

ANDROMEDA

GRAPHIKA

ROBERT BRACE





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— PART I —

ANDROMEDA

BOUND

I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me.

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

I



A GIRL STANDS BEFORE A MIRROR. There is a row of booths behind her, doors ajar: it is a public restroom, but the girl is alone. She wears embroidered jeans and a tie-dye top. Her feet are bare. She leans forward, hands on the sink, and studies her reflection. Her face is without expression.

Close up, she seems too young for what is surely to come—large unlined eyes and still with the pale pearl-like skin of a child. Her hair is dark brown, long and straight. Wide mouth, lips slightly parted. The girl stares at her image with a hooded look of cool wonderment, as if so far she has found life strange, but not yet sufficient to fully engage her.

She strips.

Her body is long and lean, slender-framed and small-breasted—awkward on the cusp of graceful: a body not quite grown into. She washes her face in the sink and dries it with a towel.

She throws her clothes into the trash.

ROBERT BRACE

There is a bag on the counter from which the girl extracts a small squared bottle of thick glass, an apothecary's bottle. It bears a hand-lettered label in Latin script: *Tinctura Belladonnae Foliorum*—the extract of belladonna leaves dissolved in diluted alcohol. The girl shakes the bottle, removes the stopper, and holds it aloft.

A single drop of golden belladonna, pendant.

She tilts her head back and positions the stopper above her right eye. She waits. She does not blink.

The belladonna refracts the image of the girl above whom it hangs. It elongates into teardrop shape before detaching from the stopper and falling, slow and now perfectly spherical, into her eye.

The girl blinks briefly, then carefully poisons her other eye. Now she may dress.

She returns the bottle to the bag. The clothes are packed in the precise order in which she must put them on. A small silver hairclip first: she is to wear her hair up from now on. Shoes next, high-heeled and secured with ankle straps. Then a short slim skirt the color and sheen of whose silken fabric changes with movement, varying from dusky ocher-hued browns to a deep dark moss. A long-sleeved blouse of green and gold in a chaotic pattern, shot through with slashes of metallic texture, cut low and loose. A leather belt, tan to match the shoes, very wide, ornately stamped and studded.

The girl applies makeup, heavy and elaborate around the eyes.

She stands back and inspects the result in the mirror. Her look is faraway now, disconnected and dreamlike, as the poison begins to work. Her neck is long and narrow, ending in an undulating landscape of collar bone and rib exposed by the low-buttoned blouse. The subtle curves of her breasts are visible if she leans forward, allowing the fabric to fall away. She puts on sunglasses, fashionably large-framed, a final touch. The effect is what the couturier had aimed for: glamour but reckless glamour; glamour that comes with a Newtonesque touch of expensive, indulgent, and dissolute abandonment.

She is a world removed from the simple girl of a moment ago.

She unscrews a tube of lipstick, applies it to herself and then, as a last act before leaving, scrawls a single word in large Greek letters on the mirror:

αμίτιΔ

The girl leaves, throwing the lipstick into the trash on the way out.

SHE EXITS INTO A broad space, brightly lit. There is a scattering of leather armchairs, some occupied, but most of them are empty. Beige carpet; a bar to the left. The far wall is composed of floor-to-ceiling windows through which is visible a single slender aircraft. Sleek and alabaster-white, it is an object of sculptural purity. She has entered the departure lounge for the Air France Concorde.

The aircraft's nose is bowed. Like her, it demonstrates submission.

Her presence ripples across the room, a subtle wave of awareness spreading through the waiting passengers. Men in business suits glance up from their newspapers or laptops, and the uniformed stewardess behind the service desk stares unabashedly. There is an agitation in the air now, as if the woman were a nearby lightning strike, a sudden and unexpected violence that immediately trivializes all else.

She strides across the room to an armchair. She sits, composed and still and remote, either unaware of the attention or simply uncaring. She remains expressionless.

At the service desk, the agent picks up a microphone and makes the boarding call, firstly in French, then in English. There is no line, and the few passengers soon make their way onto the aircraft.

The girl stands. She is hesitant now, all but blinded by the poison. She walks long-legged toward the gate, offers her boarding pass, then disappears down the jetwa—

[II]

II

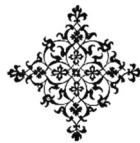
THE LAWYER EXAMINES THE WOMAN sitting in the adjoining room. She appears to meet his gaze but it is an illusion: the wall is composed of mirrored glass, and she can see nothing of him. He cannot tell if she is studying her reflection or simply staring ahead, lost in thought.

Beside him, the camera quietly whirs.

Light pours in through the windows on her left, revealing the topography of her face in vibrant shadowed relief. She is younger than he expected. Untanned; he had imagined skin turned to the color of old leather by the desert sun, but her face is no darker than his own, left pale by the New York winter. It is an intelligent face but reserved, too—the face of a woman whose interior reality will never be quite pinned down, as elusive as a quantum particle.

The lawyer can see why she was chosen.

He checks his watch and decides that he has kept her waiting long enough.



ROBERT BRACE

THE LAWYER ENTERS THE ROOM. The sofa is now vacant; the woman is on her feet and standing by the windows. She does not immediately turn, instead choosing to remain gazing out over the soaring pinnacles of the sky-reaching city. Then he realizes that it is not a choice; she has not heard him enter. For a brief interval before closing the door he is again an unseen voyeur, but the experience is more intimate without the glass separating them and he feels the fact of her physical presence in a sudden visceral rush. The lawyer is not an imaginative man but he cannot help wondering if this is a quality capable of being captured on film.

He closes the door.

“Miss Chamberlain, I’m sorry to have kept you waiting.”

She turns but makes no reply. A brief impenetrable smile, and he suspects that she knows he is lying.

He crosses the room and offers his hand.

“I’m Tom Renzitti.”

“Andromeda Chamberlain.”

They shake hands. Firm grip, cool flesh. He had imagined coarse hands and broken fingernails, but hers are smooth and the nails neatly trimmed.

He realizes that he must get her back to the sofa, for the camera’s sake.

“Let’s sit down, shall we?”

He moves swiftly to the sole armchair, leaving her no choice but to resume her previous position, the place in which the camera will best capture her.

The room is called a conference room but there is no board table or high-backed swivel seats, just the low leather sofa and matching armchair surrounding a coffee table. Soft caramel-colored carpeting, discreet recessed lighting, a sideboard with small bottles of mineral water: a comfortable setting intended to encourage the sharing of confidences with counsel.

The lawyer has kept her waiting twenty minutes—a deliberate tactic designed to foster a loquacious nervousness without enduring to the point of inducing reticent hostility—something he routinely does

when first meeting someone who is not his own client. He surveys the room as she takes her seat. The magazines lie upon the table untouched, still in the orderly, title-revealing cascade into which the staff place them at the beginning of each day. No coffee cup, although the receptionist would have offered. No cell phone or tablet device in evidence, fetishes to occupy anxious hands, replacements for the once-ubiquitous cigarette. For twenty minutes this woman has sat here alone, apparently content and without the need of distraction. Then he realizes that she is not even wearing a watch. All that time in the desert, Renzitti thinks: flat featureless land and high cloudless skies melting into a quavering, heat-shirred horizon. Time must have seemed endless in that desolate landscape, a commodity whose passage was too slow or too irrelevant to measure. He realizes that the delay tactic was a waste of time.

“Miss Chamberlain, thank you for coming.”

He places his document case by the side of the chair. Renzitti has a few more standard warm-up remarks to make before getting down to business, but when looking up again he remains silent. Instead, he spends a moment examining this woman whose life he is about to change, and probably not for the better.

More angular than he expected. Finer-boned; he had imagined a husky flat-faced woman with broad wrists and blotched skin, someone who showed a lot of gum when she grinned, and who grinned too often. This woman retains the suggestion of a smile, sufficient for courtesy, no more. She wears a charcoal suit of fine wool, well cut to her slim figure. Black stockings and high-heeled shoes, unscuffed—he had half-expected work boots from the dig, covered in dust or something worse. Slender throat, a feature for which he is grateful. She has her hair up, neatly bundled in back, which serves to emphasize her face: alert intelligent eyes, subtly chiseled nose, smooth even features, a slightly skeptical expression—a face that would once have been termed *patrician*. But it is not her expression that has silenced him.

From the adjoining room she had been too far away, then when shaking hands she had been backlit by the glare behind her, but now that she is again seated, her face fully lit by bright winter light pouring

in through plate glass windows fifty floors above Manhattan, the lawyer sees close up what he missed before: a scar, razor-thin, straight as a gun barrel, a swift emphatic slash stretching diagonally across her right cheek. There is no puckering of the surrounding skin, no distortion of her features, just the line itself, a long extended nick, as if from the tip of a rapier blade.

A dueling scar if on a man, in another time and place.

Makeup would have concealed it; he realizes that she elects not to do so.

She returns his gaze unblinkingly. This is what he feared most: a woman who could just walk away. The lawyer is not an outdoorsman—he once went two years without leaving the island of Manhattan—but right now he thinks of himself as a fly fisherman whose success depends entirely upon the precise but delicate placement of the next cast.

“I thought you would be more tanned,” he admits.

“I’ve been back for some time now.”

“Congratulations on the article.”

“Thank you.”

He briefly imagines her as she described herself that night, standing astonished and blood-soaked by the well, surrounded in a sea of moonlit white eyes.

“I expect you’re wondering what this is about.”

She nods in acknowledgment but makes no further reply. He shifts his weight forward.

“Miss Chamberlain, may I ask if your status is still freelance?”

“It is.”

“And do you currently have an assignment?”

“No, I’ve taken a break since I got back.”

Renzitti is well aware of this—like any good lawyer leading a potentially hostile witness, he does not ask questions to which he does not already know the answers. He sits back and continues.

“Then please let me reveal the purpose for which we requested this meeting. In short, Miss Chamberlain, we would like to offer you a story.”

“We?” She raises a dubious eyebrow.

He sits back and allows himself a smile. “Forgive the imprecise pronoun. Naturally, I do not mean the firm itself. Rather, it is the client we represent who would be making the offer.”

“A shy editor? That’s a first.”

This time he laughs. “Yes, it must seem a little strange, and I have to warn you that it will seem a good deal stranger before this meeting is over. For a start, apart from the obvious fact of being in the media, I’m afraid that I’m forbidden from revealing anything else about the nature of my client, including my client’s identity.”

“But a print publication, I presume?”

“Anything at all.”

Now it is she who sits back. He had thought that this would be the point at which the woman would abruptly terminate the meeting, but when he examines her face for a reaction it is not a look of annoyance he finds, it is one of amusement.

“And what does your anonymous client want me to write about, Mr. Renzitti?”

In response, he opens the document case, extracts a broad manila envelope, and slides it wordlessly across the table. She undoes the clasp and withdraws the contents, a single eight-by-ten photograph. It is a portrait of a teenaged girl, black and white, coarse-grained—perhaps a blow-up of a high school yearbook shot.

She studies the photograph. The girl is wearing a white shirt and dark blazer with a crest on the pocket, a private school uniform. Long straight hair, neatly cut but otherwise unadorned. Clear open face revealing none of the awkward self-absorption common in girls of that age. It is a photograph that other parents would have paused at when going through the yearbook, wondering about this interesting individual in their own child’s class.

She looks up. Renzitti begins the explanation.

“Her name is Margot Vaughn. This picture is ten years old and it is the last known photograph of her. She lived in Miami. She came from an affluent family and apparently enjoyed a happy childhood, but ten years ago she abruptly disappeared without a trace. There was no

violence, no evidence of mishap or wrongdoing; she simply left her home and never returned. Your assignment would be to find out what became of her.”

“Isn’t that something for a detective rather than a journalist?”

“The two have much in common: they’re both investigators. But policemen do not investigate ten-year-old missing person cases in which there are no new leads, nor indeed any evidence of a crime having been committed in the first place. And of course they do not write articles about them.”

“Who are the parents?”

“Nathan and Suzanne Vaughn. Nathan Vaughn runs an investment management firm. The mother is French and independently wealthy. Margot was their only child.”

“Why me?”

“You have obvious qualifications, Miss Chamberlain. You are a journalist, you are available, and you are female—I think you will agree that this is a subject which would be most sympathetically handled by a woman.”

“Editors normally offer assignments to people they know. Does your client know me, Mr. Renzitti?”

“I remind you that I am under an injunction against revealing any details about my client, Miss Chamberlain. However, I suppose I would not be giving anything away if I admit that it was the *New Yorker* piece that caught my client’s attention. My client believes that this story should be more than just an account of what became of this young woman. It should also be the story of what made her do it. Why would a seemingly happy, well-adjusted child suddenly just walk away? On the face of it, it makes no sense. So too, when you think about it, does the incident at...”

“Manoukaram.”

“Yes, Manoukaram. Yet it happened, and you explained it. Dozens of men hacked to death as they slept; you even made it seem logical.”

Women weary of slaughter, themselves slaughtering. But the lawyer is mistaken: it was not logical; it was instinctive, animalistic.

She looks again at the photograph. She wonders if the lawyer is aware of the resemblance. Probably not, she decides—men miss such things.

“Okay,” she says.

A pause of surprise.

“Okay?”

“Yes, okay. I’ll take the assignment.”

Renzitti is almost resentful—the fish has leaped from the water and bitten into the hook before he even baited it.

“But we haven’t discussed the terms yet.”

“I assume they would be industry standard.”

“Then you assume incorrectly, Miss Chamberlain.” He withdraws a folder from the document case, extracts a printed sheet, and passes it to her. “These are the terms that my client is offering.”

She glances quickly through the sheet, then reads it a second time, more slowly now. At last she looks up, unamused.

“Absurd,” she blankly states.

“Quite so.”

“No legitimate publication would offer this much money.”

“Miss Chamberlain, we are perfectly well aware that these amounts exceed the norm. Again I must plead the restrictions placed upon me for my inability to explain the reasons behind such unusual terms. All I can say is that they are, quite obviously, extremely generous. And they are in the contract.”

“What if I can’t complete the assignment? What if I never find the girl?”

“As stated, you will be paid the agreed sum.”

“And expenses?”

“Again as stated: you charge whatever you wish to the credit card we will provide you. I am particularly instructed to emphasize that no expense should be spared, no matter how tangential it may seem to the purpose. All travel and accommodation arrangements will be handled directly by us: you tell us where and when; my office will organize the reservations and so on. And should you have any further out-of-pocket expenses we will happily reimburse them.”

ROBERT BRACE

He can see that she is uncertain now, considering withdrawing her consent. How strange, he thinks, that the one feature that would have lured most people has repelled her. She returns her attention to the items in her lap, not to the terms sheet but to the photograph.

Do you know her? he longs to ask. *Is she you?*

He remains silent.

“Very well,” she says quietly. “Do you have the contract?”

A woman who makes her own decisions, he thinks; a woman who does not need to consult others.

“I’ll have an executed copy couriered to you this afternoon. But there are two more matters that we must discuss before we reach final agreement, Miss Chamberlain.”

“Yes?”

“The first is the question of timing. The deadline for completion of the assignment is the second Monday in March. This, too, is something that I have been instructed to emphasize: there can be no extension of the deadline. The second Monday in March.”

All assignments have deadlines but this one surprises her: the subject matter is not urgent; it is the sort of story that could be published anytime, as space and opportunity permit. She makes a brief mental calculation.

“Just seven weeks.”

“Yes, it is. May I ask where you would begin your inquiries, Miss Chamberlain?”

“Miami,” she says. “Her parents; the place from which she disappeared.”

“Then you will not want to waste any time.” The lawyer reaches into his jacket and removes an envelope, which he passes across the table.

She opens it: a first-class reservation for Miami, leaving tomorrow morning from Newark; a printout of an email from the Pelican Hotel in Miami Beach, detailing the booking of their penthouse suite; even an auto rental confirmation. All the reservations are in her name.

“You were confident,” she says.

“Just prepared.”

ANDROMEDA GRAPHIKA

She returns the items to the envelope.

“You said there were two things.”

“Yes, and before I reveal the second, please remember that I warned you this would get stranger before the meeting was over.”

“I stand reminded.”

He reaches into the document case and takes out a shallow box a foot square. He places it on the table without comment.

The top is labeled in upright black lettering, but she does not need to read it to recognize from where it must have come, for the box is of a particular shade of eggshell blue that has only one source.

“Tiffany’s,” she says.

“Indeed,” the lawyer agrees.

He lifts the lid, revealing a circular metal collar sitting on a bed of black velvet. It is a hand span in diameter, three-quarters of an inch high, an eighth of an inch thick. She lifts it from the velvet liner. The metal is polished to a mirror shine.

She looks up at the lawyer.

“Am I expected to accept this?”

“No, you are expected to wear it. In fact, it is a condition of the contract.”

“What?”

“For the duration of the assignment, you will be required to wear this item. Night and day. It may not be removed for any reason.” He halts her developing protest with a raised hand. “Miss Chamberlain, believe me, we are well aware of how very peculiar this must sound. All I can tell you is that on completion of the assignment I expect that such oddities will be explained. I regret that I cannot offer you anything more than that right now.”

He takes the collar from her grasp and opens it. It is hinged on one side and when open reveals a complex locking mechanism, concealed when the collar is closed. He picks up the key, a thin cylindrical device with multiple spiked protrusions, a key the like of which she has never seen before. He holds it up for her to see.

“As you can imagine, a lock opened by such a key is not susceptible to being picked. The collar is a one-off custom piece, and

ROBERT BRACE

so there are no duplicates. Furthermore, it is made of titanium. Grade Five alloy, to be precise, which is titanium with a little aluminum and vanadium mixed in, the same alloy used to fabricate the most critical components in aerospace applications. Titanium is much lighter than steel but many times stronger, and is a metal with highly unusual characteristics—it cannot be welded in air, for example; the atmosphere must first be purged with pure argon. What I'm getting at, Miss Chamberlain, is that once this collar goes on you must understand that it is not coming off except with this key, which we shall retain in the office safe.”

They stare at each other for a long moment without speaking. Eventually the woman gets up and walks back to the windows, radiant with light. She removes her jacket and stands with it folded over her crossed arms, looking out over the city, leaning lightly against the frame. It takes the lawyer a moment to realize that she might be expecting him to attach the collar. He gathers it and walks over behind her.

The light captures the fine down along the nape of her neck. Her ears are complex, slightly translucent. The woman is as tall as he is but close up she seems frail, someone unsuited to the rigors of the real world.

She turns slightly, and he can tell that she is briefly surprised to find him standing behind her, but then her eyes fall to the collar. She stares at the thing for a long moment before turning back and raising her chin in silent invitation.

The lawyer reaches around nervously and snaps the collar into place.