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Science Fiction

DOOR OF HOPE

by Douglas R. Mason

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Door of Hope

On the night that Chad Poldano died, I knew for a truth that I was looking for a human agent.

With the others, in spite of the brief from Northern Hemisphere Security, I had not been altogether convinced. It could have been the isolation of the place, dependence for long periods on life support systems that might blow, any one of a dozen psychological imponderables that could suddenly combine to tip the scales and convince a man that oblivion was a better place.

But not Chad.

I had known him, on and off, for years. Meeting occasionally, when he had come in from some mission and I was on my way out. Not much to say to each other. But if ever I had to define friendship, I would say that he was a friend. Somebody I did not have to put a guard up for. And I believe he felt the same.

I had checked in at PEC. Polar Experimental Complex, if you're lucky enough not to have heard of the place, at midday in late March. The sun was so low and dispirited that floodlights were still burning on the landing strips. A massive heart-shaped black lump of mountain loomed in the semi-dusk like a sombre portent. Lines of pinpoint

red light stretching away, giving definition to the city.

Well past the half million mark now, an engineering marvel, within 'spitting distance' of the North Pole, maintained as a measure of human environmental control against the utmost rigour of natural opposition. Crazy, when you thought of it. Man had no business to be there. But it was, or should have been, a gift for security.

Probably it had been, too. In the mid twentieth century, when it served an altogether different purpose as an outpost of an early warning system for the backyard squabbles of those times. Small and compact then, with only service personnel to bother about. Now it was a different matter. As far away from the probing eyes of Southern Hemisphere Intelligence as it could well get, it gave an uneasy home to the bulk of the North's classified scientific research projects and much of the production plant for advanced weaponry. Ultima Thule. Symbol of the very butt and seamark of the mind's utmost sail.

I knew, of course that Chad was there somewhere: but in the way they have of trying to see that the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing, I did not know what his cover was or where he was located. On the short flip over by trans continental rocket, I had taken another look at the files. Nineteen suicides in under six months. Not enough to bring a city to a standstill, but anybody

looking at a flow diagram of the operations side and putting the names up with obituary disks would see at once that the effect was out of all proportion to the small number involved.

It certainly looked like sabotage and I could see the force of sending in another central security man. Southern Hemisphere Command in Brazilia had been trying for years to get a toe-hold and this could be it. Infiltration was easy enough either way, With only the equatorial line dividing Earth planet into two oppsed halves. But after hearing the case histories, medical reports, careful detailed investigations, I had certainly come to the conclusion that any pattern could be coincidence. They were classic suicides every one. Individual, different in enough ways to make each one a personal job. An inside job you might say.

I never did see Chad alive. He had fixed himself an outside billet. Patrolling surface installations with an ambulance tender. I reckon he must have aimed to get near to any further cases as an accepted and unobtrusive medico.

The locale offered an easy option to the would-be suicide. All a man had to do was to head for the great outdoors like a latter-day Oates and a few hours later a medical team would be excavating for him with a heat hose.

They brought him into Umanag General Hospital when

to 3A /

I was there for my medical check. They had no time at PEC for anybody else's opinion about fitness. Every newcomer, whatever the grade on his pass, had to satisfy the local requirements for withstanding Arctic rigours.

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That was a load of bull too. You could live for years there without taking a sniff of anything but scented air delivered at a steady twenty degrees ^{Celsius}. I suppose they had in mind that if the reactors packed up, it would be a fight for survival.

It was about twenty-one hundred hours when I got to the desk. Anywhere else they'd have left it for the next day. Maybe at PEC their notions of night and day had slipped a bit. I was going through the usual rigmarole. Made more acceptable this time, because I liked the look of the medico who was calling the shots.

Mid-brown hair and a lot of it in a well-shaped, layered cut that looked interesting in the nape of a very white neck. Large, squarish face with a broad, high forehead and blue-grey eyes. Neat white shirt with a tailored look and long legs that made slacks a natural wear.

I read her name off the lapel badge - Fabiola Dent, Dr. Umanaq General: Sector 7. Room 19. "Interesting name that," I said, after a long busy silence on her part.

"Fabiola?"

"No, Umanaq. I don't see the significance of it."

She was not put out that I was not making a kind of introductory play with her own name, she said, "You'll find a lot of survivals here from early days when it was a pioneer settlement. I believe it's an Eskimo word. Something to do

with the mountain."

"I saw that. Very impressive. Gloomy though. How do you get on for entertainment?"

"We manage."

This last had an unspoken gloss that my arrival would not contribute a thing to the amenity level and I began to feel piqued.

A trim red-head came in and dropped my newly-minted identity tag on the table between us and went out again as though she couldn't care less either.

I picked it up and checked off Kruger Chevron, Thermo Engineer, Sector 4: Room 23. Hair, Light Brown; Eyes, grey. Height, 6ft 2ins; Weight, 200 lbs. Age, 32 yrs 6 months. Issued: 29 March 20th 5. Retest due 29 Ap. Then below it, the full length micro pictures which could be blown up full size to give exact definition of just how that 200 lbs was distributed, back and front view with mug shot profiles to back up.

Doctor Dent picked it up with a nicely-shaped hand; round, supple-looking fingers which were well-adapted for stroking a forehead or feeling a pulse, gave it only a cursory glance and handed it over.

I was about to say that as a heating specialist I would be glad to channel a little warmth her way, when a tell-tale glowed red on a small wall-panel console and she lost any interest she might have had.

Fifteen seconds later I was out on my ear in the reception area whilst as duty medico she answered the call.

But if she wanted to spare a stranger his share of grief, she had missed out. Orderlies were carrying the stretcher into the casualty bay as I went through.

I got to them before she did. It was Chad. Defrosting a bit now in the comfortable warmth.

I said, "Accident?" - and took a quick look at the identity tag which had been looped on a stiff ear for easy reference. Like me, he had kept his own name. His latest medical retest was quite recent - 26 March, with a signature against it that could have been F. Dent. Other data included Sector 7, Room 169.

Then she was beside me, "Not a very good introduction to PEC, Mr. Chevron. But don't worry. There are a lot of people here and the statistical chance of this happening to you is very slight."

"What has happened to him?"

"Sub zero temperatures outside. Exposure. It doesn't take long."

"He's one of yours. A medico. He should have known better."

"You should know, Mr. Chevron, a lot of things can upset the mind that we can't explain even now."

"How would a thing like that happen?"

"Don't ask me. I'm just the agent who certifies physical cause of death. Other circumstances I don't know about."

"When do you get off the hook?"

"Twenty two hundred."

"You're right about this being a poor reception. Now if you were really sold on personnel adjustment, you'd agree to meet me at twenty-two fifteen and spend a little time making me glad to be here. Like having a meal somewhere."

There was a pause to a count of five as we walked along one on either side of the trolley, with Chad uncharacteristically making no comment. We came up to a double door that began peeling back. I thought she was going to pass it up; but suddenly she said, "All right, Mr. Chevron. I'll see you then. Meet me down in reception. Thank you. I'd like to go out tonight."

Down in reception I made a play at being fidgetty. Roamed around, put on a headset in one of the individual viewing booths and saw part of a show. Asked a morose clerk with a chestnut ringlet that seemed to give her a lot of trouble about this and that.

"I see I've been listed for sector four. How do I get there then?"

She did not lift her head, "Same as anybody."

Walkway right outside."

"You medical staff live right on the spot?"

"That's so."

"Very convenient. Saves time that. Up the stairs and into bed."

"Down."

"That's a change. You'd have to adjust to that. Topsy-turvy."

"Look," she peered at my identity tag. "Mr. Chevron, I got a whole pile of documentation here. Can I get you some other spools?"

"That's all right, you carry on. I guess I'm just restless. Change of place at too fast a rate. I'll take a walk around. I'm meeting Dr. Dent here later on. I'll be back."

"I can't wait."

Outside there was the very broad corridor, more like a roofed-in square with the imposing frontage of Umanaq General at my back. Brilliantly lit tunnels going off three ways and in the centre an elliptical translucent shaft which housed elevators to connect with other levels.

Everywhere, long vistas of carefully chosen colour harmonies to give the impression of space and fight the mind's belief that it was in a well-furnished tomb.

There again, I had been in other places where the environment was really anti-life and had seen men and women

who had done a full stint. Not a suicide on record. Nothing here could have got under Chad's skin.

I walked across to the elevators and found a wall chart that gave all the answers location-wise. Even to a detailed lay-out of the dormitory area for the sector.

Room 169 was at the end of a horseshoe gallery, very spacious, nice effect of two large bronze plates doing a perpetual-motion run on each other's rims. Set on a plinth it gave the effect of moving leaves as though there was organic life.

There were a number of people about. Visitors. Medico's going on or off duty. Nobody bothered me. I stood outside 169; pressed a call button with my right hand and blew out the lock catch with a very neat gadget in my left. Then I opened it and went in as though it had been opened for me.

'Room' was a misnomer. In point of fact there were four. A very comfortable set-up. Small hallway with rooms opening off. Bedroom, study/sitting-room, bathroom and a small kitchen. Though I imagine nobody much used this last, with all the provision of restaurants in the sector.

Not a thing out of place. He was always a fastidious, tidy-minded type. I worked over it quickly and carefully with an eye on the clock. On the desk in his study was a square, buff envelope addressed to "The Senior Controller, Umanaq General Hospital."

I put it in my pocket and went out.

Fabiola Dent had continued to exercise her penchant for tailored shirts. This time it was cerise with stiff collar and cuffs. The cuffs held electrum links monogrammed in gold. She was certainly a big girl with a flat muscular midriff and the long well-shaped legs were now unkennelled for the world to see below one of the short, aluminium-foil kilt affairs then in vogue from the pole to the equator.

I did my best; although, to be honest, I would rather have found my way to room 23 and taken a ration of private study and some sleep.

I might just as well have done that, because when I finally got there, into a suite which was identical with Chad's late nest, it was 0115 of a new day and I had made no progress whatsoever.

No progress in any direction in fact. She was good company. Pleasant. Not reticent. Talked about her job and PEC and showed the right amount of interest in me and what had ostensibly brought me there; but she was as self-possessed as a professional hostess. No man born of woman would rush Dr. Fabiola Dent where she did not want to be.

At one point she said, "You'll find services priced high here, in spite of the anti-inflation law. Go carefully with that credit slip."

"That's all right. I've got a backlog to work through. I've had eighteen months on Satellite Three,

remember."

I'd given that piece of info. straight. After all there was a call for thermo engineers there as elsewhere and anybody could check that I'd done a regular stint on the staff there. Other things, too; but they were not on anybody's record.

The restaurant we were in was on the fourth level in Sector Seven. She knew about everybody and introduced me to one or two. In particular her own boss the Medical Controller.

He was one I didn't care a lot about. Heavy, full-fleshed face. One that would develop jowls. Hooded eyes with thick creamy upper lids. Thick black eyebrows and a blue-black patina of stubble just below skin surface round his chin. Moist lips, very red against a general pallor. When he leaned on the table, I had a momentary urge to pin a fish fork through one of his plump hands.

Fabiola said, "Dr. Orman, this is a newcomer. An engineer. Mr. Kruger. Mr. Kruger, this is the Medical Controller, Dr. Orman." An old-world type introduction with my rank firmly established as the less important of the two.

There was a small floor and we danced a bit to some piped electronic medleys. Old tunes. One that stuck in my mind with a dead sentimental ballad about some girl being like an angel's wing. But a good beat to dance to. She moved very

well, so that she seemed feather light and flattered my mediocre repertoire of fancy steps. At the end of the evening, if a balance had to be struck, I was on the losing end. She had told me nothing, committed herself not at all and interested me, so that I could not again be entirely objective about her.

It was not until I was sluicing down under a shower with a nightcap of Cointreau held out of the curtain of warm water that I did the sum and saw that she might be very clever. Also, if anybody wanted to slip a micro monitor into my spaghetti, they had been given every chance.

All right then, anybody could listen in. All they would get would be a gastric raspberry. I did not even check the rooms. Central Security files had gone back under seal in the shuttle. The few special tools I had might be carried by an engineer if anybody got curious.

Still, I left the shower running and opened Chad's letter in the bathroom. It was his crabbed handwriting sure enough and told me nothing. Like the others, he gave his individual gloss on the situation. Chad being a fighting man, the impression given was that circumstances had closed in round him; athane on a knoll encircled by axemen. His going out was equivalent to falling on his sword rather than give events the satisfaction of doing him down.

What events though for godsake? I was beginning

to get very irritable about the whole show. It made no kind of sense.

It was all very well for Chad to enlarge on 'how weary stale, flat and unprofitable seem to me now, all the uses of this world'; but it was no help at all.

I got into bed and snapped out the concealed lighting. In the darkness I could feel the structure of the immense city all around me. In some ways it was a more unpleasant sensation than the contrary sense on Satellite 3 where there was just plain bugger-all everywhichway.

I am very sensitive to atmosphere. The feel of a place. This was not good and could definitely work as a sap to morale over a long period.

But most people were well-used by this time to the city-complex idea, with every community need concentrated under one roof. Most of the big European centres, Orleans, Hamburg, Oporto ran to two million. Nothing new in that. Perhaps it was the feeling that here there should not be a centre? Outside, natural forces were waiting for the day when they could breach the dyke.

Even then it was not new. The Russians did it successfully with their Siberian cities over a century ago.

Although I had thought I was tired, I could not sleep. I flicked on the light and began to wander round the room, yawning, stretching, picking up a book. Miming out the

traditional attitudes of those for whom sleep would not come.

What was it about this city? Some random grouping of psychic forces which generated its own destructive power like the classic case on Satellite Eight a few years back? But Chad was in on that one. He would have smelled it out.

Below conscious level, the ten billion unit computer bank had been putting in a quiet bit of sifting. It came up with an interim message as I was pulling on my pants. Like a neon strip. Common ground: Retest.

That part of my mind which has taken to itself the special function of devil's advocate - to knock any good ideas I sometimes get, was on to it like a hound dog. Of course, retest. Everybody has a retest. Slice it where you like, every living soul in the complex is either coming up to or passing a retest.

But it was a solid bit of deduction. I have a very photographic kind of memory and I could see the files flicking over. In every case, there had been a recent retest. That was one thing which had made it odd. All the suicides were in first class physical shape. Documented as such.

Chad had been certified by F. Dent no less.

I was ready to go, except for arms and I hesitated about that. Being found with a Security Special would blow

my cover wide open. On the other hand, Chad was dead and he was no slouch. On balance, it was better to have a little advanced technology working for me.

Flat, rectangular strengthening plates in the lining of my case slipped out and slotted together. Micro energy cells from my shaver clipped into the angular butt. It was poor functional design; but effective. Anybody really asking for it, could win a bodkin hole in his head at fifty metres.

It was 0200 when I got back into the living area of Sector 7. Not that time was significant. Nothing had changed. Overhead lighting was still daylight quality and there seemed to be just as many people about as ever.

Working this hunch I reckoned no-one would expect me to start forcing the pace so early. Even if they had me identified which was unlikely. Of course, if I had been slipped a biological monitor somebody would be interested in what I was doing out of my bed. But then there was an obvious suggestion that I was simply trying to get into the long-legged doctor's.

Room 19 was silent when I walked past the first time and planted a small adhesive bug on the lintel. It could have been empty. Next time along, I retrieved my monitor and did the same trick with the lock that I'd done on Chad's. But

This time I didn't push the pinger.

It was semi-dark in the small entrance hall. What light there was came from the bedroom door which was about four centimetres open. Enough to see that the doctor was a woman of taste.

I've brought movement down to a fine art, and I'd swear that I made no noise moving to that door and easing it slowly back. So that it came as a definite blow to professional pride when she said, "Come in. Come in, Mr. Kruger," as though I had pounded the knocker and shouted through the lock.

Some salve to pride came when I saw that she was sitting in front of a dressing table which was fitted for more than cosmetic art. She was watching me through the mirror, and as I crossed the room towards her, a glowing blue asterisk came to a stop on a diagram of the complex. Tracking had gone far enough, the subject was within tactile distance.

The tactile part could have been very interesting at that. Fabiola Dent had left the shirt-look for a rudimentary bit of nonsense in translucent vermillion which gave her white skin a very warm glow. My fingers were stretched out as though to a welcome fire, when she twisted round on a spin-top stool and I saw that her capable hands had brought up an old-fashioned, mechanical hand gun and had

it lined up with clinical precision on my navel.

I stopped dead and said, "That's no way to welcome a slave of passion."

She said, "Don't give me that, Chevron. You went to Poldano's room and suppressed a letter he left there. Now you're here. What are you trying to do?"

There was a quality in her voice which I could not immediately assess. But it was familiar. I guess I had been fooled by those long feminine legs and the tumescent curvatures that the vermilion drape only emphasised by part-concealment. It took my computer bank a good four seconds to deliver. Then I knew.

Fabiola Dent was a bio-mech. Whatever care they took, there was a voice timbre which could not be entirely concealed. Moments of tension would bring it out. Something to do with the cumulative a-sexual attitudes built up by longevity. Deep down in the psyche, there was something that said sex and the centenarian do not mix.

Interest in sex is only a stage and the business of man is to be concerned finally with power. Perhaps that was the way of it. Whatever it was, I was interested enough in Eros myself to spot a phoney. It was very strange that I hadn't got onto it earlier. She must have been trying very hard.

But it raised another interesting point. I knew for a fact that no bio-mechs were supposed to be on this station. They had their uses; but they were notoriously bad security risks. Longevity brought cynicism. Once a human being had been fitted with so many non-organic renewals that he could be called a bio-mech, he seemed to take on non-human characteristics.

Southern Hemisphere Intelligence made more use of bio-mechs. There was a big training school outside Brazilia. We knew a good deal about it, though not how they managed to keep their eldest citizens toeing the human line.

That being so, it was remarkable that grandma Dent had gotten herself into this very useful slot in Umanag General. In fact, my busy computer told me that she could only have done it if there was someone else there to check her in and cook the record.

A great deal of what I had been thinking was crossing the narrow dielectric and registering behind that broad forehead. I realised that she could also be a telepath.

It was confirmed when she said, "That's right, Chevron. You finally got yourself up to date. It's fascinating the way you pin brains manage to hammer out a few simple truths. But it is encouraging in its way. It makes one quite proud of homo sapiens to watch his faltering

footsteps carry him to his goal."

It was humiliating, but it went nowhere towards making me look around for a ceremonial disembowelling knife.

Again she was ahead. She said, "Quite right. There has to be more. A little help along the road." Her eyes lifted to a point behind me and there was a tiny nod of assent.

Hands closed in on my arms and a very neat straight-jacket affair was clamping me in instant immobility before I could say anything relevant. I could still think, however, and was gratified to see a small flush rise along her cheekbones. She was not so far gone along the zombie's road as all that.

But the medico-poise reasserted itself and she busied herself at her useful dressing-table with an ampoule of clear serum which she was loading into a high pressure syringe gun.

"This will help you to make up your mind."

"A suicide drug. Clever stuff. I just don't believe it."

"You don't have to. There is no doubt about its effectiveness, however. You know that a scorpion, when enclosed in a ring of fire, will curl back its sting and sting itself to death. At the instant that its brain accepts

the inevitable, there is a secretion pumped into its system which makes the one-way decision final and irrevokable. Action after that is automatic. This is a preparation derived from that secretion. It is a one-way ticket, Chevron."

She swabbed a meticulous circle on my upper arm and shot neatly into its centre. And that was it. I felt no different except for a kind of total discouragement which was not surprising in the situation.

Ayesha went on with her gloss, "You will be given every opportunity to open your own door into oblivion; but for now you will need a little sedative until we can move you into a suitable place."

More deft movements with fingers that could definitely have been better employed and I was out as though someone had switched me off.

Medication has gone a long way since a patient had to be made raving drunk before they hacked off a leg. I woke again without side effects. Clear headed as though from sleep. Worried though. Definitely worried.

It was not so much the room, though that was no catch. Somewhere in the top level of the complex. My own penthouse. I felt that affairs had finally caught up with me. I was remembering every discreditable thing I had ever

done and it was an intolerable burden.

The room was four metres square with a lighting port in its roof and one black wall. At least it appeared to be a wall until I went over to it as the natural match for my mood. Then I saw that it was all glass. An observation window for a panoramic view of what little of PEC showed on the surface.

Upstage left was a dark shadow of darkness on darkness, the sentinel mountain. Black ice. Swept bare of snow by the pulsing gales. A bleak inhospitable landscape.

There was no wall clock and my own time disk had gone. So had the laser. In fact I was left only with items for my own destruction. I could garotte myself or poison myself from a row of conveniently labelled phials or open a vein or two with any one of a dozen razor-edged scalpels.

A monitor showed outside temperature as eighty below zero and still dropping. Beside it was a door which they knew I would find although it was neatly tailored into the panelling.

Altogether it must have taken me an hour to sort out how it all worked. Perhaps that was a bit of high-level psychology in itself. Once I'd worked it out I would be that much more keen to use it as though it was my door and my

It opened into a heat lock. Coffin size. Room for two to stand upright. Preview of the sarcophagus. The far door would only open when the inner one was sealed. I didn't open it. I stepped back into the room and took another look round.

It was rat's alley all right. I had never felt a blacker sense of despair. Everybody would take their drug a different way. For me it was an agonising re-appraisal of things past. They stank, every last one. Nothing missed its smear of failure and opportunity lost. A career set in counter-espionage, where honour was a dirty word, gave ample ground for spiritual discontent.

Then there was the current situation. The scorpion's ring of fire. Stay there and take the bio-mech's patronising sneer? Far better to do the job myself with whatever dignity remained. Walk out of the door into searing cold to cauterise and burn out the maggot-heap of trash that filled my head. A door of hope when rightly considered. A quietus.

But not yet. Not just yet. I went back inside and sat on a divan-couch affair which was the room's only furniture other than an instrument trolley. Something else was needling me.

Others had gone this way. But no-one else, as far as I knew, had known what was going on. Now that made a

difference which clever bloody, bio-mech Dent had not thought about. They had it all set up; but they had introduced a variable. Something was happening inside my head which went a little way to counteract the chemical agent of depression. Malaise had a target to latch on. Instead of being turned wholly in on myself, there was a fair ration of it reserved entirely for the smart-alec bitch who had channelled it my way.

The more I concentrated on it, the more angry I got. There would be a monitor on the room, nothing more sure; so I sat with my head in my hands in an attitude of abandon that was anyway only partly mime.

I got up and picked up a thin-bladed knife and stared at it in what I hoped would register as reluctant fascination. Good rep.company stuff. Behind it there was the germ of an idea. But I have to say that one of its attractions was that it would probably fail and I would be finished anyway.

By this time there was a red haze in front of my eyes and I was trembling so that the knife point had an interesting quiver on it.

If Fabiola Dent was expecting it to be turned in on myself, she was disappointed. I wandered distractedly round the room a couple of times with it and then fetched

up against my door of hope.

Then with a musical comedy straightening of the shoulders, I slid it back and went through. I was really sorry that I did not have a red rose to throw back into the silent room.

The outer door had a powerful, magnetic return mechanism and would no doubt put up a signal on some console when it was opened. They would have thought of that - sidetracked the circuit in some way to give me time to solidify. But they would know when it opened.

I spun a heavy locking wheel and the catches came back. I opened the door wide enough to get the flexible knife blade into the gap, probably a couple of millimetres. Then I pressed myself back against the inner bulkhead where there was some warmth even through the special insulation.

It was all a question of time. There was not much residual thermal activity in the lock - except mine - and it was due to do a slow leak out through the gap. An interesting calculation for a junior physics class. Once it was gone there was no power on earth that could re-assemble it. The second law of thermodynamics might have been knocked together just to do me dirt.

That was self-pity again and I enjoyed it.

There was a heat gauge in the lock and it dropped slowly to zero and then went on. How long it took I don't

know to this day. I know that I had a growing feeling that I would starve to death before I froze.

It was cramped, it was cold. Very cold, bitterly cold, with the coldness of thick-ribbed ice, which began to build up from condensation on the facing wall. One thing that worried me was that I should not be physically able to do anything about it, when they came to close the outer panel and check the score.

Then I felt the vibration at my back as someone began to open the inner door.

It was a tight fit in the coffin, but I plucked him in by the throat and beat his head back against the wall until he went limp.

A zipper job, and my fingers took a long time to get round to it. But eventually I had him winkled out; a medical orderly on Fabiola Dent's personal staff, according to his loquacious tag. I got the suit on and spent a couple of minutes getting the benefit of its built-in heaters, then I pushed open the outer door and dumped him outside.

The knife was still there, stopping the door from closing back, so I picked it up and put it in a handy belt pouch.

Then I walked back across the room to an open door cunningly set in the angle of two walls and out into a large

gallery which had once possibly been an observatory.

I reckoned that although I must still be carrying an internal micro tell-tale, nobody would be checking any longer on that. But the owner of the suit would be expected to go directly to the big man and report. Where and who was he?

In the ice box, there had been time for cool reflection. Whoever had allowed a bio-mech into the system had to be in the same organisation. Whoever did retests on Fabiola Dent would know all about it. A hunch told me that it could be Orman, the Director himself.

At the end of the broad gallery there was a short flight of stairs going down to a landing with a couple of elevator shafts. I thumbed for a cage and waited ten seconds for one to come. When it had dropped three levels, I was on familiar ground. I stepped out on to the far end of the open square in front of Umanaq General.

Dr. Dent was coming out of her casualty reception area looking tireless and refreshed the way bio-mechs do whether they get their eight hours or not. I came up beside her and took her arm.

I said, "A minute of your time, grandma. Take me to your Director. This Orman. Look also as if you were enjoying it."

The grip I had on her wrist was on the way towards being a tourniquet and she tried to break away.

"Don't be stupid," I said. "You want this arm, don't you? Shift along."

Her free hand was moving to a thin platinum chain round her neck, but I got there first and broke the links against her skin. It left a long red mark which showed up bright against the general pallor. At the end of the chain, still warm and scented from its sojourn in the intimate depths, was an oval medallion. I dropped it on the parquet and ground it under my heel. Anyone at the receiving end would get an interesting acoustic muddle to sift.

But she still looked very confident. Partly no doubt, at her age, she would only have contempt for the bungling efforts of an adolescent, partly on the solid basis that the Director would get them out of the jam. Denouncing her to him would just be a big belly laugh for one and all. It would make the year's best story at Southern Command. I checked her identity tag. Retest was signed by Fatso himself.

Orman had a penthouse office suite on the same level at my late cell. There was a receptionist in the hallway who was about to say, 'I will find out if Dr. Orman can see you.' But she was out of luck.

I pushed La Dent through the swing-back gate,

sorted out the wall panel for the right button and went through the opening door as the secretary was telling her video that callers were on their way.

Orman was sitting behind a big desk and looked up without any immediate change of expression. Fabiola Dent was an okay visitor and the insulation outfit could hide the honest face of one of his own party.

But there was enough off-key flavour in the situation for him to raise his thick eyebrows in a questioning way to his help meet.

It did him no good. Using old-fashioned mechanics, I levered Fabiola forward so that she had to hit the edge of the desk with her thighs and jackknife over on to its shiny top.

No nicer torso ever fell on an in-tray; but he was clearly in no mood for it. He was trying to pick my laser out of a shallow recess when I got to him.

Apart from my own murderous mood to purge, there was Chad. I was quite glad to find that he wanted to try his luck.

In the three minutes it took me to put him down, we more or less wrecked the office. Twice I had to turn aside to stop Fabiola taking a hand. The first time, she was trying to call the outer office and I picked up the video box and cracked it on her head. Then I was busy for half a

minute as Orman made another sortie and I got round to the desk again, going for the laser.

This time, I reckoned she had served any useful purpose and I clubbed her with the patient's chair. Orman came up like a train and wide open. I got him nicely, using his own momentum and spun him round twice like a shot-putter before I let him go on a very low trajectory to a solid piece of wall.

It was no good keeping them for Central Intelligence to work over. This kind would reveal nothing. Very sophisticated and all set up to put out false data even on cephalic taps.

A suicide pact would be a nice gesture, though anyone knowing about bio-mechs would know it was a phoney. I straightened up the office and found a heat lock leading out.

It was cold even in the suit and I heard that curious ping which came from my own nose freezing up as soon as I put my head out. I left them lovingly intertwined on the ice and believe me I had to work fast to get them that way before they stiffened up.

Rodin would have approved of it and I felt a lot better when I got inside. Much less depressed; as though the killing yen had been purged away. However, just to be on the safe side I took the scalpel out of my belt pouch

and left it on Orman's desk.

Not that it mattered, because I had my laser back. That would have done the trick if I'd wanted to do it. But I didn't. Not any more. I left the insulated suit hanging in a closet and went out past the Secretary.

"Dr. Orman says he's going to be busy. Do not disturb. Okay?"

She hadn't forgiven me for breach of protocol; but she nodded.

I went out to the elevator shaft and for the first time since my arrival at PEC, I was actually humming a tune. Quietly at first; but then more cheerfully. By the time I got to room 23 I was actually singing out loud. Something about the things a girl could be likened to, if I remember. There had been a vogue on for century-old tunes and that one was very popular. "You are the promised breath of Springtime."

Fabiola might have said, "Kruger, you're singing our tune;" but it would take a very persuasive breath of Spring indeed to make a Eurydice out of that one.