



**Freedom
Incorporated**

Freedom Incorporated

Peter Tylee

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This ebook edition has been created by Nathaniel Hoffelder.

The cover image was created by PJ Lyon.

Prologue

Not even the toughest self-imposed code can put the multinationals in the position of submitting to collective outside authority. On the contrary, it gives them unprecedented power of another sort: the power to draft their own privatized legal systems, to investigate and police themselves, as quasi nation-states.

Naomi Klein - "No Logo", 1999

Monday, March 25, 1998

Greenbrier High School

Evans, Georgia, USA

It's the real thing - Suspension

High school senior Mike Cameron is serving a one-day suspension today for wearing a Pepsi shirt to Coke Day, an event Greenbrier High officials created to win a \$500 contest held by the Coca-Cola Bottling Co.

Coke Day was Greenbrier High School's effort to win a competition in which schools around the country had to come up with a plan to distribute Coke discount cards in their local areas. School officials hosted a Coke Day and invited Coke executives from Atlanta headquarters 100 miles away. The day included, among other things, integrating Coke into class instruction and a sea of human art. At one gathering students wore red and white Coke shirts and lined up to spell the word 'COKE' for an approving audience of Coke executives.

However, one human pixel was proving to be less than cooperative. Mike Cameron was making up part of the letter 'C' but wasn't wearing his prescribed Coke shirt.

"I know it sounds bad - 'Child suspended for wearing Pepsi shirt on Coke Day'," Principal Gloria Hamilton said. "It really would have been acceptable... if it had just been in-house, but we had the regional president here and people flew in from Atlanta to do us the honour of being resource speakers. These students

knew we had guests.”

Mrs Hamilton said Cameron also ruined a school picture, something that had drawn a six-day suspension in the past.

“The first thing the officials did was send the assistant to my classroom to get me,” Mike Cameron said. “He took me to his office and told me some B.S. about messing up the picture or something like that.”

Mike Cameron was then sent to the Principal’s office. “When I went into her office she gave me a speech about how I may have lost the school \$500. Note this is the most important problem with what I did, it must have been, it was the first thing that came out of her mouth. Then she said something about how I damaged the picture, that this was an important day for the whole student body, and we all wanted this day to happen. But I don’t remember being asked if I wanted this day.

“I just sat in the chair looking around, and I noticed about 20 12-packs of coke sitting by a bookshelf in her office,” Mike reported.

The incident certainly provides an insight into the degree to which commercialisation pervades every element of our society. For Mike Cameron, suspension is certainly the real thing - but it also leaves an unpleasant taste in his mouth.

Chapter 1

There are certain corporations which market themselves so aggressively, which are so intent on stamping their image on everybody and every street, that they build up a reservoir of resentment among thinking people.

Jaggi Singh

Monday, September 13, 2066

Circular Quay

15:23 Sydney, Australia

Again it was Monday. And deceptively it felt the same as any other Monday - the hunt was on.

But why? Dan Sutherland wondered restlessly.

Why am I doing this? Again? And he gave the answer he always gave: Because it makes sense. Hunting provided a refuge, somewhere safe for him to hide. It was just a pity he couldn't also find asylum from the turmoil in his mind.

He paused to scan the surface of the harbour; water churned up by the departing ferries sent eddies dancing from the quay. The pregnant clouds lost their battle with gravity and a curtain of droplets pattered on the paving. Perfect. It matched his mood and elicited a grim twist to one corner of his mouth. The men and women around him scuttled for cover and before long only a dissident child remained with Dan under the growing pelt. She stood wide-eyed, holding out a small hand in a futile effort to clutch the droplets that were disintegrating upon impact. A moment later the child's mother gripped her arm and tugged her under the overcrowded eaves - to safety.

So Dan stood alone, mesmerized by the spiralling pattern of chaos etched on the water where the acidic rain mixed with the salt of the harbour. With effort he cast his gaze over the jostling crowd, nurturing a seed of envy and loathing it at the same time. Broken men could never rejoin the synthetic world of the living. Or so he told himself.

He watched as they blundered into each other, rushing to return to their cube-farms - claustrophobic squares of office space crammed in the middle of a ninety-something story building. Most were frustrated by the crush that each were, in turn, helping to create. No doubt they'd share comments of ire with colleagues while sipping a latté and shuddering at the nightmarish weather brewing outside their glazed windows. Dan's smile faded. He couldn't bring himself to care about his clothes and the rain wasn't heavy enough to threaten his lungs. He wore a tattered coat, well past its use-by date. Only his boots were of any value, and they were waterproof guaranteed. He figured now was as good a time as any to put that to the test.

The throng was receding and he recommenced worrying about his target. Dan knew he'd be easy to spot. Adam. He tested the man's name in his mind. Adam Oaten. He was wearing a distinctive brown beret, beneath which a few wisps of greying hair protruded. There you are. Dan spotted him walking toward quay five and lengthened his stride to catch up.

Ferries were such an antiquated mode of transportation, so slow and inefficient. Dan wondered how they managed to stay in business; he didn't know anyone who used them, except holidaymakers. He scanned the boards before stepping out of the rain and shaking the beaded water off his coat. Rivercats to Parramatta departed from quay five, all-stop services - express ferries didn't operate outside peak-hour. He joined the queue at the ticket terminal and craned his neck to watch Adam select his destination, but the terminal was at an inconvenient angle and Adam's hunched shoulders blocked his view. Dan frowned, wondering whether Adam was being deliberately cautious. He'd been careful, but there was no such thing as too careful, not when hunting. Soon it was his turn at the terminal and he purchased a ticket to the end of the line, eyebrows rising when the fare blinked on the display. So that's how they turn a profit. He walked reluctantly through the gates and the sensor read his microchip, automatically deducting the exorbitant fare from his linked account.

He felt his left eyelid pulse and ran the back of his hand across his face, watching as Adam sagged into a seat at the end of the pier. Dan edged his way past the other passengers to lean against the railing. There he watched. And waited. He caught a dim flash of light from somewhere out at sea and braced for a thunderclap that never arrived.

He studied the mark. Time's cruel touch had aged him since the photographs in his file and a quiver of curiosity played across Dan's face. I wonder what he did. He recalled the words: moderate danger - approach with caution. But Dan couldn't see anything dangerous about him.

With an effort he pushed his thoughts aside and focused on his task. Only the insane would apprehend him there. Too public. Dan preferred something quieter and was content to wait and see where Adam led him.

The ferry arrived. A bedraggled deckhand sluggishly tossed some rope to secure the rivercat to the pier and hauled on the line until the ferry jolted against the protective foam. The young man's muscles bulged under his oilskin and he was

panting from exertion by the time he'd swung a ramp to the pier. For their part, the passengers disembarked quickly. They trotted from the ferry holding up hats and half-opened umbrellas to stay dry.

With a resigned sigh, the deckhand swung the gate and, like cattle, herded the new ruck of passengers aboard. Dan deferred to the others, preferring to board last. He wanted to be sure that Adam would already be sitting so he could choose his seat accordingly. He always had a reason for his actions. His wife had called it exasperatingly pedantic, but Dan preferred the term efficient. This way he never wasted energy; everything he did worked toward a goal.

Oddly, a feeling of boyish excitement swelled from deep within when he boarded. The thought a ferry trip revived something he thought he'd lost forever. Enjoyment? He wasn't sure, but then, he didn't really want to know. It was irrelevant. It felt good, and good things should never be analysed. Analysis had the power to destroy.

The deckhand looked impatient, waiting for a secret signal from the Captain. When it arrived he closed the gate, kicked the gangway back to the pier and released the lines. With a whirr of the motors the ferry backed from the quay like a skittish cat, causing the brave passengers on deck to choke on diesel smog. It wasn't until the Captain swung the helm and reversed his port engine that the ferry spun, proudly pointing toward the harbour and sparing the passengers from the noxious fumes. The Captain then pushed both throttles to the stops and the rivercat lurched forward, leaving turbulent water in its wake.

Dan fought the urge to go and stand on deck. The tantalising thought of a breeze ruffling his hair and the lure of salt spray on his lips were almost too much to bear. Despite the lashing rain that would sting his eyes, and despite the pain his flesh would suffer the next day, the thrill still beckoned him. But today he was busy. Today it's business. So he contented himself with gazing at the other rivercraft from his droplet-streaked window.

Lightning flashed just before they passed under the Harbour Bridge and it lit the water with a copper-green tinge. But this time there was also a thunderclap and Dan felt it reverberate in his knees. He pressed his cheek to the window and glimpsed the Bridge, barely for long enough to admire the miracle civil engineers had performed so long ago. But the rivercat raced ahead, spearing a path through the smaller craft that were brave enough - or foolish enough - to be

on the harbour in the brewing storm.

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The Raven fingered his scar, tenderly.

Black was his colour. Stealth was his virtue. And hunting was his game. Today was no different. But he needed an omen and it frustrated him that none had yet arrived. His coat gently flapped in the slow drizzle, shining black with the wetness. The Raven brushed it aside, reaching into the folds of his clothing to stroke his Redback-PX7. Banned by the international convention of '38, the Redback had all but vanished, held only by a scattering of terrorists and law-snubbing pistol enthusiasts. It fired pellets of glass that detonated an inch into the victim's flesh, but its nanotoxin payload was the real miracle. Most men would have shivered at the thought, but the Raven was intimately familiar with this kind of convulsing death.

He caressed the cold carbon-steel barrel.

A shallow ripple of skin between his eyebrows was all that signalled a frown, the only outward indication of his mounting frustration. He crouched, the black leather of his mid-calf boots creaking in protest. And again he fingered his scar, an inch above his thick hairline. The sensitive pads on his fingers crept across the slight pinkish bulge, invisible to all but the closest examination.

The Raven was one of the few men who never found the rain bothersome. Perhaps he had thick skin stretching across his bones, or perhaps the tingling pain simply never registered with his tampered brain. Either way, he took no note of the trickle down his chin that dripped a steady tattoo on his trousers. It was getting heavier but there he would remain, as always, until an omen released him from the shackles of caution.

*

Adam stood before Dan noticed the rivercat slowing for Meadowbank station. He eased himself out of his seat, surprised to feel his lower back seizing in protest. He gently massaged the taut muscles while strolling casually to the front of the cabin.

The deckhand expertly looped a mooring line over the bollard and hauled the

ferry close enough to use the gangway. The passengers shuffled past. The rain was pounding on the corrugated iron roof of the ferry terminal and it drowned any words they may have uttered. Once more Dan deferred to the others, disembarking last. He nodded a mute thanks to the deckhand who dutifully grunted in reply.

His attention shifted. There were four people between Dan and Adam. He watched the beret's peculiar bob and sway, caused by the older man's arthritic gait. The Meadowbank terminal emptied into a barren car park where a dilapidated ute - parked lengthways across three faintly marked spaces - spoke volumes about the suburb. Dan stopped at the end of the terminal, his nose inches from a curtain of water caused by the combination of poor guttering and leaf-litter. It distorted his vision, giving the world a surreal texture. Most of the passengers scurried to their cars, one man holding his briefcase over his balding scalp in a futile attempt to avoid acid scarring. Another dived into his Commodore and revved the engine hard before grinding into gear and laying rubber on the road. With a vigorous swirl of the wheel, he navigated the chicane and sped out of Meadowbank as fast as his thrashed car would take him. That seemed to be a common sentiment. He was the first, but others followed. Soon only those unfortunate enough to actually live in Meadowbank were still there - stranded and ambling to their dreary apartments.

Dan took a deep breath. It smelled like rain. Rain and a broken sewage pipe - fairly common with Sydney's outdated sewage system. His nostrils twitched, detecting a hint of chemicals drifting across the river from the factories that had reopened at Rhodes a decade ago. He knew, at least intellectually, that they had to go somewhere. But emotionally it made no sense. He couldn't fathom why people would allow something like that in their backyard. But only poor people live here now, he reminded himself sombrely. And poor people had no political friends.

Adam had already reached the old rail bridge so Dan swept the car park with a final suspicious gaze before walking briskly to catch up. They passed beneath the new bridge and veered right to head up the hill, toward the apartment blocks that dominated the suburb. The only other passenger from the ferry was hurrying to the left, soon indistinguishable against the dreary backdrop.

Dan felt the familiar rush, the tingling sensation, the sharpening of all his senses, the knotting in his stomach. He had enough adrenaline pulsing through his veins

to reanimate a corpse. Ten paces. Dan narrowed the gap, made sure they were alone, and reached inside his coat. His fingers laced the handle of his 1911 automatic pistol. His preferred model was virtually antique, but it was reliable and the newer weapons had never impressed Dan enough to make him abandon his favourite Colt.

Five paces.

Dan raised his weapon and calmly said, “Adam Oaten.” It was a statement, not a question, and it carried a note of warning. “I shouldn’t need to tell you not to move.”

Adam froze mid-step and turned slowly, only to see the .45 jutting in his face. He uttered a resigned sigh. “I was wondering if you were one of them.” He didn’t bother to mask his contempt.

“Over to the toilet-block.” Dan gestured toward the brick structure with his weapon. It reeked of late twentieth century architecture. The once garish bricks now only held the memory of their former yellow. Dozens of snails had embarked upon the arduous journey across the path that rimed the squat building, advertising themselves as a meal for hungry birds. Adam picked a delicate path around them.

“Hands on the wall.”

The skin on the back of Adam’s hands looked like tissue paper, ready to tear at a moment’s notice.

The air reeked - an acrid combination of vomit and excrement that the drizzle only aggravated. Adam spread his legs and let Dan pat his sides for weapons.

Dan pressed the muzzle of his automatic into the small of Adam’s back, hard enough to bruise. He grappled with his handcuffs and slapped them around Adam’s left wrist. Then, with a twist to the cruel metal that would ensure compliance through pain, he wrenched Adam’s arm behind his back and fastened the other half of the cuffs. It was never easy; Dan felt vulnerable working alone. He’d never grown accustomed to it after leaving the force. Only the reassuring click-click-click of secured handcuffs released the tension pent within.

“You’re American aren’t you?” - Silence - “Aren’t you going to read me my

rights?” Adam turned to search his captor’s face when the tension eased on his arms.

“Hadn’t planned on it,” Dan said huskily, shaking his head. He no longer operated entirely within the law. He wasn’t acting illegally - after all, Adam Oaten was a dangerous man and Dan needed to apprehend him - but there were simply no laws that covered his line of work.

Adam Oaten had five days’ unkempt stubble on his chin and carried an air of moral superiority. He was the type of man that could look down his nose without tilting his head.

“So you’re the latest puppet?”

Dan didn’t understand the question. He raised an eyebrow, one of the few expressions he permitted on his stony face. “What’re you talking about?”

“But not a particularly clever one I see.” Adam rubbed an itch from his cheek onto his shoulder. “Not if you haven’t yet figured out the game.”

“What game?”

Adam searched Dan’s face for the answer to an unasked question then said, “To answer that would take me longer than you’d care to listen.” He grunted. “Tell me, do you have trouble sleeping?”

On a whim, Dan played along. “And if I did?”

He laughed. At least that’s what Dan imagined the sound was supposed to be. It sounded more like a crumbling wall. “Yeah, I bet you do. You have the brainwashed look. That naïve expression I’ve seen a million times in a million people.” His shoulders slumped, something invisible snapping within. “But I don’t have the energy left to save you. So do what you will, and find your salvation somewhere else.”

Dan wondered whether Adam Oaten was entirely sane. Salvation? Dan didn’t consider himself in need of salvation, and even if he did, Adam would be the last person he’d seek for assistance. Months had passed since Dan had needed anything from anyone, and he was fine with that just the way it was. His patience snapped. “Whatever,” it came out harsher than he’d intended and he

added more softly, “come with me.”

The stinging pain registered first. Dan slapped a hand to his neck the way he might swat an insect and was surprised to see it splotched with red when he pulled it away. Blood? In the shocked moments that followed he couldn't comprehend how that was possible. He looked to Adam, he hadn't moved. Then how...? He left the question hanging as instincts took over and he drew his Colt, his eyes urgently groping for the threat.

Then he registered the shattering sound. With rising dread he felt his wound again. Superficial. Just a graze. He risked a glance back to the toilet-block. Sure enough, there was a blossom of powdered glass on the bricks. The larger shards had already danced to a stop on the concrete path and caused the nearby snails to retract their antennae.

Dan peered through the drizzle, sweeping his handgun in an arc, ready to squeeze the trigger at anything that moved. He paced backward, acutely aware of the looming danger. He used his free hand to put pressure on Adam's chest.

“Get back,” he ordered gruffly.

Adam shuffled to obey, pulverising a snail as they retreated into the women's toilet.

Dan was preoccupied scanning the park, alert to anything that moved. A pool of water collecting in the hollow of a sodden newspaper gleamed with movement 30 metres away. He jerked the Colt toward it then steadied his aim with his other hand. Damn trees. They provided the perfect cover. The assailant could have been anywhere; there was simply too much ground for Dan to cover. A copse of trees 20 metres away sprouted foliage thick enough to conceal an entire squad.

Adam coughed. It was a strained, spluttering cough and it commanded Dan's attention. One glance was enough. Someone had fired not one, but two capsules. And the first had hit its mark. Adam hunkered against the inner wall of a toilet stall. A spasm contorted his body, jerking his legs from beneath him and he landed heavily on his rump. He coughed again, this time flecking blood at the corners of his mouth. The capsule had entered his upper thigh and the hollow pellet had delivered a devastating strain of nanotoxin.

It was useless. Dan could see that. The time until death depended solely on the

potency of the nanotoxin. He wished he knew what to say. He fumbled silently for the key to his handcuffs.

“Don’t bother with that now.” It obviously pained Adam to speak around the swelling of his tongue. The whites of his eyes darkened and Dan watched helplessly as they ripened to sickly saffron before blooming to rouge. “Do me a favour...”

“Name it.” What else could he say to a dying man?

“Spare me...” - blood flecked onto his shirt through a hacking cough - “a bullet.”

Dan stepped back and lined Adam’s forehead into his sights. The barrel quivered and he held his breath to steady his aim.

He fired a single round and Adam’s head jerked back and slammed against the flimsy toilet stall. For a moment that looked like where he’d rest, but slowly he toppled and slid to his left, striking his temple on the filthy rim of the toilet and dislodging his beret. He finally came to rest on his side, the handcuffs twisting his arms behind his back at an unnatural angle.

How pointless, Dan thought. He didn’t have to die. A flame of hatred kindled in Dan’s inner darkness.

He retrieved his cuffs and tightened his grip on the Colt before edging toward the entrance. Damn you! He knew who it was. He knew exactly who’d killed the crazy old fool. He peered outside, eyes locking onto anything that looked remotely dangerous. The park was empty. Impossible. He knew the Raven was close; the rain was too heavy for a long-distance shot. At fifty-metres a capsule might penetrate a dozen raindrops, and nobody could accurately predict where it would land after that. And that’s why I’m still alive. He gingerly felt the gash on his neck. It wasn’t bad; the nick had barely broken his skin. But if the glass had shattered...

The world outside was a plethora of movement. Every leaf jiggled cheekily in the rain, all vying for Dan’s attention. He tried to scan beyond the noise, seeking something out of the usual. He didn’t know the Raven well enough to predict where he’d hide. And he may not wait for me to leave. It was a chilling thought. The last thing Dan wanted was a shootout with a lunatic.

He heard another capsule shatter above the patter of rain and sheltered his eyes from flying shards. It could have come from anywhere within a 120-degree arc. Damn. It was beginning to look as though he'd have to dash for safety, a dangerous prospect considering he had no idea where to lay covering-fire.

One of the good things about late twentieth century architecture, at least in Dan's current frame of mind, was their insistence upon skimping wherever they could. Few things were made to last unless someone stood to profit from ensuring it would. And nobody was keen on spending unnecessary money on public property - such as a toilet-block. The wall separating the women's toilet from the men's was barely above head-height. There was ample room to vault it and Dan wasted no time tucking his pistol into its holster and clambering to stand on the nearest toilet.

A puff of dust mushroomed into the air with each hand he planted on the bricks and a few moments later he was in the men's toilet - quite literally, having stepped in the men's urinal.

The rear of the toilet-block butted against a CityRail fence. Someone had painted a crude skull on its rusted links and it served as a stark warning to anyone foolish enough to trespass on the tracks. The rails were at the bottom of a 20-metre drop with sheer walls. A poorly concealed trail to Dan's right slipped under a section of the fence where someone had yanked the wire from the ground. Dan supposed a local brigade of teenagers, who no doubt thought the skull was hilarious, did their secret binge-drinking somewhere in the artificial canyon.

Dan wetted his lips and the creases on his brow deepened to a frown. There was only one thing he hated more than losing control of a hunt: betrayal.

"Never again." The words slipped out before he could keep them in check. He abandoned the cover of the toilet-block and dashed into the rain, wondering if he'd feel the sting of poison exploding in his flesh. An acidic droplet rolled into his left eye, which watered uncontrollably. Upon reaching the fence he sank to his buttocks and slid forward, forcing his body through the tight squeeze. Thick reeds concealed the entrance from all but one oblique angle and they scratched his cheeks, ears and hands. Then his coat caught on a protruding wire. He angrily wrenched to his right and heard it rip. With another furious twist, his coat tore enough to allow gravity to finish the job and he slid off the ledge. Only when it was too late did he give any consideration to how he would slow his

descent. The teenagers who'd created the hole had also provided a rope, but Dan didn't see it in time and had no clue where he should reach. His back grated across the jagged rocks and a searing pain spread to his skull when an outcropping struck his coccyx.

He twisted and groped for the reeds that lined the embankment but the leathery plants just sliced his hands and snapped at the base. With a final desperate attempt, he dug his fingers into the rushing wall and splinters of dirt dug deeply under his nails, but his descent continued. He landed heavily, one of the tracks smacking him across his upper shoulders and knocking the wind from his lungs. If he'd landed a little closer he'd have broken his neck, closer still and his brains would be leaking out of his ears.

He lay there stunned, unwilling and unable to move. But then the track started to vibrate. He rolled onto his front, scraping his knees on the foundation of basalt rocks, and staggered to his feet. After briefly arching his back to alleviate the pain he backed into the scrub at the base of the slope.

A stiff breeze buffeted him a second before the train screeched past and he used a forearm to protect his face from the swirling water that gusted along with it. Dan counted the carriages by the whooshing sounds. Then, just as suddenly as it had appeared, the train was gone, seeming to take with it all the viable oxygen. The vacuum that remained sucked Dan forward and he stumbled onto his knees.

Meadowbank station was only two-hundred meters away and he limped toward it.

The adrenaline was gone, consumed by the pain, but the flame of hatred remained. In a way he'd always had it, he'd just chosen to forget. But now that circumstances had forced him to remember, Dan didn't intend to let it escape.

*

The Raven approached on light feet.

He was obsessed by the goal and would never rest. Not until the task was complete. Such was the omen he'd received.

Messages arrived in his mind, two of them. But neither assigned with high enough priority to distract him from the goal. He entered the toilet-block

cautiously, sweeping the stalls for Sutherland before focussing on his prize. Sutherland was gone. Good. A shiver ran the length of his spine when his ethereal senses told him Dan had just used a portal in Meadowbank station. He relaxed, holstering his Redback.

He took no pleasure from his work; it was merely something he had to do. Slowly he drew the implement from his belt and twisted it to the muted light, watching as his reflection danced along the shiny metal surface.

The Raven dragged Adam by his feet to the middle of the floor and slashed the clothes that covered his back. He paused for a moment, carefully selecting the correct position, and then plunged his instrument into the corpse. The horrific sound of grinding bone echoed from the walls as he removed the correct vertebrae, the one that contained the microchip. And that was his prize, the only part he needed to return. The stains on the floor and the state of the toxin-infected corpse never bothered him; they were anecdotal. This was his job. This was why UniForce paid him well.

A wicked smile gleamed in his eyes. On second thoughts, he did take pleasure from his work.

*

Tuesday, September 14, 2066

22:15 Coffs Harbour, Australia

Jen sipped her lemon water.

“It just doesn’t work like that.”

She took another swallow, gulping the last of the bitter fluid before her temper made her say something she’d regret.

“And it’s about time you realise it,” he said. “I just want what’s best for you.”

She believed that. How could she not? Her father had always wanted the best for her. Yet somehow, he always managed to misdirect his efforts. “If that were true you’d let me discover what I need to do on my own,” she said sharply, cringing at her unintended tone. Her tongue was often her curse - she tended to say what everyone else in a room was thinking but had the tact not to mention. She’d never been good at tact; it was a mystery to her.

“I just don’t want to see you struggle the way I had to.” His untrimmed eyebrows had turned grey five years ago and were now talcum-white.

“I won’t,” Jen retorted.

“Then find yourself a job.” John Cameron pleaded. “Start now, before it’s too late.” He paused, not wanting to press too hard. He knew he had to manage Jennifer carefully. “I can make some calls if you’d like?”

“No!” She slammed her glass to the table and made the cutlery jump. “I know you mean well but I will never go to one of your interviews. Don’t you see?” It was her turn to plead. “I’d rather live in the gutter. I’m different, I just can’t do it, and I won’t. It’d kill me.”

He sighed, taking the napkin from his lap and setting it aside. “Then how?”

She cast her eyes to the tablecloth. “The same as grandpa.”

John Cameron’s skin flushed at the mention of his father. This was precisely what he’d been trying to avoid through years of careful planning and parenting. His worst nightmare was sitting across the table. No, please. He couldn’t bear

the thought of another activist in the family. His father's activism had scarred his childhood and he didn't want that kind of life for his daughter. He knew the world had problems, but he also knew there were limits to what one person could achieve. It came down to quality of life. Why can't she see that? He studied her carefully. Stubborn child. He still thought of her that way - like a child.

Jen stood and skirted the table to kneel in front of him. She took one of his aging hands in both of hers, squeezed it, and said, "I have to do what I think is right."

He nodded. "I know." She thought she could see a thickening to the sheen over his blue eyes. "That's what I'm afraid of. The world has changed since your grandfather's day. I don't want to see you get hurt."

"I won't." But her smile looked strained. "I promise."

He grunted. "That's not something you can promise. Just be careful, deal?"

She smiled more strongly. "Deal," she said, squeezing his hand a second time. "I have to go now." And she fled to the bathroom before he could protest. There she stood, mesmerised by her reflection in the mirror. She was glad that she'd inherited her father's eyes, and very glad she'd inherited her mother's nose. Jen's rich chocolate hair swayed around her shoulders. There was something almost regal about the way she held herself, a confidence that came from the realisation she was doing the right thing. Other than that there was nothing remarkable about her, she was dressed like a typical university student - jeans, brown hiking boots and an oversized collared shirt. When she finally shattered the trance and opened the door, her father was waiting for her beside his portal in the foyer.

Jen dug into her pocket for the microchip selector. The name on the tag read Elisa Turner but she'd been using that alias for too long and she pressed the next-identity button. Two other names flashed on the display before resting on Susan Beaton. That'll do. She made a mental note to change them all, she hadn't used a new identity for months and that was a mistake.

"Bye Dad." She accepted the mandatory farewell hug and pecked him on the cheek.

"Take care." He watched as she stood on the platform, smiling at him as she flashed away.

*

Tuesday, September 14, 2066

19:37 Carnarvon, Western Australia

Deep down, Jen knew her father was wrong. He was trying to protect her the only way he knew, and she loved him for it. But they were approaching life from irreconcilable angles and there was no common ground between them. Grandpa understood. It made her feverish with guilt, but she felt closer to her deceased grandfather than to her father. Thinking about the infamous Mike Cameron left her with the dreadful feeling of emptiness - she missed him too much.

Still, her father had a point and Jen hated the part of the world that lent it credibility. That was precisely why she would continue to fight, all the way to her own destruction if she needed to. She shrugged the morbid thoughts aside. Out here, at her favourite place, she was free. Or as close to free as she could be.

There was a three-hour time difference between Coffs Harbour and Carnarvon so the sun wouldn't set for another half-hour. Just enough time. She really needed it tonight, more than most nights. That was often the way things went after a visit to her father. Reality was depressing.

She filled her lungs with sea air and strolled down the ocean road. The warmth of the sun's rays beaming on her icy flesh reassured her that everything truly would be okay. It was only a short walk; the Carnarvon city council had spared no expense, building portal stations every few kilometres.

She rounded the bend and gazed out to sea, catching the slight tang of salt in the air. Carnarvon was by far the quietest seaside town Jen had found in her quest for the perfect place. The sheer tranquillity proved the deciding factor, bumping it to the very top of her list. More than anything else, she longed to settle on a small plot of land overlooking the ocean, build a modest house, and sail a charter catamaran.

There it is. The sign was still there, just as she'd hoped. The local branch of Realty King had planted a monstrous plastic billboard at the front of the empty block. As much as she detested the sign, it meant that nobody had yet purchased the lot. The land hugged the coastline and gently sloped toward the ocean. It was squatting on a craggy hill half-a-kilometre from the water, but for Jen it represented Eden.

She read the sign as she approached - 1.74 acres of paradise - but averted her eyes before the price could sink her mood. She strolled onto the lot and sat under the gnarled gumtree that dominated the upper corner of the block. Leaning against the trunk, she closed her eyes and inhaled the eucalypt scent, allowing the energy rolling in from the sea to energise her body and mind. After a time she reopened her eyes and basked in the gorgeous sunset. It was something she missed on the east coast. The Great Dividing Range blotted out the sun before she ever realised it was getting dark. But not here. She loved to watch the dazzling pinks and vivid oranges as the sun slipped below the knife-edge of the world.

She closed her eyes and allowed the memory to bubble to the surface. She was just a little girl back then, maybe eight or nine years old. A smile pulled at the corner of her mouth. Her grandfather had seemed to tower over her. So strongly principled. She'd always had a special affinity for him. Jen recalled the first time he'd explained to her what he did, and how he had thoughtful answers for all her childish questions about why.

He'd graced her with one of the charismatic smiles that came so naturally to him. "I'm nothing like your father Jen," he'd said gently. "When I see something wrong I have to do something about it." He could tell she didn't understand so he elaborated. "At school, have you ever had the feeling that one of the rules was wrong?"

She'd thought about that for a moment before answering. "Yes, we have to stay inside during lunch, but I want to sit under the trees." She pouted.

"Do your friends feel the same?" he asked, gently guiding her to understanding.

"Yes." She nodded.

"But no one does anything about it, right?"

"No." And understanding slowly began to dawn.

"So, it's up to you little Jenny."

At the time she'd felt dwarfed by the immensity of the task. "But how?"

"If you want to eat under the trees you have to think of a plan that'll make the

teachers listen. Sometimes just telling them what you want is enough. Other times you have to stage a protest, or get the other students to sign a petition. What do you think?"

"I'll get my friends and we'll ask together." She squealed in delight. "Maybe then we can sit outside!" She understood now, her grandfather had a passion for life but he had to live it his way.

"So you see kiddo?" he'd said. "If we don't do anything we can't expect anyone else to do it either. Activists are people with principles and enough moral conviction to stand up for what they believe is right."

Jen had soaked up his wealth of advice.

"And the way things are going..."

"Mike!" Jen's mother had berated him. "Stop filling her head with all that."

But it was too late. His passion for doing what he thought was right had rubbed off on her already. She'd assimilated his critical commentary on society and bottled it inside for nearly two decades until she found a way to challenge society's problems on her own.

Jen opened her eyes to the darkness and whispered, "And that's why I'm following Mike, Dad."

Then, too abruptly, the memory was gone and she began to wonder whether David and Samantha had made any progress.

*

Tuesday, September 14, 2066

08:26 Baltimore, USA

Cigar smoke hung stale in the air and plastered the expensive furniture with a film of grime that needed constant attention lest it get out of control. Esteban slouched lazily on the sofa in the back room, naked from the waist up and puffing of his fine Cuban. He enjoyed the taste, he'd always associated it with success and not even the end with the sticky drool could detract from the experience.

A moan accompanied the persistent squeak of rusted springs, wafting from somewhere else in the compound. It had a persistent urgency to it, something animalistic and ferocious. Esteban took another deep drag and practiced blowing a halo of smoke. He'd always wanted to master that trick.

"Fuck Junior makes a lot of noise." Adrian tossed the Fortune magazine he was reading onto the coffee table in disgust, his concentration ruined.

Esteban nodded mutely, pursing his lips to better form a ring of smoke. The slimy end finally began to nauseate him and he snapped out of his reverie and snuffed the cigar out on the plate he was using as an ashtray. He clapped his hands together hard enough to tingle the nerves beneath his skin and ran his fingers through his slightly knotted black hair. "Now this is what I'm talkin' about." A smile split his face and his neat row of white teeth beamed at Adrian.

"What?" Adrian grunted, still suffering from a hangover. He didn't appreciate Esteban's clapping and loud talk.

"This!" Esteban swept his arms around the room. "Haven't you ever dreamt of this moment?"

The squeaking finally stopped after a climactic groan.

"You're still drunk." Adrian gingerly massaged his temples.

"No I'm not!" Esteban frowned and strapped his arms to his sides. The haze in his eyes lifted just long enough for a decent glare.

Junior shuffled into the room, shading his eyes from the muted light with a

sweaty arm. His real name was Frank Albert Hansen, but so was his father's, so everyone called him Junior - something he loathed with a passion. He held an upper-middle management position at the colossal computer manufacturer Global Integrated Systems and pined for admittance to the senior-staff boardroom. Some said he was nearly there; after all, the sales portfolio for his branch of the company had outperformed all the others. A favour here, a slight boost in performance there, and he'd be in. Nobody ever noticed the super discounts and promotional freebies offered to NeroTek from his office. Even if they did, and even if somebody bothered to investigate, they'd find a valid company profile, a legitimate company number and employees on the payroll. The fact that NeroTek didn't actually exist was buried beneath enough bureaucratic red tape to deter even the staunchest investigator.

They shared the burden of keeping their secret buried. Adrian knew how to fool the system from seven years at law school, Junior had access to the required databases via his security clearance at Global Integrated Systems, and Esteban was their secret weapon. They would only unleash him if the unthinkable happened. He alone had the power to remove anyone silly enough to stand in their way, and he reminded Adrian and Junior of that at every opportunity. It would be difficult to argue he was their leader, but he carried more sway in group decisions because he was the only one who'd survive if somebody shook the bag.

Esteban waved good morning to Junior and swaggered behind the bar. The fridge was elegant, blending perfectly with the other fittings. Not even cigar smoke could dim its highly polished stainless-steel front. "Want a bud?"

Adrian scoffed. "You've gotta be kidding? I'm due at work in a half-an-hour. Some of us work in the Eastern states."

Junior shook his head and flopped onto the third couch, sinking deep into the comfortable cushions. "I'm out. I've got a meeting with Deakins in the morning and if he smells piss on my breath I can kiss my promotion on the arse."

Esteban selected a beer according to criteria only he understood and held it up to the light, watching the beads of condensation trickle down the slender neck of the bottle. It made his mouth water. He used the bottle opener under the bar and flicked the cap across the room by balancing it between his middle finger and thumb and snapping his fingers beside his ear. The bottle cap whistled as it arced

across the room, then struck the far wall and flopped into some moss that blanketed the base of a pot plant.

“Do you have to do that?” Adrian peered around the thin rims of his glasses. “I don’t think the others like finding your beer caps everywhere.”

“Fuck the others.” Esteban was wise enough to keep his voice low in case the ‘others’ were nearby.

“What if they say something?” Adrian was busy adjusting his tie and collar; something was off kilter, he just wasn’t sure what.

“Let me tell you a story about the last person that objected to my bottle caps.” Esteban flopped onto the couch and kicked his feet onto the coffee table with a grace that belied his sobriety. “Once upon a time I was contracted to do some uptight arse.”

Adrian and Junior shared a look.

“He was blowin’ the whistle on some governmental toxic shit scam. This is going back a few years, back when the government still held some sway. So he’s a real do-gooder little fuck and he has to be whacked. So I started trailing him, you know, to get to know his patterns. I was at that for what felt like a months and I tell you, this guy was so boring. He was the sort of mouse who’d finish work at six and be home by five-past, even on a Friday. He didn’t have any friends, or if he did that scarecrow bitch he called a wife frightened them away. So I was getting ready for the job and decided to show this prick some excitement before I sent him on his way. He got a message from his ‘wife’,” - Esteban made the quotation marks with his fingers - “and she told him to meet him in this bar in Chicago. Junior, you know the one I mean.” Esteban clicked his fingers, trying to remember. After a moment the frustration got to him and he scowled. “You know... well shit it doesn’t matter a flying-fuck anyway. So we’re at this bar and I buy him a beer but he says no thanks. So anyway, I flick my bottle cap at the bartender when he’s turned away and got him smack in the back of the head.”

He stopped to take a swig on the beer, swilling the liquid around in his mouth to remove the fur from his teeth before swallowing.

“And you know what this guy did?”

Adrian looked impatient and tried to hurry the story along. “What?”

“He says I should apologise to the barkeep.” Esteban paused, as if he expected the gravity of his words needed time to sink in. “Me. Apologise! Well I slapped a 20 on the bar and left. So this guy’s waiting for his ‘wife’ for near on three hours before giving up and heading home. But he never makes it, he just - poof - vanishes, nobody ever found his carcass.” He left the insinuations hanging, the way he usually did. Even when he was drunk, his survival instincts saved him from confessing to anything he shouldn’t.

Adrian stood. “Fascinating, truly.” He drew a neatly folded handkerchief from his back pocket and dabbed at the memory of perspiration on his brow. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go. I need some aspirin before work.” He picked up his briefcase and headed toward the portals.

“And I need a shower.” Junior stood too.

“But we’ve got hours before work.” Esteban drained the last of his beer. He already knew he wouldn’t take another; he didn’t particularly enjoy drinking alone.

“Yeah but I feel disgusting and sticky.” Junior couldn’t stifle a smile. “You know how it is.”

So Esteban was alone. He shrugged and swaggered to the toilets, letting out a content sigh when he emptied his bladder. His urine was dark and pungent, his kidneys overworked from the beer he’d consumed the previous night.

His birth parents were Hispanic, though that meant nothing to him. He was a capitalist child, a pure product of market forces. His true parents were Supply and Demand, and his only siblings were Price and Contract. Esteban scratched the hair on his chest; it ran the length of his abdomen and merged with the forest on his groin. Taut muscles rippled under his skin. A gruelling daily routine of push-ups, weights and sit-ups kept him the fine physical specimen that he was. His physique was his last link to the past - to the part of his life that he’d enjoyed the most, the only part capable of thrilling him. And now it’s gone. His eyes narrowed and hatred made him punch the flush sensor hard enough to rattle the reservoir nestled in the wall.

I’ll get you back. Revenge flirted with his mind.

He washed his hands and admired his biceps, triceps, lats and abs in the mirror. I'll get you, you little fuck, worse than you ever thought was possible. Then he dried his hands with the blow dryer.

Esteban was the assassination co-ordinator for UniForce, the company that specialised in the detection and apprehension of convicted felons for warrants that the criminal division of the WEF sanctioned. At least, that's what the company's glossy brochure said. There was no mention of the assassination branch because, technically, it didn't exist. No fame, no glory, no pat on the back for a job well done - Esteban could expect nothing like that for his clandestine role in securing peace on Earth. But the lack of recognition didn't bother him, much. Appreciation from the CEO was enough to quench his thirst for praise. But it did bother him that he could never again work in the field as an active assassin.

"I'll squeeze your balls so hard you'll wish your daddy never raped your mommy." He knew it was possible to ruin someone's life without taking it; he'd succeeded with that already. But he wanted more; he needed to inflict more pain than he could physically beat out of someone. Torture is, after all, most effective when performed inside the victim's mind. Thoughts could cut more painfully than blades or lasers. Esteban knew that a body was a poor vessel for the delivery of pain, but he was only just learning how much fun it could be to ruin someone's life.

He went back to his bedchamber and watched Claire from the doorway. He didn't cast a shadow but his mere presence was enough to stir her. He couldn't be sure whether she'd been asleep. Just watching her there, naked and sprawled on the bed caused the sweet rush of blood to his groin.

She raised her head from the pillow, her sunken eyes void of emotion. She knew what he was there for, just as the other women knew when their masters entered their chambers. It'd been so long since she'd last seen the sky that her skin was pale and thin, almost waxy. Claire rolled onto her back when Esteban unzipped his fly and kneeled on the bed. Her ribs stuck out alarmingly and her skin stretched over them as if whoever had assembled her forgot the padding and added the outer layer prematurely. But her breasts were unnaturally large and looked odd juxtaposed with her gaunt frame.

She spread her legs. The thought of resistance never registered with her

anymore, it hadn't registered for a long time. Months? Years? She couldn't remember. Time had blurred into one endless thread of misery. A wince crossed her face when he thrust too deep and it hurt when he pulled her limp hair. His breath reeked of stale beer and cigars and she turned her head aside when he tried to kiss her on the mouth, regretting it when he thrust deeply as punishment.

When he was finished he stood over her, stroking her forehead without emotion. She rolled away, feeling nauseated by the stickiness between her legs. Then he fingered her scar, the tip of his finger tracing the inch-long incision where the surgeon had extracted her microchip.

How appropriate. The voice in Claire's head scoffed in contempt. I should be dead. Such was the power he held over her. With a simple twitch of his finger and a light brush across her skin, he'd reminded her that she was forever the property of the Guild. There was only one way out of a building that had no doors, and she couldn't operate the portals without a microchip. So they'd trapped her there, in a living death with a handful of equally mistreated sufferers.

"You stink." Esteban snarled at her.

Look who's talking. She didn't dare breathe the words.

"Take a shower before I get home tonight, okay?" He waited in vain. "Okay? Answer me!"

She mustered the strength to nod though he would never understand the effort it required. "I will."

Satisfied, Esteban wrapped a towel around his legs and headed for the showers, light-headed from beer and the exertion of sex. With his desires slaked, he turned his thoughts to what was waiting for him at head-office in San Francisco. Yeah, you're gonna wish you never heard the name Esteban Garcia Valdez you motherfucker.

Chapter 2

I picture the reality in which we live in terms of military occupation. We are occupied the way the French and Norwegians were occupied by the Nazis during World War II, but this time by an army of marketeers. We have to reclaim our country from those who occupy it on behalf of their global masters.

Ursula Franklin, Professor Emeritus, University of Toronto, 1998.

Tuesday, September 14, 2066

Sydney University, Camperdown Campus

23:55 Sydney, Australia

Samantha was giggling uncontrollably.

Jen looked fearfully around and tried to hush her. “Quiet would you? You’ll attract security.”

One hand gripped her midriff while the other wiped tears of mirth from the corner of her eye. “Are you serious?”

Jen nodded forlornly and it started Samantha on a fresh bout of giggling. Jen doubted she’d be ready to see the humour for some time yet, but merely watching her friend was enough to draw a smile, despite her usually serious demeanour.

She waited for Samantha to compose herself before asking, “What about you? You’ve never had one go wrong?”

Samantha shook her head. “Not that badly. What’d you do then?”

“What else could I do? I told him I’d think about it and portaled out of there as fast as I could.”

“So has he called yet?”

Jen nodded again. “But I’m screening them. I’d rather not speak to him again if I can help it.”

They crouched near a vending machine at the front of the Faculty of Education. The massive sandstone buildings were impressive at night, lit up the way they were. Streamers of light licked the aging sandstone blocks, attracting moths and other flying insects. The low pH in the rain from the past few days was slowly eating away at the very fabric of the building and granules of sand stuck to Jen’s skin when she placed a palm against the structure. She dusted her hands together to remove the grit. After portaling back to their apartment in Tweed Heads she’d traded her oversized shirt for a tight-fitting tank top. She expected the night to be warm, especially if they had some exercise. She’d bleached the white fabric to the point of fluorescence in the last wash, and she thought it’d be wise to do

something about it if they went ahead with the plan.

A rucksack of equipment hung loosely from one shoulder. “Are you sure you know how to do this?”

Samantha rolled her eyes. “Quit worrying would you? I know what I’m doing.”

Jen wasn’t convinced. She knew Cookie wouldn’t have a problem, but they’d never tripped this model of circuit alone before. Electronic schematics flashed across her mind whenever she closed her eyes. A bridge here, power supply there, this board boosts the power, that board formats the image, this one does the scaling, and that board scans the transmission. There came a point where all the images blurred into one and she wasn’t sure what she was looking at. She just hoped she’d make sense of it when they were standing in front of it.

Still have to get there first, Jen reminded herself. They’d be lucky just to get a shot at the jam; security around the University had tightened in recent months due to petitioning from Global Integrated Systems. They didn’t appreciate vandals destroying their equipment and they were growing tired of dispatching technicians to fix it. The Australian president, Mark Strathfield, was a Global Integrated Systems lapdog. Everyone knew it. Nobody complained - they’d voted for him. They’d voted for the policies that Global Integrated Systems had proposed anyway, Mark Strathfield was just a puppet. But along with his three-year term - only nine-months complete - came changes beneficial to the goliath computer manufacturer. Besides the lucrative advertising contract, they’d stitched a deal granting the corporation first recruiting rights from University graduates. Then there were the big bucks they tossed at curriculum development, which had the effect of whitewashing history texts and strategically placing commercials inside lecture theatres. It riled Jen to think of the Suits sitting around a boardroom, hammering out deals that affected the quality of her education.

“Well,” Jen said, shattering the tense silence that had settled between them. “This is our last opportunity to pull out.”

Samantha vehemently shook her head. “Not a chance.”

“That’s what I thought.” Jen nodded once and flipped the lid on her rucksack. She pulled a black jacket over her conspicuous tank top and buttoned it up at the front. “Ready?”

“Let’s go.”

They skirted the vending machines on light feet, heading for the only door they knew they could bypass. It was made entirely of glass, straight from the ’40s.

Jen plopped the rucksack onto the ground and took Cookie’s GT-field-jammer in both hands, not yet convinced it would work. Samantha nodded encouragement and she held it to each of the four alarm plates until the red LED flashed green. Then she pulled the handle, expecting an alarm to shriek. The glass was heavy, but the door opened quietly with a gust of outbound air that smelled like stale chewing gum.

They ducked inside, the anxiety of the moment wiring their mouths shut. Jen cast one furtive glance across the quadrangle, her eyes lingering on their target. The massive plasma screen showed a proud father smiling at his son who stood receiving his degree from the Chancellor of the University. It oozed majesty, and delight, and profound happiness, and made Jen’s stomach churn in disgust. The graduate held a portable computer in his other hand and the words underneath read, “Would you trust an education not earned on a Global Integrated System?” It was one from a series of ads designed to strengthen their stranglehold on society.

“Are you coming?” Samantha didn’t want to stay in dangerous territory any longer than necessary.

“Yeah.” It sounded dreamy until she snapped fully out of her trance. “Yeah, I’m coming.”

They weaved through the maze of corridors until they’d crossed to the far side of the quadrangle, immediately behind the electronic billboard on the second floor.

“That must be it.” Jen stabbed a finger at the small panel mounted chest-height on the wall. A plethora of green lights indicated the system was functioning optimally. Overkill if you ask me, Jen thought. The previous model was a synch - remove the old image-board and insert the new one. Global Integrated Systems had spent millions developing this system, which they’d boldly announced was hack-proof. Jen remembered the leer on Cookie’s face when he’d heard the announcement. Foolish. They must’ve known they were throwing down a gauntlet. It was like a red rag to a bull for everyone in the adjamming business. Jen couldn’t be sure how many other jammers had found a way to circumvent

the security on the new billboards, she hadn't heard any reports. But then she rarely did, Global Integrated Systems didn't appreciate word of that nature spreading. It had taken Cookie two weeks of circuit analysis and testing to come up with an idea and another two weeks to build devices capable of breaching the system.

"It's a shame Cookie couldn't be here." Jen felt another wave of doubt crushing her breath.

"We'll be fine," Samantha replied, the spot of her flashlight dancing across the room. "He tested it thoroughly."

Jen reached into the rucksack and plucked a screwdriver set from the jostling equipment. She handed it to Samantha who immediately began unscrewing the outer case. Jen did her part by periodically squirting a blast of chill-be-quick around the edges. Cookie had warned them about that - a sensor would trigger an alarm if they removed the case, but they could render it inoperable by freezing it.

There was a protesting groan of cold, hard plastic as Samantha peeled the case from the wall and Jen immediately sprayed more chill-be-quick across the circuits, something else Cookie had recommended.

They goggled at the jungle of wires and circuits, dumbstruck for a short time by the apparent complexity. "Right, to work then." Jen mustered her courage and testing the voltage across the key segments of the circuit. It was necessary groundwork in case Global Integrated Systems had hidden an individual code inside every unit. Cookie had doubted it, but hadn't wanted to take the chance. Jen pressed the sensors gingerly to the metal tracks while Samantha read the voltage and checked it against the printed sheet Cookie had given them.

"Three to go." Jen was sweating inside her black jacket. "Ground... and the junction between the scaling-circuit and the projector."

"Exactly five volts." Samantha scrolled her fingernail down the sheet. "Perfect," she said, and gave it a tick with her pencil.

It was dangerous work. Ever since '59 and the big push against social dissidents the lawmakers had sought to make an example of jammers. Hefty jail terms, massive fines, years of repaying their debt to society - and the distinct possibility of a terrorism conviction.

“That’s it.” Jen wiped her forehead with a sleeve.

“My turn.” Samantha heated the soldering iron and worked to fuse Cookie’s custom circuit - a bird’s nest of colourful plastic-coated wires - with the control circuit. She liked to chat while she worked, keeping her mind occupied by something other than the threadlike tracks. The harder Samantha concentrated on keeping her hands steady, the more they trembled. It was a recipe for disaster when working on such a tiny scale. “So is that the last time you’ll trust Cookie’s judgement in men?”

“I didn’t really trust it before.” A shudder ran the length of Jen’s spine. She made an expression as if she’d tasted something particularly sour. “He should stick to circuits and stay well clear of my love-life.”

Samantha pulled the soldering iron away to laugh. “You should’ve seen him when we first started dating.”

Jen snickered. “I did. I was there, remember?”

Samantha laughed again. Her vivacious appetite for laughter was why people always thought she was merry. “Yeah, but you should’ve seen how sweet he was. He means well, he really does. He just doesn’t have a clue what his friends are like. You can’t blame him really, he spends more time with them online than he does in real life. Have you seen the way he talks to them? They’re all nuts.”

“Yeah well Russell had an implant.”

Samantha stopped work for long enough to gape. “No!”

“Yep.” Jen nodded, eyes wide. “He tried to comb over it for the date but you can tell.”

Samantha giggled again. “I wonder if Cookie knows. He probably hasn’t seen the guy for months. Was it recent?”

“Dunno. It’s hard to tell. They do a neat job these days - have it done Friday and be back at work Monday kind of thing. More chill-be-quick?” Jen offered the bottle.

“Yeah, thanks.”

Jen squirted another blast around the edge of the box, making sure the sensor would stay frozen while Samantha finished soldering the new circuit.

Samantha dabbed the iron to the circuit and the smell of burning resin tickling her nose. She loved that smell, it reminded her of Cookie in his workshop and the time they'd made love on the bench, surrounded by the seductive haze of solder resin.

“Suction.”

Jen handed her a tube that vacuumed the molten solder from the board. It had a mechanical plunger, which squeaked when Samantha used it. Then she lifted the small board clear of the circuit and the plasma screen went dark mid-commercial.

“Now we've gotta hurry.” Jen blasted a final jet of chill-be-quick across the circuit and Samantha commenced work on the final piece of the puzzle.

With the billboard off, security was sure to notice. Jen figured they had 20 minutes as the best-case scenario, less than five as the worst. She got the screwdrivers ready while a wallop of adrenaline tingled her kidneys.

Samantha made a sloppy connection on the final node and the jammed ads appeared on the plasma screen, or so she imagined. “Go for it.” Jen stuffed some protruding wires back into place and eased the case on as fast as she dared. They worked with a screwdriver each, turning the screws so fast their forearms and wrists began to seize up.

“Hold it you two!” The gruff voice sounded like the crunch of footsteps on gravel.

Jen snapped her head around, fear dilating her pupils and making the whites of her eyes large. He was coming from their planned escape route, a great brute of a man. He was close enough for her to see his moustache and the thick stubble on his chin. The guard was barrel-chested, more gorilla than man. His enormous hands hefted a nightstick in an offensive position as he lumbered toward them.

Samantha and Jen abandoned the final two screws and sprinted for the far end of the hall, Jen's rucksack flailing at her back.

Her heart pounded in her ears as she darted down two flights of stairs, taking them three at a time. They'd reached the basement. It was dank and airless and an eerie quiet perforated the dark. Samantha's breathing was heavy with fear and Jen pulled on her elbow to make her follow into the gloom. They shuffled forward as fast as they dared with arms outstretched, probing the darkness ahead.

"Where are we?" Samantha's whispered, unable to keep the hint of terror from her tone.

Jen shrugged, a useless gesture in the dark. "Dunno, I've never been down here before." She scraped her fingers along the wall. Rough concrete. They were in the janitor's realm, an intricate network of dead-ends and loop-backs where more than a handful of wayward students had become lost and disorientated in the past. She quietened her heaving breath and strained her hearing to the limit.

Nothing.

Did we lose him already? Jen doubted it; the guard would have difficulty explaining to a supervisor how they'd escaped. He therefore had ample interest in finding them and would probably search until dawn.

"This way." Jen trailed her fingers along the wall and penetrated deeper into the dark.

Their footfalls echoed down the corridor, deafening them with chills of panic. They both understood the consequences if the guard caught them. He may be big but that doesn't mean he's fast, Jen thought. Maybe we can stay ahead of him... as long as we know where he is. Another shiver stung her spine. He's calling backup. And that changed the game. They couldn't hide in the maze beneath the University and wait for the resumption of normal activity the next day. Within the hour, the campus would be swarming with guards. All looking for us. Jen had difficulty swallowing.

She groped in the dark until she felt Samantha and drew her close enough to whisper in her ear, "We need to find a way out of here. Fast. Any ideas?"

A frown creased Samantha's brow but the darkness shrouded it. "I know there's an exit at the back of 6b." She smiled despite their predicament. "James went down there once to see what it was."

“That’ll do,” Jen said. “We’ll be close enough to reception to try and get out there. Except that’s the first place they’ll station extra guards.” It was decision time. Jen weighed up the risks of staying hidden against the risks of slinking out now. Neither was the obvious choice, neither looked appealing. She shuddered at the thought of remaining in the dark all night, but then realised the guards would turn on the lights as soon as they found the switch. That made hiding somewhat pointless. “All right, let’s go.”

“Which way?” The turning in the stairwell and the pitch black had shattered Samantha’s sense of direction.

“I think we’re under the Faculty of Applied Science.”

Samantha sounded dubious. “What makes you think that?”

“This tunnel curves to the right.” Jen had been thinking about that while they’d been stumbling through the dark. At first she thought the zero visibility had distorted her sense of direction, but she eventually came to trust her judgement - the tunnel curved. “If we keep going this way we should be near 6b.”

“Uh huh.”

“Ballpark anyway.” Jen shuffled forward, her paces shortened by the uncertainty of each footfall.

They’d been walking for several minutes when the first wave of flickering tickled the fluorescent lights above. Samantha and Jen squinted to protect their eyes. After two more flickers, a searing light flooded the tunnel and briefly blinded them.

They found the switch. Jen wired her mouth shut in case they were nearby. She motioned at Samantha to hurry and jogged quietly in what she still considered the ‘right’ direction. With the lights on it was easier to recognise the curvature of the corridor. They could also see the damp rising from the concrete floor, which helped muffle their footfalls. And Jen clenched a protective fist around her rucksack to squelch the muted jingle of equipment.

From somewhere behind, Jen heard voices. They were hushed, urgent voices, and they triggered another wave of adrenaline-induced panic. Suddenly the necessity for leaving the main corridor exceeded her desire to reach the 6b exit.

She herded Samantha into an antechamber and quietly closed the door, thankful it didn't screech on its rusty hinges. Then she pulled the catch that released the lock, wincing when a clack echoed through the halls. She visualised the guards trying to pinpoint the source of the sound, isolating the direction and refining their search. That won't keep them out forever.

She swivelled just as Samantha found the switch for the lights and a flickering fluorescence illuminated their tomb.

Samantha gasped, "This is it."

"What?"

"I recognise it. This is where James and I were."

Jen raised an eyebrow, "You were here too?"

"Come on, it's this way." Samantha grabbed Jen's hand and tugged her through a room filled with so many pipes they could barely see the concrete walls. Water had pooled on the floor from a leak and they splashed across the puddle just as someone pounded on the door behind them.

Twenty metres later they arrived at a pair of solid steel doors. They swung ponderously outward to more steps when Samantha pushed on a horizontal bar. Jen touched a warning hand to Samantha's shoulder and silently crept up the stairs. Samantha had been right - the entrance to lecture theatre 6b was to their left. Jen carefully scanned the area and strained her hearing, trying to detect whether anybody was hiding in the dark.

"Okay, let's go," she whispered.

They scuttled stealthily across the carpeted floor and looped back to the same glass doors they'd used to enter the complex. The screen caught Jen's attention and a smile tugged on her lips despite their predicament. It depicted a gagged student sweating in frustration at the cloth stuffed in his mouth. An evil-looking computer lurked in the background, and underneath in nightmare-green were the words, "Would you trust your education to a Global Integrated Silence?" The jammed images would change every five minutes. Cookie had said his alterations were so complex that it would take a technician half a day to fix. That was half a day for students to sit in the quadrangle and read the truth. Global

Integrated Systems had knotted their own noose by attempting to make their circuit hack-proof. They couldn't switch off an individual screen without affecting the network, and they weren't likely to shut down the entire system just to disengage one jammed screen.

"Let's get out of here," Samantha said, stirring Jen from her reverie.

"Okay." She felt pleased with herself. "Let's go."

They hurried around the edge of the quadrangle, staying low and hunched over in case security personnel were nearby, which seemed likely.

Five minutes later they were clear of the University and had a leisurely stroll to the nearest portal station. As usual, Samantha was beaming. "We did it!"

Also as usual, Jen was more subdued, though the thrill was burning inside her like an intense flame. "I just hope they can't undo it easily."

"I hope they shut the system down! But even if they don't, we've still won."

"This round." Jen's smile dissolved as she thought about the long-term ramifications of their actions and about what they still had to do. "It hasn't even begun yet."

Samantha disagreed. "Sure it has. It began decades ago. It just slowed down recently, that's all. But we're helping to speed it back up again."

Jen shook her head and said, "No we aren't." The thought punched her in the stomach, knocking the wind from her. She knew they were barely more than vandals. So far. But her grandfather's vision hadn't rotted with his corpse; it lived on, skipping a generation to saturate Jennifer Cameron with a sense of purpose. "We haven't started yet." She turned to face her friend - her only friend, aside from Cookie. The other people in her life were mere acquaintances. How could she call them friends if they knew nothing about her secret life as a jammer? And she couldn't tell them, they wouldn't understand. Nobody understood. Nobody except Samantha and Cookie.

Samantha stopped, returned the look, and said, "Why do you say that? We've been jamming for two years."

“And what have we achieved?” It came out harsher than she intended and Jen immediately regretted her tone. She bit her lip and reminded herself that Samantha wasn’t the enemy. “I don’t want to be just a jammer.”

“Then what do you want?”

Jen clenched her jaw and absently brushed her hair back over her shoulder where it belonged. “I want to be an activist. A real one.”

Samantha narrowed her eyes and studied Jen’s pensive expression. “Like your grandfather?”

Jen nodded, “Yes. I’ve given this a lot of thought.”

“How?”

Jen frowned. “I don’t honestly know...”

Silence.

“...but this is something I have to do.”

Samantha nodded, understanding perfectly. “Okay, what do you want me to do?”

Jen shrugged and started walking again. “I don’t know that either. We’ll think of something though.”

They walked in silence for a few minutes before returning to the somewhat less threatening subject of men, which provided plenty of entertainment to fill their journey back to Tweed Heads.

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Wednesday, September 15, 2066

04:27 Andamooka, South Australia

Dan stretched lazily toward the ceiling and perversely enjoyed the pain that shot from his bruised back. The nightmares were back, haunting his sleep with memories he would have gladly erased. The night was silent, especially out in the desert. His property was over 30 kilometres from the centre of town. Nobody, not even the locals, came out this way.

He shambled to his bathroom and ran some pink-tinged water for a shower. The hot water system groaned protestingly through the pipes he'd personally installed in the walls. At least, Dan noted, the damn computer selected the right temperature. He'd been having trouble with it recently and was thinking about getting someone out to examine it. An undersized fan laboured to siphon off the steam billowing from the cubicle and Dan slid into the curtain of heat, closing the glass behind him.

The warmth seeped through his body, massaging the stiffness from his muscles by pelting them with needle-like drops. It stung, but Dan liked it that way. His lips twisted into a savage smile when he remembered how his wife had endlessly complained. She'd enjoyed taking showers with him but could never stand his settings. And for his part, Dan had never enjoyed the tepid showers she'd preferred.

The agony of recollection thumped him like a fist in the stomach and knocked him to his knees. It took all his strength to keep from totally collapsing as he fought to keep the floodgate of memories closed. He remembered the last time it had happened, how his limp body had covered the drain and the bathroom had flooded while he just lay there, shaking. It wasn't something he wanted to repeat.

He regained his feet, then mindlessly soaped his skin and rinsed the grit from his body. He spent long minutes digging the dirt from beneath his fingernails, ignoring the sting of soap in the cuts on his hands.

Katherine, Katherine... Katherine. He thought his wife's name with each scrape of the brush under his nails.

There were some things you just couldn't let go.

And this was one of them.

The best he could hope for was to cram the thoughts back into his ill-treated mind and hope they never resurfaced. Of course, it never worked. But it was effective enough to let Dan live something that outwardly resembled a normal life.

Finished with the shower, he dried and dressed in work clothes - another set of ragged garments from the endless sea of ragged garments brimming in his cupboard. He glanced at his watch and a bemused smile flirted across his lips. He remembered the advertisements PortaNet had used to extol the benefits of the portals, back in '32 when the company was just starting. He wasn't old enough to remember the original transmissions; he'd seen them on a tribute-to-portal-technology show aired on the company's twenty-fifth anniversary. One particular commercial came vividly to mind - it depicted two social scientists explaining how portals would eliminate jetlag, allowing businesspeople to travel in comfort.

Dan scoffed.

How wrong they'd been. If anything, the jetlag situation had grown worse. Dan's circadian rhythm was still working on London time. He'd spent most of the previous week there and it had thoroughly confused his wake-sleep cycle.

He had no inclination of returning to bed and allowing his nightmares to manifest again. So, without anything else to distract his roving mind, Dan started the day in earnest. He cast a guilty look at his gym equipment, idle for months now. He sighed and walked quickly past. It seemed to laugh at him from beneath a layer of dust in the corner of his den.

Breakfast was the same as it had been every morning for eleven months - rolled oats sprinkled with sultanas. It was the only thing he could be bothered making.

Then Dan looked at his bottle. Its plastic surface was glossy white, as though Xantex had fabricated it in pristine laboratory conditions. Dan doubted it somehow. He held it loosely in his hands and read the prescription label, the same as he did every morning.

"Zyclone." His lips felt soiled just speaking the name. It was, theoretically, the most powerful anti-depressant ever to come from a Xantex test-tube. Or so they kept telling everyone. Personally, Dan wasn't sure he felt any different.

That's a lie. He tried to ignore the voice, but it was persistent. You're losing yourself, mate.

It was true, he felt numb. But he doubted that was any fault of the chemical in the capsules. Some emotions were stronger than ever - fury, grief, remorse. They were still there. Perhaps the edge was gone, but they were still powerful enough to wind him, to bring him to his knees.

He flipped the cap, tossed a capsule to the back of his tongue and swallowed without water, all in one fluid motion. It scraped as it went down despite the gelatine coating and he reached for some orange juice to wash the feeling from his throat. Hmm... not many left. He made a mental note to stop by a pharmacy within the next few days.

With a resigned sigh, he rubbed his fatigued eyes and cleaned up the kitchen before retreating to his study. Then he sank into his recliner and rested his feet on the desk. It was his favourite chair, perfectly moulded to the shape of his back and buttocks. He snuggled deeper into the fabric. It smelled musty; he admitted that. And Katherine had pleaded with him to get a new one, but he just couldn't bare the thought of parting with it. Especially now. She'd said it didn't go with any of their other furniture and not even Free-Breeze could remove the smell wafting from the cushions. Yes, Dan was glad he still had it; the study wouldn't be the same if he'd relented. But today the ugly bruise on his back made it... not uncomfortable, but not comfortable either.

He foolishly let his eyes wander to a photograph of his wife. Slowly, gently, he reached out and held the frame, gazing into her brilliant blue eyes.

"Katherine."

Eleven months had passed since that cruel twist of fate had wrenched her from him, and still he'd barely begun the healing process. I wish you were here with me. He chewed his lip. Or me with you. He didn't want to linger on that thought because he wasn't sure he could stop himself if he did. Suicide had played heavily on his thoughts in the days and weeks immediately after she'd died. So maybe that means the medication is working. He hadn't seriously contemplated killing himself since he'd started taking the Zyclone. His eyes drifted over her photograph. He remembered the way her hair kept getting caught in his mouth and it brought a smile unbidden to his lips.

If it weren't for his sister and his parents, he wasn't sure he'd still be alive. Dan put the photograph down. I haven't called Christine for... He picked up his phone and started dialling his sister's number before good sense stopped him and he hung up again. No, she'd be asleep. He wished he were better at expressing himself. He wished he were able to tell his sister how much he appreciated everything she'd done for him. Dan couldn't remember the last time he'd spoken to his family; it seemed his languishing depression had finally managed to push them away too. The realisation didn't come as a surprise. He'd become a recluse, absorbed by his new line of work.

Dan had failed his psychological evaluation after the sudden death of his wife and the dwindling New South Wales Police Department - one of the few surviving non-corporate police forces in an ever-privatising world - had relieved him from duty. With nothing left to do but sit and contemplate his loss, he'd grown desperate for distraction. He'd found it rummaging in his desk drawers one evening when he stumbled across an invitation from UniForce. They'd been trying to entice him into a career change for years. The invitation included a glossy brochure professing the benefits of bounty hunting - choose your own hours; choose from a wide range of lists all with outstanding remuneration rates; choose who to apprehend; choose when and how you apprehend them.

With nothing to lose, Dan had met with their liaison officer. And two months later, he was buying exclusive lists from their bounty co-ordinator.

He had a knack for the hunt.

Unified Enforcement, or UniForce, filled the growing void of law enforcement on an increasingly chaotic planet. They owed their legal powers of arrest to sanctions from the WEF, who saw the law enforcement branch - the Apprehension Division - of their ballooning organisation as a world-benefit. The Apprehension Division reviewed all UniForce petitions and decided which arrests to sanction. UniForce could only legally pursue sanctioned targets.

Anyone with the relevant skills was welcome to apply for a bounty-hunting license. The successful applicants could then purchase lists of wanted felons, suspects, or a combination of the two. There were also various categories on sale. Bounty-hunters could purchase large lists that UniForce sold multiple times - forcing them to compete for bounties with several other hunters - shorter lists with only a few competitors, or exclusive lists of ten names that they could

pursue alone.

The exclusive lists were especially expensive and only good hunters could turn a profit. Dan calculated that hunters paying for exclusive lists would need to return three targets before earning back their initial investment. But few hunters bothered with exclusive lists because those targets were also the hardest to capture. UniForce reserved their sale for elite hunters, those that had proven their ability by consistently dominating the easier lists.

But for the past three months, Dan had purchased exclusive lists - which explained his displeasure to see the Raven stealing his bounties. Dan pensively rubbed the stubble on his chin, wondering what he should do about it.

The ugly fact was, there was very little he could do. UniForce wasn't the type of corporation he could accuse of double-dealing. No. He shook his head. Dan needed proof before he could confront anybody with anything.

He arched an eyebrow and his recently ignited resentment flared up. He wouldn't mind if it was anybody else. But that fucker's dangerous. He hated the Raven and hated running into him. Periodically crossing paths with the Raven had convinced Dan to switch to exclusive lists in the first place.

If I just had proof. He wondered if it would be enough to prove the Raven took a bounty from Dan's list. He knew it wasn't. UniForce was unlikely to find such evidence in their database. Dan scowled.

So I do nothing. It irked him, but he had no option. Either he quit bounty hunting, or he played according to the rules UniForce put on the table.

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Tuesday, September 14, 2066

UniForce Headquarters

18:20 San Francisco, USA

Jackie watched the rain trickle down her window.

It streamed in rivulets across the glass, sliding one way and then the other in its journey to... Where? She supposed the small rivulets would merge with larger streams and then flow into the torrent-choked stormwater drains and finally out into the bay. Mergers. Her ensuing smile pulled her cosmetically altered skin tightly across her bones, giving her a cheaply manufactured mannequin look. She felt the stretch in her cheeks and uttered one of her favourite epithets at the surgeon who'd done the damage. Surgeon? Her mind used the term loosely.

She clenched her jaw - she looked more human that way, and she knew it. So the surgical disaster had snuffed her infrequent smiles. Now she just looked stern, something she didn't mind in the least. Her rich chocolate hair was also fake, though a good enough forgery to look authentic. Nobody had yet guessed that she used three different shades of brown to achieve the natural look. Certainly nobody had guessed she was turning grey.

Her skin was brown and leathery, the product of extensive cosmetic surgery and too many hours wasted in a tanning bed. Sunshine was for the hoi polloi. Executives used tanning salons - safer, faster, better - for 1,000 Credits an hour. And the salons threw in free dermal-hydration treatment. But for all that, her teeth were white, despite her daily regime of seven cups of coffee. And her eyes sparkled intensely blue - bluer than even contact lenses could make them. Ironically, her irises were real, though nobody believed it.

Her black suit bulged in places it oughtn't and lacked volume in places she would've preferred it. She knew she was fighting a losing battle, but she wasn't yet ready to give in and rigidly stuck to her routine in the gym. Absently she felt her bicep; it felt strong under the flabby padding. But, infuriatingly, the firmness of the muscle tended to highlight the ocean of blubber on top. She grunted disgustedly and shifted her thoughts back out the window.

San Francisco looked beautiful in the twilight, no matter what any of the others said. But she wasn't ready to pack up and head home yet, the day had only just begun to get interesting. Besides, there was depressingly little for her to go home to - her cute little mixed-breed dog, Sasha, and the mounting pile of dishes. She

needed a technician to fix her dishwasher and made a mental note to call one.

Her buzzer honked and the tiny strobe light attached to the communication panel started to flash. She decided it would have to go; the damn thing gave her a headache whenever it went off.

“Yes?” She snapped irritably.

“Paul Savage here to see you.” Joanne’s voice sounded clear through the latest in speaker technology. They’ve gone too far this time, Jackie thought, annoyed that she couldn’t pin down the source of the sound. It made everything sound larger than life, almost as though the voices came from inside her head.

“Send him in.” Jackie pushed back from her desk with a sigh and waited, less than patiently.

Her massive wooden doors, intricately carved with Michelangelo’s cherubs, swung ponderously inward and Paul Savage shuffled into the room. She’d never met a man with a weaker spine or less direction in life. She noted, with irritation, that he didn’t bother to hide his grey hair. And he’d clearly given up fighting the spare tyre sagging around his middle. It’s easy for men. She hated it, but it was still true. Even in the socially conscious ’60s, women had to be beautiful while men could let themselves go. Seven decades of social commentators hadn’t yet raised enough public awareness of what her favourite author had called The Beauty Myth. Typical, Jackie thought. The public is so stupid.

“Yes?” She tried to pre-empt his rambling greeting.

“Uh - yes. Uh... hello, Jackie.”

She’d obviously failed.

“I have some... things that I’d like you to, uh, take a look at. Uh, if you wouldn’t mind?”

Jackie fought the urge to sigh and stifled it into a semi-normal breath. “What is it?”

Paul ambled to her desk, zigzagging inefficiently. Inefficiency tended to be his hallmark.

He looks drunk. Jackie wondered whether he'd spent the day in a bar and tested the air with her nose, trying to detect alcohol on his breath.

Paul often looked drunk, though he partook in alcoholic beverages strictly after work and restrained himself to a glass of wine with dinner. He was once a real boozier until the doctors warned him that what was left of his pathetic balance would dissolve entirely if he kept it up. The alcohol was sustaining a strain of bacteria that feasted on something in his inner ear. They'd tried antibiotics with little success; it was one of the resistant strains. Experts blamed the prevalence of antibacterial products and over-prescription of antibiotics in the late twentieth century. The practice had lasted until the '30s when antibiotics finally lost their kick. Paul didn't really have anyone to blame but himself, or society's selfish ways. After all, he'd used antibacterial soap, antibacterial dishwashing liquid and antibacterial household cleaners just like everybody else. And so the bacteria in Paul Savage's head continued to eat, and he grew less steady on his feet by the day.

He placed a thin manila folder on Jackie's desk. "It's for the, uh, shareholder meeting."

Jackie didn't take her eyes off him and didn't reach for the folder. She waited for him to explain.

She waited a long time.

Eventually Paul said, "There are some puzzling, uh, yes, troubling figures projected for the final quarter." When he frowned, his big bushy eyebrows came forward so far they nearly pushed his glasses off. He removed the spectacles and took a moment to rub a tired hand over his ruddy face. "If you could take a look at them, uh, before the meeting then that'd, uh... that'd be great."

It was times like these that Jackie had no idea why she bothered with Mr Savage. Like any of his work will make it to the meeting. Jackie reminded herself not to smile. What a fool. You're my puppet, dear Savage, you'll do and say everything I want you to. "Okay, I'll take a look."

Paul nodded his thanks with a friendly smile. Jackie was yet to decide whether it was genuine or whether he could turn warmth on at will. She wished she could do that.

“Thanks, uh... Jackie.” Paul took his leave and shuffled in the general direction of the door, unaware that Jackie Donald’s eyes were boring into his skull from behind. With what seemed like a colossal effort, he closed the doors behind him.

And, finally, he was gone from Jackie’s sight.

“Stupid dumb-shit goddamn motherfucker.” Jackie had learnt to swear from her one and only boyfriend back in college. She rocked in her chair, inwardly twitching at the thought of Paul Savage running a shareholder meeting. But it had to be that way. Paul was the public head of the company. Only a handful of people knew Jackie was the real CEO. She could count them on one hand: Paul Savage, James Ellerman, Michele Roche, Esteban Valdez and Carole Lam. And the WEF of course, but they didn’t really count.

She opened Paul’s folder with a scowl of contempt and scanned his lame excuse for a report. How dare he drop something like that on her desk? She wondered whom he’d asked to write the report. That was, after all, the way he worked. The man hadn’t done anything original that Jackie had ever seen. Paul had scratched a few indecipherable notes in the margins and underlined a few words, probably to pretend that he understood the content. Jackie pushed it to the corner of her desk in disgust. She could imagine the conversation she’d have to have now. You made some good points in that report Paul, but I think we should focus on this in the meeting - and hand him the list of items she wanted him to cover.

Sometimes she wished she could work with someone competent. But competence might threaten her position, and therefore her vision. And as things were she felt almighty. The power she wielded as CEO of UniForce was unparalleled. Sure, leaders from some of the other giga-corporations brandished more financial power, but Jackie’s fingers stretched in ways that were more important.

Gently she closed her eyes, conjuring an image of the world she intended to create. A world where people feel safe to leave their doors unlocked at night. She furrowed her brow. Where nobody would dream of raping a young girl. She’d buried the memory so deeply into the folds of her psyche that she no longer flinched at the word ‘rape’. There was a time when it would have sent her into a tailspin depression, but that was before she’d started taking Genyrex, the Xantex wonder drug.

Pity. Sometimes she wished the people around her understood her vision. Sometimes she wished they had the intellectual capacity to fathom that it was actually possible. The fact that she intended to make billions in the process was just an added bonus. And the fact that some people need squashing... She shrugged. Too bad. Some people deserve to have their lives ended under the heel of a shoe. My shoe.

Personal security - the way of the future. She'd been striving toward it for seven years. Personal security was the Holy Grail of the law enforcement industry, something truly worthy of her dedication. She knew she could rocket UniForce to number one on the Lawson scale if she could just crack the personal security market. Not just bodyguards, company security too. She'd even created a new position; the papers were in her third drawer. She didn't have anyone in mind yet, but she'd recognise the right person when he or she came along. Guard coordinator, head of the final corporate branch. She had a vision where UniForce provided security personnel for all the giga-corporations, each with a personally tailored and neatly outsourced package - for a modest fee. Then, after conquering the corporate sector, it would only be a matter of time before she could weasel her way into the spineless government sector and promote UniForce as the law enforcement solution for the world.

She screwed her fingers into tight fists of rapture. Timing. Jackie knew it was the most important factor. Too soon and they'll run... too late and I'll miss the opportunity. And she knew exactly how to do it: feed them information about the crime riddling their innards and then propose a solution to flush the vermin from their pipes. She couldn't help another smile, but it quickly reverted to a frown when she felt her skin tightening across her cheekbones.

Jackie focussed her attention on her computer screen where figures revealed the growth of each UniForce branch, subdivided into country and product statistics. One column was particularly interesting and she arched an eyebrow. Exclusive level bounty-hunting lists were selling particularly well. "Well done Michele." She had to praise good work where praise was due. The bounty apprehension rate had increased two percent, but revenue from lists had jumped an astonishing sixteen percent. She'd more than outstripped the growth Jackie had expected and had single-handedly lifted the corporate average by three points. Jackie approved - she approved of Michele, and she approved of her decision to promote Michele. Her predecessor had finally retired. And about time too, the old fuck, Jackie thought. Within five months Michele had revolutionised the branch.

“Good for you,” Jackie said, lifted her chin to survey the room and reassure herself it was empty.

She licked her lips. Just thinking about Michele’s plump breasts and ample rump hardened her nipples and made her breathing go heavy. A few key-taps later and she’d locked her computer. She needed to go home, back to where she could get comfortable and allow Sasha to satisfy her swelling desires.

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Wednesday, September 15, 2066

NSW Police Department, Parramatta Office

10:51 Sydney, Australia

Simon warred against the urge to thump his keyboard.

Every damn word! He clenched a fist in anger and stuffed it as far as he could into his mouth, biting his knuckles to stop from smashing the computer. His spacebar was playing up again. His typing style meant that he always pressed the key with his thumb on the far right side of the bar, but for a week it'd been loose and was wobbling on a broken spring. It just jiggled when he pressed it. To insert a space he had to press hard, really hard. He was getting into the habit of slapping it at the end of each word, but sometimes he forgot and it gave him the shits.

“Damn it Mike!” Simon thrust his wheelie chair back and stretched to his full height - six foot and two inches.

“What?” Mike demanded, the frosted glass door muting his voice.

“I’ve put in a request for a replacement keyboard every day for the past week!” Simon burst from his office and scowled at Michael Tolhurst, the officer in charge of supplies.

“Well there’s nothing I can do about it, you’ve gotta ring it through to the Hell Desk,” Mike grumbled in reply. He always turned sullen when someone yelled at him.

But Simon wasn’t yelling at anyone in particular, he just needed to yell. And Mike was the nearest target. “Oh, fuck it!”

His language caught him a warning glance from Steward across the room. The Superintendent wouldn’t tolerate foul mouthing in the office. It was his job to ensure the force retained what little was left of their dwindling public image, and he considered ripe language too uncouth if there was a possibility of civilians in the building. Simon understood why, though he hated the reason. They weren’t just working for public interest anymore; they were entrenched in a bloody battle for survival. And they were losing. They had private contractors to worry about now. And the enemy were slick. They offered candy to anyone who turned up for questioning and the public loved their extravagant advertising campaign. The

Australian Government was just searching for excuses to axe the police force and outsource the entire mess.

Simon swallowed hard. He was uninitiated in the game of politics. In truth, it scared him senseless.

“All right.” He slunk back to his office and closed the door behind him.

He grunted in disgust and dialled the number, trying to relax before someone answered.

It was a long wait.

“Good morning, Help Desk. This is Peter, how can I help you?”

“My keyboard’s broken, I’d like it replaced.” Simon tried to keep his voice calm and good-natured. It was still deep and husky and sounded like a rumbling volcano, but that was as pleasant as he could make it.

“Okay, can you describe the problem to me?”

“I just did, I need a new keyboard.”

“Yes, but what’s the fault with your keyboard?”

“The spacebar’s broken.”

“So when you press the spacebar it doesn’t print a space on your screen?”

Simon nodded and the movement squirmed into the tone of his voice. “Yeah, pretty much. It looks like the spacebar’s come loose because I have to press it hard in the dead centre or nothing happens. It just wobbles. I’ve called about this every day for the past week, you know.”

“Oh, okay, do you have your reference number?”

“Huh?”

“When you first logged the call you would’ve been given a reference number. It’ll help me find your call in the system.”

Simon closed his eyes in frustration. “No, I don’t have a damned reference number, I wasn’t given one.”

A pause.

“Can you spell your name for me please?”

“Simon West. That’s w-e-s-t. As in, the opposite of east.”

Another pause.

“Okay, I’ve found your call... hmm... oh...” Simon heard him swallow. “It looks like this call was waiting on the serial number from your keyboard before we could place it through to Global Integrated Systems for a replacement.”

Simon was flabbergasted. It was a true testament to his incredible self-control that he didn’t leap down the phone and strangle everyone on the other end. “Okay, fine.” He rattled off the serial number from the bottom edge of his keyboard and scribbled down the reference number he received in return.

Steward Vincent chose that moment to crack Simon’s door and peer into his office. “You got a moment?”

Simon switched on his smile and perfectly aligned white teeth beamed from his dark complexion. “Yeah, sure.” He waited while Steward crossed the room and sat on a corner - the only corner - of Simon’s desk not covered with paper.

“Hey, if this is about the swearing just before you wouldn’t believe-”

“It’s not about that,” Steward said, cutting him off. He slapped a manila-bound file in front of his top detective.

“What’s this?” Simon opened it and immediately saw the designation-52 in the top corner, appropriately written in red. “Oh, no.”

“It’s your turn,” Steward said apologetically, which was unusual for the Superintendent.

“No, no!” Simon pushed the file away, trying to get it off his desk as if it were a snake. “Get someone else to do it, I’m too busy.”

“So are the others.”

“What about Anders? He didn’t look busy, or Kim?”

“No, it’s your turn. Nobody likes them. Today it’s yours.” With a note of finality, Steward stood and straitened his trousers and necktie. “Make it quick. Don’t let it get in the way of real work.”

“Great,” Simon mumbled when his Superintendent was gone. “Another bullshit case.” He didn’t really have any pressing work, but the thought of paper shuffling a designation-52 made the curly hairs on the back of his neck stand straight. 52 was the code the force used to identify an ‘explainable, unsolvable’. That usually meant UniForce was involved and there was a WEF sanction on the killing. Ergo, he couldn’t do anything about it.

“Okay, so... what’ve we got?” he said to nobody in particular. “Another dead dude. What a surprise.” The words were stale; he uttered them at the beginning of every case.

Adam Oaten. Simon ran his finger across the page, reading the description of the incident. It’s already old. The crime had happened on Monday. Must’ve bounced around before finally landing in Parramatta. Those cocksuckers in Strathfield wouldn’t have the balls... His animosity rose above typical precinct rivalry; he truly believed the officers in Strathfield were worse than useless. Simon had spent his orientation in Strathfield after leaving the academy, but he’d been so revolted by their standards and ethics that he’d requested a transfer six months later. He’d been working in Parramatta ever since.

He turned the page.

Someone had done the preliminary work. He wondered who, and why he or she hadn’t taken the case themselves. He read the dry description of the scene and his imagination coloured in the details. But the unemotional description of the cadaver made him squirm. He’d seen what nanotoxin could do to a body and it wasn’t a pretty. Comes with the job I guess. He swallowed hard and poured a cup of office-coffee, which looked more like muddy water. It was lukewarm and bitter, and made his stomach cramp, but it diluted the ghastly images in his mind.

So, someone shot him with nanotoxin and took his fifth thoracic vertebrae. Simon skimmed the remainder of the autopsy report and keyed the case number

into his computer, trying hard not to let his frustration boil over at the busted spacebar.

The Department's database had more information than Superintendent Vincent had handed him, but it still wasn't much and probably wouldn't be in Simon's final report. There was a list of names and destinations corresponding to the portal activity in the surrounding suburbs for two hours before and three hours after the murder. In total, it was nearly 85,000 entries. Nowonder he didn't bother printing it. The period of interest coincided with the homeward rush of commuters. Simon entered a few search terms to refine the list by ruling out private portals and eliminating all portal activity after seventeen-hundred hours. The list shortened to just over seven-hundred entries. On a whim, he decided to eliminate everything but the portals in Meadowbank. He honestly doubted that anybody would be stupid enough to kill a man in the Meadowbank reserve and flee using a portal in the same suburb.

Twenty-six entries. He briefly scanned the list, but the seventh entry caught his breath.

What? Simon sat straight in his chair and arched an eyebrow. Dan?

He double-clicked the applicable entry and squinted at the details. Dan Sutherland had portaled out of Meadowbank station to his home address in Andamooka at 16:18. What were you doing there buddy? Simon rocked back in his chair and stroked his neat goatee, lost in thought. It'd been a long time; it felt like years since he'd last seen Dan. Time was funny that way; it was really only a few months. Five? Six months? He couldn't be certain.

"But... he couldn't have..." Chief Inspector West entered his access code for the WEF apprehension database and scanned for Adam Oaten. He impatiently watched the flashing cursor and sipped some more of his coffee, unblinking. After a grinding sound from his antiquated hard disk, the list of possible matches appeared for his inspection. There were only two and he checked both. One was for an Adam Oaten somewhere in Florida but the other was for Sydney, Australia. Tingling with adrenaline, Simon's set his coffee a safe distance from his trembling hands. But... not Dan. He checked the DNA profile listed on Adam Oaten's WEF database record and compared it to the DNA taken at the autopsy. It was the same. He was both relieved and terrified to note the apprehension status - target terminated. The WEF had only issued an

apprehension warrant. Adam Oaten's death was only permissible if he resisted.

Okay, so someone from UniForce tried to nab the guy and he put up a fight. He shrugged. It's not the first time. The disturbing element was the possibility, no matter how slim, that Dan was somehow involved. It was death by nanotoxin after all. Simon had heard that Dan had crossed over to the private sector, but he couldn't believe Dan was wantonly cruel.

Could he?

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Wednesday, September 15, 2066

17:13 Andamooka, South Australia

It had taken the better part of a day, but Dan felt stable again. The Zyclone was pounding on his neurotransmitters and he felt less like lying in bed until the end of time. Now he was back to business.

His eyes darted over the list of names.

Damn you. He wondered who in UniForce was selling his lists twice. That Roach woman? He frowned. Someone else making a buck on the side?

This list was fresh; only two names had faded on his screen. The Raven had apprehended both.

He examined every file, trying to gauge whom the Raven was least likely to track. There were several large bounties on the list and it seemed logical the Raven would go for them. The Raven's return rate was astonishing, so the difficulty of finding the targets probably wouldn't deter him. Dan finally settled on a medium-return 26-year-old female. Hmm... I'm ten years older than that. It made Dan feel old and he became acutely aware of the pain in his joints. He hadn't exactly been looking after himself recently. When his wife was still alive he used to promise every morning that he'd be careful and that he'd look after himself. The promise usually preceded a warm kiss and Katherine would wrap her arms around him, pull him close, and whisper, "You'd better be careful or you'll have me to answer to!"

The target was a five foot six brunette. Thin. Dan peered closer at his screen until he could almost see the individual pixels. Perhaps willowy is the word. She looked scared in the photograph; he wondered when it was taken. He memorized the contours of her face, her thin arching eyebrows and her straight nose. He burned the image into his mind, murmuring her physical description repeatedly.

The WEF had issued a warrant for her apprehension - and her death if she resisted. It perplexed Dan to think about killing her without first knowing why, without knowing what she did wrong. He was glad bounty hunting had never forced him into that position. Most people came quietly, if not willingly, when facing the .45-inch barrel of his 1911. He couldn't imagine himself pulling the trigger on a willowy girl. Things would have to go horribly wrong before he'd

even consider it.

Dan kept reading. She was untagged. He grunted. Weren't they all? Some of the more cunning criminals had had their microchips surgically removed, which made them difficult to track. Others had escaped the microchipping squads entirely and so didn't even have a scar on their back. But they were rare. Dan had no idea how they survived in the modern world where people needed a microchip to do anything. How do they pay for groceries? The micro-implant stored the bank details that retailers needed to scan. And they can't portal anywhere. He balked at the thought of always using old-mode transport. It was amusing - even fun - for a while, but the novelty quickly wore off.

And evading the squads can't be easy. Teams of chipping-officers worked with handheld scanners in public, usually - but not always - in crowds. Their job was to ensure everyone had a valid reading on the scanner. They detained people who failed the test and forcibly took them to surgery to have a microchip embedded next to their spine. It had been illegal not to have a microchip since '59.

Dan twitched when he thought about his microchip. He preferred to forget about it, but that was difficult in his line of work. Roughly a million people objected to the chips, but everyone else thought they were a wonderful idea. There was no need for cash or plastic cards, personal identity theft was a dark creature of the past, and they'd eradicated bag snatching. So what did it matter that microchipping encroached a little on civil liberties?

He didn't want to think about it.

Dan knew the so-called 'unchipped' carried microchips in their pockets to fool the scanners and lead a somewhat normal life. But maintaining someone else's identity wasn't easy. For starters, the DNA didn't match, nor did the physical description. If the chipping-officers found anything unusual, they'd whisk the suspect away for questioning where it would quickly become evident they were using a borrowed chip.

"So where do I start?" He whispered now that he had a target in mind.

The file was sparse; little wonder she was on an exclusive list. Targets with that kind of bounty had already evaded capture on the easier lists. So other hunters had tried - and failed - to apprehend her. It wasn't going to be easy, but Dan knew his business.

And knew it well.

He started with all the typical databases, building a search profile from the skimpy details in her UniForce file. He absently sipped a glass of water. It was getting late, but he didn't want to go to bed where the nightmares could torment him.

Two hours later, he'd isolated the possible suspects to a handful of people. Even the unchipped had to leave some kind of digital footprint. Dan usually found them in the redundant and fragmented governmental databases that some countries maintained out of spite. The CMP - Central Microchip Repository - was great unless you were tracking someone that didn't have a valid chip.

He stood and pursed his lips, weighing the options. Try to get some sleep, or start tracking her now? Tired though he was, he stared at her photograph for a long time.

"Okay, Jennifer Cameron..." He rammed his 1911 Colt into his shoulder holster. "Ready or not, here I come."

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Wednesday, September 15, 2066

21:55 Tweed Heads, Australia

Jen watched from the kitchen for a while before bringing the tray of coffee. They're so well matched. While she was thrilled that her best friend had found someone, it simultaneously amplified her own emptiness. She'd looked, she'd done the dating thing, but she'd never found what Samantha shared with Cookie. Part of her longed for it, but another part, the fiercely independent part, rejected it outright. She permitted herself a sigh of self-pity before remembering that she wasn't unhappy. Tonight was a night for giddy excitement and perhaps joyous celebration later on. But that depends on how lucky we get. She reminded herself not to become too optimistic.

She crossed the lounge room and balanced the tray precariously on the edge of the coffee table.

Samantha was gently rubbing Cookie's shoulders and it quickly morphed into a massage. He groaned with pleasure, though his unblinking eyes never shifted from the screen, which he'd been staring at for three days straight. He arched his back and winced at the pain that spasmed through his aching muscles. Damn. He had to remember to stretch every fifteen minutes or he'd seize up like cold molasses.

Cookie was tall and thin, though people rarely noticed his height because he was either hunching over a keyboard or merely a name on someone's computer. He was the ultimate geek, or so he told himself. He had friends from all over the globe, most of whom he'd never met. Not because he couldn't afford it, portal technology made it easy to jump from Tweed Heads to Moscow, across to Portland, then over to Seoul. It was almost too easy; the major airlines had filed for bankruptcy less than a year after PortaNet had launched their first product lines. Governments had since turned international airports into international portal stations. Without restricting international travel to those central locations, customs and immigration would have been impossible to police.

No. Cookie had never met his electronic friends because he didn't see the need. The fragile network of friendships he'd woven across the globe would quickly collapse if he ever met them in real life. His parents had stories to tell about that, it'd happened frequently in their generation. The connections were platonic, of pure ideas, unhindered by the clumsiness of body language. Even some of

Cookie's real-life friends had drifted to the fringes of his daily life and taken a more prominent role in his online existence.

He had evolved.

That's what the social scientists called it. His mind could carry seven simultaneous conversations without getting confusing. On an exceptional day, Cookie could raise the stakes to ten concurrent conversations, but that was pushing it even for him. And he could hold the conversations while working on a totally unrelated problem, as he was today. Every few seconds he'd flip from one chat session to another and he always knew what was happening where. If his friends were online, they were fair game. And the rules of engagement stipulated that he must respond within two minutes if someone started chatting with him. It had a snowballing effect and Samantha was always chastising him for lavishing too much attention on his online friends and not enough attention on her. It was nearly impossible to get his undivided attention and it was annoying when he wouldn't take his eyes off the screen.

But today was different.

He'd cut the conversations down to three: a guy in Milan was online and they were chatting about the latest developments in superconductor technology, a genderless screen-name from Austin was providing invaluable assistance for hacking a UG7-rated network, and he was maintaining his end of the conversation with Samantha and Jen. But he was dedicating the bulk of his brain's immense processing power to penetrate the seemingly impregnable fortress UniForce had erected around their network.

"So what?" Cookie's voice was hoarse; he'd under-budgeted the amount sleep he needed. "It's not like it's hard."

Jen raised an eyebrow. She felt the beginning of a headache pulse behind her eyes and hoped the cup of coffee she lovingly stroked would kill it before it became bothersome. "You think you can do it?"

Cookie would've shrugged if Samantha's thumbs weren't working away at the knots in his flesh. "Yeah, if I had long enough I could."

Jen didn't doubt it. Cookie seemed to have endless access to that sort of information.

“Oh fuck, fuck!” Perspiration started beading on Cookie’s forehead and his body snapped to attention.

Samantha stopped kneading his shoulders and watched the flurry of activity on the screen as Cookie’s fingers twitched across his DataHand-Dvorak keyboard. “What is it?”

“Fuck!” Cookie slammed a hand repeatedly on the enter-key. “Fucking piece of... God damn it!” He threw his hands up in disgust and leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers behind his head.

“What is it?” Samantha poked him in the ribs, trying to elicit an answer.

“JP and I had a nineteenth-degree encrypted tunnel between here and Austin and someone’s just fucked it over.” He snorted and ran a hand roughly across the stubble on his chin. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d made the acquaintance of a razor.

“Weren’t you getting your information from JP?” Jen asked nervously.

He sighed. “Some of it, yeah.” Cookie replaced his fingers on the keys and they resumed their customary tattoo on the rounded blobs of fire-retardant plastic.

Jen pushed more, asking, “So now what? Do you have to stop?”

Cookie shook his head. “No, I’ll be right... might slow me down a bit but it should be okay.”

Jen marvelled that he could type and speak at the same time. She’d tried it, but usually ended up typing what she wanted to say or the other way around. Samantha placed a reassuring hand on Cookie’s arm and traced her fingers along his skin until she’d sensitised it into goose bumps. She finally stopped when the luring aroma of coffee was too much to bear. She would’ve offered some to her lover but what he was doing looked too intense for mug-holding. It was hard to tell whether he was reconstructing a secure channel to Austin or resuming the hack alone. She figured it was better not to ask, not now anyway.

Taking another sip, Jen daydreamed about what they could do if the hack worked. It was bigger than anything they would have dreamed of tackling a year ago, even a month ago. Accessing the UniForce network was the ultimate prize

for everyone struggling to restore some measure of freedom to the unwittingly oppressed. She closed her eyes and let the caffeine numb the dull throb in her head. How did we ever let it get to this? She demanded the question of nobody in particular, and she received no reply. How did we fuck up so badly? She remembered the stories her grandfather had told. He was right when he said the ‘good old days’. Anything would be better than this. She wished she could burn the whole system to the ground and watch something better raise like a phoenix from the ashes. If only we could. She tensed, not yet ready to trust Cookie’s judgement wholeheartedly. But if anybody finds out... She swallowed hard. Then we’ll be totally fucked.

“You tired?” Samantha crawled onto the couch and sat looking at her friend, leaving Cookie to work in peace for a change.

Jen nodded. “Yeah. I’ve been tired for... God I don’t know, years I think.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Jen smiled. “Yes it was.”

Samantha gathered her long black hair, secured it with a plasmaband at the back of her head, and then smoothed a few wispy strays behind her ears. Her grandparents were Korean and they’d given her a legacy of health and probable longevity, though she nearly puked whenever she visited them. She’d never acquired a taste for their prized gimchi. Fermented cabbage had about the same appeal as a bowl full of shit as far as Samantha was concerned.

Jen watched her. She knew everything about Samantha; she was in her earliest memories. She knew her well enough to complete her sentences. They’d grown up together, gone to school and university together, and now they lived in the same apartment together. And they certainly shared the dedication to change the world.

“Do you think we can win?” Samantha asked. For once, her eternal spring of energy had run dry. It’d been a busy few days.

Jen frowned. “Win? It’s not a game.”

“You know what I mean. Do you think we can pull this off?”

“I think we have a good shot at getting inside their network.” Jen stifled a sigh that badly needed to come out. “And if the world owes us a miracle we might even disrupt Echelon, even if it’s only for a minute. Hell... seconds would make me happy.” The sigh escaped. “But it’s going to take more than that to effect any real change.”

Samantha sensed a little of what Jen was feeling and said, “Stranger things have happened. It’s not impossible.”

Jen nodded. “I know, that’s what scares me. What if we bring Echelon down? What then?”

“Then we’ve won.”

“Is that winning?”

Samantha paused briefly before answering. “Yes, I suppose it is. You’re thinking too large. You shouldn’t think of everything you need to win the war, just what you need to win the battle.”

“Yeah but if we’re not prepared you can bet they will be.” Jen had never felt more motivated in her life. She could almost smell the sweet dew of a significant win - something to prove to the world that the resistance wasn’t dead. Not yet anyway. And she silently vowed that while she was alive the resistance would never die.

She remembered reading a textbook account of how Echelon had evolved. It had started innocently enough; most people had barely known of its existence. It began with the birth of the original Internet - back when it was slow and people still connected with modems. She smiled at the thought. Imagine that, modems! She’d seen one on a trip to a science museum with her grandfather when she was a little girl. There was an exhibit on display with real, functioning modems connecting two computers. It was mind boggling to think how patient everybody must’ve been, waiting for downloads from constipated servers through technology that made her toaster look sophisticated. She’d read accounts of what they’d used back then: twisted pair wires, coaxial cable, fibre optic glass tubes and microwave dishes. All primitive. Nothing that came close to the nanotechnology she’d grown up with.

It pained her to think about Echelon. How easy it would’ve been to stop back

then! But that's the way things work, isn't it? People are too busy running their lives to worry about things like that. The society that had crawled out of the twentieth century was woefully unprepared for the technology it could invent. Ha! Her mind sneered. We're no more prepared for it today. When she thought about it, Homo sapiens were a slow-witted species, especially in groups - the more there were, the stupider they got. In the year 2000, Echelon merely scanned e-mail transmissions and international communications for a preset list of words and phrases that flagged potentially suspicious activity. But the fledgling technology gathered more data than it could thoroughly scan. The system was more useful for statistical analysis of communication channels than anything else.

It sent a shiver down Jen's spine. But it evolved quickly and turned sinister. Project Echelon doubled in power and sophistication every six months, keeping abreast of the technological horsepower of the times. Primitive but deadly. She furrowed her brow and thought, Couldn't people see it was a weapon? Deadlier than bullets in the wrong hands? It infuriated her. I guess what they say is true - evil will flourish if good people do nothing.

And so Echelon, a Frankenstein's monster, had been born.

Jen gritted her teeth. Well I'm not going to stand by. Not anymore. She was determined to rebel against the regime that had risen during the chaotic corporate dive for power during the '30s and '40s.

Echelon had quickly set freedom of speech in its sights. The arguments were all the same. We'll only use it against terrorists, so what did you have to fear? Why are you so opposed to it? Do you have something to hide? But then they broadened the definition of terrorism, adding more crimes to the list. Soon carjacking and assault were also crimes of terror. The system didn't care; it happily chewed on and spat out carjackers with as much zeal as it went after potential suicide bombers. Then the '50s saw the rise of Internet Mark 4, the nano-net, which used the first generation of stable quantum products. But project Echelon had infiltrated the nano-net before they'd even switched it on, strangling the communication channels with its ever-present ear.

And Echelon's sphere of influence expanded. After targeting the major felonies, the authorities used it to clamp down on minor crime. They used video surveillance systems and visual recognition algorithms to track paedophiles 24

hours a day, 7 days a week. But the paedophiles weren't enough, were they? They were just a pilot group; Echelon's creators had always had much grander things in mind. Within two months they'd ascertained the new Echelon could cope with the increased influx of data and they expanded the project to include paroled prisoners, then to suspects, then to every member of society. Echelon catalogued and kept track of everyone that had ever shown his or her face in public. Everyone who had said something within range of Echelon's microphones, picked up a telephone handset, or spoken to their loved ones on a videophone had had their 5,326 characteristic voice-points permanently logged in the belly of the beast. But the microchips were the icing on the cake. They branded people like cattle and kept them under control with an electronic web of needles. Purse-snatchers, jaywalkers and teenagers who spat chewing gum on the pavement - Echelon flagged them all, raised an alarm, and stamped the crimes on their permanently record. Society no longer tolerated... anything. Society demanded perfection, pure harmony.

Jen shivered despite the mid-September heat.

It was only a matter of time before Echelon made the transition to the private sector. The governments couldn't keep something that valuable away from the greedy corporate giants forever. There wasn't a giga-corporation on the planet that didn't drool and rub its hands together in glee at the thought of controlling it. They were like vultures circling a dying beast, their nervous eyes darting from each other to the carcass-to-be. A cooperative of governments had jointly owned and operated the project, but they were all weakening at the knees. Unified Enforcement had simply petitioned the hardest. Already being in the law enforcement business, UniForce could claim they had a legitimate use for the system. The fact that they'd always intended to sublet time to other corporations for marketing purposes was irrelevant. Echelon was a law enforcement organism so the governments responsible for it sold it to a law-enforcement multinational.

They'd lapsed into an uncomfortable silence, unusual for the pair of chatterboxes. Samantha was tugging at the fraying sleeve of her pyjamas and Jen was nursing her empty mug.

Cookie gasped.

"What?" Samantha was glad for the distraction.

His jaw hung slack and, for once, he was incapable of speech; the present task totally engaged his brain. His fingers were a blur of activity. No matter how archaic it felt to stick stubbornly to a keyboard, Cookie refused to get implants; they just felt too unnatural. Samantha approved.

“What is it?” Jen echoed Samantha’s question.

“I’m in.”

“What?” Jen and Samantha leapt to his side, fixing their gaze on his screen.

“No, wait...” He held his breath, inwardly swearing at the false alarm. “Sorry, I just got jittery. I’m through another layer. This thing’s like an onion, they sure as hell don’t want anybody in there.”

Jen visibly sagged. “Want a cookie, Cookie?”

“Yeah, baby.” He stopped what he was doing, blinked, and removed his glasses to rub feeling back into his eyelids. A thin crust had formed over his corneas and it hurt to moisten them again. “Hey, Samantha, you think you could get me some eye drops?”

“Sure.” Samantha knew better than to argue with him. She’d tried dozens of times to stop him from abusing his body, but he pigheadedly refused to change his habits. Eventually she’d given up trying.

Jen brought the tray of chocolate biscuits and offered them around while Samantha administered the saline drops to David’s swollen eyes. “Oh, and your coffee’s gone cold.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot about that.” He pushed back from the computer. “Man, I gotta take a break, this stint’s killing me.” He munched on a biscuit and skulled his coffee.

“Can you leave it where it is?” Samantha was hoping he’d take a break, at least until morning. She planned to deactivate his alarm after he fell asleep so he could get some decent sleep for a change.

Cookie creased his forehead and brushed the crumbs from his lap onto the carpet. “I think so; just let me activate a prop.” He’d already explained to them

the necessity of such measures. Without a prop program the UG7-rated network would self-heal and all the holes Cookie had laboured to bore into the electronic defences would be gone by morning. Worse, a setback like that would break Cookie's spirit. He'd already invested more than fifty hours in the hack. The team that had devised the UG7 protocols certainly hadn't intend for anybody to compromise their network alone. All the previous successful UG7 hacks had required a whole team of hackers - all with implants - and a disgruntled system administrator leading the charge.

He sent the appropriate commands zinging through the wires and trusted the prop to keep his hard-won holes open during his absence. "That should do it."

"Good." Samantha kissed him, passionately.

Jen was used to it. It didn't even make her feel uncomfortable anymore. Besides, she thought Cookie had earned it. Penetrating another layer was a breakthrough worth celebrating.

"We're close, you know," Cookie said seriously. When he'd accepted the challenge, he didn't really believe he could do it. But every day it looked more possible.

"How long do you think?" Jen felt her stomach boiling with excitement.

"It's hard to say, I don't even know how many layers there are. It depends on how good their sys-admin is." He gracefully accepted another kiss, silencing any more talk for at least ten seconds.

Jen waited until it was over and said, "You two go, would you? You're going to steam the windows if you keep that up."

"How about it? You tired?" Samantha's slitted eyes peered into David's bloodshot whites. She felt guilty for asking because he needed his sleep.

"Hell no, I've got hours left in me." He smiled, scooped the light-framed Samantha into his gangly arms, and carried her to their bedroom.

Jen was amused. She knew he'd be asleep ten seconds after his head hit the pillow and she knew Samantha would complain about it the next morning. She sat alone, watching the prop's dizzying progress. But moments later the

screensaver engaged and the computer showed a luscious coral reef. Bright yellow fish hovered around the entrance to a moray eel's cave. To the right were more fish with sharp backward-angled spines along their top ridge. And a myriad of seaweed swayed in the shimmering slant of light. She loved that picture - the turquoise water, the brilliant coral, the tiny shrimp she knew she'd see if she leaned closer. It somehow represented freedom. Strange how that works.

Then it dawned on her - she had hope. It was fragile, but it was there and it felt good. And that was enough, for now.

*

Wednesday, September 15, 2066

17:02 Groningen, The Netherlands

Perspiration beaded on Hans's forehead. It trickled past his thinning eyebrows and stung his sensitive eyes.

Godverdomme. He blinked and rubbed a palm across his sweat-streaked temples before smearing it onto his sleeve. Yuck. His containment field was expanding; he could feel the hairs on his legs puffing away from his body with the electrostatic charge. He frowned, wondering if he'd somehow made an error and supplied the amplifier with too much power.

It's not stable. He shook his head in dismay, wondering whether it was safe to turn it off so soon after turning it on. It's definitely not stable. Hans flicked the switch and hoped the build-up wouldn't fry his circuit. No smoke, that's a good sign. He'd smelled smouldering silicon twice since breakfast and the acrid smoke was still burning his nasal passages. The last thing he wanted was another mushroom cloud of toxic particles darkening the walls of his tiny apartment. The neighbours were already getting suspicious.

With the device deactivated, he turned off the containment field. The tickle on his leg-hairs stopped and the buzz at the back of his neck receded. Hans sighed in defeat and returned to the scratchy pencil jottings that covered the graph on his clipboard. It wasn't that he'd failed - he'd found another way it didn't work. At times like this he reminded himself of Thomas Edison inventing the light bulb. But he didn't have the fate of the world on his shoulders. Hans dabbed at the sweat that was already returning to his forehead. Talk about pressure.

He drank the last of his beer and grimaced; it was warm.

Hans couldn't count the number of laws he was breaking by doing his research. He scoffed at the stupidity - his own stupidity. Is it worth it? He wondered that at least twice every experiment. Lars Olssen, his colleague, close associate, and perhaps even friend had paid the ultimate price. How far am I willing to go? And should I even bother? Nobody else is...

They were all questions beyond his capacity to answer. Some things just 'are' and he'd learned long ago not to argue with them. Hans van de Berg was an anti-quark expert. He sneered when he thought about it. His parents had said it was

the field of the future - and they'd been right. Hans thought of all the parties he hadn't attended at university so he could study his textbooks and simulations. What a waste. He would've been happier as a carpenter. Or perhaps a painter? He pondered the could-have-beens with a whimsical smile. But no. The smile faded. I'm stuck in this two-bedroom shoebox with no friends, no job, and no prospects. But he was the top of his field, wasn't he? Hans opened his fridge; it was alarmingly empty. A stale crust of bread and a portion of smeerkaas - spreadable cheese - were all he had to satisfy the rumbling in his stomach.

He munched unenthusiastically and allowed his thoughts to drift again. He knew why he wouldn't allow himself to quit, at least not until he ran out of money: nobody else would bother. Nobody else had the expertise and nobody else cared enough or knew enough to care at all. So that leaves me. It wasn't a comforting thought really. What if I fail? He swallowed his gooey mouthful with difficulty.

Quantum physics wasn't the easiest arena to learn about the politics of science. Hans had learned the hard way. Sidelined for his radical - yet correct - theories, he was quickly ostracised from the men and women he'd once considered colleagues. He still winced when he thought about it, even after so long. Isolation was like an icicle in his chest. Always a social man, the pain became almost unbearable after Lars Olssen's assassination.

A clamour outside immediately snared Hans's attention and he darted to the window, peering cautiously over the sill. He lived on the second story of a three-story building and he scanned the scene below for signs of trouble. An unleashed dog was loping down the cobblestoned street and had spooked a child. Understandably so - the dog was huge. Hans waited for a long time to make sure nothing more serious was afoot, smearing his palm across the pane when his breath fogged the window. It was getting cold. Summer was nearly over and already the first leaves were turning, carried away by the slightest breath of air. They tumble haphazardly, spinning and cartwheeling until the rotting began. He loved autumn; it was his favourite season, a beautiful death. It brought the familiar smell from the sugar factory, which settled over Groningen for months. He adored it, but everyone else complained about it endlessly. The conversion from sugar beets into sugar emitted an acrid odour that Hans always associated with home. Sadly, for him, this year would be the last. They were setting up a system of baffles to cleanse the air before it escaped the factory. It was a new design based on nanotechnology and the designers had touted that it would make factory-emitted air cleaner than ambient air.

Hans also enjoyed taking long walks through the city, aimlessly wandering around the market and drifting through the park. He enjoyed saying hello to the ducks and feeding them freshly baked bread from the bakery on his street. He clenched his jaw. But no more. Work, work, work. It pained him, but the walks were something from his past. He had to consider his personal security and meandering aimlessly through the city was a recipe for disaster. But his memories were alive and every night he dreamed of a time when he could wander the city again.

But for now, the next combination needed testing. Who knows, maybe this is the one...

*

Thursday, September 16, 2066

International Portal Terminals

08:34 Sydney, Australia

Dan felt the familiar change in pressure and stepped away from the white circle. Portaling from the northern hemisphere to the southern hemisphere always tickled his lungs and he coughed to erase the irritation. He'd asked about it but nobody else experienced the same sensation. His doctor had said it was all in his head. He'd suggested that perhaps the first time Dan had portaled, he'd gone from high pressure to low pressure and the air in his lungs had shifted. Ever since, his mind attributed portaling across the hemispheres with a tickle in his chest and reproduced the sensation because he expected it.

But Dan doubted it. It's real, no matter what anybody else says.

He was irritable from an abundant lack of results. Of the three original possibilities on his list, he'd already scratched two, but he'd had to go to London and Chicago to do it. The suspects had turned out to be innocent, even the most rudimentary reconnaissance had told him that. But bounty hunting was essentially a process of elimination. Less successful hunters shunned the footwork, so Dan tried never to shy from it. It was important. He had to do it.

One to go. He was beginning to wonder whether he'd made a mistake during his database scan. Five to one it's not her. Surely she's not in Australia. The majority of his targets were scattered throughout North America and Europe. Australian targets were rare, and he'd never had two in a row before. A dangerous thought hovered on the edge of his mind. If it does turn out to be her, I hope the Raven doesn't know she's in Australia. He might try to economise on his travel. It brought a chill to his flushed cheeks and drained the colour from his skin.

A squad of drug police were leading a Labrador through the terminals. Despite advances in olfactory technology that enabled identification of individual microscopic particles, handheld scanners just weren't as fun to work with as dogs. So they worked side by side. The Labrador's wet nose sniffed the air and the every second the scanner classified thousands of airborne particles. They were both looking for anything illicit. The dog's tongue lolled from its mouth and its big, happy, brown eyes were in stark contrast to the cold, tense, blue eyes of its handler. And the squad oozed business. Dan wondered why.

"What's going on, Chuck?" Dan asked the customs officer as he placed his

unloaded pistol in the special tray for inspection.

Christopher Delaney, or Chuck as his friends knew him, snorted in reply. “Some asshole had a condom of heroine burst in his stomach. He didn’t even make it to the counter; he just dropped dead. About fifteen minutes ago.”

Dan frowned. “They must be getting desperate.”

“You’re not wrong there. We’ve had a threefold increase over the same period last year.”

“So I guess it’s working then?” Dan raised an eyebrow and collected his weapon after passing through the scanner. For once, it didn’t go off. He had clearance to carry ammunition and an unloaded weapon into and out of the country, all thanks to the bounty-hunter certificate loaded on his chip. Besides, he was such a regular traveller that he’d become good friends with Christopher Delaney, and he knew several other terminal workers by name too.

“I wouldn’t be so sure.” Chuck lazily eyed the baggage that scrolled lethargically across his monitor. “A neighbour of mine had a son who died last week from the shit.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Dan didn’t know what else to say. He never did.

“Yeah.” Chuck’s smile looked wan. “So was she. They said he knew what he was doing too. He’d been addicted for years so he knew exactly how much to shoot up.” He lowered his voice as if discussing something taboo. “I guess he just woke up one morning, realised what he was, and decided it was time to punch his own ticket.” He slowly shook his head. “My neighbour was understandably distressed. She’d been fighting to get him clean for God knows how long.”

“Maybe now she can lay him to rest, grieve for her loss and pick up what’s left of her life.” But Dan said it half-heartedly; he knew how hard it was to pick up the pieces of a shattered life. He’d been trying for eleven months and didn’t feel any closer to a rebuilt life than he had on day one. Still, he wished well for others. He occasionally needed to hear a success story to believe there was still hope for him.

“I doubt it.” Chuck was barely whispering. “Xantex’s prescription didn’t work

fast enough and she did herself in too.”

Dan swallowed hard, understanding all too well the way she felt. “Then I hope she finds peace.”

It wasn't what he needed to hear. It sapped his strength.

The Australian government, whether through efficiency or carelessness, had combined the roles of immigration, customs and security. Dan wished other countries would do the same; it made things easy on travellers. So, now that Chuck's scanner had logged Dan's details, Dan was free to enter the county. They each nodded farewell and Dan headed to the domestic portals where he selected his home address. He was thinking about the final entry on his list. I'm tired so you'll have to wait a while. He scowled. If it's you at all.

Chapter 3

I wake up every morning, jump in the shower, look down at the symbol, and that pumps me up for the day. It's to remind me every day what I have to do, which is, "Just Do It."

24-year-old Internet entrepreneur Carmine Colettio on his decision to get a Nike swoosh tattooed on his navel, December 1997.

Thursday, September 16, 2066

Elustra Giga-Mall

14:44 Melbourne, Australia

The mall was crowded.

It always was. Such was the price to pay for living in the hub of the thirty-seventh Elustra undertaking. It truly was impressive; Jen had to admit that. A little over the top though. It was an Elustra committee brainchild - that'd wanted to increase efficiency. It chilled Jen to think of them sitting around a conference room, scoffing hors d'oeuvres, downing Champaign and concocting their plan for the Elustra Giga-Mall. The complex was actually three enormous columns arranged in a triangle with an artificially maintained garden in the middle. Each pillar was a staggering testament to the accomplishments of civil engineering. They each occupied three square-kilometres of earth - made brackish due to the raising water table - and each rose 125 stories into the sky. The tubes and connecting tunnels that linked the three pillars resembled the feeding and refuse tubes of a hospitalised monster.

The primary pillar was the epicentre of the Elustra world. It was a credit-maniac's nightmare and a kleptomaniac's delight. An array of retail stores, all operated by the colossal giga-corporation, catered for every conceivable desire. Jen frowned and tried to think of something Elustra had forgotten but couldn't. There were 400 food stalls, 60 restaurants, and 7 department stores - all with names based on the Elustra trademark: Little Elustra, Big Elustra, Lustre, Lust Elm, Elustra Cute, Mini Elustra, and Gigantic Elustra. Jen had lost count but the information board proudly boasted there were 16 cinemas, 5 supermarkets, 90 clothing stores, 17 chemists, 18 hairdressers and over 300 other specialty shops selling everything from 'antiques' to computer games.

Impressive. Jen begrudgingly admitted. If she couldn't find something on the outside, she knew she'd find it here - Elustra guaranteed it. As one of their favourite advertisements said, "If you can't find it at Elustra, it doesn't exist." Jen believed it. And the convenience! Jen marvelled that they could operate every store in the mall for 8,760 hours a year. 8,784 hours in a leap year, Jen remembered. They'd built their business on pure, unadulterated capitalism. And Jen was standing at the pinnacle. It frightened her a little and she could see a similarly uneasy expression on Samantha's face.

The second Elustra pillar housed the management team's offices. A few years

ago it had featured in Fortune magazine, which reported it to have the most luxurious offices money could buy. And that had been the case until the other giga-corporations matched Elustra's grandeur to stem the tide of quality staff they were losing to the giant retailer's extravagance. Jen couldn't remember how many offices the building hosted and couldn't be bothered sitting through one of the information screenings to find out. The boring presentations ran in a loop, 24 hours a day.

The final pillar housed the residences, everything from one-bedroom bachelor pads to expansive executive homes. Elustra had spared no expense. The building materials, workmanship, finish and fittings were all first class. They'd even soundproofed the walls to give every resident the sensation they were in a freestanding house. Or so they say. Jen had never heard a firsthand resident's account, probably because their contracts forbid them to disclose company secrets. Every resident over the age of eighteen was an employee, and the Elustra Foundation thoroughly indoctrinated the teenagers who were approaching legal working age. As a result, they tended to fight ferociously to keep a position in the company, even if that meant doing menial work such as scrubbing the scum off the nest of pipes in the basement.

It was the perfect biosphere to hawk wares. Jen knew it, Samantha knew it, and most of the people living there knew it. But that was what they wanted. Or that's what Elustra had contracted them to say if anybody asked. Jen wished she had an information pipeline into the giga-mall, but the iron-fisted approach taken by Elustra's infamous security force made that impossible. And it was rare to find an Elustra employee in the outside world; they had no need of that anymore. They lived branded lives, Elustra Lives. What need did they have of the outside world? Didn't Elustra supply everything they could possibly want?

Openings at an Elustra mall occasionally appeared in the online papers and Jen wondered what sort of people would actually apply for them. Nevertheless, there was a wide variety of positions available: office juniors, highly paid and overstressed executives, cleaners, security guards, building maintenance orderlies, doctors, dentists, medical specialists, engineers to keep the sophisticated equipment in proper working order... Elustra needed them all to keep their workforce healthy, to keep it free of decay. But the advertisements never mentioned the burnt-out employees Elustra discarded, thereby creating the vacancies.

With such a large structure, transportation could prove a problem. Or it would prove a problem if Elustra hadn't put portals everywhere. They were free for all residents - one of the perquisites of having a microchip branded by an oppressive corporation. The portals positively riddled the structure, though somebody could only access the areas for which he or she had the appropriate clearance.

And one of Elustra's manufacturing plants had fabricated every product in the mall -including the 'antiques'. But the factories didn't have a shiny enough public image, so they'd never been a candidate for integration with the perfectly balanced triangle. Elustra brushed them to the fringes where they occupied deserts and swamps, operated in sweatshop conditions wherever the local laws were lax enough to permit it.

The business model had proved successful; Elustra's pilot program in Los Angeles demonstrated that. It was so successful that they began stamping out malls as fast as their construction crews could find the materials. They scattered the first ten across the United States where the newly enlisted Elustra employees welcomed them wholeheartedly and everyone else eyed them with suspicion. The fact that Elustra only built malls on cheap, unwanted land was probably what helped them survive their youth. Who needed to be close to the cities when your patrons could portal from anywhere? So their enormous triangles, which looked more like huge turds from a distance, multiplied without resistance. Their introduction into Canada and Australia went smoothly, but the Europeans complained bitterly about the decimation of their old-world skyline and protests rocked the streets until Elustra relocated to Russia, where they weren't so finicky about outward appearances. In order to compensate for the added cost of long distance portaling, Elustra subsidised all portal activity from Western Europe into their Russian malls. It worked. Europeans flocked to Elustra's malls and brought their money with them.

A flood of money.

It was hardly surprising that other multinationals sought to copy Elustra's success and soon the gargantuan developments speckled the globe. Every multinational attempted to diversify, preying upon vaguely dissimilar segments of society. But Elustra was the original model and it would always hold a special place in the hearts and minds of the people.

For Jen, that special place was a stinging clot that choked her of oxygen.

Samantha looked longingly at a plasma screen that was spewing commercial propaganda at the passers-by. “What I wouldn’t give to hack that and get some real exposure.”

Jen was in a good mood and her enthusiasm nearly rivalled Samantha’s effervescent exuberance. “We’re on the verge of getting a much bigger canvass than a plasma screen.”

Samantha beamed and said, “I know. Exciting, isn’t it?”

Jen nodded and turned sideways to squeeze past a porky man whose buttoned shirt had popped beneath his considerable gut, revealing a tangle of belly-hair. She suppressed a shudder and asked, “So what exactly are we looking for anyway?”

“I need a new top.” Samantha despaired to think of her wardrobe, it was just so, camp.

“Yeah, me too.” Jen wanted to toss all her worn clothing in the bin and start afresh, but then remembered her grandfather’s warning and stubbed her desire before it got out of control. Her clothes were functional and that was good enough. She hated the part of herself that desired more. It wasn’t necessary. It wasn’t natural. It was the advertisements weaselling their way into her subconscious and influencing her actions like the jerk of a puppet’s strings.

“...I think.” Samantha was saying something that Jen didn’t quite catch. “Or maybe beige.”

Excited children were tugging on the arms of exhausted parents, clustering around the window of Luke’s Lucky Pet Store. Jen doubted that anybody by the name of Luke had ever worked there. There was a Luke’s Lucky Pet Store in all Elustra giga-malls. Hmm... those kittens are cute though. She knew why Elustra wanted to sell them. Owning a pet raised the rent in a person’s apartment by 20 Credits a week and it meant the inhabitants needed to purchase cat food, flea collars, and small balls that tinkled when they rolled. And that wasn’t mentioning visits to the veterinarian. But one kitten was particularly cute. It was unsteady on its long back legs and it wobbled when it ran about the pen, playing with its siblings in the sawdust.

Jen made a longing face, similar to the pestering children. “Oh, can we get one?”

“Yeah sure, it’ll love living on your yacht,” Samantha said facetiously.

Jen poked her in the ribs. “Well, that one loves water. You can tell by the way it walks - it’s not wobbly, it’s got sea legs!”

Samantha doubled with laughter. “Sure girl.”

They were halfway back to the food court, or the junk-food court as the locals called it, when Jen reflected on the serious side of their combined excitement. “We should think about how to use our window of opportunity.” She talked in codes, all the better to hide their intentions from the ever-watchful corporate eyes and ever-listening corporate ears.

Samantha knew what she meant. “I’ve been thinking about that too.” She opened the throttle on her imagination. “We could send a message to other-”

“Except that they’ll track it back to us if it contains any contact details,” Jen said abruptly. It was the crux of their problem. If Cookie managed to hack into the UniForce network and pull the plug on Echelon, they’d have the opportunity to send the world a message that could help reunite the resistance. But by delivering enough information to reconnect the fractured branches, they’d be telling the enemy where to find them. And that meant their downfall before they could even taste their newfound freedom.

“The best we can hope for,” - it infuriated her to accept this - “is to let them know we’re still here and that we’re still fighting.” She wished she had some way of knowing how many pockets there were. What if they’ve given up? What if we’re the last?

Samantha noticed her friend’s deliberation and alleviated her unease by distracting her with something mundane. “Come on, I want to look for my top here.”

They passed the scanners, which logged the activities of every patron: which store they entered, how long they spent there, which products they bought, and which products they paused to inspect. With this information, Elustra determined whom to ban from their malls. If someone consistently browsed but never bought, he or she would eventually be unwelcome. Elustra didn’t tolerate browsers; they were only interested in people who spent money. So, somewhere in the bowels of the mall, a server wrote Jen and Samantha’s unique identifiers

into three logs: a primary, an onsite backup, and an offsite backup. The fact that the identifiers recorded didn't correspond with the two girls wasn't something the storekeepers bothered to check. That was why Elustra paid security guards.

Samantha spent 20 minutes browsing the racks of garish clothes, kneading the material between her fingers to feel the quality of the fabric. She selected three to try on and a store assistant ushered her toward the change rooms, enthusiastically sprouting phoney compliments when Samantha paraded the potential purchases in front of the mirrors.

She wished her breasts were bigger. She'd been thinking about investing in a set of breast enlargers that used electrical fields to stimulate cell division. Everyone who'd tried them sung their praises and Samantha was saving up for the purchase. She was needlessly worried that Cookie wanted them fuller and she pouted at her reflection in the mirror. She hadn't yet worked up the courage to ask Jen whether she wanted to go halves in a set.

"What do you think?" The tank top revealed her slender shoulders and much of her elegant back, though it would've hung better if she had the breasts she wanted. But maybe I should buy clothes with larger breasts in mind?

Jen said, "I like it better than the other two. It hugs your waist... but maybe it's for people with... it's a bit loose at the front." It was Jen's way of gently reminding her that the design was for people of more ample bosom.

Samantha memorised her figure then closed her eyes and conjured her image with breasts pumped up like balloons. It fit perfectly in her mind. All she needed were the bigger breasts and she'd be able to afford them in a month. Just in time for summer. The enlargers were supposed to show results after a fortnight and the ads said a month of persistent use meant she'd need bras two cup-sizes larger.

She smiled. "I'll take it."

The assistant graciously scanned the top's barcode and then waved her scanner toward Samantha. It beeped approval and she neatly folded the purchase before incongruously stuffing it into a paper carry-bag that sported the store's logo no less than five times. She read the name from the receipt before scrunching it into the bag and saying, "Thank you Mrs Peterson." That was the identity Samantha was using.

Samantha just smiled and accepted the bag before shuffling from the store, Jen close behind. “You know, I was wondering...” Now’s a good a time as any I guess, she thought. But Samantha wasn’t sure how to broach the subject. “What do you think of my breasts?”

“Excuse me?”

Samantha cringed and wished she could melt into a puddle on the floor. “I mean, do you think they’re small?”

Jen didn’t often feel uncomfortable talking with her friend, but some subjects required supreme diplomacy and made her nervous. “Well they’re not... they’re a bit... they suit you.”

So Samantha spent the next five minutes explaining her intentions and the reasons behind them.

*

The Raven perched one level up.

He had the perfect vantage point, peering over the shiny metal rail to the lower level. Elustra had tried to recreate the peaceful feeling of sunlight that had often flooded malls in the twentieth century by using extremely intense sun-globes. To improve the effect, they’d carved holes through the middle of every first, second and third floor to give the light somewhere to go. It made people think they were in a four-storey building instead of a 125-storey building. Every fourth level had a plastic-looking garden with rocks, trickling water and other soothing things.

The Raven ignored them all.

But the rail glimmered in his eyes and a distorted image of his face gazed back. He ran a finger over the scar just behind his hairline. And he noticed it was time to shave; three days’ stubble was two days’ too many. Even ravens had to preen.

He detested waiting. He always grew impatient waiting for a favourable omen. It irked him that he couldn’t swoop two days ago when he’d first started tracking the girl. But he knew how important it was. Without the omen he was no better than the others, and he couldn’t have that.

He longed to lose his Redback-PX7. He wanted to lob off a few rounds and cut her down. Just thinking about it filled him with malicious glee bordering on psychosis. But that wasn't how he saw it. He was a surgeon, after all, an instrument of the new order. He carved the dead and decaying flesh from society to reveal the delicious fruit underneath. Never had he preyed on an innocent, only those deserving death. And he was good at doling it out, but the meticulously economical part of his mind refused to allow him more than a glimpse of pride before snuffing it with an electronic command. Sometimes it was difficult to tell where the machine ended and he began, but perhaps that was irrelevant. He was one organism, and a fine specimen of what humanity was capable of if they'd just overcome their inhibitions for cybernetic implants.

He signed and watched Jennifer Cameron from above, ready to swoop at a moment's notice. It had been that way for days. It's a pity I can't control the omens too. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, but he'd recognise it when it arrived. And it would spell the death of the girl - none too soon as far as the Raven was concerned. He wanted to return to America and get some decent sleep because not even his cybernetic implants could eradicate a human body's need to roost.

*

Samantha looked downcast.

They sat on a bench, away from the bustle of the crowd, outside one of Elustra's many medical centres.

"It's hard not to be a consumer."

Jen nodded, intimately understanding. "Yeah, I know. I've been fighting the impulses for a long time. Even today I had to remind myself what it's all about. It has to start somewhere and I don't think the people living here can control their sprees."

"What have I done?" Samantha looked horrified and guilty at the same time, and the combination made her look depressed. But she wasn't depressed, just distressed. She'd certainly never needed a Xantex prescription; she'd never been depressed in her life.

Jen had never taken Xantex's advice either. She shied away from their products

as though they were poison, which they may very well have been.

“You haven’t done anything wrong. Yet. I think spending money on breast enlargers would be a mistake, but it’s always-”

“No,” Samantha said, cutting her off. “You’re right. So what’re we doing here?”

Jen paused to consider that. Was I really intending to buy something? She couldn’t be sure. She didn’t want to buy anything now, but perhaps she was a consumerist at heart and had a deep-seated desire to buy a heap of junk she could just as easily do without. “I don’t know.” She scoured her surroundings distrustfully. They were far enough from the jostling crowd not to be overheard and it seemed an unlikely place for a microphone. If they kept their voices low, Jen thought their nook was a safe enough place to talk. “But now that we’re here I’m enjoying thinking about a jam - as an intellectual exercise only, I’d be too dangerous to try.”

Samantha looked at the nearest plasma screen. An advertisement for jewellery was vying for the attention of the passing bustle. The sparkling diamonds and gorgeous gold chains held a lustre that artisanship alone couldn’t explain; the marketers had created some lustre of their own and woven it into the fabric of the message. It revolted them both to see it for what it was - money in the pockets of Elustra.

Hatred poured through Samantha’s next words. “I’d love to jam that screen.”

“How?” Jen loved to think about it.

“Well...” Samantha thought for a long time before answering. “The control devices are probably in a restricted area. We’d need high security clearance to get there.”

“So it’s impossible?”

“No.” She looked serious. “We’d need Cookie to build a handheld scanner that we could use to record someone’s details.” The trade in stolen microchip data was big business for those with the technology to retrieve it. The trick was to retrieve it all; partial data was worse than useless, it was dangerous. “We’d have to pick someone that definitely had appropriate access.” She thought some more. “I don’t how yet.”

“Work experience?” Jen offered.

Samantha shook her head. “We’re too old to pass off as year ten students.”

“That doesn’t matter, does it? We could just turn up and say we’re considering a career change and that we’d like to spend a day in the life of a screen operator.”

Samantha’s eyes lit up. “Yeah, they’d be crazy to turn away free coffee-fetchers. And then we’d know where to go and what equipment they had.”

“We could scan one of their chips on the day. Afterwards, Cookie’d have to forge a chip with the appropriate clearance - if he can do that at all - and, hey-presto, we’d have access to the control room.” The beginnings of a frown crept across Jen’s forehead. “It’s probably somewhere in the office block.”

“Then it’d depend on Cookie. I don’t think he’s jammed this model of screen before.” Samantha was perking up and returning to normal.

“And then we’d run like hell.” Jen reminded her.

Samantha laughed. “Yeah, we’d run like hell.” She looked at the paper bag she was clutching and a pang of guilt shuddered through her body. “I want to take this back.”

“Really?” Jen wasn’t convinced that was a particularly smart idea. “Are you sure? You’ve got it now, why not just enjoy it?”

Samantha shook her head. “No, I don’t need it and it doesn’t look good on me without the breasts to go with it. Besides, it’ll just make me feel bad every time I wear it. I don’t want that.”

Jen bit her lip, regretting her anti-consumerist tirade. “I’m sorry, I didn’t-”

“Don’t be sorry, you’re right,” she said, cutting her friend off with a wave of her hand. “I have plenty of functional clothes and if we can’t control our own spending, how dare we expect others to?”

“Do you mind if I stay here?” Jen dreaded returning things to their place of purchase, even if it was just an Elustra store. “I don’t feel comfortable-”

“I know,” Samantha said, cutting her off again. She smiled and added, “It’s okay. I understand, remember?”

Jen breathed easier. “Thanks.” Everybody had something he or she couldn’t do. For Jen it was returning clothes, pulling the bits of soapy hair from the shower drain, and visiting her mother. Samantha understood; she had quirks of her own.

“I’ll be back in a moment.”

“Okay, I’ll be here,” Jen said as she watched Samantha reintegrate with the crowd on the main arterial walkway.

An elderly man shuffled past on his way to the medical centre and she heard the automatic doors whirr before a hospital smell engulfed her. There she waited, patiently observing the passers-by and absently wondering how the consumerist-cycle had so thoroughly sucked everybody in.

*

The Raven irritably paced, incapable of ordering himself to stand still. The swish of his cloak and the squeak of hard leather boots complemented the sound of rubber squealing on an overly waxed floor whenever he pivoted on his heels.

He froze.

Was this it? He listened with his mind, feeling a slight vibration in his temples that meant something important was about to happen. The vibration rapidly spread to his back teeth and he knew he was about to receive the omen he so desperately desired. It shivered in front of his vision, a gelatinous eye, staring back at him with cold hatred in its piercing gaze. The Raven waited, obediently. He dared not ask questions, all he could do was wait for the signal. He risked flicking his gaze to the girls below. The innocent one was walking away, leaving the Cameron girl alone. Perfect timing. He wired his mouth shut lest he start begging for his omen.

The other patrons in the mall ignored him. To them, he was just another drunk lunatic staring into space, drooling at something his eyes alone could see. The Raven was fine with that; he cared nothing for the cattle around him. He was the hunter and they were the prey - things for him to use and toss aside as need dictated. They were certainly not worthy of human compassion, if he were still

capable of such a feat.

He quivered slightly, feeling a sudden chill as the eye puffed up larger than he remembered it ever swelling before. It was football sized now and still growing. Finally, it spoke into his mind with a volume that made his knees tremble.

“I give thee sanction.”

The Raven bowed in respect and started backing away, irritating the cattle nearby and eliciting more than one oath.

He said merely, “It shall be done in your honour.”

*

Jen was absently tapping a rhythm on the seat cushions, lost in thought when the commotion began. It all happened so quickly her mind couldn't untangle the blur of activity. She first noticed something was wrong, very wrong, when a brute of a man slammed into her at chest height and she thumped her head on the unyielding tile floor. She reeled from the shock and her vision faded briefly to white before recovering to a dull semblance of its former clarity. A distant, disengaged part of her mind warned that she was concussed. What was that? She heard something that sounded like shattering glass. An earthquake? Her mind hesitantly offered the answer but she quickly rejected it. Elustra giga-malls were earthquake proof.

What then? She brought her head off the chilly floor to find the man pressing her down. “What?”

“Shut up.” He snapped roughly and thrust her down more forcefully. His voice rasped like a chainsaw badly in need of oil. But what else? Jen wondered. There was an important piece of information she knew she couldn't grasp in her stunned state.

I'm being robbed. It was the next most logical conclusion, though at that moment she didn't realise he'd demanded nothing of her except silence. She tried reaching for her wallet but couldn't move her arms, he'd pinned them to the ground behind the bench.

She turned her head and saw the bench: a solid block of old-growth wood,

carved with seats and padded with cushions. It was a corpse. It had been alive for centuries until someone had attacked it with a chainsaw. Such details were lost on most mall patrons. But if someone hadn't forced Jen into such a supine position, she wouldn't have noticed either.

Is that it? She wondered with dread whether he was going to use the solid frame of the bench as cover for rape. Her head was starting to clear. No, it's too visible from the medical centre. It frustrated her not to know what was going on. What then?

As suddenly as he'd knocked her to the ground, he yanked her up, nearly wrenching her arm from its socket. He certainly wasn't a weakling; he could toss her around like a rag doll.

Like a leopard carrying its prey, the man thrust her into the corner and shoved her against a mock-stone pillar. She got her first look at him. He was 30-something and quite good looking with a cleft in his chin that she'd always admired in her father. He looked neatly groomed, though his choice in clothing spoke volumes about his disdain for modern fashion. He reminded her of a thug, except he couldn't possibly be one. Thuggery was dead, forgotten to everyone except Hollywood producers. But his bulky clothing couldn't conceal the vitality of his frame and it alarmed her to think about his willingness to handle her so roughly. What else might he be capable of?

His eyes were feral. She recognised something viciously animalistic burning deep within him and fretted that he might aim it at her. He appeared to be searching for something in the crowd. Nobody's noticed. The truth shocked her. How could he do this without anyone lifting a finger? Her stunned silence gave way to anger and she squirmed under his vicelike grip only to have his fingers bite harder on her flesh.

"What the fuck do you think-" Jen's voice was shrill with fury but she didn't get any further.

"I told you to shut up." He spoke with such calm authority that disobedience didn't occur to her. His voice was different now, cold, detached. It retained none of the raw energy that'd perforated his words before. Businesslike? She couldn't be sure, but neither could she fathom how he remained calm after doing something so anti-social.

Jen's head was pounding with a latent headache from the knock. She tried to move an arm to feel where her scalp was stinging, but couldn't budge under his control. "Ouch." Her whisper was barely more than a wince but it instantly transformed her captor. He lessened his grip and permitted her to trace a finger along the bruise at the back of her head. It was already swelling into a lump but there wasn't any blood.

"Where the fuck do you get off pushing me around like this?" Jen kept her voice low and it was nearly cracking on every word. She didn't really feel in danger, not with so many people and cameras around. Elustra security would be there soon. Won't they? But that brought perils too. They'd be sure to discover she was unchipped and hand her to the resident chipping squad for surgery. That though brought primal fear to her eyes and she froze. What if he is a chipping officer? The idea revolted her. How could I have been so careless? She cursed herself for coming to Elustra and fervently hoped Samantha would escape a similar fate.

"Let me go." She wriggled with all the strength she could muster but it was useless in his grasp. He squeezed harder on her wrist until she was sure the ligaments were about to separate. His other hand was pinning her right shoulder to the column and she may as well have been struggling against a thousand tonnes.

He thrust her harder against the pillar and the jolt freshened the bruise on the back of her head, ending her struggle.

"What part of 'shut-up' don't you understand?" His frustration felt rushed and he only took his eyes off the crowd for long enough to scowl quickly at her. "Do you want to die?"

The question caught her by surprise and she stammered, "N-no, of course not."

"Then relax and listen very carefully." He let go of her shoulder and pulled an oversized handgun from a holster concealed by his jacket. Jen stared at the black carbon-steel barrel, fascinated by the fact that he felt the need to draw a weapon on her. It didn't register in her dazed mind that he wasn't aiming it at her. "There's a bounty-hunter over there, and he's coming this way." Dan waited a few seconds, allowing time for his words to sink in. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Jen nodded, mute. She thought she did.

“He’s coming over here to kill you.” Dan emphasised it with a piercing look, then his eyes roved the crowd again, looking for signs of his nemesis. He knew he was there, he’d seen him. He was close - close enough to fire those damned glass pellets. Three of them would’ve struck Jen in the chest if he hadn’t knocked her from the bench. “You’ve been targeted for apprehension by the WEF,” Dan said. “They’ve authorised him to kill you if you don’t cooperate, but he’s not the sort to ask politely. Do you understand?” He needed to be sure she comprehended everything he was saying. If she struggled when he made his move, the Raven would kill her and it would place him in jeopardy.

“Yes.” She was too stunned to say anything else. She stared at him with wide-eyed suspicion, wondering whether he was the real hunter. At least that would explain the gun. But then another possibility crossed her mind: What if he’s an activist? The thought of an altruistic activist saving her from a bounty hunter appealed to her romantically, but reality quickly shattered the struts that held those thoughts aloft. How would he know? And why choose to help now?

“You don’t believe me,” Dan said, reading her expression.

“I don’t know.” At least she was honest.

Dan grunted. “Well make up your mind.” He released her and she nearly collapsed on unsteady knees. “He’s coming this way and I’m not staying here to argue with him. You can follow me if you want, but if you head that way,” - he nodded in the direction of the thinning crowd - “it’s your funeral.”

Jen scanned the throng, trying to find something that would corroborate his story. Nothing. Bloody nothing. She either had to trust him on faith alone or not at all. She searched his face. There was no fear in his copper-green eyes. There was something seasoned about them, something that spoke of routine and repetition. Maybe he’s deliberately luring me away. Maybe he has something devious or perverted in mind. The seconds dragged by and he expected an answer. And Jen didn’t know how much longer he’d wait for one.

“Okay, what do you want me to do?” The cautious part of her mind screamed for her to reverse the decision. It’s a trap. Surely it’s a trap. And not a very original one either. But another part, a more trusting and naïve part that believed people were essentially good-natured, overruled it.

Dan nodded once and said, "Wise decision." The impish smile that flirted briefly across his lips didn't help reassure Jen that she'd made the right choice. "He's close. I don't know where and that makes me nervous. But he's fired at you already so he probably has a clear line of sight." He waved at the glass that was glistening on the bench and the floor. Sticky black fluid - nanotoxin - was oozing down the cushions.

Jen eyed it warily, remembering the sound of shattering glass but having no idea what it meant. It wasn't the solid confirmation she was looking for, this strange man could've planted the shards himself.

"On my word I want you to run for the clinic," Dan said, raising the barrel of his pistol. The automatic doors were a tantalising seven metres away, but it was across open ground so he wanted to wait until someone came out. That way they wouldn't have to wait for the slow-action motors to open the sheets of glass.

She nodded, mutely.

Dan scouted the crowd, willing the Raven to show himself so he could fire a shot. He was a good shot and he blessed the weekly firearm practice that'd permitted him to retain his sharpshooter status. He felt confident he could hit a human head at 20 metres. Of course, that didn't mean he actually could, he just felt confident. One of Zyclone's side effects was to elevate the patient's confidence in his or her abilities. He'd read the documentation that came with the packet but felt sure he was compensating for the medicine-induced error in his judgement. That's what they all think, he reminded himself.

A pregnant woman waddled out of the clinic and Dan tensed. He didn't want to risk harming her if the Raven fired. As soon as she'd cleared the probable line of fire, he shoved Jen roughly in the back and shouted, "Go, go!"

She staggered, her legs obeying slowly at first. But after a few unsteady paces, she was sprinting for the already-closing doors. She risked a flirting look over her shoulder but couldn't see anything atypical. The adrenaline flowing through her arteries helped, it made her fast and allowed her to ignore the otherwise incapacitating ringing in her ears.

Dan followed, urging her on and keeping his pistol in an offensive position, ready to fire the instant he spotted the Raven. He stopped briefly at the glass-littered bench and inwardly swore. Somebody might sit there. He hated the

Raven's reckless disregard for public safety. What if that pregnant woman hadn't been wearing shoes? He looked down; the sticky shards were burying into the rubber soles of his new boots. Oh shit. He knew he'd have to dispose of them, if a shard wove its way into his carpet and he placed a heel on it a year later, he'd die in a gooey pile of puss wondering how it'd happened.

Titanium poles fixed the bench to the ground and he held no illusions that he was capable of uprooting them. But the cushions were loose and he risked precious seconds in the open by tearing them from the bench and flipping them upside-down on the ground. Then all he could do was hope the cleaners were careful. He darted into the medical centre where the receptionist was prompting Jen for her name and appointment time.

Dan commanded all attention in the room when he said, "We're not here for a check-up." He cast an anxious glance over his shoulder to ensure the Raven wasn't creeping up on his blind spot.

"What can I do for you then?" the receptionist asked, doing well to keep her voice calm. She was tall, at least six feet tall, and she'd wound her blond hair into a neat bun at the back of her head. Her rich red lipstick and overdone eye-shadow looked wrong against her pale skin but Dan only gave her a perfunctory look.

Elustra had built the medical centre to giga-mall specifications. Every surface shined, scoured with a hospital-grade cleanser that made Drano look like a toy solvent. The mandatory theme was blue and white and even the receptionist wore a uniform. She looks like an evil nurse, Dan thought. But he also knew Elustra's giga-mall specifications meant there had to be a backdoor to guard against the loss of human life - and therefore an expensive lawsuit - in the unlikely event that any of the metallic surfaces caught fire.

"Have you got an exit out back?" Dan asked, his voice returning to its original rusty-chainsaw timbre.

She looked defiant. "Only employees are allowed back there." She frowned in annoyance. "If you don't intend to make an appointment then can you please leave." It wasn't a question.

Dan shook his head. "No, sadly." When he'd entered the clinic, he'd hid his 1911 pistol inside the folds of his coat where it wouldn't cause undue alarm but was

easy to access if needed. He chose that moment to pull it free and added, “And I don’t have time to argue.”

“Security’s on its way,” she replied defensively while backing away from him.

“Good for them.” Dan smiled, genuinely amused. “You can tell them we escaped out back if you like.” He felt the building pressure of lost time. Soon the Raven would arrive and the conversation would grind to an abrupt halt.

“Come on.” He gripped Jen by the forearm; she was wide-eyed and dazed. “We’ll find it ourselves.”

He led her down the sterile corridor, past doors that read ‘radiology’, ‘pharmacology’, ‘blood work’ and ‘staffroom’. Private offices and consultation rooms were next, all with doctors’ names stencilled on the doors. Dan took an educated guess and burst rudely into the office at the end of the hall.

“What is this?” The doctor peered over the rim of his heavy-framed glasses, outraged by the intrusion.

The old man Jen had seen shuffle inside not ten minutes earlier lay on a white sheeted bed, naked from the waist up. The doctor was feeding data from dozens of the man’s organs into his diagnosis computer. It seemed incongruous that he was also listening to the man’s wheezy breath with a cold stethoscope. He couldn’t get anything from the stethoscope that the computer wouldn’t tell him, but old habits died hard in the medical community. Another clump of monitors displayed the elderly man’s vitals and Jen saw the glitch their interruption had caused. They had affected his heart the most. The green tracer sped up, blipping at an alarming pace for such an old man.

“Do you have a portal we can use?” Jen asked gently, afraid her un-named companion might shock the patient to death if he spoke.

The doctor, spying Dan’s gun and deciding not to argue, pointed. Jen took two steps before Dan held her back and shook his head. “No, no portals. It doesn’t matter where you go. If you use a portal the bounty hunter will find you.”

Jen looked sceptical and thought, I doubt it - I’m unchipped. But she didn’t want to tell him that. It was easy for her; she could press a button and get a new identity. Dan, perceptive as usual, understood what she was thinking by the look

in her eyes. He rebuffed her unspoken protest, saying, “I know you’re unchipped and it doesn’t matter a damn. He can track you, he has ways.”

She frowned. “How did-”

Dan silenced her with a curt flick of his fingers and turned back to the doctor, who hadn’t moved. “Elustra builds service shafts into every mall. There should be an entrance here somewhere. Where is it?”

The doctor was a short, stout man. He looked like a human potato regardless of how many degrees he’d earned. All he could muster was a brief point to one wall.

Dan didn’t hesitate. He strode to it and ripped away the covering plate, exposing the entrance to a dark metallic shaft that spanned the height of the 125-storey structure. Aside from escaping fires, the shafts were useful for accessing the maintenance spaces between floors. An out-rush of stale air hissed from the shaft, engulfing them in a cold squall that swirled around the room, snatching loose papers and jostling the laminated charts of human anatomy.

He peered inside, unsure what to expect. It was long and dark and he had no clue where the lights would be. He slapped a hand pessimistically around the shaft’s metallic innards, groping for a switch but not really expecting to find one. There was nothing. Looking up he saw a dim halo of light filtering from the roof. Below he could see only darkness. He shivered at the thought of falling in the shaft, but realistically knew their choices were slim - too slim to argue with the hand of fate.

“Ladies first.” He waved Jen toward the shaft.

She peeked inside before taking several rapid steps back, shaking her head. “You must be joking.”

Dan tensed. I don’t have time for this. “No joke, now get in.” He waved again, this time with his pistol. “Jennifer, he’s coming.”

She froze. “How do you know my name?”

“How do you think I know anything about you?” Dan countered, unwilling to tell her the truth. “Hey, look... I’m here trying to save your life. Do you want to

live or do you want to wait for that bounty hunter to shoot you with nanotoxin?”

Jen eyed him distrustfully. “At this point I think I’m willing to take my chances. Perhaps with the portal.”

Dan’s anger rose unbidden. He honestly wanted to save this girl’s life but she was making that excruciatingly difficult. Damn it, if she wants to get herself killed it’s not my fault. Still, he had to admit he hadn’t given her much reason to trust him. It was time to consider how far he was willing to go to protect her. He could’ve placed her under arrest, except he knew the Raven would use the opportunity to close in for the kill. He swallowed hard, disgusted by his options. She has to live. For the sake of his conscience, he knew he had to do everything in his power to keep her alive. It was a selfish act. It had more to do with him than an overbearing goodwill toward humanity.

So what’re you gonna do, Danny-boy?

“Wait.” He hesitated for a hundredth of a second before dismantling the last of his inhibitions. “Here.” He used the trigger guard to twirl the pistol around his finger, reversing it so the handle jutted toward her. “If you don’t trust me, take this.”

Hesitantly she obeyed, reaching out to lace her fingers around the chequered grip of the Colt automatic. It was heavy, much heavier than she’d thought. And cold. She frowned at it in her hands, both alarmed and pacified in the same heartbeat.

“The safety’s on.” Dan pointed to the catch on the side of the weapon. “If you push it this way,” - he showed her - “that red dot means it’ll fire live rounds when you pull the trigger.” He flicked the safety back on and nodded at her once, urging her to accept his token of trust.

“Okay,” she said and looked again at the maintenance shaft.

“You’ll need both hands for the shaft.” Dan took it upon himself to help. “Here, like this.” He tugged her jeans away from her body and thrust the 1911 deep into the fabric so that only the handle was visible.

She half squealed, half gasped. The feeling of icy metal on the other side of her underpants sent a shiver down her spine, but that was secondary to the fear of having the firearm discharge.

“Well you don’t want to drop it, do you?” Dan asked, secretly calculating how long it would take to grab the pistol if the Raven chose that moment to kick down the door.

Jen looked pale but bravely faced the dark precipice. She swung one leg over, then the other, finding secure footholds for both of them on the cold metallic ladder. Dan offered a helping hand but she shook him roughly away, preferring to do it alone.

He felt ridiculous standing in the room with no weapon, especially since the hairs on his neck were standing on end, warning him the Raven was close. Jen lowered herself on the ladder, one steady rung at a time. She was trying not to think how far below the ground might be. The fact that she couldn’t see anything when she looked down didn’t have a calming effect.

“If you don’t want to end this day full of nanotoxin, I recommend you portal out of here. Both of you. Right now,” Dan said, warning the bewildered onlookers. Doctor and patient both looked ready to wet their pants but they were alert enough to nod understanding. Dan doubted they would take his advice; they were more likely to wait for Elustra security. Poor things. If the Raven set his mind on entering the medical centre, there was little Elustra security could do to stop him. And, perversely, the Raven could kill them legally. The old notion of obstruction-of-justice had evolved. If the Raven chose to, he could slaughter any innocent bystander hindering the legitimate apprehension of a sanctioned target. Dan found the idea disturbing. Bureaucrats, he thought in disgust. They have no idea what their laws have done.

He swung his legs into the shaft and tested a rung to make sure the ladder could support his weight. Jen was already ten metres down and he hurried to catch up. Soon it was pitch-black. After five metres the sparse light from the doctor’s surgery wasn’t enough to see the rungs; he had to feel for them with his hands. Unconsciously he prised his eyes wide, but he may as well have had them shut for all the good it did.

He could hear Jen below, though he couldn’t tell how far she was. “Are you okay?”

“Fucking terrific,” she said irritably. “What kind of stupid question is that?”

He ignored the acidic sting of her words and replied calmly. “There should be an

exit panel on every floor. And some kind of grate or vent between floors.”

“Yeah? What other useless information are you going to share with me today?” She was understandably pissed, and Dan was the only person at whom she could lash out. Fair enough too, she thought, he was the one who nearly knocked me senseless.

She was sorely testing Dan’s patience but he bit his lower lip instead of replying in anger. “Just run your fingers along the side and feel for the seam.”

Silence.

“You’re joking now, right?” She gripped each rung with a strength that could only come from fear. “If you want to find the damn thing take your own hand off the ladder.”

“All right. But when I find it you’ll have to climb back up.”

She calmed down a little. “Okay.”

Dan ran his fingers down the metal, listening to the squeegee-on-glass sound it made. The shaft was frosty and smooth. Elustra hadn’t designed their environmental system with the comfort of their maintenance personnel in mind. His flesh was already starting to numb, it felt like he was in a freezer. The sun’s warmth never reached the sterile belly of the superstructure, despite the warmth of the mid-September day outside. If only we could turn on the lights, Dan thought. The darkness amplified his discomfort at the cold. He risked looking up and, when he leaned away from the ladder, his adjusting eyes could just make out the slant of light from the medical centre.

There were voices above now, and they didn’t belong to the doctor or his patient. He froze, listening intently. Security? Maybe the Raven backed away. He held no illusions that he’d broken off the chase, only that he’d chosen a different angle of attack. Maybe he’s not as trigger-happy as I thought.

With the last of the meagre ambient light, Dan watched a security officer poke his head into the shaft. Without vision-enhancing goggles, he doubted the man could penetrate the blackness. But that sort of specialist equipment wasn’t standard issue and it would probably take several minutes to fetch.

“You there!” His commanding voice echoed through the shaft. “Come back up here, right now!”

Not likely. He hoped Jen had the sense to stay quiet as he lowered himself by another rung. He estimated they were three floors below the medical centre and wondered how he’d missed the intervening access points. Maybe the dark is screwing with my sense of distance.

The fact that he had no idea how far below Jennifer was gave him cause for concern. He fretted that, with any downward step, he might crush her fingers. And that would be fatal. The nanotoxin-laced shards embedded in the soles of his boots would kill her even if she managed to hold onto the ladder. He froze, looked down, and whispered, “Jennifer?”

“What?” She whispered back, perhaps seven metres below.

“Nothing. I just wanted to know how far you’d gone.” He descended another rung just as the security officer above vanished.

There it is. The seam in the metal was unmistakable. “Wait there, I found an exit.” He was still whispering to protect his intentions from the prying ears above.

Gripping the ladder with all his strength, he swung his left hand back and punched the panel, popping it out with a clang of metal against metal. The light pouring from the hole was blinding and he shielded his eyes. He’d burst into the weights room of an Elustra gymnasium, much to the astonishment of the three burly men pumping away at the dumbbells.

Displaying his gymnastic prowess, Dan vaulted into the room and reached back to offer Jen a steady hand. This time she accepted with an expression Dan decided to interpret as gratitude, but was more likely her relief at exiting the gloomy shaft.

“Where to now?”

Dan led the way. “The car park. Below.” He started toward the door.

“Hey.” The biggest of the three musclebound weightlifters blocked the exit. “You care to explain what you’re doing in my gym?”

“We’re leaving.” Dan didn’t have time to waste on the spandex-clad weight instructor. “So if you’ll just step aside we’ll be on our way.”

Spandex arched an eyebrow and peered menacingly at Jen. “Nobody’s allowed in the maintenance shafts, only maintenance personnel.” He clearly believed it was his duty to enforce the rules. “And nobody’s s’posed to come out of ‘em either. You’ll have to wait for security.” He folded his arms and his chiselled features twisted into a bravado smirk. His two students took their cue and lowered their weights, filing behind their leader with sweat-streaked scowls.

“We don’t have time to wait for security.” Dan reached into Jen’s jeans and drew his Colt. “Stand aside.”

They hesitated.

“Please?” Dan undid the safety catch. He knew he’d never fire, but his bluff, combined with his apparent unpredictability, was enough to discourage the weightlifters from trying anything stupid. They were clearly stronger than Dan, but they were also musclebound. Dan could shoot all three of them before they could reach him.

The weightlifters wisely backed down and Dan slipped past, keeping his muzzle trained on Spandex and Jen safely behind him until they were at a prudent distance. They hurried past change rooms, saunas, and many torturous-looking exercise machines before arriving back at the public walkways. They were on floor 37, which had fewer attractions and was therefore less crowded.

But that didn’t make Dan feel comfortable.

“I thought you gave me the gun,” Jen said, a quaver of nervousness in her voice.

“So I did.” Dan flicked the safety catch to cover the red dot, reversed the pistol, and thrust it back into her hand. “Come on. Walk quickly but don’t run - that’ll attract too much attention.”

So they walked, briskly. It went against Dan’s natural inclination, but he knew slipping away unseen would be better than shooting his way out. They reached the main escalator belt and heading down. Elustra had arranged the mall so that it never took patrons long to get where they wanted to go, but only if they used the portals. The escalators were free, so Elustra discouraged their use by building

them inconveniently out of the way. That, however, worked to Dan's advantage - there were fewer people about.

The mall's main escalator belt was also one of the few areas Elustra had dispensed with their design philosophy of keeping every fourth floor solid. By leaning over the rails, it was possible to see all the way to the top and all the way to the bottom. Elustra had compensated for this apparent lack of safety by installing liquid-glue guns around the rim of every floor. If the sensors detected someone falling, the guns would fire tentacles of warm glue and snare the individual before he or she damaged the plastic garden at the bottom. The glue guns had spoiled several would-be suicides and, after the incidents had reached the media, nobody had tried to suicide in that way since - removing the glue took five days in a hospital solvent bath.

It took agonising minutes. They made their descent in tense silence. It felt like it would last forever; every time Jen glanced over the rail, the ground looked no closer. Dan was just beginning to hope they'd slip away unnoticed when his plans shattered around him - they were taking the turn on the fifth floor when the Raven spotted them from fifteen floors above.

The Raven's analytical mind calculated the risks and decided to seize the opportunity. He lined Jennifer Cameron's head up in his Redback's sights, whispered a silent prayer to his omen, depressed the trigger, and was gratified to feel the potent recoil in his palms.

Dan felt the pellet whiz mere centimetres past his ear. He knew what it was; he didn't need to hear the Redback's cough to be sure. Silenced, it barely made more than a puff - not something he expected to hear from a distance.

"What was that?" Jen heard it too.

"Death's mistress." Dan pointed at the black-clad man above them. Bah! Man? No - beast! "He's the one that'll kill you unless you do exactly what I say."

Jen's eyes went wide. A shrill feeling that wasn't quite fear and wasn't quite panic infused her. She shifted uneasily, realising she'd totally lost control of the situation - not that she'd had much to start with. She squinted at the distant figure just when another volley of shots whizzed through the air. Then she mimicked Dan and ducked beneath the rail, though the Perspex panelling seemed like scant protection.

“Come on.” Dan abandoned his plan for stealth and bounded down the escalator, taking two steps at a time. Jen laboured to keep up as they skipped down one, two, and then three stories. Her heart pounded in her chest and her teeth and bronchiales ached the way they always did when she overexerted herself.

They finally reached the only level of the mall dedicated archaic transportation - the car park. Dan veered wildly to one side, skirting the line of vehicles. With society no longer dependant upon vehicles for transportation, only a few motor companies had survived the paradigm shift. Cars were luxury items to entertain the rich. Spoiled sons and daughters used them to drag in surreptitious locations on stormy nights. Consequently, the cars parked in Elustra’s spacious lot were mostly luxury or sports vehicles. Scrap dealers had long since stripped the older models of everything recyclable and dumped the remainder in landfills - junkyards on Mars were brimming with spare parts because PortaNet made transporting scrap so easy.

Dan examined each in turn, looking for a car he could use. A ‘23 model Toyota Celica MT looked promising. Unfortunately, modern cars were expensive and most owners opted to fit them with microchip disablers. Only drivers from a predetermined list could start the engine. The Celica MT was one of the first models to run on methane gas. Except, Dan noticed, this one has a soybean-oil conversion kit. But as far as the productive lifecycle of a car was concerned, the MT was an old model, so he doubted anybody would’ve bothered installing a disabler.

He retracted his elbow, feeling safe within his thick coat, and smashed the driver’s window. He quickly disengaged the central locking and said, “Get in.”

Jen stumbled to obey, brushing the glass pebbles from her seat before sliding in and slamming the door.

Dan came prepared. He reached into one of his many inside pockets and fumbled for a small black-handled device known amongst thieves as a kick-start. It was barely larger than a thick pen but it emitted a strong electrical field at undulating frequencies and wavelengths. It could bypass the ignition system to start a car; the trick was finding the correct frequency. He waited impatiently with eyes fixed on the escalator, wondering how long before the Raven came streaking into view.

Jen was wondering the same thing. The shadowy figure she'd glimpsed from fifteen stories away sent shivers down her spine. She wanted a better look at him; something deep within demanded a face for her nightmare.

The LED on Dan's kick-start was still flashing red.

"You are an unauthorised driver," a non-threatening voice said over the car's speakers. "I cannot start for you. I have alerted the nearest police department."

"Oh shit." Dan opened his door. "Get out."

"What is it?"

"A disabler. It's looking for its owner's microchip," Dan said, gingerly rubbing his jarred elbow. He'd hurt it breaking into the Celica and a numbness was radiating up to his shoulder, steadily making his right arm useless.

"Come on." Dan was running full speed down the row of shiny cars. Jen was pale, panting uncontrollably in her attempt to keep up. The adrenaline helped, but it was gone now and she had only determination to keep her going.

"This one." Dan kicked the window in.

It was a '31 model, built one year after portals had been invented. A spacious family car, it had probably been the top of its line. With sleek curves and fuzzy-logic controlling every system, it was difficult to find something to complain about. I just hope we can start the damn thing, Dan thought desperately. Mandatory microchipping hadn't come into effect until 2059, so Dan hoped the owners of such an old car wouldn't have bothered fitting a disabler.

He turned on his kick-start and watched the matchstick-like numbers on the display flicker through the range of possible frequency, wavelength and power combinations.

"Look out!" Jen rasped, pointing at the Raven.

"I see it." Hurry up you piece of shit. He gripped the kick-start harder and shook it a little, as though trying to convey to its electronic circuits that they were in a hurry.

The Raven fired and one of his pellets burst through their windscreen before detonating, showering them with toxic slivers of glass. Dan reflexively closed his eyes and hoped Jen had the sense to do the same. “Careful,” he warned her, “whatever you do, don’t cut yourself on that stuff.”

Shards had sprinkled everywhere and Jen shook them off her shirt the best she could before reaching into the glove compartment for a tissue. She used it to wipe her jeans clean then mirrored the service for Dan, who grunted his thanks despite the desperate flutter in his stomach.

The Raven was relentless; he halved the distance to their car and steadied his aim a second time.

“Are you going to use that?” Dan pointed with his spare hand at the 1911 stuffed under Jen’s belt.

“Here, take it!”

He felt better as soon as he’d gripped the pistol and he leaned out the window to lay covering fire. It was difficult to aim without looking down the sights but he compensated for the awkward angle and squeezed the trigger. His shots scattered far away from his intended target, but it did make the Raven cautious, he crouched behind a vehicle for cover.

The ‘31 Ford Fairmont Future Dan had chosen, or the ‘Triple-F’ as everybody knew it, hummed when the kick-start blundered onto the ignition frequency. The dash came alive, displaying all manner of useless information.

“Finally,” Dan muttered, tossing the kick-start onto the floor. He selected reverse on the t-bar, floored the accelerator, and was thrust against his seatbelt restraint.

Jen stifled one shout of surprise when the car lurched back and another when Dan swung the wheel, spinning the car to face the exit.

The Raven clutched his opportunity to attack and sprinted after them, emptying his clip of toxic ammunition at the Ford. He wanted to shoot the tyres, or the passengers, or... something, anything. But glass was no match for the full-metal-jacket car. It was fine for puncturing flesh but it had little penetration power. He swore luridly and cursed his omen, which had forbidden him to use metal bullets.

Dan shifted the t-bar and stomped on the accelerator. There was a whirring sound when the engine fired before the transmission engaged the gears, and for one incongruous moment he thought they'd just sit there, redlining the engine until it exploded in a puff of smoke.

A glass pellet shattered his right side mirror just as the linkage collected the correct gear, forcing them into their seats amidst the sound of screeching tyres. It's certainly got grunt, Dan thought as he flicked on the high beam to compensate for the dim lights in the car park. He was swivelling the wheel without slowing down, avoiding the many concrete pylons as he followed the twists and turns to the exit.

The speedometer crept up to 190, then 210, and Dan kept the accelerator to the floor until the car was travelling at 260 kph. Then he eased off. The Triple-F was fast, perhaps not fast enough to out-sprint the more recreational vehicles in Elustra's car park, but it felt exhilarating none the less. The Ford's tachometer was reading 6,000 and it redlined at 6,500. He didn't want to push it any harder; he wasn't feeling that lucky.

He turned onto a main traffic artery and quickly overtook three slower vehicles that were at least making pretence of obeying the posted speed limit. It took him a while to recognise he was on the highway heading north, toward his boyhood home of Albury where his parents still lived.

Jen watched him from the corner of her eye, gripping the seat to steady her racing heart. She'd never driven a car; she'd only travelled in one twice, and never at such a terrifying speed. Dan was tense, nervously scanning the mirror for any signs of pursuit. Five minutes and 20 kilometres later, he relaxed a little and slowed their car to a more respectable pace.

So, with the thrill of their escape subsiding, Jen began to wonder just who her mysterious saviour thought he was.

*

The Raven spat in disgust.

A stray dog chose that most unfortunate moment to trot through the car park, playfully wagging its tail. It stared at the black-clad warrior with its big brown eyes, panting. The Raven felt nothing that even bordered on affection for the

canine. It repulsed him. He raised his Redback and aimed it at the spot between the puppy's eyes.

Unaware of the danger, the stray continued wagging and panting, and its tongue slid happily from the side of its mouth.

He didn't do it.

There was a skerrick of humanity left in his brain after all. And that repulsed him more than anything - repulsed what he was becoming.

*

Jen considered her situation.

It didn't look good no matter which way she looked at it. A bounty hunter was tracking her. Only me? She worried about Samantha, who was probably still in the mall with the monster. Okay, a new identity. She had difficulty grasping what that meant. She gave herself a new identity every month - a different microchip in the little box she always carried in her pocket. No, not enough. Her mouth took on a sour expression as it dawned on her what she'd have to do. A new city, a new life, probably no more activism. The realisation hit hard and sunk her good mood. The sudden shift was even more painful because it followed so soon after her recent elation.

And what of him? She turned to examine his profile. What's his story?

"Who are you?" Her voice was barely above a whisper, shock and depression sapping her strength.

"My name's Dan Sutherland," was all he offered.

A bit robot-like isn't he? "Yeah?" She snorted indelicately. "Well that's good to know." What've you been smoking Dan? Then she mentally disciplined herself and promised to keep all future sarcasm to herself. He did just save my life.

"I suppose I should say thank you."

Dan took his eyes off the road for long enough to cast Jen a quick look. "Why do you suppose that?"

“Because you saved my life.” But Jen was still trying to unravel the mysteries she knew were lurking beneath the surface of life’s latest twist, so she added, “At least, I think you did.”

That elicited a smile. He even laughed, briefly. “Well if you feel grateful then by all means, thank away.”

“Thank you.”

And that surprised him; Dan never thought she’d actually say the words. It didn’t fit with the profile he’d memorised.

“So who was that?” Jen jerked a thumb over her shoulder and made another attempt to brush the glass from her jeans. She was alarmed to note that several fragments had slipped down her blouse, ending up in her bodice-like undershirt. More were glistening in Dan’s hair. I must have some in mine too, she thought. Wisely heeding Dan’s warning, she abstained from brushing them out. It was sure to end with splinters embedded in her skin.

“That,” Dan said, “was the Raven.”

He said it with such dramatic aplomb that she smiled.

Dan felt the need to defend himself. “You may think it’s amusing but I assure you he’s no laughing matter. That’s what he calls himself; it’s his call-sign. He never uses anything else; I don’t think he even has a real name. He is the Raven. Twenty-four by seven.”

“And he’s trying to kill me.”

“Yes,” Dan confirmed. “As I said, the WEF has sanctioned your apprehension and UniForce put a contract on you. The Raven intends to collect.” He paused, wondering how much he should tell her. “Have you ever been scared of something, Jennifer?”

“Don’t call me that,” she snapped. “I hate that name.”

If her rebuke had offended him, Dan made no show. “What would you like me to call you?”

“Jen.”

Dan added the appropriate notes to the dossier in his mind. “Well, Jen, imagine your greatest fears all bundled together, then amplify them by ten, and you still wouldn’t come close to the nightmare you’ve just seen.”

She frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

“He’s not human.” Dan veered into the overtaking lane and passed a black sporty-looking Spyder. “Not entirely anyway. He used to be, a few years ago. Have you ever heard of Project Smart-Stream?”

“Yes. Back in the ’30s a conglomerate of computer companies genetically engineer-” She stopped short, understanding what he meant. “No.”

Dan nodded, something alien glimmering in his eyes. Jen stared at it, wondering what secrets it betrayed and wishing she could peel away the layers off Dan’s carefully constructed shield to gaze at the man underneath. “Yes. He’s a Smart-Stream failure.”

She grunted bitterly. “They all were.”

In 2037, an acquisitions team for Global Integrated Systems scoured the planet and pooled the world’s genetic engineering resources into one integrated team. They then applied their super-team to the intellectual problem of creating human children with a fluid-filled space where normal people had frontal lobes. Although they’d abandoned the barbaric notion of carving the frontal lobes from people 75 years earlier, they hadn’t yet given up on the idea that they could compact the human brain toward the rear of the cranium. By that time, scientists had thoroughly established that a brain’s mass was unimportant for human intelligence. The density of the interconnecting neurons, nodes and synapses were the critical factors. There’d been countless documented cases of people with normal intelligence but only a shell for a brain - fluid filled the core of their most delicate organ, which restricted synapse activity to a thin rim of grey matter, perhaps half a centimetre thick. Yet the connections between neurons had grown sufficiently dense to allow them to lead normal lives. Scientists had therefore popularly believed that they could genetically engineer humans with brains squashed at the back of the head, thereby leaving a fluid-filled gap at the front, with no impact on intelligence. Indeed, by tinkering appropriately with DNA, they could engineer mice with dendrite densities 170 percent above

normal, effectively creating super-mice. So, why not take advantage of this technology in humans?

Global Integrated Systems advertised heavily and over five years lured 50,000 rich parents-to-be into the expensive pilot program. Meanwhile, biologists and cybernetics experts were busy perfecting grafting procedures by practicing on electronic bridges to assist spinal injury patients to walk again. The operations were successful - so successful that they quickly tackled something more difficult. They moulded realistic synthetic eyes and mended optic nerves to give the gift of sight to the sightless. Next, they perfected the process of grafting human nerve tissue directly onto electronic circuits. It wasn't as hard as everybody had assumed. They were, amazingly, on track to meet their obligations for Project Smart-Stream. They had to wait 18 years between altering the genetic code of their first human guinea pig and completing the process. The subjects had to achieve maximum cranium growth before they could undergo the operation.

So, on July 7th 2056, a team of surgeons and engineers entered the operating theatre with their first teenage subject. They bled the spinal fluid from their subject's cranium and integrated that generation's most powerful computer directly with his brain. A coma ensued and they postponed all scheduled surgeries until they could ascertain the success of the first operation.

Two days later the test subject awoke, screaming in pain - not caused by the surgeons' scalpels but because of the overload on his brain. He lived a week in agony until he learned how to control the impulses generated by the Global Integrated System grafted inside his head. The project leaders promptly deemed the operation a success and proudly announced that their patient was recovering and that they'd learned a lot.

So the butchering of innocent teenagers continued, and the surgeons' technique improved. After a month they'd slashed the recovery time to three days. And the cyborgs, manufactured in the fluorescent white of laboratory conditions, blitzed their creators' highest expectations and their parents' greatest hopes. While the combined mental muscle of Global Integrated Systems' top engineers had been unsuccessful in creating true artificial intelligence, their genetics division had created something even more horrifyingly impressive - enhanced human intelligence.

The very public success of the project led more timid teenagers with holes in their heads to undergo the operation. And natural, unaltered teenagers looked at their parents with hurt in their eyes. Occasionally the surgeons and engineers had a failure and a young adult would die on the operating table, but the media's onslaught of positive feedback easily drowned those cases. Besides, it was easy for Global Integrated Systems to sweep the botched cases under the carpet. Their official - law required - records showed no trace of failure.

Before Project Smart-Stream, genetic engineering had been relatively placid, concentrating on curing previously incurable diseases. Geneticists had discovered that manipulating human DNA too much in favour of intelligence, looks, stamina or health created other, worse, problems. The scattered test subjects were psychologically unstable and their longevity was appalling - an average lifespan of 16 years was not an achievement of which they could be proud. Mother Nature, it appeared, took offence at humans tampering with forces they knew nothing about.

But the genetic modifications Global Integrated Systems had patented to prepare a human head for one of their computers had hit the jackpot. All the modified humans were stable - a miracle that entitled the scientists and engineers to more than one rowdy cocktail party.

New classes of social segregation were in the throes of forming. By the year 2057, employees were falling over themselves to seize a cyborg. And cyborgs, despite their tender age, were infiltrating the most prestigious areas of society. Some companies begged cyborgs to be their CEO; others shunned them and resisted any penetration of their ranks by what they termed 'an abomination of God's will'. Still, the cyborgs flourished. Soon they held important positions across a broad spectrum of society from police officers, managers and lawyers, to doctors and engineers - themselves contributing to the evolution of human technology and the cyborg forging process.

Yet in 2058, roughly two years after the first successful implant, something went wrong.

Very wrong.

Nobody could identify exactly what happened, or why it happened. But the cyborgs became unstable. Hundreds of them went, what the courts termed,

‘criminally insane’. All operations ceased and squads in riot gear sealed the cyborg factory amid the mantra of an angry mob ranting in front of the hospital.

But by then, 14,389 successful cyborgs were walking amongst the population. People were scared, and understandably so. By the end of that year, 40 percent of the cyborgs had gone insane and died by their own hands, either in clear-cut cases of suicide or in front-page incidents of horror. A handful of rebellious cyborgs held the United States of America to ransom by masterminding the takeover of the government. However, their equations hadn’t factored that the true rulers of the country weren’t in the government. Cold-hearted CEOs, the true masters of the world, convened and decided to storm the Whitehouse, which had disastrous consequences. The cyborgs may have miscalculated but they weren’t stupid, they’d prepared for that contingency. It took three months to clean up the havoc they wrecked just by pressing mental-buttons in the microseconds before nine-millimetre bullets shredded their flesh and punched holes through their evil-spawning computers.

Fear overwhelmed any benefits that society may have derived from the justifiably eschewed cyborgs. Several religious organisations established hotlines repeating, “We told you so!” to anyone brave enough to phone. Some even tacked a graceless, “Welcome back,” on the end. But the remaining cyborgs scattered, keeping a low profile and blending with society - a society that wanted them dead.

The WEF held Global Integrated Systems liable and forced them to pay restitution. So, the giga-corporation set aside 0.04 percent of their net worth to appease the population. Amazingly it was enough. But they didn’t slow their research. Even as the Raven went about indiscriminately slaughtering targets, the geneticists were trialling variations on their original cyborg theme and the engineers were designing better ways to shield the human brain from a computer’s electrical impulses.

Now that Jen knew what he was, thinking about the Raven sent goose bumps crawling across her skin. She diverted the conversation with a shiver, asking, “So how do you know all this?”

Dan’s face looked chiselled from stone.

“How come you were in the right place at the right time? And how do you know

who I am?” Jen’s suspicion elevated to a new kind of dread. What if he’s dragging me off to something worse than death? “Were you tracking him?” She gulped and closed her eyes in revulsion, already knowing the answer. “Or me?”

Dan opened his mouth, but it was a long time before any words escaped. “I...” His mind worked furiously, wondering how best to appease her, especially since the truth was hurtful and ugly. He hadn’t technically arrested her yet; she’d freely chosen to accompany him. But if she tries to escape, I’ll have to arrest her formally. It was the right thing to do, he was sure of that. The WEF wants her. She must have done something wrong. He tensed, his attention shifting from the road to the girl sitting next to him. “I work for UniForce.”

“You’re a bounty-hunter,” Jen sneered.

A tense silence settled in the car.

“So how much am I worth?”

“One hundred thousand,” Dan said, deciding honesty was his most useful tool.

“Is that all?” The Pacific Dollar had devaluated recently and it was far from flattering.

“Credits.” North American Credits were worth nearly twice as much as Pacific Dollars. It still wasn’t a fortune - it never was - but it was better.

Great, Jen’s mind leaked sarcastically. Then it needled her with, I told you so.

“Shut up,” she whispered to her inner voices.

“What?” Dan asked, not quite catching whatever she’d muttered.

“Nothing,” she said, and then sulked in silence with arms folded and a pout on her lips.

*

Samantha left the store with a weight lifted from her shoulders after returning the garment. Sure, she wanted it. And bigger breasts to go with it, she thought. But resisting those impulses was her first line of defence against the capitalist

fever that was sweeping the globe. Jen's right. It steadied her resolve. But it still sucks. Because, no matter which way she looked at it, she wanted those things, she desired them. She tried to tell herself that unfulfilled desire built character, but it didn't help much.

She strode back to their rendezvous, feeling pleased with her self-control and wondering whether Jen would want to celebrate with an ice cream. She doubted it, but it was worth asking.

The mess in front of the clinic made her freeze. Jen?

There was no sign of her friend. Someone had torn the cushions from the bench and strewn them on the floor. She peered closer and the glimmer of glass caught her eye. What happened?

A squad of security officers chose that moment to burst from the clinic and scatter in predetermined directions. Samantha kept walking, trying to look natural. Fear gripped her lungs and forced them full with a hiss. She ordered herself to breathe normally and strolled as casually as she could back into the crowd, but she had more than butterflies fluttering in her stomach - they felt like small birds.

She reached into her jeans and pressed the 'next' button to switch identity. A disk swivelled in her little black box, shrouding the previous microchip with titanium and exposing the following one. Now, if anyone scanned her, she'd be someone else. She shivered when she thought, What if a chipping squad has her? Then she swallowed hard, abrading herself for leaving Jen alone.

Samantha wandered around the mall searching for Jen, but still hadn't found her after two hours. It was just too big. There were thousands of people, none of who seemed the least bit interested in listening to her quandary. And she didn't dare ask whether anyone had seen what had happened. That'd be too dangerous. There could be a chipping squad around. She tried to see whether anyone was furtively using a handheld scanner but there was too much activity to be sure.

Nothing looks out of place. She knew it was false sanctuary - chipping squads fostered tranquillity, they needed it. They scanned in silence, reading personal information without consent and without anybody being aware of their presence.

So, feeling disquieted but with nothing left to do, Samantha decided to return

home. She'll meet up with us there... if she can.

*

The Raven watched Jennifer's friend, trailing her from a discreet distance. His philosophy was simple - never abandon a target. He would keep tracking her until he received notification that the contract was no longer available. What if Cameron escapes? What if Sutherland doesn't turn her in? He knew they were farfetched, but his philosophy had paid off in the past and it seemed like a decent rule to follow.

So, maybe it meant wasting half a day, maybe it didn't. It was impossible to tell. As long as the contract was still valid, the Raven intended to pursue the target. And the target was Jennifer Cameron. Her friend, Samantha, was just the most likely way of finding her again. He'd watched them for long enough to understand their friendship. Jennifer would make contact with Samantha as soon as she could, if she were able to.

He trailed her to the portals and blinked when she stepped through. The blink was his only outward indication of surprise. His uplink to PortaNet's servers fed him all the data he needed. He'd learned to dissect the stream and identify the single portal of interest. Samantha had returned to Tweed Heads, but the name PortaNet had filed in its database didn't match. It had changed, again. He frowned and thought, She has a chip selector. People called them many different things: multi-chip, identity selector, microchip switcher, and even freedom finder. Nobody had ever released a formal name for the illicit device. Merely carrying one was illegal and the sentence was swift and just - implantation with a fresh microchip.

The Raven selected a portal near his target's apartment, stepped inside the white circle, and pressed the button that would shift him to Tweed Heads. After the usual disorientating puff, a muggy blanket of humid air smothered him.

Damn you. The Raven hated the tropics. Tropical New South Wales was no exception. It made him sticky and he never showered while he was on a job, though it was tempting to break that self-imposed rule. What if they smell me coming? But that, he knew, was a desperate plea from his weak human mind. The disciplined computer would never beg. He snuffed the thought and found a bench to sit while electronically searching for a map of the area. He needed to

find the best vantage to observe the apartment.

*

Outwardly, Dan was a mask of serenity, staring at the dotted white line on the highway that appeared to jump like a string of frogs as he sped past. He'd eased off the accelerator until they were travelling only ten percent above the legal limit.

The highway, Dan was amused to note, was in an appalling state of disrepair. But upon further reflection, he wasn't at all surprised. With fewer cars, there wasn't enough money for the expensive maintenance. The Roads and Traffic Authority hadn't laid any new roads since '37, hardly surprising since it cost a million Pacific Dollars per kilometre. He had to swerve for an occasional pothole and use his imagination to picture the lane-markings in many places. It hasn't been that long since I drove this way. Has it? He could remember a time when the Roads and Traffic Authority had at least kept the highway well maintained.

Part of his mind - the part that kept repeating everything was fine - was enjoying the ride. That part was delighted he'd found an excuse to drive again. He'd been dreaming of it for years. As many other motoring enthusiasts had claimed, 'drive once and you're hooked for life'.

But the other half of Dan's inner thoughts were in turmoil, and they were the cause of the deepening scowl that crept across his brow. There's something about her... He couldn't put his finger on it. He wanted to turn and stare. No, don't do that, bounty hunters don't stare at their targets. So he battled the overpowering urge and his neck muscles locked with the clash.

Occasionally something profound gnawed at the edge of Dan's consciousness. It didn't happen often, and he could never fathom or explain it. It irked him because he prided himself on logic and his ability to rationalise all feelings and decisions. Intuition? He clamped mercilessly down on the word. That was Katherine's arena.

That's it! She reminds you of Katherine, Danny-boy. He mentally slapped the offending voice before yielding to his need to look at her. In doing so, he hoped to silence such conjectures forever. But, contrary to his desire, looking at her just amplified the unwanted feeling. He turned back to face the road and gripped the wheel with his vicelike hands.

Why do they want her? He wished he knew. He'd never asked any of his targets before. That, he considered, was particularly unprofessional. Never get involved. It was a rule written in the blood of less careful hunters. But now his desire to know clashed with the good sense of remaining impersonal. Their titanic conflict warred on his face, narrowing his eyes to icy slits and rippling his jaw muscles under his skin.

Desire won. "What are you wanted for?"

It shook Jen from her silence but magnified the venom lacing her words. "Don't you know?"

Dan never allowed his targets' emotions to provoke a reaction, and he never got angry. He prided himself on it. This time was no exception; he wouldn't let her draw him into an argument. His reply was calm and honest. "No. We're never told."

Jen coughed a laugh and pierced him with a furious look. It reminded him of Katherine on the occasions when he came home late after forgetting to call.

"Don't you ever wonder why you're ruining peoples' lives? Or taking life from them?"

He didn't think that was an appropriate moment to tell her he'd never killed anyone. At least, not recently. He shivered at the dark memory that was boiling up from his past, and slammed the door of recollection shut. He already had plenty of nightmares to contend with. "Yes, sometimes. But it goes with the job. Sometimes it's frustrating, other times I think it's better I don't know."

"So what makes you interested now?"

Dan shrugged. "I was just curious. You know... what a young girl like you would've done to get into so much trouble. Not everyone has an elimination order attached to their sanction." And not many survive long enough to reach an exclusive list.

"So are you going to kill me?"

"Why would I do that?"

“Because of the elimination order.”

Dan shook his head. “The WEF have only authorised your termination if you fail to cooperate.” He waved an absent hand. “The Raven fibs on his reports and uses the elimination order as an excuse. He just likes chaos and death.”

“Have you ever heard of Mike Cameron?”

Dan froze and mentally slapped a hand to his forehead. Of course! That’s why she looks familiar. “Yeah, the anti-globalisation protestor that was assassinated a few years back.”

He wasn’t just an anti-globalisation protestor! Jen thought. But she said, “Then you understand why they want me.”

Mike Cameron first drew attention to himself in 1998 when he wore a Pepsi t-shirt to a Coca-Cola day organised by his high school. Dan remembered - he’d studied the enigmatic man while working for the New South Wales Police Department. The school had suspended Mike for his act of defiance and, at the age of 19, he embarked upon a career of activism. His tireless efforts unified the resistance against globalisation, corporatism and the present form of capitalism. Dan recalled that Mike’s real activist ambitions had only materialised during the great depression of 2012, which had left him with little choice. In 2039 he became the central voice for what people knew simply as ‘the opposition’, and he used his influence to try to force a conscience upon the corporations that ruled the failing democracies of the world. But in 2059, the same year that microchipping became mandatory, Mike Cameron and most of his immediate followers were assassinated in a wave of violence and terror that left the opposition fragmented and leaderless. Then the corporate behemoths drove the final nail into the opposition’s coffin when they privatised project Echelon and used it to enforce the law with rigid oppression. Since the WEF classified activism as a form of terrorism, activists could expect severe penalties if caught. So activism went underground. But with no meaningful way of communicating, and therefore no possible way of co-ordinating large-scale protests or demonstrations, the splintered groups gradually faded from corporate radar. And the world quietened with the opposition’s demise. A few recalcitrant groups who thought they were clever for vandalising corporate property in the dead of night were all that was left of the once mighty resistance. But those groups were small, pathetic. Nobody considered them a serious threat to corporate control, and

nobody bothered dismantling them. It was more economical to let Echelon pluck them off one by one.

And now it was Jen's turn.

Dan recalled Mike Cameron's assassination with a clarity that came from being personally involved. He distantly wondered whether Jen recognised him the way his unconscious had flirted with his memory of her. Probably not. He'd changed since 2059. I look different. And besides, why should she have taken note of me? She'd probably remember the prosecutor, the judge and the defendant... but not the cop who caught the assassin. He'd broken the unwritten rules on that case and thinking about it made the corners of his lips curl. The case had been a designation-52, a UniForce case, which meant cops weren't supposed to touch it. Dan hated the way that worked. Most cops did. UniForce acknowledged they were breaking the law, but nobody lifted a finger to stop them because of their political influence. Well... Dan clucked his tongue in his mouth. He remembered his Superintendent, his partner, and even his wife had warned him away. Katherine had begged him to forget about the case after she'd watched him pace their bedroom like a caged beast. But Dan knew there were some things he simply couldn't ignore if he ever hoped to appease his ravenous conscience. So, despite the hellish 3am phone calls targeted to break his resolve, he pored over the case for seven weeks and tracked, then apprehended the assailant.

The bastard had turned out to be a UniForce operative. And boy was he pissed when I caught him. Dan didn't enjoy thinking about it. The assassin was still a free man after UniForce bought a gaggle of lawyers and intimidated a handful of judges to protect the sensitive information in his head.

"You're following in your grandfather's footsteps?" Dan thought it was a particularly stupid thing to ask but nothing else came to mind and he wanted to smooth over the uneasy tension that'd settled in the car.

She mumbled something softly. Or perhaps it wasn't a mumble. Perhaps it was her words fighting against the inward rush of highway air whistling past Dan's shattered window. "Sorry, what was that?"

"I said I can't." Jen raised her voice above the din of turbulent air. "Nobody can. Don't you get it yet? They've fixed it so that nobody can take his place."

Dan had never given it much consideration. He'd always been laid-back and

gone with the flow. Like most Australians I suppose. He'd never wanted to demonstrate against the corporations whose presence dominated all aspects of human life. He'd certainly never wanted to incite others to join a foolhardy crusade that was doomed to failure.

But now he was starting to think.

And he didn't particularly enjoy the picture his mind was painting.

I've joined the oppressors. Part of him, the part that was still capable of feeling compassion, felt disgusted and gritty. He knew he was a cog in the massive engine that maintained the status quo, a tiny part of a machine that was so enormous he wasn't sure whether he could fully comprehend its power. And, blissfully, he was unaware of the sacrifice it would take to halt the machine's advance. Oh God... A stricken expression entered his otherwise composed demeanour. What would Katherine think? Even though she was gone, Dan was still mindful of her opinions and reactions. In that way, she was a powerful force in his life.

"I'm not a terrorist you know," Jen said. She looked as if she was starting to relax, or perhaps she was just becoming resigned to her fate - whatever that might be.

"I never assumed you were."

"But that's the charge I'm probably facing," she retorted. She wasn't directing her anger at him, but she didn't have a definite object to target. She was simply angry at 'the system'. "I mean, technically speaking, I am a terrorist. That's how scared they were of activists, they bundled the opposition in with the people who blew up planes and bombed embassies. Don't you think that's a little extreme?"

Dan knew she'd backed him into a corner. How could he disagree with that sort of logic? "Yes, I suppose it is."

"Well I haven't done any of that. I'd never touched a gun until today. I've never handled explosives, and I've never threatened anybody. All I want is to share my point of view - the same way corporations share theirs. That's it. And for that I'll either be sent to prison for the rest of my productive life, or executed... which might be preferable."

“Hmm,” Dan replied. It was all he could manage while so deep in thought.

But Jen was just getting started. “What makes them think their message is so important, so correct, that they have the right to silence all opposing voices?” She clenched her hands into fists and frowned with such intense frustration that it bordered on madness. “They think they’re so fucking righteous! Or maybe they’re scared they’re wrong. Maybe deep down they’re afraid that if someone draws attention to it, people will demand change.” Jen sneered. “They’re terrified of change, I know that. But is it really worth killing for? They’ve killed so many already. They killed my grandfather. They killed his friends and colleagues. I’m sure that Raven freak has killed people. And how about you? Mr Daniel Sutherland?”

“It’s just Dan.”

“Okay. How many people have you killed, Just Dan?”

“I’ve never killed for UniForce.”

“Ha!” But Jen stopped her ridicule short when she saw the truth scrawled on his face. Although it was a guarded answer, she believed it. “Okay, well maybe you haven’t. But I’m sure you have friends who’ve killed for their corporate masters.”

“No. I have no friends.”

“Jesus, who are you? No friends? Sheesh!” But, again, she saw the truth on his face and caught a glimpse of his pain searing just beneath the surface. She softened her tone and said, “I’m sorry.”

Dan faked a smile; it looked strained. “That’s okay.”

“Hasn’t a company ever fucked you over?” Jen asked, pleading her case. She saw him as her judge, jury and executioner - if he so chose.

Dan nodded. “As a matter of fact, yes.” UniForce. Every time they sell my exclusive lists to the Raven.

“And did you do anything about it?” She eyed him curiously, wondering what other gems she’d glean from his expression. But Dan had erected his stony mask

again, so she saw nothing. Yet she'd glimpsed something, twice, so she knew he had emotions. And that was good. Maybe I can still get out of this.

"No, I can't-"

"There!" she exclaimed, triumphantly cutting him off. Then she smiled and added, "You see? They have all the power. They hold all the cards. You're just living off scraps. When one of them fucks you over there's nothing you can do. You just accept it and go on. And that is the world my grandfather was fighting to change."

It was starting to make sense. But just as reason dawned, Dan felt as though an ocean of guilt was tossing him around like a tiny cork. Were my other targets the same? Am I just a corporate tool? Is apprehending these people really the right thing to do? For the first time since Katherine's death, he wondered whether he'd be proud of his work when he met his almighty maker. If such a thing exists. The jury was still out on that issue. His microchip read 'agnostic' in the field reserved for religion. He wanted to believe. He'd wanted so desperately to believe in an afterlife since Katherine's death. But how could he console the notion of a god with what was happening in the world? It was the same everywhere, droves of ex-believers were abandoning the world's major religions and flocking to Xantex prescription houses instead. Why not? It was a faster fix than religion and didn't require any painful soul-searching. Besides, Xantex had better commercials.

He crammed his chaotic thoughts behind the already-straining doors of mental discipline and refocused on his immediate concerns. What am I going to do with her? He found it curious - Jennifer Cameron was the first person he'd apprehended from his new list and he was thinking about letting her go. How the hell did that happen? At this rate he was going to lose a fortune. Yet, somehow, the importance of turning a profit was quickly losing its significance. What's the point? He desperately needed something fresh in his life, some kind of purpose other than being a capitalist drone. What's the point of having money if I have to sell my soul? The maths on that just didn't add up.

Dan risked another look. She's pretty. She did remind him of Katherine, no matter what he tried to tell himself. Not her looks, Katherine was taller and heavier and had a cute little gap between her front teeth. Yet there was something in the way Jen held herself, the way she spoke and the things she said. It pained him a little.

Finally, he admitted something he'd known deep down for several hours: I can't turn her in. His decision came from a combination of many things, but he wisely decided against analysing it. Don't examine it, Danny-boy. Just let it be. The logical part of his mind was throwing spasmodic tantrums but, for the first time in months, he'd thoroughly appeased his conscience.

Now I have to tell her, Dan thought with a slight pang of unease. He didn't want her to think a few cheap words had convinced him to quit his job. But isn't that essentially what just happened? Dan scowled and said irritably, "If I don't turn you in, what should I do with you?"

Hope flared in Jen's eyes. She sat straighter and licked her lips before hesitantly asking, "Are you serious?"

Dan nodded solemnly.

"So you're not such an evil hunter after all," Jen said, sighing with relief. Her words inadvertently stabbed a dagger into Dan's already tender mind.

He recoiled in shock, but knew Jen hadn't meant to cause him anguish. "It must be my turn to tell a story," he said and cleared his throat. "Seven years ago there was a great man, a leader. He was admired by his followers and feared by his corporate enemies. His name was Mike Cameron."

"This sounds familiar, didn't-"

"Please let me finish." Dan needed to get this off his chest. "Mike was assassinated by a UniForce agent and, although the murder wasn't sanctioned by the WEF, the police couldn't touch the case due to some tremendous political pressure. You're one of the few people who might understand that. The pressure UniForce applied was like nothing else the investigating officer had ever experienced in his life."

Jen did understand, or at least she thought she did. She knew what kind of heinous things corporations would stoop to in the name of preserving their control.

"The investigating officer nearly lost his job and UniForce tormented him for weeks. But he didn't give up and eventually hauled the assassin's arse in."

Jen's breath froze in her lungs as she grasped what he was trying to tell her. "It was you, wasn't it?"

Dan nodded. "Yes."

"But..." She was stunned, too stupefied to finish her thought.

"I'm sorry he got off Jen, I really am."

Jen braved a wane smile. "Thank you," she said, then paused to collect her wits. "I mean, thank you for everything you did." Something seemed strangely out of place. How could this possibly be the same person? "But I don't understand how you got into bounty hunting. I never would've guessed that someone who brought a UniForce assassin to justice" - she shuddered at the pitiful legal system that unashamedly bought and sold 'justice' on the open market - "would've started working for them."

Dan clenched his jaw. "Maybe I'll tell you someday." But his tone told her that he probably wouldn't. "I just wanted you to understand that I'm not a monster. I've never done anything illegal on behalf of UniForce; I've made sure of that." He heaved a tired sigh. "And I won't turn you in." Maybe I'll start screening targets and return only those who deserve it? But that was impossible, and he knew it. With UniForce double selling my lists, I'm barely breaking even. I can't choose which targets to apprehend, I'd go bankrupt.

"Since you're letting me go, I'd like to let Samantha know I'm okay. She's going to start-"

"Who's Samantha?"

"My friend. We were in the mall together. She was returning a top when you knocked me off the bench."

"Sorry about that by the way, is your head okay?" But although his voice was rigidly calm, something dark flashed in his eyes. It scared her.

"Yes, I'm fine." She felt the tender spot on the back of her head.

"The pellets contain nanotoxin, which is why you definitely don't want to cut yourself."

She thought about the shards resting between her breasts and her heart fluttered. “Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind. Anyway, Samantha’s going to wonder where I am.”

“Hmm...” Dan pursed his lips in concentration. “That’s probably a bad thing.”

“Why?” she asked, dread filtering through her mind.

“Because the Raven no doubt knows about her.” With his thumbs, he caressed the synthetic fibres on the steering wheel. It felt like human skin. “He must’ve seen you together and he would know that tracking Samantha is the easiest way of finding you.”

“What?” It came as a gasp.

“He’ll track Samantha until you turn up, until he detects you somewhere else, or until UniForce nullifies your apprehension order.” Dan swerved for a slower car, noticing the chill that creep up his arms from the permanently lowered window. “Did you ever see any of the ‘Terminator’ series?”

“Yes, all five.”

“Well the Raven makes the terminators look tame. He’s more intelligent, he has access to a billion times the information, and he can use the portals.” Dan would’ve enjoyed his analogy if it weren’t such a serious topic. “Sure, the terminators may be stronger and faster, but the Raven is deadlier. And just like a terminator, he’ll never give up. We can’t intimidate him or bluff him; he’ll just keep coming until you’re either dead or apprehended.”

Jen ordered herself to remain calm. “What can we do?”

“Well...” Dan arched his back. It still ached from landing on the railway track. “We do have some things in our favour. He’s not bulletproof. He’s just as fragile as anyone else, and that makes him cautious.”

“So we can scare him away?”

“No, that’s not likely. I’m just saying he’ll plan his moves carefully as long as I’m here. But eventually you’ll get sick of me hanging around. And besides, I won’t deter him forever, he’s attacked me before.”

Jen's mind raced through the possibilities. Nobly, she chose the only option that would permanently keep her friends safe. "Then you'll have to turn me in."

Her selflessness surprised him. Her file was way off. He distantly wondered what else the file had wrong, and how much UniForce had fabricated just so there were words on the screen. He flicked a switch on the dash and massage-nibs in his seat kneaded the knots in his back while he considered her offer. The problem was, he didn't want to hand her over. A wicked thought bubbled to the surface: What if UniForce sent the Raven to keep me in line? It was a ridiculous notion that logic shredded a few seconds later. Getting a little egocentric aren't we? Still, his options were grim no matter which way he looked at them. He either handed her to UniForce, or whisked her away and sheltered her under his protective wing. He didn't fancy that Jen would want him buzzing around forever. So that leaves secret option number three - help her disappear. It was the perfect outlet; he knew the system so he understood the extreme measures required to keep her hidden indefinitely. But then there's the Raven. The Zyclone hadn't clouded his judgement to the extent that he believed he could outwit the Raven forever.

"I don't want to turn you in," Dan said, his selfishness contrasting with her altruism.

"Huh? What kind of bounty hunter are you?" Jen squinted past the lowering sun, shading her eyes with her palm.

"I mean..." It clicked. There was a way it could be done, or so he thought. "We can keep both of you safe without handing you over, if you're willing to trust me again. Will you?"

"I don't think I have a choice," she said uneasily. She just hoped he was right and that Samantha and Cookie wouldn't be in danger.

"Good." Dan swerved too late and the car shuddered on a pothole masked by the slanting light. "Where do you live?"

*

Wednesday, September 15, 2066

UniForce Headquarters

22:07 San Francisco, USA

Esteban's head lolled back as Michele worked her mouth over his erection. He clenched a fist so tight it whitened his knuckles and gouged fingernail grooves into his calloused palms. Shivers of delight coursed through his body as she crafted her splendid magic. And he moaned, "Oh, yes." His whisper slithered through the air but fell on deaf ears. Michele was busy. She was concentrating on her pleasuring herself just as much as she was pleasuring him. She worked her free hand down between her legs, rubbing with her fingers and moaning in time with Esteban. She had to restrain herself from mounting him. The last time she'd tried that he'd beaten her, ending their orgy of pleasure.

It was their typical Wednesday ritual, though it would happen on any evening that Esteban was horny enough to stay back for a lube-job. They were in Michele's office, an odd combination of forged sophistication and childish trinkets. The contrast was almost perverse. Along the eastern wall there was a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf that she'd somehow managed to fill with literary masterpieces - none of which she'd read. The last piece of Esteban's mind that wasn't chasing his orgasm wondered whom she'd asked for help in selecting the books. He knew she didn't have the schooling to understand the difference between Dr Seuss and One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest. Encyclopaedias and a myriad of other reference tomes helped fill the remaining space, though none of them showed signs of ever having its cover opened. It reminded Esteban of a slow-witted neat-freak's Mecca.

Her desk was somewhat less studiedly urbane. A pencil holder collected colourful pens that had metallic chains and luck-charms attached to their ends. There was a cube sitting next to her mouse that had fragmented UniForce pictures on it, part of an advertising campaign the company had launched eight months earlier. Esteban remembered that his own cube had lasted about five minutes. But it'd been very entertaining; he'd been enthralled for at least two of those five minutes. Then he'd promptly torn it apart and chucked it in the bin, enjoying the destruction even more than the intended entertainment. The purpose was - Uh... Esteban thought, there was no purpose - to keep flipping the little cubes and watch as picture after UniForce-pro picture formed and dismantled. Michele's cube looked as though it had received just as much attention as her mouse, if not more. And Esteban wasn't surprised to see a standard Qwerty

keyboard on her desk; she hadn't grasped the significance of any other input device. Besides, all keyboards were equally slow if you had to comb them for every key.

Esteban was close and he pulled Michele by the back of the head to hurry it along. She moaned, sending vibrations through his flesh.

The western wall was electric-fibre glass. Touching a button on the control panel would have provided the squirming pair with a brilliant autumn skyline, complete with stormy clouds and heavy rain over San Francisco harbour in the distance. As it was, the electrical impulses zipping through the opaque material stained the wall with colourful blotches, transforming it into a garish tapestry. Esteban had never deciphered what the picture was supposed to be, and he didn't want to ask Michele because he feared she'd bore him senseless with her reply. Whatever it was, he knew it kept Michele spellbound. He'd caught her staring trance-like at it on more than one occasion, including tonight when he'd entered her office for his sexual sortie.

He massaged the sensitive spots behind her ears just as he climaxed.

"That was good." It was the closest he intended to get to intimacy. Why bother? As far as Esteban was concerned, intimacy was a tedious tool sometimes required for seducing a woman. But Michele was easy prey; she even enjoyed it, so counterfeit intimacy was out of the question.

Michele rocked back onto her knees, her plump breasts pointing in opposite directions. "Yeah, it was." She'd enjoyed it, that was true, but she was disappointed that she hadn't orgasmed as well.

Esteban lurched off the desk, leaving behind a streak of sweat that he'd let Michele clean up. Then he collapsed onto the couch, which she'd strategically placed in the far corner of her oversized office, and invited her to sit opposite. She would've preferred to sit on his lap but she knew he wouldn't allow it. Michele was surprised he hadn't left already; he usually departed quickly after their sinful act.

Look at her, sitting there. A wave of contempt crashed inside Esteban's mind and he had to repress the sudden and immediate urge to needle her with what he really thought. He would've equally enjoyed urinating on her, but he figured there was a limit to what she could effectively clean up - the stink of urine was

hard to remove. She revolted him. That dim-witted smile... How he hated it when she smiled. It highlighted her stupidity. What a dumb fucking cunt. He personally believed that people as stupid as Michele shouldn't be allowed to breed. And he had a knife that he would've enjoyed plunging into her throat to rid the world of another brainless bitch.

Even tactfully sensitive people had to admit that Michele wasn't first in line when the Great Maker was handing down intelligence. She'd only received half a helping. She'd found school utterly bewildering and had dropped off the Department of Education's radar in year ten. Afterwards she'd waited on tables to save up enough money to attend secretary school. She'd passed without knowing how to type by giving the instructor a night he'd never forget, one that left him grinning stupidly until she showed him her videotape of the encounter and asked what would happen if somebody mailed a copy to his wife. So, with her newly framed certificate of secretarial competence, she applied for a job in UniForce and commenced work in the mailroom. Not only did that give her a toehold into the giga-corporation, the mailroom provided her with the perfect place to have sex with anybody who could help her climb the corporate ladder. She was so sexually proficient that in five short years she'd shoot straight to bounty co-ordinator. Now, aged 26, she was at the apex of her sexuality and positively oozed pheromones, wafting them with potent experience. But considering the sheer number of her sexual partners, it was little wonder that Esteban didn't trust her to initiate intercourse. She's probably diseased. It left a sour taste in his mouth. What a waste.

But not even Esteban had guessed he was sharing Michele with Jackie Donald. And, thankfully, Jackie assumed she was the only one in Michele's epidemic love life.

"How's our little side business going?" Esteban watched the sparkle in her eyes and took it as a sign that she'd at least understood his question.

"Great," she said, smiling benignly. "I've been doing what you said, putting 75 percent back and keeping 25 percent for us."

Esteban snuffed a sneer before it could rise to his lips. Us? Uh, yeah, okay whatever you reckon. He didn't intend to share anything with her. "What's it up to now?"

She frowned for a long time, tracing a perfectly painted fingernail across her cheek. The action squeezed her breasts together and they bulged forward, snaring Esteban's attention despite his satisfied libido. "A bit more than three million, I think."

He nodded. His target was five, and he wouldn't make his move before then. He'd helped her establish the accounts in such a way that it would be easy for him to make the money disappear. And nobody'll be the wiser. He intended to tell Michele the UniForce accountants had discovered their money, assumed somebody had made an innocent error, and absorbed it into the company's coffer. Then he'd warn her to keep her mouth shut. If she posed even the slightest threat, he'd arrange for her to have an accident. But for now, she was useful: they'd set everything up from her computer so Michele would take the rap if anybody noticed their creative accounting. They'd had to fiddle with the numbers to make it work, but Esteban had made it possible with his thoroughly diabolical idea of selling exclusive lists twice. But it hadn't stopped there. They'd oversold all the lists, even the amateur ones. "Well, that's good," he finally said.

Michele had plans of her own. She wasn't quite as stupid as Esteban assumed; she knew he'd never move away with her. Besides, she liked working for UniForce. She liked the mural on the glass, the promotional cube, and the large office. And the sex, her mind added as an afterthought. There was a guy down in marketing, Luke, who was really in love with her. She beamed another smile at the idea, another grin which Esteban took for vacant thoughts. Michele was still working on Luke; she nearly had the courage to tell him about the money. She wanted to tell him the stash could all be theirs if they just eliminated Esteban Garcia Valdez.

"How about the top level lists?" Esteban asked pointedly, directing her obviously wandering attention back to what he really wanted to know. The money was incidental; he had plenty of money and little need for more. More is nice... But it wasn't the reason for hatching this particular scheme.

"What about them? They're selling just as well as the others..."

"I mean," he said, doubting whether someone of Michele's inferior mental attributes would twig to his true interest, "Dan Sutherland and the Raven. Are they still the only two who've bought double-sold exclusives?"

She nodded mutely.

“Then they’re the only ones who’re in a position to see what we’ve done. The other top hunters are still working on private lists and losers share theirs anyway.” He saw that she didn’t understand and it frustrated him that he had to explain so much. “Well have they complained? How are they going? They’re our pilot group. If they don’t show signs of misbehaviour then we can start double-selling the others.” Esteban didn’t intend to double-sell exclusive lists to anyone except Sutherland and the Raven, but he wasn’t about to share that information with Michele. He’d meticulously chosen a list-partner for Sutherland. And since the Raven had the most ruthless record, he’d deliberately stitched them together. Now he was wondering how long it would take before they cracked, and who would crack first.

“No, they haven’t complained. Oh... do you think they will?”

Esteban couldn’t help rolling his eyes. “Eventually they’re going to say something. They’re paying for exclusive lists and surely they’ll notice we’re not giving them what they’ve paid for.”

“But won’t that blow the whistle?”

Esteban was trying to mask his keen interest in Dan Sutherland. “That’s what we’ve got to find out. Don’t worry about it; I can take care of them if they make any trouble. Okay?”

She nodded, wishing he’d never talked her into doing something so risky. It’d be smarter to leave the exclusive lists alone. Though she had to admit she was enjoying the praise Jackie lavished on her for transforming the bounty-hunting branch into UniForce’s strongest growth sector. It made her feel useful and she prized that more than anything. Finally she had something she was good at.

Esteban wished he had a cigar and cursed the sensitivity of the smoke detectors. UniForce had dotted sprinklers across the otherwise white ceiling and he knew from experience that a cigar would set them off.

He had long-term plans for Dan Sutherland’s demise. But they weren’t finalised yet, there was ample room for a poetic twist to complement his demonic scheme.

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Thursday, September 16, 2066

19:54 Albury, Australia

Dan yanked on the handbrake and unbuckled his seatbelt.

“Why are we stopping here?” Jen didn’t entirely trust him yet.

“My parents place is about five kilometres from here, just over that hill.” He pointed into the darkness. “I don’t want to park a stolen car in their driveway.”

“Oh yeah.” Jen hadn’t thought of that.

“It won’t take us long,” Dan said while reaching for his coat that he’d tossed on the back seat. It was a warm September evening so he folded it across his arm.

“Are you cold?”

Jen wasn’t wearing much, she’d portaled from Tweed Heads directly into the climate controlled mall, never giving much consideration to what the weather might be like in the lower half of Australia. A warm sirocco-like breeze crawled across her flesh. “No, I’m fine.”

“Let’s go then.” Dan was nervous about seeing his parents again. He hadn’t even phoned them for six months and now he was about to knock on their door with a cantankerous ex-target in tow.

Jen stumbled after him, uncomfortable with her limited choices. She’d never been to Albury before and had no clue where to find the centre of town. Dan had painstakingly driven around the bubble of activity on the main street, which dissected the highway, preferring to avoid the prying pole-mounted cameras designed to make the streets safer. As far as Jen could tell, they were in the bush - a eucalyptus haze hung thick in the air and made breathing difficult for her sensitive lungs.

A twig snapped under Dan’s heavy feet, causing fear to ping through Jen’s body. Her eyes were wide but she could see little the gloom. I’m following a man I don’t trust into the bush. It reminded her of a horror movie she’d seen in a recent horror-binge. She stayed a dozen metres behind him, his silhouette barely visible against a backdrop of twisted scarecrow branches and sparse leaves. At the first sign of danger, she was ready to turn and sprint for the car. Not that I can start it.

It was another disturbing thought to add to the growing list.

There was a rustling of leaves to Jen's right. It came from somewhere in the undergrowth and she decided that Dan might not be the scariest thing in the bush. Common sense told her that nothing was dangerous in Australia. Other than snakes and spiders. But fear had firmly settled in and she was beginning to lose her nerve.

Snap out of it! She mentally slapped herself. He saved my life today. If he wanted me dead, he would've let the Raven do it. Besides, he can't be all that bad, he caught my grandfather's killer. It was only after they'd been walking for another ten minutes that Jen realised she had no way of knowing whether the Raven was shooting at her... or at him. And what proof did she have that this man was really Daniel Sutherland? He could be anyone.

She stopped, confused.

Dan heard. "What's wrong?"

"You... how do I... what proof... It's difficult to trust you. You are, after all, leading me into the bush."

Dan mentally groaned and thought, I thought we'd passed all this? "You know, you're right. You don't have to trust me. In fact," he snorted a laugh, which sent shivers dancing the length of Jen's spine, "you can stay here if you want. I'm going to my parent's house. We're getting close. We'll reach a road if you'd care to follow me for another 50 metres. And, unless I'm mistaken, there's also a streetlight or two." He recommenced trudging into the gloom and left Jen to whatever decision she was going to make.

She listened to him leave and wished she were back in her apartment. She doubted she could blunder her way to town in the dark, so unless she followed Dan she'd have to stay in the bush until dawn. "Shit!" she said through clenched teeth and, reluctantly, hurried to catch up.

True to his word, they emerged from the trees and Jen's boots cheerfully gripped the bitumen.

"You see," Dan said, pointing to a streetlight on the top of a rise. "There's a sign under that light, you can't quite read it from here, but it says Thurgoona Park.

We go left there and we're back in civilization.”

Jen, comforted, quickened her pace to walk next to him. In times past the road would have buzzed with cars, all with too much engine under the hood and not enough brain behind the wheel. But since PortaNet had inundated society with instantaneous transportation, the Roads and Traffic Authority had left the roads for the weather.

The temperature was dropping and Jen vigorously rubbed her bare arms, trying to keep them warm.

“You want this?” Dan offered his coat.

She nodded and said, “Thanks,” then gratefully wrapped it around her body, feeling as if she was swimming in the oversized garment.

A few minutes later, they turned onto Bennett Road and Dan jerked his head at a solid brick house. “That’s it.”

Jen used her imagination to picture the brown tiled roof and mottled bricks with beige guttering and trims. The twinkling starlight made it difficult to determine the precise colours, but she could see it had once been a majestic home. And big. Although it was narrow at the front, it stretched a long way towards the rear of the sizable block; she saw it as she crunched across the gravel driveway. Towering pines lined three sides of the property, providing privacy from the street, and Jen could smell flowers - thousands of them. The sweet perfume reminded her of a florist. And the flower garden’s intense array of orange and crimson practically glowed in the dark.

Automatic lights illuminated the veranda in a sudden flood, luring moths and making Jen wince from the stab of pain on her retinas. She slapped at a sting on her neck, cursed the mosquito she’d smeared across her palm, and then scratched at the lump that was already emerging from her irritated skin.

Dan rang the doorbell. Gone were the days he could waltz on in. Jen thought she could hear a muted argument from within as Dan’s parents quibbled about who’d get the door. Eventually it cracked open and a man in his sixties stuck his nose out. He recognised his son immediately and swung the door wide. “Dan!”

“Hi pop,” Dan said, looking embarrassed when his father shakily descended the

steps and clasped him in a bear hug that belied the older man's age.

"Dan! Hey Marie, it's Dan!" He heartily slapped his son's back before holding him at arm's length and gauging his health, and then hugged him a second time.

Jen thought she saw a thickening to the sheen in the man's eyes.

A moment later, a buxom woman bounded to the door and completed the family reunion by bursting into a joyful bout of sniffles. "Come here," she ordered tearfully.

Dan dutifully ascended the steps and embraced his mother, presenting her with a kiss on the cheek that every good son should bestow on his mother after such a long time apart. He eventually extricated himself for long enough to conduct proper introductions. "Mum, Dad, this is Jennifer Cameron."

"Hello Mr and Mrs Sutherland," Jen said, holding out a hand for each of them to shake. "Please just call me Jen."

"Only if you'll call me George," Mr Sutherland replied, eyeing her approvingly. He winked and, rather than making her feel uncomfortable, it helped put her at ease. Because at that point, Jen finally accepted that Dan wasn't going to dismember her in a grisly murder and then dump her body in a dam for some poor farmer to find two weeks later when the stench of her bloated corpse finally attracted his attention. But she still wasn't exactly comfortable with her circumstances.

"And me Marie," Mrs Sutherland said, sidling past the hand Jen was offering to welcome her with a brief squeeze and a firm kiss on each cheek. She'd decided that anyone travelling with her son deserved a proper reception.

Dan caught his parents' insinuations and decided to correct their misapprehension right away. He hadn't found someone after Katherine's death. He never would. "She's a business associate. We were in the area and thought we'd drop by."

George Sutherland made a show of scouring the driveway. "How'd you get here?"

"Taxi," Dan lied easily, delivering it with a smooth smile and a slap to his

father's back. "I wanted to surprise you."

"Well you've done that." Marie was wearing a floral dress. She wouldn't have been caught dead wearing one as a girl but she thought it appropriate now that she was edging into her late sixties. "Come, come. You're letting the insects in."

"Wait a second," Dan said seriously. "We've got something toxic on our boots." His parents knew better than to ask how that had happened. They'd learned that lesson repeatedly in less amicable times. "We'll ditch our shoes and meet you inside."

George waved to the garage. "You know where everything is." He beamed a smile, showing his white teeth. They were too white - obviously fake. "It's good to see you again, son."

"It's good to see you too, pop." Dan swatted at a moth that was trying to sneak inside with the smaller insects. "Go on, we'll be in soon."

Marie and George retreated into their warm nest while Dan tugged Jen by the sleeve to the far side of the house where some kind of vine was holding up several sheets of rotten lattice. "Take off your boots," he said, already slitting his laces with a knife. "They have nanotoxin in the soles."

Jen mutely obeyed, somewhat stunned by how normal his parents seemed. She wondered if they had any idea what he did for a living. They tossed both sets of boots into the garbage, quickly following them with Dan's coat. "We'll have to chuck the rest after a shower."

"Then what will I wear?" Jen resisted the urge to run a hand through her unruly hair. She knew stray shards were lurking just beneath the surface.

"We'll find you something," Dan said, sounding calm. He guarded his tumultuous thoughts well. It was more discomfiting than painful to face his parents again. They reminded him of long summer evenings sprawled on the patio with a mug of Marie's glorious coffee, and innocent conversations about their goals and aspirations. Of course, Katherine was a star performer in those memories and it was difficult to be back in Albury without her. It amplified his emptiness. He'd become good at barring his personal feelings at work, but Jen had unwittingly torn down his defences and he felt unprepared for the psychological war he was waging.

“Come on.” Dan courteously held the door open and let Jen enter first.

Marie and George were waiting for them at the kitchen table. But Marie stood as soon as they entered and said, “Can I get you anything to drink?”

Dan knew he couldn’t leave immediately, that would just be cruel. And he hoped Jen had the good grace to behave while they were there; the last thing he wanted was to expose his parents to the harsh reality of his daily life. He wanted to shelter them from all that.

“I’d love some coffee.” Dan couldn’t stop a smile as he turned to Jen and said, “She makes the best coffee I’ve ever tasted. And I’m not just saying that because she’s my mother.”

Jen’s social instincts kicked in. She erased her cardboard expression, smiled, and replied, “Then I’d be delighted to try some, thank you Marie.”

Dan felt needle-like itches crawling across his skin and couldn’t bear the torment any longer. “Do you mind if we take a shower? We’ll need some fresh clothes too.”

George nodded. “Of course, go right ahead. Your old clothes are still where you left them.” He frowned at Jen, gauging her size. “I think some of Christine’s things are there too. You might be lucky and find something to fit Jen.”

“Thanks.” Dan whisked Jen into the cold half of the house; his parents hadn’t bothered heating it since their children had moved out.

“Wow, this place is huge.” Jen marvelled at the sheer size of the place and chocked on a string of swearwords when she reached the windowed door at the end of the corridor and peered into a room with a cathedral ceiling. By the faint sparkle of light, she saw the nine-metre indoor swimming pool, its surface as smooth as glass without a breeze to stir the water. “Your parents must be rich.”

“Actually, no.” Dan was rummaging through the cupboard in what had been his childhood bedroom. “They worked their whole lives to afford the payments on this place. They only fully repaid their loan a year ago so they’re still working to afford groceries and electricity.” He found a pair of jeans, a white t-shirt, a flannelette shirt, and the only pair of shoes his size in the cupboard. They were an old pair of work boots, still splattered with paint. His sister’s stash of clothes

wasn't very extensive and Jen had to make do with a black skirt, which Christine had worn while briefly working as a waitress, and a sleeveless shirt that was two sizes too small. "You'll have to go barefoot. Sorry."

Jen shrugged. "That's okay. It's not the first time."

"I'll go first. If you want, you can talk to my parents."

She declined, "Thanks, but I wouldn't know what to say. I'll just stay here."

"I won't be long." Dan closed the door and the sound of streaming water soon filled the hall. He was finished in five minutes and emerged naked from the waist up, beckoning Jen to follow him into the steamy bathroom. Well toned muscles rippled across his chest, upper back and abdomen, and his exposed flesh made Jen uncertain whether he harboured dishonourable intentions. "Here," he said, pressing a nit-comb into her hands, "I need you to brush my hair." The comb had narrow slits, barely enough to fit a single strand of human hair. It would supposedly remove head lice from an infected person. "I couldn't wash it properly with all that glass."

Jen obediently ran the comb through his hair while he held his head over the basin. Tiny flecks of clear quartz chimed against the porcelain and vanished down the drain. She'd meticulously covered every inch of his head three times, with ample overlap, before declaring it contaminant-free.

"I'll be out with my parents," Dan said, snatching his shirts. "Just holler when you're ready for me to brush yours, okay?"

She nodded and locked the door after he'd retreated from the room. A mirror covered one wall of the lavish bathroom and she gazed into her eyes. How did I get myself into this mess? She ran the water. It was pink, just as she'd expected. Water was expensive. Unpolluted water was particularly expensive. Hydro-Tech held a stranglehold on the water market and charged whatever they saw fit. People had little choice but to pay the ransom - everybody needed water. They added massive doses of chemicals to sterilise and disinfect it. Pollution made most surface water unviable for bathing, let alone drinking. The pink hue was Hydro-Tech's designation for bath-grade water. Unless it was clear, it wasn't fit for human consumption. Drinking water underwent additional purification phases to eliminate the toxins deemed harmful when ingested. A glassful cost about two Credits.

After a quick shower, she squeezed into the clothes Dan had given her, reluctantly going without her bra. Shards had woven into its fabric, making it too dangerous to wear. The stretched white material of her shirt provided scant protection from roaming eyes and she felt horribly exposed. She was almost too embarrassed to call for Dan's help, but doubted she could untangle her knotty hair alone. When she finally worked up the nerve, she self-consciously folded her arms across her chest.

"I'll find you something else to wear," Dan said awkwardly and left to poke around for something more decent. He found another flannelette shirt. It was far too big for Jen, but it was definitely an improvement. "Here, put this on."

She slipped into the oversized shirt. Oversized was just the way she liked it. Then she dutifully let him attack her hair with the nit-comb, wincing with every stroke. Jen had a particularly sensitive scalp and the jerking action of Dan's inexperienced combing sent an aching numbness to the back of her skull. "Ouch! Watch it."

"Sorry." Dan combed more gently around her bump and swore under his breath as he battled the more frustrating knots. "Done," he finally pronounced.

Jen looked at her strait, wet hair in the mirror and gently massaged her bruise.

"We should go soon. I don't want to linger and get my parents into trouble."

Jen nodded. "Sounds fair. So what do we do now?"

"Where do you hide your microchips?"

She dug into her bundle of clothes on the floor and extricated her chip selector.

"You got any in there you've never used before?" Dan eyed it hopefully.

She slowly shook her head. "The best I can do is one that I haven't used for, uh, six weeks or so."

"Okay, that'll have to do. Use that one. We'll portal to a station near your apartment, something that gets heavy traffic, like a supermarket or mall." He had a distant look to his eyes and Jen wondered what he was thinking. "We'll have to approach carefully and you'll have to do exactly what I say, agreed?"

She nodded.

“Good. Let’s go.”

They said a brief farewell to Mr and Mrs Sutherland over what turned out to be a heavenly cup of coffee. Dan had to promise to stay in touch and the Sutherlands pestered Jen into accepting a tour of their sleepy little town when she had some time to whittle away. Hearty thanks and a quick flash later, they were standing in the Tweed Heads central mall, a few short kilometres from Jen’s apartment.

“I live over there,” she said once they’d left the lethargic bustle of tired workers who were scrounging for something quick but not necessarily nutritious they could nuke in a microwave. “On Boundary Street.” It was the northernmost tip of New South Wales, the street dividing Tweed Heads from Coolangatta in southern Queensland. They technically formed a single city - the councils merged in the summer of ‘35 - but neither side had been willing to lose their name, nor their identity, so Boundary Street still held some significance for the local population.

Dan pressed his lips together, annoyed with the humidity after spending only a few minutes in the heavy atmosphere. It always made him feel sticky and irritable. “All right, let’s go.” They strolled through the centre of town, not looking all that different from any number of love-struck couples that were on an evening walk.

A gaggle of seagulls squawked overhead just as Dan caught a whiff of ocean breeze. It revived him, bringing an unusual sense of calm that he couldn’t explain. It had a similar effect on Jen. She walked with more spring in her stride and stood with a confident posture.

“Tell me the second you see anything unusual,” Dan ordered when they turned onto her street and began climbing the hill. “Which one’s your apartment? Can you see it from here?”

“It’s on the other side of the street. You’re in Queensland now.” Jen motioned with a jerk of her chin. “Can you see that two-story townhouse? The blue one with the old brick retaining wall?”

“Bagged?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

Dan slowed their pace to a crawl, holding Jen back with a light touch to her forearm. Then he made pretence of doing up his shoelace, giving himself a decent opportunity to scrutinise the street. He scanned for anything and everything: the rustle of leaves in the nature strip, the puff of a cigarette from a man smoking on his balcony, anything that could spell danger and possible death by a glass pellet. “Is there another way in?”

“There could be, if you’re willing to climb. We could circle around the back and shimmy up an embankment.” She’d done it once before but it hadn’t been easy. At the time, creeping in the back had seemed the best way not to disturb her friends. It hadn’t worked, but that was beside the point.

“I’m not sure yet.” Dan lapsed into survival mode: sceptical of everything, believing only what his eyes could confirm. It’s possible the Raven’s already inside, waiting for us. It wasn’t a pleasant thought and he didn’t want to burden Jen with the possibility that her friend Samantha might already be a smouldering mound of decaying flesh. He kept going, urging her to keep up. Years of training boiled to the surface, activating triggers in his mind that generated automatic but potentially lethal responses. If an enemy appeared, Dan wouldn’t need to calculate distances, angles, ranges and rates of fire - he’d know them already. He also knew the likely survival rates for the gamut of available options, and he would act accordingly if someone ambushed them. Of course, it would do him little good if a hail of gunfire cut him down before he could mount an effective response. But his heightened senses were searching for danger.

They went past the apartment. At least Jen had the sense to keep her mouth shut at such a critical point, Dan thought thankfully. His surveillance continued unabated and he was preparing to announce the area clear, for the moment anyway. He knew the Raven could make an entrance at any time. “Keep going. Lead me around the back.”

She steered him to the right and they squeezed single file through a tiny alley. It sliced between two three-story buildings, which Dan presumed had a magnificent view of ocean sunrises.

“Through there,” Jen whispered, pointing into the shrub-cultivated gloom. “It’s the seventh on the left.”

Dan nodded, the movement lost in the dark. He saw what she meant by a 'climb'. The embankment was easily 12 feet high and practically vertical. He edged toward the blue-bagged apartment with his eyes, now fully adjusted to the dark, darting from one likely sniper post to the next. He was displeased to note there were literally dozens of perfect nooks for the Raven to hole up in and wait for his target - Jen - to show her pretty face. Not if I have anything to do with it. He clenched his jaw, sending a ripple of tension through his neck. He held up a hand to indicate Jen should stop and pressed an urgent finger to his lips, demanding silence. Something's wrong. He waited with his back pressed against the embankment while he scoured the trees and nearby houses for trouble. A huddle of rooflines sprawled to the ocean on his right and it presented the Raven with an endless parade of possibilities to perch and observe his prey.

Jen inwardly squirmed, her filthy toes numb despite the warmth of the subtropics. Prickly blades of grass dug into her bare feet, which the sandy soil had made gritty.

"Okay, let's go." Dan stalked forward until they were directly under Jen's apartment. Once, a long time ago, it had been a large townhouse. But since its construction, developers had subdivided the townhouse into three apartments. Jen pointed to the top balcony and whispered, "I live up there."

Dan ran a hand across the sheer embankment, relieved to find ample cracks that would suffice as finger-and toeholds. Surveying the neighbourhood with one last piercing gaze, he abandoned the shrubs' scant cover and started scaling the wall, surprised by how easy it was. Moments later they were crouching below a window of the ground floor apartment. Dan peered inside, somewhat suspicious that the occupants hadn't drawn their curtains. Maybe they just enjoy gazing at the ocean. He hoped so. Or maybe the Raven killed them. That was a less pleasant possibility. He was relieved a moment later to see the tenants in the throes of a passionate kiss, the husband pressing his wife against an imitation-alabaster wall while a curious hand worked under her skirt. Someone had obviously renovated the décor in the forties.

Jen pulled him away before she'd have to start thinking of him as a Peeping Tom and motioned toward the downpipe. Dan took the lead, hoping the rusted metal pipe and dingy loops that held it in place would be enough to support his considerable weight. A tired groan of old metal screeched into the night but the pipe held and Dan soon stepped onto the balcony of the top floor. Jen nimbly

sprung next to him a moment later.

He drew his Colt and carefully swept it across everything he could see and hear. A dog was barking in the distance and he could hear the far off roar of breakers at the heads. But there was nothing unusual from within Jen's apartment. The lights were on and that was a good sign. And, is that a keyboard? He thought he could hear the muted cadence of a proficient - no, exceptional - typist.

Jen heard it too and she inaudibly mouthed, "It's okay, that's Cookie."

"Something's wrong," Dan whispered in reply, feeling a prickle on the back of his neck. Something's very, very wrong. He was faithful enough to trust this particular instinct. It had never let him down in the past.

"Well, I'm going in." Jen reached for the balcony door but Dan slapped a restraining hand on her wrist, willing her to be patient and allow him to finish his reconnaissance.

With a twist and a jerk she was free and she burst into her apartment, thoroughly startling Cookie and Samantha.

The typing stopped, replaced instead by a dumbfounded look on Cookie's face. Samantha just stared. And Jen had to admit she looked a sight, dressed in a tight skirt, oversized flannelette shirt, and scuffing dirt on the carpet with her bare feet.

Samantha was first to recover from the shock. "Jen! Where the hell have you been? I was worried you-"

Dan entered. He held his Colt up, searching for hostile targets inside the apartment. When nothing jumped out he lowered his guard but wasn't yet ready to holster his weapon. Not just yet.

"Oh." Samantha's eyes popped wide, a streak of fear cutting into her normally jubilant voice.

"Has anything unusual happened here today?" Jen got to the point, not realising the extent to which her gun-wielding companion was spooking her friends.

"Apart from you disappearing? No. Why? What's happened? Who's this?"

Dan stormed about the apartment, uninvited, searching. He returned empty-handed after securing the chain on the front door. Then he closed and locked the balcony door too.

Jen slumped onto the couch next to her friend, thoroughly exhausted. And for once, they had snared Cookie's undivided attention. "I got into some trouble today." Jen felt tears welling within as she embarked upon her explanation and she fought, and won, an inner battle to keep them under control. "A bounty hunter from UniForce is tracking me." Then she waved at Dan and added, "This is Dan Sutherland, he helped me escape."

"What!" Samantha's curiosity and fear morphed into fury, which she couldn't adequately direct toward anybody in the room. "Start at the beginning and don't leave anything out."

Jen spent the better part of ten minutes filling them in, though she deliberately neglected to mention that Dan was also a bounty hunter. She thought it would be best to leave some things unsaid. Meanwhile, Dan squinted out their balcony window, peering into the darkness.

She finished with a trite, "So there you have it. That's why I was late." Then slapped a hand to her forehead and said, "I'm sorry, my manners took a dive. Dan, this is Samantha."

She waved in admiration. "Hi."

He nodded his greeting and asked, "Can I call you Sam?"

"Not if you want me to answer."

"And that's David."

Cookie got off his Posturific chair - in itself an amazing event as far as Samantha and Jen were concerned - and offered a handshake.

Maybe I misjudged Dan, Jen thought, astonished by how warmly her friends were welcoming him. She grudgingly admitted that she was a harsh judge of character. He could've just turned me in. The tension of the moment, combined with her initial mistrust, had painted him in poor light and she made the resolution to reassess what she saw.

“It’s David Coucke, but everybody calls me Cookie. How you doin’ man?”
Cookie smiled enigmatically.

“Good. And you?”

“Couldn’t be better.” Cooke’s smile spread to the rest of his face. He spun back to Jen and said, “We’re just about there.”

“Huh?” The implications of that sentence took a moment to sink in. “You mean into UniForce?”

Cookie nodded, practically orgasmic from lack of sleep and his caffeine-induced euphoria. “I’m through all but their final defence, and I think I’ll have that down tonight.” His better judgement may have considered it unsafe to speak so frankly in front of a stranger, but that didn’t stop his tumble of words. “By midnight we’ll have access to all their files, and maybe we can have a crack at bringing Echelon to its knees.”

Jen inwardly winced, wishing Cookie hadn’t mentioned it in front of Dan. He was, after all, a bounty hunter and he technically still worked for UniForce. I should have warned them, put them on their guard. But it was too late now. She silently kicked herself for the oversight.

Dan’s spine stiffened. “Are you saying you’ve hacked the UniForce network?”

An uneasy silence blanketed the room when Cookie realised his blunder. He stammered something indecipherable and looked guiltily at the floor.

Jen came to his rescue. “That depends. What would you do if we had?”

Dan sprouted a smile of his own. “Are you kidding? I’d love to get my hands on that sort of information.”

Cookie turned back to his monitor, clearly unwilling to leave the computer unattended for long periods despite his outward confidence in his prop. Dan watched over his shoulder, understanding precious little of the information displayed fleetingly on the screen.

“We’ve been working at this for a while,” Cookie said, flexing his fingers and cracking several knuckles before resuming the hack.

Samantha leaned over and hit him on the shoulder. “I told you - I can’t stand it when you do that.”

“Sorry honey, I forgot.” Cookie wasn’t allowed to crack his knuckles; it had the same effect on Samantha’s back teeth as nails scraping down a blackboard.

Samantha and Cookie, Jen was relieved to note, were too distracted to ask many probing questions about Dan. She could barely trust him herself, and he’d saved her life. She hated to imagine her friends’ reaction if they discovered he worked for UniForce.

Dan’s mind raced with the possibilities. Proof. That’s what I need. He chewed his lip. Proof they’re selling my lists to the Raven. He knew he needed something solid, something UniForce couldn’t easily brush aside as coincidence. And if what Cookie said was true, Dan believed he had a chance to get it.

So the three turned to four, and they huddled around the terminal with Cookie taking centre stage. But their familiar bantering and good-natured jokes were gone, victims of the addition to their ranks.

And only Jen was inwardly panicking - panicking about their bounty-hunter companion and what he intended to do.

Chapter 4

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 19, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Thursday, September 16, 2066

21:12 Coolangatta, Australia

At least the chill of night and a cool ocean breeze had mitigated the humidity. The Raven even enjoyed the air wafting across his face, tingling every nerve beneath the surface. He didn't like Australian assignments. Too weird. America was his homeland and he was proud to call himself American. The Australian's he'd met were too guarded, too raucous, or else too trashy. He admitted that the places he'd visited tended to attract social refuse and that if he went to the corresponding places in the States he'd find the same, but deep down he preferred to think the United States of America was superior.

He sighed, getting tired. Should I roost? He'd need to rest soon or he'd risk damaging the delicate nerve tissue that interfaced with his computer. The doctors had warned him about that - extreme fatigue was just as deadly as a bullet. Not yet. His fellow humans fascinated him and he watched these particular ones with a psychotic intensity of interest. The moon was rising and he turned to frown at it. The Raven would have preferred pitch black, all the better to stalk someone. Silver streams of light filtered through the salt-laden atmosphere and draped brightly across the cluster of houses. That will make it harder, he thought impassively.

Dan posed another problem. The Raven's animalistic senses warned him to be cautious. Taking Jen alone would have been preferable. Her two friends wouldn't cause a problem. Only Dan. Three untrained individuals were easy prey, but a highly motivated bounty hunter was something else entirely. Not that he was scared. He puffed out his chest with his swelling self-esteem. The Raven doesn't get scared. And that was true, for the most part. The last time he remembered fear was prior to blacking out in hospital, immediately before the doctors had crafted him into a cyborg. Before my becoming. He thought of it as his birth, he hadn't truly been alive before the operation. A thin smile stretched his dry lips and he felt his lower lip tear, a combination of dehydration, the salt in the atmosphere, and the parching wind. The iron tang of blood trickled onto his tastebuds and he quietly spat on the ground. That was something else he had to treat carefully. Cutting it a little fine, aren't we? He'd made the calculations and he trusted his self-generated program with his life, quite literally. He still had three hours before irreversible damage would occur. After that, dehydration would cause the stressed nerve tissue surrounding his computer to break down,

reducing him to a pile of twitching limbs. The Raven had seen it happen once, to a colleague. He'd miscalculated the time needed to re-hydrate and suffered permanent brain injury.

One more hour. Something told him the following hour would bring his chance - his only chance.

And what of Sutherland? Curiosity stimulated him into doing a preliminary database search on his competitor. And a frown replaced his earlier smile. Nothing returned from his initial fetch command. His eyes lost focus when he turned his attention inward and engrossed himself in the easily defined world of zeros and ones. A high-speed burst transmitter, which could beam three terabytes per second at maximum capacity, provided his link to the outside world. But, as a drawback, it only worked over short distances so he needed to be close to a tower. He was just thankful that a town as wretched as Tweed Heads had its own station. Statistically Australia was the country he in which he was most likely to find himself rudely disconnected. This place is worse than Mozambique, he thought with a sneer. He could still send and receive information while out of burst-transmitter range, but the data trickled in at a poky five gigabytes per second - horrendously slow for the Raven's powerful computer-brain combination.

He fed his consciousness along the link, ensuring it was stable before committing his mind to the wireless connection. Stable? Check. So he roamed into a world that no true human had ever fully experienced. His brain extended and enhanced the operation of his embedded computer; they operated jointly at the speed of thought. He usually needed to visit only one repository for all his information requirements: PortaNet's meticulously maintained central chipping database. But today it didn't yield the information he needed. Personal details, height, weight, credit history... The Raven smirked until the fresh taste of blood in his mouth reminded him to stop. Dan had an interesting credit history, information he could use just as effectively as his Redback-PX7 if the opportunity arose. He downloaded Dan's file and stored it locally, perturbed that he still hadn't dislodged the information he really wanted. What's he been doing for the past two decades? Who is he? He needed an answer for them both.

He extended his search to include secondary sources, the flashing of data and routing of packets tickling something deep within his mind. He found Dan listed in no fewer than 17 of his 20 regular sources, though the mere fact that he was

missing from three was remarkable enough. He examined each record in turn, discarding one after the other; his suspicion elevated a notch with every incomplete record. Someone cleared his history. Maybe Dan, maybe someone else. He pressed on, determined to find what he was looking for. Nobody can fully erase the past; everybody misses at least one database. It intrigued him that someone had bothered to erase Sutherland's past at all. He wondered why. He or she had certainly done a good job. Normally it took a cyborg to scour the world's databases that thoroughly, and even a cyborg couldn't erase things completely.

He retrieved and discarded 50 records in his search for pieces to Dan's jigsaw-puzzle history. Dan had spent the past few months working for UniForce. That part was easy. Prior to that, as far as the Raven could tell, he'd been a detective working for the New South Wales Police Department. His records depicted nearly ten years of exemplary service before a psychological evaluation had rendered him unserviceable and the Department had discharged him from duty. From there the Raven had to work forward. Dan was born in 2030 and he'd lived a normal life up until his eighteenth birthday. But it was the gap that bothered the Raven - the eight years spanning 2048 to 2056 where none of the databases could account for Dan's existence. It's as if he fell of the face of the planet.

It wasn't for another hour of sweating through disused and chaotic databases that the Raven finally found an answer to plug the gap. He found it in a database located in Argentina, of all places, and it had taken him 20 minutes to puncture the database's defences. His eyes snapped back into focus and he gripped the handle of his Redback, pulling further back into the shadows and peering cautiously toward Jennifer Cameron's apartment. An alien emotion forced him to swallow, and his dry throat scraped on the way down. It took him a while to understand what the emotion was: Fear.

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Thursday, September 16, 2066

UniForce Headquarters

03:01 San Francisco, USA

James Ellerman blinked to clear the sting from his exhausted eyes and slurped noisily on his cup of coffee. He'd been working without a break since eleven in the morning when his computer had first beeped to warn him about a network breach. Yesterday morning, he reminded himself acrimoniously.

A quiet-spoken man, he knew his wife was going to kill him when he got home. But he couldn't phone her now, not this early in the morning. He snorted and thought, If I ever do get home. He absently wondered whether she thought he was with another woman. Or another man? It wasn't the first time he hadn't come home without phoning to warn her. Last time she'd been hysterical when he finally had turned up, two days later. You'd think I'd learn. He snorted again. Snorting was his pet mannerism, which had always thoroughly irritated his colleagues. They called him Piggy behind his back because he frequently snorted at the end of every sentence.

In his first real lapse of concentration since embarking upon the tedious exercise of patching the network, he conjured an image of Susan, his wife, holding his three-month-old daughter, Lillian. His wife had a motherly smile and looked positively radiant. And the impish grin on Lillian's chubby face made James smile too. Then his wife's smile mutated into a snarl and she growled viciously at him, flaying him with her sharp nails while biting and screaming, "Why didn't you call me?" James severed his daydream at that point and opened his eyes, though his daughter still pleasantly tickled his inner vision. In truth Lillian had been an accident, the result of a failure for Xantex's Pill for Men. And while V.H.E.M.T, the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement, had in more recent years taken to promoting abortion for mistakes, James couldn't imagine not having her. Sure, he was exhausted from feedings and midnight diaper changes, but Lillian Ellerman was the joy of his life. He loved to make her laugh and watch her make those cute little spit bubbles, which he found adorable and others found repulsive. Sure, he could see the world was overpopulated; he knew they didn't have the resources to cope with more, but at least he was stopping at one. His brother hadn't stopped until his cow of a wife had squeezed out her fourth and the puppet-government had forcibly tied her tubes. James could see their point. Why can't they see mine? He was too engrossed with his own fatherly feelings to comprehend that the 'other side' did understand his feelings.

It wasn't illegal to reproduce, and the corporate rulers hadn't yet been brave enough to mention mandatory licenses for pregnancy, but they frowned upon reproduction and discouraged it wherever possible. One child was still socially acceptable, two was the social limit, and more than two was selfish and deserved ostracism. Sixteen billion people crammed onto the small rock called Earth was approximately ten billion more than the planet could cope with. Space exploration with portal technology had come too late. If humans didn't carefully control their spiralling population, they'd exhaust their resources before they found a new place to settle. What was the saying? Only after chopping down the last tree will you realise that you can't eat money. James could never remember who had written that, but he intended to pay heed. Lillian was the first and the last child to spring from his loins. You see, I do care about the common wellbeing.

He diverted his thoughts before lingering guilt could consume what was left of his loving fatherly feelings.

James had no need of a monitor, though he left one on his desk anyway. Sometimes he used it, sometimes he didn't. He piped the important information directly into his mind much faster than he could read it from a monitor. He had implants. They were quite simple really. A quick trip to the implant factory - as it was known - at company expense to have a small incision made just behind his right temple and a special plug inserted into his brain. They'd squirted some growth syrup in with it to encourage his nerve cells to bind with the fibrous ends of the device. They'd finished by drilling a neat hole in his skull and tucking his excess skin around the plastic plug. He had to keep dabbing it with ointment to stop infections and skin irritation, but since he'd had his operation, the implant geniuses had invented replaceable plugs that automatically seeped ointment into the surrounding tissue. With a special adaptor, the new plugs could recharge while the user was connecting to his or her computer. And that's what James wanted - a replaceable, automatically recharging plug. A tiny, plastic, skin-coloured circle was the only visible sign that he had the implant. It had a miniature plastic cover that stopped dust and grit from getting into the hole. Whenever he inserted the leads, the cover retracted and the finely engineered wires made contact with their reciprocal pairs inside his skull, completing his connection to the computer. The doctors had refined the procedure to eliminate most of the training time, though James recalled that he'd been clumsy at the beginning. He'd accidentally ordered the computer to type 'shit' into more than one business e-mail. It was like any brain function, he needed to practice if he

wanted to be perfect.

Two types of implants were available: input for replacing the keyboard, and input/output for replacing the keyboard and monitor. Since UniForce was paying and therefore money was no object, James had opted for the latter. Ever since, he'd enjoyed boundless computer freedom, piping images and ideas directly into his mind, ordered there by mental commands.

He snorted.

The blip itched his mind again. Damn. He had to admit the hacker was good. Pity he's not working for us. Maybe then I could get some sleep. He couldn't follow his thoughts through the wires like a cyborg; he hadn't completely integrated his mind with a machine. He could only send commands and wait for responses. But it was an infinite improvement over a time-wasting keyboard and monitor combination. Tonight he was using both. His fingers tapped away at his favourite DataHand Qwerty. It was the tactile model, which pissed off his colleagues even more than his incessant snorting because of the constant clackety-clack when he typed. It was little wonder management pushed for implants and silent keyboards. But nobody else was around at three in the morning so he was indulging himself, enjoying the feel of his keyboard for old times' sake.

Everything appeared normal. But he knew better than to trust appearances, which was why UniForce had handed him the sought-after position of information technology co-ordinator. James didn't take chances. Somebody was there, inside UniForce's electronic defences, and he was going to find out whom.

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Thursday, September 16, 2066

23:21 Tweed Heads, Australia

“Oh fuck!” It started Cookie on a string of curses that ended in a climactic half-scream.

“What is it?” Jen’s asked, concerned and fretful.

Cookie’s fingers were a flurry of action. “Somebody knows I’m here.”

They flocked to his side despite being unable to fathom what was happening on his screen. A red cursor was flashing on an application that had ‘detection bot’ written at the top. It was a custom application, Cookie had written it himself.

A bead of sweat rolled off his forehead and trickled down his chin, at which point Samantha noticed it and dabbed it away with a tissue. “I’ve triggered some kind of alarm.” A scowl imprinted itself on the previously blank mould of his face. “I wouldn’t have the foggiest fuck of a clue where, or even when.” He scrolled through his activity log for the past few hours, shaking his head at each entry. “I haven’t done anything recently that would’ve tipped them off.” That was a particularly unnerving thought. “They could’ve been observing us for a while.”

“Can they track us?” Jen asked, tearing her eyes from the screen to look at Cookie.

He shook his head. “They haven’t tried, or if they have they didn’t get far because they didn’t trip the alarm on my tracking app.”

Jen hoped he knew what he was talking about. “What can we do?”

“Nothing.” Cookie shook his head irritably, trying to give 100 percent of his brain’s processing power to the problem. “Just leave me in peace for a while.”

They backed off respectfully, leaving the genius to work amid a muttering of curses.

Samantha and Jen retreated to the kitchen where they whispered in low voices, mostly about Dan. Samantha thought he was cute and was trying to prise any

juicy details Jen might've left out of her official tale - such as why she hadn't come home wearing her own clothes and why she wasn't wearing a bra under her stretched white top. Dan knew they were talking about him but refused to leave the living room. He scoured the neighbourhood from the balcony windows, glad the moon had risen. It shone like a floodlight.

"Can't you just drop it?" Jen whispered irritably, not in the mood to blather about the man who'd saved her life.

"You don't think he's cute?"

Jen answered with silence.

"That means yes," Samantha said, chuckled softly. "So what's the problem? It sounds like you've already cleared your first date."

Yeah, and it was a real killer. Jen caught herself staring across the kitchen bench at Dan, her bounty hunter, who was prowling like a caged tiger and steadily wearing a track into the carpet. He is kind of cute. It was the first time she'd permitted herself to admire him in that way, in any way for that matter. She couldn't explain the animosity she had for him. It must be what he represents, she mused. But hasn't he now proven that he doesn't stand for UniForce? I'd be dead or in chains if he did. Her dreamy expression betrayed her distant thoughts, but Dan snapped her from her daze when he swivelled in her direction and their eyes met. Jen hastily broke contact and looked at the linoleum floor.

Samantha saw it happen and was greatly amused. "Why don't you just go and talk to him? You haven't spoken more than three words to each other since you got back."

Jen shrugged, not understanding it herself. It didn't seem appropriate to gripe 'he started it'.

"Go on. You know you want to." Samantha knew she could cajole Jen into action; she knew her vulnerabilities. "What've you got to lose?"

How about our freedom? She wasn't willing to risk such high stakes. But then, she thought, he's had the chance to take that from us already. "Okay."

"You want the usual outlet?"

“What do you think?” she replied rhetorically. They were referring to a predetermined signal Jen would give if she wanted Samantha to save her from the conversation. When - if - it came, Samantha would rescue her by offering something benign such as coffee or biscuits and steer the conversation back into safe waters. Their signal was a sneeze since they could both fake authentic-sounding sneezes at will.

She took a deep breath, steadied herself, and preparing for what she thought may turn into a battle. With a precisely timed stroll, she cornered Dan as far as possible away from Cookie. Not that Cookie would bother eavesdropping. He was engrossed in his hack, trying to remain undetected behind UniForce lines.

“I wanted to thank you,” Jen started uneasily.

“You’ve already done that, remember?” Dan replied, holding her gaze until she looked away again.

It surprised him when she rallied her nerve and looked back into his eyes, and she surprised him more by holding his gaze for the remainder of the conversation. “I meant, thank you for helping us.”

Dan smiled cynically. “You should save that until I’ve actually done something.”

“Okay, can I thank you for trying to help us then?”

“You’re welcome.” Dan’s ensuing smile eased the tension and Jen started to relax, just a fraction.

“I noticed your enthusiasm for accessing the UniForce network.” It sounded like an accusation, though that was not how she intended it. “What do you expect to find?”

Dan carefully guarded his reply, saying, “You asked me whether a company has ever fucked me over.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Well the biggest fuck-over of all was from UniForce, and if he” - he pointed at Cookie - “can get me inside their network, I think I can find the proof I would need to correct it.”

Jen nodded, pensively.

“Crippling Echelon won’t do you any good you know.”

It was the most unexpected thing she could have heard. “What? Why do you say that?”

“Don’t you see?” Dan sighed heavily. He felt more exhausted than ever in the presence of such youthful innocence. “Okay, so imagine you breach UniForce’s network. Then assume Cookie finds a way to pull the plug on Echelon. Both are tall orders, but for the sake of argument, we’ll presume he can achieve the impossible. Then-”

“I’d prefer improbable,” Jen snapped. “Nothing’s impossible. Impossible is a word people use until someone else does what they can’t imagine.”

Dan blinked at her. “Cute. Okay, improbable, better?”

She nodded.

“So Echelon’s down and you can send messages without UniForce listening. The problem is - nobody else will be listening either. Look outside, Jen. Look around you... people are happy. People haven’t been this happy for decades. I don’t think they want to return to the chaos of times past.”

His logic was an affront to everything she believed and brought the bile to the back of her throat. “That’s crap. You’re the one who should open your eyes and take a look around. People aren’t happy, they’re asleep. They’re hypnotised into following exactly what the companies want. We’re like a race of robots marching in step. And do you know what happens when someone misses a beat? UniForce drags them away from this army-of-the-damned and flogs them to death as an example to keep the others firmly under control.”

He laughed. “Do you really believe this is all part of some diabolical scheme to beat humanity into submission?”

She held his gaze despite her mounting need to look away. “Yes.”

“Do you honestly believe things would be better with the return of activism? Do you really think it would be good to ‘wake’ these people as you put it?”

“You missed the point. That’s not what we’re about. We want a world where people are free to choose. At the moment we’re not.”

And that struck a chord inside Dan unlike any of her other arguments. It planted a seed that had the potential to germinate and flourish into a tree that might one day bear fruit of its own. He wasn’t sure how to balance the conflicting points of view and he envied Jen’s resoluteness. She knew exactly what she stood for and had the courage to do something about it. Am I free? The silence stretched heavily on while he thought about it. No, not free. I’m free to do whatever I want within the system, but the system itself is restrictive. Then a voice came to battle for the doctrine of society. But rules are the platform of civilization. Without them, we have chaos. This set of rules permits peace, which is especially important with the planet so overcrowded. Dan couldn’t draw a conclusion to the debate raging in his mind. Not tonight. Possibly never. And that made him unpredictable. Capable of digesting both sides of the argument, he could act on behalf of either the ruling corporations or the downtrodden protestors.

But the quandary left one very important question begging: Am I really doing society a favour as a bounty hunter? His inner flame of hatred burned and he resented whatever spiteful force kept placing him in these situations. Or am I just a prop for corrupt companies? Jen and her band of wishful warriors, classified as activists - as terrorists! - were fighting oppression. They aspired to free the world of... Of what? Dan didn’t know anymore. He was too confused to arrange his thoughts into a coherent stream. But then, he didn’t have to. His motivation in the short term was simple - there was no need for Jen to die by the Raven’s hand, so for now he would do his best to keep her alive.

Jen’s thoughts were tumultuous too, though for vastly different reasons. They culminated into the question, “So if you believe what you’re saying, why are you here? Why not turn me over to UniForce?”

“Not everything they do is right,” he said, gracing her with a chagrined smile. “I like you,” - which was the truth, though he wasn’t going to tell her why - “and I don’t want to see you incarcerated for what you’re doing. You believe something strongly enough to risk your freedom and even your life fighting for it - regardless of how slim your chances may be. I admire that, it reminds me of... someone I used to know.”

Jen saw the hurt that underpinned his words but decided it was private and didn’t

want to pry. She watched the stream of moonlight, admitted to the room by a crack in the drawn curtains, play across his face. It was like a finger from the outside world intruding on their private domain.

Dan finally lowered his eyes, no longer capable of holding her gaze. And Jen shivered. Forcing herself to look at him had consumed much of her energy and she felt exhausted, drained. She took three casual steps to peek outside and looked across the sleepy Tweed, out toward the heads. It was breathtakingly pretty, bathed in silvery light. A whimsical smile tugged at her lips when she realised she'd been chatting with a handsome man by moonlight. How often have I dreamed of that? Of course, she'd imagined a slightly different conversation, but her dream had come true. It made her wonder whether her other dreams would also come true, and if so, what unintended twists they might take.

“He’s out there, isn’t he?” Jen asked tiredly, her voice hoarse.

“I think so. It would surprise me if he wasn’t. He’s probably watching the apartment even now.” He touched his Colt for reassurance, gratified when his fingers brushed the eerily cold stock.

“So what did you have in mind? For our protection I mean.” A puff of moist air escaped with her words, fogging the glass and obscuring her view. She turned back to Dan. Ready for another duel of wills, she was surprised to find him staring at the floor.

“There are two possibilities,” Dan admitted uneasily. He wasn’t yet convinced either would work. “My original idea was to move you all, take up new identities, split with your current life and recommend you don’t do anything outrageous - nothing to get you back on the corporate hit list. I know it can be done; it’s not even that difficult. The hardest part is never looking back.” He shrugged nonchalantly and added, “Of course Samantha and Cookie would have to agree... unless they want to stay here. But I suspect it won’t be long before they’re on a bounty hunter’s list too.”

Jen paled and thought, At least it’s preferable to death and prison. “What’s the other idea?”

“If Cookie really can get us into the UniForce network, we might be able to find the bounty hunter records. If we can do that, we can set your status as

apprehended. Hopefully the Raven will lose interest at that point and you'll slip through the cracks, at least until someone notices the disparity.”

A tiny glimmer of hope sparkled in Jen's eyes and she looked to where Cookie was working with renewed incentive.

A twitch irritated the corner of Cookie's eye and he rubbed it with the heel of his palm. His eyes were darting across the monitor, completely unaware of the sweat building up on his brow. His mind was racing, as if he'd consumed five times his personal limit of caffeine. And that wasn't an achievement to scoff at. Cookie's normal daily intake of the drug was enough to corrode a rookie coffee-drinker's stomach lining. He was desperate to evade the spotlight of detection. Three separate versions of his detection algorithm were crawling spider-like through the network to warn him of everything the system administrator did. Damn he's fast. Cookie's knuckles were starting to ache, the way they did when he failed to take his regulatory breaks, scheduled at predetermined intervals. His RSI was officially cured, praise going to a Xantex prescription stuffed in his top drawer. But he didn't have time to take it now and the tendons pulling his fingers were swollen and throbbing all the way to his elbows. This must be why people get implants. It was at times like these that temptation reared its ugly head.

He was working simultaneously on three separate and equally vital problems. One application was busy backfilling a punctured file, one of the files he'd used to seed his first entry into the network. Another was in the final states of repairing a checksum. And he was using a third to penetrate the final bulwark of the UniForce net. A warning buzzed on his speakers and he shattered protocol by turning off his chat software, disconnecting himself from the distracting world of cyber-chatting. A friend in Peru would be pissed when he came back online, but if that were the worst he suffered, he'd consider himself lucky.

Another alarm flashed on his screen. The UniForce system administrator was close, sniffing at all the customary places that Cookie might have used to gain access. He'd systematically locked down every weak point on the UG7-rated network. He knows his stuff, Cookie thought, irritably blinking the stinging sweat from his eyes. Where's Samantha? He didn't have time to turn his head and chastised himself for the lapse in concentration as he redoubled his efforts to assault the bulwark. I've worked too hard to have some asshole fuck me now.

With a flutter of excitement, he found a weakened node and slipped his tiny

program into the core of the host file. Then he socketed the file and recalculated the checksum so that his dastardly opponent, as Cookie now thought of the UniForce system administrator, wouldn't suspect that he'd altered it. There was a tiny window of opportunity when his entire campaign was vulnerable to detection but a few seconds later the checksum was in place and he'd altered the 'modified date' to erase all evidence of his tampering.

Cookie's heart started thumping in his ears and his breathing was shallow. Now... just these two files... He worked even more furiously, his fingers slipping twice onto the wrong keys because of the rush. But thirty seconds later, he was done, and the air he'd been hoarding in his lungs came explosively from his nose and mouth in a triumphant gasp.

"I'm in!" Cookie slapped his hands together and massaged his aching joints. "I'm in, I'm in, I'm in! Did you hear me? I'm in!"

Jen's head snapped around, her jaw slack. What? Deep down she'd wrestled with a reservoir of doubts. Although she'd never said anything, she'd never wholeheartedly believed Cookie could do it.

Samantha came bolting from the kitchen, leapt into Cookie's lap, and shrieked in delight. She entwined Cookie's tongue in a passionate kiss and massaged his shoulders before ordering him to stand up and walk the stiffness out of his legs.

"Is it secure?" Jen was still gaping, scarcely able to believe her eyes.

Cookie nodded exultantly. "I've gotta maintain it, but she's as tight as a CEO's puckered little arse."

*

The Raven appealed to the sky, begging for the omen that would free him from his shackles of restraint. He sneered at the muted light coming from the curtain cracks. A monitor? A television? Somehow he doubted they'd kick up their feet, open a bud, and watch their favourite sitcom. A computer, it must be. But it flickered quickly, casting doubt on his assessment.

Now that he possessed the full details of Dan's colourful life, he didn't intend to rush foolhardily toward the house, PX7 blazing. No. His time for rushed approaches was over, now it was time for caution and perseverance. Time would

prove his ally, generating opportunities for a silent approach and a clean kill. One shot. That was all he intended to need. Of course, he would riddle Dan's body with a full clip, but one bullet would seal his death. He couldn't in good conscience leave Dan alive, at least not for long. He needed elimination, without a doubt. Fear was beyond the programming the Raven had written into his electronic mind, though so far he believed it was coping well. Emotions could spark a crash - love, hate, fear, guilt, he personally believed they drove the other cyborgs to self-destruction. The years between the ages of 18 and 22 were tumultuous for humans, and a cyborg brain only amplified the chaos. No wonder we lost so many, the Raven sneered. Now, aged 28, he felt safe. He knew how to beat the system, how to stay calm. He prided himself on his lack of emotion. And now this. It made him angry until his programming reminded him to relax, at which point he overcame the wave of unwanted aggression with a chilling tranquillity.

Sutherland must die. It was the first time in years he'd given himself a non-UniForce assignment. Cameron too. He'd never expected to apprehend anything but her spine. It didn't even matter which vertebrae since there was no chip, they'd just have to lift her identify from the DNA.

He turned to the sky once more and mouthed, "Hurry up." He wanted it over with.

*

"Right. Now what do we do?" Samantha was first to recover from their collective shock.

"Now we hunt. Echelon," Cookie said, savouring his analogy.

"No, first we have to find my record in the bounty hunter database." Jen paled to say the words, "He's still tracking me, you know."

Samantha copied her pasty pallor. "The cyborg from the mall?"

Jen nodded solemnly.

"Righto then." Cookie was about to crack his knuckles but stopped himself just in time. Instead, he gently applied the pads of his fingers to the grooves they'd worn into his keys. "We have a choice between saving our skins and smashing

the shit out of a computer, metaphorically speaking.” He winced through a smile. “I don’t know about you lot, but I rather like my skin.”

“Where will we find it?” Samantha asked nobody in particular.

Dan chipped into the ensuing silence, “They have a three-tiered data repository, each housed separately to protect against data loss in the event of a disaster.”

“But that’s just how it’s physically aligned,” Cookie said, taking the tone of a patient teacher explaining something simple to a particularly dim-witted student. “I need to know where it is logically, in the realm of electrons.” He started battering his keys, hard enough to explain why he wore out two keyboards per year. “Hang on a minute; let me take a look around.”

After a frustrating pause he pointed at the jungle of lines he’d been assembling on the screen. He’d built a mind-map of the UniForce network based on the information his various applications were feeding him. It’s fairly standard, not what I would’ve expected behind a UG7, he thought. “Here, you see this?” They could see what he was wiggling his finger at, but had only a vague idea of the concept behind it. “This is the way they’ve set things up.” He tapped on his keyboard for another few minutes before drawing a blue circle in the middle of his diagram. But the colourful shapes weren’t just for his audience’s benefit; Cookie was embedding code behind them. “This circle’s their main data store.”

Another ten minutes and he’d decoded the data structures UniForce used in their self-replicating databases. They had a mutual-master relationship, which meant that a change to one database would replicate to the others, so it wouldn’t matter which one they modified. An intra-nano-net connection linked each database server to its peers. It was essentially a single database copied three times, split into a complex array of sub nodes and highly sophisticated reference and record structures. UniForce had implemented it so that the database engine could retrieve information in nanoseconds. Even the complex searches, which had taken minutes to complete on older systems, took mere microseconds on the latest generation technology UniForce had used.

Cookie found it enthralling. The others were just impatient, but they knew better than to hassle him while he was working.

“Okay, I think I know what we’re looking at.” He squinted in concentration. Only his subconscious mind was enjoying the tender strokes that Samantha was

lavishing on the nape of his neck. After a flurry of keystrokes, he triumphantly slammed the enter-key. “I see it. This is it, here.” He tapped a finger to the bird’s nest on the screen. “It’s not so much where we can find the bounty hunter records, that part’s easy. It’s a question of which search terms we need to feed to the engine to get the records we want.”

Silence.

Jen ventured into the hush with an intrepid question. “So you’ve got my record then?”

“Not a chance,” Cookie replied cheerfully. “But now I know how difficult it’s going to be to find. It’ll be trial and error until I can construct something similar to the front end they’re using to access the data. From there it’ll all be smooth sailing.”

Dan stifled a yawn, the first indication that his developing pattern of poor sleep was catching up with him. “And how long is that going to take?”

Cookie shrugged. “Could be twenty minutes if I get lucky, maybe a day or two if I’m not.”

“So are you feeling lucky?” Jen asked. She definitely wasn’t.

He slipped back into his semi-trance and fired a series of simple requests at the database to see what sort of garbage it would return. A delighted frown unfolded on his forehead - Cookie loved a challenge. Besides, he was still euphoric over single-handedly surmounting the barriers to the UG7-rated network.

Samantha preferred to stay close to her lover while he worked; she enjoyed feeling the warmth of his body. She’d spent many evenings with him this way, while he worked on various projects. Prior to the hack he’d been constructing the tools required for the billboard jam. She still hadn’t fully recovered from that, and the repeated late nights weren’t helping. Samantha didn’t understand how Cookie could keep going when his buttocks were numb and his fingers and wrists ached so much. She knew they were sore, she could tell by the way he flinched with each keystroke. She’d seen him pop an anti-inflammatory pill during their short interlude and hoped for his sake it’d kick in soon. Is he that motivated? Sometimes she wondered where he drew his strength. She knew she could never endure the physical demands or the psychological strain of pitting

herself against a seemingly insurmountable foe. Maybe the challenge really does turn him on. He's always joking about it, but... Personally, she preferred it when he was doing something in the workshop, which was really just an extra desk they'd squeezed into their room. Samantha and Cookie slept in the master bedroom because they paid two-thirds of the rent, but it still wasn't huge - the extra desk barely fit.

The exhaustion was catching up with her and the lines on Cookie's monitor were blurring. A yawn escaped and it triggered a yawn-wave that spread around the room. Yawns are like that. She smiled, her bubbly outlook shining through her fatigue. Then she gently lowered her head to Cookie's shoulder, not heavily enough to prove a burden, just enough to let him know she was there. She looked forward to a time when they didn't have to hide their thoughts or political ideology. And when Cookie and I can be alone again. They hadn't truly been alone for weeks. Sure, they'd frequently been the only people in the room, but that wasn't the same as being alone, not when she had to share her lover's attention with a computer.

Cookie, for his part, was only semi-conscious that Samantha was even there. He did love her, and he regretted that he couldn't pay her more attention, but he knew she understood the importance of what he was doing. A few more days, then I'll take you out for a romantic celebratory dinner. He lamented their lost time and wished their lifestyle was more conducive toward a relationship. But hacking was a bit like the ocean, he would've been unwise to turn his back to it. Once he started a hack, he had to stick with it until the end, which meant days if not weeks when he was tackling something as complex as a UG7.

His thoughts soon spun to marriage. When? How? He knew Samantha was the only one he wanted but he'd never plucked the courage to ask her how she felt about it. Not while we're at uni. He wanted to wait a year or two, so he had plenty of time to worry about that later. Or so he thought.

Focus, focus! He berated himself unnecessarily for the momentary lapse in concentration and delved deeper into his meditation-like state. He'd isolated the first part of the fetch-command structure with a lucky guess. Well, it wasn't so much lucky as educated, but Cookie enjoyed thinking himself lucky. He whittled away at the rear of the problem with as much gusto as he'd attacked the front, but UniForce had customised it so much it was barely recognisable as a mainstream structure. Damn.

Jen sat nervously on the couch, uneasy with the silence but unable to think of anything to say.

Dan came to her rescue by saying, “I failed a psych evaluation.”

“Pardon me?”

“You asked how I could go from a cop to a-”

“So I did,” Jen said, briskly cutting him off. She wanted to shield her friends from his true profession. Then, when she looked closer at his eyes, she realised he was allowing her a peek into his tormented soul. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Dan shrugged. “Something happened to me that...” Even cryptically he had difficulty talking about Katherine’s death. “It really disturbed me.” He spread his hands, palms up. “I was on distress leave when they called me in for an interview with the shrink. I’m not surprised I flunked. After that they turfed me.” Images of the interview flashed through his mind and along with them came details of his wife’s death. It angered him, though he hid it well.

“You don’t have to tell me this if you don’t want to,” Jen said gently, without the earlier snappiness in her voice.

“Yes.” He forced a smile. “I think I do. You deserve to know how I ended up working for the devil.” The jest was too close to the mark to elicit a smile from either of them. “I suddenly found myself without a job, nothing to do, and far too much time to think about what’d happened.”

Jen was curious to know what had reduced such a proud man to this, but she dared not ask. She didn’t believe she had the right to an answer, and besides, she thought she might prefer never to know.

“I was a good cop,” Dan said, his eyes drifting out of focus. “I never took bribes, although plenty of people offered them.” He grunted. “I never wanted to do anything else.”

Jen waited in silence.

“I accepted UniForce’s standing offer because I needed something to take my mind off my problems.” Dan felt profoundly depressed and his confession

wasn't helping. He distantly wondered why the Zyclone wasn't propping his mood above a lethargic flat-line. "It's intense work, it keeps me occupied and keeps my mind busy."

Dan was sitting in the single-seater and Jen leant forward to understandingly touch his forearm.

The warmth of her touch surprised him. It scalded his skin and he nearly flinched away until he realised it was pleasurable. He focussed on her fingers. Her hands looked like Katherine's and he had to suffocate a sigh.

Just as Jen's warmth had startled Dan, the chill of his skin had startled her. It felt dead.

"You don't need to stay at UniForce, do you?" Jen asked in a low voice, wondering whether Dan was beyond salvation.

"I suppose not, but I can't think of anything else to do. I couldn't return to the nine to five slog, I'm not cut out for it." He faked a smile. "That probably sounds lame, eh?"

She shook her head. "No, not lame." The thought of spending 30 years working for a multinational sent a spasm of revulsion through Jen's body. "I'm not sure I'm cut out for it either. I admire people who can do it though."

"Maybe if I-

"Hey you guys!" Cookie's shrill voice sliced through the air and severed their touch, leaving them with a spark of remorse and a pang of guilt.

"What?" Jen vaulted the couch and resumed in her usual position next to his chair, gazing at the monitor. Dan remained seated and wondered why they bothered, nothing on that screen made sense to him and he was tired of pretending it did. He watched from the relative comfort of the single-seater.

"I found your record." Something in Cookie's tone forewarned that it wasn't all joyous news. "And this is your current status field."

"And?" Jen prompted impatiently.

“They’re using encryption that I can’t reproduce from here. If we change any of the data, we’ll trip an alarm. They already know we’re sniffing their doorstep but modifying anything in the database would totally give us away. They might even discover where we are.”

“You mean track us here?”

“Right.” Cookie pouted, wondering what they’d want him to do next.

“There’s no way around it?” Jen asked despondently.

“Not unless you get me a copy of their front end. Maybe then I could reverse engineer it and forge a seal, but that’s a very big maybe.” He sighed resignedly. “They’ve protected all the keys. There’s absolutely no way we can change that field from here. At least, not unless we give ourselves away... and that would kinda negate the point, wouldn’t it?”

“Hmm.” Jen frowned. “Maybe we should go for plan-B.”

“What’s plan-B?” Samantha didn’t like the tone of Jen’s voice, it frightened her.

“We order you all a new identity and you disappear,” Dan answered from the corner. “We’ll set you up with a new life.”

“Or I turn myself over to UniForce,” Jen said, providing her teammates with an alternative. She was willing to sacrifice herself for their wellbeing if that’s what they voted.

“No.” Samantha flatly refused.

“Hang on a minute,” Cookie said. “I’ve got another idea.”

Something tingled on the edge of Dan’s mind and the hairs on the back of his neck stood upright. And he knew: Something’s wrong.

*

He fawned at the glorious orb, basking in the light and sulphurous fumes that billowed from its gluey skin. Give me the sign, he urged. I need it now... give me the sign. The Raven was on his knees, begging for a taste of freedom, even if

it were temporary.

The vibration buzzing at his temples was nearly unbearable and, as usual, it spread to his back teeth. Then the omen said what the Raven wanted to hear before fading to black with a final splutter of jelly. The Raven recovered quickly and got to his feet, flexing his fingers around his Redback before trekking stealthily to Jennifer Cameron's apartment.

*

"We're out of time." Dan drew the curtain back an inch to get a better look outside. "We can't wait - he's coming now."

"How do you know?" Jen wished she knew what to do, she wished she had a weapon.

"I just do," Dan snapped. "Cookie! Forget whatever you're doing, can you find where they store their mail?"

He nodded. "Yeah man, it's right here."

"Can you find a mailbox for Roche? Michele Roche?" Dan never took his eyes from the window. The Raven was stalking them; he could feel it.

The tapping of keys continued for lengthy seconds while Cookie muttered and wove his programs through the network. On top of finding the mailbox, he also had to evade the system administrator who was attempting to uproot him. He doubted the administrator yet knew he'd breached the final defence and gained proper access to the network - he'd been very careful to mask his tracks. But the more he tinkered, the greater the risk that the administrator would notice him and sever his connection.

"Okay, here we go. Roche, Michele. What do you want with her?"

"She's the bounty co-ordinator for UniForce," Dan said succinctly.

How does he know that? Samantha and Cookie both wondered. Their curiosity culminated in a questioning look at Jen, who looked away, worried that the answer was scrawled across her face.

“Can you write an e-mail from her account?” Dan was making it up as he went along, half expecting the Raven to crash through the front door at any moment. He’d prepared for that contingency, he knew precisely where to shoot for his .45 calibre rounds to puncture the wall and riddle the intruder. Standing by the balcony window was smarter than guarding the door; he had better visibility where he was.

“I think I can arrange that,” Cookie added a few seconds later. “What do you want to say?”

Dan paused, trying to remember the e-mails he’d received from Michele Roche and copy her distinctive style. “Hi Raven.”

Cookie took the dictation in his stride, typing it around his endless prop-the-file-and-evade-detection parade.

“Their’s,” Dan spelt it for him, “T-h-e-i-r-apostrophe-s” - he needed to replicate Roche’s mistakes to make it look genuine - “a new assingment I want you too do 4 me.”

Samantha arched an eyebrow. “You realise that’s not how you spell-”

“I know,” Dan replied before resuming his dictation. “This has the highest priority. I need u to start on this rite away.” Dan’s words were slow and deliberate. “This is contract I’m offering to u alone, because of the good stuff u done.”

Samantha gave him a quizzical look. No co-ordinator writes that poorly, she thought.

Every nerve in Dan’s body tingled with dread and he scoured the scene from the balcony window with ever-increasing ferocity.

*

The Raven skirted the rat-infested townhouse, the only abandoned building in the suburb. A plastic sign proudly heralded the beginning of a new development on the highly prized block. In a year, the two-story weatherboard Queenslander would live only in memories and aging photographs, reduced to rouble and rebuilt as a multi-million dollar investment that did nothing to bridge the housing

disparity between rich and poor.

The Raven's multiprocessing mind was feeding off no fewer than 60 information streams, digesting the data and presenting him with the best approach. His black clothing melded perfectly with the shadows and he passed as just another puff of breeze. The target was tantalisingly close. Targets, he corrected himself. Now there are two. Jennifer Margaret Cameron and Dan Sutherland were standing with one foot firmly planted in the grave.

An alarm beckoned him to water, screaming for him to appease his body's need for fluids. It made him hesitate and he recalculated his success quotient, figuring he was operating at a bleak 72 percent of optimum physical capacity. Only water and rest could rectify the problem.

Regardless, he pressed on, deciding upon a 20 percent safety margin. Fear wasn't about to degrade his self-evaluation and he knew he could take Dan out if he could just surprise him. He calculated the best approach to his targets was via a roof-access hatch at the front. He would position himself above the living room, step onto the insulation batts, fall through the jip-rock ceiling in a perfect firing position, and shoot them all before they understood that death was raining from above. The house plans he'd retrieved from the Tweed Shire Council's database depicted meagre security for Jennifer Cameron's building and he'd previously stored the necessary information to thwart such a primitive alarm.

He approached on light feet, carefully selecting every step and nimbly avoiding the pitfalls that less experienced hunters would fail to discern.

Standing in front of the security screen, he eyed the electronic lock and inwardly laughed at how easy it was going to be. From deep within the wraith-like folds of his coat, he withdrew a screwdriver set and multi-charge Pulse Stick. With practiced precision, he prised the cover off the lock and selected a 12-volt pulse at 0.5 amps, giving the Pulse Stick a total power of 6 watts. He carefully applied the pencil-like device to the switching circuit and pulled the trigger, gratified to see the 'armed' LED flicker out.

An evil grin licked the Raven's face when he snuck inside, splendidly pleased with his progress.

Death doesn't knock.

*

“I said I don’t know!” Dan was getting irritated by the barrage of questions, especially now that time had run out.

“A criminal maybe?” Samantha offered helpfully.

Dan shook his head. “No, we’d be signing the death warrant of anybody we mention - that is if he falls for it.”

Jen’s mind traced through the list of possibilities. How do we get rid of him? She couldn’t think of anything other than Dan’s proposal. But who’s so evil I’d want to set a crazed cyborg on them?

“Are you sure it’ll look authentic coming from Michele Roche’s account?”

Cookie nodded, bristling at having his work questioned. “Yes. It’ll appear to originate from her computer. It will have an unusual timestamp.” He checked his watch and added, “Unless she usually gets to work at six in the morning. But we can’t do anything about that. It’ll have all the correct encoding and encryption applied, we are writing this from inside the UniForce network, remember?”

“Good.” Dan’s left calf cramped from the tension. “Look in her address book for a contact called ‘the Raven’.”

Cookie swivelled in his chair to face the computer again, his breathing rapid and shallow. “Okay, got it. Just give me the command and this’ll shoot strait to the Raven.”

“Now if we could just finish the message...” Jen piped in, cringing at her pessimistic sarcasm.

The silence in the room was so profound it seemed to stretch to infinity, and beyond.

“Ah.” Dan snapped his fingers. “I have an idea.”

“Fire away, man. My fingers are at your service.”

“Write: It’s worth a million Credits if you accept the assignment immediately.”

Dan felt an ill-ease crawl across his skin. He knew the Raven was close. And he's not coming through the balcony. He raised his Colt, nerves wound tight enough to snap at anything. And now for the target... "The order has been warranted for..." He went to the keyboard and typed the name in himself - index finger after index finger - before quickly clicking the icon marked 'send'.

Jen inhaled sharply. "No..."

*

The Raven flinched when the message arrived, it was ill timed and he nearly ignored it until after the swoop. But it was marked with the highest priority and it came straight from the bounty co-ordinator so he quietly placed his foot back on the supporting beam. Another two seconds and he'd have placed a black boot firmly through the ceiling and gone crashing into Jennifer Cameron's living room.

A scowl of irritation ploughed across his usually expressionless face, but it evaporated when he read the message. Greed wasn't something he allowed to seep into his mind. And today was no exception, but he did want the money, he needed it. The Raven licked his dry lips with a dry tongue, his viscous saliva only chapping them more. It was tempting to accept. One million Credits was more than enough to cover the upgrade he so desperately desired. Upgrades for cyborgs weren't easy to get, being illegal. It was a lengthy procedure even though it no longer required open-skull surgery. He had to place his head in a vice and wait while strong magnets and electrical currents rearranged the putty-like molecules in his computer. Engineers had specifically designed cyborg computers for those types of upgrades. There were no wires or silicon in the core of his computer; it was PermaGel, the same substance that made the nano-net possible. As computer scientists and engineers made advances in computer architecture, they could rewire the nano-circuits in the Raven's mind to keep pace with technology. They would plunge a needle into his temple and inject a solution to liquidify a portion of his computer, readying it for something more sophisticated, more erudite. But the torturous upgrade was a small price to pay for the resulting boost in performance. Already massively multi-parallelled, in many ways it resembled an accurate version of the human brain, encapsulating the best technology that sprung from the neuron-net experiments with the leaps and bounds made in super-pipelining. It made the earlier models pale by comparison. He'd had two upgrades since his becoming and each had cost a

fortune. Global Integrated Systems were secretly sponsoring the back-alley operator that did the upgrades, but they couldn't openly advertise for clientele because of the backlash in public support - people didn't want cyborgs to access upgrade resources.

He wanted that upgrade, and Roche's offer would make it possible. A glimmer of suspicion crossed his mind at the time the message had been sent, but he meticulously scanned the credentials and they all checked out. The message even fit her pattern of sloppy English, which he confirmed by running a quick scan through her previous e-mails. It's her all right. He shrugged. If she wants to work early then that's her prerogative. He slunk out of the roof-space, taking the demands of the message seriously. 'Immediately' meant he shouldn't create more corpses before tackling the new assignment. So, Jennifer Margaret Cameron, today is your lucky day. And as for you, Mr Sutherland, I'll be back for you.

*

"Dude!" Cookie looked aghast. "I can't believe you just did that."

"That wasn't a good idea," Samantha admitted.

"No," Jen agreed. "You should've chosen someone else. Anybody else."

Dan didn't think so, though he would find it difficult to convince them of his viewpoint. The itchy feeling that portended bad things had passed, leaving him to believe he'd averted an imminent strike. "That's the only person he definitely won't kill. He'll likely do one of two things: verify the offer's correctness, or apprehend him alive. The Raven might be determined, but he's not stupid." At least I hope he's not.

All three looked at him with dubious expressions.

"Trust me, will you?" He appealed to Jen.

She nodded, but hesitantly. "Okay, I just hope you know what you're doing. You should've told us before doing something like that; we deserve veto rights when it impacts us directly."

"Okay, in future I will." Inwardly, given the chance, he doubted he would have

done anything differently. He alone knew just how horrifyingly close the Raven had come, and while he felt sure of his ability to deal with the threat, he didn't know how much of his confidence he should attribute to Zyclone.

The computer beeped, snaring Cookie's attention. He returned to jabbing the keyboard.

"Can you erase every indication that our message was ever written?"

Cookie cocked his head to one side. "Every?" He wasn't sure anybody but the system administrator could do that. "I'll give it a shot. I can erase the obvious, but if they have a backup log, and maybe a backup-backup in an obscure location, I might overlook it."

Dan nodded, accepting it on face value. "Either way, we've bought ourselves a few hours at most. We have to get out of here, now."

"Where do you propose we go?" Jen asked, mentally cataloguing the things she'd want to take in preparation for a new beginning.

"We'll go to my place until we can find more permanent accommodation for you." Dan again peeked out the balcony window; it was the only outward sign that he was still nervous with the Raven in the vicinity. He knew the cyborg had probably portaled to America by now, but his presence lingered. "Get your stuff." Dan motioned with his head. "Pack bare essentials only, enough for a couple of days. You'll want to travel light."

Samantha obeyed without further comment, trundling into the master bedroom to pack a duffle bag for herself and another for Cookie. Jen hovered for long enough to smile bravely at the man who was risking his own safety to protect a bunch of criminals. She'd returned to wondering why he was doing so much for them. What's in it for him? That question continued to pester her while she gathered her personal effects. She also changed clothes and neatly folded the skirt and top that belonged to Dan's sister. Christine wasn't it? She placed them on top of her brimming overnight bag. That's it, she thought, looking sadly around her bedroom. If I've forgotten anything, I'll have to buy it or do without.

She heard exasperated curses coming from the master bedroom so she dumped her bag in the living room and went to help Samantha. "You need a hand?"

Samantha's nerves were fraying and the stress of the evening was showing clearly in her eyes. They looked seconds away from brimming with tears. "No, I'm just fine." She was fighting with an age-stiffened strap on the duffel bag.

"Hey, leave that," Jen said, protecting Samantha from the source of her immediate frustration. She rested a reassuring hand on her shoulder before pulling her into a supportive embrace. Jen was surprised to feel her shiver. "It's going to be okay," she cooed, soothingly rubbing her hands up and down Samantha's back. "It'll be okay. I promise."

"How do you know?"

Jen inhaled deeply, squirming to think of an answer. "I can just feel it. Dan's a good man," - more doubt tugged at the cautious part of her mind - "...I think. He's going to help us settle somewhere new."

"What about uni?" Samantha was one year from finishing her degree in social science, just like Jen, except Samantha was majoring in history.

Jen hadn't considered that. She could barely believe she'd been in a lecture theatre earlier that day. She checked her watch; it was approaching one in the morning. Well, yesterday. Her studies seemed so far removed from the bizarre reality her life had become. "I don't know. Maybe we can get advanced standing and finish at another university." She doubted it. If they needed a clean break from their current lives, applying for advanced standing would go against the rules. On the other hand, even if they'd finished their degrees they wouldn't be able to use them after switching identities. "Maybe our new identities will already have degrees."

Samantha crossly shook her head. "No, I want to earn it. I'd rather have credit and finish my degree properly."

"We'll look into it." Jen wondered where they'd end up. On the coast? She fervently hoped so. With a boat? She doubted it. Not unless we win the lottery in the next few days. Determination gritted her teeth. But first we have to give UniForce the slip. "Come on, are you packed?"

"Nearly." Samantha broke their huddle and tossed a few more items of underwear into her bag. "I wish we'd done the laundry yesterday."

“Yeah, me too.” Jen helped by carrying Cookie’s bag, dumping it next to hers.

Dan and Cookie hadn’t moved. The bounty hunter was still looking out the window and the hacker was still hunching over his terminal.

“What about my LectroLogic?” That was the series name Global Integrated Systems had assigned to his model of computer. Cookie refused to budge. “I can’t just leave it here.”

“Bring the computer and keyboard, but leave the monitor,” Dan suggested. The monitor was thin and light but it was still an awkward size. “I’ve got a seventeen inch XRM at home, you can use that.” The computer itself was barely larger than the plugs that connected to it and, though heavy for its size, it had the dimensions of a dainty shoe.

“Okay,” Cookie said reluctantly. “Just give me a few minutes. I’ve gotta start a few apps or our tunnel won’t be there when we’re up and running later.” A taskbar of scanners popped up on his screen. Of the nine circular indicators, seven were red and two were green. With a whirl of activity and enough flickering to send an epileptic into a fit, Cookie set the appropriate parameters and launched the remaining applications. After five minutes only two red dots remained.

The others waited in silence, having nothing further to say. Samantha thought it seemed a sad way to leave their abode. But when the shit hits the fan, what’re you gonna do? she thought, tuning her spirit toward the positive in their situation. I can be whoever I want... I can recreate myself. She was a bit stung that she couldn’t say farewell to her other friends, but she shoved that thought as far from her mind as she could and focussed on the good things instead. Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens...

“Okay, I’m done.” Cookie stood while waiting for the computer to gracefully shut down. His fractal-bacteria screen oozed to a shade of algae brown when the signal from the box faded and he yanked the plugs roughly from their sockets before bundling the computer to his chest like a father would cradle a child.

“What now?”

“Do you have any chips you’ve never used?” Dan asked.

“I have one,” Cookie offered, “but it’s not linked to any active accounts so you

can't do anything with it."

"How about chips you haven't used for a long time?"

Cookie nodded emphatically. "Yeah, heaps," - he fished into his pocket for his chip selector - "but they're all in here, so we'd have to break it open if you want more than one."

"He doesn't get out much," Samantha offered by way of explanation.

"I can see why," Dan muttered so softly under his breath that nobody caught his fleeting words.

"I have one I haven't used for over a year. I've been saving it for an emergency," Samantha said, then added in a whisper, "I suppose this qualifies."

"But I don't," Jen said ruefully.

"I know." Dan looked displeased while trying to think of an alternative. "And you definitely can't use the identify you used in Albury."

Cookie, with his analytical mind, generated the solution. "It's simple! I go through with Samantha and come back on a different chip, bringing Samantha's selector with me. Then I switch to a third chip and Jen can use another of Samantha's instead of her own."

"Do you have one I can use?" Jen asked.

Samantha thumbed through the identities on her selector and said, "Here's one I haven't used for six months."

"Perfect." Dan snatched a bag from the floor, leaving Samantha and Jen to carry their own while Cookie clutched his computer.

"Hang on," Jen said, frowning. "What about you? You're chipped, right?"

"Yes. That's why I'm not portaling with you, as a precaution. The Raven saw us drive off together at the mall and there's a record of me portaling to Tweed Heads. Besides, for all we know he might have watched us climb the downpipe." He slowly shook his head. "There can't be any record of my chip mixed in with

the new ones you're using. I'll find an alternative means of transportation to Brisbane, portal home, and meet you in town."

"Mind if I ask where 'home' is?" Cookie raised his eyebrows inquisitively.

"Andamooka."

It drew three blank stares. None of them had any idea where Andamooka was. Nobody did. That's why Dan liked it so much; it was out of the way, his own private nest.

"Come on." Dan headed for the door, duffel bag in one hand and Colt in the other. "The Raven's gone for now, but he'll be back when he realises he's on a wild goose chase."

He noticed the fried security alarm on his way out and wondered just how close they'd come to clashing with death. And he wasn't the only one to notice; Jen pointed it out to Samantha, who silently mouthed a prayer of thanks for their timely deliverance.

None of them spoke as they lugged their bags through town to the supermarket where Dan and Jen had arrived only hours earlier. It was dead at 1:20 in the morning, and for good reason. The sane members of the community were sound asleep. There wasn't even much activity from the petty criminals and thieves since the Department of Justice logged their actions and ordered police follow-ups for individuals who exceeded the tolerance threshold. Rapes were unheard of since the introduction of mandatory chipping. Indeed, rape was the primary epidemic crime microchip proponents had sought to eliminate. And they'd succeeded. Now rape lived only on film and in history texts where it served as memorabilia from a brutal society. Women, and men, could purchase small recorders that would register the Universal Identification Number of anybody who stepped within its operational sphere. They were so small that rapists could never be certain whether they'd searched thoroughly enough through their victim's possessions to uncover such a device. Consequently, a string of rapists had either been incarcerated or incinerated - depending on where the crime had occurred - which had stemmed the ugly tide of rape. Everyone, even the grumpiest microchip antagonists and the most diehard activists, had to grudgingly admit that there were some good things that mandatory chipping had fostered.

Dan handed Cookie his bag and watched him juggle his armload of equipment as he stepped inside the white circle. Then he entered the code for Andamooka's lonely portal station and stood back for the pop. Next, he waved Samantha forward and repeated the service for her. She waved briefly before also popping away.

"The Andamooka portal is at the front of the Dusty Andamooka Inn, which is open 24 hours. I know the proprietors." His lips twisted into a wry smile. "They're a bit... peculiar, but I once used the inn as a watering hole and they're amicable enough." He gently touched Jen's shoulder, again astounded by the fire in her skin. "You should stay there tonight. It'll take me a while to reach you," he said, looking apologetic. "I don't have a car."

Jen nodded understanding, chilled by his icy touch. "No sweat." She meant it in the archaic sense, the meaning it had held before the word mutated into an anti-globalisation rallying flag. "You're a long way out of town?"

"A fair way, yes," Dan confirmed, removing his hand when Cookie popped into view and stepped from the portal.

The self-professed computer geek fidgeted with the two chip selectors before handing one to Jen. "Man, it stinks in Andamooka." He screwed up his nose.

Jen ignored Cookie and said to Dan, "You should use the main portal station in Surfer's Paradise. It's far enough from Tweed, big enough to find easily, and busy enough to stay anonymous. It'll just add another hour to your trip if you go to Brisbane."

"All right," Dan said, standing erect. "I'll do that." Then he entered Andamooka's portal code twice more and watched as Cookie and Jen popped from view.

Chapter 5

Overtime horror stories pour out of the export processing zones, regardless of location: in China, there are documented cases of three-day shifts, when workers are forced to sleep under their machines. Contractors often face heavy financial penalties if they fail to deliver on time, no matter how unreasonable the deadline. In Honduras, when filling out a particularly large order on a tight deadline, factory managers have been reported injecting workers with amphetamines to keep them going on forty-eight-hour marathons.

Naomi Klein - "No Logo", 1999

Thursday, September 16, 2066

16:33 Groningen, The Netherlands

Heavy smoke stifled the air in the pizzeria. It was a dank, dingy little place that Hans had found well out of the way. The few local patrons he'd ever seen there tended to be ragtag and surly. That made it the perfect place to escape the confines of his apartment, even if for only a few hours.

He'd just ordered a 'tropical delight' pizza from the menu, but knew from experience it would more closely resemble 'subtropical infestation'. Regardless, he was in high spirits. Getting away from the seemingly endless cycle of experiments always cheered him up. He hugged a corner of the room, always with a watchful eye on the other pizzeria regulars. Most of them were puffing on a pipe or cigarette in flagrant disregard for the multitude of laws explicitly forbidding it. There were seven, all single men. He couldn't imagine the owners were encouraged by the lack of patronage, but it suited Hans perfectly. Yet he vaguely wondered whether he looked the sore thumb jumbled in with such a crowd. He mentally shrugged. I must get out sometimes or I'll go crazy. He was already going crazy, he knew that. He would've loved to take a walk after his meal. He was tired of heading straight home. What about a movie? He would have personally traded a thousand movies for one decent walk around his beloved city. Two thousand! But though the cinema was dark and anonymous, it was just as perilous as a stroll. Indeed, since the movie house was across town it amounted to the same thing anyway.

A plump waitress bustled to his table and slapped his pizza onto the protective mat before hurrying back to the bar, nestled in the opposite corner. He didn't know why she made such an effort to look busy. How long can it possibly take to dry one plate? Hans had watched her repetitively rubbing a grotty tea towel around and around the same plate for close to half an hour. Hmm... I thought so - subtropical infestation. It looked dissimilar to the fresh steaming picture on the laminated menu card. The cheese looked stringy and his palate blandly informed him that it had seen better days before reaching the pizzeria's oven. Probably mouldy, he thought. The base was dry and too thick for the meagre topping, and the tomato paste, which the Lebanese cook had applied sparingly, was brittle from overcooking in their wood-fire furnace. Overall, it was little wonder the pizzeria was hazardously close to going out of business.

He ate slowly, savouring every second away from his post. Only after he'd

scraped the last of the burnt cheese off the platter did he consider leaving. He stood reluctantly and smiled at the waitress as she scanned him for the bill. She smiled warmly back, as if she had to thank each sponsor individually for braving the establishment. Two months ago her smile would have caused a stirring in his groin and he'd have vied for her affection in a passionate one-night stand. But the strain of constant fear had taken its toll. Tonight he merely checked the amount on the display to make sure she hadn't overcharged him before heading into the evening outside.

It was already dark. Only a hint of the fading glow in the west remained to signify the death of twilight and the onset of night. He was dragging his feet, ambling as slowly as he could through the back alleys to his tatty little apartment, breathing deeply to clear the smoke from his lungs. He was nervous when walking home, or when he was anywhere outside for that matter. Cameras were everywhere and he had to remember to shield his face. Microchip scanners were even harder to evade and he had to squeeze down the tightest alleys to pass them unnoticed. Sure, they were great for eradicating crime in Groningen. But what about the innocents who are presumed guilty? The system had faults, but wasn't one of the demons he was willing to wrestle. Nope, he'd chosen a bigger, more dangerous foe. Mandatory microchipping was just an extra hurdle for him to jump, one more obstacle on the road to a safer planet.

Hans sneered.

They've got no idea what's going on right under their noses. He wondered whether it was already too late to avert. Maybe it's all in vain and I'd be wiser spending the remaining time doing things I enjoy. The thought of living in a ticking bomb without knowing how long the idiots had unwittingly set the fuse made him jittery.

His nerves were taut as he stalked through the streets. The sudden meow of a cat startling him close to a heart attack and he slapped a palm over his chest in a token bid to make sure it was still beating. "Please don't do that," he said as the cat rubbed against his leg. He could feel the purr of its tiny inbuilt motor vibrating through his trousers.

Hans crouched in the darkness and petted the ginger cat with long strokes, which encouraged the feline to rub its head across his bent knees. "Hey, fella." Hans scratched it behind its ears and rubbed it affectionately under its chin, something

that seemed to drive the curious thing crazy with pleasure. “Hey, you live around here?” The cat meowed again. No collar, Hans thought as he stroked its side and felt its pronounced ribs. “Are you a stray?” The cat nudged him harder, nearly disturbing his delicate balance and sending him sprawling across the cold brick alley. Then it looked up with bright yellow eyes, pleading with him for... What? “What is it?” Their eyes remained locked until the cat brushed against him again, in sheer bliss from the sudden abundance of attention.

“Oh, no.” Hans stood, much to the dismay of the cat. “No, no. I can’t have a cat,” he said, looking apologetically at the soft-furred animal. “I’m not allowed cats in my apartment.” He turned his back and started walking the stiffness from his knees. They always seized up when he squatted or knelt. He deliberately bent his thoughts to something else and quickened his pace before he fell helplessly under the stray’s spell and the benevolent streak that blemished his personality forced him to adopt it. “I’m sorry, but I have enough problems to deal with at the moment.”

The resulting meow beseeched him to help. It tugged at the very fabric of his heart, the last desperate plea from an abandoned kitten whose instincts forewarned of its impending doom unless it found warm shelter and nourishing food. A devout cat-person, Hans couldn’t bring himself to forsake the animal to whatever fate tossed its way. What if I’m its last chance? He turned to see a cute whiskered face looking forlornly up at him.

With a sigh, he threw his hands in the air. “Okay, I suppose I’m breaking enough laws to go straight to hell already. One more can’t hurt.” He scooped his new companion into his arms and it restarted its adoring motor, smooching his clean-shaven chin. “What am I going to call you then?”

He took a quick peek under its tail. “Oh, so you’re a girl cat.” He ran a finger under the animal’s chin and she pianoed his jacket with her claws. He was feeling uninspired and deflated by his recent experimental ill luck, and that sentiment weaved into his lack of creative flair. “How about Kat?”

She didn’t object.

“Okay, Kat it is,” he huffed. “So what do you want for dinner, Kat?”

She purred some more.

“How about mince?” He thought he had a small packet tucked toward the rear of his freezer, which shouldn’t take long to defrost. “Tomorrow we’ll get you some real cat food.”

Despite acquiring a new friend, his problems quickly wound up his mind and consumed his thoughts. So his torment continued afresh, just as agonizing as before. His quandary revolved around an issue in the manufacture of the material PortaNet needed to contain a space fold. He’d managed to get his hands on some through Lars Olssen, before he’d been assassinated. Dangerous, dangerous stuff. More shocking was how they were disposing of the by-product. All told, they were heading down a path that led to a catastrophe the likes of which nobody on Earth had ever had the gall to imagine.

Fear of the inevitable cataclysm kept Hans van de Berg toying with the equipment that crowded his apartment. Fear of being killed like Lars Olssen kept him cautious on the streets.

As he expected, his apartment smelled like smouldering silicon. The sordid smoke engulfed him as soon as he entered. Great. Kat gave him an uncertain look when he placed her carefully on the carpet. “Sorry about the smell, you’ll get used to it after a while.”

She spent the next ten minutes exploring her new surroundings, cataloguing where things were, and sniffing all the fascinating scents that humans didn’t notice. By the time she’d finished, Hans had fixed dinner and Kat ate the mince with a gusto that could only come from true appreciation.

Hans scanned his instruments to refresh his memory on the state of the previous experiment. As usual, it was fubar. Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, tempted to start pulling it out. Okay, what’s going wrong here? He knew what the original material would do if gathered in large enough quantities; Hans was striving to fabricate something that had the same desired properties but none of the disastrous side effects.

Kat distracted him by entwining herself around his legs in gratitude for the first smidgeon of kindness anyone had shown her. Hans couldn’t begrudge a smile and he flopped onto the couch and petted her until she was twitching in a dream-filled sleep. Although he didn’t know it, he was indebted to the animal for nudging his mind from the endless cycle of failed experiments. Okay: cat food,

kitty litter, a basket to sleep in, something to play with - like a ball, a plate... It was the first time he'd truly relaxed in months and it felt fantastic. And, as many great inventors would testify, the best ideas usually came when something completely different occupied the inventor's mind.

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Thursday, September 16, 2066

World Economic Forum

14:45 Washington DC, USA

The heat was sweltering.

At least, it was for Nathan Bradford as he struggled to focus on the proceedings. He nervously adjusted his tie and collar then mentally rebuked himself for the outward manifestation of his anxiety. Why's the environmental control set so damn high? He didn't enjoy having sweat trickle down his back and soak into his underpants. And neither his suit nor the starch his drycleaners had ironed into his shirt was helping. It left him feeling like a potato crisp.

Their seating in the WEF conference hall was arranged in concentric semicircular rings with a daunting stage pinned at the focal point. A screen that reminded Nathan of the last time he'd visited a cinema was hanging on the far wall, behind the French dignitary who was blabbering about the images projected there. If Nathan had bothered to plug in his earphones he would have heard the English translation, a poor approximation of the Frenchman's flamboyant speech, but a translation none the less. The hall designers had spared no expense; they'd splurged on exquisite upholstery and the most ergonomic chairs they could find. But Nathan's discomfort had little to do with the physical appointments in the hall.

The people around him were enthralled. Some nodded at seemingly random intervals, wearing their most scintillated expressions while doting on every word dribbling through the audio system. Whatever the Frenchman was prattling on about it must have been mesmerising. Nathan snuck a look to his right and saw his CEO, Neil Walker, leaning forward, eagerly awaiting the next slide that would fade onto the screen. He didn't appear nervous. How's that possible? Nathan wondered, sitting on his hands to stop them from fidgeting. It didn't work. A few seconds later he was rearranging the papers that had cascaded over his generous desk. The black velvet folder at the bottom of the medium sized stack sent chills through his fingers whenever he touched it. The last time Nathan remembered being so jumpy was before a debate in high school. Year eight history if I'm not mistaken. In any other circumstances he'd be grinning at the memory, but instead he clamped his jaw shut to stop his teeth from chattering, just as he had then.

The thought of delivering bad news to the most powerful people in the world

wasn't something he relished. Oh shit, they're going to eat me alive. He cast another glance toward Neil, admiring him for his outward calm. They're going to chew him up too. He had no difficulty imagining them lynching everyone in the PortaNet corner.

He'd been trying to summon the courage for weeks. He had to present PortaNet's research findings but had shrunk from the task at every occasion, always ending up thoroughly disgusted with himself. Today's the day. His breathing deepened as a fresh wave of adrenaline tingled his innards. Years of public speaking didn't appear to be paying off.

Deep down, he knew today wasn't his day and he despised himself for it. He took self-loathing to a completely new level and wondered whether he should start a drug habit to conform to his pitifully low self-opinion.

Next time. He'd used the same consolation before. But this time I mean it. Sadly, he'd meant it last time too.

*

Jackie sucked in her stomach and puffed out her chest before shoving the doors open. Nobody paid her much attention, save for a few bored members at the back of the hall who broke off their game of hangman to snigger at her tardiness.

She absorbed the scene in an instant and determined that she hadn't missed anything important. She rarely did. At least, nothing vital to the smooth operation of her company. With a determined stride that could shrivel the penis of a horny chauvinist, she wove a path to her seat, three rows from the front on the right side of the partial locus. And with measured movements she laid her agenda on the desk, which curved to the right and merged with her armrest. Next, she opened the dainty earphone canister and plugged the earphones into the intended socket.

"...that it's not important. I think it clearly demonstrates this." It was a young woman's voice, which seemed wrong when the speaker was a fifty-something man. Who co-ordinates these things? She wished she knew. She'd have some harsh words to deliver from her forked tongue if she could find the appropriate people to spit at.

"I would like to thank you for permitting me this opportunity today..." The

interpreter paused, hesitating with her translation. "I hope you have a better understanding of the intricacies involved in American-European trade relations."

The spectators started clapping. Oh God, not again. Jackie hated it when people clapped. It was so... thirties. But the age distribution in the room fit perfectly with the antiquated custom. Haven't we grown out of that yet? She, for one, had never clapped at a WEF meeting. And she never intended to either.

She curiously scanned the meeting's agenda for anything of interest while the French orator left the stage to make way for the chairman. She knew she had a while; the man was more lard than anything else. What a fat tub of shit. It filtered through her callous mind in a matter-of-fact tone. He'd be the perfect candidate to test Xantex's oh-so-miraculous weight-loss drug. He was too large to walk - he waddled. And he soured the appetite of anyone near him in a restaurant.

Unsurprisingly, there was nothing on the agenda that tickled Jackie's fancy and she contemplated leaving. After all, she had important things to do. Then she remembered - she needed the WEF. She needed the status and power that membership into the secretive invitation-only organisation conferred. It amused her to think how it'd wrested so much influence from the old-style governments and come to dominate the world. Genius, pure genius! Invite the rich and powerful to a private cubbyhole, stand back, and watch them change the world. She was inwardly impressed by how far the WEF had come since its infancy in the late twentieth century. Now it closely resembled a world government - The World Government - or so it purveyed. The fact that it harboured only the first world's interests didn't matter. Concern over the squalor-bound third world was dwindling due to floundering public pressure. She thanked the TK-Media Empire for that, specifically the seven men and two women in the first row on the left side of the arc. And the fact that the WEF was non-democratic flowed like water off a duck's back - she was one of the invited. Sure, UniForce currently has only one seat, but soon we'll have more. Still in its relative infancy, UniForce was one of the newest giga-corporations on the well-beaten block.

Corporate-driven issues consumed a hefty chunk of the agenda. A button on her control panel would place her in a time-slice queue if she pressed it, but she couldn't think of anything worth raising. No, today I watch. The concerns dredged up by her fellow corporate leaders were usually more interesting than the scheduled presentations, which explained why Jackie wasn't shy of turning

up late to WEF meetings. She didn't really give a flying fuck what some pretentious French attaché thought about Euro-American trade relations. It was far more interesting to sit through the snarling and clawing of inter-corporate bickering on matters that ranged from mundane copyright infraction to exotic hostile takeovers. Besides, it was her duty to interact with fellow Important People. Sometimes she thought she spent too many hours buried with tedious matters that nobody else seemed competent enough to deal with. She inwardly sighed when a Xantex drone plodded to the stage. I need to find someone reliable, someone to make those decisions without me. Her skin crawled when she thought of Paul Savage taking more initiative. And, she thought brutally, I need someone clever enough to keep him on a tight leash.

The man at the podium was proposing a new law to make it easier for Xantex to access sealed patient records. Jackie wondered whether anybody in the room was paying attention. People were muttering in dozens of private conversations that spread like wildfire across the hall. The Xantex representative, possessing such a timid voice, found it difficult to maintain order. Jesus, haven't you got any balls? Even the sensitive microphone and audio loop equipment weren't helping. The man spoke the way he walked - plodding along in monotone with a painfully regular cadence. When it was time for the vote, Jackie watched less than a third of the attendees reach for their controls. So she took pity on the man and decided to boost his voting turnout. But that meant she must also decide how to vote, and she'd paid no attention to the details of his proposal. I bet you have a small dick. She thumbed the button marked 'negative' and impatiently waited for the voting window to lapse. The results projected onto the screen: motion rejected. He required a 50 percent majority and, being incapable of enthusing 50 percent to vote, passing the motion was unlikely.

Little of interest turned up during the remainder of the meeting and Jackie was almost relieved when the chairman announced the closure of the meeting. Resembling schoolchildren released from class after an intensely boring day, a wave of WEF invitees shuffled for the portals, Jackie among them. She wasn't in the mood for hobnobbing and she'd already registered her presence. She'd even participated in several votes and that was what counted. Participation was a vital component to acceptance in the WEF community.

It was a relief to get back to San Francisco, but a drain on her patience at the same time. Paul Savage ambushed her as soon as she stepped from the portal.

“Ah, there you are.” Paul smiled affably, turning on his cheap charm. “I wanted to talk to you about, uh, the shareholder meeting.”

“Good.” Jackie was already looking forward to the end of the conversation, but the meeting was in less than three hours and she had to set things straight in Paul’s muddled mind before then. “Now’s perfect. My office?”

“Sure.” Paul meandered unsteadily through the corridors, frustrating Jackie that she had to slow her pace on his behalf. “I’ve been reviewing, uh, the figures.” He paused to rub a hand across his face once he was occupying the seat opposite Jackie’s desk. “I think the shareholders will be pleased.”

Jackie nodded for the benefit of their work relationship, inwardly itching for the opportunity to replace him. She didn’t want the limelight for herself, but she had to select his replacement carefully and time the transition to perfection. Shareholders were finicky. If their feelings were even slightly out of tune, they’d dump UniForce stock with joyful abandon. Jackie attributed it to their mental instability. That was why Paul Savage was so important; he had a certain quality that shareholders loved. He was a harmless-uncle figure with which they would trust their hard-earned investment Credits. Jackie hated shareholders even more than she hated Paul. Her ideal company had unlimited capital and no shareholders. A dream. A pleasant dream that left her warm and fuzzy inside, but reality always came crashing through like a pail of cold water, rather rudely she thought. “And you’re comfortable answering questions about our new direction?”

Paul’s bushy eyebrows twitched, announcing that he had no such comfort, but he nodded regardless. “Uh, yes. I think we’ll do well to reinforce the theme of our return to, uh, grassroots.”

What a stupid thing to say. Jackie had to bite the inside of her cheek - hard enough to draw blood - to stop from saying the flood of venomous things that popped to mind. Grassroots? Our grassroots are in criminal apprehension, not private security. She leaned back in her inflate-a-gel cushioned chair while she thought of how to tell Paul he was an idiot. “Maybe instead you should say we’re heading in a brave new direction. Tell them we’re poised with the opportunity to raise UniForce to the next synergetic level.” She would have offered him a sour smile if it didn’t stretch her skin like a mannequin. “I don’t think people are interested in grassroots anymore. The past is over and people

are dusting their palms and looking to the future for salvation.” She leant forward, placed her elbows on her desk, and stared into his puppy-dog eyes. “And that’s what we can sell, an image of UniForce providing the salvation they’re so desperate to find.” Didn’t I set up a marketing department to come up with this crap? It sickened her to think they were employing an entire floor of marketeers and this pathetic scrap sitting in front of her hadn’t consulted them about the shareholder meeting. She couldn’t fathom that the marketeers would recommend the grassroots approach. It was extinct. It hadn’t been successful for over a decade. The marketing department, not a true company branch since it lacked a co-ordinator, was being woefully underutilised. She planned to fix that at the next co-ordinators’ meeting.

It took Paul a while to process the idea. “Uh, yes... I suppose that could work.” He flipped open the folder on his lap and scratched away with a chewed pencil, which Jackie thought was unbecoming of the company’s public CEO.

Her temper-thermometer was so hot it was melting. “I’m glad you like the idea,” she said between clenched teeth, as though she had icicles in her veins. Little wonder she didn’t trust herself in the same room as the shareholders. If one of them asked a stupid question she was liable to chew his or her head off, and shareholders always asked the dumbest things.

She was relieved when Paul went to prepare for the meeting, leaving her alone in her big, empty office. Maybe I need a holiday? She promised herself one as soon as she found a solution for her staffing issue, and she jotted in her calendar the date by which she intended to be in her little cabin in the mountains.

*

Thursday, September 16, 2066

UniForce Headquarters

14:48 San Francisco, USA

James felt fresher after his three-hour nap. It'd revitalised his mind, which he now reapplied to the problem. He'd contacted his wife at 7:30 in the morning, the time she normally woke up, and she'd told him he sounded drunk. Tired, yes. Drunk? No. James wished he were. Drunk is more fun. She hadn't been angry though, which was surprising. He wondered why.

The critter in his network was still there. He was sure of it. The constant blip from his implants warned of the anomaly, but it was nothing his systems could collar. It was unspeakably frustrating and his legs ached from a night of sitting. He was too scared to think about his back, every time he did it sent a spasm of dizzying pain past his lumbar region and into his hips. So he focussed on his network instead, like a dedicated employee. He hoped the overtime would entitle him to something special. Like a week's vacation, or a bonus. Sure, it was his job to protect the network from outside - and inside - attack. But he was putting in at least 200 percent.

He checked Echelon's central nervous system, pleased to find it ticking over as usual. It purred in his implant, like the rumble of an idling V8. He remembered the deep-throated growl of powerful engines from his sojourns to the motor show Detroit City put on every December to bask in their glorious history. He'd pestered his wife for three weeks before she'd agreed to go with him, not that she'd appreciated the fine automobile specimens on display.

At least they haven't gone for Echelon. It provided little comfort, for all he knew they were scheming a way to shatter it now. He'd find them if they tried, but by then it might be too late to prevent the damage. And Echelon was UniForce's most precious system. He'd naturally be able to repair whatever they did, but his pride would take a beating - and his arse a chewing - if that happened.

He felt godlike, having direct control over the most devastatingly powerful system in the world. And it's mine... all mine. Sure, he took his orders from above, but they never knew whether he modified their search terms or filtered Echelon's catches. In a sense he had even more power than the CEO, despite her WEF contacts. Jackie Donald's pitiful technological experience wasn't a tenth of what she would need to maintain Echelon. That was why she always ensured James was happy and under control. He snorted. A rogue system administrator

could cripple a network-dependant company.

His euphoric feeling of ultimate power brought his arduous years at university into focus. Ever since accepting the position of information technology coordinator, life had actually made sense. This is why I studied so hard. And his years of meticulous study enabled him to crack the shell of his current problem. He found evidence to conclude the hacker had penetrated the last barrier. Shit. He's good. He tracked the entrance hole and sniffed through his roster of logs to see what the intruder had been doing.

But this doesn't make sense. James screwed his eyes shut in confusion, concentrating harder on the information stream in his head. He spent days hacking in and then stopped as soon as he got inside. It posed a number of troubling questions. Has he gone already? What was he here for? Did he copy files? He initiated a consistency scan of UniForce's database. It usually took five to ten minutes, depending on network traffic and the current compaction of the database, so he left it running in the background. In the meantime, he began plugging the hole in the network's inner layer. It wasn't difficult. He simply shut down an application, restored a file from backup, and then restarted the application. Of course, nothing was ever that easy on a UG7-rated network, not even for the system administrator. There were another six layers to mend, but he intended to save them for later. First he wanted to ascertain how much damage the hacker had inflicted.

Nothing.

The database scan came back clean. No tampering. No copying. A few data accesses, nothing more. It was therefore impossible to determine where the hack had originated. The hacker could have even been somewhere inside the UniForce network, such as a bounty hunter or an assassin using a valid data access code.

The fatigue was getting to him. He needed a decent sleep. Instead, he reached into his top drawer and popped three Xantex-prescribed stimulant tabsules, which he used for short bursts of intense activity. He always kept a water bottle on his desk, one with a cyclist's cap. He pulled on the plastic nib with his teeth and squirted water into his mouth before tossing the pills to the back of his tongue and swallowing the lot.

Right then, he thought, a manual scan. He searched the logs for suspicious timestamps. Nothing. I need help, he thought with a snort of disgust. Asking his team for assistance would mean leaving his office for the first time in 28 hours, other than for food or urination. His team had the good sense not to disturb him when he'd been slogging away at something important all night.

But then he found something in the last log. That's strange... It was the in mail system, which wasn't business-critical and therefore explained why he'd taken so long to examine it. With a surge of excitement and drug-induced energy, he bounded through the network and scanned the mail servers for anything unusual, delving into the logs with a scowl of concentration.

His heart skipped a beat when he dug the hacker's message out of a backup server that he'd installed to resurrect e-mail for anyone foolish enough to delete important messages.

Oh my god...

He jerked to his feet, desperate to spread the warning and prevent a tragedy. But in his haste, he forgot about his implant and the wires connecting him to the computer snapped taut. The leads wrenched on the fragile plastic socket that surgeons had delicately connected to his brain. It roughly yanked the clip from his head and splintered his mind with an instant migraine. Then the welcome relief of unconsciousness engulfed him and his limp body collapsed to the floor.

*

The Raven snarled menacingly at the cityscape. He glimpsed it matrix-like through the grate against which he was pressing his nose. He was horizontal, tucked into the cramped space between floors, built for laying cable and air-conditioning ducts. The air smelled stale and musty, something that further soured his mood. His target was just below, pottering around his desk - a sheep unaware of the wolf that was stalking it. Or in this case, the Raven.

He laced a hand around his sickle, its razor-sharp blade more than enough to slice a throat from ear to ear. In the Raven's hands it could lop a target's head clean off. He'd done that only thrice and each time he'd enjoyed the thud of a human head hitting the ground and watching as the decapitated body twitched in shock before obediently lying down next to it. Why don't I use the sickle more often? he wondered. The nanotoxin from his Redback didn't leave such a gory

mess, but the result was smelly.

Today he favoured the blade.

The bloodier the better. He needed to compensate for his earlier fear and lashing out at the hapless - but deserving - sheep always made him feel better.

He implored his mystic protector for an omen. A favourable omen. He'd never received an unfavourable omen, but he'd once waited over a month before abandoning hope that his vision would ever come. He was starting to cramp and he wanted the task done. Yet the Raven would never dare renounce his faith by acting without a blessing from the spirits. He'd learned that lesson the hard way.

Just then, a faint tingle started to develop at his temples and he grinned in wicked anticipation of the release that was soon to come. About time too...

*

Paul Savage was muttering the speech repeatedly under his breath, practicing the various nuances he could project with his voice. He wasn't as stupid as Jackie believed; he knew his forte was appealing the shareholders. Inwardly he shrugged, it was a job and he was close to retirement. Why should he exert himself when all he had to do was serve his time? His heart palpitated when he remembered that he might end up in a wheelchair before he could enjoy his retirement, but there was a time and a place to contemplate everything and this wasn't an appropriate moment.

Already his mind was wandering and soon he was gazing out his window at the San Francisco skyline, the speech held limply between thumb and forefinger. So many people. He was tired and looking at the city always made him acutely aware of his age. It was somehow appropriate that he spent his last moments reflecting upon his achievements in life. He didn't hear the ventilation grate open above his desk and his degraded hearing couldn't detect the squeak of leather boots as the rogue bounty hunter lowered himself to the ground.

His eyelids opened for the last time and the problems plaguing his inner ear were solved when an icy blade severed his head from his shoulders. The slash was quick and brutal and it was all over before his aging nervous system could send pain signals to his brain for processing. He had just enough time to open his mouth in surprise, though he didn't understand why he couldn't draw breath and

he had no vocal cords to speak. By the time his head clunked to the carpet and came to rest facedown on the plush woollen fibres, the life in his eyes was gone. His body jerked vertically for two extra seconds before dropping like a sack of potatoes. It twitched on the ground as his heart kept pumping, sending diminishing jets of thick blood squirting across the room. A spray of red on the windows was already oozing to the floor and soaking through the carpet into the underlay. Paul's skin peeled away from the fatal wound and a cross-section of his spine was a lesson in anatomy for whoever discovered the body. His head - amazingly - escaped most of the gore. It resembled a frightened child, cowering in the corner.

And so Paul Savage met his death the same way he'd bluffed through life - without really knowing it was there. The saddest part was, despite his age, there were many things he would've done differently if he'd known the 16th of September 2066 marked his death.

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The Raven kicked the corpse in the ribs, swearing at it for marring him with blood. He'd forgotten that neck wounds bled explosively. He'd failed to store that titbit of information in his cyborg brain and paid the price for trusting his human faculties to remember. Now I recall - this is why I use toxin. He therefore dedicated several fields in his crystal-core to preserve the memory and avoid a mess in future.

Nanotechnology made memory cheap and the Raven had more than a trillion terabytes available. The ignorant twits at Global Integrated Systems had said he'd never fill it in a lifetime. But they say the same thing every few years, don't they? And every few years they prove themselves wrong. They hadn't factored how much memory total human integration would require. Every six atoms in the Raven's crystal-core defined a decimal memory cell. The designers thought it would be more logical to store the data in base-ten rather than base-two for smoother assimilation into a human brain. The Raven would have preferred twice as much memory, three times, or infinite. Yet regardless of his desires, he had a fixed amount and had to manage his memory just like everyone else. He'd deleted the sickle-equals-blood memory because he thought it was something his human mind would never forget.

He flicked his hand to shake off the worst of the gore and wiped his face on a

fistful of tissues borrowed from a box on his target's desk. After five minutes of preening, the remaining blood was beginning to dry and crack.

Without blood in its capillaries, the corpse's skin looked blue. How much blood can fit in one person? he wondered. That was another detail he hadn't stored in crystal-core.

He wiped his sickle on the back of Paul Savage's suit and slid it into the sheath at his belt. Next, he loosed his harvester, the instrument he needed to extract his victims' vertebrae. It looked similar to a can opener. He used it to slice through Paul's clothing and was surprised to see a festival of tattoos marching across his shrivelling skin. They wouldn't have looked out of place in a gangster's bar and he wondered whether his target had once been a hippie, or a bikie, or a hippie-bikie. It tickled him with amusement while he plunged the harvester into a carefully selected patch of skin and dug for the appropriate groove in Paul's spine. With a wrench of the handle he felt spinal disks tearing and bone grind against bone. Then the vertebrae slipped through the incision, impaled by the Raven's harvester.

A quick scan confirmed he'd extracted the correct spinal segment and he dropped it into an opaque plastic container. He slipped it into a special pocket he'd sewn into his coat and secured it with a Velcro tab.

He scanned the murder scene with a calm finality before exiting the target's office and heading for the bathroom. He needed a mirror to wash the encrusted blood from his face. Amen, the Raven thought solemnly. He always intoned it after an assignment as thanks to his spiritual protector. It couldn't hurt to stay in the good graces of the spirits. Who knows? Maybe that will speed things up in future.

With a composed aplomb, he strode past several security agents and stepped calmly into a portal before retrieving the appropriate number from PortaNet's database and coding his destination.

After a pop and a gush of air, he was on a different level of the same building. He marched to the collection counter and slapped his plastic container in front of the clerk, stating simply, "Apprehension from the Raven."

She was familiar with the Raven. All the clerks were. She knew he only ever returned a plastic box containing certain parts of his targets' anatomy. Once, he'd

handed her the festering testicles of an unchipped man, along with some heart tissue that'd burst from the victim's nanotoxin-infected chest. The Raven had invited her to perform a DNA test to prove it was the correct man and serenely walked from the room to await payment. Three collection clerks staffed the counter and they all abhorred the Raven. They talked about him in their staffroom and sometimes had a kitty running on who'd be unlucky enough to get him next. Today it was Rena Scanlon's turn and she suppressed a smile because she'd bet on her own ill luck. The pool had been growing too. Three hundred and five Credits if I'm not mistaken. Not a bad bonus for a day's work.

"Okay, Mr Raven." Rena's delight at her windfall quickly evaporated when she turned her attention to the dark green container he'd planted before her. "Who've you brought in today."

"A special assignment," he replied, his voice deep and husky. He spoke the way Rena expected such a ruthless killer to speak. "Something from the bounty coordinator."

"Okay," she said again. She accepted it on face value, though she'd met Michele Roche and doubted she had the intellect to requisition the Raven for a special assignment. She scanned the box and turned deathly pale when the chip's owner appeared on her screen. Her heart pounded behind her eyes and her vision began to fade until she remembered to keep breathing. A naturally sceptical woman, she scanned a second and then a third time, denying the evidence. How's that possible? A bleak expression clouded her face when she recognised what the wet blotches on the Raven's black clothes actually were: blood.

"One million Credits I believe," the Raven said, waiting for her to key the details into the database and initiate the transfer to his chip-linked account.

"Is that a threat?" It was the only explanation Rena could understand, that somehow this was an act of extortion. She wasn't about to let this thug intimidate her, not while there were two security guards in the room. The Raven had a gruesome record, true, but they were trained security personnel. It was their job to protect her. She felt safe sitting behind her counter.

He cocked his head to one side, unsure why she wasn't processing the transaction as usual. "No."

Rena, an experienced clerk, knew when to capitulate to her superiors. She didn't

have the authority to handle the situation herself. “You said this was a special assignment. That it was from the bounty co-ordinator?”

“Affirmative.”

Something’s going down. Rena pushed back from the counter and reached for the phone, holding up an index finger. “One minute, sir.” She dialled Roche’s internal extension and waited with a nervous tick in her left eye.

“Michele Roche speaking.”

She even sounded brainless. Either she’s the dumbest scrubber in America or she’s pretending to be stupid as cover for a takeover. Rena had never heard of anyone masterminding a takeover like this, but she supposed it was possible. “Yes this is Rena Scanlon at collections, we’ve got an issue here that needs your attention, ma’am.”

“What is it?” She sounded irritable.

“There’s a top level hunter here who says he’s collecting for a special assignment you sent him.”

“I didn’t do that,” she said, reluctant to move from her office.

“Ma’am you’d better come and take a look for yourself,” Rena said, remaining understandably firm.

She sighed into the phone. “Fine, I’ll be there in five.”

Rena replaced the receiver and smiled sweetly at the Raven. “The bounty co-ordinator will be here personally to deal with the results of your special assignment.” She wished he’d take the container off the counter, she knew there was a spinal segment inside and it irked her. It was even more tormenting to know it had come from their CEO. I wonder whether he’s still alive. Can someone live without part of their spine?

Michele, still reeking of cigarette smoke, portaled into the room and tried unsuccessfully to shield her fear upon discovering the Raven was the problem. Her thoughts turned immediately to the exclusive lists she’d double sold and she wondered whether he was there to complain. “What is it?”

Rena motioned with her hands, inviting Michele to inspect the catch-of-the-day.

Michele had a distorted hourglass figure - smallish breasts but a whopping arse to make up the difference. She unerringly wore tight black skirts that made the bulge even more pronounced and high heels that caused her to walk bent at the waist. So when she wore a white shirt the combination made her look penguin-like, especially since she had to waddle because of the restrictions imposed by the skirt. She had blue eyes, pride at being an Irish descendent, and a wild streak running through her otherwise empty head. Yes, Michele thoroughly deserved the nickname the clerks sniggered behind her back: the Retarded Penguin.

She gasped when she read the details on Rena's monitor and turned ghostly pale at the words 'unauthorised apprehension' flashing in red. "Who told you to do this?"

The Raven's patience was quickly fading. "You did."

"No I didn't," she retorted, stunned.

"I have your e-mail," he said, willing to forward it for their inspection. He'd done the work and now intended to collect the promised one million Credits.

Michele slapped a hand to the phone and dialled Jackie Donald's number.

"What?"

Great, she already sounds pissed. "Hi Jackie, it's Michele."

"Oh hi Michele." Her tone transformed immediately, conveying the smile she couldn't deliver in person. "What can I do for you?"

"We've got a problem." Michele didn't know how else to put it and she was desperate to contain the rumours that were already darting around the company. "Can you come to the collection counter?"

"Give me a second." She hung up.

Twenty seconds later Jackie was marching to the crowded counter. "What's going on?"

Michele answered reluctantly, “He’s come to collect for apprehending Paul Savage.” She swallowed before continuing in a grave tone, “He says he was working on a special assignment from me, but I didn’t tell him to do this.”

No, I know you wouldn’t. Jackie enjoyed fucking her but she knew Michele wasn’t smart enough to think of something like that. “And this is all that’s left? Whatever’s in this box?”

“That’s him,” Rena answered. “His chip anyway.”

“Where’s his body?” Jackie demanded directly of the Raven.

“In his office where I left it.”

She raised an eyebrow. “What’s your name?”

“The Raven,” he replied, trying not to gloat in superiority.

Jackie outwardly groaned but was inwardly delighted. Perfect! It’s the perfect way to remove Paul Savage and appease the shareholders. It’s an explanation they’ll understand. Of course, she didn’t intend to tell them a bounty hunter had murdered him, only that he’d died. Maybe I’ll cite a heart attack, or tell them about his medical condition and allow them to draw their own conclusions. There were several ways to die from inner ear bacteria: falling from a roof, falling in front of a train or car, suicide... But there were two sides to any coin and a shadowy frown crept onto Jackie’s face. First, what am I going to do with this freak?

“Shall I show you the message I received,” the Raven asked, feeling the need to defend himself. “The bounty was for one million Credits.”

“It’s true.” James Ellerman had dragged himself to the counter, unnoticed by everyone except the Raven, who observed everything. He was pressing two fingers to his implant and the pain throbbing through his skull had wired his left eye shut. He felt he might puke at any moment but important developments were afoot and he had to explain his hand in them.

“You know what’s going on here?” Jackie pierced James with an icy stare, her initial pleasure at no longer having to deal with Paul Savage blown away by the apparent complexity of the situation.

He nodded with effort. “Yes.”

“All right.” Jackie swept a hand around the room. “All of you, to the conference room.”

“Me too ma’am?” Rena was finishing her shift in fifteen minutes and hoped Jackie wouldn’t expect her to join.

“No.” She saved her most threatening gaze for the collection clerk. “But if I discover rumours circulating about this I’m going to hold you and the other clerks responsible.” She paused to let the threat sink in before adding, “Do you understand me?”

Rena nodded, hoping her colleagues had also heard. “Yes ma’am. It’s our little secret.”

The Raven snatched his prize and returned it to his pocket before striding to the portals. He wasn’t about to hand over his trophy free, it still represented a million Credits. He permitted Michele to enter the code for the conference room and he popped from the booth.

Jackie was last to portal from the room, leaving Rena and the other clerks to gossip about what had happened to their CEO. Jackie knew rumours would spread, they already had. And the thirst for more information was only imaginable by someone stranded without water in the desert.

*

“Mr Ellerman,” Jackie said, turning on as much fake-charm as she could summon. “Why don’t you shed some light on this little quandary for us?”

He was cradling his head between his hands, his elbows resting firmly on the conference table. Even mumbling sent shockwaves of pain reverberating through his head. A whisper was the best he could muster. “We had a network breach.”

That explained a lot.

“How bad?” Jackie asked, fear tingling her innards. Echelon?

“Pretty bad,” James admitted. “They breached all seven layers of our defence.”

“Didn’t we recently spend billions of Credits to make that impossible?” Jackie’s irritation dripped thick on her words.

“We did,” James said, already ashamed of his failure. He didn’t need anybody rubbing salt into his wounds. “But there are some people who have the capability to bypass anything.” He shrugged. “The people who designed the UG7 for instance.”

“Are you suggesting Global Integrated Systems did this?” It was incredulous and Jackie’s tone mirrored her disbelief.

James shook his head. “No. Just that, no matter how much money you spend, there are always people with the expertise to break in.” Reality sucks doesn’t it? “I plugged the inner layer to address the immediate danger and I have my team isolating the other breaches now.” His rasping whisper betrayed how much it had cost. “There wasn’t any damage to vital systems, Echelon’s fine. The only real mischief was an e-mail from Michele’s account to the Raven, telling him to apprehend Paul Savage.”

“Mischief?” Jackie scalded him. “I’d say this is mischief enough.” She tapped a finger to the table, drilling into their nerves before continuing. “In future I want the message system locked down. Put alarms on it. Make it secure. Do whatever you have to do to make sure this kind of foul up can never happen again. Understood?”

James nodded. “Yes.”

“Good.” She turned to the Raven. “And I’m to understand you want a million Credits for apprehending a cripple who works in the same building as our security forces?”

Put that way it sounded ludicrous. But asking why UniForce selected targets wasn’t part of the package. “Affirmative. One million.”

“And it didn’t seem at all strange to you?” Jackie was getting flustered; her icy demeanour was having no effect on the bounty hunter. He looked like a gorilla, sitting with a metal rod where his spine should have been.

He turned to look her in the eye, a feat of which James and Michele were incapable. Silently he wondered why his vision had led him astray by permitting

him to kill an innocent man. “Many things UniForce requests appear strange and inefficient.”

She bridled at the unmasked insult but wisely decided not to pursue it. “Does anyone have the faintest idea who launched the attack?” She motioned to the Raven. “I don’t mean the weapon itself, I want the hand that’s pulling the puppet’s strings.”

It was the Raven’s turn to be offended, though his rigid cyborg mind stopped his human desire to flay the bitch.

The deafening roar of silence overwhelmed her.

“Figures.”

“I have a suspect,” the Raven offered. He stepped out of character for long enough to assist his trading partners. “I was close to securing an apprehension in Australia when Dan Sutherland interfered. He returned my target to her apartment where two of her friends were waiting. I monitored their activity and detected a great deal of network traffic. In hindsight, the timing matches the pattern of a network hammer. They could have been hacking something.”

“Dan Sutherland?”

The Raven nodded, slowly, precisely.

“You’re assuming the name Dan Sutherland means something to me.” She’d never heard of him, Jackie didn’t get that involved in the clockwork of her company.

“He’s another bounty-hunter,” Michele replied before the Raven could spoil her private game. She hoped Jackie would assume the Raven and Dan Sutherland weren’t top-level hunters and were therefore sharing a list legitimately.

“I see,” Jackie said, not fooled. “Then why were two top-level hunters competing for the same target?”

Nobody answered.

“It’s not the first time,” the Raven said, shattering the conversation void. He was

just as annoyed as Dan at having to share his lists and he was pleased he now had the opportunity to speak his mind.

“But it will be the last,” Jackie assured him. “We’ll sort that out later.” She looked piercingly at Michele, wondering whether she really was a brainless bimbo. She knew it was possible that Michele had duped her with a clever façade. “Who were the others?”

It was so fresh in the Raven’s mind that he didn’t need to retrieve the data from crystal-core. “Jennifer Margaret Cameron was the target. Her two companions are unchipped and go by multiple aliases. I believe their real names are Samantha Lee and David Coucke.”

James raised his head from its protective cradle, immediately regretting it. “David Coucke?”

The Raven nodded.

“You recognise the name?” Jackie asked.

James groaned through his pain. “Yeah, he’s a bit of a legend on the hacker circuit.”

Jackie raised an eyebrow.

“I hang out there because I need to know the latest tricks used on corporate networks,” James said defensively. “Echelon doesn’t pick them up because they’re not doing anything illegal. They play intellectual games to evolve security sophistication.” He wasn’t the only system administrator that hovered on the hacker circuit. According to a recent poll, giga-corporations employed 90 percent of the participants while the remainder were mostly trying to better their employment opportunities. Still, it was difficult to build an accurate picture when truthfully filling in the questionnaire could lead to incarceration.

“Are you saying he could hack our network?” Jackie’s temper was quickly boiling to crisis point.

James shook his head, looking doubtful. “I wouldn’t have thought so, definitely not alone. But he might’ve sourced help from others.”

“Hmm...” Jackie murmured, lost in thought. She needed a way out of the debacle. There always was a way out, and she prided herself on finding solutions that suited everyone... or at the very least, solutions that suited her. She called it her ‘personal regression line’ and today it would suit most parties. “Mr Raven, you shan’t see a single Credit for the death of our beloved CEO.” She swallowed the bile rising to the back of her throat. “But,” - she severed his protest by holding up a warning finger - “I will personally double the kit to two million Credits if you apprehend all four.” She ticked them off on her fingers, “Sutherland, your original target, and her two accomplices.”

Five-hundred thousand apiece. Or, technically, four-hundred thousand apiece - I apprehended Savage without pay. The temptation was too great for his cyborg brain. “I shall bring you their spines on a platter.” He pushed his chair from the conference table and stretched to his full height, towering over them. With one cautionary sweep of his black eyes, he strode away, bursting through the conference room doors with a flutter of his cloak.

“What delightful charm,” Jackie drawled when they were alone. “Michele,” she said, stabbing her underling with a killing look. “Get Esteban in here. Now.”

She sat with James in uncomfortable silence while Michele flapped about, looking for her counterpart from the assassination branch.

Images of Paul Savage’s grisly death were already haunting James. He’d tried phoning immediately after regaining consciousness but UniForce’s public figurehead had diverted all calls to voicemail - he didn’t like interruptions while practicing a speech. So James had shambled to the nearest portal as fast as his migraine would allow, but by then the Raven was already washing flecks of blood from his skin in the bathroom. James, hoping to avert a disaster, had burst into Paul’s office unannounced. There, horrified by the gore splattered across the room, he’d wondered whether things would have turned out differently if he’d sent an e-mail instead of standing up and damaging his implant. More terrifying was the prospect of arriving a minute sooner and catching the Raven in the act. Would he have killed me too? Would my head now be resting on the floor next to Paul’s? He’d never appreciated his neck more than he did right then and his thoughts turned to his beloved wife Susan and his bundle of joy, Lillian. They’re more important than this UniForce shit. James Patrick Ellerman was therefore moping in homesickness and considering his mortality when Michele returned with Esteban in tow.

They sealed the doors behind them.

“You’ve heard?” Jackie asked.

Esteban nodded and occupied the seat the Raven had used. “Michele filled me in.”

“I’m declaring a state of company emergency.” Jackie tapped a fingernail to the glass-coated table. “Do you understand what that means, ladies and gentlemen?”

She saw three subdued nodding heads.

“Esteban, I want you to contact your top assassin. Make five contracts. Find out who these people are and eliminate them. Get rid of them all: Dan Sutherland, Jennifer Cameron...” She snapped her fingers trying to recall the others.

James helped, “David Coucke.”

“Yes, thank you James. David Coucke and Samantha Lee.”

“Who’s the fifth?” Esteban was using the computer built into the conference table to draft notes.

“The Raven,” Jackie answered coldly. “Who did you think? Elvis? He’s too fucking dangerous to be running around with UniForce credentials. Sooner or later he’s going to do something we can’t cover up and that’s going to soil our good name with pig shit.”

Esteban nodded, still typing.

“Two million each,” Jackie authorised. “And five million for the cyborg.”

If Esteban found the generosity of the contracts shocking, he made no show.

“James!” His quiet moaning was irritating her. “What’s wrong with you today?”

“I have a headache,” he explained as casually as he could. “I’ve been working on the breach since yesterday morning.”

He shouldn’t have told her that, it just pissed her off even more. “Yesterday morning? And you didn’t think to inform me sooner?” Her thundering voice was

punishment enough; she could see the pain echoing in his expression. “Lock it down! I don’t care if you have to do another all-nighter. You have my permission to authorise staff overtime if you must. Just get us secure!”

He nodded mutely.

“And find out more about this hacker, David Coucke. I humbly doubt he spent all that energy hacking our network just to flee after sending one e-mail. Pin him down, do you understand? I want to know where he is. I want to know what else he’s hacked. I want to know everything about him.”

James nodded again, already mentally tendering his resignation. I’m not putting up with this shit. Plenty of other corporations would be thrilled to accept a job application from him. Except ice-bitch here would make that impossible. He held no illusions about that. Jackie would ensure he never found work anywhere in the world if he ducked responsibility during a company emergency.

“Now, Michele,” Jackie said in a softer tone. “Tell me about Dan Sutherland.”

Michele visibly cringed. “I noticed a clerical error two days ago. We’ve been selling exclusive lists to both him and the Raven.”

Very smooth. Esteban approved of her explanation and hoped Jackie would believe it. He thought there was a good chance, especially since it came from the beguiling Michele.

“That’s not what I meant.” Jackie refined her question, “What information do we have on him? He’s a top-level hunter so he must be somewhat dangerous. He’s harbouring a target, is it possible he’s turned against us?” How pissed is he that you’ve been selling his lists to a cyborg?

Michele ostentatiously displayed her mediocre keyboard skills while accessing the database for Sutherland’s file. Her fingernails scratched against the glass tabletop and made James wince, Jackie grimace, and Esteban scowl. “He broke the previous record reaching exclusive level - it only took him 68 days.” She read aloud the brief account of Dan’s sad life, the prose dry and unemotional.

Jackie tilted her head and peered down her nose when Michele had finished. “Esteban, contract five million for him too.”

Esteban nodded, hiding the fiendish glimmer in his eyes.

“I’m disappointed in all of you,” Jackie said matter-of-factly.

What an inspiring leader. James felt sick.

“I don’t want any more network breaches. And I don’t want any more cyborgs working for us. Is that understood?”

They nodded.

“Scan the files and isolate the cyborgs. If they’re on active duty, retire them. If they protest, execute them. I’m charging you three to handle this situation. Quickly. Quietly. But I expect frequent updates.” Jackie stood, indicating that their impromptu meeting was over. She waited while the others scuttled from the room before also marching out.

Now, for the shareholder meeting. She wondered how best to break the news. At least they won’t expect me to smile, she thought. A sombre backdrop suited her fine.

Jackie did not intend to do Paul’s job for long. She just needed to find someone malleable enough to match her needs. But until then, I’ll have to do this public relations crap. She sighed. If you want it done right, do it your goddamned self.

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Friday, September 17, 2066

11:02 Andamooka, South Australia

The sun was biting.

Jen's skin already stung from the abuse. She just knew it was going to start bubbling and peeling at any moment. They'd been trekking through the harsh South Australian desert since eight o'clock, when Dan had collected them from the Dusty Andamooka Inn. She squinted at him, cursing herself for forgetting her sunglasses. Boy, he must be tired. But Dan showed no outward signs of fatigue despite walking since six. How he'd covered so much ground so quickly was a mystery to Jen, whose overnight bag felt like a thousand tonnes of useless junk.

Samantha and Cookie had barely spoken since Jen roused them from their lumpy, broken-spring bed. Energy conservation was high on their agenda. It was a high priority for Jen too, but she'd engaged Dan in conversation for the first quarter hour of their ordeal. In the end he'd ordered her to stop talking and save strength. He'd also chivalrously offered to carry her bag, though she'd refused. Now she was beginning to wonder why.

"Here we are." The strain in Dan's voice betrayed the fatigue that the rest of his body didn't show.

"Where?" Cookie swept the horizon but saw nothing that reminded him of civilisation.

"Home, sweet home." Dan showed them to a flight of marble steps that descended into the ground.

"Down there?" Samantha's eyebrows shot up.

"Uh-huh." Dan nodded. "Didn't you guys know? Half of Andamooka is built underground. It protects us from this intolerable heat and the chill of night. Earth is a wonderful insulator."

"How much of this is yours?" Samantha asked. There weren't any fences. She distantly wondered whether they'd been walking past invisible houses for the past three hours.

He shrugged. “Over to the main road, a few hundred metres that way,” - he waved to the east - “about a kilometre that way” - to the west - “and about two kilometres back from the road. Some orange poles designate the boundaries of local properties. We’ve never bothered with fences. The soil can’t hold crops anyway so it’d just be an expensive waste of time. Besides, this way the wildlife can come and go as it pleases, which is especially important for the great reds.”

He did it again, Jen thought, wondering why she wasn’t used to it yet. He surprised me again. Who would’ve thought wildlife conservation would concern a bounty hunter? I thought only activists harped about stuff like that.

Sweat was pouring off Cookie’s forehead and dripping onto the arid ground. He was ready to drop his computer and he was glad Dan had carried his duffel bag or he’d never have made the distance. “Can we go inside?”

“Sure.” Dan skipped down the steps. “Careful, watch yourselves.”

His front door was thick wood impregnated with the Vacuum Rubber, the best insulating material industrial scientists had manufactured since the health-hazard asbestos days. He ushered them in and invited them to dump their bags wherever they found space on the floor.

It was cool inside, especially when stepping from the oven-like desert. The colours Dan had chosen were tranquil and the ambiance from his lighting soft. The lights illuminated automatically when he unlocked the door. Thirty square metres of thermo-cell generators powered all his electrical appliances. He’d erected them at a place where the shape of his land radiated the heat to a perfect focal point, half a kilometre away. Thermo-cells were similar to solar cells except more efficient - they could generate 1,000 times the power under the right conditions. Dan had buried a battery reservoir to store the excess electricity. It was big enough to meet his energy needs if the sun spontaneously switched off for three days.

Jen noticed how spacious it was, not the cramped quarters she’d expected. Not a bad idea, she admitted reluctantly. Living underground saved space and minimised the human impact on the environment. She approved.

“You want the tour?”

“Yeah, thanks,” Jen said, speaking for herself. The others had crashed onto the

first couch they'd found and were politely declining the offer with exhausted waves.

He steered her from room to room, playing at tour guide in a way that made her smile and occasionally even laugh. Jen could clearly see that no woman had lived in the house for a long time. The arrangements were neat and efficiently, but simply not the way a woman would put things. It made her wonder who the beautiful woman in the photographs on Dan's mantle was. She stood transfixed by them while Dan uncomfortably mumbled something about the fireplace beneath and hurried her toward the next room. She was excruciatingly curious, but too polite to ask. He'd been smiling in those photographs, a warm smile that radiated happiness - nothing like the twisted smirks and joyless curling of his lips that she'd seen from him. She looked happy too. Whoever 'she' is. His wife perhaps? Jen noticed Dan's wedding band for the first time. Hmm... it must be. Another marriage that turned sour and ended in divorce.

"And this shall be your chamber." Dan waved her into the final room with a flourish of his hands.

It wasn't a large room, but neither was it small. A comfortable bed occupied the middle and a recessed wardrobe fit snugly into one corner. He'd obviously spent quite a bit of money on the digital window that covered much of the far wall. With bevelled edges, just like a real window, it displayed a magical scene of lush fronds and ferns. The foliage swayed with a simulated breeze and the sun filtered through a canopy of tall gumtrees.

"It's from the Daintree," Dan explained. "Before it was destroyed."

"It's real?" Jen staggered forward, wishing she could open the glass and step through to smell the aroma of damp forest. She couldn't believe such a landscape had ever existed. It was too perfect. Surely it had come from an overpaid animator's imagination.

"It was real. The picture anyway. The processor's creating the breeze and using an algorithm to calculate the movement of the sun. It depicts true light angles and absorption rates on the various textures. I believe you can watch the sun set through this window." Dan pressed a button on a wall-mounted control panel and the sun arced gracefully across the sky, lowering over a digitally created horizon with an orgy of pinks, oranges and reds.

Jen was mesmerised. She'd seen digital windows before but she'd never experienced one so intimately. It felt as though she was gazing at a rainforest rather than a few coloured pixels on a screen.

Dan reset the sun and it leapt back to its 11 o'clock position. "If you watch for long enough you'll see a flock of lorikeets and maybe a kangaroo. I think one of them has a joey." He pressed another button and the scene shifted. "Or, if you get bored, you can try an underwater landscape." A myriad of colourful coral sprung to life in a vibrant aquarium that teemed with fish. "But they're the only two I have."

"I preferred the rainforest."

He reversed the selection and the rainforest came back.

"Is this my bedroom next door?" Samantha asked, popping her head into the room.

"Yeah, that's it," Dan replied. "The one with the double bed."

"Your digital windows are cool," Samantha said offhandedly. But she was too exhausted to do anything but sleep. "I'm gonna catch some z's."

"Cookie too?" Jen asked.

"Nope." Samantha shook her head. "He found Dan's study and he's hooking up from there. I think he wants to check his hack." Samantha had spent the previous night restlessly tossing and turning on a lumpy mattress. Cookie, however, had been blissfully unaware of her torment and recharged his batteries for a glorious seven hours. He was tired from the walk but was ready to leap back into his attack on the UniForce network.

"Uh, I think I should supervise." Dan cringed at the thought of someone poking around his computers. He couldn't remember whether he'd shut them down and there was a mound of sensitive information there.

He heard lurid swearing before entering the study. Cookie was hunching over his keyboard, uncomfortable in the chair moulded for Dan's heftier frame. His eyes flicked left and right across the monitor, absorbing everything that had happened in the intermission. Inwardly he was kicking himself for being so carelessly

stupid.

“What’s wrong?” Jen entered behind Dan.

Cookie slammed the enter-key five, ten, twelve times before answering. “The fuckers have... they’ve... Oh fuck. Hang on a second.”

They waited with baited breath, wondering what had happened. It was torture. Jen and Dan were both imagining horrors in the unbearable silence.

Shall I tell them? The fragment of Cookie’s mind that he hadn’t dedicated to the hack was wrestling with that question. One of his maintenance applications had failed to cycle fast enough and his tunnel had partially collapsed as a result. It was impossible for him to say with any degree of certainty whether UniForce had discovered their location. But one thing was for sure - someone had plugged his hole. It could have been a UG7 protection bot or it could have been the system administrator. He sniggered. You didn’t think I’d only make one entrance, did you? He’d had three. Now one had been sealed. Two were still serviceable. But UniForce definitely now knew of the security infraction, and that made him uncomfortable. Now he was pitting himself against all of UniForce’s information technology staff. It left him light headed.

“They’ve sealed one of my entrances.” Cookie tried to sound calm but the tremor in his voice gave him away.

“So they know we’re here?”

“Yes,” Cookie confirmed. “Before, I was unsure. Now I know that they definitely know.”

“So they’ll throw everything against us,” Jen concluded.

“That would be the logical conclusion, yes.” Cookie admitted forlornly. It was at times like these that he really appreciated Samantha stroking his body. It calmed him down, making it easier to think rationally. But he’d never begrudge her sleep. He knew she’d spent a restless night in their stuffy little room at the Dusty Andamooka Inn.

“Can they track us?” Dan asked the critical question, perfectly prepared to rip the cables from the wall if they could.

Cookie checked his other applications, trying to ascertain the answer himself. His tracking application had failed to respond so he'd restarted it, which was why he had no way of knowing whether UniForce had pinned down their location. It meant little for the time they'd spent in Tweed Heads since they'd abandoned that post. But we've been exposed for - he checked his watch - five minutes here.

The application restarted with a green light, which meant there were no feelers hunting them through the wires. At least, not now. And nobody could complete a trace in five minutes... right? "We're safe. And if they try a trace we'll hear about it." He turned the volume on Dan's speakers to maximum, just to be sure. It was a reasonable assumption, Cookie thought. The risk to their safety was so miniscule that it wasn't worth worrying the others over.

No. Nobody could complete a trace in less than five minutes.

Dan would have seen things differently, had he known. But he made decisions based upon the information available and he didn't know Cookie was keeping him in the dark. "I hope you're right." He shivered at the potential consequences if something went wrong.

"Hey, I wasn't the one who said 'sick em' to a cyborg and pointed at the UniForce CEO. I'd say that was a big risk to take!"

Dan's overconfidence flowed through his words and posture. "He won't do it."

"I hope you're right," Cookie said, echoing Dan's earlier remark.

"Okay, so we're back in business," Jen said, easing the tension before their testosterone could boil over. A big U-shaped desk filled most of Dan's study. Cookie had set his computer up on the downward stroke of the U, so Jen perched on the other side to watch over his shoulder. "On to Echelon then?"

Cookie lingered in silence while he finished the maintenance on his tunnel. His applications weren't clever enough to do it without assistance. He'd been thinking of upgrading them with a genetic evolution algorithm but he'd read countless reports of that backfiring. Some applications wound up dumber than they started and now wasn't a good moment to run the gauntlet of cutting edge programming. He needed stability and reliability more than brainy applications.

Something interesting caught his attention while he was rummaging around the UniForce network. “Hey, look at this.”

The others leant closer.

“It’s a repository of business decisions UniForce have made since their conception.” Cookie’s eyebrows twitched. “Restricted with heavy encryption though, could take me a couple of days to crack.”

Jen wasn’t convinced they’d have a couple of days, not now that UniForce knew they were there. “Save it for any spare time we have afterward.”

Dan was peering over Cookie’s shoulder with just as much enthusiasm as Jen, though with differently aligned priorities. He was fascinated to know what his surrogate company had been doing. He wanted to know what drove them, what made them tick. He wanted to know whether they were worthy of his service. Are they law enforcement? Or just powerful thugs?

“Can you find their financial records?” Dan asked, drawing a curious look from Jen.

Cookie huffed. “Hell, man, I can find anything. I’ve got God’s access to this baby now. But why d’you wanna see that?”

“I need to see something,” he replied guardedly.

But the answer was good enough for Cookie because he started rooting through network spaghetti until he found the accounting servers.

“Okay, here are UniForce’s monetary transactions for the past three years. Anything prior to that is archived and might take longer to access,” Cookie said, sounding smug.

“I’m interested in the bounty hunting branch.”

Cookie isolated the applicable records.

“Exclusive lists.”

Again Cookie worked his magic. There were 53 top-level hunters active in the

world, but only 28 in English speaking countries. Sophisticated translation programs assisted communication between the predominately English-speaking management team and the non-English-speaking workforce. Occasionally it led to misunderstandings, but more often humans used the program as a scapegoat for their own errors. Its creator, TranSys, had called it the Universal Translator - the UT. TranSys had promoted it as a boon for globalisation back in the early '30s. But, ironically, in 2037 Global Integrated Systems gobbled TranSys whole, absorbing it into their conglomerate. The Universal Translator facilitated vast reductions in management requirements for the tumorous multinationals, slashing their operating costs. This, in turn, thrilled shareholders and overburdened the remaining employees. Burnout ran rife through corporate ladders, though that never fazed the people at the top. There were always plenty of willing servants to take their fallen comrades' places. Eventually the market found equilibrium and efficiency soared. The new business model favoured by the UT generation comprised of small, central management teams that maintained rigid control over their global operation. Language was no longer a barrier. Corporate leaders deemed irrelevant the fact that the shift coincided with a dramatic dip in bilingualism worldwide.

“Can you isolate just the Raven’s subset of purchases?”

“Of course.” An itemised list of purchases appeared on the screen.

“Now do the same for me.”

Jen stiffened in the background, shying away from the now imminent conflict.

“Huh?” Cookie didn’t understand.

“Find the subset of records for my name, Dan Sutherland.”

Cookie jerked away instinctively. “You’re a hunter?”

“What of it?” Dan hadn’t realised Jen was shielding her friends from that knowledge. “It doesn’t change the fact that I’m helping you, does it?”

He slowly shook his head, though his eyes were still wide. “No, I guess not.”

“Would I have brought you here if I was going to turn you in?”

“No.” Cookie forced himself to relax but the effort made him look constipated. He did as Dan requested and a similar list appeared on the screen.

Identical. Dan’s eyes flicked between the two, comparing item after item. Even more interesting was the amounts entered into the accounting system. They were wrong. Someone’s siphoning off the top. But who? “Can you save that?”

“Already done,” Cookie confirmed. He eyed Jen with a why-didn’t-you-tell-me look of betrayal.

Jen looked away, unwilling and unable to defend herself from his unspoken accusations. So, now Cookie knows. Which means Samantha will know soon too. She mentally shrugged. Dan was right - it made no real difference. He was helping them and right now they needed all the help they could get.

*

Thursday, September 16, 2066

UniForce Headquarters

17:03 San Francisco, USA

“What a fucking mess we have on our hands now.” Esteban disgustedly threw his arms into the air before letting them flop by his sides. To say he was displeased would be an understatement. It was home time and he’d been eager to return to Baltimore. It was poker night at the club. He loved poker night.

They were crowding James’s office. Esteban had decreed that was to be their base of operations. Not because he liked James’s décor, it was the only office with three available terminals. And he’d locked the door, a significant statement. Nobody was going anywhere until they’d sorted out the mess.

There were three separate desks arranged in a loose triangle, though only room for one chair in the middle. On rare occasions, James needed all three terminals. When he utilised the full processing capacity of one, he would plug into another and continue working. Esteban pulled the desks further apart, making a horrible grinding sound. The desks, made from chipboard with a plastic coating, wobbled unsteadily and James fretted they’d come apart with Esteban’s rough treatment and his precious equipment would tumble to the floor. But they held together - barely - and Esteban squeezed another two chairs in the middle.

“How does this work?” Michele asked, having never encountered that model of computer before. It was a GenSet.

God you’re dumb. “Here.” Esteban stabbed a finger at the little white circle that turned it on. He hoped she wasn’t going to be that annoying once she was up and running. At least she’ll be familiar with the operating system.

Esteban sniffed the air, much like a prowling wolf. “Jesus, man, it’s stuffy in here. Are you off the environmental grid or something?”

James paid him little heed; his head still hurt too much for Esteban to draw him into an energy wasting argument. He loosely wondered how Esteban’s office would smell if he spent 36 hours there sweating over a difficult problem.

He’d requested his best three administrators to stay back and he’d delegated to them the tiresome task of sorting out the mess on the network. Only two had agreed. One said she had a prior engagement she couldn’t break. Fine. James

mentally chalked an ugly mark next to her name, one that meant she'd get no interesting projects or promotional opportunities. You have to make sacrifices if you expect to get anywhere. James's mood was several shades darker even than Esteban's. He'd already been slogging away for a full night and the prospect of another was painful to consider.

He switched on the videophone and adjusted the camera before dialling home. Susan answered, "You're not calling to say you're stuck at work again are you?"

James nodded, irritable and profoundly sad. "Yes." He lowered his voice to a whisper and added, "Our CEO was assassinated today and they've declared a state of company emergency." He lowered his voice even further. "It all happened because someone hacked the network."

Susan sighed. "You spend too much time--"

"I know, I'm sorry," James said, cutting her off before she could finish. "It's not like I want to stay here, especially two nights in a row."

Susan studied him on her display. "You have company."

James shifted so she could see Esteban and Michele in the background. "Yeah, they're using my office as a command centre." He smiled bravely for her. "Look, I have some good news, but I'll save it for when I get home, okay?"

She smiled broadly, showing her dimples. "A surprise?"

"Yep. A good one. You'll love it, I promise."

He heard Lillian crying in the background and Susan turned away from the camera. "Lillian's hungry, I'd better go."

"Okay, I love you." James kissed two fingers and held them up to the camera.

"Love you too. Just do whatever you have to and hurry home, okay?" She waited to see his confirmation nod, said, "Bye," then hung up and the display went black.

"Bye." James replied into the dead receiver.

“That your woman?” Esteban’s gruff voice asked from over his shoulder.

“Yes.”

“Good looking.” Esteban always measured females that way. He had two lists, the first filled with people he’d gleefully fuck, the second with people that shrivelled his manhood. He added James’s wife to the first.

“Thanks.” James wasn’t sure how to accept the compliment coming from a barbarian such as Esteban. In truth, it frightened him. He didn’t want monster Esteban thinking of his wife that way. He soothed himself with the thought that he’d soon be home. I just have to sort this out first. It was a powerful motivator and he gingerly plugged the leads into his tender implant before throwing himself at the problem with renewed gusto that bordered on insanity.

So much ground to cover. He changed tack. Instead of examining the network’s inner barrier, he skirted along the outer ring. There was always a chance that David Coucke - if Coucke was the hacker - had meticulously covered his tracks inside the network but had been careless on his initial approach. It was worth a try. Besides, blundering into a perforation in the outer ring would bring him one step closer to isolating the attack origin.

Then he launched a second thread. He needed to closely monitor the Raven’s progress and feed from whatever morsels of information he might discover. To do that, he’d have to hack the cyborg’s brain. It was dangerous, though others had succeeded in the past and thoroughly documented the process. Anonymous pioneers had printed a groundbreaking article about cyborg hacking and all the popular computer magazines had followed the case. An entire ‘net community had dedicated itself to the art of forcing entry into hybrid computer-human brains. Some cyborgs were privacy paranoid and had erected insurmountable defences - nobody could get through without the appropriate key. Others were lax, either through ignorance, incompetence, or naivety. Some thought it would never happen to them despite the growing cult of cyborg hackers who shared the necessary tools. Hardcore cyborg hackers believed themselves to be intrepid psychologists and anthropologists, ruthlessly examining the human minds that a cocktail of doctors and engineers had generously placed online.

The Raven was easy to find. His connection to the UniForce database perpetually drew information about an array of targets. He didn’t have the space

to store all the data locally, and even if he did, he would still require constant contact to benefit from the frequent data updates. What was the point in chasing a false lead?

“What’re you doing?” Esteban demanded at the worst possible moment.

James had forgotten to switch off his monitor to conceal his activities from prying eyes. He would have preferred to work in private but it was a bit late for that now. He slowed his pace to free enough mental resources to formulate an answer. “I’m isolating, or trying to isolate the hacker’s data stream. If I can do that, I can tell you where they are.”

“Yeah, but what are you doing there?” Esteban pointed to the second application.

James snorted like an angry pig and said, “Hacking the Raven’s mind.”

“You can do that?”

“Sure. It’s just the same as any ‘net connected computer, it’s vulnerable to attack.” James massaged the bruise around his implant and refocussed on his work.

Esteban sensibly left him in peace and returned to drafting his first contract. It didn’t take long; he just opened the appropriate form and filled in the blanks. The difficult part was deciding to whom he should send it. Assassination contracts usually tendered for millions of Credits. One million was the smallest fee any quality assassin would demand. Two million was common, but five was exceptional.

He reviewed the list of assassins that weren’t presently on assignment and selected the top performer. He had an immaculate record - nobody had ever traced him and he had a 100 percent success rate. And he’s quick. Most assassins wouldn’t make the hit for at least two weeks, and frequently demanded more money if told the matter was urgent. Shadow, as this particular assassin called himself, had an average kill time of five days.

Esteban put the contract in Shadow’s pigeonhole, as standard procedure dictated. Good assassins always demanded total anonymity. The system would send Shadow a notification and he would thereby know he had mail waiting for him. He alone could access the message, using an unreproducible electronic key. For

security, reasons he used each pigeonhole no more than once. The system generated a new lock and key combination at the successful completion of each assignment.

Shadow would have 24 hours to accept or reject the offer. But Esteban rarely had to deal with rejections. Most assassins understood that UniForce didn't tolerate such impudence. One rejection would substantially reduce the frequency of future offers. Rejecting UniForce twice was tantamount to retirement.

Michele was busy reading bounty hunter records, one by one. She was yet to discover the search feature built into the database engine. Esteban watched her, pitying her in his own way. Should I show her how to search? He watched as she opened and closed another two files. Nah, she looks happy. He made a pact with himself: if she were still going at midnight, he'd show her how to isolate the cyborgs from the enormous list.

"How long until you know where they are?" Esteban asked, keen to get moving. He was tired of sitting at a desk. He was a man of action; it was in his blood. If I can't have poker then, come hell or high water, I'll have my own fun.

James snorted in annoyance. "It depends." He couldn't say which method would be faster, finding them on his own merit or poaching their whereabouts from the Raven. There were too many variables to give an accurate answer.

Esteban frowned.

The trickle of data feeding into the Raven's computerised brain suddenly surged into a torrent and James seized the opportunity to launch his trojan. It was similar to the method David Coucke had used to penetrate UniForce's network: hollow out a legitimate file and insert a tiny program inside the empty shell. Upon reaching the destination, the virus-like file would activate and reconstruct its host so that any subsequent file scans would report normal. But by then it would be too late, the program would already be inside. It would poke several inconspicuous holes in the target's firewall, allowing the hacker to delve into the bowels of the target's network. It was simple, in theory. Practical execution was a different matter, especially on a cyborg. Cyborgs tended to be more aware of their computer's activities. It wasn't just a machine - it was an extension of a human mind. That's why it was so important for James to wait for a surge in the data stream. He needed the Raven to be crunching through so much data that he

wouldn't notice the loss of a few clock cycles to the trojan.

He held his breath as the Raven swept the modified file up with his data stream. A few seconds later a port sweep revealed the trojan had opened ports 5,000 to 5,005. It worked. "I'm in."

"You've found them?" Esteban leapt from his chair and slapped a hand roughly on James's shoulder.

"No." He winced, his shoulder smarting. "I'm inside the Raven's computer."

"Oh." Esteban wasn't impressed. Nobody had ever explained to him the significance of hacking a cyborg. "Is that all."

"Maybe he knows where they are."

Esteban rolled his eyes. "Yes, but if he gets his grotty little mittens on them first it'll be too late, won't it?"

"Too late for what?" James didn't follow.

"For me, stupid."

Michele spun from her arduous task and interjected, "You're going to kill them?"

He puffed out his chest. "And why not? Jackie said to use our top assassin."

"You?" James asked incredulously. "I thought you'd retired. Been retired - involuntarily."

Esteban's gaze narrowed. His expression darkened as though a thundercloud passed beneath his skin and his eyes went icy. "That wasn't permanent. Now it's time for my second debut into the professional circuit."

Second debut? How can you have a second first-appearance, moron? James wished he had someone intelligent in the room to converse with. "Okay, whatever floats your boat."

"I'm sharing the workload," Esteban admitted. "Our second best assassin will

deal with the Raven. That cyborg might be a freak, but he won't be expecting it. Second best will be good enough for him. But I will deal with Sutherland and the others."

"And collect the reward." James understood, or thought he did. Esteban's ulterior motive would have sickened him to the core, so perhaps it was better that he didn't know.

Esteban shrugged and said, "Honest pay for honest work."

James snorted and entwined his mind around the Raven's crystal-core. He downloaded a snippet of data, not enough to make the bounty hunter suspicious, just enough to sample the data structure. The hardest part about cyborg hacking wasn't gaining access; it was decoding the bizarre storage structures. The difficulty varied depending on the intelligence of the specimen. Dopy cyborgs stored data and memories in arrays that resembled old hard disk platters. Intellectually superior cyborgs used fascinating crystalline structures that rivalled the Stanley Encryption Algorithm for complexity. One thing was certain, every cyborg had a unique way of arranging their data and it was going to take time to decode.

He gently probed the sample and turned it over in his mind, trying to find a pattern or anything he could define as a starting point. Hmm... James rubbed a hand across his tired eyes. This is going to take longer than I thought. He copied more data during the next deluge. The Raven was busy examining video feeds from around the world, testing millions of faces for a match. It was a daunting task even for the latest generation supercomputer running the most advanced face recognition software. It generated copious overhead processing and taxed the Raven's link to the nano-net. It was therefore the perfect cover for James to stealthily download analysis material. If I could just find a pattern... James wondered what the Raven might have modelled his structures on. Psychologists who'd entered the cyborg-hacking debate usually pointed out that cyborgs preferred personally meaningful structures. Once, a cyborg had joined the discussion and said she used a stellar map of her star sign to plot data locations in her crystal-core. What could possibly be meaningful to a man who calls himself 'the Raven'? Sheep? Decaying flesh? An eyeball ripe for plunging a beak into?

It was eerie to delve so intimately into another man's mind. James knew he

would find things he didn't wish to see. But business was business and he shoved those concerns aside for the sake of seeing his daughter before her next birthday.

He wove a decoding application around the problem and fed it with as much processing power as he could safely divert from network servers. How did civilisation survive without multithreading? He set an alarm to alert him the second it discovered a pattern in the data-spaghetti and then returned his focus to the trace. A sour expression twisted his lips and he popped another two stimulants into his mouth, squirted in some water, and swallowed. Five minutes later the drugs had taken the edge off his throbbing headache and cleared his thinking. It's only a matter of time asshole. He dug deeper, rummaging through code that might yield answers to the two most important questions: Where is the hacker? What is he up to?

Esteban watched, frustrated that he couldn't do more than wait. He whittled away the time by stripping his Peacemaker nine-millimetre semiautomatic and lightly oiling every surface - not too much or it would attract grit and jam at an inconvenient moment. When he was finished, he reassembled it and checked the slide mechanism before easing a cartridge into the chamber and loading a full clip. Thirteen rounds. Twelve in the clip and one ready to go. Nowhere near enough. Esteban's days of stealth were over. Brute force suited him now and for what he had in mind he needed to invite some friends.

*

Friday, September 17, 2066

12:59 Andamooka, South Australia

Cookie smiled ruefully and thought, If only I hadn't gone back. He'd done the digital equivalent of tripping a snare wire that the UniForce administrators had laid for him. He'd twisted and turned and broken free of the trap, but he'd come perilously close to being pinned down. And if that happened, they'd trace his location. He'd been careful. He'd relayed his signal through seven anonymisers and strung it around the globe five times, but still he was vulnerable. It could take them a minute, but once they'd locked onto the heartbeat of his signal, they'd trace it to Andamooka. Cookie was glad his custom applications were monitoring for a trace and would alert him if one began. Depending on the skills of his opponents, he'd have somewhere between 30 and 60 seconds to terminate the connection.

He gingerly sensed his way along Echelon's central nervous system, mesmerised by the flood of data from which it fed. Echelon intercepted and scanned every data transaction in the world and Cookie could only think of one word to describe the sheer scale of the endeavour - Astonishing. Every wire, every segment of nano-net, every videophone conversation, every telephone call... Echelon listened to everything. It scanned every skerrick of data for illegal activity, known criminals, and potential 'terrorist' threats. Cookie had a momentary pang of doubt. If we burn it all, what might erupt from the ashes? He wondered whether the seedier side of humanity would morph the world into a smouldering cesspool. But then he remembered Echelon was firmly stomping on freedom of speech and his determination flared again.

He probed deeper, digitally fingering Echelon's nervous tissue and wondering how to disable it. The UniForce administrators weren't dumb; they'd protected Echelon from conventional attack. What about a virus? He frowned and shook his head. He'd have to think of something for the virus to do and that would require in-depth knowledge of Echelon's construction. There was precious little information about Echelon on the 'net, Cookie had already checked. The governments that had started the project hadn't published how-to manuals for anarchists.

Samantha startled him by gently brushing the nape of his neck.

"Oh, hi. Couldn't you sleep?"

“A little.” She yawned. “More of a snooze. What’re you doin’?”

“Aside from avoiding the myriad of traps they’ve set, I’m trying to slay a digital monster.”

Samantha nodded approvingly. “Great,” she said, yawning again. “Where’s Jen?”

Cookie shrugged and lovingly squeezed her hand. “With Sutherland I think. Haven’t seen them for a while.” His pulse fluttered when he narrowly avoided another snare. They must have planted them thick around their prize. At least it gave him somewhere to start his analysis - the densest patch of snares would lead him to Echelon’s greatest vulnerability. And that’s where he would begin his attack.

*

Friday, September 17, 2066

07:45 Leningrad, Russia

Natasha Glinski padded barefoot to the ground floor of her Leningrad mansion. She hesitated at the junction between the kitchen and the study, an inner conflict raging between hunger and curiosity. Breakfast was tempting, especially for someone with no fat to shed. If she skipped a meal she'd weaken her muscles and she'd worked hard to get them the way they were. She wasn't tall, only five foot six inches - or one 168 centimetres as she preferred to think about it. Her thick, unruly brown hair cascaded around her shoulders and she was clad only in a white bathrobe. She preferred to sleep nude. Her brown eyes darted between computer and kitchen, a girlish grin mischievously playing on her lips.

Breakfast. The hunger won.

She collected her slippers from where she'd abandoned them at midnight. Without them, the kitchen tiles would numb her toes, especially in mid-September. She half expected to see frost on the ground but when she peered from the kitchen window she saw only a swirl of colourful leaves.

Natasha fixed a nourishing breakfast, reheating the soup she'd enjoyed so much the night before. It was thick, hearty, and dark red thanks to the beetroot she'd added - perfect for a cold autumn morning. She'd been experimenting with food recently. It soothed her, reminding her of when she was a girl and she'd helped her mother in the kitchen. Now 31, she didn't look a day older than 22 and people still occasionally mistook her for 18. She used to curse her girlish looks but had come to realise that they were an asset. She owed her magnificent dwelling to those looks, at least in part, so she guarded them with a ferocity that most women her age had given up on. She put the steaming bowl of soup on a tray, carried it into her study, and bumped her mouse to jolt the computer to life.

She'd invested in a small counter that always displayed how many messages she had waiting. There were two colours: green and red. Green designated normal mail, which arrived at her local message box. Usually it was her friends and family inviting her to a function or party. Sometimes she got spam but it'd been a while since a '\$\$\$\$ YOUR INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITY AWAITS' e-mail had slipped through her filters.

Red designated business and today the counter rested on one. She ignored her

local mailbox and hurried to the Shadow's pigeonhole on the UniForce network. She used her disposable key and opened the box to find an assassination contract. Finally. Natasha Glinski switched to business mode, erasing every trace of girliness from her face. She carefully read the contract while slurping her stew-like soup. Nothing appeared amiss. Five million N.A. Credits, her mind whispered as if just thinking it would bring the tax-squad tapping on her windows and probing her financial affairs. She had cover businesses to explain her financial success but the neighbours were still suspicious. She often lavished her family and friends with a shower of gifts to remove the excess from her accounts but it still left an electronic trail that led to her. Thank God UniForce payments are untraceable, she thought. But five million Credits would push her beyond the brink of safety and firmly into the realm of taxation peril.

Maybe it's time? She wondered about that at the beginning of every assignment but this time it rang with a truth she couldn't deny. If she accepted the contract, she'd have to leave Russia for a country that wasn't so nosy when it came to one's fiscal success. The world had changed since her grandmother's day when everyone had been corrupt and she could've purchased some leeway and made the tax beavers look aside.

She eagerly followed the link to the target's file. The Raven, huh? Known only by call sign. She read the thicket of information. A bounty hunter? That intrigued her; she'd never had a contract for eliminating a professional. She specialised in irritating government officials and business feuds. She skimmed the remainder of the Raven's file. If she accepted the contract she'd make herself intimately familiar with every word, but for now, a quick sweep was enough to paint a mental picture. Hmm, sounds charming. She wondered whether her set of skills was in tune with the requirements for assassinating a cyborg. Sometimes she lamented that she'd chosen 'Shadow' as her persona because upon careful consideration she thought 'Spider' seemed more appropriate. Or perhaps Venus. She felt like a cross between a venomous spider, lacing her web for the victim to blunder into, and a *Dionaea muscipula*, a Venus flytrap. She presented beautiful petals that lured the victim close. He or she, but usually he, would be searching for nectar while unwittingly touching the trigger hairs. That's when the gaping jaws of her trap would spring shut, entombing him forever. But Natasha didn't savour the image of slowly digesting the men she'd assassinated - that was where the analogy fell apart.

Men were intrinsically flawed. There was something wrong with their assembly.

Married or not, they all heeded the trumpet of their animalistic urges when she flirted. Natasha was endowed - or cursed as she sometimes thought - with the type of body men dreamed of. It made them slow-witted and careless in her presence, which was why she'd proven such a success in her field. Nobody suspected such a stunningly gorgeous woman could harbour evil intent. She didn't think UniForce knew she was a woman, which was just as well. How many female assassins do they employ? She often asked herself that question, usually at inconvenient moments such as when she was visiting her parents or when she went club hopping with her dwindling pool of unhitched friends.

And that brought her thoughts full circle. Do I want to live an assassin's life? Or keep the one I still have? Her life was rapidly approaching an impasse - she couldn't have both. The issue nagged at her while she showered and changed. It wasn't until she looked in the mirror and saw that she'd subconsciously dressed in work clothes that she knew the answer. Assassins didn't wear black leather suits as the movie makers portrayed. She wore a seductive, low-cut dress that showed ample breast and left just enough to the imagination to make her alluring.

She twirled, giggling girlishly.

Always the adrenaline junkie, she chose the excitement of a rocketing assassination career over the prefabricated life her parents had aspired for her - and that her friends were now miserable living.

*

Friday, September 17, 2066

20:42 Andamooka, South Australia

The aches were setting in.

Dan knew that meant he'd under-budgeted for sleep, but he ignored the warning. He felt content for the first time in... How long? He didn't know. His mind was pessimistically trying to warn him it was the lull in the storm but he shoved the thought aside and permitted himself to enjoy the feeling. It felt strange, contentment. He wasn't happy. He could never be happy again. That slice of reality grated on a raw nerve; he wasn't thrilled with the prospect of a joyless life. But you have to play with the cards the dealer gives you. It was his father's voice, repeating one of his favourite sayings. Yet despite everything, the usual ache was absent. It felt like someone had scythed a great weight from his chest. He smiled - not the cold smile of recent times, a real smile, one that warmed the room and radiated... contentment.

It's an improvement. Half of Dan's mind was thankful for the reprieve. But it won't last, the other half warned. He didn't want to grow accustomed to contentment. He was wise enough to understand the consequences of withdrawal and subsequent magnification of his former misery.

Earlier he'd cooked a glorious meal of baked vegetables and succulent roast lamb, which everyone except Samantha had thoroughly enjoyed. How was I supposed to know she's a vegetarian? He mentally kicked himself. A good host would have asked! She'd accepted the baked potato and sacrificed pumpkin but politely avoided the lamb and gravy. He'd apologised, profusely. He had nothing else to offer save for a new species of fungus growing on a tomato in his fridge and he didn't think that would tempt her. So he'd gone to his customary supermarket in Adelaide for supplies, alone. The others couldn't risk using a portal for the time being. He'd purchased a choice selection of fruits and upon his return whipped up a delectable fruit salad. Samantha, utterly embarrassed, had flushed bright red.

After dinner he'd flaked on the couch next to Jen where they'd chatted for nearly an hour before she fell asleep on his shoulder. He watched her sleep, hypnotised by the rhythm of her breath. The fact that his shoulder had cramped seemed a small price to pay. Even though he knew he had to rouse her, he delayed and procrastinated as the minutes fled past. She was so fragile. She reminded him

of a delicate flower and he wanted to protect her from the scorching sun lest she shrivel and succumb to the thriving weeds like the ones on his property. An apparition wafted briefly to the edge of his mind, bringing the suggestion that she wasn't as fragile as he imagined. And the ghostly thought made him draw another parallel between Jen and his deceased wife. Katherine was strong. Healing, it seemed, was a myth. Time had only augmented the hurt.

He tensed his shoulder and the rocking action woke Jen with a start.

“What?” She sounded groggy.

“You fell asleep.” Dan’s fatigue splintered his voice into a fractal of bass and baritone.

“Oh.” She struggled to sit straight and shielded her eyes from the light. “What time is it?”

Dan smiled again, as warmly as before. “Past your bedtime I think, come on.” He offered a hand, helped her up, and guided her to her bedroom - but refrained from helping any further. “I put a towel on your pillow. You probably remember where the bathroom is.”

She nodded, still a bit dazed. “Thanks.”

“Goodnight Jen.”

“Night,” she said, smiling sincerely in reply.

He pulled the door shut and drifted to his own bedroom, croaking a laugh when he heard the rattle of Cookie’s keyboard drifting from the study. Doesn’t that man ever rest? He wondered what could possess someone so completely that he or she would pass through all the barriers a human body naturally threw against such a foolhardy marathon.

Then he remembered.

And his spine stiffened.

*

The silence was eerie. It slithered through the trees and Dan tuned to listen for the ghosts he knew were hunting him. They're out there... in the darkness. He couldn't see anything; his night vision was destroyed. But he could feel them watching him, waiting for the right moment. He shook the feeling away, shivered, and began to march, obsessed with reaching his goal. It's not far. But what lay between him and his destination terrified him. Whatever it was, lurking in the dark. It wasn't human. But it wasn't beast either. Dan knew it wanted to drink his liver juices, feast on his flesh, and cast him into the abyss for eternal torture.

He swallowed his fear and stumbled forward, the undergrowth clawing at his boots and whipping his face. Razor-like thorns tore his clothes and shredded his skin. They gouged deep, broke from the vine, and remained fixed in his bloodied tissue for him to dig out later with his knife.

A twig snapped to his right, perhaps 50 metres into the gloom, and he reworked his grip on his knife and steadied himself for the imminent attack. Fear clutched his windpipe and stole his breath while tensing his muscles to breaking point. Not like this. He gritted his teeth for the third and final assault on his mental reserves and commanded himself to keep moving - his only chance for survival. Run. His body obeyed. He sprinted, the blood deafening in his ears as he crashed through the bush. He waved his useless knife in front of his blind eyes, eyes that opened wide at a terrifying thought: I'm going the wrong way. He spun fast, but not fast enough, and he shattered his nose to a bloody pulp by crashing against a tree that he hadn't seen until it was too late.

He clutched at the stinging mass of pain in the middle of his face and spat at the taste of blood, not surprised when three teeth failed to report to his tongue. They lay like tokens of the horror to follow, gleaming white enamel in the surrounding dark.

It's not a tree. It had bark-like skin and was solid enough to knock him over, but it was no tree. It was the epicentre of his fear. He slashed wildly with his knife, surprised when it plunged deep into soft flesh and a woman gasped. He looked more closely. Katherine?

Dan woke with a racing pulse to find himself soaked in sweat.

He'd entwined his fingers around his sheets and drawn blood by biting the inside

of his cheek. He willed himself to relax and, in time, his breathing returned to normal.

Three AM. Dan moaned, disgusted to realise he'd probably had as much sleep as he could get. The pattern was familiar, the nightmares the same. And he was thoroughly sick of it.

Instead of lying uncomfortably on his sweaty sheets, he rose and ambled to the kitchen in the dark. He had no need of light to find his way, not with such an accurate mental map of his underground abode. No sounds came from the study; Samantha had finally coaxed Cookie to bed. Good, Dan approved. They need the rest.

A glass of water numbed his lips and caused his teeth to ache, but it quickly eased his sweat-induced dehydration. So now what should I do? His question had nothing to do with the remainder of the night. He was pondering long-term options and wondering where his twisted life would turn next.

He had his evidence. Why am I not in America now? Handing it over and demanding retribution? It didn't make sense. But very little made sense at three in the morning. Dan gingerly ran a pair of fingers across his bruised back, then twisted left and right until his spine cracked in protest. It still hurt on the apex of random breaths. The injury made him think about the Raven, and where he might be. A splatter of doubt was raining in his mind. Would he do it? Would he kill the CEO? It depended on how insane he really was. Nah, the sensible part of Dan's mind reasoned. Nobody's that crazy.

He looked long and hard at the bottle of sleeping pills he'd stashed in the kitchen, wondering whether they were worth taking. Last time they'd knocked him unconscious for 20 hours and left him with a splitting headache. The pimply doctor at one of Xantex's prescription houses had assessed Dan's insomnia as chronic and severe, denoted him as a potential candidate for their new sleeplessness cure. When the memory flooded back, Dan wondered why he'd never flushed the pills into the sewer. The experience had numbed his nervous system and his 20 hours of dreamless sleep - unconsciousness - hadn't left him feeling refreshed. If anything, it had agitated him further. Xantex had a solution for that too, a never-ending cycle of drugs to combat side effect after side effect. No thanks.

He spent the remainder of the night gazing at his favourite photograph. It was faded at the edges from excessive handling and a crease ran down the middle, but Katherine was as beautiful as ever in Dan's eyes.

I'm sorry.

*

Saturday, September 18, 2066

04:25 Tweed Heads, Australia

It was colder than two nights ago.

The Raven attacked a crack that had developed in his index finger's nail. Where did you go? The trail was cold and that made them difficult to track, especially since Sutherland knew all the tricks to avoid detection. The Raven had scanned nearby portals for suspicious activity. Nothing. He'd accessed the public transport department's database for clues. Nothing. A lock of black hair wisped in front of his eyes, carried by a sea breeze.

The crack widened and split his flesh, tearing a seam wide enough for a trickle of blood to ooze free and run onto his palm. He looked at the single drop diffusing across his skin. The sting was easy to block, he'd long since learned how to filter pain through his processor. While he still registered it, pain never controlled him.

Frustrated, he kicked a rock with his black boot and sent it scuttling across the bitumen. Where the fuck are you? He was tired again - more tired than a quick nap could fix. A bitter laugh escaped his thin lips, carrying the irritation of a dangerous man. Just wait until I find you, Dan Sutherland. He stretched to his full height and spat at the moon before heading toward the nearest portal. You won't have need of a microchip when I'm finished with you. And as for you, Miss Cameron... the chipping squads won't find enough of your body to work with.

Chapter 6

The things that we hold dear

Empty promise is all you'll find

So give me something

Something to believe in

The Offspring - Something to believe in

Naomi Klein - "No Logo", 1999

Saturday, September 18, 2066

08:23 Andamooka, South Australia

“Good morning.”

Dan grunted. “Is it?” Then he mentally slapped himself. He didn’t need to inflict his tainted mood on the others. Snap out of it Danny-boy, she doesn’t deserve that. “Sorry,” he apologised. “I had a rough night.”

Jen raised a regal eyebrow. “That’s okay.” She was wearing a white robe that she’d found in Dan’s cupboard. “I’m sorry you had a bad night.”

Dan absently gestured, attempting to look relaxed but coming across distracted and disinterested. “It’s funny how you take sleep for granted until you can’t have it anymore.”

Samantha and Cookie were yet to rise. They were languishing in the comfort of Dan’s vibrating guest bed. Jen could hear her friend giggling and wondered when she’d get out of bed and brave the world. She was uncomfortable being alone with their host. Dan was radiating... something. She couldn’t put her finger on exactly what.

“You want to talk about it?” She knew she had to offer. How could she not? Something was obviously tormenting him.

Dan shook his head, unable to meet her gaze. “Thank you, but I’d rather not.” He pushed away from the bench. “How about some breakfast?”

“I’d love some,” she welcomed the change in topic. “What’re you offering?”

“Muesli, eggs and toast. Take your pick.”

Jen sat on a breakfast stool and tightened the cord around her waist, making sure the robe adequately covered her chest. “I’ve never been fond of hot food for breakfast. Muesli sounds good though.”

Dan laid two bowls on the bench and fished clean spoons from the dishwasher and muesli from a jar in the pantry. He filled both bowls and drowned the muesli in soymilk. “It’s all I have.”

“Good, because that’s all I drink.”

“Ah,” he said, placing a friendly hand on her shoulder. “A fellow dairy deserter.”

“My mother wouldn’t keep cow’s milk in the house, so I got used to soy when I was a girl,” Jen explained. “I remember the last time I had cow’s milk.” She shuddered through a sour expression. “But I shouldn’t talk about that over breakfast.”

Dan smiled but it looked strained, as though he was putting on a brave show to shield her from... What? From something lingering beneath the surface. “Where did you grow up?”

“Coffs Harbour,” Jen replied. “Not the most savoury place, I know. Hell, it’s not a good place to visit let alone spend a childhood. But that’s where my parents settled, so that’s where I was stuck.”

“Never been there myself,” Dan said, having no idea of the horrors she was repressing. It had once been a quaint seaside town with a gorgeous harbour and a wildlife sanctuary on Mutton-bird Island, a short stroll across the breakwater. But it had changed, morphing into something insidious when the population exploded faster than the local economy could sustain. The influx started before portal technology made the coast accessible to everyone, back in the early twenty-first century when adjammers were still campaigning against the negative onslaught of globalisation. By the time PortaNet had flooded the market with portals it was too late. Decent citizens shunned the place and headed elsewhere for their slice of paradise. Coffs Harbour turned into a haven for the poor and repressed, where jobs were scarce and industry dumped noxious chemicals on the nearby banana plantations. People were ignoring the warnings as late as the 1990s, at which time the local council still used dangerous pesticides and herbicides to keep pest populations under control. Nobody was willing to heed the statistics when people started becoming sick. It wasn’t long before Coffs Harbour had thoroughly earned its reputation for the highest incidence of cancer in the southern hemisphere. The council had finally cleaned up its act but local industry continued to use carcinogenic chemicals and the sickness spread, passing from one generation to the next. Hideous deformities were at a record high and birth defects were the norm. It saddened Jen to think her grandfather had picked Coffs Harbour as the place to settle in such a broad continent. And why move at all? She still didn’t have a plausible answer. What

was wrong with America? The chemicals had left their mark on Jen too - a rare blood disorder that threatened her life whenever her stress hormones rose too high. Several of her friends had died from the disease during puberty, and she'd lost another two to incurable forms of cancer. Poor health was just one of the underlying problems for the region, economic gloom and a host of social issues ran rife. Jen was glad to be free of the nightmare. True, Coffs Harbour was a lot cleaner these days, but she still wished her father had possessed the wisdom to abandon ship like the rest of the sensible population.

“Well you’re better off that way, trust me,” Jen said around a mouthful of toasted muesli.

“What about your parents?” Dan probed.

“What about them?” Her spine stiffened defensively.

“Well...” Dan prompted. “You met mine. What about yours?”

She flinched behind a smile. “What do you want to know? My father still lives in Coffs Harbour and works for Hydro-Tech, of all companies. He’s part of their Australasian management team, in charge of water quality if I’m not mistaken.”

“Not bad.”

“Oh really?” Jen retorted. “Except his corporation has the gall to hold our lives for ransom. They charge whatever they want for their products and we have no choice but to pay. Did you know they mark up by three thousand percent?” She didn’t wait for a reply, but took delight in Dan’s surprise. “Poor people can’t afford drinking water so they filter tap water until their bodies are so clogged with that pink chemical shit they just roll over and die. And do you think Hydro-Tech gives a damn? Hell no, they hike up the price and poison the next rank of the economically disadvantaged.” A furious gleam twinkled in her eyes, declaring her vehement opposition to her father’s work. “Now my mother...” She sighed, letting go of her anger. “She lives in America. I don’t visit her as often as I should.”

Dan remained silent, surprised by her emotional outburst.

“My parents are ‘amicably separated’; though they may as well call it divorce since that’s what it really is.” Jen shrugged. “One day my Mum just said she was

tired of the international security sweeps and wanted to move to America to be closer to her work. Well! Who would've thought people would need to move closer to their job at the dawn of the transportation age?"

"I'm sorry, Jen."

She didn't hear him. "I was twelve when she left and I didn't see her again until I was fifteen. Can you imagine what that feels like? To an adolescent? She didn't even visit on weekends. Jesus, it would've only taken fifteen minutes, if that." Jen chewed another spoonful before continuing, "I heard she found herself a boyfriend." She shrugged. "I haven't seen her in, uh, maybe two years now. She came to see me on my birthday with Mr Perfect in tow." A tinge of sadness had crept into her voice but she banished it and went on, "My grandfather was always there for me though. I miss him."

What could he say? Nothing. Nothing that came to mind would fit the circumstances. Dan was amazed she hadn't turned out bitter. Like me. Here was a woman who'd suffered just as much as anyone, but had surmounted her problems with guts and determination. Dan had no idea whether he'd have coped as well as her if their situations had been reversed.

She was finished her muesli and was silently playing with her spoon until curiosity itched her tongue. "Okay, now it's your turn."

"For what?" Dan deliberately misunderstood, delaying the inevitable. "You've met my parents."

"Who do the pretty photographs on your mantle belong to?"

"Why, to me of course." Dan's acerbic mood was getting progressively worse. He inhaled sharply and lowered his gaze. "She was my wife."

"Was?" She knew she couldn't stop, not once she'd begun.

Dan fiddled with the ring on his finger, twirling it around and around. It was rose gold, the traditional yellow had never suited the tone of his skin. Engraved on the inner rim was the symbol for infinity - the sign he and Katherine had shared to encompass their feelings. She had worn a matching ring, now buried in the Andamookan cemetery. "She died last year."

Jen bit her lip. “Oh, Dan I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, me too.” He smiled wanly. “Look at us, sitting here sharing sob stories. Shouldn’t we be thinking about the future instead of the past?”

Jen bravely worked a smile onto her face. “I suppose we should.”

“So what do you want now?”

She shrugged and looked into his eyes. “I could ask you the same. Are you going to return to bounty hunting after you’ve finished with us?”

That was the essence of his dilemma, the very question he’d been trying to answer for much of the night. “I don’t honestly know.”

She looked dreamily hopeful. “I guess my plans depend on whether we can still be activists wherever we land.”

“I wouldn’t think so,” Dan shook his head. “Too dangerous.”

“Then I’d like a quiet patch of the world where I can be myself, not have to worry about the grind of capitalism, and spend my time collecting shells on the beach.” She smiled brightly, eliciting a half-laugh from Dan. “Of course I’d prefer to sail around the world in a catamaran, but that’ll have to wait for the day I win the lottery.”

“Ah yes, the lotteries: a tax levied against those poor at mathematics.” Dan took their dirty bowls to the sink and splashed some pink water in them.

“Why don’t you come?” Jen was suddenly serious.

“What?” It stopped Dan in his tracks.

“Well, you don’t seem particularly happy where you are. Why don’t you come with us? We could always use another friend, no matter where we end up.”

The thought hadn’t occurred to him. So much of his miserable life was in Andamooka. Is it, really? He looked around. Is there anything here that would stop me from walking away? He had to admit no, there wasn’t.

Jen blinked, a thrilling buzz sizzling in her mind. She liked him and hoped he'd accept, yet at the same time she was terrified by the prospect. She waited impatiently for his response and cursed the ambiguity of his expression.

"I don't know." Dan scratched at the stubble on his chin. "I'll think about it."

"No pressure," Jen said, concealing her relief. "Just wanted you to know you're welcome. To come. If you want, I mean, that is, uh... you know?"

"Thanks." Dan offered her a calloused hand over the counter. She graciously accepted and he gently embraced her slender palm with both of his. "I'll think it over, okay?"

She nodded, mesmerised by his touch. "When do we leave?"

Dan checked his watch, then the calendar on his fridge. "That depends on Cookie. How long will it take him to undermine Echelon?"

"You don't mind that we're doing that?" Jen looked surprised.

"Sure, why not? I figure you deserve a chance." He tilted his head to an unusual angle. "It's not as if I'm an advocate for all that monitoring crap. It has some advantages but not enough to warrant the consequences."

Jen couldn't have agreed more. "Its biggest achievement is in lining UniForce's pockets."

"How about two days?" Dan wondered how long the Raven would take to find them. He was sure the cyborg was tracking them, but two days felt like a safe margin.

"If Cookie can't do it in two days then it can't be done." She smiled and squeezed his hand in reply. "Where are you taking us anyway?"

"You'll see," Dan said vaguely. "You'll like it, I'm sure."

"It's on the coast then?" Jen asked, hopeful.

"You'll see," he said again, the only answer he was willing to give. In truth, he had no idea. But he had two days to come up with something.

He yawned and slumped back onto his stool.

“You must be exhausted,” Jen said and began soothingly massaging the knots from his back.

“I’m okay,” Dan lied uncomfortably. “I’m used to it.”

Cookie shuffled languidly into the room, holding Samantha’s impish hand. “Yo, mornin’ guys.” He patted his stomach, which growled on queue. “I’m starving, what’ve you got to eat?”

*

Friday, September 17, 2066

UniForce Headquarters

15:07 San Francisco, USA

James was close to collapse. Seven hours sleep in three days... madness!

“Not there!” Esteban was ready to take his frustration out on Michele with his fists. “You stupid fucking bitch.” He shoved a knuckle into his mouth and bit hard before he slapped her across the cheek. “You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you?”

She looked at him with big, innocent eyes. “No I’m not.”

“Then why don’t you fucking understand?” Esteban pointed at the screen one last time. “Look, that’s where you click to sort the fields. If you want to sort by date, click on the date. If you want to sort by surname, click on surname. It’s not that fucking hard to understand is it?”

She played with the mouse and clicked seemingly at random. “But when I click on this one I lose the rest of the records.”

A nerve started twitching in the corner of Esteban’s eye and he turned away. Inhale, exhale... inhale, exhale. It was times like these that he had to remember to breathe.

“It’s filtering somehow, isn’t it?” Michele asked innocently.

“For the last time, no! It’s not filtering, it’s sorting. That’s all.”

“Then why does it get rid of some of the records?”

Esteban couldn’t believe she could be so clueless. He felt like punching her in the back of her neck just to hear the sound of snapping bones. Anyone else and he wouldn’t have hesitated. You’re lucky you’re so good at sucking cock. “Forget it.” He couldn’t take it anymore. “Okay! You’re right! It’s filtering.” Believe what you want, bitch.

Michele played some more. She had a record highlighted and each time she clicked a sorting field it shot to the top of her screen. The records she kept ‘losing’ were merely pushed above and she didn’t have the savvy to scroll with

her mouse to find them. As far as she could ascertain, the buttons Esteban had indicated were filtering the records with a confusing set of rules.

“Come now children,” James said, interrupting with a poorly chosen set of words that nearly earned him a torn ear.

“What?” Esteban spun to face him. “You’d better have good news, Poindexter.”

“And I do.” James smiled deliriously. “I’ve decoded the Raven’s thoughts.”

“And?” Esteban still wasn’t impressed, though some news was better than no news.

“He’s in Australia,” James continued translating, hoping the Raven wouldn’t detect his parasitic leech-like program. “And he’s following Dan Sutherland’s trail north from Tweed Heads.”

“So?” Esteban shook James by the shoulders. “Where the fuck are they?”

“He doesn’t know.”

Esteban’s lungs exploded with a sigh, which he emphasised by throwing his arms into the air. “All that work and you still know squat.” He smiled sarcastically. “Fuck you. And fuck you too Michele. Fuck you both! You can sit here and rot for all I care.”

“Where’re you going?” James frowned, irritated that someone was leaving. He wanted to leave too. But you don’t see me leaving, do you?

“I’m tired of waiting for you to pull your head out of your arse.” He stabbed them with a look of pure repulsion. “I’m going to find him myself.” He slammed the door on his way out and it vibrated the walls, causing one of James’s carefully hung paintings to fall to the floor.

James snorted. “It’s all fun and games until someone loses an e-mail.”

“What?” Michele didn’t understand.

“Nothing.” He sighed and returned his attention to the Raven’s thoughts. It was fascinating to see the world through another man’s eyes.

*

“Miller speaking.” He failed to keep the boredom from his voice.

“It’s me, Esteban.” He was using an internal phone that hooked directly into one of the few exchanges that bypassed Echelon. It was safe to talk. At least, that’s what James had told him. “I need to access your database.”

The boredom changed to nervousness. “Uh, you already have it.”

“Not that one,” Esteban snapped. “The other one. The one nobody knows about.”

“Is this line safe?”

“Do you think I’d be dumb enough to say this if it wasn’t?”

Silence.

“Did Junior call you?” Esteban asked.

Adrian nodded into his receiver but it wasn’t a videophone so the gesture didn’t transmit. “Yeah, he called. I heard you have a problem.”

“I’ll need your help.”

Adrian sighed. “He said that too. When?”

“Soon.” Esteban shrugged, another useless gesture. “I don’t know where they are yet, that’s why I need your database.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll rout a session to your terminal in the Guild.” Adrian sounded annoyed; he didn’t like sticking his neck out so far, not even for his protector.

A wicked smile swelled through Esteban’s lips and edged into his tone. “Thanks man, I owe you.” But he didn’t really believe that.

“Just don’t do anything stupid in there, okay?”

Esteban grunted. “Me?”

The line clicked dead.

*

He tapped an annoyed finger to the screen, fatigue and boredom wearing on his patience. It took two hours before he saw the pattern that should have leapt out immediately. That's unusual. He did a sweep of past records to confirm his suspicion before smelling victory. Esteban jotted down the portal number and licked his lips, selecting Junior from the speed-dial on his mobile.

“Yeah?”

“I found him.” Esteban's voice was husky with greed. “Tell Adrian. We're taking a trip to South Australia.”

*

Saturday, September 18, 2066

13:18 Andamooka, South Australia

A chill tingled in Dan's spine, though didn't understand why. It caught him unprepared and he lost his train of thought mid-sentence. He coughed to cover his discomfort. "Uh, what was I saying?" He had the vague impression it was important.

Jen caught the undertones and frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, just... felt a little chill, that's all." Dan brushed it aside even though his instincts were warning him... Of what? We're safe here. He couldn't think of a rational reason for his sudden uneasiness and chalked it up to lack of sleep.

Jen felt the onset of a headache and wondered whether fresh air would clear her mind. "You wanna go for a walk?"

"You mean outside?"

Jen nodded. "Uh, yeah, that's what I had in mind."

"Okay," he agreed. "You two wanna come?"

Samantha looked tempted but refused to leave Cookie's side. "Only if he comes too."

Cookie clucked his tongue, perplexed by the defensive array UniForce administrators were erecting around Echelon. It was starting to fry his brain, he was sure. The sensible part of his mind begged him to take a break but the stubborn part ordered him to think about the problem from a different angle. "No, I'm too close. I'll take a walk after I've cracked the nut."

They all doubted it.

"Just us then," Jen said, secretly glad they'd be alone. She surprised herself and marvelled, Wasn't it just this morning I felt uncomfortable around him? The walk would be their first opportunity to talk privately since breakfast. She hadn't told the others that she'd invited Dan to vanish with them. But there's no sense telling them if he doesn't want to come, she rationalised. I'll break the news if he

accepts. “You can show me your property.”

“All right, not that there’s much to see.” First he went to his bedroom, retrieved a pair of Katherine’s sunglasses from the bedside table, and tossed them to Jen. “Here, you’ll need these.”

She gratefully accepted and followed his lead into the oven-like conditions above.

The heat was blistering. She saw waves of it shimmering from the red earth, baking everything to a crisp. The scanty nearby gumtrees were scorched and brittle, their leaves incapable of withstanding the extreme temperatures despite nature’s fine engineering. In the distance she saw a fleshy plant that looked like a cactus, its thorny spines the only barrier between the heat-exhausted animals and its succulent juices.

“It’s a desert.” Jen felt the heat sear her lungs with every breath, choking her bronchiales dry.

“Welcome to the driest state in Australia.” Dan smiled and swept his arms around the horizon. “This is opal country, you know.”

“Really?” Jen couldn’t say anything else; the heat was sapping her strength.

“My house was originally an opal mine. I widened the shaft and excavated the broader passages to accommodate a house.” He shielded his eyes from the overhead sun despite the protection afforded by his sunglasses. “I boarded up some tunnels. I had an engineer assess their stability and he said he wouldn’t want his children sleeping in them. No sense tempting fate, right? Being trapped in an old mine when the roof caves in isn’t my idea of a nice way to go.”

Jen shivered despite the heat. “No.”

They strolled toward the array of thermo-cells, the only real point of interest on Dan’s otherwise barren land.

“I like the desert,” he admitted. “People think it’s dead, but it’s not.”

She was sure the soles of her shoes were melting and snuck a quick look back at the entrance to Dan’s burrow, half expecting to see black footprints of molten

rubber marking her passage.

“It’s especially beautiful at dusk and dawn.” He was squinting behind his plastic frames, sensing her discomfort in the heat. The sweat was evaporating from his skin faster than it could cool him and, five minutes after setting foot outside, he felt a brutal sunburn beginning. And Dan’s skin was several shades darker than Jen’s so she’d fry like a chip if she stayed out longer than fifteen minutes. “Do you want to come back when it’s cooler?”

She was tempted; her head reeled from the overheated blood pounding at her temples. Jen had never experienced heatstroke and didn’t recognise the preliminary signs. But she firmly shook her head. “No, I want to see the rest of your property.”

Dan laughed. “This is it, there’s nothing more to see.” They were halfway to the thermo-cells. “There’re some rocks over there, a cluster of trees in that direction, and some salt pans that came to the surface a decade ago when the watertable rose. They’re near the thermo-cells.”

“Salt pans? Are they still there?”

Dan nodded. “Sure.”

“Can I see?”

He motioned with his hand, indicating that she was welcome to keep walking. “You see that shimmer?” He was pointing.

Jen frowned. “I see heatwaves everywhere.”

“Well the densest patch is where it’s radiating off the salt. It’s a couple of centimetres thick in the worst areas.”

They reached the crusted salt and she knelt, running a finger across the rough surface. Dan walked onto it, cracking it as he went. “It was a lot worse a few years ago. It’s slowly seeping back into the ground.”

Jen muttered under her breath, “So much for responsible irrigation.” They were problems that had devastated much of rural Australia: water salinity and the rising watertable. Due to deforestation, irresponsible land management, and utter

lack of conservation, the epidemic had taken decades of innovative engineering to overcome.

Dan looked at her and thought about the feelings stirring in his chest. Are they fatal? They made him feel guilty and he wished they'd stop. The sad truth was that life had been easier before he'd apprehended Jen. Or, failed to apprehend her, he reminded himself sullenly. Maybe that was a mistake? He tried to imagine the consequences of his choice but the future was blurry, murky, and in places black. Jen couldn't be right. According to a poll he'd found on the 'net, less than 0.1 percent of respondents were dissatisfied with the world and the WEF. So maybe the world really is on track. He doubted it, but the world's problems weren't something activism could fix. Besides, what was best for the majority was best for the species wasn't it? Does that mean Jen doesn't deserve a social slot? How do you balance individual freedom with majority rule? Is she an outcast? A gaggle of questions bounced inside his mind, none of which he could answer.

Jen snapped a corner off the white slab and touched it to her tongue, as though she couldn't quite believe it was salt. "There's so much."

He nodded, absorbed by his inner thoughts. Rising above the mob of discomfiting questions was one thing he knew for certain, and he had to let her know. "Jen..."

She stood to look at him.

Dan brushed his fingers tenderly across her chin. "I can't come with you."

"Why?" Jen felt confused and ashamed. But her feelings quickly turned to anger, which she directed at herself. How could I be so stupid? She was furious that she'd made herself vulnerable. A bounty hunter of all people! Oh my God, how did that happen? Still, she needed an answer.

"It's too soon." He braved a smile that he didn't quite feel capable of giving. "After Katherine I mean."

It stung. Jen felt a pang in her stomach, which quickly moved toward her chest. Most of all she felt lost, like an autumn leaf at the mercy of a chaotic and cruel wind. She would have sooner melted than admit it, but she'd been using Dan as her anchor. And now he'd cast her adrift. It's too soon. An empty chasm settled

where hope had once been. But she defied her feelings, forced a smile, and reached up to touch him on the shoulder. “It’s okay, I understand.”

I doubt it, Dan thought, hoping she never would. Nobody deserves to understand this loneliness and desolation. “Maybe I’ll visit.”

“I’d like that.” Jen felt her skin tingling under the oppressive sun and said, “I’m burning, I’d better go in.”

Dan nodded. “I’ll be along soon. Now that I’m here, I might as well check the calibration on the thermo-cells. I’ve been meaning to do it for weeks.”

“Okay, see you inside.” She realised how straining it had been to keep the dejection from her face when she turned away and allowed the mask to slip. Each pace was like a stride into the unknown. We’re alone. But she’d been comfortable with that for months. So why is it bothering me now? She didn’t need Dan, she didn’t need anybody, or so she was desperate to believe. Three days ago she’d been fiercely independent. And now? It was different. Why? She couldn’t explain. It just was.

Dan watched her leave, hands on his hips. He was so wrapt by his inner turmoil that he didn’t notice the burgundy four-wheel drive tearing down the dirt road, throwing up a cloud of dust and grit. It swerved violently, slicing across his boundary with a bucking action that would’ve whiplashed the passengers. And by the time it was within striking distance, Dan was too late to stop them.

*

Esteban squinted at the barren landscape through the double-glazing. “What a fucking desert.” He snivelled and ran a hand across his face. Junior was driving recklessly, grinding the gearbox. Hardly surprising since he hadn’t driven a car for months and hadn’t driven a manual for years. Their stolen four-wheel drive wasn’t exactly a luxury vehicle either. Its leather seats were badly scarred and slashed, the foam in the cushions squeezing to freedom. And it stinks! It reminded Esteban of the repugnant stench of pig manure. Fucking farmers. He abhorred anything that even remotely resembled farms or farming. To him it was primitive, far removed from the luxury of the Guild.

Adrian sat in the front passenger seat, on the left since Australians drove on the left. Stupid English and their stupid left-of-the-road rules. Esteban’s lack of sleep

had deposited him squarely in an unpleasant mood.

Adrian was studying a map, turning it around with each twist of the dusty road to keep it pointing straight. “It should be about two miles.”

“Which side of the road?” A grinding sound screeched from the mortified gearbox as Junior selected a lower gear and revved the engine to mount a steep incline in the road.

“Uh...” Adrian adjusted his glasses before answering, “Right.”

The tachometer redlined with Junior’s punishment. “Right.”

“No!” Adrian changed his mind. “I mean left.”

“Left? You’re sure.”

“Uh...” Adrian spun the map again. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“Right.”

“Shut the fuck up you clowns.” Esteban wasn’t in the mood for their antics. “Just remember what you’re supposed to do.”

“How could we forget?” Junior punctuated his rhetorical question with another shift in the stick and another grind from the gears. The four-wheel drive had high ground clearance to cope with the rough Australian conditions and it felt as if he was driving a truck. It ran on diesel rather than petroleum-replacement fuel and was therefore difficult to stall. Somehow, he’d managed twice in town.

“Here!” Adrian pointed to his left. “Right here!”

Junior spun the wheel sharply and their land cruiser careered over an embankment and dipped sharply back to earth with a crunch that nearly landed Adrian’s head on the dashboard.

Esteban wasn’t wearing a seatbelt but he’d braced himself firmly against the two seats in front and taken the impact with his arms. Perfect. He swept the scene and changed his fluid plans in an instant. “Go, go! There!” He slapped Junior in the shoulder and pointed out the windscreen. “Quick!”

He recognised her, even from a distance. It was the way she walked. Jennifer Cameron. A twisted grin lit Esteban's face and he gripped the stock of his automatic rifle and grunted doggedly. Die bitch. He pressed the button to lower his power window and swung the barrel out before gently squeezing the trigger. Three rounds burst with a flash from the muzzle, visible even in the dazzle of the desert. He saw three distinct puffs of dirt explode on her left. He hadn't intended to hit her, though the rocking of their vehicle made for a dicey game. One stray round was enough to splatter her brains over the baked ground for the scavengers to feed upon. He was trying to avoid that.

Another squeeze and the rifle recoiled, again pummelling his shoulder. This time there were four quick kicks amid the deafening bark of automatic fire. He was herding her away from the reflective orange plates that warned approaching vehicles of Dan's underground abode. If I can nab her before she reaches the house... It was too perfect to have planned. Only luck and chance could deliver something so divinely flawless.

Junior swerved just as Esteban put pressure on the trigger and a burst of fire swept perilously past Jen. Esteban lowered the weapon to make sure she was still alive. Three rounds puffed into the ground hazardously close, passing half a metre from her fragile body. Okay, that's too close. Esteban lowered the rifle and reached for his Peacemaker, better suited for close range. They were near enough to make out the startled expression on her face and it thrilled him in a sadistic way. She was sprinting now, running for her life. Not that it'll do you any good, honey.

A bullet shattered the rear window and Esteban swept the horizon for anything he'd missed. There, by the cells. It was Dan. Only he would've had the wits and guts to fire upon a four-wheel drive full of men with automatic weapons.

"Cover him!" Esteban shouted above the revving engine.

"I see it." Adrian used his scope, pressing his glasses as close as he dared without the two surfaces touching. He squeezed his trigger and a volley of .303 calibre bullets zinged through the air and shredded a thermo-cell.

Esteban slapped Junior on the shoulder. "Pull up beside her."

He swerved to obey and easily intercepted Jen before she could reach a copse of trees. Adrian laid additional covering fire and splintered more of Dan's thermo-

cells while Esteban opened his door and knocked Jen to the ground.

She twisted underneath him, trying to squirm onto her back where she'd have a chance to claw out his eyes. But his heftier frame and vicelike grip were too much. He subdued her by twisting her arms behind her back and wrenching them high. She moaned with pain. Any more pressure and her shoulders would pop, tearing her arms from their sockets. Jen kicked with her feet, trying to dig a heel into his back, but he was too far forward.

“Get off me!” Her breathing was weak; the fall had knocked the wind out of her.

“Not likely.” Esteban yanked her to her feet with calculated force, jolting her with pain. Any harder and he would've shattered her shoulders beyond repair. He quickly wrapped piano wire around her wrists, securing them behind her back. It cut into her flesh, biting deeper the more she resisted. “Is that too tight?”

All Jen could do was nod, her face pale from a nauseating combination of shock and pain.

“Good.” Esteban tugged her arms apart, the action leaving her ill to her core. The slightest pressure sent waves of agony shooting up from her wrists. She had no options left, or none that she was willing to take. Nothing was worth severing her hands. Already the razor-like wire had sliced a neat circle around each wrist and it was threatening to start on her tendons and bones. If Esteban had wanted, he could've wrenched her elbows apart and cut her tendons, making her fingers limp and useless. But he didn't. He had something more insidious in mind. “Now get in.”

Blinded by pain and the sudden flood of light, Jen obeyed. Her sunglasses lay smashed in the dirt. Disorientated and dazed, she stepped one leg after the other into the air-conditioned land cruiser. In the distance she heard a shot, then another, but they were soon drowned by rapid gunfire from the cabin of her waiting vehicle.

Esteban retrieved his rifle and peered cautiously toward the thermo-cells. “Where is he?” He looked through his scope, scouring the land for Dan.

“Next to the cells,” Adrian replied, wondering how many brittle sheets of thermoplastic his bullets could penetrate.

“Don’t kill him,” Esteban ordered. His devilish mind had cooked a special recipe for Dan’s torment, a fitting punishment for causing his premature fieldwork retirement. Another .45 round twanged into the land cruiser’s chassis. “You understand? I don’t want him dead.”

*

Panic gripped Dan’s throat. He couldn’t see her anymore. Is she dead? There was something on the ground that could have been Jen and it sent a shrill spike of terror through his mind. He wished he had better cover than the flimsy thermo-cells. He eyed a dip in the ground ten metres away with desire. But they have automatics. He gave his Colt a disgusted look. It was practically useless at this range; he wasn’t that good a shot. More unnerving was the thought that if he kept firing he might accidentally kill Jen. He hugged the frame with a grimace and peered through a bullet hole punctured in the cell material.

It wasn’t the Raven. He had a vastly different operating pattern and always worked alone. But who is it? The question nagged at the back of his mind.

UniForce? He couldn’t think of anyone else who could assemble that much firepower so quickly.

He fired another two shots, giving Jen a wide berth, and was alarmed to hear one of his bullets strike metal. The wind was picking up, sending dust swirls to obscure his vision and make his trajectory unpredictable. The tiny particles of dirt stung his eyes and were gritty in his mouth, tasting like mud. He used the whirlwind as cover and dashed for the ditch, rolling into it with the all the grace and aplomb of a maimed elephant. But immediately he felt safer. A string of bullets thudded into the ground around his head and he hunkered low, giving them as little as possible to shoot at. He had a significant disadvantage. The last thing he wanted was to harm Jen, so he didn’t want to risk returning fire. I’m a sitting duck. Dan punched the ground in frustration and peeked above his mound, praying they’d be foolish enough to close in on his position.

I’ve lost. The truth tasted like poison. He wondered how he’d erred so badly. And now my foolishness has cost Jen her life.

*

“He’s holed up pretty good.” Adrian massaged his trigger with the sensitive pad

on his right index finger, gratified when the weapon recoiled once in response. He saw the clod of dirt kicked up through the swirl in the air and spat on the ground to clear the dust from his mouth.

“It doesn’t matter.” Esteban sneered. “We’ve got all we need.”

He pushed Jen roughly to her side on the backseat, enjoying her wince of pain. He reached for the long metal canister at her feet and pulled it free. It was light, made of high-polymer plastics and strengthened with ribbons of aluminium. He mounted the weapon on his shoulder and pressed the activation button, which caused the scope to drop from its recess. He closed his other eye, concentrating on the aim. He targeted Dan’s hollow and jammed his thumb on the firing mechanism. With a flare of smoke, a grenade-like projectile rocketed from the gaping hole at the front of the canister. It wasn’t a lethal weapon, or wasn’t supposed to be, though sometimes people with a weak constitution succumbed to it. It arced blindly through the sky, buffeted by the winds in a haphazard dance that landed it five metres from Dan. Upon impact it detonated with a swirl of purple reagent, which quickly engulfed area. It was a biochemical gas used to subdue crowds, which had gained infamy during the riots of the ’20s and ’30s.

“Goodnight Daniel.” Esteban leered, lowering the single-shot rocket launcher.

“Can we go now?” Junior hung out the driver’s side window, agitated by the worsening dust storm and the potential for unfriendly fire. “I’m not fishing him out of that shit.”

“We don’t have to.” Esteban smiled again, marvelling at his genius. “His torture’s only just begun.” He clambered onto the backseat with Jen, slammed the door, and invited Junior to plant his foot on the accelerator.

Their balding tyres spun twice before gripping the loose surface and their transport lurched forward.

“Who are you?” Jen abandoned her attempt to sit up; the searing pain from the piano wire was too much.

Esteban raised an eyebrow and a jovial grin parted his lips. “You don’t recognise me?” He tossed his small-bore rifle into the trunk and tucked his Peacemaker into its holster.

“Should I?” Tears of pain were blurring her vision.

“It’ll come back to you.” Esteban’s laughter struck a chord of dread in the pit of Jen’s stomach. She heard tones of her death in his mirth. The land rover rocked when they rejoined the road, jarring her wrists with another snippet of pain.

“What do you want?” Jen braved the agony and squirmed to something that resembled a sitting position by leveraging herself against the opposite door.

He licked his lips. “I want to play with you for a while.” He ran a rough hand through her hair and pulled her head back until it struck the glass, bearing her slender neck for his inspection. He leant forward and caressed her skin with the tip of his nose as he inhaled deeply, savouring the smell.

Jen squirmed in revulsion but the wire snaring her wrists prevented her from retaliating. Her next words dripped with animosity. “You twisted fuck,” she spat. “Why don’t you just kill me?”

“Ah, Jennifer, you have me all wrong. I don’t intend to kill you.” Esteban released his fistful of hair and rubbed the back of his hand against the side of her breast.

Junior barked a laugh from the front and added, “Yet.”

*

The chemicals acting on Dan’s neurotransmitters distorted his image of the world. The tears streaming onto his cheeks weren’t helping either. And the twitch was getting worse, turning into a spasm. He pulled his tongue back into his mouth and clamped his jaw shut before rolling as far and as fast as he could. Purple. It was everywhere and he screwed his eyes shut to protect them from the potent sting. Purple? He was digging through his clouded memory to recall what that meant. Nerve toxin? He doubted it; he’d be dead already if it was. Besides, they’d fired it too close without protective equipment. Too risky, especially in this wind.

His lungs felt as if they were on fire and he gasped for air only to swallow more irritant. He kept rolling, trying to get clear of the purple screen. He held his breath until he nearly blacked out and when he next opened his eyes, all he could see was red Andamookan sand. A tiny whirlwind, or spinning-devil as Katherine

had called them, was whipping the purple gas into a toxic funnel and spinning it in the opposite direction. Finally some good luck. Dan's vision was hazy and he could barely focus on his Colt's sights, let alone anything beyond. He fought unconsciousness and unwisely shook his head to clear the dizziness.

Everything spun.

The car? He couldn't be sure. It looked closer than he remembered. And it's black, not burgundy. He was aiming at his thermo-cells, the barrel of his Colt wobbling dangerously from side to side as he struggled to keep it still.

A wave of nausea rocked him when he swivelled to isolate the enemy from the swirl of blurry background. He choked on the impulse to vomit but he'd ingested too much chemical and he emptied the contents of his stomach in an uncontrollable fit of retching. With a momentous effort, he staggered to his knees and waved his Colt in an arc, the bitter taste of vomit fresh on his tongue.

Gone. He couldn't see properly but nothing resembled a four-wheel drive.

He fell to one side, unstable even on his knees, and landed in the sticky pool of his own vomit, smearing it across his clothes. The acrid smell in his nostrils evoked another gag but there was nothing left to come up.

Someone touched his shoulder and he spun wildly with a half-clenched fist, knocking him away. The chemical had also affected his ears and he couldn't hear the screech of wind whipping sand against the thermo-cells or the reassuring shout from Cookie as he made another approach. It sounded as though he was underwater - everything distorted and muffled. Dan rasped for breath as though suffering from pulmonary emphysema. If he'd inhaled any more anti-riot chemical he would've asphyxiated despite its claim for non-lethality.

"It's me!" Cookie shouted, loud enough to pierce his daze.

Dan vaguely wondered where he'd left his Colt as he allowed Cookie to drag him to his feet. There are two. Samantha helped on the other side, offering more support than he would have guessed possible from her slight frame. He entwined sickly fingers around their clothes and limped with them in a seemingly random direction. Why am I limping? His left knee was numb and he looked down to see whether it was still there, afraid the detonating canister had blown it off. He sported a nasty gash in his trousers and a trickle of blood had soaked down to his

sock, but it wouldn't leave him permanently disabled. From the roll. He'd sliced himself on one of the sharper rocks.

Dan stumbled down the stairs and obediently lifted his arms when Cookie tried to peel the vomit soaked shirt from his body.

"What happened?" Fear permeated Samantha's question. "Where's Jen?"

Jen... Dan shut his eyes and collapsed onto the couch, which Samantha had covered with a towel to protect from vomit. "They got her."

"Who's 'they'?" Cookie asked while using the sponge from the sink to remove the worst of the acidic mess coagulating on Dan's body. It made him queasy, but somebody had to do it and Cookie wasn't one to shy from vulgar tasks.

Dan did his best to shrug, regretting it when another wave of nausea splashed inside him. "I don't know."

"We heard gunfire and came to look." Cookie swallowed his desire to retch. "We stayed out of the way until we heard a car tearing arse out of here. Then we saw you rolling out from under that purple cloud."

"Riot gas," Dan explained. "Designed to incapacitate a swarm of fanatics."

"Yeah well it messed you up real good." Cookie swabbed at the remaining chunks clinging to his chest hair. "But what-"

The phone rang.

Dan prised his eyes open and sat up. His cordless videophone used a rotating encryption algorithm to skirt the privacy issues associated with boundless transmission mediums. It was shrill and drove a spike of pain through his muted hearing. Samantha handed him the receiver on the sixth ring.

"Hello?" he answered, barely above a whisper.

Silence. Whoever was on the other end had disabled the video feature. Only a steady crackle of static informed him that someone was listening.

"Who is this?" Dan's patience was wearing thin and blind rage was the only

emotion ready to replace his civility.

A crackling laugh buzzed through the speaker, just loud enough for Samantha and Cookie to hear. “Hello Daniel.”

The voice was hauntingly familiar though Dan couldn’t quite place it. Someone from his past, someone he’d prefer to forget. Damn it. He wished his memory would cooperate.

“Where’s Jen?”

“Oh, is that what you call her?” The voice mocked him with a low wolf whistle. “Quite a honey you have there. Or had I should say. What a pity she comes from such an ill-fated family.”

Dan knew the man was toying with him and he was in no shape to play games, especially ones that required him to think. A splitting headache was throbbing in his frontal lobes. “Who is this?”

“Tut, tut, Daniel. It hurts me to think I mean that little to you.” The voice laughed again. “But what should I expect, huh? You went back to your life, totally unaware of what you did to mine. But I think you’re going to remember me this time, Daniel.”

“Cut the crap asshole,” Dan snapped.

“Why don’t you guess?” The lustre of joy evaporated from his voice.

“Why don’t you just tell me?” he retorted, still unable to lock onto the fleeting memory that would bring a flood of understanding to the situation.

“Picture it - the year is 2059 and Mike Cameron is rallying public support for the opposition. But, oh dear, somebody killed him instead.”

Dan’s eyelids slid shut and he assembled the strength to rise to his feet. “Esteban Garcia Valdez.” I should’ve known. Memories crashed against his inner thoughts, bringing bad tidings.

“There, that wasn’t so hard was it?” Esteban cackled. “All you needed was a bit of encouragement. But you know what, Daniel?”

“What?” Something deep within Dan’s aura of self-defence screamed at him that he didn’t want to know.

“I’ve had a greater impact on your pathetic little life than you think.” Esteban sneered into the receiver.

A pulse of adrenaline added strength to Dan’s pacing. “Is Jen still alive?” He carried the conversation away from Samantha and Cookie.

“Oh yes, she’s fine. Very fine if you don’t mind me saying so.” He paused for long enough to lick his lips and blow a kiss in Jen’s direction. “Do you want to know what we have in mind for her?”

“Probably not.”

“Ah, but I think you do.” Esteban relished this. He’d been waiting for this conversation, waiting for when it would have the maximum impact. It was a speech he’d practiced hundreds of times before falling asleep at night and whispered to his reflection in the mirror while shaving in the morning. He’d fastidiously woven it into the fabric of his existence. And now, finally, he could deliver the message. “Listen and you might learn something.” He reached forward and squeezed Jen’s firm breast, sliding his hand inside her shirt and bra to feel her flesh. She cringed, but the piano wire ensured she couldn’t twist away. He liked watching her cower and loved to smell her fear. “First I’m going to rape her.”

Dan winced as if Esteban had plunged a dagger into his chest and twisted it. He could only imagine the fear captured in Jen’s eyes at that moment, looking at a man that had just admitted his intention to rape her. Perhaps the worst part for Dan was his feeling of overwhelming helplessness. He could do absolutely nothing, and he knew it.

“I’m going to have heaps of fun,” Esteban said relentlessly, “tying her wrists and ankles to each corner of the bed with piano wire and forcing myself upon her.” A wicked gleam twinkled in his eyes. Something evil possessed him and Jen had to look away. “I’ll be nice about it,” he said, his voice drifting through the speaker pressed against Dan’s ear. “I’ll be gentle. It won’t hurt unless she struggles, but there’s nothing I can do if she cuts her hands and feet off with the wire.”

Dan felt sick to the pit of his stomach. The residual taste of vomit on the back of

his tongue nearly spawned a fresh bout of gagging. “You bastard.”

“Ah, no, you missed a word. I’m a fucking bastard, Daniel.”

“Fuck you!”

Esteban laughed, enjoying Dan’s torment. “You want to know what I’ll do then?” He paused, though didn’t really expect an answer. “I bet you do.” Another pause. “I’m going to get a tube of superglue and squeeze a thin film into her eyes. Do you know how much the fumes sting if you hold that shit too close? I can only imagine it’d burn like a hornet’s dick if you got it on your cornea.”

Dan froze in shock, dropping to his knees.

“Your wife screamed for ten whole minutes when we did that to her. Man, you should’ve heard. This time I think I’ll tape it so you can enjoy it too.”

Disbelief sweated in beads across Dan’s slack jaw while a seed of murderous wrath boiled in the dark recesses of his mind.

“So then we’ll leave her for, oh, say four hours? That should be just long enough for her to mourn the loss of sight. Your wife was whimpering the whole fucking time, begging for her life and for the life of her unborn child. But you can’t rush these things you know, there’s a certain sophistication required or it turns into a barbaric bloodbath.”

Dan was mute.

“After four hours struggling in the dark I think she’ll welcome Adrian’s touch. Mind you, he’s not as tender as I am. He might hurt her. I sometimes hear his wenches scream because he’s fond of biting their breasts. Don’t get me wrong, he’s a great guy, but he’s an animal in the sack.” Esteban’s monologue trampled the most fragile parts of Dan’s psyche. “After he’s finished drilling whatever parts of her anatomy he feels like, we’ll be fishing for the superglue again. But this time... well you probably know what we’ll glue next, don’t you?”

A quiver of anger seeped from his lips and he forged a promise that he intended to keep: “You’re a dead man.”

“Ah, I beg to differ.” Esteban enjoyed the freedom afforded by his specially

modified mobile phone, one that hugged a channel Echelon couldn't scan. He could say whatever he wanted without repercussion. "I'm very much alive. It's a beautiful day today, don't you agree?" He took the time to lick Jen's right earlobe and held the receiver up to her mouth. "Be a dear and say hello, will you?"

"Dan?" Jen was trembling with the effort of keeping tears from her eyes. She didn't want to give Esteban the satisfaction.

His eyes shot wide with another shock of helplessness. What can I say? It was the most excruciating word he'd ever uttered, "Jen?"

"Dan, it's me-"

Esteban stole the receiver back and planted an unwelcome kiss on Jen's cheek. "That's enough for now." He smiled maliciously. "That's right, Daniel, her mouth. We'll lay a thin track of our special glue along her lips and seal them shut."

Dan remembered the state of his wife's body when he'd identified her in the morgue. He remembered how blue she'd looked and remembered the signs of stress along her eyelids where she'd tried to tear them open.

"We'll give her four hours to think about that too. Unfortunately, it doesn't stop the sobbing. Or at least that bitch you called a wife made an awful noise. It does stop the begging though, so that's something. But that's all in the past, right? Onward and upward." He appraised Jen with an admiring look. "Jen looks like a better screw than your wife anyway."

Dan crawled further from Samantha and Cookie, who were watching with anxious expressions. "If you touch her, I swear..."

"What?" Anger replaced Esteban's pleasure. "What're you gonna do about it, tough guy?"

"I'll kill you." It was the simple truth. This one man had done more damage to everything Dan held dear than the rest of the ugliness in the world combined. No matter how long it takes, I will kill you.

Esteban laughed into the phone. "You go right ahead and try. In fact, I'd be

bitterly disappointed if you didn't try. But it won't be before Junior gets his turn with your new friend." He audibly mocked a wince. "And he's the really rough one. That's why he has to go last. Do you remember all that bruising around your wife's genitalis? That was Junior, and he's grown worse since then. I almost pity Jennifer for what he'll end up doing to her."

Pity? Dan sourly doubted that Esteban was capable of such an emotion.

"After Junior's had his jollies there won't be much left." Esteban revelled in the resignation he accurately read in Jen's eyes. "We'll glue her nostrils shut, which will leave her with two choices. She can either suffocate or tear her own lips to draw breath." Another mock wince came through the phone to punish Dan's waiting ear. "You read the autopsy report on your wife, so you know what she chose. I wonder what Jennifer will do?"

"You're an animal," Dan whispered, a primal rage consuming what was left of his sanity - just as Esteban had hoped.

Esteban thought about that for a moment. "Yes, I am. And proud of it. You know, your wife used her bloodied lips to plea for her life again so we had to leave her writhing in agony for another four hours." He sighed. "She really was a mess, and the thrashing Junior gave her nearly tore her hands off. It turns my stomach to think about it, truly it does." But the merry tone of his voice betrayed the lie. "Anyway, if Jennifer's anywhere near as determined as your wife, we'll have to spend the final four hours getting drunk. After all, we'll need full bladders."

Dan's world was swirling from forces more powerful than the chemicals he'd inhaled. He felt the final strings of his sanity fraying at the edges.

"You know what's next, don't you? You probably pieced it together from the pitiful amount of forensic evidence the Australian detectives slipped you. We'll clamp her head in a vice, glue her messy lips around a funnel, and take turns pissing in it until she drowns on our beer reeking urine."

Snap. Dan screamed into the phone, an unintelligible mass of raw energy that, despite the drone of the engine, everyone in the land rover could hear buzzing through Esteban's mobile. "Your life is forfeit!"

Esteban laughed, enraging Dan further.

“Come and get me.” With a final sneer, he hung up, leaving Dan on his hands and knees listening to the beeping tones of the termination signal.

Dan tightened his grip on the phone until the plastic cracked and he smashed it against the carpet, bending the areal. In a fit of rage he pounded it again and again until the case split and bits of shattered PCB cartwheeled across the floor.

“What is it?” Samantha retreated into Cookie’s arms, frightened by Dan’s violent outburst.

Dan didn’t reply. He couldn’t reply. His mind had collapsed and was tormenting him with visions of his tortured wife’s body as she lay on the coroner’s table. Why? He bit hard on his lips to stop the scream that was about to boil from his lungs. Fucking why? It didn’t make sense. Dark emotions swamped him. Anger seethed through every cell in his body and projected a singular desire for revenge, to take an axe and smash it into those who had snatched his beloved wife. He wanted to maim, to kill and to destroy. He gathered every ounce of energy he had and bent it toward Esteban’s death. The result was a poisoned core, so damaged that he doubted he was capable of feeling anything but hatred. It generated a bloodlust unquenchable by anything except Esteban’s entrails.

Samantha wasn’t the only one to recoil from Dan’s transformation. Cookie saw the void in Dan’s eyes and wondered what it was. It wasn’t anger, nor was it any feeling he’d had the luxury to catalogue. The closest match was pure, untainted death, living in the mind of a man. He flinched, wondering whether Dan would still recognise they weren’t the enemy.

“Who was that?” Cookie’s voice cracked with a concoction of fatigue and fear.

Dan viciously snarled his reply, a guttural bark that could’ve come from the throat of a wolf. “He killed my wife.”

That stunned Cookie into silence and brought compassion flooding to Samantha’s fearful eyes.

“And he’s going to kill Jen too,” Dan said, nearly choking on the words.

“Is there anything we can do?”

Dan laughed, cursing himself for his stupidity. Why did I let her go outside? I

knew it was dangerous and I let her go anyway. At that moment, an unwelcome emotion surfaced from his past. He hated himself. He loathed what he was and what he'd done. Someone had once told him that people were judged by their actions in life, not by how much money they made. If that were the case, and if there were an afterlife, then he'd never see Katherine again because he'd rot in hell. He wished he had the power to turn back the clock and hated that he couldn't. He'd begged to revisit his past in the weeks after Katherine's murder, but no God had responded to his pleas. His reflection in the mirror revolted him and, eleven months ago, he'd smashed every mirror in the house, bloodying his knuckles and wallowing in the pain from the shards. I deserve pain. He preferred physical agony to the emotional variety; he'd already taken a gutful of that.

How could I be so fucking careless? It was just as bad as if he'd killed Jen with his own hands. There's no excuse for negligence.

But, cruelly, it gave him purpose. He had something to work toward. He doubted he'd be in time to save Jen from her hideous fate, but he'd make certain that Esteban and his thugs would never harm another woman.

“Dan?”

He was shaking on the floor, convulsing with self-loathing. Samantha's voice chiselled through to a part of his mind still capable of rational thought. His first priority had to be to the survivors, they needed him now more than ever. Come on Danny-body, snap out of it. But it was not something he'd ever be able to 'snap' out of. It would haunt him until he lay restlessly in his grave. But purpose sharpened his survival instincts and focussed his determination into a fist of cold steel in the pit of his stomach.

He struggled to stand on wobbly legs and pressed the back of his wrist to his forehead to stem the pounding in his brain. “We have to leave.”

“Whoa, hang on a second man.” Cookie took a pace forward, ready to catch him if he collapsed again. “Tell us what's going on.”

Dan wasn't in the mood to recount tales of his foolishness, but they deserved to know what they were facing. “Eleven months ago my wife was murdered, I never found out who did it.” The memory still tore at his chest. “The man who captured Jen just confessed to it, and he said he'll do the same to her.”

“Why?” Samantha was fighting tears of anguish.

“You heard how Jen’s grandfather was assassinated, right?” He waited for them to nod. “He was the one who did it and I was the detective who hauled him back to Australia to face charges.” Dan sighed with sorrow. “I wish I hadn’t. Political pressure got him off the hook, and now he’s pissed.”

“You mean this is a vendetta?” Samantha asked, mortified.

Dan nodded. “I suspect so, yes.”

“But... Why now?” Cookie thought he knew the answer but he wanted to see whether Dan shared his suspicion.

“I don’t know. As far as I knew, he hadn’t worked for UniForce since assassinating Mike Cameron. It was a public scandal so they sidelined him. Or so I thought.”

“What’s his name?”

“Valdez. Esteban Garcia Valdez,” Dan replied.

Cookie nodded vigorously. “Yeah, that’s right. I thought the name was familiar.” He slapped a palm to his forehead. “Damn it!”

“What?”

“Ah, you’re not gonna like this.” Cookie briefly pushed his lips sideways before continuing. “I found repeated references to him on their network. He’s their assassination co-ordinator. They revoked his field status in ‘59 but he’s been part of UniForce’s management team ever since. He assumed the co-ordinator’s position last year when, I might add, the previous co-ordinator died under suspicious circumstances.”

So, he thought bitterly. It was UniForce all along. It drove the final stake into his heart - he’d begun work for his wife’s killers a few months after lovingly laying her to rest. How could I be so blind? “It’s unusual for an assassin to be that... direct, that candid,” Dan said, wondering how Esteban had received permission to play out his fantasy.

“I think I can explain that,” Cookie said with an apologetic cough. “The Raven killed their CEO and they declared a state of company emergency. I think he can do pretty much what he wants.”

I told you so. Dan knew they were thinking it. Hell, I deserve it. It saddened him. One more mistake to add to my damning list. “At least we know where to start looking for her.” He wasn’t yet ready to give up. Not yet. He wasn’t going to give up until they’d recovered Jen’s corpse. He remembered where they’d found Katherine, in some musty, anonymous woods. One night and already the animals had gnawed her bones, defiling her naked and bloodied body. Her murder was bad enough, but Esteban hadn’t even granted her the decency of protecting her body from hungry animals or prying eyes. The insects had feasted too. He stopped the memories before he recalled her infested flesh.

“We have to leave. Now,” Dan said, as much for his benefit as for theirs. “Get your stuff.”

They obeyed without discourse, leaving Dan to strip naked and shower to cleanse the filth from his body. Afterward he brushed a hand across the steam-fogged mirror and gazed upon his reflection, wondering how such a vile creature could exist. But instead of landing a punch on the mirror as he had after Katherine’s murder, he slapped himself hard across the cheek. Damn you.

Something whispered in his mind, a distant memory of a time he had wished to forget. It lured him closer, enticing him to enter a realm that he’d hoped he had escaped forever. That part of him lay impoverished by famine and decay, rusted from over a decade of neglect. With no further regard for what may become of his humanity, Dan reached into his past and donned the mantle of the shrewd exterminator he had once been. He wore it with as much ease as he had all those years ago. It surprised him that nothing visibly changed, despite his inner transformation. His reflection was just as it had been. He’d half expected a putrid aura of death to rise from his shoulders and his eyes to burn red like hot coals.

He snuck into his bedroom and sorted the darkest clothes from his collection. The garb he chose was black enough to put the Raven to shame. Weapons. He needed more than his pathetic Colt, which lay somewhere in the dust above. Long ago he’d carved a secret enclave from the master bedroom that opened into an armoury of forbidden weapons. They comprised some the most innovative

slaughtering devices ever conceived. He replaced his Colt with a modified 8mm pistol that used a series of baffles to silence the shots. More. He couldn't hunt men armed with automatic rifles carrying only a pistol.

The Cobra-KT was next. He stripped the barrel from the stock and slung them separately under his thick winter coat. Ammunition. He slotted five 8mm clips into his belt and filled four magazines for the Cobra-KT. His Ka-Bar Marine combat knife was next. The blade gleamed in the ambient light of his secret armoury and Dan inspected its razor-like edge before slotting it into a hidden sheath in his right boot.

And a pulse emitter. It was the strangest weapon he owned. Designed only 21 years earlier, it was the closest anybody had come to a laser weapon. Except it didn't use light, it used a focussed beam of sound to decimate the target. Engineers had tuned the low frequency soundwave to the harmonic of human bones. Any human standing in its effective range - ten metres - would literally shatter when he pulled the trigger. The vibrations were beneath the audible range so the weapon was silent. Except for the crackle of exploding bone. Dan remembered the nightmarish sounds from the last time he'd used it. The muzzle was wide, four centimetres across, and the weapon had sleek lines, making it look docile next to the Cobra-KT. Best of all, it couldn't run out of ammunition. A tiny hydrogen cell provided the pulse emitter with constant electricity, guaranteed for 4,000 uses. Dan checked the counter. Good. It still has 3,932 charges remaining. Charge time was sometimes an issue; it took five seconds to recharge between shots so it wasn't a suitable primary weapon. But it fired a compact cone of devastating sound; the lethal spread was five degrees. And it was powerful enough to pulverise Esteban's spine if he shoved the muzzle against his back and pulled the trigger.

Cuffs. Two sets of handcuffs slipped into the deep pockets of his coat.

I'm ready. He swept his room with one final glance before closing the armoury and striding into the lounge room where Samantha and Cookie were waiting.

"Where to now?" Cookie asked anxiously.

"I'm chipped," Dan said. "And that'll be a problem where we're going."

Cookie nodded thoughtfully. "I know a guy..."

*

Jen closed her eyes, unable to look into the face of the man who was planning to murder her. It was a strange thing, knowing that you were going to die. It put many things in perspective. So many things that she had considered important suddenly didn't matter. She almost wanted to laugh, and would have if the pain radiating from her wrists wasn't bringing tears unbidden to her eyes.

One thing was certain: she wasn't going to beg. Jen had listened to Esteban recount the horror of Katherine's death and refused to give them the satisfaction of hearing her beg for her life. Dogs beg, not people. It steadied her resolve and she lifted her chin, opening her eyes again. She wondered whether he was sensitive enough to notice the difference in her gaze, to see that she was stronger than the worst pain he could inflict.

Should I talk to him? She wondered whether she could control her impulses to spit and scream if she tried. Even breathing was painful. It sent shockwaves spiralling out from the wire that was rubbing into raw nerves. Or stay silent? Which would he prefer? She would do the opposite. Hmm... Jen knew he liked watching her cower in fear and didn't want to give him the satisfaction.

When she finally mustered the energy to speak, the calm of her voice surprised her. "Do you care to tell me why you're doing this?"

Esteban smiled slickly. "Let's just say some people were pissed that you hacked into our network and ordered the Raven to do something he oughtn't."

She stifled a gasp. "He did it?"

"And about time too," Esteban said callously. "That old fart was a pain in the backside. You actually did us a favour, you know? It's just a pity we can't let you live now."

Jen tried to leverage herself to a more comfortable position but couldn't. "Then would you mind loosening my wrists? You tied them too tight."

"Uh, no. Sorry." Esteban twisted to reach into the trunk and hefted a black case onto his lap. "They're tight for a reason. But they wouldn't cause you so much pain if you'd sit still."

She noticed something feral in Esteban's gaze and it frightened her. He's crazy... he's totally fucking insane. That was perhaps the scariest thing of all, not that she was in a car with a man that intended to rape and kill her, but that Esteban was several sandwiches short of a picnic. Jen did her best to mask her fear by studying the other two men. The driver was diagonally opposite and therefore easier to see. He had a thick jaw, but looked too neatly presented to be a thug. He wore a suit and a tie, and probably shoes polished to a high gloss. His strawberry hair curled around his ears and a thick pelt covered his giant paws, which gripped the steering wheel. He chose that moment to shift gears and their land cruiser bunny-hopped before he found the friction point between clutch and accelerator. A cry of pain escaped from her lungs at the sudden jolt and the driver turned to see what the fuss was. She saw compassion in his brackish eyes and he coughed an apology for his clumsy driving. How odd, she thought. It forged the basis for hope and Jen wondered whether she could escape by befriending the driver.

"Watch it Junior." Esteban leered, slapping him on the shoulder again. "You'll hurt our grace."

Junior? Jen jotted a mental note.

Next, she tried to see the man in front. She couldn't see much: shortly cropped black hair, ears that stuck out like barn doors, and a neatly shaved neck. Another suit. Hmm... figures. It fit her stereotype of ruthless corporate managers. He still cradled his automatic rifle and was nervously checking the side mirror every few seconds. They didn't know whether Dan had stowed a car in an underground garage and was tearing down the road in hot pursuit.

What if he's waiting for us in town? Adrian swallowed and said, "We're not going back to Andamooka are we?"

"How should I know?" Junior retorted. "You're the nav."

"No, don't," Esteban piped in. "Sutherland might have laid a trap." He snatched the map and stabbed it with a finger, looking for a new destination. He felt bitterly disappointed to see how far Andamooka was from the rest of civilization; there were no nearby towns. "We'll have to knock politely on someone's door." He flipped the lid on the leather case he'd been stroking and Jen saw needles, lots of them, and fluid-filled tubes.

“Now, unfortunately, we can’t have you messing up our plans.” He extracted a hypodermic needle and plunged it into a reservoir of clear fluid.

“What is that?” Jen could no longer control the fear in her voice.

“Party juice.” Esteban grinned, squirting the air bubble from the top of the needle after flicking it a few times first. “Now, hold still.”

Jen wriggled as far back as she could, trying desperately to reach the doorhandle. She thought she’d rather take her chances tumbling headlong to the road than trust her body to whatever Esteban had sucked into the needle. It was tantalisingly close; the tips of her fingers brushed the latch. But she paid a hefty price, the restraints cut deeper into her wrists and she sobbed in agony.

“Shh... hush child.” Esteban stabbed her in the shoulder, shoving the needle deep enough for the tip to scrape her humerus. He plunged the liquid into her body and yanked the needle free, leaving Jen to wince at the new pain that distracted her from the throbbing in her wrists.

Her feeling was the first to go. At least it numbed the pain. Next was her sight - the world faded to black. In that instant, she clung to consciousness with sound alone, and she heard Esteban slobber something in her ear. She used her last thoughts before the silent void of oblivion swamped her to wonder whether she’d ever wake up.

Chapter 7

States have fallen back and corporations have become the new institutions.

Jaggi Singh

Saturday, September 18, 2066

15:12 Brisbane, Queensland

Dan surveyed the cityscape with a seething suspicion that bordered on paranoia. “Are you sure about this?”

Cookie nodded, holding Samantha’s hand with his left and clutching his computer to his chest with his right. “Yeah man, he’s helped us before.”

“You were chipped?”

“I was,” Samantha answered. “Jen and Cookie escaped but a squad rounded me up while I was staying with my parents.”

“He’s the guy that sells us the chip selectors,” Cookie explained. “He’s cool, I can vouch for him.”

Well, it’s not as if I have time to shop around. Dan pressed his lips together, squeezing them into a thin line of determination. “Okay.”

Cookie couldn’t remember the correct portal number, so they hadn’t stepped directly into the backwater surgery. Dan found it unnerving that the surgery was unlisted, but upon further reflection thought that it was just as well - he wasn’t seeking a legal procedure. They’d landed five blocks away at one of the prolific portal stations in central Brisbane. The streets looked deserted, as they usually did in the metropolises. It was eerie to walk down what had once been a thriving business district only to see stray street hoodlums and bums begging for scraps of food on the pavement. Gone were the days when they could beg for cash, nobody carried it anymore. The homeless had died from starvation in droves and a wave of needy had inundated support agencies when the cities began to decay. All thanks to the portals. Dan understood why the cities had died - he was even part of the problem. He didn’t want to live in a city and didn’t care what happened there. The cities existed on another plane, shrouded by myths and spooky stories that parents used to frighten children into being good. Nobody wanted to live there. People wanted to live in the country, or on the coast where they could take evening beach walks. Hardly surprising when portal technology afforded them the luxury of metropolitan convenience with the space and clean air of the country. After the exodus, venturesome businesses had swooped on the cheap real estate and demolished much of the old city blocks, making way for

their headquarters and factories. Realty King had forged a successful giga-corporation by buying many of the vacated premises, turning them into something attractive, and selling them for a tidy profit. Then they'd swallowed their competition and ballooned into a massive international conglomerate, just like the others. As far as Dan knew, they were the only surviving realtor operating in Australia and the United States. They used aggressive land reclamation practices to entice businesses back to cheap city land. But some of the old-world charm still stood, and a slab of it punctuated the five blocks between the portal station and the surgery. It was a grotty maze of twisting streets and cracked pavement, the perfect setting for what Dan had in mind.

Dan was deliberately leading them through the side streets, staying clear of the places likely to have mounted cameras. So it came as little surprise when an angst-ridden band of adolescents waylaid them.

“Hold it, you up-town fucks.” He was clearly the leader, wearing a spiked leather jacket plucked from the punk scene of the last century, a pair of faded blue jeans and army issue general-purpose boots. There were five in total and the others wore a similar uniform, their badge of conformity.

“This here's our turf. You gotta pay to pass this way.” He was perhaps nineteen years old, twenty at the most. But big for his age. He must have figured the odds were in his favour, despite the determined streak in Dan's eyes. He menacingly hefted a metre-long pipe and his friends carried everything from bike chains to machete-like knives.

Dan calmly looked them over. Samantha and Cookie knew about the arsenal he'd tucked inside his coat and felt safe under his protective wing.

“How much do you expect us to pay?” All emotion had drained from Dan's voice, leaving an icy clarity that only Samantha and Cookie understood.

The teenage gangster had neck-length hair that sheened with grease and he ran his fingers through it before answering, “How about you strip naked and we'll take what we want.”

“I have a better idea.” Dan took one pace forward and the gang fanned out, flanking them threateningly. “How about you bend over and I'll shove that pipe of yours where the sun doesn't shine.”

An alarm shrieked in Samantha's mind, reminding her that Dan was unstable and possibly capable of carrying out his threat. What's he doing? The gang edged behind them, closing the ring. Their leader was fuming at the insult, trying to think of a comeback and becoming flustered by his lack of wit.

Samantha reached inside Dan's coat and pulled out the 8mm modified Colt, aiming it squarely between the gang leader's eyes. She took a step forward, mustered her courage, and said, "Would you mind getting out of our way?" Her harsh tone surprised even her; she'd never snapped at anyone that vehemently before. "We're in a hurry."

Dan whipped his hands inside his coat and extracted both halves of the Cobra-KT, snapped them together, and spun to aim at a fat, surly youth carrying a machete. "Please?"

That was enough.

They bolted for cover, yelling unintelligible insults over their shoulders.

"Nice neighbourhood," Dan said. "Maybe I'll buy a condo here." He disassembled his rifle and slotted the halves back into their holsters before presenting an empty palm to Samantha.

She reversed the weapon and handed it to him grip first. "Sorry."

He started walking, only mildly irritated that Samantha had borrowed his Colt.

But the silence attacked her conscience until she felt the overpowering need to defend herself. "I just wanted to dissipate the tension."

"No," Dan grunted. "You were worried I'd kill one of those kids."

"Would you have?" She asked. "I've seen death in your eyes."

He didn't deny it. "Yes: Esteban's death. But not a bunch of kids, I'm not a ruthless killer."

"Yes you are. You're just selective."

Dan whirled to face her. "Don't you think he deserves to die?"

Samantha shook her head. “I don’t know what I believe. If you’d asked a week ago I’d have said nobody deserves capital punishment.” She shrugged. “But now... well, I don’t know.”

“He’s above the law you know. If we don’t do anything, nobody will. Nobody can.”

The truth stung enough for Samantha to question the rigidity of her moral code.

“He’s going to torture Jen, he’s going to rape and kill her, and he’s already done the same to my wife. If that doesn’t mean he’s forfeited his right to live on the same civilised planet as the rest of us, then I don’t know what would.”

“Perhaps that’s where we differ,” Samantha said, doggedly standing her ground. “I don’t think we’re civilised at all. And I don’t expect much from people, but I don’t think anyone has the right to take another life. Or didn’t... now I’m not sure.”

“Come on,” Cookie interrupted. “The sooner we get that chip out of your back the sooner we can start looking for Jen.”

We? Dan had never intended for anybody to tag along, but he’d pick the moment to tell them carefully. Another ten minutes and they were standing in front of the surgery. It reminded Dan of the bubbles he used to make from detergent when he was a child - it was one gigantic glass bubble, complete with rainbows of refracted light dancing along its curves. Somebody got drunk in the forties, right in the middle of the glass craze. It sprung from a time when glass manufacturers mastered the complex art of impregnating glass with current-controlled insulation. The marketing team responsible for promoting it had won an award, and Dan could see why.

“Round the back.” Cookie led them past what had once been a neatly trimmed hedge but had since grown out of control. It bordered what had originally been a customer car park. A single rusted shell remained, crouching on tired suspension, a dinosaur of non-quantum transportation. “If we don’t go through reception there won’t be any record of our visit.”

“Good.” Dan approved.

It was surprisingly cold inside the bubble, almost wintry, though it came as a

pleasant reprieve from the humid Brisbane air. Cookie weaved a confident path through halls that appeared abandoned. It was clean and smelled like chlorine, but it was dark and Dan couldn't hear anything to indicate human activity. "Are you sure it's open on Saturday?"

"The door was open, wasn't it?"

"Touché," Dan said, feeling ill at ease. "Lead on."

They shunned the elevators, which security typically fitted with microchip scanners, and broke a sweat hiking three flights of stairs. Cookie showed them to an antechamber in one of the deserted surgeries and pulled a curtain around their tiny corner.

Scant protection, Dan thought. He frowned, "How many times have you been here?"

"Enough," Cookie admitted. "Every so often we have to refresh our identities. He has a machine that... well, you'll see. Stay here, I'll go fetch him." He hurried from the room, leaving Samantha and Dan alone.

An uneasy silence settled upon them. Dan had the peculiar feeling that Samantha didn't like him much. Or maybe she's scared of me? He couldn't be sure. Either way the conversation wasn't flowing as it had with Jen. He simply couldn't think of anything to say.

Samantha was drowning her discomfort by meticulously itemising everything in the room. She'd pulled the curtain aside with a roll of her eyes seconds after Cookie had departed. The stencil on the glass door read 'Surgery D'. How many are there? she wondered absently. The walls were white and the tiled floor was as clean as the scrubbers could manage. Thin veins of bacteria, immune to the strong chemicals and disinfectants dumped upon them, flourished in green patches. The only solution remaining was to use a scouring pad and scrape the colony away.

Large laminated charts of human anatomy covered one wall. A massive brain captivated her imagination and, in her mind, she saw little brown men squirming in mud, not carefully labelled lobes. Two hospital beds dominated the centre of the room, a perfect symbol for the fastidious nursing staff that had perfectly aligned the sheets and folded identical hospital corners forward and aft. One had

a hole at the front for a patient's face, designed for procedures where the surgeon needed access to the patient's back. She remembered her own operation, in a similar room. Surgery B I think. She shivered when she thought about the scalpel slicing her flesh and the pulling sensation she felt when the surgeon removed her chip. She couldn't go through it a second time.

A short, stout man with a ruddy face and tufts of wiry hair sprouting from his potato-like scalp flicked on the lights and temporarily blinded them.

"This is Doctor Ingles," Cookie said, introducing them. "This is Dan... uh..."

"Sutherland," Dan supplied, easing Cookie's embarrassment at his momentary blank. He accepted the surgeon's offered hand and shook hard, noticing how limp and sweaty the man's fingers were. It felt as if he were shaking cold, long-dead fish and wondered whether he'd trust someone with such stubby fingers to operate on his spine.

Cookie turned on the electric shades to make the windows opaque, closed the door, and engaged the lock. It clanked with finality, sending a shudder of diluted panic to Dan's stomach.

Doctor Ingles smiled vivaciously and said, "So you've been chipped?"

Dan nodded.

"And you want someone to gouge it out?"

"Yes." Dan cringed at his choice of words.

"It'll cost five thousand." The doctor eyed his potential patient with a degree of curiosity. "North American Credits."

Dan cocked an eyebrow. "What's that? About seven thousand Pacific Dollars?"

Cookie's analytical mind performed a more accurate calculation. "No, more like thirteen thousand at the current exchange rate."

If the fee surprised Dan, he didn't show it. "I'll also need a chip selector--"

"I know." The doctor smiled. "They come free with the procedure."

“And three new chips,” Dan finished. “All with authority to carry weapons internationally.”

Doctor Ingles frowned and raised a thumb to stroke his lips. “That’ll cost extra.” He pondered some more. “Say... double. Call it ten thousand Credits even.”

Cookie piped in, helpfully whispering in Dan’s ear, “That’s twenty-six thousand Dollars.”

“I knew that,” Dan snapped, irritably brushed him aside. “Done.”

“Great.” The doctor opened a drawer from a cabinet at the side of the room, extracted two surgical gloves, and started tying a mask across his face. “Strip to the waist and jump on the table.” He was already dragging a tray of medical instruments across the floor and reaching for the floodlight controls. He pressed a button and a shower of brilliant, white, surgical-grade light blasted the table. It outshone the overhead lights a hundred to one and Dan could only guess how hot it was going to be under the dazzling blanket.

He handed his coat to Cookie and his shirt to Samantha before peeling off his grey skivvy and handing it to her too.

“Ah, you might want to take that off.” Doctor Ingles pointed at the silver chain dangling around Dan’s neck.

He reluctantly unclasped the chain and piled it upon Samantha’s waiting palm. It’d been a gift from Katherine and he couldn’t remember taking it off since her death. “Is this going to hurt?”

Doctor Ingles smiled gleefully. “Oh yes, very much.”

“He’s joking.” Samantha giggled. “I didn’t feel a thing.”

“But I used anaesthetic on you,” Ingles said. “And the administrator confiscated it. She locked it in a safe downstairs and I can’t get any unless you schedule an appointment through reception. I think she became suspicious about my side business when I began rescheduling legitimate appointments, not to mention I was using anaesthetic faster than she could replenish it.”

Dan paused before entering the shaft of light, reconsidering the operation. An

image of his wife's beaten, bloodied and defiled corpse skirted across his mind. Then the ghastly scene turned to a similarly horrific image of Jen - a prophecy of things to come. It was enough to override his natural aversion to pain, or in this case, anticipation of pain, which in Dan's experience was worse than pain itself. He eased himself onto the operating table, his skin glowing white under the beam of light. As he suspected, it was hot, and he began to sweat.

The doctor looked surprised. "I was kidding you know." He pulled a phial of clear liquid from his coat. "I always have a stash on hand for black ops." He wondered what kind of nut would volunteer his body to a scalpel without the promise of anaesthetic. "I don't want you jerking at the wrong moment or I might stab your spinal cord with my scalpel."

Dan lay on the table, wriggling until his face was in the centre of the breathing hole. "Just get it over with."

The doctor injected Dan with local anaesthetic, careful to ensure he penetrated to the correct depth for the drug to work. It was too dangerous to administer general anaesthetic without an anaesthesiologist to monitor his bodily functions and regulate the cocktail of drugs trickling into his system. Besides, it wasn't strictly necessary. A local did the trick. The operation was simple really; Doctor Ingles had performed it nearly a hundred times - usually for wanted criminals but sometimes for chipping protestors or people seeking to evade bankruptcy by starting a new life. Either way, he never asked questions. His clientele demanded secrecy and he delivered nothing else. He offered his services to the Australian community, and indeed the world community, with the intention of maintaining patient anonymity. Strictly speaking, that was impossible; he always knew who his patients were for they paid for his services with their microchips. But he did his best to strike all record of the transactions from the myriad of databases just waiting to absorb financial details. And he treated his patients' confidentiality with the same sanctity as a priest in a confessional. He was just thankful the law enforcement community, and specifically the chipping squads, hadn't discovered him yet. Doubtless they'd see things a different way.

He plunged his scalpel into Dan's back with surgical precision. Dan felt a pulling sensation and then a little discomfort when Doctor Ingles pulled flaps of his skin aside and used clamps to hold them in place. Then he heard scraping and the vibrations traversed his spine and grated his back teeth. He fought the impulse to flinch; the last thing he wanted was for Ingles to sever nerves or slice muscles

that he really shouldn't sever or slice.

Implanting microchips was easier. 'Surgeons' simply used an instrument that looked like a nail-gun with a mounted television. It used sensors to align perfectly with the correct spinal segment and fired a chip like a dart into the misfortunate person's back. A quick pinch and it was all over. Dan vividly remembered his chipping. They had offered him candy on his way out, as if he'd been a good boy. But when you have sixteen billion people to chip, you wouldn't want to waste time. Actually, he corrected himself, they only chipped twelve billion. The poorest African nations couldn't afford the massive capital outlay required to microchip their citizens. It effectively severed them from the rest of the world, isolating them in their own squalor. None of the giga-corporations voted to assist them; after all, you can't profit from people who have nothing.

Dan heard Doctor Ingles sigh triumphantly. "That's it." He undid the clamps and carefully stitched the wound. "All done."

"Really?" Dan had imagined it would take longer.

Ingles offered Dan a peek at the tiny black capsule he'd dug from his back. "Here it is."

He studied it. It's so small. He'd expected something larger, something more sinister. It was the size of a grain of sand, covered with a reddish tinge of blood.

"Come with me." Ingles switched off the overhead light and flung his gore-smattered gloves in the medical waste bin stationed beside the door.

Dan dressed and all three followed Ingles into his private office, a messy consulting room filled with volumes of useless medical texts. Dan didn't understand why he held onto the dusty tomes, all the information he needed was more readily accessible online. Doctor Ingles ran a scanner over Dan's chip and deducted the fee from his account. Next, he opened a bar fridge recessed in one wall and reached past a row of urine samples to grab a small purse. He extracted a dozen microchips. They looked like black rice, rolling across his palm.

"Give me your chip selectors."

Cookie and Samantha surrendered their link to electronic life and he plugged them into a special reader that fed the data into his computer. He inspected both

profiles and asked, “You want the usual?”

Cookie nodded. “Yes, please.”

Ingles pushed his thin-framed spectacles back onto the bridge of his nose and pecked at his keyboard, frustrating Cookie with his typing ineptitude.

“Come on then, take a seat.” He waved them to the chairs scattered haphazardly about the room. Only Dan declined, preferring not to place pressure on his fresh sutures.

The enterprising doctor selected several profiles that appropriately matched Cookie’s physical description, impregnated the data onto chips, and lined them up neatly on his desk. Then he performed a similar service for Samantha, careful to ensure the ethnicity field read Korean - though he slipped one Japanese profile in, doubting anybody would notice the difference. Hers were more expensive because it was harder to get legitimate Asian profiles.

Finally, his eyes rested on Dan. He estimated his height and weight and typed the variables into a search window. Dan was midrange so billions of people fit his physical description worldwide and since Ingles had hundreds of cached profiles, dozens matched Dan. But permission to carry weapons internationally was another matter entirely and it slashed the viable records to three.

Unfortunately, one potential profile stipulated brown eyes and Dan’s were clearly greenish-blue. “I only have two chips that meet your requirements.”

Dan’s gaze narrowed. “If that’s all you have then that will have to do.”

“I’ll knock a thousand from the price.” When impregnating the chips he added the refund to Dan’s linked account.

That left him with three neat rows of microchips and he spent the next ten minutes painstakingly prising the covers from the chip selectors and swapping the chips. Then he checked the validity of every profile by switching between them and running the device past his scanner. They all scanned correctly.

“Okay, we’re done.” He tossed the selectors to their appropriate owners. “Here are your new lives, less a few thousand from your accounts.”

Dan checked his watch, pleasantly surprised. “Good. We might just be in time...

if he's working today.”

*

Saturday, September 18, 2066

N.S.W. Police Department, Parramatta Office

16:35 Sydney, Australia

Simon hated the Saturday shift.

It always dragged on forever. He consoled himself by remembering he'd have Monday off. A smile crept onto his lips and a set of pearly teeth shone amidst his dark-skinned face. He did enjoy that about a weekend shift: being free on Monday when everybody else had to go to work. He leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling, dreaming about watching midday television in his pyjamas with a cold beer in one hand and the remote in the other. It wasn't exactly a productive way to spend the day, but it was relaxing, and that was precisely what he needed. It wasn't that the job was too much for him. If anything, it wasn't enough. He needed more to do. He was tired of paper-shuffling cases and cleaning up other officers' shit. Worse still were the UniForce cases, dead ends despite obvious culpability. It vexed him. They could get away with anything. Nanotoxin for Christ's sake! The smile gave way to a frown as thoughts of work again plagued his mind.

He returned his attention to the news, which he'd been browsing for most of the afternoon. Not long now. Simon was itching for five o'clock when he'd bolt for the door in anticipation of his private weekend. Browsing the news was the easiest way to pass time. Nothing interesting had happened. Same old shit. The only online paper he subscribed to was blabbering about a lucrative trade agreement that had arisen from the latest European Economic Forum, a politician found guilty of stalking little boys, and how the entertainment industry was going wild with a band that had pioneered a 'brave and original' sound. The only smidgeon of news stirring his interest was a snippet about UniForce's CEO. It speculated that he was either too sick to attend their recent shareholder meeting or that he was dead. Simon shrugged. Good riddance to bad rubbish.

A commanding knock at his door roused him from his reverie. "Come in."

He looked up to see Dan Sutherland waltz into his office and confidently shut the door behind him. "Dan!"

"Hey Slime." Dan had always called him that. It was a joke that went back a long way, back to when they were both rookies in the precinct, around 2056. They'd been on one of their customary drinking binges, which in hindsight had

always been somewhat stupid, and it had resulted in a now unmentionable dare.

“My God, what brings you to this pitiful part of the world?” Simon extended a friendly hand, pleased when Dan gripped it with as much gusto as he had in times past.

“Just wanted to make sure you were still alive.” Dan smiled stiffly. “I see they’re still suckering you into accepting Saturday shifts.”

“Yeah,” he said nostalgically while waving at the seat opposite his desk. “Sit mate, sit.”

Dan hesitated a moment before squatting awkwardly on the edge of the seat. The anaesthetic was wearing off and he felt stiff. It hampered arm movement and he wondered how long he’d take to recover adequately. With what he’d planned, he’d need to move unhindered. Doctor Ingles had slapped a thin dressing over the wound but it was weeping so heavily it had already soaked through.

“Jesus!” Simon couldn’t wipe the grin off his face. “How’ve you been?”

Dan fought the impulse to shrug. “Oh, you know, getting by. Things could be better.” Now there’s an understatement. “But they could also be worse.” Oh yeah? How? “And you?”

Simon nodded emphatically. “Yeah, good. Work’s still the same old shit, but things are going well.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” He eyed Simon’s belly and his face lit with a genuine smile. “Putting on a bit of weight, aren’t you?”

Simon sucked his gut in and looked offended. “I have it covered.”

“I can recommend a great dietician if you’re-”

“It’s covered.”

“Are you sure? Because-”

“Dan!” Simon tried to look as thin as he could.

Dan loved teasing his friend. At some point in the past their friendship took a sadistic twist and they began deriving pleasure from insulting each other. But neither of them took it seriously. “Okay mate, just thought I’d offer. How’s Maureen?”

Simon clucked his tongue and his eyebrows shot up. “Now there’s a fiery one. I caught her in bed with another man.”

“Ouch.” Dan winced for his friend.

“In our bed.”

“That’s disgusting.” Dan’s wince turned into a look of revulsion. “What’d you do?”

“I didn’t have to do anything,” Simon replied. “We never said a word to each other. She just packed her bags and left in silence - with him. That was the last I saw of her. Good riddance if you ask me, she had some bloody annoying habits. It’s him that made me want to puke; he invited me to make it a threesome.”

Dan burst into a fit of laughter, tears of genuine mirth tinting his eyes.

“I thanked him for the offer, it was sweet. Then I said I was going to make myself a cup of coffee, watch my favourite television show, and if he was still there when it finished I said I’d put a nine-millimetre round in his head. I heard them leave before the first set of commercials.” His mammoth smile resurfaced. “I have a new girlfriend now, Tanya.”

“Oh, man, you have them lining up, don’t you?”

“Hell, I have a queue a mile long. But Tanya’s really something. You should meet her. She has it all. She’s so hot she melts my cheese sandwiches without a griller and she’s worth talking to. Who would’ve thought you could have both?”

Katherine had both. It was the first thought to enter Dan’s mind. And Jen has both. That was his second thought, chasing the first. Both thoughts were unwelcome, but thinking about Jen brought a sting of urgency.

Simon was sensitive enough to notice the change in Dan’s demeanour. “So what brings you here mate? I mean, what really brings you here?”

Dan looked cautiously around the room, searching for cameras. “You got somewhere we can talk in private?”

“Nope,” Simon replied with a hint of irritation. “They’ve wired everything. You get used to it after a while, living without privacy. But then I never break the rules so I just do things the way I always have.” He raised his voice for the benefit of whoever might be listening. “D’ya hear me? I’m straight!” Simon winked.

“I need to talk to you, alone. It’s very important,” Dan pressed.

Simon shook his head, remaining firm. “Anything you want to say to me as Chief Inspector West must be said in front of cameras.” He paused briefly. “But if you’d just like to chat with an old friend we can grab a cup of coffee. I’m off in five minutes.”

Dan nodded. “That’d be great.”

Parramatta’s top detective spent those final five minutes busily clearing his desk and closing two departmental files. “Okay, I’m ready.”

The sun glowered angry yellow as it sunk toward the horizon. It was a warm spring day that would turn bitterly cold minutes after the sun vanished. Dan sweated inside his heavy coat, annoyed that worldwide travel necessitated preparing for several seasons in one outing. It was worse in summer and winter, trying to balance the two extremes from the northern and southern hemispheres. He knew he’d be in for a rude shock when he portaled to America’s East Coast International Terminal. America was having a chilly autumn.

The Parramatta precinct was nestled in one of the few thriving centres remaining in the sprawling metropolitan tumour of Sydney. It was a hub of activity. Yuppies parading crisp business suits and expensive silk ties scuttled importantly around. Office towers huddled toward an imaginary centre, as if seeking safety in numbers. And a throng of small stores clustered beneath the monstrous towers, catering to the demands of uptight office workers. The majority were grab-n-run fast food outlets, which didn’t provide seating. Others were more stylish and offered non-artery-clogging food and a few stools, but they were sparse. So coffee houses had filled the void created by the food industry when it shunned restaurant-style settings.

“I like Stan’s,” Simon was saying. “It’s less, uh, hippie than Ron’s.”

“Can we go to The Snowfield?” One corporate giant owned all three cafés but each establishment catered for different tastes. They played different music, greeted patrons differently, and offered a choice of plastic, wood and metal for interior décor.

Simon shrugged. “I suppose.” None of his friends ever went to The Snowfield, which was precisely why Dan had chosen it. It mostly attracted adolescents.

They wove through the five o’clock crowd of homeward bound drones and reached The Snowfield’s automatic doors. They were glass and had cute animal figurines grafted onto them. To make things even more garish, the glass was an angry fruit salad of colours and it made Simon dizzy just watching them open.

Then the atmosphere struck.

“God, Dan. Here?”

Dan looked apologetic. “Yeah, sorry mate.”

There was a jiggy tune blaring across the room and a chilly draft pumped from floor and ceiling suspended synthetic snowflakes in the air. It was like stepping into a freezer with the added irritation of airborne floaters that one had to carefully avoid inhaling. The ‘snowflakes’ reminded Simon of rough Styrofoam balls. Of course, they weren’t harmful. Management had made sure of that by thoroughly testing them on a barnyard of test animals.

“You want some coffee?” Dan offered. “It might take your mind off the cold.” That was precisely how The Snowfield sold their products: chill the customers until their teeth are chattering for another cup coffee. After they’re finished the first, they’ll want a second, just to keep their fingers warm. Hypothermia was a powerful motivator. It was therefore hardly surprising that people who frequented The Snowfield were twenty-cup-a-day coffee addicts. Some had since supplemented their caffeine dependence with Xantex uppers, jerking their nerves so taut they could sneeze with their eyes open.

A chill shivered down Simon’s back. “Yeah, tall dark and fucking hot.” He was glad to be out of the precinct, he hated having to watch his language. Some days he went home and swore just to make up for so much restraint.

Dan paid for two cups and selected a cute table, shaped like a snowflake and as white as virgin snow.

“So what’s so special you couldn’t tell me in the office?” Simon asked, swatting at a hovering ‘snowflake’ before it landed in his coffee. Flakes had already drifted into his hair and were wriggling their way inside his collar. But perhaps the worst part of The Snowfield was the teenagers who buzzed around with far too much unnatural excitement. He distantly wondered how many crimes he could attribute to overindulgence in caffeine.

“I found out who killed Katherine.” Dan got straight to the crux.

And that snared Simon’s undivided attention. “What?”

Dan nodded. “I know who it was.”

“Who?”

“Do you remember the man who didn’t go to prison for assassinating the opposition leader, Mike Cameron, back in ‘59?”

Simon raised his guard. Not this again. “How could I forget?” He tasted something bitter in his mouth, and it wasn’t the coffee. “I knew that would come back to bite you.”

You were right, Dan thought, stopping short of blame-fuelled mental self-destruction. He couldn’t afford that luxury, not just now. But it was my fault, he admitted, on the brink of imploding. “Well it’s him.”

“You mean UniForce?” Simon frowned, unsure whether he really wanted to know.

“I don’t know yet. Maybe. Or maybe he’s working alone. But he’s their assassination co-ordinator so they must know about it.”

“That’s some heavy shit.” Simon sipped his coffee and laced his fingers around the mug to keep them warm. “Can you prove it?”

“I don’t need to,” he replied elusively.

Simon didn't like the tone of Dan's voice. "What are you saying? Oh God... what're you going to do?"

"Well, think about it," Dan said, keeping his voice low and level. "You know how much I loved Katherine. You know how much she meant to me." He waited for Simon to nod before continuing, "I know who brutally raped and killed her, and he's well enough protected to evade a very public assassination. What do you think I'm going to do?"

"I'm not hearing this."

"Well what would you do?" Dan asked defensively.

Simon was quiet for nearly a minute - 60 seconds that left Dan's future hanging in the balance. "I'd do exactly what you're thinking of doing." I can't believe I'm about to say this. He took a slow, deep breath. "What can I do?"

"No." Dan shook his head. "You don't want to get mixed up in this."

"I'm not stupid Dan, you must've come to me for something," Simon said flatly.

"I did, but it has nothing to do with breaking the law," Dan replied. "He's taken someone else."

A deep scowl clouded Simon's dark face. "What?"

"Mike Cameron's granddaughter, her name's Jennifer Cameron." Dan lowered his voice, forcing Simon to lean close to hear. "She was staying with me in Andamooka. He kidnapped her, he's going to kill her, the same way he killed Katherine."

"Jesus." Simon was cold to his bones, and it wasn't from the frigid air.

"It gets worse. UniForce targeted her for apprehension, so technically they had the right to take her."

"How do you know that?"

"I was her bounty hunter," Dan said in monotone. "I joined them a few months after the Department tossed me. I needed something to do and that's where my

skills lay.”

“Oh,” he said, clearly surprised and clearly trying to hide it. “Well, if it was sanctioned there’s nothing you can do.”

“Sanctioned apprehension. Not rape and murder.”

“But you have no proof of that. If you try to get her back, you’ll be the one on the wrong side of the law.” Simon knew him well enough to realise there was nothing he could say to make Dan change his mind. Whatever he had planned, he wasn’t going to walk away, not from this.

“Again with the proof,” Dan huffed. “And the law? The law doesn’t help the people who need it; it just protects the people who write it.” I’m starting to sound like her, Dan thought. A week ago I wouldn’t have complained. He wondered whether he was a dormant activist, just waiting for the necessary catalyst to erupt. “Anyway, the point is, she has two friends who need your help.”

“What could I possibly do?” Simon asked. “You know I can’t harbour WEF sanctioned apprehensions.”

“As far as I know they’re not, at least not yet. Look, all I want is for you to protect them.”

“I wish I could man, but you know the rules as well as anyone. The Superintendent has to sign off on that.” Simon shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

“Just for a few days,” Dan implored. “I know you can do that.”

Simon looked at him suspiciously. Anyone else and he would’ve sent them packing, but he owed Dan. He knew Dan would never remind him, he was too honourable for that, but he’d twice saved Simon’s life. “All right, you’re lucky it’s Saturday. Steward hates being disturbed on the weekend so I can give them somewhere safe to sleep tonight and tomorrow. After that, it’s up to Steward, but you already know he won’t agree unless you come up with something spectacular that isn’t 5,000 miles outside our jurisdiction.”

“And I doubt that’ll happen,” Dan admitted sullenly.

“Where are they?”

Dan twisted in his seat and motioned to a couple huddling in the corner, shivering from the cold. They stood on aching joints and shuffled across the room to join them. They both had blue lips and Samantha was mildly chattering. They looked as if they’d gleefully knocked a teenybopper unconscious for a hot mug of coffee.

“Welcome to Snowflake-Hell.” Cookie extended a welcoming hand. “I’m David but you can call me Cookie, and this is Samantha.”

She inclined her head and stilled her chattering jaw for long enough to smile. “Pleasure.”

“Simon West.” He nodded once in greeting. “Let’s get out of here.”

*

Friday, September 17, 2066

23:42 Baltimore, USA

Jen smelled cigar smoke. It was the first thing she noticed when the fog lifted from her brain. She had a nagging feeling that something was wrong, but it was elusive and she couldn't grasp it for long enough to make sense of it.

She was floating, drifting in and out of awareness and had been for nearly quarter of an hour. It was like a restless sleep that she couldn't shake, but this time she was determined to poke through the suffocating plastic sheet of drugs that kept her under. She tried shaking her arms. It had worked in the past when she'd had difficulty rousing from sleep, but they were numb and refused to move. Where are they? First, she thought her arms had fallen off, and then she thought she was paralysed, but she could think of no good reason why either would be true. A tinge of pain radiated from her wrists and she identified it as proof that she wasn't paralytic. Then why won't they move?

She chased her most recent memories, despite instinctively knowing they were unpleasant. With great effort, she prised an eyelid open and saw an unfamiliar ceiling, which added to her disorientation.

“Ah, you're awake,” said a hauntingly familiar voice. The arrogant tone was what finally plucked her memories from the spinning vortex of confusion in her mind.

And once the gates had cracked, her memories flooded back. She groaned, wondering why she'd chosen to hurry their passage.

“Welcome back to the world of the living.” Esteban sneered.

She was lying on a bed, her hands untied. Her vision was still blurry and she squinted to check her wrists for signs of permanent damage. They were badly swollen and lacerated, and her skin had turned dark purple, but her fingers moved. She tried again to move her arms and was gratified to see them lift from the bed. But the effort cost more energy than she could spare and soon they flopped back to the mattress. Extreme fatigue stopped her from sitting up. She could barely move her mouth to talk, and when she did, it was a whisper.

“Where am I?”

Esteban puffed on his cigar before saying, “Your new home. Don’t you like it?”

Jen’s eyes roamed the walls. “No.”

“Well get used to it,” Esteban laughed. “You’re gonna be here for a while.”

“Where?”

“America,” Esteban snapped. “Which is all you need know.”

“Aren’t you going to kill me?” Jen asked, the fire draining from her tired eyes.

“No,” Esteban said quietly. “Not yet. We’re waiting for our audience.”

Morbid curiosity made her ask, “Audience?”

“Yes, your boyfriend.” Esteban laughed again, manically. “I’m sure Dan wants to watch us bang you. Seeing it on a videotape just isn’t the same as watching it live.” Esteban knew Dan would come - he had Jen for bait. If anything, he felt overconfident. But he was a talented assassin. He was ready for anything Dan could pit against him.

“You’re sick,” Jen hissed in disgust. “You’re totally fucking insane.”

The mirth evaporated from Esteban’s eyes and they promptly hardened to steel. It frightened Jen to see malice stamped so clearly in his gaze, especially when he was looking squarely at her. Then they softened to their earlier glee, his personal trademark. It was unnerving to watch a volatile man back-flip twice in the same breath.

“Yeah, maybe.” He smiled sweetly at her. “But the rich and powerful are allowed to be.” He held up her chip selector. She looked hungrily at it, panicked that he’d snatched her ticket to the portals. Without it, she was stranded, and that terrified her as much as the threat of death.

“It was kind of you to save us the trouble of digging a chip from your back.” Esteban balanced the device on his index finger. “Actually, I’m impressed you avoided the squads for as long as you did.”

Jen seethed with hatred; he was violating everything she considered sacred.

“You’re free to walk around,” he offered with mock politeness. “You can’t get far without this.” Esteban slipped the chip selector into his pocket and opened the door. “Just don’t cause any trouble, you hear?”

And with that, he was gone.

Jen let her eyelids slide shut, trying to summon the energy to sit up. She fought her drug-induced fatigue and swung one leg after the other over the side of the bed before twisting sideways and propping herself onto an elbow. The next phase was the hardest but by pushing with all her might she finally achieved her goal.

She felt light-headed and fought to stay conscious while the room spun around her. And she rested on the bed long after the whirling subsided, waiting impatiently for strength to return to her body.

Come on Jen, she coaxed. When she tried to stand her knees quivered and threatened to buckle. But they didn’t, they gathered strength until balance returned. Her room was pleasantly furnished. Prissy, Jen thought, already hating her prison. Tasteful pictures hung on two walls and a plush carpet greeted her bare feet. Bare feet? She wondered who had bothered taking her boots off. They stood neatly at the foot of the bed, her socks folded and tucked inside. She was glad nobody had removed her other clothes, though she felt underdressed, wearing only what was appropriate for the Australian desert.

Esteban’s cigar smoke was dissipating and Jen smelled how musty the room was. Nobody’s been here for a long time. A thick layer of dust had settled on the polished wooden table. The room wasn’t large, but neither was it small. It comfortably housed a queen-size bed, the sort that had a metal frame. Perfect for tying arms and legs down. Jen shuddered and examined the frame more closely. She was looking for signs that piano wire had scoured or scuffed the black paint. Nothing. It was unmarred and didn’t look as if anyone had retouched it. So they probably didn’t kill Dan’s wife here. She derived only a little comfort from the knowledge.

Next, her attention shifted to the door. She took several unsteady paces and braced herself against the frame. Taking a tentative peek into the brightly lit corridor, she found no guards. She doubted guards were necessary: Esteban had her chip selector. But one thing at a time. First, she wanted to look around,

familiarise herself with her new surroundings. The hall was long and she could only see activity at one end, though her vision was still too blurry to recognise anyone. She rubbed her puffy eyes and looked again, with no improvement. All her life she'd enjoyed twenty-twenty vision so the blur was difficult to endure. Her eyes strained to focus, giving birth to a dull headache. The other end of the hall was dark and, for no other reason, appeared more sinister.

Jen crept toward the light, hugging the wall and trying not to stumble. She unobtrusively peered into the bulbous room at the end. It was a study in diplomatic style, its décor tasteful and its hangings expensive. The subtle tones of wood and leather blended too perfectly for it to have been an accident. Somebody had spent a lot of time and effort assembling the perfect interior. A professional, it has to be. But that begged the question why somebody like Esteban would bother making such an impression. She heard voices and inched closer, trying to see who it was.

“Ah, look, here she is now. You see, I told you.” It was Esteban. He snapped his fingers at her. “Come here and meet the others properly.”

Jen unwillingly obeyed, not knowing what else to do. As she drew closer, she stubbed a toe on a coffee table because she hadn't yet reacquired fine motor coordination.

Esteban was flapping an arm at the man who had driven the land cruiser, the one with the thick jaw and strawberry hair curling around his ears. “This is Frank Albert Hansen.”

“Hi.” He tipped his beer bottle in mock salute.

“Junior?” Jen asked, remembering his name through the thick haze clouding her mind.

Esteban laughed, highly amused.

“I hate it when people call me that,” he grumbled in protest.

“Don't worry about offending him,” Esteban interjected. “Most of the time he deserves it.”

Jen jotted another mental note.

“The quiet one next to him is Adrian Miller.”

“How do you do ma’am?” Adrian asked politely. It was the first time she’d seen his face, even though it was through blurry eyes. He was thinner than Junior and his neatly cropped hair was almost jet-black. It contrasted with his pallor and made him look seedy. And nobody ever mentioned his sail-ears anymore - classmates in primary school had teased him relentlessly until he’d punched one kid’s front teeth out. He’d fostered a ruthless reputation ever since and people whispered warnings about him behind his back.

He’s surprisingly polite for a killer. “I’m fine thanks.” Jen had no idea why she was being so genteel in return.

“If you need anything, just let me know and I’ll see what I can do, okay?” Adrian looked genuinely concerned.

Why? She couldn’t even begin to fathom. He must be the one who took off my shoes. “Okay, I will.” Jen replied in stunned civility. She earmarked him as someone that might assist her escape. He was certainly more courteous than the others.

They were all impeccably dressed, though Adrian was the only one who hadn’t loosened his tie. Their suits looked expensive, probably personally tailored.

“What do you intend to do with me?” She wanted to hear the answer while Adrian was there to see whether he’d demur.

Esteban answered as offhandedly as he could. “Why, my dear Jennifer, you’re the bait.”

“For Dan?”

He nodded. “That’s right.”

“And then what?” Jen asked with dread expanding in her throat. She understood Esteban’s vindictiveness, but she couldn’t fathom the others’ motives.

“Well that’s when the fun really begins.” Esteban grinned like the maniac he was. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

Was I just in the wrong place at the wrong time? “This doesn’t really have anything to do with me, does it? This is all about Dan.”

Esteban nodded. “Yeah, that’s a fair assessment. The fact that you’re a Cameron is just a bonus.”

“And what if Dan doesn’t come?” He doesn’t owe me anything, does he?

“Then you’ll be here for a long, long time,” Esteban replied. “I wouldn’t worry though, he’s knows we killed his wife.” He had the temerity to say it without looking uncomfortable. “So he’ll come.”

Then you don’t need me for bait. Jen began to understand the broader picture. Oh, shit... I’m not bait. That was merely how they intended to keep her placid. I’m the entertainment once he arrives. Of course! What’s the best way to torture him? Tell him they’ll rape and kill me, and then make him watch it.

“Why must you insist on playing these games?” It was Adrian, as Jen had hoped, championing her cause. “Just kill Sutherland and get it over with. You should’ve finished this back at his farm.”

Esteban shook his head. “And spoil my fun? No, not yet.” He hasn’t suffered enough. If he had his way, he’d grant Dan Sutherland eternal life. Then he could think forever about what had happened to his wife and what was soon to happen to Jen.

Jen had heard enough. Time to find a way out of here. She didn’t intend lie back and await her fate. She turned and walked away, ignoring the calls of “Good night!” from the three brutes toasting their success in the lounge room.

There were several corridors, nodes and perhaps a hundred rooms in her prison. Because, despite its opulence, it was still a prison. It reminded her of a maze, and many of the halls looked hauntingly similar. She was beginning to wonder whether she’d ever find her room again when a feminine voice lured her into a darkened room. “Excuse me.”

“Me?” Jen asked, hiking a thumb at her chest.

“Yes, come here... quickly.” Her voice was hushed and scared.

Jen obeyed, willing to trust anyone from her own gender in such dire circumstances.

“Are you new here.” It wasn’t a question. “I’m Claire Robinson.” She had a thick, pretty accent that Jen couldn’t place. She wondered how her slurred Australian accent would sound to foreign ears.

“I’m Jennifer Cameron.” There was a momentary pause where neither woman knew what to say, finally broken when Jen asked the inevitable. “What’re you doing here?”

“Same thing as you,” she replied huskily. “I’m a prisoner. They removed my chip as soon as I arrived and without it there’s no escape.”

“How long ago was that?”

Claire thought for a moment before answering, “About two and a half years I think, maybe a bit longer. I know what you’re thinking, but there’s no way out. We’ve all tried.”

“We?”

“There are twelve women down here, thirteen now including you. We’re underground, deep underground. Somewhere near Baltimore I think. The only way in and out is by portal.” Claire had a resigned note in her voice, a desolation that was already beginning to infect Jen. “Without a chip we may as well be on the moon.”

Jen’s mind reeled as she struggled to take everything aboard. She wished she could see the woman she was talking to. “Can I turn on the light?”

“No!” Claire reached out to stop Jen from flipping the switch, the briefest touch enough to silence any protest. “I sometimes use this when the dark gets too much.” She fumbled for something. “One of the others gave it to me. She has a nice master and he sometimes smuggles things for her.”

Jen only understood parts of what Claire was telling her. She was drowning in the flood of information and couldn’t process it fast enough to clasp the whole meaning.

It was a battery operated lamp and it cast a muted orange hue about the room, just enough for Jen's struggling eyes to see who she was talking to. Claire had a beautiful face to go with her pretty voice and the warm glow accentuated her feminine chin and high cheekbones. She was slender, but too thin for the word willowy - there was nothing graceful about her slight frame. Jen thought she'd look healthier with another ten kilograms. A white halter left her arms and much of her back bare, and squeezed her breasts together to show ample cleavage. Esteban made her wear it; he liked seeing her flesh ripe to burst from her clothes.

Claire noticed Jen staring at them. "I hate them."

Jen blushed.

"They drugged me one day, during my first month. And when I woke up I had two massive melons where my breasts had once been." She looked sad. "A cosmetic surgeon is a member of the Guild. They've done it to all of us, I suspect you'll have yours done soon too."

Jen frowned. "The Guild?"

"You don't know?" It had been part of Claire's reality for so long that it hadn't occurred to her outsiders might not understand. "God... how can I explain something like the Guild?" She sat on her bed and invited Jen to sit next to her. "It's like a brotherhood of the powerful, all men. Most are in upper management or on the board of directors for a giga-corporation. They help each other out and use their combined influence to annihilate anyone who stands in their way. It's profane, but they live by the motto of the musketeers - all for one and one for all." She cast her eyes to the floor. "And they use women as sex slaves and little else."

"Do you mean this is a secluded mingling place for rich people?" Jen was outraged and not a little confounded.

"Yes."

"How many members?" Jen's amazement seeped into her tone.

"I can't be sure," Claire said, shrugging so hard her breasts nearly leapt out. "It's a global network and they don't all come here, but there must be several hundred."

“And Esteban, Adrian and Frank are in it?” In hindsight, it seemed like a stupid question.

“Yes. Relatively new members from what I can tell. Some of the others have been here longer than I have and said Esteban came about four years ago. I think he met his friends at college, an exclusive college where the Guild scouts for potential members.”

“Where’s everyone else?”

Claire cuddled her lamp like a child clutching her favourite doll. It made her appear vulnerable and scared, and Jen didn’t think she could be older than 23. Even younger than me.

“It’s nearly midnight so most of the women are asleep or waiting in their chambers for their masters,” Claire explained beneath lowered eyelashes. “But most of the men have gone home. Only a few spend the night here, most have wives and families.” Despite her misery, Claire had compassion to spare for the other woman in the Guild - or the Grave as she thought of it. It was underground and she would die there, and that was grave enough.

A stone of sadness settled in Jen’s chest. I wish there was something I could do, she thought despairingly. “Where’re you from? Originally, I mean.”

She summoned the courage to smile, though it felt empty. “Texas,” she replied with a glimmer of pride. “And you?”

“Australia,” Jen said, trying unsuccessfully to reflect Claire’s smile. “And I’m going home.” Fear and determination waged war in her mind, each pulling her in opposite directions.

A tear of hopeless recognition sheened in Claire’s eyes. “I knew you’d try, everybody does.”

“What about air shafts?” Jen asked. “They have to ventilate this place somehow.”

Claire shook her head. “One girl tried. She shinnied into a duct and found a shaft, but a grate was welded across the junction. And there were sensors... they disciplined her but cutting off her hands. She didn’t live long after that and

nobody's tried since." She swallowed bile. "Her name was Heather... she was only sixteen."

Jen recoiled but didn't intend to give up yet. "Then there has to be a sympathetic ear somewhere in the Guild. A male one."

Claire had clung to hope for three months before finally wilting. She knew from experience that the breaking point was the hardest. Hope was a divine gift while it lasted, but it blinded people into believing things that would never happen. All the women in the Guild's Baltimore bunker eventually lost hope and passed through a period of suicidal depression before finally accepting their circumstances. It was painful to watch, Claire knew. One of her friends had hung herself with bed sheets, and another had locked herself in the bathroom, smashed a mirror and sliced her wrists and neck with the shards. It hadn't worked; she hadn't cut deeply enough to sever an artery and the glass had been too slippery with blood for her to finish the task. But it had left her hideously scarred and in the end that had been her ticket out. The Guild wasn't interested in flawed specimens. "We tried that too," Claire warned. "It doesn't work. The Guild's very selective when recruiting new members. They're all psychotic... or so ambitious they're blind."

"Fine. Then I'll go through the portals."

"Without a chip?" Claire raised an eyebrow.

"Oh no, I'll get myself a chip." Jen clenched her jaw and entwined her fingers tightly around the sheets on the bed, screwing them into balls of repressed rage.

"How?"

"I'll rip it from someone's spine."

And she looked so furious that Claire wondered whether she might actually be able to do it.

*

Saturday, September 18, 2066

18:14 Sydney, Australia

Dan had forgotten the mountain of electronic forms required to requisition a departmental vehicle. By the time they were dodging potholes through seedy Sydney streets, Simon's fingers had cramped due to the number of times he'd typed his name. Traffic wasn't a problem, even in Sydney it hadn't been a problem since portals became vogue. An occasional red sports car laid rubber as it screeched around a blind corner, but mostly pedestrians were the concern. With fewer cars on the streets people wandered wherever whim took them.

Simon had insisted on using the car, he didn't want PortaNet logging the location of the safe house. Besides, it was standard operating procedure and Dan hadn't told him they were all unchipped.

Dan was thoroughly lost. He watched the decaying city flash past from the safety of the unmarked police car. He was glad Simon knew where they were. The best he could guess, they were approaching Blacktown. But that was an extremely rough guess and it could've just as easily been Campbelltown on the other side of the sprawling city. There weren't any street signs worth reading, they'd peeled and faded due to lack of funding for road maintenance. But it was clear Simon wasn't navigating toward a prosperous suburb. Dan doubted he could've found a poorer slum if he'd tried and he could feel the discomfort radiating from Samantha and Cookie on the back seat. They were staring wide-eyed at signs of street riots and gang warfare. The older parts of Sydney had become war zones for street hoodlums who were too poor to integrate properly with society. Their parents couldn't afford portals so their families had been castrated from society decades ago. The government, recognising the problem, had petitioned PortaNet to install public stations in poor suburbs to boost the underclass's chances of economic survival. But by then it was too late, the rich had moved to the country and flocked to Australia's golden beaches, and those with money had fled the poor suburbs. Slums like Blacktown and Campbelltown simply didn't have the population to interest PortaNet in spending millions installing and maintaining a public station. So the families with the most need received nothing but a kick in the teeth as they spiralled into a cesspool of violence and crime that the police didn't have the personnel to do anything about.

It was therefore the perfect setting for a departmental safe house. Who would suspect the police would trust a key witness to the most dangerous suburb in

Australia?

“Well, here we are.” Simon pulled into the drive of a dilapidated weatherboard house. Its beige paint was cracking from too many Australian summers and litter was piling up in the front yard next to mounds of canine faeces.

“No.” Cookie’s mouth was agape.

“Yep.” Simon pulled on the handbrake and switched off the engine. “Welcome to your new home.”

“You must be kidding.” Cookie didn’t feel safe to leave the car, let alone spend a night there. “I think I’ll take my chances in a hotel.”

Simon grunted. “Suit yourself.”

“No,” Dan interrupted. “This looks perfect.” He was the first to step from the car and waited patiently by the door while Simon fumbled with the keys, looking for the sequence that would unlock it.

The dilapidated weatherboard was just a façade. Inside it looked sturdy enough to survive a mortar blast. Thick reinforced-concrete walls and a titanium vault-like door helped ease Samantha and Cookie’s nerves. Someone had spent much time and effort ensuring the house was secure. After all, in this neighbourhood there was no such thing as too cautious.

“You see...” Dan was pointing at the various security features to make them feel more comfortable. “Nobody’s getting in here without you knowing about it. Not unless they ram the wall with a tank, and even then you’d have long enough to duck out the back.”

“There are only three ways in and out,” Simon explained. “The front, the back, and the portal.” He showed them how to operate the locks. When he turned the handle they listened to the comforting sound of massive bolts sliding home inside titanium-reinforced concrete.

The furnishings were scant but adequate and Cookie was pleased when he found a digital television he could use as a monitor and a network access socket for his computer.

“Right.” Dan was eager to get moving. “You two stay here. Don’t open the door for anyone except us, don’t let anyone - even us - through the portal, and most importantly, don’t go outside for anything. And Cookie, keep rummaging through UniForce’s network and see what turns up. Right now we know squat, so anything you can find is a bonus. Okay?”

They both nodded obediently. Samantha said, “Okay. But what’s the long term plan?”

“Uh...”

“We can’t stay here forever, right? What’re we going to do? Where’re we going to go?” She was the type of person that needed a certain measure of stability in her life, and in tumultuous times needed a plan on which to cling. She’d never been good at improvisation; she wanted to know what tomorrow would bring and wanted to prepare for it.

Dan stalled his answer. “Well, that depends...”

“On what?”

“On whether Jen’s alive. If she is, then you’ll stay here until I get her back.” He glanced at Simon, silently imploring him to keep Samantha and Cookie safe for that long. “But if she’s... not alive,” - he couldn’t bring himself to say ‘dead’ - “then we’ll have to plan where to start a new life. I’ll help you set up wherever you want to go, so maybe you could start thinking about it in the meantime.”

Samantha wasn’t stupid, she knew Dan would try to exact revenge for what Esteban had done whether Jen was alive or not. “And what if you don’t come back?”

An awkward silence suffocated the room. Nobody liked thinking about those things.

“If you don’t hear from me by noon on Monday, and if Simon’s Superintendent won’t endorse your entrance into the protection program-”

“Not a chance,” Simon said unequivocally without emotion. “I’m not due back at work until Tuesday so I can stall until then, but by midmorning Tuesday my boss will reject the petition and a fistful of cops will override the lock on the

portal to evict you.”

“I don’t need that long,” Dan said. “Either you’ll hear from me on Monday or you’ll never hear from me again. So I want you ready to leave by noon on the twentieth.”

“Fair enough,” Cookie answered. “Good luck, man.”

“Thanks.” Dan didn’t often permit himself to reflect on the danger of his plans, but it dawned on him there was a decent chance he’d be dead before sunrise Monday. It was a chilling thought and he demanded it leave his mind, whereupon it slunk back to the depths of his psyche.

Simon fished a small pad from his pocket and patted himself down for a pen. “This is my private number.” He didn’t need to add that he only gave it out in exceptional circumstances. “If you need anything, ring once and then hang up. I don’t want you talking on that phone.” He pointed at the telephone on the lamp table. “Echelon and the New South Wales Police Department both monitor it.” He’d already ensured they weren’t carrying cellular phones; they were too easy to pinpoint.

“I’m gonna want that number too.” Dan scratched Simon’s mobile number onto a leaf of paper, and then added the number engraved into the plastic on the safe-house telephone.

“This place is always well stocked; it should have enough food to last a month. You’ll find dozens of tinned tomatoes, baked beans and tinned corn in the pantry.” A malevolent smile played on Simon’s lips. “You might even find a cookbook in the drawer, but I wouldn’t bother with it, you won’t find the ingredients for any of the recipes.”

“All right, we’re off.” Dan headed for the door.

“Dan?” Samantha stopped him with a delicate hand on his shoulder. “Please bring Jen back.” She’d sealed her emotions in order to cope with the trauma of losing her best friend to kidnap and the threat of murder. But she couldn’t control them indefinitely. Fear, anger, hurt, regret... they’d all begun to resurface. She’d pinned all her hopes on Dan.

“I will,” Dan promised, though to whom he’d made the promise wasn’t clear. It

was partly a promise to himself, partly a promise to Samantha, and partly a promise to Jen. I just hope she's alive when I find her.

Simon and Dan left, lingering at the door for long enough to hear the bolts sliding home.

"What now?" Simon asked, willing to play chauffeur.

"How about some more coffee?" Dan still had a lot on his mind and couldn't think of a more appropriate setting to ask his friend for another favour.

"Only if I get to choose the café this time." Simon grimaced.

"Deal." But Dan was too agitated to wait for the café; he opened up in the car. "They're good people you know."

"I didn't doubt it," Simon replied. "Not all criminals are bad; they're just breaking the law. It's my job to stop that."

"Oh, come on, you've applied the law selectively in the past. We both have." Dan looked at him incredulously. Has less than a year changed him that much? "They're activists, not rapists or murderers. They're just fighting for the opportunity to be heard. Why shouldn't they have that right?"

"Hey, it's not that I don't agree with you," Simon said, defending his position. "But that's why we're cops, we uphold the law no matter how unfair or ridiculous it seems. It's not our job to change things, we're here to maintain order and keep the peace." It all sat straight in his mind and he didn't appreciate anybody upsetting the balance - his beliefs were too fragile to withstand much punishment. It had taken him a long time to justify arresting people for things that society had considered natural half a century ago.

Dan was deathly quiet.

"Okay, you're right. I apply the law selectively, everyone does. If we have a choice between going after a murderer and a jaywalker, we're going to pick the murderer. It's simple to justify, the murderer does more harm to society-"

Dan cut him off. "Then by that same philosophy we should focus on the people who killed Katherine," - and maybe Jen too - "instead of busting people for

activism.”

Yes, it’s just a pity they’re so far beyond our jurisdiction. Police had a love-hate relationship with portals. The technology had introduced a problem that nobody had foreseen and nobody had bothered fixing with legislation. It was too easy for criminals to commit crimes bridging multiple countries, effectively hamstringing law enforcement communities that were still squabbling about jurisdiction and spheres of control, concepts that hadn’t changed for a century. Simon could see they needed more international cooperation to tackle increasingly sophisticated criminals, but lawmakers were content with things the way they were, possibly because the lawmakers were committing the grandest crimes. And it’s worse in America. Australians couldn’t touch Jen’s abduction case because part of the crime had happened in America, but the Americans would consider it an Australian problem.

So that left Jen with Dan as her only champion.

Simon inhaled deeply as he turned a corner. “Okay, so what’re you planning?”

“Simple. I’m going to find them and kill them.”

A chill shuddered through Simon’s body, but even more disturbing than Dan’s calm was his own willingness to help. “Are you doing this for Jennifer? Or for Katherine?”

The two were inseparable in his mind. He knew he couldn’t leave Jen. If his wife were still alive, he still would’ve done everything in his power to save Jen. But, for the same reason, he would have sought Esteban’s death if he’d never met Jen. Revenge was a primal desire and Dan had no inclination to rein in his feral instincts. He fed from rage; it kept him from collapsing due to grief. “Both,” Dan finally replied, flaring his nostrils. “They’re living on borrowed time.”

“I know.” He remembered how close Dan had come to insanity while weeping over his wife’s body, and how savagely he’d searched for her killers. He remembered the anguish Dan had suffered when he found nobody to blame, and how he’d thrown away a promising career by repeatedly disobeying orders to leave the case alone. Simon felt a twin’s sorrow for his friend, empathising with him deeply. He’d seen the determination in Dan’s eyes then, and he saw it again now, as fresh as ever. Most of all, Simon knew his friend. He knew what Dan was capable of and thinking about it paled his dark skin. He didn’t question

whether Dan would succeed, not when he looked at the stony mask of death chiselled on his face. He reminded Simon of a coiled spring that was ready to disgorge its energy in one furious explosion. Simon just hoped Dan could control himself when it happened.

“How long since her kidnapping?”

Dan didn't take his eyes off the road. “She's alive. They'll toy with her first.” But even if they start now, she'll be blind in four hours. He fervently hoped they'd wait before beginning their satanic ritual of torture and abuse.

Simon sighed. “I know I'm going to regret this, but... what can I do to help?”

“What?” Dan peeled his eyes from the road and stared at his ex-partner.

“I can't let you do this alone.” Simon's soul wouldn't allow it. Lord, if I'm to be proud of one thing when I'm an old man, let it be this. “You need my help.”

Dan felt a wave of gratitude and didn't know how to put it to words. “Slime... I...”

“Yeah, I know mate.” Simon turned another corner. Their friendship had survived the interlude in fine form. Simon felt just as close to Dan now as he had before Katherine's death. It was almost as if they were working a case together. And in a way, they were. A quick catch-up conversation and it was as though they'd never been apart. But Simon was stoic by nature and didn't feel comfortable being that close to emotion; he twisted the conversation back to business. “So this Valdez guy, any idea which rock he crawled under?”

“No, but I know where to find out. Look, if you're going to help then protect Samantha and Cookie no matter what happens to me.”

Simon nodded. “I'll see what I can do.”

“And poke around the Department's database to see what you can find on Esteban. It wouldn't be the first time they've kept more accurate records than anyone else.” Dan pointed at a portal station they were passing. “Can you let me out here?”

Simon pulled to the curb. “We're not getting coffee?”

He shook his head. “Not this time. How about when I get back?”

“Yeah, okay. Just make sure you bring your carcass back alive. Where’re you going anyway?”

Dan’s steely eyes burned. “The belly of the beast.”

*

Saturday, September 18, 2066

19:00 Sydney, Australia

Cookie busily set up his computer and got comfortable for a long stint at the keyboard while Samantha pottered around the kitchen, trying to fix something tasty from the unimaginative range of tinned vegetables stocked in the pantry. He didn't feel safe in the safe house despite Detective West's reassurances. It reminded him of a tomb. Police contractors had spent a lot of energy making the house secure, but had neglected the finer touches. I guess there was no money in the budget for fixtures. Tile patterned linoleum covered half the house and a coarse, synthetic-fibre carpet covered the remainder. And they both looked as if an amateur had laid them. The seams were rough and visible, and the carpet was fraying at the edges. Tasteless wallpaper, which was fading in some places and sagging in others, covered the concrete walls. Two layers of bullet-resistant glass protected the windows. Manufacturers could no longer call it bulletproof because, disgruntled, arms manufacturers had developed munitions capable of puncturing it. But two sheets would stop most projectiles that weren't anti-tank calibre.

The neighbourhood was simply frightening. Where Cookie had expected it to be raucous, it was ghostly silent. He couldn't shake the feeling that someone was stalking them and it gave him the creeps.

He focussed on his computer to force the uneasiness into a corner of his mind. The jack hooked directly into the New South Wales Police Department's network. Well that's stupid of them. Cookie couldn't understand why a network administrator would authorise something like that. No protection at all... He wasted no time burrowing from the Department's uninteresting network and gaining access to the mainstream nano-net. From there he linked up with his pipeline and entered the heart of UniForce's network, feeling torn between his hammer-type attack on Echelon and digging for information that might help Dan recover Jen. In the end, he settled for both.

He had to be careful not to trigger electronic traps. Now they were everywhere, not just near Echelon, and they slowed his progress. His adversaries had planted them like mines around every major system. Like bear-traps, they would clamp around his paws the instant he came within range and alert UniForce personnel of his whereabouts. It understandably made Cookie nervous.

Echelon, he determined, was impenetrable. Somebody had run an impassable ring around it during the interlude. Damn. Cookie swore luridly in his mind. Still, he had to admire the beautiful simplicity of the solution. They knew he was on their network and that repairing the UG7 barriers would take time, so they'd erected a rigid blockade around Echelon, their most prized possession. He couldn't reach it, not anymore. A heavy feeling settled in his chest. All that work for nothing.

Samantha felt his sorrowful vibrations from the kitchen and took a break from her frustrating culinary exercise to see what was wrong. "What is it?"

"We were away too long," Cookie explained. "They've tucked Echelon into a steel box and buried it in their backyard."

"So? You can cut through steel, can't you?"

He slowly shook his head, feeling defeated. "Not this time. Whoever did this is good enough to know what he's doing." He grudgingly admired it. Cookie would complement even a hated enemy if he or she did something particularly clever. "There's no way through this. They've restricted network traffic to the bare minimum Echelon needs to do its job. And I can't slip in pretending to be genuine data because it scans those streams for executables. Fuck me, but they've even locked themselves out, so I don't know how they intend to do maintenance." He mused over that for a moment. "They must have a key, but they've buried the lock. So only they know where to find the door."

"Oh," Samantha said, mirroring his sorrow for deeper reasons than mourning over Echelon. "Well don't worry about it. What's the point now Jen's gone anyway?"

Cookie pulled her to sit on his lap, wrapped his arms around her, and drew her close for the hug he knew she needed. "Hey, it's going to be okay."

"Oh yeah?" She snorted indelicately. "How's that? Jen's probably dead already."

"Don't say that." Cookie was desperately clutching to hope and was finding the straws harder to hold onto than he'd imagined. "There's a chance she's still alive and I'm sure she wouldn't want you talking about her like she's already dead. She'd want you to keep hoping for her, wouldn't she?"

Samantha smeared silent tears across her cheeks. “I guess.”

“What do you think of Dan?”

She shrugged. “He’s already saved Jen once, so I guess he’s all right.”

“‘All right’ enough to save her again?” Cookie asked, wondering whether it was smart to pin all their hopes on one man. And a bounty hunter at that... not the most dependable profession.

“I hope so.” The fragile quiver in Samantha’s voice spoke volumes about how little hope she actually had, she was just trying to project the appearance of hope for Cookie’s sake. Bubbly and cheerful much of the time, she was also a realist. She knew Jen’s chances were slim.

“Well, Echelon’s out of the question, so I can dedicate my time to digging up helpful information.” Cookie squeezed Samantha tight, trying to impart some of his feigned strength.

“And I have some more sacrificing to do in the kitchen.” Samantha kissed him on the forehead before scooting away and Cookie felt her lips on his skin long after she’d removed them, leaving him warm and fuzzy to offset the desolation within.

A datamining program returned some interesting results and enveloped his train of thought. He’d set the application to work mining for information about Esteban’s history, cross-referenced with Dan. There were five records and he examined each in chronological order.

The first was a memorandum from the previous assassination co-ordinator. Interesting... Cookie wondered how damaging that single record could be; UniForce spent much time and advertising money denying the existence of their assassination branch while simultaneously promoting it in the corporate underworld. He suspected he had access to enough information to indict the entire management team and sink the company for good, so he began caching all the records he inspected, just in case. It was tempting to replicate the whole database but he knew that would create enough network traffic to alert even the sleepest system administrator. He or she would simply have to follow the torrent of data back to the Department’s network and from there it would only take minutes to pinpoint his location. Tempting, but too dangerous.

Irritation oozed through the memorandum in which the co-ordinator outlined the problem: a lowly Australian detective based in Parramatta wasn't dropping the UniForce-tagged case. It finished by recommending UniForce apply pressure on the Australian Government to control the rogue officer.

The second record detailed how political pressure had been unsuccessful in dissuading the determined detective, Dan Sutherland. Furthermore, the situation was becoming dire: Sutherland was sniffing at the assassin's heels. The co-ordinator said he had reprimanded the operative, Esteban Garcia Valdez, for his slovenly procedures, which had enabled Sutherland to track him. He'd used the record to reinforce UniForce's work ethos and warn active assassins to act professionally at all times - UniForce would not tolerate sloppy killings.

Cookie, totally hooked, devoured the third record. It depicted the horrors UniForce had inflicted upon Dan to persuade him to drop the case. They'd slaughtered his cat and scattered its entrails across his property, phoned him every night to deliver death threats, and offered staggering sums of money as a bribe. Jesus H Christ, Cookie thought. Who the hell is this guy? He couldn't think of anyone stubborn enough to withstand the brunt of UniForce's shit. The list of atrocities scrolled for three pages, a catalogue of horror that chilled Cookie's blood. But the record made it clear that UniForce had been meticulously careful to veil their hand in the matter. As far as Dan was concerned, Esteban had orchestrated everything alone.

He was almost afraid to open the fourth record. When he did, the words assaulted him with a dark portrayal of Esteban's arrest. Whoever had updated the database had been furious that someone had poached one of UniForce's top assassins. It listed serious justifications for declaring company emergency. Esteban had been one of the few assassins with detailed knowledge about UniForce's assassination branch. The co-ordinator was worried he might use the information as currency to buy himself a lenient sentence. UniForce therefore applied the full weight of their political muscle and the fifth record was a glowing report of their success; Esteban was off the hook. Yeah, but only thanks to a dubious judicial decision. Cookie wasn't impressed. So much for judges being impervious to bribes. But UniForce had stripped Esteban of his field status, planting him in management instead.

How could he start working for such an evil company? It didn't make sense. Even if he didn't know they were the ones who killed his cat, he knew they were

behind the assassination. Didn't he put two and two together? Cookie was puzzling over it when the datamining application dredged up two more records.

He read them hungrily, his appetite whetted by the developing mystery. "Oh my God."

Samantha had just walked in, balancing two plates of slop and two sets of cutlery. She put one on the bench Cookie was using as a desk. "Here's your soup."

"Ta," he replied absently, reading the final records a second and third time.

"What's 'oh my god'?" Samantha asked, tasting her concoction and wishing she'd found some salt in the cupboard.

"I know why Dan's wife was murdered... and I know why Esteban was the one who did it."

"What?" She abandoned the soup and leant over his shoulder to read the words herself.

"We've gotta buzz Simon." Cookie was trying hard to regulate his breathing. "Dan would wanna know about this."

"Already? The poor guy probably just got home."

"He said to call him if we needed anything, and this is important," Cookie rationalised.

A few seconds more and she capitulated. "Okay, what's the number?"

He gave her Simon's card. "Just one ring."

"I remember." She dialled his number, let it ring once, then terminated the call and replaced the receiver. "Okay, now what?"

Cookie resumed datamining. "Now we wait."

Chapter 8

The earth is not dying, it is being killed. And those that are killing it have names and addresses.

Utah Phillips

Saturday, September 18, 2066

UniForce Headquarters

01:29 San Francisco, USA

To say James was in a foul mood would be a grievous understatement. Dark bags had settled under his eyes, the product of ten hours sleep in three days. Sweat soaked his clothes and a repugnant odour, a thousand times worse than deodorant alone could mask, leaked from his armpits. He was treating a throbbing headache with unwise doses of Hexadril, a new Xantex painkiller. And he was beating back fatigue with stimulant after stimulant, which were rapidly losing their effect. His mind would race for half an hour after popping a pill before nestling back to a numbing daze. Yet he'd surprised himself with his gutsy determination and endurance. He hadn't pulled an all-nighter since he was a student and he'd never attempted a foolhardy four-day marathon. The ten hours rest didn't count because he'd hardly slept - the dangerous quantities of stimulant he'd ingested had ensured that.

His efficiency was suffering too. It'd taken him twice as long as usual to erect a barrier around Echelon. He checked the system's pulse. James was proud of the defence he'd designed. It should go in the next issue of Computing Genius! He had the only key, a memorised sequence of alphanumeric characters that he needed to apply in sequence in order to pass through the digital fortress. Stupid UG7... this wouldn't be necessary if that bloody network had kept them out in the first place. Indeed, overconfidence in the UG7-rating was why there was no security on internal systems. Everybody had believed UG7 protection was more than adequate.

Other members of his team had done a superb job securing the mail system. One less thing I have to worry about, he thought while chewing a fingernail. Now... let's kick this hacker's butt back to his terminal. James surveyed the sorry state of the network. His team had made spaghetti of it. Oh Christ. It was tempting to shut everything down and repair the damage at his leisure. But Ice Bitch would kill me. He snorted. Disconnecting the network would necessitate shutting Echelon down and he had no idea how long it would take to repair. We could be offline for a week. Hell, it might be faster to rebuild the fucking thing from scratch... Interrupting Echelon was not an option, not even for a second. Besides, he'd just spent two days protecting it from internal attack, which had purchased him time to isolate and eradicate hostiles behind the firewall.

Echelon was the lifeblood of UniForce. Without it, UniForce couldn't generate

income. And if the shareholders thought Echelon were vulnerable, they'd abandon UniForce stock in droves and the company might go under. That reminds me, James thought with a satisfied smile. I should dump my UniForce stock before tendering my resignation. He still planned to jump ship. I've just gotta wait for this to blow over.

His wife had phoned twice in the past 24 hours, becoming increasingly annoyed that he hadn't come home. She'd started to suspect James was avoiding her. After all, who in their right mind would demand an employee stay at work for three consecutive days? He snorted. How about my boss, the Ice Bitch?

And James's mind was starting to play tricks on him, either from fatigue or an unforeseen side effect of taking ultimately damaging doses of stimulant. A few hours ago his water bottle had talked to him, conversing authoritatively about the nuances of the chip-economy. Before that, the colours on his monitor had swirled into a dizzying fractal and he'd had to close his eyes. Impossible things had happened, disconcerting things, things that only years of therapy could help him understand and deal with. But, if seeing meant believing, then he had to believe a speckled snake sat coiled in the corner. It was huge, had a diamond-shaped head, and would periodically rear into the air and hiss at him to hurry up. At first he'd rubbed his eyes and stared in open-mouthed astonishment but more recently he'd begun talking back. Michele, bored as bat shit, had decided that was an appropriate moment to leave him alone with his apparitions. She'd then retired to her office, annoyed that Jackie expected her to stay throughout the crisis.

Another facet of James's distorted reality was his growing obsession with winning the online battle. It had become so vitally important to him that he considered it more crucial than life itself. David Cooke might be a legend on the hacker circuit, he thought. But I'm better! He shouted in his mind repeatedly: I'm better! I'm better! I'm better! And he was surprised to find those words filling three hundred pages in his favourite text editor when next he opened his eyes.

He slapped some precious water on his cheeks. Come on James, get with the program. He refocused, trying even harder to lock onto the source of the signal that had come uninvited into what he'd started to regard as his personal network.

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Saturday, September 18, 2066

05:28 Baltimore, USA

Jen lay on her back, staring at the ceiling. From the outside she looked calm, but her unblinking eyes masked a whirlpool of frustration, anger, and fear, each fighting hand-over-fist to dominate her at any given moment.

She'd tried to sleep with little success; she doubted she'd be tired until morning. The difference in time zones was wreaking havoc on her circadian rhythm, but she intended to use that to her advantage. A loose plan was forming in her mind and desperation made her believe it was a good one.

But several questions blared through her mental anguish, demanding answers lest she go insane: How can they get away with this? How can they steal women from their homes? Why aren't investigators barging through the portals to arrest them? She studied the problem from every angle trying to justify answers, but found none.

She checked her watch. The ghostly glow of the analogue hands was just visible in the gloom. It was nearly time to give impetus to her plan. Like any good tactician, she fretted about whether it would work and the excess nervous energy left her giddy.

Jen hauled herself off the mattress and the carpet tickled the soles of her feet. The Guild was quiet. She'd monitored and catalogued every sound for hours, hearing nothing to indicate human activity for at least two. Not that she'd expected a din, Dan's house had been quiet too - earth was a wonderful insulator. She obeyed her plan like an unquestioning soldier because she knew doubt would only wheedle her back to bed, defeated. The halls were empty, though she suspected cameras were constantly scanning the corridors.

She'd talked to Claire for almost an hour and already felt a special bond with her. If I can just break free, I can... She seized her thoughts. If? When! She charged her psychological batteries for the ordeal that lay ahead, telling herself it would work. It had to work. Every cell in her body demanded freedom. She couldn't cope with captivity, not for long, and that knowledge scared her. What if it fails? But she snubbed the thought before she could answer and hope glowed like a fragile ember in her stomach, driving her forward. Break free. Return with police. Free the others. She ticked the steps off on her fingers. She hoped to stay

in touch with Claire afterwards. But I'm ahead of myself again. She swallowed and focussed on the moment.

The dark licked oppressively at the fairy-like safety lights, which lit the corridors at baseboard level. They timidly illuminated the way to the toilets - the Guild didn't want captives sullyng their perfect décor with pungent urine if they were unable to hold on until morning. But the glow was eerie and a shiver crept down Jen's spine. She'd thought of two ways to reach freedom. Esteban had one in his pocket. If she could retrieve her chip selector, she could crack it apart, hand out microchips as if they were candy, and lead an exodus. Or, failing that, the hard way. She wasn't yet sure she had the stomach to kill a man, let alone gouge the microchip from his body. But if that's what it takes... She wasn't worried about her captors' souls; they were black beyond repair. Of that, she was sure. But neither did she want blood on her hands; she was only considering it because the alternative was life as a sex slave.

Leaping into a portal with a Guild member wasn't an option due to PortaNet's safety mechanisms. Every portal scanned for multiple signs of life and would deactivate the instant it detected a positive reading. There was also the weight to consider. Every microchip contained a field for the individual's weight and portals refused to operate if they sensed more than 30 kilograms above the posted amount. PortaNet deemed anything heavier was cargo. No, if Jen wanted to escape on a Guild member's microchip, she'd have to rip it from his spine.

She blinked moisture back into her eyes. Given the chance, she knew what she'd choose. All I need is an effective weapon. That was the first task. She scoured her room for anything even mildly weapon-effective but the best she found was a table leg, which she could use baseball-bat style. First, she'd have to smash the table. No. It'd be hard to hold... not good enough. It certainly wasn't suitable for what Jen had in mind. She needed something better, like a knife. Or better yet, a gun. She doubted her captors would be stupid enough to leave weapons lying around but she intended to check.

An icepick maybe? It was an intriguing thought and far more effective than a hunk of wood. Easier to conceal too. She remembered the bar in the lounge and made a beeline toward it.

She was tiptoeing silently across the carpet when a slurred voice startled her from the dark.

“What are you doing here?” He had a thick English accent, reminding Jen of an Oxford professor who had once guest-lectured at her university.

Shrill panic squeezed adrenaline from her glands and conflagrated a fire in her stomach. The only sensible answer came unbidden to her lips. “I was thirsty.”

“Ah, you must be the new girl they warned me about.” He was tipsy and Jen wondered why he’d been sitting alone in the dark. “I’m Edward Tinlin.”

Jen started sidling past him, unsure whether to classify him dangerous. “I’m Jennifer Cameron.”

“Oh yes, I know,” he said. “Mike Cameron’s granddaughter, they told me.” He pressed a button on the remote he was cradling and a light flickered on, temporarily blinding them. “Oh sorry.” He pressed another button and the light dimmed to an acceptable level. Under other circumstances Jen would have called the duskiness romantic, but now it just felt unsafe. “Ah, there, that’s better.” He gestured casually to the bar and said, “If you’re thirsty... Of course you’re not allowed alcohol, but you’re new so they probably won’t mind.”

Jen noticed that he kept saying ‘they’, as if he was an outsider. Quickly, she forged another plan, one that didn’t involve killing. “Thanks.” Still, she canvassed the area for a weapon while pouring a glass of tonic, just in case her new plan failed. The Guild had stocked the bar well and it included a hefty icepick. She tucked it into her jeans and folded her shirt over the top to keep it hidden.

“Where are you from?” She carefully gauged his reaction while lowering herself into the furthest armchair.

“England, would you believe? I only come here when in serious need of getting drunk.” He beamed happily through an alcohol haze, doing a poor job of concealing a deeper misery. Jen didn’t care what it was or why it was there, but he enlightened her nonetheless. “I arrived home early today.” He chortled and spilled liquor unnoticed onto his crotch. “I thought I’d surprise my wife on our anniversary with flowers and a box of chocolates. But wouldn’t you know it? She surprised me... fucking her girlfriend she was.” He downed the contents of his tumbler with a quick gulp and looked ravenously toward the bar.

“I’m sorry,” Jen said. But she wasn’t sorry at all. She didn’t give a toss what

happened to him or his wife. She just wanted to keep him onside.

“Yes, well, shit happens.” He looked lazily at the rainbow of light refracted by his tumbler, lost in thought.

She didn’t want to risk waiting any longer. “You look like a decent person.”

“Really?”

“Uh, yeah.” Is he too drunk to help? Jen wondered, fretting that he may not even comprehend her plea. “There are women here, held against their will.”

“Oh, ‘s that right?”

Jen nodded, trying to snare his attention for long enough to make her proposal. “I’m one of them, Edward.”

Hearing his name jolted him back to the present. “Yes, I know.” He regarded her bleakly and without much emotion.

“Do you think that’s right?” Talking to drunks had always frustrated her, which was why she rarely drank anything herself. She despised feeling intoxicated.

Edward shrugged. “I don’t suppose it is, no. But then, you’re either going to be here or in gaol, which would you prefer?”

Neither. “Secret option number three...” She let her voice trail away, sensing the conversation would go nowhere.

“Well,” he spread his palms, “you should’ve thought of that before you went and broke the law.” His eyes drifted away from her face. “You know what my wife always said?”

“What’s that?” Jen felt ill thinking about plunging the icepick into Edward’s temple. She felt like a criminal, just as he’d said. I should’ve thought of that before breaking the law. She wished she could rewrite the law, or have her vengeance upon those who’d written it.

“Never pass a golden opportunity.” He licked his lips, his pinched face looking suddenly wolfish. “How about you take me to your room and we have some fun?”

If you do that for me, I'll see what I can do for you."

A wave of repulsion rippled through Jen's body. A proposition from an intoxicated English self-righteous snob wasn't her idea of a good time. But, she thought, it would be the perfect opportunity to steal his chip. So she nodded and forced a sultry smile.

She set her tonic water on the carpet and stood, offering to help him to his feet. He accepted her hand and pulled himself onto unsteady feet. Three seconds later, he shoved her roughly to the floor and toppled onto her. "On second thought, I can't make it to your room. How about we do it here?"

He was heavier than he looked and was crushing the air from her lungs. "What? No! Get off me!" She raised her voice shrilly and twisted, trying to worm her arms free and reach the icepick.

He squeezed her right breast hard enough to bruise and used his knees to pin her arms to the floor, leaving his other hand free to undo the latch on her belt. He was kneeling on her injured wrists, making her skin smart and her joints pop.

She lashed out with her legs and rammed a knee into one of his kidneys. But, anesthetised by alcohol, it merely made him angry and he slapped her roughly across the face. The impact whipped her head to one side and split her lip, and the taste of warm blood trickling into her mouth. He'd worked her jeans down by the time she recovered from the shock, hopelessly entangling her legs in the unyielding denim.

"Hello, what's this then?" He found the icepick.

"None of your fucking business," Jen spat back. "Now get off me!"

Edward shook his head and tossed the icepick aside. "No, I don't think so you stupid cow." His fingers clutched at her underpants.

"Stop it!" Jen was nearly screaming, the pain in her wrists unbearable.

"You'd better do what the lady says, Edward."

He stiffened, looking into the gloom with wild grey eyes. "Why? She's a fucking whore, what does it matter if I drill her?"

“It matters to Esteban, do you want to argue the point with him?”

Edward hung his head and reluctantly released the pressure from Jen’s wrists. She clutched the opportunity to slam a fist squarely into his gonads, taking pleasure in his squeal of pain. He whipped his hands into a protective cup over his testicles, far too late to save them from permanent damage. He didn’t know it, but later it would develop into testicular cancer. “Ah, you fucking bitch!” He slapped her again, harder than the first time and drew his fist back to land a punch when Junior knocked him aside with a kick. Edward was too drunk to do more than lie on the ground and writhe in agony.

Junior used the remote to cast more light on the room, sending another stab of pain into Jen’s retinas. She pulled her jeans up and fastened her belt before gingerly rubbing her wrists.

“That bitch! Did you see what she did?” Edward moaned, incensed.

“Yeah, and you deserved it too,” Junior retorted. “You’re just lucky you’re as drunk as a skunk or it’d hurt even more.”

Jen rolled to her feet, snatched the abandoned icepick, and rose to a defensive crouch. Junior watched her with a mixture of surprise and amusement.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he scoffed. “Give me the pick.”

She refused and waved it menacingly, jerking it back and forth in the air with a stabbing action. If she landed it in the right place, she knew she could kill him, which was deterring enough to make Junior cautious. But she knew time was her greatest enemy. “You’ve been watching me?”

“Every move.” Junior saw no sense in lying. “We have cameras. We watch all new acquisitions until they’re accustomed to their surroundings.”

“So you were just going to let him rape me?”

Junior almost laughed. “Don’t be daft. I was the one who stopped it, remember?” He took a step toward her.

“Stay back or I will stab you.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Junior took a moment to collect his thoughts. “I want to help you, but first you have to help me.”

“How?”

“Give me that for starters.” Junior offered an outstretched hand, willing her to surrender the weapon peacefully. “If you give it to me I’ll make things go smoothly for you here. Without help it’ll be a nightmare.” He checked his watch. “Esteban’s already on his way, I woke him when you got into trouble with Edward, but if he walks in now there’s no telling what he’ll do.”

“Why’d you call him?”

“He wanted to know if you got into mischief,” Junior replied smoothly. “He wants you protected.”

“I see...” Jen said slowly with a crease on her forehead. “Until Dan turns up, right?”

Junior’s silence told her all she needed to know. On the surface, Junior would say he was willing to help, but he was incapable of delivering. Unless he lends me his chip. She took a chance and lunged, the icepick aimed deftly at his throat. If it connected, she knew she’d have time to continue stabbing him until he stopped breathing.

Surprise registered in Junior’s eyes a fraction too late to avoid the blow entirely. He twisted to one side and bashed her forearm with a defensive move, something he’d learned in primary school karate class that had worked into his reflexes. He wasn’t a skilled fighter, but the block was effective enough to save his life. The tip of the pick plunged agonisingly into the fleshy muscle on the side of his neck, well clear of major arteries and critical nerves. His skin split when the thick base of the pick entered the wound and it bled profusely, showering his shirt with a river of sticky red.

The sensation of pick piercing human flesh was a memory Jen would rather have done without. The feeling repulsed her and she fought the impulse to drop the handle. She jerked her arm back and retreated, waiting to see what would happen.

Junior predictably clutched his messy wound, ferociously scowling at her and

cussing through clenched teeth.

“You see.” Edward was pushing to his knees, the pain in his testicles having subsided to a dull throb. “I told you the silly cow was a bitch.”

A sticky trail of blood trickled down the pick and coated Jen’s fingers, making her weapon even harder to grip. It made her ill and she wondered whether she’d have the tenacity to dig out Junior’s spine. “Stay back.” Now it was two against one, hardly good odds. She swallowed her fear and planted her feet firmly on the carpet, ready to lash out at the first person to come within striking distance.

Junior was trying to reassure himself that his wound wasn’t fatal. The pain throbbing from his torn flesh was blindingly intense and a gong-like scream for revenge went off in his mind. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

Jen reworked the grip on the icepick, daring him to step closer. She brazenly stepped an inch forward, threatening to stab again if they didn’t back away. It was gratifying to see two large men backing away with fear clouding their eyes.

“No, you really shouldn’t.” It was a familiar voice and she turned to see Esteban waltz into the room. He levelled a pistol at her and calmly invited her to drop her weapon. “You want to put that down now?”

“I’d rather not,” she replied, staring at his gun. “You’re not going to shoot me.”

“Oh no?” Esteban smiled sweetly. “That depends how much you irritate me.” He secretly enjoyed watching her stand there, fist coated in blood. It thrilled him in ways that Michele and Claire were incapable of.

“You need me alive.”

“Yes, but just because I shoot you doesn’t necessarily mean you’ll die.” Esteban cocked both eyebrows. “How much do you like your kneecaps? I’ve heard it hurts like a son-of-a-bitch to have them shot off.”

Just standing in the same room as such a monster revolted her. “Fuck you.”

Oh, you will. “Later perhaps.” He enjoyed the jolt of fear that thought evoked in her. “Now be sensible and drop the icepick. What do you think you’ll achieve against the three of us anyway?”

Jen wasn't sure anymore, it just didn't seem appropriate to surrender voluntarily. "Tell me one thing first."

"Okay, what?" Esteban couldn't see the harm in entertaining her for a while.

"How do you get away with this?"

Esteban was intelligent enough to understand to what her question pertained. "You're all sanctioned apprehensions that have, shall we say, slipped through the cracks. Every now and then, someone gets lost in the system and ends up here." He looked around. "Have you asked yourself why nobody's bothered organising a revolt? They have nowhere to go. If they leave here, the only place they'll end up is prison. Your friend, Claire, she's a killer. Ask her if you don't believe me."

Jen felt the determination drain from her body and she knew she was moments away from defeat. She wasn't yet ready to release hope, but neither was she ready to give Esteban an excuse to kneecap her. She tossed the icepick aside.

"Good." Esteban waved at Junior and he reluctantly took his gore-drenched hand away from his neck to grip Jen's arms and twist them behind her back.

Esteban tucked his gun into its holster and drew a needle from his pocket. He used his teeth to remove the protective plastic jacket and spat it to the floor.

"Oh no, please..." Jen wriggled but Junior held her fast. "You don't need to use that."

"I beg to differ," Esteban replied with a tinge of malice. "You've woken me up once tonight already and I'm sure Junior would like to visit the hospital. This is my insurance."

"I'll be good, I promise, please." Jen watched him draw the clear liquid into the syringe and flick it to remove the air bubbles. "No, don't." Her voice was getting shrill.

"Shut the fuck up," Esteban commanded. "Or I'll dig out your vocal cords." He prompted with his eyes, deliberately tempting her to test him. "Have you ever seen a set of vocal cords?" He waited until she shook her head, muted by the threat. "Well they're really quite fascinating, so if you'd like an impromptu anatomy lesson just go ahead and keep screeching."

Jen bit her lip when he inserted the needle, standing as still as possible to minimise the damage to her surrounding tissue. He injected the blend of drugs with somewhat less than a surgeon's precision and although it was less painful than the previous time, it still hurt.

She was sobbing when he retracted the chilly syringe and they walked her back to her room. Her vision was already fading by the time they laid her on her mattress and the last thing she heard before blissful unconsciousness snatched her was Junior complaining about the gash in his neck.

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Saturday, September 18, 2066

International Portal Terminals

20:08 Sydney, Australia

Dan couldn't believe his luck - or lack thereof, depending on how things went. He checked his watch. Damn, Chuck, what sort of hours are you pulling? Christopher Delaney was at his usual counter, validating international travellers. Now what? It made things tricky. If he picked anybody else's counter Chuck would be suspicious, but if he went through Chuck's counter, he would know Dan's chip was fake. Dan had changed and tested his new identities twice in anticipation of international travel. Both tests had proved successful - nobody had suspected he wasn't Tedman Kennedy and Brent Bertrouney. Either that or they didn't care to look surprised. The chip selector currently displayed Tedman Kennedy and he'd spent half an hour memorising details such as the birth date, blood type and medical history of the persona. It would be disastrous to forget who he was pretending to be.

But Chuck caused a new set of problems and Dan cursed the fact that his frequent travel had made him such a well-known passenger. Dan couldn't afford to have anyone scan his real chip, it would forewarn of his impending arrival. No, not acceptable. He sipped a cup of bland coffee at a nearby café to consider his options. It was his third for the day and his mind was zinging with caffeine. I could wait... But that idea merely piqued his desire for haste - Jen was in danger now. Besides, he had no idea whether Chuck had just started his shift or was about to end it.

Dan sighed and ran a hand over his face before pushing back from the table and striding confidently towards Christopher's counter. "G'day Chuck, how're things?"

He smiled warmly. "Hey Dan-the-man-from-Afghanistan, not too bad. You?"

"I've seen better days," Dan admitted sombrely. "Say, what kind of freakazoid hours are you working here?"

"Yeah, I know, it's my turn for night shift." He sighed and blinked sleep from his eyes. "A ten day rotation every three months. It sucks, but it comes with the job."

"When do you get off?" Dan asked.

He checked his watch in the hope that time was passing quickly. “Not until the morning guys get here, around eight. But after my rotation I get a five day break so it’s not too bad.”

Dan grunted. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“So where’re you off to this time?” Christopher asked, indicating he should step closer for the mandatory scan.

“Actually, I was wondering if you could do me a favour,” Dan replied vaguely.

“Sure, name it.” Christopher didn’t even flinch. They’d developed a friendship over the past few months. Or, at the very least, he’d call Dan a close acquaintance. He passed through the terminal every few days and always had time for a chat. Recently Chuck had joked that he would have a ‘most-frequent traveller’ award printed and framed especially for Dan. And a month ago they’d gone for beers and watched the rugby final at the local watering hole.

“It’s not entirely legal,” Dan said, testing the waters. He nervously wondered whether their friendship was strong enough to support the tremendous weight he was about to place upon it.

“Whoa there big boy.” Christopher held up his hands. “Don’t ask me to do something that’ll get me fired. I thought you were going to ask me to water your plants or something.” He paused, gauging Dan’s reaction. There was none. His stoic mask only betrayed his discipline. Curiosity eventually got the better of him. “What is it?”

It was Dan’s turn to study Chuck. Trust was a luxury he didn’t have, so he had to be very careful divulging information. “Somebody I know is in a lot of trouble.” Dan started slowly, cautiously choosing every word. “For now, just tell me what has to happen to let someone pass on a fake chip.”

Chuck huffed. “It can’t be done.”

“You’ve never looked the other way?” Dan asked, angered beneath his calm surface. Since when did you become so sanctimonious?

“Shh!” he hushed. “Not so bloody loud mate.”

“You won’t help?” Dan asked flatly.

“I didn’t say that,” Christopher replied slyly. “What’ve you gone and gotten yourself mixed up in?”

“If I’m alive in a week I’ll tell you over a beer.”

“It’s that bad, huh?”

Dan nodded solemnly. “Yeah, it’s that bad.”

“Must be time you considered a new profession then.” He smiled. “We’ve got an opening if you’re interested. I could talk to the boss?”

“Pass.”

Christopher sighed. “You don’t know what you’re missing.” He would’ve liked to have someone interesting to share the monotonous night shifts with. The others were okay, but they were into computer games and were always talking about sorceresses, paladins, swords and armour. It drove him crazy. “Just so I’m clear, we’re talking about you, aren’t we?”

Dan nodded slowly, wondering whether Chuck would blow his plans asunder. He had one hand in his pocket, ready to press ‘next’ and revert to his legitimate identity if things turned sour.

“And I assume you’ve got a good reason for wanting your name off the records?”

Dan nodded again, more warily than ever.

“Come on then, let’s get this over with.” He offered his scanner and Dan stepped forward, brushing past the compact handheld device, which looked similar to a barcode-reader. It communicated briefly with the chip in his pocket and fed the relevant details to Christopher’s monitor. Meanwhile, Dan lined up his weaponry for tagging. Christopher watched as each piece of Dan’s arsenal emerged from the folds of his clothing. He uttered an oath under his breath, something that Dan couldn’t quite catch.

“Very well Mr Kennedy,” Chuck intoned formally. “Have a pleasant trip

abroad.”

“Thanks Chucky, I owe you one.” Dan holstered his weapons.

“No, you owe me two. Kegs. No, make it two bottles of scotch. The good stuff.” Christopher smiled. “Just make sure you bring your ass back alive so I can collect, you hear?”

“Loud and clear.” Dan walked away before a queue banked up behind him. It was a busy time of night, the last minute rush before most Australians wanted to be home in front of their televisions or making love to their partners.

He looked over his shoulder on his way to the portals, reassured to see Christopher wasn't making an emergency call to his supervisor and requesting police involvement. So Dan joined the short queue at the nearest international portal. Several large signs requested that travellers check their destination codes before joining a queue. It was annoying when somebody in front reached the portal and realised they didn't know their destination code. Fifty dedicated code-terminals indexed the codes for all international destinations, but Dan didn't need them. When he reached the front of queue, he stepped inside the white circle and he entered the code he'd thoroughly memorised.

The portals were impeccably hygienic, cleaned at regular intervals to PortaNet specifications. They looked like large tubes. Users stepped inside, made sure they were within the white safety circle, and dialled the destination code on the provided panel. There was an identical panel on the outside of the tube so that a second person could operate the portal on behalf of the traveller. The elderly and 'special' members of the community had been so dumbfounded by PortaNet's invention that engineers had added the extra panel to circumvent the problem of training the untrainable. The company was already spending billions on public education; they'd simply considered some people too slow-witted to comprehend the new technology.

Dan had only a vague idea how portals worked, but he'd always thought the process lacked flare. There was no white flash, no sparks, and no melodramatic countdown, just a pop of changing air pressure.

A gust of cold North American air slammed his face when his vision shifted and the customary tickle in his lungs made him cough. He stepped out of the tube, thumped a fist to his chest to ease the discomfort, and headed toward United

States Immigration. I hope this goes smoothly. American immigration was a lot larger than Australian Immigration so he didn't know anybody well enough to cause a problem. I hope. But since America used a two-tier system, he had two counters to pass: immigration and customs. He gulped in anticipation.

But twenty minutes later he'd navigated the chaos of travellers and was standing in the chill of the North American autumn, gazing at UniForce headquarters. A dire hatred consumed his inner thoughts and he was prepared to tear the jugular from Esteban's throat if he had half a chance. One year ago he wouldn't have believed himself capable of transforming into a bloodlusting killer. Yet there he stood, comfortable with the thought of bereaving Esteban's family.

He watched for security and coldly calculated his best opportunity to enter the building. He wasn't sure what he'd achieve at 2:30 on Saturday morning, but he wasn't content to do nothing. Jen's time was running out and if there were even the slimmest possibility that he could save her, he'd keep trying.

Something in there will help me find Esteban... and Jen. He had to believe it or he'd lose what remained of his fragile sanity. A digital scope, no bigger than a pen, helped him peer through the night. He was squatting in a nature strip that ran the length of the grime-smattered street. Massive buildings loomed on all sides and he couldn't help thinking it was unwise to tempt gravity so excessively. Human engineering was good, but nature could swat once and splatter the buildings like pimples. It would only take one decent earthquake. He didn't believe the rhetoric fed to the public about earthquake predictability, nor could he swallow the commercials he'd seen for the anti-vibration systems installed in modern skyscrapers. It simply wasn't clever to build them so enormous, especially when portal technology made the logistics of transportation so easy.

The concrete monstrosities spewed fluorescent light as if electricity was free and the light pollution was so bad that, despite zero cloud cover, Dan couldn't see a single star. Using a portal was out of the question; security locked them down at night. Only a small subset of authorised microchips could portal in, and security monitored that activity closely. But Dan had never navigated through UniForce headquarters on foot and he screwed his eyes tight trying to remember on which floor he'd find the management offices.

He shivered from cold and praised his thick coat.

Standard patrols guarded the building's perimeter, a few men at most. Inside there would be more, perhaps 50 - far more than Dan could handle alone. He wouldn't want to assault the building even if he had a platoon as backup. UniForce guards were well armed and portal technology ensured they could react quickly to trouble. That leaves stealth. He chewed his lower lip, picking his moment. When a host of factors had aligned in his mind, he stood, ignoring the discomfort when his knees cracked in protest. Then streaked across the road and darted into UniForce territory.

It was easier than he'd thought. Deep down he'd suspected he would need to eliminate three or four innocent security guards, and he'd been psyching himself up for that probability. But he reached the opaque glass wall without opposition and pressed his shoulder blades against it, wincing when pain jolted from his wound. The bump stretched his skin and tugged his sutures.

Dan gritted his teeth. It'd been a long time since he'd broken into a high-security building. But, although he was nervous, the necessary skills came back to him. At one time well developed, his unique skills would probably stay with him for life. They hibernated until he reactivated them in times of need - like now.

Tonight he was thankful for his past.

He extracted a knife-like instrument and began cutting a manhole-sized block from the wall. The glass was only four centimetres thick, but the manufacturer had cured it with chemicals that had modified the quartz's molecular structure, making it a thousand times stronger than a normal pane of glass. Nanoscopic wires wove through the fabric, supplying the digital information the glass needed to switch between transparent and opaque states. Dan's laser-class instrument cut through it all, slicing it as neatly as a katana would slice silk. It fired an intense beam of radiation, focused by a series of nano-lenses into a shaft that was five nanometres thick. He was finished in less than twenty seconds and pushed the panel clear, cringing when it clanked noisily to the tile floor. He then dove through the hole and replaced the disk, lining it flush with the remainder of the wall. His laser cutter was so fine that its incision was invisible to the naked eye.

Dan berated himself for holding his breath. Stupid... Now, where am I? It was hard to see in the dark and he stumbled forward with arms outstretched, blindly hoping he wouldn't trip over anything. What would they put on the ground floor? Mailroom? Storage space? The answer came a few moments later when

he kicked over a mop and bucket, spewing a brackish brew of hair-infested water over the floor with an almighty clamour. The janitor's closet, of course.

By chance, his hand blundered into the light switch, but he refused to cave in to his desire for illumination. He didn't want to do anything that would attract attention and he was already disappointed with himself for making such a racket. Come on Danny-boy, stop fucking up... the next time it might cost you. He took a deep, steady breath and pressed ahead, easily finding the stairwell. A chilly draft wafted from the basement, carrying the scent of damp grit and oil. It reminded Dan of the time he'd visited an underground mine and resurrected feelings of claustrophobia.

He moved as silently as he could in his croaking leather boots. Five flights up he stopped to ease some spit around the two leather flaps that were making the noise before continuing his upward journey. He gripped the handrail as if it was his only link to life; the last thing he wanted was to miss a step and tumble backward into the void - he didn't want to become a quadriplegic. But the icy metallic rail was steadily numbing his fingers and making his knuckles ache.

The distant thud of footfalls made him freeze and he thanked the dim, almost nonexistent lighting in the stairwell.

Voices. Two. He wasn't close enough to delineate individual words, but the muted muttering was definitely getting stronger. They were above, possibly on the tenth floor. Or was it the eleventh? It was hard to tell in the dark, he was becoming disorientated and knew with grim certainty that he'd never be able to retrace his steps.

Dan slithered through the nearest door, both glad and frightened to have finally reached some light. He shielded his eyes until they adjusted and he drew into the shadows as far as he could. It looked empty. There was carpet on the floor and the walls had been freshly painted, but only a few loose cables dangled from strategic places in the ceiling. There were no desks, no obligatory coffee machine, no computers, nothing. It was a barren landscape of stale dust and silverfish husks. He listened, paused, and crept his way up the building, empty floor by empty floor, counting no fewer than 40 abandoned levels before finally encountering something habited. It begged the question why UniForce had bothered constructing such a massive building. Maybe they're stitching together a subletting deal. He doubted it. UniForce was not the type of company to share.

So maybe they intend some serious expansion. Even that was difficult to swallow. Forty floors worth? It didn't make sense. UniForce had no need of a large onsite workforce, their contractors - the bounty hunters and assassins - worked offsite and alone. Status then? That was the only logical conclusion he could draw. All the other giga-corporations had mammoth headquarters so UniForce wanted one too. That's pathetic. The more he discovered about his ex-surrogate company the more he found to dislike.

With a great deal of effort and backtracking, he located the portals on the fiftieth floor. Three constipated looking men were guarding them. That's strange. There would be none if UniForce hadn't declared a state of company emergency. Portals had impermeable locks, so it was unusual to waste resources protecting them. But UniForce was in panic mode and capable of many unusual decisions.

Portal reception was the only place Dan knew he would definitely find a map of the building. Of course, there was none. There was only a list of internal portal destinations, but since portals were numbered logically according to their physical location, it was nearly as good.

He watched the guards from the depth of the shadows, convinced they hadn't noticed his silent approach. A wash of adrenaline coursed through his body, accompanied by the familiar sharpening of his senses that always came before he made a move. He toyed with the idea of dropping all three from where he crouched. Tempting. Katherine stopped him, or more to the point, the thought of what she would've said if he slew three innocent men stopped him. A pang of guilt seeped into his mind just for considering it an option.

Something else.

He used his scope to look at the board, circumventing the problem altogether. It worked well enough; the chart gave him an idea of the building layout. He trekked back to the stairwell and resumed his climb, feeling the exertion in his thighs and exhilaration in his head.

*

Michele was reclining in her chair, dabbing perfume on her wrists and smearing it behind her ears. The tedium was gnawing at her nerves and she'd been in a terrible mood for the past few days. She hated this part of the job, the emergencies. Why can't they sort it out on their own? James was busy with his

computer and Esteban was off looking for Dan. But what can I do? Worst of all, the UniForce showers didn't approach the high standards she'd become accustomed to.

Damn Jackie. She wondered whether Jackie would check the logs. She'd need an exceedingly good reason to leave the office during a company emergency, especially since Jackie had charged her with the responsibility of handling the situation. And Michele wasn't good at fabricating excuses so she had little choice but to stay put. She knew she'd get away with it if she were to seduce Jackie again, but the memory of the last time still left a bad taste in her mouth. It was somehow worse than the horde of men she'd been with, Jackie's crotch tasted like swamp.

She shook her perfume bottle and watched the froth at the top split the light into its spectrum. It entertained her for close to quarter of an hour before a voice rudely interrupted her.

"Funny I should find you here."

She leaned forward and twisted to the door, surprise registering on her face when she stared into the barrel of a pistol. Dan had closed the door and taken five paces into her office without her noticing. She wondered how, and in her fatigued state, that was about all she could ask. "How'd you get in here?"

"If I were you, I'd be more concerned about how you're going to get out of here," Dan replied dryly. "We're going to play a game."

"Of what?" Michele asked, her big eyes betraying her stupidity.

"Twenty questions." Dan pulled up a chair and straddled it, keeping his aim in the middle of Michele's forehead. "But before we start, I want you to put the perfume down and place your hands on the table where I can see them." He waited for her to comply. "Good, now, number one, where is Esteban?"

"I don't know," she said as a reflex.

"Wrong answer," Dan snapped. "That's one strike, and you only get three. Do you understand me?"

She nodded.

“So where is Esteban?”

“I really don’t know. All I know is that he left looking for you, and that was... like... hours ago.” Michele looked flustered, though not for any of the reasons Dan might have guessed.

“Hours? How many hours?” Dan pressed, trying to decide whether she was telling the truth.

“Maybe, uh, three o’clock yesterday afternoon?”

Dan did the maths in his head. That’d be about right.

“I haven’t seen him since, honest.”

“And you have no idea where he went?”

She shook her head. “No, none.”

“Question two: the Raven. Why’s he always turning up at my targets?” It was a test question. He already knew the answer; he wanted to check whether she was telling him the truth.

She paused and lowering her eyes to her hands, a sign that warned Dan she might be about to lie. “We found a clerical error in the system. I’d like to be the first to apologise sincerely for the mistake. We’ve been selling exclusive lists to both of you.”

Smooth, very smooth... but still a lie. He consoled himself with the fact that he now knew what to look for. If she lowered her eyes, he’d have to push harder for the truth. “I don’t believe you.”

“But it’s the truth!” she said indignantly.

“Clerical error? Come on Roche, I’m not stupid. How much have you made so far?”

She looked dejected but still harboured the slim hope that she’d get away with it. “A few million. Half is Esteban’s.”

Ah, that makes more sense. Dan turned the thought over in his mind, examining it from every angle. So he's been doing his utmost to fuck with my life for a while. Vindictive bastard. "All right, what do you know about Esteban's murders?"

"You mean assassinations, there's a difference." Michele wanted to show how clever she was with the finer points of language, but came across as an airhead instead. The tone of her voice was so irritating it set Dan on edge and her pompous expectation that he should treat her as an intellectual boiled his blood.

"No." Dan was firm. "I mean murders. You're right about there being a difference, but you're wrong to call them assassinations."

"Well, in any case, I don't know anything."

Dan's patience was stretching thin and he felt the pressure of a ticking clock. He reached inside his coat and drew the Ka-Bar from its sheath. With one fluid arc, he swept an arm through the air and buried the blade an inch into Michele's hardwood table. The ferocity of the sudden action made Michele recoil. Dan's white-knuckled fist still gripped the handle and she could see the light dancing along the razor-sharp blade. One side was serrated, designed to cause maximum damage when plunged into someone's torso.

His voice was level and an even icier chill had settled in his eyes. They'd lost their greenish hue and taken a shade of grey. He flexed his forearm and eased the knife free. "Put your hands back on the table."

She refused.

"If you don't want me to gut you like a pig, you'll put your hands on the damn table before I reach zero: five... four..."

Her hands were back on the table.

"Now, if I shoot you I won't get much useful information." A wicked smile twisted his lips. It was mostly bluff, but a malignant shadow in his mind urged him to carry out his threats if she didn't cooperate. "So if I think you're lying again I'm going to de-glove one of your fingers. Do you understand me? I'll cut the flesh off so you can see the bone. It's therefore in your best interest to convince me you're telling the truth." He watched the fear swelling in her face.

Okay she's taken the bait. "Now, once again, we're going to talk about Esteban's murders. Where does he take his abductees?"

Michele shook her head and said, "If I knew I'd tell you."

"Would you?"

"Yes." She vigorously nodded. "I like my fingers."

He paused briefly to examine her expression before continuing with the questions. "Did you know my wife was murdered?"

She replied reluctantly. "Yes."

"Did you know by whom?"

Michele nodded.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She thought about that question for a while. "I'm not allowed to divulge company information. All our clients demand strict discretion." She shrugged. "Besides, who are you? What did it matter to me if you knew or not? There're plenty of victims in this business, if I went around telling their families what really happened we'd be snowed under with lawsuits in a week."

Fucking callous don't you think? Dan hated her with as much passion as he'd loved his wife, which he thought was dangerous. Holding a knife to an object of hatred was a recipe for disaster. "Did you know about the operation against my wife?" The answer to this question would determine whether he considered her life forfeit.

She shook her head. "No, not until afterward."

"Why should I believe you?"

"I only found out when you came for your interview and I read your file. Why would Esteban tell me about every assassination that-

"Murder."

“Whatever. Why should he tell me about them? It’s none of my business, I’m the bounty co-ordinator, I have nothing to do with assassinations.”

“Look, I’m only going to say this once more. If you use the word ‘assassination’ again during this conversation, you’ll lose a finger. I’m only giving you another warning because you’re so obviously stupid. What happened to my wife was not assassination - it was rape and murder. Esteban and two of his cronies tortured her for hours before finally ending it.” His lower lip quivered and he barred the emotion before it could swell to the surface. Now’s not the time. But Michele hadn’t noticed; she was too busy watching the knife dance in front of her eyes.

“Now...” Dan had decided to believe her, so she’d live another day if she cooperated. “Why was she a target?”

Michele shrugged as innocently as she could. “I assumed it was to get back at you for ruining his life. He always says how much he loved being an assassin and you were the one that took that from him. He’s still pissed.”

It wasn’t the truth, but Michele believed it so Dan couldn’t fault her for lying. I was so naïve and stupid. If he could undo one thing in his life, it would be his pursuit of Esteban. No good had come of it. Why didn’t I listen? Katherine, Slime and my Superintendent all warned me to drop the case. Why am I so stubborn? Now Jen’s paying for it too. “Tell me everything you know about Jen’s apprehension.”

Michele didn’t hesitate; she was already committed to spewing her guts. “Jackie ordered all of you dead when we found out you’d used the Raven to kill Mr Savage.”

So that was my fault too. “He’s dead then?”

She nodded. “Why did you do that anyway?”

“It was an accident,” he said, willing himself to believe it. “The Raven wasn’t supposed to actually do it.”

“Well he did.” Michele looked at him dispassionately. “And Jackie wants him dead too.”

“Who’s Jackie?” Dan frowned at the name; she’d mentioned it twice. She must

be important.

“Our CEO.”

“There’s already a new one?” Dan had the mental image of a hydra - cut off one head and the beast grows two more.

But Michele shook her head, her hair spilling in front of her eyes. She briefly removed a hand from the table to brush it away. “No, Mr Savage was only the public CEO, Jackie’s the one that really runs things.”

Clever. He was starting to piece together what was happening and it didn’t bode well for Jen’s safety. Esteban will have his revenge. He grimaced at the logical conclusion. And it will only stop when he’s dead. “Tell me everything you know about Esteban’s friends.”

Michele shrugged. “I don’t know very much. Sometimes he talks about them after we’ve... uh...” She had the grace to flush bright red. “You know... made love.” She squirmed in her seat, even more uncomfortable when she saw Dan staring at her unemotionally. She wondered whether he’d kill her anyway. It was a sobering thought. “Anyway, I know they went to college together, but I don’t know which one.” She looked at the ceiling, pouting with the effort of remembering the snippets of information she hadn’t considered importance at the time. “He has lots of friends, but he only talks about two of them as if they’re close. They do favours for each other and hang out after work. Sometimes he phones them when he’s going to be late for poker. I think one works for Global Integrated Systems and the other one for PortaNet.” Her pout deepened while she dredged her memory for anything to add, preferably something useful to appease the man holding the knife. She knew he was capable of killing her; she’d read his file, all of it. And he terrified her. “One has a name like Henry, but different, Andrew maybe? The other he just calls Junior.”

Dan etched every detail in his mind for later analysis. But a vibration at his hip was an unwelcome distraction and he held up a finger, indicating Michele should pause while he attended to his pager. He had an unlisted number and he’d only distributed it to a few key people, so he couldn’t imagine it was spam. Simon? He wondered what was so important. He pressed the acknowledge button and it stopped vibrating. “Go on.”

“I was finished,” Michele replied. “That’s all I know.”

“Okay... you don’t know where Esteban is, but do you know how to contact him?”

She thought about that for a moment. “His mobile number?”

“Perfect.”

She scratched a few numbers onto a scrap of paper and slid it across the desk, her fingers brushing the slit Dan’s knife had gouged in the surface. “It’s a free-talk phone.” Which meant Echelon would not sift through Esteban’s conversations.

“I figured as much,” Dan said bitterly. He remembered their conversation in Australia - nobody in their right mind would say such things for Echelon to hear. “If you’re dicking with me and this isn’t his phone, I’ll hunt you down and peel you like an orange.”

She paled. “That’s it, I swear.”

Dan stuffed the paper into his coat. “Now, where’s his office?”

“Upstairs.”

“Let’s go.” Dan stood, indicating with his knife that she should follow. “If you make any sudden moves I’ll skewer you, understood?”

She nodded, fear stinging her eyes. “Yes.”

“No portals either. I want to walk.” He nudged her into motion and followed her through the bowels of the building. She took one wrong turn, explaining that she’d never walked that way before. Dan wasn’t making things easier by insisting they skirt the security cameras, which were watching from blackened bubbles in the ceiling. But after a quick prompt with the knife, she regained her sense of direction and led him directly to Esteban’s door.

Dan listened for signs of life before carefully opening it, ready for anything. Esteban’s office was more elegant than Michele’s. He’d opted for expensive, leather-upholstered couches and he’d obviously petitioned hard to get a stunning array of art hung on his walls.

Dan spent 20 minutes exploring every nook and cranny in the office while Michele watched from the couch. He regarded her suspiciously while he worked, wondering what he should do with her. Part of him wanted to kill her for her involvement, no matter how limited it had been. Another part was sickened by the thought. I can't do it. He couldn't fool himself into believing her death was justified, he wasn't delusional. She was supremely irritating and possessed below average intelligence, but she hadn't broken the law or done anything to warrant death. At one point he was seeking an excuse to justify slaying her, but deep down he knew there would be no possible redemption for his soul if he did something despicable like that.

The search turned up nothing useful and he felt as if he'd wasted his time. He straightened his aching back and groaned, "Michele..."

She raised her head to look at him.

"I'm not going to kill you." He could see the relief in her posture. "But if you're still here tomorrow I'll assume you're suicidal but too cowardly to kill yourself and I'll relieve you of the burden." He pierced her with a threatening stare. "You work for bad people here, I suggest you withdraw the millions you've hoarded and nick off. Fair enough?"

She nodded. What else could she do?

"Good." He slipped from the room without further comment, leaving Michele to ponder just how close he'd come to gutting her.

*

"What's so important?"

"Cookie found something you're going to be interested in."

A solidified lump of chewing gum stuck to the side of the videophone had Dan thoroughly transfixed. He was only paying for an audio signal, the bandwidth required for videophone calls made them more expensive than they were worth.

"All right, I'm coming back."

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

“No.” Dan fumed in frustration. “Not yet.”

*

Dan coughed the tickle from his lungs.

A trickle of sweat was sliding down his back and he wondered why the Australian terminals didn't adhere to the worldwide air-conditioning standard. He'd barely adjusted to the morning chill in America when he'd portaled back to Australia and begun sweltering inside his thick coat.

At least it wasn't busy anymore. A few stragglers and night workers scuttled past but there were no more queues. Dan obediently let Chuck scan his weapons. The weapon list before and after international travel had to match or customs began asking pertinent questions, and Dan knew his identity wouldn't hold up to scrutiny.

“That's three bottles of scotch now Mr Kennedy.”

Dan mocked a salute. “Yes sir.”

*

Saturday, September 18, 2066

08:42 Baltimore, USA

Esteban felt groggy; it hadn't been a restful night. I have to get more sleep. He was beginning to look forward to the end of the business with Dan so he could finally get some decent rest. Falling asleep after the incident with Jen had been difficult. Junior was yet to rise, which wasn't surprising considering his nasty wound. She'd certainly done some damage, which was part of the reason Esteban found her so appealing.

Adrian was in his usual seat, rereading an article in Fortune magazine he'd only had the opportunity to skim before. "You look awful."

Esteban grimaced. "Thanks for the heads-up."

"Did you get any sleep?" He adjusted his glasses and rested the magazine on his lap. He was experienced enough to realise he'd get nothing else read while Esteban was in the room.

"Not much, no." He was hungry and the only food within striking distance was a stale box of croissants in the bar fridge. Better than nothing.

"Oh God, you're not actually going to eat those are you?" A sour expression crossed Adrian's face. "You know how old they are, don't you?"

Esteban shrugged. "They look okay." He tore away a mouldy corner and tossed it in the bin. Moisture had made the pastry soggy due to the exorbitant amount of time the croissants had spent in the fridge, but Esteban was too hungry to worry about that. It was food, and food was good.

Junior ambled into the room, a fresh bandage wrapped around his neck. The way he walked clearly illustrated his discomfort; he moved stiffly, a cross between Gumby and Frankenstein. If he twisted his head even slightly, the torsional strain on his wound made him dizzy with pain. Junior hated pain. The others could tell.

"What the fuck are you looking at?"

Esteban hid a smirk behind a chunk of croissant and spoke around his mouthful, sending a spray of milky yellow saliva over the bar. "Nothin' man, how're you

doin'?"

"Don't even think about asking." A black scowl crossed his face like a thundercloud. "It hurts like hell."

"You'll get over it." Esteban swallowed, which Adrian was pleased to note, and continued, "Dan's on his way, I'm sure of it. He'll probably find me today."

"And then we get to kill the bitch?" Junior was furious with her and delighted in visions of her torture. He'd fantasised about nothing else while the doctors had stitched the gaping hole in his neck. The promise of the sadistic pleasure to come was the only thought keeping him from creeping into Jen's room and mutilating her now.

"No," Esteban said, earning himself a frown of disapproval. "I've changed my mind. I want to keep her."

"What?"

"That's a bad idea," Adrian warned. "She'll only cause problems."

"Not for long," Esteban assured them. "And until then, I'll take responsibility for whatever she does."

"So I have to punch you for last night?" Junior growled angrily.

Esteban wasn't amused. "You can try, if you feel game." It was a mock challenge and nobody expected anything to come of it, but nor did Junior appreciate Esteban's insinuations.

"Do you mean you want her as a prostitute?" Adrian asked, trying to clarify Esteban's intentions.

He nodded and gnawed off another chunk of the soggy croissant. "Yeah."

"What about Claire?" Junior asked. "Are you going to keep two? Do I detect a ménage à trois in the air?"

Esteban cast him another warning glance. "No. I'll take care of my loose ends."

“Oh man, what a waste,” Junior moaned, correctly interpreting what Esteban meant. “I’ll take her if you don’t want her.”

“No.” Esteban was adamant. “Nobody gets her, she’s mine. If you so much as squeeze her breasts I’ll make sure you permanently lose your sex drive, okay?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “It’s time I retired Claire.”

Junior sat, careful not to move his head. He’d lapsed into sullen silence.

“And Jennifer’s going to take her place?” Adrian asked dolefully.

“Yep.” Esteban was still chewing and another fleck of food made the journey from his masticating mouth to the bar. “But she likes to be called ‘Jen’.”

“Well, whatever she wants you to call her, she doesn’t strike me as the sort of person who’ll sit idly by while you use her as a pincushion.” Adrian nudged his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose. “I think we should stick to the original plan: wait for Dan, let him watch, we all get some fun.” Esteban wasn’t the only one attracted to Jen. But Adrian had secretly been attracted to her on a deeper level than the others. He didn’t want to see her raped, disfigured and killed. He couldn’t understand the change in himself and he was too lazy to analyse it, but given his way, he’d set Jen free. How his security slotted into that daydream he had no idea. But he didn’t want to see any more women murdered. He’d seen enough bloodshed to fill two lifetimes. Getting Esteban to wait for Dan was the only way he could save Claire from immediate termination. But that put Jen in peril. How long she’d live would depend on how good Dan was at tracking. It was a pickle of a situation and he hadn’t properly thought his way through it. And Adrian simply wasn’t a fast enough thinker to hatch a solution on the spot.

Esteban’s temper was starting to flare. “How many times do I have to say it before it gets through?”

“Okay, okay.” Adrian held up his hands submissively. “Just thought you might like another opinion.”

“Well I’ve heard it.” Esteban stuffed the last croissant into his mouth and left the room. He didn’t notice the look Adrian and Junior shared. It knelled of a time when they might have to turn against their protector. Not now. Not anytime soon. Definitely not until they were thoroughly established in the Guild, but at some point, they might have to bite back.

Esteban meandered toward Claire's room. She looked almost peaceful, lying on her bed. She was still wearing her white halter and he ogled her breasts, paying particular attention to her tense nipples, which he could see through the thin material. Good girl. He felt nothing akin to affection for her. She was his slave, and he treated her accordingly. Blood rushed to his groin when he thought of his new slave. She'll be good... she just doesn't know it yet. He pensively pursed his lips. I just need to break her. He acknowledged that Adrian and Junior had a point, but he wasn't accustomed to listening to their advice and he never let logic interrupt his fantasies.

Then his attention snapped back to the present, to Claire's room. She wasn't the one he wanted, not anymore. Okay, let's get this over with. It wasn't something he would enjoy; it was a chore. He couldn't have loose ends - Guild rules.

Still, it is a pity... she was good while she lasted.

She woke when he inserted the needle into her calf and flinched as he pumped the toxin into her system. It acted slowly compared with the Raven's nanotoxin, but it was just as deadly. As far as Esteban was concerned, the main deficiency with the Raven's formula was the mess, so he used a toxin that wouldn't rot Claire's flesh to a pile of puss.

"What's that?" she asked woozily.

"Something to help you sleep," he replied, his voice silky. A minuscule part of him vibrated in tune with humanity and he didn't want to sound gruff as she died.

But for all her faults, Claire wasn't stupid. She understood the true meaning behind his innocent-sounding words. "You're finally releasing me?"

She had the most unusual smile on her lips, though Esteban couldn't fathom the meaning behind it. It put him on edge. "Yes."

"No kiss goodbye?" Her eyes danced with mirth. "No 'thanks for your services'?"

Esteban scowled. She's delusional. The drugs are acting faster than I thought. He attributed it to her poor physical constitution.

“You know... there’s something I’ve wanted... to say to you... for a long time.” Claire was struggling to breathe, gasping and she snatched air with an exaggerated snapping of her mouth.

“What’s that?” He couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“You’re a... moron.” She chocked on a laugh before convulsing once and lying limp.

Esteban stood back, not enjoying being alone with a victim’s ghost. He consoled himself with the thought that she would’ve died long ago if he’d sent her to prison - a cesspool of disease and gang rape. Inmates could expect to live for mere months. Governments around the world had slashed their penal budgets and penal clinics were the first things to suffer. Often inmates had to share medication, which meant prisons tended to brew super-strains of the world’s deadliest viruses and bacteria. Half an antibiotic course only weakened the microbes and upon recovering from the shock, they returned stronger than before. The World Health Organisation had been lobbying governments to address the problem for decades, but it was already too late. The diseases had spread to the wider community and modern treatment methodology had aggressively evolved to cope with the influx of medication-resistant strains. Some social scientists pointed accusing fingers at Xantex for charging extortionary prices for their drugs. Others blamed governments for ignoring the plethora of warnings.

He checked to see whether Claire had lapsed into a coma, but she wasn’t drawing breath. She was better off here anyway. It seemed a strange justification when looking at her corpse, but in Esteban’s mind, he was within his rights for taking her life. He’d extended it, so it was his to extinguish.

Now, for Dan... He’d launched a program to monitor Dan’s progress through the portals and, the last time he’d checked, Dan was still in Australia. Slow Dan, slow. I’d expected better from you. Esteban intended to be ready when he finally arrived. And then you’ll see who the master is.

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Saturday, September 18, 2066

22:43 Sydney, Australia

“What’s so important?”

Cookie stood and granted him access to the screen. “Take a look for yourself.”

Dan crouched and wearily began reading the records Cookie had left open. Fatigue was gnawing at his patience and the pressure of finding Jen wasn’t easing with the passage of time. He didn’t want to read the entire record; he wanted a summary. But he played the game anyway.

His attitude changed somewhere in the second paragraph and by the fourth his attention was inextricably bound to the television set. No. Disbelief flooded his mind. It soaked him like petrol so that when he sparked with anger a moment later he exploded into an inferno of rage. He spoke through clenched teeth. “And all this time I thought it was random.”

“You didn’t have reason to believe it went this deep. None of us did.” Simon was standing by, feeling uneasy. He wasn’t sure how his friend would react, whether he’d start smashing government property or collapse on the spot. Nor was he sure how to act himself. Sorrow? Anger? Pity? He was wondering how best to offer comfort, but comfort was impossible for a man who’d just discovered someone had paid a million Credits to have his wife murdered.

Dan’s eyes glazed, focussing on a point a million miles away, on something only he could see.

Samantha and Cookie were leaning on each other in the far corner, intensely uncomfortable.

Now what? Dan mercilessly chewed his lower lip, ignoring the sting and taste of blood that followed. Does it change anything? Sometimes he hated the truth. Yes. Things would’ve been easier if he’d never known, but sheltering from the cruelty in the world wouldn’t give him peace. No, he was glad that he knew. He was glad to see the face that had orchestrated his misery from the shadows.

“So Esteban was just following orders.” Simon didn’t know what else to say.

Dan nodded. “It looks like that.” He stabbed Cookie with a pleading look. “Are you sure this is valid?”

“I dunno man. Someone could’ve forged it, but I couldn’t imagine why. UniForce believed their network was impenetrable, so why plant misleading information in their own database? Those records were restricted, not everyone in the company had access to them.”

The ex-bounty-hunter nodded at the logic. “I can see why.” There was enough damning evidence in those few records to send powerful people to gaol.

“What’re you going to do?” Simon asked nervously.

Dan muffled a snort of amusement. “I’ve been asking myself that question.” Everyone felt wretched during the long pause that followed. But Dan shattered the deafening lapse in conversation by saying, “One thing at a time. Jen’s probably not interested in why they killed Katherine.”

The record that had sparked his despondency was a contract between UniForce and PortaNet. The ‘total transportation solution’ company had requested Dan’s termination, but UniForce had declined. It was bad for business to assassinate cops. UniForce had a delicate relationship with law enforcement communities, why upset the balance for a few million Credits? They had an industry to protect. No, the police were strictly off limits. UniForce lined the pockets of several police commissioners to keep the baying cops away. If they assassinated a detective, nothing would stop the police from tearing UniForce asunder. So a spokesperson for PortaNet had met with a dedicated team of ‘solutions experts’ from UniForce, Esteban included. It’d been a productive meeting, apparently. Another record in the database provided a full transcript of the discussion, which boiled Dan’s blood.

PortaNet had a problem. Dan was pursuing a case that had the potential to embarrass the company and they wanted his energies diverted. By that time, Dan had a well-earned reputation for dogged pursuit of suspects, regardless of their political protection. Together, UniForce and PortaNet had concocted a scheme to kill Dan’s wife, thereby distracting him. The contract was signed. Money was transferred. And the deed was done. Esteban had personally volunteered for the project and he’d delighted in slaughtering Dan’s wife. So, with the target brutally murdered and Dan declared psychologically unfit for duty, PortaNet transferred

the remainder of the fee and was forever in wedlock with the seedier side of big business. The records didn't depict precisely why PortaNet was so nervous, it was UniForce's policy not to ask.

"He wasn't just following orders," Dan said bitterly. "He sat on the panel that proposed killing her."

"But PortaNet paid him to do it," Simon countered.

"I know, but I can only slay one monster at a time." Dan wished he were big enough to crush Esteban in the palm of his hand.

"So you're going to fight this battle too?" Simon looked sad. He knew his friend would dash himself against forces many times more powerful than he could deal with. And it would lead only to one thing, his grave.

"Up until my last breath," Dan promised, though the threat sounded hollow. He'd been skirting a fine edge for too long and felt as if he was finally slipping over. The only thing he could see beneath his rage was the bottomless pit of depression and desolation that he was burning as fuel - the inescapable end was closer than he'd thought. That's unfair. Eleven months ago he'd believed he could thrash against the world single-handedly for years, but hatred had gradually rotted his core and sapped his strength. I'll make them pay. They can't get away with this shit.

Simon wished he could say something to change Dan's mind. "Do you know why they did it?" He marvelled at Dan's steadfast mask of calm, knowing his entire world must be burning around him. "What they were covering up I mean?"

Dan shrugged, trying to remember the case he'd abandoned. Eleven months of dust had settled on the filing cabinet in his mind and retrieving the proper memories was tricky, but once they'd started flowing, the memories were crisp and bountiful. "An assassination. Some scientist I think. Lars Olssen? He was researching..." Dan stopped short. "Oh my God." The others waited for him to continue. "Oh my fucking God!"

"What?" Simon couldn't take the suspense.

He rubbed a palm over his forehead to stop the room from spinning. "He was

researching portal material, uh, you know, that white shit they line it with - it all happened before the ban on portal research. Maybe he discovered something PortaNet didn't want anyone to know. Trade secrets?"

"Maybe PortaNet tried to fix the problem, fucked things up, and hired professionals to clean up the mess."

"Perhaps..." Dan scratched his chin. "But I wasn't close to overturning any stones. I was ready to call it quits and chuck the case in my failures basket."

"Then, if they were so spooked, they must've been hiding something important."

"Anything a giga-corporation is willing to risk their reputation over must be huge." He felt a twinge of guilt, Jen was probably being tortured and he was trying to uncover the mystery behind his wife's downfall. "Cookie," Dan turned to see him reassuringly stroking Samantha's shoulders in the corner, "you're the perfect person to answer my next question."

"Shoot."

"If I give you a mobile number, can you pinpoint the phone's location?"

His eyebrows twitched. "Yeah, I should be able to."

"Then I'll deal with Esteban before digging fresh trenches." He handed Cookie the slip of paper on which Michele had jotted Esteban's mobile number. "This is it."

Cookie's fingers trembled, itching for his keys. "A friend of mine has a backdoor to a triangulation service, but bear in mind I can only tell you the general area, okay?"

Dan nodded and watched as Cookie weaved his magic. Simon took a pace forward, astonished by his remarkable keyboard skills. "Where the hell did he learn to do that?" he whispered in Dan's ear.

But Cookie heard and answered first. "I've been practicing since I was knee-high to a grasshopper." Soon he had a form on his screen that was prompting for a phone number and network. He selected United States for the network and tapped Esteban's number into the appropriate field. They watched a rotating egg

timer for three minutes before a message blinked onto the screen. “No can do, man. Sorry. You can’t pinpoint free-talk phones.”

Damn... there goes my best lead. He took the number back. It still might come in handy. “Okay, that’s it. Keep digging for anything useful in the UniForce database.”

“Sure man, what’re you gonna do?”

Dan swivelled just in time to catch Simon’s resigned look. “I’m gonna take another look at my last case. Lars Olssen had colleagues if I’m not mistaken, maybe they can shed some light on why PortaNet wanted him dead.”

“Which means you probably need me to get you inside the station.” Simon grimaced. So much for my weekend.

“Hey guys, I can access police records from here,” Cookie reminded them helpfully. “It’s not like their network is Fort Knox.”

“Don’t bother,” Dan said with a dismissive wave. “UniForce is too thorough; they would’ve purged the Department’s database, as much for their protection as for PortaNet’s peace of mind. Neither wants anyone tracing them to the deal. To be honest I’m surprised UniForce kept anything at all.”

“Ammunition,” Simon sneered.

“Probably, yeah. Just in case relations turn sour.”

“If you went digging on PortaNet’s network you’d probably find something similar.”

It made sense, Dan admitted. “Well they should’ve thought of the consequences - now we have it.”

Cookie chuckled softly. “That’s probably why they burnt so much money installing a UG7-rated network.”

Neither Dan nor Simon fully appreciated the joke. Only Samantha understood how much effort had gone into the hack.

“Does the Department still store backups in the cellar?” Dan asked hopefully.

Simon nodded. “Sure do.”

“What about Jen?” Samantha’s reminder stopped them before they reached the door.

“Esteban’s waiting for me,” Dan said. “So I’m going to let him wait.” But his calm demeanour hid the inner conflict that was tearing him in separate directions.

“Ah...” Samantha took an instant dislike to the new plan. “But what about trying to find her before they...” She couldn’t say it. “Do their thing?”

“I’m still going to tear Esteban a new arse.” Dan limbered his lower back by twisting left and right. “But his two friends are better targets and the police basement is the best place to unearth them.” It was the next best thing he could think of.

“Good luck,” Cookie said, already tapping at his keyboard. “We’ll buzz if there’s anything new.”

When they stepped into the star-streaked Australian night, Dan couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d never see Samantha and Cookie again. Don’t be silly. He didn’t believe in intuition and wasn’t superstitious. Still, it took ten minutes before he could bend his thoughts back to more constructive affairs.

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Nathan sat motionless, staring at the pixels on his screen.

The tension in the room was palpable and it radiated from just behind his sternum.

“Put that out.”

Nathan ignored his wife and took another drag on his cigarette. He felt the smoky coil fill his lungs before adding to the haze in the room when he exhaled.

She sat next to him, eased the smouldering cancer-stick from between his

fingers, and then squashed it onto the jade plate he was using as an ashtray. She was reaching the end of her patience - every day she threatened to leave. She desperately wanted to pack a bag and go to stay with her sister, though she'd never tell him about her desire. Sometimes she wondered whether it would even register if she did tell him. Their marriage was a sham. There hadn't been any life in their relationship for over a year and she was growing tired of the puerile games they played. She'd leave him alone for five minutes and he'd light another cigarette, pondering deep thoughts while staring listlessly into space. The weekends were the worst. At least during the week he went to work instead of lingering around the house like a bad smell.

She wasn't angry anymore. She was over that. The anger had given way to acceptance.

Nathan's fingers were shaking, just one of the many physical manifestations of his extreme anxiety. The doctors had warned him to change his lifestyle if he wanted to see 30. Huh... 30? He shook his head, or thought he did, his muscles hadn't actually responded. He was a statue, his fantasies dancing only in his mind. And his rigidity had affected his bodily functions. I'll be lucky to reach 28, he thought, despite being three weeks shy of his birthday.

"Is it really worth all this?"

Nathan didn't answer. He didn't hear the question. And even if he had, he was too paralysed by indecision to answer anyway. He didn't know what to think or do anymore.

We're all fucked.

*

Saturday, September 18, 2066

23:19 Sydney, Australia

The records vault was both the pride and the scourge of the Parramatta office. It burrowed six floors beneath street level and stretched for hundreds of metres in every direction. But, embarrassingly, they were running out of space. Not that Simon was surprised when he thought of how much data the vault housed. It wasn't actually a single vault, there were many vaults within vaults, simultaneously catering for different access requirements and minimising the potential impact of a fire.

It was quiet at night. A handful of uniformed officers lounged lazily at the counter and nodded greeting to Simon as he passed, glancing only casually at Dan before lowering their eyes to their scintillating game of cards. Detectives often had late-night flashes of insight and came to the office to test a theory.

They shuffled to the elevator in silence. The government, always frugal, expected its employees to use obsolete elevators and stairs rather than riding portals around the building. The first elevator descended only one floor; a special elevator would take them to the vault.

A metallic ding signalled their arrival and the elevator opened to a short corridor with a polished titanium door at the far end. The Department had opted for an old-fashioned entrance because some bureaucrats believed PortaNet could override microchip restriction circuits and smuggle people inside unnoticed. In truth, they could. But PortaNet's line of security products depended on word not escaping.

A high-powered wall mounted scanner to the right of the door controlled the lock. It logged everyone who entered and exited. Simon theatrically raised his arms while it deciphered the details on his chip and the attached computer recorded his name. A hiss of compressed gas seeped from the vault when the lock clanked free and the first door swung ponderously ajar. It opened to a small chamber where a second scanner intended to sweep them. They had to seal themselves in before the final check would commence. Simon had authority to access the vault, but the automated security system required reassurance that nobody was coercing him and that nobody would rush in uninvited once the door was open.

The blue tinged light reflecting from the walls of their metal tomb gave the vault a sterile feel. The second scan began, or so the monitor reported. It took nearly a minute because the computer had to verify Dan - or, more to the point, Mr Tedman Kennedy - wasn't on a black list of suspected troublemakers.

Simon staggered on weak ankles when he saw the name on the display. "What the...?"

"I can explain," Dan said quickly.

"I would hope so."

The system found no excuse to bar them access and the inner door opened with another hiss of gas. It'd been a long time since Dan had been in the archives and he felt mildly nostalgic - it hadn't changed much. "I don't want to announce my presence to Esteban. I know he's trying to track me."

"So you had surgery?" He looked aghast. "You can't do that."

"Sure I can," Dan retorted. "I already have."

"Then you'll have to get a legitimate chip reimplanted."

Dan adamantly shook his head. "Not until this is over." He eyed his friend with a guarded expression. "What're you going to do? Alert a chipping squad? I need to sneak up on him and I can't do that with my chip."

Simon felt his blood sugar level plummet. It was late, past his usual bedtime, and he wasn't in the mood for arguing. Besides, he didn't think it was wise to argue, he might say something he'd later regret. Instead, he dipped a hand into his pocket, unwrapped a Nutri-Bar, and bit off a huge chunk.

Police protocol dictated that administrative staff must complete a network backup every night and store it in the vault. It wasn't such a problem after the Department had spent money on crystal-cubes, but bulkier media stuffed older areas of the vault to the brim. Some very old records were on tape and laserdiscs that nobody had the equipment to read anymore. And vault management had dedicated two entire floors to paper records. An infestation of paper-lice was steadily eating them and the records were essentially useless, having no reliable catalogue. But the law said the Department must keep them for a hundred years,

so there they were, stacked in boxes from floor to ceiling. An environmental control system maintained optimum temperature and humidity to minimise the breakdown of storage media and inevitable loss of data.

It was a giant cross. Long corridors stretched in four directions, inviting them to explore the nether-regions of the information superstore. Two elevators at inconvenient locations ferried passengers to lower levels where they were even less likely to find what they sought. Computers with crystal-cube readers were in most vaults so that investigators would have no excuse to remove media. Police, it seemed, had gathered notoriety for forgetting to return things.

“Now where?” Dan asked.

Simon shrugged. Still crunching on his bar, he mumbled around the mouthful, “Check the directory.”

The vault door closed behind them with a resounding rumble, jarring their nerves. When Dan was finished watching it, he strode to the terminals, which officers used to locate desired records in the expanse of useless data. One terminal had an ‘out of order’ sticker slapped haphazardly across the screen, but the other one responded to his request. “Vault-1D,” he said. “According to this.”

“This way.” Simon felt less jittery and far less crabby now that his stomach had something to digest. “Just down here.”

“I know, I remember,” Dan reminded him. “I used to spend hours down here too, remember?”

Simon looked sheepish. “Oh yeah, so you did.”

The light above the entrance to Vault-1D was flickering erratically. The effect reminded Simon of a B-grade horror movie as he let the scanner read his microchip. The Department hadn’t bothered with two-tier security on inner doors. Vault architects had presumed anybody capable of passing the first two titanium doors had a legitimate purpose and was therefore unlikely to force entry into places they shouldn’t.

An ear-piercing siren wailed as soon as they opened the door. All inner doors had a self-locking mechanism that engaged after 20 seconds and the siren was to remind officers not to leave their fingers anywhere nearby. Dan put his fingers in

his ears. He'd always hated the siren's pitch and its ascending urgency grated his back teeth.

Once inside, and once the siren had stopped, he set to work. He located the appropriate box and began fishing through thousands of tiny crystal-cubes. Each was stored in a separate plastic container and each was capable of holding a snapshot of the Department's network. Isn't nanotechnology wonderful, Dan thought as he rummaged. Without an adequate budget to secure the network, officials had mandated the storage of crystal-cube snapshots as the next best alternative. So, if data went mysteriously missing, someone could always recover it by scrounging through the archives.

The air in Dan's lungs felt heavy as he plugged the correct cube into the reader and launched the retrieval application. He couldn't keep the trepidation from his voice. "I think this is it... yes. Here we go."

Simon curiously peered over his shoulder, swatting absently at a trail of sweat trickling down his sideburns. "What're we looking for?"

Dan chewed his lip - he often did when reading. "I'm not sure yet." He'd located a record from the day before Katherine's murder and a shiver ran down his spine, accompanied by an overwhelming desire to turn back the clock. "Look." He stabbed the screen with a finger. "He was from Sweden, here for a conference... didn't have many friends according to this."

"Maybe they cleansed it before you got a copy."

"I doubt it. He had one friend, a colleague in The Netherlands, see?" He stabbed the monitor again, hard enough to make the surrounding pixels swirl with colour and smear a fingerprint on the matte screen. "It was an angle I never pursued. Nothing indicated..." He trailed off, unwilling to finish the thought.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Simon asked, hoping he wasn't.

"Yeah, I've never been to Holland. It might be nice."

Simon sighed deeply, wondering why he chose such high maintenance friends. "I guess I should come." He yawned. "I can sleep next century."

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“Give me your weapon.” Dan held out his hand.

New South Wales police didn't have permission to carry weapons or ammunition out of the country so Simon reluctantly complied. “I assume your new identity has clearance?”

“Yeah.” Dan added Simon's pistol to his arsenal.

They strode to the immigration counter and Simon's disbelief grew with each weapon Dan placed in a neat row for tagging. “What're you... preparing for World War III or something?”

Dan ignored him.

“That's four bottles now, chief.” Chuck winked. It was a slow night and wondering what Dan was doing kept him entertained for hours.

Chapter 9

How much harm does a company need to do... before we question its right to exist?

Slogan for uncommercial from adbusters.org

Saturday, September 18, 2066

15:42 Groningen, The Netherlands

Hans felt a tingle at the back of his neck, which set his nerves on edge and made him jumpy. Kat was complaining about the pile of trash in the kitchen, unambiguously letting him know how disgusted she was by spraying the mound with urine and meowing furiously for his attention. He'd been in the middle of another doomed experiment when the altercation started.

He lowered his goggles. "Oh Kat. What've you done?"

She looked at him guiltily and came purring to brush against his leg, supremely proud of herself for snaring his attention.

"Oh God, what a mess." Hans scratched Kat behind her ears. "You know you're not allowed to piss inside, right?"

She purred louder.

"Okay, let me clean up and then I'll play with you a little." He used a sponge to soak up the yellow puddle and rinsed the foul stickiness off his hands with soap and, when that didn't remove the smell, a mild acid. The big bags of trash made a disgusting tacky sound when he peeled the plastic from his linoleum floor.

He slipped into his sandals, which he always kept beside the door. With laces tucked inside, he used them as a pair of outdoor slippers. My God that's gross, he thought, holding a paper towel under the bags to stop the sour fluids seeping through and dripping onto his carpet. "I'll be back in a minute," he said, gagging.

Kat looked at him innocently, sitting delicately on the couch like a grand lady.

Hans skipped down the stairs two at a time, hoping to rid himself of his stench-bombs as quickly as possible. His main concern was the neighbours; he didn't want them to know whose trash would be spoiling in the sun all day Sunday. He felt guilty enough without hearing them complain.

He tossed the bags onto the cleft of bricks at the front of his building with an explosive sigh of relief, staggering back to gulp fresh air. So he was too

distracted to notice two men approaching from his left.

Their words, English words, startled him. “Excuse me; may we have a few minutes of your time?”

Fear illuminated him as his eyes darted over them. One was dark skinned and heavy-set, wearing neat casual clothes. His shirt was burgundy and his trousers dark blue, reminding Hans of the bouncers who worked in the red-light district. The other was a Caucasian, slightly taller and wearing an outfit that would look natural at a funeral.

He didn't need to think, he'd become so preconditioned to fleeing that it had become instinct. His fast-twitch fibres contorted with a surge of adrenaline and he sprinted in the opposite direction, dismayed to see the men chasing him when he risked a glimpse over his shoulder.

Focus. Hans worked his body hard, pumping his arms and legs to full speed. His toes, curling into tight fists to keep his loose sandals from flying off his feet, slowed him down. So, desperate to put distance between himself and death's advocates, he added an extra kick to each leg and shed the burden of shoes. Grinding his toes into the paved street, he lowered his head, summoned his desire to live, and sprinted.

He looked again. The podgy man had abandoned the chase, pulling to a halt and gripping his hamstring with a wince of pain. But the man dressed in black was closing the gap. Hans made eye contact and what he saw filled him with dread: unadulterated determination. He had the pure clarity of purpose that people could only get when they were willing to self-sacrifice for their goal.

Hans drew an extra-deep breath and swerved to slice down another street. His lungs felt as if they were on fire and already his thighs were becoming numb, but he forked more adrenaline into the furnace and kept up the pace. The sudden onset of terror left his mind fragmented and incoherent. Part of him was entertained by how fast he could run and enjoyed the rush of breeze through his hair. Another part giggled at the thought of running barefoot through the park, drunk on the influx of endorphins.

He was still selecting the best path to take when his pursuer kicked his legs out from beneath him and his flight to freedom came to an abrupt end as he split his chin on the pavement. An instant later, someone heavy slammed on top of him.

His flexible ribs absorbed the impact, compressing his heart between sternum and spine and sending him dangerously close to cardiac arrhythmia. The world faded and all he could hear was the ringing in his ears. When his vision cleared and he'd collected his thoughts, he was supine and the pain had nestled in his chin and at the back of his neck. Both men were standing over him, their breathing laboured.

“That was a little rough don't you think?” It was the black man. He'd doubled over and was clutching his midriff. “You might've damaged him. Are you even sure it's Hans?”

The white man looked uncertain. “Yeah, I think so.”

“You think?”

He shrugged. “His hair's longer and he didn't have stubble in the photo, but the facial structure's the same. Look, you see his chin?”

“I see it's split open, yeah.”

The man who'd floored him extended a hand. “Sorry about that, I didn't mean to hurt you.”

Hans refused to accept it and struggled to a sitting position alone. “Aren't you going to finish the job?”

“I'm not here to kill you, I'm here to help.”

Hans laughed, dabbing his chin with a sleeve. “I see.”

“No really, I'm Dan Sutherland and this is my... my partner, Simon West.”

He didn't see the look they exchanged; he was too busy preparing himself for a bullet between the eyes.

“You're Hans van der Berg, right?”

“No.”

Dan hesitated while reassessing the man's facial features, but wound up even

more convinced he had the right person. “Come on, don’t make me steal your wallet to prove a point.”

“I do not carry identification,” Hans said, telling the truth. Many people had stopped carrying wallets since microchips served most purposes. Besides, he’d only expected to take out the trash and he didn’t need identification for that.

“So you’re not Hans?” Simon asked, feeling like an oaf for letting Dan overreact. He didn’t think his friend’s emotional condition was up to making rational decisions.

What the hell, they’re going to kill me anyway. Hans shook his head. “No, I’m Hans. But it’s van de Berg, not van der Berg. You make me sound German when you say it like that.”

“Sorry.” Dan chalked it up to his Australian accent. He often said an ‘r’ where there should be none and dropped the ‘r’ from words that needed them. Instead of ‘Australia’, he said ‘Us-tray-lee-yar’, and instead of ‘chair’, he said ‘cheah’.

“So, now you know who I am.” Hans felt the onset of a headache radiating from his jarred neck. “Do you now tell me why you knocked me to the ground?”

“I’m after information about Lars Olssen,” Dan replied in a low voice, offering his hand a second time. “I was the detective assigned to investigate his assassination.”

“Ah, an Australian. That explains why you are so clumsy.” Hans wiggled his jaw, working feeling back to his mandible. “And also why you did not shoot me when I run, which I suppose I should count a blessing.” He accepted Dan’s offered hand and pulled himself to his feet. “Now, I have heard of slow investigations, but this is ridiculous, do you not think?”

“I was distracted for eleven months.”

“Really? Doing what?”

He answered evenly and without emotion. “They killed my wife.”

Hans’s amused smirk vanished and a stern expression replaced it. “We should not talk here, it is not safe.” He waved down the street. “Come, we can talk

inside.”

That signalled the end of the conversation until they were standing in his apartment and Hans had bolted the last lock on his door. He smiled at them as a cannibal might smile at his meal.

“What’s so amusing?” Dan asked, ready to reach for his Colt if the need arose.

“It has been a while since I have entertained guests.” He swept a hand around the mess in his apartment. Piles of magazines were scattered across the coffee table and Kat chose that moment to jump on top of them. She skidded across the glossy surface and sent the stack crashing to the floor. “That is Kat.”

“Oh, how original.” Dan said, coldly observing the squalor and trying to remember when he’d last had a tetanus shot.

“Excuse me a moment.” He jutted his chin at the bathroom before ducking from sight, presumably to dress his wound.

Simon sniffed the air and looked pained. “Oh man, what’s... what’s that smell?”

Dan shrugged, equally offended by the odour: a combination of burnt silicon and cat pee that smothered the air as a caustic, resin-like vapour.

“Oh, watch your step!” Hans warned, poking his head back into the room and pointing. Simon had backed into the kitchen to escape the fumes only to tread in a sticky patch that Hans hadn’t yet cleaned.

Simon lifted his shoe to the unwholesome sound of sticky linoleum. “Oh... oh man... that’s piss man!”

“Sorry,” Hans said. “Kat had an accident.”

And she’s about to have another. Simon glared at the beady-eyed animal.

“You use the cloth to wipe your shoe. I do not want it to spread.”

Simon complied reluctantly, even more grossed out when he picked up the soiled cloth and the stench of urine suffocated him.

“So what can you tell me about Lars Olssen?” Dan asked, forever feeling the pressure of passing time.

Hans emerged with a thin white tape covering the split on his chin and a fast-acting painkiller taming his headache. “He was a colleague and close associate. When we got drunk together, I would go so far as to say he was my friend. Why? Tell me what happens with his case.”

“Uh, that’s not the way it works...”

“But today I think it is,” Hans replied, occasionally struggling to think of the correct English word. “You have no authority here. You have no papers. You do not come through proper channels. You turn up on my doorstep and expect me to answer questions. You are a tourist here. You are an Australian cop far out of his league. So if you want my help, you will answer me. Now, what happens with the case?”

“Nothing.” Dan had already decided to tell the truth. He expected the same in return so it was fair to be honest. “I’m not a detective anymore. I haven’t been on active duty since my wife was murdered. But I know PortaNet had Lars killed, and I know PortaNet commissioned my wife’s death to throw me off the case. What I want to know is why they’d take those risks.”

“And you suspect his research got him in trouble?” Hans asked.

“Yes.”

“Oh man, this is gross.” Simon grumbled from the kitchen, making his urine situation worse by the minute.

They both ignored him.

“And you think because he was a colleague of me that I will know what he discovered?”

Dan nodded.

“How much do you know about quantum physics?”

“Nothing.”

Nothing? he thought in startled bewilderment. Oh dear. Hans hated dumbing down his work. “Okay, do you know about quarks, or more specifically anti-quarks?” He waited while Dan shook his head. “No? Do you not even know what a quark is?”

Dan looked briefly ashamed, as if he were back in school and he’d been unable to answer his teacher’s simple question. “No.”

“A quark is a subatomic particle, but I will spare you the details.” A shudder swept through Han’s mind. “Do you at least know how the portals work?”

Dan drew another blank and covered his ignorance with sarcasm. “Sure, you step in, press a few buttons, and hey-presto - you’re there.”

Hans tutted disgustedly, slapped a hand to his forehead, and waved Dan to the couch. “Sit, sit.” He searched for a scrap of paper and, when he found none, tore the centre from a magazine. “A scientist, Damien Richards, discovered the shortest path between two points” - he scribbled a dot randomly on the paper and another about twenty centimetres away - “is not a straight line.”

“No, you fold the paper,” Dan added from the couch. “I’ve seen this demonstration before.”

“Humour me, would you?” Hans folded the paper and poked his pencil through the two points. “Once you have folded space, the two points exist together. Then it is a simple case of matter transfer and you unfold space again. The specifics would go over your head I am sure. Let us just say that it was very hard to do.”

Dan wondered whether the lecture was heading anywhere pertinent to his investigation.

“Now think about the fold. Do you know how it is done?”

“Maybe you should assume I don’t instead of always asking me,” Dan said, getting cross.

“Well, this paper is inaccurate... you must extrapolate to three dimensions. But the basic principle is to very intensify gravity.”

Dan frowned. “How ‘very’?”

“Enough for both ends of the wormhole to be classed a Type 7 Quantum Singularity.”

“That’s a black hole, right?” Simon asked. He was finished cleaning the piss from his hands and shoes, and came to sit next to Dan, fascinated by the lecture.

“Yes.”

“What’s a wormhole?” Dan wondered how Simon knew what a Type 7 Quantum Singularity was.

“It is a cute but inaccurate description of any fissure in normal space capable of matter transfer.”

Dan’s head was starting to hurt with the barrage of new concepts.

But Hans was just getting started; he loved talking about his favourite subject. Even if I must dumb it down. “Scientist Damien Richards found a way to very intensify gravity and fold space between two points. Then he found a way to transfer matter from one side to the other without crushing it with the gravitational field.”

“Hey, isn’t it dangerous to run around creating black holes?” Simon asked with a frown, remembering an astronomy lesson from high school.

“Uh, yes and no. Yes, but not for the reason you think.” Hans held up a finger, asking them to be patient and wait. He ducked into his second bedroom and returned with a fresh waft of burnt silicon and a metallic white container, which looked like a cross between a lunchbox, a toolbox and a first aid kit, except with a power cable. He set it on the carpet and gingerly undid the latches before cracking the lid. Misty white fumes spewed out and both men pulled their feet away.

“It is safe,” Hans assured them. In a manner of speaking. “It is only liquid nitrogen.” Next, he fetched a pair of tongs and slipped his hand into a rubber glove for splash protection. He dipped the tongs into the liquid nitrogen and felt around for something, wearing a visor of concentration. “Here!” He latched onto something and pulled it free, holding it up for inspection. When the fumes cleared, they leaned closer and saw a tiny white rock. But, as they watched, it began to melt, quickly turning into a thick white paste at room temperature.

“This is what Damien Richards invented to make it all possible.”

“What is it?” Simon asked, blandly unimpressed. Dan was too busy studying the almost-fluorescent paste to speak.

“PortaNet calls it SuperFlex. Have you ever down in a portal looked?” The more excited he became, the more his English deteriorated. “This is the white circle. This keeps from spreading the synthetic black hole and stops passengers from crush. This stops the gravitational fields from consuming the planet!”

“Like a black hole would.”

“Yes.” Hans dipped the tongues back into the nitrogen and banged them against the side to remove the resolidified paste before sealing the lid and peeling the glove from his hand. He was sweaty and the rubber stuck to his skin as if by suction. It yielded suddenly with a nerve-jolting slap.

Dan was eager to prove he was clever too. “Which is why they made it illegal to open the portals, right?”

“Exactly. And why portals stop work if the seal is broken, and why only certified technicians can reactivate them. The reactivation scanner works on a rotating frequency timed with the supercomputer of PortaNet. They do not want anyone to get a portal online after someone has tampered with it. Additionally, a registration computer checks regularly the status of every portal. If it detects a problem, it removes the portal from the grid and a technician must manually reset the portal and the registration computer.”

“Sounds like they’re paranoid,” Simon interjected. “And for good reason. There’s always one loon who wants to see what’s inside and will probably damage the white circle thingy and bugger up the solar system with a runaway black hole.”

“Um... yes.” Hans smiled awkwardly.

“Where exactly did you get your sample?” Dan asked, rather tactlessly Simon thought.

“Lars Olssen shared some with me.” Hans looked grave. “Which brings me to why PortaNet had him killed. You see, this matter is volatile. Its atomic structure

is very weak and in large quantities has the potential to collapse.” He paused, allowing the gravity of his words to sink in.

But they didn’t.

“Yeah?” Dan prompted. So?

“That means the protons, neutrons and electrons in the atoms collapse into subatomic particles, such as quarks. Then they fold into even smaller particles.”

Simon and Dan waited patiently for the punch line.

God, don’t you know anything? “So when that happens, it amplifies gravity in the surrounding atoms and they too begin to collapse. It starts a chain reaction that ends in a black hole.” Hans held up his hands to forestall their exclamations. “But, by my calculations, you must have 500 tons for 0.01 probabilities of that to happen per thousand years.”

“Then it’s stable?” Simon was getting confused.

Hans shrugged. “Not as stable as inert gas. Not as stable as uranium. But stable enough to use safely.”

“Then why-”

“However,” Hans silenced him with his vigour. “There is a by-product of the manufacture process that is as unstable as a hydrogen balloon balanced on a burning match. PortaNet neglects to mention this to anybody, including the WEF and world governments. If they had, they never would have permission to build portals. With just one kilogram you will have one percent chance of a black hole every year.”

Dan’s eyes popped wide. “Okay, that explains why PortaNet’s willing to kill people. I don’t imagine they want this secret going public.”

“Correct.” Hans squatted and gently scratched Kat under her chin. “Lars became curious about SuperFlex, the miracle substance of PortaNet.” He tapped the side of his box with his tongue. “He reverse-engineered the manufacture process in his lab in Stockholm and discovered all this. He asked me to verify his findings before publication, so I went there and looked for myself. Every 100 grams of

SuperFlex creates 500 grams of waste material.” He correctly read their alarmed expressions. “Yes, I know. Bad news.”

“And PortaNet found out that he knew?” Dan asked with rising nausea.

“Of course, he told them. He wanted to make sure they understood how serious the matter was. We could not believe people deliberately risk black holes for money. We thought they did not know. Lars had physicist contacts inside the company, which is how he got the sample of SuperFlex. But when he told them of his discovery, others were listening.”

“Echelon?”

“No, the security team of PortaNet. Lars was in Sydney to deliver his findings at an international subatomic-physics convention when the cleaning crew of PortaNet killed him.” He looked at Dan. “Which is where you came in.”

Dan nodded, mute.

Simon didn’t know what to say either.

But Hans didn’t have that problem. He finally had someone to talk to, and an even bigger blessing - they were willing to listen. “I do not believe everyone who works for PortaNet knows what happens. Those that do know keep it very quiet. I know they have commissioned a department to take care of the waste, called the Generation Planners.” He smiled morbidly. “Probably because the quality of their plans will determine if there is to be another generation.”

“Well this explains why you’re so jumpy,” Dan said, sneaking a look at Simon.

“How is it that you’re still alive?” Simon wondered aloud.

“Luck.”

“I don’t believe in luck,” Dan retorted.

“Oh really?” Hans found that amusing. “Then you must not appreciate how fucked we really are. By my calculations, even if PortaNet cease manufacture of portals today, every year there will be 0.5 percent probability of a black hole. So, in two hundred years, chances are good there will be nothing of our solar system

left. In truth, I am surprised it has not happened yet. That makes us lucky just to be alive.”

Dan shook his head. “I meant, why hasn’t-”

“I know what you meant,” Hans cut him off again. “PortaNet does not know about me and I have worked very hard to keep it that way.”

“Why don’t you bring it into the open?” Simon suggested. “If everybody knows, PortaNet will have no reason to kill you.”

Hans actually laughed. “Do you not think I have thought of that? I would be dead before I had the chance. Lars tried. They found him. If I mention this on the phone or the net, they will know, and they will make sure I cannot talk. Do you not understand? They have the power to make people disappear. PortaNet has power enough to disappear a small country!” Hans pleased Kat by scratching her behind the ears and for a minute her purring was the only sound in the room. “The Generation Planners will soon reach their operational limit - I presume in the next few months at the rate PortaNet manufactures SuperFlex. They have supersaturated the Earth already; no more can safely be stored here. They sent too much to other planets and the moon is as a minefield. Nor can they send any to the sun - nobody knows what the waste material would do at fusion temperature and pressure. They eject much into space, but often send it without a layer of SuperFlex to contain a potential black hole.”

“Can’t they just send it deeper into space?” Dan asked. Aren’t there black holes out there already? What’s the harm of one more?

“No. They must have a portal to accept it and we cannot build them far enough away. The gravitational pull of a black hole is very great and it would still destroy us.” Portal technology had made space exploration easier but the distances involved were too vast to make it simple. PortaNet had readily colonised Mars and established mines to harvest valuable Martian minerals, but Mars was comparatively close. They’d landed a buggy on the surface, which had carried a solar-powered portal for its payload. From there it had been easy, transporting astronauts and equipment instantly between the red planet and space command on Earth. The intrepid colonisers could effectively work on Mars and sleep at home with their families.

PortaNet had carted thousands of tons of portal equipment into space and the

cost of space exploration had plummeted because escaping Earth's gravity was no longer an issue. An orbiting station with a cargo-sized portal received space supplies and a crew of engineers dispatched portal-carrying probes daily. But the deeper PortaNet intended to penetrate space, the more relay stations they needed to build. Timing the portals was critical and once the probes had gone so far that electromagnetic signals took more than five minutes to reach the previous base, it was no longer possible to synchronise the portals and transmit matter safely. They'd tried, but gravitational distortions had destroyed the test robots.

So Dan's suggestion was impossible. But a team in PortaNet's research and development branch was working on a method for transmitting matter from an Earth-bound portal to an existing black hole elsewhere in the universe. They hoped to snare a black hole for long enough to pass equipment to a distant galaxy and rocket space exploration to new heights. So far it was little more than a lunatic's orgasmic dream, riddled with problems that had no solutions. The idea's biggest enemy was the fact that PortaNet had no control over which black hole their experiment would lock onto, if any.

Hans continued his narrative after giving his guests long enough to consider the consequences of PortaNet's actions. "I have a theory..."

"Oh, do share." Simon smiled derisively, cynical now that his outlook on the stability of life had forever changed. He was directing his resentment towards Hans for enlightening him.

"I think Damien Richards was first to discover that his invention had these side effects. I think his car accident was... not an accident."

Simon frowned. "Guilt driven suicide?"

Dan gave Simon an exasperated look. "He's saying it was murder," he muttered and turned back to Hans. "So what'll PortaNet do when they run out of places to put their shit?"

An awkward silence festered. Hans had no idea. He suspected PortaNet had no idea either. And everything Hans had said only added fuel to Dan's inferno of anger. He felt like a boiler, straining at the seams to contain the pressure.

"I work on a way of neutralising it, either with a different material to dampen the field or I find some way to decontaminate the SuperFlex by-product." He looked

weary. “So far, I have nothing. I work for a year now and I have not much SuperFlex left for experiments.” He waved an apologetic arm around his apartment. “And I do not have access to a first-rate lab.”

“Is that what that is?” Simon jerked his chin toward the second bedroom. “I thought I saw a disassembled portal.”

“You did.”

“Oh.” Simon flashed a smile. “Say, about what I said earlier...”

“About loons who foolishly open portals?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

Hans waved it away. “You are right. I am a loon. PortaNet does not make it easy to experiment.”

“By making it illegal?” Simon asked, his inner-policeman itching.

“No, by using dampers to stop unauthorised portal activity. They are everywhere, very big towers that guzzle electricity and produce a field to prohibit unregulated gravitational fields. Recently they spent trillions on geostationary satellites for the same purpose.” A slow smile of pride crept onto Hans’s face until it hurt his bruised chin, abruptly ending it. “But I found a way to negate the field.”

Dan frowned. “You can portal from here without PortaNet knowing?”

“Yes.”

“Anywhere you want?” His frown deepened.

“Um, after a fashion, yes.”

“Can you override security lockdown circuits?”

Hans nodded.

“So you can access restricted areas without a chip?” Dan felt his excitement mounting.

“Yes, I can do all that,” Hans said, lapping up Dan’s growing admiration as much as Kat was lapping up the attention he doted on her.

“Can we use it?” Dan asked, looking covetously towards the workshop-bedroom.

“Um, no,” Hans replied. “It can work without access to the network of PortaNet, but I have no access to their database of addresses either. Normal codes do not work. Do you know about computers or networks?”

Simon raised his hand. “I know a little.”

“Good. So you know every nano-net computer has a Protocol Address?” He didn’t wait for confirmation. “That is the equivalent of the code you use with the portals, but I cannot use that here. You know that each network interface card has a unique MAC address?” He noted Simon’s glazed expression but continued anyway. “That is what I need to program my equipment. Each portal has a unique identifier, coded in hardware.”

Dan didn’t care about the technical specifics; he just wanted to know what was possible and what was not. “So if we find you that number, can you get us past portal security?”

Hans nodded. “It is a 40-digit alphanumeric string, not a number... but yes. Security is all handled by the supercomputer of PortaNet, and since I can bypass that, I bypass the lock entirely.”

Simon whistled softly. “That makes you a dangerous man - not to mention suspect number one in all unexplainable bank robberies.”

“And where would I get that... string?” Dan asked.

Hans shrugged. “It is printed on the frequency modulation unit and the network connection card of every portal, but you must open the case to read it... and I presume that if you are in a position to open the portal, you will have no need of my services.” He paused to think. “Or, you could kindly ask someone from PortaNet to look it up in their database.”

“Right.” Dan abruptly stood. “I’ll get you the code. And if you help me by letting me use your portal, I’ll do my best to help you.”

“Really?” Hans looked dubious. “And how do you plan that?”

One more crusade. This time, Dan knew he was biting off more than he could chew. But he’d committed himself; this opportunity was too good to pass up. “I’m not sure yet. But I promise to do everything I can.” He extended a hand, hoping Hans would accept the offer.

Hans stood slowly, stretching his back and rotating his whiplashed neck. “You should understand something first. PortaNet has dampers for a reason, the same reason they won the right to form a monopoly on portal travel. Every space fold must be precisely co-ordinated with all the others, which is why every portal talks first to the supercomputer. If the space fold from my portal crosses a PortaNet fold it may merge you with another traveller and subject both of you to gravitational distortions.”

“So I’d be fried?”

Hans nodded. “A fragment of bone and a splatter of blood was all that was left of the chickens they experimented on. I think you have about five percent chance of colliding with another fold, killing you and someone else.”

Considering his options, Dan thought it was an acceptable risk. “Fine.”

Hans studied his guest for a long time before slapping his cat-fur-covered hand into Dan’s outstretched palm and shaking vigorously.

*

Sunday, September 19, 2066

02:26 Brisbane, Queensland

He felt better after his much-needed rest. Processing was easier. The interface between his brain and processor felt agile and lubricated instead of coarse and frail. He'd been following Dan Sutherland's financial trail and it'd led him to the backwater surgery. The Raven already suspected why Sutherland had been there, but he needed confirmation for his theory.

He sprung like a lithe cat from his shadowy hiding place and prowled to the front door, clawing at the handle. But the lock was expensive and the alarm system sensitive. It won't be easy to override, he thought irritably. So... the hard way. He sat with his back to the door and accessed the surgery's network by mentally drilling through their firewall. Then he posed as a chronometer and fooled the building's time server into believing it was nine o'clock in the morning. There was a click at the door and a flicker of lights from inside as the building sprung to life.

That wasn't hard at all. The Raven marvelled at the gaping flaw security personnel had overlooked in the system. It was a common oversight, which granted him easy access to many medium-security premises. He slid quickly inside to avoid prying eyes and headed to the receptionist's counter. It was a mess. So much for the paperless office. He'd already canvassed the surgery's network, with limited success. The information he sought simply wasn't there, so he'd expected to find a stand-alone computer with patient records and appointment times, possibly connected to a sperate internal network. But there was no such computer at the receptionist's counter and he could make no sense of the jumbled paper.

Okay, again the hard way. He wandered the halls for ten minutes, mentally jotting the names of the surgeons that worked there. Once he was finished, he exited the building and reverted the network's time to normal before erasing himself from the security videos. The lights turned out and the doors automatically locked, returning the building to sleep.

Next, he accessed the financial records database, using a backdoor the network 'geniuses' hadn't noticed for two years. Sometimes he pitied the sheep around him. But most of the time he thought they received exactly what they deserved. He scanned for unusual deposits in the surgeons' linked accounts.

One matched.

Sutherland had transferred 10,000 Credits into an account that belonged to a man named Doctor Ingles. A few minutes later, Doctor Ingles had transferred 1,000 Credits to a third account. Whose? He suspected the answer to that question would tell him what he desperately needed to know: Sutherland's new identity. The Raven licked his lips and prepared to swoop. So, Doctor Ingles... ready or not, here I come.

*

"That's five." Chuck grinned while scanning Dan's false chip and tagging his weapons. "What're you trying to do? Turn me into an alcoholic?"

*

His next stop was an elite suburb on the Sunshine Coast, approximately two hours north of central Brisbane by car - or one heartbeat by portal. The cloud-streaked night was even gloomier there and the Raven cursed the humidity. The sliver-like waning moon occasionally found a gap in the clouds but barely cast enough light for the Raven to see where he was placing his feet. The walk from the portal station to Doctor Ingles' house took five minutes. And a magnificent house it was - not the grandest on the street, that prize went to his neighbours, but it was splendid nonetheless. Its splendour made the Raven wonder how Ingles could afford such luxury on a doctor's salary. Black-market operations no doubt. Everything was slotting into place to confirm the Raven's theory.

And he bet the Doctor's mansion had elite security. Not that it matters. He sauntered across the garden, ignored the floodlights, ascended the steps leading to the veranda, and punched a windowpane with his gloved fist - but the impact only caused his wrist and knuckles to smart. I hate cured thermoplastic. The Raven half-heartedly tried a boot before giving up on smashing a window.

Come on, don't make me wait until morning. He rang the doorbell.

Moments later, a groggy voice came over the intercom. "Yes?"

"I'm looking for Doctor Ingles," the Raven said in calm monotone.

"What do you want?" He sounded grumpy, understandably too. Honest members

of society were asleep at three in the morning.

The Raven played his trump card. “I want to ask you questions about several microchip removal procedures traced to your surgery.”

Ingles’ sigh came through the speaker as a buzzing hiss. “Can’t it wait until morning?”

The Raven kept his tone level and stern. “The beckon of justice and truth can never wait, sir.”

“Hang on a minute.” The intercom static died and a trail of lights accompanied Doctor Ingles through the house. He cracked the front door just far enough to see the man on his veranda, but didn’t remove the chain. “Can I see some ID?” After all, he did look suspicious; he’d never known a cop or chipping squad officer to wear entirely black. Come to think of it, he reasoned sensibly, I’ve never known cops to work at three in the morning either. It all looked fishy and Doctor Morgan Ingles was proud to have the presence of mind to ask for identification even though he was half-asleep. He just hoped he could keep his head level when the questions started to flow.

“ID?” The Raven slowly nodded. “Sure.” But instead of reaching for a wallet, he raised a leg and kicked the centre of the door with all his might, snapping the chain from the wooden frame and sending the good doctor sprawling onto his back, clutching a broken nose. “Is that what you were looking for?”

Doctor Ingles writhed on his expensive carpet, clutching his nose with both hands and spitting blood from his mouth. “My nose!”

The Raven drew his Redback and aimed at the Doctor’s left eye, the muzzle scarcely an inch away from his cornea. From that distance, the weapon looked even more menacing, if a bit blurred. And, proud to call himself a weapon buff, Ingles recognised the PX7 model and understood what it could do. Fear shuddered through his body, overcoming the pain in his nose - a nose that was quickly turning dark purple.

“What do you want?”

“Like I said, I have some questions.” The Raven cocked his head to one side, keeping the Redback level with Ingles’ eye while the surgeon crawled backwards

to slump against the parlour wall. It was more comfortable for the Raven too; he no longer had to bend so far to keep his muzzle close. “I didn’t pretend to be an officer of the law; that was your assumption.”

Ingles wrestled with his fear and managed to keep his voice steady. He studied the aggressive man’s pallor and striking skeletal structure. “You want a chip removed?” He hoped so.

The Raven shook his head in a frightening, detached manner. “No. I’m quite comfortable with my chip where it is. I want to know about Dan Sutherland.”

“Then you have the wrong doctor because I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.”

Brave. The Raven had to commend him for that. But foolish. He used his boot to crush the hand Doctor Ingles was propping himself up with. Then he watched Ingles’ face turned ghostly pale as he leaned more heavily upon the hand and twisted his boot. The grip of his sole was doing untold damage to the Doctor’s metacarpus. “You need fine motor co-ordination to be a surgeon, don’t you?”

Ingles could only nod. The air was already gone from his lungs and the pain forbade him from drawing another breath.

“Then you don’t want me to pulverise your hand. Which means you should stop jerking me around. Understood?” The Raven viciously twisted his boot again before easing the pressure. “Next time it’s your balls. Fair enough?”

Ingles cradled his hand and nodded. “He wanted his chip removed.”

“And you did it?”

“Yeah, of course I did,” he said matter-of-factly. “There’s good money in it.” He definitely had no remorse for his illegal actions.

“He needs a chip. Which chip does he have?”

Thinking about the damage the Raven’s boot could do to his testicles was enough to sweep aside any noble ideas Doctor Ingles had about protecting his patients’ identities. “He has two.” He squinted in thought. “Tedman Kennedy and Brent Bertrouney if I remember correctly.”

“You had better be remembering correctly,” the Raven warned menacingly. His eyes lost focus for the few seconds it took to check the profiles. Intriguingly, one linked account had received the Doctor’s payment of 1,000 Credits. Probably a refund, but best to confirm. “You transferred 1,000 Credits into his account after the operation. Why?”

How could he know that? Morgan Ingles had growing suspicious to feed his fear, making him turn even paler. He can’t be a cyborg... can he? He swallowed hard before saying, “I based the original quote on three new identities, but I could only give him two.”

“Why?”

“He wanted profiles with authority to carry arms internationally and I only had two for sale.” Doctor Ingles was regretting his greed. Sure, it’d landed him a magnificent house, but people seeking a new identity were always running from something - or someone. He should have expected that, sooner or later, ‘someone’ would come looking for him. Ingles had turned himself into his patients’ guardian. And he suddenly disliked the responsibility.

“Thank you Doctor.”

*

Sunday, September 19, 2066

N.S.W. Police Department, Parramatta Office

03:15 Sydney, Australia

“How long has it been?” Simon asked.

“Fourteen hours,” Dan replied, not wanting to taste the defeat that was looming on all sides.

“They’re doing the same to Jen as they did to Katherine?”

“Yes.”

“So how many hours does she have left?” Simon asked, as gently as he could.

“If they started right away?”

Simon nodded.

Four, plus four, plus... “Minus two if she tore her lips to breathe. Minus six if she didn’t.”

Simon didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to - Dan was thinking it anyway.

“But I know she’s alive, Slime. Don’t ask me how. I just do.” He turned back to the stack of records. That’s it, believe the intuition you want to hear and ignore the intuition you don’t, a scornful corner of his mind jabbed facetiously.

They were in a stuffy vault, sifting through mountains of paper records. Simon couldn’t help wondering how moths had found their way there, and how they’d survived with nothing to eat but bleached paper. Earlier Dan had stumbled across a nest of worms chewing on paper pulp and pooping it out in little black balls. The wriggling mass of reddish-orange bodies had disgusted them both.

It was troglodyte heaven and time-pressured-bounty-hunter hell.

But profiles were emerging - names, addresses, physical descriptions and resumes of the three people Dan suspected of abducting Jen. Esteban’s profile had been easy to complete, he was a living legend in recent crime fighting history, albeit a sinister one. But somebody had erased valuable data on Dan’s other two suspects, and done it so long ago it was too tiresome to find on crystal-

cube. So they were down with the paper records instead.

“He has a real syndicate going, doesn’t he?” Simon commented, finding another reference to Esteban’s illicit activities.

“Yeah,” Dan muttered, miffed by the missing segments in the police knowledge bank. How could nobody notice? “And then they vanished.” He suspected Esteban had cleansed his record too, just not deleted it.

Simon grunted. “It’s not infallible.”

“No, especially for people with influence.”

“Influence - meaning money.”

“And connections,” Dan clarified.

Simon yawned for the third time that minute.

“Why don’t you go and get some sleep?” Dan offered.

“That’s the best idea I’ve heard all day,” Simon replied. “It’s been a long shift.” He stood, sending a precariously perched stack of paper cascading to the floor in a whirlwind of fragmented statistics. “Oh, shit.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got it.” Dan scooped the pile roughly into his arms and tossed it brusquely into an empty box. “There. Filed.” He winked at his partner. “Now go and get some sleep.”

“You’re not coming?” Simon asked disapprovingly, secretly wishing he had the stamina to keep up.

“No, I want to stay here. We nearly have enough to hammer out a plan.” He ran a hand roughly through his hair. The exhaustion was getting to him but he wasn’t yet ready to give in. “Maybe I’ll do some preliminary recon too.”

Simon shook his head, thoroughly mystified. “You’re nuts mate.” He headed for the door. “You know how to let yourself out. Call me before you do anything stupid. Okay?”

“Done,” Dan agreed.

He felt lonely when the vault door closed, truly alone for the first time since meeting Jen in Elustra’s Melbourne giga-mall. Growing accustomed to human company again? He laughed bitterly and it echoed around the titanium walls.

His mood was slipping. He hadn’t taken his Zyclone at the regular intervals Xantex had prescribed. He’d thought about it, and even considered going back for his pills or getting another prescription filled, but he didn’t want it to impair his judgement. When he tallied his recent mistakes he felt old and tired. I wouldn’t have been this careless ten years ago... is this what it means to age? He took the time to examine his hands. They were calloused and strong, not frail like an old man’s hands. So he blamed the Zyclone. It enfeebled his mind, weakened his body, and devastated his libido. No more. He didn’t feel depressed, he felt angry. And while he had anger to feed from, he wouldn’t need drugs. He needed clarity of thought and accurate judgement - he needed to become the man he’d once been.

He yawned. But I do need stimulants. He’d taken them in the past and knew his body could cope with at least 70 hours of continual use. So Dan collated the useful records, folded them twice, tucking them inside his coat, and left the vault. Now, he thought. Where can I get stimulants at this time of night?

*

Sunday, September 19, 2066

Parramatta Business District

03:22 Sydney, Australia

His eyes were inefficient in the dark so he was feeding from visual cues delivered by the multitude of pole-mounted cameras, which the local council had scattered liberally around the business hub. It's here somewhere. He wasn't sure exactly what 'it' was, but he would recognise it when he found it. 'It' was the next clue, the special something that would help him find the trail again. He sensed he was close, though he had no facts with which to back up his assumption. But he'd certainly found interesting results when he ran Tedman Kennedy through PortaNet's database. You've been a busy little bee, Sutherland.

He wasn't using his eyes, and therefore had no need of a panoramic vantage, but he savoured the bird-of-opportunity analogy so much that he scaled the Hydro-Tech office building just to survey the cityscape. They were wasting energy. That was his first conclusion. Most of the buildings were lit like Christmas trees and even with the advances in fluorescent light design, they were still burning electricity as if there were no tomorrow. The Raven found it offensive, though he couldn't compute why. Half a century ago there would've been pickets of protestors shouting energy-saving slogans throughout the night. But back then, atmospheric quality had to pay for every photon of light. Fusion power was cheap - for the environment as well as for EnFusion, the global electricity supplier. Still, it was a magnificent view, even if he was primarily using cameras and their night-piercing circuitry to peer into dark corners.

They're hiding around here somewhere. He felt certain they were in Sydney, but it was a big city and he found it frustrating that he couldn't narrow his search. The Raven was tracing a finger across the scar above his hairline while chewing on the data trail. His other hand was fondling the grip of his Redback, itching to squeeze the trigger at Sutherland's face. He wondered which body parts he should return for verification. His cerebral cortex? He thought he'd enjoy peeling it away from the remainder of Sutherland's brain. Or maybe his prostate, an eye, and his pituitary gland? It was a wonderful game to play. Sometimes he wondered whether surgery was his true calling. He did enjoy browsing the endless volumes of surgical procedures he could access.

He was still entertaining himself with thoughts of Dan's anatomy when something interesting flashed in front of a camera, immediately snaring his attention. That's curious. He raised his face to the clouded Sydney sky and

whispered his request for a favourable omen. Tonight the hunt would end and the kill would begin.

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Dan asked the officers - who were still playing cards at the counter - if they had any stimulants they could spare, but they patted themselves down and said, “No mate, sorry.”

He smiled his departure and slid into the night, unaware that a camera had captured him on digital security feed. There was always one Xantex prescription house open 24 hours and if memory served him correctly, Dan knew where it was. Nothing in the business district had changed much in the past 11 months. The same giga-corporations controlled the same turf and did an excellent job driving the sole traders out of business. Dan had never given it much consideration before, but he'd been trying to view the world from Jen's perspective and found that once he'd started, he couldn't stop.

Why am I always working at night? It was a disturbing question to ask, he thought. While in Holland, he'd thoroughly enjoyed the scant rays of sun that'd caressed his skin. It was too easy to forget the sun came up every morning when you spent so much time portaling around the world. He couldn't remember the last time he'd appreciated a real sunrise; the digital interpretations just couldn't capture the magic of an Australian dawn.

A blue neon sign proudly, but gaudily, flashed a capitalised Xantex logo, whisking Dan's wandering mind back to his task. He couldn't believe they did much business at this time of night, but the law was quite strict on that point. If Xantex intended to keep their medication monopoly, they had to serve the community's best interests. That meant they needed to operate 24-hour pharmacies and have prescription doctors available for emergency consultations. Of course, there weren't many, portals made that unnecessary. Xantex operated only a few all-night pharmacies in each state.

Stimulants didn't require a prescription. Xantex had argued with various governments for nearly a decade about it, their prime argument being that people had regulated their stimulant intake for centuries. Was caffeine a restricted substance? No. Don't be daft, they'd said. And it had worked, in Australia anyway.

He selected the strongest stimulant on the shelves and took it to the counter.

“Planning on a busy night?” She had puffy eyes herself.

Dan nodded solemnly. “Something like that.”

“Well you’ve chosen well.” Xantex trained all their staff to make customers feel good about their choice of drugs. “This’ll make you feel better in no time.”

I doubt it. Dan allowed her to scan him and swallowed two tabsules as soon as he was back on the street. The effects began almost immediately, too fast for the drugs to have reached his system - it was his mind anticipating the rush to come.

Now... He examined the police records he’d stolen from the vault. What’s your story Adrian Miller? He’d attended the same college as Esteban. So did Frank Albert Hansen, he noted. He intently analysed the data, sitting on a bench where the light flooding from Xantex illuminated his paper enough to read the words. One reference was particularly interesting. In the past, Adrian and Frank had mixed with the suspected mastermind behind a people-smuggling operation. But there’d only been circumstantial evidence to indicate they were involved, so nobody had charged them with anything. I bet this is gone from every database on the planet, Dan mused sourly. Another name appeared twice in the haphazard jottings, one that Dan was unfamiliar with and wished he’d noticed before leaving the vault. The emerging picture was all too familiar. They belonged to a breed of remorseless men who gleefully trampled innocent people to reach their goals. And too often their primary goal was to satisfy their avaricious greed with yet more money.

I bet Esteban’s the protector. Every successful operation needed one - someone to ward off the law. Dan’s grip tightened with rage until the paper crinkled in his fingers. Then he felt the real effects of the stimulant and leapt to his feet with enough spare energy to jog to the nearest portal.

*

Saturday, September 18, 2066

13:51 Baltimore, USA

She gulped for air, fighting to keep the water from trickling into her lungs. She'd been battling for nearly an hour and it had become her world. Life consisted of struggling to reach the surface to drink air through her straw before suction dragged her back under and the whole process began again. Her arms were tied behind her back and her wrists burned with pain; she could only use her legs to kick up for that next gulp of precious oxygen.

But her strength was dwindling and she knew she couldn't keep going indefinitely. In the back of her mind she was relieved the nightmare would soon end. But mainly she was sad that life would end with such misery. She held onto her breath as she slipped beneath the surface for the last time. Too tired to kick, she sunk lower than ever and watched as the light above faded to dark blue. She risked a downward glance and saw the mystery of blackness below, sending a cold shiver to her bones. The panic it induced made her kick again and she struggled for the surface, fighting with every fibre for the next breath.

But it was too late. Her oxygen-deprived muscles had no energy for the journey. Slowly her thoughts turned to molasses and the edge of her vision blurred from more than just water. She began sinking again, with nothing left to prop her from a cold and certain death.

Jen let her last breath bubble from her mouth and nose, drew water into her lungs, and... regained consciousness. She blinked in surprise to see a white ceiling. It was spinning nauseatingly, but vastly different from the watery grave she'd expected. It took her a long time to remember what'd happened. Her arms, handcuffed behind her back, were too numb to feel. And she'd tangled the sheets around her legs by thrashing through her hallucinations. She couldn't bear to think about what Esteban had injected her with. It was too terrifying to contemplate. What if I get addicted? The more pessimistic part of her mind told her it wouldn't matter, that life was all but over.

She tried to sit but her muscles didn't respond. They weren't yet ready to relinquish control to her mind, but she felt the aches and pains. Every joint felt as if she'd hyper-flexed it and every ligament felt as if she'd pulled it beyond reason. When she closed her eyes she could easily imagine a fire was raging inside her body, charring her flesh and blazing a trail of pain in its wake. She

wondered how long it would take to flush the drugs from her system, because she couldn't stand any more torment. And she didn't intend to give her captors reason to inject her again. So, although she'd never acknowledge it, they'd succeeded in phase one of her cowing.

Quarter of an hour passed before she had the strength to push herself to a sitting position. She immediately knew something was grievously wrong. Her clothes were misaligned and she could feel throbbing bruises on her breasts through the drug-induced pain. A sickening thought permeated the haze and soaked her mind. Did they rape me already? Someone had definitely unbuttoned her shirt, they'd put the buttons in the wrong holes when doing it back up. A wave of nausea settled in her midriff and she ceased contemplating rape to focus on not vomiting.

The nausea gradually subsided until only a lingering queasiness remained, and that would stay with her until she'd flushed the drugs from her body - or she got another hit. She regained a portion of strength and used it to stand on unsteady feet. The cuffs made it frightening because she had nothing to stop herself from toppling to the ground if she stumbled. First, she wanted to see Claire, and she wrestled with her foggy memory to find Claire's room. It was empty. This can't be right... I got it wrong. But she recognised the few trinkets Claire had used to brighten her room. So where is she? Then she realised she had no clue what time it was. Daytime? They regulated the lights with the sun. Yes, daytime.

A finger of clear thought poked through her enfeebled mind and she came up with an eloquent explanation for Claire's absence: She's somewhere else. So, with a series of dolly-steps, she turned around and wandered through the halls looking for her friend. She couldn't face the prospect of examining her body for rape without emotional support. She needed someone who understood and who'd been through it.

She eventually shuffled into the lounge room.

"...isn't how I wanted to spend my weekend either," Adrian was muttering.

"Why does Esteban have to work today anyway?" Junior asked, wincing as he poked at his dressing, but completely incapable of leaving it alone.

"Company emergency, remember? He's on the reaction team."

“Ha!” Junior stopped short of saying what he honestly thought. Serves him right for all the trouble he causes. He was first to see Jen. “Hello princess,” he snarled.

She remained silent.

“How’re you feeling?” Adrian asked more compassionately. He didn’t really need to ask, he could see the answer by looking in her eyes - they were bewildered and unfocussed.

Jen quivered. “Can you take my cuffs off?”

Adrian nodded. “Hang on a moment.” He strode from the room, presumably to get a key.

“You did some real fucking damage to my neck last night.” Junior didn’t know what else to say. He was furious with her, though no longer felt the need to cut off her feet.

She didn’t answer. She just sank into a chair, sitting uncomfortably upright to protect her wrists from unnecessary damage. The colours in the room looked muted and she wondered whether it was the lingering drugs or whether her outlook on life had changed. Will things always look less vibrant now? Is this how depressed people see things? It was as if somebody had taken a bucket of murky water and splashed it over the world to wash away the pleasure, the vigour, the life.

“Here.” Adrian was back, holding a small key triumphantly in the air. “Stand up.”

She stood and turned her back to him. There was quiet click, a clank, and the cuffs were off. She gently brushed fingers over her wrists, which were too sensitive for real rubbing.

“Are you okay?” Adrian asked. “They look painful.”

Jen shook her head. “I’ll be fine.” She wanted to leave. She couldn’t stand the thought of casually talking to men who might’ve raped her the previous night.

“I’ll get you some skin-healing cream,” Adrian offered. He was gone before Jen could protest and had returned before either Junior or Jen could think of

anything to say.

“Here.” He offered her the tube. “It’ll help.”

Reluctance oozed from every pore of her skin, but she accepted. She didn’t want anything from these people, except her freedom. She eased herself back onto the couch, removing the weight from her wobbly legs to apply the cream. It felt cold and soothing when she dabbed it on her skin. According to the print on the tube, it was anti-inflammatory and had a mild anaesthetic to dull the pain. “Thanks,” she mumbled, wishing her upbringing hadn’t forced her to say that word. They have no right to my gratitude. Jen tossed the tube back. “Am I free to go?”

Adrian nodded and said, “As far as you can without a chip, yes.”

Jen kept her eyes trained on them while she stood. If she had the balance to accompany her presence of mind, she would’ve backed from the room. As it was, she used all her concentration to avoid having to crawl. Back in her room, she closed the door and removed her sweat-soaked shirt and bra. A sinking feeling weighed in her heart when she saw the bruises. Ugly black and blue welts, which were turning yellow at the fringes, neatly fit the shape of a human hand. Someone had taken advantage of her unconsciousness. The question is, how much? Badly bruised breasts was one thing, seamen dripping down her inner thighs was something else entirely. She removed her jeans and underpants to perform the examination.

Holding her breath, she checked, sick with the prospect of confirming her fear. But there appeared to be nothing amiss. Strange. She studied herself three times before daring to believe that nobody had raped her. Maybe they got interrupted? But a less savoury thought soon displaced her tentative euphoria. Maybe they’re waiting until I can fight back... maybe the sick bastards think that’s more fun. She dressed in silence, bathing in temporary relief. She knew they were close to forcing her into an unwanted sexual encounter; it was just a matter of time. I have to get out of here.

She still believed her original plan was the best. Borrow a microchip. Last time Edward, the pompous English arse, had caught her unprepared. But next time will be different. She considered everyone in the Guild a fair target. They were all guilty, or so she repeatedly tried to affirm in her mind.

She wished she could banish the final effects of whatever they’d injected her

with, but dared not wait for it to clear. She suspected they'd inject her again before too long. And then the game's all over. One more shot and she'd be addicted, of that, she was somehow convinced.

She wove toward Claire's room on slightly steadier feet, growing anxious when she found it still vacant. Where are you? She checked the showers and toilets, smiling politely every time she saw another woman. The suspense was too much. "Excuse me." She sounded like a child. "I'm looking for Claire, do you know where she is?"

The woman she'd apprehended looked sad and reached out to brush Jen's shoulder. "She died."

"What?" The strength drained from her legs and she couldn't understand what stopped her from collapsing.

"They killed her last night."

Jen's lip quivered with shock. The other women were familiar with the Guild's disregard for human life but it was Jen's first taste. "Why?"

She had long dark hair and, like the others, unnaturally large breasts. They heaved when she shrugged. "Nobody knows. They dispose of us when we lose our appeal, but Claire was still young."

"Younger than me," Jen affirmed.

"Oh, you have nothing to worry about." She did her best to smile reassuringly. "You're pretty enough to keep them attracted for ages yet."

"Who?" Jen mouthed the word but not even a whisper escaped.

The dark haired woman understood her question anyway. "Frank. I think they call him Junior... not him, but his friends." She saw the helpless fury brewing in Jen's eyes. "Take some advice, don't do anything stupid, okay? Don't do anything at all." She didn't want to see Jen hurt.

Jen thanked her and shuffled back the way she'd come, beginning to understand how to navigate the bunker. Adrian and Junior were exactly where she'd left them, except now they were engrossed in magazines. She demanded to know

whose microchip she should escape with, “Who killed her?”

Adrian peered over the latest issue of Fortune and adjusted his glasses before folding the pages together and depositing the magazine on the lamp table.

“Who?”

“Claire Robinson.”

Adrian felt a smidgeon of shame that he’d never known her surname, but it quickly passed. “Esteban of course.”

Junior was still living in his sphere of silence. He wasn’t yet ready to forgive Jen for wounding him.

Jen paled and returned to her room, shuffling unsteadily down the corridor. She didn’t notice that Adrian was following. He reached her door just as she reached her bed. “Get away from me,” she shouted when she saw him standing there.

Adrian’s expression was always serious and Jen couldn’t remember seeing him smile. But now he did, or tried to. It didn’t come naturally to him and tended to make him look sinister rather than convey the intended reassurance. “I’m not going to hurt you, I promise.”

“Promises don’t mean shit if I can’t trust you to keep them.”

“That’s a good point,” Adrian conceded. “So I’ll have to earn your trust first.”

“How about letting me go? That’d be a good start.” Jen felt uncomfortable with him standing in the doorway. She looked desperately around for a weapon, but found none. And she certainly wasn’t strong enough to beat him away with fists alone.

Adrian entered her room and closed the door. But instead of approaching her bed, he sat on the table. “I’m just going to sit here.” He paused, but Jen didn’t accept the opportunity to speak. “I never knew Claire’s last name.”

You’re not doing yourself any favours. Jen maintained her disdainful stare.

“I never got the chance to talk to her much, but she seemed like a nice girl.” Adrian ran a hand through his neatly matted hair.

“What did she do wrong?”

“Nothing,” Adrian admitted with a shameful expression. “Esteban has a replacement.”

“Me.” Jen understood. “Did she really kill someone?” Her voice was barely more than a whisper.

Adrian nodded. “Her boyfriend, in self-defence.” But people on the outside perceive domestic altercations differently from people embroiled on the inside. Claire was the only one who truly knew whether it was self-defence or malicious murder, and now that she was gone, nobody could know the truth. But it felt wrong to dishonour the dead by speaking ill of them for crimes against which they could no longer defend themselves. It seemed fitting to give her the benefit of the doubt. Besides, she’d paid a thousand times for her mistakes.

Jen consumed the news in silence, wishing Adrian would leave her alone.

“I’m no saint, but I didn’t want her dead,” Adrian confessed. “I tried to talk him out of it, but he wouldn’t listen.” She was giving him less feedback than a couch or a refrigerator, and he began to wonder whether he should leave. “Once he’s made up his mind, nothing can stop him... it’s scary.”

She suddenly snapped out of her trance and turned to face him. “Then why do you stay here? Why didn’t you shoot him?”

“Cross Esteban?” Adrian’s eyebrows shot up incredulously. “No way. That’d be a death sentence.” He grunted nervously. “I don’t know why I stay. I suppose because it’s easier than getting out.” His voice sounded dreamy, as if he were imagining things that could once have been. “I don’t even know how it happened. One thing led to another and before I knew it, I was in the crew. We were doing small things back then, shifting packets of drugs on campus and other minor stuff. Esteban was the tough and he intimidated anyone that stood in our way. Once, we were busted for selling amphetamines, but Esteban beat the crap out of the security guard and threatened to kill the man’s family if he didn’t turn around and walk away. The guard sensibly applied for a transfer the next day.” Junior frowned as he recounted the course of his life. “Pretty soon we were doing bigger things and got clear of the drug scene altogether. It only leads to one place, and it isn’t pretty. So we began moving people instead. It’s amazing what desperate people will pay to have someone smuggle them out of one

country and into another. Anyway, corporations snapped us up after college and we used our new connections to join a people-smuggling cartel.” He shrugged with his hands. “Eventually Esteban was invited here and he took us with him.”

“Why are you telling me all this?” Jen didn’t really care to hear it.

“I just want you to understand where I come from,” Adrian replied. “It all started because I needed a little extra cash at college. My parents were rich, but that didn’t mean any of their money trickled down to me. From there I was just swept along.”

It didn’t vindicate anything as far as Jen was concerned. “So? You could’ve said no.”

He nodded, regarding her carefully. “I know.” Eventually he had to look away, unable to hold her gaze without feeling intense shame. “Better late than never though, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“You want to escape, so I’ll help you do it.”

“What about the others?” Jen asked, equally concerned for their wellbeing.

Adrian shook his head. “I wouldn’t know how to find chips for all of them.”

“How do you intend to find a chip for me?”

“I know where Esteban put that little device of yours.”

“It has six chips inside,” Jen said eagerly. “So that’s six people.”

“I can’t do anything for the others,” Adrian repeated unapologetically. He was already putting his neck on the line for Jen and, as far as he was concerned, that was enough. “And I want to do this without him finding out it was me.”

“How?”

“Don’t worry yourself about that, just don’t tell anyone. Deal?” He scoured her face for signs of betrayal. He wouldn’t help unless he decided to trust her.

“If I said anything I wouldn’t get out, would I?”

“Good point.” He shoved off the table and headed for the door. “I’ll be back within four hours. Wait for me here, okay?”

She kept nodding until he left the room. Now that’s bizarre. She didn’t trust him any further than she could spit, but she had to acknowledge that he represented her best chance of escape. For six of us. Then she made a vow that she intended to keep: And I’ll come back for the others.

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Saturday, September 18, 2066

10:20 San Francisco, USA

Michele wore thick makeup to conceal her sleepless night and resultant baggy eyes. She'd deactivated the video component of the phone. "I'm telling you it was him."

"Okay, careful Michele," Esteban warned in a threatening voice. "Don't say anything stupid on an open line." Sometimes he wished he could smash her skull like a melon, or throttle some sense into her brain.

"I won't," she retorted, nearly hysterical. "Where are you?"

Esteban rolled his eyes. Oh Lord, you fucked up when you put this bitch together. "How stupid do you think I am, Michele? Look, calm down, everything's going to be fine. I'm sure you just made a mistake. Maybe you dreamt it?"

Her tone was becoming whiny. "I wasn't dreaming, okay? Why won't you believe me?"

"Just meet me in the office." He'd had enough.

"No. I'm not going back there. He said-"

"I'll be there in a second," Esteban said, cutting her off before she said something Echelon would archive, giving him the added hassle of having to delete records. "You'll be safe with me there. I'm approaching the portals now. I'll see you in a minute." He hung up before she could protest.

Michele pouted and reluctantly replaced the receiver on the public phone. She was spooked enough to distrust her mobile because she didn't understand what was and what was not possible in the mystical land of technology - she lived with the myths Hollywood fed her. She looked up at UniForce headquarters. She hadn't gone far; she'd been too scared to go home. Does he know where I live? Does he expect me to leave the company? The city? The country? She kept trying to replay the conversation in her mind but fear had distorted her memory to the point of worthlessness.

She'd filled 'a sudden illness' into the necessary form as her reason for leaving the building - spelling wasn't her strong point - and fled as soon as Dan had left. She knew of a hotel in Nevada that had a 24-hour reception desk and she'd checked in there for what had remained of the night. The vibrating bed had been nice, but it wasn't as enjoyable as she remembered - probably because she'd had the company of two adoring men on her last stay. I didn't get much sleep then either, she thought with a childish giggle.

She did as Esteban bade and sought the nearest portal. A flash and a heartbeat later, she was standing in the foyer of her floor at UniForce headquarters. She marched to her office and found Esteban sitting on her desk.

"Close the door."

She obediently complied.

"Now what's this shit about Sutherland?"

"He was here last night," Michele repeated for the fourth time. "He came right up here, past all the security, and threatened me."

Oh yes, past all our 'quality' security. Esteban scoffed at the pitiful excuse UniForce headquarters had for security. The guard training programs were behind schedule so they'd outsourced all the quality guards to other companies. "I just checked his movements and as far as PortaNet's concerned he hasn't left Australia." He shrugged sceptically. "So unless international airlines have reopened for business in the past few days, I don't think it could possibly have been him. Maybe it just looked like him?"

Michele threw a tizz. "No! You're not listening to me. It was Dan Sutherland! I know what he looks like."

He still thought she'd dreamt it, but let it rest for now. "Okay, I'll go and check the parameters on my scan if it'll make you happy." But a hum of doubt had started tickling the back of his mind. He has been waiting an awful long time. Esteban had expected the legendary Dan Sutherland to be stalking him by now, but he was still messing around in Australia. He shrugged the feeling off by roaming his gaze over Michele's body. Sure, she was built like a penguin, but she could work small miracles with her mouth. And since he wanted to wait with Jen, Michele was his only option. "But first... there's something I need from

you.”

She knew what he wanted but she wasn't in the mood so she twisted away from him with an exasperated grunt.

“I won't take long.” He unzipped his fly and pulled her closer, making her kneel in front of him.

Michele grudgingly started caressing his flesh, kissing him softly. Before long they were in the ecstatic throes of passion - or at least Esteban was, Michele was merely bored. She wanted to rest and was thinking about whether it'd be safe to sleep in her office when Esteban orgasmed. She spat into a tissue.

“I told you I'd be quick.” Esteban grinned at her, satisfied now that she'd slaked his desires. He could see from the look in her eyes that she hadn't been expecting it. She'd nearly choked. Reducing the pressure on his explosive libido also gave him the opportunity to think more clearly about Sutherland. Hmm... what if he's using someone else's chip? It was a startling thought. Then he could be anywhere. He could still be in the building! Esteban zipped up his fly and reached for his gun, scanning the room with suspicion.

“What is it?” Michele's eyes opened wide with a fresh onrush of fear.

“Nothing,” Esteban snapped. “Just stay here.”

“Where're you going?” Michele asked, sounding desperate.

“To check on Sutherland.” Esteban approached every corner as if it might hide his enemy, wary now that he realised Dan could be hunting him while electronically cloaked. The confidence he'd derived from his handheld monitor had evaporated now that he suspected Dan could traverse the portals without raising an alarm. He felt blind.

Michele shrugged when he left the room. She logged into her computer and filled out the necessary forms to notify the system of her return before curling up on the couch and closing her eyes.

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James's head came up with a start. “What?” It came out as a croak, his vocal

ords too fatigued to form the word properly.

“I said, wake up!” Esteban shook him harder, trying to rouse the information technology co-ordinator from the deepest slumber he’d achieved in days.

James rubbed the numbness from his face and removed the sleep from his eyes before focussing on the intruder. “What is it?”

“You have work to do,” Esteban said cruelly, having no comprehension of how hard James had been working already.

James waved at the monitor. “I can’t find the holes. My team’s working on it.” He snorted. “The ones that came in today anyway.” None of the original volunteers was willing to spend that much time at work, but others had stepped forward to fill the ranks and he’d had a steady stream of fresh minds working on the problem, so far with little success.

“I don’t care about that,” Esteban growled. “I want to know what the Raven’s up to.” He hoped the cyborg had an insight into Dan’s mysterious appearance in San Francisco the previous night.

James shook when a frisson ran through his body. “That man’s an animal.”

Esteban nodded. “Yeah, but he gets results.”

James arched an eyebrow. “You didn’t see what he did to some poor Australian doctor.” His head was spinning with fatigue and over-reliance on stimulants. His legs were aching from too many days in his chair, and he’d been forgetting to wriggle his toes to avoid deep vein thrombosis.

“Doctor?”

“Yeah, some guy in Brisbane.” James grimaced. “He made a real mess.”

“Let me see.” Esteban pushed forward to squint at the tiny font on James’s monitor. “Why’s he tracking Tedman Kennedy?”

James shrugged. “I don’t know. I can’t download everything or he’ll know I’m here. It started after he mutilated the doctor. Maybe he’s a friend? Someone that’ll lead him to the others?”

Esteban shook his head and swore a long string of curses under his breath. “I doubt it.” He’s changed chip. “Where is he now?”

“Uh...” James sent sluggish commands through his implant. “Hang on a second.” Esteban waited impatiently, tapping his fingers against anything nearby in a fidgety display of nerves. James ignored him and busied himself with the Raven’s thoughts. After all, they required some measure of interpretation - thoughts were a very individual thing. What one man intended to be funny, another would find insulting. And so it went with every thought that passed through the Raven’s computer. “I think he’s in Sydney.”

“You think?” Esteban was far from impressed.

“It’s not an exact science.” You should be thankful I could get anything. James was getting annoyed with Esteban’s lack of understanding. But he couldn’t be bothered educating the swine, especially while so sleep deprived.

“All right, forget it then.” Esteban stormed from the room, his gun raised and his eyes darting everywhere.

What crawled up your arse? James wondered. But his interest subsided soon after his door swung shut - he’d installed a pneumatic hinge to take care of the people who forgot to close the door behind them. He hated working with an open door and hated people who forgot to knock. What if he was in the middle of a dirty video call to his wife?

“Hey honey.” He felt drunk from lack of sleep and before he knew it, he was looking into the videophone at his wife’s beaming smile. “I was hoping you’d call.”

“Hi.” James was stunned; he didn’t remember dialling. “Are you okay?”

“I’d be better if you were here.” A rippling frown marred her forehead. “You look terrible.”

James hadn’t looked in a mirror for days so he hadn’t seen his bloodshot eyes, the dark sagging bags under them, or the sickly pallor of his skin. He looked as if the flu had flattened him and antibiotics hadn’t boosted his lagging immune system to stave off death. Either that or he hadn’t slept in days. “Thanks.” He didn’t know what else to say. “You look good. How’s Lillian?”

“She’s fine.” Susan was pouting. “But she’d also be better if you were here. Are you sure we’re not having an argument?”

“Not unless you started one without me?” It was possible. It’d be just like her to get angry at his extended absence.

“No, I just wanted to make sure you weren’t avoiding me, that’s all.” She looked depressed.

“I’ll be home soon.” James tried to smile but his lips were parched and they split before he could show teeth. “This can’t go on much longer.” He thought about the Raven. He’s homing in on the target now... “I’ll be there as soon as I can, I promise.”

“Okay.” She blew a kiss into the camera. “I can’t wait to hear your good news. Are you sure I’m going to like it?”

“Positive.” James returned the kiss.

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Sunday, September 19, 2066

International Portal Terminals

4:45 Sydney, Australia

“Why don’t you just buy me a lifetime voucher at Liquor-Time?” Chuck asked dryly. Not even Dan could keep his spirits high during the dead hours of the night. His entertainment-starved mind needed a something like a ballgame to quench his thirst for distraction.

“I’ll think about it,” Dan said. “For now I’ll stick to, what is it? Seven bottles?”

It was actually six, but Chuck was the sort of person that’d scam a bottle if he could. Not because he was a heavy drinker, but because that was how he jested with friends. He’d crack open the first bottle and salute Dan and his crusade. Whatever it is. It was something to keep his imagination occupied anyway.

“That’ll do.” He tagged the weapons and passed them back. “Have a pleasant trip Mr Kennedy.”

Dan nodded and walked to the portals. He was glad Christopher was working tonight; it made things easier.

The mid-afternoon bustle of the United States east coast international terminal was in stark contrast to the lethargic pace Dan stepped out of in Australia. The jostle took him by surprise and he coughed for longer than usual. He still didn’t entirely trust his chip selector and fidgeted with it nervously in his pocket. What if it doesn’t work? What if two chips are active instead of one? What if they realise the signal’s coming from my pocket and not my spine? They were the same questions he’d tossed through his mind on the past two occasions he’d approached a foreign immigration counter. He knew instincts would take over if anything went horribly wrong, but what would instincts make him do? That was the scary part. Nobody could make a run for it; the immigration officials all had emergency buttons at their counters. If anybody bolted, the officials would override the system and lock down all portals. It was effective. Nobody had ever evaded the immigration blockade. Would I shoot? Hold a hostage? Would I capitulate? What? They were questions he couldn’t possibly answer until faced with the immediate need for a decision. He just hoped that need would never come.

The woman at the counter scanned him and checked his profile for consistency.

“Your weapons please.” She looked frazzled by the pace of the work and didn’t spare any precious energy on pleasantries. Most travellers appreciated her direct manner. Occasionally an elderly person with a severe case of loneliness would complain that she was too abrupt, but they were the exception rather than the rule.

Dan stacked his weapons and ammunition onto the appropriate belt and allowed her to tag them.

“Next!” She squawked, her attention already shifting from Dan to the next in line.

You see? It works, Dan thought in an I-told-you-so tone. He quickly holstered his weapons and strode to the next rank of counters, American customs - which also caused him no problems - and soon he was striding for the domestic portals. Next stop, PortaNet.

He could think of two places to find a lead on Adrian Miller, who seemed the least violent member of Esteban’s gang and therefore a logical place to start. Where would he be? It was disheartening to think he might be with Jen, gluing her eyes shut or urinating through a funnel into her mouth. He had to believe she was still alive, just to keep himself going. Anger alone was not enough. A mixture of anger and hope was a far more volatile combination. It made him unpredictable and capable of just about anything. When he generously tossed desperation into the beaker, he turned out to be an unstoppable monster. But the combination that made him a deadly foe also had the power to destroy him - a risk he was willing to take.

His heart skipped when the portal folded space and sucked him through the subsequent wormhole. It’d been a while since he’d last visited New York and the sulphurous smell that assaulted his nostrils reminded him why. Nearly 70 percent of the population had absconded with their wealth - and lives - as soon as Portals had made cross-country commuting feasible and the population erosion had proved fatal for the once thriving city. Without enough people to support the local economy, the city had collapsed and died from rot. Those who could, fled - by any means at their disposal. Those who couldn’t, were stuck, and soon ran the city as they saw fit - usually through brute force and unspeakable crimes. Intimidation ran rife and fear kept much of the population under control, but none of the factions could keep the others at bay for long. They fought like a

pack of deranged wolves, attacking the lead wolf until it fell from the stage only to focus their destructive attention on the next.

America's view on the problem was even more disturbing for Dan. The puppet government didn't care to spend money fixing anything. It was a city, a dirty, grimy city. A tumour on the land. A remnant from the previous century. A relic. It was where the poor people fled because affluent society had driven them away from the more popular, less crowded land. New York had developed its own ecosystem of humanity, independent from the rest of the country. The negative effects of portal technology had struck no other city in the world harder.

There was nobody left who was qualified to fix the damaged sewage pipes so greasy sludge seeped everywhere, spoiling the already fetid air and making life even harder for the struggling, miserable inhabitants. Still, a skeletal workforce kept the city intact, for the most part. Several million New Yorkers demanded goods and services, their ultimate dream to make enough money to flee, which would in turn worsen the problem for those left behind.

But PortaNet had refused to move their headquarters. Their office towered above the impressive New York skyline, a potent symbol: the most powerful corporation ever forged against the backdrop of a city wasteland that they'd created. Regardless of PortaNet's desire to move to greener pastures, political tension held them fast. If they fled, they may as well publicly announce that their invention had destroyed a once-vibrant city. As long as PortaNet kept its base of operations in New York, people could still delude themselves into believing that human civilization, although decadent, wasn't yet doomed.

On the ground it was another matter entirely. Dan had to walk carefully to avoid being shot. The police presence was a joke; they were one of the factions fighting for control of the streets and the lion's share of the cash such control would bring. Of course, few people brought fresh money into the city. Greedy individuals shuffled the same wealth in circles, gloating over it for a day before it slipped through their buttered fingers and passed to someone else.

Little wonder therefore that bounty hunting often led to New York City, a refuge for the dispossessed and desperate. Several eager youngsters who'd chased targets into the warren of vice and crime with guns blazing had never resurfaced, consumed by the passionate hatred the locals had for authority. The older and wiser bounty hunters took their time, posing as part of the scenery until they

learnt their targets' patterns and could lure them into a trap. A dangerous game of cat-and-mouse at the best of times, New York put a perilous new spin on the tumbling dice bounty hunters cast every day. Suffice to say, Dan wasn't looking forward to this part of his plan. He would've preferred to portal directly into the PortaNet lobby, but it was suspiciously absent from the portal directory so he had to settle for the nearest public station.

He reluctantly entered the street. Expecting the weather to mirror the horror of the city, he was surprised to find the sun shining on a warm autumn day. More surprising: the street didn't look like a riot zone. Ordinary people were going about ordinary tasks. Street peddlers were selling wares. Newsagents were selling newspapers - the paper variety. New York's own newspaper, the NYN - New York News - was proudly on display. A greengrocer was selling vegetables instead of standing in front of his stall with a shotgun. There was a chemist selling medication and Dan had to look twice to make sure he wasn't seeing things - they weren't Xantex products. He had no idea where the chemist had found the drugs. A forgotten basement from some ancient drug store? He wondered whether they'd still be potent enough. Those things have a limited shelf-life don't they? He browsed the shelves as he passed, startled to see a new label printed on boxes of medication. Dan couldn't believe a pharmacist would voluntarily move to New York, and he couldn't imagine there was a large enough buffer from the surrounding turmoil to manufacture drugs. Half the city should be pounding down his door. A bicycle repair shop was next door, a row of shiny bicycles on display. They were the mode of transportation New Yorkers preferred. Everywhere he looked, people were pedalling bikes. Dan pinched himself. How's this possible? It hasn't been that long since I was here last... has it?

The United States of America had abandoned New York and now New York was turning its back in reprisal. Dan saw people exchanging cash - real cash, coins and paper that you could hold in your hands. And gauging by the number of bikes, New Yorkers had snubbed their noses at portals, which the rest of the world depended upon so desperately. Bikes are good, Dan thought, remembering Hans's warning. It was an eye-opening experience: nobody cowered in fear; nobody eyed him suspiciously. Nobody is taking aim either, he was happy to note. None of the big brands had remained in New York after the bulk of the population fled. There simply wasn't enough money in the community for them to leech off. But here, in the vacuum they'd created, small operators had filled the void. New Yorkers had tired of waiting for outside help and had created their

own solution. The city was actually prospering and it lifted Dan's spirit, something he desperately needed if only for a short time. Perhaps there's some basic good in humanity after all.

A few street entertainers were begging for loose change, but they weren't holding people at knifepoint. A pleasant change. New York had bottomed out and clawed its way back from the gunk-filled well. And in remarkably short time. Dan hoped they could sustain their newfound development, hoped they wouldn't slide back into the anarchy they were renowned for. He was unaware that, for the first time ever, the two strongest factions were cooperating for the benefit of all. And the positive effects were only just beginning to germinate on the streets. Although they ruled autocratically, they understood the basic principle that had eluded so many of their predecessors. Their prosperity, and indeed survival, depended on the prosperity of the city as a whole.

It was sad to think that if New York developed much further the giga-corporations would take an interest, target the city with advertising campaigns, and try to weasel their way back into the economy by bumping local businesses from the bottom rungs. When they tried, for they surely would, the test of the locals' integrity would begin. Would the ruling factions accept the devil's invitation? Would they abandon the city they'd worked so hard to salvage from ruin? Giga-corporations would dangle unimaginable mountains of money in front of them if that were what it took to get a toehold. And from there it'd all be downhill. New York may eventually reintegrate with the rest of the country. A whimsical smile played on Dan's lips. I hope the locals spit in their faces.

He was still marvelling at the miracle that was transforming New York when he reached PortaNet security. In many ways, PortaNet was the lifeblood of the capitalist world. People were so addicted to the company's products that they would fight to keep the wheels turning. It was imperative that PortaNet had employees on call 24 hours, 365 days a year. A malfunctioning portal was a looming crisis - it deserved media attention! PortaNet therefore had an army of technicians crawling across the globe to maintain their equipment. And that army took a lot of co-ordination. It therefore wasn't unreasonable to expect some degree of activity at PortaNet headquarters on the weekend. There was a digital sign welcoming pedestrians with company trivia. It read, "Did you know that PortaNet is the world's biggest consumer of automobiles? When our reaction team responds to a portal malfunction emergency, we use old-fashioned transportation to get us there. That's how we get you back online as soon as

possible. PortaNet - keeping you connected.”

The sentinels eyed him with the hardened suspicion of seasoned guards working in the deadliest city in the world. The local population held nothing but animosity toward giga-corporations, which had abandoned them in their time of need. None of the guards was a local. After their shift, they portaled to snug little homes scattered around prettier parts of the country. For that, they were hated. And that made them weary of anyone who approached on foot.

“Can we help you sir.” His eyes narrowed to suspicious slits and he was ready to raise his automatic rifle at the first sign of trouble. He represented the security market that UniForce wished to conquer. But PortaNet, as with other giga-corporations, would need much convincing before relinquishing control of their personal security force to an outsider.

“I have an appointment,” Dan replied in his clearest, calmest voice. Americans had a tendency to disparage and distrust him for his accent. “With Adrian Miller.”

Adrian hadn’t yet risen high enough in PortaNet management for the guards to recognise his name. Dan understood the drill; the guards would first check the building’s roster to see whether Adrian was present. If he were, they would check with reception to confirm the appointment. Only then would they ask Dan to leave his weapons and escort him to the meeting. It was standard security procedure.

One of the guards fiddled with a handheld computer before shaking his head.

“Adrian Miller is not here sir. I suggest you get in touch with him and reconfirm the appointment.” Despite Dan’s poor choice of attire for a business meeting, the guard would never treat him with disrespect. What if he were an important man? PortaNet didn’t want to impart a poor impression of their company by allowing their guards to insult people. But nor would he budge from his position - the job demanded inflexibility.

That was fine with Dan, he had what he’d come for. He would’ve preferred to have somebody page him if Adrian turned up, but he knew that went against protocol so he didn’t even bother to ask. The guards would only decline; divulging the whereabouts of PortaNet personnel posed a significant security threat.

He coerced his face into a smile. "I'll do that. Thanks for your time." Then he turned and walked briskly away before their nerves snapped and their trigger fingers grew itchy. But I'll be back. Somebody who worked there shared the guilt for his wife's murder and he didn't intend to rest until all those responsible had paid for their sins.

Dan almost enjoyed the stroll back to the station. The green fronds of life were slowly unfurling, right before his eyes. Maybe it's worthwhile to hope after all. And, if he could hope for the salvation of humanity, he could hope to find Jen alive too.

His next stop was the only home address listed on Adrian's file. It was a long shot, especially considering the file's date, but in desperate times... Assuming the information was accurate, at some point Adrian had lived in one of the estates that had sprung up around the mountains near Cincinnati. It was rugged country but the past three decades had done a lot to tame it. By sheer weight of numbers, the new estates had transformed once-picturesque landscape into a giant suburban sprawl. A few acreages existed for the ultra-rich, but they were the exception rather than the rule. Without cities to concentrate human populations into tight wads, people were discovering there was precious little land to go around. Sixteen billion people were complaining about sixteen billion people. PortaNet's publicly announced solution was to seed a new planet, and they spent trillions every year on space exploration to appease an angry population that had no better symbol at which to focus their fury. After all, before PortaNet introduced them to the convenience of instant transportation, they hadn't noticed how crowded things were becoming. Now only the world's wastelands, such as Dan's property in the desert, were free of the hubbub. And such places, un-coincidentally, had the least attractive brochures.

Dan wasn't in familiar territory. None of his forays into America had landed him near Cincinnati and he had to guess which portal station would be closest to his goal. He didn't want to use PortaNet's directory assistance, wishing to minimise his exposure to Echelon. But with help from the locals, he finally located the suburb, the street, and the house.

Impressive. It was a luxurious estate boasting lush hedges and ample lawn - pocket money for enterprising neighbourhood kids who'd started a mowing brigade. But nobody had mowed it for a while and tiny yellow wildflowers were fighting for sunshine amidst the cancerous grass. A swarm of insects was

hopping from landing pad to landing pad, gorging on the nectar flowers used to pay for pollination services. Akin with many of the new housing developments, the estate had no drive or garage - it had arrived in the aftermath of the automobile craze. But it did have a garden path, which wove lazily toward the porch. Some habits died hard. Everyone wanted a front door, a path, and a gate.

No security. Dan arched an eyebrow. It made it less likely that Adrian Miller still lived at the premises. He rang the doorbell, one hand inconspicuously gripping his colt inside his coat. A late-20-something male answered the door. "Yes?"

No sense lying. "I'm looking for Adrian Miller."

He looked Dan up and down. "You don't look like one of his friends."

"I'm his boss." Dan lifted his chin to imitate conceit. "And if I don't find him today he'll have no job to return to Monday."

He had the biggest set of jug-ears Dan had ever seen. They looked like sails, driving him forward against his will. "Then if you find him, you can tell him his half of the rent is overdue."

"He hasn't been around recently?" Dan squinted.

"Nope." He didn't look like a lover. Dan suspected he was a just a roommate, someone to help pay the bills and watch the TV with. He wore parachute-material tracksuit pants and a baggy sweatshirt. With white socks to complete the picture, he looked as if he were be about to go jogging. "He hasn't really lived here for ages. A lot of his stuff is still here, but he only turns up, oh... maybe one night in six."

"Do you know where he stays?" Dan tried to soften the pounding in his chest. He didn't want to appear too desperate for the answer.

But the jug-eared roommate shook his head. "No, I wouldn't have the foggiest."

"How about his mobile number? I left my agenda in the office and never got around to programming my employees into my phone." The excuse sounded lame to Dan, but jug-ears took the bait.

"Yeah, sure. Wait a sec." He ducked back into the house. Dan could see some

furnishings from the door: spotless leather couches, a groomed carpet, plush rugs, and an ornate mirror in the foyer. “Here it is.” He slapped a torn corner of paper into Dan’s palm. “I tried it yesterday but didn’t get an answer.”

“Okay, thanks. If I find him I’ll tell him about the rent.” Dan backed from the house and showed himself to the gate, latching it behind him.

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Sunday, September 19, 2066

5:42 Sydney, Australia

Samantha heard the phone; its shrill screech tugged her back to consciousness. But when she first woke, she was too weak to do anything about it. Cookie had wrapped his arms around her and she felt safe, warm and cosy in their nest. She just hoped the phone would stop.

After another few rings, it did. And she smiled into the peaceful night. It was wondrously quiet in their safe house; nobody in the neighbourhood had caused any problems, yet. She was just drifting back into slumber when the ear-piercing ring started again, more irritating than before. Damn, whoever it is, they're desperate. All she wanted was to relish the peace. Why can't they give me that?

She poked Cookie in the ribs and he grunted, shifting away from her and creating a crevasse of cold air that chilled her through her thin pyjamas. She snuggled deeper under the covers and frowned at the persistence of whoever was calling. It was up to the seventh ring already. She jabbed Cookie again and he snorted, half-snored, and rolled over once more. On her third attempt, she mercilessly stabbed him in his ribs and he woke with a jolt. "What?"

"The phone's ringing."

He relaxed. "So?" And rolled over.

"Well aren't you going to get it?" Samantha prompted.

"Hadn't planned on it." Cookie took a deep breath and wriggled until he was comfortable, turning his back to her.

Samantha's frown freshened. She knew she wouldn't be able to sleep with the phone ringing for the rest of the night. It was up to its twelfth ring when she pulled back the covers and a wave of goose bumps prickled her skin. She padded on bare feet through the unfamiliar house, holding her hands protectively in front of her to guard against running into things. As it was, she stubbed a little toe on the couch and cursed luridly - and loudly. Eventually she squatted to answer the phone... half a second too late. Nobody was on the other end.

"Fuck." She slammed the receiver onto its stand and rubbed feeling back into her

toe. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

She was halfway back to bed when the phone screamed for her attention again, and she bit the inside of her cheek to stop from cussing at the top of her lungs. Amazingly, her voice was calm when she spoke into the receiver. “Yes?”

“Samantha?”

“Who’s this?”

“It’s Dan.”

“Oh.” She was too tired to think of anything else to say.

“Is Cookie there?”

“He’s asleep.”

“Can you get him for me? It’s important. I might have a way to find Jen.”

“Hang on a second.” She left the receiver dangling and slapped a hand on the light switch before navigating back to their room. She found sadistic pleasure in jumping on the bed and shaking Cookie awake.

“What?” He grumbled, frowning.

“It’s Dan. He want’s to speak to you.”

Cookie spent a long time lifting the fog from his mind before standing and walking to the lounge room. “Yes?” He wondered what was so pressing that Dan would risk alerting the New South Wales Police Department and Echelon of their whereabouts.

“I need you to trace a number.”

“Hang on.” Cookie nestled in front of his computer. “Okay, shoot.”

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The Raven couldn’t contain his triumphant euphoria. Foolish, Dan. Very foolish. A flicker of glee trickled into his computer and traversed the nano-net to James’s

terminal. Now the Raven knew where Samantha Lee and David Cooke were hiding. I have a choice to make, he thought rationally. Take Dan now, while he's alone? Or go for the others while they have no protection? Uncertainty clouded his pragmatic mind and he raised his chin to the sky, imploring an omen to relieve him of the burden of choice. He shouldn't be dabbling in these matters himself. They were for higher powers to decide and he would do whatever they entreated.

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Saturday, September 18, 2066

World Economic Forum

16:02 Washington DC, USA

Weekend sessions never had a high turnout and Jackie liked to think that her attendance would win brownie points for UniForce. It was important that she do everything in her power to enhance her company's chance of winning extra seats. And turning up to every session was an essential step towards that end. I could be watching the new Kane movie. It was sometimes hard living at the top. Sacrifices were often called for. Irritatingly, she knew none of the other weekend participants would work every day next week. They'd take a flexiday to compensate for their lost leisure time. But not me.

Still, today's session was important for more than one reason. She needed the floor and was waiting in the queue for her turn. Saturday was always an open forum day. Dignitaries collectively declined to lecture on weekends because they knew attendees didn't have the patience to listen to their prattle while golf courses and grand finals beckoned. WEF dignitaries were typically terrified of yawning audiences that glanced longingly at the clock every few seconds.

She'd already sat through tedious explanations of opinion polls and trade relations from companies she considered unimportant. But - no pain, no gain. She gritted her teeth and forced herself to look interested. At least I'm next. She wasn't prone to catching a case of the nerves, but the calibre of the people in the room made her knees tremble. Snap out of it! she chided herself. You're being silly. Either they'll agree or they won't. No harm done whatever happens. Jackie didn't intend to pass over an excellent opportunity to spearhead UniForce into private security. And the opportunity was ripe; she just needed the balls to grab it.

The man at the podium was talking about crime and that was an interesting topic. Making money from crime kept UniForce afloat. Much of their income came directly from the WEF, the organisation with the largest economic incentive to reduce criminal activity - particularly white-collar crime. The speaker was putting an interesting spin on the topic, incorrectly using a double-edged sword analogy. "On one side", he said, "reducing crime directly oils the economic wheels. And now we're seeing an additional pattern emerge. On the other side of the sword, a recent study suggests that reducing crime makes people more comfortable and therefore prone to spending more money. So as you can see, it cuts both ways."

Several attentive members of the audience wondered whether the speaker understood what 'cuts both ways' meant, but Jackie wasn't one of them. Perfect, she thought with glee, fighting hard to stop a smile creeping across her cosmetic lips. I'll use this.

His speech turned even better a few moments later when he raised an acclaiming hand to Jackie's seat. "And we owe a lot to UniForce for the benefits we're all feeling. Their tireless pursuit of felons underpins much of our economy."

There was general agreement among the spectators with a few cheers and - rather British, Jackie thought - "here, here's". Now that was unexpected. A soft patter of clapping rippled around the auditorium and Jackie stood to acknowledge the praise, nodding to the left and right and trying her best to look appreciative without smiling. She would've preferred to scold them for daring to clap at her - she wished that custom would expire. But scolding would be unseemly, so she settled for a pained look of modesty.

Finished his speech, the man at the podium left the platform and the chairman waddled ponderously forward to take his place. Fucking lard, Jackie couldn't stop herself from mentally stabbing the man. She insulted everyone in her mind, why should she exempt the exercise-challenged?

"Jackie Donald from UniForce," he wheezed into the microphone before puffing away to resume his seat, which groaned in protest under his considerable mass. The sound of his rasping breath stirred a black memory - something she'd worked hard to forget and refused to admit was true upon unwelcome resurfacings. That rainy summer evening when she'd been strolling home through the park and three men had knocked her to the ground, tearing at her clothes. They'd raped her in the open, but nobody had been brave enough to acknowledge her screams for help. They'd worn hoods pulled tight over their heads and had huffed and puffed with the thrill of the illicit fuck. She'd blotted all trace of their faces from her memory, so thoroughly that not even a hypnotherapist had been able to reconstruct them. But she remembered the sharp pain from when they'd forced their way inside her. It wasn't something she liked to dwell on so she flung the memory back into her psychological abyss, hoping it would stay there.

Jackie strode to the podium amidst another round of applause, which abruptly ended when she adjusted the microphone amidst a squeal of feedback. By the

time she was ready to begin, she'd forgotten all about the unmentionable crime, though it tortured her unseen from the shadows of her subconscious. Jackie was good at forgetting, she'd had a lifetime of practice.

“By now I'm sure many of you have heard about the heinous attack terrorists have committed against my company.” A deathly silence settled on the room. She integrated a lengthy pause with her speech, knowing it would stretch their nerves to breaking point. “And for the benefit of those who haven't, a terrorist organisation has assassinated UniForce's public CEO.” It was a common practice. Many men and women in the room used puppets to vie for public affection and take the heat when things turned sour. Though few would suspect their public counterparts were potential assassination targets. “Furthermore...” Jackie held their attention, making it dance in the palm of her hand. “We have sustained persistent attacks upon our network from the same organisation.” She held up her hands, calming her audience like an accomplished orator. “But before you panic, I want to assure you that they have not - I stress, not - penetrated our network. They will never access our data.” It was a lie, but she couldn't tell them the horrifying truth. Many of them were customers and frequent patrons of UniForce's covert assassination branch. If they even suspected an outsider could hack into UniForce's network and lift copies of assassination contracts, they'd bay for blood.

“What does it mean then, exactly?” The question came from someone in the front row. Jackie didn't know his name, but suspected he was an assassination customer and therefore had much to lose.

Jackie answered confidently, having prepared for the question. “Our network has sustained the attack in fine form. But, if these terrorists grow in sophistication, our information technology department may need to suspend some network services. And that would be bad for business. For everyone.” She watched several members of the audience relax. She'd told them what they wanted to hear: that UniForce would suffer monetary loss rather than harm future business prospects by exposing their colourful history to outsiders. Whatever happened, the deals were safe. Or so they assumed.

“What I want from you, ladies and gentlemen, is to permit me - permit UniForce - to protect our way of life by extinguishing the terrorist threat.”

“What dispensations are you looking for, specifically?” It was someone from

Xantex who smelled a rat.

She knew Xantex had a lot at stake. They'd been one of UniForce's best customers. "We have a reaction team standing by and they're working on a minimum-disruption solution as I speak." She jotted a mental note to get an update. Her team had been suffocatingly quiet of late. James had done a superb job keeping her informed, but she hadn't heard anything from the others for days. Jackie hated tardiness. "I don't believe the specifics of their proposal will be relevant when we consider the ramifications of failing to act. Be assured that we'll only do what's necessary to bring the enemy threat under control."

Hook, line and sinker. She started to reel them in. "Over the next few days we may need to operate outside the law, which is why I am here today - I need sanction." She needed more leeway than the criminal division of the WEF had commission to grant. For something of this magnitude, she had to go to open forum. "So, if there are no more questions, I suggest we vote."

She was gratified to note that all attendees reached for their control panel and dug a thumbnail into whichever button they thought most appropriate. Jackie held no illusions about the result; there couldn't be more than a handful of scruples in the room. But she needed their approval all the same. Without it, UniForce would come under political fire - something she could ill afford. The results soon splashed onto the screen behind her. Eighty-nine percent voted to enact the sanction. Five percent voted against, probably because of the obscure nature of the request, and six percent failed to vote. Perfect. "Thank you for your careful consideration," Jackie said, drawing blood on the inside of her lip to snuff a victorious smile.

Her high heels clanked on the platform when she left and the chairman sighed because he had to stand again. He felt as if he were in the gym, lifting weights each time he stood.

Jackie had spent two days concocting the perfect plan, and phase one was now complete. Next, she had to make a very public example of the terrorists. And if I play my cards right... Jackie hoped to prove UniForce in the public arena and use the hype to slingshot her infant security branch onto centre stage.

Chapter 10

It is only to the individual that a soul is given.

Albert Einstein

Saturday, September 18, 2066

UniForce Headquarters

12:25 San Francisco, USA

Adrian checked his watch - it was getting late. Damn... He still had so much to do and time was fast slipping away. He'd promised Jen he would be back in four hours, so he had only one and a half to spare. He wasn't familiar with the layout of UniForce headquarters, he'd only been there twice, both times with a competent guide. It was quiet on the weekend, nothing like the hubbub over at PortaNet. But then, UniForce had a much smaller employee base and fewer reasons to keep staff working on the weekend. They dealt with apprehensions and kept the clockwork of sanctions oiled, but those logistics were nothing compared to PortaNet's daunting daily regime.

Esteban's door was closed. He tapped a polite rhythm with his knuckles and waited patiently for a response. Nothing happened. He knocked again before turning the handle and entering. One step into the room, he found the barrel of a gun pressed firmly to his temple.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" Esteban breathed an exasperated sigh of relief. "What the hell are you doing? I could've killed you."

A shiver of panic resonated through Adrian's body. He'd hoped Esteban would be elsewhere and thought it was cruel for fate to allow his hopes soar only to dash them on the rocks a few seconds later. "Don't point that thing at me." He gently brushed the barrel of Esteban's weapon aside. "What's got you so nervous?"

"I'm not nervous," Esteban snapped. "I'm just being cautious. Sutherland's removed his chip so we won't know when he leaves Australia."

"Which means you think he's here already." Adrian nodded understanding.

"Maybe." Esteban clicked the safety on his weapon. "I know he's using Tedman Kennedy as an alias. Do you have any idea how many Tedman Kennedy's there are?"

"Lots?"

"The Kennedy's are prolific and seem to have a genetic predisposition for the

name Tedman. There are too damn many to keep track of, and besides, if he has one false identify he may have more.”

“Fantastic,” Adrian drawled, scanning the room and trying to look natural despite his racing heart. “So the Guild is the safest place to be then?”

Esteban nodded. “Yeah. I’m going to wait for him here; he’ll come eventually. What the jolly-fuck are you doing here anyway? I told you never to come to my office.”

Adrian’s prefabricated excuse sounded weak under the circumstances. “We hadn’t heard from you for ages and wanted to make sure everything was okay.” Another shimmer of panic passed behind his eyes, temporarily blurring his vision. With the mounting time pressure, he’d forgotten to manipulate Junior into corroborating the story. Now, if Esteban became suspicious and talked to Junior, he’d discover Adrian had been missing for two hours already. “And we needed beer. We’re out.” He shrugged. “Under the circumstances it seemed safer to get it from here rather than Liquor-Time.”

“God, Adrian.” Esteban pinched the bridge of his nose. “Sometimes you’re even stupider than Junior.” Esteban had never looked more exasperated. “Don’t you understand what’s going on here?” He lowered his voice until it was barely above a growling whisper. “You kidnapped a bounty hunter’s girlfriend and he bloody well wants her back.” He grudgingly agreed that Dan was good at what he did. “And he’s not one of those weekend-troopers either, this guy’s for real. Now get your arse back to the Guild and stay there until it’s all over. I’ll be back with Sutherland in tow as soon as I can, okay?”

Adrian nodded meekly and stepped further into Esteban’s opulent office. “I’ll just grab a couple of buds and be on my way. You want one?”

Thirst licked Esteban’s mind but he overcame the weakness. “No, I’ll celebrate later.”

“Suit yourself.” Adrian strode to Esteban’s bar fridge and yanked the door roughly open. He squatted, using his body to block Esteban’s view while a fire rippled from his adrenaline glands. It tingled in every fibre of muscle and boiled the acid in his stomach. He knew about Esteban’s secret compartment and hoped that was where he’d stashed Jen’s chip selector. But first, the beer. He had to work as inconspicuously as he could and lined seven beer cans along the bench

before tampering with the compartment. Veins of ice and frost had crystallised over the false plastic wall in the freezer, making it difficult to open. “You got any ice?” Adrian asked to cover his dash for the concealed latch. It wasn’t a safe. Esteban didn’t believe in safes. He kept repeating how easy they were to crack and how thieves could find them with a simple metal detector. But he did believe in keeping things hidden and used his refrigerator as an effective office tool as well as the perfect vessel for chilling his beer.

A stalactite of ice splintered with a crackle when he tugged on the plastic door. He’d only seen Esteban use the compartment once and had no idea whether he had more hidden caches. Maybe he retired this one. Maybe he uses them on a rotating roster. Should there be this much ice if he used it recently? Still, it was worth a try. He yanked harder, veiling the sound of grating ice behind a rough thump of the next beer can on the bench. More adrenaline gushed through his arteries when he saw what Esteban had hidden inside: phials of something clear, liquid despite the temperature, and Jen’s chip selector. White frost covered the hard black plastic and Adrian wondered whether microchips were sensitive to cold. What if it doesn’t work anymore? What if the inside wires have snapped? They were disturbing thoughts. All his efforts could be for naught. Engineers had designed microchips to survive in a moist 37 degrees Celsius, not in a freezer.

He discreetly slipped it into his pocket and took a beer in each hand before closing the fridge with his feet. He’d reduced Esteban’s stock to five. But Esteban, who was busy guarding the door, hadn’t paid a scintilla of attention to Adrian or to his beer.

“Now, how am I going to carry these?” Adrian asked, genuinely seeking input.

“Ten?” Esteban exclaimed when he finally turned around.

“Yeah, five for me, five for Junior. It’s Saturday, what’d you expect?” In times past they’d consumed up to twelve, and once Adrian drank twenty, though he had no recollection of the event.

“All right.” Esteban snivelled. “Just get back to the Guild and stay there. If I haven’t bagged Sutherland before midday tomorrow I’ll come back anyway.”

“Fair enough,” Adrian agreed, slotting a can of beer into every pocket large enough to carry one. That still left him with four beers too many. “Don’t you

have a bag or something?”

“No,” Esteban said, thinking of a more elegant solution. “Take off your jumper and carry them in that.”

Adrian shook his head. “I’m not taking off my jumper.” It was fine, hand-knitted wool and four beer cans coupled with a rough knot would stretch it out of shape. Adrian was too compulsive to allow that to happen.

“Then don’t take the beers.”

He sighed. “Okay, fine.” He carried an extra beer in each hand and tucked one under each arm, feeling like a hunched-over monkey. “I’ll see you back in the Guild, hopefully with Sutherland.”

Esteban set his teeth into a mean grimace. “Count on it.”

A bead of sweat was streaking down Adrian’s temple by the time he left Esteban’s office. It’d been a tense five minutes, every second a small miracle that Esteban hadn’t noticed what he was doing. The chip selector was digging into his thigh, wedged uncomfortably on the other side of a beer can. His fingers were numb and he was agitating the cans; he hated to imagine what would happen if he tried to open one. A sticky froth shower. The image sent shivers down his spine and he felt compelled to adjust his glasses. He tried to ignore it but the intensity only grew until he had to set two cans on the ground to push his spectacles back onto the bridge of his nose.

He couldn’t believe he’d finally plucked enough courage to cross Esteban. Man, he’s going to be pissed when he finds out. It was an intimidating thought. Adrian had a touch of obsessive-compulsive disorder but he definitely wasn’t stupid. I’ll have to disappear. He knew Jen would scream to whoever would listen as soon as she was free, and that type of publicity could spell the end of the Guild. Or, at the very least, it would mean doom for several members, himself included. The possibilities of where to go seemed boundless. Asia? South America? He’d scratched Africa from his list. He had to draw the line somewhere and refused to live in a place that didn’t have adequate portal facilities.

So much to do, so little time. He wanted to pack a few personal things. Which means I’ll have to visit Cincinnati, briefly. He was jotting a mental list of the arrangements he still had to make as he returned to the portals. The more he

thought, the more extensive his list became. And I only have an hour left...

*

Dan shook his head. "No."

"Afraid so," Cookie confirmed for the fourth time.

"You must be kidding." Dan closed his eyes in resignation.

"I don't know how else to put it man." Cookie paused. "What're you going to do?"

Dan looked up at the sun, enjoying the scant rays that filtered through the atmosphere. When he thought about the task ahead, he suspected it would be his last opportunity to bask. "I'm going in to get him."

"But if he's there-"

"I know," Dan snapped, cutting him off. "It means they're both there, and possibly all three of them - not to mention UniForce security and anybody else Esteban has recruited to make my life difficult."

"Maybe you could..." Cookie didn't know. He wished he could see another way out.

"I doubt it," Dan said to fill the silence. "If that's where they want to play, that's where we'll play." He barred his teeth and summoned his determination. "Into the lion's den it is."

"Good luck man." It was the only thing left to say.

"Thanks Cookie." I'll need it. "I'll" - hopefully - "be in touch later." He hung up before Cookie could dribble more doubt into the digital data stream. Okay, so now I know. He had positive confirmation that Adrian Miller was in UniForce headquarters. Or his mobile phone is anyway. He didn't want to waste time by waiting them out. Either they'd stay where they were until Dan agreed to a showdown, or they'd leave, in which case he'd lose them again.

He was near a portal station and jogged the final hundred metres, eager to

proceed now that he'd made up his mind on a course of action. Standing in the portal tube, he punched in the familiar number and his vision shifted into something he recognised: the UniForce lobby.

He was playing an extremely dangerous game, particularly since it was the weekend. Fewer visitors meant UniForce security would watch new arrivals like a hawk. His only consolation was that it'd be easier than his incursion the previous night - this time he knew where he was going.

What am I doing? Too many UniForce employees recognised him to make anonymity an option. He calmly walked to the toilets and bottled himself into the first stall, sitting on the edge of the plastic seat to ponder his next move. They'll be in Esteban's office if they're anywhere. He chewed absently on his lip. And they'll have a good idea that I'm coming... though they don't know I'm Tedman Kennedy so they won't know I'm in the building. Yet. He knew it was possible to slip around without people noticing, he'd done it before - not in UniForce and not for over a decade, but it was possible. Complete perforation of the building with portals helped, nobody used the stairs anymore so they were likely deserted.

Then a piercing thought fuelled his lust for success: What if Jen's upstairs too? It was unlikely. But wouldn't that make it the perfect place to hide her? He couldn't take a portal upstairs; he'd been lucky to reach the lobby. UniForce scanned for unauthorised microchips and barred access to restricted areas for people that shouldn't be there. The public couldn't access most of the building, so unless he added his details to the authorised access list - an impossibility - trying to portal upstairs would probably just trip an alarm. Fortunately, reception was on the fiftieth floor so he didn't have as many stairs to climb as the previous night. His quadriceps and calves still felt like lead.

With a loose plan in mind, he left the stall and pressed his ear against the disinfectant-smelling bathroom door. He heard a distant hum from somewhere deep in the bowels of the building but nothing from the other side. He circumspectly pushed it open, peering left and right. Nothing looked amiss. Good. His plan relied heavily upon stealth.

He walked casually to the stairwell. It was difficult to look calm when he was an inferno of raw nerves, but discipline paid off and he reached the stairs without anybody asking questions. Seven flights of stairs and an angry set of muscles later, he reached Esteban's floor. Okay, now what? He drew his Colt and held it

up for final inspection. Realising he hadn't recently tested its accuracy, he cursed his stupidity a dozen times. How could I be so careless? He calmed down when he reasoned that he wouldn't be more than five metres from his targets when he squeezed the trigger. Besides, he rationalised, I have plenty of rounds to afford a miss or two. Still, it nettled him that he'd missed something so obvious. There was a time when he couldn't possibly have forgotten something so important, even when stressed.

The lighting was dim on Esteban's level. Deep shadows stretched across the walls, making things slightly more complicated. He had to focus on every potential hiding spot and reassure himself that nobody was there before declaring each area clear. It was an arduous task, which slowed his progress and frayed his nerves.

He was rounding a corner near that floor's cluster of portals when he heard someone approach. With the aplomb and confidence of decades of training, he slid into the shadows and vanished from sight, listening to the approaching footsteps. The individual was shuffling, scuffing the carpet as he or she walked. Then, from his vantage in the gloom, Dan watched Adrian Miller approach from the direction of Esteban's office. He looked heavier than in his photograph, but the facial structure was unmistakable. Hell yes, he's even wearing the same set of glasses.

The timing couldn't have worked out better if he'd planned it. Dan checked that nobody else was nearby and stepped from his shadow, Colt raised. "Don't say a word or you won't get to drink that beer."

Adrian froze in shock and nearly dropped everything he was carrying. It hadn't occurred to him that Esteban was worried for good cause. "Sutherland, listen..."

Dan took a menacing pace forward, silencing him. "Go ahead, just give me an excuse and I'll end your miserable life. I don't need all of you alive to get what I want."

Adrian wisely clamped his jaw around the other words pestering for escape.

"Turn around." Dan's tone left no margin for negotiation. "Now walk slowly to the toilets. Any sudden moves and you might start to leak." They marched to the toilets, Dan buzzing with adrenaline and Adrian pale with eye-widening fear.

Only once Dan had closed and locked the door did the conversation continue. “Put the beers in the sink.” He didn’t want Adrian to have ammunition to throw. “Now turn around and put your hands on the wall.” Dan patted him down and removed the remainder of the beer before declaring him weapon-free. “Going to a party?”

“No,” Adrian replied soberly. He smothered his billowing sense of dread and reasserted his mask of confidence. After all, he was helping to recover Sutherland’s girlfriend, wasn’t he? Didn’t that deserve appreciation? It therefore made sense that he merely needed to convince the man that he was trying to help.

“Where’s Jen?” Dan demanded, steadying his aim toward the centre of Adrian’s forehead.

“She’s twenty feet underground in Baltimore,” Adrian replied, failing to consider how Dan might interpret his words.

Dan blinked, stunned by the traumatic image brought to mind. “You killed her already?”

Adrian emphatically shook his head. “No, no! She’s in an underground building, is what I meant.”

“Is she okay?”

“She’s fine.” Adrian nodded, risking a bullet between the eyes to adjust his glasses. “At least she was two hours ago.” Sometimes he simply didn’t know when it was wise to keep his mouth shut. “I mean, I’m sure she’s still fine, I just haven’t been back for a while.”

“Is she hurt? In any way?”

Adrian thought about the bruises Esteban had left on her breasts. “No, she’s fine. We haven’t touched her, I swear.”

“Take me to see her.” He knew everything would be fine if he could just reach her.

“I can’t,” Adrian replied remorsefully. “The portals only accept member chips.”

The bathroom had an identical décor to the one downstairs. Blue was the punch behind an ocean theme. Wavy tiles reflected the light, resulting in a ghostly shimmer across Dan's face. It highlighted the deadly black itch in his eyes and an erratic flicker from an overhead fluorescent added a tinge of the surreal to Dan's threatening stance. He looked like a soulless monster, clad in black and towering over his cringing victim.

Adrian's voice cracked under the pressure and a trickle of blood escaped from his left nostril. He snivelled. "Look, I'm trying to help." But the bounty hunter was deaf to his plea. "I'm helping her escape. Look." He reached for his pocket but Dan jerked his Colt a fraction to regain Adrian's attention.

"Don't do that," Dan warned coolly. "Move like that again and you won't have a head to consider how shithouse that idea is."

"Reach into my left pocket," Adrian implored. "I have Jen's microchip."

Dan faltered and said, "Turn around and face the wall again. Hands up high." He wasn't stupid enough to risk rummaging through Adrian's pocket while facing him. "If you're lying I'm going to shoot you in the knee for whatever stupid prank you're pulling."

"I'm not lying," Adrian assured him, patiently waiting while Dan fumbled near his groin. "It's deeper."

Dan thrust his hand in up to his wrist and extracted the device. It was cold. "Okay, back around." He stepped back two paces to a safe distance, taking his eyes off Adrian for long enough to flip through the identities in the selector. They were Jen's. "What were you doing with this?"

"I stole it from Esteban," Adrian said proudly. "I was going to give it to Jen. The portals have no restriction on outbound travellers so she can escape with it. She underground, the building has no doors so I couldn't just let her out. Hey, I'm on your side."

Dan unsheathed his knife and twisted the blade to the light, savouring the note of fear in Adrian's eyes as he pressed the tip to the soft patch under his chin. "You'll never say that again if you know what's good for you. You and I will never be on the same side." He didn't assign any nobility to Adrian's selfless act. He didn't allot him any credit for risking his life to steal Jen's chip selector. All

he could see when he looked at the man was the second person to rape his wife. Urine from this man's bladder had soaked Katherine's lungs, and Dan could never forgive or forget a detail like that.

"But I'm..." Adrian frowned, not sure Dan understood what he was trying to say. I'm helping you.

Dan didn't care and stubbornly refused to accept his assistance. He reversed the knife and turned the serrated edge outward, placing it tenderly against Adrian's lower eyelid. With the slightest dip to Dan's wrist, he could tear the lid clear from Adrian's face.

Adrian squirmed backward until his head was pressing against the cold tiles. He couldn't understand why Dan was so aggressive toward an ally. It didn't occur to him that he was seeking retribution for past crimes.

"Nothing would give me more pleasure than to rearrange your face." Dan tilted his head to one side. "Maybe if I cut off your cheeks you'll stop dribbling shit." He was the closest to insanity that he'd ever been. It was in the air; he could smell it and taste it. It hung around him like a sour cloud, obscuring his thoughts and twisting him to its will. And the insanity had a name: Revenge. Every atom in Dan's body ached to inflict as much damage on Adrian as he'd caused to Katherine. He wanted them all to pay. He wanted them to see that they couldn't flippantly torture someone and expect to get away with it. Murder victims had husbands, brothers, fathers, or sisters, mothers, and wives who were frequently willing to retaliate with their own round of death and destruction.

"I need something from you." Dan put more tension on Adrian's eyelid. Wait, I have to give him hope... "If you cooperate I'll give you the chance to live. If not, well... you can go under the knife. So? How about it? Do you want plastic surgery? We could see how pretty your smile is without cheeks. I bet you have lovely teeth."

Adrian fluctuated between looking as pale as plaster and flushing dark red when he suffered successive outbreaks of anxiety. He would've nodded if Dan's serrated knife weren't resting on his eyelid. "I want to help." His voice was hoarse. "Just tell me what to do."

"Good." Dan retracted his knife. "I need a code to the portal in that underground building."

“I told you, it won’t help,” Adrian explained hesitantly. “It only admits-”

Dan silenced him with a warning finger. He was still aiming his Colt at Adrian’s forehead. “Not the destination code, the... other code. Long. Forty digits... alpha-number shoelace or something.” He was struggling to remember how Hans had explained it.

“You mean the SAT?” Adrian prompted, trying to be helpful.

“What the fuck is a SAT?”

“The Standard Address Transform, it’s for identifying portals on our routing tables. It’s a forty-digit alphanumeric string.” He snivelled on his trickling nosebleed. “But you can’t do anything with that.”

“I’ll worry about what I can and can’t do with it; you should worry about how helpful you’re being.” Dan’s threat struck home.

This is an exam. Adrian gulped. He’d never been fond of exams. And I need to pass in order to live. He felt a flutter in his stomach when he realised he had no idea of the pass mark, but he rallied himself to be as helpful as possible. “I’d need to go to work to get it. I need my computer.”

“Fine.” Dan was willing to suffer a lot to get the number. It was his gateway to Jen.

“You know, if you let me go I could save you a lot of trouble,” Adrian offered.

“Do you think I’m an idiot?” Dan wagged his pistol to get Adrian moving and scanned the corridor for unfriendlies before ducking to the portals. He didn’t trust Adrian to tell him the number for PortaNet reception, he was more likely to select the Guild and vanish from Dan’s grasp forever. Instead, he ordered Adrian to stand in the tube while he entered the code for the nearby portal station.

“Remember, I’ll be right behind you, so if you’re thinking of running you’d better be damn fast.”

Adrian flashed away and Dan jumped inside the white circle, typed in the code, and braced himself for the shift in vision. He raised his Colt and was ready to defend himself if Adrian took advantage of his momentary disorientation to launch an attack. Instead, he found Adrian placidly waiting eight metres away.

“You expected me to run,” Adrian said. “You don’t trust me yet.”

“I’ll never trust you,” Dan replied gruffly. “Come on. Let’s get this over with. When we reach security, you’re going to tell them we have a meeting and ask them to scan my chip into the authorised access list. Got it?”

“Okay, I got it.” Adrian walked briskly in silence, past the reviving New York streets, toward the monolithic symbol of the commercial world.

“If you so much as sneeze or wink I’ll blow your fucking head off. Understood?”

Adrian nodded.

“And fix your face. You have blood everywhere.”

He pinched his nose with a handkerchief until the bleeding stopped and used saliva to dab at the encrusted blood. Then he ran a hand through his hair and adjusted his tie. He’d ruined his jumper after all - half a dozen specks had soaked into the wool and he knew blood was difficult to remove.

Dan calmed his voice so it would pass as normal conversation. “So, if you were telling the truth, why were you helping Jen to escape?”

Adrian thought for nearly a minute before finding the right words to phrase his answer. “I’m tired.”

“Pardon?” Dan squinted through his frown.

“It’s pretty simple, what part don’t you understand?” Adrian asked, already wishing he’d kept his sarcasm in check. “I’m tired. I need a rest. I’m walking out of my job, I’m walking out of the Guild, and I’m tired of them abusing those women.”

“Women?” Shock pinged through Dan’s brain. “There are more?”

“A few,” Adrian admitted. He felt the shame returning. It sounds so bad when you put it to words. He didn’t share Esteban’s philosophy - he didn’t believe the women were better off in the Guild rather than prison. Esteban might’ve been right, but Adrian was tired of witnessing the women’s repeated abuse.

The news stoked Dan's already blazing fire and a distended vein on his temple began pulsing in tune with his throbbing heart. But their imminent arrival at PortaNet security severed any further progress in the conversation.

"You again?" They eyed Dan suspiciously. Now there were two: an even greater threat, practically a riot. But at least the second man was wearing expensive grey trousers, a collared shirt, a tie, and a well preened - if splotchy - jumper. He looked well enough presented to have worked there.

Adrian stepped forward and invited them to initiate a scan.

"Ah, hello sir," said the senior guard after confirming Adrian's identity. "I presume you're here for your meeting?"

Time slurred while Dan waited for Adrian's response. If the PortaNet executive wanted to break for freedom, he'd do it now, with a fistful of armed guards to protect him. Not that they'd react in time. Dan had already decided Adrian Miller would be the first to die, only then would he see about saving himself from the deadly rush of bullets that would surly follow.

"Yes, add him to the day-visitor list would you?"

The guard with the scanner brushed his wand past Dan's spine and the device locked onto Tedman Kennedy's signal from Dan's pocket. He then integrated the information with PortaNet's security database, granting Dan access to the building's internal portals.

"Messed up the times did you?" The guard asked with a smile, wanting to engage in small talk.

Dan nodded, never moving his eyes from Adrian. "Yeah, looks like I did."

"Okay, you're free to enter, if you could just hand over any weapons you might be carrying." His eyes roamed over Dan's thick coat as he wondered what mysteries it might conceal.

He unhooked the pulse-emitter and reversed the grip, handing it to the guard. It wasn't every day the musclebound man saw a sonic weapon and he pored over the oddly shaped handgun, breaking off his inspection for long enough to sling a probing look at Dan. What sort of person carried a pulse-emitter?

Dan took advantage of the stir to slip past unquestioned.

One guard, a gaunt man in his early 30s, called after him in a weaselly voice, “Don’t forget to check back with us after the meeting.”

Dan replied with a saluting gesture and nudged Adrian forward. “Keep moving,” he muttered quietly. “Don’t look back.” Dan herded him to the ground-floor portals. There were dozens of them, neatly lined against the far wall. The building’s innards were a study in understatement. It wasn’t as flashy as Dan had expected for the richest company in the world. Their annual profit was several hundred times greater than the GDP of the United States, yet PortaNet hadn’t spruced up their headquarters the way many giga-corporations had. I guess when everybody knows you’re the richest you don’t need to remind people. But PortaNet reminded people several times a day. Whenever someone stepped inside the white PortaNet circle and jumped instantly somewhere else, he or she was reminded just how indispensable the corporation really was.

“Tell me the code for your floor,” Dan demanded. He wasn’t about to let Adrian place his mittens anywhere near the control panel.

“Internal 65.”

Dan began pressing the buttons. “Same drill as before. Don’t dare do anything to piss me off.”

Adrian had no intention of worsening his predicament. The last thing he wanted was an elite bounty hunter tracking him for the remainder of his - likely short - life. He was going to be careful with his disappearance, but Dan made a living out of hunting people who’d tried to vanish, and Adrian didn’t flatter himself into believing he could outwit a professional.

He vanished with a pop and Dan quickly followed, again prepared for anything. Going through the portal was the most dangerous part. For all he knew, Adrian could’ve been waiting to crush his skull with a fire extinguisher. But he wasn’t. He was waiting patiently again, doing nothing to startle his captor.

“It’s this way.” He waved Dan on and wound through the corridors to his office.

Dan entered and closed the door behind them. “Make it quick.”

“Hang on.” Adrian eased himself into a black-leather, executive chair and pulled it close enough to reach his keyboard. His office was elegant, dominated by an enormous semicircular hardwood table that sported dozens of executive toys. He even had the obligatory set of perpetual motion gadgets. The biggest was still moving, its spoked metal wheels spinning due to a pair of strong magnets and clever engineering. It’d been going since he’d started it, three months earlier, but Dan found it offensive and knocked the wheel to the floor.

He was in a destructive mood.

“I have to log in yet.” Ten seconds felt like a terrible burden to endure. How long would it take the damn computer to boot? And Adrian mistyped his password on the first attempt. When he finally had access, he launched a custom PortaNet application and entered the data warehouse. Not that this’ll do him any good, he thought smugly. He’s screwed in the noggin if he thinks he can get in with the SAT.

“Here.” He pointed at his 21-inch fractal-bacteria screen. “That’s what you wanted.”

“Can you add me to the authorisation list for that portal?” Dan asked while reading the plethora of other fields to check for anything unexpected. He was still suspicious that Adrian might be showing him a phoney SAT.

Adrian shook his head. “No, not even the security team can do that - they can only reset the entire list. The clients are the only ones with access to maintain security records. And, to be blunt, I don’t have a fucking clue who that would be. It’d be one of the founding members I suppose, or someone computer-savvy in the inner sanctum, but I’m not privy to that kind of information.”

Dan had no inkling what he was jabbering about. “What do you mean - founding members, inner sanctum? What kind of place is it?”

“It’s a club.” Adrian blew his nose and it began bleeding again. He sounded nasal behind his handkerchief. “...after a fashion. It’s called the Guild.”

“And that’s where you keep women against their will?”

Adrian nodded, embarrassed when his stomach gurgled. He’d skipped lunch because he was so busy preparing for his new life.

“How many members does this club have?” Dan pressed, wondering whether he’d need more firepower. He already knew he’d need Simon’s help. But maybe that’s not enough...

“It varies.” Adrian shrugged. “It’s busier on weekends. There are usually a dozen or so, but I doubt there’d be more than twenty.”

Twenty? Dan’s hopes faded; he’d relied on there being a maximum of seven or eight. He jotted the SAT on the same piece of paper that held Esteban’s mobile number. Now what’m I gonna do? he wondered, referring to Adrian. It was a difficult question with no simple answer. He’d already been deliberating for an hour without progress. Two days ago, he wouldn’t have hesitated. Two hours ago, he wouldn’t have flinched. And now? This is a person, someone with a conscience if I’m to believe his intention to save Jen. But he couldn’t just forgive and forget, and he couldn’t let him go without punishment. So what will I do with you, Adrian Miller?

Adrian caught Dan’s pensive expression and incorrectly guessed what he was thinking. “The SAT won’t get you in. You need my help... I’m the only one with access.”

“No.” Dan shook his head. “You don’t have access, your chip does.”

That sent a chill through Adrian’s bones and he became acutely aware of the very valuable silicon wafer wedged next to his spine.

Seeing Adrian’s complexion pale didn’t quench Dan’s thirst for torment, it only whetted his appetite for more. He was tempted to scare Adrian to the point where he’d lose control of his bowels and defecate in his pants. But there’s time for that later. “I don’t need your filthy chip. You don’t know as much as you think about portal travel.” He held up a finger to silence Adrian’s rebuke. “But neither do I need you. So perhaps you could tell me in 50 words or less why I shouldn’t blow your brains out.”

Adrian stumbled over his seemingly swollen tongue and uttered nothing more intelligent than a slurred grunt. His second attempt was more effective: “Because I’m an ally.”

It was true - he seemed keen to help.

“And I want Jen to get out unscathed. I’m not a bad person...”

But that can never make amends for killing Katherine. He wondered what his wife would think if he let one of her killers go free. Yes, but what would she think if I kill him in retribution? At these moments, he didn’t want to believe in an afterlife, a judgemental God, or the possibility of blackening his soul. If these things existed, then by killing Adrian he’d go to the furnace of hell and never see Katherine again. On the other hand, if he wanted justice he’d have to dole it out himself. He had no evidence with which to prosecute him, and even if he had, he knew a man of Adrian Miller’s stature would never see the inside of a prison. He had people ready to pull strings for him. He was connected.

“Do you believe in God?”

Adrian recoiled from the odd question. “Never gave it much thought.”

“So think now.” Dan sat on a corner of Adrian’s wrap-around desk and balanced his Colt in a two-hand grip, bracing himself to pull the trigger if the man said anything to warrant it.

But Adrian didn’t believe Dan would actually kill him. He believed his gesture of goodwill toward Jen had automatically transformed him into one of the ‘good guys’. He believed his single act of humanity, which any half-decent person would have done long ago, would act as a buffer from Dan’s wrath. “Then no, I don’t think there’s a God.” He was the same as everybody else, too busy to think about it and too lazy to commit energy to finding his spirituality. The rise of Xantex didn’t coincide with religion’s death rattle by coincidence. People in western society were abandoning religion in droves, adding to the flocks of listless sheep that called themselves ‘spiritual’ or, more honestly, heathens and atheists. But without religion to anesthetise them, people were discovering how meaningless life could be - unless they were lucky enough to find their true calling as Jen, Samantha and Cookie had. Antidepressants had filled the void. But nobody - not even radical brain-chemistry professors - had imagined the craze, which had started in the 1950s with Imipramine, would mutate into the current trend. It was rare to find someone that didn’t need a cocktail of prescription medication to placate his or her brain into accepting another day of socially inflicted hardship and struggle. Of course, it didn’t help that people were destroying their pituitary glands by overexposure to a deluge of harmful chemicals and electromagnetic radiation, or that corporate-funded nutritionists

had brainwashed them into believing corporate-driven rhetoric that left them starved for nutrients. It all added up to one conclusion - western society was doomed. It was like a ticking bomb that every mathematical simulation said should have detonated over a decade ago.

Dan snarled his reply, “Then you shouldn’t fear death. You won’t have to explain to a deity how you’re such a good person when you did something so evil to my wife.”

The black hatred penetrating Dan’s gaze and the tiny tremble in his hands were the first clues Adrian recognised. His foolish notion that he wasn’t in danger back-flipped and he faced the prospect that Dan might actually shoot him.

It changed everything.

He quivered in his chair and felt overwhelmed by regret for his crimes, though not due to any perceptible compassion for his victims or remorse for his actions. He was sorry his actions had landed him in trouble. “Please... don’t.”

“Is that what my wife said before you glued her eyes shut? Is that what she was saying when you raped her?”

The tension quickly eroded any sense of decorum that Adrian’s upbringing had instilled in him and he started to sob. Tears leaked from his red-rimmed eyes and a river of snot oozed from his hairy cavernous nostrils. “Please don’t kill me.”

Dan watched him cowering down the barrel of his gun, weighing his own emotions. If he’d held any faith in the justice system, circumstances wouldn’t have forced him to make this decision. But he knew the system was corrupt. So...

What to do?

*

Saturday, September 18, 2066

17:34 Baltimore, USA

Jen's headache was only getting worse and an abdominal cramp had begun singing a solo in the general chorus of pain rippling through her body. Two doses of Esteban's 'party juice' - as the other women called it - and she had tremors. She wished a pharmacologist would explain to her what sort of nightmare she should expect. It's not going to be pretty... She gritted her teeth through the next wave of gut wrenching and pounded clenched fists against her thighs for distraction. It felt like a hot knife was slicing through her innards. She couldn't remember ever experiencing more agony and was pleading for unconsciousness. Devils with pitchforks were dancing at the edge of her vision, snickering in delight at her torment.

Then the wave passed and she felt euphoric from lack of pain. But, with sinking heart, she knew it would begin again in quarter of an hour. That'd been the recent pattern and the spasms were growing worse. Her mouth felt parched despite the water she'd guzzled, and the nausea had returned.

Jen was unsure which was worse, the nightmares in her sleep or the nightmare reality had become.

She checked her watch. He's not coming. It was something else to add to her growing list of reasons for being depressed. It was just a cruel psychological game, she realised, scolding herself for falling for their tricks. Why did I believe him? It seemed silly in hindsight. What possible reason could he have for helping me? She drew a blank. All that shit about his past... It made her angry. I can't believe I was so trusting, so naïve! Given the opportunity, she'd wind the clock back and do her best to slaughter him and escape using his microchip. Now things looked impossible. Her muddled mind made thinking hard. When the tremors began again, she wouldn't even be able to hold an icepick. Even between waves her hands were unsteady; she held them tightly in her lap to deny the proof of her addiction. And her blood disorder threw another variable into the mixture. Her stress hormones were far above safe levels and had been for several days. Every additional day of stress added to the probability that she wouldn't live to see the sky again. Or the ocean.

She retreated into her mind where she felt safe. They couldn't touch her there.

But a furore outside distracted her from the light meditation. She hadn't heard any commotion since her arrival and it seemed out of character for the Guild so she stood and wobbled to the door.

The disturbance came from the far end of the compound, about 50 metres from Jen's room. A man was shouting and a woman shrieked. Then the man yelled at the woman to shut up and Jen heard the slap that landed her on the floor. Jen's face smarted in sympathy as she staggered down the hall. It had to be something important to gather everyone's attention. A fire? It was the first explanation her foggy mind offered. What will happen to the captives? Will we burn alive? There were no sprinklers on the barren ceiling, only recessed down-lights. I guess we turn to charcoal...

But it wasn't a fire.

A small crowd had gathered around the portals and people were jostling to gawk at something. Jen's curiosity kept her inching along and she craned her neck to snatch a glimpse for herself.

What she saw chilled her blood.

It was Adrian.

Or what was left of him.

The air buzzed with excitement and the onlookers' expressions ranged from revulsion to horror and alarm. He was naked from the waist up and a message had been carved into his torso. Two words: "You're next."

His eyes were still open and they stared vacantly ahead. Trails of salt were flaking on his cheeks where tears had dried, and his mouth gaped, as if the corpse wanted to speak one final word but couldn't draw breath to make it happen. He'd died from three gunshot wounds to the head. The entry holes made a neat triangle just to the right of centre. Blood had splattered over Adrian's face and trousers. One rivulet had made the epic journey down his chin and dripped onto his abdomen, forming a lake in his bellybutton.

Jen first concluded that Esteban had discovered Adrian's betrayal. The carnage was precisely what she'd expect of a lunatic like Esteban. It's a message for me... I'm next. But the longer she gazed into Adrian's vacant eyes, the closer

she came to revealing the truth. It was within her the whole time, just waiting for discovery. It wasn't Esteban. Realisation sickened her more than the ghastly sight of Adrian's corpse. Her legs gave way and another wave of pain exploded in her gut as she sat convulsing on the floor. Throughout the tremors, she wrestled with demons that shouted something she didn't want to hear: Dan killed him.

*

Junior wiped his nose and furiously rubbed the stubble on his chin until his skin was so sensitive the touch become unpleasant. This wasn't supposed to happen. During times of high stress he needed to keep his hands occupied - every few minutes ran them through his curly mat of strawberry hair. "Get back would you!" He took a menacing pace toward the gathering crowd and they began to scatter.

"Do you know what this is about?" asked Terrance Leichhardt, one of the older members who lingered despite Junior's demand. He was in his late fifties and hefted significant political weight in the Guild's inner sanctum.

Junior shook his head and lied, "No sir." It was imperative that he show due respect to high-ranking members. "I don't even know where he went." At least that part was true, Adrian had just up and vanished.

"Take care of the mess, will you?" Terrance said in a dry, smoker's voice. He'd curled his words as if asking a question, but from a man like Terrance Leichhardt a question was really a command, which carried severe penalties if Junior didn't follow it to the letter.

"Yes sir." Junior nodded meekly, running another hand through his hair.

Terrance turned and strolled back to the Imperial Lounge where Junior couldn't follow, his patent leather shoes squeaking as he went. He was keen to resume a fascinating debate on evolution and hoped the incident with the dead member hadn't irrevocably disrupted it.

Now what? Junior looked again at his friend's naked torso and the message somebody had carved into it with a knife. The pinkish flesh was beginning to turn blue. Or is that my imagination? He didn't want to touch it. He'd touched a dead body before and the experience had given him the creeps. The cadaver's

cold, livid flesh against his warm fingers had made him want to scream. But, gathering his resolve, Junior approached the corpse and gently closed Adrian's eyes. He could stand the vacant stare even less.

It was Dan. He had no doubt about that. And he obviously knows where we are. He wondered how many hours he'd tortured Adrian for information. Junior blanched, unable to admit he would've capitulated immediately. An egoist, Junior would never deliberately suffer on anybody else's account.

Adrian's body was kneeling upright, propped there by wooden slats that'd once been part of a chair. Junior pushed the body forward and it landed on its face with a thud.

There was no sign that Sutherland had removed Adrian's microchip. Of course! How else would he make it through the portal? Junior leered at Dan's error. He blew it. How stupid. Still, it was unsettling to have a close associate murdered by someone intent upon slaying him too.

He didn't want to roam outside for long. Not with Dan on the prowl. So he found a thick sheet of plastic and wrapped it around Junior's corpse. Next, he dragged it to cold storage and unceremoniously dumped it in the corner, next to crates filled with microwaveable dinners. I'll get rid of it once this is all over.

Which raised another question: Where the fuck was Esteban during all this? Isn't he supposed to protect us? Shouldn't we stick together? He knew it didn't make sense to huddle in the Guild forever, that way it'd never be over. Esteban was doing the noble thing by using himself as bait. So why did Adrian leave? And where'd he go?

He cast Adrian's corpse a final disgusted look before flipping out his phone and pressing the speed dial for Esteban. No answer. He tried again. Same result. Damn you. He trotted to the portals, hesitating before stepping inside. Maybe I shouldn't... He had a good idea where Esteban would be. And I won't be long. So in the end his self-confidence overshadowed his mountain of qualms and he dialled the code, vanishing from the Guild's portal chamber.

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Jen stumbled back to bed between tremors and lay quivering under the sheets, twisting and contorting when flashes of pain needled her body. She couldn't

remember ever being more miserable. She lay there wondering how her life had become so horrendous. A week ago she'd been happy, working on the biggest hack she'd ever dared to hope for. And now?

How could you? It seemed so barbaric. How can you write a message on someone's chest with a knife? It dawned on her that she didn't really know Dan at all, or know of what he was capable. She shivered as she recalled her invitation for him to accompany her in her new life, beyond the grasp of corporate bulldozers.

She wondered whether she'd be able to look Dan in the eyes again. If I ever get the chance. She tried to imagine looking at him without the chest-carving memory floating like unwelcome refuse to the surface of her mind. What pained her most was that she believed Adrian had intended to help. He'd carried her hopes. And now that he was dead, she was back to square one.

She wasn't convinced Dan would be her knight in shining armour. He was too busy inflicting his pent-up rage on the people who'd murdered his wife and wasn't taking enough notice of what was happening now. If he were, he wouldn't have killed Adrian. Still, she reluctantly had to admit Adrian had done heinous things. So maybe that justifies...

Jen's body convulsed and she retreated from her physical misery, preferring the despair in her mind. In a way, it was Dan's trial. The outcome would determine her reaction to him if they ever again met.

*

Esteban was aiming his pistol at mock targets when the knock came. Again? He doubted Dan would forecast his entry but didn't want to take unnecessary risks. He quietly eased out of his chair and stood next to the door, ready to ambush anybody that came through.

"Esteban?" It was Junior's voice.

Esteban's shoulders slumped. "What?" He carefully pulled the door open, ready to shoot whoever was on the other side if it proved to be a trick. Junior rushed into the room, wide-eyed and spooked. He looked like a wild horse before a thunderstorm.

“It’s Adrian, he’s-” was all he could squeeze out before Michele interrupted them.

“Esteban?” Her voice was nasal and irritating, made infinitely worse because Esteban knew she’d never say anything intelligent.

“God, this place is a fucking zoo. What the hell do you want?”

She didn’t often come to his office; he usually went down to hers. That way he didn’t have to clean the milky sex-mess from his desk, but his ulterior motive hadn’t dawned on her yet. “I wanted-”

“Close the fucking door, would you?” Esteban snapped, cutting her off. He didn’t want Dan to surprise him when he had unwelcome guests.

She pulled the door shut. “Jackie’s been trying to find you, how come you’re not answering your phone?”

That’s a good question, Junior thought. It would’ve saved me the trouble of coming out here.

Esteban rolled his eyes. “Because I’m busy doing my job you brainless bimbo. I expect Sutherland will turn up any minute.”

“He already has,” Junior said with a sour expression.

“What?” Esteban turned to face him, wearing a harrowed mask of disbelief.

“That’s what I came to tell you - he fucked Adrian up real good.” Junior wasn’t one to sugarcoat words.

“Adrian? That’s impossible... he was only just here.”

“Well he left the Guild hours ago and turned up dead.” Junior was trying unsuccessfully to gouge a grain of dirt from under his fingernail, unwilling to meet anyone’s gaze.

“The dumb fuck said he’d go straight back,” Esteban said, frowning deep in disbelief. “So Sutherland must’ve snatched him from this building.” It was a perturbing thought.

“Well he was naked from the waist up and had a message carved into his-”

“Carved?” Michele’s horrified expression betrayed precisely what she thought of that.

Junior nodded. “Yeah, it was pretty fucking grisly. He carved the words ‘you’re next’ into his chest.”

“Post mortem?” Esteban hoped. He wasn’t that sadistic.

“I think so. He had three holes in his head so Sutherland probably blew his brains out first.” Junior spread his grimy hands. “I was told to take care of the mess so I shoved him in cold storage.”

That’s disgusting. Michele felt a panic swelling within. “We’re next. He’s going to kill us all.”

Esteban shook his head. “No he’s not. He has another thing coming if he thinks he can take me.”

“Don’t you understand?” Michele gasped. “Haven’t you read his file?”

“What file?” Junior asked, having no idea what she was talking about.

“Dan has a very colourful history,” Michele shrieked in a higher pitch than usual. “It reads just like a Craig Murphy novel.”

In 2048, a few months after his eighteenth birthday, Dan joined the Australian Defence Force. He spent six months in the army’s gruelling training program before accepting his first assignment in the Sixth Border Defence Division. But he didn’t stay there long. Due largely to his high intelligence and physical aptitude, his commanding officer sought to reassign him somewhere that wouldn’t waste his talents. In 2049 he went back into training, this time to refine his skills to work with FIRE, the highly specialist division responsible for 89 Australian-led black-ops between 2049 and 2053. Dan had personally been involved in 61 of those operations, and had commanded 12 of them himself. The year 2053 also saw Dan receive his final promotion and he went to work for the Australian Republic’s blossoming shadow-intelligence division. But, three years later, the funding dried up. The Australian government, led by Xantex at the time, hadn’t deemed anyone fit for reassignment and the cabinet had retrenched

all shadow-intelligence officers. But Dan had departed with a glowing recommendation that the New South Wales Police Department simply couldn't ignore and he'd commenced his service in law enforcement.

Esteban nodded. "I've read it. So what? I'm not worried. Now go back to your room." Then he turned from Michele to stab Junior with an impatient look. "And you go back to the Guild, and for Christ's sake stay there!"

"Whatever you say." Junior just hoped it would all be over before work on Monday. The last thing he needed was another sick day on his record.

But Michele wasn't so easily placated. She snarled with fear. "You don't understand! He's going to kill us all. We're all dead! Oh my God, I should've run when he told-"

Esteban slapped her across the cheek, hard enough to whiplash her neck and raise a red welt on her skin. She reeled to her knees and Esteban derived cruel pleasure from seeing her there. Maybe if I keep going I'll eventually slap some sense into her. He could make it into a science experiment, one that was truly worthy of his time and devotion. With a smirk, he vowed to bear it in mind for the next day of knuckle-biting boredom. Something to contribute to the scientific community: can beating the shit out of a retard knock some brains into them?

Michele got silently to her feet, too scared to voice her fears.

"Get out of here, both of you. Sutherland could be here any moment." I know he's coming... In truth, Adrian's demise amused him. It proved Dan was a worthy adversary. But I'm better. And he was looking forward to proving that.

Michele nursed her stinging cheek and scuttled from the room. Junior followed a few paces later, finally leaving Esteban in peace. He sat in his chair and resumed playing with his handgun. Come on Sutherland, show your face... be the next person to knock on my door. He'd already carefully considered the potential access points to his office. There were two and he had them both covered. No matter where Dan showed up, Esteban would have the perfect opportunity to riddle his skull with bullets. And then his colourful, Craig-Murphy-novel past won't matter a damn.

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Michele examined her cheek in the mirror and splashed soothing water over her developing bruise. Fuck you Esteban. Nobody slaps me. She stared at her reflection, watching as the red patch turned darker. Damn. It was going to require a thick layer of makeup to conceal properly.

I've had it with you. Michele may have possessed below average intelligence, but she had cunning to make up for deficient schooling and lack of mental aptitude. And cunning was all she needed to concoct her plan. She leant closer to the mirror, stared directly into her pupils, and wondered what mysteries lay in the dark pools. She stood mesmerised for several minutes before abruptly tearing her gaze away, her plan fully baked. She strode through the hauntingly empty corridors and slammed her office door, shutting herself off from the rest of the world. Then she logged onto her computer and launched her accounting software.

He underestimates me.

Esteban didn't think Michele knew how to transfer money from one account to another, but she did. He'll see. She'd already set an account up to receive the money. It was simple. She just clicked the transfer button, selected the from-account, selected the to-account, and confirmed that - yes - she did want to proceed. She double-checked the numbers before clicking initiate and then carefully read the generated report. The transfer was successful.

That's my half. She wasn't going to fall into the greed trap, proving she had some basic intelligence that several intellectuals lacked. Besides, the other half was bait to trap Esteban. What was the point of sinking with the ship? Dan's going to kill him anyway. She had no doubt about that, she just wanted to land on the winning side of the scuffle. And that means...

She picked up the phone and dialled.

"Yes?"

"Hi Jackie, it's Michele."

That's what the display told me. "What can I do for you Michele?" She appreciated Michele's body but would have to find someone else if she wanted a platonic relationship.

“I’ve got a problem.”

Yeah, I know... it’s called stupidity. “What’s that?”

“It’s Esteban. And Dan Sutherland. In fact, it’s the whole situation. I think we need to talk.”

“But you told me-”

“Yes I... uh, wasn’t entirely forthcoming.” I lied. Michele regretted that now. “I’m sorry about that. Esteban wanted me to cover for him, but I think he’s out of control.”

Jackie sighed into the phone. “Okay, then we’d better schedule a meeting.”

“How about now?” Michele didn’t want to waste time, especially not with Dan lurking somewhere, ready to snatch her from the shadows and send her into the afterlife.

“No, I’m in the middle of something; it’ll have to wait for an hour.” Her day was shaping into a nightmare of mammoth proportions. She had to remind herself hourly that it would come to an end. Eventually she’d be snug under her bedcovers and could put it all in the past, but even that offered only trivial comfort.

Michele didn’t argue. If Jackie said she was busy, then she was busy. At least she’d done her reporting duty - Jackie now knew the situation was turning sour.

“Stay in your office, I’ll call when I’m ready.” Jackie hung up.

Okay. Michele’s kidneys were tingling and her heart was fluttering at 180 beats per minute. It made her feel faint and she willed herself to relax, taking several deep breaths. Now I wait.

*

Sunday, September 19, 2066

International Portal Terminals

7:56 Sydney, Australia

“Four minutes till I’m off, man.” Chuck was just itching to bolt. He was tired, hungry and in desperate need of a shower. Worst of all, he’d been suppressing a bowel movement for the past 20 minutes and would soil his underwear if he waited much longer. He couldn’t go early though, not even to the men’s room. The supervisor would grumble about dereliction of duties and dock him pay. If it’d been possible, Chuck would’ve bogged earlier in the night. The supervisor didn’t mind that, but leaving his post toward the end of his shift would be a serious mistake.

No emotion seeped from Dan’s stony mask. “That’s good.” It was the most subdued statement he’d uttered all night and Chuck wondered what weighed so heavily on his friend’s mind. But he knew better than to ask, Dan had the soldier-returning-from-a-particularly-bloody-battle look about him. He felt dirty and tired, but refused to take the next dose of ‘power-pills’ until he was ready to storm Esteban’s fort. And for that, I need help.

Chuck tagged Dan’s weapons and noticed one missing. “Where’s your ray-gun?”

He shrugged. “What does it matter?”

“The program’s gonna ask, that’s all.” Chuck jerked a thumb at his monitor. “It doesn’t like unaccounted weapons, especially on frequent travellers. If you’d been gone a month it wouldn’t care, but it’s only been a couple of hours.”

“Somebody stole it,” Dan replied, remembering how the PortaNet guards had drooled over his pulse-emitter. He hoped they’d enjoyed it; they’d probably all lose their jobs when someone walked into Adrian Miller’s office and found bloodstains and bullet holes, evidence of murder. They’ll identify the blood belongs to Adrian and quickly start asking questions. But Dan had been meticulously careful to ensure there was no forensic evidence linking him to the killing. He’d left no fingerprints or DNA and the guards would only be able to give a rough description. But physical descriptions meant little. The police would seek the owner of the microchip, Tedman Kennedy. And they won’t get far. He wondered whether anyone in the Guild would be human enough to deliver Adrian’s body to his family for a proper funeral.

“All right.” Chuck sighed, looked furtively over his shoulder, and squared the records in the system. “All taken care of.”

“Thanks Chuck.” He took his remaining weapons and stowed them in their usual places. “Get some rest for me too, okay?”

“You mean you’re still not finished?” Christopher asked, astonished. He wondered how much abuse Dan’s body could take; everyone had limits and Dan was no exception.

“Not yet.” Dan’s eyes hardened. “There’s just one more thing I have to do.”

“Okay.” Then Chuck lowered his voice and added, “When you come back, use gate eight. He’s a rookie so he won’t know your real name.”

“Rookie? Won’t that mean he’ll be paying more attention?” Dan’s eyebrows fused over the bridge of his nose.

“You’d think so, but between you, me, and the rest of the guys here, he’s not the sharpest tool in the shed.”

Dan nodded. “Got it.” His next stop was the portal station in the Parramatta business district, just one block from the police station. He found a public phone and dug Simon’s number from his wallet, as usual refraining from paying extra for the video component. Only lovers used video. Who wanted to see their colleagues at eight o’clock on a Sunday morning? It was unlikely to be pretty. Overall, videophone was more trouble than it was worth.

“Yeah?” He sounded groggy. Few people used their names when answering the telephone. It invited too much trouble from unleashed telemarketers. That was the problem with having a person’s every purchase itemised against his or her microchip: it was a statistician’s dream and a marketing department’s orgasm, but it made profiling too easy and shat on civil liberties.

“Simon? It’s Dan.”

“Oh hi mate.” He was obviously trying to clear his head. He’d only had four and a half hours sleep.

Guilt crowded Dan’s thoughts and he wished he didn’t need Simon’s help, but

knew he'd fail without backup. "You busy today?"

"I told you to call me, didn't I? What's happened? Where are you?"

"I'm in Parramatta," Dan replied cautiously, wondering whether even that was too much information to give over the telephone. "I'll tell you what's happened when you get here."

"Okay, where'll you be?"

"In the portal station," Dan replied. "Out the front."

"Give me 20 minutes." He hung up, presumably to take a shower and shovel breakfast into his mouth.

Food was also high on Dan's agenda and he paid for a small bag of biscuits from a nearby stall. The biscuits were the only quasi-breakfast product that the vendor hadn't deep-fried and Dan unenthusiastically crunched the time away until Simon turned up.

"Hmm... they look wholesome." Simon had chosen to wear jeans and a loose cotton shirt, less conspicuous than the suits he usually wore and more practical in combat. He'd also tied a warm grey training top around his waist in preparation for the frigid northern hemisphere if that's where they were going.

"You want some?" Dan offered the bag.

"Hell no." Simon held up his hands. "I'm trying to trim down, remember? That stuff wouldn't do me any favours."

Dan shrugged and tossed the remaining biscuits in the bin. "I killed Adrian Miller." He'd practiced that statement so often in his head that it came out with callous indifference rather than the gravity he'd wanted. He'd been examining his feelings about it since pulling the trigger. It wasn't the first time he'd shot someone, but in the past it'd always been in the heat of battle, never in cold blood. But this wasn't cold blood; it was... warm blood. There'd been plenty of provocation; billions of men would've done the same under the circumstances. He'd expected to feel guilt, remorse, or... something. But he didn't. He didn't feel relief or liberation either, nor did he feel as if he'd served justice. Adrian's death had affected him no more than if he'd squashed a bug under his boot. Dan

had hoped for relief. Perhaps I need to kill the others first - Esteban Garcia Valdez and Frank Albert Hansen. Maybe then I'll find relief. But then he remembered PortaNet. And if he somehow survived that, he still had to keep his promise to Hans. Peace, it seemed, was nowhere in sight.

"What happened?" Simon asked in a low voice, urging Dan to walk. It was safer that way; there was less chance somebody could eavesdrop.

"I got the portal information," Dan said, trying to feel proud of something.

"Oh, the... uh... MAC address was it?" Simon had as much difficulty remembering the details as Dan.

"Yeah, but Adrian called it a SAT." The emptiness in Dan's stomach was slowly expanding to consume him. "Then I killed him."

Simon approached the subject as tactfully as curiosity would allow. "He struggled?"

"No." Dan frowned. "That's the bizarre part, he was being helpful."

"But he killed Katherine," Simon prompted.

"Yeah." The numbness was exacting an emotional toll. It left sadness in its wake and Dan knew it would affect his performance. "So I couldn't let him live."

Simon could see the damage it was causing Dan and shrank from the prospect of facing such a decision himself. "So now what?"

"Well..." Dan swept his dishevelled thoughts aside. If he were alive later, he'd sort through them then. "I expect there'll be up to 20 men. They're holding her in a place called the Guild, along with a number of other women."

Simon whistled softly. That many? "Damn."

"Yeah, damn," Dan echoed. "And let's not forget the portal ride is dicey." He stopped, turned, and looked at Simon. "What are you going to do?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, suspicious that Dan was giving him the chance to pull out.

“Slime, you have a lot to live for. I don’t. It’s okay that I’m risking my life to save Jen - it’s my fault she’s there in the first place. But you don’t have to. In fact, I don’t think you should.” Then he mumbled, more to himself than anybody else, “It’s bloody suicide.”

“Are you trying to insult me?”

“No, I’m serious. It’s something you have to think about.”

“Well I have, damn it. And I told you to call me, didn’t I?” He waited for Dan to nod before saying, “So stop this nonsense. I’m in. Okay? All the way.” Simon remembered the times Dan had risked his life in order to save him. Back then, Dan had had plenty to live for, but it hadn’t stopped him from sticking his neck out - twice. Simon had been waiting five years to return the favour, and here was his chance. He certainly didn’t intend to shirk the opportunity to repay the debt.

“Okay.” Dan gulped a deep breath. “Then we’re going back to Holland.”

“Hang on.” Simon reeled him back with a hand on his shoulder. “Adrian had access to this place, right?”

Oh fuck... how am I going to explain this? Dan nodded, delaying the inevitable.

“Then you got his chip, right?” It curdled Simon’s blood to think about it, but the most sensible thing would’ve been for Dan to rip Adrian’s spine from his body.

“Actually, no. I sent him through the portal.”

“Where to?”

“To the Guild.” It sounded stupid now. Saving Adrian’s chip would’ve spared Simon the five percent risk of a collision when travelling through Hans’s portal.

“What?” Simon asked incredulously.

“Well, I was angry,” Dan said hesitantly, trying to explain something he didn’t understand himself. “So I stripped off his shirt and wrote ‘you’re next’ on his chest before sending him through.”

“Have I ever said you’re insane?”

“A couple of times, yes.”

“Well I’ll do it again - you’re fucking crazy Dan. Now they know we’re coming!”

“No, they know I’m coming. They think I’m alone. Besides, they knew I was coming already and now they can account for Adrian’s chip. If they thought he was dead but couldn’t find it they’d be even more alert.”

Simon snorted. “That doesn’t change the fact that you’re nuts.”

“Good,” Dan said, marching for the portals. “Because we’ve gotta be nuts to do this.”

*

Saturday, September 18, 2066

UniForce Headquarters

14:25 San Francisco, USA

Esteban slapped a hand on his desk. Of course! He pounced on his keyboard. If Dan was in the building then I should be able to... He accessed PortaNet's database, lamenting the fact that Adrian's back door would soon collapse. PortaNet would seal it as soon as they examined Adrian's computer and discovered what he'd done. And that means things'll get harder. He sighed in frustration. Back to the old fashioned way. Tracking somebody was so much easier when you could see where he or she was zapping through the portals.

His search didn't take long. There! Only one Tedman Kennedy had portaled into UniForce headquarters that day. Now I know which one you are... you're fucked. He reworked the grip on his pistol and fed the identity back through PortaNet's database, intent on turning the hunt around. He was tired of waiting for Sutherland to turn up, plucking off his team one by one. Esteban wanted to hunt too. According to PortaNet, he was in Sydney. Parramatta to be exact. But while Esteban watched, Tedman Kennedy portaled to the Sydney International terminal. Where're you going now, Sutherland?

He slouched into his chair, getting comfortable for the wait. He wasn't going to budge until he was sure where Sutherland was heading. At least I have a clear advantage again. The tension slowly drained from his body and he relaxed for the first time since discovering Sutherland had switched identities.

Chapter 11

The empire is global. There is nowhere to go to escape its corrosive barrenness.

John Zerzan

Saturday, September 18, 2066

23:42 Groningen, The Netherlands

Dan knocked harder. “God, we’re going to wake the neighbourhood.”

“Maybe they found him? He could be dead...” Simon preferred to suggest the worst. That way, things frequently turned out better than he expected.

“Don’t even joke,” Dan said sternly. If that were true, he’d lost his chance to free Jen forever. He’d been relying on Hans’s portal. Maybe that was a mistake? Oh, bugger! I should’ve taken Adrian’s flamin’ chip.

But Hans put him out of his misery when he opened the door and said, “What do you do here this time of night?”

“Sorry,” Simon mumbled.

“Yeah, me too,” Dan echoed. “It’s morning in Australia and afternoon in America.” It was just unfortunate for Hans that it couldn’t be daytime everywhere. Portals made things such as sleep inconvenient when someone was trying to co-ordinate affairs across several time zones. “We have that code you needed.”

Hans was wearing pyjamas and had to hold his trousers up lest the faded elastic slip from his bony waist. They were chequered brown and blue flannelette, perfect for the approaching winter. “What... now?”

“I have a friend waiting for me,” Dan explained. “Can we come in?”

Hans looked reluctant but admitted them anyway, and then excused himself to pull on some tracksuit pants.

When he returned, Dan handed him the slip of paper. “That’s the code, he called it a SAT.”

“It looks valid,” Hans said in his Dutch accent. He plonked it on his workbench in the second bedroom while Dan and Simon huddled at the door. “Who is this friend of yours?”

“Her name’s Jen,” Dan replied, wondering whether she was still alive. He hoped

his message hadn't spooked Esteban into killing her. "She's a prisoner."

Hans stopped what he was doing and scowled. "You mean... this is a gaol break?"

"No, no." Dan shook his head. "She's been kidnapped."

"Oh, that is okay then." Hans kept working. "Who kidnapped her?"

"The same person who killed my wife." Speaking with an emotionless voice was Dan's best defence against the anguish that bubbled just below the surface.

"Wow." Hans sadly shook his head. "Somebody really does not like you." He was busy tapping the SAT into his computer. Several ribbon-cables snaked from its open case to the portal. They could see where Hans had prised the portal's cover away and inside they glimpsed the smouldering remains of the anti-tamper circuit. Dan hoped Hans knew what he was doing; folding space sounded dangerous - several million g's would squash every cell in his body if anything went wrong. The room smelled like burnt silicon and solder resin. And it was a mess. Open textbooks and loose papers with diagrams were strewn about the floor, the product of a cluttered mind.

Kat chose that moment to enter the room, annoyed that visitors had disturbed one of her favourite naps. She usually slept in bed with Hans, who didn't have the heart to toss her out. She virtually had free rein of the house. Hans had only scolded her twice: once when she made a mess in the kitchen, and once when she protested her overflowing kitty litter by pooping on the couch. She affectionately rubbed Simon's leg, earning herself a scowl.

"You don't like cats?" Dan asked, sensing his friend's discomfort.

"I'm a dog person," Simon explained. He hated felines - they revolted him. Their fur tickled his nose. He made a special effort to be polite in front of their host, but couldn't help adding, "I'll restrain myself as long as she doesn't spew on my shoes."

"Do not listen to him Kat," Hans toned soothingly. "He is just mean." He was concentrating hard on entering the details accurately. One mistake could result in sending them to Siberia, Indonesia, or PortaNet's lunar colony. "Now, you are sure this is accurate?" He tapped a finger to the paper.

“Yes.” But Dan secretly wished he’d confirmed it again. He’d checked it twice but it was 40 digits long and he couldn’t be too careful. “I’m sure.” But his tone wasn’t reassuring.

“Well good.” Hans lifted his head after rescanning the SAT. “Because if one of these is wrong you will be flattened as a pancake.” He gave them access to the monitor. “You read it. I am tired and not good with your handwriting.”

Dan and Simon both confirmed the number before declaring it correct. “Now what?”

Hans waved at the portal. “Whenever you are ready. Who goes first?”

“I will,” Dan said, stepping onto the portal platform and carefully ensuring he was inside the white circle. Other portals would refuse to operate if somebody left an elbow or a hand outside, but Dan was wary of Hans’s contraption. There was no telling which circuits he’d accidentally fried. He gripped his Colt. One benefit of Adrian’s death was the opportunity it’d given him to confirm the Colt’s sights. “I’ll secure the area immediately around the portal.” Dan winked. “See you on the other side.” He had ample ammunition to cater for several dozen hostiles.

Hans started pressing buttons and some equipment shoved into the corner began to hum. Isn’t something supposed to happen now? Dan wondered sardonically as the seconds crawled by. He was just about to ask when the portal folded space and his vision shifted. A tickle in his lungs begged for a cough but he fought the urge and backed up to a wall. The lighting was dim and his eyes scoured the shadows for potential threats. A long corridor led away from the portal chamber and he ducked to his left to avoid detection. The blue light from the portals was the most powerful illumination in the room, everything else was dim by comparison. Why, I wonder? Dan didn’t know what he’d expected, but this wasn’t it.

Simon appeared next to him a few seconds later and whispered, “At least we’re not pancakes.”

Dan just hoped they were in the right place. He signalled for Simon to guard the five portals while he inched along the corridor. They’d agreed to use search and destroy rules - shoot unfriendlies on sight. But that begged the question how they’d tell the difference between friend and foe. Dan hoped instinct would

answer.

The grip of his modified Colt felt good in his hands and the back of his neck was tingling, partly due to the stimulants he'd swallowed and partly due to adrenaline. His senses had amplified his awareness. Jen's in here somewhere. He patted his pocket, reassured to feel her microchip selector.

He crept forward - Empty - and waved Simon on, indicating the first segment was secure. They'd agreed to take things slowly, cautiously. It'd be insane to rush around shooting everything that moved, and equally insane to split up.

The corridor was short and it emptied into a lounge room. It was large and luxurious, the antithesis of Dan's expectation for a prison. But it's not just a prison... it's a club. It reminded him of the exclusive waiting area for World Bank where pretty women pampered rich customers until bank executives could tend to their financial whims. Here the lights were brighter, as if someone lived there. He sniffed the air. Cigar smoke? It was stale in his nostrils, but it was unmistakable. Someone had squashed the chewed stub of a cigar on a plate that rested on the lamp table between couches. That's disgusting. Dan swept the room carefully, prepared to shoot anything non-female that moved. He was jumpy, his nerves pulled tighter than ever. It made him dangerous for the captive women and he hammered into his mind repeatedly to be careful - accidentally shooting Jen would pound the final nail into his coffin.

"Where is everyone?" Simon whispered when he caught up.

Dan shrugged. "Maybe my message scared them off." It was disheartening, but he had to consider the possibility. He couldn't hear anyone in the compound.

"I think this place is bigger than we imagined."

Yeah, possibly... it has to provide living quarters for several women. Three new corridors branched away from the lounge room. Which way? Dan decided to go left. If he always chose left, he'd always be able to retrace his steps if he became disorientated.

He edged silently forward, glad for the muffling carpet. Where are you Jen? The corridor they'd chosen had a number of nodular rooms branching to the left and right. They all looked used on a semi-regular basis, but none was in use now. They were bedrooms, and Dan's imagination coloured in the emerging pattern.

People - Probably powerful men - used the place as an overnight stopover when they didn't want to go home. If they have homes to...

Noise from an ablution block severed further contemplation.

A shower was running. He could hear the muted patter of water through the door. He motioned to Simon and they entered the room, a billow of steam engulfing them. Dan frowned, waving his Colt left and right in order to part the steam enough to see.

Jesus, how many people are showering? There was enough steam to theorise that there were at least a dozen. But his theory collapsed a moment later when the person in the shower turned off the water and the sound trickled away, Dan's noise buffer vanishing with it. His boots clicked on the tiles, giving him away. Realising that whoever was in the shower would be unarmed - it simply wasn't somewhere men took weapons - Dan strode the last several paces and ambushed the shower cubicle, prepared to shoot if the person turned hostile.

He hadn't been expecting a naked woman. She looked up and tried to cover her oversized breasts with her hands, surprised by Dan's intrusion. "Who the hell are you?" she demanded, frowning when she failed to recognise the intruder. It was against protocol for men to enter the women's shower. They encouraged the women to take hygiene seriously and shower often, for which they needed to feel safe in the ablution blocks.

Her high-pitched voice was piercing with the onset of panic.

Dan held a finger to his lips and lowered his gun. "Shh! I'm here to help."

He could see the confusion scrawled on her face. There was no telling how long the Guild had held her against her will. She'd resigned herself to spending the last of her days in the luxurious underground prison. She therefore found it difficult to process the fact that someone had gained unauthorised access and wanted to help.

"What?" she whispered yieldingly. "How?" Why?

"I'm here to get you out," Dan said to reassure her. "I'm with the police." It was technically true. Simon was a cop, and he was there with him. So... maybe it was a white lie, but he didn't think it would cause harm. "I'm looking for a

woman by the name of Jennifer Cameron, do you know her?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“She’s new. She was only brought here a few days ago,” Dan prompted, his heart sagging. What if Adrian was lying? What if she’s in a different compound?

“Oh, her.” She didn’t seem too self-conscious about being naked; too many men had raped her for that to matter much. But she was getting cold and reached for a towel to dry herself. “I didn’t know her name.”

“Where is she?” Dan asked, an overwhelming excitement replacing the desolation of a few heartbeats ago.

“She could be anywhere down here,” came her unwanted reply. “But her room’s across the other side, you’ll have to go around. Here, like this.” She drew a basic map on a steam-covered mirror. “You’re here.” She marked an X on one segment of the compound. “And your friend’s over here.” She marked it with another X.

Dan’s eyebrows shot up, he’d imagined the compound was large but had no idea it was enormous. He thought about how far they’d walked from the portals and estimated the compound was 200 metres wide. “Okay, thanks. Now I want you to stay here until this is over, okay?”

She nodded, hiking her towel up before it slipped from her wet skin. “Okay. Good luck.”

Dan couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something wrong with her. She’d displayed no emotion about her plausible future freedom. She’d just accepted it as the next twist in her life. Is that where numbness leads? It was scary. Dan didn’t want to end up that way, unable to feel the terror of the bad but also unable to connect with the joy of the good. He shrugged it off for later analysis; he had urgent matters to focus on.

They followed the woman’s directions, carefully sweeping forward, and Dan was beginning to hope they’d find Jen without encountering hostiles. Of course, that didn’t mean they’d happily scarp, hoping to escape without a fight - there were other women to free. He couldn’t leave them. He could bear to think of lonely families wondering what’d happened to their daughters and wives. And

nobody deserved to spend their lives trapped in an unlawful prison, serving as slaves.

A shout came from his left, “Hey, what the hell are you doing here?” And it was loud enough to raise the alarm. Within seconds, others had spread the warning and everyone in the compound knew something was wrong.

He was a large man, sporting a barrel chest and sagging girth, the product of too many three-course luncheons and not enough exercise. His neatly trimmed moustache came to life when he talked, wiggling with a mind of its own. “How did you get in?” He yelled, taking a pace forward. Then he saw their weapons.

Dan hesitated no longer. He raised his Colt and squeezed the trigger. His silencer muted the shot to a predatory hiss and he clearly heard the clank-clink of the semiautomatic reloading. The bullet entered the man’s eye, ricocheted inside his skull, and made soup of his brain, killing him instantly. His body jerked and, without the necessary nerve impulses to support his considerable bulk, his knees crumpled and he thudded facedown on the floor where some of his mashed brains leaked through his obliterated eye-socket onto the carpet.

“Here they come,” Dan warned, listening to the not-so-distant shouts of coordination. They crouched in the sunken entrances of two bedrooms, their niches the only protection from bullets that would soon be zinging past.

Damn. Dan had hoped to reach Jen before anybody noticed them. At least then he could’ve done his best to protect her. For all he knew, Esteban would use her as a bargaining tool. And Dan didn’t want to know what he’d do under those circumstances.

Two men scurried into the lounge room ahead. They overturned tables and ducked behind couches amidst a few well-aimed bullets from Simon and Dan. Then they laid some covering fire to enable other Guild members to take up strategic positions. Simon fired another two shots, his massive cannon booming and a foot-long flash coming from its barrel. It didn’t have a silencer and left his ears ringing. “They’re digging in.”

Dan nodded.

“So you know what that means?” Simon fired another shot between volleys from Guild members.

“That we’re fucked?” Dan said pointedly.

“They’re going to come from behind and trap us here.”

“So we’re fucked.”

Simon nodded, wishing he’d brought more ammunition. Dan too was starting to think he’d made a grievous error in his calculations. He didn’t have in believing he enough ammunition to cater for this type of gunfight. He tried not to fire until he had a smiling face to shoot at, and even then he was careful to make every round count.

*

Esteban’s frown was extending in ripples over his forehead, mirroring the confused tension that mustered in his mind. But that doesn’t make sense. He was watching Dan’s movements, wondering why he’d portaled to The Netherlands. He couldn’t think of anything strategic in the move.

And it irked him.

He needed to know.

So his brain revved to its limit, trying to figure it out with the pitifully limited data he had on hand. Why the hell did you go to Holland? What’s in Holland? Friends? It was possible. Maybe he’s getting reinforcements. But that didn’t make sense either. He couldn’t get into the Guild even if Adrian had squawked and told him where it was.

The buzzing of his mobile interrupted his thoughts and he decided to check the display. After all, Dan wasn’t posing an immediate threat so the pressure was off. It was Junior. Esteban heaved a sigh and mentally disengaged from his quandary to answer the call.

“What is it?”

“It’s Dan.” Junior sounded excited and panicky at the same time. “He’s here.”

Esteban sat bold upright. “Where?”

“In the Guild.”

That’s impossible. Esteban’s first impulse was to call Junior a liar, but then he heard the muted crackle of gunfire filtering through the receiver. “Hang ten. I’ll be right there.” He was already halfway to the nearest portal, loosing his automatic and coming dangerously close to colliding with walls as he banked hard around corners.

*

Jen’s head felt as if it was stuffed with cottonwool, but the sound of gunshots penetrated the haze. Initially she thought somebody was having a party and it was party-poppers or firecrackers, but people were shouting when they ran past her door - things were not as they should be.

She wobbled to her feet where a wave of nausea slammed her to her knees. There she knelt, shaking with the ugly threat of vomiting. She was about to give up and allow the nausea to overpower her when her sluggish mind correctly processed the sounds of battle growling outside her door. It’s Dan. The thought revived her and she stood again, still wobbly but determined to stay upright. She wanted to help, in any way she could.

But how? She tentatively laced her fingers around the doorhandle, feeling the cold metal chill the pads of her fingers. She wished she could think of something to do. She hated feeling helpless and didn’t want Dan, the strong knight, to have to rescue her. Is that what I am? A useless princess that needs saving? Another lashing of nausea made the room spin but she doggedly twisted the handle, opened her door, and strode into the corridor.

*

“So now what?” Dan asked, hoping Simon had a miracle in store.

“Well, unless you want them to trap us, we have to go back that way” - he jerked a thumb over his shoulder after ducking from a volley of shots - “and we have to hurry.”

Dan grimaced. Fuck me dead with a stick of broccoli. He didn’t want to abandon the cause, not now, not when he was so close. If they fled, the Guild would pack up and go elsewhere. But they’d lost the element of surprise and, the way things

were developing, they'd be dead in ten minutes. And dead men couldn't help anyone. What the fuck are we doing in a goddamn corridor! They wouldn't be able to hold their position for long.

“Okay, let's go.” Dan squeezed off several shots while Simon dashed low for the next door. He followed a few moments later, hugging the wall to avoid a bullet in the back.

They turned right after the showers and entered the lounge room they'd first encountered, the one with the corridor that led to the portal chamber. “If we leave now we'll never get Jen out, not alive. You know that, don't you?” Dan held back, hoping Simon had brewed his miracle.

He just nodded solemnly. “I know.” But there's nothing we can do. “If we'd found her before they raised the alarm we would've had a chance. Or if we'd taken the bulk of them by surprise then we'd be cruising. But...” He didn't need to finish his sentence.

Besides, he didn't have the chance. Dan shoved him hard in the stomach and Simon sagged to the ground, a fraction of a second before a bullet ripped through the space where Simon's head had been. He lay winded on the carpet, safe behind a couch.

“Daniel, Daniel, Daniel.” Esteban's voice came bright and clear. He was hunkering low in the corridor to the portals. “Funny I should meet you here.”

Dan's control was starting to fracture and he knew he could only withstand so much taunting before he'd implode. And he had no idea what would happen then.

“I was hoping you'd come and join our party,” Esteban said, his mirthful voice betraying his self-satisfaction. It was Esteban's sweetest dream come true.

“Drop dead, moron,” Dan said quietly to himself. He was surprised to discover Esteban had heard him.

“Aw, that's not a nice thing to say to your host.” Esteban was stalling. He knew the other members were creeping forward and he held aspirations of taking Dan alive - if wounded.

Dan knew it too. He divided his attention between Esteban and the other three corridors. He felt open and vulnerable, though Simon looked in no condition to move yet. He was badly winded and struggling for breath.

“Hey Dan!” Esteban relished taunting the man who’d ruined the most exciting part of his career. “I’m going to peel Jen like a juicy piece of fruit.” He laughed gutturally. “I’m going to tear strips from her body and feed them to my dog.”

Dan lost his grip on whatever remained of his self-control, just as Esteban had planned - for an impulsive man made mistakes. He took careful aim and fired two shots.

Esteban flinched when the splintering wall showered him with fragments of plaster. But he smiled broadly and thought, I’ve won. It was just a matter of time now.

Dan reached down, grabbed Simon by the scruff of his collar, and pulled him to his knees. “Come on.” He dragged him to the central corridor, the one leading to the heart of the complex, directly toward the fray. Simon had to scramble to catch up but felt grateful for the rough treatment once they’d entered the mouth of the corridor. It felt safer in there - at least they only had two directions over which to fret.

Dan pushed his friend into a nook and pointed back toward Esteban. “Make sure nobody comes this way.”

Simon nodded, not yet in full control of his breath. He spoke in short gasps, “What... about... you?”

Dan’s eyes were the most brutal Simon had ever seen. They had an alien quality. Few people ever understood it. It was something a person had to experience to understand - concentrated death. Every fibre in Dan’s body itched for carnage and virtually nothing could stop him. “I’m going this way.” He turned towards the centre of the Guild and started walking, casually replacing the magazine in his Colt. He had the Cobra-KT with a few hundred rounds for backup but preferred the Colt in cramped conditions. It was faster to aim and a sliver of a second could mean the difference between life and death.

The transformation was complete. He’d become what he feared. His ugly past had resurfaced. A death machine, capable of unspeakable things. Something he’d

tried hard to forget. And the worst part was that he enjoyed it. He was thriving on the thrill and needed to quench his thirst for blood. He'd been parched a long time.

He strode confidently but insanely into the Guild's core and obliterated their stronghold by tapping bullets to the foreheads of the four men there. They collapsed like rag-dolls, their dark-red blood bursting onto the pristine carpet.

Two more witnessed the slaughter from a side corridor and sprinted for their lives, spreading terror like a disease. Soon everyone knew what'd happened and all desperately wanted to escape. They were fleeing for the portal chamber on the far side of compound.

But Dan wasn't finished. He pursued them until they'd all flashed away. When it was over, he'd slain six, critically wounded one, and given two flesh wounds. The critically wounded man lay gasping for breath through blood-filled lungs, abandoned by his fellow members and forgotten in the heat of battle. Nobody tended to his wounds and nobody heard his dying words.

A body on the floor mesmerised Dan. The back of his skull was missing, blown away by Dan's nine-millimetre round. He hadn't honestly expected so much damage. Environmental trauma that caused bone disease? A genetic problem? It wouldn't surprise him. Dozens of genetic catastrophes had snaked into the human gene pool, which dangerous chemicals were gradually eroding. Most people suffered the consequences of at least one flaw. Weak and decalcified bones were prevalent disorders.

Now... Esteban. Dan wanted to gaze inside Esteban's skull, to see if maybe he was missing his frontal lobes. He mightn't have been a cyborg... But he's certainly fucking insane.

*

Jen was feeling stronger. Now she wished the world would stop spinning for long enough to get her bearings. But she was thankful her headache had dulled to a background throb. It'd been the worst headache she could remember - and no painkillers to ease the suffering. It'd felt as if her brain was swelling inside her skull and had run out of room to expand.

The shots have stopped. She wondered whether that meant Dan was dead. Or

captured. She wasn't sure what'd be worse. She wished she had a weapon and, with all the gunfire, she supposed there had to be guns lying around. Where're the other women? The thought of orchestrating an uprising appealed, it was the most liberating thought she'd had in days.

If I can just find some guns... She blundered into a laundry and squinted in surprise. Disorientated, she'd been expecting one of the lounge rooms. Where am I? Nothing looked familiar and that scared her. It was one of the withdrawal effects; everything was obscure in her mind. Her hands looked big and her feet looked small. She tried not to focus on the distortion lest she went mad, and she kept chanting her tasks in her mind. Find a weapon. Find Dan. It didn't really matter in which order those things happened. As long as they both happen.

An indiscernible amount of time later she found the room she'd been looking for, the one most of the shots had come from. And what a grisly sight it was. It pricked her nausea to new levels. Four men lay slain in a contorted exhibit of human limbs, a ghastly sculpture. Their skin was pale because much of their blood had trickled like thick syrup around their remains. Jen paled too, the vulgar sight sending shivers of revulsion through her body. She had to turn away and slapped a palm to her mouth to stifle a gasp and quell her uneasiness. Soon she symbolically shifted her hand to cover her eyes, her mind rendering the sight in equally horrid detail.

She turned slowly back around, removed her hand, and opened her eyes, slitting them just far enough to survey the devastation through a haze of eyelashes. None of the handguns had escaped the splattered gore. That's disgusting. But Jen was determined to fend for herself. She abhorred blood, but she hungered for survival and ordered herself to select a weapon. So, without even a grimace, she mechanically bent down and obeyed her inner voice.

It was sticky and warm, just the way she remembered. The iron-like smell of haemoglobin assaulted her nose and brought bile to the back of her throat. She came closer to vomiting then than in the past four hours.

She looked at the gun, her mind magnifying it to the detriment of her stability. She was so intent upon the weapon and the viscid feel of blood coating her fingers that she didn't notice somebody creeping up behind her. One solid hit and the gun went sprawling from her fingers, knocked to the far side of the room.

Wha...? But someone locked her into an abrasive headlock before she had time to finish the thought. Whoever it was, he was strong. He tipped her backward, taking her weight against his body. The lock around her neck was threatening to crush her windpipe and was already partially collapsing her arteries. She could hear the blood pounding in her ears like a base drum, slowed by the hallucinations in her mind.

“Don’t say a word.” It was Junior.

Ah yes. Jen recognised the ginger hair on his arm.

He pressed the tip of his gun firmly into her temple and the pressure revived a painful memory of her earlier headache. Junior was focussing elsewhere and didn’t even realise he was close to strangling her. For him, she was a tool, and always had been. To be used as he saw fit and cast aside once he was finished. And right now, she was the perfect human shield, the one person Dan wouldn’t risk killing.

A brazen smile snarled across Junior’s lips. Come on fucker... you and me. Right now.

*

“How the hell did you do that?” Simon asked incredulously, looking at Dan with a mixture of awe, respect, and concern.

“You don’t want to know.” Dan’s eyes reinforced the statement and Simon knew better than to probe further. “Esteban’s still here. So is Frank.” He paused a second before adding, “Maybe more, it’s hard to say, this place is a warren.”

“Not to mention they might just be regrouping,” Simon warned. “Or going for reinforcements.”

Dan doubted it. “This isn’t their fight, so I don’t see why they would.” He was right. The Guild was all for unification against common threats, but it was mostly lip service to an ideal. No member was willing to die for another’s problems. They were on the run, and most of them wouldn’t come back. They’d return to their cosy lives and sprout stories of their glory days to people who didn’t care and didn’t particularly want to hear.

Someone was approaching from the left corridor and Dan whipped his Colt up, already squeezing the trigger. But recognition stopped him and he snapped the Colt away when he saw it was a woman.

She was tall and slender, and supported enormous breasts with folded arms. “Don’t shoot.” She raised her hands to show she wasn’t holding a gun and her breasts visibly sagged, straining her back.

Dan waved her close. “Is there anyone left down there?” He indicated the direction she’d come with his Colt.

“No. They fled.” She extended a hand. “I’m Mindy.”

Both Dan and Simon accepted the offer and warmly shook her hand. “I’m Dan.”

“Simon,” the officer said, smiling politely. “We’re here to help.”

“Yeah, I kinda figured that.” She looked around, hungry for revenge of her own. “You need a hand?”

“You offering?” Dan asked, rather stupidly Simon thought.

Mindy nodded. “I know how to shoot. I used to be in the Air Training Corps.” Her eyes hardened. “Seems like a millennium ago now, but back then I was on the rifle shooting team.”

Dan snapped together the two halves of his Cobra-KT and undid the safety catch, selecting semiautomatic operation before handing it over. “There are only a few left - maybe two - but you’re welcome to help if you think you can.”

“Come on.” Simon was eager to have things finished. “We know he’s somewhere back there, toward the portals.”

“Ah...” Dan cleared his throat. “But there are two sets. He could’ve gone through those portals and appeared on the other side of the compound.”

“So we have no idea where he is,” Simon summed up. “Fantastic.”

“Under normal circumstances I wouldn’t suggest breaking up,” Dan said. Only a fraction of his consciousness was aware of what he was doing, experience and

skill had taken over. He was on autopilot. “But there are three of us and three directions to sweep.”

“I’ll take the left,” Simon volunteered, waiting for a nod from Dan before departing to check every room as he zigzagged down the corridor.

“I’ll take the right,” Mindy offered.

Dan held up a hand before she could move off. “Wait, my friend’s in here somewhere. She’s new. Her name’s Jennifer Cameron...”

“Yeah, I’ve met Jen.”

Good. “Okay, I just didn’t want you shooting her, that’s all.”

The determined expression in her eyes momentarily softened. “Don’t worry, I won’t shoot your girlfriend.” She departed before Dan could explain.

She’s not my girlfriend. The thought lingered in his mind while she vanished down her corridor. That left Dan with the centre. He slapped both hands around the grip of his Colt, having already fed a new string of bullets into the clip. They were his last rounds. After that, he’d have to find more nine-millimetre ammunition, find another gun, or fight with his fists.

I’m coming Jen...

“Dan Sutherland. Fancy meeting you here.”

Dan swivelled, his Colt level before he’d completed the turn. A wash of alarm boomed in his skull when he saw who it was. Junior had Jen in a headlock and he was pointing a Browning semiautomatic at her temple.

“Jen...” He froze, realising the outcome of the next few seconds would determine whether she lived or died. “Are you okay?”

She nodded the best she could, more with her eyes than anything else. The pressure from Junior’s forearm squeezed her oesophagus and vocal cords so that she could muster only a choking wheeze when she tried to speak.

“Let her go,” Dan ordered tersely, menacingly adjusting his aim.

Junior shook his head. “Put down the gun, then I’ll think about it.”

Dan judged his chance of getting a bullet into Junior’s head. He was perilously close to Jen. If his aim were off by less than one tenth of a degree, he’d kill her instead. Damn.

“Let me make it easier for you, tough guy.” Junior pressed his muzzle even harder against Jen’s temple. It was going to leave a nasty bruise. “Put down your gun or I’ll spray her brains over the floor.”

Jen’s stress hormones were a hundredfold above potentially lethal doses and her blood disorder began to react. The capacity for her haemoglobin to carry oxygen to her brain was dwindling fast and, even without Junior’s arm, she was choking. She wriggled, ignoring the pain from the cold steel against her temple, and freed herself enough to speak. It came in contorted gasps, “Take the shot.”

Dan hesitated.

Junior echoed her, “Yeah, come on Sutherland. Take the shot if you have the balls. Or aren’t you good enough?”

If he’d still been suffering under Zyclone’s protective umbrella, he wouldn’t have hesitated. He missed the confidence it breathed into him, especially at times such as these. Now he was wrecked by doubt. He couldn’t hit Junior and be sure he’d miss Jen. The brute had pulled her onto her toes and was crouching low to give Dan as little as possible to shoot at. No... I can’t.

Junior saw the defeat on his face and snapped, “No, I didn’t think so. So put the fucking gun down.”

Dan was about to comply when he caught the disappointment in Jen’s eyes. He froze, thought, and steadied his aim instead.

Jen took strategic advantage of nausea brought about by oxygen-deprivation and gagged on a jet of vomit that surged explosively from her mouth. It sprayed down her front and coated Junior’s trousers, assaulting him with its pungent acidic odour.

He relaxed his grip and she twisted to face him for the next convulsion, spraying him in the face. Junior responded the same as most people would under the

circumstances, instinctively swatting the vomit that clung to his mouth and nose and made it difficult to breathe. Jen crumpled to the floor and Dan shot Junior thrice in the head. He fell backward, away from Jen.

He rushed to her side, oblivious to the chunky vomit puddling around her. “Jen! Are you all right?”

She shook her head. “No.”

An irrepressible song of euphoria was whistling through Dan’s mind. He couldn’t explain why any god thought he was worthy of a miracle, but one had bestowed a miracle on him anyway. It was only then that he noticed Jen’s breathing was short and sharp, and a frown crossed his forehead.

“What’s happening?”

With Dan’s help, Jen rolled away from the vomit. “I have...” - she had to gasp for air - “...a blood disorder... can’t breathe...”

A helpless panic replaced his euphoria. “What can I do?”

Jen closed her eyes, trying to control her breath. The onset of haemoglobin-failure was itself a stressor and contributed to the downward spiral in her condition.

“Nothing... just tell me... I’m safe.” Jen was calming down, but wasn’t yet sure she’d live. It would get worse before it got better. “Help... me get... clean.” She didn’t want to die in a puddle of vomit. The urge to be sick had passed, for which she was thankful, but she could feel the acid on her skin and didn’t imagine it would be pleasant for Dan.

He helped her wriggle out of her shirt and jeans and cleaned the mess from her face. Afterwards she looked respectable, despite the fact she was lying there in her underwear. Naked would still have been preferable to wearing vomit-soaked clothes. Dan removed his coat and wrapped it around her, seeing appreciation in her eyes.

Then he carried her to the couch and gently laid her down, brushing the hair from her forehead. “Shh... it’s okay now. You’re safe. You’re okay.”

And Jen believed him. It didn't even matter what he'd done to make everything okay. People had died, but in her mind it was justified. It was over and they were both alive, and that was the important thing as far as Jen was concerned. She was tired but stubbornly fought the impulse to sleep. Her dizziness was subsiding and that was a positive sign, it meant she might live.

The not-so-distant rattle of gunfire snapped Dan's head to attention. It was unmistakably the tinkle of a Cobra-KT, fired on fully automatic.

"What's that?" Jen asked, prising her eyes open and fretting the situation might not yet be as safe as she'd assumed.

"Esteban's still here," Dan reluctantly admitted. Though maybe not anymore... that could've been the sound of his death.

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Perspiration beaded unnoticed on Simon's forehead. He was too distracted to sponge it away. She's dead. He checked Mindy's body again but still found no pulse. Esteban had killed her with a single well-aimed shot to the chest.

He brushed her vacant eyes closed and took the Cobra-KT from her hands, and then resumed his merciless, angry pursuit of Esteban. The man represented everything he stood against as a law enforcement officer.

For his part, Esteban was backing away. He knew the other Guild members had abandoned him and their cowardliness turned his stomach. There were only two! Surely a dozen men could overpower two intruders? He didn't grasp that the two intruders were far more motivated than the Guild members would ever be. Dan was willing to risk his life to free Jen, a sacrifice no Guild member was willing to make.

He fired a few lazy shots for cover while dialling the destination code and making his escape through a portal.

Simon stood from cover and rotated his shoulders to release the tension. The entire assault had lasted no more than 15 or 20 minutes but it'd left him more exhausted than a two-hour ordeal in the gym. He meandered carefully back to the lounge room, still alert in case there were more.

He found Dan sitting next to Jen, who was lying immobile on the couch. She looked pale. His first thought was that she'd been shot and she was dying. "What happened?"

Dan was gently stroking Jen's forehead and didn't look up. "Nothing, it's all okay now. Frank used her as a human shield, but he's gone."

"So is Esteban," Simon said, sounding less than impressed.

"You got him?" Dan's eyes flashed with that alien emotion again.

"No I mean he's gone. He escaped through the portals... but not before killing Mindy."

Dan hung his head and sent a silent prayer to wherever people went after death. He hadn't spoken more than a handful of words to her but he'd sensed she was a decent person. Take care of her, Katherine. Dan thought his wife must know her way around the afterlife and was therefore the perfect person to help with Mindy's transition. If an afterlife exists, that is. The jury was still out, and would be until the day Dan died.

Now that the danger had passed, other women started to appear. They tentatively stepped into the lounge room and eyed the intruders with as much suspicion as they'd lavished on Guild members. Simon took charge and tried to reassure them by holstering his weapon and resting the Cobra-KT next to the couch. He waved them closer. "It's okay, you're free now."

"Free?" Restrained hope twinkled in the speaker's eyes. She was short, shorter than the others. The Guild had so thoroughly beaten hope from her spirit that now it'd returned, it stung her. Tears were forming in her eyes and she wrapped her arms around her body for comfort. "We're free?"

"You will be soon," Jen affirmed from the couch. "We're all getting out of here." She sat up with Dan's assistance and looked at him askance. "Any chance you brought microchips?" Or do we have to go spine gouging?

"We might have to make a couple of trips," Dan said and handed over the device. Jen wasted no time cracking the case and handing out the precious rice-like chips.

One of the women did a headcount and said, “Someone’s missing.”

“Mindy?” Simon asked.

She nodded. “That’s right. How’d you know that?”

There was no easy way to say it. “She died.”

They met the news with grim silence, but also an acceptance that Simon had never before witnessed. These women had seen enough hardship, violence and death to grow a thick emotional defence that one more death couldn’t scratch.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” Simon said, waving them toward the portals. He was nervous that the Guild members might return better prepared. Or maybe Esteban will come back with... The thought, unfinished, still sent a chill down his spine.

“Wait a minute,” Dan stopped them. “How will we get back in?”

Jen looked at him in confusion. “Don’t you have chips with proper access?”

“Ah, actually... no.” Dan shook his head.

“Then how did you get in to start with?”

“Long story,” Dan replied evasively.

“I don’t want to do it again.” Simon swallowed hard. “That’s pushing our luck too far.”

Dan nodded thoughtfully. “You’re right. You go ahead to the portal while I... find a chip we can use.”

Simon masked a shudder and led the procession to what he considered the front of the compound. The short woman sidled up to him on the way, slipping an arm around him and pulling herself close. She liked him; it was obvious. And while Simon found it flattering, he was thoroughly embarrassed. Before they were halfway to the portals, he was everyone’s hero and they showered him with attention.

Jen, who'd stayed behind, looked at Junior's vomit-and blood-covered corpse. "Is that where you're going to..."

"Yes." Dan nodded distastefully. "You can go ahead if you'd like. It's not going to be pretty."

Jen shook her head. "No, I'd like to stay if that's all right."

"Yeah, that's fine." He didn't know what else to say. He'd prefer to work alone; it'd be easier that way. He stripped the clothes from Junior's torso and rolled him onto his stomach. Then he gripped the handle of his Ka-Bar and carefully selected the correct vertebrae. Parting Junior's skin felt like peeling a peach. And when his knife struck bone, it felt as though he was grinding seed. A knife wasn't the preferred instrument for removing a segment of a human spine and it took him five oath-filled minutes to remove the hacked and blood-smeared bit of bone. "This had better be the right one." It was the segment from beneath the tiny scar, but Dan wasn't a butcher and didn't really know what he was looking at.

Jen was watching expressionlessly from the couch. "I think that's it." She didn't know either, but it looked about right. The corpse had a messy hole in its back, the surrounding tissue massacred by Dan's knife. He rolled Junior over for no other reason than to hide his untidy work. Next, he cleaned himself with help from the bar sink and wrapped the spinal segment in a tea towel.

"Okay, let's go." He helped Jen to her feet and supported her to the portals. When they arrived, the first six women to receive microchips had already gone. Simon keyed the destination and invited Dan to follow them. He flashed away, collected the chips, and reinserted them into Jen's chip selector to mask their signature for the return trip. Junior's microchip worked perfectly and he reappeared a minute later, and they only had to repeat the process once more to get everyone out of the underground nightmare.

Jen turned to Dan when the last of the women were gone. "I need to say something."

"Uh, guys..." Simon interrupted incredulously. "This isn't the place. Can't you wait for another two minutes?"

"I suppose so," Jen said with an uncertain expression. She deeply searched Dan's

eyes and found understanding there. Maybe I don't need to say it at all. But she intended to anyway, just to make sure.

*

Sunday, September 19, 2066

9:42 Sydney, Australia

The Raven snarled at his change of luck. He hated the shackle of his omen. It hadn't come. Yet. He'd hoped to eliminated Samantha Lee and David Coucke while Dan was busy. Now he had to contend with all of them again. On the up side, at least he knew where Jen was. Her absence had begun to bother him - since he had to get rid of them all to collect his two million Credits.

The neighbourhood was the perfect cover, for which he couldn't have been happier - the kind of deserted urban landscape he thrived in. A raven's paradise. Ravens haunted deserted and barren landscapes. He was a human raven, so it made sense that he'd operate best in barren human environments.

Still, it was a dismal place. So desolate. Hideous, pitiable creatures scratched a forlorn existence from the rubble. Why do they bother? He couldn't honestly answer that question; it was beyond his capacity for reason.

The Raven was crouching in an abandoned house, which someone had deliberately converted into a dump, or so it seemed. Someone had mistaken a corner of the room for a latrine and defecated there many times, leaving a huge pile of shit. So the air reeked, but he could filter that distasteful sense through his embedded computer, attenuating his disgust at his surroundings. Indeed, the overpowering stench made it the perfect place to hide. Nobody would voluntarily come within 50 metres of the rancid hole. The flies were worse. They buzzed incessantly and frequently landed on him with their shit-caked feet. Yet he had a good vantage to observe the house where Dan and the others were hiding.

Due to an alarming lack of video equipment installed in this area of the city, the Raven was relying primarily upon his eyes - something that made him intensely uncomfortable. It was easier to trust cameras and he could use them to observe multiple angles simultaneously. Now he felt hampered, but accepted the assignment conditions without complaint.

The omen however... that was something else entirely. It frustrated him greatly that his protector hadn't given him permission to swoop while his quarries had been apart. And still he was waiting. He was willing to take them all if the omen would just give him the opportunity. The house didn't deter him. He'd accessed

the schematics from the New South Wales Police Department's database and he knew where contractors had skimmed to complete the contract on time and budget. There were always vulnerabilities. It was just a matter of knowing where they were and how to exploit them.

So the Raven waited, and watched.

*

Sunday, September 19, 2066

9:49 Sydney, Australia

Jen and Samantha embraced as soon as they saw each other, though Samantha was the only one to shed tears as the pent up tension from the past several days came rushing to a blissful conclusion. She just couldn't contain the overwhelming urge to cry. She didn't know why, but it felt good.

"Shh," Jen soothed her. "I'm okay, I promise."

Samantha wasn't so easily reassured. "Are you? Really? Did they hurt you? I swear if they-

"Most of them already are," Jen said. "Dead I mean."

Except for Esteban, Dan thought biting. I still have to remedy that.

"I'm fine," Jen was saying. "Really."

Samantha's relief came with another torrent of tears, which required both Jen and Cookie to soothe. Dan and Simon just felt awkward, watching the reunion uncomfortably from the kitchen. But they stayed respectfully silent instead of whitewashing the moment with sarcastic or light-hearted remarks.

The headaches and nausea, Jen's constant companions, were gone. Though she had the uneasy feeling another bout was near. She'd learned to recognise the preliminary signs and didn't want to be standing when the next round struck. "I have to lie down."

"Come on then." Samantha began helping her to the bedroom. "You need rest."

"Dan?" Jen turned back to him. "Can you come?"

He hid his surprise well. "Sure," he said nonchalantly and followed her into the second bedroom where Samantha was helping her into bed.

"It's the drugs, I'm going through withdrawals," Jen explained.

"Drugs?" Samantha's eyes popped wide. "Did they addict you to something?"

Jen shrugged. "I s'pose so." It was a disturbing thought but it'd been fact for long enough that she no longer flinched. "They're wearing off I think. They injected me twice. Once at the start and once last night, I think." Time was a blur and she couldn't be sure. She didn't even know with any degree of certainty what day it was.

"Is there anything we can do?" Dan asked, as concerned as Samantha. "Do you want to go to hospital?"

She gently shook her head. "No, I'm on top of it. Give me another few hours and I'll be fine." I hope. That was what she'd been telling herself all along, so that's what she'd come to believe.

Samantha reassuringly squeezed her hand. She knew when she wasn't welcome. "I'll leave you two alone then." And she closed the door on her way out.

They remained silent for a long time, studying each other. Jen had wondered what she'd feel if she ever saw Dan again, knowing that he'd killed Adrian Miller. She wondered whether Dan knew Adrian was trying to help. But she surprised herself with her reaction. She didn't care. It didn't seem to matter a damn.

Dan read her thoughts, or part of them. "You're thinking about what I did to Miller."

"Yeah." She nodded. "I suppose I am."

Dan nodded too, but mutely. He didn't blame her for holding it against him.

"I wanted you to know that it doesn't matter," Jen said, trying to get the words out before the next wave of gut-wrenching nausea.

"It doesn't?" Dan frowned, not sure he understood. "But I killed him and carved a... that doesn't disturb you?"

"A little," Jen admitted. "But I think I would've done the same if I were you."

Dan absorbed the news. He wanted to reassure her too; he wanted to say that it didn't matter to him if they'd raped her. Doesn't matter? Dan began to frown. They're not the right words. I mean, it doesn't bother me... No, that's wrong too.

I mean, I should say: I think no less of you. Deep down he believed Esteban had raped her, but he couldn't broach the subject with his mind so muddled; he didn't want it to come out wrong. Maybe later.

"I just wanted you to know, that's all," she said as her limbs began to twist with pain.

"Thank you, Jen." And he sat beside her throughout the tremors, offering comfort by talking about trivial things in a soothing voice until she fell asleep.

*

Sunday, September 19, 2066

16:55 Sydney, Australia

The Raven fumed. He was starting to wonder whether his spiritual protector deliberately intended to vex him before setting him loose. If that's true, it's working. He'd killed Dan a thousand times in his mind and imagined nuclear warheads detonating on the house. He was hungry and irritable, not the perfect frame of mind for carefully planned slaughter.

Hurry up, damn you.

*

Sunday, September 19, 2066

19:12 Sydney, Australia

Jen emerged to the sound of laughter and, for a moment, she wasn't sure where she was. The ceiling was different. Then she remembered and it all came back in a rush that left her giddy with relief. The laughter was from Cookie; she recognised his voice now and smiled at his distinctive mid-breath rasp.

For the first time in days, she felt rested. And safe.

And hungry. It felt as though her stomach was a bottomless pit. She staggered out to the kitchen where the others were hunching around the table, an open box of cold pizza in the middle.

“Hey, Jen, how're you feeling?” It was Dan and he gallantly helped her to a seat.

“Much better,” she said, looking hungrily at the pizza.

Samantha read her mind and nuked two slices in the microwave before setting the plate in front of her. “Here, you need to eat.”

Jen made short work of the first slice and vowed to eat the second more leisurely - but then quickly forgot. She spoke around a mouthful of pepperoni and ham. “So what's happening?”

Nobody answered.

That means something bad. “What?” The half-eaten slice of pizza remained anxiously frozen in front of her mouth. She hated waiting for bad news.

“We're waiting for three o'clock,” Dan said cryptically.

“In the morning?”

Dan nodded.

“What happens then?” Jen wanted to know, suspecting she wouldn't like the answer.

Dan took a long, deep breath before saying, “None of us will be safe unless we

finish this, and it won't be over until we deal with UniForce."

Jen had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. Escaping the Guild had been the easy half of the equation - she still had to remove the threat of future kidnappings. And that meant neutralising Esteban and most of the UniForce management team. There were no other options. And fleeing? She scoffed. That was a temporary fix, which would ultimately lead to a fragmented patchwork of a life. Because once she began running, she knew she would never stop. Her life was in tatters and the only way to recover a semblance of order was to smash the instrument of doom itself.

"What're you planning to do?" Jen asked. "You must have some idea."

"We do." Dan raised his palm to accolade Cookie. "Maestro here's found enough dirt on UniForce management to put them all away for life." Which wouldn't be long - and an infestation of viruses wouldn't kill them. The instant the other prisoners discovered who they were, inmates would take great pleasure in butchering them. "We can't legally arrest them," Dan admitted. That was the darker side of jurisdiction and international law raising its ugly head. "But we have enough for a convincing bluff."

"A bluff?" Jen couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You're joking!"

"No." Dan wished he were. "We can't arrest them. It'd take weeks to get authorisation for that. And if we tried, they'd pull strings to block it." Dan shook his head. "All we have is bluff. But it's a convincing one. You should see some of the stuff Cookie unearthed."

"So... what exactly are you planning?" Jen repeated, trying to wrap her mind around Dan's ludicrous suggestion. "March into UniForce headquarters, walk past security and blackmail our way to freedom?"

Dan shrugged. "UniForce security isn't as good as you might think."

Jen laughed and wiped a tear of mirth from her eye before saying, "They'll know you're bluffing. They know they can make us disappear."

"I can be convincing," Dan said almost inaudibly. "So can my Colt."

So if bluff doesn't work, you'll threaten? Jen pinched the bridge of her nose,

desperate to find another solution. “We can’t run, can we?”

“Where to?” Dan asked. “For how long do you think we’ll be safe? I can assure you Esteban won’t rest until we’re dead. And the Raven’s probably tracking us down now.” He had no idea how close he was to the truth. “Before, when you were just another target to apprehend, running was an option. But now? Well... now it’s different.”

Jen felt miserable. The hope for the future that she’d cultivated after escaping the Guild was faltering. She’d imagined a future that included both of them. Somewhere warm... by the beach. With a boat... It was a fabulous dream, but that’s all it was - a dream. The real future looked bleak. But Jen didn’t intend to pass on her one opportunity to turn her dream into reality. She gritted her teeth and said, “Then I’m coming.”

Dan glanced at Simon and saw they shared doubts. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea Jen.”

“Why?” She arched a regal eyebrow and brushed her hair behind her ears. “Because I’m a woman?”

“No.” Dan uncompromisingly shook his head. “Because you need to rest.”

“I’m fine.” It was true, she felt fine. The pizza was working wonders, fuelling her rapid recovery. Besides, there were seven and a half hours to rest. “I’m coming,” she repeated with conviction, glowering at them each in turn and daring them to demur.

Dan opened his mouth as if to speak but remained silent when he saw her determination. It wasn’t just in her eyes, it radiated from her whole body. So nobody objected. They whittled the hours away with light conversation, which periodically returned to what they’d do with their lives after settling the score with UniForce - the corporation charged, ironically, with making the planet a safer place for all.

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Sunday, September 19, 2066

UniForce Headquarters

08:45 San Francisco, USA

Esteban sat heavily. He stroked his stubble with one hand and gripped his pistol with the other. He was too angry to express the feeling properly. The thought of shooting James in the back of the head had occurred to him, but that wouldn't accomplish anything. Wouldn't it? Maybe it'd make me feel better. The frustration crawled under his skin like a nest of maggots, sending him insane.

One bullet had grazed his upper thigh, singing his skin. The burn painfully chafed against his ruined trousers when he walked. But the bullet that'd smashed through the periphery of his chest had caused much worse damage. It'd agonisingly shattered two ribs and the doctor had removed the fibrous bones, saying there was nothing left to repair. He'd said Esteban was lucky the fragments hadn't punctured his lung and had done no major damage. But Esteban saw things differently. Lucky? What a crock of shit. If he'd been lucky, he wouldn't have been standing anywhere near the hailstorm of bullets that bitch had fired. The only thing bringing a smile to his lips was the knowledge that he'd killed her.

“So, how's it going?” Esteban sounded pasty due to a haze of painkillers.

James hadn't heard him enter and the unexpected question startled him. He spun to see Esteban sitting in the spare chair, a thick bandage strapped around his chest and a torn, bloodied shirt covering little of the gore. “Jesus, what happened to you?”

Esteban grunted dopily. “Apparently I was lucky.”

“By the looks of that you were,” James said, sharing the doctor's philosophy.

Why doesn't anyone understand? Esteban wondered whether he was the only UniForce employee with genuine intelligence. “I wasn't lucky. I got fucking shot.”

James hadn't encountered the product of violence so closely before and he stared with open mouth at the wound. “Does it hurt?”

“No,” Esteban replied. The drugs were too effective for that. “I feel wonderful.”

“Did it hurt when you got shot?”

What a stupid question. “What the fuck do you think?” Esteban pointed at James’s computer with his gun. “What’s up with the Raven?”

“Glad you asked,” James said. “I’ve found him, and he’s found them.”

Esteban sat forward in the chair, ignoring the doctor’s warning to rest his side. “Where?”

James handed him the address. “There. He’s waiting, apparently for some kind of sign.” James snorted. “I’m not sure what, it’s cloudy. I’m not even convinced he completely understands it himself. But he sure as hell isn’t going to attack until he gets what he’s waiting for, and he’s pissed that it hasn’t happened yet.”

But Esteban wasn’t listening. Now I have the element of surprise. A wicked gleam settled in his eyes and he stormed from the room, leaving James alone with his equipment.

Chapter 12

Two words to remember - empires fall

Katharine Ainger

Monday, September 20, 2066

03:02 Sydney, Australia

“You ready?” Simon asked, feeling nerves jingle in his extremities.

Dan nodded once then looked at Jen.

“Yeah, as ready as I’m ever gonna be,” she said. “Do I get a weapon?”

Dan cocked an eyebrow. “Why, do you want one?”

“Don’t worry, I’m not planning on a shooting spree. I’d just feel safer, that’s all.”

So Simon handed her his backup firearm and quickly instructed her how to use it safely. “And that’s all there is to it.” He flipped the safety back on. “Leave it there unless you plan on actually firing it, okay?”

Jen nodded, hid the weapon, and they each took a turn in the portal. Dan was using his next identity, Brent Bertrouney. Jen had to make do with one of her old ones. She would’ve used one of Samantha’s, but didn’t think anybody would believe she was Korean. Because although Dan assured her it wouldn’t cause a problem at Australian customs, the Americans would undoubtedly raise an eyebrow.

Christopher was on duty at his usual station and Dan headed straight for him. “Hey, Chuck.”

He brushed a weary hand disbelievingly over his long face. “Are you telling me you’re still at this thing you’re doing?”

“Yes, but it’s nearly over.”

“You must owe me eight bottles of high quality scotch by now,” Chuck reminded him, updating his mental tally.

Dan would’ve agreed to 20, 50, or even a 100. It was irrelevant. He needed to get past irrespective of the financial cost.

“No, better make that 10,” Chuck corrected. “I’m going to start charging per capita.” He winked as he waved his scanner toward Dan. “So, Mr Brent

Bertrouney is it?” He smiled, amused by the details on his monitor.

Dan nodded, “That’s right.”

“Did you know that in ‘addition details’ your profile reports a penile length of 30 centimetres and a girth of eight centimetres?”

“What... are you jealous?” Dan asked, somehow keeping a straight face.

Chuck held up his hands, grinning. “Okay, whatever mate. Just show me your guns. Weapons,” he quickly corrected.

All three travellers piled their weapons onto the counter and Chuck tagged them on Dan’s profile. “Have a good trip.” Then he lowered his voice for Dan’s benefit and added, “She’s a real looker mate.” He was referring to Jen, and his half-hearted whisper carried to everyone. Jen had the grace to blush, and so did Dan.

“Thank you,” Jen said, bravely accepting the compliment to save Dan from stammering something even more embarrassing.

Dan was busy nursing a sparkle of hope. He wondered whether they might actually succeed and earn the chance to construct a new life. But as they approached the international portals, his sparkle transformed into an inferno of apprehension.

*

Sunday, September 19, 2066

UniForce Headquarters

09:15 San Francisco, USA

Michele was nervous. Jackie had postponed their meeting twice and eventually rescheduled for Sunday morning. The waiting was becoming intolerable.

It'd been weighing on her mind all night. Should I? It was an impossible question to answer unless she could divine the future like a seer. But, to be safe, she intended to go through with it. She needed to tell someone, the stress of keeping secrets was too much. She hadn't slept properly in days. Michele was in such a bad state that not even the colourful patterns on her glass wall or her promotional cube could keep her entertained. She slouched in her chair, chewing her lips. And waited. Impatiently. She needed Jackie to call and confirm the time they'd tentatively set aside.

Her phone finally rang and Michele leapt for the receiver. "Hello, Michele speaking."

"Are you ready?" It was Jackie.

Michele nodded into the camera. "Yes, I'm ready."

"Okay," Jackie said with a catch to her voice. "Then come to my office."

They hung up and Michele scuttled through the corridors to the nearest portal, popped up several flights of stairs, and waddled into Jackie's office. She closed the doors behind her.

Jackie looked impassively at her, trying to smile with her eyes so she wouldn't stretch her botched face-lift. She waved Michele to a chair. "Take a seat."

"Thanks." Michele's nervousness tripled and her stomach fluttered. It felt as though someone had sent her to the principal's office, despite the fact she'd requested the meeting herself.

But Jackie was in high spirits. She'd just stitched a deal to secure UniForce's future in the personal security market and she was therefore feeling excessively pleased with herself. In fact, she'd predetermined that Michele's news wouldn't dampen her elation. Besides, she reasoned. What can Michele possibly have to

say that's so important? But that was a trap. Many had fallen into it. Although stupid, Michele could still bear bad tidings. "So what do you want to tell me?"

Michele heaved a breath and Jackie's attention shifted to her plump breasts. Her allure was a hundred times more powerful than that of Sasha, her rabbit-sized dog. Besides, Sasha had recently grown bored with lapping up peanut butter. A flush of excitement tingled in Jackie's groin but she ordered herself to concentrate.

"Esteban hasn't contracted an assassin to kill Dan."

"What?" Immediately Jackie's attention snapped back to the meeting.

"He's using an assassin to kill the Raven," - she shivered when that name passed her lips - "but he's doing the others himself."

Dark red splotches boiled through Jackie's thick layer of makeup. "He can't do that." She seethed with anger. "I revoked his field status." I bet he wants to collect the assassination fee himself. She gritted her teeth. Well we'll just see about that.

"I think it's because of his personal involvement," Michele prompted, wanting to rat him out completely. She needed to be on Jackie's good side and distance herself from Esteban, lest Dan resurface. At least then she could stick by Jackie, who knew how to take care of herself.

Jackie ground her teeth and jaw muscles ripple under her skin. That was truly the final straw. She'd taken as much insubordination from Esteban as she could handle. Now, what to do about it? She knew he was a dangerous man, but it'd finally dawned on her that the problem was only going to worsen with time. She needed to take swift, permanent action. And firing him won't be enough. The prospect of assassinating him was intriguing. She'd helped dozens of other companies dispose of their awkward problems, why not do the same with one of her own? She could contract an assassin to remedy the problem and dust her hands of the issue. Promote... who? That was her next problem. She didn't have enough staff to fill the vacancies. Quality staff anyway. She still had to find a coordinator for the recently minted personal security branch. And then there was Michele. Jackie couldn't help rolling her eyes. She now regretted promoting Michele as far as she had. What UniForce needed was strong leadership. True, Michele has improved revenue... But Jackie had quietly uncovered her plot to

oversell bounty lists. Lack of business ethics had inflated the revenue stream, not strength of leadership. She'd also discovered how much was missing from the official records - that generous portion which had slipped into an accounting black hole. She wondered who was hoarding it. Esteban, or Michele?

She reasoned it was high time she received something in return. And she was in the perfect mood for it too. I can fix the problem with Esteban later. It wouldn't be hard; all it would take was five contracts. The four that Esteban failed to set up, and one for Esteban himself. But first...

"Michele, you look tense. Why don't you come here and I'll give you a massage?" Jackie felt vulnerable soliciting her subordinate for sex, but she wasn't going to let a bit of discomfort stop her from experiencing more pleasure than she'd had in months.

An invisible shudder itched Michele's back teeth. She'd detested the previous time with Jackie and couldn't fathom why it should be any better now. But neither was she going to say no to someone above her in the chain of command. So she nodded and played her part. "Okay, I have been a stiff recently."

She waddled to Jackie's chair and knelt on the carpet. It was difficult in her tight black skirt and she tore a ladder in her stockings.

Jackie applied her fingers to Michele's supple neck and shoulders, massaging her tenderly. Michele played along by parting her lips and moaning with feigned pleasure. But she quickly tired of the exploratory backrub and decided to hurry the distasteful experience along. She climbed onto Jackie's lap and kissed her, thrusting her tongue deeply into Jackie's mouth.

"Ahem." Someone cleared his throat, interrupting Jackie's sojourn into the wild side of same-sex lovemaking before it could truly begin.

Michele turned with a start and Jackie's eyes widened when she saw Dan waltzing into her office, aiming a firearm. But the grievance in Dan's eyes incited more fear than his weapon. His pupils were black fires of pure hatred.

Slipping past UniForce security had almost become mundane. It wasn't at all difficult to sneak in unnoticed.

"What are you doing here?" Jackie demanded.

The fear contorting Michele's expression signalled that she at least had a rough idea.

Next entered Simon, also with a pistol, and behind him came Jen.

Dan waved at each in turn and emotionlessly intoned, "Meet Simon West and Jennifer Cameron."

Jackie pushed Michele to her feet, straightened her blouse and adjusted her collar. She was too embarrassed to be worried about the intruders. She was confident in her supreme ability to negotiate her way out of intense situations - without bloodshed.

"Sorry to interrupt you like this." But Simon's tone betrayed that he wasn't sorry at all. "Jackie Donald, I presume?"

"That's what the nameplate on the door says, doesn't it?" she snapped, returning to her usual demeanour.

"Who're you?" Simon asked, looking at the Penguin.

"It's Michele Roche," Dan said before Michele's tardy brain could process the question. "She's the head of the bounty hunter branch."

"How convenient," Simon said. "You're both under arrest."

Jackie scowled. "By whose authority?"

"The Republic of Australia," Simon replied, proudly puffing out his chest.

"That's ludicrous," Jackie retorted, dismissing the notion with a curt wave. "I'm an American and I have rights. You can't come here and-"

"You can shove your rights up your arse," Dan said, taking a menacing pace forward.

Jackie stood, her scowl deepening with fury. "This is preposterous. You dare come here and place me under arrest? Do you understand who I am?" She glared at them. "What am I supposedly under arrest for?"

Simon had rehearsed his answer to that question, but now, presented with his chance, his speech evaporated from his mind. Instead, he blundered on, tripping frequently over the jagged words. “We have evidence implicating you, directly, in more that, what, more than 30 assassinations. That is, non-sanctioned assassinations,” Simon stressed. “We have evidence that proves you not only had knowledge of, but proves you actively promoted UniForce’s illegal assassination branch.” Ineloquent, but it did the trick. “You’ll be going to prison for the rest of your life - may it be particularly short.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Jackie sneered, looking down her nose.

“Care to bet on that?” Dan took another pace forward, lining his pistol’s sights up with the centre of Jackie’s forehead. “Fuck the rest of that shit.” He waved at the chair. “Sit down.”

“No,” Jackie barked. She dared not obey his orders. She’d learned that on a management camp. Never yield. Get them used to accepting your orders instead of the other way around.

“Sit your baggy arse in the bloody chair or I’ll blow off your fucking kneecaps.” Dan was shouting and a fleck of saliva escaped from his mouth. He meant it. Here stood a person that was responsible for selling Katherine’s death to PortaNet. And as far as Dan was concerned, she was just as guilty as everyone else involved in the sordid deed.

She could see that he meant it. His resolve was scrawled all over his face. So she reluctantly sat.

“You too,” Dan said, pointing the gun at Michele.

“Where?”

“On the floor,” Dan ordered. “Over here where I can see you. And no sudden moves. Don’t even sneeze or I’ll put a bullet in your brain. Got it?”

They both nodded.

Dan wasn’t yet certain what he planned to do. But he wasn’t going to take them back to Australia under arrest. That wouldn’t achieve anything. Nothing good anyway. Their power extended further than the law could reach. A few pulled

strings and they'd be right back where they were, while the arresting officers wallowed in a truckload of shit. Dan flared his nostrils. No, there has to be a better solution. And if it ended with Jackie's blood, then so be it.

*

The Raven nearly drooled in anticipation when he felt the tingle in his temples and was ecstatic when the vibration spread to his back teeth. He knew it was coming. It was imminent. And the timing couldn't have been better: Dan Sutherland and Jennifer Cameron were out of the house. So is that police officer they're working with.

He stood and stretched his legs, trying to work feeling back into his buttocks. He'd been sitting on the hard ground with only a thin cushion to protect him from numbness. By the time he could feel his posterior, the omen was in full swing. Again, it took the form of a gelatinous eye. That was fine with the Raven. He didn't care if it was an eye, a beetle, or a spiny toadfish as long as he got the sign. He wanted four words, four short words that would enable him to complete the contract.

"I give thee sanction." The words boomed larger than life and resonated in every bone, muscle and cell in his body. It spoke to the fibre of his soul and recharged him with vigour.

Then, as suddenly as the eye had appeared, it vanished, leaving the Raven to time his swoop to the second. He hungrily looked at the house. Only a faint tinge of light escaped from the heavy curtains, barely enough to plot a course. The moonlight helped, but not much filtered through the soupy clouds. But it didn't matter. The Raven wasn't shy of the dark. It was his cloak. It protected him from the prying eyes of whatever lurked in such a devastated suburb.

"David Coucke," he whispered the name. "Samantha Lee..." The Raven relished saying the names of his victims. "Prepare to meet the Raven."

*

"That's strange." Cookie frowned at the digital television they were using as a monitor.

"What's that, baby?" Samantha entwined her arms around him, feeling a bit like

a discarded toy when he brushed her aside. They'd been waiting nervously for news since the others had left. Sleep was out of the question. They couldn't possibly rest when so much was riding on the success of the operation. Cookie had been hunching over his computer since they'd left, leaving Samantha to fret alone. She'd hovered from room to room, trying to find something with which to occupy her mind for the infuriating wait.

"He stopped," Cookie said, making perfect sense in his own mind but doing nothing to enlighten Samantha.

"Huh?" She stared blankly at him. "You're being cryptic again."

"The tech-head who's been chasing me." Cookie's was glowering at the screen, trying to determine what his nemesis was doing. He didn't like it when something unexpected happened. He'd been dodging the administrator's blows for days and he still had to be careful not to trigger the multitude of traps. But the flurry of activity was gone. On its own, that wasn't unusual, but the way it had happened was far from normal.

"One second he was here, and the next" - he made a hand movement that was reminiscent of an explosion - "he's gone."

"Maybe he needed to sleep," Samantha reckoned. "He's been busy if I'm not mistaken. Everyone needs to rest."

Cookie drummed his overworked but itchy fingers on the table. "No. That's not it. He didn't disengage. He just... vanished." It made him even more nervous about what was happening in San Francisco. "What if something bad happened?"

"What do you mean?" Samantha knew exactly what he meant but didn't dare breathe the thought.

"Maybe Dan screwed up or something." Cookie's imagination readily concocted a multitude of scenarios that would spell doom for their friends.

But Samantha refused to believe it. She needed to maintain her optimism as much as she needed oxygen. "No way. There must be a thousand reasons to explain why he stopped whatever he was doing."

Cookie looked dubiously at her. “You don’t understand. It was... it was like a forced removal. There isn’t a system administrator on the planet that would’ve done that voluntarily.”

“Yeah, but-”

“And what are the chances of that happening at the very moment Dan, Simon and Jen were entering UniForce headquarters? Surely that’s not a coincidence.” Cookie kept digging around the vicinity of the disappearance, wearily probing the data stream for possible traps. For all he knew, it was the most sophisticated trap yet. But his curiosity was too intense; he simply couldn’t pass the opportunity to glean information about what the UniForce administrator had been working on. Maybe I’ll find passwords, he thought with a feverish lick of his lips. He had to know.

He quickly coded a program for a slingshot that would fling him off the ‘net if he trod in a digital snare and tested it twice before committing himself to the potentially baited cheese.

“What is it?” Samantha sensed his excitement.

“When he vanished he left his notes on the table, metaphorically speaking,” Cookie explained. “It could be a trap, but-”

“I know.” Samantha understood him well. “You have to find out.” She trusted him to take proper precautions and refrained from interrogating him; he hated it when people questioned his logic and procedures. Still, Samantha had to bite her lips to keep silent.

He knew what she was thinking anyway and said impatiently, “Yes, I’ve taken precautions. If I trigger a trap, I’ll be booted off the ‘net.”

“I wasn’t...”

Cookie smiled knowingly at her. “Yes you were.” He downloaded unobtrusive snippets of data until he was confident nothing would ensnare him. Gradually it formed a picture.

He gaped, his jaw slack with shock.

“What?” Samantha held her breath in sympathy.

“Oh my G-god,” Cookie stammered. “Q-quick grab a coat.”

Samantha obeyed immediately out of trust, scared by his unusual behaviour.

“What’s going on?”

Cookie was disconnecting from the UniForce network and launching his maintenance programs as fast as he could. He wanted to be out of the house within 30 seconds and if that meant ditching the computer, then that’s what he’d do. But all the evidence... It pained him to imagine losing it - there was no guarantee he’d be able to get it again. He ran out of time before launching the slowest two programs and, desperate, yanked the power cord from the computer and tore the other jumbled cables from their sockets. Deliberately doing that sort of damage felt like a crime, there was no excuse for failing to shut the operating system down gracefully. But dire times... He clutched the computer to his chest and called, “You ready?”

She emerged from the bedroom, two coats under her arm. “For what?”

“We’ve gotta get out of here now,” Cookie replied, trying to recall a safe portal destination. The number... “Hang on.” He half-galloped to the lounge room and retrieved Simon’s mobile number from beside the phone. “It’s the Raven.”

Samantha paled. “What about him?”

“He’s here. Now.” Cookie dialled the only number he could remember on the portal. “He’s watching us.”

“How do you know that?” Samantha demanded.

“They hacked into his head.” Cookie pushed Samantha inside the white circle. “He’s a cyborg, remember? It’s just a computer. You can hack them.” He pressed the engage button and Samantha flashed away. Then Cookie performed a similar service for himself and the house lay empty.

*

There he goes. It had turned out to be Natasha Glinski’s toughest assignment. How did one seduce a cyborg? Someone so mechanical he’d lost all sex drive?

She'd done her research. The Raven hadn't had an impulsive sexual encounter since doctors had integrated a computer with his brain. She distastefully curled her lips at the thought. Natasha dreaded any kind of surgical procedure, let alone one that would merge her with a machine. The Raven simply didn't give in to his human urges; he had the capacity to switch them off. Amazing. She had to admire his self-control. A bit robotic though. She shrank from the thought of losing her spontaneity. That's what makes me human.

She'd been unobtrusively watching him in his stench-pot hidey-hole for the better part of a day. Finding him had proved easy, he'd never even attempted to mask his microchip signature. A mistake, she thought disapprovingly. An amateurish mistake. Natasha used disposable personas and never engaged in assignment-work with her own chip, it was just too dangerous. But then, he's just a bounty hunter, not a real assassin. She'd purchased the information from PortaNet. Virtually anything was available on the black market for the right price. Marketing companies exploited the information trade all the time, though they were more likely to catalogue trends rather than individual movements. Finding specific information was harder, but thousands of PortaNet employees had access to the corporate database and PortaNet didn't pay them well enough to immunise the data from bribes. Natasha had her own contact, and used him frequently.

She watched the shadowy figure emerge from the house and started walking, timing her stride to intercept him on the overgrown footpath. The weeds were knee-high, the only evidence of the path being a thinner patch running parallel with the street. The parched, prickly plants rustled under her feet and she hunched over as far as her spine would permit. She wanted to pass as one of the seedy, dishevelled residents. Nobody in the suburb was homeless, though very few technically owned the house they lived in. The exodus from the city had resulted in a surplus of empty housing. So there were no street-bums, only abandoned-building-bums. But Natasha's thick coat was wretched enough to appease anybody's expectations for a western-Sydney resident. And she'd taken pains to appear feminine. People never expected a woman to pose a threat. Men were dangerous and women were not - or so most people thought.

A stale, refuse-reeking zephyr rippled over her skin. She'd committed herself now; she couldn't turn back without risking the Raven's suspicion. And she had a good idea what he'd do if he became suspicious.

Twenty metres. She wondered how close she should get. How close he'll let me get...

Ten metres. She thought she could probably take the shot from there, but would feel more confident at five metres and kept walking without deviating from the overgrown path. She imperceptibly picked up the pace of her hunched shuffle to ensure the Raven wouldn't slip past beyond reach.

Within four metres, the Raven hesitated and instinctively reached for his weapon, a Redback-PX7 if Natasha's information had been accurate. Now! All the pent up energy in her body sprung into action and she flicked her gun to head-high and squeezed the trigger. The hiss of escaping gasses and a metallic twang accompanied her bullet as it entered the Raven's forehead, punctured his skull, and struck his computer.

He fell.

And that's number fifteen. Natasha chalked another success to her growing tally.

*

Esteban couldn't believe his eyes. It didn't make sense. Surely that was the Raven. Who else could it be? But that would mean... The assassin's a woman? That conclusion didn't connect in his head. It simply wouldn't compute. Esteban had falsely believed the realm of assassins was sacred to men. After all, Shadow had an impressive record, so surely it had to be a man! Yet he could find no other explanation for what he'd witnessed.

That's a woman. He was certain of that. She was slender and lithe. When she twisted her head in the trickling moonlight, he even grudgingly admitted she was sexy.

He shrugged away his irritation. He never thought a woman would be good enough to kill the Raven. But there he was, on the ground with a bullet in his most precious instrument.

Esteban, festering with irritation, continued to the house and skirted to the back. He knew the assassin wasn't interested in the house; he'd only contracted her to deal with the Raven. And now that he's dead, the house is all mine. Esteban cheerfully used explosives to blow a window from its frame. The charge

detonated quietly, focussing its destructive force and resultant soundwave directly toward the glass by using an ingeniously modified shell. Shattering glass clamoured into the barren night.

He quickly attached the second device and shattered the inside panel before laying his jacket over the shards and climbing through, pistol ready. Everybody in the house was going to die. He'd made up his mind to shoot first and ask questions later. Dan would've returned the favour if he'd been there. Someone who blew the windows out obviously wasn't coming for a cup of tea.

He scowled. Where the fuck are you? It was empty. A disgusted expression of ill humour added to his scowl when he realised the house was deserted. It was just one more abandoned house in a suburb full of useless abandoned houses.

Slices of cold pizza festered on the table and the lights were still on. They must've left in a hurry. The bedroom and bathroom were filled with person effects. Expensive perfume wasn't something many women would deliberately leave behind. Nor is underwear. He thoroughly searched the house, looking in cupboards and under beds to rule out the possibility they were merely hiding. The manhole cover to the roof space had been welded shut, so they couldn't have been cowering up there.

"Fuck!" Esteban screamed.

He used the portal and returned to San Francisco in three hops. He hated the slowdown of international terminals. And he hated customs. He loathed their suspicion and their questions. Why the fuck should I have to answer?

Back in his office, he scrouged on his computer for a hint of where they'd fled. The first profile he tested was Tedman Kennedy and after failing to turn anything up under that, he scanned every one of Jen's chips - he'd copied the signatures from them all. Half way through, his left eyebrow arched high on his forehead. You're kidding... "Fuck me, she's in the building." And he doubted she was alone.

*

"Tell me, what do you want?" Jackie demanded, believing she was doing a good job of hiding her nervousness.

Dan sadly shook his head. “I want something you can’t possibly give me. I want something nobody can give me. Not even God, if he exists.”

Jen noticed the anguish in Dan’s words and recognised that he’d never master his grief at his wife’s murder. Unless... She wondered what would be possible if Dan won all his battles and slaughtered all his demons. Maybe then we could...

Jackie was no longer sure she wanted to know. “So... what’s that?”

“You may not remember something as trivial as this, but a UniForce assassin murdered my wife.”

That explained a lot. She suddenly understood why Dan had turned against them. He’d been a model bounty hunter until recently. Which means he only recently found out. Jackie tried to look surprised, as though she hadn’t known, but she’d read the details from his file. “Oh, that’s terrible.” She almost sounded apologetic, but her eyes betrayed her. “I’m so sorry... I had no idea.”

Dan’s trigger finger started to shake. “Don’t patronise me.”

Jackie made another concerted effort to look disturbed by the news. “I’m not. I’m truly sorry that happened to you. I know what it’s like to lose someone you care about.” It was bullshit. She had no clue. She’d severed herself from everyone she’d ever cared about so she couldn’t feel the hurt of abandonment. It was a lonely way to live, but she’d brought it upon herself.

“Everyone you assassinate has people that care about them,” Dan retorted hotly.

Jackie had never thought about it. To her they were just money in the bank and one more problem solved. The notion that a ‘problem’ had family and friends was an alien concept to her capitalist brain. Consequently, she couldn’t contain her remorselessness for long and it saturated her tone when she said, “I didn’t kill her.”

“Maybe not, but you allowed it to happen. You profited from it. That makes you just as guilty as the assassins and the people who paid for it.” Dan’s words were level and calm despite the passionate heat he felt beneath his collar. He was on the verge of snapping. He hadn’t been psychologically prepared to meet someone so coldly callous and ignorant of her guilt.

Simon edged forward. He didn't like the tone the conversation was taking. This wasn't part of the plan. He looked cautiously at his friend and wondered how stable he was. What if he kills them? He tried to throw water on the crisis by saying, "Let's talk about a deal."

Unfortunately, his water only made steam.

"She doesn't have anything I want," Dan said nastily. "And as for you Michele, I guess you're too cowardly to commit suicide and you need my help to do it."

Michele shook her head, paling. "No."

"Then you must be fucking stupid. And stupid people shouldn't breed, so how about I solve that problem right now?"

"Dan?" Jen stepped up to him and brushed her fingers along his arm. This was a side to him she hadn't seen. She hadn't even sensed it. And it scared her.

"What're you doing?"

"Nothing they wouldn't do to us if they had the guns." Dan spoke the truth. They'd all be corpses if Jackie and Michele had weapons.

"I don't want to," Jen said, speaking with the innocence of a child. She didn't want anyone's blood on her hands. The men Dan had slain in combat were different; that was justified. But this? Where would it stop?

Jackie, meanwhile, had decided it was time to bargain for her life. And she knew, or thought she knew, what Dan wanted most. "I can give you Esteban."

"Oh can you?" Esteban asked with a hyena's grin on his unshaven face. He'd stepped quietly into the office without anyone noticing. "If you even twitch I'll kill you."

Dan cursed his stupidity. He hadn't obeyed the number one rule of combat: protect your back. And now we're going to pay for it.

"Drop them," Esteban commanded in a voice few would trifle with.

Simon and Dan shared a desperate thought. If they acted simultaneously, their chances were good. Esteban couldn't kill them both in time to save his life. Or

could he? A seed of doubt rested nigglingly in their minds.

“You, black guy,” Esteban snarled. “My gun’s pointed at you. So how about it, Sutherland? If you try anything, your friend will definitely die. Can you do it? Can you kill him?”

No, Dan thought. I can’t. Simon had risked and given too much already. He tossed his Colt to the ground.

“You too big fella.” Esteban walked slowly forward. “You’ve got no hope now. You’re not that fast.”

Simon cast his cannon aside, careful to keep it close so that he could retrieve it easily if he dove to his left.

“So what now?” Dan asked, slowly turning to face the bane of his life.

Esteban stooped to pick up Dan’s Colt and then retrieved Simon’s cannon, severing any hope they had of armed resistance. He turned to Jackie. “Are you all right?”

Jackie was breathing easier. She nodded and said, “Good job.”

Esteban huffed at her. “Then to answer your question Sutherland, now I kill the bitch who was selling me out.” He switched to Dan’s Colt, refined his aim, and squeezed the trigger twice, splattering Jackie’s brains over her office.

Michele screamed, her eyes bulging wide with the fear that she would meet the same fate. She was dense, but she knew Esteban would want no witnesses for his crime. “As for you Michele...”

“Oh, no... No, please. I’m not ready.” She was crying with the suspense. She knew what came next.

“I’m afraid you’re just too fucking stupid to live.” He smiled wickedly. “You see, these three burst in, made it past security - which, quite frankly, is rat shit - and killed Jackie.” He shrugged mock-apologetically. “The only problem is I can’t have dumb witnesses. You’re too stupid to remember something simple like that.”

“But what about...”

“Yeah, you suck good dick.” He shrugged again, this time with indifference. “I’ll just have to find someone else.” He fired twice more and Michele’s head exploded like a melon, providing a fresh coat of grey and red paint for the walls. “That’s really funny,” Esteban laughed.

Nobody else understood the joke.

“Well, you see,” he began explaining unbidden. “I honestly didn’t think she had any brains. This comes as a surprise.” The sight of so much blood turned him on. That corner of his sexual drive disgusted him, but didn’t stop him from wanting to rape Jen.

Dan couldn’t say the deaths had saddened him, but he felt sick from Esteban’s total disregard for the associated emotions that Dan bore so heavily. He’d never intended to kill Michele, and hadn’t known what to do with Jackie. Blackmailing her into allowing Jen, Cookie and Samantha to live in peace would’ve been a utopian if impractical option.

“And after you stormed in and murdered Jackie and Michele, I came to the rescue and killed you.” Esteban turned the gun on Dan. “It’s a pity UniForce lost its top two bounty hunters.”

“Two?”

“The Raven bit the dust about ten minutes ago. Slain by an assassin would you believe?” Esteban choked on a laugh. “Serves the son of a bitch right. How fucked up do you have to be to kill your public CEO?”

“I’m surprised you care.” Dan didn’t think Esteban was the sort of person to lament the death of one, two or a hundred bounty hunters.

“Oh, but I do. You see, now that they’re dead” - he jerked a thumb to where Jackie and Michele had slumped - “it’s open slather for running the company. And you probably also see I’m closest to the top, so I’ll be calling the shots. And losing good bounty hunters is bad for business.” Esteban was in a fantastic mood; he felt better than if he’d just won the sweepstakes. And best of all, he was going to kill Dan. “And you, Sutherland, have the honour of being first to die - Jackie and that bimbo didn’t count.” He levelled the weapon at Dan’s chest

and said with relish, “I win.”

The gun fired.

And Dan recoiled, expecting more pain than he actually felt. It felt as if... As if I haven't been shot at all. His brain was still processing data while he staggered backward. He thought it somewhat strange that Esteban was falling too. It didn't quite make sense. Instincts and reflexes made him move his feet and, rather than toppling in a puddle of blood, he stepped back.

That's when he saw the gun in Jen's hands. She pulled the trigger a second, third and fourth time, continuing until the weapon was empty and thoroughly riddling Esteban's body with bullets, watching as his clothes turned burgundy in ragged but fast spreading blotches.

Dan encased her in his arms. She was shaking like a brittle leaf and her eyes were wide, absorbing the carnage she'd created.

Simon was the first to speak. “Good shot, girl.”

“Yeah,” Dan cooed, mirroring the sentiment. “You did great.”

Jen made a sound, a cross between a sob and a giddy laugh. In the end, Esteban's over-inflated male ego had been his undoing. It'd never occurred to him that a woman would carry a weapon - a silly mistake considering he'd only just discovered his best assassin was female.

She was trembling and Dan tried to soothe her. “It's over, you're safe.”

“Over?” Jen grunted indelicately. “How do you figure that? Everyone's dead! How do you expect we'll get away with this? They'll read the logs, find our signatures, and hunt us down even more ferociously than before.”

“Hmm... she has a point.” Simon scratched his chin.

“Then we'll just have to take over ourselves,” Dan proposed resolutely.

“Huh?” Simon didn't follow. Neither did Jen.

“Well, like Esteban said, it's open slather for the top job. Why can't we take

over? If we step in, we'll be holding all the cards. If we step aside, they'll hunt us down. It doesn't look like we have much choice."

Simon's phone vibrated once and then stopped. He checked the display and saw a number he didn't recognise. It buzzed again and he answered, "Yes?" Then, after a short pause, he handed it to Jen. "It's for you."

"What?" She hesitantly accepted the mobile. "Hello?"

"Jen, it's me."

"Samantha? Where are you?"

"Would you believe we're in San Francisco?"

"No way!"

"Yeah way."

"How? Why?" Everything was happening too fast. She wanted to put life on pause so she could sort through the mess.

"The Raven was tracking us in Sydney," Samantha explained briefly. "We didn't know where to go or what to do, but we knew you guys were here so this is where we came."

"You don't have to worry about the Raven anymore," Jen said quietly. "I think he's dead."

Samantha was silent for a time before speaking in a cautious tone. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, we're fine." She huffed. "Except that everyone's dead."

"Uh, should you be saying that?" Samantha warned. "You know... it might be listening."

"I wouldn't worry about that either." Jen surveyed the splatter of blood and smear of brains, which were congealing on the walls in Jackie's office. "Nobody's here to do anything about it. Echelon can listen all it likes."

Samantha still guarded her words carefully. “Where are you? Can you direct me?”

“Sure.”

They walked into Jackie’s gore-filled office ten minutes later. Cookie’s jaw went slack and the scene sucked the air from Samantha’s lungs. “Did you do this?”

“We had help.” Jen waved at Esteban’s body. “He did most of it.” Then she turned to Dan and suggested, “Why don’t you share your idea?”

“I think we should take control of the company,” Dan said with casual aplomb. “I guess you could call it a hostile takeover.”

Cookie squinted through his confusion. “And how do you suppose we do that?”

“I don’t know. But what else can we do? What do you think they’ll do if we run?”

“The same thing they’ll do if we stay!” Samantha predicted glumly.

And her uncharacteristic pessimism sparked a violent storm of squabbling and intense debate during which nobody was honestly listening to anybody else.

Jen stood apart from the fracas. She was staring out the window, mesmerised by the San Francisco skyline. It was pretty from above and she enjoyed looking down over the city as it slept on a lazy Sunday. She was warming to Dan’s absurd idea. It could just work... It would certainly be the ultimate win for freedom of speech. “Hey listen!” Jen said, slicing through their bickering with two words. “There are two points we should consider. First, we have no choice. Dan’s right. If we leave now, they’ll hunt us to the end of our days. Echelon will always be listening for our voices and we’ll always be top priority terrorist targets.”

Samantha was about to say something caustic but clamped her jaw shut to hear what else Jen had to say.

“If we stay, we can control Echelon. We can tame it, make it work the way I’d like to believe it was always intended.” Jen’s motivations were askew from Dan’s but the result was the same. They both saw the sense in controlling

UniForce. None of the upper management team was alive, and that produced the perfect opportunity to steal the kitty.

“Okay,” Samantha yielded. “That sounds nice, but you still haven’t answered how.”

“Who knew Jackie was running things? Nobody! As far as the shareholders were concerned, she was searching for a replacement for Paul Savage.”

“So?” Cookie asked, not seeing her point.

“All we need to do is order a shareholder meeting, propose a new CEO - our CEO - and get them to vote for it. Then it’s as good as done,” Jen said in a tumble of words, getting excited by the idea.

“What about UniForce employees?” Samantha asked. “Surely they won’t let us tell them what to do.”

“They will if the shareholders vote for it; they won’t have a choice. Besides, nobody questions those things... shareholders vote, a company gets a new CEO - no big change for the employees.”

“What about the system administrators?” Cookie asked, thinking about his nemesis.

“No different.” Jen was convinced. “They’ll follow orders the same as everyone else.”

“Okay, so who wants the job?” Cookie asked abruptly. “You?”

Jen vehemently shook her head. “Not a chance. Besides, the shareholders wouldn’t vote for a 26-year-old girl. They want someone with experience.”

“Then who?” Dan couldn’t think of anyone.

Oh dear... Jen’s eyes frosted over. “I know someone.”

They waited, but it was in vain. Jen remained silent, lost in a private world of thought.

Eventually Samantha cracked. “Who?”

“You’ll see.” She stabbed Cookie with an urgent look. “You need to program our chips into the security database. Can you do it?”

Cookie looked offended. “Of course I can. I just need to find the IT department.” He was secretly itching to get his hands on Echelon; even a small peek would be enough. He needed to see what grade of machine powered the world’s most influential system.

“I’ll come,” Dan suggested. “You don’t want to walk around here alone.”

“When you’re finished, find security and tell them Esteban went berserk because Jackie told him he wasn’t getting a promotion.”

“I see what you’re doing,” Dan said appreciatively. He liked the way Jen’s mind worked. “Then we locate someone who knows how to call an urgent shareholder meeting.”

“Right.” Jen was already heading for the door. “And I’ll find us a CEO.” Then she added with a roguish smile, “I’ll try not to take too long.”

*

Monday, September 20, 2066

04:03 Coffs Harbour, Australia

Jen felt guilty for waking him in the middle of the night. She felt even worse for scaring him half to death.

“Do you want to give me a heart attack or something?” John Cameron held a hand over his chest to calm his thumping heart.

“I said I was sorry.” Jen didn’t know how else to say it. “Do you want me to say it again?”

“Yeah.” He mocked anger. “It might help.”

“Dad, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to nearly give you a heart attack.” But Jen couldn’t contain her smile. It was good to see him again. While trapped in the guild, she’d feared she’d seen the last of him. She was hiding the piano-wire scars on her wrists by keeping the cuffs of her long sleeved shirt buttoned.

“Something’s wrong,” John Cameron’s instincts warned him. “What is it?”

“I’m in a spot of trouble,” Jen started, understating the truth to ease him into the bad news.

“It’s your activism, isn’t it?” he whispered as if there were unwelcome ears in his house - electronic ears attached to a world of surveillance that waited patiently for people to incriminate themselves. Many people falling under ‘reasonable’ suspicion had bugs in their houses.

Jen shook her head; though she was obviously hiding something. “No, it’s not that.” Uh... stretching the truth a little aren’t we? “Not exactly anyway.”

John, although frustrated and boiling with anger that she hadn’t listened to him earlier, couldn’t turn his back on his daughter. He had to help her. “What can I do?”

“Have you ever considered a career change?” Jen smiled sweetly.

“What are you getting at?” He didn’t like it when Jen was deliberately being obscure. He preferred to hear precisely what she was thinking.

“There’s a job opening at UniForce and I was hoping you’d apply.”

“UniForce?” John blurted in surprise. He could scarcely believe what he was hearing. Is this my daughter? Or an impostor? “Are you serious? Don’t they defile everything you stand for?”

She nodded. “But I was hoping you’d change that.”

“Me?” John’s bushy eyebrows shot up. “What could I possibly do?”

“The opening is for CEO.”

*

Sunday, September 19, 2066

UniForce Headquarters

10:07 San Francisco, USA

“Oh my God.” Cookie stopped at the door. “Is he... dead?”

Yeah, Dan thought. He could see the man was dead from across the room. He dutifully - though without any hope - checked for a pulse. Unsurprisingly, he found none. “Yeah. Dead as a doornail.”

James had landed facedown on his desk. It looked as if he'd broken his nose and a trickle of mucous and blood had dripped waxlike onto the white plastic surface. He'd gravely miscalculated the amount of regenerative sleep his body needed. The label on his bottle of stimulants identified it as a hazard, but in his rush to solve the network's problems and get home to his wife, he'd chosen to ignore the warning. The actual cause of death was a clot lodged in his brain. It was impossible to say with any degree of certainty what had caused the clot. Many systems in his body had degraded to the point where arterial clotting was inevitable. It could've been deep vein thrombosis from prolonged periods sitting still or the shock he'd given his implants several days earlier. It didn't matter; the result was the same. He'd lost consciousness and died from a massive stroke.

Dan gripped James's stiff body by the shoulders, pushed it back into the chair, and rolled it away from the desk.

“I guess that explains why he vanished from the network,” Cookie said with a sour expression.

“What?”

He shook his head. “Nothing.”

Dan waved at James's terminal. “Is this okay?”

Cookie nodded emphatically. “It's perfect. I should have access to everything from here.”

“Security included?”

“Yeah, that too.” He wasted no time inputting their identities into valid slots in

the security database. It would grant them a certain level of credibility when they approached the poorly trained security guards about the devastation in Jackie's office. Security's first impulse would be to validate their identities and the data Cookie was entering would ensure they'd pass the test.

"All done." Cookie relished cracking his knuckles, free from Samantha's critical gaze. "They'll treat us like dignitaries."

"That'll make for a pleasant change," Dan scoffed.

Cookie peered at everything James had downloaded from the Raven. It was too intriguing not to look; peering inside his mind was like staring into his soul. "Holy shit." He started panting uncontrollably. "Holy fucking shit."

"What?" Dan demanded, concerned something had gone horribly wrong.

"Ah, James hacked into the Raven's head before he died," Cookie explained. "You'll never guess what he found."

Dan had no idea such things were possible. He blinked at James with a mixture of surprise and irritation. Imagine how easy that information would've made it to avoid him! I would've known where and when he was going to strike. I guess it doesn't matter much now though. "What?"

"Bank account details." Cookie's mouth sprouted a massive grin.

"And?"

"Well, that's it." Cookie could see Dan didn't grasp the enormity of the news. "He's dead so he's not going to want it anymore." But still Dan didn't get it. "Well... don't you see? With this information we can access his accounts."

"How much?" Dan asked, finally twigging to Cookie's line of thought.

"Seventy million North American Credits," James read the balance from the screen three times to make sure he'd put the decimal point in the correct place.

Dan whistled softly.

"Yeah, you can say that again." Cookie's grin was only getting bigger. "Wait till

we tell Jen, she can finally afford that yacht she wants.”

“Five ways that’s...” Dan performed the calculation in his head. “What, about fourteen million each?”

Cookie nodded. Neither man had any scruples about helping himself to the money. As far as they were concerned, they’d earned it. Besides, the twisted creature they were stealing it from was dead. Thank goodness!

At that point, Dan’s conscience reminded him about Hans. He’d promised to help the struggling scientist in any way he could. “Make that six ways.”

“Six?”

“Hans van de Berg,” Dan replied. “He’s the Dutch guy who helped us get into the Guild, without a key so to speak.”

“Six ways is still bloody good.”

But money was only the second best way Dan could think of helping the man. Taking over UniForce would afford him a certain degree of protection. Then deal with PortaNet. Dan wasn’t ready to relax yet; he still had gritty work to do. But one thing at a time. They had a number of hurdles to pass before he could claim victory over UniForce.

“Let’s go find security.”

“Yeah, before they find Samantha.” She’d stayed behind with Simon to guard Jackie’s office while Cookie tampered with the security database.

“And then we wait for Jen.”

*

Monday, September 20, 2066

UniForce Headquarters

16:25 San Francisco, USA

Jen was exhausted. She'd never known how difficult it was to organise an urgent shareholder meeting. Now she'd been awake throughout the San Francisco day and her circadian rhythm was screaming at her for the abuse. She was so disoriented she didn't know what time it was or whether she should be waking up, sleeping, or just heading to bed. All she knew was that the shareholder meeting would start in five minutes and if it were successful, they'd be in the clear.

They were all waiting nervously. Nobody was confident enough to place bets on the outcome.

They'd spent much of the previous day with the authorities, answering a swarm of questions about the incident in Jackie's office. They'd carefully worked out their answers in advance and their stories held coherently together, giving the security forces a bleak image of Esteban's loyalty and a glowing portrait of Jen's courage.

John adjusted his collar and tie for what seemed like the thousandth time. "Do I-

"You look fine," Jen said, interrupting him before he could ask the same question he'd been asking every five minutes for the past hour. "Trust me would you? Just stop fidgeting or they'll see right through you."

He summoned his courage and strapped his arms to his sides. "Wish me luck."

"You don't need it," Simon assured him. He was just as exhausted as the others and looked as if he was ready to sag into a sofa and drift lazily to sleep. He was starting to forget what his girlfriend Tanya looked like and intended to apply for leave as soon as he got back to the office. He was one hour late for work as it was. Man, the Super's going to be pissed. He'd spent much the day organising deals and winning shareholder votes. He had several useful contacts owing to his links with the law enforcement industry. A bit of pressure here, a favour called there, and suddenly the flow-on effects ensured that at least one-fifth of the votes would be affirmative. "You're a shoe in."

John took a steadying breath. “I hope so.” He’d given the situation a great deal of consideration and realised that his whole life had been leading to this opportunity. He was nursing the noble goal of chairing the world’s first socially and environmentally responsible giga-corporation using the perfect blend of his father’s moral conviction and economic realities that worked in practice. He wasn’t naïve enough to believe the other giga-corporations would stumble over themselves to comply with his new brand of corporate ethics, but he satisfied himself with the thought that it had to start somewhere. And why not with UniForce?

They were standing in a nervous huddle in one wing of the stage. Many of the shareholders had taken the time to attend in person and a sizable crowd had assembled to watch the proceedings. Others had chosen to watch via video feed and vote remotely. Jen was just happy they’d amassed the required percentage to get a binding decision.

“Okay, I’m on,” John said quietly before strolling stiffly onto the stage and standing behind the podium. He was more nervous than he could remember, but nobody noticed. The room hushed to a respectful silence.

Jen watched the flicker of camera flashes from the side and closed within whispering distance of Dan. “So, what’re you doing afterwards?”

Dan grunted. “If it works I’m going to need a drink.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“A new identity.” Dan grinned despite the serious undertones. “What about you?”

“Well, I think I’ll cash in on that drink you owe me.”

“Huh?” Dan’s head spun and he regarded her with awkward suspicion. “What drink?”

His eyes changed focus at the same instant the hairs on his neck stood on end. Over there... in the shadows. It was as if a demon had plunged a fist into Dan’s darkest nightmare and used what it found there to breathe life into pure evil. Everything happened so fast, yet in Dan’s mind an ocean of time was rolling slowly past. Part of him wished his body would move faster, infuriated by the

restrictions of flesh and bone. It can't be. Denial was always his first line of defence against something too horrible to accept. It followed a familiar pattern; he'd experienced it with painful clarity when fate had snatched his wife from him. But the problem with denial was that eventually reality asserted itself, brushing aside the inferior defence and stinging even more for the temporary buffer.

The Raven was already pressing his trigger. A ghastly expression contorted his face and streamers of blood caked the corners of his eyes and the ridge of his nose. It was like looking at a ghoul. He wore a black bandage around his forehead but a glistening sheen of blood was visible through the coarsely woven material. The assassin's bullet had penetrated his cranium and struck his computer but the solid frame bracing the unyielding circuits had absorbed the impact and spared his life. It'd given him the headache of the millennium and badly damaged several circuits, but he'd survived. He'd then spent ten hours reprogramming around the damage to get back online and become semi-functional again. The impact had devastated large slathers of his specially grafted nervous tissue and his processing capacity was down to 13 percent. But that was plenty to make him deadly.

Dan didn't need to think. It came naturally to him. It made sense that he should try to protect Jen from the bullet. It was somehow fitting. Somehow right.

He pushed her aside with the same arm that loosed his Colt and bowled Jen to the ground in a tangle of limbs that ultimately spelled doom for his own balance. He then felt the round pierce his chest to the right of his sternum and suffered an acidic burn when it detonated, shredding his flesh. It wasn't even particularly painful, not as bad as he'd expected anyway. He'd taken steel bullets before, but never an explosive glass round. The detonation wouldn't cause the most damage. By the time he pulled his own trigger, the nanotoxin payload was already seeping into his bloodstream. He'd fired his second and third rounds by the time he hit the ground and he'd grouped all three rounds neatly on the Raven's chest. His fourth round entered the Raven's skull near the bridge of his nose, finished what the other bullets had started.

Dan's first thought was for Jen's safety. "Are you okay?"

Jen nodded, too stunned for speech.

Simon knelt by his side and noticed the damage first. “Oh God, Dan, you’re bleeding.”

Jen hadn’t yet noticed and frantically searched Dan for wounds, soon spotting the dark red blotch on his chest. It filled her with helpless panic.

He tried to brush them away when they moved to examine the wound. “Don’t.”

“Oh mate...” Simon tried to keep his voice calm. “We’ve gotta get you to hospital.”

He weakly shook his head. “Don’t bother. It’s nanotoxin.”

Simon flinched, jerking away so as not to contaminate himself. He looked closer and recognised the telltale signs. Dan wasn’t going to die from blood loss.

“What?” Jen mouthed without sound. She couldn’t understand why Simon was pulling back. “We have to get him to a hospital.”

Simon ever so slightly shook his head, unable to break the news with words.

Dan let the Colt slide from his grip and reached for Jen’s panicky hands. “Jen...”

“No.” She couldn’t stop the flow of tears; hearing him murmur her name was too much. It’s not fair... we’re so close. Perhaps that was the most painful thing. She’d started to cherish thoughts of the future again and allowed her hope to flourish. Now it was doomed to the weeds of life, the only things capable of flourishing in the dark. And it left a bitter taste in her mouth to mingle with the salty tears running shamelessly down her cheeks.

“Jen, it’s okay.” Dan was tired. He was fighting to draw breath and the burden of keeping his eyes open was enormous.

What? “How is this okay?” she demanded.

“It’s my time, that’s all.” Dan would’ve said something else if he’d been brave enough. He’d grown fond of Jen against his wishes. If life had spared him enough time, he might’ve eventually admitted that he’d fallen in love with her. Though he’d never tell her that now, it seemed too cruel. “Slime?”

“I’m here man.” Simon drew closer so Dan wouldn’t have to waste energy raising his voice.

“Take care of Hans... you know what to do.” He could feel the transformation starting. His body was rotting on the inside.

“I’ll take care of it.” Simon slapped a boisterous hand to Dan’s shoulder. He wanted to say so much and he opened his mouth to articulate it but the words froze in his throat.

“Thanks.” Dan’s eyes told the story - Simon didn’t have to say anything, his friend already knew.

“Jen... I need you to do something for me.”

“Name it.” She was inwardly pleading for a miracle to whatever God happened to be listening, ready to devote her life to the glorification of His or Her great name if He or She would just spare Dan. She needed a God now even more than she’d needed one in the dank pit of hell beneath Baltimore when she’d been living at the mercy of perverted monsters.

“It’s only going to grow worse... I want you to shoot me.”

She recoiled at the request. No. “What?” She shook her head in shock. “I can’t do that.”

“I’m dead already.” He pointed out. “Nothing can save me.”

But... She desperately wanted that to be a lie. It’s not fair! She opened her mouth to protest but Dan coughed on a lungful of blood before she could speak.

The toxin, although fast acting, maximised the victim’s torture. Some casualties had snapped their own spines during the violent pre-death contortions, documented back when nanotoxins were more prevalent, before the international ban.

She picked up his discarded Colt, the cold metal laughing fiendishly at the injustice of the situation.

“I suppose I should say thank you.” Dan smiled at her through his agony.

Jen's eyes glistened with a fresh wave of tears. "Why do you suppose that?"

"Because you saved my life." He found it somewhat ironic that their roles had reversed.

She didn't understand the depth of his allusion and asked through a torrent of tears, "What? How?" Under the circumstances his words seemed tastelessly incongruous.

"You reminded me who Dan Sutherland was... after I'd done a good job of forgetting." He spoke the truth. Jen's passion to change the world had saved Dan from his zombie-like trance. She reminded him what it felt like to have a soul. She reminded him what it meant to care. She'd made the past week of his life more significant than the preceding eleven months.

Jen remembered the conversation they'd had in the car and played her part through tear-blurred vision. "Well if you feel grateful then by all means, thank away."

Dan smiled at her for the last time. "Thank you."

She fired twice, mercifully ending his pain and sending herself into a spinning vortex of grief. It consumed her, tearing at the fabric of her sanity. She couldn't fathom how life could be so bitterly cruel. She'd given her heart to a bounty hunter and the wrenching pain in her chest told her that her heart had died with him.

Perversely, the shareholder meeting didn't miss a beat. The hiss of metal and zing of bullets from silenced firearms wasn't loud enough to carry to the enthralled attendees.

They voted overwhelmingly in favour of their new CEO.

*

Tuesday, September 28, 2066

World Economic Forum

14:30 Washington DC, USA

John Cameron entered the forum for the first time, believing himself prepared for his initiation into a world of power and corruption. It wasn't hard to find his seat; an aide had briefed him thoroughly prior to arrival. The information kit he'd received had included a neat holographic representation of the forum chamber.

Spiffy. He used a word from his generation to describe the décor. It was certainly impressive; they'd done a good job of ensuring their own comfort. I just wonder about everyone else's comfort. A twinge in the back of his mind pointed out he was starting to think like Jen. But maybe that's natural. It was an intriguing thought. Where was humanity heading? Straight to the depths of hell, and they were in an awful hurry to get there. It felt right that he should object to practices that were accelerating the downward spiral. Maybe we really are ready for a change. But the calibre of the human spirit in the chamber begged to differ.

A chairman of considerable girth waddled onto the platform to launch the day's proceedings. There was a good turnout, though John had no previous experience with which to compare it. Everybody was interested in summing up a new member, to decide whether he was worthy of potential deals. So they all wanted to judge him. Although they looked conspicuously absorbed in their own affairs, in truth they were concentrating firmly on John.

"I call the session to order." The chairman had the rattle of thick catarrh in his throat. "First order of the day, we have a new member. John Cameron, would you care to take the podium?"

John stood, acknowledging the chairman's request. It was a well-known fact that John was the son of Mike Cameron, the infamous revolutionary - or attempted revolutionary. Yet he was also the CEO of UniForce and had the right to attend WEF meetings.

He felt all eyes upon him when he trekked across the platform and assumed a comfortable stance behind the podium. "Good afternoon." He smiled into the silence. "I wanted to take this opportunity get two things out of the way. Firstly, I want to say how honoured" - uh-huh - "I feel to be here today." He adjusted his stance. "And secondly, I want to raise an urgent matter to your attention." He

held up his hands to stave off potential objections even though there was none. “I realise it goes against protocol but it won’t put us behind schedule. We have 15 minutes for my introduction to be used, I believe, however I wish.”

The silence was palpable.

Nobody even feigned reaching for his or her objection button.

John motioned to someone at the rear of the chamber and a tall, wafery man clambered down the steps to the podium. “Ladies and gentlemen...” John had their attention dancing in the palm of his hand. “Hans van de Berg shall be giving a short presentation about SuperFlex.”

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Fifteen words into the presentation, Nathan Bradford drew his own conclusions and much of the tension drained from his body. So, now it happens. It was out of his control and for that, he was thankful.

The assembly would finally hear the truth about the miracle material SuperFlex, the kernel of portal travel.

Epilogue

At the heart of this convergence of anticorporate activism and research is the recognition that corporations are much more than the purveyors of the products we all want; they are also the most powerful political forces of our time.

Monday, October 4, 2066

SuperFlex Manufacturing Plant

09:00 Detroit, USA

“Hey man, what’s happening?”

“Haven’t you heard?”

“No, what?”

Jake disbelievingly shook his head. “I dunno man, word is we’re shutting down.”

It was unfathomable. How could the biggest corporate giant in the history of the human race cease manufacturing their prime product? “What’re you talkin’ about?”

“Apparently this shit’s toxic or something.”

“So?” Angus didn’t care if it was toxic; he was willing to take his chances. He had a family to think about. He needed this job; it was his lifeline. “Everything’s toxic, why do we have to shut down?”

Jake shrugged and lit a cigarette, spitting in the face of company policy. “Don’t shoot the messenger, it’s just what I heard, that’s all.”

Angus doubted it was true. It’s probably just some suck-arse rumour started by the boys on vat one. The worst case he could comprehend was the company shutting down the local plants and moving offshore where labour was cheaper. But even that would spell doom for his loan repayments.

For the first time in over three decades, every PortaNet manufacturing plant stood still and the corporation’s army-like workforce hung lazily about with nothing to do. Based on the weight of the evidence presented before the World Economic Forum, members had voted unanimously to force PortaNet’s plants offline - it was, after all, in the world’s economic interest. No further portal manufacturing was permissible until PortaNet discovered a responsible method of folding space. The WEF had also charged PortaNet with the task of finding a long-term solution for cleaning up the mess they’d already scattered over the galaxy - if a solution existed.

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Friday, November 5, 2066

18:44 Carnarvon, Western Australia

Jen loved being able to talk without having to guard her words. “So you found another one?”

Samantha’s voice came loud, clear and confident over the mobile. “Yep, his name’s Shane Roberts.” She giggled. “I think you’re going to like him Jen.”

Jen caught the inference but chose to ignore it. “Okay, so that’s, what... seven now?”

“Yep,” Samantha said triumphantly. “We’re really growing.”

They were referring to the increasing number of people willing to join their voice for a fairer, more responsible, and more accountable corporate world. Once UniForce had ceased tracking activist-related conversations, Samantha and Jen had reached out electronically - without fear of reprisals - and made positive contact with a number of other resistance cells. They hadn’t truly been alone. They’d just felt alone.

“When’re you coming back?”

“An hour or two,” Jen replied. “There’s something I have to do here first.”

“Okay, see you soon.”

“Bye.” Jen hung up and flipped her mobile back into her pocket. She was wearing her favourite pair of jeans, her most comfortable boots, and a new flannelette shirt that would’ve looked at home on a construction site.

She was sitting under the big tree on her land. It was the first thing she’d done with the Raven’s money: purchased her dream plot from Realty King and torn down the hideous billboard. The second thing she’d done was decide on the plans for her house and contact a local builder. She was using a small, locally based contractor that worked out of Carnarvon instead of a major corporate player. Sure, it would probably take longer to build and be a fraction more expensive, but it was the principle that counted. Jen knew she’d feel more comfortable with the finished product if a local crew built it.

And then there was her yacht. She'd commissioned the local construction yard to begin building a 17-metre cruising catamaran. They wouldn't finish it for over a year, but that was okay with Jen who was going to be busy in the interim anyway. She had demonstrations to organise and messages to help the public understand.

The sun was setting and the warmth was slowly draining from the late spring air. Jen gazed out over the ocean and watched the war of colours, each hue battling for supremacy over the ripples on the surface. It was spectacular.

I wish you could've been here to see this Dan. It still stung when she thought about him. It knotted her heart with a pang of regret. She wrapped her arms around herself to shelter from the renewed onset of grief.

She'd already decided on the name of her yacht: Sutherland Hope.