

I

“Does the word Sparta mean anything to you?”

A young woman sat on a spoke-backed chair of varnished pine. Her face was turned to the tall window; her unmarked features were pale in the diffuse light that flooded the white room, reflected from the wintry landscape outside.

Her interrogator fussed with his trim salt-and-pepper beard and peered at her over the top of his spectacles as he waited for an answer. He sat behind a battered oak desk a hundred and fifty years old, a kindly fellow with all the time in the world.

“Of course.” In her oval face her brows were wide ink strokes above eyes of liquid brown; beneath her upturned nose her mouth was full, her lips innocent in their delicate, natural pinkness. The unwashed brown hair that lay in lank strands against her cheeks, her shapeless dressing gown, these could not disguise her beauty.

“What does it mean to you?”

VENUS PRIME

“What?”

“The word Sparta, what does that mean to you?”

“Sparta is my name.” Still she did not look at him.

“What about the name Linda? Does that mean anything to you?”

She shook her head.

“Or how about Ellen?”

She did not respond.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked.

“I don’t believe we’ve met, Doctor.” She continued to stare out the window, studying something a great distance away.

“But you do know that I’m a doctor.”

She shifted in her chair, glanced around the room, taking in the diplomas, the books, returning her gaze to him with a thin smile. The doctor smiled back. Though in fact they had met every week for the past year, her point was taken—again. Yes, any sane person would know she was in a doctor’s office. Her smile faded and she turned back to the window.

“Do you know where you are?”

“No. They brought me here during the night. Usually I’m in . . . the program.”

“Where is that?”

“In . . . Maryland.”

“What is the name of the program?”

“I . . .” She hesitated. A frown creased her brow.

“ . . . I can’t tell you that.”

“Can you remember it?”

Her eyes flashed angrily. “It’s not on the white side.”

“You mean it’s classified?”

“Yes. I can’t tell anyone without a Q clearance.”

“I have a Q clearance, Linda.”

VENUS PRIME

“That is not my name. How do I know you have a clearance? If my father tells me I can talk to you about the program, I will.”

He had often told her that her parents were dead. Invariably she greeted the news with disbelief. If he did not repeat it within five or ten minutes, she promptly forgot; if, however, he persisted, trying to persuade her, she became wild with confusion and grief—only to recover her sad calm a few minutes after he relented. He had long since ceased to torture her with temporary horrors.

Of all his patients, she was the one who most excited his frustration and regret. He longed to restore her lost core and he believed he could do it, if her keepers would permit him to.

Frustrated, bored perhaps, he abandoned the script of the interview. “What do you see out there?” he asked.

“Trees. Mountains.” Her voice was a longing whisper. “Snow on the ground.”

If he were to continue the routine they had established, a routine he remembered but she did not, he would ask her to recount what had happened to her yesterday, and she would recite in great detail events that had occurred over three years ago. He rose abruptly—surprising himself, for he rarely varied his work schedule. “Would you like to go outside?”

She seemed as surprised as he.

The nurses grumbled and fussed over her, bundling her into wool trousers, flannel shirt, scarf, fur-lined leather boots, a thick overcoat of some shiny gray quilted material—a fabulously expensive wardrobe, which she took for granted. She was fully capable of dressing herself, but she often forgot to change her clothes. They found it easier to

leave her in her robe and slippers then, pretending to themselves that she was helpless. They helped her now, and she allowed it.

The doctor waited for her outside on the icy steps of the stone veranda, studying the French doors with their peeling frames, the yellow paint pigment turning to powder in the dry, thin air. He was a tall and very round man, made rounder by the bulk of his black Chesterfield coat with its elegant velvet collar. The coat was worth the price of an average dwelling. It was a sign of the compromises he had made.

The girl emerged, urged forward by the nurses, gasping at the sharpness of the air. High on her cheeks two rosy patches bloomed beneath the transparent surface of her blue-white skin. She was neither tall nor unusually slender, but there was a quick unthinking certainty in her movements that reminded him she was a dancer. Among other things.

He and the girl walked on the grounds behind the main building. From this altitude they could see a hundred miles across the patchwork brown and white plains to the east, a desert of overgrazed, farmed-out grit. Not all the white was snow; some was salt. Afternoon sun glinted from the windows of a moving magneplane heading south, too far away to see; ice-welded blades of brown grass crunched under their feet where the sunlight had sublimed the snow cover.

The edge of the lawn was marked by bare cottonwoods planted close together, paralleling an ancient wall of brownstone. The ten-foot electrified fence beyond the wall was almost invisible against the mountainside, which rose abruptly into shadow; higher up, blue drifts of snow persisted beneath squat junipers.

They sat on a bench in sunlight. He brought a chess pad from the pocket of his coat and laid it flat between them. “Would you like to play?”

“Are you any good?” she asked simply.

“Fair. Not as good as you.”

“How do you know?”

He hesitated—they had played often—but he was weary of challenging her with the truth. “It was in your file.”

“I would like to see that file someday.”

“I’m afraid I no longer have access to it,” he lied. The file she had in mind was a different file.

The chess pad assigned her the white pieces and she opened swiftly with the Giuco Piano, throwing the doctor off balance with pawn to bishop-three on the fourth move. To give himself time to think he asked, “Is there anything else you would like?”

“Anything else?”

“Is there anything we can do for you?”

“I would like to see my mother and father.”

He didn’t answer, pondering the board instead. Like most amateurs, he struggled to think two or three moves deep but was unable to hold all the permutations in his mind. Like most masters, she thought in patterns; although at this moment she could no longer recall her opening moves, it didn’t matter. Years ago, before her short-term memory had been destroyed, she had stored uncounted patterns.

He pushed the piece-keys and she replied instantly. On her next move one of his bishops was pinned. He smiled ruefully. Another rout in the making. Nevertheless he did his best to stay with her, to give her an interesting game. Until her keepers untied his hands he had little else to give her.