



**THE
CASSANDRA
COMPLEX**

**BRIAN
STABLEFORD**

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Inherit the Earth

Architects of Emortality

The Fountains of Youth

The Cassandra Complex

The Cassandra

Comple

BRIAN STABLEFOR



A Tom Doherty Associates Book • New

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THE CASSANDRA COMPLEX

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Edited by David G. Hartwell

A Tor Book
Published by Tom Doherty Associates, LLC
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10010

www.tor.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stableford, Brian M.

The Cassandra complex / Brian Stableford.—1st ed.
p. cm.
“A Tom Doherty Associates book.”

ISBN: 978-0-312-87773-6
ISBN: 0-312-87773-0

- 1. Twenty-first century—Fiction. 2. Forensic scientists—Fiction. 3. Missing persons—Fiction.
- 4. Biotechnology—Fiction. I. Title

PR6069.T17C375 2001
823'.914—dc21

00-048018

First Edition: March 2001

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Jane, and all victims of the Cassandra Complex

Acknowledgments

The plot of this novel is loosely based on a short story entitled “The Magic Bullet” that appeared in *Interzone 29* in 1989. I am grateful to David Pringle for publishing that story, and to Gardner Dozois and the late Don Wollheim for reprinting it in their respective annual collections of the *Year’s Best Science Fiction*.

I should also like to thank Jane Stableford for proofreading services and helpful comments, and the late Claire Russell and her husband, Bill, for their great kindness and for the part their ideas played in shaping the background of the story.

The book by Claire and W. M. S. Russell to which the text refers, *Population Crises and Population Cycles*, was published by the Gal-ton Institute in 1999. The book by Garrett Hardin to which the text refers, *The Ostrich Factor: Our Population Myopia*, was published by Oxford University Press in 1999.

The Mouseworld Holocaust

When Lisa first heard the noise, she wasn't sure whether it was real or not. She didn't think she'd been asleep, but she couldn't be certain. Sometimes, like all confirmed insomniacs, she fell asleep without realizing she had done so—and sometimes she dreamed without actually falling properly asleep.

If the sound had been one of breaking glass or splintering wood, she would have sat up immediately to reach for the phone, but what she had heard—or thought she had heard—was the noise of the front door opening without any force applied to it. That should have been impossible. Both locks had combination triggers as well as swipe slots, and they were supposed to be unhackable. Lisa lived alone, and was not inclined to trust the combinations to anyone else. A member of the police force had to take such precautions very seriously, even if she was a lab-bound forensic scientist who ought to count herself lucky to be clinging on to limited duties now that she was past the official retirement date.

Because it seemed so unlikely that she had heard what she thought she did, Lisa remained quiet and still, straining her ears for further evidence. She let four or five seconds pass before she even opened her eyes to take a sideways glance at the luminous display on the screen beside her bed. The timer told her it was five minutes to four: the darkest and quietest period of the cold October night.

Then a second noise drew her eyes to the door of her bedroom. There was a certain amount of light filtering through the closed curtains, but she lived on the third floor, too far above the level of the streetlights to obtain much benefit from their yellow glow. The door was shadowed, and she couldn't tell for sure whether it was opening until she saw the pencil-thin beam of light sneaking through the widening crack—the beam that was guiding the person whose quiet hand was pushing the door open.

Lisa immediately pulled her bare right arm out from beneath the duvet, reaching for the hands suspended beside the screen. She thought she was moving fairly swiftly, but the intruder's beam had already caught the movement of her arm. Even as her hand made contact, she saw the silhouette of the gun barrel that had been raised to catch the light.

“Don't touch it!” The voice that spoke was filtered through some kind of distorter that made the sound robotic.

Lisa snatched her hand back, and immediately felt ashamed of her obedience.

“Shit,” said a second voice, sounding from the hallway.

“Shh!” said the first intruder, who was now well into the room, holding the gun no more than a meter from Lisa's face. “Get on with it. She won't make any trouble.”

Lisa had been in the police force for more than forty years, but she had never had a gun pointed at her. She didn't know how she was supposed to feel, but she was fairly certain that she wasn't afraid—puzzled and annoyed, but not afraid.

I ought to be able to identify the weapon, she thought. It was absurdly irritating that the only thing she could see in the beam of the light was an unrecognizable gun. It looked heavy and old—not exactly an antique, but not the sort of dart gun that had recently become fashionable among the young. It could easily have dated back to the turn of the century, maybe even to the period before the handgun ban that had preceded her recruitment to the police force. She knew that she would have to give Mil Grundy an exact account of what was happening, and that Judith Kenna would read her statement with

utter contempt if there were nothing she could say for sure except that she had been threatened with a gun whose make she could not name.

As the other intruder moved inquisitively around the room, a second slender guide light briefly picked out the head of the one who was threatening Lisa, outlining an almost-featureless oval helmet. Lisa knew that the two must be dressed in matte black, probably in one-piece smartsuits whose unbreakable tissue-repellent fibers would leave no clues for forensic analysis. In order to be a successful burglar in the age of scientific detection, you had to be extremely careful to leave no trace. That wasn't the purpose of smart textiles, but it was a happy side effect as far as the criminal class was concerned.

"What are you looking for?" Lisa asked. Because it was such a cliché, the question seemed far more foolish than it was. She had nothing worth stealing—nothing, at any rate, that justified the kind of risk the burglars were taking or the kind of expertise they must have employed to hack her unhackable locks.

"I think you know exactly what we want, Dr. Friemann," the distorted voice replied. The bedroom walls had neither eyes nor ears, but the other room was fully fitted and the bedroom door was still open. The speaker obviously didn't care about the possibility that the pickups in the other room would record the voice for analysis by Lisa's colleagues in Sight & Sound. Presumably, therefore, the voice distorter was no mere frequency modulator.

Do I know what they want? Lisa wondered. *If they're professionals, it must be work, but I don't bring work home. Anyway, I don't have anything to do with AV Defence, or even with industrial espionage. Even if there is a war on, I'm a noncombatant.* Her eyes tracked the movements of the second intruder, whose attention was now concentrated on the desk fitted into the corner to the left of the window. That was her main homestation. Her flat had only two rooms, apart from the kitchenette and the bathroom, and contemporary fashion dictated that if there wasn't an already allocated space, the best site for the main homestation was in the bedroom, not the "reception room." Having been brought up before the turn of the millennium, Lisa—who had little need for a room in which to receive visitors—always thought of her other room as the "living room," although the siting of the homestation ensured that she spent far more time in the bedroom.

The second intruder was already pulling wafers and sequins off the unit's shelves, sweeping them into a plastic sack without making any attempt to discriminate between them. A few old-fashioned DVD's went with them. Most of the stored information was entertainment, and most of the text and software was public-domain material that Lisa had downloaded for convenience in the days when downloading had been convenient. It was all replaceable, given time and effort, but some of it was personal, and much of that was private enough not to be stored in the unit's web-connected well duplicated in Backup City. It wasn't the sort of stuff for which people kept remote backups—not even people who were far more conscientious about such things than Lisa was.

When the shelves had been swept clean, the searcher started poking in the cubbyholes and emptying the drawers.

"None of it's worth anything," Lisa said. The comment was as much discovery as complaint because she realized as she watched the hidden corners of her life history disappearing into the sack that there was very little whose loss she had much cause to regret. She had never been the kind of person to attach sentimental value to digital images or documents.

"Be good, now," said the robotic voice, contriving to sound bitter and angry in spite of its manifest artificiality. "Stay quiet and stay alive. Play up and you might not."

"Why?" Lisa asked softly. She was genuinely puzzled. Even as an agent of the state, Lisa had rarely roused anyone to bitterness or anger; only one person had ever threatened to kill her, although her testimony in court had convicted more than a dozen murderers and more than a score of rapists. Say

for that one exception, the convicted and condemned had always recognized that she was on reporting what the evidence revealed. Hardly anyone nowadays blamed messengers for the news they brought, although it was conceivable that the national paranoia that was increasing day by day which the Containment Commission dithered might yet bring back the bad old days.

“You’ll work it out,” her adversary informed her. “If we don’t have what we need, we’ll be back and next time—”

Lisa never got to hear what would happen next time if the burglars didn’t have what they needed because the speaker was abruptly cut off by the telephone bell. It wasn’t a particularly strident bell—Lisa never needed much waking up—but the tension of the situation made it sound louder than it was.

Lisa’s eyes were immediately drawn to the screen, where the caller’s number was displayed in red above and to the left of the time. She recognized the number immediately—and so did the person on the other end of the gun.

“It’s Grundy’s mobile,” the robotic voice reported to the busy searcher. “Probably headed for the university.”

“If I don’t answer it,” Lisa pointed out, “he’ll know that something’s wrong.”

“He already knows,” the distorted voice told her. “Fifteen minutes more and he’ll know exactly how much is wrong. Believe me, Dr. Friemann, when I tell you that you won’t be very high on his list of priorities.”

That’s what you think! Lisa retorted silently.

The telephone continued ringing.

“Finished,” the searcher reported. “If it’s here, I’ve got it.”

Lisa didn’t make any conscious decision to be brave. If she’d made a conscious decision at all she’d have taken into account what the gun wielder had already told her about the possibility that playing up might put her life at risk. It was something deeper, something more reflexively desperate that made her lunge for the handset and snatch it from its cradle.

“Help me, Mike!” she yelled. “Intruders on premises. Now, Mike, *now!*”

“Shit,” said the searcher again.

“He’s at least four miles away,” said the burglar with the gun. The artificial voice still sounded bitter, but there was more contempt in it than anger. “The first three miles of that are in the blackout. The routine patrols have all been diverted. No help can reach you in time, Dr. Friemann.”

Lisa was still holding the handset to her mouth. Mike Grundy was saying something, but he must have been holding his own handset too far away for a decent pickup, perhaps because he needed both hands to drive. He seemed to be cursing, but the word “blackout” leaped out of the incoherent stream like a weird echo.

“I need help, Mike,” Lisa repeated, speaking more calmly now that it seemed she wasn’t about to be shot. “Alert the station. The burglars are armed. They must have a vehicle downstairs, but for the moment, they’re still here, taking time out to sneer.”

Some movement of the weapon or a slight change of the dark figure’s attitude must have spoken directly to Lisa’s subconscious mind, because she jerked her face back, away from the handset, a full second before the gun went off.

The bullet hit the earpiece.

The impact plucked the handset from her loosening grip without breaking any of her fingers, but Lisa felt plastic shards scoring the flap of flesh between her thumb and forefinger and drawing jagged slits along her inner forearm. She saw the blood spurting even before she felt the shock. The pain must have been intense, if only for a moment, but she was far more aware of the fact of pain than of an actual feeling, and the fact seemed trivial by comparison with frank wonder that she had turned her head out of the way in time.

She had no time to curse before the gun fired again.

~~The screen beside the headboard shattered. Then the weapon fired twice more, its wielder having swiveled through a hundred and forty degrees. The entire homestation seemed to explode—but Lisa was still conscious, still very much alive.~~

“Nobody cares about *you*, you stupid bitch!” the distorted voice hissed in her ear. “Miller never cared, and no matter what he promised you, you’ll be dead soon enough. I wouldn’t do you the favor of shooting you. Let’s go.”

The final remark, Lisa knew, was addressed to the companion who had emptied her shelves and cubbyholes; it was unnecessary, because the second burglar was already exiting the room as fast as was humanly possible. The gunshots must have awakened the Charlestons, whose bedroom was directly below Lisa’s, and maybe the Hammonds below them. The burglars wouldn’t necessarily have had a clear run down the three flights of stairs—but the inhabitants of Number 39 were a law-abiding lot. The two young tearaways on the ground floor were the kind who’d have a dart gun stashed behind a radiator, and John Charleston had always given the impression of being a man of hidden depths, but neither one would impede the escape for more than the time it took for wise discretion to get the better of foolish valor.

“Morgan Miller never made anyone a promise he didn’t intend to keep,” Lisa remarked as the burglar with the gun disappeared into the darkness of the living room. “Not his style at all.” The last words, at least, were too quietly spoken to be audible as the two intruders raced through the door that had the supposedly unhackable locks. They must have come up the stairs almost silently, but their descent went down like thunder, even in their muffled shoes.

Lisa leaped out of bed and ran to the window, not caring that she was naked as she snatched the curtains open. She hoped to catch a glimpse of whatever vehicle the thieves had arrived in, but they hadn’t left it parked in the road outside the block of flats. She lingered for a couple of minutes, but she didn’t see the fleeing burglars make their exit. If they’d come in by the front door, they’d obviously made provision to use a different exit.

The shooter had told the truth about the blackout. If Mike had started out from his own house in response to an alarm call, he’d have driven straight into total darkness, because all the lights on the farther side of Oldfield Park were out, at least as far to the north as Sion Hill. There had been a major power failure—or major sabotage. The town center was out, although the glow on the far side of Lyntoncombe Hill suggested that Widcombe still had power.

Lisa didn’t go to her own door, partly because she wanted to be certain there was nothing else to be seen in the flat—and no useful information to be gained there that might make her statement seem less ridiculous to Judith Kenna’s censorious eye—and partly because she was still naked. As soon as she switched on the light in the living room, however, she saw the word that had been sprayed on the inswung door and knew it must have been put there before the two seeming professionals had hacked her supposedly unhackable locks.

The word was “Traitor.”

It made no sense at all. Professional spies didn’t pause in their work to spray insults on the walls of their victims. Even kids bent on pure vandalism rather than on profitable theft rarely used spray paint because sprays were too promiscuous and carefully tagged; the contaminated clothing of the perpetrators would be ample evidence to secure conviction.

In any case, who on earth was she supposed to have betrayed? What awful secret did the burglars think she harbored, buried somewhere in her personal-data stores—and why did they think she had done them an injury by keeping it?

Lisa picked up the phone on the living-room table and was slightly surprised to find that it was still working, in spite of the comprehensive trashing of the bedroom systems. She punched out the number

of Mike Grundy's mobile.

"I'm okay, Mike," she said as soon as he answered. "Four shots fired, but it's mostly proper damage. I'm bleeding where shrapnel cut my hand and scraped my arm, but they didn't shoot to kill."

"I'll be there in two minutes," Mike told her. "I was already on my way to pick you up. You're not the only one to be targeted tonight—all hell is breaking loose. How bad's the bleeding?"

"Not bad," Lisa assured him, inspecting her hand while she said it. "It doesn't need gelling—not the hospital's blacked out, at any rate. I'll wrap it up." She was still aware that it was hurting, as had her injuries always did, but it was still the fact of pain of which she was aware, coupled with a peculiar mental detachment. She told herself that it was hurting because of the density of the nerve endings, not because of the seriousness of the wound, and that it would heal easily enough. Then she told herself that she ought to be glad. If Judith Kenna had had her way, Lisa would have retired from the force without ever seeing *action*. Now she had been threatened and shot at, as well as embroiled in whatever kind of hell it was that was breaking out all over the western reaches of the cityplex.

"Do that," Mike said tersely. "I'll need you at the university. Firebomb in the labs. At least one person injured—one human, that is. Maybe half a million mice dead."

Lisa felt a shiver run through her body, but told herself it was delayed shock caused by the fact that she'd just had a gun pointed at her, not to mention that the gun had gone off—four times.

"Is it Morgan?" she asked querulously. "How bad is he?"

"I don't know yet," Mike told her. "Do you have any reason to think it might be Morgan?"

Lisa was all too keenly aware, even as she issued a reflexive denial, that the gun-wielding burglar must have mentioned Morgan Miller's name deliberately. *Everything* that had been said to her, in fact, must have been said for a reason, however perverse the reason might be. In a world whose walls were growing eyes and ears in ever-increasing quantities, only fools were incautious—and it was difficult to believe that anyone capable of opening her door could be a fool. They had painted TRAITOR on her door *for a reason*.

Lisa wanted time to think, but she didn't want to hang up the phone before she'd told Mike Grundy the most obviously interesting and most evidently sinister of all the things the person who'd shot her had taken care to let her know. "The one who was holding the gun recognized the number of your mobile when you called," she said. "Whoever they are, they seem to know a hell of a lot more about us than we know about them."

It wasn't until after she'd said it that Lisa realized it might not be the cleverest thing for a person to put on the record when she'd just found the word TRAITOR sprayed on the door of her flat by someone who'd known the secret combinations of both its locks, especially when she desperately needed the goodwill of her superiors to be allowed to go on working.

Lisa dressed, cursing the clumsiness forced on her by the torn hand. She pulled on a pair of tights and an undershirt made of smartish fibers, but force of habit remained strong, and the tunic and trowse she put on next were the same dead kind she always wore on the outside. Although the undershirt soaked up the evidence of her arm wounds easily enough, the blood still flowing copiously from the tear in her hand immediately stained the cuff of the tunic.

For once, she admitted that it really might have been wise to embrace the new generation of smart fibers more wholeheartedly. She probably would have, if she hadn't grown so sick of hearing people recite TV-hatched slogans over the years that her natural stubbornness had intensified her determination not to be railroaded by the lords of fashion and the prophets of doom. The new police uniforms issued the previous year were only five years behind the times, but CID and lab workers had the privilege of lagging even farther behind if they wished, and she'd taken that opportunity even though she'd known it lent fuel to Judith Kenna's conviction that she was past her use-by date.

In order to prevent the problem from getting any worse, Lisa fetched the first-aid kit from the bathroom. She hadn't opened it for years, and it didn't have any kind of dressing adequate to take proper care of the problem, but she found an absorbent pad that would fit over the awkwardly placed cut on her hand and managed to tape it on with old-fashioned adhesive tape.

Having dressed the wound as best she could, Lisa made a concerted effort to collect herself mentally. She thanked the good fortune that had helped her resist the temptation to fight her insomnia with drugs. She'd been having trouble sleeping for some months, but she hadn't resorted to medication because she didn't believe that insomnia deserved to be reckoned as an illness. She had addressed the problem as a straightforward challenge to her powers of self-discipline: a rebellion of her treasonous flesh against the stern empire of her mind. Her method of fighting the sleeplessness had been to instruct herself not to worry about it, because a woman of sixty—sixty-one, now that her birthday had come and gone—didn't need that much sleep anyway. She had also informed herself that lying still in the darkness was, in any case, sufficient to garner most of the benefits that sleep was supposed to confer. Even so, she could easily have weakened on a dozen occasions, and last night might have been one of them.

She went downstairs to meet Mike Grundy at the front door of the building—to save time, she took herself. The crime scene would have to be examined, sooner rather than later if there were staff available, and the spray-painted legend would be duly noted; but for the time being, she wanted to concentrate on the big picture, of which the raid on her premises seemed to be a relatively trivial facet.

John Charleston and Robbie Hammond must have been lurking inside their locked front door, listening for clues to what was going on. John peeped out as she passed by, then threw his door open wide. By that time, Lisa was halfway down the next flight. Robbie had taken his cue from the sound of the door opening. They seemed absurdly like bookends as they peered at her, one from above and one from below.

She didn't stop. "Police emergency," she said in what she hoped was a reassuring tone. "All safe and secure upstairs. SOCO will probably get here before I come back. No cause for alarm."

"Was that gunfire?" was the only question either of them managed—but by that time, she'd raced

past Robbie Hammond and was well on her way to the front door. She didn't bother to answer him. She left the two of them to meet one another halfway and discuss the matter between themselves.

Mike's black Rover was already coming around the corner, and she hardly had time to stop before it was beside her. She used her left hand to open the door.

"It's okay," she assured him as his eyes were drawn to the patchwork dressing on her right hand and the bloodstain on her cuff. "Stings a bit, but it's fine. Drive. The university, not the hospital."

He nodded and put the car back into gear. He had to do a three-point turn to get out of the cul-de-sac, and the screech of his brakes probably woke up more people than the four gunshots had, but he was back on Cotswold Road inside of ten seconds. Ordinarily, he'd have crossed Wellsway on to Greenway Lane, but Greenway Lane led into the blackout, so he headed south to use Bradford Road and Claverton Road. It was a longer way around, but it was probably safer.

Why black out that part of the grid? Lisa wondered. *It doesn't cover the university or the flat—only a couple of miles in between. Are they just trying to cover their escape routes, or is there a third scenario we don't yet know about?* She didn't raise the point with Mike, though, because he was already talking urgently.

"The live feeds to the security TV's were doctored," he reported, "but the digicams themselves weren't damaged, so the wafers should tell us what actually happened. The alarms went off when the sprinklers kicked in, but the system couldn't do more than contain the fire and stop it from spreading. Apart from the one room, damage is limited. The injured man was shot with one of those dart guns that everybody and his cousin seem to have nowadays, but they dragged him way down the corridor before leaving him, so he shouldn't have inhaled too much smoke—hopefully."

"You said *half a million* dead mice?" Lisa queried to make sure she'd taken the right inference.

"That's right," Mike confirmed. "The bombs were in the room you always called *Mouseworld*."

"Why would anyone want to bomb *Mouseworld*?" Lisa asked. "All the AV research is on the upper floors, in the containment facility. All the sensitive commercial stuff is there too—what there is of it nowadays."

"Maybe they couldn't get access farther up and hoped the fire would spread through the ceiling," Mike suggested. "It won't make much difference—the Ministry of Defence is sending down a team of spooks from London. I know we aren't supposed to say there's a war on, but there *is* a bloody war on, and until they know this isn't that kind of hostile action, they have to assume it is. Whatever you people pick up tonight is likely to be taken out of their hands tomorrow, in the interests of national security. I'm likely to be left high and dry too, looking just as foolish. The chief inspector's on his way to the scene, but that won't help either of us."

"I suppose not," Lisa agreed. Chief Inspector Kenna hadn't taken any great pains to support Mike through his recent divorce, and hadn't seemed to approve of the fact that Lisa had tried to help him, even though they'd been friends and colleagues for more than twenty years. Kenna seemed to think they were both dinosaurs, their methods and instincts equally out of date. "On the other hand," Lisa added, "you and I know the territory better than anyone—and I'll probably know the victim too. The men from the Ministry will need our help."

"I know that and you know that, but will they?" Mike countered. "The spooks are coming by helicopter, but it'll take a little while for them to assemble at the point of departure—they probably won't get here until nine or ten this morning. We're trying to contact Burdillon, Miller, Chan and the other members of the department, but that won't be easy at this time of night, even if it weren't for the blackout. If the bombers could cause that to simply cover their tracks ... who the hell are we dealing with, Lisa? What were they after at your apartment?"

"I don't know," Lisa said, wishing there were some way to display her sincerity more clearly, even though Mike Grundy was the one person in the world who wouldn't dream of doubting her. "The

seemed to think I would know, but I don't. I don't have a clue. All I know for sure is that they recognized your phone number, and that they took time out to tell me that Morgan's promises couldn't be trusted, even though he never made me any, and that the one with the gun was tempted to shoot me even though that probably wasn't in the plan ... and they spray-painted 'Traitor' on my door."

She hadn't really planned to let that out just yet, but the flow had built up a momentum of its own. Mike turned to look at her, even though his eyes ought to have been glued to the patch of visibility that the headlights carved out of the road; this far out of town, the streetlights were so sparse that they might as well have been driving in the blackout.

"That's crazy!" he said. "Why would *anyone* do something as stupid as that?"

"Why would anyone do something as stupid as bombing Mouseworld?" she countered. "That's what I call crazy. What kind of terrorist would target a room full of mice?"

"The mice could have been innocent bystanders," Grundy pointed out. "On the other hand ... well, there may be a real plague war on now, but hobbyist terrorism has been a plague of sorts since '20 and I don't suppose the talk of curfews and all other containment precautions the commission is considering will have pleased the flackers, whackers, and code-busters. Must be a big gang, though, to hit three hard targets with such precision—assuming that the blackout really is theirs. Maybe they want to make us believe they're hobbyist terrorists, although they're not. Maybe they're using crazy doodles to obscure their real agenda. Some of these so-called private-security people ..." He left the sentence dangling.

"Maybe," Lisa concurred. "The blackout—"

She broke off when Mike cursed. An old red Nissan had zoomed across his path as he approached the junction of North Road and Ralph Allen's Drive, even though it was his right of way. He kept his foot on the accelerator regardless. He had switched off the computer's warning bell, but it took only three seconds for the dashboard screen to bring up a red-lettered message stating that although the primary responsibility for the near miss lay with the other vehicle, the person in charge of the Rover was nevertheless guilty of "contributory negligence."

Lisa wondered what conditions were like in the town center. The roadside digicams were self-contained and battery-powered, so they hadn't been disabled by the general blackout, but they weren't equipped to see in darkness as intense as that which had descended in the wake of the power cut. There were plenty of kids on the new estates west of the campus who might figure that this was the ideal time for joyriding. It might not be just teenagers, either—all the drivers in England tended to take whatever opportunities they found nowadays to exceed the claustrophobic legal restrictions on the speed and movement, no matter what their onboard computers dumped into their black boxes. Mercifully, it was nearly five o'clock in the morning and there wouldn't be many honest citizens on the roads, except for those driving delivery vans. The vast majority of people tucked up in their beds wouldn't know when they woke up that there had been a blackout.

Lisa was about to resume her observation about the blackout when Mike's phone rang. He snatched the handset up and pressed it to his ear. Lisa cocked her own ear as if to listen, although she couldn't possibly make sense of the slight leakage of sound. She had to wait for him to put the phone down again to receive the news.

"It's not Miller," he said tersely. "The body in the corridor, that is. The wafer from the corridor's best-placed eye shows Ed Burdillon going in after the bombers. They shot him—but they didn't leave him to burn. He's been taken to the hospital, but the paramedics reckon he'll be okay. He's unlikely to have been a preselected target, given that the perpetrators took the trouble to drag him clear before the bomb went off. Probably just unlucky—wrong place, wrong time. On the other hand ..."

Lisa's stomach had lurched in response to the news that a man she had known for nearly forty years had been hurt, but not as much as it might have done had the man been Morgan Miller.

Edgar Burdillon had been head of the Department of Applied Genetics for nearly twenty years; the eyes of far too many half-baked, anti-GM fanatics, that made him personally responsible for the rape and near murder of Mother Gaea, secret plans to manufacture a super race, high unemployment, the torture of innocent animals, and the attempted usurpation of the female prerogative. Now that the government was openly considering stringent containment measures, there would be hundreds of crazies ready to assume that he was also fully involved in developing the weapons that would be used to fight the First Plague War. Ed's days as a fashionable media pet were a long way behind him, but he had never been shy about issuing propaganda for biotechnology. He had been attacked before, but only at the nuisance level of egg-throwing, poison-pen letters, and acid on the hood of his car. Morga Miller had suffered as much—and Chan Kwai Keung still had Hong Kong connections, which would make him personally responsible in the eyes of some madmen for at least one of the epidemics that the governments of Europe and America would soon be trying their utmost to “contain.”

Lisa blinked as the Rover hurtled across what had once been Claverton Down toward the industrial park erected when the old quarries had been filled and leveled. The multitudinous lights of the campus were already vivid in the gloom. The Applied Genetics building was just north of the Avenue, and she could already see the flashing blue lights on the fire apparatus gathered on the south side of the campus. The pall of smoke above them was stained an ugly shade of pink by that fraction of the sodium light it reflected back to the ground.

It can't be anything I've given him, she told herself while she ran through a mental list of the tasks she had thrown Ed Burdillon's way during the last year in her capacity as a pen-pusher. Yes, there had been investigations concerned with DNA polluted by “viral anomalies,” but there had been nothing that looked remotely like hostile action. The MOD had undoubtedly sent work to the department, for which Ed would have taken personal responsibility, but whatever the half-baked might think, England's green and pleasant campuses were not awash with GM weapons capable of wiping out the population of a cityplex the size of Bristol in a matter of days. Viruses simply weren't tough enough to wreak that kind of havoc in a world where civilized people were willing and able to observe elementary standards of hygiene, and their much-touted propensity to mutate was a thousand times more likely to render them harmless than to increase their lethal force. Bacteria designed for immunity to common antibiotics were slightly more dangerous, but every household armed with bleach and detergents was a virtual fortress—and Burdillon had been a virus man through and through ever since the early days of magic bullets.

They came at me too, she reminded herself. *They were looking for something in my files*. Even after scrupulous reexamination, however, she couldn't find a likely link. Almost all of the work she had subcontracted to the university labs during the last three decades had had to do with problematic DNA sequences gleaned from everyday crime scenes. Not even any mass murders, let alone any sensitive industrial espionage. If Ed and she had somehow contrived to get under the skin of some rival establishment—which would presumably be a megacorp rather than a foreign government nowadays—she certainly had no idea of how they had done it.

As the Rover zoomed past a baker's van carrying the morning quota of bread to the circus-starved masses, the driver made V signs at Mike, not caring in the least that he might be en route to an emergency. If he had known exactly who Detective Inspector Grundy was, he would probably have redoubled the vehemence of his gestures.

“And you!” Lisa muttered, loudly enough to startle herself. Mike glanced at her, but made no comment.

They were almost at the campus gate; the headlights had picked out the red-and-white stripes on the barrier.

The security guard didn't wait to inspect the passcard Mike was fumbling from his pocket—

presumably figured that anyone in a black Rover who wanted to get in must have a legitimate mission. ~~Reporters always drove brightly colored Italian cars and never got out of bed at five o'clock on an~~ October morning.

Lisa wondered whether the team that was flying out from London by helicopter might be just for show, but it seemed unlikely. Until they had more information about the motive for the attack, the Ministry of Defence would be obliged to treat the incident as a possible threat to national security. Even if some lunatic fringe organization like the Defenders of Mother Gaea or the New Luddites were to own up to the crime campaign before noon, the MOD would probably want to remain involved, only to keep a heavy foot on the toes of the Special Branch. Hobbyist terrorists were perverse, unwilling to accommodate their missions and objectives to the neat divisions of responsibility set out by the last wave of institutional reorganizations.

It had been some months since Lisa had last visited the university in person, but the campus still felt more like home than her actual home. She had only to visit it twice or three times a year to maintain the force of impressions stamped on her psyche nearly forty years before, when she'd started her course of postgraduate study under the supervision of Dr. Morgan Miller.

Ed Burdillon had been merely one of the troops in those days, with not a gray hair on his head, and Chan had been in his second year of post-doc, patiently waiting for opportunity to come knocking. In those days, she had driven to the campus from a brand-new high-rise in Bathampton Warren on a 500cc motorcycle. She'd spent the best part of three years in a lab just along the corridor from Mouseworld, in and out of it all the time. It was easy enough to imagine someone working late one night, tracking a particularly tricky 3-D electrophoretic migration pattern, hearing noises and going to investigate....

Except, of course, that Ed Burdillon didn't work just along the corridor from Mouseworld. He worked on one of the floors above, in a Level 4 biocontainment facility. He might have heard the noises through the floor—but if it had been only noise, he wouldn't have thought too much about it because he couldn't have known that Security was unwittingly watching tapes instead of live transmissions. He must have seen something—perhaps a black-clad figure in a helmet like the one Lisa's assailant had worn—and realized that Security wasn't on the ball. To fix the digicams, Lisa thought, the bombers must have had an inside man—but how had they sneaked him in? Even the humblest lab assistants had to be positively vetted these days if they were to have access to the biocontainment facility.

The flashing blue lights were all around them now. Mike slowed down before braking, but Lisa had reflexively put out her right hand; the pressure of her fingers on the dashboard reminded her that she still hurt and that even the slightest shock could renew her awareness of her pain, taunting her with her fragility.

Mike, in a fit of unaccustomed chivalry, had already run around the car to open the door for her. "Let's go," he said tersely. "Better find out what we can before the men from Ministry take it out of our hands."

It was probably going to be worse than that for her, Lisa realized. She wasn't likely to have just the case taken out of her hands. Everything the intruders had said and done for the benefit of the recording devices in her living room had been calculated to imply that she knew far more about this than she actually did. Painting TRAITOR on the door was presumably mere underlining, made for mocking emphasis. She would have to be treated as a suspect by the men from Ministry, at least to begin with—and wouldn't Judith Kenna love *that*?

Lisa paused in the doorway of Mouseworld, content for the moment to look inside without actually stepping over the threshold. There were too many people there already.

She placed her right hand against her sternum, not caring that the blood oozing from the dressing would stain the front of her tunic. The pain of the rip was definitely a feeling now as well as a fact, and the fumes were making her head ache. To make matters worse, the tiredness she'd been unable to cultivate while she lay awake in bed had now descended upon her like a pall. She had never felt like throwing herself into her work.

The stink was the worst of it—but that was partly because the smoke spiraling from every direction in the hectic airflow made it difficult to see. The sheer faces of almost undifferentiated blackness might as well have been mere shadows. Oddly enough, there seemed to be hardly any warmth left in the cavernous space; the sharp autumn air circulating through the blown-out windows had carried away most of the heat, even though oily smoke still seeped from the molten remains of the plastic faces that were once cages housing small animals.

Lisa had to squint and concentrate hard to make out the vaguest outlines of the thousands of tiny corpses within the walls of shadow. Most of them must have been roasted rather than burned, but it was only in her imagination that the chorus of five hundred thousand agonized mice sounded obscenely loud. Mice weren't equipped for screaming and within a couple of seconds, the intense heat and smoke must have robbed them of what voices they had.

The central H Block had suffered worst of all. It didn't require an expert to guess that the incendiaries—of which there must have been at least two—had been placed in the coverts of the H-shaped area.

The main experiment, involving the four mouse "cities" arranged around the walls of the room, had run for decades. It had been famous in its way, but it had been regarded as a mere curiosity—a kind of scientific folly—even in 2002, when Lisa had arrived, shortly after her twenty-second birthday, impatient to be trained in all the hot new techniques of DNA analysis. She had already joined the police force, and had gone through basic training of a sort during the summer months.

If the Mouseworld cities had been a folly then, what were they now in 2041? The passage of time had lent them a certain dignity, although all the claims made over the years for their renewed relevance rang slightly hollow to those in the know. The human population explosion had indeed produced all the dire effects that prophets such as Morgan Miller had predicted, but careful analysis of the physiological tricks that the mice of Mouseworld had mastered had made not a jot of difference. Those humans who followed the mouse example had needed no help to do so, and those who were Calhounian rats through and through could not have been changed by any plausible intervention.

Half a dozen firemen were wandering around aimlessly, two of them still in full breathing apparatus and two others carrying huge axes in a fashion suggesting they were longing to get on with the job of clearing the debris off the staircases and catwalks—a job that would have to wait until the Fire Investigation Team had made a meticulous inspection of the site, probably in company with experts from the Bomb Squad. The axemen had taken their masks off, although the SOCO workers operating under the supervision of Steve Forrester were fully suited.

Lisa still outranked Forrester, in theory at least, but she wasn't his line manager; he was the up-and-

coming heir-apparent to the entire department. He came over as soon as he noticed her, but it was a token gesture.

“Nothing much for us here,” he said. “I sent Max and Lydia with Burdillon in the ambulance—you might get something from his clothing, if we’re *very* lucky. As he came through the door, he was shot and fell sideways to his right. One of the bombers got a hold of his jacket and dragged him three meters down the corridor. His jacket was dead and the bomber was wearing smart gloves, but there’s still a possibility that something stuck.”

When Lisa nodded an acknowledgment, Forrester immediately turned away. Although the senior fireman must have deduced by now that she was police, he wasn’t in any hurry to talk to her. She was, after all, a middle-aged woman, even if her passcard did state that she was a doctor of philosophy as well as an inspector. She seemed to have held the rank of inspector forever; three reorganizations of the relationship between forensic-science officers and the main body of the force hadn’t succeeded in solving the problem of a grotesquely inappropriate and largely tokenistic ranking system.

When the senior fireman finally condescended to approach her, Lisa stepped over the threshold and moved to the left of the door so they wouldn’t be in the way.

“Your mice, were they?” asked the officer as he squinted at the fine print on her card, having rubbed his eyes to clear away the last few smoke-induced tears. His hair was dyed black. The fire service, like the police force, was an institution in which youth and physical fitness were traditionally held in great esteem; they seemed destined to be the nation’s last bastions against the quiet revolution of gray power. Lisa wondered whether the fireman viewed the prospect of premature redundancy with the same vaguely nauseating apprehension that had become her own mind’s rest state.

“Not ours,” she told him. “We still subcontract some animal work to the university, but the vast majority of the mice in here weren’t on active service anymore. Those that weren’t in the cities—the ones in the central block, that is—were mostly obsolete models and other GM strains preserved as library specimens. All current work is conducted on the upper floors.”

The fireman nodded sagely, although he probably didn’t have a clue as to what she meant by “obsolete models” and certainly didn’t care. “Good doors, fewer windows up there,” he said approvingly. “Certain amount of damage outside but not much in. Parallel labs on this floor came off worse, even though heat always tries to go straight up. There was a *lot* of heat, but it didn’t last long. They used a fierce accelerant, but most of the local material was decently retardant. Whole thing was a matter of *Bang! Whoosh! Bob’s your uncle.*”

Lisa thought about that for a moment or two. “Did the bombers expect it to spread upstairs?” she asked. “Were they hoping to destroy the whole wing?”

“Don’t know what they expected or hoped,” the black-haired man replied punctiliously. “Not my job to speculate.”

“I’m just trying to understand why they put the bomb in here,” Lisa said, struggling to remain patient in spite of her stinging hand and aching head. “Might Mouseworld have been the most convenient point they could reach in order to launch an attack on the high-security facility above it?”

“Maybe,” said the fireman dubiously. “They certainly had easy access here—door was unlocked, not broken open. Then again ... has to be off the record, because I’m not the man supposed to swear it in court, but *I* reckon there were four devices, placed low down to blast in all four directions. Never saw anything like *this* before”—he waved an arm at the blackened walls, presumably referring to the vast arrays of interconnected cages—“but if I had to guess, I’d say the bombs were placed to make sure they got all the animals, and nobody gave a damn about the rest of the wing or anything upstairs. Why would anyone do that, hey?”

The fireman was trying hard not to sound anxious, but there had to be at least as many rumors running around Widcombe Fire & Rescue Station as there were around East Central Police Station.

Loyal public servants weren't allowed to say there was a war on, but they all knew full well that millions of people were dying of hyperflu in Mexico, North Africa, and Southeast Asia, and not because their chickens' resident viruses had been possessed by some kind of mutational madness. "It's a mystery to me," Lisa admitted tactfully. "Who would want to assassinate five hundred thousand redundant mice? If there are any significant experiments running at the moment—and I doubt there's anything much concerned with infective viruses—those animals are upstairs, locked in steel safes surrounded by moats of bleach. There was nothing dangerous here; the lab assistants only wore masks and gloves because of the regs. All the mice on the outer walls were part of a famous experiment that had been running since before you and I were born."

"Doesn't do to be famous nowadays," the fireman observed. "Even if you're only an experimenter. Hear about that TV weathergirl got whacked last week? Don't care what they say about the impending frustrations of containment—world can't get much crazier than it already is."

"Do you have any idea of what kind of devices were used?" Lisa asked, knowing she ought to ask the questions Mike Grundy would want answered, even if the investigation would be taken out of her hands before noon. "Have you seen anything like them before?"

"Better ask the experts," the black-haired man told her cautiously. "Most of the arson I see is kicked off with cans of gasoline or beer-bottle Molotovs."

"You mean that this was a professional job?"

"No such thing," he said contemptuously. "Nobody makes a living torching things. Anyway, even a common or garden lunatic can decant cordon-bleu bomb-making instructions from the net. Kids often use gas cans because they're lazy and because gas gets the job done—if they wanted to do it the fancy way, they could easily find out how."

"Why was *this* job done the fancy way?" Lisa persisted. "What was accomplished here that couldn't have been done with a can of gasoline and a match?"

"One-hundred-percent mortality," he said succinctly. "Like I said, all the local materials, apart from human flesh, are decently fire-retardant, so the structure held up far better than the inhabitants. As you might expect. Nothing's fireproof, of course, but labs in tall buildings have to observe the regulations. Mirrors, you know, fancy accelerants aren't easy to buy or cook up in the kitchen, so it's unlikely to have been actual *kids*. Some organization, I'd say. Some intelligence too. If I were you, I'd assume—at least to start with—that what they wanted to do was what they actually did. They certainly made sure they didn't leave a single living thing alive."

Lisa looked up at the blackened wreckage looming eighteen or twenty feet above her on three sides. She remembered the labels that had been proudly pasted atop each vertical maze: LONDON; PARIS; NEW YORK; ROME. There was no trace of them now—they, at least, had not been made of fire-retardant plastic. The mouse cities weren't Edgar Burdillon's experiment and never had been—he had always regarded them as something of a space-wasting nuisance, so there was a certain sour irony in the fact that he had gone to their defense and been hurt in consequence. It was difficult to speculate exactly whose experiment the cities were now that their original founders were long retired. They were simply *the* experiment—a hallowed tradition, not merely of the Applied Genetics Department but the university's entire bioscience empire. So why, Lisa wondered, should she feel such an acute sense of personal loss as she stared dumbfounded at the ruins? Was it because the stability of the mouse cities had somehow come to symbolize the stability of her own personality—essential and undisturbed save for a couple of "chaotic fluctuations" way back in the zero decade?

Lisa couldn't believe that any terrorist organization could possibly have a grudge against the mouse cities. Their size made them the most conspicuous victims of the attack, but their destruction could have been the unfortunate byproduct of a determination to destroy some or all of the other mice kept in the lab complex: the library specimens in the central section. *If so, which ones were the bombe*

most likely to have been after—and why?

The GM strains in the H Block had been the detritus of hundreds, maybe thousands, of most discontinued experiments. Lisa doubted that anyone currently active in the department was acquainted with the nature and history of more than a few dozen of them. There would be a supposedly complete catalogue on the computer, of course, but every data bank had to be kept up to date, and everybody knew that records of that kind never matched reality with any exactitude, because errors accumulated over the years and no one could ever be bothered to sort them out—especially if nobody cared passionately about the accuracy of the data. The animals in the tightly sealed biohazard units on the upper floors would be comprehensively documented, but not these. It was possible that nobody would ever know for sure exactly what had been lost.

The fireman had turned away while Lisa was thinking, and she couldn't see any need to call him back. Someone was coming up the corridor behind her and she put her head around the door to see who it was, after briefly rubbing her smoke-irritated eyes.

Lisa recognized the campus security guard responsible for the building. He'd been around almost as long as she had. His name was Thomas Sweet, although Lisa realized with a slight shock that she never actually had occasion to address him by name. He knew her only as an occasional visitor, but she obviously seemed to him to be a sympathetic figure—a possible ally against all the uniformed men and “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” The deeply mournful look brought forth a faint but heartrending echo in her own being.

“Miss Friemann?” he said desolately. “Is that you?”

“Yes,” she said, unworried by the fact that he hadn't called her “Doctor,” let alone “Inspector,” although she certainly wasn't unaware of it. “What happened, Mr. Sweet? Have you collected the wafers from the security cams?”

“Gave them to a DS,” Sweet assured her. “DI Grundy wants to run through them again, but I've taken a peek and the bombers are all wrapped up. Won't have left much evidence for you, thanks to the so-called smart fabrics they were wearing.” His own uniform was thoroughly dead, and Lisa guessed that his private wardrobe was even farther behind the times than her own.

“We'll get something,” she said, trying to sound optimistic.

“Wasn't my fault, Miss,” Sweet insisted. “They hacked into the system and sent false pictures to my VDU's. They had smartcards, you know—didn't trigger a single alarm.”

“How many were there?” she asked, unable to remember whether she'd already been told.

“Three of them. Heads inside helmets—purpose-built, not ordinary motorcycling helmets. Looked like they were pretending to be SAS commandos. Only one thing I could make out for sure.”

“What was that?”

“They were women. Two of them, at least. Third might have been a man—probably was, judging by the way he dragged the prof along the corridor like a sack of potatoes, but not the ones with dart guns. Doesn't make much difference these days. Remember that evil bitch you banged up after the Dox Riots thirty years back? What was it she called herself?”

“Keeper Pan,” Lisa said automatically, slightly surprised by the readiness of her memory.

“Let her out again soon enough, though, didn't they? *Animal Liberation Front!* Is *this* what they call liberation?”

For the moment, Lisa thought, Animal Liberationists were probably the least likely suspects. Even in their heyday, animal libbers had used firebombs only against people. Mice were right at the bottom of their hierarchy of deserving species, way below pigs and rabbits, but they were innocent nevertheless. Keeper Pan and her friends would never have firebombed Mouseworld. Lisa did, however, pause to wonder whether the person who'd shot the phone out of her hand could possibly have been a woman. It had been too dark to judge the shape of the black shell-suit, but there might

have been something else that would give her a clue, if only she could focus her memories....

~~“He had a lot of stuff in here, didn’t he?”~~ the security man went on. ~~“Stuff from way back—been~~ inoculating mice with voodoo for forty years, they say, trying to work magic. Never came to anything much, though, did it?”

After a moment’s confusion, Lisa realized that the *he* in Sweet’s statement wasn’t Edgar Burdillon but Morgan Miller.

“Did they try to get into any of the other labs or offices?” she asked sharply.

Sweet shook his head. “Came straight here,” he said. “Seemed to know exactly what they were doing. Didn’t go to the upper floors at all. Why would they want to burn Mouseworld, Mi Friemann?”

“I don’t know,” Lisa said, marveling at the absurdity that the casual shooting of a once-eminent scientist did not seem bizarre at all by comparison with the destruction of a classic experiment in animal population dynamics. The fact that Ed Burdillon had been driven away in an ambulance, his life endangered by toxic fumes, hardly seemed to have registered with the old man.

“I tried to call him,” said Sweet—still presumably referring to Morgan Miller. “So did the police. He isn’t answering his phone.”

“Is he away?” Lisa asked.

“Not that I know of,” the security guard replied, still shaking his head in disbelief. “I tried Stella too, but everyone sets their answer-phones these days, day and night alike. Too many nuisance calls, I guess.”

Lisa knew that Stella Filisetti was Morgan Miller’s latest research assistant. She didn’t know if Morgan was screwing her, but she assumed that Sweet believed he was. It had been Morgan’s habit since time immemorial, and he wasn’t the kind of man to give up on his habits while there was still a breath in his body.

Morgan had been seventy-three years old on his last birthday, but the last time Lisa had seen him he’d assured her that he was “as fit as a flea.” Seventy-three wasn’t old these days, no matter what the Police Admin and the top men at Fire & Rescue might think. The university certainly hadn’t tried to force Morgan to retire, even though the younger members of the department were sometimes wont to say, with a sneer, that he hadn’t produced a single worthwhile result in thirty years.

“I’m sorry, Miss,” Thomas Sweet went on. “Maybe I should’ve called you too, but I didn’t have your number. I dialed 999 to get the fire department and the police, then I tried Professor Burdillon’s office. Couldn’t get through, of course—I didn’t know then that he’d gone downstairs. I tried Dr. Miller and got no reply, so I tried Stella, then Dr. Chan. No reply from any of them. Not *one*.’9 He seemed deeply resentful of his failure, as if he suspected that he would be held responsible for it.

Their conversation was interrupted by another new arrival: a woman in her mid-thirties, with short-cropped hair and a raptorial attitude. Lisa had been hoping to see Mike Grundy before Judith Kenner found her, but it was too late now.

It didn’t seem to have occurred to the chief inspector that there were times when a professional smile, however sardonic, wasn’t entirely appropriate. “Mr. Sweet,” she said mildly, “DS Hapgood would like another word with you.”

She waited for the security guard to go through the doorway before continuing. “It’s good of you to race out here to give us the benefit of your special expertise, Dr. Friemann, but you really should have remained at the other crime scene. Senior officers ought to set an example in procedural matters, don’t you think? I see that you’re hurt too. Is that a *bandage* on your hand? You really ought to have seen a doctor before rushing off like that—Detective Inspector Grundy seems to have been extremely irresponsible.”

“Don’t blame Mike,” Lisa said frostily. “My home first-aid kit’s ancient, but the dressing will do”

the job just as well as a fancy sealant. It's just a slight cut in an awkward place, plus a few scratches on my arm. ~~There was nothing I could do at home but trample on evidence—and I do have specific~~ knowledge of this location and the victim. When the men from the Ministry of Defence get here they'll want to talk to me."

"I'm sure they will," the chief inspector purred. "Have you formed any conclusions?"

"Not yet," Lisa admitted, wishing there were some vital clue in plain view whose significance she alone had been able to see. Desperate to even the score, she said: "Have you managed to figure out why they blacked out the center of town?"

"I think so," said Kenna, her smile becoming smug as well as sardonic. "I presume they did it partly to provide getaway cover for the vehicles carrying the bombers and your own intruders, but the main reason must have been to cloak the third—and probably most important—part of their scheme."

Lisa suppressed a curse and managed to sound completely neutral as she said: "Which was?"

"The abduction of Dr. Morgan Miller," the chief inspector informed her.

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