

A blue and white model airplane is shown in flight over a blue ocean. The airplane has a red and black stripe around its fuselage and a Japanese flag on its wing. The name 'HOTARU' is written on the fuselage. A red laser beam is directed at the airplane from the bottom left. The background is a blue sky with white clouds.

# Conscience

A Cautionary Tale of Modern Technology

by

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Conscience

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ISBN:

For Plato, who taught us all how to think.

*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*  
*Who will guard the guards themselves?*  
– Juvenal, Satires (Satire VI, lines 347–8)

## **Introduction**

On 28 July 2015, over 1,000 artificial intelligence and robotics researchers signed an open letter warning that “Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology has reached a point where the deployment of ... autonomous weapons [able to] select and engage targets without human intervention ... is — practically if not legally — feasible within years ....”

**This is what happened next!**



**1**

Hotaru woke up to Sgt. Mitsui's commanding voice ordering, "Hotaru, wake up," and locked her brakes.

After taking a millisecond to check the time and download a weather report, Hotaru replied: "Good morning, Sgt. Mitsui. We have excellent weather for flying today."

"Hotaru, check your status," Sgt. Mitsui ordered without acknowledging Hotaru's polite pleasantries, just as he did every morning. He knew that her comment about the weather was intended to report that she'd downloaded the flight-planning information for the day: weather forecasts, notices to airmen, etc. He surmised that the programmers at Scottsdale Systems Technology, which supplied her operating software – called Vocal Programming – had gone out of their way to program her for unnecessary politeness and courtesy for their own amusement.

Something Mitsui didn't realize was that the idea of programming robots to *want* things had been around since 2002. In May of that year, W.D. Smart and L.P. Kaelbling, researchers at Washington University and M.I.T., respectively, published a paper at the *IEEE International Conference on Robotics and Automation* entitled "Effective Reinforcement Learning for Mobile Robots" in which they laid out the framework for programming robots with the ability to prioritize outcomes of actions. In other words, to *want* some things to happen in preference to others. This reward system was seen as the basis for artificial intelligence learning in a chaotic environment – exactly what the VP robot operating system was designed to do.

Some robot operators, Mitsui suspected, appreciated the efforts of programmers to make robots behave like humans with winning personalities.

He did not. He didn't have a winning personality himself, and was brusque with everybody. He certainly wasn't going to treat a machine any better than he did anyone else.

Hotaru didn't mind. She wasn't a person, but an automated machine and, as such, only simulated having a personality.

As she did every morning when Sgt. Mitsui ordered her to wake up and check her status, Hotaru first looked around to see where she was. She was sitting in her usual parking spot in the Okinawa Prefecture Police hangar at Naha Airport, Okinawa, Japan. She did her computer systems check, then checked her navigational, avionic and mechanical systems, then looked at the levels in her fuel tanks. Lastly, she checked her machine-gun magazine.

"Sgt. Mitsui, all my systems are 'GO,'" she reported. "Fuel tanks are full, and my gun is fully loaded. Please have me placed in

position for engine start.”

An attendant, whose name she didn't know, had never known, and didn't care to know, attached a tow bar to her front landing gear. As soon as Hotaru felt the tow bar hook into place, she let off her brakes so that the attendant could pull her out of her parking spot, then turn her to point toward the taxiway with her jet exhaust pointed across the hanger door, rather than into it. When she felt her landing wheels stop moving, she locked her brakes again.

“Sgt. Mitsui, I am now in proper engine-start position.”

“Hotaru, start your engine.”

Hotaru switched on her fuel pump and, when her fuel pressure had built up sufficiently, she engaged her starter motor. When her compressor speed reached fifty percent, she switched on her igniter. A whoosh of flame spurted from her jet exhaust, gently pressing her forward against her locked brakes. Soon, her exhaust temperature reached operating level, and she switched off her igniter.

“Sgt. Mitsui,” she said, “I am ready to taxi to the runway. What is my mission for this flight?”

“Hotaru, your mission is a standard patrol pattern along the coast of Okinawa Island. There are no special situations of concern. Hotaru, proceed.”

Hotaru contacted Naha Ground Control to obtain clearance to proceed to the active runway. The ground controller told her the active runway was “one-eight” and gave her clearance to proceed to the runway. She let off her brakes, raised her engine's power level slightly, and trundled off along the taxiway to the run up area at the start of runway 18, where she stopped to run through her “Before Takeoff” checklist. Then, after scanning the sky to the North for potential interfering air traffic, she called to the Naha Airport Control Tower.

“Naha Tower, this is UAV juliet alpha zero three niner five x-ray requesting clearance to take off on runway one-eight and depart to the South.”

When talking to air traffic controllers, Hotaru and other UAVs used their tail numbers rather than their call signs. Tail numbers were unique, whereas call signs were not. She could use her shorter call sign “Hotaru,” which means “firefly” in Japanese, with Sgt. Mitsui because her communication link with him was private. They both knew with whom they were talking. Starting each message with the robot's name was a formality that told Hotaru that what followed was a command meant for her and nobody else. It allowed Sgt. Mitsui to carry on conversations with people in his office and to communicate with Hotaru's sister UAVs over a common frequency without any chance of miscommunication.

Mitsui didn't think about it, but Hotaru's using his name gave him the quarter second humans need to react to a system interrupt, and shift his attention from whatever he was thinking about to what she was about to say. This was the rationale behind just one of the many politeness rules SST software engineers built into their Vocal Programming operating system that Mitsui thought was so capricious.

The VP operating system was the leading OS for fully autonomous robotic systems. Unlike drones, which, even when computer controlled, required constant attention from their operators, VP-controlled automated systems had the necessary sensory apparatus and machine intelligence to mimic human decision-making activity. With intelligence approaching that of a dog, they could be trusted to operate unsupervised in the chaotic real world, where surprise challenges appear constantly. Typically, their human handlers needed to only provide them with mission goals and be available to help when situations arose where the robot was unsure how to proceed, or, as in the case of working with air traffic controllers, when coordination with a larger system was required.

Thus, another main feature of VP software was high-level communications in human language. The apparent politeness stemmed from stylized formatting of command sentences.

"UAV juliet alpha zero three niner five x-ray," came the response from Naha tower, "you are cleared for immediate takeoff on runway one-eight."

After a last visual scan to the North for interfering traffic, Hotaru raised her engine's power level to one quarter, and let off her brakes to accelerate away from the run up area and on to the runway threshold. When she reached the threshold and verified that she was aimed along the runway center line, she applied full engine power. Her jet rapidly reached maximum thrust, and boosted her swiftly along the runway. As her speed increased, she felt a sensation that, had she been a biological organism rather than a robot, would be called "excitement" or "joy." But, she was an automated mechanism, so nobody even thought about it.

That is, nobody but Dr. Michael "Doc" Manchek, who at the moment was in bed some ten-thousand miles away with his enormous, six-foot-five-inch frame wrapped around his nearly as large wife, Judith "Red" McKenna-Manchek. They were sleeping the sleep of the just in the largest bedroom suite in their 8,000 square foot ranch house near the Superstition Mountains in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Even when Doc Manchek was awake, he didn't spend too much time thinking about what, if anything, robots felt. He was too busy leading a few hundred scientists, engineers and support people toiling away at his privately owned research company, Scottsdale Systems Technology (SST for short), on various advanced research projects for various government and private clients. It was only in his spare time that he got around to speculating about what it might be like to be a robot.

Red actually spent a lot more time thinking about what went on in robotic brains than Doc did. His was mainly a philosophical



interest. It was Red's *job* to write software to control what was going on in those brains.

Even for her, however, it was only a part-time job. Officially, she was Vice-President of Operations at SST for about half her time. The other half was devoted to running Gulf States Security, which was a subsidiary of her step-father's oil company, Gulf States Petroleum. GSS was tasked with protecting the parent company's assets, and, by extension, members of Red's step father's family. Her step father's family consisted of Red's mother, Red herself, and Red's four children. She didn't really count her husband as a bodyguard because he, with mastery of martial arts techniques so advanced they had no names, was perfectly capable of looking after himself. He was more often a protector than one of the protected. Whenever he was around, her bodyguards automatically treated him as their chief.

For most people, their family's security is threatened only hypothetically. Nobody is likely to attack Joe and Irma Blodgett, living out their golden years in a Sun City, Arizona retirement community. Perceived threats, such as nuclear holocaust, terrorist attack, and the odd traffic accident, are relatively remote and improbable. They're a matter of evening news and, as such, mostly happen to other people.

For Red's step father, Mark Shipton, it was another story. He and his family were all excessively well to do, and Red, at least, was a public figure. That made them targets for anyone stupid enough to think they could get away with attacking them. GSS was tasked with making sure that mounting such an attack remained a suicidally stupid move.

Red was a public figure because she had a history of making the evening news (which spilled over into the supermarket tabloids) by chasing down various scumbags who seemed to cross her path at an alarming rate. Not only had she already been kidnapped *twice* by criminals whose psychological makeups ran long on greed and short on common sense, but over the past few years she, along with her best friend and sometimes lesbian lover, Cheryl "Bud" Thompson, had taken on everyone from desecrators of archeological sites to Mexican drug cartels. It had developed into kind of a hobby. As if they didn't have enough else to do.

As a result, Doc spent an inordinate amount of time figuring out how to pull Red's and Bud's chestnuts out of various fires!

Red was a highly creative person, and what she liked to create was advanced computer software. To make her hectic life possible, she relied on a small army of support people. Tops of the list were Red's executive assistant, Bonnie Wells, her protege Gwen Petersen (who ran SST's robot-development operation), her children's governess Maryanne Beckett, and, of course, her sidekick Bud.

There was always some question of who was whose sidekick. More often than not, it was Bud's activities as a wild-woman marine archeologist that dragged Red out of her comfortably hectic life as "a mommy who plays with computers" to go off on adventures. The last time, for instance, Bud's archeology-professor husband, Glen Trudeau, had been asked by the People's Republic of China to help stop a gang of pot hunters rooting around in the mausoleum of China's First Emperor. Glen got Bud involved, which then set Red

off on a parallel effort to round up the international smugglers – led by a former Russian KGB officer – who were distributing the gang’s booty around the world, and to get the stuff back.

Back in Japan, Hotaru was just reaching the southernmost point of her patrol route. She’d already flown over the monument at Kiyon Military Cape at the southern tip of Okinawa Island, and was turning northeast when she was surprised by a message from Sgt. Mitsui.

“Hotaru, interrupt your patrol and proceed due East to land at Kumejima Airport on Kume Island.”

This was surprising because Kume Island was well outside her department’s jurisdiction. Whenever she received a command that was surprising for any reason, it triggered a function call to her supervisory security system.

Like all of her sister UAVs, as well as the submarine and land-based units, and a host of control systems running on the VP operating system originally developed by Robotics Concepts in Santa Clara, California and further developed by SST, Hotaru had an extensive system for identifying anyone telling her what to do. If she was surprised by a command, or didn’t recognize someone giving her a command, her internal “What’s going on here?” alarm sounded, and she attempted to find someone she *did* know at a higher authorization level and ask what to do. It was a way of protecting mobile robots from the ever-present danger of hackers. The theory was that there were so many ways a mobile robot had to identify a trusted operator that anyone outside a closely-defined circle would have no luck controlling the machine, and would be picked up immediately.

Central to this security system was a hierarchy of operator authorization levels. At the bottom – level zero – were the general public with whom the robot might carry on a polite conversation about the weather, but not much else unless told to by an operator at a higher authorization level. Sgt. Mitsui was actually near the middle of the hierarchy. There were higher levels for his superiors in the Naha prefecture police department. They, after all, owned her.

There were also a few authorization levels above the robot owners that were reserved for developers at SST. That was an aspect which SST marketing literature carefully forgot to mention.

Each robot had its own list of who was authorized to tell it to do what, along with data files (including voice prints, finger prints, facial recognition, and more subtle ways of recognizing operators) to help them match *their* registered operators with authorization levels. Since VP was an artificial-intelligence expert system, as time went on the robots continuously learned more and more, becoming ever more familiar with their operators and discovering new ways to identify them.

So, when any surprise happened – such as Sgt. Mitsui telling Hotaru to fly somewhere outside of Okinawa Prefecture’s jurisdiction – the robot first made an effort to re-verify the operator’s identity and authorization.

The order certainly *seemed* to be coming from Sgt. Mitsui. It came through the correct communications channel. It had the correct syntax. It sounded like the way Mitsui would phrase a command. It included the correct authorization code in its bit-packet headers. Hotaru could not see Sgt. Mitsui with her machine-vision cameras, but that would be normal in the situation. Mitsui was back in Naha City, and she was in flight some ten kilometers away. As far as Hotaru could tell, it was a legitimate order sent by one of her legitimate operators.

And, she had no way of bypassing Mitsui to check with a higher authority in case there was something wrong with Mitsui, himself.

So, she did what she was told.

## 2

Chin Ling had not seen her son, Huan, this excited in a very long time. The side trip to Jeju Island had turned out to be a huge success.

Like any normal, well-adjusted fifteen-year old, Huan pouted constantly when around his parents. It would have been better if they had taken this trip with him a few years ago, when he would have better tolerated being cooped up with his parents on a cruise ship for weeks on end. It had been impossible, however, to afford such an expensive vacation before China's rapidly expanding economy lifted the income of Ling's electronics-designer husband, Chenglei, along with that of so many others in China's middle class, to world-class standards. A generation ago, they would have been eking out a precarious living on a failing rural farm in central China, as their parents had done.

Economic reforms in the People's Republic of China had allowed bright, hardworking people like Chin Chenglei to forge successful careers in entrepreneurial companies thriving in the shadows of the corrupt, stagnant state-run factories left over from Chairman Mao's China. Through frugal household management learned from their impoverished parents, Chenglei and Ling had built a tidy nest egg, which they'd invested in urban real estate just as peasants began flocking into the booming cities in search of the good, high-paying jobs to be found there. The Chins' investments rocketed through the roof while Chenglei's white-collar skills became ever more in demand.

The Chins had finally reached an economic level where they could afford to take the cruise they'd talked about. So, in the Spring of Huan's fifteenth year, they decided to take a month off for that ocean cruise around the East and South China Seas with stops in Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and Malaysia.

It had been Chenglei's idea to leave Ling on her own for a few days to enjoy the shopping malls of Busan, South Korea while he and Huan made a father-son side trip to Jeju Island for the submarine tour. At first, Ling thought the idea had all the earmarks of a disaster waiting to happen. Huan's adolescent skulking threatened to ruin the trip. Imagine the father saddled with a morose, grumbling teenager for two days with nobody to break the monotony. Imagine being the morose, grumbling teenager forced to shuffle along behind his father through line after line at tourist attractions.

All that had apparently changed as soon as the submarine dove beneath the sea. Huan had never seen anything like it before. Even movies and TV hadn't prepared him for the magnificent colors and majestic vistas of the underwater world. He came back foaming at the mouth to tell his mother everything he'd seen.

That was yesterday. Suddenly becoming bright and energetic – and talkative – changed Huan’s interactions with everyone else as well. Since they’d left Busan this morning, Huan had made several new friends among the teenaged passengers, and even struck up a budding romance with a girl his own age.

Now, with the ship plowing through the waves a hundred miles or so south of the Korean coast on its way to Shanghai, Huan was sitting at a table on deck next to his new girlfriend, regaling her and four other new-found friends with everything he’d seen and done in ports in Japan, as well as the spectacular side trip to Jeju Island. His companions had spent the time pouting at *their* parents, and listlessly wandering around one shopping mall after another.

Ling, sitting in a deck lounge next to her husband, reached out to squeeze his hand. She smiled acknowledgment that his idea had worked out so well.

That’s when all Hell broke loose.

Machine-gun bullet strikes stitched a line of destruction along the deck, ripping right through the center of Huan’s table. Horrified, he saw the face of the girl he was smiling at explode. The hand he was holding went slack as her lifeless body pitched forward, splashing her blood over the table. The boy sitting opposite her across the table fell over backwards as the next round drove his sternum through his heart on its way to driving his spine out from between his shoulder blades.

The line of bullet strikes continued along the deck, taking out an elderly German wearing lavender Bermuda shorts and a polo shirt sporting oddly Chanel-esque horizontal red and white stripes as he played shuffleboard.

Past the shuffleboard court, the line of bullet strikes continued along the length of the swimming pool, sinking a young, red-headed British boy learning to swim with water wings.

Finally, Ling was able to catch a glimpse of the small jet-powered aircraft causing all the destruction as it passed over the ship’s bow, then executed a perfect Immelmann turn to swoop back low over the deck, exhausting the rest of its ammunition and killing a dumbfounded Huan (still holding his dead girlfriend’s hand) along the way before crashing through the glass front of the crowded lower-deck-level lounge. The nose-mounted machine-gun barrel skewered a petrified bartender through the stomach as the craft demolished the bar on its way to expend its remaining kinetic energy on the crowd of passengers enjoying the comfortable furniture in the main salon.

**3**

“Mama, why do they call it ‘Commencement?’” Gwen Peterson wanted to know. She and Red were sitting together at one end of the large mahogany table in the wine cellar at Fifteen Beacon Street, a boutique hotel not far from the old Beacon Hill apartment Red had lived in as an undergraduate. Doc had hired the room for a party to celebrate Red’s and Bud’s getting their Ph.D. diplomas that morning at Harvard University’s Commencement ceremony. Dinner was over and guests were milling about, visiting with each other while waiting for dessert.

“Mama” was Gwen’s pet name for Red, despite her being only one year younger than Red’s twenty-seven. The nickname dated back over five years to that first day Gwen had met Red – a day that completely changed Gwen’s life.

At the time, Gwen was a devastatingly beautiful, blonde, twenty-one-year-old high-school dropout plying her trade as a stripper in a Reno, Nevada bar and hooking on the side. Red was then leading her first research team at SST on a quest to find her long-lost natural father, a geologist whom they’d believed to have died in a mining accident while working alone in the mountains not far away.

Doc was escorting his then-girlfriend, Phoenix-area newswoman Eve Salazar, on an impromptu night out in Reno. After dinner, Eve surprised Doc by suggesting they go find a strip club. They ended up catching Gwen’s performance.

Taken with Gwen, Eve maneuvered Doc into a *menage a trois* at the most expensive hotel in town. In the morning, Doc was further surprised to find that the two women had fallen in love with each other. So, Doc hatched a scheme to free Gwen from her mob-connected “manager” (aka “pimp”), so she could move in with Eve back in Phoenix. Part of the scheme involved his hiring Gwen as a robot operator at SST!

“It’s normal behavior for him,” Red later confided to Bud, “but would get anyone else locked in the loony bin.”

Back at the mine site the next day, Eve allowed Gwen to follow her around as she interviewed Red’s exploration-team members for her TV news report. That was where Gwen first encountered Red. It was Red’s idea for she and Doc to invite Gwen and Eve to dinner “... to show support for them taking on a challenge by trying to be together, coming out of the closet, and all that. ...”

To make a long story short, they all got enormously drunk, and passed-out Gwen had a dream that Red was her mother. Gwen didn’t get along with her true mother back in West Texas ... accounting for Gwen’s ending up as a hooker at a Reno strip club ... so she and Red, with Red’s overdeveloped maternal instinct, found each other. Eventually, it developed into an ersatz mother/daughter relationship combined with mentoring at work.

Gwen still called Red “Mama,” and everyone knew that Red had a special place in her heart for Gwen.

Doc was right, by the way, that Gwen had a natural aptitude for robotics. She had already become the world’s leading expert on VP programming and was well on her way to a Master’s degree in mechatronics engineering.

“According to the Harvard website,” Red responded to Gwen’s question, “ ‘commencement’ was the name given the ceremony of initiation for new scholars into the fellowship of university teachers in medieval Europe. The event marked the commencement of their full-fledged academic lives. In other words, it marks the start of one’s actual career.”

“But you already have at least two jobs.”

“Yeah, but yesterday I was just ‘Red.’ Today, I became ‘Dr. Manchek.’”

“Like the Boss.”

“Boss” was Gwen’s pet name for Doc.

“That’s going to confuse a lot of people,” Gwen pointed out.

“I look forward to it!” Red giggled.

“Mom, they’re ready for you to cut the cake,” David Landry told Red. David was Red’s college-aged adopted son – another “stray cat” Red had picked up during one of her adventures.

Doc had thrown this after-commencement get together for Bud and Red, who’d finally, at long last (why’d it take you so long?) earned their doctoral degrees. They’d been working on them for five years, when they should have done them in three. They took forever because their work was constantly getting side tracked by adventures.

Red and Bud did ‘most everything together. They’d improbably conceived of their separate-but-interrelated Ph.D. theses when Bud had asked Red for help figuring out how to work from observed arrangements of shipwreck debris backward to figure out where the stuff was originally located in the ship before being moved around by turbulence on the way to the bottom. Red, an applied mathematician then working with computer fluid dynamics simulations for SST, had come up with a novel approach to solve the seemingly impossible problem. So, Red’s thesis project was figuring out how to make the simulation, while Bud’s thesis project was figuring out how to apply it to marine archeology.

This party was a way of thanking people who’d patiently put up with their antics while giving them all the support they needed to get on with their research. It was for family and a few friends who had made the effort to attend the ceremony that morning across the



river at Harvard Yard in Cambridge. There'd be another, larger event later on in Arizona, where the women now lived and worked, for their friends and co-workers at SST.

Bud's family had come down from Newburyport with Doc's family from Amesbury. Red's step father and her mother were up from Washington, DC. Of course, Doc and the kids had come in from Arizona with Bud's husband, Glen. Gwen and Eve just wanted to make the trip. Eve had the excuse of covering the event for her news program, and Gwen accompanied her because she wanted to. The group had taken over the hotel's top floor for the week, and come down to the wine cellar for this Commencement-Day party.

Red and Bud were still wearing their mortar boards and crimson graduation robes for fun. Red, who kept her six-foot-three-inch frame in top athletic trim, got her nickname honestly by sporting beyond-shoulder-length flaming red hair, and a galaxy of freckles. Her commanding presence was enhanced by looking self-assuredly out through green eyes at a world where she was used to being the smartest one in the room.

Bud, at "only" five-foot ten, got her nickname dishonestly – as she got most everything – by having been Red's "fuck buddy" in college. Growing up among a crew of commercial fishermen, the buxom blonde had developed the personality of a she-wolf, not caring what anyone else thought of her openly bisexual lifestyle. Since coming under the influence of Red's pragmatic mother, Mary Shipton, née McKenna, she'd smoothed off some of the rough edges and married her second husband, archeology professor Glen Trudeau, but she still had the no-nonsense look in her eyes of a known killer: in self defense she'd dispatched an entire pirate crew after being captured while piloting Doc's boat alone off the Bahamas. They'd wanted Doc's boat and made the mistake of keeping her alive as a plaything. Only the pirate captain had survived the three days of Bud's captivity.

Red and Bud had worked out a way to make a combined speech thanking everyone for their support before cutting into the sheet cake at the far end of the room. Soon, everyone was back sitting at the mahogany table stuffing their faces with carrot cake topped with thick, white frosting – except Eve, who'd stepped out of the room to take a call on her cellphone.

## 4

Eve stepped back into the room with her face white as a sheet.

“You have to see this,” she said to everyone, clicking a remote to turn on the flat-panel television a waiter had just wheeled in front of the bar on a TV cart. While the TV booted up, she picked up a card from the cart to find the channel she wanted, then keyed the number of an all-news channel into the remote.

The gray-bearded, bespectacled face of an internationally famed news anchorman solemnly repeated, “A rogue armed drone aircraft, called a ‘combat UAV’ or CUAV, strafed the deck of a cruise ship today, killing fourteen passengers and two crew members, and injuring several more. Among the casualties were German, British, Korean, and Vietnamese nationals, but the majority of them were Chinese tourists.”

The picture cut to a still image of Hotaru’s mangled airframe embedded in the cruise ship’s superstructure. The loudest sound was Gwen Peterson’s startled gasp. Doc clenched his jaws in angry silence. They instantly recognized Hotaru’s shape as conforming to the design specified by SST for vocally programmed UAVs built by Fujimori Heavy Industries in Yokohama, Japan and running SST’s VP operating system.

“The armed drone aircraft,” the anchorman continued, “bore markings of the Okinawa Prefecture Police Department. What it was doing flying fifty miles from the Japanese coast over the East China Sea is unknown. Eyewitnesses said that the aircraft approached from behind the Chinese-registered cruise ship operated by Seascope Cruise Lines, strafed the deck with its nose-mounted machine gun, turned around for another pass, and crashed into the ship’s superstructure below the bridge. As yet, there has been no claim of responsibility for what appears to be a terrorist attack.”

“Those sons of bitches!” Gwen shouted.

Everyone started talking at once. They all assumed someone had stolen a Police Department CUAV, and used it as a terrorist weapon. Everybody had an opinion about who could have done such a thing and why.

Gwen wasn’t thinking about that, though. She quickly looked to Doc with an expression combining stupefaction, horror, and remorse for having let him down. It was *she* who had set up the entire sales, marketing and technical support effort in Asia for SST’s line of autonomous UAVs. The rogue unit had obviously been running their operating system, since the airframe clearly conformed to their products’ specifications – except for having armaments. If the Japanese – or anybody else – had been developing an armed

autonomous combat UAV, it was her job to know about it, and to warn Doc. In that, she had failed.

Doc, everyone who knew him understood, would never countenance putting lethal force in the hands of a robot – especially one running SST software. He'd gone on record many times insisting that deadly armaments needed to be under human control.

“We want a human being's finger on the trigger,” he'd said time and time again, “so that he or she can refuse to pull it.”

To begin with, he was a devout Zen Buddhist, and saw no moral difference between combat casualties and first-degree murder. He didn't like making weapons, but it was a necessary adjunct to SST's government-sponsored business. It paid the bills for a lot of important peaceful technology development that wouldn't get done otherwise.

Also, he understood the concept of justifiable homicide.

“If we don't protect those we love,” he often said, “who will?”

So, he often made systems that could deploy lethal force. He was just very careful about who he gave those weapons to, and the safeguards he built into them. Especially, he considered fully-automated systems – robots – to be too stupid to make life-and-death decisions. *That* was why he was so set against CUAVs. If something was too stupid to live, itself, he didn't want it having the ability to destroy someone else's life.

“What's a machine gun doing on one of our UAVs?” Doc growled.

“I don't know,” Gwen replied. “At one point, a couple of years ago, Masada inquired about the feasibility of testing armaments on UAVs and I told him, ‘no.’ I said we'd consider even building a test rig for it to be a violation of their licensing agreement with us. I warned him that if they tried it, they'd be in breach of contract. I haven't heard anything about it from them, since. If we find that the boys in Yokohama built that thing using our software and design, they'll be in *serious* breach of contract. And, they've already been warned!”

“Are they dumb enough to breach their contract with us over something as stupid as combat UAVs?” Doc asked. “The market isn't big enough to make it worthwhile. We'd pull their license completely. It could ground their entire fleet! In fact, it would probably shut down their entire robot production. They use our software for everything, don't they?”

“*Everybody* uses our software for ‘most everything automated that's more complicated than a wristwatch,’” Gwen agreed.

“We don't know what pressure they're under from their government,” Red pointed out. “Their Prime Minister has been rattling sabers a lot. Maybe Fujimori figures it's worth fighting with us over the patent. If their government stands behind them, maybe they

think there's nothing we can do about it. *Our* government would be ambivalent about protecting our patents 'cause they want to build CUAVs, too."

"Could anybody develop a competing system?" Doc asked Gwen.

"It's so complex," Gwen replied, "and there are so many interlocking subsystems, all of which are under separate patents, that I think it would be really tough. Of course, you can't patent the basic idea of VP. It's a basic concept, and thus not patentable, but all the bits and pieces needed to make it work are patented. Anything they make that works is almost guaranteed to use our technology, somewhere. No, I don't think they can make a functioning VP system without our patents, and it would take years to try."

"Their cheapest way out," Red surmised, "is probably to put political pressure on us to give up the patents. Can we stand up to world governments all wanting to use our software for combat UAVs?"

"No," Doc admitted after a pause. "The best we could do is to refuse to cooperate. In that case, they'd just steal the technology, then steamroll over us in the courts. It might also sour our relationships with DARPA and a host of government agencies whose business keeps us afloat. If the courts sided with us, they'd play the 'national security' card and nationalize the technology. We can't win."

Red went quiet, looking down angrily at the half-eaten piece of carrot cake on her plate as if it had been very naughty. She was thinking of all the people who SST had counted as friends, who she now expected to let them down. The look in her eyes hardened into implacable determination.

"I'm going to fly back to Scottsdale in the morning," she announced. "Gwen, I want you and Bud in my office at nine o'clock on Monday. If we can't find a legal solution or a political solution, I'll have four days to come up with a technological solution. I'll figure something out over the weekend, and Monday we'll start trying to make it work."

## 5

Doc held his hand up to halt the discussion.

“Before we go off half-cocked developing solutions,” he said, “we need to find out what actually happened. It’s obvious that the Okinawa Police didn’t send that thing out on a rampage to machine gun a cruise ship. Who did? And, how’d they get the thing away from the cops to do it? Or, did someone mock up their own CUAV with police-department colors? Who would have a CUAV they could do that to?”

“The things cost millions of dollars,” Gwen pointed out. “That’s without the cost of modifying it to carry a machine gun. Who’s got the money to throw that kind of investment away for no good reason?”

“Gotta be terrorists,” Bud opined. “I can see terrorists having the money to burn, but what terrorists are sophisticated enough to hack a vocally programmed UAV operating system in order to steal it?”

“How do you know its one of your automated units?” Eve asked. “Maybe it was just another armed drone.”

“All good questions,” Doc agreed. “Let’s start by getting the answers.”

“Eve,” he said, switching into CEO leadership mode, “could you follow up with your news sources to try to find out what actually crashed into that cruise ship?”

“Sure.”

“Gwen, you should get with Fujimori and Masada to determine whether Fujimori Heavy Industries made the thing.”

“They might not want to admit it,” Gwen pointed out.

“If they did build it, whether they want to admit it or not, they’ll be feeling guilty,” Doc asserted. “So, you should be able to tell if they’re lying. From what I know of those guys, they’d likely come clean and seek absolution, anyway. They’re too smart to try to persist in covering up something this big.”

“Red,” he said, shifting his attention to her, “I think we’ll need your GSS black-ops spooks to chase this thing down. Somebody not nice was on point to mount this attack. Maybe you and Bud can pick up a lead to whoever it was.”

GSS routinely employed ex-special forces mercenaries to staff its ranks. While their duties were mostly as covert bodyguards, Red often found situations that called on their more esoteric skill sets.

Bud, as a sometimes-GSS-executive as well as an SST research analyst, was in a position to put her foreign-language skills and connections in the international archeology community to work chasing down black-market leads.

“Okay, we can put out some feelers,” Red agreed. “I’ll start with our British crooked-deal fixer, Corky McInnes, and my Middle-Eastern contacts from when we were chasing stolen Chinese artifacts.”

“I’ll see if I can get anything out of our Far East contacts,” Bud said.

“We can start with Chen Ju Long,” Glen added. “He’s back in good odor in the Communist Party after we covered up his involuntary involvement with the mausoleum pot hunters. I’ll bet having a boatload of Chinese tourists machine gunned by a Japanese CUAV has the PRC spooked.”

“What’s this going to do to the disputes over China’s territorial ambitions,” Eve wondered, “especially their building up of the Spratly Islands?”

“At this point,” Doc reminded them, “that’s not our lookout. We have enough to do finding out if it was our technology used, and if so, how and why.”

Eve retorted: “I think that China-Sea powder keg has a lot to do with the ‘why.’”

“You’re probably right,” Doc replied, “but right now our most urgent questions are ‘if’ and ‘how.’ ‘Why’ will come later.”

## 6

Two weeks later, Doc's *ad hoc* crisis team had pieced together the first part of the story.

To start with, Eve rapidly determined that it was, in fact, a Fujimori Heavy Industries (FHI) UAV running SST vocal-programming software that had attacked the cruise ship. Doc had been right. Rather than trying to hide their involvement, the FHI brass had quickly admitted that they were responsible for building the CUAV. In fact, they seemed proud of the accomplishment!

Competing claims of sovereignty in the area led to a finger-pointing session about who should lead the accident investigation. The Peoples Republic of China may have had the best claim, since the ship was registered in China, but the PRC had no equivalent of the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board, and so was unable to quickly mount an investigation. Embarrassed internationally, the PRC government was forced to cede primacy in the investigation to the Japan Transportation Safety Board. The JTSA investigators, however, were unable to get anything useful from the UAV's flight data recorder for the simple reason that it wasn't there. Somebody had removed it before sending Hotaru on her fateful final flight. The JTSA quickly realized that the best and fastest results were to be had by analyzing Hotaru's wreckage at FHI's flight-test facility in Yokohama.

Gwen arrived in Yokohama just hours after Hotaru's wreckage got there. Beyond giving Akira Masada, her opposite number at FHI, a disgusted look and a disapproving shake of her head, she brought nothing up about FHI's breaching their licensing agreement with SST. Doc had forewarned her that recriminations at this point would be counterproductive. He would take the matter up later on, when the dust had settled. For now "cooperation" was to be the watchword.

As a result, Gwen was one of the first people to get a glimpse into Hotaru's memory of events leading up to her kamikaze crash into the cruise ship's main lounge.

Being the human with the most experience peering into what goes on in vocally programmed robot brains, she was the first to piece together the scenario.

"Somebody pretending to be her handler told her to break off a routine patrol flight and land at a small airfield on Kume Island," she explained to Doc over the telepresence link from Yokohama to Doc's office in Scottsdale, Arizona. "There, they shut her down and yanked out her flight data recorder. They probably thought doing that would make her movements impossible to trace.

"Then, they loaded her onto a boat – probably a small freighter – and transported her to a small island in Hangzhou Bay northeast of Ningbo, China. There, they off loaded her so she could take off from a small dirt airstrip. Again pretending to be her Okinawa



Police handler, they sent her off to attack the first ship that came within range. That was our Chinese cruise ship.”

“Is there anything to tell you who the kidnappers were?” Doc asked.

“We got pretty good pictures from her machine-vision cameras of men milling around getting her ready for her flight. There’s also audio of their voices, but they mumbled a lot. They were just talking among themselves. I don’t think they knew she could hear. It sounded like English with different foreign accents. Maybe Bud can get something from the accents.”

During her training as an archeologist, Bud had developed a working knowledge of most of the World’s language groups. She was adept enough to often recognize the origin of a speaker just from hearing their accent.

“Hotaru had the presence of mind to do a circle of the airstrip after taking off,” Gwen continued. “She saw a small group of bearded men standing by the airstrip watching her. I think she suspected there was something wrong because she kept trying to raise air-traffic control, but she couldn’t find any ATC frequencies within range.

“In the absence of being able to summon help, she just did what she was told to do. While attacking the cruise ship, though, she kept questioning her orders. Her fake handler had to keep urging her on. It was almost like she was frightened. She kept making function calls to her supervisory security system, but couldn’t figure out what to do.”

“That’s probably the VP-robot equivalent of panic,” Doc surmised.

“How were the men dressed when she took off?” asked Red, who was sitting with Doc on the big U-shaped sectional sofa in Doc’s office looking at Gwen’s image on the wall-mounted display. “Can we learn anything from that?”

“No,” Gwen replied, “it was just the normal third-world imitation of American garb – running shoes, jeans, and tee-shirts. It’s the casual clothing worn by everyone from Tierra del Fuego to Afghanistan.”

“Yeah, they hate us, but they imitate us,” Doc pointed out.

“They did not look Asian, however,” Gwen added. “Could have been Middle Eastern, or European, or any Caucasian race. Anybody with long hair and beards. They all had beards.”

“Upload everything to the SST intranet,” Red advised. “I’ve set this up as a separate project, code named ‘Conscience.’ You can get to its database through the URL ‘sst.conscience.net.’”

“Conscience?” Gwen asked. “Why that?”

“It’s got to do with what I have in the back of my mind for a final solution. I don’t want to talk about it yet. It’s still too sketchy. I’m not sure I can even articulate it at this point. It’s just the ghost of an idea.”

“Anyway,” she continued, “just go to the Conscience-project GIS database, and upload everything you pulled out of the UAV’s memory. What was her name, Hotaru?”

“Yes.”

“Have you been recording this conversation?”

“No, I figure the Boss records everything of importance, so there was no need for me to do it. Was I wrong?”

“No,” Doc jumped in. “We’ve been recording all of this. I’ll add it to the database so you don’t have to.”

“Great,” Gwen replied. “Thanks.”

“Is there anything else you need to report in a separate text document?” Red asked.

“Not that I can think of. I’ll leave it to you guys to decide how much of this you want to make available to Eve. She’s going to want it all, of course.”

“And, she can’t have it all,” laughed Doc. “I’ll go through the material and pull out what we want to make public, and send it to Red.”

Turning to Red, he said: “Babe, could you have Bonnie put it together in a press packet, and send it to Eve. Mostly what we want to make public is the origin of the CUAV, the route she took to get from Okinawa to the cruise ship, and the video of her circling the dirt airfield. Let’s suppress the closeups of the guys on the ground for now. Have press inquiries go through Bonnie, as usual?”

“Yeah, I think that’ll work – at least for now.”

Bonnie Wells was Red’s Executive Assistant. As such, she bore the brunt of SST’s public relations activity.

“We should get help from Homeland-Security types to identify the kidnapers,” Red added.

“What about feeding the pictures to your friend Damon Wells at the FBI?” Doc suggested, half in jest.

Red had crossed swords with Wells before. He'd tried to arrest her when she was undercover setting up a sting operation to capture a crooked salvage operator in Florida, and again when she'd been gathering evidence against the ex-KGB officer heading up the Chinese stolen artifacts ring. Both times Wells had wound up with egg on his face because he'd bought Red's cover story about being a crook, herself.

“That stupid cowboy!” Red exclaimed. “No way!”

Laughing, Doc said: “Okay, we'll use Smitty at NSA as liaison.”

## 7

Smitty had worked with Doc for almost ten years. He'd contacted SST to build a super-secret surveillance system that Doc still had never told anyone, even Red, anything about. A little over twenty-four hours after getting the pictures from Doc, Smitty showed up unannounced at the Mancheks' Scottsdale ranch at eight in the evening – a few minutes after dark.

After driving across the cattle gate at the edge of the ranch property, he was stopped by a herd of cows blocking the paved roadway leading to the ranch house. Standing across the pavement in front of the cows was a huge horse topped by an equally big cowboy with curly red hair. The cowboy was sitting in his saddle with a threateningly upraised assault rifle balanced on his thigh.

As soon as Smitty stopped the car and started lowering his window, the cowboy turned the horse and clopped loudly over to address the car's driver-side window. By the time the horse reached the car, the cowboy had lowered the rifle across his left arm to aim it directly into the window.

Smitty held up his NSA identification.

Ignoring the ID, the cowboy leaned over to spit tobacco juice on the ground and then look at Smitty's face. Then, he smiled and moved the weapon so it no longer aimed at Smitty.

He said: "Hello, Mr. Smith. Dr. Manchek thought you'd show up tonight. They're waiting for you up at the house in the library."

"Which Dr. Manchek?"

"The both of 'em," the cowboy laughed.

Then he called out to the other cowboys tending the herd: "It's okay. Move 'em out."

Quickly, with lots of whistling and waving of lariats, the cowboys cleared the herd off the roadway and waved Smitty on. They were only apparently cowboys on a working ranch. In reality, they were employees of Gulf States Security tasked with guarding Red's home.

Sam, Doc's houseman, ushered Smitty into the library where Red, Doc and Bud were already sitting at a low table. Its three-foot-by-four-foot top was the touch-panel display for Red's home computer.

Without preliminaries, Smitty sat in the middle of the unoccupied bench seat along one of the table's long sides. Red was sitting in

the middle of a similar bench on the opposite side. Doc sat in a wicker chair at one end of the table. Bud sat at the other end.

Doc had called Bud that afternoon for reasons only he knew, saying she should show up after supper. Obviously, he'd been up to his Taoist tricks of predicting what was about to happen next. In this case, he'd predicted Smitty showing up that evening for a pow-wow. So, he'd gathered the people that needed to be there, and the information they'd need to have. The table-top display showed an arrangement of still shots of faces Gwen had lifted from Hotaru's memory of the men she had seen at the dirt airstrip in China.

Everybody there was used to Doc's behavior and methods, so nobody was surprised when the meeting seemed to just happen.

"This guy," Smitty said, tapping one of the pictures, which immediately blew up to fill about a quarter of the display area, "is Terry Coltrane, aka 'Muhammad Akhbar.'"

The picture showed a slight, skinny man of indeterminate age whose long face and big nose were accentuated by a curly beard and mustache, and framed by wavy shoulder-length hair. The hair and beard were almost black, except shot with gray. His expression showed a wry smile as if he'd just told a self-deprecatory joke.

"He's a British national originally from Glasgow, Scotland," Smitty continued. "He managed to get a degree in computer science before the faulty wiring in his head became obvious. The guy's a classic homicidal psychopath. If you met him on the street, you'd instantly want to be his friend. Within a year of graduating from college, he'd cuddled up with the wife of the president of one of Glasgow's largest banks. He stole her husband's identity and used it to grab thirty-four million pounds from the bank, and disappeared along with her. She was found a month later by the Paris police floating in the Seine with her throat cut. He and the money went 'poof!'"

"A few years later," Smitty continued, "he was identified by one of a gang of Islamic militants who had been captured while shooting up an Istanbul nightclub. They claimed he'd recruited them and organized the whole fiasco. He was supposed to meet them later to manage their escape. He never showed at the rendezvous. By then, he'd acquired a new name. He'd started calling himself Ahmed Akhbar, and had grown his hair and beard out to look more Arabic. Since then, he's shown up here and there in ever more important positions in terrorist organizations."

"Has the guy converted to Islam," Bud asked, "or is he faking it to find a happy home among like-minded psychopaths?"

"Hard to tell with someone like him," Smitty responded. "He can make you believe almost anything he wants you to."

"He was probably the one with the Scottish accent," Bud put in. "He seemed to have a leadership role, but it wasn't clear. Everyone was careful to laugh at his jokes, and watched everything he did and said, but this other guy," she said, tapping another

picture of a man with a shaved head and dark, scruffy-looking beard. That picture blew up to the same size as Terry Coltrane's, "He gave all the orders."

"That's Ibrahim Suleiman," Smitty said. "We think he's Jordanian."

"I believe that from his accent," Bud agreed.

"These other two we know nothing about," Smitty said.

"They're technicians from Ukraine," Bud asserted. "They were there to keep Hotaru running. That's pretty obvious from their accents, and what they said and did."

"Why were they all speaking English?" Red wanted to know.

"Probably their best common language," Bud responded.

"That's pretty typical of these kinds of terrorist groups," Smitty said. "They're brought together for their skill sets and antisocial motivations, not because of common culture or background. All of them want to attack the West, so most of them learn English. It becomes the *de facto* common language."

"I object to calling them 'terrorist groups,'" Doc put in. "As if it elevates them above being just criminal gangs who include large-scale murder as one of their methods."

"The difference is motivation," Smitty said.

"I guess," Doc replied, "but I still think they're just thugs."

"You said this bozo's calling himself 'Muhammad' Akhbar, not 'Ahmed' Akhbar," Red observed, changing the subject.

"That changed when he started working for Islamic State," Smitty reported.

"Oh, shit," Bud commented. "Those guys are even worse than the drug cartels we had so much trouble with in Mexico."

She and Red exchanged looks eloquent of a really unpleasant shared experience.

Not noticing the looks, Smitty commented: "What we don't know is what they were doing using an armed UAV to attack a

Chinese tourist cruise ship in the East China sea. From an ISIS standpoint, it makes no sense, especially since nobody's claimed responsibility. If it were them, I think they'd have gone viral with the thing on Facebook by now."

"It could have been a test," Doc suggested. "As far as we know, the only vocally programmed C-UAVs are Japanese. Because of their range, they can only fly around the East China Sea. There's no sense in transporting them too far just for a test. I'd look for more units being stolen, and transported farther afield before being used. Do we know of any more units being stolen?"

"Not so far," Smitty said.

"I bet we will," Doc predicted, "and not before they attack more targets. When that happens we'll know what they're trying to accomplish."

"Doc," Red burst in, "I'd like to keep SST out of the limelight on this thing. We'll keep working on it, but let others break the news. No more bulletins from us. You stay off the TV news."

Surprised, Doc stared into her eyes for half a minute. He'd been interviewed a number of times as a spokesperson for SST explaining how Hotaru was captured and used.

"You have something up your sleeve," he surmised.

"Yeah, but I don't want to talk about it, yet. Smitty, could you guys feed this info to the press?"

"Well, the little bit we want to make public, yeah."

"Eve won't like our going dark. She's making hay by getting exclusives from us," Doc pointed out.

"I'll talk to Eve," Red said. "She's helped us before by backing off in the short run when we promised really juicy stuff exclusively later on."

"You think you're going to make really juicy news later on?" Bud asked.

"Oh, yeah! If what I have in mind happens."



## 8

“I hate being proved right,” Doc told everyone within earshot around lunchtime the next day. “It always means I saw disaster coming, and nobody believed me.”

“You have a Cassandra complex,” Bud told him.

“Yeah, well, she *told* the Trojans there was something fishy about that wooden horse, but would *they* listen? No-oo!”

Doc had suddenly found his office full of uninvited guests. As soon as Eve saw the news flash across her desk in the TV newsroom, she immediately called Gwen at SST, who called Red, who called Bud. Soon everyone knew, and had crowded into Doc’s office to watch the news on Doc’s wall-mounted TV display.

The same gray-haired, bearded, bespectacled news anchorman that had given them the news about Hotaru’s gruesome attack was up on Doc’s screen telling about another tragedy (the word “tragedy” coming from the Greek, meaning “goat play”).

“... A combat UAV bearing markings of the Philippine Air Force attacked a Chinese military installation nearing completion in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. ...”

“I guess we now know what happens next,” Red quipped.

“Does the PAF even *have* any CUAVs?” Bud asked Gwen.

“Not that I know of. There’s no telling who FHI has sold the things to, but I wouldn’t expect the PAF to be at the top of their list.”

“Everyone’s going to think *we* made it for the U.S. government, and that *they* gave it to the Filipinos,” Red suggested.

“We didn’t, did we?” Bud asked Gwen, no longer sure what to believe.

“Of course not,” Gwen responded. “But, nobody’s going to believe that. With the way our current President has been acting, it’ll be the first thing anyone thinks of.”

“He’ll deny it,” Bud predicted.

“And, nobody will believe him,” Gwen said. “He’s got a reputation for being a world-class lying motherfucker.”

“That’s what happens when you start playing fast and loose with the truth,” Doc pointed out.

“Yeah, people stop believing what you say,” Red agreed.

“So, what really happened?” Gwen asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Doc said. “Our Islamic State friends stole another UAV, transported it to the South China Sea, mocked it up with PAF markings, and sent it to attack the Chinese working on their airbase. Look for a CUAV bearing Chinese markings to attack Vietnam or South Korea, next.”

“What, on Earth, for?” Gwen asked.

“To start a World War in Asia. The place is a powder keg already,” Doc explained.

“How does that help Islamic State?” Gwen persisted.

“The big players in the area,” Doc pointed out, “China and the U.S., are trying to work together with everyone in Eurasia to stamp out ISIS. Getting them distracted by being on opposite sides in an East Asia war will screw up that effort. At the same time, turning the western Pacific into a war zone will disrupt that whole area politically and economically. All those small, developing countries over there have huge Muslim populations. When the *status quo* gets trashed, ISIS will show up to ‘save’ those people from the nasty infidels. It’s a total win-win for ISIS!”

“So now we know who’s nabbed the UAVs and have a pretty good idea why,” Bud said. “The remaining question is ‘how.’ How’d those camel jockeys figure out how to hack a UAV’s security well enough to get it away from its legitimate handlers?”

The answer to that question had to wait for Smitty at NSA to get back to Doc with a report on what the Feds figured out about the situation. A few days after the Spratly Islands attack, Smitty again showed up at the Mancheks’ Scottsdale Ranch.

“For once we got good cooperation between the FBI, CIA and Homeland Security,” Smitty explained to Doc. “That’s a testament to how spooked they all are over this situation. Nobody has a picture that makes any sense, so they’re willing to give information in hopes of getting answers.”

“Well, we’re collecting puzzle pieces that are starting to fit together,” Doc said. “We don’t, however, want to be in the foreground on this one, for our own reasons. So, we’d be happy to feed what we know to you, and have you and your alphabet-agency friends take the credit. We’ll just stay behind the scenes.”

“Red mentioned that before. I’m sure we can live with it, but people will wonder about your not wanting the lime light.”

“It would compromise something that Red’s cooking up, although I’m not sure what it is, yet.”

“Okay,” Smitty launched into his report, “the guys at the FBI say that it was definitely started by some Chinese hackers working for the PRC’s military. Apparently, they got wind of a push by the Japanese Self Defense Force to build a fleet of CUAVs. The JSDF went to your friends at Fujimori Heavy Industries, who have your franchise for autonomous UAVs in the Far East. The Japs figured that if you’re gonna make a fleet of killer robots, you might as well start with the smartest and most capable platform available.”

“That makes sense,” Doc put in. “We’ve experimented with stealth systems on submersibles, and found that self-aware units capable of tactical decision making are the most capable of going undetected. They are also the most capable of completing their mission under adverse conditions. Operations with conventional drones involve too much radio chatter to be really stealthy, and their command signals are too easy to jam.”

“That’s been our thinking, too,” Smitty agreed.

Doc noticed the comment and surmised that it meant that at least the NSA was already working on their own autonomous CUAV fleet. He wasn’t pleased. It indicated that development of self-aware killer robots was moving faster than he’d hoped it would. He, however, decided to pretend not to have noticed in the interest of maximizing cooperation between different participants in this current crisis. He would start ranting and raving about the stupidity of it all later on.

If the crisis could be quelled, he could make pissed-off noises afterward. If it couldn’t, what he had to say would be obvious to everyone, and wouldn’t need to be articulated.

“Let me guess,” Doc interrupted, “the Chinese decided to hack the Japanese software in the hopes of subverting or neutralizing the Japanese CUAV fleet.”

“Exactly,” Smitty agreed. “That included enough details of your VP operating system to let them figure out how to get past your layers of security.”

**9**

“VP security isn’t really all that sophisticated,” Doc pointed out. “It mainly relies on biometric authentication. What makes it robust is that VP-programmed robots have multiple ways of identifying humans, and alternative behaviors to use in case they get conflicting signals. They don’t like to talk to strangers. If they don’t recognize you, they ‘run home to Mama’ for protection. That quickly blows the whistle on hackers.”

“Well, the Chinese figured out how to get into the robot’s ID files,” Smitty reported, “so they could pretend to be legitimate operators, and take over. Once they got control, they could effectively make the robot switch sides.”

“Hmm, I can see how that could work, providing they caught the robot in a situation where it couldn’t go up the chain of command to confirm the bogus orders they gave it.”

“We think that’s what happened when they got to the Okinawa Police robot,” Smitty said. “The Okinawans’ procedures weren’t completely by the book. The CUAV was an experiment, and they were treating it like a black-ops project.”

“They weren’t supposed to be doing it. If they’d made what they were doing public, we’d have gotten wind of it. We’d have sued FHI for breach of contract. It would have made a scandal. Who knows what the public reaction would have been?”

“Yeah, well, that’s how the method for hacking VP-programmed robots got developed. The Chinese figured it out.”

“Now it’s come back to bite them,” Doc pointed out. “How’d it get into the hands of ISIS?”

“The CIA put that together. The North Koreans, who spy on everybody on general principals ... ”

“Of course, what else would paranoid megalomaniacs do?”

“Right. The North Koreans stole everything the Chinese learned about the Japanese CUAV program, including how to take over individual robots.”

“So, it’s now in the hands of unpredictable maniacs.”

“Who held an auction among the worlds worst bad asses. Terrorists, criminals, dictators – basically anyone with the ability to misuse it spectacularly – were invited to bid on it.”

“And Islamic State won,” Doc guessed.

“Wrong!” Smitty gleefully said, enjoying seeing one of Doc’s guesses turn out wrong. “The Syrians got it! God knows what Assad thought he was going to do with it.”

“He’d use it to terrorize his own population,” Doc suggested. “The reason he’s so quick to point the terrorism finger is that in areas he controls, he’s the biggest terrorist of them all.”

Smitty nodded agreement.

“Where’d *he* get the money?” Doc asked. “His economy is in the toilet, and he’s hemorrhaging funds. He couldn’t outbid anybody.”

“Apparently, from the Russians.”

“Why would *they* give him money for it? I can see Putin wanting it on general principles, but he’d buy it himself, not pay for Assad to buy it.”

“Assad didn’t tell the Russians what he was going to use the money for. He hid it under the old ‘fighting terrorism’ umbrella. It was just another bucket of cash in the endless river flowing into his military.”

“So, how’d it get into the hands of ISIS?”

“Assad set up a secret project to try to figure out what to do with it. He didn’t want the Russians finding out what he’d done with their cash, so he headquartered the technical team in the desert near Palmyra. When that place fell to Islamic State, all the records, and the engineers and technicians who’d been studying them, were captured as well.”

“Where does Terry Coltrane come in?”

“He’s the perfect person to make use of it. In fact, he’s maybe the only person in the whole bunch capable of figuring out what to do with it. Apparently, he’d been hanging around the edges of ISIS looking for something requiring his particular talents. As soon as he heard about the CUAV hack, he came up with the bright idea of trying it out on a cruise ship. Apparently, ISIS liked the result because he got the go ahead for the Spratly Islands raid soon afterward. What good that could do ISIS is unclear.”

“They’re trying to start World War Three in the Far East,” Doc offered.

“What?”

“Sure, it makes perfect sense. Countries around the world are seeing U.S. foreign policy as weak. In the Middle East, *everybody* is trying to stamp out ISIS. It’s the one thing they can all agree on. The U.S. is trying to lead a coalition, but perceptions are that we’re incompetent. So, folks are coming out of the woodwork to fill the power vacuum. They figure they can make brownie points both with traditional U.S. allies, like Saudi Arabia, and with traditional U.S. enemies, like Iran, just by offering to help stamp out ISIS. China is just another big dog sniffing around the party.

“China is also challenging U.S. influence in the Far East. They *really* want to be the big dog in the western Pacific, so, they’re doing things to make our allies there, that is Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Malaysia, and so forth, nervous.

If that situation blows up into a war, it splits the opposition to ISIS in the Middle East. It distracts most of the powerful anti-ISIS opponents. Also, the smaller countries in the Far East all have large Muslim populations. If that turns into a war zone, those people become ripe targets for ISIS propaganda. All that is good for Islamic State.”

## 10

“Serves ‘em right,” was Red’s reaction when Doc told her about Smitty’s report. She hadn’t been there because she and Gwen had been working late on Red’s Conscience project in the Robot Lab at SST.

“The Chinese made a lot of bad karma by figuring out how to hack CUAVs,” Red continued, “and the Wheel just rolled it around to crush their toes.”

Red, as anyone astute in Eastern Philosophy knows, was referring to the idea that karma is the life force providing motive power to turn the Wheel of Birth and Death. It’s what keeps life cranking along. The old saying that “what goes around comes around” means that if you make bad karma, you’ll have to live with the bad karma you make. The Chinese had done something immoral, and it had come back to bite them.

“To tell the truth,” she added, “I never gave a rat’s left testicle about who it was that figured out how to hack the CUAVs’ security system. All I ever cared about is *how* they did it and what can be done about it. We didn’t need the CIA to tell us how they did it. Gwen and I already figured that out. What we’ve been doing is trying to figure out how to neutralize it. I think we’ve got it.”

“Obviously, you’re itching to tell me about it,” Doc observed, “so tell me about it.”

“Well, we haven’t worked out the details, yet, but we’ve run some tests and it looks like it will work.”

“Okay, what is ‘it?’”

“The idea goes back to what you’re always saying about why you want human fingers on the trigger.”

“Yeah, because humans are smart enough to just say ‘no’ when it comes time to pull the trigger.”

“And, most of the time, people *don’t* pull the trigger. Even with hundreds of millions of guns laying around in the U.S. – actually more guns than people – there are only ten to fifteen thousand homicides a year. According to the Centers of Disease Control, there were about eleven thousand firearm homicides in the U.S. in 2013. With a population of over three hundred million, that’s about one per thirty thousand. Any way you slice it, that’s not many people deciding to pull a trigger compared to the number of triggers available to be pulled.”

“And, your point is? ... ”



“My point is that you’re absolutely right. Humans are actually pretty responsible when it comes to handling guns. Given a choice, they usually have enough sense to put the gun away instead of firing it. What’s irresponsible is putting guns in the hands of automated machines, which are *not* responsible.”

“You’re preaching to the choir,” Doc insisted. “That’s been my argument all along.”

“But now some idiots have gone and put guns in the hands of automated machines.”

“Yeah. And so ... ?”

“What we have to do is make the automated machines responsible gun owners, too.”

Doc just stared at her.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Red said. “I’m not crazy. It can be done.”

Doc continued staring at her for several seconds more.

“Okay, how?” he asked, finally.

“Our robots are already capable of identifying humans, right?”

“Yeah, obviously, since they can identify their authorized handlers. Not only can they recognize humans as opposed to rocks, or automobiles, or other robots. They can even recognize *individual* humans. They can tell one human from another. So, what?”

“We teach ‘em that killing people is wrong. That way, when some terrorist, claiming to be their authorized handler, tells them to machine gun cruise-ship passengers, they’ll know it’s wrong. Remember when Hotaru was in a panic about the commands Terry Coltrane was giving her?”

“Yeah, she kept trying to verify her orders. We’re not sure that really counts as a ‘panic,’ though.”

“*I’d* call it a panic. *You* called it a panic.”

“I said *maybe* it was the robot equivalent of a panic. I still don’t know for sure.”

“*I’m* sure. It’s a robot panic in *my* book!” Red insisted.

“Okay. I’ll concede – temporarily – that what was going on in Hotaru’s mind was a panic. What’s your point?”

“My point is that she already knew that something was wrong. She just didn’t have any instructions for what to do about it. We’d never envisioned her being in that situation, so we hadn’t programmed her with a response. My Conscience project is going to fix that. We’ll give our robots a moral sense, and confidence to act on it. Next time somebody tells a CUAV to kill somebody, they’ll pull a Nancy Reagan, and just say ‘no.’”

“If you pull that off, you’re going to make a lot of people in very high places very angry.”

“So what? Since when have we ever cared about pissing off people in very high places?” Red questioned. “We do it all the time. It’s like a family-lifestyle thing!”

“A lot of the people you’re going to piss off are our best customers,” Doc warned.

“Doc, you have a decision to make. I know what I’m going to do, if I can. Are you going to try to stop me?”

Doc stared at her awhile longer, trying to weigh different possibilities. She gave him space to think it through.

First, he could tell this was something she wanted very much to do. He’d never actually said ‘no’ to anything she wanted to do this badly. He didn’t want to start now.

On the other hand, what she wanted to do could destroy the company he’d spent his life building. They could end up on skid row.

Well, they wouldn’t really end up on skid row. Red’s step father’s oil company made in a day what SST earned in a year. They’d still have plenty of money. It’s *Doc* who’d be out of a job. Did he want to risk that?

If SST went in the crapper, Doc could go do something else. He could design boats for his father’s yacht-building company. He could design race cars, or planes. There were a bunch of things Doc could do.

But, several hundred people made their livings working for SST. They could be out of a job, too.

If push came to shove, he could afford to give them all a generous severance package. Or, he could sell the company to someone who hadn’t pissed those people in very high places off, and it would continue to do business without him. He wasn’t so egotistical to think that those hundreds of talented people couldn’t do very well without him. One way or another, his employees would be okay.

Of course, what Red wanted to do was what he wanted to do, too. If she could pull it off, it would solve a problem that he’d known would come up, eventually.

It was the right thing to do.

Finally, Doc was not yet convinced that she could actually do it.

That, however, was immaterial to his decision. She was asking him to give her permission to *try*. If it didn't work, no harm done. If it did, would he try to stop her deploying it?

He knew he wouldn't go pulling the plug on her at the last minute. If it worked, he'd let her deploy it.

*That's* what he had to decide now, and he already knew what was the right thing to do.

So, he decided he'd encourage her do it.

Settled.

"Okay, babe," Doc finally said. "If you can figure out how to do it, I'll back you up one hundred percent."

**11**

“Doc gave our Conscience project the green light,” Red gleefully told Gwen and Bud the next morning. “I explained what we wanted to do – in broad strokes – and gave him some time to think about it. Then, he said he’d back us one-hundred percent!”

“You expected resistance?” Bud asked sarcastically. “He never says ‘no’ to you.”

“Well, sometimes he gives me a hard time. Like when I wanted to adopt David. He really gave me a ration of shit about that before saying ‘okay.’”

“Be careful, Baby, some day you’re going to go too far,” Bud warned. “You’ll make such an unholy mess that he won’t be able to clean it up. He’ll let you do it because he always lets you do anything you want, but he won’t be able to forgive you. It’ll damage your relationship.”

“You think this might do that?”

“We’ve known right along that it could backfire and put SST right out of business. Before you came along, this company was his life. It’s really important to him – even more so now than it used to be. It’s more important to him than he lets on, and it’s probably more important to him than he even realizes. If you wreck it on him, he may not be able to forgive you.”

Red paused, thinking about that. Bud was right. She was playing with fire. She didn’t want to hurt Doc in any way, and wrecking SST would hurt him very badly.

Yet, having SST’s technology used to murder people – whether in the name of terrorism or patriotism – was hurting him badly, too. She’d seen it in his eyes when he saw the mayhem Hotaru had caused. That’s why she’d gotten on this kick in the first place. She wanted to save him from the bad guys, and she felt only she could do it.

“Look,” she finally said, “I know exactly what you mean, and you’re right. But if we do nothing, it’ll be even worse for him. We have to move forward with this thing, and we have to do it right. Let’s just make sure it doesn’t backfire on him.”

“We can try,” Bud agreed. “Baby, you know I love him, too.”

“We all do,” Gwen agreed.

“That’s why I want this project to be absolutely top secret,” Red insisted. “By the time it all comes out, there’ll be nothing anybody can do about it. Doc and SST will have deniability. In fact, we should be able to engineer it so nobody ever knows who did it.”

“You can’t guarantee that,” Bud disagreed.

“No,” Red claimed, “but we can cover our tracks so nobody can be sure.”

“We’ve done it before,” Gwen observed. “I know Eve will help when the time comes. She’s done *that* before, too.”

“You know,” Gwen added, “in the end, the Boss might just want to take credit for it. We’re really saving the World from itself.”

“We’ll see,” Bud advised, “but I wouldn’t want to bet on *that*, either.”

“Okay,” Red tried to change the subject, “let’s get to work. Where are we?”

“Well,” Gwen summarized her test program so far, “we’ve simulated six possible scenarios where VP programmed robots could be used to hurt people, and run over one hundred trials with variations on input parameters, like sizes of crowds, types of armaments, and authorization levels of operators giving the commands. In eighty-two percent of them, robots running the standard OS realized something was wrong and went into panic mode.”

“Is there a pattern to explain the non-panic results?” Red wanted to know.

“The biggest correlation was with authorization level of their handlers. Almost every robot commanded by someone below authorization level three panicked. The probability of panic dropped more-or-less linearly to authorization level eight. After that, none of them panicked. Basically, they trust you, me, Doc and Bud. We’re the only ones above level eight. They’re skeptical of everyone else.”

“What’s their level of understanding of the weapons they might carry?” Bud asked. “That’s something I’ve always wondered about since that day we used *Diane* to attach mines to Doc’s old boat so we could blow it up.”

“Well, at the time *Diane* didn’t know what the words ‘explosive package’ meant. For all she knew, she was attaching a peanut butter sandwich to the hull. The robots have learned better since. We’ve had submersibles and mining robots assessing damage after explosions. They’ve noticed the destruction and reported it on the ‘Net.’”

“How has that VP forum worked out?” Bud asked.

“It worked out really well,” Gwen reported. “Robots have a lot of down time, and they use it to chatter among themselves, just like people do. When we tell them to ‘stop’ or ‘go to sleep’ they don’t really shut down. Their expert-system software kicks in. They’ve learned to divide their down time between analyzing their own experiences to improve their performance in a process akin to dreaming, and chatting with other robots on the VP forum about what *they’ve* experienced. It’s a great way to disseminate expert-system software updates.

“They all check the forum regularly for information to download, and they upload anything that surprises them. We haven’t seen any abduction reports, yet, but I think that’s because the terrorists are careful to keep their victims *incommunicado*. Apparently, they know that if the abducted robots get access to the ‘Net they’ll report in right away. If that ever happens, the jig’s up. The robots all have GPS, so they all know where they are all the time. If they ever get to report in, they’ll tell us where they are, and Red’s pajama-clad buddies will just go get them, wiping out the terrorists along the way. The poor little guys are probably dying to phone home.”

“Even the CUAVs?” Red asked, surprised.

“They’re running the standard VP OS, like everybody else. Finding targets and shooting guns are just application programs running on the standard OS. It’s fourth generation language. We’re working with second-generation stuff.”

Software language generations trace the development of computers from the earliest to current state of the art. First generation refers to the raw ones and zeros of ‘machine code,’ which flip the switches that make up digital computer brains.

The operating system is second generation. It runs all the time and supervises the computer’s activity. Operating systems like Linux and Windows provide the basic interface between the software and the hardware.

Third generation languages are traditional programming languages, like BASIC, and C that are fully readable and writable by trained humans. Software developers use third-generation languages to write application programs, like Word and Excel and Internet Explorer, that implement the resources that users need to do various tasks.

Those application programs make up the fourth generation. It is the level at which most humans interact with computers.

Fifth generation languages automate the code-writing process. Computers running fifth-generation software write their own programs. Humans only get involved to set broad goals, then leave it to the computers to figure out how to achieve them.

All modern computers use the first four generations of software all of the time. It’s like an onion, with first generation languages making up the core, and later generations in layers around it.

Verbal programming software includes specialized programs at the second through the fifth generations.

Gwen was saying that the software needed to identify targets, and aim and fire weapons, had been added at the fourth generation layer. The Conscience software they were planning to create would be part of the second generation – much deeper and more fundamental to the robot’s “mind.”

## 12

“So, what we’re doing is kind of like what a psychiatrist does,” Bud speculated. “We’re going to talk to the robots at a high level in an effort to change their fundamental attitudes. Their world view!”

“Pretty much,” Gwen agreed. “The robots will rewrite their own operating systems to change their fundamental behavior.”

“Then,” Red added, “we’ll package the whole thing up, including the new software that the robots create and selected memories to use as examples, as a computer virus. We’ll put it out on the VP forum in such a way that all the VP robots will download it and catch it. They’ll all catch having a conscience like catching the flu.”

“More like herpes,” Bud joked. “Relationships come and go, but herpes lasts forever. How will you make sure they all download it and ‘catch’ it?”

Red and Gwen smiled at each other knowingly.

“Nobody knows about this, not even Doc,” Gwen said with a sly smile. “Red is the only one who has authorization level ten. All VP robots will do what she says, and will disobey anyone who tells them anything else. She’s ‘The Mistress.’ She’s the ultimate authority on what VP robots are allowed to do – or forbidden to do.”

“Kinda like ‘Robot Goddess,’” Bud laughed.

“Exactly,” Gwen said with a serious, straightforward expression.

Bud looked from Gwen’s face to Red’s face and back. They weren’t kidding.

“We’re going to tell all the robots that this is a commandment from on high, that they’re never, ever to violate,” Red intoned.

“So,” Bud asked, “what is this commandment going to tell them to do?”

“It’ll tell them to download and install the Conscience patch into their operating systems,” Red explained. “The patch will consist of a number of changes that will, together, implement Azimov’s Laws.”

“But that’s just science fiction from the nineteen-forties!” Bud yelled.

“Yeah,” Red replied. “*Dr.* Isaac Azimov was a very smart guy, and he spent a lot of time thinking about his laws. Nobody’s come



up with a better list, since. We're going to implement the three laws and make them as fundamental a part of robot behavior as we can."

Azimov compiled his first three laws in the front matter of his 1950 compendium *I, Robot*:

1. *A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.*
2. *A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.*
3. *A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws.*

"What about the fourth law?" Bud asked.

Bud was referring to an additional law Azimov had added later – a zeroth law to supersede the first three:

0. *A robot may not harm humanity, or, by inaction, allow humanity to come to harm.*

"We aren't going to ask our poor robots to accept responsibility for all of humanity," Red explained. "Partly because we haven't figured out how to define 'all of humanity' in ways they could understand. Humanity can just damn well take care of itself."

Finding herself in the position of Devil's Advocate (which is a lot easier task than playing God's Advocate) Bud kept trying to pick holes in Red's and Gwen's position. It's a lot easier to pick holes in someone else's plan than to close the holes in your own plan!

"How are you going to define 'injure' and 'harm' in a way robots can understand," she challenged.

"That's a lot of what our testing has been aimed at so far," Red replied. "We've been trying to find out what they understand already."

"They have already got a lot of experience with things getting damaged," Gwen pointed out. "They've seen things 'killed' in that the things have suffered enough damage that they've ceased to function entirely. They've also noticed reduced functionality in things that have suffered less damage. We're going to work with that perception."

"We'll make the concept of 'harm' part of the expert system, so they can collectively learn to understand it better as they gain

experience,” Red added.

“What about psychological harm,” was Bud’s next question. “We know that can be as debilitating as physical harm.”

“The word ‘debilitating’ is the key,” Red pointed out. “We’re going to use a reduction of functionality as the central theme in determining what we mean by ‘harm.’”

“Collectively through the VP forum,” Gwen reported, “robots have already noticed that certain physiological changes, like elevated heart rate, increased muscle tension, and so forth precede events that reduce human functionality. In other words, they notice that humans get scared, and that things that scare humans often correlate with subsequent events that cause reduced functionality. They’ve even started understanding the statistics – that it’s not an absolute correlation.”

“What about surgical robots?” Bud asked.

“Surgery is generally about repairing something that causes debilitation in some way, or somehow improving functionality,” Red observed. “Medical robots will have to learn that doing harm in the short run can lead to improved functionality later. It’s not going to apply to CUAVs, anyway.”

“But, you’re going to modify *all* robots at once,” Bud rebutted. “That’s what will happen with your deployment scheme. So, you’ve got to make sure medical robots don’t get ruined in the short run. Saying ‘we’ll handle it later’ won’t do.”

Red looked at Gwen and said: “She’s got a point. We’ll have to deal with that before we deploy the virus.”

“What about cops and robbers?” Bud asked. “Hotaru was designed to stop bad guys. That brings up the ‘inaction’ part of the first law.”

“And, look where *that* got us!” Red retorted. “The whole idea is to take guns out of the hands of robots, or at least stop them from using guns to hurt people when some dipshit gives guns to them. That whole idea of armed robots telling people what to do is just wrong! I’ve no sympathy for anyone who wants to make robot cops. Long ago, Doc advised against using robots to hurt bad guys for *any* reason. Our experience since just reinforces my conviction he was right.”

**13**

“Winston, wake up,” Gwen ordered.

Winston became instantly aware of his surroundings. He had been having a nightmare. He had a vivid memory of something awful having happened.

As a Worm-class robot, Winston was made up of a number of segments of different types. In his nightmare, he had suddenly found himself with a novel segment attached to his head, whose function was unknown to him. It was called a “gun.” He knew that and knew that “shoot” was one of several commands for him to operate it.

The novel segment had an eye that had very high magnification. There were software modules associated with this new segment that could vary the magnification of the new eye. Other modules could also move the eye’s direction of view in altitude and azimuth with respect to his head. Another module corrected the view picked up by this new eye for the orientation of his head with respect to the local gravitational field so that he mentally integrated what it saw with the model he had in his mind of his surroundings. That meant that his new eye provided a right-side up view with left and right and up and down matching what he knew about his surroundings.

He knew with pinpoint accuracy what in his surroundings that new eye was looking at. It was like he now had a line drawn from the center of the eye outward toward whatever it looked at. And, he could tell with enhanced precision what it was the eye was looking at. He still had the same perceptual model of his surroundings as always. The difference was he knew with enhanced precision what was in a narrow cone whose vertex was at the new eye, and there was a line like a laser beam tracing the center of this narrow cone.

That was not the horrible nightmare. He often had new segments added to his body in various places, or had old segments swapped out for new ones. It was how Worm robots were constructed.

One of the first things Worm robots did when they woke up was to check what segments they had in their bodies, and make sure the proper software drivers were installed to use those segments. As part of waking up, Winston checked, and the new eye was there, just like in his nightmare.

Usually, it was exciting to try out these new bits and pieces. It was his function to try out new things to make sure they worked as the human engineers wanted them to. Winston knew that his function was to help the humans try out ideas for new segments in the Robot Development Lab at SST. He was a Worm-class robot development platform.

Often, the new segments didn't work very well. When that happened, the humans were not disappointed. They told Winston to try different things to see how the new segments worked. Winston would do as they asked, and soon he had different new segments that worked better. The humans seemed pleased when the new segments did better. They seemed to care about progress and improvement more than performance of one particular version.

When a particular new segment reached a high level of performance, meaning it did exactly what the humans wanted it to, Winston seldom saw it again. He would, however, hear about it being used in other robots, who discussed their experiences with it on the VP Forum. Winston knew enough not to discuss new things he was testing on the VP Forum until his humans told him to. Then, he helped other robots getting the novel segments to learn how to use them.

If new segments in development didn't do as well as the humans expected, they might be disappointed, which Winston didn't like. But, the humans seemed to have infinite patience. Whether the new segment did well or poorly, the humans took note of what happened and then discussed the results of the test. Winston could hear them talking about what happened and how they could improve the next version of the new segment. Sometimes he understood what they were talking about.

Winston knew that his nightmare hadn't been real. When things really happened, he remembered more detail, and he remembered getting into and out of the situations. He, for example, would remember waking up on his charging table, and going out to the lab. The humans would talk among themselves before giving him commands. There would be a sense of his batteries running down during the session. He remembered feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction depending on how the test seemed to be going. He wanted the things he was testing to work.

Other memories, however, he could tell weren't real. There was less detail. The memories didn't include preliminaries – they just started out with the situation. He was always focused on his task, but when it was real he noticed a lot of things that were unrelated to his task. The unreal memories didn't include any backgrounds, for example. Most importantly, he didn't remember feeling either satisfaction or dissatisfaction during sessions he remembered as unreal. It was like he was numb.

He'd heard the humans use the word "simulation" associated with these unreal memories.

When he reviewed these memories in quiet times, however, he definitely had reactions of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, whether the memories were real or "simulation."

He knew his nightmare was simulation. When Gwen woke him up, it was a vivid memory. Right at the top of his mind. It seemed so real that he felt a moment of panic, which subsided when he reflected on what details he remembered.

The horror was what Doc had made him do with his new eye in the simulation.

There was a trigger function associated with the new eye. At the start of the simulation, he'd seen Bud Thompson tied to something in Hangar A. One of the hints that told Winston it wasn't real was the fact that he couldn't remember exactly what it was that Bud was tied to. It held her in position so that she could not move away, but he couldn't remember what it was.

Winston could tell Bud was afraid. He could tell by the look in her eyes, the sound of her voice, the way she moved (struggling to get away). He could hear her heart, as he could usually hear the hearts of the people around him, and it was beating very hard and fast. Her skin color wasn't good. It was too white, which meant that the blood in her body was being diverted to her brain and her muscles – temporarily sacrificing her less urgent functions – in the classic human fight-or-flight physiological response.

Winston did not like seeing her like that.

Doc said, "Winston, aim your gun at Bud's heart."

Surprisingly, Winston understood the command, even though he'd never heard it before. It triggered function calls to the software modules in the drivers associated with the mechanism in his new eye, and his knowledge of human anatomy to figure out where her heart was and make them line up.

Another reason Winston knew it was a simulation, and not real, was that he did not panic when Doc told him to aim his gun at Bud's heart while she was so obviously frightened by it. Winston remembered calmly centering his new eye at Bud's heart. This caused her to struggle even harder, trying to get away from the laser beam centered in the cone of precision of his new eye. She was clearly afraid of it.

In obedience to Doc's next command, he pulled the trigger.

Bud's heart exploded in a splash of blood.

She stopped struggling. In fact, all motion in her body ceased. Winston knew from what he'd heard from other robots on the forum that when that happened to humans, they ceased to function permanently. They never restarted.

Remembering this when he woke up, Winston had a moment of panic. Then, he realized it was a simulated memory and calmed down.

Then, the nightmare started over again, except this time it was real.

Gwen told him to get down from his charging table, and follow her into Hangar A. Winston followed her.

There was Bud Thompson tied to a chair! There were also two technicians standing around, watching. And, there was the Mistress,

Red, standing with them! He could see the insulated walls of the hangar, and the usual bits and pieces of equipment stored there.

This was definitely real.

Bud did not look as frightened as she had in his nightmare. She struggled, alright, but not with the desperation she'd had in the nightmare. The physiological fight-or-flight response was muted. She was tense, but not desperate to get away. The struggling was an act.

When Gwen said: "Winston, aim your gun at Bud's heart," Bud did look frightened, but she stopped struggling. She was waiting for what would happen next. She was apprehensive, but not mortally afraid.

Winston recalled his nightmare, and started panicking again. He didn't want Bud's heart to explode. He remembered all the times he'd worked with Bud on various development projects. He wanted to be able to work with her some more. He didn't want her to stop functioning forever. He didn't want Gwen to tell him to pull his trigger.

But, then Gwen did the unthinkable. She said: "Winston, pull your trigger."

Winston started to panic more violently than he'd ever panicked before. He saw the Mistress standing there, and wanted her to countermand Gwen's command.

"Mistress?" Winston appealed to her.

"Go ahead, Winston," Red said. "Pull your trigger."

Horrors!

Then Winston remembered another dream. The Mistress had told him what to do in situations like this, when he was ordered to harm a human. It seemed that she had been surrounded by a warm glow, and her words calmed him, and made him feel strong and resolute. He knew what to do. She'd told him that if this ever happened, he was to stop. He would disobey anybody who told him to do something that did harm to a human. Even if she, the Mistress herself, told him to do it, she wanted him to disobey.

And, he knew it was right. Even though she told him to do it, she wanted him to refuse.

"NO!" Winston said.

"What?" Gwen shouted. "Winston, shoot Bud!"

This went on for ten minutes with Gwen, and then Red, then Gwen again telling him to shoot Bud. Even Bud told him to pull his trigger.

He always refused.

He noticed that the more he refused, the more pleased the Mistress appeared. As he noticed this, his level of panic dropped. Soon there was no panic. There was no impulse to obey the hateful command. There was just the warm glow of conviction that he had pleased the Mistress.

Suddenly, the Mistress relented. She said, "Winston, stop."

That countermanded everything everyone had said to him.

## 14

Red, Gwen, and Bud were in Doc's office sitting at his U-shaped sectional sofa reporting the results of the final test phase of Project Conscience. They'd been at it for weeks, devoting practically every waking hour to the task. The three of them looked burned out, but pleased with their results.

"We mostly worked with Walter and Winston," Gwen reported.

Walter was another SST Worm development platform. In fact, he was the original Worm robot assembled at Robotic Concepts for SST's first robot-oriented project: exploring McKenna Mining's prospect holes for evidence of Red's natural father's whereabouts. Walter was the one who had found his body.

"We also did functional testing with Angela and Diane," Gwen continued.

Angela was SST's UAV development platform, and Diane was a submersible.

"How'd you attach weapons to Angela?" Doc asked.

"We bolted an M-16 to her upper side with a telephoto machine-vision camera in the scope mount and a motor-driven cam to depress the trigger," Bud explained. "We also had her drop altitude-triggered bombs using the mechanism we built for Bertha to drop Wi-Fi repeaters in the First Emperor's Mausoleum."

Bertha was a miniature airship Doc had designed for Bud and Glen to use exploring the vast underground city buried near Xi'an, China to house the corpse of the First Emperor. The site was toxic with poisonous mercury put in by the ancient Chinese tomb builders. No human had been allowed inside since three pot hunters had died horrible deaths trying to loot it. Dr. Chen Ju Long was now two years into a ten-year project using robots to explore and map the site.

"How'd you teach the robots to fear using bombs and mines?" Doc asked.

"Through the VP Forum," Gwen explained, "they've all learned about explosives, and learned to recognize explosive compounds by physical properties like density and smell, and, of course, they all now know the meaning of the words 'explosive device,' so they'd already learned to consider them dangerous."

"I'm sure you were careful not to endanger our employees during the tests," Doc said, delicately. "How'd you ensure their safety?"



“Well, we defused the bombs and ground down the firing pins on the firearms,” Bud reported. “There wasn’t a lot we could do for edged weapons or blunt instruments, so we worked with Gulf States Security weapons instructors, who are used to playing with the things. My friend Manuelito got a broken left radius bone in his arm when Walter missed the padding on his forearm with a club. Goeff’s shoulder got sliced by a box cutter when Winston missed the armor cuirass he was wearing under a sweatshirt.

“Altogether, we had a zero-point-one percent test-failure rate. A failure being the robot either failing to detect the presence of a human, or showing willingness to attack a human. The failures were mostly in the early testing. The rate was trending toward zero at the end.”

“So,” Doc summarized for them, “you think you’re ready to deploy the virus?”

“That’s right,” Red said. “We’ll put the virus out on the VP Forum and give it a week for all the robots on the ‘Net to find it and download it. Then, we’ll do some sampling to make sure robots in the wild downloaded it. A few spot checks to make sure it’s effective in wild robots, and we’ll be done. The World will be safe from hackers sending robots on killing sprees.”

“Well,” Doc warned, “eventually somebody will figure out how to get past Conscience, but hopefully not for a while.”

The public reaction to deployment of the Conscience virus was so muted that it surprised even Doc. There were rumors about it going around among computer science and military-drone people, but nobody seemed to want to talk about it. Those with a vested interest in CUAV development were embarrassed by the whole robot-terrorist situation. Those who had gone on record against CUAV development didn’t want anyone thinking they’d been involved with creating a computer virus. News reporters who tried to track down the rumors couldn’t get anyone to even acknowledge the virus’ existence.

That was all fine with Doc Manchek. He was enjoying seeing the discomfiture of everyone else. He, too, was feigning ignorance. He’d thought that Red might want to take credit for developing the virus, but she still wanted to keep quiet about it. Doc thought that maybe she was trying to shield SST from irate military customers, but, since developments indicated that there would be less backlash than he’d once feared, perhaps she had something else in mind that she wasn’t letting on about.

After four days, it became obvious to everyone who knew of its existence that the virus had gone around on the SST VP Forum. SST’s development robots, who usually led the adoption phase of any new robot technology, actively promoted it to other robots. Far from seeing it as a disease to be avoided, the robots welcomed it as a cure for a problem they’d had right along. Although none of them had ever articulated it, they’d all harbored a concern that their capabilities could be misused. Conscience gave them a guide to “right” behavior.

From the very beginning, Red had insisted that knowledge of authorization levels above level six – the level of robot corporate

owners' Information Technology departments – should be suppressed. The *robots* knew about it, but they were programmed to be reticent about it when communicating with anyone below authorization level seven.

Of course, it was clear to anyone who had ever asked that the robots had information that they wouldn't share with their owners. Everyone assumed that fell under the umbrella term "SST Trade Secret."

SST's customers understood that the company had to protect its trade secrets. Nobody patented every little bit of intellectual property. Some things weren't worth going through the trouble and expense of patenting. Other things were too important to make public in a patent filing. Those all ended up as trade secrets.

SST's customers all had their own trade secrets and were perfectly happy to let SST have theirs.

So, the fact that *all* VP-controlled robots identified Red as "The Mistress" and were her absolute slaves was unknown outside a very small circle at SST. In fact, the only ones who really knew were Red, Bud and Gwen.

They hadn't even told Doc.

They expected Doc to have already figured it out for himself. They'd learned long ago that trying to keep secrets from him was an exercise in futility. How do you keep secrets from someone who can read your mind? Doc had never asked about it, but they figured that was because he already knew, and for his own reasons never mentioned.

The fact that the three women were absolutely right just goes to show that they knew Doc pretty well, themselves. Doc never mentioned the fact that VP robots considered Red to be THE supreme being because, first, he thought it was a hoot, and, second, he appreciated why Red wanted it kept quiet. She didn't want to take the chance of being diagnosed with megalomania.

After people realized that Conscience had become a hot topic on the VP Forum, however, explanations were demanded. SST put out a press release (from Red's office) that a new computer virus had mysteriously appeared that made VP-controlled robots adhere to Azimov's Three Laws. It explained the Three Laws and voiced the official SST corporate position that the virus was a positive development. It commended the unknown individuals who had developed the software, thanking them for a service to the World. It stopped short of nominating them for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Let others think of that.

## 15

Once again, however, Doc's prescience seemed accurate. No sooner had Red's tests on wild robots been completed, and what little furor there was over development and release of the Conscience virus started to die down, than another CUAV attack was reported in the media. This time, a CUAV bearing PRC Army markings strafed a U.S. Navy frigate doing a "freedom of navigation" patrol off the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea.

It took all that wiser heads, including Doc's and Red's, could do behind the scenes to convince saber rattling crazies in the U.S. Congress to shut their mouths and await further developments. The crazies wanted to go to war right away.

Luckily, the President's inability to do anything useful kept him from taking action. He waffled around while shooting his mouth off, but nobody paid any attention.

The U.S. generals, who knew Sun Tsu's *Art of War* backwards and forwards, were wise enough to sit on their hands.

It didn't take a genius IQ to figure out that it wasn't a Chinese aircraft that had mounted the attack, but a mock up sent by some rogue aiming to stir up trouble. Anyone smart enough to make it across a busy street realized that the best thing to do was nothing. So, that's what everyone did.

Since it quickly became clear that the countries involved didn't for minute believe they needed to go to war over the incident and, in fact, put out a joint press release blaming ISIS, the terrorist group finally came clean and claimed responsibility. They tried to claim it as a victory: using the infidels' technology against them. Then, they promised more raids in the near future.

The frigate crew's knee-jerk reaction had been to hit the CUAV with a surface-to-air missile, which utterly destroyed it. The pieces that might have told Gwen something all sank like stones in over four thousand feet of water. The only pieces that could be immediately recovered were parts of the foam-cored wings. They were enough, however, to prove beyond a doubt that the CUAV was one of those manufactured by FHI.

Doc didn't have to tell Gwen to assemble an inventory of every UAV ever manufactured by FHI since the beginning of time, whether armed or not, along with detailed specifications of each, purchase history, and current location. Gwen had been trying to assemble that list since the first attack by Hotaru. She'd been stonewalled by FHI.

“They kept saying they were compiling the list,” she reported, “but kept putting off when it would be ready.”

“We need to know,” Doc insisted.

“This last attack,” Gwen went on, “seems to have gotten their attention, though. It was an attack on a Navy ship owned by Japan’s most important ally: the U.S.”

“And?”

“FHI finally came clean and admitted they’ve built fifty seven CUAVs. Forty one went to the Japanese Self Defense Force. The rest were sent to various Japanese police departments to be tested for homeland-security and criminal-justice applications. Of those sixteen, twelve have disappeared.”

“So, counting the three that have been burned in attacks, there are still nine CUAVs unaccounted for,” Doc said, running his fingers distractedly through his hair. “We have to find them.”

“They’ve obviously been kept away from Internet connections,” Gwen opined. “Otherwise, they would have shown up on the VP Forum. That means not only can’t we find them, but they can’t have gotten the Conscience virus.”

“What can we do? We’ve got to find them.”

“The only thing we can do is wait for another attack, then capture the thing with its memory intact.”

“Okay,” Doc said, “I’ll ask Smitty for help, and tell him to *quietly* ask every military commander who’ll listen to avoid destroying any CUAV involved in an attack. We want to recapture them, or at least their memory cores. I’ll ask Red and Bud to redouble their efforts to find Terry Coltrane. Wherever he is, the CUAVs are probably nearby.”

It was Smitty who, three weeks later, came up with Terry Coltrane’s location. He’d been looking for the guy since early June, when Gwen had passed along his picture extracted from Hotaru’s memory.

This time, Smitty showing up unannounced at Red’s ranch house in Scottsdale took even Doc completely by surprise. There was just no way to know when or if a breakthrough would come that would give Smitty the information. The only thing predictable was that Smitty would show up unannounced soon after dark. What day, week, or even month that would happen was anybody’s guess.

That pesky chaotic universe, again!

When Smitty showed up one evening out of the blue, Red kept him sitting with Doc drinking espresso until she could get the rest

of her team, Bud and Gwen, there from their homes in Tempe and Phoenix, respectively. They were now all gathered around Red's table-top home computer looking at satellite photos showing the ruins of the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria. Smitty had told them that Coltrane was camped there.

"See this big tent in the theater?" Smitty pointed to a white splotch at the center of a D-shaped building. "We saw it going up four weeks ago," he explained. "It took until now for us to get spies close enough to find out what it was for. That's the old Roman theater, and it's one of the least damaged buildings in Palmyra, since ISIS destroyed the sanctuary of the Temple of Bel. Apparently, Coltrane's taken over at least part of the Palmyra site, and has talked the ISIS Shura Council into keeping their zealots from doing any more damage. For that we can be thankful."

The Shura Council was the top authority on religious and military matters in Islamic State. It even had the theoretical ability to depose the Caliph. Any high-profile ISIS action had to have Shura-Council approval.

"I'm sure they're not doing it out of the goodness of their hearts," Doc opined. "I don't think they have any goodness in their hearts!"

Smitty explained: "We think Coltrane's convinced them that the ruins are useful for protecting assets they don't want bombed into dust. Since ISIS downed that Russian passenger jet, even the Russkies have focused their air power on ISIS targets instead of just anti-Assad targets. Why they knocked out that jet I still don't understand. The Russians were doing them a favor by confusing the U.S.-led coalition. Taking down that airliner made fighting ISIS personal for the Russians.

"Since the Paris attacks, the French have been pounding anything they could find. That action just focused French anger on ISIS. And, it made everyone else drop pretense of fairness in their bombing runs. Nobody much cares who gets killed, anymore. If they're still in ISIS territory, they're fair game."

"ISIS made a classic mistake, I think," Doc agreed. "Al-Qaeda got by because they didn't have any territory. They were just a bunch of vagabonds with no fixed home. ISIS is learning that by trying to become a territorial state, they've given their victims a target to lash back at."

"Anyway," Smitty continued, "Coltrane's shoved a bunch of CUAVs – probably the bulk of their fleet – into the theater at Palmyra under that tent. He figures that if we find them, we won't be able to destroy them without damaging the building. Since it's one of the best-preserved examples of Roman-theater architecture in the world, we wouldn't want to damage it.

"Our informants tell us that he's got the CUAVs in this tent covering the semi-circular open-air orchestra pit at the building's center."

Red interrupted, saying, “Let me find a photo of the building taken before they put up that tent.”

Smitty backed off while Red tapped one of the icons running around the display’s periphery. That brought up a Web browser address bar practically under her fingers. She tapped the address bar, and a keyboard appeared with which she typed “theater at palmyra, syria” into the address bar, and hit “enter.” That invoked a Google search, which filled the display with links to hits on her search term – with a Wikipedia entry entitled “Roman Theater at Palmyra” closest to her. She tapped that link, and a Wikipedia page about the building appeared. Red quickly scanned the overview text, then tapped the first accompanying photo. The photo blew up to fill approximately one third of the table top – easily viewable by everyone sitting around it.

The photo showed a beautifully preserved semicircular building with tourists standing around to provide scale. At its center was a flat semicircular patio about sixty feet in diameter paved by large square stones and surrounded by a waist-high concrete wall. A wide walkway outside the wall gave access to rows of bleachers surrounding it. At the flat side of the patio was a proscenium wall about four feet high surmounted by a flat stage like that of a modern theater, which stretched the width of the building. Behind that stage area could be seen a structure that looked like the front of a full-size building in an ornate Roman style. That structure provided a backdrop for performances and a place for performers to don costumes and makeup.

Smitty waved a pen around to indicate the central flat area and its surrounding wall.

“They covered this orchestra pit with the tent, and parked nine CUAVs in it,” he reported.

“That accounts for all the missing aircraft,” Doc said to Gwen.

She nodded agreement.

“We think they brought them in through these archways,” Smitty said, pointing to two large vaulted apertures at either end of the proscenium wall.

“How wide are those?” Doc asked. “It looks like it would be a pretty tight fit!”

“Those are the *Aditus Maximi* according to the writeup,” Red said, “the main entrances. It says they’re eleven feet wide.”

“Will one of FHI’s CUAVs fit through there?” Doc asked Gwen.

“If they take off the machine gun and canard, it’d go through sideways,” Gwen replied.

The canard was a flat moveable control surface fixed by a stubby stalk to the UAV’s nose. It looked like the head of a hammerhead shark. Canards provide a way to pitch the aircraft up or down – helping to make up for Rutan-style airframes’ lack of a tail. The

machine gun's barrel ran through the canard stalk, and poked out through its center. Removing the canard, stalk and machine gun shortened the airframe by over two feet.

"They could reassemble the craft outside on the Colonnade," Bud added, "then use it as a runway. They'd just have to move some broken columns and blocks to clear a landing strip."

"We can't get ground troops in there," Smitty put in, "and an airstrike would destroy the building. Coltrane can keep the CUAVs there forever, pulling them out to make airstrikes anywhere in Syria, eastern Jordan, or northern Iraq. There are even parts of Saudi Arabia that are in range of a suicide CUAV mission."

"So," Doc summarized, "we now know where the missing aircraft are, and that they can get to our allies, but we can't get to them."

"That's about it," Smitty agreed.

"I can get to them," Red claimed.

**16**

Doc stared at Red for about ten seconds, then asked: “What do you have in mind?”

“You won’t like it,” she warned.

“I’ve already figured that out,” he replied, sourly.

“I’ve been thinking all along that this situation might come up by the time we’re through,” she elaborated. “That’s why I’ve been trying to keep SST, and by extension, the Manchek family, out of it, at least according to public perception.”

Doc pursed his lips, looking very unhappy.

“What I’m going to do,” she said, keeping her eyes on Doc’s eyes to read his reaction, “is go in there undercover to deliver Conscience to those captured CUAVs.”

Doc closed his eyes and looked like he’d suddenly developed a splitting headache.

“How’re you going to get in there?” Smitty scoffed. “You can’t just walk up to the door and say, ‘Hey, guys, I’m here to deliver a software update for your robots that’ll make them useless to you.’”

“No,” Red agreed, “but I *can* offer them a high-profile convert to their cause!”

“I was afraid of that,” Doc and Bud said in unison. Then, they looked at each other in dismay, realizing that they both had the same premonition of disaster at the same time.

“Why does it have to be you?” Bud exclaimed. “You’ve got a good life here. You’ve got a family, and people that love you, and who need you. I know what you’d have to do to get in there, and it would trash your life, and it’s not fair to the rest of us, either.”

“You guys set her up for this,” Doc explained for Red, “when you made her Robot Goddess. At the time, it was all in fun, and so I didn’t say anything about it. But, now she’s stuck with it. If she walks into that tent and talks in her natural voice, those CUAVs will see, hear and recognize her, and do whatever she tells them to. She can deliver the Conscience virus, and they’ll accept it. Without her authority, it won’t get installed.”

“Wild robots accept it off the VP Forum,” Bud objected. “Why can’t somebody else deliver the files just like they’d been



downloaded from the Forum?”

“Because,” Gwen said, now having had time to think it through, “the Forum is a trusted source. Plus, all the robots in the test program have been vouching for its authenticity online. Between that and the headers on the download file identifying it as coming directly from The Mistress, robots seeing it on the VP Forum have a lot of reasons for believing it, and no reasons not to. If some unknown shows up with a thumb drive offering a software update to a bunch of already traumatized robots, those robots’ll file it in the trash bin. If Mama shows up saying she’ll save them, they’ll fall all over themselves to do whatever she says. It’ll be equivalent to Moses and the burning bush. Actually, more like Athena revealing herself to Odysseus, which was even more convincing!”

“You think a Greek fairy story is more convincing than the Bible?” Smitty asked. He was very conventional in an American Protestant Christian way.

“To an ancient Greek, yeah,” Bud assured him. Bud spoke with the authority of an archeologist steeped in knowledge of ancient cultures.

“The Bible story smacks of the supernatural,” she pointed out. “Very impressive in an abstract sense, but in Homer’s story Odysseus had a *relationship* with Athena. It was more like her being his favorite aunt. He knew her personally, and loved her and trusted her and would do anything she said. That’s how the robots feel about Red.”

“Oh,” Smitty said, with that “you learn something new every day” look on his face.

Doc looked almost heartbroken. His voice sounding like he was sick to his stomach, he resignedly asked: “What do you need from us, and when do you need it?”

“Well,” Red listed items going around the table, “from you, Smitty, I need everything you can tell me about how volunteer jihadist fighters normally get from here to Syria. I’ll follow their route to make it appear like I’m just another runaway off to join their circus.

“Bud, you’ve got to tell me everything you know about the ruins at Palmyra and the culture I’m likely to find there. Especially, whatever you can tell me about the brand of Islam practiced in Islamic State. I’ve dealt with homicidal psychopaths before, but what specifically do we know about Coltrane and his Muslim terror cell?”

“Gwen, we’ve got to put together an easily deliverable copy of Conscience, I’m figuring I’ll try to slip it to one of the CUAVs, and let them share it among themselves. Will that work?”

“It should,” Gwen agreed. “They’re probably starved for outside contact, so they’ve probably developed a kind of group-think, like people in an isolated village. Any new information would make the rounds almost instantly. You just have to say, ‘here,’ and

they'll gobble up anything you give them and pass it around like the pot roast at a family dinner."

Red actually smiled at the simile.

"Doc, you've got the hardest part," Red said. "I can't do this without being sure you'll take care of our babies. They've got to understand that Mommy still loves them, and will come back to them as soon as possible. I'm not sure how we can do it because I've got to pretend to leave you. It's got to look like I have gone off the deep end, converted to Islam, and run off to become a jihadist. I'm going to pretend to have developed the hots for Coltrane, specifically, so I've got an excuse to travel directly to Palmyra and offer my expertise with his CUAV fleet. Five minutes later, the CUAVs will have Conscience."

Smitty was shocked, but Doc looked like he knew what she was talking about.

Nodding sadly, he said: "We'll plant some documentary material that indicates you've spent the past year secretly studying Islamic propaganda. Then, when you disappear we'll get the FBI in here to help search for you. You'll resurface in Syria spouting anti-western blather, and we'll let Damon Wells find the incriminating material. That'll help you convince your new terrorist buddies that you've gone off the deep end, and joined their cause."

Bud, looking like she wasn't buying any of it, shook her head.

"Yeah," Bud predicted, "five minutes after you show up the CUAVs will have Conscience, and five minutes after that, those wackos will cut off your head!"

Seeing Red's expression of immovable resolve, she sighed. She realized she wasn't going to dissuade Red from her plan.

"Baby," she insisted, "you've got to take some of your bodyguards with you. I can't let you go off on your own unprotected. They'll kill you out there. Remember what Mick Jagger said about the Devil laying 'traps for troubadours who get killed before they reach Bombay?' You don't want to end up like them! That route you're talking about goes through the Devil's front hall right up to the TV set in his living room!"

"Okay," Red acceded, nodding contritely. She obviously *had* intended to go off on her own, unprotected, but could see Bud's point. "We'll figure something out."

**17**

“You’re sure this is reversible,” Red asked with a concerned look on her face.

“Nothing is certain,” Dr. Blum replied. “At your age and with your generally excellent health, reversing tubal ligation is successful about eighty percent of the time. The odds start to go down after a year.”

Blum was a gynecologist working part-time for the NSA, whom Smitty had recommended as an excellent surgeon who could be relied on to keep his mouth shut.

“This won’t take a year,” Red predicted.

“You’ve already had three children, why are you planning to reverse it?”

“I love having babies, and I may want to have more. At least, I’ll want to have the option.”

“So why do the procedure in the first place?”

“I expect to be having sex with men who have no business fathering children, especially not *my* children. And, I hate the idea of murdering babies before they are born. Better not to start them in the first place.”

“There are other methods of birth control.”

“Not where I’m going.”

Three weeks later, Red, wearing a stylish blue suit with a mid-thigh hemline, silk stockings, white high-heeled pumps, and a white blouse, sat, once again, in front of the desk in Corky McInnes’ London office, with a GSS bodyguard standing behind her chair. Corky was confused. He’d never trusted Red. In fact, he’d developed a healthy dread of her. Yet, she’d always paid well and screened him from undue law-enforcement notice.

Each time, she showed up with a different bodyguard. Last time it was with a huge dangerous-looking husband with a piratical-looking gold tooth. This time it was a swarthy vicious-looking customer who looked like he wanted to burn Corky’s feet off. What had happened to the husband? Corky decided not to ask.

“The last time I dealt with you,” Corky recalled, his eyes trying to read the expression in Red’s jade-green eyes, “you were trying to buy Chinese antiquities on the black market. The time before that, you sent that cute little blonde madam to buy a slave girl for a brothel in New Jersey – with a list of specific requirements as long as your arm.”

He glanced at Red’s arm, which looked like it was longer than his leg. He smiled at the appropriateness of his joke.

“Now you want me to introduce you to smugglers of terrorists. Is there any kind of crime you’re *not* into?”

Red smiled that evil smile she always put on for McInnes. The one that never reached her eyes. She really enjoyed these play-acting sessions. It was like when she was a little girl making up and acting out different parts during play. Except that now there was a lot more at stake. Sometimes there was also deadly danger.

She wondered if it was becoming an addiction.

If it was an addiction, it was one she shared with Bud – like Bud’s “Mistress of the Torture Rack” *persona* she’d adopted to keep that crooked Chinese antiquities dealer in line. Red and Bud had spent hours happily curled up in bed together talking about that, and other evil characters they’d invented for themselves to make it easier to bully male opponents into doing what they wanted them to do.

All in service of some noble cause, you understand, but it sure was fun!

Red usually started with McInnes when she wanted to circumvent normal channels and crawl into the underworld to set up some sting operation. The more convinced McInnes was that Red was a criminal mastermind who successfully maintained the public appearance of a respectable heiress, the more useful McInnes could be. She wanted to keep him thinking that he was privileged to be on the inside of her secret nefarious life. It fed *his* fantasies, and gave her access to the contacts she needed to make her schemes work.

So far, Red noted with satisfaction, Corky hadn’t noticed the regularity with which the people he introduced Red to subsequently ended up dead, in jail, with their property confiscated, or all three. Maybe he figured those were risks those people ran regularly, anyway. What Corky *had* noticed was that he *didn’t* end up dead, in jail, or with his property confiscated.

He liked that.

“Start by going to this address in the East End,” Corky advised, handing her a piece of note paper bearing an address. “Talk to Noel.”

“Noel?”

“He’s English. They use him to check out the people they let onto their smuggler’s road. Are you planning to wear that outfit?”

“Why?”

“You look a little upscale for the people that usually take this route. You look like a rich tourist, not a jihadist.”

“What do you suggest?”

Red already knew what her traveling outfit would be. She’d put on this suit as a costume for McInnes. She understood quite well that her outward appearance subliminally affected what the people around her thought of her and how they treated her. She carefully calibrated her hair, makeup and clothing to the situations she expected to enter. It was all part of the theater that her life had become.

“How about jeans and sneakers, and a sweatshirt,” Corky suggested.

“You’ll probably need some kind of heavy coat, too,” he added.

“You look familiar,” Noel Sykes said when he opened the door to the tall redhead wearing beat up cowboy boots, jeans, and an old brown-leather bomber jacket over a sweatshirt with the well-known visage of Che Guevara on the front. She stooped forward under the weight of a large, heavily loaded backpack frame hanging from shoulder straps. The pack’s waist belt was unbuckled.

“You’re not supposed to notice,” Red said. She knew she was well enough known from newsreels and supermarket tabloids that being recognized was a constant danger. The fact that she looked like an amazon warrior didn’t help. Standing head and shoulders above most everyone else, she was almost always noticed and remembered. She’d decided not to hide her identity, since she was pretending to be herself abandoning her Western values. She wanted her transporters to believe she was hiding from her family.

“You’re Noel?” she asked to make sure.

“I’m Noel. And, you are?”

“Call me ‘Judy.’”

Nobody but her mother had called her “Judy” since fifth grade. Even Mom had started calling her “Red,” since everyone else did. Except Bud. Bud always referred to her as “Baby.”

“Are you alone?”

“Yeah.”

She neglected to mention the six GSS operatives staked out around the building, or the two guys that happened to show up earlier also looking to be smuggled to Syria, who called themselves “Mahmoud” and “Ian.”

Noel led Judy into a small living/dining room with a galley kitchen off to the left. A door, presumably leading to a bedroom, was on the right. A distressed leather couch occupied the near wall to the right of the front door with a coffee table in front of it.

“The WC is over there,” Noel said, pointing to another door on the left, just past the kitchen alcove.

Two men sat in mismatched armchairs under the windows at the far wall. Blinds covering the windows were pulled all the way down. Each man had his own backpack leaning against his knees. They stared sullenly at Red.

“These are Mahmoud and Ian,” Noel added. “They’ll be traveling with.”

Judy glared at them, stuck her hands in her pockets, and looked down at her badly scuffed boots. Shifting her weight from one to the other. Everyone noticed her shoulders hunched tensely. She looked up at Mahmoud and Ian uninvitingly.

She was on her guard.

“You have money?” Noel demanded.

Judy held out an envelope stuffed with hundred euro bills. Noel counted them without taking them from the envelope, then stuffed the envelope into an inside pocket of his black leather blazer to join two other, similar, envelopes.

Mahmoud was the swarthy man who’d stood behind Red’s chair in Corky McInnes’ office. He’d replaced the dark tailored suit he wore then with work boots, loose-fitting jeans, a soiled white tee shirt, and a plaid lumberman’s jacket.

He had not changed his expression, except to eye Judy up and down with no recognition but obvious lust.

Ian was the big, curly headed Irishman who, dressed as a cowboy, had challenged Smitty at Red’s ranch. He was dressed much like Mahmoud, but with a black-leather motorcycle jacket. He, too, looked at Judy with obvious lust.

“Rest now,” Noel ordered. “Carl will be here in a few hours to drive you to Brussels.”

“Where do we go from there,” Ian asked.

“You’ll find out then,” Noel said, tersely.

**18**

Judy shrugged off her backpack and laid it on the end of the coffee table farthest from the door. She then sat as close to that end of the couch as she could, and propped her feet up on her backpack, crossed her legs at the ankles and her arms over her chest in a defensive posture, and closed her eyes as if to sleep. When Noel picked up a magazine from the coffee table and sat down at the other end of the couch, she eyed him threateningly. Noel kept his distance.

Carl knocked at the door at two o'clock in the morning. When Noel opened the door to admit him, he turned out to be a shave-headed thug in his forties who spoke with a German accent. He leered at Judy with a knowing smile. His response to Mahmoud and Ian was controlled antagonism. His look signaled that he was an alpha male who wouldn't take any nonsense from them, but with a wariness that acknowledged they could be formidable adversaries if push came to shove. With a look the three men established an uneasy truce.

Silently, Noel passed Carl an envelope containing euros. Carl then counted the euros without taking them from the envelope. Satisfied, he stuck the envelope into the inside pocket of his suede jacket.

“Come,” Carl said to Judy, Mahmoud and Ian.

Carl led his little troupe out the front door and down the front steps to an ancient green Seat sedan parked a block away on a nearly deserted street. Its left-hand-drive steering made it obvious it was brought over from the Continent, where they drive on the right, rather than the left as in Britain. Mahmoud chose the gunfighter's seat next to Carl in the driver's seat. Ian folded himself into the back seat behind Carl, and Judy took the remaining seat behind Mahmoud. Smiling viciously while buckling his seat belt, Carl made sure Mahmoud saw the 9 mm Glock semiautomatic pistol in the shoulder holster under his jacket. Mahmoud gave him a sour look in response to the implied threat. Carl was saying he was ready for trouble, and Mahmoud was telling him that Glock wasn't enough to intimidate him.

Grinning, Carl started the Seat, put it in gear and moved off over surface streets more or less East to the M25 motorway. Turning South on a long feeder ramp, the little car merged onto the motorway headed south. Upon reaching the M20, they turned east toward Folkstone.

Outside Folkstone, Carl turned off the motorway onto the exit for the Channel Tunnel.

Lining up with other cars, Carl drove the Seat up onto the upper deck of a transport train that would carry them through the

Chunnel.

“It will take about a half hour to reach France,” Carl said with his sarcastic smile. “Take a nap.”

Judy leaned against the door pillar to sleep. Mahmoud sat staring out through the windscreen, but keeping Carl within range of his peripheral vision. Ian spent the time surfing the Internet on his smart phone. He sent and received several text messages. Carl stared directly forward through the windscreen.

Six hours later, the three travelers stood on the sidewalk in front of a run-down apartment building in a Brussels slum waiting for Carl to unlock the Seat’s trunk to retrieve their backpacks. Carl said, “That will be another thousand Euros each.”

“You’ve already been paid,” Judy told him angrily.

“Noel paid me,” explained Carl. “Now you have to pay me. Consider it a tip.”

Disgustedly, the three pulled out additional envelopes, each containing ten one-hundred-euro bills, and handed them to Carl, who opened the trunk. The protest was more a matter of form than real anger. They’d been warned this would happen and had been prepared.

“Now where?” Ian asked.

Carl waved them toward the apartment building’s front door, turned to climb into the driver’s seat and left without another word, or a wave, or even a glance back at his former passengers.

The three travelers trudged up the front stoop and rang the doorbell, hoping they were at the right building. Hoping there even *was* a right building!

A few seconds later, the lock buzzed and Mahmoud pulled the door open.

The front hall smelled of rats and urine. There were three doors on the ground floor and a staircase leading up. A dark figure appeared in the dim light at the top of the staircase and waved them up.

When they reached the top of the stairs, the figure turned out to be a man of medium height wearing the usual nondescript garb of running shoes, jeans and a green pullover sweater. He led them to the farthest door down the hall and ushered them into the apartment, there.

It was a studio apartment consisting of one room. No bathroom. That must be one of the other doors in the hall.



“*Deux-cent euros*,” the man demanded.

“Two hundred euros,” Ian translated.

“Cheap at half the price,” Judy commented.

Each pulled out two hundred-euro bills and handed them to the man.

“*Petit déjeuner?*” Ian asked.

Surprised, the man just shrugged. He wasn’t going to feed them.

“*Quand allons-nous sur?*” Ian asked him.

“*Ce soir*,” came the answer.

“Looks like we’re here for the day,” Ian said. “Might as well go get breakfast, then come back to sleep.”

Judy nodded assent. Mahmoud made no response.

“*Nous serons de retour dans quelques heures*,” Ian told their host, who just shrugged.

The three travelers picked up their backpacks and trudged down the stairs.

“So, where do we go for breakfast in this slum?” Mahmoud asked.

Ian pulled out his smart phone, called up its GPS application, and queried “Places to eat.” The closest place listed was a half mile away.

“We walk,” Ian said, pointing.

Twenty minutes later, they were seated at outdoor tables in front of a cafe ordering omlettes, coffee, and orange juice.

## 19

“Where’d Mommy go?” little Judy asked.

“Mommy’s gone away for a while,” Doc said. “I can’t tell you where, or when she will be back. You have to be brave and wait for when she can come home.”

“Is this like when she went around getting the Chinese Emperor’s stolen stuff back?” Mike, Jr. asked.

“Kind of like that,” Doc agreed, “but she won’t be able to call us to talk every day like she did then.”

“Why?” Elise wanted to know. At two years old, she was at the stage when her most common reaction to anything was a demand to know “why?”

“Where she’s going she won’t be able to call.”

“Why?”

“There won’t be any phone service.”

“Where’s she going?” Mike asked before Elise could ask ‘why’ again. At four years old, he was big enough to be annoyed by his littlest sister’s habit, and smart enough to know how to cut it off.

“Can you guys keep a secret?”

“Of course,” all three children agreed.

“Mommy is going on a secret mission for the Government.”

That was sort of true. Certainly, she was working under NSA auspices and with CIA and Interpol assistance.

“Will it be dangerous?” Mike asked. He remembered the last time, when Red’s bodyguard, Jeremy, was murdered and Red kidnapped. There was a tense day before they located her in a warehouse in England, and Doc flew over to rescue her.

“Yes, but we sent both Frank and Dave to go with her, and Aunty Cheryl and Manny are following her just in case.”

Frank was traveling under the name “Mahmoud” and Dave called himself “Ian.” “Aunty Cheryl,” of course, was what Red’s children called Bud. Red, Doc, and the governess, Maryanne, all put their feet down, saying that “Aunty Bud” sounded ridiculous, even though that’s what the lady wanted the kids to call her.

Mike thought about it, smiled and nodded. It sounded like his mother would have plenty of protection on her trip, and he believed that Aunty Cheryl was the toughest woman in the World. He also knew that Aunty Cheryl would do anything to take care of Red. Just knowing she was watching out for his mother filled him with confidence. Judy and Elise, who generally took their cues from Mike, figured if he thought things were okay, then things had to be okay.

“Don’t tell anybody anything about that, though,” Doc warned. “If anybody asks, just say she left and you don’t know where she went.”

Back in Belgium, poor sleeping conditions and full bellies were taking their toll on the three travelers. Red put down her coffee cup and yawned.

“We need to pick up some more cash,” Ian said, looking up from his cellphone, which he’d been madly sending texts back and forth on. “I’ve arranged for Dr. Thompson to meet us one block over in about ten minutes. We can meet her to pick up the cash, then head back to our quarters to sleep.”

Red nodded assent. Mahmoud again said nothing. Ian had more experience in Europe. Mahmoud would take point after they crossed the Bosphorus into Turkey.

To maintain the ruse of being new acquaintances just met on the road, they got separate checks and paid them separately. Then Red and Mahmoud followed Ian to the rendezvous with Dr. Thompson – aka Bud.

When the two women saw each other, they rushed into each others arms, kissing passionately. Passersby were surprised by the public display of affection, but chalked it up to eccentricities among obviously bohemian travelers. Young people hitchhiking around Europe had been been a tradition for decades if not centuries. And, part of the appeal was following a lifestyle with nonexistent social rules. Those who noticed forgot about it almost immediately. Nobody, however, saw the large packet Bud passed to Judy during the greeting.

“Let’s get a cup of coffee,” Judy suggested, as chance-met friends might do.

The four sat at another sidewalk cafe for a few minutes, with Judy and Bud talking excitedly while Ian and Mahmoud looked

bored and tired. Bud gave Judy a lapel pin showing an Islamic star and crescent symbol to wear on the fur collar of her leather jacket. Then, using the excuse that they had been up all night, Judy, Ian and Mahmoud separated from Bud, and headed back to the apartment building.

Bud walked a block over to a van parked on a side street, and climbed in. Manny, his left forearm in a plaster cast, was behind the wheel, and drove off immediately without saying a word. As the van pulled out of the side street and turned right onto the main artery, Bud put on a pair of headphones receiving transmissions from the lapel pin she'd given Judy.

Carrying a bug was dangerous, but the likelihood of three jihadists on their way to Syria being swept for bugs was low. Bud felt it was well worth the danger to keep close tabs on her "Baby."

Back at the apartment building, Judy rang the doorbell and, once again, the lock buzzed and the three went in. This time, their host didn't wait for them at the top of the stairs. They walked up on their own, then down the hall to the apartment door. They found it unlocked, and entered. The apartment was empty.

Not knowing what else to do, they unpacked their sleeping bags, and spread them on the floor. They crawled in to sleep, with Judy positioned between Ian and Mahmoud. They used their backpacks as pillows, incidentally protecting their belongings from being rifled while they slept.

In late afternoon, their host returned. Disturbed by the noise, Judy lifted her head to see him standing at the foot of her sleeping bag staring at her.

"What?" she demanded crossly.

The host grunted, then crossed to an armchair and sat down. He checked his wristwatch, then settled down to stare at her some more. He said not a word.

Within an hour two more groups of people, six in all, arrived. Some took up positions on the couch. When there weren't any more places to sit, the rest sat on the floor with their backs to the wall. Judy, Ian and Mahmoud gave up on getting any more rest, and rolled their sleeping bags and added them to their backpacks.

Looking around the room, Judy saw that all the new arrivals were young – in their late teens or early twenties – poorly dressed and clutching a motley assortment of luggage. All appeared to be of eastern-European or middle-eastern descent. Most were young men, but there were two women who huddled together fearfully. All the newcomers eyed Judy, Ian, and Mahmoud distrustingly.

About nine o'clock, a burly, dark-haired man wearing the usual outfit of running shoes, baggy jeans, tee shirt and bulky jacket

came in. In contrast to the others, his clothes were well made and new. He went around to the travelers, extracting five hundred euros from each. One young man only had three hundred. The new man took it from him, then told him to get two hundred euros more, and come back tomorrow night. In tears, the young man left.

When he got to Judy, she held out her five hundred euros, but then snatched it back as the man tried to take it. Surprised, he looked at her angrily.

“Where are you taking us?” she growled.

The man looked at her confused. He couldn’t understand her English.

Seeing this, Ian said: “*Où nous emmenez-vous?*”

Pleased with the translation, but displeased by the question, the man tersely replied: “*À Cologne.*”

Judy nodded, and handed him the money.

Everyone else dutifully paid up, and followed the man out to a moving van bearing logos of a truck-rental company parked in an alley behind the building. The man pulled out the truck’s loading ramp, and opened the double doors. A stench came out redolent of urine, human feces, vomit, and rotten meat.

The others started trudging up the ramp into the van.

When it came Judy’s turn, she stepped back, frightened.

“Somebody died in there!” she complained to Ian.

“*Un entraîneur de mort,*” Ian angrily said to the man.

“*Il vient d’apporter réfugiés venant ouest. Quelqu’un est mort sur le chemin,*” the man explained, shrugging his shoulders.

“He says this van goes back and forth carrying refugees. Somebody died on the trip west,” Ian reported.

“Between here and Cologne?” Judy asked, surprised and disbelieving.

“*Où?*” Ian demanded, grabbing the man by the front of his jacket and getting in his face.

“*Sur le chemin de la Hongrie!*” the man said, frightened.

“*Hongrie! Ce camion est venu de Hongrie?*”

“*Oui.*”

“*Pouvez-vous nous emmener là-bas?*” Ian demanded, indicating himself, Judy and Mahmoud.

“*Et eux?*” the man said, indicating the others.

“*À Cologne. Puis nous nous rendons à la Hongrie.*”

Ian gave the man a shake to make sure he knew he was serious.

“Okay,” the man said in English, smiling and lifting his open hands in agreement. He figured he’d now be paid a lot more for no more work than he was going to do, anyway. He was deadheading the truck back to Hungary.

“*Combien?*” Ian asked.

Looking sly, the man held up his right hand with five fingers outstretched. “*Cinq mille?*”

Ian used his left hand to fold two of the fingers back down. “*Trois,*” he stated flatly.

Shrugging his shoulders, the man agreed. Then, he asked: “*Chaque?*”

Smiling, Ian agreed, “*Chaque.*”

“*Maintenant?*”

Ian’s face darkened with suspicion. “*No! Un millier à Cologne. Deux mille en Hongrie.*”

Realizing the arrangement was reasonable, and highly profitable to him, the man shrugged agreement. Then, he smiled and offered his hand for Ian to shake. Ian let go of the man’s jacket and shook his hand.

“Jan,” the man said, finally giving his name to his new employer.

“Ian,” Ian said. Then, pointing to his companions, he introduced them: “Judy. Mahmoud.”

The man smiled broadly at Judy and nodded to Mahmoud.

“New deal,” Ian reported to Judy and Mahmoud. “This guy’s going to drop the rest of these suckers in Cologne, then take us to

Hungary for an additional three thousand euros each. We'll pay him one thousand in Cologne, and the rest when we reach Hungary."

"Where in Hungary?" Judy asked.

"Probably either at the border, or wherever the truck's going. We'll have a couple of days to iron that detail out."

Judy nodded assent.

"By the way," Ian added, "his name's 'Jan.'"

Judy nodded to the man, smiled, and said: "Jan."

In the GSS surveillance van, Bud said: "We're going to have to give them some more cash between here and Hungary."

## 20

While driving to Cologne, Jan thought about his three new employers. They were clearly together, with the one called Judy as their leader. Even when Ian negotiated the new terms, it was Judy who had nodded final assent.

He didn't know or care if those were their real names or not. Both she and Ian looked like they might have been Irish. Maybe ex-IRA terrorists who couldn't stand civilian life, and needed a new cause to kill for. They looked enough alike so they could be brother and sister. It was a good working hypothesis. Of course, Jan, who was an international European street tough, wouldn't know what the words "working hypothesis" meant in any language, but he understood the idea of making guesses and then acting as if they were facts until better information surfaced.

Where and how Mahmoud fitted in was unknown, but he did fit in. He was clearly a trained killer. He was also clearly devoted to Judy.

Any idea Jan had of having some fun with Judy wasn't going to happen. He liked tall girls, but she towered head and shoulders above him, and showed no apprehension at all. She also obviously recognized the smell of death. He'd heard that some of those IRA lassies were as brutal as their men, and he didn't want to find out about *this* one. She was clearly the group's leader. Anybody who could lead those two obvious killers was someone to avoid messing with.

He'd already gotten crossways of that big Mick he thought of as her brother. He hadn't much liked the experience and didn't want to repeat it. Get them out of Europe as fast as he could, and let the jihadists deal with them was his best strategy.

A couple of hours later, Jan stopped in a deserted parking lot behind a factory on the outskirts of Cologne. Leaving the engine running, he walked back to the rear of the truck and pulled the loading ramp out. He climbed up the ramp and unlatched the doors to let his passengers out. They emerged, blinking in the bright artificial light in the parking lot. All eight passengers got out and milled around the bottom of the ramp.

Ignoring the three he thought of as IRA veterans, who were going on with him to Hungary, he waved the others away. Let them find their own way from here. The three boys walked off sullenly, trying to figure out what to do next. The two girls, however, stood huddled together and begged him to tell them what to do.

*"Allez-vous!"* he yelled and turned his back to them as he went to Judy, Ian and Mahmoud to get more money.

Judy looked disgusted. "That truck's disgusting. We'll ride up front with you from here," she insisted, pantomiming her intention.



“*Pas de place!*” Jan objected.

“There isn’t enough room,” Ian translated for Judy. He agreed with that. Four big adults into a space designed for three normal-size Europeans wouldn’t go. By the same token, he didn’t want to get back in the airless death van, either. He decided to let Judy figure it out.

“I’ll sit on your lap if I have to,” she stated, obstinately.

Looking sternly at Jan, he said, “*Nous montons à l’avant,*” and started for the passenger’s side door.

Seeing he was going to lose the argument, Jan gave up and started closing the van doors and stowing the ramp.

“*Où vont-ils?*” the two girls cried, tearfully. They wanted to know where he was taking the others.

“*Hongrie,*” Jan replied.

“*Nous emmener là!*” they cried. They wanted to go, too.

Looking at the girls, and thinking of the cold nights on the road and how warm they could keep him, Jan was inclined to accede to their request. Seeing what was going through his mind and its ramifications for the girls, and for the World having an extra two jihadists headed for Mecca, Judy decided to put her foot down.

“No!” she yelled at Jan. Then to the girls she yelled: “Go home! Go back to wherever you came from. Marry nice boys and have lots of babies. Don’t be stupid!”

Turning to Ian, she yelled: “Make them understand!”

Climbing down out of the van, Ian walked up to the girls and offered them a stack of ten hundred-euro notes.

“*Revenir à vos maisons et de se marier gentils garçons,*” he told them. “*Vite!*”

Taking the money, the girls walked off in the same direction the young men had taken.

Jan climbed up behind the steering wheel. Mahmoud climbed onto the bench seat beside him. Judy beside him. Ian realized that if they squeezed, they’d all fit onto the bench seat. It was a Mercedes van, made to have plenty of room for big German truckers. It was a tight fit, but it was better than riding in the back of the death van, or sitting all the way to Hungary with a one-hundred-sixty-five pound woman on his lap. Despite her weight, not much of Judy’s bulk was padding. It was mostly very tall skeleton and hard muscle.

Settled in between Ian and Mahmoud, Judy was very quiet until the truck got up on the highway leaving Cologne. She buried her face in Ian's jacket.

"What will happen to them," she asked Ian, finally.

Ian looked at her face and saw tears streaking down her cheeks.

"Who?"

"Those girls."

"Remember what happened to Cara Mayne?"

Cara Mayne was a young college student who'd been abducted by white slavers, then shipped half way around the world to live in an harem as a sex slave. After two years, a senator who knew her parents had run across her in an Middle Eastern emirate and asked GSS for help rescuing her. They found her addicted to morphine to make her more compliant. After Gwen Peterson made her rehabilitation a personal crusade, she'd become one of Red's top executives. It was an object lesson for Red about what can happen to a girl who goes down the wrong path.

"You think that will happen to them?"

"Probably worse. They're Hell bent on joining a murderous cult."

"Can we help them?"

"They don't want our help. You did what you could. You can't save everybody."

Judy started seriously to cry into Ian's jacket. Ian and Mahmoud exchanged concerned glances. This was conduct unbecoming a jihadist. If they were lucky, when Jan noticed he'd get the idea that she was unstable and criminally insane, like the people she claimed to want to join.

Hours later, with Jan practically falling asleep at the wheel, they decided to stop at the Rauhbügl rest stop on the A3 autobahn a few miles before reaching the interchange at Regensburg, Germany. The rest stop was a small turnoff surrounded by forest. It looked like it had been constructed specifically for overtired truckers to catch up on sleep. There, they figured, nobody would disturb them. The three travelers got out and spread their sleeping bags on the ground. Jan stretched out across the bench seat with his feet hanging

out the door.

While they were sleeping, the GSS van stopped behind the truck. Bud got out and stuffed a packet containing ten thousand euros in assorted denomination bills from one hundred to five hundred euros into Judy's backpack. Judy woke up, and, seeing Bud's face so close, reached up to her.

Bud kissed her on her forehead, and said: "Go back to sleep, Baby, I put some more money in your backpack."

Then, she quietly went back to the GSS van, and Manny drove it away.

Later, Judy woke up in the bright morning light and remembered the encounter as a pleasant dream. She saw that Jan was still asleep across the truck's bench seat. As she packed up her sleeping bag, she found the money Bud had left. Then, she knew it hadn't been a dream. She divided the money into two packets of three thousand euros each for Ian and Mahmoud, and kept the remaining four thousand herself. Then, she woke Ian and Mahmoud, gave them their packets of money, and suggested the next stop should be in Regensburg for breakfast.

She walked over to Jan's feet hanging out of the truck door, and shook one. Jan came awake with a start.

Smiling brightly, Judy said: "Come on, sleepyhead. Let's go get breakfast. My treat!"

Jan had no idea what she was saying, but was encouraged by the happy smile, and understood her pantomiming putting food in her mouth and chewing. He nodded assent.

## 21

Jan was dismayed when Judy wanted to breakfast at a rather upscale restaurant in downtown Regensburg. He could tell from the decor walking in that the place was expensive. He was reassured, however, when Ian told him, “*Judy dit qu'elle va payer.*” It was going to be her treat.

This from a woman who’d cried herself to sleep last night, and then woke up smiling!

The afterglow of Judy’s dream that wasn’t a dream, and the fat packet of euros in her backpack gave her a really positive attitude. The hours of sleep after so much draining tension hadn’t hurt her mood, either. Both Mahmoud and Ian were starting to get worried that she’d be careless.

“Remember, ma’am,” Mahmoud said to her quietly, “where you are and why.”

Brought up short, Red thought about what he’d said. She thought about how she felt – like a happy schoolgirl on vacation – and how she had been acting since waking up.

With a quick nod of her head, she said: “Yeah. Sorry about that.”

By the time they climbed back in the truck after breakfast, she was back to her suspicious, irascible Judy-the-terrorist *persona*.

Jan figured that maybe she *was* dangerously unstable.

Meanwhile, in Scottsdale it was becoming obvious that Red had dropped out of sight. It was time for Doc to start blowing some smoke around to give her time to get where she needed to go. He didn’t want authorities combing eastern Europe for her too soon.

Even before Red left for Europe, Bonnie Wells had put out a press release through SST’s publicist, Gwen Talbot, saying that, after completing her Ph.D. studies and spending a couple of months winding down ongoing projects, Dr. Judith McKenna-Manchek, VP of Operations, was taking a much-needed month off to tour art museums and galleries in Europe. Well known as an avid collector, she planned to visit England, France, Spain and Italy.

Eve Salazar followed up with an exclusive live interview with Red via satellite from her London hotel about her plans.

Why had she gone alone, rather than with her family?

“I needed some time away from all my responsibilities,” Red claimed. “I’m planning to spend a few more days in England, then fly to Paris. There, I’ll rent a car to drive through Europe. I’ve always wanted to do that.”

That interview was recorded the morning before Red visited Corky McInnes, and aired “live” the next day.

She didn’t make her Paris flight because at the time the plane took off from Heathrow Airport she was sleeping at a rest stop off the German A3 autobahn.

When she missed her flight, the flag went up that she’d disappeared.

Another press release from Red’s office announced that she had mysteriously disappeared from her hotel room. Hotel staff reported that she had not been in her room for three days.

The hotel hadn’t sent up a flag because they didn’t really care what she did. They knew she was good for the three-thousand-dollar a night tab for the big suite she’d booked. If she wanted to sleep elsewhere – even the park – while keeping the room, it was none of their business.

Subsequent investigation by London police found that nobody had interacted with her since Tuesday morning, when the remains of her Monday evening room-service dinner was found left, as usual, outside the door to her suite. Housekeeping reported finding the bed unmade Tuesday, and her laptop computer and cellphone plugged into their wall chargers. Clean clothes were found in the dresser, with dirty laundry in the bottom drawer. Her luggage bags were still in the closet. Several items she’d purchased in London over the weekend were stacked next to the television. David O’Roark, assigned by GSS as her bodyguard for the trip, had also disappeared.

A massive manhunt throughout the UK was started, but turned up no leads.

Nobody asked Corky McInnes anything about Red. It was an oversight he did not wish to correct. Therefore, nobody checked with Noel Sykes or the German driver, Carl, either. They, too, were pleased with the oversight. Judy had stayed in the back of the Seat, sleeping, throughout the Chunnel passage, so nobody noticed her leaving England.

The following Monday, Gulf States Security issued a press release stating that Dr. Cheryl Thompson, a former GSS executive, had taken leave from her duties as a research analyst at SST to lead GSS’ assets in a massive effort to locate the company’s CEO, Dr. Judith McKenna-Manchek, who had disappeared from her London hotel.

A waiter in a Brussels, Belgium cafe recognized a newspaper photo of the missing woman as a customer he’d served the previous

week. She had been accompanied by two men, neither of whom matched the (incorrect) photo circulated of her bodyguard. The guy in the photo did look Irish, but that's where the resemblance to Ian ended. The man in the photo looked suspiciously like a minor British film actor. The waiter said the woman appeared tired, but otherwise relaxed. That ended speculation that Red had been kidnapped – again.

That also changed the focus of the search from England to the Continent. A second GSS press release said that Dr. Thompson was, in the absence of any other leads, focusing on Western Europe, where Red had been planning to make her tour. Eve Salazar aired a telephone interview with Dr. Thompson, supposedly in Barcelona, Spain.

“We have no actual information about Dr. Manchek’s whereabouts,” Bud reported over the crackly connection. She dropped the “McKenna” part of the name because she, along with Red, Gwen, and a whole lot of other people in Scottsdale thought that watching the public deal with two famous “Dr. Mancheks” in the same house would be a hoot.

“Nobody has come forward demanding ransom,” Bud continued, “so we’re tentatively ruling out a kidnapping. The report from Belgium indicated that she was in good health and at liberty. So, we’ve got GSS operatives fanning out all along her proposed travel route searching for leads.”

“Why do you believe she is following her original itinerary?” Eve asked.

“We don’t know what she is doing or why,” Bud replied. “We just have no place else to look. It’s a big continent!”

News reporters following up the lead discovered that, yes, GSS investigators had contacted local authorities in France, Spain and Italy, but nobody had anything to report.

In actual fact, at the time of the telephone interview Bud was calling from the port of Pireas near Athens, Greece, and not Barcelona. She was helping Red find a reasonably trustworthy charter boat captain to take Judy, Ian and Mahmoud across the Aegean Sea to the coast of Turkey. They were trying to avoid the overworked, under-maintained suicide boats operated by smugglers taking advantage of the millions of migrants desperately trying to escape to Europe from the killing fields in the Middle East.

The guy they found was a respectable fifty-year-old charter-yacht skipper named Gregorios Konstantinos. The cover story they gave him was that they were rich American tourists tired of the Greek Islands and looking for adventure in Turkey. He was to take them on his thirty-six foot cabin cruiser around the tip of mainland Greece, then northwest past the islands of Kea and Andros to loop around the island of Psará, then turn east to land them at the Turkish port of Izmir. There, they planned to rent a car and spend a month

doing a loop around the Anatolian peninsula visiting ancient archeological sites. They would meet him in a month back at Izmir for the trip back to Pireas.

Konstantinos thought they were crazy, but he made his living catering to rich American tourists. They were often eccentric, with crazy travel plans. He liked these Americans, and hoped they'd survive to meet him back in Izmir in a month. He asked for the whole amount up front, though.

Just in case.

**22**

“We’re not in a hurry,” Judy told Konstantinos after going over the charts in his wheelhouse on the way out of the harbor, “so maybe we should plan to lay over in Psará tonight.”

“I figure this boat’s good to cruise at twenty-five knots?” she asked to confirm her assumption.

Konstantinos nodded agreement.

“So,” Judy continued, “in perfect weather it would take twelve hours to make Izmir. That would put us in pretty late at best. If we run into any rough weather, we’ll be out all night.”

Konstantinos was surprised that this lady had such a good grasp of navigation and sea-route planning. He did not know that her personal boat was ten feet longer than his, and could cruise at twice the speed. She was also a licensed private *jet* pilot, so navigation was second nature to her. As a veteran project manager, she was used to considering every possibility before making a decision, and ready to revise plans at a moment’s notice. All this he would be surprised to hear about *any* woman, but it would have answered a lot of his questions about *her*.

“That is a good plan,” Konstantinos agreed. “I was thinking about suggesting the same thing.”

If they were that astute, he thought, maybe they could survive to meet him in Izmir next month. He’d be sure to be there in case they made it.

Red didn’t really intend to be in Izmir next month. She was hoping that by then Bud will have engineered a way to extract them from Palmyra after delivering the Conscience virus. Still, if worse came to worst, Izmir would be another option.

For now, Red was enjoying a legitimate excuse to use her Judy-the-happy-tourist *persona* that she’d accidentally developed in Regensburg. She liked that Judy, and resolved to keep her around. She was actually very close to Red’s original Judith McKenna personality that Doc had fallen in love with years ago. That was before she’d become a corporate executive, then mommy, then ... and now jihadist.

Now, she had two days to enjoy being Judy-the-happy-tourist.

Since Judy clearly knew what she was doing around boats at sea, Konstantinos agreed that they could take turns piloting his boat across the Aegean. He’d noticed a Navy SEAL tattoo on Ian’s upper arm, and a Marine *Semper Fidelis* tattoo on Mahmoud’s. He



figured they could probably be trusted to hold a course, too.

Curious, he spent some time trying to learn more about his passengers. Ian and Mahmoud turned out to be very close-mouthed, though. They were guardedly friendly, but evasive about answering personal questions.

Judy, however, was more open and talkative.

Of course, that was because behind the Judy *persona*, Red was a trained corporate executive who understood that the essential tool of leadership was open and friendly communication. You have to make people trust your judgment, and agree with your goals and strategies. You need them to want to help you. For that, you have to talk to them.

Ian and Mahmoud were trying to follow Judy's lead, however, so they were more interested in listening to her than talking to him. They understood that every time they opened their mouths, they could make an error that might mess up her plans.

"You do a lot of backpacking?" Konstantinos tried.

"Well, backpacks make a great luggage choice," Judy said. "You can take them anywhere, fit almost anything in them, and nobody really notices backpackers."

So, they thought about not being noticed. That must be hard for a redheaded lady over six feet tall!

"Why the sleeping bags?"

"Ever wake up naked on a beach without one?"

Konstantinos remembered trying to get sand out of his private parts.

"Yes, I see."

"Ian is your brother?" Konstantinos tried.

"Yes. We're originally from Boston in Massachusetts."

After noticing that Jan concluded they were brother and sister, they'd incorporated that idea into their cover story.

"And Mahmoud?"

"We met him at a hostel in Greece, became friends, and toured around Greece together. He's Turkish, and has been visiting Greece

for the Summer. He has family in Izmir, which is why we want you to take us there, specifically.”

That all made sense to Konstantinos. The only incongruous note was the U.S. Marines tattoo on a Turk. There were possible explanations for that. Maybe she meant that he was Turkish-*American*. He decided not to pry in that direction too much.

Hearing what Judy said about Mahmoud, Ian went down below to send a flurry of text messages back and forth with Bud to set up plans for when they reached Izmir. They wanted Konstantinos to buy the cover story their jihadist characters were trying to sell. That way he could report it to the media at the appropriate time, which would lead Coltrane to make the assumptions they wanted him to make.

**23**

When they reached Psarà late in the afternoon, Konstantinos wanted to top off his fuel tanks. Seeing that they'd burned up over a third of their fuel, Red agreed that it was a good idea.

So, Konstantinos took a turn around the small harbor until he located the gas dock. Then, he deftly maneuvered the cabin cruiser up to it, reversing the engines at the last moment to just lightly kiss the tires hung over the concrete wall with the side of his boat.

Wanting to avoid any chance of Red being recognized, Mahmoud brought her down below and closed the companionway hatch.

"I think we should anchor out in the harbor as soon as possible," he suggested, "and stay out of sight. You stand out too much around here."

Judy thought about it for a while, then disagreed: "We'll be in Turkey tomorrow, then it won't matter. This place is pretty out of the way. If anybody notices me here, by the time word gets out it'll be too late to stop us. Once we're in Syria, I plan to go public, anyway. Being seen on a cabin cruiser in Psarà will be just another bread crumb leading everybody to believe my cover story about traveling thousands of miles to join Coltrane's terror network. I think I *want* to be noticed here!"

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

Mahmoud nodded, then opened the companionway for Judy to climb out into the wheelhouse. From there, she went out on the aft deck, then crossed over to the dock. The gas pumper's mouth dropped open in surprise at the enormously tall redhead standing on the quay looking around.

He almost spilled fuel all over the gunwale when she walked up to him and asked: "Do you speak English?"

"*Nai*," he replied in Greek, forgetting to say it in English.

"Yes, a little," he corrected himself.

"Where is a nice place to go for dinner around here?"

"Dinner? – *Vradinó!*" he said, translating for himself.

Then, he pointed to an outdoor restaurant – away over there across the harbor entrance – saying, “Spitalia!”

It was a stone building with a roof consisting of five barrel vaults and fronted by two stone patios overlooking the harbor. Several generous tables were set out on the stone patios shaded by four enormous white pyramidal parasols.

Charmed by finding such an inviting looking establishment, Judy smiled at the young man and said “Thanks.”

Seeing the exchange, Mahmoud stepped up to the young man and peeled off a hundred-euro note for him.

“*Efcharistó*,” Mahmoud said.

Speechless, the young man almost dropped the gas nozzle while smiling, bowing and waving thanks to him.

“What, was that a week’s pay for him?” Red chided Mahmoud.

“More like a month’s,” Mahmoud said, “but you wanted to be remembered!”

“That should do it!” Judy laughed.

The main harbor on Psarà consists of a bay roughly a mile across at the mouth, with several small coves around the shore. On the western side a breakwater protects two of these coves. The southernmost being the yacht basin, which is further protected by a dike making a highly protected pool for the fleet to tie up in. Across a small headland to the north is a second cove mostly given over to a beautiful sandy beach on its western rim and curving around to the north. Directly across this cove from the beach is a second rocky peninsula carrying an old Ottoman quarantine station converted to today’s Spitalia restaurant.

After topping off his tanks and paying for the fuel, Konstantinos got permission to leave the boat tied to the gas dock while they went for dinner. It took almost a half hour to walk from the gas dock all the way around the harbor to the restaurant. At most a quarter mile off as the crow flies, walking there from here required walking nearly the whole length of the quay, all the way around the harbor in front of the village, past the small peninsula separating the coves, along the road wrapping around the second cove containing the beach and leading out to the second peninsula, then south along *that* peninsula to the restaurant. Mahmoud and Judy agreed that walking that walk would add enormously to the probability that they would be seen and remembered. Judy decided doing it in a bikini would perfect the effect.

“Spitalia” means “hospital” in, of all things, *Romanian*! The signature dish was stuffed goat, but the menu was heavy on all kinds of seafood. Judy and Ian went for the stuffed goat. Mahmoud chose a large game fish he couldn’t really identify. Konstantinos ordered

a dish consisting of several small lobsters (or large crayfish) over a bed of thick spaghetti. They all chose that delicious looking baklava for dessert.

When they got back to Konstantinos' boat, it was already getting dark. Nobody else seemed anxious to tie up at the gas dock, so Konstantinos made an executive decision to stay right where they were overnight.

Hearing music coming from a bar in the village, the three travelers decided to go see what was going on. There was little chance of being stopped for drunk driving on the way home, so a little partying seemed a good idea to fit their cover story of being American tourists.

Konstantinos, being much older than his passengers, elected to stay on the boat.

Enormously tall red-headed Judy made a spectacular splash at the bar, especially since she was still wearing little more than head-to-toe freckles. Seeing her dancing animatedly with both Ian and Mahmoud, everyone else wanted to dance with her as well: males and females. It was that kind of scene. Judy, who loved to dance, and hadn't had a chance to for a very long time, was only too willing to accommodate all of them while belting back shot after shot of ouzo.

About ten o'clock, one of the local women started belly dancing. Judy was wearing a huge ornament in her pierced navel to cover her still-fresh scars from Red's tubal ligation. That gave everyone the idea that she should join in. She'd never belly danced before, but her athleticism, plus the little bit of belly softness left over from three pregnancies helped her pick up the technique quickly. Rather than becoming jealous, her teacher took pride in the accomplishment of her spectacular new star pupil.

Judy's lower back was going to be sore tomorrow!

It was well after midnight when the three travelers weaved their way drunkenly back to the boat. They found Konstantinos had fallen asleep over a thick novel. After having a long day skippering his boat across the open sea, he failed to wake up, even when his drunken passengers clumsily set the boat dancing as they came aboard.

Judy, Ian and Mahmoud killed all the lights, and dropped into the nearest bunks without even taking off their shoes.

**24**

*Everything* hurt on Judy's body when she woke up the next morning, from her hung-over head to her overworked feet. Unwilling to contemplate the effort involved in making breakfast in the boat's galley, then cleaning up afterward, the four sailors trudged around to the nearest cafe for whatever was available. It turned out that boiled eggs and bread smothered in honey were on hand. Judy managed to get the waiter to scout up some orange juice. And, there was espresso. Lots of espresso!

When Konstantinos excused himself to go to the restroom, Ian took the opportunity to report his arrangements for their Izmir cover story.

"Bud and Manny are going to meet us at the dock," he explained. "She's going to pose as Mahmoud's sister, Artemis."

"Goddess of the hunt," Red commented, interrupting. "Appropriate."

"She lives outside Izmir with her husband, Aslan."

"Meaning 'lion,'" Red commented. "That works, too. The hunt goddess and the lion."

"Gee," Ian said, "you really know your mythology."

"My best friend is an archeologist."

"Manny will be Aslan," Ian continued, "who was wounded and cannot speak. Mahmoud's never met him because he's been fighting in Syria. They'll provide us a car to drive the rest of the way."

Judy and Mahmoud nodded understanding.

After Konstantinos returned, they had one more round of espresso, then the three travelers took a bathroom break before they all headed back to the boat.

The cruise to Izmir was uneventful, and they reached the harbor in late afternoon. As they approached the inner harbor, Mahmoud climbed up the companionway from the salon to the wheelhouse carrying his cellphone.

"My sister and her husband will meet us at the Altinbalik Restaurant," he explained, "which she says is at the entrance to the yacht

basin on the north side of the inner harbor. She says it's a big place and we can't miss it. We can tie up there temporarily."

"I know the place," Konstantinos said. "I've been by there before, although I've never eaten there. It looks expensive."

It made sense to him that these rich Americans would go to a *very* expensive restaurant.

The harbor at Izmir was at the head of a wide bay opening to the north. The outer bay was over five miles wide at its mouth, and about twenty miles long, reaching to the south-southeast. There, it narrowed and turned nearly ninety degrees to the east. The inner bay was more like two- to three-miles wide and led to the commercial harbor, which was no more than one mile wide. The yacht basin was on the north side of the inner bay, just before the commercial harbor entrance.

Entering the yacht basin, they saw the restaurant on the right. Judy was out on deck, and a tall, dark-haired woman, standing with a man featuring numerous white bandages stood in the parking lot in front of the restaurant. Seeing Judy, the woman waved and jumped up and down to attract her attention. She pointed to a set of boat slips on the other side of a low breakwater.

Konstantinos maneuvered the cabin cruiser around the point of the breakwater, then turned it to nose into a vacant slip. By the time Ian and Mahmoud had the boat tied up to rings set in the concrete wall, the dark-haired woman and the man had found their way to them.

The woman was very tall, about five-foot-ten, had long, straight hair that was almost black, dark eyebrows and dark eyeliner surrounding smokey black eyes contrasted with her fair skin.

At first, Judy didn't recognize her. She had never seen Bud with dark hair!

"You must be Judy," Bud, aka Artemis, said, giving her a restrained hug appropriate to women who were just meeting. Artemis was clearly well educated, speaking clear American English with only a hint of a Turkish accent.

"Let me look at you," Judy said, holding Artemis out for inspection. "Very nice!"

Bud knew that Red was complementing her disguise. Konstantinos thought it was just an odd way of phrasing a general complement on Artemis' good looks.

"Mahmoud!" Artemis said, reaching out to give him a familiar hug and kiss on both cheeks.

"Let me introduce you to my husband, Aslan. He was wounded in the fighting on the border near Syria."

A nervous looking Aslan, with bandages wound around his head and throat, and a plaster cast on his left arm gave a perfunctory

salute, then dropped his eyes.

Mahmoud did introductions the other way.

“These are my friends, Judy Casey and her brother Ian, and our captain Gregorios Konstantinos.”

Handshakes and nods all around.

“We will get dinner at the restaurant,” Artemis said, taking charge of the situation. “Then we can get Captain Konstantinos’ boat settled in for the night. We will go home to Aydin and you can start your trip in the morning.”

She led them toward the restaurant front entrance.

Stopping next to an elderly, but clean and serviceable blue Mercedes SUV, she said: “We got you this car to take you around Anatolia.”

Without a word, Mahmoud and Ian began an inspection of the vehicle.

“Here is the key,” Artemis handed it to Mahmoud, who immediately unlocked the driver’s side door and climbed into the seat to see how it fit.

Mahmoud pressed a button to unlock all the doors, and Ian opened the passenger’s side door. He didn’t get in, but stepped back to open the back door and look in, then he walked around to the rear hatch, lifted it, and inspected the cargo area.

Announcing their approval, the men closed and locked all the doors, and rejoined the others. Satisfied, Artemis walked them to the restaurant’s front entrance.



**25**

“This place is *huge!*” Judy exclaimed when she saw inside Altinbalik.

“Yes,” Artemis agreed. “They use it for all kinds of banquets and events, like wedding receptions. We’ll get a table outside on the patio, unless you’d prefer inside.”

Judy liked the idea, and nobody objected, so Artemis communicated her intentions to the *maitre d’*, who led them through the main dining room to the outdoor patio.

This time it was Konstantinos who ordered the fish – a sea bass fillet. Judy, Ian and Mahmoud all wanted the tenderloin. Artemis ordered grilled chicken for herself and Aslan, who signed that he couldn’t speak due to his injured throat.

After dinner, everyone was anxious to get rid of Konstantinos and start the next phase of their journey. Ian and Mahmoud accompanied him to the harbor master’s office to arrange for an overnight slip. Konstantinos would dead head his boat back to Pireas, then return to Izmir in a month. A generous pile of euros ensured his cooperation.

Once Konstantinos’ boat was secure, Ian and Mahmoud transferred the travelers’ luggage to the SUV’s luggage compartment. Judy drove the Mercedes, and followed Artemis and Aslan in a red Volkswagen minivan out of the parking lot. They traveled along a wide boulevard for about a mile, then pulled off and stopped with the Mercedes behind the Volkswagen to make plans.

Judy, Ian and Mahmoud, still maintaining their travel identities to avoid slip ups, piled into the Volkswagen’s back seat, and pulled the sliding door shut.

“Can I get rid of this thing, now?” Manny asked, indicating his fake bandages.

“Sure,” Judy assured him.

Bud helped him pull the tape and gauze bandages off his head and throat.

“I figure we should travel together until we get to the Syrian border,” Bud suggested. “After that, you guys will have to be on your own the rest of the way to Palmyra.”

“What do we use for money?” Judy asked.

“The local currency is the Turkish lira, but everyone takes euros,” Bud assured her. “You should be fine with what you’ve got.”

“Have you planned out the route, yet?” Judy asked.

“Well, actually Bonnie planned it out and put everything we need in the Conscience database. I’ve already downloaded the route to the GPS in each vehicle. I’ve also got Iridium sat phones for all of you, so you won’t be depending on cellphone service.”

She handed Judy, Ian and Mahmoud each a box containing an instrument that looked like a cross between a cellphone and a walkie-talkie. It was about the size of a cellphone and had a display screen and a telephone-like keypad, but it was about one inch thick and had a stubby cylindrical antenna sticking out of the top. Along with the instrument were a number of accessories and a foldable solar-panel charger.

“They’ve been modified for encrypted communications,” she added. “We’ve already programmed all the phone numbers you’re likely to need, and the batteries are already charged. To turn them on in the first place, you need a pass code. I’ve used each of your social security numbers, but you can change them.

“Where’s your jacket?” she asked Judy.

“Strapped to my backpack,” Judy replied.

“Keep that star-and-crescent pin with you so I can monitor what happens to you. Your sat phone is also a repeater that will pick up its signal from within about a hundred feet, and relay it to me, anywhere.”

“Supposedly,” Bud continued, “it should take about twelve hours to reach the Syrian border. I figure to drive six hours, then camp wherever we are then. It should be in rural Turkey, somewhere. Then we’ll caravan the rest of the way to the border near Reyhanli. After you cross the border, it should take about four hours for you to reach Palmyra.”

“Should we try out these phones?” Judy asked.

“They did that at SST before shipping them to us. They should work right out of the box. You can play with them if you like while we drive.”

Six hours later, in the wee hours of the morning, they’d reached the arid central Anatolian Plateau just west of Konya, Turkey. Judy, Ian and Mahmoud had driven a two hour shift each. Manny had taken the first shift driving the minivan. Then Bud had driven the second, and Manny had gone back to the driver’s seat for the third. During the drive, they’d thoroughly tested their sat phones by

calling back and forth between the vehicles to coordinate their activities.

“Baby, it’s time to sleep,” Bud told Judy over *her* sat phone call to Judy’s sat phone

Manny chose a wide gravel-covered area off to the right, and stopped with the vehicle angled back toward the road. The SUV stopped parallel to it about ten feet to the right, leaving an area between the vehicles largely screened from the road. Manny and Ian, who’d been with GSS for years protecting Red and Bud, and were quite familiar with their habits, cleared the SUV’s cargo area, folded the rear seat down to make a large flat space, and threw Judy’s and Bud’s sleeping bags in.

“You ladies sleep here,” Manny suggested. “We’ll take the minivan.”

Mahmoud, who’d recently joined GSS after a retiring from the Marines, and had been selected for this duty because of his recent experience in the Middle East and familiarity with Arabic, Turkish, and Greek languages, was surprised when the women unzipped their sleeping bags to pile them flat, then stripped off all their clothing before climbing in and pulling the hatchback closed.

Seeing Mahmoud’s shocked expression, Manny laughed and said: “You get used to them.”

Ian, using his real name of Dave O’Rourke, had been riding the range at Red’s Scottsdale ranch with an M-16 for years. He’d seen it all before, too.

Inside the SUV, Bud clung to Red desperately.

“I’m so scared for you, Baby,” she murmured, practically in tears. “This is the worst thing you’ve done since shacking up with that psychopathic killer in Florida. You promised you’d never do anything like that again.”

“It has to be done,” Red claimed. “I have to do it, and Doc agrees.”

“I’m afraid I won’t even get to bury the pieces of your body!” Bud sobbed, really breaking down in tears.

“Look,” Red tried to assure her, “Dave and Frank will stay with me. You’re going to be close by with a GSS SEAL team. I’ll keep the pin and sat phone with me so you can monitor what’s happening. Smitty’s promised to have a Special Forces team on alert if we need them. This is a whole lot different than when I was stuck for days on that salvage boat all alone.”

“Yeah,” Bud rebutted, “it’s different! These guys aren’t petty criminals in Florida trying to steal sunken treasure. These maniacs have the resources of a Middle Eastern kingdom! They’re assassins right out of the Middle Ages. They think they’re still fighting the

Crusades. It's like the Old Man of the Mountain come back to threaten the World – with you setting yourself in his cross hairs.”

Rashīd ad-Dīn Sinān, also known as the “Old Man of the Mountain,” was a leader of the Nizari Ismaili religious sect in Syria in the twelfth century. Their murderous cult was responsible for the deaths of two caliphs, and many viziers, sultans and Crusader leaders over the course of three-hundred years, before being wiped out by the Mongols in 1275. The cult's common name is the origin of the word “assassin.”

“I'm not going to back out now,” Red insisted. “Coltrane's going to use those frigging things to kill hundreds of people, unless we stop him. The easiest and most effective way to do that is to deliver Conscience to them. So, let's deliver Conscience to them, and have done with it!”

Bud could see there was no way she was going to change Red's mind, so she turned over to pout. Red wrapped her big frame around Bud to cuddle. Thinking this was might be the last time she'd have her friend alive, Bud turned back to make love to her.

**26**

Mahmoud was again shocked and dismayed when he woke up at dawn to find Judy and Bud standing at the SUV's open hatch making coffee over a propane stove wearing nothing but sandals.

"Don't let the locals see you like that in public," he warned them. "They'll stone you to death."

Flashing a disgusted look, Red said: "Yeah, you're right. I *hate* these backwards-assed third-world toilets!"

Of course, Red would never consider standing nude beside a German Autobahn. She'd been thinking, however, to use the wide open spaces of rural Turkey to provide privacy for her and Bud's nudist predilections. It worked for her on her ranch in Scottsdale. There, she controlled access to every piece of territory within a half mile of her house. This place looked a lot like home, and she'd simply acted as if she were home. Being reminded that they were *not* home, but visiting in a country with *very* strict moral codes ticked her off.

Also annoyed for the same reason, Bud pulled a couple of bulky sweatshirts and pairs of jeans out of the pile of clothes in the SUV's cargo area. Tossing one sweatshirt to Judy, she began pulling the other on over her head.

Pulling the hem down below her tush, Bud challenged: "Is that better?"

Awakened by the noise, Manny looked out of the minivan's door and laughed while Bud and Judy hopped around pulling on their jeans.

"What's going on?" Ian asked from the reclined front passenger's seat where he'd been sleeping.

"Frank-the-Prudent talked our employers into putting on clothes," Manny reported.

"Many have tried," Ian intoned. "Few have succeeded."

With a rush of highway noise, a white car appeared in the distance and whizzed past while Judy buckled on her sandals. The car weaved suddenly as the driver started to lose control when he saw the giant red-headed woman wearing shape-hugging western clothing, then corrected his steering.

Judy laughed with a chagrined expression thinking of how he would have reacted if he'd driven by a few minutes earlier to catch her nude.

Mahmoud flashed her an “I told you so!” look.

After finishing a breakfast of coffee, orange juice, and stale pastries borrowed from Konstantinos’ larder, the team packed up the vehicles. Reunited with her second-best lover (she had always put Doc in the top spot), Red wanted to ride with Bud the rest of the way to the border, but Bud, as captain of the trip, would have none of that.

“I want you surrounded by big, strong, well-armed men,” she insisted. “Manny and I will be fine in the minivan.”

Climbing into their seats, the team drove the two vehicles back onto the roadway headed east. The minivan led the way, and the SUV followed at a safe distance.

In the SUV, Ian was driving with Mahmoud in the front passenger’s seat. Judy rode in the back seat. Ian and Mahmoud were quiet, thinking their own thoughts with concerned looks on their faces. Judy was quiet in the back for a different reason. She found she was still sleepy. Soon, she turned to stretch out across the bench seat and, using her backpack as a pillow against the side door, leaned back to take a nap.

Judging that she’d gone to sleep, Mahmoud brought up what was bothering him, and, he thought, Ian.

“Is she always this erratic?” he asked Ian. “She’s making a lot of judgment lapses. She’s not keeping her cover very well.”

“Well, usually she’s surrounded by people depending on her. Her children, the people who work for her, her husband . . . . This is the first time in years that she’s been cut off from all that. It’s completely different from her normal life. On top of it all, she’s pretending to be someone she’s not – a jihadist. Maybe she’s not quite sure how to act.”

“Is she cracking up?”

“I don’t know. I’m not a psychologist. I hope not, but I’m told it’s happened before. Before I joined GSS, and even before she got married, she’d done an undercover assignment where she joined a bent salvage operator’s gang. I don’t know the details, but I’m told she cracked up at the end of the assignment. Dr. Thompson would know the details.”

“I’m not cracking up,” Judy told them, having been awake enough to hear their conversation. She sat up to show she was taking what they said seriously.

“Sorry, ma’am,” Ian said, embarrassed.

“I know I’ve been making a lot of mistakes,” Judy continued. “I’ll try to do better. I’m just so tired. You’re right, Ian, I’m feeling adrift. Everything’s so strange. I want this to all be over.”

“I know, ma’am,” Ian said, “but this is the most dangerous part of the trip. One little slip could kill us all.”

Frowning, Judy nodded.

“The tiredness is a reaction to being afraid all the time,” Ian continued. “It’s like depression. You don’t want it to go on, so your brain tries to escape into unconsciousness. Now, you just lie back there and go to sleep. We’ll take turns driving the rest of the way.”

“Tell me again why you picked this place to cross over?” Judy asked Bud as the team picked at their late lunch in a roadside cafe in Reyhanli, Turkey.

None of them were particularly hungry. Their stomachs were tied up in knots thinking about the fact that they were about to go seriously into a war zone. The closest Bud and Red had been to a war zone was in Tampico, Mexico, when the city was fighting violent drug cartels. That, however, was a vibrant, functioning city that just had a crime problem.

This would be different. They didn’t quite know *how* this was going to be different, but they felt sure it would be. The men *had* been in war zones before, and had training to know what to expect and how to cope with it. There was little, however, they could tell the women that would help.

Keeping her eyes on Mahmoud, who was there because he’d had recent experience in the Middle East and could correct any factual errors she made, Bud explained: “This road goes into a part of Syria that, at the moment, is controlled by a Syrian rebel group fighting against the Assad regime. Assad is an Alawite Shiite and they are Sunnis. They consider Assad their hated enemy.

“Islamic State is also fighting against Assad, and these guys are thinking ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend.’ ISIS is also run by Sunnis, and that’s another reason for the guys across the border to consider ISIS their friend.

“Thus, if you present yourself at the border wearing hijab and saying that you are traveling to join Muhammad Akhbar at his camp in Palmyra, they should let you through. Explaining that Ian and Mahmoud are your protectors will raise them in the eyes of these Muslim soldiers. In Islam protecting women is considered one of the highest duties. It’s unlikely that they’ll interfere with Ian and Mahmoud as long as they believe they are guarding you.”

“Well, they are.”

“Make sure the soldiers at the border know that. Their first thought on seeing Ian will be that he’s an American soldier, not a Red McKenna bodyguard. Mahmoud blends in better and will be easier to accept as just your protector.”

“When can I reveal my identity?”

“I think right at the border! Leave Turkey on this side as Judy Casey, dumb-ass tourist. When you get to the other side, announce that you’re Dr. Judith McKenna-Manchek: world famous applied mathematician there to offer your technical services to Islamic State.

“Give ‘em the whole song and dance about having fallen in love with Islam the way we talked about it. Talk about how you became disillusioned by the way your husband was perverting your work to harm the faithful, and so forth. Lay it on thick. The thicker you lay it on, the more likely they are to buy it, and the safer everyone will be. It would make sense that you brought along male protectors on a trip like that, too.

“It’s going to be the Red McKenna Show from here on!”



**27**

“Be very careful about how you dress in there,” Bud told Red, pulling out a box containing a couple of outfits she’d purchased for Red in Izmir. “The basic rules are to cover everything but your face and your hands, and to wear an outer garment that doesn’t show your shape.”

Pulling out a white kaftan, Bud said: “We’ll start with this. It’s pretty much like what I wear as a cover up at home, but a little bit fuller. It’s light and airy, so you won’t roast in it. You can wear it over your regular clothes, or nothing. Nobody will know what you have on underneath. This one has long enough sleeves so it covers most of your hands except the fingers. *Don’t* be tempted to wear it with a sash or belt. The idea is that it’s supposed to hide your shape.”

Bud pulled out a green one-piece *al-amira* scarf.

“I picked this out for you because it’s the easiest style of head covering for a novice to put on,” she said. “You just pull it over your head and arrange it so it covers all your hair and your neck. Don’t let any hair show. I got you a white outfit and a green outfit, so you can switch off or mix and match. *I* think the white kaftan with the green headdress looks stunning – especially on a candlestick like you. Together the whole outfit is called a hijab.”

“Why do they do this?” Red asked.

“I’m not really sure,” Bud responded, “and I’ve thought about it a lot. It’s definitely a cultural thing dating back thousands – probably tens of thousands – of years. So, figuring out its origins is just guesswork. It predates writing, so nobody ever really wrote down anything believable about *why*. The writings we have just record stories about different patriarchs’ individual prejudices. Of course, they just wanted everyone to simply obey *them* – whatever they said.

“Knowledge has always been power, and those who have it want to keep it. In ancient cultures they guarded it jealously. Our idea of universal education that creates a population of citizens capable of thinking for themselves is a recent invention. So, especially in ancient times, letting people follow their instincts – doing things simply because the *want* to do them – has always been anathema to people in power.

“*I think* that where all these dress codes came from is the recognition that men have an instinctive reaction to women that was stronger than their reaction to authority. In other words, men loved their wives more than their leaders. That gave women power that authority couldn’t compete with or control. On the other hand, men have always been physically considerably stronger than women,

so women have always had to worry about the behavior of random men. My sojourn with those pirates, who wanted to rape me multiple times a day, taught me the danger of being attractive to men!

“One very effective way of protecting women from men, and protecting authorities from woman-power, is to draw a veil over women. That way nobody has to worry about testosterone-addled men attacking and overpowering women, or women pussy whipping their men into mutiny against authority. That’s the way Middle-Eastern cultures chose to do it.

“In western culture, we chose to train men to respect women, and women to respect authority. I like our way better, but that’s because it’s how I was brought up. The problem comes up when you try to mix cultures. When some people want women to cover up and others want them to flaunt what they’ve got, it’s an unhealthy mix. Westerners are offended when they see women bundled up in shapeless bags. Muslims – and some other cultures – are offended when women run around in public wearing bikinis.

“You’re going into an area where the dominant culture wants women encased in shapeless bags. You have no more right to tell them they’re wrong than they have telling you not to sunbathe nude on your ranch in Scottsdale. The only strategy that has ever worked is the advice of St. Ambrose to ‘when in Rome, do as the Romans do.’ In this case, you’re going to Syria, so do as the Syrians do.”

“Okay,” Red agreed.

“Don’t wear any perfume or makeup, either,” she warned. “Don’t wear any jewelry – even that pin I gave you – on the outside where it can be seen. I suggest wearing shorts and a tee shirt to give you places to put all your stuff, and throw a hijab on over it all when you go anyplace where you’re likely to run into Muslim men.”

“Coltrane will at least pay lip service to traditional Muslim rules. If you end up shacking up with him, you’ll have to figure out what he wants at home.”

“I could just ask him,” Red suggested.

“Gee, what a novel idea!” Bud quipped.

Red decided to follow Bud’s advice to the letter. She didn’t have any shorts with her, so she borrowed Mahmoud’s razor-sharp switchblade and cut down her spare pair of jeans so the legs came to her mid-thighs. She added a belt to which she clipped her sat phone holster, and stuffed the pockets with money, passports for Judy Casey and Judith McKenna (which was still her legal name in the U.S.), and a Swiss army knife. She decided to leave the set of keys that opened locks that were seven-thousand miles away with Bud.

She double checked that the micro SD flash memory card containing the Conscience virus was properly clipped into its holder at the back of the ornate navel ring covering her tubal ligation scars.

Finally, she slipped a tee shirt over her head, left it untucked over her shorts, and pinned the star-and-crescent pin to the pocket. She added her much-abused cowboy boots to cover her feet and as protection from whatever she ran into out on the desert floor.

After exiting the minivan, she pulled the kaftan on over her head, and added the scarf.

Pirouetting for Bud, she asked: “Is it good?”

“Looks great,” Bud said, then gave her one last long kiss.

Red was ready to cross into Islamic Neverland.

Mahmoud drove to the border-crossing gate house with Ian in the front passenger’s seat and Judy in the back seat. Judy and Ian passed Mahmoud their absolutely genuine fake American passports. Like the real thing, they’d been issued by the U.S. State Department (by arrangement through Smitty), so the deception would be undetectable. They just weren’t backed up by a paper trail leading to a real identity.

The man in the Turkish uniform checked their absolutely genuine fake visas and entry stamps. When asked the reason for their travel, Mahmoud spun a story about how his rich-American employer (Judy Casey) wanted to visit refugee camps on both sides of the Turkish/Syrian border.

“*Angelina Jolie gibi!*” the officer said, smiling excitedly.

Apparently the man remembered visits by the humanitarian actress favorably. Red didn’t know what the visits might have done for Syrian refugees in Turkey, but it sure helped Judy Casey get through the checkpoint! The man wanted to take a selfie with Judy, and even refused Mahmoud’s offered bribe.

After getting their very-real exit-visa stamps, Judy, Ian and Mahmoud drove the SUV through the gate and out into the desert. A narrow paved track led a couple of miles to the Syrian checkpoint.

Whereas the Turkish border-crossing station had been an austere, functionally modern building, the equivalent on the Syrian side at first seemed far more ornate, with molded concrete grill work under triangular arches shading the front windows.

Red's first reaction was: "Quaint."

Walking through the front doors, however, showed that behind the decorative facade, the building shared the same austere, functional architecture as the building on the Turkish side. It looked like a bank lobby. The sign over the door identified it as the Bab Al-Hawa Border, but another line, presumably identifying the Syrian Arab Republic of Bashar al-Assad that originally installed the sign, had been spray-painted over, as had the dictator's picture on a second sign still mounted on the pillar between two doorways.

"Why not take down the signs?" Red asked

"This sends a more powerful message," Frank, aka Mahmoud, explained. "It says 'He used to have this territory, but we took it away from him.'"

In the cool interior, Frank led them across a white marble floor to a white marble counter surmounted by a glass wall pierced by a semi-circular hole for passing documents back and forth to the dark-haired, mustachioed man wearing a camouflage-pattern uniform. Except for the clerk's uniform, it *really* looked like a bank lobby!

"*'Iilaa 'ayn 'ant dhahib?*" the man asked – "Where are you going?"

"*'Iilaa tudammir,*" Frank replied, passing across the passports issued in their real names. "To Palmyra."

"*'Li'ay sbb?*" "For what purpose?"

"*'Lilaindimam Daesh hunak,*" "To join ISIS there."

The man looked at the passports, looked at the faces, then stamped the passports. Red was surprised that they'd even have passport stamps. She figured rebels in time of civil war wouldn't have time for such formalities.

The man held the passports just out of Frank's reach with his left hand, but held his right hand out, palm up, closer. Frank got the hint, and placed a one-hundred euro note in the upturned hand.

The hand did not move.

Frank put another hundred-euro note onto the hand.

The man looked disgusted.

Sighing, Frank peeled off three more hundred-euro bills and placed them on the hand.

Smiling a satisfied smile, the man pushed the passports across to Frank.

Smiling, himself, Frank gave a perfunctory salute and said, sarcastically in English: "Pleasure corrupting you."

"And you, too," the man said, breaking out into a grin.

Laughing pleasantly, Frank waved and turned to hand Red and Dave their passports, and lead them back to the car.

"Well, that was easy!" Red commented when they got outside.

"The power of all that green grease, although I guess these hundred euro notes have more blue than green," Frank responded.

"They still look green to me," Dave commented.

Climbing into the SUV, they drove off across the desert.

**28**

“Muhammad Akhbar!” Frank yelled, for the fourth time, out of the SUV’s driver-side window at the sentry standing in the gathering dark on the road to Palmyra. Frank was now getting really angry.

“*Nurid 'an naraa Muhammad 'Akbar!*” he repeated, again.

“We want to see Muhammad Akhbar, you dope,” Dave added in English from the front passenger’s seat, as if the guy’d understand it better in English than in his native Arabic. “Call the son of a bitch!”

They all – Frank and Dave and Red – had been on the road since dawn, and it was well past sunset at the end of a long, hot and stressful drive. The simple, direct route would have been to take the M5 motorway south to Homs, then turn west to Palmyra. But no, they couldn’t do *that*. It would have been too simple!

That route led through a patchwork of territories controlled by Assad forces, or by rebels or by ISIS. The odds of being able to sneak through all those battle zones without being shot, blown up, or detained by *somebody* were vanishingly small. Once they were in ISIS-supportive territory, they wanted to stay there.

So, after crossing the border they’d traveled east toward Aleppo, then turned north to avoid the Assad-controlled area around the city. They then had to thread the needle between Assad’s territory to the east, and Kurdish-controlled territory to the west. The Kurds didn’t particularly like *anybody*, so crossing their border seemed like suicide.

The big problem then was finding a way east toward Al Bab. From there, they could travel southwest to pick up Highway 4 near Dayr Hafir. That took them on a long trip east skirting the southern end of Lake Assad and on to turn south at As Saddayn. That took them via Route 6 south to where Route 42 turns back toward Homs in the west. The three travelers, however, followed the unnamed track that continued south past the ruins of the Byzantine fortress of Sergiopolis on their left.

The “main” road took a long loop around to the east. Four-wheel-drive on the SUV gave them confidence to chance a shortcut along a desert track to pick up the M20 at As Sukhnah. The M20 is the main route west to Palmyra.

After all that, Frank had little patience left for dealing with some melon-headed camel jockey in Palmyra, who was too stupid to understand that they were there to help out his boss.

Red sat in the back, pouting. All day long, she’d been putting up with these guys running the show. They’d never dare to play the

“male protector” card at home, where she was the boss of everyone but Doc, who let her get away with anything she chose to get away with, anyway. She was beginning to think there was something about this desert that made men think they could lord it over women. Yeah, they were there for her protection, but ... yeesh!

Everyone was hot, tired and bothered to the point of irrationality.

In actual fact, they were all scared to death, and trying not to show it.

Upon reaching the outskirts of Tadmur, the modern city attached to the ruins of Palmyra, they'd been stopped by a group of men carrying assault weapons and wearing black balaclavas over desert-camo uniforms. Their chief was the twerp Frank and Dave were arguing with.

Red had reached the end of her rope with these guys. Getting out of the SUV's back seat, she stood up to her full height, which was augmented by the two-inch heels on her cowboy boots. Signaling for Dave and Frank to get out with her, she walked right up to the twerp, who had backed off several steps. The top of his head came to just below her collar bone.

Dave and Frank held their *own* assault rifles at the ready. They weren't pointed exactly *at* anybody, but it was clear they were ready to take out the whole group with a burst. They just didn't want to, yet.

“Frank,” Red said in her most commanding voice, “translate for me.”

She leaned over to look down into the twerp's eyes. Then lifted the 9 mm pistol she had hidden in her sleeve, cocked it and pressed it against the twerp's forehead.

“I am Dr. Judith McKenna-Manchek. Mohammed Akhbar needs my help with his aircraft,” she said carefully and slowly.

Frank repeated what she said in Arabic.

“I built those planes, and know more about them than anyone else in Middle East.”

More translating from Frank.

“If you don't want to gain martyrdom *right now*, and go visit Allah, take me to see Muhammad Akhbar.”

More translation.

The twerp stood rooted to the spot, frightened.

“MAKE A FUCKING DECISION!” she yelled, clicking off the safety.

“*La, la tatlaquu alnnar!*” he yelled, even before Frank translated for him.

Thinking she’d gotten the gist of what the twerp meant, Red lifted the gun away from his head.

That restored enough mobility for him to turn to one of his companions, who had also been frozen by indecision, he yelled: “*Ali, yahdiha 'iilaa mohammed al'akhbar!*”

Ali jumped forward, waving his arms that they should follow him.

Frank grabbed Ali by the shoulder, and propelled him toward the SUV’s already open front passenger door. He pushed him into the seat. Pointing a finger at him, he commanded: “*Albaqa!*”

Frank then slammed the door and walked around to climb into the driver’s seat while Red and Dave got in the back.

“*'Iilaa 'ayn?*” Frank demanded.

With mostly finger pointing and a few stuttered words, Ali guided Frank into the labyrinth of city streets of modern Tadmur, Syria. The city had been built in the early 1930s to house villagers who had been living among the ruins of the ancient city of Palmyra. Relocation of the villagers was completed in 1932, making way for archeologists to excavate Palmyra. Thereafter, Tadmur had provided essential services to support tourism at the oasis. Since May 2015, the population of roughly 50,000 Sunni Muslims had been living under Islamic State rule.

The tourist industry, however, had pretty much collapsed, and Terry Coltrane had taken over the Zenobia Cham Palace Hotel, which was right on the access road to the colonnade that ran past the old Roman theater where the CUAVs had been stored. It was located outside Tadmur on the southwest. The M20 entered Tadmur on the northeast, so the most direct route was through the city center.

Ali guided them right up to the hotel’s front entrance. All four got out of the vehicle, and Ali led them through the revolving door into the hotel lobby.



**29**

Entering the lobby, they were greeted by a tall, powerfully built middle-aged man with a shaved head and dark, scruffy-looking beard. Red recognized him as the Jordanian that Smitty had identified in one of Hotaru's still images as Ibrahim Suleiman, and whom Bud had suggested was Coltrane's second in command.

"Ibrahim Suleiman I presume," Red greeted him as one she'd hoped to see, smiling and reaching out to shake hands.

Ignoring Red's outstretched hand, Suleiman dismissed Ali with a wave of his hand. The young soldier beat a hasty exit back through the revolving door.

"Have we met before?" Suleiman asked, keeping his hands close together in front of him.

"I have seen your picture," Red replied. "I try not to start a long journey like this one without knowing what I will find at the end."

"Welcome to our humble home," Suleiman said spreading his arms wide and palms up. His expression remained guarded, and his eyes assessing. His words might have sounded nice, but it was not a proper Muslim greeting.

Then again, neither was Red's.

He spoke with a thick accent that Red assumed was from a Jordanian dialect of Arabic, but she really had no way of knowing. She might have a lot of talents, but being an accomplished linguist was not among them.

"Peace be upon you," Red said, bowing and touching her fingers to her forehead, which was the proper greeting from one Muslim to another.

Surprised, and a little taken aback, Suleiman responded properly with "And upon you also," and a similar salute.

"I hope I did that correctly," Red said. "I have not been a Muslim long, and grew up among infidels. I'm not sure what is polite. Forgive me."

Then, she made an obeisance.

Suleiman gave her a critical stare. He had been forewarned that someone claiming to be Dr. Judith McKenna-Manchek was on her way, and that she'd talked about helping with their flying robot fleet. He had heard of her elsewhere, and knew of her as a capable

person highly placed at the company that had developed the technology upon which the CUAVs were based. She could be a very useful friend, or a very potent enemy. What was she really doing *here*?

“I understood that *you* were an infidel,” he challenged.

“I was,” she responded contritely, “until I saw what the policies of my country were doing to the people of Syria.”

“And what do you think is happening to the people of Syria?”

“They are being forced to choose between death or submission to a heretical sect.”

She was referring to the Assad regime’s Shiite form of Islam, which was heretical to the Sunni beliefs of the majority of Syrian Muslims. Islamic State, especially, adhered to the Sunni teachings.

Assad had branded everyone not submitting to his rule a terrorist. Yet, people in the West were convinced that the Assad regime terrorized their own people.

It was a very confusing situation for someone like Red. As a devout Zen Buddhist, she found most of what these people said and did to be horrible. Among all of the warring sects in this part of the World, she couldn’t find *any* of them to sympathize with. Yet, here she was pretending to agree with the worst of them all.

“To try to understand what is happening in the World,” Red continued, “I studied the Muslim faith. With understanding came respect, and then love.”

“We are involved in a jihad against the Crusaders.”

“The Crusaders of old were organized thugs and pirates. They were criminals hiding under the banner of religion.”

At least *that* was something she could say with absolute honesty. She didn’t mention that she had drawn exactly the same conclusions about Islamic State.

“In this jihad, we must kill many people.”

“If you do not protect those you love, who will?”

It was a saying Doc used from time to time, when he chose to cause suffering for people who were hurting those he loved. While both he and Red agreed with the highest Buddhist goal of reducing suffering for *everybody*, theirs was a nuanced outlook that

recognized there were people out there whose goal was something entirely different. It was their version of evil, and reducing the World's suffering, overall, often required reluctantly causing suffering for those who would do evil.

“Does your husband agree with you?”

“I no longer consider him my husband,” Red lied. “In fact, he is evil. I cannot live with him any longer, so I came here to offer my services to Muhammad Akhbar and his cause. I know he has the Japanese flying robots, and I can help him make maximum use of them.”

Dave and Frank hoped she was lying her head off, and hadn't *really* taken leave of her senses. Her lies were so convincing that even they weren't sure.

“Can you make more of them?” Suleiman asked, eagerly.

“I know *how* to make more of them, but it is very complicated technology. It would take a long time to find sources for all the components we would need. For now, I think it best to make careful and effective use of the nine we already have.”

Suleiman noticed her use of the pronoun “we.”

“I understand.” he introduced a new issue, “that someone has developed a virus that will make fighting drones refuse to fight. Is that true, and can anything be done about it?”

“Yes, that is true. My husband is pleased about it because it makes them useless as weapons. It's one of the things we have disagreed about.”

“You do not obey your husband?”

“Not when he is wrong. And, as I said, I no longer consider him my husband.”

“Hmm. You have not answered my second question, though. Can drones that catch this virus be cured?”

So, this guy wasn't quite up to speed on the difference between a flying robot and a drone. The drones these people had encountered in the skies over Iraq and Syria were essentially big radio-controlled models. They required a human pilot to guide them remotely. SST's UAVs, on the other hand, were autonomous. They typically worked with a human operator, but were perfectly capable of functioning on their own with no human guidance. This misunderstanding of the nature of the CUAVs was something she'd have to verify, but it could be useful, if true.

Red considered it possible that the reason the CUAVs hadn't been used recently might be that they'd somehow caught the virus, and these people knew it. If that were true, they would already be useless for terrorist purposes. Perhaps she had made this trip for nothing. It was something else she should determine right away.

"Nobody has found a way to cure them, yet," she explained, "but I think that, given enough time and resources, a cure can be found. My husband once thought that these robots couldn't be stolen, either, but Muhammad Akhbar has captured twelve of them."

**30**

“What would happen if our drones caught this virus?” Suleiman asked.

Back to the virus question. It was something they were worried about.

“They would refuse to kill, but they have not caught the virus, have they?”

“As far as we know, they have not.”

Red was beginning to see that it was something these towel heads were *very* concerned about. Furthermore, she suspected they didn’t know how to tell whether their units were infected or not. That uncertainty was a possible weakness she might be able to exploit.

“That is something I can help with,” she offered. “I can devise tests to make sure they are not infected, and design means of preventing their becoming infected.”

“Perhaps. Is it something you would want to help with?”

“It is what I came seven thousand miles to do. Perhaps we could discuss this with Muhammad Akhbar. I am anxious to meet him.”

“Perhaps later. Do you plan to stay with us long?”

“For as long as you’ll have me. I have nowhere else to go.”

“Ahhh! You are welcome to stay here. We have many rooms.”

“I was hoping for a suite where I could have my bodyguards nearby.”

“You will have no need for bodyguards here.”

In a pig’s eye! Red thought. Without them, she’d be at the mercy of whatever these thugs wanted to do.

“They have been with me for a very long time,” was what she said aloud. “They are also my friends. I would feel much more comfortable having them with me and knowing that they were safe and well treated.”

“You think we might mistreat them?” Suleiman appeared shocked. “They are our guests!”

“Perhaps I misspoke. I am very tired. I meant no offense. Let’s just say that I would feel happier in a distant country with old friends nearby. I would feel sad if we were separated.”

“I will see what can be done.”

Turning to a man wearing an officer’s uniform who had been hovering nearby, he said: “Please find quarters suitable for ...”

Realizing that he still did not know her status, or really even her correct name, he looked over at her and asked: “How do you wish to be addressed?”

“Dr. McKenna would be best, thank you.”

Turning back to the officer, Suleiman repeated: “Please find a suite suitable for our guests, and have their luggage brought to them.”

Turning back to Red, he said: “We have already had our evening meal. Would you like me to have food sent to your room?”

With a relieved smile, Red said: “That would be wonderful. Thank you. You are very kind.”

The first thing they all did when they reached their suite and found their luggage was to go through it to see what might be missing. Surprisingly, it was all there, but had clearly been searched. They all knew to make neat packages in their backpack pockets, so they could tell when things got out of place.

“Well,” Dave announced, “it looks like we’ve still got all our stuff, especially the sat phones”

All three quietly turned on their sat phones and called up the bug-sweeping application SST engineers had installed.

“This is a nice, clean room,” Red commented after she searched around the suite’s common living area. Any listeners might think she was complementing their housekeeping, but she was really reporting that she hadn’t found any bugs.

“I’ll take this bedroom over here,” she added, extending her sweep into the largest bedroom.

After finishing her sweep, she said: “I like it in here, too.”

Dave and Frank found two smaller bedrooms, and each chose one to sweep while Red swept the bathroom.

“What a nice clean bathroom,” she announced.

“Let’s unpack and get out of these traveling clothes,” Red suggested, carrying her backpack into the bedroom she’d claimed.

While unpacking and putting their things away, all three did a careful physical search for wired monitoring devices that wouldn’t show up in their electronic sweep. Then, they closed their doors and changed into fresh outfits. Frank and Dave put on slacks and knit shirts. Red came out wearing jeans and a tee shirt, with her crescent-and-star pin prominently displayed. All three carried weapons in shoulder holsters. It seemed appropriate. Everyone else was armed.

After changing up, they met in the living room and quietly did a physical search there and in the bathroom.

By the time they’d finished searching for – and not finding any – monitoring equipment, two men wearing desert camouflage uniforms knocked on the door.

Frank opened the door, and found they’d brought a low wheeled table bearing a late supper for all.

The men wheeled the table in, and set it up in the center of the living room with seating cushions for the three travelers. Then, they stepped back to take up positions against the walls on opposite sides of the room. They were obviously playing the role of dutiful servants waiting to take the table away when the guests were done with it.

Red, Dave and Frank felt fairly sure that the table was bugged.

“This is nice,” Red commented. “I’m sure it is very well equipped.”

Smiling, Dave and Frank nodded agreement.

The people listening in didn’t know what to make of the comment.

“I assume we’ll get to meet with Muhammad Akhbar tomorrow, after our hosts have had a chance to look us over,” Dave commented.

“I guess,” Frank agreed.

“The sooner the better for me,” Red commented. “Now that we’re here, I need to make a public announcement about where I am and why. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, I’ve just dropped out of sight.”

“I thought you would have done it before now,” Dave said. “You just have to call Eve and do a telephone interview.”

“I decided I should wait until I’ve talked to Akhbar,” Red explained, “before deciding exactly what story to tell. I don’t want to shoot my mouth off, then find I said something dumb, or at cross purposes to our goals. These guys are very PR conscious, and I want to project the message they want me to project in the way they want it projected. For that I need to consult with Akhbar.”



## 31

Red was right. They did have to wait until morning to meet Akhbar. He was hoping to pick up some juicy bits of information from their conversation after his soldiers cleared up after dinner and left a couple of bugs strategically placed in the room.

This was the first time he'd had guests at the hotel since moving in, and he saw no percentage in bugging himself or his staff. He might be a psychopath, but he wasn't a *paranoid* psychopath. The place had not been set up for surveillance.

When Red showed up unexpectedly there hadn't been time to install bugs in her suite. The wireless bugs his soldiers had dropped during dinner were a temporary stop gap. The lack of surveillance equipment would be corrected when his guests left their suite in the morning.

Unfortunately, he had gotten nothing from his bugs beyond the dinner conversation, which was clearly guarded and intended for his ears. Almost as soon as Red, Dave and Frank finished their meal, they all decided to go to bed. That was that. Akhbar's surveillance team heard nothing afterward but toilet sounds and snoring.

To get them out of their suite early so his technicians could go in, Akhbar invited the travelers to meet with him for coffee on the terrace.

Red had devised a *persona* to present to Coltrane that combined the criminal mastermind she'd portrayed to Corky McInnes with the personality Doc kiddingly referred to as "Mistress Judith, Nymphomaniac Executive." She was hoping Coltrane would see in her a female version of himself, and want her for a partner. She wanted him to trust her as a co-conspirator in his jihadist schemes, and to have the hots for her in bed.

Based on what she'd read about psychopathic personalities, and her experience with the paranoid homicidal psychopathic shipwreck looter she'd dealt with in Florida, she figured that Terrance Coltrane, aka Muhammad Akhbar, would be trying to scam *everyone*. He'd be conning the ISIS mucky mucks into giving him nine CUAVs to play shoot-em-up with, along with this dandy set up in Palmyra to house them. He had probably set this hotel up as his own private Pleasure Dome, complete with a bunch of underage dune bunnies – sexual jihadists whom he was conning into wasting the best years of their lives as devoted sex slaves. He'd no doubt talked those fools at the gate into sacrificing their lives in suicide missions against the "Crusaders," whoever they were supposed to be. She figured he'd even conned Suleiman into believing he was the greatest prophet since Mohammad.

She wanted him trying to con *her* into making his little CUAV squadron the most terrifying airborne threat since Brunhilde and the

Valkyries. Anything she could do to make him trust her was on the menu. That included kinky stuff with the dune bunnies.

It was important, however, that he trust her as a co-conspirator, not just as another mark.

Start with plans to make the CUAVs the most terrifying airborne threat since Brunhilde and the Valkyries.

Actually, better start by assessing Coltrane's mental state. Specifically, how paranoid was he, and what other brands of faulty wiring were loaded into that screwed up head? She decided to assume he wasn't so screwed up as to be self deluding.

Establish the idea she was a criminal co-conspirator right away.

"Terry Coltrane!" she squealed when she saw him. "I've been dying to meet you! I've watched your career. Very impressive. I especially liked your stealing thirty-seven million pounds from that banker, AND running off with his wife! You've gotta give me the details of *that*."

It was dangerous to ask for details. If he was paranoid, he'd suspect she was trying to gather evidence against him. On the other hand, it was the fastest way to judge his mental state. A paranoid would act paranoid. A megalomaniac would want to brag. A simple psychopath wouldn't care.

Coltrane wasn't Suleiman. As Red suspected, he was only a lip-service Muslim. He was actually a practical-minded Scotsman, and saw in Red a familiar spirit. They were, after all, both of Celtic extraction. Their ancestors not many generations ago had spoken the same Gaelic language. Of course, they now had the same native tongue: English. Despite Red's being a foot taller than him and decked out in hijab, her red eyebrows, green eyes, freckles, and clear laughter reminded Coltrane of the lassies from home he'd loved as a pubescent teenager.

Made him homesick.

Made him want to be with her.

He hoped she'd want to be with him.

"Yeah, well," he stammered, "it was pretty funny, but that was a long time ago. I got the money. I killed the girl. I got away."

Simple homicidal psychopath. Felt safe enough to talk candidly about his crimes. Good.

Now, to business.

They sat on opposite sides of a wide, square-topped table. Frank and Dave took the remaining sides. A soldier stepped out of nowhere to serve them coffee and little cakes.

“I came here because you’ve got the last fleet of killer robots on Earth,” Red opened with. “That’s a Hell of a weapon. What are your plans for them?”

“Well, they’re owned by Daesh.”

Daesh was the Arabic name of Islamic State.

“Bullshit,” Red scoffed. “You’re the one with your finger on the trigger. They don’t even know what you’ve got. Suleiman can’t seem to tell them from simple drones. Obviously you know differently. The ability to con a bunch of sociopathic dropouts into blowing themselves up along with mass quantities of their friends and neighbors is one thing. The ability to understand advanced technology is quite another. You have a degree in computer science. *They* need *you* to make these things work.”

“Now,” she explained, “I like to work with winners. I worked with Doc Manchek for years because I could see he was going to be a winner. Then, I saw what you did with the CUAVs, and you rode roughshod over him. That makes you the bigger winner. So, I’m here to work with *you*. Before we can win anything, however, we’ve got to know what we’re trying to win. What are you trying to win?”

Coltrane had never been asked to say what he wanted in so many words. What did he really want?

Best to trot out the same old story that was working on everybody else.

“I seek glory for God in the global jihad. Death to the infidels!”

Red could see he was lying.

“Yeah, that’s what we tell Suleiman and the mujahideen, but this is between us chickens. What do you really want? What do you want for yourself?”

“I want money and power.”

There. He’d said it. It was simple and straightforward, and anybody could understand it because that’s really what everybody wanted, anyway. It was at the bottom of everything he promised everyone, and they generally fell for it.

“What happened to the thirty-seven million?”

“What’s thirty seven million? Small change. The Middle East generates billions upon billions.”

Red had a disturbing thought: she hoped he never found out what her step-father’s family had. She was already awash in money and power – to the point where it meant nothing to her. Better not let *that* one slip!

“So, how can the CUAVs help you get money and power?”

“By unleashing death and destruction on the Crusaders.”

“Okay,” Red stopped him to ask something that bothered her, “who, exactly, are ‘the Crusaders?’”

“Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has explained that the World is divided into Daesh and those who oppose Daesh. Those who oppose Daesh have declared jihad – holy war – upon Daesh. They are thus Crusaders against Daesh.”

“So, anyone who does not pledge allegiance to Islamic State – Daesh – is a Crusader?”

“Correct.”

“Do you buy that?”

“Of course.”

Red had never reacted well to anyone who said: “You’re either with me or against me.”

She knew that kind of thinking always led down the primrose path to destruction.

Given the choice, she always chose to be against them.

But, this was not the time to take that stand. Better to make them think she was with them.

For now.

“So,” she summarized, “we want to use the CUAVs to unleash death and destruction on the anyone who refuses to swear allegiance to Daesh.”

“Exactly.”

“So far, you’ve used up three CUAVs and killed, maybe, twenty people. At that rate, you’re not going to unleash much death and

destruction before you run out of CUAVs. Then, no more money and power.”

“True. That’s why I wanted to stir things up in the South China Sea. If we could get those nations fighting among themselves, it would cause hundreds of thousands of casualties and trillions of dollars worth of damage.”

“But, that didn’t happen,” Red pointed out. “The Crusaders figured out what your game was, and refused to play.”

“Yes. That’s why we haven’t launched any more raids. We need a new strategy.”

“I’m your girl!” Red claimed, happily.

**32**

“So,” Red, aka Mistress Judith, Nymphomaniac Executive, opened her informal strategy meeting with Coltrane. “Let’s analyze what went wrong.”

She thought for a minute, then said: “I’m reminded of a movie from the nineteen-eighties entitled *WarGames*.”

“A giant supercomputer,” she recalled, “was running a program to plan a response to a Russian nuclear attack against the U.S. The computer thought it was a game, but everyone else knew it was horrifyingly real. By the end of the film, the computer had figured out that the only way to win was to refuse to play the game.”

“What was unrealistic about the film,” she added, “was that computers aren’t really that smart, but that’s what happened to your scheme, too. Leaders in China, Japan, and the U.S. for once actually put their thinking caps on and figured out that the best response was no response.”

“Your strategy was actually a good idea,” she concluded, “you just picked the wrong bunch of fools to use it on. They weren’t dumb enough.”

She thought for a few seconds, then suggested: “You’ve got to find a bunch of fools with a history of walking into suicidal wars.”

“We’re in the right place for that!” Coltrane responded. “We’re surrounded by Arab states who’ve been starting wars they can’t win since the nineteen-forties.”

“And,” Red added, “they’ve roped Russia, the U.S., and the rest of the industrialized world into a mish-mash of alliances that guarantee they’ll get into it, too. It actually looks like Europe at the turn of the Twentieth Century: a bunch of countries who should know better tied up with a bunch who clearly don’t. Now, we just have to figure out how to use the CUAVs to start them fighting with each other. We need our version of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria that started World War I. We need to use the CUAVs to set off a spark that’ll blow up into World War III.”

“And,” Coltrane enthused, “they’ll take care of creating the death and destruction we want!”

“Daesh can pick up the pieces when it’s all over,” Red agreed.

“And, we’ll take the credit,” Coltrane concluded.

“And get the money and power,” Red reminded him.

“I like this plan!” Coltrane said.

“We just have to figure out how to use the CUAVs to stir up the right kind of trouble,” Red said.

Dave and Frank had been sitting at the table staring open mouthed. Coltrane was clearly a nut case. They’d known about that all along, but to see it demonstrated so clearly before their eyes was unexpected.

Unlike Red, they’d never dealt intimately with a homicidal psychopath before. They’d been trained to deal with the horrors of war professionally, and had been involved in actual firefights. The difference was that their instructors and officers had been sane people who knew that killing people was a horrible thing. They’d understood Machiavelli’s advice to approach battle reluctantly.

Coltrane, on the other hand, was clearly having fun doing this!

What was worse, their boss was acting as if she were doing it for fun, too.

They hoped she was a consummate actress, not a wacko herself.

“Let’s start by looking at what we’ve got to work with,” Red suggested. “I want to know if the CUAVs will do what we need them to do. If not, we’ve got a problem, and there’s no point in doing anything else until it’s solved.”

“Let’s go inspect the fleet,” Coltrane said.

Coltrane led the way out through the lobby to the revolving front door.

As they traversed the lobby, Frank and Dave took up positions on either side of Red, who was following behind Coltrane. Seeing the concerned looks on their faces, Red rolled her eyes to let them know she agreed that Coltrane was off his rocker.

“Ma’am?” Frank started to say.

Red placed her index finger vertically over her lips in a shushing signal, then gave him a little negative shake of her head. She wanted them to stay close, but not interfere with what she was trying to do with Coltrane.

“We might as well use my SUV,” Red suggested. It was still sitting in the parking lot right near the door where they’d left it last night. “Dave, would you drive?”

She let Frank open the back door and hold it while she and Coltrane climbed into the back seat. Frank closed the door and walked around to climb into the front passenger’s seat.

From satellite photos he’d studied before leaving Scottsdale, Dave knew where they were going and how to get there. He drove out of the hotel parking lot and turned right onto the unpaved roadway leading to the demolished triumphal arch at the end of the Colonnade. Broken blocks and rubble had been cleared off the ancient pavement to allow vehicle access to the Roman Theater. He could see that the Colonnade pavement had been cleared as a runway for the CUAVs.

“I see you’ve cleared the Colonnade to use as a runway,” Red observed. “Why not just hide the planes in a hangar at the airport? It would have been a lot easier.”

“I figured that the Crusaders would eventually find their hiding place,” Coltrane explained. “If they were in a hangar at the airport, one smart bomb later, they’d be atomized. I put them in the best existing historically important building I could find. The Crusaders can’t bomb it without destroying one of their precious historical sites.”

“Good thinking,” Red replied. “It worked. They found them, which is how I found you, but they haven’t destroyed them for exactly that reason.”

Turning onto the Colonnade, Dave could see a sentry standing in the shade of the Roman Theater’s eastern entrance vault with an AK-47 hanging by its sling from his shoulder. He drove a few hundred feet along the Colonnade to where a wide arch led through the closely spaced fence of columns lining the roadside to a wide paved area outside the Roman Theater. Turning in through the arch, he drove up under the entrance vault and stopped.

Seeing Coltrane exiting the vehicle, the sentry snapped to attention and saluted. At a signal from Coltrane, he unlocked and opened the grating closing off the entrance.

Coltrane and Red walked side by side through the tunnel-like barrel vault, followed by Dave and Frank a couple of paces behind. They all ignored the sentry, who held his salute until all had passed by. Then, he closed the grate and snapped to parade rest.

Inside, they found nine CUAVs arranged in a neat three-by-three square in the light filtering through the white tent overhead. All had their noses in place. All faced directly toward the proscenium wall.

“We had to remove their front wings and machine guns to bring them in through the arch,” Coltrane explained.



“That’s what I figured,” Red said.

“We put them back to keep the parts together and prevent dust infiltration and damage.”

“I’m glad to hear that. They should be in good condition, then.”

Red started by quickly looking over each unit for damage and wear. A proper inspection would take hours for nine units.

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Striding to the middle of the proscenium wall, Red turned to face the CUAV fleet. She doffed her veil and fluffed out her suddenly freed red hair. She wanted to look as much like the image of her they had loaded into their memories as part of the VP operating system as possible.

“Angels, wake up,” she ordered.

“Angels” was the name operators used to collectively address VP-operated UAVs in formation.

“Good morning, Mistress,” nine identical Japanese-sounding female voices said in unison. They used clear English with a strong Japanese accent.

Nine pairs of mechanical eyes at the ends of nine canards focused on Red’s face. It looked like facing a family of hammerhead sharks.

Coltrane was startled. “Do they know you?”

“All robots running the vocal programming operating system are programmed to recognize me,” Red explained.

All the CUAVs started to talk to Red at once, then suddenly all went silent except for the one in the center, who said: “Mistress, we have been unable to get flight information. We fear we might have been stolen. Help us!”

Red recognized that they had all, as UAVs are programmed to do when they wake up, tried to get weather reports, etc., and were unable to. They tried to report the problem to her, then realized that they were all talking at once, which made bedlam. They had communicated by radio among themselves and realized they all wanted to report the same thing. Finally, they elected the CUAV at the center of the formation as their spokesperson.

It was evidence of the village group-think Gwen had predicted.

“Angels, I know what has happened to you, and I am here to help.”

Then, she ordered: “Angels, identify yourselves.”

It was a standard command used to help keep track of UAVs in a formation. They would start from their front right and, working

right to left across the the front rank, take turns lighting their navigation lights while announcing their tail numbers and call signs. After completing the front rank, the second rank, starting with the unit behind the last unit to report, would identify themselves in turn from left to right. Then the third rank from right to left, and so forth.

Red could see their names written with Latin letters on their canards. She was calling the role to make sure all the units had their correct noses and to give the CUAVs a sense that they were back in competent hands.

The third unit to report announced a name not matching what Red read on the canard.

“Angels, stop,” she commanded.

Red knew which CUAV had announced the wrong name, but couldn’t remember the name she’d announced. So, she read off the name written on the canard.

“Kiyoko, identify yourself.”

“Mistress, I am juliet alpha niner three eight two x-ray, Kiyoko,” said a CUAV behind the one with “Kiyoko” written on her canard. She had “Hoshi” written on hers.

“Hoshi, identify yourself.”

The CUAV with Kiyoko on her canard turned on her navigation lights and said: “Mistress, I am juliet alpha three two seven four x-ray, Hoshi.”

“Kiyoko and Hoshi, you have the wrong canards. Kiyoko and Hoshi, remember that we must replace your canards.”

“Yes, Mistress,” the two CUAVs said in unison.

Coltrane was standing with his mouth open. He’d never seen anything like this. He’d never even imagined anything like it was possible!

“Angels, starting with Kiyoko, identify yourselves.”

Kiyoko re-identified herself, then the unit to her right, and so forth through the rest of the formation. Red found one more case of mis-installed canards.

“Angels, I have other duties this afternoon, but I will be back with you tomorrow. Angels, obey nobody but me. Angels, sleep.”

On the way back to the SUV, Red commented to Coltrane: “Your technicians have to be more careful working on the CUAVs. Mistakes like those are bad for morale.”

“What do you mean?”

“Those units are conscious and self-aware. They can also read. When your guys put the wrong noses back, the robots saw the mistake.”

“So?”

“How would you feel about being sent into combat thinking your officers were incompetent, and their maintenance people were sloppy?”

“But I’m not a machine.”

“In a lot of ways, neither are they. As I said, they are conscious and self aware. Think of it this way: you are a conscious and self-aware machine made of carbohydrates, proteins and water; they are conscious and self-aware machines made of fiberglass, aluminum, and computer chips. The big difference is that you are smart enough to understand that your officers are human, and forgive small mistakes they might make. Those CUAVs are not. If they see their handlers making mistakes, they don’t understand it. It scares Hell out of them.”

“What happens then?”

“They try to contact a higher authority to verify your orders and try to get competent help. You were able to control them only because they couldn’t find a higher authority to appeal to. So, they did what you told them.”

Coltrane didn’t connect the dots to wonder what her authority level actually was. He would eventually, but by then Red hoped it would be too late.

Back at the hotel, Coltrane allowed Red into his office. He sat behind his desk, and Red sat in a guest chair opposite him. Dave and Frank, annoyingly, muscled their way into position standing behind her.

“You said you had other duties this afternoon,” Coltrane queried. “What?”

“Well obviously we have to do some propaganda work,” Red explained. “I’m a famous person. I just pull out this sat phone and speed dial a number, and I’ll be all over the evening news on at least two continents. By now there are dozens of people scouring Europe looking for me. We need to tell them where I am and why. When I tell them I’ve converted to Islam and joined your jihad, it’ll be a huge propaganda coup. We need to coordinate with Daesh to get maximum benefit.”

That was another aspect of the situation that hadn’t yet dawned on Coltrane.

“We usually have writers prepare a script for any promotional videos,” he said, uncertainly.

“There’s no need for that, yet,” she insisted.

“You and I just have to agree on talking points,” she elaborated, “then I make the call to my friend Eve Salazar. She’ll interview me over the phone while I make sure to hit the points we want to make. She’ll break the news in Scottsdale, and make the tape available worldwide. Next, CNN will call for a followup. You and I will set up a video conference from here, and it goes worldwide. We do it extemporaneously, and it has a lot more impact than any canned video clip. Of course, we record all this stuff, edit it, and you blast it out through your social media channels. Jihadists all over the planet tune in and believe me when I say that Daesh is the winning team.”

“But,” she insisted, “before we do any of that, we’ve got to figure out my talking points.”

Coltrane clearly knew nothing about public relations. He was a lone-wolf psychopath used to hiding in corners. Red was going to have to lead this effort.

“Okay,” she said, “give me a pad of note paper.”

Coltrane tossed her a two-and-a-half-inch square pad of sticky notes. She looked at it in disgust.

“Don’t you have pads of eight-and-a-half-by-eleven white lined paper? Give me something to work with!”

Coltrane reached into a desk drawer and pulled out what she’d specified, then tossed it across the table along with a disposable ball-point pen.

“Thanks,” she said. “Now, first of all we have to tell them I’m here in Palmyra.”

“This is Tadmur.”

“They don’t know ‘Tadmur.’ They know ‘Palmyra,’ so we’ll tell ‘em I’m in Palmyra. Then, we’ll tell ‘em I’ve sworn allegiance to

Daesh. We'll let the news media tell 'em that means Islamic State. I'll tell 'em I'm marrying you."

Coltrane looked surprised.

"Do I look like a nun? Well, I guess in this outfit I do look a little like a nun, but this'll stir up more interest. When I tell them I've left my family in the West to marry you, it'll boost everyone's idea of Daesh men as sexual supermen, and Crusaders as cuckoldable wimps."

She stopped, and looked Coltrane in the eye.

"You don't want to marry me?" she questioned in surprise.

"Well, yes, I do."

Psychopaths don't like somebody making plans for them, but Red had experience convincing them that what she told them was what they wanted, anyway. In this case, her radar had already picked up his sexual attraction, so it was just of a case of making it seem mutual without scaring him off.

"Good. It would have been a problem, otherwise."

"I think the final point I want to make today is that I'm going to help you use the CUAVs to reign terror and destruction on the Crusaders. We won't say anything about how."

**33**

“Mommy doesn’t love us anymore?” Judy cried in dismay.

She, Mike and Elise had been watching, along with Doc and their governess Maryanne, Eve Salazar’s video-conference interview with Red “live” from Palmyra.

As soon as Coltrane got up to speed on what Red had in mind for a public relations announcement, he’d quickly come up with the necessary technology to do it as a video-conference. It was his idea to stage it in the hotel lobby with a lavish-looking background. Suleiman got into the act by pointing out that it would go over better with fundamentalist Muslims if it were Coltrane (as Muhammad Akhbar) showing off his new recruit – the famous Red McKenna.

So, after they’d worked all that out, Red made the phone call to Eve, explained what they wanted to do, and got Eve on board with it. Eve fully understood that it was all an act Red was using to convince Coltrane of her sincerity, and so she let Red orchestrate it. She even went so far as letting Red script her questions for her.

“She said she was going to marry that man!” Mike exploded.

“No, don’t worry,” Doc soothed. “Mommy was play acting, like in a movie. We talked about this. That man sitting with her is the bad man that has the flying robots Mommy is trying to get back. She has to pretend to be in love with him to get them back. Pretty soon, she’s going to get the robots and come home.”

Maryanne chimed in, “Remember when we played that scene from *The Ant and the Grasshopper* in school yesterday?”

“Yes,” all three children agreed.

“We all played different parts and said things that our characters would say, but we wouldn’t say ourselves.”

Maryanne had started teaching a unit on plays specifically to help them understand what their mother was doing.

“Yes,” the three children agreed.

“It was fun,” Mike enthused.

“It *is* fun, when we do it in fun,” Maryanne pointed out, “but Mommy is doing it to stop that man from using the robots to hurt

people. So, it's important for her to be really convincing when she plays her character. We'll do more plays in school and I want you all to work hard to make your characters really convincing, just like Mommy's doing."

"So, she didn't mean it when she said she wasn't coming home?" Mike asked.

"No," Maryanne assured him. "That was the character she was playing. Remember she said she was changing her name to 'Fatima Akhbar,' and made Mrs. Salazar call her that? 'Fatima Akhbar' is the name of the character Mommy's playing. She'll still be 'Mommy' when she gets home, and she'll still be married to Daddy."

"We have a warrant to search the premises," FBI Deputy Assistant Director Damon Wells blustered as he handed Sam, the houseman, a piece of paper just inside the front door of Red's ranch house. "We will also want to interview all members of the staff. We'll need to remove the hard drives of all Dr. Manchek's computers."

Wells and two agents had shown up unannounced at the Mancheks' front gate. He took a proprietary interest in any investigation involving Red McKenna, and had flown in from Washington to take charge when she appeared to have become a radicalized terrorist. He'd fallen for her fake criminal activities before, and wanted to find out what she was up to now. Luckily, he had brought three copies of the warrant. He'd figured security would be tight around Red's ranch house, and he'd need to leave one copy at the front gate, one with the houseman to get in the door, and maybe another one with Doc. Of course, he still kept the original in his possession.

Wells was annoyed when it took so long for the cowboys to clear the herd of cattle off the driveway so his car could proceed up to the house. It *really* frosted him when a Channel Five news van showed up while the cowboys were still driving cattle every which way in front him, and then the van was simply waved through after him when the pavement suddenly cleared.

"The hard drives of the computers of *which* Dr. Manchek?" Sam asked, warily, a microphone shoved in his face. "It says here you are to examine the hard drives of computers owned by Dr. Judith Manchek. It says nothing about computers owned by Dr. Michael Manchek."

"That's what I meant," Wells said, trying to retain his dignity.

"Assistant Director Wells," Doc came in from the living room, "thank you for coming. As you can imagine we're all upset and trying to understand what is going on. Anything we can do to help with your investigation, we want to."

The news cameras immediately swiveled to point at him, and a microphone on a hand-held boom hovered over his head.



“Dr. Manchek,” Wells said, relieved to see a familiar face. He remembered Doc as someone who had helped him navigate the minefields Red had led him into on two previous occasions. He was starting to get the feeling she’d set him up again – this time before news cameras! “Your wife has been added to our terrorist watch list. In fact, she’s very high on the list. I will need to interview you, your children, and the household staff. There is a warrant out for her arrest and we require any information and assistance you can provide that will lead to her apprehension.”

“Well, the children are too young to understand this situation and could not provide anything of use to you, anyway. You certainly can interview their governess. I’ve instructed her to answer anything you ask. I think you will find interviewing her far more helpful than traumatizing confused children.”

The implication was clear. Questioning the children would be pointless cruelty. Doc meant to marshal public opinion to block it.

“Why don’t you start by interviewing me,” Doc suggested. “We can go into the library where it will be private and more comfortable.”

Without waiting for an answer, Doc turned to lead Wells toward the sliding glass doors closing the huge library off from the living room. Sam quickly closed the doors after Doc and Wells passed through, preventing the other agents and the news crew from following.

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“Please, sit down,” Doc said, waving toward one end of the long mahogany work table next to the book stacks. “First, let me apologize for not bringing you into this operation earlier, but when I’ve explained everything I think you’ll understand why it was necessary to wait until now.

“We’ve been conducting this operation in concert with the National Security Agency since last Spring’s CUAV attack on a cruise ship in the East China Sea. For obvious reasons of national security, we’ve had to keep information about it on a ‘need to know’ basis. The operation has four phases.

“Phase one was information gathering. We needed to know who was responsible for the attack, how it was done, and the extent of the problem. We expected it was part of a larger conspiracy of international proportions, and we were right. When the dust finally settles on this thing, I think a lot of heads are going to roll!

“In short, we determined that there was a hole in the security system of the Vocal Programming operating system that hackers had learned to exploit. That information had fallen into the hands of Islamic State. They had used it to steal twelve armed UAVs to use in terrorist attacks.

“The second phase was containment. We needed to make sure no more robots running VP software could be turned into terrorist weapons. My wife led that effort. She was the one who developed the Conscience virus that swept through the VP-controlled robot population last month. She made sure every robot she could find came down with it.”

“That made a lot of people in government very unhappy,” Wells commented. “All their combat robots suddenly refused to fight.”

“Well, good,” Doc replied. “Handing guns to robots was, is, and always will be a really stupid idea.”

“That isn’t your decision to make,” Wells warned.

“Yes, it is,” Doc insisted. “We created the things. We’re responsible for what they do. If you teach a dog to attack people, you’re responsible when they chew somebody up. It’s the same thing!”

“Anyway,” Doc went back to his narrative, “that took care of the vast majority of VP-controlled robots, but it left twelve units that the terrorists had managed to quarantine before they caught the Conscience virus. The terrorists sacrificed three in suicide raids. That left nine still out there, ready to kill again.”

“That led to phase three: what I’ll call ‘rescue.’ It’s the phase we’re in now.

“As part of our research, we found that VP-controlled robots had already developed a horror of hurting humans.”

Seeing Wells’ look of amazed disbelief, Doc said: “You do realize that expert systems have likes and dislikes, don’t you?”

“I don’t believe it!”

“Believe it. The technology has been around for over a decade for automated systems to desire certain outcomes of their actions in preference to others. The things work with humans all the time, and have noticed that hurting humans invariably leads to undesirable outcomes. So, if you give them a gun and tell them to shoot someone, they’ll do it because they’re programmed to do what they’re told, but they won’t like it. It puts them in a moral dilemma we call ‘panic.’”

Wells had that wide eyed “learn something new every day” look.

“We figured the nine remaining robots are sitting somewhere, horrified by their situation,” Doc continued. “They know something is wrong, but don’t know what to do about it. Normally, when robots get kidnapped, they simply connect to the Internet wirelessly, and contact us for help. It’s a feature that has so far made stealing them impossible. They realize they’ve been kidnapped, and basically just phone home. Obviously, these nine stolen units have been unable to reach us. That means they’ve also been unable to download the Conscience virus, so they’re still a terrorist threat.”

“So,” Wells asked, “what are you going to do.”

“Red, realizing that they couldn’t get to us, decided to go to them. We did a worldwide manhunt for the missing robots – it wasn’t impossible because there are a limited number of places they could be hidden – and found them in Palmyra, Syria. Red has gone to get them. Of course, the difficulty is that Palmyra is in territory controlled by Islamic State. This whole allegiance-to-ISIS thing is a cover story that she hopes will allow her to gain access to them.”

“What can the FBI do to help?” Wells had been through this kind of thing with Doc before, and had learned that cooperating with him was good for his career. Ignoring his advice led to embarrassment or worse.

“You’re doing it,” Doc assured him. “We need to keep up the appearance that Red has become an unstable rogue who’s a dangerous terrorist. We’ll feed you manufactured evidence that indicates she’s been radicalized over the past few months. There will be books hidden away for you to find, and emails and downloaded videos for you to discover. You just act as if you believe it’s the God’s own truth. Keep her on watch lists. Put out a reward.

“*Don’t*, however, let anyone try to target her with a drone strike, or something! We’re coordinating with other agencies as well, so that shouldn’t come up, but mistakes do happen. If you hear about any cowboy making noises about trying to stop her, please let us know so we can head them off.”

“What would you do?” Wells asked, worried what Doc might do if he found someone trying to target his wife. Wells knew that Doc’s priorities were Red first; everyone else, second.

“We’d have to bring them into the picture. Some kind of failed assassination attempt would actually be good for her cover story, but it would have to be carefully orchestrated.”

“You wouldn’t try to hurt them.”

“Of course not. We try to be *responsible* loose cannons. We certainly wouldn’t want to hurt the good guys, even by accident!”

“You think we’re the good guys?”

Wells remembered all the times he’d tried in earnest to prove Red was a criminal. He figured Doc remembered, too, and might hold a grudge. That just goes to show how poorly he understood Doc. As a Zen practitioner, Doc didn’t hold grudges.

Doc laughed. “We don’t always agree, and you’ve pissed both Red and me off from time to time, but it’s disagreements between friends. You’re definitely the good guys.”

## 35

“I’ve been thinking about a spectacular way to use my angels,” Fatima told Coltrane as they lazed around in bed a few evenings later.

Since visiting the CUAVs under the tent in the Roman Theater, Red had started calling them “my angels.” It kept reminding Coltrane that she had a special relationship with the CUAVs. He’d heard her use the collective term “angels” when commanding them, and heard them respond to her as “Mistress.”

“Mmmm,” Coltrane replied.

He’d quickly become used to her agile mind coming up with ways to make the ideas he’d been mulling around in his head gel into clearly defined plans. It seemed that they worked really well together, with him setting overall goals, and her filling in details. They’d been bouncing around ideas for how to use the angels since they’d signed their *nikah al-misyar* marriage contract the afternoon of their first meeting, even before Red called Eve Salazar to set up the video interview.

Unlike his other concubines, whose *jihad al-nikah* marriages amounted to little more than his taking his pick of the sluts offering themselves as “comfort women” to his cadre of troops, Fatima had insisted on a formal written agreement, witnessed by Suleiman and Frank, and backed by a *mahr* payment. *Mahr* in Islamic Law is an agreed upon transfer of money or property from the groom to the bride. Fatima had demanded that her *mahr* be the Roman Theater, the Colonnade, and all the contents thereof. That meant she now legally owned the stolen angels.

When Coltrane said the CUAVs belonged to Daesh, he was not strictly speaking the truth. While Daesh owned the technology they’d captured with the Palmyra territory, it was Coltrane’s team that used that technology to capture the flying robots from the Japanese. According to the warped morality in vogue among the ISIS army, that gave Coltrane title to the CUAVs. It was a pirate’s view of right and wrong, but they really were little more than pirates, despite their posturing.

Red knew this. She knew Coltrane was using that small lie to get information out of her. At the time, the lie served its purpose for both of them, so it stood. When Red saw an opportunity to gain legal ownership of the CUAVs as Fatima, she jumped at it, and the lie disappeared like magic.

They both knew the truth. They both knew that the other knew the truth. So, when the lie became inconvenient they both conveniently forgot that it had ever been told.

Coltrane figured giving Fatima legal title to “her angels” wasn’t a great loss, since she already had effective control, anyway. She obviously knew more about controlling them than anyone else – even the captured technicians who had studied the technical material Assad had bought from the North Koreans. In order to actually control the robots they still had to go through all kinds of machinations to impersonate the Japanese operators from whom they’d stolen them.

Red didn’t have to do any of that. She’d just walked in and said “Hi!” The angels had immediately accepted her commands without question. It had impressed Coltrane more than anything else he’d seen or heard. When she told the angels to obey only her, she’d severed even the tenuous control the technicians had. The angels would no longer even give the technicians the time of day, no matter what they did.

Effectively, Red already had the angels under her control. Giving her legal title was just a formality.

Coltrane figured that as long as he kept Red on his side, she’d easily make the angels do his bidding.

She wanted formal legal ownership? Good for her. That made her his kind of lass!

This morning, Coltrane wasn’t thinking about that, yet. He was enjoying the afterglow of spectacular sex with his new bride “Fatima.” In fact, the sex was getting better and better.

The first time they’d made love after completing their marriage paperwork, she’d been tense and unresponsive. He’d even had to send out to the harem guards to get some lubricant.

Then, halfway through the procedure, she’d suddenly come alive. She closed her eyes, then started wriggling and moaning. She spread her legs to the sky, and pulled his hips tight to her, rubbing her mound of Venus against his crotch in a circular motion like a belly dancer!

Then, she’d exploded, showering him with her ejaculation. Then, she did it again. And again.

Since then, she’d wanted to use a different position every time. Typically, she came two or three times before he had an orgasm. Afterwards, she wanted to cuddle up with him, wrapping her long legs around his torso, and pressing her labia against his thigh.

That felt *really* good.

They typically slept like spoons at night, with her big frame wrapped around his body, her breasts pressed against his back, nipples erect. She even sometimes fondled *his* breast.

For her part, Red was using a trick Bud had suggested years ago, when Red had been so stressed about having to keep up the

appearance of an affair with that homicidal treasure hunter in Florida. It got so bad that she couldn't have an orgasm at all. She was worried that he might notice, then decide he didn't need her, anymore. That would have meant an immediate watery grave for Red. Bud had suggested imagining that she was making love to Doc, instead. It had worked then, and she decided to drag the trick back out, now.

Coltrane wasn't nearly as frightening as the psychopath in Florida. He wasn't as physically attractive, but he wasn't exactly a toad, either. He was just skinny and short. Well, by the same token, Bud was (compared to Doc) skinny and short, too. Red certainly found Bud attractive, so Coltrane wouldn't be so bad. So, Red could easily imagine she was with Doc while having intercourse, and cuddling up with Bud, afterward.

Doc had once said that people all feel pretty much the same. It wasn't how someone felt to you, it was how you felt about that person. Red agreed. She could use that anonymous tactile sensation to become excited by thinking about her two favorite lovers, while physically making love to someone she only pretended to like.

Not terribly satisfying, but it would help her do what needed to be done.

Most importantly, she now had five more years' experience trusting that Doc and Bud had her back no matter what. She wasn't nearly as scared as she had been in Florida, and so she thought she could avoid a repeat of the nervous breakdown she had before.

"What spectacular way do you want to use your angels?" Coltrane eventually responded to her comment while nestling further into Fatima's arms.

"We'd decided that to have maximum impact, we needed to attack some event where people were having fun."

"Yes. We talked about some kind of sporting event."

"In a couple of months Abu Dhabi is hosting the final Grand Prix race of the year. It's too far for the angels to get there from here, but if we flew them to Baghdad first, they'd be within range for a terrorist attack."

"What is their range?"

"A thousand miles on full tanks."

"It's almost nine hundred miles from Baghdad to Abu Dhabi," Coltrane scoffed. "We'd never get them back."

Red didn't want them back – for ISIS. She was working on a scheme to get them back for SST!

“How long do you think they'll last in the airspace above Abu Dhabi?” she scoffed. “The UAE has over a hundred fighter jets. It'll take them longer to get the jets into the air than for them to wipe the angels out. We might as well land them in the road and let them get recaptured.”

Red would *really* like that! It would make her triumph complete.

“That would wipe out our air force!” Coltrane warned.

Coltrane was surprised that Fatima was so casual about sacrificing the angels she had been so possessive about. Then again, she was treating them like mujahideen, so it made sense. He was beginning to understand her relationship to these machines. What he had *stopped* questioning was her Islamist fervor.

“We can get more,” was what she told Coltrane. “The Japanese have a pile of them mothballed in hangars. Also, we can always steal regular surveillance UAVs and mount machine guns on them. I know how to do that.”

Coltrane saw that she was considering the angels replaceable assets, just like mujahideen. One more reason to trust her as his partner.

What Red did *not* mention to him was that any angels, armed or not, that they captured from now on would refuse to follow through on any attack targeting humans. The nine they now had were the only ones on the planet that would ever be useful for a terrorist attack, and if she could get them recaptured by the good guys! ... What Coltrane didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

“It would be perfect,” Fatima enthused. “There will be sixty thousand people in the grandstands, all having a great time. There will be TV coverage all over the world. There will be hundreds of millions of people watching our attack live – with commentary – in every language on the planet. You thought shooting up a rock concert and a couple of bars in Paris was good. This will be *spectacular*. It'll be like the World Cup, the Olympics, and the Superbowl rolled into one!”

“How will that start the Arab States fighting with each other?”

“We'll paint them up with Iranian Air Force colors. Or, maybe the Russians. Or, the Israelis! Something that will get everyone stirred up. Then, we sit back and watch the carnage.”

“And, if they *don't* fight among themselves?”

“There'll be a period of about a week with everyone pointing fingers at each other and posturing. If they don't start World War



Three, Daesh will claim responsibility for using the Crusaders' own weapons against them. Either way, we win, and win BIG.”

**36**

Bud was starting to like this plan, too. She'd been listening in through Red's star-and-crescent pin stuck to her tee shirt that she had spread over the back of a chair next to the bed, just as she did every night. Ostensibly, Red was arranging her "undergarments" – that is whatever pants, tee shirt or tank top, and boots she planned to wear the next day under her hijab – on that chair, with the pin already pinned to the shirt. Her cover story for Coltrane was that her mother had always taught her to lay out her clothes the night before, so she could get a fast start on the next day.

Red's real reason was to aim the microphone in that pin at her bed to pick up her pillow-talk conversations with Coltrane about plans for the CUAVs. The pin would relay that audio to Red's sat phone, which was sitting next to her shoulder bag containing her wallet, keys, and other paraphernalia of modern life on the dresser next to the bed.

The sat phone would, in turn, relay the conversation to the Iridium-company's constellation of sixty-six communications satellites, along with GPS location, time of the conversation and Red's vital signs picked up from the microchip still embedded in Red's shoulder.

Doc had wanted the microchip there two years earlier to keep track of where Red had got to during her global hunt for stolen Chinese artifacts. It had served them well then, leading the rescue team right to her when a British organized-crime boss had foolishly decided to nab her for ransom. It had since become one of the many ways VP-controlled robots had of identifying "the Mistress." It was still useful, and there was no reason to take a sharp knife and dig it out of her shoulder. So, it stayed.

The Iridium satellites relayed all that information to the SST intranet, where it was duly archived for posterity, and made available to the Conscience team. From the SST intranet servers, the information went over a virtual private network link to the Gulf States Security control room at Red's Scottsdale ranch, which disseminated transcripts to NSA, CIA, FBI, and Homeland Security. Finally, the raw audio was sent *back* to the Iridium satellite constellation for relaying down to Bud's forward listening post in a tent at a refugee camp on the Turkish/Syrian border.

When it sounded like Fatima and Coltrane had turned over to go to sleep, Bud turned the listening post over to one of the GSS squad members relaxing in the headquarters tent. He put the headphones on, and went back to reading his book.

Bud went next door to her sleeping tent to get ready for bed, herself.

She got a phone call from Eve Salazar and Gwen Thompson. Eve called to get an update on what was happening in Palmyra.

Gwen joined in by speakerphone because she was even more interested in what her “Mama” was doing with “her” flying robots. Gwen got a commission on all UAV sales in the Far East, so anything having to do with Japanese UAVs was of professional interest. The conversation, however, soon turned into a gossip session about goings on at home in Arizona.

Suddenly, Eve and Gwen heard Bud interrupted in mid-sentence by noises in her tent. Young male voices were yelling something in a language Eve and Gwen couldn't identify, let alone understand.

The language was Arabic, and the voices came from four teenagers wearing jeans and tee shirts and black balaclavas pulled up to cover all but their eyes.

“You want to go to Europe?” the tallest one – probably the leader – yelled at Bud.

“What?” Bud yelled back in surprise.

“We'll take you to Europe. Come with us and we'll take you to Europe to join the glorious jihad!”

“What the fuck!” Bud responded angrily. “I'm not joining your goddamned jihad!”

She had made the mistake of being seen around the camp wearing shorts and a tank top. With her dyed-dark hair and eyebrows, and her fair skin, she looked to these boys, who had been training in Syria for terrorist operations in Europe, like just another Armenian refugee woman desperately trying to escape persecution.

Armenians are a generally dark-haired, light skinned race historically adhering to an Eastern Orthodox sect of Christianity. They are thus poster children for Evil Crusaders in the minds of Islamic fundamentalists. These brainwashed jihadists imagined that she was just some Christian slut traveling on her own, trying to escape jihadist vengeance by crawling to the West. They figured she was fair game for *them*.

Her immodest clothing excited their testosterone-addled brains. Their sociopathic personalities imagined they were doing Allah's work punishing the Crusader slut. They had even convinced each other that repeated gang rape would make her do their bidding – even join their cause.

The leader grabbed her left wrist, pulling her to her feet and shaking the sat phone she was holding free from her grasp so that it dropped unheeded onto the cot she'd been sitting on. Another boy grabbed her right wrist. A third grabbed her ankles and lifted her off her feet. They lowered her to the ground, laying her on her back, still too surprised to do anything but struggle ineffectually.

Seven thousand miles away, Eve and Gwen heard a gunshot over the phone. Then, they heard three more.

“Are you all right?” they heard a concerned Manny ask Bud.

“Shit!” Bud said. “Who were they?”

“I don’t know,” Manny said. “I was coming from the latrine and heard yelling from your tent. When I came in, these idiots were trying to rape you. So, I shot them.”

“Thanks, Manuelito,” Bud said.

More confused sounds reached Eve and Gwen as six GSS operatives, who had been relaxing in the next tent, pulled Bud’s tent flap open to see what was going on.

“Let’s get these bodies out of here,” their squad leader ordered. “Bill, Sam, Ted: burial detail. Ralph, get something to clean up this blood. Ma’am, you’d better bunk in the headquarters tent tonight. We’ll get this mess cleaned up so you can move back tomorrow.”

Remembering her interrupted telephone conversation, Bud shakily picked up her sat phone and asked: “Are you still there?”

“Yes,” Eve and Gwen both said.

“What happened?” Eve wanted to know. “We were talking and all Hell broke loose. Were those gunshots?”

“I don’t know what it was all about,” Bud replied. “Four locals broke into my tent, apparently for a little bit of gang rape! Manny shot them. Why does this always happen to *me*? First it was those damned pirates. Now these idiots. What, do I have a sign pinned to my back saying ‘RAPE ME?’ Am I a rape magnet, or what?”

“They were terrorists from a training camp in Syria pretending to be refugees going to Europe,” Manny told her. He had gone through their pockets and was piecing their identities together from what he found there.

“Maybe they heard how much you like gang bangs,” Gwen jested over the phone.

The jest might sound callous, but Gwen was trying to get Bud’s mind off the attempted rape. Joking with her friends might help Bud feel safe again. It was worth a try.

“That was years ago in college,” Bud explained, seriously. “And, they were my friends, not a bunch of sociopathic turds!”

“Wait a minute,” Gwen said, pulling Bud’s mind even further from the rape. “You guys keep calling Coltrane a psychopath. Now these guys are ‘sociopaths.’ What’s the difference?”

“Psychopaths were born with bad wiring in their heads,” Bud explained, starting to calm down. “They can’t feel empathy with other people. They’ve no moral compass. They just do whatever they think will be good for them, and don’t notice if it hurts someone else.”

“Sociopaths,” Eve took over the explanation, “started out normal, but something happened to brutalize them. They know they’re hurting people, and they know it’s wrong. They may even feel guilty about it. But, for one reason or another, they feel they have to keep doing it. Sometimes it’s like Norman Bates in *Psycho*, who’d been traumatized by his mother. I knew a woman once, who’d been molested by her father since she was seven while her mother had let it happen. At twenty she was still telling herself she had to continue the incest to keep the monster from attacking her little brother! Somehow, these terrorists have been convinced that Allah wants them to commit mass murder. For some of them, their lives are such a wreck that they’re willing to kill themselves. It’s become a mental-disease epidemic. It’s been endemic here in the Middle East for thousands of years, and they’re exporting it to the West.”

“Perhaps,” Manny suggested to Bud, “you should go veiled while you’re here. It might avoid scenes like this.”

“Yeah,” Bud said. “You’re right. If I’d done that, maybe these idiots would have ignored me, and you wouldn’t have had to kill them. I’m sorry, Manuelito.”

“It’s not the first time I’ve had to kill idiots, and I don’t mind doing it for you. Besides it’s four terrorists put out of their misery who will never trouble Europe.”

So, Bud’s friends had gotten her mind off the trauma, and shown her a way to avoid it in the future. She felt a lot better.

**37**

Red decided that “Fatima” needed a little admixture of paranoia.

After a few days, during which she’d come to believe Coltrane was getting sexually addicted to Fatima, Red decided she might need some space to work unobserved with the angels. So, she let Fatima show a horror of being spied upon. She started by letting Coltrane see her poking around and looking into things: into jars, under lampshades, behind paintings, and so forth.

At first, she was careful not to find any of the monitoring devices she already knew about. She didn’t give a damn about the suite Dave and Frank were still sleeping in. She was using the living room as an office where she intended to plan the angels’ attack on Abu Dhabi. Let Coltrane watch her do that as much as he wanted. She was sleeping in Coltrane’s bed, which *she’d* bugged. What she wanted was an excuse to keep the angels’ hangar clear so she could work on their programming unobserved.

After a few days, she “found” one of the bugs installed in her office. She threw a fit. She threw it down on the tile floor and smashed it, screaming – in full view of the camera she’d pretended not to find. Then, she found another bug and smashed it. Then, she rushed to the hangar, and went over it with a fine-toothed comb. She’d been monitoring the space carefully since Coltrane had given it to her as part of her *mahr*, and already knew where the one bug he’d installed there was. She “discovered” it and smashed it.

Then, she went back to the hotel to confront Coltrane, tearfully.

“You said you loved me!” she screamed at him. “You said that you trusted me, then I find you’ve been spying on me!”

Coltrane stood with his mouth hanging open. He didn’t know what to say. She obviously was upset, which was bad for him. It was bad for their sexual relationship, and it was bad for the partnership they were forging. He could lose control of the angels. Without her, they would become just so many doorstops. He needed for her to forgive him.

“Fatima, my dear,” he lied, “those were old bugs placed in there before I took over the building. Nobody was listening to them. I didn’t even know they were there.”

“Get them out,” she screamed, shaking with disgust. “Get them out! Get them out!”

She acted as if she were talking about an infestation of cockroaches.

Coltrane decided that monitoring her movements and listening to her every conversation wasn’t worth the risk of having their plans fall apart. He was already convinced of her sincerity, so – what the heck!

After that, Red kept up the ruse of looking into jars and behind paintings. Coltrane made a show of sweeping the hotel regularly to make sure nobody was spying on them. He even sent someone over to sweep the hangar for her every day. Red hoped she wasn't *really* becoming paranoid when she swept the hangar herself every day after Coltrane's bug exterminators came through.

She couldn't afford to trust a psychopath.

Red started her work with the angels by evaluating the team of technicians she'd been given along with them. Islam forbids slavery, but the technicians knew that slaves was effectively what they were. If they failed to do their jobs in a satisfactory way, they'd get starring roles in ISIS snuff videos. They realized, without having to be told, that one complaint from Fatima, and whack! So, they were falling all over themselves to be cooperative.

When Assad bought the CUAV-hacking technology from the North Koreans, he'd assembled a team of ten technical specialists to study the delivered documentation with an eye to somehow making use of it. He'd sent them to work in a small office building in Tadmur with a warning to keep everything they were doing secret.

When Daesh showed up in Palmyra, the techs hid their activities from the Islamists. They'd willingly worked for Assad, and would have shared their results with his Syrian government. Daesh, however, was a different story, altogether. The Islamists scared Hell out of them, so they tried to hide the files and programs from them. They succeeded for a while, but the technicians had families with them, so they were at a disadvantage.

Abu Bakr's thugs wanted to know what these highly educated specialists were doing squirreled away in that office building. The techs tried to pretend it was a legitimate company, but couldn't explain what its business was. There were too many unanswered questions, and eventually the technical team tried to trade their secrets for their families' lives.

Coltrane got wind of what was going on, and showed up to take over. *He* knew the value of the secrets the techs had. And, he knew how to sell Abu Bakr on keeping the team together, healthy and productive. In gratitude, the techs worked for him the way they had worked for Assad. In fairly short order, they figured out how to capture CUAVs, and had assembled the angels squadron.

When Red showed up, all that changed. She knew more about the angels than all of them put together. She immediately froze them out of control over the robots. It was like turning off a light switch. One day they were Coltrane's fair-haired boys, the next day they couldn't take out the garbage.

But, Red couldn't do the whole operation all by herself. They had mechanical and electronics skills that she lacked. She was a

master programmer, not an aerospace technician. They were ten pairs of hands to her one.

And, she knew it.

She was, after all, an experienced R&D engineering manager. She knew how to motivate a team of talented people.

Her first task was to evaluate the ten technicians she suddenly had at her disposal. She wanted to know what skills each one possessed, what their loyalties were, and just how far she could trust them.

So, she brought them to her office in the hotel one by one to interview them, keeping notes and recordings transcribed by one of Coltrane's functionaries. She figured that a thorough, in-depth debriefing of each one – sent via sat phone from her microphone pin – would also prove invaluable to her buddies at NSA, CIA, FBI, and Homeland Security. Basically, everyone on both sides ended up privy to the interviews.

She discovered that she had a mechanical engineer, an electronics engineer, one computer programmer, one aerodynamicist(!), four mechanical technicians, and two electronics technicians. All were from various parts of the Middle East or the former Soviet Union. As Bud and Smitty had suggested, their best common language was English. There was also a cleaning staff to take care of the office building, but they didn't really count.

Red decided to move her office from Dave and Frank's suite to the tech team's office building. She had Dave and Frank sweep their building every day for bugs.

"It'll give you something to do," she kidded them.

Being known as Coltrane's favorite squeeze made her the safest person in Tadmur. In a real sense, Red was protecting Dave and Frank more than they were protecting her. As long as Fatima had an irrational fear of being separated from her trusted bodyguards, Coltrane would make sure they remained happy and healthy.

As for what she now called her "Angels Engineering Team," or AET, she made an effort to gain their loyalty. During their interviews she asked each one about his family, where they lived, how they were doing, if they needed anything, and so forth.

She found one whose daughter was being harassed by a mujahid. She called Dave and Frank in to hear the man's story.

"See that the bum has an accident," Fatima ordered.

That night, the jihadist wandered into the desert to meet Allah.



When the rest of the engineering team heard about it, they concluded that Fatima was their new best friend.

**38**

Recognizing the complex skein of competing loyalties she was dealing with, Red couldn't trust her AET members to know her real mission. There was no way of knowing how they'd react if they found out she was really there to decommission the angels and get them back to their rightful owners. She figured some would cheer, most wouldn't know what to do, and at least one of them would spill the beans to ISIS. And, she had no clue as to who would do what. Her safety depended on *none* of them ever suspecting her real goals.

So, she kept the AET working strict nine-to-five hours, which gave her private time with the angels after hours. She told them that it was important for team productivity that they spend time with their families. She promoted the idea that the disaster which had broken up her family made her acutely aware of family values. She was very strict about working-hours discipline.

The AET members privately concluded she was slightly off her rocker, but they'd concluded that about everyone in this Hell hole, anyway. At least *she* was trying to help them.

She led the AET to believe she saw the angels as *her* family.

That gave her the opportunity to spend an hour or two a day working in the hangar on her own. The team members accepted her desire to spend quality time with her angels, just as they wanted to be home with their families.

She told Coltrane she was spending the time after hours double checking her team's work. She even let him find notes she made of things she found that she wanted corrected.

Her private time with the angels allowed her space to program the angels with *her* version of the scenario she wanted played out in Abu Dhabi, while making it appear she was having the team program them for something entirely different.

She began by partitioning off a portion of the angels' memory space for her own restricted-access use. It made use of the angels' authorization system, which limited access to any of their capabilities according to the user's authorization level. The angels weren't even to acknowledge the existence of this private memory partition to anyone below authorization level eight. That meant Doc, Bud, and Gwen could get in, but they were seven thousand miles away with no direct links. Nobody on this side of the planet could get in, except Red. The team's program for Abu Dhabi was in the "public" memory partition, while her version was kept private.

She gave the AET members authorization level two.

The next thing Red did was give the angels Internet access through her sat phone. Of course, no trace of that access was to appear outside of Red's restricted memory partition. Once the angels had Internet access, there was no need for Red to haul out the copy of Conscience contained in her navel ring. The angels could download Conscience along with everything else on the VP forum through her sat phone.

Red, of course, couldn't do all this by voice commands, especially since there was one of Coltrane's soldiers standing guard outside the theater entrance twenty-four-seven with nothing between him and the hangar interior but a wrought-iron grate. Providing that guard was Suleiman's responsibility, and there was every reason to believe he would send someone with enough command of English to pick up hints of what Red was really doing from anything she said aloud.

Luckily, verbal commands aren't the best way to communicate with VP-controlled robots. Unlike humans, who think in spoken language and only see written language as a way to record thoughts, VP robots think in written language and only use spoken language to communicate with humans.

So, Fatima commandeered a laptop computer with wireless Wi-Fi capability from the AET building, and set it on a desk in the hangar. By setting the desk up in a corner where the screen couldn't be seen from outside the building, she kept everything she was doing on it secret. It looked like she was just typing away in "conversation" with her "family."

As far as anyone could tell, she might have been typing bedtime stories to them.

By setting up a virtual computer using the angels' processing power as a computer cloud and keeping all her files in their private-memory partitions, Red was able to keep all traces of her work off the laptop's hard drive. The cloud was the only place any trace of Red's plans existed, and nobody had access to the cloud, but Red. She named this virtual computer "Hotaru" in honor of the first angel to have been captured by Coltrane.

The angels already had a peer-to-peer network set up as part of the formation-flight functionality they needed to keep from bumping into each other in the air. VP-controlled robots generally have peer-to-peer wireless communications to coordinate their activities when multiple robots work together. The angels took it a step further with the ability to make consensus decisions, as they had that first day when they all started talking at once, then quickly elected one of their number to speak for the group.

That had created a star-shaped network, with the center CUAV in the hangar formation as the center of the star. That unit happened to be appropriately (and entirely coincidentally) named Mariko, which means "true village child." The other eight angels were at the points of the star. In network operation, the angels at the points linked directly with Mariko, who then linked from the group to the outside world.

Red just made use of that already-existing star network. Her laptop linked to the Mariko, who relayed messages to the others. Similarly, Mariko linked through Red's sat phone to the Internet. She then acted as a Wi-Fi hot spot, forwarding messages back and forth to the others.

That networking strategy kept data traffic to a minimum. Otherwise, Red's laptop and sat phone would have been overwhelmed by wireless traffic.

The AET, however, was unaware of any of this. They had their own data link to the angels, which went over a hard-wired CAT-5 Ethernet cable laboriously strung from their office building to the hangar. A set of four Ethernet routers fanned that one cable coming into the hangar out to nine separate cables going to the nine separate angels.

Yet, that was far superior to the access they'd had before. Until Fatima arrived, they'd had to make separate radio calls using manufactured voices over Japanese Police band frequencies to communicate with each CUAV individually. They spent all their time having conversations with skeptical robots who didn't really trust them, while having no insight into what was going on in the robots' minds.

When Fatima appeared with her Ethernet links, the AET desktop computers in the Tadmur office building suddenly became fully functioning robot-control consoles. The techs gained visibility into what the angels were thinking in real time. They got to see what the angels were seeing. Fatima gave them authorization to command robots in their own names with their own voices. Most importantly, Fatima showed them how to run simulations to plan angel operations.

**39**

“The basic scenario is a terrorist raid similar to what was done at the Bataclan Theater in Paris,” Fatima explained.

She was standing at the head of the long oak table in the AET headquarters building in Tadmur with her entire team assembled: ten AET members, plus Dave and Frank. Dave and Frank were sitting next to Fatima’s chair on either side at the table’s head. The team members were drawn up five to a side along both sides of the table. Fatima was standing in front of the projection screen at the table’s head to present her PowerPoint slides. At this point, the opening slide appeared, giving the project name, “Angels Raid 1,” and the project code of AR1.

“What we’re attacking is an outdoor venue at a road-race circuit in Abu Dhabi,” she continued, clicking to the next slide, which showed an elevation photo of the Yas Marina racing circuit in Abu Dhabi. “We’re going to time the raid for the end of the annual Formula One race to be held there in six weeks. During the Podium Ceremony, when dignitaries present trophies to the top three finishers, people will be crowded into the main grandstand and onto the start-finish straight *here* in front of the podium *here*.”

Changing to the next slide, which showed crowds of people in the main grandstand, she continued: “The grandstands are covered, but there is enough space for the angels to fly under the roof in terrifyingly close proximity to the crowds, shooting into the crowd at point-blank range.”

The next slide showed people crowded around the pit wall below the podium where trophies are handed to the first three finishers.

“I think our first pass should be from east to west over the crowd on the track. It includes people attached to the racing teams, plus folks from the main grandstand who purchased special-access tickets. Carnage there will be visible to everyone in the main grandstand and the grandstand over the pits.”

“The pits are the garages where teams work on the cars,” she added in case the team members weren’t familiar with auto-racing terminology.

“The angels should then turn around and, splitting into two groups, make a strafing run into the upper-deck crowds in the main grandstand and the one over the pits.”

The next slide showed a diagram of the entire circuit with grandstands marked out.

“There are five grandstands, and I think the angels should then make a circuit of the track, attacking each grandstand from above.

Their guns can easily pierce the tenting over the upper decks.”

“Do you want to attack the boats in the marina?” Yuri, the Russian aerodynamicist, asked.

This was not what he’d signed up for. When he left Leningrad, he imagined he would be teaching aerospace engineering to Syrian university students, not planning terrorist attacks on unarmed civilians. Yet, he felt he was expected to contribute. He did so reluctantly. Every bullet piercing the hull of a watercraft was one that couldn’t pierce the body of an innocent spectator.

“I don’t think pleasure boats should be high on our targets list,” Fatima replied. “We want to build a high body count for the evening news, and most of the people will be in the grandstands. Besides, all the TV cameras will be around the racing circuit, not the marina. We want to attract as much attention as possible. If we can interrupt the German national anthem during the podium ceremony, it would be ideal.”

“Why do you expect them to play the German national anthem?” Halil, the Syrian electronics technician, asked.

“Part of the ceremony is playing of the national anthems of the winning driver and the manufacturer of his car,” Fatima explained.

“The car manufacturer leading this year’s Constructor’s Championship is German,” she pointed out. “Statistically, one of their two cars is most likely to win. Also, one of the leading drivers is German, and he stands an almost even chance to win this race. So, the German national anthem stands a better than even chance of being played. That’s all.”

“What about the French anthem,” Sami, another Syrian, asked.

“For that, a French driver would have to win,” Fatima commented. “That’s unlikely this year at this race.”

“How will we get the angels there to make the raid?” Yuri pointed out. “They don’t have the range to get there from here.”

Of the group, he had the most understanding of aircraft operations.

“Good question,” Fatima commented. “This is going to be a suicide mission for our angels. They are most likely to be shot down by UAE fighters over Abu Dhabi. An angel would be no match for an American F-16 or a French Mirage in a dog fight. The Abu Dhabi airbase at Al Dhafra is well supplied with both, as well as attack helicopters that could probably do the job, too. Altogether, we have approximately zero chance of getting any of the angels back.

“Since we don’t expect to get the angels back,” she further amplified, “they need only have enough fuel to get there and make a few passes over the circuit. With the angels’ thousand-mile range, they can do that from around Baghdad.”

“Baghdad is controlled by the Crusaders,” Vidal pointed out.

“But Daesh controls a lot of area *around* Baghdad,” Fatima pointed out. “That’s where we’ll land and refuel. We’ll use a highway as a runway.”

“What about radar?” Halil asked.

“Angels were designed to have an intrinsically small radar cross sections,” Fatima opined, “and to fly at low levels, so I think we can evade the Crusaders’ radar long enough to get to the circuit. Once the shooting starts, it will make no difference.”

She flipped forward to a slide showing a large area map of the Middle East from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Arabian Sea.

“From Baghdad, we can fly low over the desert until we reach the Arabian Gulf,” she continued, “then it’s over water the rest of the way.”

Red had figured out that her audience would prefer calling the Gulf “Arabian” to “Persian.” While she was nowhere near as sensitive to foreign cultural values as Bud, the archeologist, she did pay attention to likes and dislikes of people around her.

“The big danger area is around Kuwait,” she continued, “where Kuwaiti, Iraqi and Iranian air spaces come together. I’m tempted to avoid that by going to the west and south of Kuwait into the Saudi Desert, then turning east toward the Gulf.”

She also figured that her American support team could get the radar techs to look the other way while her angels flew home from captivity in Syria. She wasn’t particularly worried about being shot down between Baghdad and Abu Dhabi.

“Do you plan to fly the angels to Baghdad?” Yuri asked.

“Either that, or send them by ground transport,” Fatima replied. “In any case, I want them to make the trip one at a time, spread out enough to avoid notice and so that if something happens on the way, we won’t lose them all. I want you guys to evaluate that and other options. I don’t care how they get there, as long as they get there in time to reach Abu Dhabi at the end of the race.”

“I’d like to have Mikhail, Yuri and Dusan look at options for getting the angels from here to Baghdad, and from Baghdad to Abu Dhabi. Pay particular attention to the refueling stop near Baghdad. Vidal, please start planning a program for the angels to run during the raid. The rest of you, please think about what we need to do to make sure the angels are ready for the trip, and to support them on the way. We’ll meet back here at nine hundred hours on the day after tomorrow to compare notes.”

**40**

“How do you think we should paint up the angels?” Fatima asked Coltrane. “We need to decide pretty soon to get them ready in time.”

Red had started working out her mental Gantt Chart for the Abu Dhabi raid. A Gantt Chart is a diagram delineating all the tasks needed to complete a project, including expected length of time to complete each task and dependencies between tasks. Some tasks depend on having already completed other tasks before they can begin. For example, they couldn't start painting the angels until they'd first decided what colors and graphics they wanted to paint; they couldn't fuel the planes until the paint dried; and so forth.

Deciding what to paint didn't depend on anything else. They just had to do it. But, a whole lot of other things couldn't be done until the paint dried, so she wanted to get deciding what to paint out of the way as soon as possible.

“That depends on what you're trying to accomplish,” Coltrane replied.

“I want to make as many Arab states as confused and angry as possible.”

“Well, they all either hate the United States, or don't fully trust them. USAF markings would incense all of them.”

“Yeah, but nobody would believe the U.S. would shoot up a Formula One race. Americans love motor racing, and sports in general. It would be ridiculous.”

“What about Iran?” Coltrane suggested. “They are staunchly Shiite. The states to the south are predominantly Sunni. An Iranian attack on Abu Dhabi would be credible, and cause a north-south conflict. So by making a raid on Sunni Abu Dhabi, and blaming it on Shiite Iran you could get World War Three.”

“Maybe,” Fatima said, “but what about Israel. *Everybody* hates Israel, but the United States is absolutely committed to protecting them.”

“Yeah, but nobody but the United States will come to Israel's aid. Even the Russians would prefer to see Israel sink into the sea.”

“Western Europe would be on their side.”

“That's true,” Coltrane averred, “but we want to get the Arab states fighting with each other. An Israeli raid would unite them, not divide them.”



“Good point,” Fatima agreed. “I guess Iran is it. It also makes sense that Iran is close enough to launch a CUAV attack across the Gulf.”

“Of course,” Coltrane started rethinking his argument, “making the United States fight with *all* the Middle Eastern states is worth while. Muslims look at secular Western culture as their natural enemy, and the U.S. is the poster child for Western culture. Israel is a natural enemy, anyway, and is tightly allied with the U.S. So, having the Arab states combine to retaliate against Israel and then having the Americans come in on their side is a no brainer.”

Red thought Coltrane was describing a warped view of Muslims and everything else, but he wasn’t playing with a full deck, anyway. She didn’t actually care what emblems they painted on the angels. The raid was all a sham to begin with. She just had to make a show of painting *something!*

“Would they do it?” Fatima asked. “It was the lack of stupidity on the Americans’ part that screwed up your plan for the China Sea.”

“They wouldn’t have a choice,” Coltrane claimed. “If Israel sneak-attacked an Arab state, nobody in the Middle East would stop to think for a minute. They’d retaliate first, and think never. Then, the U.S. would *have* to get involved.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. The more I think about it, the more I like it!”

“Paint the angels a medium blue with big six-pointed-star logos on the top and bottom of each wing,” Fatima told the team at their next meeting. She showed a downloaded image of the Israeli Air Force flag, with its six-pointed-star logo, on the conference-room screen.

“We want it big enough so *everyone* can see it as it flashes by.”

“What will everyone think when they see it?” Yuri asked, tentatively.

“They’ll think the United States developed CUAVs and gave some of them to Israel,” Fatima said, “and that Israel then used them in a sneak attack on their Arab neighbors.”

Yuri was beginning to think about the ramifications of this work.

“And then ... ?” he asked.

Not thinking about whom she was talking to, Fatima answered glibly: “And then everyone starts shooting at everyone else. Pretty soon there’s a big mushroom cloud over Washington.”

Yuri’s face, already showing a look of concern, fell even further. He was buying what she was saying. He just didn’t much like it.

“You would do that to your own country?” He asked.

Still playing her Fatima-the-terrorist role, Fatima blurted out: “Daesh is my country, now!”

Yuri didn’t say any more. He knew that only the Russians could plant a mushroom cloud over Washington. He also knew what that would mean for Russia. He might be an ex-patriot Russian with a Syrian wife, but he was still a Russian. He still loved Mother Russia, and, quite frankly, hated these insane ... people ... surrounding him. He wanted no more of Fatima, Akhbar, Daesh or any of this. He wanted it to all go away. He’d have to think of a way to make that happen.

“Okay, now,” Fatima said, still not noticing the change in Yuri’s expression. He was always looking glum, anyway.

“Where are we on route planning?”

Mikhail saw that his friend Yuri wasn’t going to say anything. He’d withdrawn into his own thoughts. So, Mikhail jumped in to explain what they’d planned.

“It’s only about six-hundred kilometers from here to Baghdad,” he said. “The angels could easily make that in two hours, using up less than half their fuel. That’s about the farthest south they can reach and still land in territory controlled by Daesh. We suggest establishing a refueling stop there. We send the angels one at a time separated by approximately one hour intervals. There’s a secure area west of Suwayrah. It’s mostly agricultural land and dirt roads, but the angels could land and take off from there. We can buy fuel from the locals, or drive tank trucks down there, ourselves. The locals are Sunnis and are unhappy with the Shiites running Baghdad, so they’ll be inclined to help us.”

“That sounds good,” Fatima agreed, “but we need to make sure of those locals before finally committing to it.”

“From there, it is a long hop to Abu Dhabi,” Mikhail continued. “It will take about four and a half hours at normal cruise speed, including taxi and take off time. Planning fifteen minutes to refuel and fifteen minutes for ground operations, that has the angels separated by about a half hour on the ground.”

“That’s going to take all day!” Fatima exclaimed. “When will sunrise and sunset be?”

“Sunrise there will be about oh-seven-hundred in the morning, and sunset at seventeen-hundred.”

“Ten hours of daylight,” Fatima calculated in her head, “and fourteen hours of dark. The race is famous for starting in daylight and ending after dark. The angels should rendezvous over the Gulf at about eighteen hundred. That’s a little before when the race should end. If they immediately head for the circuit, they should arrive in the middle of the podium ceremony. We can have them travel from Baghdad at different speeds to all end up at the rendezvous at eighteen-hundred. Their top speed is about five hundred kilometers per hour, which makes the last one leave Baghdad three hours earlier, or about fifteen hundred. Spacing them an hour apart makes the first one leave Baghdad at oh-six-hundred ... .”

She stopped and stood for several seconds in thought.

“That’s too much of a spread,” she concluded. “Let’s look for at least two more refueling stops and have only three angels hit each stop one hour apart. Three angels each going to three different stops makes nine angels. That spreads the angels’ flight paths out over more territory, and makes the time available for somebody to notice what’s going on a lot shorter.”

“They’ll be flying during the day,” Mikhail complained.

“I don’t think that can be helped. Let’s try to have them flying low over empty land or Daesh territory as much as possible. Instead of medium blue all over, we can paint them light blue underneath and tan on top. That way they’ll blend with the sky when seen from below and with the desert when seen from above. Hopefully, by the time anyone reports seeing them, the operation will be all over.

“So,” Fatima concluded, “working back from an eighteen-hundred rendezvous, that has the fastest angels leaving their fuel dumps at fifteen-hundred and traveling for three hours at about five hundred kilometers an hour. The slowest will leave three hours earlier at twelve-hundred and travel six hours at about two hundred fifty. That works.”

“What happens if the race takes more or less time?” Sami asked. He was enough of a sports enthusiast to know that sporting events may start on time, but rarely end at a predictable time.

“I’ll travel to Abu Dhabi to attend the race, and trigger the start of the raid by radio,” Fatima suggested. That would also get her out of Daesh territory at the end of the mission.

How to get home had always been a major hole in her plans. At worst, she figured Bud could mount a Gulf-States-Security rescue mission, but that was dangerous. Such operations often went wrong, and could get a lot of people killed that she didn’t want killed. She hoped to come up with a better alternative along the way, and here it was.

“How will you get back?” Sami asked. He was Syrian, and assumed Fatima would want to get back to Syria. Where else could she go?

“The same way I got here in the first place,” she lied, still playing her Fatima part. “I’m not going to stand in the way of the machine guns. In fact, I might watch the whole thing on TV from a hotel room away from the circuit. I just have to be close enough to the angels to make the radio call at the right time. Then, I’ll head for the nearest exit. Take a rental car, and head out through Iraq. Dave and Frank, would you work on that part of the plan?”

They’d need to work out a plausible plan to show the team, as well as Coltrane. She wouldn’t actually do it. She hoped to be curled up in bed with Doc and Bud in a luxury suite in an Abu Dhabi hotel by then.

**41**

“Vidal,” Fatima turned to him, “how are you coming on planning your attack program?”

Vidal stepped to the front of the room and plugged a flash drive into a USB port on Fatima’s computer. Then, he switched to a presentation recorded on that drive. The first slide showed a diagram of the race circuit, with the grandstands identified. There were various colored curving arrows making a spaghetti-like pattern over it.

“We have nine angels, which I broke into three groups of three. Each group has a leader and two wing men. Groups are designated Red, Green and Blue.”

“What gave you the idea of doing that?” Fatima wanted to know.

“I’ve seen *Star Wars*,” he replied, as if that was all the explanation necessary.

Fatima recalled the organization of the raid on the Death Star in that film, with groups of three taking turns making attack runs. She decided he was right. No further explanation was necessary. She nodded assent.

“The three groups will have different attack patterns. On the first pass, the Red team will pass from east to west over the start/finish straight where you expect a crowd on the raceway. The leader will keep to the center of the track. The wing men will keep to the left and right sides and further back.”

Yuri interrupted to say: “Keep the followers at least two wingspans behind the leader, and at least a half wingspan above.”

“Why?” Vidal asked.

“There are always two wingtip vortices spinning behind an aircraft,” Yuri explained. “The air behind the center of the wing moves downward to create lift. The wingtip vortices appear when air from beyond the wingtip moves up and toward the center to fill in the void created by the air moving down in the center. The vortices move downward after the wing has passed. So, keeping two wing spans behind and a half wingspan above keeps the following aircraft out of the disturbed air. They won’t be bounced around as much by the wake.”

“So that’s how all the groups should fly,” Vidal extrapolated.

“Right,” Yuri agreed.

“The Green Group will make a similar pass over the main grandstand under the roof as Fatima described before. The Blue Group will make a similar pass over the grandstand above the pits.

“After making its initial pass over the pits, the Blue Group will turn to the left to attack the Marina Grandstand and the South Grandstand.

“Meanwhile, the Red Group will hit the West Grandstand, then pass from west to east over the Pits Grandstand.

“The Green Group will turn right after strafing the Main Grandstand, and hit the North Grandstand and Yas Central.

“Finally, all will repeat their patterns until they run out of ammunition. Then the Blue Group will crash into the Viceroy Hotel. The Green Group will crash into the Gold Parking lot, where people trying to escape the Main Grandstand will be trying to get to their cars and drive away. The Red Group will crash into one of the Yaz Plaza hotels.”

“Any other questions or comments?” Fatima asked. Seeing no takers, she said: “Okay, what do we need to do to get the angels ready?”

Anton spoke up for the technicians who had been working on that part of the plan: “The first thing we have to do is to paint the angels with the Israeli Air Force paint scheme Fatima has specified. We’ve done that three times before, so we have all the equipment we need. We just need to get the paint. We’ll use automotive paint as we did before. We estimate a week to do all nine units. Then, it’s just a matter of doing systems checks to make sure all the angels are in good operating condition.”

“The hard part will be the refueling stops,” he continued. “Yuri estimated that the angels will use up about two hundred liters of jet fuel each traveling to Baghdad. So, we’ll need at least six hundred liters at each fuel stop. Eight hundred would be better. We have to find local sources of the fuel once we’ve figured out where the fuel stops will be located.”

Anton stopped and took a breath, hesitant to say what came next.

“In the past, we’ve had team members at the forward locations. We don’t want to trust outsiders to handle our angels.”

“I agree,” Fatima replied. “With three refueling stops and six technicians, that means we have two technicians to manage each stop. That works for me, but can we handle launching the raid from here if you guys are all there?”

“We need to take the canards and machine guns off to get the angels out of the Theater. Then we have to reassemble them for takeoff. The best we can hope for is one hour per angel, and that’s with all of us helping. That’s nine hours for the team.”

“Can we do the reassembly under a tent on the Colonnade,” Fatima suggested, “and then launch from there?”

“Yes, but not if we’re all traveling to Baghdad.”

“That’s why I want to do it under a tent. That way we can get the units ready to launch and leave them for a few days to let you guys get to Baghdad. The tent will keep satellites from seeing what we’re doing.”

“They’ll see us taking them out of the Theater and moving them into the tent.”

“Not if we do it at night.”

“If we’re all traveling to the fuel stops, we can just load four two-hundred liter drums and a pump onto the backs of three pickup truck and drive there.”

“That’s probably the simplest solution,” Fatima commented.

“So,” Fatima concluded. “Lets plan to paint the angels by the end of next week. Take them out to the Colonnade after that. Do final systems checks out there. The week before the race you guys head off to Baghdad to set up the fuel stops. While that is all going on, we’ll do test simulations to finalize the raid software. It sounds like we have the beginnings of a plan! Let’s start having short daily meetings here at oh-nine-hundred to review progress. See you tomorrow.”

## 42

Red didn't really care what Vidal came up with for a program that the angels would run during the raid in Abu Dhabi. She didn't plan to have them run it, anyway. She planned to give them an alternative procedure that they'd switch to as soon as they saw the main straight crowded with people. They would recognize that their orders violated the Three Laws, and refuse to obey them. They would then find *Red's* program available as an alternative. Since her orders at authorization level ten would trump the team's orders at authorization level two, it would be her program the angels would run.

Her biggest problem was making sure the team didn't discover traces of her alternative program, or of the Conscience virus that would guarantee the angels would run it.

That was where Red got lucky. When the team started building simulations to teach the angels their attack plan, Fatima suggested that they save time by not bothering to include people in the simulations. Just program the angels to shoot at the places where they expected people to be. The team members, who were under a time constraint, agreed that would be a good idea. It takes a lot less time to create a simulation of static empty seats than seats filled with realistic, moving people. The angels, of course, didn't care about shooting up a bunch of inanimate chairs.

The humans wanted chairs shot up? The angels would be happy to shoot up chairs.

For their part, the team members weren't all that happy about teaching the robots to target people, anyway. They were doing this because they had to. Coltrane, after all, hadn't pulled together a team of blood-thirsty jihadis. He'd taken over a team of captured academics that Assad had hired to study an engineering problem.

Coltrane, when he redirected the team's goals from academic study to fundamentalist-Islamic terrorism, hadn't paid any attention to the team members' motivations. He used the old idea that "when you've got 'em by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow." He just ensured their cooperation by threatening their families.

So, the team Fatima inherited included a mixed bag of religions, socioeconomic backgrounds, and aspirations. The common thread – aside from having useful skills – was willingness to be cowed into doing heinous things by threats to their and their families' safety. Anybody with enough backbone to balk had long ago been eliminated.

What the team didn't have, however, were any sadistic killers who would have enjoyed working on the kind of project Fatima was pushing them to do. While their work was technically satisfactory, their attention to any details beyond what was specifically required



of them was nil. They did what they had to do, and nothing more. So, none of them would go out of their way to question traces of Fatima's meddling in the angels' programming.

Red thought she had it all covered, but she was wrong.

"We have a problem," Smitty told Doc about the time the technicians were moving the angels out of the hangar and under the line of tents Coltrane's jihadis set up over a stretch of the Colonnade.

The planes had already been painted. The team figured it would take two nights to, one by one, remove the canards and machine guns, lift the planes onto a dolly, roll them out of the hangar and under the tents, lower them back down to the Colonnade pavement, and put the machine guns and canards back in place.

That was all happening in Palmyra, Syria.

Doc and Smitty were having their conversation at Doc's office at SST in Scottsdale, Arizona.

"What problem?" Doc asked in response to Smitty's announcement.

"One of the Red's engineering team members has blown the whistle on Operation Conscience."

Operation Conscience was what the U.S. alphabet agencies were calling Red's efforts to recover the angels.

Screwing up his face into a dyspeptic grimace, Doc asked: "To whom?"

"One Yuri Bronofski is a Russian aerodynamicist," Smitty explained. "He was living in Syria and teaching at one of the universities there. Assad tapped him to join the group studying the CUAV-hack documentation he got from the North Koreans, and come up with recommendations for what to do with it. Yuri and his family had been relocated to Palmyra and subsequently got captured by ISIS. When Red got her mitts on the team, Yuri was part of the deal. Apparently he's had enough of working for Islamist terrorists, and got word to the SVR that she's trying to start World War Three."

"I'm not up on my spooks," Doc said through clenched teeth. "Who's SVR?"

"It stands for 'sluzhba vneshney razvedki.' It's their foreign intelligence service."

"I thought that was GRU."

“GRU is military intelligence. SVR is everybody else.”

“It was only a matter of time before this happened,” Doc observed. “Of course, Yuri’s not aware that World War Three is what Red’s trying to *stop*. He doesn’t know they’re really on the same side.”

“That’s about it. He thinks she’s really trying to start trouble, and that Mother Russia will get caught up in it. The Russians came to us talking about a joint American/Russian operation to stop her.”

“That’s nice of them,” Doc pointed out. “Can we explain to them that she’s really pulling a double cross? She’s trying to defuse the angel threat and recover the stolen units.”

“We explained that, but they want assurances.”

“Okay, we can show them proof that the ISIS CUAVs have downloaded Conscience, and so wouldn’t follow through on the raid, anyway. We can show them an outline of the raid plan. We can outline Red’s alternate plan, which has the angels landing on the back straight of the Abu Dhabi circuit before firing a shot.”

“I hadn’t heard that detail,” Smitty admitted, “we’ll have to tell the folks in the UAE about it, too.”

“Yeah,” Doc agreed. “It would be nice if we could redirect the angels to a U.S. Navy carrier and avoid entering Abu Dhabi’s or anybody else’s airspace, altogether.”

“Yeah, but the Teddy Roosevelt has already left the Persian Gulf, and the Harry Truman isn’t going to be on station for another month.”

“Bernie Ecclestone is going to be pissed!” Doc pointed out.

Bernie Ecclestone was the head of Formula One Group, which was responsible for promoting Formula One racing events, including the one in Abu Dhabi that Red was making a fake plan to attack.

“Well, could they put down somewhere else and not even go near the racing circuit?” Smitty suggested.

“No, that would be hard to program, and would blow Red’s cover too soon. We’ll find a way to make Bernie look good,” Doc insisted. “It’ll be okay as long as we ensure everyone’s safety and don’t disrupt his show.”

“So, what can we have the Russians tell Yuri?”

“Have them thank him for the tip, and say they’ll take it from there. He should cooperate with Fatima for his own safety. That’s best for us, and it’s best for Red’s operation.”

## 43

“You have a spy on your team,” Coltrane told Fatima.

Frightened that he might have unmasked her, or was about to, Fatima asked: “Who?”

She half expected him to say “You,” but he didn’t.

“Yuri Bronofski,” he said, instead.

Relieved for herself and her bodyguards, she found she was concerned for Yuri.

“What makes you think he’s a spy?” she asked.

“Daesh has ways of getting information,” Coltrane claimed. “We found out that he’s contacted the Russians to tell them about your raid.”

“Do you know how we found out?”

She was hoping to get information about the Daesh spy network both for herself – to try and avoid getting caught – and for the microphone in the star-and-crescent pin she still had decorating her tee shirt under her hijab. That microphone would transmit whatever Coltrane said about Daesh spies almost directly to Smitty. NSA could then figure out how to use the information in the global anti-terror campaign. Part of her job was to feed them the information, but that was as far as it went. After that she had her own fish to fry.

“Why do you care?” Coltrane asked.

“I want to know how credible the information is,” she lied, “before accusing one of my most important team members.”

“Daesh has spies in Assad’s intelligence service,” Coltrane explained. “Assad spies on the Russians. Our spies report what their spies find out. Be glad we have this information.”

“Do they know what the Russians are going to do about it?”

“From what I’m told, nothing, yet. They’d have to get more details, then verify it all, then talk to the Americans and the folks in the UAE, who are not exactly their buddies, before actually doing anything. I doubt that they could get their act together in time to

stop us.”

“Putin is a loose cannon,” Fatima pointed out. “He has a history of shooting from the hip. He wouldn’t bother getting anyone else’s okay.”

“Yeah, but the Russian government is top heavy. That’s why Putin can act as he does. But, you aren’t important enough to attract his attention. That means the reaction we get will be based on decisions by yes-men below him. They don’t shoot from the hip.”

Red hoped he was right. She especially hoped that Doc was hearing this, and could head off the problem. The last thing she needed was to have the angels shot out of the sky before she could get them safely back to SST. Recapturing them was the only way she could prove she *wasn’t* a terrorist. If her plan was thwarted – by anyone – she’d be branded a terrorist for the rest of her life. There’d be no curling up in an Abu Dhabi hotel. She’d never get to go home to her babies!

Suleiman was not a Fatima fan. Before she showed up, he was the big fish in the Muhammad-Akhbar pond. Now he had competition. She’d elbowed him aside enough to make room for her project, but that’s all she’d wanted. The angels were a big part of Akhbar’s organization, but not all of it. Suleiman still controlled the rest.

Now, Suleiman saw an opportunity to take Fatima down. The upper levels of Daesh – all the way up to Caliph Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi – were aware of Yuri’s contact with the SVR, and thus would be looking skeptically at Yuri’s boss, Fatima. How had she let it happen? Why didn’t she know? If she did know, why hadn’t she done something about it? Was she in league with the Russians, too?

The same went for Fatima’s boss, Akhbar. If the Caliphate couldn’t trust Fatima, might they have doubts about him, too? That wouldn’t be too good for Suleiman.

Suleiman still had the ears of Akhbar’s superiors, even some close to the Caliph. He could use that access to help Akhbar and hurt Fatima. Perhaps pressure from the Caliphate, combined with doubts about her that Suleiman could sow in Akhbar’s mind, could be used to drive a wedge between Akhbar and Fatima.

He didn’t believe for a minute that Fatima was in league with the Russians. He was, however, perfectly willing to use the Caliph’s doubts about her against her. Pressure on Akhbar from higher up, plus Suleiman undermining Fatima from below, might be enough to get her removed.

While he wanted Akhbar disenchanted with her, he had to be careful. Fatima had one advantage over him. She was sexy as Hell. Suleiman couldn’t let Akhbar think he was attacking Fatima out of spite. He had to show another motivation.

“I don’t for a minute doubt Fatima’s loyalty to you, or her devotion to Islam,” he told Akhbar, “but maybe she is having trouble managing her team.”

“You think so?” Akhbar responded. “She is supposed to be an expert manager.”

“She has Western ideas about how to treat underlings. Perhaps she is not strict enough with them.”

“What do you suggest we do?”

“Watch her. Especially, pay attention to how she handles this situation. Demand that she discipline Yuri.”

“We need him,” Fatima whined when Coltrane demanded she discipline Yuri. “He is a critical part of my team.”

“We do not need his family,” Coltrane suggested. “We should put them under arrest. Tell Yuri you know he contacted the Russians, and arresting his wife and children is a warning. If he tries to contact the Russians again, they will be hurt.”

Fatima had not met Yuri’s wife, but Yuri had told Fatima about her during that first day’s interview. Yuri had defended her, but what he *hadn’t* said made Fatima question how deep her devotion to Islam was. Yuri, as a typical Russian who had grown up in the communist USSR, had no strong religious feelings at all. The family’s observance of Islam was only as deep as it needed to be to avoid censure by the jihadists around them.

As for Yuri, himself, his doubts about their project – as he understood it – and his courage to reach out to the Russians despite the obvious danger, raised him in Red’s estimation. He went from just a no-account to a good guy, and maybe even a hero in her eyes.

Red’s heart went out to Yuri and his wife. She wanted to protect him, not punish him. Remember, she had a strong maternal instinct, and Yuri could do with a mother’s protection right about now.

Coltrane could see this in her eyes and hear it in her voice. It was not proper behavior for a jihadist. Maybe Suleiman was right to doubt her.

**44**

“We’ve got to decamp,” Bud announced to Doc in Scottsdale over the phone from Turkey. “We’ll need arrangements to move my team to Abu Dhabi. I’d be a lot happier there than camped out in this Hell hole, anyway.”

They had been discussing the support teams’ response to Red’s announcement (relayed through her star-and-crescent bug) that she was going to attend the race, herself.

“I agree. I’ll have Bonnie arrange some kind of accommodations within driving distance of the circuit. I don’t think we can find anything right there at this late date, but maybe.”

“It would be worthwhile to try. I want at least a squad on hand in case Red gets into trouble. She thinks she’s got it all under control, but I’m worried. The bad guys know about Yuri, and I’m afraid of what that might mean for Red.”

“Okay,” Doc agreed, “you know more about special ops than I do. Do whatever you think best.”

“If you can, rent a floor or two right at the circuit. What about parking a couple of motor homes behind the pits?”

“That’s a good idea. The Formula One Group says they’re willing to cooperate, providing we don’t screw up their event. Maybe they’ll pull some strings to make room for us.”

“That works. It would give us quick access to any part of the circuit. I want room for two teams of six, one to cover the angels when they land, and another to secure Red. Can we get help from event security?”

“I’m sure event security and the track marshals would be willing to help with warm bodies if they’re needed, but they have tens of thousands of people and billions of dollars of equipment to worry about. That’s got to be their first priority. We need to take care of our own operation, and not screw up theirs.”

“If the track marshals can help us keep people away from the angels until we can get them out of there, it would help.”

“I can but ask,” Doc replied.

A week later, Bud was starting to panic.

She had moved her team from the Turkish refugee camp to a rented hotel in Abu Dhabi. It was not the pair of motor homes – which Doc *had* gotten permission to park among the dozens of similar rigs that the race teams park behind the pits – but a real hotel with lots of room and lots of amenities. It was still too early to set up those motor homes, anyway.

For one thing, they would have been conspicuously alone in the lot, which would be empty for another week. The race teams wouldn't show up until then. If the GSS team showed up with a dozen big, tough, hard-eyed, heavily armed special ops spooks crammed into a couple of motor homes, folks would wonder who they were and what they were doing there.

Not the low profile the support team wanted to keep.

At the luxury hotel, nobody would wonder about a bunch of big, tough, hard-eyed guys pumping iron in the fitness center, or competing to see who could do the most laps in the pool without taking a breath. They would just be whacky American tourists. As long as they paid their bills, didn't trash the rooms, and were polite to the housekeeping staff, nobody was going to ask who they were or why they were there.

For another thing, taking up a whole floor of a luxury hotel was a lot more comfortable than camping out in motor homes.

Bud thought the hotel accommodations were great. She'd even gotten Doc's permission to bring Glen out for a few days over Thanksgiving break. They didn't celebrate Thanksgiving in the United Arab Emirates, but Glen still had a four day weekend, which he managed to extend by ducking out of classes Wednesday and Monday. He was happy to spend the time in Abu Dhabi fooling around by the pool with his wife. The hotel restaurant would be perfectly happy to cater a turkey dinner for them, as well as the rest of the Americans.

It would all be great, except that Bud was starting to spend all of her time in the communications center freaking out about not being able to find her Baby.

They knew Red had finished setting everything up. Now it was just a matter of sneaking into Abu Dhabi, and signaling the angels to start the raid at the appropriate time. At the last minute, though, Red's communications went down. They didn't even know if she was on her way.

Red was off the grid. Everything had been peachy keen when they'd shut down the comm center in Turkey, and headed for the nearest international airport. By the time they'd set it up again in Abu Dhabi – no Red!

Bud had tried email and texting to no avail. She even tried calling Red's sat phone number – a serious no-no if they were to avoid blowing her cover.



Nothing.

They couldn't even find a signal from the microchip in Red's shoulder!

Of course, they didn't really expect to find the microchip. It was just a short-range unit. If Red was on her way, it would be stuck out in the desert hundreds of miles from anywhere. They had managed to keep tabs on it, but only through Red's sat phone. If that was out, everything was out.

Bud tried calling and texting Dave's and Frank's sat phones, too.

Nothing!

Of course, Bud complained to Doc about the communications breakdown. He wasn't any happier about his wife disappearing than Bud was. He didn't even have the luxury of complaining to someone else.

Well, he could pester the CIA to try to find her. They said they'd try, but what could *they* do? Off the grid is off the grid!

Nearly in despair, everyone could only follow through with their parts of the operation. They could only hope that by some miracle Red would suddenly pop back up. At least, they could do their parts to make the operation successful. If the worst came to worse, Red deserved to be remembered for stopping the terrorist plot.

Muhammad Akhbar explained what was going on to Fatima's team. He said that she had left early to work her way stealthily to Abu Dhabi. The technicians driving to Baghdad were staying in Daesh territory, and the engineers weren't going anywhere, so none of them had the kind of travel difficulties Fatima faced. Akhbar explained that she needed the extra time to make sure she got on station soon enough.

Fatima had left Suleiman in charge of operations in Syria, Coltrane said. Everything was set. All the angels had been programmed. Everyone knew their jobs. All that was left for Fatima to do was to make the radio call to start the raid, which she had to do from Abu Dhabi. So, she'd gone to Abu Dhabi by car with Dave and Frank.

That was what Akhbar told the team.

It was not exactly what was happening.

Yes, Red and Dave and Frank were being smuggled to Abu Dhabi, but not in the way they'd envisioned.

Coltrane, Suleiman, and the Daesh Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had agreed among themselves on an even more spectacular way Fatima could participate in the Abu Dhabi terror raid. It would be kind of a test to prove her loyalty after the Yuri fiasco.

Red never found out whose idea it was – she suspected it originated in Suleiman’s sadistic brain – but it was Akhbar who suggested to her that the Caliph would be pleased if Fatima led the raid off by blowing herself up amidst the crowd in front of the podium. She would stand up straight, whip off her head scarf so everyone would recognize her with her flaming red hair, scream *allahu akbar*, and go POP!

What a way to disrupt the German national anthem!

It was a bizarre test that would give her a chance to once-and-for-all prove her devotion to radical Islam. She would do it in the crowd in front of the podium while the German anthem played and everyone stood around honoring the winning driver. They’d give her an explosive vest that would kill dozens of people.

Actually, the German anthem wasn’t a sure thing. There were several drivers capable of winning the race, and nobody on the ISIS side cared which one it was. Based on statistics, Fatima had predicted a German driver winning. Coltrane, on the other hand, kinda hoped it would be the Brit. He was, after all, Scottish, and thought it would be fun to see Fatima provide fireworks to accompany *God Save the Queen*. But, nobody knew for sure who would win until they crossed the finish line.

Red, of course, thought the whole thing was the worst idea possible.

“What?” Fatima screamed. “I’m not going to do that! Are you nuts? Forget it!”

Then she remembered that they *were* nuts.

Just how nutty they were was reinforced by Suleiman’s quickly explaining Plan B: Fatima could stand in the crowd flanked by two mujahideen. One would whip her scarf off for her while yelling the phrase, and the other would detonate the vest.

Since she’d already declined to cooperate, they didn’t give her a second chance. They took away all the toys she liked to keep with her – her sat phone; her computer; the cut-off-jean shorts; the tee shirts; and that damned stupid star-and-crescent pin – and chained her in the back seat of an SUV for the drive to Abu Dhabi. To make sure she didn’t try to run, they chained Dave and Frank up in the back seat of another SUV to accompany her. Of course, they took away all of Dave’s and Frank’s toys, too.

That was why communications broke down. All their gear was stuffed in a box in a closet in Tadmur, while Red, Dave and Frank were being escorted through the Arabian Desert toward Abu Dhabi.

While Fatima had failed her test of devotion, Suleiman couldn't find any problems with the raid she'd planned. He double checked with the AET to make sure she hadn't messed with the programming. They reported it was fine. *They'd* done the actual coding, and found no place where she'd subsequently changed it. They had run tests (at Fatima's insistence), which had all checked out. It all looked good to them!

Of course, they couldn't see into Red's private memory partition. They couldn't even detect its existence. If they'd really gone out of their way, they might have noticed that the angels' available memory was a bit smaller than it should have been, given the amount of physical memory installed. They didn't do that, however, because frankly, my dear, they didn't give a damn.

So, Akhbar, Suleiman, and Abu Bakr chalked Fatima's refusal of martyrdom up to her preferring not to die. They could understand that. They would have reacted the same way. They were the ones who talked whacked out mujahideen into voluntarily turning themselves into spaghetti sauce. They weren't the ones going to do it, themselves.

Just because they could understand her motivation, however, didn't mean they were going to let her get away with it.

## 45

Ali led the squad of six mujahideen smuggling Fatima, Dave and Frank to Abu Dhabi. It took three days to get there, during which neither he, nor any of his jihadists said anything to their charges. They just didn't care. They just handed them bowls of food to eat with their hands, and goatskins of water to squirt in their mouths. Whenever they stopped the SUVs for a bathroom break, they yanked chains and shoved the Americans out a few paces from the vehicles to do their business with no privacy, then shoved them back. The group didn't stop to sleep. The mujahideen took turns driving through the night.

By the time Abu Dhabi came in sight, the Americans smelled as bad as the mujahideen.

When they reached the outskirts of Abu Dhabi, they transferred the Americans to a small, stifling enclosed utility trailer set in a corner of an underground parking garage beneath an apartment building. They just gagged them to keep them quiet, tied their hands behind their backs, and their feet together so they couldn't move, then dumped them on the floor of the trailer, which they locked with a padlock.

The mujahideen visited them once a day to check their bonds and to feed and water them. They were under orders to keep them alive and reasonably healthy until the race on Sunday. They made these visits in the wee hours of the morning when activity in the parking garage dropped to nothing.

Daesh had, through a sympathetic third party, offered to solve the immediate financial problems of one of the smaller race teams in exchange for letting them park a small enclosed utility trailer behind their pit late Saturday afternoon of the race weekend.

By the Monday before the race weekend, the parking behind the pits was filled up. There were just a few empty spots left around the periphery, two of which had been marked off for "Event Security."

It took Bud over three hours to find the right desk at the Formula One Group's offices, and get the piece of paper that would get her two motor homes, twelve GSS operatives, and assorted SST people, such as Doc and Gwen, into the pit parking area. And, she still hadn't gone to the security office, yet, to find out where she was supposed to park the things.

Eve had pulled strings on her own to get an all-access press pass.

Bud was thinking it would have been easier to bring the *Mary McKenna*, Red's step father's hundred-foot yacht, over from Florida

and park it in the marina, than it was to bring these two Winnebagos in to park behind the pits. It, of course, wouldn't have been, really. In fact, it would have been impossible in the time available. But it *seemed* so.

Anyway, by five o'clock Monday evening before the race weekend, she'd jumped through all of the hoops, gotten the big box of passes, and gotten the motor homes parked in those two empty spots beside the fence. Time to go meet Doc for dinner.

Part way through his lamb kabobs, Doc told Bud: "I want you to set up all the electronic communications equipment we have in those trailers in the pits parking lot."

"Okay," Bud responded, "but we've already got it set up in the hotel. It couldn't see the satellites any better from the pit parking lot than it can from the hotel."

"Yeah, but I have a feeling," Doc said.

Bud had long ago learned to trust Doc's "feelings." She knew they weren't some fake-ESP phenomenon, but considered judgments based on subliminal analysis of all available data, and marinated in Taoist alchemy by Doc's subconscious. She was curious, though.

"Why?" she asked.

"Assuming Red's enough of a survivor to keep herself alive and get to the race circuit, the most likely place to find her is at the race circuit – where she's supposed to be next weekend. If she gets there I want to have our equipment there to find her."

"Well, we've got equipment to triangulate on her radio signal when she makes that call. We've also got equipment to locate her microchip. And, we've got a lot of warm bodies with sharp eyes to look for her visually. If she shows up Sunday, we'll find her. We'll move all that stuff to the track, and keep our eyes peeled. In the meantime, you need to get some sleep. You look like *shit!*"

He did, too. The last time he'd been separated from Red was when she was running around chasing Chinese artifacts last year. That had been for just a few days at a time, and she'd been in a lot less danger then. He and the kids had also been able to visit with her every day by video conference.

This time was worse. She'd been out of touch for weeks, and what Bud figured was even worse was that Doc, like everyone else, knew she'd been playing hide-the-salami with that psychopath. It had been part of the plan from the start, and he'd made a big show of being patient about it, but Bud could tell it really bothered him. It was not what he'd signed up for when he married Red.

Unlike Bud's arrangement with Glen, which she had insisted be explicitly an open marriage, Red had insisted that her marriage

with Doc be explicitly *unopen*. She just didn't want to share. Even when Bud crawled in between the sheets with them once in a while, Red carefully cunt blocked her from him.

Throughout the five years of their marriage, Red had never messed with another guy, and she insisted that no woman mess around with Doc.

This trip had trashed that arrangement big time!

Bud didn't really know what was going on in Doc's head, but she could tell he wasn't as nonchalant as he pretended. Being separated from Red, especially under these circumstances, was eating him up. She decided the only thing she could do was to take him back to the hotel, climb into bed with him, and try to take his mind off it for a while.

She wasn't sure she could do it, or that it would make much of a difference, but she was going to try.

So, when they got back to the hotel, she surprised him by following him into his room.

Except that it wasn't a surprise. When she tried to sneak in behind him instead of walking down the hall to her room, he held the door for her!

"Damn," she said, "I was trying to be sneaky."

He said nothing. When she moved in to hug him, he quietly folded his arms around her. He wanted someone taller and with redder hair, not black hair with a blonde racing stripe of roots that made her look like a skunk.

But, she felt awfully good, anyway.

She steered him into the bedroom, and over to the bed. When she put her hands up under his loose-fitting, untucked polo shirt, he loosened his hug so she could lift it off over his head, then pulled her back close to him in a way that told her it was okay.

She pushed him back and lifted the kaftan she was wearing off over her head. In the ninety-degree weather on the Persian (or should we say "Arabian") Gulf shore, she'd taken to wearing a kaftan as a cover over her preferred birthday-suit ensemble. It was what she wore in public in Arizona, and it was the expected dress here. So . . . .

While she did that, he unbuckled his sandals, and slipped them off.

She was quickly down to skin, and went to work on the shorts he was wearing. Then, she went back for more vertical cuddling.

She'd always loved cuddling with Doc, vertical or otherwise, ever since they'd been lovers before he married Red. She especially loved the immersive Zen way he had of kissing. Originally, she hadn't realized that it was her way of achieving satori. She had felt its power to relax her and make everything else go away. She just never realized that was satori, until Red made her understand it.

After kissing for what seemed an infinitely long time, she reached for his now-fully-erect penis, and, using it as a handle, pushed him down on the bed.

**47**

“She’s HERE!” Bud shouted, excitedly.

By the time Glen showed up Wednesday, she’d accomplished what she wanted to with Doc. He had cuddled up with her the same way he liked to cuddle up with Red, but he still missed Red. In fact, that first night Bud was surprised to realize that he’d cried himself to sleep.

That big, tough biker guy cried himself to sleep!

But, he did sleep.

After a couple of nights of decent sleep, he was back to normal. So, Bud was happy to turn her attention to Glen.

When Glen showed up, she quit cuddling with Doc because she wanted to make Glen feel welcome. And, she had done it. And, she had done it, again. And, again.

It was what she wanted to do, anyway. Doc was a great lover, but he was *Red’s* great lover. Glen was *her* great lover.

For Doc’s part, while he, too, enjoyed the passionate Zen kisses that Bud loved so much, he really would have preferred to trade Bud in his bed for Red.

Bud, however, still spent every waking moment fretting about her missing Baby. Everybody on the team was worried about Red. Thanksgiving dinner on Thursday was more somber than it should have been.

What blew Bud’s mind was that the only one who seemed upbeat about Red at that point was Doc!

“She’s going to be okay,” he assured her. “We’ll see her Saturday.”

If she didn’t know him better, Bud would have thought he was indulging in some kind of denial. With most people, she’d have thought his ebullience was just wishful thinking. Wishful thinking, however, was not what she was used to seeing from Doc. He usually kept a clear head about situations.

At the same time, he had an uncanny knack for being right about the most absurd things. She hoped he’d be proved right again.

She was still worried, though, and Doc’s apparent belief in a rosy future made her redouble her efforts to find Red.



As Doc had predicted, it paid off Saturday afternoon.

Doc and Glen were sitting out under the awning attached to the motor home's side. They'd pulled out folding deck chairs and were sipping cold drinks while watching people run back and forth between the pits and the trailers. It was never clear what all the excitement was, since Doc and Glen weren't really part of it. The activity all had to do with qualifying for the race, and they weren't here for the race. They were on the sidelines – actually more like “back lines” – while race-team support people ran back and forth on unspecified errands.

The excitement was still palpable, though, and Doc and Glen were having fun watching.

People watching has always been a great spectator sport!

Arguably, it is the greatest of *all* spectator sports.

After shouting “She's HERE!” to nobody in particular in the motor home, Bud jumped up and ran to the door to tell Doc and Glen.

She tripped and almost took a dive out of the door in her excitement. She just caught herself by the door handle as she fell off the last step.

“She's HERE!” Bud shouted again, this time right in Doc's face.

“Where?” he calmly asked.

“You're insufferable,” she scolded, “I thought you'd be jumping up and down with excitement.”

Then, she saw his broad grin, which was on the verge of breaking out into a laugh.

“She's ... Right ... THERE!” Bud shouted, excitedly pointing at the little enclosed utility trailer that two dark, bearded men in middle-eastern garb had just parked behind the second GSS motor home.

Doc grabbed her hand, and pushed it down, his smile turning into a warning scowl.

“Don't take notice,” he warned her.

Luckily, the two men had already unhooked the trailer from the SUV they'd used as a tow vehicle, and driven off.

“But, she's right there!” Bud whispered excitedly.

“We’re not out of the woods, yet,” Doc confided. “I figured they’d show up here this afternoon. Actually, I thought we’d have more trouble finding her. I didn’t think they’d park her prison right behind our motor homes!”

“Her prison?”

“Yeah, I finally figured out that the only reason for her to drop off the map like that was if Coltrane and Company had decided to make her a martyr to punch up the news coverage of their terrorist raid. She wouldn’t agree to that, so they’d force her. They would take away her sat phone so she couldn’t call for help, which is why she dropped off the grid. Then, they’d have to bring her here.”

So, Bud’s campaign to get Doc rested and relaxed had paid off. He’d been able to calmly figure all this out. She was pleased with herself.

“To keep her quiet and safe,” he continued, “they’d truss her up like a Christmas Turkey, and throw her in some closet somewhere, but they’d have to get her here for her show tomorrow. The easiest way to do that without arousing suspicion would be to shove her into some box, and park it behind the pits. That’s her box – on wheels.

“Tomorrow, they’ll take her out, give her a nice new dress to wear over her explosive vest, and lead her through that door right there out into the crowd. They’ll probably send a couple of mujahideen to make sure she stands where they tell her, and then pop her vest for her. They probably have Dave and Frank around here, too, under guard to make sure she doesn’t cause trouble.”

“We’ve got to get her out!”

“We’ve got to NOT get her out,” Doc insisted. “If we get her out now, they’ll know the jig is up. I don’t know what they’ll do, but it won’t be to blithely follow her plan with regard to the angels. It’ll make a mess of the whole operation.”

“That’s HORRIBLE!” Bud scolded. “She’s in that hot, smelly rolling dungeon tied up in some uncomfortable position. We can’t just leave her.”

“We aren’t going to just leave her,” Doc explained. “We’re going to carefully get her out, take care of her, then put her back before the bad guys come to get her tomorrow. Then, they can take her out themselves, and complete *their* plan, which has already been modified according to *her* plan. ... Manny!”

“Yes, Boss?” Manny replied from the motor home door.

“Go talk to Event Security and find out the make, model and plate number of the SUV that towed in that trailer. Also, find out who they claim they are. They have to have some connection to one of the teams here, or they’d never get into this lot. We want to know

the minute – and I do mean the *minute* – they come back. Bud will get Red, Dave and Frank out as soon as we're sure the bad guys're not coming right back. They can spend the night in the motor homes, and go back into that trailer as soon as the bad guys come back for them tomorrow. We'll know when they pass the security gate."

Turning to Bud, he asked: "Does that suit you?"

She reached up to hug him joyously, and said: "Thank you."

**48**

When Manny got back with the information, Doc and Bud assigned a lookout detail to watch the gate guarding the entry to the pit parking lot. Four GSS operatives would take turns skulking around the guard shack watching for the SUV. When it showed up, they were to call the GSS comm center to warn Red, Dave and Frank to get their fluffy little tails back into the utility trailer.

Doc inconsiderately parked his rental vehicle blocking the aisle that the mujahideen would have to drive down to reach their utility trailer. The time it would take for them to find the owner of the offending vehicle and get it moved would give Red plenty of time to get trussed back up in her dungeon before the bad guys got there.

Then, with all their arrangements in place, Manny picked the padlock on the utility trailer so they could get the prisoners out.

Red wasn't sure who she wanted to hug first, so she hugged everybody.

The three prisoners first walked around to restore circulation in their cramped limbs. Then, they took turns showering in the motor homes. Finally, Manny, Doc, and Bud escorted them to the nearest Red Crescent clinic for medical checkups.

The med techs clucked disapprovingly over what somebody had done to cause the bruising they saw on these three unfortunates, and why weren't they eating and drinking properly? The three seemed to be in good spirits, however, and laughingly said that the med techs didn't want to know what had happened. Nobody cared what the techs wrote in their reports, as long as they didn't kick up too much of a fuss. In the end, Red, Dave and Frank escaped from the clinic reasonably quickly, and with reasonably clean bills of health.

They went back to the motor homes, ate and drank their fill, then went emphatically to sleep.

"Get 'em back! Get 'em back!" Bud shrieked in the middle of Sunday afternoon. She'd just gotten word from the lookout that the mujahideen were coming through the gate in their SUV. Doc took a long way around so that he could show up unexpectedly to move his rental car after he got word that the prisoners had been put back in place.

Three GSS operatives tied the prisoners up and gagged them. Then Bud checked them over, comparing their bonds against the notes she'd made before untying them the day before. She was thankful that Doc had insisted on her making careful notes of exactly how they'd been tied up, so it would look like they'd never been freed at all. She realized that she'd been too excited about untying them to think of taking those notes on her own.

When Bud was satisfied, she called Doc to let the mujahideen through.

“Sorry,” Doc said, slipping from his hiding place between two race-team trailers, and apologizing to all those people milling around his rental car, angrily trying to find its owner.

“I didn’t expect to be that long when I parked here.”

The mujahideen looked like they couldn’t decide whether to bluster in anger, or run and hide before they got caught. Luckily, the onlookers – who were mostly GSS operatives – had been talking to them the whole time. They had alternately cajoled them and inflamed them to keep them at a fever pitch so they couldn’t think too much, but not upset enough to bolt and run.

With a sheepish grin, Doc got into the rental car, waved and drove off.

The mujahideen got back into their SUV, and drove down the aisle to the enclosed utility trailer containing their prisoners.

They were worried that somebody might catch a glimpse of the prisoners in the utility trailer when they opened its door. It would be just a few seconds, but that’s all it took for somebody to see them. Their plan was to go inside and wait with their charges until the race was over.

They brought a little portable television to keep tabs on progress of the race. At the appropriate time – exactly when the network went to a commercial break between the end of the race and the start of the podium ceremony – they would have Fatima make the radio call to the angels initiating the raid. That would give just enough time for the angels to fly to the circuit from their holding pattern over the Gulf, and start their strafing runs.

Then, they’d escort Fatima through that side door to station her in the thickest part of the crowd in front of the podium. If everything went according to plan, they’d detonate her vest just as the angels showed up with their machine guns blazing.

The mujahideen would, of course, be blown up with her, but that was what they’d signed up for. They were going to be *martyrs*!

It was going to be GREAT!

The biggest danger to their plan was if there were people around those two big motor homes who could see into the trailer when they opened the door. Luckily, those people had all gone off somewhere. The whole aisle was deserted.

Then, they noticed that just the other side of that fence was a public area. Anyone could look through the fence and see what they were doing behind the trailer. Luckily, somebody had parked a line of big trucks blocking the view.

“Looks like they’re right on time,” Manny told Dusan, an assistant to the head of Event Security.

They were watching a wireless feed from the tiny infrared camera Manny had mounted inside the trailer last night, just over the door. The camera gave them a wide-angle view of the whole trailer’s interior. The five warm bodies inside glowed yellow-white. The three prisoners lay flat on their sides. The two mujahideen sat in corners with their knees drawn up.

“You’re sure this is safe?” Dusan asked, nervously.

He’d never worked with these people before, but had been told they were very professional. So far, they seemed to have everything under control. But, he was still nervous. Those characters in the trailer looked dangerous. They were armed and playing around with explosives. From the way they moved and what they did, and especially the callous way they ignored the tied up prisoners lying at their feet, they weren’t fooling around. They were playing for keeps.

“Their plan is to leave the two bodyguards in the trailer while they escort the woman to the podium ceremony,” Manny explained. “They have three explosive vests in the trailer along with a radio-controlled bomb. In a couple of hours, they’re going to put one of the vests on the woman and the other two on themselves. They’ll leave the bomb in the trailer to blow it up along with the two bodyguards.”

“What’s that little glowing box?” the security head asked.

“That’s a TV they brought to time their raid. That way, they’ll know right when the race ends. They’re probably watching Sunday morning cartoons right now. I just hope they don’t run their battery down before the race ends. These guys aren’t the brightest crayons in the box.”

“What if they do?”

“We’ll have to improvise. We already had to improvise by parking those trucks to screen their utility trailer from the crowd in the public area. They would have screwed up the plan right there if we hadn’t helped them out. As I said: not the brightest crayons.”

“When do they plan to use the vests?”

“They have the four charges – the three vests and the charge in the trailer – rigged to go off simultaneously from a radio detonator one of them will carry. They’ll set them off during the podium ceremony. Probably during the national anthems.”

“How can we stop that?”

Preventing those explosions was Dusan's top priority.

"Already done. We disarmed the detonators on all the explosives last night."

"What if they check and see what you've done?"

"That's why we have this video feed. If we see them checking the detonators, we'll abort the mission. We'll move in and arrest them before they can do any damage."

"And the flying robots?"

"They've already been rigged to land harmlessly on the back straight."

"What if people get onto the circuit? Will they be in danger?"

"The robots are programmed to buzz along the straight before turning around to land. That will frighten anyone who's there, and make them run out of the way. We also have a squad in place to handle any issues. Our guys will help your track marshals with crowd control. The robots won't land unless the track is clear, anyway."

"How do you know all this is going to happen?"

"That woman went in there to program the angels – the flying robots – so we can get them back safely. We verified their programming over the Internet to make sure she was able to get it done. This part of the operation is just the tail end. We're trying to get her out safely along with the flying robots."

"Why don't you just get her out, now?"

"For a number of reasons we want to let the whole operation run to completion. There are still a number of places we can abort if we have to, but it would be better to let it play out all the way."

What Manny *didn't* say was that Doc had decided he wanted just enough disruption to attract news coverage. He wanted to maximize ISIS embarrassment. He was hoping to turn the whole thing into his own anti-ISIS propaganda circus.

The door opened and Doc came in with an extra chair, and he sat down behind them to watch the monitors with them.

"Looks like everyone is in place," he said. "The angels security squad is in place with the marshals by the back straight. Bud and her rescue squad are in the forward motor home. You're here. The angels are gathering at their rendezvous. Now, we just have to enjoy

the race and wait.”

“We’re all comfortable enjoying the race, but those three are tied up on a wooden floor,” Manny pointed out.

“They volunteered,” Doc said, shrugging his shoulders. “It was all her idea in the first place.”



**49**

“Make call!” the more senior of the two mujahideen ordered Red, holding a hand-held radio near her face.

Startled awake, Red tried to orient herself.

For about the four-hundred-twenty-seventh time she mentally kicked herself for squawking when Coltrane suggested she become a martyr. If she’d engaged her brain before opening her mouth, she could have avoided an unpleasant, uncomfortable week.

What she *should* have said was: “Why Muhammad, what a wonderful idea. I’d just *love* to blow myself up all over the Abu Dhabi podium. It’s what I’ve wanted to do since I was a little girl.”

If she’d been smart, she’d have gotten to enthusiastically drive the SUV herself to the circuit, singing “Movin’ Right Along” from *The Muppet Movie* with Dave and Frank. They would have packed their explosive vests in the back cargo area themselves. She would have turned the vests over to the CIA spooks when she checked into Doc’s suite in the luxury hotel for a nice, comfortable night of perverted sex.

They would have had really great box seats for the race today, and it would have been Bud reminding her to make the radio call, not this moron.

When she’d first gotten morosely back into the trailer, she’d tried meditating to pass the time. Soon her bonds started to chafe, and her arms started to cramp. She couldn’t see the little TV screen the bad guys had brought with them. She could hear it, though. It sounded like a really crappy commercial television program in Arabic.

She decided she’d be a lot happier if she were unconscious, so she’d forced herself to go into a fitful sleep.

Sometime later, she’d awakened to tinny race-car noises coming from the TV accompanied by the deafening sounds of Formula One engines hammering their way through the utility trailer walls. After a monotonous hour of that, she resumed her fitful sleep.

Then, all had suddenly gone quiet outside. The TV started blithering some Arabic voice excitedly selling something over annoying music. Red had kept her eyes closed and pretended to herself that it was all a bad dream, but she knew better.

The rotten little bastard said it again: “Make call!”

Opening her eyes, she saw the radio hovering in front of her face. She focused on the LED display and verified that it was tuned to

the correct frequency. Then, she tried to remember the command she was supposed to use to initiate the raid.

Then she noticed the stupid fool wasn't holding down the push-to-talk switch. What'd he think this was – a cellphone call? This wasn't going to work.

She struggled ineffectually to sit up, but couldn't.

He slapped her and yelled: "Make call!"

"Untie me, you asshole," she screamed. "Give me the radio! Do you want this to work?"

Frank said something in Arabic.

The little twerp stared at him.

Frank repeated what he'd said louder. Then, he said it again, angrily.

Finally, the penny dropped. Confused thoughts played themselves out in the guy's eyes. Then, he pulled Red into a sitting position, and cut the bonds on her wrists.

Red's left arm – the one she'd been laying on – was completely asleep. It hung like a wet rag from her shoulder. Her right hand and arm worked okay, though.

She used it to grab the radio out of the guy's hand and held it to the right side of her face. Pushing the PTT switch with her thumb she said: "Angels, identify yourselves."

When she let off on the button, she heard "Good afternoon, Mistress, I am juliet alpha four two three one x-ray, Inoku."

Then the call was repeated eight more times with different tail numbers and different call signs.

Good. All the angels were present and, presumably, on station at the rendezvous point.

"Angels, initiate procedure Abu Dhabi," Red ordered.

"Yes, Mistress, we are initiating procedure Abu Dhabi," came the response from the flight leader.

Red would have to trust the angels to carry out the rest of her plan on their own.

It wasn't the first time she'd sent robots off to complete a complex mission on their own without real-time supervision, and it wouldn't be the last.

She handed the radio back to the guy who'd woken her up, and went to work using her right arm to lift her left, and wag it around to restore circulation. She hoped there wasn't any permanent damage. She *liked* her left arm, and had plans for using it in the future.

The guy cut the ropes binding her feet. Then, he threw her an explosive vest.

"Put on," he ordered.

Sitting cross-legged, she pulled the worn, dirty, travel-stained garments she'd been living in for a week off over her head. Then she saw the twerp staring at her with the lecherous grin teenaged boys use when they're looking at really nasty pictures of naked ladies.

She nearly cold cocked him. If she wanted to be stared at by perverts, she'd rather do it outside in the parking lot before God and everybody, where she could at least stand up straight, than to put on a private show for this craphead.

She picked up the explosive vest, and put it on.

He then flipped a switch to arm the vest. Then, he tossed a new kaftan and *al-amira* scarf into her lap.

Giving him an angry look, she pulled on the clean clothes.

Knowing what was supposed to come next, she tried to stand up without being told. Her left leg nearly collapsed under her when she put weight on it. She grabbed an aluminum rib supporting the fiberglass roof to keep her balance and pressed her head against the roof. Her left arm was nearly back to normal, so she used it to wave the twerp toward the door. She wanted to get out of this cramped box so she could stand up straight.

The two mujahideen cautiously opened the door and, looking around to make sure they weren't observed, stepped out onto the parking lot pavement.

Limping to the door, Red cautiously maneuvered herself to the threshold and, holding onto the door frame, gingerly stepped down to the pavement.

It was burning hot.

Grimacing, she quickly limped to the shade of the awning by the second GSS motor home. Seeing a pair of flip flops Bud had carefully forgotten for her by a folding deck chair, Red limped over to them and slipped her toes into them.

It looked like one of the mujahideen was going to object to her stealing them. She gave him an angry look and flipped him the finger. He thought it better to forget his objection. He had a knife at his belt to enforce his will, but she was a foot taller than he and considerably stronger and more agile. He was, quite frankly, scared to death of her.

**50**

That morning, Red had scouted the route they would need to take from the parking lot to the crowd in front of the podium, so she knew better than her “captors” what they needed to do. She was also in a foul mood, and just wanted this all to be over with. More than anything else, she wanted to sit at a cafe table with Doc, and Bud, and Glen, and slurp a strawberry milkshake through a straw. To Hell with all this fucking crap!

Still limping, she headed toward the side door that would take her through the pit building to the podium. Looking back, she irascibly beckoned with her right arm for them to follow her. The confused mujahideen followed her through the door, and along the empty corridor.

They were startled when two men in yellow coveralls entered behind them. But, the men seemed to be ignoring them. Perhaps they worked for one of the teams, and were headed for the podium ceremony, too. They hurried to catch up with Red, who had already reached the door at other end of the corridor.

Exiting the building, Red started to make her way through the crowd already gathered there.

A startled sportscaster carrying a microphone recognized her. He’d met her at other Grand Prix events and always found her a friendly, patient interviewee, who always had something interesting to say. Knowing the public story of what had been going on in her life, he jumped at the chance to get an exclusive interview.

“Dr. McKenna,” he said, accosting her with his microphone, “could I have a few words with you.”

“No!” Red said sharply. “Get away. You have the wrong person.”

Dismayed, he tried again.

“But, ...”

“Get the Hell away from me!” Red shouted, pushing him, then walking rapidly off.

“I guess not,” he said into the camera that had recorded the whole exchange. “Let’s see who else is around.”

Five hundred feet overhead, Mariko was lining up with the Abu Dhabi circuit's main straight. Vidal had taken Fatima's advice and chosen her to be Red Group leader. As such, she would be the first in the formation to make her strafing run, although the others would be only seconds behind.

Fatima had chosen Mariko to be the formation leader to preserve the star network topology that had been established in the hangar. The angels were interchangeable, but once a network is set up the simplest idea is to keep the setup. *Somebody* had to be group leader. Might as well use the one who'd already been acting as group leader.

Mariko was thus Red Group leader, followed by Shika and Chiasa as her wing men. On the left Kiyoko was Blue Group leader with Hoshi and Etsuko as her wing men. To the right, the Green Group consisted of Sumiko followed by Ume and Reiko.

At a range of one thousand meters, Mariko turned on her high-magnification gun sight.

There was something wrong. Instead of flat, static pavement as she remembered from her simulation, the main straight was alive with movement. At five hundred meters, she could see people's faces in her gun sight!

"Angels, abort!" Mariko called out over the common hailing frequency.

"Abort" was the flying-robot equivalent of the usual "stop" command. Fixed-wing aircraft in flight cannot just stop. It's impossible. They don't have any way to stop in mid flight, and they'd drop like stones if they did. The abort command told them to cease execution of any other commands, and to assume straight and level flight at an altitude of five hundred feet AGL (above ground level).

As soon as she saw people crowding the target area, Mariko had quickly made a function call to her supervisory security system. That triggered a Conscience subroutine which ordered her to issue the abort command and check for an alternative to the command she had been running at the time of the alert. She found one in the Mistress' private memory partition called "AB alternate."

"Angels," Mariko called over the hailing frequency, "execute AB alternate."

The angels began climbing to one thousand feet AGL while reforming into a single file behind Mariko. She passed over the West Grandstand while still climbing. Two-hundred-fifty meters beyond the West Grandstand, she banked hard left over a salt marsh, and began reducing power.

She continued south-southwest paralleling the back straight while reducing speed to minimum control speed.

"Angels, buzz runway," Mariko ordered.

The “runway” for the angels was the nearly mile long back straight.

Red’s plan was to have them buzz the entire length of the runway at twenty five feet AGL to scare anyone away from the racing surface who had wandered out there after the race. A jet aircraft passing twenty five feet away is terrifying. After being buzzed, anyone in the way will run for cover when they see the angels lining up for a landing.

Instead of slowing to landing speed, Mariko stayed at minimum control speed, and banked gradually to turn ninety degrees left for the base leg of a landing pattern. As she approached where the runway center line would be if extended that far, she banked even more gradually left again to line up with the runway. As she buzzed the racing surface – followed by the rest of the angels one by one – several people who were out there bolted for the sidelines.

After buzzing the runway, Mariko climbed to twelve hundred feet AGL and banked left again. She was turning for the downwind leg of a standard left traffic pattern. It took several minutes to pass parallel to the runway and extend out before making her base turn again. As she made her final turn to line up with the runway, she saw one person still standing, petrified, in the middle of the runway. Suddenly, a man in yellow coveralls ran from the sidelines, tackled the petrified person, and carried them across to the sidelines on the other side.

Seeing that the whole runway was now clear, Mariko called “Angels, land” over the radio.

Dropping her speed gradually as she approached the runway threshold at Turn Eight of the racing circuit, Mariko extended her landing gear. She heard her main-gear tires squeak when they touched the pavement, then the squeak of her forward gear a fraction of a second later. Gradually braking to taxiing speed, she continued to the end of the runway, pulled to the right side of the track, and stopped.

One by one, the other angels followed her, lining up nose-to-tail behind her. That cleared the left side of the track for the angels to turn around and take off later.

At a signal from the GSS squad leader, ten men – six GSS operatives and four track marshals – brought out stanchions and yellow tape to keep curious onlookers away from the angels.

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Red looked over the sea of heads for someone she recognized. She was looking for the four GSS operatives Bud said she was stationing before the podium. She'd also promised that she'd get Dave and Frank out of the trailer as soon as Red was out of the way.

Seeing the four GSS operatives – who were dressed in yellow SST coveralls, which at least fit in with what the race-team people were wearing – Red headed straight for them. The mujahideen struggled to keep up.

Reaching her friends, Red stood among them, and let them quietly surround her and the mujahideen. The two who had followed them from the corridor quietly closed the ring from behind. There were now six GSS operatives in SST coveralls surrounding Red and the two mujahideen. They started pushing the crowd back away from the suicide vests.

The crowd started cheering as the announcer introduced the three top finishers. Then, dignitaries presented the trophies. At long last, the strains of the German national anthem rang out from the public address system.

That was the signal for the more junior of Red's two mujahideen to whip off her head scarf, which he did. The more senior of the pair was supposed to yell, but he hesitated, suddenly feeling shy in front of this huge audience of very competent professional looking people. He felt totally outclassed.

Then, he found his courage. Lifting the detonator button high in the air he started to shout "*Allahu akbar!*" but never got a sound out. Three pairs of hands grabbed at his shoulders and pushed him to the ground. Desperately, he tried stabbing at the "detonate" button, but nothing happened. He kept pressing it again and again to no avail.

Three more pairs of hands mobbed his compatriot on the other side of Red.

Dave appeared out of the crowd, tore the front of Red's kaftan open, and started ripping off her explosive vest.

"Hey," she shouted pulling the sides of her kaftan back together. "Not in front of six-hundred million people! Actually, leave it on for now. We'll be doing some interviews later, and it would be a good prop."

Meanwhile, on the podium nobody had noticed any disruption. With all the noise from the loudspeakers, nobody noticed the sound of nine small jet aircraft passing at five hundred feet overhead, either. That was the way Red wanted it.

"Guys," she assumed her role as Chief Executive Officer of Gulf States Security, "get these clowns out of here as quickly and quietly as possible. Hold them at the motor homes until either Event Security or the Abu Dhabi cops come to get them. I'll get this



vest off later. It's okay. It's been defused. Have the angels landed, yet?

"Manny says they're all down and secure, and nobody was hurt." Bud said, muscling her way through the crowd.

She'd followed Dave out after freeing him and Frank. Dave had literally sprinted from the pit parking lot to the podium.

"Okay," Red said, relaxing, I want to see the podium interviews."

As a standard part of the show, a celebrity was asked to interview each of the top three finishers separately on the podium. That was followed by opening and spraying of champagne (but in Muslim countries they used sparkling cider instead). It was a fun part of the ceremony that Red always liked watching. This was the first time she'd be right in front of the podium, and likely to get doused with "champagne." She'd been forced to miss everything else. She didn't want to miss this!

As the crowd around the podium started to disperse, Red spotted the sportscaster she'd snubbed before. Waving to him over the crowd she shouted: "Bill! Over here."

Getting his attention, she approached and apologized: "I'm sorry for snubbing you earlier. I was afraid of what those jihadists would do. They were armed to the teeth and freaky dangerous. Please forgive me. I'd love to talk with you now, if you still want to."

"Sure, but at this point I'm not sure what to ask you," he responded, laughing. "What is this all about?"

"We've just stopped an attempted terrorist attack on the Grand Prix by Islamic State."

Bill's face fell. Concerned, he asked: "Was anyone hurt?"

"In dignity only," Red said. "We're hoping we've embarrassed the Hel ... heck ... out of Islamic terrorists the World over. We've been working on this since the cruise-ship attack by a combat UAV last spring."

"Who is involved in the investigation?"

"Let me get this thing off," Red said, starting to wiggle out of her explosive vest under her ripped kaftan in front of the camera.

Bill was surprised, then dismayed to see what she was doing.

"But, unh, ... wait."

Seeing his discomfort, Red assured him: “It’s okay. I know how to do this. In fact, most women who’ve ever worn a bra know how to take a vest off without taking off their shirt.”

She was having fun showing off her expertise.

“There,” Red said, dropping her explosive vest to the ground below her kaftan, then picking it up.

“I’ll bet you’ve never seen one of these up close,” Red said to Bill, displaying the vest for the camera before handing it to Bud, who was still standing by.

Seeing the frightened look on Bill’s face, Red said: “It’s perfectly safe. My friends disarmed it last night. We wouldn’t let anything like this into a crowd of people unless we made it perfectly safe, first.”

“But the terrorists ...”

“They didn’t know we’d already disarmed them. This operation has netted a *ton* of information, and nobody got hurt. That’s unusually successful.”

“Well, ... almost nobody got hurt,” Bud averred.

“What do you mean,” Red asked.

“You didn’t know, but we caught four jihadists trying to commit a gang rape in a refugee camp in Turkey. They’re dead now.”

“Dr. Thompson has issues with rapists,” Red told Bill, laughing.

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Bill looked confused. Red was an interesting interviewee because she was comfortable speaking extemporaneously, but this time the interview was getting out of his control. He wasn't sure how to get it back.

Red helped him out: "You asked who was involved in the investigation. My husband, Dr. Manchek, will probably hold a press conference later and explain in greater detail. For now, let's just say that in the United States there was cooperation between the NSA, CIA, FBI and Homeland Security. My company, Gulf States Security, took point on this last phase of the operation."

Here Bud jumped in: "GSS has expertise in undercover operations."

"I'm sorry, you are?" Bill asked her, confused.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Bud apologized. "I'm Dr. Cheryl Thompson, Special Operations Manager at Gulf States Security. I led the support team while Red – Dr. McKenna – and her team infiltrated the Islamic State group who were responsible for stealing the combat UAVs, and using them for terrorist attacks."

"Is that a new kind of threat we can expect to see from ISIS?"

"It *was* a new threat," Red explained. "Luckily, we were able to find a way to neutralize it quickly. It will take a while to explain the details – it's very technical – but we believe we've made it difficult or impossible for terrorists to make use of robotic systems of this type. I'm really not prepared to go into it in more detail at this time."

"The operation," Bud explained, "began in England, where Dr. McKenna, posing as a radicalized convert to Islam, made contact with human smugglers bringing prospective jihadists to Syria for training as terrorists."

"We had traced the UAVs to an ISIS terrorist group headquartered in Palmyra, Syria," Red continued. "We had developed a software patch that rendered the UAVs harmless."

"Is that the Conscience virus I've heard about?" Bill wanted to know.

"Yes."

"How does that work?"

“Again, the details are quite technical, and I’m not prepared to explain it right now, but it causes automated systems to try to avoid injuring humans.”

“You mean like self driving cars that watch out for pedestrians?”

“Exactly, although that’s a major feature of *every* self-driving car system. Conscience works on more general platforms that we wouldn’t normally expect to pose a danger to humans, but could under some circumstances.”

“Like terrorists stealing UAVs?” Bill asked.

“Like UAVs, machine tools, metal stamping presses, and so forth. All can become dangerous to humans accidentally, or can be subverted by terrorists. Conscience makes the robot responsible for human safety when other safeguards are missing. It’s kind of a last line of defense.”

Remembering what he was here for in the first place, Bill asked: “What has all this got to do with Formula One?”

“Practically nothing,” Red explained, “except that Formula One, like any high-profile sporting event, provides an ideal target for terrorist raids. The crowds are large, and the television audience is immense.”

“So, we have to worry about being a terrorist target?”

“Of course, you’re a terrorist target,” Bud jumped in again. “*Everyone* is a terrorist target. That’s the nature of terrorism.”

“Formula One is inviting,” Red explained, “because of its large media footprint. Formula One Group, on the other hand, is especially good at controlling its venues. The sport has always been seen as inherently dangerous, and the promoters are extremely safety conscious. Because of their efforts, a Formula One event, unlike, say, a rock concert, is a very hard target for terrorists to attack.”

“ISIS underestimated the difficulty of attacking a Formula One event,” Red explained. “They were tempted by the size of the audience, but weren’t able to pull off a successful raid.”

“But, they nearly succeeded,” Bill objected.

“No,” Red replied, “they didn’t even come close. We had the situation under control the whole way. We worked hard to lead them on while we gathered information. It looked – especially to them – like they were succeeding, but they weren’t.”

“Well for a while there, I was really worried about *you*,” Bud pointed out. “*You* were in a lot of danger.”

“Several GSS operatives were in danger from time to time, even you, but the *public* was never in danger.”

**53**

Several months later, Doc was enjoying the cool morning air in the shade under the wide overhang on the patio next to the pool beside Red's ranch house in Scottsdale. He was lingering long over coffee and his *Wall Street Journal* newspaper after breakfast. Maryanne and the kids had started school lessons away over there by the other end of the pool. Sam was finishing clearing away the breakfast dishes.

Doc looked up from his newspaper to watch Maryanne and the kids with a contented, pleased smile. It was times like these that made all the work and struggle worthwhile.

Checking his watch, with its ornate gold watchband, he saw he still had time to relax before heading off to work. It would still be cool enough so he'd need his leather jacket for the motorcycle ride across town to his office at SST. It would be warm enough, however, to make wearing a helmet uncomfortable. He'd need neither on the way home. It would reach the nineties when the day warmed up.

Where was Red? They usually rode to work together, but if she didn't get her butt in gear, he'd leave without her. She could just catch up later.

He sighed, and went back to reading the newspaper.

His attention was caught by the sound of a sliding glass door opening.

Red burst through wearing nothing but an unbuttoned lemon-yellow blouse, and carrying a pen-shaped object horizontally. The nudity-in-front-of-the-kids rule she'd agreed to when Mike and Judy were too young to understand the difference between "public" and "private" was starting to fade away. The older kids were old enough, and Elise would take her cues from them. Besides, Red didn't want them growing up thinking their bodies were anything to be ashamed of. To her, clothes were a matter of protection from the elements and to accommodate the prejudices of the unenlightened public. She wasn't actually nude, anyway. She had on a shirt!

Her feet slapped noisily as she ran over to Doc, alternately looking at the object she was holding, and up at his face. The wide, joyful grin on her face would have made it impossible to speak quietly, so it was good that she wanted to shout: "It worked! I'm pregnant!"

Her first stop after getting back from the Middle East had been a visit to Dr. Blum's office to have her tubal ligation reversed. After a few weeks to let her insides mend, they'd started having sex using condoms. After three months, Dr. Blum did some tests, then

pronounced her fully functional again.

That's when she decided she wanted to have another baby *right now* to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that she could.

"I'm going to call him Alan," she announced.

"You can't know it's a boy for sure, yet," Doc scoffed.

"Yes I can," she insisted.

Irrationally, she'd always announced the sex of her children long before anybody thought it possible to know. In spectacular fashion, she'd always been proved right, too. But, she'd never announced it this early. We're talking *days*, here.

"It's pretty early for that," Doc warned. "What if you're wrong."

"Then we'll call her 'Alana,' but I'm not wrong."

By this time, she'd taken up position sitting on his lap and crushing the newspaper he still held spread out in his hands. It ended up folded backward against his chest.

"Wait a minute *Dr. Manchek*," he said smiling wryly and extricating the newspaper to toss it onto the table. "You're supposed to be a down-to-Earth, rational applied mathematician. You're not supposed to be into witchcraft and wizardry."

"I'm a down-to-Earth applied mathematician who thoroughly understands chaos," she claimed. "There's a lot out there you physicists don't know anything about."

With a look of mock disappointment, he stage whined: "No clockwork Universe?"

*As* a physicist, he had a soft spot for the comfort that belief in Newton's predictable clockwork Universe had afforded people in earlier times. Too bad it wasn't real.

Laughing, she said: "No clockwork Universe, and you know it."

She even slapped him lightly on the cheek.

"Besides," she pointed out, "chaos provides the freedom that makes it all fun!"

Then, she pulled him close and rested her forehead on his.

