

DOMINANT SPECIES

WILLIAM BURKE



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To the Brown family, Chris, Tamiko and Kai.
Good friends are a gift.
But thanks to the pandemic we've been faraway, yet so close.

“The humanization of any animal through the science of Transgenesis is both unethical and immoral. To create a creature that cannot live a meaningful existence goes beyond hubris, to the point of cruelty. To survive, such a creature will be forced to forge its own place in the world at the expense of other species, perhaps even Homo sapiens.”

Dr. Theodore Boveri

From his 2020 Address to the United Nations Special Committee on Genetic Research.

“There was none among the myriads of men who existed who would pity or assist me; and should I feel kindness for my enemies? No: from that moment on I declared everlasting war against the species, and, more than all, against him that had formed me, and sent me forth into this insupportable misery.”

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus

CHAPTER ONE

BELLWEATHER FARMS
Truth or Consequences, New Mexico

Saturday, April 8th
2200 hours

Dr. Nho Ho-seok pulled up to the entrance to Bellweather Farms. He quickly wiped away the sweat beading on his brow then tried to turn up the air conditioner. It was already blowing full blast.

Security Officer Mitch Ryan stepped out of the guard shack and said, “Evening, Doctor. Kinda surprised to see you here tonight.”

Dr. Nho nodded politely while running his security card through the reader. The LED lit up green, but the guard failed to raise the steel barrier. Instead he leaned close to the driver’s side window. Dr. Nho’s pulse quickened. Bellweather’s security staff weren’t ordinary civilian guards or even army personnel. They were all private military contractors with something called Talos Corporation—ex Special Forces operatives with top security clearances, trained to spot a trembling hand or a bead of sweat. Dr. Nho was displaying both.

The guard politely said, “I’ll send the elevator up for you. Happy Easter.”

Nho said, “Thank you, Mitch,” and drove on, clenching the wheel in a white knuckle grip. He muttered, “Nothing to be nervous about. Just a perfectly normal evening,” over and over like a mantra. It wasn’t working.

Technically he had nothing to fear. As Project Olympus’s lead genetic engineer he’d passed through these gates a thousand times. He was considered the preeminent mind in his field and the backbone of the project. A man above suspicion.

But tonight, he would be throwing all of that away.

On its surface, Bellweather Farms appeared to be just another ostrich ranch—a common sight in New Mexico’s semiarid climate. Dr. Nho parked close to the farm’s central structure, a weathered red barn plucked right out of Grant Wood’s American Gothic paintings. He slammed the car door shut while getting out and instantly wished he hadn’t.

The noise alerted the farm’s flock of penned ostriches, who responded with a chorus of throaty booms and hisses. Dr. Nho loathed the massive birds but accepted that their eggs were vital to his research.

A moment later the Terror Bird joined the chorus, letting out a howl equal to a semi truck’s air horn. Nho heard it pounding against its steel reinforced cage. The Terror Bird had been Project Olympus’s first breakthrough, but the dumb beast had long outlived its usefulness. The cacophony went on for a solid minute, grating at his already frayed nerves.

Nho muttered, “We really should have that thing put down,” while running

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his keycard through a hidden reader.

The barn's double doors slid apart, revealing the concrete bunker concealed within. The bunker's steel doors rumbled open, granting him access to the site's massive freight elevator.

Bellweather Farms was an elaborate facade, concealing the Cold War era Continuity of Government bunker buried a hundred feet below. Since the Soviet Union's breakup the sprawling underground complex had been repurposed as everything from a Delta Force training center to a records storage site. Now it housed Project Olympus, the world's most advanced and highly classified genetic research facility.

Dr. Nho stepped into the elevator and swiped his card. With a lurch the elevator began its nine-story descent to the laboratory level. The elevator was large enough to hold a ten ton truck and served as the sole entry point to Project Olympus. Nho's anxiety rose with the elevator's descent. The next two hours would dictate the course of his life and the lives of his family in Seoul.

For them to survive, Project Olympus had to die.

The doors opened onto the main corridor. As a Continuity of Government bunker, no expense had been spared in its construction. The curved, Frank Lloyd Wright inspired concrete walls and inset lighting lent it a grandeur intended to make Armageddon tolerable for the wealthy and powerful. The long corridor branched off into a rabbit warren of windowed genetics labs. On any other day they would be a hive of activity, housing fifty researchers. But on this Easter weekend it was a virtual ghost town. To his right was a glassed-in security booth manned by another Talos Corporation mercenary. The counter outside the checkpoint had been decorated with a basket, holding three colorfully dyed ostrich eggs; the genetics team's playful nod to the Easter holiday.

Talos contractor Rick Markham switched on the speaker outside the security booth.

"Good evening, Doctor. I wasn't expecting to see you tonight."

Nho blurted out, "I had some work to finish up," his voice a bit too loud.

Markham eyed him through the glass.

Nho smiled back. The Talos people were always difficult to read. He could never tell if they were going to say, 'Have a nice day,' or slit his throat.

Markham smiled and said, "I thought we were the only ones stuck working over Easter."

"It's not a holiday I celebrate, so I thought I'd take advantage of the quiet."

"Well, have a good evening."

Nho said, "Thank you," and continued down the corridor, but the steel gate failed to open.

The speaker clicked on again. "Doctor, we have a problem."

Nho froze, his palms clammy.

Markham said, "You forgot to swipe your keycard. It's standard procedure, even on holidays."

Nho walked back and ran his access card through the security scanner. The steel gate slid open.

“Thank you, Doctor, have a nice evening.”

“You too.”

Nho continued down the corridor, his pulse still racing.

Two staff members were walking his way. Dr. Powell, one of the genetic engineers, was pushing a cart of samples. The man next to him was Harry Kim, the project’s head of security.

Powell said, “Good evening, Doctor, I’m surprised to see you here.”

“Just trying to get in some quiet time.”

Harry Kim said, “Evening, Doctor.”

Nho gave him a curt nod, avoiding eye contact with the man who held the power of life and death over his family.

Harry Kim was in his early forties and stood a head shorter than any of the Talos military contractors. But in his case appearances were deceiving. The security chief enjoyed proving his manliness by whipping off a hundred one-armed pushups without breaking a sweat—a feat his subordinates attributed to ‘short man’s complex,’ though never to his face. But Harry was also a cyber security expert with impeccable credentials and a top secret clearance. A man above suspicion.

Nho thought, *If only they knew.*

The two continued on their way. Nho heard Harry Kim cough a bit too loud, jarring his memory.

Nho stopped and said, “Dr. Powell.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll need you to assemble the staff and meet me in the containment area in thirty minutes.”

“Sure. Anything to be concerned about?”

“No, I just have an announcement to make.”

Dr. Nho was about to add something then remembered what Harry had taught him about lying. The critical part was knowing when to shut up, so he kept walking.

It took him another five minutes to reach his private domain, a sprawling suite of rooms once earmarked for the vice president of the United States. Under Nho’s supervision it had been converted to equal parts lab and apartment—ideal for a man whose life held no separation.

He didn’t turn on the lights, preferring the soft glow emanating from the trio of four hundred-gallon aquariums lining the wall. A bioluminescent jellyfish drifted in each. One was an actual Box Jellyfish, while the other two were his own genetic creations. These Phylum Cnidaria were among nature’s simplest lifeforms, providing a perfect starting point for his research. Now they served as a reminder of how far he’d come. He sat down in his office chair, gazing into the tanks, lost in the soft hum of their filters. The happiest days of his life had been spent in this lab.

A voice jarred him back to reality.

“Doctor Nho.”

Dr. Chambers, one of the staff veterinarians, stood in the doorway.

Nho asked, “Can I help you?”

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“I wasn’t expecting to see you tonight, but since you’re here there’s something I’d like to show you. Maybe get your insights.”

“Problem?”

“Just some changes in Pluto’s condition that are, well, unusual.”

Pluto was one of the twelve genetic creations they’d christened the Olympians.

Nho glanced at his watch. Twenty minutes until his announcement.

He got up, donning his lab coat. “Okay, but let’s make it quick.”

He paused in the doorway, giving his private lab a long look, knowing it would be the last time he saw it.

#

Harry Kim stepped into the facility’s primary control room and glanced at the banks of monitors. One showed Doctor Nho walking down the corridor with a veterinarian. On another he saw five lab technicians dutifully assembling in the containment area.

So far so good.

Talos contractor Rick Markham stepped into the room, asking, “Something I can do for you, Harry?”

“Yeah, I need you to shut down grid eight for a couple minutes. The sensors were acting twitchy today, and given how dead it is tonight this would be a good time to fix it.”

“Any idea what the problem is?”

“If we asked computer experts we’d get a laundry list of gibberish, but I think it’s just dust in the boards. It’s happened before.”

“You’re the boss. I’m shutting ’em down.” Markham threw a series of switches on the console, disabling that sector’s security cameras and alarms.

As soon as the monitors went black Harry grabbed his tool bag and left.

He moved down the corridor to the main server room containing endless rows of blinking servers and control panels. Harry went straight to the ones he needed, sliding out a trio of foot-long control boards from a console and replacing them with ones he’d constructed. Despite appearing identical, these boards contained entirely new, unique protocols. He slipped the original boards into his bag and headed back to the security room.

Markham asked, “Are we good?”

“Hopefully. Fire ’em up again.”

After a few seconds of glitching the system came back online.

Markham said, “Shows up as normal. I bet you just saved the project a few bucks.”

“It’s not like we can call some local IT company.” Harry stared at the monitors for a second and asked, “Does three look twitchy to you?”

Markham leaned closer, studying the monitor. Harry drew a *Rohm* snub-nosed revolver from his tool bag and put it to the back of Markham’s head. He fired a pair of .22 short rounds with a muffled pop. The .22 short was the smallest caliber bullet manufactured, but at a range of one inch it was deadly.

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Markham slumped over the counter.

Harry rolled the dead man's office chair aside, pulled up another and checked his watch.

Fifteen minutes until go. Nothing to do but wait.

Fortunately, Harry was a patient man—as a sleeper agent he had to be. His birth name was Kim Tae-seok, but for the past ten years he'd lived in America under the name Harry Kim, worlds away from his true home in Pyongyang. The training he'd received there, bolstered by forged degrees and documents, had allowed him to rise from corporate security positions up to supervising American government projects. The lies he'd lived and the people he'd murdered had all just been stepping stones leading up to tonight's operation.

Harry's long wait was about to end.

#

Dr. Nho accompanied Dr. Chambers to the veterinary lab. Chambers attempted to make small talk along the way, but Nho seemed so preoccupied that he eventually gave up.

Like everything on Project Olympus the veterinary lab was state of the art, with full diagnostic and surgical equipment. Three hydraulic surgical tables designed for horses had been repurposed to accommodate the genetically engineered Olympians. Only one of the tables was occupied.

Chambers politely lowered the surgical table to accommodate Dr. Nho's short stature.

Nho approached the table cautiously, despite the patient being fully sedated. This was a rare opportunity to study an Olympian up close, without the fear of attack.

Nho asked, "You're sure it's completely sedated?"

"Oh don't worry, I'm pumping one thousand CCs of xylazine into its IV around the clock. He's out like a light."

The creature was, by all appearances, reptilian. A two-legged dinosaur with powerful limbs and three-toed feet capped with sharp claws. The eight-foot creature looked like a mini tyrannosaurus, but instead of a T-Rex's feeble upper limbs it had strong, articulated arms with three-fingered taloned hands. Its skin was colored in a series of alternating black and orange bands, reminiscent of a Gila monster. The skin wasn't scaled but rather looked like a series of interlocking pebbles. Its tail was twice the normal length for a creature of its size and tipped with a rhino horn of hardened keratin. The tail's snakelike flexibility made it almost prehensile, serving as both a tool and a deadly weapon. The creature's head was long, with a tapered snout and a mouth full of three-inch canine teeth. Its billiard ball-sized eyes bulged against the closed lids, indicating keen vision. Plastic tubes connected to a nitrous oxide cylinder had been inserted into its flared nostrils. The creature's breath came in deep sandpaper rasps.

Nho placed his hand on its chest and closed his eyes, feeling the steady rise and fall of its breathing while inhaling its distinctive musky odor. There were fifty scientists working at Project Olympus, but the Olympians were ultimately his personal Frankenstein.

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Chambers said, “Doctor?”

Nho opened his eyes, wondering how long he’d been lost in contemplation.

He asked, “So what was the issue?”

Chambers said, “After the injury its color bands had faded from orange to a salmon pink. But in the past few hours the color’s returned.”

“I’d consider that a positive sign.”

Chambers said, “That was my question. Was the change in coloration part of your design?”

“No, it’s just a unique but unplanned trait. Do you think it’s recovering?”

“I believe so.” Chambers pointed to a row of surgical staples on the Olympian’s side. “But the Terror Bird really did a job on him.”

“I should have that bird destroyed.”

“Sergeant Torres isn’t going to like that. She’s gotten pretty attached to it.”

“Never grow attached to research animals; once they outlive their usefulness they have to be put down.”

A sudden chorus of banshee level screeches startled Nho. The sounds emanated from behind a sliding door labeled, “Containment Area B.”

Chambers said, “Sorry, Doctor, I should have warned you. The Harpies have been screeching like that all day. Something’s got ’em more riled up than usual.”

Nho said, “Another example of something outliving its usefulness. Have one vivisected tomorrow to see if you can trace the issue.”

“I’m sure the staff will be happy to put one down.”

The Harpies were an earlier experiment that had proved too savage and unpredictable even for military use. Nho had requested they be euthanized long ago, but Dr. Giove, the project’s supervisor, demanded they be kept alive for observation.

Glancing at his watch, Nho said, “I’ll be making an important announcement in ten minutes inside the enclosure. I need you to be there.”

“Okay, give me a couple minutes to recheck these sutures and I’ll be along.”

Dr. Nho left, the Harpies’ screeches still ringing in his ears.

#

Dr. Nho stepped into Project Olympus’ primary containment zone, which the staff had aptly nicknamed, The Super-Max.

The containment zone was compartmentalized into three sections. The outer section housed all the security and environmental controls. A sliding transparent polycarbonate door separated it from the center section, consisting of work stations and tools for behavioral experiments. Its floor-to-ceiling windows offered an unobstructed view into the third and largest section—the Olympians’ enclosure.

The enclosure had been modeled after the Munich Zoo’s state of the art gorilla habitat, though it was far better reinforced. It had to be, as even one of the female Olympians could dismember a silverback without breaking a sweat.

Nho swiped his keycard, opening the entryway to the center area. The polycarbonate door automatically slid shut behind him. Five genetic engineers

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milled around in the center section. Each were among the top minds in their fields—the genetic engineering equivalent of the Manhattan Project. Nho had carefully juggled their work assignments, ensuring that the best, and, above all, most irreplaceable, were present tonight.

The eleven Olympians inside the habitat were awake and alert. The creatures never slept when humans were present.

Vulcan, the alpha male, stood inches from the window, his breath fogging the glass. His unblinking pool ball-sized eyes studied the humans.

Despite having created these creatures, Vulcan's glare still made Dr. Nho uncomfortable. *He's like a starving man reading a menu.* But there was also a distinct intelligence in those eyes, functioning at a level that had, thus far, defied calculation.

Vulcan was flanked by two slightly smaller males, identified as Mars and Uranus. The other males were strategically positioned behind them, forming a barrier between the entrance and the straw-littered nursery behind them. The females were huddled around the cluster of eggs, their every move scrutinized by the alpha female, Juno.

Nho disliked the concept of naming research animals, feeling it led to bias or anthropomorphizing of the test subjects. But in the Olympians' case there was little risk of anyone forming an emotional bond.

Doctor Tate, a senior researcher, asked, "What's in the bag, boss?"

Patting his shoulder bag, Nho said, "It's a surprise," then he addressed the group. "I know you're curious as to why you were called together in this specific room, but I have an important announcement and I thought this was an appropriate location to make it." He paused for a moment. "And, as usual, I forgot something. I'm sure you're all used to that by now."

Dr. Powell said, "Doc, I swear you spend half your time revolutionizing genetics and the other half looking for your car keys," earning a collective laugh.

Nho said, "Give me a moment and I'll be right back."

He walked out of the central room. As soon as the door slid shut behind him, he went to the control panel. With trembling hands he entered a security override code, locking the entry to the central area. He reached for the switch marked, "Request enclosure opening,"—the first of a two-step process. His hand hovered over the switch, hesitant to perform the next unspeakable act. Yet his sisters' lives depended on it.

He threw the switch.

#

Harry Kim saw a red light on the security console flashing, signaling that someone wanted to open the Olympians' pen. This failsafe system prevented anyone from opening the pen without security's authorization. Likewise, security couldn't open the pen without the containment area's switch already being thrown.

He muttered, "Almost on schedule."

Harry had thirty seconds to either comply or cancel the command. He barely needed two. Eyeing the containment room security monitors he twisted

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the control knob. A yellow beacon light came on and the hydraulic door confining the Olympians slowly slid open.

Harry leaned back in his chair, calmly waiting for the butchery to commence.

CHAPTER TWO

Dr. Tate shouted, “What the hell!”

The technicians watched in horror as the door to the Olympians’ enclosure slid open. Tate ran to the exit, frantically swiping her keycard. The door failed to open.

She pounded on the window, screaming, “The pen’s opening! Let us out!”

Nho looked away in shame, grateful that her pleas were muffled by the polycarbonate window.

Tate pulled the emergency alarm, which should have echoed through the entire complex. Harry Kim had disabled it.

Vulcan stood like a statue in the open doorway. The two closest males hovered behind him, exhibiting no sign of fear—only calculation. The other males stepped back a few paces, shielding the nursery.

The technicians stood frozen in place, eyes locked on the Olympians. It was a standoff.

Nho watched in grim fascination.

Up until now the Olympians had only been released in pairs, surrounded by multiple technicians wielding powerheads—five-foot insulated poles capable of delivering high-voltage shocks. The technicians had made liberal use of them, instilling fear in the Olympians from a young age.

But now, for the first time, the Olympians outnumbered the unarmed humans.

Vulcan took a single step forward, sniffing at the air, tapping his tail rhythmically against the floor. Obeying his signal, Mars and Uranus moved forward.

Dr. Powell whispered, “Is he signaling them with his tail? Have they done that before?”

The man next to him whispered, “Not that I’ve seen.”

The technicians glanced across the room at the rack of high-voltage powerheads. If the powerhead’s electrical shock failed to stop the Olympians, each housed a single .12 gauge shotgun slug in its tip. The round was powerful enough to kill a great white shark.

Vulcan’s eyes also shifted to the rack. He rattled his tail against the floor.

Dr. Tate gave up pounding on the door and whispered, “Don’t go for the powerheads. They’ll be on you in a heartbeat. Just stand your ground and don’t show any fear.”

Vulcan’s tail tapped a staccato rhythm against the concrete floor. Mars moved a few steps to the left and held his position.

The room fell silent, save for the air conditioning’s hum. Vulcan took another step forward, letting out a low, guttural hiss.

Dr. Powell whispered, “They’re gonna kill us,” his gaze shifting to the rack of powerheads.

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Tate said, “No, just hold—”

In a panic, Powell lunged for the powerheads. A second man followed his lead.

Mars was ready.

The Olympian leapt forward on its powerful legs, clearing the distance in the blink of an eye. It locked its jaws around Powell’s skull, crushing it. In the same move, it swung its spiked tail outward, striking the other man across the face like a medieval mace. He staggered back, his face a mass of blood and shattered bone.

Vulcan sprang into action, covering the length of the room in two strides. His jaws clamped down around the staggering man’s throat, decapitating him.

A millisecond later, Mars and Uranus struck, taking down the closest technician.

Apollo, Mercury and Neptune shot out of the enclosure, eyes locked on the remaining man. Apollo bit down on his outstretched arm and jerked his head right. The force swung the technician around, right into Neptune’s waiting jaws. Neptune’s bite severed his other arm, allowing Mercury to finish the kill.

Only Dr. Tate was left alive. She dove for the floor, scooping up a metal broom handle used in training exercises. Apollo charged at her. Tate held up the broom handle as if it were a powerhead. Apollo stopped in his tracks, rocking in place like a prizefighter.

She jabbed the broom handle at him, maintaining some distance.

The other Olympians hung back, conditioned from birth to fear the high-voltage shocks.

Dr. Tate used her free hand to pound at the exit door.

Vulcan rhythmically tapped his tail against the floor. Obeying his signal, Neptune crept forward, hugging the wall.

Tate hammered at the glass. Nho saw the desperation in her eyes and had to look away.

A man’s voice behind him shouted, “What are you doing?”

Nho turned to find Dr. Chambers standing in the doorway. He’d completely forgotten about the veterinarian.

Chambers ran to Nho, shouting, “Let them out!”

“I can’t.”

Chambers shoved him to the floor and twisted the emergency control, shouting, “Hang on, Tate, I’m getting you out.”

The door began to slide open, allowing Dr. Tate to slip through the gap.

It was exactly what Vulcan had been waiting for.

Chambers twisted the switch to the close position, but Neptune was already wedged in the doorway. The Olympian twisted its body sideways, using its powerful tail as a fulcrum.

Vulcan let out a roar. Heeding his signal, Terra, the smallest of the beta females, sprinted out of the enclosure and across the room. She crawled over Neptune, slipping her body through the breach. The moment she was through, Mercury joined Neptune, wedging himself in the doorway, their combined strength keeping the hydraulic door open.

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It only took Terra a heartbeat to size up her opponent's threat level. She opted for the largest—Dr. Chambers. The veterinarian yanked the wall mounted fire alarm, just as Terra's claws ripped across his abdomen, disemboweling him.

Dr. Nho crawled behind the control panel while fumbling with the gym bag's zipper. Terra advanced on him until a loud crash distracted the Olympian.

Dr. Tate had knocked over a tray of instruments while scrambling for the open doorway. Terra cut off her escape, forcing Tate to crawl under a gurney. The Olympian advanced on the woman.

Nho unzipped the gym bag, careful not to catch Terra's attention.

With one swing of her tail Terra swept the gurney aside, leaving Tate unprotected. Two slashes of Terra's claws decapitated the woman.

Nho slid a compressed gas cylinder from the bag and twisted the knob. There was no odor, just the hissing sound of escaping gas.

Terra turned, advancing on Dr. Nho.

#

Harry Kim saw the alarm on the security console light up, followed by a piercing electronic horn echoing through the complex.

"Shit!"

The fire alarm had been the only thing he couldn't disable. Thankfully, it was a localized alarm. But it still rang at the guard shack and had to be manually shut down at the source. A light on the security console switched on, indicating the elevator was in motion. One of the gate guards was already on his way down.

Harry lingered in the control room's doorway until the freight elevator opened. Jackson, a tall, bald-headed African American man stepped out. Harry waited a moment before stepping into the corridor, giving the impression of coincidentally being on the same path.

Jackson said, "We got a fire alarm signal."

Feigning annoyance, Harry said, "Yeah, one of the researchers hit it by accident, he just called in. I was on my way to shut it down."

Jackson shook his head. "I swear, the smarter they are the dumber they are. Alright, I'm gonna check in with Rick before I go back up."

"I don't think that's—"

But Jackson was already through the control room doorway. He saw Rick Markham slumped in an office chair.

"What the hell?"

Harry drew the .22 revolver, pumping two bullets into the back of Jackson's bald head. The big man hit the floor, his body racked with spasms. Harry leaned down, pumping his last .22 round into Jackson's ear.

A voice came over the walkie talkie clipped to Jackson's belt. "Jackson, what've you got?"

It was the other gate guard.

Harry plucked it from Jackson's belt and said, "Hey Mitch, it's Harry."

"What's going on down there, boss?"

"There's no fire. One of the big brains did something stupid. No problem,

we're going to shut it down."

"Copy that." The walkie was silent for a moment. "Hey Harry, I've got headlights coming toward the gate. Looks like a truck."

"Yeah, that's going to be the feed truck. I forgot to give you a heads-up, sorry."

"Copy that. I'll hold them here until you get the alarm shut down."

Harry said, "Copy that," then cursed under his breath. It was standard protocol to hold all incoming vehicles at the gate during an alarm. Countermanding that procedure would appear suspicious and he didn't need any more surprises.

He thought, *The driver will know what to do.*

Harry tossed the empty .22 aside and pulled the bulky .454 Raging Judge revolver from Jackson's holster. If he was going into the Olympians' den, he wanted to be ready. He sent the freight elevator back up to ground level.

Glancing at his watch, he muttered, "Still on schedule," and raced down the corridor.

#

Nho saw Terra approaching and cranked the canister wide open. He pointed the valve at the creature, his heart pounding like a jackhammer.

Terra came closer then paused, sniffing at the air.

Nho thought, *Thank God it's working*, and slowly got up.

Terra eyed him but made no attempt to attack.

The canister contained a pheromone Dr. Nho had secretly created. It was designed to induce a docile, hypnotic state—a catnip-like genetic weakness he'd covertly wired into the Olympians' DNA.

Holding the canister like a fire extinguisher, he advanced on the two Olympians wedged in the hydraulic door. They gradually slunk back into the center section. The door slid shut behind them, sealing the creatures inside.

Vulcan hurled himself against the closed door, but the polycarbonate glass held.

Nho took a deep breath, his pulse still racing.

Harry appeared in the doorway. Terra locked her eyes on him, body tensing.

Nho shouted over the alarm, "Put that gun away, they're trained to recognize weapons!"

Harry hesitated. "You told me that gas would make them docile!"

"Docile, but not stupid. Any threat will cause a release of adrenaline, overriding its effects. Now put the gun under your jacket and show her your empty hands."

He complied, and, after a few seconds, Terra lost all interest in him.

Vulcan continued hammering against the polycarbonate divide.

Harry shouted, "Hey, Doc, you think shutting that damn fire alarm off would help calm them down?"

"If I use my alarm code security will have a record of it!"

"Oh for Christ's sake, I'm security, you idiot! All the records get wiped as soon as we're gone."

Nho rushed over to the panel and pressed in his code. The shrill alarm fell

silent.

Harry peered into the central area, now littered with mutilated bodies. Dr. Marshall writhed on the blood-slicked floor a few feet from him.

Harry asked, "What happened?"

"Dr. Marshall came in after I opened the enclosure."

"You didn't do a head count before signaling? Christ, you must be the only genius on Earth that can't count to six!"

"I'm sorry."

"You jeopardized the operation and could've gotten us killed. Just remember, if you die, your sisters die with you."

Nho shuddered to think of what his family was being put through as 'guests' of the North Korean government. He muttered something in Korean.

Harry snapped, "Don't speak to me in Korean. That's protocol."

Staring at the floor, Nho replied, "What's the difference? Everyone's dead."

"Protocol is discipline, something you lack. I don't even dream in Korean." He looked over at the nearly motionless Terra. "Amazing that it makes them so passive. Does it work like scopolamine in humans?"

Scopolamine was a literal zombie drug that made humans highly suggestible before reducing them to vegetables. Harry had used it many times during his career with the Reconnaissance General Bureau 39—North Korea's brutal version of the CIA.

"No, it renders them cooperative, but their defensive instincts will still kick in if they're threatened."

Vulcan started hammering his tail against the reinforced glass.

Nho said, "I need to flood the enclosure."

He opened a wall cabinet, pulling out a larger canister labeled, "Emergency oxygen." After screwing the nozzle into a ventilator intake he released the gas.

"I'm saturating the enclosure with the pheromone."

Sniffing the air, Terra moved over to Dr. Marshall. She craned her head down and tore out the dying man's throat, swallowing the bloody mass.

Harry tensed, slipping his hand under his jacket. "I thought they weren't supposed to be aggressive?"

"Eating isn't aggression, it's just eating. They have a hyper metabolism so they need to feed constantly."

Over the next three minutes the enclosed Olympians grew docile. One of the males began tearing chunks out of a dead genetic engineer. Vulcan let out a snarl and the male backed off. In a seemingly choreographed move the beta males reentered the enclosure, stationing themselves around the eggs. The females, led by Juno, came out to feast on the dead bodies.

Watching the process, Harry asked, "They let the ladies eat first? How chivalrous."

"The females care for the eggs, so they always feed first. To them the eggs are all that matter."

"Did you wire good parenting into them?"

"No, it's just what they do."

Nho silently pondered the laundry list of instincts and behaviors the

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Olympians exhibited that weren't part of his design. He watched the females gorging on the corpses—all people he'd worked with and, until a few moments ago, had even considered friends.

He muttered, "Why did they all have to die?"

Kim grunted in annoyance. "We've been through this. They were the only ones who could recreate your success. Now it'll take years for the Yankee bastards to replicate your results." He glanced at his watch. "The truck's at the gate. How soon can we start the parade?"

"If we let the females finish eating, they'll be more manageable."

Harry nodded and pulled the walkie talkie from his belt.

#

A ten-ton cube truck with *TOC Wholesale Meats* stenciled on its side idled at the main gate's steel barrier. Mitch, the lone Talos security officer, jotted down the truck's plate number before approaching.

The driver, a burly Latino man, lowered his window and said, "Evening."

Mitch replied, "Happy Easter. Why're you guys making holiday deliveries?"

"I guess whatever you're feeding got extra hungry. What the hell do you guys got in there?"

"If I told you, I'd have to kill you. Just messing with ya, buddy."

Mitch's walkie talkie crackled. "Hey Mitch, it's Harry. The alarm's shut down, no incident. Jackson's taking a leak, so he'll be coming back out in a minute. You can let the truck in."

Upon hearing this the driver slipped a silenced Beretta model 71 from beneath the seat, keeping it just below the window. He'd been anticipating two guards at the gate, but Harry's mentioning "taking a leak" was code—indicating the second guard had already been dispatched.

Turning away from the truck the guard said, "No can do, Harry. I need to wait for Jackson to come back so he can provide an escort for the truck. Rules are rules."

Harry came back with, "Yeah I know, I'm the one who wrote 'em. Hey, who's the driver tonight?"

The guard turned back to the truck and asked, "What's your name, buddy?"

Recognizing another code signal, the driver smiled and said, "If I told you, I'd have to kill you," before raising the pistol and pumping two .22 caliber bullets into Mitch's forehead.

The driver hopped out, scooping up the guard's walkie talkie from the ground.

"Hey Harry, it's Enrique. I won't be needing an escort tonight. Everything's good, see you in five."

"Copy that. The elevator's waiting."

Enrique pulled the keycard off the dead guard's belt and ran it through the gate control. The steel barrier rose up.

Enrique pounded on the side of the truck, yelling, "Wake up back there, we got work to do!" then climbed into the cab.

Ordinarily, the delivery truck would pull up to the refrigerated storage

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building. Tonight Enrique drove past it, heading for the red barn. He swung the truck around, backing up to the sliding barn doors. Two men jumped out of the back, one Asian, the other Latino. Like Enrique the Latino, Juan, was a member of the *El Familia* cartel. The Asian, Yoon Cheol-min, was an agent of North Korea's Reconnaissance General Bureau 39 who'd spent six months living in the USA as a South Korean exchange student. Cheol-min slid the security key through the hidden reader, opening the doors.

Enrique backed the truck into the waiting elevator, muttering, "This is like breaking into Fort Knox. What're these gooks getting us into?"

As a member of *El Familia* he'd committed countless felonies, but breaking into this place was a step beyond. He didn't trust the Koreans as far as he could throw them, but they supplied the best methamphetamine on the market—laboratory grade stuff.

He felt the descending elevator lurch to a halt. He'd never been inside the complex and had only been told the cargo was large animals. Something told him it wasn't going to be cattle.

#

Harry asked Dr. Nho, "Do you have the data?"

Nho fished through his shoulder bag and handed Harry a plastic case.

"Just one drive?"

"It's a silica drive, so it can hold all the pertinent data."

Harry looked Nho directly in the eye and asked, "And there are no other copies?"

Thankfully, Terra chose that moment to let out a loud snort.

Nho turned away to glance at her while saying, "Yes, that's the only copy."

He'd just employed another of Harry's tactics for lying successfully—avoid direct eye contact when doing it.

Harry said, "Good," and keyed his walkie talkie. "Is the truck inside yet?"

Enrique came back with, "Yeah, ready and waiting."

Harry turned to Nho. "Open the door; it's time to start the parade."

After a moment's hesitation Nho hit the switch and the hydraulic door slid open. This was the moment of truth. If the beasts attacked they'd both be dead men. But the Olympians didn't rush the gate. Nho approached them, snapping a metal clicker. After a few clicks the procession began filing out.

Harry said, "They're coming along nicely."

"They've been indoctrinated to move to the freight elevator for training. But this is the first time they've gone as a group."

The females each picked up an egg in its mouth.

Upon seeing this, Harry said, "Looks like they know they're going on a long trip."

"That's normal, they take their eggs everywhere."

The males snapped up hunks of human meat as they passed, carrying them in their mouths and claws.

Harry muttered, "Dinner to go."

Walking backwards, Nho led the procession into the corridor.

Harry asked, "What about that injured one in the veterinary lab? Should we

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kill it?”

“No, killing it will excite the others. Trust me, we don’t want that.”

“I just hate leaving the Yankee bastards a roadmap to work from.”

Nho said, “It’s only a roadmap if someone knows how to read it and we just killed most of the people who could. Can we just keep them moving, please?”

They rounded the corridor. The freight elevator door was open and the truck was waiting. Cheol-min slid out the truck’s cargo ramp.

Enrique took one look at what was coming and slid the pistol out of his jacket.

Vulcan stopped, legs bent, ready to pounce.

Nho shouted, “Put that away!”

Harry chimed in. “He’s right. If they see a gun they go crazy. All of you, put your guns away!”

The gangster complied. Nho sprayed more pheromones to settle Vulcan down.

Switching to Korean, Harry asked, “Cheol-min, is the inside ready?”

The Korean agent said, “There’s straw for nesting, plus a couple sides of beef for snacks. I even remembered to put in some folding chairs.”

“Did you check on the other men? I don’t trust those idiots to do anything right.”

“Our second team drivers are in position, awaiting our arrival.”

“Excellent.”

Harry eyed the two Latinos suspiciously. He’d never intended to use these cartel gangsters, knowing that criminals were too undisciplined and ignorant for espionage work. But weeks earlier his four carefully placed North Korean agents had been pulled over by the state police. They’d been issued a traffic ticket and names had been taken, potentially compromising them. Their lapse in tradecraft had earned them an unmarked grave in the New Mexico desert.

Enrique watched the passing Olympians, muttering, “Christ, they’re ugly critters.”

Switching back to English, Harry said, “You’re no prize yourself. Just forget you ever saw them.”

“For what you’re paying us we’ll forget our own names.”

“You’re sure the guard at the gate’s dead?”

“I put two bullets into his head.”

“I didn’t ask what you did, I asked if he was dead. Did you check the body?”

“Yeah, yeah, trust me; he’s dead as disco.”

Harry stared into Enrique’s eyes, but the big gangster didn’t flinch.

“Good, now help get the animals up the ramp.”

Harry turned away and Enrique breathed a sigh of relief.

Vulcan waited beside the ramp as the others filed into the truck. His eyes remained laser focused on the humans.

Harry said, “Impressive.”

Dr. Nho said, “Ramps were part of their training regimen.”

Vulcan waited until the last female had entered before filing up the ramp.

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He stood at the top, studying the humans one last time.

Nho watched him, wondering, *Just how intelligent are you?*

Harry asked the second Latino man, "What's your name?"

"Juan."

"Juan, you, Nho and I are riding in the back."

"With those things?"

"Yes. Cheol-min and Enrique are in the cab. Enrique, slide the ramps in and close the door once we're inside, and try not to slam it. Keep your speed under fifty-five. Let's move."

#

The truck rolled out of the main gates, leaving a cloud of dust settling on the security guard's body.

Mitch Ryan rolled onto his side, groaning. One of the .22 rounds had penetrated his skull, but the second had been deflected by a steel plate implanted by an army surgeon. He tried to stand, but a flash of pain, like a hot knife boring into his skull, sent him back to the ground.

He thought, *You've been shot in the head before. It's move or die.*

With superhuman effort he crawled into the guard shack. Locking his hands on the lip of the console he hauled himself onto his feet. He struggled to bring his blurred vision into focus until he could make out the console.

He swatted the receiver off the hook and jammed his finger on a red button labeled "Emergency notification."

The phone rang four times before someone picked up.

A half asleep voice said, "This is Dr. Giove, is there a problem?"

Mitch managed to blurt out, "I'm shot!" before collapsing to the floor.

"Did you say shot? Is someone there? Hello?"

Mitch Ryan was dead, but his message had been sent.

#

Harry glanced at his watch. It was just past midnight and they were only minutes from their rendezvous point, with eight hours to go before the day shift guards arrived. Plenty of time. In five minutes one of his carefully manufactured computer boards would kick in, purging all of Project Olympus' onsite data. Days earlier he'd covertly introduced a worm into the project's offsite backups. By now they were useless garbage. The silica computer drive in his shoulder bag contained the only remaining copy of the data.

Dr. Nho said, "You realize there are other researchers on the day shift who've been with the project from the start? Dr. Giove is very capable and Dr. Kavanaugh is a genius. It may take a while, but they'll be able to recreate the work."

Harry shrugged. "My second strike will take care of that."

"What second strike?"

Switching to Korean, Harry said, "That's on a need to know basis and you don't need to know."

"What happened to not speaking Korean?"

"We just pulled off the greatest espionage coup in history. I think we can treat ourselves by speaking in a civilized language. Now calm down, you'll be

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in Korea laughing with your sisters before you know it.”

“Which Korea?”

Harry glared at him and declared, “The true one.”