

PART IV

Twenty-Eight

Lamas Bordak ran through the department store, knocking over racks of clothes. The siren had been wailing for a full thirty seconds, and she still hadn't found her six-year-old.

"Midi! Midi!"

Lamas finally spotted her son crouched in a corner, sitting on the floor and hugging his knees to his chest.

"[Midi, we have to go now!]" she yelled, yanking him off the ground.

When the two burst outside, they were horrified to see throngs of people racing through the street. The air raid siren was quite unbearable, but far worse were the scores of missiles streaming overhead. The distant bursts of light and low rumbles reminded Midi of a fireworks show, but even he sensed that something was very wrong.

"[Come Midi!]" Lamas yelled, finally picking her child up and carrying him.

Lamas spotted a familiar beacon and headed for the inviting purple glow. She knew that cheaper shelters were available in the outer sections of the neighborhood, but this was no time for frugality. Lamas gladly paid her steep admittance fee (small children were free) and entered the cramped bomb shelter.

Once inside, Lamas picked a spot on a bench near some old women, who were also Lotosian. As the minutes passed, Lamas began to regret her hasty decision. Romar had reassured her time and again that the Americans would never bomb the "[floating ghetto]" (as he called it). After all, he would always point out, there were missile defenses protecting the buildings in Minerva, but nothing like that out here. Lamas had always thought this to be a rather silly argument; there were spas in Minerva too, but that was because the people there were rich, not because they had more aches and pains.

In any event, if none of the missiles hit the largely Lotosian neighborhood, Lamas knew her husband would be furious at her frivolous expense. She felt ashamed of her emotional reaction, and did not look forward to telling her husband what she had done as he hobbled around the small apartment. The family had been so close to saving up for a new prosthetic leg for Romar, but then the tightened blockade had made it too risky.

There was no telling how much higher the cost of living would go, and Romar would never jeopardize his son's future to fix an old war injury.

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"Thirty-two reported hits, sixteen confirmed," the operator informed Peckard.

"Any of ours?" Peckard asked. So long as the missiles hit property insured by other companies, or not at all, then so much the better. But far too many were getting through for Peckard's liking; a few lucky strikes could cost the Trust millions of ounces.

"Six Trust items reported, two confirmed," a different operator said.

"Which?" Peckard asked, feeling queasy. He sincerely hoped it wasn't an apartment building: at a thousand ounces per person, that could add up quickly.

"The Callahan Bridge and a GemStar warehouse," the operator answered.

Peckard exhaled. The bridge wouldn't be too bad; no one would have been on it, and it had been designed for the easy replacement of damaged sections. The warehouse also wasn't a problem; anything valuable would've been moved into hardened bunkers.

"What's the status on the bombers?" Peckard asked. Now that the Trust's Defender model had held up for a good hour, knocking down hundreds of incoming cruise missiles, Peckard's only worry was the Stealth aircraft.

"Still on their runways," a third operator said. "Oh wait, it looks like they're getting ready to move." Alerted by the apparent spike in temperature, the operator quickly trained another of the Trust's satellites on the U.S.-controlled airfield for an independent reading.

* * *

"Lord, if you get me through this," Tom Flanagan bargained, "I swear, I'll become a pacifist."

Flanagan's eyes scanned the horizon, even though he knew it was pointless. He kept trying to comfort himself. Objectively, there should have been nothing to worry about: The boys in HQ knew exactly where the bombers were, and all he had to do was

get close enough to squeeze off all his Interceptors, then turn hard and get the hell out of there.

Flanagan vowed that this time, he would be more prudent with his earnings. He decided that even if he and every other pilot got home without a scratch, taking on F-117s was the sort of thing you should only do *once* in your life. Yes sir, if and when Flanagan made it back, he'd take the penalty and immediately retire.

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“A hit!” the operator squealed, then regained his professional composure. “That’s confirmed, we definitely have a splash,” he said after a moment.

Peckard clenched his right fist in satisfaction, then finally allowed himself to relax. Even if the rest of the bombers made it through, it didn’t matter in the grand scheme: The Trust had just survived what should have been a crippling bombardment of cruise missiles, and had now even destroyed a Stealth bomber.

Peckard smiled. There was definitely a new force in global affairs.

Twenty-Nine

“Sure I can’t talk you out of this?” O’Toole asked, knowing what the reply would be.

“Yes, Peter,” Mason answered. “These missile strikes are only the beginning. I feel as if my remaining time is limited.”

“That’s not the Mason I used to know,” O’Toole said. “Back when everyone else was saying Hail Marys at the thought of an invasion from Lugar, you were urging me to buy real estate.”

Mason laughed.

“Yes, but it was different then. At that point, I was elated just with the fact that Minerva *existed*. It didn’t matter if I died; it was enough that the society and its institutions would live on.”

“And now?” O’Toole asked.

“And now,” Mason said, staring out the O’Tooles’ giant window at the eastern coast, “I have grown accustomed to the success of my ideas. There is nothing now that can stop the spread of freedom. And so I want to move on. Just yesterday I learned that Roderick Dupont, the philosopher, has decided to take the jeneers’ offer. That makes my decision an easy one.”

O’Toole nodded, knowing further arguments were useless. For several months Mason had been seriously discussing a move to the jeneers’ island, but O’Toole thought the professor had just grown flighty in his old age.

(*Jeneers* was the slang term for the few dozen genetically engineered [“gen-eered”] humans grown in Minervan labs. From almost the beginning, scientists on Minerva had conducted research that was illegal in other countries. [Indeed, these experiments constituted a major plank in the United Nations’ case against the island.] At first, the medical procedures consisted of gene therapy for inherited diseases, as well as trivial applications such as choosing a child’s hair or eye color.

Soon enough, the alarmists’ worst fears were realized. After a brief legal battle, companies began soliciting DNA samples from extraordinary individuals in order to

create genetically superior children, who were then sold for exorbitant amounts to wealthy parents. [Depending on the clients, the adoptive parents' own DNA was usually represented, in varying percentages, in the child as well.] The hopes—and horrors—for a new breed of Minervan *ubermen* were dashed, however, within a few years. For some inexplicable reason, when the jeneers reached puberty, their nervous systems suffered enormous damage, leaving the child in exquisite pain and requiring constant medical supervision. Thus, just a decade after they had started, the jeneer programs were virtually discontinued except for a few stubborn researchers who wanted to solve the “puberty problem.”

Partly out of guilt but mostly out of relief, the parents of the jeneers jointly financed a special platform to house and care for their freakish children. Located ten kilometers off the southern coast, the facility boasted state-of-the-art medical equipment for the physically debilitated. The platform's amenities allowed the jeneers to exist almost independent from outside supervision.

The uplifting twist in the sad tale occurred three months after the jeneers had all been relocated to their customized island. Despite their handicaps and constant pain, the children were still quite gifted intellectually. A few retired academics had petitioned for the right to work with the children, and were admitted. After only two weeks, the academics [with the approval of the jeneers' guardians] invited scholars from all areas to move to the tiny island. There, they were promised an unimaginable intellectual climate in which to exchange ideas and conduct research. The only stipulation: Those moving to the island had to promise never to leave, and all contact with the outside world would be limited to academic publications. The jeneers were apparently extremely private, and did not want their embarrassing condition to become fodder for gossips.

As one can imagine, at first the invitation went largely unheeded. But gradually, a few scholars—all close to death—agreed to the terms and moved to the island. The quality of their output in their respective academic journals was so pronounced that soon other, younger intellectuals began to move as well.)

“Thank you again for your generosity,” Mason said.

“Of course, David.”

In order to limit applicants, as well as finance the on-going operation of the facility, the jeneers insisted on a hefty fee for prospective newcomers. The O'Tooles were only too happy to pay the sum on Mason's behalf. They had donated almost the entirety of their fortune to various philanthropic concerns, especially college endowments, and this gift to Mason had been negligible in comparison.

O'Toole waited for the old man to speak. Instead, Mason continued to stare out the window at the booming metropolis. In the distance, hundreds of small craft littered the ocean, consisting of merchantmen, recreational boaters, and ferries to the outer platforms.

"We really did it, didn't we?" Mason finally said.

"It was your composition," O'Toole said. "I was just the conductor."

"You are a very decent man, Peter," Mason said. "And you have a wonderful family."

"Thank you, David," O'Toole said, blushing slightly.

"I'm sure you already suspect this," Mason said, "but your son is fantastically clever. The best I've ever encountered. Once he gains his confidence, heaven help the man who challenges him."

"I know," O'Toole said, "but thank you. Danny just needs to come out of his shell, and he'll do great things."

O'Toole still didn't quite understand why his son was so shy. Perhaps, if he and Tara had had another child, he could have done a better job.

"And your wife," Mason said. "What can I say, except that I am truly sorry. Please excuse my indefensible behavior."

"What're you talking about?" O'Toole asked.

Mason stopped staring out the window and turned to face O'Toole.

"Peter, surely you realize that I have been plotting desperately to seduce your wife."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" O'Toole said.

"Peter, since the day I read her review of my novel, not an hour has gone by in which I failed to fantasize about Tara McClare. And I should stress," Mason said, raising a finger, "that it has always been Tara *McClare* with whom I have been infatuated."

“Well I guess it’s a good thing you’re an old man,” O’Toole said, barely above a whisper.

Mason’s head drooped. Had he realized that Peter genuinely did not know, he would have said nothing. And now, he certainly would refrain from divulging the details of his intricate plot, which involved a plausible excuse to take Tara alone out for dinner and dancing, and a superbly crafted monologue in which he would reveal his desires and let her realize that all of his sexist banter over the years had really been just a vehicle for her attention.

“Yes, Peter,” Mason said, breaking the awkward silence, “I *am* an old man. I’ll go now to my final resting place.”

Mason tipped his hat and headed for the door.

Thirty

Dan got up from his computer when he heard the familiar knock. Anticipation built as he headed for the door, even though he knew it had to be a coincidence.

“Matt!” he yelled as he threw open the door.

“What’s up, little man?” Matt said as he entered the dorm room.

After throwing a duffel bag against the far wall, Matt very deliberately surveyed the room.

“Holy shit dude,” he said, peering at the walls, “what’d you do to get thrown in here? Stick a shiv in a guard?”

“Yeah, it’s a bit cramped,” Dan agreed.

““Cramped?”” Matt asked. “A nun’s box is cramped. That sub I took over here, that was cramped. But *this* is downright subatomic.”

“I know,” Dan said, but his attention had returned to his computer.

“Please tell me I didn’t cross the fucking Pacific to watch you play *Myst*,” Matt pleaded.

“Hang on, I’m trying to get this girl and her friends to meet up with us,” Dan said, typing and smiling.

“Objection withdrawn,” Matt said and sauntered over to the computer. “So tell me, do these girls like to bathe together?”

“Gotta hope so,” Dan said, still distracted by his internet flirting. “This girl is smoking, and at least two of her friends are pretty hot too.”

Matt smiled. Sometimes Dan could be really cute; the kid had obviously been overwhelmed by his female classmates. *That old song was right*, Matt thought. The beaches on Minerva certainly had nothing on the lovely ladies of California.

Matt waited a minute or two patiently, but Dan showed no signs of stopping.

“Look Danny boy,” he said, “I risked a lot to come here. If those lasses want to drink, then great, we’ll see them at the bar. But let’s go. For all you know, you’re talking to a thirty-five-year-old pedophile.”

“All right all right,” Dan said. “Oh wait, she wants to talk to you.”

“So she can do that at the bar,” Matt said. He had folded his arms and was literally tapping his foot.

“C’mon,” Dan said, “just type something. She wants to go but her friends want to stay in and watch a movie.”

“Danny Danny Danny,” Matt said, “I’m buyin tonight. We can splurge and get hookers if we want. I’m not going to beg some seventeen-year-old chick—”

“She’s fifteen,” Dan said.

Matt froze. He had completely forgotten Danny’s age; it was hard with the kid’s vocabulary.

“Well that’s something entirely else,” Matt said, sitting down in front of the keyboard.

“HOW R U GORJUS?” he typed.

“good...you?” the fifteen-year-old answered.

“I = STUPENDOUS,” Matt replied.

“ha. my friend wants to know how old you r?”

Matt quickly processed dozens of considerations. He decided to go with the lowest age that could possibly be believed if and when the girls ever saw him.

“20 BUT I DONT LOOK A DAY OVER 17,” he typed.

“why are you hanging out with someone so young?” the girl asked.

“LETS MAKE A DEAL,” Matt typed. “YOU DONT ASK ME QUESTIONS LIKE THAT, AND I WONT ASK YOU WHY YOU MAKE OUT WITH 20 YEAR OLD GUYS.”

Dan giggled over Matt’s shoulder. Matt had decided that he would only spend another two minutes or so on this project. The payoff, though substantial, was extremely unlikely. After an unusually long delay, a response came.

“hey this is cindy,” the apparently new girl typed.

“HEY CINDY,” Matt answered, now very bored. “I HEAR THAT YOU ARE AN EVEN BETTER KISSER THAN”—

“Shit, what’s the first girl’s name?” Matt asked.

“Oh, Heather,” Dan replied.

“BETTER KISSER THAN HEATHER. IS THAT TRUE?”

“maybe so...guess you’ll have to find out,” Cindy replied.

Matt was ashamed to discover that his penis had begun to stiffen. He vowed to end this nonsense quickly.

“SOUNDS GREAT. SO WELL SEE YOU IN AN HOUR,” he typed.

“Seriously,” Matt said to Dan, “we’re leaving in thirty seconds.”

“maybe if you buy me a drink ;-)” Cindy typed.

“What the fuck happened there?” Matt said. “Did the cat jump on their keyboard?”

“No,” Dan said, laughing, “that’s an emoticon. It’s a wink. It’s on its side, see?”

This is seriously gay, Matt decided. It was time to end the tomfoolery.

“MAYBE IF YOU BLOW ME :-o <===8” Matt typed, then stood up from the computer.

* * *

“I don’t know what’s up with these directions,” Matt said as they walked down another side street, looking for a bar where even someone as young as Danny would be served. “I’m sorry Dan, I should’ve gotten a specific address. *Damn* that was dumb.”

“No problem,” Dan said. “What exactly did he say?”

“He said the bar was on Plymouth Avenue,” Matt said, checking the piece of paper yet again. “Five minutes past the Blue Lagoon,” Matt read aloud.

“Excuse me,” Matt said as a couple approached. “Do you guys know where The Crazy Horse bar is?”

“Yeah, it’s that way,” the man said, pointing down the street. “About fifteen blocks or so.”

“Oh okay,” Matt said, smiling. “Thanks a lot.”

After twelve blocks of brisk walking, Dan said, “I see it!”

Indeed, Matt squinted and could just make out the familiar purple sign.

“Remind me to have some words with the shithead on the phone,” Matt said. “Who ever heard of giving time elapses for someone on foot? ‘Five minutes past the Blue Lagoon,’” he muttered. “Yeah, if you’re a fucking kangaroo.”

* * *

“So I never asked you,” Dan said after the waitress had served them their beers, “how come you got in so early? I wasn’t expecting you until ten or eleven.”

“Well, it’s like I said,” Matt explained, “they don’t tell you exactly when or where you’ll get dropped off. After the sub docked, there was a shuttle waiting that dropped a bunch of us off at a bus station. They gave us tickets for our ultimate destinations, and I just got lucky that my bus left right away.”

“Explain to me again all the cloak and dagger?” Dan said.

“Think about it,” Matt answered. “The U.S. has really clamped down on travel from Minerva. So these companies smuggling people into and out of the country will get absolutely fucked if they get caught. Now rather than do background checks on everybody who buys a ticket, all they do is make sure even the passengers themselves don’t know exactly when and where their sub will land. So there won’t be federal marshals waiting when it arrives.”

“But you *did* tell them where you wanted to be dropped off,” Dan said. “So you knew where you were going to be, and you also knew the approximate time.”

“Right,” Matt said, “so if I were a government informant, I could tell them where to arrest me. But the guys on the sub or driving the shuttle are fine; I didn’t know which bus station they’d drop me off at. I didn’t even know they *would* drop me off at a bus station until it happened.”

“Oh okay,” Dan said. “How much did the whole thing cost, anyway?”

“More than you want to know,” Matt admitted.

* * *

“Yeah, we’ll be down in a minute,” Dan said, then hung up the phone. “Okay, we can hang out at Jeremy’s room.”

“Is the card game on?” Matt asked. If he couldn’t bang fifteen-year-old girls tonight, maybe he could screw fifteen-year-old boys.

“Probably,” Dan answered, “but everybody’s still at practice. Did you bring that stuff? Jeremy said we can break it out in his room.”

“Oh we can, can we?” Matt said, smiling. “Is it okay with Jeremy if I give out handjobs, too? I wouldn’t want to violate house rules or anything.”

“Huh?” Dan said, momentarily perplexed. “Oh, they’ll throw in a few dollars for it—”

“It’s all right, Danny boy, my treat,” Matt said. “Besides, I’ve got the good shit on me. You guys would have to be my indentured servants to pay for it.”

Dan and Matt left his tiny room and headed down the hallway. Rather than taking the shortest route, Dan went out of his way to take Matt by the older kids’ rooms. Dan was proud to have someone as cool as Matt King as a friend. Even though the kids here didn’t know him, Matt just *looked* cool. And Dan also thought that after hanging out at Jeremy’s, word would get around about Dan’s older friend from Minerva.

* * *

“You said that to *Cindy*?” Jeremy said, laughing. “That’s fucking great. It’s about time someone told that b’yach what to do with her big mouth.”

Matt grinned, but played it off as if it *weren’t* at the boy’s use of “b’yach.”

“Hey,” Matt said, raising his can of cheap beer, “I call it like I see it, you know?”

“So I hear you’re from Minerva,” Kevin, Jeremy’s roommate, said. “What’s *that* all about?”

“No, I’m from Chicago,” Matt said, glancing at Dan. “I got this *weed* from a guy from Minerva; that’s probably what you’re thinking of.”

“Huh, my bad,” Kevin said. “I thought you were from Minerva.”

“Nope,” Matt said, “unless they made a giant replica of the Windy City and never told me about it, like in that Jim Carrey movie.”

The boys laughed. Matt decided to divert their attention by unveiling his killer buds.

“All right fellas,” Matt said, pulling out the bag from his inside jacket pocket, “feast your eyes on that.”

“You say this is from the island?” Jeremy said. “No shit, your buddy bought this in a store, right? Look, it’s actually in a package with a brand name and everything.”

“Fellas, I don’t smoke generic,” Matt said.

Matt began rolling a fat joint. He noted with amusement the determination with which Dan studied his movements.

“Stick with me kid,” Matt said, handing the completed project to Dan, “and you too can grow up to be a pothead.”

“Say,” Kevin asked, “how old are you, anyway?”

“What is this, twenty questions?” Matt complained. “That little girl kept asking me my age too. Come to think of it, how old are *you*? I’m not sure you should smoke this stuff; your parents might sue me.”

“Kev, chill,” Jeremy said. “It’s all good, man. We appreciate your sharing.”

“And I appreciate your hospitality,” Matt said. “So tell me, when’s the card game starting? I have to scrounge up my return fare.”

Matt realized with alarm that these kids weren’t supposed to know he was traveling to Minerva. But he quickly relaxed, since his statement could simply mean a trip back to Chicago.

“People should be showing up in about an hour,” Jeremy said. “So Dan, are you gonna fire that thing up, or are you waiting for them to legalize it?”

Dan was frozen. He wasn’t sure how to light the joint; the two times he had previously smoked, it had been out of Matt’s bowl. He was afraid that he would look like an idiot, trying to light it, or worse, that he would somehow ruin Matt’s masterpiece.

“Hey, I’ve got class,” Dan said, handing the joint to Jeremy. “Please, I insist.”

“Yeah, you’ve got class all right,” Kevin said, “that’s why you can’t get laid.”

“Hallo, what’s this?” Matt said.

“Yeah,” Kevin said, laughing. “Dan’s going for the Smooth Operator approach, but so far he’s Mr. Rosy Palms.”

Matt smiled, and saw that Jeremy was quite amused at the ribbing. To Matt’s dismay, Dan just chuckled.

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with holding out for a prime piece of ass,” Matt opined. “And anyway, if those sluts hanging around outside the dorm are any indication, I think you boys are better off keeping your dick in your pants around here.”

* * *

“Whoa man,” Jeremy said, “this *is* good pot.”

“The King always delivers,” Matt said, taking a puff of the joint and handing it to Dan. He noticed that Dan hadn’t been talking much in the last half hour or so. He hoped the poor guy didn’t puke in front of the older kids.

“So what’s up with this fucking war?” Matt suddenly asked, curious about the youngsters’ thoughts. “Should we send in the Marines or what?”

“Who the fuck knows,” Jeremy said. “My uncle—he was in Nam—says that Lympman’ll never send troops in, since they’d get their fucking knees blown off like those dudes who tried to invade the island before.”

“Whatever man,” Kevin said, “those people were just trying to take their land back, they weren’t ‘invading’ shit.”

“I’m gonna piss,” Dan said, getting up. Inasmuch as his father was directly responsible for the original acquisition of the island, the conversation was making him very uncomfortable.

“So what do you think we should do?” Matt asked Kevin, remembering to sound American.

“Lympman’s doing a good job right now,” Kevin explained. “Those Minervans think they’re above the rules, and as usual it’s the U.S. who has to show them what’s up. You got all these whiny activists saying we need peace, but *they* attacked *our* satellites. Lympman’s doing the best he can to limit this thing, but those fuckers won’t back down.”

“So you think we *should* send in the Marines?” Matt asked, amused by the hawkish sentiments from the boy who had no qualms about smoking his marijuana.

“Hell no,” Kevin said. He was really worked up by this point. “Jeremy’s uncle is right; that would be crazy. Nah, Lympman should go on prime time TV, tell those fuckers to stop laundering mob money and hiding ex-Nazis and all the rest of their shit,

or else we nuke them. Give them a few months if you want, but don't dick around by sending in more and more ships. That's just stupid."

"Yeah, that's stupid," Jeremy agreed. He didn't want to say more, since he still wasn't sure where Matt stood on the matter.

* * *

"Oh, he's so fulla shit!" the boys yelled.

The game was seven-card stud, and Matt was showing two kings, a ten, and a four. Jeremy was the only other remaining player, and he was holding (and showing everyone else) a pair of aces and a pair of threes.

"I don't know," Jeremy said, "that's a lot of money."

Matt began humming and sang, almost inaudibly, "We-e-e, three kings, of Orient are..."

Jeremy threw down his hand.

"Nope," he said. "I don't know how he plays yet. I'm not gonna blow a week at work when I'm already up."

The boys groaned. Matt smiled and collected the pot.

Like takin a cherry from a virgin, he thought.

* * *

"Damn it!" Dan yelled as his jumpshot airballed. He was always money in practice, but in actual games he always choked.

"It's all right Danny, shake it off," Matt said. The two were down 8-3 against Jeremy and Kevin.

Jeremy grabbed the airball and quickly banked it in.

"That's nine," Kevin said, catching the ball at the top of the key. "What do you guys have, two?"

"Three, asshole," Matt said, wiping his face on his shirt. "Damn boys, I haven't sweat like this since that night with Kevin's mom."

(After the previous night's events, Matt had decided to show Dan that this kid Kevin was a punk.)

"Yeah, scoreboard old man," Kevin said, then drove hard at Matt. Matt managed to strip the ball and looked for Dan to cut to the basket.

Dan anticipated Matt's steal, and knew full well that he ought to sprint past Jeremy, but he instead popped back out. He managed to convince himself that Matt needed room to drive in, but the real reason was that Dan was afraid of blowing a wide-open layup.

Matt was perplexed by Dan's movement; the kid usually played better than this. But he shrugged it off, crossed over to his left hand, and drove past Kevin. After finger rolling the ball over the rim, he rested the ball between his right elbow and stomach, and bent over with his hands on his knees.

"Oh Danny," he said, wheezing. "I think it's me pumper."

"We can just quit," Dan said, "you guys are killing us anyway."

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" Matt said, now able to stand upright. "Matt King never just gives up. Sure, I might get crushed, but I don't give up. Let's go, we're only down by five."

Thirty-One

“David!” Roderick Dupont yelled. He stood up and waved Mason over to the table where he was sitting with another man.

“Charles, may I introduce to you David Mason, the finest economist and political scientist of our generation. David, this is Charles Emerson, the distinguished biologist.”

The two old men shook hands.

“Pleasure to actually meet you, Dr. Mason,” Emerson said. “Please join us.”

Mason nodded graciously and sat down.

“Did you just get in?” Dupont asked.

“Yes,” Mason answered. “The boat dropped me off about a half hour ago. I just freshened up in my room and strolled out here to see if anyone were still awake.”

“Well,” Dupont said with a smile, “at this time of night, usually you’ll only find Charles and myself up. Most of the other fellows here need to turn in much earlier.”

“I’ve always been a bit of a night owl,” Emerson said. “I do my best thinking at night.”

“As do I,” Mason said. “So what were you gentlemen discussing? Far be it from me to disturb your scholarly pursuits.”

“Actually,” Dupont said, “we were discussing the so-called ‘vulnerable balls’ problem. This week’s seminar is on Intelligent Design, and so naturally we’re all brushing up on our evolutionary theo—”

“Did you say Intelligent Design??” Mason asked. He thought he’d come here to *escape* pseudo-scientific garbage.

“Hey,” Dupont said, holding up his hands, “house rules. Members can propose any topic they like.”

“And who is proposing that we waste our time debating Intelligent Design?” Mason asked. He knew that Dupont was a staunch atheist, and assumed that any biologist would be familiar with the silly anti-evolution arguments.

“Oh,” Emerson said, “Novak. Paul Novak, the theologian. He got here about three months ago. For his last seminar we got bogged down on whether the First Mover

solution to the infinite regress should be considered a point in favor of the existence of God.”

“Don’t worry David,” Dupont said, laughing. “The other seminars are all completely rigorous. And as far as theologians go, Novak’s not bad.”

“You will forgive me if I reserve judgment,” Mason said. “But I am certainly not averse to exploring evolutionary theory. What exactly were you discussing?”

“It’s called the ‘vulnerable balls’ problem,” Emerson said. “You know: why would it ever be adaptive for a creature to expose its sexual organs the way human males and certain other mammals do? Why aren’t the testicles carried inside the body for protection, instead of dangling in a defenseless sack?”

“And I was saying, just when you came in,” Dupont said, “that I thought it might have something to do with keeping the sperm warmer than the rest of the body.”

“Actually,” Emerson said, “the testicles themselves are kept cooler than the rest of the body’s interior. But your suggestion, though a good one, isn’t the currently accepted explanation.”

“What is it, then?” Dupont asked.

“Well,” Emerson said, “the prevailing theory is that it acts as a signal to females. It’s the same explanation as the peacock’s plumage: Although it is not advantageous by itself, the fact that the males have such a handicap and yet survive indicates to potential mates that their other qualities must be superlative.”

“I have always considered that a cop-out,” Mason said. “You can explain anything that way; even apparent weaknesses get turned into strengths, and Darwinism becomes non-falsifiable.”

“Starting to sound like Novak,” Dupont joked.

“Hold on a moment,” Emerson said, somewhat taken aback. “Do you deny that the male’s other traits must compensate for his vulnerability?”

“No I don’t deny it,” Mason said, “but the male does not simply pass on those other traits—he passes on his vulnerable balls too. So when a female sees him, all she can rationally conclude is, ‘This male has managed to survive, and our offspring would have half of his genetic material.’ That is precisely what she would conclude by looking at some other male, who did not have vulnerable balls and managed to survive.”

“Oh come now, Dr. Mason,” Emerson said, “you’re attacking a very powerful explanatory device in evolutionary theory.”

“Yes,” Mason agreed, “tautologies can be quite useful.”

“So do you even doubt the peacock explanation?” Emerson said, with a hint of amusement in his voice. He felt quite relieved that Mason had turned out to be so ignorant in this area; the man had quite a reputation.

“That one seems more plausible,” Mason admitted, “because it is so clearly related to a signaling mechanism. I imagine one could come up with a reasonable model in which the superior males efficiently invest some of their resources in plumage, because it’s easier for females to distinguish bright from lackluster feathers than it is to monitor a male’s ability to evade predators. In this respect, it is analogous to a human female being attracted to the big spender at a cocktail party. What I am objecting to is the knee-jerk invocation of sexual selection whenever we find an apparent handicap in nature.”

“And what is *your* explanation for vulnerable balls?” Emerson asked.

“Let me think a moment,” Mason said.

Dupont and Emerson sipped from their tea—now lukewarm—while Mason stared into space.

“You will think me a hypocrite,” Mason said, “because I have come up with a sexual selection answer myself. But since we *are* dealing with sexual organs, I think it’s appropriate.”

“Fine,” Emerson said, amused. “So what’s your theory?”

“I wonder,” Mason said, “if it might have something to do with the fact that the testicles are the one weak spot of a human male. In other words, it’s not merely that exposed testicles make the male worse in an absolute sense; but it *also* is the only thing that gives the female a chance in a physical confrontation. So perhaps the female is attracted to a male with ‘vulnerable balls’ because she knows she can discontinue future copulation if she wishes, whereas this would be almost impossible against a male with protected testicles.”

“Very interesting,” Emerson said. “Now let’s draw some empirical implications from your explanation and see if they agree with Nature...”

* * *

“So do the children participate in the seminars?” Mason asked Dupont. Emerson had long since retired to bed.

“No David,” Dupont said, shaking his head. “They would be much too boring.”

Mason’s eyebrows shot up.

“David,” Dupont said, choosing his words carefully, “just wait until you meet Nicodemus. Then you’ll start to understand.”

“He was the first?” Mason asked.

“Yes, Nicodemus is the oldest jener. He welcomes all of the academics when they first arrive. He’s the most sociable of the jeners.”

“What’s he like?” Mason asked. “I assume he’s incredibly intelligent.”

Dupont threw back his head and laughed.

“David,” he said, “you won’t believe it until you meet them. And I won’t talk further about it—you’ll see for yourself. But I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to tell you one thing, to give you time to prepare.”

“What’s that?” Mason asked.

“After meeting Nicodemus, you will see Ludwig—”

“Ludwig?” Mason asked in surprise.

“Yes, I think his parents were fans of Wittgenstein,” Dupont explained. “Ludwig is by far the smartest of the lot. His DNA was based on samples from Einstein’s brain and a few others. Anyway, you get to ask him one question.”

“What do you mean?” Mason said.

“I mean,” Dupont said, unable to restrain a large grin, “that after you chit-chat with Nicodemus, you get to ask Ludwig any one question.”

“About what?” Mason asked.

“*Anything*,” Dupont said, now smiling even more broadly.

“And then what happens?” Mason said. He didn’t know why, but he felt...creepy.

“And then Ludwig answers it,” Dupont said.

Try as he might, Mason couldn't avoid feeling a chill run down his spine. He noticed that his arms were flush with goosebumps.

"What did you ask him?" Mason asked softly.

"I'm a philosopher," Dupont said. "I asked him, 'Why?'"

Excellent, Mason thought. Thus far, the two best answers he had heard to this most famous of questions were, "Because," and "Why not?"

"What did he say?" Mason asked, even more softly.

"'Why?'" Dupont answered.

Mason paused. Did Dupont honestly not understand why Mason would want to know...or was *that* the jener's answer?

Dupont smiled.

"I imagine you're going through the same thought process that I did when he said that to me. But believe me, David, his answer was the best I could've received. It will keep my puny little mind busy for the rest of my days here. Because if you try to answer it—if you try to explain *why it is* that you want to know, 'Why?', then you start to come up with a pretty good answer to your original question."

Thirty-Two

“The next issue,” boomed the moderator, “is the situation with Minerva. If elected, how would your administration handle the lawless island? Senator Stumpel, it’s your turn to start.”

“The unfortunate situation with Minerva,” the senator said, looking into the television camera, “is the result of a failure of leadership and diplomacy. With all due respect to President Lympman, he has always been a champion of domestic affairs. But when it comes to the international arena, well, you need someone at the helm with experience in foreign affairs. Now before serving three satisfying terms as senator from the lovely state of Virginia, I spent fifteen years in the Central Intelligence Agency. When you spend a good deal of time working with classified material, you began to get a feel for how the leaders of other countries really think. You start to understand how to *deal* with these people, on their level. And so, as I say, with all due respect, I think the hostilities with Minerva are a result of President Lympman and his administration not having the requisite experience in foreign affairs. Of course no one wants to point fingers at this point in the game, but there was never a problem under the Greene Administration.”

That son of a bitch, Black thought.

“Thank you, Senator Stumpel,” the moderator said. “Same question, Vice President Black: If elected, how would you handle the anarchist threat?”

“If elected,” Black began, trying to bury his fury at Stumpel, “I would continue the same strategy of nonviolent containment that has been so successful under the leadership of President Lympman. My overriding concern will be, as it has always been, to protect the interests of the American people while minimizing the harm to innocent Minervan children. Our economic blockade is an unfortunate necessity to achieve compliance with international law, but we must never forget that such a policy will always adversely affect the underprivileged the hardest. Now, I recognize that many of my peers in the faithful opposition wish a more aggressive response to the attack on our space assets, but the American people certainly do not want their brave sons and

daughters sent into a battle that can be avoided. Under a plan that I proposed, the current administration has pursued the matter in the Minervan courts, and the U.S. government actually won a settlement, receiving full financial restitution for the damage to our satellites. We've also pumped millions of dollars into educational campaigns to raise awareness on the island of their responsibility to the world community. In this manner, the current administration has sought to enforce the rules, yes, but also to encourage voluntary compliance on the part of the Minervans, by working with their various communities. I believe that in the long run, this strategy of the carrot-and-stick will be much more effective than the full-scale invasion advocated by some of my Republican colleagues. Finally, although I agree with Senator Stumpel that what's important now is a *solution* to the crisis, we can't prevent future situations unless we understand what caused the present one. Let us not forget that the initial colonization of Minerva occurred with the full blessing of the Greene Administration. President Lympman and I simply inherited the problem that the Republicans created."

"Thank you, Vice President Black," the moderator said. "Finally, Mr. Adams: If elected to the office of president of the United States, what would *you* do to handle the Minervans?"

"If elected," Adams said, smiling into the camera, "I would return America's foreign policy to the original vision of George Washington: free trade with all nations, and military force only to defend the United States from attack. Now folks, I know you don't like to hear this, but the present 'crisis' is directly the fault of our aggressive posture. The people of Minerva are just like you and me; thirty percent of them were *born* in America, for heaven's sake. Now how would *you* feel if you were on a tiny island in the middle of the Pacific, minding your own business, when all of a sudden the entire industrialized world tried to cut off your food supply? I bet it would make you mad, wouldn't it? Why, you'd probably want to start sinking those ships that were arresting merchants who were only trying to bring food to feed your starving children. But guess what, folks? The Minervans didn't do that. All they did was to disable the *military satellites* that were being used to starve their children. The only other things they've 'attacked' were U.S. missiles and planes that were trying to blow them up! Does anybody really think that the Minervans are a threat? What are they going to do, exactly?"

Send us computers for free? Bombard us with more lobster? Develop even better medical techniques? Incidentally, on that note, I think the voters deserve to know why Senator Stumpel—who claims that genetic engineering is ‘morally repugnant’—had no problem exercising a special exemption five years ago to go to the island for a kidney transplant. And as far as Vice President Black’s claim that the U.S. was reimbursed for the damage to its satellites, what he’s not telling us is that no money was actually paid, since there were *offsetting* claims against the U.S. government in the Minervan courts because of our illegal blockade. I realize many of you don’t want to hear this, but I’m afraid, my fellow Americans, that we need to face up to the truth: The major countries of the world are *afraid* of the tiny island of Minerva, because it shows just how unnecessary and unproductive their onerous taxes and bureaucratic red tape really are. The Minervan people are getting along just fine without a class of parasite politicians, and so the politicians—including some from the U.S. of A—are going to do their best to destroy them. I trust that the American people will object to this immoral use of their brave soldiers, and will vote in November for a candidate who will return foreign policy to the original vision of our Founding Fathers.”

That’s right, Black thought, smiling, keep talking like that, and I’ll be sure to win.

Thirty-Three

“*That’s not good,*” Matt said, peering through the binoculars. He could just make out the Navy destroyer.

“Mayday mayday,” Quinn said into the microphone, not knowing if this were the correct terminology but feeling the situation to be an emergency. “I’ve got someone right on my ass; do you guys see him?”

“*We are aware of the bogey,*” the speaker informed the men. “*It is the U.S.S. Hopper. Immediately increase your speed to fifty knots.*”

“We can’t!” Quinn yelled. “We’re loaded down with barrels of oil. We’re only making twenty-nine knots.”

“*Your cargo is circuit boards,*” the speaker said.

“I think I know what my fucking cargo is,” Quinn said. “We were originally scheduled for electronics, but they changed it at the dock.”

“*We’ve got you down as carrying circuit boards and capable of fifty knots,*” the speaker said.

“Ahh shit,” Jim muttered.

“They’re not stopping, sir,” the sailor informed Captain Pierce.

“We’ve still got plenty of room,” Pierce said, referring to the 200-kilometer radius. “Fire a warning shot.”

The men heard the whistle of the shell as it approached and splashed a few dozen meters ahead of the ship.

“Jack, we need to stop,” Jim said.

“What’s the sentence for smuggling?” Matt asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Jim said. “Jack, we need to stop. With this much oil, one hit and we’ll go up in flames.”

* * *

Quinn counted off the seconds in his head. He and his crew were being escorted, handcuffed behind their backs, to the brig by three M.P.s carrying M-16s.

Three Mississippi, two Mississippi, one, Quinn thought, and tensed. He had obviously counted a bit quickly, but knew it would be coming soon. Quinn had long ago decided which of the sailors was the most alert, and had made sure that Jim knew of his choice.

BCKKKKKK!!! Everyone except Quinn instinctively ducked his head when the small vessel exploded in flames. Quinn lifted his right foot and brought it down at an angle against the left knee of his sailor, who had been walking just behind Quinn and to his right. The young man howled with agony as his leg snapped inward, and then crumpled to the deck. In one smooth motion, Quinn brought his right foot back to the deck, spun clockwise on it, and brought his left knee squarely into the nose of the sailor. The young man's face squirted blood as he fell onto his back. Quinn stepped over his limp body, and carefully placed his right foot on the man's right wrist. Finally Quinn used his left foot to kick the weapon out of the man's hand.

As Quinn raced over to the rifle, he allowed himself to check the progress of the others. He was relieved to see that his crew had successfully disarmed the remaining two sailors, and were now in the process of trying to shoot Jim's handcuffs.

"Whoa, hold up!" Quinn yelled, and ran over to the men. Nook was holding the rifle, while Matt was overseeing the operation.

"Make sure that shit is pointed away from my ass," Jim insisted.

"Bend your hands at the wrists," Quinn said. "Okay Chris, fire a single round."

Within forty-five seconds, the six men were freed of their cuffs. With the sidearms carried by the Navy sailors, each of the men now had a weapon.

"Grab those two and let's move," Quinn ordered. "Matt, give me a hand."

Quinn held the M-16 in his right hand and grabbed his downed sailor by the shirt collar with his left. As he dragged him toward the stairs, Matt belatedly offered assistance by grabbing one of the sailor's legs.

Zach Weller frantically sprayed foam onto the burning wreck. As the minutes rolled by, he and the other young men realized that there was little hope of retrieving anything but the charred corpses of those who had been searching the blockade runner.

“Move and you’re dead.”

Zach felt a sharp object poking the small of his back. He was quickly patted down and ordered to turn around. As he did so, he saw with horror that the six smugglers had somehow gotten free and were now rounding up the crew as prisoners.

“Get me in touch with your captain,” Quinn said to Zach.

“Go fuck yourself,” Zach said.

Quinn shook his head with annoyance before grabbing Zach by the crotch and hoisting him over the edge of the destroyer.

“I want to talk to your captain,” Quinn said to the next sailor in line.

“You listen to me,” Quinn said over the phone. “If you don’t raise the white flag and head for Minervan water, I won’t just kill your eighteen boys we’re holding here. I will first blow off their kneecaps, wait a good five minutes, then blow off their nuts. I’ll wait a few more minutes, then shoot them all once in the gut. Now you know as well as I do that your toy boat doesn’t mean shit in this war. So just do what I say, and be a good captain to Tommy Mercer, Joey Marino...”

Pierce’s attention zoned away as Quinn recited the names of his captive men.

The damn COWARDS!! Pierce screamed in his mind.