

TAU 4

by V. J. Waks

Prologue. Odyssey

“Dr. Weller.” The voice was soft, precise, non- intrusive. Well trained.

Stephen Weller's grey eyes narrowed as he looked up. In the brittle calcimine light of the shuttlecraft cabin, his digital notepad shone brightly before him, throwing a rainbow of coloured lights across his chest. And in the panel screen beside his seat, the image of the visored head of the shuttle pilot had just materialised into inquisitive life.

“Excuse me, Sir. Just letting you know. We'll be landing at Altair Base in less than an hour.”

Weller nodded.

Then he smiled, very deliberately. He wanted to convey a clear message of innocent compliance, a compliance which would be registered in the visual record that he knew the pilot was making, a record that was even now being sent on to the Base itself.

The screen went to a satisfied black.

How many lies? How many lies does it take to make one thing true?

Weller pushed back his dark hair and looked down one last time at the file opened so mockingly before him. Explicitly and very descriptively, it told him what everyone already knew about what awaited him at the Base. Absolutely nothing. He glanced out the shuttle's window, his eyes finding the second moon rising creamy white against the glowing hues of the Altairan dusk. The shuttle banked gently. He shifted in his seat to better appreciate the view. Below them, an endless expanse of rainforest stretched in all directions; ancient, mysterious, trees marching in unbroken line, from horizon to

horizon, as far as Weller could see.

There was no end to it. It was an old forest, old almost beyond record. Of all the planets in the Homeworld Alliance, few other than Altair had the perfect union of lush climate and isolation to support anywhere near such luxuriant growth. This was true frontier. Altair had seen its first settlers a scant three hundred years before and the burden of serious technology for less than a century. And still the jungles successfully resisted every attempt at real penetration. All in all, it was the ideal setting for a high security research venture like the Base.

It's because we're not here, thought Weller, wryly. We can hardly get into this place. To this forest, we're nothing; we're not really here at all.

He drew closer to the view port. In the clear light of dusk, he picked out flocks of basilisks, their red-tipped leathery wings flapping noiselessly as they made their way just above the canopy. As ubiquitous as birds on other worlds, they were not yet as populous as the *wdji-ko*, those tiny prosimian hermaphrodites whose numbers had swollen to near pest proportions on so many of the tropical Rim Planets. Here, these colourful little dragons were known as *palú*; small and feisty, they were as eager to feast on one another as on anything else. Two paused mid-flight, pirouetting fantastically, flashing scimitar-edged claws at one another in brief display, their raucous cries nearly drowned out by the sibilant purr of the shuttle.

Weller's gaze returned to the small, efficient cabin. For a brief moment, his bright eyes focused on nothing as his thoughts raced ahead to his destination. Altair Base.

Then for the last time, he afforded himself the luxury of a real smile, deep and sardonic. The pilot would continue to watch him; right up to the moment they landed. He knew that. But he had never needed any reminders of his peril. From now on, the only Stephen Weller that would be seen by anyone

here would be as carefully composed and as obscure as the smile he had flashed only moments ago. And just as meaningless.

The meticulous planning of the last six months had at last paid off. He was finally getting inside. And in just twenty-four hours more...

He settled into his seat to wait.

Nestled in thickly forested mountains and nearly indistinguishable, the Base was the premier facility of its kind in biomechanical genetic research. In its early days, scientific leaders from every planet in the Homeworld Alliance had flocked there simply for the chance to stare speechless with wonder at the latest marvels in biophysical interface generation and neuro-matrix conversion. But it was for what would soon become pioneering work in genetic substrate manipulation, the fusion of the genetic material from vastly different animal sources, that Altair became unsurpassed.

And, just as soon, unstoppable. It took no genius to see from what source the minds at Altair drew their terrible inspiration. Each experiment darker and more deadly than the last, its research engines soon began to propel themselves ever more rapidly forward, their purpose much more sinister than that of a questionable route to mankind's salvation.

Skillfully designed, maximally secure and at unimaginable cost, the Base's sole function was to exploit every scientific means available to ensure the continued military dominion of the Alliance, in whatever novel System it chose to impose itself.

It became a military installation par none. To allay the public's feeble suspicions, there were the yearly despatches of life-saving miracles, the medical cures and wonders culled from the planet's forests. But for those more astute, there came dark rumours; whispers of monstrous procedures whose horrifying results were designed to be ready-made grist for the hungry vagaries of the Alliance's military strategists.

The unvarnished truth about the Base was cloaked from even her sister facilities, including the Neurotechnical Institute on the far side of the planet that this particular shuttle passenger might have called home.

For a score of years, the two institutions had waged intellectual war, friendly at first, then increasingly more hostile, as the Base continued to eclipse its partner in fame, secrecy, and power. Dr. Abrams, Weller's mentor and the Institute leader in the field of behavioural conditioning, had long suspected that his competitor tenured darker secrets than were good for anyone and could only watch helplessly as the cloaks of secrecy wound tighter and more densely around the fledgling installation on the far side of the planet's thick jungles.

But as time passed, there were to be no opportunities to intervene. Suiting everyone's interests to perfection, the Alliance's declared, diligently maintained truce was fragile. It yielded equilibrium, encouraging badly needed commerce while still permitting a strategically continual state of near war to loom eternally between the Homeworlds and the enemy planets of the Out Worlds. The Military remained firmly behind the Base in all its activities. No one would contest what happened here under the cover of jungle night and determinate seclusion.

Not that attempts had not been made. In recent years, many of the keenest scientific minds in the System had systematically monitored the Base, their alarm growing until open dissension finally reached the planet's Government. But at the last, even the established heads of state were officially powerless to interfere. Invasion by the Out Worlders was a continuous threat to the Homeworlds. As long as that danger existed, the Base would operate unchecked. The Military would prevail. Altair Base would keep its power.

And Weller knew as well as anyone that the author and wellspring of that

power was Dyle Carzon.

Dyle Carzon had been here since the first stones of the Base had been set into the jungle floor. His rise had been prodigious. While yet in his teens, his applications of genetic substrate fusions alone had revolutionised his field. Now, only a handful of men yet living could approach his capabilities; his steady and continued brilliance had made him the unquestioned leader at the then new facility. But it was Carzon's savage intellect and charisma that established him as the undisputed ruler here. His understanding of human nature and motivation was legendary. And as the might and prestige of Altair Base grew, Carzon grew with it. His mind unfathomable and complex, his actions subtle, unpredictable and often cruel; he was feared by all. Few dared oppose him. They had good cause. Weller had heard stories about those who crossed Dyle Carzon. They became silent. They disappeared.

And it was everything the Military had hoped for. Through Carzon's sorcery, the Base was transformed. A steady stream of men would come, men who would be tested, evaluated and invariably rejected until Carzon, his intent satisfied, unwavering in his purpose and now certain of his supreme dominion, installed his perfect team. Blindly loyal, united in mastery, they were men whose reputations were soon to become as shocking as his own.

So that when Carzon assumed the Directorship, it was with absolute authority that he took steps to accomplish his dream. And in less than two decades, he had forged an empire, a scientific machine that permitted him to push back the limits of human enquiry. With the might of the Military behind him, his vision was made flesh. His work was groundbreaking, unspeakable, beyond the scope of men's dreams and nightmares.

It was this work that now drew Weller here, work so incredible and covert that no one at Neuro could discuss it. He was not alone in knowing almost nothing of the Project. But in this particular case, what Weller didn't know

was very likely to kill him.

He had met Carzon only once before.

He remembered being struck by the man's physical grace and the uncanny power of his gaze. Carzon was tall, his body hardened by training, his movements as fluid as those of the animals he studied and revered, the great carnivorous felids of the Altairan jungles. Most similar in size and proportion to the extinct paleofelids of Earth, they were enormous, savage predators. As large and fearsome as the long-dead *Dinictus*, the great cats of Altair were untamable. They killed with terrifying readiness. No man knew them as did Carzon and it was around these celebrated creatures that he had focused his work.

Unexpectedly, his obsession had borne deadly fruit.

For Carzon had made an extraordinary breakthrough in his research. And on the verge of what should have been brilliant triumph, something had gone suddenly and fearfully awry.

In less than an hour, it would begin. Weller would be face to face with something whose fame, if only as vague whispers and increasingly wild conjecture, had spread well beyond the emerald confines of Altair's jungles.

Something called Tau 4.

And all he had to do was stay alive.

Chapter 1. Altair Base

Dyle Carzon knew something was wrong long before he heard the shrill alarm sirens erupt angrily into violent life, filling the pristine corridors of Altair Base with deadly, insistent, sound.

Call it premonition. It wouldn't be the first time since this Project had begun. Before the first note had sounded, he was already on his way, running to Tau's quarters before anyone else was even dimly aware that catastrophe had occurred.

Even at this distance he could hear it. The fading echo of the morph's scream still hung in the air –guttural, metallic, always unearthly. The scream hadn't come from Tau; that he knew with absolute certainty.

He had always been able to distinguish her vocal patterns from amongst those of any of the other morphs. All of the morphs had the capability of producing sounds in frequencies beyond the range of human hearing. But this terrible cry had cut off short. Tremulous and desperate, it had never gone higher than mid-range. Always within the range of hearing, it could only have been a death-scream, the last sound the creature would ever make. That alone told him it was bad this time, very bad.

Tall and agile, he started to run faster, pushing people out of his way. So absorbed was he as he moved through the press of Security and Medical personnel, that he barely noticed when Block fell into step beside him.

Even with the confusion of sirens everywhere and men and women streaming past, with eyes as cold and nearly colourless as his hair, Carzon's

trusted Military advisor showed none of his apprehension. The halls brimmed with the clear signs of disaster, but Block's actions were governed now as they were always. Secretive and oppressively demanding, his sharp mind moved under an unrelenting, icy ambition. He had worked so long and so closely with Carzon that he seemed almost a living extension of his Director. It was exactly as Carzon wished it; he was a man who needed satellites rather than colleagues. The two moved on in silence, Carzon finally rousing himself to bare civility when Tyler also pushed through the press to join them.

“Status, Tyler.”

The little man hesitated. In his long years as scientific coordinator, Tyler was used to having to justify setback, even outright failure. Placating and resilient, it was what he did best.

But not this time. His fingers hovered anxiously over his plain lab coat. “No change from the initial report. Carzon, I don't know what to say, I just don't understand how this happened.”

“Yes. That's clear. Do you think you can figure out how to kill the alarms? We don't need more confusion. Do we. “

Tyler stiffened, busying himself, visibly relieved when Carzon turned his attention elsewhere.

“Block.”

The tall man snapped to attention, seemingly mid-stride. “Yes, Carzon.”

“Keep your eyes open. For a change.”

The three who had ruled here virtually unchallenged for so long now marched forward as one. They crossed the last security checkpoint and entered Prime One, where the most dangerous and highly secured experiments were housed.

From the throng of Security and Project people jamming the corridor outside Tau's quarters, a shocked and excited chatter rose to meet them, a

chatter that died away the moment Carzon stepped into view. Before he had even reached the door, the Director shot a look at Tyler, who was happy to hang back among the mass of people milling fearfully outside. There was nothing for him to do in that room and he knew it.

Carzon and Block pushed their way within.

Just inside the door, Carzon was now keenly aware of the palpable surge of mingled fear and desperation that met and rolled over him like a wave. But he was untouched by it. To one such as he, inconsequential and nearly contemptible seemed the white faces that turned distractedly to face his. The room might just as well have been empty, so unerringly did his gaze flash across, penetrating the apprehensive crowd, fixing on the single thing of any significance.

At the far end of the suite, a core of Medical personnel worked frantically over a body which was sprawled limply on the floor. Block and Carzon moved quickly forward. In profound silence, the two men looked down on pure carnage at their feet.

What lay stretched on the floor before them had once been a slightly built young man, well muscled and lithe. His near-perfect limbs were unscathed, with no signs of wounds or even bruises. His body was untouched.

But the head was cruelly pulled to one side. Lying at a vicious angle, it jutted harshly away from the rest of the neck, twisted back upon itself. The ashen throat had been ripped open. There, whole sections of vertebrae protruded, stark white against the bloody foam still streaming down his chest. In a scornful crimson line, from the torn remains of one once-graceful eyebrow to a point under the shattered chin – the livid mark of talons. Slices of skin, still bleeding, hung loose across one cheek where nails, sharp and of no known animal form, had cut deeply into the tissue.

And across the dead face, a smile was fixed coldly in the stiffening flesh.

From the midst of those by the body, a woman rose stiffly to her feet. Unaffected by the reddening carcass below her, Dr. Temwold looked straight at Carzon. Her bright brown eyes were direct, but curiously devoid of emotion and her low voice held the merest trace of sarcasm as Carzon now turned to face her.

“Well, Carzon. It’s nice work. But you should expect that by now.”

“Enough, Temwold. Just give me the damage.”

“Probable compression fractures at C3 through 6. Clavicle rupture at the sternal insertion. And just to be absolutely certain -- she crushed his neck.”

Carzon looked again at the gape of ripped throat and darkly oozing face. “Crushed his neck?”

Temwold calmly folded her tools. “You can see for yourself. The cord is soup. And there isn't going to be a single thing that I...”

Such was the relationship between Block and all others here that he cut her off.

“Is there going to be any possible salvage at all?”

She regarded the Military man with measured scorn.

“There's no time,” she murmured softly. “In two minutes, the genetic fractions will fail.” Then she leaned closer to Carzon in a bizarre mockery of intimacy. “Kiss this one goodbye, Carzon.”

He looked away and his voice was a whisper of barely controlled rage.

“Fuck.”

His eyes searched the room, coming to rest on a young woman at the far corner.

As slightly built as the young man on the floor, with limbs curled gracefully beneath her, she sat languidly on a tabletop. The two Security men that stood directly before her blinked mindlessly in fear. With rigid, white-knuckled hands, they clutched their sonic rifles in what they hoped was a

threatening manner. It was unnecessary. The girl on the table utterly ignored them.

The frantic obeisance of the Medical team fell on deaf ears. Their Director's gaze was riveted on Temwold as she moved to the girl seemingly carven in stone.

“Tau.” Temwold said, wearily. “I don't understand.”

The young woman on the table pushed long, tapering fingers through her golden hair. The wide blue eyes she turned on Temwold were troubled. But her voice, low and melodious, was resolutely firm.

“You, of all people, should.”

“He was your friend, he trusted you! Gerda, how could you do this?”

Those blue eyes flashed unexpectedly as the girl took a deep breath. “Because he was my friend. He asked me to. And I promised him I would. That's how.” Then Tau looked away.

Temwold studied the young woman before her. How beautiful she would be, she thought. If she were only completely human...

The scientist was used to the illusion that was created when they eventually produced a stable morph form. All the morphs started as human. It was usually only some time after the addition of the non-human substrates that the final form of the creatures would be revealed, often to the very great surprise of them all. Temwold and team had been mixing radically different genetic substrates for years, in hopes of creating new genetic recombinants that could survive. What was produced was largely a matter of trial and error, the horrendous mistakes expiring quickly, mercifully, never leaving the laboratory tables.

But what successes they did achieve were both extraordinary and thrilling, and not solely due to their incredible rarity. Once in a long while, the mix was perfect and something like Gerda Tau would be created, a

recombinant that was a living and breathing reality. A creature that seemed almost completely human.

Yet, a creature that was much more. For it was an illusion. In spite of Tau's near perfect human female form, Temwold knew that of all the morphs created in the Project, Gerda was the most powerful and by far, the deadliest. Tau always looked too small and delicate to be capable of the bloody havoc that was by now a signature. And it had been a long, long, time since Tau had shown any remorse for her handiwork.

But this time was different. There was an unaccustomed uncertainty in Tau's eyes, a slight trembling in the girl's shoulders. To one less knowing, the morph's body would have spelled nothing less than absolute calm. But Temwold had known this girl for some time; few were closer to her. She saw the active will, the composure. And she also saw that the girl's finely molded hands were clenched tightly in her lap.

Unexpectedly, Tau looked at her, an unspoken plea in the clear blue eyes.

But Temwold looked away. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I won't be able to get you out of this one. Whatever happens, I won't be able to help you," she said.

There was just a trace of surprise on Gerda's face. "I know," she said softly.

Temwold walked back to the body on the floor.

Its delicate features, once so fair, were changing. Softening, growing less and less distinct, the different elements of man and something not-man warred savagely from within. Now, it was impossible to say which was which, as the forms shifted ever more convulsively back and forth in a terrible, increasingly violent struggle. Then it was done; first the skin, and finally the muscles began to break down. The tissues were melting under their own weight, until finally what had once been apparently human was only an apparition from a nightmare.

Carzon watched in silence. Then his eyes glittered strangely and he turned to Temwold.

“You'll be right outside. *Won't you.*”

It was not a question. Temwold quickly left the room as one last time, Carzon looked down in disgust at the unholy thing on the floor.

“Get that...body..out of here, “ he growled. “And clear this room. *Now.* “

When the last Security guard had closed the door behind him, Carzon looked across at Gerda with cold fury. He crossed the room with slow deliberation, stopping directly in front of her. The beautiful profile remained averted with studied indifference.

“My dear Gerda. What have we done now.” The question came out like a soft snarl.

On the girl's full, curving lips, darkened to true carnelian by the presence of the alien substrates, there was a smile. Her answer was a near perfect mimicry of his own tone.

“*My dear Carzon.* I would think it's obvious, isn't it? He wanted to die; I just helped him.” But her eyes flashed as she gazed coolly at him. “And I'd be happy – so very happy – to extend the same favour – to you. How would you like that?”

“I'd like to break your fucking neck. “

Tau's laugh was tremulous with cold delight. “But you won't, will you.” she asked, very gaily. “ You can't afford to. Not any more. Go ahead, Carzon, I'd love to hear you explain this to your superiors. Go and tell them how you're down to just one morph because I've gone and killed the other one. You can't hurt him anymore.” She slid down from the table to face him. “And you don't dare touch me.”

He looked down at her beautiful face, now raised up, unafraid, in staunch and determined challenge.

Here we are again, he thought bitterly. Standing just barely apart, close enough to touch. So much closer than just inches away. So much closer, indeed.

Her face was just a breath away from his, so near to him that the scent of her hair and skin filled his nostrils and, without realising it, he inhaled deeply, tasting their achingly familiar, strangely inhuman fragrance. The girl's eyes sparkled again. And in spite of his knowing every perfect line, every contour of her face, despite his legendary will and iron self-control – he was enthralled; moved yet unmoving, lost in profound fascination.

Because now, from somewhere far below in their midnight depths, a strange copper fire was rising, growing until the blue of those eyes so close to his glinted like azure sparks on the billows of a unearthly fire-coloured sea. And his own bright gaze was locked to hers, to those eyes whose pupils were no longer circular, no longer completely human. For a moment, he stopped thinking, intoxicated once more by the sensation that suddenly coursed through him. By her nearness and the nearly human eyes turned up to his.

His hand rose up to her face. The long fingers passed close to her cheek, never touching, tracing her jaw line as his voice lowered to a bare, impassioned whisper. And now his eyes gleamed with something more than simple malice.

“Believe me, Tau. I intend to do a lot more than just...touch you.”

Then he turned on his heel and strode from the room.

Her quarters seemed suddenly darker and ominously quiet. The breath she had been holding came out of Gerda in a long, low rush. Slowly, she walked back to the place where the young man's body had lain. Curling her long, powerful limbs, she knelt down, bereft, seemingly as small and impotent as the child she felt herself to be, lost in thought. A smooth white hand reached out, hesitated, and the long fingers quivered. Then the girl gently touched the bloodstained floor.

What have you done, Gerda? What have we done?

There it was again. Her eyes, dark blue with emotion, closed tightly against it. Ghostly, relentless, like something heard in dream; the faint, sweet, voice in her head. And the morph frowned and covered her open mouth with trembling hand, unable now at the last to tell if it was his voice that she heard, or her own.

Tense with unaccustomed dread, Temwold waited in the deserted corridor as Carzon breezed out from Tau's rooms. Without a moment's hesitation, he walked to her and grabbed her tightly by the arm. She felt herself pulled forward as if suddenly weightless. Before she could utter any protest, Carzon hauled her into the ready room beside Tau's quarters, where he threw her, nearly off her feet, to the far side of the room.

The door clicked shut behind them. For one long breathless moment, there Carzon rested, his whip-like back firmly pressed against the only exit, coolly watching her as she glared at him, all anger and indignation, her face white with fury.

“Just who the Hell do you think you are?” she cried. “I'm not Gerda Tau!”
Feel fear now, he thought.

And he smiled at her, smiled with obvious pleasure at her unmistakable dismay. And at her unmistakable helplessness, so apparent to them both.

“No. You're not Gerda Tau. But we both know who *I* am, don't we?”

Large, richly coloured and riveting, his eyes glittered at her. Whatever dark dreams came from Carzon's work, the evidence of them was nowhere to be found on the face of the man who gazed at her with such fearsome gravity. The high forehead was lofty and unlined. Dark-haired, with classic features, his strong jaw line gave only a hint of that terrible intellect, the darkly celebrated will. He was an astonishingly handsome man, never so

mesmerising, nor so dangerous as when he was just like this. Absolutely calm. But his eyes were deadly and Temwold quickly stepped backward as he moved suddenly closer.

Yet he came to a stop, and actually laughed – softly; certain and content that he now had her full attention. To the shaken scientist with her back against the cold wall, his low voice was terrifying.

“How lucky for our Gerda – to have you so close. But it's not always healthy, is it? So many of her friends are alive one moment. And dead the next. For one reason or another. Now, I wonder, what part is it that you've played in what has just happened? No, please, don't deny anything, we're far past that.”

“Don't you threaten me.”

“I wouldn't think of it. But things will be changing here. I just wanted you to be among the first to know.”

“How very kind of you.”

“It is my pleasure. Oh, and I think you'll find there's something interesting for you to learn in your office.”

And he fell silent. It was over; she'd been dismissed. She walked across the room, hoping desperately for at least the appearance of control. And all the time, his penetrating gaze never left her, appraising every aspect of her face and bearing until the door closed solidly behind her.

Deeply alarmed, her thoughts racing as quickly as her heart, Temwold made her way back to her office.

For five long, turbulent years, as Government liaison to the morph Project, she had watched Carzon delved ever deeper into a grim obsession. What had begun as a brilliant hypothetical boon to genetic manipulation had grown slowly into a thirst, unwavering and consuming, for dreadful secrets that men were never meant to know. In awe, she had watched his genius flourish

astonishingly under unthinkable pressures and mind-shattering revelations. Until finally, after countless trials with uncountable horrific failures, he had achieved his masterpieces: a series of morphs. Not merely alive, but healthy, stable – *and able to change form at will*.

And at the end of the series; the being that became Gerda Tau.

But for the scientist turned diplomatist, those years had brought a gradually heightened sense of horror and, over and above the grisly work itself, one of dread. More questions arose, darker and increasingly unsettling, than were ever answered. And ever more suspicious of the Director's true designs, she herself had been brought into direct and now bitter conflict with the paragon she had been appointed to serve.

As of moments ago, her sense of personal jeopardy had never been greater. Clearly, he would brook no further opposition.

Yet she was never less proud of her role at the Base than now. Never easy and often frightening, their work was still monumental. They had accomplished things deemed impossible, even with the current mind-searing level of technological support. But death, violent and haunting despite its frequency, was ever present here. More than just a risk in such work, it was a certainty. The initial survival rate of any of the recombinants was consistently expected to be less than three percent.

The young man whose life had ended so brutally on Tau's floor had been much more than just another casualty of their deadly enterprise. He was dead. But what was devastating to them all and to the Project, was the fact he was virtually impossible to recreate. Long years of planning, painstaking manipulation and tedious hours of training; all had vanished in a twinkling. What had died in Tau's room represented a goldmine of genetic potential. In the few minutes it took for Gerda's claws to tear out the throat of her last victim, a milestone had been irrevocably lost from the program.

Now only Gerda was left in the Project. With that terrible and unavoidable reality, came the first real chance of utter failure for them all.

Temwold smiled ruefully. She knew the morph better than anyone. She clearly saw Tau's desperate purpose behind what had seemed at first to be an act of purely wanton destruction. With what could only have been cool premeditation, Gerda had eliminated the last experimental subject in the Project. In so doing, she had guaranteed that success would rest on her alone. Carzon knew this, too. Why else that power play in the ready room? Of all men, he was the most covert in his actions. He never threatened. He never had to.

A morph was dead. One morph remained. They were all one step closer to disaster.

Yet Tau had unwittingly forced many hands today. For when her young friend's life had ebbed from him, with it had drained away the last protection the girl was likely to have had. It had taken her only seconds to kill, but they were seconds which might very likely cost her everything.

Temwold halted and shuddered, suddenly struck by a chilling thought.

In doing this, by irreparably shifting the delicate balance of power to center on her alone, the morph had placed herself in unprecedented peril. Had she known? Had she known ... and killed him anyway?

The pieces are moving now, thought Temwold. We can no longer stop. We are all moving with irresistible certainty toward our final positions on the board. Her pace quickened, and she disappeared down the hall.

When, readying for the worst, Temwold at last regained her office, she entered to the sound of voices familiar and unloved, raised loudly in anger and accusation.

For it was this suddenly real likelihood of failure that was at that moment

being heatedly debated by Block and Tyler as they waited, some more anxiously than others, for Dyle Carzon.

At least two of the three in the room now also waited for Stephen Weller, not without trepidation. For, resolved in secrecy, Carzon had decided to keep hidden his plan for the coercive specialist's visit and it was a very angry Temwold that was just now hearing from his team of the imminent arrival of their guest.

She became properly livid when Tyler stepped forward with the standard, well-rehearsed recitals: the importance of discretion, the need to minimise the expected gossip at such a controversial course.

But when he blithely chirped that the necessary secrecy preserved the interests of the Military, he caught that look in her eye. He wisely stopped talking. This time, he was indeed for it.

“So why am I once again the last idiot to know this man is coming here?”

“Well! Well, ah.. Dr. Temwold,” Tyler hedged. “You know his credentials. His fame is legendary. As far as coercive conditioning goes, Weller is simply the best there is. He can make pigs fly.”

She stood up, glared disdainfully at him and began pacing with that characteristic restless energy that foreboded a serious fight. “Just because I haven't met the man doesn't mean I'm a moron, Tyler. I don't give a damn if he *screws* the pigs first. His credentials are not the issue.”

“That's the point,” said Block, just as disdainfully. “The issue is not one of credentials but of time. As of right now, with what she did twenty minutes ago, if we don't get some cooperation from Tau real soon, then this Project stops. And I mean it stops cold. Everyone agreed that a command decision was necessary.”

“Oh, stuff it, Block!” she cried. “Who is this 'everyone'? You, him, and the rest of the cleaning crew? The *issue* is that once again your little boys' club

has seen fit to make a 'command decision' and once again and as usual, I might add, *no one* else on the Team knows squat about it!”

Tyler tried vainly to calm her. “I knew it, I knew it, that was suffi...”

It was the wrong moment to stir Temwold's glowing ashes and now those embers flared into violent life.”Damn it, Tyler, *I* am supposed to know it! You don't run this Medical Team, *I do!*”

“And you don't run this Project, Dyle Carzon does.” said Block. “And we are at war, Dr. Temwold.”

“No! *Really?* Fuck your war, Block, it's the same, tired old excuse.”

“Fine. But until a better one comes along, our Director represents the interests of *the Military* in that capacity.”

Temwold turned and looked at Block as if he had just broken wind. Her opponent's eyes were as cold, as untroubled and as covert as marble. Very slowly, she walked up to him, and stopped just inches away. Her voice was calm. But her words fell with molten precision, like incandescent drops of venom.

“Dyle Carzon may run Altair but I represent the interests of *the Government* in this Project. And *the Government* just doesn't have time for this shit anymore. I've got three dead morphs in the last three months and a review board asking me what the Hell is going on out here. What should I tell them? Block? Tyler?”

Block's steely eyes bore into those of his adversary. “We're all on the same side, Temwold.” “Yes. Aren't we,” she purred softly, unfazed. “And until that side has a good explanation for the latest events, I advise the two of you to cover your asses. And do it by the book.”

As if on cue, Carzon walked into the room. As usual, no one had heard him approach the door. As usual, he had made an instantaneous and accurate estimation of the scenario before him.

“So, here we all are, asses covered, by the book, and do accept my apologies for not telling you of Doctor Weller's little visit to us, my dear Temwold,” he said lightly. “I thought we could use some extra help, don't you agree? Or what would you recommend?” Then he sat himself impudently and comfortably on the edge of her large desk.

And smiled again at her.

She wasn't going for it. He knew it. But she smiled sweetly back at him.

“The *Government* recommends...you get any help you can beg, borrow or steal to get you out of this fuck-up, Carzon. And my next report will so state.” She moved to the door. “Now if you'll excuse me, I have someone's mess to clean up.”

The door closed behind her. The three men looked at one another. Whatever thin veneer of geniality had existed during the conversation instantly evaporated. Behind it, hanging like a yellow stain in the still room, only the stale, tight scent of desperation remained.

Alone in the hall, once again Temwold took a deep breath to steady herself. Then she started shakily down the corridor. So that was how it was going to come down. The behaviour of Carzon and his team had only confirmed her worst fears; things were very grave, indeed.

Temwold's information web had functioned perfectly; she had expected not to be informed about Weller's visit and she hadn't been. She also knew quite well that the man was expected momentarily. It was the final proof she needed to assure her that Carzon's devices had ripened to the next stage.

Everything was proceeding as planned.

There wasn't a moment to be lost. She flew down the corridor.

While outside the Base, unmindful of the petty life or death schemes of

human machination within, night – mysterious, compelling and primordial – had begun to fall.

Outlined against a sky that flamed wantonly with gold, crimson, and deep purple, the intense green of the magnificent trees darkened to lustrous black velvet. Thin wisps of clouds hung silver against the darkening heavens and the light of the setting sun turned the soaring towers of the Base blood red as the dusk drew on. Leaping from cloud to cloud, heat lightning crackled against a glowing horizon. Their thin, pale wings flashing like tarnished bronze in the sultry light as they swept the sky before them clean of small prey, squalling flocks of *cheiropts* passed overhead, seeking the safety of their roosts in the deeper jungles to the south. Anywhere else, it would have been a picture of unqualified tranquility.

The incidental glory and very real jeopardy of the twilight were not lost to all.

From her chambers securely set high above the main buildings, Gerda Tau eagerly watched the drama in the heavens. It had taken her years to become accustomed to the pale iridescent glimmer of the security force grid mockingly arrayed just outside the window. Intent as she was on the sunset, this barely tangible proof of her captivity was now hardly noticeable to her bright eyes as she peered outward.

It was her favourite time of day. Sensitive as she was to the nuance of light and shadow so easily lost to the simple, hampered discrimination of the full humans around her, she had left the room lights off to better watch the play of the light's spectral range as the sun set. In the quiet chamber behind her, purple shadows deepened, spreading dark, furtive fingers across her bed. With the ravenous curiosity of the perennial prisoner, she languidly studied level after level of the many structures jutting outward just below her rooms, her gaze traveling outward and downward.

Until it came to a sudden halt.

A singular event, startling in its rarity, was unfolding on the shuttle bay dock.

Its hull glowing brightly in the last pale rays of the sun, a small shuttlecraft now hovered just above the dock. Tau's sharp eyes caught the glint off the stabilizers as they fired one last time and the ship gently set down. There was no doubt; it was a passenger craft. Coming here, to a place where no one came. Where no one was allowed to come.

Now what? Another of Carzon's puppets, come to sport with me?

As the bay crew moved forward to the ship, the shuttle hatch slid slowly open. Alive with curiosity, she leaned closer. The dock was ablaze with lights but the morph would have been able to see just as easily and with the same heart-stopping clarity, the same deadly accuracy, had it been much thicker darkness.

From out of the craft, a tall man now stepped. He was apparently alone and for a second, he stood apart from the crew busily attending to the ship.

Then, to her complete surprise, he looked upward, directly to her window.

Had Weller been closer, he would have been fascinated by the changes now occurring in the features of the young woman as she gazed down at him. The pupils of Tau's eyes had narrowed and in an instant, the colour of the eyes themselves had begun to change, altering from clear blue to dark blue shot with copper. Weller stepped forward. He was still looking up, his gaze still mysteriously fixed on her window.

On her.

And Gerda's eyes began to tilt upward, suddenly growing larger, their very shape changing as the pupils, unearthly and now unrecognisable as human, narrowed completely to bottomless black slits.

Then, just as quickly, her eyes were normal, again just the eyes of a young

woman, a woman a little fearful of this stranger. Feeling suddenly vulnerable in full view at the window, she stepped backward, instinctively seeking the shadows behind her. Her small form melted into the dim sanctuary of the familiar room. As it did so, there came the sudden flash of the fading light of the day, reflecting from her eyes.

On the shuttle dock, Weller turned and joined the armed and silent men who stood waiting to lead him in.

From his own office windows on the far side of the complex, Dyle Carzon observed the same sunset, the same arrival. The handsome face was without expression, but his eyes followed Weller intently as he entered the Base. From behind him in the room, harsh and bitter indictments flew between the members of his team as Tyler and Block furiously tried to lay blame for the latest exploit of Gerda Tau.

It was far too late for such antics. Carzon's thoughts had flown forward to a critically impending event and so busily engaged were they elsewhere, that he was only dimly aware of the childishly ineffectual argument which raged heatedly back and forth just beside him.

Exasperated, Tyler threw himself into the nearest chair. "So where was Security while she was doing this? Picking its collective nose?"

But Block was in no mood to play victim and his muscular body tensed as he paced the room. "Don't try to push this one off on Security. We work on indications. You remember, that's what *your team* is supposed to give us!"

Tyler stared up at his partner in a rage and began to sputter. "Indications? What indications? She didn't send a damn memo! I don't know why she killed him. I don't know what goes on in Tau's mind when she decides to tear someone's head off. I am not paid to read minds!"

This observation, true in only the most limited sense, drew their master's

attention and the two men froze into rebellious silence with his first words.

“Correction. That is precisely what you are paid to do. And Security is paid to observe and control. Which is what they didn't do. With the result that this program is now, suddenly, unable to tolerate any more mistakes. Am I clear?”

The attentive silence in the large, elegant room was now tinged with fear.

“What now,” asked Block.

“We proceed as planned with the single refinement that Gerda is the only morph left. For everything. Weller gives us what we need. And we deal with Temwold as necessary. “

“So when do we get to see some action from our expert in coercion?”

Carzon's fingers gently touched the control panel beside the window. Outside, narrow shutters glided noiselessly into place, screening out the beauty and promise of the coming night. And in the suddenly deepened shadows of the room, before the sensors slowly raised the ambient level of soft, humanising light, his face was uncannily reminiscent of Gerda's; willful, closed, almost spectral. He looked purposefully at the two men before him. There would be no more discussion.

“Weller's shuttle has just docked. This is full dress. And there are to be no more slip-ups.”