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Approx 8500 words

The Carpetbaggers Ball

I swung my legs over the edge of the prep table and got to my feet. Almost. The legs were shorter than I expected, and my feet hit the cold tile floor with more force than necessary. “Shit!” I said as grabbed at the table for support.

“Is there a problem, sir?” said a calm voice from behind the privacy curtain.

“No,” I said. “I just need a minute.”

“Of course, sir.” The attendant moved to check on another incoming guest. On a Friday, they were probably averaging a download every half hour.

Moving with care, I stood and stretched, testing the general state of my host for the evening. It was a young male body, as I’d ordered, but that was about it. When I checked myself out in the mirror, I swore again, more quietly this time. After the ball, I was going to kill my booking agent, absolutely kill him.

My host body looked like any skinny kid from the barrio, albeit with soft brown eyes and decent teeth. But he had no net access, and apart from the liquid silver HAG recently grafted to his first two cervical vertebrae, all he carried was a standard Homeland Security ID chip in his wrist. This boy was *primitive*.

Well, I had to make the best of it. There wasn’t time to rent another host, and I’d sooner give up my condo in Vancouver than miss the first Carpetbaggers Ball of the season. I had a reputation to build. Onward and upward. I called out, “Clothing, please!” in my new voice, a pleasing baritone with only a trace of an accent.

A rice paper-wrapped package appeared through a slit in the curtain. I took the package from the manicured hand of the attendant and tossed it onto the table. The first layer held silk underwear, a carefully torn, vintage street suit (although someone had nearly ruined the denim's natural lay with an iron), and black running shoes. I dressed quickly, gaining more confidence with each minute. In another hour, I could probably pick up a pool cue and best three local hustlers without breaking a sweat. For now, I savored the experience of standing tall without mechanical assistance or the usual tremors that plagued my hands.

CIDP - Chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy - isn't an ugly disease. A glance at my Canadian ID card shows a handsome man in his thirties with a slightly lopsided smile and watery blue eyes. What it doesn't show is the Mitsubishi exoskeleton that I have to wear if I want to carry a teapot from the kitchen to the table.

My inheritance pays for the exoskeleton, plus a spacious condo in Vancouver's Millennium Towers. Still, daily physical therapy, experimental gene treatments, and a discrete staff doesn't change the basic fact that I'm not normal, and never will be.

Is it any wonder I chose to become a Carpetbagger?

A rakish bandana completed my ensemble. I tied it over my host's wavy black hair New York-style, hiding the HAG from casual view. (In some parts of town, you might find yourself snatched and cut open for a Heuristic Access Gateway. Wiped and reprogrammed, the Sony model my host wore was worth a month's rent, easy.)

A glance at the mirror softened my mood. Mark Twain was definitely onto something, 150 years ago. Naked people definitely have little or no influence on society. A good suit, on the other hand, opened many doors.

I strolled to the exit, where another attendant waited by the armored door with my Carpetbag. This season's design was a Louis Vuitton bike messenger satchel, stocked with samples of expensive products from local companies hoping to pique my interest. There were condoms, cologne, diamond-edged razors, and a smartcard filled with numbers for real estate agents, casinos, and jewelers. "The outside temperature is 93 degrees Fahrenheit, with stronger UV than expected, sir," she said. "I added your preferred sunscreen."

"Thanks," I said, digging through the Carpetbag for a cell phone link, which I clipped to my collar. "My host is keyed to my Canadian credit line, I presume."

"Of course, sir, although many local merchants still rely on secured debit cards and cash. You'll find two thousand American dollars in non-sequential bills there."

I raised an eyebrow, but let it go. It was traditional to leave a decent tip for the host, but leftovers from two grand? The talent agency must really be squeezing these kids. "Oh, by the way, what's the host's name?" I said.

"Diego, sir."

"Excellent," I said. "I think I'll keep it."

God's flashlight switched on as I left the building—it felt hotter than... I translated the temperature into something understandable, like 35 degrees, and shook my head. I never understood why Americans held on to their old ways, inches and dollars and pounds... they embraced every other manner of change. The US was the second country (after Japan, of course) to legalize temporary personality transfer.

I applied some sunscreen and covered my eyes with knockoff Porsche sunglasses, the sort of thing that my host might wear. The video recorder beeped once as it came online.

“Aren’t you overdoing it a bit?” said a lovely voice behind me.

I turned on my toes, compensating for the slight delay as I fell into closer synchronization with my host. So much smoother than the exoskeleton! “Are you speaking to me, señorita?” I said.

“Why, yes I am, Mr. Movie Star Sunglasses.” Her face was equally lovely, chocolate brown skin and sharp eyes, full lips poised in a smirk. Her accent hinted at the Iberian Peninsula. “You’re not from around here, are you?” she said.

“I’m afraid you’ve mistaken me for someone else. Now, if you’ll excuse me...” I sketched a quick bow and turned to go. She stepped around me, nimble as a ballerina.

Leaning forward, she whispered, “No one around here knows how to bow, *Adrien*.”

I caught a scent of jasmine and sandalwood. *Ah ha!* “How did you manage to follow me, Galina?” I asked, trying for the right note of petulance.

She looked both ways on the street, as if the paparazzi were already upon us. “It wasn’t easy, believe me, but it will be worth it, I think.” She winked and laughed.

“Well,” I said. “I was looking forward to seeing you this evening, but this way is much better. Now I don’t have to share you with Kyle and Arthur quite so soon.”

“My thoughts exactly,” she said, and linked her arm in mine. She was warm, with a sheen of perspiration on her soft skin. “Oh, and please call me ‘Damita.’ I’m trying to stay in character.”

I racked my brain for a second, reviewing my Spanish lessons. *The little noble lady*. How fitting for the Ukraine’s most charming petroleum broker. “Señorita Damita, then. And you can call me ‘Diego’” I glanced around the unfamiliar street. “Where to, my dear?”

She smiled with recently bleached teeth. “Lunch. I don’t know about you, but I’m starving.” I couldn’t argue with that. Some of these hosts skipped a meal before transfer to avoid download nausea. I appreciated the courtesy, especially after my first Carpetbaggers Ball and that questionable sushi.

Damita tugged me down the street, easing us through the late morning crowd of shoppers, mostly women with two or three children in tow. The conversations blended together into a soothing background hum. I heard the usual complaints about the weather, the price of *pollo* and *agua pura*, and late government payments. Nothing really changes, does it?

We found a *restaurante*, a dingy place squeezed in between an immigration lawyer’s office and a medical clinic. The ancient fluorescent bulbs and faded plastic tables made me hesitate, but as soon as I caught the aroma of simmering corn oil and fresh serrano chilies, I eagerly took a seat. “Where’s the menu?” I asked.

“There isn’t one,” Damita said. “And no, this isn’t *prix fixe*, either.” She grinned at my confusion. “Allow me, Señor.” She strode to the register, where a very old, very tired-looking woman sat on a stool. Despite the heat, the woman wore a heavy cotton apron, much stained and patched.

“¿*Qué puedo conseguirle?*” asked our hostess.

“*Almuerzo para dos, por favor,*” said Damita.

The woman wrote quickly on a pad, then passed a piece of paper behind her without looking. A skinny hand reached out from the kitchen and grabbed it. I heard more voices and pots moving on a stove.

“¿*Algo de beber?*”

Damita turned back to me. “What will you have to drink, Diego?”

“The ice probably isn’t safe here, so we should probably have something in a bottle,” I said.

That earned me a disapproving frown. “Isn’t safe for whom? You or your host?” She turned back to the counter. “¿Usted tiene sangría?”

“Sí, señorita.”

“Buena.” Withdrawing a slim wallet from a pocket of her cargo pants, Damita paid the bill with crisp \$10 bills. She collected a pitcher of red wine and two glasses, leaving her change behind on the counter.

The wine was cold and sharp, redolent with oranges and lemon. I finished my glass, poured another. Damita sipped hers more slowly. “See?” she said.

I raised my glass. “You are correct, my dear.”

“As always.”

We drank in companionable silence for a moment. I have always liked Galina Bazhenov, perhaps more than I should. She moved through the Carpetbagger circuit with the right amount of hedonism and emotional disengagement, taking a dozen lovers every year, while I watched from the sidelines. (Arthur and Kyle had once confided to me that some Carpetbaggers augmented their hosts with illegal software hacks like “Digital Ecstasy” and “Virtual Viagra.” Perhaps it was my Jesuit upbringing, but such things didn’t appeal to me.)

Galina never acknowledged her liaisons outside our carefully scripted events, since her private face was well known in the world of petrol business world.

I doubted she had any idea of who I really was, although we had certainly shared some wonderful nights together. Would she still find me witty and attractive in the cruel light of morning, I wondered, as my nurse plugged me into my exoskeleton?

I took another sip of wine. Then another. Fortunately our food arrived, distracting me from darker thoughts. The server deposited a large plate of *chilies rellenos de queso*, a stack of corn tortillas, and a cup of pinto beans layered with *pico de gallo*. I shifted my Carpetbag to the floor near my feet to make more room. Its proximity alarm chirped once as it settled into a new position, warning any would-be thieves. There wasn't anything *that* valuable inside, but it was so *embarrassing* to ask for a replacement. That had happened to me two years ago, not long after I had joined the circuit, when some paparazzo had snagged my satchel in Fiji. The resulting photos earned him six month's salary, and an equal stretch in a very uncomfortable Suva jail cell.

I sampled each part of my dish slowly, letting my host's taste buds transfer the sensation to me through the HAG. For all its humble appearance, lunch was quite good. I said as much to Damita.

"I agree," she said, touching the corner of her napkin to her mouth in a familiar gesture. "This is what my father would call this 'good proletariat sustenance.'"

I laughed. "I had no idea the senior energy oligarch of Azerbaijan was a closet Marxist."

"My father," she responded in a matter-of-fact tone, "apprenticed under Gorbachev. He was a good reformer, but never forgot that ambition is its own master."

"How fortunate for you, Señorita Damita."

She stared at me. "You're a fine one to talk, Señor Diego." Her voice had dropped several degrees. "Your parents worked hard for their millions, did they? Hiding the assets of petty dictators and drug dealers until the UN took you to court? Your father slept well at night, I'm sure."

"As a matter of fact, he didn't," I said. Her tone had thrown me off. I felt my shoulders hunching forward defensively. "That's why he renounced his Swiss citizenship and moved to

Canada.” I slid my sunglasses down my nose so she could see my eyes. “And what have I done to upset you, Damita?”

She took a deep breath and settled back in her seat, regal and controlled. “I think my host is having some hormonal issues today. It’s obviously affected my HAG synchronization.” She settled a pair of sunglasses on her face, and added a warm smile. “I think we shall ask for some editing in the video records, *¿que piensas?*”

“Of course,” I said, a little confused. No one released Carpetbagger event blogs without extensive post production, not after the drunken brawl at Carnivale in Rio de Jeniro. She must have been making a joke to cover her social *faux pas*.

“I’m ready for some air,” she said. “Shall we go?”

We gathered our things and returned to the outside where it was, if anything, hotter than before. I slathered on another dose of sunscreen, and offered the tube to Damita. She touched up her arms and face. “We are considerate guests, are we not, Diego? Not only do we compensate these young people for their time, we keep them well-fed and healthy. No melanoma for them, today!”

“It’s only good manners, Damita,” I said. “Our reputation suffered when that host woke up tattooed and married in St. Thomas.”

She made a noncommittal sound, then paused to look in the window of a dress shop, where a group of young girls were apparently trying on outfits for someone’s upcoming *quinceañera*. Their faces were bright with joy and promise.

My cell phone buzzed quietly. I stepped away from Damita and checked the number. It was my broker, Marc, calling from his office.

“*Bonjour*,” he said. “I hope I’m not interrupting.”

I turned back. Damita had gone into the dress shop, and was engaged in conversation with one of the girls. “Perfect timing, Marc. *Qu'est-ce que tu veux?*”

“Something came across the news a few minutes ago, and I thought you might want to hear it,” he said. “Petroleum workers in Chechnya have gone on strike, and they have sympathizers shutting down production facilities all over. The market is going crazy.”

I absorbed the news. A lot of money was changing hands now, and Galina’s father was probably calling an emergency meeting of his staff. He might even ask her to upload home prematurely. “Anything that needs my immediate attention?”

“No, sir. Our portfolio is diversified enough. If things get worse, I’ll call you back.”

I sighed. Of course this sort of thing had to happen today. “I’d prefer you handle it yourself. Is this a secure connection?”

“It’s a mobile, sir.”

“Then I’ll call you back from the hotel,” I said, and hung up. A moment later, Galina joined me, clutching a shopping bag.

“What a delightful neighborhood,” she said. “They don’t have very much, of course, but they’re extremely generous and polite. The store owner had no idea who I was, but treated me like family.”

“It’s good business,” I said.

“Good manners *and* good business,” she corrected.

“Speaking of business,” I said, “have you heard from your father today?”

“No,” Damita said. “Why do you ask?”

I related the news from Marc. She listened politely, then sighed and reached into her pocket for her phone. Then she looked at me with a wicked grin. “I’m on holiday,” she said,

replacing her phone, “and they’ll have to manage without me until Monday. Come on, Diego.”

She took my arm and strode down the street.

A few blocks later, we heard sirens, and a police car screamed past us, narrowly missing parked cars and an old man crossing the street. When we got to the corner, we found an ambulance, and paramedic crew working furiously on a woman who lay sprawled on the sidewalk.

I walked up to one of the police officers who was spraying out temporary evidence markers, and asked him what happened. He gave me a quick glance, his hand hovering near his rather large gun. “Woman had a heart attack, or something,” he said. “Apparently she had just bought an ice cream and keeled over.”

I looked closer. The victim appeared in her late twenties, dressed in a kimono that had the distinctive sheen of nanofibers. Then the paramedics lifted her onto a stretcher, and I caught sight of her HAG. As they loaded the stretcher into the ambulance, one of the officers picked up a loose dress sandal and a bag from the sidewalk. It was a Louis Vuitton, identical to the one slung across my shoulder.

“I wonder who it was,” I said.

“Who?” asked Damita.

“That woman.” I pointed out the bag. “I’ll bet she was on her way to the ball.”

Damita nodded. “Could be.”

We stood there sweating. “Had enough local color?” Damita asked.

“Yeah, I suppose you could say that. Besides, it’s too damn hot.”

“There’s an underground Metro station close by,” she said. We headed away before the press showed up and caught a southbound train to the Imperial station. Damita looked at the

board and said, "Let's go to Redondo Beach." As we walked across the platform to our connecting train on the Green line, we passed what appeared to be a pensioner diligently working his way through a Bach cello suite on a battered instrument. I paused for a moment to watch and listen. His technique was good, although I could tell he suffered from arthritis from the swelling in his hands. When he finished a particularly difficult section, I stepped up and dropped some bills in his hat. He nodded his thanks.

"That was a lot of money," Damita said.

"He needed a new C string," I replied.

We boarded our train. She chatted with the other passengers in Spanish with an ease that made me envious.

She noticed my silence after a while. "Diego, is everything all right?"

"Just thinking about that Carpetbagger," I confessed. "They're probably going through an emergency upload as we speak." If the host was lucky, she might walk away with only a migraine. If not....

Damita reached over and squeezed my hand. "Transfer shock. It happens. After a while, you don't think about it. Safer than a lot of things these days, right?" She gave my hand another squeeze. "This is, what, your second year? I've been doing this since I was 21."

The Carpetbagger movement in the old Soviet republics was initially fueled by necessity. Galina had come of age in a country where kidnapping and government-sanctioned assassinations were just part of doing business. The only way for Galina Bazhenov to leave her fortified apartment would be in the body of some cash-strapped college, or surrounded by hulking men in dark suits. "I suppose you're right," I said.

“Of course I am, Señor,” she said. “Here’s our stop. Up the stairs to your right, and we’ll have a lovely view of the Pacific.”

She was right. Even the enormous Fuller dome housing the city’s desalination plant didn’t detract from the expanse of pristine blue water. “When I was born,” Damita said, “the breakwater was out past those buoys.” She pointed a good 100 meters out from the current high water mark. “Now we’re looking at the remains of some polar bear’s summer home.”

“That’s a pretty strong remark, considering greenhouse emissions from your refineries,” I commented.

“Well... we buy carbon offsets from Brazil.”

I checked in with my HAG. Everything in my host seemed quite good, and with the faintly sweet breeze coming off the Pacific, the temperature had dropped to a reasonable 28 degrees. Then an idea whispered itself in my ear. I stepped away and touched my cell phone. “Local information.”

“How can I help you?”

“Beach rentals and water safety conditions for Redondo Beach. Video display only.”

“Thank you for using AT&T,” said the voice, before a web page scrolled past my sunglasses. I glanced at the map, found what I wanted. “Come with me, Damita, if you please.”

Ten minutes and \$150 later, we had disposable swimsuits and beach towels, and the combination to a rental locker large enough to hold our things. We dashed across the hot sand and flung ourselves into water much warmer than it looked. Then I remembered: the waste heat from the city’s desalination plant was pumped back into the bay, creating a microclimate. I also noticed a distinct lack of surfers. The early efforts to hold back the rising ocean had interfered with the natural tidal flow, upsetting decades of tube riding.

We swam until I was pleasantly tired, then moved to the shallows and floated in the warm water. I had full synchronization with my host now, and could feel individual grains of sand between his toes, and the slight sting of seawater in my eyes. The wrinkling of my skin felt perfect. I turned to Damita. Her hair floated around her head, Medusa-like. Her breasts rose gently as she lay on her back, breathing slowly.

She was so beautiful. I gave into temptation and planted kisses on her eyelids.

Without opening her eyes, she smiled. “Ah, that’s sweet.”

I leaned in for another kiss, which she accepted. After a moment, she stood and shook water from her hair. “Unfortunately, I think it’s time to go.”

“I suppose,” I said.

We rinsed off the salt and sand, dressed, and headed to the street. I called for a taxi, which made Damita raise her eyebrows. “What, you don’t want to get a limousine?” she asked.

“It would take too long to get one here,” I said. “Beside, this is less conspicuous.”

The trip to Santa Monica took an hour, even with priority routing. I sipped bottled water and watched the sun sink toward the west. Galina made a phone call to someone, speaking in rapid Spanish that I couldn’t follow. Then she put her phone away and took my hand. “I cancelled the dress being sent to the hotel. I had my ensemble planned a month ago, but our little tour inspired me.” She held up her shopping bag. “This will be so much fun, Adrien.”

“Absolument, Galina, absolument.”

She raised my hand to her lips and kissed my knuckles. “How is your waltzing, Señor?”

I raised her hand, returned the kiss, then said, “Better than last year, if I may say so.”

After my first disastrous attempt at dancing with the petite daughter of the French prime minister, I had hired a retired choreographer who put me through my paces. I had even forced

myself to dance in my own body, and discovered how flexible the exoskeleton could be, given the right programming.

“*¡Excelente!*” she said. “For myself, I wish they would try something different, like salsa, or tango. Sometimes, Carpetbaggers are so predictable.”

Her words triggered something, but I lost the thought as the taxi pulled up in front of the hotel. The Fairmont Miramar had been a favorite of my father’s. He always loved the historic building for its views, its privacy, and the dark wood décor of its large suites.

A uniformed (and discretely armed) valet met the cab. While he confirmed my identity, I paid the driver, added a healthy tip.

“Go ahead and check in,” I told Galina. “I need to talk with my broker.”

“Is something wrong?” she said. For some reason, her voice had become tense.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “We have time plenty of time.”

I found an enclosed private data terminal next to the bar and plugged in my phone and sunglasses, then opened a secure connection to Marc. While waiting for him to pick up the line, I summoned a virtual keyboard and typed out a series of questions.

“*Bonsoir, Adrien,*” he said. “If you’re calling about Chechnya, things are still up in the air. It’s the middle of the night there, and the Canadian markets closed hours ago.” He gave me a summary of my investments in the area, and the aftermarket trading appeared stable for the moment.

“Thanks, Marc,” I said. “I need to get ready for dinner, and I’d like you to run some queries on Angarsk Petrochemicals and give me a background check on this person.” My fingers sent a videoclip. “Send the results to my room, secure hardcopy, please.”

His eyebrows went up a bit. “Interesting. Someone I should know?”

“Perhaps.”

“*Au revoir*, Adrien.”

“*Au revoir*, Marc.”

When I came to the front desk to collect my room key code, I found Damita standing there, clutching a plastic shopping bag and glaring at the clerk with undisguised contempt.

“Check it again,” she said.

“I have, Madam. Your reservation was cancelled.”

“*Who* cancelled it?”

He consulted a display, frowned slightly. “I do not have information immediately available, Mademoiselle.” He looked up and gave his best efficient smile. “Apparently, this happened prior to my shift. The caller’s name is not noted.”

She straightened herself up as far as her host’s height allowed. “Then please note that I, Galina Bazhenov, am standing here now and require my room.” She indicated her shopping bag. “Surely you do not expect me to change in the lobby?”

“Of course not,” said the clerk. He looked pained now, aware of the growing attention of the other hotel patrons.

I stepped forward. “Perhaps I may be of assistance.”

Damita turned, her face flushed. “Adrien! This person refuses to give me my room.”

“Is this true?”

“Sir,” said the clerk, his voice coming under control again. “There has been some sort of error, and for that I apologize. However, we’re having difficulty verifying the lady’s identity.”

She laid a hand on my sleeve. “I told them there was a problem with my host’s ID chip—”

“I’m sure there is a reasonable explanation for everything,” I said, raising my palm, “but at the moment, though, Mademoiselle Bazhenov and I have dinner plans.” I extended my free hand toward the desk. “If you don’t mind.”

The clerk passed a wand over my wrist, checked the display, and smiled with obvious relief. “A pleasure to see you again, Monsieur de Genève. Your suite is ready now, and your bags have been sent up.”

“Very good,” I said. “Now, please charge Mademoiselle’s room to my account.”

Another man in hotel livery stepped forward. “My apologies, Monsieur. There are no rooms or suites available for this evening. We had a last-minute visit by the Foreign Minister of Kuwait, and his staff required additional space.”

I turned to Damita and gave her a grin. “Would Mademoiselle care to join me?”

She shifted her arm to my waist and gave a playful squeeze. “Of course, Adrien. Most kind of you to ask.”

The suite was more than adequate for half a dozen people, let alone the two of us. My tuxedo and toiletry kit were laid out in the main bathroom. A bottle of champagne stood sweating in a bucket of ice. Damita looked around and nodded her satisfaction. “Expecting company?” she said, catching sight of the two crystal flutes, caviar and points of toast on the silver tray.

“Not that I know of,” I replied.

Damita took her bag to the other bathroom to change. I heard the shower running, then poured myself some champagne and nibbled on some toast.

A few minutes later, there was a discrete knock at the suite's door and an envelope slid through the message slot. I opened the security seal and began to read. By the time I got through the last page, I heard Damita moving about in the bathroom. I dropped the pages into a recycling bin, where they dissolved into ash. Then I took a quick shower and dressed.

When I emerged, I found Damita lounging on the couch by the large window that overlooked the Pacific, a glass of champagne and a toast point in her hands. "Ah, there you are, Adrien." She set down her food, stood, and twirled. "What do you think?"

Damita had dressed herself in a gorgeous Spanish gown with beaded seed pearls that showed her arms to good advantage, with just the right touch of décolletage. Her hair hung loosely to her shoulders.

"I had planned to wear something very new and very expensive from Chen's new Paris collection, but was inspired by our little promenade through the city. I dare say that no one will be expecting this."

"It's exquisite," I replied. My own Henry Poole tuxedo made me feel dull and boorish in comparison. I stood there a moment longer than necessary, thinking about the ash in the recycling bin. Then I chided myself for nearly spoiling the moment.

"Adrien? What is it?"

"Just woolgathering," I said, wincing inside at the lie. I offered my arm. "Shall we?"

The Miramar's ballroom was larger than I remembered. Tables had set up been around the periphery of the space, leaving the majority of the dance floor left open. Sixteen hand-picked members of the LA Philharmonic sat on the stage, playing the Sinfonia from *The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba*.

Ice sculptures graced each table, depicting a hodgepodge of mythical creatures: griffins, hippogriffs, djinn, mermaids (and mermen), and what appeared to be a pair of battling Chinese dragons.

We made our way to a small table near the stage, partially hidden by an enormous spray of red roses that glowed with their own light. A waiter appeared with canapés and a bottle of white Bordeaux, served us quickly, then left.

Damita looked around, her eyes glittering. “They’ve done an amazing job. And these flowers! Are they real?”

“Quite real,” I said. “A Ecuadorian botanist grafted jellyfish genes to give them that effect.” I pulled one closer and inhaled. “They’re illegal in Europe.”

“Too bad,” she said. She ate a bit of pastry with smoked salmon, and made a face. “Too salty.” She took a quick gulp of wine.

I tried one, and found it perfect. “Interesting. Perhaps your HAG synchronization is still off. How was the caviar in the room?”

She looked at me. “Well, to be honest, I found it lacking.”

“That’s too bad, considering your investment in the cannery.” I leaned forward. “I remember reading it on the financial news last year. The sturgeon population in the Caspian had rebounded, so you convinced the *director d’ecology* to start the season early. Too bad you slipped on the pier while christening the new boat.”

“It was nothing,” she said. “The host was healthy, and she only had a few bruises to show for it.”

I took a drink of wine, and scanned the room. I saw a pair of identical young men, dressed in matching white tuxedos, top hats, and gloves, heading in our direction. “Kyle!” I stood and waved. “Arthur!”

The lead fellow reached our table and took my hand, grasping it with tremendous force. He doffed his hat with the other hand. “Well met, sir! Well met.” He squeezed my hand once more, then turned the gesture into a flourish. “Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

“It’s Adrien de Genève. How are you, Kyle?”

“Ah! Very well,” he replied, then gave us the smallest of frowns. “But how did you know it was me? These hosts are identical twins!”

“And everyone knows you’re very fond of such hosts,” I said. “Beside, you always try to break my fingers.” I turned to the other man. “Good to see you again, Arthur.”

Arthur removed his hat and bowed toward the table. “And you, Adrien. Glad we could entice you away from your Fortress of Solitude in Vancouver.” He turned to Damita. “Who is your elegant young lady?”

Damita tilted her head like a cat. Before she could speak, I said, “Pardon my manners. May I present Señorita Damita Angelica Ortiz?”

“Charmed,” Arthur said, and gave a bow.

Damita got to her feet a bit stiffly and curtsied. “Gentlemen,” she said. “A pleasure.”

Kyle touched his ornate spectacles. “Ah, my spy tells me that that brilliant Swiss pianist, Dieter, has just arrived. Come on Arthur, I want to find out when he’s going to finish his new concerto.” He seized his spouse’s arm and dragged him away. “Save me a dance, Adrien!” he called over his shoulder.

“But of course!” I said and waved.

Damita sat down and avoided my eyes. A few moments later, a server stopped by our table with small bowls of steaming shrimp bisque and a basket of rolls. I ate half my soup and two rolls before Damita spoke.

“How long have you known?”

“Not long,” I replied. “When were you planning on telling me?”

“Not long,” she said, a small smile tugging her mouth upward. “I’d hoped to get in a little dancing first.”

“By all means,” I said and raised a hand. Immediately, a server appeared. “A waltz, please,” I said. She nodded and made her way to the musicians. A minute later, Strauss’s “Lagoon waltz” started up.

“You’re a gentleman,” Damita said as I offered my arm.

“Hate to waste the lessons.”

We joined a few other couples, including Kyle and Arthur, who had obviously chosen athletic hosts. I let myself fall into the rhythm of the dance, the mood of the revelers, and the feel of Damita’s arms. When the music faded, I released her with reluctance.

“Come on,” I said, “let’s take a walk.”

The evening was cool, so I gave Damita my jacket. We left our shoes and stockings on a bench and took to the sand. The moon winked at us as it cleared the line of palm trees on the hotel’s security perimeter.

As we strolled along, she took my arm, leaning against my shoulder. “What gave me away?” she asked.

I stopped and looked at her beautiful eyes. “Little things, really.” I mentioned her reaction to the caviar, and the fact that her father’s company, Angarsk Petrochemicals, bought

carbon credits from Belize, not Brazil. “Moreover,” I continued, “your Spanish was better than it should have been, and the real Galina would have called her father, if only to say she wasn’t coming home.” Then, I added, “There is also the small matter of your carpetbag.”

She sighed and dug her toes into the sand. “Diego called me just before the download and told me that he’d be the one hosting you, but he didn’t get a chance to see the carpetbag. So I decided to go without, and hoped you wouldn’t notice.”

“I almost didn’t,” I said. “But as you pointed out, we’re predictable.” I chuckled. “Last year, Galina lectured me at some length about the origin of the term ‘Carpetbagger’ and teased me when I couldn’t figure how to shorten the straps on my Chanel satchel to accommodate my host. Appearances are very important to her.”

“Appearance and wealth,” Damita observed.

“There is only one class in the community that thinks more about money than the rich, and that is the poor,” I said. Then, I quickly added, “I’m sorry. That was rude.”

“No need to apologize,” she replied. “‘The poor can think of nothing else.’” She gave a hard laugh. “Oscar Wilde was right, I think. Being poor and unemployed has little to recommend it, apart from the time to further one’s education and dream about living a different life.”

“Like a Carpetbagger?”

“It seemed like a harmless fantasy,” she said. “To be Galina Bazhenov for a night, to be wealthy and powerful, traveling the world without cares or restrictions....” She sighed. “Thank you for being my handsome prince, Adrien. It’s been a lovely evening. Please go enjoy the rest of the party; I think I’ve had enough.” She turned to go.

I pulled her arm back, gently, feeling a surge of desire that appeared to come from my host. “And what about Diego?”

She sighed and gently disengaged my hand. “He was my lover, but I broke it off last year. When he got hired by a hosting agency, he called me to brag about going to the Carpetbaggers Ball. He thought it might be fun for me to crash the party.”

“It was a big risk,” I asked. “Violating the privacy contract like that...”

“That didn’t worry him. Diego is blessed with an abundance of *machismo*. A little danger and an opportunity to impress me were too tempting for him.” When she saw me frown, she said, “It’s the truth. It may sound cruel, and perhaps it is, but in the morning he won’t remember a thing.” She was right. Like all hosts, Diego would be given a short-term memory wipe (what Carpetbaggers referred to as “the Lotus cocktail”) after I uploaded to Vancouver to deal with any neural crossover.

“I wanted to be here tonight,” she continued, “so I told Diego that I would play along, and be charming and let him hold me again, even if it was another man doing it. He always was a bit of voyeur.” She looked me in the eyes, then. “And you, Señor Adrien? What is your secret?”

I held her stare for as long as I could, then closed my eyes and summoned my courage. Unlike Diego, Damita would remember everything about tonight.

“It’s a long story. Let’s walk a bit more.”

I told her my tale.

“It was our first Christmas in Canada. My parents and I had gone to a party thrown by one of the big pharma companies in Vancouver. My father used to sit on the board of

directors.... In any event, the party ran late, and my parents didn't want to stay at the hotel. So I offered to drive them home."

"You had an accident," she guessed.

I nodded. "It was a stupid, unavoidable thing. A transport driver, pushing hard to make it through the border to Washington State, had suffered a massive heart attack. He was in the next lane, and his rig jumped over the divider. I swerved to avoid him, but there was ice on the road. I was driving a brand new Saab with all the latest safety gear and about a million airbags. But that damn truck just rolled right over the passenger compartment. My parents never had a chance."

"It must have been terrible."

"Terrifying," I said. Years later, that part of the memory stood out clear, the flash of headlights and grinding of metal, knowing that I was going to die right then and there. "I woke up in the hospital weeks later, and the doctor told me my parents were dead.

"Then learned I had chronic polyneuropathy. They discovered it while I was in a coma. It's not a progressive disease, like Parkinson's, but it's very expensive and difficult to treat," I said. "By the time my spine was in one piece again, my nervous system started falling apart. I haven't been able to do more than sit up in bed without help since then."

"Ah," Damita said. "A perfect reason to become a Carpetbagger."

I blushed a little. "Actually, I had already submitted a petition to the Canadian branch of the Carpetbagger Society before then. But I was too young. They're stricter in Canada about the age requirement. On the other hand, they allow more private air travel, so there's less interest in joining the Society."

I kept talking, feeling the story press its way out. “After the accident, I spent a year in rehab and another six months learning how to operate an exoskeleton. When they were finished, I could do everything I used to, except make public appearances.”

Damita looked at me in surprise. “Why not?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I didn’t want to be treated as a cripple.”

She shook her head sadly. “I see.” After a moment, she said, “Did you know my father has cancer? Of course, you wouldn’t. Well, it was pretty far along when they found it, and they had to operate. Unfortunately, the tumor was close to his spine. Too close. He came home from the hospital in a wheelchair. Medical doesn’t pay for exoskeletons.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be,” Damita said, her voice sharp. “It doesn’t stop him from taking my nephews to the park, or going to the movies, or fishing at the pier. People don’t see him as a cripple; they see him as someone happy to be alive. Because he is.”

We could see the hotel lobby now. She stopped and rubbed her arms.

“It’s more than just that,” I said, searching for arguments, finding none.

“It must be,” she said, “because from where I stand, I see someone who’s wealthy and smart and even a little charming. And yet, Señor Adrien, you’d rather hide inside the body of a rented stranger rather than face the world with your little Japanese robot.”

She rubbed her arms again and sighed. “It’s getting cold... and I’m tired. I think I should get my things and call it a night.” She stepped into the lobby and headed for the elevators.

Damn. I cursed myself and made my way toward the ball. A pair of elegantly dressed guards discretely verified my ID and opened the doors. I heard the opening notes of Edward

Elgar's Cello Concerto in E minor. It's a powerful, passionate piece, and it had been one of my father's favorites. I quietly found myself a seat at an unoccupied table.

I recalled a night a few years ago, when my father had come home from work, quietly excited. After dinner, he took me to the living room and called up his email. One of his friends in Switzerland had forwarded a old, restored video of the concerto by the famed cellist, Jacqueline Du Pré.

We downloaded and watched the entire video. I had studied Elgar's music as part of my formal music training, of course, but never seen it played with such conviction, or such joy.

Afterward, my father opened an old bottle of Mouton Rothschild and offered a toast to Ms. Du Pré, who had died at age 42 from multiple sclerosis. "It was a miracle and a curse," he said, "that God should put such a talent in the world and then snatch it away."

After we finished the bottle, he excused himself and returned with his cello. My father was only a talented amateur, and he struggled through the Third Movement of the Elgar concerto. When he put down his bow, there were tears in his eyes. "I hope someday that you'll take up an instrument again," he said.

"Someday," I promised.

I hadn't listened to the Elgar concerto since my father's death.

I helped myself to a bottle of wine from the table next to me, and drank a glass without tasting it. I watched the faces of the other Carpetbaggers around me. Most were focused on their desserts, or chatting with their companions.

Two men had set up a dueling space in the wings, and were circling each other with riot batons. They were non-lethal, of course, but still delivered a nasty shock. (There were some

underground Carpetbagger clubs that allowed full-contact martial arts; I've never been brave enough to accept an invitation.) Four Carpetbaggers, wearing petite Asian female hosts, were smoking cigarillos over a game of Mahjong. The health permit exemption must have cost the hotel a bundle.

Only Arthur and Kyle, whom I considered to be my closest acquaintances within the Carpetbaggers Society, seemed to be paying any attention to the music. They sat at a table near the orchestra, and Arthur had his arm around Kyle (or was it the other way around?), leaning his head on his lover's shoulder. Their free hands danced above the table, conducting.

When the performance ended, there was some scattered applause, mostly from the musicians on the stage. I stood and bowed deeply, then left.

Kyle would have to have his dance another night.

I found the concierge.

"Excuse me," I said, "I was wondering if you could help me with something?"

The uniformed woman smiled very politely. "Of course, Monsieur de Genève."

I wrote out a list of three items on the desk pad, then handed the paper to the concierge.

"I realize this may be a bit of stretch, but if you could manage this immediately, I would be very grateful."

The concierge looked at the paper and smiled again. I suspected this wasn't the most unusual request she would receive this evening. She pressed her lips together in thought, then said, "I have a friend at the airport who works the night shift, and we can code the chips at the cashier if you can provide me a one-time password to your accounts, sir."

"Of course," I replied.

“Then, shall we say 15 minutes?”

“Perfect. Oh, and one more thing.”

“Yes, sir?”

“My guest this evening is probably calling for a cab to take her home. I would appreciate it if you delayed her departure.”

“Of course, sir.” The concierge made a quick call, then directed me to the cashier, where I approved a fund transfer. I then strolled out to the hotel’s entrance where I found Damita standing next to a cab. The driver was steadfastly ignoring her as he chatted away on his phone in Pashto.

He looked at Damita and said, “Sorry, Miss, sorry. Next cab take you.” He drove away.

“Problem?” I said.

Damita sighed and turned toward me. She was dressed in her clothes from the afternoon and carried her shopping bag. “Nothing that I can’t handle, Adrien. It seems that someone else has decided they need my ride. I’ll have to wait a bit.”

“I see. Well, can I buy you a cup of tea in the meantime?”

“I don’t think so,” she said. When she saw the disappointment in my face, she added, “But if you think this fancy place can make a decent *café con leche*, I’d be up for that.”

We went into the bar and ordered coffee, which arrived quickly. I took a sip. “Tastes like a latté.”

“That’s because it is,” she said and smirked. “Really, Señor Adrien, you should get out more.”

“You’re probably right.” I took another sip. I suppose it was good, but I’ve never been much of a coffee drinker.

We sat in awkward silence for a moment, but were soon saved by the arrival of the concierge, who presented me with a small box. I signed for it and added a large tip.

“What’s that?” Damita asked.

“An explanation,” I said, “and an apology. Watch.” I set the box down and called up a browser on the table’s screen. I navigated over to Mitsubishi’s web site and found what I was looking for in a few seconds.

“This is Tomoko Eguchi, who was considered the best cello player in Japan about five years ago.” The tiny video showed a serious-faced beautiful woman playing Chopin. I touched a control. A series of photos from the BBC flashed by us. “When Ms. Eguchi was in London for a concert, she fell off a bullet train platform and broke her first thoracic vertebra. Her arms were completely paralyzed.”

Damita set down her coffee. She glanced at the screen and back at me. “Such a shame.” She was still a bit distant.

“So it would seem.” I brought up a series of ads in Japanese and English. “At the time of her accident, Mitsubishi had just released their first exoskeleton to the market.” The ads featured war veterans, elderly film stars, and some famous athletes. Then I tapped the screen again. “This was taken from Ms. Eguchi’s performance in Beijing last year.” The picture zoomed in on a woman’s left hand moving up and down the neck of a cello. The woman wore what appeared to be gloves that exposed the first knuckle. The camera pulled back, revealing her right hand gripping a bow. She wore a similar glove on that hand. Pablo Cassals’ “Song of the Birds” emerged from the table speakers.

The camera panned slowly over Tomoko, showing the outlines of the delicate articulated carbon fiber skeleton that covered her hands, arms, and shoulders. “The engineering lead at

Mitsubishi went to school with Ms. Eguchi's father. Nine months after her accident, the company released a series of ads featuring this performance," I said.

Damita stared at the table. "That's what you wear?" she asked. "That's what it looks like?"

"My own... device is larger and somewhat less graceful. Still, the basic design is the same. I could even play the cello again, if I practiced hard enough." I handed her the box. "It just hasn't seemed worth the trouble until now."

"What's this?" she asked.

"This is the apology."

She reached into the velvet lining of the box and pulled out two credit chips.

"Those are good for first-class priority travel within NAFTA." I said. "Round-trip, of course."

"Oh?" She looked down at her palm, realization dawning. I had just given her passage anywhere from Alaska to Honduras, free from the usual security hassles.

"You'll need a passport," I said quickly, before she had a chance to disagree, "and I'd recommend that you get those put into your name as soon as possible. They're rather, ah..."

"...expensive," she finished. "And what's this?" She indicated the other item in the box, a smartcard stamped with the hotel's logo.

"Well," I said. "It's my private number. Give it to anyone working at the Vancouver transit desk. They'll take care of the rest."

Damita said, "The rest of what?"

I felt a blush rising to my cheeks. "Transportation. It's a long walk to The Millennium Tower."

“I see.” She reached for her wallet, then hesitated. “But there are two tickets here.”

I gave her a tired smile, and signaled to the waiter. “I’d thought perhaps you could bring along your father, if he’s up for it. Tell him he can chaperone.”

That made her smile.

The waiter appeared. “Will there be anything else?” he asked.

“I believe that Señorita Damita is expecting a taxi. Could you please see that it’s ready?”

“My pleasure.” He disappeared.

I stood slowly. “Now I need to be going as well. It’s been a long day and I’m rather tired.”

“So is Diego, I bet,” Damita said.

“Yeah... he is.” I’d almost forgotten about my host. “Diego needs a good night’s sleep and some B12; tomorrow, he should be good as new. Give him my regards.”

She stood and kissed me on the cheek. “I will.” She picked up her bags. “Perhaps I’ll see you soon, Señor Adrien.”

“I would like that.”

She walked to the door, then turned and looked back.

I bowed. She grinned, gave me a quick curtsy, and left.

I made my way back to my room and left an early wakeup call for the upload crew.

They’d pick up my host and have me uploaded home in time for brunch.

The last thing I did before climbing into bed was send an email to my physical therapist.

Did she happen to know a good cello teacher?

The End