

Chapter 2. Cats Paw

The man upon whom so many wildly divergent hopes rested was at that moment just settling into the visitor's quarters.

His surroundings were simple and austere and his first cursory appraisal did little to change his overall impression of the place. Entirely consistent with what he had heard, it was comfortable if Spartan. It was also in keeping with the subtle but pervasive military creed that suffused everything, just below the surface.

Perfectly suitable, he thought. For so short a visit.

He walked quickly through his quarters, carefully but unobtrusively checking various security and communication systems. Out of long established habit, he made mental notes of exit routes. There were too few by far, even for his somewhat unconventional standards. It was very likely that the rooms were monitored. That was also to be expected. But his dark eyes sparkled with delight when he contemplated how that assumption might be best used to amuse himself as well as his hosts. He smiled with relish; the idea was almost as good as that of cookies and milk before bed.

The fun would have to wait for, at that moment, his door chime sounded.

It was Temwold. The two looked one another over silently for a long moment. Weller was quickly forming his own opinions.

Very cool. Very non-committal. Undoubtedly, very necessary, he decided.

“I've heard so much about you,” she finally said. “Dr. Weller, I presume.”

He took a very nonchalant and deliberate second to adjust the lighting in the room. From the corner of his eye, he could see that her gaze never left him.

“A dubious honor, I'm afraid,” he answered, adding a warm grin.

Her smile was polar. “No doubt.”

He tried again. “You're Temwold.”

Her eyes circled the room, came to rest on him once more.

“I am. Let's take a walk.”

Almost from the very first moment that Altair was chosen to be the future site of such a research undertaking, enterprising minds had at once set to work to create a masterpiece of form combined with function.

What eventually rose from the perfectly impassible jungle was essentially a hollow shell, with three levels soaring loftily skyward around an enormous open central rotunda. At the bottommost expanse were planted trees and the other rich natural vegetation that characterised the Altairan jungle flourishing so impenetrably just outside the main compound's meter thick walls. And, heedless of their captivity, the trees and vines grew joyously upward, their great green limbs straining toward the tantalising expanse of an enormous skylight high overhead. It was truly spectacular, the desired effect being that of a miniature rainforest set within a stunningly vast, three tiered sphere.

But illusion was at the core of most matters here. The Base had been conceived as a scientific venue unlike any other and it was so. Yet what was also true was that it was a military installation without peer. Ostensibly one could argue that the wilderness within improved the living and working environments of those at the facility. In reality, what had been meticulously created was a perfectly controlled security space, whose myriad corridors were organised to make as difficult as possible any infiltration by undesirable outsiders. Altair Base was undeniably beautiful. But anyone foolish enough to contemplate a quick incursion and easy escape would feel the consequences of their misjudgment.

It was on the second level of this elegantly designed mousetrap that Weller and Temwold paused. Soft golden light from the fading sun still streamed down through the immense channeled skylights high above, bathing everything in a deceptively soothing glow. Weller looked down over the chest-high railing, noting the simple yet deliberate lay-out. The trees, their lacy tops emerald green in the dusk, were very far below. He turned an inquisitive face to the scientist beside him.

“I like it up here. Far from prying eyes,” she mused.

He smiled. “Where there's truth, there's satire. But I've learned to take advantage of whatever opportunities present themselves. This place is as circumspect as the file I saw on the Project; I've learned next to nothing on what this is really all about.”

Her eyebrows shot up.

“You shouldn't have been able to learn *anything*. I must speak to someone about that. Seriously, the Government's main fear is letting *any* information get out at all about what we do here. But you know that already. And as one of our Military geniuses here so repeatedly reminds me: we are at war.”

“Yes, I keep hearing something like that, too.”

“As much as I deride it, it's still very real. We had a settlement wiped out on Altair by a raiding party less than twenty years ago. It happened on the other side of the planet. But nearly two hundred people died. Whole families were wiped out.”

“So, we agree. The war is very real. But still, this place...that is the issue. Will you be telling me now that the Out Worlders would kill to get an operative in here?”

This time she smiled. “No. Not at all. Because if we've done our jobs right, they haven't a clue that the Base even exists.”

“Come now. We both know the likelihood of that, don't we? We have our

research bases, they have theirs. How can it be that important or even possible that they not know?”

“You might say that the future of the Homeworlds depends on it,” she said quietly.

“You might. If you wanted the simplest, least truthful rationale for a lot of what's been said to happen here. Dr. Temwold, we both know the Alliance has heaps of other research facilities: I'd imagine, many just like here.”

“*No. Nothing like here.* You'll see, very soon. What we do here in genetic recombination doesn't just open doors, *it invents them.* And *this* Project...”

His voice lowered. “What's military and what's medical at this point?”

Her expression turned even more serious. “It's always been more military than medical. But especially lately. It wasn't always that way. I can actually remember a time when we were simply the best place in the entire System to do genetic substrate recombinant studies. Or maybe it wasn't so simple, even back then. I can't tell anymore. Even the Tau 4 Project was originally just to explore genetic plasticity, and just that. It was only later that he...that *we* decided to focus ...I mean, once the basic substrate fusions were successful, once it worked reliably, it was a natural extension to focus on specific traits.”

The slip was cataclysmic but he let it go in hopes of more. “Like aggression, I would imagine,” he offered innocently.

“Specifically, aggression. Again, the natural choice, given our location. Look outside. Altair has some of the best predator stock in all the Homeworlds. Getting suspicious yet? It's hardly a new concept. We wanted to genetically engineer not just a new kind of super-animal. We wanted something that does not exist, not in any natural world we know of. Something that could change form at will, that could alternate between two utterly different life forms, with all the best qualities intact. At least, that was

the plan,” she added.

“What went wrong?”

Temwold dropped her eyes thoughtfully while the man beside her just as thoughtfully drank in her silence. Beneath the calm exterior of tight control, the woman was deeply troubled, even fearful. It was clear the rumours he’d heard everywhere had held at least a grain of truth. Issues here went much further than a simple experiment gone wrong and he hoped that her perception of the situation might tell him what he desperately needed to know now.

“We got what we wanted,” she said softly.

The tête-à-tête between the two had not gone unnoticed.

From across the wide mezzanine, with his team close beside him, Carzon watched attentively as Temwold spoke ever more emphatically to the behaviourist, the miracle worker, the man who would save them all. And, as the conversation grew more and more animated, Carzon never took his eyes off them.

“How cozy, “ he remarked, then turned to Tyler. “Get over there and break it up. Stay with him.”

Weller did not speak as Temwold finished her story.

Both the problem and the solution was Gerda Tau. She was the ultimate morph, able to change forms on a whim. She could climb with a skill unmatched by the cat-like predator that had served as the primary donor for her non-human genetic components. And even in her alternate form, after she had changed completely, Tau's thumbs still remained apposable. Weller listened intently; he was genuinely fascinated. He was also more than a little chilled by everything he heard. But he noted that Temwold carefully avoided

any description of the morph's transformation. So tight had the security been on the Project that there was never the slightest indication anywhere what it was that Gerda Tau actually changed *to* — but he certainly wasn't about to stop Temwold now for what could only be the simplest of explanations.

“Reaction times?” he asked, instead.

“*Much* faster than in the unchanged state. For either species.”

“And human judgment?”

“Primarily...the same.”

She would say no more. Weller pondered, one idea foremost in his thoughts. The many possibilities such a creature presented to its makers staggered the imagination.

“So she can handle a weapon. If she wants.” he remarked quietly.

“*If she wants*. You get the idea,” said Temwold bitterly. “And Gerda's control over the change, her use of it, is more subtle, more accomplished than that of any recombinant we've seen.”

“Sounds ideal. For someone. What's the problem?”

Temwold opened her mouth and then closed it, seemingly at a momentary loss. Then she shook her head, as though the answer would have been funny under very different circumstances.

“She won't do it anymore,” she said at last. There was just a hint of a laugh in her voice but the tall man at her side noted with a chill that there was no trace of a smile on her face.

“*She will not change for us.*”

Of course. What was the good of a creature like Tau, capable of altering itself instantaneously into something so unusual, so necessarily invaluable to the eager, rapacious minds behind the Base, if that creature refused to cooperate and...change.

“She was doing brilliantly,” continued Temwold. “No, really. I'll never

understand exactly how she's managed to acclimate to what has happened to her. To what we've done to her. The changes are unimaginable, for both mind and body. Actually, I don't actually understand how any of the morphs can deal with it, integrate it, and she's coped especially well. But what has been truly unexpected is how, even after the addition of these incredibly different genetic inserts, Tau has learned to do so much more with this, this...ability. To change the way she does, so completely. So quickly. And she's been easy to work with. Except for now. And now, with Carzon....”

Here it was.

“What's his part in all this, Temwold?”

Not unexpectedly, she hesitated. Something very complicated was happening here and he might never be able to learn the complete story. At least, not yet. He composed himself, scrupulously attentive as she looked straight into his eyes. And after many moments, her words were strikingly precise when they came and, once again, those words raised more questions for him than they answered. They would stay long in his memory.

“The ... *vision*... of Dyle Carzon was the basis, the spiritual beginning, if you will, for what would become the Tau Project. What he tried to do, what he has done, it's not just a matter of mixing the genetic codes of two different species. That can produce a recombinant, and sometimes, once in a long while, you get something that can even stay alive. But it doesn't necessarily produce *a morph*. Out of two different animals comes one, one that can alter form. *And survive*. Something has come into being here, something never seen before. Terrible. Wondrous. And now, unique. What we have made here... *lives* solely because of Dyle Carzon . He is the only one who could have

done this thing. He alone was capable of writing the program to create the substrate fusions. He made it possible to build the morph. To keep it alive and capable of functioning.”

“*Dyle Carzon designed Gerda Tau.*”

“ I see. But two animals, two personalities, if you will.”

“ No.” she said. “*One animal, almost human.* That's not it. She was stable. Before. But now something has gone terribly wrong. It's almost as though something has snapped deep inside Tau and we can't get in to fix it. And until we do, this Project is dead in the water. And that's not all that's going to be dead. Now, something dreadful has happened, something that ...”

She never finished for at that instant, Tyler rushed up to join them. Her face close and emotionless once more, Temwold looked away as Weller smiled at the little man, wondering again how he managed to combine such furtiveness with such effusion.

“Hello! Dr. Weller, how are you, what a pleasure to see you. You remember me.” Tyler gushed.

At this, Weller nearly blurted out what was in his mind.

“Of course, Dr. Tyler,” he said instead. “I've just been getting the grand tour.”

Tyler looked nervously at Temwold. She was silently absorbed in a careful study of the treetops far below.

“We're all very proud of Altair Base,” said Tyler, and his face twitched slightly as this drew a sharp look from Temwold.

“Oh, Dr. Temwold,” he added. “The Director asked me to tell you we'll be meeting tomorrow with Dr. Weller. He hopes you're free.”

“Tell the Director that I wouldn't miss it for the world.” With one more look at Weller, she left them abruptly. Tyler smiled again, this time even more uncertainly at his guest.

“Lovely woman. Very competent,” he murmured finally. “Ah..did you have a...nice... chat?”

And Weller smiled back at him. “Oh, yes,” he answered. “Lovely woman. Very competent.”

For a second, first confusion, then a flash of real anger crossed Tyler's small, intense face. But he recovered immediately and another effortless smile appeared in its place.

“Yes. Well. We have some time. What shall I show you for fun?”

Tyler's idea of fun was to take his guest to the Base Vivarium, an enormous area designed to hold and maintain a full spectrum of the plants and animals of the planet. It was also where many of the most interesting representative animal species indigenous to Altair were housed. Before they were used.

Even Weller was impressed. It was a stunning achievement. Broad in scope and skillfully designed, the enclosures were luxuriantly spacious, some extraordinarily so. Each had been carefully landscaped and planted to ensure that its captives were maintained in as natural a setting as possible. Here, within the confines of cleverly disguised walls and force fields, high rocky perches loomed up, towering over the massed, glossy leaves, their crests jutting out from the thick, tangle of green, snaking vines. The silver murmur of rushing water as it tumbled down off glittering stones to join cool, still pools reached their ears. Piping their soft, curiously musical calls, the strange, bird-like creatures of the deep jungles of Altair flitted from view in the heavy air. In each space, the densely planted trees and vegetation worked to create a veritable microcosm of living forest.

And as they passed from area to area, Tyler rattled on, compulsively talkative, his nervous voice rising and falling. Then he fell silent, leading

Weller to a section far off to one side. Cordoned and peculiarly secluded from all the rest, one particularly impressive display extended far before their eyes.

Bold and brilliantly effective in execution, it was clear that here, far beyond that given to any of the other enclosures, especial care had been taken to effect a synthesis of profound creation. Like a sea of living green, the space was vast, far larger than any Weller had yet seen. Beyond the softly luminous grid of a force field, stretched almost impenetrable thickets of dense growth. Water dripped languidly from the lush vines and the warm, fragrant air was heavy with natural humidity. As the nurturing darkness of an artificial twilight drew on, Weller stood in silent awe before trees whose mighty girths approached that found in their natural setting. Flowers opened before his eyes and he sighed, rapturously breathing in the living scent of deep jungle.

Small creatures rustled briskly in the undergrowth, scurrying out of sight as the two men drew nearer. From the dimly seen tops of a soaring natural canopy, the sharp, chattering cries of captive flying *palú* and *cheiropts* reverberated, reaching the men as though from a great distance, from unknown sources hidden far within the foliage.

Then astonishingly, all sound ceased completely.

An ominous hush fell over the scene, while like a living thing, twilight crept forward from beneath the still trees. And as the eerie, silent moments passed, Weller's eyes began to unconsciously search that thickening darkness, more and more apprehensively, more and more instinctively aware now that something was watching them from out of that terrible quiet, something that moved toward them in almost absolute silence, with deadly purpose and merciless regard.

Then, just when he felt he could no longer stand there, helplessly waiting for he knew not what, from out of the darkest shadows under the enormous,

dripping leaves, he heard a twig softly *snap*.

Without warning, an enormous cat-like creature threw itself forward toward the two men. Coming up hard against the force grid with a loud snarl, the thing fell back, hissing loudly. Its dark lips drew back, baring long, sharp teeth that glowed ghostly white against the surrounding gloom.

Weller exhaled in wonder.

The creature's heavy, muscular body stretched more than two meters in length. Over its powerful shoulders, a soft, barely distinguishable pattern of indistinct rosettes marked the short fur, making it almost invisible against the light and dark of the deepening night. The thing began to pace rapidly before them, its muscled limbs moving strangely, far too smoothly, so silently that Weller had to look again to be certain that the creature's paws actually passed in contact with the damp ground. Large, luminous eyes, coppery red and shot with green, fixed directly on the men beyond the grid, studying them with a terrifyingly calm, clearly intelligent malevolence. For a long moment, the thing seemed to consider them carefully. Then the creature growled, and its long tail lashed so furiously that for a second, Weller imagined the thing would launch itself at them once more. But instead, it began to turn away, moving with liquid grace back toward the safety of the dark trees.

Tyler had nearly fallen over backward in his haste to instinctively get away. He did not notice how quickly Weller had regained his composure, or that the behaviourist's movements away from the cage had been reflexive, smooth and under practised control.

While Weller stood quietly beside him, Tyler tried to collect himself. His unsuccessful attempts at levity yielded little more than an apologetic squeak, yet the sound was unnaturally loud in the still space.

“You'd think I'd get used to him doing that. Even with the grid there, it

doesn't stop him from trying.”

His guest watched as, again in uncanny silence, the animal melted into the shadows under the trees. “It must feel good,” he said finally and his voice was curiously soft. “ So, this is it. This is the source animal for the other half of Gerda Tau.”

Carzon's assistant stared at the man beside him, at the look on Weller's face as he watched the creature turn once more to regard them, its gaze no less intimidating, revealing a final fiery flash of eyes that glowed back at them from the darkness. Then it disappeared.

“The better half, some would say,” said Tyler. “Except Tau is faster and much stronger than our friend here. “ His voice lowered and he stared at the spot where the creature had disappeared. “And she can do things he can't even dream of.”

Block's deep voice grated suddenly from behind them. “Or rather she will. After your assistance here, Dr. Weller,” he added meaningfully, as he moved forward and he, too, stared long at the spot in the foliage where the animal had finally vanished.

“We certainly took the best from him. Strength, ferocity. Instinct unrestrained by conscience.”

“This is Mr. Block's favorite animal.” Tyler said, and his fingers again nervously played over his lab coat. “After Tau, of course.”

“That's a curious way to refer to someone,” said Weller and his eyes met Block's unflinchingly. The Military man coldly returned the look.

“As Carzon says: ' we are what we are'.”

There was a protracted moment of unrelenting and uncomfortable silence as the two men gazed stonily at one another, before Tyler broke in quickly.

“And we all have the greatest respect for what she is,” he said weakly.

The moment passed. Block looked once again at the dense vegetation, the

shadows which spread secretively under those lustrous dark green leaves.

“And what she can become,” he added.

The three men moved away from the enclosure. And as they did, the infrared sensors mounted before the cage automatically dropped the viewing light level, lowering it to almost total darkness and a veil of true night closed finally over the captive wilderness within.

The shadows in the strange and artificial wood began to deepen, until they were as obscure as those that lengthened now in Tau's room as she sat before her mirror, brushing her hair.

There was just enough light in the room for the average human to see her, but dimly, as she stared at her reflection in the refractive glass field. The brush moved almost mechanically in her hand; its repetitive touch was soothing to the girl who now restlessly shifted forward in her seat.

For Gerda, the light level was more than sufficient for her to see quite clearly. She did not actually need the light at all, being well able to see in near total darkness. But she kept it on, at a low setting, out of long established habit. Still curiously agitated, she sighed deeply, then hummed a little to herself. Then she stopped, and her hand moved to slowly replace the brush on the table before her.

Rising suddenly to her feet, she stretched stiffly, and moved to the wall where a heavy composite bar had been set into the surface. Grasping it firmly, she pulled hard against it, feeling her joints loosening, popping audibly as she bore down on the metal, taxing it to its limit. She moved away. Gerda had used the bar before, many times, to relieve the tension of captivity. But this time, the force of her grip had left behind small deformations in the dense material, imprints impossible for any normal human to imitate.

I need exercise. Badly. I need....I need....

A cool smile came to her face as she dwelt on Carzon's most likely response to any such request from her now. After what she had done today, he was just as likely to put her on bread and water for the next month. And he would have, had he any clear assurance that such a diet would not injure the morph. Or more alarmingly, cause her to revert to some older, more primitive behaviour patterns with regards to nourishment. It was one thing to keep a leopard in a cage; quite another to insist that it eat soup.

Unconsciously, the girl began to pace and without realising it, found herself back at the window, her eyes once more searching the now vacant shuttle dock below. Where *he* had landed. Suddenly uneasy, she glided away from the view with its tantalising expanse of darkening sky and night-black forest, and seated herself once more at the table. Surprised at her sudden sense of loneliness.

Surprised that I should still feel this way...

Thoughtfully, Gerda studied the face of the girl in the mirror. The high cheekbones she would always have, even after the change. Barely visible beneath her full, now darkened lips, her teeth were perfect, white and even. Not nearly as imposing as they might be. Would be, when she wished it. One need not always have fangs. The thick golden hair was kept short; she liked it that way. It was easier to keep it out of the way when she altered into the other form and needed to move quickly. Her eyes were large and very beautiful, their blue being cast with what seemed many colours. Tau tilted her head; as she did so, the light from the table flickered in them, reflecting back at her as it would in a cat's. The effect startled most people. It was pretty. Not human, but pretty nonetheless.

Her long, graceful fingers touched the ivory skin of her throat, tracing its smooth outline.

But as her hand stretched across to the mirror's cold surface, her fingers

reaching to do the same with those of the image there, those fingers no longer ended in shapely nails.

Talons – long, retractable, inhuman, and razor sharp, now tipped each digit and followed the youthful lines of the throat of the young woman in the reflection. The fingers themselves were now longer and had thickened slightly in girth, with just a suggestion of silky hairs extending upward from them onto her hand. Her fair head tilted again and the face of the creature in the mirror stared at those fingers as though they belonged to the hand of another, still unknown being.

A sound, sudden and at the limit of human hearing, came from outside her door.

Gerda's eyes altered in ungoverned alarm, the pupils full slits now. Even had the lights been fully on, no human being could have followed her movements as she glided from the chair.

With a soft whirr, the door slid open and into the nearly dark room, Temwold stepped, a tray of food in her hands. The door closed quietly behind her. The very last of the day's light filtered softly into the room close beside the window. All else was in deep shadow and the room itself seemed to wait breathlessly as Temwold took a cautious step forward. Then she spoke, and her voice was as faint as a whisper, swallowed up by hungry silence.

“Tau. Where are you? “

Only silence answered, silence as profound and alive as the shadows that now seemed to grow alarmingly, filling the space around her.

Behind the visitor, a dark form began to move, rapidly, silently, and at ceiling height along the far wall, purposefully edging closer and closer to the woman who, all unheeding, stood waiting with the tray.

Then the form dropped to the floor, to land noiselessly behind the scientist.

And Tau stepped forward into the pale light near the table.

“I’m here,” she said gently. Temwold turned in relief.

“We need to talk,” she said. “Someone is coming to see you.”

Twilight continued to spread its long fingers in the room. The two women, lit only by the lingering glow from the window and the faint pale light from Gerda's night table, sat closely huddled together. One voice rose and fell gently, its tones increasingly insistent, yet more and more hushed with terrible implication.

As clearly as she could, Temwold explained to Gerda that Carzon had summoned yet another behavioural modifier to the Base.

But this time would be different. Weller was unlike any of the others. The stellar history of his many past triumphs was marred by terrible chilling rumours, even amongst the colleagues who esteemed him and respected his formidable abilities. While he was reputed to be clever and engaging, he was also known to be manipulative, coldly premeditative, almost ruthless in his determination to get his subjects to do his will. And Temwold felt certain that Carzon would allow him to deal with the morph any way he wished. And as forcibly as Carzon himself would have deemed necessary. She tried to tell Gerda that there was no longer any chance she could refuse involvement in the Project. Carzon's lifelong work, his entire future was on the line and he would let nothing stand in his way. With the use of any means possible, he was ready now to force Gerda to work with him once more.

This time there would be no bargaining.

Her soft hair fell forward over her forehead as Tau listened in silence and the shadows grew ever deeper around them. Then, without a word, she rose slowly to her feet. The morph walked away from Temwold, who watched the silent and unmoving form at the far side of the room. And the scientist

frowned, surprised and now alarmed, as a vague sense of apprehension began to build inside her, growing like a cold knot.

It was completely unlike the morph to react like this.

“Talk to me, Tau,” Temwold said finally. She sat upright, straining to look more closely at the shadowed figure of the girl, motionless and only a short distance away. What she saw there made her unconsciously hold her breath.

Standing apart in the dark room, Tau was trembling.

Temwold began to feel the first soft touch of real fear. Gerda had still made no answer and Temwold stiffened when she heard the girl's breathing begin to quicken slightly. It occurred to her suddenly there was a very real possibility that the morph was breaking down.

They had seen this happen before. During the early days of the Project, they had lost as many as sixty percent of their prototypes to superego fragmentation. Time and again, helpless to do anything but watch, Temwold had seen nightmare become hideously real.

What would begin as a simple unpredictability in behaviour would, for some, eventually progress into a form of insanity. They had almost no understanding of the phenomenon; perhaps it was a breakdown at the insert level, perhaps the final revelation of a natural weakness in the human receiving the substrate. But the result was always the same; violent and terrifying. As the differing elements of human and donor species struggled for supremacy, the human ego would disintegrate, dissolving until finally only an unrecognisable and uncontrollable hybrid creature would remain. It was not simply a matter of instability, the instability one would expect from having two very different emotional hyperstructures in one animal. The ability to alter was critically dependent on the genetic fusions of the two component species being balanced, balanced yet always fluid. It was this fluidity that had been the problem, time and again. It meant that the fusions

were never perfectly stable, especially at the higher cortical levels of expression. Personality and the ability to reason were radically affected. It was anticipated that all of the morphs would always display profoundly unusual and often very unexpected emotional reactions. But many were outright unstable, often with devastating results.

Tau might be going mad.

Then, nothing short of death would stop her.

Temwold slowly rose to her feet. Blinking against the perilously encroaching dark, she dared not move closer to Gerda just yet. For there to be any chance at all for survival, if Gerda were on the verge of losing control, the scientist sensed that words and rational ideas alone might be the only thing that could save her now.

“I do understand, Tau. *The first instinct is to run.* Always. Gerda, that's coming from the non-human component.”

But the voice of the morph came out of the dark like a sabre, uncharacteristically harsh, charged with bitter anger. “Don't you think I know that?!”

Temwold took a hesitant breath and started again, this time more gently and more plaintively. “They don't know what else to do, they're desperate, Tau. We're all getting a little desperate.”

“Desperate? *Yes, aren't we all.*”

There was suddenly nothing left to say. Now Temwold watched in despair as the figure of the morph began to pace, her taut body moving rapidly back and forth in the dark room. Holding in check a rising panic, the scientist tried once more to reason with the girl, whose breathing began to come sharply, with a terrifyingly uneven intensity. And Temwold could only manage a halting whisper.

“I didn't mean... I know that you, of all...”

Once again the morph's answer slashed out of the darkness. But now the sound of that voice was horribly harsh, metallic, the pitch lowering even as she spoke.

“Do you?! But do you know just how desperate? *I just can't do this anymore.*”

And her last words came out as a low snarl.

Utterly inhuman.

Frozen with terror, Temwold watched as the dark profile of the girl started to change before her eyes. She could only dimly make out the outline of Tau's head, but already the girl's ears were beginning to alter, growing taller, their dark tips narrowing to end in high, rounded points, with just the suggestion of a strange, unnatural crest forming out of the thick mass of hair on Gerda's head. And Temwold knew with heart stopping certainty what must now be happening to her nails and teeth.

If it came to it, the scientist would never be able to reach the door. She pleaded softly, for what might be the last time.

“Tau. Please.”

This time came silence. There was no answer from that dreadful form standing there shaking in the darkness. What came instead was a long breathless moment of blind terror while Temwold stood helpless, barely moving, waiting for this nightmare silence to end with her own death, unable to do little more than watch in wondrous horror as the creature just beyond the soft pale of light struggled passionately, and inhumanly before her. Then at the last fearful moment, just as Temwold contemplated a final mad, inevitably hopeless dash of escape, she heard Gerda suddenly exhale raggedly.

It was almost a sob.

But the girl's breathing had softened and slowly became ever more regular. Temwold could sense that Tau had turned to look directly at the shaken human behind her. Moments later, bright spots of light shown back at Temwold like two stars in Gerda's eyes. And now the voice of the morph came sadly from out of the darkness and her voice was gentle and sweet and once more altogether human.

“You...of all people. I would never hurt you. Could never hurt you. You know that. Please. Say that you know that.”

“ I know that, Gerda,” breathed the scientist.

The slight figure of the young woman stepped back into the dim light as she came up to Temwold and hesitantly took her hand.

“You've done so much for me.”

There were tears in the morph's eyes.

Overcome with pity, Temwold looked at the drawn, white face before her, at the weariness there and she sighed, still trembling herself, drawing Tau nearer, until her arms encircled the tired girl. Gerda's face lowered to the woman's shoulder, and while still pale, was calm now.

Temwold smoothed back the gossamer wisps of golden hair from Gerda's forehead.

“I always did have a thing for cats,” she said, finally. Tau's laugh was soft, but still shaky.

“Me too. Once.”

Temwold settled both of them down again.

“Just see him,” she said gravely. Her dark eyes held Gerda's and Tau could see how very serious she was.

“And Tau, promise me, just one thing. No, I mean it, it's so important. Please. Promise me you won't eat this one.”

That brought a grim laugh from them both.

“All right,” replied Tau. “I’ll see him. Afterward? Well.”

With another long, searching look and one last embrace, Temwold rose and left the room.

She did not see Gerda walk back to the bed, with sightless tear-filled eyes, her hand reaching to smooth the coverlet, her golden hair falling forward as her head bowed in despair. She did not see her then move in terrible mounting agitation to the window where the morph's eyes, dilated and shining out from the shadows, searched the dark forests below, seeing the jungle as could no other living human. She did not see as the girl's frail calm began to slowly unravel, disintegrating, finally giving way to growing rage, until Gerda's hand, moving too fast to see, suddenly shot out and slammed hard against the force-field grid.

A low snarl came out of the girl at the window. And other than in its softness and inflection, it was identical to that which had come from the thing in the vivarium.

Sleep was impossible.

In her mind, Tau could still see the image of Temwold before her, standing there in the dark. She could still see the stark fear in the woman's eyes as she had stared at Tau, as terror stricken and as helpless as had been all the others before her, waiting for her to change completely. And return, inexorable, no longer even remotely human.

To kill.

Haunted by this vision, Gerda was overcome with horror. Her legs and arms drew up as she huddled fearfully under her coverlet, shuddering with the thought of what might have happened. Of what had nearly happened. Temwold's sweet scent, charged with fear, still hung in the room. It reminded the morph of how little control she had had just moments before. The musky, honeyed scent of human flesh. Of human blood. Her eyes closed tightly as

she tried in vain to shut out the memory, to shut out all the other memories.

What have we done now?

I nearly killed her, she thought. Tonight, I nearly destroyed my best friend, the only friend I have right now in the world.

And with a soft cry of dismay, she bolted upright in the bed, anguished and miserable.

What am I going to do? she agonised. What is there left for me to do now?

She tossed back the covers in exasperation, and was about to leave the bed when, senses tingling, she froze. Quickly pulling up the thin covers, Tau covered herself, tucking the linens firmly across her breasts.

There was no doubt of it. She was being watched. Anger flooded through her.

“You won't see anything you haven't seen before,” she said coldly.

From out of the shadows came Carzon's clear, vibrant laughter. Then he spoke to her through the intercom that connected him with every location on the Base.

“Haven't seen. Haven't touched. Haven't made.”

Not far from the morph's rooms, Carzon's large suite was dark, except for his bedroom which was now illuminated softly by the glow of the viewing screen just opposite his bed.

The room was masculine, powerful but understated, simply appointed but leaving little doubt of the tastes of the man. Carzon's bed was spacious and his lithe body was sprawled comfortably in that bed, naked, the silken linen pooled across his hips. He shifted slightly to better see the enhanced infrared image of Gerda as she sat up. He marveled with delight at how she managed to look both icy and utterly unconcerned at his invasion of her privacy. His eyes passed over the proud head, traveled down the long, graceful throat. Lowering to her smooth, white shoulders, his gaze rested on the thin fabric of

the covers that rounded softly over the firm curve of the breasts of the young woman in the bed. Even on the screen he could see the delicate flare of Tau's nostrils as she turned her head in cold disdain. And there was an enigmatic smile on the face of the Director as he studied his creation.

“I will never tire of watching you, Gerda,” he said. “Let's make a deal. Do what I ask ...and I'll stop watching you.”

Her face was now impassive. “I'll make *you* a deal,” she countered. “Stop watching me...and I won't kill you.”

Carzon found this deeply amusing and his smile widened as he settled luxuriantly against his pillows. “How was dinner tonight, Gerda?”

“Would you believe me if I said the meat was a little too rare?”

“No,” he said. Then his voice lowered intimately. “What if I told you it was human flesh?”

“What if I told you I wish it was yours?” she asked, without a trace of humour.

Carzon laughed again, the sound very rich, very male in her room.

“*Liar,*” he whispered.

If Gerda could have seen, she would have wondered at how bright Carzon's eyes were at that moment. The smile had left him. The sensuous lips were now parted as his gaze passed again over the morph's finely chiseled features.

Then his face became pensive, transfixed by a curious expression that few would have acknowledged or even recognised in so indomitable a man. For, as he contemplated the young woman in the bed, his eyes shone with unforeseen tenderness and longing, as irresistible as it was disturbing. And as though suddenly afraid that the morph might peer back at him from across the screen to discover the unwonted vulnerability in his eyes, he glanced one final time at her shadowed figure, then turned away.

“Good night, Tau,” came his soft whisper.

She knew he had switched off the monitor. She sighed. Then, completely wretched and exhausted, she settled deeper into her bed. Now certain he could no longer hear her, she answered him, very softly, as she had done so many times before.

“Good night, Carzon.”