

CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Phil Lewis

Science Fiction, comedy crime adventures, suspense

Razz Engar is a Private Detective in an age where technology and improved human behaviour makes his skills redundant. But there is a big plot afoot, and Razz is the man to get to the bottom of it, even if it costs him his wife and family - even his life.

Full of future machines and technology, only the core human psyche remains unchanged - we still can't be honest with each other.

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Introduction

If there's one thing in this world I need to do, it's to tell this story. Every word of which is true. Believe me, I have no reason to lie. Now I have the time and the inclination, I must set down what happened. I'm baring my soul here and I hope you appreciate it.

First – me. My name is Razz Engar and I must have the busiest Detective Agency in the city. It's called the Aaron Aardvark Agency, mainly because it would come first in any alphabetic listing. Hardly an hour would pass, without some client calling me up, or calling me out. Sometimes I don't get home for days. I can't begin to tell you how busy I am, but I must. If I don't, there won't be any reality to the story.

I remember it starting last Thursday, because that was the day I thought I'd died. I remember thinking afterwards that the Weather Sceneo I was playing befitted the traumatic events that were to follow. I was tired of the stormy scenario. Now my mood had changed, I didn't know what I wanted. As the screen went blank, I had to think of another Sceneo to replace it. I pulled the receptor pad from behind my ear and threw it on to the desk. I stared at the now blank WallScreen and let my own images slip through my mind. It had been a very peculiar week. Nothing had happened. That, indeed, was unusual. Leta had been in one of her moods and had insisted I got out of the house for the day. Where else could I go, but to the office!

THURSDAY

The soft tone of an incoming call had made me sit up. A client? I spoke softly to the wall, 'Sound and vision.'

An image of an old lady shimmered into view. She had her eyes downcast and spoke with obvious embarrassment.

“Mr Engar, Beethoven's done it again.”

I leant forward casually, as I pressed the sequence that activated Beethoven's trace. “Really, Mrs Tamier! How careless of you.”

A small section of the screen darkened, as the trace searched through various data banks, until it finally located the beacon I had covertly planted in the Dat's collar last year.

This is always a problem with Dats. They'd been especially crossbred between a dog and a cat. The genetic scientists, in their wisdom and the desire to make extra money, developed this new type of pet for the home market. The publicity at the time was tremendous. 'The dog that walks itself.' 'The cat that wags its tail, to show it's pleased to see you.' Except it was more like the Dog that stays out all night and the cat that likes to do tricks. All very good, until you wanted the pet to come home to eat its dinner and sit on your lap. They still hadn't bred out of the creature the desire to lick the less savoury portions of its body.

“Do you think you can find Beethoven again, Mr Engar?”

The coyness was beginning to irritate me slightly. “Mrs Tamier, have I ever let you down?” The info panel was flashing a location for the Dat. I keyed in a local recovery agency and placed a high priority on the call.

The screen flashed its acceptance and the message 'On our way'. All this while the old dear was explaining how careful she was about keeping Beethoven confined to home.

I leaned forward again and said, "Mrs Tamier, all animals haveurges." She blushed. "It's all very natural. There are times when they wish to be with their own kind. Do you understand?" Her eyes came up to meet mine briefly. She gave an almost imperceptible nod.

I smiled gently, "How do you think other Dats are going to be born?" She looked down quickly.

She spoke so softly I had to ask her to repeat what she'd said. "Will I get him back, Mr Engar?"

I looked at the panel. The agency had collected the dog and was on their way to the old lady's home. I keyed in a request for an estimated time of arrival. The screen flashed five minutes.

I smiled at her and said, "He'll be with you in five minutes, Mrs. Tamier." The relief on her face was almost heart warming. I added, "I suggest you let him out more often. That way, he'll not stay away for so long on each....walkabout. Secondly, you'll not have to worry like this again." She nodded agreement. "Goodbye, Mrs Tamier."

"Goodbye, Mr Engar. And thank you, once again."

Her image faded and I keyed in my recovery fee, which was deducted from her account and added to mine. I watched the financial transaction on the screen. I wished all cases were as smooth as that.

I sat back and put my hands behind my head to relax. I always did that after a tough case. The screen chimed again. Busy, busy, busy!

I put on my professional, concerned look and said, "Sound and vision." The screen sparkled and Leta appeared, wearing her favourite face. The one with a frown. "Can we expect the master of the house home for dinner this evening?"

"What happened to 'hello darling'?" I quipped, to an unreceptive audience.

"Well, 'darling'. To start with, you must really increase your repertoire of facial expressions. And, 'darling'... it was not a sincere statement, can't we be a complete family for once? Even Jon's home this evening. Probably only for a quick feed, but nevertheless...."

I held up my hands as a gesture of defeat and smiled, "I'll be there. One or two things to clear up and then I'll be home, darling."

"You haven't had a case for weeks, Razz . It really shouldn't take you long to 'clear up'. One hour! Food will be on the table. One hour twenty, will see Jon out the door. End of family reunion. I'm sure you wouldn't want to disappoint them!" The screen blanked and automatically tuned to the news channel.

There were items on the next MultiGame and the latest exploits of Awake, the organisation appealing for more human rights. I must have sat for a long time, with my own thoughts. I let the sceneocasts flow over my head and switched channels randomly, seeing nothing of interest.

It was some movement that eventually caught my attention. I turned my head and SHE was there.

I was stunned. I'm normally a cool character, but this threw me. To start with, it was a secure building. How did she get past the security devices? Why hadn't my alarms gone off.....?

“Razz Engar?”

Her voice was soft and very low. So low, I had to say, “Pardon?”

“I'm looking for Razz Engar. Is that you?”

I studied her carefully so I could recall in detail later. She was very tall, almost my height of one-six metres. She was dressed in an evening cloak with the collar pulled around her face. Her eyes sparkled at me from above this self-imposed screen. Her hair was short, very dark and thin. I couldn't guess her age, but she wasn't very old. She moved her eyes from mine and turned away on a tour of inspection.

I stood and moved towards her. “I'm sorry madam, but we don't allow visitors in here without a.....”

“I've a job for you, that's very urgent.”

I smiled my most charming smile and said, “How can I help?” She ignored my proffered hand as she tried to walk around the room. It's a little small. I waved her to my one and only chair. She chose to ignore this gesture too.

I watched her look around. It doesn't take too long to take in everything in my office. It has four walls, one of which consists entirely of a WallScreen. A desk, which contains my customised terminal. My chair, which she ran her fingers over, as if to caress it. All my information is held in a secure data base, deep in the heart of my desk. There's a duplicate of the data base in my Aerocar and another in my home office.

I grinned and said, “You said it was urgent?”

She sighed and seemed to relax slightly, “You're promotional material says you find missing persons. People the police can't always find.” I nodded. “It's a very delicate matter, really. If I gave you a name, could you find the person?”

“Just a name? All things are possible with modern technology. What's the name?”

She paused and turned towards me. The collar seemed to sag a little, slightly revealing her face. I had a flash of high cheek bones, a pale complexion and a small scar under the left eye. With a casual, yet very quick movement, she pulled the collar to cover her face. Maybe she was embarrassed by the scar. Maybe.

“How would you go about it?” she asked quietly.

Seeing as she wasn't going to use the chair, I sat in it and adopted a very casual relaxed attitude. I touched a few controls and activated all the audio recording devices in the room. I stretched back in the chair and answered her question.

“I'm a licensed detective and have access to various government and private data banks. These information services can supply movement of traffic, down to the last detail. All Aerocar flights, take-offs and landings, are monitored by the Traffic Authority. Any time someone uses their credit ring, it's recorded somewhere. It's almost impossible to really hide in the city, with all this information available.”

I awaited her reaction. She stood and stared at me. I thought I'd better add some more. I sat upright and continued. “As you're probably aware, the crime rate has been falling for the past twenty years. Thanks to the efficiency of the police, use of technology, and the aftercare of criminals using high-tech rehabilitation

methods. These days, people only need people like me to investigate areas they don't want the police directly involved with."

I waved a hand at the screen on the wall. "Within seconds, I can have the information to hand. What was the name?"

"You have no qualms about this invasion of an individual's privacy? Nobody able to move in the city without somebody recording them, knowing where they are?"

"I've never really thought about it. If you're living an honest and moral life, why should the individual worry about who knows? However, those that aren't are the first to scream about privacy."

She held my stare and eventually said, "Janine Debarr."

I paused for a moment before saying, "Anything else for me to go on?" She shook her head. I tapped in the name. She turned to watch the screen and nodded.

Ten small areas darkened to represent the agency reports. "Ten people with that name have been recorded in this city." I tapped the desk controls, as casually as I could. Two panels blinked out. "Two are deceased."

I tapped the desk again. Six more panels disappeared. "Six are no longer in the city." I enhanced the information from the remaining two rectangles. The two blocks filled the screen with details of two Janine Debarrs. "Either of those the person you are looking for?" I sat back, to watch her be impressed.

She shook her head. "Just how good are you, Mr Engar?"

"Just a name to go on isn't very much. I've found the only two Debarrs in this city. Isn't that good enough?"

"So. You can't find her?" I opened my mouth with a dazzling answer, but she continued. "With all this electronic help. You can't find the person standing in front of you."

I stood and held out my hand, "We haven't been formally introduced, Janine. Please call me Razz ." She turned her back on me. I waited for a few seconds and sat down again.

"I understood you to be the best in the city, Mr Engar." I had an uneasy feeling creep into me. I was being toyed with. It's very rare that people did personal visits these days. Unless it was for a physical reason. Physical!

I'd allowed my natural caution to drop. Because she was a woman? I tried to lean forward casually and touch the controls that put the office on to red alert. I leant back and began to reach into the waistband of my one piece suit. She turned then, so I changed the movement to resting my thumb in the belt. I could feel the hard edge of the small pocket gun. I felt a little more in control at that point.

It's long been one of my fantasies that all private investigators carried a gun for protection. I have to admit, that I've never had to use a weapon to protect myself. But right then, I knew it'd been a wise precaution to carry the tiny pocket weapon. I'd practised for hours in front of a mirror. I could flip the little Zot 30 into my hand within the blink of an eye. I've never fired it, other than on the range when I bought it. I assumed it was still charged. The Zot 30 wouldn't kill anyone, just slow them down a while. Under my seat was a much bigger gun, a Burn-matic. That's big enough to take out most of the office itself.

She spoke again, slightly louder this time. "Of course you're now the ONLY agency in the city." I leaned forward and winced as the Zot pressed into my rib cage. I leant back again quickly.

I dropped my smile slowly and said carefully, "What, exactly, do you want, Ms Debarr?" She took a deep breath and sighed before turning away again. The Zot dropped gently into my hand and I took comfort in its availability. I saw her shoulders move, then move again. I felt a great weight in my stomach. Not tears! I just can't handle female tears. I slipped the Zot back into place and crossed over to her.

I held her gently by the shoulder and said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...." I found myself looking down the end of a barrel. It looked like a Super K. A very well used, Super K. My eyes were riveted to the pitted gun nozzle.

For years I'd imagined myself facing a potentially lethal assailant. A few deft hand movements and I'd disarm the villain. So much for fantasies. I couldn't move. Eventually I started to back away towards my desk.

"It's Miss Debarr." Her voice had gained an authoritative edge. In fact, it had changed a great deal. I was trying to analyse what it was about the accent, when she spoke again. "What I want, Mr Private Investigator, is for you to find a missing person."

"Call me Razz , all my friends do."

"A very simple task. Here I am. In a few minutes I'll be missing. You know my name and where to start looking. I'll pay double your normal fee if you succeed. If you fail....I will exact a forfeit. What more incentive could you possibly need?"

"Your phone number and address?" The gun was pushed into my nose. I can tell you it hurts. I'd such a close up view that I didn't see her other hand come towards me. I heard the hissing noise, saw the mist and felt the sting. The room rotated around me as I hit the floor. I was wide awake, but paralysed. I briefly saw the red canister and recognised its brand name, Para-nox. Nerve gassed, in my own office!

To add to the indignity, I felt myself being dragged along the floor. She propped me up against a wall. I could hear heavy breathing from the effort. I'm solid muscle, in parts. I must have been difficult to move, being a dead weight. I sat facing directly at my own chair. I could see the gun taped underneath the seat. I couldn't blink, or close my eyes.

She was somewhere to the side of me, just out of my sight. "Now, let's see, Mr Engar."

"Call me Razz ," I said, but no sound came out.

"Let's see how good you really are. My name's Janine Debarr. You have two days to locate me."

I tried to say, "What about my fee?" but couldn't speak.

"You may need a little more incentive. Let me see.....". She briefly came into my line of sight, but I couldn't follow her with my eyes. I could only stare straight ahead.

My eyes were starting to water at this point and I tried very hard to blink. There was a bright flash followed instantly by a loud crash. My desk erupted into flame and my chair slid across the floor, to crash into the opposite wall. She fired again.

After three shots, she'd reduced my office to rubble and my desk to a molten slag. The Super K melted everything, setting the fire alarms ringing. Smoke belched from inside the desk. Sparks bit into plastic and the smoke drifted into my streaming eyes. I couldn't see any more.

The noise from the sparks and flames was drowned out by the fire alarms. I could just make out her departing words, as the room filled with smoke. "Two days, Mr Private Investigator."

“Call me Razz .” I choked, but still no sound came out. I could hardly breathe. The smoke filled the room so I couldn't see. I knew I was going to die. The sprinklers began to pour water, but I still couldn't feel a thing. I felt consciousness slip away from me and was about to be engulfed by the ultimate darkness, when I felt hands under my arms. I was being dragged out of the room. She'd taken pity on me, at last. A huge explosion followed me out of the door. Complete with flames and smoke. I felt myself slip away, yet somehow knew I wasn't going to die that day.

When I awoke, I found I was lying in the corridor, looking up at the ceiling through diminishing tears. It was very painful. My eyes and chest hurt, along with every muscle and tissue in my body. I made a mental note to complain to Para-nox. I coughed. I was getting some movement again. I blinked once, and then twice. Into my line of sight swam a face. A man. My vision cleared to reveal a young man's face.

“Jon?” I said.

“Dad!” He said.

Jon's a handsome young man, very much like his dad. I wanted the business to be called Engar and Son, but he'd no interest at all in the profession. As he puts it, “Who needs investigators these days? We've efficient police departments.”

“What're you doing here?” I managed to croak.

“Mum asked me to call in on the way home. Well, she sent me, actually, to make sure you weren't late.”

“Just as well she did.”

“What happened, Dad?” he said, as he helped me struggle to my feet. Another complaint to Para-nox. You cannot stand for at least an hour, after the gas wears off. It's supposed to be very temporary and painless. Forget the complaint, I think, I'll sue them.

“I wish I knew, Jon. Never trust a woman.” He looked at me quizzically, so I added, “It's all right. I can tell your mother the whole story.” He smiled. A lovely smile, just like his dad.

“I'll get you to the hospital right away, dad.”

“No,” I said, trying to restrain him with my hand and missing. “Just get me home. Your mother will kill me if I'm late.”

With a great heave, he half lifted and half-dragged me to the elevator. Despite his muscular frame and youthful strength, Jon was struggling to support my weight. We struggled together to get up on to the Roofpark. He opened the Aerocar and I almost fell into the seat. I felt dizzy and weak. He climbed in after me.

I mumbled “Home.” The car responded. The doors sealed. All the panel lights came on and the screen lit up. A map of SeaCity glowed in green and the flashing white spot showed our current location. A red dot showed our intended destination and a blue dotted line joined them both. I muttered “Confirmed” and the car lifted off the platform and into the air. I felt really ill and vowed to complain to Para-nox, as soon as I could speak properly. I must've passed out about then.

Just relating this episode, makes me feel exhausted. I'll have to take a natural break here.

Break

The Aero hummed around me and I felt safe. Jon was asleep on the back couch and I was shaking off the effects of the gas, the shock of the attack, and the total embarrassment of the experience.

I felt very uncomfortable in the wet clothes. I eased them off and threw them in a ball on the floor. I reached behind and took out another suit, from the small compartment. I struggled into it and immediately felt much better. I sent off a brief report of the 'accident' in my office to the insurance company. Also, a copy to the local police. And a letter of complaint to Para-nox.

On the screen the white flashing dot was nearly at the red destination. The other screens were blank. I didn't want to see the ground moving beneath us, so I kept the windows blanked. I looked at my reflection in the blackened glass of the Aero 's window and tried to understand what had happened.

I checked every taxi and private vehicle to land on my office building that had a single female on board. All checked out to be someone else of a different build, colour, or age.

I ran the earlier checks again. Negative at every attempt, except the two I'd found earlier. Both ladies were in their seventies and couldn't be the woman in my office. Debarr had really disappeared. If she'd ever really existed.

I ran checks for birth, marriage, adoption, licences, home and vehicle purchases, and finally women's clothes shops. I then checked as many anagrams on the name and did the same checks all over again.

"What're you doing, Dad?" came from Jon, over my shoulder.

"I've got a difficult missing person case to solve, son."

"Real work?" I gave him a withering look. "Anything to do with the state of the office?" he added. I nodded. "The woman you mentioned?" I nodded again.

I turned to him. "You must've come into the office seconds after she left. Did you see her?"

"Probably."

"Probably! What sort of an answer is that? Did you see a woman in a hurry, moving away from my office, with a long evening robe on?"

After a few seconds' thought he said, "Yes. I think so."

I twisted round in my seat and said, "Well? Can you describe her? It's important."

He shrugged. "There were several women running away from your office. Men too. It was a major fire alert, Dad. I could see smoke coming out of your door. I wasn't really taking any notice of who was coming out, or going past. Or anything. I was concerned for you."

I patted his arm and said, "Of course you were, son. I do appreciate it." I couldn't easily trace any single person leaving the building, among the hundreds all panicking to get out, at exactly the same time. Very clever.

"Who's, Janine Debarr?"

I turned to look quickly at him. The Zot ground into my lower ribs and I pulled it out and threw it on to the floor, kicking it under my pilot's seat with my foot. "You do know her?" I said excitedly.

He shook his head, "I can read the name on your screen there. It does sound familiar though."

I sank back in the seat. "I've two days to find her, Jon. And I don't have a clue where to go from here."

A soft tone sounded and the corner of the main screen lit up. "Sound and vision." I said wearily.

The screen portion cleared to show my eldest daughter, Rachael. "Hi, daddy. Mum asked me to call you..."

I said, "Yes, I'm on my way." I took a quick look at the data on the nav screen and added, "About ten minutes."

She squinted at the screen, "Are you okay, daddy?"

"I'm all right. I've had a bit of an accident..."

Jon leaned over and shouted at the screen. "Dad was nearly blown up. His office is destroyed. A woman tried to kill him..."

I pushed him back. "He's over dramatising the incident."

"Daddy!"

"It's all right Rachael. We'll be there in a few minutes and we're both all right. Screen off." The screen blanked.

I clicked on some cheerful music and let it fill the cabin. I turned to Jon and said, "Let me tell your mother. Understand?" He just nodded. I just know he didn't understand. But then, he didn't really understand his mother. Did anybody?

Seconds later, the screen lit up with an over-ride priority and Leta's face glared at me. She was as beautiful that day as when we married. Her long face with those beautiful full lips that rarely smiled, was framed by the bright yellow hair colouring of the day. Her eyes were almost almond shaped and bright green.

"What's this about a woman trying to seduce you?"

"Not seduce, dear. Kill. She tried to kill me. Well, not really. It was an incentive to get me on her case. It's all so....I'll explain when I'm home. Don't worry, we're all right."

"I can see Jon there, behind you. Have you finally dragged him into your grubby business?"

I shook my head and started to explain, "He saved me from the fire....."

"You'd better explain when you get home." The screen went blank.

"Goodbye, darling." I said to the dead screen, and turned the music up to full. That hurt my ears, so I turned it off and sulked until we landed. I was not looking forward to facing the lovely Leta.

Break

The Aerocar touched down on the landing pad. Automatic and gentle. Leta stood in the doorway, arms crossed and a fixed stare. I eased myself out of the door and hobbled towards her. To help gain sympathy, Jon gave support to my arm.

I stood before my lord and master and waited. She uncrossed her arms and gave me a light kiss on the cheek. I was dumbfounded. She turned and walked indoors saying, "I'm pleased to see you're safe."

I followed slowly inside as she beckoned me into the master bathroom. The vibro-bath was full of steaming water, giving off a perfumed aroma. "Get in. You look as if you need it." She smiled briefly and began to help me out of my clothes.

Moments later the water was swirling around my body, easing the stressed muscles. Leta appeared briefly, to rest a large drink by the side of the bath. It would've been helpful if she could've placed it within my reach. However, beggars can't be choosers. All was going well. I was waiting for the hammer to fall.

Dinner was a very tense affair. For once Jon seemed keen to sit with us after he'd finished his own meal. Sweet Rachael kept asking what the problem was.

With modern food, preparation was minimal. Anyone could provide a banquet, or a simple healthy meal. Just by reading the instructions on the packets. Leta had made an effort to make the meal appear more appetising. Presentation is a major part of the enjoyment of a meal. Ask any restaurateur. Leta had prepared an excellent table.

We're a simple family, with simple tastes and would normally settle for whatever comes out of the dispenser. That evening, we had a first course of fish. This was served with delicate sea vegetables. Although the synthetic foods these days look and taste like the real thing, this fish WAS the real thing.

The main course was a medallion of meat, although I dared not ask what animal it had come from. The accompaniment was a different variety of sea vegetables, crisp and fresh. For dessert we had a refreshing sorbet cocktail, the kids adding their favourite toppings. We managed to consume a carton of wine between Leta and me. By the end of the meal I was beginning to feel quite relaxed.

After a long silence Leta rested her chin on her hands and said, "Well, you'd better tell us all about it."

I sat back and looked around at my adoring family and told them the events as they happened. I explained how much of a hero I was to have survived the wrath of Debarr. Jon wanted to hear again how much of a hero he was, in saving me from almost certain death. I watched the excitement in his eyes. Leta saw it too, but her reaction was to be different to mine.

"What happens next?" asked Leta, standing.

"I have to find this Debarr lady, and collect my fee."

Jon grinned and said, "I'll give you a hand."

I remember thinking, "At last. Engar and Son."

Leta leaned on the table and said, "Jon! You'll have nothing to do with this seedy business. As for you, Razzpack it in. The whole business. Now!" She turned and left the room.

Jon looked disappointed. I shrugged and said, "She's only concerned for our safety." I could tell from the look on his face, that he didn't believe that either.

Break

A short while later I was in my home office, which I call The Sanctuary. In fact, it's just my own room in the house, but it's open only to me. No-one is allowed inside. I sit and think, solve cases, find the criminals and can be creative. I sleep there a lot, too.

It must have been quite late and I was wired into the music, when I felt a soft touch on my arm. Rachael stood smiling down at me. I sat up and removed the sensor pad from behind my ear.

“Now, you know you're not allowed in Daddy's room, don't you?”

She nodded with downcast eyes and said, “Mummy's gone to her bedroom and shut the door and I still have homework to do.”

I lifted her on to my lap and took the small disc from her tiny fingers. I slipped it into the recess of my wall unit and said, “On.”

The screen glowed and searched for information. The screen filled with four panels, each with a different subject. Three had the word 'Complete' written across them. 'History' had still to be done.

“When's this to be finished by, Rachael?”

“Tomorrow, daddy. She's coming tomorrow morning.”

I nodded and settled her down on my lap, resting my back against the lounge support. I slipped a receptor pad on her head and said, “Run.”

Rachael watched the Sceneo compilation and listened to the voice-over, as the last ten years of local history was encapsulated into ten minutes. It's amazing how quickly you can forget momentous events. How near they seemed, yet it happened long ago.

The first segment showed the opening of SeaCity. The long shot showed the dot on the horizon from the coast. The sea rushed past the rapidly moving camera to show the circular city, rising above the waves. Home to twelve million people, the self-contained city was the seventh of its type in the world. Since its construction, three more had been built.

People had been brought from all over the European continent to be re-housed in SeaCity. Its cosmopolitan nature had provided its first problems, but had given it its unique character. Air traffic was dense above the city, Aerocars flitting between buildings. In the higher traffic lanes flew the larger shuttle craft, bridging the land and the floating island city. Moving diagrams showed the tunnel systems connecting the floating island to the land and began a run down of the building problems. It began with the use of the large antigravity generator, at the heart of the structure. I could see Rachael losing interest so I said, “Forward.”

The next section covered population control so I said, “Play.” The city was under complete control of the City Police. Monitors were everywhere. Any movement that any individual made was recorded and held in databanks. I was one of the few licensed to access these files.

Crime was being held to a very low level. The perpetrators were now only people that could not help themselves. Despite the fact they knew they were going to get caught, they went ahead and committed the crime anyway. Special therapy and minor operations were performed on these unfortunates. They were then released back into society. The last secure prison closed over two years ago.

Some people rated a special dispensation from being monitored. If you were important enough, or wealthy enough, your home could be shielded. You could travel unnoticed and live a private life. I had nothing to hide, so this didn't interest me. The only crime left was the personal type. Infidelity, petty theft, corporate misdemeanours. That's where I came in. I thought to stop the programme and explain that to Rachael, but her eyes were glazed as the receptor fed the information straight into her memory.

Economic history came next and I let my attention wander a little. I was vaguely aware that the item covered the era of robotic replacement for the unskilled. There'd been a rapid technical revolution, when all labour intensive work was replaced by technology. The Sceneo covered this briefly. Finally, the point was made where everyone in SeaCity had a right to a basic home, their own transport, personal and family entertainment, clothing and adequate food supply. No one went hungry and no one actually lived in poverty anymore.

The next section was environment control. This briefly covered the tremendous strides in restoring the planet to its proper balance. Images of violent storms and desert areas filled the screen, where once was tundra. Images of people going hungry because of crop failures, flashed before our eyes. The skies boiled into space as the special effects graphics had a field day. Slowly the ozone layer rebuilt itself, with help from technology. The seas became clean. The air breathable again.

Because of the cosseted nature of the new population of these new cities, individuals were encouraged to contribute their time and efforts to the common cause. Community hours were converted to credits and extra luxuries could be awarded. Leta put a great deal of time into the theatre. Live performances were coming back into fashion. She was very good, too.

An extra income option, open to everyone, is The Grid. Once wired into that, it stimulated and withdrew psychic energy. I don't understand the technical side of this, but apparently this energy is stored in The Grid. The donor apparently feels tired for a few hours, but soon recovers. The stored energy is then used for various purposes, one of which is to help with the therapy of the troubled. This provided an environment where nobody needs feel stress, frustration, or anger. Those that didn't want to have their mind tampered with could substitute pills for The Grid. I was certainly one of those. I, however, am the main bread winner. As was my father before me. Leta earns her credits, though we don't need the extra income.

The homework section was finishing. I felt a movement behind me and turned to see Jon and Jason standing in the doorway.

"Just wanted to say we're glad you're OK, Dad," said Jason.

I smiled, "Thanks to Jon."

Jon stepped forward and held his arms out for Rachel, who was now asleep. I eased the receptors of her head and lifted her to Jon.

"Goodnight, dad."

"Goodnight, boys. Sleep well."

I heard the door sigh shut. So much for Sanctuary.

I lay back and closed my eyes. I'd no idea what the time was. I felt tired and sore. It'd been an exhausting day. I heard a light tap at the door and I pressed the open stud. Leta stood beside me. She'd changed into a one piece suit.

“Going out?” I asked.

She nodded and sat on the arm of the recliner. “I just wanted to say I'm sorry for how I behaved earlier. I was worried. About you. And about Jon. I really do think you should give up the business. We don't need it....”

I held my hands up and stopped her. “Let's discuss this when we're less tired. Let's get over today first. Okay?”

She managed a half smile and nodded. She stood and moved to the door. “The boys are coming with me to the theatre. We shan't be late. Just a rehearsal. Rachel's in bed with the auto minder on. I've set it to call you in here. Get some rest. You've earned it. Night.” She was gone.

I settled back for sleep, letting my thoughts drift. A slow insistent sound woke me sometime later. My eyes snapped open, thinking it was the child minder. The screen in front of me was pulsing with a message 'Incoming call. Visual withheld'. “Accept,” I said.

There was a moment's pause before she said, “Any progress, Mr Engar?” I sat forward and hit the record controls.

“Not yet, Miss Debarr.” I set the trace system into operation and watched the side of the screen as it flicked up all the exchanges the call had been bounced through. “You really haven't given me enough information, have you?”

“Enough to find me, I think.”

“It was a little unfair to wreck my office. I've been recovering since. That was an unfair handicap.”

The trace was bouncing all around the City. At one point it was beamed through to ten geostationary satellites and back to earth again. It would only take a few more seconds to pinpoint her location. If I could keep her talking long enough.....

“You really must try harder.”

The 'End call' sign flashed. I thumped the consol in frustration.

Break

I looked in to see Rachael, a while later. Kids are always at their best when asleep. No-one could possibly harm a sleeping child. I tucked her in and her eyes opened.

“You won't be cross at Mummy, will you. Not like she's cross at you.”

“No, of course not.”

She smiled and was asleep again in seconds.

I moved back to the Sanctuary and settled into my recliner. I lit the screen and opened all channels. I ran enquiry requests to all major agencies worldwide, all the worlds' police forces and all international data bank services. I put out a call for information on Janine Debarr, required urgently. I sat back and waited for a response. Some time later, I must have drifted into sleep.

FRIDAY

The alarm woke me, some time the following morning. I eased out of the recliner and looked with blurred eyes at the screen. Incoming call. "Accept," I said in a muffled tone. I stretched and stopped mid-yawn.

"Good morning, Mr Engar. Good night's sleep?"

I fell back in the recliner and let my hand hit the record and trace buttons, as casually as I could. "Ms Debarr. How nice of you to call." She was wearing some sort of hat with a veil. I could partly make out her features, but they were very indistinct.

The top right corner of the screen darkened, showing me the progress of the trace on the call. "What can I do for you?"

She said, "How about breakfast. At Dino's, South Side, Rocky Street. Thirty minutes. I'll be there." The image faded. The trace panel flashed 'incomplete'.

I said, "Off." The screen blanked.

I reran the Sceneo and enhanced as much as possible. I couldn't see anything new. If only I'd looked closer.

I walked from the sanctuary into the ablute and stood while I was electro-statically cleaned. I stepped from the cubicle, feeling refreshed. My clothes felt and smelt new again. I looked in on our bedroom. The bed was rumpled, but empty. I moved through to the lounge area and saw Leta asleep on the couch. I turned to leave.

"Where are you going?"

"Morning, darling. Just out."

Leta sat up and said, "I couldn't sleep. I was worried. You could've been hurt yesterday. Even killed!"

I shrugged and said, "But I wasn't. It's okay, Leta." I went and sat on the edge of the couch. She reached for my hand. We sat and looked at each other for a moment.

"Give it up. Now. We don't need all this...." I stopped her by touching her lips with mine. Just briefly.

"I need it, Leta. It's something I have to do. Dad started it all, I feel it's my duty to carry on the tradition." I could see we were about to get into the same old argument. Then next thing she was going to say was 'It's a dead business. No-one needs PIs anymore. Your father started the business before SeaCity. My father's wealthy. He can easily support us. Why work when you don't have to. Think of the kids!' I would then say something that equated to 'a man's got to do, what a man's got to do'. Instead, Leta stood up and walked wordless from the room. I left while I could.

I stood on my rooftop and pulled on my special suit. I call it the Battledress, because that's what it is. It's completely armoured and wired directly to my Aero's database. The slim helmet is optional but has infra-red viewing capabilities, thermal and scanning tools. It has a built-in antigravity unit, which unfortunately doesn't work every time. Once I was suited up, I told the Aero the destination and I was off, flying above the city. I checked the results of my international searches of the night before. Negative.

In a moment of rashness I depaqueted the windows and looked down on the city. My heart rate accelerated and I began to sweat. I can't stand open spaces, especially from great heights. I forced myself to look at the thing

that I fear. It sharpens the reflexes when going into a potentially dangerous situation. If you can face fear at the beginning, then all following actions tend not to seem quite as daunting.

Despite the fact I hated the thought of all that space around me, SeaCity was beautiful from the air. It was roughly circular and from this height, I could see its borders in the distance. The city centre contained the high rise buildings, each lit in a multitude of coloured lights. Morning had almost broken and I was looking out on that half light that could be night, or day. Sea mist was creeping in from the south and the city was probably adjusting its height above the water to compensate for it.

The lights of other aeros could be seen all around. Going about their business, within the lower traffic levels. My licence allowed me to travel above them and reasonably unhindered. Above me would be the larger commercial craft, public transports, the intercity's and the shuttles, criss-crossing the city. I'd seen as much as I could stand. I opaqued the windows.

A soft siren sounded and I looked at the tell-tale flashing above my head. An electrical unit was overheating. I pressed the auto-fix and waited until the sound and light died. The Aero was long overdue for a service. In the centre of the screen the minutes counted down to the destination. I felt the craft begin its descent.

I let the Aero land on automatic and waited as the gyros wound down and silence descended. I activated the screen and looked at my surroundings. The car park of 'Dinos' was uninspiring. I was surprised the restaurant was going to be open this early. As I looked through the eyes of the cameras, I realised that it was not. The place was empty. I was the only Aerocar in the park. I called the restaurant and received the standard response recording. I left a request for a call-back.

This was beginning to look like more deception from Debarr. I set the monitors to respond to any outside movement and settled back in the recliner to wait.

Break

I can't remember what I was thinking, or listening to, when a call came in. Audio only.

"Aaron Aardvark Agency," I said as calmly as I could.

"Mr Engar?" It was a man's voice, maybe mid-thirties. I pressed record/trace.

"Yes. How can I help you?"

"Well, it's a rather delicate matter, really."

"They usually are. My speciality, in fact. Tell me more."

There was a moment's hesitation before he continued. I watched the voice analyser as it produced the line graph of the voice print. The man was undoubtedly nervous.

"Well, I need to find out someintimate details about somebody. I understand that you've handled this sort of thing before?"

"Certainly. May I ask how you came by my name?"

"Oh, yes, Jonathan Miles suggested I contact you. I understand you are discreet?"

"Discreet's my middle name. How can I help you? What's the name of the person you wish to have investigated?"

"It's Bryan Peters. Here are his details." A panel appeared with the information on Peters. I pressed a series of standard traces and databank surveys and waited for the responses.

"What do you need to know about Peters, Mr?"

"Oh, my name's Moore. David Moore. Well, I don't know. Anything you can tell me. I suppose I need to know if he's doing anything dishonest. This will be privileged information, won't it?"

"Of course, Mr Moore. I'm sending you my fees and terms of agreement. I touched the panel that sent the information to his Pan-Media screen and looked at my search results and smiled.

"Well, Mr Moore. I can see from our initial research that Mr Peters is a man of habit. There are twenty places he's visited on a regular basis, during this last month. Apart from work, home, restaurants and relations.....it seems he's visited the residence of a Miss York. Ten times. I'm running details on her now; it appears.....she's his mistress. At least, his bank statements and credit facilities show he's paid for many items that have ended up at her residence. It also seems that he part owns that home too. I can't find any connection that suggests she's a relative, or family friend. The records have searched both those paths."

"I'm impressed, Mr Engar."

"Call me Razz , all my friends do. Is that the sort of thing you wanted to know?"

"Yes, it's a start. Can I have the lady's address and details, please."

"They're on their way to your screen now, along with my invoice that will be processed within the next minute. If you're satisfied with the service, of course?"

"Yes indeed. Thank you." The screen went blank. I sat and thought for a while. This had been about the fourth investigation of that type in the last few weeks. There might be no connection between them. I pushed it to the back of my mind. It could wait until the end of this Debarr caper.

Sometime later, the restaurant called me back. They had a message for me, but I had to collect it by hand. I swallowed an up-and-at-em pill and felt the buzz of adrenalin. I made a dash for the restaurant door, trying not to notice the open space.

The manager was still in his day clothes and was just preparing the restaurant for lunchtime opening. He kept looking at my attire as I read the handwritten note. "If you find Walter Spencer, you may find me." I tapped my wrist communicator and started the trace for Spencer. I made a return dash for the Aero, after thanking the manager.

I sat in the Aero and looked at the vast amount of detail on Walter Spencer. Spencer's claim to fame was that he was the producer of MultiGame®. The most successful international gameshow ever. He manages to keep a low profile with the media, while producing this all time record-breaking show. I ran a data search on a variety of areas including medical, criminal, bank accounts, savings, licences, employee records, investments, hobbies, family accounts, mortgages, vehicle details, vacations, purchases, eating habits, etc.

Two things stood out above all else. His expenditure was higher than his salary. There were no references to Janine Debarr. I had his address and little else to go on, so the Aero lifted and headed for the posh part of the city.

Break

I was trying to come down from the up-an-at-ems by listening to music. I have a comprehensive selection of recordings to suit every mood. The 360 degree sound was interrupted by a soft tone. The screen flashed, showing an incoming call. I said, "Accept."

Janine's face filled the screen. Still covered by her veil. "Good morning again, Ms. Debarr."

"Call me Janine, all my friends do."

"You have friends?"

"I assume you have my note?"

"Yes."

"And you're on the way to Walter's home?"

"Yes."

"Well I'm not there."

"I know."

Her head moved slightly. I assumed it was in surprise. I didn't know, but I needed to throw her off guard. I needed more time to trace the call.

"I know exactly where you are and I'm on my way."

"Where do you think I am?"

There are times when a hunch pays off. Times when an inspirational thought can turn around a whole case and produce incredible results. This was not one of them. What could I say?

"See you later...Janine. Oh, by the way. Neat handwriting. Write it yourself?" The screen was already blank. I replayed her voice graph and noted with interest her reaction when I said I knew where she was. I tapped in an AfterCall code I use on the odd occasion and saw an echo shown on the screen. Someone else was listening in. A few more taps on the control panel and I had all the craft on the same course and similar height to myself. There were two.

One of the craft was screened against observation and not monitored by the Traffic Authority. Only rich or famous people could afford that privilege. After a few minutes, one turned off and landed. That left the screened one, who could still be following me. A warning flashed in the centre of the screen, "Maintenance alert. Refer to Section S-33A, Operations Manual." I switched off the audio chime and blanked the screen. "Not now, I'm busy."

I asked for the local map to be displayed and chose the tallest public building in the area. "Land on the Wilson Centre." The Aero flashed confirmation and banked to the left. After a moment I felt the gentle bump and waited.

The screen showed the trailing craft was circling above the Wilson Centre. I left the Aero door hanging wide open, while I slowly got out, taking my time to walk to the nearest lift block on the roof. I didn't look up, but my wrist monitor showed the craft begin its descent. The picture came from the automatic cameras on the Aero, following their moving target precisely.

The lift doors slid open and I stepped inside. I waited for as long as I could before closing them. I looked at the floor level and spoke aloud the number of the floor below. The lift moved and stopped at the next floor. When the doors slid open I pressed for the ground floor and stepped out. I pressed the call buttons on all the other lifts. Even before the doors had closed, I was running for the stairwell and back to the roof.

Slowly I slid the access door back and saw the other Aero parked on the roof. A figure stood at the lift block. Waiting for the lifts, I had just delayed.

It was my son, Jon.

Break

I watched as the Aero Jon had borrowed from my father-in-law powered into the clouds and disappeared from view. I was angry. I was angry with Leta, sending a boy on a man's mission. I couldn't vent my feelings on Jon, it wasn't his fault. I love Leta dearly, but she was going too far. My wrist unit chirruped.

Debarr focused on the small screen. I pressed record and trace. She still wore the veil, disguising her face. I was still angry with Leta and was not about to take any prak from a client I didn't want.

"Where are you, Engar?"

"On my way, Ms Debarr. I'll be with you in a while."

"I can't wait." The screen went dead.

I realised that I was standing in the open and hurried back to the safety of the Aero. I rested until I'd got my breath back. I'd nothing better to do than carry on to the home of Walter Spencer. After all, Debarr may be there, just trying to throw me off the scent.

My screen lit with another incoming call, audio only. I answered. It was a man's voice. He wanted company information on Miss U Tissues. I tapped into the databank of company accounts and watched as the information flashed across the screen. Their last few months had shown a doubling of sales on each consecutive month. I wish I had shares, but my ethics wouldn't allow me.

I triggered the transfer of my fee and found the account in the name of Rich Burr ridge. I thanked him for his enquiry and watched as the money transfer was confirmed. I then sent the information straight to his screen. He quickly thanked me, then blanked.

Another strange search. There didn't appear any connection with the rest. I was becoming confused. After all, I'd had a bad physical and emotional experience the night before, a bad night's sleep and had been chasing all over the city since the early hours of the morning. I had a right to be confused.

On occasions like this, there was only one thing to do. I changed the course of the Aero. I had to go and have a talk with Dad.

The Showcase was set in beautiful grounds, which I've never had a chance to really look at. I'm told they're stunning and Dad would have been pleased. So he should be, he selected the area. The aeropark was quite small and sat on top of the Showcase itself. I stepped out of the Aero and straight into the entrance way. I pressed my ID ring against the receptor and the door slid open. Lights came on in the reception area and I sealed the door behind me.

The reception was circular and had twenty seats set around the circumference. I chose my favourite seat and tapped my personal code into the armrest consol. The lights dimmed and a screen dropped from the ceiling. A holographic image of my dead father was displayed in the centre of the room. I felt, if I reached out, I could really touch him.

The image moved and smiled at me. "Razz. Good of you to visit."

I nodded, knowing he couldn't see me and the pre-recorded conversations were made many years previous. Still, it was the next best thing to him still being alive.

I told him all my problems and frustrations. Details of the case and what was going on at home. He listened until there was a suitable break in my conversation. He smiled and said, "Look after Leta for me. I love you both. Take care." He faded from my view as gently as he had lived. The screen returned to its slot in the ceiling and the lights came up.

I moved to the only other door in the room and pressed my ring against it. I entered the code and went into the inner sanctum. I pressed my palm to the receptor pad and my eye to the screen. The screen glowed into life with the message, 'Welcome, Razz Engar.'

I tapped in a few of the old access codes dad used to use and quickly got into his personal files. It took a few minutes to find what I was looking for. Over the many years he was operating the detective agency, Dad had built up a definitive database on crime and criminals. All his cases were there. How he solved them, what to look for and what not to do. Many of these cases were solved using laws that were now outdated. But within that database, could be the answer to my current predicament. If I could only find it.

I was there for several hours and finally came to the conclusion that I was being set up for something. Debarr was not real. I was being led around by the nose. At some point I would reach a destination and perform as she wanted. All I could do was follow her lead and try to react correctly when the moment came.

I didn't know what to expect from my visit to the Showcase, but I always left feeling I'd done something worthwhile. My father's memory was not forgotten. His purpose-built shrine used for the purpose it was intended.

I sat for a long while in the Aero, just thinking. I left the screen on automatic, randomly flicking through the 218 channels. At one point I was watching a nature programme and said, "Stay on channel." I watched with interest the programme about the life cycle of a spider. The camera was as if seen through a spider's view point. I couldn't decide whether the film was faked, or whether they'd made a camera that small.

The spider spent most of its time waiting for its food to come to it. It rarely chased after its prey. I smiled. That's just what I needed to do. I'll wait for Debarr to make the next few moves. I'll stall her as much as possible, transfer the frustration to her. Let her make the mistakes. Give her the run-around.

I instructed the screen to accept no incoming calls unless monitored. I wanted to know when she next called so I could refuse the call. I asked for a selection of my favourite relaxing music interludes and settled down to wait.

Break

I was asleep with the music gently playing at reduced level, commensurate with my heart rate. The screen chimed softly, 'Incoming message. Rich Burr ridge.'

I said, "Tell caller to hold for one moment." I quickly replayed the last conversation with Burr ridge. I remembered his interest in Miss U Tissues. What did he want now? "Accept call."

The screen brightened and the notice 'Audio only' appeared. "Good of you to call again, Mr Burridge. What can I do for you?"

"I'd like you to get some....particular information on a Leslie Barron. I'll send you the details. He will be depositing some money in a Swiss account shortly. I need to know the amount and account number. That sort of thing."

"Please send what you have now, Mr Burridge." The screen filled with details. I started the traces and enquiries and sat back in the recliner.

"Anything particular you expect from this search, Mr Burridge?"

"I'm not sure. I need to know the details of this particular transaction. Can you get this information? The Swiss banks are notorious for their secrecy."

I looked at the incoming data and it was showing negative, at every turn. I said, "Looks like we may have a problem here. I'm not going to get inside the bank's security. However, I could try a more direct approach with Mr Barron himself." I tapped a few keys and made a connection to the airport.

I heard a sharp intake of breath from the screen speakers. "I don't want Barron alerted that there's anyone on to him. He mustn't know."

"It's all right. I'm very discreet at covert operations in the field. He won't know anyone's watching him. I see that he's booked on a flight out from SeaCity North in an hour. I've just had confirmation I'm now booked on the same flight to Zurich. I can get into the airline database and swap seats around and get to sit next to him. I'll play it by ear from then on."

"If you're sure...."

"My fee will be adjusted accordingly. I'm sending you now my current rates per hour, plus anticipated expenses. I hope they'll be acceptable." As I waited for his response, I checked Barron's hotel reservations and booked myself in, on a different floor. I didn't want to be too coincidental, which might alert him.

"I accept your charges, Mr Engar. But please, be careful. It's very important he doesn't know...."

"I'll be extra careful. I've your number and I'll call you from the hotel. Relax. Razz Engar is on the case." I faded the call. "Airport. Priority route."

The Aero lifted and picked up speed rapidly, while I put a call to Jerry Jones and put him on standby for another caper. I made my next call.

Leta came on screen and tried to smile as I said, "I'm very angry with you, Leta."

She smiled her most disarming smile and sat forward with a pouting kiss. "Sorry. I had to be sure you were going to be safe. Jon said you were mad. Where are you now?"

I smiled, "That doesn't matter. It's where I'm going to be. I've another case. I'm going to Switzerland, just overnight. I'll be back tomorrow. I'm sending you the details now." I tapped a key. The hotel and flight information scrolled down the screen as it was sending it to my home.

"What sort of case?"

"Recognition. Nothing threatening. Honest."

She turned the corners of her mouth down and said, "It'd better not be risky. Call me when you get there. Be careful." She smiled again.

"I will," I said quietly.

As her image faded, she mimed the words, "I love you."

The inside of an intercontinental shuttle is always crowded. I swear they make them smaller and smaller. Although the flight was not full, it had no leg room, or space to walk properly. Fortunately the flight was only going to be an hour or so. I was late getting on the shuttle and managed to sit and strap myself in before the antigav unit kicked in and the craft shot into the atmosphere.

I liked the feeling of weightlessness. The man next to me looked ill. I smiled and said, "Are you all right?"

He tried to nod, but ended up shaking his head. "Hate flying in anything, these days."

I slipped a hand into my pocket and pulled out a small soft pad. "Try this," I said and slipped it behind his ear. Within seconds his colour was returning and he began to smile.

"What's that?" he said.

"Travel pad. Latest thing for travel nausea." I handed him a few more.

He let his breath out in a long sigh and began to look more comfortable. "Well thank you very much, Mr?"

"Martin James," I said.

"Leslie Barron. And this is my colleague, Liza Foulks. She's asleep now. She hates flying too and took a sleep-eze."

I looked across quickly at the woman sleeping in the seat next to Barron's. She was very slight of frame and very good looking. She was in her mid-twenties, while Barron was in his mid-fifties and very overweight.

"Where are you off to?" I said lightly.

"Zurich, then on to Chicago."

I nodded, "Unusual route. SeaCity to Chicago, via Zurich?"

He grinned and leant towards me, "A quick business stopover. Short and very sweet." I grinned back like I understood.

"And you?"

I smiled and said, "Nothing as glamorous, or as sweet. Interview for a new job."

"That's exciting."

"It would be if I thought I had a chance."

"Where are you staying?"

"Excelsior."

“That's a coincidence. That's where we're staying. Please join me for dinner this evening.”

“Well I...”

“I insist. Repay you finding this....thing. It's wonderful. I even feel like a drink. As this is a special occasion, champagne.” He pressed for the waitress service.

By the time we had landed he was almost legless. Foulks slept through the whole flight. I held back on the drink and tried to act as if it was having some effect. I felt the craft begin its descent and enter some turbulence. I made my move.

I excused myself to visit the toilet and allowed myself to be buffeted and fall against Barron. I managed to lift his wallet and moved off to the toilets. The old skills still come in useful. You can't get a screen, or database, to do that! Once locked inside, I copied the wallet's contents into my wrist recorder and slipped everything back inside.

I looked at my reflection in the mirror and was pleased with my disguise. I had inflatable cheek pads, skin toner that greyed and aged me by fifteen years. A wig that was a masterpiece and virtually undetectable. My suit was a few sizes too large and padded to add to my visual weight. Built up shoes added millimetres to my height. In my throat was a synthbox, which changed my voice slightly. If I ever met Barron again, he'd never recognise me. Satisfied, I returned to my seat.

As I was about to push past the sleeping Foulks and the inebriated Barron, I made a pretence of looking down and finding his wallet. I picked it up and he claimed it immediately. A look of fear and then relief swept across his face. He quickly checked its contents and let out a sigh. He thanked me and I sat beside him again.

“We're almost here,” I said, with a sense of relief.

We shared the same Aerotaxi and booked into the hotel. Barron made a reservation for eight and said to meet him for drinks at seven. Barron smiled as he said he was off to do his 'business', said with an exaggerated wink. We parted company. Not once did Lisa Foulks speak, but she never took her eyes off me.

I was escorted to my room and my bag placed on the vibro-bed. I tipped the autovalet and waited until the door sighed shut. “Lock” I said and the small sign on the back of the door confirmed the action. I stood in the ablute and let all the grime and stress of modern travel wash away. I stepped out, feeling much better.

I touched the WallScreen with my ID ring and it came alive. In the top right--hand corner the charges were being displayed and they were mounting as I made my various calls. Burr ridge would pay.

I called Leta first and she was out. I left a recorded message, which ended with me miming 'I love you'. My next call was to Burr ridge, who refused visual contact and so followed a guarded conversation. I wasn't happy using hotel screens. At least I knew my own screen was secure. I managed to convey to him that we were on target, so far. I'd call him later.

I called up the information from my wrist unit and looked at the larger display on the WallScreen. Among the junk that people carry in the outmoded wallets were often gems of information. It seemed that Barron couldn't trust to electronic systems or to his memory. Written carefully into the lining of the wallet was a twenty-figure number. It had to be his bank account. I held the information on the screen and patched into my Aero database. I sent a search for the whereabouts of Leslie Barron. Within moments I had the location of the bank he was currently visiting.

I called Jerry Jones and his face beamed at me. "Where are you, Razz ?"

"You don't want to know. I'm sending you some info. I need all the details you can get. Usual fee, okay?"

"Need the money. Send it through." He faded from the screen.

I lay on the bed and waited. Only minutes later the screen chimed and showed Jones as the caller. I set my wrist to record and the screen to transfer to the wrist database. Within seconds I had a complete breakdown of Barron's private bank account. All deposits and withdrawals. Where the money came from and went to. Jerry Jones was reputed to be the best hacker in the country. He was worth his weight in diamonds. Given the account number and bank, he could extract information that even the authorities couldn't get.

I sent a 'thank you' message via the screen. I set the transfer of monies into play, bouncing payment all over the world. It ended up in his 'special' account, somewhere in Rio. These days, you could never be too careful. No-one would want to check on what we had just done, unless Barron started the questions.

I lay back on the bed and felt relieved my work had been completed. I sent the info to my Aero, as backup. I felt I deserved a well-earned sleep. So I did.

There was a noise, drilling into my head. "Who is it?" I said.

"Leslie Barron. It's nearly dinner time."

I eased off the bed and said through the intercom by the bed, "I'll be right down. Sorry, I fell asleep." The last thing I wanted was to be sociable with Barron, but it might look suspicious if I suddenly disappeared.

The dinner was dreadful. Barron would not stop talking. Foulks tried to shut him up several times, but he wouldn't listen. He'd been drinking heavily and was beginning to lose his grip on the conversation. Foulks ate sparingly and watched me constantly. I felt uneasy. Every time I asked a question, she would look intently at Barron, as if he shouldn't answer. She was protecting him. But from what?

At one point he began to talk about his role as producer of MultiGame®. I asked what he actually did, as a producer. At this he laughed and leant towards me grinning. "I make a lot of money." He burst out laughing at this. Foulks stood up and explained she was tired and would like to retire. She suggested it might be a good idea if Leslie did as well. It was to be a long day tomorrow! Barron waved her off and told her to go ahead. I could tell by the facial expression she wasn't pleased at being refused. She said a quiet goodnight to me and left.

I had all the information I needed for Burrige. Prying questions would only arouse Barron's suspicions. He looked up and pointed to a screen set in the far wall of the restaurant. It was showing the review of the next MultiGame®

"Shouldn't you be working on that, or something?" I said as lightly as I could.

He waved a dismissive hand and said, "It's all done. All in the bag. I'm not required until we go on air tomorrow evening."

I felt a tingle as my wrist alarm went off. I casually looked at the readout and was mildly surprised. I stood and said, "I've a job interview tomorrow, Leslie. Please excuse me if I get a good night's sleep."

Barron wanted me to stay and drink some more. I tried to persuade him to go to bed himself, but agreed to another. I tried to leave after a quick drink and he was on the point of becoming abusive. The situation was becoming embarrassing and difficult.

Foulks appeared as if by magic and forced Barron to call it an evening. She led him slightly to one side and spoke sharply to him. As I watched I could see him take a grip of himself and straighten up. With a slow wave he said goodnight. She nodded at me and left with the burden of her drunken employer.

I watched them totter off and made my way back to the bedroom. I looked again at my wrist and it flashed the sign, 'Intruder.' I searched the room and found a few items that had been slightly moved. I wasn't geared up for a full equipment scan. It was times like this I missed my Aero and its equipment.

I made a call to reception.

SATURDAY

I had early breakfast in the room and checked my flight departure.

I was packed and ready to leave when a bomb went off in my room. I heard the explosion, although I was now on the ground floor, having changed rooms the night before. I left as quickly and quietly as I could for the airport.

Somewhere behind me Liza Foulks was thinking she'd eliminated me. Soon I would find out more about her, and perhaps repay the compliment. The situation was becoming dangerous and I was becoming nervous.

Break

I was tremendously relieved to be seated in my own Aerocar again. Despite my outward coolness, I'd been rattled by the near miss of the bomb attack. If I'd had my full compliment of equipment I could've detected it and probably disarmed it. It was a wise decision to change bedrooms.

I managed to gain my composure before calling in to the local police. I reported the incident and sent all the information I had. Within moments they had sent back a photo of Liza Foulks. The woman that stared out of the screen was at least forty years old and very unattractive.

I started to arrange the PhotoFit display. I found Liza's mouth first, then her eyes and a while before I got the hairstyle and ears. I sent this back to the police and I got a personal call from Inspector Jamison.

"Engar? Have we met before?"

I shook my head, "Don't think so, inspector."

He blinked and looked to one side at his second screen, "This woman, Foulks. Are you sure this picture looks like her?"

I nodded and said, "As near as I can remember. Why?"

He actually stroked his chin as he said, "Well, she's not Liza Foulks, she died a year ago. However, she could be Reyna Taylor. She's wanted on sixteen charges, two of which are murder. It seems like you had a lucky escape. Where is she now?"