



LIGHTSPEED

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

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EDITED BY JOHN JOSEPH WANTS



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Editorial, September 2012

John Joseph Adams | 783 words

Welcome to issue twenty-eight of *Lightspeed* !

Sad tidings this month: Just as we were about to go to press with this issue, we lost two legend science fiction author Harry Harrison and moonwalker Neil Armstrong.

Coincidentally, we had one of Harrison's most famous stories slated for reprint in this issue: "The Streets of Ashkelon." I consider it quite an honor to be able to publish the story in *Lightspeed*, as, in addition to being a bona fide classic, it is a story that was also very important to me personally. It is the story of a missionary who goes to spread his religion to an alien culture, and the irreparable harm that results. I first read the story when I was in college, and, though at that point in my life I was pretty much done with religion, reading it really helped cement in my mind the idea that being an atheist was not only morally acceptable but morally preferable. (Your mileage may vary, of course.) But what has made it stand the test of time, I think, is that it is no mere anti-religious tract; it is high concept pure science fiction in the most classic sense. But what pleases me more than being able to publish the story is the fact that I was able to express my gratitude to Harry Harrison for writing it, and to let him know how important and influential the story was to me.

Ad Astra, gentlemen.

On a happier note, this issue is scheduled to be published on September 1, and according to the Worldcon website, this year's Hugo Awards will be presented on September 2. So while we have no news to report right now, we're hoping that some good news will be coming our way shortly after this issue drops. I've said this before, but when you're up for an award and the voting closes, at that point they're kind of like Schrödinger's Awards—until the results are announced, the nominee is in a superposition: you've both won and lost the award until someone observes the results, thereby forcing the quantum waveform to collapse . . . and your cat to huff some poisonous gas. Or something like that.

In any case, here's what we've got on tap this month:

We have original science fiction by Adam-Troy Castro ("My Wife Hates Time Travel") and Brooke Bolander ("Sun Dogs"), along with SF reprints by Elizabeth Bear & Sarah Monette ("Boojum") and Harry Harrison ("The Streets of Ashkelon").

Plus, we have original fantasy by Nina Kiriki Hoffman ("Monsters, Finders, Shifters") and Peter Sursi ("The Seven Samovars"), and fantasy reprints by Scott Edelman ("The Last Supper") and Holly Black ("Heartless").

On the nonfiction side of things this month, we've got something a little bit different for you. As usual, we've got an artist showcase on our cover artist (Frank Hong), along with a feature interview with bestselling author John Scalzi, and our usual assortment of author spotlights.

The difference this month is instead of a second feature interview, we've got a second artist showcase for you, to, well, *showcase* the talents of our house illustrator, Galen Dara. Over the last few months, Galen has been illustrating one or two stories for us every month (all of which you can find via the Illustrated by Galen Dara tag: lightspeedmagazine.com/tag/illustrated-by-galen-dara), and we just wanted to change things up a bit so we could shine the spotlight on her because we think she's been doing amazing work.

For our ebook readers, our ebook-exclusive novella is "The Green Leopard Plague" by Walter Jon Williams. And our excerpt this month is from *The Eternal Flame* by acclaimed author Greg Egan.

Our issue this month is again sponsored by our friends at Orbit Books. This month, look for *See* ~~*of Earth*, the first in an exciting new space opera series by Michael Cobley. You can find more from Orbit—including digital short fiction and monthly ebook deals—at www.orbitbooks.net.~~

It's another great issue, so be sure to check it out. And remember, there are several ways you can sign up to be notified of new *Lightspeed* content:

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Well, that's all there is to report this month. Thanks for reading!

About the Author

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor of *Lightspeed*, is the bestselling editor of many anthologies, such as *Other Worlds Than These*, *Armored*, *Under the Moons of Mars*, *New Adventures on Barsoom*, *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, *The Living Dead*, *The Living Dead 2*, *Blood We Live*, *Federations*, *The Improbable Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and *The Way of the Wizard*. He is a four-time finalist for the Hugo Award and a three-time finalist for the World Fantasy Award. Forthcoming anthologies include: *Epic* (November, Tachyon), *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination* (2013, Tor), and *Robot Uprisings* (2013, Doubleday). He is also the co-host of Wired.com's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.

The Green Leopard Plague

Walter Jon Williams | 24518 words

Kicking her legs out over the ocean, the lonely mermaid gazed out at the horizon from her perch in the overhanging banyan tree.

The air was absolutely still and filled with the scent of night flowers. Large fruit bats flew purposefully over the sea, heading for their daytime rest. Somewhere a white cockatoo gave a penetrating squawk. A starling made a brief flutter out to sea, then came back again. The rising sun threw up red-gold sparkles from the wavetops and brought a brilliance to the tropical growth that crowned the many islands spread out on the horizon.

The mermaid decided it was time for breakfast. She slipped from her hanging canvas chair and walked out along one of the banyan's great limbs. The branch swayed lightly under her weight, and her bare feet found sure traction on the rough bark. She looked down to see the deep blue of the channel, distinct from the turquoise of the shallows atop the reefs.

She raised her arms, poised briefly on the limb, the ruddy light of the sun glowing bronze on her bare skin, and then she pushed off and dove head-first into the Philippine Sea. She landed with a soft impact and a rush of bubbles.

Her wings unfolded, and she flew away.

After her hunt, the mermaid—her name was Michelle—cached her fishing gear in a pile of dead coral above the reef, and then ghosted easily over the sea grass with the rippled sunlight casting patterns on her wings. When she could look up to see the colossal, twisted tangle that were the roots of her banyan tree, she lifted her head from the water and gulped her first breath of air.

The Rock Islands were made of soft limestone coral, and tide and chemical action had eaten away at the limestone at sea level, undercutting the stone above. Some of the smaller islands looked like mushrooms, pointed green pinnacles balanced atop thin stems. Michelle's island was larger and irregularly shaped, but it still had steep limestone walls undercut six meters by the tide, with no obvious way for a person to clamber from the sea to the land. Her banyan perched on the saucer-edge of the island, itself undercut by the sea.

Michelle had arranged a rope elevator from her nest in the tree, just a loop on the end of a long nylon line. She tucked her wings away—they were harder to retract than to deploy, and the gills on their undersides were delicate—and then Michelle slipped her feet through the loop. At her verbal command, a hoist mechanism lifted her in silence from the sea to her resting place in the bright green dappled forest canopy.

She had been an ape once, a siamang, and she felt perfectly at home in the treetops.

During her excursion she had speared a yellowlip emperor, and this she carried with her in a mesh bag. She filleted the emperor with a blade she kept in her nest, and tossed the rest into the sea, where it became a subject of interest to a school of bait fish. She ate a slice of one fillet raw, enjoying the brilliant flavor, sea and trembling pale flesh together, then cooked the fillets on her small stove, eating one with some rice she'd cooked the previous evening and saving the other for later.

By the time Michelle finished breakfast the island was alive. Geckoes scurried over the banyan bark, and coconut crabs sidled beneath the leaves like touts offering illicit downloads to tourists. On the deep water, a flock of circling, diving black noddies marked where a school of skipjack tuna was feeding on swarms of bait fish.

It was time for Michelle to begin her day as well. With sure, steady feet she moved along a rope

walkway to the ironwood tree that held her satellite uplink in its crown, and then straddled a limb that took her deck from the mesh bag she'd roped to the tree, and downloaded her messages.

There were several journalists requesting interviews—the legend of the lonely mermaid was spreading. This pleased her more often than not, but she didn't answer any of the queries. There was a message from Darton, which she decided to savor for a while before opening. And then she saw a note from Dr. Davout, and opened it at once.

Davout was, roughly, twelve times her age. He'd actually been carried for nine months in his mother's womb, not created from scratch in a nanobed like almost everyone else she knew. He had a sibling who was a famous astronaut, and a McEldowney Prize for his *Lavoisier and His Age*, and a red-haired wife who was nearly as well-known as he was. Michelle, a couple years ago, had attended a series of his lectures at the College of Mystery, and been interested despite her specialty being, strictly speaking, biology.

He had shaved off the little goatee he'd worn when she'd last seen him, which Michelle considered a good thing. "I have a research project for you, if you're free," the recording said. "It shouldn't take too much effort."

Michelle contacted him at once. He was a rich old bastard with a thousand years of tenure and no notion of what it was to be young in these times, and he'd pay her whatever outrageous fee she asked.

Her material needs at the moment were few, but she wouldn't stay on this island forever.

Davout answered right away. Behind him, working at her own console, Michelle could see his red-haired wife, Katrin.

"Michelle!" Davout said, loudly enough for Katrin to know who called without turning around. "Good!" He hesitated, and then his fingers formed the mudra for . "I understand you've suffered a loss," he said.

"Yes," she said, her answer delayed by a second's satellite lag.

"And the young man—?"

"Doesn't remember."

Which was not exactly a lie, the point being what was remembered.

Davout's fingers were still fixed in . "Are you all right?" he asked.

Her own fingers formed an equivocal answer. "I'm getting better." Which was probably true.

"I see you're not an ape anymore."

"I decided to go the mermaid route. New perspectives, all that." And welcome isolation .

"Is there any way we can make things easier for you?"

She put on a hopeful expression. "You said something about a job?"

"Yes." He seemed relieved not to have to probe further—he'd had a realdeath in his own family. Michelle remembered, a chance-in-a-billion thing, and perhaps he didn't want to relive any part of that.

"I'm working on a biography of Terzian," Davout said.

". . . and his Age?" Michelle finished.

"And his *Legacy*." Davout smiled. "There's a three-week period in his life where he—well, he drops right off the map. I'd like to find out where he went—and who he was with, if anyone."

Michelle was impressed. Even in comparatively unsophisticated times such as that inhabited by Jonathan Terzian, it was difficult for people to disappear.

"It's a critical time for him," Davout went on. "He'd lost his job at Tulane, his wife had just died—realdeath, remember—and if he decided he simply wanted to get lost, he would have all my sympathies." He raised a hand as if to tug at the chin-whiskers that were no longer there, made a vague pawing gesture, then dropped the hand. "But my problem is that when he resurfaces, everything has changed for him. In June he delivered an undistinguished paper at the Athenai conference in Paris."

then vanishes. When he surfaced in Venice in mid-July, he didn't deliver the paper he was scheduled to read, instead he delivered the first version of his Cornucopia Theory."

Michelle's fingers formed the mudra. "How have you tried to locate him?"

"Credit card records—they end on June 17, when he buys a lot of euros at American Express in Paris. After that he must have paid for everything with cash."

"He really *did* try to get lost, didn't he?" Michelle pulled up one bare leg and rested her chin on it. "Did you try passport records?"

"But if he stayed in the European Community he wouldn't have had to present a passport when crossing a border."

"Cash machines?"

"Not till after he arrived in Venice, just a couple days prior to the conference."

The mermaid thought about it for a moment, then smiled. "I guess you need me, all right."

Davout flashed solemnly. "How much would it cost me?"

Michelle pretended to consider the question for a moment, then named an outrageous sum.

Davout frowned. "Sounds all right," he said.

Inwardly Michelle rejoiced. Outwardly, she leaned toward the camera lens and looked businesslike. "I'll get busy, then."

Davout looked grateful. "You'll be able to get on it right away?"

"Certainly. What I need you to do is send me pictures of Terzian, from as many different angles as possible, especially from around that period of time."

"I have them ready."

"Send away."

An eyeblink later, the pictures were in Michelle's deck. she flashed. "I'll let you know as soon as I find anything."

At university Michelle had discovered that she was very good at research, and it had become a profitable sideline for her. People—usually people connected with academe in one way or another—hired her to do the duller bits of their own jobs, finding documents or references, or, in this case, tracking missing weeks out of a person's life. It was almost always work they could do themselves, but Michelle was simply better at research than most people, and she was considered worth the extra expense. Michelle herself usually enjoyed the work—it provided interesting sidelights on fields about which she knew little, and provided a welcome break from routine.

Plus, this particular job required not so much a researcher as an artist, and Michelle was very good at this particular art.

Michelle looked through the pictures, most scanned from old photographs. Davout had selected well: Terzian's face or profile was clear in every picture. Most of the pictures showed him young, in his twenties, and the ones that showed him older were of high quality, or showed parts of the body that would be crucial to the biometric scan, like his hands or his ears.

The mermaid paused for a moment to look at one of the old photos: Terzian smiling with his arm around a tall, long-legged woman with a wide mouth and dark, bobbed hair, presumably the wife who had died. Behind them was a Louis Quinze table with a blaze of gladiolas in a cloisonné vase, and above the table a large portrait of a stately looking horse in a heavy gilded frame. Beneath the table were stowed—temporarily, Michelle assumed—a dozen or so trophies, which to judge from the little golden figures balanced atop them were awarded either for gymnastics or martial arts. The opulent setting seemed a little at odds with the young, informally dressed couple: she wore a flowery tropical shirt tucked into khakis, and Terzian dressed in a tank top and shorts. There was a sense that the photographer had caught them almost in motion, as if they'd paused for the picture en route from one place to another.

Nice shoulders, Michelle thought. Big hands, well-shaped muscular legs. She hadn't ever thought of Terzian as young, or large, or strong, but he had a genuine, powerful physical presence that came across even in the old, casual photographs. He looked more like a football player than a famous thinker.

Michelle called up her character-recognition software and fed in all the pictures, then checked the software's work, something she was reasonably certain her employer would never have done if he had been doing this job himself. Most people using this kind of canned software didn't realize how the program could be fooled, particularly when used with old media, scanned film prints heavy with grain and primitive digital images scanned by machines that simply weren't very bright. In the end, Michelle and software between them managed an excellent job of mapping Terzian's body and calibrating its precise ratios: the distance between the eyes, the length of nose and curve of lip, the distinct shape of the ears, the length of limb and trunk. Other men might share some of the biometric ratios, but none would share them all.

The mermaid downloaded the data into her specialized research spiders, and sent them forth into the electronic world.

A staggering amount of the trivial past existed there, and nowhere else. People had uploaded pictures, diaries, commentary, and video; they'd digitized old home movies, complete with the garish, deteriorating colors of the old film stock; they'd scanned in family trees, post cards, wedding lists, drawings, political screeds, and images of handwritten letters. Long, dull hours of security video. Whatever had meant something to someone, at some time, had been turned into electrons and made available to the universe at large.

A surprising amount of this stuff had survived the Lightspeed War—none of it had seemed worth targeting, or, if trashed, had been reloaded from backups.

What all this meant was that Terzian was somewhere in there. Wherever Terzian had gone in his weeks of absence—Paris, Dalmatia, or Thule—there would have been someone with a camera. In stills of children eating ice cream in front of Notre Dame, or moving through the video of buskers playing saxophone on the Pont des Artistes, there would be a figure in the background, and that figure would be Terzian. Terzian might be found lying on a beach in Corfu, reflected in a bar mirror in Gdynia, or negotiating with a prostitute in Hamburg's St. Pauli district—Michelle had found targets in exactly those places during the course of her other searches.

Michelle sent her software forth to find Terzian, then lifted her arms above her head and stretched—stretched fiercely, thrusting out her bare feet and curling the toes, the muscles trembling with tension, her mouth yawning in a silent shriek.

Then she leaned over her deck, again, and called up the message from Darton, the message she had saved till last.

"I don't understand," he said. "Why won't you talk to me? I love you!"

His brown eyes were a little wild.

"Don't you understand?" he cried. "I'm not dead! *I'm not really dead!* "

Michelle hovered three or four meters below the surface of Zigzag Lake, gazing upward at the inverted bowl of the heavens, the brilliant blue of the Pacific sky surrounded by the dark, shadowed towers of mangrove. Something caught her eye, something black and falling, like a bullet, and then there was a splash and a boil of bubbles, and the daggerlike bill of a collared kingfisher speared a blue-eyed apogonid that had been hovering over a bright red coral head. The kingfisher flashed its pale underside as it stroked to the surface, its wings doing efficient double duty as fins, and then there was a flurry of wings and feet and bubbles and the kingfisher was airborne again.

Michelle floated up and over the barrel-shaped coral head, then over a pair of giant clams, each

over a meter long. The clams drew shut as Michelle slid over them, withdrawing the huge siphons thick as her wrist. The fleshy lips that overhung the scalloped edges of the shells were a riot of color—purples, blues, greens, and reds interwoven in an eye-boggling pattern.

Carefully drawing in her gills so their surfaces wouldn't be inflamed by coral stings, she kicked with her feet and dove beneath the mangrove roots into the narrow tunnel that connected Zigzag Lake with the sea.

Of the three hundred or so Rock Islands, seventy or thereabouts had marine lakes. The islands were made of coral limestone and porous to one degree or another: some lakes were connected to the ocean through tunnels and caves, and others through seepage. Many of the lakes contained forms of life unique in all the world, evolved distinctly from their remote ancestors; even now, after all this time, new species were being described.

During the months Michelle had spent in the islands she thought she'd discovered two undescribed species: a variation on the *Entacmaea medusivora* white anemone that was patterned strangely with scarlet and a cobalt-blue; and a nudibranch, deep violet with yellow polka-dots, that had undulated past her one night on the reef, flapping like a tea towel in a strong wind as a seven-knot tidal current tore it along. The nudibranch and samples of the anemone had been sent to the appropriate authorities, and perhaps in time Michelle would be immortalized by having a Latinate version of her name appended to the scientific description of the two marine animals.

The tunnel was about fifteen meters long, and had a few narrow twists where Michelle had to push her wings in close to her sides and maneuver by the merest fluttering of their edges. The tunnel turned up, and brightened with the sun; the mermaid extended her wings and flew over brilliant pink soft corals toward the light.

Two hours' work, she thought, plus a hazardous environment. Twenty-two hundred calories, easy.

The sea was brilliantly lit, unlike the gloomy marine lake surrounded by tall cliffs, mangroves, and shadow, and for a moment Michelle's sun-dazzled eyes failed to see the boat bobbing on the tide. She stopped short, her wings cupping to brake her motion, and then she recognized the boat's distinctive paint job, a bright red meant to imitate the natural oil of the *cheritem* fruit.

Michelle prudently rose to the surface a safe distance away—Torbiong might be fishing, and sometimes he did it with a spear. The old man saw her, and stood to give a wave before Michelle could unblock her trachea and draw air into her lungs to give a hail.

"I brought you supplies," he said.

"Thanks," Michelle said as she wiped a rain of seawater from her face.

Torbiong was over two hundred years old and Paramount Chief of Koror, the capital forty minutes away by boat. He was small and wiry and black-haired, and had a broad-nosed, strong-chinned, unlined face. He had traveled over the world and off it while young, but returned to Belau as he aged. His duties as chief were mostly ceremonial, but counted for tax purposes; he had money from hotels and restaurants that his ancestors had built and that others managed for him, and he spent most of his time visiting his neighbors, gossiping, and fishing. He had befriended Darton and Michelle when they'd first come to Belau, and helped them in securing the permissions for their researches on the Rock Islands. A few months back, after Darton died, Torbiong had agreed to bring supplies to Michelle in exchange for the occasional fish.

His boat was ten meters long and featured a waterproof canopy amidships made from interwoven pandanus leaves. Over the scarlet faux-*cheritem* paint were zigzags, crosses, and stripes in the brilliant yellow of the ginger plant. The ends of the thwarts were decorated with grotesque carved faces, and dozens of white cowrie shells were glued to the gunwales. Wooden statues of the kingfisher bird sat on the prow and stern.

Thrusting above the pandanus canopy were antennae, flagpoles, deep-sea fishing rods, fish spears,

radar, and a satellite uplink. Below the canopy, where Torbiong could command the boat from an elaborately carved throne of breadfruit-tree wood, were the engine and rudder controls, radio, audio, and video sets, a collection of large audio speakers, a depth finder, a satellite navigation relay, and radar. Attached to the uprights that supported the canopy were whistles tuned to make an eerie, discordant wailing noise when the boat was at speed.

Torbiong was fond of discordant wailing noises. As Michelle swam closer, she heard the driving, screeching electronic music that Torbiong loved trickling from the earpieces of his headset—he normally howled it out of speakers, but when sitting still he didn't want to scare the fish. At night she could hear Torbiong for miles, as he raced over the darkened sea blasted out of his skull on betel-nut juice with his music thundering and the whistles shrieking.

He removed the headset, releasing a brief audio onslaught before switching off his sound system.

"You're going to make yourself deaf," Michelle said.

Torbiong grinned. "Love that music. Gets that blood moving."

Michelle floated to the boat and put a hand on the gunwale between a pair of cowries.

"I saw that boy of yours on the news," Torbiong said. "He's making you famous."

"I don't want to be famous."

"He doesn't understand why you don't talk to him."

"He's dead," Michelle said.

Torbiong made a spreading gesture with his hands. "That's a matter of opinion."

"Watch your head," said Michelle.

Torbiong ducked as a gust threatened to bring him into contact with a pitcher plant that drooped over the edge of the island's overhang. Torbiong evaded the plant and then stepped to the bow to haul in his mooring line before the boat's canopy got caught beneath the overhang,

Michelle submerged and swam till she reached her banyan tree, then surfaced and called down her rope elevator. By the time Torbiong's boat hissed up to her, she'd folded away her gills and wings and was sitting in the sling, kicking her legs over the water.

Torbiong handed her a bag of supplies: some rice, tea, salt, vegetables, and fruit. For the last several weeks Michelle had experienced a craving for blueberries, which didn't grow here, and Torbiong had included a large package fresh off the shuttle, and a small bottle of cream to go with them. Michelle thanked him.

"Most tourists want corn chips or something," Torbiong said pointedly.

"I'm not a tourist," Michelle said. "I'm sorry I don't have any fish to swap—I've been hunting for a smaller game." She held out the specimen bag, still dripping seawater.

Torbiong gestured toward the cooler built into the back of his boat. "I got some *chai* and *chersuuch* today," he said, using the local names for barracuda and mahi mahi.

"Good fishing."

"Trolling." With a shrug. He looked up at her, a quizzical look on his face. "I've got some calls from reporters," he said, and then his betel-stained smile broke out. "I always make sure to send the tourist literature."

"I'm sure they enjoy reading it."

Torbiong's grin widened. "You get lonely, now," he said, "you come visit the family. We'll give you a home-cooked meal."

She smiled. "Thanks."

They said their farewells and Torbiong's boat hissed away on its jets, the whistles building to an eerie, spine-shivering chord. Michelle rose into the trees and stashed her specimens and groceries. With a bowl of blueberries and cream, Michelle crossed the rope walkway to her deck, and checked the progress of her search spiders.

There were pointers to a swarm of articles about the death of Terzian's wife, and Michelle wished she'd given her spiders clearer instructions about dates.

The spiders had come up with three pictures. One was a not-very-well focused tourist video from July 10, showing a man standing in front of the Basilica di Santa Croce in Florence. A statue of Dante also not in focus, gloomed down at him from beneath thick-bellied rain clouds. As the camera panned across him he stood with his back to the camera but turned to the right, one leg turned out as he scowled down at the ground—the profile was a little smeared, but the big, broad-shouldered body seemed right. The software reckoned there was a 78% chance the man was Terzian.

Michelle got busy refining the image, and after a few passes of the software decided the chances the figure being Terzian were more on the order of 95%.

So maybe Terzian had gone on a Grand Tour of European cultural sites. He didn't look happy in the video, but then the day was cloudy and rainy and Terzian didn't have an umbrella.

And his wife had died, of course.

Now that Michelle had a date and a place, she refined the instructions from her search spiders to seek out images from Florence a week either way from July 3, and then expand the search from there first all Tuscany, then all Italy.

If Terzian was doing tourist sites, then she surely had him nailed.

The next two hits, from her earlier research spiders, were duds. The software gave a less than 50% chance of Terzian being in Lisbon or Cape Sounion, and refinements of the image reduced the chance to something near zero.

Then the next video popped up, with a time stamp right there in the image—Paris, June 20, 2001, 13:41:44 hours, just a day before Terzian bought a bankroll of Euros and vanished.

Michelle's fingers formed.

The first thing Michelle saw was Terzian walking out of the frame—no doubt this time that it was him. He was looking over his shoulder at a small crowd of people. There was a dark-haired woman huddled on his arm, her face turned away from the camera. Michelle's heart warmed at the thought of the lonely widower Terzian having an affair in the City of Love.

Then she followed Terzian's gaze to see what had so drawn his attention. A dead man stretched out on the pavement, surrounded by hapless bystanders.

And then, as the scene slowly settled into her astonished mind, the video sang at her in the piping voice of Pan.

Terzian looked at his audience as anger raged in his backbrain. A wooden chair creaked, and the sound spurred Terzian to wonder how long the silence had gone on. Even the Slovenian woman who had been dozing realized that something had changed, and blinked herself to alertness.

"I'm sorry," he said in French. "But my wife just died, and I don't feel like playing this game anymore."

His silent audience of seven watched as he gathered his papers, put them in his case, and left the lecture room, his feet making sharp, murderous sounds on the wooden floor.

Yet up to that point his paper had been going all right. He'd been uncertain about commenting on Baudrillard in Baudrillard's own country, and in Baudrillard's own language, a cheery compare-and-contrast exercise between Baudrillard's "the self does not exist" and Rorty's "I don't care," the stereotypical French and American answers to modern life. There had been seven in his audience perched on creaking wooden chairs, and none of them had gone to sleep, or walked out, or condemned him for his audacity.

Yet, as he looked at his audience and read on, Terzian had felt the anger growing, spawned by the sensation of his own uselessness. Here he was, in the City of Lights, its every cobblestone a monume

to European civilization, and he was in a dreary lecture hall on the Left Bank, reading to his audience of seven from a paper that was nothing more than a footnote, and a footnote to a footnote at that. To come to the land of *cogito ergo sum* and to answer, *I don't care?*

I came to Paris for this? he thought. *To read this drivel? I paid for the privilege of doing this?*

I do care, he thought as his feet turned toward the Seine. *Desiderio, ergo sum,* if he had his Latin right. I am in pain, and therefore I *do* exist.

He ended in a Norman restaurant on the Île de la Cité, with lunch as his excuse and the thought of getting hopelessly drunk not far from his thoughts. He had absolutely nothing to do until August, after which he would return to the States and collect his belongings from the servants' quarters of the house on Esplanade, and then he would go about looking for a job.

He wasn't certain whether he would be more depressed by finding a job or by not finding one.

You are alive, he told himself. *You are alive and in Paris with the whole summer ahead of you, and you're eating the cuisine of Normandy in the Place Dauphine. And if that isn't a command to be joyful, what is?*

It was then that the Peruvian band began to play. Terzian looked up from his plate in weariness and surprise.

When Terzian had been a child his parents—both university professors—had first taken him to Europe, and he'd seen then that every European city had its own Peruvian or Bolivian street band. Indians in black bowler hats and colorful blankets crouched in some public place, gazing with impassive brown eyes from over their guitars and reed flutes.

Now, a couple decades later, the musicians were still here, though they'd exchanged the blankets and bowler hats for European styles, and their presentation had grown more slick. Now they had amplifiers and cassettes and CDs for sale. Now they had congregated in the triangular Place Dauphine, overshadowed by the neo-classical mass of the Palais de Justice, and commenced a Latin-flavored medley of old Abba songs.

Maybe, after Terzian finished his veal in calvados sauce, he'd go up to the band and kick in the strings of their guitars.

The breeze flapped the canvas overhead. Terzian looked at his empty plate. The food had been excellent, but he could barely remember tasting it.

Anger still roiled beneath his thoughts. And—for God's sake—was that band now playing *Oasis*? Those chords were beginning to sound suspiciously like "Wonderwall." "Wonderwall" on Spanish guitars, reed flutes, and a mandolin.

Terzian had nearly decided to call for a bottle of cognac and stay here all afternoon, but not with that noise in the park. He put some euros on the table, anchoring the bills with a saucer against the table. A fresh spring breeze that rattled the green canvas canopy over his head. He was stepping through the restaurant's little wrought-iron gate to the sidewalk when the scuffle caught his attention.

The man falling into the street, his face pinched with pain. The hands of the three men on either side who were, seemingly, unable to keep their friend erect.

Idiots, Terzian thought, fury blazing in him.

There was a sudden shrill of tires, of an auto horn.

Papers streamed in the wind as they spilled from a briefcase.

And over it all came the amped sound of pan pipes from the Peruvian band. *Wonderwall*.

Terzian watched in exasperated surprise as the three men sprang after the papers. He took a step toward the fallen man—*someone* had to take charge here. The fallen man's hair had spilled in a shock over his forehead and he'd curled on his side, his face still screwed up in pain.

The pan pipes played on, one distinct hollow shriek after another.

Terzian stopped with one foot still on the sidewalk and looked around at faces that all registered

the same sense of shock. Was there a doctor here? he wondered. A *French* doctor? All his French seemed to have just drained from his head. Even such simple questions as *Are you all right?* and *How are you feeling?* seemed beyond him now. The first aid course he'd taken in his Kenpo school was *ages ago*.

Unnaturally pale, the fallen man's face relaxed. The wind floated his shock of thinning dark hair over his face. In the park, Terzian saw a man in a baseball cap panning a video camera, and his anger suddenly blazed up again at the fatuous uselessness of the tourist, the uselessness that mirrored his own.

Suddenly there was a crowd around the casualty, people coming out of stopped cars, off the sidewalk. Down the street, Terzian saw the distinctive flat-topped kepis of a pair of policemen bobbing toward them from the direction of the Palais de Justice, and felt a surge of relief. Someone more capable than this lot would deal with this now.

He began, hesitantly, to step away. And then his arm was seized by a pair of hands and he looked in surprise at the woman who had just huddled her face into his shoulder, cinnamon-dark skin and eyes invisible beneath wraparound shades.

"Please," she said in English a bit too musical to be American. "Take me out of here."

The sound of the reed pipes followed them as they made their escape.

He walked her past the statue of the Vert Galant himself, good old lecherous Henri IV, and onto the Pont Neuf. To the left, across the Seine, the Louvre glowed in mellow colors beyond a screen of plane trees.

Traffic roared by, a stampede of steel unleashed by a green light. Unfocused anger blazed in his mind. He didn't want this woman attached to him, and he suspected she was running some kind of scam. The gym bag she wore on a strap over one shoulder kept banging him on the ass. Surreptitiously he slid his hand into his right front trouser pocket to make sure his money was still there.

Wonderwall, he thought. Christ.

He supposed he should offer some kind of civilized comment, just in case the woman was genuinely distressed.

"I suppose he'll be all right," he said, half-barking the words in his annoyance and anger.

The woman's face was still half-buried in his shoulder. "He's dead," she murmured into his jacket. "Couldn't you tell?"

For Terzian death had never occurred under the sky, but shut away, in hospice rooms with crisp sheets and warm colors and the scent of disinfectant. In an explosion of tumors and wasting limbs and endless pain masked only in part by morphia.

He thought of the man's pale face, the sudden relaxation.

Yes, he thought, death came with a sigh.

Reflex kept him talking. "The police were coming," he said. "They'll—they'll call an ambulance or something."

"I only hope they catch the bastards who did it," she said.

Terzian's heart gave a jolt as he recalled the three men who let the man fall, and then dashed through the square for his papers. For some reason all he could remember about them were their black laced boots, with thick soles.

"Who were they?" he asked blankly.

The woman's shades slid down her nose, and Terzian saw startling green eyes narrowed to murderous slits. "I suppose they think of themselves as cops," she said.

Terzian parked his companion in a café near Les Halles, within sight of the dome of the Bourse. She

insisted on sitting indoors, not on the sidewalk, and on facing the front door so that she could see whoever came in. She put her gym bag, with its white Nike swoosh, on the floor between the table leg and the wall, but Terzian noticed she kept its shoulder strap in her lap, as if she might have to bolt at any moment.

Terzian kept his wedding ring within her sight. He wanted her to see it; it might make things simpler.

Her hands were trembling. Terzian ordered coffee for them both. “No,” she said suddenly. “I want ice cream.”

Terzian studied her as she turned to the waiter and ordered in French. She was around his own age, twenty-nine. There was no question that she was a mixture of races, but *which* races? The flat nose could be African or Asian or Polynesian, and Polynesia was again confirmed by the black, thick brows. Her smooth brown complexion could be from anywhere but Europe, but her pale green eyes were nothing but European. Her broad, sensitive mouth suggested Nubia. The black ringlets yanked into a knot behind her head could be African or East Indian or, for that matter, French. The result was too striking to be beautiful—and also too striking, Terzian thought, to be a successful criminal. Those looks could be too easily identified.

The waiter left. She turned her wide eyes toward Terzian, and seemed faintly surprised that he was still there.

“My name’s Jonathan,” he said.

“I’m,” hesitating, “Stephanie.”

“Really?” Terzian let his skepticism show.

“Yes.” She nodded, reaching in a pocket for cigarettes. “Why would I lie? It doesn’t matter if you know my real name or not.”

“Then you’d better give me the whole thing.”

She held her cigarette upward, at an angle, and enunciated clearly. “Stephanie América Pais Silva.”

“America?”

Striking a match. “It’s a perfectly ordinary Portuguese name.”

He looked at her. “But you’re not Portuguese.”

“I carry a Portuguese passport.”

Terzian bit back the comment, *I’m sure you do*.

Instead he said, “Did you know the man who was killed?”

Stephanie nodded. The drags she took off her cigarette did not ease the tremor in her hands.

“Did you know him well?”

“Not very.” She dragged in smoke again, then let the smoke out as she spoke.

“He was a colleague. A biochemist.”

Surprise silenced Terzian. Stephanie tipped ash into the Cinzano ashtray, but her nervousness made her miss, and the little tube of ash fell on the tablecloth.

“Shit,” she said, and swept the ash to the floor with a nervous movement of her fingers.

“Are you a biochemist, too?” Terzian asked.

“I’m a nurse.” She looked at him with her pale eyes. “I work for Santa Croce—it’s a—”

“A relief agency.” A Catholic one, he remembered. The name meant *Holy Cross*.

She nodded.

“Shouldn’t you go to the police?” he asked. And then his skepticism returned. “Oh, that’s right—was the police who did the killing.”

“Not the *French* police.” She leaned across the table toward him. “This was a different sort of police, the kind who think that killing someone and making an arrest are the same thing. You look

the television news tonight. They'll report the death, but there won't be any arrests. Or any suspects. Her face darkened, and she leaned back in her chair to consider a new thought. "Unless they somehow manage to blame it on me."

Terzian remembered papers flying in the spring wind, men in heavy boots sprinting after. The pinched, pale face of the victim.

"Who, then?"

She gave him a bleak look through a curl of cigarette smoke. "Have you ever heard of Transnistria?"

Terzian hesitated, then decided "No" was the most sensible answer.

"The murderers are Transnistrian." A ragged smile drew itself across Stephanie's face. "They're intellectual property police. They killed Adrian over a copyright."

At that point the waiter brought Terzian's coffee along with Stephanie's order. Hers was colossal—a huge glass goblet filled with pastel-colored ice creams and fruit syrups in bright primary colors, topped by a mountain of cream and a toy pinwheel on a candy-striped stick. Stephanie looked at the creation in shock, her eyes wide.

"I love ice cream," she choked, and then her eyes brimmed with tears and she began to cry.

Stephanie wept for a while, across the table, and between sobs choked down heaping spoonfuls of ice cream, eating in great gulps, and swiping at her lips and tear-stained cheeks with a paper napkin.

The waiter stood quietly in the corner, but from his glare and the set of his jaw it was clear that he blamed Terzian for making the lovely woman cry.

Terzian felt his body surge with the impulse to aid her, but he didn't know what to do. Move around the table and put an arm around her? Take her hand? Call someone to take her off his hands?

The latter, for preference.

He settled for handing her a clean napkin when her own grew sodden.

His skepticism had not survived the mention of the Transnistrian copyright police. This was far too bizarre to be a con—a scam was based on basic human desire, greed or lust, not something as abstract as intellectual property. Unless there was a gang who made a point of targeting academics from the States, luring them with a tantalizing hook about a copyright worth murdering for . . .

Eventually the storm subsided. Stephanie pushed the half-consumed ice cream away, and reached for another cigarette.

He tapped his wedding ring on the tabletop, something he did when thinking. "Shouldn't you contact the local police?" he asked. "You know something about this . . . death." For some reason he was reluctant to use the word *murder*. It was as if using the word would make something true, not the killing itself but his relationship to the killing . . . to call it murder would grant it some kind of power over him.

She shook her head. "I've got to get out of France before those guys find me. Out of Europe, if I can, but that would be hard. My passport's in my hotel room, and they're probably watching it."

"Because of this copyright."

Her mouth twitched in a half-smile. "That's right."

"It's not a literary copyright, I take it."

She shook her head, the half-smile still on her face.

"Your friend was a biologist." He felt a hum in his nerves, a certainty that he already knew the answer to the next question.

"Is it a weapon?" he asked.

She wasn't surprised by the question. "No," she said. "No, just the opposite." She took a drag on her cigarette and sighed the smoke out. "It's an antidote. An antidote to human folly."

“Listen,” Stephanie said. “Just because the Soviet Union fell doesn’t mean that *Sovietism* fell with Sovietism is still there—the only difference is that its moral justification is gone, and what’s left is violence and extortion disguised as law enforcement and taxation. The old empire breaks up, and the West you think it’s great, but more countries just meant more palms to be greased—all throughout the former Soviet empire you’ve got more inspectors and tax collectors, more customs agents and security directorates than there ever were under the Russians. All these people do is prey off their own populations, because no one else will do business with them unless they’ve got oil or some other resource that people want.”

“Trashcanistans,” Terzian said. It was a word he’d heard used of his own ancestral homeland, the former Soviet Republic of Armenia, whose looted economy and paranoid, murderous, despotic Russian puppet regime was supported only by millions of dollars sent to the country by Americans of Armenian descent, who thought that propping up the gang of thugs in power somehow translated in freedom for the fatherland.

Stephanie nodded. “And the worst Trashcanistan of all is Transnistria.”

She and Terzian had left the café and taken a taxi back to the Left Bank and Terzian’s hotel. He had turned the television to a local station, but muted the sound until the news came on. Until then the station showed a rerun of an American cop show, stolid, businesslike detectives underplaying the latest sordid confrontation with tragedy.

The hotel room hadn’t been built for the queen-sized bed it now held, and there was an eighteen-inch clearance around the bed and no room for chairs. Terzian, not wanting Stephanie to think he wanted to get her in the sack, perched uncertainly on a corner of the bed, while Stephanie disposed of herself more comfortably, sitting cross-legged in its center.

“Moldova was a Soviet republic put together by Stalin,” she said. “It was made up of Bessarabia, which was a part of Romania that Stalin chewed off at the beginning of the Second World War, plus a strip of industrial land on the far side of the Dniester. When the Soviet Union went down, Moldova became ‘independent’—” Terzian could hear the quotes in her voice. “But independence had nothing to do with the Moldovan *people*, it was just Romanian-speaking Soviet elites going off on their own account once their own superiors were no longer there to retrain them. And Moldova soon split—first the Turkish Christians . . .”

“Wait a second,” Terzian said. “There are *Christian Turks*?”

The idea of Christian Turks was not a part of his Armenian-American worldview.

Stephanie nodded. “Orthodox Christian Turks, yes. They’re called Gagauz, and they now have their own autonomous republic of Gagauzia within Moldova.”

Stephanie reached into her pocket for a cigarette and her lighter.

“Uh,” Terzian said. “Would you mind smoking in the window?”

Stephanie made a face. “Americans,” she said, but she moved to the window and opened it, letting in a blast of cool spring air. She perched on the windowsill, sheltered her cigarette from the wind, and lit up.

“Where was I?” she asked.

“Turkish Christians.”

“Right.” Blowing smoke into the teeth of the gale. “Gagauzia was only the start—after that a Russian general allied with a bunch of crooks and KGB types created a rebellion in the bit of Moldova that was on the far side of the Dniester—another collection of Soviet elites, representing no one but themselves. Once the Russian-speaking rebels rose against their Romanian-speaking oppressors, the Soviet Fourteenth Army stepped in as peacekeepers, complete with blue helmets, and created a twenty-mile-wide state recognized by no other government. And that meant more military, more

border guards, more administrators, more taxes to charge, and customs duties, and uniformed e
Soviets whose palms needed greasing. And over a hundred thousand refugees who could be put
camps while the administration stole their supplies and rations . . .

“But—” She jabbed the cigarette like a pointer. “Transnistria had a problem. No other nation
recognized their existence, and they were tiny and had no natural resources, barring the underage girls
they enslaved by the thousands to export for prostitution. The rest of the population was leaving
as fast as they could, restrained only slightly by the fact that they carried passports no other state
recognized, and that meant there were fewer people whose productivity the elite could steal to support
their predatory post-Soviet lifestyles. All they had was a lot of obsolete Soviet heavy industry geared
to produce stuff no one wanted.

“But they still had the *infrastructure*. They had power plants—running off Russian oil they
couldn’t afford to buy—and they had a transportation system. So the outlaw regime set up to attract
other outlaws who needed industrial capacity—the idea was that they’d attract entrepreneurs who were
excused from paying most of the local taxes in exchange for making one big payoff to the high
echelon.”

“Weapons?” Terzian asked.

“Weapons, sure,” Stephanie nodded. “Mostly they’re producing cheap knockoffs of other people’s
guns, but the guns are up to the size of howitzers. They tried banking and data havens, but the
authorities couldn’t restrain themselves from ripping those off—banks and data run on trust and
control of information, and when the regulators are greedy, short-sighted crooks you don’t get either
one. So what they settled on was, well, *biotech*. They’ve got companies creating cheap generic
pharmaceuticals that evade Western patents . . .” Her look darkened. “Not that I’ve got a problem with
that, not when I’ve seen thousands dying of diseases they couldn’t afford to cure. And they’ve also
got other companies who are ripping off Western genetic research to develop their own products. And
as long as they make their payoffs to the elite, these companies remain *completely unregulated*.
Nobody, not even the government, knows what they’re doing in those factories, and the government
gives them security free of charge.”

Terzian imagined gene-splicing going on in a rusting Soviet factory, rows and rows of mutant
plants with untested, unregulated genetics, all set to be released on an unsuspecting world. Transgenic
elements drifting down the Dniester to the Black Sea, growing quietly in its saline environment . . .

“The news,” Stephanie reminded, and pointed at the television.

Terzian reached for the control and hit the mute button, just as the throbbing, anxious music that
announced the news began to fade.

The murder on the Île de la Cité was the second item on the broadcast. The victim was described
as a “foreign national” who had been fatally stabbed, and no arrests had been made. The motive for the
killing was unknown.

Terzian changed the channel in time to catch the same item on another channel. The story was
unchanged.

“I told you,” Stephanie said. “No suspects. No motive.”

“You could tell them.”

She made a negative motion with her cigarette. “I couldn’t tell them who did it, or how to find
them. All I could do is put myself under suspicion.”

Terzian turned off the TV. “So what happened exactly? Your friend stole from these people?”

Stephanie swiped her forehead with the back of her wrist. “He stole something that was of no value
to them. It’s only valuable to poor people, who can’t afford to pay. And—” She turned to the window
and spun her cigarette into the street below. “I’ll take it out of here as soon as I can,” she said. “I’ve
got to try to contact some friends.” She closed the window, shutting out the spring breeze. “I wish

had my passport. That would change everything.”

~~*I saw a murder this afternoon*~~, Terzian thought. He closed his eyes and saw the man falling, the white face so completely absorbed in the reality of its own agony.

He was so fucking sick of death.

He opened his eyes. “I can get your passport back,” he said.

Anger kept him moving until he saw the killers, across the street from Stephanie’s hotel, sitting at an outdoor table in a café-bar. Terzian recognized them immediately—he didn’t need to look at the heavy shoes, or the broad faces with their disciplined military mustaches—one glance at the crowd at the café showed the only two in the place who weren’t French. That was probably how Stephanie knew to speak to him in English, he just didn’t dress or carry himself like a Frenchman, for all that he’d worn an anonymous coat and tie. He tore his gaze away before they saw him gaping at them.

Anger turned very suddenly to fear, and as he continued his stride toward the hotel he told himself that they wouldn’t recognize him from the Norman restaurant, that he’d changed into blue jeans and sneakers and a windbreaker, and carried a soft-sided suitcase. Still he felt a gunsight on the back of his neck, and he was so nervous that he nearly ran head-first into the glass lobby door.

Terzian paid for a room with his credit card, took the key from the Vietnamese clerk, and walked up the narrow stair to what the French called the second floor, but what he would have called the third. No one lurked in the stairwell, and he wondered where the third assassin had gone. Looking for Stephanie somewhere else, probably, an airport or train station.

In his room, Terzian put his suitcase on the bed—it held only a few token items, plus his shaving kit—and then he took Stephanie’s key from his pocket and held it in his hand. The key was simply attached to a weighted doorknob-shaped ceramic plug.

The jolt of fear and surprise that had so staggered him on first sighting the two men began to shift again into rage.

They were drinking *beer*, there had been half-empty mugs on the table in front of them, and a pair of empties as well.

Drinking on duty. Doing surveillance while drunk

Bastards. Trashcanians. They could kill someone simply through drunkenness.

Perhaps they already had.

He was angry when he left his room and took the stairs to the floor below. No foes kept watch in the hall. He opened Stephanie’s room and then closed the door behind him.

He didn’t turn on the light. The sun was surprisingly high in the sky for the hour: he had noticed that the sun seemed to set later here than it did at home. Maybe France was very far to the west for its time zone.

Stephanie’s didn’t have a suitcase, just a kind of nylon duffel, a larger version of the athletic bag she already carried. He took it from the little closet, and enough of Terzian’s suspicion remained so that he checked the luggage tag to make certain the name was *Steph. Pais*, and not another.

He opened the duffel, then got her passport and travel documents from the bedside table and tossed them in. He added a jacket and a sweater from the closet, then packed her toothbrush and shaver in her plastic travel bag and put it in the duffel.

The plan was for him to return to his room on the upper floor and stay the night and avoid raising suspicion by leaving a hotel he’d just checked into. In the morning, carrying two bags, he’d check out and rejoin Stephanie in his own hotel, where she had spent the night in his room, and where the air almost would by now reek with her cigarette smoke.

Terzian opened a dresser drawer and scooped out a double handful of Stephanie’s t-shirt and underwear, and stockings, and then he remembered that the last time he’d done this was when he

cleaned Claire's belongings out of the Esplanade house.

~~Shit. Fuck.~~ He gazed down at the clothing between his hands and let the fury rage like a tempest his skull.

And then, in the angry silence, he heard a creak in the corridor, and then a stumbling thud.

Thick rubber military soles, he thought. With drunk baboons in them.

Instinct shrieked at him not to be trapped in this room, this dead-end where he could be trapped and killed. He dropped Stephanie's clothes back into the drawer and stepped to the bed and picked up the duffel in one hand. Another step took him to the door, which he opened with one hand while using the other to fling the duffel into the surprised face of the drunken murderer on the other side.

Terzian hadn't been at his Kenpo school in six years, not since he'd left Kansas City, but certain reflexes don't go away after they've been drilled into a person thousands of times—certainly not the front kick that hooked upward under the intruder's breastbone and drove him breathless into the corridor wall opposite.

A primitive element of his mind rejoiced in the fact that he was bigger than these guys. He could really knock them around.

The second Trashcanian tried to draw a pistol but Terzian passed outside the pistol hand and drove the point of an elbow into the man's face. Terzian then grabbed the automatic with both hands, took a further step down the corridor, and spun around, which swung the man around Terzian's hip a full two hundred and seventy degrees and drove him head-first into the corridor wall. When he'd finished falling and opened his eyes he was staring into the barrel of his own gun.

Red rage gave a fangs-bared roar of animal triumph inside Terzian's skull. Perhaps his tongue echoed it. It was all he could do to stop himself from pulling the trigger.

Get Death working for *him* for a change. Why not?

Except the first man hadn't realized that his side had just lost. He had drawn a knife—a glittering chromed single-edged thing that may have already killed once today—and now he took a dangerous step toward Terzian.

Terzian pointed the pistol straight at the knife man and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

The intruder stared at the gun as if he'd just realized at just this moment it wasn't his partner who held it.

Terzian pulled the trigger again, and when nothing happened his rage melted into terror and he ran. Behind him he heard the drunken knife man trip over his partner and crash to the floor.

Terzian was at the bottom of the stair before he heard the thick-soled military boots clatter on the risers above him. He dashed through the small lobby—he sensed the Vietnamese night clerk, who was facing away, begin to turn toward him just as he pushed open the glass door and ran into the street.

He kept running. At some point he discovered the gun still in his fist, and he put it in the pocket of his windbreaker.

Some moments later he realized he wasn't being pursued. And he remembered that Stephanie's passport was still in her duffel, which he'd thrown at the knife man and hadn't retrieved.

For a moment rage ran through him, and he thought about taking out the gun and fixing whatever was wrong with it and going back to Stephanie's room and getting the documents one way or another.

But then the anger faded enough for him to see what a foolish course that would be, and he returned to his own hotel.

Terzian had given Stephanie his key, so he knocked on his own door before realizing she was very unlikely to open to a random knock. "It's Jonathan," he said. "It didn't work out."

She snatched the door open from the inside. Her face was taut with anxiety. She held pages in her hand, the text of the paper he'd delivered that morning.

“Sorry,” he said. “They were there, outside the hotel. I got into your room, but—”

~~She took his arm and almost yanked him into the room, then shut the door behind him.~~ “Did they follow you?” she demanded.

“No. They didn’t chase me. Maybe they thought I’d figure out how to work the gun.” He took the pistol out of his pocket and showed it to her. “I can’t believe how stupid I was—”

“*Where did you get that? Where did you get that?*” Her voice was nearly a scream, and she shrunk away from him, her eyes wide. Her fist crumpled papers over her heart. To his astonishment he realized that she was afraid of him, that she thought he was *connected*, somehow, with the killers.

He threw the pistol onto the bed and raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. “No really!” he shouted over her cries. “It’s not mine! I took it from one of them!”

Stephanie took a deep gasp of air. Her eyes were still wild. “Who the hell are you, then?” she said. “James Bond?”

He gave a disgusted laugh. “James Bond would have known how to shoot.”

“I was reading your—your article.” She held out the pages toward him. “I was thinking, my God, what have I got this poor guy into. Some professor I was sending to his death.” She passed a hand over her forehead. “They probably bugged my room. They would have known right away that someone was in it.”

“They were drunk,” Terzian said. “Maybe they’ve been drinking all day. Those assholes really pissed me off.”

He sat on the bed and picked up the pistol. It was small and blue steel and surprisingly heavy. In the years since he’d last shot a gun he had forgotten that purposefulness, the way a firearm was designed for a single, clear function. He found the safety where it had been all along, near his right thumb, and flicked it off and then on again.

“There,” he said. “That’s what I should have done.”

Waves of anger shivered through his limbs at the touch of the adrenaline still pouring into his system. A bitter impulse to laugh again rose in him, and he tried to suppress it.

“I guess I was lucky after all,” he said. “It wouldn’t have done you any good to have to explain a pair of corpses outside your room.” He looked up at Stephanie, who was pacing back and forth in the narrow lane between the bed and the wall, and looking as if she badly needed a cigarette. “I’m sorry about your passport. Where were you going to go, anyway?”

“It doesn’t so much matter if *I* go,” she said. She gave Terzian a quick, nervous glance. “You can’t fly it out, right?”

“It?” He stared at her. “What do you mean, it?”

“The biotech.” Stephanie stopped her pacing and stared at him with those startling green eyes. “Adrian gave it to me. Just before they killed him.” Terzian’s gaze followed hers to the black bag with the Nike swoosh, the bag that sat at the foot of Terzian’s bed.

Terzian’s impulse to laugh faded. Unregulated, illegal, stolen biotech, he thought. Right in his own hotel room. Along with a stolen gun and a woman who was probably out of her mind.

Fuck.

The dead man was identified by news files as Adrian Cristea, a citizen of Ukraine and a researcher. He had been stabbed once in the right kidney and bled to death without identifying his assailant. Witnesses reported two or maybe three men leaving the scene immediately after Cristea’s death. Michelle set more search spiders to work.

For a moment she considered calling Davout and letting him know that Terzian had probably been a witness to a murder, but decided to wait until she either had some more evidence one way or another.

For the next few hours she did her real work, analyzing the samples she'd taken from Zigzag Lake's sulfide-tainted deeps. It wasn't very physical, and Michelle figured it was only worth a few hundred calories.

A wind floated through the treetops, bringing the scent of night flowers and swaying Michelle perch beneath her as she peered into her biochemical reader, and she remembered the gentle pressure of Darton against her back, rocking with her as he looked over her shoulder at her results. Suddenly she could remember, with a near perfect clarity, the taste of his skin on her tongue.

She rose from her woven seat and paced along the bough. *Damn it*, she thought, *I watched you die*.

Michelle returned to her deck and discovered that her spiders had located the police file on Cristea's death. A translation program handled the antique French without trouble, even producing modern equivalents of forensic jargon. Cristea was of Romanian descent, had been born in the old USSR, and had acquired Ukrainian citizenship on the breakup of the Soviet Union. The French files themselves had translations of Cristea's Ukrainian travel documents, which included receipts showing that he had paid personal insurance, environmental insurance, and departure taxes from Transnistria, a place of which she'd never heard, as well as similar documents from Moldova, which at least was a province, or country, that sounded familiar.

What kind of places were these, where you had to buy *insurance* at the *border*? And what was environmental insurance anyway?

There were copies of emails between French and Ukrainian authorities, in which the Ukrainians politely declined any knowledge of their citizen beyond the fact that he *was* a citizen. They had no addresses for him.

Cristea apparently lived in Transnistria, but the authorities there echoed the Ukrainians in saying they knew nothing of him.

Cristea's tickets and vouchers showed that he had apparently taken a train to Bucharest, and then he'd got on an airline that took him to Prague, and thence to Paris. He had been in the city less than a day before he was killed. Found in Cristea's hotel room was a curious document certifying that Cristea was carrying medical supplies, specifically a vaccine against hepatitis A. Michelle wondered why he would be carrying a hepatitis vaccine from Transnistria to France. France presumably had all the hepatitis vaccine it needed.

No vaccine had turned up. Apparently Cristea had got into the European Community without having his bags searched, as there was no evidence that the documents relating to the alleged vaccine had ever been examined.

The missing "vaccine"—at some point in the police file the skeptical quotation marks had appeared—had convinced the Paris police that Cristea was a murdered drug courier, and at that point they'd lost interest in the case. It was rarely possible to solve a professional killing in the drug underworld.

Michelle's brief investigation seemed to have come to a dead end. That Terzian might have witnessed a murder would rate maybe half a sentence in Professor Davout's biography.

Then she checked what her spiders had brought her in regard to Terzian, and found something that cheered her.

There he was inside the Basilica di Santa Croce, a tourist still photograph taken before the tomb of Machiavelli. He was only slightly turned away from the camera and the face was unmistakable. Though there was no date on the photograph, only the year, but he wore the same clothes he wore in the video taken outside the church, and the photo caught him in the act of speaking to a companion. She was a tall woman with deep brown skin, but she was turned away from the camera, and a wide-brimmed sun hat made her features indistinguishable.

Humming happily, Michelle deployed her software to determine whether this was the same woman

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