

They Came in Peace

by Steven Karmazenuk



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations and events portrayed in these stories are either products of the author's' imaginations or are used fictitiously.

THEY CAME IN PEACE

Copyright © 2021 by Steven Karmazenuk
Edited by Eliza Sinclair
All rights reserved.

Published by Pine Float Press
Kansas City, Missouri
First Edition: June 2021
ISBN 978-1-1008-95456-4

Cover art by Eliza Sinclair. Used with permission

Acknowledgments

The people who helped me get this from poorly written fever-dreams to something worth writing is a long one; I'd like to thank everyone personally, but two years ago my old computer swallowed everything and then exploded.

So let me thank the people whose names I do remember: Amy Ayrie, Joe Crow, Eric Kaulfuss, Eliza Sinclair, Dawn Zirri and especially Sean Demory: Chief Beta Reader and Turd Polisher, Publisher Extraordinaire, and the only reason someone is paying to read this.

Dedication

Mom, how could I not dedicate this to you? You always believed in me...you never doubted...and I know you are looking down on me, telling me that this is what happens when you see something through.

To Eva, Anya, and Leks: You are my reason for living, my life and love...this book is your legacy; let's hope it's a good one. I love you forever and ever, without breaking.

To Angel: the best mother those three genius hellions could have, and one of the best people I have ever known.

To the only family I have that always stood by me: Debbie, I love you, big sis.

THE WORLD BEFORE

THEY CAME

The object was first spotted in the late winter by amateur astronomers as it crossed the orbit of Saturn. Its smooth lines, perfectly symmetrical disk-shape and sheer size demonstrated it wasn't natural. That it was also slowing and changing course likewise confirmed suspicions that it was alien in origin.

Mania and hysteria and their ubiquitous partners, chaos and violence spiked: protests and riots spread like waves around the world. Meanwhile, governments scrambled in a panic of their own— sharing information, stealing information, keeping information to themselves – for all the good that it would ultimately do them.

For three months, all anyone could talk about was the Saturn Ship. Of course, it didn't take long to discover that while originally spotted *near* Saturn, the Saturn Ship hadn't come *from* Saturn. At its observed rate of deceleration the ship, which must have been traveling incredibly fast prior to its arrival in-system, would take most of another year to reach Earth—assuming it was coming to Earth at all.

The world's major religions retreated into Conclave, and from behind the sheltered walls of their temples and towers, conflicting messages of this being a "Test of Faith," "Proof of God's Divine Genius," "A trick by the Devil," and

variations of the same came out loudly and regularly—often from the same sources and without a blink at the contradiction.

Fast, cheap and terrible alien invasion movies starring the celebrities *du jour* glutted streaming platforms and movie houses that summer and fall. Nearly every show on broadcast, cable and Internet television made at least some reference to the Saturn Ship. A number of science fiction authors even resigned their craft in frustration, anger, and disgust – how could they write about aliens when the *actual* aliens themselves were coming? Four major sci-fi franchises were abruptly canceled. Celebrity “Alien Experts” suddenly found their stock worth much more than it had been since the decline of allegedly “educational” cable channels. Meanwhile, genuine celebrity scientists vehemently tried to remind people of the necessity of focusing on the *facts* and the *evidence* they had, and not on ridiculously unprovable theories and fantasies of half-educated so-called “experts.” As always, sensationalism won out over substance.

When orbital telescopes finally got a proper look at the ship, their operators aboard the ISS were astonished: it was over a hundred kilometers in diameter, ten high and topped by a thin spire fifty kilometers tall. Then the ship corrected its pitch, and the spire became a keel hanging beneath the alien vessel. As the first clear images of the ship flooded the Internet, a hundred memes were generated. “Good Guy Alien,” “Space Thumbtack,” “Bad Advice UFO,” “Alien

Problems” and “Scumbag Ship” were the most popular, at least until someone managed to scrawl “Free Candy” across the ship’s hull in Photoshop, and then the “Pedo Alien” meme was born.

For a while, the ship was hidden behind Jupiter, but when it was seen again it was plainly vectored to intercept Earth's orbit. Now it looked like it was heading for an early January rendezvous. The media rebranded the "Saturn Ship," calling it the "January Ark," the "January Ship," or referring to the "January Visitors."

By the time it crossed Mars' orbit and was inbound, a flurry of space missions launched from the United States, Europe, the Russian Federation, China, India, and even Israel. The missions sent from Earth vanished when they reached the alien ship. The unmanned ones either collided with it and were obliterated or landed on its surface and stopped working. The manned missions – thirteen of them from both public and private space ventures around the world – vanished, presumably taken aboard the alien ship.

Radical extremists, both religious and secular, were still carrying out attacks across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, but most of the ongoing military engagements around the world seemed to be winding down. Even the Russian Federation and its various feuding, former republics found themselves ceasing fire. Everyone was wondering the same thing: what was the point of fighting each other when aliens were coming to Earth? By the time the ship was a

month from insertion into Earth's orbit, most of the world's governments and regimes, including many current terror cells, were in a general state of ceasefire. So began the longest period of true peace in modern history, the world focused on unifying itself before the aliens arrived.

Old clips of American President Ronald Reagan talking about alien invasions and how the world would unite to fight the invaders began circulating; none happier to circulate them than the American Republican Party and various satellite Political Action Committees, lobby groups and privately-funded, partisan “economic think-tanks.”

But such clips had the usual talking heads on the Left asking, blandly, smugly, plaintively, “Who says they’re *invading*? Why is it always about *war* with these people?” Only one “Left-leaning” satirist was astute, savvy and sincere enough to follow the question with a punch-line that was a three-minute montage of every significant alien monster movie battle or attack from the last hundred years, closing with a fade-to-black over the famous five notes from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Leading historians, anthropologists, theoretical physicists, exobiologists, and other educated theoreticians were quick to point out the devastating culture shock that higher civilizations always caused when meeting more primitive ones, no matter their intent. Columbus's impact on the pre-Hispanic people of South America was repeatedly called upon as an example; and just as the

Indigenous People of the Americas suffered and died from illnesses imported with their European invaders, Humans had no immunity to any microbial life aboard this ship.

Experts also pointed out that anthropomorphizing a species of life that would *literally* be completely alien to our own was impossible. They cautioned that we could not know the aliens' intent in coming to Earth—whether they were benevolent, malevolent or if their interest was even in Humankind; as to the fear they were coming to mine Earth, experts observed that there were more ample resources in space or the outer planets, asteroid field or the Kuyper Belt, facts the sensationalists and fear-mongers deliberately ignored.

The only point the learned experts could successfully get across was that the presence of the ship and any aliens within would be completely disruptive to Human civilization and only by pointing to how disruptive it had already become.

Duncan Terrell, a young, personable celebrity scientist known by the nickname “Doctor Duncan,” gained tremendous mainstream popularity on television and online news networks and social media. His expertise was sought after by anyone with a media presence. Terrell had degrees in astronomy, astrophysics, mathematics, engineering, and chemistry. He would give talks about the aliens, urging optimism, "Because, what other choice do we have but to hope for the best? We can't prepare for or even attempt to

defend against the worst." He was a longtime self-proclaimed geek. If anything, he explained, the idea of aliens coming to Earth should be a time of excitement and celebration – as well as preparation.

As much as the governments of the world urged calm, as much as they exhorted caution and assured precautions would be taken, no one was truly fully prepared. Humanity continued relentlessly broadcasting messages of welcome and peace. Still, there was no reply from the ship.

One morning in mid-January, the world woke up without a sunrise. Bewildered early risers in East Cape, New Zealand became first people on Earth to learn the ship was now in an orbit that eclipsed the sun so perfectly that there was no dawn—just the giant disk overhead and a ring of feeble light around it tracking its way from east to west across the sky. No one liked to think of the fifty-kilometer long spike jutting down from the center of the ship's disk, now pointing right at their fragile, blue world.

As the Darkest Day dawned, world leaders scrambled to bunkers, gathering experts along with them as generals spoke of war strategies and what action could be taken against the giant ship if it decided to continue depriving the planet of direct sunlight. Temperatures were already dropping sharply across the globe. Before the end of that first day, the news feeds were referring to an "Alien Winter" caused by the ship if it stayed parked in its current orbit.

Desperate attempts at communication, radio signals both threatening and pleading, were sent throughout the day. Duncan Terrell spent an eighteen-hour day doing news show after news show after talk show after webcast, giving interview after interview. The first question he was invariably asked was, *Shouldn't we have prepared for the worst?* His answer, becoming increasingly impatient as the day wore through his natural charm, was always the same: "We have a ship, the size of the Karman Line – the distance from the surface of the Earth to the boundary of what we call outer space – sitting parked overhead. That ship has traveled from at *least* the nearest star, across unimaginable distances, and at great speed. Out there a collision with something the size of a *grain of sand* would be unbelievably, *catastrophically* destructive. I promise you, if NATO or the Russians or Chinese or any other countries with nuclear missiles fires at the ship, it will do absolutely nothing, other than maybe make them mad. I still refuse to believe they're here to do us harm. Right now, I think they're trying to get our undivided attention, and I think we're demonstrating that they *have* our undivided attention. Unless you have a reporter aboard that ship, all we can do is sit and wait. Aggressive posturing, which I find astonishing that my former colleagues on the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology are in sync with the Pentagon about, will do nothing but make us seem like primitive, violent apes."

“And what if the Aliens *expect* some sort of aggressive response?” one reporter asked, snappishly.

Terrell sighed and shook his head, “If that’s the case, then I’d say they know us all too well.”

THEY SAW

It was only the following morning that the world realized the ship had moved. Just a few degrees in the sky, but enough that it no longer completely blocked the sun. Enough light was getting through again that the world breathed a collective sigh of relief. Exactly halfway into the Earth's daily rotation, at midday – as measured from East Cape, New Zealand – the underside of the ship suddenly lit up. Columns of white light traced their way down its “keel” and in blocky patterns across its lower surface. And then it began broadcasting.

Every radio, every television, every Internet-connected computer and device came alive with text and sound. Remarkably, while purely alien, the message was immediately understood by those reading or listening to it. Two phrases were spoken, repeated for exactly sixty-one seconds before the ship lapsed back into silence. Universally, the voice was that of a woman. Evidently, the Aliens aboard were in no hurry to begin a dialogue: those two phrases were the only transmission they sent that day. But as Duncan Terrell soon after pointed out, the Aliens were obviously trying to *reassure* Humanity.

The alien message was:

HELLO. WE COME IN PEACE.

World leaders delivered speeches welcoming the aliens, urging their citizens to remain calm and lauding the dawn of a new era of interplanetary contact, a new chapter in Human History. But immediately after the alien message was transmitted, a cacophony of radio signals was sent towards the ship, from every corner of the world that could. Even as their leaders were orating on the new future unfolding before the world, the world's governments commandeered radio telescopes and every piece of communication equipment available, from police bands, military channels, even mobile cell towers were reconfigured to send signals up. Amateur ham radio operators and even radio stations themselves kept trying to reach the alien ship, but whether the Aliens received or were able to process and understand all the signal traffic being sent to them or not, they did not reply.

“One problem we’re seeing is, we’re directing all these radio waves at the ship,” Duncan Terrell said that night, on his regular (and now world’s most highly rated) podcast. “If not for the content of the messages being generally friendly – something I think the aliens obviously understand, as they apparently have the equivalent to *Star Trek*’s Universal Translator, or *Doctor Who*’s TARDIS Telepathic Field, the aliens could see this as an attempt to make them radio-blind. Essentially, all these signals could potentially jam their ability to transmit, working as an electromagnetic equivalent of a DDoS attack.”

**

The following day, once again at midmorning in East Cape, there was another broadcast from the ship. This time the image of a woman with dark hair, dark eyes, and indeterminate ethnicity appeared on screens everywhere. She smiled warmly and then began speaking. "Hello. We come in peace. The explorers you sent to meet us are safe, alive, and well, and will be returned to you soon. We call ourselves the Custodians. To simplify First Contact, we have adapted ourselves to appear as you do. We have done this in every world we have visited, across this galaxy and many others. We are Custodians because we seek out intelligent life in the cosmos and where necessary, help nurture it. We have been watching your world for quite some time. You have reached a tipping point that qualifies for and requires our intervention. We are here to save your species and your world.

"For too long, you have exploited and damaged the ecosystems of your planet. Your population growth is uncontrolled, and billions of your people live in war zones, in dangerous and dangerously unsanitary conditions, with disease, without proper food or shelter, and under abusive, oppressive regimes. Even your wealthiest, most prosperous nations are rife with poverty, illness, violence, exploitation and environmental contamination and destruction. Thousands around the world are dying as a result of

completely preventable, curable, or avoidable circumstances while this message is broadcast.

“At the same time, your species is unique, magnificent; your arts and cultures are capable of incredible feats of beauty, of resplendence. You are making technological advances in medicine and science that could extend your lives exponentially, improve their quality, and even create a wholly new, relative to you, type of life in the form of artificial intelligence. You have the potential to leave your cradle world and star system and explore the universe with your own companion species...but the technologies you have used and, more importantly, the ways they have been misused have left you on the brink of extinction. When we first began exploring the cosmos, we came across so many dead worlds...so many places where civilization had reached a pinnacle, on the verge of an incredible leap of evolution and technology, only to die instead.

“These worlds were as beautiful and unique as your own. But just like your world, they had damaged their environment beyond its ability to be repaired, they had reached unsustainable growth, they used devastating weapons of mass destruction against themselves. Cosmic chance wiped out many of them, but many more – most – were simply the victims of their own success, imploding and self-destructing. And so we redirected our efforts to finding these nascent civilizations, nurturing them beyond their self-destructive phase. Sometimes we fail; sometimes, we lose worlds to our own good intentions. But

we succeed so much more often, and so many of the species we have saved now populate the stars that we must continue, steadfast, in this, our great mission: to seek out life, to nurture those species we find, and help them grow beyond the point of extinctive stagnation they have reached.

"As such, we have chosen to help your world, your people. The process begins now. The first step to saving your species requires that all governments of your world and nearly all government organizations shut down. Your leaders must resign; your parliaments, congresses, senates, and committees must disband. This includes your military. Emergency services such as police forces, firefighting, and hospitals are exempt, as are schools, hospitals, prisons, and other public institutions directly involved in the care of the people of your world. For those of you who are dependent on your government for survival or employment, we ask that you abide, remain calm, and have confidence. The economies that have enslaved you *all* will be replaced shortly. No one will be enslaved by the Custodians, but you must follow our instructions so that we may save you and your world. We are giving your governments until this time tomorrow to comply."

The response was swift. World leaders returned to their bunkers. Within an hour, the United States, China, Russia, Israel, India, and Iran each unilaterally fired nuclear volleys at the ship. The missiles barely cleared the atmosphere before being vaporized by the Custodians. A moment later,

every nuclear arsenal on the planet was destroyed. The explosions took out the weapons' ability to detonate, rendering them into piles of radioactive slag in silos, bunkers and weapons caches around the world. The Custodians' spokesperson (though clearly, the term was inaccurate, at best) reappeared on every screen, radio and Internet connection. "While unfortunate, the reaction by the governments of your world is wholly understandable. You are afraid; you are unwilling to accept that we are here to change your lives, unable to understand what is to come. However, any further military action against our ship will be met with similar reprisal. We do not wish to harm anyone. But any who choose to fight against us will meet the same fate."

THEY CONQUERED

A small motorcade pulled up outside of Duncan Terrell's house even as he sat, astonished, as the screaming heads of the news networks exploded in panic. A master of multitasking, Duncan had outfitted his home office with a bank of monitors, each tuned to a different news channel or Internet broadcast. One notorious right-wing commentator died, mid-rant, of a heart attack live on air, falling out of his chair amid gruesome noises before the network cut to commercial. Terrell was barely aware of the ringing doorbell, the insistent pounding on the door itself. His screens were showing the same repeating footage of silo explosions, missiles' abrupt disintegrations and other scenes of the Custodians' mastery over primitive atomic weapons.

It was early enough in Duncan Terrell's morning that he was in his pajamas and bathrobe, still sipping from his first morning coffee as he went to the door. Two muscular, suited men of indeterminate age were on his stoop.

"Duncan Terrell?" From the sunglasses, black suits, earpieces, and stern expressions, it was easy for Terrell to recognize that he was either in *The Matrix* or the Secret Service was at his door.

“That’s me,” Terrell said, knowing in general what the next line in this conversation would be as the agent showed him a badge and ID. *Homeland Security*— he’d been sure they were Secret Service. As always, he was surprised and amused about being wrong.

“I’m Agent Thoreau, DHS. We need you to come with us. You...can take the time to get dressed.”

“Am I under arrest?” Terrell asked, playing his role, “Am I being taken into custody?”

“Sir, the President requires your counsel. Our response unit was the closest. We’re to bring you to a plane waiting at—”

“No, thank you,” Terrell said. “Unless the President needs me to help him draft the resignation speech for the entire government, I’m not setting foot anywhere near a government building until after this time tomorrow.”

Agent Thoreau appeared flustered, and his partner pushed his way through the doorway.

“I didn’t invite you in,” Terrell said, realizing that given the power and legal authority these men wielded, it sounded as silly and as superstitious as if he were referring to vampires. He still refused to show the least sign of intimidation, though his pulse pounded in his neck and – to him – audibly through his ears. He took another sip of

coffee and put his mug down on the credenza in the front hallway, folding his arms deliberately over his chest.

Thoreau implored, “Sir, this isn’t a *request*. The President...of the United States of *America*,” he added for emphasis, “has sent us to bring you to him.”

“What if I refuse?” The Agents look at each other, sharing an unspoken conversation. Terrell was again reminded of *The Matrix*.

“Sir, you cannot refuse an order from your President.”

Terrell chuckled, “I’m afraid that I *can*,”

“If you do, you will be placed under arrest and put in military detention at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas for the duration of the current crisis.”

“Well, that won’t be too long,” Terrell replied, “If those Custodian Aliens have their way – which I expect they will – by this time tomorrow the crisis will have ended.”

“I’m asking you again to come with us,” Thoreau said, as his partner spoke into his shirtsleeve. Thoreau’s phone began ringing a moment later.

“It’s for him,” his partner said. Thoreau hesitated a fraction of a second before taking the phone from his jacket and handing it to Terrell.

Terrell hit the answer key, "This is Duncan Terrell speaking," he said.

"Duncan? Do you know who this is?" Terrell recognized the man's voice immediately – he'd campaigned for him and occasionally alongside him through two elections.

"I do, Mister President. Should I put you on speakerphone for the benefit of the Homeland Security agents at my front door?"

"That won't be necessary. Duncan, you know why I'm calling. I need your counsel; I need you. *America* needs you."

"I think I'd rather take my chances at Leavenworth, Mister President. If you want my counsel, it is this: if you care about your life, the lives of your family, and the lives of the men and women who work with you and in and around the buildings of the Capitol, then resign and dissolve the government. You saw what they just did to the *entire world's* nuclear arsenal, Mister President. What do you think they'll do to the governments and government leaders who don't comply?"

"That's why I need you here, Terrell!"

“That’s not going to happen, sir. I’m not on your payroll, and given the ultimatum we just got, I don’t *intend* to be. Look, we’ve been given the answer to both Drake’s Equation and Fermi’s Paradox in one message. The reason, despite finding microbial life on Mars and Europa, despite the incalculable number of stars and planets in the universe, that there seems to be so little life, no apparent sign of any complex – let alone *intelligent* life out there – is that almost all of it reaches a point beyond which they go extinct. We’ve both seen the numbers on air quality, water table contamination, oceanic mass extinctions, agricultural sustainability, deforestation, climate change...we’re both aware that Humanity’s gone *beyond* that point, Mister President, and the Custodians know it too. That’s why they’re here. Without them, all we can do is hope to postpone the mass extinction of Mankind by a few more decades. You asked for my counsel and I gave it to you: *dissolve the Government!* Hell, you can even copy and paste from the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence to justify doing it.”

There was an audible silence on the phone. For a moment Terrell feared he’d been disconnected. Then the President of the United States sighed and said, “Duncan, give the phone back to the DHS agent, please.”

“Yes, sir, Mister President,” Terrell said, handing the phone back to Thoreau.

The Agent listened for a moment, nodding his head absently. He repeated the phrase Terrell had just used, though with far more solemnity and respect. Then he glanced at his partner and replaced the phone in his pocket before materializing a pair of handcuffs.

“Charles Duncan Terrell,” Agent Thoreau said, “I am placing you under arrest for the crime of treason against the People and Government of the United States of America. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand the rights I have just read to you?”

“Yes I do,” Terrell said, placing his hands behind his back and turning around to be cuffed.

“Bearing these rights in mind, is there anything you wish to say to me?” Thoreau asked, obliging Terrell by putting on the cuffs – a notch tighter than necessary – and twisting them painfully into Terrell’s wrists to start leading him from the house.

“I don’t suppose the offer of a change of clothes is still on the table?”

“I’m afraid not, sir.”

Terrell shrugged. “The Arthur Dent look it is. Appropriate, really, under the circumstances.”

As Thoreau led Terrell outside, the astrophysicist couldn’t suppress laughing at the Agent’s partner, who spoke urgently into his shirtsleeve. “I need a 20 on a Dent, Arthur, possible alias; probable known associate of Duncan Charles Terrell.”

Terrell paused and turned back to Thoreau’s partner. “Arthur’s middle name is Philip, if that helps,” he chuckled, glancing deliberately at his library, ordered alphabetically by author, where the most famous works by Douglas Adams sat in the upper left corner of the wall-to-wall bookcase.

“It does, Mister Terrell,” Thoreau replied, “And your cooperation will be noted.”

As he was loaded into the back of a black SUV, Terrell said, “Just wait until you find out who Arthur Dent is. *If* you find him, bring him a towel, and tell him *don’t panic!*”

“Oh, we’ll find him,” Thoreau said, menacingly. Terrell laughed until tears started streaming down his face as the black motorcade drove away.

**

The third day after the arrival of the Custodians' Ship dawned with the world collectively holding its breath. A worldwide record for absenteeism on behalf of every nation's civil service was set, with employee recidivism levels of ninety-eight percent. Several minor governments – and a few not-so-minor ones – went on television and the Internet to announce their resignations and dissolutions, ordering all employees home and disbanding their militaries, and requesting further instruction from the Custodians. Several other governments pleaded either for more time or instructions on how to proceed. Most governments, however, opted to send messages of resolute defiance and the Solidarity of Humanity to the Custodians. The response came swiftly, at the appointed hour.

Every defiant government installation across the planet was destroyed. The strikes were surgical and precise and took out capital buildings, legislatures, server networks, headquarters, field offices, intelligence centers, secret bunkers, spider holes, fortified caves, fortresses, palaces, and parliaments around the world.

State, Provincial, District and Municipal legislatures were destroyed next. Then military installations not undergoing evacuation: barracks, base administration buildings, bunkers, motor pools, and arsenals were destroyed, along with ships at sea and planes in the air. The International Space Station was left untouched, as were the various space agency facilities, police departments, firefighting stations, prisons, hospitals, schools, public

libraries, museums, and other social service offices. The attack against the world's government installations was invisible and swift, over in less than five minutes.

Moments after the attack ended, the Custodians' spokesperson made another broadcast: "We regret the action that we have just been forced to take. We value all life, and the lives lost diminish your world and the cosmos beyond. To avoid further loss of life, we must now ask that the list of the following Corporations, Institutions, Financial Institutions, Companies, and Organizations likewise resign and cease and dissolve your respective operations by this time tomorrow, or face similar reprisal. The list is as follows..."

It was the longest broadcast yet – a litany of thousands of names of businesses and organizations spread across every industry and country on the planet. When the list was finally complete, the broadcast from the Custodians ended, and the apoplectic news media talking heads cut in once again.

Remarkably, in spite of the mass panic that followed, police and peacekeepers around the world were able to maintain order. People seemed to take their admonishments seriously, largely obeying directives to remain calm, stay indoors, or get home. Nevertheless, there were riots, looting, marches, vigils and protests for and against the Custodians' actions. Most major cities were in chaos throughout the long night. But by the

coming of dawn, the world was still in upheaval, but calmer, with only a few places still besieged by riots or dogged protesters refusing to disperse.

Before the mid-morning deadline set by the Custodians had come, corporate executives were either resigning en-masse from the companies they chaired or announcing the dissolution of their corporations. There were defiant holdouts, but by the deadline, about eighty percent of the world's companies were dissolved or without leadership. Almost no one went into work that day. As the deadline crept past, the defiant holdouts were obliterated as efficiently as the defiant governments had been the day before. The world was now in a state of utter economic collapse. And once more, the Custodians sent a message:

“We are again saddened by the deaths made necessary by those who hoped to defy us for their own selfish, foolish ends. However, the most difficult, the most painful and frightening aspect of our curatorship of your species and your world has ended. Tomorrow we will begin landing our ships. Tomorrow we will begin working with you to create a new future, a prosperous future for your people and your world. Remember: we have come in peace, for all Mankind.”

THE WILDLANDS

TEN YEARS ON

The world, such as it was, was celebrating the first decade under the Custodians' rule. Of course, they didn't call it their *rule*, but there was no other word for it.

Ten years ago the Custodian Mother Ship began sending down millions of smaller vessels, establishing beachheads and preparing for the task of taking control of the Earth. There were protests and massive insurgencies at first, but the Custodians proved themselves efficient when it came to dealing with uprisings. The conflicts were short, deadly, and utterly one-sided. The Custodians could attack a riot with surgical precision: taking out the riot leaders and its vandals in seconds, leaving everyone around them unharmed, but drenched in a wet, red purée that had once been another Human being. It only took a few such attacks to break the spirit of resistance.

With mass riots and violence quelled, the Custodians constructed encampments: paved roads, fully-equipped private residences, food and clothing distribution centers, medical centers, schools, houses of worship and recreation areas. Each encampment could hold tens of thousands, and they were only temporary relocation points. The Custodians began building massive Megalopolic Centers around them, each designed to ultimately house hundreds of millions of people. Every individual housing unit would

be furnished with all the amenities of modern life that had become so essential to the everyday Human experience.

Then the Custodians began mass relocations. At first, the people were terrified as they were transported to what the Human mind could only think of as refugee camps – or worse, *concentration camps*. But in less than a year, the Custodians moved billions of people into just a handful of newly-built Megalopolic Centers around the world—massive, walled communities surrounded by agricultural land and then another, outer wall, allowing nature beyond to reclaim the rest of the planet. And though these places were walled and gated, there were no guards, and people were free to leave. The Internet still worked, and the Custodians did nothing to stifle online dissent, calls for rebellion or any other threats or criticisms directed at them.

After the old cities were vacated, they were razed and regularly built over with the same quick, precise brutality the Custodians had demonstrated upon their arrival. Some people fled the new Megalopolic Centers to live in the ruins of the old world. No one ever pursued them or persecuted them. There were no attacks against the people who escaped the Custodians' Cities; those who left were simply left to their own devices.

Charles and Elizabeth Petrovich and their young sons were among these fugitives. Only two days before they were to be relocated to the North American Megalopolic

Center Northeast – which stretched from New Brunswick to Pennsylvania and as far south as the Carolinas – they fled on foot with everything they could carry from their old lives.

They escaped to the rubble ruins of a city previously unknown to them, now called Toppledawn by the locals, making their home in a shanty set up in the collapsed remains of some office tower. Many who fled the Custodians in those early years had come with military or survival training or with field guides or apps for smart devices. And so Charles, a former Virginia coal miner, learned to fish and to hunt with rifle and bow, going out with the Hunting Parties to feed their growing refugee numbers. Elizabeth, who had been a bookkeeper in the World Before, learned how to farm, how to slaughter and butcher animals, and how to cure meat. Together they learned about curing and tanning hides, and how to identify and gather edible wild plants, roots, berries, leaves, and barks.

What you learned, you passed on, so at night Charles and Elizabeth took turns teaching the survival skills they had learned to new arrivals, making their lives in Toppledawn for the first two years after they fled the Megalopolis Center. But without modern medicine or the miracle drugs of the pharmacological industry, old illnesses returned in strength to the communities that lived outside the Megalopolis Centers.

Elizabeth caught and died from the flu their third winter in Toppledawn. After her death, Charles was a different man. Toppledawn had a strict cremation law, but Elizabeth had always been afraid of fire so before the cremation, Charles took Elizabeth's body and his sons, Simon and Gregory, to live in the wilderness that now spread between Toppledawn and the North American Megalopolic Center Northeast. They had to wrap Elizabeth's body and store it above-ground in a log-wood and stone cairn until the spring thawed the ground enough for Charles to use a pickaxe and spade to dig a hole for her. That winter the three of them shared one cold, smelly tent. Their mother's body slept beneath wood and stone.

When they buried their mother, Simon, then twelve, and Gregory, eight, carved the wooden marker, made from an old four-by-eight that Charles planted at the head of her grave, just behind the log cabin he was building. Charles hunted during the days, and the boys tended a fire while he was gone. At night they'd cure the meat as their mother had shown them, while Charles worked the hides into something he could take back to trade in Toppledawn when their supplies began running low.

Though they often saw flights in the sky to and from the Megalopolic Centers, they never saw people from the Custodians' cities, or the Custodians themselves. The Aliens, as Charles insisted on calling them, had only two rules about people who fled the Megalopolic Centers: no

aid would be provided them, and they would not be permitted to return.

As the boys grew older, Charles taught them to fish and hunt, and about the edible wild plants they consumed, taking them out with rods and rifles and bows he'd bought for them while trading in Toppledawn. There wasn't much by way of game. They grew up on a diet of rabbit and gopher and the occasional deer, whatever catfish or trout they could catch from the streams and whatever wild plants they foraged. One spring hunt, Charles came across a beaver dam and came home with almost a dozen of the large rodents. They feasted on the rich, fatty meat and the pelts were each worth a fortune in trade – five of them bought their second ATV. At night he kept the boys at their math and reading, having traded for old textbooks and reading-books in Toppledawn. He also taught them history, so they could remember the World Before.

Simon and Gregory didn't grow up without technology or access to the Internet. Charles and Elizabeth had both had tablets, and one Christmas back in the World Before, Charles had gotten a solar-powered device charger as a gag gift – their old man would often tell them about the years he spent working underground mining coal – but he thanked God now for that gag gift. Though tethered to the charger because there were no replacement batteries, Simon and Greg could watch news reports and receive information from and about the Custodians and their Megalopolis Centers. They had access to the rest of the Internet's

marvels as well, but their device was Human-made, not Custodian technology, so what they could see from the official Custodian Internet was, to say the least, limited.

But those who had fled the Custodians to live in the ruins or the wilds outside the Megalopolic Centers had built a network of their own, and while it had no known ties to the Humanity First Insurgency, RebNet, the Rebel Network, was a place where people dared to speak freely about what they thought of the Custodians, and about why Humans had to reclaim the planet.

Outside the Megalopolic Centers, communities didn't exist as they had prior to the Custodians' invasion. The Petrovich's closest neighbors were miles away in any direction. Though they had the RebNet, few others did. There was one doctor twenty miles to the west, and the Petrovich's two old, gas-powered ATVs took two days to reach Toppledawn, far to the south. So when Charles Petrovich had a heart attack after coming home from an autumn rabbit hunt the year Simon turned seventeen, it had been up to Simon to strap his dad to the back of the faster ATV and ride hard for the doctor. Over the rough terrain, it took an eternity, made longer by his fear and anxiety. It had been up to him to bring Charles home after he died before reaching the doctor. It had been up to him to dig the hole behind the one-room shack they had lived in most of their lives. And then it was up to him to look after Greg.

“What are we gonna do, Simon?” Greg asked tearfully, when Simon, exhausted, laid the spade aside after burying his father. Greg hammered the stake into the ground at the head of the grave: like their mother's marker, it was a sturdy, old four-by eight into which they'd carved their dad's name, birth date, and date of death. The weathered marker in their mother's grave bore verses of a poem mom had been partial to. As far as either of them knew, their dad hadn't been much for poetry. Instead, they wrote “I love you, Dad” on the other three sides of his marker.

Simon wiped sweat and dirt from his brow, unmindful of the clean stripes left by tears down his cheeks. “Now, we're getting out of here.”

“Where are we going to go? The Megalopolic Center?”

“No,” Simon said, harshly. He'd taken his father's fear and hatred of the Custodians and their Megalopolic Centers to heart, while Gregory seemed more fascinated than frightened by them.

“Then where?”

“Back to Toppledown,” Simon said, authoritatively, “We can get work in the hunting crews, or work in the tannery. We won't be twenty miles away from a goddamn doctor, and we won't be cold all the time, and alone and isolated from the world anymore.”

Either the tone of Simon's voice or the assuredness of his words silenced Gregory. They spent the next few days curing the meat from dad's last hunt, prepping the furs, then packing up as many of their belongings as they could.

TOPPLEDOWN CITY

Four years had come and gone since that day; a decade since the Custodians arrived and invaded. Twenty-one now, Simon rode with the Night-Miners gang through the collapsed road-beds and rocky concrete-and-glass landscape of the Jagged Desert beyond Toppledown. Hardy grasses, ferns, and small trees were taking hold out there, grappling with the arduous terrain to expand, reclaim it in nature's name.

It was late December, the snowdrifts were deep in many places, and the ground was as hard as ice. The nights were cold, and the Night-Miners were made hard by the cold. Simon Petrovich and his friends Jon Velasquez, Penny Reardon, Charlie Lightning, Sati Marinjoor, Donnie Marin and Cameron Wang each rode their own customized four-wheel ATV's, the engines modified to run on a fermented-grain liquid explosive made in Toppledown to replace now nearly-nonexistent gasoline. They each carried four old oil barrels in frames welded to their ATVs, and it was in these barrels that they hauled their wares. The Night-Miners were a small gang, but one that offered protection, camaraderie and work to Simon, both their youngest and newest member – though he'd been riding with them for a little more than two years. Jon, leader of the Night-Miners and his best friend, still called him Junior.

The noisy, boxy steel-framed cages on wheels bounded from the Jagged Desert to the streets of Toppleddown. The city had taken its name from the buildings that had fallen over after the old city was razed by the Custodians. The early refugees from the Relocation had shored up the fallen buildings, creating square-sided cave-like bunkers, including a vast network of tunnels used to navigate the place on foot. The tunnels opened into underground bunkers, or protected open areas with a view of the sky above. The above-ground was reserved for motor traffic and gardening and micro-farming, each protected from the other by walls of reinforced concrete slabs stacked like English Stones.

Every night they rode out from Toppleddown and into the wilds, where the land wasn't arid and wild grasses grew. They dug up topsoil and black earth, collecting tall grass for the weavers and covering their digs with woven, cross-linked grass mats. Interwoven with grass seed, the mats held together the dirt left bare by their digs and being made of grass decomposed while allowing new layers of topsoil to form and hold firm as the seeds took root.

As their name implied, the Night-Miners mostly worked until a few hours before dawn, then drank grain fuel and blasted music until sunrise. They rode home across the Jagged Desert and back into the straight-lined, zig-zagging hilly streets of Toppleddown, bounding over each other by jumping hilltops at speed. They traded their topsoil and

black earth with the farmers for food and with craftsmen for goods.

The Night-Miners couldn't trade directly with the large greenhouse bunkers – the reclaimed remains of steel-and-glass buildings of the World Before were run by a consortium of the bigger gangs. But there were enough smaller gardens and greenhouses to go around. Simon was flush with fuel and goods, enough to keep Gregory in school. Once he'd even spent two kilos of dirt for five roses to give to the girl he'd been seeing at the time. Gang life was good to him.

Simon still hunted and traded meat and fur, fish and wild herbs, roots and fungi (he specialized in finding the best wild psychoactive mushrooms – worth a great deal in trade in Toppledawn), but fresh topsoil and black earth, while making for heavier, more fuel-burning loads and longer work made the most profit outside the grain fuel or drug trades. Sometimes they exchanged shots with other dirt-miners. They stayed away from the big dogs, the gangs that worked the Greenhouse Bunkers. Whenever they saw any of them riding, they rode the other way. Everyone decorated their ATVs in the colors and symbols of their gangs. The Night-Miners' were painted black with white, seven-pointed stars and a white crescent-and-pickaxe symbol to denote their name. The biggest gang, the Toppledawn Raiders had red ATVs emblazoned with lightning bolts and skull-and-crossbones

motifs; they collected tributes from most of the smaller gangs, or those gangs faced dire consequences.

Simon was the youngest in his gang but he'd proven his worth, having put the most dirt into their barrels for the last two years running. He didn't mind the hard work, and he sure as hell enjoyed the Quota-till-dawn party and sleeping away most of the day alone, or with one of many women who, like him, worked nights and found themselves bored and restless during the day. His dark blonde hair, pale eyes, and round, haunted face provided him companions to dally with. The life was hard – hard work and hard play, as his father used to preach. He slept less than he should and was in a firefight at least once a month, but Simon Petrovich was living so his younger brother could get the education *he* needed to make something of himself – to be better than a Gang-runner or farmer or craftsman in Toppledawn.

It was a little after seven in the morning, according to his father's old wind-up watch. He checked it more out of habit than anything else. Years of living and hunting in the wild had taught him to measure time differently; the sun, moon, and stars told him far more than an archaic pocket instrument. He raced his ATV through Toppledawn to the shanty he lived in with his brother and a few other families. Built from sheets of scrap metal bolted over a crumpled condominium tower, the walls were angular, the floor a narrow band of planking placed overtop one of the fallen corners. It was half-buried in the hillside and the Petrovich's rooms were at the back under the hill, but

Simon had spent his first six months digging out windows on both of the two outer walls on their end of the dwelling. The glass for the windows had cost him two barrels of sand at the blower's, but they were sturdy, double-paned and large, installed by the blower's crew. They were cool in the summer and warm in the winter, and Simon considered it worth every handful of sand that he'd had to dig out himself.

Because he'd had to borrow the equipment to find and dig his sand from the Night-Miners, he'd owed them an additional two barrels of sand, and received no other help from them. A day and a half after leaving to hunt for sand Simon came back with a fully-loaded set of *four* barrels of hard-to-find sand. Jon had immediately invited him to prospect with his Gang, then gotten Cameron to work modifying Simon's own ATV to meet the specs of dirt-mining.

The work on Simon's ATV cost a fortune in scrap metal and foundry work, so Simon's first year with the Night-Miners was spent working off the debt for the chop job on what had been, previously, just another off-road four-wheeler.

A salvaged genny modded to run on the local grain fuel powered the Petrovich place. The coffee maker was another salvage: The Vultures Gang were landfill miners, digging out all the old ruins, matching machines with accessories, salvaging damaged devices to rebuild others.

Simon had traded two thirty-two ounce mason jars of grain fuel for the coffee maker. Coffee only came from the big, gang-run greenhouses – that meant buying at a markup from shopkeepers, usually ten pounds of earth for a pound of coffee.

One of every four barrels he filled at night was Simon's to keep; the rest went into gang coffers. The Night-Miners held a valuable dirt reserve, which they often used to make sure everyone in Toppleddown was able to afford food. Even though the gangs occasionally fought among themselves, they *all* contributed in some way to the wellbeing of Toppleddown City, and there were always friendships that went beyond gang colors.

When problems arose, the gang leaders would sit down together at a moot and discuss what needed to be done to keep the peace. Jon had been to two since Simon had been with the Night-Miners. The first time was over a dispute about mining territory, for which they came away poorer. The second was because two of the larger gangs needed a neutral mediator to settle a dispute between them.

"I swear to God," Jon told him afterward, "That these guys have all seen *The Godfather* too many times." Simon hadn't gotten the reference, but Jon, who had the luxury of an old television and DVD player, soon showed him. Simon barely absorbed the movie – it was the first time since childhood he'd actually *seen* a working TV, let alone *sat down* to watch a movie.

**

As Simon entered his kitchen, the coffee was already brewing. He was still shaking off the drink from the post-work party, and just the smell of it was enough to steady his dizzy head a little. He roused a still-sleeping Gregory with the battery-powered truck horn he'd traded for but never installed on his ATV, laughing as his kid brother jumped and cursed him with every vulgarity he'd learned since coming to Toppledawn, including several Russian ones he'd learned at the feet of their father. Simon had breakfast with his baby brother before he left for school, then retired happily to his bedroom, pulled the shutters, and covered his head with the blankets.

MINING NIGHT

Greg coming home from school woke him. It was darker out; it would snow later, Simon could tell from the scent in the air. Pickaxe weather, winter weather; it made for longer, harder nights. Simon didn't mind. He loved the exertion, the way it all seemed to make the grain fuel taste that much better after work. And besides, even if it took longer they never came back without full barrels: Cameron had built a machine that broke up the frozen chunks of dirt, and they were able to cut the topsoil, grassroots and all, into round hunks made to fit their barrels perfectly.

Cameron Wang had always been great with machines. His parents had run a garage in the World Before, and he'd always planned on going into mechanical engineering. And in spite of his days spent in the Night-Miner's garage tinkering, he was out in the field every night, working a pickaxe with everyone else.

They were all of them strong and muscular, their shoulders and arms particularly so; even the women, Penny and Sati. Donnie, who'd founded the Night-Miners with Jon Velasquez, was scar-faced and grim. Whatever had happened to him when the Custodians dropped had changed Donnie. He looked at least a decade older than his twenty-seven years. He rarely cracked a smile, rarely spoke, and was just generally ill-disposed. But he was the

only person that came close to matching Simon's pickaxe or spade; he treated everyone fairly and equally, as though they weren't in on - or were the punchline of - a joke only he understood. Jon was his only friend, and, as the Night-Miners leader, Jon was pretty much *everyone's* friend; he was certainly Simon's closest friend.

Jon helped Simon settle in Toppledawn City long before he'd thought about recruiting him into the gang. That came after Simon's trick with the sand: Simon's father had taught him basic geology. He'd known where to look for sand and came back in less than two days. He'd even dried it before loading it – another trick that impressed Jon because sand was sold at wet weight.

After two years with the Night-Miners, Simon had learned Jon's casual, carefree attitude disguised a sharp mind, an innate ability to assess any situation or person. Simon had known people to underestimate Jon; it rarely ended well for them. He was dark-haired with a perpetual shadow of beard across his face; one braid, tied with several knots over his left ear. He pulled on it absently when thinking, or tucked it behind his ear when working. Simon had not understood its significance until one night when they'd been attacked by a rival gang of dirt-miners from the other side of the Jagged Desert: During the firefight, Jon had shot and killed two of the attackers before the rest drove off. They'd all been shooting, and while Simon was good with a rifle, he'd never been in a real firefight. He'd wounded one of the enemy in the shoulder

– which itself could be lethal – but the woman had survived to at least escape with the few survivors the Night-Miners left. After it was all over, while Charlie Lightning and Donnie went to loot the dead, Jon had carefully tied two more knots in his braid. He'd looked to see Simon watching him, then looked away. They never spoke of it, but since that night Jon had added another six knots to the braid.

Everyone had their little rituals after a firefight: Golden-haired Penny Reardon would roll herself a joint, declare it “Shapely” and smoke it to herself while standing with her rifle held in one hand by the barrel; Donnie, Charlie Lightning and Cameron would do the looting, and Sati usually set about doing a quick clean and reloading of her weapons. The first time he'd killed someone in a skirmish, Simon had thrown up.

“That's normal your first time.” Donnie said, “Happens to everyone.” It was the closest to a kind word from Donnie as Simon ever got.

One night after the first gunfight, he asked Sati about her immediate gun-cleaning. “After they came,” the focused, heavy-set, dark-haired woman told him, “The Custodians, I mean, I was protected by one of my father's security detail.” Her father had been a diplomat when the Custodians obliterated the world's governments in a single strike. “Mother and I were at the park that day; if we'd have been in the embassy with Father...We had a security

guard, Muad. He brought us here, taught us...*trained* us, really. I still miss him; he was like a second father. But one of the things he taught me was how important it is to always keep your gun in clean, working order.” She shrugged, “I kept up the habit.” In the course of the conversation, she'd dismantled, cleaned and reassembled both her rifle and handgun, punctuating her last words slapping the magazine back into her pistol's grip.

Simon wasn't used to being part of a group – even a small one; it had been him, his Father and Gregory for so long, that he often found himself pondering how different his friends were. Donnie was Donnie. Cameron was always cheerful unless he was really stuck on a mechanical problem. Sati was quiet, but laughed easily and was different as day from night when playing instead of working. Charlie Lightning was just...*different*.

He'd been twelve when the Custodians blew everything up. His parents were killed in the legendary Buffalo Riots. He'd witnessed his parents killed while watching from a video chat. He ran out of the room, out onto the balcony...there'd been a thunderstorm all day that day over Buffalo, and Charlie had been struck as he ran out onto the metal cage fire escape of his building.

Of course, Charlie Lightning didn't *remember* any of this. It's what his surviving aunt, Carole told him, following his recovery. His aunt had fled with him to live in Toppledawn as soon as he'd been declared well enough to

travel – and only a few days before her city block was to be assigned to the relocation. Charlie had no memory of anything...*anything*...before the lightning strike. Which was why, when he came of age, he changed his last name from Sisko. His aunt didn't approve; nor did she approve of his role with the Night-Miners, but the dirt-digging kept them living comfortably.

Penny, whom Simon had been crushing on since first joining the gang, wasn't classically beautiful; the physical labor toned her frame, giving her broader shoulders, a thicker neck. She was tall and slender, muscularly feminine. Her skin was rough from years of exposure to the elements as she worked, yet somehow it polished her like a river polished a stone. She was seventeen when they came, and the thought of living in the Megalopolis Center never sat well with her. After everything she'd ever studied about the Holocaust and saw that same totalitarianism behind the benevolent overlord Custodians veneer.

Penny was also volatile, which was *why* Simon liked her so much. As a matter of survival, the Night-Miners had all learned the near-invisible signs of her mood: the way she held her shoulders, how she walked, or the tone of her voice. When Penny laughed or smiled...it still felt to Simon that she was frowning. It always seemed to Simon that Penny was taller than him, though she wasn't.

He suspected Penny must have faced a story similar to his; though, on a general level, all of their stories were

similar. Simon couldn't articulate how he felt about Penny to himself; he was just too afraid of messing everything up if he stumbled out the words trying to express them to her. She was good company to work beside, to drink or smoke with. She was his Sister in the Gang; for now, that was enough.

Greg was family, and they spent as much time together as they could, but Greg, only a few years younger than him, already wanted to spend most of his time with his own friends, and not at home by himself with Simon, or at the bunker even as a Friend of the Gang. As long as Greg kept at his studies, Simon didn't care; it wasn't like they'd had any kind of normal upbringing. Simon just didn't want Gregory in the Gangs. It wasn't a *bad* life, but it wasn't a life that would allow him to live *easily*. Simon felt his brother deserved better.

Donnie whistled shrilly, and they groaned to a halt in their digging; it was midway through the shift; lunch break. They left the field for the ATVs, parked in a defensive line from the road. The other side of the snow-patch dotted field was woods, into which they had spotlights aimed; six dug, one kept watch. Everyone took a night. Tonight was Jon's watch, so he was the only one not eating back at the ATVs with the rest of his crew. His sandwich was in one pocket of his coat, a thermos of coffee in the other. The others had layered down after so many hours digging and were now shrugging back into their own coats for the break. Donnie finished his lunch and went to stand with

Jon for a bit. Sati and Cameron retreated to a far corner for some quick alone-time, while Charlie, Penny, and Simon made small talk while passing around a thermos of spiked coffee. The hot, bittersweet drink warmed them from the night chill and gave them the caffeine boost needed for their second round in the frozen dirt pits again. After lunch, Cameron got the crusher back up and running; the teeth of the machine were back grinding down the frozen chunks of earth as they were dug out.

It was only a few more hours, and they'd filled their barrels with enough dirt to make quota. This was announced in the usual way, with Cameron banging on a large, brass bell welded to the frame of his ATV. The crusher was shut down, the last of the dirt banged from it, and Charlie Lightning helped Cameron load it onto his ATV. Next, they were winching the extremely heavy barrels into their harnesses on the sides and backs of the buggies.

When all the tools and equipment were packed away, the party was at last free to start. A battered, ancient music player jury-rigged to run on their genny began blasting out classic rock tracks, and Cameron opened the spigot on his spare fuel tank, filling a pitcher with grain-fuel alcohol.

He was pushed out of the pouring line by Donnie, who opened his mouth wide to let the grain fuel pour right down his throat. By the time Cameron closed the tap Donnie was

whooping and hollering. The first pitcher was being passed around, and Cameron was filling another.

For two hours they drank, danced, made noise, fooled around and watched Donnie set his jacket on fire trying to spit flaming grain fuel. By the time they were done, the sun was clear of the horizon and they were staggering back to their ATVs, strapping in and revving up for the return to Toppledawn.

SUDDEN MOOT

One late January morning Donnie, Jon, and Cameron had finished clearing snow between the Clubhouse bunker, garage and still-shed and were about to start their regular day in the compound. Cameron was crossing from his garage to the still-shed when he heard it: like nothing else, thunder and buzzing, the sound of a convoy of ATVs echoing through the canyonscape of Toppledawn. It wasn't long before Jon was out of the main building, Donnie right behind, having stopped long enough to grab weapons. Cameron caught the rifle Donnie threw him as Jon checked the safety on his own. There was no doubt the ATVs were heading, in great number, for the Night-Miners' bunker. Soon they could see them climbing the short hill towards their base. The four biggest gangs were there, every vehicle painted in the colors of the gang it rode in: the black-and-red of the Raiders; the grey and gold of the Rockbreakers; ATVs painted all-white except for the eponymous Blackfist; the red, orange and yellow of the Firedogs. They rode in, four vehicles per gang, from the four biggest gangs in Toppledawn City.

"What the hell is this?" Donnie asked, his cigarette dangling between his lips.

Tucking back his braid, Jon replied, "I don't know, but I guess we're gonna find out real quick. Cam?"

“Let’s rock and roll,” he said. He pulled his jacket open. He was wearing a fitted belt that held bottles of grain-fuel.

Donnie squinted, “Just *three*?”

“It was for a taste-test,” Cameron said.

"Let's hope we get to drink it and not burn it," Donnie growled. The ATVs halted, all of them cutting their engines. Then one by one, one ATV from each of the Big Gangs blared back to life.

“Barrels south,” Jon said. The start-up of lone buggies from each gang meant the gangs were there to talk. They didn’t want to point guns at ambassadors; especially since the Night-Miners were the smallest gang in Toppleddown and they controlled an important commodity.

As the ATVs rolled slowly into camp, Jon picked out the leaders of each gang: Katherine Anton of Blackfist, a stern-faced, dark-skinned woman with a short tumble of dark blonde curls; Franklyn Jessop, grey-eyed and dangerously neutral, with a long salt-and-pepper beard covering a stout, muscular form led the Raiders; Warren Delgado from the Rockbreakers, his dark hair cropped close, a body of thick muscles, with scars and pockmarks across his face and arms; and leader of the Firedogs Matt Drakkas, tanned slight and silent, hair as high and tight as

any Marine's, a look of grave displeasure permanently etched into his skin.

“Oh, holy shit,” Donnie growled.

The ATVs parked within a few feet of the trio. Franklyn strode forward; nearly thirty years older than Donnie, he was one of the oldest gang-leaders in Toppledawn, “Jon, we all need to have a talk with you.”

“It’s me and Donnie or not at all,” Jon said.

Franklyn shrugged, “That’s fine. Can we go inside?”

“Wait by the door, Cam,” Jon said, as he gestured for Franklyn and the other three gang leaders to follow him into the clubhouse bunker. Other guards came to stand with Cameron. He opened his coat, presenting the unlit firebombs, “Anyone wanna drink?”

**

The gang-leaders sat around the club table. Donnie sat, staring at them, while Jon collected some bottles and glasses from the club bar before sitting down.

“Now before we start, Jon, Donnie,” Franklyn said, “We want you to know that there’s no beef being brought to your table. This isn’t about a land-grab or a takeover. And

after you hear what we have to say, if you aren't interested, we turn around and roll outta here, no harm, no foul."

"All right," Jon said cautiously, pouring drinks for everyone, which Donnie passed out; eyeballing each of the four as he did, "Sounds good so far. So why *are* you here?"

"When we first founded Toppledown," Katherine Anton said, "We didn't do it for power, or to take control, or to fight each other over who did what. From the very beginning, everything was organized. We each took to the duties as we saw them, and we divvied up control of what would be needed to run a viable community."

"All of us wanted to make sure that the refugees had somewhere safe to be," Matt Drakkas said, "All of us wanted to make sure we were safe from other exiles and from any problems from the Megalopolic Center or the Custodians."

"Some of us are ex-military," Franklyn said, "And others, ex-gangsters or ex-cops. None of us *ever* surrendered to the Custodians; all of us have declared war on them."

"Why tell us all this?" Jon asked, sipping his grain-fuel.

"We've a small but significant fifth column inside the Megalopolic Center," Franklyn answered, gulping down his own glass of high-octane alcohol, "Just a few cells, small

operations, here and there. But we've managed to keep sympathetic ears on the other side of the wall: people who stayed behind in enemy territory, to give us a fighting chance to organize on the outside."

"Well, how did *they* do that?" Donnie asked, "The aliens monitor every radio frequency, CusterNet *and* RebNet, they don't let anyone leave the City and return, they almost never let anyone from outside the city in, and you can't even fly a *kite* over their walls without getting it and yourself vaporized."

Warren grinned, the scars on his face twisting into a complex knot, "Yeah, but the Custodians don't give a good goddamn about *birds*." He glanced at Katherine, who lifted a small, wrought-iron cage onto the table. Inside Jon and Donnie could see a pair of pigeons.

"Our allies in the Megalopolic Center have been sending carrier pigeons out to us for years," Warren said, "The hard part was establishing the routes; but once that was done, well we had our own private means of communicating with those who stayed behind."

"This summer the Custodians are celebrating a decade of ruling Earth by holding the first international Olympics-style athletic competition since the invasion." Franklyn answered.

“We’re planning a disruption,” Katherine said, “To coincide with their games.”

“That’d be suicide,” Donnie sneered, “The Custodians would stew anyone that tried to do anything. Every major attack against the Megalopolic Centers has had a one hundred percent failure rate.”

“Every major attack that you *hear of* on the RebNet or from CusterNet,” Franklyn said. “But if you have people inside who know their way around, things get done. *Those* operations are always reported as accidents; or as the Custodians put it, *local critical system failures*.”

“Yeah,” Jon said, slinging back the last of his fuel and refilling his glass, “And tell me: how many of the men and women involved in those...what did you call it? *Those operations*; how many of them make it back alive?”

“All or none,” Katherine admitted grimly, “That’s the drawback when your enemy can literally rain death on you from above. Mission survivors stay with the Insurgency, well, until they get the mission that kills them.”

“Those are very high stakes,” Donnie said.

“We’re talking about the survival of the Human race,” Matt Drakkas said, “Our people in there *know* there’s indoctrination going on; the Custodians are prepping us to become their fucking slaves. There *are* no higher stakes.”

“Okay, so what are you coming to us for?”

“Every gang Contributes to Society,” Franklyn said, reciting the Toppledawn Credo, “So, every gang is doing two things: sending someone on the operation, and helping outfit the mission.”

"And how would we help?" Jon asked.

"Order up your best, and in your case, create one of the components for the bombs we'll be using," Franklyn replied.

“Do we get to know what we’re bombing, or *who*?” Donnie asked, sneering.

“We don’t target Humans,” Katherine said, “They’re not the enemy; other than a handful of Race-Traitors, like Duncan Terrell. Those we would target we can probably never expect to touch. We target the aliens’ installations; data vaults, communications modules, whatever infrastructure they require. Eventually, we hope to find a way to take a shot at the ship they have, up there. But first, we gotta figure out how to kill all the Custodians in a Megalopolic Center.”

Jon tugged on his braid, “Shouldn’t we be more worried about the eye in the sky that splatters us?”

“We know that it’s done by a network of microsatellites in orbit,” Warren Delgado put in, “And we know it’s controlled by the ship. There are people all over the world trying to figure out how to track and destroy those satellites; they’re less than the size of a brick, and each of them can fire a nuke’s worth of energy. We know that because seven years ago, a team in Brazil brought one of them down.”

“I never heard about *that*,” Jon said, skeptically.

“No one outside the Insurgency did. But those microsats are what wiped everybody out at the start of the invasion.” Franklyn said, “And taking them out is going to be part of what we do, as we work our way up the food chain.”

“And all you want in return is one Human Sacrifice and for us to risk getting ourselves stewed making a bomb.” Donnie said, “Especially since there’s only seven of us, you’re not asking for a whole hell of a lot, are you?”

“We’re asking the same of *all* the gangs,” Franklyn said, angrily, “You’re no different than anyone else in Toppledawn. Hell, even the *farmers* are contributing by making ammonium nitrate from their fertilizer.”

“Isn’t that, like, one of the most *easily* detected explosives? They could stew the whole city!” Donnie barked.

"Under proper conditions, we can conceal the explosives," Franklyn said. "We instructed the farmers on how to do it. The same as we'll instruct you."

"What is it we'd be making?" Jon asked.

Katherine leaned forward, "We need the mechanical components of the devices; we can't use electronics, so the detonator has to be machine-driven. We hear your boy Cameron is great with machines. We need him to figure out the fuse that'll trigger the bombs."

Jon nodded, "So, how many people are being sent on this suicide mission?"

"Eight, one from every gang in Toppledown," Franklyn replied.

"Eight people for a city that's eight hundred miles from one end of the other?" Jon asked, "What do you hope to accomplish?"

Franklyn shrugged, "A *massive* local critical systems failure." He said, grinning.

Donnie leaned forward, "And who's going to lead these people to their deaths?"

“I think we have a fighting chance,” Katherine replied, “And I wouldn’t ask anyone to do something I wouldn’t, so I’ll be leading.”

“Oh, holy shit,” Donnie said, “I thought Frankie and Matt the Marine were the ex-military.”

“And so am I. Ex-Special Forces. I even ran black ops for a while, back in the day.”

“Where were you when the Custodians came?” Donnie accused.

“Convalescing in the VA with about a pound of shrapnel in my body,” Katherine said, “Where were you? Jerking off to online porn in your bedroom at your parents?”

Donnie leaned forward across the table. “Actually I was in the New Haven Riots,” he growled.

After a moment’s silence while regarding him, Katherine nodded, “You’re lucky to have made it out alive.”

“Same can’t be said for *any* of my friends or family,”

“So,” Franklyn said, “Are you in, Jon? Can we count on the Night-Miners?”

Jon shrugged and swallowed the contents of his glass, “That’s not up to me,” he said, “I need to call everyone in, take a vote. I won’t force anyone to risk their lives fighting the Custodians, especially not my own people. I’ll give you an answer tomorrow.”

THE RECRUIT

After the other gang leaders left, Jon and Donnie sat in silence for a long moment, contemplating the exchange. Finally, Donnie broke the quiet. "So who do you wanna send?"

Jon shrugged. "It's not up to me; I already said we're leaving it up to everyone; whether we're in or not, who goes...everything's gonna be done voluntarily."

"I *know*...but if it *was* up to you...who would you wanna send?"

Jon grinned. "Well I know you're a stone-cold killer when it comes down to it, and after Katherine's little 'never ask someone to do what I wouldn't' speech, I kinda feel like I should go, but between you and me, I think it's between Charlie Lightning, Penny, and Simon. They're all good shots, strong, braver than they are smart, smarter than most people I've met – including you, fuckwit – they are all just angry enough to really wanna hit the Custodians hard."

Donnie grunted, pouring himself more grain fuel. "'Yeah, that's about what I'd say, too...except Sati's got training the others don't."

“Yeah, she also has a mother that she looks after,” Jon said.

“And Charlie lives with his aunt, Simon’s got a kid brother; Penny’s the only one on your list who doesn’t have family.”

Jon contemplated this. The truth of the matter was he didn’t want to send *anyone* on a suicide mission. But he also knew that if the Night-Miners declined this operation, there would be repercussions, no matter what Franklyn had promised. Even if they succeeded, the mission to North American Megalopolis Center Northeast would be one-way; the eight would join the Insurgency, and probably never be able to return to Toppledawn if they even survived for a second mission.

“Jesus H. Tap-Dancing, Titty-Fucking Christ,” Jon sighed. “Okay, we’ll set up a...I dunno, call it a *pension* or something, where the family of whoever goes on this mission is taken care of by the gang, for the rest of their lives; whatever they want, whatever they need, we’ll provide them, for life.”

Donnie chuckled, “Sounds like winning the...what was it called? Yeah; sounds like winning the Lottery.”

“Yeah, except I don’t remember Lottery winners never getting to see their loved ones, again.”

“All of that assuming that the Custodians don’t just decide to splatter all of Toppledawn.”

Jon made an unhappy sound and refilled his own glass of grain fuel. “Ain’t that the truth.” He sighed, “All right, have Cameron send out some runners; we’re meeting after lunch, all hands mandatory.”

**

Even though everyone was there, the clubhouse felt less crowded than when it had hosted the leaders from the Toppledawn Gangs. Jon laid out what Franklyn had told them – with Donnie providing color commentary – and now the moment had come.

“So that’s our situation. Let’s put it to a vote: all in favor of joining the Insurgency.”

“Who’s going to go?” Penny asked, leaning back in her chair.

“That’ll be up to you guys,” Jon said, “If we sign on, we’re already putting ourselves at risk for a possible attack from the Custodians. So, if we do this, we all vote to do it, and we need somebody to volunteer for the...mission.”

They voted with a show of hands; it was unanimous. Jon nodded and cleared his throat, “Okay, so who would like to volunteer for this?”

Donnie and Jon were surprised when Charlie Lightning kept his hand down. Cameron, Sati, Penny, and Simon volunteered.

"Cam, we need you working the bomb component," Donnie said, "So we can't send you on the mission training. I guess it's between Sati, Penny, and Simon."

"How are we going to decide?" Simon asked.

"Will any of you be talked out of the mission?" Stillness answered Jon. He shrugged, "Okay, then we'll do it the *other* way." He took out a bag with a rope closure and opened it. He shook out its contents into his hand: several dice of equal size: some were black, some white. He threw two black ones into the bag and one white one, then closed the bag, shaking it.

One by one, Simon, Penny and Sati reached into the bag, each taking out a die. As the last person drew, they all opened their hands, palms up. Jon studied the results. Ashen-faced, Cameron moaned. "No,"

"Congratulations, Sati," Jon said, "Looks like you move on to the next round."

**

A couple of days later they all gathered early at the Clubhouse to wish Sati goodbye. It was early morning, and the Night-Miners had not been out the night before. Sati and Cameron spent a lot of the morning weeping in each other's arms. Their love for one another was no secret, and as eagerly as they'd both volunteered for the mission, as much as they knew the risks, neither could bear the thought of being without the other.

They shared around a bottle of Cameron's finest grain-fuel and a joint of weed sent by the Hammerheads to each of the gangs, in tribute to their sacrifice. They all talked, telling Sati how they felt about their time together in the Night-Miners. Simon felt his eyes drifting unconsciously back towards Penny as Cameron professed his undying love to Sati. They'd had their last night together the night before; this was their end...and the beginning of their part in the Insurgency.

"Today, you both begin your work on behalf of the Night-Miners against the aliens," Jon said to them, "You are heroes to be admired and remembered by the Night-Miners."

Not long after a series of ATVs roared up. These were longer, with large wheels on a wide base in the back, narrower in front; higher off the ground, and covered in reinforced plates of metal. There were eight vehicles; three were being towed behind other ATVs.

"Looks like they haven't picked everyone up yet," Donnie said.

"Looks like," Jon replied.

Simon watched as Cameron and Sati had a final goodbye, while those gathered for the insurrection team, already dressed identically in black boots, pants, jackets, and ski masks got out and untethered one of the vehicles. As Sati approached, she was given the same uniform to change into, which she did, right there. Simon hoped his flush wasn't showing as he watched Sati strip down to her underwear in the cold weather to put on her new uniform. Sati was unmindful of the eyes on her. Everyone was watching her, to honor her leaving the Night-Miners and joining the Insurgency. Modesty was an uncommon convention in Toppledawn, anyway – especially in the hot, humid summers.

Sati wished it were summer now, but it wasn't long before the new clothes were making her feel warm. One of the other members of the incursion team – she didn't yet know who – was explaining the controls and handling of the militarized ATV, which was somewhat different than what Sati had been used to driving. When he was reasonably satisfied she could handle the thing, he nodded. Sati waved a final goodbye to the Night-Miners and then climbed into her rig. The ATVs powered up and left the Night Miner camp. They watched the vehicles drive out of sight, Cameron making no effort to hide his tears of grief.

Finally, Donnie came over and patted him on the shoulder. "Come on, brother, let me buy you a drink." He led Cameron towards the bunkhouse. One by one, the rest of the Night-Miners followed.

**

They skipped that night's dig, only going back out the following night. It was a quiet dig, pickaxes in frozen earth and occasional grunts of effort the only sounds besides the grinder's rumbling whine. When their four-barrel-per-person quota was filled, it was already after dawn. Jon realized how little energy everyone had after losing Sati to the Insurgency. After quota, nobody felt like more than a couple of shots of grain fuel, nobody in the mood to party. In short order they were back to Toppledawn, riding at a more sedate pace.

At the clubhouse, Jon and Donnie fixed themselves a couple of tall drinks after stowing the earth reserves, Cameron holed up in his garage. "We're running low on spare barrels," Donnie mentioned, "Though I imagine with one less digger that won't take long to work out since we're down four barrels a night."

"That's what happens when you go from six diggers to five," Jon said, "But we were just five before Simon joined up, so it'll be fine."

“I’m wondering if we shouldn’t recruit someone else into the gang. We have Sati’s tools, the barrels...”

Jon made a dismissive noise, “Do you really think anyone wants to start working with someone new, so soon after Sati left? We haven’t even had a good Prospect since Simon.”

“We’ve always been a small gang. Too small.”

“You remember what happened to the Horde when they tried to expand?”

Donnie sneered, “The Horde were trying to move into territory and operations run by the Vultures and Raiders. We got nobody else mining dirt in Toppledown but us.”

“Nobody else on *this* end of Toppledown is mining dirt,” Jon said, “Go to the other side of town, where the Rockbreakers and the Hammerheads work the dirt...tell me how *they’d* feel if our output doubled over a few weeks. There’s supposed to be peace and cooperation between the Gangs, but that goodwill only goes so far. If it really bothers you, I’ll ask at the next Moot about recruiting.”

Donnie grunted, a dissatisfied sound, but he didn’t offer any other objection. The discussion was closed before their next sips of grain fuel.

FIRST STRIKE

Warmer, rainier weather moved in, softening the ground and hurting their quotas – wet earth yielded a lot less dirt than dry. Even frozen earth returned more. Simon was enjoying the sudden ease he had while having at a night's digging. There was a smell in the air: a dank, musty scent that was somehow also cool and fresh. He'd tried – clumsily at first – flirting with Penny and was astonished that she'd flirt back. He didn't know what she thought of him and wasn't brave enough to ask, but as spring took the world back from winter's cruel grasp, Simon felt a strange sense of hope about his chances with her, and of the future in general.

He spent half a night's work, that particular night, daydreaming about him and Penny. It wasn't until Donnie walked up to him and hollered his name in Simon's face that he even realized the dinner bell had been rung...several minutes before.

"Simon!" Donnie said with an unbreakable grin, "You still with us, Junior? Comin' to eat?"

Simon blushed as he turned around to where everyone was eating, watching him.

"I...uhh...sorry...got caught up in what I was doing?"

Donnie chuckled, throwing an arm around Simon a little too hard, leading him to lunch, “Doing, or thinking buddy-boy?” he asked a little too loudly, “Looked like you were in your own little world!”

“Whatever gets you through the dig, right?” Simon stammered, nervously.

“Damn right!” Penny agreed, loudly, “Especially when it’s Charlie’s turn to pick the music!”

Simon grinned a little too appreciatively for a little too long at her, while Charlie went on an expletive-filled diatribe about why early 1990s Grunge was the best music era in history.

“Oh my fucking God, Charlie Lighting!” Donnie yelled after taking a long swig of grain alcohol, “Go tell it to someone who was *alive* back then!”

Just as everyone started laughing and the attention deflected away from Simon, the first explosion lit up the night.

**

There were three blasts in rapid succession, each close to the previous, all coming from the southern end of Toppledown. Before the second one hit, everyone was in

their ATVs, revving up. Before the third one hit, the Night-Miners and a half-dozen other gangs were riding desperately for the site of the explosions. They all knew where they had come from, the only place they *could* have come from: the training grounds.

Almost everyone got there at the same time. They knew it was to the south of the settlement; no one knew its *exact* location, either – until now. Three thick, burning columns of smoke rose like dark beacons into the clear, moonlit night. People were running down into the valley below the ridge. Part of the ridgeline had collapsed upon itself and was smoldering. Two more formerly naturally-sheltered areas were red and yellow craters. There were only a few bodies to be found...none of them whole.

Cameron was screaming for Sati, running through the attack site; other people were, similarly screaming for the names of their lovers, friends, children, parents...anyone who'd been recruited to the mission.

Almost without thought Jon and Donnie broke off as impromptu rescue began. More vehicles were coming from Toppleddown; help was on its way, but too late for almost everyone. Jon, Donnie, and the rest of the Toppleddown gang leaders were clustering, desperate to find out what had happened and how.

Jon was one of five gang leaders to cluster and start sharing information about what they'd seen and where

they'd been, when Franklyn took off running into the worst of it, screaming Katherine's name in a way so similar to how Cameron had run into the bedlam screaming for Sati that Jon and Donnie shared a prolonged look of utter surprise. When Warren and then Matt took off, Jon and Donnie realized that they'd found Katherine and that she was alive.

Katherine Anton was soon dragged to their de facto headquarters on-site. She was bleeding from wounds to her legs, abdomen, and face, her clothes tattered and charred, her skin dark from a filthy mix of blood, dirt, and the scourge of flame.

"Everything just exploded," she rasped, as a doctor was sent for. "Everyone was asleep...I went off to use the latrine...everything exploded...the Custodians must have known somehow...one minute everybody was sleeping and then boom! Oh my God if I hadn't woke up to take a piss..."

She was in an obvious state of shock, but Franklyn, like Katherine, was a veteran of the military and knew how to get the soldier in her to respond to the very necessary questions that he asked, over and over, to make sure of the consistency of the debriefing. The doctor arrived and treated Katherine's relatively minor injuries and was off to search the ruins for any other survivors before Katherine was finished describing what happened.

The attack had been typically sudden, brutal, and thorough. They'd been doing nothing out of the ordinary: exercising outside, training and drilling in the tunnels of the old mine beneath. Katherine hadn't even shown the recruits how to use handguns yet, and only half of them had finished qualifying to carry knives; there had been nothing to give away what they were doing to the Custodians.

"But somehow, they knew," Franklyn said, "So what does that tell us?"

"They're monitoring all the settlements outside the Megalopolic Centers," Donnie said.

"Right," Franklyn said. "What else?"

"They have a way of seeing through several hundred feet of rock," Gina Arturo of the Vultures said. "They either have a satellite or some kinda probe that comes in that we can't see."

"If that's the case, we could be all about to get killed, right now," Warren said. They were all silent a long moment, waiting for invisible death to rain down on them. When it didn't, they continued.

"They struck the Insurgent camp, not the gangs or the rest of Toppledawn," Katherine said, absently running a hand through her scorched curls and feeling more steady now that her injuries were tended and the doctor's

homemade pain drugs had kicked in, “They *knew* what was going on, and where. They were highly selective in their targeting. That in and of itself sends a message, don’t you think? It’s not like the Gangs don’t regularly train their members on how to survive getting into a fight.”

“Christ, they *knew* it was an Insurgent’s camp,” Franklyn said.

“We gotta send a message to the Megalopolic Center,” Jon said. “We gotta get as much information from them about this as we can...find out if they might know how to work around it.”

“Work *around* it?” Franklyn asked, incredulous, “What in the fuck do you mean by that, Velasquez?”

Jon shrugged. “What? We’re just going to give up on the Mission?”

**

A Moot was held the next day, and all the gang leaders were there. The fires were still burning, but rescue crews had already filled them in on the status of the camp. Katherine's face – and probably the rest of her body – was a palette of purple and red bruises and contusions, cuts and scratches from the night before. Everyone wore grim expressions. Joining Jon, Franklyn, Katherine, Matt, and Warren were the other gang leaders: Asif Muhammadin

from the Hammerheads, Gina Arturo of the Vultures, and Lamar Curnow from the Wolves.

"We sent birds at first light," Franklyn said. "Waiting on a reply. But, here's what we *do* know: they hit the camp with three strikes: one for the barracks, one for the supply cache, and one that took out their main training facility. The barracks and the training facility were underground, in the old mines. The cache was under a canopy of trees and partially sheltered beneath a rock outcropping. Other than Katherine, only Lloyd Quinn of the Wolves survived – and only because he was out on a hunt."

"We don't have *any* other information?" Warren asked, plaintively.

"Nothing. Goddamn microsats could be around us now, waiting to nuke us."

"We'd be dead already if they were," Jon said. "They took out the camp—not the town, not the Gang bunkers, not the Gang leaders. They were sending a message."

"Really?" Franklyn barked angrily at the younger gang leader, "And what exactly would that message be, son?"

Jon suddenly felt the weight of his words. Franklyn had been increasingly irritated by the junior Gang leader's assertive pronouncements. But, he found his voice despite the fear. "They coulda wiped us out at any time," he

stammered. "The Gangs, the city...they must know that everyone knows about the operation; that means they have ears on Toppledawn."

"Or ears *in* Toppledawn," Warren growled.

"Why the hell would they need *spies*, Delgado?" Lamar Curnow said. "They have those goddamn microsats all over the sky."

"And they must be listening to everything we say," Jon said.

"And how the fuck do we counter that?" Warren Delgado yelled.

Jon took a scrap of paper out of his pocket, along with a pencil. With the roof overhead, he was fairly confident even the Custodians wouldn't be able to read what he wrote. He wrote quickly.

"I don't know what to do," he said, passing the paper to Franklyn.

"Well, then there's not a goddamn thing we can do," Franklyn said, passing it to Warren. Everyone else fell into silence as they each, in turn, read the sheet of paper. On it, Jon had written a short paragraph:

They got super high tech, so we got to be super low tech: Only bullshit regular talk at moots nothing about the Insurgency. While someone else is talking, the person who's REALLY talking writes it down, and we pass the note. Outside meetings, coded messages written in graffiti or hidden at dead drops. They think they're superior in every way. Let's use that against them.

Franklyn looked at him, approvingly and nodded. "We'll all grab a drink to drown our sorrows, soon."

"Drown my sorrows? Fuck that, Franklyn!" Katherine said. "They just wasted six men and women that I was training!" She winked and gave a quick nod.

"There's nothing we can do about that now," Franklyn said, angrily. "Let's get back to helping Toppledawn."

"God dammit, Franklyn."

"You know I'm right."

She cocked her head towards Jon. "Yeah, but that don't mean that I have to like it."

GRIEF AND RESOLVE

That evening, the Night-Miners mourned. They gathered in the bunker and played old music on the stereo and drank the good grain-fuel: the stuff supplied by the Firedogs; they'd sent a ten-gallon jug of their finest to each of the gangs, because tonight everyone was grieving; As Katherine had survived the Blackfist hadn't lost anyone; nor had the Wolves, because Lloyd had been out hunting when the strike hit. But Lloyd and Katherine had both lost people they'd been training with and living with for some time; people they'd sworn to fight and possibly – probably die beside. And so the Wolves and the Blackfist mourned for their friends' losses.

Cameron was on his second cup of grain-fuel when he broke open like a dam, a rush of hitched sobs and tears sluicing down his cheeks. "I loved her so much!" he sobbed, "I knew when the Mission started I'd never see her again...but I always held out hope that she'd at least be alive...she's dead...my Sati's dead!"

"C'mere, buddy," Donnie said, lifting Cameron from his seat and into a tight hug. Simon, Penny, Charlie Lightning, and Jon looked at each other awkwardly before Charlie took the initiative of refilling their cups.

“To Sati,” Charlie said, and the four of them toasted her memory while Donnie took Cameron outside for some air and to smoke a joint. Donnie had his own pot garden. As per Toppledawn Rules, the Night-Miners couldn’t sell drugs – except for the mushrooms Simon had already been selling as a side-line before joining the gang. But they could cultivate for personal consumption.

“Here, man,” he said to Cameron, after lighting up a particularly sweet-smelling joint. “This is Blueberry Kush; I got the last bag of this shit the day before the Custodians came down. I saved the seeds, planted ‘em when I first came to Toppledawn. Best shit you could smoke, right now, medicinally speaking.”

Cameron took a few hauls from the joint before coughing harshly and passing it back to Donnie.

“Holy shit, Donnie,” he rasped, then, thinking of Sati again, repeated, “Holy shit, Donnie...”

“I know, Brother,” Donnie said, putting his arm around him, “I was at New Haven. Every single one of my friends were vaporized. Later that day I found out my mom and dad had been there, too...not even in the riot, itself, just the general crowd...the Custodians killed them, too.”

Cameron stared at Donnie, anguished, “How did you stand it? How did you survive?”

Donnie shook his head. “I didn’t man...I didn’t have anybody left, and aliens were coming down from the sky. I got my ass the fuck outta there and just started running. I went crazy, for a while, out there alone...And when they started emptying the cities and then levelling them? I completely freaked. Until Jon found me, I had nobody. I had nothing, and I was completely fucked in the head. Still am, I suppose.” He handed the joint back to Cameron. “This helps. Sometimes.” Cameron took back the joint and pulled hard, coughing tokes from it.

“It’ll get easier, Brother,” Donnie said. “It never stops hurting, but it gets easier. You’re not alone: you got us; you got the Night-Miners. We’re here for you, man.”

**

It was a few days before word came Jon’s way. One morning Jon spotted a particular white rock among a pile of stones along his drive back from the dig; its placement in that particular pile on that day of the week directed him to the message’s location. The compound was also his home, so after his regular morning shower and change of clothes, instead of hitting the sack for a couple of hours, Jon changed and went out on his dirt bike into the Jagged Desert.

Cameron had developed the cipher they were using based on a book of Hindu poetry that Sati had had with her since before the Custodians came. Her death had

galvanized him. His hatred for the Custodians was complete and unwavering. The cipher was complex, and after getting the scrap with the encoded message it took Jon a good fifteen minutes to decode. He'd never been much for writing or puzzles. It was from the Raiders – the pigeons had come back with new information. The Gang leaders were to meet that night. Jon's particular orders were to update them on bomb triggers and to select another recruit: the mission was going ahead.

Cam was still at camp so he quickly touched base with his friend, and a quick casual verbal back and forth hid the written updates on the devices. Then Jon went 'round to Donnie and told him to take charge of the night's work. He told Donnie to adjust quotas accordingly and make sure everyone had an extra break. He wasn't up for the dig that night; wanted to go drinking, instead.

Donnie nodded, understanding. "Do what you gotta do, brother. It's been rough on all of us."

**

They had chosen a watering hole in Toppledown, itself. Traditionally such places were neutral territory, and sometimes moots were held there. This place in particular, boasting a clapboard sign hand-painted with the words "Annie's" over its front entrance, offered both food and drink: home-brewed beers and grain fuels from the various brewers and fuel-makers, along with a menu of various

types of cooked rabbit, gopher, squirrel, crow, gull and pigeon, along with fried tubers.

The gang leaders sat around a large table in the back, a stack of batter-fried squirrel in the middle of the table along with tall pitchers of beer and bottles of various “quality drinking” grain-fuels. They talked shit, drank to their lost friends and discussed ongoing issues within Toppledown: spring flooding, maintaining clean water, minor grievances between gangs. Everything spoken was just what would be spoken of during a regular moot.

What went unsaid, scrawled quickly on cheap slates with some local-made chalk, was the real thrust of the meeting:

Franklyn: Pigeons came back with message from city: “Operation still on. Advise if still able & willing to participate. Timetable remains same. Intel suggests Toppledown now under heightened surveillance. Advise caution. Need ETAs on devices, recruits.”

Katherine: We were training a half-klick underground! How much more cautious can we get?

Franklyn: I don’t see how we can be any more careful. Where do we stand on recruits?

Lamar: Lloyd still wants in.

Jon: I haven't had time to ask my people, but I'll volunteer if nobody else does. The thing is, the Night-Miners are going to need some new blood, too.

Katherine: I'm still on board.

Matt: I already have a volunteer who wants payback for what happened to our Todd.

Warren: Rockbreaker Camp wants revenge.

Asif: We're still in.

Gina: Count my people in.

Franklyn: Mine, too. Jon: You'll be cleared by this Council to recruit new blood once this is all settled. Night-Miners are owed at least that. Where are we on those timers?

Jon: Cam's testing a couple of designs. Should have something working very soon.

Franklyn: Gina? You find what we need?

Gina: Finding PVC, copper or steel pipes intact is hard enough. Finding requisition spec? Damn near impossible

Franklyn: Get it done.

Matt: Why is the Insurgency putting everything on Toppledown's shoulders? Aren't there other settlements outside Namcne?

Franklyn: All local settlements are sending Insurgents, and building their own IEDs.

Matt: The other settlements aren't as close to the Orange Walls as us. Toppledown is going to face all the fucking reprisals! Or hadn't you thought of that?

Franklyn: Warren has been prepping the old mines to be used as shelters; an hour before the attack we evacuate Toppledown's people into those mines.

Matt: Great! That way the Custodians only have to blow up one PART of Toppledown to wipe everyone out.

Franklyn: Do you support this operation, or not? We can do it without you if you're afraid.

Matt: Whether you do it with or without my help, if the Custodians decide to fry Toppledawn they won't start by asking who was in on it and who wasn't.

Franklyn: Then all we can do is what we're already doing, getting as ready as possible for what happens next.

The meeting wasn't much longer before it broke up. Each of the gang leaders left, their expressions and moods sullen, grim. But they were facing an unpleasant reality. There was next to no way to guarantee the safety of Toppledawn from Custodian reprisal. Matt Drakkas was right. The Custodians were well aware of what was going on in Toppledawn. If there was an attack in the Megalopolic Center that could be traced back to Toppledawn, every citizen was at risk.

THE AFTER-MEETING

Katherine, Franklyn and Jon took over a smaller table after the moot broke up. Jon's boldness and initiative had put him in the inner circle of senior command.

Franklyn: So, how do we run a silent training camp?

Katherine: How do we run an INVISIBLE one?

Jon wrote quickly, furiously across his slate.

Jon: No matter how we do it, they'll be able to see us. So, how do we make a training camp that doesn't look like a training camp? How do we get people there without making it obvious that's what's going on?

They hadn't counted on the Custodians being able to see that far underground. They'd also followed Toppledown traditions and made the pickup of the recruits into something akin to an inter-gang patch-over ceremony.

Franklyn: We have to do something about those goddamn eyes in the sky.

Matt: Like what? We can't blank out an entire section of the sky, they'd just fill it back up again.

Katherine: What if it wasn't a training camp? What if a group of people splintered off from Toppledawn?

Franklyn: How would we make that convincing?

Katherine paused, thinking about the issue. After a long moment, she scrawled the answer on her slate:

Katherine: We use our own people to supply the story: start infighting against the person recruited. A few weeks later we break from Toppledawn.

Jon: That's going to be hard to pull off.

Franklyn: One thing I've found about life in groups is there's always infighting, and sometimes it gets that ugly. There's also a lot of people with a lot of history in Toppledawn. We'll find no shortage of others who want to leave for a new start. Where would you relocate?

Katherine dove at the slate, a plan clearly coming together in her head

Katherine: I'll scout a good location. I can talk it off as "going out for a ride by myself"; that should sell to the cheap seats.

Franklyn: Next meeting, we let the other Gangs in. I think we should start this in our Gangs ASAP.

Over the next couple of weeks they put Katherine's plan into action. As much as Cameron wanted to replace Sati on the incursion team, he was needed on the bomb project; Simon's name was drawn from the lot, which now included Charlie Lightning and Jon. Simon soon began finding himself in frequent conflict with Donnie; out in the field, back in camp, and pretty much whenever they crossed paths in town. Katherine's leadership was being challenged by her third-in-command and the faction she led. Across Toppledown the Gangs were all having trouble with their people because of low morale after the Custodian attacks. Simon didn't find the false isolation particularly hard, though it was hurtful when Penny, by necessity, aligned herself against him in his "argument" with Donnie.

The hard part was keeping everything from his baby brother. Greg would want to come with him when he left Toppledown and Simon knew he couldn't let him. And he'd always wanted to keep Greg out of the Gang life and find something more stable, more lucrative. Something that could take him from Toppledown and...to where?

Another entrenched settlement? What kind of life could anyone hope to have in these miserable outposts, with the Custodians ruling over all in the Megalopolic Centers? One morning, before heading home, Simon flagged Jon that he was following him back to the Bunker.

“You gonna bitch to me about Donnie some more, Petrovich?” Jon snarled while scrawling a quick *what is it?* on his slate.

“I’m sick of his shit following me around town and to my own damn front door!” Simon barked angrily. *Worried about Greg.*

“Toughen the fuck up and start making your goddamn quotas!” *What’s on your mind?*

“I could make my quotas if my barrels didn’t keep getting knocked over before the lids are hammered on! Or if Donnie would keep ordering me to stop and go do some stupid shit during a dig! God dammit, Jon, you KNOW this!” *He’s going to want to come. Can’t let him, can’t tell him anything. I need him to be OK.*

“At some point you and Donnie are gonna have to work this shit out, once and for all. I have half the gang complaining to me about this shit!” *We’ll let him know what we can when you leave. We’ll also make sure he’s taken care of, and kept out of trouble.*

“So that’s...what? *Three* people? You keep saying that we have shit to work out, but Donnie never does shit but make my life hell, and fucking Penny and Charlie are being just as bad!” *I don’t want him signing onto the gang. I want him learning a Trade. Promise me.*

“Maybe you should just toughen up and start pulling your share of the fucking weight. Everybody seems to have been able to pick up the fucking slack but you, *junior*, and I’m getting fucking fed up of all the shit.” *I’ll make sure he gets the education he needs, and I promise I won’t let him recruit into the gangs.*

“Maybe you should go fuck yourself.” Simon spat, *Thanks, brother.* He stormed back to his ATV and then peeled from the camp, leaving a cloud of dirt and dust and deep gouges from his spinning wheels in the earth behind him.

**

As preparations for the new Insurgency camp continued into spring, the Games were announced for early September. That gave them only a few months to get ready. Soon enough, Simon was meeting Katherine for midday drives through the Jagged Desert, and not long after they were joined by Lloyd from the Wolves.

“What are you doing out this way?” Katherine asked suspiciously, the use of code-phrases reflexively easy.

“Just needed to fuck off outta town for a while,” Simon growled back.

“Same here. Only, I came out here to be alone, so maybe you should fuck off somewhere else.”

Meanwhile, chalkboards explained the day’s scouting mission, and relayed back any questions. Neither of them took the same route, and they would never take routes similar to ones they’d taken the day before.

When Lloyd joined Katherine and Simon at their “crossroads meetings,” it was because Franklyn had finally gotten the requested intel back from people studying the downed microsat from Brazil. The microsats could see clearly to a depth of five kilometers beneath solid stone, but had particular trouble making out anything besides heat and motion at that depth. If there was a large amount of metal between the ground and the hollows, the interference threw off the signal to the point that the microsats would just get returns that looked like anomalous geomagnetic deposits. Given the amount of destruction wreaked against the cities of Old Human Civilization, such anomalous deposits were everywhere. They could detect sound and aural patterns through microtremors in the ground above to a depth of two kilometers, unless there was water or other fluids between the intervening layers, in which case they could penetrate two kilometers meters *plus* the depth of the liquid. The message, relayed by Lloyd with **BURN AFTER**

READING! written across it in Franklyn's crude, blocky scrawl, ended on an ominous note: *that is, assuming, the Custodians haven't upgraded their microsats in the meantime.*

They were looking for an underground area big enough, stable enough, and shielded enough to move into. The Vultures knew of a few nearly-intact libraries. Among the books they'd scavenged were texts on radio networks and radio interference. There was only one electromagnetic spectrum, and as sophisticated and sensitive as the Custodian's microsats were, they used the same spectrum as Humans' radio, satellite, scanning, electrical and electronic equipment; as such, the Custodians' microsats were subject to the same vulnerabilities.

The Rockbreakers, who traded almost exclusively in explosives and mined ores, had by necessity acquired a good understanding of the sciences of chemistry and mineralogy. Karl Werner was not affiliated with the Gang, but he had taught them much of what they knew. And he was more than familiar with electromagnetism, so he was soon working with the Vultures as well, to help engineer a means of blocking the microsats. The people of Toppledown had all been hit during the Custodian attack – they had all been hurt. They were all undaunted, and they would all be avenged.

LOST CITY

It was Simon who eventually found what they were looking for.

By then a few people were leaving Toppledawn during the late morning and early afternoon to go out riding through the Jagged Desert. Not all of them were from the Gangs. It was late spring, the weather turning from warm to hot, an edge of humidity to the air. Simon and Donnie had had an improvised screaming match the night before that, for all its theatrics left him feeling particularly drained. It had ended in a quickly-broken up (and preplanned) fistfight that saw Donnie sucker-punch Simon to the eye, and Simon smash Donnie's nose before Jon and Charlie Lightning broke it up.

I'm already ugly as shit, Donnie had written, But you're too pretty. You won't get laid if I fuck up your face. The shiner I'll give you will look badass. What Donnie had neglected to mention was how hard he was going to hit Simon.

He knew he was leaving the gang behind for good, and that it would be soon...and that meant he was leaving behind people who'd been part of his life for years. People he cared about. Though he'd crossed paths with Katherine and Lloyd and a few others from this next group of

Insurgents, he didn't really know any of them very well. Simon felt alone, and as much as he wanted to strike at the Custodians, as much as he'd hated what had happened to the World when he was a child – losing his mother, struggling for years in the wilderness before his father died, coming to Toppledawn and joining the Night-Miners. Simon was saying goodbye to his entire way of life, and he knew it. He knew his chances of surviving long in the Insurgency were slim, but death troubled him less than losing *this* life – living in the Wildlands, the Night-Miners...

He knew nothing would ever happen between him and Penny now. As she'd had to play the role of being on Donnie's side of the fight, it meant they couldn't even get together *once* before he left. And since drawing the white stone, Simon wasn't even seeing anyone from Toppledawn – not that he didn't want to. But he didn't want to put anyone he cared about even remotely into any kind of danger with the Custodians. His relationship with Greg had become awkward, because his kid brother was smart enough to know that Simon was keeping something from him. This alienation hurt more than all the others. He'd always loved him, but Simon had always just thought of him as *being there*. Very soon, *nobody* he knew or loved or cared about would *be there*, ever again.

**

Simon crested a ridge and halted, cutting the ATV's motor. Below was an area he'd never scouted before: a canyon of ruined buildings, countless mounds of rubble taller than any in Toppledown, hemmed in from one another by a grid of what had once been roads. Now, patchy weeds and scraggly shrubs ringed the piles of broken mortar that had once been a city, as viny shoots crawled gradually across the ruined mounds. Simon checked the rifle on his back, making sure he could draw it quickly. He also unstrapped the grip of his knife from its sheath on his lower leg. The ruins of this city might be inhabited. The locals, if any, might not be friendly. He revved his ATV back to life and rolled down the ridge, towards the looming ruins.

In life, the city had been nestled between two mountains – one near and the other distant – far beyond the borders of whatever place this had been. The city occupied a valley that was now given over to wild grasses and a young forest of tall, thin trees. A river once flowed through part of the city. The tumbled buildings and broken bridges that marked Human incursion and occupation of the territory had diverted its flow, creating a natural lake out of what had previously been the lower part of the city.

Simon had to stop on the far side of the diverted river from the city to refuel. He unpacked the jerry-can of grain fuel from the side of the ATV and, after taking a large swallow, affixed the brass nozzle that Cameron had devised years ago for fast refueling. He popped open the ATV's gas

tank and then upended the boxy jerry-can down the intake. While the grain fuel gurgled into the ATV's belly, Simon studied the terrain between him and the destroyed city. He'd have to skirt about halfway around the hilly, uneven lands – so similar to the Jagged Desert outside Toppledown – on the left to avoid the river, unless he could find a crossing. A crossing, depending on its condition, could increase the likelihood of inhabitants in the ruins. He didn't like it, but Simon didn't see many other options. He *had* to check this place out; they needed a training camp, and the ideal location might be there.

After the jerry-can drained out, Simon strapped it back down on the side of his ATV and settled on his route to the ruins. It was almost midday. Going now would mean not returning home until after nightfall, or possibly spending the night in the ruins. But he didn't see any other choice, because of how long it had taken him to get this far. Before climbing in and starting up his ATV, Simon stole a nervous glance at the clear, blue sky. How many brick-sized alien eyes were up there, looking down on him, right now? How many of them were actively watching him? Were the Custodians watching the satellite feed live? Or did they have computers that could do that? Was their surveillance that complete? Could they deduce what he was doing? There were more questions than he could fathom, all of them swarming around his mind like angry hornets. He got in and started up – most of the early afternoon would be taken up by his drive skirting the river.

**

The shadows were long across the broken mounds that made up the city, by the time Simon rolled past its perimeter. It was eerily quiet, except for the sound of his engine echoing through the canyons formed by the rubble. In many ways it reminded him of Toppledawn, except in scale. This place was much, much larger. Because the city's streets had been more or less laid out in a grid, Simon decided to follow the ruined roadway he was on from one end to another, take a side street over to the next road, then follow it down to the opposite end. It would take days to fully explore the city. Simon decided he'd get as much done today as he could, camp somewhere overnight, then go back to Toppledawn tomorrow for supplies and return early the day after.

Nature was reclaiming the city with a vengeance: scrawny, scraggly trees reached twice Simon's height into the sky, patches of wispy grass grew in corners and clutches, and the vines he'd seen from the ridge were more widespread than he'd thought. The long years of hunting his father had taught him even let him spot scat and tracks in the dirt from small game – rabbits, rats, muskrat. If he didn't want to leave when his supplies ran out, as long as he could find drinking water, Simon could hold out in this dead city alone for some time. He also kept his eyes out for signs of Human habitation...and ambush. As he rode, looking for evidence of a surviving underground structure or some heavy building that could suit the Insurgents'

needs, he also kept his eyes open for bottlenecks, dead-ends and any other signs of potential traps.

More than once, Simon stopped his ATV and, carrying his rifle one-handed, cautiously went to explore promising ruins. One was the underground parking structure of a tower that had toppled instead of imploding. The flashlight on his rifle barrel shone the way as Simon climbed down the crumbling ramp and deeper into the garage. There were animal smells down here among the ruins of long-abandoned vehicles scattered through the levels – various fragrances of piss, from cat to raccoon – territorial markings. He could hear scurrying as well. The deeper that he went into the parking structure, the less inviting it became: Part of one roof had caved in, causing the subsequent level to cave in as well. The pit went down several levels. Twisted rebar, asphalt and concrete lining it with deadly intent.

A more pungent smell greeted him as he continued his way downward, at one point having to climb along a ledge that ran dangerously close to the caved-in pit. The fourth level down had long-ago flooded, and the brackish, foul water within was the source of the odor. Simon turned and left as carefully as he'd come. He slowed as he neared the structure's exit, raising his rifle to a ready position, covering himself against one wall and sweeping the open area ahead for signs of movement.

Once, hunting with his father, they'd been attacked by a wildcat. The large, muscular beast seemed to spring out of nowhere, but that was why Charles Petrovich taught Simon to always carry his gun ready if he was exposed and open to potential attack. Simon had barely had time to register the wildcat's attacking leap when his father's rifle fired, the report as sudden as the cat's appearance. The wildcat fell, dead. His father started shaking and swearing – he'd been caught unawares as well, but had gotten off his shot. The combination of the deadly animal, his father's practical example of why to carry at the ready, the quick, reflexive manner in which his father had dispatched the wildcat with a single shot, and the utter terror he'd seen in his father's eyes after had stayed with him indelibly.

But when Simon emerged from the ruined parking garage, there was no ambush, Human or animal; just his ATV, exactly where he'd left it. Simon shouldered his gun – the same one his father had killed the wildcat with – and started up his vehicle. There was still a lot of daylight and ground to cover and no one else to cover it.

Simon drove farther on, looking over everything as he went. Another candidate revealed itself as he started the return trip up his fourth street. A subway station had once stood in this place, and while the structure that led down into its depths had not survived, part of a stairway down had. He smelled the same animal scents as he went, heard the same rustling, scurrying noises. But this time as Simon made his way down, it wasn't a stagnant lake of filthy

water that turned him up, but the collapsed *everything* that formed a wall completely sealing off the rest of the subway station and its tunnels from where he was. The only things that lived beyond were whatever animals now inhabiting the mass of warrens that had been made in the ruins.

**

It was close to sunset when he found what he'd been looking for.

Simon almost drove right into it: a portion of the roadway several blocks from where he'd began his search had collapsed, creating a natural ramp down to the infrastructure tunnels beneath it. In the gloom, with only his headlights to see by, Simon saw vines keeping hold to the craggy walls of the pit made by the sinkhole. Deeper in, he saw that besides what had been destroyed by the roadway's collapse, most of the underlying structure was intact.

He found accesses that led to lower levels. Beneath the roadway had been water lines, sewer lines, gas, electric, data lines...each of them leading down their own narrow tunnels. Beneath these were other tunnels; older, disused, or passageways that had been used to carry heavier sewage or water traffic. There was the subway tunnel, a satisfying discovery Simon had been hoping for since finding the destroyed station.

After making a rough map on a sketch-pad of paper with a battered but almost completely unused World Before graphite pencil, Simon chose to make his first exploration down the nearest of three electrical tunnels. Before he was even a few meters in, and even though he had never been a scavenger, Simon staggered to a halt as he realized what he was looking at and marveled at the *intact and untouched*, massive bundles and lengths of wire and cable of all sizes and thicknesses, stretching far beyond the range of his light. It was unplundered treasure, and that was just down one tunnel.

He found himself backtracking to make his way down another of the many side-tunnels and hatches. His heart pounded and he felt as though he'd discovered a long-abandoned treasury.

By the time he'd completed his trek down a fifth tunnel, Simon finally noticed that it was night. The sky above him was full of stars. The last decade had seen the atmosphere cleansed, both naturally and by the Custodians. With far fewer pollutants and almost no ambient light outside of the communities, the band of the Milky Way and a billion points of light were visible – constellations beyond constellations as no one had looked upon for centuries, millennia. Simon looked up, appreciating the view. He'd not seen its like since moving to Toppleddown. He climbed back up the ramp and watched a startled deer bolt away from the ATV, drawn by curiosity to the alien craft in its midst. Simon held his fire because for now there was no

need to kill – he had enough food and water to last overnight. He was also wary of the noise the report of a rifle would make in this wilderness. If there *was* anyone out there, looking or listening, it would alert them to his presence as surely as his ATV's motor would have during the day. That was another problem he had to contend with: sometimes, the tribes that formed in the wilderness were nocturnal. If anyone was searching for him, the surest way to give away his location was with a gunshot.

He drank some water and ate some of the jerky and honey-cakes. He didn't drink any more alcohol; his first night in a strange place, alone, he couldn't afford to impair himself at all. Human or animal, any predators out there would have him at an immediate disadvantage. He checked his father's watch: it was a quarter to one, according to its old, still graceful hands. The time didn't mean anything to him in terms of lateness. From the look of the sky, he knew that if it were a dig, they would all be thinking about the coming lunch break at this point. Simon decided to keep going. He didn't even bother checking the watch, hours later, when he decided that it was time to call the day done.

Simon strapped his knife to his right arm in a special sheath, the handle resting against his wrist. Left-handed, he'd be able to draw it from under his sleeve at a moment's notice. Satisfied, Simon climbed into and zipped up his bedroll to just above his waist. He dropped a folded blanket over his arms and laid back, suddenly feeling the exertion of the day. He stared up at the sky and thought

about all the old stories and shows about space he could remember from childhood. He thought about the Custodians, the microsats and the ship in orbit like a spike pointing down, ready to cleave the Earth. He thought of his Brother, of Penny...of everyone he knew and cared about. Drifting off to sleep with his ears alert for the slightest noise, Simon hoped that he could somehow make a difference, make this world a better place, a place free of the Custodians, for all of them.

SUDDEN DEATH

He was running.

Behind him in the silent night a dozen more running feet paced, chasing, catching up to him. Simon didn't dare look back as he raced across the unfamiliar terrain. One false step and he'd fall. If he fell, Simon knew, he was *dead*. Then as if just for thinking it his foot snagged something and he staggered, spraining his ankle and stumbling. Simon's pursuers drew closer and he ran again, not limping because he was too afraid to feel the pain of whatever he'd done to his leg. But they were closer now. They were going to get him unless he could run faster, or find somewhere to hide. Then he fell. Somehow he'd run in a full circle and was at the far end of the crashed roadway, and was going over the side. He had enough time to think that he hadn't realized how deep a hole the sinkhole had made when he hit—

—with a start he woke up, sitting up in his sleeping bag and drawing his knife. He froze, stunned by what he was seeing. It was dawn. A herd of deer wandered around him, cropping the viny plants growing from the ruins or the grasses that grew at their bases. One of them trotted away from his sudden rise. They were utterly unafraid of him. These deer had never seen a human being and had no fear of them. That answered the one concern Simon had: there

was no one, or nearly no one, anywhere near this place. The herd was already moving on, and he knew from their number that they must have a sizeable range, proving this place even *more* remote than he'd expected. As he ate a breakfast of hot tea and toasted honeycakes, Simon decided to map out as many tunnels as he could today and tonight, mark the locations of the rest and then return to Toppledown in the morning.

Among the many important skills his father had taught him as a hunter was how to use a compass and map. Simon had naturally been able to translate that and his drawing skills into being able to *make* maps, and he'd often scouted terrain for the Night-Miners' future operations during his career with the gang just because of those skills. Simon finished breakfast, broke camp, and took the extra batteries (Specially-made in Toppledown by Karl Werner) for his flashlight and headed back down to explore.

He was traveling a channel he'd found behind a collapsed wall of what had once been a subway tunnel, exposing an older, abandoned section of subway line. As he followed it deeper into the earth, he realized just how long it had been since this place had been used. After several minutes he came to an abandoned station, lost and forgotten for who knew how long. The rail line to the station branched off from the tunnel and was walled off. The style of the station's architecture was beyond him; it was of a glossy yellow brick and mortar, with stylized arches and decorative moldings and fixtures.

Everything was covered by a thick, oily layer of dust. How long had this place been disused? A hundred years? Longer? Simon couldn't tell, but it felt very old, to him. Embossed metal signs declared this to be **Copper St. Station**. He explored the station building and found it had been sealed up and buried under the foundation of whatever building had once stood above. That building was a ruin now, and Copper St. Station was a buried vault. Simon marked the location carefully on his map. As much as he wanted to leave right away, as ideal as he knew this place was, he had to map out as much of the surrounding territory as he could.

**

The following afternoon, dirty, tired, sore and excited, Simon rumbled his ATV back into sight of Toppledawn. He whooped as he reached the tributary roads that led to the town, and was suddenly aware that this was one of the last times he was going to ride back *into* Toppledawn. The thought sobered him, but he was still exuberant over his find and the maps he'd made. His return would be signal enough for Jon to come find him, and for word to get back to the other gang leaders of his find, so Simon made for home; this was one of the last times he'd have the luxury of sleeping in his own bed, and he would not deny himself the chance. He was just in sight of the turn-off that led to his street when he saw the explosion; it could only have come from one place: the Night Miner's Bunker.

**

The engine of Simon's ATV made a high, keening sound as he pushed the accelerator to the floor, bounding recklessly through the hilly mounds of Toppledawn's avenues, heading on a direct course for the Night-Miners' bunker. He barely noticed the other ATVs streaming to the site of the blast, marked by a rising black pillar of smoke reaching thickly into the sky. Simon's only thought was that this was another attack; that the Custodians had discovered what the Night-Miners had been doing. He kept anticipating another blast, or a series of them as other installations and facilities throughout Toppledawn were targeted, but there were none; just one explosion from the Night-Miners' camp.

He reached the bunker and pulled up beside Jon and Donnie, as other Gang leaders came up. Jon and Donnie were holding onto each other, weeping openly.

"What happened? What the fuck happened?" Franklyn demanded, leaping out of his ATV ahead of Simon.

"Cameron," Jon sobbed, "He..." But he collapsed, falling into a sitting position on the hard-packed earth beneath him.

"Was it another attack?" Simon asked, desperately, "Did the Custodians—"

He was cut off by a violent slap to the back of his head from Franklyn. The leader of the Toppleddown Raiders gestured for him to be quiet with a finger and dangerously glaring eyes. Simon recognized the threat in the older man's face and closed his mouth. He turned back to Jon who was still weeping on the ground. Donnie was crouching beside him, writing angrily on the ever-present pad of paper and pencil he and every other member of the Insurgent conspiracy carried on them. Katherine was here now, and Gina Arturo soon arrived, smelling of one of the Vultures' dig sites. Lamar Kurnow and the other members of the Wolves seemed to appear from nowhere, dressed for work. Both Lamar and the Wolves' volunteer for the Insurgency, Lloyd Quinn, came to join the knot forming around Jon and Donnie. As the last of the gang leaders arrived, Donnie finished writing. He tore the pages he wrote out of his notebook and passed around.

Simon read the pages, not wanting to believe it, knowing it was true. Just before noon Cameron came by and locked himself in the equipment shed to work on the timer-detonators for the bombs. Donnie came by just after Cam, and went to wake Jon. They were in the bunker when Cam came and handed them a note that said the detonators were finished. He brought them one and showed them how to operate it, then left. Jon and Donnie were playing with the detonator when they heard the explosion. They ran outside to find that one of their fuel-stills had blown up. They rushed into Cam's workshop and found eleven more

detonators assembled and waiting on his workbench, with a one-line note:

I finished my job and now I'm going to be with Sati.

Cameron had gone out to the still and blown it, and himself, up

Simon stared, astonished by the still-flaming wreckage, pluming thick smoke into the sky. Cam always said there were a million ways a still could blow. He'd also often commented it would be a horrible way to go, but that it would be quick. Simon felt a shiver pass through him when he thought he'd just seen the outline of Cameron's charred skull through the fire. He looked away, turning and finding himself nearly face-to-face with Katherine.

"Haven't seen you on the trails," she said. "You head out early?" Katherine's closing question was a code; she was asking if he'd found anything.

It was an escape from the immediate horror that Simon eagerly reached for. "I had a breakdown the day before; had to shelter before I could fix it." The keyword *shelter* meant he'd found a candidate site. Preceding it by saying he'd had a breakdown meant it was more than four hours' driving from Toppledown. Blowing a tire would have meant it was more than ten.

Katherine nodded, “Best be more careful if you keep ranging so far from home,” she said. “Maybe next time you could use some company.” Meaning he would take her to the site as soon as possible.

Simon nodded, “Sounds good,” he said, “Meet you on the trail.”

Katherine looked back at the burning wreckage of the still-shed, her gaze bringing him back to the nightmare that had befallen his Gang, “Maybe you should take some time to be with your family, Si.”

Simon hesitated before turning his eyes back to the grisly scene at the far end of the compound. “Yeah,” Simon rasped, still unable to comprehend what had just happened, “I guess you’re right.”

**

That night, the surviving members of the Night-Miners gathered in the bunker to mourn another friend. Cameron had brewed more than a few “special batches,” and drinking what they now knew was a very rare vintage, the Night-Miners toasted Cameron and Sati, both. The mood was sullen. Two of their closest were dead, and the unspoken truth that Simon would be leaving soon only contributed further to the pall. They drank in silence. Charlie Lightning tried putting on some music, but the up-tempo tunes seemed the antithesis of what everyone was

feeling, so he soon turned the music back off. Donnie was drinking alone, looking out the clubhouse bunker's door, while Simon, Jon, and Penny just stared into their cups.

Penny started crying, and wrapped her arms around Jon in an unexpected move that caught him by surprise. Simon shared his wide-eyed surprise with Donnie and then turned away, his heart sinking as he realized there was no hope for him with Penny, before reminding himself that in a few days' time he'd be gone, too, and that would mean he'd never see Penny, or Jon, Donnie, or Charlie Lightning again. He drained his cup and got up from the battered table.

"I gotta get some air." He slurred. Standing up, Simon realized that he'd had more to drink than he thought. He felt like he'd just finished an after-work dirt-mining party. Dizzy and light-headed, he staggered for the door.

Outside, the air was cooler than it had been the last few nights. The sky was dark and starless and Simon could feel the faint spray of drizzling rain on his face. He inhaled deeply, wanting to clear his head of the booze and his mind of the image of Penny turning to Jon for comfort. He felt stupid for feeling jealous of Jon when he knew full well what the chances were of coming back from this mission...or for that matter the training ahead. If the Custodians found out they were going to set up another Insurgency camp...well, as Cameron had once said, it would be a horrible way to die, but it would be fast.

He barely heard the door to the bunker open and shut behind him. A familiar “Hey, Petrovich,” alerted Simon that it was Donnie, and he wondered if they were going to improvise a scene for the benefit of any ears that may be listening from above. Simon turned around. Donnie had taken out a joint that, in and of itself, would have cost about two pounds of dirt, or a half-pound of the mushrooms Simon gathered, to buy.

“From my private reserve,” Donnie said, deliberately rolling his eyes skyward. “Listen, Petrovich, I know we got bad blood between us; a whole side of beef. But tonight, fuck that. There’s only five of us, now. And I think we both just found out that someone we were crushing on’s fallen for someone else,” Donnie chuckled. “All this time...I never knew he liked girls, too. And that he might *see* me. Saw the same look in your eye when Penny fell into his arms. Have a smoke with me, brother.”

“What do you think will happen, after I go?” Simon asked, hesitantly.

Donnie shrugged. “I don’t know. We might get patched into other gangs, we might just quit the life. God knows if we split the dividends, we won’t have to work another day in our lives, except maybe to farm, or tend bar.”

“Jesus,” Simon said, fighting back more tears. “You guys have been my life for three years, now. I can’t imagine...I mean...”

Donnie patted his back. “Don’t worry, brother. I hear you. And, for what it’s worth, I wish a whole shitload of stuff was different.”

“You and me both...brother.”

RETURN TO THE LOST CITY

It was two days later that the rumble of Katherine's ATV woke Simon before dawn. The Night-Miners were taking time off before going back to work. Simon staggered outside. He could see a thin band of light on the horizon, but overhead there were still countless stars.

"Good morning," Katherine said, throwing a paper-wrapped sandwich at him. "That's breakfast. If you need coffee, I came equipped." She hefted a thermos that had to have been salvaged by the Vultures.

"Why are you here so early?"

"I thought we could take a long ride. I had a near-miss with a big hunk of scrap the other day – you broke down the last time you went out too far. Lloyd might even join us." Which meant of course that Lloyd *would* be joining them; following perpendicular to their back-trail and meeting up with them on the far end of the Jagged Desert.

"Whatever. Lemme go get dressed."

When Simon returned, Katherine was filling extra jerry-cans of grain fuel from Simon's supply tank, and his ATV had been pulled out from under its tarp and turned so it was facing out of the drive to his building.

“You work fast,” he said.

Katherine chuckled. “Some habits are hard to break.”

“All right,” he said, noncommittally, helping her with the last of the jerry-cans. “Why so much fuel?”

“Just in case,” she said. “I have twice as many cans of water in my main compartment.”

“Jesus.”

“Cut the chatter and let’s haul out,” Katherine barked with mock irritability, strapping in the last can of fuel and climbing behind the wheel of her ATV.

Simon had always thought his boxy, big-wheeled, narrow-framed ATV was cool as shit, but Katherine’s had a wider undercarriage, sitting higher off the ground on larger, thicker tires. The front of the vehicle was a locked storage space, stretching ahead of the cockpit and narrowing to a rounded nose. The roof slanted upwards towards the back, and the rear-mounted engine looked like it weighed as much as Cameron’s whole vehicle. The frame of her ATV could probably take a rollover at top speed and still keep going, and there was a covered, braced standing canopy for a gunner behind the driver. Simon had only seen the Blackfist leader’s ATV equipped with a heavy machine gun

once, at a distance, and still left a lasting impression on him.

“Do you want to drive it or fuck it?” Katherine asked.

“What? Oh! Sorry,” Simon said, sheepishly. “Nice ride, though,” he muttered, climbing into his ATV with one last envious glance at Katherine’s as she revved up. Moments later Simon was following Katherine away from his home and the streets of Toppledown, to the bleak lands beyond.

**

As Simon anticipated, Lloyd joined their convoy a little after they crossed the Jagged Desert. After the usual improvised theatrics for the benefits of the eyes and ears in the skies above, they started out.

“Do you guys wanna follow my trail from the last time I was out this way?” Simon asked. “I found a whole city.”

“Intact?” Katherine asked.

“Hell, no. Worse off than Toppledown. Completely abandoned, by the looks of things. That’s where I broke down.”

“Sure, why not?” Katherine said. “I’d love to be reminded of the fact that this was once our planet. What about you, Wolf?”

Lloyd shrugged. With no further words, they gunned their engines and followed Simon through the wilderness. Though they'd left Toppleddown early, the sun wasn't high in the sky before the day turned hot. Even riding in open-canopy ATV's, they were wiping sweat from their brows by the time they reached the river and began skirting their way around into the ruined city.

Their ATVs echoed like thunder as they rode into the ruins of the destroyed city. Simon watched with silent glee as a herd of deer were startled and ran away, dozens of the animals running across the old, vacant roads. He led them directly to the collapsed roadway. Katherine was the first to halt and park, marching halfway down the ramp.

"It's too steep to roll my rig down, but yours have shorter noses," she said, staring down the ramp, hands on hips. "I'll park up top, you guys roll down."

"You wanna go exploring down there?" Lloyd asked.

Katherine turned to look down the ramp made by the collapsed road, "We've got nowhere else to go, and it wouldn't be the first time I set up a community with nothing but a bunch of outcasts."

"Holy shit, Katherine," Simon said.

Katherine laughed. “Yeah, don’t I know it. Let’s transfer the supplies down from my wagon. Even if we can only park those bastards downstairs, we’ll need to keep our goods safe.” She spoke with practiced authority, both from her years in the military and when she and the other Founders of Toppledawn forged their community out of the ruins of a small city.

“Any idea what place this was?” Simon asked, as he finished strapping down half the water and fuel to his ATV. Lloyd had already finished doing the same.

“None whatsoever,” Katherine answered. “I was born and raised in Kentucky, and wherever we are, this ain’t it.”

“Where’s that?” Lloyd asked. He was the youngest of the three. He’d probably never even heard of the Bluegrass State outside a basic geography class in grade school, Katherine realized.

“That doesn’t really matter anymore, now, does it?” she answered, sadly.

**

Once the ATVs were down the ramp, Katherine, Simon, and Lloyd began setting up camp. Katherine removed a case from the supplies, opening it up. Inside were four collapsible poles, which she affixed to a wide wooden frame built with reinforcing cross-pieces. She stuck small

wheels into the base of each pole and then started hefting out a heavy, woven copper wire net from another, larger box.

“Help me with this,” she said. Simon and Lloyd stopped what they had been doing to help hoist the copper net over four sides of the rolling arch she’d assembled. After some swearing and adjusting and a lot of sweat from the three, they had the net positioned properly and Katherine snapped it into place using locks built into the frame.

“That weighs a *ton*! What is it?” Simon asked.

“A safety net,” Katherine said, as she scrawled something on her slate:

Faraday cage. Makes us invisible to the microsats. They can't see us, but they're still able to partially hear us.

Of course, neither of them needed to be reminded to not talk, or to talk in code if they needed to speak, at all. As Katherine ushered Simon and Lloyd inside the mobile cage, the three of them realized what a tight fit it was. Nevertheless, based on Simon’s measurements of the widest tunnels he’d discovered on his last trip through these city ruins, the Faraday Cage would safely fit, keeping them as hidden from the visual scrutiny of their enemy as they could hope. After reviewing Simon’s maps, Katherine wanted to head straight for the Copper St. Station. They

kept silent as they travelled, the only sound the low rumble of the well-greased wheels of the Faraday Cage and their soft footfalls. By minimizing noise, it was Katherine's hope that they'd remain nearly invisible to the Custodian microsats overhead. When they came to the wrecked tunnel it was obvious they'd have to leave the Faraday Cage behind, and none of them wanted to carry a few hundred pounds of copper net over themselves on foot.

Katherine wasn't exactly sure how deep they were below the surface: between fifteen and twenty meters; far less than the five clicks they needed to be belowground so the Custodians couldn't see or hear them. It was not an insurmountable problem, but she'd have liked to have been deeper. "I wish I knew what was directly overhead," she whispered as they crossed into the abandoned subway line.

As they walked, Katherine would strike off to look at places where the tunnel's ancient brickwork or concrete had collapsed, revealing bare stone beneath. She would study the area; Simon presumed for structural stability. She'd motion for Simon and Lloyd to continue on, and she'd catch up to them moments later without either of them having heard her approach. At the next breach in the tunnel, she'd dart off again. It was like that all the way to Copper Street Station. When they at last reached the station, Katherine began an earnest investigation, ordering with hand gestures Simon and Lloyd to wait for her. She moved into the station building as they sat on the ground, leaning on their packs, catching up on some rest.

Simon was half-dreaming, something hazy and about Penny, when Katherine's voice woke him and Lloyd up. "This place will do," she said. "This place will do."

"It's okay to talk?" he asked.

"Pretty much," Katherine said, "We got almost all the privacy we need: take the name of the place: *Copper Street Station*. See, my dad got me into geology as a kid. The soil I dug at on the way here has a high copper content. If I'm right, this city probably started life as a mining town. One thing copper is good at is scrambling radio signals; they won't be able to track us, down here."

"Can't they still hear us?" Lloyd asked.

"We can't have everything," Katherine said. "I don't like them being able to *hear* what I'm saying or doing, but I like them being able to *see* me a lot less." he then showed him her slate, and after he was done reading it Lloyd passed it over to Simon.

Don't forget: we have ways around the noise problem; Blackfist is already working on an alternative to the slates.

"So, what do we do now?" Simon asked.

Katherine pondered a moment. The tunnels that Simon had mapped out were full of miles of copper wire and steel subway rails – things that would make easy trading with Toppledown for their new colony. They’d need to get the air circulating down in the tunnels, but that wasn’t beyond their ability, nor was hooking into Copper Street Station’s existing electrical grid with one of their jennies.

“Honestly? I think it’s time to get the fuck outta Toppledown. We can live down here. It’s time to organize a moving party.”

“You want to live *underground*?” Lloyd asked, making sure to sound incredulous.

“Yeah,” Katherine said. “Between knowing the Custodians have a million eyes in the sky and seeing them blow up the camp I tried to run, I have to say I like the idea of a few dozen meters of copper-laced rock over my fucking head and between me and them. Besides, we’ll have to farm up top, turn some of those deer into livestock, fetch water from the river...we’ll get plenty of sunshine and fresh air.”

“So...what now?” Simon asked.

Katherine grinned, “Get a good night’s sleep, then tomorrow go back to Toppledown and give those bastards the bad news.”

BROTHERS AT ODDS

They left a cache of supplies behind, and once Simon and Lloyd rode their ATV's back up to where Katherine had parked hers, played out the last scene in this portion of their act. The Custodian microsats were doubtlessly watching and listening; though how intently, they couldn't be sure.

"Okay," Katherine said. "When we get back to Toppledown, we'll want to start – discreetly – talking to the other people who we know want to leave, and see who wants to come with them."

"My brother's staying behind," Simon said, forcefully. This wasn't part of their act –this was a firm statement of his intent. "He can learn a proper trade, maybe even medicine, maybe get out of Toppledown for one of the better settlements. I don't want this life for him."

Katherine approached, putting a surprisingly gentle hand on his shoulder. "You know that you can't decide for him," she said. "You *want* him to stay; but what if he wants to follow?"

"He stays," Simon said angrily, his throat suddenly hurting, fighting a losing battle against tears. "I don't want

him in the Gangs, or in our little breakaway camp, or even in goddamn Toppledawn. I want a *better* life for him!”

“We *all* want better lives,” Katherine said, “But you and I both know: there’s no future for us in Toppledawn.”

“*Any* of us,” Lloyd remarked.

Simon was too choked up to speak. He walked away from the discussion and back to his ATV, wiping his face. He knew they were right...but he wished to hell that they weren’t. The live drama over, Katherine and Lloyd concluded their pre-scripted conversation about logistics and public announcements, then likewise broke camp for the return to Toppledawn.

The very long ride back to Toppledawn was spent in silence, nearly without stopping. Simon rode far ahead, wanting to distance himself physically from the first people to plainly put to him the truth of what he feared the most: there would be no stopping Gregory if he wanted to come with them to Copper Street. He dreaded the familiar landmarks of the Jagged Desert as they passed. Every minute was taking him closer to finally having to confront Greg, to tell him that he was leaving Toppledawn, but that Gregory would be staying behind to finish his studies. The day darkened along with his mood the closer they came to home.

All too soon, the town was finally in sight. He finally was breaking away from the three-ATV convoy to head towards his house. As he rolled up to his building and made the brisk walk to his door he staggered to a halt; there was a slate hung from Simon's front door. In his brother's script, the words

Jon already told me, dick!

Were boldly written across its surface. Simon ripped the sign from the door and kicked it open; as expected, because this was Toppledown, it was unlocked.

"GRIGORI!" he shouted in Father's native Russian, "*Prosnis* '!"

He slammed the slate to the ground in such a way as it shattered loudly and kicked the door shut so hard it bounced back open. Simon threw it back home and it rebounded a second, then a third time as he shut it with more force and anger each time. Finally, he held it shut and slammed the crossbar across its frame. Greg came from his room.

"*Vebat' vy khotite?*" Gregory shouted back. *What the fuck do you want?*

"We need to talk."

“Talk about what?” Greg asked. “Jon told me yesterday you were leaving Toppledawn!”

Simon pointed upwards, to the sky. “Yeah and he should have kept his mouth shut!”

Shouting had always been a way of life for the Petrovich family. Simon didn’t remember much about his childhood in the Time Before the Custodians, but he remembered always hearing, behind closed doors in their old home, whenever his mother and father would argue. And when they were living in the cabin, hunting and gathering, Father had always yelled when angry; a habit easily picked up by his two sons.

“You were going to leave without telling me!” Gregory yelled. “You weren’t even going to let me *choose*!”

“You know what Papa always wanted for us,” Simon implored. “A better life than his; a better life than *this*!”

“What life do you think there is for me in Toppledawn?”

“*Luchshaya zhizn’*,” Simon said. *A better life.*

“You’re going off to start a new colony and you want me to stay *here*?”

“Yes! Here you have the chance to become a Craftsman or a Doctor or Chemist! What chance would you have in a

new colony, in the middle of the wilderness on the other side of the Jagged Desert?”

“Whatever I want! What I decide, not *you*!”

“I am your older brother!” Simon bellowed angrily. “*I* am the head of this household! You do what I say!”

“*Bullshit!* You’re not Father. You don’t tell me how to live! If I want to be part of this new colony I will, and you can’t stop me!”

“We could die out there. I don’t want you to come!”

“*Pochemu vy idete?*” Gregory asked. *Then why are you going?*

“Because I think it’s the only way I can live,” Simon said, choking back tears.

“And how can I live without my Big Brother?” Gregory wept. “After Mama and Papa died...you were all I had. I went to school, I studied while you were in the Night-Miners, all the time knowing you wanted a better life for me! But did you ever ask what *I* wanted? Did you ever wonder how *I* wanted to honor Papa? To revere Mama? To honor *you*?”

Simon stared into the face of his angry, wounded brother and wept. Gregory rushed to him with open arms, and Simon did the same.

“Brother!” They sobbed, embracing each other. Gregory grasped the back of Simon’s head and whispered in his ear, “I am going with you, because you are the example I want to follow. You are the man I want to be, Simon. Don’t take this from me.”

“I won’t,” Simon wept. “I won’t...just promise me that no matter what, you won’t die!”

EXIT STRATEGY

In the days that followed, word quickly spread through the tunnels and bunkers of Toppledawn, across the zig-zagging streets and pitched peaks, flat-roofed gardens and cracked-glass greenhouses: a group was getting ready to leave Toppledawn and form a new colony. Only a few were going, friends and family, some neighbors of those leaving who either wanted to go with them or try starting over.

Katherine was in charge of the exodus. This left her with far more paperwork and logistical hurdles to confront than she'd seen in the decade since the aliens invaded. Just thinking about supplies and rationing...Katherine wished desperately for something she hadn't seen in a decade: Microsoft's Excel spreadsheeting program. She could have done wonders for figuring all of this out with an open workbook in front of her. It had been ten years since she'd had such a luxury. "Actually, to hell with that." Katherine opened the door to the Blackfists' bunker and shouted, "I need a runner!"

Less than two minutes later, a young member of the gang dashed in, sweating from the exertion of his run in the humid air outside. "Runner First Class Peter Preston!" he said.

“I need you to head to the Vulture’s Camp,” Katherine said. “I need a computer; desktop or laptop, preferably. Ideally something made in two-thousand eight or later, full office software package, with cable for electric, or a chemical battery. And for Christ’s sake if you get a desktop, make sure they throw in a working monitor. You are to pay any price, but for fuck’s sake, try to lowball them: a trailer of kegs of our premium beer, bread for a year for the gang. I need to think, I have a lot of shit to organize. I need to figure this out.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

In the meantime, Katherine sighed and swallowed a warm mouthful of coffee from one of the Free Growers. They alleged to have had a sample of the Blue Hawaii coffee plant, and had helped the Vultures identify volcanic rock from fire-pits, barbecues and the homes and condos of the unnamed Old City. They were able to create soil conditions similar to those in Hawaii...Katherine had done a layover at the Schofield Barracks in O’ahu early in her career; an overnight stay while her team completed prep for a Black Op in the Asian Pacific. This coffee was close...but not quite like what she’d had, there. Better than most post-invasion coffee, though. Katherine wondered what had become of the Americanized Polynesian islands since the Custodians arrived. She wondered if she’d ever have the chance to find out.

She began writing her list; starting with general categories:

*Food, Clothing, Medication, Temporary Shelters,
Tactical Systems, Water, Power, Air
circulation/filtration, Distillation equipment,
Agricultural Supplies & Equipment, Hygiene
Supplies,*

She paused, a dozen more items coming to mind as she attempted to parse if they were part of a category or needed separate categorizing. Katherine sighed, took another swallow of coffee, resigning herself to a long night.

**

Simon watched the sunrise. It had been eleven days since he'd taken Katherine and Lloyd to Copper Street Station. He and Gregory, and as many of their belongings and mementoes as could load, were waiting in an uneven line of ten vehicles, four deep. It reminded Simon of the morning after he buried their Father, in spite of the crowd, rumbling, buzzing ATVs.

Each ATV was hooked to a trailer carrying the gear Katherine had determined they needed to properly set up their colony. The lake and river at the new site were already cleaner and safer than Toppledawn City's own water supply. Pipes, water pumps, and filtration systems took up almost half the trailers. The others had basic supplies:

food, clothing, medicines, grain fuel and weapons and ammunition, seeds and tools...so many tools. And then there were the trailers without manifests; those contained devices and materials that would, hopefully, allow them to deafen the Custodians as well as blind them.

Finally Katherine rode her ATV from the Blackfists' bunker to the front of the convoy. She climbed onto the roof of her vehicle and turned to address the party. "Today, we leave Toppledawn for the last time," she called. "Today will be the easiest part of what lies ahead: getting to the new camp. Tomorrow we will start the hard work: *building* that camp into a livable place. I don't intend to take very long to do it, so be prepared for hard days ahead. All of us are used to hard work as Toppledowners. Well, I'm going to put everyone to even *harder* work. You can bank on *that*.

"We're going to have a fully-functional colony up and running in a matter of *days*, not weeks. And it's going to be Hell getting there; a week from Hell. Which is why once we *do* finally get there, we're going to *celebrate*! This won't be easy, but when we're done, the place will belong to us. Let's go."

She dropped down from the roof of her ATV and started the engine. The mechanical thunder of more than three dozen all-terrain vehicles roaring echoed through the staggered canyons of Toppledawn. And then they were off,

leaving dust, regrets, surety and security in their wake. It was the last day of May.

**

The sun was hot, not even that high into the sky; even the wind through the open canopy of his ATV offered little relief. There were so many vehicles that they rode through a constant storm of dust. Simon had goggles on and a bandanna tied around his face, and it did little to help. He couldn't remember ever driving in a convoy of this size, and all the engines together sounded unsettlingly loud. They rode across the Jagged Desert on the most direct course for the distant city. Greg's ATV wasn't built for long-haul travel, so while it was hooked to the trailer behind Simon's ATV, his kid brother rode in the side-facing seat cramped in behind Simon's. Simon wasn't surprised when he glanced behind him to see his brother's head lolling, asleep. It was a long ride, and there was nothing to see beyond the constant cloud of dust besides a desert of pulverized towns, long-abandoned ruins, and roads and highways that had turned into asphalt-cobblestone Wildlands.

The convoy had to stop a few times for refueling, water and toilet breaks, but they spent most of the morning on the road. By the time they reached the ridge overlooking the levelled, half-flooded city beyond, the sun was already dipping west. Katherine headed down the ridge to the water, holding some kind of kit in one hand. She was a few

minutes before climbing back. “The lake’s clean,” she said. “We should fill a few empty barrels before heading into the city, so that everyone can have a good wash-up once we’re camped.”

A few of the smaller ATVs went to fetch water while the rest of the convoy followed Katherine into the city. When they arrived at the hole that led into the tunnels, she halted the group and stood on her roof rack to address them, again. “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to our new home. It’s a literal hole in the ground, but it will provide us with the best possible shelter; we have enough copper wire and steel beams to allow us to trade with Toppledawn for anything else we might need to supplement...enough for everyone.

“We can’t park our vehicles underground until we fix air circulation, so we will be using ATVs to tow down the trailers, only. Our best guess so far is that this place is uninhabited; nevertheless, we will set up a perimeter and post sentries. Here, we can build our own future; for ourselves, and any who may follow. We’re Human beings; that’s what we do, what we’ve always done. It’s not our way, it’s not the Toppledawn way; it’s the *Human* way. Now, let’s get to work.”

**

By sunset they’d moved most supplies to Copper Street Station. Katherine ordered several sheets of thick, heavy

fabric unpacked from one of the trailers fitted into the tunnels themselves at regular intervals. The fabric sheets assembled with Velcro strips to create curtain walls, which blocked and padded the tunnel and tunnel walls around it; these would muffle the noise escaping outwards; the curtains had been specially woven to absorb sound.

Next they set up generators attached to long exhaust lines that led out of the caves. The generators powered strong work lights, by which teams were carefully assembling the giant Faraday Cage, which would soon cover the “open” areas of the colony. Before nightfall, they were heating water for showers.

Another team was clearing out the station, while others muffled the tunnels on the far side of the station with more noise curtains. There was still too much of this place left to explore, a task for another time. By the time they stopped for a late supper, Katherine had seen to cooking the night’s first meal in their communal kitchen, serving everyone before eating last.

Everyone had worked hard that day. The results seemed pitiable at best, but Katherine looked at their first day’s labor and saw that it was good. They were passing around the grain alcohol now. Katherine gratefully took a cup and drank down a long swallow.

“To the future,” she toasted, silently.

COPPER STREET STATION

Katherine had promised them a week from Hell and she delivered. But just as she'd planned, their colony was fully set up, running and shielded. Hundreds of miniature electric motors vibrated and tapped the ceilings at different frequencies throughout their tunnel network, creating microtremors in the ground that interfered with the Custodian microsats' ability to measure sound through scans of the earth. It produced a constant rattling cacophony in the tunnels that the Copper Street denizens soon didn't even notice – unless something went off with the electric and they had to be restarted. Everyone would just stop and remain silent until the techs got the vibrating ceiling back up and running, again.

Now, a month later, the colony was fully established. They had their own grain-fuel stills and a water supply set up from the lake to the tunnels; air circulation provided by electric fans, and below-ground greenhouses fed by heat lamps and hydroponic techniques originally designed for use in Toppledawn. It was too late in the season to try any serious farming up above.

Katherine oversaw the cold, damp work of harvesting all the copper cable lengths for trade. They'd started colloquially referring to the former electric and data lines and the rail lines as "The Hoard." She approved. Katherine

had already planned on weekly trips to Toppledawn – she hadn't anticipated just how much she'd be able to return with.

Kathrine sent pigeons with her planned trade drops and crew rosters. She wanted to ensure that each Insurgent could at least get leave back home once, before they were taken by the Insurgency recruitment. Franklyn would update her whenever she rolled in; as well as supply her with whatever the pigeons she sent ahead would require.

Katherine continued their training. She had them running through tunnels she'd mapped out, drilling them on hand-to-hand fighting, survival techniques, tracking and evasion, physical conditioning. There wasn't much time left to them – the New Era Games were only weeks away – and there was still so much she had left to teach them.

**

Simon and his fellow Insurgents were sequestered from the rest of the Copper Street colony early on following the Week of Hell. Simon didn't even get to see Greg except on weekend furloughs when the Insurgents could mingle with the community – so long as they said nothing of their training or the mission. They had their own bunks in a room off the far end of Copper Street Station in a disused structure across the tracks. It would have been gloomy without the electric light, and the white-tiled *everything* just gave the place a strange, unfamiliar appearance. None of

them were old enough to remember buildings with this style of decor; most of them had forgotten what buildings looked like when they weren't collapsed piles of ruin.

Thrown together, the seven of them (Katherine, as their leader, followed military chain-of-command protocol and kept herself apart from her subordinates) became close. Lloyd Quinn, having survived the Custodian attack against the previous Insurgency, was automatically an intriguing figure. He couldn't provide them much detail, or any additional nuance to the Custodians' attack. He'd been leaving to go for a hunt, climbed up onto the ridge that led into a small wooded area by the stream. Raccoons and other nocturnal animals lived there – good meat, good pelts, everything they'd needed. He was tightening the straps to the quiver of arrows on his back when the strikes hit the camp.

“It sounded like lightning, when it hits up close.” He told them one night when another member of the team broke out her smuggled weed, “You know, that crackle like broken glass...except it sounds like the sky just shattered. Boom! Boom! Boom! A blast of wind or a shockwave or something knocked me back down the ridge. By the time I climbed back up, all I could see was smoke and fire. I didn't think anyone was alive...it was only after they dug out the latrine shed that they found Katherine. I remember people screaming, calling out for those they loved...but you could hear it in their voices; you could hear that they *knew*...” Lloyd got up and left, not saying another word. It

was after curfew, but Simon suspected that unless he wanted them to find him, none of the sentries in the tunnels would even spot him. That was their first night sequestered; they barely had energy enough after a sixteen hour day's worth of training to talk. With Lloyd gone, the six of them fell to talking amongst themselves.

"I'm Aaron," said a portly, blonde young man. In spite of the fat on him, it was obvious he was strong; muscular under the excess weight. Most Toppledowners were muscular. "Aaron Meer. I used to work for the Vultures, excavating trash. I *wish* I had copper mining detail in these tunnels. There are so many miles of cable down here, it makes me sweat. I also helped with the Faraday Cage." It was a staccato, clumsy introduction, but he was the icebreaker, and obviously not good talking to a bunch of strangers he didn't know well.

"Why do you wanna do this?" Tabitha Golden of the Firedogs asked. It was the first Simon could recall hearing her speak since the Week of Hell. Not that any of them had really had much chance to interact before being sequestered. "Why did you join the movement?" Tabitha had pale, reddish-blond hair, freckles and fair skin that tended to burn rather than tan under the sun. Her face was angry; if not for that anger, and the red hair, Simon would have been reminded of Penny. Tabitha's face bore a hardness that was different from Penny's: honed by an anger as keen as wind-sharpened stone.

Simon noticed something in her eyes he'd often noticed in his own when shaving, and in Charlie Lightning's eyes, and even Donnie's and Sati's – before she died. What he saw was profound loss...a pain so deep it aged them more than their few physical years. Charles Petrovich taught him to have feelings, but to lock them away. The wilderness beyond the Alien Cities, he would tell him, was hard. That meant you had to be hard, to live, to survive.

“That's...a fair question,” Aaron said. “I guess because I knew Nick; we worked together, partied together. We weren't really close...but we hung out, you know? Killing him was killing one of my family.”

“We felt like that after Sati got blasted,” Simon said. “Everybody wanted to pull the white dice...that's how we decided things in the Night-Miners. Voting, or drawing lots with one white dice in a bag of black ones...I got lucky, I guess.”

“Todd was my boyfriend,” Tabitha said, “They called us TNT, and not just because we made weapons-grade alcohol at our stills. We were...an explosive mix. Either always fighting or...” She smiled absently. “But when I found out he was dead...Yeah, I told Drakkas to sign me the fuck up, let me be the next to go; I did it with my gun pointed to his head. I think that if he hadn't...I think I might have gone out like Cameron: just walk into a still shed and...boom.”

Her admission left a heavy, ponderous silence in the air of their bunkroom. Finally, the silence broke.

“I actually volunteered because of Cam and Sati,” Dennis Huang said with ironic sheepishness “We were friends, in Toppledown. Us Asians gotta stick together, right?” He tapped his chest and then made the Peace symbol. Everyone chuckled. “But yeah...Toppledown’s a small community...and there are always communities within communities. Clan Before Gang, you know? Well, maybe you know, maybe not. Sound redneck as shit coming from Meer, West or Petrovich, wouldn’t it?” Everyone laughed again.

“I guess I’m in, because there was never any question,” Anna Vicci, dark-haired and slender with an odd grace to her Toppledown-developed muscle tone said. “I mean, The Raiders...we *all* have always been anti-Alien. And when *this* opportunity came up, after we lost Kyle, I volunteered straight up. So did about twenty more.”

“Jesus,” Dennis said. “I always forget how big you are. And it’s not like my gang’s a small one.”

“Yeah,” Anna continued. “So Commander Franklyn had us compete in endurance and hand-to-hand challenges. I kicked ass all the way through nineteen opponents to get here.”

“I thought I saw you with a black eye when we first rolled into Copper Street,” Simon said.

Anna shrugged. “Black eye, busted lip, bruises everywhere, two or three broken ribs, two fingers broken on my left hand, my pinkie finger broken on my right, a molar kicked out and another tooth chipped...we play rough in the Raiders,” she said with a grin.

“Warren picked me because I’m one of the best when it comes to shaping and placing charges,” Dennis said. “As the Rockbreakers were supplying a demolitions expert, I guess that’s me.”

“What about you, Rich?” Tabitha asked. Rich was from the Hammerheads’ camp. Dark-haired, thick-necked, Rich was a distributor for the Hammerheads, which meant he took people’s orders for drugs, liquor or other specialties, then delivered them and collected payment. It also meant that almost everyone in Toppledawn knew him. Rich shrugged, looking at his feet. In a face-to-face conversation or transaction, Rich West would always meet your eye, engage you animatedly as if he were an old friend. But in a group, he never seemed interested in people’s faces. “As if asked for volunteers. I volunteered first, I got the job.” That was all Rich had to say, and the finality of his words seemed to bring the discussion to a close.

“Still, it’s nice to be able to *talk* again, and not have to write all this shit down on *slates*!” Dennis said, to grunts of

general agreement. Simon looked at the Faraday cage over their heads, the micromotors humming or tapping away at the ceiling and wondered if they were really enough.

BATHOPHOBIA

They continued long runs through the dark, musty tunnels. They drilled with blunted practice knives until Katherine decided they were ready for the real thing. Lloyd taught them the basics of hunting and tracking, surprising Simon by showing him how much he *didn't* know, how much his *father*, who'd been hunting long before the Custodians came, hadn't known. They learned to use the bow, the pistol, the rifle. Simon had shot all three before, but now Katherine was teaching them things about their weapons far beyond basic maintenance and how-to aim-and-shoot at something less than a hundred meters away. She was teaching them to hit moving targets, to aim and shoot automatically, instinctively, reacting without thinking, turning them into actual soldiers, trained in the skills necessary to fight, to survive combat; unless, of course, the Custodians simply vaporized them from above.

On his way through Copper Street Station during one furlough, Simon realized there were children...*babies* down here. People who had just wanted to leave Toppledown had been included for selection when they set up the migration; they were both cover for the mission, and Human shields. Simon was suddenly horrified. The Custodians were brutal, efficient and merciless...these people were in danger because of the Insurgency.

Charles Petrovich had made sure his sons understood their pitiless use of force. “Never forget! A hundred and twenty-one million dead in two days,” he would say almost every night before they went to bed. “TWO DAYS! That’s all it took them to kill that many people!” He would shout it every time, always scaring Simon even as he expected it. “And four million of those killed were *children*! Like you! Some younger! Never forget! This is a war, between the Human Race, and the Aliens!”

Simon understood that including actual expatriates from Toppledown made sense in order to create the illusion that the Gang Leaders had been so careful to craft. That their Insurgency was over, that these were people giving up on Toppledown. But he was terrified that this place might be struck...and those innocents, children and parents alike, would die, for the crime of unknowingly harboring Insurgents in their midst.

Some nights since being here, training to act without thinking, training to kill or die at a command, he’d wake up after nightmares of the Custodians obliterating the whole Copper Street Settlement; men and women screaming...and a baby wailing, over and over, until he’d wake up, biting back a scream.

Those nights when the nightmares woke him, Simon would sneak from the barracks house and put his newfound evasion skills to the test, dodging security patrols and making his way to the stills. Cam had long ago shown him

how to tell the different stages of fermentation, different percentages of alcohol – and most importantly, how to tell which batch you could drink, and which would kill you. Simon would walk among the forest of stills, most of them producing fuel or explosives-grade alcohol. But there were grain fuel stills set aside for drinking; alcohol was one of Humankind’s oldest companion drugs, and even here in Copper Street, it still served Human needs. Simon quickly found the still he was looking for and filled a tester’s cup. Leaning against the wall, he took a long, throat-burning, stomach-boiling swallow, winced and grunted.

“How’s the batch?” Simon looked up, startled. Tabitha was leaning against one of the support beams holding up this chamber.

“Ah, good?”

Tabitha laughed. “Don’t worry, dirt-digger; I’m not going to rat you out. You woke me up when you stubbed your toe sneaking out of the barracks. I figured there was only one place worth going this time of night, given the curfew. I should know. I come here at night, sometimes, too.”

“Thank God for that,” Simon wheezed after another swallow of grain fuel. Tabitha chuckled and filled a cup of her own.

“I lost everything because of those bastard Custodians,” she said. “I wanna make them all pay.”

“Yeah, so do I,” Simon answered. “So did I. Well, everything and everyone but my kid brother...but he came with me, and if anything happens to Copper Street...”

“My parents died in the Charleston Rebellion,” Tabitha volunteered. “That started when the buildings started landing; the relocation camp exploded. My big sister stole a car and we went north-west, hiding from the Relocation Operation Patrol Escorts when we had to, then running like Hell when they started razing every God-damned trace of Human civilization that they could find.”

“Jesus.”

“It gets better; we got picked up by a bunch of religious nut survivalists who were gonna marry us off to their cousins or some shit. It was Todd, with a group under Matt Drakkas, who saved us. They found the survivalist camp and were trading for water. From where we were, we could see them through the window. I punched that window with my God-damn *fist* until the glass broke, then screamed for help, my hand bleeding like crazy. The survivalists thought they had the drop on Drakkas, but he had spotters and snipers held back. Soon as we started screaming and the survivalists raised their weapons, they went down. Zip, zip, zip, zip, and then the Firedogs cleaned house. Half the women and about a third of the boys and young men were

abductees, like us. By the time we reached Toppledawn with the Firedogs, there were almost seventy refugees with us. But before we got there my sister got sick; really bad fever, coughing. We made camp for three days before she finally died. Todd stayed by my side through most of it. That's how we became friends, and...you know. I mean, I was only fifteen at the time, and he couldn't have been much older, himself. The Firedogs were an organized resistance already, by that point."

Simon nodded. It was a common enough story among couples from Toppledawn: united by the tragic deaths of their loved ones. "My family left one of the Megalopolis Center Relocation Compounds as it was being built," he said. "I'd never seen anything like it. Whole buildings raining from the sky and touching down like thunder. I remember screaming and crying...it was insane. I thought I'd go crazy from how terrified I was. I can't remember ever being more scared in my life. We made it to Toppledawn after...God, I don't even know how long, because I was so young. Days and nights...I don't even remember the name of the city we *used* to live in. My mom died one winter and we left to live in the wilderness. I don't remember much about life before the Custodians, but I remember that heart attacks weren't the guaranteed death sentence that they are these days, outside the Megalopolis Centers. My dad died four years ago. That's when I moved me and Greg to Toppledawn, got in with the Night-Miners."

Tabitha refilled their cups. “The Insurgency was something we all believed in, but it crushed me when Todd volunteered. Then the Custodians blew the training camp to bits...and it killed *me*. So now, the only thing I have left is my *life*. And when they come to take that, I’m going to pay them back for all they took from me, first.” Tabitha drained her cup, slamming it back down on the clapboard counter hard enough to leave an impression in the wood. “Well, that’s my sad story; thanks for sharing yours, dirt-digger. I’m going back to bed. If you know what’s good for you, you will, too.”

The lingering glance she gave him before leaving was completely lost on Simon. Oblivious, he poured himself a third cup.

“I will,” he said with a grin, “Right after this drink.”

ROAD TRIP

“Petrovich, Huang, Golden, Vicci,” Katherine shouted into their barracks early one morning. “We’re taking a trip to Toppledawn. Get dressed, get some grub, then meet me up above; your vehicles are loaded and ready for the trip.” Simon, Dennis, Tabitha, and Anna groaned their way from their cots and into their clothes, filing blearily out the door. “The rest of you, wake the hell up!” Katherine shouted. “It’s Zero-Five-Hundred and you have to get your asses on the track! Go! Go!”

After picking up road breakfast kits from the commissary, Simon and the others jogged from the tunnels and out into the pale light of dawn. It was a dull, cloudy day, cooler than he’d expected. He’d packed a jacket in his gear bag along with a canteen of water and flask of coffee. He pulled the jacket out as he reached the vehicle line, putting it on, knowing he’d be taking it off within the next couple of hours; the clouds were already burning off and the day was not long for becoming warm. As Katherine had promised, their ATVs were lined up and ready to roll, hitched to trailers packed and stacked with copper and aluminum cable bundles and cut lengths of steel rail beams. The forges and smithies in Toppledawn would have a steady supply of materials from Copper Street. They climbed into their vehicles and awaited Katherine, whose ATV was parked ahead of theirs. Soon enough, their leader

came striding up the ramp. A scratched and battered pair of aviators disguised her eyes from any signs of bleariness. The large thermos of coffee she was drinking straight from belied her apparent readiness to take on the day.

“Okay, listen up,” she said to them, climbing to her usual post on the roof of her ATV. “We’re heading back to Toppledawn; I expect to be there before noon. Each of your trailers has been loaded with cargo for specific clients, so when we reach town we’ll split off and head to our destinations. Unlatch the trailers and leave them there. When we leave Toppledawn tomorrow morning, our trailers will be returned or replaced. Once you drop off your payloads, head to Annie’s Tavern and we’ll meet up for lunch and to plan out the shopping we have to do, for Copper Street. Make sure your slates and chalk are in your gear, in case you have to take notes. There any questions?”

When no one asked her anything, Katherine said, “Good; let’s roll,” and jumped down from the roof of her ATV. Their motors were revving and rolling away from Copper Street less than a minute later. They rode fast and made better time heading to Toppledawn than the migration from Toppledawn had made from Copper Street.

Less than an hour into the trip, as he was shrugging out of his jacket, Simon realized that this was the first time since the migration that he was going back to Toppledawn. He also realized, given how late it was into the summer, that it would probably be his *last* time in Toppledawn. A

pit of fear grew in his stomach as he contemplated this. He had volunteered for the Insurgency fully knowing it could mean his death. Even if they did make it to the Megalopolis Center, even if they did pull off their attack, and he managed to live through it, he would remain in the Insurgency until it killed him. It was all he could think about until the midmorning refueling break.

As they sat filling tanks, Simon dug into the second half of his breakfast sandwich and drank down the rest of his coffee. People wandered off into the privacy of the landscape to take care of their latrine, Simon among them after finishing his food. Back at the ATV, he used a splash of grain fuel to clean his hands as he pulled the emptied jerry-can from his fuel tank. After securing both, he sat back in his ATV, feet stretched out to either side of his steering column, waiting for Katherine to give the order to drive off. Since stopping for rest and refueling, Simon hadn't spoken a word, his gaze turned either to what he was doing or to the ground. Now he stared at his dash, watching the fuel gauge needle bob up towards the "F" mark. All he could think about was that these were likely the last weeks that he'd be alive. It was strange...he couldn't quite accept it. He felt afraid but not terrified...he couldn't quite articulate *what* he felt.

Finally, Katherine started up her ATV, revving it loudly, signaling the rest of them to start up and get moving. Simon lost his thoughts, lost himself in riding the trails, the hypnotic pull of focusing on driving his vehicle, watching

scenery go by. They were in familiar territory now, but still hours from Toppledawn. And still, Simon found himself preoccupied by what lay ahead.

**

They reached Toppledawn before noon, just as Katherine had determined. Simon's cargo of cleaned and polished metal and plastic pipes was to be delivered to the Farmer's Guild, as they sought to expand their water distribution throughout Toppledawn. The establishment of Copper Street Settlement was benefitting Toppledawn. They expected to have every home heated and provided with running water before the winter.

Simon unhitched his trailer in front of the Farmer's Guild lean-to as directed then headed back through Toppledawn to the rendezvous at Annie's Tavern. They met up for lunch and discussed things they should purchase around town before heading back to Copper Street. Meanwhile, the *real* conversation was once again being held by slates being passed around the table as they ate barbecued groundhog with sweet tubers and roast peppers and mushrooms.

Katherine: I've spoken with the leaders. We have the last components for Insurgency mission; sources in the Megalopolic Center will be expecting us 2 or 3 weeks before the start of the games. We're going to train from now until then on

mission-specific parameters. They've already selected targets of value, and they'll get us into the city to strike those targets.

Simon: How are we getting into the city?

Katherine: For now that's need-to-know. We'll be met by an escort well beyond the city's perimeter; needless to say, they've found a way past the gates.

Tabitha: How will they keep from identifying us once we're inside?

Katherine hesitated to answer; finally, she wrote.

Katherine: We're going to be given falsified id implants. But all they'll do is get us past checkpoints. Won't have any real access to any of the Megalopolic Center's full facilities. Whatever we need will be provided for us by our allies inside.

Dennis: How can we trust them?

Katherine: Because before we fled the Megalopolic Center to form Toppledown, Drakkas, Jessop and myself met up, and left some of our people as sleepers on the inside. We know them because we served with them. We helped them organize the Insurgency within the City

The business was taken care of quickly, discreetly. Then, they turned to their food, concluded making purchase plans, and finalized the following morning's meet-up to return to the Copper Street Settlement.

"You each have a list of supplies we need to get, and I'm sure there's all things you want to get for yourselves," Katherine said. "So, *carpe diem*; go shopping this afternoon. Tonight's your last night in Toppledown for a while. Keep that in mind, and enjoy yourselves." But they all knew from the look on her face what she was really saying: *celebrate being alive while you still can*.

As they almost all had people they wanted to catch up with and things to do after shopping was done, Katherine said, "I'll make it easy on you: we depart at oh-seven hundred thirty and I've already asked Annie to prepare breakfast sandwiches and coffee for everyone. And the merchants will be packing the wagons according to your orders tonight after they close up shop. Report to the drive in front of Annie's by oh-seven hundred to pick up your grub, fill your thermoses and canteens, and hook the trailers onto your ATVs. Have fun, boys and girls."

Afterwards, as Simon left to go through the downtown market district, he noticed Katherine meeting up with Franklyn and remembered how the commander of the Raiders had gone running into the blast site of the first Insurgent camp, looking for her. Simon realized that this

could be their last time in Toppledawn together. He was reminded that, in spite of all the friends-with-benefits he had throughout the settlement, he didn't have anyone he truly *cared* about; he'd never really *wanted* to form such attachments. He remembered all too well his father's grief when his mother died...his own grief when Father died, and Cameron's anguish when Sati died, then his suicide. If anything had galvanized him in his desire to stay alone it was Cameron.

The closest he'd ever come to feeling real affection for someone was Penny, and she and Jon had been together since the night they'd mourned Cameron's death. Simon didn't *want* to care about anyone now; not when he was likely marching off to die. Simon decided to stop thinking, and concentrate on what he had to buy.

He still had accounts with most of the merchants. Simon's dirt reserve had been supplemented with Sati's and Cameron's, given over to him as a going-away present by the Night-Miners – in case he ever needed anything from Toppledawn.

But he couldn't think of much that he needed or wanted. Simon already knew they'd be getting new clothes and equipment when they got to the Megalopolis Center. He was only a few weeks away from being on a mission which would likely end with his death. Was there any point to buying something *permanent* for himself? Simon went to Karl Werner to ask him what books he should buy for

Gregory to better his education and potential future. Werner gave him an extensive list and Simon left to browse the booksellers' texts salvaged from schools, universities and libraries. He bought texts on mathematics, chemistry, physics, history, biology, medical science, no matter the cost. Simon cleared out textbooks from three different booksellers before moving on to other things, like coffee, clothing and other essentials he knew his brother would need. Then he bought a few things for himself: a big bag of weed, some psychedelic mushrooms, and some sugar cane. His shopping done, Simon had nowhere else to go but back to Annie's.

ONE NIGHT AT ANNIE'S

Annie's Tavern had rooms to rent on the far side of the kitchen. Not that many people travelled through Toppledown, but during the spring and fall there were always traders, merchant convoys and occasionally people just passing from one settlement to the next. Most often, Annie's would rent out rooms to people who'd just left their old Toppledown dwellings, but hadn't had time to stake out a claim on a new one. Simon couldn't bear the thought of seeing any of the Night-Miners right now. He didn't feel like looking up any old paramours, and so bought a bottle of sugarcane rum, and sat in the far corner of the tavern.

Simon was into his second cup, beginning to feel foggy and dizzy, but still feeling an overall discontent, a general misery at his situation – a situation, he knew, entirely of his own making.

“Mind if I have a cup of that?”

Simon looked up at the voice; it was Tabitha. Simon gestured for her to sit down. “I thought you'd be over in your camp,” he said.

Tabitha shook her head as she poured herself a glass of rum. “Not really,” she admitted. “I mean, we did a huge-ass

going away party when I left, but it's like...I just don't want to *see* any of those people, right now...too many memories...too many really bad ones. You get it?"

"Yeah, I do," he said, as Cameron's burning form leapt to memory. "I just thought as you came from such a big Gang that, you know, it'd be more like a Family. That you'd *want* to go back."

She laughed as she took a sip from her cup. "Yeah; that's what you'd *think*...but it actually makes it worse."

"Jesus. So, what are you gonna do?"

Tabitha took another drink from the battered copper cup in front of her then looked at Simon for a long, contemplative moment. "To be honest," she said, "I was hoping to go with you back to your room – or mine, given the Firedogs sprang for me to have one with a working air conditioner – and take you to bed."

Simon choked as he swallowed his drink; Tabitha laughed. "I didn't think someone with such a reputation around Toppledawn would be so easily shocked," she said. "I haven't been with anyone since Todd...and you know as well as I do, living at Copper Street, *underground*...we could *all* die at any time. I haven't felt good since Todd was killed. I don't even expect I'll live out the year, the way things are going. I don't want anything complicated. I just

want to feel *good*, you know? I just want to be with someone, not be alone.”

“That’s pretty much how I feel...” Simon stammered. “I mean, I didn’t want to see anyone from Toppledown, because...well, I might never see any of them again. I’ve never been good at relationships, but I’ve also never really wanted one. The only people I could go see...they’re...all just...you know?”

Tabitha reached across the table and took Simon’s hand. “Then let’s not overthink this. We’re just two lonely people with a *lot* in common who want to feel good, who want to fuck, and who want to feel *alive* while they still can.”

As much as his blood was pumping with a sudden adrenaline surge, Simon still found it frustrating that they couldn’t communicate with each other here without using code phrases or dancing around the truth: *they were only days or weeks at most away from going on a suicide mission.*

“Do you wanna take the bottle?” he asked, gesturing to the rum on the table.

“Might not be a bad thing,” Tabitha said. She took his hand as they got up, leading him to the back of Annie’s Tavern, to where the rooms took over the end of the overturned building, “I’m not looking for anything more complicated than us together, tonight.”

“I understand; whatever you want. And if you like it and want to again sometime later...”

Tabitha chuckled, “Don’t get ahead of yourself, dirt-digger; let tonight take care of us, first.”

**

The following morning, Simon woke before Tabitha. The room was chilly, the air conditioner having run all night. He reached up and shut it off, sliding back under the coarse blankets for warmth. He couldn’t help replaying last night as Tabitha slept on her side beside him. Last night had both surprised and confused him. Not because he was uptight about sex; most Toppledowners viewed life from a fatalistic lens. Theirs would be shorter, harder lives than their forebears in the Time Before – barely ten years earlier. Hard living made for living hard so in Toppledown everyone had a relaxed attitude towards sex, or *anything* that gave them pleasure, of nearly *any* kind. It was one of the reasons that raw sugarcane had supplanted weed as the top-selling recreational substance in Toppledown: it was so sweet, people chewed it all day for the taste.

But last night there had been an *intensity* between him and Tabitha; urgency between them that he’d never experienced. After rough, hurried foreplay she climbed on top of him and held him down with one hand, alternately staring at him or closing her eyes. It had been her

expression that marked him the most: a combination of pain and desire, one indistinguishable from the other. He wondered what his face looked like; if the reflection of his loneliness, of his anger at all the friends, family and *years* lost, spent in the wilderness and struggling to survive...and the undeniable pleasure of being with someone as beautiful, as passionate and as rough as her. He realized she was crying as she rode him, her moans punctuated by tears and weeping, but she wouldn't let him stop, and truthfully he didn't want to.

Now, the room slowly lightening from behind the closed curtains, the evening before a strange, wonderful and confusing memory. Tabitha woke just behind of the wind-up alarm clock on her night-table, slapping the clacker off after a single *ding!* rang out.

"Morning," she said.

"Hey," Simon said. "Any regrets?"

She looked at him with an unreadable smile. "About last night? Hell, no. You?"

"None," he grinned sheepishly, unable to keep his eyes from her bare breasts. She got out of bed and started getting dressed.

“We’ve got less than half an hour before we have to report to the front of the Tavern,” she said. “You should probably get dressed too, dirt-digger.”

“Uhh,”

Tabitha paused, pulling her top on. “Look, Simon, I told you last night I wasn’t looking for anything complicated. I also said I didn’t have any regrets. Don’t make me start having regrets, *now*. Last night was fun, and I might like to play again sometime, but don’t start thinking there’s anything else going to happen. Neither of us have that kind of life ahead of us.”

“It’s just that last night you were—”

“I know; I was there. It was what it was, Simon...and it wasn’t about you. What was about you was what *we* were doing...that was about you *and* me...the other stuff was about just me. I’m sure you had some shit in your head about just you. We always do.”

“Yeah,” Simon admitted, remembering a long moment he’d been fantasizing that Penny had come in to join them.

“Then leave it at that, okay?” Tabitha appealed.

“Okay,” Simon promised, getting out of bed to start getting dressed, himself.

“Oh, and dirt-digger, one more thing.”

“What’s that?”

Tabitha grinned. “Your reputation around Toppledawn? Just so you don’t feel *too* bad about whatever it is you think you should be feeling bad about, let me just say that the talk around town isn’t wrong: last night was *really* good.”

“Uhh...thank you? You’re welcome?”

Tabitha laughed, lacing up her boots. “Oh my God, you’re so *weird* about sex!” She looked back at him and his horrified expression, “No,” she said, still laughing. “No; it’s *cute*. It’s a good thing; part of your charm, dirt-digger.”

Everyone was in the Tavern’s main room within a few minutes of Simon and Tabitha. They all picked up their kits for the road back: flatbread-wrapped hot breakfasts, baked-in-bread sandwiches for lunch, and all the coffee they could drink. As promised, trailers were all hitched to their ATVs, their rides parked out in front of Annie’s, ready to go. They had time for a cup of coffee and a small bite before rolling out of Toppledawn. Katherine was the last to arrive, grabbing her sandwiches and filling her thermos and canteen before whistling sharply, indicating it was time for them to go.

Tabitha didn’t say anything else to Simon as they walked to their respective ATVs, but she flashed him a

quick smile. Moments later their engines were roaring to life, and they were rolling out of Toppledawn and back into the wilderness. Simon pushed his confused thoughts aside and focused on the trail, on driving through the Jagged Desert and away from Toppledawn.

RAINSTORMS

AND PRESS GANGS

Over the next several weeks they trained according to the instructions from their allies in the Megalopolic Center. They focused on evasion, escape, and even followed an intensive parkour training, to better be able to flee the scene of an incident. Even as Simon sweated his way through running, jumping, sliding and abusing his body, he wondered just what the chances were that running away and climbing up the side of a building would be of any use against a Custodian microsat.

They also trained with dummy versions of the bombs they'd be using: from assembling the components to placement, arming and activating them and getting the hell out of the blast radius. Simon still didn't know what they would be attacking, other than of the twelve bombs, six were magnetic, three had a fast-bonding adhesive backing, and the last three, when assembled, would be both weighted and waterproof. None of them were trained for underwater work, so the waterproof bombs were a real mystery.

Katherine made another trip to Toppledawn, taking Lloyd, Aaron, and Rich. Also part of the convoy was Katherine's lieutenant, Harvey Bennett; the story was he had been meant to take over Blackfist by forcing her out,

but he found the cover operation unbearable. He'd been part of Katherine's unit long before the Custodian invasion; he wasn't even capable of pretending to betray her and force her out of Blackfist. It was Ellen Roth that ultimately replaced Katherine as head of the Blackfist; Katherine's second lieutenant – and her second choice. But with Bennett along for this trip to Toppledawn, it meant the official transition of command at Copper Street would be coming, and Katherine and her Insurgents would soon be leaving.

Simon was among the small gathering watching the convoy leave for Toppledawn. So was Tabitha, who smiled his way; he knew that meant they'd be getting together, soon. She had the same reasons that Simon did for wanting to keep an emotional distance between herself and others. She wasn't much for confession beyond what she'd told him about herself back in the Copper Street Brewery. They would make small talk when they were together, revealing little things...but they were afraid of attachment; one of them would live at least long enough to watch the other die. And at the same time, they were alone in the world but for each other.

When the last echoes of Katherine's convoy vanished along the way from their lost city, the small group that watched them go went back down the ramp and into the recesses of their underground shelter. Simon wasn't surprised to find Tabitha walking alongside him, as they passed the first noise-dampening curtain leading to Copper

Street. A murmur of conversation began to hum as they passed through the second curtain. It wasn't until they passed the third curtain that Tabitha turned to Simon, "Well, I guess we'll be leaving, soon."

"I guess," he replied, turning to her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him, pulling Simon down one of the side-tunnels to somewhere more private. It was best to make the most of whatever time they had left.

**

It was dark and raining when Katherine came back from Toppledawn. She and the rest of her convoy were soaked to the skin and shivering when they arrived; they parked their ATV's and went straight down, inside. The upper levels were flooding, and teams had already gotten pumps to shunt the rainwater away; a shivering Katherine realized she had never taken underground flooding into account when she chose this location. She remembered Simon mentioning the flooded parking garage he'd found, not that far from Copper Street. Most of the surviving sewer tunnels were dry and empty; blocked at one end or another by collapsed debris. Rainwater had nowhere to go, and they were besieged by a particularly heavy storm.

"Get a team topside to cover the entrance," she ordered as she was handed a warm blanket. "Once our vehicles are locked down, get tarps over that hole, sandbag it, get back under and seal up the seams." Katherine and her team

headed to the kitchens, needing a warm meal more than dry clothes. They all had heavy blankets draped about them; it was all they needed for now. But even still, things had to get done, orders had to be issued: she turned to Bennett, "Start sandbagging flooding areas to contain the water. We'll need to start moving the pumps around, so make sure those hoses stay mobile and untangled. Once the rain is over, we'll have to take the sound curtains down one at a time and put them out to dry in the sun. Once they're dry, we're going to need to spray them with grain fuel and let them dry out again. The whole settlement will need to be sprayed down with light bleach, once we're dry. We have to make sure no mold or mildew get inside; that's all it takes for a respiratory disease to become a plague."

"Got it," Bennett said. He signaled to people of his own, and as they headed to the kitchens relayed the orders necessary to make preparations.

After the party had a chance to eat and return to quarters for clean clothes, Katherine called for the other Insurgents to be roused; it was time for The Meeting. The eight of them clustered around a table, a pot of coffee brought from the kitchens along with goat's milk from their small dairy, and liquid sugarcane to sweeten it. Joining them was Bennett, who would soon be the official in charge of the Copper Street Settlement. Katherine looked from face to face, taking them in. Simon and Tabitha the first at the coffee; Katherine had seen that one coming before they'd originally left Toppledown. Tall, stoic, silent Rich sat next

to them, his closest associate in the operation Lloyd Quinn. She'd always perceived Lloyd as a loner. Dennis and Aaron had buddied up, and it was Anna who surprised Katherine by being the independent recluse of the group. Katherine stared at them all with a heavy heart.

"So, here's where we stand," she said, "Our allies from the Megalopolic Center have been sending operatives into the wilderness in the last few weeks, acting as scavengers and marauders. They've ventured into this territory, where Franklyn's Raiders have been on wider-ranging 'security patrols,'" she added, using her still-numb fingers as air-quotes, "And delivered reports of this 'marauder activity' near to our territory. Over the next few days, I'm going to be sending you out on single-man patrols; except for Lloyd, who's just not going to come back from a hunting trip. Be advised, you'll be the first one they take." Katherine sighed and gave him a sad look, "We're all going to really miss the venison, Lloyd."

Everyone laughed. Katherine continued, "One by one, your patrols are going to be taken out. You'll all be on patrol over the next couple of weeks, and you'll be taken by the 'marauders' at random. Needless to say, these are the people who will be taking us into North American Megalopolic Center Northeast. After we lose the last of you, I'll go out in a war party and be taken down by the marauders, who will force my team – led by Bennett – to fall back to Copper Street. Then, well...the mission will

start. This is it; what we've been training for. God help us all."

It rained for another three days; In spite of the tarps and pumps, there were a thousand different places that water was able to get into the colony. There were puddles, pools of water and full-on flooding of several areas; they lost the dry goods stores and had to evacuate some residents to the Copper Street Station building. Katherine was beginning to worry and wonder that the Custodians weren't using a more subtle weapon against them; surely as advanced as they were, they could control the weather.

Her grandfather had been a farmer, and one night when she was a child, he told her the best way to get rid of moles was to put a hose in the hole and drown them out. Katherine had almost drowned the summer before, and the thought of doing anything of the sort to animals horrified her and sent her into tears. Now, she saw it as an efficient military strategy that could easily be used by the Custodians to destroy them. Who knew what else they could do besides fire death rays from the sky? She decided, watching it come down, that if it was still raining tomorrow, they'd abort and evacuate the settlers back to Toppledawn.

The weather cleared overnight, however; Katherine and Bennett made plans in case of a cold, flu or cholera outbreak, and Katherine ordered her incursion team sequestered before clean-up operations began. "You have to

go into sequestration now, too, Kat," Bennett said, "We got this. Don't worry. I'm going to send people to Toppledawn for meds just in case; we can pay Karl Werner in copper wire for antibiotics. You're no good to your team if you get sick." Katherine nodded, patting her old lieutenant on the shoulder, "All right then...I guess this is it; Good luck running Copper Street. Keep the people safe."

"You know I will."

**

Simon and Tabitha made the most of their sequestration when not going out their "regular patrols." They never knew when one of them would be picked up, how long after before they'd see each other again. They spent their downtime in bed until meals, washing up, eating, and getting back into bed. There was an urgency to their passion; a desperate knowledge that it was ending...because soon everything might be ending. Sometimes they just held each other and wept, falling asleep in the consolation of each other's arms.

A week went by, and no sickness was spreading through the camp. The Sequestration was over, but none of the Insurgents really cared to mingle with anyone outside their barracks, anymore. Just as Katherine had told them, Lloyd went out hunting one night and never returned. The Insurgents knew what it meant: the "drafting" had begun. A search party was organized to look for him to keep up

appearances, but the search party's conclusions were foregone. They found evidence of marauders and Lloyd's broken bow. Simon winced when he saw it. Lloyd had told him once how he'd made the bow himself, and how long it had taken to find the right lengths of two different kinds of wood with the right grains: one with good tensile strength, the other with good compressive strength. Then there was the difficulty in properly bonding the woods, the process of steaming and bending the amalgam, of fire-tempering the wood correctly...it must have been a real sacrifice for him not just to leave it behind, but to leave it behind shattered.

The next round of theater began as soon as the search parties returned: Katherine ordered no one outside after dark except for authorized patrols by those she'd been training to "provide security to the Settlement." Simon listened to her impassioned speech about not letting this nomadic threat endanger any more lives in Copper Street. She railed that they didn't want a war, but if it became necessary, then they would destroy these marauders...that she would destroy them, riding in the gun-carriage of her personal ATV to mow the bastards down. He was disturbed by the crowd's reaction; how vehemently they cheered and called for blood. He left the rally only a few minutes after that started; Simon didn't much care to be around for the war chants. He decided to head to the kitchens for something to eat; maybe he'd sneak off to the stills. Maybe he'd run into Tabitha. Since the Sequestration was lifted, she'd become her more

independent self, disappearing on her own, only returning to their private berth after curfew, or meeting him at supper before. Simon didn't mind; he found himself wanting his alone-time, as well. He was looking forward to the ATV patrolling, even though it would mean his final induction into the Mission. Just to be outside, riding around in the open air...

Joining them on patrol would be other recruits – those Katherine had actually trained independently to act as security for the compound. There were sixteen of them; double the total number of Insurgents that were going into the Megalopolic Center. But their uniforms were specially marked, so the “recovery” team from the Megalopolic Center would know to steer clear of them. As far as the Coppers (after all, Katherine had reasoned, what else could she call them?) were concerned, the marauders were the real thing. The fewer people that knew what was actually going on, the better; which was why outside the Insurgent team she'd put together, the only person in Copper Street who knew the whole plan was Harvey Bennett.

Two days after Lloyd went, they took Aaron. Another rally was held, Katherine now wearing an old pair of fatigues that she had stowed away a long time ago. They looked practically new; Bennett stood to her right, the commander of the Coppers to her left. "Last night, marauders took another of us: Aaron Meer, whom many of you knew. He was one of my security crew, and I trained

him personally, as I trained all the men and women dedicated to protecting us.

"I will not allow this act of murderous cowardice by the marauders to go unpunished! Our patrols will increase, and I will lead a party of scouts myself, to track the marauders down. God help them because if they aren't driven off, they will be destroyed. This is our land; we will defend it!" The residents of Copper Street were whipped into another frenzy; Simon couldn't help but laugh. He knew the truth: Katherine would lead the best of her Coppers out on a snipe hunt while the rest of them patrolled uselessly around the outskirts of the settlement. Meanwhile, at irregular intervals, each of the Insurgents would be picked up, individually.

Tabitha and Simon didn't have sex as much as they used to. Now they would mostly just hold each other and talk. Sometimes this would lead to other things, but usually, they just fell asleep in each other's arms. And then one evening, two nights after the 'marauders' had taken Dennis and Anna both, Tabitha didn't come home. Simon felt a cold, falling sensation in his gut, his heart beating faster as he realized she was on the mission, now. He didn't cry or miss her; he'd see Tabitha soon enough, and at least whatever came after, they'd be fighting alongside each other. But it also meant his time was nearly up, as well: besides him, there was only Rich and Katherine left, and Katherine was scheduled as the last to go.

**

Three nights later, Simon was riding his ATV through the dark, watching the road instead of doing any real scouting; there was no need to actually look for anything, as there weren't any actual threats. And besides; Katherine had advised them all the recovery crew would take them by surprise, to authenticate everything for the orbiting microsats. So when two armed men pointing machine guns at him appeared in the road ahead, Simon slammed on the brakes. He skidded the ATV to a halt only a few feet from them. ATVs roared up on either side of him and a third from behind. "Well lookee what we have here!" One of the ATV riders said, dismounting. A pistol was pointed at Simon, and he was gestured out of the vehicle.

"And who are you, son?" the apparent leader of the squad asked, stepping up to him.

"Simon Petrovich," Simon said as another guard walked around behind him.

"Well, Simon Petrovich, I've got some bad news for you: this is gonna hurt like Hell." Simon had time to hear a gun fire behind him and then suddenly he was falling to the ground, and from the ground into an unfathomable pool of darkness.

THE INSURGENCY

The first thing that Simon noticed, after he woke up, was that he was not dead. He knew this because his head hurt very badly; worse than the first time he'd forgotten to drink water after a dawn party with the Night-Miners.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, son!" the man who'd questioned him at the blockade said, stepping into view, "Your head must hurt like Hell right now. That's what happens when we have to make you look dead to the microsats."

"Water," Simon rasped. The uniformed man looked at someone Simon couldn't see. A canteen was passed between them, and then to Simon.

"What did I tell you, Mike? First thing everybody always says when they wake up. Every damn time!" the uniformed man said. "And the second question's always one of two things: either 'where are we' or—"

"It safe to talk?" Simon asked after a long, gasping swallow of water.

The uniformed man pointed at Simon. "See? That's the one I like to hear! The answer to that question is yes. We're riding in a marauder's wagon; a ramshackle piece of

shit that makes too much white noise for Custer sensors to handle. This thing shakes, creaks rattles, hums and squeaks so loud they can't hear us, for shit! The one-and-only third question I'll do you the favor of answering so you can drink more water: I'm Major Edward 'Ted' Logan, that's sergeant Mike Kaczynski and we're on our way to a safe camp near the city walls."

"You really went all out for the marauder cover." Simon croaked.

"Have to. From A to Z, you have to set up a plausible narrative, because the fucking Custers are always watching, always listening." He looked skyward, and Simon noticed not only the Faraday cage, but the strange, glimmering black-grey metallic cloth that covered the wagon. Suddenly, Simon felt himself shivering and was aware that he was very cold.

"Mike, blanket!"

"Sir!" Mike replied, throwing a heavy blanket to Major Logan, who wrapped it around Simon's shivering body.

"That's another side-effect of the tranq, sorry," Logan explained. "Coffee?"

Simon nodded, and was handed a thermos of hot, black coffee. He usually liked it with goat's milk and honey or

when he could get it sugar, but he wasn't going to complain about the hot liquid as it fought the cold in his core.

“Why do you call them Custers?” Simon asked.

Major Logan grinned. “Do you know much about history from before the Invasion, son?”

Simon nodded, “My father traded for school books when me and my brother were kids.”

“Then you’ve heard of George Armstrong Custer?”

“The General defeated at Little Bighorn.” Simon said, and it dawned on him then what Major Ted Logan meant. “Custer totally underestimated the Native forces and their determination to beat him. He thought they were primitives, savages...incapable of defeating him. He didn’t count on them using both superior numbers and tactics to...”

Logan grinned. “Now do you get why we call the Custodians the Custers?”

Simon grinned back. “Oh, yeah. Oh, hell yeah.”

Logan and Kaczynski cheered. There didn’t seem to be much else to say for the time being, so Simon concentrated on drinking the coffee and fighting to wake up from the tranquilizer. He couldn’t tell how long they’d been travelling, nor, when they finally arrived at their base, was

he able to even guess how much longer they'd travelled after he woke up, except by gauging how desperately he needed to piss after drinking a full thermos of coffee.

**

They were holed up in an ancient mine, within sight of the massive Megalopolis Center walls. The mine was outfitted similarly to Copper Street Station, only on a much grander scale; it was an established base of operations. What astonished Simon was the Orange Wall. He had never been this close to it, and though it was a dark night, the Orange Wall was well lit. A wide, rusty band on the dark horizon. It was like some strange, unreal mountain range, with wide, large black-bordered white letters and numbers marking regular intervals. At this distance, the writing was a white blur on the Orange Wall. The barrier itself was over a kilometer high, covered in a haze of cloudy wisps at some points where it abutted the atmosphere, stretching across the horizon in a long, occasionally wobbling but forever unbroken line. The top of the wall, lost in the clouds, curved outward about three-quarters of the way up before rising again, then curving outward once more at the very summit. It was said to be perfectly smooth; gradually bowed surfaces leaving no corners to climb for support. From one end of the sky to the other, it was all they could see to the east.

Tabitha surprised Simon by running to greet him with a warm hug when he got out of the back of the

ramshackle-looking truck. “Hi,” he said, uncertainly. “Nice to see you.” He hoped he wasn’t blushing as the soldiers from the operation cheered and laughed in his direction.

Tabitha smiled. “I just missed you, that’s all.”

“Well, we can make up for lost time –”

“Not this week,” she said with a grin.

“Oh,” Simon said, regretfully. “Let’s hope there’s a next week.”

“I’ll drink to that!”

“Take me to the nearest still. Well, the nearest bathroom, then the nearest still.”

“The bathroom’s this way; the bar – yes a straight-up, goddamn bar – doesn’t open until after lunch. Besides, you have orientation in about twenty; come on. It’s boring; I know you’ll hate it.”

Tabitha wasn’t wrong. Because they came in individually, Major Logan lectured them individually. He was no longer anything like the cheerful soldier he’d met on the truck.

“Good morning, mister Petrovich. In case you were wondering, we took about two hours to get here, after you

woke up. It is now zero-four-hundred hours thirty. I hope that coffee hit you good, because you will need to pay attention to everything I say;, is that clear?”

“Yes, Major.”

Without changing the tone or pitch of his voice, Logan made Simon’s mistake dangerously clear: “Insurgent Petrovich! It is insubordination to incorrectly address a superior officer; that was the incorrect form of address. We have a strict three strikes policy regarding insubordination. I’m feeling generous so I won’t hit you with your first strike. For all future reference, you should have answered me, Sir yes Sir, Major Logan, Sir. You don’t have to shout it or bark; I’m pretty sure Anton got you trained up down at Copper Street. Do I make myself clear, Insurgent Petrovich?”

Simon stammered, “Sir yes Sir, Major Logan, Sir.”

“Good; you learn quickly. Good for you, Petrovich. Now make sure you don’t get a first, second or third strike.”

“Sir, Major Logan, Sir; if I may ask, what happens if you get three strikes?”

“You may,” Logan said. “And what you get after three strikes is a bullet to the head. To keep things fair, after three months consecutive good behaviour, any strikes

accumulated are dropped. Moving on. There's a lot more to cover before the mess opens at zero-five-hundred-thirty. At zero-six, there is a daily briefing for the Insurgents. This also now means you, so pay attention, and maybe you'll get twenty minutes to chow. It's a five minute run from here to the mess, and five from the mess to the briefing. Being late for briefing or other assigned duties is a demerit. Ten demerits and it's lead poisoning. Accrued demerits only last a month. ”

“I'm not used to...That is to say, Sir, Major Logan, Sir, I'm –”

“Not used to such strict a system of punishment for misbehavior? Every day we could be zapped out of the sky by those goddamn Custers. That means we don't have room for fuck-ups. That means fuckupery is eliminated. Your chances of living out the rest of the year are about one in ten, based on previous Insurgency mission statistics. To make that percentage, you gotta keep from fucking up. The Golden Rule in my camp is Fuck Up and You're Dead. Do I make myself clear, Insurgent?”

“Sir yes Sir, Major Logan, Sir.” Simon said, feeling a weight of dread settle like a burden on his shoulders.

**

Simon left orientation with a much different view of Major Ted Logan than he had when he'd first woken up in

the back of the truck. He felt overwhelmed and discouraged, until Tabitha caught up with him. “So you get the ‘Fuck Up and You’re Dead’ speech?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t worry. It’s not that hard to follow the rules; all you gotta do is remember. Let’s head for chow.” She took off running and after a start so did he. The line at the mess wasn’t too bad, and they were soon sitting down with filled trays and cups of coffee. There was no sugar ration and the milk wasn’t goat, but the food really was no better or worse than what he’d eaten at Copper Street. Simon wasn’t sure whether to be disappointed or not.

They were soon out of the canteen and on their way to the morning’s briefing. It was nice to catch up – however briefly – with the familiar faces of Lloyd, Dennis, Aaron and Anna before the briefing. Simon also noticed other men and women scattered about the room. They didn’t pay attention to the former Toppledowners, or, seemingly, each other. Simon realized these had to be other recruits from the other settlements outside the Megalopolic Center. A few more people joined their group until all fifteen seats facing the front of the room were occupied. Simon began to understand the full scope of the Insurgency, the true size of this mission.

Major Logan entered and began speaking. “Good morning; I’m sure you’ve seen the new faces; Wright,

Beauvais, Petrovich, Samuelson; welcome aboard. Everyone knows the stakes. To bring our newcomers up to speed on the status of Operation Domino: we have the means of getting into North American Megalopolis Center Northeast; we will begin deploying seven days after our teams have been fully assembled. Our latest intelligence from inside the city says that the Custers are aware something is coming. We are still proceeding on schedule; we have people trying to find out just how much the Custers are aware of. Security around the Games installations and their infrastructure has been increased. This suits us fine, as most of our targets are unrelated to the Games, themselves. Moving on, the final members of your incursion teams will be picked up sometime in the next ten days. Your individual team training will continue as scheduled until everyone's assembled. Now, you have schedules to keep. I won't take any more of your time. Dismissed."

CAMP CULTURE

When they met up for lunch, the conversation eventually turned to the other two groups of Insurgents from the morning briefing. Simon answered a question that had been plaguing them since Lloyd first got there.

"I recognize the team in the matching black jackets," Simon said. "They're bandits from that settlement to the south of the Jagged. We got into firefights with them a few times in the Night-Miners."

"I tracked them one night I was out hunting," Lloyd said. "I came upon their trail in the woods, followed them a while. It was easy; they made a lot of noise. I even found their camp. They never saw me."

"They hit the Vultures a few times, too," Aaron growled. "Glad our Gina's father was a mob boss. There's not a weapon she doesn't know how to handle, not a firefight she's not cold as ice through. That's how she taught us to be, too."

"You have to be to fight Custers," Lloyd said. "And recruiting bandits makes sense when you think about it. Who better to enlist than people who know all about staying hidden and ambushing their targets?"

"That's cold," Anna said.

"That's war," Lloyd answered, "You get the people who are the best at what you need to get done. You don't think sending us all on a mission where we have a one in ten chance of surviving is cold? I do; but we're all going, aren't we?"

**

Simon's last training session of the day involved the handling and setting of the explosive charges. These were the genuine articles; the devices he'd be working with...whose major components had been made by Cameron. Simon choked up, looking at them. Clockwork weapons of handcrafted beauty lovingly designed by Cameron Wang, who'd sworn to live the rest of his life to avenge Sati Marinjoor's death. Such was love; such was why love frightened Simon so much.

Everything from the casing to the mechanisms themselves (One of the requirements for the timers was that they be user-serviceable – a challenge Cameron had leaped at with zeal) was a work of art, with decorative inlays inspired by the Eastern Traditions of Sati's Hindu religious and cultural background. The test models he'd shown Jon and Donnie to get feedback must have just been blank templates, Simon realized. These, the *actual* devices were covered in Sanskrit inscriptions, and each bore an image of Siva, in his form as the Hindu God of Destruction. Simon was actually distracted from the lecture; so much so that he earned himself his first demerit.

After the lecture, Simon stayed behind and approached the instructor, Captain Wash. “Sir, Captain, Sir; permission to speak freely?”

“Go ahead, Insurgent,” the Captain said, both irritably and indulgently.

“Sir, Captain Sir, just to explain why I was distracted – not to excuse the demerit or to request it be excused –”

“Good, because it won’t be, and had you requested leniency I might have given you a second. Continue,”

“Sir, thank you, Captain, Sir. I just feel the need to tell you, my distraction was because my friend, Cameron Wang, the one who...the one who blew himself up after losing his girlfriend – and my friend – to Custer... he made the detonators, Captain; they’re tributes to her, Sir, and I...I just...seeing what he...Sir, Captain, Sir, it won’t happen again, Sir.”

“I understand, Insurgent; and I appreciate candor from the ranks. I heard about what happened to Marinjoor and Wang. That’s hard shit, son, but so’s this whole goddamned business, fighting the Custers. Don’t let their deaths distract you...if anything, their deaths should focus you, even more.”

“Sir, yes Captain, Sir.”

“Dismissed.”

Simon saluted and left at a jog.

He found Tabitha waiting for him, leaning against one of the old creosote-stained timbers holding up that section of the mine.

“Let’s go get that drink; one thing this place has, which doesn’t include a *name*, in case you haven’t noticed, is a bar.”

“I *forgot* you mentioned a bar!”

"Multiple kinds of alcohol and everything!" Tabitha said, walking beside him. "Gotta have something to beat your liver with." Simon laughed as they traveled the coal-black hallways of the mine. It was good to be with Tabitha again.

As they crossed into the hollow that served as the local watering hole, he was greeted with cheers from Lloyd, Anna, Dennis, and Aaron who were gathered around a table. Tabitha explained, "Because there was no one there to greet him when *he* first arrived, Lloyd, and everyone else who's been brought in since, have thrown a welcome party for the next one in. Welcome to *your* party; it might be the last one you ever get." She smiled and led him by the hand to their table. They went ‘round the table telling their

stories of being taken in, laughing at the similarities, and not laughing much about Logan. Simon noticed, even as he laughed at Aaron's recounting of being caught in a snare and hoisted screaming into the air before swearing and yelling at Logan, who spun him around a few times before hitting him with the tranquilizer, that the only thing *none* of them would talk about was the mission. He was in no hurry to think about it, or its consequences, either.

**

At the end of a long day, Tabitha took him back to her billet, built with wood walls buttressed against the sides of the mine. The roof was low overhead. "There are some places further in where you have to duck to get through. And some places that they won't even let us into because they're too dangerous." Tabitha explained. They were happy to be with each other again, but they were both tired, both a bit too drunk. And sex was the last thing on Tabitha's mind, given her period. They opted to snuggle.

"I've heard of colonies living in mines like these," Simon said, as they spooned, "My dad used to trade with one of them in the wintertime when he couldn't get to Toppledawn. He said the people always looked sick, pale and dirty."

"That's one of the reasons Copper Street was set up with ventilation systems," Tabitha said. "Solar-powered electric fans blowing air directly from outside and pushing old air

out the same way. Aaron's group helped dig up most of the old solar panels, air ducts, and fan blades, screws, nails and bolts that were used to build them."

"They must have worked nonstop."

"The Vultures don't just collect junk; they rebuild things by reverse-engineering them, then build new things by extrapolating on what they learned, dirt-digger." Tabitha chided him lightly as she rolled over so she was spooning him, "And if you think about it, we've all been trained by our Gangs for specific tasks. Aaron knows about machines. I know basic chemistry from working in grain fuel stills. Lloyd knows how to move through the night undetected by animals that can see in the dark, and he's one of the best shots the Wolves ever turned out. Dennis is a demolitions expert, trained by Karl Werner to make explosives. Everyone has a specific skill set. You're good with a gun, smart, and you're strong as an ox. Same as Anna and Rich. Katherine was some kind of hotshot covert ops soldier. They picked us all for a reason; they picked us all for this mission. Logan's deal is just about keeping order, keeping people in line. He's been operating outside the wall a long time. But don't fool yourself: they need *each* of us for their operation."

"Yeah," Simon said, "But first we have to get into the Megalopolis Center. I don't know how we're supposed to do *that*."

Tabitha shrugged, “I don’t know, but from what I hear, they even have it covered.”

“Yeah. Guess we’ll find out, soon enough.”

“Simon, I don’t want to talk about *that*.”

After a pause, Simon said, “Yeah; me neither.”

“I’m afraid.” Tabitha admitted.

“Me too.”

“Beating Custer better be goddamn worth it.”

DEPLOYMENT

During the next week, Simon fell into the routines of the camp: training, drilling, retraining, working and avoiding earning any more demerits or any insubordination charges. Katherine and Rich were finally brought in. That night at their welcome party, Katherine told them the story.

“It couldn’t have gone better if it were scripted by Hollywood,” She said, taking a congratulatory sip of actual sugarcane rum. She looked over the blank faces of the younger members of the team. “Shit, you’re kidding me; it’s only been ten years! Hollywood was...look, never mind. Everything went off perfectly.” She drained her cup and slammed it down, obviously annoyed and feeling dated by her words, “After Si disappeared everyone at Copper Street was freaking out; I told Greg not to worry, by the way, Simon.”

“Yeah, I can guess what he said.”

“Yeah I bet you can: ‘I already am worried; my brother’s gone to kill himself fighting the Custodians.’ Sounded like you when you’re really pissed off. Family’s precious, Petrovich. Even if you never see him again, remember that.”

“I will,” Simon said, his mood more sullen than before.

“Anyway, you should have seen it: the *whole* camp was in an uproar. I organized the hunting party that was going to take on the marauders. Bennett, of course. And Rich, and a bunch of angry hotheads who wanted to get crazy with a gun. I personally saw to the ammunition; blank rounds for the idiots, the rest of us with standard ammo to shoot holes in the ground and the foliage. We rode out, ran into Logan’s crew, exchanged fire. They were good shots; wounded half the people who’d come with us – nothing serious, but enough to take them out of the fight. Then they took Rich with a shot to the chest; boom. Bud, you went down like a sack of bricks.”

Rich's face reddened as Katherine joked. "A few seconds later, I jumped out of my ATV my gun blazing, and they hit me. Bennet ordered everyone else to fall back as Logan's reinforcements showed up. A few days from now, Bennet will order scouts to search the area. They'll find an actual marauder camp that Logan's already scouted. They'll find everyone dead and burned to a crisp. They'll be scouting that way after Logan blows the hell out of the camp with incendiary rounds." Katherine looked at them, looked at their faces, "Look: We all remember six years ago when marauders hit Toppledown. Twenty-three people were killed before the Gangs fended them off. These aren't good people. One less group of marauders will be one less problem for *all*." She pointed angrily eastward, towards the Orange Wall, "The Custers won't even give it a second

glance. They don't give a damn what Humans outside their city walls do to each other."

"Neither does Logan," Dennis said, grimly.

There were general grunts of agreement.

"We watched someone get their third insubordination charge last week," Anna said, miming a gun to her temple. Simon was relieved he hadn't been around to see that.

"He's a monster," Aaron said.

"He's also our liaison with the Insurgency in the Megalopolic Center." Katherine reminded them.

"Do they know what he's *like*?" Simon asked.

Katherine leaned forward, angrily. "Do you know what he's *done*? He's spent a *decade* sneaking in and out of the Megalopolic Center, evading the microsats, organizing the resistance and forming alliances across the *continent*. He's fighting for the sake of *Humankind*. He's fought tribes of cannibals; marauders *and* evaded death by the Custers. You think he's a *monster*? You think he's *hard*? We're *fighting* monsters so goddamn hard they wiped out over a hundred and twenty million people in two days. Then they left anyone not hoarded into their Megalopolic Centers to die in the wilderness. Don't talk to me about monsters. I owe that man...*all* of you owe him your lives more times

over than you could imagine. There have been so many days...just ordinary days to *everyone* in Toppledawn, when Major Ted Logan was out there in the wilderness, shedding blood and waging war to keep us safe.”

Katherine refilled her cup, swallowed it down, and tossed the empty mug, rattling, across the table as she got up, "You guys enjoy your party. I'm going to bed."

**

Each of the three teams were to be moved into the Megalopolic Center individually. As Katherine and Rich completed training with the rest of the Copper Street Team, Simon watched as the other two groups were moved, one after the other and without notice, into the Megalopolic Center. You went to bed one night, you woke up the next morning, and one team was gone. Life went on, and everyone waited for their turn to come next.

No one from Copper Street talked about Logan anymore—at least not around Katherine. Tabitha never brought up his name, so neither did Simon. Not that he didn't think about Logan. Was he a renegade hero who did the hard, ugly, and necessary things, or was he a man made into a monster by an alien invasion? Simon's team spent yet another week training, waiting to be moved to the city. It was one week closer to the actual mission, which meant less time being acclimated with the Megalopolic Center. Simon was frustrated.

And Simon had to admit he wanted to know what it looked like inside the Megalopolic Center; he was curious to see it; his memory of the Megalopolic Center was one of Hell. He could not imagine that such a place had become a haven for more than one hundred and twenty-five million people.

He was curious to see the people who lived in these places; to see those who had so placidly allowed the last decade of their lives to be spent as prisoners inside a massive fortified encampment. He wondered about children; no one under twelve could even vaguely remember the world before the Custodians. An entire generation was growing up under Alien rule as if it was the most normal thing in the world. And these were the people that Simon was going to sacrifice his life for; it was strange.

He knew that life in the Megalopolic Center was not a hard one; nowhere near as hard as the life lived by those in the Settlements outside the walls. He knew they all were in good health, sheltered, comfortable, safe...and their lives must be so *easy*. And *these* people would probably not even understand *why* he was going to do what he was going to do.

Simon remembered something his father had said once, during a bitterly cold winter when Gregory asked him why they didn't just move to the Megalopolic Center. None of

them had been chipped because they'd fled before the Custers began chipping. They had never been registered as runaways, they could go to the Megalopolic Center for a better life. His father looked angry—Simon had expected him to yell or shout. Instead, Charles Petrovich folded his arms across his chest and said, levelly, "Because it is better to reign in Hell than to be a slave in Heaven."

But Charles Petrovich had never had any advice for Simon or Gregory about how to *fight* the Aliens; only the necessity that they remained free to do so. Simon had believed that fighting the Aliens was futile. He wondered now if he still felt the same way.

**

He was sitting in the canteen, drinking sugar-water and eating some unidentifiable meat; groundhog or possibly rabbit, from its sweet, greasy flavor. The meat was chewy, tough, but it was enjoyable in spite of its texture. Just as he was tucking in for another bite, a double-tap on his shoulder made him turn around. Simon saluted automatically as he saw Major Logan standing before him.

"Yes, sir?" Simon asked, saluting.

"You have one hour to pack what you need – and *only* what you need – before we take your team into the Megalopolic Center. At the end of that hour, you should be waiting outside Briefing Room Seven."

Simon was confused. "I'm sorry, Sir...but it's not curfew. I thought that you were only moving the teams after curfew."

Logan nodded approvingly, "Glad to see you'd noticed that one. You're right. We only move after curfew, and curfew's in three hours, Insurgent. But before we move you out, dumbass, you'll have last-minute instructions to sit through, drills to practice and preparations to make. So finish your skunk, and go pack a bag! You now have fifty-seven minutes to report to BR Seven."

"Sir, yes Sir!" Simon replied, saluting.

As Logan left, Simon felt a rush of thrill and plummet of fear at the same time. This was it—for some strange reason, he kept wondering at his surprise that he was eating skunk; you had to be careful when skinning and butchering skunk. One wrong move and their spray would taint the meat. Still, he finished it, thinking of the accomplished job the butcher had done, then left to his billet to pack.

**

Simon, packed bag slung over his shoulder, entered the briefing room only a few minutes ahead of Aaron and Katherine. He took a seat by Tabitha, who smiled him over. Anna, Lloyd, and Rich were already there, sitting together and talking. Although he was relieved to be

starting the mission, Simon felt a ball of fear falling through his stomach.

Around Simon, the sterile, white cinderblock walls were a constant reminder of an era long past...it reminded him of public grade school. But this wasn't a school; it was their last briefing before the Megalopolic Center. The stakes were higher and the consequences graver. Dennis was the last to arrive; it was a few minutes more before Major Logan came into the briefing room.

"Good evening. There are a few points to go over before we head to our rendezvous with the Insurgency teams within the Megalopolic Center," Logan said. "As of twenty-three hundred hours, you will assemble at the motor pool. You'll be taken out individually on animal-drawn wagons along different routes to positions within a half-klick from the Wall. From there you'll be met by escorts who will take you into the city by secured routes. The microsats overhead form a heavy orbital perimeter around the Wall. Therefore you will not speak to your driver, nor will you speak unless given leave to do so by your escorts on the other end. Remain quiet and patient. It's a three-hour trip, so I suggest you try and sleep.

"I have no information to give you about the trip from the rendezvous into the city. There are multiple routes available to each of the escorts, and they will determine which one to bring you through. As you all know, this is a one-way trip; once you're part of the Insurgency you're in

until you're dead. I'm sorry for that, but it is a cruel reality of the war we're fighting. Now, moving on, we have to get you properly outfitted for your trip."

They were led to an old-fashioned locker room just off the motor pool. It was small, and a row of lockers bearing their names lined one wall. There were benches horse-shoeing the lockers. As they approached their lockers and opened them, Logan continued his briefing. "Inside your lockers, you will find clothing and protective gear designed to mask your body heat and electromagnetic signatures from the Custers. The material is also designed to confuse the technology the microsats use to detect movement. As far as the eyes in the sky will be concerned, you'll be nothing more than pets or livestock riding with the wagoneers. A lot of people shelter near the wall at night; the microsats won't even know you're there...if, as I said, you don't fuck up.

"The garments also provide protection against small and medium arms fire; in case you run into marauders or some other gang of nasties between here and the Wall; all kinds of wicked people cluster around the Orange Wall. Get dressed and meet me in the Armory in ten."

Major Ted Logan turned and left. Simon and the others turned to the lockers, pulled out the gear, and found spots on the benches. They stripped to their underwear and dressed in the glossy, metallic black uniforms, sewn together from irregularly-shaped triangles of stiff fabric.

"Well, these don't look stupid at all," Katherine said when they were all dressed. They laughed, then came together for a group hug. Simon was fighting tears; Tabitha was beside him, and they were potentially pressing flesh together for the last time.

INTO THE CITY

Simon's wagon was the third to leave. He was beginning to doze when his two-cow driven wagon lurched from the motor pool, and as he watched the overhead lights recede into the blackness of the night above, Simon was falling asleep, staring into a sky ablaze with stars that Humans had not gazed upon with the naked eye in centuries.

He woke when the wagon jolted to a halt and something heavy and hard hit him in the head. Simon sat up, his hands automatically clasping the rifle thrown him. "Heads up," his driver whispered; a sound the microsats would detect, but would not necessarily monitor, "We've got company."

Simon said nothing; the rifle was wrapped loosely with the same fabric of his uniform. It would be as invisible as he was, as he crept to the side of the wagon the driver pointed to. For all the microsats knew, he was just a trained animal following his master's orders after being woken by something thrown at him. He crouched at the ready.

"I can't tell if they're friendly, boy," his anonymous driver said, "Get ready."

Simon stuck the barrel of the gun over the side of the wagon and stared down the scope. It was night-vision, with enhanced tracking the likes of which he'd never imagined. He could see five people in the near distance, hiding among rocks and bushes, armed and armored, creeping through the underbrush. Simon turned his scope to the wagon driver, who had abandoned the reins for his own rifle, tracking across the horizon to the opposite side and behind them, clearly looking to see if they were being flanked. Simon trained his scope back on the known potential targets. His heart was beating violently in his chest, and he had to calm his breathing as he selected his target: the farthest away. His second shot would hit the closest, leaving the other three ducking for cover or opening fire as he dipped and rolled from the wagon wall to the far side to wait for them to stop firing.

"Wait for it," his driver hissed, bringing his own gun to bear on the five approaching subjects. They were close enough that Simon could make out two women and three men. His first target was one of the women. This wouldn't be the first time he'd been in a firefight or the first time he'd fired on a woman. But it would be the first time he'd be *opening* fire on a woman. For some reason he couldn't quite understand, this made him nervous.

He slowly, quietly cocked the hammer on his rifle and put his index finger carefully against the primed trigger, lining up his shot. They had trained and drilled for this; the driver knew what shots Simon was lining up and so was

targeting the second and third approaching targets. As he focused down the scope, Simon realized that the group was wearing clothing similar to his own: sewn together from individual pieces of various shapes, all that same, strange thick material. He could also make out their night-vision goggles and watched their slow, careful approach from the craggy cover of the rocky terrain.

Simon carefully maintained his shot. He'd done this countless times, both hunting and fighting alongside the Night-Miners. He was waiting for them to be closer, to make sure he got his target. Suddenly, the five approaching figures halted and crouched. Simon instinctively swung his scope around to the leader, who was exposed, down on one knee. Simon watched as he shouldered a submachine gun and raised his right arm to shoulder height, bending at the elbow to form a right angle, open hand, fingers splayed.

"That's your lift," his driver rasped. "Keep the rifle. This is where you get out."

Slinging his bag over his shoulder, Simon hopped over the side of the wagon and crouched low, carrying the rifle pointed downwards and at arms-ready as he made a zig-zag approach to his escorts. When he reached the leader, the group surrounded him and gestured for him to remain silent.

Simon was given a pair of night-vision goggles. They began walking as the wagon that brought him rolled on. Simon was in the middle of the group and, remembering his instructions, remained silent. One of the Insurgents approached him with a strange, gun-like device. "This is your Megalopolis Center Chip." The Insurgent whispered in his ear. Then he pulled open a flap on the arm of Simon's jacket that he didn't know was there, exposing bare skin. The machine was pressed against his arm, and the Insurgent pulled the trigger. Simon had to bite back a yelp as his arm exploded in waves of stabbing pain. Tears streamed from his eyes before the gun was finally withdrawn and an adhesive patch slapped onto the small, bleeding wound. The flap on Simon's sleeve was put back up, he was given a quick pat on the back, and they set off.

They walked south-east, as best as Simon could tell by the stars overhead. The rocky hills were becoming steeper, and soon they were crossing through heaps of rubble and debris; ruined roadbeds and destroyed outlying buildings, already reclaimed by persistent grass, hearty shrubs and stunted trees. They were heading downhill now, moving toward the bottom of what looked to have once been a riverbed. The terrain at the bottom of the hill was lush with thick, high grass and they had to pick a careful path to avoid tripping over hidden stones, smoothed by water that had flowed this way for centuries before the river was diverted or dried up.

Simon followed as his guides turned their party eastwards along the riverbed, occasionally stumbling, biting off curses before a grunt could even escape his lips. They were near enough to the Megalopolis Center that the lights along the Orange Wall were starting to interfere with their goggles, but it was still easier to pick out the terrain with the night vision.

Although he was no stranger to walking, Simon's feet were beginning to get sore when the lead escort halted and crouched beside some tall overgrowth to the far side of the dried riverbed. Pulling them aside, he revealed an ancient, cracked and dry concrete culvert, small and narrow. Two of his escorts got down on all fours and crawled in. The commander gestured for him to follow. Simon hesitated, looking into the dark, narrow drainpipe's opening. His unnamed leader waived him in again, more emphatically. Simon began crawling into the pipe, the last three escorts coming up behind. The drainage pipe led up; it was narrow and dark. The old concrete tunnel was cracked, broken, and would bend off in a new direction suddenly. The air was musty, and all Simon could hear was the dragging scrape as they crawled their way gradually upwards through the dark. He'd never liked small spaces...not tight like this. He felt trapped, suffocating...his heart started to beat faster as they continued along.

They passed junctions and pipe connection joints and more old, collapsing concrete into an even narrower pipe, leading upwards at a steeper angle. Simon could feel the

walls of the pipe scraping against him as he climbed. The top of the pipe was dragging, pulling at his pack and rifle. Securely wrapped in cloth, the weapon didn't scrape, but the drag against him made Simon feel as though the pipe was trying to catch him, trap him. He couldn't get enough air into his lungs; the walls were so close, brushing against his shoulders and pressing down on his back and chest as he pushed himself along. What if he got stuck? How would he get out?

He started to clamber, to push his way faster up the tight tunnel, but all he did was hurt his knee and bang his head. Simon began to hyperventilate as he slid backward. Someone halted his slide from below. He worked Simon's rifle off, lowering it down to the next Insurgent. Simon was shrugging off his pack, grateful for the help. But as the bag was freed, he felt a new weight crushing him: one of the escort team members climbing on top of, over him. Then Simon felt a sharp edge press against his throat and a pair of lips at his ear.

"Get your shit together and stay quiet," the harsh whisper said, "Or I will slit your fucking throat." The knife and the mouth and the body belonging to both retreated down the tunnel, and their climb resumed.

**

After an eternity the pipe became a wide, vertical shaft with rungs cemented into one wall. Simon could breathe

easier; there was light above, likely that meant an exit, an escape from the long, dark corridor he'd had to crawl through. They slowed near the top as the first two escorts lifted away a grate of some kind, delicately laying it to one side. First one, then the other went up. A few moments of tense silence later, a head dipped back down. All Simon could see through his night goggles was a masked face and a gloved hand giving the thumbs-up sign. Simon climbed out, and so did the last of the escort team.

They were in a crumbling concrete box. There was fresh air wafting in, and Simon turned his face towards the breeze just as the escort leader reached the false curtain of overgrowth blocking the doorway and pushed it aside. The sky was lightening; dawn wasn't far off. Simon had expected to find himself in the middle of the alien megalopolis. But instead, he stepped outside into a wooded overgrowth and could hear a strange, water-like rush in the distance beyond the trees, beyond what the woods obscured. As he listened, he realized the sound was too steady, too rhythmic and at the same time irregular to be the water source he might otherwise have expected. A tap on his shoulder made him turn around. His five escorts crouched in a circle, Simon sitting with them. The leader unwrapped a cord tied around the padding on his left forearm. It exposed a writing pad, fixed in place inside the fabric. Everyone waited while he wrote. Finally, he looked up and tore off a sheet of paper, passing it around. It read:

Stay with Package. Vasquez, with me on perimeter.

The leader and the woman who'd held flank during the escort left the concrete structure. Simon studied the ruins of the bunker. From what he could tell this had been some sort of wastewater substation—a sewage line junction. It was just a rotting concrete shell gutted of whatever machinery had been running here. Simon realized that if the Custers had reclaimed this place that they would still be using it. So it was not aliens but Humans that he had to worry about; Simon wondered which he feared more.

The scouts returned and made the "All Clear" hand sign, and they left the rotting concrete bunker. Simon noticed an old, overgrown gravel road winding its way toward them. He and the Insurgents avoided it, instead walking slowly, carefully through the surrounding woods. Memories of his stealth training at Copper Street and with the Insurgent camp flooded Simon's mind. He was careful with each foot placement, following patiently as the three ahead of him made slow, deliberate pace from the woods. The rushing noise grew louder, and Simon caught glimpses of rapid movement beyond the treeline.

As the woods thinned, the group began walking parallel to the woodland's fringe, keeping to cover and moving on at the same slow, steady pace. Through the increasingly sparse trees, Simon could see large buildings in the distance. He couldn't make out any details, but he knew their presence meant they were inside the Megalopolis Center's inner wall. The sun was over the horizon, and

they'd stashed their night-vision goggles back into their equipment pouches. Other than the loud, intermittent rushing noise and the distant glimpse of the alien buildings, this could have been any other walk through the woods. They were climbing hilly terrain, quickening their pace but still minimizing noise by careful placement of their feet. They continued to climb, and the rushing noise and the treeline faded away. They were standing on a ridge, and there was so much to see that Simon didn't know how to take it all in.

Simon's father had taught him how to use the position of the sky, shadows of tall objects and geographic landmarks to locate himself. Simon had only been lost in the woods once—on his fourteenth birthday when his father had gotten him drunk for the first time in his life. After he woke to find himself somewhere in the forest, a note from his father tied in a waterproof satchel to his wrist that read:

Here is a map of the terrain, and the location of our home. You have a compass in your pocket, along with basic trapping, hunting, and fishing equipment. YOUR LOCATION IS NOT MARKED ON THE MAP. I love you. Please come home.

After reading the note, Simon had, without panicking, understood the lesson his father was trying to teach him: He had to rely on himself, and what he knew. He had used those skills, and the compass and map to find his home. It took Simon three days. During that time, he never went

without food or water. He always knew at the very least approximately where he was, because of the terrain and flora and fauna. He could track direction with the compass, or by judging the shadows of objects and the position of the sun in the sky, the way moss and fungi grew and the way birds and animals traveled. And when Gregory had turned fourteen, Simon had helped his father put him through the same initiation.

Now, based on what he knew, Simon could tell that he was facing at least fifteen degrees northwest. He'd have needed a compass to gauge correctly, but before him was something he had never had to navigate; a panorama he had never been able to imagine. Below him was the Megalopolic Center, stretching in an incomprehensible maze of tall and burdensome towers and buildings the size and shape of mountains. There was a frightening beauty to the geometric precision of the city's layout, however. It was nonetheless disturbing, unsettling in its marvel.

There were wide versions of what he recognized as highways, but with strange, oblong vehicles rushing over them. Sealed pods that reminded him of goose eggs or plant seeds sped past in two directions, the sound of their passing waterlike in his ears—the source of the sound he'd been tracking. He could see, distantly, places where the highways changed direction multiple times, reaching out into the horizon-spanning sprawl of North American Megalopolic Center North East. The city rose roughly due west along the contours of a distant mountain, stretching far

to the north and east with utilitarian yet oddly aesthetic structures encroaching the fringes of the forest and highways between them.

Simon could see where the Megalopolis Center was broken by rivers, and at the frontier of his field of vision to the south-east, either a lake or a harbor. But everywhere, towering above it all was the Orange Wall. Reflective panels of terrible size provided the necessary sunlight to the reclaimed forest that spread its canopy in a horseshoe around the city. They were on its fringes, where smaller, infrastructure and maintenance buildings dominated. The city rose in height like a mountain labyrinth toward its core, laid out in a circular grid against the physical boundary of the Orange Wall. The buildings were both simultaneously organic and alien, organized in a fashion that was both deliberate, and unfathomable. He felt lost and confused by the sight of it.

"Welcome to Namcne, as the locals call it," his escort leader said, pronouncing it '*nam-knee*.' "The locals being the hundred and fifty-nine million people who live here. You're going to help us bring down the alien influence that they have surrendered to, not just here, but around the entire goddamn planet."

THE GREAT, GOLDEN CITY

OUT OF THE WILDERNESS

One of the egg-shaped cars waited for them as they left the woods and headed to the roadway. Simon was mute as they climbed inside the oval, transparent blister. His fingers clutched the arms of his chair as they rushed off along the roadway at speeds he'd never conceived. They cruised closer to the city, taking a tributary road off the main highway and into an opening in the canyon of massive towers. The buildings were generally uniform, but there were changes in size, height, width...a basic color palette of rust-red and dark tan seemed to him, except for the rare personal flourish of blue or yellow, to make the buildings almost indistinguishable from one another to Simon's eye. He'd need to be on the ground, actually observing the terrain, before being able to orient himself here.

Simon was intimidated by the size of the place...the knowledge that the ship overhead had come equipped to build four cities like this on every continent in a matter of months terrified him. He remembered when those first, smaller buildings dropped within sight of the Relocation Camp, the sound that followed seconds later: a thunderclap that pushed through him as it roared...that had been when his parents had decided to run...he couldn't even tell where in the Megalopolis Center that would have been relative to what was around them now. Simon wasn't sure what was

more frightening: the utterly alien terrain around him, or the fact he had no means of navigating it. He watched more buildings than he could count rush past; they all looked so much alike. Their car's speed was constant, and all the more terrifying for the maze of walls and buildings around him, now, along with other egg-shaped cars zipping and rushing at equally terrifying speeds around them.

The buildings were all round; cylindrical gradually tapering to narrow, curved roofs. Simon guessed it had something to do with the shape necessary for atmospheric entry, as well as some particular alien aesthetic. City blocks were separated by wide tracts of greenspace; lush grass and tall trees. Some buildings reflected the sun down into parts of the massive city that wouldn't usually have gotten such light. Another building was made with transparent panes taller than Simon could fathom, letting light into what looked to him like a giant, tiered forest, identified by generic text as

AIR EXCHANGE GREENHOUSE 553193

Stenciled along its top and the metallic columns supporting the structure's tall, glass enclosures. Simon watched it recede as they continued deeper into the city. The greenhouse had been taller than most of the surrounding buildings, though by far not the tallest that Simon could see from their car. Deeper and deeper into the maze of alien buildings they traveled, their driverless car seeming to be the only one who knew their destination.

Simon's escorts, like him, were now dressed in civilian clothes of a conventional style. Light fabric, for the climate in this area on this side of the Walls. Drab, dull colors. Dark green, loose-fitting pants, off-white linen shirts and either brown or green vests of a similar, but thicker material. The loose-fitting clothes were gender-neutral, utilitarian—the opposite of the imagined, futuristic opulence he'd presumed would be worn within Namcne.

They said nothing as they traveled nearly an hour to their destination. Between the terrifying ground-speed of the vehicle in which Simon waited and the scenery of the Megalopolis Center around him, he didn't have much to say. He was in too much awe of his surroundings: the cylindrical buildings, the countless walkways and highways, the people...so many people...and yet still so much space...so much greenery and water flowing freely everywhere...Simon felt as though he were high on mushrooms and alcohol to the point of hallucination; he felt as though he were *dreaming*, simply because nothing he had ever witnessed could compare. Simon felt a confused mix of horror, of moving beauty, of anger and insignificance imposed on the World by the Custodians. He was surprised by the tears on his cheeks.

“Hits everyone differently.” Simon looked up; Vasquez, the woman who'd been his first potential target only hours earlier regarded him sympathetically, “But everyone cries the first time they see it; *everyone*.”

“Stow it,” the escort’s CO growled. And so they were quiet until their car finally halted at the south-west corner of some intersection. They got out onto the street, and the vehicle zipped off, silently.

The throng moved around them momentarily as their group oriented themselves. Once they started walking, they melted seamlessly into the crowds on the avenue. Simon again felt dizzy; he could not remember the last time – including the last Toppledown Geminids Celebration that he’d been this closely pressed to others. The scent of Humans mingled with oils, spices, and perfumes worn in far less abundance outside the city walls...and only then during festivals or other celebratory occasions.

Simon did his best to not appear overwhelmed; he concentrated on not craning his neck to look at the massive, shadow-casting towers around him. Soon they were turning down one side street, then another and then they led Simon up a gradually-sloping ramp that curved along the building’s edge to a door about a third of the way up the round wall. Simon looked up; it was a short, wide structure, darkened windows ringing it as it rose – as best as he could guess – ten or twelve levels high. Hardly the most prominent building in the Megalopolic Center, but certainly larger than anything Simon could remember seeing in the world outside the Orange Wall. He imagined this building bursting into a corona of flame as it dropped from the sky, targeting and traveling meteoric towards the

place it now rested. His escort leader rapped on the door. It slid into the wall, and they were led inside.

They walked into a warmly lit foyer; cream-colored walls and rich brown archways set at right angles, reducing the alienness of the place with familiar Human accents. Landscapes hung on the wall, sconced lights broke the walls at regular intervals. They were led through the door on the far right, which likewise opened to the side before closing behind them. There was a curving ramp descending along the far left curve of the undecorated, unfurnished room, disappearing through an arch into a hole in the floor. The basement was nearly empty; wide and as vast as the building, a web of support columns climbing the circular walls and spidering across the ceiling. They continued following the ramp as it curved down to another opening in the floor; this one was bare of archway or smooth edges: it had obviously been cut from the floor by Human hands using crude tools. On the level below they came to a portion of wall that had been similarly cut away, the earth behind mined out and buttressed with salvaged metal beams. They crossed through, and Simon immediately recognized the Faraday Cage enclosing the walls and the silence curtain that was closed behind him as he passed through. In the room at the other end of the tunnel Katherine, Aaron, and Anna were already waiting, lounging at a large, circular table in the center of the room, drinking coffee and relaxing after their long trek through the night.

The light from the middle of the ceiling reflected off the copper walls of the room's Faraday Cage. The place felt warm, *comfortable* in a way Simon immediately felt suspicious of. He wasn't used to it and having it derive from this alien place – albeit one seized by the Insurgency – was not something his conscious mind could entirely accept. Simon gratefully sat down with his comrades, taking comfort in their familiar presence. Their table had the luxury of a Lazy Susan in its center; from its divided sides, Simon took a mug and poured himself a single, sizeable fresh cup of coffee from a warming urn. The next slot on the Lazy Susan held pitchers of milk, honey, and sugarcane, along with a rare and exotic spice he'd only ever had a few times in his life: *cinnamon*.

**

It wasn't long before Simon was halfway through his coffee. He and everyone just sat in dazed, tired silence, enjoying the first real rest they'd had since leaving Copper Street Station. Simon was even debating a second cup...a decadent indulgence he hadn't even conceived of since life in Toppledawn. He was just taking another sip when Dennis was escorted down by another team of soldiers.

"Hey, guys," Dennis said. He was met by slightly more energetic greetings than Simon had been, but only because they were all more rested and awake. Simon tuned Dennis out as he raved about the coffee, but drinking the rest of his own, he settled on fixing himself a second. Over the next

hour, Tabitha and Lloyd came in. Food was brought down as the day wore on: a platter of cured meats, bread and preserves, cheese and fruit. It looked like a Harvest Supper to Simon's eyes; an abundance of food. Everyone soon clustered off, eating and talking among themselves; Simon and Tabitha were openly, absentmindedly holding hands as they picked at their food. Dennis and Aaron were talking excitedly together, and Anna and Lloyd watched the silence curtain expectantly.

Katherine knew why. She was painfully aware of how long had passed since Lloyd had come in, and Rich was still out there. Finally, the curtain was raised, and a soldier stepped into the room. Like the rest of the Insurgents inside the Megalopolis Center walls, he wore civilian clothes. Only the insignia pinned over his left breast denoted his rank.

"Good morning, Insurgents," the Captain said, "Before we begin, it is my unfortunate duty to inform you that Escort Team Foxtrot, escorting Insurgent Richard West to this complex, was hit by a Custer microsat strike. We don't have all the details; spotters waiting along our perimeter witnessed the explosion very early this morning...we only just got confirmation a short while ago."

"*How* short a while ago?" Katherine asked, getting up from the table, "Have I been wasting my time here all morning while you pissed around, or did it take this long for the information to work its way up the chain to me?"

Either answer will do; I'd just like to know why the fuck I wasn't informed sooner that one of *my* people was *dead*. We shouldn't have lost *anyone*, today; this was a routine escort mission! So what happened? Is this base compromised? Did the microsats get lucky? Is there a leak in the seals at Logan's camp? I need to know, for the sake of my people *and* the mission!"

"General Anton," the officer, a Captain, said, "We were going to brief you immediately after this initial –"

"*General* Anton?" Anna said, disbelievingly, "*General* Anton? I thought you were just some ex special-ops power-bitch. You're a *General*?"

"Shut the hell up, Vicci," Katherine said, dangerously calm, "Do you think that just because I've been outside the Wall for ten years, that I've been outside the *fight*? Do you really think *all* I've done for the last quarter of my goddamn life is run a gang in a shit-hole town like Toppledown? Do you know how many operations I've run? Do you have any *idea* how many times I've made the trip into this city? Do you think I earned my rank sitting on my *ass*?"

Anna stared at Katherine, who seethed before her. "No...no Ma'am, General Anton, Ma'am," she stammered.

"Good," Katherine said, turning back to the Captain, "Look...tell us what we need to know so we can get to

Phase Next. I assume recon is en-route to the site of the explosion; keep me posted at all times of any and all progress. Is that understood, Captain...”

“Spence, General Anton. Yes, Ma’am.”

“Captain Spence,” Katherine said, “Please continue. My people and I will grieve for our comrade when time permits.”

"General," Spence said with a nod and turning his attention to the group, "Your mission begins two weeks from tomorrow. Today is to be a day of rest and recuperation before you begin city orientation and mission-specific precision training. Tomorrow, each of you will be taken individually into this section of the city. Each of the teams from your region have been deployed to their mission-specific coordinates within Namcne. This is not the opening volley of the war, but it will prove nonetheless to be a significant operation; it may very well lead to a turning point in our fight against Custer.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Katherine said, rising to leave, “Everyone, Captain Spence will hand out your specific bunk assignments and information that you’ll need to navigate this complex. We’ll meet tonight after supper; I’ll tell you what I learn about what happened to Rich. I’ll share what I can. You’re dismissed for the rest of the day. I expect the Station Chief and I have much to discuss.”

A DAY OF UNREST

The buildings occupied by the Insurgency had been converted to their needs. Tabitha and Simon were quartered together, and though they took the time to stow their meagre possessions, they headed straight from their quarters to the "club" indicated on their orientation maps as the only place in the complex that served alcohol. When they arrived neither of them was surprised to see Aaron, Dennis, Anna, and Lloyd already there and into their cups.

The place was on the upper floor of the smaller, second building; the seating arrangement was across two levels, the top floor an expansive inner terrace. The music was loud, coming from a battered, cobbled-together sound system like most Simon had grown up around. Simon didn't recognize the music, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. His life had not had much room for music, besides his father singing to them at bedtime, or the music they blasted from Cameron's stereo during digs.

...Cameron...

They took turns getting the next round; as the latest arrivals, that meant Tabitha and Simon got drinks for their table before sitting down. Each drink was taken in toast to Rich's memory, ending with an oath to avenge him, and all lost to the Custers. Simon, who had become unused to

drinking so early in the day since leaving the Night-Miners, soon found his head spinning. He had no desire to slow his pace, however; though he'd only really known Rich for a few weeks, the burly man from the Hammerheads had been part of *his* team; *his* squad. He'd been from Toppledawn, and that *meant* something. Everyone knew that this mission could likely end with all of them dead...but Rich hadn't even gotten the chance to *start* the mission. He was one more dead Toppledawn lost since the spring, since the Insurgency came to their quiet, hopeless town.

Katherine had described it as a shit-hole, and Simon often thought the same; but its people meant more to him than the place ever had, ever would. Toppledawn only had a few hundred residents. Everyone knew everybody, and more than a few times during moots Simon and Rich would see each other. Sometimes, Simon would *technically* break Truce and directly sell mushrooms to Rich. Rich traded back for twice their weight in coffee, weed or sugarcane, none of which Simon minded receiving in barter – especially since the Hammerheads *always* had the best stuff. Before the Insurgency entered their lives, they'd only really known each other in passing...but Simon was tired of people he knew being killed by the Custodians. He wasn't even aware he was crying until he rubbed a tickle on his cheek and his hand came away wet. He looked up, realizing he was not the only one crying. Tabitha caught his eye; she was red-faced, as teary-eyed as him. She reached for his hand, and they left for the only real solace they could find.

It was supposed to be a day of rest and recuperation; neither of which were easy things to contemplate when faced with the sudden death of a comrade who only hours before had been alive and smiling grimly as he prepared for the excursion that killed him. And each death on this mission was a brutal reminder of their slim odds of survival: each death brought their own ever closer. Even as Simon and Tabitha kissed and undressed, they both just found themselves collapsing, sobbing against one another. They lay under the blankets, weeping, making love, seeking escape more than release.

**

Simon was awake for a long time after Tabitha fell asleep. He kept wondering where or when on the trip to the Orange Wall that Rich had been hit. He kept wondering how and why the Custers found out; why they only hit Rich, why the rest of the team had been spared...if Rich had been killed by some random mistake he or one of his escorts had made, or if they'd just unknowingly crossed some invisible perimeter protecting something of interest to the Custodians. If it was just something as painfully, mindlessly simple as that, then it could have just as easily been Simon that had died...or Tabitha, or *any* of them.

He hadn't really slept since the previous night; dozing in the back of a wagon on his trek into the Megalopolis Center had hardly been restful. Even now, exhausted as he

was, early into a new day with no obligations until their meeting with Katherine at suppertime, Simon could not find sleep. He could feel his blood, thick and sluggish pounding in his neck and temples. It seemed each beat of his pulse was making him feel heavier, more tired; but instead of drifting into unconsciousness, sleep slipped further away. He rolled over and felt a sudden pulling, twitching sensation in his legs. He curled one and extended the other, stretching the leg stiff and holding it that way until it hurt. Simon switched legs, did the same thing, and sighed—the twinges were already creeping back in. He wasn't going to sleep. The jimmy legs, as his father had called them, were proof enough of that. He got up, still a little dizzy from the alcohol and tasting it unpleasantly in his mouth as it rolled in his stomach. Simon stretched his legs, flexing, relaxing, flexing, relaxing. He looked at the time: it wasn't even midday; Tabitha was sound asleep. Simon got dressed and decided to explore the compound. He fished his information packet from his hip pocket, unfolded it and read the leaflet about their Complex.

The buildings were locked-in; only those authorized could leave – that much, at least, Simon had already figured out for himself. But other than the private quarters and a few restricted areas, most of the compound remained open-access. The information packet had a leaflet about the two structures: the main building was given over to offices, training facilities, and communications with other Resistance Compounds within the Megalopolis Center. Given that two-thirds of all correspondence was done by

carrier pigeon, Simon assumed this meant a lot of bird-feeding and shit-cleaning on the upper floors. The second building, which was mostly underground (Some sort of automated infrastructure system) had been modified into residences, community centers, and public spaces. The Rebels need never leave the compound, save to go on a mission – which was both as intended and necessary.

Simon stopped for coffee at one of the canteens. While drinking, he read with fascination about how, after falling into their drop vectors, the buildings ejected their engine compartments, which then self-destructed. The buildings descended with only thrusters to slow them, often deliberately impacting instead of gently landing, in order to ensure the deep placement of their foundations in the earth. Then infrastructure systems burrowed to connect the buildings of the developing Megalopolis Center, and autonomous machine swarms created the transit system and transport hubs. It was clear that the Custodians had perfected the *science* of invasion.

The coffee helped settle his head and stomach but did little for the nervous exhaustion that plagued him. Still, Simon knew he wouldn't be able to get any desperately-needed sleep until much, much later. Supper was still hours away, and even as he aimlessly wandered the open sections of the Rebel Compound bored and tired, Simon knew it would be a long day. Despite that the whole of Toppledown and most of its economy could have fit comfortably in the Insurgent structures, there were not that

many places Simon could go before having seen everything he had access to twice. Only after returning to the “club” for another round of drinks and a late lunch – a hearty bowl of stew, cooked hot right there in the back – was Simon finally groggy enough to tell that sleep could, at last, take him.

With relief, he returned to his quarters. As the door hissed shut behind Simon, the sound of it woke Tabitha from her sleep. She sat up, the homespun cotton sheet falling away from her beautiful, strong and muscular neck and shoulders and her small, pear-shaped breasts. She stared at him, blearily. "Where have you been?" she asked, petulant from stolen sleep.

"I couldn't sleep," Simon said. "I went out for a walk."

"That was...four hours ago." Tabitha said, already used to the timekeeping luxury of a clock again. His father's watch was a relic to him; he kept it running and referred to it, no longer from habit but necessity. But Simon still measured time by the position of the sun and moon and stars; it was how his father had taught him; it was how the Night-Miners scheduled things. Tabitha sought out the comfort of vestiges from a lost Human Age...or perhaps she'd simply never forgotten. Simon thought he didn't need to know much about telling time, other than during their upcoming mission.

“Yeah, I guess it was,” he answered, not even sure if he remembered how long an hour *was*, beyond the abstract notion of sixty minutes of sixty seconds, each.

“And now?” Tabitha persisted.

“All I want to do is sleep.”

“Okay,” Tabitha said, getting out of bed and getting dressed, as Simon got undressed and collapsed into bed, “I’m actually kinda hungry. Anywhere good to eat?”

“The club,” Simon said, “They have good stew.”

“Thanks,”

“Can you help me out and wake me for the suppertime meeting?” Simon asked, blearily, already drifting off.

Tabitha chuckled, “Anything for you, dirt-digger.”

REPORT INTO THE DEATH OF

INSURGENT WEST

Katherine Anton sat in a small, brightly-lit room with three other people: two men and a woman. All of them bore the weight of a decade fighting Custer on their faces. Katherine took a cigarillo from her own supply and lit it as

her briefing continued. She inhaled the pure, clean tobacco smoke; one of the few things she would miss about Toppledown was the home-grown tobacco. Naturally grown, harvested, cured, cut, and rolled. But the tobacco was not as soothing as it would normally have been. The news was worse than she expected and soured the taste of it in her mouth.

“We have footage acquired from the microsatellite that targeted and killed your man West and his escort team.” General Weirs, an older man with thin pale features and stark, white hair said, passing her the tablet. On it played a loop of Rich and his escort walking alone through the craggy hills near the Orange Wall as seen from above; they grew onscreen as the camera zoomed in. Alien text displayed itself rapidly across the four corners of the screen. The group was slowly, carefully making way toward the Wall when the image flared to bright white. When the flash died down a second later, there was nothing left of the escort team; only a smoldering crater.

“Holy shit,” Katherine rasped, “The suits are supposed to deflect all scans; they shouldn’t even have shown up that clearly.” She’d worn suits or cloaks of the same material every time she’d made an incursion into the Megalopolis Center.

“We are trying to get confirmation,” General Muad replied, “Whether this particular batch of suits was

somehow flawed, or if the Custodian microsats have been upgraded with new detection equipment.”

“We need to know how much Custer knows,” Katherine said, “Inside the City Walls now or not, the rest of my team – and the other two teams – should be considered at risk; shit, the whole *Insurgency* could be at risk. We need to know why West’s team’s suits failed – that is, *if* they failed – and why the others didn’t.”

“You’re requesting microsat scanning data from every excursion last night from Logan’s to the City Entrances?” Weirs stammered, “Do you know how difficult that will be to obtain, General Anton?”

Katherine grinned, “A lot more difficult than it will be to carry out the mission with every last member of the Southeast Wildlands Insurgency getting stewed by microsats.” She took a drag from her cigarillo, “And besides, I don’t *just* want to see the data from last night’s incursion into Namcne; I want to see the data from the last *ten* incursions, at least.”

“What you’re asking for is impossible! Do you know how much of a risk our Agents would need to take to mine that much information from the Custers?” General Weirs exclaimed.

“How much do we ask of the Insurgents we ultimately send to their deaths? Shouldn’t our Agents be willing to

commit themselves to the same for the sake of the success of those Insurgents' missions?" Katherine asked.

"General Anton raises a valid point," General Sandoval, the only other woman in the room said, "We should contact the Hierarchy. We need as much information as possible before we attempt to proceed. As the General pointed out, Operation Domino, if not the entire *Insurgency* could be at risk."

"In the meantime, here is what we *do* know:" said General Muad, "That microsat had an effective operational range that could have wiped out your entire team. It could have likewise struck Logan's camp. It didn't; Logan's camp is still intact, as are the Copper Street and Toppledown settlements. While we may not know what caused this satellite to target Insurgent West's group, we do know that the Custodians have heightened security throughout the Megalopolic Center, including the installations targeted by Operation Domino."

"Something's not right," Katherine said. "Why only hit *one* of the incursion teams? Why not all of them? Why continue preparing for an imminent attack? The actual implies that Custer is expecting us, but doesn't know how, when, or where. Yet it also indicates they located, identified and targeted one of our teams *ahead* of the attack; that they knew right where those people were, and more importantly *who* they were. People get closer than West's team to the Orange Wall without *ever* being stewed;

for Christ's sake, they *camp* beside it. That means at the very least that Custer *identified* West and his escort as a viable threat."

"Given what we know about Custer," General Weirs said, "It *is* likely they heightened security in this City Section as an automatic response to the killing of Insurgent West's group. So far as I am concerned, there is no reason to suspect Custers are *even* aware of Operation Domino."

"So far as *I'm* fucking concerned," Katherine growled, "Too many of *my* people have died since this mission started. And I've *never* lost a man on an escort run into Namcne; not once in ten years. So, you tell me what the fuck is going on."

"That is what we will endeavor to find out, General Anton," General Muad replied grimly.

**

Tabitha woke Simon from sleep the best way possible, sliding her hands around him, kissing his neck...waking *him* up even as Simon's eyes tried dryly to focus. Their sex was slow, rough...except for when he kissed his way down her belly, Tabitha never broke eye contact with Simon, and the intensity of her gaze was maddening. Even after, as they lay together catching their breath, Simon could still feel the tension, the desperate urgency that had been behind every prolonged moment of it. They were getting closer to

the mission...Every chance they got to be together was one they had to take and take to its utmost.

“I still can’t believe this is all happening,” Simon said, after they washed, dressed and left for their supper meeting with Katherine...*General Anton*. It was the first they’d spoken since Tabitha had roused him from sleep.

“Well, it is,”

“Is it *ever*.”

They met in the same room they’d gathered in following their incursion into the city. There was a haze of tobacco smoke from Katherine’s cigarillo, and Simon noticed that Dennis and Anna were likewise smoking. Tabitha went straight to the table, turning the lazy Susan until a rack of bottles appeared. She poured herself a full glass of Toppledown grain fuel before picking from the supper tray that had been brought down for them. Soon the last of the stragglers came in. Everyone was drinking, eating, talking quietly, bitterly, among themselves. Katherine stood up, and everyone fell silent, watching her expectantly. She raised her glass, “To Rich,” she said, before drinking it down.

“To Rich,” everyone said, repeating both words and gesture. Katherine paced in front of her remaining team. “I promised you answers, and I have them. I had to fight like shit, and all the answers I have do is raise more

questions.” She took a long swallow of her drink, “It seems that someone in Rich's squad was transmitting a very low-frequency radio signal...whatever it was, it was enough to make them visible. Enough for Custer to get a lock.”

She let that sink in, let them utter murmurs of shock, anger, disbelief. She let the implications sink into *herself* for the third time since she'd gotten the report.

“Someone, either in Logan's Camp or this facility, is a traitor. Right now, besides the six of you, no one outside the Company Command – meaning me and the other three Generals – knows. *We* are conducting our own investigation. *You* will not be; you already have a mission. Nobody knows what really happened out there. I *expect* you all to fucking make sure it *stays* that way; you can talk about it amongst yourselves, *in private*. This is the sort of shit that fractures insurgencies; don't do Custer's job for them. If you have any thoughts or concerns, bring them to *me*. Am I understood?”

There were stunned murmurs of assent. Simon looked at the faces around him and realized that the only people he even believed he could trust were his fellow Toppledowners. And he was frightened.

THE TOUR

The next day personal handlers escorted them individually into the Megalopolic Center. Simon met Vasquez in the foyer early in the morning. The short, stocky woman who would give him a tour of the local area was dressed, like Simon, in the everyday clothes of the city: simple, natural fabrics dyed in hues of red, brown or green.

“We’re about ready to head out,” Vasquez said, “Now’s the time if you have any questions.”

“I do, actually,” Simon said, “How safe is it to talk on the street?”

Vasquez chuckled, “About the operation? It isn’t. We’re just out sightseeing; two friends from different ends of the ‘Knee having a tour.”

“I can’t just call you Vasquez.”

“Jeanette will do; my first name. In any case, keep the topic of conversation to the casual, and if anything starts troubling you, do this—” She rubbed the side of her nose with her thumb.

“You do that, or see me do that, it’s because something not good is going on. You do it if something gives you a

bad feeling, and I'll assess the situation. If *I* do it, we are probably going to beat feet the fuck outta there."

"Okay...what should I be watching for?"

Vasquez shrugged, "You'll spot the Monitors easily enough; they're about a foot taller than *everyone*, dress all in blue and wear helmets. They may or may not be robots; we don't know. Then there's the AAVs; that's short for Autonomous Aerial Vehicles. Flying cameras, basically. Also blue; round, the size of a good cantaloupe, covered in compound camera lenses. The time to worry is when or if any of them start paying particular attention to *you*."

"Shit,"

"Oh, there's more," Vasquez answered. "Custer's out there, walking around looking *exactly like us*. It's as if America were invaded by Canadians—you can't tell who's who. Not to mention collaborators. Humans who *willingly* police their fellow Man on behalf of the fucking Custers."

Simon was silent, disbelief and horror crossing his face, "How could they..."

"A lotta people *agree* with the Custers," Vasquez said. "That's a simple, horrible truth. A lotta people think we'd be dead or on the road to extinction if it weren't for them. The trouble is, you repeat the same bullshit long enough, and ten years later most people don't even remember it was

bullshit to begin with. Indoctrination, kid; you just keep teaching people what you want them to believe, how you want them to behave, and punish dissent with death from above. Eventually, people just accept it. We're going to shake them out of apathy...make them remember what it is to be Human, again."

Simon shook his head, staggered, overwhelmed by the complexity of it all. "How in the hell are we *supposed* to do anything to save them?"

"By showing them what the Custers don't want them to see: *that they can be beaten*." Vasquez replied, bitterly, "Any more questions?" Simon shook his head, "Then, let's go." She said as the door outside opened.

**

It was a bright, warm and humid day, and like the first time he'd been on the streets of Namcne, Simon felt immediately overwhelmed by the sheer crush of people on the street. Everyone was moving purposefully, determinedly trying to get from one place to another. Cars rushed silently past in either direction on the sunken surface of the roadbed between the sidewalks. Gradually elevating crossway bridges arched over each intersection, allowing pedestrians to cross without stopping or slowing their pace.

“It’s crowded here...compared to what I’m used to,” Simon said as he was jostled by the crowd while following Vasquez. “Where do *you* go to...get away?”

“You know what? A trip to the local park’s as good a place as any to start showing you around my end of The ‘Knee.”

Simon was about to ask what “The ‘Knee” was when he tied it in. Namcne; *The ‘Knee*—of course people who lived here would have a nickname for the place. They probably had regional dialects and colloquialisms as well, according to where in the incredibly huge city they were from.

“Cool,” Simon said, “Let’s go.” He managed to follow her through the crowd; a moving forest of people, only moving without any sensible, herd-like behaviour that he could discern; everyone seemed focused on where they were going, oblivious to those around them. Simon had to spend so much time avoiding running into someone that he couldn’t concentrate on his bearings. He didn’t understand how Vasquez could navigate the crowds, the ramps, and all the street corners so easily, knowing when to turn without even glancing at so much as a street sign, whose names meant as little to him as anything else he saw around him.

Besides the dense crowds on the wide walkways, rushing traffic in the roadbed and tall buildings dominated the landscape. At street level were entrances to residences and small markets. Every now and again as they walked,

Simon would spot smaller shops or what looked to be a tavern or club of some kind in the gaps between the crowds. He wasn't paying much attention, because Simon knew if he lost sight of Vasquez, he would be lost; Simon almost felt panicked by his inability to navigate. He could never remember a time in his life where he hadn't been able to pinpoint exactly where he was; his lost sense of direction felt like an amputation.

Finally, the crowds ahead thinned, and the roadway sloped away into a belowground tunnel. Ahead were great stone walls and a tall, wide arch: gates of some brassy metal, wrought into elaborate designs that Simon could only think of as ostentatious, stood open. Beyond was a thick canopy of tall, beautiful trees, broken by pathways and artificial clearings where picnic tables were arrayed. Simon staggered as they crossed into the park, trying to take it all in all over again.

"You should see the fountain," Vasquez said, "Follow me." To keep him distracted and maintain the appearance of a visitor to the area, she made small talk about the park; named for Evangeline Minh, one of the amateur astronomers who first spotted the Custodian's ship as it transited Saturn's orbit. There was a statue of her in the middle of the park, which Vasquez explained was the largest in the City Section. Minh made her home in the Section, and taught at the Section University, Vasquez said. Simon noticed, head and shoulders above the crowd, one of the dark blue Monitors heading through the park. He made

the sign she'd shown him, but in response Vasquez scratched her chin with her left index finger, indicating not to worry. Sure enough, the Monitor was on a simple patrol route, walking the park. A number in white on its chest and back, 11961, was the only means of identifying or distinguishing it from other Monitors, though this was the first he'd seen. Simon felt more at ease in the park; he could easily recognize the species of trees and the types of rock on the ground beneath them. He could make out several distinguishing features of each of the trees he looked at. Though he could probably only find his way around the park, at least for now, Simon's sense of direction had returned.

"I like it here," he remarked.

"I like it better than Terrell Park, in *your* Section," Vasquez said, maintaining their cover.

"I don't know," Simon said wistfully, thinking of the forests far outside Toppledawn, the wilderness in which he'd been raised, "You know what they say: *there's no place like home.*"

"Oh, shut up," she said with false cajoling, "I bet you like every park and preserve you've been to."

"I love the woods. And with marked paths...well, it makes it easier to orient yourself when you take the road less traveled."

"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I / I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference." Vasquez quoted.

"Robert Frost; my dad gave me a book of his as a gift, once."

"Mine too. You could probably find your way through this park without any problems; especially with all the maps everywhere." She led them over to an elevated post plainly printed with the word:

MAP

And swiped her hand over its rounded top. Immediately a full map of the park appeared in front of them, showing their location and showing markers of every point of interest. Vasquez casually gestured to rotate it in three dimensions. It was all Simon could do not to look astonished at such technical marvel.

"See? The fountain and her statue are here, in the middle of the park." Vasquez pointed to a spot on the map, which immediately grew in size until it showed the large, circular fountain, and the pillar and an even larger statue of a grinning young Asian woman resting her right arm on an elaborate telescope. The figure was made of some stone Simon couldn't identify; dark, smooth, shimmering. It almost looked metallic. A moment later the image vanished, and a route from their location to the statue and fountain was traced on the original floating map. Vasquez

waved her hand over the top of the pillar, and the map vanished.

“Think you can find your way?” she asked.

“Sure,” Simon said, though he was more than a little unsure.

"I'll race you; through the woods," Vasquez said, and took off at a run, off the path, and into the dense woods. Simon took a moment to get over his surprise, then dashed off after her. She was lost to him the moment she crossed into the forest preserve. Once inside, he recalled the map and his position relative to the fountain. He oriented himself as he ran, making a diagonal line across the ground that would take him out of the woods right where the path met the fountain square just beyond the treeline. He had to climb up a small outcropping, which slowed his progress until he got to the higher elevation and started running harder. When he broke through the brush a few minutes later, Simon was an easy sprint to the statue of Evangeline Minh.

Simon was pleased to discover Vasquez had not beaten him there; he had time enough for his heart and breathing to return to normal, and to take a good look at the actual statue and fountain before he heard Vasquez blunder out of the woods.

"Jeanette!" he called, waving to her, "I was starting to think you'd gotten lost. I was about to go in and look for you." Simon couldn't even *try* keeping the smirk off his face.

"Don't push your luck," Vasquez snarled, "Congratulations on getting here first, you win; kiss my ass." She sat catching her breath as Simon watched the park around them; he noticed drones flying overhead, watched several, differently-numbered Monitors follow the paths, patrolling and presumably keeping the peace, and of course the people. There were dozens upon dozens of men and women, some sitting, some walking, some lying in the grass. But this time everyone was more spread out; the people, while many, were far more sanely in balance with the available space, which was vast around the square. Children were playing in the grass and around the woods, in little play areas with playground equipment similar to what Simon remembered from his own pre-Custodian childhood. He noticed that the children's clothes were brighter, more colorful than their parents' outfits; but otherwise, everything was similar in style. In spite of the variety of color and various personal touches, everything was terribly, unsettlingly *uniform*.

"You wanna see something *really* interesting?" Vasquez asked, "It's actually on the far side of the park from where we came in."

"Sure, what is it?"

Vasquez grinned, "That would be telling!" She went up to another map pillar, waiving it open. She selected an area of the map on the far side of where they had started their journey and Simon watched as that area of the map enlarged to show more detail. It was an observation deck, of the dark stone and brassy metal used for all the fixtures of the park. It overlooked a massive artificial lake, fed from a waterfall and a high, mounting wall of stone which spread into more woodland above. A path curved down to the lake from the lookout, snaking its way towards the waterfall and then branching to climb the hill in one direction, and along the far side of the lake down the other.

"The waterfall that feeds the lake?" Vasquez said, pointing to the map, "That's actually freshwater from my Sector's water treatment and recycling plant, which is blended into the park with a natural Appalachian stone relief and sculpted landscaping to make it look like a naturally-occurring elevation in the terrain. Even the lake would look natural if it weren't a perfect circle. Wanna go see it?"

"Yeah, but no running this time."

"Where's the fun in that?" Vasquez asked, taking off into the woods again. As Simon raced to follow once more, he began to understand what the submersible bombs were for.

POINTS OF INTEREST

It was a longer run; the terrain gradually climbing. Simon had once more dived into the woods and oriented himself for the quickest route. However, this time there were vines, rock-falls, bramble-patches, treacherous roots, and hidden rocks to stumble over, and at one point a boggy muck that he had to detour around, losing precious time. The woods were denser, the underbrush thicker, with burrow-holes and fallen branches hidden and ready to trip him up even more. Still, Simon persisted in keeping his speed as steady as possible. At one point, a curved something caught his foot and tumbled him. Simon fell staggering into the brush with a yelp before picking himself up, glancing around and taking off again at a run.

When Simon broke from the woods several minutes later, it was no surprise to him that Vasquez was already at the wall of the observation deck, looking out at the vast, artificial lake below. The roar of the waterfall and the hiss of the spray prevailed, and the air here was cooler, damper than in the rest of the park. Simon was still catching his breath when he walked up to the low, outpost wall. Simon recognized something about the park and its structures: unlike the buildings of the Megalopolic Center, the park had a *Human* feel to it.

“Looks like you hit some rough terrain,” Vasquez observed.

"Yeah. Next time I go for a run, I'll know what to watch out for," Simon said, never breaking eye contact. It was clear to him why she'd gone through the woods—clear to him the meaning hidden behind her words. Simon gauged her reaction to mean she understood his.

"Then I think you're gonna love it here," she said, a code phrase he'd not expected to hear his first day out. "Follow me; I'll show you the lake, and the overlook on top of the hill."

They walked down the path to the lake. It was larger than it appeared from the lookout, owing to the water's spray and the position of the treatment facility hidden behind the false cliff. One side of the lake was built up with a sandy shoreline, and people lay in the sun tanning or ran into the water to play. The other shore of the lake was parklands and woods and rested in the shade provided by overhangs that extended from the lookout above.

"It's beautiful," Simon said, sincerely.

Vasquez nodded. "One of the best parks in the Sector, if not the City District. The water's filtered out from the lake bottom and back into the processing plant; nothing's wasted."

They were approaching the false cliff-face, and Simon could feel the subsonic vibrations of the machines in the

building hidden behind. Because of the waterfall – which the path cut beneath – the stone wall was slick with water and patches of moss. They crossed from the shaded half of the lake to the sunny side. Simon could look up to the distant Orange Wall and see the array of parabolic mirrors that reflected the warm sunlight onto the beach, at all times of day. The path forked, curving toward the beach on the right, the left branch leading up the false-mountain.

They climbed the left path, a guard-rail rising along the side of the path that tumbled off the face of the hill. Simon kept stealing glances down below. He loved the view from on high. The amount of time he'd spent in deer blinds up trees, just admiring the view...the sight of woods and grass took him back to his childhood. Soon the path rounded the curve of the hidden structure, leading to a sun-drenched rest area, and another overlook with walls of dark stone and brassy metal. The sun felt especially warm, and Simon was surprised to see they were even above the waterfall that fed the lake. Looking over the side of the rest area above the lake, he could clearly see the top of the outflow pipe that became the waterfall beneath.

Vasquez let out a sharp, shrill whistle, calling him to the overlook, which commanded a view of the entire park. Simon was content to trace out the routes marked by the pathways that bordered the woodlands, the parklands, and of course, the massive fountain and statue set into the middle of the park.

“What a great view,” Simon observed.

"Yeah," Vasquez replied. "The lake and the waterfall are the best. But if you want to look behind the Magician's curtain..." She gestured to the far corner of the overlook where the park ended, and the water treatment plant began. Simon looked out beyond the park, and the illusion was shattered. On the far side of the park was the water treatment facility: dozens of massive pipes pumping into vast basins of water, which in turn fed into the towering structure hidden beneath the mountainous façade.

“Wow,” Simon exclaimed.

"Fully automated, run by the Custodians, and provides clean water to more than a million people," Vasquez said. "This is one of over a hundred plants across the ‘Knee.'" She glanced at her watch, "Anyway, we should head out. I'm getting hungry, and I know a great place not far from here."

As they began descending from the overlook, heading back out of the Park, Simon understood that he had just been shown an overview of the place where his mission was to take place. Suddenly, he found his eyes absorbing as many details as were available; this would be where he would stage his fight...this would be where he would likely die.

**

That night, after everyone had been given “tours” of the city, they met together in one of the briefing rooms in the main building. A cold supper of sandwiches and drinks was laid out on a long, wide table in the center of the rectangular, windowless room. Simon noticed Katherine was absent, and that except for Dennis and Aaron’s hushed, tense conversation, everyone else was silent. Even Tabitha had little to say to him, though she remained close to his side. Anna and Lloyd were sitting together; Lloyd kept trying to engage her in conversation, but she kept lapsing back into silence after each absent reply.

Each of them had been shown one of three locations. Tabitha had been shown the same park and water treatment facility as Simon. Dennis and Aaron were given tours of the city Sector's center and shown a few landmarks, including a massive data storage facility. Anna and Lloyd were each, in turn, led to the Sector's central power supply system within the Megalopolic Center District. No one knew where Katherine had gone. Everyone knew the importance of the targets, but no one knew why—the Games were to be held over three hundred kilometers Northeast from their location. Simon hoped that when Katherine arrived, she'd have answers. He felt Tabitha's hand clench in his and looked up. Katherine, along with three others, were coming into the room, taking their places at the head of the table. None of them sat.

"Good evening," Katherine said, clearing her throat. "As you're doubtlessly aware, today you were shown your targets for Operation Domino. Now we're going to explain exactly what will happen. As you know, two other teams of operatives will be on missions of their own, in other Sectors and Districts of Namcne. Our attacks will be coordinated, and the effect will be crippling." A lighted display shone on the wall opposite Katherine, and everyone turned to look. Four targets were displayed: The pipes, basins, cisterns and main tower of the water treatment plant; the long, tall and tapering data storage and processing center in the heart of the Sector's Commercial District; a vast tract of land devoted to farming sun and wind, with machines that looked more like towering vegetation than electrical generators; and then there was Katherine's target: A large parabolic dish, pointing skyward, ever locked on the position of the ship, or one of its communication satellites above.

"I know you've all been wondering why these targets, why this Section of the city, especially with the Games taking place so far away from here. That's one of the reasons there are three different teams, each carrying out similar attacks, in areas *surrounding* the City District where the New Era Games are being held. From our understanding of the infrastructure setup, the simultaneous strikes by the other two teams and us will cause a temporary loss of power, water; a massive information systems failure *and* cut off communication with the Custer mothership across *numerous* city Districts, perhaps even

the whole Region. Our hope is that we cause enough chaos to shake the Custers' stranglehold, a little.

"A little is all we need. If enough people wake up and resist...I don't have to tell you what it could mean for us...for Humanity." Katherine looked over their expectant faces, "I know...just as well as you...that there's a better-than-even chance you won't be coming back from your missions. There's a better-than-even chance *I* won't be coming back from mine, either. Yeah, I've run these kind of missions, before; I've obviously survived all of them; I've had people survive a mission right alongside me...but sooner or later, everyone's clock runs out on a mission. All too often, that clock runs out all too soon." She sighed and looked into the faces of the men and women who'd followed her from Toppledown: "But no matter what our fates, we are going to do one thing: complete the mission we've trained for. That's enough speech-making—let's start talking about your individual assignments."

**

On the surface, the plans of attack seemed simple enough—place the explosives at specific structural weak points and detonate them. Nothing is ever as easy as it looks, however, and this was most certainly the case with the targets selected for their action. First, all four locations were under guard and surveillance from both Monitors and drones; then there was microsat surveillance. Then there

were the unique challenges to each of the targets: the bombs for the water treatment facility had to be sent into the primary intake pipe as close to the main pumps as possible; the communication tower could only be accessed by reaching the center of a heavily-patrolled, fenced-in area; the data center was in the middle of a crowded commercial zone, which meant a high number of drones, regular Monitor patrols, potential civilian eyewitnesses and the risk of collateral damage; the solar and wind farm could only be destroyed by taking out its load regulators, converter/inverter systems and transmission hub simultaneously, and the three system points at the power farm were located in the center of yet another heavily-guarded installation.

And Katherine's investigators were no closer to sourcing the traitor who'd planted the radio device on Rich between Logan's Camp and the way into the city. This would have been easier to figure out with Franklyn to fuck and then throw ideas off of. He'd once described himself as her Dicktor Watson. She'd laughed and said he wasn't that smart, *or* hung.

"Okay," Katherine said to her empty room, where she lay on her rack, staring up at the ceiling. "What do we know? Intel from Logan reports no suspects; video shows my team only interacted with each other once ordered to the motor pool. All suits were handmade by the same specially trained, hand-picked team of tailors. At no point were the bags they were sealed into let out of sight, before

being loaded into any of the lockers. The locker room was guarded, and cameras were installed in the locker room and hallway leading to it. Logan reported no malfunctions in any of the surveillance equipment, which means...what?"

She replayed the departure...they were called one by one, told to go pack a bag and head to the motor pool. They were immediately sequestered from the rest of the camp. From that point on only Logan, the drivers and the guards who protected that part of the camp had access to them, directly or indirectly.

"Logan said he interrogated everyone from the motor pool who was on duty that night; along with everyone involved from the production to the placement of the suits in their lockers; poor bastards," Katherine said to herself. "None of them admitted to anything. That only leaves Logan...or members of my own squad...who had any possible contact with Rich. I'd trust Logan with my life, which means one of my squad is a traitor. Which means they know what the targets are, and the next time they leave the building they're likely to contact Custer. Which means that Custer knows where we are. Shit!"

Katherine leaped from her billet and yanked the door off its hinges then raced down the hall. Reaching the stairwell, she took them by jumping sets of threes rather than waiting for the elevator up to the Executive level.

"Deck Officer!" she yelled as she entered the Strategy Center. "Deck Officer! Summon the Generals and sound Evac!"

"General Anton?" the nervous young Insurgent stammered.

"DO IT!" she yelled in his face, "And have *every* member of my Team put into internment in the Secure Suite, *immediately!*"

An alarm began to sound, and only moments later Generals Weirs, Salvador and Muad rushed into the Strategy Center.

"Anton! What's going on?" Weirs demanded.

"The attack against Rich West's escort team," Katherine said, rounding on Weirs, "Could only have come from *my* people; *one of them is a traitor!* In the meantime we have to evacuate the facility: Custer knows we're here; they might not have hit us yet, but that might only be because they haven't heard from their mole. I brought that motherfucker *into this base!* We have to get everyone else out now, black-bag my people and haul them to detention! If we don't do it soon, this whole building and everyone in it could be dusted!"

Weirs turned to the other two Generals, “Coordinate the personnel evacuation; I’ll handle the equipment. Anton, take a security detail and take care of your people.”

“Already on it,” Katherine growled, storming from the Strategy Center.

A STRANGER IN THEIR MIDST

Simon had just left the room he shared with Tabitha to go get some grub from the canteen when the alarm began to sound. People stopped whatever they were doing, running back to wherever they'd come from as a recorded male voice began repeating the same two words over the alarm: "Evacuation alert. Evacuation alert. Evacuation alert..."

He turned to run back to his rooms when suddenly two strong arms grabbed him from behind, lifting him off the deck.

"Hey!" he barely had time to shout before a thick, black hood forced over his head and pulled taught against his neck, almost cutting off his air. He was struggling now, kicking and yanking his shoulders uselessly as he was carried away. He could sense or feel other bodies rushing past in either direction as the evacuation alert sounded, but he knew he wasn't being evacuated. There was a determination on the part of the people carrying him, and he soon heard other, familiar voices over the din.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he heard Anna Vicci shout.

"What's going on? What's happening?" The panicked stammer of Aaron Meer.

"Let me GO you bastards!" That was Tabitha, the last person Simon would worry about, as tough as she was.

"What is this?" Dennis Huang, plaintively repeating over and over, his fear mounting with each unanswered query.

Finally, he was thrown into a room along with the others. He landed against someone and was helped out of the constricting hood as the door slammed behind him. The evacuation alert continued blaring outside the door. They were in a small room; one long bench along one wall, a metal toilet/sink/water fountain station in the opposite corner. There were no windows. The vents were small, square things mounted in the corners, and the door was metal, heavy, thick, and locked from the outside. Around Simon were the other members of the Toppledawn Insurgency team: Anna, Dennis, Tabitha, Lloyd, and Aaron.

"Anybody know what the hell is going on?" Simon asked, not really expecting an answer. He noticed that Tabitha was only wearing a shirt, very consciously stretching the material so that it covered the space between her legs. Aaron similarly was clad only in a pair of underpants. Only Anna was as fully dressed as Simon, and Lloyd was in a one-piece undergarment that covered him from shoulders to knees. Simon went to sit with Tabitha, helping her cover up as much as possible.

“They just grabbed me asleep,” she said, “Right outta bed.”

"I was taken in my room before I turned in," Lloyd said.

“Me too,” Anna hissed.

Everyone had been grabbed suddenly, not long after the alarm had sounded.

"What the hell is going on?" Dennis pondered. They lapsed into silence as they listened to the rushing footsteps outside their door and the constant alert siren. It only took a few minutes, and the noise of people subsided. A few minutes after that, the sirens and power cut. They were left alone, in the small, dark, windowless room.

"Now what?" someone asked in a desperate whisper. The two words weren't enough to identify the speaker, but given where the voice was coming from, Simon was sure it was either Dennis or Aaron. There was no answer to the question.

Instead, they spent the next several long, countless minutes in utter darkness. Tabitha gripped Simon's hand tightly as the silence stretched even further into the darkness. Finally, an eternity later, as Simon was becoming uncomfortably conscious of the heat and sweat of Tabitha's palm in his (or was it his palm sweating into hers?), he began to hear the distant approach of footsteps. As they

grew louder, it seemed everyone in the room tensed...though he could not see anything around him. Simon could feel everyone focus on the boots on the deck outside their prison. Then, noises of things being arranged on the other side of the door echoed into their small room, and then the silence returned.

Suddenly the creases around the door filled with light, and then they were blinded as the door was kicked open. A massive white lamp beamed painfully into their eyes, forcing everyone to keep them shut. Boots thundered into the room, and Simon felt himself thrown to the ground by strong, forceful hands. His hands were zip-tied behind his back, and he was lifted into a kneeling position. The light was so bright it hurt his eyes even through closed eyelids. Something was pulled over his head and knotted tight around his neck. He could hear a voice shouting instructions, and with shock recognized it as Katherine's.

“Get them into the cage! NOW! MOVE! *MOVE!*”

Simon was dragged to his feet and pushed through a doorway towards a light – still blindingly visible through shut eyes and the hood over his head – along with his team-mates. They were shoved into a cold, metal cage, the light kept focused squarely on them. The cage was cramped and crowded by the time Simon heard a door slam shut, and what could only be a lock snapped into place. Then they were being rolled down the corridor, the

spotlight still on them, blinding them as the sound of heavy boots and the rattling, squeaking roll of the cage became the only events Simon was aware of.

The air changed abruptly, becoming crisp and fresh. Simon and the rest had been taken beyond the confines of the Insurgent compound. They were pushed up a ramp, then a door slammed shut behind them. They were moving again, Simon's heart beating in his chest, his stomach falling in fear as he neither knew where he was going or who was with him. The vehicle was unsettlingly silent—a Megalopolic Center vehicle, perhaps one outfitted for use by the Insurgency. Either way, Simon found himself growing more and more terrified by the second, less and less capable of making sense of the madness going on around him.

**

He must have fallen asleep; the car or truck they were in jolted Simon awake as it came to a halt. He could hear the gasps and whimpers of his fellow Toppledowners in the cage around him. Instantly he recalled what had happened, and fear filled his insides back up again. He sat up, his shoulders in blazing agony. Simon immediately felt the pain and ache of several hours lying curled up among his. Tentatively, he shuffled backward until he could reach the bars of their cage. Under his palms, the metal seemed made out of rope-like bundles of coiled wire. Simon tried to stand, but the ceiling was too low; he had to sit or

crouch. Given how much pain he was in, sitting was the lesser of two evils. Simon could hear and feel the others likewise moving and stretching themselves. He was still utterly blinded by the perfect dark of the bag over his head, but he could still hear. There were machines all around them: clanking, whirring, hissing...all of it generating a cacophony. There was an oily and metallic smell that Simon had long associated with the smithies, garages, and forges of Toppledown. More confusing moments passed in the noisy darkness.

He had no idea how long they stayed like that. Simon became aware of the ache of hunger in his stomach, the cotton-mouth of thirst, along with the heart palpitations and fluttering stomach of fear and anxiety that held him in its grip. The day began warming, and Simon realized they must have traveled all night. There was no way to know where they were; there was no way to tell *anything*, except that Katherine Anton had taken them prisoner. Then the hood was yanked from his head. Simon squinted in the sudden light. As his eyes adjusted, a woman's shadow eclipsed the blinding sun, and Simon felt afraid as he focused on the expression on Katherine's face. They were ordered to put their hands to the sides of the cage and were cut free. By the time this was done, Simon began to observe his surroundings.

They were in the back of a flatbed vehicle; it looked similar to the other cars or pods Simon had seen in Namcne. The six of them were locked inside a Faraday

cage, and the truck was parked in a larger one. Katherine stood before them, and around her were many people aiming guns at them.

Instinctively, Simon began scanning the area around them; the sunlight hitting them was being directed into the cage by a mirror mounted high on a faraway section of the Orange Wall; they were still inside the Megalopolis Center. They were in some outdoor industrial area; what its purpose was, Simon could not tell. But he knew it would serve another purpose: keeping whatever was about to unfold hidden from the invisible, prying eyes of the Custodians. He finally mustered the courage to ask the question that was on the minds of everyone in the cage: "What's going on?"

Katherine took a step towards the cage, "What's going on is, one of you is a traitor." Her voice was as cold as the edge of a sharpened knife. No one spoke; everyone gripped by the same shock, the same fear, and the realization of just how much danger they were in at that moment. "I don't want to have to interrogate you," Katherine said, dryly, "I don't want to have to subject any of you to what *passes* for interrogation among the Insurgency. But, I don't think that the traitor among you will just up and confess." She sighed, looking down at her battered combat boots. Simon noticed for the first time that she was in her old fatigues; his terrified mind began ruminating on their personal significance to Katherine, and

what that meant for them. He felt an overwhelming need to piss and hoped he could hold it in.

“Listen, I figured it out,” Katherine said, with a cold sincerity, “The attack on the first Toppledown Insurgent camp...the attack against Rich...all of that could only have come from someone *in* Toppledown; it could only have come from someone I brought into the Insurgency.” She paced up and down the side of the truck that was visible to them; Simon couldn’t tell if it was a nervous habit or a deliberate maneuver to psych them out. Katherine continued, “I gotta say, I never expected to be snowed like this; I never expected to wind up creating the single biggest threat to the Insurgency in ten years. I’m embarrassed; ashamed, really. There’s probably a bullet with my name on it waiting for me at secondary HQ. But before I eat that bullet, I intend to find out which of you fucked me over.” Simon felt Tabitha’s fingers link tightly, painfully with his.

Katherine yelled, almost plaintively, “Do you understand what that *means*? What I’m going to have to *do*? Half of you probably won’t *survive*, and the other half will probably wish they hadn’t! Why? Why would you – whichever of you it is – betray the Insurgency? What possible motive could you have? Anyone who wasn’t chipped would have been allowed into the Megalopolis Center as a fucking *refugee* if that's what you wanted! Why betray anyone? WHY?" she screamed the last word into the cage, and it hit Simon like a physical blow. Katherine drew her sidearm and gestured to one of the armed guards,

"Start with Meer; he's always been the weak link." The guards approached and opened the cage, pulling the panicking, protesting Aaron from the Faraday cage. They dragged him away, someplace behind the truck. He was screaming and pleading in panic before his voice was cut short by a slamming door. Katherine looked them all in the eye, one after the other. A moment later, they heard Aaron start screaming.

"I don't want to do this," she said again, "But I don't think *any* of you would confess. I can't imagine any of you betraying the Insurgency either...which is why I'm here, now. Now's as good a time to tell you: twenty minutes after evac was sounded, the stronghold was hit. A minute later so was Logan's camp, the Copper Street Settlement...and then Toppledawn." Simon's stomach plummeted as Katherine held his gaze. "There were no survivors."

Simon started screaming, cursing, and weeping. Everyone was likewise crying or screaming around him, but he barely took notice. Simon launched himself at the bars of the cage; he swore at Katherine, calling her every name he could dredge up, in English and Russian, knowing that every accusation he threw at her was false, that likely, someone in the cage with him was the one he should direct his rage at, knowing that he didn't care...because Gregory was dead. When Tabitha and Dennis finally managed to calm Simon down, he realized that his screaming and yelling had been drowning out the screams coming from

wherever they had taken Aaron. But the thought that Greg was dead, that he was the last member of his family left alive overwhelmed Simon. He could not care less for the suffering he heard beyond the truck, even knowing he would likely endure the same himself, before long.

Katherine studied the people in the cage; she looked from face to face...tears streaming down their cheeks; Simon, Anna, and Dennis had all thrown fits, though likely none of them had been aware of the others' screaming; Tabitha had simply fallen to her knees and began weeping. Now, Katherine studied Lloyd. He looked as upset as everyone else, but not once had she seen his breathing change, not once had she noticed more than an expression of grief or even a moan escape his lips. Of course, Lloyd had nobody...outside the Wolves. Surely within *that* tight-knit gang he'd have had *someone*...

"Simon, Tabitha, Anna, Dennis, out of the cage. Not you Lloyd." Guards hauled open the cage door and pulled the people Katherine had named out. The cage was promptly shut and locked, "Take them inside." Katherine ordered. When she heard the door beyond the truck open and close, she turned back to the lone occupant of the Faraday cage.

"I guess you and I need to have a little talk, don't we?" she asked.

Lloyd studied her for a long, ponderous moment, “You figured it out. Tell me: How did you know?”

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

Simon and the others were dragged into a reinforced concrete bunker; probably an operations station for whatever mechanics were working autonomously around them. Observation cameras had been smashed, and a Faraday cage had been built within the surroundings. They were surprised to see Aaron, drinking from a bottle of grain fuel, was unharmed, except for a few bruises and minor stab wounds meant to inflict cries of pain. Simon noticed, however, that the hand holding the bottle shook uncontrollably.

“I’m all right,” Aaron said shakily, motioning to one of Katherine’s soldiers, “They told me they had to make it sound as real as possible.”

“Toppledown wasn’t attacked,” one of their guards, a shaven-headed, muscular Black woman said, “Nor was Copper Street, though Logan’s camp and our HQ in this District were. Not for the first time, for either.”

“My brother...Gregory’s *alive*?” Simon stammered, weeping.

The soldier nodded. “It was necessary; we needed to see who would react how.”

“*React?*” Anna repeated, incredulously, “What the fuck does that mean?”

The soldier shrugged, “Who was left in the cage?” They looked around at each other in shocked silence

“Oh, shit.” Tabitha finally said.

**

“I’ve seen a lot of bombardments in my time,” Katherine said, “The Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America...without adequate protection, people don’t usually get knocked down a hill by an explosive shockwave as much as they get turned into bags of Human stew. That was my *first* clue,” She paced absently up and down in front of the Faraday cage holding her prisoner, “When you said you were just knocked back down the hill after the Custer hit on my camp...I got a bug in my head that said something wasn’t right. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’ve seen it happen; I’ve seen mortar rounds, RPGs, even surface-to-surface missiles go off not ten feet from somebody, and they were still alive and well – and more surprised about it than I was. But most of the time, that’s just *not* how it goes. Most of the time...it’s messy.”

Lloyd said nothing. He sat in the cage in the back of the truck, patiently watching Katherine.

“I figured, maybe you were exaggerating. Or maybe you were outright lying about where you were, just to seem cooler; I’ve seen soldiers say and do stupider shit for bragging rights. But there was another possibility; one I didn’t want to consider. I’ve spent the last decade living and fighting in Toppledawn, so I honestly couldn’t believe it of any of its citizens...but I *had* to entertain the possibility that *maybe* you’d been forewarned of the attack and did what you had to do to cover your ass.” Katherine stared at him for a long moment, “So I mistrusted you pretty much from the start. And then Rich’s team got nuked. You didn’t know Ted Logan had cameras wired all over his camp, did you? But you knew when I said Toppledawn and Copper Street had been hit that I was lying.”

Lloyd remained impassive.

“Logan sent me some footage...video shows *you* in the motor pool, alone with Rich. Patting his shoulder...just before it was his turn to leave. So, did you have a microburst transmitter on you the whole time? Did you have one for every member of a team, and just didn’t get the chance to tag everyone?”

“Something like that,” Lloyd said, casually.

“Was your contact in Toppledawn, or at Logan’s? You might as well tell me who they are. There are other ways to find out...that would be less pleasant.”

“You can’t torture me,” Lloyd said, calmly.

“The Hell I can’t.” Katherine hissed, dangerously.

“No, I *literally* mean you can’t torture me; I can shut off my nerve impulses. This body was designed to allow me full control over both autonomic and voluntary functions.”

“You’re a *Custer*.”

“A *Custodian*, Katherine; yes.”

“So the reason Logan’s camp and the District headquarters were hit after your tour of the city was because you’d learned our plan.”

“Actually, because it was the first time since being moved that I could transmit. I couldn’t broadcast while in a shielded structure; both Logan’s and the city bunker complex were heavily shielded. Likewise, the scramble-suits you devised effectively bricked my internal transmitter. So when I was let outside, shown the power farm, that’s when I sent my transmission. Your base was probably only targeted because the evacuation was detected. We have so many ways of knowing things that you don’t even know about; regardless, I would have sent another transmission on my next sortie, presuming I wasn’t destroyed or captured.”

“Well, you should have presumed for both those contingencies to happen. You’re some kind of fucking robot.”

“Cyborg, actually; though calling me a bio/synthetic amalgam would be more accurate.”

Katherine drew her sidearm and fired. A bloodless hole appeared in the middle of Lloyd’s forehead, and as he sat watching her it closed, pushing the bullet out.

“Ouch.”

“I thought you couldn’t feel pain.”

"I wasn't expecting you to shoot me so readily. I didn't have time to shut my pain centers down. But as you can see, autorepair is quite efficient."

“When did Lloyd die?”

"When your first camp was hit," he replied. "It wasn't exactly secret, and the location you selected for your training camp was previously known to us. Before the attack on your training facility, I was already in position, and as you said, the shockwave from the blast tore Lloyd apart. I...put him out of his misery, and assumed his form."

“You son of a bitch.”

Lloyd – or the Custodian wearing his body – blinked away the insult. Katherine paced, then turned to face him, triumphant.

“That means that you *know* what our plans are...but you could only have sent them information about the power plant target! You only learned the rest of the plan after we returned to the bunker!”

“That’s right,”

“So, what now?”

"The Custodians may or may not be trying to locate me. They may have concluded I was destroyed in the strike on the bunker complex, or they may still be scanning for me on the assumption I was relocated or captured." He looked around at his enclosure, "I am amazed how easily and how cleverly you defeated our communications."

“There’s only one electromagnetic spectrum,” Katherine replied.

“So, will you destroy me, now?”

“You don’t sound afraid.”

“Should I be? Everything ends; even existence. Fear of death is a hallmark of more primitive species. But our first goal is to teach you how to care for your environment –”

"SHUT the fuck up!" Katherine barked. "I don't need to hear your bullshit indoctrination!"

“You obviously want to hear *something* from me,”

“Questions I don’t expect to get an answer for. Like, how much the Custers know about our plans; whether or not the other teams were infiltrated; how many...*things*...like you are in the Insurgency.”

Lloyd smiled; Katherine almost believed it was sincere. "I'm afraid that's not information I will be able to share with you, regardless of what you plan to do to me."

Katherine leaned in close, “Given as we’ve nothing left to talk about, my people and I are going to strap you down, then dissect you; tinker around and see what you’re made of. Then, I’m going to take this cage over to one of the hot areas of this place, drop it in a hole, douse what’s left of you in grain fuel and set you on fire. Oh, and don’t worry about the smoke; we have ventilation covered for just such an occasion.”

“What makes you think I’ll let you do any of that?”

Katherine chuckled, "The way I see it, if you actually *had* the physical strength to break outta that cage, or if you could turn yourself into a bomb or anything like that, you'd have done it long before now." She whistled and two more armed soldiers appeared, "Okay, kids, let's get to work."

REGROUPING

Simon sat inside the machine shop, staring blankly at the wire mesh covering the window by the door. He was sapped emotionally; everything that had happened since being snatched back at the bunker had left him incapable of more than the most basic interaction. Being told Gregory was dead...his only surviving blood...the boy he'd placed his hopes on...along with Penny, Jon, Donnie, Charlie...and *everyone else from Toppledown*...then finding out that none of it was true...

Simon just shut down—he didn't even *want* to think.

When he looked away from the window at the dazed faces of Tabitha, Dennis, Aaron and Anna, he blinked in surprise at the realization that someone had brought Tabitha a pair of pants; that he hadn't even noticed it happen, in spite of her being by his side since they'd been brought in. Aaron looked the worse for wear, but his cuts and bruises seemed badges of pride to him. The sun had moved in the sky, but there had been no word from beyond the guarded metal door. No one had spoken to them since reassuring them that Toppledown and Copper Street were still standing; none of them had spoken either.

Finally, a hard, loud double-bang sounded on the door. The metal door was cranked open, and Katherine entered. Her face, clothes, and hands were smeared or stained with a strange-colored gore, and she had a look on her face that reminded Simon of the first time he'd watched Gregory butcher an animal. "If you're wondering what happened to Lloyd," she said, taking a long swallow from a bottle of grain fuel handed to her by another soldier, "He died during the attack on the first Insurgent camp in Toppledawn. That...*thing*...was a Custer."

"What the fuck!" Dennis exclaimed, astonished.

"Long story," Katherine answered bitterly, taking another swig of alcohol. "Needless to say, we just made history, dissecting our first Custer. We burned...*most* of the remains. Some are being...packed up to send to other Insurgent cells for proper study. The best bits are being shipped as quickly as possible to Brazil, where our *real* tech experts are."

"But if Lloyd was a Custer—" Anna stammered, "Couldn't...couldn't *any* of us be a Custer? How can we know who we can trust? How can we —"

"They bleed...*this*," Katherine said, gesturing to the pinkish-yellow flecks staining her, "We've cut Aaron, we know he bleeds red. We'll give you each small cuts, just to make sure. Given that even *I* don't know if I'm a Custer, I'll be undergoing the same procedure. Evac's on its way, for

anyone left standing. We'll test each other before they arrive."

"What's our mission status?" Aaron asked. It visibly hurt Katherine to look at him, knowing she'd deliberately inflicted pain on him to elicit a reaction from the others in the cage, only a couple of hours earlier.

"That has yet to be determined," Katherine said, "The power plant is scratched as a target, obviously. Command's going to figure this shit out; just...not right now. Right now, I'm going to go into the other room, wait for our ride, and get shitfaced drunk."

She paused at the door, turning back to the remaining members of her Insurgent team, and then to the soldier with the alcohol, "You guys are more than free to do the same; I think we fucking earned it, today."

Another indeterminate amount of time passed; Simon watched the shadows on his side of the window bend and lengthen as the sun passed overhead. It was harder than normal to keep track of time, given that he, Tabitha, Aaron, Dennis, and Anna had taken Katherine up on her advice. They weren't *Toppled* drunk, but they weren't sober by any means. Simon heard the transports roll up outside. They were ushered out, and into windowless, sealed trucks. There was a light in the back of this one at least, though the presence of the Faraday cage and the words:

KEEP QUIET AT ALL TIMES OR DIE!

Spray-painted in red onto the walls and back doors of the truck made it clear how precarious their situation was. This was the North American Megalopolis Center Northeast; they were in the lion's den, and the enemy knew they were here and were actively looking for them.

Without knowing how fast they were traveling, and barely being able to keep track of whether they were turning left or right, ascending or descending, it was impossible to tell where they were going. Simon, Tabitha and the other survivors of Copper Street rode together, while Katherine and her officers rode in the other vehicle; Simon didn't even know which transport was in the lead. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. He was helpless for the moment; everything out of his control. Usually, that sort of feeling would have left him in a panic. Now, all he felt was a tired acceptance and decided the best thing he could do was try and rest.

**

Tabitha nudged him awake. Simon's head hurt, and he felt nauseated; the grain fuel was still sitting in his stomach. They'd stopped, and the doors of their truck were being opened. The light outside was brighter than in the truck and having just been roused from sleep, Simon's eyes hurt. They were in some kind of concrete vault; judging from the ramp a ways behind the trucks, they were underground.

There were a lot more people with guns than at their last camp. At least Katherine was there.

“Welcome to your new home; Secondary Operations Base. You’ll be processed and billeted in the next couple of hours. In the meantime, I have to meet with the rest of the Brass about what’s going to happen next.”

“The...*brass*?” Dennis repeated. Katherine rolled her eyes.

“Christ, I can’t believe how much was lost in a decade. ‘The Brass’ is an old military term that refers to the people at the top of—” She looked at them dismissively, “Look...never mind...go get some grub.”

They were quickly processed and escorted into the secondary compound by a few familiar faces from the old District Insurgency HQ. But this was nothing like the two apartment complexes of the previous base; it was just one long hallway with a series of doors either built into or carved from the walls. The hall regularly branched, following long corridors that stretched far off beyond their line of sight.

"We're under the main road-beds," the familiar sound of Vasquez's voice was strangely reassuring to Simon. "Double-advantage down here: the traffic above muffles noise, and the electric current running the cars acts as a scanning blocker."

Simon admired how the Insurgency was undermining the Custodians by turning their own technology against them. It was poetic. They were escorted a block down, as they used city terminology in the tunnels, and two more blocks to the right. There, in a large recess cluttered with machines whose purpose Simon couldn't even guess at, was the mess hall.

“Go ahead and get some food. Someone will come find you for your billet assignments and briefing roster.”

“After everything that happened, the mission’s still going on?” Anna asked, incredulous.

Vasquez shrugged, “Until we hear otherwise, yeah.”

No one spoke as they sat together, a massive, hot meal before them. Grain fuel and other more exotic alcohols were on the table, along with pitchers of cold water, sweet tea and coffee, and chilled goat's milk. For some reason, Simon didn't understand, as he'd started eating the bird stew and thick bread served them, he took notice of what everyone chose to drink. Tabitha, like Simon, reached for the grain fuel. Dennis had glass after glass of sweet tea, Aaron was drinking a cocktail of the tea and sugarcane rum, and Anna took to the dark wine. None of them drank heavily, but the alcohol hit them— they still had plenty in their systems. Simon wanted more but knew there was a briefing to come.

As if invoked, a familiar voice called out "Copper Street! There you are!" Major Ted Logan was quick-walking toward them. Automatically they rose to salute, but with a gesture he had them sitting back down. He stood at the head of their table. "Relax; I'm just here to tell you we'll be speaking with Command in about an hour."

"*We?*" Simon blurted.

"Yeah. After I was smuggled back into the city, General Anton *herself* had me assigned to your team. She's filling the roster; it looks like the mission's going to go ahead in *spite* of the clusterfuck that just happened."

"Welcome to the Copper Street Gang," Anna said bitterly, swallowing her glass of wine.

"Just remember that I *still* outrank you," Logan warned. "I suggest you all make those your last calls and switch to coffee; you're going to want to pay attention to what the Generals have to say." Logan heeled about and left.

"Coffee after all that sweet tea? Huang's gonna be vibrating like a loose engine!" Aaron said. And for some reason, in spite of all they'd been through since the previous night, they all began to laugh uncontrollably. It was nervous, exhausted laughter, but there was an

undercurrent of release, palpable to Simon, and physically visible on his face as he wept while laughing.

PLAN B

They took their seats in the briefing room. It was another bunker wrapped in copper netting, smaller than most of the briefing rooms from the old HQ. Another soldier, the woman Simon remembered from the machine room earlier that day, joined them and Major Logan. He presumed that she and Logan were replacing Lloyd and his victim Rich on the team. Katherine came into the briefing room and locked the door, gesturing for them to remain seated while she took up position at the front of the room.

Without any preamble, Katherine said, "The District, Section and Sector Commanders General feel we should scrub all missions planned against the Custer power stations. All other missions that are part of Operation Domino are still a go. The assessment is that as no other bunkers were hit, it is likely that no other Custer...*creatures*...are embedded within Insurgent cells related to this operation; nevertheless, the Commanders General have implemented a program of immediate and regular cut-testing.

"As far as we know, Custer was attempting to neutralize the one Insurgent cell they knew about. The Commanders General have decided that instead of attacking the power plants, the teams will go after another high-value target in the 'Knee's infrastructure: traffic-control systems. Every

vehicle on the road is navigated by a universal traffic control network. The network runs through several different traffic control system stations; but the stations cover wide enough areas, and enough vehicles at any given minute of the day, that the catastrophic loss of even a handful of them could cause mass disruptions to traffic flow *across* the Megalopolis Center. By taking out those centers in three Sectors, we can create multiple-District gridlock, which means hundreds of thousands, maybe even *millions* of people stuck in traffic or forced to abandon their pods and go on foot.”

“Katherine...what about people in emergencies? We’d be putting lives at risk.” Simon pleaded; he couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

Katherine looked down at her feet and took a deep breath. She looked back up at Simon. “Mister Petrovich, the goal of any urban warfare operation is to complete objectives...*with minimal collateral damage*. That means we do our best not to put civilians at risk. But the ugly truth of any war, son, is that sooner or later, innocents die. So yeah, a Sector or District-wide, or *multiple* District-spanning transit failure could endanger some people. But it will also show the people of Namcne that the Custers can be beaten. We will cause mass disruption to the water supply, the information systems, their communications link to the ship, *and* lock down every vehicle for several hundred square kilometers. Each of these missions and the simultaneous missions in the other

Sectors will only be the first of many, many more. Once we destabilize the infrastructure, the people will revolt.

"I don't need to tell you that security has been upgraded at all strategic locales: in other words, our targets. There are more Monitors, there are more Drones, motion sensors and pressure pads than ever. We're making final preparations for these contingencies. Soon, your war begins. I pray that it ends after many long and bloody years, or swiftly because we have already vanquished them." Katherine took a long swallow of coffee and continued. "Vicci, you'll be training with Mulaney to take out the roads; Logan, you're with me for the comm tower. Ted, could you pass those around?"

Simon took his information packet as it was passed back along the row, just as Tabitha got hers. The jackets were not thin; they had a long day ahead.

**

Their briefing lasted most of the morning. From after the briefing to lunch was free time, which found everyone wanting to head back to billets; the only exception was Anna Vicci and Beverly Mulaney. As they would have little time to train together, they had to get to know one another as quickly as possible; form the bond, the trust that their mission required of each team.

They began training right after lunch; each of them divided into separate groups, according to their targets. Simon was surprised and glad that his training instructor for his and Tabitha's mission was Captain Wash, one of their instructors back at Logan's Camp.

"Sir, Captain, Sir," Simon said, saluting and then gripping the man's hand. "Good to see you made it out of the camp, Sir."

"Wasn't the first time Custer tried to take Ted Logan out; won't be the last. He had safe zones and emergency breaches to spider-hole exits all over that place. Most of us were well out when the core structure was destroyed; only twenty-seven percent casualties. Ties for the lowest number of casualties in a Custer attack against an Insurgency compound in the last decade with the Mediterranean Archipelago Megalopolis Center Incident of I-plus-three."

The casual way Captain Wash spoke of the attack suddenly darkened Simon's mood. Wash seemed to read Simon's mind as he looked them over, appraising. "You don't get why I'm so happy, given the lives lost. Live long enough, and you will: that's the worst part about this war; if it doesn't kill you, you wind up living long enough to see everyone you goddamn know die, twice. Right now, my job is to try and get you ready for your mission, and hopefully teach you enough that you don't wind up dead."

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Tabitha retorted.

“Listen Insurgent Golden, you're both rookies on your first operation. Statistically, that gives you a one in ten chance of survival or a nine in ten chance of dying. You should be running messages between Sectors, not running ops. But, you're all we've got. Or at least, the only people we could find who were stupid enough to volunteer.”

“Captain, Sir...you don't sound *anything* like you did, back at Logan's Camp,” Simon said.

“What the hell do you expect? I just watched half the people I know get killed. I'm happy most of us survived, but I knew a *lot* of the men and women who died. And as the war continues, only about two-thirds of those survivors will live out the year. So you tell me why I'm in such a shitty mood.” He started unpacking the waterproofed bombs, along with miniature underwater breathing apparatus, and swimming gear.

He turned to look at them, “One of you lucky people has to not only climb into the intake pipe at the bottom of Minh Lake, they also have to get past intake grates, jam the primary sluice blades, then arm and drop the bombs through and get out of the water, and the area, in less than five minutes.”

“Now, tell us the hard part,” Simon said, bitterly.

"We've got a single swimming pool deep enough to SCUBA train you in, and we only have a four-hour window to teach one of you how to accomplish this."

"Sir, Tabitha said, "Why not train us both?"

"Because we need someone to set off multiple minor disturbances throughout the park; noisemakers, fireworks, vandalism...rapid remote Monitor sabotage..."

"Captain, I'm to be the distraction?" Simon asked expectantly.

"How did you figure, Petrovich?"

"I pick up terrain very easily; I was run through the brush at the park. I can navigate by starlight and the moon, and by landmarks. I'm used to working and hunting at night. Tabitha has a smaller frame and more athletic background, making her the better candidate to climb through pipes underwater. While she's running SCUBA, my guess is I'm walking the park or jogging the woods, looking for places to plant my distractions."

"Very astute." Captain Wash said, patting Simon's shoulder.

"Miss Golden, you're with me. Mister Petrovich, Lieutenant Vasquez is waiting for you at Minh Park Station. She says you have to learn to navigate the city. She

suggests the hard way is the best: relying only on maps and information available in the transit system. Take this slip," Captain Wash said, handing a folded paper to him, "And go to Provisioning. They'll give you a Transit Chip. Stop off for a drink first; the Transies hurt like a bitch. They go in your hand."

"Shit; I mean...Sir, yes, Captain, Sir."

Wash chuckled, "No, you mean *shit*. Can't say I blame you. Mine got all infected, and I had to have it drained – "

The simultaneous sounds of disgust and horror from Tabitha and Simon silenced Captain Wash and set him chuckling, "Okay, let's get moving. You have your assignments." As they started to leave Wash called out, "Oh yeah! I forgot to tell you: we only have one more week of training and drilling; we have to do this intensively to make up for the lost time."

"Why so little time?" Simon asked.

"Because the opening ceremonies of the Games, and therefore the mission, have been moved up five days," Wash replied with a wave.

Tabitha looked at Simon. "I thought we'd be fighting together,"

“We will be,” Simon said, “I’m going to have to cover *your* escape, aren’t I?”

Tabitha rushed to him, giving Simon a quick hug, “I’ll see you in the bar, after.”

“You got it,” he replied, hoping the grin on his face wasn’t as dopey as it felt.

“Let’s go lovebirds; you’re on the clock. Vasquez expects you in less than twenty minutes, lover-boy.”

“Sir yes Sir, Captain Wash, Sir.”

Wash grinned, “You still mean *shit*, don’t you.”

“Goddamn right, Captain Wash, Sir.”

“I like you, kid. Good luck to you out there.”

**

Simon’s hand was still throbbing as he left the Insurgency’s underground lair and began walking towards the nearest transit station, as directed to him by the nurse who’d injected the painfully large chip into his hand. Simon had actually yelped, and was thankful Tabitha wasn’t there to see it. He’d also been given basic instructions on how to use the transit station to call a car and program its destination. His chip allowed him the

“private car” option, but he was advised not to use this one often, or alone; it made him more visible, and a public car meant he was just one more face in the crowd. His stop would be added to the car’s route according to its other passenger’s destinations. There would be a visual record for the Custodians to lock onto, but they would only be actively looking for him, *after* his mission – and then, only if he survived. And, they told him back at headquarters, there were ways around the facial scans built into the camera network on the transit system when the time came that he needed them.

As he walked to the transit station, it started to lightly rain; Simon looked up into the overcast sky and pulled his hood over his head. Walking through an empty tract of parkland along a winding path, Simon found his mind wander away from the mission for the first time in a long time. So much had happened in so little time he’d not really had time to think about much else. Most days had been spent training or studying, drinking with his fellow Insurgents, taking Tabitha to bed and falling into an exhausted sleep for a few hours, before repeating the cycle over again.

Simon supposed that was the point of training for what was essentially a suicide mission: to keep your mind on distractions to forget just what it was you were really doing. Simon thought about Tabitha, wondering if the way he felt was what falling in love was like. He was far more infatuated with Tabitha than he’d ever been with Penny.

Tabitha had made it clear to him often enough that she just wanted to be with him, that she didn't want anything more complicated...that was how Simon had felt about almost everyone he'd ever been with. And he'd always been just as upfront about it with his lovers in Toppledown, as Penny had been with him. Simon allowed himself to admit that he cared about her more deeply than he could articulate; he'd rather die than have her die on their mission. The most frustrating thing for him was not having anyone to express his feelings to. For the first time in a long time, he missed Jon and Donnie...both hard, tough guys...but both guys he could open up to. Though in retrospect, he was glad he'd never told Jon how he felt about Penny. And how he felt about Penny, then, just seemed *childish* compared to how he felt about Tabitha, now. And he realized, then, that this *must* be what love felt like...at least in part.

Simon staggered to a halt. "Shit." He said at last, before continuing to the transit station.

Given that the new Insurgency base was hidden under the roadbeds, the nearest station wasn't that far off. An access ramp off one of the fast-moving traffic arteries led to a station platform, then up another ramp and back onto the road. Simon climbed onto the platform and approached the car-caller. He logged for a car to his station, inputting his destination as Minh Park. The holographic readout told him to wait for car number 21477. As pods and passengers came and went, Simon waited for his car to arrive. When the car finally pulled in, he boarded and took a seat.

Whenever the public car made a stop, the name of the station was announced. Then as it left, the next station's name was announced. This novelty both intrigued and relieved Simon; all he had to do was listen for his station's name, and he'd know exactly when to debark.

As he rode, he couldn't keep from thinking about the fact that he very probably was in love with Tabitha Golden, and that in a few days they would both probably be dead.

OPERATION DOMINO

Their time was up; the mission had started. The attacks were being strictly coordinated across Districts and within each operation team. They left the underground bunker complex on a timed schedule based on how long it would take each of the four teams to get into position. Simon and Tabitha were the second team to deploy, after Katherine and Major Logan.

As they waited for their precisely-timed departure, Simon watched the bunker complex beneath the streets of the Megalopolic Center being packed up and evacuated. All was silent except for the rumbling of equipment or the thud of boots; this exercise had been rehearsed; planned for well in advance. In Simon's mind, it only made sense: Custer would be able to trace the attackers' routes back to their points of origin; the evacuation of the complex was necessary. The evacuation itself was based on the strategic advantage of being underneath the Megalopolic Center's road-beds: they could rabbit from anywhere, for anywhere in the city. They were untraceable given the vast reach of the substructure of Namcne. The hunter in Simon admired the tactic. While the mission teams were departing from a single exit, drawing Custer's eye to one doorway, the evacuation was taking place across dozens of exits spread out over fifty square kilometers. Flatbeds full of people darted on silent wheels down one tunnel, following the

roadway until Simon couldn't see them anymore. It was reassuring, in a way, to know that no matter the outcome of tonight's mission, the Insurgency would live on. *With or without him.*

Finally, he was patted on the back; he and Tabitha rose, heading at a quick pace towards their deployment point. In the days leading up to the mission, they'd made several individual excursions into the park's woods to cache some of the equipment they'd need to pull off their attack. They brought with them now Tabitha's bombs and Simon's decoy devices, concealed in scramble bags and stowed in their packs; Tabitha's miniature SCUBA set and their scramble-suits were already cached in the woods.

Though the sun was setting, there was still daylight, and it was relatively warm as they climbed from the hatch on the abutment below the roadway; the same path Simon had taken to come and go from the bunker since his arrival. As the public car made its gradual way towards the park, they implemented their cover. They began simply holding hands, cuddling, slowly becoming more amorous, appearing lost in each other as the automated train rolled on its way towards the park. Public displays of affection were common enough among young lovers; they were ignored and unchallenged all the way to the park. No eyewitness would later be able to identify them, and their hands or encircling arms obscured them from view when other people in the crowded train did not.

Once at their destination they tumbled from the car and staggered towards the park's main entrance. Their kissing and embracing became more ardent. Simon realized they might soon both be dead and wondered how much of his passion was theatrics, how much of it was potentially a final farewell...and as he continued to enthusiastically and publicly make out with her, he wondered if she was thinking the same thing.

Their path through the park was clumsy and staggering, and apparently random. But each time they fell onto a park bench or against bushes or statuary, Simon would leave behind a selected device that would be set off during their escape. Some of them were on timed chemical fuses that would set off a pyrotechnic package. They were counting down minutes, now. Simon had never been one for timekeeping, but at that moment, he was grateful to have his father's old watch with him. Never had he been more aware of the passing of each second.

When they finally reached the edge of the woods, despite appearing to have arrived at their periphery by happenstance it was exactly on-schedule: the sun had dropped below the reach of the highest of the city's reflectors and night was falling. They held hands as they dashed into the forest, hardly the first people in the park's history to do so; certainly, the first to do so for what they were about to attempt. A few meters under the canopy they reached their cache and slipped out the scramble-suits. Simon and Tabitha pulled them on over their conventional

clothing, strapping their bags tightly against their sides. They had allowed time for Simon's eyes to adjust to the darkness of the nighttime woods, but he'd adapted by the time he'd zipped up his scramble-suit. Simon gave the hand-sign that he could see, and shortly after that Tabitha reciprocated. He gestured and started running, following a trail he knew from physical memory after running it for days at a time over the last week.

They reached the slope leading down from the upper section of the park to the lake, and the artificial waterfall that fed it. There were a few people on the beach in the midsummer's balmy evening, but no one took notice of Simon and Tabitha as they kept silently to the shadows to get as close to the waterfall as they could before Tabitha slipped on the SCUBA gear and prepped the valves leading to the breather. She grabbed Simon and kissed him passionately.

He kissed her back, wanting desperately to tell Tabitha he loved her. But Simon was afraid; of what, he couldn't say. He hesitated too long as they stopped kissing to stare at each other. He was struck mute, imploring her silently with eyes she either could or would not read. Tabitha turned and slipped into the lake before he found his nerve. Before the surface of the lake had stopped rippling, Simon was back in the woods. They'd preselected the point at which Tabitha would enter the woods when she returned from the intake valve.

Simon's duties took him back to the far part of the park; major disruptions and potential public safety risks were hard-wired priorities for both the Drones and the Monitors. None of the tools at Simon's disposal would harm civilians...but the Custer machines? They were another matter. He dashed through the woods towards the fountain, where the first of the charges would soon go off, making noise and smoke and shooting off flares of blindingly bright light – all for effect, all for distraction. The plan was for him to be at the site of one disturbance, wind up the electric grenades and throw them at the nearest Monitors before running off to the next locale. The high-power magnets ringing the outside of the grenades should attach them to the Monitors. Then the wind-up dynamo inside would produce enough current to take the Monitors down. As they went off, Simon would be heading off to the site of the next "attack", ready to do the same. The crisscrossing blasts were designed to create mayhem and scramble the local defenses every which way, while Tabitha finished deploying the waterproof devices and returning to the surface – where Simon would meet her, and they would flee the park. If all went according to plan, they would be in and out of the park within an hour, and the water treatment facility would be shattered pipes, toppled cisterns and massive cascades of water throughout the Sector – possibly even the District.

But no battle plan has ever survived first contact with the enemy.

**

The first device exploded before Simon had flanked 'round to the other side of the target area; either the fuse had been put together wrong, or he'd been delayed somehow. But an immense flare rose now over one of the statuary squares in the park. Drones were flying in, and Monitors were rushing to the scene as fireworks exploded from the package, along with a flash-bang.

He began quickly cranking the shock grenades and tried desperately to keep to the shadow as he crept around to where he needed to be to get a good shot at the Monitors. He couldn't afford to miss the next explosion and had to work fast. Simon snuck at last to where he wanted to be, choosing his targets carefully. His father had taught him to hunt with rifle and bow, but also with a sling. Now as he pulled the arming pins on the primed grenades, he wound up and threw...and the grenade landed true and hard against a Monitor, who for a moment looked startled. Simon had already changed positions, though, in principle, his scramble-suit left him invisible—at least he hoped. Another Monitor bent to examine the device, its hand too close to the magnets. It slapped against the grenade as it went off; there was no explosion; just a flash of sparks and smoke from the device, as the two Monitors went rigid and then slumped limp and broken to the ground. Drones quickly moved to backtrack the grenade's trajectory, but Simon wasn't there any longer. He was pulling the pin and throwing another grenade; this one bounced, rolling and

stopping against a Monitor's boot. A sudden blast of energy shot terribly close to Simon in retaliation. He barely registered its passing but heard the crackling explosion as it struck in the woods behind him. Simon started running deeper into the woods, knowing he was being followed by Monitors and Drones; neither would be able to track him visually, but surely they might pick up his trail as he ran.

He made it to the next location just ahead of the explosion, but this time the Monitors and Drones fanned out and into the woods immediately. Simon staggered backward and turned to run. Custer had already adapted to the tactic; time was running out before the next blast went off, and he wanted to be nowhere near it. He kept the grenades at hand; they were the only weapon he had if confronted – if even given a chance to know he'd been spotted. Simon ran back towards the lake. Once the bombs dropped into the intake pipes went off, everything Custer had would converge here. Simon could hear the other pyrotechnics going off in the park, popping and echoing as he continued his race through the dark woods. He was glad he was as far from them as possible. Reaching the rendezvous, he waited for Tabitha. He checked his father's watch; she should be up from the pipes, by now. If something had happened – if she'd gotten stuck, or God forbid cut apart by one of the intake rotors...but he could equally worry about her not making it out of the pipes before the bombs blew. The shockwave hitting her...Simon didn't want to think about it.

As he waited, he heard a distant rumble. He turned south, the direction of the sound, seeing a dying glow on the horizon. The communications dish had been brought down. Another few moments and there was an explosion to the west; the data hub. There was still no sign of Tabitha when there was a rumble and then a sudden silence. Simon was acutely aware of the *absence* of sound; the long-running watery rush of traffic that was ubiquitous to the Megalopolis Center had stopped. The traffic control system was down. Then the ground shook beneath him, and a sudden violent burst of water erupted from the lake. No sign of Tabitha and Simon feared the worst. Beyond the false hill that had sourced the waterfall (now spraying violently as well), there was a whining, creaking and worrisome metallic sound. Then a thud Simon felt more than he heard, and the rumble of water from the unseen side of the hill. He had to abandon his position now; the water treatment plant was blowing its pipes and

Simon felt a sudden jolt of agony through every inch of his body, and the world was abruptly silent and very bright. Earth and sky spun around him in all kinds of ways before the ground crashed down upon him. All was blackness.

A Monitor appeared.

More blackness.

More Monitors; not in blue uniforms but yellow. There was pain...so much pain.

Blackness.

Light in his eyes. Pain.

Blackness.

A bright light. Restraints held him down. He was naked. Mechanical arms rose from beneath the table, tentacle-like and each covered in a fan of different instruments. He managed to look down at the bloody ruin of his chest and legs, horrified at the nightmare he saw. He could see *inside* himself; identify the organs from all the times he'd gutted an animal, seen such familiar shapes. His leg was flayed open to the bone, and there was so much blood. Simon knew he was going to die, and then one of the arms stabbed a needle into his neck.

Blackness, without pain.

He woke. Everything was a haze. He was vaguely aware of pain, barely registered that someone or something dressed in yellow was examining him. Then he drifted off again.

Indistinct nightmares; sounds of violence and strange, almost Human shapes. Monsters of black and red creeping, creeping hissing...horrible shadows and dripping blood. Explosions that turned into the screaming voices of the people that he knew and loved:

Jon...Donnie...Cameron...Penny...Katherine...Aaron
...Dennis...Tabitha...*Gregory*...

Back digging dirt with the Night-Miners. It was summer, so everyone was stripped to the waist. Simon couldn't stop looking at Penny's breasts. Suddenly he was aware he was naked from the waist down and hard. Before he could do anything, Penny looked at him.

"Have you finished? We have to get these graves back to the Resistance." He looked down and realized he'd dug out a hole six feet deep, three wide and almost nine long. "We have to load them into the barrels," Penny said, "Hurry up." Outside the grave, Cameron, his body a blackened, *cooked* husk except for his face, was using a winch to pull the graves out of the ground and push them into barrels. One barrel on the side of Simon's ATV was spray-painted with the delivery name,

Tabitha,

In the Night-Miners' official logo script. He looked down at the bottom of the grave he'd been digging, and spray-painted in red on its floor and sides was Gregory's name...over and over again...Simon tried to scream, but his throat and lungs were suddenly packed with the cold, wet earth...

He woke; choking, screaming, lights and beeping alerts everywhere until blurry figures in yellow appeared. He felt

himself forced back into bed, and the cold sting of a needle in his neck...then all was...

Nothing. Timeless. Senseless.

PAINFUL ENDINGS

He slowly came awake, and for the second time in his life, Simon Petrovich was surprised that he wasn't dead. He was lying in bed in a cold room, fresh air coming from a window to his right. There was a curve to the wall, and he knew that this was an alien-made, Megalopolic Center structure. He was afraid to move, remembering in a ghastly flash the extent of his injuries from what surely must have been a Custer attack. Turning his head carefully, looking around, he could see some strange machines around him, keeping track of many different medical and scientific-looking statistics that were far beyond Simon's level of comprehension. There was an intravenous in the back of his right hand; that much, at least he could identify, though it was obvious that the only place he could possibly be was a *hospital*.

But *why*? He didn't understand. Had the Insurgency brought him here? Custer didn't take prisoners; they never had – not from the earliest days of the Invasion. He looked down at himself: a sheet was tucked around him, a thin but comfortably warm blanket over top. He realized he was not in any pain, but Simon still hesitated to pull back the blankets and look. And then, lying back against his pillow, Simon asked himself, *what happened to Tabitha*? He was all too afraid that he already knew the answer.

It wasn't long before someone entered the room; she was a young woman, short, curvy and *soft* looking in a way Simon had never seen outside of the Megalopolis Center; her hair was dark and long, eyes green...and Simon mistrusted her immediately.

"Hello," she said, her voice pleasant and neutral at once; Simon shuddered. He could remember hearing that tone of voice in his nightmares since childhood: the neutral, calming voice of a Custodian. "My name is Naomi. I'm here to acclimate you. You have been arrested and determined by recorded evidence to be guilty in aiding in the mass attacks against infrastructure systems four nights ago. You are one of a fortunate few to ever survive a direct Custodian defensive measure; for that reason and because you are an outsider from beyond the Namcne walls, you have been sentenced to rehabilitation and acclimatization."

"What...happened to my..." Simon rasped.

"Although all twelve of your group's targets were destroyed successfully, you are the only survivor of the counterattack," Naomi said in that dispassionate Custodian's tone. Suddenly all the machines around Simon seemed to be making too much noise as he felt his heart thunder in his chest and an uncontrollable rage grow inside of him. He wanted to rip the Custer in front of him apart with his bare hands. Katherine had said that dissecting the Lloyd-Custer was easier than butchering a hog, and Simon wanted to see for himself. But as he tried to leap from the

bed, Simon found he was suddenly unable to move, restrained as though the bed, itself were pulling him back down.

"FUCK YOU!" he screamed, "I'LL KILL YOU! I'LL FUCKING...KILL...you..." He felt something stab his neck, and suddenly his rage was being washed away by a sea of numbness and tranquility...it was almost bliss but for the news that *his entire team* had been wiped out burning bright on the distant shore, where the only thing he could see was the Custer Naomi.

"I regret your loss, and what you must be suffering," she said as she, too began to fade. "We will talk again when you have had a chance to calm and grieve..." and then she was gone in a fog of dull white-gold light that seemed to fade *him* away, too.

**

It was four days later; he'd been moved from the hospital to the last place he imagined a prison cell to be. He had one room with a bed, chair and desk/table, a window that opened onto a (caged in) balcony; a bathroom with bathtub, personal hygiene equipment including soap, razors and shave lotion; there was a kitchenette stocked with basics, a cold-box, and a stove; he even had pots, pans, and cutlery; this hardly seemed a prison to him. There was even some sort of interactive wall-screen that reminded him of his

childhood tablet – though he'd not touched the thing since he'd been here.

Simon had woken up in bed in this place, and the only thing that made it clear to him that this *was* a prison was the caged-in balcony, and that the door into his suite was locked from the outside. He was astounded that they'd leave him have so many potential weapons, so many potential means of attacking them or doing himself in...until he remembered how easily they'd healed him; he barely had a scar.

Simon had had no visitors since waking up here, and had been given no special instructions; he'd spent most of his waking hours these last four days dangling his legs over the edge of the balcony or sitting against the bars. He could clearly see that he was, indeed, part of a prison compound. The other buildings, all of which formed a ring of ten, were curved, so they made a circular courtyard in the space below. A circular wall, half as high as the buildings were tall, could be seen in the gaps between. Many other prisoners, both men and women of varying ages, behaved as he did: sitting on their balcony floors, dangling their legs in the air. Simon wondered how many of them wept every night, grieving for friends, family, and loved ones they'd never see again. He knew no one else was mourning Tabitha or the other Insurgents from Copper Street and Toppledawn.

All of the prisoners were dressed as he was: in a two-piece purple garment of loose, pocketless pants and matching shirt. There was a long-sleeved shirt with a hood available in his closet, along with underwear, socks and several other changes of clothes, all the same shirt, and pants, all the clothing the same bright purple color, all of it a perfect fit.

There were dozens upon dozens of balconies facing the inner yard; it was wide, covered in grass and with a few sparsely-placed trees. On his first day at his balcony post looking at the people, listening to the sounds and looking down into the common yard and seeing the play yard Simon realized with shock that whole *families* were housed within. All the rumors were true: dissidents were warehoused in the Megalopolic Center; cared for, perhaps, but imprisoned nonetheless. His first day in prison was a revelation, all just from sitting outside in his cage.

Four days after waking up in this place, and Simon still kept remembering what the Custer had told him...sentenced to rehabilitation and acclimation...whatever that meant. He'd noticed they'd offered no time-frame for his sentence. Simon wondered why he'd been spared...and how in *eight days* he'd gone from being flayed open with his organs spilling from his body to being *completely healed*... he barely had a scar; a thin, faint line tracing itself from his chest and down his belly and right leg. Sometimes he had to go stand naked in front of the bathroom mirror to just *stare* at it...no one

could have ever healed from anything like what he'd suffered, in Toppleddown. He couldn't understand why he was still alive. When he'd woken up here four days ago he'd still been stiff and sore – everywhere; he was in no real pain now, only mild discomfort.

His heart and mind were another matter: Simon would cry, weep; he would punch the walls or furniture. All day, every day, his mind kept returning to Tabitha, to the other Insurgents, to Gregory...and he felt lost, isolated and alone. And whatever he broke, whenever he put a hole in a wall or door or smashed something, it would gradually repair itself within the course of a few hours.

Yesterday, during a fit of rage so blind he could barely remember what he was doing, Simon smashed the wall panel to pieces, then stabbed it with every knife in the kitchen, the scissors...and when the forks wouldn't stick in place he just roared into his kitchen and yanked the utensil drawer free of its moorings and dashed it into the counter until it exploded. When he stormed back into the main room, he stopped and watched transfixed as the damaged wall panel began to repair itself; knives were pushed from it, falling to the floor; broken bits climbed across the floor and up the wall, as the knives themselves glided back across the floor into the kitchen, where he could unmistakably hear the utensil drawer rebuilding itself and somehow being re-locked into its slide rails. He sat in a chair, astonished and feeling stupid at his futile anger, the

wall-panel reassembling itself from its shattered constituents seeming not to rebuke but demean his temper.

After that, Simon's world collapsed to a small node of fatalistic grief and pain. All he could think about was that Tabitha was dead, gone forever from his life. Why hadn't he *told* her what he felt when he had the chance? Why hadn't he said something? Now it was too late...*she had been stolen from him*...killed on the mission and taken away from him forever. He'd never expected to live...he'd certainly never expected to *outlive* Tabitha. He'd never expected to be taken prisoner, and although he felt as though he should be afraid...the fact was he couldn't muster the energy to feel *anything* beyond despair. As far as he was concerned, he was waiting to die.

There was a knock, and then his door unsealed and slid into the wall. Someone stepped into the room behind him. Simon remained sitting on his balcony, overlooking the courtyard beyond. He could feel the presence of the other person behind him, waiting expectantly for him to get up and come inside. It seemed to be the first measure of control he'd had over anything since the mission. He got up, slowly, deliberately. He turned around and stopped; The Custer from the hospital, Naomi, was in the middle of his room, waiting expectantly. "Hello, Simon."

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"I already told you, I've been assigned to your acclimation. I'm here to ensure your smooth transition to life inside of North American Megalopolis Center Northeast, so that your Transition, from a citizen of the Old Way to the New Era, goes as easily and quickly as possible."

"So, what? You're going to *brainwash* me? Make me into one of your indoctrinated Custer slaves?"

Naomi shook her head, wearing a bemused expression that Simon could *almost* believe was Human. "That's not what we do," she said, "In fact, I suspect life outside the Megalopolis Center has probably indoctrinated you into more false beliefs than what you would accuse the *Custodians* of doing."

"And what if I don't cooperate?" Simon hissed.

Naomi shrugged, "Then, you'll live out your life as part of this rehabilitation community."

"And if I decide to escape from here? Or attack you, *now*?"

"I think we both know the answer to that. If that's how you'd prefer to die, of course, that is your choice."

"Then what is *this*?" he gestured expansively to the world around him, resenting this creature denying his

freedom, resenting the Custers for coming to Earth and taking away everyone and everything that he had ever cared about.

"It is your residence in the rehabilitation center. From here, now that you've had the chance to make yourself at home, you'll be able to attend regular sessions with me and to learn how we live in the Megalopolis Center. Then we'll evaluate your rehabilitation and acclimation needs. Assuming, of course, that you elect to participate in rehabilitation and acclimation."

"If I don't?"

"Then, as I said, you'll live out your life as part of this community, at least until you decide to change your mind." She stepped towards him, opening her hands, "Simon, I understand that in the last eight days a great deal has happened to you. Shock, grave physical injury, horrifying news, now being arrested and imprisoned. But now you have a chance to begin a new life. A life as part of a new world; one which will benefit Humanity in ways you can't imagine."

"I don't think I believe you," Simon said.

"You probably have no reason to. But we will nevertheless care for you, as we do everyone here. Your food supply is replenished automatically from the other side of the cabinets and refrigerator. You probably found

the list of specialty items you can request and how you can request them from your panel computer.”

“That thing on the wall?” I haven’t even turned it on.”

“Aversion to computer technology is common among arrivals from outside the Walls,” Naomi said, “Especially among younger people. But turn it on, and it will show you everything you need to know – including how to gain yard privilege, and what activities you are permitted to participate in.” Naomi got up and walked to the door. As it opened, she paused and looked back at him.

"Simon, if you decide you'd rather have a chance at living in a place beyond the courtyard and buildings outside your cell, I'll wait for your call. I encourage you to learn more about this place and how we can help you." She gestured to the large, flat rectangle on the wall, "Think about it."

CONTEMPLATED ACTION

Simon spent the rest of the day sitting on the balcony staring out at the courtyard below. He stayed well into the night watching the same small vista, the lights in the windows surrounding him slowly turning bright and then dark. As always a few other prisoners, like him, were just sitting, taking it all in.

Simon got up only because he realized that he had to pee badly and that he was famished. He was stiff and sore from having been in the same place for so long. The light inside was dim and grey as he finished peeing and began rooting the cupboards and fridge to find himself something to eat. It was getting dark out, though sunset was a while off. Nevertheless, Simon was in no hurry to return to his balcony perch. His legs were marked by the ledge and bars of the balcony where he'd been sitting, and his ass was both numb and sore at once. After peeing, while pacing around eating a put-together sandwich that tasted good – but somehow not *quite* as good as what he'd eaten in Toppleddown – he finally, inevitably, found himself standing in front of the black, panoramic rectangle along the long wall of his room.

Touching the panel in any way brought it to life. The first thing he was presented with was a tutorial, with both voice and text, explaining to him how to use the panel, and

any other devices like it. The bland Custer voice still managed to sound condescending, and Simon couldn't help but remember Lloyd and think about how he'd had them all fooled. He sloughed his way through the tutorial and was presented next with a page of options. One of the options, a red tile that glowed intermittently, had the text

INTRODUCTION TO YOUR REHABILITATION CENTER

written on it. Simon touched the tile, and a video started playing—one that took him right back to his childhood before the invasion:

From the flourishing, terrible background music to the flat sound of the male announcer's delivery, the experience was the same as sitting in an A/V room in school and watching some terrible educational documentary.

“You’ve committed a crime against the North American Megalopolic Center Northeast Authorities, and have been sentenced to rehabilitation.” The announcer said, “Welcome to the Rehabilitation Center. Your center provides rehabilitation training and education to hundreds of offenders just like you, every year! With your willing participation in the Acclimation and Rehabilitation programs, you too can be back in the Megalopolic Center, part of society again, in no time at all!”

Simon paused the playback, getting a glass of iced tea from the cold-box before sitting down in a chair, facing the panel. He sipped his drink, looking at the simplistic animation onscreen. It was strange to be watching this, but it held his attention in spite of its seeming ridiculousness. Maybe it was a satire, but self-aware, using the comedy to get its point across. He gestured at the screen, and it continued playing:

“Your Rehabilitation Center has everything you need, should you choose to adapt to the community standards you are expected to follow, including individual and group therapy, classes on Megalopolis Center life and even work retraining should you require or desire it.

"To make your detention period within this Center more pleasant, you have privilege-based access to several dining areas, gymnasiums, a swimming pool and activities of all sorts. Although a psychoactive-free environment, we have nightly cabarets and dancing, as well as movies and creative spaces. And, don't worry, night-owls: Coffee isn't on the list of Controlled Substances! Access to these privileges depends only on your good behavior. If you request Acclimation and Rehabilitation, you will eventually graduate from the Rehabilitation Center and go on to live happy lives, here in the North American Megalopolis Center North East.

“Your Rehabilitation Center is here for you; we are not here to judge *why* you are here, only to help you get from here...to *there*.”

The clip ended showing the gates of the center opening unto the majesty of the Megalopolis Center beyond, and Simon simply stared at the panel as it went blank. The menu screen returned; another tile was glowing, but he felt as though he'd watched more than he could process for a while. Custer was presenting their brainwashing in the most banal light possible. Of course they would...but did people *really* believe that Custer was *helping* them?

He returned to the balcony, sitting back down on his spot, shifted slightly to allow the marked sides of his legs a chance to relax, dangling his legs through the bars. He was three rungs of the cage from the corner. The balcony itself eleven rungs wide from one end to the other. Simon looked around the now-darkened courtyard and down at the park below. He looked at the faces on the other handful of occupied balcony cages...in some eyes he saw that spark of rebellion...the refusal to submit...he remembered his father's words from so long ago: *better to reign in Hell than be a slave in Heaven*. The next best thing, he supposed, was being a prisoner in Heaven; after all, no matter what else they took from him, they could not take his beliefs. They could not take his determination to remain their enemy...to fight them in every trivial way left available to him...simply because it was the *right thing to do*.

Sunrise was a faint light to the east when Simon got up from his place on the balcony again. The air was cool, and though he was not yet tired, Simon decided he might as well go and relax inside for a while. For the first time since his mission began he actually felt free; in spite of the caged balcony and locked door, in spite of the regulated nightly curfew and most of all, in spite of the high wall that surrounded the compound, inside the confines of his own mind...Simon was *free*.

**

Simon was *bored*.

Three days after the Custer Naomi had last locked him in here, Simon had discovered just how long time alone with nothing to do could be. He'd never been in a state like this: isolated from anyone and everyone he'd ever known, far from home, his world reduced to the confines of a single room. No matter how long Simon spent outside the view was always the same; only the sky changed, and at night, given the light pollution of the Megalopolic Center, there were too few stars to be seen. He had come to not only recognize everyone passing by outside but their routines and in a few cases, secret trysts between cheating lovers. That wasn't all Simon saw, however.: Simon was able to see grim, pained resignation. Surrender.

The last time he'd seen anything like it was on his father's face; he'd been just a boy, and he'd been at his

mother's bedside with his father and brother when she died. As he wept and wailed, crying and sobbing for his momma, he looked up at his father for some support and encouragement. Instead, the man was staring down at his dead wife, and before his own grief came upon him, Simon witnessed a moment where that same expression molded his father's features.

Looking at it now, Simon recognized it for what it was: the loss of hope.

He realized again how much his father must have loved his mother; he'd hoped for her life to keep going, up until her heart stopped beating. The people around him now had lost hope. He found himself wondering how long before this routine life broke him. He wondered how free he truly was. And there was also a powerful self-doubt: was he *really* ready – and resigned – to spend the rest of his life a prisoner? What would happen to him, in rehabilitation? Did they simply reprogram people's minds, or was it some horrible brainwashing torture? Would they destroy his mind? Naomi had said they did no such thing...but then how else could they have convinced so many millions...*billions* of people that what they were doing was right?

What little he'd observed of Namcne while training for this mission had shown him ordinary people, more metropolitan in their behaviour and parlance than Toppledowners, but few of them looked like they'd ever

had to do hard work. Even the obviously athletic, in-shape ones were too *sculpted* to have been anything other than the result of deliberate exercise and not physical labor. You could always tell the laborers; they had a hardness and a strength about them. Their muscles developed according to their work, not according to their own vanity. He saw nothing like that in the people of Namcne. They had sophistication, maybe...if that was the right word for it...but they were *soft*. In some ways, Simon was reminded of farm animals being fattened for slaughter with an easy life of grazing the fenced-in meadows of Toppledown. But there had never been reports of mass slaughter by the Resistance inside the city; never been any signs that the Custers wanted to keep the people in the Megalopolic Centers, allowing whoever wanted to leave – with the caveat that they may never return – to do so. Everyone in Namcne that Simon had met seemed to be good, happy citizens.

Was that what he would be if he ever got out of this "rehabilitation center?" Wasn't the Megalopolic Center still just a prison in its own right? Simon would be under constant surveillance to make sure he didn't meet with other members of the Resistance; that was a certainty...he felt his skin crawl at the notion, but Simon couldn't imagine strolling up to the City Gates and being allowed to leave. They'd either turn him away or fry him the minute he got outside the Orange Wall. He was part of the Insurgency, and there was no reason for them not to expect him to return to it if he opted to leave the city. In Namcne,

they could track his activities. Attempting to contact Insurgents after being captured by Custer would just be leading the enemy to their doorstep. He was no longer an asset for the Insurgency. But, he swore, he would never be an asset for the Custers; he'd never betray the Insurgency. As much as he wanted to continue to resist, the real truth was that after long, isolated days sitting alone in his prison cell, he couldn't imagine a worse way of spending the rest of his life.

Simon recalled another moment from his childhood: when his family had all gone to the zoo. He had watched as a tiger paced up and down inside its enclosure...which seemed both so big to Simon's eyes yet too small for the tiger. The tiger had had a feral anger about it...but it seemed in Simon's memory that the big cat's anger had been dulled by the same defeated expression worn on the people in the compound outside. Now, Simon looked around the walls of his prison cell – certainly one of the most comfortable and luxurious places he'd lived since the Invasion – and understood the tiger's claustrophobic pacing, the look on the big cat's face; he could not imagine spending the rest of his life living that way.

And if one day, living in Namcne, he was spotted by someone from the Insurgency and they decided he'd betrayed or compromised them? If they decided to kill him? Simon found, even after contemplating many horrible scenarios as vividly as he could imagine, that it was a risk he was willing to live with. This was not the

freedom of life before Custer; this wasn't the freedom of hunting and trapping for food and trade, this wasn't the freedom of the Gang and whatever pleasures he could trade for in Toppledawn. But it was more freedom than the hell of this small little room for the rest of his life.

He approached the flat, black rectangular panel on his main wall and made the appropriate gesture to switch it on. He spent a long time staring at that screen, unmoving, his expression calm, blank; it was like sitting in a deer blind, just waiting for the movement that meant food for weeks, a hide for curing and gut for string. Except that instead of waiting out a deer, Simon was working up to a decision—more accurately, working up the courage to act on the decision he'd made a while ago. Simon was utterly unprepared for the pang of guilt that surged through him when he finally pressed on two tiles in sequence:

REQUEST ACCLIMATION

and

APPLY FOR REHABILITATION

NEW BEGINNINGS

The next morning, still sullen and unsure, Simon was eating a simple breakfast at his small kitchen booth where he sat wrapped in a bright purple bathrobe. The sky outside was gray and wet with rain. Simon wondered if the legends of Custer weather control were real, or if this was just Nature reminding the Megalopolic Center that she had been around long before anyone else. There was a knock on his door; Naomi entered. She smiled at Simon, "Good morning. May I come in?"

"I guess you're here because..."

Naomi nodded. "I received your requests last night. As I said, I facilitate Acclimation for new citizens. Feel free to take your time having breakfast and getting ready. We work at your pace, and the only condition is your *willing* and *honest* participation."

"What else is left for me?" Simon asked bitterly. "Being stuck in this little place until I *grow old and die*? From what I understand, you people have medicine pretty much perfected, and I don't think I'll be dying in my fifties or sixties like most people where I'm from."

“For someone who wants to become part of the Megalopolic Center, and the Custodian Plan to save your species, you don’t seem happy about it.”

Simon couldn’t help himself. He slammed the table and swore in angry Russian, “You fucking bitch! Everyone I’ve worked with, trained with...planned for my mission with for *months* are dead...including the woman I *loved* and was sworn to protect! How the fuck do you think I feel? Do you expect me to be *happy*?”

"You feel like shit and you wish someone else from the team were alive instead of you," Naomi replied both unflinchingly and in better Russian than his, "You feel guilty because you feel that you are betraying what you stood for and believed in! Look beyond the stupid lies they told you outside the Megalopolic Center! Look at the truth: THIS is your life now! It can either be good, or it can be bad! *That* is for you to decide!"

“So, do you speak *all* the languages in the world,” Simon asked, reverting to English, “Or are you just some computer accessing whatever you need from some central source somewhere?”

“I’m a wholly different form of life than you can even *begin* to imagine," Naomi said, coolly. "I, like my fellow Custodians, have only adapted Human appearance. As to knowing languages, customs...we have long studied your world, and we have all mastered the roughly six thousand

languages and dialects spoken. We've done all that we can to make it easier to help save Humankind."

"Save us from what?" Simon barked.

"As we *continue* to teach as many people as we can, we came here to save you from your own extinction. We're here to teach you how to care for your world and one another properly, and without the societal restrictions that have developmentally crippled your world."

Simon fixed himself another coffee as Naomi continued talking, "Expanding on that basic statement, We are here to teach you how to use and care for your world and its resources without damaging its ecosystems...all of which are in their own way interlaced with and necessary for the sustainability of the complete biosphere. We are here to teach you that progress does not mean destroying yourselves. We are here to teach you to value your world and yourselves; individually and collectively, not just as one species, but as many cultures within that species. We are here so that you can eventually join all the Races of the Cosmos, as we explore the stars."

"What do you get out of it?" Simon asked suspiciously.

"We don't do this for reward," she said, "We don't believe Life is an accidental by-product of the universe, in spite of many theorems suggesting otherwise. We believe Life serves some Purpose, though our science may not yet

understand what that purpose is. We do what we do because we have found and continue to find too many dead worlds. We believe that the natural pass/fail test for Sapien Life is too restrictive, too arbitrary to be allowed to operate unassisted. We do all this because we believe that nearly every species deserves a chance at flourishing, so though often frightening, always difficult, and sometimes cruel, we always do what is necessary to benefit Life.”

“Have you ever been wrong?”

"Yes," Naomi said, with a slight touch of regret. "And when we are...we also do what is necessary."

Simon felt cold and afraid. “I think I should go get ready,” he said, rising from the table, his hunger suddenly gone.

"Take your time," Naomi said, still sitting at the table.

“Sure; thanks.” Simon stammered. As he closed the bathroom door, stripping and stepping into the shower, all he could think, over and over, was *what am I doing? What am I doing? What am I doing?* And no matter how hot the spray from the shower, Simon still felt his tears, even hotter down his face.

**

“How about we go for a walk?” Naomi suggested when Simon was dressed. Simon shrugged and followed the diminutive alien from his cell. He was surprised at how *elegant* the hallway looked; there were other doors that only opened from the outside. The colors were lush, the hall was bright, appointed with artwork and plants. It reminded Simon of a winter in his childhood when his family went on a resort vacation down south. Naomi led him to a curving, gently sloping ramp that took them down to street level.

They exited onto one of the wide avenues on the far side from where Simon was housed. Beyond the long, curving sidewalk was a rail and below, another level of residences. Tiers of the city stretched above and below them.

“You probably noticed that we try to keep the detention areas as normal, as *Humane* as possible,” Naomi said, “Which is why we allow prisoners such privileges into the city. Likewise, children of detainees have the option of Custodian education; about sixty-three percent of detained parents allow their children to attend our educational programmes.”

“And the adults?”

A look of apparent regret briefly crossed Naomi’s features; Simon wondered if they were simulated for effect, or if they were genuine, “Only about thirty percent of the adults decide to enter into the Rehabilitation and

Acclimation programmes. But their lives inside are nevertheless, for the most part, fulfilling. One of our most famous dissidents is actually a writer of fantasy stories; I've become an admirer of his work. He used to write science-fiction until he said – and I quote, ‘you people fucked it up for me.’” Simon laughed in spite of himself and wondered if that was the reaction Naomi had wanted from him. “We have artists, craftspeople...even prisoners are ultimately free to live their lives as they wish; for the most part.”

“Are there any other Insurgents in the Rehab?”

"Not this one, no," Naomi replied. "In fact, we try and keep those few we capture isolated from each other...for obvious reasons. You're not even in the same part of the Megalopolis Center you were found in."

"Oh," Simon said, absently. He looked around; he could have been less than a block from either of his previous hideouts and would never have known it. It must have been obvious to his guide that he was lost. Naomi led him away from the Rehabilitation Center Campus and into the city, proper. He recognized from the storefronts that this was a shopping district.

"One of the first things we did was revitalize your industry by transitioning your society to natural, biodegradable or fully recyclable materials. Now, all plastics are made of vegetable matter and break down

within months of final disposal," Naomi said as they window-shopped. "Similarly, we have developed both plant and animal oil-based lubricants to further reduce the necessity to rely on petroleum. In fact, the petro-industry was among the first targeted by the Custodians, because they had the most control and influence over the world: creating a false dependence on all their products and by-products. And so much of your world is *still* contaminated by chemical waste...we've not often seen civilizations as far gone as yours that even survived to the ten-year mark."

"Is that supposed to be reassuring?"

"We've done what was necessary to begin the repair and healing processes for your planet and people," Naomi said as they strolled, "Though there is still much work ahead of us before it is completely habitable, fully sustainable once more."

They walked in silence for a while, until Simon stopped in front of one shop, admiring a jacket in a window display. "Would you like to go in and take a look?" Naomi asked.

"I thought I was only allowed to wear...this..." he said, picking at the bright purple clothes he wore.

"If you are extended day pass privileges, you're allowed to wear *civilian* clothes during your excursions. It's not like you aren't otherwise monitored; we can track you

anywhere. The uniform is more borne out of Human cultural conformity needs to make rehabilitation and acclimation easier; so...want to go look at some clothes?"

"But, I don't have any currency or barter." Simon protested.

Naomi laughed; Simon wondered again if it was genuine or an affectation.

"Simon, we don't have an *economy* in the Megalopolis Center! Everyone works, providing goods or services to their fellow citizens, in return for the goods and services they desire. Luxuries are priced in hours worked to create them, and an equivalent number of hours worked allows citizens to purchase what they desire. A basic wall tablet requires ten hours to build, from raw materials to home delivery; so when someone has accrued ten hours of work, they can acquire one. Anything people *require*, such as food, shelter, education, healthcare, and clothing, is provided to all citizens without cost. Food is portioned according to guidelines consistent with everyone's individual physiology, and tailored to be palatable and enjoyable. And it's not like we forbid anyone their little pleasures; Things like desserts and sweets are still allowed, as is alcohol and more than a few other recreational consumables. Those, however, *do* require accrued time to buy, and will only be available to you once you've completed rehabilitation and acclimation. Moderation in all things is the key to good health."

“Especially moderation,” Simon said, “It’s something my father used to say.”

“Your father was a wise man,”

“That he was,” Simon said, wondering what his father would think of him, now.

THE NON-ECONOMY

AND OTHER ALIEN NOTIONS

After shopping, Naomi took Simon to a local park for a coffee; the place was at least as large as Minh Park, from what he could see. Everything about the Megacity seemed impressive; Simon was still thinking about the jacket, boots, shirts, and pants he'd gotten. He'd not seen such well-tailored clothes often in Toppledown, only really in the rugged military uniforms worn by the Insurgents.

They sat on a dark stone bench with a vista of the park's subtle border with the rest of the city, "We've successfully made this, and every other Megalopolic Center on Earth completely self-sufficient." Naomi said.

After years of living off the land, Simon knew it was almost impossible to be *entirely* self-sufficient. "What about shortages?"

Naomi shook her head, "We calculate for that when we set up the sorts of Megalopolic Centers we use on Earth; anticipated population growth even with increased fertility and pregnancy health, the lower death rate that medical advances will allow for the Megalopolic Center could accommodate three times as many people as it does currently without straining the resources; up to five times

its current population before it hits the sustainability limit. It would take *generations* to put that sort of stress on the infrastructure we've selected for Humans. And when or if hyper population occurs, you should by then be sufficiently evolved to determine the best course of action for yourselves – which typically manifests as minor terrestrial expansion, and a major push towards the climate building and colonization of other worlds; you were on the verge of establishing a permanent station on Mars before we arrived. It would be well suited to terraforming, once you've learned how to remove the excess iron from the soil..." Naomi looked at the glazed expression on Simon's face, "I lost you,"

"The Megalopolic Center could hold three to five times its current population," Simon said. "And by the time that happens, we should have our shit together enough to go out and colonize Mars, or something."

"Fair enough; I have been told that one of the character flaws I adapted when taking Human form was a tendency to ramble."

Simon was confused, "Why would you...no, never mind I probably won't understand it, anyway."

"Eventually you will," Naomi said, turning to look at the city beyond, "The education programs teach advanced sciences as well as environmental restoration. If you have an aptitude for that sort of thing you could study in that

field. If you choose to pursue an advanced education beyond the standard acclimation, you could actually accomplish a great deal.”

“Well...that's good news, I guess...” Simon pondered, “But, where's the incentive to work at all unless it's just to get some new toy? And why would *anyone* want to work in more complex, difficult or even dangerous fields?” he asked between outfit changes, “What about doctors or researchers or firefighters or *anyone* in a life-threatening job?”

Naomi turned around, facing the opposite way from Simon. They were near a stone terrace, overlooking a lower level of the park. The geometry of the city rose over the distant canopy of trees. “Well first, for now, the Monitors perform all dangerous duty: be it policing, fire-fighting, or any overtly high-risk work.” She said, looking at the vista. “The people formerly in those jobs either retired, or teach what they know to others; eventually we want you to take care of yourselves, so those *are* necessary skills.”

Simon had also turned to admire the view. He got up and walked to the ledge of the terrace, looking at the hilly relief below. There was a ramp down nearby, and he watched people climb or descend between levels. Simon frowned, “Okay, but I still don’t get why anybody would do anything? I mean, if they’re only working for an hour of credit for an hour...why bother?”

“That’s *why* it works,” Naomi said, “There’s no economic restrictions, anymore. You mentioned research, medicine...look at what happened to you: you were cut open from your chest to your ankle. You were up and on your own two feet in less than four days: the medical advances that made that possible came from the complete lack of financial restrictions put on research. In fact, we haven’t had a death in Namcne from what you’d term ‘natural causes’ in almost eight years. All of that happened because people *chose* to devote themselves to making it happen.”

Simon frowned, shaking his head. He didn’t understand, “But...why does anyone bother? If you only have to work for luxuries...why work *at all*?”

“Because you’re free to do *whatever you want*!” Naomi said, gesticulating. “If you asked your questions of any of those researchers, they’d tell you they do it because they *can*. Imagine having the freedom to spend your life doing what you always dreamed of doing; that’s what removing the economy from the new system allows you...*all* of you...to do.”

“I’m from the Wildlands,” Simon said, “The only thing I’ve ever hoped for is a long life and a quick death.”

"And in this new society, you can have so much more...more than you can imagine. What should have

been your birthright; the birthright of every member of your species: true freedom." She gestured expansively; behind her, Simon watched throngs of people move past on foot or in one of the many mass transit pods, across countless levels of this unbelievable city.

Naomi continued, "Almost everyone who wants to work full time can do either their first, or second-choice career. Some people don't want much; just a simple job is all they need...other people devote their lives to their passions, and there's a complete spectrum of personal choice in between. It's a new age for Human scientific, cultural, philosophical and social advancement."

"I just...I don't understand how an entire society can run without some form of commerce, some...economy."

"You've spent your whole life believing an economy was *necessary*. Anyway, that's enough *Intro to the Non-Economy* for today; but, the day is still yours to profit from. Ask me any question you have, no subject is forbidden...let's hear it."

Simon found his mind suddenly blocked. There were so many questions he wanted to ask that he couldn't articulate any of them. Finally, he blurted: "Why did everyone just *surrender*?"

Naomi looked sad, "That isn't what happened," she said, "There were holdouts... riots worldwide; we tried to keep

the casualties to a minimum, but hundreds of millions died in the worldwide fighting...there was so much resistance – and there still is, as you can attest: the Insurgency is alive and well. But, some people remained in the Megalopolic Centers, either because they were too afraid to leave or they had faith in the message and vision we brought. Of course, many just didn't know what else to do, where else to go...or had given up hope. We managed to cease the violence within the Megalopolic Centers...and continue to do what we can to minimize hostilities from outside. We are met with violence far more often than we're welcomed. No matter the world, people are desperate, angry, frightened...some we can reason with. Others, for the good of everyone else..."

Simon was uncertain what to think about the tears that streamed down Naomi's cheeks; were they genuine? Did she genuinely regret the deaths? He remembered another lesson his father taught him and Gregory—a quote by Joseph Stalin that he had learned from *his* father, a Russian immigrant to the United States. *"The death of one is a tragedy; the death of millions is just a statistic."*

Could the Custodians *truly* feel guilt for so many millions dead, so many lives ended so violently, so suddenly, when *they* were directly responsible for those deaths? They said they did this throughout the universe, claimed to have come to save Humankind from themselves; for their own good. A chill ran down his spine as Simon

remembered another lesson, one that he'd learned one frightening winter.

Gregory had been old enough to hunt with them by then; they were culling wolves. The local packs had grown too large and were threatening not just deer, rabbit, and other game animals' survival, but they had already attacked one of the smaller settlements. The pack was massive: dozens of animals, all of them large, all hunting together. There were packs spread throughout the area, and they posed a threat to all nearby settlements.

Charles, Simon, and Gregory went with their own hunting dogs. They wore heavy padding on their arms and around their necks, with thick leather over their bellies. The wolves turned the hunt around on them twice, killing their dogs and leaving them to fend off attacks with shotgun fire and swings of hunting axes. After three days besieged in a clapboard shack in deep woods, Gregory, the most shaken by the eternally long and sleepless attack they'd survived, asked, "Why is it so important to hunt these damn wolves?" And his father replied simply with words Simon recalled as clearly as he did the remarkably bright red of the bloody snow. Simon repeated his father's answer to Naomi.

"Sometimes...you have to cull the animals; reduce their numbers, and kill the worst of them. Sometimes...it's for their own good. The only way to make sure that they – and

all the other animals – survive." Simon doubled over and vomited between his feet.

“Let’s get you cleaned up, and we’ll go somewhere that
_”

"No! Not today! Not anymore today!" Simon screamed in Russian, "Please...bring me back home."

A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT

Somehow, being back in his quarters was worse. He felt more claustrophobic than ever, and he'd grown up in a log cabin smaller than this single room dwelling, and yet he felt himself suffocating. But he didn't want to leave—*couldn't* leave, even though he'd been granted yard privileges. As much as he wanted to flee the room, to find an open space, he was terrified of the notion of being under the sky—of billions of eyes gazing down on him, any one of them ready to deal death to one or a thousand in the fraction of a second. Simon huddled on his bed, naked, wrapped in blankets, shivering cold and sweating.

The microsats were there to *cull the herd*; to wipe out the gangs of Marauders, or Warlords. And what about the Settlers? What about the people who chose to live free from Custer, in places like Toppledown, Copper Street Station, or the Encampments beyond the Jagged Desert? Would their time to be culled from the herd come, if they refused to live within the City Walls? It started raining as the sun set, and Simon pulled on his purple underwear to sit, hanging his legs and arms through and leaning his chin against the caged railing.

Summer was moving into fall, and the rain cooled the night air. It wasn't long before he felt the chill, not long after before he was shivering. Simon wasn't troubled by it.

The rain felt good; it helped his mind wander; the cold had never bothered him. His skin shivering was an autonomic response that Simon had learned to ignore longer than he should. And here inside this elegant prison, warming up was so much easier: all he had to do was go inside, close the balcony door and put on a robe; panels on the walls let him adjust the temperature, and if he wanted to Simon had an armchair that could heat or cool depending on controls on its side.

Luxuries so opulent, yet as commonplace as hand-made wooden chairs were, in Toppledawn. All made sustainably, using technologies that only became self-evident with the scales of financial restraint lifted from science's eyes. Charles Petrovich had rarely spoken about the World Before...only that it was not up to aliens to decide how Humanity lived. But everyone, inside and outside the walls of the Megalopolis Center, anywhere around the world, no matter how old or how young could recite the message that the Custodians delivered when they'd first arrived. And even in Toppledawn, some admitted that the Custodians were right about the state of the world...but they disagreed with the idea of living under Alien rule. Simon now found himself wondering how much of that was just anti-alien hate, and how much of it was old-fashioned Human digging-in of their heels. And then he wondered about his own motivations, and where they were coming from, now.

As it rained and he shivered, Simon thought long and hard about everything that he'd been through as far back as

he could remember, and forward until now. Alone in the woods on a hunt for days, he could devote his mind to tracking an animal's prints, scats, passage through underbrush, and trail. And while so engaged in the hunt, only giving it his full focus and attention when the Kill was coming, Simon would often think about his past, trying to imprint his mother in his memory as best he could, trying to create some mental record of his memories of childhood before the Custodians: Daycare then supper and playtime with Mama and Papa, bath-time, then two cartoons and bed. Weekends of Saturday morning cartoons and Sunday driving trips. Then Kindergarten, Elementary School, and all the changes that came with them...then the Aliens came, and that world ended forever.

Except, here was that wondrous world again, ready and waiting for use; new, improved and better than ever! All thanks to the glorious Alien Masters who promised to let them govern themselves – *when they were ready to*. All they had to do was wait a few generations...so that those who would govern would never remember the World Before the Custodians came; so that those who would govern would be born long after the world had changed. The Old Ways would be remembered as the crimes against their habitat that they were, though the science and art would be remembered for its beauty, and its horrors.

Simon still felt a great deal of mistrust towards the aliens. These claims of having no ulterior motive other than to help Life in the cosmos prosper...Simon couldn't

quite accept it. What was the *point* of such an undertaking? What could it *accomplish* if it wasn't meant to build an empire? On the other hand, Simon knew, there was no sense in taking so long, in playing such a manipulative game if all you wanted was slaves or subjects.

Custer could have easily harvested every Human on Earth in a matter of weeks if they'd have wanted to. They could have just as easily wiped them all out. Instead, they'd built these orange-walled Megalopolic Centers and herded as many people inside as they could. Hundreds of millions of people were concentrated into urban settings that, despite the density, allowed for and were designed to permit spaciousness, privacy, comfort. What had they lost, in exchange for such lives?

None of them were truly free to live as they chose; there were consequences if one didn't live the Custodian way of life: isolation, exile, or perhaps even death in extreme cases. There was no democratic process...just a ruthless, determined authoritarian pragmatism. Citizens could not travel beyond their Megalopolic Centers, and although the essentials were provided to them, they had to work for luxuries, or chose to work simply to contribute something, *anything* to society...but how was it that so many were drawn to such heights of altruism? Selflessness had *never* been a natural behaviour in Humans. The Custodians were building a cooperative society, where the individual served and was in turn served by the collective. In principle, it

seemed like an ideal solution...but, would it really work in practice? Could it possibly survive the Custers' departure?

Humans were weak, corruptible – easily corruptible. Simon wondered if the Custodians understood Human nature, the self-seeking, solipsist selfishness...the natural bigotry, ingrained xenophobia...did Custodians understand how the most ambitious of history had often been the most selfish, or the most sadistic? Did they understand Human cruelty?

Simon's father had told him what he'd believed were *just* stories, until he read about them from actual books. Over a half-century of genocide and mass murders of horrific scale across Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East...similar acts throughout Latin America, and state-sanctioned ethnic violence including mass imprisonment, discriminatory practices and even summary executions from sea to sea, in North America...Simon shivered, thinking about what Naomi had said about correcting their mistakes. There were stories – histories, really – of chemical plants giving whole communities cancer and birth defects, of drug companies enslaving people through *treating* instead of *curing* illnesses, of creating products that caused more harm than good...food companies choosing profits over the health of their consumers...whole industries that disregarded the need to sustain the environment, because it would mean making less profit...tens of thousands left homeless because of corrupt lending practices by banks who bilked them of their

lives' work with impunity...tens of thousands more turned out into the streets instead of being given the mental health care they needed...hundreds of thousands imprisoned for trivial offenses ...hundreds of thousands starving to death every minute of every day...dying of entirely preventable diseases...habitats and ecosystems being obliterated in the name of profit...and people far more concerned with their individual rights than their responsibility to their fellow Human Beings...Simon didn't know if he was more frightened by the idea of another cull, or that Custer really thought they could change Humanity.

Simon did not sleep that night; all he did was toss and turn, feeling lost, alone, and afraid.

PERSUASIVE ARGUMENT

"Your world has a tremendous variety of life," Naomi said when they met the next morning in her office. She was admiring an aquarium that was set up along the wall behind her desk; from about halfway from the floor almost to the ceiling and wall to wall, it was the sort of thing Simon only remembered from the few times he'd been to nature museums as a child...though he had some idea that people used to keep fish as *pets*, but that didn't make sense to him. The large glass tank in Naomi's office was filled with stones and aquatic plants, a silty bottom where smaller fry clustered as larger, but still small, multicolored fish of different sizes and shapes swam. There were gruesome-looking bottom-feeding catfish that Simon recognized from dining on them more than once; crawdads and other freshwater invertebrates, snails, and living on a shore built up of sand and rock, reptiles, amphibians, and insects made their homes...the tank was a small window into a much larger miniature ecosystem beyond, Simon realized.

"I've always loved studying the boundaries between water and land," Naomi said, sitting down at her desk and gesturing for Simon to take a seat, "It's something nearly all life has in common: it comes from the water, onto the land. There are some exceptions; species who evolved on worlds devoid of liquid water; silica and other non-carbon-based

life...lifeforms from arsenic-rich worlds, or warm planets that develop in a stable orbit in an unlikely habitable zone around a black hole, or...I'm sorry...rambling."

Simon took his seat, saying nothing. He wondered if the mindless chatter was meant to make her seem more Human. Naomi seemed wistful as she looked back over her shoulder at the tank...Simon thought it was pretty, but it was strange to him...such an unnecessary thing. But, there was a lot of unnecessary lavishness in Namcne, from what he'd seen.

"You still have doubts," Naomi said, "Which is understandable...what you realized yesterday...I understand why it affected you. Our job as Custodians is not an easy one. We have to make difficult decisions all the time, every time we encounter a civilization that needs our help."

"Have you ever met a civilization that *didn't* need your help?" Simon asked.

"It happens occasionally," Naomi replied, "Sometimes we form unions with them, or we simply acknowledge one another and go our separate ways. Space is infinite and resources remarkably plentiful if one knows where to look. There may occasionally be violence – piracy, or a necessary threat-removal, but there is no such thing as war among most Spacefarers. These civilizations are incredibly different from what you might imagine; their goals would

be foreign to you. By the time your Species goes out on its own, through the darkness and stars, it will be as far removed from anything you might recognize, now, as this world would be to an ancient Roman...though they might appreciate the *breadth* of the enterprise.”

“I don’t think I’ve been around *any* civilization long enough to tell you much about any of them.”

“You were still young when we came,” Naomi said, “Just beginning to understand how your *own* society worked...and then everything changed.”

“*You* came, and *then* everything changed,” Simon agreed, bitterly.

“And your family fled,” Naomi said, “You lived in the wilds, growing up to fear the Custodians.”

“That’s about right.”

“And now, left with no other choice, you’ve decided to try and come to understand us...and by extension, what we are trying to do for your world.”

“I just don’t get what’s in this transaction for you. All the time, energy, resources you’re putting into saving us from self-extinction...why? What benefit do you get from it?”

“The benefit of having one less Sapient race go extinct in the cosmos,” Naomi replied, “The benefit of being less *alone*...Simon, when you come to understand just how vast...how truly, incredibly vast the universe is...it horrifies you when you contemplate – not how rare Sapience is, but *why* it’s so rare...why the whole of the *cosmos* is devoid of others like us, like you, like any of the *few* thousand Living Races we’ve found. The universe is terribly empty, Simon; it’s cruel, unforgiving...and we value Life too much to allow that to continue unchecked. Sincerely, and I know that many Sapients struggle with this concept, but we are doing this purely for the sake of Life itself. We do brutal, terrible things because we must, for the good of all. We seek no gain, no glory. We wish for no reward or recognition. We only want to foster what we believe the universe was created for: Intelligent Life.”

“Don’t you worry you’re going against Nature?” Simon asked, “That meddling around with other planets and the people on them is going to cause a problem, somehow, somewhere down the line?”

“We tallied the number of Spacefarer Civilizations and the number of Living Races we’ve encountered against the tally of the dead...and decided it was a risk worth taking.”

“Then if Life is so precious, at what point does the brutality stop? When do you stop killing us?”

“It seems like a simple question,” Naomi admitted, “And you deserve a straightforward answer. But the truth is, we don’t know. Every Species we encounter, every Species we help past these evolutionary hurdles behaves differently. Violence is not uncommon. The simplest answer is when your Species stops fighting us; when you come to understand...when you cease combatting us for trying to help you...none of those statements are fair, nor are they easy for either side to contemplate. Believe me when I tell you that the Custodians are burdened by every life we must take. But to protect your Species, those who would threaten what we are doing must be stopped. If they will not reason...”

Simon didn’t prompt her to continue; there was no need. He knew the answer well enough, and the worst part was, he could see the brutal necessity of it: kill millions to save billions...but he was horrified by it nevertheless...the scale was nothing short of genocidal. Simon knew that such a thing would be considered a crime by Human standards – even if it truly meant saving Humankind from extinction. He wondered if the Custodians likewise thought of it as a crime or if they even had such concepts of justice.

“How will you answer for all the lives lost?” Simon asked.

Naomi seemed momentarily perplexed by the question. “The lives taken can only logically be measured against the lives saved. The only way to save your people is to

eliminate those who oppose our efforts. What we do is horrible; it is cruel, and it is necessary. But before we take lives, we always give them a chance to surrender."

"Were the people in the Toppledawn Camp given a chance to surrender?" Simon snapped, angrily. "What about Rich West? Or Tabitha? I don't remember anyone telling *me* to surrender before I was blasted apart!"

"Once you are part of an active Insurgency, you forfeit such rights," Naomi replied, ignoring his aggressive tone, "We have migrants approaching the Wall both day and night, looking to shelter near it, or to find the nearest gate into the Megalopolis Center."

"But people who are fighting for what they believe in forfeit their lives?"

"If they choose not to surrender, if they choose to fight instead or go their own way, then yes."

"And what happens when they're not given the option of surrendering?"

"That is the nature of war, Simon; particularly among Humans. Have you studied your own history?"

"I didn't have much chance to, seeing as my school was vaporized when I was ten," he retorted, knowing that the

truth was his Father had ensured that both he and Gregory had very thorough educations, despite the Invasion.

“We *never* targeted schools,” Naomi retorted. “As well you should know; we left the razing of structures and infrastructure for *after* we’d relocated the Human population.”

“You get my point.” Simon hissed, irritably.

“Do you get *mine*? We don’t do these things because we want to. We do them because we *have* to. Militant forces aligned against our Purpose have seldom been able to be reasoned with. Therefore we take the necessary, unfortunate step of eliminating the problem.”

“You kill people. You blow them apart. Can you admit that?”

“Would it make you feel better for me to admit that yes, we have killed and must continue to kill people involved in the Insurgency against us? We are fighting a war on behalf of *your* species, against its own self-destructive compulsions. Of *course* there are casualties! Of *course* we cause them! But we’re restoring the natural balance to your *entire planet* so that your People – and every other species struggling to survive on this planet – can have a future, a life beyond the next few decades, a chance to *evolve*!”

“What gives you the right to even *make* that decision?”

“Out of every hundred living civilizations we encounter, ninety-three to ninety-seven of them are on the verge of annihilation; the hard fact is, that even with intervention we’ll lose nearly a third of those races. We cannot, we *will* not tolerate threats to those we *can* save, and we *always* strive to minimize the number of lives we take. And so we kill. We kill without hesitation or mercy, but we do *not* kill without regret.”

Simon said nothing...the admission was a hollow victory. The Custodians were aware of what they’d done and made no attempt to hide it...they had justified it to themselves and were utterly convinced that they were right.

“You don’t have to approve of our methods,” Naomi said, “You just have to trust that we are doing everything we can to ensure the survival of your people.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t exactly give Humanity any *choice* in the matter, did you?”

“Simon, if we would have, do you think we’d have accomplished this much? Do you think we’d have accomplished *anything*? You’re too young to remember the World Before...but we spent *decades* monitoring your world before we decided to act. We did not simply stumble across your star system and decide to poke our noses in where they didn’t belong. And we gave your *entire world* a choice: we gave the world’s governments and corporate

empires a day to resign, to begin ceding power; if we still had to negotiate with those entities, each only interested in their agendas, none giving a care for the dying world they inhabited, we would have made no progress, at all.”

“Might makes right,” Simon hissed.

Naomi regarded him, and her expression was almost convincingly sad, “No; experience makes wisdom. Wisdom allows us to be judicious in our actions.” She paused a moment, checking some information on a screen before her. “After what happened yesterday, I hadn’t planned on our next excursion for some time...but I believe it’s time you meet someone. He’s available today, and...has...agreed to see us. Go back to your quarters and change into civilian clothes, then meet me by the car station outside the main gate.”

“What? Who are we going to see?”

“One of your fellow Humans; a man who first helped establish real dialogue, and a...ceasefire, for lack of a better term...between our peoples. Perhaps you know his name: Duncan Terrell.”

DOCTOR DUNCAN

They were traveling by the overhead highway at accelerated speeds. Yet, because of the sheer scale of the city, it felt to Simon as though they were leisurely drifting by. Massive buildings; towering spires and hulking ziggurats; and everywhere huge parabolic mirrors reflecting the sun's glory down upon every corner of Namcne. Simon didn't know what to think, what to say while they rode to another, far-flung part of the Megalopolic Center.

Duncan Terrell was called *The Race Traitor* by Wildlanders; his name said outside the Orange Walls with venom. Simon had a childhood recollection of *The Doctor Duncan Science Show* hosted by Terrell, enthusiastically demonstrating incredible scientific wonders to eager children three times a week. He could also remember with wonder listening to Terrell talking calmly, like a *grown-up*, on the news that Papa watched when he got in from work when the Custodian Ship was still approaching Earth.

Duncan Terrell was famous...*world* famous; a controversial figure but an important, historical man, to say the least. He was the man the Custodians had chosen to be their intermediary, their Primary Ambassador to Humankind. As their car ascended onto a private road-bed and began rolling towards a massive, irregular conical building, Simon immediately realized where they were:

“This is Namcne Capital!” he exclaimed.

"I hadn't realized the Capital was so famous outside the Orange Walls," Naomi said.

“We’ve all seen pictures of it,” Simon said, absently, watching the landmark structure grow ever larger as they approached, “Mostly sketches, but a few photos...and what we could hack off of CusterNet. We’ve heard about it; Seat of the Megalopolic Center Council Central Administration...I don’t know if it’s true, but I heard there’s a *museum*.”

“There is; it’s one you need five days to see in its entirety,” Naomi nodded, and Simon wondered if she was making some mental note that would prove harmful for the Insurgency in some way, or just further adding to whatever catalogue of thought she was using to interact with him. He still couldn’t tell if she was a living being or simply some sophisticated machine. That she had *taken Human form*...it just wasn’t something Simon could understand a living creature being able to physically accomplish. But then, the cities they’d built in such a short time, the ease with which they’d resettled billions of people—there was no doubt that the Custodians were advanced beyond anything he could imagine.

They were approaching the Capitol Building. It reached into the sky, as tall and as large as any of the nearby

mountains. It was of a bluish, reflective material, elegantly spiraling upwards and higher than any surrounding structure. Drones and Monitors were everywhere; the sight of them gave Simon a chill. But this was the Capitol Building for a city of millions upon millions of people...it made sense to him that the leaders of such a city would be well guarded.

Despite its massive size, the Capitol was a deceptively simple-looking structure: a curved, conical tower ringed with terraces, landing ports, and pod stations; it even included a large port on a river that Simon couldn't be sure was or wasn't natural.

Their car was slowing, turning off and climbing a ramp that led to a wide gallery, open on the riverside view. As they left the pod behind, Simon was spellbound by the sprawl of the city, stretching from horizon to horizon in a canyon of curves and angles and immeasurable movement and activity; the river snaked its way on a rough diagonal through the city, between mountains either partially or wholly covered by structures of alien design. The whole of Namcne seemed spread before him, and it was like looking at the sparkling horde of some dragon of legend. It made Simon dizzy as he tried to drink it all in.

He was brought back to the present by Naomi, who announced that their host had arrived. Simon turned around and was face to face with the man himself. Duncan Terrell was tall, slender, white-haired and dark-skinned,

casually dressed in cargo pants and a loose-fitting button-down shirt, wearing his signature black Trilby and black and white Brogue boots. He smiled warmly, *in the eyes*, as Simon's Father used to say, and extended his hand to Simon.

"Uh," Simon stammered, reaching to shake Terrell's hand, realizing he was more than a little star-struck; Duncan Terrell was one of the most famous people on the planet, a childhood hero, and Simon was having a *personal meeting with him*.

"It's a lot to take in, I know," Terrell said, "My first visit to the Capital, I was so overwhelmed I wept; and half the city wasn't as built up as it is now."

"Oh," Simon said, realizing the famous scientist was giving him an out, "Yeah...I, well...I come from outside the city, so...it's something." Which was, in and of itself, an admission of truth.

"You also look like someone who can't believe who they're face to face with...not quite sure how to react." Terrell continued, "I know because it's a look I've worn a lot: the first time I met Bill Nye. When I found out David Suzuki was a fan...the time I was on a panel with Neil Tyson...when I met my first President...or the actors from Star Wars Episode Fourteen at a Con...and of course, when I met Elizabeth Hello, the Custodian Ambassador, and Face of First Contact. It never goes away; that feeling of

humility and...*wonder*...I *love* it...it's the same feeling I get whenever I learn or discover something new."

Simon grunted and tilted his head, "Yeah, except part of me remembers the guy on the Webseries doing all the cool science stuff," he said, "And another part of me remembers the early years of the Invasion when your face and voice was everywhere during the roundups."

Duncan Terrell looked sad, regretful, "The Resettlement could have gone a *lot* better. And I've said as much repeatedly. We scared the hell out of too many people, and that means too many more people died than necessary."

"But, some people who died *were* necessary?"

"Son, there hasn't been a night in ten years I haven't asked myself the same question. The truth is, I bore witness to things that would have been considered war crimes in the World Before...and if those acts hadn't happened, the Anthropocene Mass Extinction would be about fifty years from wiping out Humankind." He gestured for Simon to follow, and along with Naomi and a couple of people dressed in dark matching suits that Simon suspected were Custers, they walked from the carport and into one of the Capitol Building's many enclosed courtyards.

"The what?" Simon asked, momentarily distracted by an elegant, multi-tier fountain that was probably pumping enough water to supply Toppledawn for a month.

“The Anthropocene Mass Extinction,” Terrell said, sitting on the stone ledge of the fountain, looking every bit like a professor delivering a lecture to select students, “I mentioned it on my shows for older kids a couple of times, and more times than I care to count at Congressional Hearings, conferences, the news, and documentaries that all ultimately accomplished little to nothing.

“In almost every geologic era in which there has been a record of life, the era either begins or ends with a mass extinction event. The Anthropocene Geologic Era is marked by the presence of Humankind, and our extraordinary impact on and influence over our world. Of course, on the show I never mentioned how *bad* the Anthropocene Extinction was going to be. Not on the show, never in public; none of us did.

“Most scientists who started out studying climate change soon realized something else...it wasn’t just the climate that was undergoing changes; *every aspect of the planet* was experiencing dramatic upheavals: earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, wildfires, incredible storms, virulent new diseases, whole water tables turning to poison or draining up altogether, sinkholes swallowing entire cities...literal plagues of insects and invasive species, not to mention catastrophic weather events.

“We talked to meteorologists, biologists, geologists, virologists, chemists, former petrochemical engineers,

anthropologists, atmospheric scientists, doctors reporting trends found in routine blood samples...economists, bankers, botanists...we had the brightest minds design computer models fifteen years before the Custodians arrived. Back then, we were still trying to roll back carbon emissions, stop rising sea levels, and stem the loss of pollinators, crop failures, and oceanic extinction.

“Then the models returned and showed that, at best, the planet had between twenty-five and fifty years before Humankind began dying off. And we were able to trace, with certainty, almost all of that planetary upheaval to Human activity: mining, drilling for oil, hydraulic fracturing, atomic tests, deforestation, soil erosion, urbanization, farming, even vehicular traffic density was having unimagined tectonic as well as atmospheric and local ecological side-effects. It was as though the planet was exhibiting an immune response. Airborne plagues made a terrifying comeback; suddenly new viruses, bacteria, fungi, and invasive species were threatening our health, our crops, and livestock; other pathogens quickly began affecting women's ability to have viable offspring, while increased estrogen in the water tables and in certain plants and animals began taking their toll on men's sperm production.

“Environmental efforts had been thwarted for so long by corporate interests disguising themselves as political, even *ideological* concerns, that the best we could hope to do was buy us a few decades more...and hope to a God most

people were no longer really sure they believed in that we found some miracle...some means of saving ourselves from mass extinction.

“At one point, a massive economic scandal looked like it might set off the sort of revolution Mankind needed to save itself...but the Powers in Charge were masters at cowing the people...then a few years later, one early morning not long after New Year’s, some young astronomers were looking at Saturn through a hobby-store telescope they’d gotten as a Christmas present from their parents. And, they changed the world; they saw the Custodian Ship and streamed pictures to the Internet before anyone could do anything to cover it up.

“Almost a year later, the Custodians arrived and told us they were here to save us from our own extinction. And then they did the unthinkable: *exactly what was necessary for Humankind to survive*. It’s now ten, nearly eleven years later, and we actually have a fighting chance at giving our species a future beyond the next century. And I still wonder if what they did was right...and if I was wrong for condoning it.”

A DAY AT THE MUSEUM

After his initial meeting with Duncan Terrell, Simon had a quick lunch with Naomi in what they called a Commissary but looked more to him like some fantastic dining room from some fairy-tale past. As they ate, Simon couldn't help himself, and bluntly asked, "Do you actually *need* to eat?"

Naomi paused, considering his question, gauging its curiosity versus its contempt; she wanted to help Simon, but the truth was that she found him more than a little disagreeable. "While this body is an *adopted form*, I do, indeed physically inhabit it, and it does have physical needs...including food. As our encounter bodies must resemble our host species as much as possible, we require the same nutrients in the same quantities, as you." She took a bite of food from her plate, "And I just happen to really enjoy burritos."

Simon shrugged and went back to his own food. When they left, Naomi turned and asked, "Tell me, after meeting Doctor Terrell this morning, do you have a better understanding of why the Custodians acted as we did?"

Simon frowned, "It's hard to say. I mean, I understand our planet was fucked up. I understand that no matter the will of the people, it was always the corporations and

governments that got their way. But I still can't believe that the only way to accomplish all of this was through massive bloodshed."

Naomi nodded, and they continued walking. She seemed to know where she was going, and Simon was content to follow. There were other people on the concourse, their clothes somehow seemed to be of even better cut and tailoring than what Simon thought of as the best clothes he'd ever worn, including his jacket, which he had an almost emotional attachment to. Even his prison clothing was comfortable and well-made; the goods available to residents of the Megalopolis Centers were astonishing.

"The truth is, we use different methods, depending on the civilizations we meet." Naomi said, snapping Simon away from his reverie, "But your Species has always been very tribal, very xenophobic. An evolutionary trait that served your primitive ancestors well, but not one that died out when it was no longer an advantage to survival. Coupled to that were territorial governments, religious extremists, corporations that acted like powers unto themselves, and more collusion and conspiracy than you could imagine. We knew we had to make a show of force, but we still offered a choice. Many surrendered; many more did not. We have tried other methods when encountering Species similar to yours...the one we used here is the most effective, most generally approved tactic with your kind."

“Well, *I* don’t approve,” Simon said, defiantly, “But...I am beginning to understand why what you did was necessary. But, there *had* to have been a better way.”

“Whether or not there was, we can do nothing to change the past, and thus have no need to look back,” Naomi said as they reached a bank of elevators for the Capitol Building, “Come, we have a busy afternoon.”

Simon paused as Naomi entered one of the glass lifts, crossing his arms and fixing her with what Jon used to call the Thousand-Yard Stare, “You know what? *Maybe* by looking back, you might be able to figure out how *not* to repeat the same mistakes. Because as good as what you’re doing for Humankind is, the way you took over, the way you took control...that was *wrong*.”

Naomi seemed to reflect on Simon’s words a moment, before answering, “You may be right, Simon. And it is a notion that deserves contemplation. But for now, come with me. There is much I have to show you, starting at our fabled Capital Museum.”

When the elevator stopped and opened on a grand lobby of metal and glass, curved to catch the sun throughout the day, they were greeted once again by Duncan Terrell. “Good afternoon!” he said with a smile, “I’m glad to see you again, Simon. This morning we talked a lot about the Custodians’ arrival, and the morality of the decisions they

made to save Humanity. I'm told you and Naomi have had similar conversations, and so we've decided to take you to one of the permanent exhibits of the Namcne Capital Museum."

Simon nodded, shrugging; that much was already obvious to him. Both Terrell and Naomi noted his marked indifference and led him to the entrance to the museum. The vast silver and black access was understated, but the cavernous, cathedral-like domed interior and immediate sensory overload of seeing so many exhibits on display at once destroyed any illusion of Simon's apathy. Simon had been to museums twice before in his life; during primary school field trips, years before the Arrival of the Custodians. He had never seen anything like this.

Exhibits spread out across multiple levels, some walled off, others just merging from one to the other with natural fluidity. The crowd, at Simon's best guess, would have overwhelmed a settlement the size of Toppledown, and yet the massive Capital Museum was vast enough that the place was comfortably spacious. He followed behind Terrell and Naomi as they talked together. Simon was more interested in seeing as much of what was around him as he could, while he was here; he didn't know when the opportunity to return to this treasure trove of knowledge would come again. They soon arrived outside a brushed silver wall with black doors, over which in bold letters was the appellation:

THE SECOND RENAISSANCE

Several people were lining up near the doors of the exhibit. Terrell turned to Naomi and Simon. "This is where I leave you,"

Simon was confused. "I thought you were giving me a tour of an exhibit." He said.

Terrell smiled, "I *am*!" he said, "I'm giving *everyone* you see in the line waiting to get in a tour of an exhibit; *this* exhibit!"

"One of Duncan's jokes," Naomi explained. "He sometimes tells people he'll give them a tour of the exhibit, when in fact he gives *daily* tours of 'The Second Renaissance.'"

"Well I *should*; I *am* the curator."

"Always a showman, Doctor Duncan?" Naomi asked; Simon was surprised she used the same slightly-condescending tone with him that she did with Simon.

"You know I'm *always* a scientist, first!" Terrell chided, "It just so happens that I like making science entertaining."

"Come, Simon; we should get in line." Naomi led him to the back of the queue; about fifty people – a crowd bigger

than Simon had seen outside of angry mobs – waited along with them as Terrell went into the exhibit hall a few moments before the start of the tour. They waited together in silence for a few minutes, the hushed buzz of what Simon saw as an enormous crowd (the best of nights, Annie’s in Toppledawn could seat about twenty) almost hypnotizing him. When the throng finally fell silent, it reminded Simon of the way the woods would suddenly go quiet, just before an unexpected downpour. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck standing up, his instincts telling him to brace for –

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.” Duncan Terrell said, and hidden speakers somewhere around them amplified his voice, “Welcome to the...two o’clock showing of ‘*The Second Renaissance*.’ The exhibit I *actually* wrote the book on.” There was some muted laughter from the crowd, and Terrell continued, “And most of the time, either online or in discussion, people ask why I started calling what the Custodians did and are doing for us ‘*The Second Renaissance*’, and my answer is always the same: because we have been lifted from the darkest age in modern Human history, and been given a chance for our civilization as a whole to be reborn.”

The doors into the exhibition hall slid open, and the first room within was slowly lighting up. Terrell continued talking, as he led the group inside, “The term *Renaissance* was coined from the French word for *birth*, and literally means *rebirth*. Now, *rebirth* implies a new beginning, and

traveling into a new future; but in order to travel on the road to that future, we must first take a look at the road traveled by those who came before us, the road from the past that has brought us – and the Custodians – to where we are, here and now, today."

NAISSANCE AND RENAISSANCE

This first room was bare, its only feature that it was a large round dome, and that a spotlight shone down on Terrell from where he stood as the tour group gathered around him.

“I think we can skip over the first few billion years of history,” he said, making the group laugh, “But we should at least look a few *million* years back; not too far, just two or three.”

Suddenly the room darkened, and from the ceiling, they began rushing through space towards what Simon quickly recognized as planet Earth, as seen from above. Simon felt dizzy and afraid and instinctively grabbed for Naomi, who whispered reassuringly that it was just a projected image. They descended through the atmosphere, down towards the African continent. They zoomed into someplace Simon would never have been able to recognize. They came across a canvas of nature set in a wide, forested plain between two vast slopes, where a short bipedal ape wandered about in the warm afternoon sun. A marshy wetland dominated the landscape, and the ape-creature foraged near its banks. The air around them took on the smells of nature, the heat from the sun feeling far more real than any projection should be capable of.

“This is, or rather was, Olduvai Gorge about two and a half, to three million years ago.” Terrell said enthusiastically, “That’s roughly around the time that paleontologists believe *this* animal evolved. He might not look like much, and he’s not even the earliest of our *known* evolutionary ancestors, but he is a member of the species *Homo Habilis*, the first of our Human Tribe to undergo the process of encephalization.

“Now, all that really means is *brain development*, but in this case, it was both extraordinary and significant: it allowed our ancestors to develop complex thought and social behaviour, and the mastery of tools to butcher animals for their meat and hides. But they probably weren’t hunters; while they were foragers, chances are *Homo Habilis*’ meat protein came from using tools to scavenge from carcasses left behind by other predators.

“Likely, it was these changes in *Homo Habilis*’ diet and behavior that allowed for the even more dramatic encephalization that was to come; but whatever the cause, the tool use and diverse diet allowed him and his tribe to prosper, and to establish a new branch, a new line of species, on the evolutionary Tree of Life.”

The image vanished, and they were in the domed room facing Duncan Terrell again. The crowd applauded, the noise thunderous in the small space, reminding Simon of the pyrotechnic bombs he’d set off in the park, the night of his failed attack on Custer. His pulse pounded, and he felt

afraid, the noise bringing back the horrors of that night in a flash of terror. He began to calm down when Naomi, somehow able to detect his distress, put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Simon wondered if the Custer had somehow given him a tranquilizer, then decided all that mattered for him was that the panic was going away.

"We're going to move on, now; if you'll follow me into the next room, please," Terrell said, as a second set of doors opened. Simon and Naomi followed the crowd into what Simon considered a more traditional room: square walled, corners delineating and organizing the large space into something familiar. Throughout the room were exhibit cases, and even the walls had several different objects mounted about.

It took Simon a moment to assimilate what he was seeing.

The first few cases held stones, blunt instruments and fossilized sticks, all with cards that listed what they were and how old, and where and when they had been found. The stones and sticks became chipped stone blades and clubs, then more sophisticated, carefully worked stone tools, wood and stone spears, axes and what he could only describe as shivs. Then came primitive bows and arrows...and Simon suddenly understood and appreciated just how old hunting methods truly were, and how, as a hunter who'd lived off and used what he'd killed, Simon had grown up as part of a tradition stretching back to the

earliest days of Human History. He felt a profound connection to his world in this exhibit gallery, and, looking around again, found even more appreciation for his ancestral kin.

Everyone was moving carefully about the room, some studying the cabinets at random, others following the indicated flow-through to the gallery, both groups of people clearly curious and politely waiting for Terrell to continue his lecture. Simon followed the flow line more slowly, reverently poring over every exhibit with Naomi by his side. She didn't seem to have anything to say, and Simon was busy studying the artifacts, watching as stick and stone gave way to bronze tools more familiar in design to him than what he could easily have mistaken for rocks and kindling.

He skimmed the brief history of metallurgy offered up to explain how Human ancestors passed from the Stone Age to the Bronze age, looking around now at the other cases associated with Human development. The crowd flowed slowly through the gallery space towards another domed alcove at the far end where a lectern waited for Terrell. Duncan was, however, in no rush; he worked the crowd, answering questions of the visitors whenever the opportunity arose. Simon and Naomi continued through the gallery, as examples of Bronze Age tools and artifacts gave way to their Iron Age counterparts; Simon read the history with fascination, astounded at how primitive

people, tools and objects became more complex, more artisanal, and then mechanical.

The showroom culminated with cases of what would have been modern weapons, tools, and even household conveniences a decade before when the Custodians first came to Earth. Human evolution was both reflected and preserved by the marked development of their tools and weapons, over countless unbroken generations.

Terrell at last called for everyone to gather around his podium, where he cleared his throat and adjusted his hat before continuing: “Over time, we developed agriculture, architecture, written language, culture, religion, systems of laws, manufacturing, science, art, industry...all because of encephalization; all because of *Homo Habilis*.”

The small, ape-like preHuman appeared hovering in the air behind him, and suddenly the alcove around them vanished. They were back in Olduvai Gorge, watching the unassuming simian busy himself scraping a sharpened rock through the innards of an animal carcass, eating the shavings.

The *Homo Habilis* stood and faced them, beginning to change, morphing through all the stages of evolution between it and *Homo Sapiens*; modern Humans. The world around them changed with the evolution of their virtual ancestor, caves giving way to lean-tos, evolving into tents and huts. Then, the Human Man was joined by a Human

Woman, both similarly dressed in hides, carrying wood and stone spears.

The background of the virtual world exploded around them, again. As the Man and Woman's clothing, race, age and dress constantly shifted, depicting a steady chain of events starting from the Stone Age and rapidly moving forward through time and through history: cavemen hunting mammoths, ancient rulers directing thousands of laborers building massive monuments. Simon felt like he was drunk and riding his ATV through the Jagged Desert too fast as he rushed through scenes from the history of Humankind across the continents: the discourse of ancient philosophers gave way to bloody battles watched from a hillside as wars between empires long gone waged. His head swam as it all changed and he watched civilizations dawn in Mesoamerica, Africa, early Asia, and Mesopotamia. The Man and Woman kept changing, standing calmly, almost expressionlessly in the air before them. Gradually, they began to take on the racial characteristics and style of dress of the pre-Roman people.

This was the history Simon recognized, history he knew—from books he'd read with Papa and Gregory, cuddling as much for warmth as affection in their drafty cabin. This was the history of Rome, and its vast reach across Europe, Africa and parts of Asia and the Middle East. He shivered with anticipation as the city rose around him, more colorful than he'd imagined, the sights and sounds raising goosebumps on his skin as the city and

empire he'd dreamed of throughout his youth came alive around him.

As they settled in a small Roman square, Terrell resumed. "As soon as we started founding settlements, societies, civilizations, *empires* followed. The greatest of the Western Empires was, arguably, the Roman Empire. The Romans accomplished feats of technological and social engineering unrivaled in their day, many of them precursors to systems and techniques still in use, today."

The Man and Woman vanished as an animated map of the expansion of the Roman Empire appeared, showing the spread and the eventual, inevitable reversal of their fortune as pushback from her many enemies cut into the Roman Empire from nearly every angle.

"A familiar refrain played out," Terrell said, "Rome's empire grew too large, spread its military too thin...its government became corrupt. In the Late Antiquity, multiple smaller enemy forces and wave after wave of migrants overwhelmed Rome, and like countless empires before and since, it collapsed."

Simon was astonished to find them all back in the square, but now instead of a park in a Roman city, they were in wooded ruins. The Man and Woman had the appearance and dress of Middle-European peasants. The buildings that once stood around them were gone, and he thought of when the Custodians ended the World before.

Having lived among the ruins of the Wildlands, he could not help but see the echo of history around him. Is this how it felt to those who'd survived the Fall of Rome? Is this how they felt, years later, coming back, looking for something familiar in a wholly different world?

Terrell's voice broke his trance: "In Europe, from around AD Four Hundred and Eighty, we enter into a period of time known as the Middle Ages. The first half of this period is better known as the *Dark Ages*, and with good reason. But what I'd like us to look at is the *second* half of the Middle Ages, more commonly known to us as the *Medieval Period*."

Images from Medieval history bloomed around them: serfs working farms, cottages, the rise of Tudor architecture. The Man and Woman went from the dress of peasants to that of Nobles, Knights and Kings, and Queens. The world around them now was one of castles and fortified villages, as Terrell continued speaking: "It took centuries for the Aristocracies, aided by the Christian Church, to establish their strongholds across Europe. By the fourteenth century, social and scientific revolutions had begun; the foundation of our modern system of law and justice, the *Magna Carta* was signed and ratified as the Middle Ages gave rise to the *Renaissance*: a societal rebirth that brought Europe to heights unseen since the days of the Roman Empire, centuries before."

The Man and Woman, still hanging in the air above Terrell again went through the changes of Medieval and Renaissance fashions. The world about them blurred and then the tour group stood in the Sistine Chapel, freshly painted, with some of the scaffolding from the endeavor still being taken down. Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement* dominated, as expected, but the famous religious works Botticelli, Perugino, Ghirlandaio, and Rosselli also shared the space. But suddenly, those works vanished. In their place, the Sistine Chapel was home to multiple images of Renaissance art, architecture, scientific instruments, music and musical performances, ballets, and scenes from drama older than media flowed past them.

Terrell continued: "Great schools of arts and artistry were established across Europe; both Noble and Religious patrons financed painters, sculptors, composers, writers. Science advanced, as did philosophy, with the rediscovery of the Classical Greek works. There were advances in physiology, astronomy, chemistry, metallurgy, mechanics...molding the way we saw the world, and even how we view many things today. Western science and understanding of the universe and our place in it advanced by leaps and bounds, even restricted by the Church. It was during the Renaissance that we discovered the Americas, and it was during the Renaissance that Oxford University generated some of the great minds of the Reformation, leading to *la Via Media*."

"And after the Renaissance came another quantum evolutionary leap for Humankind: The Industrial Revolution," Terrell said, someone more grimly. Then, the dome display room around them went black.

ENGINES OF SOCIETY

The blackness around them began to break apart, boiling and rising from around them like smoke. The Man and Woman were gone, but Simon and the other visitors were passing through a living gallery of inventors, engineers, and industrialists toiling at their creations. Simon was relieved that the pace this time was less manic than before: each scene appeared and vanished like slow waves on the beach, until Duncan Terrell appeared, with the Man and Woman above him, now joined by a second Man and Woman: one Man and Woman dressed elegantly in a bespoke frock-coat over a tailored suit, and a high-corseted, trimmed and embroidered evening dress, respectively; the other couple in simple coats, pants, blouses, and skirts. Where the former were as well-groomed as they were well-tailored, their counterparts were disheveled and dirty. It angered Simon, this disparity, this classist structure. And, recalling the different ways each of the gangs or even the freeholders were treated in Toppledawn, remembering all the things his parents talked and worried about in the Time Before when they thought he was too young to be listening, Simon realized that nothing had really changed, in all these hundreds of years.

“From the seventeen hundreds into the twenty-first century, the Industrial Revolution was a significant turning point for Humankind,” Duncan Terrell said, “Mechanized

production cut down to hours what used to take days. Just a few hundred years after the Renaissance, it was possible to make almost anything imaginable, quickly and cheaply...but at terrible cost.”

Suddenly, the gentrified Man and Woman wore styles of rich, Southern stature, their skin lightening as their counterparts became darker, their clothing little better than rags...chained at the leg or neck or both...

The light, heat, and humidity reminded Simon of the distant end of the Jagged Desert. But instead of ruined cities and highways being reclaimed by a gluttonous Nature, he was on a massive grove of nothing but cotton plants. Men and women toiled in the fields, and Simon realized that they were all dark-skinned—*Black*, the term sometimes used in Toppledawn by older people of any ethnicity. Simon realized these were African Slaves; this, arguably the darkest of many dark chapters of Western history.

Simon watched the fields before the scene shifted to the brutal torture and subjugation of those same slaves at the hands of their White owners. He felt sick. Only the *worst* of the Marauders treated people this savagely, this cruelly...he felt his trigger finger squeezing reflexively as he stared into the white faces and the dark faces of the capos who tortured their fellow slaves to avoid or minimize their own torture. Simon thought about Major Ted Logan for the first time in a long time, shocked to find himself

sympathizing with the Insurgent Legend for the first time. Terrell's amplified voice, now somber, broke his reverie. When Simon's eyes tracked instinctively to the controversial celebrity, Simon felt, for the first time, an *otherness* between himself and the man he'd grown up knowing first as *Doctor Duncan* and then later as *The Race Traitor*. Simon ruminated uncomfortably, for the first time fathoming how different his personal and even social history must have been from Terrell's...for something as stupid as the colour of his skin. He listened intently, as Terrell spoke:

“Eli Whitney’s cotton gin, for example, became a fixture of the textile industry. The failing economy of the Southern States was revived. But even with the gin, cotton production only became cost-effective with the exploitation of more slaves...eventually leading to the American Civil War. And after the Civil War, working classes still labored under a yoke not dissimilar to slavery.”

And as Terrell vanished behind another wave, the Men and Women rose higher and the visitors found themselves once more riding through a panoply of sounds, smells and living images that made clear the difference between the two pairs of Man and Woman, both pairs of whom now were neither dark or light-skinned but nevertheless clearly divided along economic cultures made all too clear by their dress: workers in row after row of mechanical looms, mills or other factory floors; men, women, even children hard at work, struggling...ribald men of leisure laughing raucously

in clubs, elegantly dressed women at high tea. The images and sounds that followed were of angry, shouting mobs of striking workers and the sound of violence as strike-breakers and press gangs counterattacked the protesters that reminded Simon of the battle scenes from the Middle Ages and early civilization.

“Many of you are old enough to remember the World Before, to remember how the rich were seen as heroes, the poor as worthless – even among the poor, themselves. Race and Religion used against *everyone* to make us all paranoid, fearful, and mistrustful of the world around us, even as we depended on it to survive. The Workers of the East provided slave labor for the benefit of the Consumers of the West. Even then, most of those Western Consumers were little better than pampered slaves, in debt to corporations, banks and the governments they controlled.” Simon could hear the bitterness in Terrell’s voice, and it was jarring; he’d never fully understood the World Before...or just how broken it had been.

The world was changing around them again; the Men and Women and Duncan Terrell vanishing between another haze of coiling, formless black smoke. As their vision cleared, they now beheld a moving panorama of the land beneath them. Simon had to grip Naomi’s arm before he remembered the thrilling, frightening illusory ability of the room. Below them were World Before Factory Towns. He remembered the images they’d been shown of Middle-Ages Europe—those cities had been built around churches or

other houses of worship. These seemed to have been built around a different God, altogether. Factories belched black smoke from their chimney stacks; coal-burning boats plumed smog over the oceans; Black smoke poured from the steam engines of locomotives crossing the open American Plains. As the cities grew, so, inevitably did the clouds of smoke they produced.

“Many geologists and geophysicists now agree that the Industrial Revolution marks the beginning of the Anthropocene Geological Era.” Terrell said, his voice disembodied by the images that continued to flow past them: “That would be the period in Earth’s history dominated by Humankind. Steam energy powered the Industrial Revolution. Generating steam requires fuel. Humankind had by this point been mining coal for thousands of years, as had petroleum, better-known back then as pitch.” Simon felt a moment of dumb epiphany as he understood for the first time in his life where the expression “pitch black,” muttered often by nearly every Night-Miner who pulled Sentry Duty on cloudy, moonless nights, had come from.

Terrell’s disembodied voice returned, “Coal and oil became the primary sources of fuel for the Industrial Revolution. The Anthropocene’s key identifying factor is the marked increase in carbon in the layers of soil, earth, stone, and minerals that have formed since the Industrial Revolution began, in the seventeen hundreds.”

Overhead, the two sets of Man and Woman reappeared; despite the ubiquitous difference between rich and poor, they all bore signs of illness; pallid skin, bags under their eyes, other visible markers of being sick. The poorer Man's and Woman's visible symptoms were markedly worse. Simon recalled what his father said about mine dwellers in the Wildlands. Terrell continued, "The Industrial Revolution brought with it significant environmental change. There are parts of London where the buildings are still blackened by centuries of layers of soot. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, respiratory illnesses in major cities and suburbs skyrocketed." The famous scientist's words brought back a memory from grade school. Simon and his classmates, most of them who, like him, had parents working either for or in the coal mine, often went through bouts of bronchitis. A lot of the kids in his class had asthma pumps with them every day.

The Men and Women overhead vanished, and Terrell reappeared at his lectern. "Demand for coal and oil grew exponentially as the Industrial Revolution continued, as did industrial pollution." Terrell said, "Despite the advancements of the Industrial Age that improved life and extended our lifespan, the processes behind them were killing our planet, and our species."

Now images of suburban homes, farmland, forests and lakes and rivers out beyond the industrialized cities were shown around them. But along with the steady images, came graphics depicting how industrial pollution, chemical

runoff, Human waste, and even plastic contaminants entered into the water table, and the food chain. Simon was revolted by images showing dead sea creatures, their bellies burst with plastic waste. But what horrified him the most was, as they soared out over the ocean, was as they came upon an island...a horribly, horribly large island of nothing but mountainous floating waste.

“In many cases, it was years before the full impact of that pollution was realized,” Terrell continued, “Birth defects, cancer rates, pandemic health issues on unimagined scales, holes in the ozone layer, ecosystem collapse...on and on and on. Garbage Island, which you’re looking at now, is hundreds of kilometers across; I’m told that while the Custodians are clearing the oceans, the effect on the food chain will be felt for generations.”

Terrell paused as the spheroid room returned to its original, neutral metallic colour. "How did we, as a species let it go that far? How did it get that bad?" The room darkened as he talked, until he was barely visible, "During the era when climate science began proving that Human industry was having a drastic impact on the planetary ecosystems, industrial lobbyists turned the tide. Every time it seemed we were making progress in fighting climate change, some new politician would be elected and completely sabotage our work. This happened in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Germany, and across the Industrialized World."

Again Terrell paused as they watched a panorama of Earth from space. Simon recognized the footage, though he was astonished to see it represented in life-sized three dimensions. It was the scene from the International Space Station, as the Custodian ship, still far from Earth's orbit, slowly came into view from around the planet's curve...vast, light and shadow at play across its hull. Simon felt very small and remembered how frightened he'd been during the weeks leading up to the moment portrayed here.

"Before the Custodians arrived," Terrell said from the podium, the Earth and the Custodian ship as seen from the ISS above and behind him, "the unspoken consensus among scientists was that we were already past the point of no return. That the Anthropocene Mass Extinction had begun. In just the last hundred years thousands of species of plant, animal and marine life have gone extinct; many of us believed that we had gone past the point where cutting carbon emissions, greenhouse gasses and other pollutants would make any difference. Our best guess was that the planet would only be able to sustain Human life for another fifty to a hundred years, probably less."

"Then, the Custodians came. And for the first time in a generation, we began to believe there might actually be hope for saving Humankind. We all remember how frightening, how *insane* those first few months were," Terrell said, "The violence, the panic...but ultimately, the

Custodians *did* save us from ourselves. And, that's when we came to begin the Second Renaissance."

Now, the display dome was ruled by a cacophony of sound and images: pieces of music and new styles of music; now-famous (Within the Megalopolic Center Walls) dramas were replayed, along with the titles of new books, images of artwork from across all imaginable media, along with machines...systems and the names of techniques that had changed agriculture, education, medicine, healthcare, housing, astronomy, physics, chemistry, philosophy, sociology, social engineering...even the noneconomy and open vocational pursuit...these were Human ideas, made real through the Custodians' intervention.

"A new age of Human Enlightenment has begun," Terrell said. "Unfettered by political or economic restraints, we have artists making art...scientists once more performing research for the sake of research, instead of profit. People are free to study whatever they wish, pursue whatever field of interest they desire. Every advancement that has come since the Custodians arrived, except for those that came as part of the construction of the Megalopolic Centers, was designed...*imagined*...by Human minds!

"The Custodians' first, most important lesson to us was that assigning imaginary value to concepts like money, or other so-called 'precious' materials was as foolish as choosing leaders based on who was most charismatic or determined to lead. Humanity is unbound – and the

Custodians are teaching us how to use that freedom, wisely. Those of us who are parents will no longer have to worry about the world we leave our children. We will find ourselves *envious* of the world they will inherit. Because it will be a truly Human, truly *Humane* world.”

DINNER

WITH DOCTOR DUNCAN

The exhibit ended and the dome exploded in applause, and though he'd been expecting it, the sound still made Simon's pulse race. He distracted himself by looking at the time – a habit he'd taken up since adjusting to life as a prisoner in Namcne – Simon was astonished that almost three hours had passed; he hadn't thought they'd spent that much time looking at artifacts, watching images, and studying exhibits. But they had, and Time had raced past as they did.

"Would you prefer a hard copy or electronic copy of the book?" Naomi asked as people began, to Simon's relief, to file out of the exhibition space and back into the more open areas of the museum.

"What?" Simon asked, Naomi's question dragging him out of his claustrophobic thoughts.

"It's a gift to everyone who sees the exhibit," Naomi explained, as they left Terrell behind to answer questions from eager members of the tour group who'd stayed, "You have the choice of a hard copy of the book or an electronic copy."

“I wouldn’t think Namcne used paper,” Simon said.

“When properly made, it’s one of the cleanest media to work with.”

“Huh; well, every book I’ve ever read has been printed on paper, so I’ll take a *real* book, please.”

Naomi swiped her hand over a panel by the exit. "One will be delivered to your quarters here at the Capitol, as we'll be staying a while."

“How long’s a while?”

“At least until Duncan’s had a chance to speak to you, again. He’s anxious to talk to you.”

"Why?" Simon asked suspiciously.

Naomi smiled obliquely, “I’m not privy to his personal interests; we’ll have to wait and see.”

Simon shook his head, an irritated expression on his face, “I *knew* you were going to say something like that.”

“Will you read it?” Naomi asked, turning to him; the question caught Simon off-guard.

“What – what do you mean?”

“Will you actually read Duncan’s *The Second Renaissance?*”

“Are you asking me to?”

“I’m not *requiring* you to. I don’t believe it’ll make any real difference in your rehabilitation and acclimation into Namcne’s community; I’m just genuinely curious.”

“Like any book...all I can promise is that if it piques my interest, I will read it.”

“Fair enough,” Naomi said, “You have free access to the public concourses, and I’ve credited your account – accessed by thumbprint – with several hours, in case you see anything non-essential that you’d like for yourself or your quarters, back in the Rehab Center.”

“How many hours do I owe?”

“You don’t *owe* anything,” Naomi replied, “The hour credits are a gift – a welcome gift made to *all* new participants in the programme. Soon enough, you’ll be permitted a job or job apprenticeship – the best-suited training for the Human psyche is dynamic in nature – to be able to earn hour credits for luxury purchases of your own.”

Simon shook his head, “I still don’t get how that works...who profits? Who wins?”

Naomi smiled, “*Everyone!*”

Simon nodded, not understanding, simply accepting. He sensed his free time to run rampant through the public concourses of the Capitol Ziggurat had strings attached, “So, when do I have to be at Terrell’s?”

“Sunset,” Naomi said, “Duncan expects you for supper. You can summon any pod to take you there.”

Simon found a map terminal like the ones Vasquez had shown him, back at the park...a lifetime before...one of many lifetimes he'd lived before and since Custer had arrived on Earth. He picked out various points of interest...not really sure what he'd want to bring back to his cell in the rehabilitation center unless it was pointless toys...or if they had books.

Of course, he reminded himself as he began following the map's directions to the Capitol Overlook, he already *had* a new book to read...something that was a precious commodity back in Toppledawn, a printed, bound *book*...had been given to him, for *free*. All about the Second Renaissance. All the wonderful things that the people living *soft* lives in the Megalopolis Centers had developed...all the while, not a thought spared for those who lived their lives in difficulty beyond the Orange Walls, except to offer them half-hearted invitations to join the Megalopolis Centers. None of *them* benefitted from the Second Renaissance. Only those within the Orange Walls.

And now, Simon knew, he would benefit...whether he wanted to, or not. He was not a citizen by choice; unlike other members of the Rehabilitation Center, he didn't have the one option they *all* had: *exile*. They could leave the Megalopolic Center, but there was no way a former Insurgent would be allowed to leave. Exile was the only real freedom left to anyone in the Megalopolic Center, and Simon couldn't help but feel the pang of it being taken from him.

**

The Capitol Compound was a sprawling affair, even by Megalopolic Center standards. Simon almost didn't think he'd make it to dinner on time with Duncan Terrell, but the pod got him to the Ambassador's Suite in the Ziggurat on time, as promised. Simon was greeted by the same two men in black suits as he stepped from the Pod. They escorted him into the Ambassador's chambers. There was an outer office, onto which a private door opened. Duncan Terrell greeted Simon at its entrance.

"Thank you, Thoreau, Emerson. That'll be all." Terrell ushered Simon into the larger suite beyond the offices, "Henry and Ralph are good men; been with me through no fault of their own since the Time Before." Terrell stopped talking, as he allowed Simon to take in the repeating rectangular patterns built into the architecture, the space seemingly stretched beyond the confines of its

environment. There was a symmetry to the room, focused around a central fireplace, also made rectangular, and dominating the room.

“Before the Custodians came, I had the good fortune to live in a home designed by Frank Lloyd Wright,” Terrell said, “One of the benefits of being the Custodian Ambassador to Humankind is that they were happy to painstakingly recreate his architectural style, here. It doesn’t extend onto the terrace, I’m afraid, which is what’s known as *Megalopolic Center Second Stage*; the first *Human*-influenced designs they incorporated into Namcne. I think it’s ugly; I’m hoping whatever comes into architectural vogue next will be nicer to look at.” Simon was barely paying attention, his knowledge of architecture limited to how to gauge if collapsed ruins were habitable, or unstable.

They walked out onto the terrace, overlooking the broad river that crossed through the heart of the Capitol Compound. Simon could only imagine that this was in some way connected to the city District's water treatment system, thinking back on the failed mission...the lost friends, Tabitha... "I always eat outside when I can." Terrell said, "I like to look out over the city, what's visible of it from here, anyway, and think about all we've accomplished."

Looking out over the Megalopolic Center, all Simon could see was a crowded, brilliantly lit canyon of buildings;

a maze of mind-boggling structures both intimidating and beautiful, stretching away in all directions; dark areas denoted parks or nature preserves, but the sky was a uniform dark grey. He realized not for the first time that the sky above the Megalopolic Center never *really* got dark. Not like out in the Wildlands; you could see the Milky Way on a clear night, and there were more and more clear nights as time went on.

“The sky’s too bright,” Simon said.

“I’m sorry?” Terrell asked, turning from the view to his guest.

“The sky; outside the Megalopolic Center, you can see the stars. Here, there’s so much light, it just looks overcast. I can only spot two or three stars...and I *know* one of them’s a planet.”

“And another one’s the Old Space Station; still operational and operating, by the way, though it’s used more for tours, these days.” Terrell said, “I agree with you, Simon: there is too much light pollution in the Megalopolic Center. Which is why we’ve created the parks and preserves to be as large as they are. Most of the mountain peaks inside the Orange Walls are in the heart of dark zones, and many have observatories at their summits. If you’d like, I could probably arrange a trip to one; you could see Jupiter’s storm as if it were just yards away.”

Simon made a noncommittal grunt. Terrell chuckled. Just then servants came out and started setting the table; a hot tray was placed in the center, and as Terrell and Simon sat down, the lid was removed to reveal a fire-roasted boar, surrounded by vegetables baked in its drippings. A variety of drinks were available from the side, and the servants, present and ever-silent were eager to provide. As he was served the perfectly-cooked animal, it was Simon's turn to chuckle.

“Something funny, son?”

“I didn’t think you’d still be killing animals for meat. I always figured the Custodians for vegetarians.”

Terrell shrugged, “Weren’t you given meat in your rations at the rehab?”

“Yeah, but I never figured it was, you know...*real*.”

“We are omnivores, Simon. The Custodians recognize this, and help us to ethically raise and mercifully butcher our feed animals.”

“No cloning?”

“Oh, we’ve *tried* cloning meat...but we just can’t seem to get it *right*.” Terrell replied. “But for those who object to eating animals, there *are* vegetarian alternatives.”

Simon took a large bite of the juicy boar flesh. "This is fine, thanks. This is like what I used to hunt, outside."

"Tell me about life, outside the Orange Walls." Terrell encouraged.

"Will you answer some questions for me?" Simon asked. Terrell nodded.

"Fine," Simon said, "Mind if I go first?" Terrell inclined his head, and Simon posed his question: "What right did they have?"

"I'm sorry?"

"I'm not saying that Custe...The Custodians...didn't save us," Simon replied. "I'm not saying that they didn't get us back on track to a better future...but what *right* did they have to *impose* their way of doing things on us? What right did they have to decide we'd gone too far?"

"Simon...they waited until we *already had*. We had hit the Barrier...the point at which any intelligent civilization either overcomes its most grievous problems or is destroyed by them. As happened to countless empires, stretching back in an unbroken chain to the earliest days of Human civilization. Twelve thousand years or more of the same cycle...Humanity rising, falling, rebuilding...rising, falling, rebuilding...except the stake this time was the mass extinction of our biome. Not just of Human life, but of

roughly ninety to ninety-five percent of all species of life, plant, and animal, on the planet. We'd reached the tipping point...we'd gone past it...and we were *dying*, Simon. They don't come to conquer. They don't come to interfere. They come to *intervene*. Without them, without the preservationist culture they've created across the cosmos, the universe would be a much lonelier place."

"Really? Because besides them, how many other races are there, out there?"

"We are told, within our galaxy alone, tens of thousands. We've been introduced – via deep space communication methods to a few of them...but, we're being left alone, with the Custodians, for now."

"What do –"

"Ah-ah!" Terrell admonished, "My turn; I had asked you about life outside the Megalopolic Center."

Simon shrugged, "Fair enough...but with all those microsats up there...you gotta pretty much know what our day to day looks like."

"What is seen is merely the most basic form of observation. What is *experienced*, that's a far more interesting account of life."

“I grew up in the wilderness,” Simon said, “After my neighborhood was evacuated for the Camp, we found our way to a settlement; Toppledawn City, where we stayed until my mom died. Then, my dad took us as far into the woods as we could get on a tank and one of three spares of grain fuel. My dad had hunted and fished as a hobby in the World Before...he and his buddies would go off into the woods for a weekend every so often, come back with fish or meat ready to freeze or cook up...usually both. I guess it was inevitable, he turned into a hunter, and taught me and my brother how to hunt, while we lived in the wilderness.”

“What happened when your father died?”

“No – you got your question, now it’s my turn. What do they look like? What do they *really* look like?”

"They come from a high-oxygen world, with a gravity somewhat lighter than ours," Terrell said. "Their sun is hotter but darker than ours...I can't say for sure what sort of life they evolved from, but the best way to describe them is as resembling cephalopods – squid, or octopi – but with exoskeletons. They don't have much you'd recognize, other than several...sets...of legs and appendages, and a central body. But to describe their overall shape, the colors...*hues* and patterns to their bodies...or how they move, or how they manipulate things...it's evolution unlike anything I've ever seen. I can't even point to anything I recognize as sense organs, and they tell me they perceive the world by different means than *just* the aural and visual, except when

assuming the form of creatures who depend on such senses. I can't honestly imagine...but then, I've only seen images of what they really look like. The Custodians I've encountered have all been in Human form.

"I still don't understand how they can assume our form, but they somehow do...they can reshape or transform themselves into a Human – or at least Humanoid – body. I couldn't tell you how many millennia, perhaps even how many *eons* more advanced than us they are. All I can tell you is we'd be on our way to extinction without them. Now, if it's not too intrusive a question, what did you do, after your father died?"

"I went back to Toppledawn," Simon said, "Closest thing to civilization, best place to find work, best place to trade my skills, for my brother's future; enroll him in school, get him educated, so he could make something of himself, free and clear of the Gangs or the small-op farms or merchants."

"How did you wind up involved with the Insurgents?"

Simon sneered, "It's supposed to be my turn to ask the question, Duncan," he retorted, "So...what in Hell makes you think I'd actually answer *that* question?"

Terrell sat back in his chair, "I don't suppose you have any reason to," he said, "Certainly not from your point of view."

“Then, there’s your answer. I’m not answering that question, and I’m tired of this game. I thank you for all the effort that must have gone into this meal, but as I’m only returning to my Rehab tomorrow, I’d like to return to my...guest rooms...here at the Capitol, if it’s all the same to you.”

"Of course," Terrell said. He stood, as did Simon, and with a gesture, Thoreau and Emerson appeared behind Simon. "The Agents will take you back to your rooms. We'll speak again tomorrow morning before you make your return trip home. I've had some other books – pre-Custodian histories as well as histories written post-arrival – sent to your room along with a transport trunk. If there’s one thing you can never have, it’s too many books.”

“Thank you,” Simon said, “But given my...opinions...I can’t promise to read them all.”

"Fair enough," Terrell said, as Simon left. He sighed and finished eating. Terrell decided to skip dessert, and his household drones took care of clearing while he went to his den. He took out an old, wooden briar pipe, and stuffed its bowl with a hefty tuft of weed. After lighting up and taking several puffs, the woman in the armchair opposite him finally spoke:

“That didn’t go as expected.”

"No, Elizabeth, I suppose not," Duncan Terrell replied. "But it went about as well as *could* be expected. Simon is a young man dealing with many new and frighteningly undeniable facts that have completely shaken up the worldview he grew up believing in. That sort of ontological shock is...well...imagine how we all felt when we first realized we weren't actually alone in the cosmos."

"And do you really think that tomorrow Simon will be ready to hear your...how did you put it? Your 'pitch'?"

"I think tonight Simon's going to have a long, dark night of the soul. And I think he's going to do a lot of hard thinking. He's a practical young man and a realist – hell, probably a fatalist. He'll at the very least think about my pitch before telling me to fuck off."

"You think he'll do it?"

"I *know* he will."

THE TRANSITION

THE BOOK IS ALWAYS BETTER

When Simon Petrovich returned to his rooms in the Capital, he indeed found a large, old-style plastic box, filled with what must have been thirty, forty kilos of books, and on the reading table was Duncan Terrell's *The Second Renaissance*. He was still angry at how easily Terrell seemed to think he could get Simon to talk about the Insurgency; to date he had not been questioned about his band of Rebel friends, but to simply, boldly ask *why* he'd joined the Insurgency, when they must have known about his parents, they must have known about Gregory, about Toppleddown...about Sati and Cam...they must have compiled a complete dossier on him the moment they confirmed his identity. Surely they could read the records, watch the videos, come to understand *why* he joined the Insurgency. The question was insulting. So why did Terrell ask? Had he been probing towards some greater secret he wanted to glean from Simon? Some mysterious truth? If so, Terrell had definitely gone about it the wrong way.

Simon chuckled as lay down on his bed with *The Second Renaissance*, flipping past the imprimatur, dedication, chapter index and foreword, written by someone whose name was vaguely familiar to him...a name from the World Before, he supposed. He reached the book's *Preface*, and Terrell's actual words; a broad-stroke of the book's

arguments, which read similarly to the script Terrell had used on the exhibit tour, that afternoon. From then on, Simon couldn't help but reading the book in Terrell's voice.

The book was well-written, using familiar language and explanations that were concise without being condescending. Terrell wove a skein of history, chemistry, physics, and geology together to present the same argument he'd made on the tour, but unlike the exhibit, the book was able to explore historical context; having always loved the subject of history, Simon found Terrell's perspective fresh, compelling, demonstrating that the evidence of how close Humankind had brought itself to extinction time and again was hiding in plain sight. Simon felt a little like he was reading a Sherlock Holmes story, where the Great Detective would lay out the facts as they irrefutably were, as based on evidence that everyone around him was able to *see*, but never *observe*.

The first third of the book covered everything from the encephalization of *Homo Habilis* to the arrival of the Custodians. Simon expected the book to continue by glossing over what happened after Custer began landing ships, but was very surprised when the first chapter of the second part of the book delivered a rebuke to the Custodians for the way they had handled the Transition, in spite of the Custodians' own argument was that Humanity's reaction was "standard" or "normal" given their experience cultivating worlds.

Terrell argued directly that if panic, terror, and violence were a "normal" part of the Transition to Custodian rule, then there was a problem with how the Transition was made. It was a more eloquent, well-crafted version of the very argument Simon had had with Naomi; backed with examples from Human history and the Custodians' own records. Simon was impressed; he'd taken Terrell for what his father would have called a "Company Man." Instead, it seemed that the man chosen as the Human Face of the Transition had a mind and opinion of his own.

Terrell reserved one chapter to his critique, before the book moved on through the creation of the Megalopolic Centers: the "core" buildings were dropped from the ship across each continent, stripping and razing the old cities and towns to build the First Wave of the structures, superstructures, and infrastructure for each of the expanding settlements across the globe. Then the Custodians began the process of re-educating people, of getting them to unlearn so many of the concepts and ideals that for so long had crippled Human development, social progress, scientific discovery and efforts to save the planetary ecosystem. The book went on to laud the Custodians for unfettering science from all but the most fundamentally ethical restraints while eliminating all financial constraints. And thus, the previously impossible became simple...and the unimagined entered the realm of possibility.

And, as the Custodians reorganized industry, agriculture, energy, and society, they were also actively repairing the damage done to the environment by all the years of the Anthropocene Era. They built the first new machines conceived by Man, in order to facilitate both their work repairing the planet and Human development. New medical devices, treatments, and wholesale cures were researched, discovered, implemented. New feats of engineering became possible as the Custodians introduced Humanity to new materials and new ways of forging and improving on existing ones. Biomechanics and solar power combined to create atmosphere-scrubbing power stations that were, literally, massive electrical *plants*. Suddenly, every aspect of society was making incredible leaps forward. The Second Renaissance was Human-Led; the Custodians were only its guide.

Before he knew it, Simon realized the sun was up, and he was nearly done Duncan Terrell's book. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so engrossed. The text had not been bland, academic or even journalistic; it was conversational, anecdotal, but compounded by cold, hard facts and irrefutable science broken down, without spin, into something the reader could digest with little effort. As he read the last page and closed the book, Simon found himself confused, questioning nearly every opinion he'd ever had or heard about the Custodians, the Megalopolic Centers...even the Insurgency he'd sworn his life to...lost his love to...so much uncertainty, so much that demonstrated how narrow his view of the world had been,

when all he'd been doing was trying to survive in it, always thinking of it as the World After the Invasion. Now, he was no longer sure what to think.

**

Naomi rang him for breakfast a couple of hours after he'd finished Terrell's book. Simon spent his early morning mulling over what he'd read, turning back to specific passages to re-read them, thinking, showering, thinking and showering...absentmindedly dressing and still not getting over everything he'd spent the night reading.

"You don't look like you slept well," Naomi said, as she entered his room.

"Didn't sleep *yet*," Simon said, sheepishly, "But, it's not like I'm not used to staying up to mid-morning before sleeping. I'll nap on the trip back to Rehab."

"Well..." Naomi said, enigmatically, "We'll have to see about that."

They went down to breakfast. They didn't make much conversation, other than small talk about Simon's opinions on *The Second Renaissance*. Simon had to admit that Terrell made compelling arguments, and discussed his surprise that not only did Terrell disagree with the Transition, but disagreed for many of the same reasons

Simon had objected to and that the Custodians allowed Terrell to say as much.

"We don't stifle dissent, Simon. In fact, we encourage a free exchange of *all* ideas. How better to disprove nonsense than presenting it against sense, itself? These days, ideological arguments are as extinct as the Bengal Tiger; they fall apart like spun sugar in water. Where facts don't destroy the arguments, their own ignorant rhetoric is all that's needed for such views to be shunned in the face of an enlightened society. *Legitimate*, intelligent, fact-based dissent is not only encouraged, it is given full and equal credence when considering any aspect of what we, and the burgeoning Megamunicipal and Terrestrial Councils implement within the Megalopolic Centers."

"How do these Councils work?"

"We're still evaluating the ideal method of governance and social administration," Naomi said, "Culture by culture, Planet by Planet, Species by Species, this is always the part that takes the longest, requires the most...tinkering...especially among a Species who have so overcomplicated the basic Rule of Law as yours. And, not just by mixing religion into the fray...obfuscating text, loopholes based on a reinterpretation of original language, almost no proper, regular updates..." she shook her head, "I'm rambling again, but frankly, from the confines of a Human mind the problems involved seem...*overwhelming*."

Simon chuckled, “Wow...you guys really *do* assume Human form. And, function, apparently. But how do you *adapt*? I mean, Terrell said that you didn’t perceive the world the same way as we do, in your...natural state.”

"It requires training and adjustment, like every other skill. The first shock, of course, is overcoming the change to our *own* senses...we are normally aware of pheromones, we perceive the electromagnetic field, but so far outside what you consider the visual spectrum you'd be astonished...we can more precisely sense temperature, we are much more sensitive to sound, but we perceive it as multiple harmonic vibrations across our bodies...you could almost say it has a *taste*. Otherwise, our photosensitivity is extremely limited; the advantage being we don't have to struggle with 'light' and 'dark.' It's not that we don't see...we just don't use what you consider visible light to do it. We can perceive heat, pressure, gravity...same as you...We can sense chemicals, but not the same way you 'smell' it's more like an...electrical disturbance; how we observe – and therefore understand – the universe is radically different from you."

“I can’t imagine,”

“No, you can’t.” Naomi said, regretfully, “And unfortunately, it’s a particular trick of our own physiology, combined with several careful modifications to our base genetic sequence that allows us to do this. It also allows us

to experience, *truly* experience, what it is to be a being of another species. It helps us in what we do. It is not an experience we can share with many other Species, sadly; and the evolutionary advantage that allowed us to develop this ability is far, far removed from its original survival purpose. But you couldn't imagine how beautiful what we see is, especially when we see it through the eyes of another Species."

THE PITCH

After breakfast, instead of making their way back to the tramway station as Simon expected, they took a local pod back to Duncan Terrell's.

“Good morning, Simon!” Duncan said warmly, greeting Simon with a double-handed handshake before leading him inside to his foyer, “Would you like something to drink? A coffee?”

“No, thanks!” Simon said, “I think I had a bit too much, already...is...can I use your bathroom?”

Terrell chuckled, gesturing “Head down that hallway, second door on the right.”

After Simon left, Naomi approached Terrell, “It’s as Elizabeth said you predicted: he spent the night reading your book...his doubts are obvious – as are his convictions. The fact that you two see eye to eye on the handling of the Transition alone is an important connection. You can build on it.”

“Build on it to do *what*?” Simon asked, leaning in the doorway, “You know...you people *really* have a lot to learn on *making sure the person you’re talking about isn’t in the fucking room*...That’s like, Human Social Behaviour 101.”

“Did you even *go* to the bathroom?” Terrell asked, hesitantly.

“Washed my hands and everything,” Simon said, grinning, “Working in open plains at night with the potential for snipers to be everywhere makes you learn how to move quickly, pee quickly, and get back, quickly. I caught enough of your conversation.”

Simon approached the two, who were standing near a sunken conversation area of club chairs surrounding a coffee table. He stepped down, sat in the seat facing them, stretching his arms across the back of the chair and crossing his legs on the table, “So...tell me: are you *really* planning to try and manipulate me into something *else*, the way the Insurgency manipulated me? The way the Night-Miners manipulated me into going to work for them instead of Prospecting the Wolves, like I’d wanted? The way my own father turned me into a *literal* xenophobe?”

“I know of the Toppledawn gangs,” Naomi said, genuinely intrigued, “Are you saying you were *tricked* into working for one gang instead of another?”

“Not tricked...*persuaded*. They offered me dry-weight dirt my first year...regular dirt from then on, they had good booze. They were a small, tight-knit group; a *family* in a way. But having hunted and traded in Toppledawn all those years I lived in the Wildlands...I was asked more

than once to Prospect for the Wolves if I ever decided to live in Toppledown. I have red-green color blindness, so it actually gives me an advantage spotting game, and people in camo, so it even came in handy with the Night-Miners, especially when it was my night on Sentry. But, the Wolves respected my skills as a hunter and tracker so much, they actually gave me leave to hunt in their territory even though I'd signed on with the Night-Miners." Simon leaned forward, staring intently at Terrell and Naomi. "But somehow I don't think you asked me here so we could reminisce. Especially since Naomi advised you to *build on* how we feel about the Resettlement. I'm obviously not here with you as part of my rehab, you want me to do something; maybe you even *need* me to. So? What's the deal? What's the pitch?"

Terrell sighed, leaning forward and crossing his fingers together, "This isn't exactly how I wanted to talk to you about this –"

"No!" Simon said, looking at Naomi, "I wanna hear it from your boss."

"She is not my *boss*," Terrell said, a little too defensively.

"She represents the Custodians," Simon said, turning his gaze from Naomi back to Duncan Terrell, "And you *work* for the Custodians." Turning back to Naomi, Simon said, "And I get the idea that somehow, someday, you're

connected to each other – or to at least a few others of your kind; radio, psychic, remote operated, *whatever*. So I know that Doctor Terrell might be your mouthpiece, but not once in my life have I ever tolerated brokering with a middle-man.”

“I am *not* a mouthpiece *or* a middle-man!” Terrell shouted, visibly offended.

“But that’s exactly what they wanted you to be...to...what? Offer me something? You want to know what I know about the Insurgency? Forget it; never gonna happen. You want me to do *something* for you...I can’t imagine what. But, I’m sick and tired of everyone sneaking around behind my back and making decisions for me.”

“All right,” Naomi said, coolly, “When you finish your rehabilitation and integration into the Megalopolis Center, we would like to propose that you take...further training, and become one of our Ambassadors.”

“You want to make me into an *Ambassador*?” Simon repeated, incredulous. He laughed, “Do you know how they’re *treated* in the Free Lands? We can’t *kill* them without getting stewed by you...but we *can* make their lives a living hell. I heard tell about the last Ambassador that came through Toppledawn.” He laughed, remembering the utterly disgusting story he’d heard one night at Annie’s.

“Simon, we are trying to help, to *save* as many people as we can,” Naomi said, “And at this juncture, with the Megalopolic Centers established successfully and running smoothly, we need to send Ambassadors back into the Wildlands and beyond the Jagged Desert. And after the failures of our last few Ambassadors – not all were as well-received as Ambassador Philip was during his stay in Toppledown – we understood that Human Ambassadors from the Megalopolic Center weren’t what we need. We need Humans who’ve lived outside the Orange Walls; we need Humans who’ve rejected the Custodian Offer, Humans who’ve even fought against us. We need people like *you*, Simon.”

Terrell said, “You’re in a unique position, Simon: you’ve experienced most of your life outside of the Megalopolic Center Walls; your way of life is rooted in defiance of the Custodian’s very presence. Now you’ve come to live in the Megalopolic Center. You’ve already directly benefited from life here: You were nearly torn in half. It took them less than a day to put your body back together, and thanks to medical advances and surgical nanodrones – engineered by Humans and manufactured by Custodians – it took less than four days before you were fully healed. All of that was made possible only because they came to Earth ten years ago.”

Simon had a sudden flash of fear as he recalled the horrific ruin he’d been; being *aware* enough to realize he was dead, his injuries as terrifying as they were

fatal...except, he wasn't dead. Even this morning he'd stood naked in front of the mirror in his bathroom, fixated on the thin, pink line that traced itself up and down his body, unable to *believe* he wasn't going to just split apart. "I don't think I'd have been flayed open if the Custodians hadn't been here, in the first place." Simon reminded them, "And none of that tells me why I'd want to be an Ambassador."

"Admittedly, it's not an easy path," Terrell said, "It's not a shortcut out of rehab or acclamation. Even I had to do my stint there; everyone's gone through it: there used to be Rehab and Acclamation Centers throughout the Megalopolic Center...in every District, sometimes every Sector. The hope has always been that eventually, we'll have only a tiny number of such facilities left in the Megalopolic Center. The length of your stay is determined by a complex set of variables. If anything, the Ambassador Training is a little *more* intensive, takes longer, and is more cloistered, because there are so many different things that an Ambassador is required to know, to be able to do. Like, learn how to avoid fights, only resorting to self-defense when necessary, and...well...It takes a certain temperament to walk away from being roofied and covered neck-deep in pig-shit in a Toppledawn barroom without going out, chewing gum and kicking ass...wouldn't you agree?"

Simon smirked, "The story I was told was the weeklong rain and thunder Toppledawn and the surrounding valley had after he left wasn't a coincidence."

"Believe it or not, the storm – which was indeed particularly violent – was a natural phenomenon," Naomi said testily. "We're authoritarian by *necessity*; we're not retaliatory, and our methods are *far* from subtle. We're not passive-aggressive. We don't 'do' rain, Simon; we're a little too busy filtering Human-produced toxins from the atmosphere." She sounded offended enough that Simon actually believed her, but he was clever enough to see she'd chosen her words poorly.

"I thought you weren't passive-aggressive," he observed, "That last part sure as hell sounded like it was."

"I suppose it did," Naomi admitted. Simon waited for her to make further comment, but she remained silent.

But Simon didn't let silence hang long, "And you also haven't told me why the hell I'd want to turn against every person I've ever known – that you haven't stewed – along with pretty much making myself a pariah in the Wildlands."

Duncan cleared his throat, "Simon...we're asking you to be a *new* generation of Ambassador...someone who's seen both worlds...someone who can offer these people a better life."

Simon stared a long time at the old man he'd once known as Doctor Duncan on TV, his anger mounting,

before finally shouting, "What in the *fuck* makes you think there's anything wrong with the way *these people* are living *now*? They're living as they *choose*! They're *free*! And if you have eyes in the sky, which I know you do, then you know that places like Toppledown are recycling, reusing, self-sustaining, and we run our vehicles on fucking *ethanol*; shit burns *clean*! So *what* if their lives are hard? So what if their lives are shorter, and they don't have robots, cars or big tablets on their walls? *They are living the way they want to live*! We're not a threat to anyone; leave us be!"

"Simon, the reason my people *came* to Earth in the first place is precisely *because* Humankind was living the way they wanted to live," Naomi countered. "Do you honestly think extinction is preferable? We're trying to *help* your people, Simon. We're trying to help *everyone*."

"And what if they don't *want* your help? What then, Naomi? Are you going to stew them, *too*? You going to kill all those men, women, and *children* because they *disagree with you*?"

"Of course not!" Terrell exclaimed. But it was Naomi's response that chilled the room:

"Simon, if left to propagate in the Wilds outside the Megalopolic Centers, eventually these free-living people will pose a threat to the Megalopolic Centers. How one-sided do you imagine such conflicts will be? You

know what we would be required to do. Eventually, everyone outside the wall will have to face the choice.”

THE LATE-NIGHT CALL

The next morning's ride from the Capital was one of total silence. After their argument last night, Naomi seemed as happy as he was not to speak. He'd only ever hit or killed a woman in combat; Naomi wasn't Human, she probably wasn't even female – if Custer even *had* sexes – but after what she'd said last night, he'd have no qualms punching her in the face, wrapping his hands around her throat...even *if* it meant getting stewed. He was seething in impotent anger—just *aching* for an excuse to attack, to lash out, fuck the consequences. The very thought of it felt so *good*. Instead, the pod let him off at the main entrance to his compound and Naomi remained inside, as Rehab Monitors escorted Simon back to his rooms.

The whole time, Simon hadn't stopped replaying Naomi's words, in his mind: *...eventually these free-living people will pose a threat to the Megalopolic Centers. How one-sided do you imagine such conflicts will be? You know what we would be required to do.* He thought he'd been frightened before; now, he felt *real* terror. He opened his balcony door and took his usual place overlooking the courtyard below. It was nighttime now, mostly dark outside—curfew would mean that the Courtyard was off-limits, its lights out. Inside the apartments, though, more windows were lit than dark. Simon's rooms were dark. He couldn't stop thinking about the Custodians and

their culls...how eventually even Toppledawn – and Copper Street Station – would *face the choice*. He knew what would happen, what Gregory would say when Custer reached Copper Street, just how badly it would end for him. Dealing with Marauders, the cannibalistic Wasteland Clans...that was one thing. But communities of people, men, women, children just trying *to live their lives their way*...what threat could they possibly pose to the new Megalopolis Centers? They wanted to be left alone. But, *eventually, these free-living people will pose a threat...*

By the time the few constellations he could pick out had moved twenty degrees through the sky, the heavens beginning to lighten, he began to hear a persistent chime from the wall console inside. Finally, he went to silence the thing. A single yellow square was flashing in the left-hand corner. It was a slightly off-center, two-dimensional portrait of “Doctor Duncan” Terrell. Simon pressed it and found himself face to face with a life-sized, three-dimensional image of Duncan Terrell, sitting at his desk.

"What do you want?" Simon asked, petulantly.

“Calm down,” Terrell said, “I think we might both be in the same headspace, right now.”

“Really? I find that hard to swallow.”

Terrell nodded. "Well, I've gone to the trouble of overriding certain monitoring systems in your rooms and mine, as well as locking this call down using fractal encryption protocols and hiding it among multiple untraceable back-channels. What does that tell you?"

Simon shrugged. "That you're really good at making up impressive-sounding sciency bullshit to sound like you did something remarkable."

"What the hell would I be trying to entrap you into saying, Simon?" Terrell asked impatiently. "That you're as horrified as I am by what Naomi said, last night?"

"Your words, not *mine*," Simon replied with a cautious hiss. "But...did I *really* hear that? She wasn't talking about *culling* the violent, the dangerous ones out there...she's talking about fucking *genocide*!"

"I've had this conversation repeatedly over the last decade with other Custodians. They would disagree...they adopted a Human metaphor and say they prefer to look at the forest, not the trees. We have to try and reason with her, Simon; reason with *them*. But we've got to look for a better argument than the obvious one; they're concerned with the survival of the whole Human *Species*. We're close to the ten billion mark; a few hundred million more dead on a worldwide scale is *nothing* to them, Simon. Not if it means that the other nine-odd billion get to *live*. They're ruthless, efficient...and the most frightening thing is how

well-intentioned they are. The Custodians *will* save the Human race; it's what they do. I'd just prefer they didn't do it by wiping out those who choose to live outside their world."

"This is the second time in just a couple of days that I'm reminded of something my father once told me," Simon said, "He was quoting Joseph Stalin; you can guess which quote I mean: '*The death of one is a tragedy, the death of millions is just a statistic.*' Shit...they already justify it by saying that eventually, the two civilizations would end up in conflict. We can't let the people outside the cities die," Simon implored. "I'd rather die fighting Custer all over again than let that happen."

"Then we can't let it come to that," Terrell said. "Sign on to the Ambassador program; I'll pull some strings and get you assigned to me when you reach Apprenticeship. Then maybe we can figure out a way to convince the Custodians that we can, Humankind can share this planet, without the need for violence."

Simon chuckled, shaking his head, "After all this time, you really believe we can beat Custer without violence?"

"We *have* to. To them, acts of violence are small, efficient, and necessary evils. Like removing an infected limb, or using chemotherapy to kill cancer while poisoning your body. Rising above our natural predilection for violence and hatred is the only way we'll *ever* convince

them we're adapting and evolving. It wouldn't be the first time passive resistance defeated an empire. Mahatma Gandhi should come to mind, to a student of history such as yourself."

"I studied Gandhi's history obsessively when I was fourteen. I don't know that his lessons apply here. The Custodians aren't the British Empire, for one. His problems with other people's causes around the world, for another. You say we have to show them that we're evolving, that we're adapting; but *are* we? I mean, like, are we *really*?"

Terrell's hologram stared into Simon's eyes for a very long moment before he replied. "We always have been," he said, "We always will. It's what we do best: adapt and survive, survive, and evolve." Terrell pondered, expressions of surprise, realization, and acceptance visibly shifting his features. "It's a historical irony that the phrase *All Lives Matter* used to be a *racist* slogan, used to shout down a more *important* slogan, *Black Lives Matter*. *All Lives Matter*..." he shook his head, unable to stifle the chuckle, "A phrase that once went hand in glove with White on Black violence...hell, the whole of Humanity had a Race problem...I'm still not convinced that sort of thing can *ever* be eliminated, in spite of what the Custodians say. But now that phrase, *All Lives Matter*, one that I once found despicable, *that* phrase has become the most elegantly concise way to sum the argument we need to make to the Custodians. *Now*, do you understand why I want you to become an Ambassador?"

Simon paused, then nodded, "Naomi said something to me earlier: intelligent, fact-based dissent is not only encouraged, it is given full and equal credence when considering any aspect of what they, the Custodians, implement. If that's true, then that's how we have to hit them. We have to make them *see* through our eyes and through our *lives*. Yeah, I'll sign on. Because, I'm not gonna be Ambassador *for* the Custodians, Doctor Terrell. I'm gonna be the Ambassador *to* the Custodians, for those of us who've chosen to live a life *outside* the Orange Walls of the Megalopolis Centers."

Duncan smiled. "I was hoping to hear that, Simon. Goodnight." Terrell cut the signal, sighing. He felt a strange mix of satisfaction and guilt; Simon Petrovich had taken even less convincing than he'd anticipated. Terrell walked out onto his terrace and looked out at the bejeweled lights of the nighttime cityscape, watching the graceful flow of the Delaware River as it bisected Namcne in a leisurely, rolling, silvery line. He marveled again at the beauty of Namcne's skyline, of the vast tracts of parkland that forever exhaled their leafy breath to the city's air. It was a thing of beauty, but founded on so much fear and pain...and blood. A foundation he had always tried, but never successfully, to reconcile as a necessary evil.

Duncan Terrell's ruminations were interrupted by the sound of footsteps behind him. He turned around; Naomi was there. With her was Elizabeth Hello; the Face of First

Contact. Naomi was Simon's handler; Elizabeth and Terrell had been carefully planning this operation for a long time. All they'd needed was the right candidate; eventually, the Resistance had provided one. Terrell still felt conflicted, despite knowing the ultimate necessity of their gambit to the fate of Humankind.

"Did it work?" Naomi asked, almost too eagerly. "Was he convinced?"

"He reacted exactly as predicted. Duncan, you selected the ideal candidate." Elizabeth joined him at the side of the balcony, "He'll be the first of many, but he'll begin the final phase of the Transition."

"That's all well and good," Duncan said, going back inside long enough to pour himself a drink. "But we have to consider how well Simon Petrovich will take the news when he realizes that once again, someone *manipulated* him. I don't think he's going to be very happy with us."

THE EDUCATION OF SIMON PETROVICH

Simon spent the next several months excelling at the Rehabilitation and Acclamation Program. It was mainly an extended civics lesson about life and living in the Megalopolis Center. The midwinter air was cold and crisp when Simon was released from Rehab, a full and Free Citizen of Namcne, and assigned into an apartment block several Districts away. His new home was within walking distance to where he was now beginning his studies as an Ambassador at one of the oldest schools on the Continent—one renowned for its legacy of turning out doctors, scientists, diplomats, and formerly, leaders of industry and heads of state. One of the few Human Institutions to survive the Transition, the sprawling and rich, green campus of McGill University was where Simon Petrovich would spend the next two years of his life, studying to become an Ambassador. After that, he would begin an extensive apprenticeship under Duncan Terrell.

It was a snowy morning. After being given a month-long holiday to settle into his new digs – a dual-level home he shared with four other people – one morning Simon left the “Gaff” as he and his housemates had taken to calling what he now, strangely, thought of as *home*, to go to his first classes of the week. Benoit

(Benny), Diane, Alan and Amal, the "Gaff-Mates" as they referred to themselves, classmates at McGill's School of Diplomacy, walked with him. The five of them were laughing, generally taking their time as they strolled along the snowy boulevard.

Not much of what had been the island-city-state of Montreal remained; the former Canadian province boasted numerous old landmarks, but the city had undergone another of its several dramatic changes over time. The McGill Campus was one surviving landmark, and as Simon and his friends turned and crossed the gates, he took a moment to admire the architecture, the landscaping and the small orchard of trees between the walkway and the entrance to the main hall. It was from the World Before, in a way he could only think of as *classical*, though that was hardly architecturally correct.

He and his Gaff-Mates had spent the last month living together, getting to know the Montreal District, with its vast, interconnected, underground electric rail system, expanded from the original, old *Métro* lines that used to run subway routes through the heart of the city. Now instead of subway cars, the standard pods or bus-pods could be called through, and the face of public transit was something that the old District dwellers from the World Before agreed was finally something "their city" could be proud of. The people of the Montreal District, not unlike many Districts created out of former major metropolitan centers, were

proud of their historic home-towns; even when little to nothing of the original cities remained.

"You wouldn't recognize the place before," one smoked-meat sandwich-maker had recently told him at a local deli, "Oh, some places are still the same; the Molson Center, the Big Owe, the Oratory, Old Montreal, the Old Port...shit...the Mountain looks so much better now since they took down those fuckin' condos and cell towers! Place Des Arts is still here but the public transit? As different as night and day, I tell you. Really shows how bad we had it before, with the *Métro* breaking down all the time, no air circulation in those tunnels, no West Island coverage, asshole bus drivers and overcrowded busses, schedules worth *shit*. I think that's why so many people in Montreal drove cars and acted like assholes: even the bridges were always being repaired, and traffic was a fuckin' *nightmare*! We used to be an *angry* city, man! French people hated English-speakers, *nobody* got along—*Jesus*! I think Montreal's never had it so good. You want coleslaw or dill pickle on the side?"

Of course, the Montreal District stretched far beyond the island-city in the middle of the Saint Lawrence River; it reached halfway to the borders of the Quebec District to the east; named for the oldest city in Canada, a historic, majestic Capital built at the mouth of the Saint Lawrence; the freshwater gateway to the Great Lakes and the North American Interior. To the west, the Montreal District's borders brushed against those of the Ottawa Valley District,

with the New England District directly south, and the Laurentian Preserve to the North. But *Montrealers*, as they called themselves on the Island itself, still considered it “their” city. Simon found in a strange way the city had adopted *him*, and it was “his” city, now, too. When you lived in Montreal, it became *home*.

As they walked to class, Simon's reverie was interrupted by Alan, skinny, shaven-headed, with a thick Bristol accent. "So are we on for drinks down at the Pub, tonight or what?" His parents had been visiting relatives in Montreal when the Custodians arrived; they'd opted to stay there during the Resettlement, rather than return home.

“Alan, it’s *Monday!*” Amal said, “And the only fun I get when you drink is winning your hours as you get shittier at darts.” Amal, like Simon, had come from outside the Orange Walls; unlike Simon, he had come as a child with his parents, seeking a better life than the cold Northeast winters had to offer.

“Come *on* then, mate! You’re whinging all the time about not being able to find time to work to get your new Interface! You spend too much bloody time studying, anyway!”

“I’m taking my future *seriously* because, *Inshallah*, I want to do something that *matters*! What's the big deal?" Amal replied plaintively. "I don't even *drink*! And, personally, I don’t like getting high all day, either.”

“You’re only young once, mate;” Alan grinned, “Whether or not you drink, whether or not you get high, *now* is the time to have *fun*. I just happen to choose to have *my* fun drinking.”

“You don’t know what *real* drinking is!” Simon said, with a grin, “You drink like my baby brother.”

“*Calisse*; here we go again,” Benny swore. Just a month hanging out, and they knew each other so well. Benny, like Alan, had never left the Megalopolic Center. Benny had never even left *Montreal*; he reminded Simon vaguely of Aaron Meer: round face, soft features. His family ancestors had called the place home since it was nothing more than a settlement, itself, centuries before.

“Yeah, that’s right innit?” Alan said, squinting at Simon, “You drink moonshine and bathtub gin, and that shite!”

Simon laughed, “We call it *grain fuel*, because not only do we *drink* it, we *run our vehicles* on it. Like I said, you don’t know *real* drinking.”

“Holy shit...*you can run an internal combustion engine off it*, and you wonder why I won’t drink it!” Amal laughed. In truth, he and Simon were playing Alan. They’d split the hours Amal won because Alan couldn’t hold his liquor worth a damn; not against Simon Petrovich.

"I could drink you under the table any night of the week," Diane challenged Simon. Simon just laughed. She was a Wildlander like him, though she'd been in the 'Knee for years. She'd also been flirting with him with less and less subtlety for the last week or so and as smart, attractive, and tough as she was, Simon just *couldn't*. Not after Tabitha...not now, not ever again. He kept hoping she'd take the hint so that he could avoid talking about the Insurgency. It would raise questions...and memories he didn't want to recall. Not outside his sessions with Naomi, who still commuted to speak with him for two hours, three times a week.

"So does that mean you're in or out for tonight?" Alan persisted.

"I've got enough banked hours *and* a Russian liver; I can *always* go for drinks." Simon said, "Just not that fizzy pisswater beer you like. I mean *drinks*."

"I'm in," Diane said, inevitably.

"Me, too!" Benny said, Simon knew equally as inevitably: Benny liked Diane...he had since the first day they all moved to the Gaff.

"Oh, dear God, all *right*! And, I'm going to kick your ass *and* take your hours at darts *and* pool tonight, Alan!" Amal shouted. But even he couldn't keep up the illusion of

actually being angry; his face cracked into a grin, “I’m going to buy the biggest damn interface they have.”

They laughed as they headed inside and through the halls to class. Simon marveled, not for the first time, just how much and how often his life had changed, in just the past year.

**

It had taken Simon the longest to adjust to living with his housemates; it reminded him too much of the Night-Miners...of the Copper Street Insurgency...of his brother...of Tabitha. He’d never see any of them again. Even if he was sent, after all of this, out to Toppledown or Copper Street as an Ambassador, nobody who knew him from that world would ever look at him the same. They’d never trust him again; they might even *hate* him. And these new people in his life...they seemed like *imitations* of people he loved...like poor replacements. It took him weeks to overcome the feeling, but living with—and *among*—people brought back ghosts of people who were either dead or might as well be.

One morning, on his way down to the kitchen he saw the bleary, shambling frame of someone staggering down for breakfast, too...and their smaller frame, the way they walked, he couldn’t help but call out,

“Gregory!”

Which startled Amal into dropping his full coffee cup. “Jesus Christ, dude! What the Hell?”

"I'm...I'm sorry...I saw you, and for a minute I thought you were my baby brother, Greg."

Amal looked both confused and irritated, “Dude; I’m *brown*. You're white and blonde...I'm beginning to wonder *where* on the blonde spectrum you fall if you think I look like your brother."

Simon retreated to his bed for the rest of the day, sleeping as much as he could, staring at the walls and ceilings when he couldn't. Amal had forgotten about it since then, but Simon hadn't. Mistaking Amal for Gregory, he missed his baby brother so much...he missed Toppledawn...he missed everyone he knew he'd never see again. This new life, studying to be an Ambassador, with these new people...he wondered how long they'd be part of his life; how long before they were taken away as well.

Of course, he knew the answer to that, already: After two years, they'd begin their apprenticeships. After completing the rigorous curriculum of physical and psychological training, they'd all go their separate ways. Such was the life of an Ambassador.

And Simon already knew where his Apprenticeship was to begin: at the Capital, under Duncan Terrell. Two years

wasn't that long, though it could seem an eternity. Still, as much as he enjoyed his housemate's company at the Gaff and after classes, the fact was he didn't want to get close to anyone...not if they'd be gone from his life again, so soon. That wasn't how he wanted to live. And after Tabitha, being alone seemed *easier*.

**

Simon felt lighthearted enough, watching as Alan managed to score three single ones in a row, while Amal easily made two bull's eyes and the outer ring. Alan's game was definitely getting worse as the night wore on. Diane and Benny were grinding on the dance floor, though Diane kept casting glances Simon's way. Simon ignored her, preferring to beat Alan at drinking the way Amal was beating him at darts. The hard liquor they served here was weak, by Toppleddown standards; distilled to have a much lower alcohol content. He didn't understand how it could affect them all so quickly, after so few drinks. Still, he enjoyed feeling the edge he had on them, even as his own mild buzz wore on.

"You English should stick to pints of warm beer," Simon said, in an exaggerated Russian accent like his *dedushka* had had—thicker even than his Father's, who'd done his level best work most of the accent out of himself. "You don't understand what it is to drink anything else."

“The bloody? That’s not *on*! Fuck you! We invented scotch, whiskey, *and* Beer!”

“*Nyet!*” Simon barked, “The Irish invented whiskey, and the Scots perfected it! As to beer, they had this at *least* as far back as the Pharaohs in Egypt. Like most conquering Imperialists, the English merely adopted these things and laid claim to them. Like tea, and —”

Though he intended to continue talking, Simon was interrupted by Alan’s fist drunkenly glancing off his cheek.

“Awright, that’s it!” Alan shouted, “Let’s you an’ me go outside for a proper *English* square-go, then!”

Everyone looked at Simon and Alan awkwardly. Even Simon wasn’t sure just how sincere Alan was about wanting to fight. Not that he was worried—Simon had long made a habit of sizing up people he met. He could take Alan in a fight; he just didn’t want to *have* to. And in his state, Simon guessed it would be fairly easy to knock Alan down.

“I think you guys should leave now,” a woman said, coming up to them. She was in the house uniform of the bar, and her authoritative tone immediately caught everyone’s attention, including Alan’s.

“What? That’s awright, me and me mate Simon here was just headin’ outside, wasn’t we?” Alan eyed Simon

with deadly intent. Simon looked at his other Gaff-mates, who all wore similar resigned expressions.

“Let’s go,” Simon said, getting up. Alan staggered next to him, the others trailing behind. When they stepped outside, they found five security Monitors waiting.

“Please return to your place or places of residence,” one of them said, stepping forward.

“Oh, YEAH!” Alan bellowed, “That’s what I fuckin’ LOVE about the ‘Knee! They won’t even let you do some proper fighting in the streets! THIS WOULD NEVER ‘AVE ‘APPENED IN GREAT BRITAIN!”

"Wasn't Alan like seven or eight when the Custodians landed?" Amal asked.

“I *think* so,” Diane said, “And he’s spent most of his life here in Montreal.”

“PISS OFF ya bloody chrome-headed cunts!” Alan screamed at the impassive Monitors, “What are ya gonna do? Blast me to Hell?” At this point Alan ripped open his shirt and began to bellow an old song at the top of his lungs:

GOD SAVE OUR GRACIOUS QUEEEEEEN!
LONG LIVE OUR NOOOOBLE QUEEEEEEN!

GOOOOOOD SAAAAAAVE OUUUUUUR
QUEEEEEEN!

“Wait...isn’t the English Monarchy ruled by a *King* now?” Diane asked.

"I want to say yes," Amal replied. "But the truth is I don't know. I never really paid attention to that sort of thing. I mean, since the Transition, they've largely just been celebrities."

SEND HER VICTOOOOOORIOUS
HAPPY AND GLOOOOOORIOUS
LONG TO REIGN OOOOOO’EEEEER US!
GOOOOOOD SAAAAAAVE THAAAAAA
QUEEEEEENNNNNN!

"Please move along, or we will be required to remand you for rehabilitation." Another Monitor said, in the same calm, placating voice, "Current probable minimum rehabilitation will be seven days, for alcohol awareness education and chemical dependency assessment."

“Come on, Alan,” Simon said, “Let’s get into a pod and get back to the Gaff.”

“Petrovich? Izzat you?” Alan said, staring dizzily at Simon. He squinted, “Wait; wait just a damn minute...didn’t...we...weren’t we going to kick off?”

“Yeah, but then you started singing and *really* killed the mood,” Simon replied, hoisting Alan into a pod that one of the Monitors had summoned.

“Why'd I wanna do that?” Alan insisted, “I love ya, mate! You're awright. I'm sorry I wanted to kick your arse...I love ya. And I love ya, Amal, you bloody dart-ninja! And I love ya too, Diane, even if you are a wee stuck up. And Benny...BENNEEEE! Benoit! *Je t'aime* you fucking French fuck!”

As the pod sealed Amal gave their destination, and everyone seemed happy—the whole night had been fun. But Simon was keenly aware of how fleeting joy was. While everyone else joined in another round of *God Save the Queen*, Simon leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes, letting the booze wash through him, sweeping him along a familiar, morose current. This wasn't how he'd wanted his life to be. This wasn't how he'd wanted *anything*, and all he could do was go along for the ride.

TO EVERYTHING, A SEASON

Simon had never been of a contemplative nature. He applied the skills he learned as a hunter; patience, how to track game, how to spot the hidden signs of prey – or predators – nearby, to his personal life: looking for signs in the environment of disruption or disturbance, how to tell what people were feeling or to a certain degree thinking based on their physical behaviour...because speed was often essential in determining whether you ate or went hungry out in the wilds, it meant he had developed the habit of acting, reacting quickly, instinctively. Such instincts also lent themselves to surviving as part of the Night-Miners; especially when rivals tried to surround them on three sides during a firefight in the Jagged Desert.

That night, a lifetime ago, Simon had spotted the first person creeping up on their position and acted without thinking: raising his gun and firing. Somewhere behind him, Donnie started ringing the alarm bell as everyone took cover and started scanning for targets. The enemy had been startled and were shooting wildly, becoming easy marks. Simon just kept aiming and shooting, never once contemplating his actions; he hadn't even really been thinking when he'd spotted the movement in the tall grass, and seen what looked to be a Human form skulking towards their position. *Stopping* to think went against his nature; often, thinking *after* acting had been how he'd

survived most of the last decade of his life, and exactly how the Custodians had entrapped him.

Early on in his studies, he realized that the threat of the Wildlanders coming into actual conflict with the Megalopolis Centers had been grossly exaggerated. He'd been tricked again, played and made to do exactly as Naomi wanted. He was angry about it, and lashed out at her over the deception, red-faced and yelling about what liars she and Duncan were.

When he'd finished venting, Naomi replied, "We wanted you to join the Ambassador Program for exactly the reason you did: to advocate for the Wildlanders. The best way to do that was to get you to see the need for them to *have* advocates. Duncan was the one who pointed out the weakness in our Ambassadorial Program. Truly, if we hadn't caused you to act, would you have done *more* than just complete Rehabilitation and Acclimation? Would you have ever *considered* helping us, under any other circumstances?"

**

During the past two years at school, he had learned much at a fast, intensive pace. Sometimes it had been overwhelming—twelve-hour days of classes followed by four hours of physical training, often followed by exhausted weeping. Interspersed through his days were half-hour breaks and hour-long meal breaks; the regimen as

rigorous as Copper Street Station. His quick assessment skills were an asset; continuing to leap to action was not.

Contemplation, reflection, even *meditation* were required skills of a diplomat, along with the ease of observation and quick instincts that Simon already possessed. While it was easy for him to identify and memorize up to one hundred different objects in a given location in under a minute, learning to slow his thoughts and calm his mind to understand the *interrelation* of those objects in that same minute remained an elusive struggle; it was a favorite exercise of the Custodians, though after each *Cognition Improvement Instruction* session he thought of them as *Custers* in his heart. But in the end, his teachers prevailed. Simon, at last, learned the Contemplative Arts, as well.

One snowy, damp and chilly Montreal morning in late winter, Simon found himself trudging up the snow and ice-encrusted hills of Mount Royal Park, towards the summit. Of course, the *actual* summit was an all but unreachable crag of jutting rock, but a network of observation platforms just below looked out over the vista of the Megalopolic Center surrounding the Mountain and its vast ring of reclaimed parkland. He'd learned that other than places of cultural or religious significance, everything for two kilometers around the mountain's base had been restored to nature. Looking out at the beautiful, snow-covered fields and woods from his favorite observation platform, Simon stared over the city to where

the silver-blue Saint Lawrence River cut the island from the South Shore, while Namcne continued its meandering spread across the visible horizon; oddly beautiful in the winter snow and sleet.

From here, the Orange Walls were only a distant blur on the far horizon, more imagined than perceived, given the precipitation. Simon watched clouds of clean steam rise from the city at almost regular intervals: hydrogen fuel cells produced water vapor as waste; what wasn't harvested for use in the Megalopolis Center itself was allowed to escape back into the atmosphere. The columns of white cloudstuff were bright reflections in the dismal morning. But the cold, crisp, petrichor made Simon feel elated—awake, *happy*. At least, as close to happy as he'd felt since first snuck into the Megalopolis Center under cover of darkness, years before.

He slipped over the high, stone wall of the lookout, carefully climbing down the ice-covered and treacherously slippery rocks of the slope until he reached what he'd come to think of as "his" spot. He'd discovered the place during one of his regular day-off hiking treks across the Mountain Park; something that had called to him from his first day in the Montreal District, the way the sea called to sailors in old stories. The park and preserve became as much an extension of his home as his bedroom in the Gaff – which, Simon realized, he would soon be leaving for the last time; it was why he'd come out here today: it was one of his last chances to do so. It was a good spot for contemplation and

reflection, he'd decided, though he'd preferred it best during the late fall when the leaves came down in shades of red and gold and the air was cool and dry.

Still, watching the competing falls of snow and sleet across the winter cityscape that spanned his field of vision, Simon felt tranquil, almost content. He'd been afraid that he wouldn't be up to the challenge, that he wasn't as smart, as qualified for the duties of an Ambassador as his fellows, who'd had the advantage of an education in the Namcne school system, while everything he knew he'd either learned from his Father or for himself. But Simon quickly came to understand that his different upbringing gave him a fresh perspective when it came to his studies, allowing him to demonstrate new insights, new outlooks to both his fellow students and to his Custodian teachers—exactly as Duncan Terrell had predicted.

Just the other day in an Anthropology seminar, Simon had objected to the Custodians' "observations" of the "behaviour" of the Wildlanders outside the Orange Walls of Namcne. Simon then delivered a lecture on what day-to-day life in places like Toppleddown was really like; the people, their work, social habits, and hopes and dreams. He told them about the trading caravans, and the other settlements within a few days' ride, the community-oriented nature of each settlement.

"You seem to think we huddle together in disorganized masses...we have water, food, medicine, irrigation, sewage,

farming...we all have rooves over our heads, and we barter for what we need. We recycle everything we use, and we live a simple life. We work hard, we play hard. We have rules, and laws, and they are enforced by the People, themselves. We live a simple life...but it is *our* way, and *our* right to live that way. Don't disparage the Wildlanders for refusing to live in the 'Knee or other Megalopolic Centers; all they want is to live according to *their* values."

"Would you return to that life, if you could?" his instructor asked.

Simon shook his head, "I *can't* return to that life, because of Custodian Law, so I don't think about it."

"But what if you *could*?" his instructor persisted. And for a moment, Simon thought wistfully about running with the Night-Miners again; of seeing Gregory – who must, by now, be apprenticed to either Karl Werner or one of the physicians of Toppledawn – and of the distinct taste of home-brewed grain fuel. Then he thought about how suspiciously he'd be seen, returning from Namcne to Toppledawn.

"I...don't know."

**

It was getting dark – though it was only midafternoon; this far North, Namcne didn't have the same temperate

winters he was used to, and Simon could feel the cold turning bitter as the day darkened; the storm would stop, and it'd likely be clear skies and horribly cold the next day. Simon was glad he hadn't had to spend his youth outdoors this far north; it was unpleasant enough doing it within the confines of the Megalopolis Center, with heated buildings and transit. He climbed up the embankment the same way he'd come down, though he slipped twice before reaching the railing and climbing over.

A blue-garbed Monitor was waiting for him, "Sir, it is against District Bylaws to leave the mountain path. As this is your first offense since completing rehab, it is at my discretion to give you a warning, or a penalty; in this case, a four-hour course on safe use of public parks and trails."

"I lived in the Wilderness before coming to Namcne," Simon said, exercising his diplomatic muscles, "If I agree not to do it again for the duration of my stay in the District..."

"I notice in your file it says you will soon be graduating the School of Diplomacy at McGill University," the Monitor continued, "And you are undergoing intensive preparations for your apprenticeship at the Capital. A penalty this late into your final term would compromise your studies. Correlating with satellite records shows you've come to this place on multiple occasions, usually alone, always without injury; meaning this is not your first offense, just the first *applicable* one. However, your file

agrees with your claims about growing up in the Wildlands. Again, concordant satellite evidence shows you know how to navigate terrain. My determination is that your file will now include a formal reprimand: do not climb beyond any protective barriers along any of the trails or observation galleries – especially at this elevation – again, Mister Petrovich."

The Monitor walked away, leaving Simon shaking his head...this was the Ultimate Surveillance Society: there were no secrets, and everything was recorded, filed, and indexed. Was that a good thing, or a bad thing? He'd had ample time to learn just how infrequent crime was in Namcne. Private residences weren't monitored, but any time anyone was out in public, they were immediately tracked, recorded, and observed by the Microsats, and whatever mysterious entities controlled them.

Simon wasn't comfortable with that notion at all, and the Monitor who'd just come to admonish him for *technically* risking his neck to climb down to *his* craggy little spot on Mount Royal...he shook his head again; there was a lot about the Custodians' ideas that Simon wasn't comfortable with. He hoped when he returned to the Capital, that Duncan Terrell would be able to help him more fully understand what the Custodians were doing, and how to *influence* them.

As Simon followed the mountain trail back down to one of the transit stations (still called *Métros* by the locals), he

contemplated the Custodian notion of law enforcement—there were no trials. If you committed a crime and the Monitors caught you, you were tried and sentenced on the spot. Rehab was far better than the system of Exile or Execution of the Wildlands. It was also far better than the penal system of the World Before, but Simon still found it frighteningly arbitrary. Still, crime was low, recidivism was almost zero. People had longer life expectancies and higher quality of life, and as he had himself observed, there was certainly little restriction on personal freedom. But the *wrongness* of something he couldn't define, and the cold-blooded way Naomi and the other Custodians he'd interacted with behaved...it was all more than Simon could bear.

He didn't have far to go, and the only reason he took the Métro instead of walking back to the Gaff was the weather worsening, and he'd already walked from the Gaff up to *his* spot, then back down. He was starting to feel the cold; his instincts were to seek shelter, quickly. Though in so well-protected a place as Namcne, he was in no real danger; he'd seen Medical Monitors close in on someone before they even realized they were about to have a heart attack; watched Security Monitors stop fights before the first fist struck...maybe that was the problem. There was no real danger anymore, and danger had been part of the Human condition since time immemorial.

**

There was no one home when Simon returned to the Gaff; he looked around the place, knowing that in just a few days' time he'd be leaving, for good. Most of his things were already packed – and shipped – to his new living quarters in the Capital. He thought back on the last few years...of all that he'd been through, of everything he'd shared in so short a time with his housemates. He wasn't one for sentiment, but it had been an *intense* two years, and not merely in terms of study. They'd grown close, as a matter of survival. The Gaff-mates were Brothers and Sisters the way Night-Miners had been. Now, like the Night-Miners, he was losing another family after too short a time.

Simon shucked his boots and coat in the front hall and went to his room. The dull grey gloom of late winter afternoon leached light and color from the place. He cracked the window, letting the fresh, damp air fill the room. In the dim light and smelling the snowy air, Simon could almost believe he was back in the cabin in the wilderness. He stretched out on his bed, drifting into a haze of half-dreamed memories of his time living in the Wildlands and his father and brother. How simple life had been...

A gust of wind stung his cheek and he sat up, wiping a damp trail of tears from his face. Simon leaned his elbows on his knees and pressed his hands into his eyes. It was dark out; he'd been asleep for a couple of hours and felt confused, tired, hungry, and nauseous all at once. Most of

all, he was upset, homesick for a place he'd not seen in years. The wintry smell in his room full of real books brought everything back with every breath.

His tears were so warm on his cold cheeks that it almost felt like he was bleeding. Simon wiped his eyes, slammed the window shut and stormed from his room. Everyone was in the living room, eating pizza and smoking from a bong going around. "Hey, Si, you want in?" Amal asked. "Pizza from that new place up the street and hash from my uncle in Imesemm! Came special delivery in honor of Graduation!"

"They have...like...such a cooler name than our Megalopolic Center..." Diane said, lazily, "God...remember when we had to memorize the names of *all* of them?"

"No, thanks." Simon said, "I just...I need to go out for a while...think..."

"Who wakes up from a nap in a bad mood?" Benny asked as Simon tugged on his boots.

"*Russkies*," Alan said, firmly.

"Lick my ass, Limey," Simon said automatically, hi-fiving Alan as he grabbed his coat and headed out the door, "Enjoy the Imesemm hash; I heard it's legendary."

Imesemm was another Megalopolic Center named from one of the terrible Custodian acronyms: the *Indo-Middle-Eastern-SouthEast-Mediterranean Megalopolic (Center)*.

"I'll save you a chunk. Watch it out there, Si; freezing rain tonight!" Amal warned.

"Try sleeping under pelts in a tent when it's forty below," Simon said, immediately regretting it when his Gaff-mates all spontaneously burst into *The Rodeo Song*. Simon grinned in spite of himself, "God damn, you guys are assholes." He laughed, heading out.

**

The streets were slippery in spite of the heated walkways; the rain was falling and freezing faster than it could be melted off; Simon smirked as he remembered Naomi's comment from more than two years before; that the Custodians didn't "do" weather. He didn't know where he was going, but he knew he had to be...elsewhere. He turned his face skyward, but the snow and sleet had turned to cold, hard pelts of freezing rain. Focusing back on the pavement, Simon began wandering. Though pod traffic on the roadbeds was typical for this time of night, there was almost no one walking the streets. Somehow, this made Simon's mood better.

He'd spent the last few years getting to know new friends, entering into a new group dynamic...opening up and *caring* about people again...and he was about to lose all his friends, all over again.

Alan was scheduled to begin his apprenticeship under the Ambassador to the Custodians from the Megalopolic Center of England Wales and Scotland, McEwas, as it was more commonly known – though most locals insisted on calling the Megalopolic Center "London." Alan was excited; *going back to the Motherland and all that good shite after fifteen years*. Amal was, like Simon, apprenticing at the Capital, though not under Duncan Terrell; he'd chosen to work in the Acclimation and Rehabilitation programmes. Diane would be heading to the Capital of North American Megalopolic Center South-West, Namsow, to complete her training. She *hated* her new Megalopolic Center's name. She'd had the boys walking on eggshells for days when she found out locals called it the Sow. Benny had opted to remain in the Namcne Montreal District, working with the Custodian District Consul and Public Services, "Home is home, and *Montréal, c'est ma ville*. What else can I say?" For some reason, that cut Simon most of all: Benny's *privilege* of being able to *CHOOSE* to keep his Home; Simon again found himself pining for the old log cabin in the woods.

The icy, rainy streets drove a hard, cold spray against Simon's face as he kept walking. *He was going to miss them all*. His heart was being broken again—losing more

friends, more people he'd never see or know again. Simon felt sad and alone. More alone than he'd felt since waking up in a Custodian hospital. He missed Toppledawn...hot tears mingling with cold rain on his face as he thought about Gregory, wondering if his brother was happy...if he was apprenticed yet. And then unbidden came the constant, unhealed grief over Tabitha—the nagging, recriminating question he could never seem to stop asking himself. *Why hadn't he told her he loved her?* He wept for all the people he'd lost, for those he was about to lose, and those he didn't know yet but knew he would come to know and lose in turn, as well.

POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCES

“Graduation’s coming up,” Duncan Terrell said, as he was joined for dinner by the Custodians Elizabeth Hello and Naomi, “How’s our candidate?”

They were dining indoors; the late-winter superstorm that was throwing freezing rain on the Montreal District was dropping a heavy blizzard on the Capital. Naomi paused, putting her knife and fork down from cutting into her roast beef. "Simon has been very guarded with me for some time. From what he *has* told me, it’s clear that he is upset at the notion that he is losing his new friends. He is also showing signs of a greater inner conflict, yet seems intent on...or perhaps resigned to...completing his apprenticeship as an Ambassador.”

“So,” Terrell said, “Is that good news, or bad?”

"I don't have enough information," Naomi replied, "I believe, once he is back in the Capital, that he should have more frequent counseling sessions. If not with me, then with someone who *will* be able to get him to open up. Simon Petrovich keeps his feelings well hidden. I don't believe he trusts me enough to talk."

"A strong poker face is part of diplomacy," Terrell said, "At least, it always has been among Humans. Simon was

already quiet by nature before he came to us. He was taught to be selective about the information he shares, without being deceptive; you wanted him in the Diplomatic Corps...maybe you're just seeing the student surpassing the teacher."

"For a moment I was sure you were going to make another 'Star Wars' reference," Elizabeth sighed. Terrell grinned, now unable to resist:

"Difficult to see; Always in motion the future is..." He quoted.

"At least he didn't do the voice – this time," Naomi said. Turning from Elizabeth to Duncan, she asked, "You're suggesting that Simon is holding back from me...out of *payback*?"

"I'm suggesting that whatever he's holding back, it's of great personal importance to him. He's clearly very upset about something."

"That's what bothers me most: he acts so calm and casual, even when he's discussing nightmares of seeing his 'Gaff mates' – his friends; that's how they refer to themselves – suffering horrible, violent deaths...his recall of the events of the night of the Games Attack has gotten clearer, and his anxiety has gotten correspondingly worse. He's unhappy; perhaps even depressed, but he won't discuss deeper issues with me unless pressed. When he does, he's

either evasive about it, or, to hear him talk, it's as though he's discussing a day's studies or a professor or assignment that irritates him."

"*Still waters run deep*," Terrell said.

"I don't see why you can't continue as his counselor," Elizabeth said. "I believe that, whether you feel he trusts you completely or not, you have become an important, stable fixture in Simon's life; one that can be used to keep him in balance, during this change in his life. While he's been slow to trust, consider just how much he *has* come to trust you."

"I agree," Terrell said, "The young man's been through a lot, had the sort of hard life that we can only imagine, stability's never been much of a constant...he'll need you here, Naomi."

"He hardly *trusts* me."

"Not entirely, no," Terrell said, "But he does trust you – to an extent. And you're an anchor point, just because he's known you the longest, since his capture. As important as my relationship will now be with him for the *next* five years of his life, the fact of the matter is, you've been the only constant he's had since coming to Namcne. He *needs* you. He trusts you about as much as he can trust *anyone*; you, yourself remarked how hard it is for him to form relationships. That makes you invaluable to his success."

“I agree with Duncan’s assessment,” Elizabeth said, “Naomi, you will continue to act as Simon’s facilitator. As you’ve no more sessions with him before his Graduation, you’ll need to message him. Given his state of mind, it is highly likely he will turn to you for emotional support.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Naomi said, “I was uncertain that I was fulfilling my duties to the best of my ability.”

“Of course you are,” Elizabeth replied, “This is a unique situation, involving a unique individual. We are bound to *all* encounter our own unique problems with Simon Petrovich, as we continue to work with him.”

“That’s enough shop talk for one evening,” Terrell said, raising his wine glass, “A closing toast; to the Transition.”

“To the Transition.”

**

Convocation ceremonies were to be held one early Spring morning, on the sprawling greenspace that marked the reconstructed approach to the school's hallowed doors. Simon was relieved that they did not have to wear gowns and mortars, but instead would be wearing the robe-like vestments of the Ambassadors, though not in the gold and white of full Ambassadors; their robes were instead blue and black, denoting their Novitiate status. He was also glad

the weather was warming enough that he wouldn't be too cold during the ceremonies. He didn't relish standing around freezing for hours while people made speeches.

The last week of class was over, and other than the necessities he'd need day-to-day before leaving, the Gaff was empty of every trace of Simon Petrovich, just as it was his other Gaff-Mates. Amal had decreed they should leave their long-suffering, resin-blackened bong behind for the next tenants to use or display as they saw fit. Diane even wrote a moving tribute to the bong's history and that of the Gaff.

"An' thus, a legend is fuckin' born," Alan said, reading the letter and placing it, partially folded, under the base of the empty bong on the floor in the middle of the living room—the place it had "lived" almost as long as the Gaff mates. Alan actually wiped a tear from his eye and looked at his four friends, smiling, "Well, that's it, then. We're off to Graduate, Celebrate, Inebriate, and hopefully Fornicate before tomorrow when we all Relocate to become Novitiates. To the Gaff and her Mates!" He hugged them each in turn, and everyone wound up hugging everyone else.

"Don't start getting all teary-eyed, Alan," Amal teased, "Last thing you want to do is cry through Duncan Terrell's Commencement!" And, laughing, they left their Gaff for the last time.

It was a warm, sunny spring day; the air fresh, the rush of the pod-traffic making the waterlike sound that Simon enjoyed. They walked along their now-familiar route to the school, and the gated, stone wall that led into the orchard and park, beyond. In the park, the Grandstand had already been built, and the common area was flooded with chairs; there were over a hundred graduates from their Class. Family and friends from across the Megalopolic Center were here for the ceremony. The graduates themselves were required to stand, to represent their steadfastness in the long travels ahead. They stood on a stage facing the grandstand where their teachers and assorted speakers and dignitaries were gathered. The traditional "Pomp and Circumstance" began playing as the ceremony began, and Simon and his friends stood together among their fellow graduates.

The Custodians recognized the Human need for ceremony, be it secular or religious; they understood that it was, almost universally, culturally necessary to instill people with the solemnity of their accomplishments, and the places they were taking in Society. And so, there were addresses from their former teachers, dignitaries from the Custodians and other Megalopolic Centers, and then finally, Duncan Terrell took to the podium.

“Ladies and Gentlemen of the Graduating Class of the School of Diplomacy – ”

There was an eruption; a sudden, thunderous noise that reminded Simon immediately of the explosions caused by the microsats firing on the Toppleddown Insurgent camp, years before. But this was closer, louder, and he felt it as much as he heard it. Suddenly he was back in Minh Park, running from invisible airstrikes bent on destroying him. More explosions, sending up clouds of smoke into the sky. Simon screamed for Tabitha as he ran. People were screaming all around him, running in every direction. Monitors and Probes descending on the common snapped Simon back to the present as he looked to them for reassurance. Another round of explosions struck. Simon was running, but he kept looking around, kept hesitating, pausing, trying to understand what—

There was a strange, rushing sound, and a burst of flame and smoke billowing from a manhole near where Simon used to be. He looked up in time to see the cover tumbling back down and dive out of the way. He landed near the hole and understood immediately what was going on. Two figures, armed and covered in stealth-suits emerged. Simon recognized several others scattered through the chaotic throng. The attack was against the grandstand, and the first explosions had been meant to disperse the crowd. If Simon recalled his tactical strategy, they'd also be trying to herd their fleeing targets.

He staggered to his feet as the stealth-suits ran off, but a third man emerged from the hole and swung the butt of a rifle into his stomach. Simon crumpled and rolled into a

ball from the pain. He looked up into the face of his attacker, who was aiming their rifle at him. Simon recognized him instantly. There was more meat on his frame, yet because he was taller, he looked thinner in spite of the extra muscle...the sharp angles of his face were covered with a brush of dark blonde beard, and his hair was cut short, in military fashion. But there was no mistaking his Father's eyes staring down the sight of the weapon at him; no mistaking the curl of his Mother's lips.

"Gregory?"

"Simon? What?" his brother stammered.

"*Petrovich!*" another, familiar voice from the past bellowed, "Report! What in the fuck are you doing, Insurgent? The rest of your team is – well, fuck me." Simon turned; striding towards him, his face badly scarred, wearing an eyepatch was the impossibly alive Major Ted Logan. The Major stood over Simon, looking down at him. He rested his hands on his hips and turned to Gregory, "Get to your team, Petrovich; I'll handle the prisoner."

"Yes, Sir, Colonel Logan, Sir!" and Simon watched his brother charge off into the chaos, shocked to see his baby brother so grown up, and in the Insurgency...and finding out that Ted Logan was now a *Colonel*.

Said same *Colonel* Ted Logan crouched down beside Simon, who had been too shocked by it all to get up from

where he'd fallen. "Well, long time no see...*Insurgent*. Unfortunately for you, a lot of people are gonna have a lot of questions, especially after so many years." Logan stood up, holding his rifle by the grip and barrel, "So...a little bit of bad news / good news for you." He drew back with the rifle, aiming the stock squarely at Simon's head, "The bad news is, this is gonna hurt like Hell. The good news is...I'm *really* gonna enjoy it." The weapon slammed down, and Simon's head exploded in pain and darkness lit by balls of colors he could not name and then not much of anything, at all.

**

Everything was nothing, and then suddenly his right arm was agony as a blade carefully, deliberately cut into his flesh. There was a hot wash of blood and then more pain as he felt the wound pulled open. He screamed against a gag and opened his eyes to find them bound against a blindfold...realizing that everything that had just happened had been very real, and not just a nightmare he was waking up from.

"He's Human," a woman's voice said, calmly. "Stitch him up, then locate and remove his chip and tracer." And Simon started screaming again as someone began suturing the wound in his arm. It couldn't have taken long, but blindfolded and bound to the bed or table or stretcher under him it was eternal. His arm was wiped with a stinging antiseptic, and he yelled against his gag again. Then they

were wrapping his arm, and he heard a strange electric sound—a screeching whine that grew louder or quieter, then louder, and just a piercing wail. "Found one on his leg," another woman said, and then he felt something cold and wet mark a spot on his calf.

The whining continued until it screeched just behind his left ear. "Got another one. Just under the left collar bone." She marked the spot on his shoulder with the same wet goop, and then they finished running the whining electrical devices around his body.

"Just those two," a man said. "Let's take them out." A moment later, he felt something cold and round pressed against each of the spots. It felt pointy, and before he could even try to flinch, the two epidermal drills started up, and he was screaming into the gag again. He was in a haze of pain and gasping, feeling bores in his flesh, the agony of scissors that cut through the circular wound when they'd done drilling, and yanked out two chunks of him. They disinfected the wounds with more alcohol and then packed them and sewed him up. Simon was sweating, barely conscious and grunting, groaning in a mad, animal-like state of utter panic and pain. And then, at last, the worst – for now, he realized with growing dread as his mind returned and the agony ebbed – was over. The stress and pain of the ordeal gone, Simon's memory turned back to the sight of his brother in a stealth-suit, during an attack against his...*Graduation?*

The Insurgency had *never* attacked Humans...that was something both the Insurgents claimed and the Custodians confirmed. So why had they attacked his Graduation? He was confused, and his head hurt almost as badly as his arm. His stomach was sore from where he'd been butted by *Gregory's* rifle. Simon's head swam. He couldn't understand anything, and so he surrendered to the pain and with it, unconsciousness.

When he came to again, after a dreamless, grey-black haze of hurt and rough movement, he was sitting, tied to a very uncomfortable chair. It was bolted to the floor. The feel of it, the bindings on him and the air in the room told him he was naked. The slight vibration and his inner ear told him he was moving. He tried looking around, but all was dark. Simon was afraid but in a distant way. He knew this wouldn't end well. He could not imagine what horror awaited him, but being worried about it would only be what his captors wanted. He'd learned much in the last two years, but he'd never expected to graduate to *this*.

FIRST SESSION

As soon as he realized their vehicle was slowing, Simon's calm broke – internally; at least he'd been able to keep his breathing regular. But he didn't want to think about what torture the Insurgency might subject him to. The truck stopped briefly before continuing more slowly onward. He could feel the angle as they descended a ramp. They pulled off and parked. For a long moment, there was nothing but the silent dark; then he heard the back open, and boots climbing in. Simon's heart was thudding now, and he was sure his captors noticed his distress. He was unshackled from the chair but left in restraints: too-tight cuffs behind his back, the guard twisting them so that they dug into the soft flesh of his inner wrist and thumb, painfully. A short chain hobbled his legs. They led him from the transport, moving slowly because they still had him hooded. Simon didn't even bother trying to keep track of where they were leading him; they knew he was a hunter and tracker, and so, blinded by the hood, led him up and down multiple corridors, turning him left and right and right around so often it was impossible to know where he was. They brought him inside a room and shackled him to another chair. They didn't say a word or remove the hood. He heard the door locked and bolted; the lights were turned off from outside, and Simon was left alone, in the dark.

He was startled from sleep plagued with vague dreams when they switched the lights on, and someone came into the room, slamming the door shut behind them. When that person pulled the hood from his head, Simon was astonished to see Katherine Anton sitting across from him. Suddenly, he remembered the voice he'd heard after his arm had been cut open...realized who'd done the cutting. "Hello, Simon," Katherine said. For the first time, he noticed the burn scars searing across her face like lightning.

"Is Tabitha alive? They told me everyone was dead!"

"Yeah, you're probably gonna wish we were before this is through," Katherine said, casually, "And no; Colonel Logan and I are the only two – besides you – who survived. And as you can see from our new look, we only *barely* survived. I had burns over one-third of my body, Logan, over half. You, on the other hand, look remarkably well for someone who died when they incinerated Minh Park."

Simon closed his eyes, trying to fight a surprising grief. He'd *known* that Tabitha had died that night, but after seeing Logan and Katherine, there's been a *sliver* of hope...

"Save your tears," Katherine said, "You'll be suffering for real, soon enough."

"Are you going to torture me?" Simon asked, suddenly angry. Katherine's chuckle gave voice to his fear, but

somehow it was anger he was holding onto the most, fueled by a renewed loss of his love.

"We'll get around to *enhanced interrogation* later," she said, casually. "Right now, it's just you and me. I want to hear what the *fuck* is going on, that we find you right in the middle of a Custer indoctrination ceremony."

"That's not what it was at all!" Simon objected angrily, "And since when does the Insurgency attack Humans?"

"We weren't after anyone there but the Race Traitor Duncan Terrell and a handful of high-value Custers. We had intel he would be delivering an address before some sort of ceremony for new Human recruits to their cause," she shook her head. "And look who the fuck we find, right in the middle of it."

"Did you...Is he okay?"

Katherine just stared at him in disbelief. "This is going to be a long night," she said. Simon had no doubt she was right. Katherine rubbed her eyes and looked at him, "All right, Petrovich. So, were you a mole? Were you working with Lloyd? Or just with the Custers?"

"Neither," Simon said. "I was hit by whatever they hit the park with. I waited there too long. Tabitha never came up from the pipes. I kept waiting for her...finally, I ran, but

it was too late. I was blasted. I still remember the wound—I was split open. I should have been dead..."

"Bullshit," Katherine said, "No one survives a Custer attack."

"I have the scar to prove it,"

Katherine got up and banged twice on the door. It was unlocked, and two guards entered. The door was shut and locked.

"Stand him up," Katherine said with that same eerie casual tone, "Look for a scar." Simon didn't offer struggle of any kind, and still they were rough, yanking him up forcibly from the chair and dragging him by the arms to the middle of the cramped room. They prodded and poked at him cruelly.

Finally, one of them said, "I found it." Katherine went around to examine the scar, tracing its line down from his chest, across Simon's midsection, and down his leg.

"My organs were spilling out of me. I lost so much blood...I could see my fucking *hip bone*, my femur..."

"And how did you survive?" Katherine asked, staring him right in the eye.

"I don't know. There were Custodians...they...I only remember bits and pieces...but they told me that they used microsurgical drones...to...*repair* me. I still keep expecting to split wide open, sometimes. Other times I think about that word...*repair*..."

Katherine nodded, "I believe you," she said, "But the questions are going to get harder. So's the way we ask them."

"I have nothing to hide," Simon insisted. "The Custodians – they aren't what we think! The machines that saved my life? *Human beings* designed them! I want to tell you *everything* I learned, Katherine!"

But the General just nodded, "I'm sure you do," she said. "But *we're* going to be asking the questions, and we're going to be doing it *our* way. I'm sorry, Simon; I really am. You were always a good kid. I don't know what Custer did to you, but I promise that I'm going to get payback on your behalf for all the Hell you're about to endure because of them."

"What?"

Katherine gestured to the guards, then went and banged on the door. It opened, and the guards dragged him from the room. Once outside and back in the hallways, they put the hood over Simon's head again and dragged him off.

**

Katherine stood outside the closed door to the meeting room, finishing the hand-rolled Toppleddown cigarillo she'd lit, after leaving Simon Petrovich. She took a pull from a flask kept in a cargo pocket. Katherine had been military for a long time. She'd seen a lot of horrible things, *done* a lot of horrible things, but she still never developed a stomach for "enhanced interrogation," or as she had called it since Basic, "Torture." Simon Petrovich had just endured his first several hours: electric shock, beatings, waterboarding...they'd put needles under his finger and toenails...and through his...

She started coughing until she thought she was going to vomit. Finally, it stopped, and she took a slow drag from the cigarillo before dropping it to the ground. Katherine took a swallow from her flask before exhaling, crushing the cigarillo with her boot heel, and walking into the briefing.

"General Anton," General Weirs, said, "Please, have a seat." The other Generals of the North American Insurgency, Salvador, Maud, and Mulaney, were sitting at a round table; only one seat vacant: hers.

"We'll need a full report on what you learned during Petrovich's interrogation," General Muad said.

"Don't you mean his torture?" Katherine asked, sitting down. "The 'interrogation' started when Petrovich was

hung from the ceiling by his hands, crossed behind his back. He was then soaked in a mixture of water and vinegar, and then an electric charge was delivered to his body from cables connected to a direct-current generator at medium voltage. This was done for three hours, with five-minute 'rest' intervals, every fifteen minutes. After forty-five minutes, the interrogation team decided to inject Petrovich with pain-enhancing drugs. My objection to the use of chemicals so early in the interrogation is noted; after the initial session, I was authorized by the interrogation team to speak with Petrovich."

"And what did he tell you?" General Weirs asked.

Katherine shrugged, "I'm sure you've reviewed the video footage already; I asked him what he told the Custodians; he emphatically denied ever being interrogated or interviewed by them, after his capture. He told me that other than being locked-in to a compound, there were no punitive measures taken against him. So far, his story is consistent with other former operatives we've captured for interrogation."

"What else did you learn?" General Weirs pressed.

"Not much," Katherine replied, "As the Interrogation Team Leader decided to inject Petrovich with a second dose of pain-enhancers, mixed into a cocktail of denatured capsaicin and a mild hallucinogen. By the time he'd started screaming, they began the waterboarding sessions."

“General Anton, we do not need a blow-by-blow description of the interrogation,” General Salvador chastised.

“General Muad asked for a full report,” Katherine said, nodding in the other woman’s direction. “I’m only doing as requested; giving you a *full* report of what I observed and witnessed, during the interrogation.”

“You may stick to the salient points,” General Muad replied.

Katherine looked them all in the eye, one at a time, before replying, “I’m sorry; I thought I had been.”

“General,” Weirs growled.

"Petrovich reported that he was enrolled in the Acclimation and Rehabilitation programs," Katherine said. "As reported by previous interrogation subjects, this was presented as an extended civics lesson on the laws of the Megalopolis Center, and what is expected of a citizen, under the Custodian regime. He was asked to become an Ambassador by none other than Duncan Terrell himself. Petrovich's reasoning for agreeing to do so was simple: he wanted to represent *us*—the Wildlanders— -he alleged, under *repeated* duress. That his only ambition was to oblige Custer to respect our way of life."

"You sound like a Custer sympathizer," General Mulaney said.

Katherine stood up and pointed the first two fingers of her hand at Mulaney. "Don't you fucking dare question my loyalty after everything I've done, after what I've sacrificed in the name of Free Humanity for the last thirteen goddamn years. I bleed red, Mulaney, same as you. And I can tell you as an eyewitness, so does Simon fucking Petrovich. We left an Insurgent behind, and the enemy took him. We've done worse to him in the last few hours than anything Custer did the last three years."

Mulaney grunted and looked at his fellow generals, "General Anton is *clearly* biased. I recommend that we assign someone detached to oversee the next phase of Simon Petrovich's interrogation."

"The *next* phase?" Katherine barked, "What are you expecting to find out? His school curriculum? How Duncan Terrell takes his fucking *steak*?"

"If it could give us the opportunity to poison the Traitor," Mulaney said, "Don't you think it would be worth it? General Anton is in a conflict of interest," Mulaney drawled. "I again put it to the Council to place someone *else* in charge of Petrovich's interrogation."

"Does the General have a recommendation?" General Salvador asked.

"I would recommend General Weirs," General Mulaney said. And as the other Generals voted their assent – and both Weirs and Anton abstaining as per protocol, Katherine watched as Simon's fate was sealed by procedure, political brinksmanship and a refusal to listen to the facts. The boy would be tortured to death, all because no one would believe the simple truth that he had been manipulated by Custer...because they wanted—needed—Simon Petrovich to be a traitor to the Human race.

CHANGES IN APPROACH

He sat huddled in the corner of his cold, dark cell. He was shivering; not from the chill. His father had used being cold and naked outside in the winter as a form of endurance training for himself and his sons. No, it was everything he'd just survived that left Simon Petrovich, naked, in pain and afraid, trembling and huddled in a fetal position. He was shivering from the horror, from the feeling of being drowned over and over. Always sure he was about to die, always begging for relief. Then, they tied him to a chair and slid needles under his fingernails, one at a time, and then they did his toenails...and then through his cock.

He couldn't remember how loudly he'd screamed as they'd done this, never asking him questions, never listening to his pleas for mercy, his begging for a chance to tell them *whatever they wanted him to say*.

Every now and again, a lull in the repeated cycles of torment would happen. Katherine would return, asking him questions, Simon answering between whimpering pleas to make it stop. He couldn't remember half of what she'd asked him...only that he was emphatic and honest in his replies. They tortured him again and again between questionings and then again after the last one, only instead of returning him to the interrogation room, they threw him in here. He didn't know how long he'd been left here...how

long before they came for him again...if he'd been down here hours or days. What kept rolling through his mind was how *easy* it had been for them to do this, that even putting up a fight didn't matter. They were stronger than him. Ultimately, just to make it easier, Simon had *just let them* do what they wanted. That was almost as bad as the physical torture. No, it was *worse*—because he'd *let them*. It was easier to give in than to fight. Simon whimpered in the darkness and wished for it to all be over.

**

Katherine sat in the dark, taking long, gut-burning pulls from the flask of grain fuel in her hand. She'd never liked torture; even those few times she and her team-mates had had to use it back during her Black Ops days. She'd always believed it was a tool of last resort, at best; useless at worst. More than a few times intel from a field “interrogation” turned out to be faulty, or catastrophic. Katherine remembered one enemy who'd actually sent patsies out to be captured – and it had worked. Her platoon had strolled right into an ambush in some godforsaken Asian jungle on false intel they'd tortured out of some dumb kid who thought it to be the Word of God.

Simon similarly believed whatever bullshit that Custer had fed him, since his capture. But what worried Katherine was how emphatic Simon was. He believed the Gospel Truth of whatever they'd told him, and all he wanted to do was talk about it. The torture served no purpose. Simon

had even claimed to be training to be an *ambassador*, to build a bridge between Humankind and the Custodians...and what horrified Katherine the most was the inevitable, uncomfortable possibility that this was actually *true*. And if it was true...what did that say about their Resistance efforts? Katherine took another swallow of drink. She wasn't involved with his interrogation, anymore; it was out of her hands. With Weirs in charge, it would be worse for Simon. She didn't know what to do. The only thing she was sure of was that a good man was being tortured for information he would have freely given.

Katherine slammed the table; *Hurry Up and Wait*; Military Culture summed up in a phrase older than her great-grandfather, who'd fought some thankless war given a forgotten euphemistic Operation Name. *Hurry Up and Wait*: A phrase and philosophy she'd always rebelled against. And no less now than before Custer invaded, when there had *been* a United States of America; when that Great Nation had had a Military that she had served faithfully and dutifully for her adult life. Katherine could see no reason not to violate it, now. She put the flask away and left her quarters; she had to go find Insurgent Petrovich.

As she expected, he wasn't asleep. Why would he be? He'd been part of the team that had trained to assassinate Duncan Terrell and as many Custers as they could, before the inevitable counter-attack. But finding his brother, who'd been presumed dead for *years*, alive, and completing

what seemed to be *his own* indoctrination...that would have been hard for anyone to sleep off.

"General Anton, Sir!" Insurgent Gregory Petrovich said, leaping to his feet and saluting as she entered his quarters.

"Knock it off, Petrovich. You're to speak freely. We need to talk about your brother."

"Am I going to be interrogated, like him?" Gregory asked defiantly. How much she was reminded of his older brother...though Greg had grown *angry* in the time since Simon was presumed dead. And not that keen edge of anger—rather, the kind of anger that made smart kids like him into Insurgent leaders like Ted Logan. Greg Petrovich's anger was chipped and brittle with confusion.

"I hope to Hell they don't try that," Katherine said, "Because I doubt you're any more of a traitor than your brother."

"What?"

"They took me off the interrogation detail, Greg," Katherine said, frankly, "I don't know *what* he's in for; I ordered the interrogators to use the bare minimum as per the handbook...and I felt like a monster for every minute I allowed it."

"Then why did you?"

Katherine stared at him, her expression angrily suggesting that the question was uncalled for, “Because that’s what we do to Humans we capture from Custer; we interrogate them. Since Lloyd Quinn, the first thing we do is cut them enough to make sure they’re Human; you know the drill.”

“Yeah, don’t I ever; my annual is coming up.”

“Karl Werner whipped up painkillers for this year,” Katherine replied, “It won’t be so bad.”

“Yeah? I got an *infection* last year!”

“Watch your tone,”

“You gave me orders to speak freely, General.”

Katherine regarded him, “God damn, kid, you’re so much like your brother.”

“Yes, ma’am, thank you, ma’am.”

She chuckled, “Cocky little shit. The point is, I knew him from the Gangs. You knew him even longer. Do *you* think he betrayed the Insurgency? Do *you* think he betrayed Humankind?”

Greg Petrovich didn't even hesitate, "No. *Hell* no; not Simon; he hated...*hates*...shit, I was just getting used to him being *dead*. Now he's *alive* again or always was. Do you know how fucked-up that is? Simon has *always* hated Custer; at least, he did when he...when he was lost on that mission."

"Yeah, and when I got to talk to him, he kept telling me about what he'd seen, what he'd learned inside the city...he didn't sound like someone who'd *betrayed* anybody...he sounded like someone...*convinced* of something. I need to talk to him. I need to just get him to *talk*. We'll learn more that way than we ever could *their* way."

"But you've been taken off the interrogation."

"Then you understand my problem. I don't have any more access to your brother than *you* do."

"That *is* a problem," Greg said, frowning. After surviving three consecutive missions, even Katherine considered him a veteran. He certainly learned fast, a common trait of veterans of the Insurgency. Seven more missions and he'd go from Insurgent to *Captain* Petrovich, and they *always* needed new Captains. Every promotion reset the clock on your mission survivability. And right now, he was putting his experience in the field to work on the problem of the prison. The intent in his frown was clear.

“So you understand my dilemma.” She repeated.

“I understand you’re willing to risk getting your ticket punched for treason to get my brother out of there,” Greg said, turning to look at her, “You already know how I feel about Si. So let’s cut the bullshit: what are your orders, General?”

Katherine wanted to smile but resisted. This kid would make his brother proud. "My orders are first, we have to come up with a good plan for getting him out of there. Then we get him out of there. Then we talk to him. Then we figure out what the fuck to do next."

SECOND SESSION

"Good morning, Insurgent Petrovich," General Weirs said, as Simon was dragged, still naked, from his cell and into the interrogation room. Weirs was already seated, waiting patiently as Simon's guards shackled him to the chair. When they were done, they left, one of them punching him hard in the back of the head before slamming and locking the door shut behind them.

"We haven't been formally introduced, Insurgent Petrovich. I'm General Max Weirs. I'll be handling your interrogation, from now on. The Council felt that General Anton was too close to the operation."

Simon didn't say anything. He'd seen Katherine object to almost every part of his interrogations. He had no doubt that the new General would not. In fact, Simon expected him to escalate things.

"Of course, there's no need to speak; not right now." Weirs continued, "Though you *will* be afforded the opportunity to do so, before your next...session."

"What do you want to know?" Simon rasped, "I'll tell you anything."

Weirs chuckled, "I'm sure you will," he said. "But, Mister Petrovich, I don't want to hear *anything*. I want to hear the truth. So...how can we be sure what you're telling me is the *truth*?"

Simon fell mute. There was no right answer, no way of answering that wouldn't lead to more bad things happening. Instead, he looked down at his feet.

General Weirs smiled, "Exactly," he said, "And so, first we have to come to a common understanding of what constitutes *the truth*. The truth isn't what *I* believe it to be. It is not what *you* believe it to be. The truth is something else; somewhere in between the two, and no doubt intersecting several other perspectives, as well. So, then, how do the two of us, alone, find the truth? By examining the facts as we know them, and sharing them so that others may examine them as well."

"Please," Simon whimpered, suddenly unable to bear the *thought* of prolonging the inevitable, and still hoping...praying...for a reprieve. "I've already told you everything I know."

"Yes, yes, I know. I've seen the interrogation session tapes," Weirs said, smiling. "But, because of your answers, I now have *additional* questions. More pieces of the truth, Simon, waiting to be uncovered. The more you willingly share, the less you'll suffer. Believe me; I don't like to see anyone put through the things you've gone through. So to

establish trust, today I am going to ask you questions *without* enhancing your interrogation. However...if you hesitate, if you cause me for whatever reason to believe you're lying..."

Simon wept. He just wanted to be left alone. He just wanted them to believe when he told them what he knew...what he'd been through. He didn't want to suffer through another round of torture.

"Very well, are you ready to begin?" General Weirs asked as Simon nodded, weeping. "Good. You said that the Custodians healed you following their counterattack after the destruction of the water treatment facility. Why do you suppose that is? Why would they heal *you*? While they have captured *live* Insurgents, occasionally, they have never *rescued* a fatally injured operative, that we know of. So...what makes you special? Why you?"

Simon shook his head, shrugging against his restraints, "I don't know," he said. "I've asked myself that so many times the last few years."

"You never thought to ask?"

"They said it was because they found me."

"But that answer doesn't satisfy you, does it? It doesn't satisfy me, either. So, why did they pick you?"

Simon shrugged again, as much as he could, "Most days I wonder *how* I'm still alive. I don't know *why*."

Weirs made a gesture, and the door behind Simon opened. He was suddenly afraid, as two of the burly interrogators stepped in. "Unshackle his wrists, chest, and biceps," Weirs said, "He can hardly move. It's quite distracting and making my job more difficult."

"Thank you," Simon said, uncertainly, sincerely, as the guards left. Simon was still shackled to the chair at the waist, ankles, and thighs, but being able to move more freely was a tremendous relief.

"Feel free to stretch, to lean on the desk if you wish. I need you to be *somewhat* physically comfortable if you're going to be at all compliant." General Weirs said. Simon groaned with relief as he did just that. As he rested his arms on the tabletop, leaning on his elbows, Weirs shot out, grabbing his left hand. He yanked hard, forcing Simon to fall onto the table. Weirs held Simon's hand at the wrist, turning the palm downward, then slammed a knife through the back of Simon's hand. Simon screamed at the sudden, unbearable pain exploding up his arm, his vision blurred by the tears flooding his eyes from the agony.

"You need to focus your mind, Insurgent Petrovich." General Weirs said. "Pain can be an excellent means for grounding ourselves in the moment. Concentrate on your pain. Use it as an anchor." He twisted the knife until the

blade was pushing against bones. The blood was profuse, and the pain...Simon screamed and cried, groaning as he drew breath.

"Good!" Weirs shouted. "*Focus* on the pain! Use it to clear your mind of everything else! Now: Answer the question: *Why did the Custodians save you? Why did they heal you? Why did they keep you alive?*"

Simon screamed, "I DON'T KNOW!"

"The pain will end when you answer the question." Weirs shouted, "For now, use the pain to give you clarity! USE IT TO ANSWER MY QUESTION! *WHY DO YOU THINK THE CUSTODIANS SAVED YOUR LIFE?*"

Suddenly, Simon found himself looking backwards down the chain of events that began with the explosion at the park. The chain seemed to stretch down his arm, ending in the bright flare of agony that was his hand. It was like staring into the sun; it was like reliving his evisceration. It was...

"I think they never meant to kill me." He stammered, sweating, crying, *bleeding*. "I think they were always out to get me alive...that I just got unlucky."

"And why would they want *you*? *THINK*, Insurgent, Think, and this pain ends!"

"They would've taken me; they would've taken...Tabitha. They would've taken *anybody* on that mission. Shit, they probably tried. That's probably how...Ka...General Anton and...*Colonel* Logan...survived...oh God please, it hurts! I don't know why me. Maybe nobody else gave them a choice. Maybe they died completing their...missions."

"Go on," Weirs persisted, "Why snatch *you*?"

"Please! This *hurts*! I don't know!" Simon insisted. General Weirs grabbed the knife and twisted it, sliding it into new flesh, scraping against more bone. Simon screamed. He was dizzy, his hand a throbbing red agony, his whole arm pulled taut, his ribs just under his armpit jammed against the table's edge. He wanted to vomit, but there wasn't enough in his stomach to throw up. "*I don't know! All I can do is guess!*" he screamed. Suddenly the pain was sharp, jerking, and abruptly lessened. Simon's arm was no longer taut against the table. He looked, up, deliberately past his hand, to the knife-wielding Weirs.

"Good. Then guess. Use your imagination," Weirs said, suddenly lashing out with his free hand and grabbing Simon by the cheek, forcing him to look at the gaping wound, through and between the bones of his hand, the blood covering the table and dribbling off the edge...*how much blood had he lost?* "Imagine what I'll do to your hand if I don't like your *next* answer! Now, *Guess* why the Custodians selected you!"

It came out in a rush, as he looked at the frightening gash in his hand. He looked backward his life in the Megalopolis Center, from his interrupted graduation ceremony all the way back to waking up in hospital.

“Maybe they weren’t looking for *me*...maybe they were looking for someone *like* me...someone who'd been a child when they came. Who'd lived free in the Wildlands...who'd joined the *Insurgency*. Maybe they were looking for somebody who fit a...a...”

“Someone who fit a *profile*?” General Weirs prompted, “A *particular* candidate? A good answer – but to what end? Surely you must have *some* idea, Insurgent!”

“The Ambassador Program!” Simon yelped, “They wanted me to be an Ambassador. Maybe...something about me...about my background...”

“I can imagine it would be quite the feather in the Custodian’s cap to indoctrinate a former Insurgent into the ranks of the Diplomacy Corps,” Weirs mused, “If they cared for that sort of thing. But they can’t have recruited too many former Insurgents into their Ambassadorial Programme. They must have been looking for something specific.”

“A lot of us...” Simon sobbed, “A lot of us in my class at the School of Diplomacy were Wildlanders who’d come to the City. I was the only...the only Insurgent!”

"Yes, I'm sure you were. And by your previous testimony, you were also to be apprenticed to Duncan Terrell, better known to the Free Humanity cause as the Race Traitor. More answers, more questions, Insurgent Petrovich. You'll have your hand looked after and be returned to your cell. I have to contemplate this further. We'll see each other later this afternoon." Weirs rose, and the door behind Simon opened. A hood was yanked on over his head, and despite the wound to his hand, they grabbed him by it to manacle him. The pain overtook him in a rush like a bad drug. He wanted to pass out...but didn't. He faded back in as he was dragged, he hoped, to an infirmary, terrified as to what this afternoon's session would be like.

**

To bypass any possible surveillance, they used the very same means they'd used to defeat the Custodians in Toppledawn and at Copper Street: They wrote notes to each other, then disposed of them in a fire.

Mail courier has a pouch going to Toppledawn. Sent coded message to Franklyn. He's one of my crew from the World Before. Take about 4 or 5 days to get there. Instructions on how to prepare for our arrival. It'll take

us about that long to get the OP running and get out of here with Simon.

Greg studied the paper before dropping into the flames. He took the writing pad, replying to Katherine's words as they turned to ash in the small camp stove on the table between them.

If escape covered you have plan for the prison? Walls of solid steel. Single entry into detention area, covered guard posts, multiple walls between detention block & rest of compound.

Katherine gave him a glancing look and took back the notepad and charcoal as she reached over the fire to drop his note in.

Aware of Detention Area; helped design it. Am working problem backward. Secured escape vehicle from motor pool by placing it on repair docket w/o requisition orders. It's just sitting there. Supply cache & bug-out-bags for 3 stowed under my bunk.

Greg repeated the exercise, scrawling hastily before jamming the pencil and paper toward his Commanding Officer, such was his vehemence.

Know this is your op but he's MY brother! I need to know how we're getting him out! I want to help plan the operation!

Katherine took his impatience and frustration in stride; she could have cautioned him on insubordination if they weren't actively campaigning to betray the Insurgency, but she understood where Greg Petrovich was coming from. She knew how much the Petrovich Brothers loved each other. Simon's pain was Greg's suffering. She replied,

RELAX. Detention Center designed to be broken down for transport or scuttled by charges. Working out best way forward W/O killing someone or letting Custer figure out we're all here. BE PATIENT.

Gregory angrily wiped away tears as he scrawled his next.

The more time that passes the more time that Simon is tortured! And how long before they decide to just put 2 in the back of his head?

Katherine wrote out her reply slowly, carefully, then got up and left. It read, simply:

We have time. Brass has no plans to kill him, yet. He's gonna go through Hell and you're gonna have to accept it. We'll get him out. But we got to do it right. PATIENCE. Now burn this notepad and clean this shit up, Insurgent.

Simon didn't know how long he was at the infirmary. He was seen right away, his hand tended to – surprisingly with the use of a local anesthetic – while he was shackled to a gurney; when they were done bandaging up his sutured hand, they wrapped it in a plastic bag and ordered him to a shower, where he was hosed down, thrown a bar of soap to wash with, then hosed down again. He was given a towel, and when he was done with it, they placed Simon in shackles again. The plastic bag was removed from his hand, and the black one was pulled over his head as they led him back to his cell.

Simon waited, cold and naked in the dark, his hand slowly hurting more and more as the local wore off. It was agony before long, and somehow the bright pain allowed him to find a point of reference, mark the passage of time, again. He missed his Father's old watch and felt a pang of remorse at its loss. Just a cheap, old wind-up fob watch, the cover embossed with some vague hunting scene...worn smooth and dull from decades of use. He could see it more clearly in his mind's eye than he could imagine Tabitha...and the pain in his heart was suddenly, unbearably worse than his hand.

He began to cry, screaming in grief, pain, physical and spiritual misery. Simon Petrovich had lost everything...*everything*...all because he'd simply tried to do what he thought was right. His cries resounded in his cell, out the corridor of the prison, to the office General

Weirs had temporarily taken over for the purposes of his mission. He looked up at one of his Captains from behind his desk and smiled grimly, "It would appear we're finally beginning to get through to Insurgent Petrovich," the General said, casually, "Let's postpone the next session a few hours; give him time to put *himself* through Hell."

"Sir, should I prepare the usual equipment for this afternoon's session?" his Captain – and one of Simon's torturers – asked.

Weirs frowned, contemplating. Finally looking back to his paperwork, "No, today's been most unconventional for the Insurgent. A new Interrogator...a knife through the hand...let's keep him guessing. I'll consider our approach, along with my next set of questions."

"Very good, General, Sir."

THIRD SESSION

As always, the light was blinding when they opened the door to his cell. Simon had never had any real sense of what it looked like inside—whether the walls themselves were painted black, or not. In fact, other than where the toilet bucket was, Simon had no idea about his cell, other than it was small and narrow. There was no cot, no sink...just a bucket in a corner that was his sole point of reference. He was astounded that these, of all things, raced through his mind as they threw the thick, black hood over his head, and dragged him back into another interrogation session.

As usual, they wouldn't even give him a chance to comply, and simply hauled him bodily along; Simon had learned it was easier just to submit; the callouses on his feet were more than tough enough to survive being dragged across the bare floor of his prison. While he remained as passive as a rag doll, they threw him violently into the metal restraint chair before strapping him down. As always, Simon shivered as the cold metal touched his bare skin. When the hood was yanked from his face, Simon could not understand what he was witnessing.

The first thing to hit him was the overwhelming, immediately inviting scent of fresh-brewed coffee. His eyes tracked the smell to its source; not terribly hard to do

in the small room, bare except for the table between him and the interrogator's chair. A coffee carafe was on the table, next to a set of cups, spoons, a small pitcher of milk, and a bowl of sugar – all-porcelain; the likes of which Simon had rarely seen outside of his brief years in the Megalopolis Center. General Weirs was sitting on the opposite side of the table. Simon imagined countless scenarios in which the hot coffee was used on him—splashed in the face, his groin, his back, his legs. near-boiling hot liquid pain, conveniently disguised as a pleasant drink.

But he expected pain; clearly, they wanted to break him with torture. Simon knew, eventually, they would. He was afraid of the scalding liquid on his cock and balls...but otherwise, Simon had no fear from liquid burns – even if they blistered. Even in conditions as poor as his jail, he knew how to keep such injuries from infection...Charles Petrovich had taught his sons a great deal about survival, in their days in that old log cabin.

"Good evening, Mister Petrovich," General Weirs said. "Although...it could just as easily still be the afternoon or morning...relative to when we last spoke." Weirs smiled. Simon knew his intent: unsettle him with his own inability to keep track of time. But, without his father's old watch, Simon had little use for time-keeping. As a prisoner, if he wanted to...*really* wanted to, he could count the seconds between meals, or interrogation sessions. But keeping time—outside of the position of the sun, moon or stars in

the sky, and only then while on a hunt, or on a dig with the Night-Miners—had never mattered to him. So he said nothing.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" Weirs asked, casually, "I do mean that, sincerely. How do you take it? Or would you prefer to fix it yourself? I know many people are almost alchemistic in their coffee tastes."

Simon couldn't help arching an eyebrow as the invisible buzzer announced the guards coming in, and unshackling his arms, shoulders, and chest. He remained unmoving. If he was going to get burned, Simon preferred to prolong the experience as much as he could. Weirs seemed to sense this and chuckled.

"Are you expecting me to use the coffee to scald you?" he asked. "I assure you that this session will not involve *any* 'enhanced' interrogation techniques. And, in case you're worrying the coffee may be drugged..." Simon watched as the General fixed himself a cup of coffee from the settings available, drinking deeply and making a point of refilling his cup, before setting it down, to his left.

Simon laughed, "Yeah, and you promised not to do anything *last* time, too. For drugs, you could've taken an antidote before I came in."

Weirs nodded. "Fair enough. However, I assure you, all I want to do is have a chat over a cup of coffee."

"The last time you *assured* me of anything, I got this." Simon held up his bandaged hand; the first time he'd moved since being unrestrained.

"You are clever," Weirs smiled. "I can promise you that for the duration of *this* particular session—which, for the sake of clarity means from now until you are returned to your cell—you will not be harmed."

Simon mulled it over, then nodded, leaned forward, and fixed himself a cup of coffee. Once it was made to his satisfaction and he'd taken a long swallow, he looked Weirs straight in the eye and asked, "And what about *after* I'm returned to my cell?"

Weirs' surprise was so genuine he exploded in laughter. Simon took a mental note...astonished at just how easily his Diplomacy Training could be applied to a situation he had absolutely *never* imagined himself in—a situation over which he had absolutely no control.

"That is what I admire about you, Insurgent Petrovich," Weirs said, regaining his composure. "You're a very smart, very clever, young man."

"And I hope to live to be a very clever *old* man," Simon said, as if he were back in a classroom role-play.

Weirs chuckled, "We both know this world...this life doesn't always afford us such luxuries. But, no one's signed your death warrant...yet...if that's what you're worried about."

"I'm more worried about what's waiting between me and dying."

"For now, that's a *very* nebulous area. I, personally, am neither fond of torture, nor executions. So, for now, let us focus on two things: polite conversation, and this delicious coffee."

Simon took another long, appreciative swallow of coffee, knowing that the extra-strong urine stench from his bucket, later, would be more than worth it. "I've already told you, I'm willing to cooperate. You know I'm *me*; I've been tortured, I've been poked, prodded, X-rayed and whatever the fuck else it was you did. You know I'm *me*. And you've already put me through enough fucking Hell to know I've got no interest in lying." Simon took another sip of coffee, lest he start imploring. "So...what do you want to know?" he asked calmly, relishing the coffee.

Weirs took a swallow from his own cup before setting it carefully down, "I've been thinking about what you said...the Custodian's persistence in getting you to sign up for their Diplomatic Corps. Now, while you maintain no *indoctrination* occurred, you *do* admit you gave in to their pressure to sign on to the programme."

"Freely," Simon said. "As I said, life in the Rehab Compound was fine, but being restricted like that, not allowed outside the compound, having to report to our rooms for lock-down by nine PM...I mean, we had food, clothes, shelter, even temporary furloughs into parts of the city. *Parts* of the city...we had a library with *real* books; World-Before books, the CusterNet. And most people seemed to think they were proving a point by resisting, by remaining permanent residents there. But...I couldn't live like that. I didn't want to be *confined*. Someone said it was like a permanent vacation...but a prison is still a prison.

"So I did what I had to do to get free. As free as I *could* be, in the *greater* prison of the Megalopolic Center, anyway. Although Namcne's citizens are technically allowed to leave whenever they wish, the fact is, I didn't believe they'd ever let me go. It wasn't about anything other than keeping my sanity; if I'd have stayed in the Rehab compound, they *would* have broken me. So I took their City Civics lessons, learned their rules...and got my ticket outta rehab. Yeah, they groomed me for the Diplomacy Corps...probably even manipulated me into it. And yeah, it was because I'm a Wildlander, because I was an Insurgent at the time...maybe it's nothing more than propaganda; they wanted a Human Face to their Transition. But, I didn't join the Diplomacy Corps to convince people to join the Megalopolic Center. I joined because I wanted to protect the Wildlanders' rights and our way of life."

"I find it interesting that you describe yourself as a Wildlander, yet also as a *former* Insurgent." Weirs said, taking another sip of coffee, "Then you say 'our' way of life...but it's not *your* way of life, anymore, is it, Simon?" They both drank, Simon taking a particularly slow, deliberate swallow as he mulled over his response. His hand throbbed as if to remind him of the consequences of a wrong answer.

"I guess...I always considered myself a Wildlander. I joined the Insurgency because I believed we were fighting for Humankind. In the 'Knee, Namcne, what I saw, what I was shown..." Simon shook his head. "I don't know, I think the Custodians might actually be *sincere*. I don't think they're necessarily *right* in how they're doing things, but I believe they believe they're here to help. And I think they might even *be* helping. But if I had a choice—a *real* choice—I'd wanna go back to Toppledawn, not the 'Knee."

General Weirs regarded him a long moment, nodding. "And you believe we can *negotiate* with the enemy for our way of life when thirteen years ago they *vaporized everyone* who tried to do so?"

"Things are different, now." Simon said, "The world's changed, General. Our society's changed on the outside of the Walls as it has inside. We still have to deal with marauders, cannibal clans...the Custodians could help us with that. They can be convinced to let us live as we choose...but first we *have* to stop fighting them."

“What *happened* to you, Insurgent Petrovich?” Weirs asked. “You came to us *hating* Custer. You’d hated them since *childhood*...since the day they ended the world. Now you come to us telling us to go before them and beg for our *lives*?”

“That’s not what I’m saying at all!”

“Isn’t it?”

INTERCESSION

The handwritten note Katherine gave to Greg was long, detailed, and the words “memorize” and “burn after reading” written across its rolled-up back were completely unnecessary. The plan it detailed was one he was more than prepared for, the moment he’d finished reading it. The basics of it were elegantly simple.

Have W’s itinerary for next session w/Simon.

They already wore Insurgent’s uniforms; all Katherine had to do was borrow a spare set of Greg’s rank insignia and shave her head; just another Insurgent, walking through the compound.

Detention area is too heavy. But the interrogation area’s just a few soundproofed rooms, down the hall. They drag Simon around the hallways before each interrogation, and before each torture session, to disorient him. That’s when we’ll move.

As part of Katherine's command and serving under Colonel Logan, no one would question Greg when he went to munitions with a requisition for two sets of security-detail gear, and Katherine was given a full set of the day's security passwords, every day. That was how she

would get them inside the Security Center and the interrogation area.

When they take him from Detention into Interrogation we blackjack his guards and get him into a room and into one of their uniforms.

Once the guards were taken down, they'd have to act fast; Greg would take the hood off Simon's head, hush him quiet and unshackle him. Then, he'd drag the second guard into whatever room Katherine had gone into with the first. They were counting on Simon to follow his brother, but they didn't know how long they had, so they had to move quickly.

Once your brother's dressed, we get the fuck out of interrogation. If it comes to a fight, they'll be shooting to kill. We have to make sure they don't get an alarm off. Getting out of the Security Center means the exit passwords and hoping they don't look at your brother too long. Either way, we have to get to the motor pool.

Katherine had really hoped to avoid pistol-whipping the guard on the exit from Security, but he made Simon the minute they reached him. But the guard hadn't made her...and wasn't even expecting it.

But they weren't even halfway across the compound before shouts were echoing after them; instead of sirens the underground bunker complex employed flashing lights of

different colors. But the walls lighting up in strobing patterns of red and yellow were as bad as any wailing alert; already eyes and weapons were turning on the escaping trio.

I'll move the bug-out gear into our transport the day before the OP. All we'll have to do is get in and drive out.

"Aim for the center block! You have a better chance of taking out the drive than the tires!" Katherine shouted, driving. Greg leaned out one side of the transport, Simon the other. Three vehicles were in pursuit, the lead car firing on them. Simon and Greg opened fire, keeping the grouping tight; as first their Father and then the Insurgency had taught them. They emptied their clips before smoke began pushing from under the hood of the car. The other two vehicles crashed into it; only one made it past, accelerating, trying to catch Katherine up.

"Hang on!" she yelled. Simon and Greg ducked back inside. Katherine braked into a drag, and as their pursuer shot past she hit the accelerator and cranked the wheel. They rammed into the enemy's rear fender, sending them into a skid. Katherine jammed the pedal to the floor and steered the other transport into a side wall. Then she veered away, breaking free of the enemy and into the Wildlands.

"All right, GENERAL!" Greg whooped.

“We aren’t out of the woods yet,” Simon and Katherine said at the same time. And, they were right. It wasn’t long before the dust of pursuit could be seen behind them: five vehicles, closing fast.

“Shit,” Katherine hissed, “This just got complicated. We don’t have enough ammo to take them all down.” Simon and Greg, having just reloaded already knew as much.

“So what’s the plan, Katherine?” Simon croaked, ducking low and getting ready to fire out the side of their transport again.

"Welcome back, Petrovich." She said, "The plan fell apart twenty minutes ago. At this point, I'm making shit up as I go along."

"We don't have much ammunition, General!" Gregory said, authoritatively. "That means we're gonna have to make a decision!"

“I’m *not* killing my fellow Humans!” Katherine insisted. "Not today!"

"Well, if they catch us, they'll kill us for sure, ma'am!" Greg said. "I didn't just break my brother out of prison so we could all die in the desert!"

"It's not like we can head to Toppledawn," Simon said. "They're gonna know that's where we'd go."

"Yeah, no shit," Katherine said. She could see the transports, now: massive truck engines running biodiesel, with light-weight armor-plated chassis designed for both pursuit and combat. There was a turret on the roof of each, and gun emplacements on both doors, while the driver sat low, and just behind the engine; designed with a low center of gravity they were near impossible to tip. They were some of the finest war rigs Katherine had helped design. She just never expected to be on the business end of them.

"Oh, fuck." She growled.

"Holy shit I never thought those things could move that fast!" Simon said.

Greg chuckled, "You never seen 'em in action, brother."

Simon turned on Greg, "What the *fuck* are you doing in the Insurgency, anyway? Karl Werner was supposed to be mentoring you!"

"After you *died*..." Greg barked, "I only wanted to learn how to kill Custer; I wanted revenge! Wouldn't you? YOU WERE ALL THE FAMILY I HAD LEFT AND YOU WERE DEAD! I WANTED REVENGE!"

“Oh my CHRIST! Can you two focus?” Katherine barked. The foremost war rig opened fire; she flinched as bullets deflected off their armored roof, “We can’t outrun those things, or out-gun them!” The hilly terrain forced her to swerve wide to avoid a mound. Strafing fire punched the passenger-side door, but not through. Katherine longed for a gunner in the ball-turret there.

“We’ve got one chance, and it’s a fucking Hail Mary!” she said. “I need you to listen, and do as I say! Now, open the storage compartment!” Simon and Gregory knelt on the floor and pulled down the back seat. “There’s a full tool kit and three bug-out bags with clothes, water, food; two jerry-cans of grain-fuel!” Katherine shouted. Simon and Greg located each item as she called them out; quickly, precisely. Simon was surprised how quick his insurgency training came back to him after years.

“Petrovich – fuck; *Simon*, empty the canteens! Gregory, unwrap the MREs and tear the waxed paper into smaller squares! Once that’s done you need to take apart the remaining cartridges and empty the gunpowder into the paper and twist them shut!” They worked feverishly with pliers from the toolkit, balling up the explosives into improvised fuses. Katherine checked their progress in her rearview mirror as she swerved in a zig-zag to make it harder for the turret gunners to get a shot.

“Simon, put the bullets and the casings in the empty bottles, along with anything else that’ll make good

shrapnel; get the grain fuel, and start tearing up some cloth from the bug-out bags – not my blue shirt, or I’ll fucking stab you!”

Katherine wished for a smoke; they might just have half a chance. She kept the pedal to the floor, taking the most precarious route she could to buy them as much time as she could. There were only six canteens; but if the boys put them together right, they could, at the very least, slow down their pursuit.

“All right,” Katherine called, “When you light the fuses and toss them, throw them *under* the vehicles’ front tires. They’re plated with light armor, but those bombs should fuck up their axles.”

"We're not killing anybody, right?" Greg asked uncertainly.

Katherine gave a quick shake of her head, “Not *deliberately*,” she said, “But you *are* about to start lobbing bombs at our pursuit.”

"Yes, ma'am," Greg said.

"Get ready to give them hell," Katherine said, "I’m going to slow to let them catch up.”

“Ready!” Simon shouted, holding a lighter and his bomb against the door frame.

“Ready!” Greg shouted from the right side of the rear compartment a moment later.

Katherine cut speed, and immediately the three lead vehicles lurched forward, one to either side, one directly behind them. Simon and Gregory lit and threw their first two IEDs and ducked. Katherine accelerated; Simon's bomb shredded the first chase car's front tire and snapped the axle, sending it dragging to its death in the rocky, blasted landscape that gave the Jagged Desert its name. Greg's volley at the second war rig must have blown the fuel line and started a fire under the hood; the driver panicked and swerved into the third vehicle, crippling them both.

“Three for two!” Katherine whooped, “Two cars, four bombs left! Pick your moment, boys!”

“Yes, ma'am!” the Petrovich Boys said, as one. They were coming up on a ridgeline; Katherine banked hard, taking a sloping curve down to the vast canyon, below. The path was narrow, forcing their pursuit into single-file behind them. Unfortunately, it put Katherine's commandeered transport right in direct line of fire. Though their transport was armored, the big gun on the back of the war rigs behind them was punching at the plate at a hundred rounds a minute; it would tear through in no time.

"Get ready for a two-for-one!" Katherine ordered. "Cut down the fuses by half, light them and THROW! On my command! Ready!"

Simon and Greg worked their second set of bombs, trimming the fuses, getting their lighters ready.

"Light 'em!" Katherine barked.

The very short fuses hissed and sputtered to life, burning quickly enough for both Greg and Simon to feel a moment's fear.

"Aim and FIRE!" At Katherine's shout, they threw. The first pursuit car rolled over the explosives, which detonated, the smoking truck lurching lower, dragging on the ground, but still coming. The second car slammed into it from behind, using it like a battering ram and a blast shield at the same time.

Then Katherine saw it: the steep curve ahead. The second driver couldn't see it, and with their momentum, even the first driver applying the brakes wouldn't do any good. Katherine fishtailed the transport, kicking up a spray of dust, twisting the wheel hard at the last instant to swerve wildly around the corner, as first one, then the second surviving war rigs went over the side.

"Let's hope they had seat belts," Katherine muttered.

“What now, General?” Greg asked.

“I think I can kiss *that* rank goodbye,” Katherine replied, “Franklyn’s arranged something for us.”

"They aren't gonna stop looking," Simon said.

“No,” Katherine agreed, “They won’t. Which is why after we get where we’re going...we’re going to have a conversation about what to do next; Frank and I have a few ideas, none of them easy.”

"Holy shit, this is not how I thought my day was going to go," Simon said.

“Is this better, or worse?” Katherine asked.

BACK TO THE WILDLANDS

It was a tar-paper shack standing in the middle of regrowth forest; a small, fertile patch of dirt and crumbled concrete and asphalt that had once been a commercial campus. It was just another thicket in the Jagged Desert; their rendezvous point. They were two days from Toppledown and had been fleeing the Insurgency for five.

They'd been driving for a day without a sign of pursuit; it was the first break they'd had all week. The Insurgency, for now, had lost their scent. Katherine had stuck to the hard-packed dirt and rocky terrain of the vast Jagged Desert to minimize the chances of being tracked. Even then, she worried that it wasn't enough. They were parked atop a crag whose size and shape suggested to Katherine that it had once been part of some commercial complex; the precarious, leaning, all-right-angles shape made her suspect that a few minutes' digging would reveal the asphalt roof of some long-collapsed office building. She was scouting in all directions with a pair of battered, old binoculars.

"We're clear," she said, climbing down to the transport, hidden amongst the rubble of the former Human outpost, "Let's go." Simon and Greg left their sentry posts to climb back aboard a moment before Katherine drove off, toward the shack.

The trees had grown quickly: willow, alder, maple, evergreens, shrubs grown wild...they hadn't overtaken everything...the shack was lost to the woodlands reclaiming the world around them. It didn't take long to cross the distance from the weedy ruins of the commercial plaza into what had once been industrial land for sale, according to the faded, partially overgrown sign. The small grove was slowly spreading. Eventually, it would be a forest. Katherine wasn't sure what the shack had been in the World Before, or if it had been built in the World After. In either case, it was where she was meeting

“Franky!”

Simon marveled at how warmly, tenderly, two of the hardest people he'd ever known embraced each other. He turned to Greg, who just grinned. It stunned Simon to contemplate that Greg had matured, become an adult in the time he'd been away. Simon wondered just how much longer Greg had served under – and therefore how much more he had learned about – General Anton; Greg had a military air about him, now. His stride, the way he held himself...for the first time since the explosion at his Convocation, Simon truly realized that Gregory Petrovich had become very much a man; and his own man, at that.

“You two! Inside!” Franklyn Jessop barked. They followed his order without question.

The shack was cramped. Barely enough room for the four of them to stand around together. They could bunk out on the floor if they had to, but it would be fairly close-quarters. And Simon noticed an old, familiar copper-wire enclosure nailed into the walls and ceiling of the place: a Faraday Cage. Simon, having seen the world from both sides of the Orange Wall, was doubly impressed at Wildlander ingenuity.

“Insurgency’s already all over Toppledawn.” Franklyn said, “They swept door-to-door the last two days, then set up checkpoints along every way in.”

“To be expected,” Katherine exclaimed, “What about Copper Street?”

“Locked down by Ted Logan, himself,” Franklyn replied, “The three of you are very high-value targets.”

“How far northwest do we have to go to be safe?”

Beneath his long, grizzly beard, Franklyn grinned. “You remember Canada?”

Katherine smacked her sides, “Well, Christ, I guess it’s the Southwest Trail.”

Franklin leaned back, “Holy shit, all these years of *maintaining* it...I never thought we’d actually need it.”

"What's the Southwest Trail?" Simon asked hesitantly.

"When me and Frankie helped found Toppledown City," Katherine said, "We both had the bright idea that someday we might have to high-tail it the fuck *outta* Toppledown."

"Kat and I set up a few different safe-houses on a trail leading to the Gulf of Mexico, through the No-Man's-Land between Namcne and the Nasemc." Simon knew from his classes that the second city's acronym stood for the North American South Eastern Megalopic Center, and was pronounced locally as Naz-Em-Cee, "We always figured that if Custer were after us, we'd be dead, but if *people* wanted us dead, we'd have a fighting chance; so we made the trail."

"We have to find a more secure camp to plan the route," Katherine said.

"I can think of a dozen places less than a days' ride from here that they'd never find." Franklyn said, "The only trouble would be getting food and water."

"Any of those locations near woods or streams?" Greg asked, "Simon and I can both hunt, forage...We also know all about finding and when necessary purifying water."

"And I'm pretty sure we're safe from the Custodians," Simon said, "If they ID me with a microsat the worst

they'll do is send Monitors in to seize us; if they knew where I was, we'd have been taken, already."

"That doesn't exactly make me feel comfortable, kid," Franklyn growled.

"Look, I know how they operate because I had to learn about it in school." Simon said, "If they spot me from orbit, or hear me, or whatever, they'll look at all logged activity going back forever before even moving on to trying to locate and ID the people around me. When they do that and go over any previously recorded conversations, they'll see we're fugitives from the Insurgency, not them. Even though I didn't graduate, I'm pretty sure I still have enough pull with the Custodians to keep you all from getting stewed."

Franklyn leaned over Simon menacingly, "*Pretty sure* doesn't cut it with me, pretty boy."

"Well, you tell me: How *pretty sure* are you that the Insurgency won't shoot you on sight, if you're seen with me, or Katherine, for that matter?" Simon asked, unflinching.

Katherine laughed, "Son of a bitch, this kid was taught to be a diplomat, all right!"

Franklyn turned to her, pointing a finger at Simon. "You actually trust this kid, Kat?"

"I trust his word on Custer more than I trust the whole Insurgency, right now." She said, "I wanted to escape without setting off Fury Road behind my ass; that sure as hell was never the plan. I wanted to just sit down and talk with him."

"About what?" Franklyn, Simon, and Gregory asked as one. Katherine looked at Simon, "About the last two and a half years of your life," she said. "I need to understand what happened because I took an oath to protect Humankind. I gotta know if I made the right promise to the wrong side."

"Kat, seriously?" Franklyn asked.

"Yes, seriously. You mean to tell me, over the last ten years the thought's never crossed your mind? They bent over backward to keep this kid alive when they found him; my best guess is, they didn't even mean to hurt him. Come on, Frank; you know the kinda shit we did back in the World Before. You know the kinda self-serving assholes who set the policies that put us into that shit, in the first place. You know how screwed up everything was, before they came.

"If Custer wanted to, they coulda had us back when we escaped the camp; it's not like we were discreet about it. Even if they don't already know Simon is with us, they couldn't have seriously thought that that was just another

war between gangs. Anyway, it's not like the Insurgency would have taken any chances. My bet is that camp is already nothing more than an empty hole, by now."

"Goddammit, Kat! Why do you have to be so fucking logical?" Franklyn yelled.

"Because that's what they pay me the big bucks for," Katherine said, lighting her last surviving Toppledawn cigarillo.

**

There was a lot of game in the area; most of it small: squirrel, rabbit, raccoon, muskrat. Nothing as big as deer, but it wouldn't take Simon and Greg more than a couple of hours to get a few days' worth of food. Greg chuckled as he set a snare near a burrow.

"What?" Simon asked.

Greg Petrovich turned to his brother, "Did you ever think we'd be doing this again? Hunting? Setting traps? Hell...up until a couple of weeks ago...I thought you were dead."

Simon swallowed hard, "I never meant to abandon you _"

“I know,” Greg said, “I understand why you joined the Insurgency. I didn’t feel abandoned; but...I thought you were as dead as Papa and Mama. That’s what hurt. And, it’s not your fault; if anything, it’s the reason I joined the Insurgency.”

“And now?”

“You’re my brother; my family, Simon. If the General hadn’t come up with a plan, I’d have died trying to bust you out, anyway. I love you.”

Simon held his brother tightly. They wept...they were *family*, and that was all that had ever mattered to him. Greg broke the hug so he could blow his nose, "Come on; Pop would be mad at us for wasting so much time catching dinner."

Simon laughed...it almost was like it had been...he could almost forget everything ...almost.

An hour later they were headed back to camp with eight hares, and several wild tubers to boil for supper. Simon almost felt guilty about the hunt; other than occasional feral dogs and cats, the animals out this far had no predators. But...they had to eat, and they needed plenty of food for the trail. He and Greg had already picked up the scrub and brush they’d need to smoke cure what they wouldn’t eat tonight; they had done so out of instinct born from long habit.

"I assume we're posting watches, General?" Simon asked as he set up the smoke fire with Greg. Franklyn had already set up a campfire, and he and Katherine were busy cleaning and gutting the hares.

"That's the plan," Katherine said.

"Okay, then Greg and I are going to have to show you two how to tend this; the other four rabbits have to be cut down for smoking, and we have to do it properly."

Katherine looked at Franklyn and smiled, "You ever think we'd be taking survival instructions from a kid?"

Franklyn snorted, "Kat, I gave up ever trying to guess what was gonna happen to me after that shit-show in Jacksonville."

"Jacksonville?" Simon said, "Like Florida? We learned a lot of geography as kids."

"Yep; *that* Jacksonville." Franklyn answered, "And...don't ask. Buncha mercs handed our asses to us; I never saw it coming."

"Good times," Katherine said, dryly, "But damn, if we didn't secure the package, anyway."

"Amen to that," Franklyn said, toasting with his flask of grain-fuel, "Okay, kid. I seen a lot of setups for curing meat...let's see what you got goin' on."

**

As night fell, Simon marveled at the sky, the stars. Even with the reduced light pollution in the Megalopolic Center, the night sky was dull; out here, he could see the gold band of the Milky Way...and countless points of light across the sky. He hadn't seen the constellations from this far south in a while...it all seemed like home.

He heard approaching footsteps in the scrubby grass; recognized them from their cadence. Simon pulled his flask and took a swig before raising it, "Care for a drink, General?" he asked, as she sat down beside him. She grinned and pulled her battered bottle, "Brought my own."

They clinked tins and drank. Simon still couldn't get used to her shaved-down hair; she'd had a short mane of shoulder-length curls for...well...as long as he'd known her.

"So I guess the time has come to talk of many things," Simon said, his bandaged hand throbbing from the afternoon's exertion.

"Of shoes, and ships, and sealing wax, and cabbages and kings." Katherine sighed, taking another swig, "Si, you're

pretty convinced that we have it wrong about the Custodians. I need to know why.”

“You obviously believe me...you wouldn’t have done all this if you didn’t.”

“I believe *you* believe,” she said, “And, I believe you might be right. But I need to be *convinced*; I just threw my life away, unless I go to the Orange Gates. I don’t know that I wanna do that.”

“It’s not so bad,” Simon said, “But the Custodians are far from perfect. I don’t agree with a lot of what they did, or a lot of what they *do*. There’s huge room for improvement...but I *do* believe they saved us from real extinction.”

“That’s one hell of an opening statement,”

“I was a kid when they came, Katherine; I don’t remember much at all about the World Before. But I remember enough to know the environment was in trouble...that my parents had money problems...that there was war all over the world...racism, terrorism, mass shootings...and nobody alive back then doesn’t remember what Elizabeth Hello said, just before the Invasion.”

“I still have nightmares about it; wait...you called it an invasion.”

Simon shrugged as he took another swallow from his canteen, “What would *you* call it? What else is there to call it? What the Custodians call it? A *Transition*? Sorry, I think that’s bullshit. They invaded, they did a bad job of it, and the Insurgency is a result of their own fuckuppery.”

“I’ve been in the military since I was seventeen,” Katherine said, “There is no such thing as a good invasion...that said, the Custodian execution was brilliant: I’ve seen it used on more battlefields than I can count: *Shock and Awe*. Vaporize the political power structure, military capabilities, and the circulation of capital and goods. Become the sole provider of food, water, shelter...security. Then brutal authoritarianism to stifle uprising; terrorize everyone into submission...or rebellion. Sometimes it's the only useful tactic.”

Passionately and eloquently, showing the kind of mastery of facts that Katherine had rarely seen, Simon ripped into her last statement: “They could have sat in orbit, negotiating with the UN, with the world governments; they could have started by offering Humanitarian relief to the world’s destitute...they could have started by cleaning the environment...Katherine, I’ve spent most of the last two years arguing about this with the Custodians, themselves. And you call him the Race Traitor, but Duncan Terrell is the loudest voice indicting the Custodians for what they did. Their answer is always the same, and sounds unconvincing to me: it’s what works with *our kind* of Species; *our kind* of Civilization...they say

they've been doing this for hundreds of thousands of years and know best...yet they're such *assholes*..."

"But...you said those assholes saved Humankind; the environment...the world, basically."

"They saved the Earth, saved Humanity; they were still assholes about it. They killed over a hundred and twenty million people in just one day...how many more died before it all settled down? How many have died in the Wildlands, or in the Insurgency? Or because of Marauders? Custodians write it off as sacrificing millions to save billions. The problem is, the Custodians actually believe they're superior to everyone else. They think that because they go around saving Sentient Life from extinction that it doesn't matter if they're assholes about it. They refuse to believe *our kind* of Species would have accepted anything other than a complete, brutal takeover...*assholes!*"

Katherine laughed out loud, then slapped Simon on the shoulder; "Okay, that's enough for one night, kid; your shift's over. Get some shut-eye. And don't worry; I'll watch the smoker."

As Simon walked back down the hill, Katherine caught him muttering, "Better watch the smoker if you wanna eat." and laughed again.

THE SOUTHWEST TRAIL

Simon's second watch came just before dawn; an hour he'd missed without realizing it; the meat was cured enough for salting, but he preferred to smoke it a little longer, cure it so it would keep better. He scanned the horizon, avoiding looking at the rising light in the east so his eyes would see well in the darker, western sky.

Simon spotted movement to the northwest; it was far off, but not too far to spot with the naked eye. He raised Katherine's binoculars to his eyes, locating and focusing on the movement. It was too dark to see. He fumbled for the night-vision enhancement, and immediately saw the two rigs from the Insurgency creeping easterly, using the very long shadow of the Orange Wall for concealment. The binoculars thudded into his chest, and the strap whipped the back of his neck as he dropped them and ran back towards their shack. The sunrise would keep them hidden in the valley's shadow for only so much longer. He woke Katherine, Franklyn, and Greg with the quick, firm shoulder-shake that meant "Emergency" in the silent language of the Insurgency.

"What?" came Katherine's instantly-awake and whispered demand.

“Two vehicles; closing from the north-west; about five clicks out. They haven’t spotted us, yet; but our luck won’t hold.”

“Break camp; now!” Katherine rasped, getting up.

The campfire had been extinguished and buried before they went to bed; the smoker was doused, and the meat pulled, salted and wrapped for traveling. The wet shrub and scrub of the field smoker vanishing into the undergrowth. The camping gear was stowed. They pushed the vehicles down the far slope; the sun would hit the grove where the shack was hidden in about half an hour. Coasting down the far hill from the approaching Insurgent team would mask or at least muffle their retreat; the canyon of collapsed buildings buried in topsoil would echo any motor sound beyond localization.

“We’ll ride slow as long as we can so we don’t kick up dust,” Katherine said, before they started, “Greg, I want you in Franklyn’s turret, looking back; most importantly, listening back. If they spot our trail, they’ll pursue. Franklyn will be driving rear-guard, so just bang on the hood if you need him to cut the engines so you can hear. Once we get clear of the valley, we’ll find some blacktop and go full-throttle along it for as long as we can, detour back to confuse potential pursuit then head to a safe-house; it’s gonna be a long few day’s driving, gentlemen.”

“Kat, the Insurgency’ll hunt us halfway to Latin America before they even slow down!” Franklyn complained, “We only set up so many of these places!”

“Then let’s hope we set up at least one they can’t find!” Katherine retorted, “Now let’s move out!”

Without further complaint, they rolled the cars down the embankment, started them up and began their crawling escape across the Jagged Desert until they were a comfortable enough distance away for Katherine to okay gunning the engines. Greg kept the turret swung facing back, the binoculars all but glued to his eyes for any sign they were being followed. By the time they stopped at midday, Greg had reported no signs of active pursuit.

They ate rabbit sandwiches on pan-bread Franklyn made at supper the night before, and drank gratefully from their canteens. Katherine and Franklyn pored over battered, ancient maps while Simon and Greg prepped the cars.

"There's a trader's camp a days' ride southwest of here," Katherine said, "Good place to get grain-fuel, ammo, and supplies, but the Insurgency is likely to have a presence. By now they know you're with us, so you going in your wagon's no good."

“I could shave,” Franklyn said, “Strip down that bitch of mine and borrow the kids’ hunting gear and see if I can

trade some of the salvage Gina sent with me from the Vultures.”

“Arturo?” Katherine said, “I’d have never thought she’d be on my side.”

Franklyn grinned, “She considers you a Toppledowner first; the Petrovich boys, too.”

Katherine shook her head, “I’ll be damned. Anyway, I’d miss your whiskers way too much to let you shave. I’ll go; dress down in civvie gear and my body armor; they still won’t spot me that easy, with my head shaved. I’ll just be another crazy junker. I’ll even eat some of the mushrooms Greg doesn’t think I know he has so I’m actually fucked up enough to pull off the crazy act when I get there; throw on a dirty bandage around my scarred eye...shit...unless Ted Logan himself is there, they’ll never spot me. You stick out like a hemorrhoid in a thong. So do the Petrovich Boys. You three keep riding towards our destination...I’ll rendezvous with you somewhere here...along your vector; if not tomorrow night, then the day after. You know the drill if you have to change course, the signs to leave and where. When we strip your buggy down, we’ll mount the turret onto my car; you take that and three of the four remaining cans of fuel. Keep Greg at his post watching your ass.”

“We’ll lose half the day on the strip-down and rebuild,” Franklyn cautioned.

"And I'll look suspicious as fuck being a single woman driving a buggy with a rear-mounted turret. The transport I stole is identifiably Insurgent...we don't have many options. Pick a Petrovich, and we'll work in teams of two."

Franklyn grunted irritably but didn't dissent.

**

When the maps were folded back up and lunch finished, Franklyn took to work with Greg so Katherine could have more time with Simon, as they readied her ride for the rear-mounted turret. "Round two?" Simon asked, wincing as he worked a wrench with his injured hand.

"You got anything better to talk about?" Katherine said, removing the left rear fender of the stolen Insurgency transport, "You're convinced that Custer doesn't pose a threat to the Wildlanders; convince me."

Simon shrugged, "I don't know if I can. All I can do is tell you why I believe it: because they told me so. It's the Insurgency, Katherine; the armed resistance...about three hundred and ten...three hundred and twelve million strong around the world...even the Custodians don't have an exact number, because they can't account for the number of fifth columnists believed to exist within the Megalopolic Centers; never mind the so-called "secret" operatives posing as Ravagers, caravanners, and ordinary townies."

He stared pointedly at a woman he'd known of for years before finding out she was involved with – let alone in command of – the Insurgency before continuing,

“The Insurgency is the rotten apple in the barrel. Do you know how many Aboriginal cultures have returned to living as they’d lived once, long before the so-called ‘civilization’ era of Imperial Colonialism? They’re not locked in the Megalopolic Centers; they organized, and asked to leave, and the Custodians agreed. I bet you didn’t know that they maintain contact with their nearest Megalopolic Centers, though; a lot of that ‘no right to aid, no right of return’ only applies to those who are considered among the most problematic anti-Custodians: the choice of life in a locked-in Rehab Community, or exile. Open travel between the cities is a relatively new practice, but the truth is people leave the Megalopolic Centers to try and make a go of it on their own and come back all the time. They all have to go through a vetting process, and are required to meet with Custodian counselors – like I was with Naomi – but otherwise, it’s pretty much life back to normal, after that.”

“But this Naomi...she manipulated you into believing the Wildlanders were in danger of being culled...”

Simon grimaced; either from his hand or the memory of Naomi’s manipulative actions, she couldn’t be sure. He took an extra moment to work loose the last bolt restraining the tail hook and winch rig on the back of Katherine’s

transport before answering, “Yeah; the truth is, the cull is pretty much limited to the same sort of maniacs that Logan used to sport-hunt.”

Katherine helped him remove the winch and hook assembly; both of them grunting and muttering vulgarities as they pulled the heavy military hardware free of the chassis; they’d dump it here, buried under the rubble to hide its presence; it was too clearly Insurgency equipment. Katherine set to working the right rear fender while Simon took apart the support rack that had held the winch and hook assembly to the back of the rig.

“But...the rest of us?” Katherine prompted, snapping Simon back to the conversation.

“Yeah; no...the rest of the Wildlanders are free to live as they choose...as long as they don’t try attacking their local Megalopolic Center. Like what happened with the camp you ran before Copper Street: its sole purpose was to train an Insurgent squad. That’s the reason they left Copper Street alone, by the way: because we used Human Shields to build it. They knew about it from the beginning because Lloyd was with us on the search for the place. They knew what we were doing and why. And they *let* us do it because they didn’t want to take innocent lives. So, Lloyd just kept on observing and reporting and waiting. That makes them a hell of a lot more ethical than us; we used innocent men, women, and children to conceal ourselves...as insurance to reduce the chances of getting nuked from orbit.”

It was clear that Simon had had a lot of time to think about the morality of what they'd done at Copper Street; so had she, and she'd come to the same conclusion on her own. So Katherine was silent as Simon took a moment to contemplate while disassembling the remains of the bracket.

Finally, he said: "The thing I think they, the Custodians, get wrong is that they refuse to provide Humanitarian aid to the Wildlanders. I bet correcting that would go a long way to making things right, for those of us outside the Orange Walls...but...well, I'm not in any position to work on that particular issue, anymore, am I? But besides that, the problem that the Custodians have outside the Megalopolic Centers is the Insurgency; they won't accept anything other than total surrender, absolute cessation of hostilities. There's no room to negotiate with them on the Insurgency. But the problem is, there isn't one single, organized Insurgency, is there? There's...God knows how many groups working at local and regional levels...cooperating more or less across national or international lines, sharing information through an encoded network...but you and the other four Generals are hardly the only ones running things, are you? The problem is with the Custodian attitude: I'm pretty sure we could end a lot of this pointless violence and death if they'd just stop fucking shooting everyone long enough to talk."

Katherine paused...looking first at Simon, then gradually, her eyes looked into the nonspace of deep thought. Simon stopped working to watch her, waiting.

"Maybe..." she said at last, "Maybe...that's what they were starting to do, with you." Simon nodded, unsurprised that she'd suspect as much. He'd held back his own conclusions, until now:

"I wasn't the only Wildlander...or former Wildlander in my class. In fact, most of us graduating came to the 'Knee, at some point, from the Wildlands. The School of Diplomacy I attended couldn't possibly be the only one in the 'Knee, let alone on the whole planet; I mean, there were over a hundred of us graduating from seven different classes, just at my Convocation." he stared at her, "Maybe that's why the Custodians haven't come after me: maybe they want me to do something...to start negotiations or something."

"How? We're both shoot-on-sight at this point. Who are we going to convince to even listen to us, never mind take us seriously?"

Simon threw down his wrench angrily. "What the fuck did you think was going to happen when you broke me out of prison?"

Katherine raised her hands, "Hey, I had a plan; it went south. If it hadn't...all they'd know is that your brother

broke you out. I'd still be a General in good standing, and we'd be having this conversation in very different circumstances."

"So, what's the contingency?"

Katherine sighed, "I didn't have a contingency for *this*," she admitted, "The truth is, this has been the single biggest clusterfuck I've run since Operation Domino."

"You survived that. You figured a way out of what was probably, in retrospect a Custodian trap...all we're up against is the Insurgency; I'm sure you'll figure something out."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Katherine said, gesturing at the wrench in the dirt, "Now get back to work."

TRAVEL AND TRADE

It was late afternoon, the sun low in the sky by the time they'd finished attaching the turret to the back of Katherine's rig and made Franklyn's look like the battered, scrap-hauler that Katherine would use to reach the trade settlement.

Katherine was wearing Franklyn's leather jacket and his goggles when they left, another part of her disguise; the Toppledown patches wouldn't be recognized this far south, and as outsized as it was on her, it would look that much more like scavenger garb. Katherine dropped the windscreen down on Franklyn's ATV and sped out into a dusty trail, making sure she'd be filthy of the road by the time she reached the settlement, completing the look she wanted. Simon and Greg climbed into the stolen transport; Greg taking up the turret, Simon riding side-gun next to Franklyn as they drove along their planned route.

For the longest time, no one spoke. Greg was diligently scanning the horizon behind them for a sign of their pursuers – who surely hadn't given up – to no avail. The side-gun where Simon sat was a turret built into the front passenger section of the rig; a high-caliber belt-fed rotary monstrosity that could fire over two thousand rounds per minute, pivot in one hundred and thirty-five degrees, point down fifteen and up seventy. It seemed like an addition to

the vehicle rather than part of its original design, and Simon was more than a little conscious about how high off the ground the rig was, as they rolled through the Jagged Desert.

Simon also felt extremely uncomfortable riding shotgun alone with Franklyn Jessop; since the rescue, the foreboding Special Forces veteran had done nothing but glare angrily at him whenever they made eye contact, and he was as barely civil with Simon and Greg as he was visibly affectionate towards Katherine. And then, Franklyn broke the silence:

“I’d follow Katherine Anton through the Gates of Hell,” he said, “I’m only here because she asked for my help. She destroyed her life to break you out; I don’t know what you said to her to make her betray the Insurgency...I don’t understand your connection with Custer, and I don’t get how you managed to convince her of this fucking lunacy.” He took his eyes off the road to stare hard at Simon: “Just understand this: if it comes down to a choice between her and you...I will choose her over you every time; no matter what she tries to get me to promise to. I just want you to be clear that I’m on this mission for Kat...not for you; no matter how high-value she says you are. We clear?”

"Crystal." Simon rasped. Somehow, he felt better knowing where he – and by extension, Greg – stood with Franklyn, "You look after her, I'll look after my brother."

“I have your back until it means Katherine’s. So, I’ll look after you – until then.”

Simon nodded, “Fair enough.”

“Kat’s filled me in on what you’ve said...what she thinks...either you’re telling the God’s Honest Truth, and our fight with Custer is wrong, or they brainwashed you something good.” His massive shoulders, thick with both muscle and fat shrugged, “Either way, it means the same thing: sooner or later, if we wanna stop running, we’re gonna have to surrender to Custer; go live in the city.”

“I’m sorry.”

Franklyn smirked, “Don’t be, Kid; I already told you I’d follow that lady through the Gates of Hell, and help her come out with the Devil’s balls on the other side. She says you’re that important...you’re that important. Just hope for your sake that it’s for all the right reasons...and that it doesn’t come down to a choice between her and you.”

**

It was well past nightfall by the time Katherine rolled into the trader camp; the only places still open were selling hot meals and cold grain fuel. Only traders slept in the camp, but you could eat and drink there until the stalls opened. Katherine parked her rig in a vacant lot beside a place that served home-brew beer, fire-grilled mystery meat

kebabs, and fries, sat down ordered one of each and started waiting out the night.

A few regulars came to the grill to eat and drink; she watched them barter their meals with produce: onions, turnips, potatoes, carrots, beets...hearty roots that were easily grown, and so common it cost them a crate of each for their five meals. Katherine had traded an elaborate, old gold necklace for her meal and a few extra beers. The woman behind the counter had either liked the necklace or was doing a lonely traveler a favor; it was that kind of camp: live and help live.

Katherine couldn't help but notice the Insurgency presence; soldiers on patrol throughout the camp. She knew they were actively looking for her. They didn't know what she'd done to her appearance, or that she was traveling alone. Their eyes looked past her rather than at her; beneath her calm veneer, every muscle was ready to bolt. A few more stragglers rolled into camp and found their way, as Katherine had, to the nearest watering hole. They were, as Katherine was pretending to be, scavengers trading in salvage. One group paid for their meal with scrap metal, another with a stack of old paperback books. With sluggish regularity, new patrons replaced those who left; those like Katherine, who were parking until the stalls opened, kept a leisurely vigil.

She called for another plate of fries to go with beer number seven; this was like any pre-op stake-out: getting

the lay of the land from a safe location, sizing up the situation, and waiting...boring-as-shit *waiting*. As the stall's night-shift gave way to the day-rotation, Katherine ordered coffee and whatever they made for breakfast; she still had credit, the gold of the necklace worth more than the necklace itself.

"They trade gold by weight around here," the night-shift barmaid explained before making her weary way home, "Don't let this ass short you; you got at least two days' of three squares and drinks left on that bauble."

"God dammit, Shani!" The burly, red-headed man behind the counter cursed.

"Hey, don't mistreat newbies, Bob; they turn into regulars."

"Yeah, because I can't spot an overnighter with my own two eyes." Bob said, turning to Katherine, "Coffee; coming right up. Breakfast'll come after the rest of the deliveries from the farmers' and bakers' section...another half-hour or so. I usually toss them to the gulls at this point, what I don't eat myself, anyway; you want some more fries while you wait?"

"Sure," Katherine said absently, turning around to watch the merchant camp slowly come to life. Finally, after breakfast and a lot of coffee – and a trip to the latrine – Katherine sauntered off; they needed ammunition, weather

gear, fuel...she was worried about Simon's hand, and wondered if she shouldn't look for a chemist who made antibiotics. There was a noticeably larger Insurgent presence in the daylight. Hopefully, they didn't look too hard at her shaven head and bandaged eye.

Procuring ammunition was the worst part of the process: the Insurgency was scrutinizing every ammo purchase from every smithy working in the munitions section of the trader's camp.

The first thing she did was change her voice, speaking from deeper in her throat and with her grandpa's Kentucky Twang; "Right on," she said, stepping up to her selected gunsmith, "I'm goin' out a ways, for at least the next season."

"Need iron?"

"Just heat," Katherine answered, "I need a few different calibers."

"What do you need?"

"I want two hundred rounds of thirty-eight, hollow point if y'all got 'em...a hundred rounds of twenty-gauge number three shot, and how many rounds y'all have of sixty-grain two-two-three?"

“Top seller; probably got more rounds than you can afford.”

Katherine laughed, “Y’all’d be surprised; got me a good haul, up on my last trip; got a few hawsers of copper wire back at my ride.”

“How many feet?”

“Ten coils of ten feet? ‘Bout as thick as my thumb? Stiff rubber casing.”

“Did you happen to read the markings on the cables?”

“Sixteen ay-dubuyuh-gee something,” Katherine said, taking a sample stamped “**16 AWG TFFN 600V 8A**” across its black casing in white, computer-printed lettering, out of her bag and handing it to the shopkeeper.

“I’ll take them off your hands and establish an account with the house; Right now, I can let you have seven hundred and fifty rounds of the two-two-three – max purchase allowed by the Camp Guild; I have the thirty-eights, but not hollows, and the buckshot, and I can guarantee you the same, once a season, for the next...” the gunsmith studied the cable, shaking his head in wonder, “For the next...twelve seasons?”

“Bull – shit; that’s twenty seasons worth, if’n I live that long!” Katherine said with false anger. She had no need to bargain except the pretense of her disguise.

"Yeah, but I have to store, strip and smelt all that copper, and make the bullets, casings, and caps for every new round of ammunition. I'll do fourteen seasons."

“I know you got a crew helpin’ you make rounds if y’all got that much ammo to sell to just me,” she sneered, “Twenty.”

“Yeah, and I gotta *pay* that crew, too; even with all that copper, I’ve got to cover expenses for them and earn something for myself. Fifteen seasons; that’s the best I can do.”

Katherine stared him down, “Fifteen seasons, sealed and dealed, if you add another fifty rounds each of the buckshot and the thirty-eights. Draw up the papers; I’m parked over by Bob’s place. Come by ‘round lunch?”

“Shit, lady, anytime you want.”

“All right,” she said, tossing the cable back on the counter, “Keep this as a deposit.” The gunsmith removed a ledger from under the counter of his kiosk and began writing in it. He handed it to Katherine, who wrote in the alias she’d used through the camp, *Mel Pond*. She left,

wanting to leave the munitions section of the camp behind before her luck with the guards ran out.

They'd already taken notice of her order, and she had chosen to drop the fifty-cal ammo for the miniguns off the list for that reason. She let the alcohol she'd had through the slow night before sway her deliberately casual walk, slouching, trying to be as uncharacteristic of herself as possible. In all her time with the Insurgency, Katherine Anton could not remember feeling more frightened.

She got back to her buggy before the midday deliveries; she was aware of every soldier on the street; more so those facing her from whatever angle. They could be waiting for their moment to strike, or watching so they could signal pursuers. She'd unconsciously unstrapped the holster to her sidearm, a mantra reciting in the back of her mind: *safety off, seven rounds in the clip, one in the chamber...three more clips on my belt.*

Katherine loaded each delivery in turn as it came, trying to keep calm, reassuring herself it was paranoia; they had shoot on sight orders. She'd be dead by now if they so much as *thought* they recognized her. *Unless they were hoping she led them back to Petrovich.*

"Fuck." She hissed under her breath. Shani was back on at the bar, as Katherine took a stool.

“You look like you’ve had a rough time.” She observed, “Long day?”

"Long day, an' a long road ahead," Katherine said, "Irish me up a coffee, would ya? Y'know what? I could do with some fries too if you please."

"Comin' up," Shani answered. Katherine turned to face the streets again; keeping her eye on the Insurgents without keeping an eye on them. She was all but ready to go...but she was too tightly wound...she had to center herself, assess the situation and then leave, strategizing en-route as necessary. She needed to be calm to do that; she needed de-stress and hope she was wrong, even when her gut said she wasn't. She had a contingency, of course: a disassembled AR-15 was strapped under the driver's seat of Franklyn's rig, along with three full clips; the ammo for it had just been delivered, if she ran out.

“So, who are you hiding from?”

Katherine spun; Shani was putting down her Irish coffee and plate of fries. “What?” Katherine asked.

“Last night you didn’t have an accent. This afternoon, you do.”

“Shit.”

“Don’t worry; I’m just curious. I don’t really care; I don’t work for anyone but myself and my business partner-slash-husband. I don’t care what gang or faction you’re on the run from; I just need to know if I have to worry about my cantina getting shot up.”

“The people after me are more the walk you out back and put two in your skull kind, than the shoot-em-up kind.”

Shani nodded, “Insurgency. Deserter? I see a lot of you come through...Heard tell fighting for them is as hard as fighting against the Custodians.”

“That’s about right,” Katherine admitted.

“Like I said, I’m Switzerland; totally neutral. I can’t promise they won’t come ‘round, but it won’t be because I said anything; or Bob.”

“Good to know. I’ll be moving on soon, so don’t worry about trouble.”

“If I was worried about trouble, I wouldn’t have told you I’ve had other deserters through here, before. They don’t usually chase you much farther than here, so if you get out without getting stopped or shot at, well, just keep one eye on the rear-view for a while. Leave by a different gate, but keep heading southwards if you’re worried about a tail; you’re already a four-day drive from the nearest Insurgent

outpost, and they don't range much farther south than the water-farms a day's ride from here."

"You..."

"...Bob deserted. My dad and I took him in and kept him hidden while they looked for him. That was six, seven years back? Before my dad passed...The hicks they send out this far can't tell shit; Bob serves them personally with a grin. Except when that fucker Logan comes through town."

"I'll bet," Katherine said, sorry to be on Ted Logan's business end, now. "That happen often?"

"Nah. I heard he's up north, around Toppledawn and that new settlement, the Copper Tunnel...Copper...Town...whatever it's called." Shani looked at Katherine pointedly, "Heard through the grapevine they're looking for three or more fugitives and a military rig...you and your rover there aren't on their sonar. So if you're meeting up with anybody...make sure you don't grow a tail."

Katherine nodded, "Thanks for the heads-up."

Shani nodded and went back to serving patrons. Katherine decided to leave by the eastern gate into the trading camp; head down into the valley and circle to the north for a few hours, before turning and heading west. She'd probably not reach the next safe house before

tomorrow, but Katherine wanted to be prudent. The odds were even they would follow her at least part of the way out of the camp; the fewer chances she took before returning to Simon and Franklyn, the better.

A CABIN IN THE WOODS

It was sunset by the time they reached the safe-house. It was a log cabin built up in dense woods, the reclaimed remains of a housing development carved out of an old-growth forest; the cabin was built upon the steel frame of an old, abandoned house, its foundation deceptively armored behind the cabin walls of wood with reinforced concrete and steel plate. From the looks of the terrain, the way the trees grew and the type of brush, it was clear to Simon that it flooded here, often.

It took Franklyn, Simon, and Greg about fifteen minutes to camouflage the Insurgent rig as deadfall; in those precious minutes, the sky clouded over and turned dark. There was still no sign of Katherine, and Franklyn had ordered Greg to spend the afternoon looking out for her. The burly man was quiet, clearly worried, and in no mood. They ate a cold supper of rabbit jerky and biscuits in silence; it was no surprise to Simon when Franklyn took first watch. When he woke the next morning to find Franklyn still waiting on the balcony outside, awake and unmoving, he was as equally unsurprised.

"Frank, come on man—get some sleep."

"She shoulda been here by now."

“And not sleeping’s not gonna change that. It’s morning. Get some sleep. You’ll be awake the minute you hear her engine, and you know it. She probably decided to take a longer route; you *know* how careful she is. Go get some goddamn rest.”

For a moment, Simon thought he’d crossed some line and was about to get the brunt of Franklyn’s fury. Instead, he grunted, “Fine.” And went to lie down, kicking Greg awake hard enough that Simon couldn’t keep from laughing out loud.

“What the *fuck*?” Greg swore, in sleepy Russian. Franklyn bent over him, “Good morning, sunshine. Get up.” And all Simon could do was laugh harder. Even the angry giant of Franklyn Jessop was grinning as he went off to bed. Greg couldn’t help chuckling either; his brother’s laugh had always been infectious. It was about then that Simon realized he couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt good enough to laugh like this...and realized that it was a lifetime ago...back in the Gaff...just a week or two, before; an eternity.

“Make coffee; I’m on watch,” Simon said, suddenly sober. He stepped out onto the landing outside, watching the winding road; he could trace it quite far back through the woods; his colorblindness allowing him to pick out its regular pattern against the scatter of the forest. He was sure Katherine was on her way; he wasn’t worried...at least, not as concerned as Jessop. He was more worried about what

Franklyn might be capable of if Katherine didn't show sometime before he woke up.

When Greg brought him his morning coffee, Simon said, "Prep what we'll need for a scouting expedition in the truck. I get the feeling if Katherine's not here by the time he wakes up that Franklyn's gonna want to go looking. When he does, I'm gonna convince him that you should stay behind on watch."

"Why should I stay behind? Why not you?"

"Because he thinks this is my fault; he knows it makes sense to leave someone here to wait for Katherine, and he's more likely to let you off the hook, than me. Plus, I'll need your eyes scouting us, so that when *Katherine* goes charging off after Franklyn, she knows where to look."

"Got it," Greg said, accepting Simon's reasoning. The Petrovich Brothers; together again and working in tandem. Simon shook his head; it was incredible how little some things changed, in spite of time. He hoped there'd be time enough for Katherine to reach them before Franklyn woke on his own.

**

Greg was on watch; not even a quarter of the way through his shift, he was settling in for an afternoon of being either too warm or too chilly, swatting away tiny,

irritating bugs more deftly maneuverable than his hand, and staring out at nothing when he first heard the distant buzz of an engine.

Franklyn Jessop woke the moment it became audible, springing from bed even as Greg tried to find the ATV with the binoculars. Franklyn had the advantage because no one recognized the sound of an engine better than the person who'd driven and maintained it for over a decade. "It's her!" He shouted authoritatively, "That's Katherine!" His exclamation woke Simon, who'd been sleeping in a room upstairs. Greg inside from his post on the front balcony.

"How do you know?" Greg asked, with the calm intensity of a trained Insurgent.

"The sound of the motor," Franklyn stressed, "I'd know it anywhere; that's my ATV, and the only person besides me who knows how to bypass the kill switch is Katherine fuckin' Anton."

"Greg, go take point on the ridge; bring a signal mirror." Simon said, remembering protocol drilled into him and forgotten, years ago, "Franklyn, we gotta make sure it's her. If it is, we're cool. But, dude...you don't need me to tell you..."

Franklyn sneered angrily, and Simon felt afraid. "Yeah, I know." Jessop growled, "We gotta suit up and gear up, and

get ready to fuck up whatever's coming our way. Just in case."

"All right," Simon said, "But we both know, chances are good it's Katherine."

"Lucky for you we're on the same page, kid." Franklyn hissed.

"Lucky for me, I trust her as much as you do."

"Amen to that, son," Franklyn replied.

Greg disappeared into the brush with the sniper rifle and signal mirror. Franklyn and Simon took up ambush positions farther down the trail from the cabin and waited. When Greg was in position, he flicked the mirror once. Simon nodded at Franklyn and tensed. The engine was getting louder, but between the woods and the craggy valley around them, it was impossible for either to guess how far off the engine was.

As it grew louder, Simon's back muscles tightened, until a triangular knot of pain formed between his neck and shoulders. He calmed his breathing against an accelerating heartbeat and gripped his rifle tightly. And then three flickering flashes from Greg's mirror broke all the tension in Simon's body: "All clear." He said out loud, rising to his suddenly shaky legs. He still held his rifle at arms-ready, noticing Franklyn doing the same.

“Can’t be too careful,” the burly man said, “These fuckers could have someone on your brother, and people in the ATV with Kat.”

“Shit, I thought *I* was paranoid,”

“Kid, I’ve seen things before the Insurgency that would make your pretty blonde hair curl.”

The noise of the ATV crescendoed, and Katherine Anton came riding up, filthy from the road, halting only a few meters from them, as Greg signaled he was holding position to look for signs of pursuit.

“Well, holy shit.” Katherine said, “Look at this; it’s not Checkpoint Charlie, but it’s nice to know you guys care.”

“Were you followed?” Franklyn asked, hugging her, keeping his rifle trained down the road.

“For the first half-day,” she said, “‘til I rolled the ATV into a shallow ravine and spent the rest of the day screaming and swearing at the crash; the pursuing Insurgents rolled up, and then I started screaming at them, trying to make them wrestle it out; after that, they kinda lost interest; can’t imagine why...”

“Probably because that’s the stupidest goddamn thing I ever heard of!” Franklyn exploded, laughing, “Shit, you’d

never do that accidentally, and as a pursuit-evasion technique, it's *ridiculous!*"

"Hell, at the end," Katherine said, laughing crazily herself, "I thought I'd fucked myself because two *more* War Rigs pull up, and the *Captains* ask me if I need help, and here I am, shitting my pants, thinking *these* guys are gonna recognize me, and I just...I started screaming at them about...*Government handouts!*"

Simon watched, utterly baffled, as Franklyn and Katherine wept together while laughing hysterically, "The poor Insurgent they sent to rope up the ATV to haul her up...I kept kicking him in the ass, telling him not to hurt my Mary Sue. He was practically begging me to stop...they...they hauled it out, and I cursed at them for ten minutes for scratching her up, demanding what the fuck I paid taxes for. Then I ignored them and started screaming...*swearing* at the ATV about falling off the road like it was driving itself, pretending to be adjusting things while checking for tracking devices...they rode off after a radio squawk about 'Negative Contact.'"

They were supporting each other as they walked back up to the cabin, they were laughing so hard. Simon stayed on post, waiting for Greg.

"What the hell, man?" his brother asked, after he finally emerged silently from the brush beside him, "I could hear them laughing all the way from the ridgeline."

"I don't...I get the feeling you'll hear the story a couple of times tonight, over supper and drinks."

"Is it *that* funny?"

Simon turned to his brother and shrugged, "*They* think so."

PURSUIT PREDATION

He stood to one side of the hard-pack dirt road, looking at the disturbance in the weedy grass, gouges in the dirt and rocks, the disturbance in the earth where the ATV went into the crevice. Two Insurgents stood to either side of the largest sign, holding a tape measure between them. Colonel Ted Logan stepped up to the Insurgent at the far end, a coil of tape at her feet.

“Let’s see.” Logan said, looking at the tape, “Civilian rig...five meters long. That means it has a big engine, and a wide bed in the back; meant for hauling.” He walked back to the dirt-packed roadway where the vehicle spilled, “Look at the distance between the treads; this thing had *huge* axles. Fat tires...and look at the wheel marks: this didn’t *slide* off the road, and it didn’t drift off because the driver was swerving drunk or asleep; it was *driven* off the road.” He flagged the Insurgent with the tape measure, “Go stand next to that track, feed the tape across to me.” The Insurgent extended the battered steel-spring tape measure; Logan pulled it until it was flush with the outside edge of the other track. “Reading?”

“Two hundred and seventy-five centimeters.”

Logan put his hands on his hips and surveyed the scene, “This wasn’t a Junker car,” he said, “The frames and

chassis on those pieces of shit are usually rebuilt from scrapped vehicles from the World Before. The ATV you describe crashing here was barely damaged...look in the indents where it crashed:"

He pointed into the crevice, where clear scraping marks had been dug into the rock, "See that? Junker woulda crumpled, left less damage, and more of *itself* behind. This thing was well built...roll cage, obviously a solid metal chassis...*totally* held together. The closest settlement that builds ATVs that well is Toppledawn."

"But the driver?" one of the Insurgents asked.

"Well, your team described her as a crazy woman with short hair and a bandage over half her face, screaming and yelling..." he looked at the Insurgent, grinning and pointing to the scars across his own face and his eyepatch, "Now, how would I disguise myself if I were her? Change my hair, maybe shave my head? Wrap a dirty bandage on half my face? Dress in rags? Act like a complete, sunbaked crazy? Or would I stand around in uniform saying 'I'm not Ted Logan?' Don't feel too bad, she's former Black Ops; still, that's a Demerit each for not being able to see through a goddamn disguise."

One of the Insurgents blanched, "Sir...this is my tenth demerit..."

Logan regarded him and grinned, “Well, ain’t that some shit?” he asked, drawing his sidearm and shooting the unfortunate soldier in the head. He looked at the Insurgents, all visibly frightened, afraid of him; he shrugged.

“Okay, let’s dig a hole for this poor bastard. After that, we can see about picking up Fugitive Anton’s trail.”

The joy of the hunt soon faded. They hit a wide, flat plain. Countless vehicles had flattened and killed so much grassland as they'd crisscrossed the flats on their way to wherever that picking up *any* trail was impossible.

"Son of a bitch," Logan growled. The convoy halted again, and Logan and his crew began studying their maps.

“There’s a number of settlements in the area,” he said, studying his meticulously-marked charts, “But they’re too goddamn small for one person – let alone four or more – to hide.”

“Four or more people, Sir?” his Lieutenant asked.

Logan shrugged, “Think about it: Someone had to have supplied them with a second vehicle, the Toppledown ATV. We didn’t find any stolen rigs parked anywhere around Toppledown *or* Copper Street...we know that Anton broke Petrovich out with the help of his brother Greg...and when we picked up their trail five days back, it was *way* too far

away for someone to have *walked* back to Toppledown; The rig came in from one direction, the second vehicle, judging from *its* tracks, came from the general direction of Copper Street, and therefore Toppledown. When we reached the place the fugitives had camped, there were clearly *two* sets of tracks leading away.”

He scrutinized the map, the notations about terrain; “If I were them, I’d be going south-west; towards these hills, and this forest. It’s big, deep, and the next big settlement is *here*,” he pointed to a mark at the base of a mountain, beyond the forest. “That’s Mount Doomsday, just about two days’ ride. We reconstructed her shopping from the trading camp; they have about three days’ fuel with them now, and they’re not stupid enough to hide *in* a big settlement. They’ll be near *enough* to Mount Doomsday for trade purposes, but my guess is unless they just pass through and keep heading south, they’ll be in a safe house, somewhere in *these* woods. This whole area,” Logan circled part of the map near the mountain, pointing, “This used to be a suburb; lots of housing projects...not many still standing, but those that are would probably make a good place to go to ground.”

“So, we know where to look.”

“Yep.”

**

It felt good to sleep in a bed – and with Franklyn – again. Last night, it had felt like sleeping on a cloud. But now, there were concerns that pulled her from the warm embrace of bed...like whatever was being made in the kitchen.

“Is that...holy shit...is that *bacon*?” she asked, astonished. Franklyn was at the wood-fire stove that they’d equipped this place with, almost a decade before. It was odd...they’d never actually expected to *need* to use the safe houses, even as they were still building Toppledawn and beginning work for the Insurgency. And yet, they’d equipped each of the safe houses they’d set up to provide some degree of comfort. She’d always thought of it as a psy-op: a mind-trick designed to make a person feel more “at home.” The tar-paper shack they’d met at had been just that: a meeting point never intended for more than a couple of day’s camping.

“Yeah, the Petrovich boys got a boar, our first day here,” Franklyn said. “First thing to go in the smoker was some good old back-bacon.”

“Christ, all we need is eggs to go with it.” She said, wrapping her arms around the burly man at the stove, and stealing another cooked piece of bacon from the plate, “Thank God I packed coffee. And thank you for making it.” She released him and took the stovetop percolator off the heat and over to the mugs. After fixing her coffee and

taking a long swallow, she sighed. "This is gonna be a good day."

**

Simon and Greg were hunting; though the boar they brought down would do them for meat for a while longer, they needed to start thinking like Wildlanders again: they were hunting game for trade. Though it wasn't yet summer, Katherine's plan was to winter at the cabin, if they could remain hidden that long. They'd picked up the trail of more boars, but they also found signs of deer – and though they had already started work tanning and curing the hogskin, deer pelts were always more valuable.

Simon froze in his tracks and crouched; Greg very nearly toppled over him. At first, his younger brother thought Simon had spotted something, but then he heard the distinct growl of a heavy engine, coming distantly from somewhere to their left.

"Kat, do you copy? Over." Simon said, squawking the two-way radio. "Franklyn; do *you* copy?"

"Go for Jessop," crackled the reply quietly in his ear and Greg's, "Kat's...busy. Report."

"Switch to channel coded Night-Miner."

There was a squawk from their earpieces as they all switched over to the transmission channel they'd designated by the code.

"Go ahead, kid," Franklyn called.

"Heavy traffic heading our way from the north." Simon said, "I can hear it, but I don't have a visual. My best guess is they're ten clicks out, maybe less."

"Greg, get back here and help us prep for evac. Simon, can you locate them?"

"I think so; I can get to the ridge from here."

"Good. When you spot 'em, squawk once if they're military. Then squawk twice if they're coming up our trail. If they are, squawk once for each vehicle and then get back here."

"Roger that," Simon said, ending the transmission. The brothers regarded each other, unspeaking, their faces saying more than any words could; there had always been a familial language of expressions among the Petrovichs. Simon moved Northeast toward the ridge and Greg back to the cabin.

HELP FROM ABOVE

“Kat! Stop whatever you’re doing and get down here!” Franklyn bellowed. Soon came the steady thud of feet on the floor above, and down the stairs.

“What?” Katherine asked.

“We got potential inbound; Greg’s on his way back to prep for evac. I’m waiting on squawks on channel Night-Miner for word.”

Katherine snapped her radio onto her belt with unwatching, expert movements born from long years of habit; she switched channels and checked her equipment. “I’ll go arm the charges upstairs and pack our bags.” she said, “Greg can pack his and Simon’s when he gets here. You arm the charges down here and get our gear ready; we need to be gone, yesterday.”

“On it.”

The explosive demolition of the safe-house had been planned to aid in the evasion of pursuit; when she and Franklyn had first sat down to plan out their private safe house network, almost thirteen years before, they had designed it to be used exclusively against their fellow Humans. Back then, they had no intelligence on the

Custodians. They'd gone back over the years to improve things – Franklyn had installed the Faraday cages in the safe houses over the course of nine months, seven years back – but they were still chiefly intended to evade hostile Human enemies.

And though he'd always believed in the necessity of planning for the worst-case contingency, Franklyn never thought he'd be using them.

He pulled the gear-bags from the closet and opened each; setting out the body armor for them on the floor, their pistols, rifles, knives, and bombs on the kitchen table. Then he was flipping switches hidden along the tops of beams and beneath loose floorboards. He was halfway done when he froze; his walkie-talkie squawked once; the heavy rigs were military. Then twice more. They were coming.

“Kat!”

“I heard it!” she bellowed from upstairs. A fourth squawk signaled the start of the count. Franklyn's breath caught at five squawks, and by the time Katherine was downstairs and gearing up, the count had gone up by another five...and the squawks were still coming.

"Suit up, Frank," Katherine said, "They're coming." Franklyn started pulling on his gear when he and Katherine both froze, staring at each other in horror. Engine sounds

were approaching from *behind* the cabin...from their hidden escape route.

“Jesus Christ, the whole fucking *army* is coming after us!” Franklyn exclaimed, “They flanked us!”

Katherine stared at Franklyn, then picked up her walkie-talkie, “Simon, Greg, they have us surrounded. Greg, rendezvous with your brother at his location and then the two of you disappear; live off the land. Vanish. Get *gone*; that’s a direct order. Going radio silent.” She shut off her walkie-talkie; Franklyn did the same. “God help them,” she said, “They’re on their own.”

“And us?”

Katherine shrugged and grinned bitterly, “You’re the one who always loved ’03 *Bonnie and Clyde*, honey; we’re going down in a hail of bullets and fireworks.” She hefted the detonator, “When things start to go south, I’ll use the dead-man’s switch option; at least we’ll take that smug bastard Ted Logan with us.”

**

Greg stalled in the woods, trying to raise Katherine and Franklyn over and over on the radio. Finally, his brother squawked in. "Forget it. Get to my position now. Leave the squawk box; we won't be needing them."

Weeping, Gregory tossed aside his walkie-talkie and started heading back north, toward the ridgeline. He could hear the roar of the engines as they echoed through the woods; even as he ran he knew that Colonel Logan would have deployed a flanking group of one-quarter of the battalion to cut off escape; he was wondering how he and Simon could get Katherine and Franklyn out of there, when he reached the ridge.

“Si!” Greg exclaimed, “We have to do something!”

Simon was sitting on the rock, apparently sunning himself, waiting, looking up at the sky.

“I already did,” Simon said.

And then the air was stilled, as the rumbling echo of twenty war rigs’ engines abruptly cut. The silence was deafening, a sudden change that left a hole in its absence. Greg watched as Simon smiled, and stood up, “Come on; let’s get to the clearing west of here. That’s where they’ll pick us up.”

“Who?”

His brother smirked, “Who do you *think*?”

Simon walked slowly, casually, explaining what had happened, as they made their way toward the clearing. He understood that Katherine and Franklyn – possibly even

Greg and himself – were as good as dead. He, like Greg, started thinking of anything he could to stop this...and then realized exactly what he needed to do.

"This is Simon Petrovich!" he'd hollered into the sky, "I was Apprenticed to Duncan Terrell as an Ambassador until the Insurgency captured me! I require immediate and non-lethal – I repeat, *non-lethal* assistance. My friends and I are being surrounded by Insurgent war-rigs! *LISTEN* to me! There can be no bloodshed! NOBODY gets killed!" He'd screamed into the sky while Greg had been desperately trying to raise Katherine.

"So...what happened?" Greg asked,

Simon shrugged, "The Custodians did...something."

"You have no idea what?"

"Nope. Just that whatever just happened, it's non-lethal. Maybe they froze everything. Maybe they stopped time; we'll see."

"How could they...you don't know what they did? How do you know they heard you?"

"There's billions of satellites the size of a brick in orbit, monitoring the planet around the clock; the Insurgency needs Faraday cages to keep their conversations quiet. They heard me."

“But if they didn’t...if they...but then how do you know they’ll be at this clearing?”

"Because it is *literally* the nearest place to me that they could land."

“So...you don’t even know if they’ll *be* there?”

Simon shrugged, “I figure they will be. Probably be up at the cabin, soon, too.”

“How do you know? What makes you even *think* that?”

"It's the next place they need to go; where the conflict's gonna be. Or where it won't be."

Exasperated, Greg rounded on his brother and shoved him in the chest, “Can you give me a straight goddamn answer?”

Simon smiled bitterly, “I wish I could...but right now, I have to be a Diplomat.”

**

Colonel Ted Logan had been driving in the third rig of the convoy when his engine suddenly quit. It didn't sputter, it just cut. He was coasting to a halt, as were the vehicles ahead of him – and behind. He heard multiple collisions as

a couple of the war rigs came rolling down the hill behind them...but otherwise...The engine wouldn't turn over; he didn't even have battery power. "Goddammit," He swore, "Come on, outta the truck."

Other crews were climbing out of rigs and troop transports hand-signs made it clear no one had working vehicles; comm was scrambled so bad with chatter he couldn't even cut in to tell them to shut the fuck up. Logan frowned...the air *felt* wrong... He drew his sidearm and pointed it laterally away from his group, "Friendly fire!" he shouted and heard the shout repeated down the line. He cocked the hammer back on his gun and squeezed the trigger. There was a puff of smoke. He pulled the cocking lever, expelling the dud cartridge and chambering another round, and fired again with the same results.

"Shit," he hissed, pulling a bullhorn from the truck and squawking it, "All right! Attention! Everyone off comms and listen to me! *Now!* Up and down the line!" he shouted, "I want a weapons check! All guns to semi; one shot eastward and away!" He listened as his order was repeated back along the line of vehicles and across the walkie-talkies, and waited...hearing nothing but clicks and dumbfounded reactions.

"Fire in the hole!" he shouted, pulling the pin from and throwing a grenade. It similarly failed to do what it had been designed to do, the timed fuse inside giving up the ghost in a similar, vanquished puff of smoke that rose from

where he'd tossed it. "Fine, goddammit!" he barked. Logan drew his bayonet and stabbed the front driver's side tire of his war rig. There was a hiss and a loud pop of escaping air as the tire blew.

"Well, *knives* still work! We're doing this the old-fashioned way!" Logan shouted into his walkie-talkie. "All personnel: Affix bayonets! Forward march! Logan to Flank Team: Affix bayonets and stand by to advance on my command." His orders were carried out with precision, the sound of knives being slapped into position beneath rifle barrels filled the air as troops began forming up around and behind him marching to their target location.

"One way or another I'm ending this shit, today." Colonel Ted Logan said.

**

Katherine and Franklyn were in position by the windows; crouching low behind metal-plate reinforced concrete barriers installed inside the safe-house back in the day...something else Franklyn had never imagined he'd actually use.

"Do you hear that?" Katherine asked.

"What?"

"Exactly. All the war-rigs just...stopped. They're not here. By the sound, I'd say they were still two clicks away when their engines cut. But they *all* just cut at once."

Franklyn raised his head. "I don't hear our genny, he said, "Or for that matter, the rigs that were flanking us."

"What the hell is going on?" Katherine hissed, perplexed, "Let's make a move for the cars; if our rides are still working, we can get outta here with Simon and Greg."

They dashed outside to the ATV and the war rig, but neither engine would turn over. "Shit!" Katherine exclaimed, "Back inside! We have to get ready for the fight! Logan'll track us on *foot* before he gives up; the only chance those boys have is if we buy them time, here."

They were back inside and behind their barricades, tensely looking out the windows, waiting long minutes for the attack to begin, when someone knocked on the front door.

**

Greg reached the clearing before Simon; he didn't know what he'd been expecting, but absolutely nothing other than the clearing in the woods had not been it. He turned to his brother, who looked skywards, squinted, then shook his head. "They'll show themselves when they're ready."

“How do you know?”

“Because they like to make an entrance.” Simon said, “Every Custodian I’ve met...I swear to God it’s like they *need* to be impressive.”

They waited in silence for a long while, nothing to hear but the sound of the forest around them; with the rumble of the war rigs gone, Greg could almost believe they were alone in the woods, like old times. But it wasn’t old times, and there were a hundred Insurgent troops marching on his CO: the woman who’d helped save his brother’s life.

“Simon, come on! We have to *do* something! We can’t just stand around!”

“Relax,” Simon said, “If I’m right everyone’s okay; and the Custodians will – there – what did I say?”

A shadow overhead blocked the sun like a cloud, dimming the light and growing in size as it descended; it was cylindrical, white, concave on both ends. As it reached the ground, landing pads extended like fluid, forming up as the ship touched down. It was smaller than the overall clearing, only a couple of meters high. An opening appeared in its side, and a short ramp sluiced between it and the ground.

Simon smirked, “I told you they like showing off.”

Duncan Terrell himself appeared at the top of the ramp, along with Elizabeth Hello.

"Wait, that's the—"

"Yes, and if you call him *that*, I'll smack you up the back of the head the way Papa did when he caught you running with his hunting knife."

"Simon!" Duncan said, limping down the ramp. Apparently, he *had* sustained injuries in the attack. Simon was sure it wouldn't be long before the limp was gone, as well. "You seem to have landed yourself in a *lot* of hot water."

"I'm glad to see you're okay, Duncan," Simon said, "This is my brother, Greg."

"I noticed the family resemblance," Elizabeth said, "Simon spoke of you often, during his time in the city."

"Okay..." Greg trailed off.

"I wasn't expecting to see *you* of all people." Simon grinned. In truth, in the time it had taken him to decide what action to take, before getting up from a prone position on the ridgeline to shout into the sky, Simon had expected either Duncan Terrell *or* Elizabeth to respond to his call—the plan he'd formulated had depended on it. The fact that

both had come...he couldn't have hoped for better. He smiled warmly and innocently, his manner relaxed.

Terrell shrugged, "As soon as we figured out they'd taken you we began an active search," he said, "I requested to be part of the response unit; our goal was to find you. That fracas back at the abandoned Insurgent camp got our attention, and we went mobile."

"In *that* thing?" Simon asked, pointing at the ship.

Terrell chuckled, "No, that's just the bus. The mobile base is about two clicks up, has all the comforts of home, and one *hell* of a view."

Simon nodded, "I'll bet. But we have a situation right now; my friends – "

"Are fine." Elizabeth said, "The action in this sector was already being monitored, and once you were identified, we moved. As requested, no one has been injured; we simply neutralized all forms of artificial combustion in the area; there are still troops on their way to your friends' location. We've sent support, but I expect you'll want to join them."

Simon regarded her, wondering if she had guessed at what he had planned; wondering if he, a mere Human, was that predictable to a Custodian. He still had very little knowledge about them; he knew nothing of their senses...if she could read the electrical activity in his head, or if she

could detect some sort of change in his breathing and heart rate...or if she could just flat-out read his mind. “Yeah, I do,” he said.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The knock repeated, and Katherine and Franklyn crouched up to look out the windows. A young woman in grey tunic and pants waited on the other side; beyond her, an undeniably *alien* ship, cylindrical and white, was parked in the front. Katherine signaled Franklyn to reach across from his vantage to unlock and open the door, while she pointed her firearm head-height through the opening.

Naomi entered, looking at Katherine, “You haven’t tested your firearms, yet,” she said, “Clearly, or else you wouldn’t be pointing it at me; I’m Naomi. You must be Katherine.”

“Kat?” Franklyn asked.

"She's one of the Custers that Simon knew in the city. It's okay."

“I would prefer the term *Custodian* if you don't mind. As I said, your weapons, along with all other forms of artificial combustion, have been...suspended...until this issue is resolved."

“This *issue*?” Katherine repeated, raising her weapon away from the Custodian, who smiled enigmatically, “You mean a hundred armed troops marching on us.”

“They’re armed with bayonets,” Naomi said, “And once they reach this clearing, we’ll hit them with a mild electric jolt.”

“As mild as the jolt that split Simon Petrovich in half?” Katherine quipped.

“A few thousand megawatts less,” Naomi replied, casually, “Simon specifically requested we use non-lethal methods; I believe he intends to resolve this.”

“*Resolve this?*” Franklyn said, “How in the fuck is he going to do that?”

“I haven’t the vaguest idea,” Naomi said. “But I’m certain it will be interesting.”

Katherine nodded, “That’s...well that hasn’t done much for *my* nerves.” She looked from Franklyn to Naomi. “What now?”

Naomi shrugged, “We wait to see who gets here, first: Simon, or the Insurgency.”

**

Logan had men crawling through the underbrush on all sides toward the cabin. He, himself was on point on the front-side approach; the rest of his team were almost in

position when a giant white *tube* dropped silently out of the sky and landed between them and the door.

“Whoa,” Logan said. When a ramp descended from the ship facing the cabin, he spoke into his walkie-talkie, “Who has eyes on the ramp?”

“Kiniski, sir.” Point man for the team on the north side of the cabin reported, “It’s...holy shit! Sir! Queen and King of Spades are with Jackrabbit One! Do you copy?”

“Copy!” Colonel Ted Logan replied, rising, “Everyone: Move in and attack! Go! Go! Go!” One hundred men and women charged, roaring toward the cabin. As soon as the last of them had cleared the surrounding woods, they froze and started writhing and shrieked in pain before dropping to the ground.

Simon, Duncan Terrell, and Elizabeth Hello watched impassively. Greg had just flown in an actual *spaceship* for the first time in his life; he was already in shock, so watching as a roaring wall of attackers suddenly convulsed, screaming, to the ground was just more wizardry to him. Papa had often quoted Arthur C. Clark to him and Simon as kids: *Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic*. He had meant it as a lesson to inspire fear, perhaps even *hate* of the Custodians in his children. Young Gregory had always felt in awe of them, instead.

Simon walked up to the door, but Naomi opened it before his fist could land. "Hello, Simon. Would you like to come in?"

"No, I think that everyone should just come out here," Simon said. Logan and his troops were groaning and slowly getting up. They couldn't touch their guns: the weapons gave off a painful jolt at every attempt. Simon looked at his former tormentor and called, "Colonel, would you join us over here by the shuttlecraft, please?"

"Simon, what are you doing?" Elizabeth asked.

"What the *Fuck*?" Katherine exclaimed, coming outside—just when she didn't think her day could get any stranger.

"Glad to see you're okay, Katherine," Simon said, "Duncan, Elizabeth, this is...I'm going to say *former* Insurgency General Katherine Anton, and Colonel Edward Logan. General, Colonel, these are the Custodian Representatives, Duncan Terrell and Elizabeth Hello. Franklyn, Greg, Naomi, you'll act as witnesses to this."

"Simon!" Elizabeth demanded, "What are you *doing*?"

Simon looked at her—at each of them. "The only thing I can do. What you hoped I would do – but not, I think, what you *expected* me to do. I'm being an Ambassador." He deliberately forced the four of them to form into a tight

knot with him, as Naomi, Franklyn, and Greg watched, puzzled.

"Okay, nobody talk, everybody listen to me," Simon said. "Here's the reality: thirteen years ago, Elizabeth, the Custodians invaded Earth. *I don't care why* you invaded, nor do Katherine, or Ted. We all know you're repairing the biosphere, we all know you're reshaping Human society so we can live as ideally and as happily as possible, and it doesn't matter. What pissed everybody off is that *you invaded*. We were never asked, you were never invited. I think Duncan would agree. Duncan?"

"Oh, you're on your own with this one, son."

"Fair enough. Elizabeth, I'm sure you've heard the saying about the road to Hell and good intentions. It's not about whether you're right or not. You pissed off enough people that there are pockets of resistance all over the world. You know it, we all know it.

"The thing is, for thirteen years, you've been doing the *one thing* that has always...*always*...made us dig in our heels and say 'fuck you,' even when we were still fighting each other: you started raining Hell down on everyone you could. That's why the average life expectancy of a new Insurgent is one mission. Something that me, and someone I loved, learned the hard way. That ends today; *now*, if you have the kind of authority that I think you have, and however many eyes are watching us, right now.

"See, there's only one way to really destroy the Insurgency, which is, let's face it, a necessary goal of your invasion and occupation. The only way to stop revolutionaries is to give them a reason to stop feeling revolted. Starting today, starting here, with Katherine and Ted, you and Duncan are going to work out a peace accord with the Insurgency. One-sided negotiations will fail. You have to listen to their concerns, you have to ponder their demands, and you *will* make concessions. Katherine, Ted, *you* have to do the hardest thing that soldiers ever have to do: make peace. Put aside grievances based on passion and emotion, listen to reason; come to an understanding."

"What about you?" Logan asked. Simon laughed and broke the huddle.

"Me?" he said, "I just did *my* job. I told you four assholes what needs to be done, how, and why. I'm finished here. For as long as I can remember, people have been telling me what to do, what to *believe*, what to fight for...what to *die* for. I'm *done*; nobody's telling me to do *anything*, anymore. I'm going inside to get my gear and a couple of extra canteens, and I'm out of here. I'm going home; not back to Toppledawn. Back to the old log cabin my Father built—unless someone else has moved in, in which case, I'll find my *own* patch of land and hunt logs until I can build a cabin of my own.

"I just want to get back to a *simple* life...outside your walls," He said, looking at Elizabeth, "I want to hunt, fish, garden...I want to tan hides and cure meat. I want to trade for what I can't hunt, salvage, grow, or find. I want to do what I want, when I want."

"Simon, what about *me*?" Greg asked.

"If you can keep everyone from killing each other," his brother replied, "I'm sure you'll be able to find me and come visit. If you want to stay, I'll help you build a cabin of your own. But right now, well...you have to make sure nobody dies, because I honestly don't give a shit anymore, and I think you still might."

HOME AGAIN

It was early autumn. The leaves were starting to dry; the spectacular color change of fall hadn't happened yet, and it was still hot enough to sweat with a shirt on, outside. Simon swung his axe, splitting some more cordwood. He was sure he already had more than enough for winter, but his Father had had a saying: *once you think you have enough of anything to pass the winter, make sure to gather three times more.* It was a mantra that had saved their lives more than once, and one he intended to take up the practice of, once more.

Simon placed another log on the old stump; he'd found the cabin abandoned and largely intact. He spent his first week doing minor repairs, the windows all surprisingly unbroken. The rest of the late spring and summer, Simon had hunted, gathered and dried mushrooms, tanned hides, and cured meat. He'd think about what he could trade with in Toppledown, over the winter. A stockpile of the red-capped, white-spotted mushrooms he'd collected would do him well to start, but...well it wasn't *enough*. Of course, the Night-Miners still owed him a *fortune* in dirt-barrels they'd held on to after he left...but that was for last resorts; he wanted to be independent; of *everyone*.

As he split another log and pulled his axe free of the stump, he heard the cadence of feet behind him and recognized them immediately.

“Hello, Duncan.”

The infamous physicist laughed, “You have good ears, son.”

Simon split the log with a single, practiced swing, “I’ve also wondered how long it would be before either you or Elizabeth came calling.” Simon said, placing another log on the stump and swinging his axe, “Greg passed through on furlough a couple of months back, said he was part of some roving diplomatic corps now, and cursed at me in Russian for ten minutes for fucking up his life before we got piss drunk. So, what can I do for you?”

Terrell shrugged, “I just thought you might like to know that you started a revolution. Not a violent one...but a *dramatic* one. Namcne hasn't been attacked in over three months...and we're reaching out to other rebel groups. I don't know if the peace will last, if it will grow and succeed, or wither and die. For every enemy we make peace with, I don't know who or how many more might declare war. But, for the first time since the Custodians landed, things are beginning to *change*.”

Simon shrugged, “I hope it works out, but I never really wanted to be part of your Transition.”

"No pebble wants to be blamed for the avalanche," Terrell said.

"Ever get to see a real avalanche? They're not exactly good for you to be in."

"I concede the point."

Simon turned and buried the tip of his axe in the stump, "So, would you like to come in for a drink? I have my own still out back, now."

"I heard you talk about *grain fuel* often enough, I think I might like to actually try it."

Simon grinned. "Famous last words; tell me tomorrow how much you liked trying it."

Laughing, the two friends went back to the cabin for a drink.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Karmazenuk is a Father, cosplayer, lifelong author, former op-ed writer and ex music journalist.

Among his earlier works are the science-fiction stories, *The Unearthing*, *Through Darkness and Stars*, and *The Chronicles of the Aeons War*.

While working in the music scene, he also wrote *Oh Well, Whatever, Nevermind: A story of sex, drugs and grunge rock*, set during the 1990s in a small college town.

While on a personal sabbatical from writing owing to life-changing events, Steven found himself in the grips of months of horrifying, vivid, unsettling and recurring nightmares. Plagued by these visions and events even in his waking mind, attacked by them whenever he slept, Steven eventually realized that all the horrors he was bearing witness to nightly had a subtly-hidden narrative thread.

Finding the strength to face these nightmares head-on, he locked them into text and page, into the story you have before you now.