

LAIRD BARRON

Old Virginia

LAIRD BARRON

Old Virginia

ON THE THIRD MORNING I noticed that somebody had disabled the truck. All four tires were flattened and the engine was smashed. Nice work.

I had gone outside the cabin to catch the sunrise and piss on some bushes. It was cold; the air tasted like metal. Deep, dark forest at our backs with a few notches for stars. A rutted track wound across a marshy field into more wilderness. Silent except for the muffled bum of the diesel generator behind the wood shed.

"Well, here we go," I said. I fired up a Lucky Strike and congratulated my pessimistic nature. The Reds had found our happy little retreat in the woods. Or possibly, one of my boys was a mole. That would put a pretty bow on things.

The men were already spooked --Davis swore he had heard chuckling and whispering behind the steel door after curfew. He also heard one of the doctors gibbering in a foreign tongue. Nonsense, of course. Nonetheless, the troops were edgy, and now this.

"Garland? You there?" Hatcher called from the porch in a low voice. He made a tall, thin silhouette.

"Over here." I waited for him to join me by the truck. Hatcher was my immediate subordinate and the only member of the detail I'd personally worked with. He was tough, competent, and a decade my junior --which made him twice as old as the other men. If somebody here was a Red I hoped to God it wasn't him.

"Guess we're hoofing it," he commented after a quick survey of the damage. I passed him a cigarette. We smoked in contemplative silence. Eventually I said, "Who took last watch?"

"Richards. He didn't report any activity."

"Yeah." I stared into the forest and wondered if the enemy was lurking.

What would be their next move, and how might I counter? A chill tightened the muscles in the small of my back, reminded me of how things had gone wrong during '53 in the steamy hills of Cuba. It had been six years, and in this business a man didn't necessarily improve with age. I said, "How did they find us, Hatch?"

"Strauss may have a leak. The Reds are conducting similar programs. Information from here would carry a hefty price tag behind the Curtain...."

Suddenly this little field trip didn't seem like a babysitting detail anymore. Project TALLHAT was a Company job, but black ops. Dr. Herman Strauss had

picked the team in secret and briefed us at his own home. Now here we were in the wilds of West Virginia standing watch over two of his personal staff while they conducted unspecified research on a senile crone. Doctors Porter and Riley called the shots. There was to be no communication with the outside world until they had gathered sufficient data. Upon return to Langley, Strauss would handle the debriefing. Absolutely no one else inside the Company was to be involved.

This wasn't my kind of operation, but I had seen the paperwork and recognized Strauss's authority. Why me? I suspected it was because Strauss had known me

since the first big War. He also knew I was past it, ready for pasture. Maybe this was his way to make me feel important one last time. Gazing at the ruined truck and all it portended, I started thinking maybe good old Herman had picked me because I was expendable.

I stubbed out my cigarette and made some quick decisions. "When it gets light, we sweep the area. You take Robey and Neil and arc south; I'll go north with Dox and Richards. Davis will guard the cabin. We'll establish a quarter-mile perimeter; search for tracks." Hatcher nodded. He didn't state the obvious flaw --what if Davis was

playing for the other team? He gestured at the forest. "How about an emergency extraction? We're twenty miles from the nearest traveled road. We could make it in a few hours. I saw some farms; one will have a phone --"

"Hatch, they destroyed the vehicle for a reason. Obviously they want us to walk. Who knows what nasty surprise is waiting down that road? For now we stay here, fortify. If worse comes to worst, we break and scatter. Maybe one of us will make it to HQ."

"How do we handle Porter and Riley?"

"This has become a security issue. Let's see what we find; then I'll break the

news to the good doctors."

My involvement in Operation TALLHAT was innocent --if you can ever say that about Company business. I was lounging on an out-of-season New York beach when the telegram arrived. Strauss sent a car from Virginia. An itinerary; spending money. The works. I was intrigued; it had been several years since the last time I spoke with Herman.

Director Strauss said he needed my coolness under pressure when we sat down to a four-star dinner at his legendary farmhouse in Langley. Said he needed an older man, a man with poise. Yeah, he poured it on all right.

Oh, the best had said it too --Put his feet to the fire; he doesn't flinch. Garland, he's one cool sonofabitch. Yes indeed, they had said it --thirty years ago. Before the horn rims got welded to my corrugated face and before the arthritis bent my fingers. Before my left ear went dead and my teeth fell out. Before the San Andreas Fault took root in my hands and gave them tremors. It was difficult to maintain deadly aloofness when I had to get up and drain my bladder every hour on the hour. Some war hero. Some Company legend.

"Look, Roger, I don't care about Cuba. It's ancient history, pal." Sitting across the table from Strauss at his farmhouse

with a couple whiskey sours in my belly it had been too easy to believe my colossal blunders were forgiven. That the encroaching specter of age was an illusion fabricated by jealous detractors, of which great men have plenty.

I had been a great man, once. Veteran of not one, but two World Wars. Decorated, lauded, feared. Strauss, earnest, blue-eyed Strauss, convinced me some greatness lingered. He leaned close and said, "Roger, have you ever heard of MKULTRA?"

And I forgot about Cuba.

THE MEN DRESSED in hunting jackets to ward the chill, loaded shotguns for

possible unfriendly contact, and scouted the environs until noon. Fruitless; the only tracks belonged to deer and rabbits. Most of the leaves had fallen in carpets of red and brown. It drizzled. Black branches dripped. The birds had nothing to say.

I observed Dox and Richards. Dox lumbered in plodding engineer boots, broad Slavic face blankly concentrated on the task I had given him. He was built like a tractor; too simple to work for the Company except as an enforcer, much less be a Russian saboteur. I liked him. Richards was blond and smooth, an Ivy League talent with precisely enough cynicism and latent sadism to please the

forward-thinking elements who sought to reshape the Company in the wake of President Eisenhower's imminent departure. Richards I didn't trust or like.

There was a major housecleaning in the works. Men of Richards's caliber were preparing to sweep fossils such as myself into the dustbin of history.

It was perfectly logical after a morbid fashion. The trouble had started at the top with good old Ike suffering a stroke. Public reassurances to the contrary, the commander in chief was reduced to a shell of his former power. Those closest saw the cracks in the foundation and moved to protect his already tottering image. Company loyalists closed ranks,

covering up evidence of the President's diminished faculties, his strange preoccupation with drawing caricatures of Dick Nixon. They stood by at his public appearances, ready to swoop in if he did anything too embarrassing. Not a happy allocation of human resources in the view of the younger members of the intelligence community. That kind of duty didn't appeal to the Richardses of the world. They preferred to cut their losses and get back to slicing throats and cracking codes. Tangible objectives that would further the dominance of U.S. intelligence.

We kept walking and not finding anything until the cabin dwindled to a

blot. The place had been built at the turn of the century; Strauss bought it for a song, I gathered. The isolation suited his nefarious plots. Clouds covered the treetops, yet I recalled mention of a mountain not far off. A low, shaggy hump called Badger Hill. There would be collapsed mines and the moldered bones of abandoned camps, rusted hulks of machinery along the track. Dense woods. A world of brambles and deadfalls. No one came out this way anymore. Hadn't in years.

We rendezvoused with Hatchet's party at the cabin. They hadn't discovered any clues either. Our clothes were soaked, our moods somber, although traces of

excitement flickered among the young Turks --attack dogs sniffing for a fight.

None of them had been in a war. I'd checked. College instead of Korea for the lot. Even Dox had been spared by virtue of flat feet. They hadn't seen Soissons in 1915, Normandy in 1945, nor the jungles of Cuba in 1953. They hadn't seen the things I had seen. Their fear was the small kind, borne of uncertainty rather than dread. They stroked their shotguns and grinned with dumb innocence. When the rest had been dispatched for posts around the cabin I broke for the latrine to empty my bowels. Close race. I sweated and trembled and required some minutes to

compose myself. My knees were on fire, so I broke out a tin of bootleg DMSO and rubbed them, tasting the garlic of it on my tongue. I wiped beads of moisture from my glasses, swallowed a glycerin tablet, and felt as near to one hundred percent as I would ever be.

Ten minutes later I summoned Dr. Porter for a conference on the back porch. It rained harder, shielding our words from Nell who stood post near an oak.

Porter was lizard-bald except for a copper circlet that trailed wires into his breast pocket. His white coat bore stains and smudges. His fingers were blue-tinged with chalk dust. He stank of antiseptic. We were not friends. He

treated the detail as a collection of thugs best endured for the sake of his great scientific exploration.

I relayed the situation, which did not impress him much. "This is why Strauss wanted your services. Deal with the problem," he said.

"Yes, Doctor. I am in the process of doing that. However, I felt you might wish to know your research will become compromised if this activity escalates. We may need to extract.'

"Whatever you think best, Captain Garland." He smiled a dry smile. "You'll inform me when the moment arrives?"

"Certainly."

"Then I'll continue my work, if you're finished." The way he lingered on the last syllable left no doubt that I was.

I persisted, perhaps from spite. "Makes me curious about what you fellows are up to. How's the experiment progressing? Getting anywhere?"

"Captain Garland, you shouldn't be asking me these questions." Porter's humorless smile was more reptilian than ever.

"Probably not. Unfortunately, since recon proved inconclusive I don't know who wrecked our transport or what they

plan next. More information regarding the project would be helpful."

"Surely Dr. Strauss told you everything he deemed prudent."

"Times change."

"TALLHAT is classified. You're purely a security blanket. You possess no special clearance." I sighed and lighted a cigarette. "I know some things. MKULTRA is an umbrella term for the Company's mind control experiments. You psych boys are playing with all kinds of neat stuff --LSD, hypnosis, photokinetics. Hell, we talked about using this crap against Batista. Maybe we did."

"Indeed. Castro was amazingly effective, wasn't he?" Porter's eyes glittered. "So what's your problem, Captain?"

"The problem is the KGB has pretty much the same programs. And better ones from the scuttlebutt I pick up at Langley."

"Oh, you of all people should beware rumors. Loose lips had you buried in Cuba with the rest of your operatives. Yet here you are."

I understood Porter's game. He hoped to gig me with the kind of talk most folks were polite enough to whisper behind my back, make me lose control. I wasn't biting. "The way I figure it, the Reds

don't need TALLHAT...unless you're cooking up something special. Something they're afraid of. Something they're aware of, at least tangentially, but lack full intelligence. And in that case, why pussyfoot around? They've got two convenient options--storm in and seize the data or wipe the place off the map."

Porter just kept smirking. "I am certain the Russians would kill to derail our project, However, don't you think it would be more efficacious for them to use subtlety? Implant a spy to gather pertinent details, steal documents. Kidnap a member of the research team and interrogate him; extort information from him with a scandal. Hiding in the

woods and slicing tires seems a foolish waste of surprise."

I didn't like hearing him echo the bad thoughts I'd had while lingering in the outhouse. "Exactly, Doctor. The situation is even worse than I thought. We are being stalked by an unknown quantity."

"Stalked? How melodramatic. An isolated incident doesn't prove the hypothesis. Take more precautions if it makes you happy. And I'm confident you are quite happy; awfully boring to be a watchdog with nothing to bark at."

It was too much. That steely portion of my liver gained an edge, demanded satisfaction. I took off the gloves. "I

want to see the woman."

"Whatever for?" Porter's complacent smirk vanished. His thin mouth drew down with suspicion.

"Because I do."

"Impossible!"

"Hardly. I command six heavily armed men. Any of them would be tickled to kick down the door and give me a tour of your facilities." It came out much harsher than I intended. My nerves were frayed and his superior demeanor had touched a darker kernel of my soul. "Dr. Porter, I read your file. That was my condition for accepting this assignment; Strauss

agreed to give me dossiers on everyone. You and Riley slipped through the cracks after Caltech. I guess the school wasn't too pleased with some of your research or where you dug up the financing. Then that incident with the kids off campus. The ones who thought they were testing diet pills. You gave them, what was it? Oh yes --peyote! Pretty strange behavior for a pair of physicists, eh? It follows that Unorthodox Applications of Medicine and Technology would snap you up after the private sector turned its back. So excuse my paranoia."

"Ah, you do know a few things. But not the nature of TALLHAT? Odd."

"We shall rectify that momentarily."

Porter shrugged. "As you wish, Mr. Garland. I shall include your threats in my report." For some reason his acquiescence didn't really satisfy me. True, I had turned on the charm that earned me the title "Jolly Roger," yet he had caved far too easily. Damn it!

Porter escorted me inside. Hatcher saw the look on my face and started to rise from his chair by the window. I shook my head and he sank, fixing Porter with a dangerous glare. The lab was sealed off by a thick steel door, like the kind they use on trains. Spartan, each wall padded as if a rubber room in an asylum. It reeked of chemicals. The windows

were blocked with black plastic. Illumination seeped from a phosphorescent bar on the table. Two cots. Shelves, cabinets, a couple of boxy machines with needles and tickertape spools. Between these machines an easel with indecipherable scrawls done in ink. I recognized some as calculus symbols. To the left, a poster bed, and on the bed a thickly wrapped figure propped by pillows. A mummy. Dr. Riley drifted in, obstructing my view of the subject --an aquamarine phantom, eyes and mouth pools of shadow. As with Porter, a copper circlet winked on his brow. "Afternoon, Captain Garland. Pull up a rock." His accent was Midwestern nasal. He even wore cowboy boots

under his grimy lab coat.

"Captain Garland wants to view the subject," Porter said.

"Fair enough!" Riley seemed pleased. He rubbed his hands, a pair of disembodied starfish in the weirding glow. "Don't ret, Porter. There's no harm in satisfying the captain's curiosity." With that, the lanky man stepped aside.

Approaching the figure on the bed, I was overcome with an abrupt sensation of vertigo. My hackles bunched. The light played tricks upon my senses, lending a fishbowl distortion to the old Woman's sallow visage. They had secured her in a straitjacket; her head lolled drunkenly,

dead eyes frozen, tongue drooling from slack lips. She was shaved bald, white stubble of a Christmas goose. My belly quaked. "Where did you find her?" I whispered, as if she might hear me.

"What's the matter?" Dr. Riley asked. "Where did you find her, goddamnit!" The crone's head swiveled on that too-long neck and her milky gaze fastened upon my voice. And she grinned, toothless. Horrible.

HATCHER KEPT some scotch in the pantry. Dr. Riley poured --I didn't trust my own hands yet. He lighted cigarettes. We sat at the living room table, alone in the cabin but for Porter and Subject X

behind the metal door. Porter was so disgusted by my reaction he refused to speak with me. Hatcher had assembled the men in the yard; he was giving some sort of pep talk. Ever the soldier. I wished I'd had him in Cuba.

It rained and a stiff breeze rattled the eaves.

"Who is she to you.*)" Riley asked. His expression was shrewd. I sucked my cigarette to the filter in a single drag, exhaled and gulped scotch. Held out my glass for another three fingers' worth. "You're too young to remember the first big war."

"I was a baby." Riley handed me another

cigarette without being asked.

"Yeah? I was twenty-eight when the Germans marched into France. Graduated Rogers and Williams with full honors, was commissioned into the Army as an officer. They stuck me right into intelligence, sent me straight to the front." I chuckled bitterly. "This happened before Uncle Sam decided to make an 'official' presence. Know what I did? I helped organize the resistance, translated messages French intelligence intercepted. Mostly I ran from the advance. Spent a lot of time hiding out on farms when I was lucky, field ditches when I wasn't.

"There was this one family, I stayed with

them for nine days in June. It rained, just like this. A large family --six adults, ten or eleven kids. I bunked in the wine cellar and it flooded. You'd see these huge bloody rats paddling if you clicked the torch. Long nine days." If I closed my eyes I knew I would be there again in the dark, among the chittering rats. Listening for armor on the muddy road, the tramp of boots.

"So what happened?" Riley watched me. He probably guessed where this was headed.

"The family matriarch lived in a room with her son and daughter-in-law. The old dame was blind and deaf; she'd lost

her wits. They bandaged her hands so she couldn't scratch herself. She sucked broth out of this gnawed wooden bowl they kept just for her. Jesus Mary, I still hear her slobbering over that bowl. She used to lick her bowl and stare at me with those dead eyes."

"Subject X bears no relation to her, I assure you."

"I don't suppose she does. I looked at her more closely and saw I was mistaken. But for those few seconds. ... Riley, something's going on. Something much bigger than Strauss indicated. Level with me. What are you people searching for?"

"Captain, you realize my position. I've

been sworn to silence. Strauss will cut off my balls if I talk to you about TALLHAT. Or we could all simply disappear."

"It's that important."

"It is." Riley's face became gentle. "I'm sorry. Dr. Strauss promised us ten days. One week from tomorrow we pack up our equipment and head back to civilization. Surely we can hold out." The doctor reached across to refill my glass; I clamped his wrist. They said I was past it, but he couldn't break my grip. I said, "AU right, boy. We'll play it your way for a while. If the shit gets any thicker, though, I'm pulling the plug on this operation. You got me, son?" He

didn't say anything. Then he jerked free and disappeared behind the metal door. He returned with a plain brown folder, threw it on the table. His smile was almost triumphant. "Read these. It won't tell you everything. Still, it's plenty to chew on. Don't show Porter, okay? He walked away without meeting my eye.

Dull wet afternoon wore into dirty evening. We got a pleasant fire going in the potbellied stove and dried our clothes. Roby had been a short order cook in college, so he fried hamburgers for dinner. After, Hatcher and the boys started a poker game and listened to the radio. The weather forecast called for more of the same, if not worse.

Perfect conditions for an attack. I lay on my bunk-reading Riley's file. I got a doozy of a migraine. Eventually I gave up and filled in my evening log entry. The gears were turning. I wondered about those copper circlets the doctors wore. Fifty-plus years of active service and I'd never seen anything quite like them. They reminded me of rumors surrounding the German experiments in Auschwitz. Mengele had been fond of bizarre contraptions. Maybe we'd read his mail and adopted some ideas.

Who is Subject X? I wrote this in the margin of my log. I thought back on what scraps Strauss fed me. I hadn't asked enough questions, that was for damned

sure. You didn't quiz a man like Strauss. He was one of the Grand Old Men of the Company. He got what he wanted, when he wanted it. He'd been everywhere, had something on everyone. When he snapped his fingers, things happened. People that crossed him became scarce.

Strauss was my last supporter. Of course I let him lead me by the nose. For me, the gold watch was a death certificate. Looking like a meatier brother of Herr Mengele, Strauss had confided the precise amount to hook me. "Ten days in the country. I've set up shop at my cabin near Badger Hill. A couple of my best men are on to some promising research. Important research -"

"Are we talking about psychotropics? I've seen what can happen. I won't be around that again."

"No, no. We've moved past that. This is different. They will be monitoring a subject for naturally occurring brain activity. Abnormal activity, yes, but not induced by us."

"These doctors of yours, they're just recording results?"

"Exactly."

"Why all the trouble, Herman? You've got the facilities right here. Why send us to a shack in the middle of Timbuktu?"

"Ike is on his way out the door. Best friend a covert ops man ever had, too. The Powers Soon to Be will put an end to MKULTRA. Christ, the office is shredding documents around the clock. I've been given word to suspend all operations by the end of next month. Next month!"

"Nobody else knows about TALLHAT?"

"And nobody can --not unless we make a breakthrough. I wish I could come along, conduct the tests myself --"

"Not smart. People would talk if you dropped off the radar. What does this woman do that's so bloody important?"

"She's a remote viewer. A clairvoyant. She draws pictures, the researchers extrapolate."

"Whatever you're looking for --"

"It's momentous. So you see, Roger] I need you. I don't trust anyone else."

"Who is the subject?"

"Her name is Virginia," I rolled over and regarded the metal door. She was in there, staring holes through steel.

"Hey, Cap! You want in? I'm getting my ass kicked over here!" Hatcher puffed on a Havana cigar and shook his head while Davis raked in another pot. There

followed a chorus of crude imprecations for me to climb down and take my medicine.

I feigned good humor. "Not tonight, fellows. I didn't get my nap. You know how it is with us old folks." They laughed. I shivered until sleep came. My dreams were bad.

I spent most of the fourth day perusing Riley's file. It made things about as clear as mud. All in all a cryptic collection of papers --just what I needed right then; more spooky errata. Numerous mimeographed letters and library documents comprised the file. The bulk of them were memos from Strauss to Porter. Additionally, some detailed

medical examinations of Subject X. I didn't follow the jargon except to note that the terms "unclassified" and "of unknown origin" reappeared often. They made interesting copy, although they explained nothing to my layman's eyes. Likewise the library papers seemed arcane. One such entry from A Colonial History of Carolina and Her Settlements went thusly:

The Lost Roanoke Colony vanished from the Raleigh Township on Roanoke Island between 1588 and 1589. Governor White returned from England after considerable delays to find the town abandoned. Except for untended cookfires that burned down a couple

houses, there was no evidence of struggle, though Spaniards and natives had subsequently plundered the settlement. No bodies or bones were discovered. The sole clue as to the colonists' fate lay in a strange sequence of letters carved into a palisade -- Croatoan. The word CRO had been similarly carved into a nearby tree. White surmised this indicated a flight to the Croatoan Island, called Hatteras by natives. Hurricanes prevented a search until the next colonization attempt two years later. Subsequent investigation yielded no answers, although scholars suggest local tribes assimilated the English settlers. No physical evidence exists to support this theory. It remains a

mystery of some magnitude.... Tons more like that. It begged the question of why Strauss, brilliant, cruel-minded Strauss, would waste a molecular biologist, a physicist, a bona fide psychic, and significant monetary resources on moldy folklore.

I hadn't a notion and this worried me mightily.

That night I dreamt of mayhem. First I was at the gray farmhouse in Soissons, eating dinner with a nervous family. My French was inadequate. Fortunately one of the women knew English and we were able to converse. A loud slurping began to drown out conversation about German spies. At the head of the table

sat Virginia sipping from a broken skull. She winked. A baby cried. Then it was Cuba and the debacle of advising Castro's guerillas for an important raid. My intelligence network had failed to account for a piece of government armor. The guerillas were shelled to bits by Batista's garrison and young Castro barely escaped with his life. Five of my finest men were ground up in the general slaughter. Two were captured and tortured. They died without talking. Lucky for me. I heard them screaming inside a small cabin in the forest, but I couldn't find the door. Someone had written CROATOAN on the wall.

I bumped into Hatcher, hanging upside

down from a tree branch. He wore an I LIKE IKE button. "Help me, Cap," he said.

A baby squalled. Virginia sat in a rocking chair on the porch, soothing the infant. The crane's eyes were holes in dough. She drew a nail across her throat.

I sat up in bed, throttling a shriek. I hadn't uttered a cry since being shot in World War I. It was pitchy in the cabin. People were fumbling around in the dark.

Hatcher shined a flashlight my direction. "The generator's tits up." Nearby, the doctors were already bitching and cursing their misfortune.

We never did find out if it was sabotaged or not.

The fifth day was uneventful.

On the sixth morning my unhappy world raveled.

Things were hopping right out of the gate. Dr. Riley joined Hatcher and me for breakfast. A powerful stench accompanied him. His expression was unbalanced, his angular face white and shiny. He grabbed a plate of cold pancakes, began wolfing them. Lanky hair fell into his eyes. He grunted like a pig.

Hatcher eased his own chair back. I

spoke softly to Riley, "Hey now, Doc. Roby can whip up more. No rush."

Riley looked at me sidelong. He croaked, "She made us take them off." I opened my mouth. His circlet was gone. A pale stripe of untanned flesh. "Riley, what are you talking about?" Even as I spoke, Hatcher stood quietly, drew his pistol, and glided for the lab.

"Stupid old bastards." Riley gobbled pancakes, chunks dropping from his lips. He giggled until tears squirted, rubbed the dimple in his forehead. "Those were shields, Pops. They produced a frequency that kept her from...doing things to us," He stopped eating again, cast sharp glances around the room.

"Where are your little soldiers?"

"On patrol."

"Ha, ha. Better call them back, Pops."

"Why do you say that?"

"You'd just better."

Hatcher returned, grim. "Porter has taken Subject X."

I put on my glasses. I drew my revolver. "Dr. Riley, Mr. Hatcher is going to secure you. It's for your own safety. I must warn you, give him any static and I'll burn you down."

"That's right, Jolly Roger! You're an ace at blowing people away! What's the number up to, Captain?"

Since the first Big One? And we're counting children, okay?" Riley barked like a lunatic coyote until Hatcher cracked him on the temple with the butt of his gun. The doctor flopped, twitching. I uncapped my glycerin and ate two.

Hatcher was all business. He talked in his clipped manner while he handcuffed Riley to a center beam post. "Looks like he broke out through the window. No signs of struggle."

"Documents?"

"Seems like everything's intact. Porter's clothes are on his cot. Found her straitjacket too." Porter left his clothes? I liked this less and less.

Rain splattered the dark windows. "Let's gather everybody. Assemble a hunting party." I foresaw a disaster; it would be difficult to follow tracks in the storm. Porter might have allies. Best case scenario had him and the subject long gone, swooped up by welcoming Commie arms and out of my sorry life forever. Instinct whispered that I was whistling Dixie if I fell for that scenario. Now you're screwed, blued, and tattooed, chum! chortled my inner voice.

Hatcher grasped my shoulder. "Cap, you

call it, we haul it. I can tell you, the boys are aching for a scrap. It won't hurt anybody's feelings to hunt the traitor to ground."

"Agreed. We'll split into two-man teams, comb the area. Take Porter alive if possible. I want to know who he's playing for."

"Sounds good. Someone has to cover the cabin."

He meant I should be the one to stay back. They had to move fast. I was the old man, the weak link; I'd slow everybody down, maybe get a team member killed.

I mustered what grace I possessed. "I'll do it. Come on; we better get moving." We called the men together and laid it on the table. Everybody appeared shocked that Porter had been able to pull off such a brazen escape.

I drew a quick plan and sent them trotting into the wind-blasted dawn. Hatcher wasn't eager to leave me alone, but there weren't sufficient bodies to spare. He promised to report back inside of three hours one way or the other.

And they were gone.

I locked the doors, pulled the shutters, peeking through the slats as it lightened into morning. Riley began laughing

again. Deeper this time, from his skinny chest. The rank odor oozing from him would have gagged a goat. "How about a cigarette, Cap?" His mouth squirmed. His face had slipped from white to gray. He appeared to have been bled. The symptoms were routine.

"They'll find your comrade," I said. A cigarette sounded like a fine idea, so I lighted one for myself and smoked it. I kept an eye on him and one on the yard. "Yeah, they'll nail him sooner or later. And when they do. ... "I let it dangle.

"God, Cap! The news is true. You are so washed up! They say you were sharp back in the day. Strauss didn't even break a sweat, keeping you in the dark,

did he? Think about it --why do you suppose I gave you the files, huh? Because it didn't matter one tin shit. He told me to give you anything you asked for. Said it would make things more interesting."

"Tell me the news, Riley."

"Can't you guess the joke? Our sweet Virginia ain't what she seems, no sir."

"What is she, then?"

"She's a weapon, Cap. A nasty, nasty weapon. Strauss is ready to bet the farm this little filly can win the Cold War for Team U.S.A. But first we had to test her, see." He banged his greasy head against

the post and laughed wildly. "Our hats were supposed to protect us from getting brain-bugged. Strauss went through hell --and a heap of volunteers --to configure them properly. They should've worked...I don't know why they stopped functioning correctly. Bum luck. Doesn't matter."

"Where did Porter take her?"

"Porter didn't take Virginia. She took him. She'll be back for you."

"Is Subject X really a clairvoyant? My lips were dry. Too many blocks were clicking into place at once.

"She's clairvoyant. She's a lot of things.

But Strauss tricked you --we aren't here to test her ability to locate needles in haystacks. You'd die puking if you saw. ..."

"Is there anyone else? Does Porter have allies waiting?"

"Porter? Porter's meat. It's her you better worry about."

"Fine. Does she have allies?"

"No. She doesn't need help." Riley drifted. "Should've seen the faces on those poor people. Strauss keeps some photographs in a safe. Big stack. Big. It took so long to get the hats right. He hired some hardcases to clean up the

mess. Jesus, Cap. I never would've believed there were worse characters than you."

"Strauss is careful," I said. "It must have taken years,"

"About fifteen or so. Even the hardcases could only deal with so many corpses. And the farm; well, it's rather high profile. These three Company guys handled disposals. Three that I met, anyway. These fellows started getting nervous, started acting hinky. Strauss made her get rid of them. This was no piece of cake. Those sonsofbitches wanted to live, let me tell you." He grew quiet and swallowed. "She managed, but it was awful, and Strauss decided she

required field testing. She required more 'live' targets, is how he put it. Porter and me knew he meant Company men. Black ops guys nobody would miss. Men who were trained like the Reds and the Jetties are trained. Real killers."

"Men like me and my team," I said.

"Gold star!" He cackled, drumming the heels of his Stetsons against the planks. His hilarity coarsened into shrieks. Muscles stood in knots on his arms and neck. "Oh God! She rode us all night

--oh Christ!" He became unintelligible. The post creaked with the strain of his thrashing. I found the experience completely unnerving. Better to stare

through the watery pane where trees took shape as light fell upon their shoulders. My bladder hurt; too fearful to step outside, I found a coffee can and relieved myself, My hands shook and I spilled a bit.

The man's spasms peaked and he calmed by degrees. I waited until he seemed lucid, said, "Let me help you, Riley. Tell me what Porter --what she --did. Are you poisoned?" There was a bad thought. Say Porter had slipped a touch of the pox into our water supply...I ceased that line of conjecture. Pronto.

"She rode us, Cap. Aren't you listening to ME?" He screeched the last, frothing. "I want to die now." His chin drooped

and he mumbled incoherently.

I let him be. How now, brown cow? I had been so content sitting on that Coney Island beach watching seagulls rip at detritus and waiting for time to expire.

The whole situation had taken on an element of black comedy. Betrayed by that devil Strauss? Sure, he was Machiavelli with a hard-on. I'd seen him put the screws to better men than me. I'd helped him do the deed. Yeah, I was a tube, no doubt. Problem was, I still had not the first idea what had been done to us exactly. Riley was terrified of Virginia. Fair enough, she scared me too. I believed him when he said she

could do things --she was possibly a savant, like the idiot math geniuses we locked in labs and sweated atom-smashing secrets from. The way her face had changed when I first saw her convinced me of this.

She's a weapon, a nasty, nasty weapon. I didn't know what that meant. I didn't care much, either. Something bad had happened to Riley. Whether Virginia had done it, whether Porter had done it, or if the goddamned KGB was cooking his brain with EM pulses, we were in the soup. How to escape the pot was my new priority.

I settled in with my shotgun to wait. And plan.

Nobody returned from the morning expedition.

Around 1700 hours I decided that I was screwed. The operation was compromised, its principal subject missing. The detail assigned to guard the principal was also missing and likely dead or captured.

What to do? I did what we intelligence professionals always did at moments like this. I started a fire in the stove and began burning documents. In forty-five minutes all paper records of Operation TALLHAT

were coals. This included my personal

log. Dr. Riley observed this without comment. He lapsed into semi-consciousness before I finished.

Unfortunately I decided to check him for wounds.

Don't know what possessed me. I was sort of like a kid poking a dead animal with a stick. I was compelled. Cautiously I lifted his shirt and found three holes in his back --one in the nape of his neck, two at the base of his spine. Each was the diameter of a walnut and oozed dark blood. They stank of rotten flesh, of gangrene.

She rode us all night, Cap!

Thank God for decades of military discipline --the machinery took over. If a soldier could regard the charred corpses of infant flame-thrower victims and maintain his sanity, a soldier could stomach a few lousy holes in a man's spine. I detached myself from this gruesome spectacle and the realization that this was the single most monumental balls-up of my career. What a way to go out!

I determined to make a break for the main road. A twenty-mile hike; more, since I dared not use the main track, but certainly within my range. At that point, I was certain I could sprint the distance if necessary. Yeah, best idea I'd had so far.

"Cap, Help me." Hatcher's voice muffled by rain against the roof. I limped to the window. The light had deteriorated. I made him out, standing a few yards away between some trees. His arms were spread as if in greeting --then I saw the rope.

"Cap! Help me!" His face was alabaster, glowing in the dusk. I began a shout, but was interrupted by an ominous thump of displaced weight behind me. My heart sank.

"Yes, Cap. Help him," Virginia crooned.

I turned and beheld her. Her naked skull scraped the ceiling. A wizened child, grinning and drooling. She towered

because she sat upon Dox's broad back, her yellow nails digging at his ears. His expression was flaccid as he bore down on me.

The shotgun jumped in my hands and made its terrible racket. Then Dox's fingers closed over my throat and night fell.

I DID NOT DREAM of Cuba or the failed attack on Batista's garrison. Nor did I dream of walking through the black winter of Dresden surrounded by swirling flakes of ash. I didn't dream of Soissons with its muddy ditches and rats.

I dreamt of people marching single file

across a field. Some dressed quaintly; others had forgotten their shoes. Many had forgotten to dress at all. Their faces were blank as snow. They stumbled. At least a hundred men, women and children. Marching without speaking. A great hole opened in the ground before them. It stank of carrion. One by one the people came to this hole, swayed, and toppled into the cavity. Nobody screamed.

I woke to see the cabin wall flickering in lamplight. Blurry, for my glasses were lost. Something was wrong with my legs; they were paralyzed. I suspected my back was broken. At least there was no pain.

The numbness seemed to encompass my senses as well --the fear was still present, but submerged and muzzled. Glacial calm stole over me.

"Dr. Riley was misled. Herman never intended this solely as a test." Virginia's voice quavered from somewhere close behind my shoulder.

Her shadow loomed on the wall. A wobbly silhouette that flowed unwholesomely. Floorboards squeaked as she shifted. The thought of rolling over brought sweat to my cheeks, so I lay there and watched her shadow in morbid fascination.

"It was also an offering. Mother is

pleased. He will be rewarded with a pretty."

"My men," I said. It was difficult to talk, my throat was rusty and bruised.

"With Mother. Except the brute. You killed him. Mother won't take meat unless it's alive. Shame on you, Roger." She chuckled evilly. The sound withdrew slightly, and her shadow shrank. "Oh, your back isn't broken. You'll feel your legs presently. I didn't want you running off before we had a chance to talk."

I envisioned a line of men, Hatcher in the lead, marching through the woods and up a mountain. It rained heavily and

they staggered in the mud. No one said anything. Automaton winding down. Ahead yawned a gap in a rocky slope. A dank cave mouth. One by one they went swallowed. ... There came a new sound that disrupted my unpleasant daydream - sobbing. It was Riley; smothered as by a gag. I could tell from its frantic nature that Virginia crouched near him. She said to me, "I came back for you, Roger. As for this one, I thought he had provided to his limit...yet he squirms with vigor. Ah, the resilience of life!"

"Who are you?" I asked as several portions of her shadow elongated from the central axis, dipped as questing tendrils. Then, a dim, wet susurration. I

thought of pitcher plants grown monstrous and shut my eyes tight.

Riley's noises became shrill.

"Don't be afraid, Roger," Virginia rasped, a bit short of breath. "Mother wants to meet you. Such a vital existence you have pursued! Not often does She entertain provender as seasoned as yourself. If you're lucky, the others will have sated her. She will birth you as a new man. A man in Her image. You'll get old, yes. Being old is a wonderful thing, though. The older you become, the more things you taste. The more you taste, the more pleasure you experience. There is so much pleasure to be had."

"Bullshit! If it were such a keen deal, Herman would be cashing in! Not me!"

"Well, Herman is overly cautious. He has reservations about the process. I'll go back and work on him some more."

"Who are you? Who is your mother?" I said it too loudly, hoping to obscure the commotion Riley was making. The squelching. I babbled,

"How did Strauss find you? Jesus!"

"You read the files --I asked the doctors. If you read the files you know where I was born and who I am. You know who Mother is --a colonist wrote Her name on the palisade, didn't he? A name given

by white explorers to certain natives who worshipped Her. Idiots! The English are possibly the stupidest people that ever lived." She tittered. "I was the first Christian birth in the New World. I was special. The rest were meat. Poor mama, poor daddy. Poor everyone else. Mother is quite simple, actually. She has basic needs...She birthed me anew, made me better than crude flesh, and now I help her conduct the grand old game. She sent me to find Herman. Herman helps her. I think you could help her too."

"Where is your mother? Is she here?"

"Near. She moves around. We lived on the water for a while. The mountain is

nicer, the shafts go so deep. She hates the light. All of Her kind are like that. The miners used to come and She talked with them. No more miners."

I wanted to say something anything to block Riley's clotted screams. Shortly, his noises ceased. Tears seeped from my clenched eyelids. "D-did the copper circlets ever really work? Or was that part of the joke?" I didn't care about the answer.

Virginia was delighted. "Excellent! Well, they did. That's why I arranged to meet Strauss, to attach myself. He is a clever one! His little devices worked to interfere until we got here, so close to

Mother's influence. I am merely a conduit of Her majestic power. She is unimaginable!"

"You mentioned a game...."

Virginia said, "Do you suppose men invented chess? I promise you, there are contests far livelier. I have been to the universities of the world, watching. You have visited the battlefields of the world, watching. Don't you think the time is coming?"

"For what?"

"When mankind will manage to blacken the sky with bombs and cool the Earth so that Mother and Her brothers, Her

sisters, and children may emerge once more! Is there any other purpose? Oh, what splendid revelries there shall be on that day!"

What could I answer with?

Virginia didn't mind. She said, "The dinosaurs couldn't do it in a hundred million years. Nor the sharks in their oceans given ten times that. The monkeys showed promise, but never realized their potential. Humans are the best pawns so far --the ones with a passion for fire and mystery. With subtle guidance they --you --can return this world to the paradise it was when the ice was thick and the sun dim. We need men like Adolph, and Herman, and their sweet sensibilities.

Men who would bring the winter darkness so they might caper around bonfires. Men like you, dear Roger. Men like you." Virginia ended on a cackle.

Hiroshima bloomed upon my mind's canvas and I nearly cried aloud. And Auschwitz, and Verdun, and all the rest. Yes, the day was coming. "You've got the wrong man," I said in my bravest tone. "You don't know the first thing. I'm a bloody patriot."

"Mother appreciates that, dear Roger. Be good and don't move. I'll return in a moment. Must fetch you a coat. It's raining." Virginia's shadow slipped into the lab. There followed the clatter of

upturned objects and breaking glass.

Her brothers, Her sisters, and children.
Pawns. Provender. My gorge tasted
bitter. Herman helping creatures such as
this bring about hell on Earth. For what?
Power? The promise of immortality?

Virginia's blasphemous longevity
should've cured him of that desire. Oh,
Herman, you fool! On its heels arrived
the notion that perhaps I would change
my mind alter a conversation with
Mother. That one day soon I might sit
across the table from Strauss and break
bread in celebration of a new dawn.

I wept as I pulled my buck knife free,
snicked the catch. Would that I

possessed the courage to slit my own wrists! I attempted to do just that, but lacked the conviction to carry through. Seventy years of self-aggrandizement had robbed me of any will to self-destruction. So, I began to carve a message into the planks instead. A warning. Although what could one say about events this bizarre? This hideous? I shook with crazed laughter and nearly broke the blade with my furious hacking.

I got as far as CRO before Virginia came and rode me into the woods to meet her mother.