



MARK ROBERTS



UNFORCED ERROR

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ZUMAYA OTHERWORLDS

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UNFORCED ERROR

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To my parents

DAY 1



CHAPTER 1

IT WAS CLEAR YUKON DIDN'T LIKE WHAT HE SAW.

Reason?

Nothing obvious. You had to be a wolf to know the reason. The blond-haired man he was watching was a hundred meters away and walking in the opposite direction, so he wasn't a threat.

A shadow swept across the landing pad, followed by three more. Yukon recoiled and looked up. His raised paw touched the ground and took weight.

Carl Racine shaded his eyes and watched the birds fly over the river. Vultures liked to drift on rising air, but these were flying low and it was too early in the day for thermals. If they were using energy, they were hoping to feed. When they flew across the sun, Carl turned away and shut his eyes for a moment. It was time to call home. He opened his satellite location and communication unit and scrolled to the preset number.

"Azara speaking."

"It's me," Carl said. "I've just landed at Jade Four. How's Valencia?"

"Valencia is fine," Azara said. "She's right here."

"Good. Put her on."

Yukon's gaze was back on the blond man, who was now farther away at the other end of the compound. His left paw was off the ground as before, like a pointer's. His neck was extended and his nose working.

Carl walked up to the wolf as he waited for Valencia.

"Daddy."

“Hey, sweetie,” Carl said. “How’s my little girl?”

“When are you coming home?”

“I’ll be back tomorrow—lunchtime. Can you be good for Azara that long?”

“Is Yukon all right?”

“Yukon is fine,” Carl said. “He’s right next to me, and he misses you a lot.”

He smiled at his harmless lie. Valencia was too young to assert herself over a wolf, however modified its temperament. Yukon saw her as a member of his pack but down the hierarchy. He didn’t miss her at all.

“What’s he doing?” Valencia said.

Yukon placed the paw on the ground, put weight on it and took another step, all the while staring as the man approached a twin-rotor helicopter at the southern end of the compound.

“He’s looking at a man he doesn’t like.”

“Why doesn’t he like him?”

“He must be a bad man.”

“Why’s he bad?”

“I don’t really think he’s bad,” Carl said. “Yukon just doesn’t like anyone but you and me. Isn’t that right?”

“That’s right,” Valencia said. “I miss Yukon.”

“And me?”

“Yes.”

A lump formed in Carl’s throat. Sorry for Valencia? Sorry for himself? He swallowed and said, “You be good now. I’ll call you again at lunchtime. And tonight. I promise I’ll do that.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

That was a better yes.

“I love you,” he said. “Let me talk to Azara.”

Carl asked how Valencia was. Dumb question because he had the answer, but Azara was reassuring.

He returned to his helicopter and pushed the SALOCO into the recharger to the left of the terrain monitor. His compound hunting bow and daypack were on the passenger seat; he reached over and grabbed them. By the time he backed out and turned around, Yukon had advanced several meters and stopped again.

The blond man had been to the large helicopter and was now headed back to the entrance of the underground shelter, but distance was not an issue—he was still a long way off.

“Don’t you like this guy?” Carl said, and used his bow to point.

Yukon turned around and froze.

“No, we are not going hunting just yet,” Carl told him. “We follow your friend below and have some breakfast.”

Yukon didn’t move until Carl reached him.

Carl wanted to string the bow in the comfort of the underground shelter and then tune it to a target outside. The men below might sneer at this weapon, but to hell with them. If they even so much as thought their scorn, Yukon would know, and with his eyes he would let them know that he knew. Yukon was good to have around. People might say they didn’t like dogs in a communal shelter, but no dog-hater had ever said anything about Yukon. No one argued with you if your friend was a sixty-kilo wolf.

Yukon veered towards the southern end of the compound. Then he turned side-on and looked at Carl.

“Yes, I’m coming.”

The blond man had disappeared underground, but Yukon was now interested in something other than him. Was it a big cat? Carl scanned the vegetation just beyond the security fence. Waste of time with the naked eye, but he always did it, like looking at the sky when dialing up on a SALOCO.

The endemic chameleon cat of the coastal belt was *Chameleo-felis subrosa*. The *subrosa* cat had a short, translucent hair coat on a dappled skin. The pattern and basic coloring were set, but the skin changed from light to dark according to the background. They were almost impossible to see against vegetation, even when they moved. Infrared scanners could pick them up, but scanners had to be switched on, aimed the right way, and someone had to look at them. People could forget to do that, but a wolf wouldn’t know what inattention was. No big cat had ever crept up on Yukon.

The breeze was from the south. Yukon was sifting it continuously but not sighting the forest beyond the fence or pricking his ears. Didn’t fit the cat theory, but neither had his reaction to the

blond man. Carl flinched as another shadow raced across the concrete. Nor did vultures.

Yukon went around the port side of the helicopter, stopped and looked back at him.

“What is it?”

Yukon then hunkered low and leapt at the fuselage of the helicopter. He disappeared inside.

Carl jogged to the right to get a better look. The steps to the rear cabin had been retracted, but the door was wide open. An odd way to leave an aircraft.

A motion-tracking scanner mounted on the western fence to Carl’s right had tracked Yukon, as it did when any quadruped moved within the compound. Someone might be watching Yukon on the monitors in the shelter below; it was almost certain the scanner had given an audio warning. Too bad.

Carl walked up to the nose of the helicopter and noted the logo on the side of the fuselage. He had seen the Fassbender Security team a number of times although he had not gotten to know them. If Monti Fassbender had a poached animal on board, he would be in no position to get annoyed about the intrusion. He could lose his license for less.

Carl laid his bow and daypack on the ground, grabbed the lip of the cabin floor and pulled himself up. Calling Yukon would be a waste of time—he was more tractable than a pure wolf, but the dog whose DNA had provided the “tame” genes must have had a mind of his own. He got his right knee over the lip and rolled over to a sitting position.

His eyes were adjusted for the sunlight outside, but he could see Yukon towards the rear of the cabin, standing next to a large bag. It was the type of bag hunters used to lift dead animals out of the wilderness. They usually swung under an aircraft for the journey home, but if it was a poached animal, Fassbender would not do that.

The cabin smelled of vomit. One reason to leave the door open.

Carl stood and waited for his eyes to adjust. He would not report any poaching. Ceno-Gene Corporation contracted Monti Fassbender for security work, and that company had helped to

fund the Transgenic Wolf Project. Never bite the hand that feeds. Fassbender should observe Yukon in a practical situation and inform Ceno-Gene their money had been spent wisely.

Men who protected field crews in the wilderness were invariably the macho type. Most seemed taken by Yukon's assured demeanor, the fluid way he moved, his stunning looks, or was it the mythical notoriety of his ancestors? Whatever it was, Yukon had what it took to be one of the boys, and someone like Fassbender would love to have him along.

Carl went over to Yukon and knelt down.

"But you don't want to be one of the boys, do you?" He reached for the bag.

The smell of human excrement made Carl drop the flap. He felt inside and found a boot. The leg bent upwards against the body, but the knee joint did not flex smoothly. Bones were broken. The ankle seemed neither cold nor warm, but it was difficult to be sure through the fabric of the man's socks.

Ceno-Gene was the fifth biggest biotech company on the planet Cenozoic. They were the bad boys of the industry, better at cheating and espionage than original research, or so their competitors would say. Carl had heard a few stories. But killing people—he hadn't heard that one.

Yukon spun toward the door of the cabin. The metallic taste of fear seeped into Carl's mouth. His subconscious mind had outpaced the rest, but analysis was catching up. If a man was killed in an accident, you would not put him into a bag like an animal, and why would you then fly into a compound like Jade 4?

Breakfast on the way home?

He went to the door, jumped out and landed in a deep squat next to his bow and daypack. Yukon landed to his left and immediately focused on the opening to the underground shelter. Five men had emerged from below. They were dressed in red-and-orange camouflage suits. The blond man now carried a semiautomatic rifle that fired projectiles—conventional bullets or exploding—and stun grenades. If you had trouble hitting something with one of those, you could always scare the hell out of it.

All five were big men—onetime footballers. Fassbender had played the professional game and now employed some of his old mates. It was a common scenario in the security business.

The five men split apart and began to approach in a line. The blond man veered to Carl's left.

Monti Fassbender was a bull of a man with black curly hair. Apart from looking very macho, he had always seemed very laid-back to Carl, and did even now. Two dark-haired men who were tall and rangy and looked like brothers flanked Fassbender. Both had bent noses—bent the same way. Football or genetics? There were only two ways to bend them, so it could be either.

The fifth man was the shortest and heaviest and looked anything but laid-back. He also carried a semiautomatic, and his name was Viscount.

Viscount was moving to Carl's right. He had never worked out if "Viscount" was a nickname or a real name, but it seemed to fit—the man had always looked sure of his own importance.

Fassbender glanced at the sky as he ambled through a complete circle—checking that no aircraft were coming in? Carl ran his left hand along Yukon's back. Here was a true believer in human sin, and right now, he was coiled like a spring.

"What do you think, big wolf?"

Yukon's ears moved a fraction.

Carl nodded to himself. Yukon recognized apprehension in the human voice and all its gradations through to panic, but on this occasion he didn't need the human view to confirm his own. This was not to be a friendly encounter.

Carl picked up his daypack and slung it on his back. He wanted both hands free. Then he took the bow and stood up.

Viscount continued on his path to the right—no glances either way. He was heading to a small helicopter parked near the eastern edge of the compound, or so it seemed. This helicopter carried no Fassbender Security logo. Had the dead man owned it?

The blond man continued left to no clear destination. He stepped through a slow three-sixty turn while gazing at the sky, and then he was almost level with the nose of Fassbender's helicopter but forty meters out to the side. He held the rifle with one

hand only, the barrel pointing at the ground. If this was an attempt to look nonthreatening, Yukon was not convinced.

Fassbender and the other two men were close enough to say something without shouting, but like the blond man, they were silent.

And avoiding steady eye contact.

Carl started towards the blond man, not sure it was the right move, just a gut feeling he should get away from Viscount. If pretence was their game, it should be his, too, and getting close to the edge of the landing pad seemed a logical option. There were trees down the slope.

Yukon's gaze on the blond man was more intense than ever, and now he moved ahead of Carl. A shout caused Carl to turn towards Fassbender, but he kept moving, stepping backwards to stay close with the wolf.

Fassbender and the two brothers had stopped and turned around, so they were now facing the other way. Another two men had come out of the underground shelter. The bigger one had a torso like a barrel, a large shaved head and no discernible neck. It seemed as though his head and body were a single thing, although any symmetry ended with the legs. They were too thin for the weight they carried. The man had introduced himself to Carl a few months ago at a security conference run by a weapons manufacturer. Yukon had been the talking point, Dusan was the name. Dusan looked as evil as Viscount, although at the conference, beer in one hand, he had been very sociable.

That was then.

The second man was running towards the other end of the compound. This grey-haired little ferret was Fassbender's regular pilot and constant companion. Right now, his only possible objective was Carl's helicopter.

Fassbender seemed content to watch his pilot for the moment. Carl ran his tongue around the dryness of his mouth. Fassbender was in control and knew what he had to do. He might not want to, but he would. Or one of his men would.

A glance to the right confirmed what Carl had sensed. Viscount had swung around and was coming at them from the other side of Fassbender's helicopter. He would be the one.

The scenario struck Carl as surreal; it was simply not happening. He had stopped here for breakfast, and that was all.

An explosive movement caused him to spin around.

Yukon was moving.

The blond man had made some sort of move with his rifle. Time to think and time to aim, but he wasn't using it well. He was fumbling, and Yukon hit him at chest height. The rifle fired once in the air as Yukon took him over.

The make-believe aggressors who had provoked Yukon in training had carried make-believe weapons and worn protective clothing. This was an unprotected arm, and the blond man was screaming. Yukon let go and spun around just as Carl reached him—one beaten and looking for the next. Carl grabbed him by the collar.

Viscount ducked under the fuselage of Fassbender's helicopter. Thirty meters. Yukon lunged towards him, pulling Carl off-balance. Viscount fired from the hip and tripped slightly as he straightened up. The bullet pinged off the concrete to Carl's right.

Carl yanked Yukon towards the lip of the landing pad as Viscount tried to regain his balance and aim again. With no recollection of getting there, he was off the edge and floating in the air. He swung his arms as he hit the ground and reeled down the slope. A sapling loomed. He hooked his hand onto its trunk, jerked himself vertical and let go at the precise moment. As he spun slightly, he saw Viscount's big head silhouetted against the sky, then a second later he was crashing through the trees with Yukon.

Several bullets crackled against the branches behind them.

A strip of clear ground along the fence appeared suddenly. Yukon spun one-eighty in the air and made a four-point landing, looking back for the enemy. The exit gate was to the left. Carl sprinted for it and hit the red button on the steel frame. Yukon followed him into the isolation cage. A second button activated the outer gate, which rolled open as the inner one shut. An electronic voice sounded its warning as Carl led the way out.

The message repeated twice and then stopped.

When they reached a clearing, Carl slid on his knees. The dense canopy shook and rustled as the birds and tree-dwelling animals of the forest scattered. Yukon turned around and came alongside. Carl drew deep, quiet breaths. If there was a big cat nearby, Yukon would have sensed it; he would be focusing his ears and eyes in a particular direction. For the moment, it seemed, Viscount was the only threat because the wolf was looking towards the fence.

Men shouted. Carl couldn't make out what they were saying, but then he remembered the electronic warning. If someone came through the gate, it would sound again. They wouldn't. Too dangerous. The chameleon cats of Cenozoic's southern continent were aggressively territorial and, unlike the big cats of Earth, had no intrinsic fear of man. *Cenozoic* was the official name, but everyone called it the Planet of Cats. Fassbender and his men knew the risks.

More shouting. Yukon responded with a quizzical expression and a slight tilt of the head. His pointed muzzle was concave just behind the tip, and then it leveled as it flowed to the stop where the eyes were set to look ahead—predator eyes. But Yukon's ancestors had also been prey—man was their predator then and some things never change. In those early times, man rarely sighted the wolf in its native habitat. Wolves were “invisible.”

That was then. Any warm-blooded animal would show up on the infrared scanners of a modern aircraft. Fassbender had the means to track them by air, and that he *would* do.

Carl stood up, shook the leaves off his bow and pointed with it.

“We go this way.”

Yukon glanced at him and moved off, no hesitation. Carl acknowledged with a nod to himself. He had made a decision and given a lead. No delay. Wolves and dogs liked certainty, and as Yukon had just shown, they always went with their instincts. As for denial, or flight from reality, they were human failings. You could end up a dead wolf doing either of those.

Or a dead human.

A lighter and a jackknife nestled in a long thin pocket on the right leg of Carl's hunting suit. In the larger pocket next to it was a dispenser that contained four small stun grenades. Most people packed those for any sort of trip into the wilderness of Cenozoic. The missing items for survival were his short-barrel automatic and his SALOCO. Monti Fassbender had both of those.



CHAPTER 2

MONTI FASSBENDER STEPPED INTO THE CLEAR ZONE ALONG THE fence and looked each way. Matt and Frank came up behind. Viscount was to the right, standing back from the gate and scanning the forest through the scope on his rifle. There was a second clear zone on the other side of the fence, then a wall of greenery.

Carl Racine had vanished.

Monti had seen him several times with the wolf, and he had seen him playing football at college several years before. Racine had speed and agility, but he hadn't been big enough to survive in the game at professional level. Now he was well known for top placings in endurance races that involved any mixture of running, swimming and canoeing. They wouldn't catch up to him in terrain like this.

Viscount lowered his rifle and thumbed at the gate. "He's gone."

"I heard the warning."

Viscount's face was bright pink, and blood trickled from a small gash on his forehead—he'd hit his head when ducking under the helicopter.

"We could chase him," he said as he approached.

"You can chase him," Matt said. "I'm staying right here."

Monti wished Matt hadn't spoken so soon. He would have agreed to the offer, just to see Viscount sweat for a while.

Viscount's rubbery mouth sneered. "He can't prove a thing."

"It is not a matter of what he can prove," Monti said, articulating each word, as much to confirm his own thinking as to inform

this dumb ape that his input was not welcome. He pointed at the forest. “That is Doctor Carl Racine out there, a respected citizen, unlike some people I could name. CENOPOL might believe his story if he gets to them, and it wouldn’t take them long to work out who you might have thrown out of our aircraft this morning, would it?”

Viscount just stared. Monti looked back at him with a neutral expression. Viscount couldn’t decide if he’d been insulted or not.

“Here comes Juno,” Matt said.

Juno pushed his way through the saplings into the clear zone.

“What’s the situation?” He looked around.

“He’s out there,” Matt said.

Juno threw a SALOCO to Monti.

“Found that in his ‘copter. And his pistol.”

Monti caught it, flipped it open, snapped it shut again.

“Okay, he’s out there with no means to communicate and no way to defend himself. I want that to be a permanent arrangement.”

“How permanent?” Viscount inquired.

“Permanent as in dead,” Juno said.

“Just checking.”

Monti leaned backwards against the fence and gazed up at the sky.

“Don’t get too excited, Viscount. I don’t want anyone else to finish up like Sirian.”

“We must get him though,” Juno said. “We must.”

Monti nodded. “That’s right, Juno. As I said to the others, when it comes to the crunch, CENOPOL might be inclined to believe Doctor Carl Racine, not us.”

Juno fingered the red button on the gate.

“I don’t think there’s any might about it,” he said. “I’d believe him over us.”

Monti rolled his eyes at Juno. Kozlov Poleshuk, Corporate Affairs Director for Ceno-Gene, would not be amused by the little man’s dry assessment. Luther Tan’s death had to be an accident. That was the point of the exercise. No one at CENOPOL should even theorize that Ceno-Gene Corporation had iced one of its own.

“Sorry,” Juno said. “That’s the reality.”

Monti pushed off the fence and turned to Frank.

“I want Racine’s aircraft off the landing pad before anyone sees it. You can be an extra set of eyes in the air while we sort this out.”

Frank hesitated.

“Go on,” Monti said. “I’ll call you with more instructions once you’re airborne. Stay well clear of other aircraft. Don’t be recognized as the pilot.”

Frank turned away and headed up the slope.

“I still go to Pascal with the body?” Matt said.

“You do,” Monti told him. “I’ll help you shift Tan’s body into his helicopter. What happened here doesn’t change that part of the plan.”

“And I’ll get ready to fly,” Juno said.

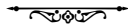
“You do that,” Monti said. “I want to be out of here before someone else arrives.” He then turned to Viscount. “I want you and Dusan to get our gear out of the shelter. Be as quick as you can.”

“So we were never here?” Juno said.

“Not sure what I’m going to say.” Monti pointed at a motion-tracking scanner mounted high on the fence to the right of the gate. “I assume they don’t record?”

“That’s right,” Juno said. “They don’t.”

Monti knew that but found the reassurance comforting. The scanners could distinguish the images of people and aircraft from those of potentially dangerous animals and alert people below with an audible alarm. It wasn’t a perfect system, however. Large dogs triggered the alarm, as had the wolf.



Luther Tan’s helicopter took off with Matt at the controls. Frank had taken Carl Racine’s a few minutes earlier. Monti scanned the sky in all directions. He had removed two possible complications, and no incoming aircraft were in sight.

It was in the plan that no one would see them with Luther Tan before his “accidental” death, and they had achieved that; but Kozlov hadn’t cautioned against anyone seeing the body after the event. No one would be dumb enough to let that happen. Sirian

had retracted the steps to their helicopter and left the door open, which might have been good enough if the only man-tracking wolf on Cenozoic had not been downwind at the time.

Monti shook his head as he strode towards the northern point of the compound. Kozlov would say he should not have used Sirian Coe for something so critical. Kozlov would be right. And Sirian should not have had the second rifle when they went to deal with Carl Racine. Sirian had been physically sick at the sight of Luther Tan's body.

The northern point gave a view down to the confluence. Monti leaned on the fence and looked at the dark water below. To his right, the huge Ribbontail River ran against sheer cliffs, forming one natural boundary for the secure compound of Jade 4. The smaller T15 tributary was to his left, coming into the Ribbontail on an angle through a slot in the cliffs. It formed the second boundary of the triangular compound.

Racine had escaped through the section of fence running along the third boundary, facing south. The fence was several meters high, and electrified wires ran along the outside at several levels. Jade 4 was a very safe place. People like Luther Tan, a little drunk the night before, could not wander out at night and fall prey to dangerous animals, or fall into a river and drown. Pity he hadn't done either of those, but then, Kozlov had wanted Tan to die somewhere else, another way.

Racine's helicopter was now high above the Ribbontail River to the south. Monti took the two SALOCOs from his belt and held one in each hand. He flipped open his own and placed a call to Frank.

"Frank Rey."

"Monti here. If you were Carl Racine, where would you go?"

"I'd head for the main river. The cliffs run out about five kilometers upstream from Jade Four."

"Only five kilometers?"

"About that," Frank said.

"And that would get him onto open riverbed where someone could see him?"

"It certainly would."

“You would not head up the tributary?”

“No,” Frank said. “It’s a very narrow ravine up there. No one would see you from the air, and you can’t put distance between yourself and the forest at any point. I wouldn’t consider it.”

“But he could get there?”

“He could. Where you are it’s a straight drop to T-Fifteen, but if you go up about half a kilometer, it’s a steep slope covered with forest. He could get down that slope if he wanted to.”

“He could lose our scanners by going in a cave?”

“Possibly,” Frank said, “but damned if I’d go into any cave down there.”

“Okay,” Monti said. “Five kilometers will take him about an hour in that sort of terrain. We’ve got all the time we need. Call me if anyone flies into the area.”

He closed his SALOCO and flipped open Racine’s. The home page displayed automatically. Nothing flashy, just a picture of the man with his wife and daughter. If he recalled, the wife had recently died in an accident.

The SALOCO cleared the fence and disappeared into the water below. Monti wiggled his arm. He’d hurt it, throwing something that hard. He mentally ticked off the features of the Satellite Location and Communication System. Racine had no means to communicate with any other person, no global positioning system by which to navigate, no locator beacon should anyone look for him, and no means to record his fate.

Viscount appeared from below, laden with gear, as Monti walked up to the entrance of the underground shelter.

“Is that the lot?”

Viscount nodded. “Dusan has the rest.”

“Okay, let’s go hunting.” He grabbed a large bag.

Viscount’s little blue eyes opened wide as he readjusted his load. Monti wasn’t sure if the eyes were really little, or whether they just seemed little in such a big face. One thing was certain, Viscount Hagar didn’t become a nice person when he was happy. For him to be happy, someone had to be suffering. Channeling that malevolent energy in the direction of Carl Racine wasn’t going to be a problem, but how would you make it effective?

Viscount led the way up the steps into the helicopter and dropped his load on the floor. Sirian was slumped over in a seat along the starboard side of the rear cabin. The sleeve of his hunting suit was soaked with blood. Monti touched him on the shoulder as he went past into the cockpit. No response.

Juno was in his seat and ready to fly. Monti got into the copilot seat next to him.

“Do we have painkillers?” he said.

“For a wolf bite, not really,” Juno said. “But we do have an excellent range of hangover pills.”

“Well, he also has one of those, doesn’t he?”

Juno grinned. “Pain-wise, I think it’s been well and truly eclipsed.”

“We’ll get him home soon enough,” Monti said, not sure how true that might be. “Let’s get out of here.”

The time on his SALOCO read 7.39. He entered 09, and Kozlov’s home page appeared on the screen. Give Kozlov the bad news? Not at this stage. Kozlov always said he could listen to any problem so long as you offered him the solution at the same time. He would get his solution—body number two.

Kozlov’s photograph was typically flattering, with ear-to-ear smile, perfect teeth, red hair nicely combed and blue eyes. Monti supposed women could be attracted to the little wimp. They seemed to be—Kozlov had money and connections.

He placed the call.



CHAPTER 3

KOZLOV POLESHUK REACHED FOR HIS BEEPING SALOCO AND checked the screen. The caller had identified himself.

“Hello, Monti.”

“Your package is on its way.”

“Did it go to plan?”

“Exactly as you wanted.”

“Did you access the files on his server?”

Kozlov caught Philippe Savvides’ eye across the kitchen table.

“Viscount persuaded him to show us,” Monti said. “The SALOCO is with his body. The password is on page one of the notepad. I’ve also taken a record of it, just in case you have any problems.”

“He only uses the one server?”

“That’s what he told us,” Monti said. “I think he was too frightened to lie, and we did promise to let him live. Poor little bastard.”

“Good work,” Kozlov said, and nodded once to Savvides. “I’ll collect the package. Catch you sometime tonight.”

He closed up the SALOCO and placed it gently on the table.

“So, it’s done?”

Kozlov nodded again. “It’s done.”

“You look worried.”

He leaned back in his chair and glanced towards the lounge. Savvides’ wife Sophia was well out of earshot.

“It’s not over yet, and I was thinking about Fassbender last night.”

“Go on,” Savvides said.

“He wants to be part of our Group. I never talk of the Group, but he knows there is one. Now he’s done us this big favor, he’ll pressure me even more.”

“It’s out of the question.” Savvides pushed his coffee cup to one side with the back of his hand. “We don’t believe in expansion, and even if we did, there would never be room for a loose unit like Monti Fassbender.”

“I know. I can handle it. But talking of loose units, there are six other men who saw Luther Tan die. They know who he was. If CENOPOL applies pressure, one of them could talk.”

“But CENOPOL won’t have reason to pressure them. It was an accident.”

“That’s the plan, but you never know what can happen. One of them tells his girlfriend, then dumps her a few months later.” Kozlov raised his eyebrows. “It’s called pillow talk.”

“I know what it’s called. For Christ’s sake, we covered that yesterday. We had no alternative, given the time frame.”

Kozlov nodded. Luther Tan had been going to report his discovery to the Cenozoic Securities Commission—he would have been doing that today—so he’d had to be eliminated. The CSC offered a twenty percent reward to whistleblowers, provided a conviction resulted and the penalty exceeded one million dollars, and in this instance, both outcomes seemed certain. Monti Fassbender was the only one who’d had opportunity and inclination to do the job in the time available. And to do the hit the way they wanted, they needed someone brutal like Viscount Hagar.

“You should talk to Fassbender tonight,” Savvides continued. “He can explain to his men that he doesn’t know the people he’s working for, which is true. If any of them talks to the authorities, they can only point to him, not to anyone higher up the chain. And if any of them does rat on Fassbender, he will end up like Luther Tan.” He pushed out his bottom lip. “Niko would make sure of that.”

“Would he?”

“He would.”

Kozlov fiddled with his SALOCO. Niko, his younger brother, had coined Savvides’ nickname “Silver Savvy”—silver hair, silver

tongue and very savvy when it came to looking after number one. But Savvides could be right. There would only be an investigation of an accidental death, and that would not involve Fassbender or his men.

“Fassbender will understand the same subtle reminder applies to him,” Savvides said. “He should never rat on you if he wants to live.”

Kozlov wasn't sure that would work, either, should the time ever come. Monti Fassbender wasn't too stupid to scare, just too arrogant.

“What about Linus Duhamel?” Savvides said. “Is he happy?”

“He's happy, and he has enough experience to know how the system works. He is never seen with me. He doesn't spend his money on anything obvious. He's happy to enjoy his consumables—women, in particular.”

Savvides snickered. “I'm sure we can persuade Fassbender the same way. We pay well, and in his case, it's all legit—most of the time. He's on a sweet number.”

His famous white-toothed smile burst across his perma-tan face. His composure had been a little frayed the last few hours, but he was coming back into form.

Kozlov looked at the wall clock above the kitchen bench.

“You'd better go,” Savvides said.

“I know.” He pushed his chair back and stood up. “I won't call you while I'm with Duhamel. He's got big ears. We could meet for a late lunch.”

“My usual?”

The usual was the best seafood restaurant on Pascal Island.

“I'll call to confirm,” Kozlov said.

“Good. I'll see you out.”

The kitchen vented into a marble-lined foyer, and in the foyer were the doors to an elevator. An electronic key enabled the elevator to reach no higher than the sixth floor, but Savvides could override the system. Getting out was less of a problem. When the car arrived, Kozlov stepped in and pressed G.

Savvides' apartment occupied the entire seventh floor, and there was no eighth. He had more than his view to lose, and Lu-

ther Tan had found a way to make that happen. Luther had had access to the necessary data, good mathematical skills and a keen sense of mission. And of course, there was the reward of not less than two hundred thousand dollars.

Luther's salary was only a round of drinks for someone like Philippe Savvides. Luther had intended to use his brain to take revenge on those who had used it with so little recognition. Kozlov smiled a little. In that respect, he could empathize.

The elevator reached the ground floor, and he stepped into the lobby. He could see through the glass entrance, across the promenade and into the dunes. The beach couldn't be sighted because the dunes were so high. You had to be on the second floor to get a view, but third or higher for anything decent.

The last of the dew had gone from the cobbled promenade, and the sand was also dry. The dunes baffled any noise from the city and were a fine place for thinking, but Kozlov's brain was running faster than allowed for contemplation. Much faster.

Getting Luther Tan's body in place was the immediate task—not much of a risk, but he wanted it done and out of the way. The risk associated with Monti Fassbender and his men was less defined and thus more of a problem. Those people would be around for years to come.

Kozlov turned around when he was deep in the dunes and looked up at the buildings rimming Pascal Bay. Everyone who mattered on the planet had a view of this stretch of beach from an office or their apartment. Savvides had both. The political machine that was Philippe Savvides was a puzzle, and Kozlov had never analyzed it to his complete satisfaction. In any technical sense, Savvides had little to offer, but he had an ability to recruit skilled people and to use them, and to persuade them it was a noble cause.

Savvides was a power person. Luther Tan had been a technical person, more intelligent than most of those above him, and he must have let the seeming injustice overwhelm his sense of reason. Expertise would always be worth something in a society based on advanced technology, but its economic value relative to power was the same as it had been on Earth—fairly low. Luther Tan hadn't

accepted that power was the main event, that you don't mess with the people who play it well, and most of all, you don't tell anyone what your intentions are.

How could a genius be such an idiot?

Monti Fassbender was a simpler case. His sense of entitlement was built on years of adulation as a celebrated football player, nothing more. Monti knew power was the game, but through intuition rather than analysis. Problem was, he didn't have the skills to make the top team, and like many who didn't have them, he didn't know he didn't have them.

A light-green helicopter clattered over the beach and jolted Kozlov back into motion. Major Linus Duhamel was on time.

The tide was out, and Duhamel landed on the wet sand a hundred meters from the dunes. Kozlov checked the beach either way and stepped into the open. No great hurry. Fassbender's man, Matt Rey, would be delivering Tan's helicopter and body to the agreed site in the next ten to fifteen minutes. They should not arrive before Matt had time to leave the area.

Kozlov had never been seen by any of Fassbender's crew, and he wasn't going to start now. They had never been invited to join their boss at a Ceno-Gene social function. Too low class, apart from anything else, not that Monti was much better. Monti Fassbender got nasty when he got drunk, and he got drunk a lot—a problem in the making. A Ceno-Gene employee had resisted his advances one night and ended up with a mouthful of blood. She had taken a lot of persuading to not go to CENOPOL.

Kozlov snickered quietly as he strode towards the helicopter. Monti talked about Viscount Hagar's sadistic streak while being oblivious to his own. Whatever you could say about Hagar, he had never hit a woman.

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