

The Onuissance Cells

by Steve Jordan

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Thanks to pretty much everyone I know, and quite a few I don’t, who contributed to making me a better person. To the ones who tried to make me a worse person: Bite me.

Foreword

Onus In (ca.1640): Obligation; Responsibility.

Onuissance \onn-uh-sonns\ n (ca.2280): Historic period known as The Age of Responsibility.

In the 21st century, Mankind finally grows out of the infant stages of the Industrial Revolution, and accepts its own responsibility to protect its common planet. This period became known as the *Onuissance*...

What happens when a civilization cannot sustain itself?

It falls.

Such was the case for the Greek civilization, the Roman Empire, the Aztec Empire, and the Egyptian Empire. Many other civilizations have risen and fallen. There is no reason to suppose that process will now stop.

Case in point: The empire of the United States and Western Europe, generally defined by the period known as the Industrial Revolution. Europe and the U.S. owe their existence to the Industrial Revolution, for without it, they probably would not have had the wherewithal to survive the onslaughts of other pre-industrial forces, like the Huns, the Native Americans, or the Africans. As a result, America and Europe have become the de-facto rulers of the world, capable of doing whatever they please, and frequently forcing other countries to bend to their whims.

However, the Industrial Revolution is also inherently wasteful and dirty. The industrial fallout of the past 200 years has done more to ruin the ecosystem of this planet than all the efforts of the previous 5000 years of human development. In the early 21st century, the sheer load of industrial fallout is colliding with the demands of the population, now approaching 7 billion, and the capacity of the global ecology to absorb so much damage. At some point, the present system will inevitably break down.

Futurists, knowing this, can spend a great deal of energy guessing what the immediate outcome will be. Possibilities include a new World War that will decimate the planet, an industrial crash that will lead to a new Dark Age, a financial crash that could lead to anarchy, a climactic ecological upheaval that will leave the bulk of the planet uninhabitable, a similarly catastrophic scientific disaster, or any combination of the above.

For the purpose of these stories, I have chosen to bypass the fall.

The Onuissance Cells are about the rise after the fall of the Industrial World... for, as civilizations fall, so do new civilizations eventually rise after them. And, at least for a time, those new civilizations tend to look at what transpired in the past, and as much as they are able, seek to avoid the pitfalls of the last civilization. The rise of civilization after the fall of the Industrial Revolution should be no different. We can expect those descendants to examine their past, work out what grievous practices caused the former empire to fall, and build a new world that seeks to avoid those practices.

As Europe recovered from the Dark Ages, they set about to improve their lot by concentrating on a drive for scientific and social development, a drive away from the ignorance and anarchy of an earlier era. They soon coined a new term for their Age of Enlightenment: The *Renaissance*. When historians look back at our time, I expect that the greatest failure they will

identify as being committed by us will be our lack of responsibility, to our fellow humans, to all other creatures, and to the planet itself. They will learn that our lack of onus caused us to pollute our planet, stifle cooperation among men and nations, and critically overextend ourselves in every direction, leading to the inevitable fall. Learning this, they will hopefully conclude that, most importantly, we must keep in our minds and hearts an understanding of our onus, our responsibility to everything and everyone around us, as we plan and act and grow.

And as this age grows and hopefully prospers, it will eventually come to be known as the Age of Responsibility... or *Onuissance*.

There is no telling how long it may be before these events occur. Within a few decades... centuries... millennia? Those living today will certainly never know. The best we can hope for is that, if we do our best to live in the spirit of the Onuissance now, maybe the inevitable fall will not be so hard, or so soon.

LOG CELL ENTRY #28949: Tour of Duty

...He imagined he was seeing a caveman, standing at the opening to his rock home, staring out at the open plains. There was a wide, bright, hot, dangerous world out there. But that caveman knew he wanted to see it all, to learn everything about it. He took his first furtive steps into the unknown...

...He imagined himself standing next to Christopher Columbus, as he stepped out of the waters of the Atlantic and onto the beach of an island, somewhere east of the Americas. He was standing on ground no European had trod upon before him, and he had no idea what was beyond the thick trees ahead. But he was determined to find out...

...He imagined himself watching Neil Armstrong, poised on the ladder of the Lunar Module, a few meters above the surface of the Moon. He and his compatriots had come a long way, and if any one of a hundred things went wrong, he may never return home again. But while he was there, he was determined to learn the secrets of Earth's nearest neighbor. Slowly, carefully, he inched downward, and planted the first human footprint on the soil of another world...

...He imagined himself watching Claude LaMonde, half-standing, half-floating on the bottom of the sea floor beside a clumsy-looking scaffolding. It had been a difficult journey, with numerous political and financial hurdles that had to be pushed aside. But now that he was there, he was determined to learn all he could about the sea that surrounded them all. Pressing a control stud calmly, he drove into the ground the first support pylon of the first permanent undersea research lab...

Then, as if his mind's eye was on the end of a huge rubber band, it suddenly raced back to Midland City, settled amidst forested plains of green. His mind's image shot past the outer balconies, past shoppers, past the cafes, to the residential levels. It seemed to stop in front of a single door, the one next to the Peacekeeper station's reinforced door. A small plaque over the announcer of the single door said, "Cartier". He was back home, in his chair, sitting alone in the dark room, a glass of whiskey on the table beside his right hand. As he'd been for many of the last few days, now.

Grimacing to himself, he swept out his hand and knocked the glass to the floor.

"Dammit!"

Frank DeJaye jerked his head up from the newsscreen he'd been reading. It wasn't that it was so rare to hear an occasional curse in the Peacekeeper station. He was the usual culprit, in fact. But it was incredibly rare to hear such an utterance out of the mouth of San Kepolis. Although Frank craned his neck, he couldn't see her in the commander's office, where she was seated as temporary Commander of the station. He finally called out, "Is everything okay, San?"

San silently cursed again, cursing herself, this time, for being overheard. She subconsciously pulled the sec tablet closer to her, as if trying to prevent anyone from seeing the message printed on its screen. Then she sighed, and put the tablet on the desk before her.

"No," she called back, "nothing's wrong. I'm just not as good a counselor as I thought I was."

She looked up to the right, to the edge of the wall that separated the office from the conference room. Frank was standing there, staring at the face-down tablet on the desk. "Matt?" San nodded. He stood silent a moment more, before he whispered, "Damn."

The huge propeller fans embedded in the wings of the Drake were beginning to spin under power. Soon they would be losing their forward momentum, and switching to a hovering mode. That meant Midland City was very close, now.

Thomas Beak took his eyes from his sec tablet for a moment to lean his head toward the portal. He could just see the edge of a vast clearing, far ahead, but Midland was probably directly in front of the Drake, and he could not see it. Presently, he turned back to the tablet for a few minutes more, before stowing it in his shoulder bag.

Presently, he became aware of a slight change in the pitch of the engines, audible even through the noise dampers. At the same time, the Drake angled and began a slow turn to port. Thomas looked out the portal again, and this time, he could see Midland slowly moving into view.

They had moved much closer to the city, and Midland filled the portal. The outer shell of the city was round overall, but its surface was made up of numerous flat planes, open spaces, balconies and decks. Many of the outer surfaces were covered with solar glass, which sparkled at some angles and appeared almost black at others. The balconies and decks were usually lined with chromed railings or brightly flowering bushes, giving a soft edge to the spaces. As the transport passed around the south side of the city, its many surfaces caught the light and either absorbed it or threw it gaily back into the sky.

Thomas was sharp enough to know when he was being catered to. He tapped the button for the ship's intercom, on the back of the seat before him. "Pilot, you didn't have to give me the scenic view... but I appreciate it."

"Hey", the voice of the pilot came forth, "everyone should see 'The Jewel of Namerica' at least once, Commander."

Thomas smiled and nodded. It was an apt nickname, indeed, for this marvelous city, towering two kilometers into the sky and spread over four kilometers of ground. It did have a more than passing resemblance to a huge diamond, placed in a setting of grasses and forests, ready to show off to the rest of the Solar System. As it was, it was a shame he was the only passenger on the transport to enjoy the view... doubtless the flight crew had seen it many times before. But as he was hitching a ride on a cargo transport, he could only have shared the experience with a maximum of fifteen others, the limit of their seating section. Still, if it was as nice to live in as it was to view from up here, Thomas knew he would be very proud to be stationed there.

There were a few smaller landing pads on Midland's upper deck, but the large transport was headed for the commercial pads, at ground level. They made up a cluster of larger landing pads, gathered just outside a large open gateway into the city. Still a good distance away, Thomas could see the storage bays and parked vehicles that filled the inside of the gateway. A few of the other pads held smaller transports, being loaded or emptied by men and cargo movers. Two cargo movers were positioned just off of one of the larger pads, with no other craft nearby. Thomas guessed that would be their landing site.

As he expected, the Drake slowed over the large pad, and presently came to a complete stop. Then it began to descend, slowly and carefully. The transport adjusted its angle once, to bring itself fully broadside to the city beyond. Thomas could now see a number of figures standing by the cargo movers. Two of them were wearing the uniforms of Peacekeepers, he could see. That would be his welcoming committee... his staff. In another minute, the Drake touched down, and the engines immediately began to cycle down. Thomas got up from his seat, gathered up his

shoulder bag and slipped on his duty jacket. He joined the flight crew by the main hatch, and waited for them to unlock and open it. They allowed him to step out first, and he wasted no time heading directly for the two officers waiting for him.

San and Frank waited on the edge of the landing pad with the rest of the cargo crews, while the Drake touched down in the center of the pad. The soft murmur of the engines began to take on a more relaxed tone as they slowly cycled down, and they could see the flight crew in the cockpit busily shutting down the flight systems.

The two officers, standing at-ease next to the loaders, could have posed for an advertisement. They were both young and strong examples of the Peacekeeper force. San Kepolis, the senior of the two officers, was also the taller of the two, by a few inches. Her short-cropped dark hair was very businesslike, easy to keep neat. She squared back her broad shoulders, and quite a number of the loading crew took notice of the full shape of her tunic and taper of her slacks, along with her classic Greek features. Frank DeJaye had a full appreciation for San's physical attributes, but he was hardly a strain to look at, himself. His dark features were dashing and slightly boyish. He was also slim and graceful of build, but the spread of his chest suggested that he was also more powerful than most men.

Frank noticed motion at one of the portals corresponding to the passenger section. "That must be him," he commented, and San followed his gaze to the portals. The figure in the portals could just be seen moving forward, towards the still-closed hatch. "I hear he's the first black man to reach a command position in the peacekeepers," he said offhandedly.

San stole a glance at Frank. "What of it?"

Frank shrugged. "Just for the record. He's supposed to be quite a frontiersman, too. You should show him around the countryside sometime."

San gave him a sidelong glance, before turning back to the transport. "I probably will." The loader they had been standing next to was already in motion, pulling up next to the cargo bays of the Drake. Since the Drakes were the chief forms of transportation between the ground and the Stratospheric bases and OCOM, they would doubtless be taking on more in the way of supplies than they would be offloading. The ground crews wasted no time opening up the access doors and offloading what cases were stored inside.

The forward hatch opened then, and a tall man came down the steps. From this distance, they could only make out his long, white hair, positively gleaming in the sunlight, over his tan PK jacket. He saw them immediately, and strode in their direction. As he approached, San and Frank avoided squinting to try to make out his features. Soon they could see the whites of his eyes below white eyebrows, then a flash of teeth.

He stopped a meter from them, and they could now see the highlights that shaped his face for them. He had a long face, very angular, with a square jaw and hooked nose that described a Native American ancestry. Similarly the long, straight hair, parted in the center and pulled back behind his ears, suggested Namerican roots, although its bright white color was in sharp contrast to the sable hair of the Old Tribes. The deep glossy black of his skin almost hid his features from them a moment longer, until he smiled and extended a hand.

"Good morning. I'm Commander Thomas Falcon Beak. Would you be Deputy Kepolis?"

"Yes, I am." San shook his hand warmly, but with only a slight smile. "Welcome to Midland City. This is Deputy DeJaye."

“Call me Frank.” The two men shook hands. “I noticed they gave you the scenic tour of the place. What did you think?”

“Beautiful city,” Thomas nodded. “Can’t wait to see the inside. Tell me, isn’t there one other member of this station?”

“Yes, Mr. Laird,” San replied quickly. “He’s checking out a distress call southwest of the city. I just spoke to him before you touched down. He shouldn’t be much longer getting back.”

“Nothing serious, I hope.”

“Sounds like a ditched glider pilot stranded with a broken ankle. Teez... Mr. Laird will be bringing him in for medical attention, but he’s otherwise okay.”

“Glad to hear it,” Thomas said. The smile he’d worn since stepping off of the Drake was slowly draining away. San was being more professional than polite, and Thomas had the distinct feeling she was trying not to seem upset. It could have easily been a case of her feeling she had been passed up for promotion... something that, since the announcement of the second Mars mission, had happened all too often to Peacekeepers around the world... but Thomas knew that wasn’t the case here. He had seen the cells on this station when he was assigned, and there was a lot more going on here than simple professional jealousies.

“Well,” Thomas picked up on the pregnant pause, stuffing his free hand in his pocket. “I’m sure it’ll be great working with you both. I’m just sorry the posting couldn’t have been under better circumstances.”

San’s brow furrowed a bit. “Do you know the circumstances?”

“Well, just that Commander Cartier didn’t work out, as it was described to me at Jetstream.” Thomas noted San’s reaction, and it was clear that she wasn’t pleased with his reply at all, although she couldn’t quite decide which one—he or Jetstream—was the bad guy. “How long has he been posted here?”

“Six years,” was San’s quiet reply.

“Six years!” Thomas had known that, too, but he also knew the value of expressing his concern to his subordinates. “And now he’s supposedly not working out? That doesn’t make sense to me at all.”

San shook her head. “Nor to me.” She reached out and took Thomas’ flight bag. Although it was heavy, he noted she had no trouble shouldering it. “Why don’t we take you on up to the station? Commander Cartier is still in Midland... I think... so we’ve arranged temporary quarters for you.”

They started walking, through the massive entrance that led into Midland. “You say you think he’s still in Midland?”

“He was out in the mountains a few days ago,” Frank explained. “He was due back today, but we haven’t seen him yet. We haven’t locator’d him yet, though.” They stopped at a lift, and Frank pressed the announcer. The doors opened almost immediately for them.

“He’s still officially off-duty,” San added. “I felt there was no need to locator him.”

“Mm.” Thomas stepped into the lift with them. “Well, he’ll turn up.”

The lift started up, and Thomas immediately noted half the lift’s wall was clear. There was only blue-gray wall beyond it, though, and Thomas watched it swiftly pass below them.

Abruptly, the wall disappeared, and they were exposed to the vast interior of Midland City. Midland was mostly open inside, with numerous major and minor levels that ended in freefloating balconies jutting out into the vast open center of the city. Even the level now below them, which suggested itself as the “ground level” of the city, had a large open space in its center, through which the supply and machinery levels could be seen below. The power levels, Thomas knew, were also down there, and it was clear from this vantage point that Midland extended far below the actual ground level Thomas had entered upon.

Above them, Thomas saw more levels, some open at balconies, some solid or windowed walls. Tapestries hung along many of the balconies, and multicolored shrubs and plants adorned the edges of many more. Many of the walls were covered with solar glass, just as they had been outside. In fact, most of the interior looked like the exterior of the city, as if someone had taken an outside wall, copied it, bent it inward, and placed it around the interior. Far above, the “roof” of the city gaped open to the sky, where clouds slid overhead. Many of the upper levels were brightly glowing under the mid-morning sunlight, and the huge semicircle of light spread throughout the interior and created a bright ambient light all the way to the ground.

The lift stopped and opened about midway up the city’s interior, and the three Peacekeepers stepped out. Thomas immediately noted how sweet the air was, and a quick glance to the left revealed a bright row of gladiolas in a window box a few meters distant. The window was apparently part of a commercial establishment named “Glad Tidings”. The large double-door was wide open, and Thomas could see bouquets of flowers and small bric-a-brac adorning its shelves.

They passed the shop and began walking along the wide-open gallery. The entire level seemed to be made up of commercial establishments of every type, mostly small, but occasionally dozens of meters across and possibly as deep. Thomas noted a number of cafes and restaurants, many craft shops, and a few trionics suppliers.

There were a good many people milling around in these shops, as well. San and Frank waved at or said hello to many people as they walked along. Thomas was glad to see the PKs were obviously popular around here. There was nothing harder than starting a new posting in an area where no one liked you.

Eventually they came to an area separated from the shops by a few dozen yards, just beyond a corridor that seemed to venture out of sight into the outer areas of the level, perhaps to the outside wall itself. A slightly tinted glass wall nine meters wide revealed two open offices, separated by glass partitions. Other than a large executive table and chairs, a larger conference table and more chairs, and a mini-kitchen, he could see nothing else. If the display screens he could see were displaying anything, they were polarized against the outer window, and blank to anyone outside. Just past the window was an extra-wide door, with the five-sided shield of the Peacekeepers emblazoned in its center, and about as high as Thomas’ chest. There was another door, the size of the average residence door, just a meter past that. That would be the Commander’s quarters, Thomas thought, if standard PK design had been used to set up this station. So far, he mused, he hadn’t seen anything to suggest they hadn’t followed standard designs.

The extra-wide door slid open for them immediately, and they stepped into a small security entry. It only took a moment for the sensors in the entry to scan each of them over, before opening the heavier door into the Peacekeeper station. The station was set up to specs, Thomas saw immediately. The Commander’s desk, to Thomas’ right, was the chief piece of furniture in

the room, with chairs and smaller tables facing it or scattered around it. There was a sec built into the desk, and its clear screen jutted up from the table's surface at the edge of the sec's control board. Now that they were inside, Thomas could see a few lines of data displayed on the screen, but since he was standing behind the screen, he could not make out the backwards data from that distance. On the left was the mini-kitchen, built into the wall with its own counter. A short hallway to the left of the mini-kitchen led to the lockup rooms, a bath and locker room, and a storage room. And beyond the Commander's desk and through the glass partition, Thomas could see the conference room, basically one table, six chairs and two wall screens.

Thomas glanced over his left shoulder at another, shorter hallway, with a heavy door at its end. That was the direct door into the Commanding Officer's apartment, which confirmed Thomas' suspicions. He also noticed at that moment how clean the office was, and he glanced over at San.

San managed a slight smile, and nodded. "Welcome to Midland Peacekeeper station, Commander." She placed his flight bag on the table opposite the desk. "You're not scheduled to take over command until tomorrow, but if you'd like to assume command now..." "No, that's all right," Thomas said, "tomorrow is fine. And call me Thomas. Tell you what: Why don't you just bring me up to date on your operations, and then I'll get settled into some quarters until the CO's apartment is ready."

"All right." San started forward, stopped and turned back to Thomas a bit self-consciously. "And I'm San." She took the seat at the Commander's chair, and Thomas pulled up a chair beside her.

"Excuse me," Frank said. "I'm going to check up on Teez... uh, officer Laird." With that, he stepped past them and into the conference room.

San and Thomas spent the next half-hour going over the general concerns of the PK station. With the season being mid-spring, apparently more than the usual amount of calls were related to people outside of the city with equipment that had gone untended over the winter, or were out of shape themselves for the strenuous recreational activities they were undertaking. There were a few projects going on outside of the city that they were keeping an eye on, but otherwise things were relatively quiet in the area. San took the opportunity to use the sec's regional databases to familiarize Thomas with the flora, fauna and general terrain of the NA(s)5 region, taking care to point out some of the more interesting or scenic sites of the region. Thomas showed great interest in a number of the mountain areas and forests, and his genuine interest in the world outside of the station seemed to soften San.

"That's right," she said at one point. "You're supposed to be a frontiersman."

Thomas nodded. "I was born and raised out there. Actually, I know a lot of this land west of here... but I'd never gone this far east. My tribe was semi-nomadic."

"Which tribe was that?"

"Cayache," Thomas replied. "Southern Cayache."

"Ah. I was about to say, I know most of the northern Cayaches. We see them hereabouts quite a bit. But not the southern tribe."

"We should be known as the eastern and western Cayaches," Thomas commented. "We used to be north and south of each other, but we haven't been for generations. Still, you know how names tend to stick."

“I know this land better than the rest of the PKs, Commander,” San told him. “I’ll be glad to give you a tour of the sights, since you need to see it all anyway. Maybe we can start tomorrow.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Thomas nodded.

Frank came back into the office at that moment. “Spoke to Teez. He’s a few minutes away from Midland, heading for the medcenter. He’ll be awhile longer.”

“Well, I can wait ‘til later to see him, I guess,” Thomas said.

“I also tried to page Cartier again,” Frank added, more to San than Thomas. “His com is off, looks like.”

“Oh, it is, is it?” San frowned and thought a moment. “Commander, we have a room reserved at the Maria for you. Frank, why don’t you take him down and let him get settled. I’m going to talk to Matt.” She stepped past them and headed for the door.

Frank turned to follow her. “You know where he is?”

“I know exactly where he is,” San said, before the door slid closed behind her.

Frank turned back to Thomas, and shrugged. “What can I say? You caught us on a down week.”

“I got that impression,” Thomas replied. “Is there anything personal involved with those two?”

“Oh, no,” Frank said. But she’s been with Matt for over four years here. He’s like a mentor to her... almost like a father to her. The thing is, Matt is a pioneer. This is the longest he’s stayed in one place for years. He’s got the itch to move on. And San...” Frank trailed off, trying to think of the best way to phrase his next comment.

“Well, San just doesn’t appreciate Matt’s point of view.”

San stood, her back to Midland, looking down the sandy shore of the river that passed through Midland. Actually, the river itself still followed its original path, which took it past Midland, but a channel had been cut that led through Midland’s ground level of docks. Directly under Midland, the waterway was broken by the boat slips and loading stages of the docks. But on either side of Midland, the waterway had been shaped to form lakes that were regularly used for recreation by the city’s residents.

It only took her a moment to find Matt Cartier, downstream from her. He was sitting on a grassy bank that hung just above the water line, dangling his bare feet in the meandering flow of the river. A few children played not far from where he was sitting, but they were leaving him alone, and he just sat there, staring out across the river at the far bank and the fields and trees beyond.

San started walking towards him, following the natural contour of the ground. The path brought her up just behind and to the left of Matt. She hadn’t made much noise, but Matt’s head inclined a bit in her direction, then turned back to the waterway. San stopped just behind him, glaring down at the full but slightly graying hair on his head, and put her hands on her hips. “You know you’re supposed to keep your com switched on at all times”, she said coldly. “You may not be Commander anymore, but you’re still a Peacekeeper.”

Matt slowly craned his neck back to look at her. “No need to quote regs at me, San. I’m on leave, remember?”

“Your leave ended this morning at zero-hundred hours!” San snapped. “Your replacement is here. I tried to call you, but you wouldn’t even give him the professional respect of showing up to greet him!”

“San, why don’t you sit down...”

“If I so much as bend a knee, it’ll be to kick you into that river!” San’s voice had dropped a good half an octave, and Matt knew what that meant. “Get up, dammit!”

Matt almost winced at the order, then slowly pulled himself to his feet, pausing long enough to grab the sandals on the grass beside him. When he straightened up, he found himself eye to eye with San, who was starting to redden in the face. Her mouth opened, and she started speaking through gritted teeth. Matt had to fight the urge to look for sharp canines.

“Absent Without Leave. Dereliction of Duty. Deliberate Disregard for Communications Protocols. Deliberate Disregard of Professional Protocols—”

“Professional protocols! C’mon, San—” Matt started to put his hands up in supplication, but San snapped out as if in defense of herself.

“Don’t ‘C’mon, San’ me!” San slapped down one outstretched hand, and stepped down until she was almost nose-to-nose with him. “Matt, what’s *wrong* with you? You’ve *never* acted like this before! You’re like a spoiled child, ignoring your responsibilities, goofing off like a kid on the last day of school! It’s bad enough you won’t act like an officer, you’re going to get yourself a dishonorable discharge like this!”

Matt stood up to her, throughout her tirade. Downstream, the children had stopped playing and were silently watching the two adults arguing with each other on such a nice, sunny day. When San finally ran down, she stood over Matt with clenched fists, breathing heavily as if she had just jumped out of a brawl.

Matt took a deep breath before he spoke. “Listen. You are not in any position to lecture me, young lady, *nor* are you in enough of a temperate frame of mind to discuss this. I’m going back to my apartment. If you want to discuss this any further, you can *calm down*, follow me, and we’ll talk in private.”

With that, Matt turned on a heel and strode across the grass back to Midland. San, still breathing hard, was caught unprepared, and it took her a moment to realize he was not going to return to finish her argument. Finally she snapped out of her astonishment, spun about, and followed after him.

“Here you are, Mr. Beak.” The hotel manager opened the door for Thomas and stepped inside with his flight bag. Thomas followed him inside and took a quick look around. The room was about half the size of the average single apartment, with a good-sized sec on the long wall opposite the bed. There was a small desk, a closet, a bathroom, and a balcony overlooking the interior of Midland. In short, your average hotel room. But the trim and finish of this room marked it as one of the better hotels in Midland, even given its simple arrangement.

“Sir, are you sure you wouldn’t like one of our suites instead? There are plenty of them available, and it wouldn’t be any trouble at all.”

Thomas smiled and shook his head. San had arranged a suite for him here, but one look at it made him opt for this smaller room. “No, that’s all right. I don’t need that much... and I’ll only be here for a few days. This will be fine.”

“Certainly, sir.” The manager placed Thomas’ bag on the desk. “Let me know if you change your mind. Just ask for Stan. There is a tour cell preloaded on your sec, if you’d like to familiarize yourself with Midland.”

“Thank you, Stan, I’ll check it out.” The manager bowed and left Thomas alone in the room. Thomas first hung up his jacket, then he walked over to the balcony to take a look around. The Maria Lane Hotel had one of the more impressive views of interior Midland, having a clear view of almost the entire interior space, including the fountain gardens just a few levels below, but too far back to see down into the physical plant levels below ground level. Just below and to the right was a large restaurant, with a number of people at its many tables. Thomas hoped he’d find room to eat there himself, later that afternoon.

He turned back into the room, closing the balcony door. It took him a moment to find the switch that opaqued the glass... hotels always managed to find new places to hide that switch, Thomas mused... but once the window was opaqued (and mirrored to the inside), he took off his uniform and selected some casual attire from his flight bag for the rest of the day. Still in his shorts, moved over to the wall sec and tapped the small blinking rectangle in the left corner. Then he sat on the edge of the bed opposite the sec.

The screen lit up in seconds, displaying a moving panorama of Midland. “Welcome to the Maria Lane Hotel, another bright light in the Jewell of Namerica, Midland City.” The voice sounded familiar, and Thomas was sure he had heard it on many other public broadcasts. “We hope your visit to our city will be a long and pleasant one. To make your stay more enjoyable, we’ve prepared a presentation of Midland’s sights and services, as well as information about our frontiers, our city structure, our local crafts and our culture. Please browse through the cell, and you’ll be—”

“Go to the menu,” Thomas interrupted, and the voice-over halted in mid-word. The views were replaced by a list of subjects, and various selections of data presentation. After looking over the choices, Thomas said, “Show me city services, abbreviated presentations.”

What followed was a series of short presentations... advertisements, really... of many of the shops, restaurants, offices and departments in Midland. Thomas usually found that this presentation method was the best way to learn about a new city, although the presentations he expected to see in a luxury hotel such as this would necessarily be biased towards the nicer places to go. Still, it was always a good place to start. Occasionally, he paused on a presentation and asked for the full version, and the sec switched to a much more detailed production, sometimes lasting for over ten minutes. After a few minutes of any one, Thomas switched back to the abbreviated versions and resumed the presentation. Most of them were rather generic, unlike programs that accessed the public records of a guest and offered subjects to match individual interest. Thomas was surprised to realize this hotel offered an inferior program to many of the more commonplace hotels he had visited in the past.

After about an hour of this commercial tour, Thomas ended the program and switched to city structure. He spent the next half-hour studying the layout of Midland, from its public areas to its restricted levels, the physical plant specs, the zoning layouts, the transportation and communications networks, the supply networks, and the power distribution systems. While he went over the wealth of data, he took notes on his sec tablet. Later, he planned to pass on these notes to his sec in the Commander’s apartment, and to his sleeve sec, but he planned to recompile and edit them first, into a form that would be more useful to him professionally.

When he was finally through with that, Thomas put his tablet down and set the wall sec to display regional views around Midland. Thomas got dressed as the sec presented images and sounds derived from the frontier. He occasionally stopped just to watch the images going by, then resumed dressing. Finally, he slipped his tablet into a shirt pocket below his left breast, put the key to the room in another pocket, and headed out the door. He planned to start with a meal in that lobby restaurant below, browse through a few shops, then check out some of the social spots he'd seen in the presentation. If all went well, he hoped, he'd end up in one of the hospitality houses with a few new friends to add to his list.

Matt leaned against the wall of his apartment, holding a sizeable tumbler of whiskey in one hand. He watched San as she paced slowly in front of him. She was much calmer than she had been outside, but clearly she was still upset.

"Matt, Matt..." she began, trying to organize her thoughts. She finally stopped pacing and faced Matt. "Matt, why wouldn't you talk to me... why didn't you tell me what was wrong? Maybe I could have helped."

"But there isn't anything wrong..."

"How can there not be anything wrong?" San started pacing again. "You've been moping around, you've been so distracted you've neglected your duty, and you wouldn't talk to your closest friend in Midland, you wouldn't let me help you with *anything!*"

"San—"

"So here I am—"

"San—"

"Let me finish! -So here I am, trying to do *your* job, trying to keep Jetstream from finding out you're goofing off—"

"I wasn't—"

"*Shut up!*" San had to refrain herself from swatting him with the back of her hand. "You were *goofing off*, which is all *I* knew you were doing, since you wouldn't *talk* to me! And now you've gotten yourself fired, and it's too late for me—"

"I wasn't fired—"

"*SHUT... UP!* —and now it's *too late* for me to help you, and it's *too late* to transfer, and..." San's tirade began suddenly to falter, as she stared into Matt's eyes. "And it's... and you can't... and I... you..."

Matt pushed his head forward a bit. "Did not get fired."

San stood staring at him, screwing her face up as she tried to make sense of what he was trying to tell her. Suddenly, like a hammer on the head, she realized what he was saying, and her eyes went wide. "No. NO. *NO!* You can't! You *didn't!*"

Matt simply nodded. San stood there a moment more, her head slowly shaking back and forth. Then, she struck out, a lightning-fast swing that knocked the tumbler out of Matt's hand. It shot across the room like a rocket, impacted on the wall, and sprayed whiskey and glass shards across half the room.

“*Shit!* How could you *quit!* *Twenty years* in the Guard! *Six years* as a Peacekeeper Commander! How could you throw it all away?”

“God-*dammit*, San...” Matt nursed the hand San had struck, which was stinging as if the glass had broken while still in his grip. “You know, there’s just no talking to you when you turn Earth-Mother and start raving like this! Look, this didn’t exactly work out the way I wanted it to, either, and I’m sorry I didn’t explain earlier, but everything happened at the last minute, and I just didn’t know how to break it to you!”

“Matt, you’ve known for over a *season* that you weren’t going on the Mars expedition!” San stalked over to the sofa and threw herself down into it. “We’ve *all known*. And I know how much of a blow it was to find out you were disqualified, but you have to be able to live with it and move on. You should be thankful that pressure sensitivity isn’t something that’ll keep you out of the Peacekeepers. There’s no reason to quit!”

“There is.” Mat walked over to her and sat down next to her on the sofa. He took a moment to decide on his words, before he continued. “About two weeks ago, the Mars Group got back in touch with me. There was an error in my health cells. The pressure sensitivity isn’t as severe as they thought it was. They’ve given me the go-ahead to be on the Mars mission.”

San sat there, dumbfounded. Her mouth slowly opened in a silent “O”. Matt turned away, his relief at finally telling her causing him to relax visibly. “I wanted to tell you earlier, but after being turned down, I couldn’t decide whether or not I still wanted to go... I mean, I’d already gotten used to the fact that I *couldn’t* go. I just decided a few days ago. I tried to tell you then, but I just couldn’t manage to. I’m sorry.”

San remained silent, her gaze leaving him to stare at the floor. Finally she managed to say, “You’re going anyway. You’re going to Mars. Matt, you idiot...”

Matt’s head snapped up. “There: That’s why I couldn’t tell you sooner. I knew you wouldn’t appreciate—”

“Appreciate what, Matt? Going on that *God-damned* trip to Mars... wasting all that money, all those resources we should be spending on the eastern reclamation project, Samerican reforestation, Gulf recovery...”

“All right, all right, I know the list.”

“God, Matt, how could you be a part of that? It’s such a waste of time and money!” She suddenly bolted up out of the sofa. “We don’t need Mars! We don’t need its resources, its space, its water, its gravity...” She turned back to Matt. “Why go there and tear it up, for God’s sake?”

“San, we are not going to ‘tear up’ Mars. And yes, there’s nothing there we need. But we’re going to go, anyway.”

“It’s insane! The last time anyone went to Mars, they got stranded out there! They didn’t have the resources they needed to get back, Earth didn’t have the resources to go get them, and they left them up there to *suffocate*—”

“San, that was almost two hundred years ago! You know as well as I do, this is not the twenty-first century!”

“It doesn’t matter! You’ll be all the way out there, all alone! And if any one of a thousand things go wrong, you’ll all *die* out there—”

San's voice choked off then, so abruptly that Matt jerked his head up to look at her. He came up out of the sofa, and San wrapped her arms tightly around him. "Oh, God, I don't want you to go," she sobbed against him. "I don't want you to die, out there all alone."

"Stop it. I won't be all alone. You know that. We aren't going to be a few dozen people with ancient machinery and no margin for error. We're not going to be dependent on Earth to help us, like the First Mission. We're going with all the resources and equipment we need." Matt held San out at arm's length, and looked deep into her eyes. "They're going to go, and they can make it. And I'm going to take advantage."

"Take advantage?"

"And explore Mars." Matt smiled, and his eyes seemed to focus past her. "Explore a real wilderness! It's the next frontier, San. It's beyond this world, which we've seen and catalogued and explored every inch of, already. I've been to every mountain, every jungle, been to the trenches, swam the underground rivers... there are no more places on Earth for me to go. And in all the traveling I've done, all the places I've been, I was always aware that one thing was missing: I wasn't the first."

Matt looked back into San's eyes. "Well, this time, we'll be the first," he said. "The First Mission didn't see a tenth of a percent of Mars before they died. We're going to see everything first."

San could see that familiar sparkle deep within his eyes. He'd had that same look when they had climbed Mt. Hood, three years ago. When he'd gone off to explore the Antarctic ice shelves, she remembered seeing that same look. It was the look of someone who lives their dreams, someone who loves their life more than any other person, any object, any passion. It was a look that San had seen in Matt's eyes many times before, but not at all in the months since he'd been turned down for the Mars mission. Now, it was back. She could see it, she could feel it.

And it meant he'd be leaving.

San pulled herself out of Matt's grip and drifted across the room, to stop with her back against the wall. She wrapped her arms tightly around herself and stared at the floor just in front of her.

Matt regarded her from across the room, at a loss for anything else to say. He started to lift his hand to his mouth, realized he no longer had a glass in it, and looked across the room at the broken glass that littered the carpet. Finally, he walked over to San, and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"I'd better get busy cleaning up," he said. "I planned to be out of here tomorrow morning... be sure to tell Commander Beak. I'll be moving to a hotel room for a few days, before I have to fly out."

San continued to stare at the floor silently. Matt took a deep breath, and continued. "I promise we'll see each other before I go." He bent forward and kissed San on the cheek. "You... better get going. You're still on duty, Deputy."

San finally looked up then, and for a moment, Matt could see her resolve battling with her emotions. He wasn't sure whether she would refuse to leave, or refuse to see him again. Finally, resolve won out, and she straightened up and dropped her arms to her sides. After a moment, she nodded, and a calm finally returned to her eyes.

“All right,” she said. “We’ll talk to each other later... tomorrow, when I’m off duty.” She looked across the room at the shattered glass. “You might want to call for a crew to help with that carpet... get the glass and liquor stains out. I’m sure Beak would appreciate it.” She paused long enough to flash Matt a slight smile, then walked quietly out of the apartment.

Matt stood there a moment longer, before turning and walking into the kitchen, being careful to avoid the broken glass. He removed another tumbler from a cabinet, filled it to the brim with the last of his whiskey, and gulped half of it down. Then he looked over the broken glass and whiskey stains littering the carpet, and called out, “Secretary: connect me with any Midland residential cleaner.”

“Aha! There you are!”

Thomas heard the voice across the courtyard, and sheer force of habit made him look for the source of the voice. Here in the middle of the hospitality house he’d stumbled upon, the noise levels were kept very subdued for its patrons. Everyone in the courtyard was now looking up, slightly annoyed at being so loudly disturbed. Most of them looked back down upon seeing two Peacekeepers threading their way through the tables, but since one of them was waving at Thomas, he waved back and turned to the young lady he had been speaking to. “Excuse us for a few minutes, please? Business.”

Frank DeJaye reached the table and offered a big smile to the girl next to Thomas. “Hey, Luna! I haven’t seen you in seasons! How are you?”

“I’m fine, Frank. Hi, Teez!” she directed at the younger PK behind Frank. “Why don’t you guys come up and see us on Saturday? We’re having a big party at six.”

“We’ll see if the boss will let us come out and play that day,” Frank smiled. The girl excused herself, and Frank slid up to the bar next to Thomas. “Thomas, this is T.Z. Laird. We call him Teez.”

The younger PK extended a hand. “Welcome to Midland, Commander. Sorry I wasn’t here to greet you...”

“That’s all right,” Thomas said, “I heard you had your hands full. How’s that pilot?”

“He’ll be fine,” Teez replied. “His ankle was mighty messed up, but he should be able to walk on it again in about a week. He said he hit a nasty downdraft and got pulled into a rock wall. When I found him, he was still tangled up in his chute, he couldn’t pull it off. Oh, and his glider is ruined.”

“Oh, well,” Thomas chuckled. “Well, I just wanted to say hello before I started duty tomorrow. You didn’t have to come up here after me, though.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” Frank said. “I did want to talk to you myself before tomorrow. About San.”

“Oh?” Thomas put down his drink. “Has she come back in? Did she talk to Cartier?”

“Yeah... she’s in the station, now. And she did talk to Matt. He’s been accepted for the Mars mission.”

Thomas gave a cough of amazement. “The Mars mission! So, that’s why he’s quitting. I didn’t even know he’d applied... and I thought the Mars mission had already gone through selection, for that matter.”

“Oh, well, there’s a story behind that,” Frank explained. “You see, he applied and tested last year, with everyone else. But there was supposed to be a problem with his test results... I think a pressure sensitivity thing. So they turned him down.”

“Oh. That’s lousy.”

“No, that’s not lousy,” Frank continued. “What’s lousy is, they made a mistake. They just figured it out a few weeks ago, and after he’s all used to the idea that he’s stuck here, they offered him a slot anyway.”

“He told San he couldn’t figure out how to tell her,” Teez added. “They’re very close.”

“Well, it’s no wonder she’s upset,” Thomas said. “I know a lot of people that feel the New Mars mission is probably going to end up like the First Mission. Hell, after the incredible disaster the First Mission was, it’s amazing they were able to get enough support to try a second one. He’s a very brave man to want to risk that.”

“Yeah,” Frank nodded. “And you know, San is very practical-minded. I mean, she enjoys getting out into the frontier, rock climbing, trail blazing. But she doesn’t really have that ‘pioneer spirit’ that Matt has. She can’t really appreciate his wanting to do this.”

“Not to mention,” Teez added, “the fact that the Mars mission is spending a lot of money and resources, that could be going into the Global Reclamation Fund.”

“One of her pet projects,” Frank clarified. “This is almost a slap in the face to her... to see her mentor joining this mission, using resources that would have gone into global projects.”

“I see.” Thomas took a sip from his drink. “In short, Cartier has managed to do almost everything possible to piss her off.”

“Yeah, that’s about it.” Frank motioned to the bartender, who grabbed a glass and began filling it from a tap. “He’s scheduled to leave for Sao Luis in three days. He’ll be there for final training, until launch day.”

“Can you imagine?” Thomas shook his head. “We’ve come a long way since the 2100s, but they’ll still be going out there virtually alone. If something doesn’t work out, they probably won’t be able to turn around and come back. Even Tranquility won’t be able to help them, all the way out there. They’ll be the most isolated people since...”

Frank finished the thought. “Since the First Mission.” The bartender placed a glass down next to Frank, and he raised it solemnly. “Here’s hoping they have much better luck.”

Just three days after arriving in Midland, Thomas mused, here he was again at the airlift port. This time, however, he was the Commander, and he was seeing someone off. The transport—an Osprey, this time, much smaller than the suborbital Drake that had brought him down—waited on the pad, its flight crew already in the cockpit making final checks. Thomas stood, about halfway between Midland and the pad, with Frank and Teez. They alternated between watching the Osprey and glancing back into the gateway behind them.

Teez was the one to finally say, “There they are.” They all turned to see Matt and San walking out of the gateway, down the wide road to the pad. Before they reached the halfway point, San stopped and handed Matt a flight bag, which he shouldered along with two others. They spoke for a brief moment... they were too far away to be heard, however... then Matt continued in their direction, while San stood where she was.

A moment later, Matt reached the three Peacekeepers and stopped beside them. “Thanks for seeing me off, guys.”

“Hey, it’s not gonna be the same without you, Matt,” Frank said. “We couldn’t let you get away without saying ‘Aloha’.”

Matt smiled at that. “That’s right. I’ll be back... eventually. And when I get back, you guys will be the first people I’ll be looking up.”

Teez extended his hand. “It’s been great working with you, sir. I almost wish I was coming with you.”

“Almost, huh?” Matt gave him an amused look. “Well, I appreciate it, Teez. Keep up the good work. Don’t pick up too many bad habits from Frank.”

“Thanks a lot!” Frank gave him a light clap on the arm, then shook his hand. “Take care of yourself, Matt.”

“I will.” Matt looked at Thomas, then back to the others. Frank and Teez picked up on the hint, nodded, said their last goodbyes, and headed back inside. On the pad, the Osprey was just beginning to power up its engines. Matt waited until they were out of earshot before turning back to Thomas.

“Commander. I’m sorry I didn’t get more time to spend with you.”

“That’s okay,” Thomas replied. “You’ve had plenty on your mind, as it is.”

“You’re getting a good crew... a great crew. They’ll never let you down. Take good care of ‘em, and they’ll take good care of you.” Matt paused, and looked back at San, still standing there.

Thomas also looked her way. “Anything I should tell her?”

“No,” Matt replied, adjusting the bags on his shoulder. “We went over everything last night. Try to keep her busy for a few days. She’ll get over it okay.” He paused, glanced at San in the distance, then looked quickly away. After a moment, he shook his head sadly.

“God, how I wish I could take her with me.”

Matt took another glance at San, not bothering to hide the raw pain in his eyes. Then he turned to the Osprey. After a long moment, he straightened up, and the pain disappeared behind a blank mask. “Well: Gotta go.” He offered Thomas a salute. Thomas returned it, then shook his hand.

“Good luck, Commander,” Thomas said. Matt smiled and nodded, and without another word turned and strode to the transport. He climbed aboard and shut the hatch himself. Half a minute later, the Osprey lifted off the ground in a rush of air, climbing vertically into the sky. Soon it began drifting southward, as its wings slowly tilted forwards and brought the twin prop engines to a horizontal attitude.

Thomas stood there while the transport drifted off, and in a moment, started back into Midland. He stopped next to San, who was still standing where she had left Matt, watching the swiftly departing Osprey.

She didn’t look at Thomas as he stood there. “He’s leaving behind the animals. The trees and grasses. The sweet air. The blue sky. He’s going to miss it all so much,” she said.

Thomas placed a hand on her shoulder. "I know of one thing he'll miss more than all of that." Then he turned and continued inside.

San kept watching the Osprey, even after the moisture in her eyes caused the tiny plane to wash about in her vision. After another minute, the tears had evaporated, and she could see clearly again. Then she turned and walked back to Midland.

LOG CELL ENTRY #29021: Recovery

“You know, sometimes I think of the years ahead, when our present civilization has turned to dust, and a new civilization thrives here. They’ll probably dig up the past, just like we do. I hope these aren’t the artifacts we leave behind for them.”

Deputy Peacekeeper San Kepolis stood atop a large pile of pulpy debris, just a few meters from the hole where that debris had just been removed. Even after being buried for at least a century, San could tell that the debris was clearly made up of building materials designed to provide non-load partitions and walls between offices.

Deputy Frank DeJaye walked up behind her, surveying the debris, and the hole. “Oh, I dunno. The archeologists of the future might be unhappy that we’re destroying so much of our own archeological history, just to clean things up and provide for our own present.” San turned and glared at Frank, who shrugged. “Just offering another viewpoint.”

Behind them both, Commander Thomas Beak chuckled. “I don’t think our descendants will mind if we tidy up a bit. After all, if we don’t, sooner or later they’ll have to do it. And I’m sure they’d mind that.”

San and Frank both nodded, and all of them looked down into the hole before them. Actually, it wasn’t a hole, so much as it was a pit... roughly twenty meters wide and deep, and nearly a hundred meters long. There were dozens of people, in groups of three and four, spread out along the excavation. One or two of each group used sensory equipment to search the ground around them, while the others used shovels and finer digging gear to sift through the dirt. It was a sunny day, with few clouds in the air, and the digging crews were mostly working in light shirts (or none) and shorts, many with strap-on kneepads. It looked to all the world like an excavation in ancient Egypt, or perhaps an old Roman villa.

In fact, they were on-site of a scientific research laboratory in Namerica, built no more than two hundred and fifty years ago.

It was part of a Peacekeeper’s job to monitor activities outside of the cities most people lived in. This site was within the region monitored by the PKs stationed at Midland City, so Thomas had been assigning one of his officers to regular checkup duty on a rotating basis since he had taken command of the station. Normally, the PKs only needed to stop in every so often, make sure no undue risks or liberties were being taken, and occasionally assist in any problems that might arise, rare as they were.

Today had been Frank’s day to keep an eye on the diggers, his first day of the rotation. Thomas and San had been outside of the city, taking the opportunity to see some of the frontier Thomas had recently assumed responsibility of, when Frank had radioed them about a problem. So they swung their gyrobikes northward and, within an hour, were standing with Frank at the edge of the excavation.

San was the first to see the man approaching from the side of the pit. “There... that’s Dr. Madison. He’s overseeing the project,” she explained to Thomas. They waited for Dr. Madison to climb the sturdy ladder against the wall of the pit. He had a sec tablet in one hand, and instead of depositing it in a pocket, he took his time and ascended the ladder one-handed. When he reached the top, he looked up at the three Peacekeepers.

“Oh... are you the new Commander? I thought I’d heard... that Cartier left.”

“Commander Thomas Beak,” Thomas introduced himself and extended a hand. Dr. Madison paused, an action the three Peacekeepers silently noted. Then he wiped his dusty hand on his dustier shorts, reached out and shook Thomas’ hand. San and Frank exchanged glances, but Thomas pretended not to notice. “I understand something’s wrong out here?”

“Yes, it looks like it,” Dr. Madison replied. “I don’t know if Deputy Kepolis brought you up to date on our project, but we were looking for a radiation source. Prior excavations revealed low-level radioactivity, and research into the site’s cells suggested there was once a radiation storage site here.”

“Yes, San did pass that on to me. So, I take it you’re having trouble finding anything?”

“No, that’s not it,” Madison said, in a noticeably curt manner. “We’ve reached the site specified on the cells, and we do get residual radiation signs from there. We’ve already begun decon treatments.”

Dr. Madison stared pointedly at Thomas, and Thomas glanced at San for help. She seemed to be as confused as he was, so he turned back to Madison. “All right, I give up. Where’s the problem here?”

Dr. Madison heaved a sigh of exasperation and thrust the sec tablet at Beak. “Look: Our cells contain the old records for this area, including every source of radioactive material, its amounts, and its status. Everything that was listed in this area was accounted for, years ago. Except at *this spot*.”

“But you found radiation,” Thomas stated, and Madison nodded. “If unlisted radioactive material was here, and isn’t here now...”

“You’re finally getting it,” Dr. Madison replied, somewhat condescendingly. “There could be more of this unknown radiation source, somewhere between here and *anywhere*, and we have no idea where or how much! Someone’s screwed up the historical data!”

“All right, all right,” Beak said, examining the data on the tablet. “Are you sure there’s no sub-level below this one, that you haven’t reached?”

“We’re looking for one, now,” Madison told him. “So far, we haven’t found anything larger than a drainpipe continuing below this level. We’re still looking, though.”

“Fine.” Thomas set the sec tablet to copy and download its data, handed it back to Madison, then set his sleeve sec to receive the data from the tablet. “Keep at it. We’ll see if we can find anything to help you.”

“What do you think you’re going to find that we don’t already know about?” Madison asked, pocketing the tablet. “A hidden vault under the floor, maybe?”

Thomas regarded Dr. Madison with a cold stare. Then, without replying, he turned and headed back to the parked gyrocycles. San followed in a moment, and Frank moved to block Dr. Madison when he started to follow them. “Don’t you have some more digging to do, *Doctor*?” Frank snapped. Madison glared up at Frank, snorted, and turned back to the pit.

Thomas reached his bike and thumbed the starter. When San reached her bike, parked next to his, he said, “Would you rather stay here and monitor the dig, or are you coming back to Midland with me?”

“Commander,” San offered, “I swear, since I’ve been out here, Madison has never acted that way with me—”

“It’s okay, San,” Thomas said, cutting her off. “I’ve dealt with my share of bigots. Funny, you don’t run into too many Neanderthal scientists these days.” San smiled at that, and visibly relaxed. “I could use your help accessing the cells... you probably know this area much better than I do.”

“Sure.” San hopped aboard her bike and thumbed the starter. “Frank,” she called out, “keep an eye on that idiot. We’ll be in touch.”

Officer “Teez” Laird was seated at the Commander’s desk when Thomas and San walked into the station. “Hey... that was a quick tour,” he said. “What happened? You have a problem with one of those bikes?”

“No,” San replied, hanging her jacket up on the hook by the door. “We made a detour to the excavation site.”

“Something going on up there?”

“Yeah,” Thomas nodded. “They discovered unexpected radiation, but they can’t find an accounted-for source. We’re going to see if we can figure out what the historical cells missed.”

“Oh.” Teez reached forward to clear the sec on the desk. “Here, let me—”

“No, that’s okay, we’ll use the conference room,” Thomas said, motioning at him to stay where he was. “What are you looking at, anyway?”

“Oh, it’s just the news,” Teez replied. San had stopped at the mini-kitchen to fix herself a drink, and Thomas noticed Teez surreptitiously watching her as she did so. He seemed to relax when she finished and walked into the conference room. Thomas fixed himself a drink when she was finished, but before joining her in the conference room, he stepped over to Teez.

“How do they look?”

“No problems, so far,” Teez said in a low voice. “They’re about eight million miles out, reporting no flares or micrometeorites worth mentioning.”

“Great, great.” Thomas patted Teez on the back, then turned to join San in the conference room. He had noted that, since their former Commander had volunteered for the new Mars mission, that San had pointedly avoided any news on the mission. Thomas hoped that she would eventually forgive Matt his decision to go, but until then, had decided there was little need to bring it up. Still, he couldn’t help following the mission, and like most others, he often found himself hanging on every report they sent back.

San had already activated the large sec on the wall, but she was waiting for Thomas before going any further. When Thomas entered the conference room, she said, “You know, some of those old research institutes used to build separate storage sheds nearby the main buildings, so they could keep samples nearby but well-isolated.”

“I thought of that, too,” Thomas agreed. “But I think if they’d done that, Dr. Madison’s people would have found it already. If it was in the plans, it would be the first thing they would have excavated. If it was in the plans but removed, they would have picked up residual traces of radiation in obvious places. So there probably wasn’t a shed. At least, not nearby.” He turned to the wall sec. “Secretary: Show me—” he stopped and considered a moment, before continuing —“show me the NA(s)5 region map.” In a second, a map covering the regions surrounding Midland appeared, with grid references and landmarks displayed. He verbally narrowed the map

reference down to the region where the excavation was located, and the sec zoomed in on the appropriate area. “What was the political designation of this region two hundred years ago?”

The sec came back with an answer almost immediately: *“Tulsa, Oklahoma, United States of America.”*

“Okay, let’s see.” Thomas stroked his smooth chin. “Search for any cells recorded by public media corresponding to that region, and display description.”

There was a pause of a few seconds. Then the screen filled with a list of recordings, at least fifty of them displayed on the screen, and scroll arrows indicating many more to come. Many of the listings included detailed descriptions, but many of them contained no more than a few key words, such as “crime”, “budget”, “weather”, “gun control”, “civic event”, et cetera.

“Whoops,” Thomas said. “I never would have guessed there were that many recordings still intact and in our files. I wonder how specific we can get?”

“What, specifically, are you looking for?” San asked.

“I wanted to find any information on the early recovery period of that region,” Thomas explained. “Different areas went about their recovery in different ways. Secretary, eliminate all listings without key words, ‘commercial’, ‘scientific’ or ‘relocation’.”

The list changed, but it still filled the screen. “Oh, mother,” Thomas said under his breath.

“Maybe we’d better just start scanning through some of them,” San said. “We may get a clue to speed up the process along the way.”

“I guess so,” Thomas agreed. Selecting an entry by tapping on the screen with a finger, he said, “Display.” There was a brief pause, then the screen went blank. It was replaced by an image of a man in a business suit, standing in an open lot with a silver tube in one hand. It was a television broadcast cell, Thomas recognized immediately. From the attitude of the person standing in the middle of the image, he guessed it was a public information broadcast. The figure began speaking, holding one end of the tube close to his mouth. Of course... a handheld microphone, Thomas realized.

“We’re here on the site in contention, the sixty-acre property formerly owned by Congressman Gerard Ryan. As you can see, the surveyors are already on site, as well as the new property owners, Hank Addison and Rayna Evans. Mr. Addison...”

“Increase speed 100%,” Thomas requested, and the recording sped up to twice the speed previous. His first choice was apparently not germane to their search, being mostly concerned with the property in question being converted into public housing. After listening for a minute longer, Thomas ended the recording and selected another.

“The damage started in the southwest corner, when the floodwaters weakened the foundation on this side. When the west wall collapsed, the rest of the structure slid into the waters right behind it...”

“We’re here waiting for the Mayor and City Councilman to appear, to begin the dedication of the new police headquarters...”

“This is the suburban townhouse where Mrs. Francine Reynolds was attacked by the closet rapist. He broke in while no one was home, then waited in th...”

“Christ,” Thomas commented. “What was this, the high crime region of the country?”

“Let’s try this,” San said. “Secretary, advance recordings fifty years, and continue.”

“The east side recycling facility was closed today, for the duration. Until authorities determine whether the facility has been illegally disposing of...”

“This is the new Tulsa Government Mall, now open for business. All city government services have been relocated to this facility, or are in the process...”

The Taylor family support facility, the first of the old government buildings to be converted into temporary housing, is finally seeing some relief in the form of...”

“Tulsa Government Mall has requested assistance from the Federal government to provide support during the relocation of the State Revenue Institute...”

“As more businesses are relocating to centralized industrial parks or malls, the city is discovering how much of its infrastructure must be reshuffled to adequately service these new facilities. The recent electrical outages...”

“Hey, I think we’ve got something here,” Thomas said. “Services were centralized. City services were redistributed.”

“And they needed outside support for difficult relocation efforts,” San added. “So the research facility may have moved to a centralized location, too. The radioactive matter was probably moved, too.”

“And the records were simply lost in the confusion,” Thomas concluded. “We’re going to have to find the location of the relocated research facilities.”

“They’ve probably been reclaimed already,” San pointed out.

“But if a storage vault of radioactive material was accidentally not recorded, it might have been missed.” Thomas drained the last from his cup. “We’re going to have to find them, and check them all.”

“Thomas. Dr. Madison. Come over here.”

Thomas and Dr. Madison both heard San clearly, despite the distances between them all. They stood scores of meters apart, on flat dry land lightly peppered with thin scrub and small rocks. There was little for sound to do in such an empty area except bounce along the dry ground and travel to its heart’s content. The site was kilometers away from the excavation where Dr. Madison’s crews were working, in the middle of a fairly flat, barren area indicated on the cells as the location of an old research complex. Thomas was the first to start toward San when he heard her call out. Dr. Madison, being closer to San than Thomas was, watched him approach and pass by on the way to San. A moment later, he sighed and followed.

When Thomas reached San’s side, she was making adjustments to the PRT control on her sec. The PRT was part of the Peacekeeper’s standard equipment, and was stowed on a clip attached to the inner sleeve of the PK uniform. The sec was attached to this sleeve, as well, and it not only acted as the control console for the PRT, it functioned as a monitor and recorder for its readings. When she was through tapping new settings through the sec, she pointed the PRT at the ground before her.

The tiny rectangular device, not much longer than San’s fingers, made no sound or indication that it was functioning, save a single yellow telltale on its wide face. But on San’s sec screen, an image was forming, a reflection of the finely tuned and pulsed radio signal from the PRT. It was

cubical, and the imaging circuitry in the sec made it clear that it was large and deeply buried. A moment later, the image was joined by a straight channel, which ran from its side under their feet, and terminated a dozen meters away. The sec began printing further details on its screen, information about the object.

“About twelve meters down,” San retranslated the PRT data for Thomas and Dr. Madison’s benefit. “Six meters by six meters, about a meter thick. Lead and packed ceramic. There’s a corridor that connects to it, that ends in an open shaft...” San turned and pointed along the ground past them... “about there. And I can’t get any radiation readings, but I can detect some heavy density objects inside. Shaped like containers.”

“That’s it.” Thomas smiled and gestured at the ground beneath their feet. “There’s your vault, Doctor. Complete with what sounds like a radiation storage container inside. It was probably constructed after the rest of the facility to store the materials, and somehow the revisions were lost to the public record... not surprising, considering the problems this area had after the mid-2000s. We’ll do a bit more surveying, and post the site of that open corridor for you. It would probably make sense to see if you can get through from there, first. It’s likely to be easiest.”

Dr. Madison took turns staring at San’s sec, San, Thomas, and the ground at their feet. When he finally brought his eyes back up to Thomas, his expression was very different than when the two had first met. “Okay, I’ll have my people here in the morning. “I’d appreciate it if you could have this area cordoned off for us, Peacekeeper.”

“That won’t be a problem, Doctor,” Thomas told him.

“That was good detective work you all did,” Dr. Madison added. “You saved me from a lot of wasted time and effort.”

“You might not want to say that, until you’ve gotten in there and found what you’re looking for,” Thomas advised.

“No, I’m sure that’s it,” Madison nodded. “Thanks again, Peacekeeper.”

With that, Madison turned and began walking back to the gyrocab, dictating orders into his sec as he walked. Thomas waited until he was well out of earshot, before leaning over to San.

“Funny. I don’t remember his thanking us the first time.”

San leaned back to Thomas. “Well, that’s the way it goes, sometimes. At least he’ll find his radiation source. And once his people vacate the other site, we can recommend a total reclamation of the area. One more old site cleaned up. Two, actually, since we found this one.”

Thomas glanced over at San. “That’s the best part, to you, isn’t it? The reclamation of the old building sites... the restoring of the original land?”

“Absolutely,” San said, as they started back to the gyrocab. “Anything that advances the reconstruction of this land is a good thing, to me. The sooner, the better.”

“Then, I guess we’d better get busy marking the area off for Madison,” Thomas stated.

“Oh, no hurry,” San smiled. “Go ahead, grab a drink in the cab. Go talk to the friend you just made.”

Thomas glanced after Dr. Madison. “You sure he wants to talk to me?”

San grinned mischievously. “What do you care?”

PERSONAL CELL ENTRY #1109: Black and Not-Black

“All right, Mr. Danelle, I’m not kidding! Put the pie down!”

The man in the blue jumpsuit with the pie in his hand did not move. Instead, he glared past Thomas at the man behind him. Both men were covered in roughly equal amounts of pastries, from head to foot. The man with the pie was clearly looking for a way to throw his past Thomas at the other man, and Thomas couldn’t help but consider how stupid the scene must have looked to the patrons of the shop, who stood about laughing.

“Mr. Danelle,” Thomas said, when it was evident the man was too upset to pay much attention, “I want you to understand the situation you’re in. As absurd as it may seem (he waited for the laughter to die down, before continuing), you are assaulting this man. He is also guilty of assaulting you...”

“And he has no business treating me like an idiot, just because I didn’t like his doughnuts!” the man with the pie snapped. “They were stale, and they had sand or something in them!”

“They did not have sand in them!” The store owner began to step around Thomas, but backed behind him again when Mr. Danelle raised his pie again. “It was just sugar! Sometimes, if you don’t mix ingredients properly, sugar can join in lumps. It may have been a lumpy mix...”

“It was sand! *Sand!*”

“But it was *not sand!*”

“Mr. DePaul!” Thomas glanced over his shoulder at the shopkeeper, keeping a wary eye on Danelle. “Would you please tell Mr. Danelle that you’re sorry for making a bad batch of doughnuts?”

“Well, of course I’m sorry! I mean, it’s not like I’d do that purposely! I have a business!” He turned to the many patrons and onlookers around them. “I make good pastries! I want to please my customers! I just made one batch of doughnuts with some lumps in them. One batch! It won’t happen again!”

“There, Mr. Danelle,” Thomas stated, “he said he was sorry. Now will you put the pie down?”

“He hit me first! With a cantaloupe!”

At the sound of that rebuttal, the crowd roared with laughter. Thomas himself had to fight to keep from smiling, but the crowd’s reaction seemed to enrage Danelle further. He raised his pie up again, and cocked his arm back.

Thomas took a step closer to Danelle. “You know, I’d really hate to lock you up for throwing a pie at a Peacekeeper. But if you don’t put the pie down, I’ll lock you up anyway for disobeying the direct orders of a Peacekeeper. And I’m very, very close to doing that right now.”

He turned to look at DePaul. “In fact, I’ll lock both of you up if you both don’t stop yelling at each other and try to settle this like men, and not children!”

Danelle stepped forward, bringing his pie arm down and holding the pie in front of him. “Are you calling me a child?”

Thomas immediately raised his arm. He struck Danelle’s hand, bringing the pie up and impacting it into Danelle’s face. The crowd exploded in laughter, as bits of piecrust and blueberries fell from Danelle’s face.

“Consider yourself disarmed,” Thomas said sarcastically. “Now then: DePaul said he’s sorry for giving you a bad doughnut. Would you like to discuss compensation for the purchase?”

“Compensation!” DePaul cried. “Look what he’s done to my shop! Who’s going to pay for ___”

Thomas cut him off. “Did you throw the cantaloupe at him?”

DePaul hesitated, then stammered, “I thought he was gonna hit me.”

“Sorry, Mr. DePaul,” Thomas shrugged. “It looks like you’re going to have to... uh... eat the loss.”

This last remark proved to be the climax of the incident, and as DePaul and Danelle began to clean themselves off and argue over compensation, Thomas separated himself from the crowd and headed for the Peacekeeper station. A few steps out of the shop, he hurriedly checked himself for stray bits of pastry. Satisfied he was clean, he hurried on to his morning appointment.

“Hi, San.” Thomas entered the office and hung his jacket on the wall hook. “Sorry I’m late. Had to make a stop at DePaul’s bakery. Is she here?”

San, sitting at the CO’s desk, was perusing the daily dispatches when Thomas walked in. “Yes,” she said without looking up. “She’s in the conference room. What did you get at DePaul’s?”

“Nothing, thank goodness.” San looked up then, as Thomas started into the conference room past her. She started to speak, but he was already around the corner and closing the door.

The far wall of the conference room, which was glass, was set to outward viewing, and the girl in the room had been facing the window watching the passers-by when Thomas entered. She was standing, and Thomas could tell before she moved that she was slightly uncomfortable, possibly nervous, about this interview. There was something else he could tell about her, as well. Although he couldn’t see her features, or for that matter a single inch of her skin, from behind her, the bright white hair flowing from her head made it more than apparent she was black.

She turned when she heard the door close behind her. Her hair seemed to be feather-light, and danced around her head when it turned. She automatically brought a hand up to brush it aside, although it was not actually blocking her face. Thomas realized he was right when he saw her eyes, the hesitant movements: She was nervous about meeting him.

But it only lasted a moment. As soon as she saw Thomas, she froze. She took in his skin, as sable-black as her own, and his silvery-white hair. Then, she visibly sighed, and smiled. “Commander Beak?” she asked, and her voice had a touch of a Latin accent. When Thomas nodded, she smiled wider and extended a hand. “I’m Reva Poker. Nice to meet you.”

“And you,” Thomas said, shaking her hand. “Please, call me Thomas. We’re informal here. Sit down. I’m sorry I’m late, by the way. There was an altercation at a bakery I passed on my way up here.”

“Oh,” she said. “Then that explains the...” she didn’t finish, but a hand came up and pointed at his face, then to her own chin.

Thomas didn’t understand at first, but a moment later, brought a hand up to his own chin, following the spot that her hand pointed to. His finger touched something sticky, and when he

pulled it back and looked at the bluish stain, he sighed. "I thought I got away clean, so to speak," he smiled, wiping the blueberry stain from his chin.

"Well, if that's the worst you got," she smiled back. "It could be worse: At least we can't blush."

Thomas gave her an amused glance as he finished wiping the stain from his chin. "Right. Well, anyway... can I call you Reva?"

"Sure."

"Thanks... uh, you know this isn't really an interview, per se. You've already been assigned to Midland, beginning duty on, uh--"

"Tuesday."

"Right. But since you're here, it's a common policy for new Peacekeepers to meet their COs before actually beginning duty, if at all possible. So just relax. I just want to know a bit about you, and check your cells."

"I understand."

"You seemed a bit nervous when I walked in."

"Oh... well, that was before..." Reva stopped, though better of her answer, and begun again. "Well, it's just that I've had occasion to be looked down upon in the past. You know: I'm pretty, and I'm black. We still tend to be looked at as airheads, in some places. So I was concerned about how you might react when you saw me. Until I saw you."

"I understand." Thomas had a fleeting memory of a few weeks back, at an excavation outside of the city, and a certain prejudiced scientist. "Well, I can tell you from experience that the officers here don't have a problem with me, and they won't have one with you."

"That's good to know," Reva replied. "I didn't know there were any blacks in command positions in the force."

"I think I'm among the first posted. I don't know if there are any in OCOM or upper level command positions."

"There aren't, as far as I know. You should be honored."

"Thanks." Thomas had activated his sec, and was looking over the personnel cell on Reva. "You're from San Dali? Were you born there?"

"I was born near there... my family lived on the frontier for years before they moved into San Dali."

"Ah. I was born on the frontier, too. Most of my family is still out there. Have you arranged an apartment in Midland yet?"

"Yes... I have a family friend who lives here, and he's offered to let me move in with him."

"That's good: You already know someone in the city. Well, you'll be meeting plenty of new friends soon, I'm sure." He looked over the cells again. "You have excellent field stats. Spend much time on the frontier?"

"Well, I haven't, since I moved into San Dali," Reva told him. "I was fourteen when we moved into the city. Most of my experience comes from before then."

“Well, we’ve got a big territory to cover, here... which is why I wanted another PK assigned here. So you’ll be spending your share of time outside, with the rest of us.”

“No problem.”

“Good O/D stats, too...” Thomas paused, as he read the information on her weapons experience. “You can throw a *bola*? What were you, ranching out there?”

Reva smiled. “God, no! My whole family can throw bolas... it’s sort of an old family tradition. I guess we *used* to be ranchers.”

“Well, it’s not something you’re likely to need around here,” Thomas mused. “Still, it is a non-lethal weapon. If you want, I’ll authorize you to carry one with your other equipment. Provided you can keep it from tripping you up. Any other special weapons training you’ve had?”

“Well, I can use a bullwhip, too. But I didn’t bring one. Scares the men away.”

Thomas smiled widely. “I’ll bet.”

Thomas saw Reva to the door of the station. “We’ll look forward to seeing you on Tuesday,” he said. “Feel free to stop by anytime before that.”

“Thanks, I might get an early start once I’ve settled in. ‘Bye.” Reva shook his hand and left. Thomas closed the door behind her, and stepped over to the mini-kitchen to get a drink.

San, long-since finished with the dispatches, got up from Thomas’ desk and moved to a chair on the other side. “So? What’s she like?”

“Sounds like she’ll make a good officer,” Thomas said. “Good frontier experience... we can always use that. Good overall ratings from OCOM. And she’s got a good personality, shouldn’t have any trouble dealing with people.”

San nodded. “I did get the impression she was a bit nervous when she came in.”

“She’s a bit uptight about being black, apparently,” Thomas confided. “I guess she had some bad experiences when she was younger. I think she’ll be okay, though. I seemed to be a calming factor on her, I noticed. I’ll keep an eye on her.”

“I’ll bet you will.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means, I can think of worse people to have to keep an eye on.” San smiled and raised an eyebrow. “Or, surely you didn’t *only* notice she was black?”

“Smart-ass,” Thomas commented.

That evening, Thomas sat at his desk, finishing up the reports for the day. Noticing the time, he looked over at Frank, who was reading a tablet by the door. “Well, that’s it for me, Frank. I’m going to knock off. The house is yours.”

“Okay, Thom,” Frank replied. “See you in the morning.”

Thomas grabbed his jacket from the wall hook as he walked over to the door that separated his apartment from the PK station. “See you in the morning.” The door opened for him, and he entered his apartment, depositing his PK jacket in the closet by the door. From there, he went into the kitchen, where he fixed himself a drink and a light snack.

About midway through his snack, his wall sec chimed. *“Incoming message from First Commander Stang.”* The sec waited for his reply with a blinking question mark in the middle of the forest image that was displayed there.

Thomas finished the cracker and cheese in his mouth, and said, “Accept.” Instantly the forest was replaced by the face of a woman in an office that, Thomas knew, was on the Jetstream Stratoplatfrom stationed high over the NA(s) territories. Bettina Stang was Thomas’ immediate superior, and someone who had a very high opinion of his abilities. Unfortunately, Thomas had the sneaking suspicion that her opinion was colored by her obvious attraction to him. And although she was certainly a lovely woman, she just wasn’t quite the girl Thomas was looking for.

“Hello, Thomas,” Bettina smiled. “How’re you doing in Midland?”

“Oh, it’s great down here. How’s life in the clouds?”

“We’re fine here. I hope I’m not interrupting anything?”

“No. I just came off duty, actually. If you’d called me three minutes earlier, you would have caught me at the station.”

“Well, I just called because I wanted you to know that I forwarded your report regarding the Tulsa excavations to OCOM. They were very impressed with your researching and finding that vault. Gold stars for you and your staff.”

“Thanks, Betty,” Thomas said. “It’s always nice to know people are looking out for you.”

“Oh, I am,” she nodded. “And I’m going to keep looking out for you, until I get you attached to my staff up here.”

“Now, Betty, you know I couldn’t stay up there long. I get cramps if I can’t walk barefoot in grass every so often.”

“I may have some imported. Anyway, you know I’ll hold a slot open for you. Just sing out.”

“I will.” Thomas took a sip from his drink. “Oh... I had a chance to meet with Reva Poker today.”

“Reva Poker?”

“Yes... the new PK you sent me. She starts Tuesday. Well, she arrived in Midland today, and I had a chance to meet her, informally.”

Bettina seemed to search her memory for a moment, then nodded. “Oh, yes. The black girl.”

Thomas hesitated before he replied. “Yes, that’s her.”

“Does she look like she’ll work out, then?”

“Oh, yeah, she should do fine. According to her record, she’s just what we need around here.”

“That’s why we okayed her request for posting there,” Bettina said. “Besides, I knew you wouldn’t have any problem with her. I’ve got a few commanders who would’ve fought me to keep her off their station.”

Thomas was suddenly aware that he didn’t like where this conversation was headed. “Well, you won’t have that problem here,” he said, slightly defensively.

“I’m sorry, Thomas,” Bettina said. “I know what that sounded like. Believe me, we didn’t allow our decision to be swayed by her being black, one way or the other. She asked to be posted there, her stats showed she was qualified, and we gave it to her. If she doesn’t work out, tell us and we’ll pull her. Okay?”

Thomas knew Bettina well enough to know she was being honest with him. “Okay. Sorry, I know you wouldn’t do that. It’s just that, she was obviously concerned about it when I spoke to her. I guess it’s got me thinking about it, now.”

“Well, don’t give it a second thought,” Bettina told him. “About her, or you. Personally, whenever I give it any thought, I just laugh.”

“Laugh?” Thomas repeated. “Why’s that?”

“Well, calling her, or you, ‘black’, implies that the rest of us are ‘white’. To me, that’s funny.” She smiled, her full lips reaching up to broad cheekbones, and Thomas had to smile as well. Her distinctly African features, with a skin tone not much lighter than the tea in Thomas’ hand, would hardly be considered ‘white’ by any means. “Well, I won’t keep you from anything. Keep in touch, Thomas.”

“I will, Betty. Good night.” He let her close the connection, then settled back into finishing his snack. He tried to clear his mind of the conversation he’d just finished, but after a few minutes he realized he couldn’t get the subject out of his mind. He remembered being concerned enough with it himself, at a much younger age, to research the phenomenon known as Promelanin-related Melanosis, in order to understand why other children in his tribe were not the same color as he... and why that difference sometimes made him the brunt of the kind of cruel jokes children tend to play on each other. What he discovered, in the cells of the tribe’s library that day, made clear just how cruel skin color could be.

It was long before he had been born, at the end of the twentieth century, when industrial pollutants had made their mark on the atmosphere of the planet. Part of the Earth’s protective atmospheric shell, known then as the Ozone layer, had been thinned in many areas and completely compromised in others. As a result, the amount of ultraviolet light falling on Earth was significantly increased. As this was also the time when Hydremias were still referred to as cancers, and were generally considered mysterious and deadly maladies, cancers of the skin became the primary concern of anyone venturing out of doors.

There were numerous lotions and balms created, designed to offer temporary protection against the penetration of ultraviolet rays. Most of them were only slightly or completely ineffective, however, and did little to alleviate the problem.

Then a new player in the drama appeared, in the form of a pharmaceutical magnate whose loss of a daughter to skin cancer drove him to create the 100% effective skin protection. After years of research, he had created a drug which, when administered intravenously, would boost the protective properties of the natural melanin in human skin, and fight off the harmful rays of the Sun. The drug did all it was claimed to do, and before long it was offered to the general public.

Of course, before the public itself could get their hands on the drug, there were certain channels that had to be followed... agencies that would retest the drug, and certify it safe for human consumption. These agencies began their tests, and the public anxiously awaited the results. The first tests proved positive, and there was every indication that the drug would soon

be on store shelves. Some of the later tests were much more precarious, however, and the drug's release was delayed for months. There was a great deal of pressure from the public, and the pharmaceutical company, to release the drug. Years later, there would be allegations that the testing agencies bowed to pressure, possibly bribes, to okay the drug. Little was ever proven, but eventually, the drug did become available.

Called "Promelanicus" on the street, the drug became the rage for all modern Sun-worshippers... the ones with large amounts of disposable incomes, at least, for the outpatient treatments were too expensive for just anyone to undergo. Soon, having the "Promel" treatment was something to impress your friends with, or brag about at work.

The bragging lasted for about twenty years. Then people began to notice that their Promel-treated skin was getting steadily darker, in fact, incredibly darker... and that, even more surprising, that hair, no matter what color, was slowly losing all color. As people aged, skin color as dark as any on the African continent went hand-in-hand with hair as white as silk. The inadequate testing of Promelanicus was finally becoming apparent, as medical circles realized the drug did indeed have undesirable side effects.

But all that was nothing, compared to the birth of the first child to a Promel-treated parent, twenty-seven years after her first treatment. When the child was featured on the cover of every national magazine, skin black as pitch and snowy-white wisps of hair on her head, the public reacted as if shot. Tens of thousands of lawsuits were filed against the makers of Promelanicus, to go with the thousands of lawsuits already on file from the original users, who were now being referred to as the "Victims of Promelanicus-related Melanosis". This public and financial onslaught was too much for the drug's makers, who were quickly forced into bankruptcy.

But this was far too little, and too late, for the public. Physicians soon confirmed that the drug had rewritten the genetic code itself, and that it could pass down through the generations just like any other family trait. And although only a small percentage of the public had used Promelanicus, it was understood that it could easily spread through the human population through inbreeding. Man, in his haste and ignorance, had managed to create a new racial strain in the space of only one generation.

As time went by, "Victims of Promelanicus-related Melanosis" became more than the public would willingly pronounce, and those so afflicted were soon referred to simply as being "black". This trend had an incredible, albeit backhanded, impact on the rest of the world almost overnight. Since being black was no longer limited to a single race, but could impact anyone of any race, identifying any race by a color did not work any more. People who were formerly referred to by the reference "black" were soon called African, or Afri, after the actual home of their ancestral strains. In a global domino effect, the use of colors to describe races soon ebbed, and races were marked by their regional distinctions.

The one exception to this rule, of course, were the new "blacks". Regardless of the actual racial heritage of anyone, if they carried the trademark black skin and white hair, they were "black".

But this was not the worst effect on the populace of the "Promelanicus Catastrophe", as it soon became known. As the years took their toll on the original users of Promelanicus, a new perception of them began to take shape amongst the public. The first users were being called stupid, ignorant, foolish, for being gullible enough to try an untested drug. Never mind that the drug was considered tested at the time (however inadequately), nor that the government had stamped their seal of approval on it at the time (which was, naturally, revoked, approximately

twenty-two years after it had been granted)... it seemed that a purely unscientific, overly emotional and completely ignorant point of view had taken root, and like any good weed, it spread like... well, like weeds.

Being “black” became synonymous with being stupid, descended from stupid stock. They became the new second class, the brunt of jokes, the people who could not hold jobs requiring “intelligence”, the ones no one wanted at the best social gatherings. Ironically, this had the effect of kicking all other racial groups into “first class citizen” status, and improving general racial harmony throughout the world... at which point, blacks were no longer considered a race, per se, but instead became a condition. They were handicapped by virtue of skin color, not to mention the incredible ignorance of their parents.

Only the science of Psychology could even hope to explain how, after more than a century, this foolish and archaic notion could still survive. Psychologists, being psychologists, naturally had any number of explanations that they all insisted were valid, but the most popular explanations generally had to do with “transference”, or subconsciously applying the deeds (and faults) of the ancestor to the descendant. As to applying blame to the ancestors, psychologists claimed it was “an easy assumption, since the ancestors are not alive to refute it.”

But even understanding the psychological explanations behind prejudice did little good, because the prejudice was still there. Even today. And Thomas knew it only too well. He remembered the efforts he’d gone through as a youth, to prove to the other children he was as good as they were in every way. Not that he’d achieved physical and mental perfection, but by his teens he had earned the respect of everyone in the tribe, and the admiration of a few of his peers.

Then he applied for the International Guard, and found himself in the same position he’d been in as a youth. Again, he found he had to prove he was up to the job of Peacekeeper, and as capable of excelling in it as any other recruit. Fortunately, the disciplines learned in his youth carried him through with flying colors. But along his training, he had come across some others who were not as well prepared for the unusual expectations they were put under. A few simply gave up under the stress (“Many people give up the Guard,” officials would say. “The number of black resignees is not significantly larger than that of resignees in general.” But Thomas knew them a little better than the stats did.), and few blacks who stayed in ever made it to Deputy status.

And Thomas let everyone else guess, and usually feigned ignorance on the subject, but he knew very well he was the first black Peacekeeper to command a station and territory. This did not concern him, however, because Thomas also knew his own abilities, and he knew he hadn’t risen to ninth in his class for any reason other than his proven skills and intelligence. He also knew his classmates, and he knew the eight ahead of him were there because they were better than he was, plain and simple. He had nothing to blame being black on, so he did not let it bother him.

But it was hard not to feel sympathetic toward someone else who was bothered.

It was two evenings later that Thomas found himself passing by the same bakery that had erupted in slapstick violence days before. DePaul saw him walk by, and waved cheerfully to him. He had obviously gotten over the loss of product he had suffered during Danelle’s assault, and his customers seemed as numerous and happy as ever. Thomas waved back, and almost didn’t see the pile of boxes with legs until it was too late.

“Look out!” he cried instinctively, though he was the one who hadn’t been watching where he was going. He threw out his arms just as he struck the boxes, and managed to keep all but a small one from toppling to the ground. He couldn’t see the person on the other side of the boxes, but they seemed to have lost control of their load, so Thomas held onto them. “I’ve got them, I’ve got them. I’m sorry, I was distracted, and I didn’t see you coming…”

“That’s okay, I didn’t see you either,” a female voice replied. Thomas saw the girl step out from behind the boxes to pick up the one on the ground. When she stood up, her ponytail of silvery-white hair danced behind her head like a mane of feathers. “Oh—Commander!” Reva laughed, and started to take the packages from him. “I didn’t know that was you.”

“Is this part of your moving chores?” Thomas asked.

“No, I’ve finished moving in,” Reva said. “I just had some other things to buy, and…” she shrugged, smiling.

“Say no more,” Thomas told her. “Is your place far? I can carry these.”

“I’m just three levels down from here.” She took about half the packages from Thomas, so they could both see clearly where they were going. “This does make it easier to navigate. Thanks.”

“Sure. So, how do you like Midland?”

“Oh, it’s beautiful here. I’m really looking forward to staying here. CC says I’m going to love it.”

“CC?”

“My roommate. Colin Cortez.”

“Oh, right, you did tell me about him. Are you two engaged?”

“No, just old friends,” Reva said. “Our families go way back together, when we were all still on the frontier. Are you engaged with anyone?”

Thomas shook his head. “I’ve been moving around too much lately, so I haven’t gotten that involved with anyone for awhile.”

“Well, if you’re like every other man in a new city, you must know what all the hospitality houses are like. You’ll have to recommend a good one to me.”

“As a matter of fact, I have stopped in a few of them,” Thomas admitted wryly. “You’ll probably like Dan Wa’s, on forty-nine west. It’s full of men who don’t scare easily, and own their own whips.”

“Ha!” Reva shifted her load as she stepped onto the lift. “Do you spend much time there?”

“I think I’ve spent more time helping Rollers break up fights in there, than I’ve spent in there off duty. I prefer The Oasis, on thirty-two north. It’s fun, but not as rowdy. Good mixed crowd, too. A little bit of everybody goes there.”

“That sounds more my speed, too,” Reva said. “I like mixed crowds. It makes me feel like I can be myself, instead of being like everybody else in the place.”

“I know just what you mean.”

“Maybe I’ll see you in there sometime?”

“Probably,” Thomas smiled. “I’m sure we’ll have plenty to talk about.”

LOG CELL ENTRY #29083: One With The Land

It was unusual, in this part of the forest, to see a ridge of land with little scrub or trees on it. But a few decades ago a virus had killed the two oaks that had stood there for centuries. They stood for years after they died, and eventually toppled from their roots. The trunks became home to numerous animals and insects. The ridge where they had stood slowly softened as the dead roots rotted away. Rain and wind worked at the ridge as it always had, and the still-forested edges of the ridge stood their ground against the natural assault. But on the part of the ridge where the two trees had fallen, the ground was cut away, reshaped, until a precarious mix of dirt and rock hung above the flatter areas below.

One day, the ground simply could not support its own weight. With no perceptible warning, the dirt gave way. Soil and rock tumbled down the steep slope, taking some of the dirt and soil below with it, and created a small but formidable avalanche in the otherwise quiet forest. The rockslide ran its course down the slope of the ridge, and soon came to rest against trees, large rocks, groundswells, and its own mass.

The forest became silent then. Slowly, the startled animals in the area began to resume their wanderings, foragings and twitterings, and the forest returned to life as usual.

Soon afterward, the single animal that had been caught by the avalanche, began to stir.

There was a sizeable bump on the back of her head, and it contained a lot of pain. This was her first realization, as she slowly regained consciousness. She slid a hand to the back of her head, to touch the spot. More pain erupted when she came in contact with it, but pulling the hand away revealed there was no blood coming out of it. She levered the hand to the ground, to help her rise.

Her second realization was that something was keeping her from rising, when she found she could not sit up. She lowered herself back down and pushed her hands forward, as she waited for her vision to clear. Her hands came to rest, just beyond her waist, on something soft, hard, and cold. Soft *and* hard?

She coughed. She realized there was a lot of dust in the air, which was partially why she couldn't see... she hoped. She waited until her vision cleared enough to make out her situation.

When she could see, she knew she was in a bad way. She was staring at fully a ton of dirt and rock, which lay in a mound across the trail she had been on. The mound had her buried almost up to her waist, pinning her to the ground. She experienced a moment of fear, which she applied to pulling herself free of the rockslide. Her first effort had no effect, which caused panic. She doubled her efforts, straining to get free.

She was rewarded by lancing pain, in her left leg, all but blinding her. She cried out in agony, and stopped pushing against the rocks. After a few moments, she slumped back onto the ground, panting from the pain and the exertion. Somewhere under all that dirt and rock was probably a broken leg, she thought. It may be bleeding, although the dirt may be keeping it from bleeding. And she had no way of knowing while she was half-buried... unless, of course, she went into shock.

"Oh, God, I can't believe this," she mumbled to herself. She pictured her Mother and Father, as she had seen them last, in her bedroom just a week ago.

"It's just that, I don't like you to go off by yourself." Mother was not crying, but she could tell by the way she worked her hands together that she was very agitated. "What if something happens while you're out there?"

“Your Mother’s right.” Father didn’t wring his hands like Mother, but he didn’t have to. His worry was all over his face like a red sign. “Anything can happen out there, hon. You know that. You really should go with someone.”

“Come on, will you both relax?” She continued packing, as she spoke to them. “You know I know how to take care of myself on the frontier. I’ve sure spent enough time there.”

“Yes,” her Father said, “but that was with landers.”

“Dad, when you live with landers, you learn how to do things on your own. You have to. Everyone is self-sufficient out there, because they have to be.”

“But even they have the others to help them, if something does happen,” her Mother pressed.

“Look, Mom, nothing’s going to happen. I’m just going to go camping for a few weeks. I’ve been camping plenty of times.”

“But why won’t you take a sec?”

“I don’t want to take a sec,” she insisted. “I want to enjoy the experience. I want to be one with the land. I don’t need a sec for that. Look.” She pulled a small device from the smaller belt pack on the bed. “I’m taking a beacon with me. If I get in trouble, the PK’s will come running. It’ll only be for a couple of weeks. I’ll be fine.”

Irony bites, she reflected. She reached for her belt pack, where the beacon was packed, but realized it had been twisted around, apparently when she fell, and was now resting under her. She tried to reach around and grasp it, but her own pinned-down body prevented her from pulling it free.

“Damn.” She’d have to free herself first, which was going to be tough... and painful. But it was better than just lying there.

She realized only then the significance of the fact that she was lying flat on her back: *Her pack wasn’t on her back anymore*. A new wave of panic swept her, and she threw her head about wildly, giving rise to a severe headache, until she spied the pack just above her head on the ground. Sighing heavily, she reached out and pulled it alongside her. She examined the pack: The straps seemed to be strong, although one of them was half-torn from the pack... she had apparently knocked it free when she fell. But it seemed to be otherwise intact.

Then she went about opening one of the side pouches. First she removed the first aid kit, and extracted a container of painkillers. She took one pill, and washed it down with a single gulp from her canteen. Then she pulled a small plastic container from the pouch, containing a quick-energy food supplement, which she was afraid she was going to need. The soft dirt coating her fingers made it too hard for her to open the packet, so she dug into a half-buried pants pocket, and eventually freed a medium-sized pocketknife from within. She thumbed open the well-used but sharp knife, and used it to cut the packet open. Then, being careful to hold the packet to avoid getting dirt on the food bars inside, she took a bite out of a bar and settled back on the ground.

She was feeling better after the first swallow of food. After a moment, she found herself looking at the knife in her other hand, and thinking of the person who gave it to her.

David Spring was much older than her—probably older than twenty!—when she’d first met him. He was the lander who regularly took their Frontier troop outside of Midland on camping

trips. He was slim, but well built, with straight hair that hung just above the base of his neck. He could handle packs so large that the other girls would sigh, and the boys would gape like idiots.

And he knew the land. He had spent most of his life on the frontier, mostly near Midland, occasionally in other territories. He often visited Midland to trade or buy tools or supplies for other landers, and while he was there, he frequently volunteered to take any Frontier club groups on camping trips. Every Frontier club wanted their children to learn from David, because they knew he lived off the land the way Man was meant to. Everyone in Midland who had a child in a Frontier club knew David Spring.

She still remembered the first trip she'd taken with David Spring and the rest of her troop. They had traveled about the forest outside of Midland, sleeping under the open stars, catching fish and picking fruits and vegetables for food. David told them about all the things they came in contact with, either entertaining stories, or important details that could mean their survival. And he had an uncanny way of holding the children's attention when he spoke... he was a natural-born storyteller, if not an outright hypnotist. If he told you, you remembered. She'd never forgotten a single lesson he'd taught her.

After a perfect four days of camping and hiking, she'd watched as he showed them how to break up a camp. He spent an amazingly short amount of time spreading fire ashes, burying food scraps and bones, collecting the small amount of waste they had generated into a single small bag, and generally making the clearing they had just spent four days in look like they had only just found it, using just a knife and a collapsible shovel. When he was through, he smiled at the clearing, then turned to the children.

"This land has now been restored to the condition in which we found it. The Earth gave of itself... the land for us to sleep on, the fire we burned for heat and light, the fish we caught for food... all so we could stay here. Now that we are leaving, we must give something back. The bones and scraps we buried will fertilize the soil and make the plants grow, which will feed the animals that come here to stay like we did. The ashes will also fertilize the ground here. And we leave the clearing the way we found it, so the animals who come here after us will not be disturbed about our visit. In this way, we confirm our place in nature, as a part of it all.

"We are no greater and no less than all of this wonderful world around us. When you are out here, you must be aware of that. You must live as though you are physically connected to nature. My people call this, 'being one with the land'. When you are One with the land, you understand your place in nature. You understand when you must give, and when you may receive."

She reached into another pouch on her pack, and took out her hand shovel. She reached out and tried to dig into the dirt covering her legs, but it was heavy, and full of rocks. The exertion, the awkward angle, and the pain in her leg caused by the strain, proved to be too much for her, and she could only manage to dig for a minute or so before she collapsed in pain and exhaustion. Then she would lay there for long minutes before she could muster up the strength to try again.

She managed to get through four sessions of digging like this, before she gave up in tears. She jammed the shovel against the ground next to her, and tried again to pull the waist bag out from behind her. But she was still too tired to manage that, and again she collapsed, fighting tears of pain and frustration.

She realized it was already getting dark... indeed, would be dark as pitch in about ten minutes without a fire or appreciable moonlight. She wrestled with fear of being exposed and helpless all

night, but despite her anxiety, her sheer exhaustion eventually won out, and soon she was fast asleep.

She dreamed of last year. She was in camp with four of her friends, who had all hiked up with her. Some of them had brought secs, and she used one to call home. She assured her worried but loving parents that she was all right.

The entire camping trip seemed to repeat itself for her. She remembered swimming in the nearby lake, realizing with delight that she was swimming amongst schools of fish. She felt part of the environment then, she knew, and it had been an exhilarating experience. She remembered the sunrise they watched, before setting out for their next camp. The relaxed pace of setting up camp came back to her, the joking they had done during, the playing afterward. They had caught some fowl along the way, and prepared it over the fire. She sat down to eat hers, and looked up to see David there.

But David had not been with them last year. Yet here he was now, and in typical dream fashion, it was not at all strange or surprising to her. He sat across the fire, holding a piece of bird in one hand. He was young and beautiful, and at that moment, she adored him. He took a bite from the meat in his hand, and regarded her, chewing.

“You know,” he said, “when the natives of this land killed game for food, they apologized to it for having to take its life, and explained that they were all part of the life cycle of the land; that, someday, they too would die and in so doing, feed another. Then, when they ate, they would thank the game for nourishing them, as they would someday nourish the animals that would survive them. Most natives who led a full life did not mind dying, because they expected their spirit to go to a better place, just as they knew their bodies would return to the earth and continue the food cycle. They knew they were all part of a larger whole.”

She remembered hearing this story from David many times, when she was growing up, and she nodded. “They knew they were One with the land.”

David stood up, and held out a hand to her. She stood up and put her hand in his, and they walked through the dark paths of the forest. Soon, they came to a break in the trees. When she looked up, she saw what looked to her like a river flowing upside-down through the sky, as wide as the sky itself. The incredible river seemed to bend down far in the distance, and touch the land beyond. Then the river flowed across the land, coming in contact with the everything on the Earth. She looked to the other horizon, to see the river rise up from the Earth and meet itself, in a loop that encompassed the entire Earth and sky.

She could clearly see that the river was filled with life, not water. It was the everlasting cycle of life that David had described to her many times, that the native Namericans had always known about, that she had never before seen until just now. It seemed infinitely large, larger than the Earth itself. This was the true scale of Nature. And she realized she was standing deep within its gently meandering current. She could see the lives flowing past her, all around her. One of them looked up at her, and she recognized it as the fowl she had just eaten. It looked at her calmly, expectantly, knowing someday she would understand, when it was her time to surrender to the current of lives and become part of the cycle... one with the land.

She awoke with an appetite, having eaten little the day before. She reached for her backpack, hoping she hadn't already eaten the...

...and realized the backpack had moved.

She fought down momentary panic, as she twisted painfully about to find the pack. There it was, still in reach, but barely. She could see it had been torn roughly open, and some of its contents lay scattered around it. She managed to get a hand on it and pull it to her. She discovered the well-wrapped food had not been found, and she held the pack close against her as she ate, surveying the woods around her.

When she was through eating, she put the pack aside and, still watching the shadows, took her shovel in hand and began working at the dirt and rocks still pinning her. She felt only slightly stronger than yesterday, and found herself making the same kind of progress she had made then, alternating between a few seconds' work and a few minutes' rest.

She was aware that she could hear very little in the forest around her, save the few birds that flew among the trees, crickets, and a distant cicada somewhere. She felt very lonely all of a sudden, but the sudden melancholy seemed to calm her, and she kept digging.

Suddenly she felt a shift in the dirt. She stopped, considered for a moment, then pulled. Her leg moved! She dropped the shovel and used her hands to pull at the dirt still covering her lower body. When she knew she was free of enough dirt, she shoved her hands into the ground on either side of her and pushed. She barely moved at first, and she could feel the protest in her broken leg, but adrenaline spurred her on. All at once, she started slowly sliding out from the dirt. She cried out in pain from her leg, but kept pulling. When her leg finally emerged, it was badly emasculated and turned wickedly to one side, now bleeding profusely with no dirt holding back the flow.

The mere sight of it caused her to pause, and in that moment, all her drive seemed to ebb. She suddenly slumped back onto her back, staring at the bloody leg. Then strain, shock and blood loss took their toll: Her vision blurred, dimmed, and went black. Her consciousness followed a second later, and she passed out.

She hadn't known what time it was when she blacked out, so when she came to, she didn't know how long she'd been out. Her head throbbed, not much less painfully than her leg. She knew she had probably lost a lot of blood, and she needed to bandage and immobilize her leg. She reached for her backpack.

It had moved again. If she had still been buried, she would never be able to reach it where it was now. It had been manhandled worse than before, this time, and she could see a number of the food packets had been torn open, their contents eaten. She lifted up on her arms, and started to drag herself toward the pack.

A nearby growl stopped her cold. She slowly turned her head to the right, peering into the dark of the brush beyond her. At first she could see nothing. Then, a shape moved, a shadow against a shadow. Wolf. Once she knew what to look for, she made out a pair of eyes, staring steadily back at her. Then she realized there was two pair of eyes. Maybe more... she knew wolves usually traveled in packs.

She suddenly felt very weary. Suddenly remembering the belt pack, she reached behind her and pulled it around to the front. She extracted the small radio beacon from the pack, and regarded it silently. At that moment, she heard another growl. She looked over. The two wolves had moved into the clearing, and were slowly approaching her. She regarded the beacon again. Slowly, she placed it on the ground, and settled back down on her side. As she relaxed and laid back, she saw the wolves approach.

David would understand. She would receive nothing more from this life. It was time, finally, for her to give.

Just before she blacked out, she thought she had said aloud, "Apology accepted. And, you're welcome."

He fired off a screamer that he had pulled out of the cycle, and the remaining wolf at the bottom of the rockslide yelped and ran off. Thomas Beak carefully worked his way down the slope adjacent the rockslide, keeping the object of his attention in sight. He reached the level where the rockslide ended, and approached the edge of it, keeping a wary eye out for wolves that weren't chased away by the screamer.

He could tell it was a corpse from the top of the ridge, but only now that he was up close could he tell that it had been a young woman. One leg was clearly broken, and the signs around it suggested that she might have been caught under the rockslide nearby. Doubtless the girl that he and the rest of the Peacekeepers had been searching for, although her body had been so severely torn up by the wolves that visual identification would be impossible. He had expected that, and had also brought a DNA sampler from the cycle, just in case. After all, there was a good chance this was an unregistered lander... Thomas knew there had to be quite a few in a territory this size.

He dropped down to one knee, searched out a relatively clean spot, and pushed the sampler against it. It would take quite a while to make a remote identification, and it would only be considered 60% correct out in the field, so he would have to arrange to have the body shipped back to Midland for proper identification. He didn't look forward to calling the parents, and informing them of their loss. Just before he rose, he noticed a small object about a meter from the body. It was an emergency beacon, unused. Thomas took a small pouch out of a pocket and, using a stick, pushed the beacon into the pouch. The subject might have fingerprints on file, in case a clean DNA scan proved impossible, so it was worth holding onto.

Thomas stood up and surveyed the scene. Thomas had seen enough kills like this one to recognize certain signs. The landslide had, of course, caught her, and it was most certainly the cause of the broken leg. She had eventually managed to dig herself free with a hand shovel, but probably not before being discovered by the wolves. They had probably taken their liberties on her backpack, before going after her. It was clear from the condition of the body, and its position, that she hadn't put up a fight with the wolves. That could mean she was already dead when they reached her. But the unused beacon, so far from the body, puzzled him. She could have dropped it had she been surprised... but somehow, he didn't believe she had been. And just a few second's warning would have been enough time to press the red stud on the beacon.

Unless she knew there was no point. Thomas nodded to himself. She must have known that it was too late for her. She must have been weak from her leg injury, possibly semi-conscious. She knew she wasn't going to get home on her own, and that the beacon wouldn't have summoned anyone fast enough. She had apparently accepted her death, possibly even welcomed it, and let it take her.

Although his official report would not reflect it, he would have called it a "natural death". It was, in fact, a death that anyone in his tribe would have been proud of. But the Guard didn't see it quite the same way as his tribe would have, so it would have to be "Death by animal attack". Somehow, Thomas didn't think she'd want it to read that way, either.

He keyed his sec and brought it up close to his mouth. "Peacekeepers, this is Beak. Call off the search and home in on my signal. I've found her."

A moment later, Frank DeJay's voice came over the sec. *"This is Frank... I see your cycle from here, and I'll be right there. Is she all right?"*

"She's dead. Killed by wolves."

"Damn. I was hoping we'd get lucky. Hope she didn't suffer too much."

Thomas shook his head, though no one could see it. "No, I don't think she suffered. She was One with the land."

"Excuse me?"

Thomas searched for another way to put it. "She knew it was her time," he said finally, and switched off his sec. "I should be so at-peace when *I* go," he said to himself.

PERSONAL CELL ENTRY #614: Living For a Living

It was a bright, sunny day, and a cool breeze wafted around the shaded north face of Midland to cool the meadows to the west and east. Toy Laird took the scene in with a smile of contentment. It wasn't often that she had a chance to enjoy such wonderful weather with Gil these days, she reflected. This was what he was missing by working all those long hours at the docks. When he was off, it was often dark, or too cool to spend outside, or raining... but today was perfect. It would be perfect, the perfect time for her to work her Master Plan.

Toy had laid out a large blanket, and placed a wicker basket in its center. Two cylindrical holders on the basket's side contained a bottle of wine, and silk napkins, respectively. A third holder contained eating utensils and plates. Toy was busy laying the plates and utensils out when she heard a rhythmic swish-swishing through the grass, and looked over her shoulder.

Gil Hamundsen waved as he caught Toy's eye. He was a ruggedly handsome man, whose well-muscled frame made itself evident through the light shirt and shorts he had on. He was a tall man; but Toy was also tall, as tall as her brother, Teez, and they made a good-looking couple together. He walked through the grass with a lively step that belied his size, and caused his sandy hair to bob in the breeze.

He reached Toy and the blanket and folded his tall frame down into the grass, then leaned forward and kissed Toy. "Hi, Toy. I'm not late, am I?"

"No, you're right on time," she replied. "I got here early, so I just started to set things up." She opened the basket as she spoke, and began removing small containers and placing them on the blanket. "Today turned out so much nicer than your last day off."

"Sure did," Gil smiled. "This all looks great. Can I help with anything?"

"No, just open 'em up and dig in." Toy popped the seal on one container, revealing biscuits that immediately filled the air with the smell of salted butter.

"Mmmm, boy! That smells like heaven!" Gil pulled a biscuit out of the container, and bit off half of it. "Stop that, you pig!" Toy chided him amusedly. "There's plenty here. Don't get stuffed on the bread alone!"

"Couldn't help it," he mumbled around mouthfuls of bread. "It smelled so good. What else do we have?"

"Nothing but the best for my honey," Toy replied, opening containers one by one. "Peach cobbler. Farmer's salad. Roman grapes. Munster cheese and crackers... and, especially for you, arctic salmon from Geneva..."

"Oh, boy, I can't believe you got salmon!"

"... and the piece d' resistance: Sirloin of beef... and Chateau Bleu to wash it all down." She opened the container of sirloin and pulled the wine into view at the same time, displaying them like prizes.

Gil shook his head at the spread. "Look at all this! Toy, you really didn't have to do all this for me."

"Oh, I wanted to," Toy explained. "You've been doing such nice things for me, I wanted to treat you to something special. Here, let me serve up the sirloin for you." She carefully removed the two sirloins from the heated container with a fork, and placed them on the plates before them. She picked up a knife, cut a bite-sized piece off of one sirloin, and held it up to Gil's mouth. Gil

took the offering between his teeth and slid it slowly off the fork. He chewed it slowly, and his face took on a look of angelic calm.

“What do you think?” Toy asked.

“Hon, I’ve had beef before,” Gil finally managed after swallowing the morsel. “But this may be the best beef I’ve ever had. And I didn’t even know you knew how to *cook* beef. Where did you get it?”

“Actually, Teez showed me how to do that,” Toy claimed as she spooned potato salad onto her plate. “Go on, dig in.”

They began to engage in small talk as they filled their plates and ate. Gil’s end of the conversation occasionally came around to the docks he worked in, below Midland, where he loaded and unloaded ships that passed on the river below the mall. Mostly he talked about some of the ships he’d seen, or sailors he’d pumped about world traveling by sea. Then he would swing the conversation back to Toy.

Toy didn’t say much about her work, helping to tend one of the immense rock gardens on twenty-nine. It was very low-pressure work, after all, never a bother to do, always as relaxing as just sitting and looking at it. She was always bringing the conversation back to Gil, trying to find out more about his years on the frontier before he moved to Midland.

Since they had first met, they had found each other intensely interesting, and had quickly developed a strong relationship. They didn’t see much of each other, however, thanks to his work at the docks. Toy wasn’t happy with the arrangement, and it made her crazy to know she was the cause of the situation in the first place. But she had decided that, if she had caused this, she could fix it, too.

Today was the day.

“Isn’t it lovely out here today?” Toy asked. “Remember three weeks ago, when we tried to go for a walk to the south hills?”

“Yeah,” Gil smiled. “My jacket took a week to dry. I must admit,” he said mock seriously, “this is much, much better.”

“We really need to do this more often, you know? I mean, without all this food, but we could come outside more often.”

“Well, yeah,” Gil began, mumbling through a mouthful of sirloin. He took the time to swallow, before he went on. “But you know I work too much to come out here that often.”

“I know. I wanted to talk to you about that.” Toy took a sip of wine, and put her plate down on the blanket. “You know, you really don’t have to work so many hours in a week. No one else works as many hours as you, Gil. Six hours a day, four days on, two days off... it’s so much.”

“It’s not that much,” Gil countered. “I worked a hell of a lot more when I lived on the frontier. Besides, what about the things I get you? They’re nice, aren’t they?”

“Oh, yes,” Toy replied, “they’re wonderful.” She almost unconsciously fingered the bracelet on her left wrist. Gil had purchased it for her last week, a beautiful metal band with jeweled inserts. “But you know you don’t have to buy me that much. And you certainly don’t have to work like a slave to afford them!”

"I'm not working like a slave!" Gil protested. "It's just loading work at the dock. And I've seen how much you liked the things I buy you. I *like* buying things for you."

Toy started to speak, then stopped and closed her mouth. She considered a moment, then took a sip of wine. She held up the glass as if to toast him, and asked, "How do you like the Chateau Bleu?"

Gil picked up his glass, touched it to hers with a mild *ting* of crystal. "It's delicious."

"You know, there's a story behind the Bleu," Toy said. "Did you ever meet Frank DeJaye's brother, Tomas?"

"I don't think I've met Frank DeJaye."

"Yes, you did: He's one of the Peacekeepers."

"Oh, I do remember. No, I don't know his brother."

"Well, Tomas was supposed to be a big wine connoisseur. He was bragging to Frank that he knew wines so well. Well, Frank decided to play a joke on him. He borrowed a bottle of Bleu from Teez, and emptied it. Then he refilled it with a bottle of Reed Jacobs. That's a local wine. And he gave some to Tomas."

"Could he tell the difference?"

"Nope," Toy said. "Frank ribbed him about it for weeks... he probably still does!" She took another sip of wine. "I told you that to tell you, he never switched the wine back."

"I wondered if that was where you were going with that story!" Gil smiled and held his glass up to the light, then took another sip. "Well, it still tastes great to me. Of course, I was never big wine drinker, so I don't suppose I'd know the difference either."

"Well, all that counts is that you enjoy it, and you're having a nice time. I'm having a wonderful time, just being here with you. And I'm so glad you like everything I brought. You know, it didn't take long to prepare all this food."

"It must have taken a while to get everything together, though," Gil said. "I mean, the tomatoes aren't in season around here, and I don't remember seeing any in the market the last time I was there."

"I'll have to take you to Andrea's store sometime. She has plenty of fresh tomatoes. You just have to know where to find them."

"What about the Roman grapes?"

"Same store. Andrea's."

Gil looked at the blanket in mild disbelief. "Okay... the salmon. That didn't come from around here." "Well, that was a lucky break," Toy said. "A friend of mine was coming out to visit from Metropolis, and I had him bring me some."

"Humph..." Gil was looking intently at the picnic now, clearly dubious about the ease of obtaining all the dishes before him. Finally, he leveled an arm at the beef. "The sirloin! No one has beef in Midland. No one *eats* beef in Midland! And it costs more than that salmon! Where did you get it?"

"Did you really like the sirloin?"

"Yes, it's great, but..."

“Good, because we were sort of guinea pigs. It’s not beef.”

“...Huh?”

“It’s not beef,” Toy repeated. “Teez got it from a guy who’s hoping to market it for the inventor, some guy named Gino... something. His last name’s got half a dozen syllables in it.”

“But if it’s not beef... I mean, I know it’s not vegetable...”

“Well, I may be wrong when I say it’s not beef. But, from what Teez told me, it’s not taken from a cow.”

“What animal do they get it from?”

“They don’t. It’s supposed to be cloned.”

“Cloned?” Gil stared at the meat on his plate. “No way. It looks just like beef... it’s got the right grain. It tastes like beef, and I’ve had real beef! Cloned muscle tastes different, and has no grain at all. How could they clone this?”

“Well, it’s supposed to have something to do with this guy’s new process,” Toy replied, taking a bite of her sirloin and considering her words. “Teez said he grows the muscle cells on racks that simulate the shape and load of an animal’s body... like synthetic bones and tendons. So the meat grows into the same shape it would on a real animal. And he uses a chemical solution to feed it that has the same elements and impurities found in the grains most cows eat. Then he just harvests the fully-grown muscle and sells it for food. Great, huh?”

“That’s wild,” Gil nodded, taking another bite and chewing it slowly. “And I sure can’t tell any difference. But isn’t it expensive?”

“I don’t know. Teez got it from his friend for free, to try it out. I don’t know how much it’s costing Gino to make it. But I think it’s a marvelous idea, myself. It may mean we’ll all be eating beef regularly again, like our ancestors used to. And without all the cost and environmental problems caused by keeping herds of cows for food. Not to mention slaughtering them.”

“You may be right,” Gil said. “But are you really telling me that all this,” he waved a hand to take in everything on the blanket, “was either cheap, or free, and all gotten locally?”

“That’s right,” Toy said. “And it still tastes just as good.” When Gil didn’t respond, Toy continued. “Look, Gil, I just want you to understand that I don’t care if you give me expensive presents... but I don’t want to not see you, because you’re spending all your time working to make money to buy me expensive presents. I’d rather see you, then stare at this bracelet, nice as it is. Besides, how are you going to get used to living in Midland like everybody else, if you’re going to be working three times harder than everyone? I mean, it’s not like you have to work for a living anymore.”

“I know, but I can’t get used to not having to work for a living. This ‘living level’ just seems so strange.”

“It’s not, once you get used to it. Everyone in Midland gets the same ‘living level’ credit, plus special needs, so no one goes without basic necessities. There’s enough for everyone. You only have to work for extra credit, to buy expensive items. Plenty of people don’t work at all, and it’s no big deal.”

“Okay, I’m getting the message,” Gil nodded. “But I’m just... so used to hard work. What’ll I do with myself?”

“Oh, I’ll think of something,” Toy purred at him. “In the meantime, why don’t you cut your hours back to, say... a three day week, five hours a day?”

“That’s all?”

“Well, we’ll see how you get used to that, then we can cut you back to standard working hours later... four hours, twice a week.”

“Geez... how can you mallers do so little work and still keep in shape?”

“We find other ways to exercise,” Toy replied.

“Yeah? Like what?”

“Eat your biscuit.”

“So, the Master Plan worked, huh?” Teez took a bite out of his salad, chewing through a big smile. His sister sat across from him at the table, tearing a piece of bread from the loaf. The two siblings regularly ate together, since they lived separately and alone, so they could keep up with each other’s goings on.

“It sure did,” Toy replied. “I got him to cut back to a 5/3 week, and I’ll cut him back even more later.”

“He isn’t freaking out over less money, is he?”

“No,” she said. “I’ve been taking him to some of the places I shop, and showing him how to find the best places. He’s already found places where he can save a lot of money shopping.”

“That’s good. According to most stats I’ve read, a lot of landers have this kind of trouble adjusting to living in the malls. Especially farmers. They just can’t get used to the fact that they don’t have to work all day, just to make ends meet. Most of them come around, though, in about a season.”

“Well, I don’t want it to take that long with Gil,” Toy said. “I’d go nuts if I had to go through this with him all summer. Better I speed up the process now... he’ll thank me for it, later.”

“That’s the spirit,” Teez said wryly. “Adapt him, or kill him. Oh: How’d you like the beef? George was asking me about it the other day.”

“Hey, that stuff’s great! It’s hard to believe that beef isn’t taken from an animal.”

“Incredible, isn’t it?” Teez agreed. “I’d love to see how this guy Gino does it. He’s supposed to be putting a presentation together that’ll be on the network at some point, but I don’t know when he expects to finish it.”

“Well, if he manages to keep costs down, I’d love to buy some of it... you can tell George that, and have him pass it on.”

“I will. That’s just the kind of feedback he’s looking for, so he can decide whether he wants to be a local supplier.”

“Well, if he doesn’t, let me know, because I know just the guy to do that job,” Toy said.

“No... not Gil!”

“Sure,” Toy said. “You should have seen how he raved over that meat... and he’s eaten real beef, so he knows what it should taste like. Besides, if it’s as successful as I think it will be, it would make Gil plenty of money. That’ll make it easy for him to keep me stocked in jewelry!”

PERSONAL CELL ENTRY #1123: Brothers and Blood

It was early in the day, and the shadow of Midland still stretched almost three-quarters of a kilometer across the land and into the forest northwest of the mall. The sky was clear and relatively cloudless today, so the edge of Midland's huge shadow was well defined along the grassy hills, and only lightly scattered where it reached the tree line. It was noticeably cooler in the shade of Midland, though not uncomfortably so.

Almost in the edge of transition between light and shadow, a man came out of the forest, heading for Midland. He rode on a tall horse, reddish-brown with a single white spot between his eyes. The horse was saddled, and harnessed to a small two-wheeled cart that rolled along behind. The square bed of the cart was covered with bolts of cloth and blankets, all handmade and of fine quality.

Once the man, horse and cart were past the tree line and out in the open, the man headed for one of the ground openings on the sunlit side of Midland. He knew how well the sun would catch the colors in the cloth, and was smart enough to exploit such an effect. Sure enough, before he was close enough to hear the conversation-level voices of the people working and milling around the ground entrance, people were pointing at him and calling back into the mall. After a moment, he heard someone shout his name: "Long Sun! Will Long Sun!" and he waved back casually.

By the time Will Long Sun reached the wide concrete apron at the ground entrance, a few people had come out of Midland and were approaching him, smiling and waving. "Hey, Will!" "Long time no see, Will!" "How've you been keeping?" When he reached the first of these greeters, Will stopped and swung down from his horse, and extended a hand to the closest of the men. They all greeted each other like long-lost friends, swapping quick questions and answers about weather, family, business, ages and the miscellaneous things that develop between friends over the years.

Eventually, they were joined by two more, a man and a woman, both older than most of the group gathered there. The woman held out her arms when she saw Will. "Hello, Will, you charmer! How are you?" Will accepted a strong hug from the woman. "Fine, fine. How are you, Millie? Ben?"

"Oh, we're fine, Will," the man addressed as Ben nodded. He reached out and patted the horse on the snout. "How are you, Lightfoot? Still strong as a bull, aren't you?" The horse tossed back its head and whinnied, causing laughter among the crowd. "So, Will, how was the season for the South Cayache?"

"See for yourself," Will replied. He stepped back to the cart and grasped the edge of the blankets on top of the pile. He pulled the blankets back, exposing the cloth bolts below. The bright colors of the cloth glowed in the morning sun, and garnered quite a few approving noises among the crowd. Then he rolled the bolts back, exposing small wooden cases below.

Will opened two of the closest cases, stepping out of the way for everyone to see. Inside the cases were painted figurines, from five to fifteen centimeters long. They ran the gamut from men and women, to various animals, to totem poles and spirit sticks. Each was exquisitely done in fired clay and hand-painted with natural paints by members of the Cayaches, just like the cloths and blankets. The Cayaches sold these hand-made items seasonally, in exchange for supplies from Midland. Will Long Sun was a regular visitor to Midland, being the one who brought the crafts in from the frontier on a seasonal basis and carried the supplies back to the Cayache.

“Ah, looks like a fine collection, Will,” Ben said after examining the cartfull of merchandise. “We’ll give you a good price for this lot. Why don’t we take it into the post, and you can sit yourself down while I go through the cart?”

“Yes,” Millie agreed, “I’ll fix you something to eat. Come on.”

Will agreed, and after a minute’s more allowing the others to examine the products on the cart, Will led the horse and cart into Midland behind Ben and Millie.

The entrance opened into a wide concourse, lined with numerous small shops and crafts stands. This open market area was set-up to cater to visitors, travelers and landers, who often entered through the ground entrance and carried on transactions with the vendors for everything, from food to tools, from art to clothing. It had a timeless look to it, appearing not too different than what a similar street in Morocco might have looked like 500 years ago. And it sounded very similar to an ancient market, as well, with vendors hawking their wares to passersby, arguments over prices, quality discussions, and general camaraderie. The real difference was in the atmosphere, for although there was a spirit of competition between the many vendors, there was no real urgency to the event, since none of the people in the market were in any danger of starving if their wares remained unsold. So even beyond the bickering and dickering, a general feeling of boisterous fun permeated the market.

Ben, Millie and Will Long Sun reached the entrance to their shop. Theirs was larger than many others, due to the fact that they did not sell to the individuals in the market; rather, they bought or traded goods with traders, like Will, and sold the goods to the other vendors, around the market and throughout Midland. It was more of a warehouse than a shop, and Ben and Millie were considered brokers. Will brought Lightfoot to a stop under the front awning, and began unloading the blankets, cloth and cases onto a large table in front of the shop. Millie went to the back of the shop, where a kitchenette was setup, and busied herself preparing a plate of food for Will. Ben, in the meantime, hunted around for a moment for his IS pad, found it on a back counter, and came back to the table of Will’s merchandise, ready to tally up the totals and work out a value for the collection.

So it usually went, four times a year, with Will and Ben and Millie. Will had his list of goods that his people, the Cayache, expected him to bring back with him. Just glancing over the items he’d brought to Midland, Will expected to have no trouble affording all the things his people wanted, and some nice extras besides. He might even stay a few days and take in a hospitality house, or see a show, he mused, as he leaned against a counter eating a bowl of couscous and beans, watching Ben go over the totals.

All around the market, people wandered about, making deals, or just socializing. Will had his back to the rest of the market, but he could hear quite a number of conversations clearly, and mostly ignored them or tuned them out. Millie joined him in the front of the store while Ben worked over the table, and the two engaged in animated conversation over the last season’s news.

At one point, in the middle of Millie’s description of a day she’d spent in Parador, Will suddenly realized he wasn’t listening to her. He had been distracted by something, but he didn’t know what. Suspecting he might have heard something from some other conversation nearby in the market, he tried to split his attention between Millie and the market behind him. He could hear a man and woman bantering over a dress, other men discussing a fight somewhere in the mall, three others trying to move a large cabinet, an old man teaching a younger...

Suddenly Will started. Millie, who hadn't noticed his attention wander earlier, stopped speaking abruptly when she saw him jerk to attention. He swiveled his head about, trying to look over the crowd outside the shop. Millie watched Will's rapidly bobbing head for a moment, then asked, "Will? What's wrong?"

Will swung his head back to Millie. There was a look of shock and anger reflected in his eyes, and he seemed to look past Millie. She shrunk back slightly, and again asked, "Will...?"

Then Will's head snapped back out at the market, and he seemed to fix on something. He swung his head back to Millie, and barked, "I'll be back!" Then he pushed past Millie, dashed around the counter, and flung himself across the market, heedless of the people he jostled along the way.

He angled for the men discussing the fight in the mall. As he approached, he could hear their voices more clearly. "...of animals! They had half the bar torn up before the PKs showed up!" "...should have seen the way Beak bounced that punk off the wall and pitched him out the window!" ...a big guy, that Beak! I've seen 'im, he can move, man..." "Beak and half the regulars tossed them kids outta there..."

Will Long Sun barely managed to stop when he reached the men, and ended up running into two of the men closest to him. His sudden impact with the group brought them all up short, and they turned to stare at the interloper.

"Beak!" Will barked out. "Beak! Thomas Beak! Is that who you're talking about?"

One of the men stared at the wild Cayache, as if afraid of being attacked by him. He managed to stammer, "Y-yeah... Thomas Beak. That's the guy..."

"Where is he?" Will demanded of the crowd, looking at each man in turn. "Where can I find him?"

"He..." one man started to say, and when Will turned his wild eyes towards him, he had to pause to swallow a lump in his throat. "...he's the new PK Captain. You know, the Peacekeepers. Go to the station. On eighty-six..."

But Will was moving after he heard the word, "Peacekeeper". Leaving the men standing flabbergasted behind him, he ran over to one of the IS kiosks around the market. He had spent enough time in Midland on his visits to know how to operate the kiosks. He stabbed at the control surface and demanded, "Locate Peacekeeper Beak!" After a moment, the kiosk displayed a map of Midland's interior, a three-dimensional diagram that rotated in the imaginary space behind the screen. It spun about its axis, showing two flashing lights: One showing Will Long Sun's location, on the ground level; and another shown moving along level 65, marked as a residential level.

Will paused over the map for only a moment, then spun and bounded out of the market, his long black hair flying. He located a bank of declifts, the cars designed to transport passengers rapidly between groups of ten floors at a time. Entering one, he blurted out, "Seventy." Another passenger started to enter the car with him, but Will unceremoniously stiff-armed him away, and stabbed the button to close the door.

"I told you, you wouldn't get away without being wrapped up, didn't I?"

Frank grinned at Thomas, who was testing his left leg by shifting his weight on and off of it. He'd had a chair brought down against it during the fight in the hospitality house, and it had

taken on an ugly purple bruise that ran from his knee midway to his ankle. When they had brought some of the brawlers down to the hospital for treatment of their fight-related injuries, Thomas had tried to pretend the leg did not bother him, and had even told Frank and San to keep it to themselves. But his limp was obvious to the doctors in attendance, and one of them practically pushed him into a wheelchair to get him off the leg and into a treatment room.

The injury was not bad, just sore, and the doctor had wrapped his leg in a treated bandage. He was already feeling silly for protesting so much, considering the chemicals in the bandage that were leeching into his leg were already speeding the healing process, and making it feel less tender as well. But the cane someone had pushed into his hand was definitely unnecessary, and Thomas refused to use it, instead resorting to carrying it at the midpoint like an umbrella.

“Yeah, I know all the doctors here,” Frank was continuing. “You’re lucky they didn’t put a cast on you.” Thomas brandished the cane at Frank, who jerked back in mock alarm. “Don’t give ‘em any ideas, Frank. Is everyone taken care of, then? Where’s San?”

“She was just checking on... oh, there she is, now.” Frank indicated the hallway beyond, from which San was approaching. She took a look at Thomas’ leg, and the bandage that clearly bulged under his pants leg, and smiled.

“Not a word out of you, either,” Thomas growled, but didn’t bother to hide a smile. “Are the boys secured?”

“All of them,” San replied. “They’re in the security ward, mostly resting. They’ll be all right there until tomorrow morning.”

“Fine, then, let’s get out of here,” Thomas said. “We’ve got some reports to process, and Benoit isn’t going to get his insurance for the bar until we do our part.” He led the other two Peacekeepers out of the treatment area and through the hospital lobby, emerging onto the level sixty-five concourse.

As they turned to the left and headed in the direction of the lifts that would take them back to their station’s level, they did not notice the figure that had been loitering just outside of the hospital lobby. The figure detached himself from the wall he’d been leaning on, rapidly walked up behind the three Peacekeepers, and put a large hand on Thomas’ shoulder. Thomas was pulled about by the hand, before Frank or San noticed anything was happening. Thomas fixed a startled gaze on the person who had spun him around, and recognized him immediately. “Will!...”

That was all he managed to get out. As Frank and San realized Thomas had been detained, and looked over their shoulders to see what was going on, Will Long Sun was already throwing a massive fist. It caught the surprised Thomas full on the jaw and snapped his head to one side with a loud smack. Thomas toppled backward against Frank, who tried to twist and catch him at the same time, with the result that they both ended up sprawled on the concourse in a heap.

“What the..!” San leapt at Will instantly. He tried to feint and block her lunge, but she slipped expertly past his block. Grabbing his outthrust arm, she brought it up behind his back and, in a second’s time, had him in a tight headlock. He snarled and twisted, but he could not break lose from her grip. She put an extra squeeze on him to quiet him down. “Who do you think you are,” she grated at him, “jumping a Peacekeeper? Say something, or you’re getting an express trip to ground level!”

Before Will could speak, however, Thomas put out a hand. “Let him loose, San.”

Frank, still struggling out from under Thomas, stopped and stared in disbelief. “Let him loose? He hit you from behind!” San stood stock still, continuing to hold Will in her grip. San and Thomas locked eyes for a good five seconds, before she finally relaxed her hold and pushed Will free.

Will, once released, did not turn to look at San. He had kept his eyes on Thomas during the entire incident, and they still burned on him now. He stood before Thomas, who had lifted himself up to one good knee and regarded Will from there.

“Thomas Falcon Beak, William Long Sun calls you Murderer and Coward!” Will bellowed, loud enough for everyone within fifty meters of the busy concourse to hear. “According to tribal law, I demand you meet me to prove your right to survival!”

Everyone within earshot of the accusation—which was a considerable crowd of people—all went still and silent, focusing on Thomas and Will in the center of the concourse. Someone from a balcony above craned his neck over the side, trying to see what was going on. Will stood heedless of all this, and waited for Thomas’ reply.

Thomas took the scene in from his crouch before Will. Then, leveraging himself up on his uninjured knee, he stood and stepped up to Will. He moved to within inches of him, cocking a warning hand at Frank, who was moving towards them. After casting an eye around the crowd once more, he fixed Will in the eye.

“I was already heard by the tribe, and I have been absolved of any crime. You have no conflict with me.” “You were not heard by *me*,” Will snarled back. “It was my sister you killed out there.” This brought a nervous murmur from the nearby members of the crowd, but Will and Thomas ignored it. “You will answer to me for the death of Gail Long Sun.”

“I was absolved of any crime by the tribe,” Thomas repeated. “Read the tribal cells, Will. It was a horrible accident, that’s all.”

“Then why did you run?” Will cocked his head mockingly, pushing his head closer to Thomas’. “Because you knew you could not tell the same lies to *me*?” He pulled back and shouted again, “I demand you meet me to prove your right to survival—”

“I am not going to fight you, Will, there’s no reason. You *know* what happened. The tribe knows what happened, and they’ve recorded it.”

“You *lied* to the tribe, and you ran to avoid confronting me! By tribal law—”

“Stop it, Will—”

“—*By tribal law, I demand you meet me! You will answer to me for the death of Gail Long Sun!*”

Will Long Sun took one precise step back, still staring down Thomas. “Sunrise, east of Midland. Weapons of your own choosing.”

“I’m not going to fight you, Will!” Thomas said, exasperated.

“Oh, yes you are, Thom.”

And with that, Will spun on a heel and stormed down the concourse, the crowd parting like a wave to let him past.

Thomas watched him go, very aware of the eyes of the crowd upon him. Just behind, San and Frank watched him, too, confusion and silent concern in their eyes. Finally Thomas turned, and

looked at both of them in turn. “We’d better get back to the station,” he said in a casual voice. He turned, wincing a bit as he realized he’d landed on his injured leg, and limped in the direction of the lifts. Frank and San paused a moment, watching him go, then looking at each other. Frank pursed his lips in a disgusted fashion.

“Well,” he stated calmly, “*this* is gonna suck.”

Teez and Reva were waiting in the station when the three Peacekeepers arrived. Both came up out of their seats when the three senior officers walked in, though Reva was just a bit faster at it.

“So how’d it go down there?” Reva asked. “Heard you got your leg banged up. Are you okay?”

“Sure, it was just bruised up,” Thomas replied. He tried to hide what little was left of his limp, as he walked over to his desk and lowered himself into the seat. “Everything quiet up here?”

“Yeah.” Teez stepped around the desk and sat on the couch on the opposite side of the room. “There was a report about a fistfight on 65, but the caller said one of you was on the scene.” Frank and San exchanged silent glances, and Teez picked it up. “What?”

“Actually,” Thomas said, “we were all there. I was the one who got hit.”

“What!” Reva and Teez exclaimed together. Reva, who had been so busy watching Thomas for signs of serious leg injuries, looked Thomas in the face and finally noticed the light bruise that was forming on his chin. She came around the desk and unabashedly put a hand to Thomas’ jaw, lifting his chin to the light. “Someone hit you? Who was it?”

“Believe it or not, he was an old friend.” Thomas pulled his chin back down and brought a hand to his own chin, massaging the bruised area. “A Cayache named Will Long Sun. We grew up together.”

“My friends should treat me so nice,” Frank commented. “Was he serious about the... his sister?” Thomas looked up at Frank, and there was a tinge of sadness in his eyes. “I’m afraid so.”

“What about his sister?” Reva asked.

“You didn’t really...” San started to ask, but couldn’t bring herself to finish.

“No. I didn’t kill her.”

“Kill her!” Reva blurted out. “What happened to his sister?”

Thomas put up a hand to calm Reva and Teez, who were both starting to crowd him. “It’s a long story, okay? And, since we’ve got no place to go right now, sit down. All this is in the Southern Cayache public cells, by the way... available for examination... but I’ll tell you what happened.”

Thomas leaned back in his chair, and the others got comfortable around him. “Like I said, I grew up with Will, and his sister, Gail. For most of our lives, we were part of about eight of us kids who were inseparable... we did everything together. Drove our parents crazy. Some of the people in the tribe had little to do with my family, because we were black, but the kids I hung out with couldn’t have cared less, so they were my closest friends.

“As the years went by, we all began going in different paths, but still tried to spend time together when we could. Will was beginning to go on regular visits to Midland with his father. The others were often going off on lone hunts... you know, boys and girls trying to be adults. I was doing all of that, too. But I was also spending a lot more of my time alone with Gail. We were really too young to know we were in love with each other at first, but we figured it out later.”

Thomas paused long enough to look at Reva, perched on the edge of the desk as she was listening to him. She had a slight smile on her lips, but her eyes reflected the sadness in his own. Frank had poured himself a cup of coffee, and was regarding him silently over wisps of steam.

“Anyway... uh, Will didn’t have a problem with this,” Thomas continued. “We were all still good friends, and he never showed any reservation about my courting his sister. And I wasn’t the only one of the group that was discovering the opposite sex... most of us were involved with someone at the time. It just tended to make our group a bit larger when we got together.

“So. One day a group of us were away from our settlement, camping a few kilometers from the tribe. We’d been out hunting for wild spices, because our crop had gotten ruined in a heavy rainfall. Will wasn’t with us that day... he was on a trip to Midland at the time. We’d collected a good supply, and we were planning to go back the next morning. That evening, we started settling down for the night.

“Well, a few of us couples headed off on our own for awhile, for a little privacy. Gail and I were walking through the brush, looking for a comfortable spot to relax in. We started playing around, chasing each other, not really paying attention to what we were doing.

“The next thing I knew, I ran around a boulder and found myself face to face with a cougar and her cubs.” Thomas heard Reva suck in a mouthful of air, but no one else said a word. “I mean, I ran into her. About the worst thing you can do to a mother cougar. She jumped at me before I knew what was going on, and put me out like a light with one paw.”

Thomas sagged visibly then, before he continued. “The others found me in moments, but they couldn’t bring me around for awhile. When I woke up, I was back at camp. They said they’d heard Gail’s screams for help, and found her being mauled by the cougar. She’d rushed in and tried to help me, and...” Thomas had to pause, and bowed his head for a moment. When he brought it back up, he spoke in a labored voice. “When they arrived, they scared the cougar away, but it was too late to do anything for Gail. She died before I could be revived.”

Thomas had to take another moment before continuing. For a moment, he appeared to be on the verge of tears, but an instant later, he seemed to regain his composure. “I wasn’t in great shape myself: I’d been cut up pretty badly by that paw. They had to carry me halfway back to the settlement, before I was able to walk on my own. When we got back, I told them what happened. The Elders convened a tribunal, which was customary in those circumstances. The others spoke on my behalf, and described the events they had witnessed, and the signs they had seen. The Elders agreed that Gail was killed trying to defend me. They ruled her death as accidental.

“It wasn’t really over, though. Many of the Elders voiced the opinion that I was not a fit warrior, because I had fallen to the cougar in one blow. Many of them looked down on my family and me before this, and now they said that anyone else wouldn’t have let this happen to Gail. They were branding me inferior, and made sure the rest of the tribe knew their opinion.

“I was crushed. Although I wasn’t officially blamed for Gail’s death, I was a pariah in the eyes of the tribe. For days, no one would speak to me or my family, and I spent most of my time

removed from everyone, including my family. In my grief, I was beginning to believe what they were saying.

“But soon, grief turned to rage: I knew I wasn’t at fault, I was being wrongly blamed for Gail’s death. I decided I owed nothing to a tribe that would treat me like that, so I committed myself to leaving. I’d thought in the past about joining the Peacekeepers, and this seemed like the perfect time to go. I came to my parents to inform them of my decision, and started packing. My father suggested I wait for Will and his father to return from Midland, but in my heart I felt I knew what they would say, and I didn’t care to see them.

“So I left. I didn’t know how angry I was back then, or how much of my decision to rush away was caused by guilt, and shame. But those feelings were helpful to me during my first year in the academy. They helped me work harder to prove myself, to be the best at my job. And I never spoke to Will or his father. Of course, they knew I was in the academy, and they could have left me messages if they wanted to see me, but they didn’t. Which was fine with me, because I wanted nothing to do with my past at that time... I was too busy hating them to want to talk to them.

“After awhile, I lost any remaining guilt about my past, or my appearance. But I’ve never forgiven the Elders for casting me out. I’ve visited my parents often, outside of the settlement, and we communicated regularly until they died, but I haven’t visited the Cayaches since I left. Once I became a peacekeeper, I was assigned to other locations... this is the first time I’ve been back to this territory in years.”

Thomas seemed to wind down, and the room became quiet. San was the first to break the silence. “What about the other friends you left behind?”

“A few have kept in touch since then,” Thomas replied. “We never talk about those days, though.”

“Well,” Frank said finally, “at least we know why this guy wants to fight you so bad.”

Reva, realizing she had missed another part of the original incident, threw up her hands. “I hate this!... what fight, now?”

“Long Sun challenged Thomas to a fight outside the mall. And I’ll bet he’s not expecting more than one of you to survive, is he?” Thomas looked at Frank, and shook his head.

“To the death?” Teez spoke plainly. “You’re not going to do it, are you?”

“I’m not planning to, no,” Thomas said. “Most likely, when I don’t show tomorrow morning, he’ll go back to the Cayache, proclaim me a coward, and that’ll be the end of that.”

“No, don’t let him do it, boss. Prove he’s wrong. You don’t have to kill him, maybe, but talk to this guy, at least.” Frank put down the cup of coffee he’d been nursing, and waved a hand in the air before him, as if trying to erase the last few sentences he’d heard. “Thomas, you don’t want to give those Elders more reason to believe you’re an unfit warrior, do you?”

Thomas looked Frank in the eye. “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.”

The next morning came and went. Thomas carried on with his usual morning routine, started his shift on time, and had a fairly normal and uneventful day. There was no reason for him to go outside the mall, so he never discovered if Will Long Sun had actually shown up to confront him that morning. He didn’t need to see him out there, though. Like the old philosophical question about trees falling in the woods, he knew if Will said he would be there, he would have been

there, as inevitably as falling trees made plenty of noise, regardless of who was there to hear them.

About midway through the day, Thomas received a call from Kena-Jo Dolorain. “Commander Beak, I wonder if I could ask you a few questions about your altercation with a lander trader yesterday?”

Thomas smiled. He was a bit surprised that no one had called him the day before about the incident. He found it hard to believe that Kena-Jo, considered one of the best of Midland’s news reporters, had only just heard about his “incident”. Generally, news was compiled from official reports and rewritten by Secretaries, so only stories described as “human interest” were actually written or covered by... humans. But Thomas knew his story would be all over the mall eventually, and had been waiting to hear from someone. “Sure, Kena-Jo. What did you want to know?”

“I understand you were accosted and challenged to a frontier duel yesterday. Is that right?”

Thomas rolled his eyes, but said, “Yes, it is.” He didn’t like the idea of someone referring to Will’s challenge as a “frontier duel”... a phrase that suggested that everyone in the frontier was some kind of barbarian whose idea of justice was Survival Of The Fittest... but he decided to let it go without an argument.

“And I understand the duel was regarding the death of a girl you once knew.”

“That’s right,” Thomas said. “And you’d be doing a great service to her family if you didn’t mention her name in your story.”

“I understand,” Kena-Jo nodded on the sec screen, and Thomas hoped she was being sincere about it. “And I take it then that there is something to the allegation. Can you tell me what happened?”

“Actually, it’s all on Southern Cayache public cells. I’ve looked up the reference number, and I’ll forward it to you. You can study the cells to your satisfaction.”

“For the record, did you kill the girl in question, Commander?”

“No, I didn’t,” Thomas replied coolly. “And the cells will support my statement.”

Kena-Jo nodded again. “You didn’t go out to meet your accuser this morning.” It was a statement of fact, not a question, and Thomas did not reply. “Why wouldn’t you face him?”

“Because,” Thomas said, “I don’t want to see either of us hurt or killed over an accident and a misunderstanding.”

Kena-Jo nodded once more. Thomas guessed she already had her slant on the story ready, and was just looking for a few statements to make it all look good. She would probably read the cells, then decide how badly to portray her subjects. “Thank you, Commander Beak. I’ll be looking over those cells, and if I have any other questions, I’ll call you back.”

“No problem.” The screen went blank, and Thomas considered the interview. At the very least, he would look like the coward he was accused of being, since he hadn’t met Will outside. Here only a few weeks, and already his reputation would be smeared. Still, if that was the worst he got, he’d be thankful.

That night, after his shift was over, he settled into his apartment and began to prepare supper. Discovering he was out of peanuts for his salad, he put in an order to Midland Stores for two

cans. He had to wait for the cans to be “blown” up through the mall’s delivery network, so he stepped into the living room to pick out a program to watch that evening.

A few seconds after stepping into the living room, he heard a thump behind him. He turned back to the kitchen. “That was fast,” he muttered, as he walked over to the delivery chute and opened the panel. His peanuts were not there, however. He glanced around the kitchen, to see if anything had fallen, but he didn’t see anything. A sudden rush from the delivery chute made him pull his hand back, just before the two plastic cans dropped into the chute with a pneumatic *whoosh*.

Thomas removed the cans from the chute, popped one open, and started to mix the peanuts in with the rest of the salad. He was immediately interrupted by a chime from his door. He put the peanut can down, stepped around the corner to the front door, and raised his hand to open it. He paused over the sensor for a moment, realizing the possibility that Will Long Sun might be on the other side of the door. Instead of using the intercom, however, he simply set himself, and palmed the door open.

Frank was on the other side of the door. Considering Frank was on-duty, the station and his apartment were adjacent to each other, and connected by a private door, Frank was one of the last people Thomas would have expected to see at that moment. He even glanced to the left, in the direction of the private station door, as if something was wrong with it.

Then Thomas noticed the others behind Frank. A crowd, in fact. None of them were within six meters of Frank or the door, but they were all staring intently at them. Thomas returned the glares with confusion, turned back to Frank, and said, “What...”

“Better come out and see this,” Frank cut him off. He looked meaningfully to the wall to the right of Thomas’ door. Thomas took a step outside and turned to see what he was indicating.

There was a dead cat on the wall. It had been run through with a short spear, which had in turn been driven into the wall beside Thomas’ door. Blood ran slowly down the wall, and began to pool on the ground. “It must have just happened,” Frank observed.

The thump. “It did,” Thomas replied. He reached up and pulled the spear out of the wall, cradling the dead cat in his arms. “Call a maintenance crew to clean this up and fix the wall.” He used an elbow to close his apartment door, then walked over to the door to the Peacekeeper station. It admitted him silently. Frank remained outside the station and inquired among the crowd for any possible eyewitnesses.

Inside, Thomas found a plastic bag to place the cat inside, sealed it, and placed it on the desk. Then he went into the restroom in the side hall of the station, to clean the blood from his hands and arms. He walked back out silently, stopped at his desk and regarded the animal, both his fists down on the desk on either side of the bag.

Frank entered from outside. “No one out there saw anyone. I’ll check the security cameras and see if we got anything.”

Thomas nodded. “There’s a tag here. You’d better check and see if anyone’s missing a housecat at the D’monet residence.”

Frank stared at the bag, then said, “You can’t let him get away with this.”

“I won’t,” Thomas said. He stared at the bag again, then turned to go back to his apartment. “Damn it.”

The air was cool east of Midland, but the approaching light from the horizon seemed to chase a warm breeze ahead of it. Thomas stood, about a quarter mile from Midland's east face, watching the sun come up. His stern visage, his eyes constricted into slits against the oncoming dawn, made him look like countless of the ancient drawings and caricatures of native Namericans contained in Midland's historical cells, with the noted exception of his white hair and jet-black skin. He silently scanned the horizon ahead, looking for any sign of Will Long Sun against the reds and yellows of morning. Seeing nothing, he began to walk east.

Shortly after he started out, he noticed a slight humming being carried on the breeze. He looked over his shoulder, searching for the source of the noise. In a moment, he spied a small metal oval floating on the air behind him. Thomas could make out tiny circles of black on the metal object, all on the side facing him. Someone was sending a remote camera after him, and he sighed at the thought. It was possible that San sent it out. Much more likely, it was sent by Kena-Jo. He briefly considered dropping the camera with a well-aimed rock... since he'd left all his weapons behind, that was the best he'd be able to do... but decided it would just make him look foolish to be seen pitching rocks at the camera. Especially if he missed. Instead, he flashed it a look that would have been plain enough to anyone watching, and kept walking, trying to ignore it thereafter.

Another mile along, Thomas saw a thin line of smoke crawling up from the horizon, cutting the sky neatly in half. He made for that. Soon he saw the low flames of a campfire, and a cloaked figure crouched before it. The figure tossed dirt on the fire, extinguishing it, and set about scattering the fuel and ashes into harmless, almost invisible stains on the ground. Then the figure stood, reached a hand up, and pulled the hood of the cloak back from his face. "About time you got here. You forget what 'sunrise' means, living in the big malls?"

"You forget how low it is to kill house pets, living on the frontier?" Thomas countered, shedding his light jacket. Shiny highlights from reflected sunlight cast off his jet-black chest.

"I didn't kill the cat. And I'm sure you've discovered I stole the tag, by now."

"I know you stole the tag, yes. How'd you get the cat?"

"Found him on a factory level. Don't you put up barriers to keep pets out of factory levels?"

"You ever try to keep a cat out of anything?" He held out his well-sculpted arms, to demonstrate that he carried no weaponry.

"Hand to hand, eh?" Will sneered. "That's okay. I can still kill you with my bare hands."

Before Thomas could respond, Will brought his other hand into view and up to his face. He held a longbow, with an arrow already poised between pinching fingers. Will brought the longbow up, took the arrow in the other hand, and drew back.

For an instant, Thomas considered that, after all the talk of "honor", Will planned to simply murder him outright. The instant was fleeting, however, when Thomas realized that Will was not aiming at him. All of this took place in the split-second before Will loosed the arrow, which shot past Thomas almost within reach of his hand. There was a metallic thunk behind Thomas. He turned just in time to see the floating camera, arrow protruding from one of its camera eyes, tumbling end over end through the air. It landed in a pile on the grass, throwing sparks and bits of debris upon impact.

Thomas turned back to Will, who was placing the bow on the ground. "Nice shot."

“I’m surprised you didn’t knock it down with a rock or something.” Will pulled the cloak from his body. His much lighter skin tone helped the muscles in his bare chest stand out impressively, and he swelled them a bit for maximum effect.

“You have something to say to me?” Thomas asked. “Now’s the time.”

“You should have waited for me to return to camp,” Will said, walking forward. “We could have settled this as men... as brothers. But you ran like a coward. You deserve to be killed like a scavenger. And by the way, you’re not getting off this easy.” He stopped about ten paces from Thomas, and reached behind his back. He pulled two knives from the belt of his shorts, and tossed one to the ground at Thomas’ feet. Thomas recognized the curved blade and stylized handle of the ceremonial claw-knife, a ritualistic weapon more suited for show than anything, but still capable of killing.

“I did not run,” Thomas said, “I *left*. I did nothing wrong, and for that, the entire tribe turned against me and my family, even as they admitted my innocence. I owed them nothing.”

“You owed *me!*” Will spat, and leapt. He covered the space between them in a heartbeat, and was upon Thomas, knife flashing. But Thomas had responded by rolling backward, grasping Will’s arm, and tossing him over with a simple judo throw. Will took the throw, landing easily on a hand and both feet, never striking the ground with the rest of his body. He rolled over instantly, and was already racing at Thomas, who was just regaining his stance.

Will ran full into Thomas, and the two sprawled on the grass. They tumbled sideways, trying to bring their knives to striking positions, and before either could manage it, Will stopped his tumble and the two separated again. Both came to their feet in a low crouch, circling each other. Thomas could see a wild glint in Will’s eyes, and was well aware that there was no such light in his own.

Will swung an arm out suddenly. Thomas almost didn’t avoid the swipe of the ceremonial blade in his hand. Will struck out again, snarling this time, and thrust at Thomas twice. Thomas had to swing around to better ground and parry at Will to slow his advance.

It did not work. Will took Thomas’ parry, and Thomas saw his knife cut across Will’s left breast, leaving a white track behind. Will’s move blocked Thomas’ hand from returning to a defensive position, and Will twisted and charged in, roaring. Thomas caught his knife-wielding hand with his free one, but it was a close thing, and Thomas could feel the blade of Will’s knife on his haunch, where he strained to keep it for the moment. Their faces moved close together, Thomas struggling to hold Will at bay, Will grimacing like a wild animal wanting the kill. Will’s arm slowly, inexorably, brought the knife up along Thomas’ side. Thomas winced as he felt the knife’s edge scraping the skin along his side, and Will smiled through his snarl.

“My sister *died* for you, and you did not deserve such a sacrifice! You should have died, not her!”

“Don’t-”

“You should have saved her!”

“I was knocked out—”

“Liar! You allowed her to die, *coward!*”

Unbidden, he saw the dream. It was a dream that Thomas had experienced many times after that night, although he had not dreamt it last night. Now it came to him, instantly and in total

clarity. He saw Gail, as young and beautiful as any memory had a right to be, perfect in every way. He felt her love for him, and the feelings he held for her were indescribable, unbounded and unreserved.

Then he saw the cougar, large as a horse, bounding up between them. It lanced out with a paw, and struck Thomas on his back. But instead of being unconscious, he was awake, eyes wide open. But he could not get up.

And the cougar turned on Gail. He fought, he struggled, he screamed against the invisible bonds pinning him to the ground, but to no avail. As he watched and wailed, the cougar ripped Gail to shreds, still alive, still screaming. He watched parts of her being thrown about the rocky ground, felt her life ebbing away, even as it cried out for him to save her. He felt the feelings he had for her turn dark, twist into his gut, and sear his insides with a palpable sickness.

Then she was no more. And the feelings he had for her had tainted and abandoned him, leaving a burning pit of emptiness in him. And the emptiness had her name, and it whispered the name, and the name echoed in the emptiness, haunting him, mocking him, taunting him...

No.

It was not his fault.

Thomas growled, and Will's knife hand stopped its slide along his side. Thomas forced the hand up between them, as the growl in his throat rose in pitch and intensity. Will tried to switch the direction of the knife's motion, and Thomas used the moment to twist the arm outward and away from their bodies. At the same time, he brought his forehead forward, striking Will between the eyes.

Will staggered back, and their clench was broken. Before Will could recover fully, Thomas lashed out at his rising knife-hand. He struck out with two fingers, which impacted with Will's inside wrist. Will's hand spasmed, and the knife was flung away from them.

Thomas threw his knife down, just as Will brought his other hand up into Thomas' midsection. But his other hand was still paralyzed, and before he could strike another blow, Thomas let loose with a right cross that snapped Will's head around violently. He followed up with a left into his midsection, and another right, and Will struggled to remain upright. Thomas tried to strike another blow to the head, but Will managed to dodge, grab Thomas' arm with his recovered hand, and pull him down.

They ended up back on the ground again, rolling over and over, trying to get the upper hand on each other. They fought for enough space to land a punch or kick, but could only manage to wrestle with each other for long minutes.

Then, in a bare second of space, Thomas was upright, with his right arm free. He instantly drove it into Will's face, snapping his head back. Will dropped, and the back of his head impacted with the ground heavily. Thomas looked up. The claw-knife he'd tossed aside was inches from Will's head. He snatched it up, brandished it for Will to see, then put it to Will's chest. Will stared at Thomas, not the knife, an expression of cold hatred in the face of death.

Suddenly, Thomas pulled at Will and pitched backward. He landed on his back, with Will fully on top of him. The knife was still between them, but Thomas had turned it to face his own chest. He pulled Will down upon him, until his weight almost drove the knife into his belly, and glared up at him.

“I *would* have given my life for her! She died for me, and I wish it had been me instead. But it wasn't! There was nothing I could do! *I loved her, Will!*”

Thomas held Will poised over him, just enough force in his arm to keep him balanced. If Will pressed down, the knife would be deep inside him before anything could be done. They remained so for long moments, eyes locked, saying nothing.

Then Will put a hand to the ground, and pushed himself off of Thomas' chest. He came up off of Thomas slowly, stood up, and stared off into the distance, hands on his hips. Thomas remained on the ground. Both were breathing heavily, but trying not to show it.

Will's eyes strayed from the horizon, to almost light on Thomas, before they came back up again. “*I* knew... you loved her. How could you think... I'd blame you for Gail's death, if you'd only stayed until I got back?”

“I'm sorry... but I couldn't stay. Not another minute. The entire tribe shunned us... *my whole family*... over what I'd done. Damned hypocritical Elders!... And your Father...”

“Fath... oh, yeah.”

“You know, he never liked me.”

Will nodded. “He would have made a good Elder.”

Thomas looked up, and Will finally looked down at him. They both chuckled breathlessly, and Will extended a hand to Thomas. Thomas accepted, and pulled himself to his feet. The two men kept their hands clasped for a moment longer. “You were right, you know,” Thomas said. “It was cowardly for me to run... not just from you, from the tribe. I just wasn't strong enough... I was ashamed.”

“If you'd told me then what you told me just now,” Will said, “I'd've stood beside you through it all. I could've helped you carry this burden. It wouldn't be so heavy today.” Thomas looked at him wordlessly. “Oh, I could see it in your eyes. It's haunted you. It's also given you fire.” Will gave a half-smile. “How else could you have thrown me off?”

Thomas returned the smile. “You were never *that* invincible a fighter, Will.”

“In our youth,” Will said, “we were *all* invincible.”

A quarter mile west of Thomas and Will, Reva crouched against a low boulder. Behind her, a gyro truck idled noiselessly. She wore tan clothing that blended well against the rocks around her, and her billowy white hair was buried under a tan cap. She held a pair of binoculars to her face, and she watched the two men as they talked and shook hands.

There was a beep on her sec sleeve. Without taking her eyes off the men, she tapped the sleeve. “Reva Poker.”

“Reva, it's San. I understand you requisitioned a gyrotruck this morning.”

“Yes, I did.”

“I didn't even know you were on duty this morning, Reva.”

Reva smiled to herself. “No, I'm not.”

“Are you going to need that truck, then?”

Reva lowered the binoculars. “No, it looks like I won't, after all.”

“Good,” San replied. “Then you’d better bring it back in, before Thomas discovers it’s missing.”

“I’ll do that. Thanks, San.”

“Thank you, Reva.”

Thomas found Will, two days later, securing the last of the lines on his cart. He had gotten a good price for the objects he’d brought in, and had loaded the cart down with supplies for the Cayaches. Will looked up when he heard Thomas approaching, and smiled. Quite a few people in the market area took to watching them closely. Even though Kena-Jo Dolorain hadn’t gotten any visuals of the fight between them (due to technical difficulties), everyone knew that they had indeed gone through with their duel. The bruises alone were enough to convince any doubters.

“Ready to head back, eh?” Thomas said as he reached earshot. “Looks like you made out pretty good on trade. Do you always manage so well on Cayache sculptures and cloth?”

“Not always,” Will admitted. “But I had a half-dozen of Anna Rabbit’s spirit sticks, and they’re very popular.”

“Anna’s still making those spirit sticks, huh? Say ‘hello’ for me, okay? Uh... on second thought, don’t—”

“Thomas,” Will stopped him. “It’s okay. She’d love to hear from you. I’ll tell her you send your regards. In fact, I’ll make sure all the old gang knows where to reach you.”

“Thanks, Will. Don’t you be a stranger, okay?”

“Never again,” Will said, and the two clasped hands. Thomas watched as Will put the finishing touches to his cart and packs, then mounted his horse. He turned Lightfoot towards the nearby gate, looked back to Thomas, and flashed a smile and a wave. Thomas waved back, and watched him ride out and turn westward, heading for the forest trails.

Once Will was out of sight, Thomas turned and walked back through the market, heading for the lifts. He was very aware of the many eyes that were upon him, just as they had been a few days ago. This time, however, they were much kinder eyes, even respectful. And Thomas became aware that he did not feel quite so empty as he had before.

LOG CELL ENTRY #29109: Rosettas

“...As an aside, I would like to point out that, had research into tunneling molecular reconfiguration not been halted in the early 2000’s, many of the designs planned for the first arcocities would have been feasible by about the 2050s, and the influences I’ve described that shaped our malls today would have been very different. But that’s a discussion for another report, thank goodness.”

There was polite laughter throughout the auditorium. Decio Pine’s report had been one of the better and more fascinating of the many reports given to the assembly in the past few days, but it had been more than long enough for most of the students there. Decio looked quickly over to his instructor, who was also smiling at his closing comment, said a quiet “Thank you,” and left the podium.

Professor Donald Dwyer, a wiry man with an impressively high forehead and sparse sandy hair, stood up and approached the podium as Decio stepped down from it. As he passed Decio, he whispered, “Don’t go far.” He continued up to the podium, and turned to the assembled students. “On that note, we’ll close for today. Ms. Pontillo, you’re first up tomorrow.” He had to raise his voice a bit to get the last sentence out, as the students pushed out of their seats and headed for the exits.

The Professor exited the podium and found Decio waiting at the foot of the stairs. “Decio... excellent report, son, excellent.”

“Thanks,” Decio nodded.

“I was a bit surprised that you approached the structural analysis assignment as a history report,” Dwyer noted, and they began walking leisurely back towards the Professor’s office. “But you pulled it off better than most. You handled that impromptu debate with Saunders about your analysis base pretty well, too. Do you still think San Dali is the best choice for your analysis base?”

Decio nodded again. “My data supports that conclusion, and even though Aspen is more typical of Arcotecture designs, it was built much later in the period, when most of the experimentation was over with.” “Mm-hmm. You might want to check the cells on Aspen more closely. I think you’ll find that its final designs were based on detailed studies drafted much earlier than you think. If you check those other documents, you’ll discover dates from the previous century. That design was originally created for a site about five hundred miles north of Aspen’s site, and fully eighty years earlier.”

Decio, who had up to now maintained his composure during his instructor’s examination, visibly sagged at the shoulders when he heard this. “Your kidding,” he managed to say.

“No, it’s true,” Dwyer said. “Of course, it’s not referenced in Aspen’s cells... don’t ask me why... but that’s why you obviously didn’t find it. The cells fall under the jurisdiction of the region where the original plan was drafted, but they’ve buried it under an old ‘City renovations’ heading, and it just doesn’t seem to cross-reference into most cell searches. So, actually, Saunders may have been right. Although he doesn’t have this information either.” Dwyer saw the apologetic look on his student’s face, and smiled. “Relax, I wouldn’t have expected you to dig that info up, or I’d’ve had to have you nominated for Sainthood. Just another obscure piece of history for you. Tell you what: Call me after seven tonight, and I’ll send you the connection.”

“Thanks. I’ll look it over, and consider re-presenting my conclusions.”

“Very good. See you tomorrow.” Dwyer gave Decio a friendly nod and turned left down the corridor to his office. Decio, finished with his public classes for the day, continued on in the direction of the auditorium’s recording room, where his report should have been ready to pick up.

A few other students saw him on the concourse, said good things about the report he’d given. He thanked them, and when he reached the recording room, he was given a chip of his report for his personal cells. The report was already downloaded into Midland’s city cells, for anyone else to access, but it was traditional to give the student a copy on chip, coded and locked to prohibit tampering with or changing the original cell. From the recording room, Decio arranged to have copies of the cell downloaded to his list of friends and relatives who were interested in his schoolwork, from an address list in his sec. Then he pocketed the chip, left the recording room, and headed for the lifts to the residential levels.

In a few minutes, he reached the apartment he shared with three others, another student, and a young couple from Brasilica. The apartment was simply furnished, but his roommates and himself were all fairly neat, and the apartment was clean and tidy.

The one exception was one corner of the apartment, a makeshift studio where the couple worked on their art. Marta and Izchlan were sculptors, combining the woodworking skill of one and the painting abilities of the other to create wonderful abstracts, busts and statuettes. Decio liked their work (fortunate, since he had to look at it every day), and he expected that someday they would become very popular and successful at their vocation. At the moment, however, they were just getting started, having only recently discovered each other’s talents after discovering their mutual attraction.

Decio admired their dedication to their art, and of trying to add to their standard with it. Decio himself hadn’t decided yet whether he wanted to work steadily, or simply live off the standard and take occasional jobs for extra credits. After all, it was so much easier to live off the credit standard, the minimum credit level given to everyone in Midland to pay for all necessities, with a small amount left over for extra items. He had always done odd jobs when he desired something the standard didn’t cover and, being young, had a hard time imagining he’d have to work much harder for the things he’d want in the future. He also couldn’t imagine liking any job enough to want to do it three days each week, half the day, for any amount of time. Still, he knew many people found vocations they enjoyed enough to do every day, and he had to admit that it might someday happen to him, too.

Andrei, his other roommate, came into the living room. “Hey, Decio! How did the report go?”

“Went great,” Decio said. “Dwyer loved it. He sprung a surprise on me, though: Told me about some data I could have used on my report, after I was finished!”

“Oh, that’s cruel,” Andrei smirked. “He didn’t do it in front of the class, did he?”

“No.”

“Oh, well, that was pretty nice of him. He must have liked it.” Andrei padded on bare feet into the kitchen, where he opened the cooler and pulled a pitcher of green liquid out into the light. “You gonna give me a copy?”

“I already sent you one,” Decio replied. He followed Andrei into the kitchen and pulled a glass from a cupboard, held it out and waited as Andrei filled his own glass, then filled Decio’s. “Where’s Izzy and Marta?”

“They went out a couple of hours ago, I don’t know where.” Andrei shrugged as he drank from the glass. Andrei was also taking classes, but the others already had him pegged as a “standard” guy. Not that that was a bad thing to be, for there was enough standard credit to go around, and many people in Midland didn’t work. But Andrei seemed to like standard living so much, no one could figure out why he took so many classes, spending by far more hours studying than he would in any job. Decio suspected that, if Andrei ever stopped taking classes, the resultant boredom would force him into finding work within a month.

Once armed with a drink, Decio went into his room and tapped the wall sec with an elbow. “Any messages?” The sec then proceeded to present half a dozen messages to him, mostly relatives thanking him for the forwarded cell of his report.

One cell was from a young woman, about his age, and Decio brightened visibly when he saw her on the screen. She was very pretty, with a sweet smile and eyes almost hidden behind thick lashes. “Hi, Decio. Thanks for the cell of your report. I’ve gotta go to a studio, but I’ll watch it later and call you. ‘Bye-bye.” She was the last message, and Decio allowed a smile to spread over his face. He thought Allyne was the most wonderful girl he knew, and he took great pleasure in making her happy. He thought briefly about Izchlan and Marta, and a familiar warm feeling began to spread throughout his body. But mostly just below the waist.

“Decio, you’ve got a call.”

“Yeah?” Decio put down his gym bag, having just walked in the door. Marta was standing in front of the sec screen in the living room, alternately looking at the screen and him, and giving him a funny look. From the entry, Decio couldn’t see who was on the screen, so he continued into the room to get a better angle.

It was a woman in a peacekeeper’s uniform. That explained Marta’s funny looks, but Decio was pretty sure he hadn’t done anything to get in trouble. The woman smiled when he walked into view, which reinforced his feeling of safety.

“Hi, Decio, I’m San Kepolis. Remember me? I share the flat with your Aunt, Felicia.”

That’s why she looked familiar, Decio thought. He remembered seeing her the last time he visited Aunt Felicia. Tall, well-built, sort of outgoing-type. “Oh, yeah... how are you?”

“I’m fine, thanks. How are you?”

“Good, I’m fine. Uh, what can I do for you?”

“Actually,” San replied, “I thought I might do something for you.”

Decio paused, his mouth opening slightly. He didn’t have a clue what this woman wanted with him, and tiny alarm bells were going off in his head. He glanced over at Marta, who had politely stepped away from the screen, but was still loitering within earshot. “Listen”, he said to the screen, “I’m going to take this in my room, okay? Transfer to Decio’s room.” He smiled at San before she disappeared from the screen, then snatched up his gym bag and jogged into his room.

He dropped the bag on the bed and said, "Accept the call." The smaller screen on his wall lit up. San was looking down at something in front of her, and looked up when she was reconnected. "Hi," Decio said again. "So, you said you wanted to do something for me?"

"Yes," San said. "You see, when I came home from duty today, Felicia was telling me all about your report today. She let me read the copy you sent her. Very well put-together."

"Thanks," Decio said.

"Well, it just so happens that a few days ago, an archeological team working on the east coast discovered some old records vaults. I happened to see the cells, and I noticed some references to the Fraternity of Civil Engineers in some of the records they dug up. I thought you might be interested."

"Wow," Decio mused. He'd read about the FCE in his classes, usually only as a title attached to someone's name. "Yeah. What did they find?"

"Hold on... I was digging up the cells when I called you..." San's eyes ducked down for a few seconds, then came back up. "There. I'll transfer it to you. There are some private organizational files, some personnel files... but what I thought you'd really like to see, is this."

Decio saw her do something on her end of the connection, and a photocopy of a paper document appeared on one side of his screen. The title read, "FCE code, Official Characters". Below that was a date, "09/08/03". That was followed by three double-columns of characters, a standard AN character on the left, and a cryptic symbol next to each on the right. Decio had to move closer to the screen and squint a bit, to make out the detail on the paper.

Then he took a step back. "Hey... that looks like the FCE fraternity code!" Decio slapped a hand to the top of his head. "It's the breakdown of the code! That's great!"

"I thought you'd recognize that," San said, smiling. "I understand the code was never passed down after the 2000's."

"That's right!" Decio exulted. "They were supposed to be very protective about the code. This is great!"

"Yeah, I got that impression."

"Oh, yeah, I did say that before, didn't I? Listen, thanks a lot, San! Let me know if I can do anything for you, anything at all!"

"I'll see if Felicia has any chores that need doing around here," San smiled. "Just kidding. See you later."

"Bye." The connection to San went blank, but the paper and other cells were waiting. Decio quickly saved the cells and document into his cells, then reached for the com control. "I gotta tell Dwyer about this!"

Decio found Professor Dwyer in his office the next morning. He was examining his desk sec, making a few notes along the side of the screen, and looked up when Decio came in. "Ah, come in! I was just looking over the document you sent me. You were right: This is the authentic FCE Fraternity Code."

Decio tossed a triumphant fist out, grinning ear to ear. "Isn't it great?"

"Yes, it's a wonderful find," Dwyer said, head bobbing up and down as he looked over the code. "I know of a few messages that have been found in the past, that were never translated."

They should prove very interesting. You know, those messages weren't meant for anyone but other members of the fraternity to read. No one really knows what kind of messages they passed to one another. It's almost like recovering an old building's dedication. Or it's tombstone, depending on how you look at it."

Decio nodded, considering this last fact. It was a bit like grave robbing, if you considered those private messages to be sacred, which he imagined the fraternity did. But, he mused, there wasn't likely to be anything intimate about such messages... and the writers, and readers, were all long since dead, so there was no one to complain about being compromised.

"You know," Decio finally said, "it's just a shame so few of the old buildings of that era are still standing. Think about all the messages that've been destroyed since then, in reclaiming materials for the malls."

Dwyer nodded solemnly, then after a moment, lifted his head and looked at Decio. "Take a look at this." He started working over his sec, as Decio came around to his side of the desk. In a moment, the Professor had a plan of Midland, represented in three dimensions, floating on the screen before them. It was much like the floor plan that visitors and residents used to get around, but it had much more structural detail attached to it. As Dwyer manipulated the viewing controls, the image seemed to rush up at them. The view moved inward, and downward, closing in on the lower levels of the mall where the physical plants and manufacturing levels resided. "I know you've seen this plan a hundred times."

"At least," Decio agreed.

Dwyer nodded, manipulated the image further, and stopped it. A single column was in the center of the image, squat between two machines of unknown purpose. Above it, a floor was cutaway, and above that, apparently, another machine almost directly above the column.

"This is pretty typical of the columns in the machine levels," Dwyer told Decio. "Because many of the lower levels are only a dozen meters high or so, columns could be put in that were designed to handle the lesser loads and spread the forces over a larger area. That meant the columns down there didn't have to be made out of the same high-load materials in the upper parts of the mall."

Decio nodded. "That's why the columns are often mismatched. Some were reformed out of existing materials, instead of being newly fabricated."

"Right. If you query the sec about these columns, though, you still get a single set of specs for them all. One average set of specifications. In point of fact, as far as I know, there is no record of the exact composition of each column. And we know that most of the columns were made from existing materials reclaimed from the cities, jacketed over with a binding casing of smithcrete."

Decio was beginning to see where he was going with his private lecture. "Do you really think...?"

"It might be possible," Dwyer stated, "that intact pre-arcotecture structural members could be inside the columns in our mall's lower levels."

"You're kidding." San took a sip of tea, and shook her head slowly. Next to her, Felicia sat regarding her nephew Decio, her face changing from pride to incredulous wonder every few seconds. Felicia hadn't seen anything of Decio in two weeks since the report, so she had invited

him over for lunch. After lunch, they had moved into the living room, where the subject of the fraternity code came up.

Decio sat across from them, looking at his sec pad in San's free hand. An image of one of the columns in the lower levels was there, along with a column of short notes. The notes were materials breakdowns, and they clearly showed evidence of ancient steel columns inside the smithcrete.

Decio leaned forward to change the display on the pad. "We borrowed a PRT from the Physical Plant Manager last week, and used it on some of the columns. See that?" On the pad's screen was a ghosted image, sharing the same outer dimensions as the columns, but with signs of various layers of materials within. "See this line? And this one? The PRT confirms those as steel girders, in the old 'I-beam' shape!"

"That's incredible!" Felicia whispered, looking at the pad along with San. "I had no idea we used old materials in our mall like that. I hope it's safe."

"Oh, it's plenty safe," Decio said quickly. "Those beams were checked and sealed to prevent deterioration before they were placed in the columns. And there's other materials in there besides the steel, reinforcing it further. Then the whole thing's wrapped in cable netting and sealed in smithcrete. They're safe."

"Well, that's good," Felicia said.

"It's good for the columns," Decio admitted. "It's lousy for me, though."

"Why?"

"Because all that stuff around the old steel means I can't get a clear reading from it," Decio explained. "If there are any old markings on them, they're hidden behind all that other stuff."

"I see."

Decio shrugged. "And I was starting to hope I could apply this to my thesis. But I can't really go anywhere with it now, if I can't see the columns."

San sipped at her tea, and her eyes drifted up over Decio's head. Then she refocused on him. "You know, there might still be a way to continue with this."

Decio looked up, doubtfully. "What?"

"Go to the City Council, and ask them to authorize you to open some columns." Decio gave San a look of helpless confusion, and San added, "I know, it doesn't sound likely. You'll have to explain to them the social and historical significance of your research, and convince them it's a worthwhile endeavor. You'll also have to show them evidence that cracking open select columns will not significantly weaken the surrounding ceiling, and can be repaired without problems. But from what I've seen of your expertise in civil engineering, not to mention your presentation skills, I think you could pull it off."

"Wow... I don't know..."

"Well, it's something to try," San said. "Personally, I'd love to see it."

Decio brightened a bit. "Yeah?"

“You bet. In fact, please let me know if I can do anything to help, as a peacekeeper or otherwise. You can use my name as reference for the audience with the council, at the very least.”

“Well...” Decio’s voice trailed off, as he considered his options. Finally, he shrugged. “I suppose I could at least write up the proposal. Even if I was turned down, I’d still get some good credit from that.”

“That’s my nephew,” Felicia beamed.

Professor Dwyer turned out to be all for the proposal, and gave Decio the nod to make it a class project. Decio immediately set to work, researching the construction data on Midland to determine the number of columns in the lower levels he would have the option of breaking open without risking ceiling collapse.

He was amazed when his sec gave him a figure of several hundred columns! Apparently the strength specifications for the columns and ceiling itself were more than adequate to handle the loss of single columns, and in areas where explosions or similar catastrophes were a risk, groups of them. Decio immediately considered the idea that he’d bitten off more than he could chew, and imagined himself examining columns until he was old and gray. If only he could narrow down the number of columns with possible codes etched into them... but he already knew PRT scans couldn’t even tell him that.

Still, he knew that his proposal would not cause the collapse of Midland. So he wasn’t shut down yet.

Next he moved on to how much of the column would have to be torn away, to expose enough of the steel underneath to be scanned by PRTs or examined visually. Unfortunately, the data reinforced his belief that the entire column would have to be stripped away. Although PRTs were capable of bounce-scanning around the inside of a hollow column, there wasn’t enough space between the steel beams and their cable netting to allow that. And the smithcrete would need to be torn completely away to unwrap the netting. Although the beam itself could be left in place and bolted to its supports, nothing of the rest of the column would be left. So each column to be examined would have to be completely rebuilt.

That was going to be tough to sell to the Council, who were going to weigh the nebulous value of mostly non-sequitur historical knowledge against the real costs of rebuilding columns. He’d have to find a way to put a lot of drama into his presentation, or they’d laugh him out of the room. Of course, he was supposed to be good at that sort of thing, at least, according to his instructors. Well, he’d have to see.

“Peacekeeper station. Deputy San Kepolis.”

“Deputy Kepolis, my name is Ahmed Klein. I’m calling from the office of the City Council. We’ve had a request from a Mr. Decio Pine to address the Council, and he gave us your name as a personal reference.”

“Yes, I know Mr. Pine well. He’s the nephew of one of my roommates.”

“Ah... and how long have you known him?”

“About... eight years.”

“I see. He has given us a subject for his address: ‘The Exploration of Midland’s Historical Resources’. Does this sound to you like a subject he knows something about?”

“Oh, yes. In fact, he’s taking professional level classes devoted to it, here in Midland. Classes that he’s doing very well in, I can add.”

“Oh? Are you his instructor?”

“No; I’m the roommate of a proud aunt. I have seen his grades, though, Mr. Klein. He’s an excellent student and an intelligent young man.”

“Can you give us any further details on this subject he’s presenting to the Council?”

“Well, I could, but I’d hate to spoil the surprise.”

“...I see.”

“Will you be granting him the audience?”

“Well... based on the information we have, I don’t see why not.”

“Good. I don’t think the Council will be disappointed.”

San and Professor Dwyer were on hand the day the Council agreed to hear Decio’s proposal. They both reached the antechamber outside the council hall at the same time, and were not surprised to find Decio already there, even though they were half an hour early for his audience. Decio was sitting in a chair, head down toward the sec pad in his hand, his eyes half-shut as he went over some part of his presentation in his head. He finally looked up when he heard the two sets of footfalls approaching him, and smiled.

“Decio,” Professor Dwyer called when they were within polite conversational distance. “About ready for your audience?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Decio replied, standing up. “I’ve found the angle to work on, and I think my argument is pretty persuasive.”

“What is your angle?” San asked.

“The Purge Flare of 2064.”

Decio didn’t need to go into further detail for San or Dwyer’s benefit; both knew about the famous Purge Flare. 2063-4 proved to be banner years for solar flares, those infamous geysers of plasma that, among other things, played havoc with the atmosphere of the entire Solar System when they erupted. Many flares in the past had seriously disrupted communications systems, both through the ether and through wire systems, and caused many organizations to take steps to protect their transmission equipment from damage or data loss.

But no one could have predicted the massive solar flare in 2064. If it had been pointed in the right direction (or the wrong one, depending on your point of view), it would have touched the planet Mercury, and according to scientists, could have even possibly caused the tiny planet’s breakup and the creation of another ring of asteroids in the system. This, however, turned out to be of little concern compared to what it did manage to do. The charged plasma reached across the void, first silencing all air-based transmission systems, and not releasing them for almost a week. Then, the charge made itself felt on the surface of the Earth. No one could have predicted the sheer power of the flare’s charge, which swept across the planet like a giant degaussing field. And it proved deadly to every form of magnetic storage on the planet, except those shielded by a sizeable portion of the Earth’s crust.

The worst part of the disaster was the realization that, had it happened fifty or a hundred years ago, it would have been nothing serious. After all, in the 20th century most valuable data

was still being stored on paper, a fairly non-volatile medium. Unfortunately for the 21st century, the use of all that paper was causing a serious space shortage for storing all that data, and the only areas that had the available space were the forests that were being stripped to provide the paper. So, for the sake of the environment, a push was eventually made to give up the paper storage standard and switch to electronic data systems. Before long, both old and new data was being placed on electronic media, and the space-consuming paper copies were being recycled.

Although optical data storage had been discovered years ago, it had never become a worldwide standard. Most of the world's records and information were still being stored on magnetic disks, cards and strips. Most of the world's old literature had been transferred to electromagnetic storage, and a precious little of it was stored optically. Most of the underdeveloped countries of the world were still using archaic storage mediums, even tape reels. This was the vast electromagnetic system that the flare washed over.

In a day, forty percent of the world's data was gone. By the end of the next day, the remainder had been seriously damaged, to the point that not a single unshielded bit of data was not either hopelessly corrupted, or completely wiped. It took years to gather, sort through and combine copies of old files to recover the original data. In many cases, the files were never 100% recovered. Many of the world's original recordings of music were lost, along with entire libraries of literature. Most obscure literary works vanished without a trace, leaving only the most popular versions of manuscripts that had been transferred to the CD-ROM storage format. and governments, corporations, organizations all over the world found themselves without a written guideline to follow, a law to legally enforce, a list to check, or a history to recall.

Needless to say, as the year 2064 went down in history as "the year of the Purge Flare", the year 2065 would go down in history as "the year everything started over". Governments rewrote laws from the ground-up. Sweeping reforms were passed in the face of urgency, changes that were held up previously by years of filibustering and red tape. Organizations changed old charters, many of which were long overdue for radical changes anyway. And in the void left behind by so much lost art, new artists appeared to revive old music forms, literature styles, even broadcast art, and attempt to plug some of those holes.

New storage methods were created, relying more on optical technology and the optronic "cell". Data sharing systems were also rebuilt, creating vast shared networks of data that were virtually impossible to completely lose and easy to find or recover, and the world finally reached the goal of being a single data resource it had aspired to a century before.

But, to this day, the world remained very aware of the millennia of history that was lost that year, never to be recovered.

San and Professor Dwyer nodded their agreement with Decio's plan, and he smiled at their knowing looks. "I think it'll work. You never know what pearls of wisdom might come up out of the past. Even on a steel column."

Across the antechamber, a side door opened and a man walked into the room. San, seeing him over Decio's shoulder, recognized him as Ahmed Klein, the gentleman who had called her about Decio's reference. Decio, noticing San's gaze past him, turned to see Mr. Klein approaching. Klein smiled at the three, and turned his full attention to Decio.

"Good morning, Mr. Pine. Are you ready for your audience?"

"Yes, sir, I'm ready," Decio responded quickly.

“Good. The Council is a bit ahead of schedule this morning, so they’ll be ready to hear you in just a few minutes. If you’d like, you can go in now and get yourself ready. I assume you have a presentation prepared?”

“Yes,” Decio nodded, holding up his sec pad. “I just need a few seconds to set up.” Dwyer smiled to himself. He knew Decio’s skill at preparing well-organized media presentations, and was sure this would be one of his better ones.

“Fine,” Klein said. “If you will all follow me?” He led the trio through the large main door to the Council chamber.

Inside the chamber, the Council was discussing the scale of a proposal to rebuild the level 73 park into another rock garden. Rock gardens were undergoing another one of their regular popularity renaissances, and they had been springing up all over Midland in various sizes. Most of the Council seemed to be of the opinion that one more rock garden was getting excessive, but there were enough dissenters to make the discussion interesting.

Klein led San and Dwyer to a row of seats where they could watch the audience, along with others who were already there watching the Council. Then he took Decio over to a podium facing the Council table, and showed him the podium’s controls. It wasn’t much different than the podiums he used in college, and he soon began setting up his sec pad for broadcast over the chamber system.

By about the time Decio was ready, the Council settled their decision (approved in an abbreviated form, 9-3), and began to quiet down. One of them turned to the podium, where Decio waited patiently. The Councilman glanced down at the sec in front of him, looked back up at Decio, and nodded.

“Mr. Pine. Welcome to the Midland Council.”

“Thank you, Mr. Tsien.” Decio had taken the time to familiarize himself with all the Councilmembers’ names, since he’d had no idea who would be their spokesperson.

“You may proceed, if you’re ready.” All the Councilmembers looked patiently to him, and waited. Decio glanced down to his sec and tapped an icon. On the wall behind him, an image of a great 20th century city appeared, projected by his sec. There were moving vehicles, people walking everywhere, bright blue skies, pigeons flitting by, a veritable sea of movement. It was clearly taken from a recording of the day, as evidenced by the recognizable grain of old film stock. Old as the scene clearly was, it evoked an immediate response from the Councilmembers, some of whom sighed at the tableau as if wishing to be there personally. There was always that emotional attachment to the past with older people, Decio knew, and he hoped to play to that attachment.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, this is Saint Louis city,” Decio began. “It stood, not far from here, for three centuries. It was a city like all cities in old Namerica, full of people, living their lives, doing their jobs, raising their children, and looking forward to another day. We have precious few records of those times today. This image is one of the few surviving pieces of film footage of the era, and we value it as a piece of our history... one of the few windows on the past that haven’t been covered over with too much dust to see through.

“I’ve just discovered that there are many other windows, some perhaps as clear as this one, all over Midland. Windows to the past, waiting to be opened, and looked through. Windows to

human culture, to our ancestors' lives, waiting to give up their secrets. *And we're all standing on them.*"

Across the chamber, San and Dwyer exchanged smiles. This was going to be good.

Even with the noise dampeners working on the pneumatic hammers, bringing their otherwise deafening concussions down to soft puffs across the vast machinery room space, each pulse caused by impact of metal on smithcrete bounced against Decio's chest like staccato hoofbeats. He was well back, too, behind a crowd barrier with about half the Council, San Kepolis, and Professor Dwyer. The two men with the hammers leaned into them, as the hammers chipped away at the sides of a column next to a long assembly-line construct. The construct was so long that they could not see either end from their vantage point, and what it might be manufacturing, none of the observers would have been able to guess. It didn't seem to be particularly disturbed by the commotion next to it, and just kept humming to itself as it did its job. The comparative silence of the room was occasionally broken by the crack of smithcrete, followed by its impact on the ground, and the constant sifting of dust around them.

Decio strained to look through the dusty air, past the ragged edges of smithcrete, to see the columns inside. Here and there, he caught sight of a wrap of cable, but nothing beneath. He tried not to look too anxious, but his project had come down to being hinged on this one column. Well, actually three, but this was the first one they had started to dismantle. The Council had been swayed by his argument to rediscover their hidden past, but they were none too keen on taking apart hundreds of support columns below their very feet. After a day of deliberation (and hours of consultation with other sources, who finally assured them that the proposal was not hazardous), they agreed to open three columns, and look for the writings that Decio himself could not be sure were there. If any were found, they said, they would allow a continuation of the project, starting with those columns selected by the machine level Foreman to be due for fault examination. If not, Decio would have to be content with theory unless he could find a less invasive way to examine the columns.

So they stood, as the first of the three columns were torn apart, waiting to see signs of history. San, standing just beside Decio, saw his nervousness, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Relax. You've got two more columns to check, if this one doesn't show anything. No point in being nervous now. Save it for number three."

Decio looked around at her, and she smiled mischievously. He smiled back, and his shoulders loosened noticeably.

The last of the smithcrete outer casing finally came away. The hammer men stepped back, and a woman with a set of cutters as long as her forearm stepped up. Starting at the bottom, she began cutting the cable sheathing, a dozen at a time. The cables snapped loose and piled on the ground around the column, clanging about like bells. Many of the observers put their fingers in their ears.

Then the cutter was through, and she stepped away. There, in the center of the pile of rubble and cable, stood four thick steel columns. Each was an "I" beam, each as tall as the other, but it was plain that the beams were not from the same original structure. One was visibly larger than the others, thicker, with much wider flanges: This one was in the center. Two others were apparently identical, and were placed on opposite sides of the large beam. And a fourth, longer in the body with thinner flanges, was placed at the far corner of the large beam, becoming the third point of a triangle created by the two identical beams. Each beam looked slick, the result of the

rust-arresting coating. One of the identical beams had a large piece taken out of the end of a flange, large enough to pass a man through, but it was shaped like a stubby “V”. It was unclear to the observers what the hole might have been intended for.

A woman had been standing about midway between the observers and the column, watching the dismantling work closely. Once the workers were through, she turned to the observers. After a moment, when it seemed they were hesitant to move, she walked over to them.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” she said to them. “We’ve got the beams exposed. Go look ‘em over.” The group began to step around the barriers and approach the beams, Decio in front. One Councilmember paused long enough to pass their thanks to the Foreman, who nodded her appreciation and followed them over.

Once Decio reached the column, he reached into a pouch around his waist and removed a small, handheld PRT. He tapped at its controls, then began circling the columns, using the PRT to sweep over their surfaces. He made a complete revolution around the columns, never stopping until he was all the way around. He looked at San and Dwyer, and shook his head.

“A bit closer,” Dwyer suggested. “Reduce your surface tolerances.” Decio nodded, tapped some more at the PRT, and started around the columns again. San, who had heard Dwyer’s suggestions, brought her left arm up. A PRT was built into the Peacekeeper’s uniform sleeve, tied into the uniform’s sec. She set her PRT, removed the remote sensor, and began circling the column herself, in the opposite direction of Decio. They met on the opposite side, and Decio looked up in surprise when he noticed her. San flashed him a smile, and turned back to her PRT. Decio smiled back, and moved in even closer.

About a minute later, Decio called out, “I think I found something.” He was kneeling close to the base of the large column, where he had managed to wedge his arm between the smaller ones. San halted her search pattern to come around beside him, and Dwyer and the Councilmembers crowded closer. Decio pulled his arm out into the light and examined the PRT screen closely. Then he adjusted it again and stuck his arm back between the columns. He strained to see where his arm was pointed in the tight space, and San tried to guide him from just above him. Finally he removed his arm again, examined the screen, then showed it to San. The two of them looked at each other and grinned, and Decio looked up to face the Council. “Got one.”

Decio stood, and brought the PRT over to the group. Dwyer turned it for everyone to see, and examined the image on the screen. There was a line of characters, a bit faint against the background of the column, but distinct enough to be recognizable. The characters seemed to be similar to ancient Greek letters, but there were numerous symbols that were completely alien to any recognizable Greek, Arabic, or Asian characters. “Yes. He’s found the Fraternity code.”

The group began making approving noises at once, each trying to get a better look at the image on the screen. One of the Councilmembers, craning his neck to see, asked, “Do you know what it says?”

“Hold on,” Decio said. “I’ve got a link to the translation code. I should be able to translate it right now.” Removing his sec pad from the pouch, he began working over the control screen. After a few moments of that, he held the PRT close to the pad and transmitted the PRT image to the pad. Then he tapped an icon, put the PRT away, and waited. The group went silent as Decio stared down at his working sec, hoping to get a response from the translation link.

There was a beep from his sec, and a single sentence was displayed. Decio looked it over, smiled, and read from the screen: “*My first building, but not my last.*” signed, Evan.”

Dwyer smiled widely. “Quite a prophetic statement, eh?” He turned and looked at the Council, expectantly.

The irony was not lost on the Council. One of them looked at Dwyer, and shrugged amiably. “Very well. You have our permission to examine one hundred columns on this level. We’ll look forward to your findings, young man. Congratulations.”

“Thank you, sir,” Decio replied, suddenly the center of a round of applause and shoulder-clapping. Slowly the group diffused, some of them moving closer to examine the markings on the exposed steel, others giving their personal congratulations to Decio, before they moved away to attend to other business. Finally, only Decio, Dwyer, San, and the Foreman were left, and the Foreman was already busy organizing her workers to rebuild the column, as soon as they had Decio’s okay to do so.

San waited until Decio and Dwyer were finished discussing the markings, before she came up to Decio. “Great work, Decio. I’ve got to get back to the station now. But I expect you’ll be spending a lot of time down here over the next few weeks.”

Decio smiled wryly and scanned the vast machine level around them. “Yeah, I may pitch a tent.”

“Well, I’ll try to stop by from time to time, to see how it’s going. See you later.”

“Bye.” He watched her leave, lingering on his aunt’s roommate maybe a little longer than he should have... then remembered that he had a new job to do, and an interesting one, at that.

By the end of that week, Decio reflected that even interesting jobs can be a monumental pain. At least, that’s how this one had turned out. With all the bending and stretching around the tightly packed steel beams, sometimes in very tight spaces, his back had been strained almost to the limit in three days. It was slightly mortifying, too; he thought he was in great shape. But the type of movement he’d been doing in the last few days was unlike anything he’d done since crawling around in playground mazes as a kid. All of this came to him as he slowly straightened up from the base of another column, groaning under his breath, and bending backward and sideways to get the kink out of his back.

“Hard at work, eh?” San’s voice called out from behind him, and Decio immediately tried to adopt a more relaxed posture when he turned in her direction. San had a long coil of rope around her shoulder, a small block-and-tackle connected to one end, and heavy gloves over her hands. She smiled and looked him up and down when he reached her, making him only slightly self-conscious about his dusty appearance.

“I just came in from outside,” San explained. “Thought I’d stop by and see how you were doing. You sure look like you’re getting a workout.”

“Yeah,” Decio nodded. “It’s a lot more work crawling around this stuff than I thought it’d be.”

“You know, if you’re getting a sore back from all this, it would be a good idea to see a therapist about it. They can give you a set of exercises that will make your back feel better. Maybe something for the pain, too.”

“I’m not that sore yet,” Decio replied bravely, though he suspected it was already too late to pretend he wasn’t hurting. “But you’re right, I should probably see someone.” He already felt much more at-ease around San than he had a few days before. Although he wasn’t usually

attracted to women who were much older (not to mention almost a head taller) than he was, San's interest and obvious attractiveness had been distracting Decio more and more each day.

In fact, he had been actually considering broaching the traditionally unbroachable subject with her, just before providence intervened in the form of Marla Blake. Marla was taking classes at Midland... in fact, Decio was sure he had seen her around, although he didn't share any classes with her... but they had never met until a few days ago, when she approached him from out of the proverbial blue.

She had a very pretty smile, and she hit Decio with it as soon as she spoke to him. She had told him she'd heard about the project he was working on, and proceeded to complement him on his efforts and ask to see how he was doing. Much of which went right by Decio, who was still reeling from her smile, and had to all but shake himself to recover. They had since spent quite a bit of time together, Marla even coming down to be with him while he poked around the columns one afternoon. In a matter of days her attentions had managed to swing Decio's heart away from the puppy-love infatuation it had been toying with, and not too secretly, Decio was happy to be out of that awkward situation.

"Did you find something here?" San looked past him to the beams. "How many columns is this, then?"

"Uh..." Decio pulled up his sec pad and tapped at it a moment. "Forty-four. Including this one. So far, I've found markings in only sixteen percent of the columns... seven of them. But I've found more than one set of markings in some of them, since most columns have four to six beams, and I've catalogued thirty-six individual phrases."

"Thirty-six!"

"Uh-huh. A few of them are only partially legible. Three are so worn away that I can only make out that they're there... I can't get a clear reading at all. I think those might have been purposely erased, from the looks of them."

"Do you really think they were permanently removed?"

Decio held up his pad for San to see. "Look... the PRT picked up traces of high corrosives on those areas, and only where the writing was. So it looks like they were intentionally removed. I guess we'll never know why."

"Have you translated the ones you've found?" San asked.

"Some of them. I've got to do more detailed study of some of the more illegible ones. But here are the ones I've gotten, so far."

Decio held the pad and moved beside San, so they could read them together, and began to scroll down the list. The first phrase was fairly harmless:

Hope this lasts forever. -Steve H

The next one, however, was not so innocent:

My contribution to the Blight

Two of the phrases had quotes around them. The first was clearly from a poem or song:

**The greatest thing you can ever learn,
is to love and be loved in return.**

but the next one could have come from any source of media, for all they could tell:

Livin' just enough for the city. -Morris

A few were dedications, mostly to parents or spouses, their intent clear enough. One, however, was a bit more obscure than most:

For Carlo: He believed in me. -Dennis

This made San and Decio exchange glances. Was Carlo a mentor? A relative? A lover? Only Dennis and, hopefully, Carlo, would know the answer to that now.

Then there was a phrase that sobered them both:

**The blame is not mine, for I tried to stop them.
The shame is mine, for I failed to stop them. -Neil**

San looked up at the nearest stand of beams, as if they could offer more of an explanation, and Decio's thoughts probably mirrored her own. Who was Neil? Did his lament refer to the building the beam had come from, possibly some dangerous building code violation? Or was it about something else entirely- a crime, a confrontation, a selfish act or a cruel decision? Or was it about something that "Neil" really had no power over, but felt compelled to vent his frustrations about anyway? Decio was suddenly glad the phrase was as nonspecific as it was. Given the unlimited statute of limitations connected to manslaughter cases, he fervently hoped no confessions of a deadly nature would reveal themselves here.

The last phrase he'd translated was interesting:

Ecotopia Now! -Black Apache

Decio was sure he'd never heard of a place, a movement or a person called "Ecotopia", and Midland's records only held a reference to a work of fiction from the 20th century. If it was the same reference, Decio thought, it might make interesting reading. If the book still existed.

Once at the bottom of the list, Decio looked up at San. "What do you think?"

"Wonderful," San replied, her voice pitched low as if she felt the presence of the spirits of these dead writers around her. "It's incredible. And you've only just started."

"Ugh... don't remind me," Decio said, rubbing his lower back with one hand.

San laughed at that. "Well, don't worry... you'll be through before you know it. And just think: Someday, people will be reading about you." She patted him on the shoulder. "Well, I've got to get going. See you later."

"You bet. See you." Decio paused, watching San as she walked away. *Just to give my back a few seconds more, before I get back to work.* "Yeah, right," he said aloud, once he knew she was out of earshot.

Seventy-three. That had been the grand total of messages found in one hundred columns in Midland's machine levels. Seventy-three messages in one hundred columns was a much higher figure than anyone dared expect, much less Decio. There was already talk in the Council about continuing the project until every column in the machine levels had been opened and examined.

Decio had been offered an official position (albeit a temporary one), a salary, and a staff to supervise! It was more than he could have ever hoped for.

He was still very excited about the offer, after spending most of the day telling his friends and family about it. Marla, whom he had been actively dating for the past ten days (and nine hours), had been there when he received the offer, and she left little doubt how thrilled she was for him. All this, and a girl, too! He was practically humming with excitement.

Marla had gone back to her apartment to change. To keep his mind off of what she might be changing into, Decio sat in front of his sec pad, looking over the last of the messages he'd translated. He scrolled through some of them quickly, some slowly, depending on his level of concentration at the moment. An endless variety of phrases scrolled by him, some very notable:

Times are a'changin.

Born to Build. -Kimberly

Someday the rape will stop.

Stop me before I overconstruct again. -Steid

There wasn't nearly enough humor in these, Decio mused.

"Metropolis... will be the last." -Arameschi

Someday one of these will truly be mine. -Greg

"Keep your head to the sky." -White

"We thank the good Mother for providing us with the means for shelter."

Decio recognized that last one as part of the Omniterranist's prayer. Maybe more than any other phrase here, this one was truly timeless.

At one point during his scrolling, he became vaguely aware that he had just missed something. He had been thinking of Marla again. He returned his concentration to the pad, and began scrolling back upwards to find what he'd passed. He finally reached a single line, not notable in itself:

**Someday my children will see the things I built in my pride...
and they will laugh at me.**

Then he realized what had caught his attention: It had been signed, "Pine".

An ancestor? Decio smiled at the thought that he had possibly discovered his own special link to the past. As if his mind's eye was attached to an elastic string stretching through time, he allowed it to snap back through the past. He imagined the beam just before being encased in its smithcrete prison; being salvaged from an old building in some unnamed, unoccupied city; resting in its position, adding its support to the original structure as it was designed to do; and being just put into place, still exposed to the elements, when a lone man, perhaps feeling

melancholic, perhaps simply in an odd sense of humor, removed an etching tool from his pocket and touched it to the face of the beam.

He allowed his mind's eye to rush back to the present. He imagined the man starting a family, which continued on through the generations, living, learning, struggling, as all families do. He imagined one of them coming to Midland, starting her own family... his grandmother, who had told him she'd been the first of the family to come to Midland.

Suddenly he saw his link to his family, like a web of connections running backward, ending with him. For the first time, Decio could see the greater whole that he was part of, feel the ties to family long departed, family in his life, family yet to come. He thought of Marla. And back to the man who had left this message to his descendants.

Looking back down to his pad, he ran his fingers across the last line. He didn't laugh.

LOG CELL ENTRY #29143: Harlequin

The squat round Cornet sat quietly in its place, in the corner of the station by the entrance to lockup. Normally it sat in lockup, to monitor any detainees held there. But there was no one in lockup... in fact, no one in the station at all. The small robot knew that, at times like that, its place was in the main office, in plain sight in case someone came to the station needing Peacekeeper aid.

Through its connections to the systems in the station, the cornet monitored secretary traffic, station and exterior comfort conditions, high-attention camera monitors, and other cornets in Midland. The highly intelligent mobile droneservants, and their non-security brothers, the squires, often functioned as the eyes and ears of their human masters in their absence, as well as the eyes and ears of Midland's secretary system itself. And although the Peacekeeper and Roller cornets were actually capable of subduing a human (provided he or she was too slow to avoid it), this particular unit had never done more than relay messages to the Peacekeepers when they were out.

Remote sensors in the station door alerted the cornet to the presence of two people in the entryway. The cornet turned towards the door as recognition software in the entryway trained itself on the occupants. Within a second, the occupant to the rear was identified as Peacekeeper Frank DeJaye, and his condition as healthy and in control of the youth in his grip was established. The door opened to Frank and his charge, and the cornet moved backwards to avoid being tripped over.

Frank caught sight of the cornet just a half-meter ahead, and jerked the collar of the boy in front of him to the left. "We're going this way, kid."

The boy, a tall and skinny teen, jerked his arms around as if trying to struggle out of his shirt. "Hey, cut it out, man! I didn't start nothin'! That lady was bullshittin' you, man!"

"Yeah, I'll bet," Frank frowned, steering the boy through the door into lockup. He shoved the boy into the first cell, pulling the door shut before the boy could bounce off the wall and make for freedom. The boy thumped loudly into the bars instead, almost striking his head into them. "Okay, now, you're going to be here for a while, so just sit down and *cool off*. Got it?"

"Man, don't leave me in here! I get clausterpedic! C'mon, I didn't *do* anything!"

Frank checked to make sure the cornet, which had followed him into lockup, was rolling back into place to guard the boy. Then he stepped out of lockup and closed the door behind him, effectively muffling the boy's wails. "Clauster-*pedic*. Jerk kids," he muttered under his breath. He reentered the main office and sat down at the desk, activated the desk sec, and began the recording process. The recognition software had already managed to match a name to the boy, and had almost half of the information required for Frank to finish the report. Frank himself added the rest of it, including the cells of the statements given by the waitress at the restaurant and numerous bystanders, and the claims of the boy. It took only a minute to access a camera cell from the restaurant, which clearly showed the boy throwing food and starting a fight with another patron. He added that to the file and forwarded it to Midland's police system. Once the Rollers reviewed the cells, they would come and pick up the boy, and take the rest of the matter under their jurisdiction.

Frank closed the cell, noting the time. It was still early, in fact earlier than he expected to be in, since he'd had his run-in with his food-fighter on his way to breakfast. Breakfast. The thought

triggered a mild pang of hunger in Frank, as he just remembered that he hadn't eaten breakfast. Well, he was here. He might as well order something to be brought in.

But before surrendering to hunger, he punched an access code into the sec and waited. The code belonged to Thomas, who had all of the Peacekeepers with him outside of Midland. They had been called out to assist in the investigation of an airship crash a few hundred kilometers from here, and this was the second day they were on-site there. It was a rare instance when airships went down, these days, but this catastrophe had been as impossible to predict as it had been to avoid... sudden severe weather conditions overtaking the airship, mechanical difficulties hindering their efforts to reach safe ground, and incredibly bad luck resulting in uncontrollable loss of altitude, the collision of the airship with a bluff, and its unscheduled landing. There had been many deaths resulting from the collision and fall, and many more injuries besides. The owners of the airship line, as well as the EMPA's weather monitoring centers, would have a lot of explaining to do before the incident would be considered closed.

It took just a few moments for the sec screen to wink on. Thomas' face filled the screen, looking down into his sleeve sec's communicator. "Morning, Frank. You're in early."

"Yeah, I had an early start today. How are things going out there, boss?"

Thomas looked up from the screen, probably to survey the scene around him. Frank had seen the views they had sent back when they arrived, and he was sure it wasn't pretty out there. "We've still got a lot of wreckage to sift through, and more analysis of the ship itself. There's indications of metal fatigue in the rear sections which might have affected maneuverability, but that's nothing definite."

"Gotcha. How much longer do you think you'll be?"

"Well," Thomas replied, "the Flight Management Authority sent down a lot of Generals, but only a few Privates. So work is slow... none of these guys wants to get their hands dirty. We'll be another two to three days out here, at least. How're things there?"

"Oh, nice and quiet," Frank replied, hoping the kid in lockup wouldn't pick that moment to pipe up and make a liar out of him. "Worst thing I've gotten my hands on has been a thrown doughnut. Wish I could help you guys out."

"I appreciate that," Frank said. "If we do need anything from Midland, I'll let you know. But take my word for it: You really don't want to be here."

He was probably right, Frank reflected. "Keep in touch. Say 'hi' to the others for me."

"I'll do that. Beak out."

The screen's image vanished, and Frank leaned back in his chair. It was looking to be a long few more days... especially if things didn't pick up soon. His lack of anything immediate to do brought a growl from his stomach, and he again remembered he hadn't eaten. Leaning forward again, he called up a menu from a nearby cafe, and picked out a delectable combination of quiche, sausage, fruit and rolls. He input the order, with arrangements to have it delivered to the station, then went to work on the city cells trying to find a good novel he hadn't read yet.

Sure enough, the food fight turned out to be the highlight of Frank's morning. Other than a few administrative duties, he had hardly moved from his chair all morning. He had finally found a good old-fashioned mystery, and had busied himself with solving Detective Barbieri's Case of

the Blue Bonnets. The wily detective had just reached the garden and discovered the stand of flowers with all the bulbs snipped off, when the text on the sec screen disappeared.

It was noon, precisely.

Frank was so startled by the face that suddenly filled the sec screen that he gave an involuntary cough of surprise and jerked upright in his chair. The face was smiling brightly... practically leering... and scanning around with his eyes, as if taking in the whole of the room. In the split-second it took Frank to recognize the face, it spoke.

“Well, tip-top-o-the-mornin’ to Midland! And look at all those bright, shiny faces with those goggling eyes bouncing up and down! I just love a stupefied audience!” The voice changed, sounding much more serious. *“I would like to formally announce that today in Midland, Namerica has been formally declared to be Harlequin day! YAAAY!”*

Frank could feel his blood go cold. “No. No. Not here. *Not now. NOT TO ME!*”

He punched at the sec screen to clear it, but the smiling face remained. It was clearly not human, being more an elaborate computer generation of a face, made all the more comical by its obvious emphasis on being artificial. The face of the so-called “Harlequin” seemed to be made out of a soft rubber which bounced as it spoke, the hair a garish brown plastic that resisted any movement whatsoever. The white collar below the neck was just a short, wide tube, at least four times as wide as the neck that ran down into it, and as completely without depth as a sec’s graphic construct can be. The plastic-looking red shape at the bottom could only have been called a shirt by virtue of its position below the collar.

“And as the first official act of Harlequin day,” the face was exulting, *“I would like to introduce yourselves to each other! Oh, I know that you all know each other already... after all, you’ve all lived in this beehive together for sooo many years. But I’ll bet you don’t know each other nearly as well as you think you do. And don’t you think that’s wrong, don’t you think that’s so un-natural? You should all know each other completely and totally! You have to depend on each other, you know... to provide food, to make clothes, to chase each other’s wives, to kick the furnaces in the basement when they go cold... you know, the things that make it so good to be alive! So let’s celebrate life! Let’s explore each other’s spaces! Let’s see each other for what we really are! And I can’t think of a better place to start than... right here!”*

Suddenly, the image on the screen disappeared, to be replaced by the view of a bedroom. Most bedrooms in Midland had wall-sized or medium-sized secs mounted in a prominent place, and all secs included viewing cameras. Most people kept their bedroom cameras off to preserve their privacy, but they were always capable of being overridden by voice command. They were not supposed to be able to be overridden by outside intervention, except by official channels, like the Peacekeepers and Rollers, but it was open now. There was a single woman in the room, standing by a full-length mirror across the room, her back to the camera viewing her. She was busy sliding a red stocking up her left leg. Other than the stocking already on her right leg, she was completely naked.

Frank howled and slapped both hands to his head. He bolted around the corner, into the conference room. The main sec screen on the wall, and the table unit, both showed the same image. He swiveled his head out the window, where he could see a public sec mounted on a nearby kiosk. A small crowd was gathered around the sec, where Frank could clearly see the exposed back of the same woman that was on his screen. It was probably on every screen in Midland.

The woman, meanwhile, had finished pulling up the stocking, and was now busy admiring the set, and her figure, in the full-length mirror. When she shifted and turned, every inch of her body was revealed to the camera, either directly or in the mirror. Even though the station's walls were well soundproofed, Frank was sure he could hear the cheers and applause going on throughout Midland.

At that moment, the voice of the Harlequin came back. *"Loooo-king goooooo!"* The voice was obviously broadcasting into the bedroom, for the woman started, then swung around, facing the camera fully. When she looked at the sec screen, Frank could guess she was probably seeing the leering caricature of the Harlequin there. She screamed, realized she was fully exposed to whatever it was, and tried to dash out of sight.

"No! The other way!" Frank yelled, as if she could hear him. She had run into a corner, which she immediately realized was not hidden from the camera. Bleating in fright again, she turned and ran back across the camera's view, using her arms ineffectively to hide her breasts and crotch, to dart into the bathroom. Her half-hysterical screams could clearly be heard over the sec's link.

The synthetic voice laughed crazily throughout the scene. Once she was safely in the bathroom, it called out in a singsong voice, *"I can see you through the keyhole!"* She resumed screaming, and a flicker of shadow in the corner of the screen made it plain that she was now dashing around in the bathroom, still trying to hide herself.

"We-ell, I'm certainly glad we stopped by... aren't you?" The synthetic face once again covered the screen, smiling more broadly than any human could. *"Let's see if we can meet any of her neighbors, hmm? "Oooh, looky what we have here: Ain't love grand?"*

The scene had already switched to a young couple in their living room, fully involved in kissing and petting each other. They were fully clothed this time, much to Frank's immediate relief. But within moments, the boy's hand was sliding up into the girl's blouse, while her hand moved to his crotch. *"Go for it, kiddies! No better way to learn the basics, I say!"*

"Oh, Damn!" Frank cried as the young couple yelped at the screen and ran into opposite corners of the room. "I can't believe this is happening on my shift!" As the Harlequin resumed its verbal tirade, he punched the official override codes into the desk sec, clearing the screen and allowing him access to a trace circuit. But within four seconds, before he had set the trace up, the screen abruptly jumped back to the Harlequin. "No!" He tried again, with the same result. "NO!" Frank slammed his fist onto the desk in frustration.

"Oh, YASS!" The screen image seemed to look directly at Frank, and he momentarily froze. In the corner of the screen, a small box opened up to reveal a man poised in front of a desk sec. He looked furious, shocked, desperate, his eyes darting back and forth like a caged animal.

It was Frank.

"Hey! No tracing on my shift! You wouldn't want to do anything antisocial, like cut me off, would you, Peacekeeper?"

"I sure as Hell would!" Frank tried the override code again. He was quickly cut off.

"Nooo, not yet! I just got here! And there are so many other people I haven't properly introduced to everyone yet! Like this guy!" The screen changed to a man in what looked like a clothing boutique. He was a large man, trying unsuccessfully to squeeze his ample girth into a

pair of slacks. Again, Frank was positive he could hear the laughter outside. *“Actually, I’ll bet everyone knows someone like this. But, just in case you didn’t..!”*

“Dammit!” Frank spat, punching the override back in. He stabbed at the dedicated access icon for Midland’s police system. He noticed in the second it took to connect that there were no incoming calls waiting for him. Considering the circumstances, most of the communications lines had probably been cut off by the Harlequin. He hoped his secure line to the Rollers was not likewise cut off.

Within another second, the screen changed, and a face that was definitely flesh-and-blood appeared. It was Renee Ricks, one of Captain Henri Gregorson’s senior rollers. Behind her, Frank could hear yelling and cursing, see people dashing back and forth. “Renee!” Frank called out, to be heard over the din on the other end. “What’s going on over there?”

“What do *you* think!” she barked at him. “Unless your secs are all broken up there, you know as much as we do!”

“We’ve got to find Singer Quiun!” Frank barked back. “Where’s Gregorson?”

“Thank you, I know very well who the Harlequin is!” Renee snapped back. “And he’s busy!”

“Do you have *any* access to directories? Can you trace?”

“What do you think I’ve got forty men here trying to do ? We’re cut off, too! We can’t even access our internal cells!”

Frank almost yelled back at the screen, then caught himself, and took a deep breath. When he turned back to the screen, he was noticeably calmer. “Renee, I’m sorry. I’m locked out, too. Listen, if you get anything-”

“Aawww, a lover’s quarrel. I so HATE to see that kind of thing.” Frank was caught in mid-sentence, gaping in surprise at the Harlequin that now filled his screen in place of the secure line. *“It’s the long hours. When was the last time you sat down and just talked to each other? Not as enforcers, but as the lovebirds you were in school?”*

Frank had to restrain himself from putting the back of his hand through the sec screen.

At two that afternoon, the scheduled skate cruised leisurely into the Midland terminal. The terminal itself was chaos: The sec screens and information screens that filled the terminal had been broadcasting the Harlequin for the last two hours, and as a result, no one was able to access schedule information, check on skate arrivals and departures, identify skates until they were actually in the terminal, or report when skates had arrived.

The skate’s doors slid open, allowing a wash of yelling crowds to spill in. The noise generated by the crowds, accompanied by the ravings of the Harlequin reverberating about the terminal, created instant panic in the skate. The occupants of the skate fought bravely to exit the cars, many being jostled by frustrated travelers. Terminal authorities swam among the crowds, trying to maintain order, but only added to the din.

No one noticed the man who worked his way out of the forward car onto the platform. There was nothing particularly noticeable about him, as he was fairly average of build and looks, although he was just slightly taller than most of the people in the terminal. He was dressed well, in the fairly typical style of suit worn by businessmen in Namerica, with a thin briefcase in one hand. As he stepped clear of the car, he was elbowed by a last young man, trying to enter the car

before the doors closed on him. The elbow bent him over a bit, but he straightened up, and ran a leisurely hand through his hair to smooth it out.

At that moment, the Harlequin on the screens seemed to look to one side and do a double-take. On a large screen near the skate platform, the large image of the Harlequin seemed to be looking directly at the tall gentleman straightening his hair.

“Well, WELL, look who it is!” the Harlequin cried, and many people were forced by the changed tone of his voice to look up at the screens they had been trying to ignore, then follow the simulation’s gaze to see what had attracted its attention. *“Yes, as I live and breathe... well, exist and process, anyway... if it isn’t my old friend, Singer Quiun! Quiun! YOO-HOOOO! Up here, handsome!”*

The tall man looked up, around, and finally brought his gaze to the large screen and the simulation staring at him. In a well-modulated stage voice, the gentleman called out, “Well, hello, Harlequin! How are you?”

“Just peachy! Yourself?”

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“I heard you were coming to town, old buddy, so I took it upon myself to entertain the troops until you arrived.” The Harlequin seemed to puff up a bit, and smiled widely. *“I must say, I’ve had the place captivated!”*

A number of people nearby noticed the exchange between the man and the image on the screen. Many of them began to crowd around to watch the conversation, keeping a close eye on both participants. One of the terminal authorities was close enough to see the gentleman talking to the Harlequin, and ran for a supervisor.

“Well, WELL, look who it is!”

Frank DeJaye looked up from the wall panel his arms were deep inside. He had been spending the last half-hour attempting to reroute the sec’s communication lines to bypass the annoying Harlequin’s broadcast, so far unsuccessfully. He thought he’d finally figured out a configuration that would allow him to lock a communication line down without a chance of outside interference, and had a number of lines unplugged around his hands. Not wanting to let go of the cables he had his hands on, he had to twist about to see the new development on the screen.

He could still see the Harlequin, but its tirade had apparently been interrupted by something. A small box in the lower portion of the screen showed a view of the Midland skate terminal, and in its center, a man stood talking to the Harlequin. The box was too small on the desk sec for him to make the person out at that distance, so he craned his neck in the other direction to see the image on the big conference room screen.

“Quiun! Dammit!” Frank started to extricate himself from the wiring panel, then thought better of it, and started hurriedly plugging lines back in. As he worked, the conversation between the man and the simulation played on every screen.

“Now, Harlequin, I sincerely hope you haven’t been annoying anyone in the city,” the man identified as Quiun spoke to the screen.

“Annoying? Moi? Oh, certainly not! Why, we’ve all been having such a wonderful time, getting acquainted, meeting our inner children, so-to-speak, playing all sorts of old-fashioned

parlor games. You should have seen the winner of our 'Hide-and-Seek' game. She's so excited, she can't stop crying! Here: Let me show you what you've missed." The screen abruptly changed to shots of the many people who had been candidly exposed by the Harlequin over the past two hours. The shots went by in such quick order that it was impossible to recognize anything but an occasional breast, buttocks or crotch. In three seconds, the flash of images was gone, and the Harlequin was back. *"Whoa! What a rush! Wanna see it again?"*

"No thank you, once was enough," Quiun replied. "In fact, now that I'm here, I think you can stop 'entertaining' our hosts. You wouldn't want to wear out your welcome, would you?"

"No, no you're quite right," the Harlequin replied with mock seriousness. *"Well, it was nice talking to you, Mr. Quiun... we just don't get together enough. Ta-taa!"* And with that, the simulation turned and exited the screen with a flourish. Behind its retreat, the data and images usually displayed on the sec screens swept back into place as if they were printed on a closing curtain.

Quiun nodded at the now-cleared screen, and said, "Ta-ta, Harlequin." He started to walk off through the terminal, amidst crowds all exclaiming relief at the end of the chaotic episode they had just endured. A few people applauded Quiun, in thankfulness or confusion, their apparent savior.

When the sec screen cleared, Frank plopped himself into the chair before it and entered a retrieval mode. "Subject: Singer Quiun, private citizen, no known address. Presently located in Midland skate terminal. Request full detail of whereabouts over the last two weeks, starting with his origin point on the skate backward. Request notification of any people subject visits or contacts, and any hotel he checks into. Request constant full monitoring of subject-"

The sec interrupted him. *"Full and constant monitoring of subject requires authorization of station chief, or override by ranking officer."*

"Identify Frank DeJaye," Frank quickly replied. "I am ranking Peacekeeper. Authorization override given, code Beta-red-NAS-five-two." Well, that was it, Frank thought; he'd put his neck on the line. He would be required to give a full report about his actions now, to Thomas and his superiors in Jetstream.

He didn't give it a second thought as he charged up his Estaff and checked the load in his tranq grip.

Singer Quiun set the briefcase down on the bed of the hotel suite he'd just checked into. A larger suitcase sat on the bed next to the briefcase, sent ahead of Quiun under another name. He opened the suitcase and began moving articles of clothing into a nearby dresser. Occasionally he stopped to admire the view out of his window, one of the more scenic views of the forest and lands outside Midland that any hotel had to offer.

There was a buzz at the door to the suite. Quiun walked out of the bedroom, crossed the main room and opened the door. An official pace from the entry was Frank DeJaye, standing legs apart, hands clasped behind his back. He made no sound, guaranteeing that Quiun could hear the slight hum of the Estaff slung on his hip. Quiun looked Frank up and down, taking note of the humming staff, and back up to Frank's glaring eyes.

"Singer Quiun. Let's talk."

Frank walked into the suite before Quiun could object, pushing the door closed behind him. He walked directly over to the picture window overlooking Midland's surroundings, seemingly taking in the view. Quiun slowly followed the Peacekeeper, keeping a respectful distance away. When Quiun was a few paces behind Frank, Frank turned around to face him. The light from the window darkened Frank's features and seemed to add mass to his frame.

"I'll bet you've practiced that," Quiun stated matter-of-factly. "That was a very good entrance. Speaking professionally, of course."

"Of course," Frank repeated dryly. He stepped forward, until he was half a meter from Quiun. "I'll put it to you simply, Quiun. I don't want the Harlequin here."

"What makes you think I have anything to do with the Harlequin, peacekeeper?" Quiun asked innocently.

"Don't pull that shit with me!" Frank snapped, quickly closing the distance between them. "We both know that the Harlequin is your puppy-"

"That has never been proven, peacekeeper. You know that." Quiun stepped back to regain his distance. "No evidence of my involvement with the Harlequin has ever been established. I'm just in town for a visit. I didn't come here looking for trouble."

"And if the Harlequin just happens to show up in town just before you get here-"

"Now, I hardly have any control over such a coincidence-"

"-*Just* as he's shown up, each time just before your arrival somewhere, for the last *six years*-"

"-Perhaps someone may mean to implicate me by association, but there isn't anything I can do about that-"

"Quiun!" Frank cut him off with a slash of his hand. "May I remind you that commandeering public and private comnets, vandalism and terrorism are illegal, and-"

"Vandalism? *Terrorism*? Really, peacekeeper..."

"Keep it up," Frank gritted. "Just keep it up. I came to warn you, fair and square: I don't care who you've blinded with your bullshit before, and I don't care what you think you're going to do here. I'm keeping an eye on you, and you're not going to get away with it. If you pull anything like this afternoon's gag while you're here, I'm going to throw you out of that window or *into* my jail, whichever you're closer to. Is that clear?"

"As the proverbial crystal," Quiun replied. "And if you're ready to lose your job, just threaten me like that again while I'm here."

"I never threaten." Frank locked eyes with him for long moments, making sure his intent was clear. Then he stepped around Quiun and strode for the door. As he reached the door, he paused in the entry. "Do us and yourself a favor: Go visit someone else." He left, leaving the door wide open.

Quiun waited until he couldn't hear Frank's footsteps in the corridor, then stepped forward and closed the door. Then he reentered the bedroom.

He opened the briefcase on the bed and removed a small, black case from its contents. He brought this case back into the main suite and set it down on a small writing desk, which he moved to the wall below the wall secretary. Just below the wall sec's screen was a small access

panel, matching the design of the wallpaper and affixed with a single screw. Quiun took a small tool from his pocket, unfolded a small screwdriver from its clasp, and put it to the screw.

In a moment, he had the screw out, and the panel removed. Just behind the panel were a few access sockets and a tiny control panel, part of the secretary's diagnostic system. Quiun slid a panel aside on the black case he'd brought, and extracted a cord from a recess. There was a small black plug at the end of the cord, and he attached this to one of the sockets in the diagnostic panel. He pushed a hidden set of studs on the black case. Then, selecting six studs on the diagnostic control panel, he put a finger on each, and pressed them all simultaneously.

There was a quiet beep from somewhere inside the panel, and a single green light began to wink on and off beside the socket he had plugged into. Quiun smiled, and walked back into the bedroom. After a few moments, he walked back out with his briefcase, and left the suite.

"Oh, brilliant move, peacekeeper. Confront and threaten a private citizen, with no criminal or arrest history. Then order surveillance of said private citizen, using a criminal intent authorization. Did you belt him yet?"

"No."

"I'll give you a day to hold out," Renee commented. "Really, Frank, how could you do that? You're no rookie, you know how much trouble that can get you into!"

"Frankly, I couldn't care less." Frank leaned against Renee's desk in Roller headquarters. He had gone straight to her, after leaving Quiun's suite, to talk to her face-to-face, hopefully away from interruption or outside monitoring. "I wanted him to think I was a hothead, anyway. It might make him careless around me."

"Or it might just provoke him, dummy," Renee pointed out.

"Well, if it provokes him, maybe he'll slip up, and we'll nail him with something. Just so we get him."

"Frank..." Renee shook her head, holding out a hand as if it had the facts balanced in it. "Frank, no one's ever caught Quiun at this game of his! He's brilliant, he's sneaky, and he's brilliant! Whenever the Harlequin's been sighted, surveillance and secrets have always established Quiun's presence somewhere else. No one can do what he does with comnets and optronics. And he's too good to trip up."

"No, he's not," Frank stated. "I'm going to trip him up. And I'm going to bring him down. Just watch me."

"Watch you do what? Ruin your career? Don't do anything stupid, Frank, I'm telling you."

"Look, are you going to help me, or what? All I want is a roller placed on visual surveillance, and a warrant to search his hotel room."

"Search it for what?"

Frank and Renee turned when they heard the voice of Henri Gregorson, Captain of the Midland Rollers. The burly man stood filling the door to Renee's office, arms crossed against his massive chest. His thick white hair and bushy white mustache gave him a grandfatherly appearance, made all the more serious by his stern expression. "Exactly what is it that you expect to find in there, peacekeeper?"

Frank looked Gregorson in the eye. “Illegal or hazardous electronic and-or optronic equipment,” he quoted from a well-known regulation. “He’s using non-standard equipment...”

“Of course he’s using non-standard equipment,” Gregorson drawled, “but that doesn’t make it illegal.”

“I want to scan his equipment. If I detect any unauthorized emissions, I have the right to confiscate all of it for further testing.”

“And what if you test it, and don’t find anything?”

“Well, we’ll have removed it from his hands for a few days,” Frank replied. “That’s a few less days for him to pull this Harlequin stuff on us.”

“In other words, you just want to annoy him out of town.”

“Hey, it works for me,” Frank shrugged.

“Actually, it works for me, too,” Renee agreed, looking at Gregorson. “Let’s let him have the warrant, Henri.”

“And what if you don’t find any unauthorized transmissions in the first place?” Gregorson pointed out.

Frank smiled. “Don’t worry. I will. Say, can I tap into my office and see if he’s still in his suite?”

“Sure.” Renee moved over for Frank to use her sec. In a moment, he was accessing the PK sec and checking on his surveillance connection. The screen showed the hotel suite Frank had just left, where Singer Quiun sat quietly reading a book.

“Good, he’s stayed put. Now if-”

“Hold on.” Gregorson came around the desk, watching the image closely. “Keep looking at him.” The three of them stared at the image for long seconds. It soon became evident that the man in the chair was not moving an inch, even to breathe. “That’s not him. He’s pulled a fast one on you, son.”

“Damn!” Frank thumped a fist on the desk. “Some kind of false image! How the hell did it fool the sec’s cameras, though? They can scan full spectrum!”

“I told you he was brilliant,” Renee said. “He could be anywhere, and we have no way of searching for him with the secretets. What now, Frank?”

“Cut me that warrant,” he replied. “I’m gonna nail the self-confident sonuvabitch. I’m gonna nail him.”

The rest of the afternoon turned out to be as uneventful as the morning had been, except that Frank spent most of the day wandering around Midland in the vain hope of running into Quiun. Finally, hours after his shift was supposed to end, he gave up the search and called it a day. He probably would have kept at it, but he had made arrangements to meet a girl he’d recently been introduced to, and he had no intentions of breaking their date.

He got to his apartment in just enough time to shower and change, before his date arrived. She was a pretty young girl, with a bright smile, and Frank almost managed to forget the day’s tribulations when she greeted him at the door.

They went directly to a favorite restaurant of Frank's, the High Side, on one of the highest outer levels in Midland. The restaurant overlooked the west side of Midland, and during sunset offered one of the most singularly beautiful and romantic vistas in the mall. Lena- Frank's date for the evening- being new to Midland, she had never seen this most renowned of Midland's sights, and was delighted and impressed by both the view and the person who had introduced her to it.

Unfortunately, Frank was too preoccupied to fully enjoy either the view or the appreciation. He kept finding himself looking over his shoulder, stealing glances at any sec screen within view, or cocking his head at any sound coming from a speaker. His date would have been a disaster, had it not been for Lena, who had decided that whatever was distracting him simply would not be allowed to upstage her. She proceeded to do what was locally known as "drenching" Frank with her charms, and after awhile, Frank had managed to almost completely forget about the Harlequin.

Once dinner was over, the couple found themselves back at Frank's apartment, sharing drinks and an incredible dessert Frank had discovered at one of his wilder haunts in the lower levels... he avoided telling Lena exactly where he'd gotten it, but assured her he could get more of it by the kilo. Dessert led to more drinks, and more drinks put the two of them in a very amorous mood. Time and a path of hastily shucked clothing eventually led to the bedroom, and the two were soon in the throes of sexual frenzy.

Most couples tend to discover that they fit together best in one way, and spend a lot of time in that position. Frank and Lena had been no exception, so they found themselves on the bed, Frank on top and working at a smooth and relaxed pace, when he heard a throat clear in the room, to his right.

Frank and Lena jerked their heads around to the right, and found themselves staring at themselves. The wall sec was showing a view of Frank's bedroom, with himself and Lena on the bed staring back down at themselves. This was actually something Frank had done purposely on occasion, although he hadn't set it up on this particular night. But what was really alarming about the image on the sec screen was that it showed another man in their dark room, apparently standing on the other side of the bed with his hands in his pockets. Both of them threw their heads around to the other side of the bed, and saw no one there. Then back to the screen, where the man still stood.

"Can we talk?"

The voice seemed to come from the apparently unoccupied far side of the room. This proved to be too much for Lena, who cried out, wriggled out from under Frank, and dashed into the closet on one bound. Frank was summarily bounced off of the bed, and landed in a sitting position between the bed and the screen. The figure on the screen walked around the foot of the bed to join Frank, leaned over, and asked, *"I hope I didn't alarm you."*

Frank looked away from the screen, and still saw no one in the room. "Daylights!" The overheads clicked on, bringing the room to full illumination. When the room lights snapped on, Frank saw the now-visible closet door snap shut on the screen. The form on the screen also brightened, assuming features in the light.

"Quiun."

"Excuse me? The name's 'Harlequin'. Surely it hasn't been all that long since you've seen me. Imagine confusing me with other people..." The person on the screen was undeniably Singer

Quiun, not the obviously caricatured face that had terrorized Midland during the afternoon. This image looked too good to be generated in real-time by a sec. Frank could only guess that Quiun was broadcasting his image from his hotel suite, and was somehow incorporating it into Frank's room using his own equipment.

"What do you want, Quiun?"

"Why do you keep calling me 'Key-oon'? Koo-inn, koo-inn, Har-le-koo-in. That's me. Listen, Frankie... can I call you Frankie?..."

"No."

"Frankie, baby, you and I are fighting for no good reason! I'm not here to hurt anybody. That's the Rollers' job, isn't it?"

"Quiun..."

"Now, my job is completely different. It's my job to wake people up to their disgusting, sterilized, nonentity-nonsense-filled existences. How's that for a credo? See, I'm trying to enlighten people! I'm trying to broaden their perspective! I'm trying to show them that life is for living, love is for giving, beauty is for the taking, and sterile bandages are for cuts..."

"Quiun!"

"Harle-"

"Harlequin! What-the-fuck-ever!" Frank stood up and stepped toward the screen, pausing only a moment to look at the spot in the real room where Quiun was not. "You are not a harmless prankster. One of your gags set a man on fire once!"

"For all of two seconds: The water balloon put him right out."

"Yeah, but the seventy-two-year-old man almost died of a heart attack, you asshole!"

"Hey, I can't be blamed for a man's bad health habits. Hey, I didn't tell him to be born seventy-two years ago, now, did I?"

"And what about the lady you dangled out of a sculpture in New Quebec?"

"The sculpture was called 'Hanging Violet'! At least I didn't put a noose around her neck..."

"Violet Bailey happens to be a friend of mine, you sadist! I'm not going to let you do that to anybody in Midland... or anywhere else! In fact, I may blow off my career and just plain beat the crap out of you!"

"Oh, how you kid! Relax, man. I promise my next gag won't threaten a single bodily organ! Listen, I gotta go. By the way: Nice tush, Lena. But yours is kinda skinny, Frank. Ta!"

Before Frank could say another word, the screen went blank. Frank stood there facing it, trying to keep himself from howling in frustration.

A few moments later, the closet door opened. Lena stuck her head out and looked carefully around the room, then came out, still wary of corners. She walked up beside Frank and huddled up against him. "What was all *that* about? Why were you talking to that Harlequin guy?"

"It's a long story," Frank said. "And I'm in the wrong mood to talk about it. Are you okay?"

"Yeah... just kinda spooked, that's all. I thought bedroom secs aren't supposed to be able to do that?"

“Oh, they’re not,” Frank agreed. “Believe me, if I knew how he did it, I’d kill him for the secret. Then probably patent it.”

Lena smiled wryly at that, and kissed him. She put a lot into it, and in moments, Frank found himself responding to her again. After a moment, they leaned back to recline on the bed again.

“Hey, watch it!”

They both yelped and shot back off of the bed as if propelled, staring at the empty bed and the blank screen in shock.

“Made you look! HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

The next morning, Frank arrived at Quiun’s suite with a warrant cell in one hand and his PRT scanner in the other. He swept through Quiun’s room, swept the PRT over the cases and equipment on tables and on the bed, and announced that all of them “appeared to be emitting signals which were not part of the legal spectrum for publicly-used optronic appliances”. Quiun dutifully protested as Frank gathered the equipment up in a bag and left the suite, with a promise to return “all legally-operating equipment, after they were extensively checked out”.

Quiun ordered breakfast brought to his room. He greeted the Roller stationed outside of his door, when it was delivered. He sat down and took his time eating, occasionally glancing at the time display on his wall sec. At five minutes to nine, he finished breakfast, moved the tray to a distant table, and walked into the bedroom. Opening the door to the closet, he reached inside of a thick robe and pulled a black case out of a hidden pocket. With the tap of a thumb, he disabled the field that hid it from the PRT scan. Then he brought it over to the wall sec, unscrewed the access panel, and plugged the case into the diagnostic outlet. Sliding the panel back on a small control face embedded into the case, he tapped out a code and set up the mechanism.

At nine precisely, Quiun put in a call to the city Administrator’s office. “Good morning. My name is Singer Quiun. I have an appointment with Mr. Bradley Westcott.”

“Your appointment is confirmed. Please stand by,” the office’s sec told him. Quiun sat quietly in front of the screen, examining his fingernails, and waited.

A few seconds later, the screen changed to the office of the Administrator. A thin man with a thin shock of dark hair sat regarding him. “I am Bradley Westcott.”

“I am Singer Quiun. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Mr. Quiun, your... reputation... precedes you. What business do you have with this office?”

“Sir,” Quiun began, “I was told you were the gentleman to talk to regarding funding efforts for the Midland arts program.”

“I see,” Westcott replied, regarding Quiun through furrowed brows. “Do you wish to donate your services?”

“No, not really. No, what I had in mind was something in the way of supplies. Raw materials.”

“Raw materials?”

“Yes. Specifically, marble. You see, I’ve recently entered a contract with the EMPA to restore a parcel of land to its original condition, and there is a marble quarry on the site.”

“Mr. Quiun, if you have a contract to restore that land-”

“Oh, no, Mr. Westcott, I assure you I have no intention of mining anything!” Quiun put up his hands in mock defense, and smiled. “But as it so happens, I’ve surveyed the land, and there is quite a bit of loose marble on site, already mined.”

“Mined marble still on-site?”

“Yes. I would guess that there was some impurity, or possibly a size limitation, that made the marble worthless to the quarry’s owners. Whatever the reason, the marble has been left in a corner of the parcel. And although they may be a bit impure, many of the pieces are sizeable.”

“I see,” Westcott said, although he didn’t appear to see at all. “And your intention is to donate that marble to our arts program?”

“That’s it, exactly. After all, budding sculptors need to work on something besides clay. And I hear there’s nothing like carving marble. So: If your office is amenable to our transaction, I should like to discuss the particulars with you.”

“Particulars?”

“Yes. Transportation details, shipping protocols, freight cost arrangements. Surely your office has handled things like this before. I’m new to bulk shipping, but I’m sure that with your help we can work out these details.”

“Oh. I understand. Well, yes, we can go over all of that. We have certain procedures that we prefer to follow, and I’ll be glad to go over them with you...”

“Say, look out for that vase!”

“Eh?”

“Behind you,” Quiun stated, pointing over Westcott’s right shoulder. “That vase looks like it’s teetering.”

“Eh?” Westcott turned and looked over his shoulder, at a vase on the table behind him. At that moment, Quiun reached for the case on the table next to him and tapped a small stud. Then he stood up and went into the bedroom.

Westcott reached around and placed a hand on the vase, as if steadying it. Then he turned back to the wall sec. He smiled at the image of Quiun on his screen, still sitting in the chair before him. “It seems to be fine, Mr. Quiun. Nothing to worry about.”

“Terribly sorry. Must have been a trick of the light.”

“That’s quite all right,” Westcott replied. “Now, where were we?”

“Procedures to follow,” Quiun’s image replied.

“Ah. Yes. Allow me to access the cells on those procedures, and we’ll go over them, one by one.”

“Take your time,” the image told him.

“Over there! Over there! If you hurry, you might still catch him!”

Frank dashed around the wall of bonsai trees that formed one side of the wide atrium. His feet suddenly slid on the flagstones, and he flailed like a madman, barely managing to keep his balance. When he came to a stop, he stared at the ground, realizing the entire atrium’s floor had the same slick sheen. When he looked back up, he saw fully two-dozen people approaching him

on cautious footsteps. Although the flagstones looked like they had just been rained on, none of the people in the atrium looked even slightly damp.

One man, dressed in an old-fashioned blue tuxedo, led the charge. "Peacekeeper! He was just here, that, that Harlequin! He went that way!"

Frank followed the direction the man pointed in, straight up into the high balconies above. "He went where?"

"He came down from there!" the man insisted. "He came down on a wire!..."

"All right, all right!" Frank held up his hands to quiet the man and the half-dozen people trying to talk around him. In the back of the group were a young man and woman, in ceremonial wedding dress. He pointed to the blue tuxedo. "You: Start from the beginning. Now, you saw the Harlequin. Up there."

"Yes!" The tuxedo stopped, took a deep breath, and continued. "Yes. He was on a wire... I guess some sort of a harness."

"What was he doing?"

"Well, he had a big drum, and a hose. He came down, in the middle of the wedding ceremony, and started spraying all of us with the hose!"

There was general, and loud, agreement on this last point, causing Frank to examine everyone in the atrium. "How long ago was this?"

"It was just a minute ago!" Blue tuxedo cried. "He was just here!"

"Come on, be specific. How long ago?"

"...All right, it was maybe two minutes ago. Three tops."

"Oh, come on," Frank said, waving a hand at all of them. "You're all bone dry! Now, come on, someone with good timing skills, please!"

However, everyone insisted that the incident had indeed happened just two minutes before. Frank examined the sleeve of the tuxedo, and various articles of clothing on others, but could detect nothing. While he did this, others began to relax and joke about the incident. Even the bride and groom seemed relieved that nothing in the atrium had been actually damaged. After Frank checked the liquid on the flagstones, which appeared to be nothing but harmless water, he straightened up and shrugged.

"I can only guess that he was just trying to shock you all," he said. "It doesn't look like anything was damaged at all. If I were you," he looked toward the bride and groom, "I'd continue with your wedding. Give 'er a kiss for me, son."

The bride and groom smiled, as everyone breathed a sigh of relief around them. The bride hugged close to the groom, and in response, the groom turned and kissed her.

They turned red. That was the effect, at least; actually, only their suit and wedding gown turned bright, blood red before the eyes of the guests. Then, the suits and gowns of the guests around them began to turn the same shade of red, moving outward from the young couple and sweeping along everyone in the atrium.

Frank blinked hard, twice. The alarmed cries of the guests roused the newlyweds, who hadn't noticed anything up until that point. When they saw the roomful of red suits and gowns, the shocked looks of the guests, the bride screamed.

The scream wasn't much louder than Frank's cry of rage.

"Well, I think that should cover all the details of shipping," Westcott said, using one hand to close various menus on his sec screen.

"Yes, I think so, too." Quiun settled back in his chair on Westcott's screen, smiling and stretching his arms. "Such tedious details, but well worth the satisfaction of those budding artists."

"I quite agree, Mr. Quiun..." Westcott trailed off, as he heard a commotion at Quiun's end. Quiun turned in his chair to face the door of his suite, where loud voices snapped. A moment later, the suite door opened, and Frank DeJaye bounded into the room.

"Quiun! Get up, dammit!" Without waiting, Frank grabbed Quiun's armpit and pulled him out of his chair. "If you think you're going to get away with a stunt like that wedding..."

"Peacekeeper! What are you talking about?" Quiun yanked his arm free. "I've been here all morning, discussing shipping details with Mr. Westcott, here."

"What are you... shipping details?" Frank looked at the screen Quiun indicated with a gesture. He recognized Westcott, staring at them from his office. "Bradley? What's he talking about?"

"Frank," Westcott replied in a surprised tone, "I've been on the line talking to Mr. Quiun for the last... well, a little over an hour now."

Frank slowly turned to face the sec screen, doubt in his eyes. "Over an hour."

"Yes."

"When you came to me last month, asking about your... unique cell situation..." Frank paused long enough for Westcott's expression to change, indicating he knew what personal and embarrassing subject Frank was dancing around. "...who did I tell you to talk to?"

"Uh... your brother, Tomas."

Well, it was probably him, then, Frank decided. "Bradley, are you absolutely sure about how long you've been talking to Quiun? Check the call record from your end."

"Hold on." Westcott leaned forward and tapped his fingers across the screen. After a moment, he leaned back. "Okay, he called me at nine this morning... and the sec confirms we have been connected for the last eighty-seven minutes. It's ten twenty-seven now."

Frank automatically looked at the time indicator on his IS sleeve: It said 10:27A. He slowly lowered his arm.

Quiun turned back to Frank. "Satisfied, peacekeeper?"

"Not even slightly," Frank said, and strode out of the suite.

Quiun looked after Frank with a shade of exasperation, then turned to the screen. "Mr. Westcott, as you can see, I still have my... reputation problems with the constabulatory, but I

hope this incident proves that I am only the brunt of harassment. I'm sorry about all this. Anyway, we've concluded our negotiations, so we might as well end it here."

"Yes, our business is concluded," Westcott agreed. "Please call me when you've made the arrangements at your end, and we'll confirm everything."

"I will. Thanks again. Oh, and watch that vase."

Westcott could be seen turning and adjusting the vase again, before the screen went blank.

Dana Minot loved a challenge. If anyone had walked up to her at that particular moment, she would have joked that she was having so much fun she was ovulating.

As an entertainment programmer, she spent her days creating simulated worlds, virtual characters and special effects for some of the fiction and non-fiction programs carried by the sec network in Midland. It was a job filled with interesting-to-exciting assignments, and Dana was one of the better people in Midland at her job. She was an artist, capable of creating simulations that often far surpassed reality, adding a dramatic flair that was uniquely her own, but still seeming as real as possible.

At the moment, she was staring with near-adulation at her workstation screen, but not at one of her own projects. She had managed to isolate the Harlequin broadcast that had so badly disrupted her morning the day before, locking the controls of her workstation and ruining her morning work schedule. She was at her job today, in fact, because of the backlog she had picked up as a result of the Harlequin. Now finished with her work, she studied the image on her screen carefully. She could only marvel at the skill at which the original program had been created, not to mention its ability to force itself on Midland's networks, appearing on selective screens and in the middle of crowds, and being absolutely indistinguishable from the real people moving around it. She had never gotten up the courage to get in touch with Singer Quiun, the man who (according to authorities, anyway) created all this intricate magic, and ask him frankly about his secrets. But she was very close to doing so now.

"I knew it. You're always one step ahead of me."

Dana turned to see Frank DeJaye leaning up against the doorframe. The two of them were old friends, and had dated quite a few times, so she was very familiar with his body language. Although he was smiling, she could tell he was a very troubled man at that moment. "Hi, Frank. I wondered when you'd find your way up here."

Frank chuckled lightly, but slowly dropped the smile from his face. It was replaced by a slight but clear expression of helplessness. Frank unfolded his arms, and said, "I could use some help, Dana."

"I'll bet." She motioned him over to her workstation. "You're right, I was just sitting here thinking about Harlequin. If it really is Quiun who creates that thing, I'd like to have a few of his kids."

"It's Quiun, all right," Frank told her, stealing a wry glance at her. "Just because there's no direct proof, doesn't mean he's fooling anybody."

"Well, he's definitely impressed me," Dana admitted. "The guy makes me look like a hack."

"Please, Dana, no more hero worship for today," Frank said. "Quiun is dangerous. He's hurt and near-killed people, including a friend of mine. I need you to help me shut him down."

“Wait a minute... you never told me he almost killed someone you knew.”

“A girl I know in New Quebec... Violet Ki'lay.” Frank leaned over beside Dana and stared pointedly at the screen. “She was the one Harlequin hung from the ‘Hanging Violet’ sculpture, suspended at the sixteenth level over the city center.”

“Oh, god,” Dana whispered. “She was okay?”

“Yeah, but practically comatose with fear for two months.” Frank’s eyes seemed to blaze at the image on the screen. “We didn’t think she’d ever get over it.” He finally looked at Dana. “Whatever it takes. If I can’t stop him legally, I may simply break him in half and leave him for the wolves.”

Dana had rarely seen this side of Frank, and she found herself slightly taken aback by his intensity. She stared at him a moment longer, just to make sure he wasn’t joking. He didn’t crack a smile.

“Yeah.” Dana turned back to her screen. “Well, I’ve been studying the simulation for the last hour. Although the image itself isn’t too difficult, the human responses it makes to outside stimulation are downright incredible. The memory access it has must be massive and incredibly fast.”

“Too fast for a portable system?”

“Absolutely,” Dana nodded. “In fact, I’m not sure Midland’s sec could do this, without shutting down significant... and noticeable... parts of its database to process the raw data and simulate human responses so well.” “Someone would notice the performance drop.”

“Would they?” Dana challenged. “Remember, when the Harlequin took over the Midland system, everyone’s secs were locked out. That means no one could check on performance cells. Half the automatic systems in Midland could have been disabled, and no one would have noticed, because no one could have checked it.”

“You’re right,” Frank admitted. “And if he could do that, then he could alter the cells to make it look like there was no performance drop-off.”

“That’d be the easy part.”

“What about recognizing the simulation? I think Quiun can simulate himself well enough to fool someone on the other end of a sec.” Frank described the events of that morning to Dana.

“Visual and response simulation? Damn... Well, recognizing it shouldn’t be hard. Human movements can’t be simulated by a program accurately for more than a few seconds... the randomness breaks down. I can create a program that can recognize a simulation in just a few seconds.”

“Okay. Now, is there any way to cut off the program once it’s running?”

“Honestly? I don’t know.” Dana shook her head. “See, first you’d have to know where it was initiated... and whether it was controlled by an outside source, or self-contained in the system as it ran. If it’s self-contained, I don’t think there’s anything that can be done to stop it, short of cutting the power to the entire network.”

“Ouch,” Frank winced. He knew the Midland network controlled too many of Midland’s functions to make total shutdown a reasonable alternative. “Not my first choice of actions. I’d rather just shoot Quiun. Well, what about tracing the transmission to its source?”

“Uh... well, probably not the point of entry into our system,” Dana said. “But you know, I might be able to figure out where the original program was created, right down to the original sec used.”

“Whoa,” Frank said. “The original sec? How can you do that?”

“Well, every sec has a unique optronic signature, based on the laser microoptics inside. That signature has to be converted into an optromechanical action at the output source, and you can analyze the output signal backward, to get the original signature.”

“Of course, it’s obviously not that simple,” Frank stated.

“Right... first you have to have an isolated tap on the output source. Then, once you work out the signature, it’s up to you to find the sec that matches it. It’s like finding a set of fingerprints, but no cells to match them to. And no one records sec signatures.”

“No one? Not even the manufacturers?”

“No reason to,” Dana explained. “Each sec is manually coded to the owner, and that’s kept on cells.” “You think Quiun knows about the optronic signature?”

“I don’t know. He’s obviously an excellent programmer, but I have no way of knowing how much he knows about the mechanics of his systems. If he’s like most people, he just plugs the stuff in and starts using it.” “Uh-huh.” Frank considered everything she’d told him. “So, I can’t stop him, but if I can find the sec he used to create the original program, I may be able to pin circumstantial evidence on him...”

“Circumstantial?” Dana echoed. “What’s the point? He’s already proven he can beat circumstantial evidence, or he’d be locked up by now... right?” Frank paused, then nodded sourly. “Maybe you shouldn’t be worrying about all of this, and try fighting fire with fire.”

“Huh?”

“Think about it,” Dana said. “Quiun fakes his innocence. Why don’t you try faking his guilt?”

It was one of those things that, once said, suddenly made everything crystal clear. Frank slowly stood up straight, and Dana recognized that unfocused look in his eyes. He stood there silently for about half a minute. Then, slowly, a smile dawned and his eyes came back into focus.

Dana smiled, too. “You got it?”

“I got it.”

“That’s my Frank. Go get ‘em, tiger.”

They’ll be back this evening. I’ve got one more day. Frank shut off the desk sec and stared despondently at it. *If he doesn’t do anything today, I’m sunk.* He switched the sec to surveillance mode, homing in on Quiun’s suite. As he watched, Quiun walked into the living room of the suite, dressed only in tight-fitting shorts and an open-neck shirt. He settled into a wide stance in the middle of the suite, bent over, and touched his toes.

“Oh. Great. Exercises.” Frank looked over to the chair on the other side of the desk. On it resided a sec case that looked identical to the case in Quiun’s room, a pair of gloves, and an Estaff. He regarded the two items, then turned back to Quiun. “I may have to kill him outright.”

He looked up when the door to the station opened. Dana Minot walked in, carrying a case about half the size of the case on the chair, and set it on the desk in front of Frank.

Frank eyed the case. "So, what is it?"

"I told you I could whip up a program that would recognize a simulation from a real person." She gestured at the screen, where Quiun was now standing erect and pulling one foot up to his waist with both hands. Then she held a hand out to the case. "This'll do it. All we have to do is hook it into your system."

"Good. There's a terminal right there." He pointed to the wall terminal he'd been elbow-deep in just two days before. Dana popped the cover from the wall, exposed a few plug outlets along one side, and opened her case.

Frank watched her for a moment, then turned back to the screen. Quiun had let go of his foot, which was now folded in front of him in half a lotus position. Then he reached down for his other foot, slowly picked it up, and placed it in the other half of the lotus position against his other foot.

Quiun was now floating about a meter off the floor. He looked directly up at the surveillance camera, and smiled.

"Don't rush," Frank sighed. Dana stole a glance over her shoulder, then did a double-take at the screen, muttering an oath under her breath. Then she turned back to her work, doubling her efforts anyway.

A flicker of light on the screen caught Frank's attention. Instantly, the sec screen changed: No longer was it directed at Quiun's suite. Now Frank was staring at a view of the center of Midland, most likely from one of the many cameras placed around the mall for official use. The camera panned upward as it looked out over Midland's open center, until it stopped and zoomed in on a monstrous head and shoulders, floating in the center of Midland.

It was the Harlequin's computer-generated features, smiling down upon the camera and winking its eye. When it spoke, its voice rang on every sec in the mall. "*Well, won't you just look at all the happy little people! And don't you all look so precious, scurrying around like ants in your precious little hive?*"

On the screen, Frank could see people stopping, looking at the nearest sec screen, then looking out over the expanse for a gargantuan floating head that wasn't there. Frank had to refrain from going out and looking, himself. He didn't want to miss what the simulacrum was going to say.

"...*Well, you certainly look like ants from my perspective. In fact, if I had feet, I could squash you all, down there on the ground!*" At once, a dozen stories above the ground level, a single clown-like shoe appeared out of nowhere, poised over the crowd like a malicious giant. Frank realized there was something different about this image: the people on the ground actually saw it there, not just on a sec screen, and they pointed and yelled. It hovered there for a moment only, then plunged down on the crowd. People screamed and ran, running into each other, falling over, throwing hands over their heads. But the holographic shoe slammed into nothing, not even kicking up dust as it passed through the ground and disappeared.

And the Harlequin laughed. "You greasy simulated geek," Frank hissed. "Never again, dammit." He got up and walked over to the chair, where he grabbed the gloves and slipped them on.

"You know," the Harlequin continued, "you people look kinda tense... nervous... you know? It's pretty obvious to me that you all need a break. For god's sake, GET OUT A BIT! You're always hanging around inside the house, and it's such a nice day outside! You spend entirely too much time indoors... and if you won't go outside, then I'm going to have to send you outside."

"That's it," Dana announced, "I'm ready."

"Hold on," Frank said, putting up a hand to quiet her. He hadn't liked the sound of Harlequin's last sentence, and he stared intently at the screen.

"Nobody moving, huh? Okay, that's it. You all know what a Quasar is? It's a big, mean optic amplifier designed to pump up whatever light source it's connected to. You have to be careful with 'em... you wouldn't want to connect one to an already powerful source. They have a tendency to overload and... how shall I put it?... blow things up when you do that with 'em."

"Well, I have a Quasar. And I think I'll use it! I've put my Quasar somewhere in Midland, and at precisely 1PM, it will activate at full charge and terminate whatever it's attached to with... ex-treemme prejudice. Now, it might only be attached to a door sensor. But it might be connected to the skate control terminals. Or the light regulators. Or the sewage disposal system. Who knows? It might not do much when it goes off. Or it might do a whole hell of a lot."

"So, your choice is simple: Wait for the big bang to go off. Or go outside, get out of your little sterilized hovels, and live outside like Men were supposed to! Oh, women, too."

"He's just crazy enough to have sabotaged something serious around here," Frank said. "If he wants everyone outside, it's so he can do some serious damage inside."

"Or maybe he just wants us all to trample ourselves to death trying to get out of here," Dana pointed out. She indicated the screen, and sure enough, people were flocking to the lifts and escalators, forming unmoving human clots at each lift door and stair landing. "I hope the rollers can handle that kind of crowd control."

"They're gonna have to," Frank said. "I've gotta find Quiun."

"Harlequin? Did someone say Harlequin?" Frank looked at the screen, and realized the computer-generated image was looking directly at the screen. "Heck, I'm always around! You know me, always trying to raise the consciousness of my fellow... fellows. But hey, I want to be fair to everyone. I suppose there's always the chance that someone doesn't want me to blow something up in their precious mall. So I've got a failsafe switch. It turns off the Quasar. And I've got it on my person, right now. All you've got to do is find me, and you've found the switch. 'Course, you've only got about... an hour."

"An hour. Great." Frank tossed his hands up in frustration, but Dana was already working over the sec terminal.

"Thank goodness they're not locked off this time," she said as she set up a search program. "You should be able to find him quickly enough."

Frank stood over her as she punched in the search parameters and started the search. Almost immediately, the sec offered up a standard Midland interior location map's reference number, and an image of the location. On the small square, they saw Singer Quiun walking along with a group of residents, heading for a nearby escalator.

"Hey!" Frank shouted, pointing at the map number. "That's right outside here!" He bolted for the door before Dana could reply, and bounded into the crowds.

Outside, Frank almost came to a dead stop. The people were fighting to reach the escalators, and they didn't seem too inclined to give Frank any leeway in that direction. Frank craned his neck to see Quiun.

Everyone's back was to him in the direction of the escalators, but Frank managed to see the bright red jacket he'd seen on Quiun. He surged forward, and when he was in arm's reach, he grabbed the jacket by the collar and yanked. He followed the figure to the ground, rolling him over before he had a chance to fight him off.

The man wasn't Quiun. "*Damn!*" Frank picked the shocked man up, holding onto him by the jacket while he scanned the crowd. "Who gave you this jacket? Where is he now?"

"What are you talking about? This is *my* jacket! Let go, I want to get outside! Let go, Peacekeeper!"

In the commotion and noise, Frank barely heard his sleeve com beep at him. Pausing a moment more, he released the man and thumbed his com on.

"Frank, it's... Frank, what are you doing! You let him go!"

"Dana, it's not Quiun! He must've switched jackets or something..."

"Frank, I'm looking right at you." Frank looked up quickly, could see one of the standard Midland monitor cameras pointed at him. *"I watched you tackle Quiun from here. That guy was Quiun!"*

Frank started to reply, then snapped his mouth shut. He thought a moment before he spoke again. "Dana, run that search again, right now."

"Hold on." Frank waited while she worked. *"Got him! He's..."* Frank knew what was coming. *"...on level nineteen? How did he get there so..."*

"Quick, run it again." Frank began to walk back to the station, pushing against the current of people to get to the door.

"Now he's on sixty-four! What the hell..."

Frank managed his way into the station, moved over Dana and took over the search. Each time he initiated a search, the figure of Quiun appeared in a different place, everywhere in Midland. And each new reference number was accompanied by a visual of someone, each time wearing different clothes, having a different build, but always with Quiun's face.

Frank groaned. Dana stared dumbfounded at the screen, occasionally squinting closely at the visuals on the screen. "Look at them, they're seamless," she half-whispered. "That man's a genius." She looked up at Frank in undisguised awe, but his sour expression returned her to the problem at hand. "But which is the real him? I suppose I could try overlaying my simulant recognition program over these images, but narrowing them down one-by-one is going to take forever..."

"We may not have to," Frank interrupted. Dana looked up at him, as he scratched his head and stared at the screen. "Maybe we're looking for the wrong person."

"Huh?"

"We're looking for Quiun... which is what he wants us to do, obviously, so we'll waste our time doing this. Let's look for the Harlequin, instead."

“I repeat: Huh?”

“Look for the Harlequin!” Frank bent over Dana’s shoulder and worked over the sec. “The Harlequin said the failsafe was on *his* person. Not on Quiun!”

“He doesn’t want to connect himself with the Harlequin, so he wouldn’t say...”

“No, he wouldn’t have said it *that* way,” Frank insisted, as he finished the new parameters and initiated the search. “It’s all part of that warped sense of humor of his. The failsafe button is on the Harlequin. And I’ll just bet...”

At that moment, the screen changed. Beside a map reference deep within the bowels of Midland, a screen overlay showed a man in workers’ coveralls, sweeping up the floor beside a large piece of machinery. The man turned his head slightly, not quite revealing all of it to the screen. But the literally pencil-thin neck, smiling face and plastic-looking hair were unmistakable.

“Harlequin. See the big red button on his chest? That must be the failsafe switch.” Frank noted the location, then went over to the chair and picked up the E-staff and sec case.

“I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it,” Dana said, as Frank pulled his own E-staff from his belt holster and replaced it with the one on the chair. Then he picked up the case. When he was ready, he looked at Dana, who watched him expectantly.

“Do me a favor,” Frank said. “Stay here and monitor him, so I don’t lose him down there.”

“Be careful,” Dana told him. “Those are the Power levels. He might have actually planted something down there, you know.”

“I don’t think he’d be down there, if it was all that dangerous,” Frank replied. “But I’ll be careful. Watch my back, okay?”

“Have I just been deputized or something?”

“If you want, I’ll nominate you for Emperorhood,” Frank said. “Just watch my back.”

Frank opened the manual door to Power level P4 and slipped past it. He didn’t bother to keep silent: Even with noise dampeners all around these levels, the generators and switching systems created a background hum which masked most quiet movement. Keeping close to the wall, he moved lightly down the edge of the massive room. Beyond and all around him, the massive machines that harnessed the river deep below the city gave no sign that they had been tampered with. On the other hand, the noticeable lack of workers on the level suggested the Harlequin had managed to frighten everyone away from the machine levels, and probably had free rein down here.

Frank hadn’t gotten any messages from Dana regarding the Harlequin’s position, so he assumed he was still in the same place. As he moved up to a corner and looked around, he caught sight of a lone man in workers’ coveralls. The man had a broom in his hand, but he was not sweeping. Instead, he seemed to be trying to look around the machines surrounding him, as if checking for someone or something. There was no doubt that this was a human being, not some kind of computer-generated simulant. And when the figure turned in Frank’s direction, he could clearly see that it was Singer Quiun.

Frank waited until Quiun had turned around to face the other way again, then came out from around the corner. Quiun did not hear him arrive, and when he eventually turned back around, he was surprised to see Frank standing there.

“You know,” Quiun said, a wry smile on his face, “I really didn’t expect to see you down here. At least, not so soon.”

“Don’t exactly have a high opinion of me, do you? But, of course, you’ve never shown any respect for officials of any kind, have you?”

“Officials’? You mean the few idiots who conspired to lock Mankind into these ground-crushing boxes, strangling our connection to the world that spawned us?” Quiun smiled and shook his head. “No, not really.” “Well, I’m glad to be the one to say I was there when Singer Quiun finally outsmarted himself,” Frank said, allowing a Cheshire grin to spread across his face.

“Really? What gives you the impression that I have been outsmarted?”

In response, Frank gestured to the case he had placed on a utility box, on the floor beside him. Quiun noticed it for the first time, and took a long look at it, but otherwise did not move.

“That’s right, it’s yours,” Frank stated. “Just got it out of your suite, while you were screwing around down here. This is gonna put you away for a long time.”

“No, it won’t,” Quiun said. “There’s nothing in there that you can get at. You’ll find no evidence in there.”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s well-coded,” Frank agreed, nodding a bit theatrically as he considered the box beside him. “In fact, I’m sure that if we try to break into your code, the entire case will probably self-destruct, or launch itself into the Sun, or something. Fortunately for me, though... I don’t *have* to see your data.”

Quiun’s smile seemed to fade just a bit. Frank knew he had him going, so he decided to let him stew a bit. “As long as we’re on the subject... Tell me, did you actually put something down here?”

Quiun seemed to have to change gears at the new direction the conversation had gone into. “If you think I’d be the slightest bit interested in making myself some kind of martyr down here, think again. Of course,” he added, “if some sort of device did manage to knock out the power to this precious city of yours, even for a few moments, it wouldn’t be particularly painful to me down here.”

Something in the sound of his voice didn’t seem to work, Frank decided. “You’re sure about that? I mean, you never know what kind of accidents can happen in these Power levels. Especially during an emergency. Lights go out. Hard to find your way around, even in the best of conditions. You could slip and *seriously* hurt yourself.”

Quiun was still smiling, but it was now a frozen mask as he regarded Frank. “That’s right, you’re in *my* house, now,” Frank said. “And your sec is in my hands, so I can run a few tests on it.” Quiun took a step forward, eyes locked on Frank’s. Frank calmly put a hand on the E-staff on his hip, and Quiun stopped again. “Y’know, I always knew you were using your own sec to initiate those programs of yours, even if it wasn’t doing the actual work. The program you use to slave larger systems to yours and do all the processing for you, must be pretty impressive. At first I was thinking about just getting your sec’s recognition signal... but then I realized that you’d know that, and could change that at any time. So the recognition signal would hardly be useful in proving your program transmissions originated from your sec.

“But I found out about something else I could use. I discovered that every sec has a unique optronic signature. That’s something that can’t be changed... it’s built into the optronic circuits

themselves, and it's measured at the molecular level. Which I didn't think was a particularly useful thing to know, until a programmer friend of mine told me that the optronic signature can be used to identify the source of a foreign transmission in our Mall network."

"You're trying to bluff me."

"It's true," Frank insisted matter-of-factly, and leaned against the wall beside the sec case. "See, Midland's network has very sophisticated optical recognition software built into its input/output transceivers. You need them to be able to accurately separate and read information beamed from so many secs at any one time. The optronic signature is used to tag each transmission, and keep track of each one. Of course, the network normally dumps its signature data once the transmission is through. But yesterday, we made a few adjustments to the network. Do you know what we have now?"

"A story with too many holes in it," Quiun replied, but there was little confidence in his voice. Frank smiled again, and shook his head.

"Uh-uh. We have recorded cells of each incoming transmission to the Mall network that started your Harlequin programs yesterday and today. Including the threat you made half an hour ago. When I take this case upstairs and have it analyzed, it'll prove the commands came from here. From your sec. And that'll be enough evidence for anyone."

Quiun took another step forward, and Frank unstrapped his E-staff from his side. Quiun stopped again, eyeing the staff. Frank looked down at the staff, then up at Quiun. "You know, I get the impression that you'd really like to try your hand at mopping the floor up with me. And that the only thing stopping you is this staff in my hand." Quiun did not reply, but continued to eye him silently. "Well, tell you what," Frank went on. "Since it's likely to be your last act as a free man, I don't think I'd object to your trying to fight me for your freedom. Besides, I'd love the excuse."

Frank shifted his grip on the staff, from the handle to the body. He placed it lightly on the box next to the case, giving it a pat, then removed his grip from its holster and ejected the cartridge of tranq shells. Before he had a chance to place them down, Quiun lunged at the case.

Frank cut him off, and Quiun obligingly ran full-tilt into him. Frank spun him around, trying to get him into a headlock, but Quiun managed to keep an arm free long enough to throw an elbow at Frank's head. It struck him close to the temple, but too high, and Frank merely staggered back.

Quiun threw a roundhouse punch at him. Frank dodged it easily, realizing as he did so that he was being set up for the real blow. He saw the leg arching for his head at the same moment, and kept ducking, trying to reach the floor first. Quiun's foot glanced off his shoulder, but it was enough to tip him over on his back. Quiun tried to drop on him knees-first, but Frank rolled out of the way.

Quiun was suddenly all over him. They rolled on the dusty floor, clawing at each other for purchase. Quiun was clearly in good shape, something Frank hadn't reckoned on, and he found he was having a tough time keeping from getting clocked.

A judo flip put Quiun on his back, and Frank scrambled to his feet. Quiun was already up and approaching, throwing a badly-timed kick at Frank. Frank dodged, and sent a fist at Quiun's nose.

Quiun snapped a hand up and took Frank's wrist... and Frank realized his mistake, too late. Before Frank could stop his momentum, Quiun was using it to throw Frank completely over him. A sickening moment of flight, and Frank landed hard on the floor on his back.

Frank groaned, and rolled over slowly. When he lifted his head, he realized the end of a long cylinder was hovering just inches from his nose. He stopped when he focused on the end of his E-staff, then looked up and past it. Quiun was at the other end, holding the staff with both hands.

"Well, I'd say that I might manage to do a few *more* things as a free man, won't I?" Quiun smiled, trying to hide the fact that he was breathing as hard as Frank was. "And thanks to you, I can simply destroy my case, and there won't be enough left of its innards for you to get ashes out of. I will go on being the Harlequin, and you'll still have no proof of any of it."

"Except for that confession you just made," Frank stated.

"Oh... how melodramatic. You don't mean to say you staged all this, just to tape a confession from me? Well, right after I self-destruct my case, I'll just give you a tap with this, and your recorder will be fried like an egg. You won't look much better, in fact." He turned his head slightly towards the sec case. "Emergency order Quadrant-Beta-Smoke, now."

The case sat there on the box, unmoving. Quiun shifted his eyes to look at the case closer, then back to Frank. Frank was smiling.

"Oh... did I say earlier that case was yours? I meant to say: No, it's *not* yours," he answered Quiun's unspoken question. "Yours is upstairs, being tested right now. Do I really look that stupid?"

In response, Quiun reached for the power setting on the staff and charged it to maximum, pulled his arm back to strike, and froze. There was no hum from the staff. It was dead.

The instant's space was all Frank needed to lunge out and plant a fist on Quiun's jaw. Quiun's head snapped back, then forward, and he collapsed like a rag doll on the floor.

"I guess I do look that stupid," Frank said, bending over him. There was no big, red button on Quiun's coveralls, but Frank was willing to bet that the failsafe was there, somewhere. A quick check revealed a large touchpad under his shirt, just where the simulated red button would have been. He tapped it once. He immediately heard a loud beep nearby, taking him by surprise, and he closed his eyes for a moment... just in case. When satisfied that his eyes, and the rest of him, weren't going anywhere, he got up and searched for the device.

He found it lodged against a coolant pipe in a nearby switching machine. If it was some kind of explosive, the worst it could have done through its action was cut power to a small section of Midland. On the other hand, he really couldn't tell for sure exactly what it was supposed to do.

He tapped his com sleeve. "Peacekeeper DeJaye to Captain Henri Gregorson."

A moment later, a gruff voice barked out of his sleeve. "Frank! It's Henri. I heard you're in the power levels... you okay, son?"

"I'm fine. Everything's fine. Send a few of your rollers down here to pick up Singer Quiun. I'll be up with a taped confession later."

Frank could hear other voices, then cheers, go up behind Gregorson's voice. "Outstanding! I've got four of my men on the way down. Stay right there!"

Frank waited until the rollers arrived and carted Quiun off. Then he removed his PRT scanner from its sleeve holder. Using his PRT to get a base reading off the device, Frank scanned the rest of the machine room for any more devices. Being that the room was fairly sizable, this took him about forty minutes. Before he was finished, machine room workers began to trickle back into the vast room, looking a bit sheepish about rushing away from their posts. Frank placed the Harlequin's device in his empty E-staff holster... it seemed to fit well... and acted as if he was doing a precautionary check only. Once he was satisfied that there were no more devices planted in the power level, he retrieved the dead E-staff and sec case and headed back for the station.

Frank had been as surprised as anyone else to see the rest of the Peacekeepers return to Midland that afternoon. According to Thomas, they had gotten wind of the problems in Midland, and were about through with their investigation anyway, but they had not been able to contact anyone to tell them they were flying back in. Once they arrived, they were surprised to find nothing out of place in Midland, a disgusted Singer Quiun in the roller lockup with a taped confession in Gregorson's hands, and seemingly the entire population of Midland offering congratulations to a very smug Frank DeJaye.

"Don't worry. It'll wear off," was all Thomas said, after hearing the report.

Thomas gave Frank the rest of the day, and the next day, off, for a job well done, and Frank didn't bother to argue. He headed straight for his apartment, stripped off the uniform he had rolled all over the machine room floors in, and stepped into the shower. He took a long, leisurely shower, letting the hot water sap the tension from his shoulders and burn the last of the day's grime off his skin.

He felt much better after the shower, and immediately thought of the best way to take advantage of his good mood. He threw on a light robe, then headed for his wall sec to make a call. Before he reached it, however, his door chime rang out.

Frank paused between sec and door, then smiled. He walked over to the door and opened it. "Lena. I was just thinking about you."

Lena stood in the door and regarded him in his barely-closed robe. "Were you, now? And exactly what were you thinking about, hm?"

Frank glanced down at his robe, smiled and stepped back from the door. "I just jumped out of the shower. If you saw me fifteen minutes ago, you wouldn't have recognized me."

"Actually, I did see you. On MidNet. They showed you bringing Quiun in." She walked in, closed the door behind her, and slid her arms around Frank. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm great. Especially now." They kissed, dragging the moment out a long time, until they could feel each other's arousal grow strong. "Say... didn't we leave off somewhere the other night?"

Lena smiled, and allowed herself to be led into the bedroom. Once inside, they resumed kissing, Lena pulling Frank's robe off in seconds and tossing it on the floor. Frank began to undress her, allowing item after item to drop on the floor at their feet. Once she was naked enough for his purposes, he began to move toward the bed.

"Ahem."

Frank and Lena looked up. The sec screen had engaged, and the Harlequin was on it. It said nothing, but smiled a nasty smile. Then it rotated its torso, revealing a skinny arm where none

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-Daniel Mores (www.mores.cc), commentary on PocketPCThoughts.com

Encephalopath

Glen Jansen is seeking to improve his work and prospects when he purchases bleeding edge personal computer technology. But when the tech gives him unexpected access to strange parts of the net, and seemingly to other people's very thoughts, he finds himself on the run from the government, the mob, and a bunch of ersatz terrorist/patriots, all while trying to find out who's really controlling the country's networks!

Somewhere between Johnny Mnemonic and The X-Files is an aspiring architect thrown unwittingly into a national conspiracy! And you thought your workday was a pain!

"...if you are looking for more content in addition to Baen's collections or the olders books from Gutenberg or ManyBooks, this is an excellent new author to give a try."

- MobileRead.com

Worldfarm One

All Keith Maryland wants to do is leave the collapsed United States and start a new life in the U.N.'s ambitious Worldfarm project. But with American prejudice directed at him, demeaning office politics forced upon him, the distrust of his colleagues, and the unwanted attention of local drug smugglers—not to mention a mysterious past that he hopes to leave far behind—he soon wonders whether this was the best, or the worst decision of his life.

Want to know what it's like being an immigrant in a country that doesn't like you? Neither does Keith Maryland. Sometimes, being a foreigner can suck.

Evoguía

A scientist in Atlanta creates a revolutionary breakthrough in accessing the untapped potential in humans, and in so doing, sows the seeds of a war between Homo Sapiens and Homo Evoguía... the Self-Evolved Man...

Who says mucking around with DNA is the only way to change the human body? This story covers three generations and three crises caused by the attempt to improve the species!

"...highly emotive...sure to make the reader consider their own position were they to be placed on either side of the evoguía divide. 9/10."

- digiReader.com

Sol

The Solars are the grunts of the Union... unappreciated and maligned. Even the creation of a new drive engine, capable of taking the Union on an unprecedented trip to the Inner Arm, earns them no respect. But when the Solars discover that an alien race is on its way to take over their ancient homeworld, no race in the Union can stand in their way.

A good old-fashioned space opera, with humans as the underdogs, lots of aliens, exploring other star systems, and an unexpected visit to the homeworld to save it from an impending invasion! Can't beat that with a blaster butt!

"...Once again Steve Jordan has produced a riveting read, part mystery, part sci-fi. And whilst you always know the good guys are going to win in the end there are still plenty of twists to keep you reading breathlessly till the final words. 9/10."

- digiReader.com

Midgard's Militia

Imagine a world of Superheroes: The godlike figures; the daring exploits; the incredible battles; the frightening mayhem; the thrilling victories.

Now imagine a world suddenly without its heroes.

Earth's heroes have just been killed on an outer space mission. And as the deadly force that destroyed them now rushes towards Earth, brave souls come forward to try to take the place of the heroes... to keep the world safe...

"...a fun book, along the lines of the heyday DC/Marvel comic books. The story is much more Clark Kent than Superman and all the more enjoyable for it. 7/10."

- iBme Network.

Factory Orbit

Ted Canter responds to a job offer and ends up at the next stage of the Industrial Revolution: Living and working in orbit. And in the midst of his experiences as a space pioneer, he finds himself at a pivotal moment in history...

A realistic blueprint for the next logical step in Mankind's industrial development—the development of working outposts in Earth orbit, the next frontier. Desire for profit may get us there, but ordinary men and women will make it work.

Robin

When Dr. Morris Cole tries to convince Robin Taft to give up the valuable medical equipment of her late mentor, she disappears literally overnight, equipment and all. Years later, Dr. Cole finds Robin Taft, but with a new name, a new face, and a secret too incredible to believe.

A secret he may not be able to keep.

"...a good premise and a main character with a cat-like personality."
- eBook Reviews.net.

"...an enjoyable and compelling read...8/10. A must for Sci-fi fans."
-iBme Network

Free downloads from the SJB:

The Onuissance Cells

Onus \n (ca.1640): Obligation; Responsibility.

Onuissance \ onn-uh-sonns\ n (ca.2280): Historic period known as The Age of Responsibility.

A series of short stories following the daily lives of the men and women of Midland City, Jewel of Namerica. Primarily centered around the complement of Peacekeepers assigned to the station, led by Commander Thomas Beak, each story is a window upon the new era known as the Age of Responsibility, or Onuissance, and the people who will define that era.

"...worthy of being compared to the Lord of the Rings... This book was brilliant and I would recommend it to any-one who likes sci-fi or human interest stories. I was gripped by both the characters and the environment they lived in, and was left wanting more. Thoroughly enjoyed it!! 8/10"

-digiReader.com

The First Expedition

Follow-up short story to The Onuissance Cells

"They should have turned back at the Moon." That was what they said about the ill-fated First Expedition to Mars. Now Matt Cartier, ex-Midland Peacekeeper, has followed his soul and made it to Mars... and finds one of his first duties is to lead his fellow astronauts to the site of the First Expedition.

Matt Cartier was the man with the heart of an explorer, who took his leave of the Midland Peacekeepers to join the Second Mars Expedition in the first chapter of the Onuissance Cells (Tour of Duty). His mission is a success... but before they can start exploring, Matt must visit the site of the unsuccessful first Mars mission, now 200 years dead.

See all novels, and more, at www.SteveJordanBooks.com.

