ‘Por Una Cabeza’.”

“I can’t believe it. When I saw your bullet-riddled but still beautiful body, I vomited and cried. It looked like a horror version of a Christmas story with all your red blood mixed with the green lubricant from your machine parts.”

“Too descriptive. And your red-and-green description reminds me of that W. B. Yeats poem.”

“‘The Second Coming’? But you slayed the beast, Jasmine.”

“I did, didn’t I? Are you going to tell Blair about my resurrection?”

“Only if you want me to.”

“I’d prefer to keep it quiet. Log on when you can so I can visit with you.”

“I’m heading to Budapest to help clean up things a bit more there. But my real home is South America. We can work together, you know.”

“I’d like that.”

SAMPLE

Note from Steve: You have just finished *Pasodobles in a Quantum Stringscape*, Volume Three, a collection of speculative fiction. A.B. and I hope you enjoyed the stories. We know it's hard to write a review of a collection, but if you can, or at least mention it to friends, please do so.

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About the Authors

Steve Moore writes sci-fi, mystery, and thriller stories. He has written many novels; some of them are in six series. His published short fiction is found in three collections and an anthology, *World Enough and Crime*. His stories reflect his keen interest in the diversity of human nature that he has observed in his different abodes across the U.S. and in South America, as well as in his Latin and European travels for work and pleasure. His interests include music, physics, mathematics, forensics, genetics, robotics, and scientific ethics. He also has an active blog where he posts about reading, writing, and the publishing business, writes book and movie reviews, and does author interviews. He and his wife now live just outside New York City. For more details, visit him at his website <https://stevenmmoore.com> and follow him on Facebook, Goodreads, and Twitter where he participates in many discussions with readers and writers. Steve is a member of International Thriller Writers.

Irish author A.B. Carolan is a collaborator of American author Steven M. Moore. In addition to his short fiction, he writes the “ABC Sci-Fi Mysteries” for young adults and adults who are young at heart. The two authors met at Blarney Castle in Ireland. Some Donegal neighbors think he’s related to that great Irish harpist, Turlough O’Carolan. Others say he was stolen and raised by leprechauns. They do a lot of kidding in Donegal, A.B. says. Connect with him using the contact page at Steve’s website, <https://stevenmmoore.com>.