

Sacred Cow

Larry Niven & Steven Barnes

Taffy's bedroom was a bit too warm, but I sensed that the chamber itself was cold. Couldn't feel it of course. It was just a projection from Geneva. And it was probable that none of the people I faced were really at ARM's Geneva facility at all.

The committee chamber was dark at the edges, with bright glowing circles spotlighting each of five ARM executives. Martin Lister sat second from the left. He was one of my supervisors and seemed more irritated than the others. Maybe that was just his default face, as if a normal person had gargled with lemon juice. "Before we retire to consider, have you anything to say, Officer Hamilton?" Lister stands five feet two, lean and muscular, straight black hair, pale complexion, sharp-edged nose and chin and cheekbones. It's hard to meet his eyes. They burn, especially when he is pissed. At those moments there's someone else living in there, someone I'm not sure I'd want to know.

I fought to control my temper: this was not the time or place for an outburst. "I saved a life," I said. "Mine. Fujimoto resisted arrest, and it is reasonable to assume he knew he'd be spare parts if found guilty . . . and he's guilty as hell." However true that was, it was also true that Fujimoto was an officer of one of Japan's largest corporations, and therefore capable of causing ARM trouble. First unwritten rule of any organization: *Thou shalt not shit where we eat*. Put into improbably appropriate terms, someone wealthy enough to purchase a black-market penis is powerful enough to screw you.

Lister seemed to have expected more of an outburst, was slightly surprised that I'd kept my voice stable. Maybe I'd lost a step in Earth's gravity well. In the Belt, maintaining a tight rein on your emotions under stress can be all that keeps you and your crew alive.

The woman in the center of the table was a gray-hair, with a symmetrical, unlined face. Which was the correct data? Gray hair, or smooth face? Her name was Wallingford. "Your actions have caused an international incident. ARM functions as it does purely by fiat of the member nations. Tazing a foreign national half to death is NOT the image we wish to project. Is that understood?"

"Yes, but—"

"And there is nothing more to say," Wallingford said. "You are restricted to 'level two' administrative functions until we complete deliberations. Is that understood?"

"Yes." Restricted to a single syllable. I could feel that my tenure at ARM was hanging by a

thread, my career over before it had really begun. What I wanted to say was, “what a pity you weren’t there to advise me!” The guy had brandished an antique handgun!

The man on the extreme left was brown-skinned and narrow-faced. His name was Dr. Sanjay Chudhury. “I would like to add that as the first ARM representative from the Belt, you had an obligation to represent your people with pride. It is not too late. Contrition will be taken into account.”

I wouldn’t say his eyes were exactly *kind*, but I did feel some openness there, and spoke. “Sir . . . at the time, I had no better choice. It is possible that I might make a different choice in the future, but I believed I acted in the best interests of all involved.” I paused. “Well . . . all but Mr. Fujimoto, of course.”

I watched them. I couldn’t claim that last hadn’t been a bit . . . what was the term? Puckish? Was that a bad thing? Frankly, I felt like I had one foot out the door. If I was setting the other on a banana peel, so be it. There were other ways to make a living.

But . . . was that a smile tugging on Sanjay’s face?

“Level two administrative only, Gil,” Lister said. “Don’t muck it up.” The chamber winked off, and I was back in Taffy’s living room.

I stretched and walked out onto the balcony. Midnight here, nine in the morning in Geneva. I’d had to be ready on their schedule. I wondered if they’d kept me up on purpose. The lights of the Los Angeles basin were bright. Smog had been no matter of concern for almost a century, and the air was sweet.

And I was about to be out of a job.

* * *

Sixteen and one-half hours earlier . . .

My relationship with Dr. Taffy Grimes was newer than my employment at ARM, but for the moment, more stable.

Taffy’s waterbed is enormous. It will hold four in comfort, and yes, we’ve performed the experiment. By no means can it be made retractable. The headboard is a complex of instruments and controls: hi-fi, scent orchestra, vid library, a voice remote for the holo cube that projects above the bed, a minikitchen, even a bookshelf. Anti-assault security mounted overhead, voice activated.

I’d hate to be the man who motivated her to scream her danger phrase. He’d be yelping for a doctor or a cop in about twelve seconds and would probably never walk straight again.

In a world of eighteen billion people, wasted space is expensive. Not as bad as the Belt, but I sometimes suspected they’d get there. The first morning I woke up in that bed, I’d wondered. I’d only known Taffy a week then. Was sex a hobby with her?

She’d been embarrassed. “I was going through one of those long lousy months at the hospital. I came home to my solitary bed and I looked down the long corridor of my life and I said to myself, ‘If I ever get any play time, I’m going to have to take it fast.’ Then this setup came up for sale on the Huxter Net. It looked . . . efficient.”

Mornings like this, I wake to find Taffy watching classic commercials in the vast hologram space above us. We loll in companionable silence. I feel waves rise in the waterbed when Taffy shifts her weight. If there’s time—

“What day is it?”

“Tuesday,” the wall and Taffy said. The wall added, “June 18th, 2126, 7:28 A.M.”

Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays I’m on the jingle. I can lead a normal life, except that my phone can pull me on duty at any time. The ARM office is civilized about it. I’m not on duty until I phone in.

But Tuesdays they want Taffy at the hospital.

“Save me an assignation,” I said.

She squeezed me intimately and said, “Tonight.” Changed her grip to pinch up a roll of chub below my short ribs and mused, “When was the last time you played karate with Julio?”

I felt the usual guilt reflex: I hadn’t called Julio Ordaz in too long. We deduct the lessons as a form of dance, because martial arts are illegal. According to Julio, all over the world, when you

see men dancing together, it is martial arts in disguise. If I'd been savvier, maybe I'd have been able to use a wristlock instead of a taser.

Without him I was probably going soft. Taffy's small fist held too much love-handle flesh.

"Point taken," I said. She grinned, rippled her belly muscles at me, and went off for her shower.

Show off! I didn't mind: muscle control is sexy. I lay there fantasizing, not ready to get up.

The holo cube showed guests crowded in an ancient kitchen, a huge room, acting out parodies of old movies. It was a marathon of classic Stan Freberg ads, made as flatscreen but remade into holograms by the Turner-Hamashita process.

I dialed cappuccinos and set muffins toasting. An anonymous message came through my system: **TURN ON THE NEWS. GANDHI'S CUBE.** Huh. I took a quick look at the message's provenance: Lister. What was up?

I watched the Pizza Rolls commercial and an Alka Seltzer, then switched to channel 70, local news.

A cow had been murdered in Gandhi's Cube.

Were they kidding? No, the visuals were unmistakable: blood everywhere and red-smearing bones. Close shot of a bovine head. It was still attached to the throat and stomachs . . . which were too small. Then bones which were too small too. I'm no rancher. Was I seeing it wrong?

Then quick flashes of internal organs that didn't look bovine. Strange: when they displayed an archival image of the animal, its head looked disproportionately large, almost as if it had been bred as a house pet. Another archival holo verified this: the kittenish huge eyes that remind us of human infants and trigger the instinctive "a wwwwww" response.

The beast had been a dwarf, bigheaded. Some kind of experiment.

There was also a picture of the man sentenced for the crime: a stocky Muslim named Tanka. He was accused of ARM-level offenses and already on his way to being tried, convicted, and frozen.

There were other images, including two lead scientists and a technician borrowed from the WHO.

Where the hell was Gandhi's Cube?

Then the broadcast showed me, and I remembered.

People know Gandhi's Cube the way they know the *Tour Eiffel*: they never think about it, but they know it when they see it. You could still see that it had been from the Paolo Soleri school of design, or something very close to that. The core was still there, a cube tilted onto one corner. Pillars lifted six corners: fullerene carbon, marvels of engineering in their time. The eighth corner, the top, was flattened for cars to land. Windows everywhere, bronzed under silver shades on the upper surfaces, in a frame the color of sandstone. Gandhi-Soleri had been built above luxurious parkland, outside Jaipur, capital of India's Rajasthan state.

Over the following sixty years, structure had crawled up the slender support pillars. The pillars grew fat, then acquired yet another shell. Some parkland was eaten by Gandhi-Soleri's out-buildings.

The rest went to encroachments resembling favelas, slums. By then Gandhi-Soleri was an armed camp enclosing a million people.

They were mostly Hindus, of course. By covenant, beef was illegal in the cube, and there were sniffers at the entrances. How had anyone gotten clearance for a cow to be experimented on? Baksheesh, probably. Lots of it.

I made a basic request for information available to a level two clearance, just wondering if there was anything the vid hadn't shown me. A quick scan showed one: The cow's name had been "Indira."

Indira? As in the twentieth-century Indian prime minister? That . . . seemed a little disrespectful. Had it been a somewhat tasteless joke?

Taffy came out damp, chose a muffin, and flopped against me. "What's new?"

"Murder of a cow named Indira." I kissed her. She tasted like clean girl, with a trace of chocolate muffin. A kiss is mostly texture, but should still be treated as a taste.

As she stiffened, I looked up. The broadcast had switched back to the . . . abattoir, I guess, rather than murder scene. Taffy grunted and switched to a cartoon.

I heard Taffy's silence and felt her stiffness. I said, "This isn't one of mine, you know. The ARM doesn't deal in murder. Especially murdered cows."

Taffy nodded, pulled away, began getting dressed. "Cow," she said. She thought I was kidding. I'd still have stayed out of it if Taffy hadn't poked at my love handles.

Time to go to work. I used my Pocketmaster to call ARM Headquarters LAX.

There were messages. Routine announcements. A chain letter, a sure thing in stocks, a dating service, bio-enhanced virtual sex, straight porn—probably Judeo-Christians for Traditional Values, that one. And a work-at-home job selling virtual advertisements. How do they get past our security?

I didn't have to go straight to Lister; he could see I was logged in. I browsed the virtual office. Talked to a few ARMs on duty. Checked in with Doctor Whom. The Doctor is always on duty, and he makes house calls too, but he lives as a program in the ARM computer net. The Doctor keeps a running roster of missing persons, and of patients in need of transplants who disappear, drop large sums, and get well. Last year we broke an organlegging network that had half the planet in its grip.

Amalgamated Regional Militia's duties break down into three areas: We try to stay on top of new, potentially dangerous or destabilizing technology. We deal with organleggers, claim their stocks, and pass the stuff on to the hospitals. We enforce the Fertility Laws.

We don't always have the cooperation of local police. Too much of ARM business is intended to slow progress. Edwin O. Wilson had once said: *"The real problem of humanity is the following: we have Paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and god-like technology."*

I've heard wags suggest that ARM's real purpose is to try to slow down that god-like tech until our hindbrains can catch up.

Not sure I believe that. Older folk don't want to see the organ banks dry up completely. They don't want medical research slowed either. Shutting down a bootleg genetics lab might stop a plague, but it can also block a pollution-eating bacterium or a more efficient cancer cure.

And some localities don't feel that the Fertility Laws should apply to them.

The Fertility Laws aren't always popular even within the ARM. Would you want to know someone who enjoys hunting down unlicensed parents? Enforcement happens during slack periods.

You can judge a newbie in the Amalgamated Regional Militia by watching his face when you show him Gandhi's Cube. The place looks like the epicenter of the population explosion. He can see it's ready for a mother hunt. Will he flinch?

I'd flinched. But that was months ago.

As I've said, it's hard to meet Lister's eyes. They burn.

"Hamilton. You look comfortable. Don't stay that way: there is a board meeting at midnight your time. You will be there."

I sat in half lotus on Taffy's wonderful bed, still wearing pajamas. I grinned at him. "I'm glad I'm here. Looks boring there."

He said, "Do us some good, Hamilton. Organleggers don't go on strike. Old folks still get sick. The harder it is to get kidneys, the more they pay."

"Like drugs used to be. People get addicted to life." He'd told *me* that.

He's not my direct boss, but above me in the chain of command. I talk to Martin Lister because nobody else wants to. He's one of the most valuable men we've got, but there's a price.

Lister is crazy.

Paraschitzies can't get a UN birthright unless they do something spectacularly good for society, so they don't often have children. There are fewer every generation. One day the human race will be entirely sane.

Yeah, right. One day the Brooklyn Bridge really *will* be up for sale.

Meanwhile there are sufficient crazies out in the world to suggest that the ARM should employ a few in self-defense. We have about four hundred registered paraschitzies, worldwide. Off

duty, a chemical cocktail keeps them as cogent as the rest of us.

They give up the chemicals during the week and live on the premises. Being crazy gets to be a habit sooner or later. Then we retire them.

Where the average citizen sees incompetence, coincidence, swamp gas, a trick of the light, a paranoid schizophrenic sees conspiracies. Sometimes they're real. Martin Lister can spot patterns no regular mind would even consider. Most of his scary daydreams can be shot down by a computer search.

Of course he doesn't have a license to make babies. Anyone who breaks that law is stealing a privilege Lister doesn't have. If there's a mother hunt upcoming, Lister will know it first. He'll want to supervise.

So I talk to him. I'm doing my part to keep him sane.

"Things look slack," I said.

"What tipped you off?"

"The news doesn't have anything more interesting than a dead animal."

"Gandhi's Cube? Don't take that lightly, Gil. Nobody else is."

Why? "Sacred cow?"

"Sacred hell. Indira was growing organs for the whole Vajpayee family."

So they can't eat beef, but they CAN breed freaky cows that can grow human transplants? How sick was that?

"Oh!" I said. "Someone could die?"

"The name of the prospective recipient is Brajesh Vajpayee, very rich, very old industrialist who wanted to get older and richer still. He's upset. Gil, if this case isn't wrapped up fast it'll have every stand-up comic on the planet looking straight into Gandhi's Cube. Would you like to see a mother hunt there?"

Lister knows I hate mother hunts. "It'd be a major war," I said. "Gandhi's Cube is best left alone."

"Have you ever solved the murder of a cow? Keep you busy."

I said, "You don't actually want me going—"

"No, not to India! Just do a search."

Relieved, I said, "I'll look into it. What's the security level? Taffy's holosystem here is better than mine." I wanted to know if I had to go home.

"It's just a cow, Gil. Lowest security, but speed counts."

"What's our interest level?"

"When you get bored, drop it." Lister rang off.

* * *

The recorded voice said Taffy was in surgery. It always says that, with a maniacal giggle, but it's often true. There are surgeons who just let the machines handle the knives and lasers, but Taffy knows they can turn flaky. She's a bit of a mechanic, bit of a programmer, and she's held a scalpel herself a time or two.

I felt an irritating urge and went back to the Gandhi's Cube story. I wanted a look at Tanka, the maintenance man who had been caught with traces of cow blood. I began a search.

A gender-neutral voice answered in perfect English. "I am Tanka Matish's counsel. What is the ARM's interest in my client?" Tanka's lawyer was a computer program.

I said, "I'd like to talk to him."

"Mr. Matish prefers silence. May I answer your questions?"

"I understand that he's confessed to stealing beef."

"Yes. Stand by—" and I listened to a translating program. Tanka was scared and angry. He knew the cow as a pet, he said, and was devastated to find her dead at two in the morning. Checked himself out, then came back later with tools he'd acquired during his days as a butcher's assistant. He'd sold meat to Muslim and Christian occupants of the Cube. No, he would not name names.

There'd been rumors of one hell of a party on the forty-third floor that morning, and neighbors had complained about the smell of beef barbecue. Confronted with these matters, and

urged to name its location, Tanka had suddenly gone silent.

That had to be a suite with a balcony. It should be easy to find . . . unless the authorities were reluctant. I asked the law program, “Have there been other arrests?”

“No.”

“He left a lot of meat behind,” I said.

“Recall Mr. Matish’s confession. He found Indira dead of the poison that had been forced down her throat, a sealant. Either brought to the lab or a poison of opportunity that workmen had left behind. Most of it clogged her throat, but traces were found in her stomachs. Mr. Matish left those alone, along with the organs she’d been set to grow. He’d no wish to poison clients nor to offer them human flesh.”

Tanka was a short broad man with a round dark face, a didactic voice and thick wrists. He hadn’t named names, even under pressure. It may be a character failing of mine, but that sounded like an honest thief to me. Would a butcher flinch from killing a cow?

What was the case against him? I ran the news clip where Tanka proclaimed his innocence to a reporter.

On May 12th, he had checked out of Indira’s cage and laboratory at two A.M. The cameras in the lab had been turned off at three forty-seven. No one was cleared for being in the lab at that time. No one at all.

But . . . and this might be critical. Tanka had been suspected of theft before this incident, of using a stolen security card to sneak lab supplies out of the building after hours. They’d been watching him and, in spite of his caution, had caught him in a security holo.

There was also an indication that the cage had been sabotaged a week earlier, May 5th, discovered not long after Tanka had repaired the cage door, using . . . *chemical sealant*, the same that had killed the cow. The sabotage? Wiring had been dug up from under a mat of straw, exposed, and a seeming attempt made to short it out. That could have been Tanka’s first attempt to get through the security.

That earlier picture showed Indira munching at the matted straw. Seen healthy and alive, she was indeed a dwarf, bigheaded, but lumpy too. She was badly misshapen. The human organs she was growing were inside her skin, mostly, but they protruded from her torso, and a human leg was growing alongside her front left leg. How would she lie down? Maybe that was why she looked so unhappy. I turned away, then changed the view.

Tanka was in the building illegally. There was bovine blood on his clothing. He had ultimately admitted to selling the meat—but not killing the cow. He was charged with collusion to kill old man Vajpayee, who owned the cow and the lab, by denying him critical transplant organs.

Vajpayee couldn’t accept normal transplants, right? Not in the Cube, right? Better check that. I tagged a question, and yes, in India transplant surgery was a capital crime.

How much would Tanka have been paid? And by whom? Nothing more than trivial money flow had been traced. That sum might have come from the barbecue. He’d denied the charge of murder, of course. Local law made a distinction between butchery and murder: for murder, the penalty was to be frozen for later organ transplants, the transplants to be sold outside of India. So . . . his protests meant little.

But . . . why would he risk discovery by butchering the cow? Lot of work. Did he gather meat lovers to help him carry? But why not just sneak in, kill it, and sneak out? Who sells steaks, taking time to carve and carry, creating potential witnesses who can get him frozen . . . unless that was the only profit to be made?

So if that was true, did it mean that he killed Indira for the meat? Possibly. But why the bizarre method? That suggested anger. I thought about the gentle creature, its eyes filled with pain, fear, and confusion as a human she had once trusted forced deadly fluid down her throat.

Those eyes. They haunted me.

Indira. Was someone angry at that name, or the torture of the cow? But if angry *about* its mistreatment, why commit an even greater atrocity? If you had to kill it, why not in a more humane fashion?

No. Someone was making a statement. Someone wanted a scandal. An anti-tech group. A

ANALOG

private ARM, wanting publicity and embarrassment. Perhaps they were willing to sacrifice Indira to make a larger point and shut down the boutique organ farm business before it could get started. . . .

My head hurt. I watched Tanka's video, simultaneous confession and proclamation of innocence: "*I did nothing. I'm being persecuted because I am Muslim.*"

Damn it . . . he was lying. But I had the feeling he was also speaking the truth. "I did nothing *this time* . . ." perhaps. But forging a pass card and sneaking into the building was a crime. Past theft was a crime. Was stealing a lab animal's meat a crime? Say it was, yes. And if Vajpayee's heirs wanted to get their hands on his money, then Tanka was guilty of . . . what? Collusion? Attempted murder? Attempted manslaughter? Something else?

* * *

I'd come to the end of what the public files offered. I needed the ARM files. For that, I had to synch my Pocketmaster with Taffy's home computer system. The Pocketmaster is more than a phone. It also contains hardwired decryption/encryption sensors that allow us to access work computers remotely. It only took a minute for them to handshake, and I was in. Then I was in the right files and reading.

I looked over the schematics and time logs. Who had had access? I saw the entries and exits.

The law had been obliged to prove motive, means, and opportunity. And they had done so . . . but something felt off to me. The cow-killing was too emotional.

I wanted more interviews. The family of the intended recipient, Vajpayee. But those were private and not available at my level of access.

I researched cultural attitudes toward cows. The online encyclopedia said: Hindu cow worship is based on a belief "*that cattle represent divine grace, and on a practical level, that their products supply nourishment.*"

Right. Practical considerations dovetailed with spiritual beliefs. Common enough. But it implied that whoever had done this was *not* a practicing Hindu.

I took a closer look at the murdered animal. Bones and a head, the throat and stomachs Tanka wouldn't touch, and nearly a dozen human-looking organs he hadn't touched either. Dammit, "murdered" wasn't right, it was "slaughtered," because only humans could be "murdered," right?

How had she . . . it, dammit, been slain? Killed with sealant? It looked spontaneous. The perp could have killed Indira with a knife or a gun. Again, I had to conclude that *someone had wanted her to suffer*. Why? What the hell was *that* about? Destroying any argument that the facility was humane?

Perhaps the point had *been* suffering to Indira. Perhaps it had been to cause anguish to one of the humans involved in the project, someone who cared about her. I could feel it. A gut hunch, something that had sometimes saved my life. Perhaps even involved a touch of precognition. *This was about suffering.*

Two scientists had been running that lab. What were their specialties? What was their investment in the project and commitment to Indira? They'd certainly planned to butcher her in the end, but that wouldn't stop one of them from developing an emotional attachment. It happens. I tapped a few hot points, and there they were, a middle-aged man and an older woman, both Indian, whose time and presence gave them real access to the crime scene. Their names were Mitsui and Kray. Mitsui was the biologist, Kray a geneticist. What had been their intent and investments in this mess?

There was little direct evidence, but I did manage to find information about Mitsui's doctoral dissertation at Tokyo Technical University. A quick search showed he was especially interested in the potential of transplantation to facilitate increased circulatory and neurological efficiency. Could that have influenced his design of decreased body size? Enough for how many neural patches, I wondered. Almost as if he wanted back-up patches. For more than one client, perhaps?

What if he had violated some sort of exclusivity clause, had used their tech to produce twice the neural material . . . and someone had objected in the clearest possible manner?

* * *

I barely noticed the alert emoji flashing above the computer. Fujiko Naga had been the first woman I'd dated at ARM and had been Lister's executive assistant at the time. We'd been a casual but intense thing for a couple of months, and it had simply trailed off. No animosity. Her lovely facial oval floated to view. She wasted no time. "I heard something, Gil. It's not good news."

"We're sort of stuck in that loop, aren't we?"

"Not personal. Business."

"I know," I said. "Just wanted to delay the inevitable."

"I heard Lister talking. They've decided. They won't announce it for another five hours. That way they can tell the union there was due deliberation. But you're cooked."

She wagged her head. "Told you, Gil. This time, I'm not sure there's a way out."

"I know. I'm just killing time. Time to break for lunch," I said and said my goodbye.

I found an Indian restaurant and ordered a vegetarian sampler plate delivered. It seemed appropriate.

* * *

"*You're cooked*," Fujiko had said. I knew it. Accepted it. Then why was I still digging?

Maybe I wanted to prove something. Maybe I hadn't liked Taffy probing my chub. My ego was hurting.

Tanka the handyman guy would be convicted of the killing of "a valuable property" and collusion with an unstated member of the Vajpayee family. He had motive: money. Means: an illegal access card. And opportunity: he'd been in that cell just a week before, so it was clear he knew what was what.

But he wasn't the only one. I should look at those interviews. But the black wedge of my Pocketmaster would have been remotely programmed to limit my access. And there was no way to change that programming without accessing the innards directly. Opening its flat onyx case was strictly illegal, cause for immediate dismissal. Possibly prosecution.

This is where being Gil Hamilton becomes a useful thing. I have a psychic arm, PK, and telekinesis. Such abilities are documented and replicable under laboratory conditions. More to the point, they've saved my ass in the field. Also won me drinks from bar bets. Lifting a salt shaker with your mind is a world-class ice breaker.

I could technically respect the seal, but still reach through into the works, feel around, and disconnect the inhibitor bump. When I plugged it back into Taffy's home system I was ushered past the defenses and welcomed as if I was an L-4.

And the phone twittered.

I jumped. But the address wasn't an ARM number, and the picture wasn't anyone I knew. I answered with the camera turned off.

The caller looked like a young Indian male, medium dark skin and black straight hair. "Good afternoon. Am I calling the ARM? I want to talk to Agent Gilbert Hamilton."

"Speaking. To whom do I have the honor?"

"I am Sijeem Vajpayee. I am Brajesh Vajpayee's lawyer and his grandson. I'm calling because you seem to be interested in our affairs. Why?"

I turned on the camera, showing my face. No need to tell Sijeem that his call wouldn't have got through if I hadn't fiddled with my phone. "I'm glad you called, sir. The case is a peculiar one. Does your grandfather believe that the destruction of his organ supply was aimed at him personally?"

"I see. Are you aware that some of those organs were intended for other family members? My brother Hajat shattered his leg through ill-considered use of a racing bicycle. My aunt Bekshee has a skin condition."

I waited. I also noticed he hadn't answered my question.

He shrugged and did. "My grandfather thinks he's been murdered. I can play you his new will, in strict confidence, of course. He has disowned person or persons unknown, whatever family member or members butchered the cow, or caused it to be butchered. I'm working on how to

enforce such a clause, or resolve the matter by finding the perpetrator.”

“May I speak to your grandfather?”

“No. He has no interest in being spied on. None of us do. I’m speaking for all of us.”

“Do you consider the rest of your family to be suspects?”

“I think the local police do. I was hoping for better from an international agency. Me, I think none of the twelve of us needs more money than they already have, and we all love grandfather.”

“Did you love Indira?”

He gaped. “Love a cow? What do you mean?”

I was running dry. “Four children, eight grandchildren. The numbers—”

Sijezen said, “The Fertility Laws became more restrictive after my father was born. We obey the laws, we Vajpayee.”

I got his phone number, failed to get any others, and rang off.

What next? Summon up an interview of the biologists who had built Indira. While I still had access.

Mitsui looked more like a jock than a bookworm, and something about his square-tipped fingers told me that Julio and he might have enjoyed a little mat time together. Huh.

But when he spoke of his work, my mind immediately spun in different directions:

“Neural transplantation holds promise for the Central Nervous System. Aborted embryos used to provide most of this, but worldwide abortions have plummeted since the fertility laws, so animal tissues are considered a more reliable source. Until recent advancements, neural tissue transplants between species carried a high risk of rejection, but once this issue was solved, the possibilities have proven endless. While still technically considered ‘new technology’ the science of xenotransplantation is the most promising medical advancement in a century....”

My my. Mitsui was much more interesting than the other person of interest, a sallow woman named Dr. Stephanie Kray. Kray’s eyes shifted a few times when the interviewer asked questions about her motivation to perform her work. I had the sense that she didn’t like what she was doing, and a bit of research suggested that she’d left the University of Heidelberg under a bit of a cloud. Ethics violations.

Either she’d done something or been accused and hadn’t fought it.

Maybe they were in on it. Used Vajpayee’s money to develop the donor and the tech, then went behind his back and offered organs and neural patches on the black market. There might have been a first crop. Vajpayee’s critical pieces might have already been harvested and delivered, but then Indira destroyed in a fashion that was guaranteed to cause a problem and send a message.

Had anyone checked old Vajpayee, to be *sure* he hadn’t already gotten the transplants? I added to the list I was building on my mental notepad.

I accessed interviews with the family. They were a dour lot, all professing love for Grandpa, all of them with that “I’d rather have the money” look in their eyes. Any or all of the twelve, or their spouses and partners, might have decided to hurry Grandpa Vajpayee toward the grave. Maybe not the two who needed transplants.

Which of them might have paid off the big three?

Mitsui, Kray, and Tanka. They were the only ones with access to Indira. Tanka was a thief, Kray had been dishonored and was happy to find work in private industry. Mitsui was a world-class theoretician, and perhaps . . . *perhaps* above suspicion.

It had to be Kray or Tanka. And probably whichever . . . what? Needed the money more? Was more conflicted about what they were doing? More murderous?

And why had Lister pointed me at this? Was it a clue, or was that crazy bastard just conflicted about my firing and tossed me a bone?

The tortured cow. The handyman. The gene wizards. The shipping magnate. His heirs. Lister. All the pieces, circling each other.

And then . . . I saw it.

* * *

June 19th. 8:02 A.M.

Virtual ARM headquarters again.

Gail Gay Wallingford said, "Gil Hamilton, we have come to a decision."

They expected me to wait, perhaps my head hanging low. I decided to meet them head-on. "So have I. I was wondering if I might explain before you give me your judgment."

"This is highly unusual."

"But there are parallels. In criminal court the accused is often allowed to make a statement before judgment is passed."

"True," Wallingford said. "Well, what is it you wish to say?"

"That I know I was wrong, but I also know that sometimes you need people who are willing to be wrong."

"Excuse me?"

"Yes. For instance, the case of Gandhi's Cube. The files are lightly encrypted, and I'm afraid I bypassed them."

I had Lister's attention. "For what reason?"

"Because something was wrong with that case, as I read it in the public files. It felt like someone was lying."

Sanjay Chudbury smiled. "Always possible in an investigation. Who?"

"Nobody, as it turns out. It gets uglier than that. Allow me. Probably a couple of years ago, an experiment was begun to grow body parts on a selectively dwarfed cow. Enhanced organs and nerve tissue, grown on Indira. The organs were to go mainly to the patriarch of the Vajpayee family, who live in the Cube's penthouse.

"So the organs were scheduled to go to Brajesh Vajpayee. The death of Indira ended this, as the transplant window is no more than a few hours at room temperature. By the time the staff came in the morning, no reputable surgeon would have attempted those transplants." It was true: I'd checked with Taffy. "The window for harvesting meat, however, is more flexible, especially if it is to be well-cooked. In that time, someone butchered and carted off the black-market beef, presumably to clients within the Cube. The janitor, handyman . . . whatever he is, Tanka has been tried and convicted of destruction of property and sale of controlled substances. The courts assume he is shielding a member of the Vajpayee family, who arranged for Indira to be killed. Evidence is circumstantial, but in certain cases that is enough for ARM protocols."

"All this is a matter of public record."

"And it is all . . . *wrong*. None of the Vajpayee family plotted to kill their patriarch. The malfeasance with which Tanka was charged and of which he was convicted was correct in the case of butchering, but incorrect in terms of the death of the animal, so there was no collusion."

Lister barked, "Tanka didn't kill the cow? Who did? Are you suggesting it was one of the scientists? No one else had access."

"You are correct. That would be Mitsui or Kray, the biologist and the geneticist. The usual standards are motive, means, and opportunity."

They were getting irritated. I was enjoying this. "Are you attempting to educate us? We are aware of these things."

"To make sense of it, I need you to take a look at the intent of the experiment: to produce organs and nervous tissue capable of transplantation to human beings."

Gail Wallingford said, "That is clear, yes. But does that help us determine which of these people you consider responsible?"

"The answer is in the design. The problem was to create a dwarf animal whose tissues could be genetically manipulated to be compatible with human beings, and nervous tissue compatible with the same.

"To this end, a dwarf animal with an oversized head was considered the perfect host. And would have been, except for one error."

"And what was that?"

"It was the combination of enhanced neural efficiency and a head disproportionately large for

the body.”

“And what does that do for us, or you?” Gail Wallingford demanded.

“Are you aware of the reason elephants aren’t smarter than human beings? After all, their brains are larger. No? The reason is that it isn’t the size of the brain, *it is the relative proportion of size to body*. This experiment produced something totally inadvertent—”

“What was that?”

“*Sapience*. Somehow, between the increased brain relative weight and the increased neurological efficiency, Indira . . . *woke up*.”

“What?” They were all staring. I had them. You know when the hook is firmly set. You know.

“Awakened,” I said, turning the screw. “Became aware.”

Lister demanded, “Are you suggesting human level intelligence?”

“Perhaps more. I would like you to imagine something. A being coming into awareness knowing only pain, unable to communicate. Could not see anything but endless misery . . . but with problem-solving capacity.”

There. My gut had been correct. This whole thing *had* been about suffering. I just hadn’t intuited how.

“Problem . . . solving?” Wallingford again.

“Yes. Indira figured out *how to kill herself*.” I paused, let that sink in. “She could see, and one of the things she saw was Tanka repairing the seal on her cage. And she somehow guessed that the same material that sealed the cell would kill her.”

“Indira . . . the cow . . . committed suicide?” Wallingford laughed, but all by herself. “If it was so smart . . . why didn’t it just escape?”

“She tried. On May 6th, there was an attempt to short out the door to her cell.”

“By?”

“Chewing away the lining and then urinating on the wiring. I find it likely that she had watched repairmen, and somehow figured out that that might work.”

“But it didn’t. Not that smart, I guess.”

Now I was irritated, and uncertain why. “Could you have done as much? With no training, no ability to read, or direct instruction? How intelligent did she have to be to even get that far, Ma’am?”

“I am . . . confused. If I accept this notion, then the experiment accidentally produced a thinking creature . . . which deliberately ended its own life.”

“Yes,” I said. “By swallowing industrial sealant. Which she stole off the repairman’s cart during the repairs earlier that day. Probably hid it under the straw. The attendant then made an opportunistic decision and stole the meat, thinking that the day janitors would be blamed. The use of a neutral entrance badge should have covered him so that it would never have been suspected he was in the building. He didn’t realize that he was already under suspicion. It was sheer accident that took him to the lab that night. He was looking for something to steal . . . and he found it.”

“And what happened to the meat?”

“There are rumors of a barbecue in the building. I would imagine that the evidence is long consumed.” Must have been quite a party. “If this is true,” I said, “then Tanka can only be accused of trespass and theft. Collusion or conspiracy is out of the question, and the heirs are innocent too.”

“This is a nightmare,” Wallingford said, kneading her temples with her fists. I could understand why. New technology, animal cruelty, bribery to bring a calf into a private lab for medical experiments . . . this was the very definition of a political firestorm.

I decided to turn the screws. “The company created a thinking being, ma’am. And I would assume that the reasoning here would not be something anyone would want exposed.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“That what happened here is a tragedy. One that needs to be swept under the rug as quietly as possible.”

Sanjay Chudbury said, “What if there are more Indiras? Surely your genetic sculptors would

not go through such trouble just to build one animal. Word will get out.”

I hadn't thought of that. But Wallingford was speaking again. “Mr. Hamilton. I admit to being nonplussed. We called this meeting to terminate you, and now we are in your debt.” I could imagine. Indira had been smuggled into the building, probably through bribery, and had been enhanced with unlicensed technology in collusion with one of India's leading families. No matter what level you looked at it: legal, political, academic or whatever, this was a hot potato no one would want to handle. And Chudbury might be right.

I said, “May I make a suggestion?”

“Please,” Lister said mildly.

“Offer me a job. As an employee, my communications with, say, the press, are very limited.”

“That sounds like extortion.”

“Hardly. But I had decided to quit the moment you put me on trial. So I am a free agent, and I suspect that you would, as the saying goes, rather have the camel inside your tent pissing out than outside pissing in.”

* * *

An offer, and a handsome one, did come through within three hours. I did wonder about Lister both pointing me toward Gandhi's Cube and affecting real anger with me concerning Fujimoto. Wanting to fire me, but simultaneously giving me a chance to save myself? Had *he* suspected the case was hinky as well?

Was that his Paraschitz nature coming out? Or did he simply contain multitudes? I doubted I'd ever ask directly.

* * *

So Taffy and I went to her favorite restaurant to celebrate. I liked Perino's. We've eaten there several times. Its specialty was veal, and I'd always loved it. An insanely expensive luxury in the Belt, I'd considered that to be one of the things I loved most about Earth. But to Taffy's surprise I ordered the chicken. And somewhat to my own I realized it might be a long, long time before I ate veal again.

* * *

Those eyes.