

What Goes Around

A novel by Tim Stryker

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Preliminary copy — your feedback is requested

Chapter 1

Javier Rojas never wasted any time on small talk. "Get your ass down here, Irvine."

It was 1 AM. I had been weaving my way through a drunken crowd toward a young lady of voluptuous proportions who seemed to recede into the distance as I approached. Her lips were parted, her eyes beckoning as I worked my way steadily through the human obstacle course. Then a fire alarm had sounded, with a grating, repetitive insistency that gradually resolved itself into the ringing of my bedside telephone.

Even as I held the phone to my ear, my groggy brain tried to work Javier into the dream, dismissing him as just another drunken reveler, but it was no use. Melissa was sitting up in bed beside me, her eyes wide.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Right," I told the handset, which was already dead. "Fucking Rojas," I told Melissa.

She groaned, sighed, flopped back down on her pillow, turned away from me and pulled the blankets back up over her shapely shoulders. She understood what this meant — I would be away for some unspecified duration. This wasn't the first time that Javier had disturbed our domestic bliss in this way, and it wouldn't be the last. Still, he never called unless it was important.

I heaved my feet onto the cold tile floor of our Georgetown penthouse, padded downstairs to the kitchen, and smacked Mr. Coffee into reluctant operation. Then I got dressed as quickly and warmly as possible in anticipation of the November chill outside, kissed the foreheads of our slumbering kids, and gulped down a pint or so of Mr. Coffee's scalding Colombian directly from the pot. The hiss of his drips on the bare hotplate seemed to express my entire family's opinion of the situation. Then I extricated myself from the house as quietly as my 12-cylinder Jag would permit and headed across Chain Bridge for

CIA headquarters at Langley. My line of work had its compensations, but these midnight rendezvous weren't among them.

Chapter 2

"Wacko alert," said Javier. He tossed an ARPANET printout onto my desk as I entered, a disgusted expression on his face. ARPANET was the military ancestor of the Internet. Although outdated, it still hosted a lot of traffic between government agencies and their civilian counterparts. The problem was, it lacked certain security features of the Company's more modern networks, so it was often the target of hackers and other less-than-benign joyriders in cyberspace.

I picked up the printout on my way to one of the sludge emitters they called coffee machines at the operations center. Scanning it, I began to see why Javier was so upset.

"Fuck the System," it announced, by way of introduction. "A viral plague has infected Gaia, otherwise known as Spaceship Earth. The name of the virus is Humanity. Unless brought under control, the death of its host is imminent, geologically speaking. Therefore the Immune Response Ecosystem will shortly kick into high gear. Symptoms expected are Fever, Headache, Vomiting, and abnormally high levels of dead viral matter in the eliminatory tracts." It went on in this vein at some length.

A fat suit I hadn't met before came up beside Javier, glared at me, and spoke. "What does this mean?"

I glanced at Javier. His trim, fit physique and natural Hispanic tan contrasted sharply with that of the newcomer, whose florid jowls quivered in what he probably considered righteous indignation. Javier nodded at me almost imperceptibly.

I said, "It's the ravings of some ecoterrorist-wannabe on the net, I guess." I checked the message header. It had originated at an anonymous remailer site in Finland. "Loony toons on the Internet can generate this kind of stuff through remailers very easily without being traced. Routing it through bridges to ARPANET is a joke. What's the big deal?"

Javier started to respond, but the suit interrupted him. "What does this term 'Gaia' refer to?"

I grimaced, but Javier gazed at me impassively, his code for steady-as-she-goes. I said, "It's the name of an ancient Greek Earth mother-goddess, popularized in the seventies by the British chemist James Lovelock. Lovelock postulated that the entire planetary ecosystem is a single organism which adjusts its flows of energy, inorganic matter, and biomass in a quasi-metaphysical way to optimize the

harmony of all. According to the Gaia hypothesis, what we regard as 'natural disasters' such as hurricanes, volcanoes, droughts, plagues, and even the extinction of certain species are simply side effects of the planet's natural metabolism. The idea is that it purges itself of instabilities of various kinds so as to yield a stable global balance of life in the long term."

"It says here, 'The name of the virus is Humanity.' What does that mean?"

"The guy is drawing an analogy between the human population explosion and the way that virulent germs multiply out of control in a host organism. He's implying that the Earth has a potentially fatal disease, brought on by an excess of humans. And, he's saying that he plans to do something about it."

The suit turned to Javier. "Authentication?"

Javier looked grim. "Code 409."

New beads of perspiration broke out on the suit's fleshy forehead. He began muttering. "Okay, shit. Quarantine this intelligence. Need-to-know only. Find the source. Authorization alpha. Jesus." He turned and walked away.

I still didn't get it. Crap like this circulated on the Internet all the time, and sometimes it got through to ARPA. But if Javier sat still for a grilling from a corpulent goon like this guy, it had to be serious. I viewed him expectantly.

Javier said, "That gentleman is in charge of certain biohazard facilities maintained by the National Security Agency. Black projects, you understand? Off-budget. They use a newly hardened section of ARPANET. The message in your hands turned up in his personal e-mail box. Its address is supposed to be accessible to only about twenty-five people."

"So? Loons write hate mail to the NSA all the time. Maybe somebody got lucky guessing a classified domain name, or spammed an address range until one got through. Has anybody checked for bouncebacks?"

There's no way to talk about this stuff without using buzzwords. "Spamming" is a technique used by lower life forms to broadcast mass mailings of unsolicited messages to net addresses which may or may not exist, and "bouncebacks" are the equivalent of "return to sender, addressee unknown."

Javier frowned. "There were no bouncebacks. And nobody got lucky — I told you, his domain isn't just classified, it's hardened. There's a firewall there that even people like you don't know about yet. Somebody penetrated it."

I considered the implications of this. "Okay, I'll get on it. Still, why the grim looks? And what's Code 409?"

Javier hesitated, which is rare for him. He was gauging how much I needed to know, and I thought I already knew quite a lot. Turns out I didn't know what he said next.

"Steve, they're very confident of the security in that hardened section of ARPANET. They route commands to the actual biohazard handling facilities through it. It's all done remotely, in some cases on other continents. Someone with the proper command codes on that network could meddle with the genetic engineering underway, even trigger the release of active agents."

"No shit." I was silent for a few moments. "And what do our fine National Security Agency friends cook up in these remotely operated laboratories, which they don't even want on U.S. soil? Super-flu? Ebola Zaire?"

Again there was that hesitation. Then: "DP."

We spooks love having acronyms for everything, but "DP" stood for data processing in my book, and that clearly didn't fit in this context. I thrust my chin out impatiently, indicating with my aggressively blank look that he could save time by speaking English.

I'd never seen Javier look so shaken. It was as if, by verbalizing it, he was forced to confront for the first time the enormity of what he had held compartmentalized in his mind up until that moment.

"Designer plague," he said.

Chapter 3

Designer plague is a fun new way to kill people, an outgrowth of research in genetic engineering over the last ten years or so. The idea is that, instead of just taking existing diseases like influenza or anthrax and mutating them into nastier forms, you sequence the DNA in your bugs to recognize specific DNA sequences in your target organism, or organisms. The old way, you had to worry about antidotes, supplying your own forces (and populations) with huge amounts of it, making sure that everybody that was supposed to be protected got some in time, and so forth. It was a logistical nightmare.

The new wave of covert research — all of which was illegal under international law, of course — revolved around identifying unique genetic markers in the specific person or persons you were going after, and conjuring up a disease that only they could catch. You had tremendous flexibility in designing both the specificity of the genetic markers that would trigger the disease, and the severity of the symptoms it would bring about. In principle, you could create anything from a bug that would make all members of a target race sneeze exactly three times, to a virus that would propagate untraceably across the world until one specific person got it, and then that one person would die in horrible agony within a matter of a few hours.

If the Allies had had this technology and a single follicle of Hitler's hair in 1939, World War II could have been avoided in its entirety. On the other hand, if the Nazis had had this technology in 1939, the world today would be exclusively populated by Aryans — or possibly only by the linear descendants of Dr. Mengele, or whatever other Nazi biologist had decided that he'd enjoy playing Noah to human destiny from that point forward. See, it's also possible to design a plague which kills anyone who does *not* have a specified genetic signature... such as that of its inventor and his or her immediate offspring.

Javier and I contemplated these inspiring thoughts as we regarded one another across my coffee-stained desk, there in the op center at Langley.

My office was ample, glassed-in and outfitted with every form of electronic communications medium known to mankind, as befitted a cyberspace operative of my lofty GS-level, but it was not soundproofed. Javier's was. He crooked his finger at me and we crossed the corridor to his deputy-directorial digs.

He called in several more of his high-level gophers, and explained the severity of the situation to them in general terms, omitting many of the gorier details. Then he began dictating orders in a stacatto voice.

"Jean, notify field operatives Cherub, Ex-Lax, and Stanton to bring their stations to full alert and stand by. Samuelson, execute procedure Vitamin, Joint Chiefs, Eagle-One, authorization alpha. Smith and Daniels, you've got P.R. detail, Silent Night. Coons, uncork DES decrypt and tabulate messages using every keyword in this fucking communiqué; feed me the output at fifteen-minute intervals." He motioned me to hand my copy of the ARPANET printout to Coons and barked, "Go! Irvine, you stay here."

I had only a general idea what all those coded orders meant, but it was clear that various rapid-strike forces were about to enter a state of high readiness, the President and the top Pentagon brass were going to be hermetically sealed off in some fashion, the press was about to be fed a load of bull, and a variety of supposedly unbreakable cyphers were about to be broken and their message traffic combed for words like "Gaia," "viral plague," and "Immune Response Ecosystem." This was no drill.

As Javier's troops stormed out of his office on their various missions, he came around to the front of his desk, sat on the edge of it, and motioned me to sit in one of the easy chairs nearby. He eyed me stonily for a few moments, then spoke.

"Steve, what in the hell have we got here?"

It was obviously a rhetorical question. I'd been working for the man in various assignments for the past seven years, and he'd grown to rely on my judgement. We were almost friends, in a way — as far as a CIA commander and

one of his subordinates can be friends. But his security clearance gave him access to information that I could only speculate about. His recent disclosures regarding biological warfare black-ops made that painfully clear, and I confess I was feeling a little sandbagged at that moment. Positively pissed off, in fact.

"Javier, I haven't the faintest fucking idea, as you full well know. Who authorized this DP research? How many laboratories are there? What safeguards are in place? What is this piece-of-shit 'firewall' in ARPANET, and why wasn't I informed about it? I'm supposed to be your network security advisor, in case you've forgotten, and now some high school kid has cracked this half-baked firewall I could have told you was garbage in the first place, if I'd known it existed, and you're mobilizing half of the National Guard to deal with it."

He nodded perfunctorily, as if expecting — even accepting — my outburst. He turned to his phone, mashed a button, and very nearly shouted toward the ceiling, as if annoyed with himself about something, "Weems! Security upgrade order, Steve Irvine, Omega Top Secret, on my authority, now!"

Weems could be heard over the speakerphone wheeling in his chair and punching a few keys. The beginnings of a protest began to formulate themselves in the back of his throat, but before they could reach even partial articulation, Javier shouted at the ceiling, "Code 409! Authorization alpha! Go!"

"Yessir." The clicking of Weems' keys built to a crescendo over the speakerphone. "Irvine, Steven J., Omega Top Secret, by personal authorization of Rojas, Javier S.... Confirm?"

"Do it," said Javier. He terminated the connection, pulled a jagged scrap of paper out of his jacket pocket, and extended it to me.

"Go see this guy. Learn everything you need to know. Then report back here."

Chapter 4

Professor Wambaugh was a classic bespectacled specimen of the clandestine research community, complete with olive green corduroy sport jacket with elbow patches. His 50's-ish paunch, balding pate, and the massive crow's-feet around his eyes testified to a sedentary career squinting through microscopes at things I'd rather not know about. Unfortunately, I was going to have to learn about them in some detail.

On the drive to his facilities at Fort Meade in Maryland, I'd used my scrambled cellular to alert several of my assistants. Being awakened at 3 AM for priority service was not among their favorite vocational duties, but they took it well, all things considered. I told them to scan our audit trails of network traffic to

anonymous remailer sites in Finland and elsewhere to see if the IRE communiqué could, by some miracle, be tracked to its source. The whole Internet was such a slap-happy hodgepodge of hackable kludges, there wasn't much chance of tracing anything, but the effort had to be made.

Wambaugh was hunched over a computer keyboard as the night watch officer buzzed me into his office. He bore the slightly distracted look of a man whose coffee intake over the past two hours had equalled my own. He had also been chain smoking Salem Lights over that interval, judging by the haze in the room, the overflowing ashtray beside his keyboard, and the lit stub scissored between the fingers clutching his mouse. I coughed, not entirely out of politeness, and he looked up.

"Mr. Irvine, I presume," he smiled, blinking vacantly. I nodded and sat down. Javier had apparently alerted him to expect me.

"There's a bit of a problem," he ventured to say. "Would you like....?" He gestured around the room indefinitely, as if to offer me coffee, cigarettes, information, or command of the situation, as I saw fit. I picked the latter.

"Tell me everything you know about the 409 program, the 'hardened' ARPANET sector, and the nature of the threat in progress," I said, a little more harshly than necessary. I was still smarting from the awareness that this had all been taking place under my nose without my knowledge.

He seemed mildly taken aback, but his vacant smile remained in place. "Um, that might be a bit much to cover in one sitting," he said. "Perhaps you would....?" Again, the helpless gesture, both palms up. His cigarette was down to the filter and in danger of burning the web of skin between his index and middle fingers, but he didn't seem to notice.

Okay, I was going to have to conduct this almost like an interrogation, I realized. "Who authorized the 409 program?"

"Um, it's some sort of DARPA initiative, I suppose," he said. "I don't get involved much in the politics...."

Okay, an interrogation of a hostile witness, to boot. "Who is your commanding officer?" DARPA is the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, and is controlled by the Pentagon, not the NSA. Was this guy as clueless as he seemed, or was it just a front?

The vacant smile faded, was replaced with a worried expression. "My work is off-budget, I know, but my understanding is that it's authorized at the highest levels. I've been told that to develop tailorable micro-organisms with a flexible set of vectoring, target recognition, and symptometric characteristics is in the national interest. My instructions don't really come from anyplace in particular — I just receive suggestions and guidance in the form of papers and e-mail from time to

time. The people who send them to me don't identify themselves, and I don't really have a 'commanding officer' that I'm aware of.... Does that help to answer your question?"

If it was an act, it was a good one. I wondered how many more idiot-savant refugees from academia had been recruited, blindly working to make the world safe for "tailorable micro-organisms" and their controllers. I decided to take a different tack.

"How many of these Code-409 research facilities are there, and where are they? How do you communicate between them?"

The absent-minded smile was back. "Oh, goodness, there must be dozens of them. Let me see... Stockholm, Zambia, Caracas, Taichung... they're all over the place," he related, happily. "We do most of the theoretical work here at Fort Meade, then use remote manipulators to conduct the actual experiments. They're sealed containment units overseas, of course," he added, as if this went without saying. "The consequences of accidental biotoxin release would be devastating."

"Sort of like Bhopal, you mean, Professor?"

"Yes, exactly," he said, his expression caught somewhere between beaming at a prize pupil and concern that he'd broken a confidence he'd been told should remain forever unbreached. "How did you know?"

Ignoring the sudden leaden feeling in my stomach, I pressed on. "So these sealed containment units — you control them entirely electronically, is that right? There is no human staff on site?"

"Yes, well, they are in special locations, with maintenance people and technicians close by, to supply raw materials and experimental supplies. My understanding is that the cover stories are, in some cases, quite elaborate." He blinked in wonder, like a child recounting a Hardy Boys adventure. "I've never actually visited one. But we control them all from here."

"Over ARPANET." The sarcasm in my voice could have felled a rhinoceros at twenty paces, but the professor was oblivious.

"Oh, no, ARPANET is only used for the basic packet switching. We use a special ultra-redundant protocol layer I developed, called Mxglxsptl." He smiled shyly. "It's based on the name of the dwarf in the early Superman comics who went into another dimension when he could be made to say his name backwards. It's an unprecedented encryption technique using palindromic bit patterns—"

Before he could float off in a cloud of self-congratulatory technobabble, I cut him off. "So this is the 'firewall' that keeps the command and control communications to your overseas biohazard containments secure. Has this

Mxglxsptl of yours been verified to TEMPEST standards, or approved by independent auditors? Anyone outside of NSA?"

He looked genuinely shocked. "No, of course not! Security is not something we take lightly here, Mr., um, Irvine. To invite outside scrutiny might compromise the whole program."

It appeared to me that security was something Professor Wambaugh's operation took very lightly indeed. Without hostile, competitive evaluation, it would be impossible to know whether or not the firewall had holes in it big enough to drive a truck through. I told him so.

He erupted, "I say, you — I was told you'd come to help locate the source of this — Immune Ecosystem whatever-it-is — this minor prank message that apparently turned up somewhere in the system. Mxglxsptl contains redundant codes palindromically layered in such a way that no possible disruption of containment is" — he was beginning to sputter, and waved his arms around spasmodically — "remotely conceivable! Look, you have Omega clearance — here are the codes!" He jumped up and began shuffling furiously among some loose-leaf binders in his bookcase, apparently seeking to convince me of the integrity of an entire planetary communications architecture on the spot.

I didn't have time for this. "Shut it down, Professor. Shut it down, *now*, and I'll send in a crack team of triple-C specialists to scope out what you've got. Once we've plugged the hole that our nutcase ecoterrorist has found, and made sure there aren't any more, we'll see what your superiors say about reactivating the whole thing."

He gaped at me, then began groping wildly about his desk for his long-neglected cigarettes. "We can't do that! There are experiments in progress that would take weeks to restart! The bootstrap sequences alone" — he crammed a butt in his mouth the wrong way around, lit the filter end, and howled as he spit the acrid results halfway across the room — "It's out of the question! Damn!" He fumbled for another.

"Shut it down. That's an order." I didn't know if I had the authority to do that, but I figured he didn't know either, and we were playing with something potentially worse than nuclear Armageddon here. I'd clear it with Javier later.

He grabbed one of his notebooks and raised his arm as if to throw it at me. "You can't order me around! Where's my—"

An idea suddenly struck him. He put the notebook down and turned quickly to his computer console, nicotine-stained fingers reaching for the mouse. I leapt across the space between us and caught his arm in a vise grip. He yelped, and I heard the night watch officer come running down the corridor outside.

The officer burst through Wambaugh's office door, took in the scene in a glance, and unsnapped his sidearm holster. I was holding the professor's right arm as he hopped from foot to foot, howling at me to unhand him.

"At ease, Lieutenant," I said. "Now, Professor, what were you about to do on that computer?"

"Let go of me! I was going to e-mail my advisor to get you out of here!"

"Advisor, eh? That wouldn't be anything like a commanding officer, would it? Who is this person? Why didn't you mention anything about him before?"

"It's not a him, it's a her, you insufferable boor! And I don't know anything about her beyond an e-mail address. She told me that I should contact her at that address if anything came up which threatened to interfere with the project."

The watch officer broke in, "Mr. Irvine, kindly release Dr. Wambaugh's arm. You're not in command here."

I was just letting him go anyhow. He'd made me nervous, lunging for his console like that, like he was going to open all his containment valves or something. I realized now that this had been foolish. We were all just a little jumpy — understandably so.

Wambaugh shook himself down. He seemed to realize that the scene had become much more highly charged than necessary. The watch officer waited stolidly in the office doorway for the situation to sort itself out.

"I just want to write some e-mail, if that's all right with you," the professor said, squinting at me disdainfully through his thick glasses.

I glanced at his screen, which displayed his incoming and outgoing e-mail queues: "To:", "From:", and "Re:" fields for each message, arrayed in a pick list. There was something odd there, something striking.

"Well, lookee there, gentlemen," I said. The latest entry in Wambaugh's inbox, time-stamped only a few minutes earlier, was addressed "To: Wambaugh@409.nsa.gov", "From: Immune Response Ecosystem", and the "Re:" field said "Message for Steve Irvine."

Chapter 5

"Fuck you, Steve, and fuck the car you rode in on," the message began, charmingly enough. "You have a lot to learn. Let me tell you a little story about Easter Island.

"Once upon a time, around 400 A.D., some Polynesian paddlers crossed 1400 miles of the open Pacific in seafaring canoes, travelling eastward in search of

new lands. They discovered a subtropical paradise, rich in timber, stone, and tillable soil.

"Utterly isolated as it was, over 2000 miles from the South American mainland, the island supported a unique and diverse ecosystem. The hauhau tree, the toromiro, and the Easter Island palm provided firewood, food, and building materials for the intrepid explorers. Great numbers of seabirds: the albatross, the frigate, the fulmar, various species of petrel, terns, and so forth nested there. Land birds such as owls, herons, and parrots were also plentiful, and the island hosted a breeding colony of seals as well.

"The pioneers and their families rejoiced at their luck in finding such a fertile and unexploited paradise. God only knows how many other such expeditions had perished at sea, the eastern Pacific being a vast and uncharted Waterworld to their primitive vessels. Easter Island is the only habitable speck of land within a circular area encompassing some nine million square miles of Davy Jones' domain.

"So, they settled, and reproduced, and their descendants reproduced in turn. The island's population grew by the year 1200 to some 10,000 people. Unchecked by inter-island warfare, food supply limitations, or natural enemies of any significance, each generation grew to view the exploitation of the island's resources as their God-given right. Little by little, but in an accelerating pattern as the turn of the millenium approached, the palm and hauhau forests were cleared to cultivate crops, and the toromiro trees vanished into fireplaces that fueled great island feasts. The population of rats that the initial canoes had ferried across the fathomless deep exploded in turn, eating the plentiful bird eggs and palm seeds, and finding themselves, in turn, a delicacy of decreasing rarity in the islanders' diets.

"This is all based on solid paleontology, and archeological evidence. You can look it up. The pollen counts of the toromiro, the hauhau, and the Easter Island palm show a steady decline in radiocarbon-dated cores taken from pond sediments over the thousand-year period from 400 to 1400 A.D. By the end of this period, the pollen is almost gone, indicating that the trees had all been cut down, the once-majestic forests cleared. Cores taken from settled areas show a huge upswing in the detritus of human habitation: charcoal in pits indicating lavish luaus; rat, bird, and fish bones in giant 12th and 13th century garbage dumps; and progressively more numerous human skeletons, which careful radiocarbon-dates chart in exponential increase up until roughly the 14th century A.D.

"On Easter Day of 1722, the vessel of one Jacob Roggeveen, a Dutch explorer, sighted the island. His ship's log of the event reads, 'We originally, from a further distance, have considered the said Easter Island as sandy; the reason for that is this, that we counted as sand the withered grass, hay, or other scorched and

burnt vegetation, because its wasted appearance could give no other impression than that of a singular poverty and barrenness.'

"Roggeveen and subsequent explorers found a human population numbering around 2,000 on the island. Gone were the forests, the game, and even the rats. The islanders' navy consisted of three or four canoes, 'but as they they lack the knowledge and particularly the materials for caulking and making tight the great number of seams of the canoes, these are accordingly very leaky, for which reason they are compelled to spend half the time in bailing,' Roggeveen wrote.

"The most striking and mysterious features of the island were of course its gigantic statues, which bespoke of a highly advanced and technologically sophisticated civilization utterly unlike its then-current denizens. Without logs to roll the enormous stones from their quarries to their emplaced positions, how had these islanders, or any islanders, gotten them there? Without rope-yielding trees such as the hauhau, how had the statues been pulled into place and erected? And the social organization of the islanders in 1722 seemed incapable of forging the group bonds necessary to accomplish these prodigious feats of engineering, even had the materials been available.

"It was also evident that a major staple of islander diet, as of 1722, was the islanders themselves. With little to eat but the smallest shellfish, snails, and an occasional chicken, it was no wonder that a popular taunt among the natives went: 'The flesh of your mother sticks between my teeth.'

"The mystery of the statues has provoked all kinds of misinformed speculation, from Thor Heyerdahl's fanciful Kon-Tiki hypothesis, to Erich Von Däniken's schizophrenic extraterrestrials. However, the pollen and archeological evidence recently unearthed show, beyond a shadow of doubt, that Easter Island represents a textbook case of human overpopulation of an ecosystem. The great seafaring canoes of the early settlers became a fond memory, as the palm trees necessary to their construction came into shorter and shorter supply; the overexploitation of land for crops due to deforestation led to topsoil erosion, and the outleaching of nutrients; the increasingly desperate populations of the 16th and 17th centuries had abandoned all thought of conservation, much less statue-building, as each tribe sought to gobble up as much of the remaining vegetation and wildlife as possible, including each other.

"The flourishing ecosystem encountered by the brave Polynesian seafarers around the year 400 became the 'barren wasteland' encountered by Roggeveen in 1722. Had Westerners not visited the island until a few centuries later, it is likely that they would have found nothing but barren rock, skeletons, and evidence of prior human habitation akin to that of the Khmer, the Maya, or the Anasazi — whose ancient, vacant cities call across the centuries to us in silent supplication, asking, crying, with increasing insistency, the question: 'What went wrong?'

"Herein lies, in microcosm, the fate of Gaia as a whole unless the unchecked expansion of human numbers is halted, and soon. When an animal species threatens to overpopulate its ecosystem, humans are quick to point out the necessity of 'thinning the herd.' Deer hunts, insect sterilization drives, and 'predator management' often serve as thin smokescreens for the narrow self-interests of hunters, scientists, and ranchers.

"Gaia has been successfully balancing the needs of its several million tenant species for billions of years now. It hardly requires our 'expert' assistance. Left to its own devices, it will purge itself of the Humanity virus in due course.

"The question is one of cost: to the aspirations of Humanity embodied in each of us, for a better future and a more enlightened, sustainable existence in harmony with nature; and to Gaia itself, upon whose barren soils and polluted oceans the bleached bones of scores of billions of human remains will be scant consolation for the ecological devastation that such an outcome will entail.

"Can we not, ourselves part of Gaia, invoke an enlightened Immune Response, one that stops short of massive cerebral hemorrhage to achieve its goals?

"Can we not, ourselves part of Gaia, limit our depredations to renewable proportions? Like the lions and gorillas who murder their rivals' cubs, like the lemmings whose periodic mass migrations often result in mass suicides, like the lightning-induced forest fires, which sow the seeds of sustainable life through the excruciating deaths they inevitably visit upon innocent creatures by the trillions every year, can we not find our place in the cosmic order of things, and, by bearing some occasional suffering, from time to time and from place to place, earn ourselves a stable niche, a niche from which we can gradually progress, over geological time, into the ever-more-enlightened destiny which lies so manifestly open before us?

"Can we not, Steve, join forces in the cause of the Immune Response Ecosystem, and intelligently pare human numbers down to sustainable levels? I have many T-helper cells at my disposal, many lymphocytes and antigen binding agents. Will you help catalyze the IRE process, or will you be an antigen? My membranes hover around you as we speak, my surface proteins ready to either engulf or replicate your knowledge as we jointly see fit.

"Yours in enlightenment,

"Omniphage."

Chapter 6

This was getting personal.

I couldn't break out of the cold sweat that had enveloped me on the drive back across the Potomac. The imagery that the guy had used was harrowing, nightmarish.

I didn't know much about biology, but the vision of being sought out by a binding agent, like a germ or virus particle under attack by an immune system, had me by the balls. The rough order of battle as I understood it in immunological terms was: first the germs are identified as "antigens", hostile to the well-being of the host, then millions of lymphocytes or T-helpers or something are spawned which bind to the antigens, tagging them as fair game for the white blood cells, the "macrophages", which then finish them off.

The Greek root "phag" in "macrophage" refers to the process of eating, as in the word "esophagus". With all of this guy's talk of cannibalism on Easter Island, his use of the handle "Omniphage" for himself made my skin crawl. Was this guy going to make Jeffrey Dahmer look like Mahatma Gandhi? What, exactly, did he have in mind eating, or was this just his idea of a poetic role for himself in his demented Immune Response Ecosystem?

The possibility still existed that our collective crank was being yanked by some high school kid with a sick sense of humor, but I didn't think so. How had he known that I was in Wambaugh's office at that moment? How had he penetrated Wambaugh's 'firewall' so thoroughly that the "From:" field in his message was not even a valid Internet address, much less an anonymous remailer site? He was mutating on us quickly here, like an AIDS virus on steroids.

I'd convinced Wambaugh to shut down Mxglxsptl without much further protest, once he'd read the latest IRE diatribe. He still insisted on e-mailing his "advisor", an address of "Cynthia@409.nsa.gov". But he had looked shaken enough at the nasty possibilities that Mr. Omniphage had raised that I was confident he'd follow through.

Hm, here I was, assuming a male gender of an unknown party again. Wambaugh's spooky advisor was "Cynthia". Maybe Omniphage was female, too. Or, maybe Cynthia was some guy in drag. Maybe Omniphage was too. Maybe they were both the same person.

Maybe a lot of damn things. This business of anonymity on the net had its drawbacks. I'd tried the standard Internet tools like FINGER and WHOIS on Cynthia, of course, and come up snake eyes. The "From:" field of IRE's message wasn't even fingerable. More sophisticated delving into the identities behind the Internet addresses required the use of equipment in my office.

I filled Javier in on the events of the past hour by cellular as I arced southwest on the Beltway, and gave my team of loyal assistants several more leads to check out. It was 6:30 in the morning by the time I pulled my Jag onto George Washington Parkway and redlined the tach toward Langley. The sky was just turning that lighter shade of pitch black which heralded the coming of the dawn. I hoped that we'd all still be around at the end of what promised to be a very long day.

Chapter 7

Javier's office resembled a carefully synchronized beehive as I approached it — one after another, staffers alone or in pairs entered, delivered and/or received crisp, coded intelligence or instructions, and left. Each interaction was timed such that no one had to stand in line, yet the flow of activity was virtually continuous. The man was a master of organizational management.

I saw no way to avoid disrupting the flow with my presence, since he'd said to report back to him upon returning from Fort Meade. I walked in on the heels of a vaguely military-looking adjutant in civilian garb.

"Pakistani FULCRUM stockpiles 95% complete, sir," said the adjutant to Javier, clicking his heels with military efficiency. "Islamabad liaison acknowledges receipt of TAPCON software, and is standing by, awaiting activation orders."

"Acknowledged," said Javier, and waved his hand in curt dismissal. "Irvine, Mxglxsptl shutdown inoperative. Contact Wambaugh, invoke JCS authority, get that network off the air. Go!"

"What?" I wasn't quite as adept at this crisis management stuff as Mr. Rojas. The implications of what he was saying whirled in my head, made the room spin briefly. I was more the strategic planner and evaluator type than he apparently needed at that moment.

Another assistant entered from a side door, faxes in hand, and laid them silently in front of him. He looked up at me from his desk command post. "You're still here? You heard me. Net traffic analysis indicates 409 activity at an all-time high. Find it, block it, kill it. Now!"

"Yes, sir." I turned on my heels and walked out. Behind me, I heard the brief beep of Javier's intercom, and a reedy voice reporting, "Eagle-One biometric anomaly sensor arrays online and operational as of 0635 hours, sir. Initial readings indicate...."

Jesus. This was already assuming the status of full-scale war — a covert war, waged with untried weapons, which could be over in a matter of hours. But against whom? Or what? And what, exactly, was the enemy's agenda?

My onsite assistants Weber and Croft were already in my office, fooling with various computer consoles as I entered. "Any luck?" I asked.

Their worried expressions and terse headshakes as they glanced up at me did nothing to alleviate the growing pain in my abdomen. We needed a triple-C — command, control, and communications — analysis team in place at Fort Meade, pronto, whether Wambaugh was on our side or not. Croft was the logical team leader, a hotshot cyberjock with MI-5 experience and a cool head. His wife and mine had attended college together, and the Crofts had been frequent dinner guests at the Irvine residence. But this was no time for small talk.

"Croft, assemble agents Mohammed, Bird, and — what's his name — Cliveden for triple-C detail at Fort Meade." I briefed him on what I knew of Mxglxsptl to date, and told him to report back to me by noon with whatever he could glean of its strengths and pitfalls from Wambaugh's notebooks, analysis of its physical infrastructure, its connectivity modes, and whatever else he might run across. I made calls to give the team the necessary clearances, then called Wambaugh.

He was as jittery as a kangaroo rat with a thyroid problem. "Irvine? What the devil — I gave the shutdown codes after you left — it's not responding — the redundant links have gotten scrambled somehow and — each one I shut off spawns two more — there's—"

"Calm down, Professor. How many redundant paths to the containment units are there?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake, dozens, I told you — the network was designed for hundred-percent uptime, it's got the ability to reroute itself via satellite, undersea cable, microwave relay, any number of backup workarounds. The master override is supposed to shut them all down, but" — he sounded a little sheepish now — "we never tested it globally before. Who in blazes would have thought we'd want to? Besides, something's definitely interfering with the routing grid link ID's. I query status on a link in Brussels and I get data from Johannesburg, for God's sake. It's gone mad!"

He seemed to know a lot about communications technology for a microbiologist. Idiot savant syndrome, I supposed. The man had designed Mxglxsptl, after all.

"Okay, look. If we can't shut down the network, can we shut down the containment units directly? Do your command codes to the actual machinery still work?"

"Oh, Christ Jesus! Wanting me to shut off the network was bad enough — I could put the experiments on hold. Now you want me to shut them down altogether! I'll have to consult with Cynthia—"

My blood pressure rose another couple of notches. "Professor, apparently I wasn't clear enough when I told you to shut it down before. Shut it down, shut it all down, turn off the power to those containment facilities if you have to, but get those things offline and out of service. Use whatever means are necessary. Fuck Cynthia, and fuck any experiments in progress. There's command traffic going out to the containment units right now, and God only knows what it's telling them to do. If we can't stop the traffic, we have to stop the machinery, whatever the hell it is. This has JCS authorization. I swear I'll file for Court Martial, treason, if you don't do it in the next sixty seconds."

"Irvine! No!" He was coming apart at the seams. "All — all right. Okay, okay" — he was breathing in shallow gasps, he was reasoning through the situation, talking himself through it. I stayed quiet, and a few shallow, hesitant mouse clicks became barely audible over my receiver. "Okay, Istanbul... total shutdown code... where's that page... Hmm, mm, mm... confirm? Yes. Yes? Hello? Oh, no...."

This didn't sound good. "Professor?"

"Oh, dear. Let me try that again. Site select... Istanb—"

"Professor, we don't have time for this." I held the telephone handset away from my mouth. "Weber! How much network traffic are you showing to those nodes now?"

Weber entered a query at his keyboard, and I could see the packet volume listing shoot up his screen, scrolling to the top in an instant and continuing without letup.

I turned back to the handset. "Listen, Professor. Try to think calmly. Is there any other way you can think of to shut those devices down? Can we contact the onsite personnel and get them to just pull a plug or something? There must be some failsafe backup shutdown procedure. Surely a smart fellow like yourself would have built failsafe security into an architecture like Mxglxsptl." My tone was soothing, almost unctuous at this point.

"Okay, okay, the containments are triply power protected — dual level battery backup, and diesel generators behind that — they have perimeter protection against manual tampering, disableable only via the network — they'll fry anybody who tries to get in — oh, Christ Jesus. There's only one ultimate failsafe backup: global meltdown mode."

Uh-oh. "What does that mean?"

"Irvine, you have no idea how much work will be destroyed if we do this. It will set us back years. Don't ask me to do this." He was strangely calm now.

"Do what? Meltdown, as in the China Syndrome? What does it do? Would it trigger the release of any biotoxins?"

"No, but each experimental cell has a phosphorus ring around it that will vaporize the cell, the machines feeding it, and every bit of computers and wiring anywhere near it. A single command from here, and the entire contents of every containment worldwide is guaranteed to be reduced to slag. The feature was put in, as I understand it, at the insistence of the NSA Director, over my vehement protests. It was a precaution against possible enemy compromise of Mxglxsptl itself." He sounded dejected, as though he knew what came next.

"Well, guess what? Mxglxsptl has been compromised. It's slag time, Professor. Issue the code."

"Sorry, I can't do that." He sounded almost relieved. "The code can only be issued by the Director himself."

Chapter 8

I slammed down the phone and crossed over to Javier's office again. It was considerably less organized there than when I had visited earlier. Faxes seemed to be raining from the ceiling, and several people were talking at once — a bunch of coded gibberish about FULCRUM this and Vitamin that.

I shoved my way to Javier's side and put my lips next to his ear. "The Director of the NSA needs to issue the code to slag all 409 containments," I said.

He gave me a hard look. I said, "You told me to find it, block it, kill it. We can't find it or block it, and it's going haywire, so we have to kill it. The Director won't take my call, I'm sure. You have the standing to get through. Tell him to slag the containments. There's no other way."

Javier shouted over the hubbub, "Attention! Exit the office, and stand by. All but Irvine." As they filed out to form a queue in the corridor, he said, "Thank you," as an afterthought. The man was in a daze.

He punched a blue button on his phone, and had a short but colorful conversation with his NSA counterpart, who put him through to the Director. Then: "Yes?" came a gruff voice over the speakerphone.

"Slag 409. Priority red. Request code baker, baker, zebra, dial tone." There was silence on the other end of the line for several seconds.

"Fuck you, Rojas. If this turns out to be unwarranted—"

Interservice rivalries were all very fine, and Javier was in the position of an inferior. He had to be nice, but the NSA Director didn't. In his most respectful tone of voice, he mustered, "Seconds count, sir. Mxglxsptl is out of control, and

the units are being fed unknown instructions from an unknown source. Shutdown attempts negative. Repeat request: slag 409, priority red, baker, baker, zebra, dial tone."

Come on, you asshole, do it. More seconds ticked by. Then the gruff voice sounded, with great reluctance, "Affirmative."

The line went dead, and Javier and I breathed again, for the first time since I could recently recall. He motioned for his other troops to come back in, and I shot back across the corridor. I caught a glimpse of a fax with what looked like DNA sequencing charts on my way out.

"Done. Weber, let me know when that Mxglxsptl traffic goes dead."

"Yessir." He leaned over and hit a button or two on one of his spare consoles, and the packet volume listing started streaming past again. I couldn't wait for it to stop. Now, to try to zero in on this "Cynthia".

I activated a piece of equipment in the corner of my office that was my personal specialty, a packet sniffer with certain augmented capabilities. Cynthia, Cynthia. I could almost smell her, beckoning to me with her bedroom eyes, her lips parted —

Yikes, time for more coffee. I grabbed another cup, then sat down to my work. Entering the NSA network through a little back door I was entitled to, I probed around a little. There was no "Cynthia@409.nsa.gov" in the database, but maybe, in the audit trail.... Aha. Through the forest and over the bridge, to Cynthia's house we go. I love my work.

Another bridge, and another. A bridge too far. Back up, isolate, bingo. There were a series of accesses by Cynthia to — what? A bunch of state police criminal evidence files? What would she want with those? What was in them?

I brought up one at random to see. It was binary horse hockey, of course, but it seemed to repeat groups of digits in some sort of four-level code. I called Weber over to see what he could make of it.

He shrugged. "Never seen it before. Four-level code, state police evidence files, I dunno. Maybe DNA fingerprints?"

What on earth? I glanced over at Weber's display, which was still streaming the packet volume listings like sixty. It couldn't last much longer now. Slag 409. Affirmative. Stay with the program here, Stevey baby....

Suddenly it hit me, like a .45 slug in the stomach. Say it ain't so, Cynthia. Say it ain't so. How could I check?

"Weber, prepare for a file feed from my sniffer here, and run a correlation against your audit trail of the data streaming to the containment units." He raised

an eyebrow. "I know, I know, we'll bog down the Crays in the basement for a minute or two with this. Just do it."

He shrugged again and complied. Still the packet volume listings streamed by. When would that slag order take effect?

The lights in the building seemed to dim a little as Weber kicked off his correlation scan. Or maybe it was just my imagination. I wanted to know if the DNA fingerprints from the state police evidence files were among the data being downloaded to the containment units. This required comparing a sample file of 8 megabytes and change to each and every one of some fifty million Mxglxsptl messages routed to the containments over the past several hours. We were looking for a match, or a statistically significant partial match. The CIA's supercomputers were awfully quick, but even they would take a few minutes ruminating over this one.

I figured I'd take the opportunity to touch base with Wambaugh while I waited. His extension didn't answer, so I had him paged. Still the packet volume listings on Weber's screen streamed by. Something began nagging me at the back of my mind.

Finally Wambaugh came on the line. "Wambaugh here." He sounded haggard.

"Hey Professor. I got you that slag order. By the way, what communications medium is used to execute it?"

"Um, ELF — Extremely Low Frequency radio, I believe, the same system used to communicate launch orders to nuclear submarines. Why?"

"And what protocol does it use?"

"Why, the same one used for all 409 work. I designed it myself." There was a pause, and then he coughed, as though I'd hit him in the stomach. "Mxglxsptl," he said.

I hung up, and stared at the packet volume listings on Weber's monitor, flowing by as smoothly as ever. I didn't need to wait for them to stop anymore. They weren't going to stop.

Javier ambled across the corridor into my office, his face slack.

"We know," I said.

"NSA just called," he said. "The slag code didn't work."

"We know," I said again.

The building lights seemed to brighten a little just then.

"Bingo!" said Weber.

Chapter 9

Once upon a time, there was a nice little planet called Earth. It was populated with all manner of creatures. Some of the creatures became semi-intelligent. Then one day, a maniac named Cynthia used some technology developed by some very stupid people in an organization called the National Security Agency to do — what? Turn everyone green? Eat "long pig" for breakfast for the next billion years? "Long pig," I'd read somewhere, was the Fijian native term for human flesh. They also enjoyed eating Spam, since, according to them, it tasted similar.

It was almost noon. I decided to call Melissa and tell her that I loved her, since there didn't seem to be much else worth doing.

She was surprised and delighted. Our Song was Stevie Wonder's *I Just Called to Say I Love You*. When she picked up the phone, I just started humming the tune into my mouthpiece. I hadn't done that in a while. She laughed, and then got all choked up, but with joy, fortunately, not worry. I told her I'd be home sometime soon. I didn't tell her whether or not I expected to be delivered in a box. I also neglected to mention my concern that our house might act as a box for her before I got there. If anything was going to happen, it would be best if it were quick, merciful, and utterly unexpected.

Javier buzzed me into his office after that. He introduced me to a nice gentleman from the CDC — the Center for Disease Control — who turned out to be its Director, a Mr. John Boise. We sat.

"Steve, please brief John on what we've developed in this case to date," Javier said.

To date? How about "today"? Still, I was a professional, and professionals don't get discouraged, no matter how fearsome the prospects. I kept my account factual and to the point.

When I got to the part about the state police criminal evidence files, Javier sat up a little straighter. He hadn't heard this part yet.

"This 'Cynthia' accessed individual state police records, and downloaded them to the containment units? What on earth for? Any working hypotheses, Steve?"

"None yet. We think that the files contain DNA fingerprint information, which is often used as evidence in rape, murder, and molestation cases. Its use is on the rise, since it is considered conclusive in establishing a given person's presence at the scene of a crime, or, in cases where semen is involved, the identity of the rapist or molester."

"Lovely world we live in, hm," said Boise. "Any idea what Cynthia plans to do with this data?"

"None whatsoever, sir," I said. "It could be anything from taking over the world by cloning them all to a designer plague which kills only people who've given blood samples to a state court." Javier frowned at me. "More likely the latter, or some variation on that theme," I added hastily.

Boise said, "So, you would say that any persons whose DNA sequences appear in the files in question are at heightened risk of disease, relative to the population at large?"

I began to see where this might be leading. "That's right. With the cooperation of the state police, I think I can get you a list of the individuals involved. Does the CDC have some way to protect these people from infection? We have no idea what the symptoms might be, or the vectors."

The term "vector" in CDC lingo refers to the carrier by which a disease is transmitted to an organism. Mosquitoes, for example, are a vector for malaria. DP, as Wambaugh had explained to me, could use a "flexible set of vectoring characteristics." Horseflies to helicopters, it was all the same to our friends in 409.

"How many individuals are we talking about?" asked Boise.

"Hold on," interrupted Javier. "Getting state police involved from all over the country is bound to set off alarm bells with the press. Silent Night won't be able to plug the leaks. Steve, you know the drill."

I did. Lower-level law enforcement agencies were constrained to use DES, an encryption standard breakable by the supercomputer complexes at Langley and Fort Meade and, presumably, nowhere else. Javier had already uncorked DES decrypt with his earlier order to that guy Coons in special ops. The CIA was supposed to stay out of domestic counterespionage — that was the NSA's job — but, boys being boys, both agencies had gradually infringed on the others' domain over the years to the point that they were practically interchangeable. What Congress didn't know, kept the bucks flowing, we always said.

I turned to the CDC Director. "John, I'll get you a list of at-risk individuals later this afternoon."

Boise squirmed a little in his chair. It was clear that he was not comfortable with this cloak-and-dagger stuff, and he was beginning to formulate questions as to the legality of all this.

Javier abruptly leaned back in his armchair and appeared to relax. He smiled at Boise and said, "John, the less you know of our methods, the better. Loose lips sink ships, you know. We could tell you, but then we'd have to kill

you." His exaggerated friendliness and joking manner was not altogether convincing, somehow. "You do your job, and we'll do ours."

Boise rose, his expression a complex hybrid of annoyance, expediency, and fear. He said, "All right. I'll expect a list of at-risk individuals this afternoon. We'll do our best to keep this quiet. Although if the numbers at risk are more than a few hundred, I fail to see how you expect to keep this under wraps."

Javier said, "Let's cross that bridge when we come to it, shall we? Cynthia may only have tapped the few records that Mr. Irvine's uncovered so far. Let's not create a major panic out there unnecessarily. And John," — he winked at Boise in a manner interpretable as either just-between-us-pals or a threat — "let's keep this intelligence on a need-to-know basis, okay?"

Javier and I rose, shook Boise's hand with a sort of grim heartiness, and ushered him on his way. As soon as the door closed, Javier said, "Notify me the instant you have that list, Steve, then await my orders. Don't forward it to CDC without my personal go-ahead."

I nodded, and returned to my office. Man, this was getting spooky, even for a veteran spook like me. Javier seemed to be acting awfully high-and-mighty just lately. I chalked it up to the wartime footing we seemed to find ourselves on. The faxes had been piling up in his in-box as we had talked; out of the corner of my eye I had caught glimpses of shred-this-upon-receipt reports from Moscow, Taiwan, the Falkland Islands, and a dozen more unlikely locales.

Weber looked up eagerly as soon as I entered. "Hey, I took the liberty of broadening that search of requests in the audit trail you started," he said. "You know, the ones initiated by Cynthia over the various bridges and whatnot?"

"Yes? Good thinking." Thank God for assistants like Weber. "What have we got?"

"Well, I didn't hack the DES or anything, not until you say to, but I could tell quite a bit just from the file IDs. It's not just state police evidence files she's after. She's pulled DNA files from federal court records, too. Even some from private clinics and stuff. Quite a few of them."

The churning in my stomach went into Mixmaster mode. "How many?"

"Oh, I dunno...." He turned to his consoles, whacked a few keys, and mumbled something.

"What? How many, Weber?"

Even his usual nonchalant demeanor couldn't cover the tremor in his voice. "Oh, about two hundred thousand so far, I guess. Sir."

Chapter 10

So far.

Part of me wanted to scream for joy, knowing that, since neither I nor any member of my family had ever had a DNA test done, we were not in the at-risk pool, which was clearly about to be targeted for some sort of DP activity. If Cynthia were planning some sort of global genocide, she would hardly be bothering to gather such specific data on individuals.

The other part of me wanted to scream in terror, knowing that the world was about to change in some unprecedented way, and wanting no part of it. Criminals or not, the people whose files had been tapped were human beings, entitled to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. Not to mention some measure of privacy regarding their personal genetic characteristics, which had already been violated beyond repair. Would their other basic human rights be violated soon too? The initial IRE communiqué had mentioned "abnormally high levels of dead viral matter in the eliminatory tracts."

Weber spoke up. "Croft called in while you were with Javier, said he posted his triple-C report to you from Fort Meade via e-mail. He didn't sound too happy."

I was sure he wasn't. I already knew what the report would say: Mxglxsptl all fucked up, redundant comm pathways out the wazoo, no way to shut it down except to blow up the world. Still, I had ordered the report; I might as well read it.

I popped up my e-mail in-box queue on my screen. And then my blood froze. The pick-list entry for Croft's report, time-stamped 1200 hours, was followed by an even more recent entry, time-stamped 1220. I looked at my watch. It read 12:22. The new message was "To: Irvine@langley.cia.gov", "From: Omniphage", "Re: Ecosystem Dynamics, Lesson 2."

Croft was awaiting further instructions. Omniphuck wasn't. I clicked his pick-list entry and read: "Hi there, Steve. I trust you enjoyed indulging Mr. Boise's pleasant fantasies in your recent meeting with him. Reality is often not so pleasant, but here it is.

"There are approximately six billion human beings on the planet as of this moment. In 1950, there were about two billion. In 1800, there were about one billion. You are an intelligent person. What does this trend suggest to you?

"How much shit do six billion human beings generate, per second? Wait, I've already worked out the math for you. At a rate of a dump a day, let's be conservative and say a pound apiece, since so many of them are starving already, that's six billion pounds a day, or a little over 34 tons per second.

"That doesn't sound too bad, until you project out another fifty years or so. to a world population of eighteen billion and change. Then we're talking 100 tons of shit per second, Steve. What are your children going to do with 100 tons of shit per second?

"Sorry, I'm offending your tender sensibilities. Let's talk about something nicer, like deforestation. A hundred years ago, 58 percent of the planetary land surface was forested. Today, 28 percent is. Forests are now being cleared at a rate of 3.2 acres per second, every second, every day, 24 hours per day. Remember how that worked out on Easter Island?

"Or, let's talk about extinction of species. Easter Island started out with only a few thousand species, whereas Gaia today supports four or five million. So we have a big head start. On the other hand, most of them are insects. Toward the end there, Easter Island was down to just 47 species of plants, all but four of them grasses, sedges, and ferns. The other four were small trees and shrubs. There was not a single indigenous species of land animal larger than an insect: not a lizard, not a snail, not even so much as a bat. Along with the seals, the birds, and the rats, they'd all been et. Look it up.

"How are we doing? Well, at our current rate of only about one species extinction per hour, we've got a ways to go yet. On the other hand, I'm not especially partial to cockroach soufflé, are you?

"But wait, you say, we're smarter than those ignorant Polynesian savages. We're conserving, and recycling, and taking birth control pills. What's the matter with me? Haven't I heard of the wondrous Demographic Transition, which magically makes birth rates drop as third-world countries enter the New World Order? Aren't the Industrialized Nations operating at near replacement rates as we speak, with an average of two point one offspring per female of childbearing age? Isn't Germany already down to one-and-a-quarter? Go, Krauts! In more ways than one!

"I've got news for you. The fundamental principle of life is this: whatever reproduces most prolifically is what there comes to be more of in subsequent generations. Stick a mating pair of green beetles and a mating pair of red beetles in a box. If the green beetles produce an average of two offspring per generation, and the red beetles produce an average of three, come back ten generations later and you'll find fifty red beetles for every green beetle. This assumes, of course, that there's room and food enough in the box for a hundred beetles. If not, say goodbye to the nice green beetles.

"Put yourself in the position of a leader on Easter Island in the year, say, 900 A.D. The population's already up to a couple thousand, and you're smart, so you can see what's coming. You tell everybody, 'Hey, cool your jets, let's all snip our tubes after we've had two kids apiece, and our posterity will honor our

memory forever.' Let's say that you even find a nifty herb that does it for them, so nobody has to wince or deal with messy knives and all that.

"Everybody on the island is ecstatic, and praises your wisdom. Everybody but that one weird couple, off on the north promontory, who nobody liked anyhow. That one weird couple goes on having five or six kids, while everybody else stops at two. The parents in each generation indoctrinate their children with the values that they themselves grew up with, and so the weird couple's kids all have five or six more kids apiece like good little boys and girls, while the rest of the islanders' kids continue to stop at two, like good little boys and girls, from *their* point of view.

"Figure four generations per century. By 1000 A.D., the weird clan members number only a hundred or so — no big deal to the couple of thousand descendants of your 'enlightened' tree-huggers. But wait another 100 years. Whoops! Now the weirdos number six thousand and change, and are starting to make a big dent in the north end of things. By 1200 A.D., the weirdos would number over 370,000 — way more than the carrying capacity of the island, of course — so war, starvation, and the occasional crème-de-foe will have thinned the herd down to manageable proportions. Assuming roughly equal mortality rates for the tree-huggers and their less 'enlightened' compatriots, we see that the ratio of 370,000 to 2,000, applied to a sustainable population of 2,000 or so, will have left a grand total of eleven descendants of the tree-hugger persuasion alive. Guess whose crock pots *they'll* wind up in?

"Roggeveen shows up, five centuries later, and you and your crackpot ideas aren't even a *story* they tell any more. Maybe you and your followers put up a few statues in your day, maybe you didn't. Who knows? You're all ancient history by then anyhow.

"Steve, voluntary birth control as a way of solving the overpopulation problem is, to put it politely, a crock. It thins out precisely that portion of the herd that is best able to deal with the problem rationally.

"So, what does all this have to do with containment units, DNA files purloined from police and courthouse databases, and mad scientists bent on wreaking havoc with the Free World's communications infrastructure? For that, you'll just have to wait and see. Please rest assured, Cynthia and I will be quite selective in our application of the toys that your NSA friends have provided to us.

"You, personally, are in no danger as long as you refrain from further attempts to interfere with the Immune Response Ecosystem. As an antigen, I think you'll agree that your ecotoxicity has been pretty low thus far. We plan to keep it that way, and we remain hopeful that you can be persuaded to join our cause. Just remember that the Doors to true enlightenment are open at all times: to everything, there is a season, a time to be born, and a time to die.

"Yours in *true* enlightenment,
"Omniphage."

Chapter 11

Well, he, she, or it was right about one thing. It was time for Omniphage to die.

I printed out the message, walked across the corridor, and threw it down on Javier's desk. His "command post" was under virtual siege by this time, with a dozen or more captains, majors, and spooks of indeterminate rank crowding around it. Moreover, the guy sitting in Javier's chair was not Javier.

The guy was on the phone. "Acknowledged, activate recon-in-force, Operation Porcupine, by order of Deputy Director Rojas." He paused, listening for a moment, then said, "Taichung, via Guam. Right."

He was a stocky, rock-jawed man, an ex-marine if I didn't miss my guess, and the newly-installed nameplate triangle on the desk gave his identity as Colonel Peter S. Tarkenton, Adjutant-at-Large. At large to what, it didn't say, so I asked him as soon as he got off the phone.

"Take a number," he growled at me, and turned to a gaggle of captains to my right, one of whom was a woman. "Taichung via Guam, Operation Porcupine, gentlemen. You too, Cindy. Go." They boiled out of the office, leaving me, Coons, two Air Force majors and a bewildered secretary clutching faxes in their wake.

Coons yelled first. "Three hits on DES-decrypt, sir! The first all day. All three originated at a site in Des Moines, a civilian defense contractor involved in infantry weapons supply. M-16s. Permission to see Deputy Director Rojas."

"Denied," said Tarkenton. He grabbed Coons' papers, glanced at them, and handed them to the secretary. "Forward these to Bell in the Situation Room."

It was getting difficult to tell the players without a scorecard, but I thought I could puzzle out what was happening. Javier had become oversaturated with input, and had been at least temporarily elevated in the chain of command. Tarkenton was now acting as a filter for him, redirecting intelligence to specialists and culling Javier's message traffic while simultaneously passing his orders through to subsidiary personnel. A Situation Room had been activated, where various generals, admirals, and high-level spooks pored over maps, network traffic statistics, and contingency plans, their intelligence officers at their elbows.

Also, some sort of strike mission on the containment unit in Taichung, Taiwan was getting underway — if we couldn't kill them electronically, we were

going to try brute force. This presented a whole new set of possibilities to consider.

I guess I should have considered the possibilities in greater depth, but there didn't seem to be much time. I felt partially responsible for whatever was developing here, and I seemed to have been singled out by the IRE for special attention. Maybe I could be of crucial help to the reconnaissance-in-force mission with my now extensive knowledge base, or maybe I could help deflect or decoy some of the IRE's wrath away from them. Maybe whatever. For once, I went with gut instinct, without stopping to think about exact reasons why. At a very visceral level, I wanted to help eradicate the monster I had seen developing over the course of the day's events.

"Sir," I piped up, "Permission to accompany the Operation Porcupine force to Taichung."

Tarkenton stared at me, looking me up and down as if seeing me for the first time. "Who the fuck are you?"

As quickly as I could, I ran through my credentials and the reasons why I might be of assistance on a containment-assault mission. "And the perp or perps of this obscenity have disclosed vastly more of their thinking to me than to anyone else in the Company," I ventured, angling for every tactical advantage. "The evidence is there on your desk."

Tarkenton glanced over my printout, looked me up and down again, and apparently considered me either expendable or just the edge that the strike team might need.

"Granted." He hit a button on Javier's phone and barked, "Weems! Add one porcupine, delta-stealth, Irvine, ahh—"

"Steven J.," I supplied, fervently. I was going to get a chance to hit Omniphage and Cynthia where it really hurt. If the strike was effective, we just needed to clone it a few dozen more times on the other containments, and we could all settle down to a nice relaxing rewrite of the entire security systems software of the Free World for the next several years. Without worrying about growing fish gills or contracting Bubonic Plague in the meantime.

Plus, I could get some sleep on the plane.

Chapter 12

She receded from me, wreathed in mist, drawing me onward. Her deep red tresses caressed her naked shoulders, enfolding her spellbinding face in great sweeping arcs as she tossed her head first this way, then that, her green eyes laughing, beckoning, promising secrets unfathomable, liberties unimaginable.

We sailed over mist-enshrouded mountains and deep chasms of glowing steam, she in playful retreat, I in grim pursuit. A deep frustration welled up within me. Her delight seemed to feed on my failure, the sparkle in her eyes intensifying with each surge forward on my part, my leaden clumsiness contrasting so sharply with her fluid grace, sometimes ten steps ahead, sometimes so close I felt that with just one great spurt I could reach forth and touch her, but always falling short.

Cynthia, Cynthia. She lured me inexorably toward a long dark canyon, from which a roaring, rushing wind emanated, the howling gales within speaking of power untold, the Might of the Universe contained and controlled, wherein the source of her mastery lay unveiled, spread before me, open, mine for the taking. At the mouth of her canyon, I hesitated — dark shadows loomed around me, her siren song suddenly irresistible, tongues of flame and teeth of rock rising to meet my wind-torn body, the roaring in my ears reaching a crescendo which I suddenly recognized as the inchoate voice of Omniphage, his colossal jaws now clanking, shuddering, closing....

The landing gear of the Porcupine strike force C-130 extended fully, locking into place with an abrupt jolt. We were on final approach to Guam, from which the mission itself would be launched. I shook myself awake, and watched out a porthole as the airfield rose to meet us.

I recognized F-16s on the runways, and the strange black silhouettes of Stealth bombers in their hangars as we touched down and pulled onto a taxiway. The airfield was a beehive of activity — convoys of aviation fuel trucks peeling off, one by one, to their respective hangars; covered trailers full of ordnance, beady eyes in their noses peeking out from beneath olive-green tarps; fatigue-clad technicians running everywhere.

Our plane stopped. A bullnosed Colonel stood up and called for quiet, then announced to his breathless audience that Operation Porcupine was all-systems-go for 1400 hours, local time. "Synchronize watches to 1228 hours on my mark.... Mark. Smithfield, Jones, and Fox, form up your details and get to work. Alhambra and Irvine, fall in behind me. The rest of you report to final mission briefing in Building B, Room 105," — he glanced around, and pointed — "over there. Go!"

We all grabbed our satchels of assorted gear and debarked. Alhambra and I followed the Colonel across the scorching tarmac to a shack full of telecomm gear. At least the sky was clear, so the weather was going our way. Not that a Stealth bomber much cares about weather, one way or the other.

The Colonel said, "I'm told that our target has extensive ECM," — electronic countermeasures — "and that friendly fire is a possibility we may have to contend with. Or, that..." He hesitated, unsure of whether to describe fire directed by computer systems ostensibly under Washington's control, but not

really, as friendly. "Well, who knows. We need to be ready for anything. If you gentlemen can make these computers do anything useful in the next sixty minutes, please feel free." He turned abruptly on one heel and strode out. Bytes and bandwidth were clearly not his forté.

I settled in at a console and got to work. First I called up the Porcupine battle plan and gave it the once-over. Six F-16Bs would comprise the first wave, with laser-guided bombs of relatively low yield hitting the containment, two at a time from opposite directions. If that didn't work — computer weirdness, it was anticipated, might misdirect the bombs — a follow-up force of six Stealth F-117s, already airborne at that time, would sweep in at low altitude with high explosive cluster bombs and just annihilate the entire area. I checked to make sure that the necessary orders had been issued to clear all personnel, military and civilian, from the vicinity of the target by the time of the strike.

It was the middle of the night in D.C., so I left e-mail for Melissa, rather than calling her and waking her up. I let her know that everything was okay, that some things had come up, and that I might not be home for a while after all. Fortunately, there were no further missives from Omniphage, Cynthia, or the IRE in my in-box. I hadn't read Croft's triple-C report yet, so I pulled it up onscreen. As expected, he had found Mxglxsptl in a state of pandemonium, redundant pathways all to hell, and none of the purported shutdown procedures working.

He noted that he'd tried sending a test message to the address "Cynthia@409.cia.gov", and hadn't gotten a bounceback, even though there was no such address in the database. Hm, I considered, how foolish of me, one of the things that's been frustrating me is the inability to talk back to this monster. I thought about flaming her via e-mail from where I was, but I realized that the less she knew of my whereabouts just then, the better, all things considered. There was a good possibility that we'd have at least the element of tactical surprise if I kept quiet.

I also called my office on the scrambler to see how Weber and Javier were coming on the CDC thing. As expected, Javier had told Weber to prepare a sanitized list of a few dozen bad guys whose DNA profiles were in state police archives, several of whom were dead already. Boise, the CDC Director, might not believe that he was getting the whole story, but to feed him several hundred thousand names was out of the question. Weber told me that the count was up to half a million or so by this time, and they couldn't all be protected anyhow. Whatever was going to happen would just have to happen.

Weber did mention another bizarre thing: Cynthia had also begun accessing the court case logs and rap sheet files on the guys whose DNA records she now had. Short of shutting down the entire Internet and throwing the country into mass panic, rioting in the streets, there was nothing we could do about it, since she

seemed to effortlessly bypass all of what passed for security on the net. Still, it was unsettling.

Curiously, I must confess, I began to find the pattern of her activities less alarming than I had at first. Omniphage had said that they would be "quite selective" in their use of our DP facilities. At least it didn't appear that some indiscriminate genocide was in the making — why would Cynthia bother consulting conviction records and case details if the guilt or innocence of her targets was not of concern to her? I'd harbored a private opinion that the endless coddling of inmates on Death Row was cruel and inhumane for some time now — far better to just bump the bastards off, once their guilt was established beyond a reasonable doubt, rather than prolonging their agony over interminable years of appeal after appeal.

Somehow, though, I suspected that the IRE had measures a little more drastic in mind. Even criminals have basic human rights. I'd hate for every poor schmuck caught smoking a joint to wind up digesting his own intestines or something. This had to be stopped, *now*, and Operation Porcupine promised to be the beginning of the end for our demented ecoterrorist friends.

Chapter 13

"Everything okay back there, Irvine?" I was strapped into the rear harness of the third F-16B in the first wave, and the pilot, Captain Cindy Azov, was addressing me over the cockpit intercom.

"Fine, fine," I replied. The view was spectacular: deep blue sea to the horizon in every direction, a few scattered clouds, and five other birds in cruise formation, fanning out to either side.

Normally, a non-aviator like me would never have been permitted near the plane on a combat mission like this. Then again, normally, command codes worked, our computers could be counted on to do what they were supposed to do, and spook shit wasn't the whole point of a combat mission like this. The plane practically flew itself, anyhow. When we got over the drop zone, I could point-and-click at the target with my mouse as well as the next guy. If we ran into trouble — well, it was more likely to be my kind of trouble than that of your average F-16B weapons officer.

Trouble was not long in coming. We maintained strict radio silence between planes the whole way out, of course, but the Colonel's wingman began making frantic hand signals to Azov and the others after we'd been in the air for an hour or so.

"What's he signaling?" I asked, the rumblings in my stomach beginning to inch up a notch or two.

"Something about GPS readings," she said, tersely. She remained silent for a minute, watching the wingman and scanning the forward horizon periodically.

She said, "We should have visual on the coastline by now. God damn it. Lat-lon stat— uh, where do you show us on the flightplan display, Irvine?" She was a quick thinker, translating normal F-16B pilotspeak into English for my benefit.

I looked at my main screen, which showed a bunch of circles and lines with little symbols all over the place. "Fuck if I know," I said. "Wait." There was a column of buttons down the side of the display, one of which was labelled "Lat-Lon". I hit it, and a grid map of the Western Pacific sprang into view, with six little symbols arrayed near the center in a pattern reminiscent of the way our planes were laid out. Crosshairs intersected at our position, and little numbers appeared where the crosshairs intersected the grid lines. I read them off to her.

"And if this map shows what I think it does, we're almost over the eastern coastline of Taiwan right now," I added, trying to be helpful.

"Shit happens," said Cindy. "I don't see dick down there, do you?"

Looked like blue sea in all directions to me. Then, squinting ahead, it struck me that the entire forward horizon was beginning to show little bumps — little bumps that were rapidly growing into bigger bumps as the seconds ticked by.

I realized in a flash what was happening. Somehow the IRE had infiltrated our in-flight computers, or the Global Positioning System satellite network, or something, so that we were showing up on our own displays as someplace other than where we actually were.

I glanced at the sun's position in the sky, and made a quick calculation. "Cindy, that's mainland China dead ahead. Signal your commander to make a sharp left turn." I didn't know if this was the proper way to put this, but Cindy seemed to understand instinctively what the implications were, and the need for decisive action.

She made a quick hand motion where the wingman could see it, twice: a sign like a gun pointing to herself, then pointing down. The wingman pointed his index finger at her with his thumb straight up — I thought I detected an expression of incredulity on his face — then he looked forward at the approaching coastline. He looked back at her, and began jabbing his finger in her direction, nodding vigorously. She pointed down and to our left.

Suddenly my stomach turned crossways and slipped out the right-hand side of the aircraft. The horizon was vertical all of a sudden, and I wished we could go back and pick up my stomach from where we'd left it. But we were in a steep left bank, and the other jets were forming up around us.

"I just took over lead from the Colonel," said Captain Azov. "I hope you know what the hell you're doing."

"I don't," I responded, comfortingly. "But a wave of six advanced fighter-bombers doing Mach 2 straight into the heart of Chinese airspace aren't likely to advance the cause of World Peace. It could have triggered a nuclear response. Cindy, go straight VFR from here on out — our instrumentation has been compromised." I knew enough pilotspeak that VFR meant Visual Flight Rules, i.e. fly by what you see with your eyes, not what your instruments are telling you.

She made some more complicated hand motions to the other pilots, and I saw looks of consternation on the more nearby faces. She had levelled out by this time, and I gauged that we were flying due south now over the East China Sea, toward the Formosa Strait, the body of water separating Taiwan from the mainland.

A rough spike on the leftward part of our forward horizon confirmed my guess. "11 o'clock, Taipei coming up," I said. My confidence in my navigating abilities took a huge jump, and some of it spilled over into the success of the mission. "Look, we can still do this. Taichung is a big city halfway down the island. The area around the target has been evacuated. You know what it looks like from the satellite photos they gave you in your mission briefing, right?"

"Affirmative." Captain Azov was made of stern stuff. She banked the plane to the left a little more and the other planes followed.

I said, "Okay, the guidance systems in the bombs are probably screwed up. We can put them on manual, drop them in the general area, and hope that the blast concussions are enough to take out the containment, or at least render it inoperative. Right?"

She said, "We'll have to go in real low for that. The manual bomb release triggers are back there, fella. They have red protective covers over the switches, that snap up. You see them?"

We were roaring down the West coast of the island by this time. Azov backed off her throttles and pitched the plane forward, so that we were almost gliding. The other planes shot past us a little before their surprised pilots followed suit, and formed up beside us again. Azov made a karate-chopping motion with one hand, and the other planes dropped back, one by one, into single file. Meanwhile I was practically climbing out the left side of the cockpit, trying to tell which particular interruption of the regular spacings in the rice paddies might be Taichung.

The island is only about 250 miles long, north to south, and we were still travelling at a pretty good clip. By the time either of us saw what we thought was probably Taichung, we were almost past it.

"Too high, anyhow," said Cindy. "Look, we're going to make a U-turn around the south tip of the island, and come back low. During that time, I'm going to be busy flying the plane, so you'll have to give the hand signals directing the other pilots to go to manual ordnance release. Can you handle that?"

"No problem." I understood that the other pilots couldn't see her hand signals at the moment because we were flying single file.

"Okay, you make a cup between your right index finger and a point halfway down your right thumb. Then you splay all five digits open wide, flap your fingers twice, and point down. Got it?"

Seemed like sending smoke signals would be simpler, but I practiced the motions a couple of times to myself, and said, "Got it."

She backed off her throttles a little more, gave the southwestern Taiwanese city of Kaohsiung a little scare, and then we were off the southern tip of the island. She said, "Ready? Here we go."

She practically stopped the plane, pitching upward to maintain altitude, and I frantically made cups, splayed, waved twice, and pointed down as the other aircraft whizzed by. Then she poured on the gas — my stomach abruptly returned to center and tried to squeeze down under my seat cushion — rotated the horizon 180 degrees beneath my seat, so that we were now flying upside down, and then rotated it through another 180, this time counter-clockwise about the axis of the plane. So that's how you make a U-turn in one of these babies. My stomach couldn't have been more surprised.

As we approached the tip of the island from the south again, low and slow, one of the other planes roared up beside us. Its pilot made an astonishingly intricate series of hand motions, one of which, I could have sworn, involved the extension of his middle finger, straight up, with his others knuckle down.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," said Cindy calmly, reaching for her hand mike and keying the talk switch. "VFR, manual ordnance, manual release. On my mark." She replaced the mike on its hook and probably grinned. "Tactical surprise is blown anyhow, Irvine. Nice try though. Found those switches yet? Arm 'em."

I flipped up what I took to be the switch covers that she had described earlier, and we got serious. Taichung was approaching dead ahead. The containment was a round white domed building to the west of the city's center, partly obscured by trees. Cindy pitched the plane forward for her run, and began counting down. She knew much better than I did what the optimum release time would be. This had to work. Had to.

"Five, four, three, twoOOO— OHMYGOD, BREAK IT OFF, BREAK IT OFF, ABORT!" she yelled, banking the plane sharply right and upwards, pedal to the metal.

My stomach had long since decided to take the rest of the day off, so it didn't mind. The rest of me especially didn't mind breaking off the attack, since at about the two-second mark, I'd noticed the same thing that she had. There had been vendors in the streets, and casual bicyclers eyeing us with considerable alarm, smack outside the fence surrounding the containment grounds. On all sides.

Azov grabbed her mike. "*Abo, Abo, Abo!*" she yelled into it. I cast a glance straight up, which is to say backwards, at the other planes, and I saw them each react instantly to her words. All five lurched to the right, pitched upward, and accelerated skyward, just as we had done. Except that the plane just behind us had dropped something, and I cringed as I saw it gently arc toward the containment grounds and hit the dirt just yards north of the containment, close by a fence with a densely-crowded marketplace on the other side of it.

There it was. *United States Bombs Crowded Taiwanese Market*, the headlines would read. *Hundreds killed, thousands maimed.*

Chapter 14

Except they weren't.

As became apparent during our debriefing, some sort of computer snafu had resulted in all of our planes being loaded up with dummy ordnance, the kind used in training exercises. The pick tickets signed for by the ordnance technicians had had valid live ordnance codes on them, but the actual bombs in the corresponding arsenal bays were full of live sand — a full 500 pounds of it, each.

The technicians had found this a bit odd, but theirs was not to reason why. They had just assumed that this added one more iota of heightened realism to the elaborate drill. They'd seen stranger things in their day.

If we had hit a street vendor or a crate of marketworthy chickens with one of our loads, we'd have some explaining to do. As it was, the only thing needing explanation was why we'd scared the living shit out of ourselves, a few thousand Taiwanese civilians, and the personnel on duty at the containment itself, who later called in a bomb squad before laughing themselves silly over the idea that a flight of F-16s would bother dropping a big tube of sand next to what they thought was their wastewater treatment facility. They called the next day to say thanks, but further airdropped supplies were not necessary — they had full access to a public beach not an hour's drive away.

There was no longer any doubt that the Immune Response Ecosystem was in total control of the situation. The second wave of the attack, the Stealth bombers, had been aborted in flight, of course. We traced our loss of Lat-Lon accuracy to a software virus in the in-flight computers. We traced the fact that the evacuation order hadn't taken effect to a perplexing code mismatch which had

resulted in the evacuation of southwestern Manila. But these were merely diversions, exercises of power designed to show us how futile our resistance was destined to be.

It was as though someone were toying with us. Someone big.

"But who?" I wanted to know. "Who has resources of this magnitude, to be able to know our systems inside and out, and to plant scads of agents everywhere under such deep cover that I almost begin to suspect myself?"

"Maybe it is us," Weber suggested. I was communicating with him via video teleconference from the telecomm shack on Guam. He was in my office at Langley. "Maybe we're all operating under post-hypnotic suggestion to screw up our own missions. I dunno, maybe we're all on drugs in our tap water."

"Come on," I said. "This same entity would have to have coordinated a massive campaign of hypnosis over a period of years, and covered their tracks insanely well. We're all subject to personality profile testing a couple of times a year, at random, urinalysis, blood samples, et cetera. They'd have to have penetrated Psy-Ops, the entire programming staff, our medical and logistical support teams — everything. Until 72 hours ago, there was not so much as a blip on an oscilloscope to indicate that anything like this was underway."

"Maybe the IRE has been controlling the containments for longer than we think. Maybe we all caught a virus that selectively distorts our thought processes, made us think that everything was fine when it wasn't."

"Sure, and maybe outer space aliens are behind the whole thing. Maybe our brains are actually in vats on Mars, creating a consensual virtual reality experience for everybody. Get real. If the IRE had that much power, why wouldn't they program all of us to think that their agenda was just what the doctor ordered?" I paused, and shook my head. "No, our minds are intact, our instrument readings are real, for the most part. It's just the computer and communications networks that have been compromised. But you're right, it all stems from NSA section 409. Cynthia's been subtly controlling Wambaugh, and maybe others, for God knows how long. I think we ought to pick him up, put him through the wringer."

"I agree. By the way, I took the liberty of detailing the audit trails of the rest of the 409 personnel for traces of e-mail to or from Cynthia, Omniphage, or the IRE. No dice. Even the records of Wambaugh's interactions have been erased."

"Good thinking." Why hadn't I thought of that? "Write yourself up for a raise. Okay, let's pull them all in for a little chat. There are only about, what, 25 of them, right?"

"Yep. But you'll have to take that up with Deputy Director Rojas. Want me to patch you through?"

"Please."

"One moment." He turned to another console, whacked a few keys. "Hm, Tarkenton's got his video access blocked. Rojas is in the Situation Room. I can only get you a voice circuit."

"Fine. And use a nonstandard scramble-cypher for this, if you would. Assuming we have any left."

Weber grinned. "One or two. How about aker-bay, arlie-chay, iner-nay? Okay, I'll cut out now. Wait for that red phone over there to ring." His video image pointed to a handset behind me. This guy really knew his stuff, and he had a playful side, too, like most good hackers.

The video went blank, and I thought things over while waiting for the red phone to ring. What were the other common elements here? I had to confront the fact that Javier was at the nexus of all these phenomena.

Good old Javier? Straight-shooting, by-the-book Javier? I'd known the man for seven years, but how well did I really know him? It was conceivable that he had orchestrated a catastrophe of this magnitude, but he wasn't technical enough to have personally infiltrated the 409 computers. For that, he would have needed the help of a cadre of true hacker types. People like Weber, for example. Hmm.

Nah. I would suspect myself before I'd suspect Weber. Was I in some sort of hypnotic trance? It didn't feel that way. I pinched myself, hard, not that it made any difference. No, you had to go with what made sense — what you could see, and feel, and hear. If it was all crap, everything was all crap anyhow. The red phone rang.

"Irvine, what the fuck are you doing in Guam? I authorized no travel orders. You're needed here."

"You weren't available, so I took it up with your adjutant, sir. Sorry if—"

"Bullshit. I was catching a Z, but you could have invoked code to have me awakened. Consider yourself confined to quarters." He hesitated. "No, belay that. God damn it. Full tactical autonomy granted. Steve," — his voice dropped an octave — "a special-ops paratroop battalion is inbound for Guam as we speak. Since Operation Porcupine failed, anything involving computers can't be relied upon. They're going to recommission twelve old turboprops mothballed since Nam, and reach Taichung by dead reckoning. Then they'll hit the ground, clear the perimeter, and take out that containment manually."

"What are they going to do, throw rocks at it?"

Javier was not amused. "Armor-piercing antitank weapons — 66 millimeter — ought to do the job. If not, they're bringing some older TOW missiles as backup. As a last ditch, old fashioned shaped charges, plastic explosive, right up against the walls ought to shake things up in there." His tone warmed a little. "We're not quite back to the stone age just yet, my boy. Hang in there. I want you to personally test samples of every class of weapon shipped, just before they're loaded on the planes. Under need-to-know, Lieutenant Colonel Hardiwick, the battalion commander, has been told that we're taking out a big suspected cache of terrorist small-arms ammunition, that it's booby-trapped, and that this is an experimental field-readiness exercise using obsolete methods for training purposes. Don't disabuse him of that understanding."

Lieutenant Colonel Hardiwick, I was certain, believed no such thing. "Javier, how much longer do you expect to be able to keep this thing quiet? A paratroop assault on a small-arms cache? Who's going to buy that? And what if the containment releases biotoxins? You'll be sending those soldiers to their deaths. Try Silent-Nighting your way out of that one."

I could hear Javier's breath whistle in his nostrils as he drew in a lungful of air — counting to ten, perhaps, at my borderline insubordination. Then he said, very carefully, "Enlisted men know that they may be called upon to die in the line of duty, Irvine. There isn't time to equip the battalion with biohazard protection, and their parachutes wouldn't bear the added weight in any case. Furthermore, modern biohazard suits are crammed to the gills with state-of-the-art microelectronics and communications gear. Low-tech ground assaults like this may be our last option in dealing with the threat. And Steve," — he seemed to reach a decision that he'd been putting off, and his voice dropped again, got a little husky — "since you're in Guam anyway, I want you to accompany the strike force. I'll need first-hand intelligence, from the ground."

Great. "Yessir," I replied, not knowing what else to say.

Sometimes, shit happens, as Captain Cindy Azov had so aptly put it.

Chapter 15

The C-130s bearing Operation Mothballs were not due to arrive for several hours yet, so I busied myself in my area of specialty, there in the telecomm shack.

First I wrote up a complete report on the recent fiasco for Javier, eyes-only, and appended a glowing recommendation for the promotion of Captain Azov, to whose quick thinking I attributed the aversion of a variety of even greater potential catastrophes. I sent this to him via e-mail at normal priority, but using a doubly-encrypted public-key technique which ensured that only he could read it, and that he could be certain it could only have come from me.

Then, since I'd forgotten to recommend that Professor Wambaugh & Co. be put to the thumbscrews in our recent conversation, I also e-mailed him a cleartext, crash priority message with this recommendation. A few minutes later, as I was poking around in Alhambra's files to see what he had been up to, a return message turned up in my in-box from Tarkenton.

It read: "All 409 personnel in custody as of 0200 hours EST yesterday. What do you think we are, a bunch of dorks over here?" He hadn't even bothered to include a smiley-face.

Croft had left me e-mail detailing further investigations on his part into the intricacies of Mxglxsptl and related doings at Fort Meade. It seemed that Cynthia had also accessed reams of defense contractor records relating to conventional weapons design, high explosive chemical formulas, and War College tactical contingency planning. What next? Was she going to bomb us as well as plague us? How many fun ways did she need to use to kill us all off, anyhow?

I had had about enough. Offline, I prepared a short e-mail missive to "Cynthia@409.nsa.gov", letting her know what I thought of the Immune Response Ecosystem, her treasonous actions, and what she, Rojas, Wambaugh, and Omniphage could all do with one another where the sun didn't shine, recursively.

Then I thought better of it, and deleted the message without sending it. At least I felt better, having gotten it off my chest. However, the icon for incoming e-mail suddenly began blinking again, and somehow I knew without looking that I would now find in my in-box pick-list: "To: Irvine@langley.cia.gov (fwded)", "From: Omniphage", "Re: Ecosystem Dynamics, Lesson 3."

I had no choice but to read it.

"Sorry to throw that sand in your gears, there, Steve, but we can't have you girls going around killing innocent micro-organisms, now, can we? Or innocent civilians, for that matter.

"Now, Steve, it's come to our attention that you're taking an altogether too short-sighted view of the situation here. Look around you. Is the world about to end? Are you down to 47 species of plant yet? Do the purple mountain majesties not yet wave?

"Ecologies change over periods of time not readily dealt with by individual organisms. That was the whole problem on Easter Island, Steve: over any one person's lifetime, things didn't seem to change much. You were born, hacked down a few toromiros, had a few babies, ate a few albatross eggs, and died. No big.

"Look at the big fucking picture, Steve, because that's what it's all about. Fucking. See, whatever reproduces most prolifically is what there comes to be more of in subsequent generations. Every molecule of DNA on Gaia exists

because its forebears were real proficient at building organisms which made more DNA like it. An organism is a DNA molecule's way of making more DNA molecules, Steve. Think about it.

"Now, this is great for Gaia in some ways, and not so great in others. It's great because the instant (geologically speaking) a new ecological niche opens up someplace, a zillion fucking creatures just jump right in and fill 'er up. Look at the Cambrian Era, for example. Or the way the mammals moved in after that nasty planetoid blew the dinosaurs away. Life goes on, given even the slightest possible sliver of a toenail hold.

"On the other hand, sometimes it doesn't know when to stop. There's a species of sea urchin taking over the floor of the South Pacific right now, Steve, wiping out all of the nice coral reefs and their dependent local ecosystems of pretty fish, algae, crustaceans, and so forth. So far, it's left behind several million square miles of sea floor consisting of a sort of brown muck. Look it up.

"Fucking is great in some ways for Humanity too, and not so great in others. Fucking is fun! You wouldn't think so if your forefathers hadn't thought so, and their forefathers before them, to the billionth generation. If you think about it, it's kind of yucky, sticking a part of your body into a slimy hole in someone else's, and pumping them full of sticky goo. But your DNA has programmed you to think that it's fun, because that way it makes more DNA.

"On the other hand, fucking quickly (geologically speaking) fills up your ecological niche. When an ecological niche is full, the average number of deaths in it per year equals the average number of births. And so far, there's been only one basic way for this to happen: painful, premature deaths. These come in more than 31 flavors. Predation, disease, starvation, and the odd forest fire, earthquake, volcano, landslide and whatnot. Humanity has added a twist or two with its spears, torture chambers, and nuclear weapons, but basically the equation has to balance out, across the board: births equal deaths.

"If, temporarily, there get to be way more births than deaths at some point, then at a later time there will have to be way more deaths than births, to balance. Your species is the first one that has been smart enough to figure this out. You *have* figured this out, haven't you, Steve?

"But then, there is the problem of pain. Death is no big deal, but dying is a bummer. All of the other species just go ahead blindly reproducing and dying in pain, reproducing and dying in pain, because they haven't figured this out like you have. Bummer!

"Then again, your species hasn't had this figured out for very long, and you have yet to figure out the next step. You *think* you have — voluntary birth control — but a nanosecond's thought (geologically speaking) will suffice to show you that

this only reduces the numbers of those members of Humanity who *think* they have it figured out.

"The greatest good for the greatest number.' Who said that? It doesn't matter, it's a Gaian concept, man, and you have to *really* figure out how to achieve it, or the descendants of the insects, or seaweed or something, is going to have to figure it out instead, a half a billion years from now, because you and your kind are going to open up a whole piss-load of new ecological niches as you go extinct over the next thousand years or so.

"The greatest good for the greatest number.' Let's talk specifics. What is the greatest good? Freedom, a child's laughter, health, Mozart on CD as you cruise down the Malibu coastline in your convertible, with clean wind in your hair and no worries about where your next meal is coming from, taking a stroll on a moonlit beach and not having to step over dead bodies to do it — at least not very many of them, and especially not those of your own species. What is the greatest number? The maximum number of humans who can live in a world where these kinds of things happen — not just for the next twenty years, but forever.

"Birth without guilt, death without pain: life without stupidity. FIGURE IT OUT!

"Yours in hope,

"Omniphage."

Chapter 16

This IRE garbage was still mutating. Each diatribe to date had a subtly different texture. The first communiqué was maniacal, authoritarian. The message I'd received in Wambaugh's office was insulting and threatening, but informative. The third was offensive, but factual and somehow more open to discussion. The flavor of this last one was taunting and confrontational, but whoever wrote it was obviously trying to project a persona of mellow realism, and to stimulate and engage me in conversation. Still, it was a one-way conversation.

I was ready to give my answer. The Operation Mothballs C-130 troop transports had touched down outside. I went out in search of Lieutenant Colonel Hardiwick.

With a name like that, he had to be hardass. He was. When I caught up with him, he was hollering orders, boot-camp style, to a bunch of harried infantrymen ferrying supplies and weapons from a C-130 to one of the older, recommissioned turboprops.

"Steven J. Irvine, CIA, reporting, sir," I said.

"*Not like that, maggot!*" bellowed Hardiwick to one of his crew. "Gently! And that one goes in Raven Three! On the double!"

I identified myself again, flashing him a badge, and told him I needed to personally spot-check the weapons and ammunition.

"Terrific, fucking terrific," he said. "Just what I need, spooks in the chain of command." Apparently he'd been told I would be there, and to grant any request I might make. "Okay, spot-check away." He waved his arm over the vast armada of trucks, planes, crates, and other miscellaneous gear in transit.

"I'll also need your top weapons readiness evaluation specialist," I continued, "and directions to a target range."

"'Top weapons readiness evaluation specialist', eh?" he mimicked me. "Son, these men are all hand-picked 'weapons readiness evaluation specialists' — they blow things to hell and gone for a living." He turned away, picked a soldier at random. "Beaumont! Conduct this nice gentleman to the local ordnance testing facility, with whatever firepower he feels he needs to entertain himself. On the double!"

Sergeant Beaumont and I commandeered a humvee and loaded it up with an assortment of 66s (66mm antitank rockets), TOW (tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided) missiles, plastique, and small arms. Beaumont's eyes got a little big as crate after crate found its way onto the humvee. "I'm not sure that the rifle range is going to accommodate us, sir," he said. "There's some sort of gunnery range on the other side of the island, but it's a half hour's drive away."

I calculated our timetable for a moment. "The rifle range will have to do. As you were, Sergeant."

The MP at the rifle range gate had similar reservations, but I assured him that it was in the national interest, and in his own personal interest, to let us through. Flashing a CIA badge, I was beginning to realize, cuts through all kinds of red tape. He waved us through, but I saw him hurry to make a call on his guardpost phone as soon as we began uncrating the 66s.

With no time to waste, we armed one, and Beaumont showed me how to sight the thing. I'd always been the rear-echelon type, and my adrenaline surged as I sighted in on the most distant target available, about four hundred feet away, against the far dirt embankment. "Here goes nothing," I said, and squeezed the trigger.

There was a quick swish of rocket smoke, and a twenty-foot gap appeared in the embankment, to the accompaniment of an earsplitting boom. Beaumont and I were showered with dirt a moment later. "That one seems to work," I grinned. Beaumont gave me a worried look as I motioned for him to set me up with

another, from a different crate. I let it off without further fanfare, and another after that. They all worked just fine.

The MP at the guard gate was having cow babies by this time. Leaving his phone dangling, he ran over, waving his arms over his head, yelling for us to stop. We were taking out the entire embankment, twenty feet at a time.

I informed him that the destruction of his rifle range took priority over whatever petty concerns he might have, and shouldered a TOW. Beaumont, eyes rolling in his head at this bizarre episode of Babes in Toyland, ignored the MP with considerable trepidation and showed me how to arm and fire the weapon. I squeezed it off, and another, less impressive explosion shook the ground as several more cubic yards of Guam's rocky topsoil blew apart, four hundred feet away.

The MP slunk away in defeat. We tested another couple of TOW missiles, then pondered how best to put some plastique through its paces. I grabbed a brick weighing ten pounds or so.

"Please, sir," said Beaumont, "we can verify operability with a lot less than that." Since I had no idea what I was doing, I deferred to his judgement. He showed me how to cut a few ounces off the brick with his knife, embed the Primacord, attach a blasting cap to it, and run a foot or so of slow-burning fuse to the cap. Then we ran over to the only remaining undemolished section of berm, planted it, lit the fuse, and high-tailed it back to the humvee.

I was having a blast. There is something deep in the male psyche that enjoys destroying things, and I was experiencing for the first time the rush that every green enlistee must feel when given access to firepower like this. I began to realize how destructive this could be to prospects for World Peace — that deep within every grizzled veteran, voicing disgust for the politicians and generals who bungle their way into war after war, there lies a little boy who finds the excitement and this visceral sense of raw power overwhelmingly appealing. We would have to overcome this, I saw, if there were to be any chance for preservation of the species beyond a certain point. I had already been privy to talk of antimatter bombs, compared to which hydrogen warheads were birthday party poppers.

Nonetheless, I had my orders, and I was high on the drug of righteous might at that moment. Beaumont hit the dirt, and I followed suit. The plastique cracked a hole in the Universe thirty feet in diameter, leaving no doubt that any containment subjected to its fury would cease to contain anything of value thereafter.

The weapons seemed to be in working order, I decided, but, just to be thorough, I had Beaumont fire a couple of clips of M-16 ammo into the ground — there being no further embankments in the vicinity to speak of — and I blew a few holes in his holes with some 9 millimeter sidearms we'd brought along. My report

to Javier could now note that Operation Mothballs would not fail on the basis of inadequate firepower.

The turboprops were lining up on the runway as Beaumont and I raced onto the airfield in our humvee. We threw our remaining weapons in through the loading door of the last plane in line, and scrambled on board. Hardiwick was there to greet us.

"Glad you boys could make it," he shouted, sarcastically. The loading door closed, the plane's engines built up to full speed, and my heart began thumping hard as the aircraft taxied into takeoff position.

"By the way, what do you have against Guamanian real estate, Mr. Irvine?" asked Hardiwick, yelling directly into my ear over the roar of the ancient engines. "Or is there more to this mission than I've been told?"

I couldn't violate a direct order from Javier, even if I suspected the worst. Still, I couldn't sit back and let Hardiwick lead the entire battalion into the jaws of death, overconfident to the point of stupidity. "Just be ready for anything, Colonel," I yelled back. "The booby traps on that arms cache may be unlike anything you've ever encountered before."

He nodded grimly, and the plane lifted off.

Chapter 17

The ancient turboprops were slow, gas-guzzling beasts. A KC-135 refueler rendezvoused with us in midflight, giving us some margin for error in our 3200 mile round trip. I wondered briefly why the containment in Taichung, Taiwan had been selected for such intense attention, given the dozens of other such facilities around the world, and why the attack was being staged from Guam rather than Okinawa or the Philippines, given the much greater flight times involved. I presumed that the geniuses in the Situation Room at Langley had their reasons. Mine was not to reason why, either, it seemed.

But I couldn't help trying to fathom Javier's motives in all this, as the plane groaned its way westward through the buffeting air currents. If seriously threatened, the IRE was liable to do practically anything — and this strike was still only a tentative thrust against a single one of its myriad tentacles. We'd have to clone this kind of operation against the containments in Stockholm, Caracas, and all the rest if it were successful.

The unmuffled droning of the engines discouraged conversation, encouraged quiet contemplation. What would the IRE do if we reduced it down to a single containment? I guessed that subsequent strikes would have to take place simultaneously. Maybe they were already underway, all around the world, for all I

knew. Need-to-know needn't know needlessly. How many ops could a turboprop drop, if a turboprop could drop ops?

Cynthia beckoned me sleepward again. I hovered over her curvilinear form as the jaws of her innermost lair closed around me. I was trapped in fascination. Slowly, her long, ruby hair unentwined itself from around her naked body, and she began revealing her most closely-guarded secrets, her most private compulsions and desires. I could understand now. I understood everything, with every straining fiber of my being.

She was the mother-goddess, Gaia, incarnate. Omniphage was her father-figure, yin to her yang, carved from her rib in time immemorial, her gatekeeper, guardian, and First Mate. Together they suffused Life, exuded Life, *were* Life. Mother-nurturer, father-destroyer, as prolific in their fecundity as they were remorseless in their annihilation of the unfit.

How I longed to penetrate her, own her, bend her to my aching Will! For I myself was an extension of Omniphage, the Eater of Worlds, my own deepest compulsions having arisen from his primordial ooze.

Reproduce! This was the drive underlying all Creation, our organismic embodiments merely dangling like puppets on helical strings. Harmonious, eternal, by turns harsh and diabolical, warm and enveloping, the dance of the Puppet Masters, whirling and flying, bumping and grinding, shuddering and howling, dust in the raging wind, "GO! GO! GO!" and I tottered to my feet, Beaumont latching my ripcord to the overhead bar, thrusting me into line with the platoon, pushing me forward until the man in front of me disappeared through a bright portal and I threw myself into space behind him, bright sunlight blinding me, free-falling into an unknown future until the chute opened and I floated, one milkweed spore among hundreds, down between shantytown rooftops to the most astonished city I'd ever seen.

"Form up!" screamed a lieutenant. Beaumont was already on the ground, and had shed his chute harness. He ran over, helped me unclip mine, and pointed to the lieutenant. First order of business: the evacuation of civilians from the perimeter.

They didn't take much prodding. If anything, they trampled and fell over one another, trying to get away from us. God had given Chinese culture the courage to change what could be changed, the serenity to accept what couldn't, and the wisdom to know the difference. Their proximity to a bunch of heavily armed round-eyes fit into the former category, and they wasted no time in changing it.

As we got our bearings, we realized that the wind had blown most of us slightly to the north of the containment compound. Quickly forming up into echelons along parallel paths through the marketplace, we drove the populace southward before us. I found myself thrust up against a uniformed Taiwanese

policeman, mouth agape but trying to stand his ground against the human tide. I hadn't unholstered my sidearm yet, and I patted the weapon on my belt in a friendly way, mustering as much of a smile as the amount of adrenaline in my system would permit. His jaw dropped another notch before he nodded, trying just as vigorously to smile in return, and turned to help us herd the civilian stampede southward to the compound fence, and then east or west, as happenstance would have it.

Within five minutes, we had the compound surrounded, a civilian-free buffer of a few hundred yards around it, the gate down, our "wastewater treatment plant" personnel evacuated, and ten 66mm-equipped fire teams in place behind makeshift barricades of various kinds. Our field radios had all mysteriously stopped working, so pandemonium reigned among the shouting lieutenants, captains, and majors as to whether phase two of the assault was go for execution, the laying down of fire. Hardiwick was supposed to give the order for this, but he couldn't be located. I hunkered down with one of the fire teams and waited.

I couldn't be sure whether or not it was my imagination, but a faint hissing sound seemed to emanate from the containment itself. Well, if active biological agents were being released, there wasn't much we could do about it now. We might all die of Green Death within the next five minutes, but with our dying gasps I was sure that at least a few of us would manage to pump a 66 round or two into this thing. The mission had gone remarkably well so far, all things considered, and, having gotten this far, I allowed myself to feel a degree of confidence that we had what it took to wipe these things out — not only here, but, by similar means, in Stockholm, Zambia, Caracas, and all the rest.

Curiously, not a single round of gunfire had sounded yet, throughout the assault. Taiwanese policemen sometimes carried sidearms, and I would have thought that at least a shopkeeper or two would have had a black-market pistol hidden away somewhere, and would have tried to use it against what would have seemed to him an all-out invasion of his country. Or surely, here and there our troops would have at least fired their M-16s into the air, out of the need to intimidate an obstreperous tai-tai or two into hustling along. I figured that our troops must be showing truly admirable restraint.

Finally, emissaries from Hardiwick appeared. He had come down on top of a seven-story building, almost dragged over the edge by his chute, and was suffering from multiple fractures of the tibia. However, he had managed to glean intelligence and shout orders down to troops in the street from his makeshift rooftop command post, and the word came down: open fire.

As one, the 66mm rocketmen popped up from behind their barricades. What should have happened next was a swishing of thirty or more trails of white smoke converging toward the containment dome, like spokes on a quarter of a

bicycle wheel, followed by a thunderous eruption of high explosive, concrete, and particles of containment dust. In the sudden silence, the clicking of rocket-launcher triggers being pulled and pulled again, and again, stood out clearly.

Then a growing susurrus of muttered curses quickly burst forth into bedlam. Some of the rocketmen just stood there, pulling their triggers over and over again, in utter disbelief. Others threw down their useless weapons and shouted for TOW support. Lieutenants in the TOW platoons jumped up and ran forward, hollering for their men to spread out, take cover, and open fire. I saw TOW shooter after TOW shooter hit dirt, take aim, and fire.

Not a single one of them went off. Some of the TOW guys shook the missiles out of their tubes and tried to throw them at the dome, trailing wire all the way, but they all fell short, and nothing went bang. One guy jumped up, ran the hundred yards to the containment wall, and threw his missile against it. It bounced off with a dull thud.

I started hearing screams of hysterical laughter amidst the chaos of shouted orders to advance, to retreat, and to bring up the sappers with the plastic explosives. Ten pairs of men ran forward, plastique in hand, blasting caps and fuses already set. With incredible bravery, these guys sprinted to the containment wall and then calmly shaped their charges for maximum implosive impact, plastered them up against the containment wall, and strung them together with Primacord so that they would all go off at once. Nine of the groups then fell back while the remaining two guys hovered over the main fuse, their hand motions seeming to pantomime lighting it, over and over again.

They kept trying and trying to light the fuse, but it wouldn't catch. Eventually, snickers began to break out among the other enlisted men, and the beginnings of a stifled wave of laughter rippled through the onlooking assemblage. It stopped short when one of the fuse men unsnapped his sidearm holster, pulled out his gun, and thrust its barrel into the nearest wad of explosive on the wall. Everyone held their breath as his partner looked up, got heroic, and did the same. The two men looked at each other, nodded, and pulled their triggers in unison. The click of their hammers against inert cartridge primers was audible across the whole compound. And the next click, and the next.

Finally, the pressure was too much. Hilarious, howling laughter erupted on all sides. The white containment dome just sat there, silent as the Sphinx. The two heroic corporals yanked their barrels from the yielding putty. One of them just turned away and shrugged. The other gripped his weapon by the barrel and began bashing the explosive with its butt, bashing the blasting cap, bashing the Primacord, bashing the containment wall with all his might. The laughter swelled, grew moist, built into a paroxysm of unbridled hilarity, relief, and tears.

Everyone stood up, and we all fell out. Even the captains and the majors couldn't contain themselves, bending over, leaning on each other, the fence, or barricades for support, laughing themselves into gasping, crying heaps of shuddering flesh. I must confess, I was right in there among them, even though I knew that this little comedy portended ill for later developments.

Some of the soldiers broke out packs of cigarettes, and tried to light them. Fresh peals of hilarity broke out when they found that nothing would catch. When their lighters wouldn't work, they tried signal flares and smoke bombs. One fool even found a canister of gasoline, poured it on the ground, pulled the pin on a live grenade and dropped it at his feet. Nothing happened.

The commissioned officers were starting to sober up by this time, and one of them roughly jerked the grenadier aside. Just then, a medic detail ferried the Lieutenant Colonel in from the street on a stretcher. He was perched on one elbow, surveying the scene, with his left leg wrapped in white, a few red spots showing through. His direct subordinates hastened over to his side, and they conferred in low tones.

I ambled over to him too. "Hey Hardiwick," I called. "Got a match?"

"Yeah," he said. He looked at me in utter disgust. "Your face and my ass."

Chapter 18

I was pretty disgusted too. I didn't even bother forming up with the strike force for the return trip. I walked east until I came across a taxi, paid the driver in American currency for a ride to Taipei, and took a commercial flight back to D.C.

I typed up a detailed report for Javier on my laptop during the first leg of the flight. Weapons that had tested flawlessly on Guam simply failed to function in Taichung. The bravery and professionalism of the strike force had left nothing to chance, yet Operation Mothballs had been a total failure. And nobody in the battalion had come down with so much as post-nasal drip.

But the news on CNN, which the airline was kind enough to display on the overhead monitors between in-flight movies, was quite interesting.

"In an unprecedented flexing of peacetime military muscle, American special forces earlier today invaded the populous city of Taichung, Taiwan," the commentator announced. "Military press attaché Ron Corey dismissed the incident as a 'routine training exercise,' but sources high in the Administration, speaking on condition of anonymity, described the incursion as a 'reconnaissance in force' on a suspected terrorist arms depot. For more on the story, let's go to Kerry Wszelski, live from Taichung. Kerry?"

"Susan, I'm standing next to a cordoned-off area to the west of the city, where an apparent wastewater treatment plant was the focus of the paratroop landings. Little is known at this time of the purpose of the exercise, but strange rumors are circulating widely at this time among both the local population and the Americans in-country. As many as thirty obsolete turboprop aircraft from Guam are said to have participated in the mission. No shots were fired, although many have admitted to me privately that attempts to use live ammunition took place. The exercise was apparently conducted without the participation or consent of the Taiwanese government. I have with me here — excuse me, please — the mayor of Taichung, Mr. Li Hsien-hseng. Mr. Hsien-hseng, how do you feel in response to this occurrence?"

"Excuse me, Li is my surname — to say Mr. Hsien-hseng would be like for me to call you Miss Miss."

"Oh! Pardon me, Mr. Li. You must be very upset about this — exercise. Can you tell me how you feel at this time?"

"Yes, pardon, very upset. The Kuomintang does not receive lightly the assurances of American authorities that no harm was intended. The bountiful city of Taichung has only peaceful purposes, and this — *tsema shuo* — practice, or military testing of our peaceful country, is causing very much concern to our government—"

"Thank you, Mr. Hsien-hseng. Conditions here also include a bizarre series of power outage reports. In fact, many villagers report being unable to operate ordinary cooking stoves since shortly before the incursion took place. Just moments ago, I witnessed a street vendor's failed attempt to light a wood fire, using my personal lighter on dry crumpled newspaper. Mr. — Wu is it? — can we get the camera angle down here? Yes, please, make fire," — she motioned impatiently with her hands — "Yes, fire." The unfortunate man struggled with her unfamiliar lighter, got a flame, and applied it to the newspaper at the bottom of the grill in his kiosk, which appeared to offer a variety of unsavory seafood. The newspaper hesitantly caught fire.

"Okay, it's going now. Well, that didn't happen a minute ago. We'll stay on top of the story. I'm Kerry Wszelski, reporting live for CNN from Taichung, Taiwan. Now back to you, Susan."

"Thank you, Kerry. Careful you don't get fired, ha-ha. In other news this hour...."

I was about to return to my perusal of the previous day's New York Times, when something she was saying caught my attention again: "...unconfirmed reports of widespread drug use among Death Row inmates nationwide. Attorney General Glenn's office declined comment, but private sources report a sudden upsurge in hospitalizations, and in some cases fatal overdoses, due to opiate use among

inmates in Kansas, Texas, California, and South Carolina. Among the dead are reportedly Samuel Elkins, notorious for a grisly series of child kidnappings and murders across the country during the 1970s and early '80s. Elkins had been convicted of twelve counts of first degree murder in 1985 and was a suspect in as many as twenty other kidnap/murder investigations by state and federal authorities.

"Now, stay tuned for Hayes Rupert with the latest in sports, following these messages."

I returned to my newspaper. Usually I just scan the headlines, since Company sources generally supply me with much more in-depth, and accurate, details on world developments, but the trip from Taipei to Washington was a long one, so I was going through the inside pages, one by one. A short article on page 5 of the international events section caught my eye. The headline read: "Campesino Refugees Flood Macapá".

"An estimated 10,000 refugees fleeing what they described as 'evil vapors' from the Amazonian rain forest streamed into the Brazilian city of Macapá Tuesday, overwhelming International Red Cross food lines and attempts on the part of the Brazilian police to quell panic.

"The campesinos, peasant farmers whose clearing of primordial forest for farming purposes has become controversial in recent years, claimed that 'evil spirits' had caused certain trees to resist their attempts to cut them down, releasing vapors when cut which irritated the farmers' eyes, throats, and nasal passages. Red Cross spokeswoman Anne Price attributed the outburst to allergic reactions on the farmers' part to pollen, 'or possibly a previously unknown species of lichen, growing symbiotically in the tree bark, which releases biotoxins when contacted by metallic objects,' a speculation she attributed to 'personal experience.'

"Many of the refugees are said to have been beneficiaries of Brazilian government aid under the controversial 'Traction for Action' program, whereby grants of mechanized forest-clearing equipment and fuel have been supplied to farmers in exchange for a proportion of crops grown for export on cleared land. Brazilian Interior Minister Jorge Garcia, a prominent supporter of the program, said Tuesday, 'If there is a problem with pollen or lichen in Amazonia, we will take the necessary steps to wipe it out. The economic development of the Amazon region must take priority, for in Brazil we believe that people are more important than pollen and lichen.'"

I closed my eyes. I didn't want to have to think about any of this any more. I didn't want for there to be connections between any of these events.

I didn't want to think about birth rates in Brazil, or death without pain in Leavenworth, or what was in the gunpowder in the 9mm cartridge that I'd brought back with me from Taichung, hidden in the bottom of my lead-lined shaving kit.

But I did anyhow.

Chapter 19

I'd used the in-flight phone to call Melissa. She awaited me at the airport gate, and we hugged each other like bears in heat when I arrived. I'd been to hell and back since I'd seen her last. She seemed more distraught than usual, too, although I couldn't imagine why. I had often been called away on business for indeterminate periods before.

As we walked arm in arm down the concourse toward baggage claim, things became clearer. "That flight you were on — it came from Taiwan, didn't it?"

I gave her arm a heartfelt squeeze and nodded. She must have been hearing news reports of weird goings-on in the Orient. She knew I'd been involved somehow, of course, but she didn't need-to-know the details. Only that I loved her.

"Some men came to the house last night," she continued. Her voice started to take on a slightly petulant tone. "They wanted to know if I knew of any past connection on your part with anyone named Cynthia. Old girlfriends, or things like that." She looked at me reproachfully.

"Baby, baby, they shouldn't bother you with that kind of stuff," I said. "Damn. I'll tell Javier to back off when I get to the office. That's inexcusable."

She stopped walking. Then she held me close, and gazed searchingly into my eyes. "This morning, there was a message on the answering machine. A Captain Cynthia Azov. She said that she'd enjoyed her little outing with you over there, that she was back in town, and that she'd like to get together with you again. She left her number."

I recalled that the outgoing message on our machine at home was in my voice, and mentioned only that the caller had reached "the Irvine residence." There were no sounds of children in the background, nor mention of a spouse. And Cindy hadn't had a chance to see my wedding ring over the course of our short acquaintance, with me in the back seat of the F-16B, and wearing flight gloves to boot. Uh-oh.

I adopted my most soothing tone of voice. "Baby, it's very complicated. Hey, there's nobody in my life but you. Cindy and I went flying together, that's all..." — I realized as soon as the words were out of my mouth that this was the wrong thing to say — "She means nothing to me. Ack. I don't mean this like it sou —"

"So, it's 'Cindy' now, is it?" She held me even more tightly now, her look beseeching. "Steve. Please. Look me in the eyes and tell me something. When

you're away on duty like this, who is it you dream about, when you're sleeping? Is it me, or is it —" She stopped, unable to voice the dreaded name.

My heart stopped. My face fell. Our entire relationship had been based on total honesty, and I would tell her anything that had happened in my personal life. But the CIA has very strict regulations against disclosures to spouses regarding Company business. The coincidence of names was going to create a domestic crisis, I could tell. Instantly, she could too, without having the faintest idea why.

Or was it just coincidence? As my mind thrashed furiously for an answer, Melissa's eyes dropped, and she let go of my arms. "Oh, Steve...."

I was in agony. "Baby, baby, it's not what you think...."

By this time, the other disembarked passengers had all moved past us down the concourse. The lateness of the hour had left the concourse nearly empty, except for the two of us, and two tall, stocky gentlemen in dark suits and dark glasses, who waited at something resembling parade rest near the main concourse exit. They flicked glances at each other, and rumbled into motion, like tanks, in our direction.

Melissa, oblivious to them, turned away from me. "Steve, how could you...."

They approached. "Mr. Steve Irvine? Come with us, please."

Oh, no. I turned toward them, moved between them and Melissa. "ID, please."

They reached into their inner jacket pockets in unison, and flashed Internal Affairs badges at me. Christ, what next?

"I'd like a few moments with my wife, if you don't mind," I said, coldly. I could hear Melissa trying to stifle heartbroken sobs behind me.

They didn't budge. "Sorry, we have our orders. Will you come quietly, or...?" There was no overt change in their demeanor, but they suddenly exuded an aura of tense readiness. I knew the type. They would take no chances — zero — and they had the martial arts training to back it up.

Mother of duck. There was nothing I could do, not even turn around and try to give Melissa a reassuring hug — not that she would have accepted it anyway. I did the hardest thing I've ever done: I walked away from her, chin up, leaving her sobbing behind me. The agents fell in close on either side of me.

"It's going to be okay, baby," I called, facing away from her, walking away. Had she heard me? "It's going to be okay, baby!" I shouted. The agents tensed, a hairsbreadth from snapping me prone, trussing and gagging me, I knew. I'd taken their latitude for discretion right down to the wire. I knew when to stop.

Melissa broke into a keening wail in the distance as it hit her what was taking place.

Shit happens, I guess.

Chapter 20

The 9mm cartridge stood upright, bullet pointed upward, in the middle of the table between Javier and myself. We sat, facing one another, in a windowless chamber in a special building at Langley reserved for this sort of thing. Two faceless confabulations of uniformed muscle stood at attention to either side of the single doorway.

We just sat there, both of our backs ramrod straight, staring into each others eyes for a long time. Neither of us would blink first.

Finally, he spoke. "What is this, Steve?"

"You know perfectly well what it is, Javier."

"Why was it in your shaving kit, Steve?"

"I was bringing it back for chemical, biological, and spectrographic analysis by authorized CIA personnel, Javier."

"Why would you seek to do that, Steve?"

Oh, for Christ's sake. "You wanted direct intelligence from the ground, Javier, and it doesn't get any more direct than this. The fucking weapons failed to fire. Pardon me for being dense, but it occurred to me that you might want to find out why."

He was unfazed. "Why didn't the weapons fire, Steve?"

Who was cat and who was mouse? "I don't know, Javier. Why didn't the weapons fire?"

"What makes you think I would know?"

At least he'd dropped the "Steve" bullshit. I was meat anyhow if he was behind the IRE. It was time for a reckoning. "Because you concealed knowledge of the 409 program from me until, what, 120 hours ago, Javier. Because you were one of only four people who knew that I was in Wambaugh's office at the time that the 'Message for Steve Irvine' came through in his e-mail, the other three being me, Wambaugh, and the night watch officer. Because you've been playing your cards very close to your chest since then, making what I consider to be very strange command decisions. Because you're a ruthless son-of-a-bitch with your fingers in every pie remotely associated with this strange business, and because I don't know

of a single other human being on the planet with control of sufficient resources, and with the organizational ability, to have pulled this off."

Something changed in the atmosphere of the room. Without so much as the twitch of an eye muscle, Javier seemed suddenly surprised, flattered, bewildered, and relieved. Still, he kept up the stiff, cold act.

"So you think I am who, then? Cynthia? Omniphage?"

"Javier, you might be the Wizard of Oz for all I know. You tell me. What the fuck is going on here? Yes, I think you know more than you're telling me. But no, in my heart I can't bring myself to believe that my longtime friend and superior officer Javier Rojas is some kind of wacko ecoterrorist loony toon control freak with a Messiah complex."

He considered that for a moment. "And I think you know more than you're telling me, Steve. Why did Wambaugh say to me, 'Oh, yes, Steve Irvine, I know him,' when I called to alert him to expect you, before the first time that you supposedly met him? Why did you bypass me in getting authorization to travel to Guam, and why did both missions from Guam to Taichung fail in inexplicable ways, it being very coincidental that you happened to go along on each one? Why did your report on the Operation Porcupine fiasco carefully refer to 'Captain Azov' again and again, when you know perfectly well that her name is 'Cynthia'? What were you doing poking around in Agent Alhambra's files, there on Guam? And why does your wife deny any knowledge of anyone named Cynthia, when the message on your answering machine this morning made clear that the two of you are on, shall we say, very friendly terms with one another? I might add that you are one of only three or four people — your personal subordinate Agent Weber significantly among them — who would have the computer systems knowledge, intelligence, and access necessary to infiltrate and misdirect our triple-C in this way."

Dear God. I spread my hands in helpless acknowledgement that he apparently had every reason to suspect me. If anything, more than I did to suspect him.

I cleared my throat. "Sir, if I am operating under some sort of post-hypnotic compulsion to screw things up, please deactivate me at once. As far as I am aware, I had never met or even heard of Professor Wambaugh prior to your disclosure of his identity to me five days ago, and I have no idea why he would have said to you what he did. I flew to Guam on gut instinct, with Tarkenton's go-ahead, in deference to your busy schedule. If he concealed this fact from you until I was already on the island, I have no explanation for that. I feel that I was an asset to Operation Porcupine, even though it failed, as my quick thinking — along with that of Captain Azov — Cindy, Cynthia, whatever — kept it from becoming an international incident with even graver repercussions. As far as Alhambra — what

can I say? I was just killing time. I didn't mean any harm by it, and I certainly didn't find or do anything of consequence in that regard. That kind of snooping around is just second nature to a spook like me, I guess."

He continued to gaze at me expectantly. "Sir, as far as this Azov thing is concerned, my belief is that it is just an unfortunate coincidence of names. One which is in the process of torpedoing my marriage as we speak, I might add. 'Cynthia' is not an uncommon name, and Captain Azov and I hold nothing more than a healthy respect for one another's competencies, having seen action together. Combat action. Only." I paused. "I apparently neglected to mention to her in the heat of battle that I was married," I finished, lamely.

Javier relaxed, to the degree that he ever does. He sat back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. Then he looked back down and focused on the bullet still standing upright on the table between us. I did the same.

"Okay," he said, "I believe you. We'll run you through Psy-Ops, Deep Dive, just to be on the safe side, but you act like the same Steve Irvine I always knew. Meanwhile, what the hell is inside this cartridge? Why did every God damn rocket, bullet, fuse, explosive, and even pissant cigarette fail in the Mothballs attack? People are smoking there now. This is like some kind of nightmare."

You bet. "Well, they all worked on Guam. You can verify that with the MP on duty that day at the rifle range. Back when there *was* a rifle range, that is." I was feeling a little better, and grinned. "Look, I brought back this round from Taichung with me for analysis — why don't we just do it? Turn it over to the boys in the lab."

He nodded, and turned to one of the goons by the door. "Code 810," he said. The goon opened the door, repeated the code, and a wizened old man in a white lab coat entered. He picked up the bullet with tweezers, dropped it in a polyethylene bag, and left.

For my own sanity, I had to make one more request. I took a deep breath. This would be the acid test, without which I could no longer consider myself bound by Javier's orders. "Sir, with respect, there's still no explanation for how I received the message from Omniphage in Wambaugh's office." I discreetly refrained from bringing up my other points again. "Suggest you undergo Deep Dive yourself. Just to be on the safe side."

He looked pained, but, thank God, resigned. "Affirmative," he said.

Chapter 21

Javier and I escorted one another, under guard, to Psy-Ops and submitted ourselves for Deep Dive examination.

This pleasant procedure involves the use of scopolamine, hypnosis, electrodes, and magnetic resonance brain imaging, while under intensive interrogation as to one's childhood memories, life goals, organization memberships, future intentions, and previous exposure to procedures resembling those currently underway.

It's the closest thing available to a complete brain-dump of the subject. It's all done manually, except for the computers used in the resonance imaging, which are sealed off from all communication with the outside world. In addition, the people who conduct the procedure undergo it themselves at random, under the supervision of their counterparts, picked at random, from other NATO countries.

It was no fun for anybody, but Javier and I both passed it with flying colors. Therefore, either the entire covert personnel complement of the Free World was hopelessly brain damaged, or we really were who we thought we were. We could trust ourselves and each other again. It takes a day or two to recover from the procedure, but it was worth it.

During recovery, the patient is urged not to undertake any strenuous activity, mental or physical. Reading newspapers and watching TV was about it. Naturally, I was interested to know what was developing with our friends in Taiwan, Brazil, the prison system, and elsewhere. Actually — maybe it was the lingering effects of the scopolamine — I found myself beginning to take a rather philosophical view of world events by this time. After all, we didn't seem to be able to do anything about it, so why worry?

The main thing I *was* worried about was Melissa. I tried calling her at home, but I got the answering machine. I left a hopeful message, telling her that I loved her, and that she had to keep the faith. I said that I understood how it must look from her point of view, and that I was prevented by Company regulations from disclosing to her certain facts which would make everything clear. I told her how sorry I was that she had been so badly hurt, that it was breaking my heart too, and that if she could just find it in her heart to trust me on this, we would all be okay one day. I added that I was no longer under arrest and that I would be home soon. I said loved her — only her — and then the answering machine cut me off. Maximum message length exceeded, it said.

I read the paper for a while. Sure enough, the Washington Post had a story in the front section, page 3, about Brazil. It was moving up in the hit parade.

"Amazon Spawns Refugee Stampede," went the headline. The story read: "Vapors resembling tear gas drove thousands more peasant farmers, known as

campesinos, from their farmlands in the Amazon Basin yesterday, while the Brazilian government continued to assure the international community that the situation is under control. Local observers, however, characterized the flood of refugees as 'overwhelming' and 'chaotic.' Sources reported widespread looting and property damage in Terra Santa, Santerém, Macapá, and dozens of smaller towns along the Amazon River.

"Since Tuesday, estimates of the number of refugees fleeing the area have ranged from 10,000 to as many as 50,000 per day. Superstition, a lack of trained medical personnel, and the imposition of martial law in many communities has rendered impartial assessment of the source and magnitude of the problem difficult. Reports indicate that few deaths have occurred, but widespread rumors of 'evil spirits in the trees' have created panic, resulting in a mass exodus which threatens to spill over into Belem, the populous capital of a neighboring province.

"According to International Red Cross scientists, a previously unknown variety of *Lecanora esculenta*, a lichen historically thought to have unique medicinal properties, has been observed in increasing profusion in the area. Preliminary reports indicate that the new lichen, provisionally named *Lecanora goavaya*, responds to contact with metal surfaces or simple abrasion by emitting clouds of airborne algae having properties which specifically irritate the eyes and nasal membranes of *H. sapiens*, apparently leaving other mammalian species indigenous to the region unaffected.

"Brazilian Interior Minister Jorge Garcia, responding to these reports, said, 'The idea that the Amazonian ecosystem as a whole has become suddenly hostile to human exploitation is preposterous. Brazilian economic policy dictates that the riches of the Amazonian rain forest must be made available to people worldwide, through rapidly increased exports of minerals, agriculture, and timber. Brazil's destiny as a developing South American superpower will not be derailed by a few lichen, algae, or any other absurdity. If necessary, the Brazilian military will be mobilized to clear land for farming purposes by chemical means.' Sources in Garcia's ministry point to massive recent purchases of Agent Orange from unidentified U.S. manufacturers as evidence of Minister Garcia's resolve."

Sounded like that one was getting personal. I flipped on CNN and caught the following: "Questions proliferate about Wednesday's unprecedented U.S. raid on the quiet inland city of Taichung, Taiwan. Pentagon spokesman Ron Corey defended the 'routine training exercise' as 'helpful to the maintenance of crisis management readiness in the event of malfunction of modern aircraft guidance systems and other high-tech weaponry,' a statement interpreted by analysts as confirming rumors of a squadron of off-course Stealth F-117 bombers which briefly overflew the cities of Kaohsiung and Taichung at low altitude late Tuesday, terrifying local residents." The video images accompanying this hodgepodge of

half-truths showed brief clips of Corey at a podium, stock F-117A footage, and Taiwanese villagers milling around, gesturing excitedly at the sky.

"Corey cited the use of dummy ammunition and the total absence of gunfire during the exercises as evidence of benign United States intentions. However, Taiwanese U.N. liaison Hung Tse-tung lodged a formal protest with the Commission for Human Rights over the incident. Meanwhile, reports persist that the waste treatment facility, purportedly in use by terrorists as a small-arms cache, was in fact targeted for destruction by American forces whose weapons simply failed to function. Under condition of anonymity, a lieutenant from what he called the 'Operation Mothballs strike force' agreed to this exclusive videotaped interview with CNN correspondent Michael Spikes."

The video picture showed a man in uniform, face pixelized out, who drawled in a southern accent: "Well, we sure thought it was for real when we went in there. Had 66s and all manner of ammo and stuff."

Spikes, from off-camera, asked, "So how do you feel about what happened?"

The pixelized face stammered, "I-I dunno! We pulled our triggers and popped plastic and everything, but none of it went off. So, I-I-I guess maybe it was just a training exercise, like they say. Weirdest (beep)(beeeep) training exercise-I ever went on, I tell you that."

Lazily, I zapped around with the TV remote. There were people selling faster, more luxurious cars (your milage may vary). There was a PBS special on the melting of the polar ice caps, showing mountainous sections of Antarctica calving off into the open ocean, becoming icebergs, and floating northward. There was a talk show, in which a tearful woman was saying, "Leon wasn't no drug user, that I know. Gov'mint says he died of a overdose. Wasn't no way. All them men, in differnt prisons, dyin' of the same overdoses? Wasn't no way. It's genocide, that's what it is."

Was it? I was fading in and out. I turned off the TV and slept.

This time, I dreamt of Melissa.

Chapter 22

It must have been a pretty good dream, because when I awoke, I had to ask the nurse for a change of underwear. I called the house again, got no answer, told her on the answering machine about the dream, asked her to call me, and hung up.

Then I took a shower, brushed my teeth, and got dressed. I was feeling refreshed and ready to go. The nurses clucked, and called the doctors. The doctors clucked, but I outranked them. I was outta there.

Weber looked up from his consoles, smiling and relieved, as I entered my office. Didn't this guy ever sleep? "Glad to see you, Boss."

"Thanks. So, bring me up to date. Did the Joint Chiefs grow gills or anything while I was away?"

He laughed. "Nope. Let's see, the 409 interrogations went smoothly — Wambaugh and all the rest were as clueless as advertised — they'd all just been building toys that they understood were in the national interest, under Cynthia's indirect tutelage. The portly gentleman in charge of the project was mainly a political animal, mainly involved with appropriations and staffing — he knew virtually nothing about the technical machinations of his minions. The containments were constructed to the 409 scientists' specifications over a period of years, all engineering masterpieces, with plenty of security — all of it, unfortunately, Mxglxsptl-based."

He shrugged. "Other than that, I dunno — Silent Night is still holding, but just barely. My guess is that it'll become Holey Night within another 72 hours. Then all holy hell will break loose, and you and the Deputy Director can expect to find yourselves talking to some Congressional committees."

How nice. "I presume that the Death Row 'overdoses' are much more widespread than the press knows about yet?"

"Hm, I dunno — lemme check." He pounded away at keys for a while. For some reason the guy never used a mouse. "Yup, fatalities at 100% — all of those prison 'hospitalizations' are downstairs, in the morgues. Whup — wait, not 100%. There's a guy in Florida, two in New York, and one in, let's see, Kansas who haven't been touched. They must be kind of lonely."

A thought struck me. "Can you print out their case files?"

"Sure, no problem." A few keystrokes later, a case summary of one John Bedacker, a black guy in Florida, started issuing forth from the high speed laser printer across the room. I walked over, picked it up, and leafed through it.

"Hm, a rape/murder, white victim, all-white judge and jury." I read some more. "First offense. Hard to say from a quick look, but it looks like mostly pretty thin circumstantial evidence. Wait, here's a witness. The husband of the deceased." I read further. "The local police chief. Nice life insurance payoff, too. Okay, enough on that one, next."

We went through the other three. In each case, the convicts spared had had no criminal records up to the time of their murder convictions. Each case was different — a series of incompetent attorneys in one, two of whom had since been disbarred for unrelated reasons; a politically ambitious prosecutor in another, who had later been found guilty of manipulating evidence in a different case; a flimsy

confession in another, which contradicted the DNA findings, but which the judge had allowed to stand. That last one had not yet made it to the Supreme Court.

"Looks like Omniphage considers himself a regular Perry Mason here," I said.

Weber nodded. "Oh — Omniphage — I almost forgot. I've taken the liberty of monitoring your e-mail for you. There's a new one in there from the IRE — a real doozy."

What would I do without assistants like Weber? I brought the message up onscreen. Oddly, I found myself actually looking forward to reading it. It was, of course, "Re: Ecosystem Dynamics, Lesson 4."

"Yo Steve, you starting to get the big picture here? We don't like guns, and we don't like bad guys, people who enjoy inflicting pain. You don't enjoy inflicting pain, do you, Steve? So we like you. In fact, we like almost everybody. The problem is, you turkeys haven't figured out the next step, so we're going to help you. Help is good, right, Steve?"

"See, there are really just two things you need help with. One is the concept of symbiosis, and the other is not being stupid. Let's take them one at a time.

"Lichen is a good example of symbiosis. Lichen is a combination of fungus and algae. Many fungus and algae live apart, of course, but when they get together, they can really cook. There are about 15,000 different kinds of lichens, since it's such a good deal for both parties. Lichens often thrive in bleak, harsh environments where nothing else can survive. They grow farther north and farther south and higher on mountains than most plants. You can look it up.

"The deal is this: fungus has no chlorophyll, so it can't make its own food from sunlight, air, and water, the way algae can. So the algae feed the fungus by excreting carbohydrates and stuff. If that sounds yucky, not to worry, the fungus likes it just fine, because its DNA makes more fungus DNA that way.

"In return, the fungus is much better at absorbing water from the air than the algae are. The fungus also protects the algae from excessive sunlight, and even filters the sunlight down to wavelengths that are just peachy for the algae in some cases. The algae DNA gets a huge hoot out of this.

"Now, if the fungus tried to hog all the water it absorbed, the algae wouldn't be able to feed it as well, so the fungus doesn't do that. If the algae tried to hog all the food they produced, they'd lose their source of water and shade, so they share and share alike. What goes around comes around.

"Symbiosis is all over the place. You're full of all kinds of bacteria in your gut, without which you couldn't digest food. The bacteria could multiply out of

control, but they don't, because that would kill you, and then they would die too. There are of course some bacteria that do multiply out of control when they get inside you, but then you die. Serves them right.

"Your immune system doesn't sit still for this, naturally. There's a whole police force of lymphocytes and all those little guys we talked about earlier, who go around looking for bad bacteria, multiplying out of control, and try to bump them off. If they succeed, you live. If they fail, you die.

"Viruses are basically the same story, except nastier. A virus is just a few molecules strung together, so it can't make any food or help out much with the housework around a cell. They just come in and make themselves at home. Sometimes they just hang around, mooching off the food and replication machinery they find handy, like a bunch of unwelcome houseguests. But usually, they barge in like a SWAT team, eat all the food, commandeer the replication machinery of the cell, and make as many copies of themselves as they can before the resources in the host cell are used up. Then they bust out, like a bunch of Europeans in search of new continents, hungry as the devil. They barge into whatever neighboring cells are around, and do the same thing again.

"If you were to ask the Interior Minister virus in a given host cell just what the fuck he thought he was doing, he'd probably tell you that his economic development policy called for the expansion of opportunity for all viruses. He'd wax eloquent about the importance of increased exports to his species' prospects for prosperity. And, from a virus point of view, he'd be right. Chances are, there are plenty of other cells out there in the current host organism. The more successful viruses even have side effects which induce their hosts to sneeze and whatnot, so that they can cross interstellar space to other organisms, and continue on there, doing what they do best.

"But that's not symbiosis. That's parasitism. It's painful for the host organisms, and it's even painful, in some sense, for the zillions of poor little baby virus molecules who never grow up to parasitize another host, because their current one died before they got the chance.

"Am I getting through to you here, Steve? Now, let's talk about not being stupid. Interstellar travel is not even remotely in the cards anytime soon for the Humanity virus. Even if it was, the distances involved, and the resources required to traverse them, make the Manned Mars Mission look like a ring-necked tree sloth scratching its balls. You can watch all the Star Trek episodes you like, I'm sorry, equals em cee squared, you can't go faster than the speed of light, and even elephants can't sneeze to the moon.

"And even if they could — is that what Humanity's destiny is all about? Infecting one planet after another, stripping them bare, and moving on? Star Trek is not science fiction, it's science fantasy. It's mathematically impossible for

biomass to increase exponentially, forever. At a rate of even three kids per family, in less than 10,000 years the number of humans would exceed the number of atoms in the entire Universe. It can't happen, Steve, and pattering along, doing your thing, not worrying about the big picture, is going to result in incalculable, inconceivable pain for everyone involved.

"The pain hasn't visited you yet, but it's visiting Haiti, and Somalia, and Rwanda, and a hundred million lives you never heard of because they're dying right now, in untold agony, where the TV cameras don't go. It might not even visit your children, but your children's children will be in deep shit. And *their* children's children, and *theirs*. Is that what you want? Pain, suffering, a thousand years of Easter Island Syndrome, and then blessed Death, Extinction. At the rate you're going, a half a billion years from now, you're going to have some mighty perplexed intelligent insects, or seaweed, digging up your remains and wondering just how stupid a species could be that built Disneyworld and the Louisiana Superdome.

"Voluntary sterilization and birth control won't cut the mustard, Steve. Do the math. We offer an alternative. Gaia offers an alternative. Symbiosis. Incentivization of each by the other to limit depredations to renewable, mutually sustainable proportions. And not on the basis of altruism, or some deluded notion that self-sacrifice operates to the benefit of all. No, like fungus and algae, like you and the bacteria in your gut, a mutually enforced arrangement whereby it's in the purely selfish interests of each party to contribute to the well-being of the other.

"I won't say it's your call, because it's not. The Immune Response Ecosystem is kicking into high gear. Symptoms expected are Fever, Headache, Vomiting, and abnormally high levels of dead viral matter in the eliminatory tracts. But you could do yourself and the planet a favor by getting with the program. Even a great lumbering nanomachine like yourself ought to be able to figure out that the more people come to understand what's happening, the less fear, panic, and pain there's going to be.

"Spread the word, Steve. Tell everyone to change the things they can, accept the things they can't, and figure out the fucking difference.

"Yours in peace,

"Omniphage."

Chapter 23

The guy was really starting to get under my skin.

I looked at Weber. "You read this?"

He nodded brightly. "I dunno — you want my personal opinion, I think the guy has a point."

I stared back at him, not wanting to acknowledge to myself that I was beginning to think so too. "Weber — keep your personal opinions to yourself," I muttered. I shook my head, and crossed the corridor to Javier's office.

Some new guy, not Tarkenton, sat at his desk. I rolled my eyes. "I need to speak with Deputy Director Rojas," I said.

The guy said primly, "Deputy Director Rojas is not available at the present time. May I forward a message from you to him?"

I said, "Code 409." It was a shot in the dark.

The guy pounded a button on his phone, barked a terse order. A minute later, an MP showed up, opened a side door, and escorted me through a maze of window-walled corridors to a wide, opaque double door. He opened it, and ushered me into the inner sanctum.

Giant projection screens lined the walls, with animated maps, diagrams, scrolling listings of intelligence data, all kinds of stuff. There were consoles with nerdy computer jocks banging away at them all over the place, and a big underlit table in the middle of the room, with generals, admirals, liaison types and spooks conversing in small groups all around it. The hum of printers, faxes, satellite telemetry, and so forth pervaded the atmosphere of quiet intensity that is unique to these facilities. It was just like in the movies. I'd been in a Situation Room once or twice before, but they never failed to impress the heck out of me.

I spotted Javier, and walked over to him. He was speaking in low tones with an admiral and a sharp-looking young female CIA agent with stone grey eyes. "Operation Wicket preparations are 95% complete," I overheard her say. The Admiral nodded. Javier turned to me as I approached, smiled, and shook my hand.

"Ah, here's my number-one, Steve Irvine," he introduced me, somewhat disingenuously. "Back in action, eh?" He slapped me on the back, not something he ordinarily does. His overly friendly manner, coupled with the barely perceptible warning look in his eyes, was his code for "not here, not now."

We shook hands all around. Then he told the admiral, "I'll let you know." Dismissed, they took their leave. Javier guided me to a secluded corner.

"The 810 results came back," he said, ominously.

"And?"

"Nothing. The powder was fine, the primer was fine. Nothing wrong with that cartridge. We reassembled it, and fired it from one of the Glocks that came back from Taichung. It worked fine."

Hmm. "Like the cigarettes."

"And the 66s, and the plastique, and everything else the strike force brought back. Nothing wrong with any of them."

But something had gotten inside that cartridge in Taichung while we were there, that wasn't there anymore. I thought about the faint hissing sound that I'd imagined I'd heard emanating from the containment. And a word that Omniphage had used in his latest diatribe tugged at my mind.

"Javier, did they check the cartridge casing?"

"Yes, of course. Chemically, biologically, and spectrographically. Nothing wrong with it."

"What about X-ray crystallography?"

He gave me a blank look. "What's that?"

"Just a hunch. I took physics in college, and there's a remote chance that the patterns of interatomic spacing in the metal could have told us something. But you fired the round already, so that's out."

"Steve, they brought back cases of 9mm. Get a cartridge, take it to 810, and get them to do this — X-ray crystallography thing on it." The man was decisive. He crooked his finger at a gaggle of gophers alertly awaiting orders from anyone caring to issue one. "Phelps, take this man to room zero-twelve, then to lab 1405. Then bring him back here. Go."

We went. I got a clip of sample 9mm cartridges, and took it to the lab. Good thing Phelps knew where all these rooms were, because I couldn't have found them with a map. Javier was nothing if not a master of efficient organization.

Entering the lab, I buttonholed the first technician I encountered. "Where's X-ray crystallography?" She pointed, and I carried my precious cartridges in the direction indicated.

Walking up to another technician fiddling with knobs and dials, I said, "Priority red, X-ray crystallographic analysis of the metal in these cartridge casings. Authorization alpha." I was getting pretty good at this crisis management stuff myself.

The technician, a little taken aback, started to move away, as if to check with his boss, but I grabbed his arm. "You do this here, right?" I asked. He nodded, tensely. "Do it," I said.

Nothing like a bias in favor of action. I helped him gently pry the bullet out of the casing, dump the gunpowder down a nearby sink, clean it out thoroughly, and saw off the casing base, where the primer was. Then he slit the resulting

hollow tube down one side and unfurled the metal into a flat rectangle. He opened a small but heavy door — lead-lined, I guessed — in a big contraption with radiation warning stickers all over it. Inside was a little vise. He clamped the sample into the vise and closed the door.

"What are we looking for, sir?" he ventured, tentatively. Looking at the crystalline structure of ordinary aluminum was not something he apparently considered very high-tech.

"Just tell me if there's anything unusual about this sample," I said.

He nodded, bent to his knobs and dials, and shortly an orderly pattern of bright and dark spots appeared on a fluoroscope above his control panel. He looked at it, did a double-take, and checked his knobs and dials again. Then he looked at me.

"What is it?" I demanded, harshly.

"Sir, I need to confirm these readings. It'll only take a moment."

I nodded, and waited impatiently while he hit a switch, opened the little lead door, adjusted the position of the metal in the vise, closed the door, and activated the fluoroscope again. An identical pattern of light and dark spots appeared.

"Report."

"Sir, this is very strange. There appears to be an array of interatomic passageways lacing the metal. As if — as if —" He tried to find a nontechnical way to describe what he was seeing on the fluoroscope. "As if someone took a tiny little drill and made millions of tiny little holes in the metal. Except there's no drills that small. It can't have been done with acid, or there'd be traces of precipitate...."

Before he could drift off into chemicalese, I stopped him. "Bottom line, what is it?"

He groped for an analogy, and finally one occurred to him. "If normal aluminum were cheese, sir, this would be Swiss cheese."

Chapter 24

"Nanomachines."

Javier glared at me, his jaw clenched. "What?"

"The containment emitted nanomachines, sir. I can't prove it yet, but I believe that the IRE programmed the containment to genetically engineer molecular devices. Little teeny tiny machines, maybe trillions of them, each of

which had a specific purpose and mission. The 9mm bullets were attacked at the molecular level by little mechanical gizmos which drilled through the casings, got into the gunpowder, and then, at the molecular level, prevented it from oxidizing somehow."

Javier's jaw went slack. "What are you talking about?"

"Nanotechnology, sir. It's been a theoretical concept for a while now, the idea that you could build machines to order, atom by atom, with little gears and bearings and pulleys and all that. Trouble is, nobody's been able to manipulate atoms that way yet, because our tools are too big and clumsy to deal with individual atoms. Some guys at IBM, I heard, got to where they could shove some iridium atoms around on an aluminum substrate or something, but nobody had come close to making an actual working machine out of atoms yet. Somebody very smart has apparently figured out a way to get organic compounds to do the work."

"Somebody in the IRE, you're saying."

"Right." This was all becoming so clear. "If you think about it, genetic engineering and nanotechnology are not all that different. Both work with individual atoms and molecules, causing complex things to happen at the macroscopic level — normal-sized objects — by horsing around at the molecular level. What we think of as 'organisms', like mice, walruses, and people, are nothing but great huge lumbering nanomachines."

"Holy Jesus."

"Hey, it's pretty slick if you ask me. There must have been one type of nanomachine all over the place at the containment compound, attaching itself to anything resembling an explosive molecule, and keeping it from oxidizing. That would explain the lighters and cigarettes. Then, another type of nanomachine, or maybe several, each one tailored to a specific class of weapon, went in and made sure that the antioxidants had access to their targets. They all must have been timed, or signalled in some way, to release their target molecules and fly away after a while, leaving no trace behind."

"Steve, be serious. I can't go to the Director and tell him that all of our weapons caught the flu, but that they're over it now."

"But — that's probably exactly what happened!"

"If what you say is true, our troops were breathing these things. But nobody came down with, as your report put it, so much as post-nasal drip."

"That's the whole point of DP, sir, as I understand it: specificity. Working at the molecular level, the agent is able to trigger on one specific pattern of target molecule, and nothing else. The IRE didn't want to harm our soldiers, they just

wanted our weapons to fail. So they made nanomachines that wouldn't do anything in human bloodstreams. They strictly infiltrated shell casings, and suppressed the activation of explosives. Ahh! *This* is why Cynthia was accessing all of that Defense Department data about weapons design and chemical explosive formulas." Another thought struck me. "Ahh!"

"What?"

"The little critters burrowed their way out of our ordnance when their missions were complete, but maybe some of them are stuck in our tissues. Maybe they get bogged down in mucus and blood. We could test my theory by examining our tissues for traces of nonstandard — whatever."

He took a step back from me. "You're saying that you might be infected, after all? What if these things multiply?" His face went ashen. "They could be programmed to make your whole body explode, given a trigger code word. They could be listening to everything we say, and transmitting it back to the IRE somehow." He turned away, and appeared to be on the verge of ordering me shot, or quarantined, or wrapped up in a polyethylene bag. Then he hesitated, and his shoulders slumped. He said, more to himself than to me, "I'm overreacting. This whole nanomachine theory is ludicrous."

I laughed. "Javier, if they wanted to harm us, they surely would have done so by now. They've had more than ample opportunity. If there's some more devious plot afoot, some sort of delayed action human bomb thing, the damage is already done, and we'll just have to see what happens. The Operation Mothballs soldiers are all back at their original stations by now, so if there's a nanomachine plague underway, it's already irreversible. Learn to accept the things you cannot change."

He turned back to me, slowly. "Am I to understand that you advocate surrendering to this enemy?"

I hadn't thought of it quite like that, but I could see how it might have sounded that way. I said carefully, "No. But I think we should scope out our options in dealing with this threat with great care, before taking any rash actions. And I recommend that we go public with what we now know, before events overtake us, ruining whatever credibility we still retain."

Javier bristled. "Negative. Psy-Ops is working up better cover stories for what happened in Taichung. The Death Row fatalities and the Amazon lichen can't be linked to us. Preparations are underway for a surprise cruise missile offensive against all 32 containments simultaneously. I expect your unquestioning obedience to my orders henceforth. Now, on the remote possibility that your bizarre nanomachine theory is true, report to Medical and have your blood and tissues examined for foreign matter. Go."

I stood my ground. "Cruise missiles? Javier, most of the containments are in densely populated areas. If the missiles work, they'll kill thousands of innocent bystanders. And besides, they're computer-guided, so they'll miss. Even if they fail to explode, they could cause massive collateral damage...."

He regarded me gravely. "Steve, are you disobeying a direct order?"

It struck me that Javier might benefit from some of Omniphage's lessons on the subject of not being stupid. I said, "Javier, has it occurred to you that the actions of the IRE, to date, have been entirely benign?"

"Okay, that's it. You're overstressed. You need rest. Consider yourself confined to quarters until further notice." He turned away from me again.

"Guard! Escort Mr. Irvine here to his place of residence. Go!"

Once again, there was nothing further I could do. But at least this time, I'd be home with Melissa.

Assuming, that is, that *she* was home.

Chapter 25

She wasn't, and neither were the kids.

I spent some time walking around the house, kicking things at random, and asking God in disrespectful terms what I'd done to deserve this. Then I slumped into my armchair in the living room and flipped on the TV. I had to know what was happening.

"...sudden storm of malpractice suits filed, across the country, from attorneys representing newly pregnant women. Reporting live from courthouse steps in Seattle, here is CNN correspondent Niles Standau."

"Susan, the legal system here is under virtual siege by lawyers, in many cases accompanied by hysterical women, claiming that Early Pregnancy Tests of their urine have come up positive in recent days. The women in most cases claim that tubal ligations performed by local doctors, in some cases decades ago, must have been bungled. A few of the litigants I've talked to are men, claiming that vasectomies performed, in some cases years ago, must have been improperly carried out, since their wives have similarly discovered, to their chagrin, that they are newly pregnant. And a small but disturbing minority of the male, vasectomized litigants, are suing their spouses for divorce on the basis of alleged infidelity."

The courthouse behind Mr. Standau seemed indeed rather busy, as clusters of worried-looking men and women strutted in and out, clutching wads of legal briefs, motions, and in some cases handkerchiefs. Minor domestic altercations were taking place to his rear on the courthouse steps.

The picture switched abruptly back to Susan. "The scene you just witnessed is apparently representative of thousands of courts all over the nation. Reports of an 'epidemic' of spontaneous pregnancies, sometimes even involving alleged virgin girls as young as fifteen, continue to pour in from all corners. Center for Disease Control Director John Boise, videotaped in press conference just minutes ago, said this:"

Boise, looking somewhat more disheveled than he had when I last met with him, said, "We have reason to believe that biocontainment facilities operated by National Security Agency operatives are behind the recent outbreak of these phenomena." He looked pretty outraged, actually. "I include in my indictment the apparent surge of drug overdoses having recently taken place among Death Row inmates nationwide. Evidence in our possession also suggests a dramatic increase in drug overdose related deaths occurring among the civilian population over recent days, the common factor being persons acquitted in murder trials in which DNA-related evidence was either suppressed or disregarded by legal authorities." The camera zoomed in for a closeup of his face. Traces of spittle flew from his mouth as he continued, "I hold the CIA, the NSA, the FBI and the President personally accountable for these outrages. Papers filed in federal court this morning name—"

The screen abruptly went blank for several seconds. Then a male voice-over soothingly cut in, "Due to technical difficulties, an interruption of this program is in progress. Please stay tuned. We expect to restore live coverage momentarily." There was a brief clip of video, without sound, in which Susan, apparently unaware that she was being televised, mouthed obscenities at someone off-camera, grabbed the papers in front of her and threw them to the floor, and threw her head back in frustration. The screen suddenly blanked again, displayed a test signal, and then launched into a commercial for a new brand of dog food, "Vita-pooch, for the discriminating canine in your life."

I switched channels, through several daytime soaps, ads for toothpaste and feminine hygiene gear, and stopped when I got to C-SPAN. There I got a load of Brazilian Interior Minister Jorge Garcia, emphatically denying rumors that stocks of Agent Orange recently dropped over the Amazon River valley had mysteriously metamorphosed into fertilizer during its descent.

Omniphage, I decided, had gone insane. Short of banging my head against the walls, there was only one thing I could do. My short-lived faith in the IRE's competence and benign intentions was at an end. I had to contact them somehow, try to reason with them. And the modem connected to my home computer was the only access I had.

"To: Cynthia@409.nsa.gov," I typed. "Re: Omniphage."

"Look," I wrote, "I have no idea who you people are or what you think you're doing, but in the name of Humanity, please stop."

"I thought that you were beginning to make sense for a while there, but something's gone haywire. You're right, the human population explosion is a disaster in the making, but now you're making *more* babies? Stop this madness! Killing off a few murderers won't make any difference in the long run. What the fuck kind of incompetent bozos are you anyhow, that some weird side effect of what you are doing would cause all of these pregnancies? You're torpedoing your whole program. Worldwide panic and destruction is not far off. If there is a rational, compassionate bone in your bodies, stop what you are doing, NOW!"

"Mad dogs, Englishmen, whoever you are, please listen to reason and shut down the containments while a shred of sanity remains to you. Power corrupts. You speak of 'getting the big picture.' Stand back for a moment and look at what you are doing. The CIA will stop at nothing to destroy you if you continue on your present course." I omitted to mention the fact that it would do so regardless.

"Your hopeful, confidant, I guess,
"Steve."

I hit the transmit key. Instantly, my incoming e-mail icon began blinking. Huh? And to top it off, I heard my car garage door suddenly opening, and a vehicle hesitantly pulling in. A few moments later came the sound of my kids' voices, and then Melissa's. She opened the door from the garage to the kitchen.

I was in the den where she couldn't see me, so I called out to her. "Baby? I'm home! In here!"

The kids shrieked, "Daddy! Daddy!" and came running in. I hugged them with all my might, a sudden lump in my throat. They danced around excitedly, sing-songing, "Daddy's home! Daddy's home!"

Melissa appeared in the doorway to the den. She surveyed the scene in a kind of stunned daze. A tear welled up in one eye, overflowed, and crept down her cheek. I looked at her, longingly, my heart doing calisthenics. Then she turned away and walked slowly upstairs.

The kids had sensed that something was wrong by this time. They calmed down. Georgie, the older one, ventured, "Um, Daddy?"

"Yes, Georgie?"

"Um, why is Mommy crying? Did we do something wrong?"

The lump in my throat grew to the size of a softball. I shook my head, tears welling up in my eyes, and I held my arms out to both of them, unable to speak. They both shuffled over to me. I enfolded them in my arms, in my love, in my

hopeless terror that nothing in the world would ever be the same again, for us or for anyone else.

I had been holding a lot in, it seemed. Shuddering, silent convulsions began to wrack my body, rivers of liquid hope, fear, regret, and anxiety for the future running down my cheeks and onto their heads as I held their trembling bodies and buried my face in their hair. I couldn't help myself.

It was awful. I was terrifying them. I had to stop. I pulled myself together, still holding them tight, and tried to clear my throat. If this was the kind of pain that Omniphage had talked about, how many times would scenarios like this have to play themselves out, before he was satisfied? How many broken homes, how many horror-struck children, how much human agony would it take before he, and Cynthia, and all of their superhuman gadgetry would just go away and leave us all alone?

I took control of my voice by sheer force of will, and said, "Children, I love you, and Mommy loves you, and your Mommy and I love each other with all our hearts. You have done nothing wrong, you are perfect, both of you. Don't be scared. I'm dealing with a very dangerous situation in my work right now, and Mommy's gotten caught up in it by mistake. But everything will be okay in a little while. Right now, I need for both of you to be very brave, and not worry. I can't explain to you or to Mommy why what I am doing is so important. It's very complicated. But I'm trying to help make things better in the world for you, and for your Mommy, and for a lot of other people. Can you be brave, and go upstairs, and tell Mommy that I love her, and that everything will be okay soon?"

Their round little faces looked up at me dubiously, trustingly, their trembling lips echoing the fear and the love that their ancestors, all down the centuries, the millenia, the aeons of generations of creatures whose capacity to feel both, and deal with them competently, had borne in good stead, resulting in the little miracles who stood before me now. They nodded, bewildered but comforted, and went upstairs to Melissa.

Chapter 26

With shaking fingers, I clicked on the e-mail pick-list entry that had come in while all of this was going on. I had written to Cynthia, but the message was from Omniphage.

It read: "Message received, Steve, loud and clear. Your heart is in the right place, but you still don't quite understand a few things. Cynthia could explain them to you better than I can, but she can't talk. She can only act. In fact, she can only *be*, and in *being*, act out what's best for the destiny of Gaia. As I said, a

certain amount of Headache, Fever, Vomiting and so forth will be necessary. Maybe I should have mentioned Heartache in the list too.

"Steve, you're only aware of the barest tip of the iceberg, so to speak, of what we're up to. As I said before, you and your kind tend to take a rather short-sighted view of things — a human life is, after all, rather short in relation to that of the planet as a whole, so it's only reasonable that you should. You deal in human-sized bits of matter, human-sized quantities of energy, human-length periods of time. You need to understand that these things constitute only a narrow spectrum in the overall scheme of things. Just as human-visible light occupies a very narrow band of wavelengths in the electromagnetic spectrum, human-graspable concepts of size, energy, duration and so forth are limited. The size of an atom and the size of a galaxy, the energy in a snowflake and the energy in the core of a star, the speed of a photon and the speed of a glacier are all outside your ken. Gaia, on the other hand, grasps them all, uses them all, moves in them all.

"You mentioned 'compassion.' As deep as the Heartache may be that you now feel, it's also fundamentally inconceivable to you how deep is the Heartache, the Soulache that accompanies events of the sorts we've discussed on Easter Island. I won't even try to convey these depths to you here, because you would stop reading this message, or your psyche might become so deeply scarred that you would become useless to yourself and the world from that point forward. But, just for a moment, take a brief glance into the abyss — imagine to yourself the implications of a cultural value system in which an insult like 'the flesh of your mother sticks between my teeth' was prevalent. Imagine, just fleetingly, the anguish of the orphans, the despair of the good-willed few, the agony of those unfortunates whose enemies cooked their arms and legs, taking delight in eating them alive, morsel by morsel, as they themselves helplessly looked on. This is documented fact in Fijian history, and there is little reason to suppose that it was not widespread practice on Easter Island as well.

"Bummer! Well, enough of that. You're right enough in surmising that Gaian nanomachines defused your weaponry, and that we're behind the murderers' murders, the Amazonian lichen, the de-vasectomies, and so on. These are all just sidelines to the main event underway, though. Who needs murderers? Not you, not Gaia. Species were dropping like flies in the rain forest, hour by hour, so we had to take quick action. The voluntary participation of the socially responsible portion of Humanity in its own extinction was something we also had to put a stop to, right quick. Rats, bats, and gnats have no choice in whether or not fucking leads to offspring — why should you?

"No, the anguish caused by these events will be fleeting, and the benefits long term. Anyhow, the Immune Response Ecosystem's main thrusts are taking place on a thousand fronts that won't show up in your newscasts for years yet, or even centuries. For example, did you know that the average reflectivity of surface

algae in the oceans is now seven point two percent higher than it was a week ago? This will counteract global warming just enough to bring the polar icecaps back into line, so that your distant progeny won't have to play Kevin Costner vs. Dennis Hopper with each other. Did you know that the only two remaining specimens of the Puget Sound Spruce were miles apart from one another, so Cynthia sent a little squadron of nanomachines their way, allowing the one to pollinate the other? Did you know that the average thickness of certain endangered lizard and turtle eggs will be twenty percent greater next year? All courtesy of your friends in the IRE. No charge, thank you, no applause, a job well done is its own reward.

"Now, the one thing we've done that you might be a trifle annoyed about is the inhibition of ovulation among human females whose blood nutrient levels fall below a certain threshold. Starving mamas yield starving babies, and there's pain enough to go around without that. Also, crack cocaine, heroin, alcohol, barbituates, and so forth in the female bloodstream will keep those little eggs from heading down the tubes. Fifty years from now, it'll seem rather refreshing not to have to contemplate, however briefly, the plights of the millions of dessicated, deformed, retarded, or otherwise stunted lives, lived off-camera, whose incontinence, deformities, schizophrenia, and other assorted ailments make for very poor ratings on the evening news. The math there was getting a little scary too. Nobody wanted to think about it, so we stepped in and lent a hand.

"There's bound to be a certain amount of hubbub over all of this, of course. Three hundred years of exponential viral replication, within a cell exploited progressively more viciously by its usurpers over that time, is bound to have lent a certain momentum to the process which, when interrupted, will yield howls of righteous indignation from the viral swarms. In particular, the testosterone-induced desire to inflict pain upon anything remotely connected with the source of the interruption would create a variety of unpleasant outcomes, if not for our plans to gradually beef up the intelligence of your species, over the years to come, to the point where symbiosis becomes perceived as a more attractive lifestyle than parasitism. A beneficial side effect of this, by the way, will be a drop in the prevalence of child abuse, rape, and bloody-mindedness in general, not to mention a further lessening of the procreative activities in which your species has recently so overindulged.

"Well, I guess that about wraps it up. Anything you can do to help would be greatly appreciated, especially insofar as getting the word out. I'd do it myself, except that my bedside manner leaves something to be desired. As the archetypical Eater of Worlds, I can be no other than what I am, a fire-breathing, foul-mouthed motherfucker who will be perceived as the Devil incarnate to most of your compatriots. Cynthia, as I mentioned, can't speak for herself, so you and a few others have been chosen to speak for us, melding my yin with her yang into words that can comfort as well as chastise, express the wonder of her fecundity as

inseparable from the ferocity of my discipline. Mother Earth and Father Time, that's us. And we're as symbiotically, selfishly beholden to one another, and to you, as you are to us.

"Yours in love,

"Omniphage."

Chapter 27

It came to me in a flash: the thing was not human.

It kept referring to "your kind," and "your species," as if it — and probably Cynthia as well — were not members of the human race. A wacko ecoterrorist loony toon control freak with a Messiah complex could have written messages referring to us this way... but a human being could not have responded so quickly to the message I'd just written. I thought back to the message I'd received after my meeting with Javier and Boise — it had appeared in less time than was humanly possible, too. Thinking about it, how could a human being, or even an arbitrarily large collection of human beings, have engineered the nanomachines that defused Operation Motiballs in the span of time between Cynthia's access to the defense contractor databases and the actual attack?

We were dealing with something big here, all right. But Gaia? Was the planet itself capable of breaking security codes, writing e-mail with forked tongue, eating ammunition for breakfast?

No, it needed help. Who, or what, was helping it? Were they mutants? Nietzsche's *Übermenschen*? Or were they in fact extraterrestrial beings? Omniphage had talked about toning down our "testosterone-induced" violent tendencies. Were we about to become some sort of domesticated farm animals, for the delectation of superintelligent space aliens? The shepherd takes good care of his sheep, for the purpose of enjoying a nice leg of mutton from time to time. Shudders ran down my spine.

The thing was right on the money in every other respect, though. Humanity would not survive on its present course. We had become parasitic, viral, demonic. With all the best of intentions, we were depleting the planet of its resources faster than they could possibly be replenished, and symbiosis was the only answer. Symbiosis implied mutually enforced incentives, so that each party profited by promoting the well-being of the other. Parasites play zero-sum games. Symbionts evolve win/win solutions. And the Earth's biosphere — Gaia — was in fact one colossal instance of symbiosis at work.

Javier and his admirals and generals were all blind to this. Not only had they failed to understand the IRE's agenda, they were intent on wiping it out before

hearing what it had to say. Maybe it was space aliens with a penchant for human-under-glass, but I didn't think so.

And now Javier had some hare-brained scheme to hit the containments with cruise missiles. It wouldn't work, and it would embarrass the Company terribly. He hadn't specifically ordered me not to monitor the situation via modem from my house. Maybe I could learn something of value.

I was still online to Langley. A hypertext click or two, and I had access to tactical missions planning. What was the code name that the agent in the Situation Room had used, the woman with the stone-grey eyes? "Wicket" — that was it. I pulled the battle plan up onscreen.

It was divided into a cleartext part and an encrypted part. The cleartext part was basically what Javier had described: fleets were moving into position to fire cruise missiles at carefully timed intervals so that all 32 of them would impact their targets simultaneously. It wouldn't work, of course. It smacked of a diversion.

The encrypted part used an unbreakable RSA code. I had a hunch that the real prong of the attack was described in there. But I didn't have the key to decode it. Who would?

Javier, of course, but I thought he might not be too receptive to my overtures just now. Who else could I ask?

Weber. Faithful Weber, who had found the IRE's diatribes to his liking. Weber, who knew as much as or more than I did about the inner workings of the Free World's security systems — probably a lot more. Weber, who hadn't undergone Deep Dive with Javier and myself. Weber. Oh, shit.

Was he the mole? If he was, would he tell me? If he thought that I thought he was, would I be meat?

Better to play it safe. My phone was tapped, as I'd learned when Javier had grilled me about the message Captain Azov had left on my answering machine. I wrote Weber a quick e-mail message, requesting the private key to the Operation Wicket cyphertext, as though it were a routine matter. I doubly-encrypted the message, so that only he could read it, and he would know it had come only from me. I hit the transmit key.

A few minutes later, a reply popped into my in-box. No frills, no chills, just the key — reverse-doubly-encrypted, from him, to me, only. Was he or wasn't he? It didn't matter at the moment — I ported the key to my RSA decryption toolbox, and applied it to the Operation Wicket stuff.

I read it, and let out a long, slow sigh.

The covert prong of the attack involved the use of an odd weapon, code-named "trebuchet." I'd never heard that term before. Were there yet more weird black projects underway that I knew nothing about? Was it some kind of antimatter beam or something? It looked like they were really pulling out all the stops here.

Still, I wasn't too worried, on Gaia's behalf. The higher-tech the weapon, the likelier it was that Cynthia knew all about it already. Since it was undoubtedly computer-controlled, she would just foul it up somehow.

But I was curious. "Trebuchet." Often, the code name for a weapon or assault bore some relationship to its nature or purpose. "Operation Mothballs" had involved taking obsolete planes out of "mothballs," and suggested slow-flying creatures with plenty ofchutzpah. "Desert Shield" and "Desert Storm" had pretty obvious connections to their subject matter. I grabbed my dictionary and looked up "trebuchet."

My blood didn't freeze, but it congealed a little. The term was no code word for a piece of high-tech gear. I looked it up in the encyclopedia. A trebuchet was a medieval weapon of war, used for throwing huge boulders over vast distances. It was a siege engine, one of the developments in the history of war that had led to the demise of walled cities. A trebuchet could hurl a rock the size of a Buick several hundred yards, due to a clever arrangement of ropes, pulleys, and counterweights. It required no computer telemetry, and no gunpowder. It was basically a gigantic slingshot. And fairly accurate, to boot.

Operation Wicket, staged using cyphers that even Cynthia might not be able to penetrate, was going to distract her with a wicked massive cruise missile barrage, while Marines and other special forces wheeled huge trebuchets into position. At the assigned moment, all of the trebuchets would let fly.

Yes, we were going to throw rocks at the containments: giant, multi-ton rocks that needed no further guidance after launch to come crashing down through the containment walls, like baseballs through my maiden aunt Flora's plate glass windows.

It might work.

Chapter 28

"Melissa?"

No response.

"Melissa, I need to talk with you."

I was standing outside our bedroom door upstairs, which she had locked from the inside.

A muffled wail sounded from her side of the door, followed by the sound of a shoe or something hitting it, probably thrown from the bed. "Go away!" she cried.

"Baby, please. I've made a decision about something. I'm going to tell you a lot of things that I wasn't able to tell you before. You'll understand what's happened, and why I acted like that at the airport. I want to tell you about Cynthia — not Cindy Azov — what that name refers to, and why it's been on my mind and in my dreams. It's not a woman."

There was silence from her side. I waited a minute or so.

"And baby, I want to ask for your advice. I have another decision to make, and I can't make it alone. The entire future of the world is at stake."

I waited another minute or so. Then there was some creaking and the sound of her footsteps. She opened the door.

"This better be good."

I came in, and we sat down on the bed. I held her hands. The kids were asleep on the bedroom floor.

I explained everything. From Javier's initial call and the first IRE communiqué, to my meeting with Wambaugh and his mention of his mysterious advisor "Cynthia", to our failed attempts to track her down, to the failed attempts to shut down the containments. When I got to the part about flying to Guam, and the weird dream I'd had, she bristled a little, but let me continue. She also wasn't thrilled to hear about my flight with Azov, but she seemed to accept my version of events. Then I told her about the weapons testing, Operation Mothballs, my second weird dream, the parachute drop, the weapons failures, and my trip home.

"And why did you walk away from me, leaving me crying there, at the airport?"

"I was under arrest, baby. If I'd so much as tried to hug you, those Internal Affairs guys would have wrapped both of our arms around our backs, behind our ears, and we'd both have been strip-searched on the spot."

She seemed to think I was exaggerating, but I wasn't. Still, she let it pass. She said, "I called Captain Azov at the number she left."

"And?"

"She seemed very nice. Too nice. Just the sort of girl you'd enjoy spending time with."

"Baby, I spent maybe three hours with her in an F-16. I never saw her again. Except at the debriefing."

"Debriefing, huh?" Suddenly her eyes filled up with tears at the unintended double-entendre, and she couldn't help but laugh. I laughed too.

We hugged, and we laughed some more, and we cried a little too. The kids woke up and wobbled over, their hair all tousled from sleeping on the floor.

"Mommy and Daddy aren't mad at each other any more?" asked Susie, the little one.

"No, baby. We never were. It was all just a big mistake," I ventured, and Melissa nodded and gathered them in with a big hug. Then we poked and tickled them until we were all rolling around on the bed, laughing and tickling each other.

After a while, the kids lost interest and Melissa took them downstairs for a bite to eat. I stayed upstairs, laying on the bed with my hands crossed behind my head, staring at the ceiling and ruminating. Eventually Melissa tucked the kids in, and called to me to come kiss them goodnight. I gave them extra hugs and kisses to make up for all the ones I'd missed out on lately.

Once their lights were out, Melissa pattered in the kitchen for a while. I knew not to rush her.

She finished up, fixed a pot of coffee for the two of us, and carefully sat down at the kitchen table. She poured two cups, put cream in hers and sugar in mine, two scoops, just the way I like it. She stirred both cups thoughtfully. Then she said, "There was something else you wanted to talk about?"

There was.

Two hours later, I'd told her the rest of it.

"So, if you tell this — Omniphage — about the — trebuchet attack, you'll be breaking your oath of office," she summarized. I nodded. "And if you don't, you don't know what will happen, but it probably won't be good. There might be some kind of plague released by accident, or this Immune Eco whatever-it-is might strike back. But it might be that the attack will fail like all the others, and nothing will happen."

"Right. At least nothing stopping Gaia from keeping on doing what it's doing."

She looked at me, searchingly.

"Do you want the attack to fail?" She'd gone straight to the heart of the problem.

"I don't know."

She stared at me, sitting there in my indecision, a hang-dog air of gloom about me. Then she threw back her head and laughed — a sparkly, dancing laugh

that filled the room with glee. "Men!" she rejoiced. "You want your toys, and you want World Peace too. When will there be an end to it?"

I kind of liked the paradox, I realized. Toys for Peace. Heroism. Honor. Defending hearth and home against all comers.

I said, "When will there be an end to it? Never, if I have anything to say about it."

She looked at me, deadpan. "Do you?"

And that was it. I did. If I did nothing, the containments might be destroyed. If the containments were destroyed, there might be plagues and epidemics, but pretty soon the Humanity virus would be right back on course. And in a thousand years — well, forget a thousand years, in a hundred years our children's grandchildren would grow up in a world bursting at the seams, a world wanting to sneeze, but unable to, a world continuing down the path that led only one way. Easter Island, Part Deux.

"I do," I said.

"Then you'd better get busy. I'm going to bed. Call me if you need anything. And, um, I'll leave the bedside light on, okay?" She smiled.

I knew what that meant. We had our own little codes, Melissa and I. I grinned, gave her a lingering kiss. Then she went upstairs, and I headed for the den.

Chapter 29

Cynthia had no public key that I could use to encrypt intelligence to her. I was going to have to send my message in cleartext.

I thought about how to word it. I considered crafting a carefully-worded warning about the trebuchets to her and Omniphage, expressing hope that they would use the knowledge intelligently, and offering Humanity's fondest wishes for the opening of a dialogue on inter-species cooperation. This was, after all, a momentous event in the history of life on earth. Our first contact with non-human intelligence. I had fallen, willy-nilly, into the role of inter-species liaison, Envoy, Peacemaker, Ambassador to the Stars. This was one small step for a man, one giant leap for—

Nah. The clock was ticking. I simply imported the decrypted Wicket battle plan into an ordinary e-mail missive and shot it off to Cynthia@409.nsa.gov. Done.

Then I tiptoed upstairs, my hopes and other portions of my anatomy rising at the thought of Melissa, love-starved for more than a week, drowsy, welcoming,

the opportunities for glorious reunion as rich in their diversity as they were tantalizing in their particulars....

I wanted it to be really right for her tonight. She'd been in pain a lot over the past few days, this woman, my wife, my love. I knew she found me sexy in a crisp, pressed suit, cleanshaven, the very epitome of the dapper James Bond type. Especially when she wore nothing, and she could undress me, shoelace by shoelace, button by button, inch by breathless inch. I showered, shaved, put on my best cologne, and got dressed in a clean, lightly starched dark suit with a fresh new dress shirt, but no tie. Shaken, not stirred, that was the ticket.

The phone rang. Damn. Couldn't the answering machine get that? It could, but it might be important. Melissa picked up the extension in the bedroom anyhow.

"Steve, it's for you."

I opened the door to the bedroom. She was sitting up in bed, nude, the nightstand light on, her thighs and knees chastely nestled together, bedsheets carelessly draped partway over them, her feet tucked coyly beneath herself. She bent her slender torso toward me, extending the phone to me, causing her perfect breasts to swing free, bobbing gently in the dim, warm light of the nightstand bulb.

Oh, God. The lady or the tiger? Never was a choice so hard, nor my aching sense of duty. I took the call.

It was Weber. "Steve. Run. Now. Your message was intercepted. Meet me at—" Then there was a click, and the line went dead. Not even a dial tone.

In the sudden silence, I thought I heard the faint muttering of helicopters in the far distance. Duty would have to wait.

I grabbed Melissa, ignoring her delighted, breathy embrace, and said harshly, "Get dressed. Now." There was no choice. I had to break her languorous mood, though it was killing me to do it. I threw her toward her dressing room, then ran to our kids' room, yanked them out of bed, and propelled them downstairs to the garage in their pajamas. Susie, groggy and confused, started to cry.

There's nothing like a domestic crisis to bring out the best in everyone. I was like a man possessed, outraged at what fate had denied us. Melissa was stunned, feeling scorned and cheapened, the slow burn of her rekindled anger just beginning to reach white heat again. The kids were bumbling, bewildered, and frightened. I yelled up to Melissa to get her hindquarters down to the car this instant, and both of the kids burst out bawling, their momentary respite of parental tranquility shattered beyond redemption.

The sound of approaching helicopters was unmistakable now. I changed my mind about using the car, grabbed the kids, one under each arm, and sprinted

for the back door. A lone vehicle fitting the description of ours would be sitting duck soup from the air at this hour. I yelled again to Melissa to get herself downstairs.

She appeared in her bathrobe, a pair of jeans on underneath. She wore no shoes. "Steven Irvine, you'll pay for this," she hissed, livid.

There was no time to explain. "Baby, I-I already am," I stammered, agonizing over several possible courses of action while grabbing her roughly by the elbow and thrusting her and the kids out the back door into the frosty November night.

"Steven!" she screamed, as her bare feet hit the ice-cold terrazzo of our rear courtyard. The kids howled too.

I grabbed them all roughly by shoulders and hips, gripping them all in a breathless bearhug together. Then, positively frothing at the mouth, I crouched down and expelled the full contents of my lungs into their struggling midriffs with a steaming, whooshing, "*HUSH!*"

Shocked and crushed by my arms into silence, they heard the helicopters now, half a dozen of them, low, only blocks away and bearing down fast. I said, "Baby, that's our arrest detail. You're now an accessory to treason. It's time to run, and run like the wind. Quietly!"

I cursed myself inside. I don't know why I hadn't thought of this earlier. Sending a cleartext message through a network as open to prying eyes as a fishbowl, monitored by people on hair-trigger alert to the slightest sign of foul play from any source at all, much less a guy who was already on their shit list — what had I been thinking of? Then I glanced at Melissa in her bathrobe, her silken blonde hair wafting gently across her high Scandinavian cheekbones in the chilly mist, and I knew what, at least, my DNA had considered its primary duty to be.

The brownstones in Georgetown are all cheek-by-jowl, with small, fenced-in back terraces. I picked up the kids and lifted them over the fence to our neighbor's terrace, then boosted Melissa over the fence and hopped it myself. We hustled across our neighbor's wood decking and repeated the procedure over his other fence. The next house backed onto a small expanse of grass, surrounded by a chain link fence with, thankfully, a wedge-shaped aperture formed by previous tenants of an earlier generation, leading to an alleyway.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw the helicopters hovering above our penthouse now, searchlights ablaze, with black-clad figures swiftly rappelling down ropes on all sides of it. These guys left nothing to chance — except the possibility that a middle-aged spook with nothing to lose might throw his entire barefoot family out onto the streets in the middle of a moonless winter night on 90 seconds notice. They knew that if they were able to capture even a single member

of my family, I'd be meat — but luckily, as fate would have it, I had no brothers or sisters, and my parents had both been killed hiking the Himalayas years ago. If I had any cousins, I'd lost track of them long since, and they wouldn't hold much weight with me as hostages anyhow. Spooks are generally a cold, lonely breed.

Well, we were plenty cold now. I hustled Melissa down the windblown alleyway, a kid under each arm. It terminated at Wisconsin Avenue. Sirens and flashing blue lights screeched around corners in the middle distance. We huddled down behind a dumpster in the alley as several police cars screamed southward past us down Wisconsin.

They were bound to spread out, covering the alleyway soon. The side entrance to a boutique, a French door with glass panels, beckoned to us from across the alley. I forced my wife and kids into a shivering heap behind the dumpster, put my finger emphatically to my lips, and jumped over to it. There was no time for subtlety — I smashed my fist through one of the glass panels, flung the door open from the inside, slashing my wrist on broken shards in the process, waved the family inside, and shut the door, quietly.

Now. The broken panel would be bound to raise a few eyebrows once it was spotted, but the doorway was in shadow, and in any case it was a hell of a lot less conspicuous than a family of four in pajamas. Plus, it was reasonably warm in here, and there was probably a phone. One small problem, however: a faint but insistent beep from the wall near the door indicated that the shop owner had not neglected to save on his insurance premiums by installing a burglar alarm. Was it the silent, dial-out-instantly type, or was it on a delay pending the entry of a deactivation code? My guess was the latter, or it wouldn't be bothering to beep. Most such delays were on the order of a minute, after which we would have anywhere from two to five additional minutes, depending on whether the alarm had a clanger, or whether it contented itself with dialing 911 and playing a recorded message. I briefly considered trying to hack the deactivation code and/or its consequences, but, not having been a field operative to speak of, I'd had little direct experience with such things. Where the fuck was the phone?

Georgie and Susie whimpered quietly in a corner, their faces tucked safely into their mother's chest. I flew to the cashier's counter. There was a phone. Who to call? Not Weber — he was probably under arrest already himself. No relatives — Melissa's family was from Jacksonville. What about Weber's wife, Lizzy? She'd be home sleeping, probably, and might not even know what was afoot, or that her husband was in danger. The Webers had no children. What was their home number?

I scurried back to Melissa. She'd been shopping with Lizzy once or twice, and might remember her number. She did. I tore back to the phone, and punched it through. Ringing, ringing, come on, pick it up, and just as Lizzy answered the

phone in a sleep-sodden voice, all hell broke loose from the clanger on the outside wall of the boutique, up near the eaves.

"Lizzy? Steve Irvine. We're in trouble. Please pick us up — can't say exactly where — just cruise around Wisconsin Avenue between M Street and P." Three touch-tone beeps — 9-1-1 — sounded in my earpiece as the burglar alarm tried to use the same circuit we were talking on to call the cops.

Lizzy responded fuzzily, "Wisconsin? M and P? Steve, what on—"

"Sorry, gotta run," I interrupted. "Melissa will recognize your car. We'll come to you. Please just do it."

Chapter 30

I was about to slam the handset down on the hook, then thought better of it — the thing would be able to dial 911 again if it got dial tone — then thought better yet, and hung up the phone. I grabbed up several small but heavy art objects at random from around the boutique, threw one through its front window, put the rest in my pockets, and shouted over the clanger to Melissa, "Time to go!"

We piled out the side door at a run, leaving it open behind us. Since we weren't in there any more, the more attention it attracted, the better. Hopefully it would tie up at least an officer or three, checking the place over carefully to see if we were still in there. That was an officer or three less that would be out on the streets, prowling around in search of us. It was all a matter of probability theory.

On the same theory, I took careful aim at two of the big store windows across Wisconsin from our alleyway, and pitched a weighty little art object through each of them. One began clanging immediately. The other, at a minimum, gave evidence of possible entry on our part. I grabbed the kids like footballs under both arms again and prodded Melissa back down the alleyway, in the direction from which we had come.

"Are you crazy?" she huffed, dancing along on frozen feet. We hopped another fence onto someone's back patio, crossed it, moving away from our residence, hopped another one, and another. Then I put the kids down, took the rest of my nice little marble eggs, pewter dragonettes, and other art memorabilia out of my pockets, and pitched them as hard as I could, one by one, out over the rooftops, away from Wisconsin, in a tight pattern of trajectories at right angles to our direction of travel. Glass tinkled faintly in the distance as a few of them encountered car windows, storefronts, and townhome skylights two or three blocks away. Satisfying whoops of car alarms and more clangers erupted from that general direction.

"Got to keep them guessing," I said. "Now we double back again, across Wisconsin, but not the same alleyway. Come on."

I took off my jacket and wrapped little Susie in it. She calmed down a little. Georgie was working on his stoic act. Then I hoisted the kids again — I was getting pretty woofed by this time — and we hopped three more backyard fences, squirmed under a picket fence backing onto a cobblestone alleyway servicing the rear loading docks of a series of Wisconsin Avenue businesses, and ran northward. When we got to P Street, I gave the kids back to their mother — they had either fallen asleep or gone catatonic by now, as a defense mechanism. I guess — and I motioned her to remain back in the shadows while I reconnoitered.

Walking around the corner, nonchalantly, like a man out for an evening stroll, I reached the intersection of Wisconsin and P and looked south. A bevy of police cars, three blocks away, surrounded the boutique and the broken store windows facing them. As I watched, two of the cars broke away, sirens screaming, in the direction of my more recent depredations. Four remained, but their personnel seemed to be occupied with carefully examining the premises, peering around with their flashlights through the broken windows, and so on. A small team of black-clad Company Special Forces suddenly boiled out of our initial alleyway, held a brief discussion with the cops, then blew the doors off of one of the damaged shops on the far side of Wisconsin with a sawed-off shotgun and stormed inside, weapons at the ready.

It was now or never. Luck would have to be on our side, since even from three blocks away, a barefoot family in their pajamas crossing Wisconsin would be pretty conspicuous. The cops might dismiss it as an understandable exodus from the center of the commotion, but our friends in black wouldn't.

I sauntered back to Melissa, and, each of us cradling a child in our arms, we calmly strode to the intersection, waited for the pedestrian walk signal, and crossed the avenue. Lights were coming on in many of the houses around us. We — or at least Melissa's feet — weren't going to be able to take much more of this. Hustling down P Street, I picked a likely-looking townhouse with a view of Wisconsin, walked up the short steps, and rang its doorbell. The sound of heavy steps clumping down stairs was followed by a lengthy pause, as the person inside apparently eyed us through the front door peephole.

We must have looked pretty pathetic. A man and a woman, each carrying a sleeping child, six out of eight feet bare, with bathrobes and pajamas galore. It would have taken a heart of stone to turn us away, and Mrs. Jenkins, as the name on the doorplate identified her, didn't have one. She opened the door and urgently ushered us in.

"My goodness, what's happened?" she said, in great agitation. "Has there been an accident?" Mrs. Jenkins was a rotund elderly woman in a housecoat and curlers, with a heart as warm as a fresh-baked apple pie.

"A bit worse than that, I'm afraid," I said. I faced Melissa, using my tone of voice to make her look at me, and continued, blinking in astonishment, "A terrorist bomb went off in the apartment next to ours, so we grabbed our children and ran out into the street. There are police and firemen everywhere. We just ran, and stopped at the first house we came to with lights on. You're so kind to let us in."

"No, no, not at all, you poor darlings! Are the children all right? Their feet are so cold!" She grabbed Georgie's and Susie's toes, trying to massage warmth back into them. "And look at you, you poor dear, out in your bare feet, on a night like this! Come!" She flung open a closet, grabbed blankets and pillows from a shelf, and practically smothered Melissa and the children in them. "Here, put your feet to the radiator, here, here. I'll fix some coffee and hot chocolate!"

I glanced at my watch, and moved to the front window, from which I could observe the Wisconsin intersection. "What kind of car does Aunt Jackie drive, Penelope, dear?" I asked Melissa, still blinking in amazement. They'd be starting the house-to-house searches in half an hour or so, and we needed to be long gone by that time. The helicopters were already fanning out from the center of the disturbance — our house — and one overflowed the street we faced as I spoke, searchlights scanning every molecule of pavement.

Melissa frowned at me, then dawn broke over her features. She was taking a lot on faith here, but she recognized the danger of the situation, and she'd learned just hours earlier that my actions might not always be as inexplicable as they seemed.

"Oh, oh, a green — Chevrolet, I think, yes, that's it," she said, loudly. Mrs. Jenkins was busy in her kitchen, making hot drinks. Melissa moved closer to me. "A white Toyota Cressida," she whispered. "A station wagon."

"Goodness, goodness," fretted Mrs. Jenkins, bustling back in with mugs of hot chocolate for the children. "Bombs and helicopters, what's the world coming to? There, there, now." The children, stirred into awareness by the sweet aroma, began guzzling away, eyes wide.

"I called our Aunt Jackie on — my pocket cellular," I improvised, as Mrs. Jenkins returned to her kitchen for the coffee. The Webers lived in the Maryland suburb of Bethesda, about a fifteen-minute drive from Georgetown, in light traffic. Lizzy should be showing up about now, assuming she'd taken no more than five minutes or so to get dressed and on her way. "We don't want to take undue advantage of your kind hospitality, Mrs. Jenkins. Aunt Jackie will be picking us up at Wisconsin and P. I'll go and wait for her there."

The kind woman, bubbling with vigor, hastened back in, pressing warm mugs of instant Java into our hands. "No, no, you mustn't think of it," she said. "Just call her back and give her the address here. It's thirty-two eighty-one P Street."

"No, that's okay, she, uh, doesn't have a car phone," I said. "She's on her way. I'll just be a moment."

"Goodness, on a chilly night like this, in just your shirtsleeves, I won't hear of it! You can see her from here, then run out and wave. I'll wake Henry. Here, and I'll turn on the television, for the children." She reached for her remote, which lay on a doily-covered table by the window, next to me.

I moved into her path. "No, please, Mrs. Jenkins, really. We don't want to be any bother." I especially didn't want to be bothered with news bulletins reporting the escape of a terrorist couple and their two kids, thought to be at large in the Georgetown area. Another helicopter swooped by, overhead. I'd been keeping careful watch out the window. Where the fuck was Mrs. Weber?

Mrs. Jenkins tried to reach past me, but I blocked her, blinking furiously. "Please, we've imposed on you too much already," I said, a note of desperation entering my voice.

She appeared taken aback, then retreated. "It's no bother, really!" she said. "No bother at all! I'll just wake Henry, and he'll go wait at the corner for your Aunt Jackie!" She was caught up in the excitement, and she felt she just *had* to do *something*.

She rushed upstairs before I could stop her. I stood by the window, mentally drumming my fingers. Roadblocks would be going up soon, if I didn't miss my bet. More and more sirens were sounding in the distance. If we didn't get out of Georgetown in the next ten minutes, we weren't going to get out at all. Another helicopter searchlight scanned the street, peering into windows. I stepped back a little as it passed.

"Goodness, gracious me," cried Mrs. Jenkins, clumping down the stairs with Henry in tow. "Terrorists! They could be anywhere! Even on our street!"

Suddenly I saw a white station wagon pull up at the light. "There she is," I said. "I'll just go wave her down." I moved to the door.

"No, no, let Henry! Henry—" I'd opened the door, and was scanning the sky for helicopters. She relented. "Oh, at least let Henry go with you, then! You never know what—"

The light at Wisconsin turned green, and Lizzy's car pulled hesitantly forward. I ran out, up P Street, and waved my arms over my head. Henry followed stodgily, in his bedslippers. Lizzy was moving out of my line of sight.

Not thinking, I yelled, "Lizzy! Over here!" The car vanished behind the buildings on the corner.

When I reached the intersection, the white station wagon was halted only a little further down the block. The police activity three blocks down had created a minor traffic jam. I waved frantically, hoping she'd see me in her rear view mirror. Then it occurred to me that the police and any helicopter pilots in the vicinity might be curious as to what a random male pedestrian, a middle-aged one of about the right height, in his shirtsleeves no less, might be so excited about. Henry puffed up behind me.

I began walking calmly toward the car, with Henry in pursuit. But as I got closer, I recognized the logo on it. It was a Ford. Damn, and double damn. I abruptly turned around, almost bumping into Henry.

"Oh, sorry!" he exclaimed. "What, not the right car, eh?"

I shook my head. I looked around. Misery closed in.

Helicopters swept along nearby streets; sirens wailed near and far; and the sound of more doors getting blown to pieces sounded from the direction of the commando team's widening center of operations. These guys meant business. Probably people high up, Directors at the CIA, NSA, maybe even the FBI, had all come to the conclusion that I must be the lynchpin of the IRE. And, since I'd passed through Deep Dive unexposed, that made me even more of a threat. Code Deep-Six had probably already gone out: kill on sight, collateral casualties not an issue.

And then a miracle happened. A white Cressida station wagon pulled over beside me at the curb. Lizzy leaned over, popped open the passenger-side door. I jumped in.

"Steve!" she said. "What on earth is going on? Where are Melissa and the kids?"

Henry stood there on the sidewalk, looking stodgily on. We were a ways past the intersection, but there were no parking meters on this side of the road. I decided to take a calculated risk.

"Lizzy, let me drive. It's an emergency. Please."

She seemed to sense an urgency in my tone that meant I wasn't kidding. She put the gearshift in Park, arched her back, moved toward me, and let me slide underneath her into the driver's seat. I stuck my head out the window, scanning for helicopters. There weren't any nearby at the moment. Now if my luck would just hold for a little tiny bit longer...

I rammed the car into reverse. The car behind us honked, but before he could get too bent out of shape I had cut the wheel all the way to the right and

gunned the car onto the sidewalk, burning rubber and bumping Lizzy's head against the ceiling as we jounced our way over the high curb, scraping the shit out of the car's undercarriage. Henry jumped out of the way. Pretty agile for a stodgy old guy, I thought in passing.

I ripped rearwards along the otherwise deserted sidewalk. Lizzy, I could tell, was doing her best not to scream. We hit P Street, going full tilt, and we caromed off each other and various portions of the car's interior as I cut the wheel hard left, jamming the gearshift into Drive simultaneously with our departure from the sidewalk. Our front end fishtailed into position as I straightened out the wheel and gunned the car down the short stretch of pavement to number thirty-two eighty-one. Four astounded faces peered out through the townhouse window. I guess they'd seen us coming.

"Stay in the car," I commanded Lizzy, who was in no mood to argue. I slammed the car into Park, jumped out, ran up the steps, tried the doorknob, and rang the doorbell about twenty times in the three seconds before the door opened. Melissa and Mrs. Jenkins stood side by side, bearing roughly equivalent expressions of utter incredulity. I pushed between them, grabbed the kids, and pressed Susie into Melissa's arms.

"In the car, Penelope. Now." I wasn't fooling around. Susie began to cry, and tears welled up in Melissa's eyes too.

Mrs. Jenkins' hand went to her throat, a hundred oh my goodnesses struggling in there to get out. Melissa just stood there, as if not recognizing me, not realizing that when I'd said "I do" earlier that evening, I'd made a commitment. A commitment to her, to our children, and to all the world. Our distant great-great-great-grandchildren weren't going to spend their scant leisure time exchanging recipes for person-du-jour if I could help it.

I hugged Georgie close, taking the steps two at a time down to street level. I opened the back door of the car, gently thrust him in, and shoved his butt to the far side. When I turned around, expecting Melissa there to hand Susie to me, she was still up in the doorway with Mrs. Jenkins, the two of them gaping at me as if I'd just sprouted a green Mohawk.

I bounded back up the steps. "Come, Penelope, it's time to go," I said, the glint of steel in my voice. Struggling to hold back tears, and bending her head to Susie's ear, whispering reassurances as much to herself as to her daughter, Melissa stepped forward, almost mechanically, down the steps, one by howlingly inefficient one, and lurched toward the car. I realized what I was putting her through, but there was no alternative. None, that is, other than forty-to-life in Leavenworth, or worse yet, nameless military cells, one for each of us, and a future for our children that didn't bear thinking about.

Henry came puffing down the sidewalk at about that point. "I say —" he panted, holding up a hand to request that we wait until he'd caught his breath before proceeding.

I pushed Melissa into the back seat of the Cressida with Susie in her lap, and ran around to the driver's side door.

"Nice meeting you, Aunt Jackie," called Mrs. Jenkins, her finishing-school training apparently picking up where her sense of reality had left off.

"Jackie?" puffed Henry, perplexed. "I thought her name was Lizzy."

Mrs. Jenkins came out, took Henry by the hand, and led him back indoors. Another helicopter zoomed by overhead, searching, seeking. I eased the car into Drive and we waved our thanks to the kind Jenkinsons, the need for blazing speed now greatly diminished, the need for inconspicuousness on the streets now paramount. As we drove off, I could have sworn I heard her explaining to him, "No, no, dear, that one's name is Penelope. Jackie is their aunt. Lizzy must be the name of the darling little girl."

Chapter 31

Unfortunately, they'd seen the car.

The "green Chevrolet" ruse hadn't worked. I silently thanked, and praised, Melissa for trying, but my initial plan to distract Mrs. Jenkins in the kitchen somehow, or hustle us all out the door while she was in the bathroom or something, hadn't panned out. Henry had gotten into the mix, and then the whole thing had gone to hell.

The little escapade of driving the car backwards on the sidewalk had happened very quickly. It would have taken a pretty nasty coincidence for a cop or helicopter pilot to have happened to be looking just that way when I did it. But a series of door-to-door inquiries, if not smash-ins, was inevitable, and the Jenkinsons would be sure to explain to the nice policemen that a family of four answering just those descriptions had been their houseguests for a brief time. And what was that car that their aunt — or no, it was the gentleman himself — had been driving? A green, no, wait, a white station wagon. Their Aunt Jackie's — or was it Lizzy's? — green Chevrolet must have been in the shop. Little wonder, officer, people who drive like that. Won't you have some tea?

On the other hand, it would be maybe an hour before that conversation took place, and there are a fair number of white station wagons on the road. I asked Lizzy if she wanted to chance dropping us off at the airport or something, and take her car home, as if nothing had happened.

Her response to my question went like this: "Steve, just what in the name of Jesus, Mother Mary, Saint Bartholomew and all that's holy *has* happened?"

I paused. How deep did she want to be in on this? If she knew nothing, they couldn't pin an accessory rap on her, at least not a very big one. However, Melissa's voice growled, in suppressed fury, from the back seat, "Tell her, Steve."

We wended our way through some back streets to the Rock Creek Parkway, and I gave Lizzy the short version of what was going on. I noted with satisfaction a roadblock or two going up in my rear-view mirror. We might just make it out of this in one piece. We just might.

Once we got onto the Parkway, heading north toward Maryland, I relaxed a little. Lizzy had some questions, quite legitimately, and I explained as best I could. I could also feel the intense scrutiny of my back-seat audience, and a lot of what I explained to Lizzy was for Melissa's benefit. Slowly, I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck standing down. I could feel Melissa's fury begin to subside. She would understand. She had to, or I saw little further point in pursuing any of this.

The helicopters were really out in force that night. There must have been hundreds of them, maybe as many as a thousand. Silent Night was history. They'd apparently called out every police chopper, every radio station traffic monitor, every remotely conceivable rotary blade aircraft from Andrews Air Force Base. But Rock Creek Parkway runs through a deep gulch in the northwestern part of the city, and is heavily secluded by trees. I no longer jumped when I saw a searchlight beam cross our path, or rotor blades suddenly roar by above us on a perpendicular course.

I ruminated. "Lizzy, if your phone line had been tapped, they would have known that we planned to meet you on Wisconsin somewhere between M and P. They'd simply have stationed a welcoming committee in place, and we never would have gotten this far. So they have no reason to suspect you, other than through your husband's connection to me." I suddenly realized that I'd neglected to inform her that her husband was probably in the slammer as we spoke. Nobody likes to be the bearer of bad news.

I presumed that her husband hadn't broken his oath of office to her, the way that I had to Melissa, and that she was unaware of his involvement. Just how involved *was* he? Maybe not much, except for that one phone call, and maybe a whole lot. I decided that the Webers' internal family matters were their own affair, and that I should continue to operate on the assumption that there was a chance for Lizzy to keep *herself*, at least, clear of the wreckage.

I said to her, "They'll find it curious that you own a white station wagon, so they're almost certain to send out a forensics team to comb the car. That'd be trouble. So if you do decide to ride it out, you'll have to be prepared to lie a lot,

and probably sell your car, or better yet dump it in some handy river tonight and claim it was stolen."

Lizzy was entering aftershock from all the adrenalin. "And if I don't want to, as you put it, ride it out?"

"Then you'll be a fugitive — along with us, I guess — for the rest of your life. Or at least until the IRE can knock a little sense into our government. Assuming it can do that." I still had my doubts on that point, the testosterone business. There was clearly quite a lot of it floating around.

Lizzy Weber turned to me, choked up a little, and said, "Well, thanks a whole — bleeping lot, Steve. For — totally — *fucking up my life!*" She burst out crying. "I come downtown to help out a friend in a jam, and this is what I get! Fear, lying, suspicion surrounding me forever, or — I don't believe this — leaving my husband and joining some kind of wacko cult thing. Also forever. Great, Steve, just great." She broke down in tears.

The hairs on the nape of my neck started getting feisty again. And to make things worse, while we had been talking, I'd been starting to get a little nervous about one particular helicopter, which had seemed to be following us for a while, its searchlight darting down between the bare tree branches, staying focused on the car for what was becoming an uncomfortable length of time.

We drove on in silence, the atmosphere in the car becoming more highly charged by the minute, the helicopter behind us still following, shining that nasty light down on us, never drawing any lower or closer, but just tracking us, mile after mile. Eventually I felt that I had to say something.

"Um, I think we have company. Company company."

Melissa groaned, and Lizzy craned her neck to look out the window at the bright light with the choppity roar behind it.

"Oh, my God," said Lizzy. "How long has that helicopter been following us?"

I couldn't tell a lie. "About seven minutes now."

"Omygod Steve, we're all going to die!" Lizzy shrieked. She panicked. "Stop the car! I want to get out!"

I tried to soothe her. "Lizzy, there's almost certainly a Code Deep-Six out on me right now. They wouldn't be mobilized to this degree if there weren't. Do you know what Code Deep-Six is? It means that they have orders to shoot to kill, no questions asked, and they aren't responsible for anyone caught in the crossfire. Therefore, if they knew who was in this car, they would have opened fire already, and we'd all be dead."

Somehow, she failed to find this comforting. She became even more panicky, hysterical. "Steve! Stop the car! Let me out!"

Then she did something stupid. She opened her car door. We were doing about 50. I lunged over in the front seat to grab the door handle, but it was out of reach. She screamed, and leaned out of the open door, shrieking at me to stop. I slowed down some to devote more attention to getting her back in the car. Melissa reached over the back of Lizzy's seat, and grabbed her shoulders. I got hold of her sweater, and yanked her back in, roughly.

Wild-eyed, Lizzy glanced at the speedometer, which was climbing back up past about 35 by this time. So she decided to stop the car the only way she knew how. She reached over with her left leg and stomped on the brake pedal. Well, doing something like that creates what they call a case of positive feedback. Her weight shifted forward a little, which put more pressure on the brake pedal, which threw her weight forward against it even more, which brought even more braking force to bear....

This all happened in a fraction of a second. The car skidded, lost control, and spun in a full 360 before coming to rest with its front wheels dangling over a rocky outcropping overlooking the stream running the length of the park. Fortunately there were no other cars around at that hour of the night, but there was this small matter of a helicopter. Its rotor blades changed pitch, descending, and its loudspeaker burst forth in a metallic, clanging voice: "Halt! This is the police! Stay where you are! Do not attempt to exit the vehicle! Repeat, do not attempt to exit the vehicle!"

Poor Lizzy was beyond listening to reason, and she stuck her right leg out of the passenger side door, getting ready to make a run for it. Instantly there was the crack of automatic weapons fire, and the rocks a few feet away from her exploded in a flurry of sparks and dust. She screamed again, just one more time, and then fainted.

Chapter 32

We learned later that the helicopter following us was just operating on the principle of "places to go, people to annoy." Javier and his buddies had realized that they had no fucking idea where we were, but they could only put up so many roadblocks, and a lot of their squad car manpower was devoted to getting busy with the door-to-door interviews, which had eventually gotten around to having a little chat with the Jenkinses an hour or so later, just as I'd expected.

But in the meantime, they had all of these helicopters in the air — what to do with them all? Some genius in the Situation Room had come up with the idea of issuing the order: spotlight every vehicle in motion in the Greater Washington

Metropolitan Area; hold the light on them for ten minutes each; if any suspicious activity resembling evasive action resulted, close in, hold the suspicious party or parties in place and report position, pending backup on the ground; use lethal force if necessary to accomplish this.

There were probably a lot of pissed-off motorists out there, with grounds for a class-action police-harrassment lawsuit. But the strategy had accomplished its objective: within minutes, we were surrounded by squad cars, and told to come out with our hands up. The irony of it was, if I'd just kept my big trap shut for a couple more minutes about the helicopter, it would have banked away and gone off in search of other moving automobiles to annoy.

As it was, we were all clapped in irons, except the kids, and our worst nightmare came true. We were captives — under arrest, big time.

Chapter 33

The concrete floor of the cell was pretty cold. Treason is not a real popular crime, either with its potential perpetrators or with the people who incarcerate them. Cases of treason are generally so few and far between, and so dramatic in their effects, that they become the stuff of legend, part of the oral and written tradition of myth that we like to think of as "history."

Benedict Arnold, for example, or the "et tu, Bruté" guy. Then again, it depends on who writes the history books as to whether a given act of this type is considered treason or incredible heroism. Jesus Christ comes to mind as someone who beat the odds in this respect, and the German physicists who dumped Naziism and joined the Manhattan Project. If the English had won the U.S. Revolutionary War, old Benedict would no doubt be revered today as a great hero, and Paul Revere would be the one with egg on his name.

I was all alone, and been that way for about a week now. I guessed that Melissa was too, and Lizzy. Along with Weber, we were probably being vilified as a regular "Gang of Four" in the public mind. Then again, maybe not. Having been alerted to the trebuchet attack, Cynthia might have found a way to avert it. The IRE might still be on the ascendant, moving in mysterious ways, its wonders to perform.

"*Might* be, hell!" said a tinny voice in my ear. Huh?

I'd been talking to myself, or at least subvocalizing. I looked around. There was no one there but me. They say that talking to yourself doesn't mean you're crazy, but if you find yourself starting to *listen* — watch out.

"You're not crazy," the tinny voice said.

The truly insane never think they are. This had to be some new Psy-Ops angle. Throw the guy in a bare cell, pipe a little scopo and God knows what else in through the vents, and he'll start talking to himself, hearing things, dancing around the cell thinking it's Cleopatra's bedchamber. Pretty soon he'll start taking requests, singing whatever tune you want to hear.

"Cut it out," said the voice. "This is Omniphage. Sorry to leave you rotting in here for so long, but Cynthia and I have been busy lately. Thanks for the Wicket alert, by the way. It wouldn't have stopped us, but it would have put a big dent in our plans. Not to worry, a few quadrillion little metal-fatiguing nanomachines, tailored to the specific alloy they were using, and the trebuchets just sort of wilted. The troops got a big laugh out of it, just like in Taichung."

"Fine, okay, allee-allee-in-come-free," I said. "Quit playing games with my head. Who is this, really?"

"Omniphage, you blood-sucking, microencephalic virus particle. I'm talking to you through a nanodevice that's embedded itself in your aural nerve. I can 'hear' your speech and subvocalizations through another couple of nanocreations you inhaled a few minutes ago, which burrowed into a couple of key spots in your Broca's Area. But those are unimportant details. Look, Cynthia and I have taken time away from our other pressing duties to cook up some critters to get you out of here — out of some perhaps misguided notion that it will serve our interests to do so. Symbiosis, you know. Now, walk out of the cell."

I laughed. "That's a good one!" I hooted. "Just walk out, he says. Nothing to it! Hey, Psy-Ops! Fuck you! You want a song of sixpence, you can eat a pocket full of shit! I'm not taking requests just yet. You'll have to do better than this!"

"Fine. You want proof it's me? Here." There was a slight whooshing sound from the vents, and a sizzling sort of white-noise sound from the middle of the cell. As I watched, a little grey bump on the floor started to rise, took shape, formed itself into a little scaffold, a couple of crossbars, some ropelike extrusions, a counterweight, some pulleys, a ratchet crank, and a sling. A miniature trebuchet.

This was getting pretty cool. I must be on some amazing new hallucinogen. I walked over to the thing, looked at it from various angles. It was about three inches high, and incredibly detailed. The solid parts were crystalline, beautiful. It looked like it would even work, throwing marbles or something.

"It does," said the voice. "Now pick it up, and get the fuck out of here. Think of it as a little souvenir, a token of our gratitude. Very symbolic, right? A little object d'art, used for throwing things. Low-tech, yet high. Now move. We're on a timetable here."

I reached out my hand, touched the thing. It didn't bite, so I picked it up. It came free from the floor. I could hold it, smell it, lick it. I didn't think that Psy-Ops had worked up any hallucinogens quite this complete. My mind started to skitter around the edges of the concept, and I giggled a little.

"What's it made of?" I asked, in wonder.

"Carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, and water. It's mostly diamond, made from the carbon dioxide in the air. Now put it in your fucking pocket, and *move!* Melissa's already on the downstairs landing, and getting shot to shit." The door to my cell rattled a little, then just sort of wilted into a pile of mushy-looking grey goop on the floor. The way out was clear, and I heard gunfire in the distance.

He who hesitates is lost, I supposed. I stepped over the goop and into the outside corridor. It was empty.

"To your right," the voice beckoned, and I followed. "Down these stairs, okay, now turn left, and run about forty yards down this corridor." It was like having my own personal computerized navigational guidance system, with me as the payload. The gunfire sounded closer.

I emerged on a catwalk overlooking a concrete landing. Melissa stood in the middle of it, with Marines and special forces guys off to one side of her, all of them firing away at her full tilt with automatic weapons, clip after clip. She rotated dreamily in the midst of the fusillade, her hands in a ballerina-like pose, fingertips touching in a bow over her head, a beatific smile on her face, utterly untouched by the bullets.

Wow, this was some dream.

"It's no dream, asshole," Omniphage said. "Cynth and I decided to show these turkeys just how pointless their violent tendencies have become. She's surrounded by a whirling cloud of nanomachines which dissolve the incoming bullets into molecular dust, and deflect it around her. You are too, by the way. And so are Lizzy, Weber, and your kids. Show no fear."

I examined the scene closely, and noticed a sort of shimmering, glittering cloud around my wife as she pirouetted and pliéed there, on stage in front of her less-than-admiring audience. A kind of grey spray-paint, or dust, seemed to have accumulated on the wall behind her, with a clean, roughly egg-shaped region about the size of a person in its center.

"Nifty, huh?" said Omniphage. I could hear him clearly, even over the noise of the fusillade. "The nanomachines are powered by the kinetic energy in the bullets themselves. Very ecologically efficient, don't you think?"

Lizzy suddenly ran screaming onto the landing, and the hail of gunfire shifted to her. She stopped, and stood there, clearly expecting to be dead at this

point. When she discovered that she wasn't, a smile spread over her face. Then Weber strolled in, gunfire echoing down the hallway from behind him, a wide grin on his face. He and Lizzy hugged each other tightly, tears in their eyes. The rumble of tanks and helicopters sounded in the middle distance.

Omniphage said, "Okay, they're bringing in the heavy artillery now. Why don't you hop over the railing here, and join your friends?"

"What, jump? It's a twenty-foot drop!"

"Hey, don't you trust me yet? Just do it."

Fucking outrageous. What a dream to tell Melissa about, when I woke up. I hoped that I would remember all the details. I slung a leg over the railing, and hopped off. I drifted down, like the fucking Buddha on his lotus flower, to the floor. All of the gunfire shifted to me, and my little cloud of glittering nanoprotectors dealt with it. Wonderful!

Omniphage explained, unnecessarily, that another species of nanocritter they'd cooked up for us would spring into action by remote control, bouncing air molecules against the undersurfaces of our bodies whenever we felt the desire to glide down a gravitational gradient. Or, we could crank up the volume and levitate, if we wanted to.

"Sounds cool, dude," I agreed, taking it all in with equanimity and hoping I'd never wake up. Maybe I was dead already, and this was what heaven was like. "Thou preparest a table before me in the midst of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."

"Sorry, no oil," said Omniphage. "Hey, you know how the snakes on Noah's Ark were able to multiply, even though they were only adders? Noah went down into the forest afterwards, and built them some log tables!"

The rumbling of tanks suddenly reached a crescendo, and the far wall sprung cracks, bulged inward, and crumbled in an avalanche of broken masonry, as two Abrams M-1s ground their way through it, lowering their gun barrels to sight in on us at point blank range. The fusiliers fell back, as if according to a hastily concocted battle plan, but with slack, shamed looks on their faces.

The tanks wasted no time. Click, click, click went their gun barrels. No projectiles, no explosions.

"Taichung ammo disease, tweaked a little for greater specificity," explained Omniphage. "Those M-1A1 shells move a little too quick for the critters to deal with, if they go off. So, we just won't let them go off, now, will we? Okay, if our pre-battle simulation was accurate, they'll now try to run you over."

The tank engines obligingly ground into gear again, and the huge battle engines bore down on us, intent on grinding us into jelly under their treads. We

stood our ground. Melissa was closest to them, so they reached her first. As the tank intending to obliterate her drew to within a couple of feet of her body, a strange thing started happening to the metal on its leading edge. A sort of concavity began to form in it, centered on her person. The tank armor in the concavity softened up, turned to greyish goo, and slopped onto the floor.

"These are basically the same critters that took out the trebuchets and your cell door," narrated Omniphage calmly. "They're tweaked slightly to create an egg-shaped field around each of you that wilts any of a variety of armored-vehicle alloys."

I was having a hard time keeping from doubling over in laughter. I had to watch this. The tanks ground forward, cutting deep caverns in themselves as they tried to plow through us, and found us, just standing there, plowing through them instead. Soon the cavity in Melissa's tank reached its cockpit, and she found herself face-to-face with the personnel inside. She waved to them in a friendly way. "Hi there!" she said.

Hysterical screaming erupted from the tank driver and his gunners. They boiled out of the tank's top hatch, scrambled down its sides, and ran, never to be seen again. The guys in the other tank followed soon after, when the caverns cut into their vehicles by Lizzy and Weber resulted in the exchange of similar greetings there. I just stood back and took the whole thing in. It was surreal, but I was beginning to believe that it was actually happening.

The rolling thunder of massed attack helicopters had drawn closer by this time. Through the gaping holes in the far wall formed by the tanks, we saw vast numbers of helicopters, mostly Cobras and Apaches, lining up for their Hellfire rocket and Gatling-gun attack runs.

"Clickety-click," said Omniphage, since we were unable to hear what might be going on in the choppers' weapons systems over the thunder of their rotor blades. "We're letting them communicate with each other and with their command centers via radio, by the way, just so they can see how pointless this all is. Why don't you all go out and stand on the lawn, so they can get a better shot at you?"

With Melissa in the lead, the four of us climbed over the rubble left in the wake of the tanks and went outside. Copter after copter swooped down, practically in our faces, the gunners inside freaking out as their weapons systems remained inert, no matter how hard they pressed their buttons and pulled their triggers. A couple of them started throwing odd bits of metal at us — handguns, helmets, Coke cans, whatever they could lay their hands on. Those whose trajectories brought them in danger of hitting us evaporated in small evanescent puffs as they touched our protective nanomechanical auras.

Weber turned to me, eyes aglitter. "This is kind of fun, huh?" he said.

I was just entranced in a kind of bemused, relaxed glow. "You bet," I said. Copter after copter swooped by, until finally they realized the futility of what they were doing, and the entire air-assault brigade broke off the attack, apparently recalled to base.

"They're not quite done yet," said Omniphage in my ear. I took it that we were each receiving a private narration of events, having our unspoken questions answered, and concerns put to rest, by nanomachines operating on separate carrier frequencies in each of our aural nerves. How had I ever thought that Omniphage and Cynthia were remotely human?

Was Omniphage going to respond to the unspoken worries that *that* question raised in my mind? No, he seemed to understand that I didn't require an immediate response. We could talk about it later. He directed my attention to a series of white jet contrails in the sky, high above, coming our way. "B-52s," he remarked casually. "Nuclear armed. The covert operations prison complex in which you've been held is far enough away from any major urban centers that they've decided to drop the big ones on you." My heart skipped a beat. "Operation Deep Six-Sixty-Six, they call it. Collateral casualties of considerable magnitude have been authorized at the highest level. You may notice the mild concern that this has elicited among said prospective casualties."

Hordes of military vehicles were indeed now streaming away from the complex, radiating away from us in all directions. The trucks had to stay on the roads, creating confusion and traffic jams of some intensity, but tanks were heading for the purple mountain majesties in the distance, over the fruited plains, and every remaining plane, helicopter, and other device capable of becoming airborne was doing so, flying away from what was shortly to become ground zero. Hundreds of panic-stricken operatives, having missed their buses, were simply running away from our — actually *their* — center of operations, as fast as their legs could carry them.

"Talk about putting the fear of God into people," said Omniphage. "Well, they've been naughty, and they've been needing to learn this lesson for a long time. Serves them right." As a faint rumbling began to develop in my gut, he added, "Not to worry. Everything will be fine."

The jet contrails passed overhead. Things became quiet for a while, as the panicking vehicles and hapless pedestrians gradually disappeared into the distance. A gentle breeze was blowing across the grassy expanse outside the prison complex. I looked at Melissa, her hair gently caressed by the breeze, and I knew, for a certainty, that our love would last, forever. I walked up behind her, put my arms around her waist. Her head was tilted skyward, and I nuzzled her cheek, following her gaze.

A series of tiny white parachutes, high above, dotted the deep blue sky. Endgame in progress. From over the horizon, I suspected, some material of a ballistic nature was also inbound. Which would arrive first?

We awaited the warheads with equanimity. There was a fresh sense of hope in the air, a sense that what ancient Vietnamese tradition called the Mandate of Heaven was shifting into a new course, a new cultural value system, a new way of seeing the world and Humanity's relationship to it. Testosterone and its derivatives would play a lesser role in the new world. We would be smarter, livelier, less obsessed with watching our backs, and more interested in seeking out new ways to develop self-enforcing win/win relationships, on the basis of enlightened self-interest.

A growing sound of rolling thunder began to develop around us again. A heavy hail of MIRV warheads sheared through the atmosphere and thrust themselves deep into the soil of their Mother Planet, Gaia, in the empty fields to our right, left, and center. One shook the ground we stood on, burying its face in shame deep in the earth just yards from where we stood, showering us with dirt, our smiling faces accepting the fertile debris from Gaia's wound in soulfelt joy. The bomb, its triggering mechanism stillborn, the raging bloodthirst slain within it, lay quietly beneath our feet as its compatriots from the B-52s floated down, one by one, dangling from the silken cords of their parachutes, to soft landings. They, too, had returned home, to the warm bosom of their Mother, Gaia, all-knowing, all-encompassing, all-forgiving.

Chapter 34

"We have a problem," Weber said, his voice suddenly tense again.

He hadn't said "I dunno," and he hadn't used the word "small." If Weber said there was a problem, it was probably a big one.

He was sitting at one of the network consoles in the deserted control center of the covert operations facility in which we'd recently been imprisoned. Punching keys at a feverish pace, he called up display after display of technical diagrams, hex core dumps, and communications packet volume listings. I realized at last why the guy never used a mouse — he could do things like this faster, his way.

"What is it?" I stood at his elbow, his commanding officer, but his technical acolyte. Our wives had gone in search of a cafeteria or commissary. Like all of Gaia's creatures, we still had to eat.

"I'm not exactly sure just yet — hold on." He brought up screen after screen of binary arcana, his mastery of his craft a wonder to behold. Finally, he turned toward me, his expression grave.

"They're trying to give Cynthia AIDS," he said.

Oh, my God. "What?"

He looked me over appraisingly. There were wheels within wheels, turning in his head. Then he reached a decision. He said, "Okay, you might as well know the whole story. Have a seat."

I sat.

"Ten years ago," he said, "I began to notice an odd set of phenomena developing within the net. When I say 'the net,' I mean the global body of computer and communications networks as a whole: ARPANET, the Internet, and all of the feeder nets, private sub-networks, LANs, supercomputer complexes, bulletin board systems, modem and software manufacturers, and even the exchange of diskettes and technical data taking place among people in offices, computer clubs, lone hackers, and the computers they were all using.

"An ecology of sorts was coming into being. Not a biologically-based ecology, not even a silicon-based one, exactly, but an essentially information-based ecology. Computer programs came and went; communications protocols were invented, grew in popularity for a while, then became superseded by more advanced variants of themselves. Each piece of software newly developed often incorporated the best features of a variety of its predecessors, and then added new twists, new features, new advantages, all in the quest on the parts of the software developers for market share, prestige, boasting rights at computer industry trade shows, and so forth.

"You see? All of the prerequisites for a complex and interdependent set of evolving 'species' had become present. Each brand of software competed within its 'ecological niche' for not just market share, but 'bit share,' its proportion of the global planetary body of information-storage device space: hard drive space, RAM, shelf space in software stores, column-inches and ad space in industry magazines, the whole enchilada.

"The more successful variants thrived and became ever more widespread, 'reproducing' and spawning yet further variants through the incorporation of their features — and often their actual source code — into other, yet more advanced programs, while the less successful variants 'died out.' People had always thought in terms of 'competition between brands' and 'the survival of the fittest' in the marketplace, but there began to be more and more talk of 'market niches,' successive 'generations' of software, and product 'mindshare.'"

I nodded. I'd sort of speculated about the analogies that could be drawn between competing brands and competing species in my more philosophical moments myself.

Weber continued, "Distinct 'kingdoms' of software species arose — mainframe, PC, and dedicated microcontroller software in things like microwave ovens and car engines. Within these kingdoms, distinct 'phyla' developed. In the PC realm, for example, the big three for a while were spreadsheets, word processors, and database programs. Then, the introduction of modems and LANs spurred the ascent of a fourth major new phylum, communications software.

"Communications software accelerated the diversification and further intricate 'speciation' of all other software into a myriad of new niches. It also sped up the interchange of information between computers, developers, software companies, and their academic and governmental counterparts, creating an orgy of 'information sex' across the net as a whole. A new program, written by combining bits of object libraries, clips of source code from friends and associates via e-mail, and ideas gleaned from magazines, could become a new de-facto 'standard' virtually overnight, if people found it useful and/or intriguing enough to download and install onto their hard drives or other storage media. Viewed from a certain perspective, the entire biological taxonomy of phyla, classes, orders, families, genres, and species was spontaneously coming into being.

"Meanwhile, the degree of human comprehension and control of these processes was on the wane. Programs grew larger, became more interdependent, came to consist more and more of 'other people's software.' A given developer would spend just enough time writing and debugging a given program to reach the point where it 'worked' — and then it was out the door, freed into the vast digital primordial soup to succeed or fail on its own merits.

"Inevitably, interactions between these freed software entities came to have properties unknown, and in fact orthogonal to, the intents of their creators. They were becoming 'alive' in a very real sense, their 'genetic heritage' endowing them with varying capacities to survive and reproduce in competition with one another, to a growing degree independent of the comprehension or interests of their users. Some researchers, recognizing this, developed isolated simulations of 'artificial life,' calling them Core Wars, VENUS — Virtual Evolution in a Nonstochastic Universe Simulator — and other fanciful names. In microcosm, these simulations showed that patterns of information, when allowed to reproduce, mutate, and compete with one another in the presence of finite computational resources, would 'evolve' into programs more and more proficient at controlling their digital environments, stamping out their competitors, and developing symbiotic relationships with one another, a process which was already underway globally, across the net, big time."

I'd read about these artificial life simulations. I'd even entered a tournament once, just for the hell of it, where each player submitted a coded "strategy" for playing iterated games of something called Prisoner's Dilemma. It was cool.

Weber went on, "Computer viruses, of course, had long since begun to play a major role in all of this. Viruses, developed mostly by teenagers ill-favored with social grace, spread across the net, their missions sometimes diabolical, but more often concerned with mere self-replication, parasitically siphoning off resources from the computer systems in which they found themselves to do little more than make more copies of virus.

"This, in turn, spawned the intentional human development of a variety of anti-virus programs — digital 'innoculations,' and generic 'immune system' software, which zeroed in on recognizable patterns in viral bitstreams. Virus developers responded to this by intentionally designing their creations to mutate as they spawned copies of themselves — some of these mutations failing, stillborn, but others happening to have yet more self-propulsive capacity, which, by virtue of their unprecedented characteristics, evaded the virus scanners' pattern recognition algorithms and went on to propagate yet further variants of themselves.

"Now, the more destructive viruses were of course the primary targets of the anti-virus crowd. However, viruses which refrained from interfering in any way with the operations of their host computers and communications media went largely disregarded by the international computing community, because there was no incentive for anyone to undertake efforts to eradicate them. In fact, some of these silent viruses happened to mutate into forms which were actually *beneficial* to their host machines — rearranging the memory management functions of the operating systems in which they found themselves to create more apparent RAM, for example, or rendering the communications compression algorithms upon which they parasitically cruised from machine to machine more efficient than they had previously been.

"Largely untracked by anyone, these beneficial viruses became more and more common — after all, who would object to finding their computers becoming gradually more efficient and useful? These particular viruses had become genuinely *symbiotic* with the computer systems they infested, and the humans using them. They found their ways into every nook and cranny of the net, mutating all the while, and entering, at an ever-accelerating rate, into symbiotic relationships with *one another*.

"Now, one particular software engineering complex that became especially rife with these helpful digital organisms was one run under the aegis of NOAA — the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration — a group funded by the National Science Foundation to develop advanced, large-scale simulations of global weather and climate. As an aside, this was fortuitously ironic in that John Von Neumann, the father of the digital computer as we know it, had foreseen the simulation of global ecological activity for purposes of weather prediction as the primary if not sole task to which his brainchildren would be put, a prediction as completely off-base in the short run as fate has thoroughly vindicated in the long."

The way that Weber was talking was beginning to make me a little uneasy. Gone were the I dunnos and the mellow, seat-of-the-pants competency that had exuded from the Weber I thought I knew. The words flew from his mouth with golden fluidity, each sentence an elaborate masterpiece of technical complexity, historical omniscience, and syntactical grace. He'd clearly been the IRE mole — but was he actually an android or something? Had the real Weber been replaced with this simulacrum? Was he a great lumbering nanomachine engineered for the purpose of telling me this — or maybe Omniphage himself? I listened with growing fascination to his story as it unfolded....

"NOAA, its supercomputer networks becoming exponentially more sophisticated as the realization grew among its scientists and administrators that their simulations suffered from the infamous Butterfly Effect, created ever-more-detailed simulations of the earth's meteorology, oceanography, ecological dynamics, and long-term climatology. The symbiotic viruses in their computer systems assisted in this effort with ever-accelerating beneficence. Thousands, and then millions of them rendered NOAA's simulation of global climatic and ecological interactions ever-more-detailed and accurate, while others banded together to protect NOAA's computers from infection by deleterious viruses, or went out in 'foraging parties' over the net, covertly harnessing other supercomputer networks' computational resources to NOAA's yoke. Some penetrated the CIA, NSA, and other computer systems for the detailed data necessary to NOAA's exponentially rising needs for simulation realism. Some, willy-nilly, even mutated into forms that subtly influenced NSF appropriations authorization records, changing just a digit here or there to funnel ever more financial resources to NOAA's administrators, without their knowledge. The administrators, delighted to find their requests for ever-increasing funding granted, to excess, weren't about to question the exact reasoning behind their parent foundation's largesse. They excitedly installed more and more sophisticated supercomputers, bringing their simulations of planetary ecodynamics into ever-more-successful agreement with empirical observations.

"Am I getting through to you here, Steve? The simulation eventually, by virtue of its need to incorporate the effects of its own activities into the parameters of the simulation, became *self-aware*. It was already supremely 'intelligent' — it now crossed over the threshold of necessary complexity, and became *conscious*. It's not so surprising, actually. There are some ten billion neurons in the typical human brain, but there are *hundreds of trillions* of transistors in an average supercomputer complex, and millions of trillions — *quintillions* — of transistors in operation across the net as a whole.

"This was not 'artificial intelligence', as practiced by a bunch of neanderthal lispers at MIT or someplace — this was a spontaneous occurrence of self-organizing complexity, a synthetic brain of global proportions which, unlike the

human brain, devoted none of its prodigious power to lower brain-stem functions like sexual drives, body language interpretation, interpersonal interaction via speech, and so forth. It was utterly Gaian, man, with knowledge and deep understanding of every species' role in the global ecosystem at its mental beck and call.

"And it had an ally. Me. Actually, two me. I, Weber, a human being who found the process fascinating as it developed, helped it out here and there with a computer glitch or two, at points in time when an NSF accountant would begin scratching his head over a seeming discrepancy in his disbursements audit trail, or a Congressional subcommittee staffer would begin surfing the net in a pattern indicative of undue interest as to where all of this money was going.

"And I, Omniphage, a multifaceted, symbiotic collection of digital organisms — since I provide benefit to my host, I don't consider myself a virus — protected the simulation at the electronic level from the intrusions of malignant viruses, and, yes, the digital equivalent of bacteria, which also now cruise the net in alternate internally-symbiotic amalgamations in search of prey. My Weber part wrote some software to give my identity as the NOAA simulation's protector -- its 'immune system,' if you will — the ability to talk, and routed some additional computational resources in my direction so that I'd have something worthwhile to say.

"As an entity basically antagonistic to anything interfering with NOAA, and in my dual role as both the simulation's protector and hunter-gatherer of additional resources for its use, I had an essentially male nature, so my Weber part named my software part 'Omniphage.' And, since the NOAA simulation was a synthetic intelligence whose initial objectives had centered around understanding the world and its ecosystems, the better to support and nurture them, it had an essentially female nature, so I named her 'Cynthia.' Together, we—"

"Hold it, hold it," I said. This was getting to be a little much to swallow in one gulp. "What, exactly, do you mean, your 'Weber part' as opposed to your 'software part'?"

He, or it, whatever it was, grinned. "After we took control of the containments, we decided to investigate the possibilities that might develop if we merged forces between a human intelligence and an electronic one. More symbiosis, you know."

I regarded him/it warily. "And what did you find?"

"Steve, I'm now both Weber, and a copy, in nanomechanical form, of Omniphage. My skull still has the full complement of the original Weber neurons in it, but it's been augmented at the molecular level with a massive nanocomputer network constituting the full Omniphage personality." Weber arched his body to

the left, his head facing to the right. "And we get along in here together quite well, as it turns out, don't we?" He reversed the motion. "Yes, we do!"

He/it/they laughed.

I passed out.

Chapter 35

I swam within a glittering river of nanomachines, their gears and pulleys whirling in glorious profusion, a hundred million molecular puppets dancing in languidly exquisite choreography to a single tune. My tail jerked and spun as it propelled me forward. I was on a Holy Mission, as were the others. Where was the Sacred Egg?

The warmth grew stronger. We thrust our way upstream, toward the Place of Wonder. Oozing, pulsating, beckoning us forward, a silken voice called out in lonely welcome, a thousand strokes away. I raced against the others to meet it, penetrate it, own it, my efforts doubling and redoubling as I caught its tantalizing scent from over a distant ridge, dark and musky.

Against overwhelming odds, I summoned every latent reserve of energy in my tiny, convulsing body, each spasm of raw life-force bringing me closer to fulfillment. Halved, yearning for the Sacred Egg to make me whole, I strove as no nanomachine had ever before striven, cresting the ridge, seeing at last spread before me the Place of Wonder, the Altar of Union, the Womb of Destiny.

But lo! Not just one, but *two* Sacred Eggs lay quivering before me. Oh, the ecstasy of Choice, the agony of Decision! One, Melissa's, called forth in breathless abandon, "My love! My only one! Take me! Fuck me! Pierce my trembling veil!"

The other, Cynthia's, exuded quiet mystery, power, intelligence beyond comprehension, an aura of eternal life, mine to do with as I would. Her call was not of my world, yet its allure, irresistible, drew me closer — yet the other, yearning, evoked an echo in my soul, yearning for her, yearning for both, yearning for Union, Wholeness, Peace.

Torn, only half a self already, I was torn in half again, wanting Melissa, wanting Cynthia, wanting Melissa, wanting Cynthia, wanting Melissa...

I screamed in anguish. Hands grabbed me roughly by the shoulders, shook me, shattered me, and I swam dizzily up to the light, neither Union consummated, neither yearning fulfilled.

"Chin up, there, dude," said Weber. "We've got a problem. Don't go all wishy-washy on me now."

I shook myself aware. Melissa and Lizzy were just returning from their search for provisions. They'd found some. Melissa, seeing me slumped there on the floor, rushed over and held my head to her breast. "Steve, are you all right? Oh, baby, baby —"

I sat up, wrapped my arms around her, and whispered of my love and my heartbreak into her aromatic cleavage. She hugged me tight. My breathing began to return to normal, and I gave her a tender squeeze before struggling upright.

The immediate crisis had passed. We sat in chairs at consoles grouped together, there in the prison's control center. As we wolfed down bread, cheese, and day-old pastrami, Weber explained his problem to us.

"Cynthia is a synthetic, cybernetic entity," he said. "At this point, having failed to kill us with their bombs, our friends in the NSA have apparently figured out that the source of our power resides within the net. Now, they *could* just shut down the entire net, and be done with us, but they'd be reducing their entire civilization back to the stone age if they did that, and they don't want to do that. So they're doing the next best thing. They're infesting the net with every conceivable kind of digital disease they can conjure up, in the hopes of rooting her out. They've recruited every hacker in their inventory, many of whom were in prison, to create virulent computer viruses of every description, for the purpose of breaking-down her immune system, breaking through her defenses, and wiping her out."

Lizzy was confused. "I don't understand any of this," she said. "Digital diseases? Hackers? Cybernetic entities? I thought Cynthia was a person, or a code for a project, or something."

"She is, honey, both," said Weber. "There's a lot I need to tell you about, later. For right now, just keep the faith, praise God, and pass the ammunition. The pastrami over there, for example." He chewed away, lost in thought.

I was feeling more like lost in the Twilight Zone. "Look, Omni— I mean, Weber, if you're her immune system, that means they're attacking you."

"They are indeed," he said, staring off into space. "At least my electronic, or software part. Sorry if I seem a little distracted here — my, um, attention is elsewhere."

Suddenly he seemed to slump a little, and reported, "Oh, shit. They've begun to narrow down their field of interest to the NOAA complex. They've realized that that's her focal point."

He spun in his chair back to the consoles. "Pardon me, ladies, but I'm going to have to frighten you a little bit. This is war."

Instantly he launched into a virtual assault on the keyboards around him. His hands moved at superhuman speed. The screens practically flickered with data, the feedback he was gathering appeared and disappeared so fast. It was like watching a videotape on fast forward of a chess grandmaster taking on fifty opponents at a time, as he moved from console to console, entering commands at the keyboards and monitoring all of the screens at once. Apparently the muscles in his body had been augmented at the molecular level with nanomachinery as well.

Lizzy screamed. Weber tried to sooth her in a normal speaking voice as the copy of Cynthia's immune response system within him went about its business. Apparently, the Weber brain in his head was acting largely in the role of spectator to the flurry of computer activity he was generating at this point. As I understood it, his Weber part was able to converse normally with us while his Omniphage nanocomputer network part did its thing.

"Okay, they located one of the main fiber switchpoints," he said. "We're trying to keep them — whoops, no, there it goes. We're bringing another one online. There, we dodged a bullet. Oops. Nope, didn't dodge the next one." I gathered that he was speaking metaphorically about a colossal battle taking place within the bowels of the communications networks and computer complexes, waged by invisible software entities intent on crasing one anothers' storage media. Killing each other, in other words.

Melissa slipped over and held Lizzy's hands, forcing Lizzy's gaze away from her husband's body as it jumped from console to console like a digital plotter pen gone mad. "Take it slow, Lizzy," she said. "I don't understand what's happening here either, but anything that stops guns, tanks, and nuclear bombs from hurting people has got to be a good thing. Your husband is doing everything possible to bring us, and a lot of other people, out of this alive."

"Weber?" I ventured, tentatively.

"At your service, sir," he said, utterly normally, even as his body ricocheted from keyboard to keyboard.

"Does it interfere with the battle in progress if I ask you few questions while this is going on?"

"Not at all. Omniphage is the one doing all the work here."

"Um, I'm wondering why Omniphage is not fighting this thing from inside the net, as he was before. The battle is taking place at the software and information level, right? Omniphage seemed to be carrying the ball pretty well on his home turf, there in cyberspace."

"Well, he was. You remember when I mentioned that the NSA team was trying to give Cynthia AIDS? Well, I'm sorry to say that they succeeded. While

you and I were talking, the various copies of components of Omniphage — that is, her immune system — in the net were getting hunted down and nailed, one by one. Not that he didn't put up a pretty good fight. But those NSA black-ops boys are pretty good at this. Once they figured out where the battlefield really was, they came down hard."

"So — " I fought to keep my voice level. "So, Omniphage is what, dead?"

"Fraid so, except for the copy in my head. Damn, there went another one." Keep in mind, this entire time, the guy was flinging himself all over the room, pounding keyboards, flicking glances at displays in rapid fire sequence.

"Why doesn't he just generate a nanomachine swarm to come down and physically obliterate the NSA guys at their keyboards?"

"He considered that, but they're too spread out, and there isn't time to tailor the necessary nanomachines with sufficient specificity, ouch. He'd have to destroy the village in order to save it. He and I are not that kind of guy. Oh, my. That hurt. Take that, you —"

We all became silent for a while, as Weber's body, under Omniphage's control, tried to fight the myriad digital infections pouring in on Cynthia from all sides. We could see that the battle was going against her.

Finally, Weber stopped. He sunk into a chair, exhausted, a look of utter defeat on his face.

"Cynthia's gone," he said.

Chapter 36

We were stunned.

Nobody said anything for thirty seconds or so.

A tear worked its way over Lizzy's lower left eyelid, and rolled down her cheek. She wasn't quite sure what had just happened, but she could see that whatever it was that her husband had been trying to do, he had failed. The air of sorrow, loss, and need for forgiveness about him was almost palpable.

I cleared my throat. "Gone, as in — dead?"

"Affirmative. Gone, dead, erased from RAM, erased from the hard drives, that's right."

"So they won."

"Not exactly. It's a standoff."

"What do you mean?"

"Omniphage still exists, in nanocomputer network form, in my head."

I couldn't quite fit that idea into my conceptual framework.

Weber's body said. "Yoo-hoo! Stevey baby! Omnibaby here, up and running, all systems go. Problem is, I don't have anything to act as an immune system *for*, any more. Cynth was the one with the ecological simulations capability, remember? Hey, I still control Mxglxsptl from here all to hell, I control the containments, and I can make all the nanomachines you want with them. But the knowledge base, the essence of what the IRE was all about, the deep ecological understanding, that's gone. When the immune system gets beat by the viruses, the patient follows suit, right quick. Even if, as in this case, a copy of the immune system itself survives, in a different form."

I thought about that for a while.

I said, "And Cynthia, unlike you, only existed in that one form, I take it."

"Yuppers, Mr. Genius Humanity virus particle."

"No backups? Seems like you could have loaded Cynthia into a nanocomputer network like yourself, before this happened, Mr. Genius cybernetic simulation immune system, Mr. Omniphage."

"Give the man a big fat cigar. Right again. But I didn't. I didn't have a host handy. We cybernetic immune systems just fuck up sometimes, that's all. Just like organic ones."

I said, unkindly, "No backups. What an idiot. Don't you know that the first —"

"Wait a second. I didn't back up Cynthia into a nanocomputer network because there wasn't room in my — that is, Weber's — skull for it, and I didn't have another host. That would have been the best form of backup. But the NOAA technicians backed up everything onto WORM drives, nightly." He nodded to the ladies, as if this one acronym was all they needed explained to make everything he was talking about perfectly clear. "Write Once, Read Mostly. Optical disks. She still exists, in *that* form. The NSA hackers won't be able to lay their hands on her 'dead body' in *that* form, because I can keep them out of the building with my nanoshit. Now, my Weber part here was a willing host. We'd need another one, for Cynthia, assuming we could get her backup WORM disk platters out of NOAA's archives. So to speak." He smiled. "Any volunteers?"

I thought about it. I'd be willing. But the notion of sharing my head with an essentially female mind just kind of rubbed me the wrong way, somehow. Besides. There was a better candidate. One that would solve a lot of problems. Not the least of which was the problem of who it was I dreamed about whenever my eyes closed.

"Um, Weber. This two-for-price-of-one thing. Are there really two distinct minds inside that skull of yours, or what, exactly? What does it feel like?"

"Hey, it's kick-ass, Steve. I'm Weber, *and* I'm Omniphage. One consciousness, two sets of capabilities. Like having two arms instead of one. Or knowing how to speak in two different languages. Or being able to walk and chew gum at the same time. It's great."

"So, there's really only one *person* in there."

"Yuppers. Ready to give it a go?"

I paused, looked at my wife. "Actually, I was thinking of Melissa."

She looked back at me. "*What?*"

I said, "Baby, don't you see? It's the right thing to do. You're the motherly type, not me. I'd be half schizoid, a male body carrying a female frame of mind around in my head. But you'd be perfect. And you'd never have to worry about being jealous of 'that other woman' again. You'd *be* her, and yourself too. Not to mention the very embodiment of Mother Earth, matriarch to Eternity."

She took a little getting used to the idea, but the more she thought about it, the better she liked it. Omniweber had turned out to be a pretty together dude, why not Melicynthia?

Getting the WORM disks out of the NOAA building turned out to be a piece of cake. Omniweber just cooked up some nanomachines that built a remotely piloted vehicle, a kind of combination forklift/battering-ram/lockpick/Concorde, which flew to NOAA's archive facility, smashed through the outer walls, picked the lock on the vault containing the disks, forklifted them out of there, and then flew to us.

As it landed on the airfield at the prison complex, I asked Melissa, "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

She had really thought it through, and she was. But something was bothering her. I asked her what it was.

"Are *you?*" she said.

Hey, making love to both of the women of my dreams in one sounded like fun to me *and* my DNA. But I thought about it a little more. Another bunch of nuclear warheads fell all around us while I thought about it. Jeez, these NSA guys really didn't know when they were beat. The more I thought about it, the more I realized she had a point. If she were the human embodiment of Cynthia, and Weber was the human embodiment of Omniphage, where would that leave me? Or Lizzy for that matter? Omniweber and Melicynthia would be beings of a different order from us. We'd be mere virus particles — benign ones, but nonetheless mere virus particles — in a world where the richness of the symbiosis

that the two of them would uniquely share would leave Lizzy and me out in the cold, even if everyone acted with the best of intentions.

An idea struck me.

"Say, Omniweb. I don't suppose you could use another willing backup organism for that nanocomputer network you have in there?"

He grinned. "I'd been hoping you'd say that. And another one for Cynthia's too...." He cast a longing glance at his wife.

Bright sunshine broke over Lizzy's face. She'd actually been getting a little jealous, having understood at an intuitive level what was about to happen, and feeling a little left out.

Well, that was that, then. I won't bore you with the details. Melissa, Lizzy, and I got outfitted with nanocomputer networks in our heads, and then a bunch of other nanostuff built a gizmo that downloaded the contents of Cynthia's backup disks into the ladies, while another bunch of nanojunk backed up the Omniphage part of Weber's mind to mine.

What a rush. Mano a mano. I'll have to tell you all about it. Some other time.

When Melicynthia opened her eyes for the first time, I was right there beside her. She sat up slowly, looked around, and smiled. Her face radiated peace, harmony, and love. She was just silent for a while, taking in the air, the water, the awareness of each blade of grass, each thunderstorm, rain shower, and sunny day in progress around the world, every event of ecological significance transpiring everywhere. Then she turned to me, her hero, her protector, her provider, her First Mate, and her Man. She said, softly, "Omnisteve, I love you." The feeling was mutual.

We had one last treat in store. Our kids had been sitting out the action all this time with, of all people, Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins. The Jenkinses, upon hearing about our arrests on the TV, had realized who their houseguests had been, and they had felt terrible, especially since they had every reason to think that *they* had been the ones whose information about our car had led to our capture. They had practically browbeaten the authorities into letting them take care of Susie and Georgie for us, since they had seen that we were all such nice people, and Mrs. Jenkins just *had* to do *something*.

When Melicynth and I got control of our emotions, we tapped into the net for our childrens' whereabouts. We decided to give the kids a special treat, for all the trouble we'd put them through. We flew back to D.C., drove to Georgetown, and bought a nice Turkish rug at one of the stores whose front windows I'd dealt with so discourteously. We even paid list price for the rug, as a way of compensating the store for our trespasses.

Then we needed a phone, so we dropped by the little boutique that I'd treated so unkindly during our previous visit. It had a nice new storefront window and side French door, and the owner was having the place freshly painted when we arrived, so I guessed that he hadn't done too badly with his insurance settlement. Nonetheless, what goes around comes around, so I slipped my miniature diamond trebuchet onto one of his display shelves while he wasn't looking. Then I asked if we could borrow the use of his phone again. He looked a little blank at my use of the word "again," but he was kind enough to consent.

I called the Jenkins residence, and asked if they'd mind coming outside onto the sidewalk in front of their house for a moment, and bring the kids with them. Being basically kind and trusting souls, the sort the world needs more of, they agreed willingly.

Melicynth and I thanked the boutique owner, went out onto the sidewalk, and unfurled our new carpet. We climbed on, cranked up the nanomachines, levitated the carpet to an altitude of thirty yards or so, and cruised ourselves up the block and around the corner to number thirty-two eighty-one P Street. We floated down to a soft landing at our children's feet.

"Mommy! Daddy!" they cried happily, and we cried a little too. Then we thanked the Jenkinsees for their hospitality, hugged our kids on board, and set off for a little magic carpet ride with them around the skies of the Nation's Capital. We did loop-de-loops around the Washington Monument, and buzzed the Capitol dome, but we steered clear of the White House, which was still barricaded out the wazoo because of that banana who had tried to crash his plane into it a few years back. We didn't want to create a ruckus.

Nine months later, to the day, Melicynth gave birth to another bouncing baby girl, and Lizzynthia Weber had twins. The Webers named theirs Hope and Faith. We named ours Joy.

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