

New Gary

There was commotion inside a clothing shop on Broadway. A woman could be heard shouting and a man rushed out. He stopped in his tracks and looked around in confusion. “Where the hell am I?—Excuse me, can you tell me what city we’re in?” he asked a pedestrian.

“I beg your pardon?”

“What city is this?”

“You don’t know?”

“Those apartment blocks weren’t there a few minutes ago.”

The passerby rolled his eyes and moved on. “Try that bar over there,” he said with a backward glance at the strange man. “Or you just come from there?”

The man crossed the street. The bar had an industrial door and a small window framing the word “Bar” in cursive neon. He entered the dark interior and sat down at the counter. The bartender, a rugged man in a cowboy outfit, swiveled his face past the stranger and reversed direction to meet him in the eye. “What’ll you have, buddy?”

“What do you got?”

“Budweiser and Miller High Life.”

“That’s it? The Mexicans used to drink that High Life shit. You don’t even have Miller Lite? Reminds me of the ’80s. No Old Style either? How about Augsburger? Leinenkugel’s?”

The bartender looked at him quizzically.

“How much for a beer?”

“Forty.”

“Forty cents?”

“Forty dollars.”

“Forty fucking dollars?” The stranger looked in his wallet and

replaced it in his pants without removing any money. “Can I just wait a minute before I order something? I feel a bit dizzy.”

“Coffee?”

“Yes, that would be nice.”

The stranger took in the interior. Pool table, linoleum floor, neon beer logos, fake wood paneling, pressed metal ceiling, ceiling fans. He got off his stool and walked over to a pair of saloon-style doors at the back of the bar. Beyond was a hallway obscured by steam. “What’s in there?”

“The sauna.”

“A sauna in a bar?”

“Yessir.”

Pointing to an event advertised on a placard, the stranger then asked, “What exactly is an ‘underparty?’”

“You don’t know?”

“Well, I could guess.”

“You’re not from around here I can see.”

“No.”

“Whereabouts are you from?”

“Chicago. Isn’t this Chicago?”

“No, it’s New Gary.”

“You mean Gary, Indiana?”

“That’s the old name.”

“I didn’t know they changed it. When did they change it?”

“Not sure. That was before my time. There’s a tourist center over on Polk Street. I’m sure they can answer your questions. Let me take you there. It’s just a few blocks away.”

“You’re going to leave your bar unattended?”

“I’ll cover for him,” said another man who had pushed through the swinging doors. He was tall and dressed in a black T-shirt and jeans, thumbs hooked in his pockets as he gazed at a point beyond the stranger.

“Thank you, Ishmael.”

“My pleasure, Algernon.”

They exited the bar and headed down West 5th Avenue.

“As in Ishmael from *Moby Dick*?” said the stranger. “And you’re from *Flowers for Algernon*? You know, the character who becomes really smart and then stupid again?”

“It’s a nickname everyone started using with me and it stuck.”

“Well, nice to meet you, Algernon. I’m Jeff Malmquist.”

“Nice to meet you too. Are you planning on staying long in New Gary?”

“Not if I can help it.”

Several blocks later Malmquist said, “Where is this tourist center, exactly? Seems a bit strange it would be on a residential street rather than back over there on the main drag.”

“It’s just up ahead.”

On Polk Street they turned the corner and Malmquist found himself in front of the New Gary Police Department. “The tourist center doubles up here,” said Algernon.

“You’re joking.”

He escorted Malmquist up the steps and into the lobby where they were buzzed through a steel door, and deposited him before an officer at a desk before walking out.

Malmquist pointed at Algernon and said, “He’s undercover?”

“I’m Sergeant Fink, by the way. Well, let’s start by you telling me who you are and how you got here.”

“Got where?”

“Across the Zone.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Why don’t *you* tell me how I got here.”

“Name?”

“Jeffrey Malmquist.”

“Where are you from?”

“Chicago.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I really have no idea. I was teaching a class at my university and suddenly I found myself in Gary, Indiana.”

“What were you teaching?”

“Semiotics.”

“Semiautomatics?”

“No, semiotics.”

“What’s that?”

“The science of signs.”

“Like street signs, shop signs?”

“Yeah, it includes that.”

“How to make signs? They teach that in university?”

“How to understand signs.”

“But you call it semiautomatics.”

“No, semiotics.”

Fink scratched his head. “Looks like we need to process you, Malmquist. Born in Chicago. Date of birth?”

“October 31, 1960.”

“1960.” He scratched his head again. “Identification?”

Malmquist pulled out his driver’s license.

“1960, all right. Doesn’t jive.”

“Why not?”

Fink slammed his fist on the desk. “Because that would make you one hundred years old! What’s with the antique ID? And why aren’t you readable?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Put him in the pen till we figure out what to do with him,” he told Algernon, who had returned and was now in uniform.

Strip-searched and fingerprinted, Malmquist was led to a bull pen containing several other prisoners.

“Here you go, Leroy. He’s an odd one,” said Algernon, passing him to the guard.

“Where the hell did *you* come from?” said one of the prisoners.

“What’s the goofy message mean?” said another, pointing to Malmquist’s T-shirt.

Malmquist looked down at his shirt and back up.

“He’s a professor. He teaches how to make shop signs for selling semiautomatic weapons.”

“All right, fine. Semiautomatics,” said Malmquist.

“What did you get picked up for?” said another.

"I haven't the slightest idea. I don't even know how I got here. I also just discovered it's 2060. Tell me it's October 1, 2015."

"You got the day right, but not the year."

"All right. Please excuse me while I cover my ears to keep my brains from spilling out."

"Man, you a trip," said Leroy. "You musta taken some heavy shit."

"Maybe he has amnesia."

"No, I don't have amnesia. I'm in some kind of time warp. Are you dudes the only prisoners? And what's with that cop called Algernon, anyway? Is he ever weird. He has this super smooth way of moving his neck when he talks."

"All droids like that."

"Droids?"

"Yeah, droids. Androids."

"He's a robot?"

One of the prisoners laughed. "You think he human? You stranger than him."

"He had me fooled. But this police station doesn't seem right. It's so informal. Only two cops. Like a town jail in the Wild West with a sheriff and his sidekick deputy."

"Crime rate low. One hundred percent employment, twelve-hour shifts. Nobody have the time or energy to get arrested."

"What are you guys here for, then?"

"Late getting back to work after our break. And for having an attitude."

"They put you in jail for that? Are there other androids besides Algernon? How can he watch over everyone?"

"We all monitored by our chip."

"What chip?"

"Embedded nanochip."

"Where do they embed it?"

"In your brain."

"Oh, God. I'm stuck in a bad sci-fi movie. You mean they control your every thought?"

“No, it just an ID chip. They put it there to keep track of you, know where you are. And make it very difficult to remove the chip should you ever try to do so.” Leroy returned to his conversation with the inmates through the jail bars. “So as I was saying, I was ridin’ Delilah, see, and she pounding into me bam, bam, bam, so hard she like a machine, man. I’m thinking, maybe she one of them female droids I heard about but never seen. So I turn her over to examine her more closely—”

“Well, Malmquist, we’re releasing you,” said Algernon, who had re-emerged. “We think you have amnesia and got lost after crossing over from Chicago. Here’s your gun. Leroy, would you take him to the Zone and see that he gets back across?”

“I don’t understand,” said Malmquist.

“You won’t get too far in Chicago with no gun,” said Leroy.

“Why not?”

They laughed at him. “See I told you he has amnesia. It’s the law to carry a gun. As long as you not from New Gary, that is.”

“We had to scrounge around to find an extra one, since you appear to have lost yours,” said Algernon. “We would sell it to you but that money in your wallet is play money.”

“How do I put this on?” Malmquist fumbled with the gun’s sling as Leroy led him out.

“Interrupted again!” said one of the prisoners. “Don’t you forget to finish your story when you get back, Leroy, you hear?”

They got into a beat-up old vehicle shaped like an almond. It extended its wings and headed west in the air down 5th Avenue.

“Holy shit! This thing can fly? Where are we going?”

“To the Zone, to get you out.”

They flew just above the treetops and no faster than the cars on the ground.

“I’ve never held a gun before in my life, let alone shot one. I don’t know how to use this. Will you please tell me what the fuck is going on?”

“Whatever happened to you, your head got wiped clean as a ho’s sandpapered ass. Now listen up. We got another four mile to go

before we get to the Zone. When we get there, you gonna hear a lot of guns being fired at the Coliseum. That's when I'm gonna dump you off and you gotta cross over yourself without getting shot. Once you on the other side of 912, you safe."

"What's 912? What's the Zone? And what the hell is the Coliseum?"

"Highway 912 that's where New Gary ends. Hammond on the other side. You see all them thirty-story residential buildings stretching down this way? The buildings face Hammond from the cloverleaf where we're headed down south to I-80, that's over one mile of residential buildings. The Coliseum. You got thousands of freakos from Chicago and Hammond lined up on the near side of 912 with they AK's be trying to pick us off. You'll see sandbags ringed around the towers to protect the residents trying to get back home safe. You gonna slip out around them sandbags and into view. As you do this, you run backwards pretending you shooting at us, and work your way up to the barbed-wire fence and find one of them holes to stick yourself through and out the other side."

"Let me get this straight. I have to throw myself at hundreds of gunmen while running backwards and shooting at you?"

"No, not at me. I be long gone before you get to the front lines. It might get a little hairy at first, but their sensors don't pick up no chip on you, they'll know you one of them and ain't no pedo."

"What's a pedo?"

"Shit. I got to explain everything to you. As in pedophile. Child molester. When they got you in their sights, your chip is pinged by a laser and your mugshot and stats pop right up in their viewfinder. Everything about you, where you originally from, what particular offense you nabbed for, what danger level you considered to be. But since you ain't pedo they can't ping you. And plus they'll see your gun. New Gary people ain't allowed to carry no gun."

"I am not a pedophile."

"As long as you in New Gary, you a pedophile. As soon as you outta Gary, you no longer pedo."

"I have never committed any sexual offense against children or

anyone else.”

“It’s not what you done or haven’t done, man. It’s what they got on you.”

“Everyone in Gary is a convicted pedophile? Including you too?”

“You bet. All one million of us.”

“One million! The only thing I remember about Gary is it was a ghost city. Hardly anyone lived there. They used to use the place as a set for horror films.”

“All them houses of old Gary torn down long ago. Actually I heard they got another million coming down the pipeline. They building more housing but can’t keep up with the conviction rate. That’s why all these new bastards gotta do their time in the Coliseum. Ain’t nowhere else to put them. They all on a waiting list to get into safe housing. Until then they the sacrificial lambs being fed to the lions.”

“Wait a minute. Chicago only has about three million people. If we don’t count children and teenagers, that would leave some two million adults, wouldn’t it? You’re telling me half the population are pedophiles? No way. That can’t be.”

“They got people here from the suburbs and surrounding areas too. Ain’t just Chicago city where they find them. New Gary is the regional incarceration center for the upper Midwest. They got New Gary’s all over the country.”

“We used to sweep pedophiles under highway overpasses to get them out of the way. So Gary is one big highway overpass? I still can’t understand how there could be so many pedophiles.”

“The more technology advances, the more pedos they able to find. They got all kinda ways to find you.”

“If there’s a million pedophiles here and another million on the way, how can that shabby little police station with two cops handle them all?”

“They all processed in Chicago, then transferred here by the military over on I-90. This station only for local incidents.”

“How did you wind up here?”

“Kiddie porn they found that I never even knew I had. They proved I paid for it and presented the court with evidence of my financial transactions. All put there by hackers. The money came right out of my bank account. I had no idea.”

“So innocent people have been convicted?”

“Listen man, nobody completely innocent. They also nailed me for porn I was knowingly in possession of but didn’t know was underage. And there was the underage droid porn I knew was underage. And then there was the porn I had of legal age until they raised the legal age. But yes, you’re right, there’s a conspiracy out there. Heard the Russians are heavily involved with they hacking expertise.”

“Why are we being shot at?”

“It’s a war, man. Those are the front lines.”

“It seems a pretty unfair war, when they have all the guns.”

“They say it’s preemptive. They gotta keep us at bay or else a tidal wave of pedos will deluge Chicago and devastate their communities. But they pretty aggressive, already chewed up the front row of buildings facing Hammond with them M2 50-caliber machine guns. Turned reinforce concrete into cottage cheese. Lots of us were killed and the buildings rendered uninhabitable. Then they—”

“Machine guns are legal?”

“Oh, yes. Anti-aircraft guns. Built right into these aircars. They flew all around the Zone. Legal or not don’t matter nohow. Any weapons legal when they unloaded on pedos. The law over there look the other way. But they realized if the buildings are uninhabitable there ain’t no more pedos to kill. Not too smart. I mean, first they took out all the windows. How can the residents board them up without getting shot at? If there ain’t no windows, how can they survive the winter? They all left and doubled up with friends elsewhere in the city, which is illegal since place of residence is strictly controlled. But they ain’t got no choice.”

“You can’t treat people like that.”

“They did and it was brutal. The aircars and heavy guns finally

got banned for use against us and only lighter arms allowed. Since the first row of buildings was put out of commission, they now attacking the second row, which they can only hit at an angle. The greater distance makes for more challenging target practice, though most freakos don't have the marksmanship to hit targets 200 yards away. They just spray bullets everywhere. Some started cutting holes in the fence to sneak in and shoot at closer range. But because of them holes—the same holes you gonna escape out of—they see a new danger of us pedos getting out. So they always be calling up more reserves to come out here and protect Chicago.”

“Not sure I follow this logic.”

“This logic's gonna help you get out safe. They'll just regard you as one of them more gung-ho types firing his way back.”

“If I'm on their side, why are you being so nice to me?”

“I don't know. Something about you seems different. Innocent. Maybe you is from another time and place. Now here we are, two blocks away. You hear the roar of them guns? And see those sandbags and that little entrance? Don't you go in there but continue on down the street. When you get to the next block you gonna be in firing range. That's when you turn around and start shooting at the building.” Leroy landed the car. “Good luck.”

“Wait. I really don't know how to use this gun.”

“It's hot and good to go. Just release this safety here and fire.”

“What do I do when I get to the other side?”

“Hope your memory come back by then.”

2

Xinluoma

Malmquist lifted his head off the floor in a daze as he regained consciousness. “Where am I?”

“E tu chi sei?” a man whispered to him in the darkness.

“Who are you?”

“Sei lo schiavo nuovo?”

“What language are you speaking?”

“Che lingua stai parlando?”

“Do you speak English?”

“Inglese? No, non parlo Inglese.”

“Where am I? Chicago? What happened?”

“Di dove sei? Non sapevo che voleva uno schiavo nuovo.”

“I don’t understand you. Are you Italian?”

“Shsh. Fa silenzio.”

“L’eunuco ha preso uno della sua eta’,” murmured another, with a laugh.

They lit an oil lamp, and the room revealed a group of startled young men wearing simple tunics, lying on thin pallets. “Di dove sei?”

“Would you please tell me what the hell is going on? I was just in Gary, Indiana, in the future. Escaping from Gary. And then I must have blacked out. Am I shot?”

“Non capisce. Chiedi a Stefano questo da dove viene.”

They opened the door. Just outside the room another man was sleeping on a pallet. Moonlight bathed a spacious atrium, in the middle of which was a pool, and above that, an open roof. Colonnades, curtains, tall plants, marble statues.

“Oh, Stefano, di dov’e’ sto tipo?”

The man peered in at Malmquist. “E che ne so.”

“Do you guys have any food? I’m really hungry,” said

Malmquist, motioning to his stomach.

“Non ci e’ permesso mangiare finche’ la Padrona non finisce i suoi lavaggi mattutini,” said one.

“Non capisce niente. Vedi se Giulia gli trova qualche rimasuglio,” said another. “Stefano, chiedi a Giulia di dargli qualcosa da rosicchiare per stanotte.”

Stefano ran off. Malmquist got up to follow him.

“No!” they said, and held him back. One drew his hand across his neck like a knife. “Agli schiavi non e’ permesso di muoversi dal loro posto!”

Malmquist sat down in perplexed silence. In the lamplight, the walls of the simple room gave way to a landscape mural of mythological creatures—centaurs, satyrs, cupids, a minotaur.

“Come ti chiami?” one asked him.

“I don’t understand.”

Pointing outside he said, “Stefano.” Pointing at himself, “Riccardo.” He pointed at Malmquist.

“Oh. Jeff.”

“Ah, Giulia.”

Stefano had reappeared with a woman. “Uno nuovo?” she whispered, annoyed. “Come mai adesso?”

“E chi lo sa. E’ apparso dal nulla e ci ha svegliato.”

She crawled partway in the room and handed Malmquist a tray with a wet hand towel and several small bottles on it.

“What’s this?” he said, sniffing them. “Scents? Perfumes?”

She pointed to his stomach. “Devi assistere la Padrona nei suoi lavaggi mattutini, e poi puoi mangiare.”

“What? I can’t eat this.”

“No.” She gestured across the atrium to a large closed doorway. “E’ per la Padrona.”

As she bent forward to explain, her tunic dipped open. The atrium light shone through it from behind and revealed at a glance her long hanging breasts and pubic bush and in the distance, another man sleeping on a pallet who had lifted up his head at the ruckus.

“What?” asked Malmquist.

“Dio santo. Non sa che fare. Glielo devo fare vedere io.” She motioned to him to come closer. “Avvicinati. Vicino.”

She opened her legs and handed him the towel. He understood he was to wipe her down. She emptied a few drops from one of the vials on her fingers. “Questo è l’olio di rugosa,” she said, placing her fingertips under his nose before transferring the oil to her genitals. “È importante spalmare dall’alto in basso, non viceversa. Ora, questo è l’olio di reseda. Solo un poco!”

She then instructed him to apply the other scent to her vulva, perineum and anus, in that order and made kissing and licking motions with her mouth. “E poi baciala e leccala.”

“God, you’re gorgeous but this is all a bit sudden for me.”

When he bent down and pressed his lips to her groin, she slapped him. “Che stai facendo! Non lo devi fare a me ma a lei. Ti sto solo facendo vedere.” She pointed to the door across the atrium. “Fa’ lo stesso con *la Padrona* quando si sveglia.”

The others in the room were smirking. The man across the atrium signaled to keep the noise down.

“I don’t understand,” said Malmquist. Giulia sighed in exasperation. He rubbed his stomach. “I’m really hungry.”

She returned a minute later with a plate of boiled chicken feet.

“What are these?” He took one in thumb and forefinger and retracted his lips in disgust.

“Okay?” she said, and left.

He scraped the skin off the claws with his teeth and finished the plate. The others had gone back to sleep, and he slept too.

Malmquist was nudged awake at dawn. “E’ ora di andare dalla *Padrona*.”

“What?”

“La *Padrona*.”

Stefano handed him the tray with the scented oils and a fresh hot towel. He led him across the atrium. The man guarding the mysterious room received them and Malmquist entered. It was a luxurious room with recessed windows; the walls were splashed with

colorful frescoes. There were ivory-inlaid wardrobes and bench chests with gilded feet carved into lion's paws. A large bed with a disordered blue and yellow-striped satin bedspread took up the middle of the room and was raised so high a footstool was at its side for climbing onto it. Stefano and the guard pushed Malmquist forward and he mounted the bed.

"Ei, nucai, kuaidian'er. Deng shenme ne? Mali'er de!" snapped the person on the bed, an elderly woman of Asian race. "Ba maojin na guolai," she said, before sitting up at the sight of him. "E? Ni na'er laide? Wo zenme mei jianguo ni?"

"Xin laide nucai," said the two men from the doorway.

"Zenme huishi'er? Shui anpai de? Hao ba. Jiu zheyang. Wo xian shishi ni, kan ni zuo de zenmeyang."

Malmquist set the tray down by her legs. She opened them. Where there should have been a vagina was only a tiny red scar. At the sight of this he convulsed and unleashed a torrent of vomit on her groin.

"Wode ma ya!" she screamed. "Lairen!" Pointing to Malmquist she said to the guard, "Ba ta la xiqu bile!"

He was seized and led back to the slaves' chamber to be confined. Stefano summoned Giulia, while the Mistress's guard dashed out of the house. The female servants ran into her room to attend to the emergency. Other servants ran across the atrium in different directions.

"What's happening?" asked Malmquist.

The others looked at him with fear and malice in their eyes.

"Cosa dice la tua maglietta?" asked Riccardo, pointing to the writing on Malmquist's T-shirt.

"What, this? Who cares what it says? That's all you can think of to ask me right now? I was just thrown onto an old transvestite with deformed genitalia, having no idea what's going on or warning about what I supposed to do, and now I'm being accused of a crime? What did I do wrong? I don't even know where I am right now. A few hours ago I was in some kind of pedophile colony, and this doesn't look to be all that different. What are you all, a bunch of

slaves? How do you put up with this bullshit? Is this some kind of comedy routine?"

"Stai per morire, quindi ci piacerebbe avere la maglietta."

"Tu," said another to Malmquist as he drew his finger across his neck, "morire." He too pointed to his T-shirt. "Dacci."

"You want my T-shirt?"

"Sì."

"Why?"

"Non è utile per te. Stai per essere giustiziato!" said a third man in the room, who got up and grabbed Malmquist's shirt in his fist.

"Let go of me, you asshole!"

He tried to yank the shirt out of his hand and when that didn't work grabbed his arms. They struggled and Malmquist slammed him against the wall.

"Mi sta attaccando!" screamed the man.

Three muscular men wearing Roman military uniforms rushed in. They dragged Malmquist into the atrium, by which time everyone had been assembled. Two of them retracted his arms and yanked his head back by the hair. The third was about to slice open his neck with a sword when Giulia yelled, "Non uccidetelo, vi prego! Non sapeva cosa fare! E' nuovo, non e' Italiano e non capisce niente. Risparmiatelo, vi prego. E' stato un incidente!"

The mistress had emerged from her room dressed in a robe. Giulia got down on her knees before her and implored, "Nuzhuren, ta bushi guyi de!"

"Zhende? Hao! Danshi, fang ta zou zhiqian, ta bixu gei wo daoqian!"

"Peili daoqian!" the head soldier said to Malmquist.

"I don't understand."

"Daoqian! Chiedi perdono!"

Stefano got on his knees and showed Malmquist how to kowtow. Malmquist prostrated himself in front of the Mistress.

"Please, I didn't mean to offend you."

"Ta shuo shenme yuyan? Yingyu a? Zenmekeng?"

"Nucai gang daole. Women bu zhidao ta cong nali laide. Shi

women de cuo.”

“Hao la,” said the mistress, softening. “Wo yuanliang ni. Buguo, zai yi buneng zai er. Hao, women xianzai jiushi pengyou le!” To the guard she said, “Rang ta gundan.”

Giulia plopped her head down on the marble floor in relief. The soldiers escorted Malmquist out of the house, deposited him on the street and marched off.

“What’s going on?” he said after them.

He reached for one of the bronze lion’s head knockers and banged on the door. A guard appeared.

“I’m thirsty,” said Malmquist, gesturing.

Giulia arrived with a cup of water. Malmquist gargled and spat out the remaining vomit. “I’m hungry,” he said.

She glanced inside the house and back toward the street. “Vieni con me,” she said impatiently.

He followed her down the street. There were on a hillside, and soon the city’s vista came into view. “Holy shit! Where are we?”

“Nuova Roma.”

They stepped into a small eatery with an open front. Vats built into the counter sold rice and corn porridges, along with fried dough twists, boiled eggs, and pickled cabbage. He ate ravenously.

“Come sei finito qua?”

“I really do not have any idea what’s going on.”

When he was finished, she pointed toward the city and said, “C’e’ una stazione di polizia a Suburra. Forse ti possono aiutare. Vedi quel quartiere nella vallata di la’ del Foro, sulla sinistra della collina dell’Esquilino? Chiedi a qualcuno quando arrivi la’.”

“Giulia, I don’t understand. Please help me and don’t leave me. Thank you so much for saving my life. Oh, god, you’re so lovely.” He passed his hand over her face and hair. She dropped her head in shyness.

Just then an Asian male customer came up to them and grabbed her breasts, dislodging them from her tunic and balancing them in his palms. “Wa! Zhen da!”

Malmquist moved toward him but Giulia held him fast under

the table.

“Xiansheng, wo buzai zheli zuo gongzuo,” she calmly told the man. She pointed to a young waitress who had pulled out her breasts and beckoned him to the second floor. “Ta hui manzu nin. Feichang ganxie!” He followed her upstairs.

“Who the fuck is he?”

She wagged her finger at Malmquist gravely. “Non litigarci. Mai. Andiamo!”

The food paid for, she led him briskly toward the destination she was mentioning before the rude interruption. “Ricorda la strada se dovessi aver bisogno di tornare per farti aiutare da me.” Indicating the street they were on, she said, “Questa e’ Via Nova.”

They entered a public square with a tremendous display of classical architecture clad in white marble. Hundreds of people milled about, Asians in purple-fringed togas and Caucasians in tunics trailing behind. She pointed to the Temple of Julius Caesar on their right and the vast Basilica Julia on their left. They turned and crossed the square along the Via Sacra to another huge building, the Basilica Aemilia, which they proceeded around into a compact square lined with columns, the Forum of Nerva. Exiting out the other end, they descended along the Clivus Argiletum and into a shabby neighborhood teeming with shops and alleyways, Suburra.

Along one side of the street was a masonry wall punctuated by archways. One of these they entered. More soldiers in Ancient Roman armor were coming and going from the precinct headquarters across a courtyard interior paved with cobblestones. Giulia consulted with a guard in the entrance and they were directed to a back room, where a Black man in a toga was sitting at a desk adorned with a toy American flag.

“Now who have we got here?” he said.

“Finally, someone who can speak English. Man, am I happy to see you. Would you please tell me how I wound up in this fake Ancient Rome?”

“You ain’t Italian? Where you from?”

“Chicago.”

“Chicago? How’d you get here? Ain’t no foreigners except Italians here.”

“Then who are you, may I ask?”

“The American Ambassador.”

“This is the American Embassy?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hey, wait a minute. I’ve seen you before. You’re Leroy from the police station in Gary, Indiana.”

“I ain’t seen you before. You must be thinking of someone else.”

“I could swear it’s you. No, it’s really you.”

“Wrong person. Now what you doing here?”

“Why is the Embassy in a police station? Are there other countries’ embassies here as well?”

“Only the Italian.”

“Italian? How could there be an Italian Embassy? We’re in Italy.”

“Italy? What made you think this Italy?”

“What are all these Italians doing here then?”

“They slaves. You in China.”

“China! Well, how do I get out?”

“You can’t.”

“Why not?”

“You a slave too.”

“I am not a slave.”

“You in New Rome and you honky, then you a slave.”

“Are there other Americans?”

“You the first I’ve seen. Where were you before you came here?”

“I was trying to escape from Gary to Chicago. And you were helping me!”

“You all mixed up, man. Who that woman slave you come here with? Can’t she help you?”

Malmquist turned to Giulia. She was gone.

“That’s right, she gone. And you know why she gone? You know why they done through with you? She told us what happened. You offended a retired Chinese court eunuch.”

“It was an accident. I was disoriented and sick to my stomach when they shoved me onto her naked. They almost executed me. But I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You made her lose face. It don’t matter why it happened but it happened. That ain’t no ordinary eunuch. You know who Guo Meimei is up there on that Palatine Hill where you almost got your head chopped off? Once you offend a Chinese ain’t nobody gonna help you nohow.”

“A eunuch? I thought eunuchs were male.”

“She call herself female, she dress female, she female.”

“Wait. The Palatine? How could it be the Palatine if we’re in China? Are you telling me it has the same topography as real Rome? They constructed this all so perfectly?”

“Down to the very inch. The Tiber too. They diverted another river nearby and carved it out. And they built the Aurelian Wall to keep all you slaves in.”

“How many slaves are there?”

“One million. Half as many Chinese masters. More during peak season, though most of the Chinese live here permanently and keep they own slaves.”

“Where did they get one million Italian slaves?”

“From Italy.”

“I mean how?”

“Heard they hired them all at first. Italy economy bad back then. After they arrived they got a big surprise. They had a job all right. Worked they asses off, but passports all confiscated and the only salary any of them ever seen was a few sesterces in tips for good behavior. Phones took too. No way to contact the outside world, no way to go home. No countries dare mess with China no more, and Italy can’t help them. Anyway, most of the slaves used to it by now. They’ve been here several decades or more. Some born here and already grown up. Don’t know nothing else.”

“What year is it?”

“2060.”

“Same as New Gary.”

“Don’t you start having fantasies of escaping back to the U.S. now. You better start worrying about finding gainful employment. They throw jobless slaves to the animals in the Colosseum.”

“As my country’s ambassador, you have an obligation to help out a fellow U.S. citizen. I have no money, no passport.”

“You already forget no matter where you from a slave ain’t no citizen. Where you living now, since they kicked you out?”

“Why don’t you tell me.”

“Yep, you need a master to take you on and give you a pallet to sleep on and some food to eat.”

“Can you help me find one?”

“Nope.”

“Can you at least direct me to where I might find one?”

“Come to think of it, that balneum over there across the street, the manager slave he got beaten to death last week by some Chinese. Heard the slave boy helping him is struggling to operate the place. Maybe you can go ask him if he need someone.”

“Why was he killed?”

“Don’t know.”

“Why would I want to work there?”

“Look, I’m just helping you out.”

“What’s a balneum?”

“The local bathhouse.”

“Could you take me over there and introduce me? I don’t know any Italian and can’t explain myself.”

“I can’t, but I’ll get one of the guards to take you there.”

“Wait. There’s one thing I still don’t understand. If this is the U.S. Embassy, then this must be the capital city of China. What happened to Beijing?”

“They can put the embassy anywhere they damn well please, and they put us here.”

“I thought this would be the consulate.”

“Ain’t no U.S. Consulates in China. Only me. I’m the man.”