

PART V

Thirty-Four

“Well?” Tara asked as her husband emerged from his study.

“Hard to say,” O’Toole admitted.

“What does that mean?” Tara asked. “Either Danny raped her or he didn’t.”

“Tara, please calm down,” O’Toole said. “He’s really mixed up. Of course he doesn’t think he did—he said he was shocked by the charge.”

“So he didn’t rape her,” Tara said.

“Well...”

“Well what?” Tara asked.

“Well,” O’Toole said, “I asked him if it was possible that he misunderstood the situation, that the girl was too frightened to speak up, and he...hesitated. He wasn’t sure.”

“What’s the school say?” Tara asked.

“They’re waiting for the outcome of the police investigation.”

“This is crazy,” Tara said.

* * *

Mason’s hand trembled as he opened the door and entered the inner chamber. Contrary to the public’s perception, the academics on the platform needed special permission to gain an audience with the jeneers.

“Dr. Mason, welcome,” a pleasant, youthful voice said from within the dark room. A large chair swiveled to reveal an apparent teenager.

“Nicodemus, I presume?” Mason asked, feigning nonchalance.

“My my, you *are* intelligent,” Nicodemus said. “Tell me, how have you enjoyed your first week with us? I hear you and the boys are discussing Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem. That’s always fun.”

* * *

“Matthew, I need to talk with you right away,” Tara’s voice urged on the machine. *“But if my husband answers when you call, hang up. I don’t want him to find out about this.”*

Matt took a few steps back from the phone, stunned. He had never actually thought it would happen.

“She wants my cock,” he whispered.

* * *

“Dr. Mason,” Nicodemus said with amusement, “you seem puzzled. Is everything all right?”

Mason’s shock at the boy’s intellect subsided long enough for him to realize that yes, indeed, something *had* been puzzling him during their conversation.

“Aren’t you in terrible pain?” Mason asked. “You hide it very well.”

Nicodemus smiled.

“Dr. Mason,” he said, “I feel incredible. This isn’t surprising, since my body was literally designed for flawless running.”

“But...” Mason paused, not wanting to embarrass himself yet *again* in front of the boy. “Of course; you cured the puberty problem.”

“No,” Nicodemus said. “There was never anything to cure.”

“But all the testing...” Mason’s voice trailed off, as he once again caught himself. “And why?”

“Your privatized society is indeed an improvement,” Nicodemus said. “But people are still people. I was a very young boy indeed when I realized we ‘mutants’ would never be tolerated. So I did what I had to, to buy us the necessary time.”

“Time for what?” Mason asked. His stomach felt very uneasy.

“Time enough to ensure that no one can ever hurt us again.”

* * *

“Sheldon, it’s Peter O’Toole,” the lawyer’s machine recorded. *“Call me as soon as you get this. I need to arrange a visit to Washington.”*

* * *

“[Enter,]” Mason heard as he walked into Ludwig’s chamber.

Ludwig thought.

Mason fought down his panic when he saw the large brain—easily twice the size of a normal human’s—in a glass container filled with liquid. The brain was covered with countless fibers that ran out of the container and into the computer in which it was housed.

Ludwig thought.

“[May I have permission to explore your memories? It will make our communication much more efficient.]”

At this point, Mason realized that Ludwig had not been speaking at all.

Ludwig thought.

“Yes,” Mason said.

“[Pose your inquiry,]” Mason heard.

Ludwig thought.

Mason deliberated for a moment. He had had a backup question in mind, but now that he truly believed in what the others had said...he had to know.

“Besides the jeneers,” Mason said, “who is the smartest human being who has ever lived?”

“[According to your definition, David Mason is the smartest man with original DNA who has ever lived,]” Mason heard.

Ludwig thought.

Thirty-Five

“How many jets could they possibly have?” Black asked.

“It’s hard to say, Mr. President,” General Merton answered. (Riggs had been sacked after the *Hopper* fiasco.) “Could be anywhere from 500 to 2,500.”

“Too many for a direct assault,” Black decided. The public would tolerate a lot at the moment, but not the sudden loss of dozens of pilots or more.

“Fuel is still their weakest spot,” Miller said. Since the election, the new president had encouraged Miller to speak his mind. “We should send in another carrier group, and double the patrol sorties. [***]** Force them to fall back on their SAM sites, or keep more of their own birds [***]** in the air. If they do the former, I think we can whittle down that blockade radius. And if the latter, they burn their gas that much quicker.”

* * *

“*Dr. Childress is here,*” the intercom announced.

“Send him in, Rita,” Peckard said.

A small man with glasses entered.

“Dr. Childress, come in, come in,” Peckard said. “Please sit down.”

“Thank you,” Childress said. “Have you looked at my proposal? It will win the war.”

“Well let’s just slow down a bit,” Peckard said. “Yes, I read over your materials, and I was very interested in them. But naturally, I have to allow my own experts to evaluate your code. We wouldn’t want to infect every computer on the planet, now would we?”

“That’s why I developed the vaccine!” Childress said. “We’re wasting valuable time! The U.S. is sending another carrier as we speak!”

“I’m aware of the situation, Dr. Childress,” Peckard said. “You’ve got to understand that there are all sorts of legal and technical problems to consider before

we...unleash something like your little beastie. Incidentally, you *haven't* sent it anywhere yet...have you?"

"Of course not," Childress sulked. "We need to inoculate Minerva's systems first, and I can't very well explain the situation to our firms without tipping off the U.S. That's why I sent it to you!"

"And I appreciate it very much," Peckard said. "I'll tell you what: Why don't you come work for the Trust, so you can oversee the development of this project. I'm sure my teams would love to have the author of the virus to answer their questions."

"Oh...okay," Childress said. He could not *believe* Peckard's blindness.

"Thank you, Dr. Childress. I'll have Rita give you more details on your way out. See you on Monday."

Childress gave a slight jerk with his head and left the office.

What a nut, Peckard thought. This battle of wits with the United States was getting far too expensive for Peckard's liking. He was beyond ready to call it a draw; the last thing in the world he needed was a terrorist strike on American computers.

"*Captain Quinn is here*," Rita announced a few moments later.

"Send him in," Peckard said.

Quinn entered the room and shook Peckard's hand.

"Mr. Peckard, it's an honor. What you've managed to do...simply incredible."

"The honor is likewise," Peckard said. "My claim to fame is capturing an army with 600 snipers. But *you* managed to capture a destroyer with only six men. Maybe *you* should be sitting behind this desk."

"Well," Quinn said, blushing, "people are always surprised by what they can do when they have to."

"Indeed," Peckard said, sitting back down. "So tell me, what's your legal status?"

"It looks like it'll be fine," Quinn said, sitting down himself. "The rest of my crew was exonerated immediately. There was an issue about a certain Navy sailor that I threw overboard, but since we picked him up my actions were ruled acceptable self-defense."

"Excellent," Peckard said. "And what are your plans for the future?"

“I think it’s gonna be more of the dog that bit me,” Quinn said. “I lost my entire cargo, not to mention a brand new ship. I’ll probably stay away from smuggling oil, though.”

“That’s too bad,” Peckard said. “Right now we need all we can get.”

Indeed, it was precisely this that was prompting Peckard’s trip to China. If he could convince them to block the Security Council vote, and begin shipment of “humanitarian” supplies, it would be a simple matter to smuggle in enough oil to see the Trust through. Unfortunately, the Chinese wanted a face-to-face meeting.

“Oil’s very profitable right now,” Quinn admitted, “but I’ve been burned once, so to speak.”

“I understand,” Peckard said and laughed. “In any event, I want to thank you again. You may not realize it, but your heroics have not only boosted morale here at home, but you’ve also gotten 13 percent of the American public to change their mind.”

“Glad to do my part,” Quinn said.

“Maybe when things settle down a bit,” Peckard said, “we can organize a parade.”

“I’m not too fond of parades,” Quinn said.

“Fair enough,” Peckard said, getting up. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Quinn. Thank you again.”

“Thank you,” Quinn said, standing up as well.

That’s one tough man, Peckard thought with amusement as Quinn left the office.

Thirty-Six

“Thank you for the critique of our current policy,” the senator from Iowa said. “And now, Mr. O’Toole, perhaps you could offer this committee some constructive suggestions?”

“That’s why I’m here,” O’Toole said. The room laughed.

“First and most important,” O’Toole began, “the Black Administration must retake the moral initiative. Too many people, even in the First World countries, view the U.N. as the aggressor. After all, that’s how America’s own Independence Party platform describes it.

“What you need to do,” O’Toole continued, “is remind everyone of the facts behind the original founding of the so-called anarchist island. Contrary to its official reports, the Minerva Corporation under Eugene Callahan’s leadership did *not* acquire the original title through purely voluntary means.

“I should know,” O’Toole said, “since I oversaw the operations. And,” he said, holding up a stack of papers, “I’ve got the documents to prove it.”

* * *

“That’s right, Senator Holland,” O’Toole said. “Do everything you can to provoke the Minervan firms; send in spies, flood them with counterfeit bank notes, you name it. Once they take the necessary countermeasures, it will be more and more clear that the islanders have a ‘State’ just like everyone else on this planet. The only difference is, the Minervan State is controlled by private individuals, rather than elected politicians.”

“This committee thanks you for your enlightening testimony, Mr. O’Toole,” the chairman said.

“And I thank you for the opportunity to set the record straight,” O’Toole said.

* * *

“So what exactly was that all about?” Sheldon Marcus asked as they headed for the press conference.

“I just freed Danny,” O’Toole said, a wide smile on his face.

* * *

“Linda,” Heather Durant said, “you’ve got to stop making excuses for these assholes. These rich kids come in and think they can do whatever they want. *Bullshit.*”

“I know,” Linda Graves said. “It’s just...I never actually said ‘no.’ What if there’s a trial?”

“Linnn-*da*,” Heather said. “How many times do we have to go through this? Didn’t you tell him all along that you wanted to wait?”

“Yes,” Linda admitted.

“Didn’t he get you piss drunk that night?”

“Yes.”

“Most important, did he ask your permission before he rammed his dick in you?”

“No,” Linda admitted.

“Well, I hate to tell you this kid-o,” Heather said, “but Dan O’Toole raped you.”

* * *

Linda buried her face in the towel and stood in the shower, dripping, for several moments. She then patted herself down with the towel and wrapped it around her head. She slipped on a robe and walked into her small bedroom.

On her bed sat a woman dressed in black.

“Wh-who are you?” Linda stammered as the woman got up and approached her.

“Listen to me you lying *slut*,” the woman said as she snapped off her sunglasses. “You and I both know that Daniel O’Toole didn’t rape you. I don’t care how your sorority friends try to twist what happened, *you know that Daniel O’Toole did not rape you.* I know you were drunk and now you’re embarrassed and you just wish the whole thing had never happened, but *you know that Daniel O’Toole did not rape you.*”

“Wh-who are you?” Linda repeated.

“You listen to me,” the woman commanded. “You need to think about this before you continue. Let me tell you, it will *change your life FOREVER* if you become the sorority girl who charged a boy with date rape. Now if it ever happens to you, then by all means go ahead and endure it, but you do *NOT* want to be that girl if *it didn’t even happen.*”

“Who are you?” Linda asked.

“Remember,” the woman said as she put her glasses back on, “you and I both know full well that *Daniel O’Toole did not rape you.*”

Thirty-Seven

“You have no respect for me, do you?” Novak asked, after the others had gone to bed.

“I have treated you with the utmost courtesy,” Mason replied.

“Plenty of thinkers have been Christian,” Novak said. “Are they all fools as well?”

“But they kept it separate!” Mason said. If Novak wanted to hear it, Mason wouldn’t spare him the truth. “I respect an Einstein because of his physics, not because of his theism.”

Novak just nodded and sipped from his tea. He could tell Mason had much more to say.

“And you were an atheist,” Mason began, “and then you *flipped!* It is understandable when someone is brought up with an illogical belief structure, and never really questions it. But you *embraced* it...as an adult!”

“I don’t suppose,” Novak said, smiling, “that it would matter if I told you that I don’t consider my beliefs to be illogical.”

“What are you talking about?!” Mason said. “Christianity is *founded* on its irrationality. That is one of its core beliefs.”

“I don’t recall Jesus ever commanding His disciples to abandon their reason,” Novak said. “In order to stress the limits of the human mind, yes, I grant you that some Christian writers have...”

“Do you believe in the Trinity?” Mason interrupted.

“Yes,” Novak answered.

“Q.E.D.,” Mason said.

Novak took another sip of tea. Mason gulped from his wine goblet.

“Are you an economist?” Novak asked.

“Yes,” Mason replied.

“Are you a mammal?” Novak asked.

“Yes,” Mason replied, sighing. “I see where you’re going with this, but the Trinity is based on ‘three is one.’ It’s not *supposed* to make sense.”

“It makes sense to me,” Novak said.

* * *

“What I am saying,” Mason declared, gulping more wine, “is that your ‘God’ doesn’t even meet up with human standards of decency, let alone divine ones. And you expect me to worship Him?”

“By all means,” Novak said, still smiling, “please defend your assertion.”

Mason laughed. Didn’t Novak realize he had been *raised* as a Jew?

“How about punishing sins to the third and fourth generation?” Mason taunted. “If any human did that to a transgressor, it would be grossly unfair.”

“Dr. Mason,” Novak said, “imagine a couple: The man is an alcoholic who beats his wife, while the woman is a drug addict who sells her body to support her habit.”

“Okay,” Mason said, becoming interested.

“On the other hand,” Novak continued, “picture a couple where the man is a loving, caring companion, while the woman respects her mate as well as herself.”

“Okay,” Mason said.

“Now tell me, Dr. Mason, if we looked at the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of these respective couples, do you think we would find any differences?”

“Statistically,” Mason said with caution, “I imagine the latter would be better off.”

“Now then,” Novak said, “if someone were to tell the original couples this information, would that be ‘grossly unfair’? Or would that person merely be informing them of reality?”

Mason thought ahead a step in the argument. He knew Novak would simply come back and say that God cannot be blamed for including free will in His original design, and Mason knew from experience that *that* would be a quagmire.

“Fine,” Mason said, “sinners and their offspring can be punished. Doesn’t matter. You still have to explain why your loving, benevolent God torments His most faithful servants.”

“Can you be more specific?” Novak asked, without sarcasm.

Mason considered. Abraham would be inconclusive; Novak would surely argue that nothing had really happened to him and Isaac except a good fright. Suddenly Mason smiled.

“Job,” he said. “The story of Job has always revolted me. Here you have your all-powerful Lord God *bragging* to the devil, and killing innocent, righteous people just to win a bet.”

Novak felt a surge of anger but restrained it. It was one thing—indeed, it was a pity—when a person truly did not believe in our Heavenly Father. But it was quite another when a person *mocked* Him.

“Dr. Mason,” Novak said, choosing his words with care, “with all due respect, I think you are being very close-minded about this.”

Mason grunted.

“You continually view the matter from your perspective,” Novak continued. “Yes, if you assume that the idea of an omnipotent being is absurd, then no amount of evidence I offer will persuade. But surely if we are to debate, you must at least *entertain the notion* that there is a God, before judging whether the scriptures are compelling.”

Mason stared at Novak but said nothing.

“In this case,” Novak said gently, “let us take seriously the possibility that there is a God, as described in the book of Job. Now certainly He is not *boasting* to Satan. It would be far more accurate to say that He is merely *informing* Satan, to demonstrate that the Lord’s method of earning loyalty is far superior to the Enemy’s.”

“Even so,” Mason said, “He killed Job’s innocent children. I don’t care why He did it. He had no right.”

“He had no *right*??” Novak said. “The Lord may certainly undo what He has created. Is that not your own view of ownership?”

Mason snorted. *Now* Novak was trying to dabble in his own area!

“Actually,” Mason corrected, “I am a fairly harsh critic of Lockean ethics. But even the adamant natural law theorists don’t believe that parents can murder their ‘creations.’”

“But parents do not create their children,” Novak objected. “They use the resources that the Lord has placed in their custody.”

Mason grunted again. This poor Novak had certainly painted himself into a corner. A fine mind, too.

“And moreover,” Novak suddenly said, “a parent obviously doesn’t ‘own’ his children, because the parent himself would then be the property of the children’s *grandparents*, and so on. Notice that this regress does not occur for the true Creator.”

* * *

“Yes, I believe in salvation through faith alone,” Novak admitted.

Gotcha, Mason thought.

“So then it is logically possible,” Mason declared, “for a person to be an unrepentant sinner—a murderer, a thief, a rapist—and yet pass through the pearly gates. I am sorry, Dr. Novak, but I find this ethical system simply abhorrent.”

Novak tried to restrain his surge of pride and contempt. Mason was incredibly intelligent—an absolute genius—but now the economist was dabbling in Novak’s area of expertise.

“Once again, Dr. Mason,” Novak lectured, “you aren’t taking your assumptions *seriously*. If someone truly accepts Jesus Christ as his personal savior, then the peace of our Lord descends upon him. In that condition, a man feels nothing but benevolence and compassion for his brothers and sisters. He desires only to help them, and in particular, to help them share in his incomparable joy.”

* * *

“Okay,” Mason said, now quite drunk. He had been very close on several occasions, but Novak had always eluded him at the last moment. Now it was time for the kill.

“Do you believe,” Mason said, “that a system of political government is compatible with Christianity?”

Mason waited for Novak to say “yes,” thereby linking his religion to a collection of doctrines that Mason *knew* he could prove to be internally contradictory. Q.E.D.

“In a world where all are true Christians,” Novak said, “there would be no formal government.”

“Okay,” Mason said, still hoping to catch the wily theologian, “but in the present world, where there are sinners galore, is there a place for government?”

“I’m not sure I follow you,” Novak said. “Even true Christians are sinners. What I meant was that I can consistently be a Christian, even if other men around me set up violent institutions such as formal governments.”

“Wait a minute,” Mason said, forgetting his trap and becoming intrigued, “are you an anarchist?”

“In the political sense, yes. A formal government is a violent institution, and as a Christian I cannot condone the use of violence.”

“Awww,” Mason groaned, “you’re a *pacifist*?”

“Yes,” Novak said. “As a Christian I have no right to use violence against my brother.”

“What about Sodom and Gomorrah?” Mason asked. “What about the flood? Your *God* is certainly violent.”

“In the same way that earthquakes are violent, certainly,” Novak agreed. “But when it comes to His instructions for us, I believe His message is clear. When He Himself lived as a man, providing the perfect model for each of us, the Lord was anything but violent.”

“Well,” Mason chuckled, “it’s a good thing you believe in the afterlife, because a group of pacifists doesn’t stand a chance in this world.”

“Oh no?” Novak asked, amused.

“No,” Mason said. “There are certain people for whom violence—or at least its threat—is the only thing they understand. I myself, as well as a darling little boy, would’ve been dead had I played the lamb.”

“Ah, your famous mugging,” Novak said. Naturally, Mason had shared the story with Dupont, and it had quickly made the rounds of the small community.

“Yes, my famous mugging,” Mason said. He sensed that he had *finally* caught Novak. It was true, he hadn’t gotten the pure contradiction he had sought, but the implication of earthly misery was good enough.

“And why did you not simply follow our Lord’s command?” Novak asked. “Had you given your possessions to the young men, are you so sure they would have killed you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Mason said, annoyed. “People are shot all the time. So don’t tell me there really aren’t criminals out there who will kill you, even *if* you give up your money.”

“I never denied that a Christian could be killed,” Novak said, trying to restrain laughter. It was amazing how *sloppy* otherwise brilliant people could be when arguing about the most important matters of all. “After all, the first Christian was murdered. My claim is that violence is not a legitimate tool, and that, contrary to popular belief, it is unnecessary. You simply need to take your own arguments against government to their logical conclusion.”

“Don’t lecture me about politics,” Mason said. “You tell me what you would do in a comparable situation. If some young *punk* is about to shoot you and a young boy, how would you get out of it without threatening him?”

Novak paused. He considered reiterating his earlier solution; he would have given the muggers his money. But he decided to try a more illustrative answer.

“I would have told him,” Novak said, “and with the same absolute conviction that you used, ‘Son, I can take away your pain.’”

“That wouldn’t work,” Mason instantly scoffed. “He was a criminal.”

* * *

“Well,” Mason said, almost slurring his words, “I need to pass out. An interesting conversation.”

“Quite,” Novak said.

“Tell me something,” Mason said.

“Certainly,” Novak answered.

“You don’t respect me very much, do you?”

Novak smiled.

“Dr. Mason, I respect you tremendously. You have written wonderful things in your life.”

“But?” Mason asked.

“But,” Novak said, and lowered his eyes. “Dr. Mason, at any given time, by the process of elimination, there has to be the smartest man alive.”

Mason braced himself for a lecture on his vanity.

“Now, if that’s the case,” Novak said, “by implication, that means he is smarter than everyone he encounters.”

Novak paused.

“How utterly *sad*, then, if this man, rather than using his tremendous gifts to their full potential, instead spent the great bulk of his time...*deploring* the fact that everyone else is so stupid.”

Mason felt as if he had been punched in the stomach.

“You have an incredible mind, David,” Novak said. “Far beyond my own. It just...breaks my heart...the Enemy has convinced you to construct a prison with it.”

“You don’t know me,” Mason said.

“David,” Novak said, “look at what you *did*. You had a chance to ask one question from a being who far surpasses anything we can imagine. And what did you waste it on?”

“And what did *you* ask?” Mason said.

“I asked,” Novak said, “what it would take to get David Mason to join our community.”

* * *

“Dear Father,” Novak prayed, “please forgive me for my pride and anger. Please give me another chance. Let Your Spirit fill me and guide me so that I may lead them back to You.”

Novak sighed as he knelt by his bed. Even though he understood the phenomenon quite clearly by now, it was still almost unbearably ironic that the very smartest and most skeptical of men were the ones most easily seduced by the Enemy.

Thirty-Eight

“How many times do I have to tell you,” Ribald said, “Chairman Peckard is unavailable. I have assumed his duties, so you can tell me whatever it is you want to tell him.”

Black leaned back in his chair. Could one of the special ops boys have gotten a lucky break? Probably not. Maybe Peckard had just had a heart attack from the stress.

“Very well,” Black said. “I have a proposition for you.”

“Yes,” Ribald said, “*I’m listening.*”

“Allow our planes within 180 kilometers, and we’ll cut back our sorties to their previous levels.”

“*Why should I do that?*” Ribald asked.

“Oh come on, let’s drop the bullshit,” Black said. “After that ridiculous *Hopper* incident, I have to give my public something tangible. If I can say that we’ve gained twenty kilometers, that will work fine. Hell, I’d just *lie* about it if it weren’t for your own damn news agencies.”

“*Remind me again why I want to boost your popularity?*” Ribald asked.

“Damn it man, drop the act,” Black said. “You know you’re running out of fuel. Our heightened sorties have to be killing you. Pretend they’re not if you want, but I’m just trying to give us both a way out of this mess.”

“I’ll need to discuss it with my colleagues,” Ribald said.

“*Oh bullshit,*” Black shot back. “*Don’t tell me you don’t have the authority to change your pilots’ rules of engagement. What if we launched a massive bombing run? Would you have to consult them, too? No: you either take this deal or not. You’ve got sixty seconds to think it over, then it’s off the table.*”

Ribald quickly pulled out a sheet from a hanging file folder. At the current rate of consumption, the Trust only had twenty-three days’ worth of oil locked in with futures contracts. After that ran out, the Trust would need to purchase its fuel on the open

market. President Black's offer could save it millions of ounces. And what was an extra twenty kilometers?

"I can only control Trust aircraft," Ribald said. "There's a few independent militias, not to mention a whole host of hothead civilians. I can't stop them from attacking your planes."

"*I understand,*" Black said. "*Do we have a deal?*"

"Yes," Ribald said, "I suppose we do."