

IDENTITY THEFT

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The door to my office slid open. "Hello," I said, rising from my chair. "You must be my nine o'clock." I said it as if I had a ten o'clock and an eleven o'clock, but I didn't. The whole Martian economy was in a slump, and, even though I was the only private detective on Mars, this was the first new case I'd had in weeks.

"Yes," said a high, feminine voice. "I'm Cassandra Wilkins."

I let my eyes rove up and down her body. It was very good work; I wondered if she'd had quite so perfect a figure before transferring. People usually ordered replacement bodies that, at least in broad strokes, resembled their originals, but few could resist improving them. Men got buffer, women got curvier, and everyone modified their faces, removing asymmetries, wrinkles, and imperfections. If and when I transferred myself, I'd eliminate the gray in my blond hair and get a new nose that would look like my current one had before it'd been broken a couple of times.

"A pleasure to meet you, Ms. Wilkins," I said. "I'm Alexander Lomax. Please have a seat."

She was a little thing, no more than a hundred and fifty centimeters, and she was wearing a stylish silver-gray blouse and skirt, but no makeup or jewelry. I'd expected her to sit down with a catlike, fluid movement, given her delicate features, but she just sort of plunked herself into the chair. "Thanks," she said. "I do hope you can help me, Mr. Lomax. I really do."

Rather than immediately sitting down myself, I went to the coffee maker. I filled my own mug, then opened my mouth to offer Cassandra a cup, but closed it before doing so; transfers, of course, didn't drink. "What seems to be the problem?" I said, returning to my chair.

It's hard reading a transfer's expression: the facial sculpting was usually very good, but the movements were somewhat restrained. "My husband—oh, my goodness, Mr. Lomax, I hate to even say this!" She looked down at her hands. "My husband ... he's disappeared."

I raised my eyebrows; it was pretty damned difficult for someone to disappear here. New Klondike was only three kilometers in diameter, all of it locked under the dome. "When did you last see him?"

"Three days ago."

My office was small, but it did have a window. Through it, I could see one of the supporting arches that helped to hold up the transparent dome over New Klondike. Outside the dome, a sandstorm was raging, orange clouds obscuring the sun. Auxiliary lights on the arch compensated for that, but Martian daylight was never very bright. That's a reason why even those who had a choice were reluctant to return to Earth: after years of only dim illumination, apparently the sun as seen from there was excruciating. "Is your husband, um, like you?" I asked.

She nodded. "Oh, yes. We both came here looking to make our fortune, just like everyone else."

I shook my head. "I mean is he also a transfer?"

"Oh, sorry. Yes, he is. In fact, we both just transferred."

"It's an expensive procedure," I said. "Could he have been skipping out on paying for it?"

Cassandra shook her head. "No, no. Joshua found one or two nice specimens early on. He used the money from selling those pieces to buy the NewYou franchise here. That's where we met—after I threw in the towel on sifting dirt, I got a job in sales there. Anyway, of course, we both got to transfer at cost." She was actually wringing her synthetic hands. "Oh, Mr. Lomax, please help me! I don't know what I'm going to do without my Joshua!"

"You must love him a lot," I said, watching her pretty face for more than just the pleasure of looking at it; I wanted to gauge her sincerity as she replied. After all, people often disappeared because things were bad at home, but spouses are rarely forthcoming about that.

"Oh, I do!" said Cassandra. "I love him more than I can say. Joshua is a wonderful, wonderful man." She looked at me with pleading eyes. "You have to help me get him back. You just have to!"

I looked down at my coffee mug; steam was rising from it. "Have you tried the police?"

Cassandra made a sound that I guessed was supposed to be a snort: it had the right roughness, but was dry as Martian sand. "Yes. They—oh, I hate to speak ill of anyone, Mr. Lomax! Believe me, it's not my way, but—well, there's no ducking it, is there? They were useless. Just totally useless."

I nodded slightly; it's a story I heard often enough—I owed most of what little livelihood I had to the local cops' incompetence and indifference. "Who did you speak to?"

"A—a detective, I guess he was; he didn't wear a uniform. I've forgotten his name."

"What did he look like?"

"Red hair, and—"

"That's Mac," I said. She looked puzzled, so I said his full name. "Dougal McCrae."

"McCrae, yes," said Cassandra. She shuddered a bit, and she must have noticed my surprised reaction to that. "Sorry," she said. "I just didn't like the way he looked at me."

I resisted running my eyes over her body just then; I'd already done so, and I could remember what I'd seen. I guess her original figure hadn't been like this one; if it had, she'd certainly be used to admiring looks from men by now.

"I'll have a word with McCrae," I said. "See what's already been done. Then I'll pick up where the cops left off."

"Would you?" Her green eyes seemed to dance. "Oh, thank you, Mr. Lomax! You're a good man—I can tell!"

I shrugged a little. "I can show you two ex-wives and a half-dozen bankers who'd disagree."

"Oh, no," she said. "Don't say things like that! You *are* a good man, I'm sure of it. Believe me, I have a sense about these things. You're a good man, and I know you won't let me down."

Naïve woman; she'd probably thought the same thing about her husband—until he'd run off. "Now, what can you tell me about your husband? Joshua, is it?"

"Yes, that's right. His full name is Joshua Connor Wilkins—and it's Joshua, never just Josh, thank you very much." I nodded. Guys who were anal about being called by their full first names never bought a round, in my experience. Maybe it was a good thing that this clown was gone.

"Yes," I said. "Go on." I didn't have to take notes, of course. My office computer was recording everything, and would extract whatever was useful into a summary file for me.

Cassandra ran her synthetic lower lip back and forth beneath her artificial upper teeth, thinking for a moment. Then: "Well, he was born in Calgary, Alberta, and he's thirty-eight years old. He moved to Mars seven mears ago." Mears were Mars-years; about double the length of those on Earth.

"Do you have a picture?"

"I can access one," she said. She pointed at my desk terminal. "May I?"

I nodded, and Cassandra reached over to grab the keyboard. In doing so, she managed to knock over my coffee mug, spilling hot joe all over her dainty hand. She let out a small yelp of pain. I got up, grabbed a towel, and began wiping up the mess. "I'm surprised that hurt," I said. "I mean, I *do* like my coffee hot, but..."

"Transfers feel pain, Mr. Lomax," she said, "for the same reason that biologicals do. When you're flesh-and-blood, you need a signaling system to warn you when your parts are being damaged; same is true for those of us who have transferred. Admittedly, artificial bodies are much more durable, of course."

"Ah," I said.

"Sorry," she replied. "I've explained this so many times now—you know, at work. Anyway, please forgive me about your desk."

I made a dismissive gesture. "Thank God for the paperless office, eh? Don't worry about it." I gestured at the keyboard; fortunately, none of the coffee had gone down between the keys. "You were going to show me a picture?"

"Oh, right." She spoke some commands, and the terminal responded—making me wonder what she'd wanted the keyboard for. But then she used it to type in a long passphrase; presumably she didn't want to say hers aloud in front of me. She frowned as she was typing it in, and backspaced to make a correction; multiword passphrases were easy to say, but hard to type if you weren't adept with a keyboard—and the more security conscious you were, the longer the passphrase you used.

Anyway, she accessed some repository of her personal files, and brought up a photo of Joshua-never-Josh Wilkins. Given how attractive Mrs. Wilkins was, he wasn't what I expected. He had cold, gray eyes, hair buzzed so short as to be nonexistent, and a thin, almost lipless mouth; the overall effect was reptilian. "That's before," I said. "What about after? What's he look like now that he's transferred?"

"Umm, pretty much the same," she said.

"Really?" If I'd had that kisser, I'd have modified it for sure. "Do you have pictures taken since he moved his mind?"

"No actual pictures," said Cassandra. "After all, he and I only just transferred. But I can go into the NewYou database, and show you the plans from which his new face was manufactured." She spoke to the terminal some more, and then typed in another lengthy passphrase. Soon enough, she had a computer-graphics rendition of Joshua's head on my screen.

"You're right," I said, surprised. "He didn't change a thing. Can I get copies of all this?"

She nodded, and spoke some more commands, transferring various documents into local storage.

"All right," I said. "My fee is two hundred solars an hour."

"That's fine, that's fine, of course! I don't care about the money, Mr. Lomax—not at all. I just want Joshua back. Please tell me you'll find him."

"I will," I said, smiling my most reassuring smile. "Don't you worry about that. He can't have gone far."

* * *

Actually, of course, Joshua Wilkins *could* perhaps have gone quite far—so my first order of business was to eliminate that possibility.

No spaceships had left Mars in the last ten days, so he couldn't be off-planet. There was a giant airlock in the south through which large spaceships could be brought inside for dry-dock work, but it hadn't been cracked open in weeks. And, although a transfer could exist freely on the Martian surface, there were only four personnel air locks leading out of the dome, and they all had security guards. I visited each of those air locks and checked, just to be sure, but the only people who had gone out in the last three days were the usual crowds of hapless fossil hunters, and every one of them had returned when the dust storm began.

I remember when this town had started up: "The Great Fossil Rush," they called it. Weingarten and O'Reilly, two early private explorers who had come here at their own expense, had found the first fossils on Mars, and had made a fortune selling them back on Earth. More valuable than any precious metal; rarer than anything else in the solar system—actual evidence of extraterrestrial life! Good fist-sized specimens went for millions in online auctions; excellent football-sized ones for billions. There was no greater status symbol than to own the petrified remains of a Martian pentaped or rhizomorph.

Of course, Weingarten and O'Reilly wouldn't say precisely where they'd found their specimens, but it had been easy enough to prove that their spaceship had landed here, in the Isidis Planitia basin. Other treasure hunters started coming, and New Klondike—the one and only town on Mars—was born.

Native life was never widely dispersed on Mars; the single ecosystem that had ever existed here seemed to have been confined to an area not much bigger than Rhode Island. Some of the prospectors—excuse me, fossil hunters—who came shortly after W&O's first expedition found a few nice specimens, although most had been badly blasted by blowing sand.

Somewhere, though, was the mother lode: a bed that produced fossils more finely preserved than even those from Earth's famed Burgess Shale. Weingarten and O'Reilly had known where it was—they'd stumbled on it by pure dumb luck, apparently. But they'd both been killed when their heat shield separated from their lander when re-entering Earth's atmosphere after their third expedition here—and, in the twenty mears since, no one had yet rediscovered it.

People were still looking, of course. There'd always been a market for transferring consciousness; the potentially infinite lifespan was hugely appealing. But here on Mars, the demand was particularly brisk, since artificial bodies could spend days or even weeks on the surface, searching for paleontological gold, without worrying about running out of air. Of course, a serious sandstorm could blast the synthetic flesh from metal bones, and scour those bones until they were whittled to nothing; that's why no one was outside right now.

Anyway, Joshua-never-Josh Wilkins was clearly not outside the dome, and he hadn't taken off in a spaceship. Wherever he was hiding, it was somewhere in New Klondike. I can't say he was breathing the same air I was, because he wasn't breathing at all. But he was *here*, somewhere. All I had to do was

find him.

I didn't want to duplicate the efforts of the police, although "efforts" was usually too generous a term to apply to the work of the local constabulary; "cursory attempts" probably was closer to the truth, if I knew Mac.

New Klondike had twelve radial roadways, cutting across the nine concentric rings of buildings under the dome. My office was at dome's edge; I could have taken a hovertram into the center, but I preferred to walk. A good detective knew what was happening on the streets, and the hovertrams, dilapidated though they were, sped by too fast for that.

I didn't make any bones about staring at the transfers I saw along the way. They ranged in style from really sophisticated models, like Cassandra Wilkins, to things only a step up from the tin woodsman of Oz. Of course, those who'd contented themselves with second-rate synthetic forms doubtless believed they'd trade up when they eventually happened upon some decent specimens. Poor saps; no one had found truly spectacular remains for mears, and lots of people were giving up and going back to Earth, if they could afford the passage, or were settling in to lives of, as Thoreau would have it, quiet desperation, their dreams as dead as the fossils they'd never found.

I continued walking easily along; Mars gravity is about a third of Earth's. Some people were stuck here because they'd let their muscles atrophy; they'd never be able to hack a full gee again. Me, I was stuck here for other reasons, but I worked out more than most—Gully's Gym, over by the shipyards—and so still had reasonably strong legs; I could walk comfortably all day if I had to.

The cop shop was a five-story building—it could be that tall, this near the center of the dome—with walls that had once been white, but were now a grimy grayish pink. The front doors were clear alloquartz, same as the overhead dome, and they slid aside as I walked up to them. At the side of the lobby was a long red desk—as if we don't see enough red on Mars—with a map showing the Isidis Planitia basin; New Klondike was a big circle off to one side.

The desk sergeant was a flabby lowbrow named Huxley, whose uniform always seemed a size too small for him. "Hey, Hux," I said, walking over. "Is Mac in?"

Huxley consulted a monitor, then nodded. "Yeah, he's in, but he don't see just anyone."

"I'm not just anyone, Hux. I'm the guy who picks up the pieces after you clowns bungle things."

Huxley frowned, trying to think of a rejoinder. "Yeah, well..." he said, at last.

"Oooh," I said. "Good one, Hux! Way to put me in my place."

He narrowed his eyes. "You ain't as funny as you think you are, Lomax," he said.

"Of course I'm not," I said. "Nobody could be *that* funny. I nodded at the secured inner door. "Going to buzz me through?"

"Only to be rid of you," said Huxley. So pleased was he with the wit of this remark that he repeated it: "Only to be rid of you."

Huxley reached below the counter, and the inner door—an unmarked black panel—slid aside. I pantomimed tipping a nonexistent hat at Hux, and headed into the station proper. I then walked down the corridor to McCrae's office; the door was open, so I rapped my knuckles against the plastic jamb.

"Lomax!" he said, looking up. "Decided to turn yourself in?"

"Very funny, Mac," I said. "You and Hux should go on the road together."

He snorted. "What can I do for you, Alex?"

Mac was a skinny biological, with shaggy orange eyebrows shielding his blue eyes. "I'm looking for a guy named Joshua Wilkins."

Mac had a strong Scottish brogue—so strong, I figured it must be an affectation. "Ah, yes," he said. "Who's your client? The wife?"

I nodded.

"A bonnie lass," he said.

"That she is," I said. "Anyway, you tried to find her husband, this Wilkins..."

"We looked around, yeah," said Mac. "He's a transfer, you knew that?"

I nodded.

"Well," Mac said, "she gave us the plans for his new face—precise measurements, and all that. We've been feeding all the video made by public security cameras through facial-recognition software. So far, no luck."

I smiled. That's about as far as Mac's detective work normally went: things he could do without hauling his bony ass out from behind his desk. "How much of New Klondike do they cover now?" I asked.

"It's down to sixty percent of the public areas," said Mac. People kept smashing the cameras, and the city didn't have the time or money to replace them.

"You'll let me know if you find anything?"

Mac drew his shaggy eyebrows together. "You know the privacy laws, Alex. I can't divulge what the security cameras see."

I reached into my pocket, pulled out a fifty-solar coin, and flipped it. It went up rapidly, but came down in what still seemed like slow motion to me, even after all these years on Mars; Mac didn't require any special reflexes to catch it in midair. "Of course," he said, "I suppose we could make an exception..."

"Thanks. You're a credit to law-enforcement officials everywhere."

He snorted again, then: "Say, what kind of heat you packing these days? You still carrying that old Smith & Wesson?"

"I've got a license," I said, narrowing my eyes.

"Oh, I know, I know. But be careful, eh? The times, they are a-changin'. Bullets aren't much use against a transfer, and there are getting to be more of those each day."

I nodded. "So I've heard. How do you guys handle them?"

"Until recently, as little as possible," said Mac. "Turning a blind eye, and all that."

"Saves getting up," I said.

Mac didn't take offense. "Exactly. But let me show you something." We left his office, went further down

the corridor and entered another room. He pointed to a device on the table. "Just arrived from Earth," he said. "The latest thing."

It was a wide, flat disk, maybe half a meter in diameter, and five centimeters thick. There were a pair of U-shaped handgrips attached to the edge, opposite each other. "What is it?" I asked.

"A broadband disrupter," he said. He picked it up and held it in front of himself, like a gladiator's shield. "It discharges an oscillating multifrequency electromagnetic pulse. From a distance of four meters or less, it will completely fry the artificial brain of a transfer—killing it as effectively as a bullet kills a human."

"I don't plan on killing anyone," I said.

"That's what you said the last time."

Ouch. Still, maybe he had a point. "I don't suppose you have a spare one I can borrow?"

Mac laughed. "Are you kidding? This is the only one we've got so far."

"Well, then," I said, heading for the door, "I guess I'd better be careful."

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My next stop was the NewYou building. I took Third Avenue, one of the radial streets of the city, out the five blocks to it. The building was two stories tall and was made, like most structures here, of red laser-fused Martian sand bricks. Flanking the main doors were a pair of wide alloquartz display windows, showing dusty artificial bodies dressed in fashions from about two mears ago; it was high time somebody updated things.

Inside, the store was part showroom and part workshop, with spare parts components about: here, a white-skinned artificial hand; there, a black lower leg; on shelves, synthetic eyes and spools of colored monofilament that I guessed were used to simulate hair. There were also all sorts of internal parts on worktables: motors and hydraulic pumps and joint hinges. A half-dozen technicians were milling around, assembling new bodies or repairing old ones.

Across the room, I spotted Cassandra Wilkins, wearing a beige suit today. She was talking with a man and a woman, who were biological; potential customers, presumably. "Hello, Cassandra," I said, after I'd closed the distance between us.

"Mr. Lomax!" she said, excusing herself from the couple. "I'm so glad you're here—so very glad! What news do you have?"

"Not much," I said. "I've been to visit the cops, and I thought I should start my investigation here. After all, your husband owned this franchise, right?"

Cassandra nodded enthusiastically. "I knew I was doing the right thing hiring you," she said. "I just knew it! Why, do you know that lazy detective McCrae never stopped by here—not even once!"

I smiled. "Mac's not the outdoorsy type," I said. "And, well, you get what you pay for."

"Isn't that the truth?" said Cassandra. "Isn't that just the God's honest truth!"

"You said your husband moved his mind recently?"

She nodded her head. "Yes. All of that goes on upstairs, though. This is just sales and service down here."

"Can you show me?" I asked.

She nodded again. "Of course—anything you want to see, Mr. Lomax!" What I wanted to see was under that beige suit—nothing beat the perfection of a transfer's body—but I kept that thought to myself. Cassandra looked around the room, then motioned for another staff member—also female, also a transfer, also gorgeous, and this one did wear tasteful makeup and jewelry—to come over. "I'm sorry," Cassandra said to the two customers she'd abandoned a few moments ago. "Miss Takahashi here will look after you." She then turned to me. "This way."

We went through a curtained doorway and up a set of stairs. "Here's our scanning room," said Cassandra, indicating the left-hand one of a pair of doors; both doors had little windows in them. She stood on tiptoe to look in the scanning-room window, and nodded, apparently satisfied by what she saw, then opened the door. Two people were inside: a balding man of about forty, who was seated, and a standing woman who looked twenty-five; the woman was a transfer herself, though so there was no way of knowing her real age. "So sorry to interrupt," Cassandra said. She looked at the man in the chair, while gesturing at me. "This is Alexander Lomax. He's providing some, ah, consulting services for us."

The man looked at me, surprised, then said, "Klaus Hansen," by way of introduction.

"Would you mind ever so much if Mr. Lomax watched while the scan was being done?" asked Cassandra.

Hansen considered this for a moment, frowning his long, thin face. But then he nodded. "Sure. Why not?"

"Thanks," I said. "I'll just stand over here." I moved to the far wall and leaned back against it.

The chair Hansen was sitting in looked a lot like a barber's chair. The female transfer who wasn't Cassandra reached up above the chair and pulled down a translucent hemisphere that was attached by an articulated arm to the ceiling. She kept lowering it until all of Hansen's head was covered, and then she turned to a control console.

The hemisphere shimmered slightly, as though a film of oil was washing over its surface; the scanning field, I supposed.

Cassandra was standing next to me, arms crossed in front of her chest. It was an unnatural-looking pose, given her large bosom. "How long does the scanning take?" I asked.

"It's a quantum-mechanical process," she replied. "So the scanning is rapid. But it'll take about ten minutes to move the data into the artificial brain. And then..."

"And then?" I said.

She lifted her shoulders, as if the rest didn't need to be spelled out. "Why, and then Mr. Hansen will be able to live forever."

"Ah," I said.

"Come along," said Cassandra. "Let's go see the other side." We left that room, closing its door behind us, and entered the one next door. This room was a mirror image of the previous one, which I guess was appropriate. Standing erect in the middle of the room, supported by a metal armature, was Hansen's new body, dressed in a fashionable blue suit; its eyes were closed. Also in the room was a male NewYou technician, who was biological.

I walked around, looking at the artificial body from all angles. The replacement Hansen still had a bald

spot, although its diameter had been reduced by half. And, interestingly, Hansen had opted for a sort of permanent designer-stubble look; the biological him was clean-shaven at the moment.

Suddenly the simulacrum's eyes opened. "Wow," said a voice that was the same as the one I'd heard from the man next door. "That's incredible."

"How do you feel, Mr. Hansen?" asked the male technician.

"Fine," he said. "Just fine."

"Good," the technician said. "There'll be some settling-in adjustments, of course. Let's just check to make sure all your parts are working..."

"And there it is," said Cassandra, to me. "Simple as that." She led me out of the room, back into the corridor.

"Fascinating," I said. I pointed at the left-hand door. "When do you take care of the original?"

"That's already been done. We do it in the chair."

I stared at the closed door, and I like to think I suppressed my shudder enough so that Cassandra was unaware of it. "All right," I said. "I guess I've seen enough."

Cassandra looked disappointed. "Are you sure don't want to look around some more?"

"Why?" I said. "Is there anything else worth seeing?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Cassandra. "It's a big place. Everything on this floor, everything downstairs ... everything in the basement."

I blinked. "You've got a basement?" Almost no Martian buildings had basements; the permafrost layer was very hard to dig through.

"Yes," she said. "Oh, yes." She paused, then looked away. "Of course, no one ever goes down there; it's just storage."

"I'll have a look," I said.

And that's where I found him.

He was lying behind some large storage crates, face down, a sticky pool of machine oil surrounding his head. Next to him was a fusion-powered jackhammer, the kind many of the fossil hunters had for removing surface rocks. And next to the jackhammer was a piece of good old-fashioned paper. On it, in block letters, was written, "I'm so sorry, Cassie. It's just not the same."

It's hard to commit suicide, I guess, when you're a transfer. Slitting your wrists does nothing significant. Poison doesn't work, and neither does drowning.

But Joshua-never-anything-else-at-all-anymore Wilkins had apparently found a way. From the looks of it, he'd leaned back against the rough cement wall, and, with his strong artificial arms, had held up the jackhammer, placing its bit against the center of his forehead. And then he'd held down on the jackhammer's twin triggers, letting the unit run until it had managed to pierce through his titanium skull and scramble the soft material of his artificial brain. When his brain died, his thumbs let up on the triggers, and he dropped the jackhammer, then tumbled over himself. His head had twisted sideways when it hit the concrete floor. Everything below his eyebrows was intact; it was clearly the same face Cassandra

Wilkins had shown me.

I headed up the stairs and found Cassandra, who was chatting in her animated style with another customer.

"Cassandra," I said, pulling her aside. "Cassandra, I'm very sorry, but..."

She looked at me, her green eyes wide. "What?"

"I've found your husband. And he's dead."

She opened her pretty mouth, closed it, then opened it again. She looked like she might fall over, even with gyroscopes stabilizing her. I put an arm around her shoulders, but she didn't seem comfortable with it, so I let her go. "My ... God," she said at last. "Are you ... are you positive?"

"Sure looks like him," I said.

"My God," she said again. "What ... what happened?"

No nice way to say it. "Looks like he killed himself."

A couple of Cassandra's coworkers had come over, wondering what all the commotion was about. "What's wrong?" asked one of them—the same Miss Takahashi I'd seen earlier.

"Oh, Reiko," said Cassandra. "Joshua is dead!"

Customers were noticing what was going on, too. A burly flesh-and-blood man, with arms as thick around as most men's leg's, came across the room; he seemed to be the boss here. Reiko Takahashi had already drawn Cassandra into her arms—or vice-versa; I'd been looking away when it had happened—and was stroking Cassandra's artificial hair. I let the boss do what he could to calm the crowd, while I used my commlink to call Mac and inform him of Joshua Wilkins's suicide.

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Detective Dougal McCrae of New Klondike's finest arrived about twenty minutes later, accompanied by two uniforms. "How's it look, Alex?" Mac asked.

"Not as messy as some of the biological suicides I've seen," I said. "But it's still not a pretty sight."

"Show me."

I led Mac downstairs. He read the note without picking it up.

The burly man soon came down, too, followed by Cassandra Wilkins, who was holding her artificial hand to her artificial mouth.

"Hello, again, Mrs. Wilkins," said Mac, moving to interpose his body between her and the prone form on the floor. "I'm terribly sorry, but I'll need you to make an official identification."

I lifted my eyebrows at the irony of requiring the next of kin to actually look at the body to be sure of who it was, but that's what we'd gone back to with transfers. Privacy laws prevented any sort of ID chip or tracking device being put into artificial bodies. In fact, that was one of the many incentives to transfer; you no longer left fingerprints or a trail of identifying DNA everywhere you went.

Cassandra nodded bravely; she was willing to accede to Mac's request. He stepped aside, a living curtain, revealing the artificial body with the gaping head wound. She looked down at it. I'd expected her

to quickly avert her eyes, but she didn't; she just kept staring.

Finally, Mac said, very gently, "Is that your husband, Mrs. Wilkins?"

She nodded slowly. Her voice was soft. "Yes. Oh, my poor, poor Joshua..."

Mac stepped over to talk to the two uniforms, and I joined them. "What do you do with a dead transfer?" I asked. "Seems pointless to call in the medical examiner."

By way of answer, Mac motioned to the burly man. The man touched his own chest and raised his eyebrows in the classic, "Who, me?" expression. Mac nodded again. The man looked left and right, like he was crossing some imaginary road, and then came over. "Yeah?"

"You seem to be the senior employee here," said Mac. "Am I right?"

The man nodded. "Horatio Fernandez. Joshua was the boss, but, yeah, I guess I'm in charge until head office sends somebody new out from Earth."

"Well," said Mac, "you're probably better equipped than we are to figure out the exact cause of death."

Fernandez gestured theatrically at the synthetic corpse, as if it were—well not *bleedingly* obvious, but certainly apparent.

Mac nodded. "It's just a bit too pat," he said, his voice lowered conspiratorially. "Implement at hand, suicide note." He lifted his shaggy orange eyebrows. "I just want to be sure."

Cassandra had drifted over without Mac noticing, although of course I had. She was listening in.

"Yeah," said Fernandez. "Sure. We can disassemble him, check for anything else that might be amiss."

"No," said Cassandra. "You can't."

"I'm afraid it's necessary," said Mac, looking at her. His Scottish brogue always put an edge on his words, but I knew he was trying to sound gentle.

"No," said Cassandra, her voice quavering. "I forbid it."

Mac's voice got a little firmer. "You can't. I'm legally required to order an autopsy in every suspicious case."

Cassandra wheeled on Fernandez. "Horatio, I order you not to do this."

Fernandez blinked a few times. "Order?"

Cassandra opened her mouth to say something more, then apparently thought better of it. Horatio moved closer to her, and put a hulking arm around her small shoulders. "Don't worry," he said. "We'll be gentle." And then his face brightened a bit. "In fact, we'll see what parts we can salvage—give them to somebody else; somebody who couldn't afford such good stuff if it was new." He smiled beatifically. "It's what Joshua would have wanted."

* * *

The next day, I was sitting in my office, looking out the small window. The dust storm had ended. Out on the surface, rocks were strewn everywhere, like toys on a kid's bedroom floor. My wrist commlink buzzed, and I looked at it in anticipation, hoping for a new case; I could use the solars. But the ID line said NKPD. I told the device to accept the call, and a little picture of Mac's red-headed face appeared

on my wrist. "Hey, Lomax," he said. "Come on by the station, would you?"

"What's up?"

The micro-Mac frowned. "Nothing I want to say over open airwaves."

I nodded. Now that the Wilkins case was over, I didn't have anything better to do anyway. I'd only managed about seven billable hours, dammitall, and even that had taken some padding.

I walked into the center along Ninth Avenue, entered the lobby of the police station, traded quips with the ineluctable Huxley, and was admitted to the back.

"Hey, Mac," I said. "What's up?"

"Morning, Alex," Mac said, rolling the R in "Morning." "Come in; sit down." He spoke to his desk terminal, and turned its monitor around so I could see it. "Have a look at this."

I glanced at the screen. "The report on Joshua Wilkins?" I said.

Mac nodded. "Look at the section on the artificial brain."

I skimmed the text, until I found that part. "Yeah?" I said, still not getting it.

"Do you know what 'baseline synaptic web' means?" Mac asked.

"No, I don't. And you didn't either, smart-ass, until someone told you."

Mac smiled a bit, conceding that. "Well, there were lots of bits of the artificial brain left behind. And that big guy at NewYou—Fernandez, remember?—he really got into this forensic stuff, and decided to run it through some kind of instrument they've got there. And you know what he found?"

"What?"

"The brain stuff—the raw material inside the artificial skull—was pristine. It had never been imprinted."

"You mean no scanned mind had ever been transferred into that brain?"

Mac folded his arms across his chest and leaned back in his chair. "Bingo."

I frowned. "But that's not possible. I mean, if there was no mind in that head, who wrote the suicide note?"

Mac lifted those shaggy eyebrows of his. "Who indeed?" he said. "And what happened to Joshua Wilkins's scanned consciousness?"

"Does anyone at NewYou but Fernandez know about this?" I asked.

Mac shook his head. "No, and he's agreed to keep his mouth shut while we continue to investigate. But I thought I'd clue you in, since apparently the case you were on isn't really closed—and, after all, if you don't make money now and again, you can't afford to bribe me for favors."

I nodded. "That's what I like about you, Mac. Always looking out for my best interests."

* * *

Perhaps I should have gone straight to see Cassandra Wilkins, and made sure that we both agreed that I was back on the clock, but I had some questions I wanted answered first. And I knew just who to turn

to. Raoul Santos was the city's top computer expert. I'd met him during a previous case, and we'd recently struck up a small friendship—we both shared the same taste in bootleg Earth booze, and he wasn't above joining me at some of New Klondike's sleazier saloons to get it. I used my commlink to call him, and we arranged to meet at the Bent Chisel.

The Bent Chisel was a little hellhole off of Fourth Avenue, in the sixth concentric ring of buildings. I made sure I had my revolver, and that it was loaded, before I entered. The bartender was a surly man named Buttrick, a biological who had more than his fair share of flesh, and blood as cold as ice. He wore a sleeveless black shirt, and had a three-day growth of salt-and-pepper beard. "Lomax," he said, acknowledging my entrance. "No broken furniture this time, right?"

I held up three fingers. "Scout's honor."

Buttrick held up one finger.

"Hey," I said. "Is that any way to treat one of your best customers?"

"My best customers," said Buttrick, polishing a glass with a ratty towel, "pay their tabs."

"Yeah," I said, stealing a page from Sgt. Huxley's *Guide to Witty Repartee*. "Well." I headed on in, making my way to the back of the bar, where my favorite booth was located. The waitresses here were topless, and soon enough one came over to see me. I couldn't remember her name offhand, although we'd slept together a couple of times. I ordered a scotch on the rocks; they normally did that with carbon-dioxide ice here, which was much cheaper than water ice on Mars. A few minutes later, Raoul Santos arrived. "Hey," he said, taking a seat opposite me. "How's tricks?"

"Fine," I said. "She sends her love."

Raoul made a puzzled face, then smiled. "Ah, right. Cute. Listen, don't quit your day job."

"Hey," I said, placing a hand over my heart, "you wound me. Down deep, I'm a stand-up comic."

"Well," said Raoul, "I always say people should be true to their innermost selves, but..."

"Yeah?" I said. "What's your innermost self?"

"Me?" Raoul raised his eyebrows. "I'm pure genius, right to the very core."

I snorted, and the waitress reappeared. She gave me my glass. It was just a little less full than it should have been: either Buttrick was trying to curb his losses on me, or the waitress was miffed that I hadn't acknowledged our former intimacy. Raoul placed his order, talking directly into the woman's breasts. Boobs did well in Mars gravity; hers were still perky even though she had to be almost forty.

"So," said Raoul, looking over steepled fingers at me. "What's up?" His face consisted of a wide forehead, long nose, and receding chin; it made him look like he was leaning forward even when he wasn't.

I took a swig of my drink. "Tell me about this transferring game."

"Ah, yes," said Raoul. "Fascinating stuff. Thinking of doing it?"

"Maybe someday," I said.

"You know, it's supposed to pay for itself within three mears," he said, "cause you no longer have to pay life-support tax after you've transferred."

I was in arrears on that, and didn't like to think about what would happen if I fell much further behind. "That'd be a plus," I said. "What about you? You going to do it?"

"Sure. I want to live forever; who doesn't? 'Course, my dad won't like it."

"Your dad? What's he got against it?"

Raoul snorted. "He's a minister."

"In whose government?" I asked.

"No, no. A *minister*. Clergy."

"I didn't know there were any of those left, even on Earth," I said.

"He *is* on Earth, but, yeah, you're right. Poor old guy still believes in souls."

I raised my eyebrows. "Really?"

"Yup. And because he believes in souls, he has a hard time with this idea of transferring consciousness. He would say the new version isn't the same person."

I thought about what the supposed suicide note said. "Well, is it?"

Raoul rolled his eyes. "You, too? Of course it is! The mind is just software—and since the dawn of computing, software has been moved from one computing platform to another by copying it over, then erasing the original."

I frowned, but decided to let that go for the moment. "So, if you do transfer, what would you have fixed in your new body?"

Raoul spread his arms. "Hey, man, you don't tamper with perfection."

"Yeah," I said. "Sure. Still, how much could you change things? I mean, say you're a midget; could you choose to have a normal-sized body?"

"Sure, of course."

I frowned. "But wouldn't the copied mind have trouble with your new size?"

"Nah," said Raoul. The waitress returned. She bent over far enough while placing Raoul's drink on the table that her breast touched his bare forearm; she gave me a look that said, "See what you're missing, tiger?" When she was gone, Raoul continued. "See, when we first started copying consciousness, we let the old software from the old mind actually try to directly control the new body. It took months to learn how to walk again, and so on."

"Yeah, I read something about that, years ago," I said.

Raoul nodded. "Right. But now we don't let the copied mind do anything but give orders. The thoughts are intercepted by the new body's main computer. *That* unit runs the body. All the transferred mind has to do is *think* that it wants to pick up this glass, say." He acted out his example, and took a sip, then winced in response to the booze's kick. "The computer takes care of working out which pulleys to contract, how far to reach, and so on."

"So you could indeed order up a body radically different from your original?" I said.

"Absolutely," said Raoul. He looked at me through hooded eyes. "Which, in your case, is probably the route to go."

"Damn," I said.

"Hey, don't take it seriously," he said, taking another sip, and allowing himself another pleased wince. "Just a joke."

"I know," I said. "It's just that I was hoping it wasn't that way. See, this case I'm on: the guy I'm supposed to find owns the NewYou franchise here."

"Yeah?" said Raoul.

"Yeah, and I think he deliberately transferred his scanned mind into some body other than the one that he'd ordered up for himself."

"Why would he do that?"

"He faked the death of the body that looked like him—and, I think he'd planned to do that all along, because he never bothered to order up any improvements to his face. I think he wanted to get away, but make it look like he was dead, so no one would be looking for him anymore."

"And why would he do that?"

I frowned, then drank some more. "I'm not sure."

"Maybe he wanted to escape his spouse."

"Maybe—but she's a hot little number."

"Hmm," said Raoul. "Whose body do you think he took?"

"I don't know that, either. I was hoping the new body would have to be at least roughly similar to his old one; that would cut down on the possible suspects. But I guess that's not the case."

"It isn't, no."

I nodded, and looked down at my drink. The dry-ice cubes were sublimating into white vapor that filled the top part of the glass.

"Something else is bothering you," said Raoul. I lifted my head, and saw him taking a swig of his drink. A little bit of amber liquid spilled out of his mouth and formed a shiny bead on his recessed chin. "What is it?"

I shifted a bit. "I visited NewYou yesterday. You know what happens to your original body after they move your mind?"

"Sure," said Raoul. "Like I said, there's no such thing as moving software. You copy it, then delete the original. They euthanize the biological version, once the transfer is made, by frying the original brain."

I nodded. "And if the guy I'm looking for put his mind into the body intended for somebody else's mind, and that person's mind wasn't copied anywhere, then..." I took another swig of my drink. "Then it's murder, isn't it? Souls or no souls—it doesn't matter. If you shut down the one and only copy of someone's mind, you've murdered that person, right?"

"Oh, yes," said Raoul. "Deader than Mars itself is now."

I glanced down at the swirling fog in my glass. "So I'm not just looking for a husband who's skipped out on his wife," I said. "I'm looking for a cold-blooded killer."

* * *

I went by NewYou again. Cassandra wasn't in—but that didn't surprise me; she was a grieving widow now. But Horatio Fernandez—he of the massive arms—was on duty.

"I'd like a list of all the people who were transferred the same day as Joshua Wilkins," I said.

He frowned. "That's confidential information."

There were several potential customers milling about. I raised my voice so they could hear. "Interesting suicide note, wasn't it?"

Fernandez grabbed my arm and led me quickly to the side of the room. "What the hell are you doing?" he whispered angrily.

"Just sharing the news," I said, still speaking loudly, although not quite loud enough now, I thought, for the customers to hear. "People thinking of uploading should know that it's not the same—at least, that's what Joshua Wilkins said in that note."

Fernandez knew when he was beaten. The claim in the putative suicide note was exactly the opposite of NewYou's corporate position: transferring was supposed to be flawless, conferring nothing but benefits. "All right, all right," he hissed. "I'll pull the list for you."

"Now that's service," I said. "They should name you employee of the month."

He led me into the back room and spoke to a computer terminal. I happened to overhear the passphrase for accessing the customer database; it was just six words—hardly any security at all.

Eleven people had moved their consciousnesses into artificial bodies that day. I had him transfer the files on each of the eleven into my wrist commlink. "Thanks," I said, doing that tip-of-the-nonexistent-hat thing I do. Even when you've forced a man to do something, there's no harm in being polite.

* * *

If I was right that Joshua Wilkins had appropriated the body of somebody else who had been scheduled to transfer the same day, it shouldn't be too hard to figure out who's body he'd taken; all I had to do, I figured, was interview each of the eleven.

My first stop, purely because it happened to be the nearest, was the home of a guy named Stuart Berling, a full-time fossil hunter. He must have had some recent success, if he could afford to transfer.

Berling's home was part of a row of townhouses off Fifth Avenue, in the fifth ring. I pushed his door buzzer, and waited impatiently for a response. At last he appeared. If I wasn't so famous for my poker face, I'd have done a double take. The man who greeted me was a dead ringer for Krikor Ajemian, the holovid star—the same gaunt features and intense eyes, the same mane of dark hair, the same tightly trimmed beard and mustache. I guess not everyone wanted to keep even a semblance of their original appearance.

"Hello," I said. "My name is Alexander Lomax. Are you Stuart Berling?"

The artificial face in front of me surely was capable of smiling, but choose not to. "Yes. What do you

want?"

"I understand you only recently transferred your consciousness into this body."

A nod. "So?"

"So, I work for the NewYou—the head office on Earth. I'm here to check up on the quality of the work done by our franchise here on Mars." Normally, this was a good technique. If Berling was who he said he was, the question wouldn't faze him. But if we was really Joshua Wilkins, he'd know I was lying, and his expression might betray this. But transfers didn't have faces that were as malleable; if this person was startled or suspicious, nothing in his plastic features indicated it.

"So?" Berling said again.

"So I'm wondering if you were satisfied by the work done for you?"

"It cost a lot," said Berling.

I smiled. "Yes, it does. May I come in?"

He considered this for a few moments, then shrugged. "Sure, why not?" He stepped aside.

His living room was full of work tables, covered with reddish rocks from outside the dome. A giant lens on an articulated arm was attached to one of the work tables, and various geologist's tools were scattered about.

"Finding anything interesting?" I asked, gesturing at the rocks.

"If I was, I certainly wouldn't tell you," said Berling, looking at me sideways in the typical paranoid-pro prospector's way.

"Right," I said. "Of course. So, *are* you satisfied with the NewYou process?"

"Sure, yeah. It's everything they said it would be. All the parts work."

"Thanks for your help," I said, pulling out my PDA to make a few notes, and then frowning at its blank screen. "Oh, damn," I said. "The silly thing has a loose fusion pack. I've got to open it up and reseal it." I showed him the back of the unit's case. "Do you have a little screwdriver that will fit that?"

Everybody owned some screwdrivers, even though most people rarely needed them, and they were the sort of thing that had no standard storage location. Some people kept them in kitchen drawers, others kept them in tool chests, still others kept them under the bathroom sink. Only a person who had lived in this home for a while would know where they were.

Berling peered at the little slot-headed screw, then nodded. "Sure," he said. "Hang on."

He made an unerring beeline for the far-side of the living room, going to a cabinet that had glass doors on its top half, but solid metal ones on its bottom. He bent over, opened one of the metal doors, reached in, rummaged for a bit, and emerged with the appropriate screwdriver.

"Thanks," I said, opening the case in such a way that he couldn't see inside. I then surreptitiously removed the little bit of plastic I'd used to insulate the fusion battery from the contact it was supposed to touch. Meanwhile, without looking up, I said, "Are you married, Mr. Berling?" Of course, I already knew the answer was yes; that fact was in his NewYou file.

He nodded.

"Is your wife home?"

His artificial eyelids closed a bit. "Why?"

I told him the honest truth, since it fit well with my cover story: "I'd like to ask her whether she can perceive any differences between the new you and the old."

Again, I watched his expression, but it didn't change. "Sure, I guess that'd be okay." He turned and called over his shoulder, "Lacie!"

A few moments later, a homely flesh-and-blood woman of about fifty appeared. "This person is from the head office of NewYou," said Berling, indicating me with a pointed finger. "He'd like to speak to you."

"About what?" asked Lacie. She had a deep, not-unpleasant voice.

"Might we speak in private?" I said.

Berling's gaze shifted from Lacie to me, then back to Lacie. "Hrmpph," he said, but then, a moment later, added, "I guess that'd be all right." He turned around and walked away.

I looked at Lacie. "I'm just doing a routine follow-up," I said. "Making sure people are happy with the work we do. Have you noticed any changes in your husband since he transferred?"

"Not really."

"Oh?" I said. "If there's anything at all..." I smiled reassuringly. "We want to make the process as perfect as possible. Has he said anything that's surprised you, say?"

Lacie crinkled her face. "How do you mean?"

"I mean, has he used any expressions or turns of phrase you're not used to hearing from him?"

A shake of the head. "No."

"Sometimes the process plays tricks with memory. Has he failed to know something he should know?"

"Not that I noticed," said Lacie.

"What about the reverse? Has he known anything that you wouldn't expect him to know?"

She lifted her eyebrows. "No. He's just Stuart."

I frowned. "No changes at all?"

"No, none ... well, almost none."

I waited for her to go on, but she didn't, so I prodded her. "What is it? We really would like to know about any difference, any flaw in our transference process."

"Oh, it's not a flaw," said Lacie, not meeting my eyes.

"No? Then what?"

"It's just that..."

"Yes?"

"Well, just that he's a demon in the sack now. He stays hard forever."

I frowned, disappointed not to have found what I was looking for on the first try. But I decided to end the masquerade on a positive note. "We aim to please, ma'am. We aim to please."

* * *

I spent the next several hours interviewing four other people; none of them seemed to be anyone other than who they claimed to be.

Next on my list was Dr. Rory Pickover, whose home was an apartment in the innermost circle of buildings, beneath the highest point of the dome. He lived alone, so there was no spouse or child to question about any changes in him. That made me suspicious right off the bat: if one were going to choose an identity to appropriate, it ideally would be someone without close companions. He also refused to meet me at his home, meaning I couldn't try the screwdriver trick on him.

I thought we might meet at a coffee shop or a restaurant—there were lots in New Klondike, although none were doing good business these days. But he insisted we go outside the dome—out onto the Martian surface. That was easy for him; he was a transfer now. But it was a pain in the ass for me; I had to rent a surface suit.

We met at the south air lock just as the sun was going down. I suited up—surface suits came in three stretchy sizes; I took the largest. The fish-bowl helmet I rented was somewhat frosted on one side; sandstorm-scouring, no doubt. The air tanks, slung on my back, were good for about four hours. I felt heavy in the suit, even though in it I still weighed only about half of what I had back on Earth.

Rory Pickover was a paleontologist—an actual scientist, not a treasure-seeking fossil hunter. His pre-transfer appearance had been almost stereotypically academic: a round, soft face, with a fringe of graying hair. His new body was lean and muscular, and he had a full head of dark brown hair, but the face was still recognizably his. He was carrying a geologist's hammer, with a wide, flat blade; I rather suspected it would nicely smash my helmet. I had surreptitiously transferred the Smith & Wesson from the holster I wore under my jacket to an exterior pocket on the rented surface suit, just in case I needed it while we were outside.

We signed the security logs, and then let the technician cycle us through the air lock.

Off in the distance, I could see the highland plateau, dark streaks marking its side. Nearby, there were two large craters and a cluster of smaller ones. There were few footprints in the rusty sand; the recent storm had obliterated the thousands that had doubtless been there earlier. We walked out about five hundred meters. I turned around briefly to look back at the transparent dome and the buildings within.

"Sorry for dragging you out here," said Pickover. He had a cultured British accent. "I don't want any witnesses." Even the cheapest artificial body had built-in radio equipment, and I had a transceiver inside my helmet.

"Ah," I said, by way of reply. I slipped my gloved hand into the pocket containing the Smith & Wesson, and wrapped my fingers around its reassuring solidity.

"I know you aren't just in from Earth," said Pickover, continuing to walk. "And I know you don't work for NewYou."

We were casting long shadows; the sun, so much tinier than it appeared from Earth, was sitting on the

horizon; the sky was already purpling, and Earth itself was visible, a bright blue-white evening star.

"Who do you think I am?" I asked.

His answer surprised me, although I didn't let it show. "You're Alexander Lomax, the private detective."

Well, it didn't seem to make any sense to deny it. "Yeah. How'd you know?"

"I've been checking you out over the last few days," said Pickover. "I'd been thinking of, ah, engaging your services."

We continued to walk along, little clouds of dust rising each time our feet touched the ground. "What for?" I said.

"You first, if you don't mind," said Pickover. "Why did you come to see me?"

He already knew who I was, and I had a very good idea who he was, so I decided to put my cards on the table. "I'm working for your wife."

Pickover's artificial face looked perplexed. "My ... wife?"

"That's right."

"I don't have a wife."

"Sure you do. You're Joshua Wilkins, and your wife's name is Cassandra."

"What? No, I'm Rory Pickover. You know that. You called me."

"Come off it, Wilkins. The jig is up. You transferred your consciousness into the body intended for the real Rory Pickover, and then you took off."

"I—oh. Oh, Christ."

"So, you see, I know. Too bad, Wilkins. You'll hang—or whatever the hell they do with transfers—for murdering Pickover."

"No." He said it softly.

"Yes," I replied, and now I pulled out my revolver. It really wouldn't be much use against an artificial body, but until quite recently Wilkins had been biological; hopefully, he was still intimidated by guns. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"Back under the dome, to the police station. I'll have Cassandra meet us there, just to confirm your identity."

The sun had slipped below the horizon now. He spread his arms, a supplicant against the backdrop of the gathering night. "Okay, sure, if you like. Call up this Cassandra, by all means. Let her talk to me. She'll tell you after questioning me for two seconds that I'm not her husband. But—Christ, damn, Christ."

"What?"

"I want to find him, too."

"Who? Joshua Wilkins?"

He nodded, then, perhaps thinking I couldn't see his nod in the growing darkness, said, "Yes."

"Why?"

He tipped his head up, as if thinking. I followed his gaze. Phobos was visible, a dark form overhead. At last, he spoke again. "Because *I'm* the reason he's disappeared."

"What?" I said. "Why?"

"That's why I was thinking of hiring you myself. I didn't know where else to turn."

"Turn for what?"

Pickover looked at me. "I did go to NewYou, Mr. Lomax. I knew I was going to have an enormous amount of work to do out here on the surface now, and I wanted to be able to spend days—weeks!—in the field, without worrying about running out of air, or water, or food."

I frowned. "But you've been here on Mars for six years; I read that in your file. What's changed?"

"*Everything*, Mr. Lomax." He looked off in the distance. "Everything!" But he didn't elaborate on that. Instead, he said. "I certainly know this Wilkins chap you're looking for; I went to his store, and had him transfer my consciousness from my old biological body into this one. But he also kept a copy of my mind—I'm sure of that."

I raised my eyebrows. "How do you know?"

"Because my computer accounts have been compromised. There's no way anyone but me can get in; I'm the only one who knows the passphrase. But someone *has* been inside, looking around; I use quantum encryption, so you can tell whenever someone has even *looked* at a file." He shook his head. "I don't know how he did it—there must be some technique I'm unaware of—but somehow Wilkins has been extracting information from the copy of my mind. That's the only way I can think of that anyone might have learned my passphrase."

"You think Wilkins did all this to access your bank accounts? Is there really enough money in them to make it worth starting a new life in somebody else's body? It's too dark to see your clothes right now, but, if I recall correctly, they looked a bit ... shabby."

"You're right. I'm just a poor scientist. But there's something I know that could make the wrong people rich beyond their wildest dreams."

"And what's that?" I said.

He continued to walk along, trying to decide, I suppose, whether to trust me. I let him think about that, and at last, Dr. Rory Pickover, who was now just a starless silhouette against a starry sky, said, in a soft, quiet voice, "I know where it is."

"Where what is?"

"The alpha deposit."

"The what?"

"Sorry," he said. "Paleontologist's jargon. What I mean is, I've found it: I've found the mother lode. I've

found the place where Weingarten and O'Reilly had been excavating. I've found the source of the best preserved, most-complete Martian fossils."

"My God," I said. "You'll be *rolling* in it."

Perhaps he shook his head; it was now too dark to tell. "No, sir," he said, in that cultured English voice. "No, I won't. I don't want to *sell* these fossils. I want to preserve them; I want to protect them from these plunderers, these ... these *thieves*. I want to make sure they're collected properly, scientifically. I want to make sure they end up in the best museums, where they can be studied. There's so much to be learned, so much to discover!"

"Does Wilkins know now where this ... what did you call it? This alpha deposit is?"

"No—at least, not from accessing my computer files. I didn't record the location anywhere but up here." Presumably he was tapping the side of his head.

"But you think Wilkins extracted the passphrase from a copy of your mind?"

"He must have."

"And now he's presumably trying to extract the location of the alpha deposit from that copy of your mind."

"Yes, yes! And if he succeeds, all will be lost! The best specimens will be sold off into private collections—trophies for some trillionaire's estate, hidden forever from science."

I shook my head. "But this doesn't make any sense. I mean, how would Wilkins even know that you had discovered the alpha deposit?"

Suddenly Pickover's voice was very small. "I'd gone in to NewYou—you have to go in weeks in advance of transferring, of course, so you can tell them what you want in a new body; it takes time to custom-build one to your specifications."

"Yes. So?"

"So, I wanted a body ideally suited to paleontological work on the surface of Mars; I wanted some special modifications—the kinds of the things only the most successful prospectors could afford. Reinforced knees; extra arm strength for moving rocks; extended spectral response in the eyes, so that fossils will stand out better; night vision so that I could continue digging after dark; but..."

I nodded. "But you didn't have enough money."

"That's right. I could barely afford to transfer at all, even into the cheapest off-the-shelf body, and so..."

He trailed off, too angry at himself, I guess, to give voice to what was in his mind. "And so you hinted that you were about to come into some wealth," I said, "and suggested that maybe he could give you what you needed now, and you'd make it up to him later."

Pickover sounded sad. "That's the trouble with being a scientist; sharing information is our natural mode."

"Did you tell him precisely what you'd found?" I asked.

"No. No, but he must have guessed. I'm a paleontologist, I've been studying Weingarten and O'Reilly for years—all of that is a matter of public record. He must have figured out that I knew where their fossil beds are. After all, where else would a guy like me get money?" He sighed. "I'm an idiot, aren't I?"

"Well, Mensa isn't going to be calling you any time soon."

"Please don't rub it in, Mr. Lomax. I feel bad enough as it is, and—" His voice cracked; I'd never heard a transfer's do that before. "And now I've put all those lovely, lovely fossils in jeopardy! Will you help me, Mr. Lomax? Please say you'll help me!"

I nodded. "All right. I'm on the case."

* * *

We went back into the dome, and I called Raoul Santos on my commlink, getting him to meet me at Rory Pickover's little apartment at the center of town. It was four floors up, and consisted of three small rooms—an interior unit, with no windows.

When Raoul arrived, I made introductions. "Raoul Santos, this is Rory Pickover. Raoul here is the best computer expert we've got in New Klondike. And Dr. Pickover is a paleontologist."

Raoul tipped his broad forehead at Pickover. "Good to meet you."

"Thank you," said Pickover. "Forgive the mess, Mr. Santos. I live alone. A lifelong bachelor gets into bad habits, I'm afraid." He'd already cleared debris off of one chair for me; he now busied himself doing the same with another chair, this one right in front of his home computer.

"What's up, Alex?" asked Raoul, indicating Pickover with a movement of his head. "New client?"

"Yeah," I said. "Dr. Pickover's computer files have been looked at by some unauthorized individual. We're wondering if you could tell us from where the access attempt was made."

"You'll owe me a nice round of drinks at the Bent Chisel," said Raoul.

"No problem," I said. "I'll put it on my tab."

Raoul smiled, and stretched his arms out, fingers interlocked, until his knuckles cracked. Then he took the now-clean seat in front of Pickover's computer and began to type. "How do you lock your files?" he asked, without taking his eyes off the monitor.

"A verbal passphrase," said Pickover.

"Anybody besides you know it?"

Pickover shook his artificial head. "No."

"And it's not written down anywhere?"

"No, well ... not as such."

Raoul turned his head, looking up at Pickover. "What do you mean?"

"It's a line from a book. If I ever forgot the exact wording, I could always look it up."

Raoul shook his head in disgust. "You should always use random passphrases." He typed keys.

"Oh, I'm sure it's totally secure," said Pickover. "No one would guess—"

Raoul interrupted. "Your passphrase being, 'Those privileged to be present ...'"

I saw Pickover's jaw drop. "My God. How did you know that?"

Raoul pointed to some data on the screen. "It's the first thing that was inputted by the only outside access your system has had in weeks."

"I thought passphrases were hidden from view when entered," said Pickover.

"Sure they are," said Raoul. "But the comm program has a buffer; it's in there. Look."

Raoul shifted in the chair so that Pickover could see the screen clearly over his shoulder. "That's ... well, that's very strange," said Pickover.

"What?"

"Well, sure that's my passphrase, but it's not quite right."

I loomed in to have a peek at the screen, too. "How do you mean?" I said.

"Well," said Pickover, "see, my passphrase is 'Those privileged to be present at a family festival of the Forsytes'—it's from the opening of *The Man of Property*, the first book of the Forsyte Saga by John Galsworthy. I love that phrase because of the alliteration—'privilege to be present,' 'family festival of the Forsytes.' Makes it easy to remember."

Raoul shook his head in you-can't-teach-people-anything disgust. Pickover went on. "But, see, whoever it was typed in even more."

I looked at the glowing string of letters. In full it said: *Those privileged to be present at a family festival of the Forsytes have seen them dine at half past eight, enjoying seven courses.*

"It's too much?" I said.

"That's right," said Pickover, nodding. "My passphrase ends with the word 'Forsytes.'"

Raoul was stroking his receding chin. "Doesn't matter," he said. "The files would unlock the moment the phrase was complete; the rest would just be discarded—systems that principally work with spoken commands don't require you to press the enter key."

"Yes, yes, yes," said Pickover. "But the rest of it isn't what Galsworthy wrote. It's not even close. *The Man of Property* is my favorite book; I know it well. The full opening line is 'Those privileged to be present at a family festival of the Forsytes have seen that charming and instructive sight—an upper middle-class family in full plumage.'" Nothing about the time they ate, or how many courses they had."

Raoul pointed at the text on screen, as if it had to be the correct version. "Are you sure?" he said.

"Of course!" said Pickover. "Galsworthy's public domain; you can do a search online and see for yourself."

I frowned. "No one but you knows your passphrase, right?"

Pickover nodded vigorously. "I live alone, and I don't have many friends; I'm a quiet sort. There's no one I've ever told, and no one who could have ever overheard me saying it, or seen me typing it in."

"Somebody found it out," said Raoul.

Pickover looked at me, then down at Raoul. "I think..." he said, beginning slowly, giving me a chance to stop him, I guess, before he said too much. But I let him go on. "I think that the information was extracted from a scan of my mind made by NewYou."

Raoul crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Impossible."

"What?" said Pickover, and "Why?" said I.

"Can't be done," said Raoul. "We know how to copy the vast array of interconnections that make up a human mind, and we know how to reconstitute those connections in an artificial substrate. But we don't know how to decode them; nobody does. There's simply no way to sift through a digital copy of a mind and extract specific data."

Damn! If Raoul was right—and he always was in computing matters—then all this business with Pickover was a red herring. There probably was no bootleg scan of his mind; despite his protestations of being careful, someone likely had just overheard his passphrase, and decided to go spelunking through his files. While I was wasting time on this, Joshua Wilkins was doubtless slipping further out of my grasp.

Still, it was worth continuing this line of investigation for a few minutes more. "Any sign of where the access attempt was made?" I asked Raoul.

He shook his head. "No. Whoever did it knew what they were doing; they covered their tracks well. The attempt came over an outside line—that's all I can tell for sure."

I nodded. "Okay. Thanks, Raoul. Appreciate your help."

Raoul got up. "My pleasure. Now, how 'bout that drink."

I opened my mouth to say yes, but then it hit me—what Wilkins must be doing. "Umm, later, okay? I've—I've got some more things to take care of here."

Raoul frowned; he'd clearly hoped to collect his booze immediately. But I started maneuvering him toward the door. "Thanks for your help, Raoul. I really appreciate it."

"Um, sure, Alex," he said. He was obviously aware he was being given the bum's rush, but he wasn't fighting it too much. "Anytime."

"Yes, thank you awfully, Mr. Santos," said Pickover.

"No problem. If—"

"See you later, Raoul," I said, opening the door for him. "Thanks so much." I tipped my nonexistent hat at him.

Raoul shrugged, clearly aware that something was up, but not motivated sufficiently to find out what. He went through the door, and I hit the button that caused it to slide shut behind him. As soon as it was closed, I put an arm around Pickover's shoulders, and propelled him back to the computer. I pointed at the line Raoul had highlighted on the screen, and read the ending of it aloud: "... dine at half past eight, enjoying seven courses."

Pickover nodded. "Yes. So?"

"Numbers are often coded info," I said. "Half past eight; seven courses.' What's that mean to you?"

"To me?" said Pickover. "Nothing. I like to eat much earlier than that, and I never have more than one course."

"But it could be a message," I said.

"From who?"

There was no easy way to tell him this. "From you to you."

He drew his artificial eyebrows together in puzzlement. "What?"

"Look," I said, motioning for him to sit down in front of the computer, "Raoul is doubtless right. You can't sift a digital scan of a human mind for information."

"But that must be what Wilkins is doing."

I shook my head. "No," I said. "The only way to find out what's in a mind is to ask it interactively."

"But ... but no one's asked me my passphrase."

"No one has asked *this* you. But Joshua Wilkins must have transferred the extra copy of your mind into a body, so that he could deal with it directly. And that extra copy must be the one that's revealed your codes to him."

"You mean ... you mean there's another me? Another *conscious* me?"

"Looks that way."

"But ... no, no. That's ... why, that's *illegal*. Bootleg copies of human beings—my God, Lomax, it's obscene!"

"I'm going to go see if I can find him," I said.

"*It*," said Pickover, forcefully.

"What?"

"*It*. Not him. I'm the only 'him'—the only real Rory Pickover."

"So what do you want me to do when I find it?"

"Erase it, of course. Shut it down." He shuddered. "My God, Lomax, I feel so ... so violated! A stolen copy of my mind! It's the ultimate invasion of privacy..."

"That may be," I said. "But the bootleg is trying to tell you something. He—*it*—gave Wilkins the passphrase, and then tacked some extra words onto it, in order to get a message to you."

"But I don't recognize those extra words," said Pickover, sounding exasperated.

"Do they *mean* anything to you? Do they suggest anything?"

Pickover re-read what was on the screen. "I can't imagine what," he said, "unless ... no, no, I'd never think up a code like that."

"You obviously just *did* think of it. What's the code?"

Pickover was quiet for a moment, as if deciding if the thought was worth giving voice. Then: "Well, New Klondike is circular in layout, right? And it consists of concentric rings of buildings. Half past eight—that would be between Eighth and Ninth Avenue, no? And seven courses—in the seventh circle out from the center? Maybe the damned bootleg is trying to draw our attention to a location, a specific place here in town."

"Between Eighth and Ninth, eh? That's a rough area. I go to a gym near there."

"The old shipyards," said Pickover. "Aren't they there?"

"Yeah." I started walking toward the door. "I'm going to investigate."

"I'll go with you," said Pickover.

I looked at him and shook my head. He would doubtless be more of a hindrance than a help. "It's too dangerous," I said. "I should go alone."

Pickover looked for a few moments like he was going to protest, but then he nodded. "All right. I hope you find Wilkins. But if you find another me..."

"Yes?" I said. "What would you like me to do?"

Pickover gazed at me with pleading eyes. "Erase it. Destroy it." He shuddered again. "I never want to see the damned thing."

* * *

I had to get some sleep—damn, but sometimes I do wish I were a transfer. I took the hovertram out to my apartment, and let myself have five hours—Mars hours, admittedly, which were slightly longer than Earth ones—and then headed out to the old shipyards. The sun was just coming up as I arrived there. The sky through the dome was pink in the east and purple in the west.

Some active maintenance and repair work was done on spaceships here, but most of these ships were no longer spaceworthy and had been abandoned. Any one of them would make a good hideout, I thought; spaceships were shielded against radiation, making it hard to scan through their hulls to see what was going on inside.

The shipyards were large fields holding vessels of various sizes and shapes. Most were streamlined—even Mars's tenuous atmosphere required that. Some were squatting on tail fins; some were lying on their bellies; some were supported by articulated legs. I tried every hatch I could see on these craft, but, so far, they all had their air locks sealed tightly shut.

Finally, I came to a monstrous abandoned spaceliner—a great hull, some three hundred meters long, fifty meters wide, and a dozen meters high. The name *Mayflower II* was still visible in chipped paint near the bow—which is the part I came across first—and the slogan "Mars or Bust!" was also visible.

I walked a little farther alongside the hull, looking for a hatch, until—

Yes! I finally understood what a fossil hunter felt like when he at last turned up a perfectly preserved rhizomorph. There was an outer airlock door here, and it was open. The other door, inside, was open, too. I stepped through the chamber, entering the ship proper. There were stands for holding space suits, but the suits themselves were long gone.

I walked over to the far end of the room, and found another door—one of those submarine-style ones with a locking wheel in the center. This one was closed, and I figured it would probably have been sealed shut at some point, but I tried to turn the wheel anyway, just to be sure, and damned if it didn't spin freely, disengaging the locking bolts. I pulled the door open, and stepped through it, into a corridor. The door was on spring-loaded hinges; as soon as I let go of it, it closed behind me, plunging me into darkness.

Of course, I'd brought a flashlight. I pulled it off my belt and thumbed it on.

The air was dry and had a faint odor of decay to it. I headed down the corridor, the pool of illumination from my flashlight going in front of me, and—

A squealing noise. I swung around, and the beam from my flashlight caught the source before it scurried away: a large brown rat, its eyes two tiny red coals in the light. People had been trying to get rid of the rats—and cockroaches and silverfish and other vermin that had somehow made it here from Earth—for mears.

I turned back around and headed deeper into the ship. The floor wasn't quite level: it dipped a bit to—to, starboard, they'd call it—and I also felt that I was gaining elevation as I walked along. The ship's floor had no carpeting; it was just bare, smooth metal. Oily water pooled along the starboard side; a pipe must have ruptured at some point. Another rat scurried by up ahead; I wondered what they ate here, aboard the dead hulk of the ship.

I thought I should check in with Pickover—let him know where I was. I activated my commlink, but the display said it was unable to connect. Of course: the radiation shielding in the spaceship's hull kept signals from getting out.

It was getting awfully cold. I held my flashlight straight up in front of my face, and saw that my breath was now coming out in visible clouds. I paused and listened. There was a steady dripping sound: condensation, or another leak. I continued along, sweeping the flashlight beam left and right in good detective fashion as I did so.

There were doors at intervals along the corridor—the automatic sliding kind you usually find aboard spaceships. Most of these panels had been pried open, and I shone my flashlight into each of the revealed rooms. Some were tiny passenger quarters, some were storage, one was a medical facility—all the equipment had been removed, but the examining beds betrayed the room's function.

I checked yet another set of quarters, then came to a closed door, the first one I'd seen along this hallway.

I pushed the open button, but nothing happened; the ship's electrical system was dead. Of course, there was an emergency handle, recessed into the door's thickness. I could have used three hands just then: one to hold my flashlight, one to hold my revolver, and one to pull on the handle. I tucked the flashlight into my right armpit, held my gun with my right hand, and yanked on the recessed handle with my left.

The door hardly budged. I tried again, pulling harder—and almost popped my arm out of its socket. Could the door's tension control have been adjusted to require a transfer's strength to open it? Perhaps.

I tried another pull, and to my astonishment, light began to spill out from the room. I'd hoped to just yank the door open, taking advantage of the element of surprise, but the damned thing was only moving a small increment with each pull of the handle. If there was someone on the other side, and he or she had a gun, it was no doubt now leveled directly at the door.

I stopped for a second, shoved the flashlight into my pocket, and—damn, I hated having to do this—holstered my revolver so that I could free up my other hand to help me pull the door open. With both hands now gripping the recessed handle, I pulled with all my strength, letting out an audible grunt as I did so.

The light from within stung my eyes; they'd grown accustomed to the soft beam from the flashlight. Another pull, and the door panel had now slid far enough into the wall for me to slip into the room by turning sideways. I took out my gun, and let myself in.

A voice, harsh and mechanical, but no less pitiful for that: "*Please...*"

My eyes swung to the source of the sound. There was a worktable, with a black top, attached to the far wall. And strapped to that table—

Strapped to that table was a transfer's synthetic body. But this wasn't like the fancy, almost-perfect simulacrum that my client Cassandra inhabited. This was a crude, simple humanoid form, with a boxy torso and limbs made up of cylindrical metal segments. And the face—

The face was devoid of any sort of artificial skin. The eyes, blue in color and looking startlingly human, were wide, and the teeth looked like dentures loose in the head. The rest of the face was a mess of pulleys and fiber optics, of metal and plastic.

"*Please ...* " said the voice again. I looked around the rest of the room. There was a fusion battery, about the size of a softball, with several cables snaking out of it, including some that led to portable lights. There was also a closet, with a simple door. I pulled it open—this one slid easily—to make sure no one else had hidden in there while I was coming in. An emaciated rat that had been trapped there at some point scooted out of the closet, and through the still partially open corridor door.

I turned my attention to the transfer. The body was clothed in simple denim pants and a T-shirt.

"Are you okay?" I said, looking at the skinless face.

The metal skull moved slightly left and right. The plastic lids for the glass eyeballs retracted, making the non-face into a caricature of imploring. "*Please ...* , " he said for a third time.

I looked at the metal restraints holding the artificial body in place: thin nylon bands, pulled taut, that were attached to the tabletop. I couldn't see any release mechanism. "Who are you?" I said.

I was half-prepared for the answer, of course. "Rory Pickover." But it didn't sound anything like the Rory Pickover I'd met: the cultured British accent was absent, and this synthesized voice was much higher pitched.

Still, I shouldn't take this sad thing's statement at face value—especially since it had hardly any face. "Prove it," I said. "Prove you're Rory Pickover."

The glass eyes looked away. Perhaps the transfer was thinking of how to satisfy my demand—or perhaps he was just avoiding my eyes. "My citizenship number is 48394432."

I shook my head. "No good," I said. "It's got to be something *only* Rory Pickover would know."

The eyes looked back at me, the plastic lids lowered, perhaps in suspicion. "It doesn't matter who I am," he said. "Just get me out of here."

That sounded reasonable on the surface of it, but if this *was* another Rory Pickover...

"Not until you prove your identity to me," I said. "Tell me where the alpha deposit is."

"Damn you," said the transfer. "The other way didn't work, so now you're trying this." The mechanical head looked away. "But this won't work, either."

"Tell me where the alpha deposit is," I said, "and I'll free you."

"I'd rather die," he said. And then, a moment later, he added wistfully, "Except..."

I finished the thought for him. "Except you can't."

He looked away again. It was hard to feel for something that looked so robotic; that's my excuse, and I'm sticking to it. "Tell me where O'Reilly and Weingarten were digging. Your secret is safe with me."

He said nothing. The gun in my hand was now aimed at the robotic head. "Tell me!" I said. "Tell me before—"

Off in the distance, out in the corridor: the squeal of a rat, and—

Footfalls.

The transfer heard them, too. Its eyes darted left and right in what looked like panic.

"Please," he said, lowering his volume. As soon as he started speaking, I put a vertical index finger to my lips, indicating that he should be quiet, but he continued: "Please, for the love of God, get me out of here. I can't take any more."

I made a beeline for the closet, stepping quickly in and pulling that door most of the way shut behind me. I positioned myself so that I could see—and, if necessary, shoot—through the gap. The footfalls were growing louder. The closet smelled of rat. I waited.

I heard a voice, richer, more human, than the supposed Pickover's. "What the—?"

And I saw a person—a transfer—slipping sideways into the room, just as I had earlier. I couldn't yet see the face from this angle, but it wasn't Joshua. The body was female, and I could see that she was a brunette. I took in air, held it, and—

And she turned, showing her face now. My heart pounded. The delicate features. The wide-spaced green eyes.

Cassandra Wilkins.

My client.

She'd been carrying a flashlight, which she set now on another, smaller table. "Who's been here, Rory?" Her voice was cold.

"No one," he said.

"The door was open."

"You left it that way. I was surprised, but..." He stopped, perhaps realizing to say any more would be a giveaway that he was lying.

She tilted her head slightly. Even with a transfer's strength, that door must be hard to close. Hopefully she'd find it plausible that she'd given the handle a final tug, and had only assumed that the door had closed completely when she'd last left. Of course, I immediately saw the flaw with that story: you might miss the door not clicking into place, but you wouldn't fail to notice that light was still spilling out into the corridor. But most people don't consider things in such detail; I'd hoped she'd buy Pickover's suggestion.

And, after a moment more's reflection, she seemed to do just that, nodding her head, apparently to herself, then moving closer to the table onto which the synthetic body was strapped. "We don't have to do this again," said Cassandra. "If you just tell me..."

She let the words hang in the air for a moment, but Pickover made no response. Her shoulders moved up and down a bit in a philosophical shrug. "It's your choice," she said. And then, to my astonishment, she hauled back her right arm and slapped Pickover hard across the robotic face, and—

And Pickover screamed.

It was a long, low, warbling sound, like sheet-metal being warped, a haunted sound, an inhuman sound.

"Please ... " he hissed again, the same plaintive word he'd said to me, the word I, too, had ignored.

Cassandra slapped him again, and again he screamed. Now, I've been slapped by lots of women over the years: it stings, but I've never screamed. And surely an artificial body was made of sterner stuff than me.

Cassandra went for a third slap. Pickover's screams echoed in the dead hulk of the ship.

"Tell me," she said.

I couldn't see his face; her body was obscuring it. Maybe he shook his head. Maybe he just glared defiantly. But he said nothing.

She shrugged again; they'd obviously been down this road before. She moved to one side of the bed and stood by his right arm, which was pinned to his body by the nylon strap. "You really don't want me to do this," she said. "And I don't have to, if..." She let the uncompleted offer hang there for a few seconds, then: "Ah, well." She reached down with her beige, realistic-looking hand, and wrapped three of her fingers around his right index finger. And then she started bending it backward.

I could see Pickover's face now. Pulleys along his jawline were working; he was struggling to keep his mouth shut. His glass eyes were rolling up, back into his head, and his left leg was shaking in spasms. It was a bizarre display, and I alternated moment by moment between feeling sympathy for the being lying there, and feeling cool detachment because of the clearly artificial nature of the body.

Cassandra let go of Pickover's index finger, and, for a second, I thought she was showing some mercy. But then she grabbed it as well as the adjacent finger, and began bending them both back. This time, despite his best efforts, guttural, robotic sounds did escape from Pickover.

"Talk!" Cassandra said. "*Talk!*"

I'd recently learned—from Cassandra herself—that artificial bodies had to have pain sensors; otherwise, a robotic hand might end up resting on a heating element, or too much pressure might be put on a joint. But I hadn't expected such sensors to be so sensitive, and—

And then it hit me, just as another of Pickover's warbling screams was torn from him. Cassandra knew all about artificial bodies; she sold them, after all. If she wanted to adjust the mind-body interface of one so that pain would register particularly acutely, doubtless she could. I'd seen a lot of evil things in my time, but this was perhaps the worst. Scan a mind, put it in a body wired for hypersensitivity to pain, and torture it until it gave up its secrets. Then, of course, you just wipe the mind, and—

"You *will* crack eventually, you know," she said, almost conversationally, as she looked at Pickover's fleshless face. "Given that it's inevitable, you might as well just tell me what I want to know."

The elastic bands that served as some of Pickover's facial muscles contracted, his teeth parted, and his head moved forward slightly but rapidly. I thought for half a second that he was incongruously blowing her a kiss, but then I realized what he was really trying to do: spit at her. Of course, his dry mouth and

plastic throat were incapable of generating moisture, but his mind—a human mind, a mind accustomed to a biological body—had summoned and focused all its hate into that most primal of gestures.

"Very well," said Cassandra. She gave his fingers one more nasty yank backwards, holding them at an excruciating angle. Pickover alternated screams and whimpers. Finally, she let his fingers go. "Let's try something different," she said. She leaned over him. With her left hand, she pried his right eyelid open, and then she jabbed her right thumb into that eye. The glass sphere depressed into the metal skull, and Pickover screamed again. The artificial eye was presumably much tougher than a natural one, but, then again, the thumb pressing into it was also tougher. I felt my own eyes watering in a sympathetic response.

Pickover's artificial spine arched up slightly, as he convulsed against the two restraining bands. From time to time, I got clear glimpses of Cassandra's face, and the perfectly symmetrical artificial smile of glee on it was almost as sickening.

At last, she stopped grinding her thumb into his eye. "Had enough?" she said. Because if you haven't..."

Pickover was indeed still wearing clothing; it was equally gauche to walk the streets nude whether you were biological or artificial. But now, Cassandra's hands moved to his waist. I watched as she undid his belt, unsnapped and unzipped his jeans, and then pulled the pants as far down his metallic thighs as they would go before she reached the restraining strap that held his legs to the table. Transfers had no need for underwear, and Pickover wasn't wearing any. His artificial penis and testicles now lay exposed. I felt my own scrotum tightening in dread.

And then Cassandra did the most astonishing thing. She'd had no compunctions about bending back his fingers with her bare hands. And she hadn't hesitated when it came to plunging her naked thumb into his eye. But now that she was going to hurt him down there, she seemed to want no direct contact. She started looking around the room; for a second, she was looking directly at the closet door. I scrunched back against the far wall, hoping she wouldn't see me. My heart was pounding.

Finally, she found what she was looking for: a wrench, sitting on the floor. She picked it up, raised the wrench above her head and, and looked directly into Pickover's one good eye—the other had closed as soon as she'd removed her thumb, and had never reopened as far as I could tell. "I'm going to smash your ball bearings into iron filings, unless..."

He closed his other eye now, the plastic lid scrunching.

"Count of three," she said. "One."

"I can't," he said in that low volume that served as his whisper. "You'd ruin them, sell them off—"

"Two."

"Please! They belong to science! To all humanity!"

"Three!"

Her arm slammed down, a great arc slicing through the air, the silver wrench smashing into the plastic pouch that was Pickover's scrotum. He let out a scream greater than any I'd yet heard, so loud, indeed, that it hurt my ears despite the muffling of the partially closed closet door.

She hauled her arm up again, but waited for the scream to devolve into a series of whimpers. "One more chance," she said. "Count of three." His whole body was shaking. I felt nauseous.

"One."

He turned his head to the side, as if by looking away he could make the torture stop.

"Two."

A whimper escaped his artificial throat.

"Three!"

I found myself looking away, too, unable to watch as—

"All right!"

It was Pickover's voice, shrill and mechanical, shouting.

"All right!" he shouted again. I turned back to face the tableau: the human-looking woman with a wrench held up above her head, and the terrified mechanical-looking man strapped to the table. "All right," he repeated once more, softly now. "I'll tell you what you want to know."

"You'll tell me where the alpha deposit is?" asked Cassandra lowering her arm.

"Yes," he said. "Yes."

"Where?"

Pickover was quiet."

"Where?"

"God forgive me..." he said softly.

She began to raise her arm again. *"Where?"*

"Sixteen-point-four kilometers south-southwest of Nili Patera," he said. "The precise coordinates are..." and he spoke a string of numbers.

"You better be telling the truth," Cassandra said.

"I am." His voice was tiny. "To my infinite shame, I am."

Cassandra nodded. "Maybe. But I'll leave you tied up here until I'm sure."

"But I told you the truth! I told you everything you need to know."

"Sure you did," said Cassandra. "But I'll just confirm that."

I stepped out the closet, my gun aimed directly at Cassandra's back. "Freeze," I said.

Cassandra spun around. "Lomax!"

"Mrs. Wilkins," I said, nodding. "I guess you don't need me to find your husband for you anymore, eh? Now that you've got the information he stole."

"What? No, no. I still want you to find Joshua. Of course I do!"

"So you can share the wealth with him?"

"Wealth?" She looked over at the hapless Pickover. "Oh. Well, yes, there's a lot of money at stake." She

smiled. "So much so that I'd be happy to cut you in, Mr. Lomax—oh, you're a good man. I know you wouldn't hurt me!"

I shook my head. "You'd betray me the first chance you got."

"No, I wouldn't. I'll need protection; I understand that—what with all the money the fossils will bring. Having someone like you on my side only makes sense."

I looked over at Pickover and shook my head. "You tortured that man."

"That 'man,' as you call him, wouldn't have existed at all without me. And the real Pickover isn't inconvenienced in the slightest."

"But ... *torture*," I said. "It's inhuman."

She jerked a contemptuous thumb at Pickover. "He's not human. Just some software running on some hardware."

"That's what you are, too."

"That's *part* of what I am," Cassandra said. "But I'm also *authorized*. He's bootleg—and bootlegs have no rights."

"I'm not going to argue philosophy with you."

"Fine. But remember who works for whom, Mr. Lomax. I'm the client—and I'm going to be on my way now."

I held my gun rock-steady. "No, you're not."

She looked at me. "An interesting situation," she said, her tone even. "I'm unarmed, and you've got a gun. Normally, that would put you in charge, wouldn't it? But your gun probably won't stop me. Shoot me in the head, and the bullet will just bounce off my metal skull. Shoot me in the chest, and at worst you might damage some components that I'll eventually have to get replaced—which I can, and at a discount, to boot.

"Meanwhile," she continued, "I have the strength of ten men; I could literally pull your limbs from their sockets, or crush your head between my hands, squeezing it until it pops like a melon and your brains, such as they are, squirt out. So, what's it going to be, Mr. Lomax? Are you going to let me walk out that door and be about my business? Or are you going to pull that trigger, and start something that's going to end with you dead?"

I was used to a gun in my hand giving me a sense of power, of security. But just then, the Smith & Wesson felt like a lead weight. She was right: shooting her with it was likely to be no more useful than just throwing it at her. Of course, there were crucial components in an artificial body's makeup; I just didn't happen to know what they were, and, anyway, they probably varied from model to model. If I could be sure to drop her with one shot, I'd do it. I'd killed before in self-defense, but...

But this wasn't self-defense. Not really. If I didn't start something, she was just going to walk out. Could I kill in cold ... well, not cold *blood*. But she *was* right: she was a person, even if Pickover wasn't. She was the one and only legal instantiation of Cassandra Wilkins. The cops might be corrupt here, and they might be lazy. But even they wouldn't turn a blind eye on attempted murder. If I shot her, and somehow got away, they'd hunt me down. And if I didn't get away, she *would* be attacking me in self-defense.

"So," she said, at last. "What's it going to be?"

"You make a persuasive argument, Mrs. Wilkins," I said in the most reasonable tone I could muster under the circumstances.

And then, without changing my facial expression in the slightest, I pulled the trigger.

I wondered if a transfer's time sense ever slows down, or if it is always perfectly quartz-crystal timed. Certainly, time seemed to attenuate for me then. I swear I could actually see the bullet as it followed its trajectory from my gun, covering the three meters between the barrel and—

And not, of course, Cassandra's torso.

Nor her head.

She was right; I probably couldn't harm her that way.

No, instead, I'd aimed past her, at the table on which the *faux* Pickover was lying on his back. Specifically, I'd aimed at the place where the thick nylon band that crossed over his torso, pinning his arms, was anchored on the right-hand side—the point where it made a taut diagonal line between where it was attached to the side of the table and the top of Pickover's arm.

The bullet sliced through the band, cutting it in two. The long portion, freed of tension, flew up and over his torso like a snake that had just had forty thousand volts pumped through it.

Cassandra's eyes went wide in astonishment that I'd missed her, and her head swung around. The report of the bullet was still ringing in my ears, of course, but I swear I could also hear the *zzzzinnng!* of the restraining band snapping free. To be hypersensitive to pain, I figured you'd have to have decent reaction times, and I hoped that Pickover had been smart enough to note in advance my slight deviation of aim before I fired it.

And, indeed, no sooner were his arms free than he sat bolt upright—his legs were still restrained—and grabbed one of Cassandra's arms, pulling her toward him. I leapt in the meager Martian gravity. Most of Cassandra's body was made of lightweight composites and synthetic materials, but I was still good old flesh and blood: I outmassed her by at least thirty kilos. My impact propelled her backwards, and she slammed against the table's side. Pickover shot out his other arm, grabbing Cassandra's second arm, pinning her backside against the edge of the table. I struggled to regain a sure footing, then brought my gun up to her right temple.

"All right, sweetheart," I said. "Do you really want to test how strong your artificial skull is?"

Cassandra's mouth was open; had she still been biological, she'd probably have been gasping for breath. But her heartless chest was perfectly still. "You can't just shoot me," she said.

"Why not? Pickover here will doubtless back me up when I say it was self-defense, won't you, Pickover?"

He nodded. "Absolutely."

"In fact," I said, "you, me, this Pickover, and the other Pickover are the only ones who know where the alpha deposit is. I think the three of us would be better off without you on the scene anymore."

"You won't get away with it," said Cassandra. "You can't."

"I've gotten away with plenty over the years," I said. "I don't see an end to that in sight." I cocked the hammer, just for fun.

"Look," she said, "there's no need for this. We can all share in the wealth. There's plenty to go around."

"Except you don't have any rightful claim to it," said Pickover. "You stole a copy of my mind, and tortured me. And you want to be rewarded for that?"

"Pickover's right," I said. "It's his treasure, not yours."

"It's *humanity's* treasure," corrected Pickover. "It belongs to all mankind."

"But I'm your client," Cassandra said to me.

"So's he. At least, the legal version of him is."

Cassandra sounded desperate. "But—but that's a conflict of interest!"

"So sue me," I said.

She shook her head in disgust. "You're just in this for yourself!"

I shrugged amiably, and then pressed the barrel even tighter against her artificial head. "Aren't we all?"

"Shoot her," said Pickover. I looked at him. He was still holding her upper arms, pressing them in close to her torso. If he'd been biological, the twisting of his torso to accommodate doing that probably would have been quite uncomfortable. Actually, now that I thought of it, given his heightened sensitivity to pain, even this artificial version was probably hurting from twisting that way. But apparently this was a pain he was happy to endure.

"Do you really want me to do that?" I said. "I mean, I can understand, after what she did to you, but..." I didn't finish the thought; I just left it in the air for him to take or leave.

"She *tortured* me," he said. "She deserves to die."

I frowned, unable to dispute his logic—but, at the same time, wondering if Pickover knew that he was as much on trial here as she was.

"Can't say I blame you," I said again, and then added another "but," and once more left the thought incomplete.

At last, Pickover nodded. "But maybe you're right. I can't offer her any compassion, but I don't need to see her dead."

A look of plastic relief rippled over Cassandra's face. I nodded. "Good man," I said. I'd killed before, but I never enjoyed it.

"But, still," said Pickover, "I would like *some* revenge."

Cassandra's upper arms were still pinned by Pickover, but her lower arms were free. To my astonishment, they both moved. The movement startled me, and I looked down, just in time to see them jerking toward her groin, almost as if to protect...

I found myself staggering backward; it took a second for me to regain my balance. "*Oh, my God...*"

Cassandra had quickly moved her arms back to a neutral, hanging-down position—but it was too late. The damage had been done.

"You..." I said. I normally was never at a loss for words, but I was just then. "You're..."

Pickover had seen it, too; his torso had been twisted just enough to allow him to do so.

"No woman..." he began slowly.

Cassandra hadn't wanted to touch Pickover's groin—even though it was artificial—with her bare hands. And when Pickover had suggested exacting revenge for what had been done to him, Cassandra's hands had moved instinctively to protect—

Jesus, why hadn't I see it before? The way she plunked herself down in a chair, the fact that she couldn't bring herself to wear makeup or jewelry in her new body; her discomfort at intimately touching or being intimately touched by men: it was obvious in retrospect.

Cassandra's hands had moved instinctively to protect *her own testicles*.

"You're not Cassandra Wilkins," I said.

"Of course I am," said the female voice.

"Not on the inside, you're not," I said. "You're a man. Whatever mind has been transferred into that body is male."

Cassandra twisted violently. God-damned Pickover, perhaps stunned by the revelation, had obviously loosened his grip, because she got free. I fired my gun again and the bullet went straight into her chest; a streamer of machine oil, like from a punctured can, shot out, but there was no sign that the bullet had slowed her down.

"Don't let her get away!" shouted Pickover, in his rough mechanical voice. I swung my gun on him, and for a second I could see terror in his eyes, as if he thought I meant to off him for letting her twist away. But I aimed at the nylon strap restraining his legs and fired. This time, the bullet only partially severed the strap. I reach down and yanked at the remaining filaments, and so did Pickover. They finally broke and this strap, like the first, snapped free. Pickover swung his legs off the table, and immediately stood up. An artificial body had many advantages, among them not being woozy or dizzy after lying down for God-only-knew how many days.

In the handful of seconds it had taken to free Pickover, Cassandra had made it out the door that I'd pried partway open, and was now running down the corridor in the darkness. I could hear splashing sounds, meaning she'd veered far enough off the corridor's centerline to end up in the water pooling along the starboard side, and I heard her actually bump into the wall at one point, although she immediately continued on. She didn't have her flashlight, and the only illumination in the corridor would have been what was spilling out of the room I was now in—a fading glow to her rear as she ran along, whatever shadow she herself was casting adding to the difficulty of seeing ahead.

I squeezed out into the corridor. I still had my flashlight in my pocket; I fished it out and aimed it just in front of me; Cassandra wouldn't benefit much from the light it was giving off. Pickover, who, I noted, had now done his pants back up, had made his way through the half-open door and was now standing beside me. I started running, and he fell in next to me.

Our footfalls now drowned out the sound of Cassandra's; I guessed she must be some thirty or forty meters ahead. Although it was almost pitch black, she presumably had the advantage of having come

down this corridor several times before; neither Pickover nor I had ever gone in this direction.

A rat scampered out of our way, squealing as it did so. My breathing was already ragged, but I managed to say, "How well can you guys see in the dark?"

Pickover's voice, of course, showed no signs of exertion. "Only slightly better than biologicals can."

I nodded, although he'd have to have had better vision than he'd just laid claim to in order to see it. My legs were a lot longer than Cassandra's, but I suspected she could pump them more rapidly. I swung the flashlight beam up, letting it lance out ahead of us for a moment. There she was, off in the distance. I dropped the beam back to the floor in front of me.

More splashing from up ahead; she'd veered off once more. I thought about firing a shot—more for the drama of it, than any serious hope of bringing her down—when I suddenly became aware that Pickover was passing me. His robotic legs were as long as my natural ones, and he could piston them up and down at least as quickly as Cassandra could.

I tried to match his speed, but wasn't able to. Even in Martian gravity, running fast is hard work. I swung my flashlight up again, but Pickover's body, now in front of me, was obscuring everything further down the corridor; I had no idea how far ahead Cassandra was now—and the intervening form of Pickover prevented me from acting out my idle fantasy of squeezing off a shot.

Pickover continued to pull ahead. I was passing open door after open door, black mouths gaping at me in the darkness. I heard more rats, and Pickover's footfalls, and—

Suddenly, something jumped on my back from behind me. A hard arm was around my neck, pressing sharply down on my Adam's apple. I tried to call out to Pickover, but couldn't get enough breath out ... or in. I craned my neck as much as I could, and shone the flashlight beam up on the ceiling, so that some light reflected down onto my back from above.

It was Cassandra! She'd ducked into one of the other rooms, and lain in wait for me. Pickover was no detective; he had completely missed the signs of his quarry no longer being in front of him—and I'd had Pickover's body blocking my vision, plus the echoing bangs of his footfalls to obscure my hearing. I could see my own chilled breath, but, of course, not hers.

I tried again to call out to Pickover, but all I managed was a hoarse croak, doubtless lost on him amongst the noise of his own running. I was already oxygen-deprived from exertion, and the constricting of my throat was making things worse; despite the darkness I was now seeing white flashes in front of my eyes, a sure sign of asphyxiation. I only had a few seconds to act—

And act I did. I crouched down as low as I could, Cassandra still on my back, her head sticking up above mine, and I leapt with all the strength I could muster. Even weakened, I managed a powerful kick, and in this low Martian gravity, I shot up like a bullet. Cassandra's metal skull smashed into the roof of the corridor. There happened to be a lighting fixture directly above me, and I heard the sounds of shattering glass and plastic.

I was descending now in maddeningly slow motion, but as soon as I was down, Cassandra still clinging hard to me, I surged forward a couple of paces then leapt up again. This time, there was nothing but unrelenting bulkhead overhead, and Cassandra's metal skull slammed hard into it.

Again the slow-motion fall. I felt something thick and wet oozing through my shirt. For a second, I'd thought Cassandra had stabbed me—but no, it was probably the machine oil leaking from the bullet hole I'd put in her earlier. By the time we had touched down again, Cassandra had loosened her grip on my

neck as she tried to scramble off me. I spun around and fell forward, pushing her backward onto the corridor floor, me tumbling on top of her. Despite my best efforts, the flashlight was knocked from my grip by the impact, and it spun around, doing a few complete circles before it ended up with its beam facing away from us.

I still had my revolver in my other hand, though. I brought it up, and, by touch, found Cassandra's face, probing the barrel roughly over it. Once, in my early days, I'd rammed a gun barrel into a thug's mouth; this time, I had other ideas. I got the barrel positioned directly over her left eye, and pressed down hard with it—a little poetic justice.

I said, "I bet if I shoot through your glass eye, aiming up a bit, I'll tear your artificial brain apart. You want to find out?"

She said nothing. I called back over my shoulder, "*Pickover!*" The name echoed down the corridor, but I had no idea whether he heard me. I turned my attention back to Cassandra—or whoever the hell this really was. I cocked the trigger. "As far as I'm concerned, Cassandra Wilkins is my client—but you're not her. Who are you?"

"I *am* Cassandra Wilkins," said the voice.

"No, you're not," I said. "You're a man—or, at least, you've got a man's mind."

"I can *prove* I'm Cassandra Wilkins," said the supine form. "My name is Cassandra Pauline Wilkins; my birth name is Collier. I was born in Sioux City, Iowa, on 30 October 2079. I immigrated to New Klondike in July 2102. My citizenship number is—"

"Facts. Figures." I shook my head. "Anyone could find those things out."

"But I know stuff no one else could possibly know. I know the name of my childhood pets; I know what I did to get thrown out of school when I was fifteen; I know precisely where the original me had a tattoo; I..."

She went on, but I stopped listening.

Jesus Christ, it was almost the perfect crime. No one could really get away with stealing somebody else's identity—not for long. The lack of intimate knowledge of how the original spoke, of private things the original knew, would soon enough give you away, unless—

Unless you were the *spouse* of the person whose identity you'd appropriated.

"You're not Cassandra Wilkins," I said. "You're Joshua Wilkins. You took her body; you transferred into it, and she transferred—" I felt my stomach tighten; it really was a nearly perfect crime. "And she transferred *nowhere*; when the original was euthanized, she died. And that makes you guilty of murder."

"You can't prove that," said the female voice. "No biometrics, no DNA, no fingerprints. I'm whoever I say I am."

"You and Cassandra hatched this scheme together," I said. "You both figured Pickover had to know where the alpha deposit was. But then you decided that you didn't want to share the wealth with anyone—not even your wife. And so you got rid of her, and made good your escape at the same time."

"That's crazy," the female voice said. "I *hired* you. Why on—on *Mars*—would I do that, then?"

"You expected to the police to come out to investigate your missing-person report; they were supposed

to find the body in the basement of NewYou. But they didn't, and you knew suspicion would fall on you—the supposed spouse!—if you were the one who found it. So you hired me—the dutiful wife, worried about her poor, missing hubby! All you wanted was for me to find the body."

"Words," said Joshua. "Just words."

"Maybe so," I said. "I don't have to satisfy anyone else. Just me. I will give you one chance, though. See, I want to get out of here alive—and I don't see any way to do that if I leave you alive, too. Do you? If you've got an answer, tell me—otherwise, I've got no choice but to pull this trigger."

"I promise I'll let you go," said Joshua.

I laughed, and the sound echoed in the corridor. "You promise? Well, I'm sure I can take that to the bank."

"No, seriously," said Joshua. "I won't tell anyone. I—"

"Are you Joshua Wilkins?" I asked.

Silence.

"Are you?"

I felt the face moving up and down a bit, the barrel of my gun shifting slightly in the eye socket as it did so. "Yes."

"Well, rest in peace," I said, and then, with relish, added, *Josh.*"

I pulled the trigger.

The flash from the gun barrel briefly lit up the female, freckled face, which was showing almost human horror. The revolver snapped back in my hand, then everything was dark again. I had no idea how much damage the bullet would do to the brain. Of course, the artificial chest wasn't rising and falling, but it never had been. And there was nowhere to check for a pulse. I decided I'd better try another shot, just to be sure. I shifted slightly, thinking I'd put this one through the other eye, and—

And Joshua's arms burst up, pushing me off him. I felt myself go airborne, and was aware of Joshua scrambling to his feet. He scooped up the flashlight, and as he swung it and himself around, it briefly illuminated his face. There was a deep pit where one eye used to be.

I started to bring the gun up and—

And Joshua thumbed off the flashlight. The only illumination was a tiny bit of light, far, far down the corridor, spilling out from the torture room; it wasn't enough to let me see Joshua clearly. But I squeezed the trigger, and heard a bullet ricochet—either off some part of Joshua's metal internal skeleton, or off the corridor wall.

I was the kind of guy who always knew *exactly* how many bullets he had left: two. I wasn't sure I wanted to fire them both off blindly, but—

I could hear Joshua moving closer. I fired again. This time, the feminine voice box made a sound between an *oomph* and the word "ouch," so I knew I'd hit him.

One bullet to go.

I started walking backward—which was no worse than walking forward; I was just as likely to trip either way in this near-total darkness. The body in the shape of Cassandra Wilkins was much smaller than mine—but also, although it shamed the macho me to admit it, much stronger. It could probably grab me by the shoulders and pound my head up into the ceiling, just as I'd pounded hers—and I rather suspect mine wouldn't survive. And if I let it get hold of my arm, it could probably wrench the gun from me; five bullets hadn't been enough to stop the artificial body, but one was all it would take to ice me for good.

And so I decided it was better to have an empty gun than a gun that could potentially be turned on me. I held the weapon out in front, took my best guess, and squeezed the trigger one last time.

The revolver barked, and the flare from the muzzle lit the scene, stinging my eyes. The artificial form cried out—I'd hit a spot its sensors felt was worth protecting with a major pain response, I guess. But the being kept moving forward. Part of me thought about turning tail and running—I still had the longer legs, even if I couldn't move them as fast—but another part of me couldn't bring myself to do that. The gun was of no more use, so I threw it aside. It hit the corridor wall, making a banging sound, then fell to the deck plates, producing more clanging as it bounced against them.

Of course, as soon as I'd thrown the gun away, I realized I'd made a mistake. *I* knew how many bullets I'd shot, and how many the gun held, but Joshua probably didn't; even an empty gun could be a deterrent if the other person thought it was loaded.

We were facing each other—but that was all that was certain. Precisely how much distance there was between us I couldn't say. Although running produced loud, echoing footfalls, either of us could have moved a step or two forward or back—or left or right—without the other being aware of it. I was trying not to make any noise, and a transfer could stand perfectly still, and be absolutely quiet, for hours on end.

I had no idea how badly I'd hurt him. In fact, given that he'd played possum once before, it was possible the sounds of pain were faked, just to make me think he was damaged. My great grandfather said clocks used to make a ticking sound with the passing of each second; I'd never heard such a thing, but I was certainly conscious of time passing in increments as we stood there, each waiting for the other to make a move.

Suddenly, light exploded in my face. He'd thumbed the flashlight back on, aiming it at what turned out to be a very good guess as to where my eyes were. I was temporarily blinded, but his one remaining mechanical eye responded more efficiently, I guess, because now that he knew exactly where I was, he leapt, propelling himself through the air and knocking me down.

This time, both hands closed around my neck. I still outmassed Joshua and managed to roll us over, so he was on his back and I was on top. I arched my back and slammed my knee into his balls, hoping he'd release me...

...except, of course, he didn't have any balls; he only thought he did. *Damn!*

The hands were still closing around my gullet; despite the chill air, I felt myself sweating. But with his hands occupied, mine were free: I pushed my right hand onto his chest—startled by the feeling of artificial breasts there—and probed around until I found the slick, wet hole my first bullet had made. I hooked my right thumb into that hole, pulled sideways, and brought in my left thumb, as well, squeezing it down into the opening, ripping it wider and wider. I thought if I could get at the internal components, I might be able to rip out something crucial. The artificial flesh was soft, and there was a layer of what felt like foam rubber beneath it—and beneath that, I could feel hard metal parts. I tried to get my whole hand in, tried to yank out whatever I could, but I was fading fast. My pulse was thundering so loudly in my ears I couldn't hear anything else, just a *thump-thump-thumping*, over and over again, the

thump-thump-thumping of...

Of footfalls! Someone was running this way, and—

And the scene lit up as flashlights came to bear on us.

"There they are!" said a harsh, mechanical voice that I recognized as belonging to Pickover. "There they are!"

"NKPD!" shouted another voice I also recognized—a deep, Scottish brogue. "Let Lomax go!"

Joshua looked up. "Back off!" he shouted—in that female voice. "If you don't, I'll finish him."

Through blurring vision, I thought I could see Mac hesitating. But then he spoke again. "If you kill him, you'll go down for murder. You don't want that."

Joshua relaxed his grip a bit—not enough to let me escape, but enough to keep me alive as a hostage, at least a little while longer. I sucked in cold air, but my lungs still felt like they were on fire. In the illumination from the flashlights I could see the improved copy of Cassandra Wilkins's face craning now to look at McCrae. Transfers didn't show as much emotion as biologicals did, but it was clear that Joshua was panicking.

I was still on top. I thought if I waited until Joshua was distracted, I could yank free of his grip without him snapping my neck. "Let go of him," Mac said firmly. It was hard to see him; he was the one holding the light source, after all, but I suddenly became aware that he was also holding a large disk. "Release his neck, or I'll deactivate you for sure."

Joshua practically had to roll his green eyes up into his head to see Mac, standing behind him. "You ever use one of those before?" he said, presumably referring to the disrupter disk. "No, I know you haven't—no transfer has been killed on Mars in weeks, and that technology only just came out. Well, I work in the transference business. I know the disruption isn't instantaneous. Yes, you can kill me—but not before I kill Lomax."

"You're lying," said McCrae. He handed his flashlight to Pickover, and brought the disk up in front of him, holding it vertically by its two U-shaped handles. "I've read the specs."

"Are you willing to take that chance?" asked Joshua.

I could only arch my neck a bit; it was very hard for me to look up and see Mac, but he seemed to be frowning, and, after a second, he turned partially away. Pickover was standing behind him, and—

And suddenly an electric whine split the air, and Joshua was convulsing beneath me, and his hands were squeezing my throat even more tightly than before. The whine—a high keening sound—must have been coming from the disrupter. I still had my hands inside Joshua's chest and could feel his whole interior vibrating as his body racked. I yanked my hands out and grabbed onto his arms, pulling with all my might. His hands popped free from my throat, and his whole luscious female form was shaking rapidly. I rolled off him; the artificial body kept convulsing as the keening continued. I gasped for breath and all I could think about for several moments was getting air into me.

After my head cleared a bit, I looked again at Joshua, who was still convulsing, and then I looked up at Mac, who was banging on the side of the disrupter disk. I realized that, now that he'd activated it, he had no idea how to deactivate it. As I watched, he started to turn it over, presumably hoping there was some control he'd missed on the side he couldn't see—and I realized that if he completed his move, the disk would be aimed backward, in the direction of Pickover. Pickover clearly saw this, too: he was throwing

his robot-like arms up, as if to shield his face—not that that could possibly do any good.

I tried to shout “No!,” but my voice was too raw, and all that came out was a hoarse exhalation of breath, the sound of which was lost beneath the keening. In my peripheral vision, I could see Joshua lying facedown. His vicious spasms stopped as the beam from the disrupter was no longer aimed at him.

But even though I didn't have any voice left, Pickover did, and his shout of “*Don't!*” was loud enough to be heard over the electric whine of the disrupter. Mac continued to rotate the disk a few more degrees before he realized what Pickover was referring to. He flipped the disk back around, then continued turning it until the emitter surface was facing straight down. And then he dropped it, and it fell in Martian slo-mo, at last clanking against the deck plates, a counterpoint to the now-muffled electric whine. I hauled myself to my feet and moved over to check on Joshua, while Pickover and Mac hovered over the disk, presumably looking for the off switch.

There were probably more scientific ways to see if the transferred Joshua was dead, but this one felt right just then: I balanced on one foot, hauled back the other leg, and kicked the son of a bitch in the side of that gorgeous head. The impact was strong enough to spin the whole body through a quarter-turn, but there was no reaction at all from Joshua.

Suddenly, the keening died, and I heard a self-satisfied “*There!*” from Mac. I looked over at him, and he looked back at me, caught in the beam from the flashlight Pickover was holding. Mac's bushy orange eyebrows were raised and there was a sheepish grin on his face. “Who'd have thought the off switch had to be pulled out instead of pushed in?”

I tried to speak, and found that I did have a little voice now. “Thanks for coming by, Mac. I know how you hate to leave the station.”

Mac nodded in Pickover's direction. “Yeah, well, you can thank this guy for putting in the call,” he said. He turned, and faced Pickover full-on. “Just who the hell are you, anyway?”

I saw Pickover's mouth begin to open in his mechanical head, and a thought rushed through my mind. This Pickover was bootleg. Both the other Pickover and Joshua Wilkins had been correct: such a being shouldn't exist, and had no rights. Indeed, the legal Pickover would doubtless continue to demand that this version be destroyed; no one wanted an unauthorized copy of himself wandering around.

Mac was looking away from me, and toward the duplicate of Pickover. And so I made a wide sweeping of my head, left to right, then back again. Pickover apparently saw it, because he closed his mouth before sounds came out, and I spoke, as loudly and clearly as I could in my current condition. “Let me do the introductions,” I said, and I waited for Mac to turn back toward me.

When he had, I pointed at Mac. “Detective Dougal McCrae,” I said, then I took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and pointed at Pickover, “I'd like you to meet Joshua Wilkins.”

Mac nodded, accepting this. “So you found your man? Congratulations, Alex.” He then looked down at the motionless female body. “Too bad about your wife, Mr. Wilkins.”

Pickover turned to face me, clearly seeking guidance. “It's so sad,” I said quickly. “She was insane, Mac—had been threatening to kill her poor husband Joshua here for weeks. He decided to fake his own death to escape her, but she got wise to it somehow, and hunted him down. I had no choice but to try to stop her.”

As if on cue, Pickover walked over to the dead artificial body, and crouched beside it. “My poor dear wife,” he said, somehow managing to make his mechanical voice sound tender. He lifted his skinless face

toward Mac. "This planet does that to people, you know. Makes them go crazy." He shook his head. "So many dreams dashed."

Mac looked at me, then at Pickover, then at the artificial body lying on the deck plating, then back at me. "All right, Alex," he said, nodding slowly. "Good work."

I tipped my nonexistent hat at him. "Glad to be of help."

* * *

I walked into the dark interior of the Bent Chisel, whistling.

Buttrick was behind the bar, as usual. "You again, Lomax?"

"The one and only," I replied cheerfully. That topless waitress I'd slept with a couple of times was standing next to the bar, loading up her tray. I looked at her, and suddenly her name came to me. "Hey, Diana!" I said. "When you get off tonight, how 'bout you and me go out and paint the town..." I trailed off: the town was *already* red; the whole damned planet was.

Diana's face lit up, but Buttrick raised a beefy hand. "Not so fast, lover boy. If you've got the money to take her out, you've got the money to settle your tab."

I slapped two golden hundred-solar coins on the countertop. "That should cover it." Buttrick's eyes went as round as the coins, and he scooped them up immediately, as if he was afraid they'd disappear—which, in this joint, they probably would.

"I'll be in the booth in the back," I said to Diana. "I'm expecting Mr. Santos; when he arrives, could you bring him over?"

Diana smiled. "Sure thing, Alex. Meanwhile, what can I get you? Your usual poison?"

I shook my head. "Nah, none of that rotgut. Bring me the best scotch you've got—and pour it over *water ice*."

Buttrick narrowed his eyes. "That'll cost extra."

"No problem," I said. "Start up a new tab for me."

A few minutes later, Diana came by the booth with my drink, accompanied by Raoul Santos. He took the seat opposite me. "This better be on you, Alex," said Raoul. "You still owe me for the help I gave you at Dr. Pickover's place."

"Indeed it is, old boy. Have whatever you please."

Raoul rested his receding chin on his open palm. "You seem in a good mood."

"Oh, I am," I said. "I got paid this week."

The man the world now accepted as Joshua Wilkins had returned to NewYou, where he'd gotten his face finished and his artificial body upgraded. After that, he told people it was too painful to continue to work there, given what had happened with his wife. So he sold the NewYou franchise to his associate, Horatio Fernandez. The money from the sale gave him plenty to live on, especially now that he didn't need food and didn't have to pay the life-support tax anymore. He gave me all the fees his dear departed wife should have—plus a very healthy bonus.

I'd asked him what he was going to do now. "Well," he said, "even if you're the only one who knows it,

I'm still a paleontologist—and now I can spend days on end out on the surface. I'm going to look for new fossil beds."

And what about the other Pickover—the official one? It took some doing, but I managed to convince him that it had actually been the late Cassandra, not Joshua, who had stolen a copy of his mind, and that she was the one who had installed it in an artificial body. I told Dr. Pickover that when Joshua discovered what his wife had done, he destroyed the bootleg and dumped the ruined body that had housed it in the basement of the NewYou building.

Not too shabby, eh? Still, I wanted more. I rented a surface suit and a Mars buggy and headed out to 16.4 kilometers south-southwest of Nili Patera. I figured I'd pick myself up a lovely rhizomorph or a nifty pentaped, and never have to work again.

Well, I looked and looked and looked, but I guess the duplicate Pickover had lied about where the alpha deposit was; even under torture, he hadn't betrayed his beloved fossils. I'm sure Weingarten and O'Reilly's source is out there somewhere, though, and the legal Pickover is doubtless hard at work thinking of ways to protect it from looters.

I hope he succeeds. I really do.

But for now, I'm content just to enjoy this lovely scotch.

"How about a toast?" suggested Raoul, once Diana had brought him his booze.

"I'm game," I said. "To what?"

Raoul frowned, considering. Then his eyebrows climbed his broad forehead, and he said, "To being true to your innermost self."

We clinked glasses. "I'll drink to that."