

*BOOTLEG
BROADCAST OF THE
FREELANCE RITERS
2112*

*Bootleg Broadcast of the
Freelance Rítters
2112*

*by
Richard Fliegel*

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*It's the end of the world as we know it
and I feel fine.*

-- R.E.M.

Richard Fliegel

For Lois

I

Raid on the Arroyo

At four-fifty-five in the morning the canyons of the Santa Cruz Mountains are still dark. The rising sun touches the peaks of sandstone first, creeping down the arroyo patiently as the shadow on a sundial. The General stood at the edge of a cliff, watching details emerge from the blackness on the opposite wall. His eyes were still sharp though no longer young, and the creases at their corners deepened as he peered into the well of night like a gray hawk searching for a prairie dog.

He knew his prey was somewhere below, sleeping in a teepee of the Silko raiding party. The scalps of his own men hung on a crescent of spears stuck around the ashes of the fire pit. On a feathered shaft in the center dangled a gray braid streaked with blood. Hollister knew it only too well, floating in the wind beside him. The Yawkman swore an oath to him, and he had promised the Yawkman.

The Silkos had to pay.

Hollister's hair was still dirty blond, his hips still slim and shoulders still square, preparing for a charge that would have made a younger man quail. He was tired and he was angry and the snorts from the horse stamping behind him might have come from his own weary lungs. He was not what they thought him, not a brilliant strategist and only a fair tactician. He wasn't even a real general. He had earned the rank of colonel in the land wars, but ever since his supposed death, his exploits had been so daringly described, the public demanded a field promotion. Lord knew what they would say tomorrow, after six riders on thirsty horses attacked three times their number.

He started this campaign with real fire in his belly, ambition or indignation he couldn't recall. Now he was

tired of it, bone-weary of the saber cuts and tourniquets, the thud of arrows smacking flesh, the war cries and silent grief that cost him everyone he loved.

Everyone but Lara.

“Colonel?” She touched his elbow.

Lara refused to call him General because he hadn’t really earned that title, had he? No, he had not, and that was one thing he loved about her. By now there were too many more for him to count – the way her brown eyes glistened around the fire as she recounted her day’s slaughter, the way she squatted in the grass behind her bay mare, even the greenish pallor of her skin when she retched in the early mornings. As always, she sensed what he was thinking and wiped a bit of vomit off her luscious lower lip.

“It’s time.”

As she said those words, she stroked her bulging belly and for a moment Hollister thought she meant that time. But the Captain shook her head with a matronizing smile and gestured with her chin toward the arroyo.

“They’ll be stirring soon. He’s not moving yet.”

He. It was the first time Hollister had heard that word. He looked at Lara hard, but the glint in her eyes never flinched. She squinted at his face.

“Can’t you get up?”

Yes, he could, though it was getting harder. Hollister rose from his crouch and turned his attention back to where they all wanted it – the spilling of Silko blood. He tightened his saddle strap and checked the Dragoon dangling from his pommel. A saber was a brutal weapon at the best of times, but now, dull as it was from so much bone, it was hardly better than a meat cleaver. All right, if they wanted savagery, he could give them buckets full. He set one boot in the stirrup and heaved himself onto the shuddering horse’s back.

Lara galloped ahead before he raised his reins. She moved around her belly as if it had hardly any bulge at all. She seemed half an animal herself, the queen of the centaurs. Bellestar knew what her mistress needed from the lightest tap on her braided mane. The bay mare trotted back to calm Hollister's restless stallion.

The Colonel stood in his stirrups and raised his saber into a ray of the rising sun. The gleam from its blade brought his cavalry around him. "Santa Barbara!" Hollister murmured, and his riders echoed, "Aye."

The golden saber led the way and the troop moved as a single creature down the side of the rocky embankment into the yawning canyon. The clatter of their hooves on the broken stone was lost in the morning wind. If any eyes below peered up into the dawn, they saw only a flash of light moving more quickly than the shadows receding before it. Behind that flash rode drawn pistols with grim faces above them.

Hollister's Hellions roared into the arroyo like a thunderclap. Death came to the Silkos on the horses of the apocalypse. The Colonel himself gored a lone sentry before she sounded the alarm. With a pistol in each hand, Captain Lara Caballera fired at wigwams on her left and right as if she could see through animal hides. By the groans from within, every shot seemed to find its mark. Silko warriors stumbled through the flaps, writhing in the dirt as their blood spilled through their fingers. Their yelps raised their comrades in nearby tents, who scrambled out waving tomahawks only to be shot through the head by a pistol or cut in two by a saber.

It was a rout, a massacre, another victory for Hollister. The Silkos scattered like sheep before wolves – except for one painted warrior, who held the ground outside his tent against all Hellions. Two eagle feathers stood in his Mohawk while a third tipped to the right, and

Hollister knew from a distance what his riders died to find out – they had come upon the Silko Chief Jobowa. One rider after another spurred his horse toward the figure only to topple from his saddle with an arrow through his heart. The Colonel was the only man who stood a chance against him.

The Chief stood with his bow in one hand and an arrow in the other. A war club hung from his beaded belt with veined chunks of turquoise worked into its silver clasp. His broad shoulders were bare except for a hand-tooled leather strap that ran from his left shoulder to his right hip. Above and below the strap his chest showed scars of countless wounds from knives and arrows and spears and bullets, healed red and white. The skin of his back was smooth except where the muscles bunched and released as he fit an arrow into his bow and raised it dead at Hollister.

The Colonel could have dropped from his saddle and kept riding on the far side of his horse, standing in one stirrup as he had done a hundred times before. But the sight of the Chief standing upright in the hail of cavalry fire made him ashamed to hide behind his mount. Instead, Hollister sat squarely in his saddle and threw back his shoulders to offer the Chief a target for his final shaft. Baring his heart as Jobowa had bared his own to their Remington pistols.

He heard the ash wood bow creak as its strap drew back and the twang of its release. The Colonel turned his shoulder to the wind.

That slight shift proved enough, because the feathers of the arrow whispered past his jaw. Hollister felt a twinge of regret at the flaw in his courage, but his heart still beat wildly as he reined his horse around. He stuck his pistol into his belt and drew his saber. The Chief never faltered but raised his war club, waiting as the

morning sun picked out silver shards in the wood. Hollister kicked horseflesh and flew forward, raising his blade and opening his ribs to the club that would swing for them. This time he drew a breath and let it come.

The Chief held his weapon upright in his left hand but the blow did not fall from that side. Instead, at the last instant he swept it across his chest and grasped it with his right hand above his left. The blow came from Jobowa's right, across the Colonel's solar plexus. But the pommel of his saddle deflected its force so that it caught Hollister across the ribs but failed to break them.

It merely knocked the air out of him.

The Colonel filled his lungs again as he reined his horse and turned to face the Chief for another pass. His right arm felt numb, but his left hand covered his right, still clutching his saber, so he struck with the strength in both his arms and his shoulders. The blade caught the Chief's left shoulder where his neck muscles met his back, piercing skin and bone –

ZZZTH!

Passing right through the Silko! Jobowa set both hands on his hips and roared with laughter, as the straw-haired General pulled on his reins, struggling to convince his nag to turn and face his foe.

It took the bloodthirsty Hollister a moment to realize what happened. Jobowa raised his war mace over his head, where the rays of sunlight streamed right through it. Then through the shimmering body of the Chief himself.

"A hologram!" cried Hollister.

But it was too late. Jobowa set one hand to his mouth and howled his fearful cry. The cavalry paled and tugged at their reins as the Chief's whoop echoed from teepee to teepee down the length of the camp. The Silkos inside heard the signal and rolled up the canvas of their tents.

Revealing a battery of Gatling guns hidden inside each one.

The hologram of Jobowa spread his arms wide as the first round exploded right through him. Blasting the horrified Hollies.

Hollister's horse reared at the sound. The General stood in his stirrups, realizing his foolishness – too late! As a dozen rounds of iron blew his skull to pieces!

ZZZTH!

The only one to keep her head was Captain Lara Caballera, who dropped to the ground at the first whoop and pulled Bellestar down beside her, as a hail of Silko bullets passed harmlessly overhead. The Holliland riders scattered, doing their best to turn their horses around and attack the gunners blazing inside every teepee. But it was no use, a terrible trap Roy had led them into. Well, Lara had warned him. Now there was nothing to do but pick up the pieces. And she did mean pieces.

Bellestar knew what to do without a command from her mistress. The bay mare reared and trotted over to the Colonel's body in the sand. Lara knelt beside it, rolled him over and cradled his head in her lap – only to discover a sizzling mass of wires where his brains should have been. Two wires fell together and his left leg twitched ... then fell back at an inhuman angle and lay motionless in the dust.

She stared at the thing sprawled before her and wondered how she never knew. Was it just the fame of the celebrated soldier that kept her from sensing the truth? Was it his charm, smooth talk and rough manners, his passionate, tender kisses? Was it simply love that blinded her? Her hand moved instinctively to her own belly, where the life they created was starting to kick.

"Goodness," she muttered to the sparking circuits. "What have we done?"

2

Mook

Mazeltoe, mager. Congratias. If you're accessing this broadcast – hearing my voice and watching my lips when you close your eyes – you've eluded the official limits on content distribution and stepped outside the habitats. If you're tapping in for any R&R enforcement, I hope it fries your brains.

Wait. Forget that. I promised not to start that way. So welcome, magers one and all, to this ... whatever it is.

Manifesto. That's what Priss calls it. She's smarter than I am and better trained, so let's go with that.

You've just been watching an authorized episode of *Hollister's War* in the Arena. But we've hijacked the signal, riding its frequency with a wholly unauthorized message you might not want to hear. You can swing your eyes to the right, find the next episode of Hollister and tune us out. Or you can swing your eyes all the way to the left and then straight up, where you'll see a little flash. That's us. Stay with it for two seconds and your chip will find our frequency. If that sounds chilly to you, then read on MacDuffy, as they said in Old Scotland.

This is going to be a little rough. It's not the way I like to rite. I'm squatting on a flat mattress in a concrete bunker, with the cold of the naked surface seeping through the foam to my naked ass. Priss is sitting just out of reach with a foil blanket clutched to her chin. Her hair is a mess and her lipstick smeared but she's still beautiful, glaring at me through violet eyes. If I asked her for a kiss right now, she'd tuck the blanket tighter and scoot even farther down the wall – until I get down to business.

So here goes.

This is an illegal upload from the surface of the Earth. You might have guessed that already from the basic

scenery, but I'm saying it anyway to build credibility, according to instructions. I'm more inclined to go for *verisimilitude*, a word they use all the time in-house at Holliland. It means something looks true and sounds true but isn't true at all, which turns out to cover more than I thought. That's something else you ought to know, but I can't spill the beans yet. Priss says you won't believe a word until you know who we are and how we found out. She knows herstory better than any of us know ours, so that's what we voted to do.

Three to one. Can you guess the holdout?

My name is Mikal 5412. The avatar you see is pretty close to the real thing, or the real thing ten years ago. I'm twenty-nine now, still with grey eyes and white hair, but the dewy ambition glinting in my eyes has recently lost its shine. For those of you who program, I should admit in the name of total honesty that shine you see was put there with a subroutine that's still for sale from Holliland. I've coded a shinier one since then and made it freeware, but people always prefer what they see in the wars, and anything Lara warms up to still pulls in credits like a hungry black hole.

We're big on total honesty, here. Priss insists, and who wants to argue with her? So I ought to confess you probably know me by another name. The mage-mags call me Mook, which was the name I used as an in-house riter when I first created the Colonel. Not the character in that piece a junk episode running on the Area, where he turns into a cyborg in the Olde West. Are you buying that?

When I left the staff, Hollister was in Mexxaco, still human and still in love with Lara, who wasn't twisting his pistols into knots with every tangle of the plot. Now they have a whole suite of riters pumping out her doomed romances. I wouldn't recognize Lara these days if I met her in the Z-zone, so I can't understand why the maging

public keeps voting her victories. But, hey, who am I to complain? I just created her, right? They say character consistency is a thing of the past, shut up and respect the residuals racking up your credit account. Well sure, I could, but that's just how the corps expect us to think about everything, isn't it?

All right, I got that out, I'll stick to the program. Before Priss starts zipping up her nightsuit.

First a brief lesson, for anybody who doesn't know where we stand. If you do, just move your eyeballs up and down to skip ahead to the next section. But if you're chipping in from Silko Valley or MOI, Alpha Centauri or the next century, picking up waves of intergalactic noise, let me welcome you back to Earth in the twenty-second. Forget all the bullshit they've planted in the centennial servers on Luna. This is the way it happened.

I won't bore you with the platitudes they fed us about the old "international order" of nation-states and estate-states, privately held and publicly traded with votes or shares or whatever they called it where you lived. By the time I was born, nearly all the land between the Pacifist and Atlantis Oceans above the 39th parallel had already been sold into the holdings we know today. The maginary line between political states and corporations had been erased and the six habitats had staked their claims and more or less negotiated their borders.

They swear they don't collaborate, but of course they do. To your left you'll see a map of the habitats. The Yawks rule the northeast and keep track of the credit scores, which you can access through a chip implanted behind your left ear. In the southeast, the Seeds hold a death-grip on the latest health technology, although most health care is actually provided by the Mois, who hold the middle ground between Okie-home and the Lakes.

They have the catchiest slogans, if you ask me. “The state? Say MOI!” has an old-fashioned ring, don’t you think? To their south is Mexxaco, land of petrochemicals. The Silkos in the northwest run the software, while Hollies in the southwest produce the lion’s share of episodic catotainment, keeping magers glassy-eyed in all six habitats. If that doesn’t make Holliland essential as the rest, the Hollies also manage the Arena – the multi-level platform where the fighting takes place. The *wattlefield*, the suits call it. The *twaddlefeel* to us.

You might think that rude, since most of us earn a living riting those programs, but you don’t know us really, and you’d never guess what we’ve discovered. You only know what the corps pump out to sell time on twaddle-sites. I rite my stories bloody, just the way you like ‘em, with now and then relief in a plucked heartstring. You might know my characters, my strategies and my plot points, but you don’t know me. Or the Gryphon, Ezmer Elder, or even Honcho.

“Tell them something personal,” says Priss, “a reason to believe you,” scooting over to nestle right beside me.

Okay, but there isn’t that much to tell.

Nothing about my early years is worth a second look. I was raised on a family farm in the south Mojave, about fifteen miles from the old coast, with a thousand other kids. We had the usual early growth counselors and the latest parental models piped into our heads every night as we knelt to say our preys.

In higher school I fooled around with programs, riting a script that was broadcast into everybody’s dreams. It was meant for a certain girl, and she got the message. She wouldn’t talk to me the next morning or six moons afterwards, but it gave me a taste of coding and got me tracked as a tech when the selection came.

Those files are all accessible, now that the corps have opened them. When I first read their analysis, I burst out laughing. How many words do you know for *goofball*? Only when I got to school did things begin to change. And then after my arrest. But those files are locked so tight, no one could've hacked in without the kind of clearance that makes you the enemy of freelance riters everywhere.

3

How We Got Here

Patrissa doesn't like the way I began, and she ought to know how to lay the groundwork, since she used to be a warden. She's no coder, though, so she'll do the talking and I'll make it viewable. I've given her gold-frame glasses, which she doesn't wear, and a plaid skirt, because that's the way a teacher ought to look, in a pleated skirt and knee-high socks with two-tone saddle shoes. What did they used to call that look – Booby-soxing?

Training for a warden of trafficking court is different from a riter's, and Priss has done a lot of viewing on the cable boxes in the lieberry. I wanted to call this broadcast *A Herstory Lesson*, but Priss thought that would be exclusionary and insisted we go with her title. Straight to the point, isn't it? That's Priss. You should see her old cell in the courthouse – just a pallet bed and polycarbon desk, two gunmetal chairs unfolded over a floor of Norwegian Wood tiles. Sitting in those chairs, you felt like she might throw the switch any time she didn't like your tone of voice.

To tell the absolute truth, Priss is prettier than I coded her, skinnier, in skimpier styles than a schoolmarm. Her clothes look like animal hides stitched together, dyed blue-black or red-black or black-black, to match her irises. Her hair is blondish, most of it, and looks like she trimmed it in a window-fan, quickly, so it swings. I don't know what they did to the ridges of her teeth, but when her tongue flicks for a quick lick of her purple lipstick, you'd think she might take a bite out of you.

"It started with the election of Vidal Gore," Priss says. "The prophet of the first ecological collapse was actually elected President of the United States – more

than half the people voted for him. When the Supremists gave the House to a Bushman instead, they showed they didn't have to base their decisions on reason or ethics, the will of the people or even their own voting records. Patronage ruled the Court that day, seated at the head of the bench, where it was still pounding the gavel a few years later, when United Citizens came along.

"That was when they used two older rulings to make one that broke the system. The Court had already ruled that corporations were not just groups of people gathered together to make profits, but entities that should be treated under law like individual citizens. Of course, the corps could never be imprisoned or executed for capital crimes, but the Supremists didn't think those differences relevant. The only way a corp could be penalized was to be charged a fine, which they quickly built into their business plans as expenses. Individual citizens don't devote every waking breath to turning a profit, while corps are legally required to do just that, since stockholders can sue the board for lack of fiduciary responsibility if they pursue any other purpose. But the Supremists ignored that too. Corporations can own things and be sued, so why not treat them like people in every other respect?"

"Why not?" I agreed.

"Because they're not people, Mook. They're just businesses, pure and simple. But the Supremists didn't choose to see them that way.

"Then in the twenties the Trumpeters seized power in the white houses and the country broke into pieces. It didn't take his Court appointees long to decide that a corp could have religious beliefs as well as political opinions. But the howler was another ruling, that spending money was the same as speaking freely. So rich people had more free speech than poor people, and superrich corps had

more free speech than anybody else. United Citizens put those old bricks together and declared that corps could spend as much as they liked to influence elections. That was back in the day of personality cults, but it laid out the logic for the Duke Court to rule that a corp could run itself for office like any other person.

“The Trumpster’s victory at the polls fired up all the CEO’s, who ran themselves for public office, financed by their companies. But a problem arose when a corporate board replaced its CEO and had a hard time removing him from elected office as well. That’s when the idea occurred to some bright junior exec that a corp could run itself for office.

“Mexxaco became the first corporate Governor of the old state of Texas, with a gopher in a cowboy hat as the chief spokes-critter for the candidate. The campaign was a media blitz but tax deductible as a business expense, and nobody but a corporation ever had a chance at public office again.

“Money was never speech, but it was powerful, and the corps used their power to repeal any laws that limited their ability to win elections. *Trust* was historically a pretty good word, but they made sure that any reference to *anti-trust* would be welcomed by the public as warmly as the Anti-Christ. Once the SEC was dismantled, the corps went merger-crazy, issuing credits strategically to keep investors quiet and voters divided. That’s why those payments are called *dividends*.

“Finally, it made no sense to keep differentiating between red and blue states. The old borders between them, with different laws on each side, were inconvenient for long-range financial planning. So they eradicated the state lines, first by making the law uniform across regions, then by subordinating state legislation to the policies of the local corps, finally by shifting public

allegiance from the states to the corps that paid their salaries and dividends. This was first made commonplace by corporate ownership of sports teams, followed by even more absorbing competitions.

“It didn’t take long for the corps to go after each other. What started as healthy competition ended in the land wars, with troopers firing rockets over the Alleghenies and the Rockies and all along the River. But the corps were always too interdependent for that sort of conflict to last, with the damaged real estate hurting their bottom lines. So they made the switch to virtual war, transforming the whole bloody enterprise from a net loss to a profit item.

“And what a profitable item it proved to be! The suit who proposed that policy must be bathing in olive oil and slurping oysters. Not only did millions of magers tune into their battle scenes, coughing up credits to vote on the outcomes, but the merchandising rights made the v-wars a win-win. Can you imagine how the opportunities for product placement made them wet themselves in the boardrooms? And the customer base! You can’t squeeze everybody into a ballpark, no matter how big you build it, but everyone can close their eyes.

“All they needed were stories that never ended.

“Once they could project the war directly into our brains, they hardly needed actors, who could hurt themselves or tweet something critical of the corps. That’s why all the coders had to sign as in-house riters for one corp or another, who were ready to pay whatever was necessary. They never anticipated that anybody might care about anything other than credits. That very idea fell outside the corps’ conceptual frame, as they used to say in gobblespeak.

“There was no way for them to understand why anybody might want to be a freelancer when they could be a corporate insider. They never imagined you, Mook, or any of us on the surface, squatting on a concrete floor while the wind rattles the door. I’m not sure I understand it myself, all the time.”

4
Priss

Have you ever seen an eighteen-foot crocodile? Not an animulation? I just saw a live one in the river and it juiced my brains. I can't get the sight out of my head, so you can bet the Corporal will be seeing one soon. *From our eyes to your eyes* – that's the logo over the entrance at Holliland in-house. Only now I ought to be saying, *From my eyes to yours*, I guess, since it's one man's vision.

Priss affects me like that. Something about her is not like anybody else I know. Honcho says she had contact with her birth mother early on and they had to hush it up, but you never know where he hears these things. She must have done pretty well in rehab, because they made her a warden, until she lost her bench a year ago. She doesn't speak about it except to say, "Too much politics," which must be a joke because politics is one thing that really gets her reactor firing.

You've met Patrissa 849 now. After listening to her for fifteen minutes, you tell me what she's doing with us, besides keeping warm. She doesn't even sound like she *likes* riters, does she? It's hard to tell what she does like, exactly, and I don't mean just about me.

She never answers a simple question the same way twice. What's her favorite color? *Vermillion*. Yesterday you said aquamarine. *Well it was then*.

She doesn't notice the temperature. That's not a problem inside a habitat, but there are no thermostats on the naked surface. There's weather out here, even climate, not that Priss can tell you what it is. She wears whatever she feels like, however the wind blows. When it's hot she'll sweat without bothering about the stains, or keep talking in the cold until her lips turn blue.

She does pick up any stupid remark she overhears on the street. It doesn't have to be directed at her, or me, or anyone. She's always ready to fight for her principles. And she has plenty of those.

She only eats meat, for example, refusing grain to protest Holliland's pact with the Mois. Meanwhile, most of our meat comes west from Mexxaco, and I hear they're massing troops right now in the mountains outside Flagstaff. What will she eat when they march down the passes – synthetics? When I asked her, Priss tossed a spork at me. She's not strong on strategy, but can she ever work her tactics.

Okay, now I do mean me.

As soon as she found out what I did for a living she started asking me to change the lines in the Arena, as if they were character arcs in a soap opera. I explained to her that my job as a mage-riter was just to provide strategies, intriguing opportunities for the militants to exploit. We arranged the battles, but the people voted on the victories.

She said options were everything, and what were we all doing really but cheering for one corp or another?

I reminded her that virtual war was a major advance over the old kind, a step forward in human evolution. The stock prices made clear – nobody wanted to see the loss of blood and treasure from another land war. The corps have trouble accounting for blood in their financial reports, but treasure is their mother's milkshake. Monsanto and Gold-Sax shared the Noble Peace Prize for their first virtual assaults.

"Sure," said Priss, "they *would*. But what did they use it for? Except to gain an edge over other corps in the next round of mergers?"

She always makes my head spin when she gets going. "Isn't that what they're supposed to do?"

Priss treated me to a pout. “What did the Yawks do, once they captured the drinking rights to Lake Eerie? Sold ‘em right back to the Moiss, that’s what.”

“So everyone turned a profit.”

The corps say the same thing in their annuals but don’t make it sound so illegal. I mean, have you checked your credit portfolio? Who hasn’t got a few shares of Yawk tucked away, just in case? For *diversification*, as the ceeps say. Which has less to do with *verse* than *suffocation*.

But you can’t argue with Priss. She starts talking and keeps at it, asking, “What do you think, Mook? What are you thinking?” When most of the time, I’m not. But I try to answer her questions the best I can.

For example, in my humble opinion, anything that doesn’t crap shouldn’t have the legal rights of a person. That’s where we get our daily lessons in humility, isn’t it? Our common experience of humanity? If you never spend time with your pants around your ankles, you probably think you’ll never be responsible for anything. Otherwise, they might as well let the cyborgs vote.

“Something else I’d like to see,” Priss declared.

It would be, wouldn’t it? As she would say. Her voice sticks in my head and I have to admit, it does sink into my brain. My soldiers started squatting in the bushes at the side of the battlefield, and the magers liked them even better for it.

That was one result of her questions on my thinking. But it didn’t stop there. Little by little I noticed Priss’s voice starting to influence the tactical choices my officers made on the ground, as if they were listening – where they attacked and what they passed by, who they tortured and who they spared, when they chose to go nose to nose and when they chose to blow the horn and live another day.

The Offense Department complained to my boss about the falling numbers of decaps and dismemberments in my episodes.

There are rules for riting mage, like anything else. You can't introduce an alien from another planet or a mutant from an unknown habitat, or use any technology that hasn't been invented yet. You can't bring back an old character from the past, like King Martin Luther or Howdy Dowdy. Some riters tried trotting out those avatars and fell into a sinkhole of proprietary rights. It screwed up the wars, disturbing the balance of power among the habitats and undermining the credibility of the Arena itself. That's in nobody's interest.

All riters have to start in one house or another, but you can go freelance if you create a popular avatar. I created Colonel Hollister and Lara Caballera when I was still an in-house riter at Holliland, in Old Buena Vee. I told them I had attended the USC School of Cinematic-Holistic-Magical Arts for two years. That wasn't entirely true, but nobody checks if they like what you rite. The Hollies were at war with Mexxaco, but I set the action back a couple hundred years, before Mobil, Exxon, and Texaco merged, when they were still buying up all the land to the south. It was a novel innovation, if I say so myself. Today Cro-Magnon Silkos toss granite boulders at Neanderthals from Des Moines, which is just ridiculous.

There used to be an understanding that you stuck to the details of a time period, but that went the way of ezines. I never liked the idea of reading the present backwards into the past, so that Shakespeare was really an ecofeminist and Jesus was a Publican. But the magers don't complain, so these new in-house riters are never called to account.

Holograms and cyborgs in the Cavalry West – that's just lazy riting, if you ask me. Certainly not old school.

Freelancers don't work for one house any more but still have to follow the rules or no one will employ them. Most of us are still hired by two or three corps, the Silkos, say, and the Seeds, who don't usually face off in conflict. It's not hard to move between corps while they're in alliance, and afterwards, well, how were you supposed to guess? Everybody knows there are no riters in the boardroom.

A lot of things have changed since I started riting. The rise of teaming, for one thing, so that nobody really needs to know who a character is, what she's likely to do, and what she ought to sound like, doing it. That's led to a lack of magination in the episodes. The fan mags keep asking where I get my ideas, and I talk about my research on the land wars, but that's not where I found Lara Caballera and Colonel Roy Lovejoy Hollister of the Fort Indio Regiment. I based their whole first romance on a novel from Missionary California. A book. That seemed pretty safe, since no one reads those things. It's hard to find a machine that can still play one back.

The Colonel met Lara in a convent school near Indio, where she went to avenge her sister. All she had was a Colt six-shooter that jammed half the time. The Colonel taught her to ride and shoot, and everybody knows the rest. They're both still trying to get together, and Holliland is still raking in billions from those episodes in the Archives. The company keeps the credits, of course, since I was riting in-house when I dreamed them up. After I went freelance, I created Corporal Capricorn and managed to keep a few points for myself. The Corporal paid for this house we all live in, from its gables to the swans in the moat.

Priss was first to join me here, not long after I bought the place. She was a traffic court warden in Clinton Heights, which has been an important job ever since cars went auto. There are no more accidents, because a vehicle knows where the others are at all times. When its steering computer crashes, a cab stops dead where it is, and the others swarm around it, no problem. According to the video archives, humans were terrible drivers, smashing into each other while they poked at hand-held phones. If you want to get behind the wheel you can go to a driving range, where you'll still see plenty of crashes, if you like that sort of thing. Traffic court today is for other kinds of trafficking – in babies, illegals from other habitats, and black market imports.

Priss had some conflict with her regional manager over a spawner trying to locate his grown daughter. It cost Priss her seat on the bench and the chambers that went with it, so she ended up unemployed on the street. For the sake of a crazy birther.

I met her in her courtroom on a pineapple case. I bought a prickly one from a kid on Guevara Street but didn't notice the scancam drone hovering overhead until we heard the guardian's garble over the speaker. I was ready to pay both fines, but the guard fell on the kid like a ton of plastix, charging him with black market racketeering. That carries mandatory prison time. Imported pineapples are exorbitant – only the jumpsuits can afford them. Domestics are grown by independents, who band together to sell their fruit wherever they can. Holliland shops won't carry any. They say they can't guarantee its quality, though you should see the rotten apples they sell from their sister corps. People like me can only get a pineapple on the black market, and the guard insisted the kid must have known all that.

The kid sat on the edge of his bench with the widest eyes I ever saw, when Priss asked him, “Where do your pineapples come from?”

He said, “Tio Felipe’s garden,” shifting his gaze from her bench to the guard and back again. He didn’t know where the blow would fall.

Priss asked, “Do we have any proof they didn’t come from his uncle?”

The guard shrugged. “Proof? What proof do we need? It’s a pineapple, isn’t it? And how would he know who his uncle is?”

“Tio Felipe is everybody’s uncle,” I said, “on Guevara Street.”

Priss gave me a curious look – as if she’d spent time there herself, or wanted to. She tapped her wooden mallet into her palm.

“Holliland invites and celebrates personal initiative. Don’t you agree, Officer? It’s the wellspring of private enterprise, as they say in the blasts. If we have no reason to believe this pineapple did not come from Tio Felipe’s garden, we have no legal basis to hold this child for racketeering. Or anything else.”

The guard opened his mouth, looked at her face, and closed it again. The mallet came down with a *thump*. “Case dismissed.”

That’s the kind of warden Priss was. She did not dismiss the fine against me, however, since she said I should know better.

I didn’t mind that. I was so relieved for the kid’s sake, I asked her out to a dinner at Che’s Chacos, where she could meet Tio Felipe herself, if she wanted. Priss refused for professional reasons, even when I asked her, “How can they accuse you of taking a bribe after ruling against me?”

But go try and argue with her.

She turned me down again the next week and the week after that, when I asked and asked again. But she sent me a post when she got canned to say she was finally free for a meal and chocolate tacos sounded just right. She had been thinking about them ever since I first asked her out.

Tio Felipe was not at Che's, but Priss didn't care. She drank mescal and licked mole sauce off her fingers as if she was born to do it.

When I heard they had kicked her out of her chambers, I invited her to stay at my place, and to my surprise she accepted. Priss slept with me that night – in gratitude, she said later – and out of habit ever since. But whenever I try to kiss her mouth, she puts a finger on my lips and says she doesn't go in for that kind of intimacy. It's just the kind I do go for, so we have what riters call a recurring conflict.

I used it once for a plot point between Madame Matilda and Capricorn. There are no rules against doing that.

Priss looks sweet with cold blue lips, if you want to know the truth. Or chapped lips, when she nibbles the lower one, thinking hard. Or when she eats, trying to speak seriously with tiny flecks of spinach in her teeth.

She told me once that sex was originally a sin, at least between certain people. Then it became a physical workout, orgasmic aerobics. Now it's a spectator sport. But people still feel the need for a special kind of touch, a way to open up body and soul to somebody else.

That must be why I want to kiss her on the mouth, and why she puts her hand between us. She's testing me, waiting for me to show *sincerity*.

I have no idea what she means by that.

I printed a bunch of tulips on Valentino's Day and sent her Francis Sinatra ballads, crooned in her name –

which brought her to this mattress with her face in her pillow, and that's all I can say for sure.

The day I quit Holliland, Priss threw me a birthday party.

Freelance Manifesto: First Draft
Port Neuron Statement

There is no revolution.

There can be no revolution.

There is no place for people to go who are sick of the world as it is, except to the beach or their couch.

Even there the corps have framed the possible maginings and modes of thought.

The corps permeate not only business but the fine and visceral arts, books and movies, music, medicine, law, engineering, politics, the media – everything you do for a living and everything you do to forget what you do for a living.

There is no idea you can tweet, no emoticon you can text that is not corps-sponsored and approved, certified safe from terrorism and lost profits.

There is no news but corp news, nothing older than corp history, nothing fresher than corp ideas, nor more odious than abrogating corporeal, corporate ethics.

Together the corps uphold the values of human diversity, providing opportunities for improvement and security for all. Outside the corps are just chaos and confusion, the breeding ground of selfishness and solipsism.

Oh wait. Shit.

6

Profman

The model for Colonel Hollister was my college herbiologist, the first person I ever met without a chip in his head. The tissue in some people's brains won't accept them, so there's a procedure for getting permission to pull the things out. You get labeled as disabled, of course, and have to do all sorts of things that are done for normal people by their chips. If you need to know your credit score, you can't just roll your eyeballs to the upper right to see your account. You have to keep track in some other way, on a minipad or hackboard, checking your tablet every day to make sure you catch all the charges. You can't summon tunes, you can't text anybody without an external device, and worst of all you can't plug into the episodes.

The thing that impresses me about Professor Hoffman is that he never seems to resent his disabilities. He keeps track of his credits on a roll of toilet paper, with a sharp stick dipped in goo. He never misses the wars, he says, any more than we miss the toons they piped in our cribs at a family farm. Once he even claimed he *appreciated* the silence in his head, and didn't I think it might be nice to hear that too?

I would really like to hear what he thinks of my mages. He told me he was sure they were more imaginative than anybody else's, without having watched them on his eyelids. That's not exactly what I'm shooting for, *maginative*. It's like calling a pup song *sing-able*. Well, sure it is. But what else is it? Moving? Is it credible? Does it make you want to sit up and cheer for your habitat? That's how they grade a mage in-house, and even though I'm a clone-cold freelance now, I like to think the work I do earns its marks for esthetics.

Profman fought in the land wars and was either wounded himself or killed somebody – you hear rumors both ways. He doesn't dress like a veteran. He wears loose white shirts in woven cotton and workman's pants with a fat black belt. His beard is sparse, what they call salt-and-pepper, and his hair hangs down in shaggy loops over his ears. Mostly what you notice are his watery eyes, which some people remember as leafy green while others swear they're blue or even grey. Nobody disagrees on one point – they focus on you as if you were the only person in the world worth seeing, and seeing all the way through.

Randall Hoffman always has his own way of judging things. The exec-cadets around campus called him Prof-Hoff and bragged how easy it is to ace his class. Then they taste their first in-class bowl and can't remember how to pull their pinkies out of their asses. Freelancers call him Profman to his face and the Prof to each other. He has to wear a bracelet all the time, since he has no chip in his head, but he's embroidered the thing with silver and chunks of stone so it looks comfortable and spiritual in its own sparkly way. He claims it catches dreams and bounces bullets.

I'd like to see him do that. I mean, it couldn't really, could it?

Profman has an apartment in a dorm but doesn't live there. Instead he moved into an abandoned lab on the edge of campus, between the boat docks and the flight field. He rearranged the cement blocks, filled them with knickknacks, and calls the whole ramshackle ruin his homestead. Here and there in the cement walls he set blocks of glass, which must be lead-based because the reception is so poor. Profman says he likes it that way.

He hung a shingle out front that says *Herbiologist In Practice*, with the first initial of each word done in a fancy script, though I've never seen him treat a patient

there. He likes to gather a few kids from his classes and ask questions they can't answer. If you try to answer, he'll offer you a drink or a meal. He cooks his dinner on a firepit out back and always seems to have enough for whoever stops by. Nothing fancy, but not just wafers either. Soups and stews with plants from his garden, things you have to eat with a spoon. Also bread with nuts in it, and corn tamales.

After dinner we can usually convince him to pull out his ukulele. It doesn't take much. He likes to start with a few classical luau compositions but afterwards he'll prop up one knee and play something else entirely. He rocks back on his haunches and rolls forward into the chorus of some very strange numbers he claims to have learned from a psychotropic medicine man.

Other times he'll start reciting lyrics without music, about boys swinging on birch trees, missing plums, or this little ditty:

*Had I the heaven's embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light;
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

I don't know where he finds this stuff.

He has a little herb garden, which he is allowed as a professional herbiologist, but he's also planted a lemon tree in one corner by his sunflowers. As a result, he cooks everything in lemon juice, makes lemonade and liqueur. He said, "When life gives you a lemon tree, make *limoncello*," which made perfect sense to me. Profman seemed to think it should be funny.

His lectures online are all herbiology, but if you catch him in his second teapot you can get him talking about all kinds of things. I once used the phrase *evil weed*, and he gave me the weirdest look. I said, “What?”

He shook his head, which only made me want to know it more. When I pressed him, he said, “You ought not throw around a word like that.”

It took me a second to realize what he meant. “*Evil*? It was a compliment.”

“I know how you intended it. But every time you use that word, the easier it gets. Your mouth gets used to saying it and your ear to hearing it. Once it rolls off your tongue, it’s easy to use elsewhere.”

“You mean for people? Is that what you’re worried about?” He only shrugged, but I didn’t let it go. “There are evil people, wouldn’t you say? Who would steal your shoes if you left them unzipped? Who commit rape and murder every day?”

“And on special occasions, genocide,” Profman said. “It’s not hard to get them going, is it? Genocidists tell us all you need do to incite one part of humanity to commit unspeakable atrocities on another part is let them know that no one will punish them for it.”

“I wouldn’t,” I said. “Priss wouldn’t. We’re not all that awful.”

“No, we’re not,” agreed Profman. “Let’s call those truly awful folks *Group A*. The problem is, the next crowd, *Group B*, will do the same things if you give them a little motivation – if they inherit the farm next door after slaughtering their neighbors and adopting their orphaned daughter. That’ll do it for *Group B*.”

“But what about the rest of us? Who don’t want to do anything at all depraved, even if we’d earn a few credits from it?”

“*Group C*,” said Profman, “don’t want to, maybe, but they’re afraid to protest and become the next victims. So they’ll pick up machetes too.”

“You’ve got a letter for every group, or each of us, don’t you? So you’re saying, what? All people are evil?”

“Some are. The voice on the radio, urging violence – that’s an evil voice. But we’re all just a gene or two up from the chimpanzees, who throw their shit at each other. A few brave souls refuse to go along – which can cost not only their own lives but the lives of their loved ones as well. We admire the saints in that brave *Group Z*. But what would their sacrificed friends say, if they were still alive to say it?”

Profman asks that sort of question all the time.

He was the only person I ever met who liked to go outside. I mean, I like the desert too, I love the lake country, and I even tried skiing a few times. But those are all inside the habitat, while Profman talked about wrapping up for the landscape outside. He says it’s hardly a *landscape* now, after the third collapse. He showed me the pictures he took out there. He ought to post them, they’d get a zillion hits, but Profman won’t post anything anymore. Another of his weird little quirks.

[Static]

The broadcast signal was lost. Reconnecting to a classic episode of the Arena.

The Mission of Santa Clara

It took the Colonel an instant to realize he had fallen once again into a trap. Enron's Raiders had hit the missions and trading posts outside Indio deliberately to draw out his cavalry, to provoke a response. And Hollister had taken the bait, too confident in his men and his own leadership to think what might be behind it. Now the twenty horse of his unit faced two hundred Mexxacan infantry and artillery, with another hundred closing off the Judas Gap behind them.

Only one thing to do. Hollister drew his saber.

"We're charging, boys. Straight for the cannon. They can't reload as fast or bring 'em around, and we can jump those big wooden wheels as easily as hedgerows. We might find a few bayonets on the other side, but we've faced plenty of those before. Bugler!"

The horn rose up in the sunlight, blowing its summoning notes, and Hollister's Hellions matched its call with their shouts.

"For the ladies of Holliland!" the Colonel cried, and the earth shook under eighty hooves.

Like a bolt from the hand of Jupiter, Hollister's horse flew over the line of cannon to the loaders behind them. It took six men to reload the big guns after firing, to clean out the barrels, reload munitions, and readjust the aim. Those men held wet sponges and dry sponges on long wooden rods. Leather pouches of live rounds hung over their bellies. They fell back like shafts of wheat before the gleaming edge of Hollister's saber, crawling under a cannon barrel or cringing beside its wheels.

The Colonel drew up his horse ten yards behind the line and saw to his horror that the kid from Barstow had not cleared the jump. Jackson's horse had stumbled when

its rear hoof caught a cannon wheel. Its rider was on the ground.

Dropping his saber into its loop to draw his pistol, Hollister brought his mount around and touched spurs to its flanks. He charged back into the cannons, firing the Colt at any Mexxacan who dared stand in his way. Reaching down below his stirrup, the Colonel caught young Jackson under one arm and lifted him onto the saddle of the chestnut.

"You're okay, son. I've got you. Hang on."

But the enemy had time to gather behind them. Once again Hollister had to face a line of kneeling soldiers with rifles raised and jaws clenched against him. His moustache curled in the grin his men had learned to watch for.

"Aren't you afraid, Colonel? With eight of 'em against us?"

"I only weep for their mothers, son," Holliland replied, pulling back on his reins so that his horse reared and leaped forward on the line of enemy muzzles. Jackson heard the retort and saw only powder as they galloped right through it, trampling one soldier under their hooves and scattering his brethren.

Remingtons rang around them, but none of them found their marks.

Hollister turned once to see what had happened to his charge, but there was nothing he could do at that point for the rest of his men. Four of the enemy had found their saddles and were heading towards them. With a tug on the reins Hollister turned his horse and leaped off in the opposite direction.

Jackson shut his eyes and clung to the Colonel's ribs, but there was no better horseman on the field that day, north of the Rio. Hollister's stallion flew over the ground

as the hooves behind them grew softer and quieter until there were none at all.

When Jackson finally opened his eyes, they were trotting through a field of cactus flowers under the afternoon sun. Hollister's hat was off his head as he passed a glove through his blond ringlets to dry them in the air. The reins lay slack in his other hand, resting on the pommel. He allowed his horse to follow a path of hard brown earth that led through a grove of lemon trees and a ruined garden to the broken door of a mission. A sign dangled from one nail over the arch.

The Mission of Santa Clara.

Whitewashed adobe, a red tile roof, a dark wooden door with a brass ring off its hinges. The Colonel rode into the courtyard, where his chestnut drank from the fountain at the base of a bell tower. Hollister called out, "Halloo! Anybody home?" but heard only silence. The reports seemed to be true. Enron's Raiders had not drawn the line at holy sisters. They had abandoned the settlement. Any sensible women would flee from the sins of the flesh rather than trust in the protection of the spirit.

Hollister filled his hat with water and emptied it over his head, then knelt beside his horse and drank deeply. The mosaic tiles of the fountain shimmered in the clear water. Jackson drank from his cupped hands and wiped them on his trousers. He said he was hungry and would look around for something to eat. That was fine with the Colonel, who allowed himself to fall into the shallow water, stretching out and resting his head on the low wall that ran around its perimeter. It felt splendid, with the sun on his eyelids and the holy water rushing up his ass. Until he felt a ring of metal pressed against his temple.

"Don't move, Raider. Open your eyes and I'll blow another hole in your head."

A determined but melodious voice was speaking behind his skull. Hollister tried to figure how fast he would have to spin around to snatch the revolver before it exploded his brains.

"Not fast enough," said the voice, as if she could read his thoughts.

Hollister murmured, "I'm no Raider, Ma'am. I will to open my eyes, so fire if you must. But I think we have something in common."

A pause. "What's that?"

"Enemies."

He opened his blue eyes. Lara never told him why she didn't pull the trigger. Sometimes she said she was sorry that she hadn't. But not on that first day. He risked a sidelong glance. "That's the biggest pistol I've ever seen in the hands of a Holy Sister. Do you know how to use it?"

She lifted the long barrel from his temple and fired at the opposite wall, where an E had been scrawled in dried blood. Her bullet put a nice hole in the center stroke of the letter. Then he felt the pressure of the Colt's barrel settle on his temple again. It was an old model that jammed all the time, whether she knew it or not.

"I'm no Sister," she told him. "I had one once."

"But no longer," surmised Hollister, "thanks to Enron's Raiders, I'd say, from your warm greeting. You'd like to see them dead. So would I."

"My sister was a Sister of Mercy living in this convent. Showing kindness every day to every living thing. Even to them, when they rode in here. They had no reason to do what they did to her. And no reason to kill her afterwards."

Hollister sighed. "Poor thing! Eighteen good cavalymen lost their lives for no crime worse than trusting in me."

"You betrayed them?"

"No, I led them. Now they're waiting for me to do something about it."

He felt the pressure relax on her pistol, so the Colonel turned his head and got his first good look at Lara C. She was nineteen years old in a black dress with her right foot propped on the low fountain wall. Her elbow rested on her raised knee, and her left hand helped her right hand hold the pistol barrel steady. Her lips pressed together in concentration, holding back the flood of grief in her brown eyes. He did not want to see either one explode.

"Would you mind pointing that thing at my shoulder instead? In case your finger slips. I have another shoulder but only one head."

She gripped the stock harder but lowered the muzzle. "You're not a Raider, are you?"

"My name is Hollister. Roy Lovejoy. Colonel in the Holliland cavalry."

"Lara," she said. "Caballara."

"Do you mind if I climb out of this fountain? The water is wrinkling my ... buttons."

She took one step backwards. "This thing fires if you shake it."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said, rising to his full six feet. The water drained off him like a giant clump of seaweed. Hollister picked up his hat and heard a second female voice cry out from the far side of the bell tower.

"I've got one too!"

The Colonel and Lara turned to see a Sister of Mercy in convent dress, toting a rusty shotgun. In front of her marched Jackson with both hands on his head. "She got the drop on me," the kid from Barstow said.

"They do that," said Hollister, nodding at Lara. "Senorita Caballera, let me introduce my comrade,

Private Jackson. I take it you ladies already know one another."

"Should we shoot them?" said the nun in the habit.

Lara shook her head. "No, Sister Isabelle, I don't think they're Raiders. I have an idea they might help us, anyway."

"We'd be delighted." Hollister tipped his hat.

"I'm not so sure you will," Lara said. "I've heard of you, like everybody else. The illustrious Colonel Hollister! There's a price on your head in Mexxaco that grows with every rifle shot."

"If your interest is cash, I can beat the price on my head."

"I doubt if my sister would countenance that," Lara told him.

Sister Isabelle circled her heart. "Not Sarah."

Hollister waited.

"Do you know what we do about a mountain lion?" Lara asked him. "A beast who has taken our sheep? We tie a lamb to a stake and let it bleat. The sound attracts the hungry lion, and we shoot him dead."

"I am no lion," said Hollister, "so I must be the sheep in your story. Staked to attract who? Enron's Raiders? Who will come for the glory of killing me, or the ransom on my head? That's brilliant, Miss Lara, though I am disappointed to hear it. Hoping as I was for Christian charity."

"That used to be our way," said Sister Isabelle. "Before."

"I'm sure it was," said Hollister. "Just as surely as I know you never picked up a shotgun before the Raiders made you do it. You handle it well, I must say. Do you think you could hit the E on that wall as squarely as Senorita Lara?"

Both women and Private Jackson glanced at the wall, but it was all Hollister needed. In that second he grabbed the barrel of the shotgun and snatched it away from Sister Isabelle. By the time they looked back from the opposite wall, the shotgun was pointed at Lara's heart.

"I'll take that Colt, Senorita," he said, "before it jams or fires, please."

Instead of surrendering the weapon, Lara pulled the trigger, and the pistol went off with a bang!

The Colonel ducked his head in the nick of time. Before the smoke cleared, he reached over, lifted it from her hand, and passed it to Private Jackson, muzzle to the ground.

"Take the bullets out of the chamber, will you? Before someone gets hurt."

"I knew I couldn't trust you," Lara said.

"Unfortunately for me, you can," said Hollister, lowering the shotgun. "I like your plan. Only I'd like to add one piece to the plotting. Private Jackson will take my horse and ride west, where the survivors of our company have retreated. With luck, they'll reach us before Enron's Raiders can. I'll be your lamb, Senorita, but I want to be sure someone kills the lion before I'm lunch meat."

"You sure about this, Colonel?" said Jackson. "Trusting them with your life?"

"We need to fill out the company," Hollister explained. "It won't be easy to replace our boys. But I do believe we've found our first recruits."

8
Dinner

Cold air goes right through you, doesn't it? I'm sitting here on the unfinished floor of a concrete bunker on the naked surface, and the skinny woolen blanket under my ass is doing nothing to insulate me from every pointy bump in the concrete. The coils of the heater in the corner look red, but they don't seem to disturb the air between us at all.

None of us are used to this discomfort, having lived in habitats all our lives. *How did we get here?* That's what Priss keeps whispering in my ear, and it probably is what you need to hear, since they're already calling us terrorists.

Priss invited Profman to a Moonday night dinner, and to everyone's surprise he accepted. I never thought anybody could pry him out of his ramshackle house near the sculling docks. He built it himself of sand-glass and cinder-blocks in the style of an old master builder named Frank Lloyd Rite. It's not really a house – just a bedroom, bath, and kitchen indoors, arranged like arms around a green garden that overlooks the river. He keeps his dining table out there, made of black iron with four matching chairs with seats covered in red vinyl. They squeak when you sit on them, so nobody does until all the rocks are taken around the firepit. Profman has a microwave, like everybody else, but he does most of his cooking over the open fire in heavy iron pans that look like they came through a war zone and probably did.

Anyway, Priss invited him and Profman came one Moonday night to our dinner.

He showed up with a carrot cake, which was also a surprise, since everyone expected him to bring a bottle of the limoncello he likes to make himself. That was okay,

because Honcho brought a bottle of pistachio stoli he ordered online, which turned out for once to be just as the ad described it.

We are usually five on Moonday nights, six with a guest. I asked Priss and the Gryphon to live with me, and the others just seemed to follow. I invited Gryph to stay because I liked his poetic but polemic turn of mind. He rote the poem, *A CORPS IS A CORPS IS A CORPSE*, and you know how lucrative that became. If you ask me, it owed its popularity to the music as much as the lyrics, but the Gryph is still racking up credits selling t-shirts with that line running front to back.

Honcho just came along with him. I thought he might sleep with Gryph, but no, he poked his head into all the empty rooms until he found one he liked. He dropped a mattress on the floor, hung a big poster of Cheech Guevara over it, and marched a troop of Lolitas through, tween-age fans of his shoot-em-up episodes.

One day Ezmer Elder showed up at breakfast. She was twenty-six and too sensible for Honcho by half. Their affair lasted less than a week, but by that time the rest of us got to know her well enough to ask her to stay.

She's a riter. Some people have the idea only men can rite mage. Lots of women do it too. Ezmer Elder lives with us though she rakes in credits for her own episodes, which avoid hand-to-hand combat and romantic stuff. She concentrates on air-to-air dogfights and missile campaigns, which are technical, tactical, precise, and very pretty to watch.

Gryphon has the palest skin I've ever seen, off a purebred. They call my skin coca-batter, but it looks semi-sweet next to his, which is white as latte with cinnamon freckles. His hair hangs in loose curls he calls red but look a lot more orange to me. Ezmer Elder's nose is a little crooked, but her shiny black hair falls straight to

her ass. I'll bet she hasn't cut it since they took her away from her birthers.

On Moonday nights we talk about our projects and someone goes under the gun. That night it was Honcho's turn, working for the Seeds against the northeast. He was nervous, because it wasn't one of his usual shoot-em-up jobs. Honcho is known for his ultra-violent mange-mash, set to mariachi trumpets and flamenco guitars.

This episode was a departure for him. He had fitted out the ironclad Monitor with biologicals from Seed Dock and sent it steaming toward Newa Yawk. But the Northerners tied up the credits the captain needed to keep his engines burning, while they suped up the Merrimack to intercept it off Old Jersey. The Gryphon and Ezmer Elder were grilling Honcho on ship-to-ship protocols, when Priss piped up to tell him, "You've got 'em backwards."

We all looked at her. Honcho said, "Who?"

"The ships. The Monitor was a northern ironclad. The Merrimack was a southern ship. It was actually built as a frigate in the north, but the Confederates salvaged it at the Norfolk navy yard, replaced its wooden upper hull with iron, and christened it the Virginia. It attacked a flotilla of Union ships off Newport News, Virginia, where it took out the Cumberland and the Congress, and ran the Minnesota aground."

Neither Gryph nor Ezmer Elder challenged that. In Priss's telling of herstory, things happen first and then get ritten down. In our showing of history, we rite it first and then it happens the way it should.

Honcho wasn't about to recode an entire battle at sea. He just shrugged and muttered, "Magers know all ritters take a little liberty."

"With the facts."

“Whatever you call them. The important thing is to make it exciting.”

Priss opened her mouth and closed it again.

Before she could raise the idea of war and propaganda, truth or lies, the Gryphon said, “It’s my turn.” He launched into an account of the mage he was writing about a space cadet on an orbital chasing a saboteur through the unit. He comes to the fuel depot and knows his enemy is hiding among the storage tubes of reconstituted carbon waste that keep an extra-tee habitat orbiting with limited resupply.

“There are two huge tubes. One filled with processed fuel, highly flammable. Another with raw shit. Our hero has only enough juice left in his pistol for one final blast. He listens ... is that the sound of breathing? He can’t tell. His only real choice is to try to make it out by the smell.”

Honcho started laughing at the idea of the space cadet sniffing out the saboteur among the septic tanks, until Ezmer elbowed his ribs.

“He couldn’t tell by the feel?” she said. “Were the tanks equally hot?”

“The waste was there for days,” said Gryph, “and so was the fuel. So one had cooled and the other warmed.”

Honcho slapped his knee.

Ezmer Elder made a face. “He had to smell them himself? His hand-held couldn’t tell them apart?”

“He dropped it,” said the Gryphon, “like five clicks before.”

Profman set down his cup of stoli and blew his nose in a rag. “A dog could tell the difference,” he said, “if he had a dog.”

The Gryphon stopped mid-sentence, because for one thing no one expected the Profman to know about excrementals. That’s technical stuff, and you can’t find much about it online. He said it like he had seen a living

canine sniffing out a leaky canister. That's the kind of sensory detail any riter searches for and few of us ever find. But the bigger reason was none of us had ever seen a living canine. We'd seen them in mages roaming in packs, or in cartoons where they barked marching orders at slouching mice, but not in actual fur or hair or whatever a panting canine wore.

When I was four I asked my counselor what happened to them. She said the souls of dogs were so pure, they made it to heaven before the rest of us. That pretty much put me off religion forever.

Officially I'm a Lennonist – I know all the songs by heart and I observe a moment of eye-silence on December eighth – but I don't believe the Imagineer will ever come back to save us. I mean, if he could he would've already, don't you think?

In the ninth grade you learn elementary synergy. Something changes in the ecosystem and a life form disappears. We lost the bees, then the frogs, then the dogs. You see plenty of cats roaming the streets with hardly a mouse to chase or a dog to flee. The corps pass laws and post signs and the felines slip from sight for a while, only to creep out again a week or two later.

Not the canines. No one's seen one for decades.

Ezmer Elder filled Profman's mug to the brim with pistachio stoli and asked, "Did you ever have a dog?"

Profman must have noticed how quietly we all sat, looking at him. He laced his fingers together behind his head and I thought he was going to say, *You know I can't talk about that*. Instead he turned to Priss at the head of the table and said, "They hardly ever prosecute for love stories, do they?"

"Only when you reveal propriety information."

Profman shook his head. "This all belongs to me. And one other person, but I don't think she'd mind my

sharing it with the likes of you. If we can depend on you all to keep it out of your war stories.”

He glanced around the table, and everyone nodded solemnly. Those were my buds, my housemates, and I wouldn’t trust any of them to keep it out of their mages, even if they honestly wanted to, when they said so. But their silent nods were enough for Profman, who nodded in rhythm with us, as if we had all sworn a blood oath on the D-plus-plus manual.

“I didn’t own the dog,” he said. “She did. Kilo.”

“Was Kilo your girlfriend?” asked Gryphon.

“Kilo was the dog,” said Profman. “Rachel was my girl. Though she’d never let anyone call her that.” Then he had to tell the story. I could show you what he said, but I’d rather show you an episode the Gryphon broadcast afterwards.

9

The Passing of Yoshi Kyudojin

Save a life and you save a world, my master taught me, when I was old enough to raise a stick against another boy. I thought I knew what he meant – saving the life of a warrior saves the generations of descendants he might bring into the world. As my skill at the tachi and katana grew, I came to understand a deeper truth – that each opponent is a world unto himself, populated with allies and enemies, lovers and rivals, the dreams that draw us and the nightmares that haunt us.

It was my friend Yoshi who taught me to see this. Yoshi began to learn the art of kyudo as I learned to hold a blade steady despite the force of an enemy. As archer and sword, we would never have to face one another in a match or a battlefield. Yoshi would protect me, sending death through the air, and I would protect him on the ground. We became closer than brothers, sharing our room, our food, and our thoughts.

We fought many battles together, Yoshi and I. At the end, when the ground was soaked with blood, I would seek him out among the living and the dead. I would find him covered with gore from the part of the fight where the struggle had been fiercest, with a broken bow or single arrow left in his quiver. But he always had a quick smile for me, an ear for my story, and a nod of respect for my accomplishments, though the count of his dead always humbled mine.

The battle of Ryuku was the bloodiest of our military career. We broke the siege that day, driving a stake through the heart of the Wutang Clan, though it cost the lives of a thousand men. Still, I had no doubt I would find Yoshi afterwards grimy with gore but composing his mind for the challenge ahead. I sought out his unit of kyudojin,

but did not find him there. I visited the tents of the wounded but did not find him there either. Fearfully I entered the tents of the dead, but his corpse was not among the honored. So I went to the place where the battle had turned and found his body under a corpse, with an arrow through his chest.

Yet the arrow had not killed him. Yoshi was tougher than that. When I put my hand to his cheek, he opened his eyes and moved his lips. No sound came out, so I set my ear to his lips, which struggled to whisper, "It burns."

The arrow had been poisoned – that's what he needed to tell me. I nodded to show that I understood. Then I lifted him carefully in my arms, cradling the shaft in the crook of my elbow, and carried him off the field to the tents of the wounded.

He made no sound the whole time I bore him, though the pain must have been intense. There was a young volunteer in one of the tents who helped me lay him on a mattress of straw. She wore no makeup on her face and had wrapped her hair in a headscarf of gauze, trying to conceal her beauty. As if that was possible! Her eyes fixed on Yoshi from the moment she saw him, but for an instant she looked at me. And in the still pools of her eyes I found a reason to fight off death or to face it as bravely as I could.

I told her the arrow had been poisoned, but she smiled without asking anything further and I knew she had seen it before.

The Wutangs dipped their arrow tips in the venom of the mamushi snake, whose bite makes tissues liquify. Yoshi was past all help. She did not tell him or me either, at first. But as the hours we spent beside Yoshi's pallet grew more painful, she finally told me the truth.

Yoshi was going to die. It would not be easy to watch. But it was an honorable death, which would make his

family proud and glorify his ancestors in heaven. And it could be a loving death. She and I could comfort him best with our silent companionship and patient forgiveness, as his body learned to change from the habitation to the memorial of his spirit. I didn't know if I could do that. She assured me that I could, if we did it together.

She sat with me while I sat with him, easing his way out of time and decay into the bliss of eternity. She had never met Yoshi and never met me, but when the last breath escaped his lips and his face relaxed into peace, her eye filled with tears and she sobbed as if for a lover or brother. She took my hand and squeezed it to offer me comfort, when what arose in my heart was the most profound gratitude that this angel had appeared to help Yoshi leave the earth with the grace he had always shown in every aspect of his life.

Then she disappeared.

I was busy the next day, arranging for Yoshi's body to be prepared for shipment home to his family. When all had been properly done, I went back to the tents of the wounded to find her

and thank her for all she had given us. But she was gone. No one seemed to know where – or no one would tell me the truth.

The tag on her collar read only Nurse Rae. No one would tell me her proper name, the village of her family, or why she might have left so suddenly.

I suppose wounded soldiers often fall in love with the women who nurse them back to health. There are probably good reasons to conceal the private lives of the women who take on such difficult duty. But each year, on the anniversary of my friend Yoshi's death, when I honor his memory in prayer, I say a silent prayer as well for the woman who shared his pain with me. If I knew where to find her, I would fall on my knees and kiss the hem of her

kimono. For all of my life, she has been the model against which I measure all women, and her face is the one that appears to me in my moments of gravest doubt.

That was when I learned the deep truth behind my Master's teaching – save a life and you save a whole world. Lose a life and you lose the world you might have created together. Each death leaves behind a silence as profound as the instant before the world began.

10

Breakfast

Gryphon's episode opened well in the Arena and is already drawing respectable hits in the Archives. Of course, the original poison was gamma rays, not snake venom, but you have to allow a little license in inspiration. Gryphon moved the scene overseas and back a few centuries, but it was Priss who had the craziest idea, about a week after Profman came to dinner.

She was sitting at breakfast around two in the morning, crunching a bacon and egg wafer. Her arms were crossed on the table, her blonde hair dangling in her eyes, her silk pajamas taking my breath away. No peekaboo patches or faux leopard hides – the fabric shimmered with every shift of her weight, so I couldn't help picturing what moved underneath. Priss had an idea of the images in my mind and was just about to frown, when she sat up and announced, "We should find her."

Honcho was mixing a packet of Froot Loops in milk powder. "Who?"

"Rachel."

"Three-eight-six or seven-twelve?"

Honcho knows a lot of girls with practically every name. For some reason that bothers Priss, who made her incredible face. "Profman's girlfriend."

"We'll never do that," he said, gulping Loops and wiping his moustache on the back of his hand. "We don't even know her number. She could be a Rachel, or a Rache, or a Rae anything. From what he told us, she's probably not even in this habitat. She must be somewhere in Mexxaco or Silko Valley."

"She's got a chip in her head, doesn't she?"

You can't shake Priss from her own idea. Honcho looked at me for support, but I was still watching her pajamas shine.

"You can't track a GPS outside the dome," said Honcho. "You need like thirty clearance. Am I right, Mook?"

He had a point. I've got fans all over the habitat, but I don't know a soul above junior veepee. Maybe twenty-two clearance at best. "I can't track outside."

"Well I might know someone who can," said Priss, the former warden of Clinton Heights. But she didn't sound sure.

"Even if you do," said Honcho, pressing his advantage, "we'd never be able to reach her. She's probably a million miles away from here, in an igloo or a silicon mine. Somewhere far. You know what it takes to make personal contact between habitats? How would we talk to her, even if we could find her?"

None of us had ever been outside the dome. For one thing, there's no reason to go. Everything that used to be outside is inside now, in your home or outside of it but still safely under the shelter. In second grade they take you on a trip to a sentry station, where you see storms on the open surface and a bleak, black sky. The wind thumps the plexi, and there's a little red button you can press that lets you hear the sounds outside, like damned souls howling for salvation. They always take a counselor along, in case a kid start trembling or throwing up at the noise.

"I'll bet we could get there," said Ezmer Elder from the doorway. She yawned, and her red plaid robe yawned wider.

Ez often oversleeps, leaving her less than an hour awake before we all go back to sleep. But she knows engineers who move freight in and out of Holliland,

wheat from MOI and oranges from our groves, even a pilot who sends drones into the ooze-zone. If anyone could get to Silko Valley or Mexxaco City, Ezmer Elder could.

I thought it was a terrible idea. We had nothing to gain and everything to lose. But I could feel excitement building in Priss, the way it does sometimes when an idea takes hold of her. She asks, What do you think your mother would say, if you could ask her? And I have no answer to that. “How do we know that Profman even wants to see her?” I said aloud.

Priss showed me the same face she showed Honcho earlier. “He’ll never say he does,” she explained. “Obviously. Profman wouldn’t want us taking any risks for him. But you heard his story on Moonday night. How he thinks about her, Mook. How he must feel remembering her in the middle of the night. You know what that’s like, don’t you?” She paused. “Why wouldn’t he secretly want us to find her?”

I didn’t know the answers to those questions either but knew there could be one. Not Priss, who kept looking at me with blue-black eyes, brushing back a white-blond curl that kept falling into them, until the only thing I could say was, “I have a friend in a mage tower. Let me see what she can do.”

When Holliland premiered the Arena, all the other corps were dubious. They assumed that Holliland would contrive to win all the battles, as they would have done themselves. Holliland published the randomizing specs, but that made no difference. They introduced mager voting on the outcomes of the battle scenes, and still the others rejected the plan. It was only when Holliland shared their P&L plan, comparing a level playing field with a biased one, that the other corps paid attention. They worked out their own projections and realized they

could tolerate a little home court advantage for Holliland and still improve their own stock positions.

That's when the wars went virtual. Peace was at hand – another victory for the free market, where everyone had a share. But the shooting stopped, and for people like Profman in fatigues, facing real MI-32s and AK-64s, it was a life-saver. I've never heard him say a word against that particular progress.

But even as the dividends grew, the corps held onto their old suspicions. At the time, all the code was sent to a Holliland subsidiary managing the servers for the Arena. A few nasty lawsuits took a bite out of Holliland's credit, and that ruffled the jumpsuits in the boardroom, who broadcast a splash announcement decentralizing control of the Arena. Instead of a single office managing the war, code could be submitted to any of the broadcast towers, where episodes could vie for airtime based on the clearance of the riter and the meta-code embedded in the programming. The votes of the mager audience would still decide the outcomes of big battles, but the riters working for one corps could seize control of an episode started by another, if their meta-coding trumped the code on the air.

At first clearance came from the corps themselves, but as the wars unfolded the past experience of the riters, their prestige index, became a bigger factor. That came as a surprise to everyone, an intrinsic feature of the fabricating code of the Arena itself. It must have been encoded by the original programmers of the Arena, the riters insuring a place for themselves in the brave new world they created.

That gives freelancers leverage with the corps. The popularity of Hollister, and my own obsession with meta-code, meant I could interrupt an episode launched by a Silko riter and turn the definition tables. It meant I could

keep the brave Colonel alive and yearning for the elusive Lara C, while each episode increased my clearance status, my ability to break into an episode, and my price as a freelance riter.

All of this depends on the predictable behavior of the IT managers in each of the broadcast towers. Those people are not hired for their imaginations, and having met a few I can tell you that most of them don't follow the episodes they broadcast. They're hardly content focused. They scan incoming code for propriety, which does not mean that the characters keep their clothes on, but that the riters observe the rules of war as spelled out by the software developers who coded it and the suits who have controlled the Arena since it opened for business.

Courting execs is a waste of time. A lot of riters try, and I want to say to them, *They're onto you*. The suits know that riters want to be hired. They know we all think we can end the war in decisive victory if they just give us a chance to lead their troops against whoever they happen to be fighting at the moment. I never bother with execs. If you rite well enough, they'll come to you. On the other hand, taking a little time to show compassion for the lonely souls confined to the towers is worth the effort for any riter who hopes to set the virtual world on fire.

My favorite tower warden is Otera Denge, in East Irvine. She must be forty now, six-foot-two with five-inch fingers and a laugh like a lunch bell. I always stop by Coffee Bucks on my way and pick up a meth latte grande for each of us. Otera works double shifts whenever she can and appreciates a wake-up call in the middle of the night. Her desk is near a window high enough to see reflections on the underside of the dome. I like to sit there, watching neon blink off the plastic.

Otera has permission to broadcast episodes in the Arena, which means she has access to store them in the Archives in the Mojave, where people can visit old episodes for a few credits each. It also means she has access to the Back-up Archives on Luna, where servers were installed after the third Eco-Crisis. There are all kinds of postings in those archives, poorly indexed but searchable with Boolean engines. Birth certificates, obituaries, travel papers, all sorts of forms have been filed away, never to be viewed again except by wardens like Otera. So I asked her about tracking an individual by the chip in her head.

“Oh yeah,” she said, “easy-peasy. If you have the CIN and clearance.”

“What if you don’t know her Chip Identification Number?”

“Well, what do you know, Mook?”

“Her name.”

“And family farm number?”

I shook my head. “But I know roughly where she was fifteen years ago.”

“Where?”

“In the desert outside Santa Fe.”

Otera lifted her eyes from her screens for a moment. “In Mexxaco? You mean she’s not in the habitat?”

“We don’t know. We think not.”

She laughed, like a wedding bell. “Setting aside the legal issues ... you’re asking me if I can track someone in another habitat using just her common name and a location fifteen years old?”

“I didn’t think you could. But I told my friends I would ask.”

Otera didn’t ask who my friends were. She knew about my homelife. At one time or another I’ve told her anything she asked, to pass the hours monitoring code.

She likes Ezmer Elder, though she's never met her. She's not so sure about Priss, especially for me. She thinks the Gryphon needs to do something useful with his talent, and makes a face whenever I mention Honcho. She keeps asking me if we've tossed him out on the streets yet.

"One more thing," I remembered. "We think she left Mexxaco fifteen years ago. Does that help?"

"It might," she said. "It's still quite a long shot. Most of my broadcasts are local – shopping, community events, the usual catotainment. I can root through the Santa Fe archives as much as I like, so long as I avoid contact. If I don't disturb their foosball game or the hookah in the staff room, your old pals in-house at Holliland wouldn't notice a thing."

"They're not my pals," I said.

"The moon site is different," Otera said. "The servers up there are on the Arena protocol, with its own encryption and access codes. A series of specifications must be approved or a whole tower is cut off the air. Instantly. The Arena is subject to constant scrutiny by elite wardens with hidden clearance numbers."

"I'm not asking for the Arena," I said.

"But you might be. Because the only network that crosses between habitats is the Arena. If you try to use the satellites to find a chip in a foreign dome, the only network that could possibly work is the one that sends the war into everybody's skull. If you had her CIN, I could locate her chip in this habitat in ten minutes. But in Mexxaco, with no number to reference..." She shook her head. "Is it worth the trouble?"

"It might be."

I must have drawn a serious face, because she laughed again, like a funeral gong. That turned into a groan of sympathy and she said, "All right, Mook, let me see what I can do. But don't hope for much."

I promised that I wouldn't and told her everything Profman told us, except his name. I thought it might get back to him and didn't want to ruin the surprise. Otera made a face, but she seemed to understand that stuff without being told. We talked for another few minutes, but I could see she was already thinking how to do it. Then a bit of code crossed the screen on her left. It caught her eye, and she forgot that I was sitting on her right. I mouthed, *Bye-bye, O*, without waiting for a reply and figured that was the end of it.

11

Freelance Manifesto: Profman's Daft

I asked Profman to look over one of our drafts and make suggestions. I don't think he understood just what I was asking, because this is what he wrote:

The evolution has already begun. It has never ended. The evolution will take place in your head, with or without a chip. The evolution will be danced. It will be sung. It will be painted on the walls and the skyways, it will not be piped but you will sense it everywhere.

His usual brand of gibberish, and he couldn't even get the words right. I'd hardly even call it a draft – a daft, really. But you have to humor him or he stops making tamales.

12
Yoncee

Honcho's episodes were always popular among teen demographics, who like shoot-em-ups more than character fights. His real strength is his personal appeal to young women in his mage intros. Or perhaps I should say his real weakness.

He has brown eyes and soft skin, melon lips and wavy hair. He claims to have a mix of Asian and Latin genes in his bloodline and tries to play on both stereotypes – Japanese race car drivers and Spanish mathematicians. He nailed up a flag of Old Cuba on his wall, from the days before it went to Ceed. But mostly I think it's the sound of his voice that melts them.

None of us are purebreds in this house. They found eleven ethnicities in my gene report, and they've isolated new markers since then. By complexion, Gryphon is the palest, except when he blushes. He claims a trace of Amerindian blood, but you wouldn't know it until you pinch him. Ezmer Elder's skin is like a cappuccino, which sets off her emerald eyes. My genes read like a demographic analysis of the Mojave Union School District – "a citizen of the world" they called me, when I asked about my parentage on the family farm.

There aren't too many purebreds left anywhere except on the upper floors of corporate headquarters. That's one of the markers they score in tracking exec-cadets.

They don't care what kind of purebred you are – Asian descent is as good as African, which is as good as Euro or Islander. They're just convinced they can predict what any purebred will do, and predictability gives selectors their boners.

Honcho is an equal opportunity adolescent sex magnet. When he first showed up with Gryph, we assumed they would share a bed and breakfast. It turned out to be only breakfast. Ezmer Elder was Honcho's first surprise guest but by no means his last. There's a constant stream of them turning up at our table, hanging onto Honcho's neck or sitting in his lap while he reaches around to wolf down cornflake wafers. Most of them are gone by noon, but every now and then one of them knocks on the door asking for Honcho, and one of us has to tell them he's not home, or home with somebody else. They usually shrug like that's no big surprise, but there's always the odd nymphet who walks to the edge of the moat with the idea of throwing herself into the muddy water. That's a weak idea, even for those who can swim, which anyone knows who's ever met an angry swan.

They say if you line up enough chimpanzees, one of them will rite the code for Hamlet on Ice. That's the way it turned out with Honcho. Sooner or later he had to bed the purebred daughter of a Holliland suit.

Her name was Yolanda 212 but she called herself Yoncee. No one but a veepette would shorten the Queen Bee's moniker. She looked nothing like her chosen namesake, of course, with skin like kindergarten glue – except she smelled like powder, so who knew what was under it? She only missed the albino ideal in her irises, which were too inky a blue, so her red contacts made them glow an unnatural indigo. She wore the ribboned linen sackcloths they give all those girls, with the kind of sandals they wore around the Aegean. The total effect was a schoolgirl-priestess-pauper style that must excite their purebred boyfriends but is totally lost on me. Purebred boys and Honcho.

Yoncee shows up one night with Honcho and two of her friends, giggling over a flask of fluorescence. They all

disappear into his room, but Yoncee is the only one left by breakfast. She plants herself at the table and asks Priss to get her a creampuff wafer. Priss is standing next to the sterilizer, so she hands the princess a plate and tells her the wafers are in the cabinet. Yoncee then asks Honcho to get her a creampuff wafer and a packet of Cap'n Cee crystals. We don't keep that junk in the house. It's too sweet for anybody but a diehard Lara fan. Honcho thumbs over his shoulder toward the wafers in the cabinet, but Yoncee doesn't budge. She asks Ezmer Elder, who's got the cabinet open, to bring her a packet. Ezmer tells her very patiently we don't have any Cap'n Cee, and Yoncee replies, "You could at least look, couldn't you?"

By which time we're all looking at her.

She stands up from her chair as if she's been asked to scrub out a toilet, pushes Ezmer Elder out of the way, and burrows through the boxes in the cabinet like a snake after a rat. When she can't find the sweet stuff she wants, she turns to Priss and says, "What kind of house are you running here?"

Priss says, "Me? This is his house."

So Yoncee turns to me. There must be something in my face that frightens her, because she turns to the cabinet without a word and snatches a packet of asparagus. She tears it in half, dumps the whole thing into her cup, and turns just as green as her milk. We're all waiting to see her face once she drinks the concoction, but she never picks up the cup. She just leaves it fizzing on the table and storms back into Honcho's room. He shrugs at the rest of us and follows after her.

Now that's not the way you want to introduce yourself to someone like Priss. As far as I'm concerned, a kid is a kid, and nobody must have taught her any better. If you're lucky you get a counselor with years of

experience, but they all have to start sometime, don't they? They say the purebreds get the best counselors, but that's all in how you decide who's best. What they mean is that purebred infants get purebred counselors, but that's not to say they're capable teachers. It looked to me like nobody ever taught her how to make breakfast.

Based on our observations of Honcho admirers, we thought we would never see Yoncee again, which was too soon for Priss. But Yoncee showed up at the house again the very next week, alone but expecting to be invited in anyway. It surprised me when she asked, "Is Hector home?" for two reasons – because Hector is actually Honcho's name, and because of the time of day. It was just after ten in the morning.

Lunchtime.

I need to say a word about meals, because Priss won't stop bugging me until I do. I don't know who she thinks is plugging in.

In the moldy olden days, when everybody worked the same schedule, meals had names that marked the time of day. Breakfast was after the sun came up, lunch came four hours later, dinner a couple of hours after dark. Now that people work around the clock, that no longer makes a lot of sense. Instead, you call the first meal of your day breakfast, no matter when you sit down, and the second meal lunch, no matter what time it falls.

Since most of us are riters who work whenever we have to, we try to have at least one meal in common. We wake up at two or three in the morning, call it breakfast, and go back to sleep for another six hours. If a script is due to an in-house shop, it's usually expected after first light. You send it off, grab a bite of lunch, and get around to dinner when you feel hungry again.

Once a week, on Moondays, we match those up. But lunch is usually a private time, after your long sleep, so

it's not usually a polite time to knock on someone's door. But there she was, asking for Hector.

Ezmer Elder said, "He's not here, honey," but Yoncee just stood there, one foot over the other, as if she hadn't heard. Then she saw Gryphon coming down the stairs and asked him if Hector was home.

Gryphon told her the same thing, of course, Honcho having been very explicit about what we were to say in those circumstances. Gryph shook his head, but he never likes lying, so he added, "I haven't seen him," which probably was true.

Yoncee took one foot off the other and stamped on the porch to show she didn't believe us, or else that she couldn't believe Honcho could be out when she wanted to find him in. Nobody responded, and she marched off indignantly.

Again, we expected never to see her again. But Yoncee came back that night with a big sector guard, and while Gryph was staring at the man's facemask, Yoncee slipped around the two of them and headed upstairs, calling, "Hector! Hector! It's me!"

I stepped out of my room to see about the noise and found Yoncee in the hallway outside Honcho's room.

The door was open. Honcho was inside on the floor doing push-ups while this lean black kid sat, wrapped in a bedsheet, counting out reps with a clock in his hand. Not a mobile device but an actual round timepiece with a button at the top.

Yoncee saw the kid, and, wouldn't you know, she recognized him from the purebred academy. His name was Keyes, which she hollered even louder, as if it were two syllables and each was worse than the other.

"Kee-yez! Kee-YEZ! Oooh. What are you doing here?"

It was pretty clear to the rest of us what he must have been doing, even as he cowered against the headboard and pulled the sheet closer around him.

Honcho sat up on the floor. Yoncee is only five-four, but she towered over him in cork heels and flesh-colored fishnets under her sackcloth. She stamped her foot once, twice, three times.

Honcho flipped over and returned to his sit-ups, grunting at Keyes to “Count.” Keyes threw her an anxious glance and lifted his timepiece. Yoncee whirled on her heel – close as she could manage on cork – and stormed out of the hallway. That seemed to be her favorite mode of transport. I heard her on the stairs, thudding through the cork, trying to make her point. Then she was gone and the kid on the bed said, “Twenty-three.”

Honcho seemed to think that was the end of it, the last we would see of Yoncee.

But he was the only one who did. Perhaps that was because of the ape in the facemask who waited for her to come downstairs and kept staring at the Gryphon even after she walked out. Perhaps it was the official vehicle parked across the way that watched the house for a week. They made no effort to be discreet but sat with their windows open, playing loud music. Anyone who dared approach the car was told that, yes, they were watching our house because there was reason for them to watch.

Two guards were assigned to that detail. We could tell them apart by the music that streamed into the street. One of them liked techno-pop and the other liked military tunes – not esprit-de-corps stuff, marching music or the songs the troops sang around their campfires. Some talented songsmiths rite that stuff. The guard liked the repetitive music in the background of a mage that lets you know how to feel about the characters. I won’t stand for

those jingles attached to my episodes, and neither will Ezmer Elder, but Gryphon doesn't object, and Honcho codes in his favorite tunes for the goriest parts of his firefights. Whenever you hear a cheery melody in one of his mages, you know someone's about to be chop-meat.

Then things started to change for Honcho, little by little.

First to go was his standing contract. Teenage boys were still chipping in and revisiting his episodes in the Archives, but Holliland suddenly lost interest in his new work. Acquisitions didn't give him any reason for their flagging interest. They just informed him they could acquire his kind of material more cheaply from other sources. The appeal of his name, they said, had not yet fallen but it was likely to wane, and his demographics no longer justified his price. This was odd, because his printouts showed no slacking of interest among their darling teenagers, but no appeal made a difference. The market was the market, and they could buy what they chose.

At first Honcho tried to be philosophical about it, as philosophical as he was capable of being. There were other corps in the Arena, we said, who would snap up his episodes as soon as they learned he was available. Except they didn't. Mexxaco never called back, nor Silko Valley nor MOI. When Honcho reached out to their acquisitions, he encountered lukewarm receptions. They should have fallen all over themselves for a riter of his standing who had broken free from Holliland. Instead, they closed ranks with their supposed competitor. If Holliland wasn't interested in Honcho, neither were any of their enemies.

Instead, he picked up unwanted friends.

He started getting unsolicited u-mages of purebreds singing Exmas carols and lectures on Jobean philosophy. He tried to block them but they came right through his

firewall. He complained to the towers, who told him that u-mages were privileged correspondence and they had no right to interfere. They kept coming all hours of the day and night, driving him crazy.

I came home one day to find Ezmer Elder squatting next to Honcho, staring into his face. He was sitting in a corner of the common room on the bare floorboards. The light from a lamp reflected off his forehead, but something was wrong with his eyes. They were shut but fluttering. Whatever he was watching inside his lids was troubling, but it wouldn't let him open them. I called Priss, who came downstairs, took one look at him, and called a doctor.

The doc came to the house and squatted next to Ezmer Elder. He whispered Honcho's name three times, each time louder than the one before. It sounded like an echo, as if Honcho had fallen to the bottom of a well.

Then the doc took a silver rod from his bag and poked Honcho. It had a point at one end and a tiny hammer at the other. Honcho grew more violent in his fluttering, shaking his jaw and straining his neck. The doc put two fingers to the side of Honcho's temple. Then he stood and put his instrument back in his bag. Packing up to leave.

Priss's forehead wrinkled. "Do you know what's happening to him?"

The doctor nodded. Sure he knew.

Priss waited two seconds. "Can you tell us what it is? Is he dying?"

The doctor shook his head and looked at me, as if I could save him. "No, he's not dying. But he might wish he were. He's being audited."

"Audited?"

Priss couldn't believe it, but I could. That's what Honcho looked like, if you thought about it – a guy

watching his credits roll. They were flashing rows of numbers inside his lids, overloading his nervous system. He couldn't stand to watch it go but couldn't look away, and the synapses were popping like confetti in his skull.

"Will it end?"

"As soon as they're done with him."

"And he'll come out of it? The same as he used to be?"

"It will end, sure," sighed the doc in a lame attempt at reassurance, "though I can't promise he'll ever be the same."

And he never was, financially. When he did open his eyes, Honcho was broke. He wasn't even Honcho any more. His magic name had vanished in his audit, and the credits it earned went with it. We all tried to help him out by hitting his episodes in the Archives, but all we brought up was UNAVAILABLE. His whole history as a riter had been wiped out in one killer audit. All because of a teenager in sackcloth.

Hector refused to leave his room for a week after. Priss knocked on his door, but he never answered, so a couple of days later she went in anyway. She found him on his bed with his knees drawn up and his eyes open. She brought him a plate of truffle oil wafers, his usual favorites, but they sat there for two days untouched before she went in again, took them away and left a plate of honeydew wafers outside his door.

He didn't touch those either.

Ten days later the guards outside left their vehicle and banged on our front door. We didn't know the old metal could sound like a sonic boom. Ezmer Elder refused to answer, but Priss threw it wide and planted herself in the open space.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

“Step aside,” said the smaller guard, only six foot three. “Official business.”

“I’m a warden,” said Priss. “What business do you have here?”

The bigger guard grunted, but the little one was more attuned to the voice of authority. “Making an arrest, Ma’am.”

“You can’t arrest Honcho. He hasn’t done anything outside the law. The girl was over twelve, for Yoko’s sake, and she pursued him. You want to do something to protect the public order? Keep those baby tramps away from here. For their sake as well as everyone else’s.”

Priss stood her ground. I came up behind her for moral support, but the big guard didn’t appreciate the change in numbers. He reached out an arm like a bundled cable and shoved Priss aside. She landed hard but crawled to the foot of the stairs to block their advance by gripping each bannister with one of her hands. Her arms looked very thin, stretched across the staircase.

Neither guard approached her. Instead, the smaller guard marched up to me. “Who are you?”

“Mook,” I declared, making a show of it for Priss.

The smaller guard nodded and his partner moved behind me. Suddenly I felt my arms seized behind me, pinning my elbows in a hydraulic clamp. “We got him,” the smaller guard murmured into his mouthpiece, and they hustled me out, while Priss hung on gamely to the stairs.

The Interrogation Game

They tossed me in the back of their vehicle and took off, siren wailing. At least they won't be sitting out front, I thought.

Bravado rather than bravery. You can look it up.

I was driven into a garage, bundled up an elevator and dumped in a windowless room with a camera in the corner. No table or hard chairs, but a couch of squishy stuff covered in white leather.

The guards told me to sit and I sat, falling into the cushions so deeply I lost any sense of balance and control. I tried to squat on the edge but sank into the front of the frame. The carpet was also white, so you left guilty shoeprints wherever you set your feet.

"You've got the wrong guy," I told the guards, who smirked and left me alone. They didn't have to tell me, *They all say that.*

I sat with my hands folded, tapping one thumb on the other, trying not to move my feet and leave another print. After ten or fifteen minutes, music started, either in the room or in my head. It's hard to tell sometimes. It was the kind of stuff you hear in the background of a kid's video games, when the little mechanic is tooling around from one burnt-out building to another. Every now and then the music boomed! – like the sound of a wall falling over.

Then, all of a sudden, I was no longer sitting alone.

No one came in the door, of course. One minute I was alone on the couch, and the next I felt someone beside me. She looked like a twelve-year-old girl, except the cushions weren't sinking beneath her, and she had the glassy eyes of an avatar – if she was actually broadcast into my head.

If she was in the room, she was a hologram. As I said, it's not always easy to tell.

"Hi, Mook," she said, my old pal. Who are you?" I asked.

"Sally Mae." She looked like a pre-teen but she didn't sound like one.

"You've got the wrong guy," I said. Not wasting any time.

"I'm a big fan," she assured me.

That's why they sent a twelve-year-old. I said again more slowly, "You've got the wrong guy. I've never slept with a purebred or broke her heart."

"That would be wrong," Sally Mae agreed, "unless you're really a breed match. We don't have many left."

"I didn't," I swore. "Never poked her or even tried. Your intel is off this time. You've got the wrong suspect, missy."

That sounded harsh, but I couldn't bring myself to call her *ma'am*.

"Is that what you're worried about? Harassment?" She stretched her pudgy arms across the sofa. "You have nothing to fear on that score."

That was sort of good news. Harassment is a Class A felony. At least I wasn't headed for an indium mine. But her last three words were unsettling.

"What score should I worry about? What's the charge?"

"It's too soon to talk about charges, ain't it?"

"What should we talk about?"

"The Arena."

"That's my job," I said, "as you would know, if you were really a fan."

"Oh, I am that. I am. It's just not all that I am."

I was thinking hard already. Had I posted something against the rules? They would have sent it back to me, as

they always did. I rewrite scripts. That's why they hire me. Magers love to hear sass, backtalk to superiors before fighters go off to die, bravely defending their habitat. Magers love it, so they chip in, and suits love the numbers who do. If I stepped over some line, all they had to do was let me know.

There are whole departments in the corps whose whole job is to make sure the ritters stick to the rules. They issue weekly reports of mages that push the line, with notes about why they were pulled. I wouldn't be hauled into a white room just because Capricorn said something wry that bent the nose of a jumpsuit.

"The Corporal talks tough," I said, "but he's as loyal as they come."

"The Corporal?" said the twelve-year-old sitting next to me. When I squinted, I could see the edge of the sofa cushion through her legs, so I squeezed my eyes shut and she disappeared. A hologram then. Outside my head.

"Capricorn."

She giggled. "Is he yours too? I just love him – the way he looks like he's getting it wrong but it turns out right in the end? My wife's brother is exactly like that, except he never gets it right in the end." Then she remembered her hologram looked only twelve. "My brother's wife, I mean."

"Of course," I said. But it changed the mood in the room and not to my advantage. When Sally Mae spoke again, her voice dropped half an octave.

"Let me make this clear. It has nothing to do with the Corporal or any of your avatars. Yes, you've entertained millions and earned a shit-pile of credits for Holliland. You've brought us glorious victories and consoled us after massacres. But that won't make any difference when it comes to a charge of treason."

"Treason?" I couldn't believe it. "Why?"

She didn't answer. "You said it was too soon to talk about charges."

"Too soon then," she said. "Now is later, ain't it?"

She expected me to defend myself, to deny the charge and start making excuses. But I had already said too much, about bedding a purebred and breaking her heart. Somewhere a computer was already whirring, trying to track down a sexual infraction it had not caught the first time.

"You want to tell me what you're talking about?"

My first smart response. No, she didn't want to tell me, but we had reached an impasse. If she remained silent and so did I, it would never become a confession. If the threat of a threat didn't scare me, she would have to move on to the threat.

"Illegal use of the Arena for private purposes."

A trumped-up charge, I thought. They could scare you with one of those, but you beat it in court. And I knew all the best wardens working my side of the street.

The little imp shook her head.

Then she pointed at one of the walls, where an image appeared of Otera Denge, my favorite tower warden, who was sitting on a plank bed in a cell. Not a white room like mine but a stone dungeon, with walls leaking slime and an upside-down bucket in the corner. She looked dejected, staring at the floor, and the left side of her face was swollen. There was no way to know if the image was real, until she scratched her knee. It took a damn good coder to manage that move. Why would a riter with that kind of skill be working for these sleazeballs?

"She gave us your name," Sally Mae said.

"I don't believe it."

She shrugged. "She had no choice. She held out for two days, shaking her head and saying she couldn't remember who asked her."

She let me watch silently. I saw more than fatigue in Otera. Despair. When my face mirrored hers, Sally grunted.

“Have you ever seen the Orwell book, *1984*?”

That was a trick question. They made a few attempts at translation in the early years of maging, but it’s been on the list of forbidden works for years.

“Never heard of it.”

“You must have,” she said. “They show its scenes in riting classes, don’t they? Not the whole thing, of course. Who could stomach that? But you get to see Room 101 in the Ministry of Love.”

I saw no point in denying it. “With the rats.”

“Exactly!” she said, as if to a favorite teacher. “Those rats in a cage strapped to Winston Smith’s face. Remember that part?” She looked again at the image of Otera on the wall.

“You couldn’t do that,” I said. “She has rights.”

“She did,” said Sally Mae, “until she entered your question into the Arena. Then she became something else. A traitor. A terrorist. Once a suspect acquires that status, we can do whatever we like.”

“No, you can’t,” I insisted. “Not rats.”

No more giggles now. “Maye not,” she conceded. “The animal people would be all over us. We can’t subject rodents to that abuse. But we can project rats into the chip in her head.”

The image of Otera gripped her face in both hands and started clawing at the air in front of her. She shut her eyes and screamed.

“All right,” I said through my teeth. “Enough! You must have fucked-up ritors working for you. No one I know would write torture porn.”

“I don’t know,” the imp said, watching her writhe. “It’s just a question of incentives, ain’t it? And disincentives?”

“That’s what they teach in coding school.”

“You’ve learned your lesson then,” she said. “I’m glad to hear it.” The image on the wall dissolved as she rubbed her palms together. “I’d like to know why you asked Otera Denge to track down this woman from Mexxaco. She owe you credits, something like that?”

That would have been an inoffensive answer, but his next question would have been, For what? “No,” I said. “It’s a personal matter.”

She leaned closer. “There are no personal matters, here. And there’s more than one person involved in it now.”

She meant Otera, but anything I said to accept the blame myself would increase her guilt as my co-conspirator. “It was a joke,” I said, “that’s all.”

“A joke.”

“A prank, for a friend. In bad taste, maybe. But hardly treason.”

“I didn’t see Denge laughing,” Sally said.

No, it wasn’t for her, and I’m sorry I involved her in any way. She had nothing to do with it. She doesn’t even know why I wanted it. She said she would see if there was anything she could do within her legal authority.”

“Why?”

“Because I wheedled it out of her.”

She didn’t seem to think that possible. “We’ve been through her credits already and haven’t found anything yet. But we will. We’ll turn up a transaction, and you’ll both go down together. I’m giving you one last chance to work with us. We can’t have tower wardens abusing their privileges for personal gain. Or worse. I should think a riter would understand that.”

Another dangerous phrase. “What do you mean, or worse?”

“Have you any idea who this woman is?”

“Otera? Sure —”

“Not Miz Denge,” she said, losing patience. “The woman she was searching on the Arena interface.”

Profman’s Rachel? So they weren’t after Honcho at all, when they came for me. The whole thing was ridiculous, a misunderstanding. But I couldn’t bring Priss or Profman there. I said, “Who is she?”

Sally Mae said, “You don’t know?”

“No. I don’t.”

“I’d stick to that story,” she said, giving up on me. “That’s your best defense.

From one loyal Hollie to another.”

Sally Mae was wrong about that. My best defense was a good offense, and nobody rites offensives better than yours truly.

Over the next two days, I was introduced to the latest forms of persuasion. I was blindfolded while they pumped into my chip an exquisite array of sounds and images designed to scare the shit out of me. A centipede crawling across the floor grew larger and larger until it loomed over me, dripping sizzling acid from its mandibles. Sallie Mae crawled out of a hole that opened in the wall behind me. I felt something wet and sticky at the foot of my mattress, which turned out to be the severed head of a stallion. The walls curved in and out.

I should have been horrified, but I rite magery and focus on the craft instead of the content. Why did the riter choose a girl in a green uniform to signal the violation of innocence? Why not a millipede with hundreds more legs? A bay mare or palomino?

The sight of a black stallion is petrifying when it’s riding down on you with bared teeth and flaring nostrils,

but a lighter color makes a better contrast with blood-soaked linen. Nothing sucks the heart out of horror like thinking about the details that were chosen and rejected.

The images kept coming. Hairy creatures with wolfish teeth standing upright like a man. Old Euro nobility in formal wear and fangs. Amphibious creatures with flapping gills rising out of the everglades. And all the while I couldn't help wondering, Who rote this shit?

"I did," said a voice close to my ear.

At least it sounded near and I felt a bit of moisture on the lobe. Spit? I waited to see if it spoke again.

Instead I felt my wrists unbound and the blindfold lifted. The light in my cell was dim, and it took my eyes a moment, but when they focused, I saw a kid with skin like an old sheet leaning on the plank bed beside me. He looked about nineteen, and from the way his ribs appeared under his tunic, no one was feeding him regularly. His head was mostly shaved except for a strip of fuzz down the center, the way prisoners are marked when they're released on parole. He wore the baggy shorts and jersey of a bicycle guard, watching me with a hopeful expression.

"You rote the shit they've been forcing through my head?" He nodded.

I don't usually criticize another riter, especially when he's next to me. But I still wasn't convinced that he was. "Did I say that out loud?"

"It's not so easy to tell, after a while. You held out longer than I did."

I squeezed his shoulder and he winced at the pressure, but I felt the warmth of his blood. "You have a name?"

He shook his head. "Not in here. Just a number."

"You should have a riting name. You've got some imagination."

“I do,” he insisted, “but you haven’t seen my ideas yet. Most of the scary stuff comes out of their lie-berry. They prefer it.”

“Their what?”

“They have a server crammed with digital copies of stories from old platforms. Movies. Games. Even paper stuff recorded in code.”

“Like the Archive.”

“Sort of. But you can’t chip in and buy an episode, no matter how many credits you bid. You need a card to see the material and the clearance of a veep to get a card. Unless you’re working for them. Whether you want to or not.”

“Like you?”

He nodded. “You know that spooky catotainment they show you in fifth grade, about an old man and a boy wandering down a road on the surface?”

“They both get eaten by cannibals.”

“Right. Well, I’ve seen the original in their lie-berry. The boy gets into a habitat. A nice place in the end.”

“Where nobody eats him?”

“Oh, sure, they eat him. The whole place, for a holiday. But at first it looks like he’s found a haven. You’ve seen the mage to that point, haven’t you? Tell me this. How consistent would it be after everything that happened, if he found a safe habitat?”

“Not very.”

“He and his old man could have found one any time? No, they have to eat him. What message would it send, if they didn’t? That you can wander outside any time you want and just get lucky who you meet?”

The kid had some story sense. “If you don’t mind my asking – why exactly are you riting their torture porn instead of something more original?”

“Like the war? I tried my hand at that. I’d like the opinion of someone like you on my episodes. I’ll send you the numbers, if you ever get out of here. But I made a mistake in coding one time, with no idea how serious it was. I had a character suggest there must be something more rewarding than shooting Silks and racking up credits. Not that I was speaking for myself. I just thought it an intriguing idea, coming from a soldier. Something I never heard before.”

Neither had I.

“It wasn’t against the rules,” he said. “I checked. The episode was never even broadcast. I submitted it to my tower warden, and the next thing I knew I was sitting on a plank bed like yours.”

“How long ago was that?”

“About two years. They didn’t keep me the whole time. They let me go after a couple weeks of questioning. But my career was dead. I lost my post at Hollie House, and my request for a freelance license was denied. My chip went dead for two weeks. I was cut off from everything, all contacts and credits. I had no way to make a living, find a place to live or order food. I had no access to health care or public assistance. I had no place to go ... until finally it occurred to me to come back here.”

“To prison?”

“They feed you, don’t they? I get a cushion on my bed, since I’m doing a bit of riting for them.”

For the first time I felt afraid. This was the real threat – not the girl scout or the headless horse, but the prospect of riting this material instead of my own. When he saw my face go pale, the kid banged on the wall and shouted, “Okay? He’s got it. Now let me out of here!”

Then the lights went out completely and they left me in the dark.

14
Hollie House

It could have been hours later, or days. If it was hours, it was lots of them. The temperature had slowly been lowered to chilly, then cool, then cold, then damn cold. I heard a low whisper, a hissing noise, as if air was being sucked from the room. I had already decided to tell them the whole story, the next time the kid asked. But instead of him they sent a greenhead into the cell.

Her forest green hair looked as natural as the color they inject in spinach. Her eyelashes were turquoise, so there was obviously some indecision in the beauty parlor. She was short and squat, maybe forty-five, with an accent that had nothing to do with Holliland. The green dye is supposed to signify something, but it changes with every reorg of Security Services. I knew where she came from but no idea what she wanted. One minute I was squatting on my planks, shivering in the dark and listening to the air drain out of the room, and the next the cell was blindingly bright and a greenhead was standing in front of me with a pair of white overalls over her arm.

“Up and at ‘em, Mook. You’re free.”

It took me a minute to believe her. “Just like that?”

She tossed me the overalls. “What did you expect? A parade?”

I stepped into them. They hung loosely on my frame. “An apology?”

“Sorry. Arrest is a bitch, ain’t it?”

So here was Sally Mae, my pre-teen interrogator, in the flesh. No wonder they sent in an avatar. “I can just walk out the door? No one will stop me?”

“They’re sending a car to pick you up.”

“Why?”

“You’re needed, Mr. Mook.”

That was the explanation – they needed my skill set. Only Holliland Magic Arts had the clout to take me from Security Services. When I stepped out of the building, blinking at the sunlight, a plush van was waiting at the curbside with the big Hollie leaf logo in brilliant red and green.

Two men in grey wool were waiting by the sliding door. They looked like a calf and a bull, even in their suits. When they saw me exit the Security Center, the skinny calf murmured, “Mr. Mook?”

Only execs called me that. Junior execs, by their deference.

“Right this way,” said the fatter bull, making passes at the van door.

I could either step in or go back inside. Not so hard a decision. “Can you get me a coke?” I said, to put them both at ease.

“Sure,” said the calf. Something he knew how to do.

The bull knew how to drive fast. That is, he knew how to make a self-driving vehicle speed through traffic like an ambulance. In a way, it was. Only the patient was entirely digital and apparently no longer human.

In fifteen minutes I was back in my old office as if I never left Hollie House, still clutching a coke and chatting with a pin-striped exec. I created Colonel Hollister as a riter on their payroll. When his episodes took off, they promoted me to suite warden and gave me a staff. Hefner 1237 was one of the first riters I hired and the one I left in charge when I went freelance. Heff had a fair sense of what magers liked to see and what the execs wanted, which made him a good assistant for me. He was a little short maybe on magination, but that was never an issue while I managed the suite. Once I left, he ran into problems.

They had Colonel Hollister doing all sorts of things he never would have done, mimicking the moves of other avatars. The magers were loyal, so they stuck with him while he treated Lara the way Heff thought women should want to be treated.

When Holliland spun off Lara C, her own ritters weighed in, trying to get her as far as possible from the unpredictable Colonel. The current problem was just an extreme version of what had come before.

Heff sat on a corner of my old desk and drew me a picture of their plot problem. They started an episode in confident control of the Colonel and his cavalry, raiding a camp of Silkos in a southwest arroyo. For the last few episodes they had been building up to a confrontation with Chief Siva Jobowa, who brings a storm of clicks from the Valley. But at the last moment, something went wrong. The Silkos took control of the scene, turning the tables on Hollister. And just as the Colonel was about to face death for the millionth time, a third suite of ritters hijacked the episode.

“Not only did they blow his head off,” said Heff, “but just to drive the nail in, instead of brains they left wires hanging from Hollister’s broken skull ... turning him into a cyborg! Can you believe it?”

Sure I could. And I knew who. “The Lara ritters, didn’t they?”

He lowered his voice. “Where did you hear that? No one’s supposed to know. The veeps blew their fuses! Competition is supposed to be good between the suites, even rivalry. But this is practically treason! You have any idea how much revenue is involved here?”

I never paid attention to that side of the House. There were credits coming in. That’s all I knew about it, and all I cared to know.

“Oh, we can save his life, Mook. We’ve done it dozens of time. But how do we restore his humanity? Think of all the magers out there. Do you realize the General has slipped sixteen likeability points in a single episode?”

Promoting the Colonel to General was Heff’s own idea, and despite all the nasty blogs he stood by his decision.

I said, “Do you ever wonder if it isn’t time to let the old man go? Think Dan’l Boone at the Alamo. The bugler blows, Lara weeps, and we watch his unbroken spirit ride off into the sunset. That should be worth a million hits. Guaranteed.”

Heff shook his head. “You and I had this discussion a hundred times already. We might want to see something like that. I’m not saying that I do, but even if we did, it’s not really a question of what we want. What do the magers want? And the suits? Hollister may be long in the tooth, but his profits are still fresh as daisies.”

As if he ever smelled a daisy. The selectors really missed the mark when it came to schooling Heff. They should have made him an exec-cadet instead of a riter-probie. He would have been happy to sit behind a plexi desk all day long and come home to a mint martini and his purebred wife. The man belonged in a grey suit, not a riter’s white overalls. But they would have cited his profitability index to affirm their selection. It’s not what makes us happy...

“What makes you think I can help?”

“You invented him, didn’t you? So reinvent him.”

He was right. We both knew I could do it as a favor to my old buddies. For the sake of *esprit de corps*.

“Kay,” I said, “for your sake, Heff, and Hollie House. I’ll see what I can do. But there’s one little thing I need you to do, to clear my mind for this project.”

“What do you need? Our credit-line is open.”

“A tower warden held by Security Services on a bogus charge. With visions of sour apples pumped in her head. I need her out of there.”

“Mook –” Heff said, shaking his head.

I cut him off. “I’ll never be able to concentrate on this with Otera on my mind. You want Hollister out of his pickle? Get Otera out of hers.”

Heff settled back in his desk chair, where the springs still squeaked. “All right,” he said, “the warden comes out an hour after the episode is delivered. But the credits stay in-house – all of them. We don’t want some junior exec looking to make a name in his suite by poking his nose in Creative.”

“Fair enough.”

“Can you work right here?”

“Might as well.”

“Wonderful,” he said. “Just wonderful.”

15

The Sweet Smell of Hell

Colonel Hollister dreamed of autumn in the countryside. Fields of grain swayed in the wind, yellow and golden brown. Harvesters moved among them, swinging scythes in muscular swoops as they sang age-old folk songs. A sweet smell of hay filled his nostrils and something sharp poked his cheek. He opened his eyes and saw filthy stalks of broken hay looming before him. He sat up and found himself on the floor of a haystack, with small creatures moving in the husks beneath him and a wretched figure cowering in the corner.

"Hullo?" said Hollister.

The figure shrank closer against the far wall.

The Colonel reached into his tunic and fished out a dried biscuit.

The sound of plastic unwrapping stirred a reaction from the shadows. The figure unfolded, found his knees, and crawled into the light. His face was covered in grime, his hair plastered back on one side, and his clothes flapped about him in tatters. Hollister broke his biscuit in half, bit into one and offered the stranger the other.

One scrawny arm reached out tentatively, then snatched the half biscuit and shoved it into his mouth. He crunched it noisily for a moment, watching Hollister for any sign of danger. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed, his right eye fixed on the Colonel, while his left wandered back to the wall. His cracked lips unstuck and a gasp of air hissed over his pale grey tongue.

It took the Colonel a moment to recognize the sound as "Thanks."

Hollister reached into his tunic again, but there were no more victuals tucked away for emergencies. He

searched for something to say instead, a sign of human contact, but the best he could think of was, "Been here long?"

The scrawny face wrinkled even further. He might have cried, if he had any moisture inside him. His left eye shot even further afield and he managed a small nod.

Hollister sized up the situation. They were confined in a narrow attic filled with old hay, suspended above a barn. The only light came through the floorboards and a crack in the south-facing wall. From that quarter a single ray of sunlight fell on a door in the attic floor, a square of bolted iron with a rusted ring.

Hollister tugged on it as hard as he could, but it never budged. He braced himself and set his full weight against it, but the stubborn door refused to lift. When he put his cheek against the metal and peered around its edge, he could see cross-boards nailing it shut from below.

No one was planning to open that door any time soon.

He settled back, brushed off the knees of his uniform and wiped the hay from his boots. "We're not getting food, are we?"

The filthy man shook his head and then croaked, "Or water."

Hollister began to pace the loft from one end to the other. He set his shoulder against the far wall and leaned into it. The wood wouldn't break or even bend. He moved along the length of the wall, testing its resiliency. None of it gave. He sat down again in the center of the hay, crossing his long legs and resting a hand on each knee.

"Well, my friend, we won't be breaking through these walls either, will we?"

The stranger cracked a brief, painful smile. But Hollister saw it.

"You have a name?"

"I did," said the stranger hoarsely. The effort sent his left eye spinning. He put his hand over it and said, "Fenamin. Sergeant Fenamin."

"Nice t'meetcha, Sergeant. My name's Hollister."

"I know who you are, sir. I was a quartermaster in your regiment. Responsible for food supplies in your campaign against Mexxaco." He lowered his hand so Hollister could see his whole face. "I was trying to strike a deal for summer wheat with MOI, when my trading partners turned on me. They threw a sack over my head and dragged me off. Once I could open my eye again, here I was."

The Colonel nodded at the resemblance to his own recent history. While struggling back from the Mexxacan border, he picked up a rumor that MOI was massing troops on the Arkansas River. Exhausted though he was, he had turned his horse northward to reconnoiter. Holliland was at war with Mexxaco, getting their asses kicked. The last thing they needed was a second front against MOI, opened with a surprise attack.

The Colonel had followed the river for cover, sleeping in the marshes when he couldn't go on, rising before dawn to gather apples for Moxie. One morning he returned from foraging to find three MOI soldiers admiring the stallion, trying to strap a saddle on him. Too tightly. The sounds of the horse's protests were too much to bear, and the Colonel sprang at them, skewering one with his saber, blasting another with his pistol, pausing to face the third man-to-man.

But there were actually four of them. He learned of the last man only when a blow from behind him fell across his shoulders. Hollister turned to see a sergeant with a log from his fire, raising it overhead. And that was all he saw.

"How long have they kept you, Fenamin?"

"I'm not sure, Colonel. Months."

"Any idea why?"

"I've been thinking about that, and I have an idea. From something my trading partner said, before they sand-bagged me. He kept asking me questions about my job, sir. I think he was planning to replace me."

"Replace you?"

"As quartermaster, sir. I think they've sent in someone else – a robot maybe. To take my place in the regiment. Collecting information about supply lines, how many men in each unit, that sort of thing. We need to keep count of how many mouths we have to feed, Colonel, which is awfully useful information to an enemy."

"That doesn't explain why they've left you alive."

"No, that doesn't," said Fenamin, blushing. "But I think you've guessed the rest of it. Now and then they crack that door open, climb up and question me. Nothing secret, you understand. Just day-to-day stuff about a quartermaster's job. You'd be surprised what you'd give for a drink of water. Surprised and ashamed, sir, if I say so myself."

"Not at all, Sergeant," Hollister said. "You did what you had to, to survive. No military secrets? No troop movements, that sort of thing? Then no one should condemn you for trying to live and fight another day."

"That's gracious of you, sir. I've never been a hero. But I doubt if either one of us will fight another day."

"We'll see about that," said Hollister. "That's glass in your eye-socket, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mind if I use it for a while?" He held out his palm.

Fenamin stared. "You want ... my eye?"

"The glass one." Pointing at the iris as it swung toward the roof. "Do you mind terribly poking it out?"

"No, sir. If you have a use for it. Lennon knows I don't."

The Sergeant reached into his socket and pulled out his eyeball. It floated in a little pool of tears in his hand.

"Thank you," said the Colonel, smiling gently. "Courageous, after all."

He took the eye and knelt in the hay where a ray of sunlight from the south wall struck the floorboards. Scooping together a handful of hay, he piled it into a tiny teepee of dry yellow stalks. Then he held the eye in the shaft of light and tilted it until it caught the sun and refocused it on the base of the teepee. Each stalk seemed to grow in clarity under the sunlight, the shadows shifting dramatically as he repositioned the eye – turning it, until the sunlight fell crisply on the bottom of each hay-stalk.

Fenamin couldn't believe it, but after a few minutes he thought he saw a wisp of smoke rising from the teepee. Then another wisp definitely rose. By the time the first flame crackled, the Sergeant was ready for it, with clean, dry stalks to place across the base, building up the fire. It didn't take long before a tongue of orange-blue flame licked at their fuel.

"Now we've got to move," Hollister said.

"Away from the door, sir?"

"We can't burn through the floor, Sergeant. Fire rises up. We're going to burn a hole through the wall."

Hollister scooped up the hay around the fire, carrying the flame from the center of the floor to a spot against the wall, directly beneath a crack where the sunlight entered. The boards were a little weaker there, with more space between them.

The Sergeant held his breath as the fire nearly died, but Hollister piled more hay on top like a mad arsonist. The flames disappeared beneath the hay. The stalks went cold and dark. Then a curl of smoke forced its way

through, rising along the wall until it crossed the ray of sunlight that sparked the conflagration.

The other stalks burned in earnest as Hollister shoved more fuel on top. The Sergeant joined in until they had a regular bonfire burning, crackling and charring the south-facing wall. Fenamin stamped out the sparks that scattered over the floor, inhaled a mouth of smoke, and coughed it out.

"We're not burning ourselves alive, are we?"

"I hope not, Sergeant. You've been trapped here long enough for both of us. That wall will fall in a blaze of glory, or you and I will suffocate. Either way is better than dying slowly of thirst and hunger, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, sir, I would. Having nearly done so a couple of times."

"I'll take your word on that, Fenamin. Look, the wood is buckling over our little hay fire. How many kicks would you say it should take to knock those timbers out?"

The Sergeant tried. "Five or six?"

Hollister planted one riding boot solidly in the hay and raised his other high. His heel came down with a splintering crash and passed right through the wall. He pulled it out and the second kick cleared a crawl-space through the boards.

"Two," said the Colonel.

"Yes, sir. Two," said Fenamin, stamping out the fire. When the stalks were scattered widely enough for him to kneel before the hole in the wall, he stuck his head outside the barn and looked at the landscape.

He came back frowning. "We're ten or fifteen feet off the ground."

"Then it's lucky we have padding to break our fall," said Hollister. He gathered up the hay again and shoved it through the hole. It seemed to fall everywhere, like stiff

yellow rain, but he kept on shoving it out until a respectable pile collected directly beneath the hole.

It didn't look very high to the Sergeant or soft enough to break a fall. "I don't think it's ready yet, sir."

Hollister stuck his head out and sized up the hay-pile. "You're probably right about that. But we just lit a barn on fire, didn't we, Sergeant? How long will it be before anybody notices? How much longer before MOI reinforcements arrive?"

"I shouldn't think long, sir."

"Neither should I," said the Colonel and jumped through the hole.

The Sergeant watched Hollister leap like a diver off a ship, landing on his feet on the pile below them, kneeling and tumbling forward. When he sat up on the ground beyond the hay-pile, he waved to the Sergeant.

"Come on down, Fenamin, heels first. Unless I'm mistaken, that's a MOI patrol raising dust on the horizon."

The Sergeant closed his eyes, sucked a lungful of air, and felt the world below rise up to meet him. When he landed on the hay, his ankles buckled under him. But the Colonel was there to break his fall.

"Good man, Fenamin. Steady on your feet. We'll make a hero of you yet."

"Yes, sir, Colonel," said the Sergeant, saluting as he wobbled.

Hollister picked up a shovel leaning against the barn. "You see that rake by the water trough? That's your rake, Sergeant. Treat it as an infantryman treats his rifle. The only thing that stands between you and certain death."

Fenamin gripped the rake with both hands. "I've got it, sir."

"Good. Now, two cavalymen will riding by soon. You and I will wave them down from the center of the

road, leaning on our shovel and rake as they approach on horseback. As soon as they're within arm's length, I'll swing at one with my shovel. Why don't you swing at the other with your rake?"

Fenamin turned the tool around so its jagged tines pointed outward. "You can count on me, Colonel."

"There's no one I'd trust more, Fenamin, in this place and time. What do you say? Will you follow my lead?"

"I'd follow you through the gates of hell if you asked me, Colonel."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

Hollister turned to the riders thundering down the hillside toward the two Hollilanders.

Fenamin saw the Colonel's fingers tighten on the shovel handle. But his grip grow slack again as the riders grew closer, and the peak of the hill behind them filled again with an entire MOI cavalry troop. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen riders in spotless uniforms, sabers rattling on their left thighs and pistols holstered on their right.

The Sergeant took a step closer, to hear Hollister mutter, "It may come to that, after all, Sergeant. Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir," said Fenamin, as the Colonel disappeared in a cloud of dust from the hooves of the MOI cavalry, and the barn burned like a sacked city behind them.

16

Friends and Family

“So the Colonel was never in the arroyo, was he?” said Heff, when he first viewed my script. “He hasn’t been turned into a cyborg – we’ve been following a robot for the last few episodes and didn’t know it. We saw Chief Jobowa cut down a robot, while the real Hollister was in MOI, secretly imprisoned. Perfect.”

“It’s clumsy plotting, Heff, but they can believe it, if they want to.”

“It’s not clumsy at all. It’s brilliantine. You’ve got a real gift for this stuff, Mook. If you ever want to earn a regular salary again –“

“No thanks.”

“We could add points to it ...”

I shook my head. Like the suits, Heff responds better to visual clues.

He sighed. “Okay-dokay. We can pick him up and bring him back to the arms of Lara Caballera. Once he polishes off a little posse of MOI cavalry.”

“All with a shovel,” I said.

“Don’t you worry, Mook. My guys can take it from here. Nobody but you cares about very-similarity.”

“Verisimilitude.”

“Whatever. The magers want to see him cut the moo-moos to ribbons, and they don’t give a rat’s ass how probable that is. We all believe what we want to believe – how many times do I have to explain that to you?”

“Not once more,” I said, cutting him off before he launched into his theory of catatonic entertainment – the art of keeping people enthralled with conflicts that never existed and never would. “I’ve got the basic idea, Heff, and you’ve got your episode. Delivered as promised.”

"I'm good for it, Mook. We'll have your tower warden free again lickety-split. Just doing the paperwork. You know I wouldn't hold out on you."

"Sure I do," I said, "since you never know when you might need me again," matching his fake jokey-joke. We were friends, me and Hefner, compadres. That's what it said in his profile. Family even, two guys raised at the same time on the same Mojave farm, with two-hundred-thirty-eight sisters and brothers. And we both saw reasons why we might want to call on each other again.

"So I can go?"

He set a hand on my arm. "Soon as it airs, Mook. Soon as it airs."

My episode drew a wonderful rating when it aired that night. Hefner said so himself. They changed the title to *Barn-burner*, but even that didn't hurt its numbers. Bells started ringing from the veep suites, congratulating Heff and his staff on their success. With each kudo he winked at me, but all he said aloud was, "Thank you, sir. We try to do our best. That's very generous of you. I'll alert my staff to check their credit accounts."

All I wanted was out of there. At least that was the first thing. The second thing I wanted, once they let me through the door, was to see a real friend. So I went to visit Otera Denge, to make sure she was actually home.

She was back at her desk, of course, which was lower in the tower than it had been the last time I came to see her. It hadn't occurred to me to make that a condition. But Otera brushed the whole thing aside when I tried to apologize.

"I don't need to hear it, Mookie," she said, shaking her head. "I know who got me out of that place."

"The same guy who got you into it."

"Oh, no. I got myself into it. You asked for a favor without knowing what was involved. I knew and could've

refused. But I didn't. I said I'd give it a try, and I did. I knew what I was risking. And then I did it anyway."

"Still, I'm sorry what it cost you."

"This? Don't pay it no mind. I'll have my old desk back in a nano. You know why? Because they don't care about competence around here, that's why."

"Sure they do."

"No, Mook, they don't. They hire and promote people for every reason except whether or not they can do a good job. So most of them can't. That's the bottom problem here – authority with no talent or experience. What people do to move upstairs has no connection at all to the job they need to do once they're up there."

I said, "You always know what you're doing, Otera, and those are the people I always like best."

She shrugged away the compliment.

"Me? I'm a tech-grunt. I know my job, I know the networks, I know the Arena. Sooner or later they need somebody around the tower who actually knows what she's doing. That's when they look around and finally settle on me. Then I start moving up through the offices 'til I land at a top floor. Where I can see the lights of the city flicker off the dome."

"I'm sorry I put you through that for no reason at all."

"Who said, for no reason?"

"I meant for no result. Since we never learned a thing about Rachel."

"Sure we did."

"We did?"

"You think I went to prison and have nothing to show for it? Mookie – you know me better than that. I pushed an inquiry into the Arena, and they took me away for it. That doesn't mean I never got an answer."

"You found a clue?"

Otera nodded. "What I can't decide is whether to share it with you."

I gave her my best grin. "Who else would appreciate it?"

I expected her to laugh but she only shook her head. "You're a big boy, Mook. So think before you do anything stupid."

I held up the two-fingered vee to swear that I would.

Otera lowered her voice. "Eighty-seven Rachels of approximately the right age accessed the tower on the south end of Santa Fe in the time period you guessed. Of those, only twelve applied for permission to travel outside the habitat. Seven of those twelve still live in Mexxaco. One of the others is in Gitmo, one is dead, and a third is somewhere in Silko Valley."

Holliland was at war with Silko, so there was no chance of going there. "That still leaves two," I said. "Any idea where they went?"

"I have some ideas," said Otera, tapping a rapid sequence into her keyboard. "I'm sending a file to your folder, Mook. Whatever I could find. But let me give you a piece of unwanted advice. Don't open it. I don't know your friend, who hooked up with this woman. And I don't know why you feel about her as you do. But I do know this – she's a dangerous person for anybody to be asking after. You know the rules against tracking down your bio-progenitors?"

"Of course."

"You know the penalties?"

I guessed. "Stiff?"

"More than you make in a year. And you're a big earner."

"I'm not looking for my mum."

"I'm glad to hear that. And I never want to hear that you are."

“She ain’t Rachel.”

“I don’t care about Rachel. I care about you. The penalty for this sort of thing makes your sojourn in Security look like a kiss on the forehead.”

I had never heard Otera talk like that and it spooked me. She was a woman who knew these things. By the time I reached home, I had decided to let the whole thing go. I saw no credit opportunities – just another of Priss’s smart ideas. By the time I saw her again, she would probably have dreamed up another.

Then I saw my house.

The first thing I noticed was the front door. Nobody leaves their door wide open for any passing hobo. With the number of people out of work, it’s worse than a stupid thing to do. It’s ridiculous. Even low-rent domiciles have recognition software you can configure to read your eyes or your thumb-print or the wattles under your chin, so no one tries to steal your body parts. Our front door security is keyed to a song we change every four days. A wide-open door means that something has gone very wrong inside. It’s a form of public shaming.

The front hall was even worse. Totally trashed. Carpets were torn off the floors, the furniture smashed, even the walls defaced, with gaping holes where a sledge went through, scrawled all over with bright red paint. Mexx-texter. Silko-sucker. Yawk-fawker. The worst things the home-wreckers could think to say.

But these had been no random vandals. I could tell by the systematic way they had gone through the place, as I walked from room to room. They were searching and destroying at the same time. These guards had instructions to send a message and see what they could find. I had heard about special squads for this kind of mission, sixteen year old security cadets who loved these assignments, who volunteered for them and not just for

the fun of it. On these missions they were given special permission to keep whatever drugs they could find.

After surveying the entry level, I made my way upstairs, loudly and slowly. I didn't want to walk in on any guard still doing his duty. But there wasn't much chance of that. The place was quiet as a suicide crematorium. Not even the music we usually left running for anyone who wanted to chip in for a tune.

I checked Priss's room first, which was painfully sad. Her mirror was smashed, and the hologram dancing on her dressing table kept repeating the same twirl. They had broken the frame of her bed, and the floor was slick with water from her mattress, with soggy paper stuck to the boards. You don't see a lot of paper anywhere except toilet paper. Lennon knows where Priss got all the antiques those pages must've come from. Her clothes were still in her closet, but the bag she kept of earthquake supplies was gone.

Gryphon's room was no better, nor Honcho's, nor Ezmer Elder's. There was no one in sight and nothing worth scavenging.

When I finally reached my own room, a geo-mage was waiting for me. I heard the distinctive *zing-zong* I had chosen for private messages, and when I blinked at it, I saw Priss's face looking harried and grave. She didn't have much time to talk and kept looking around as she spoke. Ezmer Elder was behind her, calling Priss to come. The message said: "Mook – I'm leaving this in case they let you go. We've all got to get out of here. Fast. They'll be tracking our frequencies any time, so I'm fixing a post to this location. We're heading for a place I can't identify. If you go to the place where you first tried to kiss me, you'll find another geo-mage. I hope you get this message, Mook, I really do. I'm pretty scared for all of us, but I'm terrified for you."

To tell you the truth, that was nice to hear. Chilling, but gratifying. Priss is not the most expressive person when it comes to emotions. That was the first time she ever admitted she felt something special for me. Okay, it was fear, but still, I liked topping her list. I especially liked that she knew I would remember the first place I tried to kiss her. It was romantic, in a Prissy, disappointing way.

There were lots of places I tried to kiss Priss, but you never forget the first time, don't you? She's turned me down in public parks, in hot tubs and party halls, while celebrating or copulating or crying on my shoulder. Everyone admires her constancy, her stable and reliable consistency. Everyone else but me.

Priss told me once about a twentieth-century President of the United States who said fellatio wasn't sex. They all made fun of him, but it turned out he was right. Blow jobs and screwing involve physical encounters, but they are awfully common, low on the intimacy scale. For us to call it sex these days there has to be some bonding and the possibility of a spawn. Priss and I spent a lot of time together, in and out of the sack, and a reasonable part of that involved fluid exchange. But she never let it grow beyond exercise to something more personal and meaningful.

Like kissing.

It wasn't that I never tried. I tried kissing her in a rowboat as it drifted among the robot swans, and inside a concert hall when I took her to see the Rebel Accountants for three hundred credits apiece. I tried kissing her on a bench I reserved for an entire morning so we could sit and feed the pigeons. I tried kissing her in her chambers when she was a warden and in every room of my house. But she was very clear every time. No means no, though she would console me with a hand job or some similar

distraction. Some nights, when she felt lonely in bed, I might wake to find her crawling into mine. But even then, if I tried to kiss her, she turned her face to the wall.

I wouldn't say I ever reconciled to it. I kept hoping. But it was nothing like that first time, when a stab of rejection cut my gut under the smirking stars. We were just getting to know each other, and it was her birthday, so I planned a special night. Two tickets on the bullet-train and a campsite at Joshua Tree, where they domed off an acre of gnarly trees with air fit for breathing. You can book a tent and watch the moon come up. When the sky outside doesn't cooperate, they project a nice facsimile on the inside of the dome with a spooky little lecture on the constellations overhead. She told me she liked trees, so I thought it might be a good place to spend a night.

The moon came up, better than I hoped. Priss drew a breath and made a sound you usually hear only the sack. Her mouth opened and I could see moonlight gleaming off her teeth. I leaned over to kiss her casually as I could, but she turned her head as if to see Orion over her shoulder.

I said, "Don't you like it here? Aren't you comfortable?"

"Sure."

"Don't you like me?"

Priss took my hand in hers and squeezed it. "Don't be silly, Mook. You're great. Everybody knows that. I'd be a fool not to know it too. Just look where you brought me tonight."

"Then what?"

"Not then – when. I like to keep that special. You understand that, don't you?"

What choice did I have? "Sure," I said, but I took my hand away and stared at the moon. You could see the

shadow of every crater, and I felt like I was in one of them.

Priss laughed. “Don’t be a sour flower, Mookie man. I like you well enough – too well for my own good. I’m just not ready yet for that kind of intimacy. Let’s sit and watch the stars and enjoy being together. Can’t we?”

We could and we did, but I never forgot the feeling of being alone on the moon. She kept up a line of chatter, so I couldn’t tell if she knew how her rejection affected me. But when her message sent me back to Joshua Tree, I had my proof. How else could she be sure I remembered where to go?

You don’t actually have to visit a place to position a geo-mage. You can do it by coordinates. But you have to be standing in the spot in order to retrieve the message. I had to catch the same train, and book the same campsite, and watch the same moonrise, to hear what Priss left for me. It was timed to coincide with a lecture on Orion. While everybody else in the park listened to the myth of the archer, I heard Priss’s voice in my head, saying:

“Hiya, Mook. I knew you could find this spot, when no one else could. I know what it meant to you, the night of my birthday, but now is not the time to dwell on that. There’s a little butte just off to your right. You can see it against the moon.”

I hadn’t noticed it the first time, but Priss evidently did.

“Climb to the very top of it. From there you can see the whole park around you. If anybody followed you, you’ll see them from there. If no one did, don’t climb down quickly. They may be tracking your chip. Enjoy the view from the butte for a while, as if you were waiting to meet somebody there. Let the moon rise behind you and float across the sky. When enough time has passed for you to grow anxious, climb down to your campsite and

spend the night in your sleeping bag. If anybody is tracking your chip, they'll conclude you expected to meet us there but we never showed. Try to look dejected. You can manage that."

Oh, I could pull it off without half trying. I just had to feel it, and all I had to do was remember our night in the desert. Priss's recording said:

"Sorry to put you through that whole night again, but we have to make sure they're not tracking you. In the morning, if you're sure, pack up early and head home. But instead of going to your vandalized house, at the last minute change your route. Why not see a friend and share a buckwheat cake?"

Her geo-mage broke off, but that was enough for me. I knew where they went and why. They were hiding.

The only place I ever heard of buckwheat cakes was in the second verse of the Stephen Foster song “Oh Susanna,” when Profman played it on his ukulele. And what did the Professor have that no one else did? Glass blocks in the walls of his hideaway, with enough lead in the glass to scramble the GPS tracking signal from the chips in our skulls. Priss was telling me they were at Profman’s but to be careful not to leave a trail of 1s and 0s to his garden.

I took the bullet-train back to the station and booked a cab to my door. But when we arrived, instead of climbing out and giving the robo-driver his tip, I sat back in the seat cushion as if I changed my mind and gave him the coordinates of the rowing dock on campus. Then I got out and hoofed it over to Profman’s place.

There was no one in sight when I rang the front doorbell, and no one out back when I walked around. But I rapped on the glass three times, waited two seconds and rapped again twice. That was a signal Gryphon used in one of his episodes, and soon after, a light went on inside and someone came to the garden door. Profman had hung a curtain of colored beads, and when it was pushed aside I saw Priss, unnerved. She unlocked and opened the door just wide enough for me to slide in sideways.

“Mook! I knew you could find us. Come in. Quickly!”

Did you catch that LY? Priss never forgets an adverb, even at the worst of times. That’s one of the things I love about her.

They were all huddled in the kitchen, which is too small for guests. That’s why Profman does most of his cooking out back.

As soon as I stepped in, Gryphon asked, “Were you followed?”

“Of course not,” said Ezmer Elder. “Or Mook never would have come.” Honcho was at one end of the table, tipping back his chair. Gryphon closed the kitchen door and peered out through the window.

Profman didn’t say anything, just stood at his tiny stove, boiling a saucepan.

Priss tapped the table where an empty mug was waiting. As soon as I sat behind it, Profman filled it with the liquid from his pan. It was steaming and smelled of violets. “Drink it,” he said, squeezing in a lemon from his hybrid tree.

A mouthful burned my tongue, and I pushed the mug away. “Ith’s hot.”

“I know,” he said, edging in closer. “From the stove. Sip it.”

I blew on it first and that was better. The steam went up my nose and calmed my frenzied brain. Bits of iris swished around a swirling blur of purple.

“Why are you all hiding?” I asked.

“Because of our friend Rachel,” said Ezmer Elder.

“Because of our plan,” said Priss. I glanced toward Profman, and she added quickly, “He knows all about it. He wouldn’t let us in unless we told him.”

“Foolish,” said Profman. “You like the tea?”

I nodded. It made my ears tingle, and I thought I saw colors in the white light dripping from his overhead fixture.

“Otera gave you up,” said Priss, settling across the table from me.

“I can’t blame her.” Each word fell thickly on my tongue. What was in the tea? I peeked into the mug again, where the bits were growing larger.

Profman grinned at me.

“Neither can I,” said Priss, “or any of us. It wasn’t her idea to ask about Rachel. It was ours. That must have set off an alarm somewhere, the minute Otera inquired, because they showed up in her tower in record time and pulled her out without a word to anyone. A couple of hours later, the goon squad broke down our door.”

“Looking for us?”

“Looking for you,” said Gryphon. “You’re the name on the lease, right?”

“They had me already,” I said. “In custody.”

“They weren’t looking for him,” said Priss, in the disapproving tone of a warden. “They were looking for whatever they could find to incriminate him. We weren’t home at the time, so they had no way to know we lived there.”

“Because his is the only name on the lease,” insisted Gryphon.

“But they will know soon,” continued Priss, as if no one had interrupted her. “They’ll track the GPS traces at those coordinates over time, and they can do the math. It won’t take them long to work out that each of us spends a great deal of time in that house at all hours of the night.”

“There’s no law against that,” insisted Ezmer Elder. “I can sleep with anyone I want, for as long as I want to sleep with them.”

Honcho looked away as if she couldn’t possibly mean him.

“We don’t know exactly what law applies,” said Priss, “because we don’t know enough about Profman’s Rachel. We tried to track her down – okay. That happens all the time. People search for farm friends, the corps search for people who owe credits. They don’t send in the goon squad for every query. There’s something about Rachel we need to know. Is she a criminal? A runaway? A terrorist, for heaven’s sake?”

The last three questions were meant for Profman, who shrugged. "I haven't seen her for years. I didn't ask any questions about her."

"Maybe we shouldn't have done that," Priss conceded. "But now we really need to know."

"About Rachel?" said Gryph. "Are you still on that?"

"Not still," said Priss. "Again, for a serious reason. We don't know much about her, do we? But they think we do. As long as they think that, they're going to search for us until they arrest us, which will prove ten times more unpleasant than it has been so far. How are we supposed to answer their questions unless we know a bit more about Rachel?"

"We don't answer them," said Gryph. "We just tell them what we were doing and why. It was stupid. As soon as they realize that, they'll leave us alone."

"And go after Profman," Priss murmured.

"Don't worry about me," he said, hearing his name. "I'm a hero of the land war. I can take care of myself."

Nobody else believed that. But there was no reason to say so.

"Do you all understand what you're contemplating?" he asked. "Rachel is not in Holliland. She's outside the habitat. Have any of you ever traveled outside? Not safely in a sealed train from one local dome to another, but from one entire habitat to another? The process for asking permission takes months for execs with official excuses, and you don't have any. As soon as you file the form, you're toast."

Priss shook her head. "We can't do that."

"No, we can't," agreed Ezmer Elder. "That makes us runaways."

"Well, there are trucks, aren't there?" asked Gryphon, his interest piqued by the obstacles to the project. He was a riter, whose natural instinct was to solve tricky plot

points. "Trucking in corn from MOI, beef from Mexxaco, and whatever those habitats want in return."

"Avocados," said Priss, "and artichokes."

"Really?" said Gryph. "With the prickles insides?"

"Those are robo-trucks," said Ezmer Elder, "with no people on board and no enclosures against the weather. We would die."

"And no idea where to start," said Profman, starting another saucepan of blue tea. "You haven't a clue where she is."

I'd kept quiet to that point, but I couldn't hold out any longer, since everyone was driving Priss to the wall. I didn't want to go outside either, but I felt I had to help her make her case. "We can guess where to start," I said. "We do have a clue."

They all looked at me.

"Two clues, in fact." And I told them what Otera said, including her warning at the end. But there was no one who thought we shouldn't watch the file she sent to my mailbox. Even Profman raised no objection. He led us all into his bedroom, where he had an old screen wired to his wall. The room was hardly bigger than his kitchen, and his bed took up most of the space, but we all found a spot to lotus on the mattress, as I forwarded the file to his account.

Otera herself did not appear in the mage by voice or avatar. Instead we saw three personal profiles of the type that comes back when you submit a possible hire for a security clearance, or the wardens go public after a fugitive. The person's common name and identifying number flash a few times, then retreat to a corner of the report as the vital statistics unfold. Credit history, current totals, known employments, social media, medical status, known coordinates. Any video they have with identifiers on it, any ID photos, requests for permission, criminal

record, voting history. The files were not in pristine shape, or else Profman's receiver was lousy, but the visual kept breaking up and the voice track sounded like a train whistle.

Still, Profman stared at the first profile, and when a face appeared he declared, "Nope. Not her."

I thought he might say the same thing about each of them just to discourage us. But there were no clear visuals of the second and third candidates, and he sat on the edge of his mattress, peering at the screen, until all three possible Rachels had run their course. Even a few seconds afterwards.

Ezmer Elder clapped, but the lights did not come on. Profman roused himself from his stupor and reached for something rigged to the wall. A recessed light winked and sizzled too brightly, and the rest of us blinked, trying to focus.

Priss said to Profman, "Well?"

He shook his head. "It's worse than pointless. Suicidal. Right now you're all victims of a minor misunderstanding. You asked for information about a woman you never met, so the worst charge they can muster is willful ignorance. That's not even a felony, is it, Priss?"

"It would be, in a better world."

"Maybe it should. If you leave the habitat without permission to find a woman you know to be sensitive and possibly worse ... you'll turn yourselves into the outlaws they believe you to be."

"I like the sound of that," said Gryphon.

Profman shook his head. "You're an idiot, Gryph – a very likeable one, but that won't save your hide if they catch you on the surface. None of you have the least idea what you'd be risking here. You lead safe, comfortable lives, and I don't mean that as a criticism of any kind.

You've stepped into something awkward now, but you can step out again with a halfway decent attorney and the credits to pay the retainer. Mook can cover the bill for all of you."

I might have blushed, because Priss gave me a sympathetic smile. She knows I don't like talking about my royalty account.

"That's where you are, so far," said Profman. "But once you take the next step, outside the dome, you'll be past any hope of legal explanation. And for what? I didn't ask you to find anybody, did I? If I knew you might dream up anything this stupid, I never would have mentioned her to you all in the first place."

Even Priss was quiet after that lecture. Everything he said made perfect sense. Honcho was nodding through most of it, and to tell you the truth, I felt relieved myself. I didn't want to back out just when things turned dangerous, and I wanted to back up

Priss as long as she stuck with it. But there was no shame in dropping a foolish idea when there were lots of reasons to abandon it.

It hadn't occurred to me to call my lawyer. I couldn't for the first twenty-four and then I didn't need one. Now it seemed the obvious thing to do in the morning. It was too late to call anybody then. That's what I went to sleep planning to do, and it's probably what I would have done, if Priss had not crawled into Profman's bathtub that night to wake me up about two hours before breakfast.

"Mook!" she whispered. "He's gone."

It took me a minute to grasp she had not come for sex but wanted my attention anyway. "Who's gone?"

"Profman. You know how light a sleeper I am. I thought I heard someone in the kitchen and figured it must be the guards. When I went to check it out, I saw Profman creeping around in his stocking feet, filling a

knapsack with wafers and fruit. I thought it strange, since he's such a stickler for cooked food. Then I realized what he was up to. Preparing for a journey."

"Where?"

"He's going after her, Mook! He's going to find Rachel himself! You see? What did I tell you? I could hear it in his voice."

"What?"

"You are a dim bulb sometimes, you know that? Just as he was ready to leave, I asked, 'Professor ... what about all the things you said? The dangers and the purpose?' It was the first moment he realized I was standing there. He replied, 'All of that is true. But she must be in trouble. Rachel must need help.' He doused the light and closed the door and left me in the dark."

I yawned and reached for her. "He didn't want us risking our necks. We ought to be grateful for that."

She pushed my arm away and shook her head. The movement made her hair fall across her cheek and made me want to fix it.

"Listen to me! What chance does he stand on his own, Mook? He can't chip into the networks. If I was sneaking out to set off alone, would you just let me go?"

"No-o-o," I said thickly and would have added, You'd never do something like that, but we both knew that wasn't true.

"Then what do you think we should do about it?"

I thought we should go back to sleep, maybe cuddle a bit first. But I knew that wasn't the answer Priss was pressing for.

As it happened, I didn't have to answer at all, because we heard Gryphon's voice come crackling down the hall.

"Will you two shut the fuck up?"

Then a groan like someone had punched him.

A beat later, Ezmer Elder yanked open the shower curtain. “How much of a start does he have?”

Priss said, “Half an hour.”

Ezmer Elder sat on the edge of the tub. She was wearing a tee-shirt and panties, and it wasn’t her shirt. It was Gryphon’s, with a logo. “Did he give you any idea where he planned to start looking?”

“He told us she wasn’t the first one, right?” Priss said. “He seemed sure of that. So she must be one of the others. He didn’t say a word while he watched those two, so we don’t know what he saw that looked familiar.”

“I was watching him,” said Ezmer Elder. “He was sitting on the edge of his bed, while their info flashed. Then he stretched back on his elbows, as if he were watching the war.”

“He doesn’t watch the war,” I said. “That’s what he told me.”

They looked at me as if I were speaking a fake foreign tongue. Then Priss said to Ezmer Elder, “You know what I want to know?”

“Sure,” said Ezmer Elder. “Rachel.”

And the two of them said together: “Who is this dangerous woman?”

18
Outside Info

By the time breakfast was over, we had worked out a rough plan. We figured Profman must have gone after one of the two Rachels identified for us by Otera Denge. Ezmer Elder and Gryphon would check out Newer Yawk, since she had so many pilots in her fan base. Priss and I would try to find the Rachel who lived on a farm in MOI. Priss said that was where her people came from, but how on earth could she know? I thought we were her people, and I wasn't too anxious to poke around any cornfields, but I never said a word. Once Priss makes up her mind, you can either go along or get out of her way.

For most of the meal, Honcho was quieter than I was. When it became clear what we intended to do, he started speaking up, by raising practical objections. How were we planning to travel? Could we still access our credits? Whenever one of us answered him, he shook his head and muttered. By the time we washed up, Honcho was saying, "You're crazier than they are," to each one of us. He announced he wasn't going anywhere and predicted we would all be back around the breakfast table the following week.

Gryph and Ezmer Elder had worked out a scheme by morning.

Newa Yawk is where they count the credits, so the veeps of every habitat go back and forth, taking each other to court. Holliland is a long way from Newa Yawk, and the veeps are not about to waste two days on a train, so they run a regular aeroferry three or four times a week. No one gets a ticket on those jets without astronomical clearance, so Gryph and Ez had no chance to be passengers. But somebody has to serve drinks to the veeps, and someone has to keep the restrooms clean.

The pilots get to draw up their crew lists. Pilots don't actually fly on the planes. They fly them like drones from the departure ports, but they still dress in uniforms with captains' caps and epaulets, and they love to watch dogfights in the Arena. As Queen of the maginary air, Ezmer Elder figured she could wheedle crew spots for the Gryphon and herself on the Tweny-fourth Century ferry.

Priss and I had a harder time finding our route to MOI. There are no regular diplomatic missions from Holliland to the Midwest. The financial reports carry price information for corn and other imports, but I was told those aren't really important, since most negotiations are actually done in futures. By the time the crop is harvested, its price is old news.

Holliland was at war with MOI a dozen years ago. They ran a popular series of episodes set on Lake Tahoe with sea battles between men-of-war, though the real cause of the conflict had something to do with water rights and cloud salting. The end of the war was celebrated with fanfare over the treaty and promises of undying partnership.

They even created a corporate entity for joint stock issues, but sales were disappointing. There was no agreement on compensation for lost real estate revenue, and before you knew it, the two corps were squabbling again over drainage. Holliland was rearming for a second whack at MOI, when a declaration of war was announced by Silko Valley. All our attention swung to the north, while the eastern border with MOI observed an uneasy truce.

They were still observing it when Priss and I had to cross. It was a busy place. Freight trains raced back and forth at breakneck speed, while unmanned trucks carried foodstuffs without the weatherproofing needed for human safety. You can file a form to request permission to

emigrate, but those are routinely denied and the crats make your life hell while you're waiting for an answer. The only requests that get expedited are for funerals, because those are so often unexpected, with so little time to prepare. You have to produce a death certificate, so somebody has to die to authorize a border crossing. That is what Priss proposed we do – take advantage of somebody's grief and make it our own.

"You can cry, can't you?" she said.

"I'm already filled with remorse," I told her.

"Add a touch of guilt."

Priss had a friend from her wardening days with access to funeral requests. We needed a name and a copy of the death certificate, and a story about the deceased – who they were in life and how we were related. Priss secured the first two, and I concocted the third. Priss thought her gene pool had spent some time near Lake Michigan on their way west. Bio-relations are illegal but property rights are respected, so Priss requested permission to attend the funeral of her manager in Wisconsin, who had been handling a behest of farmland.

That sort of thing usually occurs when a birther discovers the identity of a spawn and confesses their connection in a will. You won't see that covered in the Daily Mage, but it happens more often than you think. When a property manager dies the owner has to sell off the land or make a new arrangement, so the wardens have to grant a travel permit. An owner is allowed to bring an assessor along, to determine the current value of the property. Priss and I could take advantage of that. Sometimes a law written by the corps will benefit a couple of citizens.

We had to look our parts, of course, which meant we had to shop for clothes. Priss used to dress every day as a warden in court, but the only uniform I ever wore at

Hollie House was the white overall of a riter. As a freelancer, I spend half my days in pajamas. My preference would have been to find a suit online and print it out at home. But Priss doesn't like the feel of 3-D printer cloth, which isn't really cloth at all but dyed plastic. It'll pass at a distance, but not so good when your elbow might be sharing an armrest with a guard. She insisted on taking me to a store, where they scan your whole body and you have to wait while a fabric machine in the back cuts out your pants and jacket and jumpsuit.

We bought me a blue suit with pin stripes and a black suit for the funeral. The shirt that goes under it comes with a matching tie attached. You can buy them with a tight, high knot, or a loose knot that goes with an open top button. I wanted the second, of course, but Priss shook her head and insisted on the first. All I can say is, I'm glad I'm not a property assessor. Because even in our scratchy finery, with authorized letters of transit in our pockets, we still had to find a way to get there.

The trains turned out to be impossible. The corps move produce by high-speed rail in compartments that are sealed against the weather on the surface. But they're sealed only for produce, which means vacuum-packed for freshness, as they say in the ads. There's no air inside. Not only that, but the trains travel full in both directions, since the contracts are written months ahead of time. The security is incredible inside the habitat, and once the train passes through the valve, motion detectors take over, designed to kill rats and things. Those lasers are not programmed to draw distinctions for human beings.

The trucks serve a different market. Most produce is grown on agricorp land, but there are small privately-owned patches of ground that are too oddly shaped for use by the big combines. These can be independently owned and traded for stock speculation. It was one of

these that Priss supposedly inherited from her anonymous egg donor. The corps build huge public relations campaigns around these places as symbols of our thriving private enterprise system. At the same time, they try to keep their crops off the market, so these farmers form collectives that purchase space on the robo-trucks to ship their produce around. Those trucks have simple protections against the weather, and they travel back to MOI half empty. Carrying passengers is unlawful, but Priss felt sure we could find a truck with crawl space for the two of us.

“Do you know any truckers?” I asked her.

“No.”

“Do you know any farmers in collectives?”

“No, but we have what those farmers always need.”

“What’s that?”

“Credits, Mook. You’re fat with them.”

Bribery is difficult to manage when all transactions are recorded in your credit account. Those accounts are maintained in Newa Yawk by the Sisters of the Moon-eye, cloistered in the Temple of the Golden Saxon. Holliland gave up paper and coinage a long time ago, to solve the problem of graft, which it did rather well. It is hard to bribe anybody when every credit exchanged is recorded by a sacred sister for a possible tax investigation.

Priss had a way to get around that. Farm collectives offer futures in Chicago, and citizens can trade in farm futures as investments. You can’t turn the produce into wafers on your own, but the collectives can, so all the contracts eventually belong to the corps or the collectives, but there has been a court decision providing legal protection for speculators. Priss knew all about it, and she knew how to speculate. A sizeable bid on a collective’s future should be highly desirable to its farmers.

What we needed to do was access a robo-truck and use its control system to contact a collective. It amazed me how a woman could serve as a warden one day and then use what she learned to get around the law she had enforced. Priss told me that happens all the time. Wardens move back and forth between law enforcement agencies and in-house legal departments like ants between an anthill and a lollipop. The only thing unusual was seeing it on the street working for freelancers like us.

I could use that, of course.

19
Trucking

If there was one place Corporal Capricorn knew he never belonged was the middle of a firefight. The flash of gunpowder, the stink of cordite, the zing! of bullets near his ear shaped an environment unsuitable for a soldier of his scale and talents. He was far better at taking cover than taking aim, and was destined for a sergeant's stripes in Procurement. Capricorn was a first class procurer, who had earned his third stripe twice and lost it twice as quickly. His military dedication was second to no one's, though it more often focused on the opportunities of army life than on any risk of an early death.

He was quick to calculate the odds at craps, cards, and commanders. Which is why the Corporal traded two cases of smokes and a talking bass alarm clock for a post with Lieutenant Middlemouse, a young officer from a military family. Teddy Middlemouse had delicate features, a healthy portfolio and thoughtful stammer. What he did not have was a killer instinct, which made him the perfect officer to command Capricorn.

At the Battle of San Marcos, his calculation paid off. While soldiers of the Twenty-third Rifle Corps crept forward on their bellies through a storm of flamethrowers, Capricorn captured a strategic position on the far side of a hill, where he could survey the entire field undistracted by gunfire. He was shocked, therefore, when his secure position was invaded by another body, and seriously considered drawing his pistol before he recognized Middlemouse.

"Lieutenant!" cried Capricorn. "I'm glad to see you, sir! But is it worth the risk to our forces, exposing yourself to the enemy?"

Middlemouse ducked his head to avoid a seed pod falling from an oak tree. "I won't send my men anywhere I won't go myself," he said.

Capricorn nodded, feigning admiration. On the far side of the hill, the enemy had opened fire with a machine gun. They heard its rat-tat-tat and the groans of men.

Middlemouse crawled forward on his elbows, his pistol trembling in front of him. "We don't have much of a line of sight here, do we?"

"Not from this lie, precisely," said Capricorn. "But neither do they."

"Shouldn't we be out there?"

"Grandstanding?"

"I meant ... leading. Leading the men."

"Drawing fire to their positions? Do you think that's what they want, Lieutenant? What their families want?"

"Their families?"

"If we do ... and it does draw fire ... and one of them goes down ... I can imagine the letters to the major, can't you? And all the way up the line. Have you ever read those letters, sir? They tear your heart out, every one."

Middlemouse nodded. He could imagine the major reading such a letter to him out loud. But he still felt awkwardly far from the action, unable to see over the hilltop. "Don't you think we should move a bit closer, at least?"

"You're the officer," said the Corporal with a shrug. "I was trying to think strategically, to avoid repeating what happened to poor Dan Hopper. We can't afford to replace a lieutenant every week, you know."

Middlemouse settled back by Capricorn. "You were his sergeant, weren't you?"

"Not just once. Twice."

"You know your way around a battlefield, I imagine."

"Around one and out again. Upright."

The lieutenant nodded. "You can't underestimate the value of survival."

"No, sir. I don't."

A mortar shell flew over their heads and landed behind them. Both men covered their heads and were covered again in earth.

When his ears stopped ringing, Middlemouse said, "Shouldn't we reposition ourselves, Capricorn?"

"A shrewd observation, sir. I think if you're up for the challenge, we could penetrate the underbrush at the base of this hill and reconnoiter from there."

"I'll lead the way."

"Of course, sir. Right behind you."

The two men scurried downhill and took up position among the roots and brambles in a grove of old-growth trees. Capricorn tried sitting on a stump, didn't like it, and tried another, looking for a comfortable seat. As he did, a fireball exploded on the hilltop they had abandoned, yellow and chemical orange. The two men exchanged a look and crawled behind the bushes that grew between trunks of a split melaleuca.

It wasn't long before they heard boots tramping past them. The Lieutenant crept out on his stomach, far enough to see the cuffs of their trousers.

Definitely not his men.

He crawled back again and whispered to Capricorn, "Any suggestions, Sergeant?"

"That's Corporal again, sir."

"Of course."

"I'm not sure what an officer would do," said Capricorn slowly, "but a non-com knows that the better part of valor is discretion. In this case, a nap."

"You could sleep at a time like this?"

The Corporal stretched. "There's a time for action and a time for reflection. I do my best reflecting with my eyes closed." He set his back against a bole to demonstrate.

When he opened his eyes again, night had fallen, and Middlemouse was nowhere in sight.

Capricorn said, "Damn," and crawled out of the bush. Only to hear the hiss of a snake.

He scoured the ground and danced a few steps to protect his ankles from a strike. But nothing slithered at him or wriggled through the underbrush, and Capricorn wondered if he wasn't still asleep – when he heard a louder hiss!

It was coming from above him.

When he looked up, nothing dangled from a branch. Instead he saw Middlemouse crouching on a branch. A finger extended across his lips and then pointed deeper into the trees. The Lieutenant climbed down and said, "A road in there runs north and south. Back to our own lines."

"Our lines?"

"We're maybe twelve miles beyond them now."

Capricorn yawned and scratched his belly. "I guess we lost last night."

"Ten miles, if we're lucky," said Middlemouse, squinting at the sky. "I've been watching the trucks go by. They have to slow down on an incline to the east. That's our best chance. If we lie in the leaves alongside of the road, we should be able to hop one."

"Hop a truck?" said Capricorn.

"Unless you'd rather surrender. Or be shot in the head as a spy."

The Corporal weighed those alternatives.

"Bad breakfast or a bullet hole – either way's a belly ache. I guess we'd better hop to it. But do you mind,

Lieutenant, dragging a log across the roadway? I do my best hopping once they come to a stop."

"Very good, Sergeant! Refining my plan."

"Yessir, Cap'n," said Capricorn.

The two men picked their way through a thicket of trees, crouching when a truck rolled by, keeping out of sight until the road began to climb up the hillside. They found a soft spot in the foliage to hide, and when the coast was clear, dragged a rotting trunk across the road. It looked suspicious to Middlemouse, so they found another log and rolled it out beside the first, then tossed a bramble of branches on top, still bearing green leaves. They hustled back to their hiding spot and waited for a truck.

It took longer than expected, but as the moon began to set, a brown truck with its back covered in canvas rumbled down the roadway and squealed to a stop before the pile of wood strewn across the tar. As the engine idled, Capricorn and Middlemouse scurried out of hiding and slipped in under a loose flap of the canvas. Inside the truck was filled with wooden boxes. They crawled in the back, waiting and listening. After what seemed an hour at least, the engine kicked into gear and the truck began to roll again. But instead of moving forward through the cleared roadway, the truck turned one hundred eighty degrees and headed back the way it came.

"What the hell is he doing?" asked Middlemouse.

Capricorn said, "The lazy bastard ... didn't feel like moving so many logs. When the wood refused to roll itself out of his way, he turned the truck around."

"Doesn't he have to be somewhere?"

"Everybody has to be somewhere, sir, including our driver. Now he's here, going this way. And so are we."

"Heading away from our lines," said Middlemouse.

"Heading somewhere, at least."

The truck picked up speed as it moved out of the forest, and the engine grew too loud to be heard in a whisper. The two men sat on wooden crates opposite one another, bouncing together as the tires rumbled, springs squeaked, boxes slid and thumped against each other. It grew worse when the truck turned off the paved road onto dirt and stones.

When it finally ground to a stop and the engine died, Middlemouse and Capricorn held their breath. The tarp at the end of the truck was raised and a crate near the edge was hoisted off. Capricorn and Middlemouse waited for silence, then followed it off the truck.

It was morning. The sun rose over a small shed a sprint away from the truck. The driver was nowhere in sight. Probably in the shed. Middlemouse whispered, "Two of us and only one of him," and slipped into the shed. The Corporal went in carefully after the hero. But they found themselves alone inside.

No, not quite alone. They were standing in a provisioning warehouse, stocked with food, cans of Spam stacked shoulder-high, crates of mole and enchilada sauce. The shelves lining an entire wall gleamed as the sunlight streaked through the dust. Capricorn pulled the door closed behind them and peered at the bottles sitting on the shelves – filled with clear liquid and dead worm floating at the bottom of each one.

"Good lord," said Middlemouse, wide-eyed. "Do you know what this is?"

"Tequila," murmured Capricorn, as if a holy name.

The Lieutenant began unbuttoning his shirt. "Do you know what we could do with this? If we stuffed each bottle with a strip of cotton –"

"No, sir!" said the Corporal in rebuke. "That's army property you'd be damaging, for one thing. And for another, do you realize how unstable this alcohol is?"

Middlemouse stopped three buttons down. "It is?"

Capricorn unscrewed the lid from one bottle. He sniffed it and wrinkled his nose at the pungent aroma.

"Why do you think the Mexxacans drink it with salt and lime? To keep it from bursting aflame, that's why! The best we can do is make damned sure the enemy never uses it against our boys. Tuck back in your shirt-tail, sir. We have some work ahead. I only hope our stomachs are up to the task."

20
Sister Rae

The Gryphon here. Everyone knows Newa Yawk is a spiritual place, a holy city where sylphs in silken robes sing at the foot of the Wall and float through the air. I'm going to take you behind the veil, into the secret sanctuary of the Golden Saxon and the Sisters of the Moon-Eye. Maybe you've made the trip yourself, the pilgrimage package, but this is a peek you'll never get unless you come with me.

Our trip begins on a commuter jet in the first class section, where the seats are full of senior execs clinking highballs on their way to their east coast credit accounts. The tail is full of pilgrims, already in their cowls, mumbling prayers and pretending to be penitent while unable to contain their excitement at the spiritual prospects ahead. The storage bin at the back of the jet is packed with camera equipment and fancy cowls for pilgrims to don on landing, so they'll show up pressed and pure.

We can hear the Captain's voice from three thousand miles away. The suits buckle into their seats, and the retro rockets fire. There's a whoosh as the jet lands vertically on a big cushion of steam, and the whirr of something noisy as the landing gear cranks. If there ever was a time for prayer, this is it, but the jet is quiet as a tomb, while everyone holds their breath.

It takes like forever plus fifteen minutes as the fans cut off and the air grows thick and clammy. Then the bay doors open on the City in the Hills.

Old New York was never so high. It sat down at the waterline. But that was before the FED – the First Ecological Disaster – when the currents changed directions and the Gulf Stream stopped flowing north.

That was a cold time in the old town, when the northern ice cap began creeping south while the weather ladies tracked its progress with reports about the ice ages. The corps of engineers tried to stop the ice. But all their attempts only produced the SEC – the Second Ecological Catastrophe – when a hole opened in the ozone over the Northern Pole. That melted the ice, all right, and raised the level of the oceans, flooding half the world including both coasts of America. San Francisco disappeared and the lower tip of Manhattan. The City was rebuilt on higher ground in the old Catskill Mountains, with the Temple of the Golden Saxon at its tippy-top pinnacle.

Let's take a minute to appreciate the view. That's what the other passengers do. Which made it the perfect time for me and Ez to lift a pair of cowls from the storage bin and join the line of pilgrims filing down the aisle.

In the jetport is a Wafe 'n' Watt selling ferments from all the habitats to tourists renewed by time with their credit accounts. Most of its customers were on their way home, cowls folded neatly under their arms, browsing the aisles of agave water from Mexxaco, branch water from Seeds, and grape water from Silko Valley and the domed vineyards of Holliland. An entire shelf was lined with the honey mead blended by the Sisters of the Moon-eye themselves.

Ez pounded my arm to signal she had an idea, then ran over to buy a square bottle with a dead worm curled at the bottom. She asked to have it wrapped, which meant we had to wait even longer. If anybody wanted to know where we were, the charge on her credit account would point the way faster than a bird dog in a swamp.

We caught up with our pilgrimage party before they reached the Temple. It's a long climb on cobblestones lined with sycamores and tulip trees, towering red oaks, finally a stand of white beech as you near the doors. On

either side are stone-faced men with blue robes and staffs cunningly carved into truncheons with a cross-bar in the middle. Inside the door the lights are dim with flashing readouts on your left and right, so it takes a minute for your eyes to focus on the Wall at the far end.

The Wall was human-made, carried brick by brick and stone by stone from the lower tip of Manhattan, when the ocean spilled over the south-side docks and swept across the island. It doesn't feel human-made. Standing before it, you can't shake the feeling that the hand of a giant must have placed those stones together. They say the lower stones came from the original wall that defended the Dutch from the English and gave the Street its name. The bricks above were saved from the rubble of the Exchange and placed on the Wall unrestored. You can still see scratches or engravings in the clay, like cuneiform and broken hieroglyphs on debris from the pyramid at Gaza.

If you don't experience an overwhelming desire to fall to your knees at the Wall, you have no respect for a holy site or the credit accounts behind it.

The Chamber of the Wall is never silent. Voices are always mumbling prayers, printed on the cards you can buy at the gift shop next door. They also sell mages of the Wall, of course, you can imprint right on your chip. And cute little figurines in cowls that bend forward and murmur when you pass your hand over them. On the opposite end of the hall is a Sister who sits in a stone grotto with a fountain and computer screen, perpetually scrolling numbers. People wait for hours to whisper questions about their credit accounts. She checks her screen and gazes toward the Wall, as if it spoke to her. Then she answers your question, taps on her screen, and prints out a receipt with a faint image of the Wall bled onto the background.

Ez elbowed her way to the front of the line with the gift-wrapped bottle of agave water tucked under her arm. The Sister in the grotto must have been forty years old. She wore a green plastic halo angled over her forehead to shade her tired eyes and keep the moonburn off her neck. Through her diaphanous robes showed circlets of brown none of us needed to see.

“Step to the back of the line, ma’am,” said the Sister, despite the fifteen years she must have had on Ez. White letters on her halo read Sister Sal.

Ezmer Elder didn’t budge. “We have a gift,” she said. “For Sister Rae.”

Sister Sal would have waved her away, but Ez jiggled the gift under her arm and the agave water sloshed in its bottle.

The Sister seemed to recognize that sound. “Is it consumable?”

“By the thirsty soul,” said Ez. “From Mexxaco.”

The Sister licked her lips delicately. “Just a minute,” she said, tapping a different part of her screen. “Stand aside, please.”

We didn’t have to wait more than two minutes before a second Sister parted the curtain behind Sister Sal and stepped into the grotto. Older than Sal but livelier, she must have been doing something more interesting when she got the summons. Short, with cropped grey hair, broad shoulders and chunky calves, she wore the same style robe as Sister Sal, but hers was not cinched at the waist, so it blossomed as she swayed. She spotted the bundle under Ezmer Elder’s arm and relieved us of its weight.

“You asked for me?”

“Sister Rae?” said Ez, still hanging onto the neck.

“That’s right.”

“Is there a place we can talk?”

She tucked the gift bundle under her arm.

“Follow me, please.”

She led us through a curtain hidden among the rocks at the rear of the grotto. On the far side was a narrow passage, poorly lit, its walls glistening with moisture. At the far end was an archway under a sign that read *BROWSING*. Sister Rae held aside the curtain of sparkly beads and let us into a wider hall with an aisle down its center. Both sides were furnished with couches and armchairs on which Sisters sat or reclined or sprawled in comfortable if indelicate postures. They all kept their eyes tightly shut, but here and there lashes fluttered and lips trembled silently.

Ezmer Elder asked, “Are they praying?”

“Shopping,” whispered Sister Rae. “The gamers have a noisier space. Some of us do very well in six-card stud.”

Ez shook her head. “I heard chanting.”

Sister Rae listened. “Cooing,” she explained with a beatific smile. “Cat videos. Please,” putting a finger to her lips, “follow me.”

She led us out the far end of the hall and past a short, padlocked door. Then she paused and opened a taller door into a small, smoky cavern.

“We can use the Chapel,” she said aloud.

What do you think, viewer? Does it look like any chapel you ever saw?

There were torches mounted in sconces on the wall, all unlit. The only illumination came from overhead, where numbers flashed on the rough-hewn surfaces of three rock walls. Stone benches in a half-circle faced the fourth wall, made of smoother stones and ancient bricks. It took a moment to realize we were staring at the backside of the Chamber Wall, the inner sanctum of the Sisters of the Moon-Eye. On this side was painted a huge golden pyramid, with a ribbon at the bottom that read *IN*

GOODS WE TRUST and a single eyeball hovering over the peak. The eye was silver, radiating wiggly lines of light.

“That must be the Moon-Eye,” Ez said quietly.

“It was originally pronounced Mon-Eye,” said Sister Rae, so that the first half rhymed with groan. “Everyone kept mangling it, so we repainted the Eye to look like moonlight.” Ez and I contemplated it, imagining it golden, until the Sister broke the spell of our reverence. “Well! You asked for Rae, didn’t you? Here I am.”

“Ezmer Elder and Gryphon here.” I offered my hand.

Rae crossed her pudgy arms. “I know who you are, Simon.”

She knew my actual name?

She grinned when she saw my face. “The sensors in the grotto pick up the GPS prints off the chips in your skulls. I checked your credit accounts when you asked for me. Neither one of you has paid rent or a mortgage in months. So who are you living with? Let me guess. Mook?”

Real divination. What else could it be?

“You know Mook?” asked Ezmer Elder.

“Of course I know him,” said Sister Rae. “Not that we ever met. We run these algorithms all the time, regression analyses, that sort of thing. Looking for patterns. To see who’s buying what in coordination with what other accounts. Mook buys a pair of hockey sticks, and you pick up a puck. That sort of anomaly jumps out, once you’ve read enough accounts.”

“So it’s not really divine-nation,” I said carefully.

“It might as well be,” Rae replied, “as far as your privacy goes. You bet lots of credits on cyborg-boxing, Gryphon. Ez paid for my gift in a Wafe ‘n’ Watt at the jetport. Just tell me it’s not Mead of the Sisters.”

“Agave water,” said Ezmer Elder, tearing off a strip of wrapping paper to reveal the bottle inside.

“Tequila,” confirmed Sister Rae, with a practiced eye. She made a little circle in the air around her heart. “Thank the Moan.”

“Sister Sal looked grateful too,” observed Ez.

“Oh, she is!” agreed Rae gleefully. “Right now she’s wondering if we popped the top, and if there’ll be anything left by the time her shift is over.”

“We wouldn’t do that –” I started to say.

Before I could get the sentence out, Sister Rae had twisted the cap and broken the seal. She sniffed the open bottle and then swallowed three long gulps before setting it down and wiping off the mouth.

“You sure?”

“No thanks,” I said. Ez shook her head.

Sister Rae settled herself on the hard stone bench. As she did, her diaphanous robe parted and she covered up again. I was hardly anxious for a closer look, but I couldn’t help wondering how Ez would have looked in those silky robes, which would have fallen nicely from her proud shoulders and catch a bit at her hips. That would have been inspiring, soul-stirring. But when I glanced up at her face again, Ez seemed to know just what I was thinking.

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

I flushed, but she was facing Sister Rae, who only made a face. “I haven’t been a Sister my whole life. I came like most of the girls, deeply in debt. The Sisters collect one hundredth of one percent on every transaction everywhere, and we’re all credited with a share. There’s nothing to spend it on in the temple, so it pays off a debt awfully fast.”

“Can’t you travel?”

“Business only, once you take your vows. I did a bit, before.”

“Have you ever been to Holliland?”

She shook her head.

“Mexxaco?”

Sister Rae said, “No. Yes! I was actually, years ago. Why are you asking?”

“That was during the land war, wasn’t it?”

“I arrived before it started. But I was still there when it broke.”

“Volunteering as a nurse? In a radiation tent?”

Sister Rae shook her head. “Some of the Sisters have that calling, a medical vocation. But I’m not one of them. I can listen to somebody talk for hours, complaining about misfortunes, and help reconcile them to suffering. What I cannot do is watch anyone writhe in agony.” She shivered and lifted the bottle to her lips.

“Then I don’t suppose you recall a soldier from that time? A handsome young man named Hoffman?”

“What was he – a doctor?”

“He carried a companion into a medical tent. With radiation burns.”

“I tole you,” said Rae, starting to blur her words, “I was never in a medical tent. If you doan believe me, what can I do?”

“You can tell us what you were doing there.”

“I could do that.”

“Please.”

“I checked out an oilfield,” said Rae. “They used to have oilfields around Santone, did you know that?”

I did, though Ez claimed she didn’t.

Sister Rae seemed annoyed. “Well, what do you think they do with those fields, once they’re played out? Donate them, that’s what! To the church that gives ‘em the highest form of grace. On their taxes.”

“Moon-Eye.”

“The Golden Saxon,” said Rae. Then she shrugged. “Same thing. I was just a kid then, in my twenties and getting restless in here. Mother sent me down there to check out an oilfield with no more oil in the ground. To see if we had any use for it. It was horrible. A dump, smelling of the poison they use to leach the oil out of the rock. Fallen in on itself. I stuck around for a couple days, trying to sell the swamp. But even Mexxaco weren’t interested. So I left Santone empty handed.”

“Without stopping off at the war?”

She shook her head at Ezmer Elder, then at me, but neither of us said anything. So Sister Rae went on.

“That poor plot is still there, a course. The Mon-eyed Sisters still own it. It’s probably a blackened rut by now, but if you can think of anything to do with it, I could talk Mother into selling it. Dirt cheap. An act of holy contrition.”

“That’s all?” Ez pressed her. “On your vows? The best and worst of it?”

“You want the best too?” murmured Rae. “Okay, Mother Confessor, I’ll tell you. I met a pair of ladies who entertained the troops. Spirited girls, like me. My age too. We diddled away a few days together. But I never entered no medical tent. Or met any Hoffmans either.”

Personal communication between habitats is illegal and closely monitored. If we wanted to share what we learned with Prissy and Mook, there was only one Arena.

21

The Ghost Carrier

At eighteen thousand feet you lose half the pressure in your cockpit. The air tastes dry and metallic in a Boeing F/A 18-E Super Hornet.

The single-seat cabin is snug but roomy enough to stretch both elbows at once. When you switch to your tank, the air tastes richer but colder. The sky outside is whipping by at a thousand miles per. You've got to know yourself, your lungs and heart-rate, what sets you at ease and what enables you to make a crucial decision in a nanosecond. You've got to know your hardware.

The Hornet was a creature of McDonnell Douglas before they sold out by Boeing. The Hornet's wing and tail configuration can be traced back to a 1965 Northrop project P-530, which started as a reworking of the lightweight F-5E with a larger wing, twin tail fins and a distinctive leading edge root extension. Boeing took it from there. The Block II Super Hornet incorporates an improved active electronically scanned array radar, which can be equipped with an aerial refueling system (what they call a buddy store) for refueling mid-flight. Mine isn't. Bringback for the Super Hornet – the fuel and munitions it can carry back to land on an aircraft carrier – exceeds 9,000 pounds or 4,000 kilos.

The Block III added stealth technology and longer range. But I'm not flying that crate. I'll stick with the Block II.

The satellite intercepted the sonar echo of an aircraft carrier headed for Charleston Bay. A pair of Spirits scrambled to keep her from reaching her destination. My bird was faster, sent ahead to post coordinates for their bombsites, to scope out the flak they would face and the fighter jets on her decks.

In front of me sat a Touchscreen control panel, liquid-crystal readout and fuel display. Check, check, and check. If things went south, I'd trust my life to her quadruplex fly-by-wire and flight-control systems to detect and correct for battle damage.

I settled back and watched the horizon.

The seconds ticked by.

Closing in on the GPS recorded by the intercept, I saw only blue sky and green water.

I checked my own coordinates but they held steady. Where the hell was she? I climbed higher.

Zzzt!

To an angel on a nearby cloud the Hornet would have looked like a strangely feathered bird rather than a stinger. Its nose had been painted like a snarling tiger, while on its fuselage stood a statuesque redhead wearing a bathing suit and a sash that read Esmeralda. The hum of its engines climbed in pitch with the altitude as we rose above the storm clouds and the vapors turning pink and orange in the sunrise.

Zzzt!

Suddenly the cloud cover cleared and I could see three-sixty for miles. Nothing in sight. No carrier. No fighter jets rising on my heat signature. Not a thing but ocean, murky green and grey, mile after mile to the horizon. Had we been led into a trap? I looked at the sky farther above me, but there was only blue and grey in sight. I couldn't tell where the knockout might come, but I knew what I had to do.

I picked up my radio. "Super-Duper calling home. Do you read me, Signalman?"

"We read you, Lieutenant."

"I have a message for the Commander. 'She's not here!' Do you copy?"

“She’s not there, sir.”

“Try it with a little more urgency, son. ‘She’s not here! Repeat. She’s not here!’”

Old Souls in MOI

No one goes hungry in the world today. That's what the corps claim in their annual reports, and I'm inclined to believe it. The droughts and famines of the last century changed the way people thought about food, and the land wars between corps made unprocessed food dangerous. You never knew if a plum was blue because it grew that way or because fallout irradiated its genes. Once people started dying from little green apples, they wanted some agency to insure their first crunch wouldn't be their last.

The famines drove technology. It got harder to enjoy a feast of organs in sauce when you knew half the people on earth were starving. Once the UN went corporate and started selling shares, there was enough money around, and there turned out to be enough food to feed us all, once a corp was paying for it. The question was food-form. They tried a few different varieties of tasty processed food. Pills were too much like medicine and the flavors never caught on. Drinks never felt like a meal. Then they hit on wafers, and that proved the answer. Cheap to make, easy to transport and store, crunchy or chewy, whatever you liked. First they exported them to the hungriest folks in the world, but soon the habitats started selling them too, and they will keep selling whatever people will buy. Now you can buy wafers in hundreds of flavors with names like Strawberry Fields, Oyster Bay, Tete-a-Tete or Mac-n-Cheese. All the habitats make local brands, like Mission Fig, Tropicana, or Cherry Garcia. Most people eat them three quarters of the time.

You can still get an apple if you want one or a sealed pouch of grapes, but the warning labels make them unappetizing. There's no law against growing your own – Profman planted lemon trees – but it's mostly something

old people do, which is not exactly a sign of habitual sophistication, like a yard full of electronic parts. If you have enough credits in your account, you don't need to patch up your digitals or grow your own broccoli. You can order a peach in a restaurant, if you can afford it. In one episode I had the Colonel and Lara C sharing a red plum, and the demand for hothouse plums shot through the stratosphere. But you can hardly find a plum today except in laxative wafers.

In the countryside things are different. The big operations are owned and run by MOI under a network of domes. If you speed down a country road you'll see a giant dome enclosing hundreds of acres of farmland, connected to another dome by a tunnel just large enough for a truck to roar through. Outside the dome the sky is dark grey, looming with black clouds. Inside, the lights are always bright yellow to fool the crops into growing faster than they would in days and nights.

Everybody in the countryside works in one of the domes, growing the foodstuff, processing it, or shipping it out to the habitats. What I never realized until we arrived was how many people live outside the corporate domes, on jagged bits of acreage left behind when the divisions of MOI chopped up the map, claiming chunks for corn or cheese production. It was one of those private patches that Priss supposedly inherited from her anonymous sperm donor. We didn't have any trouble gaining access to the registry, using the name of a recently-deceased manager supplied to us by Otera. Priss said she wanted to check out her property, the word that opens chip sites across MOI. The land belongs to everyone, according to the songs. But property belongs to the corps or execs, or the people they name as inheritors.

What we really wanted to know was where we could find Rachel 1784. Otera had tracked her to a corp farm in

Mizzory, but we couldn't march into a processing plant in the middle of the day and start talking to baggers. Her GPS trace also turned up a listing as a member of a collective in the area, which meant she either owned or worked on one of the small independent plots as well. We thought that would be the best place to contact her, if we could track her down. It turned out that Otera was right as usual – once you have the status, information tumbles out. And property-owner was primo status in MOI.

The corps are always trying to buy back any land that slips out of their control, so all we had to say was that Priss was interested in selling her plot and the Registry was ours. Rachel 1784 was part of a small collective offering to sell corn oil to Holliland. All we needed to do was track down the collective and the private plots of its members.

It didn't take us long to locate her holding, which turned out to be a zigzag patch of mud along a river. It must have been part of the river once, but it had dried out and the MOI engineers calculated it wasn't worth the investment needed to turn a profit. They were probably right, since they had to figure labor costs in credits, not blood, sweat and tears – which have always been the edge of the independent farmer.

In Holliland you never hear about these collectives. They have to put warning labels on their wafers, but that's it. In Mizzory the local broadcasts are full of talk about them – of complaints, I should say. Anyone with a chip in his head hears all about it. They salted land, poisoned livestock, undersold the market rate on wafer futures. They were dangerous, which made me a little nervous about tracking one down.

Rachel lived in a ramshackle house on the outskirts of the habitat. That was putting it nicely. There had once been a dome over the whole place, but it had cracked in

several places and somebody tried to fix it with a resin gun. You could smell the air leaking in, and the storms left scummy puddles where the rain had pooled. All around the base of the dome the ground was scarred red. Five or six feet farther inside, corn had been planted and funny things that looked like fat striped battle maces. Priss called them squash, but if that's what a squash looks like, I'm not eating Squash Court wafers ever again.

Two boys knelt on the porch when we came near, sixteen or seventeen years old. One was watching the other turn over cards on the boards between them. The dealer peered at each card face and then looked up at the sky, listening, as if they were telling him if it would rain, when, and how much. Priss knocked on an upright beam like it was a door, even though they must have seen us coming up the walk and standing right in front of them at the foot of the steps.

"Hullo, boys," she said. "Mind if we come up?"

She tried to make it sound friendly, but they were not charmed. The dealer held a card against the opposite sky. His partner waited. The dealer set it down again and spun it around, so that it faced the other boy. "That's yours," he said ominously. "You better watch out."

"For what?"

The dealer shrugged. He couldn't say for sure with strangers listening.

The other boy stood to face us. "Who're you now? What do you want here?"

"Riters," said Priss, which wasn't entirely true. One of us was.

"What do you rite?" asked the dealer.

"Episodes," I said.

"For the Arena?" said the dealer.

"That's right," said Priss. "This here is Mook. I'm sure you've heard of him."

The standing boy looked at the other, who shook his head. Then he turned back to me, squinting. "Who do you rite?"

"A few soldiers," I said. "Corporal Capricorn. Colonel Hollister."

Those names would have lit up the face of any sixteen-year-old in Holliland, but neither one registered in Mizzory.

"You don't know Honcho, do you?" said the dealer.

A noise came from Priss like a tire bursting, but she patched it up quickly. "Sure, he knows Honcho. Tell 'em, Mook."

"Sure I know Honcho," I said slowly. "You like that kind of thing?"

The two boys looked at each other and nodded in unison. "Yessir, we sure do," said the dealer respectfully.

"You kidding?" The other boy practically exploded. "Have you seen his latest laser, with heat-seeking grenade launcher? That shoots around corners. Pow! Pow! Kabloom!" His arms flapped like a vulture.

The dealer asked, "You're from Holliland, huh?"

"That's right," said Priss.

"So what do you want here?" said the other boy, rising to take a step toward us.

He was taller than his friend, I suddenly realized. Bigger than Priss. Or me.

"Rachel," said Priss quietly.

The big boy's shadow loomed over us, but the dealer shouted right from his seat on the porch, "Rae! Hey Rae! You got company!"

We heard heavy footsteps inside that rattled the whole house and everything in it. A moment later the door scraped open and a woman was framed in the doorway.

She looked ifty at least, with a red face and green eyes. She wore an army-surplus officer's coat over her housedress and carried a Remington 870. The shotgun must have been a hundred years old, but it was oiled and cared-for. Its muzzle pointed down at the ground, but it wanted to look at us.

"Rachel?" said Priss.

The lines in her skin converged at her eyes, as if she had peered at the sun. She said, "Who are you, now? I don't know you."

"No, Ma'am, you don't," said Priss calmly. "But I think you might know a friend of ours. Can we come in?"

"Let's hear about this friend first," Rachel replied, blocking the doorway with her body. As if we might try to knock her down and force our way inside.

"Hoffman," I said. "A Professor of Herbiology."

"Never heard of him," said Rachel. "Nor herbiology, neither."

"It's a new discipline," said Priss, as if the woman had expressed doubt about its academic integrity. "You were in Mexxaco during the land war, weren't you?"

"That's on file," said Rachel.

"We're not from the corps," Priss assured her. "Not MOI or Holliland or Silko Valley. My friend and I are freelancers. Freelance riters."

"We know Honcho," I said.

She looked at the two boys. "What have you been telling these people?"

"Nothing," said the dealer sullenly. "They told us they knew you."

"From where?" asked Rachel, turning back to us.

"Santone," said Priss. "You were there, weren't you? During the war? As a volunteer in a radiation tent?"

The woman shook her head, sadly I thought. "You aren't from the corp, are you? Or you would've read in

my file that I never volunteered for anything. Not in Santone, at least.”

“But you were there,” Priss insisted.

“Sure I was,” said Rachel. “Because I had to be. Trying to find a buyer for corn. Any buyer. You know what the corp calls the farm collectives?”

“Communalists,” I said, to show I was up on the local broadcasts. “That’s the nicest name they use for us,” said Rachel.

“You are trying to bring them down, aren’t you?” I said. “To ruin the free market and the corps that build our shares?”

“We are the free market,” said Rachel. “We’re the only folks who compete with the corps – holding their prices down. Why do you think they buy up every square acre of land? We can’t undersell them, but they can lose credits as long as they like, so long as we lose more. They don’t even do it in secret anymore.” She shook her head. “We couldn’t sell corn during a war. That ought to tell you something.”

“What?” I asked.

“How free the market isn’t.”

She had me there. I must have looked like I couldn’t understand what she was trying to say. Mostly because I didn’t.

“Look,” said Rachel, trying to be patient, “let me ask you something. The corps own all the farmland, right?”

“Except this place. And others like it.”

“Except the land that no one wants. And they’ve taken over the states as well, haven’t they?”

“They run for office. They have a right to do that, like anybody else.”

“Not exactly like anybody else. But since they are the state, and they own all the means of production, how is that not socialism?”

“Not what?”

“They’re calling us commies.”

“Because you work together. Collectivizing things.”

“Does this look like a commune to you?”

I had no idea what it looked like. And it was getting confusing.

“You’re paying these boys, aren’t you?”

“More than they’re worth.”

“Out of profits you steal from the corps.”

She stared at me for a whole minute. “You don’t really get the whole buying and selling thing, do you?”

“He’s a riter,” Priss explained.

“But you’re not, are you?” said Rachel.

Priss shook her head.

“A warden?”

“I used to be. Not anymore.”

“Well, I’m not who you think I am either,” said Rachel. “Yes, I was in Santone, trying to sell corn. But no, I never volunteered to help burnt soldiers. Tell whoever sent you – Hoffman, you said? – he’ll have to find his Rachel someplace else.”

23

The Dragon of Santa Fe

“Setting off the air raid siren was a stroke of genius, Capricorn. Much better than tripping the fire alarm.”

“The alarm brings them out, Lieutenant. The siren sends them to the basement, where they might stay long enough for us to get out of here.”

“How long would you say we’ve got?”

“A couple of minutes at most. There’s a motorcycle with a sidecar near the barn. If we hop to it, we should be able to clear the gate before they realize there are no planes overhead.”

Middlemouse nodded and looked the wrong way.

“Excuse me, sir, but where are you heading? The barn is that way.”

“But the farmhouse is this way.”

“Yes, with soldiers inside. Enemy soldiers.”

“Then there must be a radio, don’t you think? Where there are soldiers?”

“A radio?”

“To call in our position, Sergeant.”

“Still a Corporal, sir.”

“I’ll see you promoted, Capricorn. Damn me if I don’t.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. They say the third time’s the charm. But I’d rather they didn’t know we’re here. I’d rather we weren’t here at all.”

Middlemouse was already trooping up the porch steps and marching into the farmhouse. With a sigh, Capricorn lumbered after him.

The front parlor was empty, its furniture left in disarray when air raid sirens went off. The Lieutenant passed through the doorway on the right into the kitchen.

When Capricorn followed, Middlemouse put a finger to his lips, pointing toward the root cellar door.

It was ajar, and the Corporal heard boots on the floorboards below. The enemy was in earshot, so they could be overhead too.

Capricorn wanted to run right out, but saw to his chagrin that there was in fact a radio on the kitchen table. Lieutenant Middlemouse crouched beside it, turning the dial until he found the band he was searching for. He picked up the microphone and whispered, "This is Officer Middlemouse, calling in. Do you read me, Sparks?"

Capricorn thought his officer plumb crazy. Any moment the enemy would come up from the basement, find them and shoot them.

A stunned voice crackled over the radio. "Lieutenant? You're alive?"

"Very much so. With Corporal Capricorn. We're about twelve miles inside enemy lines. Heading home. Don't shoot us when we get there, will you?"

"Just a minute, sir," said Sparks. "The Major is standing by. He wants a word."

"Of course."

Capricorn groaned aloud. Middlemouse waved to shush him.

"Lieutenant," came a gravel voice, "did I hear correctly that you're inside enemy lines? Twelve miles to the east?"

"Yessir. More or less. Maybe southeast."

"Close enough, Middlemouse. Do you know the Cocoa Café?"

Everyone knew of the place – a notorious den of thieves and spies in an old river mill, where the border moved back and forth.

It was the perfect spot to find smugglers or coyotes, fences who handled pilfered supplies, or muscle looking

for work. Middlemouse had never been inside but he wasn't about to admit it.

"Of course, sir."

"Can you reach it without getting pinched?"

Middlemouse nodded at the radio. "There's a motorcycle at our disposal, Major. We ought to be able to make it there."

"What about making it back?" wondered Capricorn. No one else seem to be thinking about that.

"Good man," said the Major. "Now listen closely. Have you ever heard of Carlita Cain? They call her the Dragon Lady, or the Dragon of Santa Fe."

Her picture was rolled inside the sleeping bags of thousands of infantryman. The most famous seductress of Silko Valley, she wangled the plans for Santa Juanita Hill from a hapless General, hopelessly in love. The General had gone to his court martial insisting she was worth any penalty he had to pay. Her name was still on his lips when he tossed his last cigarette and faced the firing squad.

Middlemouse grunted. "I have, sir."

"Our intel says she's in the cafe right now, on a visit from Frisco City. That offers a rare target, Lieutenant. We can send in air power to level the place, once we verify she's there."

"We'll check it out, Major. Depend on us."

"We tried to hit her once before, Middlemouse, on a rumor. But she wasn't there and the enemy hooted, turning it into a real morale booster. We can't let them hoot again."

"No, sir. The Sergeant and I will make sure of it."

"What Sergeant, Middlemouse?"

"Sergeant Capricorn. I've promoted him in the field. For ingenuity."

"Good god," said the Major. "Heaven help you, son."

Capricorn heard a boot tramp the steps leading up from the basement, so he followed the Lieutenant as best he could, racing for the barn. Middlemouse was already on the seat with his heel on the starter when Capricorn reached him, huffing and puffing from the run. But a shot rang out behind him, and he leaped into the sidecar just in time for the cycle to swerve around a Mexxacan Capitan and tear up the dust of the road.

There was no way to talk to Middlemouse as they tore through the desert air. There was no point to it either. The Lieutenant zoomed straight to their doom humming an army song, grinning at Capricorn whenever the Corporal dared to peer out of the sidecar. When they passed a squad of Mexxacans with shotguns on their backs, Middlemouse waved – and wouldn't you know, they all waved back?

It took a couple of hours, bumping down the roads, but as the sun set in front of them, they entered a gully where a river once flowed. Following the gully they came to a ramshackle house with a broken mill wheel. Middlemouse cut the engine and pushed the cycle under the rotting boards that barely held up the floor. Then he crept under the only window that hadn't been boarded up, and made a little basket of his interlaced fingers.

Capricorn stood for a moment before he realized he was expected to reach for the window. He shook his head, *No sir*. But the Lieutenant had come too far to face insurrection now. He nodded and kept nodding until the Corporal saw no choice but to set his foot in Middlemouse's hands and totter up against the wood toward the filthy window.

He nearly toppled twice despite the Lieutenant's efforts to offset his bulging weight, but Capricorn clung to the boards of the mill house and inched his way upward. The paint has long ago chipped and worn off,

and his palms felt the prickles of splinters, but his fingers finally felt the rough edge of the sill, and with one final heave Capricorn hauled himself high enough to wipe a circle in the dust and peer through the glass.

The place was empty.

Not just unoccupied. Deserted.

A great beam of the ceiling had fallen across the center of the room, where it cut the place in half diagonally. One chair lay flat on its back. Another was broken for firewood. The logs in the hearth were black, covered in grey and white ash, which floated through the air of the room. The overhead fixture dangled unlit, its glass bulb shattered. A rat picking through its pieces on the floor looked up and scurried away.

Capricorn signaled for the Lieutenant to lower him. Slowly.

When he finally felt firm ground beneath his feet, the Corporal drew a breath. Then he strode without a word back to the bike, where he took up his seat in the sidecar and waited for the Lieutenant to resume his own.

“What was it?” said Middlemouse. “Did you see the Dragon Lady?”

“They tried to get her once before, didn’t they?” said Capricorn.

“And missed?”

“She wasn’t there,” said Middlemouse.

The Corporal touched his own nose. “Tell them to stand down the jets on the runway. She’s not here either.”

“Are you certain of that?”

“Do I need to say it again? She’s not here either!”

24
Frisky Town

When the first tsunamis hit the California coast, some people said San Francisco was gone for good, like Los Angeles. Others insisted the waters would subside and the place could be restored. The ocean had a third idea. The sea level ebbed but it stopped around halfway up the old hills. What remained was a city of islands with broad canals between them, like Old Venice in Euro before it sank into the sea.

Profman's Rachel wasn't in MOI, and she wasn't in Newa Yawk, but the only candidate we had left from Otera Denge was somewhere in the Silko Valley habitat. That stretched from San Luiso to Portland Bay in a loosely linked sequence of domes with long stretches of wilderness between and around them. The official capital was Sanjo, but the heart and soul of the habitat was still north in Frisky City. From what Profman told us about Rachel, it was hard to picture her in with the geeks and execs. But she would fit in nicely in Frisky City.

We thought Gryphon and Ezmer Elder would figure the same, so we headed straight for the canals. If they didn't, it was the safest place for a couple of fugitives from Holliland to go unnoticed in Silko Valley. All sorts of people moored their boats along the canals or hid among the old apartments submerged to their windows at the waterline. The city guards couldn't keep up with the human flotsam and jetsam that washed up from all the habitats. Flotsam is carried overboard, and jetsam deliberately tossed, and there were plenty of each on display in the markets and cafes that lined the canal shores. Whenever the guards need a confidential informant, it's the first part of town they visit. But in that place Priss and I looked relatively respectable, and if it

came down to it, I had a few credits to spare racked up in Newa Yawk. Amazing how often that made a difference.

We bought our way onto a cornmeal truck headed for Frisky City, and off the truck into the habitable parts of town. They have these water taxis to ship the people around. Ours was full of tourists, which was fine with me. Priss and I weren't exactly tourists but we weren't locals either, and I didn't want to hear anybody use the word spies if they noticed us passing by.

When we floated by the tower on Coit Island, Priss said, "Now what? You got us here, Mook. Do you have a plan? Or should we just wait around seeing the sights until a guard picks us up?"

"The first thing we have to do is find Gryph and Ezmer," I said.

"There are, what? Twenty million people in Silko Valley? How do you expect to find two Hollies in all of those Silks?"

"I thought I'd buy you a cup of coffee. And wait for them to show up."

She gave me the kind of look you hide from a raving lunatic. "This isn't a mage, Mookie. You can't just pass off a coincidence. Unless you have a magic wand stuffed down your pant leg."

"You don't believe in magic, do you?" I said. "Trust me on this."

Priss didn't have any better ideas, so a short time later we were on Coit Island, sitting on rusty chairs in a makeshift café overlooking the GR Deli Canal. Priss said she hadn't realized how hungry she was, but I didn't notice any difference in her appetite, which was always quite healthy. She was putting away one croissy wafer after another, smearing each with a different jam, when a woman with a fat belly came through the door and squeezed onto a counter stool. The cushion gave a little

sigh beneath her, and Priss looked up from her crumbly plate with gooseberry on her knife.

“Four months,” she said. “Maybe five.”

“What?”

“That’s all she’s got left before they take it away. The baby.”

“She’s pregnant?”

Priss nodded through a mouthful. I don’t know how she could tell. I had never really seen a birther-to-be, before.

“They don’t go out, once they round up, do they?”

Priss wiped her mouth on her napkin. “Not usually, no. Enjoy it while you can, sister,” she mumbled.

Enjoy it? That’s not what I’d heard about pregnancy. Nausea, swollen ankles, all sorts of pains and urges. Who would enjoy that? It reminded me of what Honcho said about Priss meeting her birth mother. And why she lost her wardenship. A creepy chill rode up my neck.

“Is that why we’re here?” I asked Priss, trying to whisper but speaking aloud. “Is that why we’re searching for Rachel?”

Priss shot me her dismissive look, but her eyes brightened and I thought she was actually going to tell me something about herself. Instead, she gave my shoulder a nudge and tilted my head toward the door as Gryph and Ezmer Elder tried to enter inconspicuously.

I guess you need to practice inconspicuousness, because they sure looked suspicious to me. His eyes kept moving to the street behind them, while she scanned the café from under the brim of a singularly broad hat. When she spotted our table on the edge of broken concrete they called a terrace, her face lit up and then turned away as if she feared someone might be watching her reaction. She headed off slowly for the opposite side of the café, running her hand on the backs of empty chairs as she

moved passed one then another in search of the perfect table.

As they slowly made their way around to us, Priss whispered, “How on earth did you know they would turn up here?”

“I invited them from Newa York,” I said. When that provoked her favorite face of scornful doubt, I added, “You saw the latest mage I wrote, didn’t you?”

“About the Corporal? Honestly, Mook, I don’t know why you waste your time on that fat slacker and his sidekick.”

“A little respect for Capricorn and Middlemouse, please. Who pay for the wafers you’re gobbling now. Remember the place the Captain sent them to check out?”

“The Coconut Café? Near Santa Fe, Mexxaco?”

“That’s what the magers will remember, I’ll bet, since it’s shown up – how many times? – as a notorious spot for thieves and spies in the Arena. I can’t understand why riters keep using the same tired sites.”

“Please don’t go off on them now. Since you used it yourself.”

“But I didn’t,” I insisted. “I sent the doughty Corporal and his long suffering companion to a place called the Cocoa Café. Did you happen to notice the handwritten sign over the door when we came in?”

She turned around the cup in her hand and saw the café logo. “But how did you know they would catch the difference? I didn’t.”

“Gryph spent some time at Stanford before the corp bought the campus,” I said. “He set a mage in this place at the end of a chase scene. The fugitive abandons a boat on the wreckage below and scrambles through these tables. Two Silko guards storm in and lase down a MOI refugee, who topples from this terrace.”

“This ... patio?”

“That’s what they call it.”

Priss glanced over the edge, as if the refugee might still be floating in the canal.

Then a chair scraped behind her, and Gryphon sat down on it, backwards.

“Mind if we join you?” he said.

Ezmer Elder drew up her own chair and set her broad hat on the table. She was dressed like a Silko Dame, in grey synthetic silk skirt and over-blouse, with stylish ovals of netting at the nipples. Gryphon looked like her gardener.

“We saw your episode,” he said.

“We saw yours,” said Priss.

“Nice,” I said. “Very Ezzy. Except for that bit about the angel and the redhead. On the fuselage of a B-52, sure. But on a Hornet?”

“That was the Gryphon,” said Ezmer Elder, tilting her head.

“I thought so.”

Priss said, “I think he likes you.”

“I thought he liked boys,” said Ezmer Elder.

“I’m glad you two finally made it,” Gryphon boomed, rosy-cheeked. “We’ve been lurking around this place for two days now. The waiters are starting to think we’re snoops for Security.”

“We had farther to go,” said Priss sotto voce. Trying to give him a clue to bring his own voice down.

“A jet is a jet,” Gryphon said, just as loud.

“No, it isn’t, actually,” said Ezmer Elder, who knew all the specs about aircraft. But instead of a lecture about midrange versus supersonic transport, she said, “They couldn’t fly, Gryph. A truck is not a jet.” To Priss she said, “But we haven’t wasted our time entirely. At least we both haven’t.”

Gryphon lifted the last croissy wafer from Priss's plate. I said, "You wouldn't be eating those, if you knew what went into them." But he popped it into his mouth.

Ezmer Elder leaned closer to the table. "I've been doing a little research, based on your friend Otera's leads. With help from a fan in Sanjo software who has access to personal files. According to him, Rachel 1216 was raised in the Mojave on the Santiago family farm, maybe ten miles from the Hoffman place."

"Where baby Profman was raised?" asked Priss.

Ezzie nodded. "So they could have known each other way back when. He never told us that, did he?"

"I doubt if he knew that," I said. "He never asked us to find her."

Ez continued as if she hadn't heard me. "This Rachel was a medical volunteer in the Mexxacan war, in a radiation tent. After the war, they sent her back to nursing school for a specialty in nuclear care."

"Since she did so well in Mexxaco," Priss supposed.

"Could be. Then they assigned her to a burn facility in the southern desert, where she's spent most of the past twenty years. Only this year they reassigned her, right here in Frisky Town."

Priss said, "For nuclear care? Do they even have a reactor here?"

Ezmer Elder shook her head significantly. "Not since the flood of the bay."

"So, why...?"

"We thought Rachel might know. So we asked her."

"She's still here? You found her?"

"No, we did not," declared Gryphon. "She's gone."

"Out on a call," explained Ezmer Elder. "I'm not sure how much local history you know, but the medical facilities in Silko Valley were sold to MOI Medical fifty years ago."

I said, "The same thing happened in Holliland."

"Right," said Ezzie. "They're all run by insurance companies. The policies most of us carry cover a nose job or hysterectomy, but they give corp execs a whole 'nother class of policy. They have to, they say, to recruit the best managers."

"As if a pile of bonus credits wouldn't be enough," said Gryph.

"Don't get me started on that," said Priss.

"You've never seen these policies," Ezmer Elder continued. "They guarantee medical care whenever you need it, wherever you are. The veeps are always just a few clicks from a clinic anyway. Except when they're not anymore."

Priss's face grew more confused, as Ezzie expected. But I've always been pretty good at riddles.

"Not veeps," I said. "When they're fired."

Gryphon nodded. He knew I would figure it out.

"Right again," said Ez. "They let some senior veep keep his health insurance as part of his golden parachute. And then forgot about that when they exiled him from the valley. He's out on the surface somewhere, with a broken ankle. But because of his high-flying policy they had to send a team out. Now guess who was on it."

"Wait," I said. "You mean Rachel 1612 isn't in Silko Valley? She's Outside?"

Ezmer Elder nodded. "On the surface."

"Somewhere," said Priss.

"We can do better than that," said Gryphon. "I haven't been lying in a gondola for three days, you know. You can ask the guards to track a chip, if you have a good enough story. And that's what I do for a living, isn't it? Make up stories?"

"You lost your disabled sister?" I said.

"My nurse," said Gryph. "With my insulin beer."

“That is better.”

Priss said, “You mean you know where she is? On the Outside?”

“I know where she was,” said Gryphon. “They tracked her GPS signal to an old research station not far away. They suspect it may be a leaper colony. But that was over a week ago.”

“And then?”

“Her chip went blank on the GPS screen. They don’t know why, or wouldn’t tell me. One of the guards started looking at me funny, so I thought it best to abandon the station. But at least we know where she was.”

The others exchanged significant looks, but I didn’t quite grasp their significance until I said, “Wait – you’re not thinking of going after her?”

They let Priss to deliver the news. “We’ve come so far already, Mook,”

I said, “Outside?”

“We probably won’t be able to get out anyway, but after all this work – for Profman’s sake – we ought to give it a try. Don’t you think?”

I couldn’t think clearly, and she didn’t want me to. But there’s no one I can blame except myself.

The Dancer at the Well

It's never easy to get out of the habitats, and a war only makes it more difficult. None of us could remember a time when we weren't at war, so that became our normal expectation. People live and work and vacation inside a single habitat, the network of interconnected domes under one management. Anyone who asks to go out is instantly scrutinized. There's something suspicious in the very idea of wanting to go Outside, which suggests that life is not perfect in Silko Valley or Holliland.

Sometimes people need to leave for business or other reasons. There are official processes that enable approved individuals to move out of a portal and back in again, once their business is finished. If you're not a veep or senior exec, those processes take time. To fugitives like us all official channels are closed. But there are still a few ways for desperate people to escape from the habitats. The exits are closely monitored and the depots closely watched, but a train station or truck stop are easier to watch than an airport, where the dome has to be lifted for a jet to blast off. It might only go up for a few minutes, but people escape in its vapor trail.

All the airports have observation decks, where guards watch the jets move out, and friends wave through the portholes. Most decks are accessed through hallways that lead in from the tarmacs. There are guards stationed in front of the doors, to keep the wrong people out. But it's a boring assignment, hour after hour, often reserved for a negligent guard who has screwed up somewhere else. Which means there's often a way to get through those doors, down the up staircase and outside, onto the launching pad extending from the port over the naked surface.

People find a way into those halls and wait for a jet to take off. When the dome goes up and the engines fire, the launching pads fill with vapor and people rush out from hiding. There's a scary few minutes while the warning lights flash and the sirens start to sound. But if you keep your wits about you, you can make it to the edge and leap before the dome comes down again, closing you off from Outside.

Leapers has become the generic name for anyone who flees a habitat. Leaper is not a polite term. It implies caving into cowardice, as if the person who fled lacked the courage required to face the challenges of social life. It's used to describe an employee who changes positions too often. But leaping was the only option for us, if we wanted to find Profman's Rachel.

I'm not going to reveal how we accessed a hallway that led to a launching pad. Ezmer Elder arranged it, and sharing information in this broadcast would put brave people at risk. What I can tell you is that we finagled our way onto a deck and watched a few supersonic jets take off before we got the signal to run.

Our jet was powered with water vapor, not synthetic fuel. That saved a chunk of credits and spared the atmosphere one more trail of burnt carbon. It also allowed us to run onto the launching pad a few seconds sooner after take-off. We watched through a porthole as the jet rolled into launch position and pivoted its nose cone toward the west. We heard an indecipherable voice crackling over the audio system, then the monstrous vapor engines whoosh!

The jet lifted vertically and roared forward. As soon as it cleared the launch pad, we heard a grinding noise that meant the curved edge of the dome was coming down again. It closed at the same rate it opened, leaving us barely two minutes to make good our escape. Through

the mist of condensed water in the jet's wake I saw other figures scrambling from hiding places around the runway toward the open sweep of the launch pad. They hardly seemed to hesitate at the edge before throwing themselves into the unknown abyss.

Ezmer Elder put both hands on the rubbery tarmac and launched herself like a sprinter. "C'mon!" she called over her shoulder to Gryphon, who glanced at me as if to ask, What could he do but follow her?

She waited at the very edge for him to join her, where they stood side by side. For a moment they paused, staring into the landscape. Gryphon looked very pale there, his fresh face red from the wind. They rocked their clasped hands backwards, threw their weight forward, and their shared momentum carried them over the edge. As soon as they dropped from sight, Priss whispered to me, "Our turn."

I trailed her to the edge and peered over, where my tingling anxiety turned to gripping terror. The world that lay before us looked unhappy to be outside the dome. The sky howled at us, complaining about the bitter cold and the streams of soot that streaked and churned like cinders from a fire. I was forced to squint to protect my eyes from injury. I cast them down and saw twenty-five feet below a river of light brown sludge even more violent than the filthy air above us.

Where the current smacked the rocky bank the foam broke dingy yellow. That was helpful, I thought, since it pointed out exactly where the cruelest rocks lay hidden. If we jumped away from them, we might drown a few feet farther down the poisonous stream instead of breaking all our bones on contact.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" said Priss.

I had to nod silently. What else could I do? I turned to face her.

Now there was something beautiful. Perched on the edge of the launch pad, her body stood taut and ready to dive into the maelstrom below her. Her eyes were bright, gleaming. Her cheeks seemed wet already, as if she wept for joy. She caught her lower lip between her teeth, to keep from shouting louder than the storm. For an instant I felt swept up in her excitement, sharing the thrill of leaping blindly into a swirling mass of destruction and creation. If that's how she saw it.

I put my hand on her cheek, turned her face to mine, and leaned closer. Felt the tightness of her skin as she squinted.

"You know how to swim in these waters, don't you, Mook?"

I thought she was speaking metaphorically about the emotional commitment it took to follow her anywhere, even over the edge. I nodded solemnly and prepared to seal our fates with a kiss.

"Let's go, then," Priss murmured and threw herself over the side.

I stood for a moment, staring in horror as her body fell beneath me, plunging toward the river. It took longer than a moment – an eternity. When she finally struck the water I felt my chest heave, filling my lungs after the loneliest seconds of my life.

I stood at the edge of the known world, gazing at the nothingness that swallowed my love. Behind me I heard and glimpsed overhead the curve of the dome coming down. My heartbeats marked each instant of indecision. I could stand there one beat more, weighing the pros and cons, and live my life without her.

Or I could leap.

I plunged into an oily flood that hardly resembled water. The river was icy cold but worse was the smell and the slick but sticky feel against my face and flailing arms.

Whatever coated those molecules hated human skin. My foot struck something large as I kicked the thick water, struggling to keep my knees up and mouth above the surface. However bad it stank, the taste of the river was worse. Even the dribble burned my lips as I spit out gobs of brown.

And it got harder and harder to spit.

The only places I ever went swimming were club pools or placid lakes built for recreation. The strokes I learned on the family farm were no match for the turmoil of brown foam bubbling and spewing around me. It filled my mouth, I vomited it out, and it filled my mouth again. When I focused on breathing, my strokes faltered and I dropped beneath the surface. If I focused on keeping up, arm after arm, I swallowed mouthfuls of slime. I sank, forced my way to the air, sank down again, struggled up, and dropped back into a cavern of muck.

I saw a rock on the bottom blink up at me, when something lean and muscular grabbed my jaw from above and flipped me onto my back. I flailed at it, trying to free myself, when suddenly I heard a voice through the hiss of white bubbles.

“For John’s sake, Mook, don’t make it harder!”

I thought it must be a vision concocted by my brain cells to ease me into death. Because it sounded just like Priss. What did I think an angel would sound like? Then I realized it actually was Priss, gripping my head in one white arm while she pulled us toward the bank with her other.

Gryphon and Ezmer Elder were waiting at the edge to help us out of the gook. I felt his hands under my arms lifting me onto the bank, and thought I heard something snap behind me. But I never looked back. Instead, I threw myself toward the dry land, which wasn’t all that dry but covered with slippery tangles of root that cracked under

my weight. I thought that must be the snapping sound I'd heard before, but Priss was looking backward at the river. Wide eyed.

"What was it?" I said.

She shook her head. "We've still got a ways to go."

Gryph and Ezmer Elder were squatting in a circle of dirt they cleared among the roots, trying to sketch with a broken stick the map stored in her skull.

"To where?" I said.

"There," said Gryph, pointing down river.

"The colony," said Priss. "Don't you remember talking about it?"

She meant alongside the canal in Frisky Town, what seemed like a long time ago.

We had the GPS coordinates, sure, but mapping those numbers onto muddy land was a different story entirely. Priss figured we could find the colony eight miles to the south, if we followed the riverbed. That distance seemed manageable from a comfortable table in Frisky Town, but under an ominous sky it seemed a superhuman trek. Overhead the clouds swirled and clotted in a wind that tore at our faces, dried our lips, and watered our eyes. How could it do both? With every step my feet sank deeper into mud, which just as quickly filled with filthy water when I lifted them.

The river spit in our faces as we struggled to advance. The current roared and sloshed, brown with yellow foam, twisting around jagged rocks and the hulls of rusted vehicles. Here and there a log opened its eyes, or slithered through the sludge to snap at junk circling an eddy. We hadn't gone two miles before the path beneath our feet disappeared, forcing us to stumble over gnarled roots that reached down from the stunted trees on our right to the bank of the river on our left, where they gripped the earth for dear life or rotted away.

After a lifetime of missteps, tumbles, and bruised limbs, we spotted a cluster of concrete sheds gathered around a rusted tower and a giant bladder hung over a solar stove. We climbed a hillside of brambles and found a lane hacked through the thorns, meandering into the valley on the far side. I must have been thirstier than the rest, or just more anxious to sit, because I trotted down the hill like a wild kid coming in for an udder. By the time I reached the bottom, I saw that the bladder was a cistern and the stove beneath it was a mechanism, churning to filter out whatever worms and poisons the collected water carried.

In other words, a water well.

I tried to remember what we learned about the leaper colony. It had been built seven years before as a research station collecting data on the surface. All its scientists left three years later and filed a report damning enough to be deleted from any public site. The place was supposed to be abandoned, but the cell tower was evidently active again and there were chips moving around. The authorities turned a blind eye to the leaper colony, because no one wanted malcontents inside the habitat, anyway. In the cafes you heard people whispering about it, wondering if anyone survived out there, and if they did, how. The four of us were about to find out.

At the foot of the well a woman was twirling in the square. Both her arms were bare, and the hem of her skirt swirled around her feet like a cat chasing a mouse. Her hair was a mass of brown, and her eyes were green-black, shining with a light that did not look like joy. Her mouth was smeared with red mud and her fingernails looked as if she had recently dug them into the flesh of a living animal. Behind her, a jug glinted in the failing light, where a young man rested against the base of the well. Or rather, what seemed to be a young man was resting

against the well. I'd seen enough cyborgs to recognize a Cy 8900, even when it needed a good cleaning.

People who get hurt can replace their broken parts with artificial ones – limbs and organs, even eyes and hearts – and still count as people. But replacing a brain is another thing. The 8900 is a pretty good model, but it has its limitations. They can program in the ABCs and multiplication tables, but the original person is gone. They have to put in some personality, and they try to make it likeable. So whenever you meet anybody too polite or cheerful, you're probably talking to a cyborg. They had bulked up the neck and shoulders to make this one useful. He gave me that look they all try to conceal, mixing service and suspicion in watchful silence.

"Hi, Cy," I said to start the interface.

The twirling lady answered me. "See more."

Up close I saw she wasn't as young as she looked from a distance. Her hair was auburn streaked with grey, but her eyes were a purer greener than I thought, shifting from kindness to sadness and passionate anger. I figured caution was the better part of valor and said, "Pardon?"

"See more. That's his name."

"Seymour, is it? And what's your name?"

She twirled away from me but soon returned to say, "Are you thirsty?" holding up a ladle of sloshing water.

"Thanks," I said and reached for the ladle. But she dashed it to the ground.

I bent down to pick up the ladle, keeping my eyes on her. She watched, with one foot on the other, bending this way and that, until I looked at the well.

"Do you mind?"

She shrugged her whole body, then reached over and pulled the ladle out of my hands. With her stare now fixed on me, she paced backwards to the well, refilled the ladle, and brought it back to me.

“Go ahead.”

I took it from her gingerly, but she didn’t pull away. In fact, she watched me tip it to my lips, and when I tried to lower it, she tipped it up again.

“We’ll get more,” she said. “He will.”

“Seymour?”

“That’s right. Down at the river. At the riverside.”

I glanced at Seymour, who nodded.

I’m not in the habit of asking permission of cyborgs, but it seemed right at the time. So I drank.

While I did, Priss arrived, a few strides ahead of the others. I offered her water, but she shook her head. “Did you make friends already, Mook?”

“That’s Seymour,” I said.

Priss’s gaze never moved off the twirling lady. “And who is this?”

“She hasn’t told me her name yet,” I said and in a softer voice added, “She might be the person Rachel and her doctor came to treat.”

The twirling lady must have heard me, because she stopped her dance mid-spiral and might have said something, if Seymour had not spoken first.

“Are you looking for the doctor?” the cyborg said. “I’ll get him, if you like.”

“He’s still here?” asked Priss.

“Oh yes,” said Seymour. “He has to stay as long as Mister Stillman needs him.”

“His patient.”

“Yes.”

“And the nurse who came along with him?”

“The nurse?” repeated Seymour, and for a moment I thought he would say, *That question does not compute*. Instead, he nodded and looked at the dancer, who laughed merrily and stuck out her hand.

“Call me Rachel,” she told me in a warm professional tone. “If you’ll please take a seat, the doctor will be right with you.”

The Leaper Colony

By the time Ezmer Elder and Gryphon joined us, we had made enough noise to bring the other Leapers out of their bunkers. The first one out was a slender young woman with pale pink hair cropped to her jawline. She wore a thermal suit from wrists to ankles that clung to her limbs like nylon. Behind her from the same bunker came a stockier woman, ten years older, bundled in a parka. Slower than her companion, she eyed me and Priss with undisguised suspicion. But the younger woman strode right up to Priss and tucked both hands in her own back pockets.

“Hey there,” she said. “Who’re you?”

“You’ll have to excuse Dolly,” said the stocky older woman. “All impulse. No manners.”

“That’s perfectly fine with me,” said Priss. “Hello, Dolly.”

“Hi,” said the younger one. “Dutch worries so much about everything.”

“There are rituals,” insisted Dutch. “For strangers who meet in the wilderness. To keep everyone acting nice and polite.”

“And safe,” said Priss. “Since you never know.”

“Exactly.” Dutch sighed in agreement, or else from the effort required to scramble out of her bunker. She put her palms together and bowed to me. “Welcome, stranger.”

I looked at Priss, who nodded, so I did the same, pressing my palms together and bowing to Dutch and then Dolly. “Nice place you’ve got here.”

From Dutch’s face I thought that might not have been the proper reply or even a reasonable observation.

We were standing in a windswept square formed by the well and three squat concrete structures. Each was about eight feet by ten feet and no higher than I could reach standing on tiptoes. Two of them had windows we could see from the square, made of translucent plastic so thick no shades were needed for privacy. On the far side of the three bunkers stood two more structures, one larger than the others. They were farther up the hillside, more exposed to the elements than the three huddled around the well. Behind those loomed the cell tower, a mass of rusted metal, like the one that crashed in Paris. A red light blinked on top reassuringly. The air smelled foul and the filter made a squealing sound, dangling over the well.

"Forgive us," said Priss. "We don't know your rituals too well."

"It's not our ritual," said Dolly.

"We didn't invent it," said Dutch seriously. "It's the recommended exchange between unfamiliar Outsiders. According to the latest research."

"That explains it," said Gryph, always the diplomat. "We're not Outsiders."

"Well, neither are we," said Dolly. "Dutch is here to study the river, and I'm along to keep her company. Nobody's a real Outsider, except maybe him."

She was talking about a skinny figure stepping out of a bunker. He wore a furry coat twice his size over hip boots. His left arm hung in a filthy sling and ended in a stump where his wrist used to be.

"Fingeroff," said Dolly, distastefully.

Behind him walked a taller man in the ankle-length coat of a medic. He was clean-shaven with flamingo legs and wing-span shoulders. His hair was the white of an aging blond, but his air of authority survived the wilderness. Doctor Bob, no doubt. Rachel's traveling physician.

“Hullo!” he called before reaching us. “Have you come from the habitat?”

“We didn’t mean to interrupt treatment,” said Priss, glancing at the one-handed man.

“Oh, I’m not treating Fingeroth. My name is Robert Hook 233. A physician, as you’ve gathered. I see you’ve already met Dutch and Dolly.”

“And Nurse Rachel,” said Ezmer Elder, “and Cyborg Seymour, there.”

“Patrissa 849,” said Priss. “This is Mikal 5412.”

“Mook,” I said, offering my hand. “Nice to meetcha, Doctor Bob.”

“Doctor Hook, if you will,” insisted the physician. He ignored my palm, which obviously played no part in his greeting ritual.

“The Gryphon here,” said Gryph, “with Ezmer Elder beside me.”

Doctor Bob acknowledged both with a single grunt. “I contacted my office requesting certain supplies. I don’t suppose you’ve brought them?”

Priss shook her head. “Sorry, Doctor.”

Ezmer Elder was focused on one-handed Fingeroth. “I understand that medical science can regrow a severed limb. Like a hand.”

“Yes, we can,” the doctor said. “I could, if Fingeroth had the right insurance. But you never thought you would need it, did you?”

Fingeroth didn’t answer him. Instead he murmured to Priss, “You’re a warden, aren’t you? I could always tell. But they don’t look like guards.”

“They aren’t, and I’m not anymore,” she said. “What happened to you?”

“He stole a couple of wafers,” said Dolly, “so—” She chopped the air with one swift blow.

“You cut off his hand?” said Gryphon.

“It was his idea.”

“We don’t have a jail,” explained Dutch. “Stealing food is a serious offense outside the habitat, but we weren’t ready to hang him for it. We all voted to kick him out, but he said that would kill him anyway. He begged us not to exile him and argued that his hand would be a more fitting penalty. Severe enough to serve as a disincentive, with convincing historical precedents.”

“You asked for this?”

Fingeroth said, “It wasn’t my first choice. But it’s better than dying alone.”

The wind blew up, and we braced ourselves, waiting for it to subside. All except Rachel, who raised her arms and launched herself into the gusts, dancing and twirling as her skirts swirled around her bare feet. Gryph tried to catch and partner her, but she evaded his grasp by dipping under his arms.

“You’ve got your work cut out for you, Doc,” he said breathlessly.

“Rachel? She’s not my patient either. I have tried to help her using the meager meds in my bag, but I haven’t come prepared to deal with this.”

We all watched her.

“So who exactly are you out here to treat?” asked Ezmer Elder finally.

“Mr. Stillman,” said the Doctor. “The man in that bunker there. He fell and broke his ankle two days ago. And fortunately he carries the full Life-Health Package. It covers a client’s health for the whole of his life, whenever and wherever he needs Class-A medical attention.”

Gryphon whistled silently. “That must’ve cost an arm and a leg.” Ezzie stuck her elbow in his ribs and glanced at Fingeroth. Gryphon colored. “Sorry.”

“Stillman never paid for it himself,” said Fingeroth. “Did he?”

The Doctor cleared his throat. "MOI Life and Health doesn't discriminate on the basis of the purchaser of the policy. Some are used as perks to recruit suits in demand. But you needn't have a suit to purchase a policy."

"You only need the income," said Fingeroth. "Isn't that the way it usually goes? Those who can afford it have it gifted, while the people who need it most..."

"Let's not hear that diatribe again," said the Doctor, "standing here in the cold. Nor is it likely to interest these travelers." Turning to us he said, "The cabin on the hillside is empty. Why don't you take that for yourselves? It's further from the well but close to the dining hall, so you should be fairly comfortable. You'll want to lie down and uncramp your muscles."

"I'll show them," said Rachel.

"I don't think that's wise," said the Doctor.

She twirled off toward our bunker anyway. I hoisted my pack and followed her, and the others followed me. We had come a long way to find Profman's Rachel, and finally here she was.

The bunker was hardly warmer than the air outside, but the walls did stop the howling wind and that was something. There was a solar heater in the corner, but the weather must have taken out some rooftop panels, because it wasn't coughing up too much heat. A pile of mattresses lay in one corner, a file cabinet stood for a dresser, and a black screen was bolted to a wall. Gryphon tried to turn it on, but no matter how often he touched the glass, nothing lit up the picture.

Rachel sat on the concrete in the middle of the bunker, looking up at the rest of us as we stood around her. "I'm not crazy, you know. But I am mad."

Was that a riddle? I couldn't tell.

Ezzy said, "At what?"

Rachel whispered, "They're planning to kill us all."

That cleared it up for me, but Ezmer Elder stuck with her, squatting alongside Rachel on the rough floor.

"Who is?"

"The corps."

"How?" persisted Ezzy, glancing at Gryphon. "How will they kill us all?"

"I'm a nurse," said Rachel suddenly.

"We know that," said Ezzy.

"Trained in radiation. Treating people poisoned and burned that way."

Ezzy nodded, *uh huh*. We found the right Rachel.

"They sent out a notice on all chips to people like me. Calling us together for a special training session. That's what they said."

"But it wasn't true?"

"No, it was," said Rachel, "but not exactly. They called us together because they needed all the people who knew how to treat radiation sickness."

"Why?"

"For training," said Gryphon. "She told us."

Ezmer Elder shushed him. "Why, Rachel? Why did they call you together?"

Rachel lowered her voice to a nearly silent whisper. "They're planning a war."

"No kidding," said Gryphon. "We're already at war. We've been at war with one corp or another for how long? Ten years?"

Rachel gave him an impatient look. "A real war. All the corps together against Chinkorea."

She might have said Neverland and made it sound more convincing. The Arena only reached from ocean to ocean. They couldn't broadcast episodes overseas.

"What do you mean?" asked Priss. "They're all real, aren't they?"

Rachel shook her head. “Missiles,” she said, lifting her fingers, “with warheads. Pointed west.” Her arm drew an arc though the air overhead that exploded in her palm. Then she looked up and started to shriek like a siren, and wouldn’t stop. Her voice grew louder until she was screaming at the top of her lungs, without words – just a long, sustained cry of horror.

None of us knew what to do, until the doctor burst in. “Rachel!” he frowned as he fumbled through his bag. “Not again!”

Gryphon touched my arm. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

I nodded. “Think so.”

“What on earth are we gonna tell Profman?”

27
Herbiology

We donated a few packs of wafers and earned an invitation to dinner in the big concrete bunker near our own. Portions were dietetic, to say the least. Two wafers and a packet of powder apiece. Dolly said we could drink as much water as we liked but could only choose one packet to dissolve in it.

Priss was talking to Dutch when I sat beside them. They kept right on talking as if I wasn't there.

"Did I hear you're studying the river?" Priss asked Dutch.

"Yes and no," said Dutch, swallowing with difficulty. "The river, but not just the river. The river and more than that, yes."

That seemed to me a long way around her affirmative answer. Priss smiled as if Dutch had coined an engaging rejoinder.

"Would you like an apple?" Dutch offered a bowl of stunted fruit with yellowish skins. They looked like an ogre had grown them in a mineshaft.

"I wouldn't eat those," said Dolly through a mouthful of lemon wafer.

"Are they safe?" asked Priss, picking up an apple.

"Absolutely," said Dutch. "I've them tested for every poison and biological agent."

"Now she wants to test them on us," said Dolly. "Her guinea pigs."

"I'm only trying to determine when the world Outside will be habitable for humans again," Dutch explained. "We can't all live under plastic domes forever. The demographics won't allow it. At some point we'll need to return to a more natural life."

“There’s nothing unnatural about habitats,” said an older man, entering the bunker in a medical chair that floated inches above the ground. He was wrapped in a thermal suit with a hood over his head. Doctor Bob followed behind him and turned down the hood to reveal the man’s bald pate, patched with grey liver spots. His hands lay folded in his lap, as if were accustomed to people rearranging his clothing.

“Mr. Stillman, I presume,” said Priss.

He gave her a curious look. “Did you bring my medication?”

Doctor Bob said, “They’re not from my office.”

“Then why are they here?”

“For another reason. Though they still haven’t said what it is.”

That made Priss and the rest of us more interesting to Stillman. “Did one of my friends send you? One of my dear former colleagues?”

“You’re that Stillman?” asked Priss.

The old man smiled. Not a pretty sight. “I made an impression on a few people during my lifetime,” he said. “My glorious career.”

“This man shook the heavens in Silko Valley once,” Priss told me. “A very senior veep. Number Three to the Chair, I think.”

“Number Two,” said Stillman.

I didn’t care, but Gryphon was staring at him, as if to read his wrinkles. Stillman’s eyes moved from one of us to the next but stopped at Ezmer Elder, who didn’t seem the least bit fascinated by him.

Ezzy was busy chatting with the physician. “Tell me, something, Doctor Bob. Today Rachel shared with us an incredible story, about missiles aimed at Chinkorea. Any chance there’s something to that story? A morsel of truth?”

“Afraid not,” said the Doctor, on his way to the table of wafers. “I know how persuasive paranoia can be, when it comes from a truly imaginative mind. Clinicians get caught up in these fantasies. But there’s no point trying to decode them.”

“She seems to think them important.”

“There’s a reason Rachel’s madness takes this form, but it hardly helps her recovery to pay too much attention. Just nod when she talks like that. Let it pass in one ear and out the other.”

“Nothing escapes my ears,” said Ezmer Elder.

“You grasp my meaning,” said the Doctor. “Nod and ignore it.”

He headed for the food, but his advice didn’t sit well with Ezzie. “There could be something to it,” she said. “Where’s Rachel?”

“Sleeping,” said the doctor.

At that moment the door flew open. I expected to see Rachel twirling in. But no one crossed the threshold. We heard only the wind, until a voice outside said, “We could use a hand here.”

Firm, familiar, almost ironic, like – Profman?

I knocked over my chair heading through the door, and only made it seconds before Ezzy. From the pallor of her face I knew she had heard the same note. Outside, a man was kneeling alongside Seymour, whose forearm he held as loose wires dangled from the wrist.

“Hello, Mook,” he said, as calmly as if he had just stepped out for a pot of tea. “Ezmer Elder. Can either of you rewire this thing?”

“Profman!” I cried for both of us. “How did you get here?”

“Same as you, Mook. No other way.” He grinned. “Did you shut your eyes when you leaped?”

I shook my head, dumbfounded. But Ez was faster, kneeling beside Seymour to examine his arm. "It doesn't look bad," she said. "A bit of solder should manage it. What happened?"

"My own fault," began Seymour.

"What did I tell you about that?" chided Profman. "This was not your fault. Who sent you out alone to haul these barrels of water?"

"Do you want to do it?" asked Dutch, standing in the doorway.

"I tried to give him a hand," said Profman, "until I saw his arm."

"I was careless," said the cyborg, "leaning over the rail without paying attention. Something bit me."

"I'd say so," agreed Ezzy.

"I've got a gun in my bunker," said Dutch, "and a spool of solder. Come on, Cy. We'll patch you up."

"I do regret my carelessness," he said, trailing Dutch.

"Are you coming back inside?" Ezzy asked me.

I looked at Profman, who slung an old rucksack over his shoulder. It was belted, but between the canvas flaps stuck out sticks of thorny foliage.

"What's that?" I said. "Your lunch?"

"Close," he replied. "A cuppa tea. But not for me."

Once we had him inside, we got the story out of him. Profman knew our leads from Otera Denge were wrong as soon he saw them. But he wanted to save us the risky trip through Silko Valley. So he let us head for MOI and Newa Yawk, while he went straight north. He found the clinic where Rachel worked and tracked her to the surface. We should have seen him when we arrived, but he was outside the settlement, rooting around the wilderness for his rucksack of herbs.

"Herbs, did you say?" asked the doctor from the end of the table. "What sort of herbs were you looking for?"

“This and that,” said Profman. “Nothing medicinal.”

That reassured Doctor Bob, who drew up his chair. “I’ve treated her with sedatives and psychotropic drugs. I doubt if anything more would be helpful.”

“Perhaps not,” said Profman.

“Or perhaps yes?” prodded the doctor.

Profman scratched his neck. “Do you have much experience with hallucinogens, Bob? I’ll bet you’ve treating patients who have overdosed. But even from that limited experience you must know that people who ingest them express delight at the insights that accompany them. They’ll hold up an orange or an idea and go mute with the joy of discovery.”

“Wow, they’ll exclaim,” said the doctor. “*Oh wow*. Afterwards they can barely remember their insights. Or if they can remember, their insights have paled by the morning, when an orange is just an orange again.”

“That’s true,” said Profman. “But what is going on, there? Have the doors of perception cleared and then fogged over again?”

“Some patients believe so.”

“But what do we believe? One scientist to another, doctor. I’ll tell you what I do. There is a center of the brain that tingles at discovery. Hallucinogens make pretty pictures and stimulate that whorl of brain. A tingle of insight comes first. Then we look for a way to explain it, something we can attach it to. If an orange is handy, we pick up the orange.”

He took a stunted something out of his pocket, with an eerie resemblance to an orange.

“This,” he said, “is an awful a fruit. Bitter as bile and wholly indigestible. But you know what? When you stare at anything long enough, you’ll notice something about it. See that navel?”

Doctor Bob snorted. “And the relevance of this?”

“I believe that paranoia works in a comparable way. A center of our brain warns us when we’re facing imminent danger –shooting adrenaline through our veins to trigger the fight or flight response. Some errant biochemistry can stimulate that part of the brain as well. When it does, we feel a desperate fear. Our life is at stake. And we look for a reason to explain that sensation, just as we did for an insight. Only this time the likely cause is more pernicious. A man looking at us sideways across the tram station, or invisible radio waves. A conspiracy of everyone. That’s why paranoids jump from windows, desperate to save their lives.”

“It’s a theory,” said the doctor, “but there are others. Witchcraft, for example, has its believers.”

Profman shook his head. “Rachel’s brain has been attaching a survival response to random thoughts. There are plants that can be used to calm that mental processing, which work far better than drugs designed simply to dull her emotions. Rae refuses to swallow those. She hides them under her tongue until your back is turned.”

“If that’s true,” said the doctor, “there’s nothing more I can do. No one can heal a patient who does not want to be healed. I have always been careful not to overstate my influence. Medicine has never advanced so rapidly as it has under the corps with their healthy – forgive the pun – spirit of competition.”

He hadn’t made any pun. Using the same word twice with the same meaning is not a witticism.

“My advice to you, Mr. Hoffman,” Doctor Bob went on, “is to leave medicine to the medical profession. Drink your herbal tea, share it if you like, but please don’t confuse it with genuine healing. My advice to the rest of you is to get a good night’s sleep. You’ll need it to go on in the morning.”

That pretty much killed the party. We had eaten our wafers anyway and drank our powdered water. There was nothing else to do but make our way back to our bunkers and find a path to sleep.

That wasn't easy. I tossed around on the floor with only a blanket to soften the rough concrete. Little by little, I inched closer to the mattress where Priss lay sleeping, until I had my head on its corner. I could feel the warmth of her thigh inches above me. It gave me some comfort, and I closed my eyes.

I must not have been the only one having trouble, because later that night I felt Priss's breath in my ear, asking me to bundle for warmth. We lay on the thin mattress wrapped in each other's arms, and it was heaven. The closeness must have gotten to me, or the intimacy, because the impulse came over me to lift my head for a peek at her. She looked so sweet, I decided to lean over and kiss her on the cheek.

But again she turned her face away. Even her cheek.

That pissed me off. I sat up on the mattress, two inches off the floor. Priss was barely breathing, until I heard her say, "What is it?"

"It's that doctor, isn't it?"

"Hook?"

"Doctor Bob. He's tall, clean-shaven – a professional man. I can see the two of you happily together."

"Don't be absurd. He told us all to get some sleep. That's what I plan to do."

"That's who you're waiting for, isn't it? A man like him."

She didn't open her eyes. "I had dozens of men like him when I was a warden."

"Dozens? You had them all?"

She lifted her head. "Maybe a dozen. I didn't sleep with them all, Mook."

“Did you kiss them?”

She turned her back to me, bundling against the wall.
“Go to sleep.”

I had just realized a truth about me or maybe her – about someone important. I stood up and pulled on my boots.

“Where are you going?” she mumbled.

“Outside,” I said. It sounded dramatic enough to me.

“Shut the door behind you.”

If there had been any doubt, she settled it.

I left.

The only problem was, as soon as I stepped outside, it was awful cold and there was nowhere else to go. None of the bunkers I could see had lights burning inside. I made a large circle, crunching over the frozen ground roughly toward the well, and was relieved to see a single light on the far side of a bunker.

Rachel’s.

I figured the doctor must be inside, ministering to his nurse. I knocked on the heavy door and got no reply. But when I banged with my fist, I heard Profman’s voice.

“Who the hell is it?”

“Mook,” I said. “And it’s cold.”

“C’mon.”

He opened the door quickly, and I saw Rachel on her mattress. Her mouth was open and noises were coming from her lungs. Profman put his finger to his lips and sat down on a blanket he had folded by her bed. Next to the blanket was a small cook-stove. A pot of something odorous was boiling.

“Keep quiet,” he said. “Rae is sleeping.”

The room smelled familiar. I couldn’t place it until I remembered the scent of his classroom in Herbiology. He was cooking up one of his teas for Rachel, that’s what it was. Profman was treating her with tea.

“Have a seat, Mook.”

The only place to sit was the empty second mattress, so that’s where I plopped down. The scent was even stronger there.

“You want some tea?”

“What does it do?”

“It soothes the brain’s center of fear and inhibitions. Try a cup.”

“Does it help with confusion?”

“Nothing scrambles the brain so much as fear.”

“There is one thing.”

“Something on your mind? Or someone?”

I never knew how he divined these things. At times it creeped me out, but it felt good that night to be hearing his voice. I said, “I just don’t get her.”

“Priss?”

“Any of them. She says she wants intimacy. Then she shoves me away.”

“You’re not alone in confusion,” he said.

“You seem to do all right.”

“You mean with the crazy girl I’ve drugged into a coma?”

I hadn’t thought of it like that, but Doctor Bob would. That gave me something in common with Profman. I almost told him everything, our whole sad story. But I spotted his ukulele wrapped in a blanket. “Are you singing to her?”

“Music hath charm to soothe the savage beast. Or breast, I never remember.”

“Pardon?”

“It’s a line from an old comedy. You want to sing along?”

“Won’t she hear me?”

“I’m sure she’d appreciate it more than my yodeling.”

He strummed the strings, fiddled with the tuning and sang, "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are grey. You'll never know, dear, how much I love you. Please don't take my sunshine away."

"That's a cheerful number."

"Wait 'til you hear the second stanza."

"Can't wait."

Profman resumed more softly, "The other night, dear, as I lay sleeping, I dreamed I held you in my arms. When I awoke, I was mistaken, so I hung my head and I cried."

"That's where I come in," I told him.

"That doesn't sound like you to me," he said.

"You should talk to Priss."

"Mook – Priss likes you. She wants to respect you. But you've got to give her reason to believe that you'll be ready to do what needs to be done."

He was always quick with lyrics. I never said he got them right.

28
Tea Time

Whatever Profman brewed into Rachel's tea made her sleep deeper than I ever saw anyone sleep before. She hardly moved under her blanket. He sat beside her bed for hours, strumming his ukulele or whispering into her ear. Once I saw him playing chess against himself, moving the pieces for the white side and then the black. He was awfully drowsy and mumbled about Marcel Duchamp, Phillip Marlowe and a bishop named Lopez. By the time I realized he was talking about an actual Spanish Bishop and not the cone-head piece on the board, Rachel was stirring and groaning in her sleep. I never saw anyone wake up as quickly as Profman did for Rae.

As soon as she opened her eyes and fixed them on Profman, I felt like a houseguest who walks in on his host. I needed an excuse to get out of there and saw the pot of tea still bubbling on the portable stove. There was a thermos sitting next to it with the lid off.

"You mind if I bring some tea to the fire? It's cold out tonight."

Profman never looked up. "Sure, Mook. Take enough to share. The others must be cold too."

He was right about that, because I offered the thermos to Priss and she took a swig, and so did the Doctor and Fingeroth, who were absorbed in a conversation with Dutch about transcontinental life forms. That was the reason Dutch had given on her exit visa – to research non-native life forms in the river Outside. Nothing about living a more natural life.

The atmosphere was natural enough a few feet from the firepit – it was freezing cold. Maybe for that reason Dutch was talking about heat.

“The first geothermal disaster altered the ocean currents,” Dutch said in a tone certain to annoy the Doctor. “The trade winds lost power, shifting the North Equatorial current, and the Gulf Stream petered out along the eastern coast. The northern Atlantic froze over, and the polar ice crept south. People started to panic about another ice age until their efforts to prevent one opened a monstrous hole in the ozone. All the new ice liquified with a vengeance.”

“The Flood,” said Fingeroth, clapping his remaining hand.

“That’s what religious folks called it,” said Dutch. “But it was just a predictable result of natural forces. As were the earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions of the third geothermal disaster. Releasing enough heat to open a tropical stream through the Pacific, enabling cold-blooded life forms to cross.”

“All perfectly natural phenomena,” said Dolly, taking the thermos from Dutch to down one healthy swig, then another.

Stillman was sitting in his floating chair, wrapped in a blanket, his eyes closed. I wasn’t sure he was listening until he repeated, “Natural as plastic.”

Priss turned at the sound of that. “Plastic?”

Stillman opened his eyes. “We are natural creatures. We cannot escape our nature. It follows that everything we do and everything we make is equally natural. A straw to suck ants from inside a tree? Perfectly natural for a chimp. A dome to keep out the storm? Just so for us. Nothing is more natural than plastic.”

“That’s your opinion,” said Fingeroth to all of them. “I wouldn’t call what I saw today *natural*.”

“It is my opinion,” said Dutch, taking the thermos, “but not *just* my opinion. Everyone may be entitled to one, but all opinions are not equally tenable. Stillman

may have his ideas, but on this topic mine are more than that. They're scientific facts, the closest thing to truth we can reliably discover."

"So you're right and everyone else is wrong," said Fingeroth. "That's not very tolerant, is it?"

"As tolerant as a claim deserves."

"I thought you people were supposed to be big defenders of difference."

"You mean people like Dutch and me?" said Dolly indignantly. "Don't you like lesbians, Mr. Fingeroth?"

"Sure. You're in my thoughts, day and night."

"Your prayers, I imagine," said Dutch.

"Those too." He flushed. "I don't care what you do at night. I just liked pro football better before it went touch for the sake of lady players."

"It's more equitable now," said Priss. "And less violent."

"But that was the whole point, wasn't it?"

"I'd say she's got you pegged, Fingeroth," said Stillman, floating his chair closer to the thermos. When the Doctor held it up, Stillman took it in both trembling hands, wiped off the mouth and gulped.

Doctor Bob turned to Fingeroth. "Our warden has maneuvered you into saying the unsayable."

"I think it's the tea," I said.

"The doctor deserves the last word," said Priss. "He's the only one qualified to comment on the cost of traumatic injuries."

"Thank you, Prissy," said Doctor Bob, "if the rules of polite society still apply in the wilderness."

"Are we really wild as all that?" Dutch asked.

"Wild is as wild does," the doctor said. "I'm sitting between a one-handed thief and an ousted senior executive."

Stillman made a sour face. "Too bad you can't choose your patients."

Priss reached for a second swig from the thermos. "You were excused from the Valley, weren't you, Mr. Stillman?"

"That's the verb they use for it," Stillman confirmed. "I prefer exiled, which makes me sound like Napoleon. An old Frenchman."

Priss nodded to show she had heard of hm. "Were you exiled from all the habitats?"

"Of course not," said the former veep. "The Silks are at war with MOI and the Hollies right now, so I wouldn't be welcome at the two nearest habitats, but don't waste your tears on me! I still have contacts in Porto Rico who'll make me a vested Ceed as soon as my fly-papers come through."

"So this is just temporary?"

"Did you think I would stay in this shithole forever?"

"If you don't mind my asking," Priss said, "why were you ousted?"

Stillman gave her a bemused glare. "That's rather a personal question, don't you think?"

"It's the tea," I repeated, though no one seemed to hear me.

"Sorry," said Priss.

Stillman waved it away. "We are beyond the rules of society here, aren't we? So let me answer candidly. I was bounced from the suite for nothing more than executives do every day. Padding your credit account is necessary to win the confidence of your suite-mates. Only when they force you out do they claim financial finagling and outrage over the discovery."

"For fraud, then," said Priss.

Stillman's eyes narrowed but he managed a chilly smile. "For playing my part in the system," he said. "To

quote some ancient fart – ours is the worst system, except for all the others.”

“That was Winston Churchill,” said Priss, “an Olde English King, who wasn’t talking about the corps. He was talking about democracy.”

“A king?”

“They voted him in, I think.”

Stillman shrugged. “It’s pretty much the same thing, wouldn’t you say? They voted in their monarchs, and we vote in our corps.”

I could tell how excited Priss was growing as she shifted on her log. She couldn’t help asking, “Is it really? The best we can do?”

“You can dream about something better.”

“Can you think of a reason the corp execs should have all the power?”

“Somebody has to.”

“Why?”

“Would you rather live in a place where no group holds authority? Anarchy creates a power vacuum that some group rushes to fill. Once it was the biggest bully who ruled the tribe. In our day wealth is power, so plutocracy became the default structure of influence. The rich will continue to get their way until another group rises to challenge them.”

Stillman lost me completely, but Priss kept up with him. “The execs,” you mean.

“Engineered for leadership. Trained for it from day one in philosophy, ethics, and practical management. Just as Plato wanted.”

“Plato thought philosophers should rule,” Priss said, “not a suite of business suits.”

“Plato thought people like him should rule,” said Stillman. “Isn’t that what we all want? The question is, who are people like us? In the old days, the mob voted in

anybody they liked. Butchers, bakers, television stars. Now at least there's some merit to the selection."

"You call born a purebred *merit*?"

"Purebreds aren't guaranteed access to power," said Stillman. "They get the first crack, because we have an idea of their genetic makeup, so we know what they're likely to do. But they have to prove themselves like anybody else. The boardroom is the most competitive place in the habitat."

"While the rest of us twiddle our thumbs, is that it?" Priss was practically spitting now. "You're a purebred, aren't you?"

Stillman shrugged. "As a matter of fact, I'm not. That may be why I'm sitting out in the cold, instead of a toasty office with a cyborg in my lap."

"That's horrible," Priss said. "Just awful."

"It is," Stillman agreed. "Did I hear that you were a warden at one time?"

"Yes, I was, in traffic court, until they canned me too. I couldn't figure out how to serve the corp and the bench at the same time. They always seemed to be pulling in different directions."

"I entirely agree!" he said. "The corps should not be running the state."

Priss was taken aback. "They shouldn't?"

"Oh no. People should."

"You don't believe the corps are actual people?"

Stillman paused as he must have learned to score his points in the boardroom. "Legally, the corps can own things and be sued, and that's why the law treats them like people. But those are hardly the defining terms of human existence. Corps are made of people, but so are lynch mobs. In fact, the corps have more in common with lynch mobs than they do with individuals."

Priss said, "Now you're just sucking up to us."

"It's a useful skill," said Stillman, "but not much use in the wilderness." He looked pleased with himself. "Lynch mobs exist for a single purpose, and so do corps – in the latter case, to make money. If a corp spends its resources on anything other than making money, it can be sued by its stockholders. People have more complex motivations. At least I hope they do."

"You do?"

"I'm a person too."

"So why," said Priss, "do the corps insist on the rights of human beings?"

Stillman smiled like a crocodile. "They don't want rights. They want power, which they use to pile up credits. Which serves a social purpose, they would say. After all, the biggest corporate holdings are in the hands of the suits themselves. The corps serve the personal interests of the most aggressive members of society. Who happen to be them."

They, I thought, always the grammarian.

"That hardly seems fair," said Priss, yawning.

"No, it isn't fair, but fairness isn't the point. Winning is. That's who women really want, isn't it? The man who can bring home the bloodiest kill."

He looked my way, and I couldn't help wondering if he knew what happened with Priss last night.

"It's not what I want," announced Dolly, unbuttoning her overcoat.

"What are you doing?" said Dutch.

Dolly stood up, dropped her coat at her feet, and disappeared into her sweater.

"It's hot," she said.

"No, it isn't," said Dutch.

"I'm hot," insisted Dolly, re-emerging. "Maybe not scientifically so, but I ought to know my own body. Don't you think, Mr. Fingeroff?"

“Absolutely,” he said, as she draped her sweater across the stump of his wrist. He didn’t even bother to correct his name.

“Sit down, Dolly,” said Dutch.

“I don’t think so,” said Dolly, undoing a zipper on her hip. “What’s the point of coming Outside, if we can’t live more naturally? More spontaneously?”

“You’re being ridiculous,” said Dutch, rising.

“Isn’t that funny? That’s what they told me in Frisky Town when I said I was coming with you. To live a more natural life? Ridiculous.” She stepped out of her pants and stretched her arms overhead, standing in her undies in the whistling wind.

Dutch picked up Dolly’s coat and tried to wrap her inside it.

“Stop!” said Dolly. “I’m fine.”

“You have goose-bumps,” said Dutch. “And you’re making a fool of yourself. What’s got into you?”

I probably would have said *Profman’s tea* for the third time, if Ezmer Elder hadn’t come out of her bunker and planted herself on a tree stump. By the way she sat down with her hands on her knees, I knew she had something to say.

“Well,” she announced, “it’s true.”

“What is?” said Fingereth.

“What Rachel told us. We are going to war. At least preparing for it.”

“Ridiculous,” said the doctor. “Another land war?”

“Not for land this time.”

“Then what?”

“The rumor is, something they use to make chips,” Ezmer Elder said, tapping her temple.

“That’s ridiculous,” said the doctor, less certainly.

“I’ve been communing with fans,” said Ezzy. “I asked anyone to write back who’s ever piloted a bomber.

Not a single tattle. So I asked for anybody who's ever flown inside a bomber or fighter jet. You know how many chatters came back?"

No one guessed until she opened her empty palms.

"Not one?" said Dutch. "That is interesting."

"It's spooky," said Dolly.

"They must be busy," said Fingerroth. "Or else bored with your blog."

Ezzy shook her head. "You don't know my fans. If I asked the time of day, I'd get hundreds of answers. They're busy, all right. Rachel told us they gathered all the doctors and nurses with experience in nuclear burns. They've gathered the pilots too, capable of bombing. Now why would they do that?"

The doctor shook his head. "It can't be true. Rachel is not a spy. She's sick, that's all, imagining things. That's what sick people do. They imagine they're in danger. Or that all of us are."

"Just because she's crazy doesn't mean she's wrong," Ezzy said. "My fans don't lie to me. Those jets are locked and loaded, and aimed at Chinkorea. The only question is, *Are we gonna tell anybody or not?*"

We had one advantage over everybody else. We were riters, with access to the Arena. At least that was the general idea in our heads when we decided to spread the word Rachel had given us.

This broadcast has grown longer than we anticipated, but at least you know how we found out now, and can make up your own mind whether to believe it. We believed it and tried to do what we thought right – to let the rest of the world know. That idea inspired Priss. She thought she had found her purpose, the very thing she was meant to do when she gave up her wardenship.

I wasn't sure that anybody would care. But we talked it over and didn't know what to do next, after finding Profman's. If there ever was a reason for us to find her, maybe this was always it.

We couldn't rite new episodes for the war, anyway. Those were still virtual, so anybody watching them would assume that the war with Chinkorea was virtual too. We had to get the truth out, the reality on the ground, but discovered that our access to the Arena was useless for this more serious purpose. We had created a virtual world and found ourselves trapped in it.

Priss was our conscience, urging us to keep trying. If the Arena was no help we would have to find another way to broadcast the news.

The first person I tried to contact was Otera Denge, but I never reached her chip. She was never available, which made no sense at all. Once they assign you an address, it's yours for life. That's how you track your GPS, manage your credit file, and charge your purchases. There were occasional traffic jams, and Otera sat in a high-traffic site, but they usually got those cleared in a

matter of hours. For an address to be unavailable longer than a day meant that something had gone seriously wrong, probably with her whole tower.

Or with the sender.

Profman stuck by Rachel with tea and his songs, chanting by her bedside as she slept. He couldn't understand why they hadn't yet proven effective. I couldn't tell if he was wasting his time. Maybe the Doctor was right after all. But Profman's conviction was so compelling, his belief in his own construction of her consciousness, I had to give him the benefit of the doubt. Doctor Bob kept giving her medicines through a tube in her arm, and they were doing no good. Profman's tea, daubed on her lips, could hardly be doing worse.

Profman must have wondered too, because he began experiments. He borrowed equipment from Dutch and set up a little filtration system on the floor of Rae's bunker. When I stopped by, I would see him stooped over a bubbling beaker, or else strumming 'til his fingers bled and whispering in Rachel's ear.

We couldn't make any progress. The same outlets that welcomed our episodes showed no interest in broadcasting the facts of an actual war. Rejections were polite, couched in the language of our profession, but the message came back over and over. The current material is unsuitable for our needs at this time. Please feel free to submit your ideas again to us in the future.

Then they began coming back without that second sentence.

Ezmer Elder tried using her blog to spread the word, but her posts wouldn't upload. Our fan sites were blocked. Someone targeted our screen names, and we could guess who they were. We were disconnected, which was the scariest thing of all once we realized it.

“Hey guys,” said Ezzy, “let’s not forget the fighter jets and missiles.”

“Oh yeah,” said Gryphon. “Them.”

This was more than we bargained for. The corps were pushing us, raising the stakes, making life more expensive. They were forcing us to choose – were we in or out? They didn’t know we were already as far Outside as anyone could get. Or so we thought.

“Are we ever going to be able to work again?” Gryphon asked Priss. “I mean, have we ruined our reputations forever?”

“Something bigger is at stake,” Ezzy told him.

It wasn’t clear to me what was at stake. If Rachel’s story was on the level, we had to get it out. But Doctor Bob supplied a reasonable explanation for what she said, and Profman’s theory seemed weaker as he failed to bring her out of her coma. Rae slept and muttered about clouds and radiation burns. Sometimes it seemed we’d been carried away by the threat of her delusions, just as the doctor warned us.

Gryphon and Ezmer Elder broached a new idea. If nobody else would broadcast our discovery, maybe we could broadcast it ourselves.

We didn’t have the right kind of tower. A cell tower designed to allow incoming calls didn’t have the power or the systems needed to broadcast a signal strong enough to be picked up by chips embedded in skulls miles away. But Ezmer Elder thought it possible to pump up the power in our cell tower and convert it to a pirate broadcast station.

“That’s illegal, isn’t it?” I said.

“Sure,” said Ezmer Elder. “But we’re already a gang of spies who sneaked out of Holliland and into Silko Valley with no exit or entrance visas. Are we going to worry about a broadcast license?”

That left only a technical question. Did any of us know how to convert a tower? “Seymour might,” said Gryphon. “That’s part of his programming, isn’t it?” None of us was sure, so we asked the cyborg.

Seymour was anxious about breaking the law – there was no better way to describe it – but he was programmed to do as he was told, and the four of us together convinced him to help by coding a string in his memory that left him no choice. Our survival was at stake. His final reservation concerned his responsibility to carry barrels of water from the river to the filtering system of the well.

“Mook will do it,” Priss promised. “He’ll give you a break from that duty.”

Seymour shook his head. “He won’t be able to lift those barrels.”

“I’ll help him,” she said and again refused to take NO for an answer. Cyborgs are often programmed like that, so customers won’t return them in frustration. The guards have special frequencies that override civilian commands, but we were outside the reach of any guardhouse. In the end Seymour went with Gryph and Ezzy and a toolbox from Dutch, while Priss and I went down to the river to fill a barrel of water for the colony well.

Those barrels were bigger than they looked when Seymour tossed them around. We had to roll one to the river, onto a bridge, and hook it to a pulley that lowered it into the water. It made a huge splosh as it dropped under the surface. There shouldn’t have been any reason to haul it out again. A pulley system was supposed to do that at the push of a button. Except the button didn’t work when we pushed it, so we had to crank the thing out of the current by hand. That proved even harder than it looked.

My head was over the edge of the bridge, when all of a sudden I imagined the meanest two rows of teeth set in

jaws that yawned like a trap and came straight at me. For a minute I couldn't move, unable to believe my eyes. At the last instant I felt two hands on my shoulders, pulling me away from the edge. A second later, a giant snap! clamped the air where my head had just been.

"Mook ... are you all right?"

I felt dizzy but said, "I think so. What the hell was that?"

Priss gestured with her head and I turned back to the river, where the thing I thought I imagined was reaching again for the bridge. An eighteen foot crocodile flew up from the brown water, wriggling as it leaped. Its jaws unhinged, spread wide and snapped shut again, showing me what I had missed.

"I don't believe it," I said.

"Don't you listen?" replied Priss. "Dutch was talking about them last night. Those things used to live in the swamps of Australia, but now with all the changes in ocean currents —"

"They're here. Welcome to life on the Outside. I think we have enough water for one trip, don't you?"

I'm no Indian Jones, but schlepping the barrel back to the well was a piece of cake, after that. There was no way we could lift it, filled with water. We hammered the top back on again with a wooden mallet that hung by the pulley box for just that purpose and rolled the barrel sideways down the bridge. To keep it from rolling away from us I had to get in front of it, with my back to the barrel and both feet planted on the path. It was muscular work, which isn't my strong suit, but it gave me a chance to show off for Priss, who watched rather anxiously. The main thing was not to let it crush me.

After that, I made a few trips to the river on my own. Once you have a system, it's a one-man job. I needed help emptying the barrel into the cistern that hung over

the well, but they had a pulley for that too. The more water I carried, the less Seymour had to, and the more time he spent rewiring the cell tower with Gryphon and Ezmer Elder. After a while, I didn't even mind water duty. It was strenuous work, but I was actually doing something of tangible benefit for our community. It made a nice change from my usual line of work.

I got pretty good at rolling the empty barrel, faster and quieter with each trip to the river. One time I was rolling with so little noise the Doctor didn't hear me coming at all. I found him at the foot of the bridge, intent on a conversation he was having over a commercial satellite phone. At first he was murmuring, but as I drew up behind him he raised his voice and I heard him say, "Yes, we're still here. Yes, she is. But I can't tear her away from an old beau of hers that showed up one day like the Plague. He sits by her bedside, and no matter how much I pump into her through the tube, he finds a way to distill it. With tea."

I stopped rolling the barrel to listen.

"He has four allies," the Doctor said. "Riters, most of them. One is called the Gryphon and the next is called Ezzy. Short for Ezmer Elder ... You've heard of them? That is interesting. There's another, Mikal 5412, who calls himself Muck. No, that's right. Mook."

I wasn't about to let him name Patrissa 849. I was standing on higher ground, so I leaped at him from behind, knocking us both to the ground. He kept himself in shape, I'll say that for Doctor Bob. I struggled to keep one hand over his mouth, so he couldn't name any more names.

He grabbed my throat in both hands and started to choke me. I couldn't pry his fingers loose, so I had to do something I invented for Colonel Hollister, striking him in the windpipe with my elbow. That knocked the breath

out of him, and he broke off his satellite call. But he found his footing between me and the riverbank, with no focus for his fury except yours truly.

You don't want to fight a doctor if you can help it. They know all the weak spots in the human body. But you don't want to fight a riter either, who has imagined every possible way to kill an enemy. Doctor Bob had big fists and he swung them like balls of iron, but he had no practice at hand-to-hand combat, while I spent many working hours dreaming of nothing else. He swung his fist, I ducked and hit him in the stomach. He swung, I stepped aside and hit his the face. He kept picking himself up, staggering a little more each time, until he paused to catch his breath with hatred in his eyes and the roar of the river behind him. I could hardly hear the curses he howled at me.

Apparently neither could he, because even though I warned him he didn't hear the crocodile scraping its belly over the stones along the riverbank. At the last instant he must have seen the horror in my face, but it was too late for him to avoid the terrible jaws that caught his knees. He made a funny face, toppled, and the beast dragged him back to the river, where they disappeared together beneath the brown surface. I saw a trail of blood bubble up in the foam, but there's so much junk in that water, it's hard to tell one blotch of scum from another.

I left the barrel where it dropped and ran back to the colony. The only one in the square was Profman, filling a jug at the well. Breathlessly, I told him what happened at the river. But he didn't seem surprised at all.

"You caught the doctor making a call," he summarized my story.

"Reporting us. One by one."

"So you took him on, hand to hand, and tossed him into the river."

That wasn't how it happened exactly, but Profman dismissed the details.

"I'll tell this story, Mook, including a piece you don't know. I've been wondering what triggered the survival response in Rae's brain. Our own biochemistry can do it, but that doesn't usually spark at fifty years old. We see it mostly in the twenties, unless someone lends a hand."

I didn't know how, but I could guess who the lender was. "Doctor Bob."

"You know the drugs he's been feeding her? That psychotropic mash in her IV line? I analyzed the stuff. It suppresses neural activity, all right, together with emotion. But it stimulates the brain center that warns us we're in danger. Calming her down on the outside, like a pillow over her face, while it stirs up the fear juice in her brain stem. Inviting her to look for an explanation."

"You mean there are no jets aimed at Asia?" I felt a rush of personal relief and professional embarrassment. How could we explain this?

"I wouldn't go that far," Profman said. "Come, see for yourself."

He led me into Rachel's bunker, where Priss was sitting cross-legged on the floor in the spot Profman had occupied for days. Rachel sat up on the bed with her back against a pillow to the wall.

"Hello, Mook," she said pleasantly.

Priss stood and took my elbow. "I'd like you to meet Rachel," she said. "The Real Rachel, this time."

"You healed her?" I said. "Your tea finally worked?"

"And songs," said Rae, with a sunny laugh. "Don't forget the singing."

"Once I knew what Bob was feeding her, I made the adjustment," Profman said.

"Not to mention cutting off her IV line."

"I have an account to settle with that man," Rachel said.

Profman said, "Not any more. Mook settled that score at the river."

"What do you mean?" asked Rae.

Profman balled his hands into fists. "We won't see Doctor Bob again."

"You drove him off?" said Priss.

"So to speak," said Profman. "Mook fed him to a crocodile."

"Well," I said, but she didn't wait for details. Priss leaned over and kissed my fuzzy cheek. I turned to face her, and she hesitated ... so I shrugged.

"I guess I did."

Priss kissed me on the mouth. That was what she meant all along by sincerity.

I would have liked to kiss her back, but there was no urgency. The line had been crossed. One kiss meant there would be another.

Instead, I asked about Ezzy and Gryph, who were making progress. Seymour built the cell tower for the first residents of the colony. He knew it like the back of his hand, which was wired in the same configuration. He knew every cable and relay of the tower, which made its conversion faster than it would have been if we had to figure it out.

"Show her the Manifesto," Priss urged me.

"It's not finished," I said.

"It's not yours either," Priss said. "We've all been contributing. I want Rae to see what we've been up to, while she was dreaming about bombs."

"The threat is real?" I said.

Rachel nodded. "I think that's why they poisoned my mind in the first place," she said slowly. "So I wouldn't spread the alarm."

“We can, if anybody can,” Priss assured her. “C’mon, Mook. Give.”

I closed my eyes and forwarded the broadcast, as it was coded by then. When I opened mine again, Rachel’s eyes were closed, but they kept opening wide. “Oh my god,” she said, more than once.

Profman squeezed her shoulders in comfort. “You don’t have to scan the whole thing at once —”

Rae sat up like a woman possessed, both eyes open and focused. “Have anyone got a pen and paper?”

She might as well have asked me for a feather and inkpot. But Priss kept a pen in her pack ever since her warden days. And she had a little pad, scribbled over with notes from the farmhouse at MOI. Priss tore off the top and handed it over to Rae. “Be my guest.”

Rae looked at Profman, then at us. And began scribbling madly.

Freelance Manifesto: Rachel's Draft

There can be no revolution without a lively counter-culture to nourish it.

People disaffected with the status quo need validation and support: validation that they are not crazy for wanting things to be different, and support for their attempts to change things.

Without it they will end up on the surface or in the grave.

Change is easy. Improving things is hard. It's easiest to fuck things up.

Every change is not an improvement. But that doesn't mean the impulse to change is misguided.

Thinking outside the box is simple. Thinking differently inside the box is hard. Throwing away the box requires an understanding of the purpose the box was designed to serve.

Inspiration is fun. Perspiration is not. The former without the latter makes for unhappy people.

With all these cautions and warnings in mind, the only human conclusions are still:

Choose hope over despair. Action over inaction.

The life you save may not be your own.

The Return of Ten Black Feathers

After she finished scribbling, Rachel fell asleep again, exhausted by the strain of coming to her senses. Profman said it would take several rounds of sleep and tea and music and remembering. He was ready to keep it up forever, if that's what she needed, dozing on the rough floor, while the wind beat random rhythms on the concrete walls of her bunker. Happy even.

The rest of us felt good too. I never expected to find Rachel myself, and we had tracked her down to help restore her sanity. Profman looked twenty years younger, despite his lack of sleep. Seymour was rewiring the cell tower for broadcast capability, which meant we ought to be able to transmit our message. I was starting to wonder when we might start for home, when Ezmer Elder asked if anybody saw the new mage posted by Silko Valley for broadcast on the Arena.

No one had, so she said, "You'd better. We're in the army now."

I couldn't figure what she meant, since three of us were already riting the war. Then I saw the mage.

It had obviously come from Silko Valley's in-house riters, but the surprise was the narrator. It was voiced by Ten Black Feathers, one of the most popular Silko characters ever.

He was an old medicine man who had once been a reckless warrior. He hadn't appeared in an episode for months, because of a copyright issue.

Ten Black Feathers was the brainchild of a freelancer who'd picked up a lackluster pony rider named Two Black Feathers, reimagined him as an old man, and made him more popular than he had ever been. The corp claimed the credits, the freelancer objected, and the

character was kept off the air while the case was adjudicated.

It made the news mostly because nobody ever challenged a corp in court. Who do you think appoints the wardens deciding those cases?

I was also curious for professional reasons. It had to draw a huge audience of Ten Black Feather fans.

Then I saw the episode that changed everything.

32

Shooting Blankets

Aliksa'i!

Hatred in the hearts of our enemies our people understand. We look for it, celebrate and revel in its power, because behind that bitter hatred lies their fear of our strength, our courage, and our faith in the Spirit that made us.

What our people cannot fathom is the kindness of our enemies. We see only weakness there, a faint-hearted attempt to win our pity through surrender. We do not pity our enemies, and their gifts will not bend our resolve. Like a spear in the grip of a warrior, our will penetrates the soft flesh of their tributes and blandishments, tearing out the poison that lies behind them.

We seize their appeasements as the spoils of victory and swear no oaths of gentle treatment. But sometimes that eager pride, cried aloud, strikes us in our bowels.

You laugh at an old man warning his people, shaking his feathered staff. But I have seen what you have not, and the moon that wanes will wax again, as springtime turns to winter.

You have made your blankets for hundreds of years, just so, on your looms. What do you need these woolens for? You think the ones who offer them are acting in fear of you, turning up their throats to your knife. But they are not gifts of tribute, not surrender to our strength, but traps they will spring in our sleep.

How can a blanket be a trap? Where is the hidden spring? The pit or toothed claw? A bolt of warm cloth, folded on itself, an extra layer of warmth against the coldest night. Where could be the threat in that?

You point to the traders, unarmed, our friends, spreading their blankets of peace on the ground, inviting

us to sit on their soft nap. But who are these people who offer us these gifts? Why have they come? Where do they call their homes? What do they hope to achieve by their kindness – if that is what it really is?

These are the questions we asked of old, the questions we must always ask. Who are these traders and their soft spoken friends? Who are these ritters, these story-tellers, who crept into our nation, hidden in the straw?

They have not come to the tents of our chiefs, they have not bent a knee to us, or shared a pipe with any sign of respect. They have come to make us warmer in our sleep, they claim, to help us keep our babies dreaming through the night. Put your hand on this wool, they tell us. Is that not a comfort? Why not rest your head? Why not take one back to your tent?

Why not? We should be asking, why do they care? You may think these questions do not matter. But wait until you hear what I have heard.

I have entered the sweat lodge and let the Spirits lift me as a Black Crow over the River of Mud, until we floated on the wind over Crocodile Bend. They have shown me our enemies in their full feathers, and this wisdom I will share with you.

Sit, sit and you will learn.

This man who invites us to call him Mook – would you like to know who he really is? His true name is Mikal 5412, born in the southern Mojave, a native of Holliland, and the father of Colonel Roy Hollister! Cursed be his name. Do you really think the Blond Butcher's father is here to help your children sleep?

Who has he brought with him but Simon Giorgio 7, who calls himself the Gryphon when he rites. How many brave warriors have fallen under his sword? How many children wander the camp homeless thanks to this scheming monster?

Ah, you listen now. Good, good. You may save yourselves yet.

Look at the women they have brought into our camp. This one they call Priss, but that is not her name. She is Patrissa 849. Do not be misled by her simple dress among us. She served as a warden in her own place, dispensing Holly justice. What Silkos would subject themselves to that special kindness? None, I should think.

Thanks to the Crow.

And you, the last one, the nearly silent woman – Ester Ellyn 19, is it? What do you do? Go ahead. Tell us all. No secrets here.

“I drop bombs.”

Yes, you do. From heights greater than the eagle flies. Too high above the earth to see the figures down below, as they burst soul by soul into flames.

Do you hear, my people?

These are the friends who have come to bring us blankets. Would you still touch them? Would you wrap your children? I think not. I hope not.

These are not blankets! They are weapons of the enemy. I have seen blankets no dirtier than these bring painful death to a tribe. Striking the strongest warrior deep in his guts, forcing him to turn his stomach inside out, retching and shitting until he died. Those are the blankets they have offered us as gifts!

What should we do? Throw them on the fire and burn them to ashes – the blankets first, and then the spies who brought them!

All right, we'll give this tower one last try.

Seymour says this mage will go to somebody, somewhere. I hope he knows what he's talking about.

This is our last broadcast. We need to leave the colony immediately. The Silkos have posted an episode on the Arena voiced by Ten Black Feathers. In the middle of his spirit talk he names each one of us, calls us spies for Holliland, and reveals our location. The guards will be here once their orders trickle down.

Our welcome has expired.

There's no point in trying to enter the habitat again. Once they have a warrant and your chip signature, there's no safe place to hide. Our only choice is to head south toward the Holliland lines. It's a long way, but we'll try to catch a truck on its way to Holliland or Mexxaco. The farming domes in the inland valleys are usually pretty lax when it comes to security. They've been traded back and forth so often by the habitats, they hardly know which battle side to root for.

We'll have to do some hiking over the surface, and we'll need some supplies to manage the trek. Priss put herself in charge of organizing those, with Gryph and Ez to her load the backpacks. I went to Rachel's place to give Profman the news and find out if he wanted to come with us.

I found him in his usual spot by Rae's bedside with his legs up on the mattress, strumming his ukulele. He was cheerful, expecting a full recovery and ready to wait forever if that's how long it took.

"Bad news," I told him. "They found us."

"Who?"

“Silko. Somebody. I’m not sure, but they’re on their way.”

He thought it over. “You better go.”

“What about you?”

He shook his head. “I need to see her safe and well.”

I tried to reason with him. “Rachel is safe. She was sent Outside by her company. She’s supposed to be here. They might ask about Doctor Bob, but hey, everybody knows the surface is dangerous. Eaten by a crocodile? An awful accident, but hardly her fault. The guards won’t touch her. She’s a nurse on a medical mission. She hasn’t traveled anywhere without permission or sent out any mages with no broadcast license.”

“Neither have I.”

“But what are you doing here? Speaking of which, how exactly did you get here so fast?”

“Clear thinking.”

“Is that what you’ll tell the guards? It’s their least favorite kind.”

He picked up his ukulele and fingered a chord. “Who would make her tea if I left, Mook? Or sing songs?”

“Who will play that thing if they haul you away?”

Rachel’s eyes opened.

Profman smiled at her. “Nobody’s going to haul away this cranky old veteran. I’m a war hero, Mook. Fight your fight. We’ll keep fighting ours right here.”

He wasn’t about to leave her side no matter what I said, and to tell you the truth, I never thought he would. Profman came a long way back to his Rae and wouldn’t risk losing her again.

When I left, she was propped against the headboard, laughing at the silly tune he sang as he strummed. That’s the last memory I have of them and that’s the one I plan to keep, no matter what anybody tells me.

Our fight was to tell the truth.

People say, *You heard this and I heard that*, or *You think this but I think that*, as if all points of view are equally believable. They are not. It's the Tower of Babble in ruins, preventing folks from working together with a shared vision of what is wrong and how to fix it.

Some ideas are well informed and carefully thought through. Other ideas are half-baked. Gryphon, Ezmer Elder, Priss and I claim that nuclear bombs are loaded on jets heading overseas. The corps claim there are no jets. One of those statements is true and the other is a bald-faced lie.

That's why they're calling us terrorists.

If we weren't scared enough, Ezmer Elder wondered aloud, "How do you suppose they got our full names?" There's only one way they could have managed that. Someone at Hollister must have shared our private data with a friendly exec in Silko, who contacted them after Doctor Bob's satellite call. They do communicate *for compassionate reasons* in wartime, they say, *to minimize collateral damage*. That's what they claim, though it has more to do with who trained with whom as junior execs and what favors they expect in return. The question is, what do they mean by *collateral*?

There's one truth for the executive suites and another for the rest of us and no resemblance between them.

They like to call ritters imaginative, but at least we know where a mage gives out and life on the ground begins. Virtual doesn't mean the same – in optics it's opposed to real. We can't forget the people out there who care about what pops up in their skulls. The Colonel and the Corporal and even Lara C are ghosts of sounds and images, inside your brain. The people who suffer actual pain and hunger and loneliness are walking around beside you.

The wardens of Holliland and Silko Valley shared their truth, and guards are closing in on our colony. Priss has come to get me, urging me to end this mage. We need to leave, to make our escape, if any is still possible when signals from our skulls keep revealing our location. We have no secrets any more. But thanks to a bootleg broadcast tower, no longer do they. It's up to you to decide that now, after watching and listening.

This is our manifesto, our testimony and the story that led us to the truth. If you pick up this broadcast, please share it with your friends and anyone else you can reach. If they bounce it back, claiming it's badly coded, mistaken, or otherwise unacceptable – now you know who it came from and how we learned the truth. Do with it what you think best. If you're picking up our broadcast somewhere else in the galaxy, in another era or fractal dimension, let it serve as a record how we lived in this place, at this time, on this world.

Signing off freelance. Chow, baby.

Mission Report: Prisoner Exchange

In response to a tip from a southern source, a squadron was dispatched by Silko Security to sector 49 of the open surface in pursuit of reported terrorists. The suspects were discovered in a grove of fallen sequoia trees seventeen miles outside the protective domes. They claimed to be eco-tourists collecting samples of petrified wood, but their chips identified them immediately as the four wanted fugitives Mikal 5412, Patrissa 849, Simon Giorgio 7, and Ester Ellyn 19.

They were apprehended and brought into custody without resort to violence, despite their uncooperative behavior. The women were consigned to cell-block 16 and the men to cell-block 11, where they were held for three days. Interrogation reports concurred in finding them well trained or poorly organized, since no coherent terrorist plot could be detected in their brainwave patterns under questioning. Charges were emended to espionage.

On the third day a post was received from SV Corp that all four prisoners should be prepared for transport. An arrangement had been negotiated with Holliland to exchange them for three Amazing sales reps, two Oracle hags, and a Google-eyed program Searcher. Holliland sent a junior exec and two familiars to the exchange site, plus guards for the Silko Valley prisoners. The following conversation was recorded among the four Holliland spies as one of their escorts approached.

[PLAYBACK]

"Is that ... Honcho? In a white smock?"

"It must be. Look who's standing beside him."

"I can't believe it. Yoncee?"

"Priss and Ezzy, please. They're almost in earshot. Mook –"

"Hey, Honcho! Good to see you, man!"

"And you, bro! C'mere."

"What are you doing out here?"

"What does it look like? Springing you out of the pokey, man. All of you."

"You did? Or Yoncee."

"Somebody had to speak up for the four of you. I mean, you're not much, but Yoncee needs somebody to throw flowers at her."

"You don't mean –"

"Uh huh. We're making the long trip, bro. Down the orchid aisle."

"You are? But she would never bond with anybody except..."

"Sad to say it, man."

"You're a purebred? No fucking way."

"Scary, huh?"

"I can't believe it. What about the Cuban flag strung across your wall? What about Cheech and Fidel?"

"They're still cool. Inspirational."

"While you're what? Pure Euro, I guess, if Yoncee wants to bond with you."

"Spanish. From Seville."

"Wonderful. Not even Barcelona?"

"You have no idea how hard I tried to get away, man. I mean, a purebred? Me? But Yoncee saw the scar on my navel and knew what it meant –"

"So?"

"She said she likes my dimples."

"And?"

"She wants her offspring to have my disposition."

"You're breeding with her?"

"Only for two spawns, then we're quits."

The male escort tried to shrug it off, but the female came up behind him and took his arm in hers. She kept it locked tight as a pigeon-trap and beamed her gap-tooth grin at the four returning refugees.

“Isn’t he wonderful?”

[END RECORDING]

Freelance Manifesto: Final Draft

There can be no revolution.

People disaffected with the status quo will end up in Thailand, on the couch, or in the grave.

Change is hard. Accepting reality is easier.

Change will not be an improvement. The impulse to change is misguided.

Thinking outside the box leads to deeply troubled people.

With these cautions in mind, the only possible conclusions are still:

Hope leads to despair.

Your life is not your own.

Service to home and habitat is wonderfully rewarding.

THE END