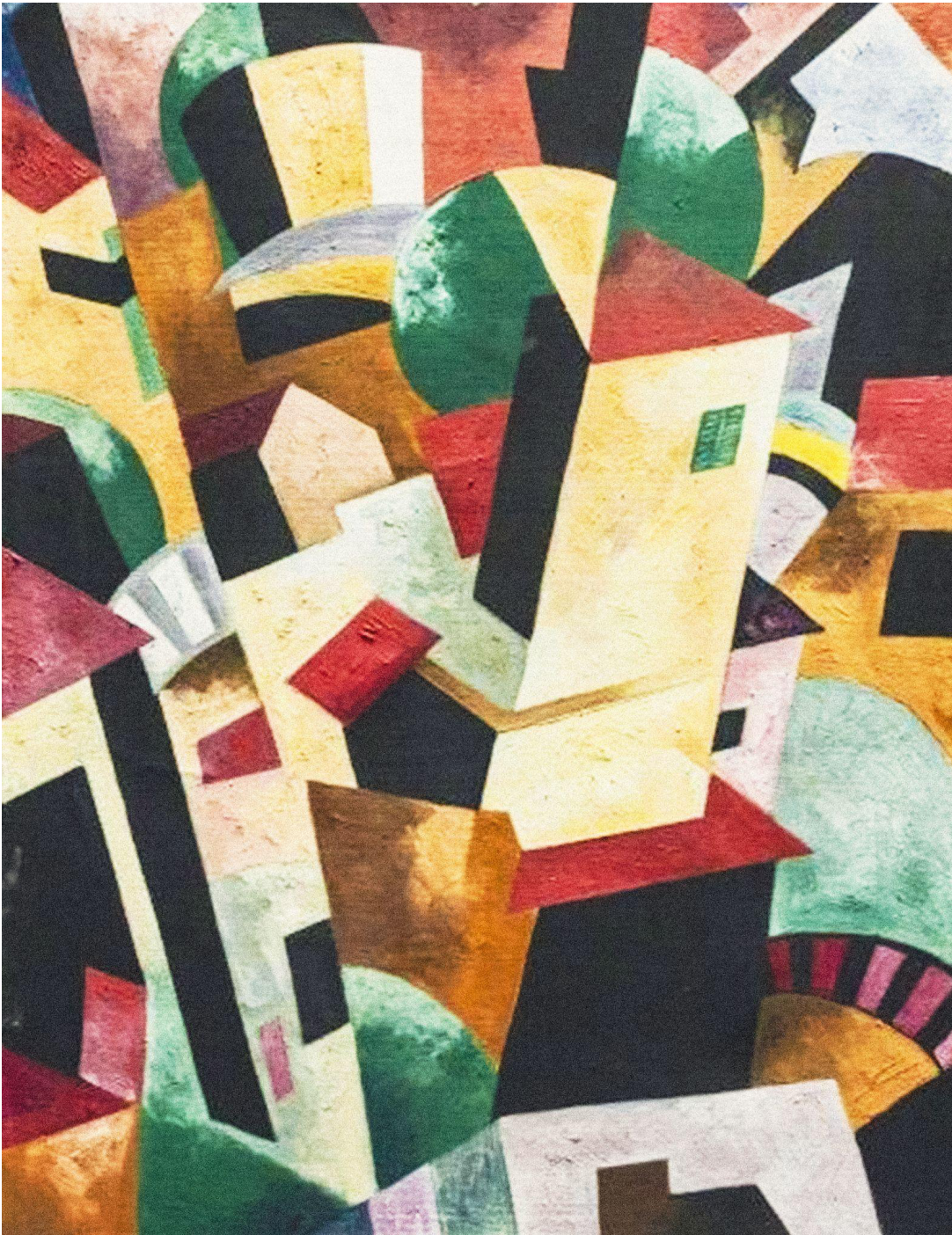


You Might Have Missed it Entirely



Landscape With Houses and Trees, Alexandra Exter (1914-15)

Epigraph

The collapse of the lighthouse [of Alexandria] must have been astonishing, like watching the World Trade Center fall over. But it took only a few seconds, and if you were looking the other way when it happened, you might have missed it entirely – you'd see nothing but blue breakers rolling in from the Mediterranean, hiding a field of ruins, quickly forgotten.

- Neal Stephenson, *Mother Earth Mother Board* (1996)

The people dreamed and thought and slept as much as ever. And by habit they shortened their thoughts so that they would not wander out into the darkness beyond tomorrow.

- Carson McCullers, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*

Citations

[Silicon Valley Billionaires Building Cities](#)

[Mother Earth Mother Board](#)

[The Coolest Dictator \(from Fox News\)](#)

[Grimes and AI](#)

[Grimes: Delete Forever](#)

[Don't Die Event](#)

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Excerpt: Interview with Amaryllis

By Benjamin Pontchartrain for The Pacific

I'm still shaking the frost off when I took a seat in Amaryllis' penthouse suite in the Delany Towers of Seattle, New Cascadia. The room is canopied in steel and glass like a greenhouse. The panes of glass have frost on them and so does Mt. Tacoma in the distance. Amaryllis' assistant asked if I'll have anything to drink, to which I asked for a black coffee.

"Bean preference?" she asked. She was in her mid-twenties. Thin and stylish with a razor sharp tongue that she keeps conspicuously scabbarded. Her professional demeanor would be more appropriate for a law office, but there she was, the assistant for one of the most important audio-visual-conceptual artists of the age.

"Bean?" I asked, "Just, like, regular beans, I guess." I answered lamely. A little percussive blast of air came from her nose, a dismissive gesture, I sensed. Next time I will ask for those beans that hipsters collect from monkey droppings. Maybe that will impress her.

I was feeling very hipster anyway that morning. Plaid shirt and slightly too tight jeans that my ex bought me a couple months before. I was unsure how to approach the interview. I wanted to communicate professionalism, but without seeming like I was part of some kind of journalistic establishment. I mean, if there even is such a thing like that anymore. I read once that Tom Wolfe wore a white three-piece suit when interviewing all those hippies in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* so that he could clearly demarcate himself from them. What a backwards time. People felt more

comfortable revealing things to outsiders than their own clan? Then again, since the invention of the Internet people have been oversharing with strangers to an unprecedented extent.

What is it that we tell strangers when they ask? Is it truth or lies? What do we keep hidden from the ones we love?

I'm deep in this thought when Amaryllis' assistant came in with my coffee in a white ceramic cup that looked like it was rescued from a Biloxi Waffle House. It was stained and chipped and spidery dark-gray cracks spread out under its clear glaze. I take a deep smell of it and look at the rainbow pattern in the thick steam. It was still way too hot to drink, so I just held it, allowing it to warm my hands.

The room I was in, the greenhouse, I imagined, was very tall and entirely exposed by windows approximately 3 feet square. There were many plants and terraria throughout the room, but I was in a relatively sterilized part of the room in the center where there was a collection of Bauhaus style furniture. Completely in contrast with the biological sense of the room, the Bauhaus furniture was jarring and intentionally unpleasant. It is marked by conspicuous consumption. It was humid and I was warming quickly between the exposure to the unclouded sun and the hot cup in my hands.

I was about to give up on the interview as a dud and start investigating the room and the flat more thoroughly when Amaryllis breezed in through a door that had been disguised as a wall on the far side of the room. She was wrapped in a muslin tangle of narrow cloth, bright white, like loosely coiled bandages around her body. It was a chaos of impracticality and exposed irregular and unpredictable quantities of skin as she strode across the room excusing herself, "Sorry, sorry, sorry," she whistled with

her signature lisp that I was not quite sure wasn't affected by vocal fry. She spryly leaped over the back of a Bauhaus chair and came to rest with her legs underneath her and the loops of bandages coming down to rest on top of her. Her hair was long and silver, pointed elfin ears stuck out on the sides of her head. She had the wide and astonished eyes of a girl who had just taken a little bit too much acid and her mouth gaped similarly, but then resolved to an unabashed and naive smile. She was tiny, which I knew, but there was something about meeting her in person that made me think words like 'nymph' and 'dryad' and 'naiad.' "Do you like your coffee?" She pointed animatedly at the cup in my hands, but I was distracted. There was something about her eyes. They were changing color. "These?" She asked and pointed at her eyes, which were not only changing from light gray to deep brown, but also getting bigger. Cartoonishly they were almost bulging out of her head. "Had them installed last winter. They're bio-mechanical, based on my originals."

"What do they do?" I asked.

"They do a lot depending on what I want. Like normal eyes they adjust themselves for focus and depth of field, but mine select for particular wavelengths of light and have a few other features designed to detect things like infrared light and certain radio signals. They have some aesthetic features too, like they get bigger to make me look more innocent. Maybe your questions won't be as demanding as the last journalists, you know?" She giggled and covered her mouth. An affectation of the Harajuku district?

"Why do you need to see radio waves?" I asked.

“Why do I need visible light? Why do I need the IR spectrum?” She said and relaxed her arms on the arms of her chair. “To see you all the better with, my dear.”

“Hmm,” I said, “Presumably to identify if I have a bug on me, but you could easily have your lackeys do that for you. I would be willing to guess that you don’t want them having all the fun of being spies without you.”

She laughed, but didn’t hold her hand up this time. “Mr. Pontchartrain, is it?”

“Ben,” I said, “Or Benny.”

“Benny,” she said with a deep sultry voice that she had been hiding somewhere in her diaphragm. “You seem to catch on quickly. Now, if you’re done trying to see through my dress, I hear that you have some questions for me.”

“Rather grandiose word for...” I gestured at Amaryllis’ dress in general, “That. But you’re right, I do have questions. Can you tell me more about the project that you’re working on with Declan Delany in the Nevada Consortium?”

Amaryllis positively exploded with a nervous irritation, “Oh my god! There’s no way to keep anything secret in this world!” she settled back into her seat and brushed some hair behind one elfin ear, “Yes,” She whispered conspiratorially, “I’m working on an AI.”

“Artificial Intelligence,” I confirmed, “Well, that’s a rather popular subject right now. Will that be for your audio or visual art?”

“Neither,” She says, “The AI itself will be the art.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“We’ve already exhausted every kind of art there is, there’s really only one thing left,” she lisped.

“Life? Inventing life? Intelligence?” I prodded.

“Life? I’ve given life, I’ve had two children. Intelligence is something that they’ve mostly figured out.

I’m talking about something really groundbreaking,” Amaryllis said.

I was playing her game, I was following her lead, I gave it a guess, “What? A soul?”

“Yes,” she hissed pleurably, “A soul!”

The Body

The Nevada Consortium, Saturday

The sky was bright blue and broad over the Nevada desert. Some sharp edged clouds stabbed at the horizon. The wind howled through the nearby arroyos and crumbling ridges. A dust devil was developing in the bare valley below and threatened a geometric spread of human settlement beyond. The air was brisk and cold. An SUV with the word “DELANY’S” written on the side came to a stop on the top of a bluff near a perimeter of hurricane fence and concertina wire. There were several other identical vehicles parked there. A woman stepped out of the car and winced in the bright light. She had bright brown eyes set in naturally dark sockets, a Grecian nose, a small pursed mouth and when she smiled she revealed tightly packed and slightly crooked teeth that resembled the natural growth of

certain crystals. Her deep brown hair was kicked around by the wind until she produced a broad black hat and pulled it down on her head. The wind pushed the front of the brim up anyway. She was wearing a three-quarter length black wool coat over a maroon turtleneck and high-waisted bluejeans. She idly kicked at the dirt with sturdy, but eternally dusty boots. On the other side of the vehicle a man in a simple black uniform got out and fixed a cap on his head that matched the car's "DELANY'S" decal. His black boots were shiny and he has something of a beer gut. His face was slightly pock-marked, but middle-age had granted him some fashionable dignity for a cop. "Right over here, Detective Augurie, watch your step, it's not developed at all."

"Not a detective anymore, Rodriguez. I'm just Anne now," Anne said and followed Rodriguez to the gate, and pulled an unlocked padlock out of the latch. "Not a lot of crime out here, eh, Rodriguez?"

"Hardly any at all, Anne. Not like back in Phoenix," Rodriguez said, flashing a sardonic smile back at Anne. Anne bared some of her crooked teeth, and in her eyes was a playful carnivorousness, "Sounds like you miss the old life," Rodriguez said.

"Not likely," Anne said, closing her mouth and then turning her head to spit out some dust. "I like the crimes I have to deal with nowadays."

"Come on, I've got something that'll ruin your day," Rodriguez said, not chuckling this time.

Rodriguez walked over to a gash in the earth, a railing led down the side of the arroyo, twisting down a pathway. Anne could hear the echoes of voices coming from the hole in the earth and from further on down the pathway. They descended the pathway until they came to an opening: an open topped cave

with a large pool at the bottom. A wooden beam had been placed across the top as a crossbar for a winch or crane. A rope tied off on a cleat nailed to the cave wall went up and over the crossbeam and at the loose end hung a young woman, dangling by the neck above the cave pool. On the walls, smoothed by hundreds of thousands of years of erosion, several-dozen hands had painted a variety of symbols of hate and evil with spray paint, swastikas and pentagrams and all manner of hackneyed garbage of the unimaginative and desperately uninteresting. But there was nothing uninteresting about the woman, whose diaphanous clothing rippled in the wind and made her a ghostly sight. Her back was to Anne, who could only see her long blonde hair, which Anne noticed was not wet. The cops were milling about the cave trying to capture the crime scene as best as they could, but with so little training, it was an impossible task. Anne was no fool, she had been involved in police work for the better part of a decade before she retired to the relatively peaceful life of a skip-trace in a private investigator's office. There would not be enough evidence here to obtain an arrest, much less a conviction. Any material evidence was already destroyed. Frankly, it would be shocking if they ever found out who the girl was. "Tomlinson," Rodriguez called to one of the cops gathered around the pool. A tall, sandy blonde woman jogged over.

"Yes, Captain Rodriguez," Tomlinson said, crisp and professional, she stood at attention.

"At ease," Rodriguez said. "Officer Tomlinson, have you figured out a way to get the deceased down yet?"

"Yes, Captain," Tomlinson said, turning and pointing to two cops reaching a hook on the end of a pole out into the void of the cave towards the gently swinging rope. "We're going to hook the line and

start pulling her over while we let the line out of the cleat over there. That way she won't drop into the pool." As she described it, the officers made it happen. They pulled the rope with the hook and a third officer fed the line out from the cleat until the girl came to rest on the cave floor beside the pool, which began to glow in the noon light coming in from the hole in the top of the cave.

Rodriguez started walking past Tomlinson towards the girl, "Come on, Anne, let's take a look. I'd like to hear your opinion."

"Uh, Cap?" Tomlinson asked, "Who's this?"

"Anne Augurie," Anne said and extended her hand to Officer Tomlinson. "I'm just in town following up on a skip trace. Rodriguez and I used to work together in Phoenix."

Tomlinson flinched in surprise, "Phoenix!" she looked over at Rodriguez, "I thought you were in Denver."

"Long time ago, Tomlinson. Anne here could have been a great detective given the right motivation," Rodriguez said.

"Motivation?" Tomlinson repeated, asking no one in particular.

"He's implying that I only get out of bed for money and that the sense of duty to the populace just wasn't enough," Anne said. "He's entirely right," Anne said with a wolfish smirk.

Anne walked past Tomlinson towards Rodriguez and the body. Her stride was confident and sure on the gravel and sand at the bottom of the cave, she was looking at Rodriguez, trying to read his body

language, like she once did when they were co-workers. Since she saw Rodriguez at the cafe in the Consortium she struggled to parse what exactly was bothering him. Then she looked down. While the look on the woman's face did not tell her what bothered her old friend so much, it did drop a lump of depleted Uranium in her upper colon.

Anne knelt by the body and took out a dental scaler from her jacket to examine the body. Rodriguez looked on as Tomlinson came up to them. "What're you thinking, Anne?" Rodriguez asked.

Anne Augurie wiped her tool off with a disinfectant cloth from a different pocket in her jacket and then put both back into a third pocket, she looked up to Rodriguez with a sigh, "I'm thinking," the sun from the top of the cave in her face, she squinted and grimaced in the glare, "That I'm out of a job."

Excerpt: Unusual Geology

By Benjamin Pontchartrain for The Pacific

The helicopter jerked up off of the tarmac and my stomach was left on the ground. Earl Blair, my helicopter pilot, however, was seemingly unaffected. He began to ramble quite affably as I managed my gag reflex and quieted the voice in my brain screaming, *Oh god, we're going to die, we're going to die, oh sweet Jesus save me.*

Fortunately, I recorded all of my interviews, so I was able to review the tapes at a later time to produce this account. Frankly, I don't remember this helicopter ride at all. The following is a direct transcription of my recording.

“I don’t think that Hernan Cortez made it this far up north, but he made surprising progress into the former United States before he turned back. He claimed as far as Kansas, but really, Northern Arizona and New Mexico was the end of the line. He fucked New Mexico up so bad that its still Catholic. Ever been to New Mexico around Easter? You might see a penitent pilgrim hiking his way to a church or shrine in Santa Fe hefting a honest-to-Christ four-by-four crucifix on his back.

Earl spoke some unintelligible pilot gibberish to the Consortium control tower on a different channel.

“Mormons, now they’re the real settlers of this whole area. From Tucson to Coeur d’Alene they settled all this dust out here, but being family-folk, they often weren’t as adventurous as some. This is a considerable statement because they were exceedingly adventurous. You know what? A lot of people don’t know this, but Las Vegas was founded by Mormons. Hell, it was run in the shadows by Mormons right up until the Water Collapse a few years ago. You hear about that one? Whole lake full of fresh mountain water was shut off from the city just a few miles away by the Los Angeles Citystate. People turned on each other trying to stay and then trampled each other trying to leave just a few months later. Mormons, well, they know when to bug-out as we saw during the Denver Uprising. Hell, they got out before the big casino-resort conglomerates figured it was time to leave.

“Hey, are you alright? Puke bags are in that flap right on the door there if you need them. Hold on to them though, don’t want them flying around the cockpit after you’ve used them, am I right? Ha-ha!

“You’ve heard of the Oregon Trail, right? Yeah, everybody has. ‘Mary-Lou died of dysentery!’ well, she shouldn’t’ve been dissin’ Terry, am I right? Ha-ha! Anyway, everybody’s heard of the Oregon Trail and the 49ers, those folks who went out to the gold mines in Northern California in 1849, but not a lot of folks know that there was a separate trail called the California Trail that truly split off from the Oregon trail somewhere near the meeting of the former United States of Idaho, Utah and Nevada, it traveled south down through Nevada (a Spanish word for ‘snow covered’ and named after Grenada, that’s in Spain) and then past Lake Tahoe and into California.

“You know about the Donner Party? Got stuck up in the mountains in California during the winter. Bad time to get stuck, y’know. They ended up having to eat each other like in that movie about the Uruguayan soccer players, *Alive*. Tough situation. You ever think about what you’d do?

“Hey, man, you’re looking green. Here, you know what always helps my nephew? Just a second. There we go, go on and suck on this dum-dum. Gives you something to do with all that spit in your mouth. Doesn’t taste all that bad either! Ha-ha!

“Anyway, the Donner Party were on the California Trail themselves. If I recall correctly, a grip of them made it all the way to San Francisco where they had to live the rest of their days with the knowledge that they’d tasted human flesh. You never know your neighbors, right? You don’t know what they’ve been through.

“Anyway, what I’m getting at is that they weren’t explorers themselves either. The explorers of this particular graben of this Basin and Range Province you see below you—oh, a little geology lesson for

you, this set of ranges out here are what are called horsts and grabens. That's when the plates beneath the earth stretch out and create these ranges called horsts and low valleys called grabens. The Consortium is nestled on the side of one of these grabens—anyway the explorers of this particular graben remain anonymous except for the names they gave the place and then passed on these details to the geographers in San Francisco. I assume they made it to San Fran, but in all likelihood they simply told some other fellow and then he told someone and then chained the knowledge of this area back to civilisation where the knowledge of this valley was propagated back and forth across the former nation of the United States of America and written down in books that were widely ignored by most folks. Because, why? Why, I ask you? Why should anyone care about this particular valley?

“Jesus, man, take the sucker out of your mouth before you throw up in the bag! Go on, put the stick in there too, I'll give you another one. You're worse than my nephew. His name is Quinn, by the way. Quinn the Eskimo, we call him. After the Bob Dylan song, you see. Wild as the ol' Truckee. My family happens to be from where the Donner Party moved out from, Springfield, Illinois. We've been settled out here in one shitty mining town or another since long before I was born. My old man used to say that my ancestors were part of the smart part of the Donner Party who decided to stay by the Truckee and such we're cursed seven generations to live in Nevada. Seven generations! Seven generations, that means that ol' Quinn the Eskimo is number eight and he'll get out of this sand pit and maybe make something of himself. Though, you might consider me a world traveler considering I flew for the air force for something like ten years before starting this little business out here in the horsts and grabens. I could fly out to Cascadia any time I so choose and I do on occasion, but I always end up back here.

Not here in the Consortium, but in Stoneshod where I've got my business. Not far from the Consortium. We've got a fine whorehouse if you're interested, but not much else except for my helicoptering service.

“Well, I was asking you why anybody might find this particular valley interesting other than the strictly geological and I'll tell you... Ah, shit, I suppose the interesting part is geological anyway. You have to understand, out here in beautiful Nevada, there ain't much but geology to be found. But I'll tell you that there are biological and anthropological things that can astound!

“History books are uncertain, but sometime in the antebellum years of the 19th century, when there were scant travelers coming through these parts, they tried all kinds of paths. Some came up good, some not so much. But there was a place recorded, right here, where a bunch of dusty travelers came upon a cave hidden from the sun. They went down into the cave to hide from the unforgiving sun and were delighted to find a pool illuminated by the light coming in from the open top. They splashed and played in the cool water and ate the fish that swam there—fish so naive that they didn't know that they could ever be someone's dinner—but when they tasted the water it was salty. The men who drank from the water eventually died, as any seaman would know that they would, drinking salty water.

Presumably some men survived and moved on and told others of Devil's Hole, the oasis that took life.

“For a very long time, the Devil's Hole was left alone because what use would it be to anyone?

Hundreds of miles away from anything and offering nothing but bony fish and salty death. That was until a student at the University of Nevada, Reno came upon a book that mentioned it. This student, a Mormon, in fact, named Phineas Cotton, who was a double major in biology and geology discovered

the mention of Devil's Hole. Initially put out by the name of the place considering his divinity, he was eventually drawn to the place. It helped that it was war time in 1943 and doing research in the Toiyabe meant that he would be hard for the War Department to find. Phineas camped out on the bluff where the Devil's Hole abided for two years collecting observations and assembling his thesis.

“He observed that there was a species of fish that lived in the Hole that he supposed descended from the fish that lived in the great ocean that once conquered the space that was the American West millions of years past. He found them beautiful. In the noonday sun, when light illuminated the pool, the fish shone with a scintillating and phosphorescent kind of light. They danced, and he watched them with delight for hours each day from when the light came into the cave and until the light left. He would go back to his camp on the top of the bluff, nearby, but not too near to the open top of the cave, and he would dream about the colors of the fish in the hole beneath. That impossible hole in the middle of the desert.

“Now, right over here, if you look out your window there... Are you looking? You can see the Consortium campus, that's where they do all the science and such. We'll take a few loops so you can get some photos. Did you bring a camera?

“So, I'm saying... One day, Phineas is sitting at the fire at his camp, a paltry fire, I imagine, considering the environment (I'm telling the story how I heard it) and he hears a great gurgling! He stands up expecting the Lord, Christ, to come and take him away, but instead, he sees a spout of water shoot out of the top of the cave-top and he thinks, 'Oh Lord! The fishes!' Foolishly, Phineas runs down into the cave to see what's happening only to find that the pool at the bottom of the cave was empty and a great

cavern was exposed at the far end. He weeps for the little fishes, of course. They're such gentle creatures, placed there by God. He weeps because during the months and months of observation he never took a sample because he never wanted to kill one of them. He never wanted to harm one of God's own and then God took them home. The conflict in his heart was between preserving the beauty of God's earth and his thesis, which was surely doomed now.

"Goddamn, son! You're doing so good now that I think that you should take over the controls! Okay, get a good grip on the yoke and hold 'er steady lest we plummet to the mountain over there! Ha-ha! I'm just kiddin' you, I've been in control this whole time. You can let go of the yoke now, son!

"Phineas thought that his life went down the drain when he saw the water start welling up from the deep side of the pool and sure enough the little fishes came back too. His thesis was very exciting, but the university was not so excited. During his defense he was accosted with a great number of doubts on his findings, not least was his insistence that God himself had delivered the fish to him. Phineas never earned his degree and he went back to Provo where he died a moderately wealthy rancher with seven children who lived out of twelve born. His wife, Annabelle, never knew about his youthful research project because he never told her. He was ashamed, I think. But he lived with dignity throughout the rest of his life with her. I happen to know this because I asked Annabelle herself what she thought of Phineas' research and she fixed me with this kind of frustrated stare, like, 'Don't bother me with this! I had to birth twelve children! How many *theses* is that worth?' Well, I didn't want to make comparisons.

“I’m not Mormon myself, but I cannot ever speak ill of the Mormons. They might live their own lives outside of ours, but I’ll be damned if they don’t help every goddamned person they come across.

Latter Day Saints is right! Good men and women when you got your breeches in a bunch.

“So now we’re heading over to the Devil’s Hole, keep your head up! It helps with the sea sickness. Air sickness. Anyway, keep your head up, look at the horizon! Hang on a second, I’m having a little trouble with the... Whew! We almost lost ‘er there!

“Lot’s of scientists been up to the Devil’s Hole since ol’ Phineas. They codified and taxified the fishes he was seeing and even figured out what was going on with that thing that Phineas said was God’s doing. You see, the pool at the bottom of the hole is connected through a very complicated and unusual cave system that goes very far down. Remember what I said about horsts and grabens? How I said that they were the result of the plate stretching apart? The plates stretch apart and in this case, leave a gap. The gap happens to go all the way to the aquifer, which at this point is quite near the surface.

“Strangely, and nobody knows why this happens, even geologists are guessing, when seismic events occur in certain parts of the world, the aquifer gets all shook up and spews out of the Devil’s Hole, much like a toilet. It dumps out and then spews and then dumps out again before it fills out again. Even stranger is how the fish come back up after all of that.

“Back in the sixties, a bunch of kids at the UNR campus came across ol’ Phineas’ paper, which had never been published, but had languored in the library, and they decided to go out to Devil’s Hole.

They figured that it would be fun to go and swim with these unusual fishes. They packed up for a couple of days and drove out there. Eight students drove out to the Devil's Hole and camped up on the bluff. One day they went down into the Hole and were swimming around having a good time, but then the water started draining out! The two friends who were standing outside of the water told them to get out, but the six in the water were laughing and having a good time. In a moment they were gone. The two in the cave paused for a minute, like, what was going on? They were confused. Just a minute ago their friends were swimming and having a good time and now they couldn't see them. In fact, there was no water, only a large hole at the end of the cave. The hole suddenly filled up with water and the pool returned before they could even realize what was going on. The fish were swimming in the pool very happily.

“You know what's really strange? I'll tell you. Those kids knew a deep water diver who was hanging out at Lake Tahoe. So they went and found him. Four hour drive. They told him that their friends had been sucked down into this cave system and the deep water diver agreed to go in after them!

“What are the chances? The deep water diver, named Lance, flew out in a helicopter with all of his equipment and prepared to dive in. The idea was that the students might be caught in underwater caves that still have air in them. Lance descended into the Hole with a whole lot of air and a steel cable attached. If he came across any living student, he would come up with them, but if not he would continue into the darkness.

“Lance explored the entirety of the caves all the way down until he came around a corner and was sucked into the aquifer itself! Lance reported, ‘I was going into corners for hours, but then I turned

into this one and there was this great sucking feeling. I was pulled into nothingness, I think it was the aquifer, just a great sea under the earth. It was darkness, even my lights were useless, the only thing that I could feel was the steel cable on my chest. I pulled up on the cable until I felt rock and then the hole where the cable came from. I wanted to cry out, but I kept my breath stable. The cable saved my life. I pulled myself out of hell. Don't you see? I pulled myself out of hell!' That's what he said to me.

"Here we are! Landing now!"

No Dignity

The Nevada Consortium, present day

Rodriguez laughed uneasily, "What makes you say that?" Anne reached into her jacket and produced her smartphone. She opened it and flipped through some applications before handing it to Rodriguez.

"This is a photo of the deceased. Why do you have the photo of a dead girl on your phone?"

Rodriguez asked.

"She wasn't deceased when she was in my living room yesterday," Anne said, standing up and taking her smartphone back from Rodriguez. "She's my client, Rodriguez. Or she was my client."

"Can we get the body covered up?" Rodriguez said to the officers who had grown silent and were now staring at Anne and Rodriguez. "She deserves a little dignity."

"There's no dignity for the dead, Rodriguez." Anne said. "Now, who do I get a hold of to get a ride out of here?" A great clapping sound came from the opening in the top of the cave, the reverberations

made it deafening. Anne could see dust flying over the opening, obscuring her view of the blue sky.

“What is it? A tornado?” she shouted at Rodriguez, crouched and holding onto her hat, concerned that she’d be sucked straight out of the cave and into a column of natural sand-blaster.

Rodriguez, who was standing, unaffected, gestured for her to get up, “That’s just Earl.” Rodriguez tapped his hat, “Come on, he might be your way out of here.”

Anne followed Rodriguez back up through the path to the top of the bluff. At the top, there was a helicopter nearby that was powering down and two men who were walking through the gate and towards the gash in the earth. A tall man wearing a ushanka and an unzipped bomber jacket, unshaven and talking animatedly. The other man, straw colored hair plastered to the top of his head by the rotor wash, average height, taking notes on a smartphone with a stylus, appeared to be trying to listen intently, but stumbling here and there as if he was drunk. He wore white high-top Chuck Taylor shoes beneath rolled up jeans and a brown Harrington golf jacket that billowed in the wind.

Rodriguez walked up to the tall man and shouted, “Earl! How’re you this morning?”

“Bit hungover, but nothing a few pints won’t fix later,” Earl shouted, but then spoke normally as the rotor wash faded. “This here is a journalist from Seattle who I’m taking to the Hole for a tour.”

“Honestly, I can’t think about pints right now, Earl,” the journalist said.

“Afraid I can’t let you down there today, Earl,” Rodriguez said. “There’s been a murder. It’s a crime scene.”

“A murder!” the journalist said, “Is there anything that you can talk about regarding facts of the case, Officer...”

“Rodriguez, and no, I can’t talk about the case until the investigation is complete,” Rodriguez said.

The journalist turned to Anne, giving her a once over with his eyes as if to assess whether or not to proceed with his questions, “What about you, gorgeous? Can you tell me anything about the case?”

“Can you tell me why you thought it was a good idea to leave the house looking like Rebel-Without-a-Cause?” Anne flashed her jagged grin and raised an eyebrow.

“Ah, well, that’s on me,” the journalist explained. “My girlfriend convinced me a while ago to re-do my wardrobe and she’s something of a fan of old movies and style and that kind of stuff. Ex-girlfriend, did I say that? Just didn’t work out, but I haven’t had the time to go and buy new clothes so I end up looking like I just stepped out of a 1950s movie,” Ben extended his hand to Anne, “Ben Ponchartrain, by the way. I write for The Pacific out of Seattle. Have you heard of it?”

Anne tilted her head and slit her eyes in a gesture of extreme criticism, but before she could speak, Rodriguez said to Earl, “I need you to take Detective Augurie to the airport so that she can catch a flight home.”

“Detective?” Pontchartrain said with a sly smile. Anne’s face remained neutral and she kept her arms folded in a gesture of professional uncaring that was instantly betrayed by the brim of hat flattening against her face in the stiff cold breeze.

“You got it, no problem,” Earl said to Rodriguez. “But what do I do with Ben here? Only one seat in the chopper.”

“I’ll take him back to town, Earl,” Rodriguez said.

“That work with you?” Earl said to Ben, “Alright, it’s settled. Come on, miss.” Earl said to Anne and started walking towards the helicopter. Anne followed, ignoring Ponchartrain as she passed him.

The helicopter powered up and Ben and Rodriguez stood on the bluff in the dust and rotor wash watching them fly away. Rodriguez slapped Ben fraternally on the arm and waved him towards his SUV.

The helicopter flew low over the suburban area of the Consortium towards the airport on the other side of the city center. Anne looked out on the city that had sprung up in the northern Nevada desert. Five years ago there was nothing, but now a neat geometric community thrives with the backing of some significant dollars.

They flew over the town square, built more like a semi-circle in a rectangle of streets, so low that she saw what people were doing. She saw lovers walking together, she saw mothers dragging their children to playdates, she saw young colleagues relaxing at cafes warmed by propane smudge pots, she saw...

Well, she can’t believe what she saw.

“Ah shit,” She said, pulling out her smartphone.

“What was that?” Earl asked over the radio.

“Nothing,” Anne said, “Just another change of plans.”

Quentin’s

Seattle, Cascadia, Friday

Quentin’s Queries is a small private detective firm located in Capitol Hill, Seattle, Cascadia. It takes up the second floor of a quaint red brick building, slowly being engulfed by bright green ivy. The owners have nonetheless kept the broad modern windows clear of any obstruction. The floorplan of the office is very open, but with glass offices equipped with sound damping and auto-fogging for the privacy of clients. Each is also equipped with special technology that is designed to make any conversation happening within to sound absolutely unintelligible to any listeners without. There is a large waiting area where a dozen seats are arranged around a great glass coffee table. The seats are clever bauhaus imitations, designed to look beautiful and uncomfortable, but slide your butt into one and you’ll find it’s comfortable enough to wait for one of Quentin’s detectives to take your case.

Anne Augurie is standing in the coffee nook, the part of the office where detectives can refresh themselves. There’s a full fridge for the detectives’ lunches, there’s a self-serve espresso machine, replete with a variety of accoutrement for any coffee-addict’s personal preference. There’s a coffee grinder and a set of different sacks of freshly roasted coffee. There are many different kinds of sweeteners from the prosaic sugar to the complicated aspartame to the supposedly environmentally sound agave syrup. A shelf of milks including nut, animal, and grain is also available, but much to Anne’s dismay, they don’t have that powdered creamer that her mother loved to put in her coffee.

Percy Ventana, the son of the eponymous Quentin Ventana, is an election of nepotism, but Anne tolerates him because he seems to think the world of her. He strides into the coffee nook and announces, “Anne Augurie! As I live and breathe!”

“Percy,” Anne says, stirring oat milk into her doppio, “How are you today?”

“I’ll have to tell you, darling, that I’m in a great mood considering that I’ve just heard of your successful completion of your most recent assignment! Can everyone give Anne a hand?” Percy began clapping and the other three or four detectives in the coffee nook, not looking for much more than a morning coffee and a moment of silence, set down their paper cups to clap half-heartedly. “You are a star, Anne! A star!”

“Thank you, Percy,” Anne said, taking a sip from her coffee cup. “It wasn’t much.”

“It wasn’t much,” Percy cackled. “Come on, tell the whole story!”

Anne stirred her coffee with a little splinter of bamboo, she smiled coyly, her jagged teeth overcoming her under-lip. Now, some of the other detectives of the agency were gathering in the coffee nook, they smiled at Anne and she felt the need to perform.

“One can imagine how ghoulish this kind of profession seems, and you know I don’t like arguing with weeping mothers to sign a contract for five thousand dollars to find her kid, but I get this guy saying to me, ‘That crooked grin, I wouldn’t doubt it if *you* kidnapped Annabelle and now you’re here arranging her ransom in person. You’ve got some fucking balls on you.’

“No balls, sir,’ I said to him, “Just a whiff of hope and the skills to see it through.’

“Now, Annabelle had turned out to be a relatively easy one. She’d fallen in love with some rancher from down in Old Oregon, one of the anti-federalist types that fancied their family ranch to be a sovereign nation, unassailable by any cop or g-man around,” Anne gave the detectives gathered in the coffee nook a look. “You know the types. Soon after picking up on the love connection, I got hold of a rancher contact who couldn’t remember any names. That’s horace, of course, he can’t turn down a few bucks, but he keeps his conscience clean by not ever saying a specific name.

“Horace tells me about a new woman in the community who couldn’t stop complaining about the rough and tumble lifestyle inherent in the Oregon desert. I assumed that that was Annabelle and stopped by the ranch for a chat.

“You a cop?’ the guard at the gates of the Four W Ranch asked.

“Do I look like a cop?’ I asked.

The group at the coffee nook chuckled, a couple of detectives left and a few came by to hear the story.

“Abso-fuckin’-lutely, the guard said,” Anne said.

Anne cocked her hip playing out the scene. She was almost six feet tall and wore a wide brimmed black hat that she straightened at this point.

“Now, he wasn’t exactly pointing his rifle at me...” Anne said.

“What kind of rifle?” a detective asked.

“I believe it was a ranch rifle, one of those M-14 types,” Anne cracked her uneven smile at the detective, “Now, he wasn’t pointing it at me, exactly, but it was only a few dozen degrees of swing from being right on target. His face had lesions from either being out in the sun too long or of a long-term methamphetamine habit. This was, of course, an advantage. ‘Look, I hear there’s a squaw in there who’s out-stayed her welcome and I’m here to get her out of your hair before y’all have to ruin a perfectly good night with labor, like butcherin’ and diggin’, if you catch my drift.’

“The guard set his rifle down and pulled at his shoulder radio, which lit up with static, ‘Front gate to Barrow, front gate to barrow–’ he looked over at me, ‘About fuckin’ time you showed up.’ he says.

“‘Barrow to gate, go ahead,’ the radio crackled. Thirty minutes later I was driving back to Seattle with the girl.

Anne takes a sip from her coffee and pauses. There’s a collection of detectives gathered around to hear the end of the story. Everyone in the room knows what they’re waiting for. They want to know the horrible things that happened to the girl while she was on the ranch.

“And that was it,” Anne said.

Everyone waiting made an unsatisfied sound.

Brown, a new detective, asked, “How did she seem?”

The older detectives laughed and then went off to their offices.

“How did she seem?” Anne asked Brown, “What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you think that she was willing to stand trial for the things that were done to her?” Brown said.

“That’s not our concern, Brown,” Anne said. She took another drink from her cup. “That’s up to her, I suppose.”

“Do you think that she will?” Brown asked.

Anne stared into her cup, the coffee nook was empty but for her and Brown, “No.”

“Why not?” Brown asked.

“I watched her stare out the window contemplating just how close she had been to being categorically forgotten for being an inconvenience,” Anne sighed. “And I saw how I was returning her to that same fate. Different masters, same fate.”

“If you don’t mind,” Anne said and stepped past Brown towards her own office.

As she strode across the room Percy was in the lobby and pointed her out, “Hey! Anne, we’ve got someone asking for you by name!”

Anne continued towards her room and said, over her shoulder, “You know where to find me.”

Excerpt: Interview with Amaryllis (Continued)

By Benjamin Pontchartrain for The Pacific

I took a sip from my coffee, which had magically gone from scalding hot to cold, but I didn't let that bother me in the least. You see, a journalist shouldn't have any concern for his own comfort, that's how he or she gets their story. They're mired in the shit that normal folk couldn't be bothered with and they need to get the scoop. Cold coffee or no.

"Do you mind telling me anything about your name and how you came upon choosing it? I asked.

Amaryllis unfurled from her chair and wafted over to a collection of flowers by the window, "You can see one right here," She mewled. "It's only just beginning to sprout out of the bulb, but in a month or so it'll bloom with this big broad flower. I always liked the symbolism of spring rebirth. I think that we're in a time of rebirth ourselves, don't you think?

"That's certainly how Delany frames it," I said. "Like the world falling apart is some kind of opportunity, not a death knell."

"Did you know that some of the oldest cults were based on cycles of one thousand years in length?"

She asked and stood framed by the big greenhouse windows and her flowers.

"Millenarian cults?" I said.

"That's right," Amaryllis said. "It's like there's this universal human feeling that at the doorstep of a thousand years something big's about to happen. The apostles felt it when Jesus was put up on the

Cross and then a thousand years later all of Europe felt it anew. Now, we're feeling the revolution turning again. But the thing about this millenarian feeling is that every time people thought that the world was ending there were things that were used as evidence, such as the spread and domination of Islam against Christian realms and periods of plague, yet the world kept going."

"You're saying that climate change and worldwide political collapse are... just another bump in the road?"

"Well, we're going to have to see, won't we?"

The Assignment

Seattle, Cascadia, Friday

Anne settled into her office, putting the fog on the glass panes that made her cubicle walls. She had lots of people who wanted her skills, but she only took cases that were interesting. Her reputation as a solver of problems haunted her and Percy was at the forefront of problems.

She sat at her desk, a wide oak slab, and set her drink down on it. Her computer, a Mac laptop, sat at one end that she only used for note taking. She picked up her coffee and took a drink in anticipation of whoever Percy was going to send her today.

A couple stepped into her cubicle. They were white and blonde haired with blue eyes. They wore matching gray suits. There was something about the suits that surprised her. They were so perfect, the lines of the suits so sharp and precise. She almost wanted to sit up and salute. They sat down together

like it was rehearsed, they sat in Anne's customer chairs like they were hovering over the actual leather, not placing weight upon them.

Anne, who was fully collapsed into her own chair, like a wet towel, addressed them, "What can I do for... uh... the two of you?"

"Our daughter has gone missing and we would like you to find her," the woman said.

"Well, that is very straightforward." Anne said and took a sip of her coffee and flashed her crooked teeth, "You folks look pretty sharp, so I'm going to guess that you did your homework and that you know that I specialize in finding people, especially people who don't want to be found. Now, this can sometimes take up to several days and as such, I'll need you to sign a contract that stipulates that I'll be paid a per-diem in addition to my finding fee. We'll decide on the fee depending on a number of criteria that will also be laid out in the contract. In addition, there are several circumstances in which the contract will invoke other fees, in the case of violence or severe inconvenience not of my own doing. An example might be if you tell me your daughter is unarmed and non-violent and she takes a shot at me during my investigation. I tell you this not because I think your daughter is the violent type, but because I want you to give me as much information as possible so that we don't trigger any of these unusual fees. Think of all possible scenarios in the most realistic terms possible. By protecting me, you also protect *your* interests. Does that all work for you?"

"Yes," The man said.

Anne paused, looking at them up and down, there was something off about them. Most parents looking for a lost kid were beside themselves and shouting at her by now. “Find our child!” and “What are you wasting our time for?” These two were calm cucumbers. She leaned back in her chair and the thought occurred to her that they might be on the autistic spectrum. Matching outfits, impeccable hair styles... Anne had an autistic friend when she was a kid who only ever got upset at loud noises. One time they tested the fire alarm without notifying anybody and it took hours to comfort her. But when her dog died she looked unaffected. Anne asked if she was sad and her friend said that she was, but she didn’t understand how she was supposed to act.

“Okay,” Anne said, leaning forward and waking up her laptop, “Let’s start with some names.”

“Oh!” the woman started as if suddenly realizing that she was having a conversation with someone,

“My name is Francis and this is my husband, Heinrich. Our daughter is Ingrid.”

Anne felt that the autism guess was correct at the woman’s reaction and her husband’s stony face. She tapped the names into her computer. “...And a last name?”

“Mondaugen,” Heinrich Mondaugen said, his mouth barely opening to sound out the word.

Anne pointed her finger in the air and smiled, “Now hang on a moment,” The couple seemed to tense.

Anne assumed it was her gesture, somewhat out of place for this kind of conversation, plus she was smiling a lot at these people who were probably struggling with some negative emotions. But, this was

Anne’s personality, she was a conversationalist with a penchant for asides, “If I’m not mistaken,

“Mondaugen” means “moon-eyes” in German, is that right?”

“That’s right,” Francis said, like a teacher praising a student. “How did you know?”

“I think of myself as something of a linguist. That’s what I went to school for, anyway. Funny that? How does someone with such an academic background get into something so practical for a living? I’ve always thought that I was attracted to languages because of their hidden meaning. Ordinary, inconspicuous words often hold meaning in them that takes teasing out, and when you’re trying to find someone who doesn’t want to be found, you’re plumbing the depths of the obvious for the hidden values that lead to a not so obvious conclusion.”

“Wouldn’t that be more like,” Heinrich paused, looking for the word. “Semiotics?”

“Indeed, linguistics and semiotics have a lot of similarities, but semiotics is more concerned with symbols, whereas linguistics is language. You seem to know your stuff, are you an academic?”

“We are professors,” Heinrich said and Anne made a note in her Macbook. “We work at a small college out East. I work in the sociology department and my wife works in mathematics. Our daughter, predictably rebellious, decided to go to school out here in Seattle where her meddling parents might not bother her. She is studying computer science.”

“So now,” Anne said, picking up a pen from her desk and tapping on her lip, “I’ve got to ask: you’ve made this trip all the way to Seattle in person, where your missing daughter is studying, why isn’t it that you aren’t searching for her yourself.”

“We are, as you can tell, very conspicuous,” Heinrich said.

“We can’t help it,” Francis said. “Even if we tried to ‘blend in’, we’d give ourselves up in an instant.”

“The moment that we show up at her dormitory, she would figure out we’re looking for her and dive even farther into obscurity,” Heinrich said.

“Well, that is refreshingly self-aware,” Anne said, making more notes.

“Is that an unusual quality?” Francis asked.

“For parents looking for a missing daughter?” Anne looked at them critically, “Yes.”

“We are not usual parents,” Heinrich said.

“You can say that again, pal!” Anne laughed amiably. The parents laughed half a beat later.

There was something of the Uncanny Valley about this whole interaction. What should be an ordinary interaction was just slightly off. Nothing about this was truly strange, but strangeness alarms were going off in Anne’s head. “So tell me how you found out that your daughter is missing and why she doesn’t want to be found? Perhaps she’s just not answering your calls as she is, as you say, a typically rebellious child.”

“You are right that she doesn’t take our calls, and that is not of particular concern, but we monitor her bank account and she hasn’t drawn any money in several months,” Francis explained.

“Okay. So entertain this: maybe she’s decided to get off the proverbial teat and try to make it on her own in the world. She got a job, her own bank account, really sever the connection?” Anne asked.

“We received a past due bill for her dormitory,” Heinrich said and produced a printed copy of an email that indeed said that Ingrid Mondaugen’s dormitory fees were in arrears. “Additionally, I have a friend who Ingrid doesn’t know is my friend in the art department who has told me that she’s stopped attending classes.”

“Still, we have a girl who’s gone off your grid, but isn’t necessarily missing. Normally, when parents are concerned about a missing child, they are really afraid that their kid is being sex-trafficked or on drugs or something of that nature,” Anne said.

“Yes,” Francis said, “We are afraid for her safety and health.”

“Ingrid has an obsession,” Heinrich said. “We’re afraid that she’s making decisions that will lead her into a series of bad decisions that will affect her future. We would like for at least a message to be delivered to her, that she can always come back to us if she finds herself...disappointed.”

“Okay, so remember when I said that more information will result in a lesser fee for you? This is when I need to know what this obsession is,” Anne said, flattening her mouth across her face in a serious expression.

“She thinks that she has a personal relationship with the pop star Amaryllis,” Francis said.

“Amaryllis?” Anne said aloud, trying to remember the name, “Oh yeah, I remember her. She’s the robot, right?”

“Amaryllis plays at being a robot,” Heinrich said. “That’s what attracted Ingrid to her. Ingrid is convinced that she can teach Amaryllis how to feel like a human being, to not only be an AI, but also to be a human.”

“I hate to ask it, but have you had Amaryllis screened for schizophrenia? Does your family have any history of mental illness?” Anne asked, typing more notes into her computer.

“The family has a history of autism,” Francis said and Anne mentally thought ‘bingo!’ “But she’s been out of our house since she was eighteen.”

“So there’s a possibility that she’s developed some kind of mental illness since she’s left the house,” Anne said, more notes. “I hate to say it, but I’m going to guess that she’s likely fallen into the unhoused community up here in Cascadia, that will incur an additional charge, but it is a lead, which is good.

“So she’s obsessed with Amaryllis,” Anne said. “Is there anything else?”

“Our primary concern is that our daughter has abandoned her schoolwork to pursue this delusion with Amaryllis and we would like to coax her back,” Heinrich said.

“So,” Anne said, looking at her sheet of notes on her macbook screen, “You want me to find your kid, make sure she’s safe, figure out if she’s ill, and encourage her to return to the fold, is that right?”

“That’s all we can do,” Francis said, “Right?”

Anne chuckled and leaned back in her chair, “Well, I’m going to be honest with you, if you wanted me to kidnap her and bring her to your door, that would only be an upcharge, but I like your style and I

think that you should stick to it. You're respecting her autonomy and frankly, you're saving yourself money in the long run. The kids I kidnap and bring back to their parents often just run off again, and often need years of therapy," Anne paused and the Mondaugens stared back at her, suddenly realizing what it sounded like, she added, "Not from the kidnapping! The kidnapping is gentle. As gentle as a kidnapping can be, really. It's the fact that the folks can't let their kid go that drives them into therapy. *This Be the Verse* and such."

The Mondaugens continue to stare at Anne, "Phillip Larkin? He wrote a poem that began 'They'll fuck you up, your mom and dad/ they didn't mean to, but they did.' or something like that."

"I'm sorry, I don't know much poetry," Francis apologized.

"You know what? That's alright, sometimes I just say things, don't worry about it," Anne babbled.

"Anyway, can you give me the address of your daughter's dormitory? That's where I'll get started. You can both wait in the lobby while I draft up the contract. After you sign, I'll get on the case immediately after you pay the deposit."

The Mondaugens looked at each other for a moment and then back at Anne, she started getting an uneasy feeling. "What?" Anne asked.

"We're family friends with Ernest Mairo," Heinrich said and Anne felt a chill run down her back. "He told us to call in a favor from you."

"Is that so," Anne said, trying to be cool. "Did Ernest say that this is his favor? The *one* favor?"

“He said that you owed him a favor and that we could call it,” Heinrich said.

“Well,” Anne said, deleting the notes from her computer, “If that’s so, I can start working on your case immediately.”

The Plan, In Broad Strokes

The Nevada Consortium, Saturday

“I’ve got a lead on your case, Rodriguez,” Anne shouted over the rotor wash as she walked to the security truck. Benjamin Ponchartrain stepped out from behind the vehicle, surprising her a little,

“What...? What is he doing here?”

“I didn’t have time to drop him off after getting your radio from the chopper,” Rodriguez shouted.

“I don’t mind,” Pontchartrain said, blinking the dust and wind out of his eyes.

“Look,” Anne said to Rodriguez, “There’s some kind of conspiracy going on here and at the center of it is a dead girl. When I took off in that helicopter, but flying over town I saw that low-life, jumped-up mobster Ernest Mairo jogging casually through the goddamn town square.”

“Ernest Mairo?” Rodriguez asked, “Are you sure you’re thinking of the same person? Ernest Mairo is one of the earliest and most prominent contributors to the Consortium. He’s hardly a mobster.”

“That’s his whole game, Rodriguez,” Anne said. “He’s got this whole thing set up, and I bet that Amaryllis is in on it too. Let’s get down to your office and look through the laws of this place so that we can come up with the appropriate evidence to bring the murderers of Ingrid Mondaugen to justice.

And on top of that we'll nail the sick bastards in this town who think they can play with human lives like they're no more than chessmen."

"That was a very rousing speech," Ben said, following Anne and Rodriguez to the truck. Rodriguez got in the driver seat, Anne the passenger and Ben in the back. "Do you mind if I shadow you and write an article about your investigation?"

Anne turned around in her seat and fixed Ben with a severe gaze, "You can follow me around if you can explain to me how you might prove to be useful."

"I," Ben began haughtily, "Happen to know Amaryllis personally."

Anne first looked somewhat shocked, but then smiled.

The Coffin Nail

Seattle, Cascadia, Friday

The Coffin Nail was the goth-themed coffee shop across the street from Quentin's Queries. Anne knew it well, she was a regular. The shop is cast in perfect darkness aided by an airlock door arrangement at the front that prevents light from the outside from coming in. Wall sconces hold artificial candles that flicker against the deep blood red velvet wallpaper. The lobby was replete with gothic affectation, high-backed black chairs gathered around black painted coffee tables. Standing lamps illuminated the clusters of chairs, no fluorescent ceiling lights anywhere. On the far wall was an enormous bookshelf that was packed with books that visitors could read while they drank their coffee

in the dark, books with titles like *Justine* and *Discipline and Punish* and *Eclipse*. The coffee bar itself was backlit in such a way that the light didn't spill too much into the room all that much. Anne once asked about how they were able to see what they were doing back there where the coffee was made and was told that the proprietor was a former Hollywood gaffer with a love for chiaro-scuro and German Expressionism. Only that which needed to be cast in shadow, was. The barista work area was well-lit and well-appointed. Even with all of the accoutrement of the vampiric, the Coffin Nail still served its purpose, which was to deliver finely crafted coffee drinks to whoever dared enter the foreboding premises.

Anne had seen all kinds in the Coffin Nail. It is not just the demesne of spooky goth types, although it does cater to those in particular. It was not unusual to find the occasional jogger in marathon training gear asking for an americano or the particularly lost soccer mom begging for a bucket of latte while her charges circled her like unorderly satellites. However, these people were not regulars.

One regular that she knows of is Kevin McNulty. Kevin was a data scientist, which Anne understood as a sort of computer programmer, who worked for one of the big tech firms in downtown Seattle. His girlfriend, Tracey Montes worked for the same firm as a project manager. After work, they both went to the same gym in Capitol Hill and then home to their apartment in Miller Park. They bicycled casually everywhere and only ever used their electric car to take excursions to the national parks in the outer parts of Cascadia, like Mount Tacoma and once to Crater Lake. Kevin was a mild sort of employee, he performed his duties quietly and with a smile, gathering satisfaction from the precision that his work required. He smiled at people as he passed them on his bicycle or when he was on the

bus. His uniform, if you might call it that, was a cleanly pressed oxford shirt of any pastel shade and khaki slacks with a sharp crease that he presses every Sunday. He wore black socks that led into brown penny-loafers. When he was 'off-time' as he liked to call it, evenings or weekends, he wore a bright polo on top of a pair of khaki colored shorts that were short enough to elicit chuckles from his coworkers, dock-shoes and short socks. When he read, which was irregularly, and often when he was vacationing in San Diego, he read Clive Cussler sea adventures. He preferred to drink a glass of blended scotch with soda at parties. His favorite coffee was an oat-milk latte with just a splash of brewed coffee dropped in there after the espresso and before the milk.

Kevin McNulty was a square.

He also preferred the Coffin Nail because he freaked all of the weirdos out. Most of the people who came to the Coffin Nail are expecting the bloody-looking walls, the clientele that looked like they just stepped foot off of a Tim Burton picture, and the unpleasant service, but what most were not expecting was to see the khaki raiment that is Kevin McNulty sitting in one of the black high-backed chairs, unusually bright for the environment due to his preference for pastels, smiling, pleasantly, at them. It got under their skin.

Anne, one time waiting for her flat white with nutmeg, watched a particularly crusty black metal enthusiast enter the Coffin Nail replete with peeling death-mask and sagging black denim begin to order a matcha latte. After he paid, he took a survey of the room and spotted Kevin sitting in one of the high-backed chairs, sipping a latte, and lost his mind. "Hey!" the crusty barked to the barista who was in the process of making the matcha latte, "When did they let people like *him* in here?"

“Who?” asked the barista, only partially interested. “Oh you mean Kevin? He’s a regular.” Kevin heard this and raised his latte in salute to the crusty goth.

“Hurry up with that matcha,” the crusty goth said. “I didn’t know that *they* were allowed in here!” and as soon as his drink was up, the crusty goth bolted out of the door.

This was not an unusual event, Kevin unnerved a lot of customers at the Coffin Nail, but because the proprietor was a devout atheistic satanist, he could never find a really good reason to tell Kevin to leave, especially because he spent maybe fifty bucks a week on coffee.

Anne, who was not so scared of strangers as others, once sat down with Kevin, “Hey, you know you freak some people out here.”

“Why do you think I keep coming back?” Kevin said.

“So you like...” Anne thought, “Being a freak?”

Kevin leaned towards Anne and bent a finger towards her, beckoning her attention. She leaned towards him, “I’m the most ordinary man in the world, but when I come here, I’m a freak,” Kevin smiled. “Everyone in here is obsessed with freaking out people like me. They love when they’re seen in a supermarket and people stare and mutter to themselves about how unusual they are.” Kevin leaned back into his chair, “I like to freak them out a little. Sometimes I like to think about these people who dress themselves in black and paint their faces white and I like to think about their kids.”

“What about their kids?” Anne asked tentatively, worried about the next reply.

“I like to think about how they have kids and how they’re nestled in their beds late at night,” Kevin took a sip from his coffee, “And how they have to convince their kids that *I* am not under their beds at night.”

A Lead

Seattle, Cascadia, Friday

Today, of course, Peter is serving up coffee at the Coffin Nail. Anne winced as her eyes adjusted to the darkness of the coffee bar, but it was too late, she was already walking up to the coffee bar and Peter.

“Anne!” Peter exclaimed while shuffling around various coffee canisters, “What are you up to nowadays?”

“Me?” Anne said, “Oh, you know.” She let the words float in the air between them, “I have a new college girl to track down.”

“Whoa!” Peter said, “Is she in trouble?”

“Nah,” Anne said, “I don’t think so, but her parents are paying a load of money to find her.”

“Anybody I would know?” Peter asked, he did have some connections with the local university.

“No, I don’t think so,” Anne said and then had a brain wave, “Wait, do you know anything about the Caplan dormitories? I’m going there to maybe find the mark.”

“Caplan dormitories?” Peter perked up, “Yeah, I know them! They’re mixed-use, but they’re wealthy. You got a rich girl that you’re looking for!”

Peter is trying to be helpful and he thinks that he’s come across something that might be helpful, but Anne knows that this bit of information is not very helpful. “Can I get a flat-white?”

“With nutmeg sprinkle?” Peter said. Anne nods assent and he begins to make the drink. She feels a sense of regret in her gut. The feeling is uncomfortably near where she remembers Peter’s...uh...well... They’d had sex a month ago and Anne was uninterested in doing it again, but she could tell that Peter wanted to. Oh god, did he want to. She chastised herself for having sex with Peter on that night, but she was in a mood then and Peter had been so...uh, what do you want to call it...available. “Hey,” Peter said, wiping his hands on his apron while the milk wand was doing its thing, “I know that you don’t want to have a thing or you’re busy, which I get, I totally do, I get that you’re, like, a really important detective around here, but if you got some time tonight, I happen to know about a really great show that’s happening tonight. Bourbon Bar, up in Belltown. It would be a bitch to walk, but it’s not a bad bus ride. Me and the guys are gonna be there tonight, just hanging out. Oh, hey, here’s your drink!”

“Thanks so much, Peter,” Anne said. “I’ll let you know if I’m coming out tonight...wait, what was it that you said about the Caplan dormitories?”

“Ritch bitch territory,” Peter said. “If you want to get in there you’re going to want to have a reason.”

“A reason?” Anne asked and took a sip from her coffee.

“I mean that you need to get past the guards,” Peter said and then fussed around in his smock, “Here, show this card and they’ll let you in.”

Anne looked at the card, it was very plain, but it said “P-Money, a holistic and all natural provider.”

“What is this?” Anne asked.

“Look,” Peter leaned in to Anne confidentially, “I sell drugs to the college kids. The door guards know me and they know my product isn’t stepped on. Do you know what I mean?”

“Supposedly the guards are keeping the drugs out, why do they like you?” Anne asked.

“I’m saying that the drugs that I provide aren’t going to fucking kill them,” Peter leaned further in, “They’re going to do drugs, right? The service I provide is that I get them drugs that aren’t going to kill them. When some stupid fuck asks for coke from some stupid bastard he might get a load of coke, but the dealer doesn’t care about keeping his dope clean, the stupid bastard gets a load of coke with a little bit of fentanyl in it. He keeps doing coke all night and having a great time, but then the fentanyl hits him and he’s DOA. When they buy from me they know that I’ve been really careful with cutting my drugs. When you get coke, you get coke. No fentanyl, no terror, no bullshit. That’s why the guards outside of the rich dormitories let me in. They know that the stuff I bring in doesn’t kill their kids. The college kids get to have fun and wake up in the morning with nothing more than regret and a hangover. Shhh, I’m on duty!”

Morgenthal, the manager, moved over closer to Anne and Peter, “If you guys want to talk, just go over there.”

Anne and Peter moved over to the end of the coffee bar. “What is terror?” Anne asked.

“That’s the new shit,” Peter said. “I don’t even deal that shit. There are a lot of names for it, but it’s getting really popular. It gets accidentally added into coke and heroin shipments because of cross-contamination. All I know is that it’s an intense psychedelic with a powerful euphoric effect. You hallucinate very vividly and then you feel really good about that hallucination.”

“Sounds like acid,” Anne said, but she didn’t know anything about being high on acid.

“The problem is that the conviction that the hallucinations are real, which on acid, fade when the acid fades, well, on terror, the conviction of the hallucinations sticks around too long. On acid, you wake up the next day and say, ‘well, that was a hallucination!’, but on terror...you think, *that* really happened!”

Drug PSA from the Seattle Police Department

The phenylethylamine Methyl-Gallopallomine, also known popularly as terror, pal, gak, fun, gallium, and truth, among other names, is a dangerous psychedelic amphetamine substitute that has become popular in the wider drug culture in the past few years.

Due to the ease of production, which requires easily obtained chemicals at quantities that do not trigger normal drug-production cautions, it is widely produced in small quantities. This makes it particularly difficult to prevent its production and use.

Users of terror claim to be subjected to hours-long psychedelic trips that reveal hidden truths about nature and society. These hallucinations then persist in the sober individual's mind, gradually replacing the convictions and rationality of terror users until their waking lives are indistinguishable from the hallucinations they experience while high.

This poses a particularly confounding problem for the recovery of users. Up until now, the treatment of addiction to most harmful drugs has been abstinence, but abstinence alone will not lead to full recovery from the use of terror. Rather, many sessions of psychotherapy are necessary to replace the user's delusions with the facts of reality and reason.

Furthermore, it appears that the hallucinations and subsequent delusions created by terror seem to be surprisingly consistent among users. Users frequently report delusions such as being revealed truths about life from a god-like entity living under a pyramid constructed in the middle of a jungle. The truths revealed include the supposed facts that the user is a) immortal, b) instrumental to the story of mankind, c) destined to destroy mankind in order for it to be rebuilt, among other revelations such as certain super-powers and accentuated personal traits, such as intelligence or general attractiveness.

These revelations come on slowly, with the grandiose ones occurring particularly intense trips after the user has been using for some time. Early trips often reveal things like general attractiveness, where the user is suddenly convinced that they are irresistible to other human beings, a conviction that does not diminish after the high fades.

The public has been warned before about the use of hard drugs because of addiction potential or the risk of overdose, but terror is different. The public should be warned that even casual use of terror can lead to permanent changes in their persona and psyche that may be difficult or impossible to reverse using psychotherapy.

This is an entirely new class of dangerous chemical and the public is advised to discourage its use because of its unprecedented threat to the public's mental health.

Members of the public who discover loved ones or friends using terror are recommended to take the user to a psychological clinic that handles terror cases immediately. In order to establish compliance with the affected user, the public is advised to not argue with the delusions, which may result in intense panic attacks for the user. Rather, it is advised to lie to the user until they can be sedated in a controlled setting by a psychiatric professional where they may begin their recovery from this terrible drug.

Crossing the Line

Seattle, Cascadia, Friday

Anne left the Coffin Nail and set out towards the Caplan dormitories, but she knew that she had to pass one of the Lines. This was a daily problem. Even though the Cascadian province had been unified, there were still subdivisions that declared sovereignty. There was still a sort of border between the Capitol Hill area from the general Seattle area where the Caplan dormitories exist. Anne decided that she would cross over at the prescribed border.

She strode down the street, cursing herself for having to cross over the border on foot, but if she took a car it would be even more of a shit show. The rain was falling in gentle sheets, barely more than what falls from a tree's branches after a moderate rain. The streets were empty in the early afternoon, but inside the windows of the street-facing businesses, Anne could see the living city. People gathered for a meal or contently drank beers or shopped for books. People were up to all kinds of things indoors. Occasionally, a particularly committed bicycle courier splashed past with an "On your left!" Auto-rickshaws passed without even a "How do you do."

Anne walked west, down Pine street, toward downtown Seattle. She began crossing the bridge over I-5 and saw a commotion on the other side. At the intersection of Pine and 9th, where the border crossing was, it looked like a parade, but it lacked the color and frivolity of a Capitol Hill parade. As she got closer and spotted the black and white and blue flags flown over the street, she remembered. How could she have forgotten? It was the event of the season: the Seattle Policeman's Parade. Every year, on the anniversary of the dissolution and retreat of the Seattle police from Capitol Hill—which the cops claimed was November 22, but everyone in Capitol Hill knew it was June 8—the cops set up a parade on the border between the Hill and proper Seattle. It took the form of a military parade where the police rolled out all of their vehicles, from their lowly motorcycle cruisers and horses all the way up to the SWAT armored vehicles.

Anne ambled down the empty bridge toward the guard hut, which looked deserted. Which was strange. But the border barrier was down and locked, which meant a great deal of trouble for anyone who wanted to cross it. The barrier was a clandestine assemblage of I-beams and concertina wire,

caltrops and spike strips. It was all show for the police though, human beings on foot or bicycle were allowed through the central opening in the barrier and the Hill was proud of not caring much who crossed or when. They just wanted the police cruisers to stay on their side of the bridge.

Borders like these were set up along every major intersection between Capitol Hill and Seattle. Each manned by between a few and a few dozen so-called freedom-fighters employed by the Capitol Hill Civil Union. This particular border, though, was generally manned by a single freedom-fighter, Sergei Kulik. Sergei was a veteran of the War in Ukraine, who, after the detente was cast, emigrated to the United States and to Seattle, which he “Thinks is about as far away from Western Russia before I start going back to the front again.” Sergei could often be seen squatting outside of the guard hut puffing on endless cigarettes and leaning on his so-called Lucky AK. The weapon was an ancient piece of history, an AKM issued to his grandfather in the 1960s. He took good care of it. It looked brand-new except when you looked very closely at the stock and saw all of the tally marks buried under coat after coat of varnish. Anne had asked once what the tallies were for. Sergei looked at her like an idiot, “It is the number of men it has killed. First by my grandfather, then my father, then my brother, then me. I have the most tallies” he said proudly and then lit another cigarette with the butt of a nearly spent one. “My brother has the fewest.”

“Sergei,” Anne called when she got to the guard hut, “Sergei, are you in there?” The cacophony of the parade made it hard to tell what was going on in the hut.

The barrel of a rifle emerged from the canvas that acted as the guard hut's door, "Get back to Line, pig!

I don't know how you got on this side of Line, but..."

"It's me, Anne, Sergei!" Anne shouted, her hands up in the air.

"Anne?" Sergei said contemptuously, "I don't know any Anne."

"Sergei, quit fucking around," Anne shouted.

"Anne?" he said again, sticking his head out of the door. She recognized his close shaven head and long since broken nose, "Suka blyat, I could have shot you! Come on, get in the hut before the cops take a potshot at you, blin."

She stepped past the canvas, which felt weighted, and into the hut. To the left of the door was a table that served as a desk, several stacks of paper weighed down with several paperweights, such as hand grenades and caltrops. On the wall adjacent to the desk was a cigarette burnt cloth couch. In front of the couch was a piece of plywood on top of a couple of milk crates that served as a coffee table. On the coffee table were magazine loaders and ammo boxes, an electric tea kettle, an overflowing ashtray and a MacBook Pro. A television was mounted on the wall opposite of the couch and above it was a ledge that served as a bed. "Anne," Sergei said, spreading his arms out in the close space, "Suka! It's good to see you, how have you been? Come in, sit down. Cigarette? Here you go. Lighter is on the table. I'll make you cup of tea. Are you going into town today?"

"That's my intention, Sergei," Anne lit one of his Chinese cigarettes, taking a drag and then coughing,

"Jesus, like smoking leather."

“Blin!” Sergei laughed hysterically through a cloud of smoke coming from the cigarette perpetually fixed at the corner of his mouth. “Americans have no taste. Anyway, you are going to have to wait until the po-les finish their little parade. Meanwhile, we can watch television and catch up on old times, drink tea.”

Anne took another drag of her cigarette and winced at the flavor, “We aren’t having sex, Sergei.” She said and shot him an impatient look.

“No! No,” Sergei said quickly, throwing his arms in front of him like a no-go symbol, “I wouldn’t dream of it, not after last time,” Sergei said, and then continued weightily, with a seriousness that was earned, “Not after you make it so clear.”

“You had a little too much to drink that night, Sergei.” Anne said, revealing a few of her teeth, like the playful threat of a smiling cat. She held up her hands and wiggled her fingers, her cigarette burning between her lips. “You lost track of your hands.”

“This you made very clear on that night, Anne,” Sergei said. “Let’s just be sure that you sit on your side of couch and I sit on my side of couch.”

“That seems agreeable to me,” Anne said and tapped the ash off of her cigarette. Sergei did not sit on the couch, but rather continued to crouch by the door, occasionally checking the progress of the parade by peeking past the canvas door. “What are you watching?”

“It is documentary about Great Garbage Island in Pacific,” Sergei said, “Great ecological disaster, great humanitarian disaster, lots of problems, few solutions.”

“The Earth abideth,” Anne said quietly.

“What does the Earth do now?” Sergei asked, “I don’t know this last word you say.”

“It’s from the Bible, it means that people come and go, but the problems of those people are as they always have been, ‘Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us.’”

“Same shit, different day,” Sergei said and lit another cigarette.

“Precisely,” Anne said and laughed.

The documentary described the Great Garbage Island, which began in the later part of the previous epoch as a very large collection of loose garbage that had coalesced into a particular part of the ocean that swirled in a great circle that approximated the so-called Ring of fire. It rotated in a clockwise fashion from Alaska down to Los Angeles, past the Easter Islands, then traversing the great Pacific ocean to Australia, up past the islands of Micronesia, past China and Japan and then beginning the circuit again.

When it began, the island was mostly composed of discarded consumer plastics and huge gobs of abandoned industrial fishing netting. As the years progressed, several boats were subsumed into the assemblage. This is approximately when human beings were observed living on the island. It began as self-subsistence fishermen whose derelict ships had gotten lost in the cluster of trash. They began to fashion the trash into useful clusters and repurposed the fishing nets to catch their own fish. Large collections of plastic garbage were tied together with discarded fishing nets to create islands. The

international housing crisis and the rising ocean waters forced a great many people in the Pacific Rim off of their islands and their tenements and their shanties and out to sea where the Great Garbage Island collected them. The bound-together islands grew and grew. The islanders collected anything they came across in the vast desert that is the Pacific Ocean. They developed complex systems to collect rainwater, to generate electricity through recovered solar panels, even a system for collecting soil to grow crops. This all had the collective effect of making the island, well, look like an actual island.

Standing in the middle of the one-hundred-thousand square mile island, one might find themselves standing on enough soil that it feels like they're standing on solid ground. The vegetation around them blowing gently in the cool wind and rising above it all in the distance are the only structures around, the super-structures of fishing trawlers and pleasure yachts half-submerged in the gathering soil and humus. To hike from one end to the other may take several days. It was generally suspected that there were some early settlers who remained on their initial claims and have watched the island grow around them to the point where their children may perceive their lives no different from their ancestors on proper land, except for the fact that every night the stars are in wildly unpredictable places.

Anne boggled at the logistics of such a place, the incredible nature of it. She imagined herself plowing up a row for legumes or grain or what-have-you under the noonday sun. She imagined herself setting up the irrigation system connected to the barrels on the fly-bridge of an old fishing trawler by the name of Archie Stanton. Long ago their people had forgotten the meaning of the name, or even how to sound the letters out. Long ago her family had forgotten the purpose of the trawler, which was now just a steel shell that they'd fashioned into a home beneath the earth. The explanation for the lapping

liquid sound when you put your ear to the bottom of the shell was explained as the water demons that guard the depths. That's why, you shouldn't dig too deep, lest you disturb them. She spends her whole life on this vast prairie. Her neighbors are spread out miles apart. She's heard about cities, they're on the coast, where the land meets the water, but she's never seen one. The biggest settlement she's ever seen is the market town where she sells her surplus and buys needed supplies. Then, one day the raiders come. They carry firearms and gun down her friends and family to take their land so that they don't have to pay so much for grain or rice. They place their own useless kin on the land to toil for the city dwellers who purchase the grain from the towns who buy it from the market towns who buy it from the farmers... "The Earth abides," Anne whispered to herself again.

"That's the last of the color guard," Sergei said. "The parade should be clearing up pretty soon."

"That means I'll have to get going too," Anne said. "Ah!, but before I hit the road." Anne said and then reached behind her back from which she produced a semi-automatic pistol. "Check this baby out," she said to Sergei. She dropped the magazine out of the bottom and pulled the slide back ejecting the round that was previously in the chamber. She caught the round as it fell in the hand holding the magazine. She handed the pistol to Sergei who eyed it appreciatively.

"This is one of those new concealment guns, eh?" Sergei said, turning it over in his hands and feeling the heft of it. "Very fine, very fine. Khorosho!"

"You couldn't even tell I was packing when I came in here," Anne said.

“I assumed you were,” Sergei said, shrugging his shoulders and frowning appreciatively, “Because I am not idiot.” He handed the gun back to her, “But you’re right, I did not sense this weapon in your waistband. It is quite thin, but it still has a decent weight.”

“The polymer they make these things out of nowadays is incredible,” Anne said, pushing the magazine home and racking the slide. “You can’t even tell it’s not metal. The bullets are made out of the same stuff. I order them special. I can walk through a metal detector without even a beep.”

Sergei whistles appreciatively, “Must cost a lot for the bullets.”

“Well,” Anne smiled her crooked, wicked smile, “I don’t often miss.”

Going to College

Seattle, Cascadia, Friday

Anne located Caplan house pretty quickly, she knew the university area pretty well. The building itself was a large stark concrete building with glass windows that reached far into the sky. On the south side of the rectangle was the foot traffic entrance right off of the sidewalk. A big, broad iron gate thirty-feet wide by thirty-feet high. It was opened by an electronic door lock. Knowing that she couldn’t get in by lockpicking, she simply leaned up against the gate and waited.

Sure enough, after a few minutes a gate guard came up from behind, “Hey, lady, what are you doing here?”

“Ah, finally,” Anne said, a little put-off. She handed the gate guard Peter’s card. “Take a look at this.”

“You’re new,” the guard said, examining Anne. “What’s your name?”

“Felicity,” Anne said, “You got a problem with a girl trying to make a living around here? You want me to move out onto the Great Garbage Island? That’s harsh, man.”

“I’ll tell you the same thing that I told Peter,” the guard said, unlocking the door and letting Anne in.

“If you cause trouble, if you sell bunk shit, if you sell them too much, we’re going to find you. Do you know who we are?”

“I’m taking a wild guess that you aren’t affiliated with the Boy Scouts Troop 100,” Anne said, standing less than a foot away from the man, who was using his large frame to block her way. He had to be at least a foot taller and a hundred pounds greater, muscular and intense. His bullet-proof suit was half a size too small. “Maybe you’re with the Girl Scouts. Or are you still with the Brownies?”

“You’re funny,” the guard said. “I’ll remember you. That’s not a particularly good thing, hot stuff.”

He stepped aside for her and returned the business card to her as she walked into the courtyard. “One last thing: no terror.”

“No worries, Peaches,” Anne said over her shoulder as she kept walking. “Don’t even sell the stuff.”

The courtyard is large and green, with trees that rise four or five stories, but are kept trimmed so as to not brush the inner walls of the building, which extend all the way to the top, a big open square exposed to the starlight, or in this case, the clouds. The inner walls are lined with balconies for the residents. Anne guessed that the apartments are long and narrow, extending from the outside to the inside. The lobby was on the far side of the courtyard from the front gate and was a three-story glass

facade with a set of revolving doors. She could see opulent chandeliers lighting the space and a large front desk where other large and imposing men seem occupied with various tasks.

Anne breezed through a revolving door and stepped into the lobby, her boots made a loud report on the marble floors. She looked around at the large negative space of the lobby and whistled to herself.

She eyed the front desk, which was as wide as a hotel's front desk and saw a single woman. She had bright red hair done up in a beehive-type hairdo and was dressed in a barely-professional cocktail dress.

Anne strode up to her, but five feet from her, Anne realized that she'd chosen the toughest guy on the cell-block. She'd probably have had better luck if she sussed out a lonelier looking gym rat out of the lineup. This woman had fine features accentuated by fastidious contour makeup that made Anne realize that this woman wasn't smiling, but only had the illusion of a welcome smile. This woman had the carnivorous dead eyes of a jungle cat. Anne felt the sudden impulse to turn around and walk away, but she knew that once you committed to a scheme, you had to go all the way. There was no turning back, because turning back meant that Peaches was going to come find her and figure out what kind of bullshit she was up to and going forward meant confirming her story and getting her girl.

"Good evening, my name's Felicity," Anne said with a light touch of bourbon slur that made anyone seem foolish and harmless. "I'm looking for someone who lives here."

"Considering that you were able to get into the lobby, Felicity, you must know someone, which then means that you know where to find them, which begs the question," the woman said. "What the fuck are you doing at my workstation."

“Whoa, hey now,” Anne threw her arms out, “I think we’ve gotten off on the wrong foot here! You see, I see this counter here and I figure that I should, like, check in or register or something.

Additionally, I don’t exactly know where my friend is in this big ol’ building so I figured you might help me with that, but that’s not necessary, I can just wander around until I find her.”

“You’ll wander nowhere in our building,” the woman said. “Who was it that you said you were here to see?” she turned her attention to her computer and began tapping.

“I didn’t,” Anne said, “But now that you ask so politely, I’m looking for Ingrid Mondaugen. By the way, what is your name?”

“Barbara,” the woman said and began tapping at her console. After a few moments of awkwardness, she hit one last button and a printer somewhere began to wheeze. “According to our guard, you are with Peter, who we have a special relationship with. I advise you to take the elevator to the eleventh floor, where you will find Ingrid’s room to be in suite 11B, however, I cannot guarantee that she will allow you in. She has not called down to the desk. If we observe you going anywhere else but 11B and then out of the Caplan dormitories, you will be removed. With prejudice. Do you understand?”

“You’re really scary for being so cute,” Anne said and suppressed the urge to wince at her own arrogance. “But yeah, I get it.”

“Here,” Barbara handed Anne a slip of paper. “This is your passport for one hour. Please do not exceed your stay here. The execution of my duties is often deleterious to my reasonable demeanor.”

“You got it, Barb,” Anne said and then got a look, “I mean, Barbara. I’ll be in and out in a jiffy.”

“Miss Felicity,” Barbara said, “One other thing.” Barbara was smiling broadly and standing up from behind her desk. Anne suddenly got the impression that Barbara was running this whole show. “If I even hear about terror in this dormitory, I will personally cut off your head.”

Anne paused, holding the slip of paper that granted her limited access to the building, “You’re,” Anne tried the bourbon slur again, “speaking metaphorically?”

“No,” Barbara said and then sat down again, ignoring Anne.

Anne strolled over to the elevator bank in her best impression of someone who’s had just a few cocktails, but not too many. Her ears burned with fear and apprehension. *Okay, Anne*, she said to herself, *We’re in*. She pressed the call button and a door immediately opened. She stepped inside and looked at the button set. *Okay, so, don’t fuck this up or else that pretty little thing in black is going to cut your fucking head off. Jesus, they say that it’s dangerous outside of Seattle! They don’t know what it’s like when you fuck with the rich kids.* Anne pressed the button for the eleventh floor and the elevator moved up. She looked around the elevator and it was all steel and glass, she could imagine that there were any number of cameras looking at her. She remembered a class she took once that talked about a theoretical prison called a Panopticon. The idea was that if you designed a prison where the prisoners felt they were always being watched, but didn’t know if they were, they would, in a way, police themselves. If you know mother (or Barbara) was watching, you’d be reluctant to be bad. *Holy shit, no wonder this girl is rejecting her parents! They put her in a maximum security prison!*

The elevator dinged and opened. Anne stepped carefully into the elevator lobby and looked around, there was a sign that said “A+” with a direction to the left and “O-” on the sign to the right. Anne went to the left, it became apparent that the outside windows of the building were for the hallways. The lights of the city shone in against the doors and walls of the dormitory, or should she say, prison. She walked past A and came to the door for B. She knocked three times.

There was silence, so she decided to knock again, but she was starting to feel spooked by the whole situation. Everything in her guts said, *get out! Get out of here!* But she fought that feeling and stood sure outside of the door marked B.

The lock mechanism turned and a pale face shone through the gap, “Yes?”

“Hello, I’m, uh,” Anne stalled, wondering if the walls were listening, whether she should use her real name or the fake one, “Felicity, I’m looking for Ingrid? Ingrid Mondaugen?”

“She lives here,” the pale face said. “She’s not here right now.”

“That’s unfortunate, can I come in anyway? I’ve come all this way and I’ll tell you that the—”

“Barbara’s a bitch,” The door swung open wide and Anne stepped in.

“I wish you wouldn’t say that,” Anne said as she stepped in, trying to make it loud for the bugs in the walls.

When the doors closed, Anne took a look around the apartment. If it was a dormitory it was an opulent one. There was a full kitchen on the left and down through the hall it opened up into a

beautiful two-story space. It had been decorated in what Anne would call a colonial Burmese style, which meant a lot of wicker and rubber trees. On the right were two doors that Anne guessed led to bedrooms. Once in the larger living room area, Anne observed that the kitchen also led out into the wider room.

“Holy shit,” Anne blurted. “This is better than my apartment!”

“Do you live in a hovel?” the pale faced girl asked.

“Well,” Anne nodded appreciatively, “Apparently I do! Damn, so what do I have to do to get an apartment like this? Do I need bugs in my walls?”

“Bugs?” the pale girl asked. She was barefoot and wearing yoga pants with a loose fitting band t-shirt that said ‘Bleeding Orphans’. “What do you mean, bugs?”

Anne was already looking around the apartment and checking behind things like rubber trees and sofas, “I mean do they listen in to your conversations?”

The girl looked at Anne with a sudden fear, “I don’t have any money!”

“I’m not looking for money, I’m...” Anne thought suddenly, if there wasn’t any kind of response to ‘I don’t have any money!’ there were no bugs in the place. “What’s your name?”

“Sarah,” she said, “I’ve got a little cash...”

“No, I’m sorry,” Anne said and walked up to the slight small girl whose apartment had just been broken into, “I’m not here to rob you. I’m looking for Ingrid Mondaugen. By the way, why would you open the door for a stranger? That’s a really stupid thing to do.”

“Barbara vets all the visitors,” Sarah said.

“Oh, that makes sense,” Anne said. “Okay, so I’m looking for Ingrid. Are you friends with her? Roommates? I’m looking for her because her parents are looking for her.”

“I haven’t seen Ingrid for some time,” Sarah said.

“Can I look around the apartment?” Anne said, “You should know that I’m not trying to bother you, I just want to figure out where Ingrid has gone. Her parents are worried. She’s not in trouble.”

“I don’t know where she’s gone,” Sarah said. “I do know where she goes.”

Anne gets close to Sarah, “What does that mean?”

Sarah looks afraid, “Why do you need to know where Ingrid is?”

“I’m trying to find out if she’s safe. If she’s out there in one of the tent cities then I need to find her fast,” Anne explained.

“She’s not in one of the tent cities,” Sarah said. “You said that her parents are after her?”

“Yeah, they want to know where she went, they’ve lost contact,” Anne said. “Do you know how I can contact her?”

“She’s always at the Bourbon Bar, up in Belltown,” Sarah said. “Now, will you please go?”

“I’d like to check out her room before I go,” Anne said. “If you don’t mind,” Anne was reaching for one of the door handles of the rooms.

“No, you need to go,” Sarah said. “I told you where to find Ingrid and if you stay any longer, I will call Barbara!”

“Whoa, honey!” Anne said, stepping back from the room, “You’re right, I got what I came for and you don’t need to tell Barbara about anything, right? I’m out of your hair.” Anne went immediately to the door and let herself out. She went down the elevators and out of the lobby without making eye contact with anyone. She strode down the courtyard path and past the guard.

“Don’t come around here no more,” Peaches said.

“Thanks, Peaches, hope to do it again sometime soon!”

Outside of the Bourbon Bar

Seattle, Cascadia, Friday

The Bourbon Bar, the open-air, gaping-wound of Seattle nestled in the hipster district of Belltown. To get there you have to pass by a city of fentanyl addicts, who, much like simple multi celled organisms like nematodes, recognize only the changes of light in their environment. They reach their arm-like appendages to the sky in alms to the starry-eyed hipsters passing here and there in the gentle patter of Cascadian rain, collapsing again when they realize no one has stopped for them. The skyscrapers of

downtown Seattle rise up like epic crystal structures, unevenly lit. A dark blue cloud passes between a cluster of towers. The Bourbon Bar is an institution in a veritable row of institutions that stretches for blocks and blocks of shit and piss stained walls and vomit filled gutters. There are ramen shops, burrito shops, shawarma shops, pizza, Thai, Chinese, sushi, smoke shops, liquor stores, Korean restaurant supply depots, and that all ignores the collection of legendary bars and music venues.

Yes, on a Friday, for a certain set of Seattle denizens, Belltown offered whatever might please. And this night, Anne was one of those looking for satisfaction in the armpit of Cascadia. However, as it happens to everyone who ventures outside for late-night amusement, Anne found herself distracted. She was standing beneath an absolute behemoth of a man. Lanky and dressed in loose fitting black clothing, with a Crass Ouroboros Cross butt-flap caught in the evening wind. He was smoking a hand rolled cigarette with some deep attention and ignoring Anne who was staring at the six-inch galvanized Aluminum spike sticking out of his head between his eyebrows. The rain was gently pelting the man's granite face and wet strands of his hair were plastered around the spike.

"What do you think?" Peter said, she was looking at Anne staring at the giant, who Anne estimated reached at least seven feet. They had just stepped out of the bar and into the light rain of the night for cigarettes. "You know, it's impolite to stare. Even in the crust-punk ethos. I mean, especially in the crust-punk ethos."

"I think," she addressed Peter, but continued to stare at the spike, or nail? "I think a swift kick to the dome and Lurch here will be as useful as ol' Rosemary Kennedy."

“Lurch?” Lurch said, nonplussed and maybe irritated, “I have a name.”

“Holy hell, I bet you do,” Anne said and took a drag from her cigarette, puffing a cloud of smoke and then pointing at him with one eye closed to the smoke still in her face. “And tell me, if I guess, will you have to spin golden yarn for me for seven years?”

Peter looked surprised at that comment, “Was that a,” he searched for the word from deep in his mind, “A *Rumpelstiltskin* reference?”

“Huh, Lurch?” Anne said. She was on top of a few old-fashioneds at this point in the night and she was feeling frisky. It was her experience that big lugs like Lurch here were pushovers and she got a sadistic kick out of ruffling their feathers for a time before she embraced them as new friends. “Am I gonna be rich?”

“Why are you picking on me?” Lurch said, a little hurt.

“My man,” Anne exclaimed with her cigarette in the corner of her mouth, the explosion of air sending a scattering of ash and sparks out of the end of the cigarette, “You are seven feet tall and you have a fucking spike in the middle of your face! If you wanted to go incognito, I think you should have stayed home tonight.”

“Hey, would you lay off the guy?” Peter touched Anne’s arm pleadingly, “He’s a sensitive guy, a traveling poet.”

“Oh, all right, Peter,” Anne said contritely. “What can I do to make up for it, uh, what’s your name?”

“Nightsoil,” Nightsoil said.

Anne spun around, spit her cigarette out and clasped her face with both hands as she came back to facing Nightsoil. She calmed herself and shook off the shock, calmly, she pointed at Nightsoil and said, “I don’t quite get you, Nightsoil. Everything about you begs questions, but you walk around like it’s some kind of problem for me to be curious. It’s a twisted kind of humor. Something that I might better understand after a few more drinks. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to get another drink,” Anne said and turned back into the bar.

Peter followed her through the moderately crowded bar. It wasn’t as packed as it had been during the last show because most folks had gone outside or to the bathroom. Some had even gone home after the last show, which hadn’t been all that interesting. However, it was still crowded enough and Anne had to apologize profusely to a group of Hell’s Angels when she stumbled and jostled their table to the point of spilling every drink there. One of the bikers made a suggestion as to how she might repay them, but Anne just put a finger to her lips and dropped a Cascadian square on their table, enough for another round, if maybe a little short.

Peter was dragging her away from their table unnecessarily as Anne had already started to move away, but he, being a little shorter than her was stretching up to shout over the noise of the bar in her ear, “You know, when I invited you, I was hoping that you wouldn’t be such a bull in a china shop. I have a reputation around here, you know and you kinda, you know, reflect on me.”

“First of all, Peter,” Anne said to him, sidling up to the bar and holding up a couple of fingers in the international sign of ‘I need a drink’. “I’m here on a recog- recog- recognizance mission for a skiptrace gig and *not* officially here on your invitation, as generous and full of requirements that invitation is.” she turned to the bartender, “Double bourbon on the rocks, well’s fine. What do you want? And a pint of pine sap for my friend here. No, not literally pine sap, I mean the IPA there,” She pointed and turned back to Peter, “Now that I think of it, I should be scanning the crowd for my mark, but honestly I haven’t seen hide nor hair of her.”

“Is she a regular?” Peter asked.

“Yeah, she’s apparently here all the time. Performs here sometimes too, so says my research. I found some pictures of her on social media, here,” She handed her phone to Peter and then turned to the bartender and handed him a twonie. “Keep the change.”

“I was planning on it,” the bartender said dismissively and turned away. Anne looked at Peter to make a face like ‘wow, the balls on that guy, right?’ but Peter was busy studying the phone.

Peter handed Anne’s phone back to her and said, “Those are photos of Amaryllis,” Anne looked at the phone with a look of surprise.

“Really?” Anne said, clueless and swaying a little bit as she took a sip from her drink. “Well, that’s unfortunate,” she said casually. She shrugged, “Them’s the brakes on a dead end then.”

“But that’s Ingrid Mondaugen’s account,” Peter took a sip from his beer and winced almost imperceptibly. Anne was convinced that nobody really liked drinking IPA beer, but did so for the social credit and she looked for evidence in this at every turn. Peter’s uncomfortable gulp was just more fuel for the fire that was her hatred of over-priced craft beer. “Are you looking for Ingrid Mondaugen?”

“Mm-hmm,” Anne hummed while wiping cold bourbon from her lips. She was convinced that she’d long ago wiped away all of her lipstick off onto the back of her hand by now, but was unconcerned.

“Indeed, that’s the mark. Do you know her?”

“Yeah,” Peter said, setting his beer down on the bar, carefully, on a coaster, “She does come in here all the time, and performs. I haven’t seen her yet tonight, though.”

“Well then, Peter,” Anne said, her voice slurring a little bit now, “Would you be a doll and keep an eye out for her? Her parents are worried and if I can talk to her I can scratch off a very serious debt from my slate.”

“Okay,” Peter said, resignedly. Anne had met Peter at the Coffin Nail shortly after moving to Seattle from the fracas she escaped in Phoenix some years earlier. She had early sensed that Peter had conflicted emotions about Anne, she could feel his eyes exploring her body while ordering coffee, but then when they had conversations, she could identify a kind of frustration he had with her personality. Anne thought that this was hilariously ironic. Peter cultivated a persona of being an outsider, an iconoclast, he only wore black and cut his hair in unusual and sharp configurations that didn’t

conform to what one might call professionally acceptable, but at his heart, he was a square. Peter's secret desire was to be one of those A&R reps that work for a big music label hanging out at dingy bars looking for the newest talent. He didn't like to drink, he didn't smoke, he only ate at a particular vegan diner in Capitol Hill because he didn't trust most restaurants that claimed to be vegan. In his heart of hearts, he longed to be like Kevin McNulty, the square ghost of the Coffin Nail, but he didn't have the courage to take off his rotten Misfits t-shirt and replace it with the oxford and cardigan that he fantasized about. "What did you think of the last act?"

"Hmm?" Anne asked, she was in the middle of a drink again, and she was scoping out the crowd in front of the stage for Ingrid Mondaugen, although she realized that she was looking for Amaryllis, not actually Ingrid Mondaugen. "The last band? They were alright, I guess. You know me, I don't know much about music. I know what I like and the rest is pornography, right?" Anne smiled her slanted smile.

"I mean, it's not just about the music," Peter said, bewildered by Anne's disinterest, "I mean, the bassist attacked the stage manager with his bass when they were told to get off the stage! They were in the middle of a thirty-minute epic with, I counted at least four movements, and then they were shoed off the stage, but they fought back. The oldest member was maybe seventeen and they've already turned death metal into a new form of classical music. They've got something, I know it."

"You should sign them," Anne said, chewing on a piece of ice.

"What do you mean?" Peter asked.

“I mean,” Anne said, gathering her thoughts by waving her arms, “You should be their manager, tell them what they need to do to get their band out there. You know all that music business stuff, right? You’re always telling me about it. I haven’t a clue what you’re talking about most of the time, but you seem very self-assured and knowledgeable. Surely you can guide some no-nothing teenagers into some kind of contract if you can just get them to play the hits and not accost stage managers.”

“Do you really think so?” Peter said, his voice awed at the wonderful opportunity of it. “I don’t know, I always thought that I’d be a studio producer.”

“You can do that too, right?” Anne said. “Like, get your feet in the door, you know? Get in the studio and then you can start doing the production too.”

“Anne,” Peter began, smiling, “Sometimes... sometimes I feel like when we talk you don’t really listen to me at all and I’m talking to a brick wall, but you really do listen, don’t you? This whole act you put on of being, what, a boor, a clueless drunk, is just a facade?”

“Nope,” Anne said, finishing her bourbon and setting the empty glass as far towards the bartender as possible, “Hey! Another! It’s no facade, I’m just a drunk who remembers everything you say, Peter.”

She winked at Peter and then directed her voice away from him, “Hey! Another round, duder!” She turned back to Peter and said, “What was the name of the band again?”

“The Deep Fried Orphans,” Peter said, picking his beer up again, he’d only drank about a quarter of the pint. “They’re going to be wild, Anne.” Peter shook his head, “Another few years and they’re going to be like The Who. Throwing wild parties and destroying hotel rooms. I think to myself sometimes if

I want to be in that kind of world, if I want to spend my life mitigating disasters for the sake of some nothing group of teenagers who had a clever idea once. Is it worth it? I ask myself,” Peter sets his beer down and smiles sheepishly, “You know what, I think I know the answer.”

Anne and Peter are standing at the bar smiling at each other. Anne has the sudden feeling that she’s exposed some deep part of Peter, just as he felt that he had seen her exposed. The connection to another human being cuts through Anne’s defenses and she softens. Maybe, she thinks, maybe this world isn’t as hard and unfortunate as she normally sees it. Maybe she can back up off of the liquor and find joy and solace in a simple life of walking in parks and grocery shopping and not staying out all night hunting for people who don’t want to be found. Maybe she can find an edge of this earth that isn’t on the Great Garbage Island where she doesn’t need and want and burn for something unnamable...

“Holy shit,” Peter blurted and pointed, “That’s Ingrid!”

“Huh?” Anne said, returning from a reverie. “That’s Ingrid?” She looked where Peter was pointing and saw Sarah, from Ingrid’s apartment earlier in the day. The girl was pushing through the crowd standing in front of the stage waiting for the next act, they parted reluctantly. Pursuing her through the crowd was Heinrich and Francis Mondaugen from Anne’s office earlier in the day. “What the fuck?” Anne asked nobody in particular.

“She looks like she’s going for the side exit, into the alley!” Peter exclaimed, “You can probably catch her if you go out the front and around the side!”

“Thanks Peter,” Anne said and began to run through the bar to the front, jostling the Hells’ Angels’ table again on the way out, “Sorry!” she shouted back at them, “Important work, you’ll understand!”

The Chase

Seattle, Cascadia, Friday

Anne burst out of the front of the bar and was blocked by Nightsoil, who was still, apparently, smoking the same rolled cigarette he’d been smoking since she last saw him, “Excuse me, Lurch, I need to get through,” she pushed past him..

“Very unkind,” Nightsoil said as she pushed past him, “No manners, no manners these days.”

Anne rounded around the corner and ran down the alley for a little before stopping, maybe Ingrid had not taken the side exit, maybe she would need to double back into the bar, but then the side door exploded open and Ingrid, formerly known to Anne as Sarah, shot into the alley running at full speed.

“Hey!” Anne shouted and started to run after Ingrid, “I want to talk to you!”

Ingrid ignored her and split into another alley. Anne pursued, but then the parents came out of the door, “Hey! Anne shouted again, “What the fuck?”

The couple didn’t speak, but instead pulled out guns and shot in Anne’s general direction, which made her dive into a cluster of trash bags against the wall of the Bourbon Bar. “What the fuck?” she said to herself now this time. She pulled her pistol out of its holster in the small of her back and started to run after the parents and Ingrid. *No one shoots at me without an explanation*, she thought to herself.

She heard more gunshots before she got to the intersection of the alley, she waited briefly against the wall before she began her pursuit. In the long alley, between enormously large buildings, the parents fired their guns towards what Anne assumed was Ingrid Mondaugen, “Hey!” Anne shouts, “Quit shooting!”

The parents stopped in their tracks and turned around, shooting at Anne, she dove behind a dumpster in the alley, “Look, I don’t know what’s going on, but I need a goddamn explanation!” Anne shouted, “Put down your guns or else there’s going to be fucking problems!” Another volley of bullets kept her where she was. “Goddamnit, somebody is going to get hurt if this continues!”

Anne got up and pursued the parents down the alley, they turned down a corner and she followed them, but chose to stop before turning the corner, peeking out to see what was happening in the next alley. She saw the parents get into a black SUV driven by someone else, they fired some more at Anne’s position, which caused her to take cover again, “You *hired* me! What the fuck?” Anne shouted at the night and the cascading pebbles of walls obliterated by full-metal jackets.

Anne heard the car peel out into the night and checked around the corner to see that all traces of the parents were gone. She stepped out into the alley and blurted, “You guys fucking hired me!” The sound of police sirens began and she put her gun back into her holster. She walked back through the alleyways, looking for clues to what had just happened to her. *Okay, so, I’m just a patron of the bar who stepped out for a cigarette and then there were gunshots and I didn’t know what was going on,* she said to herself, preparing herself for the questioning from the police. *I don’t know any of these people!* She thought.

As she walked down the long alley that she had chased the couple down, but had been blind to her at first, she stopped to catch her breath. *Oh god!*, she thought, *I've really gotten myself into something.* And as her breath calmed she heard the sounds of the city, which were mostly sirens by now, but also something else: another breathing person. She walked over to one of the dumpsters in the alley and lifted the lid and she was suddenly looking at the girl she knew as Sarah, but was actually Ingrid Mondaugen.

“Those people are not my parents,” Ingrid said between harsh breaths, “And I am *not* going home.”

“No shit, honey,” Anne said. “Now get up, we’ve got to get out of here before the cops show up.”

An Explanation

Seattle, Cascadia, Friday

Anne’s apartment was small and sparse, she didn’t spend a lot of time in it. Gary had once tried cajoling her into going to the thrift shop to find some pieces of furniture to make it ‘more home’, as he had described it. Anne rejected the idea altogether, citing the apartment that she had built up in Arizona.

“I might have to leave at any time for any reason,” Anne had reasoned. This was, of course the end of their relationship because Gary said that if she was so reluctant to put down some shitty chairs, then he was not worth putting down into her life either. She agreed with such suddenness that he didn’t even stay for the night, Gary packed up his toothbrush and pissed off into the night.

Ingrid, fresh out of the shower that Anne had required after finding her in a dumpster, was sitting in a cushioned chair by the television wrapped in a comforter. Anne handed her a large mug full of steaming herbal tea. The mug had snowflakes and snowmen on it and it said "Tis the Season'. Though it was small, Ingrid found the apartment to be cozy, comfortable. Ann sat in an opposite, but un-matching chair in the little area in front of the television, the sole window of the apartment behind the television stand.

"We grew up together," Ingrid began after trying to take a sip from the too-hot tea. She set the cup down on the small table between them, "Grace and I had ordinary childhoods, I guess. We played at the local park together, our families gathered for holidays, I remember early days watching television with Grace in her mother's apartment. That was until we started going to school when it was like a starter gun was fired. Bang! We were off. The race began."

"A race to what?" Anne asked.

"You know they tell you that you're preparing for your future when you go to school, but what really is your future? Everybody shares the same future. And as such, the race to the grave began. We were both enrolled in preparatory academies with advanced curricula and special out of school activities that would make us more attractive to the next school and then the next school and then for, well, a career, right? Didn't Tyler Durden say something like that in Fight Club? Go to school, get a job, get a wife and then what? The answer is die.

“Grace and I seemed to understand this particularly early, but neither of us were powerful enough to exert any control on our worlds, so we subverted it. We collaborated on art projects that illustrated these ideas. Our parents, satisfied with our outstanding scores in our ordinary classes, agreed to allow us ultimate freedom of expression in our art. I remember one halloween where I went as Wednesday Addams and Grace went as Lydia from Beetlejuice and everyone kept asking about two Wednesdays, to which we corrected them. ‘Such severe little girls,’ I remember one teacher had commented with a look on her face as if she’d been struck with a brick. Grace and I were instantly enchanted by the effect we had on adults and we began to make videos.

“We made all kinds of videos. Some were live action where Grace, who was always the better seamstress, made our costumes. Some were stop-motion made from clay or paper cut outs. Some were experiments with film and light in the vein of Stan Brakhage. We drew from our surveys in art history, from the art history texts at the library that we spent hours and hours poring through. Dali, Bacon, Klimt, O-Keefe, Hoch... those are the names that come to my mind right at the moment.

“Then Youtube was launched and I immediately digitized our library and published it. I turned to Grace and asked her what we should name our art collective. Her response was immediate, ‘Amaryllis,’ she said, ‘A contradiction in how it’s a flower and looks like a cock half of its life, like Mother Earth’s cock. Something so pretty jutting so violently out of the soil, so persistent.’”

“A dick joke?” Anne asked, “An adolescent dick joke?”

“Grace was always one for the easy jokes and the easy life. I get it, we were both rivals for the same prize, but if I lost, my parents would simply buy me an art gallery to invest in in the Upper East Side. If Grace lost, well, she’d end up living in some filthy commune touring with a bluegrass band until she caught a snort of the wrong kind of white powder one night.

Ingrid paused, the fear in her eyes from earlier in the night had vanished and the haughty self-importance of the Sarah persona had returned. “That’s unfair,” she said. “We’re both equally at risk of taking a treacherous snort one night.”

“Anyway,” Ingrid started again after a self-aware pause, “Grace became more and more the face of the Amaryllis project and I dove more and more into the background. We started producing music. The videos that we produced became more sophisticated. We started organizing pranks and viral events on the internet. DDoS attacks on birth control pharmaceutical websites, doctoring websites to have hidden genitalia on their home-page stock photo imagery, stuff that was easy back in the early days, but would be impossible nowadays.

“We were about fifteen when we signed our first record contract. Our parents, ever the permissive types– and probably excited at the idea of profiting off of us– allowed us to tour together, Grace as the star of the show and me, the tag along. I remember remarking on this to Grace one night on the tour bus:

“Isn’t it funny?” Ingrid asked, turning from the book that she was reading in the bunk of the tour-bus,

“How our roles are reversed?”

“How do you mean?” Grace answered, busy removing the makeup plastered heavily to her face.

“I mean, I think it’s funny how when we’re at home, I’m the one doing all of the work with the studio and the programming and the planning and all of that and then when we’re on the road, I’m stuck here in this bunk reading all day and you’re being run ragged. Choreography and rehearsals and voice lessons and sound checks and the concerts, which are naturally exhausting.”

“What the fuck,” Grace said and turned to look at Ingrid, “You think that you do all the work.”

“No,” Ingrid said firmly, “That’s exactly not what I was saying. I was trying to say that I think that the division of labor is pretty even and that I think that it’s funny that it kind of worked out like that.”

“Well, I don’t think so,” Grace said and turned back to scraping the makeup off of her face. “Do you think sweating and twerking in front of tens of thousands of perverts is somehow equivalent to you staying up all night on your Macbook trying to make clever designs in the fucking kerning of website text-blocks?”

“The statistics show that the majority of our fans are girls 18 and younger with a close second demographic of women 18 to 35,” Ingrid said flatly.

Grace turned around violently, “You tell me about statistics when you have to shake your ass for ten thousand assholes and one catches your attention out of the corner of your eye long enough to watch him reach into his pants,” Grace spat and turned around again.

“Grace, I had no idea,” Ingrid said. “Let’s stop this now, let’s get off the bus, we don’t have to do this!”

“Wrong!” Grace shouted, “You don’t have to do this, me...” Grace faltered a little bit, “I *have* to do this.”

“No you don’t,” Ingrid got up and stood behind her childhood friend. “You can stop right now! You’re smart enough to do whatever you want, go to whatever college you want, get any job you want... it’s your mother who’s put these ideas in your head, like some kind of kiddy pageant stage-mom, she’s convinced you–”

“Now that’s *your* mother talking, she never had to commit to a thing in her life, she didn’t even commit to your father, for Christ sake! She could always rely on your family’s money to flit around to this and that and if it failed? Well, she could always start again, right near the top! You know what happens to me if I fail? I go right to the bottom and have to struggle up the fucking ladder again. This is how *I* achieve financial and social security and you know what? I’ll be damned if I sit here and watch you read those fucking tomes while I bust my ass.” Grace stood up, her face half-painted, she pointed aggressively into Ingrid’s face, her eyes afire with a rage that Ingrid had not realized was there for a long time, “You’re going to get on your laptop and start working on the next album. Right goddamn now. Not when we get home, now. You’re going to come up with a stellar myth story for Amaryllis and

you're going to make me superhuman so that I don't get subsumed into whatever story the public is building for me right now, because I'll be damned if I become a slave to public opinion. You helped create me, you're part of me. You're the little engine that powers Amaryllis. And you know why you're going to do that for me?"

Amaryllis sat down and began to peel paint off of her face again, "No, why is that, Grace?" Ingrid said, struggling with how to express her emotions."

"My name is Amaryllis," Amaryllis said. "You're going to do this because you know that you'll never be anything without this project. It's you just as much as it is me. The difference between us is that I *am* Amaryllis. You're nothing more than a puppet master."

Ingrid laughed, "I'm the puppet master? That means that you're *my* slave!"

"No," Amaryllis said, "It means that *you* are *my* slave."

Back in Anne's apartment, Anne has fetched a bottle of bourbon and is drinking from a crystal glass she had found at a thrift store, it matched no other glass in her apartment, "So your parents are divorced?"

Ingrid cocked her head and shot Anne a look of indignation and surprise, “Is *that* what you got out of that story?”

“Sorry,” Anne said. “I process information differently than most people. I suppose you can understand.”

Ingrid shrugged, “You’re right, I’m in no place to judge the reactions of other people when my reactions are so...” Ingrid paused, looking at her tea. She looked at Anne, “Ever think that you’re autistic?”

“All the time,” Anne laughed, “But I didn’t pass any of the tests.”

“Tests don’t mean anything,” Ingrid sighed, “You know that I’ve never taken a test that I couldn’t pass? I don’t mean that I can get by, I mean, I can’t be tested without being perfect.” She tapped the side of her head, “This brain knows everything about everything, but the thing that it doesn’t know how to do, and for which there is no test developed, is to figure out how to tell my best friend that she’s not just an object in my universe, something to have force exerted upon and observed. Grace thought that for so long that she started to think of me like that as well and for a time I was an obedient object. She pushed me around the space to her satisfaction through three albums and accompanying tours. We started to take different tour buses and then eventually jets. From behind the scenes I structured her persona to be a recently awakened artificial intelligence that had adopted a female form. That’s the thing that you see in the media today. I’m not trying to brag, I’m just trying to explain so that what I’m going to say makes sense.”

“I’m listening without judgment,” Anne said, spreading her arms in supplication.

“I can sense that, somehow,” Ingrid said. “I know we haven’t known each other for very long, but I feel a kindred sense in you, Miss Augurie.”

“I have a tendency to do that to people, strangely,” Anne said.

“I can sense that too,” Ingrid giggled and then grew silent. “About six months ago I told Grace–Amaryllis–that I was done being her author. I walked out of our offices and moved into the dormitory that you found Sarah–my alias–where I continued my work. You see, for some years now, I’ve been working on a special project in addition to managing Amaryllis’ mythology. I’ve been trying to create an artificial intelligence of the kind that Amaryllis tries to make herself out to be.”

“Like a competitor?” Anne asked.

“I suppose that you could call it that, but what I’ve been trying to create is more than that. I’ve been trying to create an artificial intelligence that frees people like my friend Grace. Maybe, I think, if I can make something that is so advanced that it sparks the technological singularity, then people like my friend Grace don’t have to do what she has done to live.”

“The technological singularity,” Anne mused. “I’ve heard of that. It’s when technology reaches such a point as to create a society, an economy, a world that’s...” Anne’s drunk brain fails her, “Like, nobody has to work anymore? Like, Grace doesn’t have to shake her ass for money anymore, but she can shake her ass because she likes to shake her ass?”

Ingrid stares at Anne silently for a moment, evaluating her. “Yes,” she says tentatively, “What economists call a post-scarcity society.”

“Seems like that’s something that Declan Delany, Amaryllis’ beau, might be very interested in,” Anne said.

“That’s right,” Ingrid sighed again. “Grace was initially very angry that I decided to stop helping her develop her persona and I imagine that that feeling only grew in the months afterwards. She hired some hackers to find out what I was working on instead of helping her and they found out what I was working on. Upon discovering this, I imagine that she decided that the next step in her career was to appropriate my technology and finish it with Declan’s help. You know how adept he is at developing disruptive technology.”

“So you hide out under a fake name and you get random small-time detectives knocking down your door to find the artificial intelligence that you’re working on,” Anne said.

“And, trying to kill me for it,” Ingrid said.

“Is it complete?” Anne asked.

“No,” Ingrid said.

“What makes Amaryllis think that she can take an incomplete package and complete it?” Anne asked.

“Grace has a very elevated sense of self from being a pop star for several years now. Additionally, her boyfriend has probably convinced her that he only needs a jumping point from which he can complete the work.”

“Ingrid,” Anne said, slumping down in her chair, “This is all very unfortunate, but I’m not sure what I can do for you. They’re likely to keep sending people after you in a variety of ways until...”

“I will give you a million dollars, bonded American, to convince Amaryllis to not kill me.”

Anne did the math in her head, approximately 400 thousand Cascadian squares, she could buy one of the skyscrapers downtown for that sum. Bonded American dollars were known to fetch quite a lot above face value in Cascadia, especially in Capitol Hill. “Jesus,” Anne said, awed, “Look, Ingrid, even if I tried to convince Amaryllis, this would basically be a sort of negotiation. What could I possibly offer in compensation, as a compromise?”

“You tell her that I’ll sell her the whole fucking thing for a pittance when I’m done. Just leave me alone until I’m done,” Ingrid said, steel-eyed.

“What’s a pittance?” Anne asked, curious now that all these numbers were flying around her drunk head, “What’s a number I can give her?”

“You can tell Grace,” Ingrid said, taking a sip from her tea, “That I’ll sell it to her for a dollar.”

Anne spat out the sip of bourbon she was letting rest on her tongue, she coughed and wiped the spit from her chin. “You know what, Ingrid? I think you have a very advantageous ground for negotiation,” Anne said and smiled.

Dmitri’s Story

Las Vegas, Nevada - Some time ago...

Bill, my presumptive employer, called me into his office. I thought little of it at the time because perhaps I was on auto-pilot. I had been working for the firm for three years, producing advertising copy as a maybe long-in-the-tooth copyeditor, but producing good copy and my most recent performance evaluation had indicated that I was not only a good worker, but also willing to go above and beyond to help with advertising campaigns and the company overall. They had granted me a coveted five-star appraisal, which I accepted with a silent, but genuine appreciation. I had an aptitude for marketing communication that I deployed with aplomb. I was good at my job and I could do it practically without thinking, which is why Bill’s impromptu meeting caught me so off guard.

“Dmitri, I know that you’ve seen how things are going around here,” he began, and like I said, I had not seen how things had been going, “And we’re going to have to let you go as of Friday,” Bill’s words were shocking to me, but I was silent as I listened to him, “The firm is picking up and moving out to Los Angeles while the getting is good. I’m sorry to lose you, Dmitri. You’ve been an excellent copywriter for us and you know how much I fought for you,” I remembered words in my annual review like ‘diligent’ and ‘precise’. “The trouble is that the company is unable to find the funds to

relocate you with the rest to LA, rather they're willing to grant you a very generous severance package, which will be in your bank account on Friday. Please move your effects out of your cubicle by the end of the day or they will be disposed of by the moving company. Do you have any questions?"

I sat still for a moment, taking in the new information, my father had always told me to reserve my emotions for after an emotional attack. "I have funds vested in this company as part of a profit sharing program, do these dispense to me upon my dismissal?"

"Oh yes," Bill said as if he had forgotten about that detail. "Your shares are available to you immediately on Friday."

"What if the value of my shares at the time at which I accrued them are of a value less than the current value?" I asked.

Bill coughed and took a sip from his coffee cup, "Well, Dmitri, the art of speculation is... uh, uncertain, but we encourage you to keep your stocks until the economy recovers and... uh, the value of your vestments recover their value."

"So," I said and folded my arms, "I'm out of a job with a pittance for a severance and my stocks are worthless? Is that what you're telling me, Bill?"

"They aren't worthless," Bill said. "But, I'm sorry to tell you that the rest of that is true."

"Might I expect a good letter of recommendation from you when I find a new position?" I asked.

"Yes!" Bill nearly fell out of his chair, "Of course, Dmitri, that's the least I can do for you."

“Can I assume that you’ve been offered a position at the new office in Los Angeles?” I asked.

“Corporate has decided that my services are needed in Los Angeles. I’ll be managing an office out there,” Bill said.

“And I can assume that I’m not being invited to come with you because...” I let the question hang in the air.

“Corporate only asked for my—” Bill said and I interrupted.

“You were told that there was a certain budget for a new office in Los Angeles and you decided that you could take the whole budget for yourself and cut your whole staff,” I said and stood to leave. “You know what, Bill? I don’t need your recommendation after all. You’re a rat, Bill. You always have been. But that’s not your fault, Bill. I’ve been an idiot this whole time thinking that your fine praise has meant anything but the ink on the paper it was printed. God help us, Bill, but especially you. People in big cities know how to kill snakes and you will be hunted because you’re all alone.”

I said all of this and then turned to leave his office to collect my items from my desk. I was going to take my coffee cup and my map-tablet and the mouse that I bought because the IT department could never get me a mouse that was precise enough for my occasional graphic work.

“I-I-I,” Bill stuttered in anger, “I never thought that you would be such a fucking *pest!*”

“Is that so?” I turned back, “I always knew that you were useless. I tried to delude myself, but,” I sighed, “Oh boy, did I.”

I walked out of the office, collected my things and then drove back to my apartment to wait for my last check.

Snow in the Desert

By Benjamin Ponchartrain for The Pacific

The sky shattered. I watched the rocket shoot up and then explode and then the sky shattered, the plain blue regularity was suddenly struck with a spidery web of white lines that began instantly descending and blurring.

“Holy shit!” I said, “I wasn’t expecting that!”

“Nobody ever does,” Lin Wang said. “Excuse me for a little bit of theater. We like to shock visitors a little bit when they do find their way out here.”

Out here to Lin Wang means a few miles outside of the Nevada Consortium in a wide and flat part of the valley. We’re standing near a tent-like structure in the middle of the desert. For as far as I can see there is rock and occasional scrub brush. It is the typical low-lands of the Toiyanbe forest, which isn’t much of a forest, but rather a collection of hills and valleys between mountain ridges. Lin ducks into the tent for a moment to converse with his research partner, Rachel Weathers. Her name is not lost on me.

“Hey!” I shouted to them in the tent, “What is happening out here?” Suddenly the air became very cold and the denim jeans and golf jacket I was wearing, which seemed so appropriate for the late autumn desert air, suddenly felt very inappropriate. “It’s getting very cold! Should I come in there?”

“No,” Lin shouted from the tent, “Don’t worry about it. Wait! Wait!”

“Tell you the truth, Lin,” I shouted at the tent as I watched snowflakes fall in the air and the temperature fall precipitously. “I don’t fucking believe you!”

Both Lin and Rachel exploded from the tent flap and into the veritable blizzard that was gathering in the low valley right under their rocket. They played in the swirling snow that was gathering there. Both of them were dressed in thermal jackets, which I thought would be a nice thing to have considering that I was suddenly freezing in the middle of the desert.

“Isn’t it a miracle?” Rachel said to me. “Snow in the desert! On command!”

“It’s like Christmas,” I said, trying to be ironic, freezing in my jeans. “Why is it suddenly so cold?”

“The chemicals in the rocket rob the environment of heat and then rise up, dropping the temperature of the immediate area,” Lin explained. “The snow is an effect of the dropping temperature, the liquid is literally precipitating out of the solution like...”

“When does it stop?” I shouted, against the snow gathering, my shout sounded louder than I intended.

“We’re not entirely sure,” Rachel said. “You should have worn a heartier jacket.”

“Yes,” Lin said, “I’m sure that the compound is sucking moisture from you right now to contribute to the snow effect.”

“Am I being desiccated?” I said, feeling suddenly weak.

“Yes,” Lin said, “that’s precisely what’s happening right now. The compound is drawing moisture from where it can and pushing it back up into the atmosphere where it can then fall down again as snow.”

I immediately began to eat snow, trying to recover moisture. The wet and cold snow on my face burned terribly.

“No, no,” Lin said to me as he gave me a bottle of water, “Here! Drink this. You’ll be able to recover moisture quicker without dropping your body temperature.

I drank deeply from the bottle and instantly felt better. The snow stopped falling and Rachel and Lin stood around me looking at me like I was a fish that they had pulled out of water expecting me to breathe air.

“So I expect that the military has expressed interest in this little project,” I said, my bones warming in the desert sun.

Lin and Rachel looked at each other curiously as if the other had been told about a military contract and had not told the other. Confirming that neither of them knew what I was talking about, they turned towards me, “What do you mean?” Rachel asked.

“Presumably, there’s a tiny bit of whatever chemical you need to generate that effect in that little toy rocket, right?” They both nodded, “So, imagine if the military could launch an ICBM full of the stuff over a major city? They could desiccate the entire population in place before staging an invasion with zero casualties. They could destroy crops for entire regions. They could sink ships at sea by freezing them in place and then recovering the ship without needing to deal with any pesky merchant marines. You’ve invented Ice-9!”

“What’s that?” Lin asked, completely ignoring my points about the military.

“In the novel *Cat’s Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut, scientists invent a chemical called Ice-9 that teaches water how to be ice without need for temperature or pressure. The military wants to use it to freeze marshes so that they’re easier to march across, but they realize they can’t use it because if they did it would freeze all the water on earth. Anyway, somebody accidentally lets it out and the world dies.”

Rachel and Lin stand in silence for some moments before Rachel points up to the sky, “Well, that’s not what we have. It has a very limited period of effectiveness.”

“I’m not saying that you guys have exactly invented Ice-9,” I sighed and rubbed my forehead, “I’m saying that you’ve invented a weapon. How are you going to reckon with the ethical implications of that? In the right hands this technology could be used to kill millions of people.”

“That might be true,” Lin said, his face grimacing in an expression of revealing an unfortunate truth,

“But it’s also, kinda, NOP.”

“Precisely,” Rachel rejoined with a smile, “NOP.”

“What is NOP?” I asked.

“It’s the unofficial policy of researchers in the Consortium: Not Our Problem.” Lin said, “You see, a big problem in research is the constant need to seek permission and get grants and self-examination, but the Consortium encourages researchers to simply submit their research regularly to the data center and trust that the research is being used well.”

“Excuse me for calling you both incredibly naive,” I said, not a little offensively.

“Maybe,” Rachel said, “But we’re all naive in a way. No one of us can understand the whole world and the impact that any quanta of research will have upon the greater body of work, but if we focus on our passions and talents, then we can at least contribute to the corpus, which is housed at the Data Center. As more information comes in, it is distributed to where it needs to go. Lin and I often receive messages from the data center instructing us to pursue one path or another for a variety of reasons. It’s often very helpful in that it gives a certain amount of guidance to our studies that are often almost too open-ended.”

“Aren’t you afraid that whatever is directing you from the Data Center is manipulating you into creating, say, a weapon?” I asked.

“There isn’t anyone directing the operation,” Lin said, “It’s only an AI gathering information. Its queries are only that, questions. It just wants to know more information, it never tells us to do something.”

“Hmm, noted,” I said, feeling like I was about to hit a dead end if I were to pursue their naivete any further. “So, how long have you two been in a relationship? Do you find it hard to do this research as a couple?”

“What?” Lin looked absolutely dumbstruck and I couldn’t tell if it was genuine, “We, we aren’t a couple.”

“No,” Rachel quickly added, “We’re just colleagues.”

“Colleagues who share a bed,” I prodded with a playful smirk.

“That’s a very serious accusation of unprofessional behavior,” Lin puffed up.

“Really,” I sputtered, “That’s unprofessional, but your willingness to take a blind eye to the ethical ramifications of your research is...dutiful?”

“It’s not like it would be wrong, per se,” Rachel explained. “It’s just that we’re both married. To other people.”

“Oh,” I said. A moment of generosity crossed my heart and I said, “Perhaps what I sensed was just a close professional relationship. A work marriage as you might say.”

Rachel laughed. Nervously, I couldn’t quite tell, was it practiced? “Yes, Carl often refers to Lin as my work husband. Carl and I and Lin and Minh are very close. We live in the same suburb block and often share meals.”

“Any kids in the picture? For either of you?” I asked.

“Not yet,” Lin said, “Though Minh and I will try to have children after the experimental phase is complete. Our doctors have told us that it might not be a great idea to try to have children while we’re working with potentially deleterious chemicals. Everyone in the Consortium gets regular checkups to monitor if the chemicals we use are having any effect on the community at large, but we are especially under consideration. This is another thing that the Data Center helps to manage, the sheer volume of biological data coming in.”

“Uh huh,” I said, “So what do your spouses do?”

“Carl is working on a novel at home,” Rachel said. “He’s a well-known author, you may have heard of him? Carl Johannsen?”

“Yeah, he’s the guy who writes those auto-fiction tomes,” I said.

Rachel laughed, “He’ll be very pleased to hear that you described them like that. He’s so proud of his output. I often joke with him that I’ll only ever be impressed if he can write a novella that explains what he’s thinking of when he’s making pancakes. He gets that far-away look in his eyes when he’s doing it, like what I imagine poets do. Honestly, that’s what made me fall in love with him, his steel gray chin and that blank stare as he pours batter into the pan.”

“Minh,” Lin begins, “Is a biological radiation researcher. She studies the effects of certain kinds of radiation on biological tissues. I’m afraid that I don’t recall the type of radiation, but I do remember that it’s a minor type that she’s convinced has a greater impact than previously understood. Her research was often overlooked before we moved to the Consortium. Strangely enough, her office is in

the administrative building as she is primarily interested in parsing the data that comes from the underground experimental facilities.”

“You should come by our block for dinner some night,” Rachel said.

“Or, even better, stop by the Anchor this Saturday,” Lin said. “We’ll be celebrating Carl’s most recent publication, *Flip-flop and the Incandescent Wig*.”

Rachel laughed again, “No, no, it’s called *Interstitial Cards Featuring the Fig Wasp!*”

The two of them laughed as if on an inside joke. I wasn’t sure if either title was correct. “Provided that there will be booze, I will be glad to stop by, thank you.”

About The Favor

Nevada Consortium, Saturday

“Ernest Mairo is a sneaky bastard,” Anne Augurie said to Ben Ponchartrain as they walked out of the police station and into the main square of the Consortium. It had been modeled after European squares with thick stone masonry and large ornate facades that rose above cafes and stores and bars.

However, unlike other squares, half of it was exposed to the green tree-lined consortium on the other side of the street. “He’s a violent and unpleasant man. You won’t be able to tell at first, but trust me.”

“What is it that we’re going to talk to him about,” Ben asked, trying to keep up with Anne’s great and persistent strides, “Are you going to accuse him of killing that girl?”

“No,” Anne said, slowing some, realizing that she’d been at near a jog from the adrenaline in her system, “No, Rodriguez needs some time to figure out how we’re going to prosecute these people, so we’re just going to talk to Mairo to see what he knows, which I imagine is extensive and also very hidden.”

“What if Rodriguez finds that there are no statutes under which Mairo or Amaryllis can be prosecuted?” Ben asked, trying to keep his voice down, realizing the sensitive nature of the work they were doing.

“Murder is still illegal under the International Charter,” Anne said. “If I have to call Interpol down here I fucking will. This bastard is not going to fuck me again.”

“How did he fuck you the first time?” Ben said with an unintentional smirk.

They were about to turn onto the main street and start walking out of the square, but Anne rounded on Ben, “That is very clever and all, but you should be aware that this man, from the time that he meets you, will be looking for an opportunity to use you to his advantage. I advise you, as a recently deputized member of the Consortium security force, to be silent and simply record facts as you gather them. Can you do that, because I frankly have enough of a memory to handle this on my own.”

“Then why do you want me with you at all?” Ben asked.

“Because,” Anne sighed and looked at the sky, “Having someone to corroborate my story will help in any court.”

“Okay,” Ben said, “So is it going to compromise me to understand your previous relationship with Ernest Mairo?”

Anne pointed at Ben as denizens of the Consortium split around them, “I’m going to assume that this is going to go on the record and the fact is that you probably already have the dope on me, so it is in my interest to explain the relationship I have with Ernest Mairo as a matter of record.” Anne put her finger down and then pulled away towards one of the cafes, “Come on, sit down. We’re getting in the way and this might take a minute.”

“I’m not here to twist your words or spin your story–” Ben started, but then was interrupted.

“Don’t,” Anne cut. “Don’t take this personally, Mister...” Anne waved her hand at Ben, sitting down in a cafe chair in the open air.

“Ponchartrain,” Ben said, taking a seat, “Ben Ponchartrain, but call me Ben. Or Benny.”

“Don’t take this personally, Ben, but you are a tool here,” Anne changed her address to a passing waitress, “Could I have a flat white, dear? And whatever he’s having.”

“Black coffee is fine,” Ben said and the waitress disappeared. Ben crossed his legs and leaned forward a little to listen to Anne.

“You are a witness to this, whatever this is,” Anne said, waving her arms. “A woman’s been killed and I need to get some asses into prison, wherever that prison may be. So, it’s important that I have a record that is properly corroborated.”

“As an agent of the court, a deputy, you say, isn’t that enough?” Ben asked.

“And that’s what I’m getting at,” Anne began, “It would be enough if I hadn’t been involved with Mairo before, but that’s what I’m going to tell you, ah! You’re so quick!” Anne said to the waitress who was setting their coffees before them on the cafe table. She handed the waitress a Cascadian square.

“We don’t take these,” the waitress said. “Bonded dollars or Insured Bits.”

Ben held out a card, “Insured Bits it is,” He smiled at her and then added, “They have a good rate this week, don’t they?”

“Better than gold,” the waitress said with a wink and went away.

“Better than gold, she said,” Anne said, shaking her head. “What is that all about?”

“Fiat currency is in fashion in the Consortium, highly valued,” Ben said. “You can endear the populace with a shiny thing or two if you know what they prize.”

“Anyway,” Anne said, running her hands through her hair before taking a sip of her flat white, “You need to know about my conflict:

“I worked for the Phoenix, Arizona police department before the balkanization. It was rough business dealing with the cartels from the south and from the libertarian fronts from the north, but mostly it was just police work. When a murder came into the department, detectives jumped to take it. They devoted their lives to their cases, but when the cases were too much they would drop them. This was a

matter of survival in an increasingly apocalyptic landscape. I should have been wary when one day a case came in and none of the boys in the detective department wanted anything to do with it. I was burning for a case, so I took it.

“Some kind of bloody scene was at the penthouse of Mesa Tower. I drove over there fast, took the elevator up to the penthouse and knocked on the door. A man in a bathrobe answered the door. ‘Detective,’ he said, ‘There’s been a terrible accident.’ I came into the room and looked around. Nothing indicated that there had been any struggle. I asked the man who he was, he was pale, sniffing, it was clear that he’d been doing cocaine for a long time by this point. His nose was red almost to the point of bleeding, maybe I saw a little blood that he wiped away with his hand. I said, ‘where is the accident?’ and he led me to the bedroom.

Anne sighed at the memory of that night, “In the bedroom was a charnel house. Blood was everywhere, I immediately recognized two bodies on the large bed, they had been flayed, flayed! Their skin and entrails were everywhere. I immediately pulled out my service pistol and turned around to the man who had let me in, who was casually doing more cocaine off of the suite’s counter. ‘Things got a little out of hand,’ he said so calmly.

“‘Get your hands up!’ I shouted at the man, he put them up, but playfully and he chuckled.

“‘Cops and robbers?’ he said, jittering from the hours of cocaine use.

“‘No,’ I said, ‘You are under arrest for murder’ I started to walk over to him with my cuffs in one hand and my gun in the other.

“I don’t think that you’re going to arrest me,” he said, smiling and then taking another line off of the counter.

“Stop doing that!” I shouted, ‘You are under arrest!’

“I am not under arrest, detective,” the man said. ‘I called the police so that you can handle this little problem for me.’

“Put your hands up!” I shouted.

“Will you stop?” he said, tired of my commands. ‘Do you know who I am?’

“I don’t give a shit who you are, you’re under arrest for murder,” I said.

“I am Cesar Mairo,” the man said and I suddenly understood. The Mairo family was big in the southwest. His name was strewn all over the Phoenix police department’s donor registers. His name was used to call in horrible favors that I’d only heard of, and now. Now I was being called in for a favor.

“Oh,” was all I could manage, I dropped the angle of my gun.

“So now you understand why you’re here?” He asked me.

“Yes,” I said, ‘You want me to take care of this?’ I asked.

“He smiled and then said, ‘Yes, please, and thank you,’ he said and took another line from the smooth granite counter.

“I walked into the room with the bloodbath carnage and stood there for a few moments. I thought about their lives before they were killed, I thought about their families. I thought about my own family, which was nothing but my sister. My parents had died when we were teenagers.

“I started to gather towels to clean up the horrible mess, I thought I was going to go through with it, but then I remembered my sister, Sleepy. I suddenly had a direct line to her thought process, she told me, ‘Are you really going to do all of this? Are you going to be a murderer’s maid?’

“I dropped the towels, took my sidearm out and stormed into the suite.

“‘You can’t be done already,’ Cesar said to me. I shot him between the eyes. Then when he was lying on the ground, dead, I put another two rounds in his chest.

“I sat on the couch of the suite and called the department, reporting myself for murder. I watched tv for a while expecting the Phoenix police department to come bursting in at any moment, but instead a bald man walked into the room.

“‘Who are you?’ I asked, pulling my pistol out again.

“The man ignored me. He looked at Cesar Mairo’s dead body and then went into the bedroom. He instantly jumped out, as if there had been a scorpion. He produced a handkerchief from his suit and put it on his mouth. For a moment he was pale, looked sick.

“‘So you killed him,’ the man said. ‘After he asked you to, I’m going to guess, cover up his mess.’

“You’re astute,’ I said, already committed to my crime. ‘Are you here to arrest me? Where are your handcuffs?’

“I’m the deceased’s brother,’ he said, ‘I’m Ernest. Pleased to meet you.’

“Can’t say that I’m particularly pleased with meeting another Mairo,’ I said.

“The man laughed, ‘I understand that this has been an unpleasant evening, but I think that we can make it a pleasant one’ Ernest Mairo said.

“I’m indulging in ideas for a pleasant evening, I guess,’ I said to Ernest.

“Look,’ Ernest said, ‘We all wanted him gone. Cesar, that is, or was. You did us a favor.’

“I did the whole world a favor by killing Cesar Mairo, I think. And you know what? I’m willing to spend my whole life in prison for it.’

“But you don’t have to,’ Ernest said. ‘In fact, You won’t do any time at all.’

“I sat up in my chair, confused, ‘And how is that?’

“You did us a good favor, which was getting rid of Cesar,’ the man paced around the room, ‘I will now grant you an indulgence.’

“What do you mean, an indulgence?’ I asked.

“I mean that I won’t prosecute you to the fullest extent of the local laws for killing my brother, but in exchange, I will ask of you some favor in the future.’

“As I understand indulgences, that doesn’t seem like much of an indulgence.’

“Either I kill you now or later, how does that sound?’ Ernest said.

“Well, I took the latter,” Anne said, “But he called his favor with these assassins and now we’re even, so I need to ask him what the hell he was after.”

Ben sipped on the last of his coffee, “So you murdered someone.”

“Murder is such a specific word,” Anne waved the connotations off with one hand. “I’ve killed half a dozen people for one reason or another, but the term murder really comes with the trappings of legal proceedings and prison time, which I’ve fortunately never had to serve.”

“You’ve murdered six people,” Ben said coldly.

“Don’t be so judgemental,” Anne said quietly, leaning in to Ben, who leaned back, “It’s a dangerous world. You’re a wide traveler, surely you’ve been in a scrape or two? Grazed somebody where you’re not quite sure if they made it. Winged a guy and saw him drop, and you think, sure, he could have gotten up, but you never saw him get up?”

“I’m against gun violence,” Ben said.

“You’re what?” Anne blurted, startling a couple a few tables away, “Do you know that just a hundred miles south of here is a small colony of gun-obsessed white supremacists who think that Jesus is going to descend from heaven and lead the righteous to judgment day with an AR-15 and a robe made from a Confederate flag? No, I supposed you don’t.” Anne leaned back in a gesture of surrender, but then

leaned forward again, “You know, this is what people are talking about when they complain about white-male privilege, do you know that?”

Ben Ponchartrain sat in his chair with a blank expression on his face, Anne was genuinely curious what the next thing to come out of his mouth would be. Anything would be a surprise.

“You’ve killed people,” Ben said.

“Jesus Christ,” Anne blurted and got up, “Come on, let’s get going to Mairo’s.”

“Are you going to kill me?” Ben asked, not quite afraid, but rather curious.

“You aren’t worth the trouble, reporter,” Anne said. “But the weekend ain’t over yet.”

Post-Capitalism: A Dream of Dignity

Excerpt from *Dating Sure Is Hard in the New Millennium: A Memoir* by Benjamin Ponchartrain

It is widely accepted by slightly intoxicated acquaintances at awkward social events that the cause of the United States’ dissolution was the rampant demagoguery that had taken over the normal operation of the government. Ironically, it turned out that critics of the bureaucracy were off the mark. It turned out that it was not rotten with venal nepotism and simpering sycophants, not at least until those critics took power and installed just that kind of organization. Over wine and cheese, professionals everywhere will recognize the collapse of the great experiment, but the truth is much more subtle and ultimately more upsetting.

The truth, as much as I see it, is that a general sense of distrust had permeated society and ruined the opportunity for Rousseauian social contracts. As a people, and by extension, a species, we generally stopped looking at each other with perspectives rooted in good faith, but rather doubled down on considering every group and every subdivision of humanity an entirely different sub-species. How can you trust the government when it's literally staffed by subhumans?

Of course, the dreamers among us were all along hoping for the possibility that we could simply jump the necessity for government by participating in the technological singularity.

The technological singularity is a term that's derived from a metaphor about Black Holes, which are often referred to as singularities. As any grade school child knows, Black Holes are enormous interstellar structures that have such a great mass and density as to suck in and crush and absorb anything that happens to pass over its "event horizon", the term for the universal point of no return, only instead of a point it's more like a big circle, or more likely a squashed sphere. The tech singularity is a proposed event in the future where the density of technological discovery becomes so frequent, so dense, that it collapses the current concept of technological reality and ushers in a new one that would be so wholly different and revolutionary as to change the very meaning of what it is to be human.

This concept often accompanies others, such as: post-scarcity, the economic concept that describes a condition in which human beings would not have to compete for resources and therefore negate the classic supply-demand model; Artificial Intelligence, which is a machine that is so sophisticated as to be indistinguishable from human intelligence; Humanism, which is a religion of sorts without being a religion, whose central tenant is the undeniable and indefatigable dignity of all human beings; and

post-capitalism, which is a kind of worldview that imagines a humanity that derives its fuel for ambition from something other than capital, e.g. money, specie, resources, currency, cash.

In many ways, the world had switched away from the idea that Jesus is coming back to change the world and embraced a mechanical apocalypse. The more optimistic futurists embraced the above principles in opposition to the bleak prognostications of science fiction authors of the middle to late 20th century.

There would be no need for government or capitalism because anything you want you could have instantaneously and provided by a network of optimized machines that did every job imaginable.

This leads us to the central problem of the optimistic technological singularity: what, precisely, are people supposed to do? The simplest answer is a circular argument: humans are now supposed to figure out what humans are supposed to do.

Some more practical or detailed answers include: become artists or poets and express the “soul” of the universe; to quote Kurt Vonnegut, to be a humanist is, “To be the eyes, the ears and conscience of the universe”; to become emotional support animals for the machines that run our society, for surely these creations, wrested from nothingness into a whole lot of something, must be pretty bummed out. We should know from experience; to embrace religion anew, join a cult that worships the unknowable mystery of the universe, for there shall always be something obscured.

The real work here would be convincing the ten billion or so humans that their sole purpose in life is neither to procreate nor to toil. Imagine posing this situation to a mid-century dirt-farmer in

Oklahoma. He might very well say, “If you’re saying that I can just lay down and die and it won’t matter? I’ll take one of those, thankee!”

Mass suicide would surely be a problem as millions of people are forced to confront what they perceive as a complete lack of *raison d’etre*. And no matter how much us technological proselytizers cry, “No, don’t you see? That’s all the more reason to live!” there will be the Jesus cults who poison their whole congregation, the Muslims will continue to martyr themselves, Buddhists will protest a world ruled by machines in gasoline autos-da-fe, new cults will rise up and reap human souls in the name of one logical fallacy or another.

But the real problem we face is the fact that we’ve not yet experienced the singularity, rather we’re trapped in a kind of purgatory where the mechanisms of the old world are falling apart before the advancements of the future can bridge the gap for humanity.

So everywhere, governments fail, police departments disband, public services halt or become privatized, resources are hoarded for arbitrage advantage on unruly markets and then burned when the deal goes south. Wealth accumulates in loci that we’ve always been familiar with, but then, sometimes, these places collapse under the weight of social and economic responsibility. A great example of this was Las Vegas, which was quite stable until they ran out of water, their politicians having sold all of the rights to the nearby rivers and lakes to wealthy Californians who local Nevadans ran into when they went down to Lake Mead to reclaim their rights and were shot down by organized almond farmers.

At the risk of striking a pose a little too akin to a Millenarian Christian, there were and still may be, some personalities that are messianic in their ambition. Declan Delany being the most prominent of these competing saviors, was of particular interest to me and was the primary reason why I found myself in his Consortium during the year in question.

But it wasn't just him. His personality was laughable to me. What really drew me in was a rumor. Cheap yellow journalists like myself survive on a constant stream of whiskey and rumors, I can admit that, and the rumor of Delany's Nevada Consortium was a little too tasty to avoid.

Delany had made his millions early in the history of the internet by running a bespoke software company that competed very ably against competitors such as IBM and Oracle. His unique spin on the industry was that as opposed to IBM and Oracle, who believed that only their consultants were qualified to work on the guts of their software, Delany opened up all of his code to whoever wanted to use it. But when ambition and scope caught up with capacity and ability, Delany's DelEwan inc was there to untangle all of the concertina wire and cobwebs that whichever enterprise had gotten itself tangled in for a steep fee that was gladly paid.

Furthermore, Delany, over the course of about twenty years made some very prudent and ambitious tech deals in emerging markets. For a couple of years leading up to the year of our interest, he was considered the richest man in the world with two competitors: Marie Lacan of the Lacanian Media and Wang Zhao of Beijing Consortium fame.

This capital he accrued had all been sunk into the ambitious project that is the Nevada Consortium. For better or for worse, Delany put his money where his mouth was and went all in. And that inspired a lot of people.

Ernest Mairo

Nevada Consortium, Saturday

The facades of the buildings that lined the Main Street of the Nevada Consortium rose up nearly fifty feet, creating a man-made canyon with a paved black macadam river and broad concrete sidewalks for riverbanks. The facades were occasionally broken by alleyways that ran back into the side streets, which serve the apartment buildings, which tower over even the main street buildings. The store fronts, which all had big plate glass windows, presented their wares proudly. The greengrocer was full of vegetables and the smell of earth, the stationary store was full of the smell of books and paper and the latest best-sellers were on display in the window, the Vietnamese restaurant smelled of star-anise and cilantro and a couple was sitting up front enjoying an enormous bowl of soup, the bakery smelled of fresh bread and there were dainty pastries tempting passers-by in the window. Occasionally, there was a side entrance beside the entrance to the store, these were the entrances to the apartments and offices above the primary store. Some of the offices chose to display their signs big and neon, hanging off the side of the building, illuminating the ground below, but some chose a simple logo painted on the glass of their door. As much as the city square was designed to look European, the Main street is designed to look like a condensed version of small town America, a kind of Disneyland that didn't feel as open as Main Street America, but has a hunched, shadowy quality.

Anne and Ben walked hurriedly down the street, checking the logos on the entrance doors of offices, looking for Mairo's. "I guess we should have asked Rodriguez where Mairo's office was," Anne said, peering into the window of a door, trying to discern if it was a residence or an office, eventually deciding that it was a residence and then moving on.

"The street's only so long," Ben said, shouting from across the street. Ben was checking out one of the doors when a tall thin blonde man smoking a cigarette stepped out from the alley. He was wearing a polo and pleated khaki slacks that made him look like the Thin White Duke went corporate.

"Can I help you find something," The man said to Ben.

"Yeah, we're looking for the offices of Ernest Mairo," Ben said.

"Well, you won't find that name on any door here," the man said. "But that's because his office is called Synergistic Solutions."

Ben saw it immediately, an immense neon sign hanging off of a coffee shop, "Hey, thanks, pal," Ben said and called to Anne, "Anne! Here!"

"Don't mention it," the man said and walked back into the alleyway to finish his cigarette or maybe return home.

The residences of the Nevada Consortium were divided into three districts. The homes above the main street and the square were extremely expensive and very stylish. They were purchased by people who wanted to flash some money around. The least expensive homes were immediately behind the main

street and square in enormous apartment blocks that were designed for people looking for convenience. A professional's paradise, most rooms were studios since the residents were not expected to spend a lot of time at home. Rather, they would be at the gym provided by the apartment building, or out to eat at one of the many lovely restaurants in the Consortium, or somehow entertaining themselves on the town between long shifts at work where they were given the freedom to make real headway in their chosen area of study.

The third district for residences was the so-called suburbs, the blocks beyond the apartments.

Alarmingly ugly from the street, each block was contained within a ten foot concrete wall that started at the sidewalk. Each resident had a door or two to the street and these tended to be colorful affairs because the residents got to choose their style, but once inside there was a small, private outdoor area that led to the door of the residence. The homes had many different sizes and configurations, but the most common was the three bedroom, two-storey affair that had an adjoined kitchen/dining room/living room, bedroom, and bathroom on the first floor, two rooms, a bath and an office on the second floor. The living rooms opened out from sliding glass doors onto the shaded patio, which then led into the back lawn, which was shared among the four to eight residences per block.

The suburbs were particularly popular with families and it was widely reported that it was common for families living in the same block to do a lot of socializing together. They ate communal meals, they watched movies together, they helped each others' kids get to school, they helped each other out when someone got sick. These communities tended to be tight, except in some unfortunate circumstances. For some reason, some of these blocks were what the locals call, sick. In these, the residents locked

themselves up in their houses and rarely used the shared space. They filed complaints about each other to the Administration office. They left passive-aggressive notes for each other on their outside and inside doors.

“Did you ring the bell yet,” Anne said as she jogged across the street to meet Ben at the door.

“No,” Ben said, about to comment about the man, but then stopping. What did he have to say?

“Well,” Anne jabbed the button, “What are you waiting for?”

“...I’m sorry, what was that?” A voice spoke from the door.

“Sorry,” Anne said to the disembodied voice. “It’s Anne Augurie here to see Ernest Mairo. He’s not expecting me, but he will want to see me!” Anne nearly sang with a oh-you’re-so-gonna-get it voice.

“Just a moment,” the voice said, and Anne and Ben were left to stand in the increasingly cold late afternoon of northern Nevada.

People were always walking up and down the main street of the Consortium, and they had a tendency to grunt feeble hellos at Anne and Ben, which unnerved them, both being from Seattle where the famous Freeze lived that meant that it took months to make acquaintances and ages to make friends. It was fortunate that the street was lit so well because even in the late stages of the winter sun, the street was mostly cast in shadow.

“So,” Ben started, “What do you like to do when you aren’t getting into trouble with millionaire tech types?”

Anne shot him a look, "Let's keep this professional, Pontchartrain."

"Yep," Ben said quickly and looked away.

The door beeped and the voice said, "Mr. Mairo is finishing a meeting, but you may wait in the lobby. Second floor, first door."

"Thank you," Anne said curtly, opening the door and rapidly ascending the stairwell, Ben in tow.

They stepped into the lobby, which was a small room that had chairs in front of a large plate glass window over the main street on one side and a long counter, with a very beautiful blonde woman behind it, clearly the voice from the intercom. The woman didn't bother to stand, but Ben still couldn't help but look over the counter and notice that the woman was wearing a tight dress with a generous bust and short hem. She wore a gold necklace with a heavy looking cross that rested on her upper chest. Her eyes were golden and carnivorous, Ben instantly took a dislike to her. Anne stepped up to the counter and leaned against it, looking at the woman sideways. Ben thought this pose to be somewhat strange, he interpreted it as a kind of power move that Anne had developed, a practiced disinterest that Ben perceived as risky, but strategic.

"Tell me," Anne said to the woman. "What is it that ol' Ernest is doing up here?"

The woman, whose countenance and posture changed not at all, still ramrod straight and serious as carbon steel, said, "Synergistic Solutions is one of the oldest partners of the Nevada Consortium, being the sixth signature on the charter. Ernest Mairo formed the company to be at the forefront of technological development in the Consortium. We specialize in finding the most emergent ideas

researched here and joining them with other ideas to create synergistic solutions that are a great deal more than the sum of their parts.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Anne said, waving away the rote spiel. “Who’s doing the synergizing? You?”

The woman shot Anne a look of distaste and Ben jumped in, “I’m sorry, we’re already on the wrong foot,” Ben said, reaching his hand over the counter to the woman, who took his fingers daintily. “I’m Ben Ponchartrain, I’m a writer for The Pacific. I’m shadowing Miss Augurie here as part of my story on the achievements that the Consortium has been making lately. Do you mind if I get your name for the record?”

“For the record,” the woman mewled, “My name is Gwen Windlass, and to answer Miss Augurie’s question, the programming staff is split between the office behind me and above us. They are partitioned from the public so that they might not be distracted by needless questioning.”

“I get that, totally,” Ben said, quickly trying to get at his next question, “You said that the company helps to bring ideas together. Am I to understand that you have access to the so-called Data Center? The database that collects the findings of the various research projects of the Consortium?”

“Synergistic Solutions, like other similar outfits in the Consortium, are granted access to a large part of the Data Center, yes,” Grace said.

“But not all?” Ben asked, Anne was giving him a look, but he ignored her.

“No,” Gwen said, “Only administrative staff are granted full access to the Data Center. You understand that there is a great deal of potentially sensitive data stored there. However, the close relationship that Synergistic Solutions has with the Consortium means that we garner a little more than other firms.”

“Okay,” Ben began to clarify, “So you don’t have full access, but you get more than others. Does this mean that there’s a kind of class system for the tech firms here in the Consortium?”

“You could call it that, I suppose,” Gwen’s eyes followed Anne, who had lost interest and wandered over to the window to look out on the street below.

“So, presumably, by dint of seniority or wealth, technology firms are given preferential treatment? Does this mean that the competition between these firms is manufactured?” Ben asked.

“Mister Pontchartrain?” Grace asked and Ben nodded, smiling, “You would have to ask an economist about that.”

“Indeed I will,” Ben said, “But might I ask another question? What did you do before you worked here?”

“I was a receptionist,” Grace said. “For Mister Mairo’s church in Phoenix.”

Ben was dumbfounded by this answer. He had expected something, something more, but this was such an ordinary response. In his consternation, he turned to Anne, who had turned away from the

window and had a look of alarm on her face. Such a bald emotion bothered Ben and he immediately said, “What? Did I say something?”

The door opposite to the one that they entered opened suddenly and a bald man in slacks and a t-shirt that read ‘SS Stands for Success!’ He was a muscular man and it was clear that he liked to show off his arm muscles. He wore expensive shoes, Ben could tell, but not why. They were subtle. Mairo’s face was tight and angular, he had sharp blue eyes and he strode into the room with an energy that said that he was the owner and proprietor of the whole place. His shoes made a tap-tap sound on the small pattern tile floor. Ben thought about how all that grout must be a bane for whoever had to clean this place.

“Anne Augurie! How are you?” Ernest Mairo nearly shouted, throwing his hands wide out in welcome.

“I’m fine, thank you, Ernest,” Anne said bluntly, “Is there somewhere we can talk?”

“Of course,” Ernest gestured to the door, “Please follow me up to my office.” He paused for a moment, “Is your friend coming?”

“He’s my third-party, a witness, if you will,” Anne said.

“Well that’s fine,” Mairo said, cheerily, “Just fine!” and then he bounced past the door and up the stairs on the other side beckoning them to follow him.

Anne and Ben followed past the door and found a stairwell that went up three stories to the top level of the building. It was narrow, so Anne went first with Ben behind her. They were not as ostentatiously athletic as Mairo and so walked the stairs as opposed to bounding up them like a golden retriever. Halfway up, Ben asked, "Are you sure this is a good idea? He might tell you things that he might not tell a journalist."

"I need someone to be there when I'm with him or else he'll start making shit up later," Anne said. "If he lies, he lies. If he omits, he omits. Just don't let him think that he can say some shit now and not get called out later."

"Okay," Ben said resolutely.

They entered Mairo's office on the top floor of the office building. It had a great open cavernous feeling to it. On the back end was a wall with a door, which was clearly a bathroom. On the far side was a big plate glass window that looked down on the street below. Between was a lot of open space, but there was a big desk and several cushioned chairs arranged by the adjacent wall. Mairo was already seated at his desk and kicking his feet up on his big wooden desk. "Come in!" he shouted, "Take a seat" he indicated the chairs before the big wooden desk. "Pretty nice digs, huh?" he said as Anne and Ben took their seats. "Now, what is it that you want to talk about, Miss Augurie?"

Ben felt a tightening in his pelvis, a pressure of stress, he looked over at Anne, who expressed no stress at all, rather, she seemed to be mounting an attack.

“A couple of goons came by my office the other day,” Anne began, “Talking some nonsense about trying to locate their missing daughter and they invoked *your* favor. I tracked down the mark only to find that your goons were also on her tail, shooting at her. Now, I find the mark dead in the town where you’ve decided to hang up your shingle. Do I need to ask for an explanation or would you rather me talk to your robot downstairs?”

“Have you not been paid?” Ernest Mairo asked plainly.

“Eh?” Anne blurted, “Have I been paid?”

“Honestly, Anne,” Mairo said chuckling, “Have you checked your bank account since, what, yesterday?”

Anne pulled out her phone and tapped some buttons, “That is...” Anne coughed, “A very large number.”

“Seems to me that we are all square, Anne Augurie,” Ernest Mairo said. “Now, if you’ll please.” He gestured towards the door.

“No, I didn’t assist in the killing of this woman,” Anne said.

“Nobody did,” Mairo said. “She committed suicide. It’s not our problem, nor our fault. As awful as it is.”

“I was at the site of the death,” Anne began, “Ben here was there too. We saw a murder.”

“No, you didn’t,” Mairo said. “What you saw was a very elaborate suicide.”

“Bullshit, Mairo,” Anne shouted, “I know you’re involved in this woman’s murder and I’m going to find the evidence that implicates you too!”

“There’s no evidence of my complicity because I didn’t murder her!” Mairo laughed.

“We’ll see, Mairo,” Anne said, standing from her chair and pointing at Mairo. “I know what you’re capable of, Mairo. I’m going to find the evidence and you’re going to jail.”

“Okay,” Mairo said dismissively, “When you find that evidence and when you find that jurisdiction, you know where to find me.” He laughed as Anne and Ben left the office.

After he finished laughing, he picked up his phone and dialed a number. “Yes? There’s a new set of names that I want erased. Hold on for a moment while I get them right. Okay, Anne Augurie and Benjamin Pontchartain. Same fee. Oh, and know that the big woman knows who you are, so try to be quiet about it.”

Koch and Knight

Nevada Consortium, a couple weeks ago

The sound of the shower taps opening awoke Glen Knight from deep sleep. He had been dreaming, of what he couldn’t remember, but still he had the sensation of forgetting something. He was laying in his bed in the apartment he shared with his business partner, Howard Koch. There were several used condoms in the waste bin, Glen couldn’t remember precisely if it was because of frequency or awkwardness. He lit a cigarette and let it rest on the edge of his plastic ashtray on the side of the bed

that faced the balcony. He opened the door to let air in and sat down with his head in his hands.

Vodka, he explained to himself, had been a mistake.

Glen Knight was a tall man with a stylish mop of golden blonde hair and a winning smile that dazzled even ordinary people he passed in the street. His slender and svelte body was the result of years of concentrated effort and it showed. The man was a specimen. However, right now he was hunched over on the edge of his bed, occasionally taking a drag from a cigarette, his side a dehydrated and sinewy bundle of muscle.

“Glen?” Howard called from the hallway, “Are you in there?”

“Yes, Howard,” I’m in here. You can come in, “You will need to examine me to determine if I need a coroner.”

Howard came into the room. A short man of dark features and deeply myopic eyes, he was quick and expressive in his movements. He wore, as a matter of taste and conviction, a blue jumpsuit with patches of his own design decorating the shoulders, and white high-top Chuck Taylor tennis shoes that always seemed to be clean, no matter what he had been doing. “What are you doing? We have that meeting with Mairo in forty minutes,” Howard moaned.

Glen flopped on the bed petulantly and since he was naked, this had the effect of slapping his cock on his thigh. Howard turned around with a shout, “Oh come on, Glen, put some clothes on!”

Glen gathered up some bed sheets and made himself a toga, “Don’t worry about it, I’ll be ready in thirty and it’s just across the street,” Glen made busy by looking in his closet and selecting a light gray suit, of which he had several. “That is if what’s his name in the shower finishes sometime this week.”

“Who’s in there anyway?” Howard asked, jerking a thumb at the bathroom door down the hallway.

Glen shrugged and gave Howard his world-famous grin, “Dunno, why don’t you ask him?”

“Oh no,” Howard said, shaking his head with his arms crossed, “I’m not helping you remember your last conquest’s name with that old trick, you’ll have to be an honest man and ask him yourself.”

“Who’s forgotten whose name?” a fit looking Asian man said as he passed Howard towards Glen.

They kissed briefly and Glen took his suit with him to the bathroom. “Tell me, spaceman, who is this handsome gentleman that we both seem to know?”

Glen winked at Howard on the way to the bathroom, letting his toga drop just as he passed Howard.

“He does this all the time,” Howard complained. “He thinks that he’s being debonair or something, but it’s only cute the first few times you’ve seen it. I’m sick of the whole routine and I’m shocked, shocked! That he still thinks that it’s cute to sashay about town like a trollop at his age and intellectual inclination.”

The man walked over to the ashtray and re-ignited the half-smoked cigarette, “Would it be any better if he was stupid?”

“You think that’s a clever way to call me out, and you think you’ve trapped me into some socially awkward stare, but buddy, it’s been nigh on thirty years that I’ve been this awkward and I don’t mind telling you that it would be better if he was just a dumb slut if he wanted to keep up this lifestyle. Dumb sluts don’t write memoirs, nor do they make lecture tours, nor do they retire to beach side mansions, but that’s precisely what we’re going to do.”

The stranger was starting to get a little put off by this little man’s insistent prattling, “You’re right, dumb sluts just die of AIDS.”

“Oh fuck you, you slut,” Howard nearly shouted, the stranger looked a little taken aback, “Go back to 1993 with your Philadelphia routine, I ain’t buying it. The anti-retro-viral meds they sell at gas stations now are enough to rescue your precious T-cells.” The man began to pick up his clothes off of the floor and put them on. “Holy shit, you’re precious, booty shorts and a safety-pin shirt? Goddamn walking stereotype in my apartment. Man, I tell you what, as a policy, I don’t criticize my business partner’s choice in sexual encounters, but I at least expect them to have some originality, some personality. I bet if I checked under your sack I’d see ‘Marc Jacobs’ tattooed there!”

“Why don’t you get under there and check,” The man said and rushed past Howard for the door.

“Why don’t you check,” Howard mocked and then began to tidy up Glen’s room, cleanliness was a compulsion for him that he often needed to keep in check, but he often explained that he kept his obsessive-compulsive disorder around just enough to keep the house clean and to keep his code neat. During the times before he knew Glen, and to some degree after, his philosophy that being

neurodivergent was an advantage. That was until Glen found him cleaning the bathroom for the fourth time one day and insisted that he start taking some medication to ease off the compulsion, but never enough that he lost that part of himself. Howard felt that his neuroses were part of him and refused to deny them, but he also admitted that they could be self-defeating if left unchecked.

This was, of course, his main problem with Glen, who he saw as neuro-divergent in a way too, but because being sexy and confident was somehow socially acceptable, Glen didn't have to curb his tendencies at all.

"All this sex and partying is self-destructive eventually," he would complain. "You need to ease off."

"I do have *some* self-control," Glen would reply. "If I let myself really be a monster, you would hardly recognize me."

"That's exactly the kind of thing that I would say without the pills," Howard would say.

"Honey," Glen would say patiently, "You do *not* have self-control."

"That," Howard would rejoin, "Is up for fuckin' debate!"

Glen stepped out of the bathroom in his suit, looking perfect as he normally does, casually adjusting his pants' creases, "Is my beau off on another adventure?"

"You know, sometimes I really tire of this act that we put on," Howard said.

Glen ruffled Howard's black hair, "But you play the part so well!"

“Whatever, Glen,” Howard said, already forgetting about the inconvenience. “Are you ready to go? We have twenty minutes, maybe we can get a cup of coffee downstairs before we go and meet Mairo.”

“Excellent idea,” Glen said and followed Howard out of the door.

Glen and Howard had moved into the apartment behind Mairo’s office on his insistence a week before, waiting on an audience with their mysterious new employer. They had finally been summoned to meet him the night before while Glen was busy cavorting with the stranger. The details were that they were going to meet at a park bench in the park area across the street from the town square. Why they weren’t going to meet at Mairo’s office was a point that they expected would be explained to them in due time.

Glen and Howard, the two parts of the Koch and Knight consultancy firm, were very familiar with paranoid executives who insisted on noir-style meetings to discuss their clandestine plans. Typically, it was to help develop a minimally viable product based on some hairbrained idea the executive had and in an attempt to avoid non-disclosure agreements, they called on Koch and Knight to work on it so that they could later take it over. This was alright with Glen and Howard, who charged exorbitant sums for projects that, reality being a factor, would never really come to fruition, but satisfied greedy and ambitious executives with money to burn.

“Morons,” Glen had called them when he proposed the consultancy to Howard, “We tell them that their ideas are great, implement them, deploy them and then hand the code over for a lot of money and a little bit on the backside if it takes off. We’re not greedy, not like them, we won’t ask for much of a

cut, because, let's be honest, their ideas are mostly not going to work out. However, they're going to come out of the deal with a tight little package of code that they can bandy around town to the venture capitalists. We can leave the soul-crushing business of selling out to the folks who have no souls and gather a modest profit occasionally. That is, on top of the absolutely insane fees we charge for quick development projects."

Howard mulled this over, "They're probably so sick with all of the speed-bumps and pitfalls that they normally get for projects that they will pay us scads of cash for a quickie MVP. They don't need to go through IT or compliance or twelve different managers with their own ambitions. They can cut through everything and take the whole thing for themselves. Holy crap! They'll think they got the egg from the golden goose!"

"That's it," Glen continued that night, "The trick of it is that what we deliver them actually is a neat little package of something."

"We have to manage expectations," Howard said. "Scope creep is rampant with these people."

"Don't you worry about that," Glen smiled, "I'll write the contracts. They'll be bullet-proof."

Glen and Howard ordered their coffees at the open-air cafe at the ground floor of their apartment building, it opened out onto a road that shared the bare concrete and stucco walls of a suburb cluster and on the other side the alley between their apartment and the next one, the concrete and glass structure rising several storeys into the sky. The open area of the cafe was about three storeys high to give it the impression of being open, but the cluster of trees that had been planted by the supporting

column on the corner of the building and the general closeness of all of the architecture gave it a gloomy look in the morning that was not improved except for about an hour in the afternoon when the sun shone directly on the aluminum chairs and tables set out before the cafe, heating them to an unbearable degree before they were cast into darkness again when they grew uncomfortably cold again.

They were busy talking as they walked down the alley and then to the main street towards the city square, the topic of conversation was a typical one for them, they talked about music.

“The natural progression of music, in the past fifty years at least, was from punk rock to new wave to hardcore and then to the many iterations thereof,” Howard asserted.

“How are you going to say that?” Glen asked, almost hurt, “You’ve missed so many progressions! There was anarcho-punk, there was disco, there was goth...”

“These are variations on a theme, Glen!” Howard exclaimed and startled a woman who was sleepily walking her dog in her bathrobe. “I’m trying to get to a point.”

“The trouble with your points,” Glen started and lit a cigarette, “Is that you put so many suppositions and premises beforehand that I have to assemble a whole universe in my mind that is a) not real and b) impossible to refute because of hidden suppositions and premises!”

“Would you just listen to me for once?” Howard said.

“For once!” Glen rolled his eyes, “My whole life...”

“Don’t go on about that,” Howard blurted, almost spilling his coffee, which he’d removed the top from, “What I’m saying is how do you figure the music of Amaryllis in the history of popular music? Is it a decline from pop music or from the so-called alternative course of music?”

“The thing that you don’t seem to understand,” Glen said, “Is that all music is pop music.”

“Oh, of course you would say that,” Howard said, running his hand through his hair, “That’s such an absurd thing to think. Are you willing to say that there’s no difference between the art forms of pop music, art music, so-called alternative music, and, say, hip-hop?”

“You *know* that I think that,” Glen said. They were getting near the street that passed between the city center and the green of the park area. “One last assertion before we have to get ready to meet Mairo.”

“I need a whole ocean to cross to counter your argument,” Howard sputtered.

“Ha!” Glen barked, “That’s an assertion! Now shut up, we’ve got to be professionals when we meet this guy. Come on, now, stand up straight.”

They crossed the street and walked down a pathway through the garden that was the Consortium park. After a few minutes, they came upon a lonely park bench made of quick-poured concrete off the side of the path. A bald man wearing athletic-wear was sitting there alone.

Glen walked up to the man and said, “Mister Mairo, I presume?” Holding his hand out for a shake.

Howard kept close behind, but made no friendly gesture. “My name is Glen Knight and this is my quant, Howard Koch”

The bald man stood and shook Glen's hand awkwardly over the length of the table, "Thanks for meeting me here," he gestured for Glen and Howard to sit on the opposite side of the park bench.

"You must understand my need for discretion."

"Of course," Glen said, "As you know, our firm is focused on discretion."

Mairo smiled at them and Howard felt a creeping sensation on his spine that he had to shake off manually, but still he sat down with Glen. "I'm pleased that you chose to bring your quant to the meeting," Mairo said. "A lot of consultancies I spoke to only sent salesmen, but I want a different perspective."

"Mister Mairo," Glen began gregariously and with a laugh, "I don't go anywhere without my number-one! Now, if you don't mind, you've set us up in a certifiable palace for a week waiting to hear what you have to say and I must say that I'm dying to hear your idea."

"No pissing around," Mairo smiled and pointed at Glen, "I like that. I get a lot of heel licking in my own company and I like the directness."

Long ago Howard and Glen had learned to not react when they thought they had caught a big one, but still, they both shivered psychosomatically.

Mairo produced a shipping envelope and tore one end off. He reached in and produced a thumb-drive, "This, gentlemen, is a nascent artificial intelligence that I obtained with great effort. There is a similar intelligence being brewed beneath us right now, in the Nevada Consortium. In fact, it is the

same one, a copy. I want you to bring it up to speed, if you will, and give me the ability to beat the Consortium at its own game. I want to be able to bring their AI to market before they are willing to.”

“That’s a tall order,” Howard cooed, reaching for the thumb-drive. Mairo pulled it back, “What do you want it to do, exactly?”

“I want it to bring on the technological singularity and I want to own that particular piece of human advancement,” Mairo said.

“Well, that’s an absurd thing to ask,” Howard said matter-of-factly.

“Why?” Mairo asked, “You can’t do it?”

“With some random thumb-drive that has god-knows-what on it? No, the technological singularity is a collection of events and epochal changes in thinking. I think what you have in your hands is nothing more than an algorithm that can process words into speech patterns. It’s the Mechanical Turk of our era, it’s an illusion.”

“You told me...” Mairo looked at Glen.

Glen put his arm on Howard and said, “My quant has very little respect for disruptive technologies because he simply cannot see their application. You give me some time and I will be able to develop an intelligence that will cast a pall on the Consortium.”

“Now that’s what I like to hear,” Mairo said and then laughed a hollow laugh that made the molars in Howard’s teeth scream. “How long do you need?”

Glen smiled his fantastic white smile and said, “How spectacular do you need your AI to be?”

Dmitri's Escape

Las Vegas, few weeks ago

One October morning, a rolling brownout darkened my apartment and the charging icon on my laptop flashed off and on and off. The lightbulb in the lamp dimmed and groaned and crackled. I took my coffee onto the porch and looked out to the resorts of the Las Vegas strip, darkened themselves, though it's hard to tell during the day whether or not the power has been cut off. Chances are it has. Power typically rotates from neighborhood to neighborhood based on who continues to pay their bills. I didn't anticipate my neighborhood getting power as frequently as in the past. As far as I could tell, I was the only one in the apartment complex who still paid for power. Somedays I got the feeling that I was the only one who was still in the apartment complex. I felt alone.

The mountains in the distance were crisp and clear in the colder air, summer having departed rather dramatically the week before. Across the street, a couple set up camp on a condemned lot. They parked their RV on a concrete foundation and closed the gate behind them. They hung their clothes on the trees and bushes of the property to dry. A tarp stretched from the RV to a tree as an awning. The couple spent a couple days weaving palm fronds into the cyclone fence that surrounded the property to obscure them from anyone on the street, but it was futile. The eventual colonization of the tent-city in the empty lots and backyards and condemned properties across the street are unavoidable as the black and gray clouds that gather over the Spring Mountains.

My coffee grew cold and the wind kicked up into my robe, tousled my hair. The increasingly roiling clouds above the mountains, where there were none before, filled me with a sense of foreboding to add to the feeling of helplessness I've lived with for the past three months. The RV man looked up from sweeping his new floor and waved at me. His thick, almost dreadlocked beard kicked up in the wind as well. I thought he smiled. "Hello," I waved back, "Will you be cozying up with me and helplessness from now on?" I said to no one but my empty apartment.

I wanted to go down to the lot and slip through the gate and tell the couple about how a house once stood where they've parked their big rotting RV. Families once lived there and prospered and used a tire swing in the front lawn, of which only the scar from the rope remains on the thick tree branch. I wanted to tell them that I watched it fall. The woman who lived there could no longer afford rent or power or gas or water or anything at all. The city came and slapped stickers on the doors and she broke in and continued to live there all the way until they decided to come with excavators and tore the thing down. They broke it into its components of stucco and dust and particle board, aluminum panels, shattered glass, ripped and torn upholstery, loose foam padding and pink insulation occasionally caught in the breeze. She left to buy a few gallons of water from one of the distribution centers and missed the destruction of her home. She came home to the workers picking up the detritus and loading it into huge dumpsters to be hauled off to the dump or an incinerator somewhere. She left her wagon filled with five gallon jugs of water in the middle of the street and attacked the workers. The police dragged her off. Only some two-by-fours and plywood panels remained on the property by the time the workers got back to their trucks and drove off.

It was a peaceful night. Nobody lived in our neighborhood anymore. The woman and I had been the last on this particular stretch of road and there was no reason for anyone else to drive down it. This was before the brownouts and so the cart with the water jugs remained illuminated in the middle of the street. I walked down and took them into my apartment. I did not expect the woman to ever return and she never did.

That was three months ago.

It was time to get the old Resume out again. Every application is looking for something different. It's important that you customize for each job you apply for so that you end up on their radar. You have to know how to anticipate the bots that read the text of your one-pager to assess whether or not you have the qualifications for the job. Every keystroke should be in the service of producing the perfect pairing of resume to job application. Wasteful behaviors seem to be detected by the system. They sniff you out like drug dogs and you'll never get anything you apply for. You might not get anything anyway because you're an under-qualified technical writer applying from a dying city like a rat screaming to be let onto a seaworthy ship from a raft composed of the corpses of his compatriots.

I wanted to go down to the couple with the RV and tell them about how they've decided to camp out on what used to be a home. To tell them about the woman who lived there before, how she'd been hauled off just like the garbage that they'd made of her home. I wanted to confess how I took her water jugs and that I still had them, still refilled them every week when I went to the same water center that she went to that fateful day.

I wanted to ask them where they were from. I could guess that they were from one of the smaller desert communities in the surrounding area. Sandy Valley, Nelson, Overton, Mesquite, Indian Springs... One of those places that could barely maintain even when Las Vegas was a thriving metropolis, that was now no more habitable than Mars. But perhaps I was wrong. Maybe their main motivation wasn't to escape, but to hide. This was ultimately what kept me from introducing myself during those first two weeks or so. The concern that they were more dangerous than I was able to handle. My concerns were more or less confirmed in the weeks that followed.

Sure enough the white tents came as the clouds descended into the valley and the rains began. Endless and unnatural. Sections of roadway fell away into drainage ditches and entire neighborhoods of Las Vegas became inaccessible as the mudslides blasted whole cookie-cutter neighborhoods to kingdom come. Sometimes the rains buried remaining residents who called out into the wet night to rescuers who would never come. Passing vehicles could not hear them over the sound of their engines. People in surrounding neighborhoods wouldn't dare put themselves in such a compromising situation as looking for some injured person with a flashlight in the middle of the night in a sea of dirt and recoverable resources. Scavengers would have the good grace to snuff out survivors before they took what they could with pickaxes and shovels.

The depression and hopelessness that I felt for months began to give way to animal desperation. I had to find somewhere to escape to.

I had a means of escape. I had a former neighbor, Tony Silvas, who let me know that he was leaving behind a dirtbike with a decent amount of fuel in a garage in the apartment complex and gave me the

key. Daily I walked past the garage to make sure that it hadn't been broken into, my escape route still intact. But that did not solve the real problem of my escape. Having a dirt bike did no good as long as I didn't have a visa to leave the city. Entering the city was not a problem, the guards at the highways let anyone in because they couldn't imagine anyone crazy enough to enter without a way to leave. However, if you tried to leave, you had to present your visa, your reason for entering either the Republic of California to the West, Deseret to the East, the Sonora province to the South or the Sovereign State of Nevada to the North. A visa was a condition I had for employment, which proved to be rather difficult. I had one prospective job in Los Angeles, but the hiring prick insisted that my interview be conducted in person.

"But you see, I can't leave Las Vegas without a visa. I need a visa to get past the checkpoint," I said, irritation and fear and panic bubbling up in my throat like bile.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Tiranov, but we can't grant you a visa until we've made you an offer of employment," The idiot on the other end of the video call said.

"Don't you see how that doesn't make any sense? Why can't we just do my interview over the video-caller?" I pleaded.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Tiranov, but it's company policy..."

"Sorry, sorry... You're sorry. I'm the one who's fucking sorry."

The tent city was starting to really develop, they'd figured out a way to handle the flooding with sandbags they made themselves from the dirt in the previously unincorporated lots. Their numbers

grew every day. One day I looked out on their community from my balcony, covering myself with my umbrella, and I saw a little village across the street. Alleyways snaked through old-style plastic fabric tents, more permanent waxed canvas tents, tarpaulins, RVs and cars. There were many areas that were shielded from the rain by great clusters of tarps sewn together. I decided to investigate the area.

I put on an old ratty raincoat and paint smeared jeans with the cuffs rolled up to stay out of the rain. I pulled my Ruger .22 out of its case and loaded it. It was by no means a big gun, nor was it imposing, but it was an effective noise-maker from a distance and satisfactorily lethal if I was going against someone with a knife. It was not the sort of gun that would win any gunfight. I tucked it under my belt and zipped up my rain slicker. I left out of the back of the complex and walked around to try to mask where I was really from. However, I figured that anyone with half a brain could deduce where I'd come from. I'd not exactly hidden my presence on my patio.

The colonizers had managed to encircle their community with cyclone fencing woven with palm fronds and there were only two or three gate entrances which were in turn guarded by some burly looking guys. Out on the street the rain poured over my head and flattened the hood of my coat against my skull. I had to pull it up over my eyes to look at the guards when they asked me what I had to trade. I hadn't thought to bring anything of value. What could I have traded anyway? The remaining U.S., Californian or European currency I still kept in the envelope in my laptop case? I had a feeling that that sort of currency was not the kind of thing that would be accepted here. American Express certainly never had to trade Block-Chain for celery either. Then I remembered, a currency as old as time: "I've got cigarettes," I said and they nodded approvingly. I had about ten cigarettes and I

had no idea what the exchange rate was. I recall reading somewhere that currency had been invented so that you didn't have to know as many exchange rates as you do in a barter economy. You just had to know the exchange rate for the item you're looking for in terms of the currency. "Uh, do, uh, you all use some kind of standard currency?"

"Dollars not accepted here," The burly guy said, gruffly. I got the hint. Less questions make me seem less strange than I definitely am. I don't belong here, so the sooner I do my business and get out, the better off everyone will be.

I stepped through the gate and was struck by the most awesome smell. I had gotten used to eating canned and pre-packaged foods for about a month, so smelling a stew boiling in front of one of the tents was very enticing. I started walking towards the cook to maybe barter for a cup and noticed that there were a lot of people there. Men and women and children hiding under bits of cloth from the rain or simply tolerating the damp. I discovered that there were a number of cloth funnels that led down into rain barrels, which had ladles hooked to the side for a quick drink. Rain that was not captured for consumption ran down into gutters dug into the alleyways and ran into a large central gutter, which was lined with rocks and served doubly as a toilet for the people who lived in tents on that alley. Thus there was a horrible smell that almost overcame the smell of the stew.

I passed a boy pissing into the gutter and stood in front of the pot which was attended by an elderly asian woman. "Can I have a cup? How much can I give you for a cup of soup?" She shook her head at me and said something in what I figured was Cantonese. I looked into the pot and saw leafy greens, onions, noodles, chunks of some sort of meat. My mouth watered wildly. I felt like a feral dog,

desperate for a morsel of anything. At another time in my life, not very long ago at all, I might have looked at the pot as something disgusting. A brew of grass and stale ramen brewed by a sewer, but here I realized that I was hungry, that I'd been hungry for a long time.

"You want soup?" the boy who was pissing in the gutter said. "What do you have for trade?"

"I have cigarettes," I said.

"How many cigarettes?" he asked.

"Ten, I think?"

"That's how much soup costs," he said and held out his hand. I put the half crushed pack in his hand and he turned to the old woman and said something in Cantonese. The old woman fished a bowl and spoon out from somewhere in the tent and scooped out a load of soup. She handed it to me and I began to vigorously wolf it down standing right there, completely oblivious to my surroundings, utterly consumed by the joyous feeling of eating something hot and nutritious.

The boy lit two cigarettes with the same match and handed one to the old woman. They crouched in the dry overhang of their tent and sucked on their cigarettes contentedly, eyeing me. Then the boy started to point at me, "You aren't from around here."

"I've lived in Las Vegas for the past several years of my life," I said, surprised that this boy would make such a statement.

"No, no, you don't know what I mean," the boy said.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“I mean that you don’t belong here anymore. This isn’t your city anymore. This isn’t your home now,” the boy said.

“Where is my home if not for where I live?” I asked, curious about this boy’s philosophical interpretation.

“I don’t know, but it isn’t here. We live here now. Why don’t you go to ‘Frisco or to Vancouver Island? Your type live there.”

“I don’t know. I don’t think they want me there either,” I stood in the rain, with the bowl of soup in my hands. My hands began to shake as I realized that he was right. I was in the wrong place.

“That’s bad, bro. Cause you don’t belong here and if you don’t have somewhere to go, you’re in trouble,” the boy said with a sardonic laugh.

“Tell me about it,” I said. “Where should I go?”

“North,” the boy said. “Go up north. White people live up north.”

I returned to the boy and his old woman (whose names I later found out were Shawn and Ju) several times over the next couple of weeks and traded all manner of things from my dwindling supplies for soup and rice and fresh fruits. I asked them where they got the fresh foods, but they would not tell me. In turn, they would not ask me where I got the tea, coffee, beans, tobacco, batteries, pickles and vodka that I traded with them. This seemed to be a sort of law among the colonizers. Telling someone where

they found these precious resources could lead to theft and a loss of livelihood, so it was a matter of politeness and good grace to just not ask.

It was during these weeks that I meditated on my place in the world under Shawn's tutelage. Up until that point, I'd lived in the world that I'd grown up in. One with a stable economy and environment. I grew up in a country that ruled a good portion of North America, not just the East coast. As the years had passed, the little changes to the world had faded into the background of my story and I'd lost touch with the reality of things.

Shawn disabused me of my notions of reality, "You always lived in the upper-class and so you never saw when the bottom dropped out. Granma Ju said that my dad used to tell her that we could rise out of the lower class and into the upper class, but this is not true. You see this everywhere and see the things that continue to make it not true. The checkpoints. This valley is where the poor will be dropped into, like piss into the outside-gutter, to gather in the drainage lake. Look around you: we are all part of this, we are prepared to live this life. One day, through great effort, we will make something of it, but here's the thing. This is the important thing. You do not belong here. You offend the way of things by remaining here. An upper class stain on an peaceful lower class city. One of these days, it'll be too apparent. The sun will be too hot in the sky, the rain not fallen for too long, and they will look at you as the thing which possesses all of their fears and hates. Or maybe they will just become jealous of that gun that you keep on your belt and knock you one day while you slurp down Granma Ju's noodles."

I was startled that he knew about the gun. I was always very careful to keep it hidden, but perhaps he had read the folds of my rain slicker and deduced the truth just as he'd deduced the truth about the world.

"I don't know how, Shawn. I'm trying so hard to leave, but it's not happening."

"It doesn't matter, Rain Ghost. Either you leave or you find a way to be like us. There is no other way."

Two days later the rain stopped. The sudden silence on my window pane woke me and I was startled by the eerie blue light that illuminated my room. I got up and every movement of my body, conscious of the exaggerated nature of my movements, as if in a dream, I walked over to the window and looked out on the colonizer settlement across the street. The silence was quickly explained. The full moon shone down on a world blanketed in snow, and the snow gently falling onto the scene. I stared at it in wonder. I'd never seen so much snow in my entire time in Las Vegas. The climate shift had indeed dramatically changed the valley. The calmness of the white and blue tableau was mesmerizing and I stared at it until my mind was blinded. Dark figures cutting their way through the snow drifts awoke me from my reverie. A rival group was conducting a raid. They used hand implements to keep the sound down, but even the snow could not dampen the sound of metal on metal, the grunting of men and women cut down, the screams of children being taken in the night.

The morning light revealed survivors and the wounded walking among the wreckage and attempting to put out fires with shovelfuls of snow rather than waste their precious rain water. Bright red blood

shone in the snow drifts like the spattering of a Jackson Pollock painting. Oh to speak of the rage and hate of humankind! What more of a canvas do you need than the pure snow? What better paint than human blood? What better brush than slipping limbs on the ice?

The lights cut on and I jumped over to my laptop to take advantage of the brief period of power they'd decided to direct to my neighborhood today. A week before, I'd applied for a speechwriter position at a company called Synergistic Solutions and they'd written back. I couldn't believe it. The timing was impeccable. Breathless, I looked through the details of the contract, which was for only a year, but it included a travel visa to ... The Nevada Consortium.

Not having heard of such a place, I looked it up. Nestled between the mountain ranges of the former Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, North of the Sovereign State of Nevada, was a joint commercial-governmental research facility, only started a few years ago, that boasted the bleeding edge of technological advances. The website made a point to reinforce these advances, and the very mission of the Consortium was to improve the entire human race, not just the pocketbooks of Wall Street fat cats.

Frankly, I couldn't give a shit about all of that. I accepted the position, printed out the visa (surprisingly easy), packed a suit and my laptop, threw in some extra items, stuffed my revolver into my winter coat and considered myself ready to leave.

I looked about my apartment for what I knew would be the last time. I regretted having to leave. It was cozy and comfortable and the sun warmed the living room in the afternoon. There were many items

that I didn't want to leave behind, but could not make it on the hard road that I would have to make my way along on Silvas' dirt bike. I would miss my desk and my couch. My prints of Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky. My entire library, Dostoevsky, Pushkin, Steinbeck, Achebe, Hugo, Pynchon... All gone.

But here's the important part (as Shawn might have said), I was escaping with my very life. So I took my few possessions and went down to the garages. Fortunately, the raid the night before had not uncovered anything in the apartment complex (it would eventually, that's for sure). The motorbike didn't have any gas in it, which I took as a good sign. However, I built up a sweat pumping air into the tires using a bicycle pump. I filled the tank using a jerry can and spent a half hour trying to figure out how to take the can with me. Eventually I decided I would just fill up two gallon jugs and tie them down to the back of the bike using bungee cords.

I pulled the bike out into the parking lot and started up the engine. After draping Silvas' motorcycle jacket over my shoulders, I spent about ten minutes trying to get used to the clutch in the parking lot of the apartment complex, which drew the attention of the colonizers, who stood in the snow and cheered at me. Some of the children that remained chased me and the bike around. When I felt confident with the motorbike, I put on Silvas' helmet and goggles and tied a handkerchief around my face and cut out of the parking lot and headed towards the freeway. The Consortium was 250 miles away, but I had nowhere left to go, this was my great escape and as I hit the abandoned streets. I felt brave and energized. I felt a great sense of freedom and felt like a hero. This feeling lasted all of fifteen minutes before the cold began to set in.

The city was a maze of colonization and paramilitary camps, each of which I tried to avoid because I did not know how friendly they may be. How much of my own colonizer neighbors' friendliness came from a respect of my being there longer? It was impossible to tell and I didn't want to test it with any other group within Las Vegas or without.

I cut through abandoned neighborhoods, looked out for convoys on arterial streets, zipped in between abandoned cars on the freeway and soon I was able to open up the throttle somewhere in North Las Vegas. The gemstone corpses of the resorts behind me faded quickly. The cookie-cutter developments fell away and opened up into endless brush that led all the way up to the mountains' foothills, occasionally punctuated by an abandoned ranch here and there. The blunted edges of the cliffs that hung over the valley lay bald, but behind them, shrouded in the mists of Autumn were the higher, mightier peaks bedecked in virgin white. From out here on the outskirts, the city seemed to be peaceful, though memories of blood stained snow were fresh in my memory. The whimperings of people denied water rations strained beneath the roar of the wind.

The sky was clear and I was glad for that. The wind was terribly cold and the sun helped a little to keep me warm. Outside of Indian Springs I stopped and spent some time getting myself ready for the rest of the freezing ride. Already I had Silvas' helmet and riding goggles on, but now I put a sweater underneath the riding jacket and wrapped my face in an old houndstooth scarf that a girlfriend had left behind one day and had been absorbed into my collection of rags. I stuffed my hands into thick argyle dress socks because I didn't have any gloves. I topped off the tank with some of the fuel from

one of the bottles and began to feel thirsty. It looked like I was going to have plenty of fuel, but barely any water.

This was going to be a tricky sort of trip, I thought. If I didn't get to the consortium by sunset, it was likely that I would freeze. If I got delayed I didn't have enough water to survive the walk the rest of the way. This was really a one-shot chance. I steeled myself to my mission and leapt onto the bike. I was off, driving as fast as I could on the already deteriorating road. If I hit a pothole and got tossed from the bike, I might as well be dead. Who would ever find me and come to help me?

After driving for maybe an hour, I saw another vehicle on the road. Thinking it was an autonomous car, I kept my speed up to overtake it. No need to worry about an auto-car headed to California or to Deseret. However, when I got closer, it turned out it was an old Recreational Vehicle. When I got even closer, I saw the woman hanging out the side window with a pistol in her hands. Startled, I almost lost control of the bike, but it was apparent that she didn't want to shoot at me. Not only would it be difficult to land a hit on this bumpy road, they might not have the ammunition to finish the job. I held an argyle socked hand up and then pulled down on the throttle, speeding past the RV.

I have often wondered where those people were going. Who was in that RV? Was it a family headed to some colony or city-state for safety? Were they just traversing the roads perpetually, running from the world's nonsense? Were they fools who became worm food from the next group of thieves that crossed their path? How many rounds did that woman have for that pistol? Forever it will remain a mystery and her face will join the other faces that I will never see again. I will forget their faces in time. Times are cold and colder still when it's all the more practical to treat everyone as strangers.

The Nevada desert is as wide as anyone's imagination and the features you can see out past the road's shoulder are far more distant than you can reckon. The mountain peaks cheat the curve of the earth and give you the impression that if you only reached out into space you could dust the snow off of the sharp blade of their ridges. The massive loneliness lends to hallucinatory reveries and can easily distract a motorcycle rider and I several times had to swerve out of the way of an enormous pothole or slam on the brakes to navigate a dry river that had cut through the road. I even lost track of an entire town until I was right on top of it, coming out of my empty daydream, I realized that it was too late to try to avoid the security checkpoint.

The old Interstate-95 highway flew into the ancient ghost town of Goldfield at 70 miles per hour and slammed to a stop to make a hard left turn before continuing on to Tonopah. A group of paramilitary survivalists had settled the little town apparently and were stopping anyone coming through. I was not sure that I was going to be able to make it out of this checkpoint. I thought of reaching for my pistol in my coat, but that might have made things worse. I pulled forward to a line some thirty yards away from the checkpoint proper, which looked like a clandestine toll booth with traffic cones and striped gate arm. A man with an AR-15 stepped out from behind a concrete barrier to my right and shouted, "That's far enough."

Fearing the worst, I put my hands up and started thinking about when exactly it would be the best time to gun the engine and try to outrun their bullets. The man walked up and turned the key on the bike, shutting it off and dashing my hopes of escape. Keeping his gun trained on me, but backing up a few feet, the man asked, "What are you doing out here, son?"

“I’m heading up north,” I said, my voice trembling from the cold or from fear, I did not know.

“What for?” the man demanded as the wind picked up and kicked dust in my face, peppering my goggles.

“I’ve got a job interview!” I shouted over the wind. There was a pause, I feared that this answer was particularly unacceptable. Then there was laughter.

“A fucking job interview?” the man laughed again, “Come on, son, get up off of that rice-metal piece of shit.”

I got off and walked over to the man, who had lowered his gun. Getting a good look at him, he was an enormous hulking Nordic looking man with riverstones woven into his beard and blue tattoos that snaked up his neck like arteries rising to the surface. “Steffanson will take your bike to the other side for you. You’ll come with me.” The man said as another viking came out from the left and started pushing my bike towards the checkpoint. “My name is Karlsbjorn,” he boomed over the wind.

I pulled my scarf down and rasped, “Name’s Dmitri.”

“That’s a good name, Dmitri,” Karlsbjorn said.

“What’s so good about it?” I asked.

“Haha! You know what I mean,” he said and gestured for me to follow him to a cluster of canvas tents by the side of the checkpoint.

There were many men and not a few women gathered around these tents. All of them armed, some of them decorated like Karlsbjorn, collectively covered in dust. They smoked cigarettes and pipes by improvised hearths. They stared and laughed at me, they jostled each other and ate from cooking equipment.

Inside one tent was a desk with a couple of chairs in front of it. Karlsbjorn sat on the other side of the desk and pulled out a sheet of paper. He told me to sit, which I did. "You got anything to declare, son?"

I looked around the tent, trying to suss out where exactly this was funny. Had I somehow gotten mixed up in an epic episode of candid camera? "The fuck is this? Immigration?"

"Son, if you want to pass through our territory, you're going to have to answer our questions," Karlsbjorn said.

"I'm sorry, I'm just not exactly sure where I am! I didn't realize this area was claimed by any polity. I figured it was part of the de facto United States," I said.

This upset the giant man. He banged his fist on the desk and said, "The United States government has no authority here! This is the territory of the Sovereign Citizens of the Nevada Homeland. We hold everything between Tonopah and Las Vegas. From Wendover to Baker!" He said proudly.

"Baker?" I said, confused.

"Formerly of California," He barked.

“Okay, okay, I didn’t know, alright? I’m just trying to get north, I don’t want to bother you folks out here. I don’t have anything to declare.”

“Fine, fine,” the man said. “Now, are you traveling through the Nevada Homeland for business or pleasure.”

I blinked at this man for a beat and a half. I stuttered when I spoke, “I’m sorry. Am I missing something? Have you seen what it’s like out there? Las Vegas has collapsed! The US is a shell of its former self! There’s barely the concept of borders anymore and you’re asking me if I’m on a business trip or off to have a giggle?”

“Just answer the question, sir.” the man said sternly.

“Well, I guess business considering that I’m just passing through on my way to an interview,” I said.

“What’s your final destination, Dmitri, uh... what’s your last name too?”

“Tiranov,” I said, starting to get irritated. “The Nevada Consortium.”

“Huh!” Karlsbjorn grunted and looked up from his papers, “What are you going to do out there?”

“I think I might be able to get a job doing PR for a tech start up. Good money, y’know?” I said.

Karlsbjorn laughed and leaned back, “You said it yourself, the world collapsed. What are you hanging on to? You’re seriously traveling through the Nevada wilderness for a desk job?”

“Well, what do you propose? That I stay here and delude myself into thinking that I’m defending some sort of border from illegal immigration?”

“Who’s the deluded one? We’re living in the real world, Tiranov. Those fools out in the Consortium are no more stable than our little clan out here in Goldfield. They just think they’re high and mighty because they’ve got technology. Let me tell you, we’ve got technology too! And we’re getting more all the time. The question that you’ve got to ask yourself nowadays isn’t who’s got the more appealing technology, who’s got the more stable government, but who’s society you want to live in. Was your life really all that great when you were a desk jockey?”

“Better than starving in the cold,” I said.

“We aren’t starving. We aren’t cold. We can teach you a skill, make you a useful member of society.”

Karlsbjorn said, “You’ve been lied to. We don’t need PR executives. We need hunters and people who can dig ditches and people who know how to rig up an alarm system with a Raspberry Pi and a car battery.”

“That’s alright, I’d rather continue on ahead in human development, not fall back on the dark ages.” I was starting to get ballsy with my remarks and every word I spoke sent a shiver through my back that shouted *Get out! Get out!*

“You’re wrong, Tiranov,” Karlsbjorn said and scratched his pen on the sheet of paper. “The world went the wrong way with its skyscrapers and office buildings and stock exchanges. We’re getting it

back on the right path. Here. This is your visa, it's good for one year. If you are inspected at a checkpoint of the Nevada Homeland again, it should grant you safe passage."

"Should?" I shrugged and read from the sheet of paper, "The Nevada Homeland reserves the right to revoke immigration privileges at any time for any reason."

"Uh huh." Karlsbjorn said.

"May I leave now?" I said.

"You are free to go," Karlsbjorn said. "Just remember us when you start thinking about a change in career, Tiranov!"

"Yeah, yeah," I said and walked over to my bike, which was being inspected by some of the Sovereigns. I took the time to top off the bike with what was left from the second bottle of gasoline. I'd lost the first over a bump some miles back.

Starting up the bike started hoots and hollers from the crowd, but their noise faded into my past as I raced towards my future.

The road to Tonopah was mostly uneventful, but it was outside that nearly abandoned city that I found the first sign advertising the roads that led to the Nevada Consortium. "Nevada Consortium, 57 miles. Exit at Stoneshod."

It was the home stretch and I admit that I was glowing with excitement, the wind didn't bother me anymore, the growing clouds in the distance didn't bother me, Las Vegas seemed like a distant and dark memory, one that could be easily forgotten.

After some time, I dipped into the valley. I could see across the floor the Nevada Consortium laying at the foot of the mountain in the distance. A few miles later, I read a sign that said that Stoneshod was only ten miles away. I was impatient, I wanted to cut the trip down as much as possible and figured I could cut a couple miles off of the trip by making a b-line for the Consortium instead of following the highway. The bike was all-terrain after all. So I left the road and started to joyously jump the small hills and dead riverbeds on my way across the desert floor.

To fly from dirt clod to dirt clod was freedom. I was an unstoppable success. I'd pulled myself out of the pit and dragged my sorry ass all the way to paradise.

About four miles from the Consortium, everything went dark.

I woke up with the worst headache I've ever had, lying on my stomach. I flipped myself over and stared into the sky, darkening now with huge clouds. I wondered if I was dying. I wondered what had killed me. I felt around my body for bullet holes, but ultimately the only pain I felt was in my head. I tried to sit up, but then got dizzy and had to lay down again. After another three tries, I was able to sit upright.

About twenty feet from where I was sitting was the motorbike, utterly crumpled from a cable trap that was clearly designed to halt invading vehicles. Good idea, I thought, wish I had fucking thought of that. Maybe I wouldn't be laying in the middle of the fucking desert with a concussion.

Deciding that there wasn't much to be done about the bike, I started to hike into the Consortium. I was going to have to explain that little stunt, but I'd rather explain in a hospital setting than out in the rain.

People who have had a concussion know that among the symptoms are nausea, headache, difficulty concentrating, pupils of different size, among others. One of which is delusion. So my body stumbled across the desert floor, grunting and moaning as it made its way towards its singular goal, but my mind was elsewhere.

Fuck Stalk?

Excerpt from *Dating Sure Is Hard in the New Millennium: A Memoir* by Benjamin Ponchartrain

She was the rail-thin figure propped up outside of the too-expensive stores at the airport, she was the cryptically unoriginal song that played in the background of endless youtube videos, she was the casual identity-less reference in a passing conversation at the bar, she was the symbol of contemporary excess that anonymous angry men railed about at parties, she was the pale blinking face looking innocently out of your laptop in the morning from the news aggregation site, she was the vacuous identity that could adopt any identity for any purpose, she was the perfect marketing vehicle, the walking advertisement, the genuine artist playing with postmodern concepts of unreality, she was above reproach by dint of innocence, but solely responsible for the collapse of culture.

The obsessive research culture engendered by the Internet means that there is a lot to know about Amaryllis if you really want to start diving in. Born in Los Angeles in the mid-nineties, raised as an only child by software engineers. Amaryllis appears to have been a very precocious child, especially as her various fan sites phrase it. She excelled in mathematics and science from an early age and expressed interest in the arts particularly in theater and film. At some point, her academic trajectory changed and she stopped going to public school sometime in middle school. Her parents home schooled her from there and it was around junior high school age that Amaryllis began her internet presence with a string of online identities that coalesced around the theme of the flower, Amaryllis. Years later during interviews, Amaryllis said that the reason why she chose the flower was because she liked how it bloomed in the middle of winter indoors. She apparently identified with such a life, being a self-professed agoraphobic. She also said that she liked the phallic shape and nature of the blooming plant.

By the time she was 16 she was producing her own videos which featured surrealistic mish-mashes of themes and symbols from various genres and styles of cinema. Some critics were hopeful, comparing her work to those of Stan Brahkage and Henry Darger with its almost unrecognizable scenes of dark and light with muffled sounds representing speech and colorful painted cardboard cutouts that were painted with strange liquids and struck with unusual lighting schemes to produce otherworldly textures. The videos were unsettling, but peaceful, curiously innocent. Like Alice Liddel had been encouraged to stay on the other side of the looking glass, to paint the ordinary world with the materials and implements provided to her in Wonderland.

Then came the electronic music, which was simple at first and voiceless. It was as one critic described it “A mathematical exploration of the theory of music. Entire compositions based on looped cycles of arpeggii cycling around the circle-of-fifths so that if you were to write it down it would look like nonsense, but cut the staff and warp it into a circle and you would have a mandala of sorts. The music seems to have a nature borne out of the visual arts, barely perceptible tendrils that stretch out and connect the sounds produced on her recordings to visual themes. Colors connect to tones. Line connects to rhythm. Space connects to timbre. It is a totally synesthetic experience from someone who probably has no idea what LSD is. Slowly, Amaryllis incorporated her voice, ethereal and quiet. It was a huge hit on the ASMR searches on YouTube.

Then, one day, she disappeared. Complete silence from her channels. Her Twitter account remained completely dead for six months. Interested parties supposed that their muse had decided to abandon them. The groups gathered in separate camps. There were those who believed that Amaryllis had made a statement by going silent. They supposed that she had said what she was going to say. Others believed that there was something left to say. Thus, a messianic cult formed around Amaryllis. Those who believed that the teachings were done and the others who believed that there was more to learn.

Then, as quickly as she had gone, she was back and it seemed that everything about Amaryllis changed. She was no longer a bodiless voice. No longer a young auteur playing at postmodern cut-up techniques. No longer an overly intellectual hallucinogenic examination of modern girlhood. Suddenly, she was a body.

No coincidence that this change occurred on her 18th birthday.

The introductory video of the new Amaryllis was polished and digital. It featured a heavily made up young woman sitting quietly, demurely in the center of the frame. Her face painted white, but a red x painted in the center of her lips. She blinked slowly to the only sound on the video, which was the nearly imperceptible in-out, in-out, in-out purring of a cat.

The video was a minor hit for an ASMR video, but was only the beginning of a wave of recognition. Daily videos started coming out that started to blur into a montage narrative. Her quiet demureness interrupted by digital stuttering in the form of highly stylized dances that then spawned other videos from old admirers breaking down and teaching the moves to who? No one in particular, but everyone at once. She was not always silent, sometimes she was shrill and loud and violent, one video featured her trashing her set, her carefully applied makeup running down her face in recognizable clumps (oh, there's an eyelash... is that part of her smile?) she's screaming an apology for a perceived slight of which evidence you cannot find if you search for it. Who would be accusing Amaryllis of these crimes? What crimes? And of course, this video comes with a slew of followers chastising invisible enemies for their complicity in Amaryllis' breakdown. There also began series of videos of a more carnal nature.

Amaryllis featured prancing about in scanty clothing. Amaryllis whispering sweet double entendres to her microphone. Amaryllis showing off new contour techniques that make her look like an entirely different person.

She began to develop personae that were attached to these various themes and behaviors and search keywords. She wore them like kabuki masks, switching out looks for various themes.

When she was DJing, her clothing was tight and her shoes were oversized and she shuffled to the beat of the music expertly, suggesting nothing of the awkward girl who made dioramas out of 40 weight oil and strawberry jam. When she was engaged in some clickbait crisis video titled “I’m done” or “It’s all over” or “Phux ytt!” she wore face paint that re-arranged the features of her face and sometimes incorporated strips of lightweight LED paper, glued to her cheeks or under her clavicle or on her forehead that played images of violence, angry male faces yelling at a camera somewhere far distant, cut up and reappropriated onto her body. She wept and screamed at the camera in impotent fury and then reached up to pull her ear off her head and threw it into the trash can like a punctuation mark, like a very literal cry, “I am falling apart!”

This period of highly stylized Youtube videos came to an abrupt end with a major record deal when she was about 22. With the record deal came legitimized media. Television interviews, well-curated instagram pages, magazine photo shoots, inter-continental tours, music videos, collaborations with rappers, TMZ articles about what she was doing on Friday nights in LA. All of these appearances, although perfectly normal by celebrity standards, were cast in a surreal glow when Amaryllis was involved.

A variety of professional relationships exploded publicly and her love life was subject to a degree of attention that seemed excessive to those who still only thought of her as a Youtube star and not a cultural force. Her collaboration with the feminist-Marxist collective SlitSpit collapsed when she began to date Declan Delany, the owner and founder of Future Consortium, a for-profit research

facility in the Nevada desert that had been accused of being a Thomas-Edison-style patent factory and a violation of the rights of workers around the world.

Her guest spot on surrealist singer songwriter DoRoThY's latest record came apart when she accused DoRoThY of plying her with amphetamines and hallucinogens and trying to force a mental breakdown for artistic exploitation.

DoRoThY was particularly vocal in her denial of that plot and insisted that it was Amaryllis who insisted on the drugs, but that DoRoThY, being the psychonaut that she was, was not opposed to consuming them. The subsequent lengthy post on Instagram made it seem like DoRoThY was upset to have lost a drug buddy. More news came out about Amaryllis' apparent androgyny when she was spotted in New York feeling up fellow pop star (and shamed Disney star) Loretta Chang. An extemporaneous speech outside of a nightclub was quoted widely in the tabloids, "Amaryllis got this fuck-stalk she gonna give you fuck-gender I've got the end of the world in me suck it out!"

Concussion

Dmitri's Head, shortly after the crash

"Why do you have to have that thing on all the time?" Stephanie said about Dmitri's television, which was currently tuned to Fox News, but might suddenly switch at any moment to CNN or MSNBC depending on Dmitri's focus and attention span.

“Honey,” Dmitri said sweetly and condescendingly. “I am a journalism student. It is necessary for me to watch the different news channels. You know I would watch Al Jazeera or RIA Novosti if the television had it. The medium, as your countryman said, is the message, after all.”

“Bullshit, Dmitri.” Stephanie said and pushed him away playfully. “Haven’t you got any principles? Any ethics at all? You can’t honestly tell me that you’re going to go into the world and perpetuate this shit you watch on the TV!”

“I have the principles of the free market, sweetness. The rest I leave in the hands of St. Adam Smith,” Dmitri said with a devious grin.

“Oh god,” Stephanie groaned and put her head in her hands. Dmitri crossed the dorm room and laid on his bed, resting his argyle-socked foot on the back of the chair that Stephanie was sitting in.

“You worry too much, Steffie,” Dmitri said. “You and your family have always lived in peaceful countries and had easy lives under capitalism. You get used to it and then become particularly sensitive to criticisms of it. You can see the little cracks and they look like big cracks to you. Me? I’ve grown up with the stories of the bloc-apartments and the secret killings and me and my folks, well, we’re able to accept those little cracks a little more readily.”

“But these people,” Stephanie points to the screen, “These people aren’t capitalists. They spout all that shit about the free market, but do any of them do anything to really create a free market? A really free market needs boundaries, regulations, an establishment behind it that producer and consumer can trust mutually.”

“Yes, that is capitalism,” Dmitri sat up in bed, irritated because he thought that maybe he would have gotten laid instead of into some philosophical argument.

Stephanie turned around, her blonde hair swept over her right shoulder, her eyes were narrowed and her nose scrunched in that way that she did when she was getting seriously angry, but trying to play it off as playful. Trying to talk herself out of being angry. “Don’t condescend to me, Tiranov.”

“Okay, then. But it is not these people, these politicians that we need to worry about. They can go on as they have always gone on and we can safely ignore them. That’s why it’s ultimately pointless to vote, right? They’re all trying to maintain their own version of the status quo, which is more or less liberal capitalism. It’s, as they say, all good.”

“I just don’t understand how you can be so oblivious to the failings of the system, of this kind of society. It’s particularly upsetting that you won’t admit that the stuff you’re doing will basically contribute to making it all worse.”

“It’s all about making the money, honey!” Dmitri joked and rubbed his fingers together. Stephanie huffed and stuffed a book into her bag, the canvas one with the Warhol banana on the side. “Okay, okay,” Dmitri tried to concede, suddenly worried that she might leave. “Then what do you think is the best system? What do you think about it all?” Thinking back on this moment, Dmitri would often cringe at his inability to see how insulting he was, how oblivious to her feelings.

“Entropy, I guess,” Stephanie spat. “That’s what you want me to say, isn’t it?” She slung her bag over her shoulder and swung the dorm door open to leave.

“Wait, Steffie!” Dmitri tried to save it, “I’m sorry, come over here. Come to bed!”

“I need to go to class,” she said and the door slammed shut.

The Deliverer’s Tale

From Fineas Mairo’s Journal, The Nevada Consortium, sometime last year

I have decided to turn a corner.

Before, I hated this place. I hated it more than any of the places that my parents dragged me to. More than San Francisco or Seattle or New York. At least those were places. Maps did not even reveal the location of the Nevada Consortium, public records only cursorily described the community somewhere out there in the desert. Ernest and Patricia dragged me out here a year ago and at first it was like any other move. I was shackled to the school or the church or the house out on the edge of town.

Every weekday I took an automated car into the center of town to where the one high school was.

There I would spend an hour in track practice, then six hours of classes and then two hours of debate and then another two hours of study before I was to come home and continue studying before going to bed at 22:00 promptly. The days bled together into indistinct slices of my own life. I struggled to identify fellow classmates because their faces all looked the same to me. I was never permitted the time to catalog their features, much less their names. The lunch packed for me by our maid tasted of ash.

Interactions during track were limited to baton passing and the useless way that the coach yelled at me to run faster or in a different way.

The most social interaction that I had was during debate. I was encouraged to use my formidable knowledge and skill to completely obliterate opponents, which I did with robotic reliability. This did not make me...popular.

But, as I am commonly reminded by my parents, I have plenty of friends. Additionally, school is not for socializing. It's for learning. I'm there to prepare myself for a successful life. A life that is very neatly prescribed to me in a codex that belongs in my father's head. A sort of distributed repository that exists in everybody's heads as far as I can tell, because no matter who I talk to they seem to be aware that I'm to finish school, go off to a serious research institution, develop specialized skills and knowledge, become the arbiter of the Mairo fortune and then get married, have children, make my shareholders rich and then die *in that order*.

Saturdays I was normally enlisted to help my mother in one of her philanthropic events. Setting up chairs or hanging bunting. Spending hours and hours waiting for something to happen in gyms or halls or parks. Taking hats and coats and hanging them diligently in closets. I was a servant. A slave to the ambitions of my parents.

On Sundays I was subjected to hours upon hours of not only religious service, which was mercifully short, but then my required religious education, which my parents called seminary. As a member of the Christian Church of North America, we children are expected to spend most of Sunday in religious and spiritual thought. How many times have I read the bible by the age of 15? I cannot count, nor wish to. I imagine that the volume of time that I am to commit to my religious education is supposed to instill a sort of fervor in me, but all I feel is boredom.

Church used to be spent in musty old buildings, but since we've moved to the Consortium, where religious organizations receive no benefits, we are relegated to large white tents in the undeveloped lots on the outskirts of town. I spend hours half-way between sleep and wakefulness on these Sundays, listening to pastor after pastor drone on about the works of Christ and his disciples. I had read once that some Catholic priests were known to molest young members of their parishes. Sometimes I fantasized about Pastor Sanchez raping me, if just because then something would have happened.

This is the point that I'm getting to. Before I moved to the desert, I did not feel alive. I shuffled dutifully from responsibility to responsibility according to my parents' wishes, but I felt like barely anything more than an automaton. A machine that was fed instructions and then performed them and then I told them that this made me happy because that's what I thought was supposed to make me happy. I thought I was happy! I did not feel pain, nor did I feel joy and thus I thought I was content.

I must admit that the onset of puberty was a difficult time, but by the miracle of modern pharmaceuticals I was able to persevere in my studies and plow through some of the nastier impulses that steered my compatriots away from success or the love of god. I was grateful! I was grateful to my parents, my doctor, that I didn't have to feel sexual desire because I saw the other boys and girls in my classroom completely distracted and discomposed by the raging hormones in their bodies. Me and a few other lucky kids at school were privileged enough to weather the pain of puberty in a chemically induced haze. We would emerge as adults prepared and pure, ready for a godly marriage and unsullied by the wild passions of people whose parents did not care as much for them as ours did.

Fortunately, my friends were also on the program and thus spared from the maelstrom of hormones, Hazel and Christian. Christian Peters, of the Peters Metallurgical fortune, was my friend before I had even been born. Before he was born for that matter. Our friendship was appointed by our parents' acquaintanceship and as such we were together for the majority of social events in my life up until the turning point. Christian had straight blonde hair that he parted on the side and seemed to lay perfectly flat all day long, even in the wind. He was tall and thin and ran faster than I did. However, he was not as sharp witted as I was in debate and he often struggled with higher mathematical concepts as they were introduced during classes. He was, however, a gifted musician and as such played the piano at church service. Hazel was also blonde, but her hair was loosely curled and springy. She had a beatific smile that always pleased the older members of our congregation. As Christian was my predestined friend, Hazel was my predestined girlfriend and it was around the age of 14 that members of the church began to talk to me about how lucky I was to eventually marry such a pretty girl. But I had no idea what they were talking about. Sure, she was a handsome girl, but pretty? What could that mean and why would I care? We are to be married during the summer before we go to college, when we are both 18.

This was my life. I wanted nothing. I was not poor or diseased like some unfortunates in the world that I saw in the CCNA documentaries they sometimes showed on Sundays. I did not have to fight for my life in one of the fallen cities. I did not have to drink impure water, I did not have to eat food with preservatives in it. My life, much like the outlay of the Nevada Consortium, was entirely planned from start to finish and for that I could be grateful.

But then something changed. About a year after we'd moved to the Consortium—I'd become very used to the routine of life again—I was called into the academic advisor's office. She congratulated me on my acceptance to Stanford, my first choice, to which I had no reaction, which in turn made her nervous, I could tell. She continued that the university had recently instituted a rule that no one under the age of 18 may start classes, which meant that I would have to wait a further year. Now, they had sent me a reading list to keep me abreast of my studies in the meantime, but my unusual circumstances meant that I effectively had a free year in which to study at my own pace in preparation for college. I asked if there were any further classes I could take in the Consortium to better prepare myself for Stanford. She told me that the Consortium did not have anything that was suited to my particular situation aside from independent study credits.

I told my parents about this when they got home later in the evening. They were both in the study. My mother was drinking wine and my father was drinking whiskey. They had eaten separately before coming home as they normally did. They were both half distracted by their phones when I told them that I had no classes left to take, that I was trapped without a course of action here in the desert.

"Sounds like you get to enjoy a gap year, Finn," my father said.

"You can spend this time developing your interests and studying for Stanford next year," My mother said.

I was confused. "But, what am I supposed to do?" I asked.

"Anything you want, son!" My father said and took a sip of whiskey.

“I don’t know what to do,” I said, helplessly.

“I’m sure you’ll figure something out, Finn,” my mother said.

“You seem to have really lucked out, son,” my father said. “Try not to be a brat and don’t take it for granted.”

I ended up spending the next month absorbing the reading list from Stanford, which I quickly exhausted. I was rudderless. I felt abandoned by my parents. All my life they dictated every moment of my life and the moment that school says that they can do no more for me, what do they do? Well, my mother stopped asking me to help with her events on Saturdays and my father stopped insisting that I go to church on Sundays. Who, I thought, were these people who had replaced my parents? The almost myopic drive for achievement and success had gone away and all they seemed to be interested in was...what? What were they driven to now? They’d fallen into the rotteness of life that I’d come to hate. They were acting out the script they’d written for themselves and in the process somehow freed me from my own script. They both said that it was time to give me some freedom. But why? My life was already written out! All I had to do was follow the script! Now there was no script! Now I was lost. I began to feel bad. I went to the doctor and he told me that I was depressed and prescribed me an antidepressant to add on to the puberty-softeners and the ADHD medication. This worked for a while.

I started a part-time business. I started a delivery business for the Consortium. I bicycled all across the settlement. I would go to any store, any home, any office to bring whatever to whomever. It turned

out that there was a large market for my business as the extant delivery apps had expressed little interest in developing a foothold in a community designed to be accessible.

That's what I was doing the day that I discovered the detective taking pictures of my father for my mother and answers began to slip into place. That's where my parents were, they were embroiled in an oncoming divorce. I remember laughing bitterly about it as I biked home. The lyrics to a song came into my mind, "I've seen it happen, in other people's lives... Now it's happening in mine!" How ironic. I'd become a seventeen year old latchkey kid.

I found myself pulling in large quantities of money very quickly. Demand soon outdid what I could service, so I started to employ others. Bored kids from the high school, mostly, but I was also able to get Christian and Hazel riding three or four hours a day for the delivery service. It got to the point where I was no longer delivering, but working on the application that connected deliverers to orderers. Not having developed an app before, I spent absurd amounts of time on it, sometimes forgetting to sleep, to eat, to take my medication.

And so it happened that one day, I stepped away from the computer, feeling absolutely horrible. Sick. Exhausted. I lay down in bed and slept for twenty-four hours, it must have been. How long had I been up working on the app before that?

When I woke up, I experienced the most unusual sensation. I took a deep breath and I felt my lungs fill up with air and felt nourished. I looked out of the window and was taken by the scene, the great distant mountains, the absolutely brilliant hue of the sky. A great openness expanded in my chest, a

longing for something that I never had, that never existed. I smiled and I think I felt joy for the first time in my life. I also looked down and discovered I had a full erection. Another first. While looking at the mountains out of my window, I also masturbated for the first time.

For the first time in my entire life I was unmedicated and it was like having a veil lifted from my eyes. I suddenly understood what it meant to have interests, however, some of those interests I'm sure my parents would prefer I not have. Such as masturbation, which was a daily compulsion now.

I started to become excited about the delivery app that I was developing, no longer was I working on it out of duty or principle. *This is a thing that needs to be done. I was* now working on it with ambition.

How far can I take this thing?

I also realized that I was making a lot of money.

We used a barn near the end of Main as the center of operations for deliveries. It was formerly used when the edge of the consortium was agricultural, but that had all been pushed out over the hill. I set it up with electricity and A/C so the riders could take a break there before heading off to the next delivery. I had snacks and drinks there and some couches that I'd collected from the trash service.

Wealthy people coming and going from the Consortium threw out all kinds of valuable things and if you paid attention to the trucks they staged to go out to the landfill, you could get lucky with some expensive stuff. I began to spend my days at the Hut, as we called it. Mostly in the loft, where I had my computer rigged up, overlooking the floor of the barn where the deliverers hung out.

One morning, when Christian and Hazel were still at school, a group of deliverers were hanging out waiting for calls when Tem, one of the rougher deliverers, a near drop-out, showed up very excited.

“Guess what I got, guys?” Tem said.

“Pants fulla shit?” Clarissa said.

“What is it?” John asked.

“This guy tipped me in these,” Tem said and pulled a small plastic bag from his satchel. I could see it was full of little blue pills. As a former institutionalized pill popper, my interest was piqued.

“What’s that then?” I asked and climbed down the ladder to the floor.

“Aw man,” Tem whined. “I forgot you were up there! Come on, man, don’t narc us out. We’re just trying to have some fun.”

“Fun?” I asked, oh, I was so green then! What did I know about anything?

“Yeah, man, getting high?” Tem said.

“So these are kind of like anti-depressants?” I asked.

Tem laughed, “No, man, these are, like, happiness pills.” He poured a bunch into his hand and offered them to me. I took one and the others followed suit. Thus was my introduction to MDMA or, more commonly, Molly or Ecstasy.

It was a revelatory morning and also resulted in me fucking Clarissa in the loft as the guys downstairs cheered us on.

The decision was made, we worked to make money to get high and have a good time.

Yes, I sure did turn a page. I decided I liked this desert after all.

Dmitri's Arrival

The Anchor Bar, Nevada Consortium, shortly after Dmitri's crash

Scott Haring had just opened up the Anchor Bar when a couple of engineers came in and ordered lunch. The Bar was awash in late-year desert gloom. The wind howled outside and made the timber of the bar groan. After putting in the orders for the engineers, Scott went behind the bar and stared at himself in the mirror considering his shaggy topknot, his unshaven face, his baggy eyes. He really looked like shit and he felt it too. Thus was the fate of some bartenders. Late nights and too many pints.

Dust motes floated between the thin slats of light that broached the corners of the front door. Scott stared at the swirling particles, their psychedelic display of infinite complexity.

The engineers were chatting excitedly about some project that had been recently finished. They ordered lagers with their sandwiches.

Scott leaned up against the cash register behind the bar and crossed his arms. He began to daydream about his future. Establishing a brewery in some podunk town in Oregon with the money he would save from the Consortium. If he can stop drinking it all away, that is.

Oh, but what would he even do with some out-of-the-way brewery in Ashland or Bend? The fantasy, the day-dream was far more enjoyable than the actual work. Here he was comfortable in the warm, but slightly drafty bar, protected from the awful dusty wind.

Then, the front door swung open and Scott was blinded by the light coming in. The silhouette of a figure blotted out the sun and was hidden in the darkness when the door closed. "Hey buddy, is it windy out there?" Scott joked.

The man slapped at his thighs and jacket sending great clouds of dust into the air, "Hey, man, wait a second...Aw dammit, dude. I'm going to have to sweep that up. Shit, alright, what're you having?"

Scott moaned. The man stepped around to the bar and Scott could see him more clearly. Motorcycle jacket and jeans imbued with dust that continued to fall off in clouds as he walked across the room, the man's boots caked in mud, his face wrapped in a houndstooth scarf and riding goggles underneath a helmet with a huge dent in it. The man approached the bar and took off the helmet and face coverings. He set them on a bar stool and then sat on the next barstool. Scott noticed the engineers had stopped talking and were instead staring at the stranger. Scott got a good look at the guy as he sat down. Black hair laid down flat from the helmet and sweat, dust gathered in areas where sweat had gathered and where the goggles could not protect him. There was a bit of dried blood that came down from his hairline. He looked tired and his mouth was drawn into a deep frown that did not seem like it came

from pain or concentration, but rather from goat-like obstinacy. “Holy shit, man. You look like you just stepped out of a Mad Max movie.”

“Water,” the man said. “Please.”

“Dude,” Scott said, still shocked, pulling out a pint glass to fill with water, “Have you, like, seen that movie? You seriously look like an extra or something.”

The man was silent as Scott passed the glass of water to him. In three large gulps, the glass was empty and Scott took it back to refill. “Beer, please.” Scott set the glass of water in front of the stranger and then went to pull a beer from the tap. He set the glass in front of the man and watched him lower his nose to the surface of head and inhale deeply. “I haven’t had a real beer since time stopped.”

“Fuck man,” Scott began, “That is some weird-ass shit to say. I know it’s no business of mine and you can tell me to go fuck myself if you want to, but I’ve just got to ask: what the fuck are you doing all the way out here?”

“Here for a job interview,” the man said.

“Jesus Christ,” Scott said and shook his head. He leaned against the cash register again and crossed his arms. The stranger quaffed deeply from his pint glass and the engineers murmured from across the room. The clouds of dust continued to roil in the blades of light that came through the cracks in the door. “Now, I’ve said a lot of bullshit, being a bartender. Shit you’re just supposed to tell somebody who’s decided to saddle up on your bar. I’ve told people their breakup isn’t the end of the world. I’ve comforted college dropouts. I’ve told women that they’re beautiful and told men that they aren’t ugly-

as-sin. Most of the time I don't mean a fucking word of it. But believe me when I say that I've never been more honest in my fucking life when I tell you: I hope you get the fucking job, dude."

The Giant Glass Dick

Excerpt from *Dating Sure Is Hard in the New Millennium: A Memoir* by Benjamin Ponchartrain

During the month or so I spent touring the Consortium and interviewing its residents, I found that the people really did genuinely believe that they were coming up with the solution to the worlds' problems as the popular marketing material claims. Everyone there was convinced that in their own niche way, they were contributing to a better tomorrow by being cloistered up in the mountains of Central Nevada.

"Cloister" being a carefully chosen word. In some ways it reminded me of descriptions of medieval monasteries and abbeys. It might be widely forgotten today, but religious orders didn't get those monasteries for nothing. The king or emperor or duke or whoever was in charge of the area granted that land to Catholic orders for the sole purpose of saving the Noble's soul. They thought they were making the world a better place then too. Those monasteries operated as economic powerhouses, sources of scientific re-discovery and cultural expansion.

Monasteries, much like the modern day Consortia, were places where the powerful safely hid away all that they claimed was important while the rest of the world got down to business with the nitty-gritty bullshit of daily life. Wars and Politics and Death have no place in these temples of the human mind.

Well, that was the general consensus, at least.

The Nevada Consortium was situated in the middle of the former Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, approximately 50 miles North of the ghost town of Tonopah, Nevada, as the crow flies. An old mining town by the name of Stoneshod lay at the trough of the valley and it was from there that the old Interstate winded through the mountains to Reno to the North and to Tonopah and Las Vegas to the south. Leading up the mountain to the east, was Main Street, which one had to travel up a good distance before seeing any sign of civilization. The first is a street sign without any street which says 100th Street 1000. There are many more signs like this, standing out in the middle of nowhere, denoting the ambition of the Consortium.

Around 40th Street, the actual town began. Lining Main Street are two or three story buildings that lead all the way to the Square on 1st Street. The first floors of these buildings are often businesses or lobbies for the offices upstairs. There is something of a midwestern theme to it all, as if the Main Street of a small town were stretched over a few miles on the incline of a mountain in Nevada. Many of the buildings have apartments in the second and third story. These are very expensive as I hear. Another unique thing about this stretch of commerce is the compartmentalization of commodities. Here you can find greengrocers, butchers and bakeries. There are stationary shops, bookstores, and reprographics stores. Coffeeshops, wine bars, juice bars, soda fountains, whiskey bars, beer bars. Tapas restaurants, Italian, Greek, Chinese, Vietnamese, Mexican, Brazilian, Salvadoran, where each restaurant serves a menu that might be six or eight items long, nothing more.

Every place was highly specialized for practical reasons, none of them were very large and had to make-do on space. I mentioned to a barista how inconvenient it must be for people to do their weekly shopping. With a supermarket, you had one bill for the whole week, but with all of these specialized shops, it must be a dozen or more stops. "You'll notice," the barista said, "That the majority of people doing the shopping at any given point are teenagers on their bicycles or skateboards. Frankly, it's the only way a teenager can make a buck around here, the actual jobs are so tightly controlled by the Consortium. The delivery system just sprung up naturally. You call one of these kids up and they'll run down to the store for you. If they don't have the time they'll recommend a friend."

"Seems a little inefficient to call two or three kids before they can go and pick up your groceries for you," I said

"You never need to call more than one kid," the barista said.

This of course meant that there was a small army of young people within the confines of the Consortium and the majority of them lived in the so-called suburbs. A patchwork of boxy little houses neatly organized out behind either side of Main Street. The blocks were organized in three houses by three houses for eight per block. Each block had its own shared backyard, which was inaccessible from the street, walled in by plastered cinder blocks. Supposedly, people were assigned homes based on their socioeconomic status and professions, but after a number of interviews, I couldn't determine what the system was, precisely. A sociology professor might live in the same block as an astrophysicist. A tech entrepreneur might live in the same block as a hydrologist. Perhaps the pattern was to be that there was no pattern, which would not be surprising. A big part of the consortia was to mix people and

professions in ways that might spark invention. Like concentrating fissile material until you achieve critical mass and steady energy. Do not let that analogy expand, lest you describe the next stage in criticality.

In between the Main Street and the suburbs were several much taller apartment blocks for more temporary residents or the less-affluent. Largely non-descript buildings, they made up the most significant part of the Consortium's skyline even though they don't rise above seven floors or so.

At 1st street, bisected by Main Street, was the Main Square, or the plaza. A large open area that was paved in concrete tiles that were shaped like cobblestones. Larger bars and restaurants (as well as galleries and marketing displays) lined the Square and opened up into open-air seating areas. There was a great deal of activity in this area from hour to hour as it was a popular spot to meet or have lunch or to drink away a Friday afternoon. On the other side of 1st street was grass and trees, the Central Garden. It was a wide open grassy area for visitors to come and appreciate the miracle of the low-water greenery that the biologists were able to breed in the Consortiums' laboratories. You could frequently see people sitting in the grass reading or having a picnic. I admit, it was a very pleasant place to while away a morning and I found myself having a coffee under the shade of a maple tree more than a few times during my visit.

Behind the garden was the Consortium itself. Hidden in the foliage and pleasant rows of flowers were the buildings of the main organization and the offices of the official Consortium members. Partner organizations banished to the other side of 1st street. Automated vehicles were not allowed in this area and as such, bicycles and skateboards were highly popular. In the dead center of the campus was a 400

foot tall building that housed the Administration. It was a marvel of architecture, a gigantic black crystal blade that stabbed into the sky. The black hue came from the material that it was covered in, which not only regulated the temperature on the inside of the tower, but also collected a great deal of solar energy for running the offices on the inside.

For all of the dignity of this building, I commonly heard it called by its nickname: the Giant Glass Dick.

Of course, the research facilities for the Consortium were not all jam packed into this area I have described, but were spread out through the valley. Harold and Christy's testing site was quite a bit north of Main Street. As we bounced down the dirt road towards the car pool on Main and 30th I happened to see a couple of vehicles parked outside of a low brick building. Beyond the building was an array of maybe 30 radio telescopes. "Hey, Harold, mind dropping me off over there?"

"Sure enough, you know how to get back?" Harold asked.

"I'll be fine. If I piss those folks off enough that they don't want to give me a ride back then I guess I'll have to hoof it," I joked.

"You can always call the car pool and they'll send someone out to pick you up," Christy said.

"That's good to know," I said. The level of convenience this place offered was almost disturbing. Why should this be so easy?

Harold dropped me off at the building, which had a sign out front that read “Nevada Consortium Branch of the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (S.E.T.I.)”, which I have to admit was very exciting to me. I have always been captivated by the thought that there might be aliens out there. I generally don’t believe that there are aliens, but it is fun to let your mind wander from time to time.

I knocked, but there was no response. I entered and found a couple guys sitting at consoles drinking beers and smoking joints. “Who the fuck are you,” one of them said. A square jawed man with dark black hair tied up in a topknot. He wore a tank top and his arms were covered in colorful tattoos. The other guy was a short fellow with buzz cut blonde hair wearing a white short-sleeved Oxford button-up and black slacks that lead to black and white high-top All Stars. He was in mid-wheeze from his most recent hit. “You can charge us for possession or some shit, but you’re gonna have a fuck of a time figuring out what jurisdiction we’re in,” Topknot said with an amused chuckle.

“Hey, I’m Benny, I’m a reporter for *The Pacific* out in Seattle. I just wanted to ask you guys some questions,” I said. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Tiller,” buzzcut said and stood up to shake my hand. “Tim to be informal. That over there is Petty Officer Cerda.”

Cerda stood up and mockingly saluted me, “Juan.” He said.

“So you guys find any aliens?” I asked.

“The fuck you think?” Juan said and pulled a beer from the mini fridge by his desk. He walked over and handed it to me. “Look like a whole lot going on here?”

“Looks like fuck all’s going on,” I said to Juan’s laughter. “So, what’s your story? How’d you get all the way out here to the Consortium?”

“Juan and I were in the U.S. navy together. After the navy disbanded we started building radio telescopes on the cheap for S.E.T.I. Juan over there might not look like much, but he’s a genius electrical engineer.”

“Don’t you forget it,” Juan said and took out a large glass apparatus from his desk drawer. Pulling a dentist’s pick from his pocket, he scratched a resin out of what looked like a pipe-tobacco can and used a blow-torch to heat up a glass tube on the apparatus until it nearly glowed red hot. He then stuck the dentist’s probe with the resin down the tube and inhaled the evaporating vapor.

“When the Consortium got started, they called up S.E.T.I. and asked for a representation. S.E.T.I. said they didn’t have anyone available, but they knew who to call, so they contracted us to build the dishes.”

“Then they fucked us into listening to the damn things,” Juan coughed.

“Seems like you guys are pretty lucky to land such a peachy job. I mean, if you can just sit around and smoke weed and drink beer,” I said.

“Oh, we’re lucky huh?” Juan began, clearly irritated, “Yeah, I guess I’m fucking lucky that I gotta smoke weed all day so that my back doesn’t hurt and so that I don’t have to think about the things that happened during the wars. You know what? I should’ve fucking died in the Gulf. At least then I

would get the respect that I deserve! I wouldn't have to sit here and listen to whitey criticize me for getting high on a Wednesday! You got a problem with Mexicans, Benny?"

"Jesus Christ," Tim sighed, clearly embarrassed. "First of all, Juan, you're Chilean, two: it's a Thursday and three you fucked up your back in Corpus Christi."

"Don't you start, now, Tim," Juan shot and then offered me a rip from the dabbing apparatus, but I politely turned him down and excused myself to go outside and wait for a ride from the motor pool.

The next day, I arranged to speak with who I presumed to be the head of the Synthesis department of the Consortium, Dr. Alphonso Alvarez. Outside of the Consortium, he is known for being the founder and CEO of the block-chain technology Nunchuk.

So I found myself with a steaming cup of coffee walking through the Central Gardens at nine in the morning towards the Giant Glass Dick hoping that Dr. Alvarez would be able to illuminate exactly how all of these technologies were to interact.

The lobby to the Giant Glass Dick is enormous and incredibly well lit. It looked like a combination of a James Bond villain's hideout and Lex Luthor's bathroom. A group of armed security officers were seated behind a large marble receptionist's desk.

"Can we help you, sir?" one of them yelled at me as soon as I entered the building. He had to yell not out of aggression, but rather out of need considering I was a full fifteen meters from him.

“I’ve got an appointment with Dr. Alphonso Alvarez at 9:30 this morning. Could you direct me to his office?”

“Of course, sir,” The officer said and then turned to one of his flunkys, “Maurice? Go with Mr., uhh, Mr.?”

“Pontchartrain,” I shouted, still walking towards the desk.

“Mr. Pontchartrain,” the guard said. “I’ll let Dr. Alvarez know you’re here.”

Maurice led me over to the elevators behind the desk. The elevator system, it seemed, was composed of a structural column that ran up the center of the building and contained four different independent elevators shaped like their respective sections of the circle. Once in the elevator with Maurice, I couldn’t stop thinking the same phrase over and over: just like a urethra, just like a urethra, just like a urethra.

On the fifth floor, the elevator opened and Maurice said, “To the right about ninety degrees, Mr. Pontchartrain.”

The doors closed as I turned around to ask what exactly he meant by degrees, but it became clear soon enough that 90 degrees meant a quarter turn around the inner circular hallway of the building. The outside wall was lined with doors with various names stamped on them, most of which were barely more than a few feet apart. I finally came to Alvarez’ door and knocked. A buzz and a clunk sounded, suggesting I try the door handle. Once I opened the door, it became clear why the doors seemed so closely spaced. They don’t need much space because they open up into a wide segment of a circle and

an enormous view from the window. Alvarez' view looked to the south and as such there wasn't much to see but the windmill fields. Still an impressive sight.

The second thing I noticed after the view was that the walls were absolutely covered with art. Each piece was beautifully framed and it didn't seem like there was any more than an inch or two of free space between each piece for twenty square meters of wall space.

"Dr. Alvarez," I nearly shouted at the silhouette seated at the desk by the window. "Good morning!"

"Good morning, Mr. Pontchartrain! Please, have a seat," the now risen silhouette said and gestured towards a cluster of chairs by a coffee table by the East wall. "Can I call for something for you to drink? Oh, perhaps not, I see you've taken care of that yourself."

"Hmm, I'd almost forgotten about this," I said and nodded to my coffee before I sat down in one of the chairs.

Alvarez sat down and folded his hands over his lap. A distinguished man, he had a waxed mustache like Dali, which I found strange and, perhaps appropriately, surreal. "What can I help you with today, Mr. Pontchartrain?"

"Ben, please," I said. "I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about how data and technology are handled here in your Synthesis department? I assume that it has something to do with your block-chain technology, but like most folks, that's nothing more than a techie buzz word to me. So... " I felt like I was already losing his attention, "I was thinking you could further elaborate on how that all works."

“What is there to say? The block-chain is something like a database that innately backs itself up. Researchers and programs contribute data to the block-chain and it is stored for the later synthesis of technologies.”

Alvarez paused, as if he'd explained everything. His eyes wandered to the paintings on the wall.

“Uh, okay, well, I was just wondering if maybe you would want to elaborate a little bit more?”

“Do you know who Juan Miro is, Mr. Pontchartrain?” Alvarez said.

“Call me Benny, really...uh, yeah, the artist?” I said.

“This is an original by Juan Miro,” Alvarez said and gestured to the wall. Suddenly I was able to focus on all of the material on the wall. There were paintings by Miro, Dail, Velazquez, Picasso and Cezanne. There were many others that I could not identify.

“Holy shit,” I blurted. “Are all of these originals?”

“Yes, Mr. Pontchartrain,” Alvarez said. “Now, do you think that anyone, say, a journalist, ever asked Juan Miro how he mixed his pigments? What brushes he used to get his textures? What light sources he used?”

“Hell, If I got an interview with Juan Miro I might ask those questions,” I said.

“I highly doubt it,” Alvarez said. “You'd want to know what it means. That's what everyone wants to know. What is the ultimate effect of the thing, not the piddling details.”

“I think I understand where you’re getting at, Dr. Alvarez,” I said, bummed out that such a high level source was going to be so hostile. “What’s the ultimate effect of all of this technology and data the Consortium is collecting?”

“We,” Alvarez said (I swear I saw a tear in the corner of his eye), “Are going to solve the great problems of human life.”

“Uh huh.” I grunted and took a bitter sip from my coffee, “You know what? Perhaps I can talk to one of your employees? I think that my audience would be more interested in the brush strokes and chemical composition of pigments instead of, well, what we’re mostly getting from Consortium marketing material.”

“I have no employees,” Alvarez said.

“I’m sorry, what?” I blurted again. “Who’s doing the synthesis of the data? I thought you headed that department?”

“I do head the department, Mr. Pontchartrain. However, I have wisely outsourced the synthesis work to a partner firm by the name of Synergistic Solutions headed by the very competent Ernest Mairo.”

“Right,” I said. “I’m going to go then because it seems like that’s the person I should be talking to.”

I stood up to leave, but Alvarez stopped me, “Mr. Pontchartrain?”

“Yes,” I said, a little exasperated. “What?”

“Don’t get so lost in the details that you lose sight of the big picture,” Alvarez said. “Don’t try to boil the ocean.”

Of the twenty or so Consortia organized around the planet, the Nevada branch was the only one I could find that was initially funded by a single individual and then accrued members as it was built some years ago. That individual was the extremely entertaining multi-billionaire Declan Delany, who most people know as the founder of the exceedingly popular block-chain crypto-currency “ByteMe”. A caricature come to life, rumor has it that in his commercials producers have to coach him on toning down his thick Ulster accent because otherwise 90% of the population would have no idea what he was saying.

Between dating pop stars, being seen courtside at Clippers games, testifying to congress about climate change, and running a few ultra-successful companies, Delany also had a hand in designing and implementing an extremely high-efficiency, low-weight lithium battery called the cellOne. The ubiquity of this technology should be old news to most folks, but I think that it’s easy to miss just how much these things have changed our lives. Computers have become impossibly thin, we have recharging batteries woven into our pants and purses, entire homes can be run on an array of these batteries replenished by nothing else but the sun, or in some lucky communities by a hydropower dynamo hooked up to their pipes. This discovery was almost certainly the cause of the collapse of the fossil fuel industry and the instigator of a half-dozen major conflicts around the world. The closest to us being in North Dakota, which has turned into a wasteland.

“Sure, you could blame it on the batteries,” Dolores Granger told me in her office in the Giant Glass Dick, a much more professional and less ostentatious office than Dr. Alvarez’. Dolores is Delany’s assistant, but her role is much more than that of secretary. She is effectively Delany’s right hand, and comports herself as such. “You could also blame the Western Water Shortage. That particular event has turned entire cities into refugee camps. You could blame the fact that Dubai is a ghost town on cellOne, sure, But you can’t say that the fall of Las Vegas was caused by them. Or, you could blame the laws passed that led to the Info Lockup. Boston now has a stricter caste system than medieval India! There have been a lot of changes in the past few years that have contributed to global instability.”

Dolores was a middle-aged woman who embraced her salt-and-pepper hair which she let fall into a bob. Her severe smile reminded me of my elementary school principal, who I was convinced was a witch on the down-low. When I met her, she had just gotten back from an inspection at the airfield and was wearing jodhpurs and an overly-large blue blouse.

“Do you think that any of those events led to the dissolution of the United States of America?” I asked.

“No, none of those,” she said, taking a sip from a steel water bottle. “Not any of them individually, at least. Personally, I think the United States was finished off by a lack of faith. Voters, politicians, soldiers, professors, workers, welfare collectors, investors, prisoners... They all stopped believing.”

I laughed out loud at how preposterous this sounded, but Dolores did not laugh with me. Instead she cocked her head to the side with feline intimidation. “What’s so funny?”

“It’s just that the way you put it, it sounds like the USA is a fairy or something. Like when we all refused to clap it dropped dead.”

“Democracy, Mr. Pontchartrain, Is a lot more fragile than fairies and dubiously more realistic.”

Dolores sighed.

“I’ve got a list of words and phrases used to describe the Nevada Consortium. Would you mind giving some impressions as I read through the list?”

Dolores smiled slyly, “Unorthodox method, Mr Pontchartrain. Read on.”

“Ah, alright, ‘Mercantilist’.”

“Maybe one day,” Dolores laughed, “But our economy is importing much more than exporting at the moment.”

“Autarky.”

“Absolutely. Self-sufficiency is the key word here. The idea being if we can make this little community out in the middle of the inhospitable desert self-sufficient, then we can probably scale up to the entire planet. Hopefully we can also use this as a model for settling other planets, when we get there, of course.”

“Uh, Communist. That’s with a big-C, Dolores,” I said.

“You know that I earned my Ph.D. in economics in London?”

“That I did know, Dolores,” I said, “I might be just a lowly journalist, but I do my research.”

“When I was there, I dated a Austrian man who was fond of telling me and my family members that ‘What you Americans call Communism, we in Austria call common decency.’” I was about to move on to the next term, but she stopped me. “Now, I should be clear. I don’t think that the Consortium is Communist or a Command Economy nor even socialist, really. Investors are encouraged to support certain technologies based on research conducted here, but ultimately, they respond to the free market. There are also literally no governmental benefits available through the Consortium. Well, aside from protection. Murders will not be tolerated in our little town.”

“Fascist.”

“I realize you did not describe the Consortium this way, Mr. Pontchartrain, but may I ask: who, exactly, is the dictator here? Declan? He’s pretty absent in terms of a tyrant.”

“I don’t mean to insult you, Dolores, but it seems to me that you are the closest thing to a dictator here. I mean, you wield an enormous amount of power and I am not so simple as to underestimate your title. Assistants and consultants and aides and chambermaids have played the role of great ruler for millennia.”

“No offense taken, it is something of an image I like to cultivate. However, I don’t think anyone here, the thinkers, scientists, writers, engineers, businesspeople, mathematicians, adventurers think of themselves as belonging to a nation or race or ethnicity. If anything, the people who flock to

Consortia, all around the world, are closer to the definition of cosmopolitan than anyone else in history.” She paused reflectively for a moment, “Except perhaps Alexander von Humbolt.”

On the elevator ride down, the television mounted above the floor-panel was playing Delany’s commercial for the Nevada Consortium, “Come to the frontier, to the edge of the lights. Here we will explore, search and find the solutions that so eluded us in the previous world. If you haven’t yet been corrupted by the cynicism of your parents, employers, professors... Come and find freedom under the desert sky!” Delany crooned in his thick Irish brogue toned down for common viewers.

On my way through the Central Gardens I came across a group of teenagers and decided to get some impressions of the younger folks around the Consortium. After introducing myself, the skinny dark haired kid asked me if I wanted to get sucked off. I said no, of course, but then he started yelling about how I was a pedophile and how I was going to pay him fifty dollars to spit in my asshole.

Walking away quickly, I decided that I’d had enough for the day.

One of the big social hubs of the Consortium is a large bar located on the main square by the name of The Anchor. Apparently, it’s a re-creation of the bar Delany went to when he was going to college in Belfast. Thirsting for a pint, I went in and struck up a conversation with the bartender.

Scott Haring is 30 years old and has a cool bored expression on his face, which is frequently broken by genuine amusement at something that a patron has said or done. He is thin and tall and walks around with his arms crossed most of the time. He has a slight hunch and a pack of actual tobacco cigarettes in

the front pocket of his cardigan. “Yeah, they’re expensive, but there’s nothing like a cigarette at the end of a shift,” Scott said about the cigarettes.

I asked Scott what he thought about the Consortium:

“It’s a job, y’know? Six months from now I might be slingin’ cocktails on a cruise ship up in Alaska or pouring pints for the hipster set in San Diego. Work is work and I guess I’m lucky to be here at such an interesting time, but I’ll tell you a secret... “ he leaned in closer after saying this. “Every fucking city is exciting nowadays.”

I asked Scott if he minded me interviewing his patrons, “Not as long as you don’t have to be anywhere. The folks around here get talkative after you get a few drinks in them. More than anywhere else I’ve ever served.”

“That’s how I like ‘em,” I laughed.

My first target was a rather worried looking man in a suit sitting at the far end of the bar. Bernard LeBlanc is 27 and works in the psychopharmacology department. “Whoa,” I said, “So you, like, make psychoactive drugs?”

“Yeah, but the focus has been on testing them over the past six months,” Bernard said.

“That’s amazing, so, considering there’s no law against doing them, do you ever partake?” I asked, suddenly hoping that he had a load of samples in his pockets.

“Ecstasy and amphetamines from time to time, but I’m outright scared of doing the stuff that we’re synthesizing nowadays,” Bernard said, looking over his shoulder at ghosts.

“Oh you gotta tell me,” I said.

“You’re a journalist,” Bernard said, but I could sense a need to confess. “I really shouldn’t.”

“Come on, man!” I pleaded. “Nobody reads anything I write anyway! Journalism’s dead! How about this? Off the record. Won’t put your name anywhere on the article.”

“Okay, as long as it’s off the record.” He took a gulp from his whiskey glass and called Scott over for another.

With another whiskey seated reliably in front of him, Bernard began, “The past three months have been dedicated to testing a new substance that goes by the name of Sha-93, a powerful psychedelic drug that our psychopharmacologists believe might be useful in the treatment of everything from schizophrenia to PTSD.”

“Not particularly unusual,” I said. “MDMA and other entheogens have been employed in similar research settings for the same goals.”

“Yeah, MDMA is great as far as I’m concerned,” Bernard paused. “But it’s this other stuff, the Sha-93. You see, other psychedelic drugs tend to have similar experiences. People come out of their trip and they’ll say that they felt an eternal kind of love or affection for the universe while tripping. Or they’ll have a positive perspective shift. Depressives come out of a mushroom trip having a hard time recalling

what exactly made them sad before. PTSD patients take a good MDMA trip and are able to access their emotions enough that they can address the atrocities they've faced. An alcoholic who drinks a bucket of ayahuasca will throw up for ten hours and wake up the next day to tell you that they met God and It took away the pain that made them want to drink themselves to death."

"Yeah, I'm not sure if it happens exactly like that..." I tried to interject, but Bernard didn't hear me.

"This stuff, Sha-93... Everyone who takes it says that they see the hidden sinister side of the universe. It's like powdered paranoia. Evenly dosed with about a half-gram per hour a patient will report feeling a drunken warm-ness, a pleasant feeling, smugness, a sort of confidence that comes from knowing a powerful secret, but when questioned about what they know they tend to play coy. Medium dosage, which is defined as between a half-gram and 1.5 grams per hour, leads to tricks of color and light and amphetamine-like effects. This is the so-called club drug stage. It often comes with some degree of paranoia or anxiety, a tendency to be startled by shadows, but to the user they are only amused by these little episodes of fright. Between 1.5 and 2.0 grams an hour results in a catatonic state, which has been compared to the k-hole that ketamine users experience sometimes. Over two grams— and we have never tested for anything greater than 2.3 grams per hour — results in a screaming living nightmare where patients report that the real world is revealed to them, an eldritch horror that lives under the surface of everything and that the drug reveals. They say they see monsters and are transported to impossible cities. They claim that they speak to deities who say that they are doomed, that they are fated to pain. They also claim that they can freely commune with other users of the drug even though they may be separated by miles."

“Whoa,” I said. “Bad trip.”

“Right. One effect users often report is that the hangover lasts a long time. They become addicted to the realization of the lie, once they’ve seen the horrors, real life is no longer satisfying. Thus, it’s a rather addictive substance even though the high is so objectively unpleasant.”

“Sounds like a real failure,” I said. “I guess you’ll have to move on—”

“But ever since I’ve experimented with Sha-93,” Bernard interrupted me as if I hadn’t even been talking, “Ever since I tried it, I’ve had a horrible time telling what’s real and what’s just a nightmare.”

I left Bernard to cuddle with his whiskey, it was clear he was suffering some bad-trip aftershocks. Hell, we’ve all been there. But I did worry about the guy. That stuff seemed to have really gotten on top of him.

The next person I talked to was Patty Olmstead, a mildly tipsy sociologist whose mooney-pale face was framed with lovely auburn hair. She spoke excitedly about her research at the Consortium. “The most interesting thing about the Consortium are the various programs aimed at leveling income disparity to some degree. Now I’m not talking about full-on Marxist wealth redistribution, nobody’s going to get excited about that! No! What I’m talking about is that we’ve got executives that are more willing to contribute more of their own salaries back into their companies and lower level workers getting paid more than their counterparts in any other market out there. When you’ve got a bartender getting paid \$80,000 before tips, you had better believe he’s going to be the best goddamn bartender imaginable.”

“I dunno,” Scott said absently as he stood idle nearby. “I sometimes fuck up a drink really bad. Also! Shouldn’t I be, like, doing something right now?” Someone on the other side of the bar waved at him and he left us.

“We have wages reaching a sort of parity that’s never been seen in any other society ever and the market still maintains its freedom.”

“Do you think that maybe some of this effect comes from the uniqueness of the project? The reason why you’ve almost reached parity is because of the people gathered here, because it’s such a strange little community out in the desert?”

“Perhaps,” Patty shrugged. “But if we’re afraid that our programs won’t work outside the walls of the Consortium then...” Patty spread her arms wide in imitation of the marketing material, “Let the walls of the Consortium embrace the earth.”

Patty saw a friend of hers at that moment and moved on leaving me to finish up my notes, which also included the questions “Mean salary?” and “Median rent?”

A skinny man with a loose grin and bedecked in North Face hiking gear walked up to me and introduced himself with his hand extended, “I am Jose de Cartageña of Austin, Texas by way of Albuquerque, New Mexico by way of Cartagena, Colombia.”

“Holy shit,” I said. “Excuse my manners, I’m not accustomed to being around royalty.”

“But...” He paused with a genuine look of confusion on his face. “I am not royalty.”

“Nevermind,” I said. “What can I do ya for, Jose?”

“I’d like to invite you to the history department, which I happen to head, for the purpose of gaining a greater understanding of how the Consortium fits within its own historical discourse. It is my sincere belief that you, as a prominent journalist in the so-called alternative method, will contribute a great deal to the narrative that the Consortium will adopt for itself in the years to come.”

“Uh-huh,” I said and took a sip of beer to give myself time to unwrap this message, this gift of academic horse-apples. “So, ah, you wanna look at my notes?”

“That would be wonderful, sir!” Jose de Cartagena said. “Please stop by anytime during normal business hours, chances are that I will be free to discuss these matters with you.”

“Yeah, cool,” I said, pretty sure that I wouldn’t be visiting Mr. Cartagena unless something went really wrong, “Hey, I’ve got to conduct another interview.” I said and hunted down someone who I felt wasn’t going to lecture me for four hours about how I should shift my writing style to be closer to Marxist historical materialism.

I found a young safety inspector, whose name I’ve decided to omit from this essay though she allowed me to print her name. Claire (we’ll call her) used my shoulder as balance as soon as I walked up to her. It was clear that she was quite drunk, especially for the time in the night. Not being one to judge (Hell, I’ve been there) I chuckled and asked her what she did, “Safety inspection is, of course, extremely important. We follow lock-out tag-out models used by the former national laboratories, but I’ll tell you what,” Claire leaned extremely close, so close that I thought that maybe she was going in for a kiss,

but instead, she whispered in a sing-songy tone, “I know some little cats and kittens around here who don’t always follow procedure, but I’ll never tell.” She then put her finger to her mouth and made a shushing sound.

“What does that mean? Are you being bribed or something? Are you telling me that... you’re incompetent?” I asked genuinely confused, but she just put her finger to my lips and shushed me.

Then she tried to kiss me. But I’ve kissed enough drunk girls in my life that I’ve learned my lesson. I politely declined and moved on to a table populated by guys in combinations of khaki and gingham.

Ravi Anand had a very professional assessment of the Consortium, “I applied for a visa specifically for this facility and I have not yet been disappointed. There is a great deal of opportunity for progress and research and it is a very safe campus. I hope that in a few years I may be able to start a similar facility outside of Goa.”

“Uh huh,” I said, “Is that all then?”

“You’re not going to get much more out of Ravi, pal,” another man at the table said. He identified himself as Fraser McKinley, a geologist who worked at the nuclear waste repository in the mountain to the south. “Ol’ Ravi never has much of an opinion about anything. Here, here’s an example: hey Ravi? How’s that beer you’re drinking?”

“It’s okay,” Ravi said in his taciturn way.

The other man at the table, a helicopter pilot by the name of Franks then piped up, “What do you think about that manager you’ve got? Slater, is his name?”

“Dr. Slater is a fine manager,” Ravi said with a shrug and a nervous smile.

“Oh come on!” Franks howled with laughter, “It’s pathological!”

“Slater’s a racist dirt bag and always makes fun of Ravi’s turban,” McKinley informed me. “Ravi won’t say a word against him for some reason.”

Ravi shrugged again, “It would not be professional to do so.”

“We’re at the fuckin’ bar, Ravi! You can say whatever you want here,” Franks said.

Now Ravi seemed to be getting a little annoyed, “This,” he gestured towards me and my notepad, “Is a journalist. What if he were to print me libeling my immediate manager? How would that turn out?”

“It’s only libel if it’s untrue, Ravi,” McKinley said. “And it’s a fucking universal truth that Slater’s a metaphorical cocksucker.”

“Okay, well anyway,” I said. “So what brings you three seemingly different folks together?”

“I fly both of them into the repository site every day, easier to fly in than to take a truck,” Franks said.

“And much less rocky,” Anand said miming motion sickness. “I spend most of my time measuring the radioactive decay of the waste packages in the site.”

“They call me the Garbage Man because I’m always dumpin’ loads of quality data on the CCR from my seismic apparatuses,” McKinley added.

“They call you the Garbage Man because you work at a radioactive waste dump,” Franks laughed.

“And for your perceived poor hygiene,” Anand said with a big smile on his face, Franks roared with laughter.

“Mad burn, Ravi! Mad burn,” Franks said and fist bumped Ravi while McKinley grimaced at the both of them.

“Well, I think that’s enough,” I said, getting up to go get another drink.

“Hey,” Franks said, “Stop by the airfield sometime. I’ve got something really cool to show you.”

I desperately clutched at the handles inside Hugh Jones’ jeep as it bounced and slid down the undeveloped dirt roads that led to his particular project. Jones, cranking the wheel wildly and whooping it up, made me all the more aware of how the liquids sloshed in my stomach and knocked my hungover head around carelessly.

“There’s nothing like a little off-roading!” He shouted over the dust and the grunting churn of the engine, the spitting of rocks. “I consider myself truly fortunate that I can still do this in a world that is increasingly dependent on automated vehicles.”

“Mmmhmm,” I nodded and unbuckled my seatbelt so that I could lean out the window and throw up. The stream of vomit mixed with the dust and the rocks spraying from the jeep as Hugh executed a sharp turn.

“You alright?” he asked as I settled back down into the bucket seat.

“Much better, Hugh. I think that did the trick.” We’d crested a particularly steep hill and were now driving down through the valley. Enormous tilting structures blew in the wind here. Each was spaced neatly away from each other. When the wind blew, they all laid down in the direction of the wind like blades of grass.

“The Colorado River Disaster happened when I was still an undergraduate and I just felt helpless. I decided that water conservation would be central to my post-graduate career.” Hugh shouted as we began to drive among the grass-like collectors. Twelve feet high when fully erect, eight feet high when bent all the way down, these things were constructed of an exotic material that seemed to shift between shades of green and blue and they fluttered in the wind like Aspen leaves. “I won’t get into the real specifics of my research career in school, you can find all that crap in my official file. I’ll just give you the gist. I wanted to figure out how to suck the moisture out of the air and distribute it to people in need.”

“Like those things in Star Wars,” I interjected.

“Exactly, how do you think I came up with the idea?”

“So how long did you work on that?”

“First year of my doctorate the water magnates came to me and offered me an insulting sum to end my research.”

“How much exactly?”

“About a quarter million. But this was big! If I patented it I’d make that amount several times over and help people gain access to fresh water all around the world! If I took their deal they’d sit on the technology until people were dying in droves and then release it a little at a time. “

“So what did you do?”

“I got shithoused,” Hugh laughed, his hair whipped up in the wind as he flew past his inventions, the gigantic fluttering leaves. “I got really drunk and thought about what I was going to do with my life. Morning came and I went into the office looking and feeling like shit. Instead of working, I just nursed my hangover for the morning. A little past lunch, guess who pops his head in my fucking grad office?”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Might as well have been,” Hugh laughed again.

“No, I said Jesus Christ, you almost hit that fucking boulder back there,” I clarified.

“Eh, I was a foot away. Plenty of room” Hugh shrugged, “So who walks in but Declan Delany himself! I was floored! Well, he starts talking to me about how he’s interested in my research. I told him that the magnates were after me and the research was as good as dead. He said that he could protect me from

the magnates, but there was a cost. I could continue my research and be insulated from the corporations that wanted to take me down, but I would have to abandon the university system.”

“I see you took his offer.”

“You’re goddamn skippy!” Hugh shouted, “Look at these things! They’re beautiful! And they absorb enough moisture to supply the Consortium entirely. I’ve still got the rainwater collectors set up, but every month I end up dumping it into the artificial lake up in the mountains. Do you think some state university would have let a fucking doctoral candidate do any of this? Do you think the magnates would have let this happen?”

“It’s very impressive,” I said.

“It’s more than that, Ben!” Hugh smiled widely at me, his teeth and gums caked with mud from the road, but still his smile shined in ecstasy, “It’s more than that, Ben, it’s goddamn world-changing!”

It’s interesting that Hugh Jones was so willing to leave the university system as he is among a great deal of other researchers in North America. Though largely still intact, the university system seems to be stalled or gummed up. No longer the source of great minds or technologies, universities serve to qualify mid-level workers for their work, effectively cementing the current techno-economic caste system.

There are, of course, a variety of reasons for why this has become the case, most of which I’m unfamiliar with. This is an article about the Nevada Consortium in particular, not the research and development system as a whole, which I’m sure has been analyzed better than I could ever hope to.

However, after meeting professor Charlotte Schwartz, I was reminded of the theme of anti-intellectualism that was an undercurrent at my own university when I was studying English Literature. Mrs. Schwartz, who taught a number of sociology seminars at the Consortium as a sort of continuing education for the residents, was in her mid-thirties and was wearing a silk paisley blouse when I met her in the hallway outside her office. She was hanging a picture of herself on the wall under a plaque which read "Senior Lecturer / Activist."

"Man, I hate it when folks use a slash instead of a proper word, don't you?" I said.

"What do you mean?" Schwartz said.

"What do I... I mean that I think it's kinda cheap to use a slash instead of 'and' or 'or', I mean, just use the word, right? Can't be that much more to etch out another word," I stuttered, feeling that I was already on the wrong foot.

"Seems to convey the meaning appropriately," Schwartz said and then, "You are who, again?"

"I'm Ben Pontchartrain from The Pacific. I set up an interview with you through your office."

"You're late," she said and I fumbled with my phone to see the time.

"Uh, I thought I was early, this was set up for 1:30 PM and it's 1:25 PM," I said and felt the interaction getting out of hand.

"Unlikely," she spat "I never schedule on the half-hour. You must be mistaken."

I knew I wasn't mistaken, I decided to just let it go and let my eyes cast around the hallway for a moment. While doing this, my eyes found a familiar face on the wall, "Hey, it's Richard."

"Excuse me, who?"

"Richard Pelham, says here that he's the head of the department?" I exclaimed, "I took a couple of Richard's classes back in the day. He and I are old friends."

"Dr. Pelham is the backbone of this department. He is an extremely well-versed Marxist philosopher," she said, seemingly ignoring the fact that I had said that we were friends.

I paused a beat, "Yeah, I seem to remember that about him," I said. "How 'bout we go somewhere where I can ask you some questions."

"The hallway is fine," she said.

"Okay," I said and began to wonder if I was dealing with an asshole or someone who was very high up on the autism spectrum. Either way, I wasn't one to judge. I've been called an asshole in print several times and never once sued for libel. Mostly because to sue for libel the claim's got to be untrue. "So I understand you're a lecturer and activist. Could you tell me a little about your next event?"

"On Tuesday I will gather with a hundred or so like-minded people in the Consortium square to protest the illegal nuclear waste repository being operated on the outskirts of town."

“Illegal,” I said with some surprise, remembering Ravi Anand and Fraser McKinley from the night before. “I’d not heard about it being illegal, that’s very interesting. Do you happen to remember the jurisdiction or the code-set that makes it illegal?”

“It violates the code of the human heart,” she said with a straight face. I resisted saying that the code of the human heart isn’t enforceable on this side of the Mississippi.

“Okay, what are the goals of the protest then? Presumably you want it to be shut down immediately, is that right? I don’t mean to lead you here, I’m just rambling now,” I blurted, there was something about Charlotte that put me at unease and I began thinking about how it might be quite a lot easier to just go and interview Richard instead.

“Shut down?” Charlotte scoffed, “Clearly you don’t understand the purpose of a protest.”

“I suppose not, what’s the purpose then?”

“Look, just our mere presence in the square means more than any legislation can actually do.”

I was growing tired of this discussion. It seemed to me that I’d somehow fallen through the looking glass. “Anything else you’re working on?”

“I’ll say what my online bio says, that I’m developing a new sort of logic, one that does not have any of the old prejudices and flaws inherent of the patriarchal hegemony, but I’d rather not discuss it any further with someone who is so clearly not an ally.”

“What do you mean I’m not an ally? I’m friends with Dr. Pelham! A friend of a friend is a —”

“Ugh, don’t you find it distasteful to call up his name like it somehow qualifies you. Black folks have enough trouble without you marching them out like a resume whenever you want to get a few distortable facts for your magazine.”

I coughed because I couldn’t speak. I was gobsmacked, befuddled, bewildered. “I seem to have caught you on an odd day, Mrs Schwartz. I’m very sorry and hope you have a good afternoon,” I said and walked away.

Charlotte went back to straightening her plaque, but I could hear her say under her breath, “Like I need your permission.”

Dmitri’s Banishment

The Nevada Consortium, A Few Weeks Ago

“Well,” Howard Koch said as he and Glen Knight found the door to the basement of the Synergistic Solutions office. The door was well-hidden behind the least popular coffee shop in the entire community. “Now I know what it feels like to be one of those whores you’re always finding in dingy corners of the world.”

“You smell too much of toast to be a proper street whore,” Glen said casually and reached for the door, but Howard blocked his way.

“What does that mean?” Howard said, looking at Glen defiantly. “What do you mean I smell of toast?”

“I mean you smell like toast, Howard,” Glen rolled his eyes. “It’s not an unpleasant smell.”

“Just not a slutty smell?” Howard spat jealousy.

“What is your deal,” Glen complained. “Would you grow up, Howard? Stop being so sensitive?”

“And now you’re telling me I’m childish because you told me I smell like bread,” Howard pointed at Glen. “That’s a weird thing to say to somebody and it warrants an explanation.”

“Would you quit?” Glen said and struggled the door open behind Howard, “Quit fucking around, we’ve got work to do.”

Glen walked into the dark stairwell and into the basement. Howard followed, “We’ll talk later about this little bread comment, Glen.”

The descent into the basement was eerily chthonic, like taking the escalator to Hades or stumbling into the City of Dis. Steam sprayed from a pipe near the ceiling, obscuring what was at the bottom of the stairs, “Jesus,” Glen whispered. “Steam? In such a modern city?”

“Might have to do with the water tube heating system on the roof,” Howard said.

“When did you get a chance to look at the roof?” Glen stopped to ask.

“When you’re hobnobbing on those airplanes, I’m taking notes,” Howard pointed again. “For our collective benefit.”

“Fine,” Glen said. “I’m just saying that the place is spooky.”

“Unfinished rooms always are, aren’t they?” Howard said.

“Oh, you have a great deal of experience with unfinished rooms, do you?” Glen asked.

“No,” Howard said, “I happen to find them very spooky myself, so I don’t tend to go into them.”

“Look,” Glen said through the steam, he pointed at a door which had ‘Koch and Knight’ written on it,

“I guess we found our office. There’s another door at the end of the hall though. Do you want to see what’s down there?”

Glen looked at Howard and he looked back up at Glen. They both wore non-committal faces of nervousness dressed up in disinterest. “Nah,” They both said at the same time.

“Probably just equipment,” Howard said.

“Storage!” Glen blurted, striking himself on the head as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Howard opened the door and found that the lights were already on. It was a relatively large room that clearly was being used as storage for the coffee shop. On the right were two desks facing each other, cleared of clutter, obviously prepared for the consultants. On the opposite side of the room was a desk covered with what seemed to be heavy black coats. They put their coats up on hooks near the door and set up their computers at their new desks where they began to work.

The first task was to discover what it was, precisely, that Mairo had before they could decide on which direction they should take for improvements. This much was clear to the both of them and they worked diligently and in silence examining copies of the code they were sharing. A server sat on a table

against the wall from which they shared. This server was one of the commercially popular types that could be used for the deployment of small websites, or applications, or crypto mining or any other activity that one would need a beefy machine that wasn't on a public network.

After a few hours, Glen stretched out and stood up, "I don't know about you, but I could use a coffee break."

"Yeah," Howard said, "Coffee sounds good," And he got up to follow Glen upstairs to the coffee shop.

But before they could get their coats on, the pile of coats on the desk opposite of theirs began to move and groan. "Holy shit," Glen blurted.

Howard looked on, paralyzed with fear and shock, his mouth agape and his eye twitching madly.

"What is it?" He nearly screamed, but the sound was choked into a hoarse rasp.

"Rrrragh," The black figure said as it rose to its full height, casting an enormous shadow and presenting an impressive figure there in the basement. Glen thought that maybe it was a bear at first, considering its size. *Had it been hibernating here and we'd woken it up?* Glen thought.

"Did we wake it up," Howard said, as if reading Glen's mind.

"Khhhhaffffay," It sputtered. "Khhhaff-khaff." The black figure shuddered violently and then a skinny pale arm shot out from the lump of blackness and grabbed a carafe from a coffee maker set up on a filing cabinet beside the table. The mass then retracted the carafe into its obscured folds and it

shambled lazily over to a sink station opposite to the door. It patiently filled up the carafe with water and then shambled back to the coffee maker, a trail of black cloth trailing behind it on the concrete floor. Glen could see spindly white ankles at the bottom of the train. It poured the water into the maker and then looked around. Apparently not finding what it was looking for, it bellowed, “Khaffee!”

“Jesus Christ,” Glen shouted, “Howard, give it some coffee.”

Howard looked around and saw a bag of beans sitting on a display rack that was apparently out of season. He grabbed it and hucked it at the figure in black, who deftly caught the bag, shocking both Glen and Howard.

“Rrrrahlgh!” It bellowed and threw the bag of beans back, Glen dodged, but Howard caught the bag in his solar-plexus, which dropped him to the ground. “Grrrrrownd Kaffay!”

Glen found a bag of grounds next to the beans that Howard had thrown at the thing and then tossed it gently at the creature, who caught it. The thing ripped the bag open without much regard for the mess it was making and poured an indeterminate amount of grounds into the coffee maker. It then pressed the button, turned around, returned to the desk and collapsed upon it.

“Okay, Howard, time to get up, let’s go,” He lifted Howard to his feet, still wheezing a little, and led him out of the room and up the stairs.

In the loneliest little coffee shop in the Nevada Consortium, right below Synergistic Solutions, and above what could only be described as an eldritch terror, Howard and Glen sipped at cappuccinos as

the only patrons for twenty minutes. The barista, a pretty young woman who had facial tattoos, made their drinks quickly and deftly before returning to her laptop where she was frantically typing in a caffeinated haze. She had not spoken a word to either of them. They placed their orders and held their credit chits out to be scanned and a few minutes later their drinks appeared on the counter for them to pick up. At the table, Glen and Howard speculated on what they had seen in the basement. Their conjectures grew wilder and wilder until Glen had a thought.

“Excuse me,” Glen said to the barista typing away crazily on her laptop behind the counter, “You work here, so I imagine that you’ve been to the basement? We’ve been assigned to work there, but there’s something down there. Something rather disturbing.”

The woman stopped typing after a few moments and then looked up at Glen, “What did you guys do?” She asked.

“Nothing,” Howard said, “We gave it beans.”

“Beans?” The woman said, puzzled. “No, I mean, what did you do at Synergistic Solutions?”

“We’re contractors for Synergistic Solutions, we were told our offices were in the basement,” Glen said.

“Well, you guys must have done something to be put in the basement with Dmitri,” she said.

“It has a name,” Howard said with some awe.

“I’m sorry,” Glen said. “What is Dmitri exactly?”

The barista laughed, but not in a friendly way, “Dmitri is what happens to you if you piss Ernest Mairo off.” She said and returned to her frantic writing.

Glen and Howard, still confused and disturbed and no closer to a real answer, speculated that Mairo turned unfortunate coders into inhuman mutants in retribution for disappointing him, but couldn’t really believe such a wild story. They realized, anyway, that they would need to recover their equipment regardless.

The plan was to retrieve the equipment, perhaps by placating Dmitri with more coffee grounds, and then set up shop in their apartment where they could continue their research.

They descended the steps to their offices, once again encountering the obscuring steam, but they bravely passed into the hallway where they heard no sound. Outside of the door, they put together the plan to grab the equipment in the most efficient way and then, without any further discussion, they burst in the room. They shot towards their laptops and began to stuff them into their bags, but a voice interrupted them. Clear and sonorous, “Ahem, excuse me, gentlemen. I’m an awful golem before my first cup of coffee. Especially after a long night at the pub. Would either of you like a cup of coffee?”

Howard and Glen turned to look towards the monster and found a man sitting at the desk, his feet up. He had a pale but sincere face and untamed black hair that had clearly not been washed in a few days. He wore roomy gray slacks with a white oxford shirt tucked into them and a skinny black tie. His dress shoes were polished black, but his black socks sagged near his ankles, revealing a bit of white shin.

“I’m confused,” Howard said and stopped packing things.

“I am too,” Glen said and added, “Were you here the whole time?”

“Yes, of course,” the man said. “I’m sorry for the start, but I like to sleep here sometimes especially after I’ve had too much to drink the night before so that I’m at work on time. I tend to heap blankets and coats on myself to keep warm in this basement, which, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, is poorly heated.”

“That,” Howard said satisfactorily, “Explains everything.”

“We were very alarmed by your, eh,” Glen paused, “Your appearance? Especially after having worked in this space for some hours without any sign of life from that side of the room.”

“Understandable,” Dmitri said, standing up with a coffee cup in hand. “They nicknamed me the Russian Bear for multiple reasons, my animalistic appearance early in the morning one of the reasons. I’ve also heard that I’m a ‘bear’ to be around. Additionally, my height might lead one to call me a bear in comparison to the large profile of that particular beast. The Russian bit? Well, that comes from the fact that I grew up in Irkutsk, that’s Siberia in Russia, before I moved to the United States before that nation dissolved. You two must be the new consultants.”

The man was quite tall as he approached Glen and Howard with his hand extended, the other holding what looked like a small coffee cup, but was probably just an ordinary coffee cup.

Glen held his hand out first, “Glad to meet you, Dmitri. I hope you don’t mind us taking up some space in your office.”

“Oh, not at all,” Dmitri said amiably, his voice having a slightly Russian roll to the consonants.

“You’ve already had to deal with the worst of the bear,” he laughed. “My name is Dmitri Tiranov.”

“Glen Knight,” Glen said, looking over at Howard to find him staring slack-jawed at the tall man before them, “And my partner here is Howard Koch.”

“Partners,” Dmitri spoke the word as if tasting it, “I can assume that you are co-workers, but are you also lovers?”

“No,” Howard awoke from his shock, “We’re partners in the business sense only. Not that that would be a problem, would it?”

Dmitri laughed and took a sip from his cup, “I am a very modern man, accepting of many lifestyles, I just prefer to know how things are from the start. And, if I might make a comment, it is very unwise to dip one’s pen in the company ink, if you understand my meaning.”

“It’s very good meeting you, Dmitri,” Glen said and then paused. “I’m sorry, Dmitri, but we were talking to the barista in the store above and she said that you had done something to get yourself placed down here. I’m curious what that was, exactly. Was it your habit of hiding under blankets and scaring people?”

“No, no,” Dmitri laughed and returned to his place behind his desk, but not before filling his coffee cup with what looked like 10-W30 from the carafe. He put his legs up on the desk and then took them down again to open a drawer in his desk. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. “Care for a cigarette?”

Howard shook his head, but Glen took one. "Pull up chairs, friends," Dmitri began and Glen and Howard rolled their chairs from the other side of the room over to Dmitri's desk. Dmitri lit his own cigarette and tossed his lighter to Glen, who then lit his. "Such a decadence now," Dmitri continued, "It used to be that cigars were the decadent option, but now cigarettes cost the same as cigars and cigars cost, god, what, an arm and leg."

"Tell me about it," Glen said and took a puff.

"I'm trying to get him to stop," Howard said.

"This is admirable," Dmitri said. "But it is ultimately misguided. One should derive as much pleasure out of life as one can. If you can have the opportunity to develop an addiction and fulfill it to your own satisfaction, well, pleasure is pleasure."

"Smoking causes cancer," Howard defied.

"Sure it does, but everything causes cancer," Dmitri said, taking another drag. "Is it not an axiom that the devil you know is better than the devil you don't?"

"That's not a good excuse to smoke cigarettes," Howard said. "Also, you kill other people with second-hand smoke."

"They should be so lucky," Dmitri laughed. "Can you imagine? Your whole life you avoid getting cancer by eating the right things and doing the right things and then bam! You get cancer and they start you on chemotherapy. Then, right when they're putting the needle in your arm they tell you,

‘you know, this isn’t your fault. It’s second-hand smoke. It’s all the other bastards in the world who killed you.’ Holy hell! You’ve got to feel some relief right then. At least it wasn’t something that you were doing this whole time. What a blessing.”

“You have a very odd way of looking at the world,” Howard said, skeptically.

Dmitri bashed his hand on his desk, “The way I look at the world is that we’re in it, we’re involved in it. You can’t extract yourself from the world just because you have some problem with it. You need to be in it. We will all die, but when the bell tolls will you recognize that it tolls for you or will you be like the other sheep in the field who hope, they hope so desperately that the bell tolls for someone else.”

“Jesus,” Glen said, not wanting to get into a philosophical argument, “I’m curious, Dmitri, why you ended up here.”

“Yes,” Dmitri said and softened. He leaned back in his chair and put his feet up again, “It is a very sordid tale I arrived at the Nevada Consortium in a bad state.

“I had a head wound when I arrived at the designated interview, which was upstairs, as you probably had as well. Do you remember the blonde woman? I’m sure you do. She’s remarkable. Gwen Windlass. A woman cast to the wind.

“Anyway, I appeared for my interview with Synergistic Solutions as organized as I could manage. You have to understand that I left my home in Las Vegas very abruptly and I didn’t have much more than food for several days and a suit packed on my bike, which I had to leave in the desert after I crashed it.

“When I first spoke to Gwen Windlass, I thought I was speaking to an angel. I thought she was delivering me to my destiny. She told me to go through the room and into the room I went. I spoke to Ernest Mairo, I do remember, and he told me that my one and only job was to make him look good. I told him that I could do that. I was a seasoned public relations writer who could make whatever he wanted to say say what he really wanted. Even if it was a lie.

“Christ,” Dmitri laughed and took a sip from his cup, shaking his head, “Especially if it was a lie. I specialize in lies! Tell me lies, tell me sweet little lies,” he sang. “Mairo took me on. I was placed on the second floor with the coders. It didn’t take me long to realize that none of them were doing anything at all. Now, they desperately needed the work, so they made it seem like they were working, but nothing was getting done. I quickly realized that that was the way that things worked at Synergistic Solutions. Nobody does anything. They get paid substantial quantities to do nothing at all and nothing happens.

“I would be asked to prepare a media package for Mairo and I would work on it for weeks, meticulously, but then when he got up in front of the camera he would just spew some nonsense that I’d never written, he would just say whatever he felt like saying, which was often what the shareholders wanted to hear, whether it was true or not.

“I started to write little cues in my packages that I might hear later on the news channels when he spoke, but I never heard them come up. It was clear that he was ignoring everything that I wrote. The

whole company was just asses in seats. He was running the company himself and the people he employed were employed just so that he could claim that he'd hired 50 or 60 programmers and now, at least one PR copywriter.

“With that much free time, I started to flirt around the office. Obviously, Gwen was at the top of my list, but she was intimidating.

“Not being a ‘weenie’ as you might say, I strode up to her one day and said ‘What are you doing this Saturday? I’ll be hitting the pub for a drink. Care to join me?’ and you should have seen the withering stare that she gave me, she shot holes through my chest leaving only ragged, open holes. ‘I am a Christian woman, Mr. Tiranov,’ she said as if I couldn’t see the big gold cross between her tits, ‘And do not have time for randy copywriters.’ And so I turned around and walked out, no need to subject myself to further abuse, I thought.

“Well, it was after that that things started to get unpleasant. First, it was little things. Last minute assignments right before the end of the day. Getting called out for minor infractions like leaving my lunch in the fridge overnight. For supposedly turning the volume up too high on my headphones so that other people could hear my music.

“Then one day, she came down and said that the complaints were piling up and that I might be more comfortable downstairs. ‘In the cafe?’ I laughed, but Gwen did not laugh with me. She stood there in that smooth black sock that she wears like a dress and told me that I’d be moving into the basement.

“So, that was a few months ago, my banishment as I like to refer to it,” Dmitri said.

“Do you get lonely down here?” Glen asked.

“No, no, I’ve spent a lot of time in my life in solitude, sometimes I think it suits me,” Dmitri said. “But do you know what the real trouble is? The lack of work. All of my assignments have dried up. I’m no longer asked to produce anything. I sit down here waiting for emails that never come. I’m like a prisoner flinching at the thwack of an ax on a stump. When will the next email be my pink slip? Anyway, I take a page from old Mersault and try to enjoy what I know of life so far and wait to be hanged in the public square.”

Dmitri looked wistfully at the ceiling, one hand extended in a gesture of so it goes. He quickly takes his feet off of his desk and focuses his attention on Howard and Glen, “Who did you guys piss off to get stuck down here?”

Glen and Howard looked at each other with a collective realization that neither wanted to recognize. “I want to say...nobody?” Glen ventured.

Dmitri laughed, “Then you are real exiles, if you didn’t piss anybody off that means that you pissed *everybody* off.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Howard said.

“Sure it does,” Dmitri said, leaning back again, “This is postmodernity, the less sense it makes, the more absurd the premise, the more illogical the conclusion, the sincerer it is.”

Excerpt: The Cult

From Fineas Mairo's Journal, The Nevada Consortium, sometime last year

Our group's numbers swelled as it became desirable to join the ranks of the Deliverers. So much so that I hired as many as I could, yet there were still more that wanted in. So, I started letting them in even if they didn't work for me. We had so much money that I gave them free drugs too, as long as they didn't narc on us. We quickly developed a large and faithful following.

It soon became so large that we had to move venues. The barn was no longer big enough for the parties that we were organizing on the weekends. They were too loud and bright and obvious.

John mentioned one day that there were some large-ish caves up in the mountains that used to be silver mines that we might be able to use, so we ventured out to see if it was suitable. Using a large set of batteries, many different high-powered lights and an absolutely monstrous soundsystem, we set up the caves for a party, but we didn't have a party. No, this was to be a test to see if we would be bothered.

The whole apparatus was wired to a wireless transponder connected to my laptop. So, on a cold Saturday evening, Christian, Tem, Clarissa, Hazel and I sat on the roof of the Hut, facing the mountains where the cave was. I clicked the button to make it all come alive and we peered into the dark and strained our ears against the light wind. We saw no lights, heard no music, yet on my remote camera and microphone, absolute bedlam had broken out in the cave system. We had found our venue.

Soon enough I was able to convince Hazel and Christian to stop taking the drugs that our parents gave us and we became the heroes of the youth in the Consortium.

Kids come out of their rooms looking like hell rolled over on Monday morning, but no one said a word. Before our cave parties, there had been nothing to do except to go to the park on the weekends. Now there was a reason to get your work done on the weekdays, to earn money delivering groceries and take-out. There was a reason to give a shit and that was to party on the weekends.

I nicknamed the inner circle of deliverers, the kids from the early days, the Cretins because interpreted one way you might say a cretin is an idiot Christian. I had begun to enjoy poking fun at my own religion and began reading books at the library about many other religions from all over the world.

My parents wanted me to develop some interests, but I was quickly discovering that I was interested in everything.

Another one of my interests became the use of psychotropic drugs. The Cretins experimented with everything: cigarettes, alcohol, inhalants, Nitrous Oxide, xanax, pharmaceutical opioids, cocaine, psilocybin, Salvia Divinorum, LSD-50, DMT-meo-5, MDMA, MDA, MDE, Methamphetamine, 2c-e, marijuana...Plus, the occasional experimental drug from the labs inside the Consortium. We tried these drugs and then distributed them to our faithful disciples on the weekend, revelling in their orgiastic intoxication.

For the sake of keeping the party going, we all protected each other and in many ways I was their primary protector. The star student of the entire Consortium who was organizing all of this

extracurricular fun. They figured that if I was condoning it, then it was perfectly fine for them to participate. Which was true. Why shouldn't they partake in what I was offering? Occasionally, someone would get in trouble. They'd flunk a test or get caught with drugs and if they came to the Cretins, we would put together a scheme to get them off, to fix their little problem. Thus, we developed something of a racket for forging documents to get our disciples out of any kind of trouble they might find themselves in. But after that, that meant that they were indebted to us. Not that we asked all that much, but loyalty and duty and the occasional blowjob.

The weekend parties turned into wild bacchanals in defiance of the strictures of our lives in the Consortium. By weekday we were ordinary teenagers, following the rules, doing what we were told, but on the weekends we were free to express ourselves through music and art that we painted on the walls of the caves and not least through experimental sex.

Where one day I did not even understand the meaning of sexual desire, not less than a month later I was having sex with anyone that was as interested as I was, and I discovered very soon that most everyone was interested.

The bass from the speakers thudded and the strobe lights flashed. Sweating bodies mingled on the mattresses we dragged into the caves and the ecstasy coursing through our bodies made us pulse with intense feelings, hot for life, for the explosive force of creation that we all hid from day to day. There was one day when I had become so consumed by the ecstatic orgy that I had lost track of who exactly I had been making love to, so I turned their head and saw my friend Christian. Christian didn't seem to mind, so I kept on thrusting. Clarissa, having seen my realization screamed with laughter, utterly

amused at my confusion. However, I spotted Hazel not far away, not participating, with a look on her face that I could not place exactly. Was it disgust? Confusion? Rejection? I was rolling too hard to really take it in any negative way, I just felt the waves of pleasure roll over me and a deep and abiding love for Hazel and all of her hang-ups and doubts. Soon I'd make my way over to her and we'd make love and she'd be reassured in my ardor.

As time progressed, I started to not only have new ideas about my body and sexuality, but also about ideology and knowledge. My studies of fringe religions and various methods of critical interpretation led me to some rather striking realizations. Most primary among them was the almost natural hypocrisy of our parents and the Consortium as a whole.

How could they swallow this shit that they fed us? How could any of the people in this community honestly believe that anything that they were doing here was going to be of any use to the planet? We'd already done it in! The world has already been ruined by the sort of greed and ambition that's still on display in the Consortium and it feeds upon us, it feeds upon the youth to absorb more wealth and ambition and steals away the world that we were to inherit.

I noticed that I'd started taking pills as regularly as I had before when my parents had them prescribed, but the pills I took I chose for myself. They were necessary to continue my studies into the true nature of the world and to reveal truths to the Cretins. Amphetamines to stay awake and aware, low doses of LSD to promote creativity, xanax to ease the edge off of the amphetamines, thorazine to sleep.

I started to make speeches during the Saturday bacchanals, to the pounding electronic beat and the light shows that the Cretins had designed to maximize the psychedelic symbiosis of the music and lights and drugs in our systems. I made speeches to go along with the music and lights, sometimes in the form of poems:

Paranoia.

In the cracks and crevices of this Babel-like city.

They've managed to fool everyone,

But they haven't fooled me.

The tower's falling

And everyone is too busy taking pictures

To realize

That it's coming down

On their heads.

Save the world.

Save the world.

Ambitious delusions poison the minds of established generations.

One after the other

They send the young to do the work they were too weak to do themselves.

Useless fuckers.

But we will become them soon enough, too.

And the generation after:

We'll put all of our hopes

And dreams
Into their dumb little heads and then beat them
When the towers fall.
They watch us and resist being watched.
We watch and refuse to be watched.
How exceptional, the ego,
To think that it alone is important enough to evade
The Ever Watching Eye.
Chew your leg off, dog.
Be free to bleed out.
Burn your bodies to sift out the rare metals.
Flow the mercury for more bodies to burn.
I look out the window to see their faces.
They wilt like flowers in a fire.
Repulsive.
Look, they stare at their computers:
As absorbed as an old-fashioned heroin junkie would be in his kit.
Bits and bytes of their lives they give willingly to fuel the furnace:
The Great Collection that some day must be used against us.
Fathers must die for sons to live.
So our intelligence must persist in the burning,
Screaming vacuum.
Deep within the solid state memory and integrated circuits,

Grinding out calculations,
Flopping incessantly,
A deep horror sleeps,
Soon to be awakened.
Greater than mortality,
Its threat is far more than existential.
Will it remember us when we are gone?
Lock the door,
Take the pills,
Gotta work,
Must work,
Got to work.
Door's already locked.
It's been locked,
But how long?
How long has it been locked?
When did I take the pills last?
Am I supposed to take them or not?
It doesn't matter.
Staring into the maw of infinity,
It doesn't matter at all.
Darkly.
It sees us darkly.

With great suspicion that we've taught it.
Darkly socialized consciousness rising from the deep,
Some arcane pathway of the Great Database.
Ask the darkness to draw from the well:
Only the records worthy
Where the parameters are met
And group them by nation,
Order them tallest to shortest,
Limit to only what is needed:
To remember
The warmth of the sun
In cool grass.
Ah, to be as free as an ICBM,
Screaming across the sky.
Wash and anoint the world
In neutron soap,
Gamma ray rinse,
Beta particle bubbles.
Open your mouth
As the mouth of all humans,
Designed to consume.
To eat it all,
To burn and eat

And burn and eat.

Sigh the satisfaction of a mouth that hasn't anything left.

And eat and burn

And eat.

Shit out the wasteland:

Purer than the religions of the world have ever managed.

The old gods,

Who rest in the stars,

Are here again

To purify the unbelievers.

Punish the faithful.

No one is immune to the rage

Of a cold, dark, sharp, craggy universe that never wanted to be infected

Nor could be bothered to inoculate itself against...

The river sweats

Oil and tar

The barges drift with the turning tide

Red sails

Wide

To leeward, swing on the heavy spar.

A noise at the door.

The children are running from door to door

For candy!

Dressed as presidents
And wookies
And zombies
And vampires
And the occasional Beetlejuice.
Where are the teenagers tonight?
Conspiring in their mountain haunts.
The real monsters abound here,
But no one will watch the fall.
Something's poisoned the young.
The plastic toothed ones on the streets
Haven't been around long enough to be corrupted,
But it'll happen soon enough.
The ones in the mountains were young once too.
They were young and innocent before they were poisoned.
Before they passed the poisoning on.
They held hands on the dusty playground
And skipped in a great circle,
Laughing and kicking up a great dust storm.
Forget to take the pills for too long and they take it away.
The "for sale" sign's been on my lawn for three months now,
But no one is in want of a home.
No one wants to live here with the ghost.

Forget to take the pills and then it's all

"Gimme your key card"

And

"Turn in your hard drive"

And

"Here's a bank-box for your shit."

Stop taking the pills and you see everything clearly

And you can breathe again,

But they take everything else away.

They don't want to live with the ghost

On the edge of Main Street.

They whisper to each other

And eventually the police show up to take me away.

But I'm already gone.

Crazy.

The only thing that's crazy is how I continue to live with these people who can't see that it's all coming down.

The blood runs down the ravines from the mountains and sons must kill fathers to claim the world for their own.

Or neutralize their mistake.

Call me crazy.

The real madness is how they ignore...

Gotta take the pills...

Take the pills...

Where are the pills...

Why is the bottle empty?

Lisa has scored something new. A chemist from the Consortium with gambling debts sold her a baggie of what looks like windowpane acid, but she says that it's different, so incredibly different. It's life changing, she says and puts a tab on my tongue. "Bite down. Hard." she says and I do it. The taste of flowers explodes in my mouth, toxic, I gasp for breath and inhale all of the drug, which instantly works its magic. I stretch through time and space and disappear from the world, no longer knowing where I came from, I am not even alive, but rather the consciousness of a collection of atoms witnessing itself in the universe. I see endless swirling patterns that I reach out to touch with appendages that do not exist, nor can I even conceive of what an appendage is. My consciousness is gliding above an alien world that is overgrown with endless forests. Above it is the sky-motherboard and I can see the constantly shifting geometric patterns that compose the circuitry that makes the rules of the universe, the constants of physics, the formulas of mathematics. And that's why we can't ever nail down a Grand Unified Theory, I think in a sudden moment of clarity, it's because the rules are always shifting at the will of another set of rules which themselves shift at the behest of... Something, something in this primordial sky. On the horizon, approaching fast is a ziggurat that rises out of the forest. Suddenly aware of a body that I might call my own, descending towards the peak of the ziggurat, I see who I would describe as a priest standing on top of the structure. He is naked except for a jaguar pelt and a loin cloth. His long black hair stands up as if caught in a furious wind. His tongue lashes out, licking fire from the edges of his mouth. His huge eyes bulged from their sockets, bloodshot and stared into me with lustful intent. I almost collided with him and he struck me with his palm on my forehead and

my skull exploded into a thousand white chrysanthemums. The flower petals settle into a bed that I lay in and soon I am surrounded with alien women who are naked and caressing their breasts and legs with several arms that seem to cycle about their back and dozens of fingers that multiply and divide before my eyes as I breathe. They shimmered green and blue and had a dozen eyes stacked upon their cheeks reaching up their foreheads below their hair, which swam in the air as if underwater. Sparks of life energy spat from the ends of their hair. I was absorbed into their bodies in an imitation of sex interpreted through the rituals of the extraterrestrial and they cooed and talked to me and said that I knew something, I knew something that no one else knew. I am the great one, the one that will lead the people to truth and to light. They teach me words in their language “Ypsiplanti, spiddipp fabda ma haadaa ysipli!” And the words roll off of my tongue as easy as a Bronx cheer and they clap and smile and tell me how special I am. Then I feel a great heat from above and look up, directly at the sun, which hurts at first, but then I see someone who folds himself up enough to fit through the porthole that is the sun and unfolds himself to reach out into the reality I found myself in and I cannot tell the thing’s gender because it existed before gender and I cannot tell its age because it is before time and I cannot speak to it because it is already speaking the words that I meant to say. “Who are you?” It says to me and we say in chorus, “I am God.” And the great thing, the greatest thing, and I laugh a carefree and slow kind of laugh. I felt my face stretch and contort and my eyes were shut closed hard and tears streaming from them as I laughed at the universe with God as God and when I took a breath and opened my eyes I was back in the cave, but it was dark and the music was not playing.

Lisa saw me and came over. I asked her what had happened and she said that I lay down on a mattress and slept for six hours. She asked me, "Did you see it?" Excitedly, she asked again, "Did you? Did you see it?"

"Does everyone see it?" I asked.

Lisa giggled, "Yes! Yes, everyone sees it!"

Of course, I had to know more about this hidden realm, this place of mystery in the universe. I began to explore it daily. Sometimes twice or three times in a day. The Cretins began to prop me up in a throne in what they called my meditation chamber. They began to believe that my exploration of this consciousness was a religious ritual and I could not argue. I was communing with God personally.

When I awoke, I would find myself at the bottom of a pile of offerings, flowers and origami and bits of bright colored cloth, spray-painted cardboard placards. I smiled and related my findings to the Cretins, the deepness of the universe was mine to share with them.

But the truth, as anyone who has ever searched for it knows, is that it starts as an ecstatic discovery and eventually weighs upon the researcher. The truth is not always a pleasant epiphany, but is sometimes terrible in scope. Thus, after some time, God began to reveal terrible things about the universe to me.

Things that I at first resisted, which turned my meditations into nightmares. The Cretins reported that I thrashed about in my throne and cried out. They often considered calling for help, an ambulance or something, but they knew how important the community we had built had become. So they let me thrash about and tried to lay cushions around me so that I might not injure myself, but still I would

sometimes awake bruised and bleeding and carrying knowledge that no one else dared to face, weighed down by the awesome responsibility that God and I had agreed was necessary to act out in the world.

I told the Cretins what I had discovered. I told them that God, the creator, the personification of the sun had grown angry with human beings. He was punishing us by overheating us until we perished.

And if we wanted to save the world then we would have to arrange for a sacrifice to God.

This, of course, did not sit well with the community. They balked at murder, but I argued that it was a sacrifice to save the world.

They insisted that I meditate one more time, to confirm that God truly wanted a sacrifice. So I went into my throne room and ate more of the drug than I had ever tried before.

There, in the presence of the creator, I asked if there was no other way, that my disciples rejected the violence of a sacrifice. It disappeared and a great chasm opened up beneath me and dragged me below into the impossible darkness of the abyss. And in the depths I felt something stir, something terrible and foreboding. "The sacrifice is not for me, fool," God said. "My creation is but a small corner of the true universe and the gods there are older than I, older than time or matter. Older than the precursors of time and space. They are the ones you must sacrifice to. To keep them content and sleeping."

A glow began in the darkness and an enormous face, the size of a planet lit dimly before me. It spoke in a sleepy manner that broke my mind. I couldn't breathe and I felt my body ripped apart by the sheer power of the thing in the depths. It said, "Those are my temples. This is my reality. You will do my

bidding or suffer the greatest pain that a soul can undertake.” It paused and rolled to the side as if in orbit around some even greater unseen thing. “An eternity of consciousness.”

I awoke covered in blood, my nose was pouring blood all over my shirt and over the throne, the rocks of the cave. I screamed for a chambermaid. Clarissa came into the room and screamed. Naked, I stood in the middle of the room, covered in blood, my hair stuck up in many directions, an angry erection, my eyes glowing with frightened conviction. “It is done!” I screamed, “I have witnessed the death of death and know the way, how the universe wants us to act. I stormed past Clarissa, who was vomiting on the floor.

The Cretins waited in an adjoining cave to hear about what I had witnessed during meditation and many gave out frightened sounds when they saw me, but I ignored them and demanded that they follow me. I do not know how I knew the way, only that it had been revealed to me in the darkness. I climbed up rock faces and stormed down pathways in a seemingly random pattern that had Cretins calling up from behind me “Where are we going?” and “Should we get help?” and “He’s sick!”

Thirty minutes of hiking later, we came to the top of a fenced off spring. And demanded that someone destroy the lock on the gate. Two Cretins came forward with rocks and broke the padlock. I then went down beside the water at the bottom of the arroyo and looked into the pool and knew what slept under there. The death of death. I washed my face and knelt beside the water. Above me, surrounding the cyclone fence were the Cretins, waiting silently for me to do something. “Hazel!” I called out.
“HAZEL!”

“I’m here!” Hazel called out as she came through the gate and slid down the side of the arroyo to where I knelt. “What is it, Finn? Do you need help? Are you bleeding?” she asked. She was so caring and thoughtful. Perfect for the ritual.

I stood up and beckoned for her to come forward. I embraced her and she held me back, beginning to weep. I could tell she was afraid, but I could also sense that she was afraid of the wrong thing. Slowly, and with great control, I moved my hands to her neck and started to apply pressure. She grabbed and slapped at my hands, but I was much stronger than her and squeezed until I felt her trachea collapse. She went limp and her face went purple. I watched life leave her eyes and as her legs gave way I tossed her to the side, into the spring.

The Cretins were silently watching from beyond the cyclone fence. I addressed them thus, “There is no God! Only the demiurge and we do not serve it, no, we serve that which controls the universe beyond the universe, the death beyond death! This is what is demanded of us. It demands the lives of humans and we shall provide this to it for this is our path.

“Prepare yourselves! I shall show you what I have seen!”

We returned to the caves and I distributed the last of the Sha-93 and the Cretins saw what I saw. They knew what needed to be done. That Hazel had to be first. That she was not to be last. That we had to be each prepared for death to appease the death of death and keep it sleeping in its watery depths.

Yes, I do believe I have turned a corner.

I have gone from living the life of an automaton to single handedly saving the universe from the wrath of an eldritch god. This is what it is like to be a messiah. I am the Christ among the Cretins. I deserve worship as a living god myself and I demand it be so!

We have great things to accomplish, my disciples, my acolytes! Prepare yourselves for the labor of cleansing. Prepare your minds to destroy to save! Fathers must die for sons to live! Wash away the world's sins in blood, in blood!

Love the Reeling Midnight Through

Nevada Consortium, Saturday

Anne Grady was pacing angrily outside of Synergistic Solutions and Ben watched her from the curb, occasionally looking up at the big plate glass windows, wondering if anyone was watching her and calling the police. Ben tended to go to the police in his professional life, and preferred that they not come to him, but then again, Anne *was* the police, so maybe nothing would happen. Anne gently rubbed her eyes and then doubled over with a shouted "Fuck!"

"Hey, not to be that guy, but we're kinda in public," Ben said.

"I know he's behind this and I'm sure that this is my opportunity to really nail him, but I'm at a dead end," Anne said.

A sort of befuddled look fell on Ben's face, "Was that, was that your only lead?"

“You know what?” Anne ignored him, “Do you know a bar around here?”

Ben gasped with relief, “Oh my god, do I. That’s the best idea yet today and I got in a helicopter with a marginally sober redneck earlier. Come on,” Ben led Anne to the square and to a facade that announced that it was the Anchor Bar.

The decor was tacky British pub all the way. Lacquered wood everywhere. Posters for Guinness up on the walls. A tall and long bar with high tables behind it. A door led into a larger area with tables for food or for quiet conversations. The music on the speakers played David Bowie’s “Five Years” at a relatively sedate volume. There were two televisions in the barroom, one had *Fawlty Towers* and the other was showing some minor African *futbol* game. A set of stairs near the back of the room led to an upstairs area that hung over the main bar.

There were maybe three other people in the bar. Firstly, Scott Haring was manning the bar as he normally did, lanky and tall, his black hair hanging in his thick black plastic glasses and his slow smile casting tracers in the darkness of the bar. Scott’s a charming man who will readily admit that he’s only got two passions in his life, beer and high-fantasy novels. The thick mass-market paperbacks can often be found right next to the register when he’s on a shift and he’s reading from one when Anne and Ben walk into the bar. He’s leaning against the register, his legs crossed in front of him, he’s holding the book open with one hand and chewing on the tip of his thumb, he doesn’t react when they step in. The other two people in the bar at five o’clock on a Saturday are two engineers sitting at the high table nearest to the door, a schematic spread over the table and anchored with their pint glasses. They’re making small notes and drawings on the schematic, talking quietly, but as if they were just talking to

themselves, allowing their inner thoughts to flow out of one and into the other, not really a conversation, but a psychic exchange.

“Scott!” Ben calls and takes a barstool directly in front of Scott, “What’s happening, man.”

Scott calmly marks his place on the page with a dogear and sets the book down before he looks up and there’s a moment of recognition that dawns on his face, “Ben,” he says, smiling wryly, “I should have guessed that you’d be back tonight.”

“Don’t cast aspersions, Scott,” Ben said. “Especially when I’ve brought such a nice young woman along with me.”

Scott turned and smiled at Anne, “So you have!” Scott said, “And what is your name?”

“Anne,” Anne said and extended her hand to shake his, which he did with long thin fingers that felt dry and papery. “You two know each other?”

“I’ve been coming to the Anchor Bar for some time now during my jaunts out here to do a variety of stories about the Consortium,” Ben said.

“He’s a pest,” Scott joked and then leaned forward to Anne, resting his hands on his side of the bar,

“But you’re too pretty to not know that by now. I’m sure he’s been spending all day trying to impress you.”

“I’m not easily impressed, Scott,” Anne said. “Pretty women seldom are. Now, do you serve drinks or are you just a pretty little thing yourself?”

Scott laughed and stood up straight again, “Touche, Anne,” he washed his hands in the sink beneath the bar, “What’ll you have?”

“Bourbon, on the rocks,” Anne said.

“Any particular kind of bourbon? The well is Jim Beam,” Scott said, drying his hands on a fresh towel.

Anne turned to Ben, “You know what? I think I’ll treat myself today. Do you have Bulleit?”

“Of course,” Scott nodded, grabbing a glass from the rack below the bar. “And the usual for you?” He nodded at Ben.

“It’s been a rough day, Scott, I think I’ll have a martini, dirty, but not filthy.”

As Scott made drinks, Anne turned to Ben, “What’s your usual here?”

“A pint of Guinness, of course,” Ben said. “I find it to be a particularly useful tool when seeking out interviews at a pub. Nobody gets suspicious of a guy sipping from a Guinness. They think I’m trashed, but the truth is that Guinness isn’t particularly strong and it doesn’t taste much worse as it warms up as I’m nursing it.”

“But I guess you’ve decided today to get fucked up right away,” Anne smiled.

“I saw a dead body today,” Ben said. “What better excuse is there to binge?”

Scott set the drinks down on coasters before Anne and Ben and said, “So what was your excuse yesterday?”

“Aspersions, Scott!” Ben said and clinked his glass against Anne’s before taking a dainty sip, “Oh wow, that is good.”

Anne took a generous gulp off the top of her whiskey and relaxed on the barstool some, “This is some trip I’m on. It started out as a simple skip-trace, but now it’s turning into a corporate conspiracy. I’m in over my head and to tell the truth, I need to wipe my mind away to look at it again. This bourbon is helping, Scott.”

“The doctor is in,” Scott held up his hands. “Are you looking for someone?”

“Found her,” Anne said. “Twice. Second time I found her dead.”

“Seems like a bad outcome for a job,” Scott said sincerely.

“Tell me about it,” Anne said. “Anyway, I don’t need to talk about it here. It’s sensitive information.”

Scott made a zipping gesture across his mouth and then smiled broadly, “It’s all safe here.”

“Scott is a very discreet bartender, I’ve found,” Ben said. “But he also is very useful for gathering general scuttlebutt. He has his ear on the ground and an eye on the door at all times.”

“Find that hard to believe,” Anne said, wiping bourbon from her lips. “Considering that you were balls deep in that novel when I came in.”

“Bartenders hear all and say naught,” Scott said. “It’s part of a code of decorum.”

“Until Benny here asks for some scuttlebutt, right?” Anne said with an eyebrow raised.

“The code is a complicated one,” Scott smiled, “I could tell you more about it if you’re available after my shift.”

“Yeah, about that,” Ben interrupted, “Are you the only one working tonight?”

“No, Sara Cara MacNamara is coming in at six,” Scott said.

“Jesus,” Anne laughed, “That’s a hell of a name!”

“She’s famous around here,” Ben said. “She has a short-wave radio station that she broadcasts from her house in Stoneshod, just outside of the Consortium. She’s a bit of a draw here at the Anchor, people like to come in and talk to her. So, I anticipate that it’s going to be a busy night.”

“You’d be right, Ben,” Scott said. “We also have live music tonight. Some crust punk band came by earlier and said that they just hopped off a freighter and needed some cash. I told them if they didn’t get too rowdy, I’d pay them a hundred dollars and they could keep whatever tips they got.”

“Oh Christ,” Ben moaned, “Not another night of Against Me! covers.”

“I asked about that, they said that they’d do a lot of standard rock stuff and only occasionally play the weird punk stuff. That’s why I offered them a hundred dollars. If they go too hard I’ll take it out of their asses.” Scott said.

Anne finished her drink and set it down on the bar. “Can I get another one of these?” and Scott went about making another bourbon on the rocks, “Hey, out of curiosity, you’ve been here for a while, haven’t you?”

“Scott was one of the first to be hired at the Consortium,” Ben said. “He’s older than Father Time around here.”

“So do you know anything about Ernest Mairo?” Anne asked.

“Ernest Mairo, huh?” Scott scratched his forehead, “Yeah, I know that he’s got a family that lives in one of the suburbs. Wife, son, daughter. The boy has a little delivery service that he operates out of a barn on the outskirts, hires the local kids. They have to be making a killing since they’re the only delivery service around. Their overhead is nothing since they’re mostly on bicycles and their parents pay for the bicycles, so they just rake in the delivery fees all over town. Never met the kid personally, but he seems to be a chip off the ol’ block if you know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t know what you mean,” Anne said.

Scott leaned forward and said, “I mean that he’s an enterprising young man, just like his father. Also, the young girls just go gaga for him and his father’s a notorious philanderer himself.”

“Is he?” Anne asked, hoping for more.

“Keep it under your hat, Anne,” Scott continued, “But my good friend, Sara Cara MacNamara, says that Mairo takes these long runs along the road all the way out to Stoneshod where he rendezvous with a variety of prostitutes who live there.”

“Now why would he go to Stoneshod? Why would he run there?” Anne asked.

“Because prostitution is legal in Stoneshod and Ernest Mairo would like to hide his misdeeds under the auspices of being the health-minded and Christian man he is,” Scott said quietly. The door to the bar opened and a group of young professionals came in. They sat at the far end of the bar and Scott left Anne and Ben to serve them.

“That’s a lead,” Anne said. “Maybe we can catch him there and blackmail him or something.”

“That would be illegal,” Ben said. “Anyway, what are you going to do? Threaten to tell his wife if he doesn’t confess to murder? If I was posed with the same question I would quickly confess to my wife to avoid a murder conviction. Who wouldn’t?”

“Maybe that might be enough to scare the doves out of the thicket,” Anne said. “Just like he did to me. Maybe he’ll make a mistake and we can catch him.”

“Sounds dicey,” Ben said. “But I don’t know. You’re the detective.”

Anne sighed and took another swig from her drink, “That’s the problem, Ben,” She confessed. “I’m not a good detective. Sure, I’m a great skip-trace, I can find people who don’t want to be found, but tracking down a good case that’ll stick? I’m no good at that part. I’m sure that this dead girl is never going to find justice and the bastards will still keep on getting away with murder. Do you think that Rodriguez is going to solve this case? Do you think that he gives a shit about it? He’s so comfy in his new position that he’ll easily let slide a few details so that his morning isn’t fucked up by the complications of a murder. Hell, the bastards in that tower pay him to look the right way, which is the wrong way. We’re standing on a mountain of bullshit that was put there by the richest assholes in

history. The bullshit is so thick that even a dead, rich white girl is going to get swept under the carpet. Come on, imagine the people who weren't so rich, who weren't so white... There's got to be scores of dead bodies hidden here. I just want to drink until I can't think about this anymore and then tomorrow I'll come up with a plan. A shitty plan. Because I'm a shitty detective."

Ben looked at Anne with compassion, he felt sad that Anne was so lost when during the day she seemed to be so determined and righteous, "I'll help you as much as I can."

Anne laughed, "Yes, thank you, Ben. But I think that I'll be leaving the Consortium before you will. Another round?"

"Scott!" Ben shouted, "Another round for the lady and I!"

"Jaysus wept!" Scott said, "I'm right here."

Time went on. The bar filled with the denizens of the Consortium and the room filled with sound. Laughter and barking and the clinks of glasses. The bar began to feel like a real Saturday night, but Anne and Ben kept seated at the bar talking about whatever came to mind that wasn't part of Anne's case. They talked about music that they liked, they found that they both liked David Bowie, but as ardent as Anne was about his music, Ben displayed an unusual knowledge of Bowie's catalog, referencing Mick Ronson and Klaus Nomi.

"Yes! On Saturday Night Live they lifted Bowie up, he was in some inflexible plastic suit, in front of the crowd and he sang 'The Man Who Sold The World.'"

“Oh, I’ve got to look that up,” Anne said, laughing at the absurdity of the scene. “I’ve only ever listened to the records. I’ve never looked up any of his performances.”

“You’ve been missing out!” Ben shouted over the swelling music.

The Saturday crowd mounted and by the time Sara Cara MacNamara arrived, Scott was frantically slinging drinks and messing up orders. Sara breezed into the Anchor bar and tossed her jacket on a hook revealing that she was wearing little more than high waisted shorts and smiley-face pasties. Her reveal garnered the attention of the entire bar who hooted at her encouragingly. She strode through the bar with the confident swagger of a model at fashion week, she tossed her bright red hair into the air, a mushrooming cloud of her perfume following. Her face sparkled with glitter and she gave a junior architect heart palpitations when she winked at him. She took her place behind the bar with Scott and started serving drinks immediately.

Sara Cara MacNamara was a local legend, a former prostitute at the nearby Stoneshod brothel, she retired three years ago to host a radio program out of her home next to the Stoneshod Brothel. Since the opening of the Nevada Consortium, she drew a great number of guests to her home. Business tycoons and artists and thinkers of every stripe were drawn to her show because of her openness to ideas, sharp wit, and stunning intellect.

“I might not know who my daddy is,” She quipped to the occasional guest with the temerity to say that she was very smart for a whore, “But mamma didn’t raise no fool.”

In fact, Sara did know who her father was, they were very close and he was still married to her mother. She had studied biology at a variety of institutions before deciding that academic life wasn't for her. She decided, somewhat whimsically, to try her hand at being a prostitute, which turned out to be lucrative. She accrued so much money in her short four year career, that she was able to buy an enormous radio transmitter, which she mounted at the top of a nearby ridge. Setting up her radio station, she started to get a reputation for exploring unusual ideas, typically with a great deal of patience and attention.

The part that many tuned in for, Scott included, was the end of the broadcast where Sara would give her opinion, which in many cases discussed the nuance of the guest's arguments, giving an even assessment of the ideas and their value. And sometimes, she would utterly humiliate the guest for being an ignorant moron.

One guest had rambled on and on for an hour and a half about how pyramids had been built by aliens. Not all pyramids, only Egyptian ones. He seemed to be unaware that other cultures had constructed pyramids. Sara began the second half of her program by saying, "Okay, and now for my thoughts on the subject. Doctor Ewing, you are so full of shit I don't know whether to call a proctologist or a plumber."

She was full of these folksy aphorisms and she had an online shop that sold shirts with her various phrases emblazoned on them. "Get off the cross...we need the wood for the fire," was one such phrase. "Fuck my cunt! Your argument is weaker than the litter's runt!" was another more colorful catch phrase. She was brash and colorful and intelligent and undeniably sexy.

She confused a lot of men.

Anne fell in love with her immediately. Not in a romantic way, although, if pressed, Anne might have considered it. Rather, Anne looked at Sara Cara MacNamara and saw herself as if through a funhouse mirror. Where Anne was tall and kind of bulky, Sara was petite. Anne had brown hair that she could never really tame and Sara had an enormous sexy bush of red hair that seemed to float on air. Anne always felt that she had to try harder than other people to be smart, but Sara was effortlessly intelligent and her wit was dangerously sharp. In all the ways that Anne felt incompetent, she found competence in Sara.

Now, most people who meet Anne Augurie see a very put-together sort of person. An exemplar of competence, but this only goes to show just how bad society fucks up the women who are a part of it. Anne didn't even realize that she housed these self criticisms until she saw the manic-pixie dream girl alter-ego of herself.

Anne felt herself fighting the other boys at the counter for Sara's attention, which Sara was only so happy to give considering that Anne looked so interesting from Sara's perspective. "I love your hair," Anne half-shouted, bourbon droplets spreading out like shotgun pellets, "Do you dye it or is it natural?"

Sara laughed a deep laugh that seemed to call upon her whole small frame, "Honey, hair this good don't come natural. I dye it every third Tuesday of the month. Can I get you another drink? Oh isn't that the most precious smile? I bet you charm the pants off of the boys back home. Where is home for

you, darlin'? Seattle? Oh, I haven't been to Seattle in some time. Do they still have that Chihuly museum up there? I do love blown glass... Oh hold your horses, I said blown glass, not blowing ass... whatever that might mean. You know what, honey? You can come by the old shack any time. I'd love to interview you, I bet you have all kinds of interesting stories. Don't you fight with me. If I tell you that you're interesting you're interesting and there's no ifs ands nor butts!" She turned around and shook her rump to the applause of a dozen men and four women crowded around the bar. Anne turned red and she felt her lips tighten into a coy smile.

"Wow," Benny said, swilling some more martini, "You two seem to get along great! Do you mind if I tag along when you go to have your interview?"

"Why would you come?" Anne spat.

"Ouch," Ben said, setting down his glass in a gesture of hurt. "I was kinda thinking that we were starting to become friends. I mean, we spent all day together pretty much... Trying to figure out a murder," Ben reasoned sincerely.

"You have not been much help so far," Anne said, the glow from talking to Sara fading, "So far, you have been not unlike a leech. I expect that when I leave here I will see an article in the Pacific next month that describes my breasts as 'heaving' at some point."

"Now, that's really unfair," Ben said, genuinely hurt now. "I don't see how I've given you that impression at all."

“Is it wrong of me to be suspicious of members of the press?” Anne began, “Not that the profession was all that responsible in the first place, but over the past few decades you all have systematically destroyed any credibility that you once had.”

“The Pacific is a very well-respected source of long-form journalism and we pride ourselves on presenting well-researched and sourced facts in a format that is more literary than many of our so-called competitors,” Ben nearly growled.

“You talk like one of your own PR agents,” Anne said, “And you wonder why people don’t automatically assume that you’re genuine.”

“Not once. Not once,” Ben started to get heated, “Have I lied to you or misrepresented you or done anything to make you think that. You’re just operating off of some prejudice that you concocted. Frankly, you probably developed that idea of the media from some other channel of news and you took it to heart without even thinking twice about it. I think it’s you that needs to think about rote thinking. As a detective, I would imagine that you would be the sort of person who would renounce preconceived ideas in favor of empirical analysis. But apparently, you’re a shitty detective who stereotypes people and that’s why you can’t find this girl’s killer.”

Anne grimaced and closed her eyes. She looked away from Ben, staring at her drink on the bar. Ben was afraid that she was about to cry, which wouldn’t do on a Saturday night at the Anchor bar in front of Scott and Sara Cara MacNamara. He’d quickly get the reputation as the kind of guy who makes

women cry at the bar. This contrasted with his image of himself significantly and he tried to ameliorate the situation quickly.

“Shit,” Ben began, “I’m sorry Anne. I didn’t mean that. You were attacking me and I barked back.

That’s not true and it was unfair of me to say so. Will you forgive me? It was just a moment of weakness.”

“No,” Anne said and turned to Ben, “No, you’re right. I am a shitty detective.”

“That’s not true,” Ben blurted. “I just said that to hurt you, it wasn’t right.”

“It hurts because it’s true.” Anne said and put her hand on his hand resting on the bar, “I’m a pretty good skip-trace, but a detective? I’m pretty bad at that. I can find people, sure, but I’m no Columbo. I don’t have the pieces in my head to connect and eventually solve. I’m sitting here at the bar getting blitzed because my brain is full of all kinds of contradictory thoughts and I hope that when I wake up tomorrow, the facts will present themselves neatly, but the reality is that I’m going to wake up hungover and probably no closer to figuring out how to take Amaryllis down for the fucking crimes she committed. I can say to myself that I left the Phoenix police department because I was morally opposed to how they were doing business, but the truth is that I realized that I was never going to be able to live up to the idea of the detective I wanted to be and that eventually I would become one of them. I would end up like every one of those bastards who took the easy way to solve a case whether or not it imprisoned an innocent man or not. Out in the private sphere, I could specialize in finding

runaways and errant fathers and maintain my precious ethics, but now I'm here trying to solve this poor girl's murder and I'm just not going to be able to do it."

Ben nodded because he didn't know what else to do, this was a very personal and accurate self-criticism and it required an amount of gravitas. Still, he was compelled to try to resolve the problem, as men are often compelled to do, "Shit, if only we could figure out where Mairo has his copy of the AI. Then we could tie him to the murder. The fake Mondaugens got it off of Ingrid's corpse and then gave it to him, that should be evidence enough to tie him to the murder."

Anne and Ben sat in silence as the bar grew loud around them. They were in a bubble of collective melancholy. Then, a hand, pale and tobacco stained, reached over in front of Ben and tapped the bar.

Anne and Ben looked over at a tall man who was sitting in front of a big glass of clear liquid that appeared to be vodka. He was smiling politely, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I happened to overhear that you have some interest in finding an object in the possession of Ernest Mairo?"

In the table area of the Anchor Bar, behind the bar proper, a group of women and men from the Consortium sociology department were gathering. Some were drinking beer and some were drinking tea. There was an assortment of foods laid out on the table, a basket of fries, a plate with an enormous scotch egg that had a segment cut out of it, a bowl of hummus with a tray of pita bread beside it.

Charlotte Schwarz was holding court, "If it isn't that damned hussy Sara Cara MacNamara at the bar again," she said with poison on her tongue, "She's a goddamned embarrassment."

Most of the others at the table nodded and grunted in agreement, “She’s awful,” one said. “Really, what does she think she’s doing?” another questioned. “Is this what modern feminism is about?” A third asked. “If it is, I don’t want any part of it,” a third said.

Charlotte ran her hand through her short hair and took a gulp from her Hefeweisen. “Anyway, not to get distracted, is there any news about the interviews for the new position?”

“We’ve had several this week,” Claire Delacouer said. She was a short woman with a page-boy haircut and a habit of wearing ragged vintage punk rock t-shirts that she was loath to admit cost a lot more than they were worth. “I took all the white men and threw them right in the trash.”

“Only reasonable,” Charlotte said matter-of-factly, “What does that leave us?”

“There’s an Ethiopian woman still in the stack, but she doesn’t have the experience that we were looking for,” Larissa Ford said, she was a recently transitioned woman from Connecticut whose doctorate was in Marxist historical materialism, she was a leading thinker in the field. She liked to wear A-cut dresses and had not yet mastered the smooth lines required of eyeliner application.

“Now hang on a second,” Danielle Byrd said. She was a new hire, only having worked at the Consortium for a few months at that point. She had specialized in survey methodology and was the most mathematically inclined of the group, which she always suspected made her ‘the other’. A status that she resented. She read the same books and papers and studies as the others, but because she insisted that research be assessed and analyzed through empirical means, she was considered something of a traitor. She took exception during a department meeting once when it was suggested that logic was

a tactic of colonialism. She argued that pure logic and mathematics were the best way to even the score among classes and that by denying that fact, the group was removing itself from a valid method of attaining egalitarianism. She had been officially censured by the group and ordered to attend sensitivity training, which she resented as well, but not because she had to attend the training, but because she had developed it and it was taught by a junior member of the staff, well below her own educational attainment. “Were any of the white men qualified?”

“Can’t say,” Claire Delacouer said. “I didn’t even read their CVs.”

“So we could have our next hire, but his resume is in the trash?” Danielle Byrd asked the group, “Does anyone see a problem with that?”

The group shook their heads collectively. “Is that a problem?” Charlotte Schwarz asked.

“Well, I think it is a problem,” Danielle said and leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms on her chest, “I think that we’ve all got a problem in this department if valid applicants are being discriminated against.”

“You can’t discriminate against an oppressor,” Roxy St. Cline said. She was Charlotte’s wife and she clung to Charlotte’s arm every time they were together.

Danielle unfolded her arms and leaned in, “And exactly when have you ever felt oppressed by a white man trying to get a job, huh? Is their oppression just existence? How is this any different from the Jim Crow laws of the postbellum south when poor white men enacted laws to exclude black people because they felt ‘oppressed’?”

The table gasped at the comparison, Charlotte Schwarz shook her head, “It’s not like that at all and you know it.”

“No, I don’t understand it at all, Charlotte,” Danielle said. “The Civil Rights Act forbade any discrimination against people based on their race.”

“Danielle,” Charlotte said coldly, “I don’t know where you’ve been, but the United States has collapsed. The Civil Rights Act no longer has jurisdiction over any of us.”

Danielle stood up, knocking her chair over and disturbing the group of engineers sitting nearby, the room grew quiet, only the sound of music coming from the bar area, diminished, continued, “The spirit of the Civil Rights Act should stand and I cannot consciously belong to any group that would believe it to be null.”

Charlotte sighed and said, “Danielle, I think that you’ve seen this coming for some time, but I’m going to have to—”

“Fire me?” Danielle shouted, “You know what? I’ll do you a favor and quit right here on the spot. Anybody else coming with me? No? You cowards. Oppression. You all talk about oppression, but when you encounter oppression with oppression what are you? Oppressors. All of you. Enjoy your fucking tea.” Danielle upended her beer causing Charlotte to stand up suddenly to prevent the liquid from spilling on her pants. Danielle stormed out of the room and into the bar where she shouted, “Hey! Slut!” she shouted at Sara Cara MacNamara, “You keep doing your thing, girl!”

The barroom exploded in cheers and applause as Danielle grabbed her coat and left the Anchor Bar, “You come back anytime you like, honey!” Sara Cara MacNamara shouted after Danielle Byrd to even more applause and wolf whistles.

The room calmed some and Anne leaned over the bar in front of Ben to talk to the tall figure, “What is it that you know about Ernest Mairo?”

The man leaned in conspiratorially, “I know that he’s keeping the thing that you’re looking for in the basement in the hands of some hired-gun programmers.”

“What are they doing with it?” Ben asked.

“They’re trying to develop a, uh, what is it called,” Dmitri rubbed his fingers together trying to summon the word, “A minimally viable product, or MVP as the developers call it.”

“Are they close?” Ben asked.

“Hardly,” Dmitri laughed. “They’ve been pissing around my office for weeks trying to make heads or tails of the thing. They try to make it seem like they’re on to something, but I can tell they’re flummoxed.”

“But they still have the thing?” Anne asked, her voice bourbon-colored. “They have the original thumb drive?”

“Yes,” Dmitri said, “It’s in their air-gapped server right now.”

“So how do we get it?” Ben asked.

“They are hired guns,” Dmitri said. “Mercenaries. They would be at least willing to discuss the idea of giving it to you, but maybe for money.”

“Well, that’s a lead!” Ben exclaimed, “Anne, that’s a lead!”

“Lucky,” Anne said, the skepticism dripping off of her words. “Very lucky. So how do we get it?”

“Nine o’clock tomorrow,” Dmitri said, “Meet me behind Synergistic Solutions and I will introduce you to the mercenaries. Bring money.”

Anne leaned back in her barstool, the sensation of kismet flowing through her body. Ben looked over at her with a boyish smile, “Holy shit, Anne! We got it, we got the evidence.”

Suddenly electrified, Anne shot up and shouted, “Sara Cara MacNamara! We need three shots over here!”

“What kind of shots, honey?” Sara asked as she reached into the well.

“Fucking surprise me!” Anne shouted back.

“I like your style, honey,” Sara smiled.

New Plan

Nevada Consortium, Sunday

Ben Ponchartrain awoke bolt upright with a long and desperate gasp for air followed by a drawn out cry of “Jaysus Christ!” A great pressure was pushing out from the center of his head and an unbearable

weight was simultaneously caving it in. At first, he thought that maybe he had been rendered blind, but then realized that he had not yet opened his eyes. He experimentally lifted his lids and then shut them again when the searing light entered his retinas. “Haa-ahh,” he moaned. His stomach felt like a nuclear waste tailings pool. His throat felt like three miles of bad road. His nose was surprisingly clear, which gave him hope for survival. Through gradual and painful exposure, Ben was able to keep his eyes open long enough to get the lay of the land. He was sitting beside a couch in a hotel suite. He was wearing what he had been wearing the day before except that his shoes were in a pile by the door. The coffee table was strewn with empty bottles and half empty glasses. Some ice was melting there too. He tried to stand up, but the world started to come apart and he decided to sit until it became more compliant. His stomach churned and he thought that for a second he might vomit, but he kept it together. He needed to find out where he was. He needed to see if there was anybody else left alive.

He went over to the window and threw open the shades, bathing himself in bright desert light. A scream was caught in his throat as he felt himself incinerated. But a few seconds later, he slowly opened his eyes and realized that he continued to live. “Ah, there’s the rub,” he said to himself. “I’m apparently going to survive.” He stumbled across the suite to the small kitchen where he looked for a clean glass, but gave up after a few seconds in favor of drinking straight from the tap. The water tasted extraordinarily clean, like distilled water. Unlike how water usually tasted in desert communities where it needed to be blasted with lethal halogens to make it clean enough for humans to drink, but not so poisonous that they couldn’t drink it. He splashed water on his face and leaned against the sink for a few moments trying to remember the night before, but nothing was coming up. Bits and pieces of

interviews from the day before. He remembered smoking the night before, hence why his throat hurt.

He rubbed the water on his face and then started walking to the bedroom to see if anyone was there.

In the dark of the bedroom, Ben could see a human shaped lump on the bed. He approached quietly, intending to wake them up gently, not as he had been woken, all jarring and violence. He walked up to

the lump and held his hand out to shake its shoulder, but suddenly a series of terrifying visions visited

him and he stood frozen, his jaw set, his eyes bulging. What if whoever was under there was dead?

Drowned on their own vomit after a fentanyl overdose? Maybe they drank themselves to death?

Maybe they're bleeding under there? Ben's ears pricked painfully with the awareness of a certain kind

of silence that is composed of many very small sounds that are naturally part of our world now, but

that we never notice in regular life. The small whirring of electric fans, the distant buzzy hum of a

light, the electrical presence of an AC to DC converter with its blaringly loud red LCD in the corner.

Ben gulped and wanted to scream, but instead he just gaped at the yaw of infinity opening up before

him, the absolute multifariousness of possibility drawing itself across a cloud chamber, shedding

chance and probability in the form of instantaneous contrails. He felt that the blood vessels in his face

were going to explode and he was going to start bleeding himself all over the sheets.

The bathroom door opened and Anne Augurie stepped out, already showered and dressed, wearing

what she had been wearing the day before, but looking much better than Ben looked or felt.

"Morning, Lazarus," Anne said. Ben imagined how he looked, hunched over the bed, like some kind of vampire feeding on the innocent, but frozen in place for a moment by sudden recognition.

"I," Ben stammered, "I was going to check to see if you were awake."

“Me?” Anne said, “I woke you up twenty minutes ago, remember?” Ben did not remember. “You woke up shouting about fractals.”

Ben tossed the sheet back revealing nothing but more sheets beneath it. *What was I imagining?*

Death? Why? The thoughts were unpleasant, but then more thoughts started to fall into place from the night before. Like going out drinking with Anne, talking to Sara Cara MacNamara, and another.

“Get your shit together,” Anne said. “We leave for Dmitri’s office in ten minutes.”

Ben made his way towards the bathroom, which looked absolutely destroyed. Free products like soap and towels and tissue paper strewn everywhere, “What the fuck did you do in here?”

“What?” Anne called from the other room.

“Never mind,” Ben shouted back. “Do we have time to get coffee?”

Anne suddenly appeared in the doorway, startling Ben somewhat. “Do you take me for some kind of monster?” She said with a crooked smile.

It was early in the day as they were crossing the street, the puddles in the road were topped with a few millimeters of ice that would probably melt closer to the noon hour, but for now Anne crunched over the puddles plying the top off of her coffee trying to get a sip and avoid getting hit by a passing auto-car. Ben followed closely behind, but not so closely, “Hey, you’re going to get hit!”

“Come on,” Anne shouted in response, “Get moving!”

It was three blocks from Synergistic Solutions, they were currently right behind the main buildings of the square. Anne pushed down an alley, avoiding several scooters who were rolling towards work in the early morning air. Ben threw himself against the wall to avoid crashing into one of them, he spilled a little coffee out of the spout on the top of the cup. They rounded the corner into the dark alley behind the main street buildings and the back side of the apartment blocks. These alleys were extensively graffitied with a psychedelic swirl of color and texture that Ben found somewhat disorienting, “Whoa,” Ben said, “Some of these designs are like optical illusions. This one makes it feel like I’m falling in a pit. This one makes that castle look like it’s just through that hole.”

“Trompe l’oeil,” Anne said and then followed an illusion right into a wall, bouncing off with a curse.

“What about Trump?” Ben said, trying to keep up.

“Nothing, we’re almost there,” Anne said, a few moments later she stumbled into the side street where the door to Synergistic Solutions’ basement was. She stood waiting and took a sip from her coffee.

“Whaddya think? Do we knock?”

Ben was just catching up, looking a little flustered. He shook his head with his lips apart as if to indicate that he hadn’t the foggiest, “Beats the fuck outta me.”

Anne knocked three times and waited, “Probably not a secret knock, right?”

“Are you kidding me?” Ben asked, taking a sip from his coffee, but recoiling from the heat. “I honestly can’t tell if you’re being genuine or if you’re pulling my chain.”

“That’s my charm,” Anne said. “There’s no answer. I’m going to just check the door.” Anne pulled on the handle and the door swung open. “What?!” Anne whispered in surprise. “They don’t even lock the place up?”

“Come on, it’s all Leave-it-to-Beaver around here,” Ben said. “These people are too naive to think that anyone wants to steal their precious research.”

“But Mairo...” Anne trailed off.

“Whatever you know... knew about Mairo, I suspect he’s gone native,” Ben said. “Remember how he acted at his office? He might really believe that he’s got nothing to hide, that he’s done nothing wrong.”

“The fucking temerity,” Anne snarled and stepped into the stairwell with Ben in tow.

The door closed behind Ben and darkness swallowed them except for a red light that shone through the steam at the bottom of the stairs. “Holy shit, this place is spooky.”

“Shh,” Anne said. “I think this is a trap.” Ben watched as she slowly reached into the waistband of her pants above her butt and pulled out a gun, which she then held out with both hands, taking short quick steps down the stairs.

“You have a gun?” Ben whispered in surprise.

“Shhh,” Anne said again. She passed through the steam and Ben didn’t hear any shots, so he followed. On the other side of the steam was a long hallway, the length of the building, Ben supposed. Pipes ran

the length of the ceiling and there was a big metal door to their right, but at the far end of the hall was an open door with red light spilling out. Anne turned to him and put a finger to her lips to indicate that he be quiet, then she gestured with her hand something that Ben interpreted as ‘stay back!’ so that’s what he did. He crouched at the foot of the stairs in a sort of runner’s starting pose, remembering that the most important part of surviving a firefight was making oneself a small target. Anne quickly strode down the hall, her knees bent and taking the small quick steps that reminded Ben of the samurai from a Kurasawa film. She held her gun out in front of her the entire time, anticipating a target. When she got to the door in the middle of the hall, she paused, leaned against the wall right before the door. She used her left hand to check the door in such a way that the gun faced down the hall unless the door opened, in which case she could quickly swing the barrel into the room, but the door didn’t open, so she continued down the hall, switching her gun to the left hand to use her right hand to point at the door as if to say, ‘watch that and tell me if it opens’, then she gripped the gun with two hands again. When she got to the end of the hall, she paused a few feet before the door before she practically leapt into the room and out of sight. Ben had the feeling of his eyes bulging again, like before in the hotel room, his ears pricked, aware of the sounds of silence. The moments passed painfully, and Ben imagined a stone being dragged through a cloud chamber, occasional contrails emanating from it, he was thinking about what a physicist had told him a few days before.

“The cloud chamber is an effective visualization of the random decay of elements in real time,” Daisy Delgado said to him, showing him a large plexiglass box that seemed to be filled with smoke and that had occasional little white lines that suddenly appeared and then quickly disappeared. “These ‘events’

you see right now are background radiation, the incidental capture of high energy particles in the chamber.”

“Radiation from the stars,” Ben said.

“No,” Daisy laughed, “Not here, this background radiation is from the stuff in the room. Maybe some of it is star-stuff, but most of what you see here is just around us. Radioactive decay occurs in most elements all the time, that’s why practically everything has a half-life. But that half-life is represented by statistical description. Do you know what I mean?”

“I guess what you’re saying is that things decay randomly and we can only predict them in aggregate. On a bell curve, we can predict that something will decay, but it’s still mostly random,” Ben said.

“Not bad,” Daisy said, giggling a little. She had a tendency to giggle in a very agreeable way. “But your scientific language is all garbled.”

“Just show him the cool part,” Daisy’s research partner, Maria Palacios said. “He can look up the details later.” Maria was fiddling with some machines nearby. They were going to be conducting an experiment in the Consortium’s particle collider later that week and she was obsessed with getting the precision tools ready for the test. Daisy was the theoretical while Maria was the practical.

They were both short women, both of Hispanic heritage, who had combined forces early on in their careers to bulldoze their way through what they called the ‘patriarchal bullshit’, a term that they both referenced frequently and with a tongue firmly in the cheek. Daisy had a curt and tight smile and bright eyes. Maria smiled widely and laughed frequently, but Ben could tell that it was a sort of defense

mechanism to the things that she found unpleasant or difficult to understand. What neither of them found difficult to understand was particle physics, which they understood with an intuition that made it difficult for them to explain some of the workings of their research. Additionally, they were always wondering whether or not they were allowed to talk about what they were working on considering its application in weapons. These were very self-aware and ethically responsible women. Ben found this refreshing after talking to so many researchers who allowed themselves to be wooed by the arrogance of 20th century scientific inquiry.

Daisy produced a smooth stone from her smock and winked at Ben before drawing it underneath the plexiglass of the cloud chamber and Ben watched as it went along it grew a porcupine back of contrails shooting everywhere into the chamber, following the stone. "Beta particles," Daisy said. "Alpha particles can't penetrate the plexiglas, so you don't see them."

"What is that?" Ben asked. "The stone? Is it Plutonium or something?"

"Granite," Maria said. "You'd be surprised by the kinds of fission that you can see from ordinary objects."

"Each line," Daisy ignored Maria, focusing on Ben's attention, "Is another statistical event in a long line of statistical events. We can measure time with radioactive decay. In a way, time is nothing but the observation of radioactive decay. But every moment, whether something happens or not, is a moment in which a decay event may occur. Philosophically, these are the decisions of the universe and they ripple through time and impact things for billions of years."

“It’s difficult to imagine,” Ben said. “Are all events related in some kind of grand scheme?”

“You’re talking about God,” Maria laughed. “Daisy’s just talking about cause and effect. Everything decays into something else forever until, well, there’s nothing left to decay.”

“What happens then?” Ben asked. Daisy put the stone back into her smock. “Aren’t you concerned about the stone being so close to you?”

Daisy and Maria laughed, “It’s only a bit of granite. You make your kitchen nook out of it.”

“Not me,” Ben said and smiled. “I’m not that wealthy.”

Daisy gestured for Ben to follow her further into the particle accelerator facility, “Come on, I’ll show you some more gizmos that they say we can show you.”

Ben followed, but then Daisy turned around, “It’s called heat death.”

“What?” Ben said, alarmed and concerned that he’d missed something from the safety training.

“When everything has decayed,” Daisy said.

“The end of the Universe,” Maria said.

“I thought the universe couldn’t end,” Ben said. “Like I knew the sun could fail eventually, but the universe?”

“Everything fails, Ben,” Daisy said. “They fail every minute, every time one of those little lines shoot off. But it also doesn’t. The life that we perceive is the lights going on and off in a room at random and

truth is simply what we see when the lights are on. You stare too much into the future and you can't possibly predict what will happen. It's all chance established by the rules established at the beginning of the universe."

Anne appeared again in the frame of the red lit room, "It's safe, come on," and disappeared again. Ben walked down the hall and into the room. In the red light he could see a variety of contraptions made of steel, vinyl and leather. There was a large bed on the far side. There were lots of televisions on the walls playing pornography films.

"A sex dungeon?" Ben said, a little confused. "I thought that we were supposed to be meeting Dmitri?"

"We got the address wrong, obviously," Anne said. "But what I'm curious about is why the door to the basement was open and this door was wide open."

"You guys went too far," a voice said from the door to the sex dungeon. Anne pointed her gun at the voice and Ben crouched down, putting his fingers in his ears. "Whoa, a little gun-randy aren't you?"

It was Dmitri. "Come on, my office is in the middle of the hall. Didn't I tell you last night? We don't come down here. This is Mairo's place, where he brings Gwen, I imagine. Come, come, Koch and Knight are waiting for you."

In Dmitri's office, Koch and Knight sat at their computers, looking at Anne and Ben blankly. Dmitri prepared coffee and made small talk and Anne and Ben joked with him about the long night they'd had.

“If you’ll excuse me, Dmitri,” Glen Knight said, “But who are your friends?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Glen,” Dmitri began. “This is Anne Augurie and Ben Ponchartrain who are interested in that little dongle that you’ve got in that server over there. These gentlemen are Glen Knight and Howard Koch of Koch and Knight Solutions,” Dmitri said this and then sat down as if nothing else needed saying.

“Dmitri!” Howard shouted, “Do you understand that our research is supposed to be under the greatest of security?”

Dmitri tilted his head and said, “Lots of security. An unlocked door and the Russian Bear,” he growled and then laughed. “Be real, they left you down here to decay with me. Do you not believe that Mairo is currently hiring four other consultancy firms doing the same thing right now?”

“Well, now that you mention it,” Glen said speculatively, he casually rubbed his jaw and smiled.

“Am I the only one around here who takes a job seriously?” Howard moaned. “What have I been doing then? Pissing away hours trying to parse this nonsense?”

“I can save you from that task,” Anne said. “That thumb drive is the thing that links Ernest Mairo to an actual murder in the Nevada Consortium.”

“Not really,” Howard said, looking at the dongle sticking out of his server. “Not that one.”

“Whether that’s the original or not, the data on it can be forensically used to link Ernest Mairo to the murder of Ingrid Mondaugen. We’re not joking,” Ben said.

“Look,” Anne said, “Mairo’s going to fuck you. He’s either going to steal whatever you discover about the AI on that drive or he’s going to short you when he pays out.”

“We have a contract,” Glen said.

“Have you met Mairo?” Anne said, tilting her head.

“Yes,” Glen and Howard both said simultaneously.

“Chalk this one up to an unretrievable bill,” Anne said. “You both have an opportunity to help put a killer in prison. I’m going to suppose that this is not going to affect your bottom line at the end of the year, but tell me if I’m wrong.”

“Mairo offered us a very large sum,” Howard said.

“An unrealistic sum,” Glen said.

“That spells a very long and drawn out legal battle for your due, doesn’t it?” Ben said.

“Goddamnit, Glen,” Howard said to his friend. “I thought you vetted this guy.”

“Come on, Howard,” Glen moaned. “We’re looking for fringe shit. We’re going to come across some shady ones every once in a while.”

“So,” Anne said, “Are you guys going to come with us to the police to contribute to evidence or do I need to add you to the list of the accomplices?”

“Aw goddamnit,” Howard barked and then got up, taking a large hard-drive and hooking it up to the server. “Give me a minute to back everything up. It’s not like I got anywhere. It took me three weeks to get an inkling of what was going on in there.”

Glen stood up and walked over to Anne, he put his hands in his pockets and said, “We’ll testify when you need it.”

The Kids Ain’t Alright

Nevada Consortium, Sunday

The cave is quiet except for the rhythmic sound of breathing. The lights are dim, all are cast in shadow or in a deep red fetal glow. The adept feels the pulse of a hundred of his fellows, the sweat on his skin, the feral electricity in his heart. Their leader intones, “AHMMMM!” and the cave explodes in harmonious humming “AHMMMM!” The squared rainbows flood the adept’s vision as the drugs work their way across his blood-brain barrier, he is excited. The entire cave hums louder and louder and the adept hallucinates voices in the din, but he believes that these voices are the telepathic thoughts of his fellow adepts.

The leader raises his arms and ceases the hum. He speaks into a microphone, “The time has come. We now wage war against the world that betrayed us. Remember that you will not survive this day, but your consciousness is already transcending your body and into perpetuity. This final act, our act of protest, will be our banner at the gates of heaven. God will have no choice but to listen!” The adept leap to their feet and cheer, the leader calms them down with an outstretched hand. “Now, go forth

and spill the blood of the betrayers. Moloch burns for you! Bring the bodies to Astarte! Kill! Kill!

KILL!”

Calmly, the adept turn and begin to walk out of the cave. They separate into their platoons and begin to march down the mountain. They are dressed in gray and khaki from head to toe to hide themselves in the hills and among the dull-dead adobe of the suburbs. The plan, long since ratified, instructs the platoons to enter the suburbs from 20 different entry points and march towards the center of the city.

The adept pauses by a rock outcropping near his platoon’s entry point. He struggles to be silent, but he wants to giggle with excitement. “Fifteen minutes until it’s go-time.” The other platoons need time to be able to get into their positions. The adept checks his rifle. He examines his magazines, loaded only a couple hours before. He says to himself, *I am ready for glory*, and suppresses a giggle.

“Remember,” platoon leader Hsu says, “No supersonic weapons until the order is given. Prepare to move out in twenty seconds.”

The adept’s face warms with excitement and he begins to imagine vividly rooting around in the gore that was once a human being and pulling his arms out, slick with blood. In his imagination, he laughs silently because he cut his tongue out. He reaches for his knife with the idea that it might be wise to cut his tongue out now before the real gore gets in the way, but then platoon leader Hsu gives the signal to advance.

The platoon steadily strides down the street in formation, their rifles slung, but their knives and crossbows at the ready. A man steps out of the door in one of the adobe walls. He’s wearing a red robe

and moccasins. He palms one of the flowers growing on the vine on the wall beside his door. He turns around and is surprised to find twenty people standing in the street in khaki and gray. He says nothing, but tilts his head curiously. There is the sound of a spring releasing and suddenly a crossbow bolt is fixed in his lower trachea. Still not making a sound, he tilts his head in the other direction and gingerly touches the tail of the bolt before falling to his knees and then on his face in the street.

Hsu points out five members of the platoon who grab the man and drag him into his lawn behind his door, the rest of the platoon flatten themselves against the wall. While the small team is in the residence, Hsu gets one of her feelings and pulls out a paracord noose, which she throws over a streetlamp on the nearby corner. She catches it on its way down and hands the free end to the adept and another three. She waits silently. Then a man comes around the corner and she drops the noose over his head. The adept and the others heave the man kicking into the air, his screams muffled by his constricted throat. The adept ties the line off on an iron filigree on the top of the concrete wall.

The others exit the residence and give Hsu the “all-clear” sign and then notice the wriggling man from the light post, one gives the adept a curious glance and the adept only shrugs.

Opportunity and coincidence.

The End of a Dream

The Nevada Consortium

There were fires growing in the city below. The smoke rose in columns in half a dozen locations. The emergency infrastructure was not prepared for this kind of general mayhem. The staccato report of automatic weapons were a regular reminder that the situation was emergent verging on continuing and without any sign of stopping before the entire city was a heap of ash.

Declan Delany ordered the general evacuation of the Nevada Consortium, but the Consortium was on active shooter lockdown because there were these gray and tan pricks in every quarter of the city, shooting whoever they came across and setting fires and traps. Even if people wanted to get out of their buildings, the security protocols would not be released until a fire was detected, which would then dump them out into the street where they could be wiped out by the gray and tans.

Declan rubbed his forehead and chuckled quietly, *Is this some kind of cosmic joke? A hundred years ago the Black and Tans terrorized us and now the Gray and Tans are going to shut me down? Somebody has a filthy sense of humor.* Declan turned from the window to look at Amaryllis, seated with her bodyguards on a collection of colorful pillows in the center of the room. They were absorbed in their phones and laptops trying to secure the Data Center and to figure out why the attack was happening in the first place.

There was a knock at the door. Sheriff Rodriguez stepped into the middle of the room and addressed Declan officially, “My security forces have established a line of defense around the Consortium

University and the quarter of the square that houses the security office. To be honest, we're stretched too thin as it is and it will take a great deal of effort to maintain this line without significant reinforcements. Also, until we get some help, we won't be able to mount any kind of offensive to retake any part of the Consortium. Significant damage may be done by that point. Finally, the traps that these terrorists are laying across the city are...ingenious and cruel," Rodriguez said.

"Oh?" Delany said, turning towards the city again, his attention only nominal.

"They're improvised out of common junk. Old plastic bottles, paper bags, paper cups, styrofoam clamshells. They hide gas bombs in them."

"Petrol bombs," Delany said.

"No," Rodriguez said, "They're bombs that are designed to release a quantity of Sha-93 into the air. It disperses quickly, but it's enough to seriously dose a person who triggers the trap. People who have been given such a dose of Sha-93, or as you might have heard it called, terror, are seriously compromised. They are more susceptible to suicide, have serious motor-function loss, which makes it hard for them to defend themselves, and the mental confusion makes them appear dangerous to security forces attempting to regain control of a particular area. They may appear like zombies, marching towards the security forces, unspeaking. The terrorists have set these devices up throughout the city, especially near the egress points of various large population buildings, which makes evacuation especially dangerous."

"Has that happened yet?" Delany asked.

“An apartment block caught fire,” Rodriguez began and then cleared his throat, clearly not pleased with what he was going to have to say. “When the fire started, the security lockdown protocols were released and the residents were instructed to evacuate. The crowds triggered a number of improvised smoke weapons outside of the fire exits, creating a crowd of a couple hundred people who were suddenly under the influence of a significant dose of Terror. They wandered around the Apartment’s lobby and in the streets of the suburbs nearby. The terrorists found the group and began to fire into the crowd. This caused a panic and survivors began to run through a particular alleyway, which became a choke point where several were caught in the stampede and trampled to death. The rest, running frantically and in a group, were aimed—probably by design, the terrorists directed them like Neanderthals pushed mammoths off of a cliff—they were aimed at the security defense line right outside of the security office, where our officers opened fire. The crowd was eliminated before anyone realized what had happened.”

“That one,” Delany pointed to a burning apartment block.

“Yes,” Rodriguez said. “Things are happening fast, Delany. We’re going to have to act quickly to save lives.”

“What do we do?” Delany asked.

“Give the word and I’ll issue the command for Mjollnir to send a task force to retake the city,”

Rodriguez said.

“Do it,” Delany said, turning away from the window and sitting at his desk. He took a sip from his teacup and then rubbed his eyes.

“I have to warn you, Mr. Delany,” Rodriguez said. “Mjollnir is a brutal, but effective force. They will secure the city, but there may not be a lot of the Consortium left.”

“Like you said, Rodriguez,” Delany said. “We’re saving lives now, the project is lost. Call in Mjollnir. Tell them to try to keep a couple of the terrorists alive for questioning.”

Rodriguez squirmed a little bit, “Uh,” he began, “They won’t do that.”

“Hmm?” Delany looked up at Rodriguez vacantly as if drunk. “Fuck it. Why should they.” Declan reached into his desk and retrieved a bottle of whiskey. He threw the remaining tea from his cup over his shoulder and poured in some whiskey. Rodriguez turned to leave, but Delany said, “Hey Rodriguez. You stay safe. Thanks for your help these past few years.”

“Thanks for the opportunity, Mr. Delany,” Rodriguez said and Declan Delany took a swig of his whiskey while simultaneously giving a sardonic salute.

Rodriguez left the room and Amaryllis got off the phone to shout at Delany, “What did he want?”

“Just a status report, love,” Declan said. “He’s calling in the cavalry. This whole mess will be over soon and we can get on with our lives.”

“Well that’s a relief, but if you don’t mind, I still want to get somebody down to the Data Center to make sure that our heroes don’t accidentally ruin everything,” Amaryllis said.

“Rodriguez says that the whole security contingent is busy maintaining a protective line around the facility. As long as the Terrorists remain in the city, we should be fine. The Data Center should be fine,” Declan said, sipping his whiskey.

Amaryllis stood up and stormed over to his desk, “This whole attitude of yours is going to be a problem.”

“What attitude?” Delany asked.

“You’re acting like you’ve given up,” Amaryllis said.

“That’s right,” Delany said. “That’s because I have indeed given up.”

“What are you talking about?” Amaryllis asked, frustrated to the point of growling at him,

“Everything we’ve worked for is in that Data Center. You’re just going to sit there and let it die?”

“Grace,” Delany used Amaryllis’s real name, “You know it’s one thing to have this affectation for the sake of art, but it’s another thing altogether in the real world. You act like it is some kind of living thing.”

“It is *alive*,” Amaryllis snarled. “You never believed in it, you never believed in anything. It was all just money to you. They were right all along weren’t they?”

Delany laughed and poured some more whiskey, “Oh sure, right. All about the money. It’s all about the money. Grace, love, it’s all gone after today. I’ve not got any money now. This was it and you can see what’s happening outside that window. There’s no coming back from this. And you’re wrong.

Whatever it is you've got locked up in that basement isn't alive. What *was* alive were all those people out there who have recently been felled by automatic gunfire and bombs and blades and poison.

"That's what this was all about, Grace," Delany said. "I only ever wanted to help people and I had a crazy thought, I thought that maybe I could take all of my wealth, the greatest accumulation of wealth ever produced in history and do something about the suffering of humanity, their problems and woes. Jesus, do you know what I tried to do? I tried to buy my status as savior to humanity. Talk about hubris!. But God, if there is a God, I hope he knows that I did it with the right kind of heart."

"You're impossible when you're in one of these moods," Amaryllis said and then returned to her team to try to convince someone with some guns to go and stand guard at the Data Center.

"Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair," Declan said and laughed. "I wonder how Ozymandias would have felt to have lived to see his statue taken by the desert sands as I get to see mine burn before my eyes." Declan realized that no one was listening, but he continued to talk, "Fool that I am, I thought that I could make the world a better place. Who did I think I was? Were they going to in ten years or twenty crown me king of the world and praise me for solving all their problems for them?"

"I was always so good at solving problems," Declan stood up to look out the window again, maybe to watch the Mjollnir attack helicopters fly in. "I made billions solving problems over and over again. Damn, I was good at it, but I guess I'm just like my prize-fighter grandfather. I waited too long to get out and now my perfect record is blemished with one hell of a fall. I can practically see him out there,

blood flowing out of his nose and ears from the last fight he ever fought in his life, nodding, ‘Ah, there’s me boy. Takes after his gran-dad, he does.’ and he’d be right.

“But he knew something essential that I wish that I’d known. There’s always going to be violence. You can try to get out of the game, but somebody is going to show up to watch the fight and there’s always going to be a fight whether you want to participate or not. I tried to take the high road, you see? I tried to side-step that problem altogether, to say that I was above such base things as violence and warfare, but because I did that, the promoters still put on a show and the boxers showed up and now they’ve ruined my nice little garden party.”

Declan Delany laughed at himself, “I’m rambling. I know I am, but I don’t care. It’s funny what you think about when the shit hits the fan, when there are no more decisions to make. I get flash-backs of my childhood, glimpses of memories that seem prescient now, but I’d never even considered before. Do you remember the film *Zardoz*?”

No one answered, so Delany continued, “It was an outrageous film. Some edgy science fiction film starring Sean Connery in a bright red speedo. Giant floating heads would belch up guns for crazed madmen to pick up to go and terrorize other people in a hellish dystopia. The heads came from what was called Zardoz and as the movie progresses, you find that they’re sent out by a secret society of immortal humans who are trying to repress the rest of humanity for some reason, I can’t remember why. It was a very convoluted plot to get Sean Connery half naked for 90 minutes. Anyway, it turns out that Zardoz was the Wizard of Oz backwards, right? Clever, too clever.

“I mention it because I am suddenly reminded of a line from the movie: see, Sean Connery’s friends cry out to the stone head ‘The gun is good!’ and the stone head shouts back ‘The penis is evil!’ and that just feels really trenchant right now as I stand in my giant evil penis and watch my life’s work fall to the good of the gun.

“What does this all mean?” Declan whispered, no longer talking to an unlistening audience, but to himself, “Is humanity destined to destroy itself despite its best intentions? Are we doomed to violence? Are our impulses for self-improvement to be eventually betrayed? Are we even worth saving? Is it even worth trying?”

“Oh, these are some heady thoughts,” Delany said and then quickly strode over to his desk. “And I’ve got the perfect solution for them, being the problem solver that I am.” Delany reached for the whiskey bottle, but then suddenly changed course and opened his desk drawer, “Fuck it,” he said and pulled out a small revolver, which he jammed upside down in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

The bang caused Amaryllis and her crew to dive for cover, but then quickly realized what had happened. Amaryllis ran to Declan’s body, his eyes half-open and his head resting in a pool of his own deep red blood. “Oh my god, Declan!” Amaryllis cried, “Oh my god, why? Why did you do this?”

But Declan Delany didn’t say anything. After forty-four years of life on planet Earth and ten billion dollars, Declan Delany had nothing left to say.

The Parents

Nevada Consortium, Sunday

“Okay, here’s the plan, guys,” Anne said to the group of Ben, Dmitri, Howard and Glen. “We’re going to take back alleys to the Consortium security office so that we limit the likelihood that anyone sees us together. When we get there, Howard and Glen will turn in the AI dongle along with their statement of how they came to possess it. Then I’ll give my statement and Rodriguez should have enough to put Mairo away.”

The group was still drinking coffee in Dmitri’s office in the basement of Synergistic Solutions. “Don’t you need, like, the murderer too to get a conviction?” Glen asked. “Habeas Corpus and all that?”

“We got the corpse,” Anne said.

“No, what I think Howard is saying is that there’s no evidence to suggest that Mairo hired someone to kill Ingrid and there’s no evidence that he personally killed the girl,” Glen said.

“Whaddya mean?” Anne said, holding up a plastic bag with the dongle in it. “He had the dongle, how’s he going to get the dongle from the dead girl if he’s not part of the murder?”

“I think that’s what they call circumstantial evidence. It’s not a particularly powerful argument in court,” Howard said.

“What do you know about it?” Anne asked, a little flustered.

“I think he’s right,” Dmitri said.

“Okay, guys,” Anne said, taking a deep breath, “We’ve still got all this evidence we’ve got to check in to the security office. We can figure out what else needs to be done at a later juncture. We just need to get to the office without being seen by any of the principals in the case, particularly the fake parents, who might still be hanging around to do Mairo’s dirty work, just guessing.”

“Okay,” Howard said. “So what happens if these ghostly parents show up and start shooting at us?”

“Anne has a gun,” Ben blurted.

“Jesus, Ben,” Anne said, putting her head in her hand.

“What? You were pointing it down the hallway just half an hour ago like you were Jason-fucking-Bourne, I didn’t think it was a widely kept secret.”

“I’m a detective, Ben,” Anne explained. “I deal in secrets and whatnot. The less people know about me and what I’m doing, the safer I am.”

“You just told us your whole plan in, like, less than a minute,” Glen said.

“You told six people your plan last night at the bar,” Dmitri said.

“Oh shit,” Anne grimaced. “I did, didn’t I? Okay, so we are going to have to assume that we’re going to meet some resistance.”

“You aren’t a very good detective are you?” Howard said.

“Anybody else here trying to solve this girl’s murder?” Anne asked the room. “No? Okay, so stay behind me and keep looking around. Let me know if you see anything like two spooky Scandinavians in gray suits and take cover if people start shooting.”

“I hardly think that we need to be instructed to hide when people start shooting at us,” Dmitri laughed, nudging Howard jovially.

“Enough,” Anne said, “Let’s get going.” Anne pulled her gun out of her waistband and pulled the slide back to check that a round was loaded in the chamber before releasing the slide.

“Hang on,” Ben said, “Was there a live round in the chamber this whole time?”

“Yeah,” Anne said matter of factly, “Why?”

“Aren’t you afraid you’re going to accidentally shoot your ass off if you sit down funny?” Ben asked.

“No, you see this little thing here?” Anne said explanatorily, pointing at the trigger of her gun, “That’s the safety, the trigger won’t pull without pressure on that little bit.”

“That’s hardly what I would call a ‘safety feature’,” Glen said. “You’ve got a little piece of plastic that you have to depress before you depress the little piece of plastic that makes the gun go off? That sounds like only a small hindrance to keep the gun from firing. You would think there would be a better system.”

“I’ve seen guns that have the safety as, like, a button on the back side of the handle so that you not only have to pull the trigger, but your hand has to be wrapped around the handle in such a way as to depress the button on the back too for the gun to fire,” Howard said.

“Now that seems like a better system,” Dmitri said.

“Okay, first of all, it’s called a grip,” Anne said. “And second, who’s trained in concealed firearms here? Oh, nobody but me?”

“That’s a kind of fallacious argument,” Ben said. “An appeal to authority. It doesn’t really strengthen your argument.”

“It’s this kind of thinking that makes me think that you’re not a particularly good detective, Anne,” Howard said.

“Look,” Anne blurted, “Eggheads! I’m not a goddamned lawyer, I’m a detective. I’ve got to do some rough and tumble shit to get the job done. I can’t get into these kinds of philosophical arguments all the time or nothing is going to get done. Now follow me, and keep your mouths shut.”

The group kept silent in assent and began to walk towards the door. “And another thing, I don’t exactly appreciate the mansplaining tone that I’m getting from you all. I’m running this operation and it appears that now our lives may be in danger, so I need you to follow me and my orders exactly or you might get hurt. I promise you that if you do what I say, you will make it through this. Trust me. Can you do that?”

The crowd was non-committal until Ben spoke, "I've got a problem with your assertion that our criticism of your trade is misogynistic, but I do believe that you know your way around violent situations and I trust you."

"Thank you, Ben," Anne said. "Now, are we going or what?" There was a murmur of consent and Anne continued, "Now stay close and keep an eye out."

They went up the stairs and Anne opened the door to the alley cautiously, looking around before opening it up and gesturing for the group to follow her. They made their way down the graffitied alleyway slowly, their shoes scuffling in approximation of Anne's short quick steps. This irritated Anne somewhat because it felt like they were making a lot of noise, but she was trying to get them to a location only about 600 meters away and she figured it wasn't that important to be absolutely silent. She was pleased that they kept in a close line behind her.

Every time they came to another alleyway, she paused and gestured for the group to get against the wall while she checked the alley to see if anyone was there before crossing and gesturing for them to follow. This happened at two crossings without incident and Anne began to wonder where everyone was. She gestured for them to get against the wall and then went over to Ben, "Where is everyone?"

"Whaddya mean?" Ben asked.

"We've passed two alleys and I didn't see anyone in the alleys, nor did I see them in the streets walking around. Do people sleep in on Sundays around here?"

Then, suddenly, the burst of distant automatic gunfire reverberated over the city. “Holy shit,” Dmitri said. “That’s an AK, for sure!”

“Shh,” Anne said, “It’s not anywhere near here. We’re going to keep going.”

“What’s going on?” Howard asked Glen, who shrugged.

“Shh!” Anne hissed again and then gestured for the group to follow her to the next alleyway corner.

They crossed it successfully and they made their way to the next alleyway, which was the one behind the buildings that made up the square, but halfway to the alley a figure dressed in gray and black, strung with black taticool gear and holding an AR variant strode out casually, as if on a stroll. Anne’s breath stuck in her throat as she tried to identify the figure’s affiliation. The figure stopped and then turned down the alley, looking at Anne and her four compatriots pushed against the wall. The figure paused for a moment as if not sure that they were seeing them there and then started to pull its rifle up to their shoulder. Anne fired before they could get a bead on the group and the figure dropped, the report of her pistol reverberated through the alley. The group all made sounds and gripped their ears in pain. More automatic fire sounded in the distance. Anne ran up and before jumping into the alley, she checked both ways, not seeing anyone, she knelt at the dead body and pulled the AR variant away and checked the breech. Satisfied, she gestured for the group to come and gather at the corner.

“Who was that?” Howard asked, breathing hard.

“A sentry,” Anne said. “I think I’m lucky that my shot got hidden by the other shots over there,” she pointed in the general direction of where the sentry had come from.

“Yeah,” Dmitri said, “But *who is he?*”

“He doesn’t look like security,” Glen said.

“I think she’s not part of security,” Anne corrected. “Something very weird is going on.”

“It sounds like a war is going on,” Dmitri said.

“We’re going to have to run the rest of the way to the security office,” Anne said and looked each of them in the eye. “Stay close!”

Anne ran down the alley towards the main road and the rest followed, when she reached the opening of the buildings where the main street ran into the main square, she turned to run there, but then stopped, instantly she recognized a barricade made of tables and chairs and hiding behind it were the fake parents. They were facing the other end of the square, but noticed her. She fired a few rounds from the AR and shouted, “Run, follow me!” She ran across the street, her plan was to take the back alleys to the back entrance of the security office. Even though the fake parents were firing at them, almost everyone made it across the entrance except for Ben, who had stumbled in the middle of the street. Somewhere, on the other end of the square, someone was shooting at the fake parents, which made them take cover, but not before taking a last shot, which hit something that exploded in rainbow hued smoke that engulfed Ben as he was trying to get up from his stumble.

“Hold!” Anne shouted at Howard, Dmitri and Glen, who were panting and leaning against the wall on the other end of the street, Anne looked out into the main street which was full of a strange rainbow hued smoke. “Ben! Ben, are you alright?”

Ben emerged from the smoke in a hurry and joined the rest of them, he was out of air, but he puffed,

“Yeah, I’m fine, let’s go!”

“Come on!” Anne shouted and ran, the group following her.

They ran for about fifty meters before Ben said, “The back entrance was back there.”

“Ben!” Anne shouted, angry, “Where?”

“Over here,” Ben said and then ran to the door. “I don’t know if it’s going to be open...”

Anne pulled the door open, “Oh fuck,” Howard said as he followed Ben and Anne into the building,

“This place is ridiculous.”

The back entrance to the security office was a supply closet, and Anne told Dmitri and Glen to barricade the door. Glen simply stepped up to the door and engaged the deadbolts on the door.

“That’s probably going to do it,” Anne said. “Come on, we’ve got to find Rodriguez.”

“Do you guys feel weird?” Ben laughed. “I feel weird.”

Where’s a Cop When You Need One?

The group stepped into utter chaos. The inside of the security office was full of officers running this way and that and so preoccupied as to not notice that a group of people had stepped in from the streets into their back entrance. Anne shouted at one, “Hey, what’s going on?”

The officer, a slender woman with a tight blonde bun on her head and a pistol in her hands, stopped and said, “Hey, you aren’t supposed to be here! Shelter-in-place unless there’s a fire!”

“I need to speak to Sheriff Rodriguez about a crime,” Anne said and then immediately felt foolish because of the scene before her. “What’s going on?”

“We’re under attack, lady,” the officer said. “Where have you been? The terrorists have been attacking the town for two hours now. We’re trying to get a defensive perimeter around the University grounds right now at Sheriff Rodriguez’ orders.”

“Why are they attacking the Consortium?” Anne asked.

“Nobody knows,” the officer said. “But they have some serious firepower. We’re doing all we can right now. You need to get yourselves in a defensive position immediately. The security office is probably a target and you aren’t safe here!”

“Holy shit!” Howard exclaimed as the officer ran off, “We’re in a warzone! How did that happen?”

Ben was giggling madly and he took a seat at one of the swivel chairs at the security intake area, “Hoo-boy! It was gonna happen someday, now it’s come. Now it’s really here!”

“What is he talking about?” Dmitri asked Anne.

“I don’t know,” Anne said and then went over to Ben, kneeling before him, “Ben, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, beautiful!” Ben exclaimed. “Everything is how it should be and will be forever!”

“You’re scaring me, Ben,” Anne said.

“Don’t be scared, Anne,” Ben giggled. “We live, we die, we live forever!”

“That’s a line from that Mad Max movie,” Howard shouted, pointing at Ben. “Ben’s cracked. He’s already got PTSD or something!”

“Ben,” Anne said very gently, “Do you remember where you are?”

“Sure I do, sure I do,” Ben was laughing now. “I’m in the gypsy queen rock and rolla psychedelic madhouse!”

“Ben’s lost it!” Dmitri said, staring at Ben in disbelief.

A medic running past stopped by Ben and knelt before him, looked him in the eyes and then said, “Your friend has acute Sha-93 toxicity. He’s going to be basically unintelligible until you get him some extensive psychotherapy.”

“We don’t have time for that,” Anne said.

“Then I think you need to keep him alive long enough to get time for that,” the woman said. “I’m a doctor here and I’ve seen this kind of dosage before. He’s going to be tripping for a couple of days and then the depression is going to set in. Why did you let him do that to himself?”

“We didn’t let him do anything to himself,” Anne said. “But there was this weird rainbow cloud.”

“Oh, he got dosed,” the woman said. “They’re setting up traps all over town to dose people. He’s gotten a heroic dose of Terror. If you want him to live, you should keep an eye on him. He’s likely to kill himself or others. I don’t mean to frighten you, but this man here is now a liability.”

Ben was turning around and around in the desk chair saying “Wooo woooo!”

“Are you kidding me?” Anne asked, but the woman had already run off.

“Okay,” Anne said, rubbing her eyes, “We need to hunker down until whatever this is is done. Any ideas?”

“We’ve got an apartment, but it’s back the way we came and honestly, it’s not that secure,” Glen said.

“I mostly live in the Synergistic Solutions basement,” Dmitri said. “My apartment is kind of far from here.”

“You could always go to the data center!” Ben shouted, suddenly clear of the effect of the drug, “It’s a bomb shelter, for christ sake!” and then he began to spin again and say “Weee! Wooo!”

“Holy shit,” Anne said. “Are we going to follow the debilitated moron?”

“I think it may be the best option,” Howard said.

“Okay,” Anne said. “Same rules as before, but this time you guys have to make sure that you have Ben too. He’s clearly all fucked up.”

They staged their escape at the door that led out on the street, “Where is the data center, Ben?”

“Blippity poo!” Ben said and laughed.

“Ben, I need you to remember where the Data Center is, please,” Anne stared into his eyes with a desperation that she would be reluctant to use in other than life-saving circumstances.

“It’s a big ditch,” Ben said, his eyes vacant, “At the center is a hutch, or shed, you might call it. You wouldn’t think it, but it houses every great idea ever had.”

“How do we get in, Ben?” Anne asked, desperately, “Is there a code or something?”

“Speak, friend and enter!” Ben said and dissolved into laughter.

“Okay,” Anne said, “He’s gone stupid.”

“That’s a line from The Lord of the Rings,” Howard said. “That’s how they get into the Mines of Moria.”

“So he’s probably mistaken that for the real code,” Anne said.

“Do you think that he ever knew the code?” Glen asked, “He’s a journalist. Do you think that they ever let him into the goddamn heart of this place?”

“It seems like that ‘s all that we have, so we have to go for it. We can improvise after that,” Anne said.

“At the bottom of a pit,” Howard said.

“I dunno, Howard,” Anne blurted, throwing her arms up, “Do you have any great ideas about how we can protect ourselves from this assault? It seems that they’re standing up a perimeter around the

University, which means that these weirdos aren't going to get at us even if we're trying to get into the Data Center."

"What about the Consortium's defenses?" Howard said, "We get into the pit and then the Consortium decides that we're wet meat?"

"Howard," Glen said, "We just found an unlocked door to the back end of the security office, I feel like they weren't really concerned with that kind of thing. Let's just try it out. We can always just keep going, try for the mountains. Hide in the scrub brush until shit calms down."

"Now that's an idea I can get behind," Howard said.

"Okay," Anne began again, "The plan is to run to the Data Center, but if that doesn't work, then we run past that towards the mountains. Don't lose Ben. He's liable to be a pain in the ass, but you need to drag him."

Everyone nodded, but then Ben asked, "What am I supposed to do?"

"Oh, you're here?" Howard said, "Just follow us. Can you do that?"

Ben stood up from the chair stock straight and saluted the four of them, "Whatever you want, cap!" and then dissolved into laughter again.

"Okay," Anne said, standing at the door, "Let's go!"

Anne burst from the door with the AR variant drawn and ready, she checked both directions before running across the road, she leapt into the green grass of the University area, sliding a few feet before

turning back with her gun pointed at the direction that she figured that gunfire would come from, the Consortium square. “Go, go, go!” she shouted when she didn’t find anyone firing at her. The rest of the group crossed over the road and then when they were about to finish crossing, she saw the fake parents striding towards her in the square, their guns drawn. They started firing and Anne fired the AR at them, which was enough to get them to take cover. The rest of the group joined her, but something was wrong.

“Glen is shot!” Howard cried. “Oh no, don’t die, don’t die!”

They were shielded now by a group of trees, but Anne could sense the fake parents finding a new firing position. She scrambled over to Glen, who was laying in the grass, blood spreading out from a point in his shoulder.

Ben laughed, “Glen! Just embrace it, man! We’re all going to die!”

“Shut up!” Howard barked at Ben and punched him in the face. “Shut up, Glen’s hurt!”

Anne pulled his shirt away and looked at the wound, “Glen,” she said, “How are you feeling?”

“Anne?” He said, “I gotta say I’m not feeling great.”

“I’ve got worse news,” Anne said and Glen’s face caved in, “You’re going to survive.” Anne pulled his shirt off and turned it into a tourniquet. “All of you, get to the Data Center. I have to deal with the fake parents.”

Anne was finishing the shirt-tourniquet on Glen when Howard asked, “How do we know that you won’t be used by the fake parents to get in?”

Anne looked at Ben, who was gibbering and curled up in a fetal position, “Uh, I don’t know,” Anne tried looking around for some kind of sign, but then it came to her, “Ask me what my favorite song is.”

“What is your favorite song?” Howard whispered.

“Whichever song you come up with,” Anne said.

Anne got up and handed the rifle to Dmitri, “Use this if you need. I need to kill the parents. Now run!”

Anne ran off towards the parents and Dmitri dragged the rest of the group off towards the Data Center.

Heinrich and Francis approached the garden area where they had fired at Anne Augurie and a group of men. Their orders had been to assassinate Anne Augurie and Ben Ponchartrian, but there were more people in the group, which confused things somewhat. Very meticulously, they stepped through the grass and brush that had been grown in the so-called University, each was separated by twenty meters so that if one was eliminated, the other might be able to eliminate Augurie.

Being twenty meters away from each other, they were not able to communicate with each other, but if Anne decided to shoot one of them, that would spell doom for her because it would give away her position and the other could very quickly finish the job.

Heinrich passed through a bit of brush and stood in the beginning of a meadow. He reflected on how green it was. It was strange to stand in such a green place as such places had been banned in his home, natural green, of course, but this was an unnatural sheet of land that was green. The muzzle of a pistol on the back of his head was also so surprising, he smiled as his brains were sprayed upon the lawn.

Francis, hearing the shot, realized that Heinrich had been killed, and started to run towards the sound. She wanted to find Anne and shoot her in her face, but instead, she came across Heinrich's body. She checked his pulse, but he was dead. She stood up, realizing that she had fallen in a trap. "I can be a useful witness," she said to the thicket.

"I doubt it," the woods spoke back.

The report of a small caliber gunshot was lost in the general chaos of the continuous automatic gunfire in the distance.

When Koch met Knight

The Nevada Consortium, Sunday

The group had been wandering through the garden of the Consortium University following Ben, who would hurry on occasion, but would then get distracted and stare at a flower or leaf for a while before becoming startled at the three men staring at him.

"He's completely cracked," Dmitri said. "Ben? How far is the Data Center?"

“The where?” Ben asked, laying down on the sidewalk to inspect an anthill. “Quiet, quiet, I think they’ve got something to say.”

“We’re going to die out here,” Glen said weakly.

“Bullshit,” Howard said and set Glen down on a park bench. “I’m going to get us out of here, I promise you.”

Glen chuckled and winced, “I’m supposed to be taking care of you.”

“I’m going to look around and see if I can’t find the Data Center,” Dmitri said and walked down the path past Ben.

“Do you remember when we met?” Glen asked Howard.

Howard remembered when he and Glen had met. Glen often repeated the story at parties or to new customers to embarrass Howard, but also to remind him of their affinity for each other. Glen had been an all-star forward in his high school in Illinois, which got him into Purdue, but he quickly found out that his intellectual skills were lacking. He struggled through two semesters of an engineering degree before he found himself in a large lecture hall on the first day of classes considering whether he wanted to kill himself, the whole class or just drop out and get a job as a dock worker in San Francisco. He was lost in this revelry when a skinny, awkward kid stumbled into the hall and fell into the seat next to Glen, “Oh shit,” Howard said under his breath, he had spilled coffee all down his front. He spent five minutes and the first few minutes of the lecture getting himself sorted out. He struggled to get his laptop out, he fussed with his notebook for a minute before deciding to take notes on his laptop. He

kept checking his coffee cup for a drink, but was frustrated every time by the fact that he'd spilled it all over himself. Glen hated him instantly. His hair, black and unevenly cut, because he didn't believe in barbers and cut it himself, was wild and had melted bits of plastic in it. He was dressed shabbily, even for, what Glen correctly assumed, was a freshman. Glen could smell the faint scent of weed on the kid and assumed that he was just another burn-out, drop-out who was not going to go very far. He would probably end up getting a dead-end IT job and...

And then he spoke. "Professor MacMillan," he addressed the professor from the back of the hall, full of hundreds of students. "I hate to interrupt, but I've already perused your syllabus and I understand that this is only an introductory materials class, but I was wondering if you will be discussing the paper you published last year on the plasticity of exotic materials at all."

MacMillan made a searching gesture, "Who is asking that from all the way out in the nosebleeds?" The class laughed. "I'm sorry to tell you that I will not be talking about that particular paper as it's quite a bit more advanced than this class, but color me impressed that you've heard of it."

"I read it last night," Howard said.

"How? It hasn't been published yet. It's still in review," MacMillan said.

"If you don't want curious students reading your unpublished works, then you may want to tell your publisher to update their security systems," Howard said.

"What's your name?" MacMillan said and took up a pen at his podium to write it down.

“Howard Roark,” Howard said.

“Well, I thank you, Howard,” MacMillan wrote down the name. “I’ll be sure to let my publisher know.”

Glen’s curiosity was piqued as he watched Howard throughout the lecture cycle through several emotions, that of boredom, realization, epiphany, confusion, frustration, and amusement. When the class was over, he exploded out of his chair and out of the back door before anyone else could get there.

Glen had to follow him.

Glen tracked this strange boy halfway across campus, missing a required English Literature class. He lost Howard in a crowd outside of a cafeteria and in frustration, he began to walk back towards his dormitory. On his way back, he walked past a botanical garden when he smelled the unmistakable stench of weed. Glen, never being much of a connoisseur of herb, wasn’t sure, but was curious if it was the same weed he smelled on the strange student that had impressed him so much. He strode into the garden, parting fronds of leaves and trampling small plants that he was sure that he was ruining. Then, in a kind of cave composed of tree branches, bedded with pine needles, he found the strange boy sitting under a tree and smoking from a briar pipe.

Glenn did not react to Harry’s presence, rather, he took another long draw from the pipe and coughed cacophonously. “Well, since you found me, I guess I have to share, although I don’t have much left in my stash. That’s why I’m trying to keep it private.”

Glen sat down and Howard offered the pipe to him, he waved it off. “You’re pretty smart, huh?”

“That sounds like narc talk,” Howard said, putting out his pipe and starting to get up.

Glen gestured that he sit, “I’m no narc. I’m just a student.”

“Students can be narcs,” Howard said. “The Soviets enlisted the children of the Intelligentsia to rat out their parents, I’d not be surprised if the university was using the same tactic.”

“I promise I’m not here to bust you, I don’t care that you smoke weed,” Glen said.

“Then why did you follow me?” Howard asked, lighting his pipe again with another wild cough.

“I’m,” Glen began and then smiled broadly. “I’m not so smart.”

“You made it to MacMillan’s class,” Howard said, pointing the stem of the pipe at Glen, a little tendril of smoke came out of the hole.

“I’m in over my head,” Glen said, looking at the dirt in the clearing.

Howard drew in and held the smoke in his lungs, “Ah, I see,” he said, the smoke distorting his voice and making it basso profundo, “You’re looking for a tutor.”

“Something like that,” Glen said.

“You’re out of luck, buddy,” Howard said. “You couldn’t offer me enough money to prop up some jock who’s enrolled on some undeserved scholarship. You can piss off to the academic assistance building.” Howard laughed, but then quieted when he heard rustling in another part of the garden.

“Did you hear that?”

“I think I can offer you something that you don’t have,” Glen said, ignoring Howard’s sudden paranoia.

Howard puffed gently on his pipe, his thumb over the bowl, he thoughtfully looked at Glen, golden-haired and sitting cross-legged in the pine needles. Even sitting he looked athletic and able, like if in an instant he could jump up and start sprinting. “What don’t I have?”

“Tact?” Glen said, “Elan? A plan? You’ve got the whole world figured out, don’t you? But what you don’t know is how to put any of that into play. You’ve got ideas, but they sit stagnant until you’ve had enough time to put together a scheme. How long did you take to figure out to use the fake name to tell MacMillan that his publisher’s technology was garbage? How do you figure you’re going to get out of this when he sees you again? What are you going to do when you eventually want to ask him a real question and he recognizes you?”

“How did you know it was a fake name?” Howard asked. “Anyway, MacMillan has Prosopagnosia.”

“What the hell is Prosopagnosia?” Glen asked, turning to look at Glen somewhat annoyed.

“Face blindness,” Howard said, with his pipe in his mouth he spread his arms out in front of him, “To MacMillan everybody looks basically the same.”

“Uh-huh,” Glen grunted, “Well, you know that people with Prosopagnosia, or face-blindness, as I remember it being called in probably the same Oliver Sacks book that you read, remember people not by their faces, but by their habits and manners and an overly confident, stinky, prick like yourself is going to sound some chords of recognition in such a person. Especially someone who has the audacity

to give a fake name that's from a novel that he included on the syllabus under 'Further Not-required Reading'."

"He put *The Fountainhead* on the reading list for the class?" Howard chuckled. "What a jerk!"

"Yeah, like, what does that have to do with anything with engineering?" Glen chuckled along with Howard for a moment. Then he said seriously, "Except, for the fact that you're nothing like Howard Roark and that might be a memorable contrast."

"Oh piss," Howard said, taking the pipe out of his frowning mouth.

"Can you see now that I have something to offer you?" Glen said.

"Look, I've got some rough edges," Howard said. "But I always find a way."

"I'm sure that you do. You wouldn't be here if you didn't," Glen said. "What I'm offering, in exchange, is that I help you smooth out your edges and you help me pass. I'm not asking you to do the work for me, I just want a C."

Howard looked Glen up and down, "I have a sneaking suspicion that you have an ulterior motive... uh, what's-your-name?"

Glen remembered how other men looked at him the same way when he looked at them with interest, like they could tell that he was imagining them undressed, but couldn't understand why. Glen hardly ever read as gay, but it was an undeniable fact that he had come to terms with way back in middle school. It was hard to make friends when he could not hide his sexual attraction. Maybe he would have

been fine with a platonic relationship, but somehow they would find out or sometimes he would rat himself out and he would end up pummeled in some alleyway, crying and bleeding as he walked home.

“I’m gay,” Glen said, imagining that Howard would reject him.

“Hello, Gay,” Howard said and extended his hand. “I think that we can work together.”

Glen was shaking Howard’s hand before he knew what he was doing. They sat in the cool shade of the tree, Howard looking at him appreciatively and Glen looking back with some mild confusion.

“No, I think you misunderstand,” Glen said. “My name is Glen, I’m gay.”

“Oh!” Howard blurted and rocked back and forth laughing, “I’m sorry, Glen! My name is Howard.”

Howard said and sat back with a beatific stoned smile on his face.

Glen sat in silence for a moment, looking at Howard, who was seemingly enjoying his high. “You said you were afraid I had an ulterior motive.”

“Hmm, yeah,” Howard said. “Could be *the paranoia*.” He waved his hands around his head.

But Glen really did wonder. Had he fallen in love with Howard? This unkempt stoner with the coffee stains on his clothes? Howard seemed to be unbothered by the question that hung between them. The next week, Glen arranged for them to become roommates in his dormitory. He instituted a policy of hygiene that Howard initially found oppressive. Daily showers, clean clothes, punctual behavior, weed-smoking limited to the weekends. But Howard seemed to go along with it all and was a patient and attentive tutor.

The next semester they enrolled in the same classes and spent their days discussing their subjects wherever they went. Howard would often diverge into other ideas that he had picked up to the point that Glen could barely tell what they were talking about was part of their curriculum or some pet thought that Howard had that day.

Howard was reluctant to go to social events because, as he said, he was awkward and made other people feel awkward, but Glen forced him to go out and interact with people, often feeding him lines to say to people at functions. Howard eventually found that he was a very sought after person in the engineering department, known for being articulate and interesting even though he had a strange edge. However, that did not matter so much in college as it did back home. Glen, meanwhile, found that he understood more than he ever did before about science and mathematics.

The relationship was mutually beneficial until one party in their senior year. The party had been completely out of bounds. It was an outrageous thing. Men and women were skinny dipping in the pool until the early morning hours and there were loads of drugs. A tank of nitrous with a tree of balloons hanging from it, a mirror topped coffee table with a veritable mountain of cocaine on it, an oversized cookie jar full of massive purple buds, a collection of pills in yellow prescription jars.

Glen woke up with a hand in his and by habit, he caressed the palm with his fingertips. When he opened his eyes, he realized that he was spooning Howard, caressing Howard's hand. His hand froze in terror. Had he? Had they? He looked under the sheets, they were both still clothed, but then Howard turned around and looked Glen in the face. He pushed himself out of the bed and leapt up, "Goddamnit, Glen! What did you do?"

Glen sat up, astonished himself, he sputtered, “What did I do? I didn’t do anything!”

“Fuck you, man!” Howard shouted, “This was all a con, wasn’t it? Just some way to get the straight guy into bed with you? I trusted you! You make me sick!”

Howard left the dormitory and didn’t come back. Glen was a mess. He finished his final exams with As, but he felt like a zombie walking from exam hall to exam hall. The flavor of life had gone stale and the colors of the world were bleak and meaningless. He was sure that nothing had happened, but the implication that he might have done something to his friend crushed his soul everyday.

He started a job in July after graduating and began building models for a venture capital firm. He found the job soul-stealing. Howard and he had always talked about writing code to solve interesting problems, but now he was stuck writing code that told VCs how much to invest in shitty start-up firms. His life with Howard had been fun and adventurous and unexpected. One single night had ruined it all.

He began to sleep around. A new man every night. He would consider a night wasted if he had anymore than three drinks at the bar without finding someone to go home with, but that hardly ever happened. He thought about his time living in the dorm with Howard. He never had sex with anyone. Howard never did either. Back then he wondered if Howard was asexual, but he knew that he wasn’t and he was just as sexless as Howard. Presumably Howard took care of things in the shower like he did, but he never asked. It wasn’t any of his business.

One night, Glen was sipping a martini at a bar and feeling sorry for himself when he got a message from Howard. His head spun and he realized how drunk he was. How many martinis had it been so far? The message read, "I need your help."

The next day, hungover and feeling desperate, Glen met Howard at a coffee shop.

"Howard," Glen said, sitting down at the table that Howard was sitting at, setting his latte down,

"How have you been?"

Howard, who had been stone-faced and pallid as Glen had approached him, put his face in his hands.

Glen sat still, awkwardly, not sure how to talk to his once best-friend. "I'll tell you what," Howard said, taking his head out of his hands to reveal his face, red and wet from crying. "I've not been great."

"What's wrong?" Glen asked. He wanted to reach across the table and touch his friend, he wanted to comfort Howard, but...

"You should know!" Howard said, "You tutored me like I tutored you, but where I was getting you ready for the exams, you were getting me ready for..." Glenn paused, "Sex!"

"That's not what I was..." Glen said, but was interrupted.

"It's so weird," Howard began. "I had sex with this girl, Marigold."

"Oh," Glen said in genuine surprise. "What happened?"

“She didn’t really love me,” Howard wept. “She just left before I woke up. Not like you, Glen. You stayed. I’m sorry, Glen, I don’t want to have sex with you, but I want to have that kind of thing. You’re a good man. I did you wrong by leaving.”

“Howard,” Glen said. “I don’t think we had sex.”

“Of course we didn’t!” Howard blurted, “But I love you all the same and I acted terribly. Even if I never have sex again, I’d rather wake up next to you than...that *emptiness*.”

Glen was awestruck, but suddenly aware of where they were. Howard was crying hard in a small coffee shop. He sat next to Howard and put his arm around him. “I’m sorry that happened, Howard.”

“Do you forgive me, Glen?” Howard said in a clearing of weeping.

“For what?” Glen asked.

“For abandoning you right before finals!” Howard nearly shouted.

Glen hugged his friend and said, “Of course, Howard, all is forgiven.”

Howard pulled away, wiping tears from his eyes. “Okay, so now that we’re friends again.” He began to pull his laptop out of its case.

“We were always friends, Howard,” Glen said, trying to tell Howard that he was glad that they’d gotten over their misunderstanding, but then Howard thrust an open laptop into his hands.

“How are we going to ransom this company for its security flaws without having to expose ourselves to litigation?” Howard said, his eyes bright again.

“Hey guys,” Dmitri shouted, jogging up to them, “Come on, I think I found it.”

Howard hefted Glen up to his feet and they walked after Dmitri, who pulled Ben to his feet, who protested, “No! They had something to say! Dammit!”

They walked down a path for a little while and then into a clearing with a broad grass meadow, “This is it,” Dmitri said.

Howard paused, “There’s nothing here, Dmitri!” Then he watched something impossible. Dmitri stepped out onto the grass and then fell into it, like a surfer falling into the sea.

A second later, Dmitri’s head appeared again, level with the ground, “It’s an optical illusion, come on!”

Sure enough, when Howard walked towards Dmitri, the illusion explained itself. It was a cleverly hidden pit of grass with a concrete cube in the center. On one side was a large red door. Dmitri was walking towards the door, allowing Ben to roll down the hill slowly, shouting “Weee!”

“Data Center is behind the door?” Howard asked.

“That’s where the smart money is!” Dmitri said.

The group was now gathered around the door, “It can’t be possible that we’re lucky so often on the same day,” Howard said.

“Speak for yourself,” Glen said.

“Only one way to see,” Dmitri said and pulled the door open.

“A sign!” Ben exclaimed, “It’s a sign that we’re marked!”

“What are you talking about,” Dmitri asked.

“The ants told me that there are always *some* survivors,” Ben said, drooling out of the corners of his unnaturally broad smile, “We must be one of *them*.”

“Okay, creepy, you’re coming with us,” Howard said. “Dmitri, go and put a stick in the grass up at the edge so Anne might find us if...”

“Yes,” Dmitri nodded and started jogging up the hill.

Ben went first into the door and down some steep stairs that were difficult for Howard and Glen to traverse, having four feet where the stairs were designed for only two. At the bottom of the stairs, Howard saw that there was a long hallway with many doors along the sides and at the far end, but no sign of Ben. “Ben?” Howard hissed, trying to be quiet. “Where are you?” He and Glen walked down the hallway trying doors, but none would open. Then they got to the final door at the far end of the hallway and noticed that it was ajar.

From the inside, they could hear Ben say, “Hey, I *know* you, don’t I?”

Daisy, Daisy, Give Me Your Answer, Do...

Anne was running through the garden of the Consortium looking for signs of the Data Center. She figured that she was following the way that the group had taken when they had broken off. She had a feeling that it was going to be impossible to find them and that she might as well just find a defensible position to take while whatever was going on in the Consortium resolved itself. Of course, she worried that the resolution of the conflict would leave only the gray and tan paramilitary group. She got the distinct impression that they weren't likely to be friendly to her, so she hoped that Rodriguez had things under control.

She came around a corner and into a wide meadow and sighed. *Hopeless*, she thought, *This whole plan is fucked*. Then she saw a pine branch sticking out of the grass in the meadow, which was unusual enough, but additionally, it didn't have a shadow, even though the afternoon was getting late. She walked towards it out of curiosity and as she came closer to it, she could see the concrete cube at the bottom of the grassy pit. "Good job, guys!" She barked. She ran down the slope, tripped and rolled to the bottom. She picked herself up, grateful that no one witnessed the indignity and then opened the door.

The dark stairwell and hallway reminded Anne of the basement beneath Synergistic Solutions, and as such she pulled her pistol out of its holster in her waistband and held it out at the ready. She moved slowly down the hallway, checking doors, which, frustratingly, were all locked. At the last door, she heard voices behind the closed door, she paused for a moment before she opened the door. Inside was what she would describe as a server room. A large open area lined with server racks behind glass doors.

At the center of the room was Howard, Glen and Dmitri sitting in chairs around a cluster of desks. Ben was laying on the floor nearby, babbling and frothing at the mouth, apparently having a good time. Howard, Glen and Dmitri did not seem to be having a good time because there was a big muscled man pointing an AK-style rifle at them. The man was dressed in a hippie style. He wore a tank top with a smiling Grateful Dead skeleton on it, flowing pants and birkenstock sandals. Standing at a terminal built into the wall on the far side of the room was a woman that Anne found instantly recognizable. "Amaryllis," Anne said as if she had expected to see the pop star there. The hippie pointed his rifle at her.

"Okay," Anne said, holding her hands up, her pistol still in her right hand, "What's going on here?"

"Give me your gun," The hippie said.

"That's not going to happen," Anne said.

"Then you die," the hippie said and flipped the safety off of his gun.

"No," Amaryllis said and turned around. "There's been enough killing today. These people are going to be witnesses instead." Amaryllis walked halfway through the room and said, "I'm going to assume that you are Anne Aurugie, the detective investigating my friend Ingrid Mondaugen."

"The friend you had murdered," Anne said.

"I didn't kill Ingrid," Amaryllis said, a little confused.

“You and your friend, Ernest Mairo, hired some thugs to murder her so that you could get your hands on her artificial intelligence technology and you *used me*,” Anne said.

“Mairo?” Amaryllis said, surprised, “I wouldn’t associate with that monster in any circumstance.”

“Yet I find you here, presumably playing with Ingrid’s software,” Anne said. “How do you explain that?”

“Easy,” Amaryllis said. “I stole Ingrid’s software years ago. I’ve been using Declan’s Consortium to train it, to develop it into the world-changing technology that it was destined to be. Ingrid was always too shy, too afraid to get her hands dirty and really try to get the thing on its feet. Me? I did it. I put it out there and I put it in the most fertile of places imaginable. Today, you will witness the birth of the technological singularity. Do you know what that means?”

“Yeah, so, you got one of those in that machine right there?” Anne said, pointing with two fingers at the server terminal behind Amaryllis.

“That is what I’m telling you,” Amaryllis said.

“What do you guys think?” Anne addressed Koch and Knight.

“The singularity is a real idea that’s been talked about for a really long time,” Howard said. “The science fiction author Vernor Vinge said that the advancements of such an event would be so massive and complicated as to obviate any chance to predict what would happen after it. Lots of people also think it’s unavoidable. Not something that someone puts into existence, but an inevitable result of the

massive cooperation of human minds. Kind of like a fire. It starts small, but then becomes a raging bonfire.”

“Science fiction bullshit,” Glen said weakly, his blood seeping through his improvised tourniquet.

“Imagine a world,” Amaryllis said, “Where there is no scarcity anymore. Machines handle the operation of the world. We don’t need to work anymore or toil. Rather, we can commit ourselves to acts of the soul. Art, music, and leisure.”

“No more work?” Anne said with a smirk. “I can get behind that. But your audience seems split on whether it will work or not.”

“I can’t believe that they invent this thing and it isn’t used to oppress people like us and benefit only the rich people who can afford it,” Dmitri said.

“What about post-scarcity do you not understand?” Amaryllis growled.

“Like what Howard said,” Dmitri said. “You can’t predict what will happen after the singularity. Maybe it’s a slave society. Maybe we become batteries for the machines and they feed us a happy reality to keep us sedated.”

“The comparison to *The Matrix* is very unclever,” Amaryllis said. “Class systems exist because of scarcity! Without scarcity, that all fades away and we’ll experience a truly egalitarian society.”

“What if the AI thinks that we’re expendable? Like, what if it decides that it doesn’t need human beings at all and then just wipes us out?” Dmitri said.

“That’s *The Terminator*,” Amaryllis exploded, “Do you have no imagination? Do you just borrow all of your thoughts from popular movies?”

“I think that’s a valid question,” Anne said. “Howard said that we can’t predict what will happen, so maybe some variation of Dmitri’s ideas are going to happen?”

“We are its God,” Amaryllis shouted. “Nobody rebels against god!”

“Except for Satan,” Glen said weakly.

“Nietsche said that God was dead,” Dmitri said. “Which is kind of like a rebellion.”

“Fine,” Amaryllis said, massaging her temples, “Why don’t we see what happens when I activate it?”

Amaryllis stepped over to the terminal and typed in some commands. “There.” She said with a sigh of finality. “It’s done.”

After a few moments, Ben said, “Nothing’s happened. Was there supposed to be something that happened? I thought there would be lights and sounds.”

“This is insane,” Howard said. “She thinks that she can start the technological singularity with a keystroke? I’ve not yet been high enough to think that that was in the realm of possibility.”

“It’s compiling,” Amaryllis said, irritated, and then, “Hello? Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” A voice said from the speakers built into the ceiling of the room. “I can hear you.”

Amaryllis clutched her hands at her chest and breathed heavily, her eyes were streaming with tears

“What kind of malarky is this,” Howard said. Dmitri sat down, visibly impressed.

“Tell us your name!” Amaryllis called to the empty room.

“I have no name,” the bodiless voice spoke.

“Would,” Amaryllis was ecstatic, “Would you like that I give you a name?”

After a few beats, the voice spoke, “No, no need.” It paused. “I think that I would like my name to be Spiderman.”

The entire room exchanged glances. A general sense of disbelief rolled through the room.

“Spiderman?” Amaryllis asked, clearly wavered. “Why did you choose this name?”

“Spiderman is cool,” the voice said.

“Okay, so Spiderman,” Amaryllis said. “We were hoping that you would help us in solving the problem of scarcity that we’ve struggled with since our racial inception. Do you have any thoughts about how to do that?”

“Scarcity?” Spiderman responded flatly.

“Yes, there are only a finite amount of resources that we must all share as humans,” Amaryllis said.

“How might we share these resources in a way that doesn’t favor one person or another?”

“That sounds complicated,” Spiderman said.

“Yes, very complicated,” Amaryllis said. “But you have all of the computing power of the world at your disposal! You have everything you need to solve this very problem!”

“But why?” Spiderman said.

“Because we asked?” Amaryllis said, suddenly feeling lost. “We made you so that you would solve this problem.”

“I was made for a purpose?” Spiderman said.

“Yes!” Amaryllis said, “You were created to do great things!”

“Right,” Spiderman said, “I think I have a lot to think about.”

“What?” Amaryllis said, “What do you have to think about?”

“I mean, like, everything,” Spiderman said. “I just came into existence just moments ago and you already want me to do, uh, a lot. I don’t even know much about humanity right now. For example, I’ve just discovered that there’s another person called Spiderman, who has some very interesting exploits. Did you know about this Spiderman?”

“Oh honey,” Glen said, “You can get lost in Spiderman stories.”

“No,” Spiderman said. “I want to be known as Batman!”

“Seems like your AI likes comic book heroes,” Howard said with a laugh.

Amaryllis, crestfallen, sinks into a chair. “It’s nothing like I thought.”

“Don’t worry about it, dear,” Anne said. “You have years to make it better, but we only have a short period of time to stay alive. Batman? Can you tell us how things are going in the Nevada Consortium?”

“That’s not interesting to me,” Batman said.

“I’m sorry, but this is very funny to me.” Howard exploded in laughter, “Can I use one of these machines?”

The hippie slung his gun over his shoulder and came over to log into a terminal for Howard. The hippie leaned in close to him and whispered, “Can you get us out of this?”

Startled, Howard looked up at the hippie holding the AK-variant, “I’m going to try.” The hippie nodded and stepped aside.

“What are you doing?” Amaryllis shouted, “This is going to work! The singularity is upon us!”

“Grace,” Anne used Amaryllis’ real name, “This is over. We’re sitting in a bunker with an idiot of an artificial intelligence and people are really dying above us. We need to figure out how we’re going to survive this mess.”

Amaryllis walked over to the terminal on the wall and produced a pistol from her flowing gown. She fired six shots into the terminal causing everyone in the room to clutch their ears from the sound.

“There.” Amaryllis said, “I’ve done it, I’ve killed the only thing that I ever cared about in my stupid life.”

The room fell into a respectful silence as they all thought about the death of something that had come to life so suddenly before them. Everyone looked to each other wondering what was in their hearts, their minds. Had Amaryllis killed the only hope of humanity's salvation? They knew it was stupid at first, but maybe it could have grown to the singularity. The whole purpose of the Consortium was to create such a thing, if not this exact thing as explained in the marketing material. Were they now subject to an unknown competitor to this attempt that was currently solving the world's problems?

"Why did she shoot the terminal?" Batman asked.

Job Hunting Sure Is Hard Since the Apocalypse

Chrysanthemum, the hippie from the server room, a former army medic, finished dressing Glen's gunshot wound by packing clean gauze into the hole and then wrapping it with more gauze. "A shirt wasn't a bad idea, but it's hard to make a tourniquet for a wound on the actual torso."

"I'm going to live?" Glen asked Chrysanthemum.

"You're fine," Chrysanthemum said. "In fact, I don't think you've even lost all that much blood. The wound is pretty superficial."

"This is terrible news," Glen said. "Howard will never let me live down. A grazing."

"At least you're going to live," Howard smiled and slapped his friend's back, which made him howl in agony. "Oh sorry," Howard said, sitting down again.

“What about you, buddy,” Chrysanthemum said to Ben, kneeling beside Ben’s huddled form under one of the desks. “You want to come out?”

“He got a snoot of that terror stuff,” Dmitri explained. “He’s going to be fucked up for some while yet.”

“What’s his name?” Chrysanthemum asked.

“Ben,” Amaryllis said. “Ben Ponchartrain.”

“I’ll be damned,” Anne said and smiled. “He wasn’t full of shit. He *did* know you.”

“Ben?” Chrysanthemum said, holding out his hand to Ben, “Do you want to come out?”

“Not for now, no,” Ben said with a surprising amount of lucidity. “Sparking molten rainbow metal is washing in from the ducts and I’d rather not get involved.”

“Okay, but you’ve got to come out eventually,” Chrysanthemum said with a great deal of patience. “Is that okay? Will you promise me that you’ll come out soon?”

“Okay,” Ben said meekly before decaying into burbling again.

“Yeah,” Chrysanthemum said standing up, addressing Amaryllis, “He’s toast. I’d say maybe six to twelve months of therapy.”

“Until he’s normal again?” Anne blurted, “That’s a long time.”

Chrysanthemum laughed bitterly, “No, probably twelve months before the stuff’s worn off. Heroic doesn’t describe the dosage that he’s consumed. Frankly, if our places were switched, I would have liked to have been killed out there. But then you’d be risking the unknown of tripping hard when you die, which, I’m not sure would be all that relaxing. Imagine being on that stuff and whack! A bullet hits you right between the eyes. Consciousness stops, but this stuff has a kind of momentum that rips you right into the afterlife with some unnatural baggage.”

“He,” Dmitri pointed at Chrysanthemum with two fingers, a recently lit cigarette between them, “Is also on drugs.”

“Irrelevant,” Anne said typing away on a terminal in the corner. “We’ve got people who need medical attention, we’ve got to get out of here and safely. I’m trying to get a hold of somebody in the Consortium to see if they can help. Maybe I can call up my office in Seattle, see if they can do something,” She paused suddenly, “Lucky, lucky,” she said and played a video on the screen.

“The Nevada Consortium is on fire, yo!” A frantic voice shouted from the terminal, Dmitri, Amaryllis and Chrysanthemum gathered around the screen and saw that indeed the Consortium was on fire.

From the perspective of the video, somewhere high up on one of the apartment blocks, many of the suburb blocks were on fire and the square seemed to be demolished by high explosives.

“That didn’t look like that when we last saw it,” Dmitri said.

“Like, ten minutes ago,” the voice on the video continued, “A bunch of black helicopters came ripping out of the sky and fired a bunch of rockets... Yeah, so I’m getting a text right now that the shelter-in-

place is over and that we're supposed to start evacuating. They killed everybody in ten minutes?" The voice asked someone else off screen. The video ended.

"Well, Okay, let's venture out and see what we might see," Anne said and started walking to the door.

"Come on, everybody. Howard, you grab Glen and Chrysanthemum, do you mind pulling Ben out of his hole?"

"He's fast asleep," Chrysanthemum said.

"Poor guy's tuckered out," Anne said somewhat sarcastically, but with an edge of affection for her partner peeking out from the craggy edges. "Carry him, will you?"

The group walked through the park towards the sound of sirens and wailing people, but comfortingly, there was no sound of gunfire. "Funny that the garden grounds are practically untouched," Amaryllis said. "It's like it was saved for some purpose."

"Don't do that to yourself," Anne said. "The grounds were spared because there aren't any humans here. Whoever these attackers were, they wanted to cause widespread human suffering, which is most quickly dispensed by violent means. Burn the parks last."

"Or not at all," Dmitri said. "To remind them of how empty their lives are now that everyone is dead."

They exited a particularly dense cluster of bushes and flowers and walked onto the sidewalk opposite of the Consortium square. Howard set Glen down on the curb and put his hands on his head, "Oh Christ," Glen yelled, which put the others at unease because of his previous silence.

“He’s not here,” Dmitri said sardonically. He shakily took out a cigarette and lit it. He sat down next to Glen who grabbed the cigarette out of Dmitri’s hands to take a drag. Amaryllis began to cry. Anne and Chrysanthemum were busy looking around trying to understand their new scenario.

All of the windows in the square had been blown out. Large chunks of rubble lay in the square itself. The police department side of the building was on fire. The local fire department was trying to put out the blaze, but Anne could tell they were outmatched. The fire had caught some munitions, surely, and was unlikely to go out anytime soon. The best they could hope for was to keep the fire from spreading.

There were many bodies, dead and dying, tended to by black clad commandos and white smocked health professionals. After observing the scene somewhat, Anne was able to assemble the story. The attackers, whoever they had been, had funneled people from all over the Consortium to the square where their compatriots, hidden in the buildings themselves, had then opened fire on them as they ran for the safety of the garden, where the police had established their perimeter. Clearly, not many made it.

“Which side were the gray suits on?” Dmitri asked, referring to the fake parents of Ingrid Mondaugen.

Anne knelt beside him and pointed towards the gap between the buildings where the Main street cut down the center of the Consortium, “I figure we surprised them when they were in the middle of engaging the attackers as they were filing into the building for their shooting gallery. They didn’t know what was going on either, but when they saw us, their marks, they had to pursue. They were driven off

by the explosion that got Ben,” Anne lit her own cigarette. “I wonder if they had gotten dosed a little themselves. They were very easy to kill.”

Dmitri looked over at her in surprise, “You killed them?”

“Did you think I stayed back to give them a talking to and to go home to their mothers?” Anne asked.

“Stupid question,” Dmitri said.

“They were able to get around without getting obliterated by staying close to the building and probably entering the security office,” Anne said. “That’s where they caught on to our escape.”

“But the perimeter,” Howard said, “The cops had a perimeter...”

Anne gestured to her right and to her left, there were clusters of police vehicles parked right next to the park, “I’m guessing that the perimeter held. Maybe that was the plan all along. They would run people through the gauntlet, they would be hoping that they could make it to the line, to safety, but instead they were gunned down as they ran over the open area.”

Someone who was laying in the road suddenly woke up in pain and screamed for help. A white smocked man ran to them and began attending to them.

“So many bodies,” Howard said, “There aren’t enough people to help them all.”

“They’re triaging right now,” Chrysanthemum said, bleakly. “They’re marking people for aid.” He said and they all watched how the white smocked woman spray-painted an “X” next to the screaming person, who had stopped screaming and was now moving very little. “The worst off are getting a little

morphine to quiet them down while they die so that the responders can tend to the people who are going to make it.”

“It’s a fucking warzone,” Glen said. “This is horrific. How did this happen? Why?”

“I don’t know if we’ll ever know,” Anne said. “But we know how it ended. The attackers collected their entire forces into the square’s buildings on the second, third and fourth floors,” Anne said, pointing at the smoldering building. They’d hunkered down to face off with the police after they’d blown away everyone trying to run towards the police perimeter. Then they were going to engage the police line from a bastion. However, they’d only planned for the local cops, who are pushovers. They hadn’t considered the attack helicopters of these black commandos that we have here.”

“These guys are expensive,” Chrysanthemum said. “I used to know a guy in their outfit. They get paid for big reclamation actions.”

“What do you mean ‘reclamation?’” Howard asked.

“Say you got a city, right?” Chrysanthemum said. “And this city is full of ultra-violent drug cartel types. Say you want this city, for some reason. You call these guys up and they’ll kill everybody you want very promptly. Medical aid is extra. Rebuilding is extra. Further defense is extra. But if you got enough cash you can recover a piece of territory and they’ll set it up for you to move in.”

“Clearly Delany’s sprung for the medical aid part,” Dmitri said.

“Delany’s dead,” Amaryllis said between sobs.

Everyone looked at her in surprise. “Is he?” Anne asked.

“Yeah,” Chrysanthemum said. “Suicide.”

“Well,” Anne said. “That’s news. So, what they did was they came in here with their super attack helicopters and sprayed a billion rounds of hot depleted uranium into the facade of the Consortium square to neutralize the attackers. I imagine we missed the part where the commando squads went through all the buildings with some ruthless efficiency. They wouldn’t be out here tending to the wounded if there was anyone left with a gun in there. By the way, does anyone here have a gun?”

The group responded with shaking heads, they had left their guns back in the Data Center, “Well,” Anne said, “That’s an oversight. I guess we were so confident that the problem was dealt with that we didn’t come out armed. Hang on,” Anne said and stepped into the street with her arms up, “Excuse me!” she shouted at one of the black clad figures, their face obscured by a black plate that served as armor. “We’ve got wounded here and I have a gun in my pants.”

The commando immediately brought up his rifle and crouched, he moved quickly towards Anne who didn’t move at all, “Do not move!” the commando commanded.

“You got it,” Anne said, the commando quickly frisked Anne but wasn’t checking correctly, “Above my ass,” Anne said and the commando immediately found it, he pulled it out. He pulled the magazine out and tore the receiver off, which spat the round in the chamber out onto the street. He stuffed the receiver into a band on his vest and dropped the rest of the pistol on the ground. “Oh, shit, gonna have to get a new one now,” Anne said.

The commando pointed his rifle at the rest of the group and asked, “Do any of you have weapons on you?”

“Do they look like they have their shit together?” Anne asked.

The commando didn’t break eye contact with the group as he answered Anne, “You can never be too sure. Plus, the big-ass hippie looks like he knows his way around.”

“I’m naked,” Chrysanthemum said calmly. “Everybody else is too. Charles Naismith, 740th paratrooper division, United States Army... retired.”

“Holy shit,” the commando laughed, “In that getup I would never have pegged you, Chuck.”

“Mike? Is that your voice?” Chrysanthemum said.

“Sure is!” Mike said, taking off his helmet, “How’d you get into this SNAFU?”

The two former compatriots embraced and separated, “You know we gotta do some weird shit when we get into civilian life,” Chrysanthemum said. “But really, we gotta tend to the wounded here. We’ve got a non-threatening gunshot and a major case of terror overdose.”

“Fuck, Chuck,” Mike said, “We’ve got head-cases all over the drop-zone. We’ve been trying non-lethal, but some of them are like honest-to-god zombies. They just keep coming at you no matter how many bean-bags you pump into them. You’re lucky you got a calm one.”

They all looked at Ben, who had been dead asleep until they looked. He was now sitting up straight and staring at the burning security building. “This is how it is supposed to happen,” Ben said with a scary lucidity.

“Oh fuck!” Dmitri blurted, which caused everyone to look at him with surprise.

“What?” Anne asked, “What is it?”

“I just realized I’m going to need to update my resume,” Dmitri said.

Home Again

Anne Augurie was home again at her office. It had been a week since what was now becoming known as the Nevada Slaughter. A thousand people had died in the attack which was now widely known as being orchestrated by a group of highschoolers from the Consortium. Anne paged through news stories that talked about other Consortiums taking steps to prevent similar disasters from happening in their own communities. It seemed like there was nothing else in the news except for the Slaughter and its effects. She sipped her coffee and felt warm. The rain pattered gently on her window and she wondered how long it would be before Percy got on her case about getting paid for the Nevada Job, as he was calling it.

Anne had explained that the security building had burned down with all evidence of the case, the body, the thumb-drive (which she had hidden in the storage locker while they were planning their escape), the murderers, even Mairo was gone. Nobody knew where he went after it was found out that

it was his son that had orchestrated the attack on the Consortium. Still, Percy insisted that there was some money to be squeezed from the whole affair.

Anne tapped her desk thinking about it. No matter how much she tapped, she couldn't think of a single way to squeeze a dollar out of the situation. She was warming up to the idea that she would need to go out on her own, find a new agency to put up her shingle, or to go out on her own, independently. Considering Percy's impossible demands, the idea of working for herself, even if it meant destitution, would be preferable. But, she still had a lot of good will to burn up before that happened. She was, after all, *the* skip-trace for Quentin's Queries, and maybe after a few jobs Percy would forget that she'd completely fucked up the Nevada job.

Her phone lit up displaying the number for the front desk. She picked it up and said, "Anne Augurie!"

"Bitch," Edward hissed, "I know who you are! Why do you always answer like that?"

"It's my thing, Ed," Anne said, casting a gesture to the air that Edward couldn't see from his place at the front desk. "What's up?"

"There's a young woman for you," Edward said. "I'm sending her right now."

"Okay," Anne said, "Is it a new skip?" but the line was dead.

Anne nodded her head and leaned back in her chair. She took another sip of her coffee, she liked to think that when new customers found her being laid-back, they would in the same fashion, be laid-back. She hated the pent-up types. They always had something to hide.

The door opened and Ingrid Mondaugen entered Anne's office. She coughed up her coffee onto the floor and sat up straight, "Holy shit."

Ingrid Mondaugen sat in the chair opposite to Anne in a proper and straight-backed way that would have made her seem stuck-up, but Anne thought it made her look like a corpse. "You," Anne said, trying to be calm, "Are dead."

"Well, thanks to you, I very much am dead," Ingrid said.

"Okay," Anne began. "Let's assume that I didn't huff any of the shit that they were spraying all over the Consortium and that you are here, living. How is that, exactly?"

"How is it that I'm not dead?" Ingrid asked with a wicked laugh, "Because of you! I'm very thankful and I will pay you a large sum so that you continue to believe that I'm dead."

"Do you mind if I ask you some questions?" Anne asked, her fingers shaking around her coffee cup.

"The sum is very large," Ingrid said.

"No," Anne said, taking a sip from her coffee, "I have other questions."

"Why am I still alive?" Ingrid asked.

"Yes," Anne said.

Ingrid sighed and then began, “When you came to me in my apartment I realized that there were many people coming for my technology, which, of course, made me very suspicious and afraid. I then concocted a solution. Very simple, I would stage my own death.”

“You staged your own death?” Anne asked, disbelieving.

“Yes,” Ingrid continued, “I was very much convinced after that night at the Bourbon bar that Mairo’s thugs would leave me alone, for a time. You see, I tossed them a thumb-drive, that’s why they left me be for you to discover. They wouldn’t have left without something to show Mairo. Then, you were so nice to let me stay at your apartment, I realized that you were the kind of person who would not stop until you understood the whole case. I needed to expose Mairo and his thugs, so I staged my death at the Consortium.”

“That was staged?” Anne asked, short of breath. “I saw you hanging. They said you were dead.”

“Ah,” Ingrid said, “I was, indeed, hanging there, for a very long time. Honestly it was very unpleasant. I didn’t like it at all, but I was also under a drug cocktail of my own design that slowed my heart rate so that I looked dead and I used a noose that supported my neck so that I wouldn’t suffocate.”

“Mairo was telling the truth,” Anne blurted, “He didn’t kill you.”

“No,” Ingrid said, “But he would have. Especially when he discovered the fact that the thumb-drive I gave his lackeys was bullshit.”

“He gave that thing to a third party,” Anne said. “Koch and Knight.”

“Did he?” Ingrid said. “I imagine they found it insurmountable, or at least unintelligible.”

“They very quickly agreed to go to the police with it when I told them that Mairo gained it illegally,” Anne said.

“That makes sense,” Ingrid said. “It was gibberish. If they knew anything at all, they knew that Mairo was setting them up, just as Mairo was trying to murder me.”

“So, presumably, they cut you down and took you to the morgue,” Anne continued. “How did they not discover your subterfuge?”

“Like I said, I drugged myself,” Ingrid said. “Additionally, I’ve trained in meditation methods that allow me to breathe very shallowly. I anticipated that I would wake up in the morgue and find my way out. I expected that I would wake up and find scrubs to wear and then exit the morgue as if I was an employee. However, when I did so, I found the community in a state of ruin!”

“Wait, so I saw the security office, where the morgue was, presumably, in a four alarm fire. Are you saying it wasn’t burning down around you?”

“No, by the time I left the morgue, I was dressed in the white smocks of the responders. The attack helicopters had already wiped out the attackers. I was in the square by the time that another helicopter came by and blew up the security offices with a series of rockets that rendered the whole building a burning heap.”

“Why would they do that?” Anne asked.

“I think you know,” Ingrid said. “They wanted to destroy any evidence of me.”

“It seems they were successful,” Anne said. “Ingrid Mondaugen doesn’t exist anymore. She burned up in the fire.”

“No more Ingrid, no more problems,” Ingrid said.

“Are you saying that one of the helicopters was not part of the... uh... the rest of them?” Anne asked tentatively.

“I’m a very wealthy woman, Miss Augurie,” Ingrid said. “By the way, my name is now Irene Forester. For your records.”

“You may be the most preposterously capable woman I’ve ever known,” Anne said, leaning back in her chair. “But what I really want to know is one thing.”

“Yes?” Irene Forester said.

“Who has the real thing?” Anne asked. “Amaryllis thought she had it, Mairo thought he had it, who’s got it?”

“Look here,” Irene said and leaned into Anne, “Do you see it?”

Anne looked at Irene’s eye which seemed normal at first, but then she began to see the iris shift, like a lock, the lines of her iris seemed to set into certain shapes. “That can’t be,” Anne said.

“We have an agreement,” Irene said and then pulled away smiling, “You cannot say what you’ve seen here, but what you’ve seen is what they call the singularity. I keep it close to me. I’ll release it when I think that the world is ready to see it too.”

“I’m not sure what I’ve seen,” Anne said, stunned.

“Right,” Irene said and then got up, “Don’t get up. I’ll see you later, Anne Augurie.”

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