

CHAPTER 2

ONCE, TWICE AND AGAIN

Once in a great while, the mix is perfect. This is that time. Unless I am mistaken, she will be the perfect morph. Tau has the strength and agility of her primary donor. Will it help her? It hadn't helped the others. The survival rate of the transgenics still does not exceed 5%.

And what of the human recipient?

What remains of mind?

Of spirit? Of soul?

--Judith Temwold, Liaison, Morph Project

As the prisoner and his entourage passed down the hall, a door opened almost soundlessly, not far from Stephen Weller's suite.

Adjusting her lab coat, almost in anticipation that the man once more in chains might look back to see her, a woman stepped out into the corridor.

A rich if not immediately unequivocal array of emotions crossed the face of one of the most acclaimed scientists on the planet, as she watched the figure of Col Adrian, still flanked by his guards, until it was lost to view. A group of technicians nodded courteously to her in passing. Judith Temwold smiled wryly at the propriety, as false as it was seemly, as she finally turned away and re-entered her office.

You can never become less famous. I outlasted him. That's all I did. I merely survived
Dyle Carzon.

In her spacious research suite, her own assistant rose from his seat by the console as she entered. The young man held out the printed record of the scan.

"It's the same as before," he said. "And the one before that as well."

She regarded him gravely, marveling at his near success at sounding efficient, respectful and smug, all in one breath.

They get younger every year, she decided. More cold-blooded and more eager -- for the kind of feeding frenzy only Altair Base can still provide. Even with the scuttling of the morph project.

You name it, we'll design it. As long as it can kill. We still have it. That clout. What makes us unique throughout the System. After all, we accomplished the impossible.

Nearly.

But what else did we nearly accomplish? If we'd only...? If she'd only...?

Her protégé's soft voice broke in upon a very dark reverie. "What are we looking for, Dr. Temwold? Captain Adrian's trace record is the same. It's the same, this time, as in the one before. As in all the others before. For the last four months."

Briefly scanning the report, she put it down. Then, sitting at the console, she mechanically replayed the last third of the interview between Col and Dr. Weller. With practised skill, she again studied the range of vibrant colours in the complex field that played over the form of the prisoner in the room, a field that surrounded him --revealing his mood, his precise physical state, and virtually the plinth of his

soul. As before, the IR and magnetic signatures displayed a near constant glow, as unperturbed as the by now predictable queries and responses lobbed back and forth between the two men in the room.

It was anything but a game.

“He’s not lying. He never was,” her assistant murmured, watching as the figure of the Captain rose and approached that of the man behind the desk.

“I know.” She breathed a sigh of relief, unaware of the young man’s rapt attention on her, as once more, he attempted to fathom the frank mystery of the woman for whom he worked.

He took in the neat, dark hair, the penetrating gaze. A mouth that, on any other woman, could even have been inviting. Ice maiden, he mused, echoing what was by now common conjecture at the Base. It was a conclusion that had seen more than enough fuel from the stories about her questionable relationship with Dyle Carzon and his wildly notorious tenure as Director-cum-Dictator of Altair Base, and creator of the morph project. Little was known, all was speculated. Still. Judith Temwold remained a mystery. Still.

Does she ever feel? he wondered.

His cheeks flamed suddenly, guiltily. For in apparent answer to his very thoughts, the scientist beside him drew a quick breath. Her eyes were now fixed again on the monitor. Then she shook her head and cleared her throat, her demeanour as calm as before. The young man stared first at her, then at the display. There was nothing to see. Nothing but colour, colour pulsing on colour, mirroring the foreseen spectacle of demand and denial and demand.

“What is it?” he asked.

A long moment passed. Her face was once more inscrutable. “Nothing. Nothing,” she replied, calmly. As steady as before, her hand moved to abort the feed. “You’re right. It’s the same. Each time. Done. Hopefully for the last time. Get us some lunch?”

She looked directly at him.

And smiled.

He was thunderstruck. Without thinking, he smiled shyly back, and nodded, surprised into swift compliance at the sudden, unexpected rarity of the gift playing across those suddenly, clearly inviting lips.

She shuffled papers, copied the file, did the usual busy work with the hands. It was with sublime, impenetrable calm that Temwold waited patiently for him to leave. Then, as the door closed on him, she leapt up from her chair, hands clenched with raw excitement for the space of a heartbeat. Striding quickly across the room, she stopped and stood, staring back at the monitor as if it would sprout hair.

One breath to steady herself, and she triumphantly seated herself once more at the desk. Carefully reactivating the feed, she scrolled back to replay the last few

moments. It was as she had said, all was exactly of a piece with what they had observed before, over the by now countless series of interviews between the behaviourist and the captive man.

But, this time, by pure chance, Col had approached his former mentor's desk and the field sensors had briefly engulfed both men.

This time, Temwold's gaze was riveted – not on the Captain's field traces, which continued, predictably, repetitively unchanging, as they had been so many times before.

This time, it was with a sense of frank astonishment that she watched the field. What had started as a constant thing, had now inexplicably glowed; pulsing, changing in both hue and intensity.

And it had changed, unmistakably — if only for a split-second – around Stephen Weller.

Through hallways as immaculate as they were silent, the walk to the quarters of the former Director of Altair Base was short.

But as Temwold's course led her ever nearer to the place that Dyle Carzon had conceived as the heart of his unchallenged dominion for nearly two decades, she unconsciously slowed her steps, until she reached his doors and stopped before them.

There are no ghosts here, Judith.

Should there be?

Yet still she hesitated before her former leader's door, hesitated a long moment before her Class One security card allowed her to enter the darkened chambers.

“On,” she said. Full, comforting light flooded the empty rooms, rendering them impotent, if not at peace. The damage incurred during the battle to wrest the morph from her captivity here had been repaired. The space now differed little from the time when Carzon himself might have walked here. Yet, despite all that she had known then, and knew now – the image of a cenotaph – grim, cold, waiting – prevailed, doing little to alleviate her growing tension.

Or her wonder.

This was only the second time she had come here since Col's ship had wreaked such destruction on Sephis, and with it, all that the creator himself had made.

What are you listening for, you silly woman? He's not here.

It was still not without some effort that she traversed the rooms, unwilling to touch anything. First his living quarters, then the bed chamber, and finally the private office of the man whose genius had come so near to creating a new line of

living creatures, never before seen in any System, Homeworld or Out World alike.

Seating herself at his desk, her fingers flew over the keyboard as once more she attempted to unlock his personal data files. Tried and failed. As had so many others before her.

And drawn irresistibly, compelled by memories, as tormented and consoled as had been few others before her, she once more activated the morph project hologram log – and propelled the image of Gerda Tau into graphic life over the desk of her creator. Temwold drew a quick breath and sat back in the chair, unable to look away from the effigy of their finest work. Her thoughts, unchained as ever at the sight before her, came unbidden, like tears tumbling free once the will had failed a stoic but fragile sway.

I came here to watch him. That was my job. To observe. We wanted to improve the race of men. To make us stronger, faster, better – to make us more than we'd ever been before.

That was all.

It was never to create you. In a hundred years, we never imagined we would create anything like you.

Lithe and muscular, here, as in some dazzling, terrible, dream, hung the form of a young woman with skin glowing uncannily white, and whose hands, so shapely and so beautifully wrought seemed poised to change into something inexplicable -- savage, deadly and unstoppable. Temwold studied the classic features, the full lips, carnelian dark with non-human genetic substrate, the girl's thick mane of short golden hair. And the morph's eyes – large, liquid, sapphire – full of wonder.

As full of promise as of ready death.

Look away, Judith. Don't look at her any more.

At a touch from her fingers, the image faded and died. She rose. With the room unseen around her, her own blind walk took her away from the console to the windows at the far end of Carzon's suite. Here the Director had surveyed his domain; the high security Base, unparalleled in the System, sprawling acres wide, with its lofty towers, its impenetrable sancta bordering the jungles of Altair itself, jungles that spread as far as eyes could see.

She was high above the rest of the complex, which seemed from this vantage to be little more than an island, cold, forbidding, and deadly, floating in an even deadlier sea of green.

We have made here a savage world, within a savage world.

The muted calls of *cheiropts* reached her through the thick security glass. Pestilent here as they were throughout the System's many planets, Altair's raptors, smaller but as ferocious as the Storm World's *palú*, ranged in massive flocks. One group drew near. Circling acrobatically ever closer in expert flight, these aggressive reptiles were as eager to fight on the wing amongst themselves as to feed on the rich boreal life of the planet.

A low sound made her gasp involuntarily and drew her gaze back across the room.

As if called, like some phantom unwilling or unable to rest, the image of Gerda Tau once more hung above the desk. And its eyes somehow seemed to seek out her own, in silent plea.

Had she merely paused the program, instead of closing it?

And Judith Temwold cried out again, this time in horror, as with a loud, harrowing shock, two *cheiropts* violently struck the window right beside her face. Their bitter warfare had cost them dear. Locked in death, with tooth and claw still deeply imbedded in dying flesh, the broken mass of shattered wings and crushed limbs slid wetly downward, the tangled crimson pulp soon lost to view.

And on the window, like ominous red fingers drawn across the glass, rivulets of dark blood trickled, streaming slowly down.

Her pulse racing, Temwold returned to the console, and with trembling fingers, conclusively ended the hologram program, watching as the image finally died away.

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

She took a deep breath. It failed to steady her. To the scientist at the desk, the rooms again seemed preternaturally silent. But it was the stillness of a held breath, not an absent one.

Around her -- not the hush of vacancy, but of abeyance.

She was the stranger, here in these rooms.

Afraid of what she might now see in their emptiness, and resolutely resisting the dreadful impulse to glance behind her, Judith Temwold once again darkened the suite to a level as would befit a sepulcher, and passed through the doors.