

RARE EARTH



PD COLLAR

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Of all the grimy PI and Security outfits on the *Calle Cinco* circuit, this curvy broad in designer raims picks mine and humps it up three flights and without even kleenwiping the seat in front of my desk plants her fulsome behind down on it. She crosses big long legs and leans forward with her hands on her knees to reveal her interminable cleavage and give me a long unsettling once-over.

I had seen her ride when she pulled up and broke away from her examination to pull myself to my feet and amble over to the window and flip back the curtain for form and reveal some of my detection chops. “Don’t get too many tire-kickers pull up in an aerosine.” I said this over my shoulder, admiring the hovering craft that lit the grimy concremac with its fuchsia runners three floors down. I turned to her and re-took my frayed seat behind the business end of my desk. I planted my elbows on the arm rests and settled my chin on my thumbs. “What can I do for you, ma’am?” I asked.

“You mind?” she held up a *nicstick*.

“They’re your lungs,” I waved toward her comely bosoms.

She *lased* it and *cheshired* me. As the whiff of lilacs reached my nose, it dawned on me, and don’t ask me how; the broad had had a mortality intervention. She didn’t look much like a wig’s daughter, so I figured her for a wig’s *goomah*, but why would a love-bird be slumming in my neck of the woods? What kind of wig would let *this* babe soil the soles of her shoes on *my* staircase?

“My client requires some discreet inquiries,” she said. “You do still have a network on the Osa Peninsula, don’t you?”

“Your client?”

“Yes, my anonymous client.”

“I may have some high friends left in low places,” I fed her the shtick. “But I see you’ve already read up on me . . .”

“We are not concerned with past peccadilloes and personal vices and that sort of thing so long as it doesn’t get in the way of the job.”

“Which would be?”

“Are you current in your licenses and permits?” she lifted her eyebrow.

“You already know I am,” I said. “Who do I gotta shoot?”

“Oh, Mr. Durante,” she sighed. “Please, we’re not that sort of people.”

“What sort of people are you?”

“The sort that would prefer to have our investment return from the hills intact and not in a powder-flask.”

“What is this all about, Ms....?”

“Call me Señorita Safiro, Mr. Durante.”

“Okay, Miss Sapphire,” I said. “Ricardo Durante at your services. My friends call me Mighty.”

“Well,” she smiled. “I’m not in the market for new friends, so let’s keep it formal; she winked. What’s your day rate, Mr. Durante?”

“My day rate?”

“Well,” she said, “What’s your *top* day rate?”

“Five hundred Z’s plus expenses.”

“I’m going to double that and pay you a retainer of five thou to get you going. I need you ready tomorrow. I have an eight am charter out of Pavas and a suite booked for you at CrocoCorp Tower. I’m sure you will enjoy rubbing shoulders with all your old pals there. Will you excuse me while I wave the accountant to pay you?”

“Hold on, Little Sister. I’d like to know what the mission is first.”

“She uncrossed her long ones and re-crossed them the other way. “Does it really matter, Don Ricardo?”

I cocked my head to one side and studied her and leaned back. “I suppose not,” I owned up.

“Excuse me.” She stared off into space for a few seconds. “Can you check your account for me please?”

I waved up my bank register, and there was a fresh five grand burning a hole through the leaf storm of my sad balance.

"I will need to add you to my wave-set," she averred. "But please don't reach out unless it is an absolute emergency."

He cleared her on his wave-zone. "And you're sure I don't have to pop a cap?"

"Positive, Mr. Durante. Please review the file I've dropped in your wave-box. Do it tonight, please, to bone up on details. Any questions you have, you can ask your tech-handler, who will join you for the flight down. But let's hit the high points: Gato Izqadi. Name mean anything to you?"

I looked up and furrowed my brow. "Rings a bell, somewhere," I struggled to recall. "Can't quite place it, though," I lied. "Should it?"

"If he is not known to you, his associates will be."

"And you want me to flush him out so your *other* people can pop that cap?"

"Nothing of the sort," she puffed. "Izqadi fathered a child in the joint. The mother was young, problematic, working through substance issues, GIDS sufferer, the whole bit, now tragically deceased."

"May she rest in peace," I said. "And Junior as well, for that matter. . ."

"Junior had an in-utero intervention," she puffed lilacs. "He didn't get it."

"So, what did he get?"

"Multiple myeloma. Bottom line, we need *Papi* for a marrow intervention."

"What if *Papi* likes his marrow the way it sits?"

"We have incentives. It's painful, but Izqadi would walk away with a hundred thousand Zs or so; so, there's a big pay day in it for him. And for you too, for that matter. You broker the deal, dial yourself in for 20%, and double your pay."

"Easy as that?"

"Easy peasy," she replied.

"And Junior warrants all this?"

"I'll just exhaust my clearance with you so I can get out of this shithole," she said, re-crossing her legs again back the other way. "Junior is the last of a long and privileged blood-line. Grandpa is

too late in the game for a mortality intervention, and his biotics are squashed from chem-rad and immune-enhancement, beyond cloning, beyond even viable stem lines. He's a dying old man and wants his heir. Details are in the wave-file."



"Look, we know you know the personalities and terrain where Izqadi is hunkered. Both are challenging. He is a fugitive from justice, of course, or this would not be so delicate an issue. You

fit all our parametrics for this job, despite your..." she looked around, "*Je ne sais quoi* . . . choice of ambiance. You're a man we think we can work with."

"You think it over and show up tomorrow at Pavas to sign on. Turn it down, and we'll sweat the retainer out of you in more conventional local services. It's your choice, Mr. Durante. If you punt altogether, kindly direct your deposit to the charity of your choosing, and we'll look elsewhere."

I watched her ride whoosh up Cinco, but the blurred vision and fatigue turned me to a blood-chem scan, and I pushed it by heading downstairs before taking my shot. I found her nic butt on the *concremac* outside. It was too easy by a country mile, but even folks that think they're smart, I've often found, delude themselves. The sound of Lyrica's wave tweaked chemicals inside me that I prefer to retain from any self-initiated reaction. She balked for form but was still my home-girl and technically still owed me, though we were beyond the debt stage. She had the DNA-track back to me in fifteen, and my insulin was kicked in. I had perused the file and now waved the new pile of dough over to my med-fund and admired the slightly swelled balance. I was now just forty-five thousand *zitbills* away from my own intervention. I had just chipped the balance by ten percent in the space of a miserable half hour while beholding a fully-fleshed goddess in the raw. We all knew I was going to take the job...

"This is not about a sick child, Polly," I told my parrot back home. "This is about gold!"

"I want a cracker," Polly replied.

I wondered about Jacques and whether he may have let our secret out of the bag. But if he had, he wouldn't cop to it to me of course, and if others had happened on it like we did, he would've certainly filled me in. Anyway, I hated to be waved at all, especially late, and figured I wasn't the old Lone Ranger. So, I passed on waving up my old buddy Jacques.

"Help me first," I told Polly. "This babe, whose *real* name is Silvia Amador Cornuda, is a *Law-Bat*, Polly."

Polly cocked her head.

"And a *Biz Whiz*, and she works for Jantz Commodities, which has already tried to edge in on our flow train. Gold is not their main commodity. But Polly, what metals brokerage would not want in on our action? These guys are onto me," I sussed.

Polly cocked her head. "Bread crumbs," she said. "You're jogging down along a trail lain for you." She shook her head and distended her neck feathers and looked at me with great severity. "Smells like a triple cross to me, Papi."

"Maybe," I owned up. "But never sell short the myopia of otherwise clear-sighted people."

She ruffled her wing feathers and stretched them out and pulled them back in again. "You will have to play this close to the vest," she said.

"Close to the vest," I repeated.

"May I please have my cracker now?"

I fetched a whole package and passed it through the bars of her cage. She opened it and handed me back the hempophane wrap and powdered the crackers and let them rain on the bottom of her cage and settled down to them and rustled her feathers in the heap of crumbs. "Ah," she glowed. "Just what I wanted!"

I packed my meds and ran my fingers across the derm patch on my inner thigh to feel the hardness of the extracted RID hidden there. I assembled tools and a few raims, my jungle peds, two pair of *synth-wool* socks. I lay back on my bed and thought how nice a couple fingers of Stoli would be right now and turned off the light to wander around the morphhood a spell and was all bright and shiny and on time the next day. But I low-downed the bug in the works to the Cacique through our channels and not to be surprised if I were to show up otherwise unannounced in the next few. As I was led to the jet by my handler, I retraced the steps to see if they could have planted a redundant on me. But I didn't figure this outfit as very cloak-and-dagger, and I was sure it was just my RID they were probably fixed on, even with its one-kilometer radius of uncertainty. I was sure there was no physical redundancy, just the transmissible gadgetry, the wave ring, heaters, a few other tools that I could power down. I had never used the *RID-slip* before and of course it was a one-time and one-time gig only. But the constellation of circumstances made it worthwhile having it ready just in case.

Good luck, waved the faux *Señorita Safiro*, from, I imagined, some immaculate tower, looking out over a blustery skyline in the bustling rainy-plex. *I am pleased that you have decided to come on board.*

Couldn't be happier with my decision, I waved back. I set my wave-zone to block her further transmissions.

You'd think I'd have been surprised, but of course I expected her to be there. At least she was seated in the suite foyer and not draped supine on the edge of the bed like a honey trap that she

actually was. She sat where I would not see her as the *aircab* docked on the *suiteport*, but I was expecting her to be there, and could not help after all our history but to damp her thunder a bit and have her choke on sour grapes a bit.

“Honey Dew,” I nodded, setting my stuff down as the cab disengaged to swoop back into the not-yet-quite-sultry Puerto Jiménez air.

“Lover Boy,” she nodded back.

“From your *raims*, Ruby, I’d say you’ve jumped a couple sharks since I seen you last.

“My job *desc* is a matter of public record,” she balked. “Yours, on the other hand, is a bit fuzzy.”

I raised her by the hand from her seat and embraced her warmly. “It’s not the only thing about me fuzzy, Rubes,” I eased her shoulders back to look her in the eye. “I think I need a shot.” She broke away to fetch an OJ from the mini-fridge, and I did a *chem-scan*, had a shot, drank the juice, and sat back to enjoy the convergence of her lissome immaculateness in the restoration of my vision as my chemicals settled down around her tailored business suit and the tight bun in her hair. My loins tensed in her proximity, and I lost myself for a minute as I watched her lips gently chewing the words that escaped from between them.

“Hey, this is out of the plan,” she told me straight. “My greeting you like thisThis was *my* idea.”

“Ricardo, be careful. We don’t know why you’re here, but it’s probably not what it’s pretended to be.”

“How is old Strauss doing?” I replied. “Over-performing, still?”

“He still has a pulse. Me too, if it means anything . . . Let me know if I can help you.” She allowed her eyes to drop beneath his waist for a second, and then Darling Ruby stood and turned to leave, and I was back alone with my mystery and remembered how nice three fingers of neat Stoli would be right about now but instead unpacked and planned the litany of appetizers with which I would tonight line my expense account downstairs. Miss “Sapphire” was right; it was fun rubbing shoulders with my old pals.

I slipped away from the raucous lounge as tourists from around the planet shifted gears from dessert and liqueurs to the dance-floor as the Limbo Lizards up-tempo-ed from cool fusion to red-hot salsa jazz and the joint shook with eager plump holiday partiers struggling to conform the gyrations of their hips and steps of their feet to the immaculate examples of the sculpted lead dance pros sequined in spandex that smiled vapidly beneath the whirling spotlight at the head of the floor.

I broke quickly into a sweat beyond the aircon lobby in the now-fully-sultry air above the Main Street *concremac* and powered down my gadgetry and on the edge of town changed into *raims* I had bought at the CrocoCorp Boutique and ditched my old ones, keeping only the socks and *peds*. I detoured up the Bambú Road and stashed my electronics, heaters, *wave ring*, and *RID* at Eusebio's. He curbed any surprise at seeing me after my six years of self-imposed exile and was kind enough to not ask questions. He took me out back to a stash-spot. "In case it's after hours when you return," he smirked. Eusebio was old school; he wouldn't hold out against coercive interrogation, of course, but short of that our secrets were safe with one another. Armed with only my meds and *paleotools* I hiked north and turned off on Río Nuevo Road and walked it inland a couple hours till it petered out and then headed up a stream and then the most likely main *trib* and into the forest and then a couple hours later up a dry ravine till I made the ridgeline around midnight and followed it up into the highlands. I had nothing transmissible on me (or so I thought at the time) and with my *RID* slipped, I was still nominally in Jiménez to Esquire Cornuda and her crowd, or anyone else looking in on me for that matter, so with the *RID*'s radius of uncertainty, it would require foot work to flesh out my stash and untie the knot of my clandestine motives. But I planned to be back before anybody *truly* wised up on me. It had been two decades since I had been fully off the radar with the only other *RID* Slip I had ever pulled, that on a sensitive mission, and I was a bit exhilarated over my presumed freedom. To top it off my vision was good and steady under a fine drizzle and I followed my mind's map as a rising moon backlit a turbulent night sky filled with puffy clouds that jostled beneath the quarter moon. Once beyond the reasonable limits of human detection, I made plenty of noise to scare off wildlife that might be loitering along my path. With my heaters stashed in the Bambú, all I had for protection was a knife and what remained of my wits. I cut down the slope to cross the Piedras Blancas River and cased the valley hard for unfriendlies before crawling on my belly across the flood plain and through the river and up the far bank to the forest where I stood back up and cased the valley to make sure I had not raised a sentry. A couple hours later I lay up exhausted just short of the spine in a nest I made of a tree fall to *morph* a spell. Morning was full on me as I drank water and took a shot and hiked the spine to do the math on the convoluted spread of micro-sheds that diverged on either side of the divide of this conflicted peninsula. I studied it long and hard knowing what a challenge it would be to have to hike back out of a wrong turn and settled on the most probable one after lengthy scrutiny and hiked down through thick jungle that tore my *raims* and bruised my palms.

I lost more and more elevation in the steep slope and resigned myself to corporeal misery till an hour downhill where springs birthed a stream that I could hike along more easily that gave in turn to a small river. I was pretty grim-faced at the prospect of hiking back if I was wrong but got downright pleased with myself when from the lip of a waterfall mid-afternoon I looked out over the Cacique's camp, the workings glaring on the scoured far valley wall, worker bees going about the chaotic order of mining gold, the whole thing clearly visible to the constellations of satellites polluting the heavens above the planet.

The point of an arrow gently depressed the skin of my neck right about where my carotid artery kept my brain and sensory organs oxygenated with clean blood.

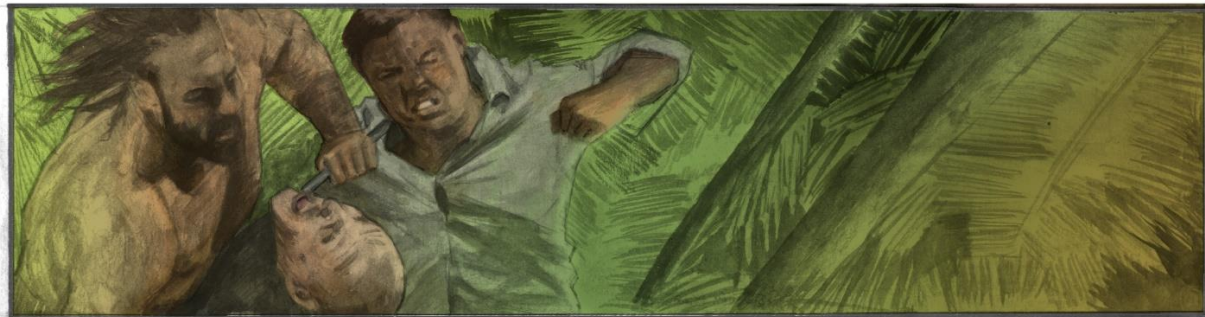
"Friend or foe?" came the voice to my left.

I had allowed someone to slip up on me but was generous in my self-reproach. I'd been pounding *concremac* for the past five years, out of practice with the subterfuge of nature and *real* outlaws.

"Friend, of course," I chortled. I love it when they throw me soft balls.

"You will need to strip your clothing and leave behind all your things to go further."

"Izqadi, is that you?"



"I hear you're looking for me, old pal," the man lowered his weapon. I turned and shook his hand, but he pulled me into a full embrace. "I hope you're not here to try to renegotiate your cut, something foolish like that," he grinned.

"I wish it were that simple," I smirked.

Gato cut me a staff and led me down to camp.

"I don't trust this," said the Cacique softly, looking at me. I shrugged. It wasn't me he didn't trust. It was this. Well, I didn't trust it either, but the only cards you get to play beside those up your sleeve are the ones you're dealt. Tough shit for him, I figured as I stood naked, surrounded by his lieutenants.

"Jefe, he's had a RID extract," one of the men said helpfully, pointing out the scar I had shown Izqadi.

"Did you come up the Piedras Blancas?" he squinted.

“Up the Nuevo,” I said, “then across the Piedras and into the park up the mountain and along the ridge. I crossed their turf a couple hours before dawn but didn’t raise any dogs.”

“Well,” the Cacique glanced around his huddled men. “If you’ve slipped your *RID*, then you’re an outlaw, dead meat walking, like the rest of us. Anyway, you’re here, and your things are up yonder. So, if you’ve been traced, we are compromised already. No need to worry about little things like life and limb, right, *Señor Durante*?”

“I don’t know about that, *Don Astral*,” I said. “I will go kicking and screaming all the way over either.”

The Cacique turned and led our party down to HQ. It was a *geotext* yurt, the furnishings Spartan but serviceable, a nuke-pack dried-in out back with cable the size of my arm running out the side and down toward the workings. The comms center was old, older than even my vintage model back home, but one nevertheless like mine with encryption beyond the power of anything but real-world military to crack. It took me two glances to see that I was not their only gold broker out there beyond the forest. These boys were making some bank out here in these back woods.

One of the help rustled up a pitcher of something vile that they drank here. I looked into the chipped mug I was handed, and they all fell to chuckling amongst themselves as I studied its contents.

“It’s okay,” Izqadi assured.

I sniffed the vessel. “What is it?”

“We ferment the heart of the raffia palm,” the Cacique replied gravely. “Outside of pay days, it’s what keeps us going out here.”

“And this is the good stuff,” said a tough to my right, as he sharpened the machete laying across his knees, his movements back and forth raising a familiar hum of stone on steel first one way and then the other, filling the air around me with the synchronicity of spectral ranges up and down the scale. “Ten days of aging,” he boasted. “Down below we’re happy if we can get ours past two.”

The group chuckled in unison at the inside joke.

I’d been saving myself for six excruciating years imagining those first few fingers of welcome-back post-intervention Stoli. But I was expected to drink their mash and knew it and in fact wanted to. I took an incautious draught. Since I was *pre-int*, I could still hold onto that holy-vodka-grail fantasy beyond all this somewhere into the tenebrous mists of my near-future.

“Hmm,” I looked down at the mug. “That’s a lot less bad than I expected,” I said. I took another drink.

The men broke out laughing, and even the Cacique cracked an uncharacteristic smile.

“Look, I’m not here to drink your wine,” I said gruffly. “There’s the real matter, which concerns you, about which I have not more than a clue, and then there’s the cover story,” I looked at the Cacique and turned to look at Izqadi. I told them the cover.

Again, they all laughed.

“But how can I have a son if I sleep only with men?” Izqadi smiled, sheepish, with a downward glance.

The boys chuckled awkwardly, mostly, not all of them. I studied over his revelation and wrinkled my brow, turning over the new intelligence and measuring it up against the depths of what *Señorita Safiro’s* people might know.

“It is always about the gold,” the Cacique spoke up through a furrowed brow. “When there are mysteries and cloaked motives, it always gets down to the gold. That’s just the way it is.”

“Look,” I said, riled up a bit by the wine. “It is not *always* about the gold. It just *usually* is. Problem is that your chit is no longer clearly placer. We’re moving semi-crystalline gold not far from the vein—at least for the last three loads—and that has not likely gone unnoticed by the handlers and end-buyers. Look at me; I don’t even touch the product, and I know this. So, the way this goes down is that you guys are onto the lode out here, and that puts a lot of people in a very difficult position.” I tossed my head over at the workings face. “Landslide scarp,” I pointed with my chin. “Exposed a vein, didn’t it?”

“It’s not *that* secret, Mighty,” Izqadi said to me. “But what can they do? It’s Corcovado National Park, the most treasured bio-reserve sanctuary in all of Middle America. It’s not like after nearly two centuries of looking for the primary, they are going to reverse the eco-order of the Costa Rican universe to open the Park to mechanized mining now that we have actually found it. Come on,” Izqadi argued. “You’ve lived here since before I was an aching in my dad’s balls. You know how things work here.”

“Jantz Commodities may want cut in,” I said. “Or they may want to edge in. Either way, it’s a burr under the saddle, something you have to fix now.”

“We have good socials and good politics,” the Cacique declaimed. “I’ve got brokers from Panama, Singapore, and Dubai all bending all over themselves all the time trying to edge in. I get this day in, day out,” he waved at the comms center. “But I know my coffee is sugared on Avenida

Central in *Chepe*.” He raised his eyebrows emphatically. “And the Piedras gang is too addled with infighting and alcoholism to pretend upon us. We’ll ride this mare into the sunset.”

“Well maybe,” I allowed. “But some things is simply bigger than gold.”

They all stared at me blankly. The singing of the stone on steel stopped. Everything got quiet. It was an improbable and possibly even heretical utterance, and the jury leaned back in its chair.

“It ain’t the gold that’s maybe got a hostile takeover on your horizon,” I told them. “It’s the matrix. It’s loaded with rare earths, including unusual silicates and oxides of dysprosium, yttrium, promethium, and terbium...”

They all looked at me as the breeze danced inside the yurt to tickle my scalp. “You’re fattening out here on scooped icing,” I told him. “But you’re throwing the cake back into the river.”

“Bullshit,” said the Cacique.

“Look,” I said. “I am a security specialist. I cannot escape what I am. I have the final leg of your product train, and naturally I follow the weights and smelting efficiencies and deliveries and spot and see that it all adds up. That’s not in our agreement, but I do it because it’s just the way I’m wired. And other than those couple of times in the past that you have since taken care of, it has always added up.’

“But, looking at the raw ore and final product weights, I have back-calculated that the *float* is averaging a density consistently higher than our purely placer runs. It’s not much, around 28%, but I’ve watched this number stay about the same over the past three loads since you hid the primary. I had Jacques pull a sample to run for rare earths from the last haul and swore him to secrecy till I could find a way to get to you without setting my *RID* subscribers to scratching their heads. This information has a sensitivity beyond the security confidence of our encrypted channels; at least that’s the way I saw it.”

“These are elements that exist only in a physics lab,” Izqadi objected. “These are man-made elements.”

“No,” the machete sharpener corrected. “They mine yttrium from asteroids; I know it for a fact.” He looked up to smile. “I bet they get those others from space also.”

“You’re both right!” I laughed. “They produce the elements atom at a time in nukes, and they also mine them from asteroids. And they’re not uncommon on Earth. They’re much more common than gold in fact. But they hardly ever concentrate anywhere. Commercially viable concentrations are typically in the 100-300 parts per million range.’

“Your float is running 2-3% in what Jacques’ lab is qualified to analyze. That’s one thousand times higher than conventional commercial accumulations. He says there’s up to 6% total. There’s no telling how much curium, americium, thulium, and other cool shit is in there! And the economics of this are jaw-dropping.”

The Cacique stood and walked across the packed soil floor to the edge and looked out across the stream at the mine face and the men working there.

“These are *tech min-chems*?” asked Izqadi, who had transformed himself in the space of three years from an enforcer for the Barranquilla Cartel to a gold expert and mulled the new learning curve with apprehensive trepidation.

“This could spell a new era,” the Cacique turned to inveigh. “Ñato,” he turned to machete-man. “More wine!”

Wine gave way to the fruit of their grow-patch, and smoke drifted beyond the yurt’s edges into the thick afternoon air. Men stoked up the cook-pit; a runner brought up a side of white-lip from the main camp; Ñato had one of his subs butcher it in the right sizes as he poked in the fire to gage the settling bed of coals. We drank and smoked and ate and a man played guitar while another beat a rhythm against *geotext* stretched taut over a *polym* bucket. My vision was all clear, my energy level high, and I smirked bibulously at the *chem-pack* and meds lost to me back up in the forest and took another puff, another bite, and washed it down with *raff*.

I was in the outhouse just before dawn with a throbbing head and traitorous gut when the troopers swept up on military-grade *Para Pods*, the hum of the crafts betraying them to me. I peeked from around the *geotext* door as the squad hovered over the camp and some men stirred from their bunks to raise an alarm. The squad banked into a circle, eight of them, and unloaded on the valley floor. I watched slack-jawed as their crafts were propelled back into the sky from the recoil of the *EM* cannons. I pulled the flap tight and listened as they settled their pods down and the disquieting hum was displaced with an eerie silence. I could make out a rustle from the breeze, but dawn’s birdsong had quelled, and even the insects had stilled their voices.



I peeked again and from within the remains of the yurt I saw the report of another *EM* burst. Then, amazingly, they dragged a living man out and threw him down. The eight commandos surrounded him. It was Izqadi. They tied him up and carried him to the single duo-pod and strapped him in the back seat. They powered up in a murmur of hums and lifted off the river terrace to retrace their flight path leisurely back downriver where I figured the mother ship was probably hovering off Salsipuedes Point. I shuddered at the turn of events but managed a successful bowel movement, and when I emerged from the shitter to assess the carnage, the forest had lifted its morning hem and light swelled the valley, and the birds had resumed their song.

They were all dead, all of them, open-eyed, their mouths and necks slick with the black blood nursed from their innards through their gaping mouths by the *EM* bursts. Dead. All of them but me. Me and Izqadi.

I was starting to get blurry-eyed and looked upstream and wondered about my kit. And that's when it hit me. I didn't have the backtrack on my meds pinned down enough to know for sure they weren't radio-marked, and I was now sure they were. It had simply never occurred to me. I copped on a budget and now studied the gaping security hole I had carved out for myself. I'd been set up in the most deeply personal way, played like a bull fiddle at a hipster jamboree, me the security expert on everything but the thing closest to me. I was the stupidest part of stupid. In my moment of despair, I was left to pathetically wonder if they had left me alive on purpose for some artistic end-stroke yet in store for me. I took in the casualties in their final poses, my fingerprints smeared all over the liquefied guts inside each of them and now drying on their curled lips. I scavenged some food and found a pack and hunted out the corpse of Ñato to

retrieve his sharp machete for the hike out and headed upriver hoping I would find my rig, which I felt I was about to urgently require.

My kit was intact. I adjusted my chemicals and changed back into my old *raims* and did the math. I wanted to head north and get off the peninsula across the Sierpe River. I could stay below the radar through the forest, and I knew I could find my way. But I couldn't go off and leave my little Bambú time capsule to age like Raffia wine. It was a bit like turning headlong into the headwinds of a hurricane. But I had to get back on the radar if I was ever to get an intervention. Of course if they had traced me with radio-locator in my meds then everything was lost and it would be preferable to remain RID slipped. But until I was certain of that, the liability of a voluntary outlaw conversion was too great. Also, the only way I was going to be able to get Izqadi out of whatever fix I had gotten him in required a quick trip back to the Rainy Plex

I hiked it straight and fast and gnawed on *pecc jerk* on the move and made Eusebio's a few hours before dawn. The house was sealed with yellow Judicial tape, and I chewed a bit on my liver at the sight. I was waiting for my life to flash before my eyes, but instead it was head beams in the drive. Ruby left the pod in hover and stepped beneath the opened op-hatch out onto an unruly lawn over to where I stood, my long streak of good luck still nominally intact. She was flying a Caddie.

"They flew him to Golfón for questioning," she reported.

"Well," I figured. "Golfón's out of my reach. I guess that means I don't have to go do something stupid."

She smirked without pointing out the obvious, and I broke away and headed out back where I recovered my intact stash. She followed and watched as I stripped naked and washed the forest from me as best I could with water from a hose bib.

"Ricardo," she said. "You're in danger here."

"How do *you* know?"

"It's obvious, Sweetie."

"Okay," I chuckled. "I have to give you that one." I powered up my wave ring and focused on Lyrica's urgent message in my wave-box.

"The Piedras gang has already moved across the ridge to take over the Cacique's workings," Ruby said. "They were all massacred up there. The buzz is that it was either military or private paramilitary, but none of us know."

The DNA in the sample degraded. It was a counterfeit. Your babe's identity remains unknown. But her name is certainly NOT Silvia Amador Cornuda!

"Really," I gaped. "Massacre? Where?" So, the Jantz Commodities lead had been a plant to sidetrack, and I now had to revise the entire script for the pieces to lay right. Perhaps this was never about gold in the first place and really does have something specific to do with Gato Izqadi.

"Oh Ricardo, don't be coy. You were there!"

"Me? What are you talking about?"

She crossed her arms and gave me the old glare that I knew so well. She did not believe me, but she did not know for spitting sure if I was lying or not. Whoever it was radio-tracking my insulin, it was not her, but they were talking to her. She wanted to believe me, and I figured I had her just rattled enough as a plan pulled itself together.

"I need you to give me a ride," I schmoozed.

"Ricardo," she insisted. "Strauss has approved a queue upgrade, emergency, so we can get you out of here within ten minutes of arrival at the *telepad*."

"Anywhere on your telenet, right?" I asked. "Oakland, Newark, Perth, Dusseldorf, Tehran, Cape Town?"

"Yes! Guangjou and New Delhi, and a few others to boot! But more importantly, we can do it right now! Before they haul you off to Golfón, or God forbid someplace worse."

"I just want to go home," I sighed, exhausted. I waved a penetration of her pod's identity file and waited as my algos plodded through the security protocols to decode her ride.

"You know San Jose is not on our network."

"Well," I grimaced. "I hear it's nice in Cape Town this time of year."

"Attaboy," she finally managed a smile.

"Town sure has changed," I said as we edged toward the hub. "Crazy what ten years will do. Remember when we landed here? What it was like? Now look at it . . ." I lifted my palms against everything outside the *pod-screen*.

We got out and she *waved* it down and it settled onto its *blocs*. I activated my attack and saw I was in high cotton. Inside the lobby I pulled her aside. "Ruby," I said. "I have been having some

really difficult toilet moments lately.” I glanced down. “Touch of dysentery. I have to go sit on the pot and grind it out, babe. I’m sorry, but I have to.”

She took it in stride, not liking it much, but tolerant and understanding. “I’ll be in my office. Meet me there. See you in fifteen, ten if you can swing it. Five?” she shrugged.

“As quick as I can; I am with you, babe; I’ve gotta get out of here quick! But excuse me, I’m about to lose it,” I grimaced, clenching up my sphincter to hobble stiffly for form toward the men’s room.

After hanging inside for a few minutes, I emerged and slipped out the lobby and into my new wings and flexed the ailerons. “It’ll do in a pinch,” I reasoned, headed up Main. I turned off the *concremac* and down across the berm that gave to the beach and across the sand to the line of gentle waves and then tossed my *RID* out on the water and gunned her north over the gentle Golfo Dulce as the eastern sky brimmed with the promise of dawn and a dim ring of blackness circumscribed me in ridges and mountains on all sides of the gulf. With me now *RID*-slipped and the internal tracking of the *Cad Pod* disabled I was now off the grid altogether and forever more. And it meant my med int would now run me ten times more on the free market. Of course, that would not matter is I were able to successfully suckle the teat of Corcovado’s rare earths, something that was going to be hard enough as it was, even if it did not carry me to death’s corridor. My vision was sharp and in just a few minutes I was reverse thrusting onto the Río Esquinas mangroves and cut her to an idle to mosey up the main river channel, careful not to jam her before I was ready to ditch. But Ruby would get to be proud of me. I found a perfect landing beyond which the mangrove brambles would not let me pass, serving my purpose to a tee. And it was a small cleared terrace along the bank, above high tide, where I set her down as pretty as you please, not a scratch on her, so Ruby would get her ride back. I always knew you could have it both ways, but small successes never deserve less than a pat on the back, so I gave myself one. I waved the *retro-gram* to restore Ruby’s identity to the pod and wipe most of my fingerprints from the code. Upslope I came to a small house with a dilapidated *duo-pod* under a weathered *pod-port* and called the man out. He had a cousin in Chacarita with a *Kia Pod* and another buddy in Pérez that could run me up from there to the Hose in his *Toy Pod*. We settled on 75 Zs, paid in thirds along the way, and the coconut *teleport* put me back in the *Rainy Plex* before noon. Naturally, I could not go home nor to Calle Cinco. I settled on a sketchy sector of Desamparados and rented an hourly room lost among outlaws and ne’er-do-wells, confident that other than the hookers in the lounge I was off everyone’s radar. I was probably too late to gum up the works, but if I was not, then whatever was about to happen would happen at a hospital. It was a job for Lyrica. I waved her up.

Did you get my wave about the DNA *deg* on that *nic-butt samp*? It was a counterfeit label alright. Pretty sophisticated, clearly Pharma fingerprints all over it. Not just any Pharma. Big Pharma. Do you think for sure this wave is secure?

Not really, I replied. But I don’t care. You got a juvie in the network for a *marrow-plant*?

No, Ricardo, only juveniles in the docks are a kidney and cornea.

Anything unusual on the transplant *int sched*?

Yes. I'm sure of it. There's an old *pluto* here scheduled for open heart without a clear donor that has all the marks of the people behind this DNA cover. His records are beyond my *sec-lev*. But there's a young male in secured isolation, nothing about him at all on the system. Very unusual. I am sure they are paired up. The *int* is scheduled for six am tomorrow morning.

If I make it out of this mess alive, Lyr, can I take you out to dinner? Check out Mario's?

I would like that, Ricardo. Be careful.

I tallied my zits and borrowed from my med fund and headed out to equip myself on the free market and scared up a couple laundered heaters, a handful of perc-caps, a cutting laser, *paravest* and *parapedes*, and an oversized yellow *sports-jack* to cover it all and humped it back to my lay-low and spread the gear out on the worn mattress and took a shot and waved into Lyrica's account to case the hospital and learn the lay to work up a plan.

I was in place on the sixth floor in a janitor closet with my great yellow *sports jack* and a Panama hat as they wheeled the old geezer up on a gurney. I watched it in the dark from my security cam feed and saw their shadows pass by the crack beneath the door. There were six *paras* in black and three nurses in white. They had wheeled a strapped-down Izqadi in minutes before. Happily, the guards were made to wait outside the *int-room*. I put on the mask and emerged from the closet and tossed the *bang-pops* down the hallway floor, four of them, like dice, and they did their dance before the *paras* could raise a weapon or alarm put all six down like sleeping babies, their limbs all akimbo in a big black heap on the gleaming floor tile. I stepped over their pile and kicked the door open and walked in with my heater leveled on an astonished med staff preparing for their work.

I tore off the mask. "Untie him," I pointed with the heater.

"Do it," the doctor insisted.

A nurse rushed up to release the restraints.

But the heater scattered across the floor and I looked down to find a bone sticking out of my arm and Señorita Safiro—all gussied up in a *nurse fit*—releasing disabled stupid me from her nifty aikido move.

"You broke my arm," I exclaimed, tossing my second heater with my left across the room. Izqadi pulled it from the air and clapped her with an *EM* burst around her shoulders as she swung to follow the track of the weapon through the air. Gato sat up naked on his gurney and turned the heater on the now cringing med staff. Miss Sapph sprawled on the floor unconscious.

"You got this on stun?" Izqadi marveled, switching it over to lethal and stepping forward to put a second jolt into the back of her head.

"No!" I yelled. "What are you doing?"

He walked over to the other gurney but did not let the wizened man get his feeble arms even raised in a trembling protest before popping a cap. Did he not realize that the old guy was his father? He had to know, surely, he recognized him. Gato was nobody's fool. But it was so cold-hearted, that I was sure he must not have it figured out and was just on a tightly wound spool.

"You have got to be kidding me," I protested loudly. "That was a *loaner*, dude. That's my heater. You can't go killing people with it!"

"Hell I can't," he waved it at the cowering med staff.

"What are you going to shoot me next?" I declaimed all filled with outrage and indignation.

"Of course, I'm not going to shoot you," he replied, stunned. "What sort of thing is that to say? You saved my life! I owe you!"

"Oh look," he pointed down at Señorita Safiro, who was stirring. "She's had a *mort int*!

Dude!" he walks over to me and puts his hands on my shoulders, gentle on my right side. "I am sorry about that arm; that looks pretty nasty. I have to borrow this for a sec, excuse me." He yanked the laser from its attachment to my *paravest* inside the sports jack.

"No, don't, please, Gato," I begged.

But it was to no avail. He lased her head off and threw it across the room.



“Only one way to kill one of them,” he shrugged. “What choice do I got?”

“She broke my arm, Gato,” I winced looking down, feeling faint.

“You were careless,” he chided me. “You need to work on your situational awareness. Now get over here.”

He lay me down and rummaged quickly through the cabinets and injected me and poured burning *antisept* copiously over the puncture in my arm where the bone poked through. “This is going to hurt quite a bit,” he said.

He pulled at my arm until the bone slipped back up into the flesh and rubbed it around until it felt right to him and then tied it in place with *velc-tape* and bound me up, the staff compliantly huddled in a corner. Despite the des-oxy-heroin shot, I passed out right up front from a pain that was like a thunderbolt and only reconstructed the events later. But when Gato revived me with an *adrena-meth* shot I was all bound up and ready to go and popped up off the gurney, chomping at the bit. He fetched me the strayed heater and stripped the doctor of his scrubs to shimmy into them, and we took the stairs two at a time to shrink into the downtown crowd beneath a canopy of umbrellas to wend our way ever deeper through Barrio Mexico *ped-zones* and were finally joined by friendlies of Gato’s and rushed to a safe-house. A runner was sent to hustle up some *pens* against infection and insulin *amps*. He was back in a flash, and I gratefully medicated, tweaking on the speed meds and ready to do something but too lazy to get up from the seat and still circumspect about my arm and able to lapse into a narcotic interlude at will, and that’s when the little pink elephants began to tiptoe through the room tittering, seeing that everything seemed funny to them.

"You know what we gotta do," I told him frantically, sweating profusely, oblivious to his sketchy cohorts. I sighed and laid back in the chair and focused on the inside of my eyelids a spell.

"The Piedras gang will move in," he smiled, laying his hand on my knee. "Probably already has," he said.

"Already has," I murmured. "Did so the day after the massacre."

"Good, then we're set," he smiled, breaking into a delighted chuckle. "They're numbskulls, but at least they're *my* numbskulls. We need to go see Jacques now," Gato said. "Perhaps even his higher ups."

"Give us a minute," I told the gawking posse.

They looked at one another and then at Gato and he nodded them off and they all went out in the rain to share umbrellas, leaving us alone.

"No more shooting anybody," I said.

"No more shooting anybody that don't need shooting," he corrected me.

"I am not taking you to Jacques for you to shoot him."

"Why would I shoot him? He's our friend with a secret close to us. Unless, of course, he's sold us out . . ."

"I think we're still in a *cloud-bubble* on this and have time to move on the intelligence," I said very seriously.

"That is, *if* you think you can control the Piedras crew."

"Let's go pop the bubble," he grinned.

My arm hurt like the dickens and Jacques repaired to the lab med kit to produce a *morph-amp* to settle me down a bit.

"We go three ways," Jacques said, staring down a glaring Gato. "We ran this on a lark," he winced, embarrassed at the truth of it, "on Mighty Dick's suggestion." He looked over at me. "But it won't be long before this gets noticed by others, and then the gig's up. We have to *own* this and take it to the ones that will wind up with it anyway and give it to them on a silver

platter *before* they get a chance to snatch it from us and cut us out and liquidate us. Time,” he raised his eyebrows, “is no friend of ours!”

“They’ll just take it anyway,” I objected. “What do we got that they don’t?”

Izqadi smiled. “We got the people. What *don’t* we got? This is Costa Rica, *mae*. Get a grip.”

Gato turned to Jacques. “Pitch it for twenty percent, which we cut three ways after downstream expenses to settle the boys and do a little community patronage. Maybe argue to split the patronage costs, since they’re long-term, say five percent. We deliver it up in a tight package within a week—take it or leave it—or we march the offer to the Pan-Ex commodities market and stir up a whole world of shit between Panama and Costa Rica. None of these bozos wants to risk a *Big Uncle* mediation intervention. They’ll fold.”

In my *morph* cloud I was rationalizing *Señorita Safiro’s* prim appearance on my scene with the disjointedness of her body on one side of the int-room and her cauterized head rolled across to the other, small crusts of blood littering the floor in crumbs like flux bubbles on the floor of a weld-shop. I waved up the hospital stream and pulled her up from the case file, cause of death decapitation by laser. Rosario Luz Santorro. In real life an aspiring actress, taken as a trophy-wife by atrophied plutocrat Enrique Carriles Vázquez, a Pharma magnate from Cartago, newly deceased from an *EM* burst to the head, the biological father of a delinquent child that was now calling the shots in an improvised triad of desperate conspirators. I dug a bit deeper with my penetration ware and breached the wall of her personal wave-block and looked through her pictures and patched into a few perma-waves to get a feel for her, and there among the recent stuff was an image of her and Darling Ruby embraced in a kiss.

Corundum conundrum indeed. Ruby and Sapphire, sitting in a tree, kay I ess ess I in gee.

“Mighty,” Izqadi snapped his fingers by my ear. “Our business here is done. Let’s go. We gotta go draft up our *TFR*. Let’s head over to slum in *Cinco Esquinas* a spell; I got another band of friendlies there.”

It was all good by me. What did I care?

“What doctor did this to you?” Lyrica’s doctor friend wanted to know. “This is amateur hour. With only basic tools a first-year med student could have done a better job!”

“I’m sorry,” I looked up all sheepish. “It was cheap.”

The doc sighed in reproach. “Look, we should re-break it and set it better, otherwise you will always have this . . .” he pointed at the x-ray, “curve. You might even get arthritis.”

“So, it’s not infected?” I looked up hopefully. “Think it will heal?”

“Oh, it will heal. It’s not infected. You’ll be good as new. Only a little bent.”

“Doctor,” I smiled. “I’m already a little bent. I think I can live with it.”

The *Testament For the Record (TFR)* that we put together hit the high points without descending into tawdry details, and as we red-lined the final draft still holed up off the radar, beyond bodily threat. We had a hungry whiz-bang *Law-Bat* that tied us in fast to the ground base so hard they couldn’t get away our assassinations without having Judicial rain down on them like vitriol, not to mention the Dubai backstop, an Izqadi ace-in-the-hole. And our target partners balked of course at a lot of the language but didn’t press the terms, and we worked through the sticking points and signed off and uploaded the TFR to the National Registry, a secret encrypted account of the underpinnings—plenty of them criminal—protected by the Judiciary unless or until the partnership was legally contested and the document revealed publicly to mutual embarrassment and defamation and possible prison terms for the principals. It was an ethically awkward but effective way to ensure corporate stability in an age where business alliances were fleet, fickle, and nakedly populated by remorseless ambition. The British Law nations had not yet accepted the TFR Protocol, but it was nearly universal in the nations adhering to French Law precedent. The three of us split the down payment of Z 240K evenly, profits to be divided quarterly thereafter, and I waved fifty over to my med fund and called up Lyrica about our date.

“Want me to whack her for you,” Gato looked over at me from the *op* seat of his new *Tes Pod* as I sat in the passenger seat, assimilating.

“Oh no, Gato,” I objected. “There’s been too much killing already. Let it go.”

“Ruby and Sapphire,” he dug in, “sitting in a tree . . .”

“Cut it out Gato. You don’t have to rub it in.”

“But she betrayed you, Mighty, in all the essential ways!”

“So what?”

“So what? She was sending you off to your disembodiment in one of those *teleporter disassociation* pulses. I know she was. You know she was. One of those one-in-a-million tragic flukes. Good old Mighty Dick Durante, old sputtered-out love flame. One in a million...probably would have shed tears, maybe even in private.”

“Better alone than poorly accompanied,” I replied. “Nothing more to it than that.”

“Dude, I’ll do it for you. For free. What are friends for?”

“I’ll get over it! I forbid you to whack her. Now drop it forever!”

“Ok, Papi, you da boss!”

We dawdled over candle-light and ate a bitter-green strawberry and macadamia salad drizzled with mangosteen vinaigrette and tippled red *Cabernacchia*. Mario’s was packed but we took our time, oblivious to the reservations queue and allowed ourselves to be pampered by the waiters. My med-int was set for three days hence, and I had been sleeping again at my pad, opening the office daily like nothing had changed. Lyrica buttered a hot roll and took a bite and then a sip and set her salad fork down on the plate we shared and looked up full of mischief.

“It’s just that men today,” she glanced briefly downward . . . “it seems that all they are interested in is acrobatic bed-tricks and someone that will dutifully go away, afterwards...”

“Yeah,” I consoled her. “Love is dead; it’s there in the fossil record, like a vestigial organ, there, but absent any anatomic function.”

“Silly,” she giggled. “You’re worse than I am.”

“You like tuna?” I asked hopefully. “I am assured that it’s fresh from today, and I hear the tartare here is to die for.”

“I quit tuna twenty years ago,” she scowled.

“Over the dolphins . . . that’s ancient history, Lyr; it’s all farmed anymore.”

“Yeah,” she brightened. “But old habits die hard, Mister Mighty. Why don’t we try the curried sea cukes with kelp chutney?”

I suppressed my revulsion. “Yum,” I said. “Good idea!”

I looked up to find Ruby outside the plate glass standing on the *concremac* looking in at me, her hair matted from the rain.

“I have a stalker,” I excused myself. I felt vulnerable without my heater but recoiled at the notion. I loved that girl out looking in. I stepped outside, awkwardly into the rain and turned my collar up against the wind...

*

Her eyes swelled as she looked at me, the rain hitting the *mac* hard beyond the awning, and the tears brimmed over. She rushed into my arms and grasped me into a collapsed embrace and cried.

"Careful with the arm," I managed.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

"I tripped," I looked down. "Sprained it pretty bad trying to catch myself."

She heaved on my left side a spell and I let her till she got through the worst of it and gently eased her shoulder back with my left hand to face her.

"I loved her!" she shrieked.

"I'm sorry, babe," I faltered.

"Why'd you have to go and cut off her head?"

"I couldn't stop it," I said lamely. "It wasn't my idea. It was not in the plan."

She looked at me with that look all clouded with tears.

"Ruby. It was the only way. She had had a *mort-int*."

"And I was scheduled for mine next month," Ruby whimpered. "We were going to live happily ever after! And now you've gone and taken it all away. I have to start all over again. This will be my third time, Ricardo," she said gently. "I'm too old for this..."

"Oh baby, I'm sorry. It was never my intention."

She composed herself and wiped her nose and stepped back from me and looked up. "Well, goodbye, Ricardo."

I looked at her and tried to decode it all.

"I just had to see you first."

"Wait," I objected. "What are you talking about?"

She looked at me and finally smirked. “Oh, I’m not going down like that,” she chuckled. “Puh-lease. Kicking and screaming all the way.”

“You’re scaring me, Sweetie.”



“If I hadn’t lost mine,” she tossed her head toward the window and Lyrice’s back in the far corner of the joint, “you’d have lost yours. I guess it’s true that all is fair in love and war. Go get her, Tiger.” Ruby turned with a stiffened spine beyond the cover and into the falling rain and crossed the street and hopped into an *air cab*.

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“Can you check my back, Dear?” Lyr piped up as I retook my seat to examine the sea cucumbers and kelp thing. “Feels all full of daggers.”

“Oh, that . . .” I said. “Think nothing of it.”

“Is that little ragamuffin the competition?” she winked.

“Not anymore,” I owned up. “Hey, you all fed up? You’ll get a real kick out of Polly. Come on,” I said. “Let’s go meet her.”

