

A Legendary Mystery

By Henry Drake

“If it doesn’t kill you, it will make you stronger,” Cole said.

“Shut up.”

“It all evens out,” Cole said, more loudly.

“Shut up.”

“Grin and bear it.”

Thomas threw a magazine at Cole’s head, just missing.

The two men, Cole Porter Palmer and Thomas Jefferson Penn, were seated in their Dearborn office on a Monday morning.

“Someone said that Churchill was a floating kidney in the body politic. I don’t think it was a compliment. That could apply to you too,” Thomas remarked.

“It doesn’t sound like a compliment, whatever it means. You must have heard it from Leander Kelly. It’s too deep for you.”

“I’m capable of deep thinking,” Thomas retorted, suppressing a grin.

That was it for about five minutes. Both men were busy on their respective laptops. Their private investigation business had been brisk of late.

Thomas broke the silence by saying, “After breaking this toe falling down the stairs, Christine suggests I get more insurance.”

“Lucky you didn’t break your neck,” Cole, who thought the world of Christine, said distractedly. It was not uncommon for Cole to attend Friday night dinner with Thomas and his family. They usually let Cole bring something for desert from the Shafer Avenue middle-eastern bakery. Christine Kumara Penn was an excellent cook, and there was almost always a spicy Ugandan dish on the table.

“She takes my misfortunes as seriously as you do,” Thomas observed, glumly. “You’d think I was expendable.”

“Who isn’t?” Cole said, and he wasn’t grinning.

“It doesn’t do any good to look for sympathy from you or Christine.”

“None. Listen to this.”

“I’m busy.”

“No, listen,” Cole persisted. “There’s an article in the paper about a research project at the University of Michigan. A guy named Mark Legend, L-e-g-e-n-d – says here it’s pronounced “Le-jawnd” - had an extensive and sophisticated marine facility on the grounds of his estate, just outside of campus: fish, aquatic animals, and plants. When he died, he left the property to the university, which converted it to a Special Projects Center in the School of Natural Sciences. The university made it into a top-notch research facility. Anyway, he had large indoor fish tanks, even his own water treatment equipment to make sure the water chemistry was perfect.”

Thomas had turned away from his work, but he looked less than captivated by Cole’s narrative. “What’s the point?”

“I’m getting there,” Cole replied. “It says that the university is developing genetically enhanced fish at the site. Top secret. After a lot of experimenting, they’ve created a premium specimen, a fish with extremely high protein and HDL content. It says that the University is planning to sell the biological patent for a fortune.”

“Maybe tuition will go down.”

Cole shook his head. “I give up on trying to educate you. At least Leander was able to get a few quotations into your thick skull.”

Thomas pretended to knock on his forehead as if he were rapping on a tree trunk, then he said, “And why do you think I’d care about Franken-fish?”

Just as Cole opened his mouth to reply, and it would have been an inspired reply, the office phone rang and the witty rejoinder evaporated. Thomas lifted the phone and growled, “Yes!”

Now, Thomas’ eyes looked like saucers and his jaw dropped, not common occurrences in Cole’s experience. Thomas shook his head more than once, even as he was saying, “Okay.” Suffice it to say that neither Thomas nor Cole could ignore this caller’s request, as it seemed to both of them that Providence, or fate, demanded an affirmative response. Less than an hour later, Thomas parked the car in a lot behind a large baroque building just east of campus, a sprawling three-story stone structure with many gables and turrets, small heavy glass windows and several large outbuildings.

“This must be the place,” Thomas remarked, removing the key from the ignition. Cole opened the door and stepped outside. It was a pretty autumn day after a spectacular weekend. The last place Cole expected to be that morning was the Special Projects Center of the University of Michigan School of Natural Sciences. When that eerily coincidental call came, Thomas had

requested background information, but nothing doing. He would be informed of the situation, he had been told, after he had signed a confidentiality agreement.

A tall woman, who appeared to Cole to be in her forties, met them at the front door. Her hair was brown seasoned with some gray, and while her frame was curvilinear, her features were a series of sharp lines punctuated by two dark eyes. The woman's neck was long, which further accented that angular face.

"Are you Penn?" she asked.

"Yes," said the big man.

"Who's that?" she asked, suspiciously.

"My partner...Palmer."

She didn't look happy. "You didn't say anything about a partner, and Dr. Zimmerman didn't mention it either."

"I didn't tell you I have a wife and four kids either. And I don't like asparagus. It's your lucky day; it's a two for one deal."

Cole had known Thomas long enough to have learned that people hired Penn for his investigative skills, and not for his bedside manner. For a moment, Cole thought that the woman was going to run them off, but then she pulled the door open and motioned them inside. She didn't say another word until she had led them through two rooms and into a room paneled with white pine. A table and chairs were in the center of the room, freestanding bookcases of various heights on two walls, a grease board on one wall, and windows on the fourth wall. In spite of the windows, it was a dark room because of the shading bushes outside. A chandelier hung over the table but the woman let the natural lighting suffice.

"I'm Marsha Angler, the Director." She reticently extended a hand.

"Thomas Jefferson Penn." Thomas took it.

"Cole Porter Palmer."

"Sit, please."

She looked around the room and asked them, "Do you know what we do here?"

"You make super fish," Cole said drolly.

"Succinct, and not far from the mark, though my colleagues would shudder to hear me admit it. We are genetic engineers, but our interests these days are academic *and* mercenary."

"We're a for-profit enterprise too," Thomas deadpanned.

She smiled and cracks appeared on that interesting face. "The lines between education, business, and entertainment have been blurred," she admitted. "As a research scientist, I get what

I want, and the university gets what it wants: good publicity and money. I'm not comfortable with the demands of the marketplace but I've learned to live with them."

"Whether it was coincidence or fate, Cole happened to be reading an article about your research when you called. What happened here that requires private investigators?" Thomas asked her.

"I know your meter is running," she said wryly. "What I'm about to tell you is difficult. I must insist you sign this confidentiality agreement first."

Thomas and Cole read it. The document wasn't anything out of the ordinary, and their signatures were secured.

"Very well," she said, gathering the papers. "We've been working for many years to produce a special fish of the genus *Oncorhynchus*...salmon will do, by a combination of selective breeding and genetic enhancement. Suffice it to say that tens of thousands of hours have gone into this project, and millions of dollars, and several patents have been secured. It was worth it — all of it.

"As Palmer suggested, we created a *super* fish with properties that make it extremely nutritious and fabulously healthful. We felt so strongly about the potential of this project that we retained a full time chemist and we made everyone in the know sign secrecy and non-compete agreements.

"We were close, so close," she said, anxiously, "but there's a killer here."

Cole and Thomas looked at each other. So it was murder, Cole told himself. "And what have the police concluded?" Thomas asked her.

"We haven't informed the police."

"Now wait a minute. I read your confidentiality agreement. It's null and void if we have a legal obligation to inform the police, and they get touchy if we keep a little thing like murder to ourselves."

"Let me finish," she said, anxiously. "I always come to the Center Sunday morning after breakfast; it's a habit. Last Sunday, when I arrived, no one was here but the day guard. Binker Bell comes on duty at eight a.m. and was stationed outside the door to the Ichtheater."

"What's that?" asked Thomas.

"It's a room with a large tank containing thousands of gallons of water," she replied, impatiently. "I unlocked the door and when I went inside, I saw the dead body."

"Who was murdered?" Thomas asked.

"Not who," she snapped. "It was the subject."

"The fish," Cole observed.

“Of course,” she replied, “but the subject happens to be a one-of-a-kind organism, not a dead goldfish.”

“Tell us exactly what you saw, with as much detail as you can,” Cole instructed.

She surveyed him keenly before saying, “The moment I stepped into the room, I knew something was awry. The subject was a large animal, almost eighteen inches long, and I was used to seeing her roaming the glass tank freely. But there was no activity in the tank, only something floating on the surface. Immediately, I retracted the wire screen cover and went up the ladder to the catwalk on top of the tank. The subject was on the surface of the tank...dead, mangled.”

“What did the guard say?” Cole asked.

“Our day guard insisted that no one entered or exited the room since he came on duty,” she answered.

“I’m sure you spoke to the night guard too,” Cole continued.

“Of course. Same answer. No one went into that room.”

“Unless one of the guards is lying.”

“I had thought of that possibility, of course.”

Cole asked her, “When was the last time you saw the fish alive?”

“I always check the tank before I leave for the day. I happened to be here late Saturday. Becky Poe is our night guard; she’s a student. Both of our guards are students. The subject was fine at nine-thirty on Saturday night and the wire screen was in-place when I left the room.”

“Can we see the Ichtheater?” Cole requested.

She stood and led them out of the paneled room and down a dark corridor to a small room, almost bare. There were two doors in the room and one window. One door, the one they had entered, faced the corridor; there was a wooden chair and credenza next to it. The other door was on the opposite wall at right angles to the window.

Marsha Angler said, “You should know that this building and these grounds once belonged to an amateur naturalist named Mark ‘Le-jawnd’”.

“L-e-g-e-n-d,” Thomas suggested, knowingly.

“I’m grateful to know that we’ve hired cultured investigators,” she said, raising an eyebrow. “When Legend willed the estate to the university there was confusion about what to do with it, and the property was vacant for some time, until this project was conceived. Then, the university embarked on extensive renovations to make this a state-of-the-art facility. I have been told it wasn’t easy, what with masses of buried concrete, archaic wiring, and secret passageways.”

“Secret passageways?” Thomas inquired.

“I should have said rumors about secret passageways, but concerns about voids and tunnels slowed down the work. None of these hidden passages were ever discovered to the best of my knowledge.”

“Is this where the guard sits?” Cole asked, apparently uninterested in hidden passages.

She nodded.

“Where is he?”

“We suspended guard duty when the subject was killed.”

Thomas and Cole examined the small space. Except for the chair and credenza, the room was empty. There weren't any curtains on the window or anything on the walls.

“Is this door normally locked?” Thomas was inspecting the far door.

“Always,” the Director replied. “Thalia, our chemist, and I are only ones who know the access code.”

“Who's been notified of this crime?” Cole asked, running his hand over the credenza.

“Thalia knows. Binker knew something was wrong when I came out of the Ichtheater, but he doesn't know the truth. The Head of the School of Natural Sciences – Dr. Zimmerman, and the President of the University have been informed. They may have advised others: legal, insurance. Dr. Zimmerman instructed me to call Penn. He was made aware of your work some years ago by a colleague in the Philosophy Department.”

“So the guards don't know what happened, to the best of your knowledge. What did you tell them?”

“A little white lie; that we had moved the subject.”

“Who else works on the grounds?”

“There's Thalia Poe and there is a maintenance man, Glenn Fry. Thalia's the only other person allowed in the subject's quarters, unless maintenance is required, and then the workers are always accompanied by Thalia or me. Neither the guards nor the caretaker have been given the access code to the Ichtheater. Sometimes, we have university support for utilities maintenance: the water treatment plant, air handling, electrical but they're not here very often.”

“Have any of the university support people been on site in the last week?” Cole asked, abruptly.

“Not to my knowledge. They need authorization from Thalia or me. You can ask her.”

“Do you have a theory about what happened, Dr. Angler?” Cole queried.

“No,” she said, tentatively.

“How carefully have the guards been scrutinized?” Cole inquired.

The woman shook her head and said, "They are here to watch this door, the only entry to the Ichtheater. They do not have the access code so they cannot enter the subject's room without damaging the door, and there is no sign of tampering. There's a limit switch that is triggered when the door is opened, and the computer record proves that it was not opened the night of the crime."

"Let's look at the fish tank," Thomas suggested.

Marsha Angler keyed in the code and opened the door. The room was about fifty feet by fifty feet and the ceiling was at least twenty feet high. All four walls were built of cut stone, large blocks at least a foot square. There were a series of small, elongated windows at ceiling height on every wall, except the one containing the entrance door. These opaque windows were side by side along the entire length of the wall; each was one foot tall and two feet wide. There were no other visible doors or windows in the room; however, there was a bolted six-foot by six-foot stainless steel plate on one wall, beginning at floor level.

Dr. Angler, noticing that Cole was looking at the steel plate said, "That's how we get larger items into and out of the room. Removing that plate requires special tools and can only be accomplished from inside the room. I've been told that steel plate is one-half inch thick, and that it requires at least four strong men to move it."

Cole left Dr. Angler and Thomas and circled the room. In the center, was an enormous glass tank, at least twenty feet by ten feet, and ten feet tall. There was a foot of granular sediment on the bottom of the tank, from which a number of frond-like plants were growing; otherwise, the tank contained just water. At one end of the tank, a four-inch pipe exited the floor and entered the tank at an elevation of three feet above the floor. There was an identical arrangement at the other end of the tank.

Turning from the tank to the room itself, Cole observed two-foot square supply and return air ducts on opposite sides of the entrance at knee level. Both were covered with metal grills. He examined each grill carefully. The screws exhibited no signs of having been recently removed. There was a battery of lights criss-crossing the room at a height of about eighteen feet. As Marsha Angler had indicated, there was a single ladder on one side of the tank leading to a cross shaped catwalk on top.

Cole had already climbed to the top of the tank when he said, "There isn't any way into or out of this room except for the locked door?"

"That's correct. The windows are almost twenty feet above the ground."

"The screen cover that you told us about is not being used?"

“There is no need for it anymore now that the subject is gone. The screen was intended to be our last line of defense if an unauthorized person got into the Ichtheater.”

Thomas shook his head. “Don’t dismiss access through those windows too quickly. A ladder might have been used, or someone could have come down from the roof.”

“The windows don’t open,” she said, impatiently. “And they are over a hundred years old. Can you imagine the mess if someone came in that way? On account of the subject, this room was kept spotless. We’d have seen it immediately. I can guarantee the windows weren’t tampered with.”

“I’d be careful about guaranteeing anything yet,” Thomas observed. He walked to the ladder and looked up at Cole.

Cole shook his head. He had been looking at the ceiling.

Another woman had entered the room while the three were conversing. Despite her boots and work clothes, lack of make-up, and the fact that the hair on the back of her head had been twisted into the shape of a propeller, she was a striking woman. Her gray-blue eyes were oblong, and she had a small nose and a wide mouth. She had the look of an athlete.

“What’s this all about?” the newcomer asked tentatively.

“Hello Thalia. This is Penn, and this is Palmer. Kenneth wants them to conduct an investigation.”

The propeller-topped woman shrugged. “All the King’s horses and all the King’s men can’t put the subject back together again.”

“Thalia can be dramatic, but in this case I’m afraid her sentiments are accurate.”

“What are your duties here?” Thomas asked.

Thalia Poe gave Thomas a frown. “Am I a suspect? I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You don’t have to. I’m responsible for water chemistry in the tank. I make sure the pH is balanced, the nutrients and dissolved oxygen are sufficient, the alkalinity is stable, and that contaminants are removed from the water.”

“How often do you check the water?” Thomas queried.

“Twice a day. We weren’t taking any chances.”

“Every day, or just weekdays?”

“Every day.”

“So,” Thomas said, returning to the door to the Ichtheater where the two women stood, “what were the analytical results on Saturday and Sunday?”



“Well within specifications. When you see the subject, it will be apparent that water chemistry wasn’t responsible for her death,” Thalia Poe explained.

A loud clanging sound signaled that Cole was finished on top of the tank. He wiped his hands with a handkerchief and joined them. “Did you do an analysis of the fish tissue?”

“I’m impressed,” Thalia Poe said, but with a hint of sarcasm. “We did. It was clean; no foreign substances.”

“What’s this?” Cole asked, inspecting a metal bar along the outside wall of the tank.

“Watch,” Marsha Angler said. She walked to a panel on the wall and went to work on a keypad. Immediately, a wire screen emerged from the bar and slowly covered the tank surface. It would have been difficult, not to say impossible, to gain access to the tank when the cover was closed.

“Dr. Poe,” Cole said. “How are you related to Becky?”

“She’s my niece. She’s also a junior in the Natural Sciences program at the university. It’s been good experience for Becky to be associated with this project, and the money comes in handy. It was easy work, watching the door. She could study and do homework; we encouraged it.”

“Let’s see the fish,” Thomas said.

They left the room together, Dr. Angler pulling the door shut behind them. Cole delayed before asking the Director to open the door, then he scanned the Ichtheater one more time, saying, “I notice you didn’t have to enter a code to open the door again.”

“Right,” the Director concurred. “The door is programmed to remain unlocked unless we input the code to lock it again. When we are busy in the room it helps to be able to close the door for secrecy without having the door lock.”

“What do you hope to accomplish here?” Thalia Poe asked Cole, and by extension, Marsha Angler. “The subject is dead. Months of toil are lost.”

“Can’t you replicate the animal?” Cole asked the chemist.

“We can, but it will take a long time, and others are experimenting too. Coming in second in this race is not much different than being last.”

Marsha Angler led them down a shorter corridor toward the back of the building to a room that looked to have been, at one time, a kitchen. It had larger windows on each wall, which afforded a view of a small garden, where two rabbits were nibbling the greenery.

The Director pulled open the door of a large vertical freezer. She extracted a tray with a transparent plastic bag containing what once had been a large fish.

It was obvious what had caused the creature's demise. Large areas of the surface of the fish were gouged out. A quarter of the head was missing. To Cole, it looked like someone had attacked the creature with a wide-headed drill.

"This was how you found it?" Cole asked, moving his face to within inches of the wrapping.

"Yes," Marsha Angler said. "The subject was floating on the surface of the water beneath the screen."

"I want a sample," Cole instructed.

"I told you we analyzed the tissue," Thalia Poe retorted.

"I want a sample."

The chemist seemed to be on the verge of an explosion, but Marsha Angler put a hand on her shoulder. "It's to be expected. We can comply combatively...or gracefully. Let's be graceful."

"We cannot allow the subject's DNA to leave this building," Thalia insisted. "The attorneys will crucify us."

The Director nodded and said, "Dr. Poe is right. I am sorry to hinder your investigation but I cannot accede to your request."

"We'll make do without it," Thomas said, staring Cole into submission.

"Do you want water samples?" Marsha Angler asked.

"No use," Cole observed. "The water chemistry could have changed within hours of the incident."

"Well reasoned," Thalia Poe observed.

"Have we seen everything?" Cole asked the Director.

"Not everything, of course, but you're not taking rooms here. What else interests you?"

"It's a matter of knowing what interests me *after* I've seen it, not *before*. The article I read mentioned a water treatment system."

"The treatment system is Thalia's bailiwick. She can show you, but we have already ruled out poisons in the water. The equipment is in the basement and like many old vaults, it isn't very appealing down there."

"Here...follow me," Thalia Poe instructed them.

The staircase to the basement was behind a small door that reminded Cole of a closet. The wooden stairs were steep and narrow; Thomas had to bend low to keep from hitting his head on the beams.

“It looks medieval down here,” the chemist observed when they all reached the bottom, but the treatment system is ultra-modern. The city potable water line enters in that corner...see? These are cartridge filters; that’s the first treatment step. Then, the water passes through those carbon filters in the far corner, and then the reverse osmosis membranes. Once we make a virtually pure water, we add the salts, nutrients, and dissolved oxygen we desire.”

Cole could see that work had been done to prepare the basement for the equipment. The floor had been replaced. There was a large hatch at the top of one wall, like the one in the Ichtheater, probably to move larger equipment in and out. He said, “What are those pipes going through the ceiling?”

“The Ichtheater is above us,” Poe replied. “One of those pipes brings the treated water to the tank. The other pipe carries the waste from the tank. You can see where it penetrates the wall and then connects to the city sewer.”

“Don’t get any strange ideas, Palmer,” Marsha Angler interjected. “This ceiling, which is also the floor of the Ichtheater, is made of two-foot thick concrete, and there are no doors or hatches in it.”

“Are you sure? Remember that rumor about Legend’s secret passages.”

“See for yourself,” the Director retorted. “The ceiling is solid concrete. Hand him the flashlight Thalia.”

The chemist did so and Cole confirmed Marsha Angler’s judgment. He said, “It looks like another pipe used to be connected to both of the pipes that pass through the ceiling.”

“Don’t make it sound so suspicious. Those blind flanges cover clean-outs, which can be used if the lines get plugged, or are slow. It doesn’t happen often but the pipes are only four-inches in diameter, so we needed a convenient way to get inside them with a cleaning tool. The valves allow us to isolate the clean-outs so that we can remove the blind flange without draining the tank or flooding the basement with city water.”

Cole indicated satisfaction with his inspection of the room and up they went, Cole getting a face-ful of cobwebs in the process.

After the Director had closed the stair door, Thomas said, “We’ll want to interview everyone individually: you and Dr. Poe, the guards, even the caretaker. We’ll need names, addresses, phone numbers, and e-mails.”

“Certainly,” the Director replied. “I’ll give you the information before you leave.”

On their way out, they passed the white paneled room. There was a man in overalls cleaning the windows. His back was turned to them.

“That’s Glenn, the caretaker,” Marsha Angler observed, adding, “He’s never been in the Ichtheater.”

Cole stepped into the room and waited for the man to turn around.

“I’m Cole Palmer,” he said, extending a hand. Cole’s practiced eye assessed Fry. The caretaker was a clean-shaven man who looked to be in his forties or early fifties, with short brown hair and a prominent jaw.

The man wiped his hands on his overalls before taking Cole’s hand. “The name is Glenn Fry.”

“Notice anything out of the ordinary in the last week?” Cole asked the man.

Fry looked over Cole’s shoulder at Dr. Angler.

“Answer him, Glenn.”

“There were two men on the power pole near the street last Friday. After an hour, they went up on the roof where the power line from the transformer enters the building.”

“Where is that?” Thomas asked, from the entryway.

“Outside the utilities room,” Fry answered.

It was Cole’s turn again. “How long were the men on the roof?”

“Only one was on the roof. I’d say half an hour.”

“Anything else out of the ordinary?”

“No.”

“You’re sure,” Cole prompted the man.

“I don’t remember anything else...sorry.”

“How long have you worked here?” Thomas asked Fry.

Cole could tell that the man was getting more defensive with each question. “Just four months,” was Fry’s laconic response.

“We were told,” Thomas said, “that you have never been in the Ichtheater and that you don’t know the door code.”

“True.”

“Do you have a key to the building?” Thomas pressed.

“Of course I do. If something goes wrong, day or night, I’m the first line of defense. Dr. Angler, I have to see to the air conditioner if that’s all.”

The Director looked at Thomas, who nodded, and Fry left the room with alacrity.

Marsha Angler led the group to the front door. Once there, she excused herself to retrieve the information they had requested, while Thalia Poe remained with them, not saying a word. It

didn't take the Director long, but when the woman returned she seemed more anxious than she had before.

"I want to know who killed the subject," she said, with emotion. "This is disastrous, and it can't be repaired easily...or soon. The person who did this must be identified...punished."

"Earlier, you said you didn't have a theory," Cole said, deliberately. "I'm asking again. What do you think happened?"

Marsha Angler and Thalia Poe looked at each other furtively. Each seemed to be waiting for the other to say something. Finally, the Director spoke, saying, "We can't prove anything. We had a visitor last Friday: Dr. Herman Collip. Let's just say he directs a competing research project at Z University. I don't trust him; I've never trusted him. He would never have been admitted to this facility if it had been up to me. But Collip's well connected politically, so we were compelled to give him a tour. At least, we were able to limit it to Collip; he wanted to bring his retinue of researchers. Thalia and I showed him the Ichtheater and the subject. We were in the room for less than one hour. Then, we talked in the library – the paneled room - for ten or fifteen minutes. We didn't offer lunch.

"I don't believe in coincidences. On Friday, we had an unscrupulous rival – I say this confidentially – in our facility and on Sunday we find the subject dead."

Cole took a step closer to the two women. "I need to ask a question, and I need an honest answer. This is no time to hedge to avoid embarrassment. Was Dr. Collip alone in the Ichtheater at any time? Was he ever on the opposite side of the tank from the two of you? Can you remember any distractions which might have provided him with even seconds of unobserved freedom?"

"No, to all your questions," Marsha Angler said, firmly.

"No, no and no," Thalia Poe seconded. "We had agreed ahead of time that we would watch everything he did and every move he made."

Thomas and Cole decided to split up the interviews. A day later, Cole was on his way back to Ann Arbor to meet with Marsha Angler, Thalia Poe, and Glenn Fry. Thomas had drawn the two guards. Both were to participate in a conference call with Herman Collip later that day.

Cole met Marsha Angler in the library. She was at work on her laptop, and he waited patiently for her to finish, using the time to observe the Director. He judged that she was of the type that was used to being in control. This setback would be a big test for her. How good would she be at beginning again, assuming she was given another opportunity? The disaster had occurred on her watch and there was enormous prestige and millions of dollars at stake for the

enterprise that reached the finish line first. He had gotten hints of the extent of her anxiety on his first visit to the Center; now, she looked distracted and worn.

Marsha Angler looked up, forced a smile, and said, "Go ahead."

"You know this building and these people. Have you thought of anything else since we last met?"

"I've wracked my brain. Someone must have gotten past the guard. They must have netted the subject, hacked her up, and escaped, but I can't imagine how they retracted the screen."

"You said that no one other than you and Dr. Poe had the door code; not even the guards or Fry, and you told us that the wire screen, requiring another pass code, is always closed when the Ichtheater is unattended."

"That's right," she answered him.

"Codes can be deciphered," Cole suggested. "Is it possible that one of the guards deciphered the codes and committed the crime, or had a hand in doing it?"

"Almost anything is possible, but I think it's a remote possibility. I trust Becky and Binker. They've been with us over a year. They aren't professional guards but they have never given me reason to question their honesty."

"They must realize they're suspects."

"Yes," she admitted, sadly. "Justice must be done, wherever it leads. Have you interviewed Collip?"

"Not yet. Is the caretaker here today? I'd like to talk to him after Dr. Poe."

"He's here every day during the week. I can arrange a meeting."

"Have you ever been on the roof?"

"Once, and just to survey the grounds from above. It's a tile roof, as old as the house. There are no openings, apart from an inactive chimney and some penetrations for building ventilation, if that's what you mean. I don't think you can lift the tile, but I'm not sure. I haven't tried it. I'm an ichthyologist, not a roofer."

"Could the fish have been in the tank, alive, when you entered the Ichtheater on Sunday morning?"

She laughed, then said, "I understand. Could someone have introduced a dead, but similar, fish to the tank and counted on my reacting to the decoy. They would have had to be nearby to remove the subject from the tank when I ran out of the room, counting on my being too disturbed to lock the door. But that solution will not work. The dead fish *is* the subject. I can tell by its distinctive markings, not wholly erased by the attack."

"Why did you leave the Ichtheater without securing the fish?"

“I’m ashamed to say that I was so horrified by what I saw that I forgot it was Sunday. I was looking for Glenn. At least I had the presence of mind to instruct Binker to remain at his post. So you see, no one could have gotten into the room while I was gone.”

“Except Binker.”

“Yes, but there was only one fish in the tank when I entered the Ichtheater...the subject. The fish I removed from the tank was, and is, the subject. I maintained what is called ‘chain of custody’ from the time I returned to the Ichtheater and retrieved the mangled subject until this moment.”

Cole nodded and wrote some words on his notepad. He looked up and said, “I’m finished.”

“I’ll get Thalia.” Dr. Angler rose from her chair and left the room.

There was genius at work in this crime, he told himself. A sealed, locked and guarded room, and still someone had gotten in and destroyed months of work. He couldn’t help asking if it was for man to get into the creation business, before reminding himself that this was a question for metaphysicians like Leander Kelly; Cole was in the applied logic business.

Thalia Poe had taken a seat across the table behind Marsha Angler’s laptop.

“Are you a proponent of genetic engineering?” he asked her, still pondering the big question.

“Unequivocally,” she replied.

“Fish *and* people?”

“Yes.”

“Cloning, embryo experimentation, where do you draw the line?”

“I don’t. There are scientific goals and objectives. We do what we must to achieve them.” Her features were impassive as she said this.

“Does it ever worry you?” he questioned.

“I don’t think about it.”

“Where have I heard that before?” Cole asked, reflectively.

“Are you here to debate ethics? If that’s what you’re after then you’re in the wrong place. The Philosophy Department is that way,” she said, pointing a finger.

Cole asked her, “What’s your take on this?”

“Someone found a way into the room and killed the subject. I don’t trust Collip, but I was there, and I watched him like a barn owl. Someone got into that room. Security systems are breeched all the time.”

“You’re responsible for the water,” Cole observed.

“Yes. I’m proud of our water treatment system. The subject had a good matrix. She thrived...till Sunday.”

“Can I have copies of the water reports for Thursday through Sunday?”

“Of course. I’ll prepare them. Anything else?” she asked, abruptly, even defensively.

“Not at the moment. If I think of something may I call you?”

“Only if it has something to do with the subject,” she said suspiciously.

Thalia Poe didn’t look at Cole again, or offer to shake his hand. No sooner had she left the room than the caretaker walked in and sat down. He chose the end of the table, at right angles to Cole.

“Ask away,” the man said. Fry was dressed in his work clothes, and he appeared to be more distracted than annoyed by the summons.

“You said there were men on the transformer pole and men on the roof Friday.”

“*Men* on the pole and a *man* on the roof.”

Cole smiled. “What were they doing?”

“What electricians do, I guess. Is something going on here? The docs are in a bad state.”

“Did the men have a truck?”

“I think so. I’m not sure. There was a white van on the street, but I don’t remember any markings or decals.”

“Have you ever been in the Ichtheater?”

“Nope. That’s off limits. I think they’ve got the Creature from the Black Lagoon in there. Seriously, it’s common knowledge this is a fish research project. I read the papers too. But I’ve never been inside.”

“You’re responsible for the utilities, right?” Cole asked Fry.

“Routine stuff. We call the University Physical Plant if we have any serious problems.”

“If someone got to the air handling units, they could restrict air flow to the Ichtheater,” Cole said. “The air carries oxygen. You could harm a creature, like a fish, that needs oxygen.”

“There are two heating and ventilating units in the utilities room; one of these is a backup unit. They’re new but the ductwork is ancient, or so I’ve been told.” Then, he laughed. “What you’re suggesting is a wild idea. First of all, the Ichtheater isn’t airtight. Second, it would take a long time to deplete the oxygen that’s already dissolved in the water. I think a fish could survive it. And the docs use a special compressor to add air – oxygen – to the water.”

Cole picked up the analytical report from Thalia Poe and sought out Marsha Angler, who said, “The longer this goes on, the more suspicion is directed at Thalia and me. A few days ago, I didn’t think it mattered who did it. I was naïve. As much as I hate to admit it, we need your help.



You may not be able to put Humpty together again, but you must identify who pushed him. Thalia and I are scientists, researchers, so we like to pretend we have ice water in our veins instead of blood, but this could ruin our careers.”

Thomas Jefferson Penn’s first stop was a house on the north side of Ann Arbor. He parked the car on Kingsley and rang the bell for the second story apartment. A woman’s voice told him to take the exterior stairs, which turned out to be more fire escape than stairway. Thomas gripped both rails and crept to the top. He didn’t like the thought of tumbling down those metal steps.

The woman who answered the door was young and blond. She was wearing jeans and a pullover. “Come in,” she said, apprehensively.

The room was like a thousand other campus rooms, an eclectic mix of personal belongings and second hand store necessities. She sat cross-legged on the wood floor and waited for Thomas to speak.

“You are the night guard,” Thomas began.

“I *was* the night guard. Binker and I switched every semester.”

“What happened Saturday night?” Thomas asked. He had chosen a beanbag chair, the only alternative to sitting on the floor.

“Same thing as every night. Nothing. I listened to music, studied, did some reading, talked on the phone.”

“How about outside the building, especially last Saturday night?”

She shrugged and said, “I didn’t see anyone. There’s just one window in the guardroom. It was lighter than normal in the room for a while. I was reading a book at the time, so I didn’t pay much attention.”

“The light was outside?”

“Yes. There was a glow in the window.”

“Would anyone have had a reason to be on the site?”

“Not a good reason. It’s dark on the grounds, so students park sometimes. You know, making out and drinking.”

“I have been told that you have never been in the Ichtheater. Can you confirm this?”

“Never...ever,” she said nervously.

With some effort, Thomas extricated himself from the beanbag, thanked Becky, and made his way tentatively down the rickety steps. He’d gotten his exercise for one day, and his sore toe reminded him that he’d had his quota of misadventures.

Thomas was looking forward to sitting on a sofa or in a chair when he parked the car several miles to the east, just off Plymouth Road. He was admitted to the first floor apartment by a portly young man with a shaved head.

“Binker Bell?”

“That’s my moniker.”

Just my luck; another Ann Arbor weirdo, Thomas thought to himself. He walked to the sofa and sat.

“Dr. A told me you’d be here. I’m not supposed to ask what happened, so I won’t, but if you tell me I won’t mind.”

Thomas ignored him. “You relieved Becky Poe at eight a.m. Sunday.”

“I did. It’s a routine we have. She leaves the coal mine when I arrive and I leave in the evening when she arrives; everything but the heigh-hos.”

Thomas took a deep breath and asked, “Anything out of the ordinary from eight until Dr. Angler arrived?”

“Nothing. I should have appreciated that coal mine. Now, I’m looking for work. I miss seeing Becky’s smiling face too. She’s the kind that’s friendly to a fellow worker but otherwise, forget it. She hasn’t even returned my call.”

“How long did you work there?”

“A year or so.”

“Were you ever in the Ichtheater?”

“Nope.”

“Weren’t you and Becky curious?”

“I’ll say. We tried to get in – I can admit it now – but nothing doing. It was a game for Becky and me to see if we could break the code.”

“You’re sure Becky didn’t get in and neglect to tell you?”

“Are you trying to hurt my feelings?”

“How did Dr. Angler and Dr. Poe get along?”

“I never witnessed any trouble between those two.”

It was four o’clock in Dearborn when Cole pulled a chair over to Thomas’ desk. They had dialed and were waiting for someone to answer the phone.

“Hello, Collip here,” a mellifluous voice said.

“This is Thomas Penn and Cole Palmer.”

“I prefer Ellery Queen and Nero Wolfe.”

Thomas hit the mute button and cursed loudly.

Cole deactivated the mute and said, "I'm sure you want to keep this conversation brief."

"You're a mind reader," the voice said.

Cole continued. "You toured the Ichtheater last Friday."

"If you can call it a tour. Those two harpies were just this side of being rude and unprofessional. I came a long way to see the experiment and they rushed me in and out like I was an obnoxious kid on a field trip."

"Why did you want to see the experiment?" Thomas asked.

"Listen, Ellery, or are you Nero? They're doing cutting edge work at that place. We are too. Used to be that scientists helped each other. It's the money that changed everything. It was bad enough when it was just egos."

"Did you touch anything when you were in the Ichtheater?" Cole queried.

"No. They would have chopped my hand off. I haven't been that intimidated by a woman since I met my girlfriend's mother. We were only in the room for a few minutes. Listen, it's my turn to ask a question. What the hell happened? They wouldn't go to the expense of hiring P.I.'s unless it was serious. The fish is sick, right?"

"How far are you from replicating their work?" Cole asked.

"You didn't answer my question, but I'll answer yours because I'm a professional. Not far."

"A year? A month?"

"Not far."

"Had you ever been on the site before last Friday?"

"No."

"Anyone else on your team ever been on the site?" Cole persisted.

"Not to my knowledge. If they have, I'm not aware of it."

Thomas pulled his chair forward. "Did you notice anything about the Ichtheater that struck you as odd or suspicious?"

"Besides those two paranoid bitches? Let's see, there was a guard at the door, no other entrances or exits. It would be ironic if something happened to the fish in spite of all the security. Can't you give me a hint?"

"Nero doesn't hint," Thomas said sullenly, hanging up the phone. Then, he asked Cole, "Where do we go from here?"

This was a devious locked room murder in Cole's estimation, even if the victim was just a fish. When Cole offered this opinion to Thomas, the big man said, "I bet the fish had more insurance than you and me put together."

“What do we know?” Cole asked reflectively.

“Know, or suspect?” Thomas answered. “We know that Dr. Collip toured the site last Friday, and we have been led to believe that the fish was alive and well at that time. We know that Dr. Angler found the dead fish on Sunday morning. We know there is a keen competition to produce this super-fish, and that a lot of money is at stake. We suspect that Angler and Poe are the only ones who know the door code. We were told by Angler that the screen covered the tank when she entered the room on Sunday morning. We were told that the chemical analyses of the water and tissue were clean with respect to poisons, and Poe gave us data that seems to corroborate it. We think that there is only one entrance to the Ichtheater, if you discount the bolted panel in the wall that can only be opened from the inside.”

“So how did the killer get into that room?” Cole asked rhetorically. “Someone is lying, but whom?”

“A secret passageway?” Thomas offered.

“If this were a mystery story, the author would be tarred and feathered for a solution like that.”

“This isn’t a mystery story; it’s a fish story.”

Cole started as if he’d received an electric shock. His head was spinning trying to re-order everything he knew. “You’re a genius,” Cole said to Thomas, who nodded at him as if that were common knowledge.

Late the following morning, Marsha Angler, Thalia Poe, Becky and Binker, Glenn Fry, Thomas, and Cole were seated in the library of the Special Projects Center. Cole had propped a life-sized cardboard figure of Dilbert by the door, and had labeled it Dr. Collip.

“I hope this is important,” Thalia Poe remarked, “because it’s inconvenient. Dr. Angler and I are trying to prepare for a meeting with the president and a university attorney.”

“Give him a chance, Thalia,” Marsha Angler admonished her colleague. “At least he didn’t bring the genuine article with him,” she said, examining the pseudo-Collip.

They were a strange group: the Director with her sharp features and erect posture, the chemist with suspicious eyes and a haughty smile, one guard with eyes for no one but the other guard, the other guard oblivious to his attention, the caretaker who seemed uncomfortable without a tool in his hand, and the Dilbert figure.

“Why did you bring that thing anyway?” Binker asked, indicating the cardboard figure.

“Because he plays a role in this puzzle too,” Cole responded readily.

Thomas said, “Yesterday, Cole and I listed facts and suspicions. Since then, the list has changed. For instance, Fry saw men working on the electrical system on Friday, but neither the power company nor the university Physical Plant has any record of a maintenance call.”

“Are you calling me a liar?” Fry asked angrily.

“I’m listing facts,” Thomas replied, “everything we know.” He went to the greaseboard on the wall and wrote:

- ✓ Dr. Collip toured the site Friday
- ✓ Dr. Angler found the mangled subject Sunday morning
- ✓ Dr. Angler and Dr. Poe are said to be the only people with knowledge of the access code for the door to the Ichtheater
- ✓ Chemical analyses of the fish tissue and water conducted by Dr. Poe were clean
- ✓ Neither the university nor the utility made a maintenance call to the site on Friday
- ✓ The door to the Ichtheater was not locked after the crime was discovered by Dr. Angler

“And this tells us everything we need to know?” Thalia Poe vented. “Who cares if the door was unlocked after the crime was discovered? Why lock the henhouse *after* the fox has gone?”

“The list doesn’t tell us everything, but it tells us a lot,” Cole said, in response to a glance from Thomas. “If the door was left unlocked after the crime was discovered then it might have been unlocked later that day, because there was no longer anything to guard. And if it wasn’t necessary to lock the door, why bother covering the tank with the screen?”

“Stop, Palmer,” Marsha Angler said, standing as straight as a scarecrow. “While the subject was alive, that door was never left unlocked, and the tank was never left uncovered unless Dr. Poe or I were working inside the Ichtheater.”

“I accept that,” Cole answered.

“Then what is the significance of your observation? The subject was already dead.”

“Yes,” Cole admitted. “But perhaps the killer hadn’t escaped from the Ichtheater.”

“Nonsense,” Marsha Angler retorted. “The room was empty. I promise you it was empty. There was nowhere to hide. Are you suggesting that some creature of legend – a pixie or a leprechaun – spirited into the building and destroyed the subject? If I desired assistance of that sort I would pay you in rainbow gold or with a draught from Ponce de Leon’s fountain of youth.”

“If it grows hair, we have a deal,” Thomas piped.

Cole said. "I think you'll grant me that the door could have been left unlocked and the tank uncovered *after* the crime was discovered."

"We'll grant that irrelevant possibility," Thalia Poe said. "It doesn't cost us anything and you don't gain anything by the admission."

Cole let her finish, then he said, "Let's assume the guard followed procedures when she arrived Saturday evening..."

"I did. I always followed the standard procedures," Becky exclaimed in an anguished tone.

"And so did I," Binker said, more calmly.

Cole looked around the room before saying, "We have no reason to believe either guard possesses the door code. It's possible, but unlikely. We know they tried to get into the Ichtheater."

Thalia Poe cast a withering glance at her niece, who was staring at the floor.

Cole continued. "So how was the fish killed?"

"Killed? Oh, man," Binker exploded. "Heads are going to roll for this."

"Just make sure it's not yours," Fry interjected, quieting Binker.

"I toured the Ichtheater," Cole stated. "The air vent hadn't been disturbed for years, judging by the vent cover. The windows don't open and are too small for a person to climb through. Removing the steel plate is a major operation and can only be accomplished from inside the room. There aren't any other doors. The floor is concrete and the roof is slate. How could a killer get into that room?"

"I think that's why they hired *you*," Binker said, with a smile, then seeing the expressions on the doctors' faces, he sheepishly lowered his head.

Thomas said, "Cole was up meditating all night. See the dark circles?"

"Spare us the levity," Thalia Poe snapped. "If we wanted a comedian, we would have hired one...for a lot less."

"Dr. Poe reported that the water and tissue samples showed no evidence of poison," Cole continued. "She is also responsible for the water treatment system."

"Dr. Angler told you I was. The water had to meet our specifications, twenty-four seven."

"When was the last time the clean-out was used to service the water line that supplies the tank?"

"Over a year ago, when we initiated an experiment with an earlier version of the subject."

"When I was downstairs, I noticed that there were cobwebs on the adjacent pipes and valves but not on the cleanout," Cole said.

“So someone crawled into a four-inch cleanout, wormed their way through the pipe, and emerged inside the subject’s tank,” Thalia Poe offered, sarcastically.

“Do you know the meaning of the word ichthyophagous?” Cole asked Thalia Poe.

“Of course,” Thalia said, her brows suddenly furrowing.

Cole stood up, saying, “That eminent detective, Sherlock Holmes...”

“Good God,” Thalia Poe erupted.

“...said that ‘When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.’ Then, there are the rumors of secret passages in the Legend mansion, which have been mentioned more than once. Are these passages real? We have no evidence that they are, in the sense of people moving invisibly from one room to another. But this idea of passageways can have more than one...more than a conventional meaning. I wondered if the killer had come into the Ichtheater through a pipe. When I re-inspected the cleanout this morning, I concluded that it was possible. I now believe that this is the likely answer.”

“What?” Becky asked breathlessly.

“Palmer used the word ichthyophagous. That means fish eating,” Thalia Poe said.

“Thomas put me on the right track when he said that this is not a mystery story, it’s a fish story. I spent the entire night on-line, searching, encountering one dead end after another. Finally, I found an article in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled, ‘Plague of Asian Eels Highlights Damage from Foreign Species.’ Suffice it to say that these eels can survive without food and water for months and can subsist in subzero weather. In a word, they are almost indestructible, eating fish and just about anything else. They breathe like fish but can even travel short distances on land. I say this to prove that an Asian eel, introduced at the cleanout, could have swiftly migrated through a four-inch pipe into the tank, and once in the tank, it would inevitably kill and eat the fish, the only source of food in the tank.”

“The tank was empty, except for the subject,” Marsha Angler asserted. “I was there.”

“Apparently,” Cole replied. “But consider the most likely refuge for the eel once it had killed and had its fill of the fish...the sediment. Twelve inches of sediment would have been ample to conceal the predator. I believe that the eel was in the sediment when Dr. Angler entered the Ichtheater. I also learned that this eel is nocturnal, and it was morning when Dr. Angler discovered the dead fish.”

“I suppose that this monster was trained to return to the clean-out after it had done its dirty work,” Thalia Poe said sarcastically.

“Shut up,” Thomas erupted, causing the chemist to blanch.

Cole, undisturbed by Thalia Poe's nettling, said, "Something that must be understood to comprehend this ingenious plot is that the human killer was more than willing to have the eel discovered inside the tank provided the fish was killed first, because this person had never had access to the Ichtheater. There was no luck involved in killing the fish, only an inspired plot and flawless execution, but there was good fortune afterwards. When the door was left unlocked and the tank uncovered, it provided the human killer with an opportunity to retrieve the eel. I suspect that the human killer came in after dark on Sunday – the Ichtheater was no longer guarded – and recovered the predator, perhaps using bait and a net. The human killer was a trained ichthyologist, so he would have been equipped with the necessary knowledge and tools to accomplish this."

"A biological assassin," mused Marsha Angler. She turned to the facsimile of Dr. Collip. "Then it was that bastard after all."

Cole said. "If Collip had been seen on the site, it would have been suspicious. I believe that he was a conspirator, but his role was to be the decoy. I'm confident Collip has an alibi for the entire weekend. It was a confederate who actually did the deed. That's correct, isn't it, Dr Mudd?" Cole said, turning to face Glenn Fry.

"Ridiculous," the caretaker said.

"Your physical appearance, except for the doctor's beard, matches the physical description of Dr. Collip's research partner, Howard Mudd. Dr. Mudd is an experienced ichthyologist. He's your height, weight, and your approximate age. You have only been working here for four months; I suspect that Collip's reputation and influence helped in securing this job. Your colleague probably described the layout of the Ichtheater to you after he toured the facility last Friday, which would have been useful in retrieving the eel. You admitted having a key to the building, which is all you needed to access the water treatment equipment in the basement. As the maintenance man for the site, you have the tools to open and close the valves and to remove the clean-out flange. The guard, required to remain at her post, would have no knowledge that you were in the building. Becky mentioned that she had seen a light in the yard that night, probably your car when you arrived.

"You provided me with an interesting piece of information when we talked. I suggested that the fish might be affected by reducing airflow to the room and you replied that it was unlikely that this would influence the oxygen level in the water. Isn't that spectacular insight for a caretaker, and for someone who was supposed to be ignorant of the Ichtheater? There were no electricians at the Center on Friday; that was a red herring to detour us from the truth."

"We can and will prove you're Howard Mudd," Thomas asserted. "Even if we can't prove conclusively how the crime was done, the fact that you were here under false colors when



the fish was killed, along with Cole's plausible theory, will be enough to destroy you and Collip in the academic world."

"If an Asian eel was responsible for the death of the subject, there will be traces of its DNA on the subject," Dr. Angler asserted.

The room was suddenly silent. Everyone was looking in Fry's direction. The caretaker's features had assumed a sour expression.

"It seems you've got me by the gills," he said.