

A Dog's Breakfast

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It's been said that a man likes to marry someone very much like his mother. Rusty Baughman frequently recalled this saying when Catha Baughman walked into the room. People often assumed Catha was the daughter of Scott and Kimberly because Catha and Kimberly looked so much alike. He had even been asked if he had adopted his wife's surname when they wedded. And, of course, Rusty thought this was hugely entertaining, while Catha did not. Originally Catha Oriphant of the Cleveland Oriphants, she was proud of her name and her family. Even if marrying into the Paladin's family was considered a high honor in the Upper Midwest Palatinate, the Paladin was not necessarily a hereditary position. There were no guarantees her husband would wield the sword. And there were no guarantees her offspring would either.

“Hey, Cath, Dad needs us for a meeting,” Rusty said.

“And you waited until now to tell me because?”

“Because he just called me.”

Catha sighed. “And how much of my afternoon will I have to spend in your father's office, then?”

“Did you make other plans?” Rusty asked.

“I have my work, you know,” she said. “I bring my share of the income to this family.”

Rusty held up his hands. “Hey, hey, hey. Can we start this conversation over again?”

Catha shook her head. “I thought I had made myself clear, Russell. Your father feels free to call upon us whenever the mood strikes him. He has not the slightest respect for *our* time and activities.”

“You had no problem with this five years ago when we got married,” Rusty said. “I've been Dad's roving trouble-shooter for the past twenty years. It's what I do.”

“Perhaps you might want to think about doing something else. We cannot remain attached to your parents' apron strings forever.”

“And do what, for example?”

“Why you could work for Father in the family firm. You know he has been hinting around about that.”

“And I talked to him about it,” Rusty said. “He wants me to do pretty much the same thing for him as I do for Dad. What would be the difference?”

“It would be a nice change of pace,” she said.

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“And your dad could summon us to meetings at his desire. What's wrong with this picture, Cath. We would be more constrained than we are now.”

“Oh, Daddy is not like that.”

“Daddy *is* like that. You were working for him while we were affianced. You complained about it all the time. And I don't think he has mellowed with age, honey.”

“I do not think you are being very gracious about Daddy. Daddy and Mummy have been very good to us.”

“I cannot argue about that,” he said. “It is just the unspoken *quid pro quo* that hovers there. It is like they are asking, *We have been nice to you. What are you going to do for us?*”

“Well, what is wrong with that?”

“Your parents are genuinely nice people, and I am fond of them, Cath. I do things for them because I like them. When you put conditions on love, it becomes something very different.”

“And I think you are just looking for reasons to snub my parents.”

Rusty threw his hands in the air. “Oh, for crying out loud.”

Catha glared at him for a few moments. “Come on, let us get this meeting done. Maybe I can get back to something productive, then.”

Rusty levered himself out of his chair. While he had his father's dark hair and facial structure, he had the slim build of his mother's family. He was constantly thankful he didn't fight the weight problems his father constantly wrestled. He followed his wife out of his office and to the elevator. They did not speak to one another as they rode to the roof of the two-hundred-story Chicago skyscraper that was their home.

The Paladin's aircar was waiting on the landing pad, and they climbed aboard. The hop over to the landing pad on the roof of Wilton House took only five minutes. Chicago was growing, but it was still a compact metropolis on the shores of Lake Michigan. The second paladin had built his capital on the ruins of the old city. The capital of the Upper Midwest Palatinate was not sprawling like its predecessor but rather had built upwards. The city's towering spires reflected the nation's optimism and reach for the stars.

“What is going on, Dad?” Rusty asked as they walked into the Paladin's office.

“Siddown, kids,” he said as he leaned back in his chair.

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The Paladin was a heavy-set man of eighty years, although he looked to be in his late forties with the medical therapies available on Earth. He had been in office for thirty-five years and was widely popular within the Upper Midwest Palatinate. Most other nations on Earth either feared or hated him... or both.

“I need you to take a run out to Pacifica,” the Paladin said. “I'm hearing things I don't like.”

“Okay, no problem,” Rusty said. “What am I looking for?”

“There is a team doing genetic engineering that may be getting out of hand.”

“Dad, everybody does genetic engineering,” Rusty said. “It is a major industry.”

“Uh-huh. But, in this case, they are mixing human genes with animal genes.”

Rusty looked at his father. “I'm not sure I understand. This is a little off my specialty, but don't geneticists put human genes into mice to study disease and stuff?”

The paladin shook his head. “That's not what I'm talking about, Rusty. It seems they are trying to breed highly intelligent animals.”

Catha had said nothing so far in the conversation, mainly because she was still angry at being interrupted by the summons. She spoke now.

“What are they trying to achieve, Dad?”

The paladin shook his head. “I don't know if they are trying to weaponize something or if this is a pure research project. However, I am convinced it is highly dangerous.”

“Is the government of Pacifica involved in this?” Catha asked.

“We have no evidence they are. But, it seems unlikely there would not be official sponsorship. This is the sort of thing that sends people to jail everywhere.”

“What's my cover?” Rusty asked.

“Oh, you will go as you,” the paladin said. “You're about due for a vacation anyway, right?”

“It would look a little strange for me to go on a vacation by myself.”

“So, take your wife,” the paladin grinned. “I'm sure she wouldn't mind a trip out west.”

“I cannot simply drop everything I am doing for a faux vacation,” Catha said. “I have to work for a living.”

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The paladin shrugged. "I'll let you two sort that one out. I'm sure you can think of a reason for going alone, Rusty."

Rusty nodded. "How soon do I need to get moving?"

"I'd say in the next two or three weeks. We just stumbled across this, and it looks like the project is already pretty well advanced."

"Okay. I assume you got this from Grandma."

"Your grandmother is fully in the loop on this. She will set up a briefing for you before you leave."

"Are we done here?" Catha asked.

The paladin raised an eyebrow. "So you think we have covered everything I desired?"

"I apologize, Sir," she said. "That is not what I meant. I am in the middle of a complex algorithm and do not want to lose the thread of thought."

The paladin laughed. "I'm sorry, Catha. I didn't realize. Of course, we are finished. Your work is too important for me to interrupt."

"Thank you, Sir."

"We will have a family dinner before you leave for Pacifica, Rusty," he said.

"Just let me know when."

Catha was quiet until they left the aircar and rode the elevator down to their offices.

"Just what did your father mean by suggesting you could think of a reason for going by yourself?"

"Excuse me?" Rusty said.

"When I told him I could not go, he said you could probably come up with a reason for going by yourself. Is there something you have not told me?"

"What's the matter with you today? You take offense at anything I say or do. All I hear are complaints about this and that. What have I done to make you so unhappy?"

"I have just decided I am going with you, Russell. There is no telling what you have planned for this trip."

"Planned? Planned? You heard about this almost as soon as I did," he said. "That is why I wanted you

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to come along to meet with Dad. So you would not hear about it second hand.”

The elevator door opened, and Catha marched out without saying another word. Rusty watched as she walked down the hall to her office. Shaking his head, he left the elevator and walked to his office.

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“And this is the target?” Rusty asked.

“Correct. Steppan Donaldson,” Pei Baughman said. “He is one of the top two or three bio-engineers on the planet. Obviously, the best in Pacifica.”

“I have heard of him,” Catha said as she looked at the three-dimensional image rotating before them. “He is supposed to be brilliant.”

“Oh, I think he is,” Pei said in her warm, buzzy voice. “He believes in what he is doing, which makes him doubly dangerous.”

“How did you twig onto him, Grandma?” Rusty asked.

She chuckled. “I love those anachronistic expressions you have learned from your father. I cannot reveal the sources on this, Rusty. It is poor trade-craft.”

“What is our entrée into Donaldson's laboratory?” Catha asked. “I assume we cannot simply walk up to the door.”

“Our assets are scarce in Pacifica,” Pei said. “Their former president complained rather vociferously to the paladin some years ago, and it seemed wise to keep a lower profile. Unfortunately, you are going to have to find your own ingress.”

“That sounds dangerous,” Catha said.

Pei shrugged. “Danger is a relative thing, my dear. Most likely, your largest risk is the people there discovering what you are attempting. And that risk is relatively low since this is merely an information-gathering mission.”

“*Relatively?*” Catha asked.

Pei frowned at the younger woman. “A bit of brazen deftness is required. Since the Paladin's son is vacationing in Pacifica, the president will be obliged to invite him and his wife to a reception. We can hope that Donaldson will also be present. He usually shows up since the president likes to show off his pet scientist.”

She turned her gaze back to the image of the scientist. “Take the opportunity to get to know him. If you

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shower him with attention, he is likely to invite you to see his laboratory.”

“It seems like a lot of things would have to come together just right,” the younger woman said.

Now Rusty was frowning at her. “Our job is to ensure that those possibilities become actualities.”

“Easy for you to say,” she replied.

“I’ve been doing it for twenty years. Dad has always said that the people of this age are not difficult to manipulate. He taught me how to do it.”

“That sounds so tawdry,” Catha said.

“Espionage,” Pei said, “which is what we are contemplating here, is a tawdry business. But it is often necessary. And it is my job.”

“I am sorry, Pei,” Catha said. “I did not mean to imply....”

“No, I understood what you meant,” Pei said. “I did not take offense. It is what it is.”

“And Grandma is one of the masters of this game,” Rusty said.

“I will attempt to begin influencing events from here,” Pei said.

“Dad calls it *chumming* the water,” Rusty said with a grin.

Pei sighed. “Your father loves his little analogies. It mostly confuses people in the palatinate.”

“But the sayings are so picturesque.”

“Russell,” Catha warned.

“And what about the support team?” he asked.

“I have completed the build-out for the team,” she said. “Availability of two members is not assured at the moment. Do you want to see the list?”

Rusty shrugged. “Just whenever you have it together. Will we have time to meet with the team before we leave?”

“I will ensure that is the case,” Pei said. “There will not be a luxurious amount of time to prepare; however, it should be adequate.”

“Even for Catha?” Rusty asked.

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Pei looked surprised, and his wife glared at him.

“Okay, okay,” Rusty said. “I’ll make arrangements for the trip and send you an itinerary, Grandma.”

Pei nodded. “Very well. Please let me know if you have any further questions.”

The three stood up. Rusty slipped over, hugged his grandmother, and kissed her on the cheek. Catha grasped her hands and air-kissed. They then left the low-slung home and climbed into the waiting aircar.

“I do not understand why your grandparents live out here in the middle of nowhere,” Catha said when the door closed.

“Indianapolis is the second or third largest town in the palatinate,” Rusty said. “They like it here.”

“I just could not imagine living here. I would be bored.”

Rusty leaned back in the leather seat and debated with himself about baiting his wife. He decided he didn’t want to fight all the way back to Chicago.

“I don’t know, Cath. I guess it’s what you’re used to. I think *I* would get bored fairly soon as well.”

“Really?”

“I used to get frustrated when I was a kid, and we visited our grandparents. There just wasn’t anything to do. Grandpop used to take me with him over to see Grandpa Sterling. Those two were interesting.”

“I wish I could have met your grandfather Sterling,” she said. “He must have been an interesting person.”

“He and Grandpop were a pair. You’ve seen how Grandpop can be. Grandpa Sterling was not much different.”

“And he has been dead for ten years,” she said.

“Pretty close,” Rusty said. “He had been out in interstellar space looking for new business and picked up some kind of disease. He lost his mind.”

“That must have been terrible,” she said.

“Oh, it was. He started getting irrational. He was always kind of paranoid, but he decided Uncle Rodney was trying to murder him.”

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“I cannot imagine your uncle even considering something like that.”

“Exactly. So eventually, we get him in for a checkup and discover his brain is coming apart.”

Could they not put him into the tank for that?” Catha asked.

“No. The doc tried to explain it to me. Something about a prion disease. It changed the actual molecules of the brain. There was nothing they could do.”

“That is really frightening.”

“You are right,” he said. “Nobody really knew if he was infectious or not. Honestly, the docs still do not know. But nobody since has caught it, thank the Lord. Dad has a research team working on it. They have been at it for ten years, and there is no cure yet.”

“Is that the team led by Dr. Kinsolver?”

“That is the one. I have met him a couple of times. Sharp fellow. They have made remarkable progress in understanding the disease. He told me that figuring out a cure is something else altogether.”

The conversation subsided briefly as the aircar climbed over the central plains. The palatinate had been the first to recover systematic farming following the time of troubles, and the fields stretched out below them. This was not only the breadbasket for the North American continent but the entire planet.

“Why are we really going out to Pacifica?” Catha asked suddenly. “What business is it of ours if one of their scientists has an ethics problem?”

Rusty started to answer, then paused. He leaned back in his seat and gazed at the ceiling of the aircar.

“That is a good question, Cath. You know, I just sort of drifted into this job. Dad began asking me to jump into these problems as they cropped up, and I found out I was good at it. Plus, I was working for the family and doing something useful. I know I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer, especially compared to my parents. So I was delighted that I could do something useful.”

“I think you underrate yourself,” she said. “You do not have the technical mind like your father. But you interact with people far better than he. Or me, for that matter.”

Rusty considered and then decided not to respond to her last comment. “I guess that is why he sends me out on these missions. But back to your question. After doing this for several years, that same question occurred to me. So I went to see Dad about it.”

“And what did he say?” she asked.

“He told me that while he accepts that there will never be peace on this planet until the Lord comes, the

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mission of the palatinate and the paladin specifically is to keep the lid on as much as possible for as long as possible. He said it was one of the things passed along from Arthur Wilton.”

Catha was quiet as she considered what he had just said. She frowned as she gazed out the window and then turned back to Rusty.

“Who elected us to be the keepers of the entire planet?” she asked.

“Am I my brother's keeper?”

She paused. “No, Russell, I do not think that answer fits the context. God was confronting Cain after he murdered his brother. This is different.”

“Do we not have an obligation to look out for people?” Rusty asked.

“Individually, yes,” she said. “But for the paladin to commit his government to something like this is patronizing. It says we know better than you do, regardless of how you feel.”

“Hmmm,” Rusty said, looking down at the carpet. “I see what you are saying. I need to think about that. On the other hand, much of what I have done for Dad has also benefited the palatinate. And that is a legitimate objective for espionage.”

“Will going out to Pacifica benefit the palatinate?” she asked.

“Without question, Honey. If they are weaponizing their genetic research, it becomes a clear threat to us.”

“That I can live with,” she said. “I do not want to hear anything about helping the poor, benighted Pacificans, who are probably more civilized than we.”

Rusty nodded. “Fine by me.”

He was happy to agree with her on something inconsequential if it avoided the fights that had become too common of late. And he wasn't sure what had caused them.

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Portland was a town of about twenty-five thousand people nestled in the valley at the confluence of the Columbia and Willamette rivers. The heavy forests of the Pacific Northwest crowded the edges of the city and the surrounding mountains. Except for the town itself, the area was largely virgin wilderness. The inhabitants of Pacifica preferred to huddle in their villages and leave the countryside as pristine as possible.

A combination of poor governance and environmental catastrophe resulted in the collapse of the United

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States of America early in the twenty-first century. The balkanized remains then struggled to survive the whiplash of multiple events. An enormous solar flare had wrecked the technological infrastructure of most of the planet. The climate had been cooling for thirty years and tipped over into a full-fledged ice age. The pandemics, which subsequently marched across the earth, killed two-thirds of the population over the ensuing decade.

The people who crawled out of the rubble were obviously concerned, first of all, with survival and had become very provincial in their outlook. And many of the remaining nation-states lacked the strong leadership that characterized the Palatinate. Pacifica, which covered what was once northern California, Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia, remained poor. However, the current president had been making investments in the economy, and these were starting to pay off in a better standard of living for his citizens.

There was a welcoming committee of sorts when the shuttle landed. A representative of the hotel was on hand with a groundcar. Another individual waited as they landed, this one with a more *official* demeanor. Both looked a little non-plussed when they saw the size of the entourage disembarking from the shuttle.

Rusty and Catha Baughman were accompanied by Hugh Boscawen and George Granville, providing security. Also with them was Terrance Cripplethorpe, who was an investigator with Paladin's Law Enforcement Division. His wife, Patricia, was a cyberneticist and was along to provide additional cover. As it happened, Terry and Rusty were old friends and colleagues. Their wives had a mutual love of cybernetics and were good friends. They spent the trip comparing their coding achievements and plans for new applications. Since Rusty and Terry were both pilots, they could dispense with adding two pilots to the manifest. The only other member of the team was *Billy*, who was a Woogie.

Woogies were intelligent autochthons from the planet Woogaea. The creatures had radial symmetry – each having five arms and five legs. They were about five feet tall and smelled heavily of menthol and stinkweed. But their most distinctive characteristics were their hot pink skin color and single five-inch blue eye. And that blue eye was eerily human looking. The Woogies liked humans, and the obverse was also true. Woogies had interacted with humanity for two centuries and were close trading partners.

Adding *Billy* to the team was Pei's idea, which Catha actively resisted. She did not like Woogies and could not stand to be close to them. Pei was much more plain-spoken than Rusty's parents and told Catha that this was how things would be, and she needed to shut up about it – all in her polite way, of course.

“Mr. Baughman, I am Saddam Hudson. I represent the government of Pacifica.”

“How do you do,” Rusty said politely as he shook the man's hand. “I was not expecting an official welcome.”

“Not at all,” Hudson said. “We always like to welcome visitors to our nation. And, of course, President Oliver would like to meet the son of the Paladin.”

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“Um, I see. We would be honored to meet President Oliver. May I introduce my wife, Catha. And also the Cripplethorpe's, Terrance and Patricia.”

At that moment, the Woogie bounced out of the shuttle. “Are we here? So happy to be well grounded.”

“And that is Billy,” Rusty said dryly as Catha rolled her eyes and looked disgusted.

“Yes. Well.” And Hudson cleared his throat. “Er. The President will probably want a small reception, possibly just you and Mrs. Baughman.”

“Oh, that is fine,” Catha said. “We do not want to be any trouble. We are just here on vacation, you know.”

Rusty couldn't decide whether Catha was trying to be helpful or was just glad the Woogie wouldn't accompany them to the Presidential reception. Although things went well, Rusty feared it would be a long trip.

“The president will direct an invitation to be delivered. It should arrive at your hotel today or tomorrow.”

Rusty nodded. “We do not have a particular schedule, so I think we would be delighted to meet with the president at just about any time.”

The groundcar was a large one, so it could transport the entire party to the hotel. Rusty decided it was just as well the weather was pleasant. Several passengers were pale from suffering eau de Woogie, even with the windows open. When they arrived at the hotel, the driver quickly left the car and trotted into the hotel. Someone else came out to help with the luggage a few moments later.

“What is so funny?” Catha demanded as they collected their things.

“I think our driver was overcome by the *Billy* fumes. He was in a hurry to get inside.”

“That is not funny! Your grandmother had no business sending a *Woogie* of all things on this trip.”

“Hush,” Rusty said quietly.

Catha's eyes opened slightly, and she clapped her hand over her mouth. “Oops. Sorry.”

The desk clerk welcomed them effusively. Rusty supposed there were not a lot of travelers coming through, even though this was the capital of Pacifica. Rusty had requested a block of four rooms on one floor and it seemed no one else was staying in the hotel at the moment.

When they got into the room with the luggage and shut the door, Catha spoke.

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“I am sorry, Rusty. I did not think...”

Rusty held a finger over his lips and motioned for her to follow him into the fresher. He turned on the water in the shower and sink, then turned to her.

“Be careful what you say here in the room, actually anywhere, now that I think about it.”

“You think they have listening nanites in the room?”

He shrugged. “Who knows? I would if I were them. Just act like we are on vacation.”

“We have a couple of hours to kill before lunch, do we not?” she asked.

He nodded. “It is too late in the morning to do much. We might as well relax.”

“Okay. Good,” she said. She threw her arms around him and favored him with a deep, lingering kiss. “Does that suggest anything?”

“Why, Miss Catha,” he exclaimed with a grin, “how you do go on.”

Her mood changes astonished him, but he was not disposed to complain at the moment.

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“So you are going to see the president tonight?” Terry Cripplethorpe asked. “That was quick.”

The six were gathered together in the Baughmans' room at the hotel, making plans. Outside, a gentle but cold rain had begun falling. It was late August, and the weather was already turning cooler.

“Surprised me,” Catha said. “I hope I can get ready in time.”

Rusty glanced at his wife with a scowl and turned back to Terry. “I get the impression nothing much goes on in this town. Results of boredom, maybe?”

Pat Cripplethorpe looked at the hand-engraved invitation. “They certainly did not waste any time about it. I can help you get ready, Catha.”

“Oh, thanks. We should run the men out of here first, of course.”

Terry stood up. “I can take the hint. I think I will go walk the town to get a better feel for it. Besides, I need to see where Billy has gotten to.”

“Where is he anyway?” Rusty asked.

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“Oh, I think he is off doing whatever Woogies do.”

“Most likely annoying the populace,” Catha said. “He smells like a walking industrial waste dump.”

Terry raised an eyebrow but didn't comment.

“I will just grab my comp term and spend the afternoon in the lobby,” Rusty said. That rain does not look like much fun to be out and about in.”

The two security people looked at each other.

“I will go with you, Mr. Cripplethrope,” George Granville said. “Hugh will hang around the hotel.”

“I think I will be fine by myself,” Terry said.

“When away from home, the security people call the shots,” Rusty said.

Terry looked confused. “What does that mean?”

“It means they are in charge,” Catha said. “Honestly, Russell, I wish you would speak plain Anglo for a change.”

Rusty grinned at the men. “I picked up too many of my dad's pithy phrases, I guess.”

Catha sighed. “I think your father's philosophy is to never use plain Anglo when a euphemism will do.”

“Mom told me that he has talked that way ever since they met,” Rusty said. “I don't think he knows how to talk differently.”

“If he put a little effort into it,” she said.

“As I understand it, this is pretty much how everyone talked where he came from. He has had as much trouble adjusting to the way we talk.”

They exited the room and headed for the lobby.

“Did your Dad really come from three hundred years ago?” Granville asked. “Pardon me if I am invading your privacy.”

“No problem, George. It was four hundred years ago. And yes. He and Grandpop were kidnapped aboard a sublight relativistic starship and carried about four hundred light years away. They didn't realize the time dilation had occurred until they escaped and returned to Earth.”

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“Even though I have heard the story before, I cannot even imagine the shock,” Terry said. “He seems well adjusted, despite the experience.”

Rusty shook his head. “He told me it took him years to get over it, and he still has his black moods.”

“It makes his success all the more amazing.”

“He is an amazing man.”

The Hotel Portland was an ancient concrete building, but the owners had put real effort into making it comfortable. There was a small sitting room off the lobby, and Rusty settled into one of the wingback chairs arranged on either side of the fireplace. The room was trimmed in pine stained so dark it was almost black. He could see a light rain or heavy mist drifting through the tree-lined streets through the windows. It was kind of cozy in the room.

He began working through accumulated messages, and a few minutes later, one of the hotel staff walked in with an armload of wood. He arranged it in the fireplace and got a fire started. The man was tall and gaunt looking. He stood up and brushed his hands off.

“There. I thought maybe a fire would make the afternoon a little more cheery.”

Rusty grinned at him. “You did not have to do that just for me.”

“Oh, I like having a fire when the weather gets this way. We will have snow by evening, looks like.”

“Really? The temperature did not seem that cold when we came in.”

“A Pacific front is coming through,” the man said. “A bit early for the year, but...” And he shrugged. “There is coffee and tea in the lobby, by the way.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Rusty continued working for a while, then got up to grab a cup of coffee. Hugh walked through the lobby and glanced in at him as he sipped on his mug. Rusty had finished the cup of coffee and noticed large, fat snowflakes drifting down. He set the cup aside and didn't bother to pick up the comp term again. It was peaceful just watching the snowfall. The winters were long in North America, but still, it was unusual to see snow in late August.

Ninety minutes later, Catha touched his shoulder. “Hey, sleepyhead.”

He opened his eyes to the pleasant heaviness that accompanies a deep nap. “Hi, Cath. I must have drifted off. I was watching the snow.” He nodded towards the window.

She walked over to look out the windows. “It has not accumulated on the street yet. It has been

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snowing for quite a while.”

He checked his wrist chrono and stretched. “I should be getting ready for dinner.”

He glanced at his wife. “And you look really nice.”

“Why, thank you. I thought perhaps you did not notice anymore.”

“I always notice you, Catha,” he said.

Twenty minutes later, Rusty had passed through the fresher, put on something appropriate to the reception, and walked out of the hotel with Catha. As they approached the groundcar, Hugh Boscawen walked up.

“The Woogie has gone missing,” he said without preamble.

“What do you mean?” Rusty asked.

“He left to explore and never returned to the hotel.”

“It isn’t dark yet,” Rusty said. “Did he tell you when he would be back?”

“No, he did not. I decided to comm him and see what he was doing.”

“What did he say?”

“I got an out-of-service signal on his com,” Hugh said.

“Why can that *thing* not take care of itself?” Catha spat. “I knew it was going to be trouble.”

Rusty put his hand on his wife’s arm. “We really do not know that it is Billy’s fault.”

He looked at Boscawen. “This concerns me, Hugh.”

“I have George out quartering the town. It is not that big. We should be able to find him.”

“If he is to be found,” Rusty said. “Okay, you’re accompanying us to the reception?”

Hugh nodded.

“Suddenly, I feel exposed,” Rusty commented.

“Are we in danger?” Catha asked quickly.

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Rusty shrugged. "I do not know. But this makes me nervous."

"Perhaps we should just go to the shuttleport and return to Chicago."

"And leave the Woogie?"

"Of course. He apparently got himself into something he could not handle. We should not make things worse."

Boscawen looked questioningly at Rusty. Rusty looked at the security guard and at his wife, then back at the security guard again.

"The mission," Rusty stated.

Boscawen nodded. "I read you, chief."

Rusty turned to Catha. "Shall we go?"

"To the shuttleport?"

"No. The president of Pacifica is expecting us."

"But what if we are in danger?"

"We have a job to do, Catha."

"Sometimes I just do not understand you."

"To the reception, Catha," he said.

As he watched her enter the president's groundcar, Rusty decided his wife had perfected the art of *flouncing*. It was clear she was angry at him. Again.

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Rusty had to admit President Daniel Oliver showed good taste. He did not live in a mansion like many heads of state or a two-hundred-story skyscraper like the Paladin. The driver took them up a long driveway that wove through the ever-present forest until a long curve revealed a chateau or maybe a villa. It was low-slung and seemed to be arranged carefully among the fir trees like it had grown up along with the forest.

Catha gasped. "Why, it is beautiful."

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The snow, which had accumulated through the afternoon, covered the ground and provided a white garland on the trees. Warm light flowed in the windows and provided a welcoming touch.

“Striking,” Rusty said. He leaned forward towards the driver. “Is this the presidential mansion, or does it belong to President Oliver?”

“Both,” the driver said. “We have a tradition that the President always provides his own living spaces, but those homes are always referred to as the Presidential Retreat.”

Rusty nodded. “I see. This is lovely.”

“We try to coexist with nature as much as possible,” the driver said. “We believe mankind should be the conservator of the planet. We have not done so well at that in the past.”

“Interesting. I expect it is difficult to develop your economy without impacting the surroundings.”

“Oh, very true,” the driver said, growing visibly more enthusiastic. “We Pacificans view this as our great mission. We want to teach the rest of the world how to coexist with nature in a sustainable way.”

Rusty wondered if he saw evidence of the fanatic in the driver's speech. He had to admit the city of Portland was well cared for. Chicago was, too, but differently. These people strove to weave their town in and around the surrounding forests where the second Paladin had laboriously cleaned up the radiation and toxic chemical brew that was the grave of old Chicago. He had built a modern, forward-looking city along the shores of Lake Michigan, and the town was well shielded from what nature could throw at it.

Daniel Oliver was short, with thin, graying hair and merry eyes. He seemed genuinely delighted to see his guests and trotted down the retreat's front stairs to greet them as they arrived.

“So good of you to come out tonight,” he cried. “I know the weather is unsuitable, but we have to accept that.”

Rusty inclined his head as he looked down at the little man. “Thank you for inviting us, Sir. We are honored. I am Rusty Baughman, and this is my wife, Catha.”

Oliver took his hand and shook it firmly. “Daniel Oliver at your service. And, indeed, you are here for a vacation?”

“Yes. Actually, my dad suggested it. None of the family has ever visited Portland. I was frankly curious.”

“About the people or the place?”

Rusty looked sharply at the man, wondering if a veiled innuendo existed. What he saw were twinkling

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eyes and a smile.

“Unless I need to know something about the people here, I would have to say the place. And the scenery does not disappoint.”

The president laughed. “Well said. Still, we should get in out of the damp. Catching cold here is nothing to sneeze at.”

Rusty laughed out loud. “No, I suppose not.”

Oliver swung his arm around a tiny, elfin brunette. “And this is my wife, Annette.”

Rusty shook her hand and noticed her obvious perceptiveness. Perhaps the brains of the family.

“And you are here on vacation?” Annette Oliver asked.

“Oh, yes,” Catha said. “It was kind of a spur-of-the-moment thing, but I am glad we came out here.”

“Despite the atrocious weather?”

“I think the snow falling on the trees is peaceful,” Catha said. “I suppose it could be unpleasant in January, though.”

Annette laughed. It was more of a giggle. “It is unpleasant now.”

They began following the couple into the house.

“It is supposed to melt off tomorrow,” Daniel interjected.

“We had hoped to experience some of your hiking trails,” Rusty said.

“Give it a couple of days to settle out,” a tall, gaunt man said as he walked up. “Tomorrow, you will mainly get muddy.”

“And allow me to introduce Steppan Donaldson,” the president said. “our Scientist Laureate.”

Rusty leaned forward to shake the man's hand. “Honored to meet you, Sir. And in what field do you specialize?”

“Bio-engineering. I have focused on the sustainability of macro-diversity of the Pacific-northwest. We believe the biosphere here is God's gift to us, and we work to be good stewards.”

Rusty had been prepared for a fiery-eyed zealot and could only associate Donaldson with puppy-dog eagerness. He had an infectious grin and seemed relaxed.

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“Steppan has worked here in Pacifica for thirty years,” the president said. “We consider him to be one of our treasures.”

“Oh, Daniel,” Donaldson replied, “you are exaggerating as usual. I just kind of muddle through.”

“Do you work with plants or animals?” Catha asked.

“Oh, I try for a holistic approach. For example, I have been recently working with Northern Kudzu. The plant has adapted to a much cooler climate and has become an invasive pest species. We have been searching for that min-max lever to solve the problem.”

“Min-max?” Rusty asked.

“Oh, yes,” the scientist said. “Minimal effort for maximum effect.”

“Come,” Annette giggled again. “If we allow Steppan to begin lecturing, we will be standing in the foyer all evening.”

She led the group into a large dining room. The expansive room had windows along one wall giving a view of a patio and garden and the falling snow. Candelabrum with pin-point lights graced the table and buffet. White-jacketed servers stood by, and Annette directed them to their seats.

Catha fingered the edge of the table. “Your furniture is lovely.”

“Oh, thank you,” Annette said. “This is made from salvaged timber. We harvest from trees that have fallen in the old-growth forests.”

The servers slid bowls of clam bisque in front of the diners as they conversed.

“But timbering is still a major industry, I understand,” Rusty said.

The president nodded. “Yes, timber is our major export. We regulate it carefully. The companies work with our Sustainability Council on the best ways to harvest timber without permanently damaging the natural infrastructure of the forests.”

“That sounds like a challenge,” Rusty said.

“It is, but we have had several centuries of practice. The population decline during the troubles was tragic, of course, but it ironically allowed much of our land to return to something like virgin wilderness.”

Rusty shuddered inwardly at Oliver's almost casual reference to the population decline during the troubles. These people weren't zealots as was commonly understood. But their entire worldview

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seemed to subordinate man to nature. The people of the Palatinate were careful about the environment. Indeed they had actively guarded large swaths of the country which had returned to wilderness. But there was no question in their minds who had stewardship over the Earth.

The bisque had been enjoyable, but Rusty was not a big fan of salads, and the plate slid in front of him had a lot of unidentifiable items. As the conversation continued, he stirred it around with his fork but ate little. The main course was Pacific Salmon and was very good. Daniel Oliver accompanied the main course with a lecture on how Pacifica protected the salmon and carefully harvested the fish while maintaining sustainability.

By the middle of the evening, the snow had tapered off, as had the dinner. The heavy cloud cover had contributed to an early darkening of the evening, and by 9 PM, it was completely dark. Rusty and Catha took their leave and rode across Portland back to their hotel. Few lights were shining in the dwellings, so apparently, the Pacificans retired early.

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“So where is our Woogie?” Rusty leaned over the breakfast table and whispered to George Granville.

Granville shook his head and also leaned forward to whisper. “Hugh was out most of the night looking. No sign of him.”

“I knew we should never have brought him,” Catha muttered. “Stupid Woogies are always more trouble than they are worth.”

“Question is, what do we do next?” Terry Cripplethorpe asked. “Does that blow the operation? I wonder if the president knows about Billy.”

“He said nothing about it,” Rusty replied. “But, he said nothing about you and Pat either.”

“I thought the president was a nice man,” Catha said. “His wife is precious.”

George looked at Rusty with a raised eyebrow. Rusty looked back and forth, then sighed.

“I have to go with Catha on this one. The president seems genuine, and he really is a decent human being. You've worked with me before, and you know I can usually spot problems like that.”

George nodded. “I will have to trust you on that one, Boss.”

Rusty glanced out the window at the foot traffic along the sidewalks and the snow melting in the morning sun. “I suppose we ought to take Steppan Donaldson up on his invitation. It's going to be too muddy for any serious hiking.”

“What about Donaldson?” George asked.

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“If he is malevolent, I did not detect it. I would be more apt to classify him as one of those brilliant bumblers. Last night he just managed to avoid pouring a cup of coffee into the president's wife's lap. One of the servers was there with a towel almost before the cup completely spilled.”

“Quick reactions on their part,” Terry commented.

“I cannot say, really. I somehow think this was not an uncommon occurrence from the reactions.”

“In other words, the staff was familiar with Donaldson's... proclivities?”

“That was delicately put, Terry,” Rusty said. “You are getting better at that.”

“How long do you think it will take?” Catha asked. “You know, the tour of his lab?”

“I do not know for sure,” Rusty replied. “He mentioned the morning, so I suspect we will be back by lunch.”

“Oh, good. Patricia and I have been discussing a new algorithm we want to experiment with this afternoon.”

“But this is vacation, Cath,” Rusty said. “You can work on that when we get home.”

“If we are on vacation, Mister, that means *I* can do something I find relaxing. Right, Patricia?”

Pat turned bright red. The others looked distinctly uncomfortable. Rusty looked around the table and bit his lower lip.

“Uh, okay. I will comm Steppan Donaldson and see if he intended his invitation for this morning.”

The rest of the breakfast was uncomfortably quiet. Finally, Rusty pulled out his com and arranged to visit Donaldson's laboratory. The scientist sent a groundcar for them. The Baughmans and the Cripplethorpes got into the vehicle along with George Granville. Hugh Bosacawen remained at the hotel to catch some sleep since he had been up all night.

The driver kept a running commentary as they drove through the town and then over a bridge across the Willamette River. The western shore of the river seemed to be complete wilderness. The driver explained that the city had once stretched to the base of the mountains. This was now a forest preserve under the care of the president. It was known as Pitock Park, named for an ancient landmark. Only ruins remained of the site, but it was along a hiking trail and presented a wonderful view of Portland and a snow-capped Mount Hood in the distance.

“So we could come back here to hike tomorrow?” Rusty asked.

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“I would suggest two days, Sir,” the driver said. “The trail would not be enjoyable until it dries out somewhat.”

“Are you speaking from experience?” Terry asked.

The driver chuckled. “Indeed. The wife and I decided to try the trail and turned back after an hour. I believe we were equal parts bruised, wet, and muddy.”

“Bruised?” Catha asked.

“The trail is steep in places and slippery.”

“Oh.”

Steppan Donaldson's laboratory was a long, low building nestled at the base of the Pitock ridge. It blended into the surrounding woodlands and was almost invisible amid the backdrop.

“Interesting building style,” George said. “You could walk by here and not notice it.”

“Ah, yes,” the driver said. “We try hard to harmonize with nature. Our president once commented that setting a skyscraper in downtown Portland would be like making a rude gesture at nature.”

Terry snorted. “That is certainly a colorful way to state it.”

“What?” Catha asked.

Rusty twisted in the seat, arranged his hand so that only she would see, and demonstrated the gesture.

“Oh.” She giggled nervously. “That is quite colorful.”

The driver eased the groundcar to a stop. “The entrance is over there. You can make out the outline of the doorway.”

Steppan Donaldson's laboratory was not large. The group of visitors required only an hour to see the labs, and this was with Donaldson's voluble explanations. The scientist led them into a larger room that had a group of medium-sized cages along one wall.

“It looks like you study some larger animals,” Rusty commented.

“Indeed,” Donaldson said. “Not large enough for bears or the larger cats, but we occasionally trap animals for study. Usually, they get released quickly. We want to minimize the impact we have on sustainability.”

There was a slight musky smell in the room, and Terry commented on it. “An interesting odor in here.”

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Donaldson looked nervous. “Err... yes. When we have to capture animals for study, it stresses them. We tend to experience some unique smells.”

“What is that – a menthol air freshener?” Catha asked.

“Uh... well. That's a cleaner we use after we release the animals. It's a disinfectant.”

Rusty nodded and looked thoughtful. “How many people work in the lab, Stepan?”

“We have twenty-five employees. Most work here.”

Catha looked around. “Must be a holiday or something.”

Donaldson chuckled. “Because of the snow last night, the schools were closed today. Many of our workers stayed home with their children. It throws the work behind somewhat, but what can you do?”

Terry and Rusty looked at each other but said nothing. The tour wrapped up, and the group from Chicago rode back to the hotel in the groundcar. They selected a restaurant a block from the hotel for lunch. Hugh was up again and accompanied them on their lunch along with George.

“Safe to talk?” Catha whispered as they took their meal in a private dining room.

Rusty shook his head. “This lunch looks good.”

“Indeed,” Hugh said. “Like everything else in this town, it is unique.”

Everyone nodded in agreement, though for different reasons.

“It seems we cannot speak openly *anywhere*,” Catha said later as she and Rusty strolled through one of Portland's many city parks.

“Probably true,” Rusty said. “Especially not now.”

“What do you mean?”

“Couple of things. When I looked out the window this morning, I saw children walking along the sidewalk wearing backpacks.”

“School?” she asked.

Rusty nodded. “And the menthol we smelled in the lab wasn't disinfectant.”

She hesitated for a minute, and then her eyes opened wide. “That Woogie!”

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“Right. Billy was in the lab recently. If they had caught him and he escaped, the lab employees were probably out searching for him.”

“Poor Billy.”

“I thought you didn't like Woogies.”

“I don't. But I can't imagine running through a strange forest with people chasing you.”

“I somehow think Billy can take care of himself,” Rusty said. “But the plot has definitely thickened.”

“Russell, will you stop?” she said. “Speak Anglo!”

He stared at her for a few moments, then folded his arms. “Okay, things are going on that we are not seeing.”

“It is also incongruous,” she said. “Steppan and Daniel Oliver are non-threatening.”

“There is that,” Rusty said. “I don't think they were faking it either. Which points to them not being bad, merely stupid.”

She looked into the distance at the late summer foliage and shivered suddenly. “It is still rather cool out.”

“Let's get back to the hotel, then. I think I will schedule our hike for tomorrow morning, regardless.”

“Won't they be suspicious?”

Rusty shook his head. “Based upon what we've seen so far, I think we can convince them we're a group of foolish Midwesterners.”

She started to say something, and he touched her arm. “Don't say it, Cath.”

“What makes you think I was going to say something?”

“I have gotten to know you well, Honey. You just cannot resist the straight lines.”

“And you just cannot speak plain Anglo. You are just like your father.”

He stopped and faced her. “Very well, I will speak plain Anglo. You seize every opportunity to verbally slash and hammer my family and me. It seems none of us can measure up to the standards of the Cleveland Orophants. You commented about the attitude of superiority the people of the Palatinate have towards Pacifica, and you may even be right. But that does not begin to compare with the towering

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superiority you exhibit. I strongly urge you, lady, to adjust your attitude. I am weary of it. Very weary.”

Then he spun and began moving towards the hotel, walking quickly. He left Catha standing on the sidewalk. She looked abashed.

“I am sorry, Russell,” she whispered.

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Thirty minutes into the hike, Rusty decided that Steppan Donaldson's people had reasons for them not to go into the forest. The hiking path was carefully constructed and well-drained. It was paved with stone in many places and otherwise had firm footing.

Pitock Park encompassed forty-thousand acres, according to the guide Rusty had downloaded to his porta-comp. While it was considered a *wilderness* park, the areas close to Portland were carefully tended. The undergrowth had been cut back from the paths, and the grass had been mowed in many places.

The Paladin's weather wizards were predicting a rough winter, and it seemed to be getting its teeth into Pacifica early. Most of the early snow had melted, although it was still easy to spot in the shady areas. The air was still cool, and the wind brought a knife edged breeze in from the Pacific Ocean.

The group from Chicago had bundled up for the hike and were comfortable. Catha and Pat walked together and conversed. The men spread out ahead and behind, studying the woods as they passed. The breeze filtered through the pines in soft sibilance mingled with birdsong. The progress of the weather front had cleared the normal haze, and a clear sky completed a beautiful day.

Catha caught up to Rusty as they worked their way along the path.

“Not that muddy,” she commented.

“How about that?” he replied. “The paths are well constructed, and the water drains away. I wonder if they didn't want us up here today.”

“Why would that be?”

“If they were trying to track Billy, for example.”

She was quiet for a while.

“Thanks for encouraging me to get out today,” she said. “This is really lovely country.”

“It's different from the forests of the Palatinate but perhaps more lovely,” he replied.

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“I know we have a job to do here, but this has been a nice vacation.”

“Aside from a couple of issues, I can't disagree.”

“Such as?” she asked.

“If I return without Grandma's Woogie, she would be devastated.”

“Grandma's...”

“Grandma Pei has known Billy for a long time. She really loves that Woogie.”

“I did not know that. I would hate to see your grandmother hurt.”

“What about the Woogie? Do you care about him?”

Catha was quiet for a while as they walked. Rusty's tone was not terribly friendly with his last question. She debated whether to respond with a barb or try conciliation. She eventually tried something in the center.

“What am I missing, Russell?”

“Billy is a *person*, Cath. He is not a thing. Would you be upset if something happened to Hugh or George?”

“Of course, I would be upset. I like Hugh and George.”

“Would you be upset if something happened to Daniel Oliver?”

“I do not really know him, of course,” she replied, “but it would be sad.”

“But you wouldn't be sad about Billy.”

“He is not human!” she exclaimed.

Rusty suddenly stopped and stared at his wife. After a long moment, he turned and began walking ahead, more quickly this time. She watched him for a few moments, then trotted to catch up.

“Russell, wait!”

He kept walking. She trotted again and then grabbed his arm. “Will you wait up?”

He looked at her again. “For the first time, I have realized how much you are *into* yourself.”

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“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Two different times, Dad's life was saved by the Woogies. Both times it cost them their lives. And let me tell you something else; if Billy were with us and we were in danger, he would jump into the breach at the cost of his own life, if necessary.”

“I.. I do not know what to say... will you stop?”

“Catha,” he said, “the Woogies are not human. I know that. But they *are* people. It bothers Billy that you are rude to him.”

“He has never said anything.”

“And he wouldn't. For one thing, he is just fundamentally decent. And I do not think he knows how to hold a grudge.”

“What about you?” she asked, poking him in the chest.

“Not so far,” he replied as he started walking again.

She waited until Patricia caught up and walked with her again.

“I just do not understand him,” she said.

“And men do not understand women,” Pat said. “It has always been that way. Terry and I have been married for ten years and are still trying to understand one another.”

Catha shook her head. “Maybe I should just try to enjoy the day.”

“Sometimes that is all we can do.”

The group entered a clearing where a solid-looking stone cabin had been constructed. It was placed for hikers and other visitors to the park. Instructions on using the facility and cleaning up afterward were engraved in various places.

“These people have a fetish for cleanliness,” Terry said as he dumped some firewood in front of the fireplace in the cabin.

Fifty feet from the cabin, the firewood had been cut and stacked in an open shed. In the other direction, the Pacificans had dug a well and installed a hand-powered pump.

“If you have forgotten how to start a fire, Dear,” Pat said, “here are the instructions on the wall next to the fireplace.”

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Terry rolled his eyes. “Live close to nature, and here is how to do it. I really do not understand these people.”

Rusty leaned against the wall and folded his arms. “They put together a nice park, though.”

“True,” Terry said, “but if I hear the word *sustainable* again, I think I will hurl. They think they are the only ones who truly practice it. Kind of holier than thou.”

“We would feel bad, though, if we let our cooking fire get away from us and we burned down their park,” Pat said.

“If we lived through it,” Rusty said. “Have you ever seen a pine tree burn?”

Catha looked up from where she was pulling foodstuffs from a backpack and setting them on the table.

“What do you mean?”

“Poof,” Rusty said, throwing his arms up. “I think the word is energetic. If a fire got started in this wind, it would probably burn Portland down.”

“Surely not.”

“Surely, yes. These people are terrified of fire.”

“We must be careful, then,” Catha said.

“No argument, Cath.”

The team had made an early start on the hike, and this midmorning break was a good time for a late breakfast. A cast iron skillet hung on the wall next to the fireplace, and George Granville opened a package of bacon and laid strips in the pan. He set out a bottle of prepared scrambled eggs for use after the bacon was done. Because everyone carried a modest backpack, there was plenty of food for breakfast, and George was obviously the master of his craft.

Rusty and Terry stepped back outside as the food was cooking. They gazed around the clearing as the tops of the pines raked the sky in the breeze.

“Really is a pretty place,” Terry said.

“Sure is. I prefer the Central Plains, but this is nice.”

“I guess it depends on where you grew up,” Terry said. “The Willamette is kind of pathetic after seeing the Mississippi.”

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“The Columbia River is impressive, though.”

“True. I think the Mississippi just does not care whether we are there or not. It will move on its way to the Gulf regardless.”

“An interesting perspective,” Rusty said. “I have not spent that much time along the river. On the other hand, watching Lake Michigan freeze over each winter is also interesting.”

Terry shivered. “Please do not remind me. I somehow do not think it gets quite that cold here.”

“It is milder,” Rusty said. “I read about it.”

Hugh stepped outside. “George said another five minutes, and we can eat.”

“I hope I can last that long,” Terry said with a laugh. “There is a reason why one should not start a hike on an empty stomach.”

Hugh held up a hand. “Quiet.”

The other two men stopped talking and looked around.

“What?” Rusty said.

“Listen.”

After a few moments, Terry spoke. “Okay, you have me spooked. What am I supposed to be listening for?”

“The birds stopped,” Hugh said.

Again the three looked around at a clearing that had gone silent.

“What do you suggest...” Rusty started to say.

At that moment, it was too late.

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A tawny creature burst from the undergrowth and ambled toward them.

“What is that thing?” Terry yelled.

“Maybe we should get back into the cabin,” Hugh said.

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As it got closer, its details were more apparent. At first, Rusty thought it was some kind of an ape, but then he decided it looked more like a dog. The head was canine, but it had a massive lower jaw. While it moved on all fours, the front paws had articulated fingers. And the sound it made was eerie. It snuffled and then made what sounded like a grotesque chuckle. Kind of a *huh-huh-huh-huh-huh*.

Terry ducked behind Rusty and stumbled into the cabin. Rusty took two steps back but was also fascinated by what he saw.

“Get into the cabin, Rusty,” Hugh said.

“Wait a minute,” Rusty said.

George stepped outside of the cabin carrying a pistol. The animal saw him and skidded to a stop.

“Oh, no, no, no.” The incredible voice came from the creature--a strange, clearly articulated voice, but sounding almost consistent with its ambling pace.

“No, no. Do not shoot the dog,” it said. “No slugs for the dog. The dog wants breakfast, pleasee.”

The beast flopped over on its side and wagged its tail.

“I think it is trying to be ingratiating,” Rusty said.

“I wouldn't call those teeth ingratiating,” George said.

Another creature erupted from the undergrowth. It was an explosion of pink tentacles and a single bright blue eye.

“Rex, where did you go?”

“My friend Billy,” the creature said in his loping voice as the Woogie thrummed across the clearing.

“Rex is hungry,” Billy said. “The Woogie is chilled.”

Terry stepped back outside, followed by the two girls.

“If you wore some clothes, you would not get cold, you crazy Woogie,” Terry said.

Billy turned to Terry and looked him up and down. He then emitted a loud raspberry sound and filled the air with the noxious odor of something long dead.

“Oh, ho, ho, ho, ho,” the other creature said. “Whooo-eeeeee.” The last was more like a dog howl. “Billy made a stink.”

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“Gosh, Billy!” Rusty said.

Hugh coughed a couple of times. “Billy, what is going on?”

“Steppan the wolf made a dog. Rex is a Hedge Dog. Friend Rex.”

The Woogie moved over to the creature in his floating gait and patted it with a tentacle. “Good friend.”

“Not have many friends,” Rex said.

“What the devil is a Hedge Dog?” George asked.

“I think we are looking at the results of Steppan Donaldson's work,” Rusty said.

Rex had rolled upright and was sitting in a very dog-like position, holding out a very human-appearing hand.

“We are Rex, Jax, Max, Trix, Carlix. We are...,” and the beast hesitated, “many.”

“Five, Rex,” Billy said.

“Could I have a dog's breakfast, pleeease?” Rex said in his lumpy cadence. “Hungry Hedge Dog.”

Whatever else the creature was, Rusty thought, it knew how to beg like a dog.

“Oooooohhhh, you poor thing,” Catha said as she trotted over to Rex.

“Catha, wait,” Hugh said. “We are not sure if it is safe.”

She reached over and scratched it under a long floppy ear. Rex groaned and leaned against her.

“You are just a big old lug, are you not?” she said. “We have some food we can share.”

The Hedge Dog stood up on all fours, wagging its tail frantically. “Yes, yes, yes, yes.Fooooood.” The sentence ended in another howl.

“George,” Catha commanded, “fix a plate for Rex.”

George looked back and forth between the strange beast and the people. “Well, I suppose I can fix something up. You need anything, Billy?”

“The Woogie can survive. Rex needs the Dog's Breakfast.”

Catha followed George inside. “I will give you a hand, George. Rex needs a good breakfast.”

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Pat studied the creature briefly and then retreated to the cabin. Rusty looked at the two creatures, both alien in their own unique way. He scratched his head and walked over to a pair of stone benches near the cabin. He sat down.

“Come over here, you two. We need to talk. George is fixing breakfast for Rex.”

Billy glided over near the bench, and Rex lumbered after him. Billy gazed at him with his single, five-inch, blue eye while Rex managed an expectant expression.

“Where did you come from, Rex?”

“Rex came from the forest.”

Rusty shook his head. “No, Rex. I mean, who made you?”

“God made Rex.”

“And who is God?” Rusty asked.

“Steppan is God.”

“Do not confuse the Woogie,” Billy interjected. “Be not deceived. Steppan is not God.”

“But Steppan made me. He must be God.”

Rusty scratched his head and looked where Hugh and Terry were obviously amused. He glared at them before returning his attention to the Hedge Dog.

“Where did Steppan make you, Rex?”

“Rex made in the lab.”

“When did Steppan make you?”

Rex swung his head around. “Not know. Does Billy know?”

Billy spun back and forth, looking at the members of the conversation. “The Woogie guesses five years.”

“And why did you leave the lab?” Rusty asked.

“Heard Steppan say he was going to kill the Hedge Dogs. Billy helped the escape.”

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George stepped out of the cabin holding a plate.

“Is that the Dog's Breakfast?” Rusty called.

“It is,” George said.

Rex whirled around and galloped over to the cabin, again making the *huh, huh, huh, huh* sounds. George hurriedly set the plate on the ground and stepped back. Rex skidded to a stop and picked up the plate with both hands. Using his fingers, he carefully scooped up the eggs, then ate each piece of bacon, one at a time.

Rusty looked over at Billy. “Your friend has some seriously messed up theology.”

“The Woogie not inclined to argue. Perhaps understandable, though.”

“Do you need to get into the cabin to warm up, Billy?”

“The Woogie about ready to turn blue. Cathadatha not like the Woogie, though.”

“Go ahead, Billy. If she doesn't like it, she can come back outside.”

As they watched, Catha returned outside and began petting the Hedge Dog.

Terry shook his head. “I do not think I would like him mad at me, Boss. Pat is frightened of him.”

“I guess that is why she hasn't come out of the cabin,” Rusty said. “We will need to head back down the mountain after we eat.”

“And away we go,” Billy replied.

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Rusty felt like the insane Grand Marshall leading a parade out of the woods. Patricia and Catha followed immediately behind him – Patricia because she was terrified of the Hedge Dog, and Catha because she couldn't stand Billy. Terry came next, followed by George. Hugh was behind the Woogie and Hedge Dog at the tail of the line.

Billy and Rex were in high spirits. Rusty occasionally had a smirk crawl unbidden across his face at the antics of the two creatures. But he wondered how he would deal with Steppan Donaldson's creation. And when the walking path widened, Catha moved up beside him.

“I liked Steppan Donaldson,” she said.

“I did too.”

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“Was he really going to kill Rex?”

“I think so,” Rusty said. “I still have not figured out how Billy got involved and even got into the lab. But that may have kicked Steppan into gear.”

“Did he really know what he was doing?” she asked.

Rusty shook his head. “I don't think so. I think he was trying to breed a more intelligent dog, and the results were... let us say, *serendipitous*. Rex is clearly self-aware. As to how smart he actually is will have to wait until we can test him. You noticed his *dogginess*, I guess we could call it. That kind of gets in the way.”

“That is what makes him so lovable,” she said. “But I think he is very intelligent.”

“And we will have to confront Professor Donaldson and Daniel Oliver. I mean, this kind of genetics engineering goes way beyond the pale. And then trying to cover it up by murdering sentient creatures makes it worse.”

“What will we do with the Hedge Dogs?” she asked. “If we believe Rex, several more are around.”

“I don't know, Cath. For better or worse, we have introduced a new species into the world. And we do not know if the gene sequence is dominant or whether it will fade back into the background again over several generations.”

“That would be sad.”

“Yes, but it might be the best for everyone.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it, Cath. The scientists and the theologians will argue whether Rex has a soul.”

“Of course he does,” she said. There was an edge of indignation in her voice.

“Does he? How did he get a soul?”

She was silent as she walked along with him. Finally, she spoke.

“I think I see what you mean. Are human beings even supposed to be able to do something like this?”

He snorted softly. “The answer is self-evident.”

“I guess that is so. And poor Rex thinks Steppan is his god.”

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“I remember Dad telling me about a couple of scientists back in his time debating about whether science could create life,” Rusty said. “One of them was a strict creationist – that was back when evolution was the predominant view. He stated that it would prove what he had said all along – that it took intelligence to create life.”

She didn't laugh but continued to watch him as they walked along the path.

“Okay,” he said, “I guess you had to be there. But I suppose the question has been hovering out there since the time mankind began playing around with recombinant genetics. What if we managed to... *build* a self-aware sentience? Would it have a soul?”

“I have read about the Class A cyberints,” Catha said. Before they self-destructed, they emphatically stated they did not have souls.”

“I know that. I wish some were still around so we could ask them about Rex.”

“I think we are going to have to make this call,” she said.

“I think you are right.”

The group walked out of the park into the area where the vehicles sat, and another ground car pulled in. Stepan Donaldson stepped out, carrying a rifle.

“You need to get away from the creature. It is dangerous,” he shouted.

“Who, the Woogie?” Rusty said.

“No, the Hedge Dog. Really, you need to step away.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” Rex muttered. “No, no, no.”

And the hedge dog loped back into the woods. Billy thrummed over to stand in front of the scientist.

“Not to kill the hedge dog. Not hurt, friend Rex.”

“Get out of my way, you stinky pink lump,” Donaldson shouted. “I have got to kill that monster.”

George slipped around behind Donaldson, walked quietly up next to him, and eased the rifle out of his hands.

“Let me take care of that, Mr. Donaldson. Someone might get hurt.”

“But you do not understand,” Donaldson said. “We cannot allow the hedge dogs to get loose. They will

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negatively impact the sustainability of our land.”

“What about the sustainability of the hedge dogs?” Catha asked.

“You do not understand. The hedge dog is an accident of genetics. We cannot allow its type to spread.”

“I think you are too late, there,” Rusty said. “You had, what, five or six of them in the lab, and they are all on the loose?”

“But we can track them down. We need to destroy them.”

“I think we need to talk to your president.”

Donaldson now looked even more frightened. “No, we cannot do that. Please, let me take care of this.”

Rusty nodded toward George. “Put him in our ground car. It is time we were going to see Daniel Oliver.”

Donaldson turned pale. “Oh, there is no need to bring the president into this. I think we can get things settled here. It is really not that urgent, after all.”

Catha looked at him with her eyebrows raised. “It seemed urgent a few moments ago when you were waving that slug-thrower around.”

“I am really quite sure we can reach some kind of accommodation. And then you can be on your way.”

“And then what? You go back to killing innocent creatures?” Patricia said.

“We should go,” Rusty said. “I think we can fit everybody if we use Steppan's groundcar, too.”

“The Woogie will go find Rex,” Billy said. “To visit the president. All will be well.”

Billy and Rex climbed into Steppan's groundcar. George slid behind the controls, and Rusty joined the group. The girls, along with Hugh and Terry, took the other one. Rusty made a quick com call to verify that Daniel Oliver was at home, and that is where they traveled. Oliver was waiting on the front steps when they arrived.

“This is quite mysterious,” Oliver said as Rusty stepped out of the ground car.

“And what is that?” he asked, pointing to Rex.

“That, Mr. President, is a Hedge Dog.”

“That cannot be native to Earth,” he said. “Is it intelligent?”

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“It is a sapient,” Rusty said. “It escaped from Steppan's lab.”

Donaldson walked quickly over to Oliver. “I can explain everything, Daniel.”

Oliver studied the Hedge Dog as he rubbed his chin. He then looked at Donaldson.

“Yes, I suppose we should go inside where it is more comfortable. It appears we have much to discuss.”

“I should hope to think so,” Catha muttered under her breath.

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“I agree with Steppan,” Oliver said hours later as they occupied his living room. “Keeping the Hedge Dogs in this area will destabilize the ecology of the region. It will add a new predator into the food chain, and it is still too fragile for that.”

“That sounds very heartless concerning a being you people created,” Catha said.

“No, listen to me,” Oliver said. “I am not suggesting we exterminate the Hedge Dogs. They are something unique and valuable. What I am saying, I suppose, is that we are asking for help in finding a place where the Hedge Dogs can survive and thrive.”

Rex sat on his haunches in the corner and watched the conversation carefully, turning his head to watch each speaker. Catha studied him and admired the noble creature. Rex raised one of his hind legs and furiously scratched behind his head. He then snorted and then shook his head.

“We can take them,” Rusty said. “They would be welcome in the Palatinate.” Catha nodded in agreement.

“Are you sure about that?” Oliver asked. “We have not been in an environment where humans have had a direct competitor. How will the citizens of your nation react when the population of Hedge Dogs begins to be significant?”

“A point,” Terry said. “Have you talked to your father about this?”

Rusty grimaced. “I have not had a chance.”

“To be honest, that is one of my concerns,” the president said.

“I will support your decision, Daniel,” Donaldson said.

Oliver gazed at the scientist. “Yes, I suppose you will. You really have no choice, you know.”

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“What does that mean?”

“I am going to insist, Steppan, on some strict controls over your work in the lab. In spite of the surprises of today, I consider this to be a happy result. But it could have easily been very bad. What if Rex had decided humans were a danger.”

“Humans are friends,” Rex interjected. “Humans made the Hedge Dogs.”

“Just so,” Oliver murmured. He looked back over at Donaldson. “Steppan, is there any work that will be destroyed if you are absent from your lab for a while?”

“No. I suppose not.”

“Good. Then that is settled. Consider yourself on indefinite leave from your laboratory. We must consider how to proceed in the future.”

Donaldson looked as though he had been slugged. “If you insist, Daniel.”

“Steppan, I am not insisting. I am *ordering* you. I want you to stay home until I can sort things out.”

“Now?”

The president looked around the room slowly. “Yes, I suppose now would be good. Your groundcar is outside. I will provide transportation to my other guests.”

Steppan Donaldson rose to his feet and looked around the room. He then turned and walked out.

The president shook his head. “Unfortunately, Steppan has left a considerable mess for me to clean up.”

“The Hedge Dogs clean their messes,” Rex said.

Daniel Oliver smiled sadly at the Hedge Dog. He stood, walked over to where Rex sat in the corner and crouched down. He placed his hands on both sides of the creature's head.

“I believe God has placed a wondrous and marvelous new creature in the Universe. You are amazing, Rex. But, Steppan showed some incredibly poor judgment.”

“How can God have poor judgment?” the Hedge Dog whined.

Oliver breathed heavily. “Listen to me carefully, Rex. God created the heavens and Earth. He has perfect judgment. I do not know quite how it happened, but an imperfect man fashioned you. Steppan is not God but is an imperfect man who mixed the chemicals. And God gave you life.”

The Hedge Dog whined again. “Not understand.”

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“None of us understand,” Oliver said as he stood up again.

Billy chose that moment to thrum into the living room where the group had gathered.

“Never fear, the Woogie is here. Bringer of solutions.”

“What are you talking about, you crazy Woogie?” Catha said.

“Talked to other Woogies. We have home for the Hedge Dogs.”

“Billy, what are you talking about?” Rusty said.

“To give a world to the Hedge Dogs,” Billy said.

“Not understand,” Rex said.

Billy rotated so his single blue eye focused on the Hedge Dog. “Woogies have found a safe home for the Hedge Dogs.”

“Where?” Terry asked.

“Star the humans call Cardiff,” Billy said. “Planet Clay.”

“Cardiff... Cardiff,” George muttered. Then he snapped his fingers. “Caledon.”

“Give the human a cigar,” Billy said. “Planet Caledon, planet Clay. Orbits Cardiff.”

“And that is where Woogea is, right?” Patricia said. Everyone looked at her since she had been silent throughout the entire meeting.

“Planet Clay orbits Cardiff-A. Woogea orbits Cardiff-C.”

“How are you going to get them there, Billy?” Rusty asked.

“The Rusty One will take Hedge Dogs to Chicagalago. Woogies charter starship.”

“Can he do that?” Oliver asked.

Rusty nodded. “If a Woogie says he can do something, you can take it to the bank.”

“Take it to...” Oliver looked puzzled.

“He means they can certainly do it,” Catha said. “My husband loves these obscure sayings that no one

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understands.”

“Billy will take the Hedge Dogs to the Bank,” Rex said. “Hedge Dogs will be happy.”

“I think I need to talk to Dad,” Rusty said.

The president of Pacifica laughed softly. “May I suggest, young man, that you not take too long.”