

SKY SEEDS



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EVERYTHING YOU KNOW ABOUT LIFE ON EARTH IS WRONG

And the only one who knows the true story is a teen-aged Mexican street punk who deals dope, smuggles wetbacks, and breeds gamecocks in Tijuana. And he wishes he didn't know.

Fatherless boys often have the fantasy of a Dream Dad showing up; rich, powerful and ready to pluck them out of squalor and insecurity into the lap of luxury. But when it happens to Ben, in spades, he has a hard time coming to grips with his Papá being from the outreaches of hyperspace. Not to mention being arrogant, selfish, and possibly a mass murderer. His blond, blue-eyed father is back to rebuild the infrastructure of the planet (including the moving or rebuilding of the world's pyramids to jumpstart the decayed power/communication system) that he and his people built in the first place-- meaning also the creation of human beings. He plans on using Earth as a strategic base for his vague powerplay and wants Ben to run it for him. In a couple of years.

Years that Ben will spend not only as a student at Yale, but in private classes in The Sky, a extra-terrestrial, non-existent, hyper-projection where his father's people--who think of themselves as the the only human race--now live. In the timeless, immaterial realm of the Sky, with its "Tubes" that transport people instantly from planet to planet, Ben is learning languages, arcane technology, and martial arts based on transporting people around as if by sorcery.

He quickly cuts his gang from the street into the deal, develops a love affair with a redheaded Yalie, and forms both friends and enemies among the blondes of The Sky. All against his father's wishes. Rebelling against schooling and his father's arrogance, Ben leads his pals Monke and Nabo out to other worlds, resuming their trafficking on a universal scale. Which only brings him to the attention of the poorly-understood government of "The Race", to whom his father is an outlaw.

Ben is quickly trapped into making decisions that weigh loyalties to his blood, his friends, his people, and his planet against his own needs and desires.

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Chapter One

A furious flourish of feathers, a skirling blast of *ranchero* music, a vicious uppercut with the strapped-on knife, and it was already over. Right through the ribs on the first winged leap. It happens like that sometimes. Other times it can go on forever, two stunned roosters with blood-matted plumage lurching in for a kill with their last trickle of life. Anyway, there hadn't been many bets on the first fight.

Benito's crew could have used the extra seconds for preparation, though. This pit barely tolerated teen-aged fighters and Nacho was already giving them an eye like he was going to flag them off. Standing there with their cock only half-heeled. Men were already laughing and jeering. *¡Apurate, wey! ¡Arrre, burro!* Ben held his bird firm and gentle, took his cue from its incurious calm. It wasn't fazed by the animal roar of wagering and distorted music after weeks of training to the sound of a cranked-up boombox.

Monke, whose stolid face could have been a poster—"Mexico's Proud Indigenous Heritage of Displaced, Unwanted, Illiterate *Indios*"—shook the other *navaja* out of its box, and wiped its curved razoredges with a slice of lime. Nabo, his fierce predator eye attuned to the instincts of the birds he so admired, had already slipped the moleskin sock on the stub where the big giro's spurs had been amputated: now he carefully set the little dagger's socket of the stub and lashed it in place with dental floss. Too low and the tips might drag on the floor, too high and they might strike with the back of the blade instead of the wicked, honed tip. He tied off and nodded: the bird was heeled. And Nacho was waving them into the pit impatiently. The other gallo was waiting.

Ben stepped into the ring wearing his straw Stetson copy, the brim carefully pinched and crushed into the ever—so-cool *Texano* beak. He kept his stolen sunglasses on in the gloom of the cockpit, a teenager's defense against the eyes of elders. He looked around at a ring of dark-faced factory workers and taxistas raving as they placed bets and waved money. Drunken dorks sweating in a nasal swirl of *norteño* music.

He accepted Nacho's glare, nodded to the other *gallero*, and held his cock out towards its opponent—"flirting" the birds into a macho killing rage. The other bird's ruff of red throat feathers went up like an umbrella popping open around the basilisk eyes while the cruel beak screamed outrage and deathwish. The two surging cockades of hatred flashed back and forth under the low-hanging light bulbs, straining forward in the handlers' grips. Ben leaned close to the seething gold plumes of his own enraged bird, whispering urgently as he whipped its inbred lust for supremacy into an explosive bundle of genocide.

"*Vamos, mi amor,*" he crooned over the screams of the crowd and the distorted ranchero music that echoed through the pit. "You've already won, my little beauty. *Te amo*, you gorgeous little winner."

The sudden hush came, then the motion from the arbitro. Two sets of hands opened and two birds launched towards each other powered by strong strokes of wings, their feet slashing in figure-eight patterns, each foot delivering an inch of steel bayonet. They'd done a damned good job breeding and training this bird. It fought like a flurry of demons, slashing and pecking not only for its own life, but the lives of offspring yet to come. It was a programmed killing and impregnation machine with a stonecold refusal to die. But all cocks are like that and in every fight one has to die.

Ben slammed out the door of the pit, stalking across a dirt yard full of old tires and rusting hulks of pickup trucks. He was so furious he'd forgotten that he held a dead chicken until Monke offered him a joint. He glanced down at his hands and saw the forlorn clump of bloody feathers, took two steps and slamdunked the dead cock into an oil drum half full of green water. Then ignored the joint as he paced and raged.

"I can't believe it! We're fucking broke! All that training..."

"Next time try incubator, training, Güero," Monke told him stoically, "The only kind that pays off."

Ben glared down at him. He was taller than his compas, and so light-skinned that the "Güero" nickname was inevitable. Tall, solid, nice-looking seventeen year old. But in no kind of mood.

"He's right," Nabo tossed in. "Give it the right parents and you've got a winner."

He ambled over to Monke, proffering the joint. There was something stocky and thick about Nabo's build, but he moved with the fluid grace of an athlete and looked out at the world through dark feral eyes in a face as stern and rounded as old basalt heads in Yucatan jungles.

Ben was still furious at being left without a peso in his pocket because of some damned bird. "*¡Carajo!* We needed that money to buy the chiva we're supposed to sell those asshole yuppies. In like two hours."

"*¿Yupis?* What kind of fucked-up gringo word is that?" Nabo demanded truculently. "What does it even mean?"

"What do you want to call them?" Ben replied testily. "*¿Fresas?* What does that mean? They're strawberries? Get off my ass."

"The point is, we don't have any dope to sell them," Monke reminded them.

Nabo slid a switchblade from his pocket and into the air with one smooth movement. It sprang open in mid-toss and fell into his waiting hand. "Who says we really need any dope?"

Ben looked at him and cracked up. All three boys were laughing and roughing each other up as they headed past the weathered old cowboy who guarded the pit with an ancient shotgun. Ben picked up his machete at the broken wire gate, slipped it down the back of his shirt and tossed his hair over the handle. As they turned up the mud street of one of the most derelict *colonias* of Tijuana he reached out for the joint and sucked in a powerful slug of sweet smoke.

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Chapter Two

Monke sat on the bottom tier of the degraded cement bleachers, hunching his narrow frame forward to concentrate on rolling a neat, tight joint from their last pinch of *mota*. He fussed with the resulting spliff before lighting it up, took a deep drag, and held it smoking and sputtering over his head. Nabo whizzed across the crumbling surface of the old basketball court, effortlessly jumped his skateboard up on the riser, then the one above. He sizzled by behind Monke's head, snatching the joint and taking a deep hit before two classy jumps brought him back down to the court. He carved a hairsbreadth stop beside Ben, holding the smoke out to him.

Ben took it and sucked deeply. He handed it back, looking around the crumbling graffitiscap of what was once a proud municipal sports *cancha*, now decayed into staging area for delinquency dimly lit by lights from the street, its standards broken down and an empty box where the scoreboard had been. Three magpies squabbled over a flattened iguana carcass in a rubble-strewn far corner.

"*Oye, Nabón,*" he said. "I don't think those *ricardos* are coming to buy our shit."

"Fair enough," Monke piped up from his seat at midcourt. "Since we don't have any to sell them."

"Wonder if they had any money?" Nabo said, and they all three laughed. Monke took the dwindling number out of his mouth to speak, then whipped his head to see what Nabo had focused on. A cat in the dark, that Nabo. Canary in a mine shaft.

The guy standing across the court from them emphatically did not belong in a shot-out neighborhood like Cinco y Diez. It was hard to say exactly where he did belong. He was under forty, tall and elegantly slim. Ash blonde Nordic and handsome in a cold, aristocratic way the boyz thought of as British, but only because they'd seen films of David Bowie and the young Peter O'Toole. The White Duke in Tijuana. *Que barbaro*. He walked over to them like he owned the cancha and questioned their business there.

"Gentlemen." He made the word sound like a slur. "I'd like to speak with Benito in private for a moment, if you'd be so kind."

The *muchachos* stared at him, taking in the soft drape of the pearl gray slacks, the snowy spread of shirt, the dark cashmere topcoat that trailed his calves like a gunslinger's duster. The gold ring. The cold blue eyes. The perfect Spanish. The fucking attitude.

"Why not Monke, here?" Ben asked defiantly. "He's cute and has a tighter ass."

His friends laughed, but not in a relaxed way. They should have been coyotes entertaining a well-haberdashed rabbit, but it wasn't playing that way.

"*¡No mames!*" Monke snickered, "Mine's tight because I don't rent it out like you do."

The dude waited them out with an expression that stopped barely short of a sneer.

"Well," he said evenly. "I suppose everything is relative in a place like this. But it's Benito I want to talk with." He turned to face Ben directly. "Alone."

Ben could feel Nabo beside him, ready to explode into mayhem. He reached behind his nape and slid the machete out, let it dangle in his hand. Monke had his right hand in his pocket, all eyes for the stranger. He said, "When we talk to faggots, we do it together, *puto*."

Nabo nodded grimly. "And we don't have that much to say."

The slim gringo shook his head in exasperation. "Fine," he said. "Here."

He pulled a slim, expensive-looking automatic pistol from his coat pocket. It was a European-looking gun, amoral menace in every line of its design. He held it out to Ben, butt first. The guys stared at him wide-eyed.

"Hold this. There's no need to be afraid. Now can we talk man to man? We're already running a little late."

Ben took the gun gingerly, gripped it in an attempt to look relaxed, but couldn't figure out where to point it. His buddies moved closer, gaping at the pistol. Nabo caught himself ogling it like a kid and looked up. "What if we just steal your gun and run away?"

The dude looked at him with eyes like winter rains. "What would be your guess?"

Nabo was a blooded veteran at sixteen, a natural raptor well accustomed to being the cat among pigeons. But he already knew a thing or two about measuring men and there was something about this *catrin* that gave him pause. The dude dismissed him and spoke to Ben.

"Don't you get the impression that it might be worth a minute to talk? Learn a few things? Maybe make a few pesos?"

Ben had been the unspoken leader of this trio since they'd been gamines in the street, but he took their counsel. He glanced around quickly, his hand heavy with the pistol pointing vaguely at the gringo's midsection.

Monke broke the tableau. "A few pesos sound good. It's been a pretty shitty night for that."

The two dark-skinned kids drifted back to sit warily on the risers, keeping an eye on things. They didn't discuss it. It was too weird to have an opinion.

Ben glared at the intruder, refusing to be intimidated. "*Sobres,*" he said. "Tell me what's on your mind."

The stranger's manner thawed into what Ben interpreted as a languid decadence. He said, "My name is Kairos. Intimates call me Kai."

"What do people call you when they're holding a gun on you?"

Kairos gave a masterfully blasé shrug. "In this particular case...Father." He smiled without warmth. "*Papá* will be fine."

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Chapter Three

Ben had the pistol up the slick asshole's face with no forethought. His face flushed as he yelled, "*¡No me chingues, gringo cabrón!* Don't you *even* fuck with me."

"A little late for that sentiment, I'm afraid." Kairos leaned in slightly meeting Ben's outraged glare over the barrel of the gun. "Who did you think your father was... 'Güero'?"

Ben stood with the gun pointing in front of him like an accusing finger. His body quivered, his skin flushed, he tensed his lips to stop their tremble. He wanted to cry, to laugh, to scream, to keep pulling the trigger until the gun was empty, then go to the machete. Slowly it washed over him, cloaked in shame and the bittersweet regret of unavoidable truths. He spoke in a low, small voice. "My mother won't tell me. All she ever said was 'a handsome foreigner'."

"Foreigner." Kairos smiled with actual warmth and humor for the first time. "Her usual gift for understatement. I trust the beautiful Libertad Ochoa is still well? And still impossible to argue with?"

Ben just stared at him. The gun slowly subsided, sank to the far reach of his sagging arm, pointing at the ground.

Kairos went on in a breezy tone. "And you are Benito Ochoa. What, seventeen now? Your sister Cielo will be around twelve.

"Thirteen last month," Ben retorted woodenly. "Don't keep in touch much, do you?"

"And where are you living? Not the literal gutter, I hope."

"I live here in a back room. My mother and sister live south of here in Todos Santos."

"Actually they've moved back to Mexico City. So maybe it's you who doesn't keep in touch."

"Back to the D.F.? How do you know that?"

"She's my woman. I know where to find her when I need to." The phrase "my woman" was an odd chill for Ben, dripping with unwanted connotations.

"Well you sure didn't keep much of an eye on me, did you?" About time to get down to the basic issue here, he thought. The gun grip felt harder and tighter in his fingers. Just punch the spine along the top of the barrel right into his teeth, the front sight raking his smooth cheeks. Blow his faggy, superior dick off. Then get mean.

But Kairos blew the whole thing out of the water with two lines. "Of course I did. As soon as I needed you I came back to this planet and walked right up to you."

Some lines just hit the table like an iron plate and roll around for awhile before they slap down and lie there flat in front of you. Ben stood as though flash-frozen. He couldn't believe, he couldn't deny. He couldn't think straight.

"I ask where you're staying in case you have anything we should pick up on the way," Kairos said into the silent void he'd whirled out around them. "And we really should leave right away. If your schedule permits."

When Ben didn't respond, he pulled a slim black cellular phone from his other pocket and spoke into it. "Come for us now, please."

Alarmed, Ben whipped the gun up to Kairos' chest. Kairos effortlessly snatched it away, tapped out the magazine and flipped it back. Empty.

"A man should know what he holds in his hands before he starts waving it about," he chided so gently it was a slap in the face.

Ben started edging away from him. Monke and Nabo were on their feet immediately, moving to get his back, blades in their hands and a stern determination in their stride.

Kairos heaved a sigh as theatrically overblown as any daytime TV star and pulled out another object. Ben saw that it was black, curved like a boomerang. It looked like a cross between a phone, Playstation controller, and Star Trek phaser. It even flipped open under his thumb. He pointed it at Ben, who stopped in his tracks.

And suddenly realized he was naked. Before he could react in any way to that reversal of affairs, he found himself standing on top of the old scoreboard box. He gawked, completely disoriented, then fell. He caught himself, hanging butt naked by his hands.

Kairos took a step towards Monke and Nabo to draw their attention from Ben hanging there with his dick waving in the breeze. He pointed the device at them. Instinctively, they raised their hands and clasped them behind their heads. They were staring in profound, physiological shock. Which merely means they have some imagination, Kairos thought. Remarkable.

He touched the device again and Ben stood in front him, fully clothed. He stared at Kairos, then at his dumbfounded friends. He looked back to the man he was forced to realize was actually his father, and who now pointed towards the end of the court. A long black luxury limousine slinked up over the curve and through a section of torn-down link fence, eased up beside them, sat purring ominously as a leashed panther. Kairos nodded at the car.

"If you are through wasting my time? And yours?"

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Chapter Four

Kairos lolled in the wide, luxuriant seat, a man obviously accustomed to First Class or better. He accepted a drink from the pretty stewardess, who returned his frank appraisal with a smile. He sipped, eying Ben. Who fidgeted, peered out the window, stroked the buttery leather upholstery, examined the dials and doodads in the panel overhead. *¡Sobres!* He was airborne!

Movies hadn't shown him how much you were aware of actually leaving the ground and surging up into the sky. He'd watched the smear of Tijuana drop away below, spotted the broad traffic-choked slash of the Revu, the rambling scar of the Border. Had the usual revelation about ants. The skyline of San Diego dipped and wheeled away in the distance as the plane rose past Las Playas and banked a steep turn over the ocean. He was enthralled. Sitting up in the sky! He felt like hijacking the plane just for a joyride. Then they slipped into a lacy lingerie of cloud, wrapping the stark Baja landscape in diaphanous swirls, then hiding it completely as they broke into the brightest sky he'd ever experienced, a deep blue wash carpeted in white cotton candy. It took him awhile to get tired of staring.

When he did turn away from the window, Kairos was looking at him, drink in hand, amused. "It's quite a feeling," he said. Ben nodded emphatically.

"It's a backward, primitive way to travel. On a backward, isolated planet. You'll find this out in time. Meanwhile we have three hours until we reach Mexico. Maybe you have questions?"

Well yes, he did have a few, oddly enough. He'd avoided blurting anything out in the limousine or the airport. Partly captivated by the novelty of it all, partly trying to get a grip before letting his father take more shots at his shaken sense of the way of things.

"Okay," he said with what he hoped was a mature acceptance. "I believe you're from space or the future or whatever you say. I don't go to school, but I'm not stupid."

"By no means stupid. Breeding tells."

That rankled Ben a little. He could see a relationship here where his faults were his own, but his qualities due to superior sperm. "So, *Papá...*" He let a little snot drip off the word. "Tell me."

Kairos moved his cocktail in a circle that took them both in. "I'm your father. I'm not from Earth. That's the hard part, really. Do you have any problem with it?"

"It's a total *desmadre*, but I buy it. You didn't get that ray gun thing from Acme."

"Ah, maybe this will be easier than I thought."

"*¡Santita!*" Ben muttered. He looked back out the window to confirm that things had changed. "My *papi*, the ET. So how'd you do that thing with the ray gun?"

Kairos ignored him and went on. "I came here years ago and met your mother. I had to leave. I'm back. Things are in a mess and I need to straighten them out."

"*A la chingada, jefe*. You're one interesting *loco*. What things are you going to patch up?"

"What do you think of the world situation, Ben? The politics, racism, wars, poverty, not enough pussy to go around? People still say that? Pussy?"

"Yeah, we say that. A lot. I think all that stuff sucks. So what?"

"Those are the things I need to get turned around. But first I need to repair the infrastructure."

Ben stared, then laughed. "I don't know whether I should throw a net over you or vote for you. And I don't know what that structure thing means."

"Anything I say that you don't understand, please tell me at once. Like you just did," Kairos finished his drink, reached up to push the call button. "You were asking about the device I used? Not that communicator. Those are new since my last visit, by the way. But still very primitive."

"Yeah, that 'device'. Little magic wand PlayStation deal."

"It's called a concentrator. We call them 'trators'. I realize that's funny here."

Ben looked blank.

"Sorry. It will be funny once you learn English."

Ben's eyebrows shot up and he started to speak, but Kairos raised a hand. The stewardess appeared, took his empty glass, and smiled as he motioned for another. He turned back to Ben. "Please pay attention. It works, all of our technology works, by energy that is broadcast by an inherent system transmitted as interlocking waves from pyramids located at strategic points within the electromagnetic field of the planet."

Ben gaped, then laughed in delight. "Oh, man. This is better than *El Trek*" or Matrix."

"Reality still has its appeal," Kairos remarked dryly. "The trouble is the magnetic field has shifted over the millennia and the pyramids no longer line up properly. Most of the transponders have moved out of resonant range. Some nexi are under oceans now. The grid is almost inoperable."

Ben stared, his mind chewing away. Never mind all the words, he got the picture. And he figured out that inoperable meant "busted". He waited until the girl handed Kairos his new drink, bending over to give him a peek into the terrain behind her little AeroMexico pin. Then he summed it up, "*¡Fuckala!* So you came to fix the lights? Hook up the power again. Read the meter?"

"I came to repair the system."

"What? Move the pyramids? So your little X-Box will work?"

"Exactly." Kairos nodded, pleased that the boy was following him. This was going far better than he'd dreaded. "And I need your help."

Ben stared, mouth open. He started to speak, stopped. He started to snicker, then broke into a laugh so derisive and raucous that two passengers turned to frown at him.

Kairos nodded in comprehension. "I admit, it seems pretty ridiculous. From both of our viewpoints. You're completely illiterate, aren't you? Undisciplined, common."

Ben bridled instantly. "I can read a little bit, asshole. I'm not some damned *analfabestia*. And I get by. You know, for a kid whose father bugged out on him."

Ben took Kairos' nod as a parody of apologetic sympathy. He would have pushed his case for pissoff, but instead laughed again. "I just think its funny your pyramids broke down. You mean the big pyramids, right? Chichen, Uxmal and shit? Well, hey, *Hecho en Mexico*."

"The ones in Africa and Asia are worse."

Ben laughed again. "So why not complain to whoever built them?" he asked, enjoying the opportunity for ridicule.

Kairos made a self-deprecating face. "Because we built them."

That stopped Ben cold. He was suddenly aware that his dad had been saying "we" all along. And that he was too far over his head to keep this up. When did they build those *méndigo* pyramids, anyway? A *chingo* of years ago, for sure. He looked out at the fluffy field of cloud for a moment. He said, "*¡Chiiin!* Can I get a drink, too?"

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Chapter Five

Ben hadn't been in his childhood home since he was twelve, but he immediately felt welcome and at ease in the airy, gracious architecture. It had been built to be welcoming and inclusive; simple and unadorned except for indigenous artifacts. It had the feel of a Zen spa, an ashram, a shelter.

His mother stood in the big, old-fashioned kitchen staring at Kairos and Ben, who posed in the arched doorway waiting for her to speak. Ben hadn't seen Libertad in the three years since he'd split for the excitement of the border, but she hadn't changed in the slightest. She looked strong and striking in her mid-thirties, wearing her hair in a long Indian braid with an embroidered white cotton dress. She looked like she was posing for one of the generic Frida Kahlo knockoffs gringos bought in Tijuana.

She didn't seem astonished that the two men in her family had suddenly popped back in... simultaneously. She just seemed to be taking it in and sorting it out. Finally she murmured, "*¡Dios mio!* The two of you together!"

"If you have a camera nearby?" Kairos suggested.

"No," she said. "This was what I dreamed: the two of you standing together in that doorway. That's why I came back here from the Baja."

"So I'm still the man of your dreams, Lili?" Kairos smiled with more warmth than Ben had thought he was capable of. He turned to him and said, "Her dreams. Remarkable, no?"

Ben shrugged it off. "She's always been like that. It's why all those *tarados* come see her to get healed and all that."

"We were doing wonderful work in Todos Santos," Libertad said, somehow making it a mild rebuke to both of them. "But now I'm here."

"In your hilltop palace of health and well-being," Kairos said, looking around the cheery tile kitchen and into the serene, whitewashed inner rooms. "She made me build it for her just exactly like this, Ben. With all those windows and that steeple thing on top. Had to be yellow tile, not the blues ones that are easy to get."

"It's a good place for now," Libertad said. "Cielo will be old enough for *prepa* soon."

"Is she here?" Ben asked.

"She's down at the bus station bringing the rest of the things I shipped." She glanced down at the luggage with fresh airline tags. "Your wife and daughter spend two days on a bus: you and your son ride in expensive luxury."

Kairos stepped across the sandy paver tiles, looked down at her from close up. "That was what we agreed, remember?"

Ben, bemused by that bit of history, looked back and forth at them.

"She's yours, he's mine," Kairos said. "I treat him like my son should be treated. You mold your daughter your way."

Libertad nodded, looked up at Kairos and accommodated her posture to him. Ben gawked, uneasy with the sexual electricity they suddenly exuded.

Libertad raised a hand in front of her face, showing him the bronze bracelet Ben had never seen her without. He smiled, touched it, trailed his hand on her arm.

"Yes," she said. "I remember so much of what we agreed."

"I'm glad you still wear it," Kairos said easily. "It suits you well."

Without breaking the lock of their eyes and stance, Kairos reached into his pocket and pulled out an identical bracelet; a simple bronze-colored band with raised rims and faintly etched runes. Libertad raised her other hand and Kairos pulled the bracelet open. It snapped out into straight rigidity, like a rollup ruler. In that position, it was a foot-long, wickedly angled knife. He slapped the flat of the curved blade against her bare wrist and it snapped around it, now a bracelet like the other. Ben stared. He'd seen that thing every day of his childhood and never known it could do that.

"I'll let you give it to her."

She regarded the bracelet solemnly, then smiled warmly up at him. "You're still the same. After how many years? Always surprising me with something thoughtful and charming when I most distrust you."

Kairos moved closer, subtly leaning into her. "I love surprising you. Would you like to be totally astounded?"

Ben watched, appalled, as her eyes fluttered and she leaned forward, almost touching. Then she recoiled, her mood sharply broken. "Oh, no," she said. "No you don't. Because you also always surprise me with something rotten and selfish every time I trust you the most."

Kairos was about to speak when, to Ben's relief, his parents' reunion was interrupted by the slamming of the metal gate to the street. A moment later Cielo came in, carrying armfuls of bundles and sacks. She dropped them on the floor at the sight of Ben and Kairos. She stood wide-eyed, seemed about to run across to her mother. She couldn't take her eyes off Kairos. Well, she seems to know who he is, Ben thought. I must not be as smart as I thought.

He recognized his little sister, but had no idea who she was at this point. There was nothing in the slim, pretty thirteen year-old to suggest the scrawny ten year-old he ignored up until splitting at fourteen. She was showing a finer-boned, lighter-skinned version of her mother's dark Indian beauty. And getting some curves. *¡Hijole!*

Ben waved to her as one waves to a child, smiling. "Hiya, Sis. *¿Que pasó?*"

Libertad rescued her from staring by saying, "Cielo, may I present your father. Kairos, this is Cielo Ochoa. You meet at last."

Her instincts confirmed, Cielo stared at Kairos with a mixture of fascination and loathing. "Why are you here?" she blurted. "Why now?"

Kairos bestowed his most charming, rueful smile. "Sorry I missed your birthday."

Overcome, she turned and ran past them, into the living rooms and up the stairs. Ben called after her. "I brought you a totally cool T-shirt from Tijuana, Cici."

Libertad pursed her lips, surveyed them, shook her head. "Two of you! *¡Ay, Dios Mio!*"

"Don't worry, Libi," Kairos said in an ironically consoling tone. "We'll have to move on soon enough."

Libertad looked up at him, a long and impassive study. She turned to treat Ben to the same evaluation. She moved towards the door to the *salón*, going to Cielo. As she left the kitchen she said, "Good."

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Chapter Six

Newcomers to the Mexico City metro have described the underground train system as an underworld, as human hell, as moving bowels. Ben was long accustomed to it: a habitat, a territory, a rich central ecosystem. He and Kairos let their car empty with a surge, then stepped onto the platform milling with everything from businessmen, workers and peasants in native dress to vendors, hustlers and buskers. Kairos moved through the mob with purposeful strides, Ben beside him.

“Don’t worry about that,” he said, continuing their conversation seamlessly. “It’s easier to experience than explain. The important thing is this: language is central to everything you’ll be doing. The main concern. Everything you are going to learn is a language of some sort. And English is the most important one for now.”

“Because I have to go to Harvard.”

“Please!” Kairos mimed hurt and betrayal. “To Yale. No comparison, really. And here we are. Ah, we wait.”

They had moved beyond the crowds, into smelly dark offshoot tunnels full of maintenance gear and evidence of urban encampments. Kairos stopped across from a low niche where a doorway had obviously been filled years before and folded his hands to wait. Inside the niche a chubby Indian prostitute, dirty tipica skirt raised, accommodated a client. Their view was dominated by the scabby, thrusting buttocks of some squat day laborer.

Kairos turned to Ben philosophically. “One must always grab opportunity when and where it presents.” He winced slightly at a bestial grunt from the obrero. “No matter how unseemly it might seem.”

“Should we take a number or something?”

Kairos shot him a long-suffering look and peered around the uninviting sooty stone walls while the couple finished, fumbled, realized they had a viewing audience and scurried back toward the station platform. Kairos stepped gingerly into the alcove, wrinkling his nose, and beckoned Ben to follow.

“You’re aware that they discovered one of the great Aztec pyramids while they were building this place?”

“At Pino Suárez station,” Ben said. “Everybody knows that.”

“How many know that the biggest one of all is at this station? About twenty yards below our feet. The only one working at all these days.”

He pointed to the seams on the floor. “Stand right there.” Ben stepped where he pointed then glanced down in alarm as the floor beneath his feet glowed with a purplish grid. He started to step away, but Kairos threw his arms around him.

“Hug for daddy?”

Ben struggled, then immediately gave up in shock as the walls around them disappeared and they slid along the inside of a round tube, standing erect and moving about the speed of a skateboarder on a medium grade. The tube was made of some slick pinkish substance that somehow looked flexible. It glowed faintly as they shot along side by side, Kairos arm around his shoulder.

Reflexively, he started to pull away, but his father tightened his grip and he realized he wasn’t all that keen to be on his own in this bizarre plumbing. He kept his voice steady as he asked, “Did we take the wrong train?”

“This doesn’t really exist,” Kairos explained.

That’s a big comfort, Ben thought. He said, “Fine. Can you cut the crap and tell me what the hell’s going on?”

“Most people call this The Tubes.” Kairos told him, like a tour guide. “The term we stood on is part of a system of transportation from one place to another. Not as colorful or odorous as your metro, but faster for long distances.”

“Like to other planets and shit?” Ben didn’t consider this a brilliant conclusion.

“And intermediate points. Let me explain that we are actually in hyperspace right now. I’ll go into that later, if you don’t mind. There is no time or space here, we are nothing. Our minds construct the tubes to rationalize the relocation to themselves. It’s a defense mechanism.”

Ben was determined not to be rattled by his sudden shift from quotidian Mexico to cosmic waterslide. “I wish I had Nabo’s skateboard.”

“Why?” Kairos said, with enough pressure on the word to get Ben’s attention. “You don’t need it here. Can’t you see that we’re already in motion? Keep that in mind: you need to lose as many worldly artifacts as possible when you’re in the Tubes.”

Ben nodded. “So it’s taking us somewhere?”

“I told you ‘it’ is imaginary,” Kairos said. “We’re already here.”

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Chapter Seven

“Here” being precisely where they were. A spacious marble hall where fountains bubbled up merrily from depressions in the alabaster floor and bronze statues of scholarly looking types lined fluted alcoves between ceiling-high shelves of dark, burnished wood crammed with leather-bound lore. A set of wide, low steps led to a laureled throne where a tall, blond, sixtyish man in rumpled suit and wire glasses sat staring at them like a kindly version of the Great Oz.

“A bit much, don’t you think?” Kairos said and Ben nodded rapidly, entranced with the serene majesty of the place, the way it reeked of money and learning at the same time. Then he realized that his father had not spoken to him, but to the curious figure on the throne. Who slipped a slim tome in Moroccan binding into a bulging valise-style briefcase at his feet, stood and shuffled forward to meet them, blinking through the thick lenses of the frameless spectacles. Ben noticed that his suit was of a cheap material and cut. He just couldn’t figure this tip-o.

He bumbled up, saying, “Well, perhaps. But what about my appearance?” He was beaming, obviously delighted to see Kairos.

“Superb,” Kairos told him. “I have no idea who you are trying to resemble, but it reeks of linguistic ledgermain and pointless scholarship.”

The scholar, or whatever he was, blinked around the room, as if seeing it through Kairos’ eyes. “I think I’ll add some sort of anteroom. Cushion the initial effect a bit.”

“Well, the effects on the uninitiated...” Kairos waved a hand at Ben. “Speaking of which: my son Benito. As uninitiated as it’s possible to be, I would say. Ben, please meet Master Memon.”

Memon turned his rapt gaze on Ben, smiling with a genuine warmth and excitement that made him feel like wriggling and wagging his tail. “Ah. Your son. Welcome to my studio, my boy. You have an interesting appearance yourself. May I ask?”

Ben stared at him until Kairos cut in smoothly, “That’s what he actually looks like. He was born down in the dirt. Lives there.”

“Fascinating,” Memon exclaimed. “Does he speak?”

“Oh, to say the least. Something called ‘Spanish’. Similar to ‘Latin’, which I know you’re aware of. Very much like Drysidic. Oddly enough.”

“Ah. Might I hear a little?” The guy’s rapture at the prospect of hearing simple Spanish was poignantly unfeigned, but Ben continued to stare.

“Ben,” his father coached, “Speak to him. With respect, please. He’s quite a genius.”

Ben cleared his throat, something he seldom did, and said “*Hola, profe. Mucho gusto.*”

Memon cocked his head, savoring the words like a wine snob lingers over a simple mouthful of fermented grape juice. “Ah, I see,” he pronounced. “Yes. I like the twist on *profesh* and *ghust*.” To Ben he carefully pronounced, “*Na brofest. Ses ezemlore.*”

Now it was Ben who was intrigued with the play of tongues. “He’s not a professor, he’s an example?”

Kairos nodded, smiling. “Very good. He’s an Exemplar. He doesn’t teach like you think of it. If you ever have. He provides an example for us to follow and strive for. It’s the basis of our society, actually. Or was.”

The light was dawning on Ben and he regarded the Exemplar with more interest. “So he’s going to example me English?”

Memon chuckled in delight. “*Ainglise*. Interesting! I look forward to this, Kai. I think it will go very smoothly.”

“I don’t know how much patience he has, but you’ll probably use a Concentrator, right? And please, no chemical accelerants.”

Memon blinked owlishly. “Drugs? Whatever do you mean?”

“I mean ‘herbs’ as well, all right? I’m sure he’d have no objection to any drug you came up with, but I’d like to avoid that right now.”

“Yes. A very quick project, I think. He has the look.”

“Thank you, Master. I’m sure you’re aware of my continuing respect and regard.” He turned and paced across the luminous floor to the spot where they had appeared in the room. Ben saw the floor light up in the same gridwork as the subway floor. Kairos waved an affected adieu and vanished with a slight “whuff”.

“*¡Epa!*” Ben called out. “Wait...” Left to his own devices, he turned back to the Exemplar, who smiled, rubbing his hands together. Ben shook his head, “*¡Ay, ay, ay!*”

Kairos stood with his hands behind his waist, peering politely around the promised anteroom. It looked like a cozy Victorian study might look if books were white tubular scrolls suspended across the walls like wine bottles in invisible racks among artwork and bibelots. A curtained side nook had comfy sofas, a low table strewn with maps, charts, and arcane devices...and a crackling fire in a fieldstone chimney.

“Very nice,” he said dutifully. “Charming yet functional.”

Memon beamed, then waved a hand at Ben as though producing him by a conjure trick. Given leave to speak, Ben blurted excitedly. “It’s the *maximo*, Pops! Everything is based on this one language!”

“*The* language,” Memon coached gently. “And it’s called?”

“Lexus,” Ben said, smiling. “Sorry, I still have trouble not laughing at that.” Kairos and Memon didn’t get it but that didn’t stop the pedagogy.

“Meaning both ‘word’ and ‘law’,” Memon intoned.

“And you’ll find that’s exactly how it works,” Kairos said. “Words command through being right. And when you move beyond words, you are beyond laws.”

“You know I disagree with that, Kai,” Memon scolded with an upraised finger. “Apparently his world calls the contamination of language by local grunts ‘Babel’.

Kairos wasn’t fascinated. “Every world calls it something.”

“And sees it as progress,” Memon said sadly. “Not degeneration. They all think they are ‘evolving’ into something wonderful instead of disintegrating. Tragic, really.”

Ben was too ready to hype his latest knowledge than to pick up on that. “It’s so *chido*, Pop,” he spouted. “Once you get that main groove it’s like singing *ranchero* in a rap style or scatting. Just jamming on the beat. Spanish and English are like different accents. *Palomeando, no mas.*”

Kairos shook his head wonderingly. “I have no idea what you’re saying. I suppose that’s ironic.”

“But I’m talking to you in *inglesito*! I learned English in like a week or...” He paused, suddenly confused. “Wait a minute. How long has it been?”

“That’s hard to explain, too,” Kairos told him.

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Chapter Eight

The air “whuffed” away from their bodies as Ben and Kairos appeared in the metro tunnel. Ben stared around, wide-eyed with a newbie’s visceral reaction to the rush and “gearshift” of slipping. Kairos stepped out of the nook where the termno grid was fading away and looked down the passageway to the platform. “Step here a minute.”

Ben, examining his hands closely for signs of relocation or anomaly, walked up to him, looked at where he was pointing. Twenty yards down the tunnel the laborer and prostitute were walking hand in hand, scratching their butts. Ben stood like a poleaxed steer, staring and tongue-tied.

“So how long were we gone?” Kairos asked silkily.

“I... They...” Ben stammered. “What the fuck?”

“Congratulations on your new mastery of English.” When Ben turned to face him, lost in confusion, he went on, “How old am I, Benito?”

Glad for a question with a possible sane answer, Ben looked at his father, examined his skin. “I don’t know. Hard to tell with rich people. Thirty-five?”

“How old was I when I met your mother? When you were born?” Kairos motioned for him to follow as he walked towards the platform. The obrero and puta had melted into the crowd.

“How would I know? Oh, wait. Older than her. Yeah, twice her age she said once.” Ben took two steps towards the platform and stopped in his tracks.

“Oh, shit!”

“I see you can do simple math. I was around thirty-five. She was seventeen.”

“Hijo de su madre! So you really have been around forever?” He was feeling light-headed about all this, but also vaguely excited.

“No aging occurs when you’re in the Tubes or the Sky. There is no time up there, no material substance.”

“This is going to take a little time to figure out,” Ben said weakly. How could there be no time when he did all those classes? And wasn’t he matter while he was doing it?

“There’s not that much to figure out. If you walk away from a chess game and come back an hour later, the pieces haven’t moved. They aren’t bored waiting for you.”

“Sorry, Space Genius. It’s a lot for me to handle.”

“Good practice. Studying at Yale will challenge your handling ability nicely.”

Ben started walking toward the train platform. This whole gringo college thing was a different ball game. Hyperspace was one thing, but the otro lado was weird. He couldn’t make up his mind about it, so he kept picking at the edges of it.

“Look, how are you going to get me into this school for rich gringo geniuses when I didn’t go to high school? Or even *secundaria*?”

“It will take a few minor tricks,” Kairos replied smoothly. “You’ve just seen one of them. But basically it’s not a big problem. I’m one of the founders.”

“¡*Chingada madre!*” Ben stopped and stared searchingly at his father. “I can never tell when you’re full or shit or not.”

“No, you can’t,” Kairos agreed amiably. “Your best option is to accept everything I tell you. I have no reason to deceive you.”

Ben quickly thought of what his mother had said on that topic. “I don’t know why you would ask me, Benito,” she had said. “I had his children and I don’t know how much to believe. But I know this much: if he lies to you, you’ll never know. Until too late.”

He said, “You’d best not bullshit me. I haven’t made up my mind about you yet.”

Kairos rolled over what Ben had to admit was pathetic menace, “Good. The longer you wait to make it up, the better it will work.”

Ben hit his temple with the heel of his hand a couple of times. It just kept getting stranger and coming on faster. He turned to Kairos almost beseechingly, “Look, this is going to take some getting used to. Can we go get a beer or something? It makes me tired.”

“An excellent idea. Somewhere where there are women.” He caught Ben’s look and laughed. “You know, have a beer, look at women. Don’t you like to look at women?”

“Oh, yes.”

“What else is so worth attention, really?” Kairos seemed transformed by some inner vision, a poet contemplating. “What else is so beautiful and fine?”

He suddenly turned to Ben and said, “I probably shouldn’t say this to you. Or maybe it’s what all fathers should say to their sons. I wouldn’t know. I’ve known thousands of women, countless. But among them all, across more places and time than you can imagine, your mother stands out to me like the moon among the stars. There is nobody like her, really. Anywhere. If you had seen her when I first met her, a scared, beautiful Indian waif on the city streets, like an orchid amid garbage...”

He put his hand on Ben’s shoulder and this time Ben didn’t shrug it off. “Let’s get that beer,” he said. “Somewhere you can order in English. Congratulations, son.”

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Chapter Nine

“I think perhaps you are overcomplicating the thing,” Kairos said gently.

Ben held his hand out over the soiled floor of the alcove in the metro station, frowning in concentration.

“You don’t need to give instructions or commands. Just be ready to go. Anticipate being elsewhere.”

Ben closed his eyes and unfurrowed his brow. He jerked his thumb as though hitch-hiking. And the termno grid glowed faintly, then stronger as he opened his eyes and grinned at it. He started to step onto the grid. “Beam me up, bitch.”

“Wait!” Kairos snapped and Ben jerked his foot back. “Where are you going?”

“I thought you said...”

“To activate the termno. But you need to have a destination in mind. Literally.”

“Acapulco,” Ben said.

“Very droll. Now listen. The termno will deliver your point of view—we call this form of transport “slipping” by the way—to the location you specify. When we did it before I had the igo in mind...”

“Igo?”

“I held you in order to take me with you by induction. Now you will slip by yourself. So you need to know where to go. And how to return.”

“Learning the stations?” Ben asked mischievously.

“If you say so. Every termno...and there are thousands all over the universe... has a unique visual symbol. A character or logo which you hold in your mind to direct yourself to slip there.”

“An igo.”

“I’m glad you pay attention. Now. I’m going to show you the igo for our destination. And the one for this location, so you can come back here.”

“I’m going to another planet and back? Outer space? By myself? Right now?”

“It’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“Are you serious? This is so fucking chingon! ¡Vamonos!”

“Wonderful; bilingual vulgarity. Now, look at this: it’s the igo for this station. You have to remember it and visualize it in your mind or you can’t come back here.”

He held up a piece of paper with an ink drawing, a stylized Aztec warrior with eagle helmet.

“How can I forget that?” Ben laughed. “I’ve seen it all my life on soccer shirts, the stadium, Mexicana Airlines...”

“Good. It’s an ancient glyph as far as your people go. Most stations located on worlds use local glyphs to tailor the station to ambient awareness.”

“So your people built this thing, but you took our symbol for your station?”

“The termno was here long before you developed language.”

Ben’s mouth fell open at that, but Kairos cut him off... “It sounds like you have this igo in mind. Think of it anytime you want to return here.”

He handed him a second piece of paper, showing a simple maze pattern. “This is your destination. Go and come back.”

Ben took the paper and studied it. “So I just think about this and...” He vanished, then immediately “whuffed” back into existence. Flushed with excitement.

“It’s incredible, *caramba!* It’s like a video game, some sort of 3-D puzzle. There was some weird *vato* there, but I couldn’t figure him out. He showed me around and...”

He looked around, calmed down. “But no time passed here, right?”

“As I’ve explained. ‘Time’ in the tubes isn’t really time.”

“Right.” Ben stood in thought, his father watching silently. “But wait... what if I jumped around a lot of places, then came back here?”

“When you go to the Tubes, you have to return to the same locus you left.”

“Yeah, okay.” He stopped, frowned. “But why?”

“Because otherwise it would be time travel, wouldn’t it?”

“And that’s impossible?”

“It’s more like illegal. And nothing worth fooling around with. Our people live in the tubes. In the Sky. We are ageless. Why bother with time?”

“The Sky. Cool. Wow, this is flipping me out. Anyway, that guy in the Maze...”

“Your next Exemplar,” Kairos told him solemnly. “You are about to face a test.”

“No shit?” Ben said. “I thought this whole thing was a test. Ever since you showed up.”

“Did you really?” Kairos looked at him quizzically. “A test for what?”

“I don’t know. Sanity? See how much bullshit I’ll believe?”

“I suppose that’s what life is, actually.” Kairos smiled thinly. “No, your test has a name. Letters, actually: S. A. T.”

“*Eset?*”

“You need to take the test to get into Yale. And pass it. I can only bend things so far. It’s a test designed to see how much you learned in school.”

“That’s easy. All I learned in school was to get the hell out of there.”

“Remember that you have time on your side now. Or more correctly that it is no longer an adversary. You could spend years here studying, then return.”

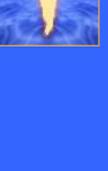
“That would be worse than school!” Ben protested. *¡Que horror!*

“But instead, we are just going to teach you how to pass tests.”

Ben curbed his resistance to schooling and thought it over. “Why don’t schools think of that?”

“Oh, they do,” Kairos told him. “They do. But Puni does it better.”

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Chapter Ten

Ben would never have admitted it to anyone, but he loved watching his mother work. She was most attractive while healing: moving her hands on people, concentrating on them with that dynamic, open look. She still had an unusual but striking beauty about her. Guys his age had told him they found her hot. Generally not more than once. Sitting in her pose, palms held out seeking and changing, she had a look that made a guy smile and relax, feast his eyes.

But beyond that was the subtle aura that came off her. Ben might pooh-poo her New Age Earth Mother spiel, but there was no mistaking that she radiated something powerful and curative when she worked. Ben squatted on the roof, shaded by the yellow-tiled cupola, and happily watched as Libertad worked her magic once again, slowly reshaping the posture and facial set of an aging Zapotec woman.

She paused, leaned back on her heels, and smiled at the older woman, who smiled back and moved her arms freely in obvious delight. She remained seated while the woman got to her feet, moved in a sort of dance step experiencing the new fluidity of her joints, and laughed like a young girl. Ben felt like laughing, too, just from the infection of whatever his mother spread.

As the woman withdrew from the upper room, nodding and babbling incoherent thanks in Zapoteca, Ben stood up and moved across the sloped red tejas towards the window to his mother's studio. This was how he'd come home when he was a little kid: bounding up the piled debris in the alley, tiptoeing along the top of the rear wall, a couple of daring leaps to the eaves, then in over the roof. He had almost reached the window when Cielo blasted into the room. Not happy or relaxed at all.

Ben stopped to watch his kid sister. He hadn't paid much attention to her and could barely take in the ways she'd changed while he was at the border. She was darker-skinned than he was, but lighter than their mother. Taller and slimmer. And, Ben hated to notice, getting a nice body on her. He noticed that the sweet, boring child had become a somewhat assertive teenager. She didn't just ask, "*Mamá*, did you really tell Marisol that I would study with her in the afternoons?" She was demanding an explanation.

Libertad smiled at her, like she always smiled at her children. She spread her hands into a sort of remote embrace. Cielo had obviously learned what Ben had, don't let her get in close and hose you down with her lovey-dovey, or you're sunk. She stood rigid and aloof, tapping her sandal on the tiles. Libertad said, "She knows everything about herbs and plants. I thought you were interested in those things, *mi vida*."

"She's a nutty old hick, *Mami*. I work hard in school all morning. I study with you at night. Why do I have to spend my afternoons on this stuff, too?"

"When you'd rather be singing on the bus routes?"

Cielo looked a little startled at that. Ben thought, You still get surprised when she knows everything you do or think?

"It's dangerous," Libertad went on. "You're only thirteen. And you don't need the money. Whatever you need, just tell me."

"I need to play!" Cielo snapped.

"And you need to learn," Libertad said calmly. "But I agree. I'm sorry to push you too much. Why not go see Marisol today, then twice a week?"

Cielo stared impassively. Getting a stubborn streak, Ben thought. Good.

Libertad stood and moved to Cielo, who resisted the impulse everyone always felt to move close to her, feel her warmth and peace. She said, "You need to learn things if you still want to heal people."

Cielo looked at the floor for a moment, fidgeting. Then raised her eyes and firmly said, "I do want to heal people. Like you do. But in my own way."

Libertad beamed. "You have a way already?"

"Yes," Cielo told her. "I don't really understand it yet. But singing on buses is part of it."

Libertad looked at her thoughtfully, nodding. "That's wonderful, Ciel. It makes me very happy to hear that. But please, play somewhere safer for now, will you do that for me?"

Cielo nodded, not very enthusiastically. Libertad moved in to plant a kiss on her cheek, stepped away. She said, "But today, will you go to Marisol? I promised her you'd come."

"*Claro que sí, Mamá*," Cielo said dutifully. She returned the kiss and left.

Libertad immediately turned and walked to the window, looking straight at Ben. Christ, he thought, she probably knew I was coming before I did. He stepped in through the vaulted window and accepted her hug, kiss, and aroma. She sat on a floor cushion, motioned him down beside her. He sank down on the cushion and into the cool, scented atmosphere of the room. He looked at his mother, gazing at him with pleasure and expectation. Home again.

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Chapter Eleven

Libertad was washing her hands in a bright talavera bowl splashed with hibiscus flowers. As always, she made it look like some Asian spiritual ritual. She turned to Ben, drying her fingers by running them through her thick cascades of hair. “Are you enjoying your father’s company?”

Always straight to the heart of the matter, Ben thought. Even when you didn’t know what the matter was until she brought it up. He grinned at her, hoping for a boyish, loving son effect. He see-sawed his spread hand. “*Mas o menos.*”

Libertad gave him what he and Cielo called The Scan. She nodded. “I think he’s already been good for you. I can see a difference. Growing to manhood.”

Ben frowned. “I’d say I’ve been a man for years. Taking care of myself.”

“Yes, you certainly have. While I could have used a little help taking care of your sister.”

Ay, Ben thought, she’s always one step ahead of you. He stood and walked to the window, stared out at the smogbound rooftops of the Distrito Federal. He saw Cielo burst from the house and run to the street, carrying her guitar. She looked up defiantly and saw Ben. He waved, careful to hide the move from his mother. If such a thing were possible. She stood and stared at him a minute, then shook her head violently and hustled off towards the bus stop.

Andale, hermanita, Ben thought.

Behind him, Libertad continued, “If I thought he could lead you to true manhood, I’d tell you to follow him and do whatever he says until you know what to do yourself. You came here to ask me what to do, didn’t you?”

Ben turned, leaned on the windowsill, and looked at her. He nodded.

“I don’t mean to mother you, Ben. But you’re barely seventeen. You’ve never had a job, a family, a responsibility. You think Tijuana was manhood but it’s just a Disneyland for wayward boys.”

“Less boring than Todos Santos.”

“Maybe it was a mistake to take you there. I wanted to take you both out of the city, get you away from your alleycat friends. But they came to Tijuana with you, didn’t they?”

“I thought you went there for the healing community and the wonderful vibrations and all.”

“Yes. And for you, a smart, sensitive boy with no father. It’s different in the country. Boys get married at sixteen, support families, work men’s jobs. They are men immediately, living their lives, making the world. The *transa, narco, cantina* life you lead has nothing to make you grow. Quite the opposite: instead of making a world, you chew away at what others have made.”

So you’ve told me, Ben thought. Now, about the alien father you never told me about...

She glanced at him, her face smooth and impassive. “He’s offering you his standard deal: the world. Is that what you want?”

“Do I want the world?” He laughed. “Do I want money, a nice house, nice women, a car? Let me think.”

“You were thinking. You couldn’t decide. So here you are.” She spread her arms out, drawing his full attention. “You have small dreams, Ben. Small, young desires. Your father can cure you of that.”

Sounds good, he thought, except she makes it sound like a trap.

“But it’s not about your dreams, is it? Or about you?” She was maximum serious now, her face like polished mahogany, her eyes strong and persuasive. “One thing you learn around your father is that nothing is ever about you. There’s no room for that.”

“He’s already taught me some valuable stuff. Like English. How to pass tests. How to Tube.”

“Ah, so you’ve been in The Sky. Did you like it there?”

Whoa! She knew about that part? Ben looked at her with new eyes. That might explain a lot.

She waved a dismissive hand. “I went up the Tubes. I learned what I needed to know. I came back here to work. Are you that surprised?”

Surprised I didn’t figure it out sooner, Ben thought. “What did you study?” he asked. But he already knew.

“Healing. As many kinds as I could learn.”

“So I should do that, too? Grab what I want and blow off the rest?”

“If you don’t let him hook you in. Kairos always has something more to offer. Which means more to demand.”

“He wants me to go North. Go to college. Work with him to set up... I don’t know... a new system for the whole world.”

She nodded. “That’s got to be what he wants. It may be the reason you were even born.”

¡Caray! That was more than he’d bargained for. And did it mean he should take it? Or leave it?

Libertad stood up effortlessly and walked to the window. She came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his chest. His token resistance shattered and he felt the familiar surge of well-being in his mother’s touch. She stood motionless, just holding him tight.

“So what should I do, *Mamá?*” There was no point in playing games. He came here hoping she’d tell him.

Her voice came to his ear from behind him. “I can’t tell you what to do, corazon. You are his son, there is no changing that. But you can change who you are. Don’t let him make you do anything that damages that. Kairos is like a hard, changing wind. You have to learn how to sail against it. Without getting blown over.”

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Chapter Twelve

“Do they have toilets in this place?” Ben had seen any, but you couldn’t tell much about The Tubes without a program. He peered around Memon’s cunning cozy as if he might have missed a walnut door with “Gents” in stained glass.

Kairos was amused by the question. Of course. “If you feel the need...”

“That’s just it: I don’t feel the need. I’ve been around these places for months and I’ve had all sorts of teas and wines and those dumb little cakes and even a few big meals...but I never have to piss. Take a good old primitive Earth dump.”

“You don’t really have to eat or drink.”

“I figured that. But I do. Same reason you and Memon do. Its social, isn’t it?”

“Don’t underestimate the esthetic pleasure.”

“So... what the hell?” Ben pressed. Kairos dropped by to check up on him now and then, but never seemed to have any questions or points to make. He’d poke around Memon’s curios or try out some of Sporan’s new gadgets. Ben would have thought he was trying some awkward father-son bonding if he didn’t generally ignore him.

Kairos leaned back into the soft leather cushions and put down the scroll he been examining. He started to reach for a flute of golden wine, but stopped himself. “All right,” he said. “It’s suspended destiny.”

“*¿Mande?*” Another flaky curveball from the spin doctor.

“The Race came to The Sky by accident as much as anything else. We’re like people who moved into a train station. Or living on an airplane. Or something.”

Ben settled down in his armchair. Maybe they were finally getting somewhere.

“I can tell that you understand about the Tubes being a projection. Our minds create that illusion because we’re terrified of naked singularity.”

Ben nodded. He wasn’t entirely sure about the singularity, but got the idea.

“But where are you, actually, when you are slipping? You aren’t streaming through the stars wrapped in moonbeams. And not being scanned at one end and rebuilt molecule by molecule at the other, either. This isn’t a fax, it’s human beings. And hybrids, of course. Anything with a semblance of a mind.”

He ignored Ben’s dark look at that, rolled on. “You’re in hyperspace. Not in real space where there is matter and time. So of course you don’t age. You don’t decay, don’t defecate, don’t get pregnant, don’t even really breathe. You are here: your body is not. Just the persistent memory of your body. Your lingering impression of matter.”

Ben nodded. “It took awhile, but I figured that all out.”

“Good. Now what happens if you just stop? Don’t go where you’re going? Maybe meet somebody else in a Tube? Sit down and talk about it?”

“Is that what happens? Can there be traffic in the Tubes?”

“We slipped together, didn’t we? And now, while you’re sitting there... nowhere... you think it might be more comfortable to have a bench to sit on.”

Ben stared at him, wonder coming up in his eyes like false dawn. “And then maybe some paintings and a nice fireplace?”

Kairos broke into one of his rare open smiles, an intense flash of affable, boyish charm that took Ben by surprise. He reached over and slapped his knee, beaming. “Very good, son. Very good.”

He leaned back and reached for the wine, still regarding Ben with pleasure. “You’re sitting on a sofa woven from the fabric of the Tubes. I’m sipping some of it. We built a world out of it and moved in to stay. And it’s all in our minds.”

“*¿Asombroso!* So you’ve got infinite room to build and can do anything with it.”

“It’s the step our society made, up to another realm. Free from all constraints of energy and matter. It took us almost a century from achieving transport to figuring all this out and living in the Tubes. Deciding that the voyage is more than the destination. This where The Race really lives. Our home is The Sky.”

“Suspended destination.” Ben had to admit, when his dad’s curves broke, they always came right across the strike zone.

“In many ways,” Kairos said, his mood fading back to his usual cynical regard. “It’s more of a metaphor.”

“That’s what you were saying about computers.”

“Probably the most powerful metaphor available to your civilization. And I don’t understand why you wouldn’t be excited about learning all about them. Play games. Design games. Meet girls on the interweb. Music. Art. Sex. Technology.”

“Boring.” Ben was actually starting to get interested in computers, particularly the Web. But there was no point in letting on. “I’m not some gringo yuppie puppy in the suburbs, Pops. I smuggle people across the border. Do they have a video game for that? I get into cockfight pits and knife fights and whorehouses. Burgle stores and trucks. Buy and sell narcotics. I design my own game. It’s called reality.”

“It’s a cheap local version of reality, true. Well, if it’s not surrogate excitement, it can at least serve as an analogy.”

“Is that like one of the *pinches* metaphors?”

“You’ll see.”

“Great.”

“You can get a glimpse of it from here,” Kairos poured the last of the bottle into his glass and leaned back to savor it. “Is your brain a computer?”

Ben started to smart off, then thought about it. He had to admit, it was an interesting concept. He’d have to think more about it. He said, “Only my brain on drugs.”

“Yes, I’m sure inhaling gasoline improves your computational speed. But what about this...is your planet a computer?”

Ben stared at him, lost.

“Is the universe a computer? Are you a visual program being run by some user somewhere? A flash application in the hard drive of God? How would you know?”

“Go to school and learn?”

Kairos’ turn to stop a quick retort and think things over. Finally he lifted his glass in a minimal salute. “Very good. Sarcastic and counterproductive, but good.”

He set down the glass and leaned forward, garnering Ben’s full attention. “Most of what they teach you at Yale will be primitive, useless cowshit.”

“We say ‘bullshit’, Pops.”

“You see why avoid vernaculars. But you have to learn it because that world is you. It’s yours and you have to know it and own it. What you learn here in the sky will illuminate what you learn at the college, but it’s also from a perspective. Remember that. The Sky is a meta-world, in a way. You understand what I mean?”

Ben nodded doubtfully.

“It goes above and beyond your reality down there. It’s the big picture.” He leaned back again, holding Ben’s eye. “But it’s a world. And your world is also a world. Just like you are a person with your own unique perspective and worth. Does that make sense?”

“If I’m so unique and valuable, why send me to the factory to get to be like all the others?”

“Do you think that’s going to happen to you?”

“No. I guarantee it.”

“If I thought that would happen, this whole project wouldn’t be worth the gamble.”

“Wait a minute... ‘gamble’?”

“Life is a wager. To me, you are an investment. Which is another word for wager.”

Ben stood up and moved around the little cozy, touching various objects without seeing them. “So you think there’s a big money future in programming the universe and shit?”

“One thing you’ll be finding out is how something like that could work.”

“*¿Chingale!* That’s the fifth big project I’m supposed to be on. Aside from a few little things like all these examples up here and passing classes at the hardest school in the world.”

“Well, aside from unlimited time here in The Sky, you have six years to finish college, remember.”

“You mean four.”

“Graduate school.”

“Aw, shit.”

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Chapter Thirteen

His father had given him a quick, cursory glimpse at the Communal, but had not lingered. He hadn't said it in so many words, but Ben got the feeling it was assumed that he'd be better off not hanging out there. Which was like telling a suburban American kid he'd be better off not wasting time at the mall.

In fact, that's what Ben more or less thought the Communal was, a mall food court for blonds. His father had briefly mentioned that the function of the space was for the Race to gather and commune with each other, significantly showing him the igo, a simple square. But Ben saw it as a rec room where people mingled and hooked up. At least he thought that's what went on and was trying to figure out how it worked.

The layout was impressive, even from somebody who'd been in Azteca Stadium and the ostentatious Olympics halls in Mexico. He hadn't paced it off, exactly, but it was pretty obviously vast. The ceiling was luminous, but inset with huge windows that looked out into a night sky full of stars and colored dust. Somehow Ben didn't think that was quite right. If you were in the Tubes, you couldn't see out into real space, could you? But how would he know? It might be a movie for all he knew, like that Imax planets show at the Cultural Center. The ceiling looked domed, but if you walked a hundred meters towards the slope it was still the same height. You couldn't really see the edges of the room.

But it didn't matter because it was full of booths and walls. Not shops, exactly. More like places to show artwork and hang around talking and drinking stuff from these free vending machines. There were places where people sat and listened to other people playing music or singing or dancing. And in between the partitions were all sorts of tables, chairs, benches, cushions, big bouncy platforms, beds with see-through curtains. There were screens on some of the partitions, showing what might be movies. Sometimes screens appeared in the ceiling and showed enormous films. Ben couldn't figure them out though. They just went on and on, no point, no plot. Like somebody walking around with a camera on his head. He saw Menon lecturing on a screen once. There were some shots of naked women, but nothing interesting. Just women sitting around, talking. Sometimes large groups of people would move in unison, but he couldn't figure out if it was dance, a play, an exercise, or some sort of re-enactment.

What was interesting was just talking to people. He'd gotten over his initial discomfort of being in a large group of people who all looked alike. And didn't look much like he did. It was a towhead flow of white skin and blue eyes, slim and tall, beautiful and contained. He couldn't rein in his fascination with the women. Just all this blue-eyed, cornsilk stuff sweeping around him.

At first he had feverishly wondered if you could have sex in the Tubes. Permitted? Advisable? Possible? He'd decided to work up to that gradually. Start by learning how to talk to the girls here. He didn't have that completely figured out yet.

He'd tried sitting near one of the dispensing machines, looking friendly, but nobody had approached him. He'd never cared for safe approaches anyway.

So he'd tried just going up to a table and saying, "Hi, I'm Ben. I'm new here. Could you answer a few questions?" Mixed reviews on that one. He'd never been so conscious of his color in his life. He was the only non-blond in their universe and had no idea what that meant to them. He could tell that lots of these whiteys were repelled by his dark skin and hair. At one point he'd realized he could see right into their eyes, right into their heads. All they could see in his eyes was blackness. They're like somebody sitting in a lighted room staring out into the dark. It would make you more apprehensive.

Fortunately, he was finding, girls will be girls. Even weird Barbie-rella Swiss Family space girls. Some of them seemed quite interested in his novelty and led him into conversations without really getting around to asking obvious questions like, What the hell are you doing here with our kind? Or maybe they already knew? He couldn't figure out how to get to the questions that were bothering him, either. Like, ever wonder what color my dick is? Take the taste test challenge?

So he tried to stick to what seemed normal to him, like he was just some anti-albino visiting from another freaky mall in a nearby universe. One thing he was particularly interested in finding out about—aside from his own scientific curiosity about color, taste and configuration—was the devices like the one his father used to zap him up off the ballcourt.

But they seemed uncomfortable discussing them, evasive as if he'd asked Yale students where to buy a handgun. He tried to lead around to where you learn to handle them by asking about what these centerfold honeys were studying or Explificating or whatever. And couldn't understand most of the answers. Studying Arrangement? Polyharmonic? Olfaction? He was getting the feeling they were all bored. *Chin*, what a setup! All he had to do was get a better handle. But he'd have a couple of babes eating out of his hand, talking about cockfights or Carnival, then they'd just be gone like flushed quail and he'd try to figure out what he'd said. Some came back.

He was sitting with three girls he could barely tell apart, giggling softly and speaking solemnly as their white/gold hair swung around their faces. There was a guy in his twenties at the table, too, but he didn't say anything. Just kept checking Ben out like some sort of zoo exhibit. Then the guy looked up, over Ben's shoulder, and got a slow smile Ben didn't much care for. The girls clammed up but watched, fascinated. Ben turned to look and there was a guy about his age looking at him. A guy he immediately classified as the definitive, textbook example of a rich gringo asshole.

He was tall and blond with eyes so blue they looked fake. Athletic carriage, an arrogant attitude stamped right into his bone structure. Loose, rich clothing with an elegant drape. Superiority all over him: *chico de categoria*. He reminded Ben of the American kids who swarmed into Tijuana, absolutely sure they were from some higher, finer race, tossing coins to the local peons. Or worse, the spoiled Mexican juniors who plowed through the masses in expensive cars with impunity given them at birth by their father's stations. He also, though Ben didn't make the connection right away, reminded him of his father. Ben felt like bitch-slapping this clown on sight.

Ben played it cool, lounging back in his chair and crossing his legs. A man with no concern whatsoever. He looked at White Rabbit with a bored, amused expression that had driven some guys he'd faced in the past into rage. Didn't work. All he got back was the most supercilious look he'd ever seen. It wasn't even arrogant. He didn't rate high enough to get arrogant. He might look at a dog that way. Or a poorly made chair. Ben felt a warm rush into his stomach. Not his face, thank God.

The asshole pointed at him a toss of his head. Said, "I told you."

His buddies looked at Ben with as much curiosity as disdain, nodding. One said, "I didn't believe it. But here it is."

"I don't understand," one of the girls said.

"He was bred from the worlds," Blondie told her, with the air of telling somebody they'd almost been taken in a forgery scam. "Half human, half animal. Any offspring would have that dark hair and eyes until the human elements were wiped out."

The girl shuddered, but couldn't keep her eyes off Ben. Like she's looking at a body on the metro tracks, Ben thought.

"This is where that whole sort of thing leads," one of the sidekicks said, disgusted. "Wiping out light with darkness, contaminating the human seed."

The Ken Doll said, "Exactly. And now they've dragged this specimen up here into the sky."

"Seriously?" the other girl asked him. "How is that possible?"

"Well it's pretty obvious who made it possible."

Another sidekick said, "And who would have fathered this... experiment?"

"Quite right." His eyes were right on Ben's face. "There aren't that many of us who would drag our dicks in the dirt."

Ben's leg slammed down and he came out of the chair like an ejection seat. He would have taken Blondie at the midriff and carried him into the table behind while slamming hooks into the side of his neck and knees into his solar plexus, the sort of move that had worked so many times before.

Instead he found himself glued to a tabletop.

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Chapter Fourteen

Finding himself suddenly adhered to a table in the Communal “food court” affected Ben as it would have done anybody else, Trapped motionless, he looked around in confusion but still trying to bring the fight to his infuriating pale opponent. Then he was abruptly in mid-air, spinning around spread-eagled. Released, he fell into a cluster of chairs and small tables. He fought his way up out of the wreckage and headed for the smiling dickhead, who waited for him calm and amused with his smirking friends and titillated girls.

He lost it. His adrenaline surged, slowing down the world in a silvery sheen as had happened so many times before when he needed to reach down inside to win a fight. He threw a chair into Tullio’s knees and jumped forward for the uppercut smash to the throat, his left already coming around for the single-knuckle follow-up to the temple. Tullio fell forward over the chair, but snapped out a command in a loud, curiously inflected voice. Ben didn’t even hear what he said, but was instantly driven to his knees.

Tullio spoke again, something that was sort of like Lexus, but sort of not. In that weird, Oingo-boingo accent. And Ben felt his head go down, his forehead touch the ground. He was on his knees, bowing in surrender. His action rush curdled into a nauseating shame. He could only see the floor, hear Tullio and his friends laughing.

He heard a voice, somebody older, saying, “Masterfully done. But you shouldn’t use that here. ‘Not among folk and friends,’ you know.”

“He’s not a friend,” Tullio retorted. “He’s not even a person.”

Ben didn’t feel like crying, but almost wished he did. He couldn’t take this guy. He wasn’t up to any of this. He was alone and abused without friends, weapons, or the slightest clue. He gave up. And as soon as he relaxed, he felt control over his body again. He came to his feet and stared, trembling, at Tullio’s back as Aryan Youth Poster Boy sneered, turned, and walked off. His friends were praising what he’d done. Both girls glanced back, tittered, and moved closer as he walked away without even the good grace to strut.

He felt the crowd before he looked around at them: he was hemmed in by a pack of blue eyes. They were staring at him, backing away. Frozen faces and resistive body language. He’d been dropped in the middle of bored blond wonderland and had fucked it up. He’d had to take it and swallow it. He just wanted to spit. Instead he radiated calm as he walked to the row of termnos and got his ass out of there.

He didn’t mention the Communal confrontation to Puni, instinctively suspecting that fighting in The Tubes was a no-no and that he wasn’t even supposed to show up at the Sky Mall in the first place. But it came back to haunt him during his discussions with the dour exemplar.

Puni didn’t like the implications of what Ben was trying to riddle out and his expression grew even more sour than usual. “I am teaching the inner workings of representation logic. Not how to cheat people out of their credit or options. I thought you understood that.”

“Well, yeah,” Ben backtracked. “I just meant it has application to games of chance, you know.”

“I also thought you understood that games like that don’t involve chance. That’s what we’re examining here: the myth of random occurrence.”

“It’s not like I’d go cheat some gamblers or something.”

“Gamblers.” Puni’s face softened somewhat. “Gambling halls. Fortunes wagered in front of the eyes of women.”

“They have that here in the Sky?”

“Not at all,” Puni said, approaching something almost resembling a smile. “You haven’t thought that out, have you?”

He paced around the mind-jolting décor of his studio, obviously caught up in some line of thought or recall. Ben settled back in the chair he’d first thought was a window and listened to him reminisce.

“Before they shut it all down, I used to frequent places like that. On worlds, you understand. With your father. Our whole cabal of wild young men. But now we’re living up here in Illusion Central and there is no gaming. No sport.”

“Okay, I figured it out,” Ben said. “If you can teach people how to spot games, there’s no point in it. Like starting a fight.”

Puni nodded a fraction of an inch. “Yes, you don’t bet on boxing tournaments in a place where everybody controls combat and outcome. I always thought that’s a big reason why your father went the route he did.”

That had Ben’s full attention immediately. “What route? What was it he did? Nobody will tell me anything about him.”

“If he won’t tell you, nobody else will. I’m only saying that I think it was because he loves gambling. He’s a sport. He bet everything on the actions he took. Just like he’s betting everything on you right now.”

“Me? Betting on me to do what?” Ben was beside himself. Here was somebody who could fill him in on what the hell happened, what was happening, how he fit in...and he wouldn’t spill it.

“You. Your world. The whole thing he’s doing.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, what are you talking about?”

“Ask Kairos about your future. I’m talking only about the past. About his character. He’s a born gambler in a civilization where nobody gets to take chances.”

Ben stared at him, wound-up and frustrated. He started to speak again, but Puni cut him off. “I’ll say more than that. Kairos is a winner. Trapped in a life where nobody is allowed to win.”

Which Ben didn’t understand, but could completely relate to.

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Chapter Fifteen

“They’re old friends. For more years than you can imagine.” Kairos said, eyeing a group of young women fluttering around a floating tabletop nearby. “The exemplars you meet accept you for a reason. I am that reason, you might say. And that’s why they won’t tell you anything I haven’t seen’t tell you myself.”

Ben was having trouble keeping his attention on his father because his eyes were also flitting over groups of girls milling around the Communal. But he pulled himself back to the matter at hand, which was trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

He sat on a comfortable figure “2” of what felt like soft fabric, his arms resting on a table top made of polished wood with red and gold highlights. Which had looked like brushed copper when they sat down. He leaned towards his father, avid to know.

“Then you better tell me. What are you doing with me?”

“I’ve explained that. I’m educating you. It’s the first step in the project.”

“Oh, so I’m a fixer upper?” Ben’s frustration in being waved off from his father’s past and plans was seeping into everything he said.

“No, more like an intern. To be a project manager.”

“I’m going to manage a project? What, for you?”

“At first. Somebody has to take charge of things on your world. On the ground, so to speak.”

“Take charge of what?”

Kairos gave him the look of one addressing the slow-witted. “What I said. Your world. If I’m going to get things running.”

“I’m going to be in charge of the world?”

“For a start, yes.”

“*¡Hijo de la chingada putamadre!*” Ben stared around the Communal. The very impersonal bustle of the place backed up what he had just heard. This was like, Starfleet Command. The Earth was at best a remote and petty interest here. *¡Hijole!*

“I operate here. In this milieu,” his father went on, unperturbed. “You will run things down there. Where you live. Think of it as a grand game.”

“A big gamble, is what I heard. Why do you care what goes on in the real world anyway?”

“Because it’s what’s at stake here. Worlds, stations, ships. All parts of the physical world.”

“Well, I don’t...” Ben paused. “Wait a minute. Ships? Why do you need ships when you have those termno things?”

“For transporting large objects, for one thing. And, if you think about it, going to other worlds and building the termnos.”

“Oh, yeah. Which takes time, right? A long trip instead of just slipping over.”

“It can take decades to reach another system then do what is necessary to build and support a termno there. Then centuries to build an infrastructure out of nothing.”

“But when people are on worlds or ships or whatever they’re aging right?”

“Yes. Just as I age when I’m on a world. But there are people who like living on ships. Pinches yachtsmen.”

Ben glanced at him and he shrugged. “I like that word. It sounds nastier for some reason.”

“That’s funny,” Ben said. “I’ve been saying ‘fucking’ ever since I got to Tijuana because I thought it sounded nastier than ‘pinche’.”

“That’s what I like about worlds,” Kairos said. “The variety allows for personal tastes like that.”

Ben nodded slowly. “That makes sense, yeah. You’re a tourist, essentially.”

Kairos smiled, “Business as well as pleasure.”

“And the planets, like Earth. They got ‘seeded’ after the termnos were built?”

“Exactly. New genomes introduced from the point of the initial termno and spreading out through normal...intercourse.”

“So... what, you fucked the people who lived there before you got there?”

“We created the people there,” Kairos said firmly. “There is only one race. The human race. And various hybrids and dilution of the pure seed.”

“¡Epa! Hold on!” Ben was on the front of his chair over that one. “So what are we? We...”

“Were animals before we arrived. In many cases we created the animals, as well. Without breeding with The Race, the universe would be animals. The lowest common genetic denominator.”

“So you run around the galaxy fucking animals? Is that it?” Ben couldn’t identify the focus of his anger, and had a feeling it was leading him into a hole.

“We were exploring the universe, planting the seeds of humanity. That’s our purpose. Was our purpose. Will be again.”

“And this all has something to do with gambling?”

Kairos leaned back into his chair, which molded to accommodate his new position. He looked at Ben for a long moment and Ben felt his indignation ebbing away into the same confusion he’d felt since meeting his father.

“Breeding is a gamble. Wouldn’t you say?”

Ben nodded. No arguing with that. You try to get better *gallos* out of the flock, but you never know what you have until you strap on the knives and let them loose.

“We cast seed into the world and await the results,” his father went on. “That’s what I am doing right now. This very minute.”

Ben gave up. He was just going to have to glide along on this thing until he had a better line on it. He said, “Okay. You’re waiting to see how I turn out. I guess that’s the way it works for everybody, huh? So you don’t want to tell me what’s going on, fine. Can I get a clue about what I’m doing, like, tomorrow?”

“It is tomorrow, Ben. As soon as we step off a termno into Mexico, time starts again.”

“Back to Mexico?” Ben had mixed emotions about that one.

“And from there, we fly to Tijuana.”

“Tijuana?”

“So we can get to the United States. You remember the way, correct?”

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Chapter Sixteen

“So, yeah,” Ben told Nabo and Monke. “*Asi es la chingadera.*” They lounged on broken chairs out front of a pitiful bodega that was essentially somebody’s living room with chips and beer for sale. They had nearly worked through all the beer on hand and would have to move across the plaza to a bigger store pretty soon.

Like in the *telenovelas*,” Monke muttered. “The poor chick always turns out to have these rich parents who lost her.”

“Yeah, then she takes off her glasses and does her hair and suddenly she’s all fuckable,” Nabo agreed. “And Güero’s going to turn into some gringo suit driving a Hummer and voting to build bigger walls at the border.”

“It’ll give us a really good shot, *mano.*” Ben went in for another Tecate, used the cavity in the bottom of his empty one to twist the cap off the cold one. Nabo lifted his bottle and Ben handed him the fresh beer, got another one and opened it. “I don’t know how big it is, but it’s huge. And we’ll cash in like fat fucking fish.”

“You said you’ve already been studying a lot, learning English and shit,” Monke bored on in. “How to cheat exams.”

“Yeah. Quick program, you might say.”

“But you don’t have any more shit than you did when your papi showed up, do you? Just talk. And you’re going to some school where they have more talk, right?”

“I can’t see where it’s all going, but it’s already.... Look, I learned English. I could go get a job on Revu right now, hustling gringos.”

“Shit, we make more than that dealing chiva.” Nabo swilled beer, spit.

“Then why are we sitting here in this *cochinera*? Wearing rags?” Ben was getting a little pissed of at his *cuates*. It’s a break, assholes. Where’s the love?

“But I can see some of it,” he kept on. “I’m already better off and it’s only been...you know, however long it’s been.”

“A week since we’ve seen your ass,” Nabo said.

“And already... Hey listen to this.” Ben was excited about this thing he’d figured out from dealing with Puni and Skarba. “I’m learning a system for cheating at cards, slot machines... any type of random game.”

Monke wasn’t impressed. “Don’t they say they’ll send a free ticket to Las Vegas to anybody with a system?”

“I mean for real, *baboso!*” Ben snapped. What was wrong with these guys? “You saw what happened at the *cancha*. My old man is connected to real shit.”

His amigos were silent. They’d seen. And couldn’t work it out.

“I’m already learning to read right through the symbols. See the meaning pattern behind a card layout, the stock market. The more I learn...”

He stopped, thought a moment while they regarded him cautiously. “Pretty soon I’ll be at the point where I can take my *jefe* or leave him, you understand? And have some serious market advantage. A cushion between my ass and the street.”

Nabo looked up at him, holding his bottle at his crotch. “You know, I wish I had that, sometimes. A little padding between my nalgas and the pavement.”

“You do,” Ben told him earnestly. “You’ve got me.”

There was an awkward pause of the kind that follows young dudes making declarations of their feelings for each other. Then Monke, very quietly, said, “But you’re leaving.”

And Ben got it then. He laughed out loud, putting a little too much into it. He said, “Not for long, *cabrones*. I’ll be back to kick your butts in no time.” He knuckled Monke’s rough thatch and aimed a cuff at Nabo that got caught and turned into a painful hold. He grinned, helpless in his friend’s strong hands. Then Nabo released him and he straightened up, looking down at them, smiling. He lifted his bottle and heard the clink as if it were the chiming of church bells he wouldn’t hear again for a long time.

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Chapter Seventeen

The old *Señora*, rumply and bent-over in her moldy black widow’s weeds, peered up to smile at Kairos as Ben led him past the front porch of her crumbling clapboard house. Which surprised and impressed him: the old *Ñora* had been nothing but a typical rosary-counting, disproving old sourpuss every time he’d come with his buddies to maintain the Keep. Whatever Kairos had, it was apparently more palatable than the few dollars rent they’d been paying on her old shack out back.

Kairos looked around the rubble-strewn back yard and runcible corrugated shack as Ben popped the heavy-duty padlock off the door. His nostrils widened, then fluttered as they stepped into the dark space that smelled and clucked of poultry. Ben pulled a dangling string and a dozen caged gamecocks crowed their challenges as bright lights came on and rough-shod *ranchero* music blared from an enormous boombox. Kairos winced as Ben stepped over to shut off the gallop of noise.

“It’s for the Keep,” he said. “The light and noise makes it more like a pit when we’re training them. So they don’t get confused in the real thing.”

“Good thinking.” Kairos nodded absently, examining a caged *giro* that returned his scrutiny with a basilisk eye. “This one is quite beautiful, really. In a poultry sort of way.”

Ben laid down the packages they’d just bought in Wal-Mart and Dorian’s, opened the cage and lifted out the bird with gentle hands. He cupped its body, stroking the proud colored feathers. “Chupacabra’s my kill machine,” he said happily. “Eight wins, all against big odds. He’s been financing a lot of our business. It’s getting hard to find good odds against him. We had to go to San Felipe last week. Cleaned out some time share idiots. El Chupa took their bird out on his first strike. Just like that.”

Kairos poked around among the cock paraphernalia and bins of feed. “So the ‘Keep’ is a training period? Leading up a fight?”

“Controlled diet, controlled periods of light and darkness, vitamins, blood builders, exercise.”

Kairos peered at the splendidly plumed cock, breathing calmly in Ben’s hands. “How does one exercise a bird?”

Ben placed the *gallo* on the table and gripped its tail. When he lifted the tail, the bird flapped its wings furiously to keep from falling forward onto its beak. “Builds the wing muscles,” Ben explained. “That’s what powers their stroke, really. The feet strike up with the blades, but the real punch comes from the speed they’re flying into each other.”

He replaced the bird in the cage, tipped in a measure of grain. “So, yeah,” he said to his father, “I may not go to school, but I know a few things about breeding.”

“And you are saying that their looks have something to do with their fighting ability? Their beauty is related in some way to their ferocity?”

“Yeah, sort of,” Ben said, examining the breast down of a young Red. “I couldn’t tell you why or how, but there’s a connection. I look for that when I buy chicks. Look at the parents, you understand. Whatever their blood brings them out of the egg with, it’s a package.”

“It’s very good that you know that. Because you’ll run into a whole... cult... in the United States, in academic circles particularly, that thinks appearance is superficial and unrelated.”

“It’s bullshit. I mean, you’d breed different to get long silky feathers or something, but you can see a lot of the fighting ability at a glance.”

“Oh, I know. But at college you’ll run into other concepts of breeding. Biology, genetics, all that. In some ways very backwards views and belief systems.”

“Sounds like you’re going to get the most for your money.”

“Yes, ironic. But any education requires some sorting. I’ll guide you with that.”

He sure likes that “ironic” shit, Ben thought as he unpacked clothes and gear, laying them out on the table. “We can leave our stuff here,” he said. “Nabo and Monke are in here every day. Nobody messes with this place.”

Kairos still studied the strutting *giro* in the cage. “I see why Mexican men admire these birds. It’s a perfect match. They’re small in size, big in ferocity and mindless courage. Flamboyant, ready to defend to death an impulse not clearly understood. Sex and domination above all considerations.”

Ben stopped, a pair of Japanese binoculars half extricated from plastic and desiccant. “Are you sneering at Mexican manhood?”

“On the contrary,” Kairos said sincerely. “I admire it. I’m that way myself. But my life has been a history of understanding those impulses and channeling them into productive, controllable, less destructive channels. Which you people may someday learn.”

Ben cocked his head, trying to figure. “How do you channel *macho* into anything productive? Other than *huevos*?”

“One way is learning to remove yourself a little bit, step back.” Kairos gestured at the birds, “For instance, cockfighters don’t fight each other with knives, do they? They watch birds kill each other for them. Identify with it.”

That was a startling new perspective for Ben, as it would have been for any dedicated cocker. Slowly, he nodded. “Same with the National Selection.”

“What, football idols? Absolutely. That’s what champions are: people who fight instead of you having to do it yourself.” Kairos looked around once more, then started unbuttoning a garish blast of red shirt. “So you grow these things from eggs and they make you money. Very impressive.”

“Yeah, well, it kept us off the streets,” Ben said, laughing. “Let’s hurry up and get into costume here. We can’t go crashing international borders without dressing the part.”

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Chapter Eighteen

“They say you can see it from Space,” Ben told Kairos, immediately realizing the irony. His father just stared down at the wide swath below the cliff they stood on, a belt of featureless no man’s land between two fences. They could see across the estuary from the top of Goat Canyon, see the hazy skyline of San Diego in the distance, the graceful sweep of the Coronado Bridge.

Being back in Tijuana wasn’t the way he’d thought it would be. The whole place seemed tackier, dirtier, less important, smaller. How long before Mexico seems that way, he asked himself. How long before Earth seems that way? Maybe a place just seems different when you arrive in a jet. He motioned to Kairos and headed down the cliff. They both wore shorts, Hawaiian shirts, and sunglasses. Kairos had binoculars around his neck, Ben an expensive digital camera.

“We’re the only ones here,” Kairos said. “I thought there were thousands trying to cross.”

“At night,” Ben told him as they descended the rocky defile to the river valley. “We have an advantage. You’re the most *gringo*-looking wetback of all time. Just a couple of stupid bird watchers who got lost.”

“So people really come here just to watch birds?”

Ben pointed to a peregrine falcon circling over the river. “It’s a multi-use facility.”

“We could be terrorists or drug smugglers, couldn’t we?”

“Are we? Terrorists?” Ben slid down the last few yards of dust like a skier.

“Of course not.” Kairos did the same maneuver, cutting his feet elegantly sideways to stop beside him. “We are engineers of the future.”

“And terrorists aren’t?” Ben had been scanning the frontage road from the time they first got off the Playas bus at the top of the cliff. No sign of Border Patrol jeeps. They didn’t expect much action in the daytime. So far so good. He headed down the gulch toward the road, Kairos falling in beside him. He handled himself well for a rich *gabacho*. “Have you always been rich?” he blurted out.

Kairos chuckled. “Is that what I am?”

“Limousine. First class jets. First class hotels. Expensive restaurants in the Zona Rosa. The house. The gifts you bought Mamá and Ciel. Your clothes.” Ben hefted the camera. “A thousand dollars just for a disguise.”

“A local effect,” Kairos said breezily. Ben noticed he was scouting their route very competently as they moved. “And interest compounds nicely over a few hundred years.”

“Yeah, right. You started with a penny back when Christ was a *cabo*. Come on.”

“I would think it was obvious. I’ve been around this system for centuries. I know how things work. That’s really all you need to know to make money: knowledge and time.”

Yeah, it would be easy to know how things work if you built them, Ben thought.

“Think. What have you already seen? I can jump to the Sky and learn all about anything that happens. Come back instantly as an expert on horse racing or language or gambling or whatever. I know more about economics than the scholars on this world will ever learn.”

“Makes sense, I guess.” Ben said. “But it you’re so on top of things, why do we have to sneak over to *El Otro Lado*? Why don’t you use your super powers to get us a *mica* or *pasaporte* or something?”

“I thought I’d explained that. I haven’t been back long enough to accrue the layers of paper needed to cross frontiers in a place like this. Much less produce them for you. Once on the other side I can access....what?”

Ben wasn’t listening, his attention focused on the hulk of a burned-out Ford van shoved into the scrub at the edge of the gully. Kairos followed his gaze. Yes, there was something wrong there. Ben realized what it was: the smell of fresh feces and tobacco. But by then the four junkie bandits were stepping out of the van and heading towards them. Fanning out. Carrying clubs. One had an old-fashioned carpenter’s chisel. And he hadn’t brought his machete. Bird-watchers don’t.

The four thugs were foul and smelly with open sores on their arms and their heads scratched red from chasing lice. They rob *mojados* at night, Ben thought, but the passed out and decided to stay here. Must have robbed the *chiva* some poor wetback was carrying, gotten them through the day.

“I would have thought the Border Patrol could afford better uniforms,” Kairos sniffed. “And soap.”

“Very funny, Pops. You said you were carrying your magic twanger?”

“Yes, but...” Kairos shrugged and pulled the “trator” out of his leather fanny pack. He pointed it at the robbers, who stopped and stared in alarm. He touched a stud on the case. Nothing happened.

“Remember, I said the power was faulty here?” he said apologetically.

“*Hecho en Mexico*.” Ben nodded grimly. Facing toughs with a Mexican power supply.

The bandits laughed and moved forward. One said, “*Hecho un Mendigo*.”

Yep, we’re self-made idiots, Ben thought. At least he had his switchblade.

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Chapter Nineteen

The four *bandidos* closed in on them in a shrinking semi-circle. Ben ran toward the one with the chisel, his hand in his pocket, screaming. Just as he came within arm's reach he pulled out his hand, the blade flicking out from his fist. He dropped to one knee and slashed, his knife coming in under the man's guard and slicing deeply into his thigh.

He came up, pushing off the ground to slam his open left hand into the thug's nose as he bent to grab his bleeding leg. The nose burst into blood and the man went over backwards. Ben cut back with the knife, catching the fingers that gripped the chisel.

But one of his partners had closed around to Ben's side and grabbed his arm, trying to worry him to the ground while pounding his back with a piece of rebar. Ben kicked out, caught him on the knee. The junkie yelled, then screamed in earnest as Ben wheeled around and raked the knife across the side of his face. He jumped over the falling opponent to get some space between himself and the other two. He turned, panting, to face them, but they weren't showing any signs of jumping him. Ben squatted and tore the rusty bar from the hand of the sobbing punk. He took a step and threw it with a full body motion, like a baseball pitcher. The bar turned over twice before hitting one of the remaining *ladrones* in the chest.

Ben held his knife high out to his side, showing the blood on his hand and blade. He gave a blood-chilling whoop of bloodlust and charged. The two broke and ran. Ben stepped on the fallen chisel, picked it up and threw it after the running robbers. They were gone. He turned to the fallen, looking for signs of further opposition. None at all.

Charged with adrenaline and exertion, he ran to where Kairos had watched the fight, motionless. He yelled into his face. "Thanks for all the help, *pinche puto Papi!*"

Kairos ignored his mood, nodded in approval. He raised his hands and clapped them three times. "That was really exceptional."

Ben stopped, derailed.

"You did that very well, very smart. And struck them like a tiger, a predator. I'm very impressed."

Ben already saw his father as a manipulative fop who could possibly be milked. Now he was seeing him as a wimp coward who wouldn't cover your back. So he was astounded and humiliated at the sudden surge of childish pride that swelled up in his chest, clenched at his throat. Wriggling like a puppy at a father's praise. Disgusting.

Kairos stepped close and put his hand on his shoulder, a formal, oddly military gesture. "I'm proud of how you handled that."

Gulp. The conflict of proud warmth and self-loathing reduced Ben to shambles.

"Breeding always shows through," his father told him.

"Fuck you!" Ben exploded, jerking away. "*¡Chinga tu putamadre!*" His fists clenched in incoherent fury. "If I'm fucked it's my fault, if I pull us through it's because of you? Fuck you!"

Ben stomped down the gulch three paces, turned to see Kairos motionless, staring. "I'll tell *you* what breeding tells. Birds don't get their bottom from the cock, they get it from the hen."

Kairos walked towards him, motioned ahead. "Shouldn't we get out of this place pretty quickly?" He started towards the road and Ben caught up, still fuming. "What do you mean by 'bottom'? Not like 'buttocks', right?"

"Guts," Ben snapped. "Courage. Hang in. You fucking pussy."

"How did you learn to fight like that?"

"On the streets. In Mexico. Advanced course here in Tijuana. It's not something you study in a dojo, *wey*. It's TJ Fu, alley fighting."

"Very interesting."

"You want lessons?"

Kairos stopped. He scanned the gully and the road, then faced Ben. "Why not?"

"First lesson," Ben said grimly. He stepped to his father and slammed his open hand up under his jaw. His other hand was already coming in for a hook to the side of the throat, but Kairos fell away, the power of the blow translating into a backflip. His hands touched the ground, then pushed him up to stand erect two meters away.

Ben stared, his left hook hanging in mid-air. "Holy shit! Where'd you learn *that*?"

Kairos dusted his hands on the bright blaze of his aloha shirt, shrugged. "Any of us can do that. Gymnastics lessons, you know. Universal."

"Well, skip the lessons, then," Ben grumbled, turning back towards the frontage road. "Let's get moving." He realized his father hadn't been afraid to fight. Maybe he was just sizing him up. Or maybe he didn't like dirtying his hands if there was some handy Mexican to do the sweaty work for him.

¿Quien sabe?

Once they were a hundred yards down the road, moving into an area people would think of as "beach" rather than "border", Ben relaxed his vigilance somewhat. Once they were on the beach, bopping along with their cameras, they'd be fine. Ford the river, walk up to the Imperial Beach pier, grab a latté while waiting for the bus downtown. Catch a plane to New Haven. Whatever that was.

He turned his head so Kairos, walking single file behind him could hear. "So what happened to your magic iPod? How come you can jack me around and not those assholes?"

"I told you the power grid here is faulty. We're too far from the translator in Mexico City. The unit has power storage..."

"Batteries, you mean?"

"More like circuits, but yes internal power source..."

"Then why..."

"But I depleted the last of the charge demonstrating it to you and your hooligan friends at that ball court."

Ben turned to glance at him. "Why? Wouldn't it be good to have some reserve power in case, oh, say, some bandits attack you?"

"I felt it was needed. I wanted to convince you as quickly as possible that I am who I say I am, that you can believe what I think would be some pretty wild claims without proof. And I had to show you in a way your friends couldn't later convince you was all in your mind."

You can say that again, Ben thought as he strode along the road. A border patrol jeep approached them, slowed. Kairos waved cheerfully. Ben raised the camera and took a picture, smiled. The *migra* officers looked slightly embarrassed, waved lethargically, moved on without stopping.

Ben had put something together that he should have realized all along. "So I really am your big mission, here? More important than any of the other stuff?"

"My only real priority," Kairos agreed from behind him. "I can't save the world without you."

Ben stopped and turned, stared at him. Shit, you put it like that. *¡Caray!* "First it's just moving a few pyramids. Now you want me to save the whole damn world for you?"

"If you've nothing more pressing."

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Chapter Twenty

One thing Ben figured out as they strolled through the autumn ivy and distracted bustle of academia was: “This place is really old. Like hundreds of years.”

Kairos nodded, keeping a fancier’s eye on passing co-eds. “Founded in 1701 to be exact. Over three hundred years. They’ve kept it up nicely, wouldn’t you say?”

“And you were here, three hundred years ago?”

“No. Let me explain that my cluster formed the school. In the guise of conservative priests, I might add. And named it Yale because a rich man paid them to name it after him. Just so you get the idea.”

“Cluster?”

“Clan, crew, party, team... what you would call it. My people. Not quite related enough to be a family, but genetically similar and grouped for purpose. One of which was instilling a little humanity on this continent. To this country, which was also our project. As was getting the place “discovered”. We thought they’d never get that done and we’d have to discover it for them.”

Ben sunk into one of the brain aches his father so frequently inspired, eying the old buildings as they moved through the heart of the campus. “Your family founded the United States?”

“Simply put, but yes. So many of those “founding fathers” were larger than life for a reason. Role models, is how we would put it. Don’t look too closely into who started Mexico up, either.”

“*Chingao*. And you started this school to produce leaders?”

“Exactly,” Kairos nodded to a passing professor, who smiled back. “A great many American presidents went here. Most of the recent Mexican presidents, too.”

“But not the really great *presidentes*. Like Cardenas. Or how about Juarez? He wasn’t some college white guy, he was an Indian.”

“And came from the soil, like Lincoln. Perfect examples of what we were trying to produce here. They tell you in school that Juarez was wonderful, but maybe you can see enough now to realize what an incredible jump he was: from peasant hick to international statesman in a generation or two. Ever wonder how that happened?”

Ben stopped on the sidewalk, causing two freshmen to bump into him. He gaped.

“Ever wonder why you’re named after him?” Kairos went on.

“It just means...*benito*,” Ben muttered, getting sick of these revelations.

“Correct. Blessed. But it’s also an expression of hope. That you also become a statesman, a great man. A leader with his feet in the common soil and his head in the heavens. You are needed, Ben. These buildings around you are just a doorway to a great man’s future.”

“Holy *shit!* Stop doing this to me!”

Kairos winced theatrically. “It’s more than just wealth and power, son. We built this place to initiate certain human principles and instill them in the populace of the planet.”

“And you did a really wonderful job of it.”

“I know, I know,” Kairos made exasperated gestures with his hands. “The ideals didn’t hold up as well as the physical plant. But now I’m back to give it more attention.”

“And I also have to join this *calavera* club for some reason?”

“Skull and Bones. It’s a sort of secret society, a core within a core. Both Bushes were members, John Kerry...should I go on?”

Ben gave him a sour look, “Do you end up getting to anybody who isn’t a total fuckhead?”

Kairos shook his head, went into a satiric lecture mode. “Those men, seated in luxuriant wealth, fondling beautiful actresses, wielding world power, will be sad to hear you say that. I can hear them weeping, their advantages as ashes in their fingers compared to the opinion of a grubby, penniless street urchin.”

“Okay, okay,” Ben muttered. When he wasn’t blowing his mind, old Papi was a major jerk. In fact, he could do both at the same time.

“First step,” Kairos told him cheerfully, swinging open a brassbound wooden door in an ivied wall, “Is a chat with admissions.”

“Another one of those clerks with forms?”

“Oh not at all.” Kairos ushered him into a dark, carpeted hallway. Ben felt like he was wading hip deep in tradition, power and snooty money. “A cup of tea with the Dean.”

Ben and Kairos rested their teacups on their knees, Ben sitting at attention in his expensive new suit, Kairos lounging on the cordovan upholstery. It had come clear to Ben immediately that a lot of Memon’s ideas of how a study should look were picked up in offices like this one. Maybe this specific one. He also realized instinctively that this wasn’t so much an American creation as Old Country décor. England, he supposed.

The Dean was pushing seventy and done up in tweedy scholar drag that also looked like a major influence on Memon’s appearance. He wasn’t touching his Earl Grey, just peering at papers in a manila file. Not without certain question marks forming on his brow. He looked up at Kairos, then addressed Ben. “This is a remarkable application,” he said in neutral tones. He might as well have tied on a fishhook where he’d omitted the question mark. Ben nodded politely, tried to look like he was gracious about compliments.

The Dean took another tack. “Your SAT scores are virtually perfect.”

“I was surprised how easy it was,” Ben said earnestly. “It was like the questions just spoke to me, like a song I already knew.”

The Dean nodded. “That’s the advantage of a really superior grounding. It makes the world familiar. And you achieved this without any formal schooling.”

“I was schooled at home,” Ben said dutifully. “Private tutors with my sister. My father traveled so extensively as a diplomat.”

He caught Kairos’ eye before adding, “And he couldn’t stand being parted from his family.”

“Of course, of course,” the Dean said, finally picking up his cup. “We see that now and then. A much better education than most American schools, I’m sure.”

“With these scores. And these recommendations! My. And of course your family and Bones, too, you know. But that would have been before your time.”

“Ah, but your name lingered on.”

The Dean set down the cup, shuffled the papers into the folder and closed it with a definitive closure. “I can only say that you seem like an excellent prospect, Mister Kairo-Ochoa. And I think your choice of Morse College is a perfect way to continue in the footsteps of your father and his forebears.

Forebears? Ah. Ben realized that you couldn’t very hang around for a hundred years being the same guy at the same age. He manfully said, “Thank you sir. I’ll try my best to live up to this opportunity.”

The Dean picked up one paper he hadn’t filed, a rich embossed vellum stock with an elaborate letterhead. He glanced at Kairos, debating whether to speak, then took the plunge. In a lowered voice he said, “This is an amazing letter. How well did you really know him?”

Kairos gave him an opaque smile. “Let’s just say I’m one of those who will still admit to having been a close friend.”

The Dean looked at the letter again, shaking his head in speechless wonder. He carefully slipped it into the folder and beamed at Ben.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Ben tried inside, tried outside. Tried right up the middle. Between the legs, over the head, stutterstep, flatout cheating. He already realized he was never going to get the ball past this guy, but didn't want to admit it. Besides, it was fun. Ducking and darting out on the varsity field, sweating in the fall sun, getting his ass handed to him by the big guy from Hermosillo.

He hadn't needed to ask where the big guy was from: he had Sonora written all over him. You see a big Mexican athlete dominating in the United States and they're always from Sonora. Valenzuela, Najera. This Gallardo guy. Ben tossed his head and jutted his arms as he bounced back and forth, toeing the ball. The *grandulón* moved with him, like a damn dance instructor. Just when he thought he'd craftily juked him out and took a plunge past to his right, Gallardo just stepped on the ball...right where he knew it would be... and Ben tripped over it and fell.

He rolled over, laughing, and pulled himself up with Gallardo's proffered hand. "Had enough?"

Gallardo laughed, toed the ball back and booted it lightly into the air, bounced it off his head and caught it with one hand. "You play like a *Chilango*," he said, smiling.

"*Lo soy*," Ben said, brushing grass off his sticky skin. "*¿Y que?* I hope you don't play against Morse this year."

The big guy dropped the ball to one foot, booting it up rhythmically off his instep while he talked. Damn showoff. "Not intramurals," he said. "Coach doesn't let us. Not scholarship players, anyway."

"You're on varsity? That figures. Wait a minute...Yale has soccer scholarships? You're kidding. Why?"

Gallardo shrugged, idly hacking the ball from one foot to the other. "Well, you know *gringos*."

"Not yet," Ben said. "I'm just a sophomore."

"Well, they have to be the best at everything. Even shit they don't give a rat's ass about. You want soccer cups, you just go buy them up. So they bought me. But I think I'm going to get the best of the deal."

"I'm not so sure, myself," Ben said, pulling on his jersey. "But they're hard to figure. Half the time I think they'd have given me a full ride just to feel good about social justice..."

"And the other half you think they're waiting for you to bus their table and rake the leaves, right?"

Ben laughed. "You should be my counselor, not that constipated old Yankee who keeps telling me to diversify."

"I think most of us get a handle on *gringolandia* in about two years if we already speak the language. If you live on campus, you've already got the picture."

"Yeah, okay, things don't blow my mind as much anymore." Unless you count by father dropping by now and then, Ben thought. But he's not really a *gringo*, is he?

"Yeah, you're cool from here on out." Gallardo put the ball in a mesh bag and started off the field. "Except for one thing."

"I knew it."

"The women. You never get them figured out. They're just crazy."

"I think I see what you mean. I'm still researching it, though."

"God, yes. Crazy in a really good way if you can get your hands on them. Until you've screwed them about twelve times and the crazy bomb goes off."

Ben pushed open the mesh gate to the field and looked back at Gallardo. "So you put up with the crazy?"

Gallardo grinned. "I could be playing for Guadalajara right now. For a lot of money and all the *Mexicana aficionadas* I could eat."

"Eat?" Ben said, horrified and making frantic signs of the cross.

Gallardo laughed and nodded. "It's a whole different ball game here, *chico*."

Ben grinned and waved back at the big jock, dribbling his ball along the sidewalks, bopping it up to tap off with his knees from time to time. His control wasn't that bad, he was thinking, that Sonora guy was almost a professional, after all. Then the ball, and all his control, wobbled right into the street as he stopped in his tracks by what he immediately thought of as "wildfire".

She was standing under the boxy stone arches of the main entrance of the cemetery, looking out into the collection of impressive marbles owned and operated by distinguished members of the dead community. He cut across Grove, heading towards her with an impulse so involuntary and compelling that he didn't notice cars braking to keep from running over his oblivious butt as he loped across the street, drawn like a moth to a lamp, a ship to a beacon, a bull to the maddening wave of red.

She stood motionless in the wind, staring through the tombs, one hand on her hip, the other wrapped around a stack of books and folders. Her hair looked like it had never been motionless in its wild-tossed, gold-copper, sunfire-screaming life. In two years in New Haven, Ben had seen a lot of blondes and quite a few redheads, but this was far beyond that. This wasn't the henna of punk or the brassy dross of whores back home, or even the strawberry streaks and whorls he'd stared at before. This was an *incendio*. A flashing flame of godly fire Prometheus would have given his left liver for. This was friendly fire, cross fire, answering fire.

The sunrays wove through the firegold waves like dolphins through a wrack of surf. He stood stone-still, wiped out. His hand came up, fingers stretched out in an inchoate reach that despaired of any grasp, like a child's unbidden salute to a Christmas tree or toystore window. His lips were open. He stared like a retarded baby, like a *campesino* hillbilly seeing Carnival for the first time. Pledging an organismic allegiance to that bravely billowing mane. And of course she turned around and nailed him.

He was too fargone in admiration and wonder to react to being caught ogling. And set up like a stiff for the two-punch. Because her eyes were green pools: clear as jewels, wide as skies, deep as daring. Flashing though the whip of curly Rheinfire as she wrote him off as a clueless goggler. Her skin was whiter than any white girl in the world, dusted with freckles of little-girl pink. She was not of this earth. And she thought he was a jerk.

She snapped her head, tossing her glory behind her and striding past him through the gate. He turned, staring, not even smarting under the scorn. "Why don't you just take a picture," she said as she gave him wide berth. "I'll last longer."

She was three steps past him, looking both ways at the street before he blurted, "Because I want it to last longer than that."

She knew she shouldn't, but couldn't help turn to look at this handsome Latino gawker--if not stalker/rapist. She'd regretted the trite "take a picture" shot, and now she could only come up with, "What did you say?"

Ben moved toward her slowly, as if she might suddenly bolt or ascend into roiling gold clouds. "Pictures?" he asked her, winging his way across the minefield that he suddenly remembered lay between him and this vision. He wouldn't get lost in rapture if he kept talking. "What good are they, really? And you can lose them, you know? And anyway, they don't do justice..."

He saw dismissal surge up in her face and hurried on to wherever he was wrecking this train. "I just wanted to make sure I remembered it. Standing there with that hair... *Jesu Cristo*. Sorry, I was just... And then the eyes, too. Holy shit."

She clamped down on the smile that almost got away, rolled her eyes at him--like shooting a Vegas Green natural right off every wall in his head--and jaywalked away. One of the most closely-watched retreats in history. Ben played it back, saving and savoring. A new flag heard from. Sacred pools of icy emerald. Cinnamon spill of freckles down cleavage. He raised his fingers to his lips and blew a kiss after her. "*Adios, pecosa*." He'd learned that *gringas* are crazy and desirable in totally different ways than *Mexicanas*. But he hadn't really gotten the whole picture until right then.

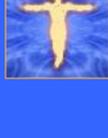
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Chapter Twenty-Two

Ben wasn't sure if he had the same latitude to question in a special seminar that he had in a classroom, but he'd come here for answers he wasn't getting in class so he raised his hand and hoped for the best. Ah, shit, Old Greybeard saw his hand, nodded his head at him. Careful, Benito, he thought. You're talking to Distinguished Author of, Winner of, et. al. His question sounded louder than he'd intended in the auditorium. "Yes, sir. Could you tell me where the white race came from?" And preferably in a simple, no-shit way I can pound right up my father's behind?

Uh, oh. He'd farted in church again. Distinguished Beard stared at him and things around were quieter than they should have been. Everybody in front of him turned around to look. *Ay, wey.*

"Everyone human, everything alive on this planet," the Distinguished paused dramatically and Ben thought, Sure, narrow it down like that. "All 'came from' the same origin. And the concept of 'race' is meaningless in scientific discussion. There are essentially no such thing as 'races' in humankind."

How about the Tour de France, Ben thought as he dug himself deeper. "Excuse me sir, but there obviously are different races. You look at me, at Waldron there." Three rows up, a cap of dreadlocks spun as Waldron turned to look at him, smiled and gave a "You're screwing up" grimace.

"Or," Ben didn't know the names of any of the paleface blonds he saw so he turned around. And there she was! The redhead! Right over there! Ambushing his Big Fat Debauch Moment, *caramba!* And she was looking right at him. And she smiled. Her eyes sparkled, seemed to say, We can't wait to see if you get out of this one, *amigo.*

Desperately, Ben looked away, pointed to a slender WASP, "Or Miss Cornwell, there." Where had he been going with this? Oh, yeah. "And you're obviously seeing what we call racial differences. So they exist. But..."

"Young man," the Beard said, in an oppressively not unkindly manner. "I assume you are studying biology? And are familiar with taxonomy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Phylum, gender, family, species," again with the drama queen pause. "Do you see the word 'race' in your texts?"

"No, sir. Just in front of my eyes."

"Plain Sight and Common Sense aren't science. Are they?"

This guy wasn't starting to get on Ben's nerves. It was just a simple question. "I'm not sure I understand. Are you saying that if a scientific classification system doesn't list something, it doesn't exist in the real world?"

"Son," the emeritus began ominously. "Oh, don't start that, Ben thought. "Son, I sort of believe that science *is* the real world. And if you examine the data describing the human genome, I believe that you will find that human variation is too complex to be categorized by one simple factor like skin color."

"It's not just skin color," Ben said sharply. "An albino Negro is still obviously a Negro. It's well, it's a lot of characteristics that occur together in some groups and not in others. And white people are all about recessive characteristics that you couldn't breed out of a chimpanzee or African in a billion years."

"There is no way that science can describe any division with homo sapiens that could be called 'race'," the Eminence intoned. "In fact..."

Ben broke in, shocking many, "Science can't describe beauty, either, can it?" Thinking about the girl behind him, the green eyes staring at the back of his head, Ben thought, But I can: flames dancing on milk around deep green holy *cenotes*. "I can't think you would say that if science can't describe something that it just doesn't exist."

The Distinguishator lined up the knockout shot that many in the room saw coming, but blew Ben's set entirely. "Race isn't a scientific construct. It's a sham dreamed up by slavers and perpetrated by racists. It had a place in the Nazi pseudo-science, but not in the real thing. Which, yes, describes the real world."

Ben's voice was low, but everybody heard what he said and immediately looked at the Beard in apprehension. What he said was, "Are you saying that asking a question at a college about a common observation is *racist?*"

From the back of the hall a single male voice said, "That's how you sound to me."

Ben was on his feet in a minute and turned around to face the upper rows. "Listen, white boy? You might not know where your blood came from, but I do. I'm Mexican: my mother is pure Mixteca stock. What we call *indio*. What you call 'Native American'. Kind of cutting us South of the Border types out of the continental pie, sort of like thinking you're the 'Americans' and we aren't." It was a piece of PC Judo Ben had learned created havoc in leftie academic heads. Call me a Nazi, *pendejo*, he thought.

On the dais, a faculty member had moved to the lectern. "Mr. Ochoa, sit down. Are you just trying to disrupt this discussion?"

"No," Ben snapped, turning back to the front. "I came here looking to answers to stuff in the face of somebody who's been telling me where white people come from. I hoped you'd have another answer. But you aren't giving it to me."

He started to move out of the row of seats, then stopped and faced the podium again. "So do you admit that breeds of dogs exist? Or is there no difference between a Great Dane and a Chihuahua?"

He got back strained silence as he pushed his way to the aisle and walked out of the hall. The Pops is winning this thing by default, he thought. Probably turn out to be that Bearded Butthead's father, too.

He told himself he needed to cool down, but didn't push it that hard. Sitting on the bench donated by some rich dead guy, chilling in the night air. He knew what he really needed was to check out that redhead again. And guess what? Here she came now. *¡Ujule!* Walking right up to him. Everybody else is avoiding eye contact. Except Waldron, who pointed at him, gave him a fist salute, then laughed, shaking his head. Messed that up, huh, beaner? But hey, she's coming out of the hall, down the stone steps, across to the bench.

He stood up and she walked right up to him, gave him the eyes. Yow! He birthed the soul of a sailor on sundeep seas, the arc of a diver. Amused expression peering out at him from the Rim of Fire. "Interesting questions. I hope you didn't get them from your Nazi skinhead pals."

A million riffs he could have run off that line, but instead he gaped. Infatuation at Second Sight. "Well," he fumbled, "I don't know that much about... Are you up on that stuff?"

She shook her head, igniting the yellow light from the streetlamps. "My anthropology prof told me I should hear the lecture. I've got to report on it briefly tomorrow." She grinned, a white gleam. He could never understand where *gringos* got those teeth. "Don't worry," she said, "I'm leaving you out of it."

"You know what's really messed up?" Ben asked earnestly.

And got a different answer than the one he'd had in mind when Matthew Stratton, a senior, fraternity officer, and varsity football jock, walked up to them, ignored him completely, and spoke to the girl he still thought of as Wildfire.

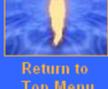
"Yo, Erin," he said. "It's like this. You, me, the Nantucket place, no parents."

She turned to face Stratton's blonde, expensively dressed bulk. "Look, Matt," she said, then glanced at Ben. She turned, leading Mr. First Down away from Ben. He couldn't hear what she was saying, but thought he could hum the tune.

Fuck it, he thought, walking off. Who the hell am I kidding? Redheads obviously come from the same planet as blondes, anyway. Puto Planet. He punched a historical marker as he passed. It hurt him more than the sign.

Behind him, Erin was popping into Stratton's face with the storied redhead spunk. "You just ruined a perfectly nice conversation with the only guy I met this semester who's got anything different to say and isn't a total tool." She turned, slapped his hand away from her forearm, and stalked off. She tossed her papers to the side as she turned and added, "And could have helped with my paper on Mesoamerican pyramids. I'm sure you'll be happy on Nantucket with a bucket of cheerleaders. Stay away from me."

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Chapter Twenty-Four

It wasn't like Ben was stalking the redhead. Who was apparently named Erin. Who was apparently named Erin McBride and went to high school in Connecticut and pledged Kappa Alpha Theta, though she didn't live in the house. So, okay, it wasn't like he *wasn't* stalking her, either. Just sort of happened to know her routes and when he might just happen to see her, maybe without her seeing him.

Which was almost the case when that Stratton dickhead showed up with his sidekick Hale, a guy who really personified the title Offensive Tackle. Ben liked to do some of his reading in the top tier of the tennis court bleachers these days. Where he could also watch Erin slam a ball up against the green wall at the end of the court, drilling in a pretty devastating backhand. Every other day, same time. Long white legs sizzoring under the twirly little skirt that flicked around her butt as she stroked, drove, turned, reached, all the lovely little moves of this really genial sport. And all under the cap of red curls popping out from under the white scarf and trailing her like a matador's cape floating over the horns in the most abstract of *veronicas*.

But it looked like the Beef Boys also knew her schedule and walked right out onto the court. Erin walked over to pick up a ball. That she'd just dropped so it rolled to where if she walked to it she'd have the net between her and the Bicep Twins. She turned to face them, which from that angle made it pretty hard to miss Ben sitting up there with his largely unread Chemistry book. And the court acoustics, oddly silent without the pock of the ball, made it hard to miss what they were saying to her.

"It's not some virgin sacrifice," Stratton was saying. "Just a couple of your Kappa sisters for a mixer. Kind of a blind quadruple date. Just ask around. Lots of your house might *want* to hook up with the team."

"Then why not go ask them yourself?" Erin said. "I made the mistake of pimping for you animals before. Never again. Leave me alone."

"Leave me alone?" Stratton mimicked in a snotty falsetto. "That's not what you used to say."

"So what did she used to say, Matt," Hale asked with ham-handed second banana phrasing.

"You know the sort of thing," Stratton explained to him. "Let me put my ankles up behind your neck so you can fuck my brains out."

"Suck my clit until it caves in my head?" Hale offered helpfully. "That sort of thing?"

Erin took a new stock of the situation. This was a whole new level of ugliness. What was going on with this pair? Stratton was a four-door asshole, but basically human. Hale was harder to classify. She said, "Always a joy talking to you, boys," and moved towards the side bench where she's left her sweater and racket case.

Immediately the two jocks shifted along with her, moving on the other side of the fence. Cutting off the run. Erin didn't like the looks of this. They weren't going to grab her right here or anything like that. But what were they trying to do? She didn't want to find out.

Neither did Ben. He'd heard enough to bring him to his feet and down the tiers towards a probable fight that he didn't have chance of winning. He wished he had his machete. You know who else would be good right now, he thought: Nabo. He had a three inch pen knife in his pocket and figured these guys might not expect it until it was too late. Trouble is they weren't just bigger; they were faster and quicker. And probably not as stupid. He was almost down to the court now. And she'd seen him. Here we go.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Erin had been deeply embarrassed that the Mexican guy from the lecture had heard what they'd been saying to her. But she couldn't let him walk into this. These guys were like gorillas with permission. She suddenly moved towards the gap between two nets, Stratton and Hale matching her move on the other side, looking at her with an avid, hungry scorn. She hoped she could time this just right. Oh, hell, what was his name? She approached the net supports racking her brain. What's his name? His *name*?

It hit her just as she got to the gap and the two footballers stopped, flanking it.

"Ochoa!" she called out in a pretty good imitation of carefree greeting. "I thought you weren't going to show up."

Hale and Stratton turned, following her eyes between them and squaring off to face Ben, who was approaching with his face set and one hand in his pocket. He stopped, startled by her greeting. Hey, she knew his name.

She plunged through the gap between the two athletes, bubbling, "Sorry, guys. Got to cop some lecture notes. Having a sorority pin doesn't mean you can get through without a little friendly cheating."

She had beat them by a hair and almost skipped over to Ben. He stared as she bounced up to him, grabbed his arm, wheeled him around and hustled him towards the gate in the chain link fence around the courts. I think we can beat them to that gate if we have to, she thought. And there's the padlock, hanging on the fence.

Hale and Stratton hadn't moved by the time they got to the gate, but she locked it anyway, leaving her sweater and harassers inside. She kept Ben moving away, though. When they'd gone a block and crossed a street, heading off campus. She looked at the Ochoa guy. He seemed so normal, but obviously had a dazzling lack of awareness of consequences. He hadn't spoken, so she did. "I'm sorry you had to hear those guys."

He didn't look at her. He still seemed pretty wound up. What was going on here? Sir Lancelot? Rambo? Fight Club? Finally he said, "I didn't hear anything. I just thought they were bothering you."

"I've known Matthew since we were kids," Erin said. "I'm past being bothered by him. He'll never change." But she wondered. He might be wobbling toward some scary line that ends up with headlines and hospital bills. She might be seeing some early warnings of steroid psychosis here.

"Oh, you never know when your life is going to take some weird twist," Ben said. "That's my experience."

She realized she was still holding his arm and let go. "Sorry for the familiarity. I kind of needed a parachute to get away from those guys."

"Why?" Ben asked, genuinely puzzled. "All you had to do was walk away."

"I hope you're right." She took another look at him. There was something about this guy that made her think she could be open, say things. He was an outsider, really. And didn't walk away from accepted dogma: she'd seen that. Or scare sensibly.

"I think I've been trying to walk away from him my entire life," she said, surprising herself a little. "People like him. People like me, I guess."

"You and he are the same kind of people?" He realized he had absolutely no idea what kind of people most people around Yale were. They were as alien to him as... well, no point in getting into that.

"His father and my father are partners. Or something like that but more complicated. We went to the same schools, he was my obligatory prep boyfriend." She glanced at him, saw nothing but incomprehension. "I mean almost literally obligatory. I almost got bequeathed him by our parents. It's not like they threw us at each other. More like fired us out of cannons at each other, like cereal."

"Yeah, I've seen that. One of our neighbors, that jerk Rodriguez, scandalized all the old *Señoras* because he got the priest to pressure a guy into making his daughter marry Rodriguez' son. I think maybe half the marriages you see in the *Gente* sections are because of politics and business connections."

Now Erin felt like a cultural outsider. But she stuck to her own story. "Well, the parent setup thing just means I don't have to write it off to bad taste and judgment. And he was awfully cute and popular." She laughed, playing it all down with a hand gesture. "High school and parents. What else do college kids talk about?"

"Beats me. I didn't go to high school and barely had parents," Ben said. "Just friends. You know, my gang."

That intrigued Erin, and she knew right then she had to talk to this guy more. Homeless gang dropout? What was he, Eminem meets Ricky Martin? But for now:

"Well, Matthew was one of my biggest lessons in school. And I hope I've learned it. You don't have to take what your parents hand you. And you don't have to take who they hand you to, either."

Ben couldn't believe it. He had to talk more to this girl. It's like she was broadcasting right on his private band. He said, "Same go for friends?"

"What? How much do you take? I guess it depends on how good a friend they are." She paused, took a few steps. "Or how good a friend you are."

Ben took a deep mental breath, a few mental slaps on his mental cheeks. Okay, ready. "In a completely unrelated question," he said. "You want to get some coffee sometime? Or a beer or something? Go bowling? Knit sorority sweaters?"

"I sure do," she said off-handedly. Then pointed her finger around the campus. "But listen, if I'm trying to get away from them, why am I here, in this school that one of them told me to go to and I don't know whether I'm here because he pays the tuition or because I secretly want to be an alcoholic housewife in Darien."

Ben was having trouble taking all this in. Here she *was*! Walking along holding his hand! Cute little white dress, hair like an explosion of bougainvillea, hitting him with those coral cove eyes. *Talking* to him! She said, Sure. She wants to hang out! Whoa! Try not to blow this, Ochoa.

"Those are your options?" Good. Non-committal, progressive. Good Yale, gringo response. *Don't* mention that she could probably earn about three hundred times the Mexican minimum wage as a topless dancer.

"Oh, no. Let's see... I know some frustrated stockbrokers with degrees in French literature, some burned out social workers and teachers. A few CEO's out there. What do you think I should be? You're from outside this culture."

"You've got that right. I don't understand any of this stuff."

"Housewife? Career woman? Anarchist? 'Before' model in hair straightener commercials?"

Ben stopped in the middle of the footpath. She turned around and walked back to him. Much better, he thought. I can see her from here. "My name's Ben," he said. "Nice to meet you. And what I think, you should have your own shrine. The Virgin of New Haven. People come and light candles, cross themselves, pour a shot of tequila and sprinkle lines of cocaine, put coins in the pot, sacrifice a goat, crawl down the street behind your statue with their knees bleeding. But I guess they do things different here."

Erin sized him up. Well, hello Ben Ochoa. From stalker to artless admirer. I accept. "I'll bet you say that to all the girls," she said, smiling. She turned away, walked three steps cudgeling her brain for a movie exit line to sink the hook. She turned and called back to him. "And by the way, I'm not much of a virgin."

Ben stood watching her walk, swinging that cute butt past the trees and old ivy and faceless extras. Hard to be much of one with your ankles behind your ears, he was thinking. He would have loved to have said that to her. He could see her stomping off, but he could also see her laughing at something that risky. He could see himself talking to her, dropping things that didn't make any sense into those green wells and watch the ripples spread as they drifted down in guileless green.

He laughed at himself. You couldn't be friends with anybody so beautiful that looking at them made you want to tear off your clothes and do cartwheels in the grass. What I need, he thought, is a night of sitting around the Siete Yeguas flirting with sorry whores and listening to hours of nasal cowboys singing about treacherous women.

Instead he buckled down to six hours of homework. The stuff was getting easier.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

One nice thing about soccer, Ben thought as he dribbled past two of the hulking Sig Ep players, is that size doesn't matter. The Morse team must have been out-weighted thirty pounds to a man, but were doing all right. Unfortunately the Sigs also had more athletic ability. Most of them being varsity jocks. He and Waldron were the best on the Morse team, and had done a lot of coaching to bring their house side up to competitive status, but they were definite underdogs. So they'd just have to fudge a little.

He toed the ball to Justus, probably their weakest player, and ghosted to the left. Justus drew a concerted attack and faltered beautifully, as if intimidated. Then he heeled the ball back behind him, well-timed for Waldron, to sweep by with his dreadlocks bouncing and give it a powerful instep kick that got it to Ben at the sidelines. Ben had chosen this side because it put him straight up on Hale and Stratton, whose arrogance and size he saw as vulnerable points. They were waiting for him.

Ben angled to the outside, keeping up his speed so he wouldn't have anybody behind him. He was looking to pass as he rolled in on the two bruisers, looking at them anxiously. He cut outside, faked back in. They separated just enough...

He caught Hale in mid-stride, booted the ball between his legs. His next stride landed right on Stratton's foot, pinning it down as he bent low and plunged by him. He almost made it clean, but Hale recovered and grabbed his jersey. Ben rolled sideways, diving. He threw his arm up, skinned out of the shirt and continued back to his knees, then feet. He reached the ball before the Sig wing, and bent it prettily through the goal.

Waldron ran over, slapping his back and laughing. He hit if off well with the slim black Senior, who had grown up playing in the Bahamas. A beach and sandlot player, like himself. Justus ran up, flushed and jubilant, for high fives. Ben turned and started back downfield, but almost ran into Hale and Stratton. They moved to block him, scowling. Hale threw his jersey in his face.

"Figures a spic would be decent at soccer," Stratton sneered.

The other players heard that, and drifted quietly into a ring around the three.

"Thanks, Stratton," Ben said affably. "I get so sick off these guys pretending not to notice I'm a beaner."

The other players from Ben's house looked at each other uneasily. Was this going to be one of those dreadful scenes?

"I'd like to see how you'd do at real football," Stratton said. "Not this sissy shortpants shit."

"You mean the one with all the pads and cages so you boys don't hurt yourselves?"

"What a dumb fuck," Hale rumbled.

"You mean you didn't play football down at Tamale Junction High, Benito?" Stratton had obviously been waiting to get to this. "Oh, that's right. You didn't go to school, did you? No records at all. Just swam the Rio Grande and here you are."

"How could you know any of that, Stratton?" Waldron asked sharply.

"I know," Stratton said. "Trust me."

"Oh, sure," Justus said, dripping sarcasm. "You're such a pillar of honesty."

"Come on, 'Ben', clue us in," Stratton rolled on. "How does a greaser dropout get the money to buy their way into an Ivy League school? Did you play for a cartel?"

"Nope," Ben told him brightly, "I mostly just pimped your mother to sailors. A cheap trick, but I made it up in volume."

Ben had underestimated the big guy's speed. The suckerpunch came in fast and hard. Ben managed to twist slightly, take it on the shoulder, but was knocked off balance. Then Hale stepped in and slammed a piledriver left to his stomach. He bent over, gasping for air and fighting the urge to vomit.

"There was no call for that, Hale!" Waldron yelled. "What the hell are you doing? You assholes pick on somebody your own size and IQ."

"Fuck off, Bob Marley," Hale said with a fierce grin.

Stratton leaned over to get in Ben's strained face. "Never badmouth my mother, punk," he said. "And stay away from my woman."

The circle of players didn't like it, but vacillated, waiting for Ben's response. He caught his breath, straightened up. What he saw was Hale and Stratton fronting a line of gringos, all staring at him.

"So that's the way it is?" he grunted. "I thought so." He held up his index finger in a "just a second" gesture. He wheezed, "I'll be right back." and stomped off the field.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ben blasted into his dorm room, slamming door against the walls. And stopped in his tracks at the sight of Kairos sitting on his bunk, hefting his machete.

His father looked up mildly. “Hi, son. Looking for this?”

Ben’s sheepishness didn’t override his anger. He stood silent, glaring. Kairos eyed the blade curiously.

“A curiously brutal weapon. Even for this world. Businesslike, isn’t it?”

“It’s really more of a farm implement.”

Kairos showed bored distaste and let the blade drop to the bed. “Farming? Preposterous.”

Ben was in no mood for this David Niven shit. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ve been keeping a fairly close eye on you, actually. Fatherly duties, you know. Especially in likely trouble spots. I witnessed your one-sided confrontation with the *quirol*.”

“With what?”

Kairos spoke with exaggerated patience, raising his spread fingers to the side of his head like antlers. “You know, *quirols*? Big, stupid animals with three horns?”

Ben gaped at him, distracted from his whole tantrum with Stratton. “Is this some sort of game or test or something?”

“Oh, wait,” Kairos said, his eyebrows moving together. “You don’t have those here, do you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then...?” He snapped his fingers. “Of course! I remember now. Sorry.”

He stood up and walked to the window, peered out through the blinds. “Keeping so many worlds separated gets confusing. That’s why you need to develop your mind now, catch up with flown time. You’ll have far more to deal with than these other students.”

“Great. I can barely keep track of what they’re telling me now.”

“Or even, apparently, the simple and obvious principle that you are living in civilization now, such as it is,” Kairos turned his full cold, pedantic style on him. “You can’t slash your way out of things here. That’s over. You understand?”

Ben stood rigid, his jaw tight, but couldn’t argue.

“What works here is politics,” Kairos went on, still chilled and aloof. “You are learning how to get people to follow you. To do the right thing out of respect for you. Not because they’re afraid. And certainly not because they’re dead.”

Kairos paced across to Ben, standing still and sullen in the doorway. He hesitated, then touched his shoulder in a awkward attempt at affection. “Don’t worry, Ben. You’re going to do fine. Let me show you something now. Come.”

He breezed out the door. Ben turned and kicked his dresser; He strode to the bed, his hand sliding onto the handle of the machete. He looked back at the door, then out the window. He hovered a moment, then leaned over, stuck the blade between the mattress and springs, and followed.

The apartment was no big deal, actually. An efficiency two bedroom of the “grad school roomies” variety with worn carpeting, mismatched appliances, defeated-looking furnishings and walls repainted so often that the corners were rounded coves. But it was enough to blow Ben’s doors. A real place of his own! He lived here! He rushed around checking things out in a daze. You could see the commons out the window. *Too* cool! But wait a minute...

Kairos was standing there in the doorway, flipping two keys on a cheap realtor’s chain and regarding him with a flat look.

“Mine?” Ben asked. Kairos nodded. “Why? What’s the catch?”

Kairos tossed him the keys, which Ben grabbed in one hand. “There’s your catch,” he said with a thin smile. “It’s a quick walk to campus. It does suit you?”

Ben loosened up and let his gratefulness out. “*Chin*, Pops. It’s great. But I thought I was supposed to live in the dorms to bond with...”

“You will live in the dorms,” Kairos told him evenly. “But you also need this ‘town house’ because you have certain special needs. One of which is privacy. Especially...” He opened a closet door and stuck his foot inside. Gridwork glowed on the floor. “...To operate your equipment.”

Ben moved close, looking into the closet. “Holy shit! Is that a termno?”

“Your no-frills, portable model. No end of trouble to acquire.”

“Waaay cool. But hey, wait. If you can do that, why can’t we just...”

“Good thinking,” Kairos nodded. “But this one is very weak. One person at a time, extremely local in effect.”

“How local?”

“Limited to this continent.”

“Oh,” Ben said. He longed for the day when his father couldn’t shut him up just by explaining some major offworld weirdness.

“Also,” Kairos went on, a man apologizing for a product’s defects, “Since there is no decent planet grid, it must operate on electric power from the civic wiring system.”

Ben examined the grid. “I don’t see any cord or plug.”

Kairos laughed. “What, a hundred volts?” He pushed open the door to the spare bedroom. “We have to step it up a bit.”

Ben stared in awe at a high tech transformer the size of a dishwasher, sitting in the corner of the room.

“The demand on an antique system like this is enormous,” Kairos explained. “The financial cost of a slip is immense, but more important: it attracts attention. So this is not a way to traipse down to Mexico for a taco, you understand?”

The superior, lecturing tone was back in his voice and manner, putting Ben off. “I understand. Gee, what can I use it for... ‘Dad’?”

Kairos ignored the sarcasm in his tone. “Well, for one thing, you’re late to class.”

“What class? It’s Sunday.”

Kairos smiled and motioned him onto the termno. He handed him a card to study, an igo with a stylized image of a pair of horns. And said, “Physical education.”

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

When Kairos appeared on the termno behind him, Ben was studying the severe, Spartan room. It was all dark wood, lined with hard benches. Elaborate plaques engraved in Lexus hung on the walls along with odd carved symbols that seemed African in cast, perhaps religious fetishes. The effect was a strange mixture of peacefulness and quiet menace. A door, padded in canvas, ran from floor to ceiling.

“What is this place?” he asked. It looked like a monastery waiting room.

“It’s a studio,” Kairos said. “This is not like the other Exemplars you’ve met. I would suggest diligent respect.”

“Oh, you bet,” Ben replied airily to annoy him.

Kairos smiled and stepped to the door. “I suppose you’d call it a ‘dojo’.”

“Cool!”

But what was behind the door wasn’t white Zen walls and tatami mats. It was a large, circular room with a battered, medieval look. The low ceiling was vaulted, looked like rattan. The walls were scarred, marred by suspicious-looking dark stains, and festooned with strange weapons. It looked like a Dark Ages bearbaiting pit where Vikings and ninjas held meetings.

As Ben sized it up a deep rumbling sound came from behind the wickerwork, the warning growl of a really big animal in a really dicey mood. Ben slapped his hand to the nape of his neck, smoothed down his hair. He turned to Kairos, fighting his alarm. “What the holy hell was that?”

Kairos laconically pointed to a section of wall opposite, which swung open to reveal an eight foot tall, barrel-chested, bull-man with hooves the size of soccer balls, biceps like basketballs, a rank and matted pelt, wickedly curved horns a yard from tip to sharpened tip, great steel bands on his wrists and ankles, and a bronze ring in his nose as big around as a softball.

“Oh, Christ,” Ben said, not even ashamed at the high tremor he spoke with. “What the fuck is that thing?”

It turned huge, baleful eyes on Ben and stepped forward. He felt a weakness in his legs, a slackness in his bladder, an urge to jump behind his father. Worsened by the hot lick of shame at having felt them. His life in the streets had taught Ben to hide fear, and he’d come to believe the mechanisms of hiding it were an actual fearlessness. One look at this big hairy, reeking monster and his ruses ran off and left him naked.

The bull thing scratched its wild chest hair with surprisingly slender human fingers and spoke in a deep, pleasantly resonant voice. “It’s been a long time, Kai. You look well.”

“Thank you, Master. And you look...well...”

“Couldn’t find my comb this morning.” The monster laughed like a rock crusher and Kairos joined in. Ben just turned his brain off and sat there with his nerves jangling.

Kai stepped forward and held up his forearm, crossed across his face as if to ward off a blow. An enormous, hairy wrist in steel gauntlet came up and crossed with his. They knocked their arms together. Kairos turned and inclined a hand towards the mountain of musky hair and said, “His name is Minator. Master of Movement.”

He waved a less respectful hand at Ben. “Master, this is my son.”

Minator, Exemplar of Conflict, glanced dismissively at Ben. “And not the only one, I would imagine?”

“Who can know for sure? But this one is interesting, whatever he might look like. He’s my wife’s boy. Born on *Delpe Sapt Oragi*.”

“Ah. Understood.” The beast crossed its arms on its massive, vaulted chest and peered at Ben without much reaction. “And I am to give you back a man.”

Kairos did a half-bow that was both gracious and ironic. “If you possibly can, I’d appreciate it.”

Minator stalked closer to Ben, who barely controlled the many wiser parts of his brain that were shrilling urging him to get the hell gone. He leaned forward, hands on knees, to bring his bull face to the level of Ben’s. His breath smelled like a circus, the odor of his hair would have driven a pack of dogs into suicidal psychosis. He inspected very closely while Ben put everything he had into simply standing his ground. Once we attain adulthood, we are not accustomed to being in the presence of intelligent beings that could just pick us up and eat us.

Minator grunted, which almost caused Ben to jump out of his shoes. He said, “Not an easy task.”

Kairos made an understanding moue. “Anything you can do.”

Ben didn’t say anything, just stared across eighteen inches into the eyes of a force of some nature far beyond his ken. Kairos waved lightly, bowed slightly, and walked jauntily towards the door.

Wait. Oh, God, wait. No. No. Wait. That was Ben’s overall concern. He stood motionless, facing Minator.

Who stood erect, peering down over mounds of pectorals. And said, “Before we get started, you can ask me a question. After that, you will just listen.”

“Thank you,” Ben said. “Uh, Master. How long will this training take?”

Minator snorted and Ben could feel the damp heat of it on his face. “It will take as long as it requires,” he said. “You wasted your question. Now, only for the sake of a trusted comrade, I will teach you how not to get injured or killed.”

Ben nodded. The guy said just listen and he was not going to push it.

Minator rumbled, “I don’t teach you how to touch, I teach how to avoid touch. I don’t teach how to hurt, I teach how to avoid pain. I don’t teach you how to move your body, I teach how to move the mind and heart.”

Ben nodded again.

“Good,” Minator said curtly. “You will sleep here, study in this room. Now tell me what happened the last time you came to conflict with another person?”

“Today,” Ben told him. “Two big guys knocked the wind out of me.”

“An unprovoked attack.”

Ben started to deny and elaborate, but quickly abandoned the idea. “I guess I did,” he said. “But they hit me first.”

“Just give simple answers to my questions,” Minator cautioned softly. “Now. Hurt me the same way they hurt you.”

Ben looked up past the bulging shag and said, “Well, uh...”

“Don’t take your fear seriously,” Minator said. “It has its uses, but it’s not in control. That is really my only lesson here: There is Nothing You Need Fear.”

He spread his arms, lowered his head. He said, “Show me.”

Ben threw his best punch at the Minator’s midriff, a meter across and less than two feet away from him. He missed. His momentum carried him to the floor. He rolled over and looked up at the Minator, standing over him like the Herculean Hairball from Hell.

“Now you know what to do,” Minator told him.

Ben got to his feet, saying, “No, I... What happened?”

“You already know. Your mind saw what happened. You only need to remember. You also know why it’s best this way. You will remember that, too.”

He shifted his looming bulk, feet apart, arms hanging loose at his side, forearms extended with palms facing outward, fingers down. He said, “When in conflict, assume this stance.”

Ben thought he was acting out, Who Me? Or maybe, What Can I Tell You? He carefully copied the pose.

“The posture is a message to the eye, mind, and heart of the other,” Minator explained. “It says that you are not afraid, that you want to understand and resolve. Your hands are empty and held out to them. You are ready to examine, compromise, suggest. You will remember that you actually mean all these things, because they are the attitude of a civilized human being towards the conflicts that arise. If you understand me say, ‘Yes, Master’.”

“Yes, Master,” Ben said.

“Good,” Minator grunted. “Now take off your clothes.”

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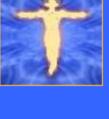
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Chapter Twenty-Nine

The Minator attacked, rage in his monstrous bull face, thundering across the floor bent over; hooves pounding, huge arms reaching, horns tossing. It was a sight to evacuate many a bowel, but Ben stood calmly, waiting in the Minator stance.

At the moment of impact, he moved his hands subtly, shifting his body without moving his feet. There was a flurry of motion around him, then the charging juggernaut was past him, but already twisting for another attack. Which Ben parried in the same way, avoiding contact, facilitating transport of mass.

Minator stopped, stared fixedly at Ben, struck the Stance, and flexed. Ben hung upside down from the ceiling.

He fell, but was suddenly spread-eagled against the wall. He rebounded, took the stance, rippled. Minator translocated a few feet to his right. Ben tried again. Minator materialized a meter above the ground, fell lightly. Ben looked at him, threw up his hands, smiling. The sound of polite clapping came from the doorway.

Kairos leaned languidly in the doorway, spectator to the spectacle. He walked towards the combatants, obviously pleased.

“Oh, I must say,” he said pleasantly. “He’s shaping up nicely. Minator, you’re a wonder on, well...hooves.”

Minator offered his forearm for the bumping salutation. “He has a long way to go, Kai. There’s something missing. A piece he holds out. But there’s always time in the clear blue Sky.”

Ben nodded to his father, almost a bow.

“Hi, Pops. Good to see you. I guess this means PE is over?”

“For now,” Kairos nodded. “You have a matter to finish up.”

“I do? What?”

“Forgotten already?” He tossed a despairing look at Minator. “No matter. Change and meet me at the termno, please.”

“Sure,” Ben said, moving towards the door. He stopped and turned to Minator, did a deep bow. “This has really been amazing. Thanks a lot.”

He pushed out into the anteroom, Kairos studying him as he moved.

“Not bad, Master. Not bad at all. He’s more reserved, more adult. More... what...respectful?”

“More watchful, less insecure. He needs to find out who he is.”

“I wish him luck on that one. But he’ll do for now?”

Minator looked at the door a moment, the great head lowered. He said, “I hope so.”

Waldron spotted Ben jogging toward the soccer field and yelled, “Ochoa! Where’d you go? The half’s almost over and we’re down by three.”

“Sorry. I had to deal with something. In fact...” Ben walked past the huddle of team-mates, into the Sig Ep team. He stopped directly in front of Hale and Stratton. He struck an odd pose, as if asking them what to do. Nobody knew what to make of it. Least of all the two jocks.

“I came out here to play ball,” Ben told them in even tones. “Not playground bully games. If you want to play, let’s play. If you want to fuck around, tell me when and where.”

A faculty referee strode briskly to the knot of players watching the face-off. As he pushed through the players, Stratton said, “How about a real football game sometime, asshole?”

Ben laughed. “Why? You can’t even keep me from scoring in this one.”

“Break it up ladies,” the referee barked. “Stratton, Hale. I don’t want to see any more of that bush-league crap like in the first half. There’s no stupider, more self-defeating way to lose your football eligibility than assaulting another student.”

He snatched the ball from a Morse player and slapped it. “Now let’s keep everything in bounds. That goes for you, too, Ochoa. Shall we play now?”

There was frivolity and horseplay in the steam of the showers, jubilant naked college boys rollicking around in triumph. Waldron punched Ben’s shoulder. “Way to hang, Baby. I couldn’t *believe* that last goal.”

“It’s all about using your head,” Ben “modestly” maintained.

Somebody shouted from the mists, “Got to use it for something!”

Another called out, “When they said you gave good head, I just assumed...”

Justus stepped up to Ben, dripping. He looked startled, cried out, “Hey, wait! I just noticed something!”

There was a second of silence, then he yelled, “Ochoa is Mexican!”

After an almost imperceptible beat, there was a chorus above the din of pounding water. “No way!”

“Shut up!”

“Are you sure?”

Ben laughed delightedly. “Hilarious guys. Look, I didn’t mean...”

Waldron squatted and squinted at Ben’s naked crotch. “My God, Justus, you’re right!” he exclaimed in wonder.

Ben hid his pleasure at this initiation. “Fuck you, freaks!”

Justus blinked at him, wide-eyed. “If you did, would we notice it?”

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Chapter Thirty

“So this sort of thing actually *can* be done, you know, down there. In the real world?” Ben couldn’t understand why Minator didn’t see his point. He was hot to persuade, but the towering Exemplar was gradually easing him out of the studio into the anteroom.

“You consider life in the dirt more real than the life of the Race here in the Sky?”

“*Bueno...*” Ben paused. It was always a little nervous contradicting Minator. But he’d learned to be forthright. “Yeah. It’s a real world. This is a fantasy. Or something. You said so yourself.”

“So is your world. You’ll come to understand that.” Minator rumbled as he continued to subtly edge Ben towards the termno. “Or you won’t.”

“So why can’t you teach me how to do that trick you did in there?” Ben would have given his favorite testicle to be able to translocate like that, walk in a sphere that tossed aside anything in his path.

“Think about it a minute,” Subsonic undertones indicated Minator thought it unlikely he ever thought about anything. “How would that appear?”

“Awesome!” Ben enthused. “Totally *chingon!*”

“It would look un-natural.” Minator paused, giving Ben the eye. He held him like that for a moment, then said, “There is a way to act in the dirt, and another for the Sky.”

Ben nodded humbly, then was blitzed by another train of thought. “Wait a minute. There are fights in the Sky? With that stop-action Kung Fu stuff?”

“No.”

“Oh.” He was sensing one of those areas not to probe, but couldn’t help it. “Well, why not?”

“Because we are all equal. Everyone has the same power and validity. It’s done with the same skills we use to live and move, to make our world. We all know it, do it equally well, like your people can all... I don’t know... walk or talk or whatever.”

“So nobody could beat anybody else?” Ben couldn’t decide if that situation inspired or sucked. “Hey, then why study it?”

“So we will all be equal.”

“Ah. Okay, I get it. Sure.”

Minator subtly moved Ben towards the glowing termno grid, obviously tired of the conversation. But another idea hit and Ben turned to him, puzzled again.

“Then how about you? If everybody’s equal, why are you the master?”

“Look at me. Feel me.”

Ben looked, felt a sudden rush of his initial inner panic at the sight of Minator. He said, “Okay, I get it. You’re the man. The warrior.”

“That’s not a good thing,” Minator intoned. Ben nodded piously. Martial arts types always came off with that humble, peaceful Mr. Miyagi bit. He’d seen the movies. He’d also realized that Minator was sick of having him around and pestering him. He was about to make a respectful farewell when he felt the whuff! behind him. He turned around to see the same Peroxide Ken from the Commons standing on the termno.

The guy nodded to Minator, then saw Ben and stared incredulously. “What,” he asked in a demanding tone, “Is *that* doing here?”

Before Ben, even with his street-honed reactions to insults, could reply, Minator snapped out a syllable that resounded the room like the report of a cannon.

“HE!” Minator thundered, “Is the son of a trusted comrade?”

Ben looked at the Minator, gratefully surprised, then at the newcomer, whose superiority collapsed like a cake too soon from the oven.

“YOU,” the Minator continued in the same tough tone, “Let me remind you, are the son of someone I regard with suspicion. You may actually be my enemy. We’ve been through this.”

Ken Doll slumped, lowered his eyes. Ben loved it. Minator continued in what for him was a moderate voice. “I accept you in my studio because you are gifted and conscientious, irregardless of your family. The same applies to all my students. Insulting any among them is an insult to me. Hardly respectful.”

In a neutral voice, the blond kid said, “I ask your pardon, master.”

“And it’s given,” Minator said simply. He pointed. “Tullio, this is Ben. Ben, this is Tullio.”

They nodded to each other with the minimal effort they could get away with. Minator stood, huge fists on his slim hips, regarding the two for a very long moment. Then he spoke in a totally neutral tone.

“Let me remind both of you, if you meet again, that one thing I will not pardon is violence among my students. If anyone can follow my example without learning to manage conflict, there is no point in their continuing. You understand my meaning.”

They both nodded, rather unnecessarily, Ben thought. He would have loved to stick around and find out more about this meeting. And he was sure there was more to it. But he’d worn his welcome out even before this Tullio *manequi* showed up, so he bowed his head and stepped onto the termno and into the clamoring stink of the Mexico City metro station.

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Chapter Thirty-One

Cielo stood against the layers of political and musical posters that coated the walls, a small figure in the largest metro station in the largest city in the world. Her hands fluttered up the neck of her guitar while her clear, sweet voice soothed the chorus of an old folk song from Spain that had been resurrected as Mexican “*trova*”. She already thought of herself being in the *trovador* tradition: not just a singer, but a carrier of messages of oneness and persuasion to the peoples of the Earth. The milk can at her feet was showing that people in the subway tunnels of Mexico either approved of her message or of pretty girls with nice voices lightening their trudge through the echoing chaos of the metro.

She noticed Felix’ guitar when he walked up, but paid little attention to one more wispy-bearded college guy with *Buki*-long hair and a Zapatista T-shirt. Until he unlimbered his guitar, predictably covered with stickers for Manu Chau and Mano Negra and Chac Mool, and stepped in beside her. She looked askance at this liberty, but kept singing. He fit right in with what she was doing, adding fills and runs and grace notes to her chords. His playing was entirely different, warping notes like Santana or something, but he laid down a lead line that complimented her vocals. On an impulse she finished a chorus and stopped singing, just playing the chords. Immediately he picked up the central tune in his loose, long-lined style, bending strings for a bluesy sound against her simple acoustic chords. His solo drew applause and when she started singing again, and he fell back into his twisting second lead, the approval soared and money rained into the milk carton. Cielo was young and not experienced at public performance, but she knew when to smile, bow and take a break. And pick up the money before some skate punk whizzed by and grabbed it.

She didn’t even consider getting into anything with the older boy, though she highly admired his guitar work. She stooped quickly, grabbed the tip can and started to hustle off towards the trains. But Felix said, “*Oye*. Fair’s fair.”

Cielo stopped and looked back at him apprehensively. He didn’t seem like much of a threat. A skinny leftist, probably from a welfare dorm at UNAM. Kind of cute. She said, “What do you mean, fair?”

“I played, too,” Felix pointed out. “Brought in some *plata* on that last song. Shouldn’t you at least spare me a few pesos for two cups of coffee?”

Embarrassed for not thinking of that, Cielo pulled out some coins and held them out. She couldn’t just drop them on the filthy metro tiles. So she waited while he walked up, put them in his hand. He pocketed the change and stepped closer with a winning smile. Uh, oh, exactly what she’d tried to avoid. Being hit on by men in the subway.

“All I’m interested in...” Felix let that hang a minute watching her apprehension. “Is fair division of wealth. That and the blues.”

Dividing wealth was obvious enough from his Zapata shirt, Ché pin and “*Chinga el gobierno*” jeans patch. But what was this “blues”? Was that what he’d been doing? So she was hooked.

“What is it? Blue?”

Felix’ face lit up and he hefted the guitar, started strumming twelve bar, Delta blues chords. He spoke to her over the music. “Well, it’s gringo music, but it’s actually from the *negros*. Like that folk protest stuff you sing, but from slaves. It’s music of oppression, but human spirit turns it into something beautiful. I’m in love with it. Listen.”

He picked a solo line out of the chord structure, bending and hammering strings, doing some slide on the topstring with a wide ring on his left hand. Cielo was fascinated.

“That’s really... different. Where’d you learn it?”

“From records. Guys who’ve been around.”

“Do they have *letra*? Can you sing the songs?”

“Yeah, but not so well. Not like you, *kena*.”

The compliment pulled Cielo back from her interest, flooded her with shyness. She looked around for a clue, started edging away.

“But I could write some down for you,” Felix said quickly, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out the coins she’d just given him. “I think I have just enough *lana* here to buy us some coffee.”

Cielo laughed, then walked towards the stairs instead of the trains. Felix caught up, strumming a blues in E7 as he walked beside her.

“Yes, I’d like that. I like learning new things. That music is so, what, alien.”

“Happy to share it with you. Oh, hey, I’m Felix.”

“I’m Cielo.”

“I believe it.”

They cut through an alley, too wrapped up in their mutual discovery to pay attention. Like to the three *Transito* cops shaking down a tattered Indian couple selling hand-picked curative herbs from a blanket on the sidewalk. The cops noticed them, though. The combination of Cielo’s innocent looks and Felix’ rebellious outfit drew them off the herbalists, to cut the kids off and move around them. Almost before Cielo was aware of the men around her, they had bullied her and Felix up against a wall.

“Excuse me,” Felix said with exaggerated politeness, “But you...”

A short, stocky cop whose belly bulged over his gunbelt smashed him in the face and he fell against the wall. Cielo screamed but a taller *transito* with a pockmarked face grabbed her from behind, slapping one hand over her mouth and the other over her breasts. The other two cops kicked at the slumping Felix until he curled into a submissive position, cowering and whimpering. They spit on him in scorn and turned their attention to the terrified Cielo who had dropped her guitar and was quickly losing her wits entirely. A mustached Sergeant gloated over her a minute, eyed the ends of the alley for stupid onlookers, then slapped her several times until she closed her eyes, shaking. The pockmarked man held her by cupping her tits while the other two tugged her jeans and panties down in one quick swipe. They laughed, pointing at her little girl cotton panties and sparse feather of pubic hair.

“Cute white *chones*! She’s a nice tender little pullet.”

“Not much rug, either,” the Sergeant offered. “A sweet little virgin here.”

“Well, you know,” the fat cop said, fumbling under his belly for his belt buckle, “There’s a sure cure for that.”

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Chapter Thirty-Two

Cielo squirmed briefly and futilely in the rough hands of the police, then subsided but choked and retched, obviously about to vomit. The pockmarked cop laughed and pushed her head forward, bending her over at the waist while playfully humping her naked hindquarters. The others stepped back to avoid the anticipated puke.

She snapped her head back violently, splashing her captor's nose into a bright spray of blood. His grip loosened and she snatched her father's bracelet off her wrist, uncoiling into a blade as she pulled it. She spun, slashing sideways with the knife. It took him right above the belt, opening him up. He went down screaming, arms wrapped around the big yellow lips that had opened across his belly with hints of protruding tongue. Like a can of spaghetti, crossed Cielo's fevered mind. And the stink of his guts hit her like some fetid demon.

Gagging, she continued her turn to see the fat cop frozen in shock. But the Sergeant was reaching for her, one hand on his gun. She stepped in, slammed the knife into his throat in a roundhouse sweep from the side. This time the blood came out like a ruptured fire hydrant, spewing on her as the man went down without a sound. She looked at the fat cop, rapidly reaching the limits of the fatal instincts her fear had fed her. She was sickened by the results, screaming inside from the horror of it. She saw him draw his gun and tried to stagger away, hobbled by the pants around her ankles.

As Felix lunged up from the ground, tackled the cop, bearing him down to the pavement. Instantly he was up, jumping on the cop's back, then on his head, driving his face into the cement tiles. Cielo stood with her hands in her mouth, the knife imprinting a bloody slash on her cheek, as Felix snatched the dazed cop's gun and shot him the back of the head. He quickly stepped to the other cops and fired into both of their skulls.

He stuck the gun under his shirt and moved quickly to Cielo, who he judged to be a hot second away from hysterics, knelt to grab her pants and pull them up. At her hips he paused a second, leaned in to plant a light kiss on her mons. Then pulled her pants up, zipped them, and stood. "You'd better come with me. Right now."

At the point of psychic meltdown, Cielo looked around the scene. Shuddering, she slapped the knife across her forearm, where it snapped back into a wrist bangle. She stooped to grab her guitar and prepared to bolt. Get away from these bleeding, stinking animals on the ground at her feet. She stopped, looked at Felix, wild-eyed. "Come where?"

"With me. I can already see you're one of us." He gently wiped the blood from her face with the hem of his T-shirt, retrieved his guitar. He looked her over quickly. "Good thing you're wearing dark clothes. It doesn't show too bad. Come on."

He grabbed her elbow, turned her and started walking her briskly away. Within three steps they were both running. Cielo called out as she ran, "One of who?"

"Come find out," he said just as they reached the street. He stopped her, looked around the sidewalk packed with incurious passers-by. Then took her arm like a boyfriend and led her into a slow walk in the middle of the sidewalk. "Just walk, same speed as the rest. Keep your eyes at chest level. Hold my arm like we're lovers."

They walked half a block in silence. He could feel the girl steadying, losing the rigidity of fear. He could almost hear her starting to think, to sort it out, to start forgetting parts of it. She said, "That gun sure turned you from a sniveling wretch to Señor Take Charge."

Felix glanced at her and laughed out loud. This *chica* would handle it. It's so often the dainty-looking little things that have the real *cojones* when the teargas and batons start up. "It was just a pose," he told her seriously. "To make them think I was weak and helpless. So I could avoid damage, strike from their blind side. As you just saw."

When she didn't answer, he glanced at her hardened profile and said, "I wouldn't have let them hurt you."

Now Cielo looked at him. Skinny teenager telling her what he would have let three big, armed cops do. But somehow it wasn't ridiculous. She said, "Yeah, I saw. Thank you."

Felix shrugged. "The least I could do. They probably wouldn't have attacked you if you weren't with me. They hate us raggedy striker types. But you are the one who made the moves. You already know. Or learned damned fast. Were you really going to vomit?"

"No. But I could right now. Easy."

"Understandable."

Neither wanted to return to the tunnels, so they took a series of crowded, smoky buses. Cielo sat beside Felix, both of them leaning their chins on guitars held upright between their knees. Cielo was still somewhat pale, and she knew pieces of what happened would come crashing down on her for quite a while, but she felt calm and was making the smallest talk she could to keep feeling that way.

"I just sing in the metro for extra money. And practice. I'm a student, really."

"Well, you learned a few things today." So much for staying away from the creepy stuff.

"Let me see," she said, still going for the light touch she desperately wanted to maintain, "The blues. Pretend to be weak and scared. Shoot them after you stab them. Wear more secure pants."

Felix chuckled. Definitely all right, this *chava*. "You sound like you're all right now."

"*Mas o menos*," Cielo said, wagging her hand. "But not the same. I guess that's what learning does."

"I learned something kind of exciting, too."

"What?"

"That you have a beauty, silky pubis."

Cielo leaned away from him, studying him. She knew where he'd just gone, but didn't feel shy at all now. She didn't think she'd be so intimidated by men in the future. "No," she said, "That was just a pose."

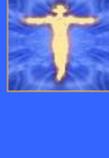
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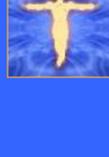
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Chapter Thirty-Three

Whatever Cielo had expected a welfare dorm to look like inside, “Dormitorio Popular Tañia Guevara” effortlessly exceeded. In fact, excess seemed to be a theme of the place. She heard the music before Felix pushed open the garishly painted door, a blend from several sources, including distorted boombox rap in Spanish and English, ragged political punk, and the sound of several bongos and djembes. After the door opened the music was all over her, as ubiquitous and irrelevant as a soundtrack. She stepped inside, staring at a dayroom blurred by dirt and smoke, furnished with collapsing throwaways, walls plastered with faces from Jim Morrison to skimasked Zapatistas. She got a quick impression of Alternative Hairdo Expo: dreadlocks, Beatles hair, purple crests, tattooed skinheads. And the smell of old wine, fresh marijuana, unwashed bodies, stale food, youthful enthusiasm. Young bohemians were drinking, smoking, eating, talking, exhorting: all with enthusiasm. Cielo drew glances, but no great interest.

Felix motioned and a young Rasta Wannabe approached, banged fists with him. Felix eased the police pistol from under his shirt and handed it to him. Without a word, the dreadlocked boy hid the gun and vanished into the crowd. Producing a large caliber pistol, one of the most illegal things to own in Mexico, had no apparent effect on the room. Cielo was arranging a graceful exit line when it hit her that Felix might have been right. She had a feeling maybe she was one of them. Actually it was a step by step process.

1. A large chalkboard served the crowded room as a backdrop and scenario for the intense lecturer in scraggly beard and steel wire glasses. As he harangued the seated students, he occasionally lashed a tense finger to the board, slamming into the chalked boxes of a complex flow chart that featured words like *IMPERIALISMO*, *NEO-LIBERALISMO*, *GLOBALIZACIÓN*, *NEO-COLONIAL*, *BUSHISMO*.

Cielo surrounded by older students who listened intensely, was a little dazed by the lecture. But she was taking notes.

2. The largest mosaic murals in the world looked down from the library with aplomb as another skirmish in the ongoing *huelga* unfolded with about the same amount of violence and indecision as usual. The state police were formed into a rigid line, but it was hard to tell what the line protected or what division it established. The strikers surged in front of the line like waves to a seawall, surging and eddying with motion, emotion and hand-lettered banners of generic political polemic.

The *huelgistas* didn't know it, but in about six minutes things were going to reverse themselves and it would be the cops who charged chaotically and the students whose flight was discrete and unidirectional. In the front row of strikers, carrying red and black flags, were Felix Carrancha, blues fan and experienced cop-baiter, and newcomer Cielo Ochoa, trying for Rookie of the Year. She seemed much less childlike as she waved a clenched fist and shouted angrily about the adamant, if unfocused, goals of the strike movement. Both kids managed to get out of the ensuing *desmadre* without serious injury. But found the afternoon extremely exciting at many levels.

3. Cielo's head hung upside down, dangling off a stained mattress covered with a pilled-up polyester blanket. Her eyes were closed, her breath came in ragged pants, her head bobbed in a rhythmic motion that suggested somebody was fucking her brains out. Lips slid down her breast and throat and Felix' head came down beside hers, kissing her throat. She threw her arms around him, then her legs. She thrust and yowled. Felix exulted in her. Rookie of the year.

4. The rather pompous professor wore a beret over collar-length hair, but couldn't pull it off. He was a square and everybody else in the huge classroom knew it. But they kept it to themselves. He expounded in a pathetic attempt to sound hip and useful. He actually used the term, “*Chido*”. He said “*no mames*”. And kept using a wooden pointer to connect words on the blackboard: *CAPITAL*, *MERCADO*, *BANCO MUNDIAL*.

Cielo held up her hand, scowling, but the prof ignored her. She came to her feet and he imperiously motioned for her to shut up and sit down. Incensed, she began talking loud and furious. The professor recovered from his shock and drew himself up, blustering. Cielo slid from the rows of seats and turned to the class, exhorting them in fiery tones. She stepped to the board and wiped out words with her sleeves. Replacing them with *GLOBALIZACIÓN*, *NEO-COLONIAL*, *BUSHISMO*. She was going over really well, too.

Not so the professor. His remarks were losing steam, drawing boos and heckling. Livid, he threw his pointer at the class like a javelin and stomped out of the room. Cielo yelled at him as he retreated, turned to lift her fists to the class, who applauded heartily.

5. The dais of the commodious conference room was draped with banners of the EZLN and three of the men seated behind the lecterns wore the black Zapatista skimasks. The wall also bore pictures of Juarez, Ché, Zapata, Marcos. More chairs on the riser were occupied by the Usual Leftist Suspects, determined men of toil, stolid *Indigena* women with stern looks and woven robes, slick PRD politicians, ruffled academicians. The rest of the room was packed with supporters, suited dignitaries to kids in camo fatigues, most sporting PRD yellow or red/black strike totems.

At the center lectern a bearded *imminence gris* of the labor agitation movement wound up his talk to fervent applause. He nodded, bowed, then waved a hand to the wings of the stage. Nothing happened.

Felix, wearing black slacks and a red shirt with black buttons, smiled, got up from his chair on the dais, and walked off to the wings. He returned towing Cielo, wearing a peasant dress, rural braids, her guitar and a bad case of stage fright. A renewed applause startled, then steadied her. She stepped to the microphone and adjusted them confidently. She ran an arpeggio up to a minor chord, then started to sing a song of field workers rising. They liked her much better than the grizzled veteran and showed it.

6. She was actually something more than one of them. By years the youngest of the striker/leftist coalition around her, she was starting to become a fixture, even a leader. She tried not to think about that. There was suddenly so much else to think about.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

His contretemps with that Tullio jerkoff hadn't so much changed the way he was accepted in the Communal as accelerated it. Those who had avoided him earlier practically scrambled out his path now, practically spit on his shadow. Not that there were any shadows in the even white glow of the place.

Those who had seemed intrigued by his differences were now fewer, but they were a lot more intrigued. And most of the intriguees were female. And young. The fight, if you could even use the word for such a shameful *fracaso*, was never mentioned. Except one time when he was alone at the table with a girl so refined and sweet she was melting his engine block just by talking to him. As soon as her friends got up and left she leaned close to Ben, an experience in itself, and spoke quietly, "It wasn't fair for Tullio to do that to you. He exploited his natural advantage." Ben looked at her, completely conflicted. She seemed to like him and take his side, but she also seemed to be saying he was inferior and shouldn't be picked on.

Before he could come up with an answer, she stood, shook out her hair like a gust across wheatfields, and smiled a goodbye. She took a step, then moved back. "It took a lot of valor for you to attack a man of the Race, but you shouldn't do it again. You can't win and people will judge you badly for it." She glided away, a rolling rhapsody of slim hips and long curves. Ben clenched his teeth, his fists, his guts, his anus.

On the other hand, she seemed pretty receptive. Maybe enough for him to find out what kind of shit you get into for hitting on "a woman of the Race." It was like everybody at the tables nearby read his thoughts, because they were all suddenly staring at him.

And behind him. He spun around, coming smoothly to his feet. To face Tullio and a group of his cottonhead admirers. He was smirking, daring Ben to move, bullying him into leaving. Ben glared at him, locked in place as he ran the calculations. He wasn't a dirtboy now, was he? He had some Minator time in and was more of a natural fighter than this simpering turd. But an attack would probably deepen the distrust of the Sky people. A win would probably ostracize him, a loss would make his balls shrivel up and disappear. And Minator had made it pretty clear that jumping off a fight would be the end of his training.

Tullio laughed at something his entourage said and made a dismissive shooing gesture at Ben, showering him with that superior fucking smirk. Ben's calculator came up triple lemons: Go for the Dark Side, Luke: it's worth it. But be a little craftier this time.

He stepped up to Tullio, looked up into that imminently smashable face and said, "You were strutting your pussy pretty big before, when you had a cheating advantage. Maybe you can work up the guts for a little rematch?"

Tullio looked down at him, smiled for a long beat, and said, "Why?" Then turned and walked away. His retinue laughed at Ben like a bunch of geese. Ben could literally feel the grip of his machete in his hand, envision cutting a swath through these pampered space-pussies. But they walked away, laughing and congratulating Tullio. He turned back to his chair, disgusted. His second helping of crow, both served by your smiling waiter tonight, Tullio the Foolio. *jCaray!*

The girl was back, standing beside the table. Ben stood by his chair checking her out. God know what this was all about. He picked up on people looking at her, at them. They couldn't believe she was talking to this zoo leper. She sat down very prettily, folded her hands on the table. Ben sat, too. Screw all the other eyeballs in the nuthouse.

She wasn't smiling or receptive. She was very matter-of-fact. She said, "It's not fair. You don't know anything, do you?"

I know a thing or two, *chulis*, Ben thought. But *nada* about your world. This little cafeteria in the stars. He said, "What can you tell me?"

She pointed after Tullio. "Do you know who he is?"

"He's a pansy who needs his ass kicked in," Ben said flatly.

"His father is titular counsel to the Lumen party."

"I'll make a note to be impressed." Ben saw no reason to kiss up to anybody in the room at the moment. So what if she had perfect tits and eyes like thumbnail summer skies?

"You are his natural... not enemy exactly... but everything they stand against."

"Let me guess, wetback menace."

"I don't know what you're saying," she told him. "I don't understand half of what you say. But you should know who he is. The future of Lumen. And you are Gravitus, just sitting there. Another future, maybe. Of course he's going to despise you."

"Gravities?" Ben asked. What new brand of shinola was this?

"You don't even know that?" She seemed completely amazed. And immediately seemed to feel sorry for him. He wasn't liking any of this and decided he'd be better off back at school. Or better yet, Mexico. He stood up.

"No. I don't know dick. I'm a dog off the streets sniffing around your nice kitchen here, looking up your skirts."

He turned and stomped off. After three steps he stopped, took a breath, and walked back to the table. One good thing, she looked like she was expecting him to come back. He said, "I'm sorry. You're really nice. You're the only one here who's human, as far as I can tell. And you're gorgeous. You're too much to hope for. Thanks."

He walked out of the Mexico City metro looking for tequila and a fight. Whichever came first

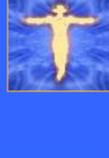
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Chapter Thirty-Five

"I guess this means you own the whole building," Ben said, staring down at the peculiar construct dominating the basement.

"Of course. You're too important a project to leave in the hands of strangers. Besides, I like to putter around the cellar."

Sure you do, Ben thought. On the other hand, the pyramid looked brand new. It also looked fairly small to do what Kairos said it would. Barely ten feet high in the thirty-foot cavern of the boiler room. And made out of *sheetrock*? He descended the iron ladder to the basement floor and walked over to the brand spanking new Cheops autograph model pyramid.

"So now we won't need the transformer?"

"No, this will provide enough power for slips. And power any other application in an area about the size of New Haven itself."

"Like concentrators?" Ben was dying to get his hands on one of those. Naturally.

"Yes," Kairos said. "As well as dimensional and transmutational devices. But as for your unasked question, no you can't have one yet. By the time you graduate."

"Gee, Dad, I'd settle for a nice convertible like the other guys in the frat." Ben tapped the white pyramid with his toe, trying to get a feeling for the designs that ran down its faces, cut off by the floor. "But yo, if this is big enough to put out that kind of power, why bother to move all the rock to build them a hundred feet high?"

"Tip of the iceberg," Kairos told him breezily, coming up beside him. "Energy doesn't work anything like you believe. Which is why you don't see it being pulled straight out of the field, the way these loci do."

He pointed to one of the designs, oddly compelling abstracts like the popular "tribal" tattoos. "There's no need to complete the design because this construct insinuates the existence of a much larger collector below."

"Insinuate?" Ben looked hard at the floor, which was obviously unbroken. "You're talking about the *idea* that this thing extends downward?"

"Very good," Kairos said cheerfully. "Energy responds to thought patterns, to . . . Forms merely point a finger that energy likes to follow."

"You realize how crackpot that sounds," Ben said. "And I'm not going to trot any of this past my physics profs."

"Not for several years," Kairos agreed in a serious way that made Ben nervous. "Have your learned professors mentioned anything called 'Maxwell's Demon'?"

"Yeah, we were talking about old Max last quarter. He tells molecules to go in one chamber or the other, so one chamber gets hotter."

"Exactly. Creating a heat engine. Energy from information. Which works the other way around, too, of course. The demon just stands in the door and points a finger."

"But," Ben stopped. He was getting into the mental stimulation/fogging Kairos always caused. "But you have to have the two rooms and the door, right? I mean, you have to have some sort of real objects and, you know. . . force."

Kairos shook his head. "Suggestion works better than force. A very, very basic principle of the universe. Also poorly understood by anybody you'll run into on this world. Except the ones who control it. Let me make an analogy."

Ah, crap, Ben thought. An analogy. There goes coffee with Erin.

"In psychology. . . regrettably the least understood 'science' here. . . they tell you about conditioning and association. You get this whole picture of little rooms and boxes getting rats to do things because they associate them with food or sex or drugs or whatever. Crude power plays. Suggestion is already there, and more powerful if tapped."

"More powerful than food and sex and drugs?"

"Most amusing. What the mind works on is closer to rhymes. To music."

"Like everything else to hear you and your example dudes tell it."

"You are having trouble urinating. You turn on the water tap, and everything comes out nicely. What experiment made that association? What complex operant re-enforcement planted it?"

Ben had a quick answer, but stopped. He could get a glimmer of this. You respond to most things because they invoke response, don't you? You don't have to learn to get a hard-on when you see a picture of a nice tit. Therefore, you buy a Ferrari instead of a Peugeot. Hmmm. "Okay, I see a little of this. But that's just in your mind."

"And energy is in its own mind, so to speak. It respects and admires symmetry, form, suggestion. So do genes, but that's a different topic for another day."

Well that's good news, at least, Ben thought as he regarded the pyramid. "Okay, so there's an idea in your head that this pyramid is huge. A virtual monument down there in the dirt. My mind, too, now."

"Your mind, too. Very important to these principles, yes."

"I still don't buy the idea that you can tap power out of that. Not that I ever bought the whole idea of where the power comes from in the first place. Or we'd be plugging radios into the ground."

"Will be." Kairos walked around behind the pyramid and pointed to a flight of narrow wooden steps set into the rear side. The designs flowed down on either side of them. Like snakes, Ben thought. Aborigine dragons. He pointed to the steps and said, "Please see if you can walk to the top."

Hey, if energy can do it, I can." Ben thought, stepping carefully up the white-painted two-by-six steps. They seemed sturdy enough. He stood looking down at the sharp point of the cap, decorated by a stylized eye on each side. Bright blue eyes.

"How high above the peak can you reach, Ben?" Kairos said. "Straight above the center of it?"

Ben extended his arm up, reaching into the imaginary line from the tip of the cap to the ceiling. Whatever this was all about. . .ZAP!

The jolt cracked across his eyes like a sharp, hot stick that spasmed his muscles, hit up a sparky sky in his head, pounded his ear like a thousand simultaneous gunshots, and HURT. The charge threw him backwards off the steps. He was too stunned to turn in the air, propelled by the sort of muscular reaction a two hundred volt shock can bring about.

Kairos effortless caught him and swung his feet to the ground.

His muscles cramped and tingling, his voice high from shock and scare, Ben whirled on him.

"You *asshole*! Why'd you do that?"

"So you would know. Not just pretend to believe what I tell you. To know." Kairos brushed Ben's jacket lightly, unmussing it. Then did the same to his own. "You can see for yourself that the peripheral charge is much higher than if this was a mere three meter pyramid."

"I can? How?" Ben was still jittered and still pissed. "I can't compare it to anything, can I? You shocked me for nothing."

"Sorry." As usual Kairos used the word with no sense of contrition. "But there is this: you know."

"What I should know is better than to do any more foolass crap you tell me to." Ben stalked to the ladder in a show of damaged dignity, took four steps upward, then stopped and turned, his curiosity overriding his irritation. "Wait a minute. If you can just think these things into putting out power, why bother to build big stone ones?"

Kairos applauded him silently. "Oh, very good. And while you're still in a pet over my instructional methods, too. It's because they had to last when there was nobody around to think about them."

And now you're back, Ben thought as he stared at his father. And thinking about things. And I get to think about them, too, even if it zaps my ass off. He clattered on up the steps, shaking off the residue of the nasty shock. He could still catch Erin if he hurried. He felt he was getting closer to something with her. Not sure what, but something major. Probably be a big shock when he figured it out. Story of his life lately.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

“Another question, Mr. Ochoa?” He gets about one more like that last lot and he’s off for a talk with his advisor, no error, the harried biology lecturer was thinking. And he’s got the other students doing it, as well. I should have stayed at Oxford where nobody thinks out loud.

“Yes, sir, thank you.” Ben was extra polite with this guy because he seemed to need it. Must be the British way. “This concept of ‘center of diversity’. I understand it as meaning the area where something first appeared, like the apple in the Caucasus, the potato in Peru, the *chile* in Mexico.”

“Correct. Your question?”

“And those centers usually end up showing the widest possible diversity of phenotypes. All these wild, different potatoes and *chiles* that you never see anywhere else.”

“What were you wondering?”

“So if mankind arose in Africa, why don’t we see this wide variation of types there? Why aren’t there blonds and Polynesians and redskins and Asian types?”

“Those are characteristics that were selected out by the environment. Actually you would find that other genotypic characteristics less blatantly racial are actually in greater abundance there.”

“So genes for blond hair and blue eyes were present in, like apes, but got eliminated in Africa but continued in Europe?”

“An over-simplification. But yes, environment plays a part in the selection process. May we continue here?”

“Sorry, Doctor. And thanks.”

Ben leaned back in his chair, not really hearing the rest of the questions and answers. He’d heard everything they had to say about it and it seemed like a tissue of fancy words to him. His goal to find scientific evidence that his father was full of crap was going nowhere.

The time he saw his father he decided to play it cool, learn what he could instead of trying to best him. Kairos leaned back in his seat, a silly green canvas director’s chair matching the green canvas umbrellas on the sidewalk. He motioned to the waiter for another espresso and made an approving gesture at his empty plate. “I’ve tried to come up with a theory on why the best cuisine on this world is Italian, Mexican and Chinese. They’re not even from the same clusters.”

That caught Ben’s attention immediately. He pushed his unfinished cannelloni aside and fixed on his father. “I thought your bunch did the whole planet?”

“Of course not. There were twelve seedings here, as there always are. Only five took hold. Only three of those really flourished into the present. The other clusters pulled out even before the Ban.”

Ben let that last word go. He was more interested in the “clusters”. He said, “So there are some basic differences between, oh, Asians, and I don’t know, Indians or Africans? Because of ‘seeding’?”

“The ‘Asians’ as you call them, were a project by another cluster called ‘Aynou’. Didn’t work out for them here. There are a lot of worlds that they totally dominated though. They are a very old group. Very shrewd people. Shorter than us. Makes them more competitive, I think.”

“Okay, who’s ‘us’? You and your *amigotes*? Breeding us up in like Norway or wherever?”

“Ah. Scandinavia. That was our very special project. You see, most of us like cold climates. We tend to like white, ice blue.”

Ben looked at his father’s pale eyes. He hadn’t noticed before, but the whites of his eyes were also a very faint bluish color. A sign of superior health and vitality, he’d been told by a boxing coach. The irises were like glacier flows in a cold blue sea.

“It was a special project within a project,” his father went on. “A sort of recreational area for Nyrdic tastes.”

“For what kind of tastes?”

“That’s what our cluster is called, didn’t I tell you? Nyrdic. We are the Nyrd people. It survives in your speech as...”

But Ben was laughing so hard it alarmed the other town/gown types in the trattoria. A waiter headed towards him, solicitous, pitcher of water in hand. Ben waved him off, but couldn’t stop laughing. Kairos waited him out, much less amused.

“So *you’re* the Nyrds?” Ben finally choked out, then was consumed in laughter again. “Planet Earth: The Revenge of the Nyrds.”

Kairos testily tapped his little cup with his fingernail. “I suppose I never saw the humor in it before. I still fail to, in fact.”

Ben shook an index finger at him, still struggling to control his laughter. “Forget it, Pops. It’s an Earthman thing.”

“I’d call it an impertinence,” Kairos said stiffly. “Meaning it doesn’t pertain.”

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

“Is that an impertinent question, Mr. Ochoa?” The linguistics professor was not tenured and generally rather insecure. His button-down Ivy look and carefully disheveled hair did little to dispel his feeling that he didn’t really belong and his students knew it.

“No sir,” Ben said respectfully. He’d gotten a glimpse of the prof’s need to be coddled. “It’s just something I ran across outside of class and it sparked my interest in the subject.”

“Of course I am familiar with PIE,” the prof said rather bitchily. “Proto Indo-European, for those who haven’t been sparking their interest outside the survey text.”

“So they were saying that it’s a sort of theoretical language that people spoke before it broke down into Latin, Greek and Sanskrit.”

“Conjectural. But sound. I hope this isn’t heading off into more of your science fiction fantasies. Or into the usual Tower of Babel mytho-babble that seems to grip sophomores who approach it.”

“No sir. But they do see this sort of proto Earth language, and all our other speech sort of corrupted down from it?”

“That’s the idea. It becomes a compelling idea when examined with better knowledge of the languages in question.”

“And the further they get away from the source, the less inflected they are? Like Spanish has less conjugation than Latin, and...”

“Yes, yes. You have a point Mr. Ochoa? Or even a question?”

“Well, I guess what I’m asking is that if evolution and history are this rise from simple cells and grunts into greater complexity...then why do we see language going the opposite direction?”

“We’re not talking about evolution in this class.”

“But we’re talking Devo here, aren’t we?”

“No, you are. You have a penchant for crackpot ideas that I’d warn you will not be helpful.”

“I figure that no pot is so cracked it’s not worth seeing if it will hold water.”

“I’ve noticed that, Mr. Ochoa.”

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

“I’d call it ‘overview’, actually,” Kairos said from out of a cloud of steam. “Not overseeing. You’re learning at a rapid rate here and in The Sky. I’m trying to provide you with a general view that organizes it all for you.” He ladled out more water from the birch bucket and they were engulfed in more steam.

Ben had liked the jacuzzi and steam rooms. He liked the sauna. His big impression from the faculty club was that professors liked to be cooked. So did Kairos, apparently. Not your usual ice-loving Nyrd. Ben could handle the steamy heat. He and Nabo had hitched to Chiapas in July one time. And it was actually easier talking to his father when he was hidden in mist. Another one of those *pinche* metaphors, Ben thought. One of which he was trying to unravel at the moment.

“So what you’re saying,” he spoke in the odd voice you pick up in saunas, “Is basically, Life Is But A Dream?”

“That’s an illusory concept in itself.”

“Say *what*?”

“Sorry, I thought you people liked having your cosmic messages wrapped in vague, contradictory half-messages like that.” Kairos wiped sweat from his pecs, idly slapped his abs, splashing sweat. He might spend all his time lounging around eating, Ben thought, but he sure stays tight. “What I would say,” he went on, “Is that life, or a dream for that matter, is no more illusion than anything else.”

“Great. I find the one guy who knows what it’s all about and he goes Zen Master on me.”

“Maybe those Zen masters know, too. And that’s why they talk that way.”

“How about just giving me the big picture? A quickie nutshell overview?”

“Of the nature of reality. Ah, to be a young student again.” Kairos dabbled his hand in the bucket, splashed his face. “Okay, here’s the one I use myself. You are a dream in the mind of a dreamer who is composed of all dreamers, including yourself, in the same way your body is made of cells but hosts cellular dreams.”

“Oh thank you, Yoda.” Ben stood up, but got light-headed from the hotter air at head level. He looked down, saw the dark imprint of his butt evaporating. He sat down again, and leaned over, forearms on his thighs, head dangling. “I was hoping for something a little more down to earth. Not mystic poetry slams.”

“It’s a more comprehensive way of saying this. You’ve seen what projection does in the Tubes, in The Sky. It’s no different here. You have billions of mind projecting the same picture, so it has substance. It’s not like two of us in the tube where I can just change things to suit myself. You have to get everybody on the same page if you want to make a mountain disappear or something. And they all have to believe it will happen.”

“So you can have, like, sorcery, in The Sky, but not here?”

“The difference is The Sky is more recent, more local. That’s why there’s so much etiquette on altering things. I’m sure you understand that.”

“Yeah. But you can do sorcery on this world with a concentrator.”

“Because it concentrates energy and will. That’s what it does. It basically moves minds. That’s what our technology is based on. Transportation is our only trick.”

“So if you concentrate enough energy and will, you can change reality?”

“Think about that a minute. How else is reality altered?”

“You know what I meant.”

“Yes, I do. Examine this: the amount of truth behind any given proposition is directly proportional behind the amount of energy and will it represents.”

“Then... Hmmm. Okay, I have to think about that one.”

“Please do, it’s a very central key to our environment. And here’s another one, tailored to your present experience. Reality is an election. What’s real is what has the popular vote. Can you change the vote with enough will? With enough energy? Money? Firepower? Scientific proof? It’s entirely a question of consensual projection.”

Ben stood up and walked to the door. “Can we get the hell out of this steam?” He opened the door and felt the cool draft from the locker room tighten his pores and shorten his dick. Kairos laid full length on the wooden slats behind him.

“You go ahead,” he said. “I could stay in here all day.”

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

“Personally, I consider the whole veneration of French food a short-sighted overestimation,” Kairos intoned. His dismissal didn’t keep him from taking obvious pleasure in his *Tripes à la mode de Caen*. “They are taken in by pretension passing for elegance.”

“Oh, God forbid,” Ben remarked straight-faced as he investigated his cassoulet. If just looked like *frijoles charros con chorizo*, was his initial impression.

Kairos glared at his sarcasm, but continued to eat and pontificate. “It’s all about trappings. Certainly as presented here in this country. It’s no better than Cantonese cuisine, and much less honest. Frankly I think it just borrows prestige from the wines.”

He sipped from the Pinot in front of him, nodding happily. “Which is forgivable. I’m sorry Mexico hasn’t developed better vintage. Maybe we can work on that in the future? As a sort of side project, you understand?”

“I’ll make a note of that,” Ben said. Actually, these *frijoles* weren’t bad at all. And that was duck meat? Where the hell did you go to buy a duck in his town? “I mean in our spare time between rebuilding the planet and restructuring civilization.”

“As usual, you are being...is ‘pissy’ the word here? I think so. At any rate, you’ll see that it all falls together. The overall project is composed of many small ones, some quite ordinary in their way. It’s not a wrecking ball sort of approach. More of an organic evolution.”

“Now that’s a word that’s starting to bother me,” Ben said between bites. Damn, this stuff was great. Just like Kairos to bitch about something as killer as these beans.

“Ah, yes. I thought we’d get to that.”

“Yeah, well, the wonderful school you hauled me up here for has ideas on that subject that are pretty much a total crock if I believe what you’re telling me.”

“I know exactly what you mean. But I doubt you’re particularly confused between what you observe and what they tell you.”

“There’s some areas I haven’t figured out yet,” Ben said. If those eggheads could give me something to slam you with, he thought. But they haven’t. “But there’s sort of an overall thing that’s got me doing a lot of thinking. It’s like ‘evolution’ is a religion. Like it’s the scientific alternative to God. Or maybe their rival God. Something like that. I mean, I’ve seen people with little Christian fish bumper stickers that say ‘Darwin’ on them.”

Kairos laughed as he adroitly speared a stray *pomme du terre*. “A religion of science. Yes, that’s what happened here. Most worlds that reach this point have evolved a balance between matter and energy, but here it’s a competition, no?”

“Yeah, but not really competitive around school. If you don’t think everything from day one to the opening of the first Walmart was a series of accidents you’re like a heretic hermit or something.”

“And they speak of their religious figures as a sort of accelerated evolutionary breeding, correct? Quick time creation.”

“Yeah. So anyway, I decided I should ask God about it.”

“Oh, I recommend it,” Kairos said, sampling a roll from the nice Provencal basket. “Since evolution is unavailable for comment. But since I didn’t have God’s cell phone number, I decided to ask somebody who thinks he’s God. Or plays him on television or whatever. So, what do you think?”

“That is so precious. Actually I would think the things I’ve told you, and not without evidence, would have settled a lot of that for you.”

“I guess what I’m wondering is...you guys didn’t build the universe, right? There was something here when you got here, too. Was everything just random chance before you showed up and started playing powerball?”

“Let me guess. They tell you it’s a game of chance. Random events that somehow stagger together to form a coherent, progressive thing called life, which organizes against the pull of entropy, even as it, itself, has risen against the thermodynamic tide?”

“Whoa.” Ben hadn’t been set for that riff, but sorted it out and nodded, reaching for more wine. “But yeah. That’s it. Random chance. Some big accident to start with, then everything goes according to chance, like a roulette ball.”

“Accidental combination over,” Kairos used four fingers to scrawl quotation marks in the air, a smirky gesture that poisoned anything he so framed. “...billions of years. Time becomes God, in a way. Organizing against chaos merely by providing all that opportunity.”

“Yeah. And personality develops the same way. Accidents in what happens when you do or think different things. The mind, the universe, the race, the world. They believe that with a really hard line of faith, like martyr zealots down in the *pueblos*.”

“An infinite number of monkeys would eventually type all the works of Shakespeare.” Kairos frowned, thought. “That’s this world, right?”

“Yeah. Infinite monkeys. Everybody believes it. I don’t, but I can’t prove it. Unless you can get hold of the monkeys and set them up somewhere.”

“Like most sophomore sophistry, it has an initial appeal. The very ‘wrongness’ of it lends it charm.” Kairos carefully wiped his plate with a roll, looking a bit downcast that there was no more to eat at the moment. He sighed happily, then looked back at Ben. “Do you also have trouble with the concept of an infinite number?. It’s sort of like dividing by zero.”

“I prefer the term ‘an endless shitload’.”

“Not surprisingly. So our infinite shitload of monkeys would eventually... does the word ‘eventually’ also bother you in this context?”

“Now that you mention it. If you’ve got infinite eventually, why not just use one monkey?”

“Good. And if they had pianos instead of typewriters...” Kairos shuddered. “Well, so far we’ve been spared that. The thing is, it’s important to realize that these smartass ideas, even though they can’t be rigorously disproved, don’t hold water and aren’t useful. You instinctively feel the holes in them.”

“Exactly. I don’t believe they’ll type anything but an infinite amount of garbage.”

“Good instinct. And I’ll come back to the word you used...belief. But why would the monkey school not produce literature?”

“Well, that’s why I’m asking you about this. I can’t really put it into words. But it’s like...there has to be some system for the model to work.”

“Excellent. Ask your mathematics professors about this, by the way. But yes, Shakespeare was organized, the monkeys aren’t. You can’t win a chess game with random moves even if you play an infinite number of games. There is blind luck...and there are systems. The temple of my wisdom is a place in Nevada called Las Vegas. Where *à la mode* establishing my base of operations, by the way.”

Las Vegas? Ben shrugged that one off, this other thing had been on his mind and he didn’t want to get sidetracked. “Yeah. If an infinite number of monkeys played slot machines...”

“Actually I think that’s precisely the principle that has achieved such wealth with in that city. The chimps could play. They would hit jackpots. But would they win money?”

“No. They’d lose more than they won. You’re right, it’s almost like they have a laboratory to test it.”

“Well, they also have a system. And to get to back to your word...it’s a matter of belief. Quite apart from smartass tricks like infinity and zero and immovable forces. There is also what I’ve heard called ‘the seat of my pants’. I have no idea why?”

“Because when it comes down to it, that’s what you bet you ass on.”

“Ah, you’ve already learned it, then. And the more you know, the more intelligently you bet.”

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Chapter Forty

“Okay, so we project things.” Ben said reasonably to the hiply aging prof in front of a projected image of a Rorschach card. Ben wondered if there was psychological significance in his standing right below what looked like an enormous gaping vagina. “So you see a bat in that ink blot and I see something X-rated.” There was a small titter in the classroom.

“So it just doesn’t happen in a shrink’s office, right? So I’m seeing something different than you when I watch television, or look out the window. Correct?”

“Of course. It’s a universal mental process. It just gets more noticeable when it becomes abnormal.”

“So doesn’t that make it seem like we’re not really just passively receiving here, like a TV set? Like maybe we’re interactive, not really cameras, but more like projectors?”

“That our perceptions *create* reality? That’s a question for philosophy class, Mr. Ochoa. This is abnormal psychology, not parapsychology. Perhaps you’d be happier at Duke.” Another chuckle from the class gratified the prof, who raised his voice slightly.

“There’s a name for that awareness. It’s called psychosis.”

“But look, you’re testing for it. It’s not just *locos* who project. Take a look at Wilbertson, Schein...”

“No, thank you, Mr. Ochoa. What you are overlooking is consensus. For instance, right now there are forty other students here who are more interested in the reality of their final exams than what you perceive it to be.”

He flipped a remote, causing the screen to show a picture of a bell curve divided into standard deviations. He paused, looked back at the class. “Let me say this, because I’m not trying to belittle your thinking. Psychology is a very young science. What you are talking about is not inconceivable. In subtle fashion. In philosophy, certainly. In psychology, even. Where it doesn’t make any sense is the area where the rubber meets the road, as it were. By which I mean physics.”

He turned away, pointing to the card on the screen. “Now if we can get on the measures of intelligence.”

“Measure it?” Ben asked loudly. “We don’t even know what it *is*, do we? We know what energy and matter are. How they work, what they do. So what is intelligence?”

“There are two definitions that any real application, Mr. Ochoa.” The prof was not thrilled about this kid’s aggressive investigations, but on the other hand he generated interest in a class that mostly seemed like they were just ticking off hours until they could graduate and go get some money. “One was in your reading. David Wechsler?”

“Designed the major IQ tests,” Ben nodded.

“If you recall, he said that intelligence is the global ability of an organism to function effectively in its environment.”

“Yes, I read that. And what I thought was, if your environment is the jungle or prison or some tough ghetto, being intelligent might just mean being big, fast, and vicious.”

“That’s a problem with the definition. Most people understand it to refer to mental functioning.”

“So are we measuring our intelligence against each other? On the curve? Or against the environment?”

“Does a high jumper measure himself against the pole?” The prof paused for a nicely timed beat. “The pole for organisms being, basically, survival.”

“I was thinking that we measure this thing, but we don’t know what it is or how it works. Now I’m wondering if we even measure it.”

“Well, there is that other definition.” He waited the class out, then dropped the punchline. “Intelligence is that quality quantified by an intelligence test.”

Ben grimaced in disappointment. “I think I read that in ‘Intelligence for Dummies,’” he said. The prof frowned at the sarcasm, but it got a good laugh that he read as constructive.

“It’s analogous in many ways to economics, Ochoa,” he said with his best hip “out of the envelope” delivery. “We set things up as standards and they work according to the degree people subscribe to them. It’s based on confidence as much as money is. Is there anywhere you see faith fading over to a gold standard here? If you do, and can back it up, you might have a career in the field.”

“Do you think it’s possible to get the picture on what intelligence is? What attention is? I mean, see it’s basic design?”

“I think you just stepped out of psychology. Again. And over into some other department where somebody else will have to deal with you.”

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Chapter Forty-One

“What I learned today,” Ben told Kairos as he watched him uncork an expensive bottle of wine he’d purchased with obvious doubts after driving the manager at The Wine Thief batty, “Is that if I say the words ‘intelligent’ and ‘design’ in the same sentence they break out torches and pitchforks. Start piling firewood around a stake.”

“A lot of work for nothing. They could just use this jumble for a fine conflagration.” Kairos peered around Ben’s cluttered flat disapprovingly. He squinted carefully at the two stemmed glasses, wiped them with his impeccable handkerchief.

“Thing is, I can’t see way of proving or disproving any of it. But they’re damned sure of themselves.”

Kairos nodded approvingly at that sentiment. He poured, sipped dubiously, deliberated, apparently decided the Beaujolais Nouveau would do in a pinch. He held his glass up for Ben’s reluctant clink. “I’d suggest to them that a good glass of wine is all the proof any man could demand. Wonderful things just don’t happen on their own. *Argumentum ad veritas*. I told you you’d run into provincialism, especially in fields involving religion and ideology.”

“This was in a psychology class.”

“How well did you comport yourself?”

“Split decision.”

“You have to tell priests what they want to hear. Keeping in mind what you really think and concentrate on clarifying the distinction.”

“Well, they’re all pretty emotional about it. And a lot of what they say makes sense. There’s a lot of stupid design around.”

“Mostly after the fact. Let me ask you this. If God... or the local deity Evolution... is not intelligence, then what would be the source of creation?”

“Sex, I guess.” Ben sipped, still failing to appreciate all the “complexity” and “nuance” his old man raved about. Not all his obsessions seemed to pay out. “Love?”

“Or course.” Kairos smiled with an irritating indulgence. “And by ‘love’, you also mean, ‘sex’. You’re nineteen. An almighty orgasm is your lord.”

“It seems pretty conclusive to me.”

“Actually, there’s something to that. The beauty of women is a rebuke and model to us all,” Kairos swished his glass, held it up to the light. “Is beauty truth or isn’t it? Is truth not sense? Can you really look at them... or the nebulae or a flower or a single cell of your body and not see the design? The intelligence and creativity throbbing there?”

“Now *you’re* starting to sound like a preacher.”

“Intelligence is truth is beauty is creation.”

“Works for me. In other family news, I met the coolest girl.”

“Speaking of beauty, intelligence, and truth?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

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Chapter Forty-Two

“The sad thing,” Ben told Erin, swirling coffee in the bottom of the cheap white cup, “Is that the *indigenas*, the actual descendants of the people who built all these ‘Wonders of the World’ are usually barely aware of them. They might live ten miles from a temple that thousands of Europeans and Japanese visit every day, but they’ve never seen it.”

She leaned over the formica diner table, searching his face. “How about you? Do you feel your heritage? As a Native American?”

“Native Mexican, you mean?” Ben smiled. “All these hypens get me mixed up. No. I’m was just one more hustler on the street. Now I’m just one more foreign student trying to beat the competition at Yale. But you know what’s funny?”

“In some contexts.”

“The ones who take all this pride in the old sites and talk about Mexico’s rich archaeological history... know who? White professors and intellectuals and politicians and foreigners. The same rich crooked white guys you see praising the Chiapas *indios*.”

“It’s not so different here. My parents are so liberal they think Clinton was a Republican. They go on and on about civil rights, Indian rights, women’s rights, labor. But if a black working man showed up on the front porch they’d speed-dial 911 and call for an airstrike. But I wouldn’t say that at home because ‘strike’ is a dirty word.”

“This is all part of why you had to go to Yale?”

“Very much. My family goes back to the founders of this place.”

“Now there’s a co-incidence.”

Erin leaned back and studied him. The contrast between his dashing *caballero* looks and the funky townie diner where they loitered suggested more contrast to her. He was not like guys she knew. She didn’t have a handle on anything about him, where he was coming from. What he wanted. What he meant, half the time. There was mystery behind Ben Ochoa.

She said, “You meant something by that. But you’re not going to tell me about it.”

Ben smiled. “You caught me. Maybe if I knew you better.”

“That’s what they all say this time of night, honey,” the stocky, ageless waitress called from behind the counter. “They want to know you better. You know what waitresses say this time of night?”

“Would you like more coffee, kids?” Ben tried boyishly.

“Not even close, cutie. We say, ‘You don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here.’”

Ben did a double-take at the big pink clock over the counter and stood up reaching for his wallet. “I got a feeling this place was our last refuge, too.”

“I can’t think of anyplace open around here,” Erin said, slipping out a few dollars for the tip. “So it’s back to the dorms.”

“Well, actually,” Ben said. “Hang on a minute.” He stepped to the counter, paid and thanked the waitress. She handed him his change, glanced at Erin, winked at him.

Ben moved to the door, where Erin waited, pushed it open for her. “Actually, I have an apartment.”

“How nice for you,” she said, giving nothing to go on.

“So, you know,” Ben fumbled on. “I have a Mr. Coffee and everything. So if you want to come over.”

“Come over,” Erin said in a flat voice that typecast “come over” as a lurid innuendo.

“Yeah,” Ben told her. “*Mi casa es su casa*.”

He lived in a normal block of medium-priced, middle-class furnished places. No adobe barrio tucked in under the town’s secret side. No marble coke cartel mansion. He unlocked and asked her to wait while he slipped inside. She smiled in the hallway--he’s neatening up for me, she thought. That’s sweet. She heard him close a closet, then the sound of a lock. Then he opened the door and motioned her in to a major undergrad dude pigsty.

“Jesus,” she blurted. If this is what he shows company, God knows what he tossed in the closet. “Didn’t your parents teach you to pick up after yourself?”

“I was street trash, remember?” he swooped discarded clothes and takeout cartons off the sofa with his foot. “Nothing to pick up. Guess I should learn, huh?”

“Well, it might cut down on infections.”

“I’m not used to visitors,” he said. “In fact, you’re my first guest. *Bienvenida*.”

First girl in his place? That’s cool, Erin thought. She said, “I can see why.”

She looked around, gnawed by the compulsive impulses that had gotten her the grades and gymnastics medals. “Look, you were going to make coffee?”

Ben nodded and she waved at the room. “Mind if I straighten up a bit while you’re at it?”

“Mind? Look, I’m sorry...”

“Go. Coffee.” Erin waved him to the kitchenette. A thought struck her and she called, “Shall I put the really toxic stuff in the front closet here?”

“No!” came from the kitchen. Ben peeked out, discolored glass coffeepot in hand. “It’s full of stuff. You don’t have to...”

“I got it,” Erin said. Mystery closet. Probably bodies of stupid co-eds. She quickly tidied the room, piling the big stuff on a chair in the corner. She heaped kitchen things and disgusting remnants on a pizza box and carried them into the kitchen, where there was no counter space to set them down. She shook her head at the clutter. “I should have known better than to come in here. God knows what the bath and bedroom look like. Probably land fill.”

“You’ll never know,” Ben said, handing her a cup of coffee and spiking it with a dollop of tequila. “I’m not that easy.”

Yeah, right, Erin thought. “You have any milk that doesn’t resist capture?”

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Chapter Forty-Three

Ben wasn't exactly a stranger to Anglo girls. He was a dashing, good-looking guy with predatory instincts, so his first years at Yale weren't exactly a virginal wasteland. But this was different. So different.

Seeing Erin naked, he thought as he lay watching her doze, has to be one of the major revelations of my entire life. Ranks right up there with finding out my father's a spaceman. But way better.

He'd seen her hair, stared at it, stalked it, marveled at it. But he hadn't buried his hands and face in it. Watched it fall through his fingers glowing like metal light. Lain with it over his eyes, turning the world to auburn smolder.

And her skin. *¡Barbaro, wey!* Her cute spritz of freckles had fooled him into thinking of her as he thought of most *gringos*, as pinkish people. But naked, she was a whole different story. The screaming whiteness of her took him by storm, the endless scope of milky mounds like cherry vanilla ice cream. Dusted with cinnamon in places, in others touched by the pink of babies, of little girls, of sugary icing in the bakery. These nipples weren't black like Mexican girls. Or ruddy like other American girls. They were translucent! Like rose quartz! That's what killed him, the light passed through her flesh and cast a color on her skin. Her nipples were a source of light.

And her eyes were a source of visions. Light flowed into them, then washed back out shining and sparkling like hidden seas. They were green beacons that shone through her hair. Her hair was a filter that lent everything the color of things warm and precious. Her pubic hair curled out of her crotch like red smoke, as though she exuded a flame. She was a miracle. She was a masterpiece, a mystery he must plumb to its fullest extent.

He liked Erin. A lot, actually. He liked her company, her humor, the feel of being around her. She felt right, something he could slip into like a well-worn shirt. He didn't feel like blowing her off afterwards and going out for beer with the guys.

BUT, that was a minor factor compared to his immediate, deep infatuation with the bounties of her body. After all, he was a nineteen year old kid from the streets of Mexico. And also, there was something working up through him. She'd lit some sort of fuse. Something about the delicacy of her beauty and the frankness of her friendship cut away at his *machote* mode and stimulated an impulse to enfold, to cherish and protect.

He broke his hungry gaze to move slightly and her eyes opened, washing him in green. She smiled at him and said, "You've heard of doing it French style?"

He nodded. What, did she miss that part?

"Or Greek style?"

¡Epale! Not bad for first date! He nodded again.

"So is there a Mexican style?" she asked, wide and innocent.

"It involves a few props and religious rituals."

"Well, let me know when you line that stuff up."

"So you didn't notice anything different about the *macho Mexicano* experience?"

"Well," she said, thoughtfully, reaching under the sheet to grasp him. "There's this right here."

"*Gringo* guys have them, too. I take showers with them. I would have noticed."

"Well up here they cut this off."

"They *what?* At what age? I did right to come to this country, I can see."

"No, you jerk, they cut it off when you're born. Not the whole thing. Just this, you know, this part right here."

"*Jesucristo*, that's a cold shot, all right. No wonder *gringos* are always so paranoid and grouchy."

"Well, it adds a dimension."

"I'm surprised I'm the first Latino you've investigated." Hint, hint.

"Lack of opportunity." She shifted to look at him full on, but without relinquishing her grip. "You surprised? Flattered? Elated? Not sated, I hope."

Ben smiled and brushed her hair back from her face. "Dumbfounded. Electrified. Mutated." He leaned forward to kiss her, leaned away. "But I have to say, I am a little surprised. We think of the United States as racist and elitist. In Mexico a rich girl from a good family wouldn't have anything to do with a guy like me."

She checked him quickly for sarcasm. "You're serious, aren't you? Wow."

She used her grip to pull herself over, slither on top of him. She let her hair drop around his face, enclosing them in a tunnel of coppery sunrise. She told him, "I just wish you were black so I could *really* piss my parents off."

Ay, Ben thought happily as he wrapped around her, she's sooooo cool. I'd think I'd be nuts about her even if she was ugly.

He rolled over, bearing her beneath him, and leaned up on his arms to watch her face as she squirmed laughing up against him. But thank God I don't have to find out.

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Chapter Forty-Four

Ben blinked in the dark room, sorting out why he was awake. He didn't sense the presence of anybody in the room except Erin, sleeping quietly beside him with one hand across his belly. But there had been something...

He eased out of bed and pulled on his boxers. The bedroom door was ajar, with a faint light around it. Which there shouldn't be. He pulled his machete from between the mattress and box springs and moved to the door, feeling ahead of each step with spread toes. He looked through the door from three feet away, moving carefully closer to widen his view of the living room. He saw the source of the dim glow and tensed up. The termno grid was fading, but still lit. Oh, shit.

So it was the little puff sound of the termno that woke him up. Erin stirred behind him, muttered something. He waited until she stilled, lifted the machete to a ready position, took a deep breath, and popped his head through the door and back again. He took a second for the image to register. How the hell could that be? He stuck his head through the door again and there was no way around it. Nabo was sitting on the sofa, staring right at him. *¡Chiiin!*

Ben stepped into the living room, pulling the bedroom door shut behind him. Nabo continued his flat stare. Ben smiled. "*¡Qui'ubo, vale?* What the fuck are you doing here?"

Nabo stood up, but didn't move toward him. "Your mother took me down to the *metro*, told me how to get here." He nodded towards the termno, now almost dark.

Ben laid the machete on a bookcase, flicked on a lamp, and moved towards him. "It's great to see you, *mano*. Wait until you see this place."

"There's no time for that. Come with me. Back to Mexico."

Ben gaped at him. *¿Has vuelto loco?* Listen..."

The door opened behind him and Ben turned to see Erin, naked and blinking in the light. "What's up, Babe," she murmured drowsily. "I heard... Yow!"

She jumped at the sight of Nabo, plunged back into the bedroom. Ben glanced at Nabo, who was grinning one of his grins. "Go back to bed, *Querida*." Erin poked her head out the door, eyeing Nabo nervously. Ben gave her a reassuring smile. "I'll explain it all later. Okay?"

She nodded and withdrew, her eyes lingering on Ben as she closed the door. But not all the way. And she didn't get back in bed.

She'd broken some invisible surface tension in the room. The awkwardness vanished and Ben almost jumped over to embrace his friend. They pounded each other's backs, fell apart to exchange a complex, ritual handshake neither had used for years. Nabo stepped back and examined Ben closely. He eyed the living room and exposed kitchen. "Not much like life back in 'Lomas Chingado' is it? And neither are you."

"It's been a hell of a year, *compa*. It's exciting. You'll see."

Nabo shook his head with an opaque, Indian solidity. "I don't think so. You have to come back with me. It's Cielito."

Ben felt the quick grab in his throat, then knew that it was nothing grave or he'd have seen it immediately. He smiled. "I should have known. You're more like her brother than I ever was."

"Well, here's your chance to be a little more," Nabo said. "Like ask me what sort of trouble she's in, for one."

"You came four thousand miles with news and aren't going to tell me?"

"She ran away, *carnal*. Some commies up by the university have her."

"Holy shit! Have you talked to her?"

Nabo made a dismissive hand gesture that practically identified him as a *chilango* in itself. "She doesn't want to leave. Won't talk to me, your *mamá*, nobody."

Ben hadn't realized how tight he'd snapped until he felt himself relax. "So she wants to be there? Then there's nothing we could do about it."

"Fuck we can't. We go in there, the three of us, show them *el chingazo*."

Erin, watching through a crack in the door, hadn't been following the Spanish conversation, but no translation was needed when a springblade knife suddenly appeared in Nabo's hand, then came up as he pantomimed cutting a man's throat from behind. He mimed letting the victim fall, raised his hands to signal All Over. She shrank at the unmistakable proposition of murder, shuddered. One night, she thought. One damn night with the guy and he's some serial gang killer. Couldn't we have had breakfast first?

"Then we bring her home, back to school." Nabo completed the thought that began with slitting throats of commie assholes. "All that shit. *Vamonos*."

"Great idea, Hulk. Look, we have to think like grown-ups anymore. She's a big girl, she calls her own shots." He put an affectionate hand on Nabo's shoulder.

Behind the door, Erin quailed. That didn't much look like "No let's not cut any throats just now" to her.

"But stick around, *amigote*." Ben was expansive, glad to see somebody who knew who he was. "Hang with me in the dorm. Get laid. These girls aren't like those Catholic little *Mexicanas*, *wey*, they suck dick, everything."

Nabo had been clouding up: he finally erupted. Behind the door Erin recoiled from the sheer animal ferocity of this blunt, dark killer.

"You get blowjobs and clean sheets and you forget where you're from? Your own family? Fuck you, *Agringado*! I'll handle it myself."

He stalked to the door, threw it open in his usual swashbuckling style. Ben followed him. "Wait, Nabón! It's not like that anymore. You can't get what you want with a knife now. Let me..."

Nabo turned in the doorway, a stocky brick of destruction. He yelled, "*Olvidalo, pinche malanchista!*" He spun out the door and stomped down the hall. There would be doors opening in a minute, Ben thought, watching him leave. He looked down at his undershorts, stepped inside and closed the door.

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Chapter Forty-Five

Erin, wrapped in a bedsheet, grabbed him right inside the door and swarmed all over him. “Who was that, Ben? *What* was that? That guy...”

Ben embraced her, drew her face down to his chest. He rocked her a moment, felt her clinging to him. She knows she should get dressed and get out of here, he thought. But she’s not going to. He was surprised at the race of exultation he felt at that.

“That was my best friend,” he said softly into her ear. “He wanted me to come rescue my sister from leftist anarchists. I didn't jump up and go.”

Erin pushed back to the length of his arms around her waist. “Shut up! Ben! How old’s your sister?”

“Fourteen. She ran away with a cult is what it is. Nabo’s a violent hothead. He wouldn’t discuss it.”

“Boy, I guess not. What did he yell at you? It sounded awful.”

“He called me a *malinchista*. Maybe he's right.”

“Are you? Is it bad?”

Ben smiled, waggled his hand for *mas o menos*. “It’s a Mexican thing. Hard to explain.”

“You said you’d explain it all.”

Ben scooped her up and carried her to the couch. He could still feel a slight tremor about her. She needed to be cooled out, no doubt about it. He set her on the couch and knelt facing her.

“Sure. For what it’s worth. La Malinche was an Indian woman who guided Cortez when he first conquered Mexico. They were lovers. Or whatever you’d call it. Conquistador and Indian woman.”

“Pocahontas meets Sacajaweah?”

“Whoever they are.” Ben reached up to smooth her hair. He felt like wrapping that red fire around his fingers, covering himself in copper gold. “They had a kid. The very first *meztizo*, mix of European and Indian, like most Mexicans are. So she was kind of the mother of my race.”

Erin closed her eyes as he stroked her hair, pulled him to her more snugly. “What’s so bad about that?”

“Well, a lot of people would say that a white conquistador fucked her into leading her people into slavery. So *malinchista* means race traitor, a sellout to the *gringos*.”

“You’re right,” she said. “That's hard to explain.”

“There’s another name people use for her. La Chingada: the one who got fucked. And all us Mexican half-breeds are *hijos de la chingada*.”

Her hand ran down his back, her fingers slipped into the waistband of his shorts. Everything about this guy just seemed convenient, placed for her personal touch. Why did he have to start sounding like a project? “That sounds bad for self-esteem, if you ask me.”

Ben laughed. “You’ve got no idea. Mexico has a major national identity crisis. We brag about Mayan ruins, but are ashamed to be *Indios*. We're torn between hate for our conquistador father and shame for our Indian mother.”

Erin opened her eyes and searched his face. “That’s terrible. You, too?”

This laugh was a little less jolly than the last one. “Worse,” he said. “That whole thing, squared.”

He leaned forward, embracing her on the sofa. Holding her tight, not moving. She could barely hear him say, “He wants me to go back to Mexico, back to the street. Back to being a third world hick. Back to my messed-up family.”

As good a time as any, Erin thought. She said, “Back to slitting throats?”

Ben didn’t move or change his grip on her. Just said “That’s more of a hobby.”

Just a cheap joking remark, but for some reason Erin relaxed, uncoiled inside. It was as if the whole room had shifted and she suddenly wasn’t One Night Stand Getting The Bad News now, but Way-Needed Girlfriend. She giggled. “Butthead. Are you going to go?”

Ben raised his head, kissed her. “I’ve got too much going on here. Especially now.”

Inside Erin the sky cleared, the larks sang, the bells tolled, the sap ran. But...?

“But I’m going to go look for him,” he said. “Calm him down. I’ll be right back.”

She made no move to release him from her hug. “Right now?”

“Yeah. He can’t get home unless he comes back here and he won’t come back unless I go drag him.” He gently freed himself from her hands, kissed them both, stood up. “He’s out there stomping around the parking lot, probably. Pissed at me. Christ knows what he could get into.”

God, I guess, Erin thought. She stood up, too, headed for the bedroom. “Then you better go. Wait, let me get dressed and I’ll come with you.”

“No, you stay here. I promise I’ll be right back.”

“No way, cutie. I just got my hands on your ass and I'm not letting you out of my sight until we make it about a hundred more times.” Erin was already pulling on her jeans. Without finding her panties, Ben noted from the door. He watched her coppery thatch disappear behind the zipper and felt a powerful impulse to jump over there and snatch that sucker right back down again.

“I can get behind that,” he said.

Erin glanced under the bed, around the tumbled room. “Can I wear your shirt?” She was already buttoning it on.

“Sure,” Ben said as he grabbed his leather jacket off a chair. “If I can wear your bra.”

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Chapter Forty-Six

On the street in front of the building, Nabo steamed along in full stormgod fury, punching the mirrors off cars. His left fist was dripping blood. He stopped suddenly, overwhelmed by the pointlessness of it all. He had to go back to Ben's to that spook machine. He slumped against the fender of a nice Japanese car and stared back at Ben's complex. He slammed both fists down on the car hood, punching two dents and setting off the alarm. He leaned back his head and screamed at the sky. "*¡Chinga'o!*"

Barefoot, bare-chested under the jacket, Ben rushed out of the lobby entrance, his arm around Erin's shoulders, his eyes searching shadows of the kind where Nabo would lurk. Erin pulled out her car keys and held them up.

"No," Ben told her. "He'll be around close somewhere. Let's split up and look between the cars."

He sensed her hesitation and smiled. "He wouldn't hurt you. He'll hit on you, but not hit you. He's like a rooster: only deadly to other males."

Erin nodded somewhat less than enthusiastically and started moving down the rows of cars. She only gotten ten yards away when she heard a car door open and turned around to see Matt Stratton loom up out of his Lexus, glaring at Ben. He also shot her a glance so charged with hate and nasty lust that she involuntarily put her hand to her mouth. Stratton was disheveled and unshaven. He'd been staking out the building, waiting for her. For them. Scared and embarrassed, Erin headed straight to where Ben faced Stratton.

Then the other door of the Lexus opened and Hale bulged out. He was grinning like a jackal, thumping a baseball bat into his big, hard hand. Erin stopped in shock, staring at the two jocks. Hale pulled another bat out of the car and flipped it across to Stratton, who caught it without even looking. The two hefted the bats and moved forward, all teamwork, measuring Ben for a severe beating.

Erin overcame her shock and sprinted toward Ben. "Matthew!" she screamed. "What are you doing here? What are you *doing*? Leave us alone."

She reached Ben, stood beside him and put an arm on him. She was stunned when he spun around and pushed her away violently. She had to take two running steps to keep from falling. "Run!" he snapped. "Back to my place. Call 911."

Now hurt as well as afraid, she couldn't help her pleading tone. "*Me* run? I don't think it's me they..."

"You just had to fuck him, didn't you?" Stratton screamed at her. She stopped with her mouth open, staring. He dropped his voice to a menacing snarl. "Just couldn't stand not having his tiny uncircumcised dick in your mouth and up your little ass, huh? You fucking spick-hopping little whore."

Erin suddenly understood something she'd laughed at in the books she'd read as a kid; women swooning away. She'd have loved to turn this all off, just stop the world. She stared at Stratton, horrified, as he laughed at her, then jumped forward to take a swing that Ben barely managed to duck.

The two big athletes split on Ben, closing him in. Swinging for the fence. His gutter-honed agility saved him from several hits that would have ended the whole thing right on the spot, but he was getting trapped. He ducked around a car, sidestepped a swing that smashed a windshield, vaulted the trunk and whirled as another swing almost took his head off. He faked then jumped, trying to run up on a roof and start jumping down the line of cars. It had worked before. But not this time.

Hale caught him on the meat of the thigh in mid-jump, knocking him to the pavement. His leg felt dead as he got up, like it was full of cement. Erin ran up to protect him, standing in front of him with her fingers clutched. "Matthew!" she screamed, "Stop this. What are you..."

Stratton shut her up by palming her face, then jerking his hand he throw her down to the pavement, tumbling between two cars. She yelped and started up, but he kicked her in the chest, knocking the wind out of her. She gasped for breath on her knees.

Stratton brought his bat up off the pavement like a golf swing, smashing into Ben's ribs with a loud crack. Ben rolled over, tried to get under the car beside him. But it was too low and both jocks stood over him now, sneering at him. They both raised their bats over their heads.

And Nabo bounded from the pavement to a trunk lid, to a roof, to Stratton's back. The impact drove the big guy down like a falling hammer. By the time his face hit the ground he was already dead.

Blood spewed out from his ripped throat, splashing all over the cowering Erin. He lay in front of her, gushing onto the ground.

Hale, shocked but used to sudden reversals, was already swinging at Nabo's head. Nabo exploded up off Stratton's back, inside the swing, and plunged his knife into the big lineman's groin. Hale screamed like a stuck mare, going to his knees. His fall ripped his stomach down the blade that Nabo held in him, standing motionless and vengeful as Hale's collapse continued the process of eviscerating himself. Sobbing as he groveled at his spilling guts, Hale never saw the slash that parted his throat and ended all that shrieking red pain.

Nabo squatted down on his heels, looking at Ben, who lay up against a wheel, gasping as each breath ground the edges of his broken rib together. Erin knelt, sobbing and retching amid two gory corpses of schoolmates. She looked at the dead, at Nabo, at Ben. Then looked down at the ground and went on sobbing.

Nabo grabbed a handful of Stratton's sweater, wiped the blade of his knife, then slipped it away somewhere. He rose to his feet and grabbed Ben's arm, pulled him to his feet. Ben almost yelped in pain, but gritted his teeth. He leaned against the side of the car, holding his rib, looking into Nabo's face. Nabo stepped toward him, raised a bloody hand.

Ben bent over with a sharp gasp and touched his hand to Hale's chest. He came erect and held out his bloody palm, echoing Nabo's gesture.

"This is what it was about, *Mano*. Blood. What we used to belong to."

Ben stretched out his hand towards Nabo's face, Nabo mirrored the movement, dabbing a bloody spoor on Ben's forehead.

Erin, fighting herself back under control, looked up at the two of them, touching their brows with fresh blood. She shook violently, looked down at the blood on her shirt and chest. She crawled to Stratton and rolled him over, looked into his face.

She spoke slowly, like a little girl in a dream. "I've known him all my life. His family..."

She turned to Ben, her face shifting from the slack white of shock to sterner angles and planes. Ben felt a sudden wrench in his heart. The pixie doesn't live there any more.

Erin got to her feet, looking down at Stratton. Carefully, deliberately, she spit on his upturned face. "Do you have any idea how many times I thought about stabbing that prick?"

Nabo didn't know what she'd said, but heard how she'd said it. He grunted appreciatively.

Erin looked at the horrorshow that had once been Hale. "But you guys... You really did it. They're really dead.

"Listen," Ben said gingerly, "I'm really sorry. It..."

Erin gave him a fierce, ice-green look. "Is this some Mexico City initiation or something? See if I'm a standup girlfriend or something?"

"No." Ben moved carefully toward her, put his hands on her shoulders. "But you passed. Now we've got to get you out of here."

"Too late, Ben. I'm in it, too. Opportunity. Motive. Abetting."

She raised her blood-soaked hand to touch his forehead. Then to dapple her own. She turned a defiant look at Nabo, who gave her a dull flat stare, then slowly nodded. Then smiled.

Ben didn't know what to do or say next, but somehow was seeing Erin as the priority. He said, "So you saw. What's all this schoolboy shit compared to this?"

"I know," Erin said. "I just don't want you to leave."

She'd moved it back to the real priority all right. He glanced around the parking lot. No sign of motion or attention. "It's not over, I promise you."

Erin gave an offhand nod. Or course not.

Suddenly Nabo wasn't there anymore. But they heard his voice. "They left the keys in the car."

They saw him now, sitting in the Lexus. Ben nodded at him, turned back to her.

"We're leaving right now."

"I understand." She fell onto him, hugged him fiercely. "Tonight was the beginning of something very special, Ben. Please don't let it be the end."

She touched his cheek, leaving a bloodstain, then turned away.

Ben said, "Wait," and her heart fluttered.

He quickly removed the bloody shirt, wiped her hands, chest and face, inspected her closely. She stood self-consciously with her breasts exposed to the night. He peeled off his jacket, gave it a quick wipe, and zipped it on her. "There. Much better."

"Sorry, I'm new to crime scene chic. I think you boys better wipe off a little, too." She glanced at Nabo, sitting behind the wheel of the car. He tipped her a subtle salute, then started the engine.

"By the way," she asked Ben. "Can either of you drive?"

"Yeah, sure," Ben told her. "Well, pretty sure."

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Chapter Forty-Seven

The Autonomous University of Mexico might or might not be the largest college in the world, but it's right up there with the most hectic, egalitarian, and politically volatile. UNAM students have pretty much heard it all. But there was a thick clot of attention around a generic wispy, Ché-wannabe agitator waving leaflets in front of the campus metro station. Since the leaflets were the usual leftist rhetoric anybody could recite without reading it, the interested audience would have to be attributed to the lanky student playing bongos and the slim young girl in a white dress who strummed a big guitar to accompany the protest trovas she delivered in a sweet, clear voice.

She was very good, but beyond her singing was the way her firm fire of conviction contrasted with her innocent appearance: a pretty Indian girl dressed for communion. Students ranging from scruffy strikers to serious future neo-liberal technocrats stood three deep to hear her sing about the injustice of it all. Cielo Ochoa was the only protester on campus with a following.

She ended her song by letting the last guitar chord die while she held the final vocal note forever, a fierce silvery line passing over the crowd and bringing quite an applause for a street performer essentially taunting the audience for their apathy in the face of horrors done in their name. When the last syllable finally died away she swept the crowd with a smile, thanking them for their enthusiasm. Her gaze moved past one face in the crowd, then snapped back.

Nabo wasn't clapping or drifting away from the pushy leafleteer, just staring at Cielo like she'd dropped straight down out of heaven. She looked at the single male she had loved most in her childhood, the dashing brother figure who had treated her better than anybody except for her mother. And tensed up.

Nabo moved towards her through the dispersing audience. She could feel his attitude towards the two boys with her, but was touched by the awkward sheepishness with which this dangerous maniac approached her. She wasn't ready to talk to him, but wasn't up to refusing, either.

"*Chin*, that was beautiful, Ciel." Standing there grinning like a kid at dance class, she thought, his arms just hanging. "You should be on stage, or some show on the *tele*."

"So I could make money instead of trying to help people stop being slaves?" She secretly enjoyed political arguments with people she liked, but not all of them rose to it.

Nabo just said, "I only mean you're really good, Cici."

She was about to say something about her calling her by a name from the childhood she'd made a point of abandoning, but her accompanist stepped in front of her, blocking Nabo. Uh, oh, she thought, but couldn't think of what to do. Sing a song about peaceful co-existence?

The bongo kid said, "She doesn't want to talk to you."

Nabo patiently explained, "I'm talking to her, not you, *puto huelgista cabrón*."

The boy with the leaflets moved in beside Bongos, posing truculently. The musician said, "I'm talking to you, punk. Fuck off."

"Have you ever heard that expression?" Nabo asked blandly. "Actions speak louder than words?"

"That's what we're all about," Leaflets said. Patented tough guy voice.

"Then you'll really enjoy this." Nothing fancy. Just speed, power, and years of experience whipping big hurts on insolent twerps. Few people even noticed Nabo move, but in four seconds both boys were flat on the ground moaning. The bongo player, gushing tears, held an obviously fractured wrist. The pamphleteer had a bloody patch of scalp where his cool little forelock had been snatched out. Nabo stepped over them and approached Cielo with an embarrassed smile and shrug.

She glowered at him, conscious of shock among the students who had seen her companions go down. But she just couldn't keep it up. She had more nostalgia in her that she could admit, and part of her life had been the pugnacious, rambunctious Nabo performing his feats of skill and savagery. She had to smile. And when she did her heart opened and the sweet girl singer flowed back into her like water into a bowl.

"Same old Nabucho," she said, mock-scolding. "Fists of fury. I wish you'd unleash a little rage on the ones who truly have it coming."

Nabo returned her grin, the pleasure of her company washing all over him. But... "I only came by to say hi, Cici."

Yeah, sure. "Try to understand this, Nabo," she told him gently, stepping up to tap him on the shoulder like she always used to do. "This is what I am now. I'm not little Cici anymore. I have to do this. It means too much."

"Well, I don't understand." He looked at her wistfully for a second, then snapped back into being Nabo. "But actually I came to say goodbye. For a long time, I think."

"You're going somewhere?" She was surprised how much she didn't like the idea that this guy she'd told to stay away from her three different times might actually be going away. "Where?"

"Well, I'm not sure, exactly. Ben's the only one who knows the way."

Cielo's gaze flicked around the station. Sure enough, there was Ben standing over by the kiosk. He held up his hands, silently applauding, and grinned at her. She hardened right back up. You let in one person from your old life and they all come swooping in to turn you back into a baby. She looked back at Nabo, her irritation obvious. "Benito's taking you somewhere and you won't ask where or why. Same old Nabo, all right."

She turned dramatically and started stalking off. But couldn't help herself. From a secure distance, she turned and said, "Goodbye, Nabucho. Thanks for coming. Stay safe, okay?"

"You too, Cielito Lindo." He called to her. "*Cuidate mucho, eh?*"

She looked down at her groaning, bloody comrades. They looked like silly children to her. He'd turned them back into babies, too. She looked up again and her brothers were gone.

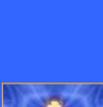
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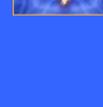
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Chapter Forty-Eight

Even in the dirty, stinking furor of the sprawling inner city flea market, where the unwashed masses of the world’s largest dysfunctional city came to buy the cheapest crap they could get their hands on, one ratty booth stood out as flimsy and unsavory. It was actually part of the marketing strategy. Two broken crates, smeared with residue of over-ripe papayas, made a rickety table to display an array of buttons, pins, and decals depicting and phrases regarding anything from hip bands to punk posture to sleazy sex. Monke stood behind the crates completing a transaction. Everything about his movements and his customer’s advertised that the sale involved something other than pop.alt_culture souvenirs.

He’d seen Nabo and Ben coming, but ignored them. He noticed that Ochoa was back into the barrio slouch, hands deep in the pockets of his big black jacket. When they were two meters away, Monke looked up to take notice of them, expressionless.

“Well look at this,” he sneered. “Reunion of *Los Tres Mosqueteros*. ¿*Que transas?*”

Ben gave him an uneasy smile. “How they hanging, MonkeDonke?”

“Oh, you suddenly wondered about the state of my hanging parts? Is tomorrow my Saint's day?”

“I was wrong.”

That took both Nabo and Monke aback. Not a common expression from this guy.

“Look,” Ben said, addressing them both. “I’ve got something really big going on. Bigger than you can imagine. I’m not walking out on it. No *pinche* way.”

“Well, that makes sense.” Monke was the purest of capitalists in the bottom reaches of his soul.

“Yeah, but it doesn’t make a shit if I’m up there and you *cabrones* are still down here it this crap. Know what I mean?”

“Yeah,” Monke drawled offhandedly. “We already knew.”

“I said I was wrong. I’m here. You with me?”

Monke was having too much fun to let up yet. “I think he means he needs us for something, Nabito. ¿*Que no?*”

“You got it, shithead.” Ben was completely straight faced about it all. “Not right now, so much. But down the line, yeah.”

“What the fuck does a big deal *gringo universitario* need a couple of ignorant Tepito *indios* like us for?”

“Muscle.”

Monke let his happiest fox smile out to play. He whipped a butterfly knife out of nowhere and spun it, the blade and handles whirling out a flower of glittery steel around his hand. “I’d say we’ve got that covered.”

Ben laughed, his tension dissolved. Things were all right. He nodded at Monke’s knife show. “Oh, it gets a lot better than that.”

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Chapter Forty-Nine

Nabo was not a guy easily impressed or intimidated. But he was getting there, squatting on the floor in Minator’s studio, leaning back against the wall while a huge hairy monster with arms the size of his whole body loomed over him and thundered. “What do you mean, bringing these animals into my presence?”

Ben wasn’t intimidated, but he had his respect level dialed all the way up. “Excuse me Master, but *you* are talking about people being animals?”

Minator uncoiled a monstrously long arm to point at his friends, who didn’t enjoy the attention at all. They didn’t need to understand the language to get the drift of this giant ogre’s meaning. “They are clay without souls. Half alive.”

“They’re just like me, half-breed *hijos de la chingada*.” Ben wasn’t prepared for the sheer volume of the response to that statement.

“They are *not* like you! You are a human being.” Minator roared, then paused to add timing and weight to what was already an impactful delivery. “You. Are your father’s son!”

Ben dropped all levity or disagreement. “Please, Master. I don’t understand all this genetic and bloodline stuff. All I understand is the blood bond between myself and those guys, my oldest friends. May I tell you what happened? Why we’re here?”

Minator folded his arms across his chest and inhaled deeply in profound impatience and doubt. He peered down at them over the enormous slabs of muscle, his fur ruffled, his ears laid back, his horns pointing at them as if dousing for their blood. “Because of your father, I will hear what you want to say. It might be the last time I will talk with you.”

“See, these are more than just friends. We lived together like family, we fought together, killed together. But I ditched them to go to school because my father wanted me to be... you know, whatever it is he wants. But then Nabo came and told me we had to rescue my sister. But what happened...”

Nabo and Monke watched as Ben lurched through his story, pleading earnestly for this bullbeast’s approval. *Putamadre*, where did this guy come from? How could he exist? How could Ben know him? He rolls with Monster Incorporated and needs *us* for muscle?

Minator maintained his position without moving a hair as Ben wrapped up his ramble.

“...so I decided I need them with me. Back there or up here. They’re as important to me as anything Kairos is doing. This whole thing scares me. You scare me. I need somebody I know is with me all the way.”

Ben paused, glanced at Nabo. “Seeing those two assholes dead really got to me. I want to be able to use force without killing people. And I want them to know how to do it, too. I’d rather they were using your skills than knives. I’m sorry I pissed you off.” He trailed off, fixed on Minator, who was giving no clues.

“Those jocks thought they were tough, but they were really defenseless. I don’t want to be defenseless and ignorant. I want to make things happen without innocent bloodshed. You’re the man for that.”

“That’s why you’re here?”

“Yes. And to challenge you...”

Minator’s throat rumbled like a metro train passing below.

“Challenge you to do something new, stretch your skills,” Ben hastened on. “To teach us how to do your moves in the real world. Not just here in the Sky where it’s easy.”

There was a long, scary pause before Minator spoke. When he did, it shocked Ben’s friends by being a soft, pleasant baritone. “I finally see in you signs of a warrior’s heart, not just a boy doing as he’s told. A warrior’s heart is necessary here, even though I don’t teach war. I teach how to end conflict. I will teach you what you want. And your pets, as well.”

“They’re my friends, Master. My brothers. I love them, I guess you’d say.”

Minator nodded impassively. “Then come to me. Bring your friends.”

“Thank you, Master,” Ben said. “I don’t know how much ‘credit’ my father has with you, but...”

“That has nothing to do with it anymore,” Minator rumbled. “This is between you and I. Come and learn. I want to learn, as well.”

Ben bowed his head and murmured, “Thank you, Minator.”

“You realize, don’t you,” the Minator said in a tone that Ben couldn’t place. “That just being here with those two is a violation of every law, custom, and principle of this place and this people?”

“No. But I could have guessed. What should I do?”

“Whatever you need to do. That’s what it is to have a warrior’s heart.”

“Thank you, Master.”

“It’s not a good thing, actually. But we live with it. You have it. Listen to it.”

“Thanks again, Master.”

Minator leaned down to examine Monke and Nabo more closely. He didn’t seem to be too taken by their aspects. “Let me suggest,” he said to Ben. “That there is more to life here than just combat.”

Ben laughed. “Yeah, they’ve got a lot of rough spots.”

“To say the least. I can suggest some other Exemplars. Your father has many friends. I think you will, too.”

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Chapter Fifty

Nabo zoomed down the tube in a low crouch, faster than he'd ever skated in his life. He popped his heels up against his butt, then down, feeling the action of his traction. Then veered to his right, carving up the sides, his body a rigid radius to the diameter of the tube. At the top he leveled off and stood erect, upside down, spread his hands to trail along the black surface of the sides. He accelerated as the tube dipped, plunging down a steeper incline, hanging with his head brushing the bottom of the cylinder. Monke and Ben, sliding along just behind him in seated positions as if they reclined in Barcaloungers, applauded.

Nabo flexed his arms, drawing the sides of the tube inward until his palms were sliding along them, then kicked off the "ceiling" and spun around his spread arms. Pulling his arms to his chest, he dropped, sped along the steep floor, then did a series of loops around the circumference of the tube. He turned backwards, still sliding in his skateboard stance, and eyed his friends. "This place is the *maximo*," he told them for the twentieth time. "Where skaters go when they die. I don't see any reason to go home."

The tube slowly widened and flattened, its pitch leveling off, its color changing to a slick orange. Nabo kicked his feet out in front of him, landing on his ass facing his pals. They slowly came to a halt, the tube nestling around them into a cushy pod where they lounged luxuriantly. It was like being inside a big pumpkin, Ben thought. He wondered where he came up with the image of it in the first place. As good a place to talk as any. Now that Nabo had gotten hyper-thrashing out of system for a second.

And talking was Monke's strong suit. "Okay," he said, as if they'd been discussing something all along. "We can do Mina Fu. We can speak English and Skywalker. Ben can speak like, anything. So how do we turn a few pesos out of this deal? Get something going for ourselves?"

Nabo nodded reluctantly. "Yeah, how? Or we'd be better off back in the *Defectuoso*, really. Come up here to skate now and then."

"I've been giving that a little thought," Ben said. His friends groaned and made defensive gestures as he went on. "I think we need to get back to our roots."

"Street Trash in Space?" Monke grinned.

"*Trafficantes* in Space."

That shut them up for a moment, all right. Finally Nabo, with subtly more respect in his tone said, "That's a great idea, *Güero*. But smuggle what? And where? There's no here here. And no *chiva*, either."

Ben pulled a slim cylinder out of his shirtfront, so white it almost glowed in the amber light of the tube. He tapped it just so and it unrolled, stiffening into a rigid sheet of translucent plastic covered with the fluid Lexus script and a long vertical column of pictographs.

"What's that," Nabo asked, "The instruction manual?"

"What's it in, Mayan?" Monke put in, staring at the glyphs.

"It's a list of igos," Ben told them with a strong touch of smugness. "It's like a Yellow Pages for the termnos. See the symbol you thought of to get here? And the Aztec one that gets us back? All the rest of them go to other places."

Monke was absolutely floored. "*¡Sobres, carnal!* See, this is the sort of reason we waste our time with you." He scanned down the list, trying to associate the little logos with anything he could imagine. "We go to them, find out what shit they got, run it, then flog it."

"You got it, Monkola. Intergalactic outlaws of supply and demand. Except first we find the demand, then we tell them we can score a supply. Get the money up front if we can tweak it out. Been here, done this."

Nabo looked up from the directory to Ben. "You think they've got any shit out there?"

"Hey, Nabs," Ben chuckled. "It's the universe."

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Chapter Fifty-One

The three young traffickers tried hard to blend in as they sidled cautiously through a raucous flea market that looked like a highlight in some brochure for travel in a galaxy far, far away. But they stuck out like whores at mass.

The market was a teeming, chaotic sprawl of goods, livestock, and short, dark people bickering over alien objects and currency under canopies of strangely dyed, slubby fabric. Some of the vegetables looked vaguely familiar, even edible, but the hanging cuts of meat covered with iridescent bugs were obviously from no sort of animals they had ever seen. Probably because they came from relatives of the weird beasts standing in stalls or pulling carts heaped with bizarre merchandise and offal.

The guys weren't exactly strangers to such sights, but this place was so tweakily off-kilter to their eyes and expectations that they crept along bug-eyed and timid. Nabo relaxed enough to practice one of his skills from boyhood, filching a long, trailing robe from a stall and throwing it on over his barrio scum outfit.

All three wore robes by the time they rounded the corner from the "garment district" and hesitated at the intersection. A lane opened between stalls selling a variety of peculiar round things that might have been eggs if they hadn't been such creepy colors and bogus sizes. One shop displayed their pride object, a purple egg the size of a beer keg. A boy from the closest stall cut a boiled egg open for them, showed them the pus-yellow albumin and blood-red yolk, rolled his eyes to simulate yummy. The edged into another aisle.

Where an animal, part camel and part ox but incorporating some major design flaws, grunted at Nabo. He leaned closer to inspect this rough beast and it spat greenish phlegm at him. Señor Reflexes ducked in time, but the swarthy yokels in the aisle laughed like magpies.

They ducked down another alley of flapping cloth awnings, noticing less merchandise and a lot more female vendors. One of whom stepped in front of them and opened her robe dramatically to expose her diminutive, somewhat grotesque, but anatomically complete body for their approval. She yapped at them harshly, presumably quoting price for Short Time Boom Boom. They nodded their admiration and backed away to another chorus of cackles and catcalls.

By the time they'd settled down a little, they had ruled out finding any drugs, or identifying them if they did, and were focusing on jewelry. At booth after booth, Monke pored over the tawdry offerings and moved on, shaking his head.

They passed a shabby stall made of black wood and sheltered by roughweave cloth that looked as if it had been dyed with urine. Three paces past it and Monke doubled back, started rooting around the pots of oddball minerals displayed on the rickety counter. He fumbled around, examining handfuls of stuff under the wizened eye of a bulkily built native shopkeeper. A boy who could have been his grandson eyed the alien trio incuriously.

Monke dipped a hand into a bucket and pulled out a clutch of gravel. He looked at it closely, poured it from one hand to another, backlit by the weak local sunlight. He held his handful of grit out to the shopkeeper, a question in his eyes. The proprietor let him pour it into his hand, then picked up a knife with a dirty blade that looked like transparent obsidian and started scraping the grunge off it with the gravel.

"Cheap abrasive compound," Monke pronounced. He pulled up the sleeve of his robe to reveal his cheap Korean wristwatch. One of the bigger chunks of abrasive laid a clean scratch across the crystal. Ben and Nabo now regarded the granules with much greater respect, while the shopkeeper stared at the watch with avid interest. Monke stirred the bucket with his finger, frowned. He stretched out fingers to indicate something a little larger, perhaps. The vendor immediately cawed a command to the boy, who jumped up and tore off into the surrounding thickets of baskets and heaped goods. The shopkeeper beamed repulsively at the guys while trying to keep his fascination for the watch from being too obvious.

By the time Short Round returned with a big gourd filled with a few gallons of diamonds the size of garbanzos, the shopkeeper held the watch in his hands, marveling at it with open-mouthed astonishment. One of a kind: a miracle. Value beyond calculation. And it looked like he might be able to get it for a frithin of third-quality abrasives.

As Monke strode away from the stall with his new horde of diamonds, a crowd of colleagues swarmed around the shopkeeper, looking over his shoulder at the watch, yammering and pointing as he proudly downplayed his pride in possession of the only one of these gizmos in the entire world. Nabo slugged Monke on the shoulder hard enough to sting. "Deal of the century, Monk-ass."

"Great eye, carnal," Ben added.

"Man, it's easy getting rich up here, *Güero*," Monke gloated.

Nabo, grinning with pleasure, scanned the dark little locals. "We're all *güeros* around here. Now how do we get the stones out?"

Monke was eying a local lass of slighter build and fairer form than the professional women they'd been exposed to. She gave him an eye that needed no translation. "What's the rush?"

Back in the ruined fortress where they had first popped into this bucolic planet Ben and Nabo watched a rain of uncut diamonds fall out of empty air and bounce around on the glowing grid of the termno.

Nabo glanced at Ben. "Ah, shit."

There was an instant "wuuf" and Monke stood on the grid again, perplexed. "*Oye, compas...*"

Ben and Nabo pointed at the floor and Monke scowled. "Well, crap. I knew this was too good to be true."

"We'll figure it out," Ben said, "We're still just journeymen here."

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Chapter Fifty-Two

Ben and Nabo leaned back in cheap chairs, their feet on the crappy bed of a generic Mexico City flophouse, watching *Sabado Gigante* on a flickering black and white television. Nabo grabbed one of the three Dos Equis cans from the battered nightstand and tipped it up. He wiped his mouth with his cuff and belched. “We don’t even really know if this is going to work either, do we?”

“Who knows what’s part of our selves and what isn’t?” Ben replied philosophically.

“That’s really deep, *mano*.”

A yelp of pain came through the old blanket that divided the bathroom from the rest of the dump. Nabo grinned triumphantly. “Hallelujah. Sounds like it worked.”

The curtain swirled back and Monke stepped out, his harrowing experience writ large on his features. He held a cheap colander from the public market, dripping water. He grabbed his beer and chugged it, thrust the colander savagely into Ben’s hands and stomped over to pull a bottle of Tequila from his pack and guzzle it. Monke and Ben laughed, Ben jangling the dish of diamonds. Monke scowled at them, took another pull. “Your turn, assholes.”

Ben laughed again, then applauded as Nabo took a bow before stepping behind the bathroom curtain. He picked up a large rough diamond from the colander and held it up to examine.

“It’s not our usual line of goods, you know,” Monke said, and took another fiery swallow. He’d become less optimistic over the whole caper since acquiring the stones.

“Yeah,” Ben nodded. “If we go to a legitimate buyer, they’d laugh at us.”

“You really think so?” Nabo’s strained voice came from behind the blanket. “I think we’d be in jail in about fifteen minutes.”

Monke gave an eloquent shift of his shoulders. “So fuck ‘em, we go straight to jewelers.”

“That makes the most sense,” Ben agreed, squinting at the rock in his hand. “Of the shadier kind.”

Walking out into the polluted sunshine of one of Mexico City’s tackier pleasure districts, Ben didn’t seem very happy for a young man counting a big wad of ill-gotten two hundred peso bills.

“Not a bad haul for a bunch of dropouts,” Monke told him, placatingly.

Ben scowled back at the glittering display of *naco* adornments in the glass storefront with glitter sign saying, *El Señor De Los Anillos*. “It’s fucking pathetic. Even the ‘Lord of the Fucking Rings’ there said we had over a thousand carats.”

“So it’s really twice that,” Nabo shrugged. “He’s a prick. So what?”

“We should take them to like, Venezuela,” Monke said. “Columbia. Trade some for guns, *coca*, liquid shit like that.”

“Don’t talk about liquid shit to me,” Nabo said forcefully. “You want to go to Cali or somewhere, *you* swallow them.”

“The stones aren’t the problem here, you numbnuts,” Ben said, suddenly getting the picture. “We are.”

“Oh, right,” Nabo said with the sarcasm of a kid who has run a border or two, “We’d need to have proper passports and all, wouldn’t we?”

Ben pulled out the gleaming white roll, now somewhat smudged, and waved it back and forth. “On *this* planet, we would.”

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Chapter Fifty-Three

Ben appreciated his professional rapport with this slim, olive-skinned offworld jeweler much more than that *pajero* back home. The guy was slim and cocoa-colored, with a high forehead and slightly crossed eyes like everybody else on this world. He sat crosslegged on an ottoman behind his low counter, surrounded by a wall of gold necklaces, bracelets, bangles, complicated chain ornaments—but very few inset stones. What stones there were showed color, but none were transparent. They look like the agates and turquoise in Indian market stuff, Ben thought with pleasure as the jeweler examined the rough-cut white diamond, the prism colors blowing his mind.

He looked up, across the leather countertop with four tiny cups and a handful of these incredible stones. At three very suspicious kids wearing weird clothes and fidgeting on their cushions. Thirty years in this trade, he thought, and three beardless boys come in here with the Fire of the Ages. Sacred Mandour! He saw no point in hiding his reaction from these lads. Who knew who or what they were?

“Beauty beyond the words of the mind,” he breathed softly. “Impossible. What are they?”

Ben started to speak but Monke raised a hand to cut him off. Speaking carefully in his fifth new native tongue, he said, “That’s not really the question, is it?”

Ben hid a smile and followed the lead. “The question is: How much would a guy pay to hang one of these babies around the neck of a woman he wants to screw?”

The jeweler nodded at this unexpected maturity and wisdom. He said, “Do you accept Guild ducats?”

Nabo spoke up, mangling the few local words he knew. “We take gold.”

Ben said, “Do you have anything that’s kind of round and smooth so it wouldn’t hurt if you stuck it up your ass?”

After thirty years in this trade, the jeweler thought, I believed I had heard every possible taste and perversion. He had no idea how to respond to the question, so he gestured at the wall behind him. “I have the finest chains on the coast.”

“Perfect,” Ben and Monke said in unison.

The dark space of the old temple crept Nabo out a little. It was like a Catholic chapel would be if they worshiped vampire moles. He looked around warily as he followed his buddies back to the weird little *nicho*, all three of them draped in gold chains. He glanced again at the figurine of the tall, thin, white man holding a sun over his head with both hands. He closed the door of the alcove behind them.

All three of the *muchachos* whuffed into existence in the Mexico metro at once, still grinning happily at their wealth. Their smiles faded quickly as they looked at each other. No bling, cuz.

“¡Putamadre!” Nabo howled. “This sucks!”

Monke stared down at his unadorned chest, puzzled. “I don’t get it. Why would my watch go through, but not a necklace?”

Ben always felt like not understanding this system was his fault. “Sorry, guys. I don’t know. We’re still learning.”

“Somebody could explain it to us,” Monke said, letting his meaning hang.

“Nobody we’d want to ask about it, though,” Ben said with finality.

“¡Carajo! More crapping on goddamn mosquito screens,” Nabo grumbled, then disappeared.

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Chapter Fifty-Four

Ben and his Boyz were less than comfortable in the apothecary, a dank, candle-lit cavern with an eldritch, Tibetan sort of look, cluttered with baskets, boxes, bales, bowls, urns and cages of exotic cures. Shelves and cubbyholes that looked centuries old carried their burdens of bizarre chemicals and herbs from the hairy, carpeted floor up to ceilings lost somewhere in the redolent smoke overhead.

The chemist himself was just as unsettling, a wizened old dwarf with twisted nine inch nails, a robe that looked like sickly moss, and a long white beard sprouting from his left cheek like a fly whisk. But they were there on business and Ben shoved a grubby leather pouch across a table littered with peculiar glass and metal instruments, vials and crucibles. The old chemist reached out a gnarled fingernail to flap the purse open, revealing a blaze of gems. He nodded and turned to a ten year-old, shaved-head acolyte, who stepped forward with a black wicker cage that moved in an unsettling way, made scary, scaly noises. The boy placed the cage on the table by the gems and the way he moved away as the chemist reached for it wasn't lost on Ben's bunch.

The chemist solemnly opened the cage and bent to look inside with impassive eyes. He brought his hand up to caress his off-center beard. The gang was startled at how fast his hand darted into the cage, then withdrew wrapped in some kind of pissed-off snake. If you can use the term "snake" to describe something with vestigial legs, stingray wings, and dorsal spikes. A quasi-dragon with a major attitude was the *muchachos'* read on the damned thing.

A somewhat older acolyte with a tri-lobed green tattoo on his forehead appeared and handed the chemist a chased dagger, long and thin as a fillet knife. He took the dragonito by its barbed tail and stretched it out away from the chemist's hand. The guys felt queasy and apprehensive watching the little reptile--if that's what it was--squirm in hatred and fury.

The knife flashed in the flickering candlelight, slicing the scaly little throat. The young apprentice held a heavy chalice covered with creepy runes, catching the thing's blood to set reverently aside. With deft strokes the old chemist skinned the little animal, which somehow managed to project hatefulness even in death. He adroitly flayed the carcass and placed the hide on a metal charger held by the older acolyte. The flick of a yellow, sharpened pinkie nail dropped the entrails into a truly beautiful orange lacquer bowl. The master placed the carcass on the charger and the older boy retired, carrying the remains like a king's corpse.

The convoluted nails ripped and explored the bowl of alien guts, then extracted a black, still-pulsing organ. He held it up for approval, which the dudes rather wished he hadn't. The younger boy placed a tall, slender shooter glass of pale white liquor on the table and the chemist squeezed the bladder or hate gland or whatever it was, forcing out drops of bilious black that spreading into the liquid. He tossed the used-up gland to the floor and picked up the glass, swirling and shaking it in a stylized manner. He set the glass in front of the staring gang and spoke to Ben in a garble of semitic-sounding hawked syllables.

Nabo had made no bones of his distaste for the whole proceeding and muttered to Ben urgently. "Fuck's he saying, *mano*?"

"Basically," Ben said, unconsciously leaning away from the potion, "It's 'Take a test drive'."

The chemist coughed out another series of harsh sounds and Ben frowned. "That doesn't make any sense at all." The old goblin repeated the same words.

"He says that whoever tests it already knows what results it will bring."

Monke and Nabo stared at each blankly. Then Nabo snapped, "Well, fuck it, then," snatched up the glass and tossed it off.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, looked at his pals with a "now what" expression, and suddenly convulsed. He collapsed, falling over towards Monke, who laid his head on the table. Ben already had a jeweled thumb-lock pistol in his hand, but Monke held up a hand in restraint.

"I think he's getting his money's worth."

Ben looked back at Nabo, whose eyes had rolled inward to reveal white orbs. He slowly righted himself without using his hands. His feet came in, folding into a lotus position. His face was transforming, blazing with a holy fire. He vibrated, hovering an inch above his stool. The front of his pants tented up dramatically and obdurately. Monke stared at his friend for a few long minutes, then spoke to Ben.

"Ask Mister Whiskers what he wants for as much as he can get."

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Chapter Fifty-Five

The cops weren't hard to spot. Six of them in bell-bottomed indigo coveralls that made Ben think of American jailhouse attire. All carrying big wheel-lock rifles, the first local guns they'd seen that weren't fancied up and bejeweled. And the guns were pointing right at them, pinning them to the front wall of the apothecary. Were there laws against dragon gut ick around here?

All three knew that wheellocks are unreliable. The spring drives the striker wheel around, and sooner or later the flint sparks. Could take a second. Or it could fire immediately and the bore on these guns was at least an inch. And looked like a yard. The cops stood motionless, holding them frozen like a cobra eyeing a hare. Ben was calculating at the adrenaline speed that made him crave moments like this: cells firing like champions, ass-clench juice whipping his brain to superhuman performance. The street had cleared, but there were plenty of civilian targets in the flimsy reed cribs behind him. He realized that they couldn't move out, but it wouldn't be easy to wrap them up, either.

"I say we drink that snakeshit and take our chances," Nabo growled, measuring the line of chunky cops for where his first shot would hit when he popped his move. He had three single shot pistols on him, and figured they'd get him within distance to demonstrate some Mexican knifeplay to these *babosos*.

"Let's back into the shop, slow," Monke said out of the corner of his mouth. Like anybody could understand Spanish.

"You do that," Ben said, seeing their whole escape mapped out in the quicksilver trails of adrenaline rush. "Nabo and I run opposite directions. We meet up back at the termno."

"Run," Nabo scoffed. "Back up slow. What a couple of faggots."

"We'll do it your way, *Güero*," Monke said, cautiously preparing for his move.

"Why don't we give them all blowjobs first?" Nabo sneered. But Ben knew he was ready to sprint to his right. Then the guy in the cape showed up.

A full-length black cape that draped like velvet over his entire body, including a hood that hid his head. The saffron and gold insignia on it included a large version of the same crest that the cops wore on their lacquered hubcap helmets. He walked up to the end of the line of cops, far enough out in front of them to be seen and heard. He spoke in the local tongue but with an accent, maybe how educated locals spoke. He raised a hand and gave a command. The cops didn't move. Their guns and eyes remained fastened on Ben's bunch.

The guy in the black robe stood a minute, then grabbed his sleeve, rotating it to show the emblem there more clearly. He snapped out a phrase that only Ben knew was a demand that they look at his ranking. The soldiers' eyes moved to the emblem on the robe. And the three Mexicans did their dash. Monke was back into the apothecary in one leap, moving quickly away from the line of fire through the door, plunging into the depths of peculiar objects and creepy odors.

Ben dashed three steps and rolled, flopped behind a cart full of asparagus-looking veggies, dived right through an oiled-paper window behind him, a pistol in each hand. Nabo ran to his right, but immediately turned backwards, sprinting in reverse as he fired at the cops. He hit an arm, a gun. The cops wavered, flinched and sought targets as the boys melted away. Nabo bicycled in a zigzag pattern, trying for a clean shot at the robe, but when he came to the corner he dropped the empty pistols and took off, bounding up a pile of barrels to launch a long leap onto a roof.

There was a single cop guarding the termno, which Ben thought of as really careless. They'd been over-confident back there, thought they'd just nab us easy. No backup plan here at the only logical chokepoint. He worked closer to the termno, set in the stone floor of a pretty little picnic gazebo sheltered under graceful conifers. Then it hit him. They knew about the termno.

He stopped in his tracks, pondering the ghastly implications of that. He stuck his gun in his belt and move toward the gazebo, determined to take the sentry down without hurting him too seriously. If possible. He was ten meters from the cop's unguarded back when Nabo fell from a tree like a sack full of paperweights, drilling the cop to the ground and snatching his gun out of the air before it fell. He looked at Ben, smiling. "Seen the Monk?"

They stood back to back on the fully lit termno for seven fairly tense minutes, eyeing the grove and green/white meadow for Monke. Who showed up at a dead run, heading straight towards them across the pale grass, pumping like a wild man. They could hear pursuers shouting behind him. The pursuit came up the low rise when Monke was still thirty meters from the gazebo. Nobody knelt to fire, just pelted as fast as they could after the fleet Monke. Ben and Nabo stood rigid, ostentatiously pointing pistols at the cops behind past their sprinting pal. The threat did nothing to slow them, but one dived to a prone position and pointed his rifle. Nabo gripped his pistol in both hands, steadied it while he squeezed the trigger and the wheel spun off sparks. It was an impossible distance for a stubby smooth-barreled pistol, but the shot hit directly in front of the marksman, spraying him with dirt and particles, causing him to roll over, rubbing his eyes. Nabo instantly pulled out his bronze key and started winding the wheel back up again. Monke plunged on toward them. "Go," he was screaming. "Just go, *pendejos!*"

"Oh, yeah," Ben said. And instantly disappeared. Nabo threw down the gun he truly hated and vanished as well. Monke poured on a final kick, dived and rolled over twice before hitting the stone floor and winking out of sight. He continued to roll across the floor of an abandoned hotel lobby on Brindis, where Ben and Nabo laughed as he lay spread-eagled on his back gasping for wind.

"You didn't experience any delay, did you?" Ben asked, reaching to help him up to a sitting position. "You didn't straighten out in the tubes, just rolled straight across."

"Like an ugly *boliche* ball," Nabo added. "You were never tubed, were you?"

"No. I guess my mind had other things to be freaked out by," Monke said between heaving for air.

"What did you see?" Ben asked, highly curious.

"*Nada*," Monke replied, waving a dismissive hand. "Nada damn thing." He got to his feet, still breathing heavily. "But is that really what we care about right now? Scientific curiosity?"

"Oh, you mean the *placas*," Nabo said. "Waiting for us. And knew where we'd go if we got by them. That stuff?"

"Yeah, and the Grim Reaper in charge of them. Who the hell was that?" Ben hated not knowing, but the whole thing had shaken him.

"Did you notice his hand?" Monke asked, very intently, his breathing under control. "Anything special about it?"

"You mean the hand that was whiter than mine?"

"What the fuck's going on?" Nabo demanded truculently. "Who's after our ass? I thought this whole system was like an abandoned railroad or something."

"Well, I guess we just stay out of there from now on," Ben said, uncomfortable because he didn't know more about the situation he'd led them into. "They can't trail us across hyperspace."

"*Lastima*," Monke lamented. That *dragoncito* goo is big, big money."

"It was getting a little dull, anyway," Nabo said. "Never having any cops to deal with."

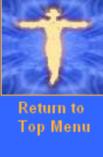
Monke and Ben gave him the eye, then laughed.

"We could use a drink," Ben said.

"You know it," Monke agreed emphatically. "Lets slip to Mexico and knock off some tequila."

Nabo was already heading for the termno "Andale, pues."

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Chapter Fifty-Six

The breathy puff of their sudden appearance was blown away by the wind. The seemed to be standing in midair, surrounded by miles of jungle, rows of yellow crops, and clumps of primitive clay huts, spired like inverted goblets. Monke, never fond of heights, peered very gingerly down the tiers of the eighty foot pyramid they stood on. The entire apex, about two meters square, was covered by the fading glow of the termno pattern. Not their usual landing zone.

The stone courses of the steep structure weren't empty. They looked down on a dozen or so tall people with waist-length black hair and complexions the color of milk chocolate. They all wore elaborate costumes of shiny hides, complex feathers, and silver. Monke quickly noted that several of these priests or carnival clowns, or whoever they were, appeared to be attractive women. "Not too shabby," he remarked to Nabo, who nodded approval.

His words caused the priest on the top row to jump, almost falling off his tier. He caught his balance, looked up, and nearly fell over again. Completely unhinged, he fell to his knees and started making hand signs at them.

"Gang signs?" Ben asked, snickering.

"Wow, real feather-wearing *indios*," Nabo said. "Kind of impressive."

Below the priests were screaming and weaving in excitement. Their language was close enough to Lexus that the guys could understand most of their wailing chorus.

"The time is now!" "We are here at the Arrival!" "At last the centuries send the Gods back among us!" "All our days are sacred, as we have lived to see this moment." The yells crescendoed into an incomprehensible babble.

Ben's group tried to look suitably God-like while surveying the hysteria. The men were banging their heads on the ground, holding up their arms with wrists bent like claws. The women were swaying, wide-eyed. Nice place. Built women.

"I'd say this one's a piece of cake," Nabo said dryly.

"Let's just hope they have something we can move," Monke said, eyeing the crowd of loin-clothed tribespeople who were flocking to the base of the pyramid's stairway.

"Yeah, because it doesn't look they're going to have much money to cop our shit." Nabo descended to the tier below, taking the stairs in a regal swagger. He approached a young priestess who knelt with her head bowed low, her sweet breasts bare under her feathered silver pectoral piece. She saw Nabo's scuffed boots in front of her eyes and stared at them in awe. She slowly raised her eyes to his face, ecstatic and fearful. Nabo made a lordly motion for her to stand. She came to her feet trembling. He reached to brush the lank hair away from her lovely, cocoa face and she swooned at his feet, shaking in orgasmic religious trance. He looked up at his friends.

"Piece of cake."

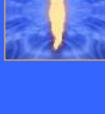
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Chapter Fifty-Seven

“Okay, this is the most disgusting one yet.” Monke wiped his watering eyes and avoided touching the filth-smears of the stinking alcove. At their feet, the termno glow was obscured by a layer of excrement and urine. “Get out of my way, will you, *cabrónes*.” He punched at Ben and Nabo, also struggling to breathe in the foul, stinging atmosphere of their arrival booth. They stumbled out into a wide, low stone room, somewhat less pestulant than the improvised pissoir they’d appeared in.

Ben looked around the dim, solemn space where they stood. You could see where the altar had been, the risers rubbed smooth by centuries of knees. He glanced at the row of alcoves, like confessionals or *nichos* for statues. All public latrines now, apparently.

“This used to be a temple,” he said. A lot of them used to be, he thought. He was forming an impression of how things had worked back in the day. He didn’t particularly like it.

“Great. *Capilla de San Cagada y Santa Miada*.” Monke was still having trouble drawing a full breath.

“We may just have to buy homes and settle down on this place,” Nabo said, examining his boots. “Because I’m not going back into that shithole.”

“We should be able to get prime real estate if they have any.” Ben tried to inject a cheerier note in the situation. “We’re going to be some rich mofos. We just need to get to a sieve and a bathroom.”

“What do you call this?” Monke grumbled. He made exaggerated gestures towards the door, making a show of holding his nose. Ben and Nabo smiled as they followed him through the carved stone pillars of the wide doorway. They stood blinking in the light of the street. Almost too many blinks.

Even dazzled by the sun, they made out the low wall of sandbags, crates and overturned metal carts. And the line of pecan-colored men with polished metal helmets, high collared sleeveless indigo coats, and very efficient-looking rifles with cylindrical magazines protruding from their sides. And the figure who stood behind them, bright chrome badges on the sleeves of a long black cloak.

The guys stood motionless on the steps, facing murderous firepower. Ben’s brain jumped into feverish gear, but registered nothing workable before Nabo spun around and punched a rough hand into his chest.

Nabo had caught the merest upward flicker of eyes in the skirmish line of mirrorhead cops, and put it together in the split-second allowed him. He spun and drove forward off his toes like a fullback, slamming his palms into his friends’ chests and carrying them backward in his desperate drive towards the temple door. Ben and Monke stumbled, trying to run backwards or turn. Monke tripped on a step and started to fall, but Nabo clutched his shirtfront, holding him as he charged to safety. The net fell right behind them, but snagged on a toe of Monke’s trailing foot. Ben fell against a pillar, saw the big fiber net that had just missed entangling them, Monke’s leg caught in the mesh. The black cloak yelled a command and the net jerked away from the door, accelerating down the street. Ben saw the rope, the team of horses it led to, the boys on the horses whipping them to a gallop. He took one step and kicked up from under the net, driving the moving webbing up and off Monke’s boot. The net whisked off down the street. Monke bolted toward the door on all fours, stumbling to his feet as they ran. Nabo stood in the cover of a pillar, daring any motherfucker to approach. Ben dived through the door, pushing Monke to the side, behind the pillar. A storm of automatic fire blasted a line of dust and rock chips from the pillars, a spate of bullets ricocheted into the calm, reeking air of the chapel.

Ben’s crew ran to the rear wall, sticking to the sheltered areas out of the line of the doorway. They waited for a break in the sleet of slugs to jump for the termno’s niche. They heard The Cloak scream a command outside, and the firing stopped. Ben had a thought as he hit the grid and punched through a very quick tube passage to stand safe in the Mexico subway. He looked around at his friends, Monke rubbing his ankle and Nabo shaking himself all over like a dog, his usual tension-breaker.

Nabo grinned at Ben. “See if they get any more of our business.”

Monke nodded, lips pursed in disapproval. “*Eso*. We come to help these people, inject their economy with the benefits of interplanetary tech, and this is our thanks?”

Ben smiled perfunctorily, but was working on something. “I know that voice from somewhere.”

“My nightmares,” Monke said fervently. “I’m about to make a huge score then some pale-assed gringo dressed up like Señor Muerte himself shows up yelling ‘No’ and trying to kill me. Then it turns all dark and there are scorpions and clowns and stuff.”

“How’d you know he was saying ‘No’,” Ben asked him. “Instead of ‘Fire’, or ‘Come back you scum’ or something?”

“Well, that’s what he said,” Nabo said, puzzled and trying to play it all back.

“He said it in Skywalker,” Monke blurted. “Tube talk. That Audi shit.”

“Lexus,” Ben said. “He’s from the tubes. Going around trying to catch us. Not kill us, catch us. And he knows where we’re going to show up next.”

“How?” Nabo asked. “We’d never even been to that toilet before.”

“No clue. Maybe they know what we bought and where it would sell well.”

“We don’t even know that yet,” Nabo objected. “We were just trying our luck there on Planet of the Turds.”

“Maybe they’re waiting for us everywhere,” Monke said solemnly. That had a chilling effect on the trio. They pondered their reverses, probing what they knew.

“Then why aren’t they here?” Ben suddenly said, drawing only shrugs. “Who the hell is after us and why? Who would give a damn?”

Abruptly, he stepped back onto the termno, which flickered into life. Monke yelled, “No, Ben. *Estas loco, wey?*”

Ben smiled and said, “Duh,” then disappeared.

He didn’t see anyone in the temple or by the doors as he peered out of the stench of the pisser. He moved cautiously to the door and looked into the sunlit street, where the line of riflemen was off guard, milling around while three of their company carried metal casks toward the steps. The black-robed figure stood with his back to the chapel, talking with agitated gestures to a few obvious non-coms. The hood was down, showing a shock of pale cornsilk hair. Aha, Ben thought, a *gabacho* in the woodpile.

He could hear what the cloak was yelling. And yeah, in Lexus. “We are here to capture them, you idiots, not kill them!”

Ben smiled. That’s nice to know. He stepped out into the doorway and yelled, “That’s nice to know, Snowflake.”

Tullio whipped around and stared at him in shock. Ben was also very surprised, but almost instantly chided himself for not thinking along those lines in the first place. His thoughts on that were cut off when one of the officers Tullio had been chewing out snatched a hand device from the top crate in the barricade and started hooking it up to the end of a wire that ran across the street and up the steps. The soldiers carrying casks dropped them and ran for the barricade. Uh-oh.

Now I notice all the little barrels and sacks piled against the pillars, Ben thought, turning to run. Behind him he heard Tullio screaming, “No! No, I said!” He leaned into his sprint for the alcove, running the Aztec glyph through his head like a Tibetan monk gone yantra-happy. Then he lost his train of thought as the hard billowing storm of the explosion caught him and hurled him to the wall.

He came to on the grimy paving of the metro, hurting all over and looking up at Nabo and Monke laughing so hard they could barely stand up.

“You look like a cat that lit a cigar the mouse gave it,” Nabo hooted. Ben rubbed his face and felt the soot, smelled his singed hair as well as the delicate bouquet of exploded outhouse.

“Next time take care of your bodily needs before we go,” Monke scolded him. “We can’t stand around waiting for you to go to back to the toilet.”

He could hear the relief beneath their humor and felt one of his occasional nudges of helpless affection for these, his asshole buddies. He accepted Nabo’s hand and got to his feet aching all over. “The ironic thing,” he said, “is that we still need a bathroom.”

“Or another destination,” Monke said. “And pretty quick before nature takes its course and we end up with our drawers full of four million ducats of dope nobody on earth would come near.”

Ben looked back at the fading termno grid. “I’m a little burned out on travel right now. Let’s get a room with good *baños* and bar service.” He stretched, groaned, and looked at them seriously. “There’s something we need to discuss, anyway. Somebody, actually.”

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Chapter Fifty-Eight

Everybody in the place had flat, blue-black skin, slitted eyes, and heads shaved bald except for elaborately lacquered topknots that added almost a foot to their height. They were also uniformly roughneck scoundrels. Even here in Minius, the most rugged ratnest of rascally rakehells they'd happened on yet, this bar stood out as degenerate and dangerous. Even the wall art advertised the general orientation of the place. Lots of bars have paintings of naked women, but usually not brandishing knives and decorated with scars. Ben and Monke held firearms cocked in their laps, ugly revolvers with huge cylinders and bamboo handles. The other partiers at their table were sleek black local drug fiends, laughing with pointed yellow teeth as they tossed off odd liquors and smoked from stubby blue clay pipes like stubby kazoos.

Nabo stood squarely behind them, making no secret of what he held under the bright blue brocade ceremonial robe. His counterpart stood opposite, also advertising being armed, vigilant, and a hair from going off. He scowled at Nabo, a ghastly display of ridges and teeth that would have intimidated many a strong man. Nabo flashed him a friendly grin. The counterpart blinked, thought it over, then returned a merry smile, marred only slightly by his collection of welts and scars.

One of the local drug fiends, a white rosette pattern etched into his face, passed Monke a bottle of pinkish liquid with some vaguely aquatic creature moving inside it. Monke tipped it up and knocked back a swig. He handed the bottle, carefully masking his disgust in order to set Ben up. Ben took it, squinted at the struggling mollusk, and tilted it up for a deep draught. He covered up his reaction, but Monke had been watching and caught the flutter of his throat muscles. Ben kissed the glass outside the imprint of the suction pseudopod and passed the bottle on. Meanwhile their tattooed trading partner was examining the low stone bowl of golden herb. He sniffed at it, examined some on his finger. He spoke laconically to Ben in the lilting local jive.

“No way,” Ben told him. “Totally organic. Look at this.”

He reached into his robe, drawing a flicker of attention from Nabo's counterpart, and slowly drew out a large, golden marijuana leaf, which he passed to the fiend.

“See. It's all herbs and spices, Tats.”

The leaf was sniffed, stroked, nibbled, and tugged at by the tattooed dooper and his circle of attendant fiends. Ben took out another whole leave and ground it between his palms. He dusted the crushed herb into the bowl of a huge Max Ernst hookah in the middle of the table, motioned the Tattooed Man to the ivory mouthpiece beside him, and leaned over to light the weed up.

The smoking tube passed from mouth to mouth with mellowing results and smiling nods. Nothing too crazy. Good for mellowing out or having some nice, violent sex. The lead trader looked at the leaf again, stroked it, scrutinized the contents of the bowl. He jabbered again, cat cries in the night.

“Michoacan”, Ben said, drawing a blank.

The tattoos clumped together as the local tried to place the name. He spoke again.

“Hell, no,” Ben replied indignantly. “We're from the *Distrito Federal*.”

Finally hearing words he understood, Nabo chimed in, “Damn straight. Red-boned *Chilangos*, that's us.”

Their man nodded judiciously, now understanding all. He held the bowl up in one hand, waved at it with the other as though trying to make it disappear in a puff of smoke, and yowled more jive at Ben.

“We've got a buttload of it,” Ben said. “Actually, three buttloads.”

Grinning, the local flashed a role of bright blue banknotes, raising his eyebrows to redraw the white lines of his forehead. Ben shook his head. What these worlds needed was a central bank. Their host clapped his hands twice and a very snaky dancing girl undulated over to the table and showed her wares to the boys. Not too bad, Nabo thought. Even the scars weren't bad, arranged in an interesting pattern like contour lines. Ben smiled at the dancer, but politely shook his head at TatMan.

Who frowned and pulled a finely worked leather pouch from his robe and rolled it out on the table. Inside were a bundle of what looked like large porcupine quills. He mimed stabbing one of the quills into his forearm, then held it up close to Ben's face. He squeezed it lightly and a tiny drop of green fluid appeared, quivering on the needle-sharp point.

“Oh, no. Not that shit again,” Nabo groaned.

“We know where we can double up on it,” Monke told Ben. “Take it.”

“You test the sample,” Nabo snarled. “I'm not touching that psycho *cagada*.”

“What a puss,” Ben said, offhandedly.

“Fuck it,” Nabo snapped. “If I have wet dreams I want them to be human. At least mammals.”

“A bigot, too,” Monke intoned sorrowfully. “Sad.”

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Chapter Fifty-Nine

The deal had been consummated on the strength of Monke's test of the sample green injection turning him into a gibbering heap of sweats, moans and simulated coitus that amused the tavern habitués no end. Nabo and his hulking counterpart were seated at the table now, joining in the drinking and highsiding with this fascinating new group of *compadres*. Monke had just drawn a chorus of laughs and applause with a sudden spasm of dryhumping when Ben felt Nabo stiffen beside him.

He looked up and swore under his breath, but still smiled at their hosts. "Who *are* those guys?" he asked Nabo, who made a face and stepped back to the wall where he'd leaned a three-barreled bronze blunderbuss with an ornate piezoelectric element to fire its loads of waxed chain.

"I'd say Tool-io picks up a different bunch of stooges on every world," he said. "Seems weird they all wear the same color. But tell me, do we really care?"

"I'm starting to be a little concerned," Ben said as a second wave of troopers flowed in behind Tullio's escort. Dozens of them, some carrying heavy weapons that looked like elongated tubas. His thinking was starting to accelerate, stretching out towards the quicksilver calculations he dug so much. "When I talk to this guy, hand me that shotgun," he said calmly. "You take care of Monke. Don't let him too near your sporting goods, I'd say."

Nabo looked at Monke, who spasmed with lust for invisible partners, his mouth working, his pelvis twitching. "Too bad we didn't keep that net."

Ben leaned forward, raising an eyebrow that brought his new trade partner's hieroglyphic face closer, leaning conspiratorially over the wreckage of snacks, pipes and drinks. "Have you ever been around white guys like us before?" he asked.

The tattooed villain examined him, thought for a second. "There are stories."

"Well, you know, we're just here to deal. Have a few drinks and laughs with some colleagues." The swirled face nodded expectantly. "But a lot of white guys are into like, well, they capture black guys and make them slaves. Not us. But you know, it happens a lot."

The fiend's face hardened, re-assessing Ben and his companions. Then he smiled delightedly. "That's what the stories were about. They wanted to make us work for them. Build things."

Ben hadn't expected such a cinch payoff to his gambit. He blinked at TatMan, glanced back at the cops spreading slowly along the back walls, Tullio searching the smoky room for sight of them. He couldn't resist his curiosity, though. "How'd that turn out?"

"We ate them." The limned head flopped back in raucous yowls of glee. His sidekicks also howled and yowled, the table surrounded by hundreds of gleaming, sharpened teeth. Monke yelped, too, from the depths of his sexbuzz.

"Well don't look now," Ben said, knowing they would all look now. "But there's your slaver right there. With his gang. My amigo is going to hand me that gun. Relax, it's for them, not you. Okay?"

The dealer turned and stared at the encircling line of cops. And at Tullio, who practically had Arrogant White Slaver embossed on his forehead. He scowled, then turned back to Ben. He grinned ferociously. "So you will stand with us against them?"

"Absolutely," Ben assured him. "That's why I warned you. Who are those guys in the purple uniforms?"

"Never saw them before," the tattooed dooper said, pulling out two wicked looking pepperbox revolvers. He turned to his men, who were glaring at the intruders and readying some fairly scary weapons of their own. He grinned at Ben again, "And nobody's going to see them again."

Ben felt the shotgun brush his flank, grabbed it as his latest drinking buddy stood up, hammered the table for attention and squalled a word that sounded like "*Efrendu*". Carousers at other tables also stood, just noticing the uniforms among them or getting clear on how to treat them. The tattooed dope fiend nodded pleasantly at Ben, spun around with both hands held straight out in front of him and opened fire on the cops. Around the room there came an echoing blast as fifty black avengers followed suit. Ben jumped up, aiming the tri-lobed blunderbuss. Gunning with a clusterfuck of bicycle horns, he thought as he pulled the first trigger. The shot removed a section of four cops who had been unlimbering one of the tubas. Other cops were going down, some returned fire. Customers were screeching like maniacs, jumping up on chairs and tables to charge the offending cops with long, wavy knives or vicious hatchets with trailing blades like iceskates.

Ben fired another barrel into a knot of heavy weapons cops, blowing them out of the picture. From the corner of his eye he saw Nabo snatch Monke up with one hand and throw him over his shoulder. Monke copulated madly with the shoulder, his dangling hands cupping Nabo's butt cheeks as he moaned. "Let's get out of here," Nabo growled. "Somewhere I can slap this *puto's* ass around for this."

Ben nodded, pointed to the rear door he'd already picked out. Nabo headed for it, the undulating Monke over one shoulder, the other methodically firing an eight-barreled pistol into the police line to cover his retreat. Ben was right behind him, his final barrel held ready. He didn't see Tullio... no wait, there was the flash of pale hair moving back out the front door behind a phalanx of indigo uniforms. He backed towards the door, but a white-whorled face popped up in front of him. Waving a smoking pepperbox and one of the grisly tomahawks. "Where are you going, friend?"

Ben pointed at the cops following Tullio out the front door. "Around front, cut them off," he yelled. The tattooed warrior, who had thrown off his shirt to reveal a chiseled musculature dotted with various nicks and lesions from old wounds, howled approval. "Yes! Good! Go! I'm enjoying myself here." He turned back, firing and howling.

At the termno, set in an abandoned plaza between two dry fountains filled with trash, Nabo strode right on to the grid, Monke draped on his shoulder as limp as boiled linquine. "It's all just love," he muttered into Nabo's ass. "Love is love is just love. It's all love because we all love."

Ben laughed at Nabo's expression at receiving this sentiment and stepped on the hashmarks beside him. A second later a pile of guns clattered down onto the flagstones, along with the bundle of injectable reptile sextasy. This was starting to get expensive.

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Chapter Sixty

The most superficial scan of the waterfront skyline tells all that needs to be known about En Lari, brash jewel/sewer of the Northern continent of Plenati: it's a jittery, nasty, wide-open pleasure port tossed up in fitful spasms of profit and appetite. Within earshot, the city boogies to a pounding clamor of the same sexual goodjive music spun out by hot, outlaw seaports on any world. Between the glittering neon buildings and sprawl of striving squalor, it's South Beach meets Vegas meets Rio. But with much higher tech and cooler cars.

For instance, the lowslung, open sex sled coming around the corner on two wheels with Nabo at the tiller and his buddies grasping to keep three squealing girls from sliding off the slick seats or out of their skimpy madrags. The kind of car you get when you package the technological essentials in an iridescent skin that wraps form around function with the same insidious logic as a woman's body. As if designed by Buck Rogers for a Lowriders spread. Whooping and shrieking, all six kids survived Nabo's ongoing experiments in ballistic improbability and the car yanked to a halt somewhat near a vacant space guarded by several truculent urchins and a uniformed, officious type whose corruption was as obvious as his function as Beat Cop.

Hitching up a complex web harness loaded with insignia and curious tools of the trade, tugging down the broad brim of his shiny shako, the cop strolled over to the recent scene of at least five illegal vehicular activities. Not even to mention the underage girls and artlessly displayed liquor and drugs. Nabo, resplendently stoned, managed to lift a girl out of the covey by handling almost every interesting area of her body. Monke was turning his own extrication into a virtual sex act. Ben stood up with a girl sitting on his shoulders, hands on his head. With her feet down behind his back and his face buried between her thighs. She craned her head around to give him navigational directions. Which didn't work out all that well.

Nabo spotted the approaching cop and darted a hand under his loose, kimono-styled shirt of many, many garish colors. The cop froze in his tracks, then stepped forward smiling as Nabo pulled out a flat, rounded flask of translucent green metal and offered it to him. Tapping a hand to his hat brim, the cop accepted a deep draft from the flask, then another quick one when Nabo turned to either get the girl's hand out of his side-slit britches or help her at her task.

The cop waved imperiously to the gang of urchins, who showed him obviously despicable gestures before running to the car and shoving it sideways to the curb of the red cobbled sidewalk. Once the car was tucked into its favored spot, they started polishing it with loving care. Several snatched up remnants of booze and dope from the seats and floor, two others sidled up to Our Gang as they fumbled their bimbos towards the sheer glass front of the building.

The leader of the brat pack thrust out a hand to Ben for money. Ben tossed him a handful of octagonal metal tokens from his pocket. The assistant gamine leader dived for them, but the other sneered at the amount and stuck his hand out to Nabo. Monke, moving with startling speed for a young man practically at the passout level from ingesting copious overloads of God knew what, snatched the kid and held him upside down, shaking him. Money, drugs, cheap pornographic toys, and improvised weapons showered out on the entrance apron. The other gamines nearly killed themselves acting out their deep amusement at this event and the cop grinned as he toasted them with his new flask.

Nabo gestured and Monke spun the squirming boy towards him, jerking down his ragged pants to display his scrawny ass. Nabo slapped the writhing buttocks playfully, then his girl leaned over to plant a big kiss on one cheek, leaving a glowing violet lip print. Released, the boy tried to look around and see his new adornment, then kicked off his pants and strutted back to the car to show it off to his convulsing chums. Yet in spite of everything, Ben and company managed to get themselves and their booty through a pair of doors six meters wide.

The lobby was everything to be expected of one of the tallest, loosest, most attention-demanding buildings in a city built largely on excess and diseased ego. Vast, ostentatiously rounded, seemingly carved from a block of pure white quartz, with a common area as common as anybody could wish, especially the swilling, smoking, frolicking, gambling denizens of this buzzing nest of wickedness. Suspicious quantities proffered, if not force-fed, at every gleaming occasional table. Chances being tossed against the side walls as strings of colored beads were waved in wager. Whores sitting on laps and chairs displayed their wares while sneering at the attributes of our boys' latest finds. Women stalked through in diaphanous color like flaming butterflies, men gleamed in jewels and shined boots. Music from four different sources created an urgent, insistent bedlam.

Everybody waved at the guys, touched them in passing, laughed, toasted, cajoled, and glared. They herded the girls onto a soft round platform hovering in one of the transparent tubes across from the doors. Lust and hilarity continued in the tube, bare buttocks seen pressed against the clear walls. Then Ben spoke three syllables and the girls squealed prettily as the platform shot upward with a pneumatic suction sound that seemed to echo down a mile of dark cave.

Hugh Hefner by way of The Jetsons: an endless apartment bounded by an arrogantly flaunted floor-to-wall marine view on one side and a relentless display of wealth, leisure, impulse, sexuality, and menace in the shelves and niches opposite. Plenati was more advanced than Earth, which the guys had appreciated mostly in terms of cool toys.

An upholstered conversation pit offered the choice of watching an enormous curved gold screen, an egg-shaped gold fireplace with dancing flames in chemical colors, or miles and miles of the colors of water over offshore reefs. The place glowed cozily, though no light sources were visible. Obscure metal appliances winked here and there, a huge bar bristled with peculiar bottles in odd colors and glassware that looked like ice squeezed to fit the hand. The floor was a fleecy invitation to lay down and roll around naked, an invitation more often accepted than declined.

The double doors from the elevator landing exploded inward and immediately an array of piezopods thundered into music best described as "Fuck Me Stupid Beats". Nabo drove directly to the pit, sweeping the wide-eyed girl with him and tumbling out of sight except for the occasional kicking of uplifted feet.

Ben and Monke went to the bar while the other two girls stared around, distracted by the view, the piles of big raw jewels on the counter, the tangle of money and weapons on the tables. They ogled the scene a minute, then shot each other a quick look. Holy moly, honey!

Then Ben and Monke were back with drinks for one and all. Ben swept out a gracious hand, holding a gold tray laden with fine pink powder. The girl who'd been riding his shoulders stared at it, then looked him in the face and slapped the tray out up out of his grip. She gave him a wicked minx smile and stepped into the expensive pink cloud and took a deep breath that expanded her breasts to the bursting point. Her friend stared at her in shock and took a halfstep back towards the doors. But Monke fell apart laughing and Ben was obviously smitten.

Drinks, girls, and more pink dust finally gathered in the conversational cockpit, where things took a turn towards beautiful young people having a good clean frolic. The whole orgy, lit by the flicker of screens and diodes and flame art, was reflected in the huge wall of windows as the bluish sun dipped to the horizon, sparkling the scene with motes of alien constellations.

When you run riot over dozens of worlds, you can select from a pretty broad menu of choices when it's time to pick a hideout. And Ben had come to the conclusion that of the options available he'd picked a unique and excellent profession. And definitely a great way to work weekends while doing college.

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Chapter Sixty-One

“Look.” Ben spread his hands in what Erin was starting to think of as his Faux Reasonable Mudra. “Let’s say a bunch of Swedes go down to Africa and start interbreeding.”

“Make it Dutchmen and you might be onto something,” she said, leaning back to wait for where he was going. Since she’d humanized Ben’s apartment they did a lot of their studying and arguing here, usually over this rickety table littered with debris of a wolfed-down meal. When he wasn’t off on his mysterious weekend trips to wherever. She felt oddly at home in the tacky little kitchen. It wasn’t exactly “hers”, but it also wasn’t a public place like the dorm or library...and it wasn’t a home that belonged to people who’d made a career out of finding and supersizing her every conceivable fault.

In the bedroom they seemed to agree on absolute everything. She was a little nervous about the degree of intimacy she’d achieved with him. Especially since she had a feeling it had less to do with true love or even great sex than with forced complicity. Such as being the only two people on campus who knew the truth behind the headlines about the grisly murders of two star athletes.

And that other little matter of aliens being among us, and possibly having created us in their image. It had narrowed her field of serious science discussion down to the two of them. Everybody else was fooling around with childish myths: she and Ben were just trying to hammer out something they could understand from what fragments they knew.

“Okay, Dutch uncles,” Ben said with his slight patronizing inflection. “The next generation of Dutch/Zulu or whatever is not going to have any blue-eyed, blonde kids.”

“But what I’m saying is there would be some blending. Coffee-colored skin. Not just pure black.”

“I guess I resemble that statement,” Ben said. “But how about the next generation? And the next one?”

“The recessive characteristics could match up. I think it’s like one out of four could exhibit any given recessive quality.” She poured more coffee from the nice Italian carafe she’d contributed to the impromptu household. Stirred in cream. Thought, See?

“But eventually, they’ll be eliminated. Or you’ll have an occasional black kid with blue eyes. But the Swedes will have essentially disappeared. And if they know that, they are going to protect their recessive genes by limiting interbreeding. Doesn’t that make sense? Is self-preservation some racist evil?”

“You know, that’s exactly the point of a Public Enemy album called ‘Fear of a Black Planet’. My sister used to listen to it as part of her war of attrition against Mums.”

“This was back when rappers were black, right? So if they say it, it’s brilliant and if I say the same thing I’m a racist? Of mixed race?”

“That’s right, you’ve only been in the U.S. two years, haven’t you?”

“I’m learning. But see, the Swedes aren’t just white.” Ben peered at her cup and she offered the carafe. He held out his cup, smiled as she poured. See there was that sort of thing. He never took her for granted. A small thing, but it made up for a lot.

“They have Volvos,” he went on. “And iPods and machine guns and middle management.”

“And the locals have donkeys and drums and spears.”

“Exactly. So they get deferred to. They can stick together and rule from a castle on the hill. And the locals will see them as superior. Another reason not to water down their gene pool.”

“And they form a caste system. Like in India. Jesus, I never thought of that before. The caste system is light-skinned on top, dark on bottom. And the white guys were called Aryans. So is your alleged space father the honky in the woodpile there?”

“Somebody like him.” Ben was never sure how much of his story Erin bought. She’d seen the termno work, but he often suspected she thought his explanation was some sort of cover story. “It’s not that different in Mexico. The people you see on the *tele* and the government posts are all blond *güeros*. Down at the bottom, a bunch of *indios* and *negros*.”

“So you’d end up with a hierarchy based on genetics. With Abba on top and Idi Amin at the bottom.” She paused and thought. “Which is pretty much what we have.”

“And with a little social structure the racial tiers perpetuate themselves. I believe it completely. Because check it out...you can breed for blondes, but you can’t breed up a bunch of recessive characteristics out of African monkeys.”

“Monkeys?” Her shock was only half-feigned. She couldn’t get a handle on where Ben fit into all this. And got the feeling that he couldn’t, either.

“That’s sooooo racist.”

“Me, racist?” Ben put his fingers to his breast in protest. “You’re the one who keep saying everybody evolved from apes over in Olduvai.”

Erin’s eyes sparkled in fun as she leaned forward for rebuttal. But a crisp knock at the door cut them off. Ben stood and went over to answer and Erin had the uneasiness that she got at any interruption in his apartment. There hadn’t been any sequels to the one about a hard-eyed savage dropping by to massacre her classmates, but still...

She countered the feeling with a light jest. “It’s probably the Monkey Anti-Defamation League already. Sniffed out your anti-simianism.”

Quite the contrary: it was Kairos. Ben nodded at him, thinking; Uh-oh.

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Chapter Sixty-Two

Ben notice a slight glitch in his father's usually well-oiled response as he stepped in smiling formally at Ben and bowing graciously to Erin. The usual womanizing fascination was missing and there seemed to be something disturbing him. Which Ben rather enjoyed. He gestured at the table, where Erin had regrouped into a less casual posture, and said, "Dad, this is Erin. And this is Kairos, baby. My father."

Kairos glided to the table and Ben could see his charm working on his girlfriend. If she could see her response, she'd hate herself for a week, Ben thought. Kairos bent to kiss her hand, gave her the usual studied eye, and slid into a chair facing her. "A great pleasure," he said, all clipped old-world suavity. "Your taste in company is as good as your taste in wines is bad, Ben. She's a true beauty."

Ben removed the empty *vin ordinaire* bottle from the table and got another cup from the drying rack. "Sorry, the coffee isn't imported from anywhere exotic."

Kairos waved imperiously at his cup. "I'm sure it will be fine." He turned his attention back to Erin. "You have that Yale pre-law look about you, my dear. Are you helping Ben to improve his marks?"

"We were just discussing racial colonialism," Ben said quickly. "Caste systems, things like that. Erin is a bit of a bug on racism and exploitation."

Erin shot him a look that promised drastic payback and spoke demurely to Kairos, who she was having a little trouble taking in. If nothing else, he made Ben's claims easy to believe. He looked like some decadent immortal from the Highlander series. "I suppose if I was pre-law I could do more about it. But I haven't declared a major yet."

"Do more about the caste system?" There was an undercurrent in Kairos manner. He knows she knows, Ben thought. Oh, shit. He must know about the trafficking and all that, too. Maybe even about Nabo killing those jocks. *Ay, ay ay.*

"In the larger sense of the concept," Erin answered.

"Delicately put," Kairos said. "Would India be a proper barometer for that larger view? I suppose. Wouldn't you say that modern colonialism checked the racism?"

"By replacing the Brahmins at the top of the pyramid with even whiter foreigners?" Erin was startled by the comment, suspecting a trap.

"Well, yes. But that's over now, isn't it?" Kairos sipped hot black coffee as punctuation. Then bored in. "Was India better off before the Raj? They were inhumanly poor slaves ruled by some of the wealthiest tyrants on Earth. Lifelong captives of racial classes. Now they have a middle class, elect their own leaders, worship their own stupid religion, design cybernetic systems, have nuclear weapons."

"Oh, good," Erin said, playing for time.

"Personally, I think they were better off under the British," Kairos continued blandly. "So many cultures were."

"Mexico didn't do so well," Ben said. "We got the Spanish. We're poor Catholics with an agricultural economy, a caste system, and no nukes."

"Would you have been happier as an Aztec peasant?" Kairos said, smiling. "Now there's a life said to require a certain amount of personal sacrifice."

Erin smiled in spite of herself. "The Spanish preferred to enslave and interbreed," she said. "The English just killed the Indians off."

"Take your pick," Ben said darkly.

Erin rose smoothly, showing her figure to advantage, and nodded to them. "Nature calls. Excuse me, Mr. Ochoa."

"Please," he said, instantly on his feet. "Kairos."

She gave it a little extra heading for the bathroom, but Ben sensed that his father's usual intimate manner had just been perfunctory. None of his normal sexual focus on any attractive woman. Ben actually felt a little slighted. What, my main girl isn't worth lusting after? As soon as the door closed he turned to his father, "Gee, Pops, what a nice surprise. What brings you around?"

"I've a few questions about your travel arrangements lately. But that will wait. Look, who is she?"

"I told you. She's Erin. Yalie. Hot redhead. So what?"

"Red hair. Exactly. And a very pure strain."

"Yeah, breed her with Blue Jumper and she could win a few cockfights. What are you saying?"

"You had no way of knowing. But listen, red hair is just as much a genetic tag as blond hair is. But it's not from The Race."

Ben stared at him. "Wait, wait. Are you saying there's a third player in your whole planetary DNA gangbang?"

"Absolutely," Kairos said, setting down his coffee and leaning forward. "They aren't planetary and they aren't Sky. Nobody really knows much about where they came from or what they are doing here. Or elsewhere. It's a mystery. But one thing's for sure, they are dangerous."

"Dangerous? She's more dangerous than you are?"

"It's hard to explain quickly. But yes. You need to be very careful about dealing with them."

They heard the toilet flush and Kairos became more urgent. The only thing I've ever seen him get agitated about, Ben thought. Wonder how he feels about chicks with green and purple hair.

Quickly, Kairos said. "We need to talk about you running around in the tubes. And about this. I'll be back soon. Meanwhile, I have to caution you about the Reds. The vital thing is this: don't get too involved."

"Involved? What do you mean?"

"Don't play stupid. I mean sex. Procreational activities, you understand. I'm very serious about this."

They heard her hand on the knob and Kairos said, "We'll talk further."

Erin came back and picked up the carafe, took it to the kitchen to refill. "Would you like anything to eat, Mr. Ochoa?"

Behind her back, Ben grinned at Kairos. "Hey Erin, weren't you telling me that Thomas Jefferson was a redhead?"

"Yes I was. My mother thinks he's a relative but hasn't been able to prove it yet. Only a matter of time. Or money."

"Wow," Ben said. "A founding father."

"The federalists," Kairos said suavely. "A different voice in the making of the nation."

Erin returned and sat, offered the coffee around. "Aaron Burr, also. But Mums isn't as hot to get him into the genealogy."

Kairos shook his head at her offer of coffee. He stood and leaned over to catch her eye. "Very nice to meet you, Erin. Sorry I have to run. Ben, I'll see you soon." He was across the room and out the door before they could react.

Erin leaned back in her chair and studied Ben solemnly. "So that was Daddy, huh? I'm glad you got the looks without having to also be a charming prick."

"Oh, he grows on you," Ben told her. "Kind of an acquired taste."

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Chapter Sixty-Three

“You’ve been using your termno for mischief.” Kairos was talking before he even got through the door, pushing past Ben with a sidelong glance at the ratty sweatpants and Marilyn Manson T-shirt he’d slept in. He strode to the kitchen and poured coffee, turned to face Ben, who had slouched into a chair to wait him out. “It was supposed to aid you in your studies in The Sky.”

“And it does. I’ve been spending more time with Exemplars than I have here at school. And I go up there to do a lot of my homework. Stolen hours and all that.”

“Yes, yes. In front of the fire in Memon’s Henry Higgins stage set. But I’m talking about traipsing around to other worlds. What are you thinking?”

“Doing research. Getting to know what’s out there. Aren’t I supposed to?”

Kairos glared at him, simmering and probing. Finally he said. “I’d suggest you concentrate on books and examples for now. You don’t want to be seen interfering in other worlds. Please believe me on this.”

“Sure. Anything else on your mind this early in the morning?”

“As you know.” Kairos pushed his cup aside and leaned toward Ben, speaking more urgently than Ben was used to seeing. “The girl who was here last night.”

“Erin. My main squeeze.”

“Squeeze. That’s a wonderful locution. Listen, there are lots of young women and a young man like you shouldn’t have any trouble accessing them. But she won’t do.”

“Won’t do what?” Ben asked with innocent eyes.

“I should have anticipated this,” Kairos said. “But there is so much to…”

He leaned back and took on a less aggressive tone. “Let me explain something. I think I’ve made a pretty good case for my ‘theory’ about the dark haired and blond-haired races on this planet. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Sure have. And if I don’t repeat it to anybody I might not flunk out or get scooped up for the house of buggin’.”

“Well, there is another factor in all that, which I haven’t explained. Because, frankly, we don’t understand it very well.”

“Incredible. It’s kind of comforting that you don’t know everything.”

“There is another group active on this planet. And other worlds. They didn’t build anything here, or anywhere. They seem to wait, then swoop in after things are well established. And start manipulating things to their own ends. There aren’t that many, but they show up in powerful places with agendas. They are trouble. They have red hair.”

“So Conan O’Brian is part of a conspiracy? Wait, wait… Ronald McDonald! That *is* insidious, *caramba*.”

“I suppose being snotty is hereditary, as well as the rest. But listen, because I am very serious about this. Avoid the whole red-haired race. They’re like us in many ways, including the recessiveness. They are bandits. And one way they work is by subverting bloodlines. They can’t bear true among the local breeds, but among us they can. You have to break it off with her.”

“That seems sort of harsh.”

“They have a way of bringing sexuality and reproduction to the forefront very quickly. It’s what they do. You’re still quite young to be saddled with a family, don’t you think?”

“Oh, families aren’t such a burden. Not in this family.”

Kairos glared at him, so tense he seemed coiled to explode. Ben could easily have seen him launching out of the chair and swinging. But the moment passed and the usual blasé style resumed.

“Does she get to know why I’m dumping her?” Ben asked. “She’s probably not really aware of being a temptress and DNA bandit.”

“Well, I suppose you could tell her,” Kairos said with offhand sarcasm.

“No need for that,” Ben said, stretching lazily. “I think she can hear pretty well with the door ajar like that.”

Kairos snapped his head towards the open bedroom door, which immediately framed Erin, tousled and sexily vulnerable in one of Ben’s old shirts.

“Tom Robbins says redheads are made up of sugar and lust,” she purred sweetly. “I can do without the sugar, personally.”

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Chapter Sixty-Four

“Well, of course, I’m interested the whole Red Menace thing,” Erin told Kairos seriously, smearing cream cheese on her microwaved bagel. “But frankly I’m a lot more interested in you blondies. Vis-à-vis ‘People of Color’.”

Kairos had been at the edge of even his monumental unflappability when he realized not only that his son and heir was actively commingling with the redhead gene pool, but that his girlfriend was privy to everything he had revealed to Ben. But he betrayed no motion or emotion as the kids frolicked around his discomfiture.

“Pops is your kindly colonial type,” Ben told her. “He likes screwing the *inditas*, crossbreeding more hands for the old plantation.

“But doesn’t that contradict what you were saying about inbreeding, Mr. Ochoa?” Erin asked, the soul of sympathetic inquiry. “Preserving superior racial superiority and all those concepts of patronization and well... racism?”

Kairos gave her a stare so measured and experienced that she shut up. Let’s evaluate instead of getting cute, Erin, she thought to herself. This is a pretty unique learning experience, after all.

He said, “Your ‘racist’ term is informed by such a small, simplified, jejune sample of life that it’s less insulting than just funny.”

“Well, all we have available is our experience here on this backwater world,” Ben said. “And we’re just sophomores. So maybe there’s a better word for a ruling class jerking our planet around so we can be peons and fuck-puppets.”

“Before this is over,” Kairos said, with a serious power that drew their undiluted attention, “You will understand what these concepts really mean. And that I’m on your side. There’s a much bigger game going on in the universe and I’m trying to deal you people in.”

There was a long pause after that remark. Erin and Ben looked at each other, but didn’t communicate anything. They both looked back at Kairos, sitting stiffly in his chair as if it were a throne he’d built it with his own hands. Finally Ben spoke.

“So tell us. Who are you, really? Who is she? Who am I. What the fuck?”

Kairos lapsed into a lecture tone. “There are several groups responsible for humanizing this world, each with a different area granted to them. Asians came from one cluster, Amerinds from another. Indo-Europeans from another. Not counting influence from the redhead...tribe. Who are called Areans.”

“*We* are the Aryans?” Erin burst out. “Then what in God’s name are you? You look like a Master Race poster.”

“Our input to the genome here is centered in Scandinavia. It’s a sort of protected preserve for our characteristics.”

“So you’re like Nordic?” Erin pressed. “Or Nordics R U?”

“We call ourselves by a really ancient term,” Kairos told her. “We are the pure Nyrds.” He was taken completely aback by Erin and Ben breaking into laughter so uproarious they had trouble keeping their seats.

“Did I say something funny?” he inquired coldly.

“Oh yeah,” Ben said. “You *so* did.”

Still giggling, Erin said, “So you were right about them having Volvos.”

This time Kairos reacted. “Having *what*? What does that have to do with anything?”

They stared at him blankly, then Erin started laughing again. “Lost in translation, part two? Don’t worry, I think I figured out what Volvo means in Nyrds-speak.”

Which set Ben laughing. “Study in Lexus, but relax in Volvos.”

Exuding disdain, Kairos continued. “Some areas developed as planned. Some rebelled and threw out the clusters who had controlled them.”

“Really?” Ben jumped on that concept. “Did they leave any instruction manuals for rebellion and overthrow? Like where?”

“Asia was a bit of a fiasco. Less a rebellion, really, than a failure of nerve by the Aynou group.” Erin picked up on that, Kairos noticed, but not Ben. He went on. “Some areas just weren’t workable. Impossible to improve or influence. They remain in primitive conditions even now. Africa, for instance. Sacked by others because the inhabitants remained animals.”

Ben knew Erin would hit the ceiling over that, and he was righter than he knew. Kairos weathered her explosion with panache, sipping coffee. When she stopped for breath, he said. “I take it that’s not a politically fashionable idea. But where are you comments if what I said is true?”

“But it’s not,” Erin snapped angrily. Ben didn’t register much of what she’d said, but was bestirred in admiration by her taut pose and the way her anger flushed out of her like a solar flare. Stabbed out like green fire. Whew.

“Well, that settles it,” Kairos shrugged dismissively. “Just because a man who’s been on hundreds of worlds and speaks a hundred languages, who first stepped on this world over six hundred years ago, says something about the history of races, it’s invalid if denied by a nineteen year old female with two years of college on a peripheral planet.

He spread his hands, inviting Erin’s input. “Can you tell me your theory?”

She subsided slowly, staring at him. She couldn’t answer that. That bothered her more than anything he’d said. She was back to being a little girl raging impotently against adults who understood the world better than she did. Or claimed to and couldn’t be disproved. In a small, controlled voice she said, “My theory is that you don’t have the right to determine our destiny for us.”

“I’m the only destiny you have,” Kairos said forcefully, as much to Ben as to her. “We built your destiny here. The very concept of destiny.

He turned to Ben, speaking reasonably but forcefully. “What would you suggest? Democratic elections to see if you can figure out how to travel by energy instead of matter? How to draw that energy without depleting? You don’t know what you are doing yet, where you are going.”

“Well if you’ve got all that technology and know how... and we can get a whole vibe for what a humanitarian you are... why not just give it to us?” Ben chewed the words off stubbornly. “Why not just throw it open and let us in?”

“*We did* give it to you!” Kairos exclaimed in exasperation. “We built a civilization for you with real laws, real language, real energy sources. And you couldn’t even maintain it, much less learn to design it. What little you’ve mastered you use to kill each other. What should we do, let a bunch of vicious mud puppies out into the sky?”

Ben and Erin were silenced by the force of his expostulation, and the undeniable sense of it. “You can’t control yourselves,” Kairos said with a still finality. “That’s the whole problem.”

There was another long pause, with no eye contact. Finally Erin said, “So you need to control my relationship with Ben.”

Kairos looked at her with an affectionate gentleness that surprised her. He said, “It just wouldn’t work out. You’ve learned enough to realize that Ben’s life is not as simple as the average college guy you meet. Adding you to it would complicate it beyond anything you can imagine. Disrupt it.”

At least he didn’t say, “I’m so sorry”, Erin thought. I’d say the next voice we hear had better be Ben’s.

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Chapter Sixty-Five

Ben shifted into a position that made it clear he was going to address Kairos' ultimatum, then remained silent, stringing it out. Kairos waited impassively, Erin was on pins and needles. Finally he spoke. "Know what?" he said, "I didn't even want this shit in the first place. It was all your idea. Now you're pushing me around, trying to fuck things up with somebody that cares about me more than you ever did. So, fine: if you think you're in charge of me like that, fuck it. I'm out."

This time it was Kairos who let the silence build. He hadn't foreseen this, but admired the way his son had read the situation. He needed the boy, and Ben was going to use that as leverage. Bravo. Brat.

Just to keep it interesting, Kairos said, "You're going to walk out on all this? Go back to the gutter?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact. It's so obvious what you're playing here. Start out slow, get me hooked, then use that to make me play along. It's bullshit and I'm not going to take it. Get off my ass or I walk."

"Don't be silly," Kairos told him. "You're just getting started. You've my son. My plan from the first was to bring you all the way in. To put you in charge."

Erin got the full scope of that before Ben did. Hoooooooly shit, she thought. Ben, mulishly slugging out the discussion, had yet to grasp the whole implication. He scowled at Kairos, sensing a deeper level of the trap. "In charge of what?"

Kairos didn't say, Duh. He did it with his eyebrow. All he said aloud was, "Everything."

He paused a beat and drilled in the two-punch. "Everything you know about. And much more. All right? In charge of everything."

Ben was stunned, sat trying to gather his composure and come up with a story. Erin was in a bit of state herself. And Mums said she only picked losers.

"The trouble is, how much do you know?" Kairos went on, sensing that all resistance had crumbled in confusion. "Not enough yet. That's why we're having this conversation."

"I know this much," Ben said fiercely. "I don't care what plans you have for me. I have some needs of my own. And I'm not going to ditch somebody I care about, who makes me feel loved and wanted, because of anything you have to offer."

Where do I swoon, Erin thought after the warm blitz Ben's speech rocketed through her head and heart. Say what you will, Bryn Mawr girls don't get a lot of guys refusing to rule the universe for the love of them. It's a good thing I'm sitting down because I think my knees would have gone out over that one. She shifted her full attention to Ben, with a new wonder and growing hunger.

Kairos' head dropped forward, shaking impotently back and forth. The Mexicans have three words for this, he thought, *Ay, ay ay*. He looked back at Ben and said, "I took you from the sewer. I made you. I conceived you. I believe in you. You should stand by me."

"Then level with me and quit playing God with my life."

Kairos looked around the cozy apartment, at the termno closet. "You haven't objected to my *deus ex machina* before."

"Because I didn't have anything on the line before."

"I can't bring you up to speed overnight, Benito. There's just too much going on. You have to trust me. I don't think I've let you down so far."

Ben started to speak, but Kairos lifted his hand. "I propose a compromise. I won't try to dictate your affections and amours. But I am investing a lot in you. More than you know. I don't think it's too much to ask that whatever else you two do, you avoid procreation. Whatever it takes. Is that such bad advice, anyway?"

Christ, no, Erin thought. Not to mention it's one of my major preoccupations. Without any visible movement, she touched Ben's thigh under the table, a gentle tap of agreement and solidarity. Ben said, "Okay."

"That's an agreement?" Kairos asked blandly. Ben nodded and stuck out his hand. With a wry smile, Kairos shook it. He stood up. "Ben," he said.

Ben looked up warily, but Kairos had the smiling charm back in place. "Would you really drop out of all this to defy me?"

Ben looked him over a long moment, then said. "No. I would have lied to you. I don't want to be back in the streets. Especially not now."

Erin felt another flutter in her torso. Especially now, she thought happily. Oh my God. Just two words, Ben Ochoa, but I am so going to kiss you all over because of them. For openers. She stood up and held out her hand to Kairos, palm down. "It's been extremely interesting, Mr. Ochoa. I hope as time goes on you feel better about me."

Kairos bent to kiss her hand, then looked at her with a blatant twinkle. "Actually, I already do, my dear. I can see there's more to you than your considerable beauty and your obvious worth to my son."

"Well, I think that's one thing we have in common," she said brightly. "In spite the deep differences of hair color. We both just want Ben to be in good hands."

Jesucristo, Ben thought. I think I'd better get back to the safety and security of interplanetary crime.

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Chapter Sixty-Six

The slick sportster slid around the corner sideways as Monke tapped the tiller and rode the brake handles. He finger-frigged the knurled knob beneath his finger and the car leapt forward like a goosed cat, skidding to a stop and sideslipping right into their reserved space, scattering the ragamuffins who did the reserving for them. The off-planet trio, draped in fine, flowing clothes and unanimous good spirits, hopped out. Slim brocade purses dangled from the brocade belts under their unstructured blouses, hanging inches above their groins. Wallets newly stocked with tokens and bills of credit. They were flush, in charge, and very pleased with themselves. They grabassed unmercifully with their urchin squad, tipped them extravagantly, and strode to the doors laughing and insulting each other. All of which changed instantly when they hit the doorway.

No players, no strumpets, no games, no carousing, no personnel. No shit, no shoes, no service. They turned on a dime and headed for their car, getting handy to their weapons, game faces firmly in place. And stopped dumbfounded by the size of the dark indigo transport that stopped in front of them, blocking their car in. And the number of special unit cops that spilled out of it wearing mirrored armor and carrying some very butch heavy weapons. Worse than the number of cops involved was their attitude: they had never seen cops on this world who didn't act like they were on the take. These guys acted like they were overdosing on Search and Destroy.

Their pet cop ran up to the troops in indigo, remonstrating. A lead cop scornfully knocked him down with the butt end of his weapon. The urchins had scattered, but some threw rocks and garbage at the cops from behind cars and garbage receptacles. One threw a plastic vial that burst into flame against the side of the transport, but burned out with no damage. Two cops turned and fired bursts in the direction the little cocktail had come from. Bursts that tore big hunks of stone out of a retaining wall. These guys did not come to dance.

Ben and Monke turned and ran through the lobby doors. Nabo followed, walking backwards, firing at the deploying Cops From Hell. He took two down immediately, then had trouble aiming because the entire glass lobby façade, the size of a basketball court, was falling around him in glinting shards as sixty cops opened fire.

Dancing backwards towards the lift tubes, firing maniacally into the mist of glass dust dancing in the wind from whistling projectiles, Ben heard the sucking hiss of a tube behind him and turned to see the platform steady down. Tullio was standing on it.

Ben's gun came up, pointing at his face. Through the glass, Tullio mouthed, "It's time to talk."

More platforms were whooshing down the tubes, packed with indigo uniforms. Covering the entrance, Ben's bunch ran to the lobby bar, a monstrous slab of pink marble well out of the line of fire through the doors, and vaulted behind it. There was a pause, filled with the sound of lift tube doors opening and boots crunching over the glass at the entrance. Ben looked around the backbar and under the counter. No way out of here. Monke peeked over the top of the counter, squatted back down, crossing himself. Ben raised an eyebrow at him. "Don't look out there, *Güero*," Monke said. "I don't want you getting pessimistic."

Ben looked at Nabo, who shrugged and reloaded. Monke plundered under the bar and came up with what he was looking for. "The house edge," he announced, and showed them the ugliest gun in existence.

A receiver with two rubber pistol grips ended in a flat splayed barrel like a duck's foot. A boxy magazine fed in lines of half inch shot and belts of plastic explosive. The design effect was like a machine gun firing buckshot down a flat, wide swath. And there were two spare magazines. Nabo grinned like a demented skull and reached, "Cute little guy. Can I hold it a minute?"

Monke handed it to him and took his pistol in exchange. Leaning back against the wall with a pistol up on each side of his head, he watched Nabo fondle the hand-held massacre machine. "It's you, girl."

"It's the *mega-chingazo*, bitch." Nabo looked at Ben. "Are we waiting for anything special?"

"I've got a feeling Tullio has something to say. Don't fret, there's plenty of them for you to kill."

"*Basante*," Monke agreed. "How did he find us?"

"Maybe he just wants to score." Ben eased up to pop a peek over the bar. He was mostly looking at gun barrels. Little black holes with him in mind. Shit.

Tullio watched the Special Unit flow into the lobby, taking up positions behind furniture, in the alcoves, up the mezzanine stairs. He checked their positions, held up a hand to their commander. In a conversational tone he said, "It's easier to just talk."

"Talk to my *verga*, Snowflake," Nabo called out. He fired a burst from the gun, angled up to rake the ceiling and shower the cops with quartz flakes. The cops replied with a long fusillade that demolished the backbar, covering the guys with plaster, splinters, debris, glass and wasted intoxicants. Tullio held up his hand again and the fire ceased.

"Ben, it's important that you know things aren't like you think. If you knew what your father is really trying to do, you wouldn't be working for him."

"*We aren't* working for him, you stupid asshole." The disgust and condescension in Ben's voice were obviously real. "Some of us managed to cut our apron strings and think for ourselves."

Tullio was stung by that, but remained firm and unruffled. "Let me put it this way. If you knew what he's up to, you'd help us make him stop. Let's calm down, talk."

"Shut up and come get us," Nabo yelled. "I want to waste you *culeros* in time to get a little pussy before dinner."

"Kairos isn't who he says he is," Tullio went on. "He only has one goal. Conquest."

A loaded word for Ben, and it hit him hard. He thought a moment and looked at his friends, who shrugged noncommittally. "Okay," he called. "Let's talk."

"Are you serious?" Nabo yelled. "You queerbait! It's *massacre* time, *güey*."

"It won't take long to find out what's going on," Ben told him quietly. He yelled, "Step out, walk over here to the bar."

The gang peered warily over the desk as Tullio shrugged off his armored vest, dropped his gun and concentrator, and walked into their field of fire.

"Gotta admit, the *vato*'s got balls," Nabo ceded.

"Let's see what else he's got." Ben stood up slowly, regarding Tullio across the bar. No love lost. "How the fuck did you find us here?"

"Yes, you're living so low key," Tullio sneered. "You're creating anomalies. They all leave traces. People notice them and report them. Each shabby little transaction or relocation you perform is like a spark in the night. And they add up. To a trail of sparks leading here to your little nest."

Monke poked his head up to look at Tullio. "What do you care? You some sort of cop?"

"I'm not police. My father sent me on a mission to deal with Kairos."

The trumpet barrel of the bartender's gun appeared over the bar, creating visible consternation among the troops. Nabo's head came up behind it. He looked at Tullio. "So go deal with him. We got nothing to do with that. You should know."

"Your activities are..."

"What? Illegal? Thought you weren't a cop?"

Tullio ignored Nabo, looked at Ben almost pleadingly. "They just aren't done, understand? I never should have... They're just not right."

"Sins?" Ben said archly.

Tullio met his tone sincerely. "Yes. That's closer. They are against the will of the people. Against what is righteous and whole."

"So you brought along Miami SWAT here to make things holy again?"

"They're nobody. Locals."

"Dirt people, right?" Nabo showed Ben signs of being ready to go off. "Like us. You fucking tourist."

"They are special police who believe that you are international terrorists. They would prefer to kill you all."

"Let them try." Nabo spoke flatly. Operational readiness.

"Or you can walk out of here. Keep your money. Just take me, alone, to talk to your father. It's very important to everybody alive."

Ben looked at Tullio a minute. Trouble is: he's a prick, but he sounds on the level. He turned to his friends, sensing Monke's reluctance, Nabo's itchiness. He looked at Tullio. "Here's what we'll do. We'll check it out. Investigate him ourselves. Think it over. And get back to you."

Tullio laughed. "You want to go warn him." He motioned at his battle-ready escort. "You still have trouble understanding the forces at work here."

"No!" Ben snapped hard enough to make raise Tullio's eyebrows and twitch a few gun barrels. "I promise you. We'll look into it, make a decision, let you know. Either way, we're not with him. We're on our own."

For a very still, silent moment Tullio read Ben's face across the tense distance. He nodded. "I believe you. Go. Look. Think. Tell me what you think."

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Chapter Sixty-Seven

“Know what I think?” Ben asked. As he grabbed a riot gun off the wall and racked it. His spare room in the New Haven apartment had acquired much more than the transformer and termno. Much of the wall space was covered with firearms, edged weapons, and troublesome-looking electronic devices.

Nabo snatched a brace of Browning 10 mm pistols and stuck them in his belt. “Yeah, I think better this way, myself.”

Ben smiled. “I wouldn’t go quite that far.”

“Okay, since we’re thinking so clearly now,” Monke said as he picked a few guns for himself. “How do we investigate?”

“I’m renting a car, first of all.” Ben reached for a cell phone in a charger dock.

“Why not just slip?” Nabo asked.

Ben held the phone to his ear with one hand, brandished the shotgun and wagged it back and forth in front of Nabo with the other. Monke said, “Duh.”

“Oh. Yeah. What kind of car?”

Outside the picture window, the frenetic lights of Vegas were an island of dazzle surrounded by a wide black sea of nothing. Three pairs of shoe soles suddenly appeared in the blackness, came to rest against the glass. The shoes stuttered down the window as Ben and his gang played out more rappel rope. They stood horizontally on the window as if levitating in space.

Monke produced a glass cutter from his pocket and leaned forward to whip a big circle on the glass. He quickly added a semi-circular cusp and two “X’s” to create a blitzed happy face. Nabo cuffed at him impatiently, missed and caught his balance, looking down at forty floors of exposure. Monke bent his knees and kicked himself out into the air. Swinging back in, his feet hit the circle dead center, shattering it out into a sparkle through the room. He released the rope and fell to the floor, rolling through the glass fragments.

Nabo laughed at him and kicked out himself. Sailing in through the circle, he spun out of the rope and released it, falling easily to his feet. He smirked down at Monke and nudged him with his foot. “Get up, *baboso*.”

Ben swung through the hole and almost landed as clean as Nabo, but had to skip a few steps because the rope was still around his leg.

Getting to his feet, Monke grinned. “We’ve got a lot of practice to do if we want to get a gig with that Circus Circus place.”

The glass all over the carpeting would be the least of Kairos’ worries. The guys had tossed the place completely and utterly. An outraged ex-wife couldn’t have done a better job of tearing the swank penthouse apart. But they had hit a snag.

Frustrated, Monke stepped back from the wall safe and kicked the painting that had covered it. He motioned at the safe as if accusing it of unmentionable crimes. Equally put out, Nabo whipped out a silenced pistol. Monke and Ben ducked as he fired a fast three shots into the flat steel face of the safe.

“Very subtle, Nabucho,” Ben said from the floor. “But know what?”

He jumped up and went to desk, where a large flatscreen monitor had loaded Windows and was demanding a password. “I think this is more important. And don’t fucking shoot it, okay? *Pinche pistolero*.”

Nabo glared at the blinking cursor. He turned to Monke and gestured at the intransigent screen, “Cut those Windows, smartass.”

Monke shrugged. “I break into buildings, not software. We need somebody who knows something about this shit.”

He looked at Nabo, then they both looked at Ben. Who nodded, laid his gun on the desk and moved to the closet, where a termno grid was visible through the splintered door.

Erin’s eyes slammed open, flitting around desperately in confusion and alarm. She was wakened into a world with things gone wrong. Such as the hand across her mouth. She started to struggle, trying to remember what her Assault Prevention class had to say about situations like this. Then Ben whispered into her ear.

“It’s me. Relax. Everything’s okay.” He waited with his hand still on her mouth until he felt her tension subside. “No noise.”

Erin glanced at the thin wall dividing her room from Keira’s and nodded. The hand came away, quickly replaced by a pair of lips. Much better, but this boy still had some heavy explaining to do. She glanced at her bedside clock. 4:08 AM. That sucked. Ben lifted her hand and carefully cupped it around a cup of mini-mart coffee. Okay, maybe she’d let him live long enough to explain this.

There didn’t seem to be any reason to avoid clichés, so she whispered: “What are you *doing* here? It’s four in the morning, you loco. How’d you get in?”

“It’s important,” Ben said and nothing in his tone made her doubt it. “Get dressed.”

“That’s one thing I never like to hear from a man.” She sipped coffee and shook her auburn mane to clear her head. “Are you taking me somewhere nice?”

“Ever been to Vegas?”

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Chapter Sixty-Eight

By the time Erin got dressed, went to Ben's, stepped into his closet for some quick fooling around, suddenly ended up in a Penthouse on top of the New Luxor, and got her ducks in a row, it was pushing four in the morning in Las Vegas, as well. And I've got less than an hour to get back, shower and get to my Econ test, she thought as she fiddled with the Intel-powered brain of the sleek computer in the lavishly appointed, viciously trashed apartment.

Ben and the guys watched her—no make-up, lifeboat drill outfit, frightwig hairdo, dazed and confused—insert a gold CD in the Kairos' drive. "I told you I'm not some expert ninja hacker." She looked at the new décor and hole in the window and added, "Maybe I'm the only one here who's not?"

"You're better at it than us," the stout Indian buy called Monke told her.

"Maybe. What I'm hoping is that your father isn't all that up on our technology, either." She punched the Run command, searched for the CD menu.

"Our primitive, backward, Goofyworld technology," Ben said, then grinned as the screen flashed, "INSTALL WINDOWS XP FROM DISK?"

"I'm sure he's well beyond childish devices like floppy disks." She highlighted "YES" and heard the whir of the operating system loading. And hopefully copying over the existing program, including the password. She smiled. "When on Earth, do as Earthlings do."

Erin stared at the monitor in horror, Ben leaning on her chair to look over her shoulder, his dawgs standing close on each side of her. The screen showed a menu of thumbnails and each one she clicked on brought up an image that deepened the dread and shock of the overall picture that was emerging. She felt Ben's hands behind her shoulders, trembling as they gripped her chair. She felt like reaching up for a reassuring pat, but just didn't think it would help much, all told.

The were annotated in something that looked like Latin or Greek, but wasn't quite either. But there was no mistaking the import of the graphic files. Blueprint-like depicted a grid of curving azimuth lines connecting worldwide sites marked with tiny pyramids, each with a tiny six digit number. Broadcasting world domination at 600,000 watts, she thought. And now a word from our sponsor.

A map of North America with a couple of dozen cities highlighted was an html file and clicking any of the gold-starred cities yielded 3-D CGI constructs of their downtowns, but overlaid in faint wire skeletons with brave new layouts.

Red squares marked Seattle, San Diego, spots in Florida, Kansas and Texas that spelled out, Your Aerospace Industry Proudly Salutes. More clicks opened nicely worked files that showed huge hangers where 747's could be assembled. As well as handy ghost outlines showing how dangerous-looking spaceships would fit, as well. Perhaps after conveniently suggested modifications were completed.

Erin was starting to get nervous about clicking deeper into this stuff. A hit on one of the chickenwire spaceships brought up a white file with fine red lines rendering a top view and elevation of the ship itself. Including schematics of how the interior could accommodate several divisions of troops with their cute little unit flags, fighter jets, and tactical missiles. Along with other ordinance whose very unfamiliarity aided the impression of Deadly Force and Mass Destruction. Wonder how much Syria would pay for this Weird Warkraft, she thought.

A Word file showed a list of igos, which Monke quickly printed out. Clicking on any of the little pictographs revealed specifications of the area where the termno was located, along with very clever, Pixar-style animation of tiny troops deploying out thought the area.

She stopped typing and hit the desktop button to hide the damning files beneath a stock view of a sailboat cruising idyllic islands on some endless azure sea in some cloudless clime. She stood up, blocking the view of the screen, and turned to Ben. His faced was clenched tight as his fists, his jaw worked as if chewing on a tire tread. Beside him, his gangsta pals were also frozen and impassive. The Monke guy looked like those stone Olmec heads you see in art classes about stuff nobody can explain. The other guy, the swift, savage murderer if her memory served, looked ready to explode into rage, blood and shrapnel. She laid her hands softly on Ben's cheeks and spoke to him, gentle and sad. "Oh, Ben."

"One more evil fucking gringo conquistador out to loot a new fucking world." His words hung on the air like the memory of the on the screen. Then Nabo laughed.

"Cooooool."

Monke slapped his shoulder and snapped, "Fuck that, *idiota!* Don't you get it? He'll turn this place into Iraq. People will die, things will get all fucked up. It's bad for business. There's nothing *chido* about this shit."

Nabo gave one of his panther shrugs. "Can we get our hands on one of those rockets, at least?"

Erin glared at him and turned back to Ben, who still seemed shut down. "I'm so sorry, Ben. I don't..."

"All apologies are mine." He came back into focus, but she could see that he'd taken a blow that would take awhile to shake off. "I got you into this *chingadera*. Now I'm going to get us out."

Nabo squared off at the monitor like a gunslinger. "We sure shooting this computer isn't a good idea?"

Monke pushed him away, spun the chair to face away from the screen and sat down. He folded his arms and looked at Ben. "Okay, *carnal*, we checked it out. Are we going to get back to that Tullio dork?"

Ben stepped to a table and picked up one of his pistols. He stuck it in his waist and moved to sit facing the door. "*A la chingada* with that White Trash. I'll handle this myself."

The guys nodded. The only thing that really made sense in family situations. Not to mention saving the world type situations. Erin, stricken, moved to sit by Ben on the sofa. She reached to touch his shoulder, stopped. She started to speak, stopped again. Then said, in a soft, clear voice, "Should you ask your mother about this?"

Ben turned and stared at her. And saw a quality he'd never noticed in her before. Something old and settled. She didn't just care about him, she cared *for* him. He stood up, set his pistol down beside Erin, and headed for the termno. Nabo fell in step with him. Ben glanced sideways, "I'll be right back."

"There's another member of your family," Nabo said. "Which you never seem to remember. We'll split up, be back here in two kicks."

Ben turned and looked at Erin. "If he comes, don't let him..."

She shook her head. "This has got to be stopped. Go. Hurry."

Nabo nudged Ben towards the termno. "Don't worry. Monke can handle him. Probably cut a deal where we own the whole thing by the time we get back."

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Chapter Sixty-Nine

“He’s the last Jap on Guam.”

Ben looked askance at Libertad, sitting in the middle of the floor wearing a long white native *huipil* painstakingly embroidered with suns, flowers, and the antlered heads of deer. She sat on a low muslin cushion, looking at her son with an expression he found dauntingly neutral. She was making him ask questions, drawing him out. Same old story. “I have no idea what that means,” he said.

“The war against the Japanese,” she said without inflection or tone. “It spread all those islands with forts and bunkers and caves full of bombs. Then the war ended and they went home and left it there. Fifty years later you’d hear stories about finding some old Japanese soldier or squad hiding in a cave or married to the locals. Maybe they never learned that the war was over. Or they were hoping Japan could come back and win. Or they just didn’t want to surrender to Americans.”

Okay, he saw it now. But it wasn’t much of an answer to his current problem, was it? “Oh, yeah,” he said guardedly. “I saw a movie on the *tele* about that. That’s what you think is going on here?”

“What does it look like to you? Why have to come to ask advice?” She made one of her typical soothing gestures. “Did you also see a film called Boys From Brazil?”

Ben shook his head. Sit it out, make her explain things.

“They cloned Hitler and were raising these little Hitler boys down in Brazil so they could grow up and start the whole Third Reech thing over again.”

“It’s pronounced, ‘Rike’, Mamá.”

She waved dismissively. “However you say it, the lesson is clear. Don’t be one of those boys, Benito.”

Ben often ended up lost and stranded in discussions with his mother. He tried a different tack. “He talks more like he’s trying to help us. Like the Zapatistas down in Chiapas.”

“Zapatistas, my ass,” Libertad said, shocking Ben a little. “You’re not stupid enough to believe all the publicity on that, are you? They were just poor *indios* caught up in a political game Commandante Blue Eyes was playing. He makes points in the capital, they do the dying.”

“Well, you know... Fidel. Ché.”

Libertad gave him a pitying look that stung him a little. “Fidel. Ché. Do you know what happens when you run around the woods trying to be Ché? The government sends troops to kill you and farms get burned and people die. Most of the time the rebels are killed quickly, other times the war goes on for years, with boys dying, girls getting raped.”

Ben was taken aback by the vehemence of her reply. He had no idea how to answer, came up with, “So what would happen here? The space government sends a ship to burn down Earth?”

He was equally unprepared for her reaction to that. Her eyes snapped to his, more intense than before. “There’s a ship?” she said. “Did you see it?”

“No, you know...” Ben couldn’t seem to put a foot right in this whole chat. “It’s just an example... An expression.”

His mother relaxed and gave him a smile he associated with smoothing everything over. “Sorry,” she said gently. “A side effect of my relationship with your father is being very susceptible to science fiction.”

“Well, I guess I’m a side effect, too,” Ben said somewhat sulkily. He was getting nowhere with all this. “Know what I keep wondering?” He broke off, looked away.

She stood up smoothly and came to him, inclining her head to brush his cheek with her lips. She knelt beside him, brushed his hair back from his brow, smiled sadly.

“So if he’s the Second Coming of Hitler and Cortés, why did I marry him? Is that what you wonder?”

Ben nodded cautiously. Maybe drawing her out wasn’t such a good idea after all.

“You still love him. I saw you together. You could tell from a kilometer away.”

“Well, that happens when your heart and other various organs get involved. I was a foolish girl to let “*El Catrín*” turn my head, then go away and leave me with two wonderful children to raise by myself.”

Ben glanced around the room. He didn’t exactly leave you sleeping in the street, did he? His mother caught the look and smiled.

“Let me tell you something, *amor*. The trouble with Kairos is not that he’s too blonde: it’s that he’s too much a *Mexicano* at heart. A glutton for women. A connoisseur, he would say. But it comes to the same thing. This happens to girls in Mexico all the time. Not enough men to go around, all these greedy boys out there.”

Ben stared at her. Where was this thing going *now*?

“Boys think they are men when they kill somebody, girls think they are women because somebody screws them. But that’s not so. We become adults through families. Not by abandoning families. Half of the women who come to me for healing are really suffering from boys. Who never grew up. Don’t be those boys, either, *mi vida*.”

Ben sank to a sitting position, staring at her. What was she telling him? Did it matter? For some reason a picture of Erin flashed into his mind, trying to comfort him on the couch in the penthouse.

“So what should I be? What should I do?”

Libertad settled on her heels and folded her hands in her lap, palms up, bend knuckles touching, thumbs tip to tip. She looked at him deeply, a familiar gaze that mixed a love so deep it scared him with an inflexible search for the true way of things. Ben managed not to look down like before, like a little boy.

“You are confused about who is your blood, who is your family.” She said quietly after a pause during which he tried not to squirm under her knowing raptor eye. “What Mexican isn’t? Please listen, Benito.”

And as he always did when she said those three words in that special way, he gave her his full attention.

“I’m afraid you haven’t had much family, *mi’hijo*. You haven’t much standing behind you at a time too difficult for somebody your age.”

She held up a hand to stop his protest, went placidly forward. “You think when I say ‘family’, I mean the people who came before you, older people, people who are dead and show up for *Día de los Muertos*. But you’re a young man. Think about those who will come after you, the family you will create for yourself from your own blood. Your children, and their children. It’s what we make of children that makes us women and men, Benito. Your duty isn’t to me or your father, it’s to your children. And their children.”

She leaned forward and placed her hand on his head, a gesture that seemed oddly Biblical and tribal at the same time. And smiled. Ben wanted to dive into her lap.

“You don’t see them or know their faces, but they call to you from where you will know them and see how what you do affected them. The path of the heart doesn’t just come from somewhere, it also leads somewhere. You’re young, but I hope can feel what I am talking about. I am talking about you as an old man, with your generations around you and your works behind you, with the really big questions still to be answered. Sit in that chair, those clothes, that tired old skin, and see if you know enough to find your way there. Your family isn’t behind you, Ben. It’s waiting for you.”

Ben couldn’t stand it any more. He leaned forward and hugged her, surprised at the pressures in his chest and eyes. He held her tight, rocking slightly back and forth. He smelled the odor of herbs and *chiles* and earth and musk. He didn’t ever want to let go.

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Chapter Seventy

Cielo sat at a table in her panties in the predawn chill, writing lyrics in a composition pad. She could hear Felix peeing in the attached semi-bath, and hoped he wasn't getting it all over the floor again. She smiled at the bourgeois domestic concern and read over her new verses. And the door exploded back against the wall, so hard it drove the door knob off and detached from its top hinge. Nabo stepped into the room. He looked at Cielo, sitting prettily in skimpy panties and nothing else, then at Felix, naked, turning from the toilet with fear on his face and his dick in his hand. Nabo lashed out his right hand and Felix slammed back into the wall, slid down the toilet bowl to the floor. Nabo thumbed his fly open, whipped out his own unit, and pissed all over the unconscious "grillo", his face stiff with rage. He turned, zipped up, and saw the scruffy guitar Felix had the last time he'd seen him with Cielo. He snatched it up by the neck and smashed it over Felix' head. Then he turned to Cielo, who waited calmly.

"You look great, Cici. Got a minute for some family business?" It took him ten minutes to fill her in, and she didn't move or take her eyes off his the entire time. When he finished she spoke as if he wasn't there, like she was organizing her thoughts for a lecture.

"Oppressors exploit us and kill us because it's their nature. And because we allow them to do it. We have to take whatever means we can to stop them. They build huge engines of steel and blood and gold, but they are only machines. What we have is our hearts. We can fight them and we can win. But first we have to pry their claws from out of our flesh."

She stood up and walked to Nabo, unashamed in her nudity. Nabo watched her walk across the worn floor, his heart slamming him against the ropes. She never looked away from his eyes. "He's my father. Just like we all have foreign white blood in us. Even *indito burros* like you and Monke. But what is that blood? It's the seed of rape. Of advantage. Domination. It's not the blood of our own hearts and there is no need to obey it or honor it. We have to be ourselves if we are going to stop them."

Her eyes left his for a moment, flicked down to Felix, lying on the floor in his own urine and blood. She looked back angrily and reached up to hit Nabo hard on his head with her knuckles. "You always fight the wrong people, Nabucho. Go tell Ben to forget the machines and money and protect the world of his own people. And his own heart." She stood glaring at him with her hands on her hips, her pointy young breasts thrusting forward to bolster her indignation.

Nabo backed to the door and stood in it for a moment, looking at her. He raised his hands, palms facing each other, as though to frame her, then dropped them. He said, "It was great to see you, Ciel." And tore his eyes away from her to stomp away. The first two *grillos* to blunder into his path suffered heavily for it.

Nabo took only three steps off the train before Ben was beside him, picking up his cadence as they strode toward the side tunnel. He looked sullen, agitated, didn't look at Nabo. Who was in no kind of mood, either. When they turned into the termno's alcove, he finally spoke. "So what did she say?"

"We need to strike out against the oppressor class."

Ben turned and smiled slightly. "Mmmm. Imagine that."

"How about your *mami*?"

"You know what Moms say, *caramba*. If I settle down and have kids I'll know what to do." He paused at the termno and looked at Nabo almost beseechingly. "That make any sense to you?"

Nabo scratched the nape of his neck, thinking it over. "I gotta say, right now it kind of does," he said. "But I'll get over it by tomorrow."

"He didn't show up yet?" Ben was beginning to wonder if Kairos had caught wind of things and flown from the coop.

"Not yet," Erin said from the sofa. "What did your mother and sister say?"

"Hard to say," Ben answered, more curt than he intended. "But look, don't you have a class?"

"A piddling final exam. You think I'd bounce out of here before I find out what you're going to do?"

"You probably should go. I won't know until he gets here and I talk to him. And he might not be coming. He's not exactly Mister Stick Around and Come Home."

"Sounds like your trip wasn't all that helpful."

"Maybe it was. I figured this out. All that stuff in the files has got to stop. Whatever that involves. Does that suck too much?"

"Oh, I think it'll do nicely."

"So I'll let you know. You can get back to my place by..."

Erin laughed merrily. "Oh no, no, no, no, no. How often does a girl get to see the world saved? Or fucked up, whichever?"

So Ben shut up and left her alone. At least she felt alone, sitting on the luxuriant sofa, watching her lover sit with a heavy pistol in his hand, waiting for his father to come back. How much of his life did he do that, she thought, wait for him to come back to him? She was thinking she should sit beside him, touch him in some way when they heard to lock click in the big doors. And Ben was on his feet, his waiting done with.

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Chapter Seventy-One

This might not be the perfect town, Kairos thought as he stepped from his private elevator into narrow marble foyer flooded with pink/gold sky light. Yet. But you can't complain about the desert sunrises. Simply glorious. Each day spangled with newborn beauty and kissed with bright promise. He moved to the door with the jaunty possession of a man who has cornered the market, hit the jackpot, and just gotten laid. In fact he could still savor the slight scent of that musky pleasure on his upper lip as he opened the door to his suite. He was already removing his tie, preparatory to stripping naked and standing at the window, washed by the gold light, before hitting the shower and a well-deserved rest from his labors.

So he wasn't exactly set for the doorknob to fly out of his hand, a gun to thrust into his face, or his son's forearm to bang into his throat and pin him against the wall. Or to hear, "Got any reasons I shouldn't pull this trigger, asshole?"

He eyed Ben's furious face, took in his heavily armed hoodlum friends behind him, the glowing monitor screen, gave the matter a second's thought. "I don't suppose an appeal to filial duty...?"

"Fuck that," Ben snarled as Monke kicked the door shut. "Nabo and Monke are all the family I need." He grabbed Kairos' lapels, swung him around into the room and pushed him into an Eames chair. He glanced at Erin standing by the computer and added, "If I want more family I'll raise my own and won't leave them in the gutter."

"The gutter seems to have done you well," Kairos said evenly, smoothing his elegant sport coat. "Where did you find these friends, learn to be a man?"

Ben leaned over him and spoke with soft, cold menace. "You're about one more word away from losing some teeth, *Papucho*. They all tried to warn me about you. My *compas*, Mom, Erin. Even Cielo. But I argued with them, said you were trying to do something good."

"Actually, I am doing a great deal of good," Kairos told him, looking him straight in the eye. "If you would listen to me..."

"Listen to your mindfuck?" Ben yelled, knocking him on the head with the butt of his pistol. "Your control game? 'These aren't the droids you're looking for'? Screw that! They've been shooting at my friends because you're trying to be an interplanetary Ché."

"More like Hitler, I'd say," Erin put in.

Kairos gave her a charming smile and nod, then gestured expansively at the view from the window, the new sunlight streaking strong and blond through the castles and dungeons of the Strip below. "I built the only real thing in a city of sham. Unlimited power, unlimited wealth, unlimited healing for all. Unlimited capacity to send a message to the entire human race."

"We already saw your message."

"Yeah," Monke said from somewhere behind him. "Especially the part where we aren't part of the human race."

Kairos shook his head. "But you are. Go back far enough and you have the same roots as Ben."

"You got it backwards, Pops. I've got the same roots as them. Except for you. And I'm rooting you out."

Kairos patted the air in a placating gesture that soothed Ben to within an inch or slashing the gun across his mouth. "Just sit down and hear me out for twenty minutes. I promise you..."

"Fuck *off!*" Ben loomed over Kairos, fists clenching of their own accord. "You people are just using us like *gallos*, aren't you? Train your gamecocks then let them do their dying for you?"

Ben stopped, cocked his head as though listening to what he'd just said. Erin stared at him, glanced at Nabo and Monke, who were nodding as if the lights had just come on. Whoa! Maybe that made some kind of sense.

"That's exactly what's happening here, isn't it?" He spoke slowly, staring at Kairos with both anger and wonder. "It all adds up now. Your little playthings, your gambling. We're just surrogates, sitting here in a keep waiting to go out and kill for your disputes with some other Fuckturd From Outer Space."

"That's the only thing that makes any sense," Nabo said with uncharacteristic thoughtful calm. "They just breed us to fight."

"I wonder if we can get some bets down," Monke chimed in, but nobody was in the mood to lighten it up just yet.

Kairos looked at them, shook his head sadly. "It never occurred to me, but I can see how it might look like that. But I'm not running tournaments here. It's a liberation struggle, really. I'm trying to bring you people up to speed, to equality in the universe."

Nabo laughed harshly, glaring at him. "Oh, sure. So we can get voter cards and have a rooster or two in the *congreso*? That's sooooo thoughtful."

Erin, smoldering at the recent revelations, spoke in bold, justified script, "A chicken in every cabinet."

"It's not like that at all. If you would just calm down and listen to me for a minute..."

"Shut up!" Ben screamed, startling his friends. "Shut the holy *fuck* up!" He paced fretfully, running his hand through his hair as he stared at his father. Then he stopped and took a deep uneven breath. He shifted into a static, formal pose and looked at Kairos in a completely different way, his features firming into a different, severe set. He fixed his father with a cold eye.

Erin stared, amazed at the sudden transformation. He made his decision, she thought. And just all of a sudden grew up, right in front of me. She moved carefully to her left, absorbed in Ben's new facial set. I can see his father in him now, she thought, who he's going to be. For some reason she shivered.

"Okay," Ben said in a low but forceful tone. "I've got it now. We're turning him over to Tullio."

Kairos lost his serene coolness for the first time, almost came out of the chair. "Tullio! Deio's son? Benito, are you out of your mind? You can't do something that rash without listening to me. You have no idea what's..."

He stopped, staring at the termno as it gave a low whuff. Everybody in the room turned to look at the shining grid. Where Tullio stood beside an older man with patrician white hair, a simple floor-length toga, and a Caesarian look and stance. Behind them were two athletic-looking thirtyish guys in black robes with gold sunburst crests, staring at Ben and his group with haughty disdain.

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Chapter Seventy-Two

Furious, Ben and Monke swung on Kairos. Nabo continued to watch the interlopers. Leaving no doubt that he had them covered and was itching to prove it.

“Did you bring them here?” Ben demanded, his pistol back up on point.

Kairos had recovered his aplomb, nodding ironically to the newcomers. He gave Ben a condescending look and chuckled, “Hardly.”

“We followed you,” Tullio said, “To Mexico, to your apartment, to this place.” He bent to place his concentrator where two of the termno leylines crossed and a section slid up, revealing a mass of circuitry with a tiny display screen. He touched a node and the screen revealed the Aztec igo.

“*Carajo!*” Monke yelled, “Those things have redial buttons?”

“Which I would have told you,” Kairos said wearily. “And how to circumvent it. If you ever listened to me.”

“Listening to you would only mire them deeper in your morass of lies, Kai,” the older man said. “You snared your son and these things into your scheme. Pathetic.”

“Excuse me,” Nabo said, and his feral force drew their attention. “But who the hell is this old shit for brains?”

Tullio made a deferential movement, half bow, half salute. “My father. Deio Mongenides.”

Ignoring the introduction, Deio intoned, “Dean of Lumen and Exemplar to The Race.”

“*The Race?*” Erin giggled. “What a privilege to meet you.” Deio looked at her blankly, Tullio with interest. Ben caught the look.

“Listen, Whitetail,” he snapped, “I’m not in any of his schemes. So leave me out of yours.”

Tullio spoke to Ben evenly, the first time he’d heard him talk without a sneer. “Ben, be credible, all right? Why are you here? Why are you raising money on the worlds, building things here? Like this pyramid?”

Kairos looked at Ben, pained. “Raising money on the worlds?”

Ben ignored him, focused on Tullio. “I do as I please, Daddy’s boy. Screw Kairos and you and your old man.”

The young robed muscleboys stiffened at that and stepped forward, one of them brushing past Tullio. “We will handle this, boy,” he said in passing. “Be still and observe.”

The other gave Ben the look with which he’d treat a dog that had messed the floor. “You are all involved in this abomination.”

Erin laughed out loud. “Abomination? You guys aren’t just Space Nazis, you’re the Inquisition, aren’t you?” She realized that she wasn’t intimidated and that the main reason was the smoldering presence of Nabo. I’ve caught his act, she thought, and if you caped crusaders mess up you’re not going to like it.

Ben gave Tullio an archly pitying look. “Your babysitters are kind of stuffy, huh, Sonny?”

Red spots burned under the strained white skin of his face, but Tullio spoke evenly. “They are Majors of Lumen. Don’t take them lightly.”

The first Major addressed Ben with a heavy I Have Spoken tone. “We believe that you are involved.”

Ben served him with a practiced sneer and stepped up to spit at his feet. “Know what, Snocone? I don’t really give a greasy green shit what you believe.”

Deio digned to enter the conversation again, his voice descending ponderously from Olympus. “Are you telling us you were acting independently? That a son would turn his back on riches, on a human lord of the Race, to frolic with these animals?”

“That pretty much sums it up.” Ben told him. “Asswipe.”

“Hey,” Nabo said and caught every eye in the room. “If you want some samples of animal, just keep pissing me off.”

Deio regarded him with frank incomprehension, then turned his judicial disdain back on Ben. “You’re a ‘rebel’ then? Rejecting the counsel of parents and dictates of community to cavort around the dirt with darkies? Well, you are certainly your father’s son in that respect.”

Ave, Caesar, Erin thought. There’s two sides to every coin, aren’t there? She was far from a fan of Kairos, but his opponent was really a piece of work.

The Major whose foot got spat on spoke directly to Ben, “First, it doesn’t matter whose idea it was for you to contaminate and exploit worlds. That ceases immediately.”

Ben spat into his face and spoke to Deio, “Says who?”

Deio thundered at him, a roll of drums in cloudy heavens, “You are not just talking to me, halfling. You are addressing Lumen itself. The People, the entire human race.”

Monke snickered, “Yeah, well we decided to bet the second race race.”

“Keep your animals silent,” the first Major snapped like a martinet lieutenant. “You are the only one we will address. After all, you had a human father. Such as he is.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Monke said with the air of somebody raising an interesting philosophical side point. “Nobody knows who my father was. Might turn out to be one of your space queers.”

That intrigued Deio in spite of himself. He looked at Ben inquisitively. “How could he not know who his father is?”

“Well, when your mother’s a whore it comes with the territory,” Monke explained cheerfully. He savored their stunned expressions, glanced at Nabo. “Nabisco’s, too.”

“*¡Chinga tu madre, wey!*” Nabo snarled with no irony. “Call my mother a whore?”

“Call me a liar?” Monke taunted, obviously walking through a set piece.

“Well, okay,” Nabo grumbled. “But watch that shit.” Erin wished she could give them a rimshot.

Deio shook his glorious mane in pitying confusion. “I never understood your fascination with these thing’s antics, Kai. But it’s beside the point.”

He motioned to the Majors, a picture of a statesman making a regrettable but necessary decision. They moved towards Kairos, visibly gloating over his fall into their eager hands. Immediately Monke and Nabo stepped into Minator stances in their paths.

Deio sighed. “I can see you have had lessons and can guess who taught them.”

The first Major cracked a thin, pale smile. “It doesn’t matter. We took those examples since birth. We are advanced professionals, warriors. There is nothing you can do against us.”

“Now if I was a wagering man...” Nabo drawled lazily. He drew a gun in a flicker of speed, shot the Major right between the eyes. A large portion of the man’s head hit the wall above the termno, blood splattering Tullio and Deio’s white robe. “...I’d cover your money on that.”

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Chapter Seventy-Three

“No bet.” Monke chirped, covering the other three offworlders. Ben also pointed his gun at them, but kept a close eye on Kairos as well. Erin stared at Nabo, shivering in a rather creepy mix of disgust, fear and excitement. Say what you will about that guy, she thought, he’s consistent. And knows how to define a moment.

Kairos came out of his chair as it electrified, his usual blasé detachment shoved aside by a horrified stare. “My God, Ben!” he yelled, almost pleading, “This is a shocking outlaw act. What have you *done*, son?”

“When you refuse orders you have to back it up, Pops.” Ben said, pushing him back down into the chair.

Nabo blew smoke from his barrel theatrically, spoke to both Kairos and Deio. “Welcome to Earth, Big Daddy.”

Monke stepped to the Major’s body and kicked it over. The dead man’s hand rolled out from under his robe, clutching a concentrator. Monke squatted to pick it up without taking his drop off the other Major. He held it in front of his face, giving it the eye. “Hope it comes with a manual.”

“Good idea, Monk.” Nabo said, thrusting his gun to point into the face of the surviving Major. “Hand over your gizmo, too, Mr. Spock.”

“Impossible,” the Major blustered haughtily. “I…”

Monke and Nabo fired almost simultaneously, blasting him off his feet to roll up against Deio’s legs. Monke picked up his concentrator, did a two-handed quickdraw move.

“Same way,” Ben went on unperturbed, “If you ignore orders and can’t face up, you can expect reprisals. Tullio. You and your old man better hand over your devices right now. *Right* now. Understand?”

Kairos let out a tortured moan, dropped his head into his hands. “Ben, what are you doing? You can’t do it this way. Using armed force against Deio?”

“Sorry, we don’t have time to build an army to do it with,” Ben said with maximum sark. “We like the personal touch. And we aren’t going to do anything your way. You see why?”

“Then we agree on that,” Tullio said calmly.

Ben gave him a long, pissed-off look. Then nodded. “We’d better also agree on you dropping your concentrator.” Tullio took it out with two fingers, tossed it to Nabo, who grabbed it out of the air. Deio spread his hands, scowled. Do you really expect such a personage to carry gadgets on his person? Mar the drape of his toga?

Kairos suddenly spoke in his command voice. “Boys! Put down your weapons at once.”

Monke and Nabo jerked, started to comply. Ben wavered, but stiffened back up. “Forget that happytalk crap. You’re not in control here, Pops.”

Nabo, furious at having almost been buffaloeed out of his weapon, snarled, “And neither are you space punks.”

Deio smiled, pitying the fools. “And you believe that you are?”

Ben was on him in two strides, Nabo smoothly swiveling to cover Kairos. He thrust the muzzle of his pistol up into Deio’s eye, continuing the pressure until he’d backed him into the wall. He stood, quivering, with his gun indenting the older man’s eyelid. “You really want to argue about it?”

Glowing triumphantly through one eye, Deio pointed a dramatic finger at the window. An indigo helicopter flashed by, clattering ominously.

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Chapter Seventy-Four

Monke jumped to the window to stare at helicopter, followed by Erin. Far below, at the base of pyramid, they could see two indigo trucks disgorging men in black combat gear with an impressive array of weapons. Another truck pulled up, followed by something that looked like a miniature tank.

Tullio coughed politely. “They are anti-terrorism commandos from this nation-state. Led by a very special international unit. An ancient Coptic sect...”

“...descended from your old Egyptian cult of informers and sneaks.” Kairos said from his chair.

“As usual, Kairos, you’ve underestimated us,” Deio tolled in a conqueror’s tones. “We have kept our presence on these worlds, had them here even before the war.”

“A bunch of effeminate monotheists, as I recall.”

“Enlightened sun worshipers among your tombs of stone.”

Erin stared, muttered. “Akhenaten.” Tullio looked at her, surprised. She stared through the windows to the swarming street below, waiting for the killer to come for them.

“Exactly,” Deio gloated. “The Akthenic sect. You thought you’d removed it to keep playing with your rockpiles. But the order never died out.”

Nabo grabbed an assault rifle from the pile of guns on the table, cleared it with a chunk of understated menace, stuck another pistol in his belt. “*No hay pedo*,” he pronounced. “They can die out today.”

Monke used a riot gun to push Deio and Tullio into a corner away from the doors. “You two sit there, backs to the wall. And shut up for once.” He turned to push a sofa over the termno. “Will that work?” he asked. “Or will your couch just end up slipping off to Nauga Planet?”

Ben stepped to the window, where Erin still stared down at the deployment in the street. “It’s time for you to go, Babe.”

She turned and slipped past him, walked to Kairos and squatted to look him straight in the face. “What Ben was saying before, about this being a surrogate cockfight? It’s not looking like such a strained analogy now, is it?”

Kairos regarded her blandly. “That’s a complete mis-interpretation. If they’d just listen to me...”

“Have I got the situation straight?” she snapped fiercely. “We’re sitting here waiting for their armed local troops to come up here and try to kill your local hands, and none of them have the vaguest idea what they’re getting killed for because it’s really just some political spat between two old guys playing with their cocks. Did I leave anything out?” Ben felt such a rush of admiration for her he wanted to pounce over and bury his face in her hair. For a start.

“Doesn’t sound so different from Ben’s scenario, does it?” She went on crushingly. Kairos didn’t answer, just leaned his head back with a distant look. Erin stepped to the table, picked up a pistol and racked the slide. She looked at Ben defiantly. Try to make me leave, lover boy. Ben stepped over, cupped his hand behind her head, and kissed her. “You’re nuts, Coppertop. You’ll do.”

He stepped to the table himself, selected another pistol and a pistolgrip shotgun. He started feeding shells into its magazine when Tullio spoke up from the floor.

“Listen, Ben.”

Stuffing shells of buckshot and slug into his pocket, Ben spoke without looking at him. “We’re a little busy here, Ken. Just sit.”

“You said you cut your apron strings,” Tullio went on. “Were on your own.”

Ben looked at him, as did his friends.

“You’re just fighting us because we’re here. Do you really want to fight to the death, kill more people, to protect this man? What’s your experience of him?”

Ben lowered the gun, looking thoughtful. Erin’s eyes were on him. Listen and think hard, baby, she thought. Ben spoke, looking at Kairos, “Let’s see. He abandoned me for thirteen years, then showed up and tried to cut me off from my friends, lied to me to drag me into a private war, and doesn’t seem to mind getting us all killed.”

“You have no idea what I’m really doing, Ben,” Kairos pleaded. “You can’t trust them. The very fact they’re here.”

“He’s got a point, there, Blondie,” Ben told Tullio. “You promised to let me decide this thing. Then you barge in with the Uberwaffles there.”

Tullio flushed, glanced at his father, cast his eyes down in sullen silence.

Ben turned back to Kairos. “But who I really don’t trust, *Pápi*, is you.”

Deio stuck in his ponderous oar once again. “Your decision...”

Ben leaped across the carpet and stuck his shotgun into the mouth of the Exemplar of The Race. “Why don’t you shut your hole or something?”

Tullio said, “Father. I’ll talk to Ben.”

Deio turned to give his son a surprised, measuring look then subsided.

“Your father came here to set things up to run the entire universe his way, with him in charge. We can’t allow that. We’re not an army, we’re agents of justice, here to stop violence.

“Justice is Lumen, Lumen is you,” Kairos said bitterly.

“We’re here on behalf of the people. Come with us, learn justice and peace.”

Ben stepped back from Deio, leaving him to massage his jaw and savor the unfamiliar sensations of pain and humiliation. He held the shotgun up warningly as his father started to speak. He scanned Deio and Tullio. He walked to the window and looked down, laid the shotgun to lean against the glass. He squatted on his heels, appeared to forget about the room, the people there, everything. He stared into the sky. His cupped hands came together and he rocked on his heels in silence. Nobody in the room interrupted him. Monke thought, he’s doing that thing with his hands. Like his mother. He’s sorting it all out with Zen or whatever. Best be ready for anything.

Ben stood and turned to them, backlit by the blue blaze of desert sky. He walked across to Deio and squatted in front of him. He said, “Okay, look. I want those guys downstairs called off first.”

Tullio looked embarrassed. “I don’t think we can do that anymore.”

Nabo grunted. “Good.”

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Chapter Seventy-Five

“Okay, here’s what I came up with,” Ben speaking to Tullio, rather than the white-maned Mayor of the Universe, there. We give him to you. You take him to your law and justice and shit. But me, these guys, my people, this whole planet? We’re out of the picture, right? Whatever psycho crap you guys are running, it’s not us. Deal?”

“Deal?” Deio pronounced incredulously. “I don’t make ‘deals’. I…”

Tullio held up a hand in front of his father’s face. Deio started in shock, then flushed in anger. But shut up.

Ben went on. “Let me put it this way. We give you Kairos. Do you see any reason to make trouble for us after that?”

“No trouble,” Tullio said hastily. “No war. No killing. We only came here to neutralize Kairos and his threat to peace. And you’ve seen why.”

Ben rocked on his heels, looking at the decidedly unpeaceful face of Deio. “Promise?” he said. “Cross your heart? Because if you jerk me… Look at me. Look at me dammit!” Deio’s eyes snapped up to his and Ben leaned closer. “Do I look like somebody who says he’ll come kill you if you fuck me, then doesn’t come through?”

Deio almost made his condescension sound like kindness. “You’re young, uneducated, half-formed…”

Tullio winced at the words even before Ben’s hand lashed out and wrapped a handful of Deio’s glory of white hair. He jerked his head to the side, forcing him to look at Nabo, who stood there seething with an obvious urge to excavate a new anus or two at the slightest pretext. “How about him?” Ben hissed into Deio’s ear. “Does he strike you as somebody who wouldn’t hunt you down and slaughter you in the worst possible way? And enjoy it? Or are you totally stupid?”

Tullio cut his eyes sideways as his father’s face bulged in anger. *Avi, Pathi*, he thought, for once I see you with nothing to reply. He spoke soothingly to Ben. “Is there something you can show us that would prove you’re not involved in this?”

Ben understood what Tullio was saying. And it probably was better to offer something than to just keep threatening. He thought a moment.

Erin spoke from behind him. “How about the computer files?”

Grinning, Ben said, “Good one. That computer has the whole plan on it. You can examine it as much as you want. Take it with you.”

Kairos let out a despairing moan that sounded to Ben like a dog or coyote out in the dark. “Why don’t you just take my life’s blood while you’re at it?” he said. “Take my genitals. My firstborn son is definitely up for offers.” He stood up, so resigned and beaten that even Nabo didn’t cover him. He walked to Ben, who gave him a long, appraising look. He glanced at the Lumens, at the corpses and firearms.

“This is so ironic,” he said in a flat, lifeless voice. “You’ve become exactly what I needed and now there’s no need.” Erin heard something in his voice, and eyed him closely. Just one more of his manipulative actor tricks, she decided.

“I misjudged you, Son.” More feeling crept into his voice. “My mistake. We can still salvage all this, rebuilding this world, survive what’s coming. Stand by me and I promise I will never lie to you again. I need you.”

He smiled wearily at Monke, Nabo, and Erin. “And your friends, as well.”

“Hey,” Monke beamed, “We made it from pet animals to imaginary playmates.”

Ben stood toe to toe with Kairos, probing his face as his father stood still, open and undefensive. He motioned for Tullio to stand and gave him the same scrutiny. Holding the Delft blue gaze, he said, “You’re not going to kill him or hurt him. He’s going to a trial or something? To justice? Protection and peace?”

“Absolutely,” Deio said from the floor. “We…”

Ben shifted his weight, the shotgun rising in his hand. Deio shut his mouth with an almost audible slam.

“That’s the only reason we’re here, Ben. So nobody gets hurt.”

“That better be the truth. Or we’ll come get you. Stick a machete up your ass and stir vigorously until done.” He visibly stood down, pointed to Kairos. “Take him. You’d better hurry.”

Kairos sagged, then made a resigned gesture. “Keep the apartment, the money. Finish school, learn all you can. You’re going to need it. I’m going to need you.”

“Yeah sure, Pops. I think we’ll do fine without your guiding hands.”

“Ben” his father said in a low voice that shivered his neck hairs. “I’m offering you worlds.”

Erin looked at Ben quickly. Tell him, Get thee behind me, bitch, she thought.

Without hesitation, Ben shook his head. “No sale.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Monke chimed in. “Which worlds? How much?”

Kairos gave Ben a smile that changed his whole face, like throwing open shutters. Ben was amazed to see this man in front of him, instead of the guarded, insidious person he’d known. “You’re better than I could have hoped for, Son. I’m proud of you.”

Ben’s emotions hit him treacherously from behind. His throat clamped, his eyes threatened to water. He slumped back against the edge of the desk. Erin saw the tremor in him, knew exactly what had happened. Daddy dearest, she thought, you bastard. You knew exactly what that would do to him. And couldn’t just say you love him, could you?

She laid down her gun, slipped up behind him, spoke low to his ear. “I’m proud of you, too.”

“The rest of think you’re a pussy,” Nabo said gruffly. But he and Monke smiled at the pair.

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Chapter Seventy-Six

Deio got to his feet uncertainly, looking at Ben and Nabo the whole time. He held out his hand to Tullio, who pulled a hood of metallic cloth from under his robe and handed it to his father. He fiddled with knobs and attachments on the hood, motioned for Kairos to come forward. Which he did, striding elegantly over with an air of abdicating royalty. He stepped around the blood leaking out of the senior Major, stopped to look down at the body.

“Still infatuated with pretty veterans, Deio? It would spare a lot of trouble for everybody if you’d just done some time in the war or not be intimidated by your lack of it. Some are born to lead, others to fight.” He nudged the body with his toe. “Some better at it than others, of course.”

“But you think you’re born to do both?”

“I’ve never wanted to lead anything. I only wanted to save the worlds.”

Deio gestured at the diagrams displayed on the monitor. “Oh, so it appears.”

Kairos gave a wry, resigned smile and bent his head to accept the hood. Deio snugged it on, then flipped some very technical-looking goggles down over his eyes.

“Hey, wait a minute,” Ben said. “What is that?”

“You need not concern yourself,” Deio told him imperiously.

He didn’t even register the move that Ben busted, bringing a knife from his pocket, opening it and slapping it alongside Deio’s throat, etching a thin line of blood. “I asked you a question, motherfucker.”

“It generates a signal with beams of virtual light,” Tullio quickly explained. “High intensity beams, like lasers, paint an igo directly on his retina and optic nerve.”

“Why?”

“So when he steps on the grid he can’t escape. He’ll go where we send him.”

“To justice,” Ben said hollowly.

Tullio nodded. “Yes. It’s over now. We won’t pursue you any longer.”

“What?” Monke mimed outrage. “And take all the thrill out of interworld smuggling? The nerve.”

Tullio stepped towards Ben, but the look he got made him smoothly swing over to Monke. He pulled a cylinder the size of a tall beer can from under his robe and handed it over. “The last person out of this place should just hold this, touch the depression on top, then slip. It will destroy the termno. And the locus of the pentahedron’s power.”

“Gee,” Ben said acidly, “You guys think of everything.”

“We have to,” Deio said.

Ben controlled his impulse to push the knife on in to the vocal chords. He removed it from his neck, wiped the blood on the stained toga, and shoved him towards Tullio in disgust. “I don’t think we have a whole lot of time.”

Kairos nodded solemnly under his black hood and stepped towards the termno with head bowed. Like a condemned man going to the gallows, Ben thought. He took one step forward, then stopped. It’s all a tradeoff, *mi chavo*, he thought. This works best for this fucked up planet and my future snotnosed bastards. Shit.

Tullio guided Kairos to the termno, where he turned around facing Ben. “Until next time, son.”

“What, when I’m forty and itching to jump off Armageddon?” Ben said in a high brittle voice that surprised and embarrassed him.

“Give my love to your mother and sister.”

Ben flushed, groveled for a retort, but Kairos disappeared. That’s the MO, Ben thought. Out of sight, out of his fucking mind.

Deio stepped on the termno and also turned to speak, but Tullio put a hand on his shoulder and he closed his mouth. Tullio glared fiercely back at Ben before the two interlopers vanished.

Ben turned away from the termno and looked down at his knife hand. Knuckles white, wrist trembling, blood dripping on the creamy gold carpet. He closed the knife with a deft one-hand move and stuck it in his pocket.

“Erin, you’re up,” he said briskly. “You still have the igo? The little logo?”

She held up her forearm, where Ben had inked the igo for his apartment, a stylized fighting cock. She moved towards the termno and Nabo chivalrously tugged away the sofa. She looked down warily as the glow deepened, and stared at her arm. And was gone.

“I get to drop the bomb,” Nabo said.

“He gave it to me,” Monke said in the arch style from their days as street trash.

“I called it,” Nabo answered in the same convention.

“You’ll already be gone, *pendejo*. You won’t get to see it go off.”

Nabo shrugged eloquently and reached for the bomb. “I’m a purist.”

Monke laughed and tossed him the bomb, which he snatched out of the air effortlessly and looked for the dent on the top as he hopped on the termno. Nabo and Ben joined him, laughing. A collection of knives, guns and a bomb fell to the grid through empty air.

As the door to the penthouse blew in with a blitz of white fire and a shock wave that took out most of the windows, their gold-tinted glass swirling out into space and tumbled through the clear desert sunlight like bright birds before raining bloodily into the crowds in the street.

A “V” of indigo uniforms with black helmets followed the blast, fanning into the room behind exotic weapons flitting beams of Maglites and laser sights.

Then the bomb went off, eliminating the floor, wall and ceiling where the termno had been and tossing the special force back like a freak wave. When they recovered, they spent a long time looking into what was left of entire apartment, but the results were never conclusive.

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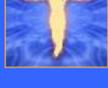
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Chapter Seventy-Seven

“Don’t get us wrong,” Nabo said earnestly. “We think your old man’s a real piece of shit.”

“Thanks,” Ben said dryly. “But now you’re thinking maybe I am, too?”

“We didn’t say that.” Monke was avoiding his eyes, rolling a diamond the size of a pea back and forth on the scratched plastic surface of a Corona table in a crummy *taqueria* where the intergalactic scamps had been planning crimes, triumphs and alibis since childhood. They could easily afford to flash some *postin* in the Zona Rosa, but when the chips were down they always unconsciously gravitated to Tacos Tumbras for the things they associated with home: cheap beer, lousy *tacos al pastor*, and *ranchero* braggadocio blaring from the distorted speakers in the rafters.

“I mean those guys were, you think about it, cops,” Nabo said. “And you turned him over to them.”

Monke nodded agreement, still keeping his eyes on the diamond. “You just don’t do that. It’s like, against the code.”

“The *code*?” Ben tried to make the word sound like a childish joke. “What? The secret code of Barrio Badass Bruddas?”

Nabo didn’t back off an inch. “Yeah, matter of fact. You having memory trouble again?”

That stung Ben good, but he kept a straight faced, listening.

“If some *vato* runs a bigger street, does that make him a different person, different rules of how you act?” Nabo was building up some steam at this point, pointed a finger at Ben’s chest. “You don’t rat people out, you don’t give them over to the law. You deal with it.”

“You didn’t mention that up there with a hundred storm troopers coming up the elevator. So how should we have dealt with it? Shot it out?” Ben gesticulated towards Monke, a gesture to some common sense on the table. “Then what?”

“Whatever it calls for. Isn’t that what you said?”

“And that’s what I did.” They broke off, glaring at each other while the new waitress set down three more paper plates with cheap corn tortillas heaped with greasy pink pork. She was the latest in a long, long line of young cuties the aging owner hired in hopes of getting some privileges on the side. Each lasted until he gave up hope and brought in new talent. She saw the diamond Monke was fiddling with and gaped.

As she moved away Ben leaned over the table, trying for a less brusque confrontation. “You know, Nabs, I was just sort of getting used to the idea of having a father, so it seemed a little premature to just gun him down.”

“Yeah?” Nabo wasn’t down for any conciliation, he was working himself up to something. Never a good sign. “Then what did you drag us along for?”

Ben threw up his hands. “I’m beginning to wonder. You show up, kill everybody in sight, then dis me for trying to straighten it out.”

“I didn’t hear you bitching about me losing those assholes who were beating you to death in the parking lot.”

“Those Space Creeps, either,” Monke threw in.

Ah, hell, Ben thought. He said, “Listen, the game is getting bigger than three *mocosos* stealing mangos from the *mercado*. And we have to step up. How about you, Monko? You’re not a homicidal hothead. What’s your hit on this?”

Monke spun the diamond, a play of colored fire on the table, then met Ben’s eyes. “¿*Sabes que*? I can see where you’re going, Güero. What you’re gunning for. And I admire it. I’d like a piece of it. But I can’t see it being me, you know?”

“Where are you going to end up?” Nabo agreed heavily. “Sitting with a board of directors in some suit? Giving orders to *peons*?”

“So I’m with Nabo. We shouldn’t have given him over. We should have taken him ourselves.”

“And *what*?” Ben snapped in exasperation. The waitress looked up from under her giant bangs, trying to catch Monke’s eye. “Locked him up? Executed him? Become The Law ourselves because the code says we can’t turn him over?”

Nabo shook his head stubbornly, pissing Ben off even more. He strained to reason with them. Christ, he thought, you can take the boys out of the *mala vecindad*, but you can’t take the *vecindad* out of the boys. “And they weren’t cops, by the way. They were like the government of the galaxy or something. Kings of the universe.”

“And a couple of total tools, don’t forget.”

“¿*A poco*?” Ben dripped sarcasm. “Tell me about it. But see, they have a clue. And we pretty conspicuously don’t.”

Monke stared at him sadly. That was it right there. As much as anything. The way he talked any more. Like some snotty *junior* up in Chapu. And he was still talking, like they were kids. Ignorant *indios*.

“They already knew what we found out, did you get that? They knew where we were all the time. Could have killed us, but they didn’t.”

He subsided, looked at the grainy television over the bar playing some blurred, insignificant soccer game, guys running around on confused cockroaches on a wavery greenish field. He tried another tack. “If I could have talked to them earlier, none of that might have happened. We might have known what was shaking.”

“I don’t know,” Monke said, simply. “It’s not like I’m judging you. Or holding it against you. It’s just that it seems like you’re heading off into something that’s way over our heads. Yours, too, I think. But who knows?”

Now Nabo was looking away from Ben, staring out at the soot-stained chaos of third world street life. Monke went on, trying to round it up, head it off. “I don’t want to be an *ingrato*, here. But it’s not like our only other shot is being tenement trash anymore. We had it going on up there.”

Nabo snapped back into the conversation. “That’s right, we did. And the only thing that fucked it up was them coming after us because your old man was being the Asshole From El Paso. I think we should drop all this crap and head back out there.”

“Me, too, Güero,” Monke said softly. “In fact that’s what I’m going to do.”

Ben looked at them both for a long moment, then signaled the girl for three more Coronas. She was there with them in record time for a fifth rate taco shop in Mexico. She set them down affording a scenic vista of her comely cleavage. Ben picked up his beer and looked her off before she stuffed Monke’s head down her blouse.

“Okay.” He said, and took a long pull of the cool beer. The tension ebbed from the table, but both of his buds were still hanging on what he said. “Not a bad idea. Let me finish school here, get a line on all this stuff. You guys head out, rake it in. Maybe I can come up and run with you over the summer.”

Nabo snorted, but not aggressively. “Intergalactic trafficking for Spring Break?”

“Why not? We used to do it after school, selling cigarettes we stole the night before.” He leaned forward, spread his hands. One last shot. “You don’t get it. We’re making our own rules now. You’re talking about conduct laws for people who are still trapped in something we broke out of like nobody else in the history of the world. We’ve got wide open access to the whole universe and you want to tie things down to barrio gang slang. We don’t need any steinking codes, *manos*. We can make our own.”

They both looked at him without answering. He looked at them. Well, the last shot doesn’t sink all that often. He shrugged, took another slug. “Keep my end of the money,” he told them. “The place on En Lari. Nobody’ll be after you now. Down the road we’ll hook back up. Your cash flow, my connections: we’ll be millionaires. Buy the world up and make it our bitch.”

Nabo reached out to tap Ben’s jaw with his knuckles. “You’re missing it, Ben. You’re the one who’s the schoolboy, has to do what they tell you to get in their club. We can do what we want right now. And that’s what we’re going to do.”

Ben leaned back to regard them impassively. “Then you should go do it.”

When the waitress came to pick up their bottles they were all quietly watching the soccer game. Nabo waved off her offer of more beers and they all stood to leave. Monke reached out with the diamond blazing between two fingers. He snapped them and it disappeared. He gaped at her and produced the diamond. Then dropped it into her gaping blouse as he followed Ben and Nabo out into the hubbub and pollution of Mexico. The owner came out of the kitchen, trying to see what she was pawing up from her cleavage. She found it, threw her serviette in his face and skipped out the door.

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Chapter Seventy-Eight

“He was serious about letting us staying with him in his apartment,” Monke said unhappily. “He’d take care of us. You know that.”

“Yeah, I know. But what if we got in the way of his play to get his hands on the big chips?” Nabo was less certain of things than he let on. He sat naked in front of the glass wall of their hideout in En Lari, flicking a local hook-bladed gravity knife open and shut as he stared out at squid boats surrounded by with necklaces of lighted net on the night sea. “Besides, we can take care of ourselves. That’s the whole point.”

Monke fiddled with the hair of the girl passed out with her head in his lap, stared without seeing the ripe flesh that had fascinated him an hour before. “Is that the point?” he asked.

“Every time you score, it’s a point,” Nabo replied. He slapped the lush ass of the other girl, beside him on the carpet. She muttered and nuzzled in her sleep. “What’s missing in this picture?”

“Languages, for one thing.” He carefully didn’t say, “leadership” because he knew his *cuate* would get grumpy. “Gotta admit it was good having Ben around to talk to all these locals.”

“Yeah, and he probably learned it over a long weekend with that weird old *tipo* that taught us English and TeleToobie and all.”

“If he could learn it we could,” Monke said, but wasn’t really sure. Ben had a knack for that kind of thing. They’d known he was smarter since childhood, just like Nabo was a better jock and Monke was... well, whatever he was.

Which seemed to be undergoing some overhaul. “Maybe we could go up there, take some classes.”

“Why would they teach us? Nobody up there likes us. They think we’re *marocho* freaks. They only tolerated us because of Ben.”

Monke slipped out from under the girl’s head and looked down at her fondly, curled prettily on the sofa. He went to a closet for two blankets as light and airy as inch-thick patches of thistledown. He spread one over his recent playmate and walked to the window to hand one to Nabo. Who idly slipped it over his shoulder like a *serape*. Monke grimaced, snatched the blanket off him and draped it over the girl on the floor. “I’d say it’s worth a shot,” he said. “Find out.”

“Well, sure,” Nabo agreed, rising fluidly from the floor without using his hands. “Find out how tough security is up in the Tubes.” He went to the low crystal table, picked up a charger and dialed in a combination that would chill him down towards sleep. He put it in his mouth, inhaled the mist, licked his lips. “But they’re going to hate us.”

“My dear boys, how wonderful to see you again!” Memon exclaimed, practically bouncing up and down with bonhomie and glee. “The ‘*Mexicanos*’, correct? How risqué. I’d hoped to see you again.” He took their elbows to usher them out of his cozy new paneled entry salon into the rococo splendors of his studio. “I have a problem with some pictographs Ben gave me. A little project we were working on.”

“Picture graphs?” Monke inquired politely, shooting Nabo an eye. Oh, the hate and horror here.

“Glyphs, characters, runes. But he hasn’t been back and maybe you can give me some hints because I think they’re from your culture.”

That knocked the guys aback. *This* guy wanted to learn from *them*? They allowed him to settle them around a massive dark wood table littered with books, scrolls, and electronic devices. He fussed around to clear a space in front of them, brought cups of tea, sliced a thin yellow cake studded with little greenish berries. All the while cheerfully chirping about matters as foreign to them as Chinese phrenology.

“Do you recognize these glyphics?” he asked, tapping one of the luminous white scrolls to flatten it out rigid on the table. “They are supposedly from your planet. From your country, in fact.”

Monke looked at the symbols, rendered in stark black that seemed to float off the bright field of the scroll. “These are mostly Maya,” he said. “Like you’d see in a codex, or in Palenque or Chichen or something.”

“We’re Aztecas,” Nabo clarified.

Actually mostly gutter Mixtecas, Monke thought, but left it alone. Definitely not Mayans, anyway. “We can’t read this stuff,” he said. “A few here and there.”

“Maya. Interesting word. A different country? Clan? Race?”

“Tribe. *Indios*, also, but they live over on the Caribe.”

“Tribes.” Memon savored the concept a moment, then pressed on. “Fascinating. But are they a language, as such? Like these?” He fanned another white sheet with samples of Japanese kata and another with a set of graceful *nouveau*-looking vignettes.

“Oh, sure. I mean I don’t know this stuff, but that’s *Chac* right there.

Nabo pointed at another one, “And that’s *Balam*.”

“Wonderful. But how do you decode them if you don’t read?”

“Well everybody knows those. You see them. You just know.”

“And those syllables have meanings or are they just sounds?”

“Yeah, they all mean stuff. *Chac* means ‘*lluvia*.’ ‘Rain’.”

“And *balam* is a jaguar,” Nabo added.

“A jaguar?”

“Yeah, a big pussy that eats you,” Nabo rejoined automatically.

Monke kicked him under the table. “It’s a big cat that lives in the jungle. Has spots all over it. See the spots? They’re wild, can kill a man easy.”

“A cat from the dark wilderness that can kill people. I assume they worship it.”

“Of course” Nabo grinned. He was starting to like this old *vato*. “They fed them hearts, right, Monke? Still-beating hearts.”

Memon’s face flushed with pleasure. “Oh, hearts. Beating hearts. Sensational. I’m so glad you boys dropped in. Should I expect Ben?”

“Well, no,” Monke said, easing by that sticky point with a level expression. “We’re on a little project of our own right now.”

“I don’t suppose you’ve heard from his father lately?” There was a slight beat, a cast of his eyes, that many would have missed, a second of hang time where they could have answered an unspoken question. Monke let it pass.

“I couldn’t tell you,” he said.

Nabo looked at the vaulted glass ceiling, not hiding his embarrassment.

“Well,” Memon said pleasantly, drawing out another pause, “I’m sure he’ll show up soon with some wild adventure tale. It’s just incredible what he’s come through. And shows no sign of stopping.” He winked. “And measure my words, there will be some woman at the bottom of it all.”

He tapped the scrolls back into cylinders and set them aside. “Now. You’d like to access the entire language *tree*, correct?”

“Well, yeah,” Monke said, only slightly abashed. “If it’s not too much trouble.”

“Trouble?” Memon jiggled with choked laughter. “My lad, it’s what I do. Shall we start right away? I have a few questions about this ‘*Español*’ of yours as well.”

“Well, see,” Monke mumbled, “We aren’t very educated.”

“Nonsense. You’ve already taught me things. You’ll do very well. And I know you’re at least partly educated because I did it myself and you don’t get much better than that.” He laughed again, nudging Monke’s arm to indicate false modesty. “Now what can I do for you... ‘*caballeros*’? Is that the right word?”

“We prefer ‘*cabrones*’,” Nabo told him.

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Chapter Seventy-Nine

“That’s why I haven’t been feeling *cien per ciento*,” Nabo said contentedly, hoisting a flagon to wash it down--and eying a gaggle of ruddy-skinned girls with complex braided hairdos taking a long time to draw pitchers of water from the well in the center of the tiled plaza. “Not enough precious stones in my diet.”

“Diamond deficit disorder,” Monke said laconically. He peered into the empty bowl they’d been stuffing themselves from, just to make sure they hadn’t missed any. “A problem all through the hundred and third world.”

Nabo laughed at his impression of Memon. “Yeah, he was wound all the way up yesterday. It’s like the more ballistic he gets the more I learn, though.”

“Yeah,” Monke nodded. “If they’d had teachers like him back home...” He trailed off and looked around. It was little places like this that teased his nostalgia for Mexico. The plaza could almost have been some Poblano village out by the lakes. Awnings in front of clay block stores and restaurants, the dogs and long-eared beasts of burden, the girls in long white skirts. But when things were similar is when the differences got to him. Why pave a square with green tile? Why did everybody look like they’d been sunburned? What the hell was that on top of all the buildings? Some sort of toxic warning swastika?”

“Yeah, if.” Nabo was obviously feeling no regrets to be sitting there sipping sour mash under a blistering blue sun, playing eyeball games with the local *chicas*. “We wouldn’t be sitting around with twenty thousand carats in our *tripas*, would we?”

“Nope. So let’s get back to somewhere with decent plumbing before they start showing up again.” He never called the En Lari pad “home”, but it was starting to feel that way.

Nabo nodded cheerfully. “Sure, Sr. Anal. But we can’t leave without being polite to our hostesses, can we?”

Monke nodded, looking across at the simple, powerfully build chapel where a roped-off altar concealed the termno. He liked this place, not just for the fine pink stones they sold as trinkets, but also because it was convenient. No groveling around in ruins and shitters here: you could sit and sip a brew right across from your transportation, like a Mexican village with the bus station on the main *zocalo*. He suddenly stiffened and touched Nabo’s arm with a light brush that caused him to instantly lose interest in the girls and turn inquiring eyes to Monke. Who jerked his head towards the chapel and warned him softly, “*Fijate, wey*. It’s Drago Malfoy.”

“Just as well,” Nabo said, standing to face the approaching Tullio Mongenides. “I’ve got a few things to sort out with that *puto*.”

“Careful will you?” Monke said with forlorn hope. “He’s a *junior*. His old man can hang a lot of crap on our bumper if he wants.”

“Let’s see how he feels about that after our little chat,” Nabo said. *Ay*, Monke thought, try to talk sense to a bull in the *corrida*.

Tullio walked up and stood with the table between himself and Nabo, showing no fear. Monke still hadn’t figured out if that was stupidity, arrogance, or competence. He caught himself wondering what odds he could get on a fight between these two. Classic science vs primal brutality.

“Sorry, I never got your names,” Tullio said. By no means what the guys had expected. “You are friends of Ben?”

“You’ll have to ask him,” Nabo growled. “If you can get an appointment.”

Uncharted waters, Monke thought, and decided to test them. “We’re still friends, but at the moment we’re our own concern.”

Tullio nodded, looked at the simmering Nabo. He motioned to a chair, “Shall we sit down? I came because I heard you were here.”

Monke felt Nabo’s tension as well as his own. He’d heard this whole interplanetary thing was a real barrel of monkeys.

Tullio pulled out a chair and sat facing Monke. Nabo still hovered, staying in check but still on point.

“I’d like to show you something,” Tullio said. “And ask you to think about something.”

“We’re always open to new experiences,” Monke said affably, waiting it out.

“I need to show you over there,” Tullio told him. He looked up at Nabo. “Where the termno is.”

“Didn’t we already see this reel?” Nabo was leaning forward now, knuckles on the table.

“Okay, we’ll start with the thinking, then,” Tullio said. “Can you see any reason whatsoever that I would bother to try to deceive you?”

Monke leaned back silently and looked at Nabo. Who pondered ponderously, then gave a tiny shrug with just his hands. “Well, I gotta admit.”

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Chapter Eighty

Standing on the glowing termno with the Mexicans, Tullio tapped out a cylinder of the super-white “paper” and sketched a quick design with a stud protruding from a gold ring on his right hand. “This is what I wanted to show you,” he said.

“That’s your big deal?” Monke asked him, disappointed.

“Looks like a Mercedes logo,” Nabo said. “Or that hippie thing.”

“Well, think about it,” Tullio said. And they were standing on one of fifty grids set along a smooth white wall in what Monke instantly thought of as the “Star Trek Food Mall”. They were under an immense, shallow dome of pearlescent white covering acres. Skylights the size of basketball courts gave ultra-clear views of wheeling galaxies. The graceful curve of the ceiling slimmed out as it dipped beyond partitions, displays and whatever else all this stuff was. It was really hard to figure out just how big it was or how far it extended.

Neither of them realized that the Communal was as elastic and accommodating as the translocation tubes themselves. It might be a nice, commodious fit for four hundred souls. Or for forty thousand. Depending.

At the moment it seemed to be a hangout and central public square for a community of a few thousand, all of them tall, slim, blonde and blue-eyed. And half of them very much in the mold of a mythos Mexican men have happily taken to heart: the Swedish National Bikini Team. They stood out among the tall, pale people but nobody paid undue attention. It’s the rec center for the master race, Monke thought. He turned wondering eyes on Tullio as Nabo stared flabbergasted at the women.

Tullio motioned to a nearby table, apparently a sheet of soft silver metal suspended high enough off the floor to allow access from six chairs that looked like “S”-shaped air mattresses. “I assume you’d like a drink.”

“Sí,” Nabo said. “*Chingo de sí*. Any Tequila here?”

“Whatever that is,” Tullio responded, taking a seat and waving for a service cart to approach the table, like a stubby snack machine sliding on the featureless white floors.

“Wherever ‘here’ is,” Monke said, sitting down across from him.

“We’re in the Sky,” Tullio said, offhandedly. “This is what you might call the ‘downtown’.”

Nabo looked around the place carefully. He didn’t see anybody particularly hostile. In fact, he’d noticed that a group of very nicely formed young blonds at the next table cluster had taken major notice of Tullio as soon as he showed up. Well, he’s got to be quite a catch around here, Nabo thought. The fucker. He was also noticing that the girls seemed somewhat aflutter that Tullio was talking with the two dark savages in their midst. He smiled at them and registered a fairly gratifying response. *Chido*. Mercedes looking thing. He filed it away. And sat down to glare at Tullio, who was handing around three cups of what the guys decided was “*café*”, though if the service carts had put it in a glass, they would have called it ‘*vino*’.

“Okay, WhiteOut,” Nabo said in his No Shit tone. “You’ve got us.”

Tullio turned to Monke. “Is he always this hostile?”

Monke nodded as if that were self-evident. “It’s his default.”

“You got us. You can turn us up whenever you want, you know our game, you’ve got fucking armies,” Nabo went on, ignoring their comments. “How much do you want?”

Tullio regarded him with lifted platinum brows and limpid blue innocence. “How *much*? Of what?”

“Of our action. And I’m only you warning you once, keep it reasonable. You don’t want me unreasonable.”

“Ah,” Tullio said after staring at him for a moment. “I see what you mean. Well, you know, I want the whole thing.”

He saw no real change in Nabo, but somehow felt as if the air around him had gone cold. And Nabo, very slowly, leaned forward and started to stand.

Monke reached out to restrain him. Which might work for about thirty seconds.

“You want everything,” he asked Tullio. “Is that your idea of reasonable?”

“No,” Tullio said, sorting through his response to these curious groundpounders’ mindset. “What I mean is, I want in. To work with you.” He looked at them quizzically. “Does that make sense to you?”

After he got his mind around that one, Monke said, “Let me get this straight. You’re like the son of the main honcho, judge, jury and *pez gordo* around here, right?”

Tullio nodded and Nabo picked it up. “But you want to be a smuggler, down on the worlds full of dirty black animals like us.”

“Yes,” Tullio said. In the stunned silence, he quickly added, “I have no interest in all this training and conferences, the meetings I go to, my father’s schemes. I like to go down to the dirt... to the worlds, work in the field. Since we stopped Kairos there’s no need.”

He looked at them for possible problems about mentioning their last meeting. Seeing nothing on their faces, he went on. “I think you two are having fun. I want you to bring me in with you. Be partners.”

There was another long incredulous pause, then Nabo, with his usual gracious tact, said, “Why should we do anything that stupid?”

Monke smiled patronizingly at Tullio. “We don’t really take applications. And you look like about five kinds of trouble.”

Nabo nodded energetically. “A rich white daddy’s boy who wants to gang around with us until he gets big enough to be a bigshot. We’ve already done one of those.”

“Yeah,” Monke added, “And when your *papi* calls you back and your have to run off and be somebody, why wouldn’t you carry our butts back as a trophy?”

“Why would I?” Tullio asked, stopping them again. “And think about this, outlaws: I grew up in the sky. I know everybody. I know the markets, what people want and will pay for. And I can take you to a lot of worlds you don’t know about.”

Nabo pursed his lips and considered. “Yeah, I can see how that might help.”

Monke examined Tullio shrewdly. “If it’s for real. What’s the main stuff people around here want moved?”

Tullio could tell it was a screening probe, answered carefully. “There are some favorite substances. But believing it or not, the real profit might be just moving people from one place to someplace else where they aren’t supposed to be.”

Nabo broke into a laugh that drew serious attention from the girls at the other table. “Just like back home, huh, *compa*?”

Monke was grinning happily. “New *telenovela*,” he said, “Wetbacks In Space.”

“I’ve got another question, though,” Nabo told Tullio seriously. “A big one.”

“How big?”

“Did Ben send you? Have anything to do with this?”

Tullio smiled dismissively. “By no means. Ben doesn’t like me. His father and my father are enemies. As you saw. And I have to say I don’t like him or Ben. Will that create a problem?”

“You see any problems, Monke?”

“Hey, I’m the monkey. I see no evil. I think we should do it.”

“But first we want to show you something,” Nabo said.

Tullio looked at the two of them and nodded. “Fair’s fair.”

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Chapter Eighty-One

Tullio took in the agave worm Nabo was showing him, curled in the bottom of the bottle of mezcal. He regarded it with scientific detachment, going so far as to hold the bottle up to his eyes like a telescope, staring at the distorted image of the pallid *gusano*. Nobody paid much attention to him: you got your slumming *gringos* in the “Siete Yeguas”.

They’d chosen the bar because it was close to the metro and because they’d always admired its pseudo-hick style. Peanut shells on the floor, ancient leather saddles for bar stools, fly-specked sepia photos of the Revolution of 1910, a welded iron sculpture of seven horses bursting out of the wall behind their table. A dingy, country kind of place mostly populated by sleek-suited yuppies. They also liked the revolutionary pun of the name, which they’d been unable to explain to Tullio even after they’d all gotten drunk. This was Nabo’s idea of screening personnel. Tullio was doing all right so far.

Nabo poured the last shot of mezcal and knocked it back. He fished the pale grub from the narrow glass, flipped it up into the air, and leaned back to catch in his mouth. He chewed it noisily and slurped it down. Tullio picked a cigarette butt from the ashtray, tossed it up and swallowed it whole. Monke, lolling in his primitive leather/cane chair, applauded wildly. He leaned forward to pour three more shooters from their bottle of tequila, motioned the bartender to send over another bottle of whatever they wanted to fob off on some wasted kids with more money than discrimination.

“So what do you think of tequila, *cabrón*?”

“Think?” Tullio replied, astonished. “Hah!” He paused, considered. “Think, you think?” Another pause for clarity. “Hah!”

“What I think,” Nabo declared weightily, “Is that you are *bien pedo*. Go, ahead, tell me I’m lying. *Bien, bien, pedo*.”

Tullio stared at him owlshly. “I’m really... fart? Is that what you said?”

“Yeah. *Bien pedo*.”

“Drunk,” Monke lectured in a cunning imitation of Memon’s manner. “*Borracho. Ebrio. Alumbrado. Encandilado. Mamado*. Or as you *gringos* say, ‘Shit-faced’.”

“*Shit-faced*?” Tullio couldn’t figure that one out, for some reason. “Shit? Faced? That makes no sense.”

“Oh, but you do?” Monke snickered.

“You don’t,” Tullio intoned with dignity. “You are totally, completely, fart.”

“You just never got drunk on tequila before.”

“I have never been drunk on anything before.” The whole bar didn’t really come to a silent halt and stare at that pronouncement, but Nabo and Monke had that impression. They gaped at Tullio, who tossed down another shot, gave them a sloppy blond grin, and belched loudly. “*Eructo*,” he said, happy to be learning more Spanish.

Nabo and Monke looked at each other in amazement, then broke up. Nabo stood, pounded both fists on the table, which actually did cause the bar to pause and look at them, then thrust his hand out to Tullio. “That did it, *Blanca Nieves*. You’re in.”

Tullio returned the complex handshake, switching grips then banging fists. He did the same with Monke, all smiles. He shifted slightly on his chair and farted mightily. He said, “I think we should start with precious stones.” Nabo groaned, clutched his ass protectively and sat down for another drink.

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Chapter Eighty-Two

“But what *are* they?” Monke was moved to abject admiration and awe. He slowly turned the rounded lozenge of blue fire between his fingers, watching it flicker with faint stars and concentric circles in the light of an oil wick burning in what looked like a dog’s skull with antlers. Nabo weighed a dozen more in his hand under the smile of a wizened old joker with dirty cinnamon skin and kinky hair trained into two rasta-looking horns.

“You want some local name?” Tullio asked him. “They used to be called Skyfall years ago. They’re on the initial survey of this world as “figured *saffozul*” but what does that mean? What’s important is they’re in big demand. Anything that beautiful that evokes sky is in demand. Ironically, we live in the ‘Sky’ but never actually see a sky.”

Monke tore his eyes away from the spectral play of diffraction. “In demand? What, by your people?”

“Yes, and on several worlds that have valuable goods to trade. These were very popular before the war. Well, before congress with worlds was restricted.”

Nabo placed the stones on the rough ceramic tabletop, where they touseled the light into flickering blue embers. He looked at their companion, who grinned toothlessly and rattled the collection of amulets, whistles, utensils, and junk that festooned the front of his sleeveless fur jacket. The old cuss stood up and was immediately flanked by four tough young woodsmen in similar get-ups. He placed his forearms together, palms touching, and bent them forward from the elbows to offer a sort of arm bow to all three of the young smugglers. Then held out his hand.

Monke slipped a slim glassine envelope from his shirt pocket and pulled out several small paper tokens elaborately printed and punched like surrealistic postage stamps. One of the young bucks stepped up to pocket the tokens, but the geezer picked up the envelope and examined it in obvious wonder. Monke leaned forward and motioned for him to keep it. He did the forearm salaam again and faded out of the lamplight.

Monke immediately turned to Tullio and asked, “Survey? Does that mean you have information on what’s on all these planets?”

Tullio gestured modestly. “I told you I would bring something to the table.”

Nabo stared at him a minute and laughed out loud. “An inventory and customer list? I guess so.”

“I wish we’d had you with us earlier,” Monke said thoughtfully. “We’d understand a lot more. Like you just said there used to be trade, but it got cut off by the war, right?”

Tullio reached for a rustic but nicely designed black clay teapot and poured steaming amber liquid into his cup. He looked out at the deep woods beyond the porch awning of the trading post and organized his thoughts a moment. “The other way around,” he said. “The war was because of Retiring. The decision was to withdraw to the Sky and stop interfering with the seeded worlds or exploiting them for our own purposes.”

Neither Nabo nor Monke were the world’s deepest thinkers. The statement lay on the table like a lead skillet while they chewed things over. Finally Nabo ejaculated, “*Why?* Who lost their mind?”

“This was after you built this whole termno system, right? Invested, you know, billions of something into this system?” Monke shook his head sadly. “I smell politicians in this thing.”

“The will of the people changed,” Tullio nodded, glad they were following things. “There was a time when we were discovering worlds, seeding them with humanity, molding them. Bringing the fruits of the Sky across the stars.”

“Colonial imperialism,” Nabo said. Maybe we can get Cielo up here to protest against it.

Tullio shot him a sharp look, then a half-smile. “Ah, you’ve seen what happens? Yes, there was a reaction to those policies. By that time a lot of people lived in The Sky. It affects your attitude. We withdrew from the worlds, left them to their own devices. Traffic and exploitation were proscribed.”

He looked at Monke. “Yes, it was political, you could say. These things work differently for us. Lumen isn’t really a political party or a faith. It’s not even a name, you understand, just what everybody calls it. But under the predilections of Lumen we avoided interference and advantage. And conflict.”

“But there was another group that thought fucking around with us peasant niggers from the dust wasn’t such a bad idea, right?”

“Essentially. To interact with other peoples, interbreed, share knowledge.”

“Yeah, right. They wanted to keep scoring Third World *fayuca* and dope and pussy and stuff. So let me guess what the war was about.”

Tullio smiled ironically. “Basically it was about you.”

Nabo started, then grinned. “Hey, you can’t pin this one on me.”

“About you, your world, peoples like yours. Whether to have anything to do with them or not.”

“Oh, man,” Monke breathed. “*Andale, wey.*”

“There were two... factions, I guess you’d say. Opinions. But it was also about whether or not anybody had the right to tell anybody else what to do. Or not.”

“I’d vote with the other guys, then,” Nabo said firmly. “Do they have a name?”

“They’re less organized than Lumen, less... official. Like you’d expect from a group that doesn’t accept rule. Most people call them Gravitus.”

“And they lost.”

“Yes, they did. But not all of them accepted that.”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute,” Monke suddenly blurted. “I’m getting it now. Lumen is you and...”

“And those men you killed. And the people of the Race and Sky. Yes.”

“And that Deio asshole...”

“My father. Advocate and Advisor to the Lumen Consensus.”

“Yeah,” Nabo said bluntly. “So you’re some kind of prince. And this whole thing with us and Ben and his dad and all those cops...”

“We managed to get right in the middle of somebody trying to start Stars War II,” Monke cut in. “Lumens against Gravitons.”

“Now you understand,” Tullio told them.

“Do these Gravitus guys have a leader or coach or anything?” Nabo asked.

“You haven’t figured that out yet, *tarado?*” Monke said quietly. “It’s Ben’s old man.”

“*No mames!*” Nabo jerked his head around to Tullio for confirmation, could see that Monke was right. “So this whole thing we got here is a real *chingadera.*”

Tullio nodded and reached for more of the soporific tea. “That’s as good a word as any.”

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Chapter Eighty-Three

The scorpion would have been half a meter long with its tail stretched out. Instead of curving over its head and bobbing around with evil intentions. It didn't cower when its woven grass cage opened, it chittered out on the dented metal table, a gleaming black monster with spread cutters and whipping tail. Rotten attitude at both ends. Nabo struck like a cobra, snatching it up by its tail to dangle, with furiously scissoring claws. He looked at it with a professional admiration. "Wonder if anybody keeps these as pets?"

"They say they're loyal and affectionate after you kill them and put a stake in their heart," Monke said, gingerly grabbing the barb at the end of the tail. It was a needle-tipped comma, a bitter end the size of a peanut. He snapped it off and squeezed it very slightly. An oily drop of puss-yellow formed on the stinger and he nodded, dropping the loaded stinger into a plastic test tube. Nabo tossed the disarmed scorpion into a barrel made from a two meter-long joint of enormous bamboo. "That the last one?"

"Have you ever actually ingested that... venom?" Tullio asked from a chair placed well away from the table. "It must be powerful if people pay so much for it."

"I tried it," Monke said. "Once."

"It's not so bad," Nabo said laconically, kicking the barrel gently to stir the decommissioned scorpions to an infuriated sizzle. "I'd just rather have the platinum."

Monke sealed the tube with a black rubber chemical stopper and looked at it glumly. "The scorpion's revenge," he said. "Where the sun don't shine."

Tullio laughed, stood up and crossed the crushed shell floor of the hut to a set of golden burlwood shelves that covered the entire woven cane wall. He took down a small backpack of buttery yellow leather, darkened in places by sweat and long wear. He came to the table, peering into the barrel with distaste. Nabo kicked the barrel into a clatter of brittle wickedness and Tullio shot him an eye. He held the pack open, nodded for Monke to toss in the vial of stingers. Monke and Nabo stared at him.

"That's the same pack you had back in Qetlaz. How'd you get it here?"

"I wore it. Put those nasty little jabbers in here and I'll take them when we slip to Ronchell."

"How come you can do that and we can't get a lousy gold necklace through without eating it?" Monke demanded. "Or worse?"

Tullio looked at them curiously. "You don't know? Ben didn't tell you about this?"

"Ben didn't *know* about this," Nabo said testily. "None of us know dick. And Ben's *jefe* didn't tell us."

"That's not surprising," Tullio nodded. "He wasn't your partner; he was using you to an end."

"We figured that out, thanks," Nabo said acidly. "So how come you've got a backpack and we've got sore butts?"

"How come my old watch slipped across, but not my new ones?" Monke asked.

Tullio took the vial from him, dropped it into the back and slipped into the straps. "It's part of my self image," he told them.

"Wonderful," Nabo grated. "I'm glad you have a fashionable ego."

"Ever notice that if you've been growing your hair longer, it goes back to the old length when you slip?"

Monke had to think about that a minute. "We haven't been staying anywhere long enough to notice our hair's longer," he said.

"How about your clothes, then?" Tullio said impatiently. "Whatever you wear when you get on the termno, you're back to your same outfit when you step off the slip. Right?"

"Yeah, I guess," Nabo said, trying to recall details of barging around the cosmos. "It was just robes and stuff that wouldn't slip."

"We didn't model a lot of native styles," Monke said defensively.

"Here it is," Tullio said briskly. "There isn't really any 'space' in hyperspace. There isn't really any space in space, but forget that for now. The only thing that translocates is your consciousness. Your individual mind. And in your mind, there's a way you look. The way you look in your dreams. Have you ever grown a beard?"

Nabo and Monke fidgeted slightly. "We're *indios*, *wey*. We can't grow beards."

Tullio, surprised, nodded as if he wasn't. Hmm, he was learning, too. "Or grow you hair long? Or shave it off?"

"The cops shaved it off a few times," Nabo said.

"Well, you didn't think of yourself as being bald, did you? You look in the mirror and it surprises you, right? You see a girl look at you, then you suddenly realize she's seeing you with no hair."

"Yeah, okay, I get you."

"Well your body doesn't go through space in a tube to get somewhere. Your mind projects the tube, it projects your body in the tube... and it projects your body when you arrive. What you're standing in right now."

Monke slowly sat down, leaned on the table, thinking. Nabo watched him, waiting for somebody to do the heavy thinking for him. He looked up after a moment. "So this," he pinched his arm, "Is just some dream, some hallucination I'm having?"

"Something like that," Tullio said. "I'm seeing the same thing you are, though. See what I mean?"

"Yeah, yeah. We're having the same hallucination. Or something. But where do the, like... 'pieces' come from? The atoms and shit?"

"That's what you project."

"But... Hey, wait, how does that fit in with the rest of the world? It's solid and I'm just some daydream?"

"No, everything you see is the same. Your daydream. Everybody else's, too."

"*Chingao*," Nabo yelled. "That is so fucked-up. No wonder you don't like drugs."

"It's difficult to incorporate," Tullio told him smoothly. "We can get into it more if you want some time. But here's what's important. The watch was part of you because you always wore it and it was part of your residual self image. A wedding ring, things like that go with you. They change in time. This pack has been like a part of me for years, so anything in it is like it being in my stomach." He smiled. "Or worse."

Monke looked at the pack, calculating. "How long would I have to carry something around before it was part of my image?"

"It depends. Some things never come aboard. They just aren't you. Nabo could wear a ballet skirt for fifty years and it wouldn't be him. Somebody you love could give you something that's part of you forever, instantly. Also, you can learn to incorporate things faster."

"From some exemplar?"

"Exactly."

"Man, you're getting us into deep water, Snowflake," Nabo grumbled.

"No, you jumped into deep water. I'm just telling you where the rocks are. And where the sharks are."

"Well, you know," Monke said, "Those are things worth knowing."

Nabo nodded. "You bet. If you don't know where the sharks are, how are you going to kill them and eat them?"

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Chapter Eighty-Four

First problem was the door. It was boarded up. Tullio took a globe the size of a grapefruit from his backpack and shook it. It lit up, a soft golden glow that looked perfect in this sanctum of elaborately carven walls and pillars. Monke motioned him closer to some of the carvings, marveling at the intricate interplay of figures. It looked like a plate of intestines, was his impression. Then a nest of eels. Then you started to see it was some kind of winged snakes, copulating and swallowing each other. Often simultaneously. The serpent penises were as big around as their bodies, long and barbed. He turned to the others. "Are we sure we want to continue our tour of this place?"

"Ritual symbolism," Tullio replied offhand, examining the dark hardwood planks that had been fastened over the ceiling-height doorway. "Probably a cult created by the clan who seeded here."

He held his globe overhead, faintly illuminating the ceiling. "See, there's the messenger from the heavens, with his Sun emblem."

Nabo ran at the planks, launching into a leap that culminated in a powerful kick. One of the planks flew off into the gray moisture outside. Two more kicks and they could see the next feature of their destination: torrential rain.

Their door led out to a stone platform with low risers down to a courtyard of some kind. Hard to tell about its paving since it was covered with water pebbled by the driving rain that colored their entire view an aquarelle gray and sounded like millions of mice applauding some rare feat of mousedom.

A short man with powerful calves the color of brown mustard ran away from them across the flooded court. He wore sandals with elaborate leg lacings and clogs over six inches high. Barely enough to keep his feet dry. He wore a low conical hat with brim wide enough to shed water past his shoulders and a stiff batwing cape of laquered cane. And what looked like black diapers. He was running towards the low building across from the temple entrance. He carried some sort of long, simply designed musket.

The building opposite made no claim on grace: it was a fortification, plain and simple. A bunker with a high, steep roof of split cane, cleverly relieved across the front so that water spilled off to the sides, creating two curving cataracts like Mongol mustaches. The front of it was embattled, with typical narrow, tapered slots in a solid wall. A very solid-looking low door opened to admit the running sentinel. Then muskets popped out of every fire point and began to fire rapidly and methodically. Shot the size of golf balls thudded into the door planks and screamed through the gap Nabo had opened.

Monke, plastered against the front wall, glanced quickly out and drew back as a musket ball showered chips of stone by his face. He said, "Look, I'll settle for dragon dorks." Nabo, disgusted, nodded towards the termno, which immediately lit up. They ran for it, diving to slide onto the grid with their igo richly in mind.

At their roost above the En Lari embarcadero, Tullio pulled out a scroll tube, tapped it flat, and passed his writing ring across it. "I think we can safely scratch that place off our list."

"You think so?" Monke asked. "I was hoping we could build a hotel there. Take package tour junkets."

Nabo said, "That fort was really old. They weren't waiting for us. Who, then?"

"I could only guess," Tullio said, tucking away his revised igo list heading to the bar, where Nabo poured a shot of the pungent local millet liquor for each of them. "You've probably noticed by now that termnos tend to be in religious structures."

"When they aren't in bus stations or shitters," Nabo added.

"Understand that the termnos were there first. Usually the first permanent building in the world. The fount of life. These cults grew up around them. Not by accident."

"Not a bad plan," Nabo acceded, carrying his drink to his favorite perch by the window. He settled to the floor and pulled out a flat black gadget that looked a nine volt battery with recessed buttons and dots of yellow neon. He tossed it thoughtfully in his hand as he stared out over a sparkling expanse of ocean. "You get them praying to you and their balls are in your hands."

"Worked for the Spaniards," Monke said dryly. He flopped on a wide sofa and fiddled with something that looked like a beaded cat collar, but was actually a calculator. "But you don't see Mexicans shooting at the Pope the minute he shows up in the Cathedral. We might pop off an archbishop or two, but we don't shoot up the church."

Tullio sat at the transparent table and grabbed a handful of blue fruit from a basket of metal screenwork. He told them, "The war changed everything. There's no way to know who they thought we were. I could guess they were a Gravitus enclave and turned away from the destinies of Light." He caught Monke's questioning look and explained, "Lumen. The universal sun cult. The spread of unimpeded light. I'd say it got impeded up there on Chi-io."

"Ah. And when Kairos and his *cuates* left, they told them to keep an eye on the place and shoot anybody who didn't say the countersign."

"Or something. Some of the worlds rebelled on their own. Some were just abandoned for some reason. Most don't even really remember the ancient history. Unless the war touched them. The Last War wasn't that long ago."

Monke caught the way Last War was a title, like The Great War. He thought about that a minute.

"So there aren't any more wars?"

"No. It was an immense conflict, fought across the Sky, the worlds. We learned our lesson. There are still conflicts, but they're handled without violence or destruction."

Nabo looked up from his little device, which was projecting a disk of dusty white light in front of itself. "How can you have a war without violence?"

"He said they weren't wars, *burro*."

"Things work more on esteem now. What you might call social pressure. You don't do things because they just aren't done."

"Etiquette," Monke said, and Tullio nodded.

Nabo scowled, smelling a rat. "But who says?"

"Everybody says," Tullio said. "It's numbers, peer pressure. And I'd have to say there's a hint of force that makes it work. I'm just starting to realize that."

"Like maybe those fuckheads you showed up with at Kairos' penthouse?" Nabo was giving him his full attention at this point.

"That's the color of it," Tullio said. "They're called Majors. They're zealots. It's hard to explain, but they're like a religious warrior cult. They're all veterans."

"Of the war?"

"Yes. There were very strong bonds and charisma forged during that time. And even more so because we were essentially fighting ourselves. Heroes and saviors from that period have powerful prestige and relationships that are stronger than family."

"Just a wild shot," Monke hazarded, "Did Minator serve his country capably?"

Tullio smiled. "Good guess. And you see the sort of loyalty and respect he gets. And I think you can feel something around him, an aura or presence?"

Nabo and Monke both nodded their heads.

"That's charisma. Its main source, at this time in history anyway, is heroism and sacrifice in the Last War." Tullio paused, looking at them as if deciding something weighty. He sipped his drink and his brow cleared. He said, "I'll tell you another person who carries that sort of charisma and loyalty. Kairos."

Nabo nodded as if it was abundantly clear. But Monke was surprised "Who those Majordomos were going to use force against. Arrest him."

Tullio looked out to sea a moment. "No. They were going to ask him to submit. And he probably would have. That's why he was so shocked that you killed the Majors. So was I."

"So were they," Nabo said.

"I assume," Tullio said blandly. "And they were, by the way, definitely assholes. Of the first order. But that's not what bothers me about it."

"You didn't seem bothered at the time," Monke chided.

"But I'm in a little different position now, aren't I?" Tullio stured around at the room, the booty and armaments, their whole enterprise. "You haven't really asked yourselves why I left a pretty good position in life to run around with bad-smelling ignoramuses getting shot at, have you?"

"Oh, we discussed it a little. We think you're a white rich boy rebel like Ché and Fidel and Commandante Marcos."

"Am I rebelling, though? Or just having fun making money the wrong way?"

"Which is the best way," Nabo said, raising his glass in salute.

"Agreed." Tullio returned the toast. "What I am is a defector of conscience."

"Nabo also has a defective conscience," Monke informed him brightly.

"I didn't like that whole Kairos campaign," Tullio ignored him, went on. "Not after I thought about it awhile. I started questioning a lot of things. It's hard to explain this, but the sort of ethical compulsion we have now is worse than force in some ways. Because it becomes part of who you are. And you end up not really having any choice in what you think and feel and do."

There was a pause in the room, both of the Mexicans looking at him blankly. Then Nabo turned back to his gizmo. Monke stirred his drink with his finger. Finally he said, "Yeah, that is kind of hard to explain."

Nabo moved his fingers in the disk of light, producing a silvery chime. The face of a pretty girl in elaborate ringlets appeared in the light, looking like a three dimensional miniature hovering behind the light. Nabo held the device close to his face and said, "*Hola*, Gaisha! You're damn right it's me: Nabo the Magnificent. What are you doing and what aren't you wearing?"

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Chapter Eighty-Five

These people are too wretched to even qualify as Guatemalan *super-pobres*, Monke thought as he watched the line of gaunt, ragged little folks shuffle by: they'd need bank loans to become homeless. He was reminded of the tiny Zapotec women who beg on Mexican city streets, but these guys were frailer, paler. They looked like children affected with malnutrition, their arms and legs pitifully skinny under their dark, purplish skin and lank black shags. Their children looked like wet kittens bundled in trash. They looked ahead and down as they filed past him at the gate, filling the inner courtyard of stone ruins.

They were herded down into the terraced seats of the ruined amphitheater by guards with quarterstaffs of orange-grained wood. The guards were bigger, better fed, and the only ones who looked around. Occasionally they shoved somebody into line or slapped some laggard around. The guards looked shocked when Tullio suddenly appeared in the center of the round floor of the sloping pit and bounded up the rows of seated peasants to confer with Monke.

"Everything's ready on the Kilailee side," he said. "We can start bringing them through any time."

Monke nodded, but wasn't all that thrilled. "You said there was more money in moving people than goods," he complained. "I understand the whole long-term payoff thing, but we're working on credit, here. That's the same as fronting weight to people. Nobody does it but idiots."

"But they aren't something that gets consumed. We know where they'll be. And do you have any doubt they'll pay us?"

Monke looked down at the herd of tiny refugees, cowering before the guards and even Nabo, who was doing nothing more aggressive than stamping a symbol on their forearms. "No, I think they'll do what anybody says who's bigger than them. Which means just about everybody in the universe."

"They're persecuted here, but are needed as labor on Kilailee. It's beautiful."

"Oh, we're all over that idea," Monke said, "But we're used to getting money up front from families or refugee groups or somebody. Or at least cash on delivery."

"Remember this," Tullio said. "Once they get established, there will be family. And refugee groups with money to pay up front for others to come."

"Yeah, we've seen that work, too."

"We're getting money from..."

"Yeah, I know. Which means they'll be pretty much slaves for a couple of years, right?"

"If you don't like that, give the money back and wait."

"Oh, no," Monke laughed. "I can be a slaver for awhile. You can see from here we're doing these *nacos* a favor."

Nabo came up them, slipping his crude wooden stamp into a pocket. "We sure as hell are. If they had any women worth screwing this would be a real wet dream. But no, you found the only people in the universe with no babes. Are we ready to rumba, here?"

Tullio nodded. "Feed them through about every two minutes, two at a time. I'll move them off on the other end. You told them if they don't see me to look at their arms and concentrate hard, right?"

"Yeah. Let's get 'em out of here before I start feeling like that Schindler *vato*."

Tullio descended the tiers to the "stage" of the amphitheater, picking his way through families of huddled masses. He was just stepping onto the termno grid when a guard snatched a woman up from her seat and backhanded her. She fell, crying piteously, but nobody moved to protect her. Tullio stepped back to confront the guard. "Let's not see any more of that."

The guard nodded sullenly and walked away.

Above, Nabo asked Monke, "Did you figure out what he was saying about the set-up here? These herder guys with the sticks are total buttholes."

"You said it. It's weird, not even politics or race or anything. They're like a different family or something. They all think Tullio is God On High because of his hair."

"Well, let's move these turkeys out."

Which smoothly enough, the subservient 'fugees filing like sheep to where Monke positioned their arms in front of their eyes, pointed at the igos stamped there, and said the only local word he'd learned, "Concentrate". They'd bow, step on the grid and disappear. And Nabo would lead up two more. This is a lot of trouble for chicken feed pay, Monke was thinking. Although he could appreciate the idea of a regular future income, it just didn't seem like a sound business plan for smugglers and pirates.

And then of course they had an odd number of peons to pass. When the last pair stepped onto the grid the odd woman out, a tiny young thing with big, scared eyes, panicked and ran towards the termno. It's okay, honey, Monke thought. We won't leave you here all alone. He stepped back to allow her to the termno. Three in this load, he thought. Then we're out of this slum.

But the herders, who were now clumped around the termno, took her breaking ranks personally. One of them tripped her with his staff, and grabbed her by the hair to help her back up. He dangled her with her feet of the ground and his fellow guards laughed. Nabo was on it in a hot second. "*¡Epa!*" he yelled, motioning for the guard to put her down. "Drop that girl and back the fuck off."

The guard stared at him insolently and Monke suddenly realized that it was only Tullio who had any authority over them. They might not know where he and Nabo fit into the pantheon, but they didn't see it as being a command position.

Nabo, never fond of being ignored, was on the guard immediately. He grabbed his wrist, forcing his hand down until the girl's feet touched, then twisted savagely until he yelped and let go. The woman ran blindly away from him, but right into the arms of Monke, who had seen this coming. He set her on the grid, pointed to the igo and chanted "Concentrate, concentrate," until she was gone. He turned around to see Nabo surrounded by a semi circle of a half-dozen herders holding staffs in menacing postures. Oh, you stupid shits, he thought. Well, you've got it coming.

Nabo snatched a staff from the hand of the guard whose tendons he'd just outraged, and smacked him over the head with it. He held it overhead in front of him with one hand and advanced to within two paces of the others. He looked down at them with his gored bull look and roared.

Two of the herders dropped their poles at once, three vacillated, one raised his into a combat position and advanced on Nabo. Who grabbed his own staff at the end, turned sideways to the guard and tapped the staff on the ground like a baseball player at the plate. He tapped it again, shifting his hips, a whole ritual of loosening up, then hoisted it, awaiting the pitch. The guard paused, uncertain, then stepped forward with his staff at port arms. Nabo stopped and swung, a beautiful silken motion, pure Ken Griffey Jr. He caught the guard right on the knuckles.

The guard let out a curt cry of pain and dropped to his knees, holding his right hand between his thighs. Nabo spun his staff under his arm like Gene Kelly securing an umbrella, then did a pirouette that whipped the tip of his pole through an arc terminating at the side of the guard's head. Dropping him like the proverbial sack.

Nabo continued his spin and twirled his staff with Asian/Matrix overtones. He dropped into a stance, staff held high like a samurai and hopped toward the other herders. He screamed, "*Hai!*" They dropped their sticks and beat feet out of there.

Nabo turned, idly spinning the staff like a baton just as Tullio appeared on the termno again and looked quizzically after the fleeing herders. Nabo waved a hand at them and pulled an innocent face. "I just wanted to say Hi."

Tullio laughed and Monke gave his "see what I put up with" gesture. Tullio looked around the area, said, "We should probably get gone, ourselves."

"Yeah, why is that?" Monke asked him. "I keep thinking how you always managed to turn up right on top of us. Is there anybody in Blondie Central who can see what we're up to out here? And where we are?"

Tullio motioned them towards the termno, saying, "The termno system is central. In fact it's the most central single event in the universe. Hyperslip is a web though all reality with a node on every planet humans have ever lived on."

He stood on the grid waiting for them to join him. Monke paused. "Can they be monitored?"

"By people with the right access."

"Like your father?"

"And the Majors. Are you guys coming or not?"

Monke stepped on the grid talking fast, but he didn't get his answer until they stepped out in the old section of En Lari. And Tullio told him, "I can cover our asses quite a bit. And I'm still trying to figure out the rest."

"That's really reassuring," Monke said. "I think I could use a drink."

"Me, too," Nabo said. "But look. Are those *peons* going to be okay?"

"I'm sure of it," Tullio said. "We have made of them a great nation."

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Chapter Eighty-Six

Everyone else in the place was either wearing the local kilted blouse and sandals or writhing around nearly naked, but Tullio, Nabo and Monke strode purposefully through the smoky, bawling entertainment center in their “traveling clothes”: the jeans, boots, and canvas shirts they’d worn when they’d arrived in this funky little world. All three carried rucksacks made from colorful local scarves. They picked their way through a combination of the worst elements of Bombay brothel and Wild West saloon, under an arched stone roof that looked like the place might have been a church at one time. The haphazard jumble of tables full of drinkers and pipe smokers, grabby whores, and tough hombres armed to their unsavory teeth hindered their progress and the raucous, bawdy horn music made it hard for them to talk.

“So you’re thinking this might be a major payoff?” Monke yelled to Tullio, who did a matador pass of a leering nude waitress carrying a square tray loaded with squat metal flacons. Like everyone in this din of sin, she had shiny black hair and skin the color of a badly sunburned Italian.

“There’s no way to know,” he answered. “I just know it wasn’t with the other igos he has. It was really stashed away.”

“But you found it,” Nabo said, stroking a comely red ass that presented in his path.

Tullio turned to look at them, at pains not to avoid their eyes. “I’ve been spying on him. Something strange is going on.”

Turning to openface his embarrassment caused him to collide with a drunken badmash, a big hillbilly in dirty kilt and the threadbare blouse of a mountain regiment. Who took immediate umbrage, steadying himself and dropping his hand to the elaborate carved bone grip of the four-barreled peacemaker in his sash. He spat between Tullio’s feet. Nabo’s knife was in his hand instantly, like an offhand magician’s trick. A short, curiously chased singleshot firearm fell from Tullio’s sleeve to his hand, looking like a bronze oilcan at half-cock.

But Monke stepped forward quickly, holding up his hands to restrain them. He faced the ruddy brawler in Minator posture, staring into his eyes. The outrider vacillated, unsure of himself. His mood was downshifting, but he still had the potential for opening fire. Monke hit him with his most charming foxish smile.

Another naked wench swiveled through holding a tray of fat mugs over her head and making salacious contact with her white-lined eyes and other points of interest. Monke snatched a mug and handed it to the brawler. Who blinked, grabbed it, took a deep pull of the muddy brown brew, and pounded Monke’s shoulder as the guys moved past him.

“Good move,” Nabo yelled into the blare. “You little sissy.”

“If Minator has seen it, he’d have rumbled on about for a week.” Tullio said, laughing.

“Don’t mock the MinaMaestro around me, *mi chavo*.”

They stopped in the middle of a long row of gaily painted doors with plaques bearing obscene details and a words in a surprisingly graceful script. They fidgeted outside a screamingly bright blue door with a red kite pattern that teased the eyes, listening to the sounds of industrial strength loveplay from inside.

A sadly short time after the erotic bellowing hit its ragged crescendo, the crib door opened and a very hardassed whore steered a bleary, smiling john out past them, his kilt still slightly tented in front. She gave the guys a cursory come-on gaze, shrugged, and flipped the plaque over to show its Not Occupied side before trundling her satisfied customer away, reaching over to fasten the frogs of his blouse. The guys reversed the sign again and stepped inside the murky, candle-lit crib furnished only with a high, padded stool and a few stamped metal religious ikons on the walls. Immediately the floor glowed in the familiar grid.

Tullio held up a sheet of translucent Lumen parchment. “Can you both see it?”

“Think happy thoughts,” Monke said as the three vanished.

“I can’t believe he built the termno under a *pinche* waterfall,” Monke grumbled.

“That’s my old man,” Tullio said, unbuttoning his soggy shirt in the heat. “Ever the artiste.”

All three smugglers had their boots off as they spread out across the soft white sand of a breath-takingly gorgeous “tropical” beach bounded by inviting blue-green forest. They had removed their wet jeans and Nabo had his shirt off as well, prowling along like a brown panther in a pair of white briefs covered with bright red kisses. “There’s nothing but water and trees and shit,” he grumped. “We could get this in Oaxaca. I don’t see anything that looks like some fantastic treasure.”

Monke spoke in a low, almost reverential tone. “I think I do.”

They looked at him, then down the beach where he was staring. Tropical postcard with fantastic treasure: an achingly beautiful, naked girl in her late teens, with waist-length black hair and a complexion like burnt butterscotch, was approaching them, kicking up rainbows along the foaming edge of the water.

All three were stunned into silent wonder by the vision of her. Perfectly formed, exquisite in face and features, she walked up to them as graceful and guileless as a deer, regarding them curiously. Involuntarily, Monke crossed himself.

Even Nabo felt a tang of spiritual response, muttering “*¡Santa Virgen!*”

Monke almost whispered, “I think we just found your father’s secret treasure chest.” He walked up to the girl, who had stopped to examine them. She stood her ground as he approached, sniffed him, reached to touch his face. She fingered his clothing, obviously marveling. She looked back into his face, gave him a heart-wrenching smile. She looked at the other guys as they walked up, idly scratching her almost hairless crotch.

Monke pointed a finger to his chest. “Monke.” He pointed at his pals, “Tullio. Nabo.”

He touched a finger to her chest carefully, raised his eyebrows, shrugged, whatever he could think of to pantomime interrogation. She touched his chest, raised her eyebrows, shrugged.

Tullio laughed, the spell of her beauty broken by her aping of Monke’s grimaces. “Monke see, Monke do.”

“Me Tarzan, you Bambi,” Nabo chuckled.

Monke tapped her breastbone again, mouthing his word carefully. “Bambina,” he said.

Bambina yawned, stretched lazily. She surveyed the guys, her surprise replaced by calculation. She said, “*Os bhrat chrischapi, amichin?*”

“*¡Hijole!*” Nabo said, “That’s Lexus, isn’t it?”

Tullio nodded, amazed. “The language of the Race.”

“I told you to quit that shit,” Nabo snapped. “You guys aren’t the only *Raza*.”

Monke grabbed Tullio’s sleeve. “Talk to her, Tuley. Find out about her.”

Tullio smiled. “Well, she doesn’t seem to have much concealed.”

Monke, dead serious, tugged a fistful of his sleeve urgently. “Find out everything, man!”

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Chapter Eighty-Six

Nabo and Monke were doing what any Mexican will do on an idyllic beach, sitting in the shade of the trees. Bambina stood at the edge of the water, talking to Tullio. She suddenly pushed him over and ran into the water laughing. She splashed and frolicked as Tullio walked over to his friends. Monke jumped up and hurried to meet him.

“What’d she say? What’s her deal?”

“Did you get her cellular number?” Nabo added sarcastically.

Tullio turned to look back at the cavorting Bambina. “It’s very sketchy. She only knows a few words. She lives in that cave we passed before. She’s lived alone since becoming nubile, it sounds like. People come, bring her food. She’s got some pretty crazy ideas about what the world’s all about.”

“Like what?” Monke demanded.

“Like God made her for his pleasure and will come back for her soon.”

“That does sound pretty crazy,” Nabo said. “But kind of, you know, familiar.”

“I don’t want to get into all that right now,” Tullio told them. “But what do we do about her? About this?” He waved his hand at the whole beach and island.

“You guys can push off anytime,” Monke said. “I’m going to live right here forever. Drop by now and then.”

“I’d say she’s doing okay here,” Tullio said. “Let’s just get out before we contaminate her.”

Nabo eyed Bambina bounding in the surf. “I was thinking, ‘contaminate’ her first, then leave.”

“Fuck off, Nabo!” Monke barked. “Listen, we take her with us.”

Tullio nodded judiciously, “Oh, splendid idea. We can take her shopping on Tularis. I’m sure she could use a clothing item or two.”

“Why?” Nabo asked. “She’s got all she needs now.”

Monke stared rapturously at Bambina. “Yeah she does, smart guy.” He tore his eyes away and looked at the other two. “I say we take her up. To the Tubes. Sort her out.”

Tullio snorted, “What are you thinking with?”

“You said it yourself, there’s something going on here,” Monke said with foregone determination. “Maybe something we can figure out, use.”

Nabo broke into a nasty laugh. “You don’t have to rescue her, *pendejo*. You can just fuck her if you want to. Don’t pretend that’s not what you want.”

“You know all about that,” Monke lashed back. “At least she’s not anybody’s baby sister.”

Nabo exploded off the ground, driving at Monke. Who eluded him with a silky move. He struck the Minator pose, then turned and ran as Nabo pounced toward him. He ran down the beach, looping towards the surf, with Nabo right behind him, fast but unable to quite pin down the elusive Monkster. Bambina saw them and ran in from the surf to join the “game of tag.” Laughing like a windchime, she tripped Monke up and Nabo pounced on him. Whooping, she jumped up on down on Nabo’s back.

Nabo rolled off Monke, laughing too hard to be mean. Bambina jumped on Monke and growled fiercely. She nipped at his shoulder and arms as he tried weakly to defend himself while rolling in the sand howling with laughter.

Tullio walked up and looked down at the playmates, shaking his head. “You two are terrifying predators. Minator would be so proud of you.”

Monke gave up, lay on his back with Bambina straddling his chest, playfully slapping at his face. “Let Minotaurio get his own girl.”

Tullio dropped into a squat beside them. He looked straight at Monke because looking at Bambina was giving him some serious physiological side effects. “But seriously, about taking her back up...”

Monke didn’t take his eyes off Bambina’s giggling face. “I’m taking her with me. You guys do what you want.”

Nabo, covered with the powdery white sand, rolled up on one elbow to watch the show. “Ask her how many diamonds she can eat.”

Bambina wore Monke’s shirt, strutting it like a mink coat as the four of them strolled through the teal-colored vegetation along the stream to the waterfall. It hung an inch or two on the side of decency, but somehow the garment turned her primal Disney innocence into nubile porn on the hoof. Nabo and Tullio were already cultivating brotherly feelings towards the girl, but in the shirt every other move she made caused them to suffer.

Nabo took it out by teasing Monke about his shirtless lack of masculine brawn. “Maybe she’ll put some hair on your chest, Monko.” His hand snaked in to snatch the lone hair on Monke’s chest and pluck it out. Tullio, also experiencing a bit of envy and unrequited itch, laughed.

Bambina touched the place where the hair had been, stroked Monke’s chest. He smirked at Nabo, who groaned and ran a hand through his own pectoral hair. “Anybody bring a razor?”

“A little more important,” Tullio said as they came up to the pool beneath the low, burbling falls. “Is where exactly we are going to take her. And why.”

“You said yourself that she’s anomaly,” Monke said.

“Whatever that is.” Nabo sat on a boulder by the pool to unlace his boots.

“It’s somebody who lives on an island all alone without any other people and speaks Lexus, that’s what it is,” Monke said. “An island with a hidden termno with a secret iglo.”

Tullio was also pulling his boots off, but stopped and looked up, his face tight.

“Sorry,” Monke said. “But it’s true and it’s kind of major.”

“We’ll go to the den on Malorvan and sort this out. Get some clothes and figure out what to do. Right?”

“That sounds good, *Güero*.” The term was an automatic tag for anybody with pale skin or hair, but Monke winced every time it slipped out while talking to Tullio. Tullio was a great guy, actually. But he wished Ben was with them and always felt a little disloyal applying his nickname to a foreigner Ben didn’t even like.

Nabo was stuffing his jeans and boots into his rucksack. “It wasn’t so bad sundrying here, but *carajo* if I’m going to squish around that stagecoach station on Malorvan.”

“Yeah, naked would be much better,” Tullio snickered.

“We’ll go through five minutes apart, smartass,” Nabo said, “Give each of us time to change in that shrine or whatever it is, then move out for the next one arrives.” He stuffed his shirt in the pack and stood up. “Monke and BeachBabe can come in last, together.” He glanced at Bambina, hand on his briefs. “I think this is a nude beach, *que no?*” He skinned them off, put them in the pack and sealed it up.

Bambina was pulling off her shirt, but stopped to stare at Nabo’s groin. Her mouth fell open. She turned to Monke as if for an answer, then turned her attention back to Nabo’s “*partes nobles*”. Monke figured out that he’d better lay down his cards, too, and pulled his shorts off over his boots. Bambina glanced at him and stared, her wonder increased twofold. She leaned down to examine his manhood, cooing in childlike awe. Who would have imagined such a thing? She cast a quick glance down at her own smooth pubis, then reached out to touch Monke. Incredible!

She quickly darted over to Nabo, dropping to her knees for a better look at this strange appendage. She reached out to lift, heft and examine, her eyes wide with wonder. Both of the guys felt the tension rising in Monke. The tension that rose in Nabo was readily visible. Bambina, already wriggling in the excitement of discovery, was rendered totally aflutter by this amazing new trick. She ran back to Monke and resumed her investigations, with similar results. She goggled, stroked, sniffed, laughed in delight. She moved towards Tullio, who waved her away. He pulled his shorts back on, as did the other two guys. Better to get a little damp, seemed to be the attitude.

Monke stood staring at Bambina, who seemed lost in contemplation of recent revelations. Opened to the world of difference, she was now checking out other secondary sex characteristics of her bizarrely endowed new friends. She cupped her breasts and stared at them, then looked at the manly chests around her. She held up her forearm, scanning it’s color and comparing it to Tullio’s golden arms and white belly, the *cafe con leche* of the Mexicans. He spoke slow and soft. “It’s not just that she’s never seen a man before. She’s never *heard* of a man before. Has no idea.”

Still rigid and rapt, Nabo said, “I wouldn’t mind giving her the general idea.”

“You and everybody else,” Tullio said gently. He turned to Monke, “Are you still sure you want to bring her? We can duck out of here now and tomorrow she’ll think we were a weird dream.”

Monke nodded his head stubbornly. “I’m bringing her. I’ll take care of her.”

“Ah, the dreaded commitment,” Nabo said wryly. “First time you claimed her.”

Monke started to retort, then smiled. “I saw her first.”

Tullio swung his pack on and waded in towards the falls. “Remember, you have to be wearing the pack. Guess I’ll have to live with wet pants until we get to the house.”

Nabo laughed. “*¡Sobres!* Mine are wet already.”

“A cold shower will do you good,” Monke grinned, waving him towards the cascade. “See you at the Malorvan place.”

“Will you?” Nabo scoffed. “Given any thought to how she’s going to be thinking of the iglo when you hit the termno?”

Tullio paused at the edge of the water and turned to say, “Draw it on your dick, that’ll get her full attention.”

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Chapter Eighty-Eight

“She’s certainly exquisitely beautiful. But I get the feeling that there’s nothing more to her. No life, culture, history. She’s a non-entity, really. A blank tablet.”

Memon sat in a deep, musty, oppressively upholstered leather arm chair, surround by a tumble of books, bibelots, paintings, stacks of notebooks and yellowing paper. Outside the leaded windows the sun had been setting for several hours. Bambina, wearing a peasant skirt, bikini top and feathered beret, browsed the place, poking curious fingers, thumbing through picture books, smelling things.

“Well, she has some weird religious ideas.” Nabo offered.

“Compared to which non-weird religious ideas?” Memon leaned back and stared at the vaulted ceiling. He cast a quick eye at Tullio, then continued to regard his steepled fingers while Nabo fidgeted and Monke hung waiting his words. “Will you allow me a guess? A God-like creature will come and make love to her on her eighteenth birthday. And make her queen of heaven.”

The Mexicans stared at him. Tullio reddened. “She wasn’t that specific.”

“There is no nice way to put it.” He looked at the ceiling again, fidgeted. “She is almost certainly a sex toy. Born and bred to provide an expensive but exotic experience to some rich, jaded man of our race. You hear rumors of this sort of thing.”

“A sex slave? Man, that sucks!” Monke jumped to his feet, stomped around the rich carpets and peculiarly carved tables. “Exploiting the third world!”

“I think it’s probably about the three hundredth world, *mano*.” Nabo tried to lighten things up, but didn’t get far.

“Same idea!” Monke snapped. “Like the shit Ben’s old man was pulling. Just Gringo imperialism and sex tourism on a bigger set. Just breeding women for harvest.”

Tullio started to speak, but Memon broke in with a surprisingly crisp tone that stopped their argument. “This wasn’t Kairos’ work. Too contrived for his tastes, too primitive. And requiring much greater wealth and influence than he could bring to bear.”

Nabo and Monke looked at Tullio. Who flushed. “I know it looks bad. But that can’t be the situation here. My father is the leading opponent of colonies, presence on worlds, exploiting...”

“There’s a factor I think might be universal,” Memon broke in. “When you find a dedicated man devoting his life to expelling certain demons and vices, he is so often the most shameful—and shamed—practitioner of those very activities.” He turned to the Mexicans. “Have you noticed such things on your own world?”

Both laughed. Nabo said, “Not any more. Since I quit going to mass.”

Monke slapped his upheld palm. “I hope you aren’t insulting our presidents, priests and leaders, Master.”

Tullio sat rigid, flushed beneath his tan, clenching the arms of the chair. Memon leaned forward to direct his soft gaze more directly at him. “I hope this doesn’t upset you, Tullio. You know I respect your father. No man is perfect.” He glanced at the others. “There are many who take their pleasure and profit from the worlds. You know that.”

“But my father...” Tullio stopped talking and drew a deep breath. “I’m going to look into this. If it’s true, I will be at a loss over what steps to take. But I will tell all of you what I find and what I decide.”

Nabo held his thumb up. “Same deal you gave Ben for his *jefe*, right?”

Monke smiled, “Works for me. We’re not part of your whole family feud anyway.”

Tullio gave him a pained look. “Aren’t you?”

He shook himself, stood up and walked over to Bambina, who was trying to cozen a mechanical songbird off its perch. “For now, what about this girl?”

Memo leaned back in his chair, spread his hands. “The obvious decision. You either care for her or throw her back in the sea.”

“I’ll take care of her,” Monke said flatly, the matter long since settled in his own mind.

Memon beamed at him, every inch the pleased professor in whatever worlds he had mined for his appearance and demeanor. “An admirable impulse. And not such an easy task. For instance, you can’t communicate with her.”

Monke thought it over, chewing his lip. Bambina came to lean on his shoulder, showing him the bird warbling in her hand. The softening inside and throbbing swell of his chest were almost visible. He looked shyly at Memon. “Do you think you could help me out, *Maestro*? And her, too, I mean.”

If Memon’s Pickwickian face had beamed before, it went practically nova at that point. He stood and moved across to the two young people, unconsciously rubbing his hands together. “Of course, of course. I would be delighted on any occasion. She truly is a lovely creature. But what a fascinating project. She has a vocabulary of less than a hundred words. How often does one encounter a *tabla rasa*?”

Monke chortled. “The rain in Spain, huh, guys?”

He got no reaction, but Memon turned to take in all three of the *muchachos*. He lifted an admonitory finger as his brows shot together like mating white parakeets. “I can teach her English. And this Spanish thing. More Lexus. More important, how to learn.”

“*Gracias, Maestro*.” Monke gave a small bow along with his most boyish smile.

“But then what? Will she just be your toy, instead of somebody else’s? Will you teach her humanity, then dump her back in the seraglio?”

He stopped Monke’s expostulations with a sudden upraised hand. Nabo remembered that here in the Sky people aren’t really what they look like. Even less so than in the real world, that is.

“You can’t civilize people by halves, gentlemen.” He spoke sternly, but an obvious deep concern. “It makes them miserable. Tears them apart.”

“We’ve been finding that out,” Nabo said quietly.

“Some of our best friends...” Monke put in. He stepped close to Memon, looked directly into his eyes. “I’ll take care of her.”

Memon held his gaze for a beat, then smiled happily. He gently lifted the bird from her finger and replaced it in the cage. He took her hands and sat her down in the plush chair angled in towards his own. He turned to the guys making motions like shooing poultry. “There is no better time than the present to start learning. When you come back, I think you’ll be very pleased.”

They moved awkwardly toward the vestibule, Monke waving goodbye to Bambina, who started to stand. Memon placed a hand on her shoulder and sat down to face her. “Now my dear,” he said, “*Vesos an prandra*.”

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Chapter Eighty-Nine

Ben backed into the vestibule, jabbering at Memon in excitement. “So you know what I’m talking about? I mean... I made myself clear? It makes sense?”

“Certainly I do. The English word would be ‘semiotics’. The language of objects and symbols. And I think I see what you are driving towards with this inquiry.” The Exemplar paused, going out of focus in the way he did when caught up in the vector of ideas. “So what is a language can be learned, parsed and expressed. Very clever, Ben.”

“Well, I kind of got most of the idea from studying... Well, actually kind of...”

“Gambling? Or I suppose I should call it cheating?” He laughed. “Sperat is a very shrewd Exemplar. I can see some fruitful ways our studies could interact. Very, very good. Let me investigate this a little, confer with some people. When you return I think I can teach you something nobody else has ever asked to learn.”

His jovial manner, fired up further by his joy in intellectual daring, suddenly slipped. He blinked at Ben from behind the little glass disks. “Ben, about your father. I have still heard nothing about where he is, but I wanted to assure you that...”

Ben surprised himself by holding his hand up to stop the old Exemplar. “Forgive me, Master. But there’s a limit to how much studying language can really help you talk about certain things.”

Memon nodded sadly and did something he had never done before. He reached out to pat Ben’s shoulder. A clumsy gesture, but the first time he had ever touched him. Ben smiled his thanks and Memon turned towards an alcove off the side of his entryway. Ben hadn’t really noticed it before, partly because of the heavy brocade drapes held back by tasseled metallic ropes. Now he saw two low couches in the shadows, the inevitable bookshelf, a low table with a flickering glow above it. And two beautiful legs.

“That’s it, my dear,” Memon called out. “When you finish perusing, just knock on the door. *“E prandarus.”*”

He turned back to Ben. “And you come back when I’ve finished perusing, my boy. My best regards and highest hopes for your father.” He spun away and scurried into his studio, already heading for the ladder to the arcane volumes in the highest shelves.

Ben was oblivious to his comments or departure. He stared into the alcove, where a stunning young woman sat, illuminated in flickering silver light from the glowing rectangle hovering in front of her. He approached quietly, watching her lips move, her feelings dash across her face as she studied a romantic scene from an old film. He watched a tear flood up in her eye as the tiny white figures broke their embrace and parted, watched it swell and break loose, tracing the exquisite, creamy contour of her cheek. As it rolled past her lush lips a pink tongue darted out to rake the stray droplet back into the fold. She waved her hand through the triangle of light and it disappeared. She looked up and saw Ben, standing there staring at her stupid as a stunned calf. She broke a warm, friendly smile and his goose was cooked.

She seemed just as interested in him. She bounced to her feet, a light, supple caftan in silky burnt orange swirling around her provocative body as she stepped right up to him and stuck out her hand. “Hello!” she said, as if delighted to see him again. “What’s your name? I can speak English. And Spanish. And the real language. My name’s Bambina.”

Ben stared like a junior high boy. *¡Chihuahua!*

“Look!” she exclaimed proudly, slipping from the gown and stretching, naked and vibrant. “Say ‘Wow!’,” she said happily.

“Wow!”

“Say *‘¡Hijole!’*,” she said.

Ben breathed out, *“¡Hijole!”*

“A slight furrow indented her brow. “What does *hijole* mean, anyway?”

“It means you’re beautiful,” Ben said. “I’ve never seen anybody so beautiful.”

Bambina apprised him artlessly. She leaned over to sniff at him. “You’re beautiful, too. Do you live on the beach?”

Ben shook his head. “I live in a city.”

She nodded, thinking that one over. Then brightened and waved at the space where the film had appeared. “You mean like New York City?”

“Not as big.”

“But many people, no?” She pressed for more detail. “Many big houses like New York City. Beautiful houses.”

“Many things,” Ben said, realizing he was falling into her speech patterns as quickly as he was falling into her eyes and cleavage. “Everything. Piled up for miles. I visit New York sometimes.”

That got her attention in a major way. She stepped closer than Ben thought he could handle, enthusiasm radiating off her. “Could you take me with you?”

This was just too good to be true, Ben was realizing. There was a catch somewhere. He tried, “So where do you live?”

She looked around, her face painted with honest confusion. “I don’t know anymore.”

“Would you like to come with me?” Ben asked, expecting the catch to stomp him flat.

Bambina wriggled in delight. “Can I? Do you like me?”

“So far I’m pretty impressed,” Ben had been cultivating understatement.

“How is this?” she asked. Then stepped forward, threw her arms around his neck, and pressed her lips to his for a long, deep French kiss. He was completely wiped out long before it was over.

“They do that in those films,” she informed him when she took a breather. “Did I do it right?”

“Oh, yeah,” staggered out of Ben’s mouth.

“When can we go to your city?”

“Now,” Ben told her. “Right now.”

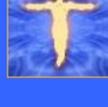
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Chapter Ninety

The knock at the door went unheard over the sound of a running shower and a Latino station playing in the bedroom. Erin cracked the door, peeped inside, then walked into Ben’s apartment smiling at the clutter of clothes on the sofa and floor. She’d neaten up fast while Ben was still in the bathroom.

Her smile wiped off fast when the tawny, dropdead gorgeous teenager frisked into the room, wearing nothing but one of Ben’s shirts, unbuttoned. As Erin stared in unhappy shock, the beautiful little hussy bounded across the room to her, extending her hand.

“Hello! So nice to meet you. I’m Bambina. Do you live in the city? I speak English. Do you know Ben?”

If Erin hadn’t already been standing there helpless and tongue-tied, it would have happened anyway when Bambina skinned off the shirt and posed nude in front of her.

“Say, ‘Wow!’”

“Oh, wow,” Erin intoned sadly, turning to leave.

But the Tramp From Hell bounded over to her at the door, spun her around.

“How is this?” Bambina asked as she slapped a lingering, probing soul kiss on Erin, who was too startled to resist. The island girl broke off the kiss and awaited praise, eager as a puppy.

“Did I do it right?”

Brushing her lips with the sleeve of her green jumper, Erin mumbled, “You’re a little fuzzy on some important details.” Then it hit her. “Hey! Wait a minute. That tongue thing you did there at the last.”

“Do you mean this?” Bambina grabbed her again, in strong athletic arms, and latched on for another scorching kiss. Erin’s arms flapped helplessly as she tried to extricate without touching anything incriminating.

Released, she said, “Yeah, that.” Then yelled in a harsh tone not normally associated with finishing school debs. “Ochoa! Get your ass out here!”

She heard the shower stop, a pregnant silence. She took a closer look at the clothing on the floor. “Looks like out here is exactly where you’ve been getting it.”

Ben, wrapped in a big towel, was sheepish and not liking what he knew was coming. But he walked into the living room like a man.

Bambina ran to him, slapped the big hug/kiss on him. “She speaks English, Ben!” she informed him excitedly.

“You’re a little fuzzy on details yourself, aren’t you, Ben?” Erin said in a small, flat voice that Ben liked even less than anger or acid sarcasm.

There is only one thing to say at such a time and Ben said it. “Listen, Erin, I can...” But not quickly enough.

“Explain all this? Good for you.” Erin turned on her sensible flat heels and strode to the door. Bambina wave a cheerful goodbye as she jerked the door open. Erin told her, “See if he wants to wear your bra.” And slammed from the outside.

Bambina turned to Ben, bubbling with this latest novelty. “She was nice, Ben. Why is her hair that color?”

Ben waved a hand, unable to think straight. But Bambina had more questions.

“Do you want to wear my bra?”

“No,” he said in a subdued voice. “I’m good.”

“What is a bra?”

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Chapter Ninety-One

Seen from across the immaculized sod of the New Haven Green, it was obvious that Ben was pleading with Erin. And that she wasn't having it. Possibly because Bambina was romping on the grass in overlarge cutoffs and a T-shirt emblazoned with "Harvard Eats Boogers". Prim and chilly in her tennis whites and racket bag, Erin was plainly waiting for Ben to dry up and blow away.

But from a closer viewpoint, it might look like Erin wanted to be won over, and was leaning in that direction. Except when Bambina rollicked by.

"She doesn't have anywhere to go," Ben was telling her. "She's like, homeless. She doesn't have a life. She thinks she's waiting for some rich asshole to come use her as a windup sex doll. Should I try to figure out how to ship her back to that?"

Carefully, Erin said, "Actually, that's very touching. But why does she have to live with you?"

"Where else should she live? Nobody else knows who she is. Hell, *she* doesn't know who she is. Nobody else can talk to her. She's not somebody who should be wandering around loose."

Erin glanced at Bambina, who was doing a handstand with her T-shirt falling down around her face, baring her breasts to the examination of some extremely interested undergrad boys. She had to admit. "Well that's something we can agree on. Look, how about this? Keira will be in Rome until the end of the semester."

Erin's apartment was nothing more than a typical student efficiency two bedroom, in keeping with her general instinct to underplay her family money and position. But Bambina tore around the place in delight, marveling at the unfamiliar feel of a female habitat. She ran to kiss Ben and Erin. She gawked at her new bedroom, sniffed the bed before flopping on it, bouncing and curling up like a kitten in the throw blanket. Jumping up, she ran to get the plastic grocery bag she'd brought with her, started placing her belongings on the dresser.

Erin watched with mixed feelings. "If I wasn't already sold, that would do it. That's all she owns in the world?"

"It's not like she needs much," Ben said, realizing he shouldn't have.

"Don't push your luck, Ochoa." Erin stood watching Bambina make a nest, then sighed. "Well, I suppose I'll just have to steel myself for what has to be done."

"What's that?" Ben asked apprehensively.

Erin broke into a wide smile adorned by dancing green eyes. "Shopping!"

Relieved, Ben reached for his wallet. "Great idea. I'll pick up the tab for what she needs."

Erin reached out two pincer fingers to nab the credit card he held up. She smiled pityingly. "Two years at Yale, yet you know so little." She tucked the card away and gave Ben a kiss. Bambina bounded out toward them, obviously ready for more demo.

"Hands off, Creature From The Blue Lagoon," Erin warned. "I nailed him first."

Bambina looked around the room happily. "We are room mates? 'Friends'? Like on the television?"

"For now," Erin replied. "Come on, I think I can fit you out in some of my old sweatpants." As the two girls headed for Erin's room, Bambina already stripping down, Erin turned her head to Ben, hovering in the doorway. "I don't think she'll need your help getting into my pants, loverboy. She got into yours easy enough."

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Chapter Ninety-Two

The first invasion of Connecticut Post Mall by an extra-planetary lifeform ended in a standoff with collateral casualties on both sides.

Bambina, energetic though unfocused in the role of Alien Horde, was agog for the first hour of buzzing through the shops in Erin's wake. The past week had been rough on a nervous system honed by seventeen years of featureless beach and stormless ocean, but here the overload was like a relentless machine gun drilling her full of input and jaggedly mixed signals.

Fortunately Erin was a seasoned mall campaigner and conscientious guide. The shiny toys, outré clothes, clamoring jewelry, insistent food odors, dazzled men, intimidated women, and otherworld design washed over her in a jumbling, jangling, intoxicating montage of stimuli, soundtracked by constantly shifting music.

When it looked like her head might explode, Erin schlepped them into Brookstone and plunked them down in futuristic massage chairs. Bambina lounged and gurgled, rapt in pleasure. She grinned at Erin, undulating slightly as the robot shiatsu wheels traversed her spine. She smiled fetchingly at the two male clerks who happened to be around that section of the store a lot, nothing loath to have the chairs in their front window occupied by a smashing redhead and this Polynesian movie star in her killer new halter top.

It only took about three times for Erin to convince her new mascot to use dressing rooms, not just strip down anytime she saw clothes she wanted. The worst one had been the jersey in the SportsLocker franchise, where the stripshow had an audience of a dozen male jocks. She was learning a few things, herself. Like not to try to get Bambina into shoes. She would tolerate sandals, but would also walk right out of them at any moment.

A pause to re-energize at a coffee chain so soul-less and blandly evil it might as well have been a Starbucks hit a snag when Bambina held herAmericano up and lapped from it with her tongue. Shortly before throwing the cup across the room and wailing while holding her tongue and staring at Erin in hurt betrayal. Erin chilled that one out with an iced cappuccino and a tip to the kid with the mop.

In Victoria's Secret an arch, elegant saleswoman practically purred to have such model-class customers. When she showed them a pair of lowcut, snaky black lace panties Bambina took them to examine, then sniffed them and licked them. The saleswoman shot Erin a knowing look that brought an instant flush, not all that becoming on a freckled redhead.

In the food court, Erin managed to control Bambina's predictable impulse to graze the intriguing stalls of tantalizing odors, grabbing something tasty from each. She was not to prove popular with the sub-hourly employees of the burger and salad stations, but made a huge hit with two little girls at the next table when she sniffed at a bagel with cream cheese, stuck her finger through the hole and started nibbling around the edge, streaking her face with globs of Philadelphia's finest. The little girls laughed uproariously at her technique, taking it as adult permission to smear their own faces with ice cream and donut filling.

Erin stalked the upper deck in sultry new finery, giving lethal looks to passing men. At the escalator landing she stopped to lean on the rail, peering over her sunglasses to scan the veldt for prey. She nodded to Bambina, who stepped off an imitation of her slinky glide that cracked up not only Erin, but twenty onlookers. When she reached the rail and did her take on the slouch and Vuarnet flourish the laughter mingled with applause. Erin mined a bow, so Bambina gave one, too, sweeping her hair to the floor.

Unwinding after a grueling day in the fashion trenches, Erin lolled in a stylish booth among their bags of new purchases, nibbling at a Long Island Iced Tea in an environment of ferns, beveled glass and big photos of people you'd be embarrassed to admit you didn't recognize. She'd tipped the waiter extravagantly and dropped a few names, so Bambina also enjoyed a non-Tea, though in a paper takeout cup. Erin was marveling at the degree of bonding she'd achieved with this big, bouncy, dangerous puppychild: Bambina was having trouble sipping.

"I can't feel my lips," she said in a way that made it clear she was telling the truth. "Are they broken?"

"They're just fine," Erin told her. "Believe me."

Bambina threw back her head and poured a finger of cocktail down her throat without any need for lip seal. She blinked around the room and fingered her lips wonderingly. "Can you kiss with numb lips?"

"Oh, it happens a *lot*."

"I wish I could kiss somebody right now. Do you..."

"Look, we've been over that," Erin told her, supportive but firm.

"I want a kiss," Bambina sulked. "I wish Monke was here."

"Who?"

Bambina looked at her in surprise. "Monke. You know? Monke."

The name got lost in the scatter as the girls blasted into their apartment, strewing wrapping and new accouterments to the four corners, obliterating a bottle of chilled vodka. Driven by the twin demons of low alcohol tolerance and high impressionability, Bambina tore into the bags, dressing up at random like a child in an attic. Abstract regressionism, Erin thought as she cheered the parade of Osterized "outfits", Mix'n'Mash.

And found herself competing: vogueing around in improvised hautery, by no means her usual behavior. When Bambina emerged from the bedroom in a new outfit barely less sexually advertent than her preferred nudity, Erin applauded drunkenly from the sofa, wolf-whistling with her little fingers in her mouth.

When she entered in a model's stalk, wearing slide-slit pants and bolero jacket with the accusative black panties outside of the slacks, Erin rolled on the couch laughing until she hiccuped. Bambina slouched, thrust out her pelvis, and pouted.

She finally staggered out, leaving Bambina strewn unconscious among the wreckage of the mall loot. It was only a short walk to Ben's and she had found that a day of bonding with the girls tended to leave her in a mood to have a man grab her and reset her defaults.

A project in which Ben was happy to oblige her. As she nodded off, sated slack, and spooned in tight, something crossed her mind and she murmured, "Oh, Ben? You awake?"

"Yeah," came groggily in her ear. "But pretty used up for now."

She chuckled softly, ground her butt against him. "I forgot to ask you something."

Slipping into unconsciousness, Ben managed to tumble a hand down to cup her breast and whisper, "Wha?"

"There's no way Bambina could know your friend Monke, is there?"

Her impression was as though she'd touched a bare electric cord to Ben's ass. He jerked completely awake, lunged to flip on the bedside lamp, loomed over her, insistent.

"What the *fuck*? What did she say?"

Erin was also wide awake at that point. She stared at Ben in the glare of the reading lamp. "She said she wanted to 'kiss monkey'. I thought it might be some sort of slang where she comes from."

Ben collapsed onto his back, shaking his head. "*Ay,ay,aycita*," he groaned. "I don't believe this."

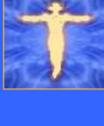
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Chapter Ninety-Three

“*¡No mames, culero!* Don't try to bullshit me, fuck me around!”

Monke, fired-up and frantic, blasted through the door like the Taz Devil. He simultaneously searched the apartment while menacing Ben with ferocious glares and oaths.

Ben leaned against the door, watching Monke spin out. “Why would I do that?”

“*Fuck you!*” Monke yelled. “I know you took her, that Exemplar *vato* told me.”

“I told him to tell you,” Ben said calmly. He didn't close the door, just stepped to the front closet and pulled out a jacket. “I found out she knew you, so I got you word.”

“So you admit you were fucking my woman, *pinche puto cabrón?*” Monke was boiling over, his vocabulary inadequate to the task of describing such treachery. They'd been through the same issue on previous occasions, but it never lost its zest.

“She didn't have your name on her,” Ben told him in adult-to-tantrum-thrower tones. “Or anything else. If you're going to get all *machista* about shit, you should keep a better eye on her.”

Monke stared wildly at him as he slipped into the jacket and patted his pockets for keys. He stuck to classics. “*Fuck you, man!* Where is she?”

Ben stepped out the door, motioned for him to follow. “She's rooming with my girlfriend. Okay? I'm going to take you to her if you get a little sane.”

Monke paused in his jitters and invective, took in Ben's pose and attitude, and bounded out the door and onto the stairs. “Okay. *Salve vale.* Let's go.”

Ben smiled indulgently as they headed down the stairs. “Hey, but listen, how'd you find me?”

“Nabo brought me.”

“Why didn't he come up?”

Monke hustled around the landing, clattered down the lower stairs. He yelled back, “I didn't want him pulling me off you if I had to fuck you up.”

Ben nodded as he caught up. “Fair enough.”

Monke and Bambina collided in the middle of the living room with squeals and yells of delight in addition to various non-verbal communication. Erin watched from her bedroom door, taken aback. Nabo and Ben watched from the entry, laughing their butts off. Bambina had her clothes on for some reason, but was crawling Monke's frame.

Erin cleared her throat. “Yo, Bambina! Remember what we discussed?”

Bambina reluctantly peeled off Monke, looked at her and said. “Oh. Right.” She stepped away, sat demurely at the table and glanced coyly at Monke from behind her hair. “So,” she said with an air of boredom. “Tell me about yourself.”

“What have you *done* to her?” Monke screamed as Nabo and Ben fell all over each other. “You're *ruining* her!”

Erin also made sitting at the table a showpiece of post-feminist possession and maturity. “She's not what I'd call emotionally ready for a relationship.”

Monke stared at her, aghast. “Who dealt you into this? *¡Carajo!*”

“But,” she continued without reacting, “I think she's going to have one anyway.”

Nabo clenched his fists and screamed at the ceiling. “Mother *pinche* fucker! What have you *done* to her, you crazy *gringa* bitch?”

Unperturbed, Erin continued. “And you're it.”

“You'd better just... What?” Monke downshifted. “Me? You think so?”

“Ask her.”

Monke looked at Bambina, who was doing the blasé bit but couldn't help letting slip a few searching glances. He hesitated, suddenly shy. “I wouldn't know what to ask.”

Erin turned to her conversationally. “Hey, Bambina, what if you could only be with one man the rest of your life?”

“Why?” Bambina asked, puzzled. This was a fun place but there was always some new complication.

“What if, girl?” Erin pressed.

“Only one man to kiss?” That just seemed so pointless and abstract.

“Yes. And what not. Who would it be?”

Bambina chuckled deep in her throat, nailing Monke. “Well, that's easy.”

“Yes...?”

“Monke,” Bambina said, looking askance as one does when having to spell out the blatantly obvious. “Who else?”

Erin glanced at Monke, wreathed in smiles and relief, but hardly her image of Prince Charming. “Why?”

“Who cares?” Monke fell over on the sofa behind him, staring at Bambina in wild surmise while Ben and Nabo guffawed. “That's good enough for me.”

Bambina came out of the chair and across the room in one fluid surge. She landed on Monke's lap, straddling his knees with her arms around his neck. “Good enough for me, too.”

Erin laughed with the smug satisfaction of cupid pimps everywhere. “You may kiss the bride.”

Without taking her hands, eyes, or bouncing hips off Monke, Bambina said, “Right now?”

“Have you heard the expression, ‘Get a room,’ yet?”

Bambina leaped to her feet. “I have a room!” she cried jubilantly. She grabbed Monke's hand, jerked him to his feet, and dragged him into her bedroom.

Erin stood, listening to the audibles from behind the slammed door. She moved towards Ben and Nabo, snatching her purse and coat off the coffee table. “I just thought of a movie I'd *love* to see,” she said brightly as she herded them into the hall.

Nabo glanced back at Bambina's bedroom as he left. “Yeah, me too.”

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Chapter Ninety-Four

Erin lay on Ben's chest, feeling his ribs under her breasts, his breath in her hair, luxuriating in the kind of lazy chat they had while drifting down into sleep. "Actually, I really like her," she said. "And I'm not usually crazy about gorgeous women with perfect bodies who screw my boyfriends."

Ben smiled into her riot of ginger curls. "One more time. She's incredible, but I like you better. Can you stand it?"

Erin giggled. "Oh goody. I finally won a big one." Then more seriously, "But she can't stay past Tuesday. Keira's been great about letting her stay here, but when she gets back... And my room's too small to share."

"Good thing I've got some space around the place."

She jerked the hair in his armpit.

"Ow!" Ben reached and grabbed. "So we're nipping body hair now?"

"Don't do it," Erin begged piteously. "You got me by the short hairs. I give."

Ben changed his grip. "I give, too. Give and take, that's me."

"Hmm," Erin murmured. "Maybe we can deal."

"I think we've got a meeting of minds. And don't worry about Bambinita, because she's leaving Sunday with the *chicos*."

"Really?" She tried to imagine a situation where that jolly little trio would blend in. "Where to?"

"She's going into the business."

Erin raised her head to look at him in total incomprehension. "Business? What can she *do*?"

Well, the island girl could do a thing or two:

1. Light played a many-colored gamut of tricks and stunners inside a diamond the size of an almond, ladders of rainbow, lances of glitz and dazzle. It showered fire on Bambina's fingers as she brought it up to her nose for an exploratory sniff, then slipped it past her lips. She swallowed daintily and picked up an emerald the size of a walnut, scintillating with green fires. An admiring look, a sniff, and down the hatch.

2. Bambina wasn't lagging behind the three guys as they pelted down the yellow brick streets dodging woven sedan chairs and chained herds of food-grade dogs. Running with desperate concentration, they cut into a sordid alley reeking of butchery and littered with household detritus tossed down from the towering, round-windowed tenements. But the four heavily armed ruffians stayed right behind them, howling as they drove the smugglers towards a rickety raffia fence across the river end of the alley.

The guys and Bambina hit the fence simultaneously, leaping off unsavory bales to get as much height as they could. They clambered, then skinned over, Tullio and the *muchachos* plunging to the dank stones of the wharf. But the fence broke under Bambina, peeling backwards as each strand of vine snapped, dropping her among the pursuers.

There was a second of frozen tableau as she landed among them like a doe among hounds. Nabo and Monke scrambled on the fence, but it was swaying slackly, and a higher climb from their side.

Bambina said, "Look!"

Her torso bobbed down as she swept a leg up, spinning a kick to the head of one of the thugs. She grabbed a broken broom from the ground, ducked grabbing hands and stabbed the splintered stick into the nearest gut. She pulled it back, straight into the crotch of another ruffian. She sidekicked a kneecap, followed up with an uppercut.

Nabo dropped from the fence onto the head of the biggest guy, who had been moaning and holding his vitals. Monke landed beside her, knife drawn. He looked at the four guys who had only wanted their merchandise back without refunding the payment. He looked at Bambina, more deeply in love than ever. She grinned at him. "Say 'Wow!'"

3. It wasn't really what you'd call a boat, just a curved raft made by binding together long hollow canes as big around as coffee cans. Monke sat on it, holding a long double paddle and staring down into the turquoise depths. Nabo and Tullio hung off the raft, naked in the warm lagoon water, gasping for breath. They wore goggles that looked like leather Zorro masks with mica inserts.

Bambina's clean profile broke the surface like a breaching whale, water cascading from her hair and goggles as she clutched the boat. She handed him a jade green, fluted bivalve the size of a hamburger and trailing red weeds, then lolled on her back, finning with her feet while catching her breath, her nipples breaking the surface like emerging atolls.

Monke inserted his knife, wrenched the shells apart, fumbled inside, and drew out a pinkish pearl an inch across. She pointed to him, laughing. He sniffed the pearl, swallowed it. Laughing, she ducked back into the water, her legs thrusting up into the air then sliding down into the blue depths. Monke scowled at Nabo and Tullio, who were still heaving for breath.

4. Bambina's outfit was vaguely Edwardian with cunning attention given to supporting her cleavage without unduly hiding it from the admiration it deserved. The tight torso and full, slit skirts were luxuriantly soft with shining fabrics peeking through here and there. She was radiantly made up, maddeningly scented, and her Bambi eyes were as round, wide, and evocative as the moon. She smiled fetchingly at the pinch-faced bureaucrat across from her, a functionary in gray worsted and silver braid who looked like an honor graduate of the Martinet Academy.

He was not as debonair as he thought, but Bambina seemed fascinated with him. Smitten, he leaned forward, drinking in her presence and bouquet as he signed and stamped the papers she'd presented him, somewhat exceeding his authority in such matters, but not feeling a shred of guilt about it.

5. Bambina emerged from a quaint water closet that looked like a ceramic boiler with appliances molded into the vivid blue walls. She carried a pottery bowl cleverly pierced with hundreds of small holes in a spiral pattern. She held the bowl like a harvest goddess with an offering of plenty, water dripping from the holes.

She stepped to the bed where Monke lay naked, watching her. She upended the bowl, showering him in gleaming red gems, then wallowed on top of him in the hard fire of the stones.

6. Monke shoveled coal into the ornate bronze firebox of the clunky, iron-wheeled steamer. Damn tractor, he thought as steam hissed and smoke belched from the crenelated stack. Bambina sat with her hands on the steering levers, staring at the frosted glass entryway of the sporting house across the wide, scrubbed sidewalk.

When one of the windows blew outward in a lamplit spray of glass and the sound of smashing and gunfire, Monke dropped the shovel and bounded to the front seat, grabbing the levers. Bambina slid to the curb side and poked a brass gun with a circular magazine and protruding hand crank through the window.

The doors slammed open, shattering, and Nabo and Tullio emerged, carrying sacks and holding big, complicated pistols. Behind them several guards in linen whites and peaked hats fired at the fleeing smugglers.

Bambina started turning the oddly delicate crank, producing a ratcheting sound and a staccato burst of fire from the octagonal muzzle. Monke lay his arm on the back of the fleece-covered seat and squeezed off shots from his own hand cannon as his friends sprinted to jump in the back of the steam wagon.

Bambina kept cranking, happily blasting shards of glass and splinters of fine wood as the guards took cover. Tullio and Nabo were shooting as Monke punched their vehicle into the street with a getaway more stately than speedy, but Bambina leaned out the window as they escaped, cranking energetically to pepper the casino with pellets.

7. Tullio and Monke lounged on the thwarts of a long, slim coastal boat with lateen sail and a keel that continued up to carved curves fore and aft. They drowsed in the tawny sunset, drinking the milky local wine from bone cups, backs resting on the walyo, squinting towards the sun. Bambina handled the towering stack of amber cumulus to Nabo, who nodded, wide awake from testing their cargo. He lifted one of the little pelts to his mouth again, sucking on the oily fuzz. He shuddered and smiled into the golden light. Bambina nudged the tiller, steering wider off the thunderhead.

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Chapter Ninety-Five

It only took a few seconds for Monke to whip the light cotton robe out of his grungy blue bunny rabbit pack and pull it over Bambina’s elaborate nakedness, but it was a long couple of seconds standing there in the middle of a somber, pious religious ceremony. Plunging through the sea of faces whose shock and outrage was exaggerated by the glow of candles and pungent odor of temple incense, Nabo hissed at Monke, “Look, she’s got to get a grip on this. Flying around the Sky naked is one thing, but she can’t keep flashing people on the worlds. Half these termnos are in churches, *coño*.”

Turning to push open the massive inlaid doors with his butt, Monke waved placating hands. “She’s working on it. Taking that class.”

“Lighten up, Nabo,” Tullio said, enjoying the whole thing. “It’s her self image. Who she is.”

“Who she is, she’s interplanetary jailbait,” Nabo groused as they oriented themselves in the dusky, deserted streets of a town that seemed to be devoted largely to production of smoke that smelled like manure.

“You can’t just take control of how you see yourself overnight,” Monke said, offended at getting a hard time for Bambina slipping around nude, which he rather enjoyed.

“Obviously,” Nabo said nastily. “Or you wouldn’t have to carry your stuff in that Pooh Pussy pack.”

“Can you shut up about that one time,” Monke flared. “It’s the only thing I can get my... you know.”

“Subconscious identity,” Tullio supplied.

“Yeah. The only *mochila* it’ll accept. I lived with that thing with I was a kid.”

“I remember,” Nabo said. “It was really cute, too. When you were *seven*.”

“It’s the only thing I owned, *cabrón*,” Monke retorted as they drifted down the street looking for something that didn’t look like a sooty white brick brazier. Bambina wiped her hand at specks of smut falling on her white “*tipica*” shift.

“We lived in a garbage dump, if you recall.”

“Hey, I think it’s adorable.”

“*Chinga tu madre*. I’m going to take that class, too. Learn how to accept something that doesn’t turn you into a flaming asshole.”

“Good idea,” Tullio said. “Rechis said he’s just about got Bambina exampled into thinking of herself wearing boots and jeans.”

Monke looked at Bambina, who was leaning over to cozen a small, furry animal out from under a stoop. “Doesn’t that seem sad, though?”

“I gotta admit,” Nabo admitted.

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Chapter Ninety-Six

“It’s the strangest part of his mod,” the Major said. “Obviously there’s no need for it here. It’s just an affectation.”

Deio, Dean of Lumen, nodded. He looked around his son’s previously luxurious room, currently altered to alien architecture and furnished like some savage lodge for scavenger hunters. The Major’s quick search of the room had turned up some disturbing things, but nothing really scandalous. He looked at the artwork, some featuring naked women with knives and scars. Well, at least the boy wasn’t effeminate. On the other hand, why the water? The cleverly arranged illusion of cascades of hot water to wash the immaculate illusion of a body? He looked at the new bathroom door as the sound of running water stopped.

The door opened and Tullio stood naked in an excellent reproduction of the bathroom in a high tech En-Lari brothel, rubbing his shoulders with a thick fluffy towel. He was startled to see his father and the Guide Major standing in his room, but didn’t show more than a frown. “That feels so great,” he said. “You should try it.” He glanced down at the pink glow of his skin, tousled his hair with the towel.

“Why is your hair like that?” Deio asked him. He didn’t realize it was an imitation of Nabo’s windtossed wildman hair style, hacked off with a knife at the edges. Not something generally seen in The Sky, whose people tend to be cleancut and stay that way.

Tullio looked down insolently and said. “I don’t know, it’s just always been curly. Oh, you mean on my head? You like it?”

Deio started to react to the sassy tone, then stared in shock at Tullio’s lower belly, where a jagged, complex pattern of scars edged up out of his pale fuzz and curled towards his navel. “What is *that*?” he demanded, pointing.

Tullio passed on the straight line. “Cut myself shaving,” he dead-panned. He wrapped the towel around his waist, tugged it down to reveal the top of the scar. It was a tribal relic from a world where they had found excellent women and ferocious men, but nothing of any financial value. They’d stayed there a month. “Notice the way it gathers interest and directs it down where it will do some good?”

“What is that abomination?” Deio almost shouted.

“A youthful fancy.” Tullio pushed past the two intruders and walked to his new wardrobe, which looked like something made from a Victorian leather steamer trunk.

“It’s true, then. Isn’t it? You’re going down onto worlds, interfering and profiteering.

The Major looked disgusted. “You can see that better from some childish body decorations than from the transcripts of termno transport?”

“But it’s more fun breaking in and staring at young guys’ cocks, isn’t it, Cromutin?” Tullio threw his towel in the Major’s face. It swept around him as if blown by a capricious breeze, hit the wall and slid down onto a big brass hook. “Is there a purpose for violating my privacy here?”

“I had thought you were responsible. Or at least working for the advancement of The Race and progress of Light. What has distorted your transmission like this?”

“I’ll tell you what I think,” Tullio said stepping into a pair of loose, fleecy pants. “I think if you want father to son talks we’d do it better alone. Not in the presence of such a *major* nuisance.”

“This isn’t a paternal chat. It’s an official investigation.”

“What a relief. I thought it was homo-voyeurism.”

Deio stiffened at the aggressive sarcasm of the tone, felt the fury building in the Major by his side. What had happened to his son? “As such,” he went on stiffly, “The Major’s presence is appropriate. You helped me chase those vandals down, son. And now you’re slipping worlds with them, aren’t you?”

“Hey, transcripts and hairstyles don’t lie.” He could see how much Nabo was influencing his conversational style and didn’t see much reason to worry about it.

“Cavorting with Kairos’ son, debauching and contaminating worlds. Contaminating yourself.”

Tullio slid the pants down enough to show the top cusp of his scar. “Get rid of Major Nuisance here and maybe we can talk.”

Cromutin glowered at him. How he’d love to get this snot somewhere private. Deio made a haughty gesture and pronounced, “The Major will stay.”

“Fine,” Tullio said. “It’s good to have public witnesses in official things, I guess.” He pulled on a long sleeveless shirt and stepped back into the steamy bathroom. Wiping a clear spot in the mirror, he combed his hair back. Except for a lock that fell over his forehead, a grace note he had worked hard on when tweaking his residual image. Without turning he served his father dramatic notice of the fact that he was no longer a puppet, or even particularly on the same side.

“What’s the matter, *Pathi*? Are you afraid I might run into something down there you don’t want me to know about? Or for anybody to know about?”

Deio bristled, moving into the bathroom door. He could see the cylindrical shower stall from there, and even the fluidly formed toilet/bidet. What was the purpose of all this foolishness? “You are impertinent and bordering on impropriety of accusation, boy. There is nothing in my life that would not bear public scrutiny.”

“Not even a little debauching in the dirt on your own side of things?” He leaned over and sketched in the steam on the mirror. The igo of Bambina’s planet. He patted his hair into place and turned to show his father a face of implacable estrangement.

Deio stood still, seeming to shrink somewhat in his confusion and hurt. The Major stepped close behind him, giving Tullio a look that caused him to tense before relaxing into the instructive mindset of Minator teachings. Since Kairos’ capture he no longer believed in the Majors’ invulnerability, but he still respected their mastery of combat skills. Even if nobody called it that.

But Deio turned silently and brushed by Cromutin, heading for the outer door in an uncharacteristic slump. The Major glanced at him, fixed Tullio with a cold glare. Tullio called after his father. “Oh, I forgot. The Majors already know everything about you, anyway. And everybody else. But still... should I mention your recreations in the Communal? Let me know. You know where to find me.”

He nodded at Cromutin and slammed the bathroom door in his face. The door parted around him, flew across the room to reassemble lodged through the fabric of Tullio’s viewing screen.

“If you’re waiting for the next showing, it’ll be a few hours,” Tullio informed him. “You can get all excited.”

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Chapter Ninety-Seven

Actually, it was more the other way around. From the time that Tullio had turned his mind away from contemplation of the Order of Light and titillating girls in the Communal to notice that the Majors were all over his home and spying on him, he had gotten a huge thrill in spying right back. It had been a fascinating game against a highly worthy quarry. He could use his Concentrator to good advantage for lurking and following, but the Majors had done this sort of thing in real life, he kept reminding himself. In actual war where mistakes brought actual death. Which, of course, only made it more exciting. His espionage on the shadow organization in his home and government was his first taste of the heady sensation that had led him to seek out Nabo and Monke. For his own taste of real worlds.

As soon as Cromutin left his quarters, Tullio slipped into rubber-like footwraps and ducked out the window. He was used to the dizzying drops from the towers by now, and aware that it was illusory. A series of Concentrator-controlled falls and leaps took him down to where he knew the Major would emerge, hot to confer with Remolam, his second in command of something that was not supposed to have ranks or commanders. And there they were, walking a parapet along the alabaster walls of the public palace where he lived. Which viewing films with Monke and Bambina had brought him to think of as Xanadu Meets Rivendell.

His new Hollywood vocabulary also made him think of his means of approaching them as “Matrix Spidey”. He warped gracefully from point to point, arriving unseen at where he could move along outside the parapet, listening to the two Majors. Who seemed to be talking about him. Flattering, he thought, but hardly surprising.

“If there was any question about before,” Cromutin was saying, “There isn’t any more. The boy is lost for good.”

“That’s what I told you,” Remolam said flatly. “And we may be losing the father as well.”

“You’re absolutely right about that. He’s already compromised.”

“The real question is, can the boy really do any harm? He’s a playboy, and now he’s getting so feral and louche I don’t think he means much to The Order any more.”

“Which is not such a bad thing,” Cromutin agreed.

“No. And Kairos is isolated and neutralized. His son might be a problem.”

“This whole business of sons is tiresome.”

“A throwback to dirt days. And look at where it leads.”

“I think it’s pretty clear that it leads to Kairos’ half-breed whelp and his whole pet world.”

“Well said, Major,” Remolam said immediately. “When you think about it, that system blocks a great deal of light for no good purpose.”

“Well, that’s something we can deal with soon. In the meantime, the ship should arrive there before the boy can attain any real power. And without Kairos’ leadership...”

“But better without his seed. As soon as the ship arrives there we should slip to it and make sure the occupation forwards the proper priorities.”

“Exactly,” Cromutin said, “Leaving our other priority the control and neutralization of the Dean’s son.”

“We should toss him in with Kairos,” Remolam said, smiling. “They’d grow on each other after a few decades.”

“Decades of aging,” Cromutin mused happily. “Decades imprisoned in gravity, accelerating towards decay and death.”

“For that matter,” Remolam continued in his jocular vein, “The boy obviously likes scars and would probably enjoy having a few more.”

“I can think of a few promising locations.”

Below the parapet, supported by his fingertips, Tullio was already thinking past getting off the wall and back to a termno. He was trying to frame out what he should do about what he had heard. And who he could count on to help him.

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Chapter Ninety-Eight

“He just came out of the closet,” Erin said, motioning at Monke. Who was sprawled on the couch with his feet on a stack of homework and his hand on a cold beer. Ben glanced at the open door to the termno closet, smiling at her wordplay. She’d guessed Monke wouldn’t catch it and was right. Monke smiled, too, hoisting his expensively imported cheap Mexican beer in salute. He looked good, Ben thought. Hard, quick and hungry: the action look. He was very aware of his own desk-sitting, shag-carpeting, non-action look as he slid into the worn armchair opposite.

Erin went into the kitchen nook, calling over her shoulder, “Two beers, then?”

Monke watched her walk away, admiringly. He grinned at Ben and spoke in quick gutter Spanish. “Very nice, *carnal*. Do I get a shot? You owe me a swapout, remember?”

“One of life’s longterm rainchecks,” Ben replied in English. “You do know Erin is taking Spanish, right? And getting some private tutoring.”

Erin handed Ben a beer and held the other one out to Monke. “*Ni sueños, güey*,” she said sweetly to Monke as she gave him his fresh one. “In your *pinche* dreams.”

Monke laughed in delight, offering another bottle salute before swigging. “Bambina says, Hi.”

“She’s apparently doing really well in the Galactic Smuggling career,” Erin tossed in, settling herself on the arm of Ben’s chair with a beer of her own.

“We could have used her, running the border,” Ben said. “She’s so obviously a girl with nothing to hide.”

Monke laughed, then rocked up into a sitting position, wrists on his knees.

“Look, *Güero*,” he said seriously. “You should come up with me, okay? There’s a guy you’ve got to meet.”

Ben could tell it was a serious matter. You always knew with Monke. And when he wasn’t going to show his hand until he was ready. He angled for a little more data.

“Listen, *mano*, it’s finals. I’ve got a *chingo* of reading and study this week.”

Monke snorted rudely. “So we go up, back. It’s like twenty minutes out of your pansy-assed *agringado* life. While you’re up there go see some *ruco* who can teach you how to cheat your *examenes*.”

Ben scoped him out, but got stared down. He tipped his beer up, chugging the rest, and stood up. “Will I need a jacket?”

“No, you’re good,” Monke said, pounding his brew and coming to his feet.

Ben kissed Erin on the cheek and moved towards the closet. “Back in a minute, babe. We’re going to some shithole a zillion miles from here. Shall I bring you anything?”

And a shithole it truly was. They stepped out of a stone pagoda Ben had come to think of as Exploitation Architecture Type IV and walked across a square of dried red clay. Slim girls in baggy linen coveralls drew water from a stone well in the center of the plaza, which was ringed with frond-roofed ramadas in front of shops made of the same red clay. The heat was wet, brutal, and intimate. “Why can’t we ever meet in an air-conditioned hotel?” Ben bitched as they ducked under the shaggy roof into the somewhat cooler porch of what was apparently a restaurant specializing in big blue bottles and disgusting stews. Nabo looked up from a basket in his lap and hit him with the old lopsided Nabo grin/sneer. Ben felt homesick and sheepish.

He straddled a chair made of bones and leather. “*¿Qui’hubo, Nabote?*”

“*Como sí, como no*,” Nabo said affably, handing him a blue bottle. “Think of this garden spot as a neutral corner.”

Ben sniffed the bottle, winced but took a pull. He was pleasantly surprised by a smooth taste reminiscent of hazelnuts. “What are you even doing in this *basurero*?”

Nabo grinned again, pulled a polished ruby the size of a walnut out of the basket and held it up for admiration. He dipped it in a cup of malodorous black sauce, popped it in his mouth and swallowed. “You know what they use them for here? They glue a bunch together with this nasty stuff from boiled hooves and horns and shit and make skylights for their huts.”

“Spare me one of them?” Ben asked casually. “My girlfriend loves red.”

“She said not to bother bringing her anything,” Monke said.

“She also likes surprises,” Ben replied, catching the thumb-sized ruby Nabo flipped him. He extended it towards the bowl of sauce, reconsidered, and chased it down with a slug from the bottle. “That’s tasty stuff,” he said, wiping his mouth on his cuff.

“It sneaks up on you,” Monke said. “But about why we’re here.”

“Hey, I’ve got some bling and a bottle,” Ben said. “I’m set.”

Nabo leaned across the table, pointing at his face with a pair or bone chopsticks. “Here’s the deal. We’ve got a new partner and we want you to meet him. Very important, *entiendes, Mendez?* But we need you to keep your cool and act grown-up and not flip out.”

Ben turned to Monke, his eyebrows in the arch of high irony. “Did I just hear that from *Nabo*?”

“It’s even funnier than that,” Monke said seriously. “He’s actually right. Can you sit on your ass for ten minutes without losing it? It has to be that way, okay?”

Ben was impressed by the gravity behind their expressions. He took Monke’s wrist and looked at his watch. “I can hang ten minutes.”

“Good,” Nabo said. And Tullio stepped from the restaurant door behind him.

Ben was on his feet instantly. “What the *fuck*?”

Monke held his watch in front of Ben’s face. “Elapsed time fifteen seconds.”

Slowly Ben sank back down to the front two inches of his chair, eyes fixed on Tullio in a hatred he couldn’t realize was largely composed of his own guilt. He gave Nabo a grim look and waved an interrogatory hand at Tullio. Who stood still, relaxed.

“They say politics make strange bedfellows,” Monke said.

“So you two sweeties should be totally happy together,” Nabo finished.

Ben unwound a little. If they were joking, it was probably okay. But he glared at Monke. “Lucy, you got some ‘splainin’ to do.”

“That’s what we’re here for,” Monke said quietly. “He’s going to tell you some messed-up shit. We buy it. We ran it by Memon and he backs it up. I think you should hear us out, then check with Memon.”

“Screw that,” Ben said tightly. “I’ll listen to this asshole. Then I know exactly who I’m going to check it out with.”

“We’ll go with you if you want,” Monke offered. Nabo and Tullio nodded.

“Let’s hear it first,” Ben said, “Then I’ll see if I’m still taking to you pricks. How much of my ten minutes is left?”

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Chapter Ninety-Nine

“You miserable, traitorous whelp!” Minator thundered. He approached Ben like a looming warship, his hooves vibrating the floor. He leaned over him, giving every cue that he was a red pubic hair away from reducing him to well-chewed cud.

“How *dare* you come into my presence!” He raised hands the size of pillows to the sides of Ben’s face, blocking his view of anything but the raging bull face and thrusting horns. “You sold your father into prison, into the hands of these jackals! You destroyed everything, you ungrateful, unnatural little scum!”

Nabo, leaning in the door to the dojo, spoke up. “We didn’t like it either. We thought he was an asshole for turning him over.”

Minator put his huge eyes on Nabo, breathing a heavy, dangerous musk.

“What he said,” Monke chimed in. “You stick by your blood, even if they’re shitheads. Whip them into shape yourself, don’t toss them to the cops.”

Minator gave the two Mexicans a long look, pregnant as a ticking bomb. He nodded slightly. “I respect that. We have more in common that I had thought.”

“I think the reason he’s here is because he realizes he screwed up,” Monke went on. “But can’t admit it yet. He came to get your advice on what to do.”

“And what about him?” Minator demanded, pointing menacingly at Tullio. “Deio’s son? Is he part of this change of heart?”

“He’s the one who brought us the information that made us contact Ben,” Monke said. “He thinks he made a mistake about Kairos, too.”

Minator put his hands on his hips and treated the four young men to a universe-class glower. “You’re a likely crew of reformers,” he finally said. “But that’s how it works sometimes. Tell me.”

“Tullio tells it best,” Monke said and the other guys all nodded.

Ben watched as Libertad took the crying baby from its mother, a squalling bundle of sickness and aggravation. She touched it in a studied way, running her blunt brown fingers over it like scanning sensors. She laid her hand on its head, gently massaged its tiny feet. He watched the baby calm under her touch, look up at her with eyes wide and soft. The flush of screaming faded, replaced by something that almost seemed like a glow. The brat looked healthier somehow. It lifted a hand towards Libertad’s face, then gradually lowered it again as it drifted into a peaceful sleep.

She continued to touch the kid, but spoke to Ben. “Your father likes gadgets. Toys. The greatest concentrator is the mind.”

“Whatever you’re doing, it seems to work.” Ben always said that.

She smiled and handed the child back to the mother, who bowed away showering tears and shy thanks. She brushed her hands together as if sweeping sand from them, a gesture she made after every examination or healing. Then looked at him, cool and direct.

“Do you know how many years I’ve lived, Ben?”

“I used to think I could tell things like that, but not anymore.”

She nodded. “I spend lifetimes in the Sky. Studying, learning how to do this. I probably had a gift for it, but I worked hard to help these people.”

“But you came back here. Started aging again.”

“I needed to age nine months, *hijo*.” She waited for him to catch her meaning. “I wanted to have you. And once back I knew I wasn’t going to take you back up there.”

“*Gracias, mami*.”

“*Por nada, mi vida*. You needed to grow up. And now you’re grown and need to make decisions not even experienced men on Earth are qualified to make.”

“Could they really destroy the planet?”

“Not really destroy. Concentrate. Accelerate. They are dedicated to advancing the future of light.”

“I have no idea what that means.”

“It means bloom the earth into a sun,” she said so softly he barely heard her. “Every living thing converted into a pulse in that flare. Not death, a choir of energy. That’s where suns come from, actually. The advancement of souls.”

“Sorry, but your mysticism doesn’t help me much with this.”

“It’s pure science, *mi’ijo*. I learned it in the Sky.”

“When I came to you before, I got the feeling you agreed that I should let them arrest...Kairos.”

“But it’s a different situation now, isn’t it?” She moved to the window, sat on the wide ledge with the watery Mexico City sun spilling around her shoulders. “Before, your father was bringing trouble to us. Now the danger is coming and you need to know everything you can, bring every tool and ally to hand, in order to deal with it.”

Ben stared past her out the window as she waited patiently, watching him. He suddenly felt small and weak. He wanted her to heal him. To tuck him in and leave a lamp on in the dark.

“I’m nineteen. I don’t know my ass from asphalt. And I’m the one who’s making decisions to save the world?”

Libertad spread her arms and he took a step toward, almost ran to kneel and embrace her. He felt her hands on his head, drank the calm and integration that flowed from them. He felt her lips touch his hair. He heard her say, “You are the only one who can decide. And you are capable. You were born for this. You will do what’s right.”

And he knew she was right. That was her gift to him. He knew.

“Did you go see Cielo, too?” Nabo was pumping out pushups from a handstand with his heels sliding up the wall of Minator’s dojo. “Since you’re taking polls on this shit?”

“No,” Ben said. “I think I know what she would say.”

“Fight the power?”

Ben looked around the dojo floor at a ring of questioning eyes. “And I agree with her this time,” he said.

“But that is not a plan of action,” the Minator said meaningfully.

Ben looked at Tullio for a moment and said, “I think you’re a complete, total asshole.”

Tullio nodded, unaffected. Ben turned to Monke, spread his hands in explanation. “But what can I say? I fucked up and he hasn’t done anything really stupid yet.”

“Oh, he’s about due,” Nabo said nonchalantly, flipping to the balls of his feet and bouncing up and down. The light tone brought Ben up to speed.

“I’ve got one more person I want to talk to before I figure this out.” He sensed some unrest, went on. “Trouble is, I don’t know where he is.”

He looked at Tullio. “But maybe your daddy does.”

Tullio nodded. “I already have a line on that. And I can find out a little more.”

Minator spoke relatively softly. “You came here for my help? My blessing?”

“Just your advice,” Ben said. “Thank you, Master.”

“Well, you have my blessing anyway. Contact me about this at any time.”

Nabo moved smoothly in front of Ben, looked at him in challenge. “So. Are you in? Or not?”

“In what?”

“The rescue, *estupido*.”

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Chapter One Hundred

I suppose it's a good indicator, thought the Dean of Lumen and Exemplar to The Race. He's concerned about the well-being of another person, conscious of the pulse of his peers, and even this criminal rebelliousness shows a daring and initiative that will stand him well once he grows into his role. But in the meantime it was getting obnoxious.

There had been a change in his relationship with the boy since the arrest of Kairos. Again, the independence was mostly to the good. But lately he felt as though his son was turning into some sort of in-house opposition sector. He played cat and mouse with the Majors and house staff, skulking around like a fantasy spy. He was spending a great deal of time on worlds: he was still young enough that a few months of aging showed up. But most troublesome were the constant arguments. Deio had almost forgotten having to argue with anyone.

"You are no longer a child," he told Tullio, who slouched at the other end of a table that seemed to be made of creamy opal. He had seated over a hundred persons at this table, but at the moment it was short enough to allow him to speak to his son in conversational tones. But long enough to keep him a bit removed. The surface of the table could display any information or image he needed, effect his decisions. But at the moment the business of the universe was taking a back seat to a sulky kid. "So why do you complain to me about what your friends think of you? Or of me?"

"They know I broke my word to Kairos' son. And that you lied to him, to Kairos... and to me."

"They know nothing about it." Deio immediately sensed that he'd erred.

"Truth, like light, shines despite all obstruction."

There are few things more annoying than having words with which you motivate the entire human population thrown in your face by your own offspring. Deio cast his eyes around the luminous egg that housed what The Race had instead of government. There were no Majors in attendance because Tullio was openly hostile to them since the capture and they associated him with the preventable death of two of their most respected comrades. He tried another tack.

"You will learn more about the balance of serving people's needs and obtaining their favor. Meanwhile you are being very disagreeable just to defend this man. The man you brought to justice."

"Is that what he was brought to? I didn't notice any of the usual trappings of justice. Such as judging or judgment. You have deprived him of movement and self-expression because he disagrees with you."

"No, as I've told you a dozen times. Because he is--not 'was'--trying to subvert the will of millions. All of us. Exploit savages for his own appetites and plunge all existence back into chaos, war, and shadow. You waste time worrying about him."

"Because he's no longer in sight? In some dungeon, his light blocked?"

Deio saw a possibility of scraping this entire mess off the table and getting back to being a shining example. The truth. "Dungeon? You have very charitable opinions of me, Son. Kairos is living happily on a wonderful island on a mild, welcoming world. There are people there, ignorant beasts. Their women are beautiful. It's his idea of paradise. Now if there is nothing else?"

Tullio stood abruptly, treated his father to a petulant nod and walked away from the table. Deio watched him leave, sighed. His chair, a sleek comma floating in the air, turned to give him a view of the wall behind him. Immediately a window irised open in the wall, spread to fill his field of view. He stared out at a stone patio above a turquoise sea, blue-green trees sloping away to hills of a wave-splashed point. A slim woman stood at the edge of the flagstones, knee-length blonde hair blowing around her. She stretched beautifully, staring out to sea. She would never turn around. She would never leave that porch, that cove, that world. If she had lived he would have had more children. At the moment he didn't regret that much, but still...

On the other hand, he thought, if I had stayed there with her I'd have been dead over a thousand years ago.

He turned back to the table, the window fading away behind him. He looked at the tabletop between his forearms and saw Tullio moving purposefully past two Majors who always stood at the doorway. He didn't look at them. They looked at him, though. They hated him. How had things gotten to this?

As he passed the Majors into the fountains and gardens where the termnos were located, Tullio grinned. Just before he disappeared from the elaborate, contrived beauty of his father's station, he said, "Got it."

The termno had been artfully concealed behind large red boulders in the jungly overgrowth. Kairos had "whuffed" into form, blinded by the hood over his eyes. He'd pulled it off immediately and looked around, seeing nothing but lush yellow-green leaves and vines. Then he'd smelled smoke.

He jumped off the termno as its glow flickered and faltered. A thin white smoke smelling of burnt selenium sifted up from the grid. He watched the pad fuse, the glow gutter out. He passed a hand across the grid. Nothing.

"What Ben would call a one-way ticket," he said. He peered around some more, noticed a faint thinning of brush that might be the start of a path. "Well, then," he said cheerfully. "This must be the place."

The path was fairly passable, leading fifty yards past a series of obvious marker stones to a sandy clearing lined with simple mat huts. He'd seen the inhabitants moving between the huts, a domed rock oven, a row of dugout canoes with elaborate figureheads of whitish wood.

Then the inhabitants had seen him.

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Chapter One Hundred One

Ben wasn't doing that good a job of ignoring Tullio. He slouched low on his couch, with Erin cross-legged beside him, watching his mates listen to Tullio taking charge. Here in his own damned apartment. But what was blowing his mind wasn't so much the way Tullio had changed from a supercilious Prince Of The Galactic Mall Rats into a focused, take-charge kind of guy. It was Bambina: no longer the ditzzy, bounding ingénue, but obviously on the ball. A real trouper. Go figure. Something in his mood triggered Erin's emo radar and she patted his knee, then let her hand rest on his thigh.

KenDoll was grilling Bambina and she was coming up with answers. "People raised you as a child, right? And they brought you food and things?"

"Every now and then, they'd come and check on me. I don't remember much about being a kid."

Erin had been listening while Bambina deconstructed her childhood and was washed with wonder. Imagine growing up all by yourself. *Nobody* to mess with your head. No boys or dogs or parents to make you miserable. No lessons. No goddam compulsory enjoyment. No neurosis. No wonder her ex-roomie was poster girl for mental health.

"So where do these people live?" Tullio went on with gentle but steady pressure.

"Another island." Bambina's brow was knit in unaccustomed furrows as she groped in the mists of early memories. "A bigger one, I think."

"What makes you think it was bigger?"

"I'm not sure. It just feels... felt... like a bigger place. With more people."

"Were there other islands around?"

"I don't think so," Bambina said, continuing to probe her memory. "Nobody ever came from anywhere. I mean... Oh, I mean, there were never strangers."

"Good, good," Tullio said, "Did your people leave the island?"

"Just to..." She stopped, closed her eyes. Her breathing seemed to slow, and her hands bounced in small, childish gestures. Her eyes popped open. "Fish. To go fishing in boats."

"And you went to your island in a boat?"

"Well, yes. Of course. Wait..." She looked right at Erin for minute, staring unseeing at the redhead while her mind swam deeper. "They built my house," she said. "They brought all my things. I had a dog. But he died."

Everybody in the room stared, silent as she plunged down into the shoals of her youth. A tear formed, rolled down her cheek. Monke was at her side immediately, blotting it with his sleeve. Did I just see the first tear of her life, Erin wondered.

Bambina smiled at Monke and patted his ass. Tullio continued. "How far was the trip to where we found you?"

"How would I know that?" She looked around, puzzled.

Ben spoke up for the first time. "Was it overnight? Did you sleep in the boat?"

"Ah." That seemed to part some inner curtain and she happily exclaimed, "Yes! Yes, everybody slept in the bottom of the boat. But I didn't. I helped steer."

"So you had been in boats before. At night."

"I suppose so. I don't think it was more than one night to my beach. Because they came a lot. And didn't bring any extra water." She smiled, pleased with her mental excavations.

"That helps a lot," Monke said.

"But still," Tullio told him seriously, "I could be completely wrong."

"Yeah, you could." Ben said flatly from the couch at the other end of the room.

"But so what?" Tullio asked him without expression. "Do you have anything more urgent to take care of?"

"No," Ben said, after a pause. "Let's do it your way."

The way Monke and Nabo jerked their heads around and gaped at that remark would have been comical if it hadn't been kind of embarrassing. Erin smiled to herself, gave his thigh a nice sexy squeeze.

"What? *¿Que me mires, wey?*" Ben glared at his two-timing pals. "It makes sense. Anyway, he's the one taking initiative to rescue my father for me. It's fucking embarrassing."

"I'll tell you a secret." Tullio spoke to him calmly from across the room. "If my father needed rescuing right now, you'd have to be the one to jump it off, because I don't feel like it."

He met the surprised looks of everybody else in the room, then muttered almost to himself, "In fact he may be in need of rescue, just not know it."

"Well, one salvation job a time," Ben said, standing up.

"Should I take a sweater?" Erin asked blandly.

Ben rolled his eyes at her and everybody laughed but Bambina, who earnestly told her, "Oh, you won't really need any clothes."

Erin smiled at her. "Have I taught you nothing?"

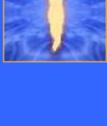
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Chapter One Hundred Two

“Now all we need is a boat.” Nabo made it sound like a mild accusation. He stood knee-deep in the gentle waves at the hook off Bambina’s beach as if considering wading out to the empty horizon.

“And hope we’re not halfway around the planet,” Ben put in, dropping to sit on the sand. “Or on the wrong planet.”

“How many worlds are there like this, would you say?” Tullio said evenly.

“And how many does his *papi* control?” Monke added.

Nabo turned and walked back to the group on shore, kicking spray all over them. “So, Bambi girl,” he asked, “You know how to build boats?”

“No,” Bambina said, nibbling at her lower lip as she focused on the subject. “Maybe. I might have watched when I was little. I think you start with a tree.”

Nabo looked at the dense stand of trees on the other edge of the beach and grimaced. Tullio saw it was time to get directional.

“What do we have for tools?”

Nabo pulled out a nasty-looking dagger and his skateboard wrench. Monke had a switchblade in his bunny pack. Ben showed them a Leatherman tool and pocket flashlight, Erin a barrette and comb. Tullio shook out his leather pack: the light globe, a concentrator, debris, some stray diamonds.

“You guys really thought this through,” Bambina said, laughing. She reached into the pile Tullio had spilled and pulled out a titanium cigarette lighter, flicked it. “Well, anyway, we have fire going for us.”

“So much for Promethean, huh?” Erin said to Ben, straight-faced.

“Embarrassing,” he admitted.

Nabo glared at them. “What the *chingada madre* are you talking about?”

“I think we should look for a tree that’s already cut down,” Bambina said.

Monke fingered his switchblade and looked at the enormous trunks looming around them. “Good idea.”

They found it lying on a rock shelf two coves to the west, a big trunk with lightning scars, obviously tossed on the shelf by storms. They managed to roll it into the water without too much bickering, then frolicked in the waves as they swam it around to Bambina’s beach. They rode it in on the low waves, the guys pushing it, Erin and Bambina sitting astride laughing and trying to stand up like surfers.

Peeling the greenish bark wasn’t unduly difficult, though dirty work requiring a lot of dips in the waves to get the dust and gook off. Once the bark was off they stared at the log. Now what? Erin and Nabo looked at Ben, Monke looked at Tullio. Both shrugged. Bambina straddled the log with Nabo’s dagger and started digging out shavings. Monke and Ben watched her for a minute, looked at each other, shrugged, and started helping her carve.

Bambina sat awake in the rich purple darkness of the “tropical” night, staring into the fire that flickered and smoldered along the length of the log. She carefully poured water from a large plant husk, keeping the outer wood damp while the fire ate into the dry inner core. She went for more water, smiled at Monke where he lay curled by the dying campfire embers with the others, then returned to her vigil. She knew what she was doing. That was what pleased and surprised her. There was something here for her, she just had to see it and welcome it home. She settled back down, staring into the hypnotic pulse of fire working down into the spongy wood. She was leading them, she realized. They did what she said. This was her world.

The guys, blackened as minstrel players, chipped charred wood out of the log, which was starting to show a pronounced central depression. They worked hard under the sun, chopping away with their knives. Erin and Bambina walked out of the surf, clean and naked, and laughed at them. The guys glanced at each other and leaped up, chasing the girls down the beach like some fantasy slave rebellion. They caught them and smeared them with soot, painting their faces with shiners and mustaches.

Monke and Ben did a little more comprehensive smearing. Ben rubbed against Erin, who squirmed in protest, and said, “You said you wished I was black.”

“But not *here*,” she told him between squeals and squawks. “My parents can’t see you.”

Bambina suddenly sat up, pushing Monke off her. Tullio quickly swiped his hand down her face, leaving a black streak. She stared at Erin. The guys laid off her as she stood up and walked down to the shore. She looked out to sea, then turned to them, “My parents. I must have had parents, right?”

Nobody responded. She stared down at her body, then waded in, washing off the smut. She turned to them again with a puzzled expression. “Everybody else had darker skin than me.”

Tullio walked into the water, a few yards from her, and squatted down to wash the charcoal off. He spoke to her very gently. “Let’s go and see them.”

She looked at him for a moment, then nodded. “That’s what I want to do.”

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Chapter One Hundred Three

Their rhythm was ragged and half-assed. Bambina sat in the stern, holding the tiller stick. The mast wasn't bad, stepped in the hull and lashed with some pretty decent rope they'd twisted from fronds. But their stupid leaf sail was hanging limp and they had to use their crudely whittled paddles. And they just didn't have the rhythm. Which Bambina could grasp easily, a beat drawn from the slap of the hull.

She said, "It's easier if we sing."

So Nabo sang. An unfortunate performance. What he rasped out was, "*Las piedras rodando se encuentran, y tu y yo algun dia nos tendremos que encontrar...*"

Ben came in with, "*Para bailar La Bamba se necesita una poca de gracia...*"

Monke, always the sophisticate, began, "Wan handred bottles of beer on the wall..."

Tullio, not to be left out, sang in a very nice tenor, "*Avi, amichi, amichi us oma pra dolimus, us prelimus...*"

Thankfully, the cacophony didn't last long. When the vocal styling died out Erin sang out, "Baby, let me take you on a....sea cruise."

"No, listen," Bambina said. She paused, eyes closed, then started a wordless chant. It rose and fell, but with a little glide to it.

Sounds like Enya, Erin thought, falling into the rhythm. Paddling music. She saw that the boat surged forward more smoothly. She picked up the repetition of syllables and started to chant along. Tullio came in, then the Mexican guys. Their bodies moved more rhythmically with less effort. The blunt, bulky abortion of a canoe skimmed the sea. They were going places.

Monke stopped chanting, broke his stroke. He stared down into the water and yelled incoherently. The rest looked, just as the back of a huge sea thing moved past them on their port side. What they could see looked like a cross between shark, armored dinosaur, and Jules Verne submarine.

Nabo raised his paddle to strike, then stopped, aware of the futility. "*¡Chinga tu madre, wey!*"

"What the fuck was that?" Ben yelled as the thing dropped down out of sight.

He didn't get any answers. Except for a rise and rock of the canoe as the monster shrugged under it.

"Oh shit," Erin yelled. "It's Moby Dick."

They all clutched at the hull, staring over burnt gunwales at a shape twice the length of their craft. It rolled to turn and they could see a mouth big enough to gobble any of them whole. And teeth that could reduce their boat to splinters quicker than their knives had.

Nabo whipped out his knife, stood up and started over the side.

"No!" Bambina's command was sharp and strong. "It's a *rochi!* Pee into the water!"

Nabo and the other guys stared at her. As the boat did another, scarier tilt.

"Quick!" she demanded. "Pee over the side. Or I'll do it."

The four males stood up, leery of more lurches from underwater. They dropped trou and started pissing earnestly over the sides.

Erin lifted her fingers to frame the four water-passers standing with pants around ankles. "And I didn't bring my camera."

The monster broke water off starboard, glared malevolently, and moved rapidly away.

The four fellows shook off, pulled them up, and looked around at the girls.

"They really hate piss in the water," Bambina informed them.

"Understandable," Erin agreed. "That's why I never use the pool at Ben's apartment."

The night breeze would die but in the meantime it was enough to make headway, fluffing out the woven leaf sail. The group sprawled in uncomfortable positions in the hull, Erin wrapped around Ben. Bambina handled the tiller lightly in the wind, her eyes glued on the invisible horizon.

Tullio rolled over, struck the mast with his nose, and sat up. He moved aft, carefully stepping between his sleeping comrades. He sat crossways in the stern, watching Bambina's sure hand on the helm.

"How can you tell if you're going straight?"

"See those three stars there, like a little triangle? They don't move around like the other ones do."

Tullio thought about that a moment. He lived in the Sky, but didn't really have any idea of observing it from below. Finally he said, "So that's North?"

Bambina smiled. "Or South, right? I just know they should be right over there. Like the two on a clock."

He had been admiring the tight curve of her body, bent to the tiller, but now he examined her face in the faint light of two small moons. "How could you possibly know that?"

"I'm remembering things. Out here I remember a lot more."

"Ah." Tullio nodded, more to himself than to her. "I've noticed you changing since we got here. Getting more confident."

"Because I'm remembering who I am. And that means my world comes with me."

Tullio turned to look where she was looking, saw nothing but dark sky and sea. "I'm trying to forget who I am. And I've got so many worlds I can't keep them all straight."

"I don't think you find out what to do by forgetting. I think you have to remember more. Who you were before they started making you into what they want you to be."

"I think you're right."

"You and Ben and Erin have too much... parents. Monke and I don't have any. But here we are together. Does that make any sense?"

"I'd say so."

"Get some sleep," she said. "I don't think we're just stumbling around anymore. I think we'll be home by morning." She pointed out ahead of the prow. Right over there."

And four hours later, that's exactly where it was.

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Chapter One Hundred Four

“Welcome to Devil’s Island,” Kairos proclaimed expansively, sweeping a lordly gesture from the hammock where he reclined, fanned by several naked young women who looked a lot like Bambina.

“Don’t give up hope,” Ben said acidly. “We’re here at last.”

Kairos offered him a swig from a cup. “So this is a rescue? That’s my boy.”

“You must have suffered horribly,” Erin said.

“Don’t make me talk about it!” Kairos shuddered. “Not just inferior wine... *no* wine. It’s been a nightmare.” He rolled his eyes at Ben theatrically. “Thank God you’ve come.”

“My father might have been right about exiling you,” Tullio said.

“I told you.” Ben’s exasperation was not simulated.

“Well the important thing is, you’re here. Ready to whisk me off in that contraption.”

“I’m thinking there might not be any seats left,” Nabo tossed in.

“Well, let me see,” Kairos weighed his options carefully, rocking gently while his escorts eyed these light skinned young men. “There’s power out there. Wealth, fine wine, literate women. Revenge, let’s not forget. Then there’s this place here. HmMMMM.”

Tough decision. His eyes closed and he seemed to doze off.

“Yo, Pops!” Ben snapped. “Can we cut the shit here? We’re hungry and thirsty and need to gather food to go back.”

“Yes,” Kairos sighed. “I suppose we must.”

Down at the water’s edge, several naked local men examined the dugout. They laughed heartily over some of the details. But seemed impressed that Bambina had made it, treated her with a deference you could spot even from the dining mats in front of the huts at the jungle edge. She broke away from the men and walked up to eat, striding naked across the powdery sand.

Kairos slurped some sort of shellfish out of a conical shell, watching her approach. “I would have my conclusions about that,” he said, not looking directly at Tullio as he said it.

Tullio didn’t answer, but Ben saw some flush under his tan. “Yeah, she has to be a crossbreed,” he said. “And it had to be somebody from The Race. But that doesn’t mean...”

“I wish you wouldn’t talk about her like she’s livestock,” Erin objected. “And I think her background is none of your business.”

“*Eso*,” Monke said to Kairos, darkly. “And you’re embarrassing Tullio. It was his idea to come here and get you. Not his best ever idea, either, I’m thinking.”

Kairos nodded to him, offered to replenish his bamboo cup from a large pitcher made from some sort of chitinous carapace. “It might be better for all concerned if I were to stay here, frankly. Possibly even myself.”

“Now you tell us,” Ben said acerbically. “On the other hand, there is the matter of, you know, that thing...”

“The fate of Earth,” Erin filled in for him. “Hanging in the balance.”

“They’re coming to take us over.” Nabo nodded at Tullio. “Isn’t that the way you read it?”

Tullio nodded solemnly. “With a ship. Full of Majors, occupying force, two *ideleis*.”

“Which means government, right?” Ben pressed.

“I’d assume.” Kairos looked around the table. “And you are the opposition forces?”

“We’re what we’ve got so far,” Ben said. “What else have we got? The armed forces of Earth?”

Kairos made a gesture with his hand as if brushing away a gnat.

“We’ve got us, a termno, three concentrators,” Ben said. “And you.”

“So you do,” Kairos said almost sadly. “So you do.”

He brightened as Bambina reached the table and sank cross-legged between him and Monke. He smiled at her. “This is the last time I’ll speak of this,” he said. “But wherever she came from, it was a good combination. She’s lovely.”

He reached to touch her jaw, eyes shining at the beauty of her. Monke stiffened slightly, but Bambina swung her hand up sharply, knocking his away.

“Don’t touch me like I was an animal,” she snapped at him. “Don’t look at me like you want to fuck me, because you never will. You didn’t make me.”

“No, I didn’t,” Kairos said softly. “That’s not my style.”

She jumped to her feet and leaned over him. “And treat my people here with respect, do you hear me? We aren’t your servants. They think you’re God because of your hair and you take advantage of that. This is my world. Behave yourself, you old goat.”

Kairos bowed his head to her, but she grabbed a broiled crustacean of some sort off the serving mat and stalked off chewing on it angrily. Three local girls, who had been sitting behind Kairos like acolytes, stared after her. Shocked and impressed, they immediately fell into rapid chatter, looking at Kairos and Bambina, who stalked back to the water’s edge in a lovely display of mobile pique.

Kairos listened to them for a moment of strained mealtime silence, then leaned towards Monke. “They are very impressed by your woman,” he said. “As am I. They remember her, but didn’t expect her to come back here. Now she’s come back with more Gods and semi-gods. And treats me familiarly. Well, scornfully, actually. They are seeing her as something very, very special.”

Monke gave him an oddly formal nod. “That’s how I see her, too.”

Kairos returned the same nod. He sipped from his cup and picked up a plump orange fruit. He pointed down towards the water, where five local men were obeying Bambina’s instructions in provisioning one of their own canoes, much larger than their dugout. It was a scene of emphatic, Technicolor beauty, and evocation of simplicity and peace. He said, “You know there’ll be a war.”

Nabo leaned forward, dominating the group around the mat. He said, “Bring it on.”

Kairos looked at him, gave a sad smile. “You have a lot to learn.”

Tullio spoke to the group at large. “We all do,” he said.

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SKY SEEDS



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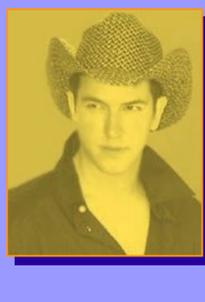


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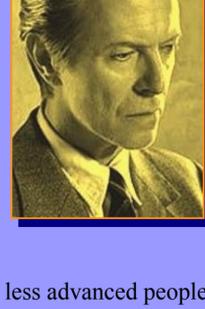
SKY SEEDS Character Profiles

BENITO

It's tough enough being Mexican--torn between warring identities of ancient Native Americans and European conquerors. But for Ben Ochoa, it's much worse. His father came to Mexico from The Sky--outer hyperspace. And he plans to change Earth around to suit his needs and ideas. And elects his son Ben to help him do it. It's a big jump from ignorant Third World street trash to President of Earth, but Ben has a few hole cards: like being able to study in the colonies of The Sky without aging while he's up there learning everything from languages to advanced technology to voodoo combat.



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KAIROS

He may be out of favor and hunted up there in the far reaches of galactic civilization, but on Earth he can pass as a God if he wants. He needs to make some changes like moving pyramids before he can establish a power base here, but he's done it before. And unlike others of the Sky race, he likes it down on planets: mostly because of the women. Which is where Ben came from in the first place, and Kairos seems to feel he owns his son. Is he an exploitative conquistador, or a powerful loose cannon helping the less advanced peoples for all the wrong reasons? Ben and Cielo are hot to find out. But what can they do it about it?



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CIELO

On the cusp of her teens when Kairos comes back into the life of the family that never knew him, Cielo is steadfastly her mother's daughter, rejecting the powers and claims of the whitest gringo she ever met. But she's getting older and falling in with men: some of them dangerous leftist radicals who use her singing for their own ends. It's a good thing she has Nabo to protect her...but then he disappears off into space. And when he returns, she's older and more experienced. Can she be a woman to the friend she's loved since childhood? And can her singing and healing do anything to balance her father's power...or worse, the power of his enemies from beyond The Sky?



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NABO AND MONKE

Ben's childhood amigos from the streets, and partners in the border-running criminal enterprises they turn to, these guys are standup sidekicks. Hothead athlete Nabo has a



lifelong love for Cielo and the clowning Monke knows he does better when Ben takes charge. But when Ben goes off to American colleges, intergalactic schools, and international politics, they wonder if there's a place for them in his future. On the other hand, he's opened up some new worlds for them to traffick and hide out. Literally new worlds, that is: the sprawl of planets where The Sky people put in systems of transportation and exploitation.

LIBERTAD

As Mexican Indian as they come, and as classic a nurturing, healing Earth Mother as you'd ever want, Libertad's exotic beauty and banked sexuality lured Kairos when she was just sixteen: and he lured her into having his children before he left for planets unknown. She has little use for the world of The Sky, except in whatever ways it can help her heal and comfort herpeople. When Kairos returns for Ben, she wonders what sort of deal she struck with life, and saves her hopes for her daughter, Cielo.



MINOTAUR

It's just a way he's learned to project the residual personal image people carry with them through the hyperspace tunnels of The Sky, but it's disconcerting to be taught by an eight foot tall half bull/half man. Especially since he teaches martial arts far beyond anything on earth and is the last warrior of his race.

ERIN

If the world spawned dark pre-humans who were then humanized and molded by the blond Sky race...where do redheads fit in? Ben is warned about them, but can't stay away from Erin. She thought she was getting involved with a foreign-born whiz kid more interesting than the other Yale guys, but found out she'd signed on for more than she bargained for when her first night with Ben turned into an explosion of death and freaky revelations that challenge everything she believes about history, race, and human life.



TULLIO

His father's party has outlawed Kairos and when Tullio meets Ben he shares the antipathy. But he's a disaffected scion himself, bored with the effete perfection of the Sky world. So when Ben abandons the interplanetary smuggling business, Tullio jumps in and partners up with Nabo and Monke. It's a perfect blend of Sky knowledge and Earth savvy until Tullio's father makes his move to eliminate Kairos, and

possibly the Earth along with him, bringing Tullio to the same conflict affecting the other characters: choosing sides between the ties of one's blood and one's heart.

BAMBINA

Raised alone on a tropical island to be the toy of a powerful Sky lord, Bambina speaks no language and has no name until Monke and his pals stumble onto her while smuggling interworld, name her and take her along. Cheerful, affectionate, undefended, and oblivious to clothing, the beautiful nature nymph showers her newfound love on Monke and Ben, creating tension between friends already at odds. Choosing Monke and the smuggling life, she quickly becomes a seasoned rouper. But with worlds at her fingertips, she might prefer going back to live on her island planet. And Monke just might go with her.



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T. GRAYSON MORAN

Civil engineer turned security consultant, smuggler, grave robber, and investigator, Grayson Moran brings a unique perspective to his work.

A hard-core SciFi fan who claims not to have read any fiction outside the genre, Moran nevertheless takes a highly social, cultural, individual approach to writing. SKY SEEDS is his first attempt to write for young people, who he sees as the purist audience for SF/F.

Moran is antagonistic to much of the accepted scientific explanations for the origins of races, humanity and life itself, but not for religious reasons, citing, "knowledge of breeding and common sense".

He is the author of several books of "outlaw anthropology" and alternative explanations of history, all published under names that "would not injure my professional reputation, back when I had one."

Moran describes himself as an apostate, womanizer, renegade, and temple raider. He is also author of several dull professional books on theodolites and land survey. He currently resides in Murphysboro, Tennessee in order to pursue his new calling as a songwriter in nearby Nashville.

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SKY SEEDS is the first of three books in a series that will see Ben and his friends grow to adulthood and positions of inconceivable power... and conflict.

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