

E Unum Pluribus

- a tale of The Big Diss

A Novel by Robin Andrew

Warning: includes brief content regarding a reported act of suicide.

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Where,
in the name of common sense,
are our fears to end,
if we may not trust our sons, our brothers, our neighbors,
our fellow citizens?”

Alexander Hamilton, 1788

"A nation divided against itself cannot stand."

Sam Houston, 1850

“...past the onset of turbulence,
disturbances grow
catastrophically.”

James Gleick, 1987

Jack

Like anyone else in this sovereign little realm, I have no trouble recalling exactly where I was the night our world ground to a halt: jammed into a knot of fellow squatters in the abandoned nail salon we called home, eyes glued to an obsolete Windows machine displaying the only feed covering a cult-like horde of bookworms gathered in our outer wasteland for purposes unknown. Wisecracks sparked around our room as we watched hundreds of the faithful file into the ceremonial stage set their organizers had erected, our skepticism giving way to guarded curiosity as falling darkness focused attention on the evening's first speakers - until their final words were drowned out by reflexive ooh's and ah's at the surprise display of fireworks. Seconds later, even those exclamations gave way to a unanimous moment of silence as both on- and off-screen audiences registered the arrival of the night's unannounced guest of honor. Some in our crew whispered disbelief as they recognized her face, others delight as she started speaking; several seemed on the verge of hysteria as the multi-camera coverage jumped around among her devotees to capture one tear-streaked face after another after another, their fervor reaching fever pitch by the time she finished speaking, arms flung wide to receive their adoration - which was when all hell broke loose.

“WTF!” was our common reaction as a sudden shift to overhead drone view showed two strings of tactical warriors, helmeted and armored in blood-red, filing in from the rear of her crowd. Like pincers of a scorpion, they barged along either side at quick march till the leaders of the two lines met at front and center, whereupon the troops turned as one to face the faithful, snapped to attention, raised weapons to shoulders - and froze. Pretty stock stuff that, but someone had been thinking outside the box because, a breathless moment later, instead of all firing at once to make the expected big-bang (ho-hum...) their two leaders fired in tandem, followed faster than an echo by the next gun on each side, then the next, and the next and so on and on. Seriously-well rehearsed, or maybe the result of some electronic timing trick, either way what their massed arms produced was a ripping, tearing zipper of detonations moving palpably from center-front across to each corner then down the two sides to the very back of the assembled multitude as if some higher power had grabbed up a seam in the fabric of our world and was wrenching it open...

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Act One

Up until that night, Mondays in my sixth year as intern at the Outside Comptrolling Division had been as much social occasions as business ones - whatever else had changed since the US of A self-destructed, the novelty of sipping actual coffee still attracted sleepy-eyed forensic accountants to the kitchen alcove, where fauxnuts held them long enough to exchange stories of how they'd spent their weekends, who was feeling the effects thereof and who had a particularly thorny contact to make in the coming week. From Monday-noon on, our division mostly worked out of our residences, or on-site of whomever's financial dirty laundry you were pawing through, but for a few hours each week we managed to simulate a cohesive unit, sharing triumphs and challenges along with fat, sugar, salt and caffeine. Not to mention the fashion show aspect, for those of us still so inclined.

Twenty-minutes of Monday-mingling was all I could stomach though, so I had already drifted to a marginally-functional shared workstation to input hours from the previous pay period when my LyfeMachine vibrated with a rhythm that indicated personal rather than office. Pulled it out and tapped several times to see who had tagged me, then beat a hasty out to the corridor before opening the message, seeing as how the sender was identified as MSS - Municipal Security Services; the for-profit provider retained by our government to enforce the public order. (Same-same as what the old 'police departments' used to do, but on a fee-for-services basis that enabled more effective cost management.) Not an organization someone in my position normally had anything to do

with; nor hoped to. Only other information the message contained was my name - Jack Shirley – my Shareholder number, the sending machine’s corporate resource identifier (heavily redacted) and a grid of pulsing crimson text:

“NOTICE TO PERSON OF INTEREST:

RE. CAPITAL CRIMES PROSECUTION:

RE. SHIRLEY, VINCENT:

YOUR IMMEDIATE RESPONSE REQUIRED.”

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So we’re all on the same page; this story really starts back when the Second Administration played its hole card, citing a vaguely defined ‘National Security Emergency’ as reason to postpone the upcoming Federal election. When the incumbent’s handpacked Court declined to consider any challenge to that maneuver, in the same week it affirmed the right of State legislatures to select their appointed electors without the inconvenience of a popular vote, one presidentially-disfavored State concluded that winner-take-all governance had gone too far and registered its frustration with a Petition to Secede.

Unsurprisingly, the Chief Executive refused to give up such a significant part of his revenue, rejecting both the petition and subsequent calls for reconciliation by instead ordering his slender majorities in both houses of Congress to pass the Defense of Nature Act, defining a woman’s egg cells as human beings and marriage as the union of a male and a female *of common heritage* at the same time it quietly memorialized the right of any

legislature to denominate (though not “establish”) a State faith - much as they had long been accustomed to naming a State flower, tree, mammal or insect. Almost immediately, that same rogue State’s legislature re-constituted itself into two separate governmental entities and announced that since neither of those was descended from the territorial authority which had been granted statehood way back when, there *was* no secession issue to consider and so no longer any Federal restriction on how these new entities could govern themselves. The many practical questions these dueling semantic shenanigans might have raised at any other moment in history became moot when two other States – whose rulers believed the patriarch’s national makeover had actually *not gone far enough* - announced their own desire for emancipation. This triggered the nation’s suddenly and miraculously united Congress to approve, and the required three-fourths majority of State legislatures to just as quickly ratify, the Twenty-ninth Amendment, establishing the right of any member of the union to re-constitute itself in whatever form or forms it might choose, and those new ‘sovereignties’ to remain nominally part of the republic *but otherwise subject only to the terms of their own constitutions*. When a challenge to that rapid-fire transubstantiation was dismissed by our dear leader’s court of pet Supremes - much to his spluttering outrage - it did preserve the USA in name, albeit at the expense of enfeebling it beyond recognition through proliferation of first a handful and then dozens of new city-states, statelets, states-lite and what one legacy-media commentator drolly described as ‘state-like entities with pretensions to self-sufficiency.’

Thus was George Washington’s “great experiment” effectively dissolved and that episode christened ‘The Big Diss;’ thus were the worst effects of widespread civil warfare

sidestepped and thus did Uncle Sam, like that old king who foolishly parted-out his realm to a trio of ungrateful daughters, dodder into irrelevance.

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Fast forward a decade or so, and my vox response to the message from MSS connected quickly (via the super-local network embedded in our civic facilities ever since a previously innocuous constellation of telecommunications satellites had burst awake and scrambled virtually all radio-wave communications). “Jack Shirley,” I spoke, after which a bot-voice requested I hold while that vocal sample was analyzed to confirm I was myself. Surprisingly, the resulting confirmation beep was followed by something sounding very much like a real person.

“M Shirley,” the speaker began, employing the universal salutation mandated for all official communications. “You’re next of kin to one Vincent Shirley, residence unknown, correct?”

Don’t recall exactly how I responded, but I must have said something because the voice continued. “We’ve ID’d one of the participants in a recent criminal incident as Vincent Shirley and need you to provide a DNA sample for confirmation. You are requested to present yourself at MSS downtown admin. center within one hour’s time. Do you acknowledge this request and agree to comply?”

The terms ‘request’ and ‘agree’ bearing, for the purposes of any interaction with MSS, very different meanings from their normal usage, I voiced my agreement and was soon

walking the dozen blocks to get there – at a carefully-measured pace so as to avoid working up a sweat in the swelter we’ve come to expect these years, even at nine on a January morning. All vanity aside, a flushed face and sweaty palms could be subject to misinterpretation when arriving for a meeting with our sovereignty’s security service.

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Re: that ‘our sovereignty’ bit: as any historian worth her doctorate could have predicted, once the Big Diss kicked-off, its regress was uncontrollable: State governments fracturing into independent regions and counties; counties shedding territory to Constitutional Sheriffs’ Shires and all of those losing tax-base to a welter of new city-states. Not surprisingly, those new entities not aligned with the Second Administration had no desire to fund its policies and instead shifted their economies from dollars to crypto currencies unreachable by its sadly-diminished IRS. Since the remaining loyalist enclaves generated insufficient revenues to maintain the old system, such entrepreneurial moves were contested, initially by Federal military deployed against the National Guards of uncooperative States and, later, by National Guard troops themselves sent up against the citizen militias of smaller enclaves. Still later, the most vicious actions occurred between the militias of the various new-born sovereignties. This period was sometimes referred to as the Border Wars but more often just ‘the battles,’ and given the fact there were fifty-percent more guns in circulation those days than people to point them, the resulting dead across the titular USA were generally believed to number over a million (terrible enough, and a tragic waste, but still a far smaller portion of the populace than had been sacrificed in either of the nation’s two previous

internal conflicts). Worldwide, the brutal chaos of climate displacement was in full swing by then as well, and claiming many times that number of lives *each year*. With follow-on devolution of the food, fertilizer and pharma supply chains over the next decade taking scores of millions more, a minor debate arose between those who claimed the period actually constituted a Third World War and the few remaining academic historians, most of whom claimed it was more-properly considered the dawning of a new Dark Age, as foreseen by Barzun, Bridle, Kissinger and others. (A pessimism with which aspiring rulers outside the ‘western’ half of the northern hemisphere heartily disagreed, as they rushed to exploit every niche and void which Uncle Sam’s abdication of influence had left behind).

Even where open warfare was avoided, this welter of new entities found themselves engaged in wild experimentation over who to let in, who to let out and what to charge for moving and shipping across their plethora of freshly-drawn imaginary lines. All of which led, to, in our neck of the woods, *The Commonwealth of Confluence*, hailed as a ‘corporatocracy’ by its proponents (and a profitopoly, scarcitopia or fuckitopia, by its detractors). However one chose to describe it, this consortium of eight major commercial corporations (disaffectionately referred to as ‘the korps’) had taken over the affairs of two city governments, five surrounding counties and multiple townships. Day to day that whole ball of whacks was administered under a no-bid, five-year-renewable, cost-plus-fee contract held by the *Valleywide Municipal LLC*, which is why we sometimes referred to the entire system as, simply, ‘Muni.’

Confluence was, therefore, an acute expression of the old bromide that ‘what we need is a government that’s run like a business,’ and Municipal Security Services one of its most

coldly efficient subsidiaries in doing so.

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The MSS office to which I'd been directed occupied the lower floors of a granite-clad high rise next to the remains of an off-ramp from the interstate, its six lanes long vacant now that all traffic was stopped and inspected at our city/state's Outer Limit in order to be assigned an appropriate secure surface route – or else turned away). Once through the building's own security screening, I was escorted up two flights of a scarred and echoing utility stairway then down an even more neglected-looking corridor into a tiny box of a room, furnished with one bolted-down table, two bolted down metal chairs and a single slit window through which I spent the next several minutes pondering dust patterns on derelict petromobiles in the parking structure opposite. Hearing the room's door open behind me, I turned to encounter a high-and-tight barbered detective whose squint-eyed glare would have puckered my scupper even if I'd run into her under more pleasant circumstances. I assumed she'd prefer 'her' from the cut of the purple polyester pantsuit - how I knew she was a detective is more difficult to say; maybe the wrinkles in the suit's coarse weave gave it away, or the toothpick oscillating in one corner of her downturned mouth. Maybe the way she was scowling at the battered old LyfeMachine drooping loosely in one hand while the other fiddled with something in her front trouser pocket or maybe it was the sum total of all those caustic-boredom tropes but regardless, my guess was confirmed when she flashed the underside of her device to show the credential displayed there. Clearly, 'Detective Lieutenant Nousheen Etienne, Capital Crimes Detail, MSS' was all business and no

pleasure. No sympathy, either, which seemed a little out of line, given what she was soon to tell me.

“M Jack comma Shirley?” she asked, giving the salutation its correct official pronunciation. Not the casual ‘M-a’ sound, which the subject could choose to take either as a lazily truncated ‘Ma’am’ or a similar stub of ‘man,’ depending on their preference. No, Etienne’s delivery was just the name of the letter – ‘M’ - with no subtext at all. Considered the egalitarian way to show formality and respect without presuming any Ms, Mx, Missus or Mister the subject might not want presumed, her reticence seemed excessively proper on this occasion, given that my Monday-mode included an ankle-length skirt and twenty extra minutes of fussing over hair and face. When I responded that yeah, that was me, only it was actually ‘M Shirley comma Jack,’ the detective scanned me down and up, then locked eyes on mine for a long beat - after which she sighed an entire world’s worth of weariness before launching into the rundown on an early-morning emergency call from a party claiming there’d been a home break-in with shots fired. Time MSS got there, two persons were dead, Etienne added blandly, and most of the perpetrators had fled, but the responders did manage to take one into custody, a non-Shareholder who claimed she’d entered the house as part of a legitimate pre-cycling crew; authorized in writing to scavenge anything re-sellable before the place was to be demolished. Called herself Mutt, if that meant anything to me? When I replied it did not, the Lieutenant backtracked a bit to explain that, oh yeah and by the way, one of the deceased persons was my sister.

“Vincent,” she added, chewing the name around her toothpick with no noticeable concern as to how using the words ‘deceased’ and ‘sister’ in a single phrase might affect the subject’s sibling. “Odd name for a female child?”

“Not if you knew her,” I offered out of reflex, then instantly regretted it. Humor seemed lost on this Etienne, who possessed all the conversational warmth of a boning knife. Truth was, after our mother’d taken our father’s name and become Priscilla Shirley, she vowed no daughter of hers would have to bear such a frilly label. Some book she’d read years before’d featured a fem named Vincent and Pris’d felt a pang when the character was killed off, so that’s the name she gave her female firstborn. “We weren’t close, by the way, so if you’re about to ask me what my sister was doing when all of this happened - or anytime in the last six or seven years - you’ll be wasting your breath.”

“Don’t know, don’t care, or just don’t want to help the law?” the Lieutenant shot back, at which point I thought it worthwhile to give a quick recap of some family history.

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Vinnie and I passed our youth roughly seven miles south and east of downtown, in a prototypical nuclear family in a prototypical sub-rural landscape rapidly being transformed into prototypical suburban sprawl; ranks of cookie-cutter homes sprouting on eighth-of-an-acre plots of what had been, not long before, somebody else’s beloved fields and pastures. Priscilla at home with the two of us kids, Duncan on the road to anywhere, re-engineering irrigation systems in hopes of outwitting the effects of climate creep. Between drought and dust storms, viruses, the Diss and then the battles, he had to travel farther and longer each season to find any landowner that could pay for services, so it sometimes took him days to make his way home - until the time he didn’t make it, that is. The slow

accumulation of negativity we felt when that happened, the confusion, dread and disbelief; they're hard to appreciate any more, thanks to all the other intervening drama: Pris's slow slide from denial into furious anger followed by a state of generalized and indiscriminate delusion, the effect all of that had on her blood pressure and then the premature stroke that put her in bed for the duration.

Long before that, though, Vincent and I had chosen different paths, me attending to schoolwork as if the future still existed, Vincent raging against everything that was changing around us - the weather, the prices, the ebb and flow of refugees from old places that no longer wanted them to new sovs that couldn't afford them... And, her very favorite bugaboo: the feminization of our culture as its 'manly' virtues were progressively replaced with compromise and inclusion and 'rights' that had never existed before, to the expense of the only rights she believed counted – unbridled freedom of (the preferred) religion, total freedom of the cannibalistic free-market and the absolute and omnipresent freedom to bear arms - of which, in true biblical form, the last freedom became first, since guns were, according to the persons my sister revered, the only means by which an individual had a prayer of retaining any other freedoms.

Once the fighting came close - our fellow citizens knocking heads over whether we were all inhabiting 'the Gemstone State' (epitomized by our largest city with its gaudy casinos, declining rivers of tourist cash and inclining inflow of free radicals, i.e., refugees whose only credentials came from governments that no longer existed) or 'the Bristlecone State' (moniker preferred by our ranching, mining and blank-space-on-the-map factions) - Vincent joined up with the Patriots of Jefferson State. A self-appointed militia advocating self-rule for the heavily-forested hills of south-coastal Oregon and north-coastal California,

the Patriots operated under a system of weighted voting based, as far as I could tell, on body-weight, weapon caliber and general badassness - in which last category my sister had long excelled. Kissing our heavily-sedated mother goodbye, she grabbed the keys to Duncan's work truck (returned to us some time earlier by one of the old State's last functioning Highway Patrol units after it had been found in a ditch bordering a parched field of ryegrass – along with his desiccated remains) and lit out for the unincorporated wilds which she considered to constitute the real west. That was nearly seven years ago, and I had not heard a word from her since.

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Whole time I was talking, the Lt. seemed to be listening intently, so I was caught off guard when she responded to my little recap by pulling up a photograph on her machine and sticking it in front of my face. First impulse was to pull back from the seeth of resentment it showed, but after I'd looked a little longer, my lizard brain experienced something else – some atavistic warming of the heart as it excavated the subject's glare to unearth a pleasing arrangement of almond-shaped eyes beneath brows whose shallow arches played well with the straight & narrow bridge of her nose and its modestly skyward-bending tip. Her upper lip was a study in restraint, the lower a promise of plenty and where they met at each end, the hint of a curl belied their bearer's worst intentions. Graceful symmetry not yet battered by very many years, those features confused as much as delighted: green eyes squinting distantly toward Asia, rounded nostrils suggesting scents of Africa. Her skin bore a northern tint but a southern tone and her gaze was definitely of the west – cold and objective and

shaped by its own visions.

Recalling now how that photo struck me brings to mind a study I once heard of, where they showed pictures of faces to pre-verbal infants and monitored the landscape of their brains for electrical activity. Certain faces got positive responses from infants of all racial and cultural backgrounds, while others generated nothing but static. Well, this face had set *my* inner baby giggling; it made me want to know more about her, despite the asymmetrical hat-hair and the harsh shadows cast by whatever lighting the imager had used.

“You know this kid,” Etienne announced, which kicked me back a bit, because, in some way, I did feel as if I knew her. Not like I’d ever seen her before, but like I knew something of *who* she was, what she was feeling when they pointed a camera at her in what was probably one of the worst moments of her brief life. Like maybe what she was feeling then, I’d felt too; back at an age that knows everything and accepts none of it. When you realize you are not ‘either, or’ but sharply ‘neither, nor’ and nowhere and nothing fits without you feel an itching just beneath your surface that you’re certain will draw blood if you dare to scratch it. Which is maybe why it took me a minute to say, being honest only in the sense Etienne was asking about, that I didn’t recognize her.

To which the detective shot back an accusing, “Why not?”

“Because I – no! wait... that’s an absurd question. If I don’t recognize her, I *don’t* recognize her, there is no ‘why’ - I just don’t. Should I?”

Which was when Detective Lt. Nousheen Etienne did the most surprising thing of our

entire interview - she laughed. Loud and deep like the front-row drunk at a stand-up act, one smug guffaw before quickly slapping the scowl back across her face and assuring me it was fine. We were all fine here. She believed me.

“Just gathering information, y’ see. Take you a little by surprise, M. Learn how your mind works. Always get something useful out of that one,” she offered by way of an (almost) apology before drawling out another question as if it had crept into her head for no particular reason.

“Whadda you know about readers?” was the new topic, as the detective leaned a shoulder against the paint-peeling wall and crossed her ankle boots in a pose of studied nonchalance. When I started to deliver a primer on the software utilities our office employed to decipher data stored in archaic filetypes, she laughed again, though just a small cackle this time. Seemed about to pursue a new subject when her LyfeMachine buzzed. Holding it where I could not see the display, she read a bit, tapped a finger several times in frustration, then read again. (No surprise the machine was old and acting up, btw, mine was too. Those EM scrambling satellites – later christened ‘the interferators’ - had made all the old ‘smart phones’ useless, and between the scrambling’s effects on international trade and the USA’s own Big Diss, tech in the former fifty had been seriously de-globalized, like so many other things. Took years for individual sovs to each engineer and produce their own workarounds. VSR (a very-short-range transmission network) and LyfeMachines constituted our local fix, which is why they were the only devices anyone carried any more, but with all the supply chain challenges, only the very top dawgs got new units. The rest of us were lucky to inherit their semi-functional hand-me-downs.)

“Well, Shirley comma Jack – or Jack comma Shirley; whichever it is,” Etienne offered eventually, her idea of another joke at my expense. “It’s been fun and games, but I’m afraid that’s all we’re gonna have time for today.” Had ushered me halfway out the door when I surprised myself as much as I did her by stopping and turning back.

Attractiveness, I’d come to believe as I struggled over the years to locate any in myself, is a matter of perception. Some invisible progression of proportions, some agile assortment of alignments that meshes gears with whatever random collection of favored images a particular viewer has starred and tagged and stored away without intent or even awareness. For my currency, this girl had it, in spades.

“That picture you showed me?” I found myself asking, left hand reaching out all on its own. “If you could give me a copy, I might... I mean, if there *was* some connection...maybe, uh, back when Vincent and I were kids or something... it might come to me?”

Etienne did that thing again, where she locked eyes on mine and held them long enough to let you know there were words attached to the look, even if you had no forsaken idea what words they were, then tapped a few clicks into her machine.

A heartbeat later, I felt my own Lyfe vibrate.

“Thanks,” I added, then realized the detective had never said who the photo was of or why it was important. When I asked, Etienne sighed again, even more deeply. Not with sympathy certainly, more like hopelessness, and for the first time it occurred to me she was probably a lot younger than I’d been imagining. Credit the worry lines tracing her forehead

and the regions of gray at the temples of her blonde-bristled scalp.

“That,” she offered as she pocketed her machine and plucked the toothpick from the corner of her mouth to spike it in my direction, “is the Burrow-rat who killed your sister.”

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To know what a Burrow-rat is, you need to understand about Burrows - and Counties too - and to do that you’ve got to start with Center, and to understand *that*, you need to know a bit more about how our sovereignty attempts to keep itself sovereign.

Steadfastly independent, Confluence does maintain an arm’s length association with the notoriously progressive Republic of Northern California (commonly referred to as NorCal rather than RNC, given that acronym’s prior usage). This arrangement eases import/export challenges, thus allowing a variety of high-tech enterprises which had regional manufacturing and distribution facilities here prior to the Diss to continue bringing in the offshore revenues and resources that allow us to survive (special shout-out to Visible Elements Solutions, LLC, whose gene-splicing and -dicing innovations are in worldwide demand!). Our secular setup makes for delicate relations though, with the Sun River Supremacy - a Christian Nationalist republic to our north - and especially with the Kingdom of the Word (our second neighbor to the east, where it encompasses the most-sparsely

populated portions of several old states; sometimes referred to as the K.O.W., but usually just ‘the Kingdom’). Despite those hazards, we live in relative peace thanks to a robust defense posture which includes consolidation of all business, administrative and industrial facilities - as well as their critical workers, families and supporting amenities - into a dense area of restricted access known as Center. Center’s checkpointed perimeter is surrounded by a densely populated Inner Buffer broken down into six Burrows (early debate on nomenclature bounced between the technocratic ‘Sectors’ and the Latinate ‘Barrios’ then veered toward the Big Apple nostalgia of ‘Burroughs’ before a noisy populist campaign decided the issue in favor of that more cuddlesome spelling). These Burrows are home to the majority of our metro population including all non-critical – i.e., not highly-paid – workers, many of whom commute into Center on restrictive permits to fill our service needs (one reason our streets are hand-swept, our gardens so neatly trimmed and even mid-level Centerites can boast multiple household staff). Burrows is in turn surrounded by an uninhabited Outer Buffer zone we like to call ‘the moat;’ land that was either blasted barren in the Battles, burned bare in the wildfires that went unfought during that same period or, more recently, scraped clear by the authorities to stitch those charred patches into a continuous kill-zone that is still being expanded and optimized today. Everything beyond the moat is ‘Counties.’ Rural and sparsely populated, Counties had been content to live off the land for a few years after the Diss, but limited access to manufactured goods (and processed foods!) soon convinced them it was better to leverage their surplus produce into a Reciprocal Commonwealth arrangement with Center. Still intensely counter-dependent, the fact folks out there were so heavily armed meant Counties also served as an early-warning perimeter for Center’s defenses, despite being terra incognita for most of its regular citizens.

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“Counties? They mostly keep to theyselves, out there with the coyo-tees and the skunks... Wouldn’t be caught dead there myself though, M’ah. No way. Those counties muckers jus’ waitin’ to go ballistic; no re-zun a’ tall.”

Credited to a young masc I.D’d. as Ton-oko Brezhneive, who was being interviewed after escaping the scrum generated by rumors a truckload of Counties beef was due at a Wells Fargo Victuals Dispensary, I caught that bit on Feed Three, the morning after my meeting with Etienne. Switching over to Feed Seven, I learned some more significant but equally unsurprising news: SoCal’s Sovereign Secretary claiming she possessed incontestable proof the ongoing sabotage of water diversion structures up and down the Colorado River was the work of the Phoenician Yeomen, an arm’s-length militia based in the hottest of the Southwest’s hotlands. That attribution made sense: more water in the upper river would mean more water passing through the Powell Mudflats into Lake Mead which, along with the Yeomen’s recent seizure of the control room at Hoover Dam, meant the system would keep generating power so their deep-desert megalopoli could stay cool and illuminated. Not to mention, more reliable water for the cotton-fields the Phoenicians’ financiers had been planting in hopes of profiting off those sovs who’d been unable or unwilling to meet the New Confederacy’s trading conditions.

Water, power and export income in one move; those new Phoenicians knew how to play the board.

Confluence having been cut off from Colorado River power and water since the Battles, the level of alert at our critical facilities remained at Red - Minus One.

In other words: business as usual.

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Players and water wars were not my only distractions from work that day, as I repeatedly resolved and repeatedly violated my resolution to stop pulling-up and staring at that mug-shot I'd received from the Lieutenant. Eventually quit fighting and decided to see what I could find out about its subject; which was a bit of a challenge, since Etienne had only mentioned a nickname. That was overcome quickly enough though, once I realized the image had been zoomed-in when she displayed and forwarded it. Pulling out to full-frame exposed a text block at the bottom. 'Bethany Anne Joan's,' it read, plus date and time in a blocky typeface that had probably been around since before pixels were born. Figuring the surname was a typo, entered in a rush by some desk-cop enduring an overnight shift on an undersupply of caffeine, I did an internal Muni-directory search for Bethany Jones, but it came up short, as did Anne Jones and every other variation I tried.

News threads were not much more helpful. One overnight summary did list an item that might relate: anonymous call to MSS reporting a scuffle on a fringe of the moat resulting

in dispatch of a minor-incursion detail to the location. Multiple parties wounded, it said (no mention of any deceased) and an unknown number of persons taken into custody for transfer “to the appropriate authorities.” I didn’t fully appreciate that last part till I mentioned my frustrations to one of our senior forensic researchers, Du Huei, who had voxed to give me her trademark overly-detailed instructions on a credit-kiting investigation that was being closed out and needed archiving.

If any of the detainees were Center, she answered my purposely vague question, the appropriate authorities would’ve been MSS’ own holding facilities, where they’d be read their rights, given a med check, phone calls and access to the legal-pool. All the good stuff, that is, including even an HR consultation on the inevitable workplace repercussions of whatever had gone down. Fact the Feed said ‘transferred’ though, meant at least some of the detainees were non-Center and by law those buggers would each be sent back to where they came from – Burrow-dwellers to Burrows, County persons to Counties - so their local authorities could decide what to do with them pending further legal action.

Out in Counties, she went on, the policy was to turn suspected criminals over to the community of their accusers. Like if you stole some guy’s petrobuggy, you’d be held by whatever posse or clan that guy belonged to, until your peeps and his agreed on where you’d get heard and sentenced (unless you were offed first, that is, or busted out by whoever had your back). As the saying goes, ‘Counties is just another word for chaos.’

Burrows were diff but not much better; they had no budget for actual jails and no appetite for the continuing headaches of running them even if they had had. Instead, Burrows Oversight (an administrative coordination commission funded by revolving grant from Muni), would post a request for proposals to determine who was willing to hold the

prisoner for the lowest daily fee. Sim to the old bail/bond system, the contractor had to guarantee the accused would appear when required; if they didn't, the contractor had to give back their fee plus pay a hefty penalty. That downside, combined with the low-bid process, ensured that being detained in Burrows was no picnic, and the cost to the community a few percent of what it would've been to house the same person in MSS custody.

Du's little lesson gave me even more to ponder each time I pulled up the girl's image over the next few hours. And yes, I did think of her as a girl; that fist-in-your face hair and the bit of ink I could see crawling up the side of her neck made it difficult for me to voice her as 'woman,' but the features were decidedly not masculine, either. 'Fem and fighting it,' I'd heard more than once, and as much as I'd resented that language when it was applied to me, it seemed to fit this person. Certainly more than 'Bethany' did; I imagined she'd hate being called that. Probably give you a black eye for it - or worse.

As to the whole 'rat who killed your sister,' thing, I have to confess to ambivalence - at best. Like I've already said, Vincent and I were never close, she made sure of that with plenty of teasing and taunting and 'practical' jokes whose 'practical' effect was to burn into my cortex that she was four years older, four years wiser and way more than four years tougher. Didn't help, of course, that we had nothing in common from day one, her out fishing and riding dirt bikes with Duncan, me back at home scanning fashion blogs and helping Pris around the house in any ways she would let me. You could see it in our rooms too: Vinnie's looking like a tornado in a second-hand shop, mine as neat as the 'after' image on one of those ancient house-flip vids Pris took a liking to in her declining period. Also by appearance: me experimenting with clothes and hair and all, versus Vincent: outfit by Tractor Supply (at best), or Duncan's hand 'em downs, more likely.

The arguments we'd had were epic. Even before Dunc disappeared, they escalated more than once to pushing, shoving, slapping (by me) and punching (by Vinnie), so there were no tears when sis took off; it had been coming for so long it was more of a relief than anything else. Result: hearing that she was gone for good (dead, that is) just felt like confirmation of something I'd accepted long-before. Maybe if I'd been there and seen it happen, or been required to identify a body – which issue never came up with Etienne, btw; a lapse which would, sadly, not tick my curious-meter until much, much later – maybe then there'd have been more impact, but as it happened I felt more emotional connection with this Bethany character I'd never met than I did with the sister so gracelessly-described in the official Notice of Shareholder Status Revision that hit my machine right about the time I was heading downstairs for calories. “Shirley, Vincent,” it read. “Age 32. Deceased in the course of committing a felony.”

Ah yes, the old ‘innocent until no longer alive to protest being called guilty’ trick.

Same official notification went on to inform me the subject's remains had already been cremated and the ashes would be available for pick up anytime in the next 24 hours, if I was so inclined.

I'd have to think a while on that one.

—

Someone said we seek in love what we feel is missing in ourselves. That would have me hooking up with persons resembling Vincent, which is, well, nagonnahappen. No, what tweaks this freak's bones is when I sense some of my *me*-ness resonating in another person's space, but even in Center, which is supposed to be so highly evolved, there just aren't a lot of peeps embracing a chronic refusal to settle. Our corporate culture embraces its transmen and transwomen of course, peeps whose public persona consistently reflects what their inside says is real, but there's still some friction over those who mix our messages. It's all too easy to find yourself in a corner for transgressing some random bozo's idea of what it means to be a 'real man.' Or woman.

Executive summary: you can be this or you can be that in Center, you can change from x to y, or y to x, or x to y and back to x again but not being any one thing? That's incomprehensible to an awful lot of Shareholder minds. To me though, 'choose your box' is nowhere near the same as 'no boxes,' so yeah, when I saw that Mutt person's image and sussed that her world was just as poor a fit on her as mine is on me, it placed a pin in the palm of my hand, right there in the center of my lifeline, that I could not stop thinking about. Ergo, when Directory listings and the overnight news summaries weren't helpful, next thing I did was search the net.

—

Time now, for a note on THE END OF THE INTERNET AS WE ONCE LOVE-HATED IT!

As the Big Diss gathered momentum, a crazy-quilt of different restrictions were put on the Internet by the multitude of new and evolving governments. Some sovs wanted to prevent access to web content their leaderships found offensive (do the words ‘social media’ still ring anybody’s chimes?), some just wanted to wring the online world for revenues. Finding those efforts unsatisfying, others tried instead to silence the entire conversation, attacking its connecting tissue by digging up fiber-optic trunk lines, cutting undersea cables or releasing viruses targeting its data-routing nervous system. Initially ineffective, those attempts did, however, reduce the redundancy of the infrastructure sufficiently that when the scrambling of radio comms suddenly cut off sat-links, the world wide web was effectively swiffed into darkness. Posts stopped appearing, queries went unanswered, previously popular websites accumulated no more views and, for much of Earth’s population, access to the web-wide world of information became a thing of the past. Those sovs with decent tech capabilities managed to cobble together their own intranets to share locally produced content, some even filtering in carefully-curated knowledge from outside. Here in Confluence, Shareholders (those of us privileged to work and reside in Center) were each allowed an occupationally-appropriate level of access within Muni’s own NewNet – with the implicit understanding that every key stroke was subject to monitoring, logging and analysis by our administrators’ databots.

Being (nominally) part of an investigative office, I had higher-level access than your average Shareholder and so was able, with some dedicated exploration, to view a crime-statistics log for the night in question: sixteen traffic incidents of varying severity, four disorderlies (peeps’ll regret those citations for the rest of their careers, if they’re Center!), one weapons violation (transporting a set of chef’s knives in an unsecured container) and two

petty-theft apprehensions (pickpockets being almost as resilient as cockroaches). A typical weeknight, in other words, and nothing at all that related to Etienne's story - or that sketchy news item I'd found on one of my first lookie-loos.

Which news item, it turned out, I could no longer bring up that evening, no matter how many different search tactics I employed.

—

First thing I heard when my desk machine came to life at its appointed time Wednesday morning: the Royal Navy of England – the 'Great Britain' era having petered out some years before – had begun forced evacuation of remaining hold-outs on The Bahamas!

(All of that island nation's low-lying properties had been condemned *years* before due to sea-level rise, and with them the tourist trade - which would have died soon anyway, once EM jamming reduced commercial air travel to a daylight-only shadow of its former self. Now the rising seawaters had infiltrated an expansive geological strata beneath the remaining dry ground and engineers said there wasn't a single structure safe from collapse on any of the commonwealth's nearly 700 islands, islets, keys and atolls.)

Toweling off after a tepid and timer-limited shower, I caught the tail end of a Swedish oceanrise specialist's prediction that at least three of the Caribbean's remaining Virgins would face similar violation in the near future. Her reaction to that prospect though, was what struck me most:

“What we call ‘climate change’ is only a problem to humans,” she pronounced with smug confidence. “To the rest of creation, it’s simply more of the same. Every organism is subject to its habitat, every habitat is subject to change and when – not if - a habitat changes, its organisms either adapt or they evolve into something else or they die out completely and their place in the food chain gets filled by something better suited to those new conditions. It’s business as usual for mother nature - just not for all the dumb stuff we *humans* have constructed on the naive assumption that nature would stop progressing just to suit us.”

Had plenty of time to ponder that vision while putting together an appropriately-professional waist-up look for the first agenda item of my day - virtual Case Review conference on a minor muck-up at Peace Works, a non-profitable entity the korps had set up for PR purposes, like providing free management training and consultation to financially-strapped ventures in other sovs to whom Muni was sucking-up in hopes of increasing trade. One of Peace Works’s Board members’d voiced concern that their operating-funds balance was consistently lower than she thought it should be. In the end, our Division’s forensic investigation (of which my main contribution was to collate and data-base the 23 boxes of paper documents turned over to us) had pinned it all down to overly-optimistic budgeting by P W’s CEO. Appointed from a middle-management position at one of the larger korps, he had not anticipated that even a non-profit’s staff would need food, beverages and housing

while on the road, plus the occasional purchase of office supplies – all at whatever was the going rate wherever they were providing services. As we wrapped that rather tense video-meeting, I asked our team leader, Alliyah Weiss-Jabar, if the two of us could stay on for a quick minute. Once certain all the other parties had logged out, I filled her in on my meeting with MSS and subsequent failure to get more info, then asked if I could use her higher-level New Net access to find out something more about this Jones kid.

“I can’t share my log-in, Jack. You know that,” she responded a little sharply, before course-correcting with a not particularly convincing expression of sympathy regarding my sister’s demise. Once we’d traded that requisite polite language, M Weiss-Jabar conceded she could do a little looking on her own and get back to me, which was actually what I’d been after for all along. I just approached it the way I did – asking if I could use her access - so she’d have the satisfaction of telling me ‘no.’

Bosses. Ya’ gotta love ‘em.

—

Learned an interesting tidbit when I went down later for lunch in my building’s food court (fancy name for a ‘cafeteria,’ the place would have been unimpressive even for a suburban community college, but was blessedly free of charge as part of the subsistence package we low-level Shareholders received in lieu of a pre-Diss pay scale). Settled into an open chair at a four-top occupied by Pilar Da Alves and Toddy Sinclair, their heads bent close over something displayed on a book-size machine.

“Jack – you’re good with words,” Pilar suggested brightly, though I sensed e was just winding me up. “What would you think this article is gonna be about? Read it to ‘m, Toddy.”

“Ok, ok, so what it says is: ‘Dissolution Allows No Solution to Solvent Situation,’” Toddy read, stumbling a bit over the alliteration.

Had to admit, I had no idea what that was about, other than a second rate journalist’s attempt to capture attention over nothing. Once I admitted I couldn’t guess what the headline was getting at, Pilar and Toddy lost interest, which left it to me to look up the story after I got back to my room.

Turned out though, the report could impact us all, and soon, because our korps’ production of wind generator rotor blades’d been shut down for the last two weeks. One of the largest industries in our metro area before the Diss, SteadyWinds was among Confluence’s remaining profitable manufacturers. Generally managing to source raw materials and components despite all the new trading blocs, embargoes and tariffs, it’d been supplying generator components to several sovs whose petro resources didn’t meet their power needs. Resulting revenue covered a significant portion of our imports of food and offshore-manufactured goods; a prolonged shutdown would mean less of everything for everyone and was, therefore, something our execs would typically avoid like the plague (sorry; poor taste after the last twenty years...).

Except...

Apparently, there was some very specialized solvent SW needed to clean the mold after they pulled out each new rotor blade, and there was only one refinery producing that solvent anymore – located on a stretch of the Gulf Cost recently annexed by the New

Confederacy, with whom Confluence had failed to reach a trade agreement due to ‘philosophical differences’.

In other words, until Muni accepted a laundry list of Confederacy conditions - which included ending those of our social policies which conflicted with their extensive Bill of Freedoms - we’d get no solvent, no clean molds, no new rotor blades and no income from selling such.

One more economic injury the shallow-state folks bequeathed us when they balled-up all the old maps and tossed ‘em in the bin.

—

“What do you really know about this girl?” Weiss-Jabar asked me early Thursday morning. Her way of emphasizing what we both already understood: that I didn’t know squat.

I’d made an excuse to stop by the office in hopes of running into her and then gotten myself backed into a corner outside the coffee-kitchen by Dervla, a full-charge investigator I’d sometimes assisted. She was droning on about her partner’s research project at a some korp’s bioengineering workshop, so I was bigly-relieved when W-J called me over with a nod of her exquisitely natural locks. Since Alliyah was the lead for our entire work group,

Dervla could take no legitimate offense as I muttered my apology and scooted, surprised to be led into a confer-pod where my supervisor immediately closed the door, putting us in the classic compromising situation: two persons behind a closed door with no third as witness. Not really a violation of office policies yet – the electrochromic door and one wall were still fully transparent and would stay that way unless one of us keyed in a PIN to opaque them - but still, being in a fishtank with my boss was unusual enough that my skin was already a bit tight even before she'd started out with such a frank and, frankly, passive-aggressive, question.

Once I'd admitted all I knew was that the shooter was from Burrows and probably being held somewhere in private custody, my superior continued, her eyes alternating between quick scans of the office outside our pod and long, lingering tight-focus probes of my own amber orbs.

“Nineteen years old, mixed heritage,” she recited from memory. Six years education – spread over twice as long in calendar time and virtually all virtual. Raised in a privately-owned intimate-recreation facility– never a recreation herself, just there because of the mother, one Lucretia Bracciolini, born Flushing, Old New York, to a Congolese/Malaysian mother and an absentee goofball with a rap sheet to match the surname she took when they hooked. M. Bracciolini held a Senior Recreation's license, so she must've been highly skilled.

“They say,” W-J added pointedly, “not that I would know. Mother is now deceased, since you were about to ask...”

M. Weiss-Jabar can be quite a scold sometimes; has firm ideas on where your

attention should be focused at any given moment, which is generally fine because she's a caring kind of boss, but can be intimidating. I used to get distracted wondering if I was measuring up to her standards, till one day I realized no one really does, not even her, so fob that: be yourself.

"Reason you didn't find her is the last name. It really is Joan's with an apostrophe, not o-n-e-s." I must have looked confused by that, as she chuckled and responded to my question before I could pose it. "You'd have to ask her. Even when I figured that out though, your girl was hard to track; no employment or enlistment, no official residence, just a couple of notations in MSS monitoring logs saying she'd been picked up dossing in zombie-buildings along the edge. You know - run-down places owned by some smoke & mirror set up to hide whoever is in line for the payoff when Muni gets around to condemning them to expand the moat, not that that matters for your purposes."

Still a bit surprised she'd mentioned the mother's-mother's ethno-racial background, usually a no-no in Center conversation, I was also wondering why Weiss-Jabar hadn't said anything about the girl's other parent. As usual, my boss was a step ahead, voice getting softer and expression more somber as she confessed there was no record of the father. "Maybe she has none, just sprung up out of her mother's loins like...well, been known to happen. Call it magic, if you want, but it's been known."

My face must have revealed how skeptical I was of that, because W-J smiled a grudging little smile and went on to offer another, more-plausible hypothesis.

"Ok, so this part isn't certain - no DNA confirmation *that my source knows of* but rumor among the recreations is that her father was some korp biggie who got careless, back in the day."

Which might explain why the perp had survived once the break-in turned deadly. Had bothered me from the start, actually. Why, if someone was spraying lethal rounds, didn't they just off the entire crew and avoid any potential witnesses? W-J though, had yet another idea she wanted to share, and went on to tell me, in the driest Center-speak, that the Joan's girl had been logged by Muni surveillance as part of a radical group spreading anti-religious propaganda in Burrows. And that 'Grace,' the member of Mutt's crew who'd been killed, was believed to have been a leader of them all. 'Habitual agitator' was how the citizen-surveillance directory listed her. Which, to MSS, was more a sentence than a description.

How W J'd found any of that out was not addressed. Neither was how she'd gotten hold of the Detainee Transfer form she forked over only after I agreed not to tell anyone where I'd gotten it. Hell, I was so surprised my boss was being that helpful - even offering use of division's car-service account if I decided to go visit the suspect; wink, wink, nod, nod - I would've agreed to just about anything. Was pleased as well, of course, but mostly surprised.

Like to think that explains why it wasn't till I'd left the building that I realized W-J had never mentioned just what variety of 'anti-religious propaganda' this group was supposed to be spreading.

—

Which might raise the question: what did the religious establishment think of all the chaos we patriotic Americans had brought upon ourselves in recent decades? For the most

part, they welcomed it, ascribing Diss, Battles, EM interference, drought, fires, floods and subsequent famine and pestilence to the judgement of whichever God they prayed to; retribution for whatever sins they ascribed to the modern era. Perhaps the most colorful justification came from one Josephat Baptiste, head of a small unaccredited college in the old Florida panhandle, who characterized pre-Diss culture as “the new Babel;” a society “so full of pride and arrogance they believed their institutions had made God unnecessary.” Only this time, instead of making the hordes suddenly start speaking in multiple tongues so they could no longer work together and challenge His power, Baptiste’s media-savvy deity had allowed us to develop digital media that communicated *too* effectively, anticipating that the resulting rat’s nest of social, financial, legal and political squabbles would eventually steer any survivors back to His one true path.

Soon as that analysis became widely distributed (digitally, of course), Baptiste College’s endowment began to swell - donations cheerfully accepted to this day, in any currency listed on the New Confederacy’s current exchange rate table...

If I'm honest, I have to admit I disliked India Billacerkowicz from the first time I contacted her, which I made sure was via a work address. Not exactly kosher, but it seemed the most credible way to present myself to the person listed on the Joan's girl's transfer form as 'DETAINEE'S LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE'.)

It hadn't been difficult get the representative's comm address, it was listed right below the subject's name, but a call-back – *from a Counties civil servant?* After three voice messages went unanswered throughout the day, I finally played my most questionable card: calling just before five PM and not bothering to leave any I.D.; just a dead-pan recitation that this was “an urgent call from the Forensic Investigations Section of the Outside Comptrolling Division of the Valleywide Municipal Corporation and it was imperative to M Billacerkowicz's future that e speak to me as soon as possible about some questions regarding eir finances.” Between the bureaucratic lingo and use of official neutral pronouns, I was not surprised to receive a call back within the hour.

Got the niceties over quickly enough, those standard phrases you volley back and forth till it's clear who's going to set the agenda for a conversation, a point I won by reassuring India e was not really under investigation, at which point e proposed we both use she/her to make things more casual and I graciously agreed.

Told her I had an interest in the Joan's girl's case and again didn't disagree when she assumed I meant some sort of public-finance interest. Did get corrected myself though, when I referred to the kid as her client, and even more when I back-pedaled to another title I'd heard of.

“Public defender?” India wailed. “You Center sweethearts slay me! Why the hell should the public defend criminals? You get accused of a crime, it’s your job to defend yourself. You can’t pay? That’s your problem, not every other Jack (sorry!) and Jill scraping to make their own way in the world.” Ms. Billacerkowicz was the perp’s Rep/Con, she informed me. ‘Rep,’ as in *representative* appointed by Kaolin County Courts to stand-in and sign the paperwork for her so her case stays on schedule, and ‘Con,’ as in *con*-vince her to cooperate and not make things go any harder for herself than necessary. Sooner everyone involved understood that, the better we’d all get along.

Apologies offered and accepted, I dipped another toe into what seemed to be rather troubled waters by asking how she saw her not-a-client’s chances. The R/C snorted.

“Snowball in Death Valley is the word that comes to mind,” she quipped, then sighed a deep one, perhaps at her own numerical fail, perhaps something else. “Was picked up at the scene, murder weapon trigger-locked to her bio-metrics, target clearly visible in on-board vid record so the fact the slug was not recovered is only a minor tickle. It’s pretty obvious she and her friends were caught in the act of a felony and used illegal lethal weapons to try and blast their way out of it. Her bad luck the milit she off’d was County; folks out here don’t like long sentences – too damn expensive, too much chance of some friends organizing a breakout and starting a range war. Execution is the most popular solution, but I’m hoping to avoid that, given her tender age and all.”

To say the conversation went downhill from there would be an understatement, as I let slip that I’d been talking to Lt. Etienne. India claimed interference with Court business and when I protested I had a right since it was my sister who’d died, she realized she’d been tricked into talking to me in the first place. Fortunately, by that time she’d already clicked

me over a packet of minimal case material; two shadowy ‘scene of the crime’ images and a few still-frames from a weapon’s on-board vid, but even that was a lot better than the nothing-burger I’d had before the call. In parting, I did my best to patch things up between us, maybe generate a little emotional connection for future abuse, but the R/C’s closing words were not encouraging.

“I can maybe understand your emotions getting the best of you, Shirley, but I see these kind of cases all the time. This office has no budget for hiring outside resources, and my bosses have no appetite for dragging out the inevitable, so I plan to acknowledge the uncontestable facts, plead self -defense – the residents of that house were heavily-armed themselves; hell they killed one of hers first – and ask for prison time. Then, when they refuse that, I’ll whine and whimper a while before accepting banishment for life from Confluence, Nor Cal and all contiguous sovereignties.”

From the tone of her voice, it was clear M India B. would consider it a very good day’s work if she could get Mutt off that lightly.

—

Day’s final disorienting development came in late evening, as I was bumming over how far into the night I’d have to work to justify going off-clock at noon next day if I failed to talk myself out of visiting this Mutt person, when my Lyfe announced an incoming from my significant other.

Richard’s occupational-training program means most any time he’s not in class he’s

on-duty: presiding over a dorm of budding adolescents, pre-schoolers or squalling infants - Humaniculture studies requiring exposure to the entire range of developmental-levels before selecting an age-specialty for one's residence. That regimen rarely allows him to break-out for personal calls, but this evening the pod of nine-year-olds I could hear in the background were heading off on a 'bonding' outing: an overnight trip to a pre Diss children's museum where they'd camp-out in the remains of its atrium garden and spend their daytime hours living in whichever of the interactive exhibits were still functional. Get to play pioneer for a few hours, or astronaut, or maybe sailor on an old whaling ship (non-lethal whaling, of course, those sims had been edited quite carefully, back in the days of woke).

"I just wanted to let you know I'll be hard to reach," Richard explained, "for the next 54. In case you had something come up you wanted to do, or talk about..."

Hope springs, they say, eternal.

I do not want to give the impression here that I do not like Richard, I do. We've had many good times together and he's stood by me despite my dreams of a career in law enforcement having been arrested. I've even been referred to as his fiancée at least once – in a mumbled introduction as some other trainees shifted butts to fit mine in at a fellow trainee's bachelor-night mocktail bash - despite never so much as meeting his parents. More recently though, I'd been wondering if maybe we were just too many ways different, starting from the day he'd decided that an internship in Humaniculture was the best path to boost his future public service career. Guy had made that specialization sound like a total burden when he first brought it up; just something he would power-through in order to silence critics later, as in 'how can my opponent say I'm not sensitive to the needs of working mothers when I've...'

A common tactic for masc polits in Center, and usually enough to get them over the hump to where they can talk about the things that really matter: budgets, marketing, R&D, marketing and customer information services (aka, marketing). And security, of course, though having interned in kids rather than defense, he'll never be able to speak with any authority on martial affairs.

None of which was a problem for me, really. Or would have been; if he hadn't taken so well to the thing, right from the start. Hadn't begun to sound as if he really *liked* this new world of diapers and feedings and total devotion to beings who couldn't even hold a conversation. That was during the first-month immersion phase - or 'Basic with Babies,' as they apparently refer to it over in the care-corps. Intended to weed out any weanies who didn't have the cojones to last the rest of the run. Richard, it turned out, was not one of those. On the contrary, he was filled with wonder at what those little creatures could accomplish with a bug-eyed stare or the atonal concerto of a full-commitment tantrum. Overjoyed at the slightest hint of age-appropriate advancement in their motor skills or the apparent recognition of a familiar face (especially when that face was his).

"It makes me think again about my life-path," he shared during that evening's unexpected call, having just gotten back to his dorm from a 12 hr shift with barely two hours to prepare for their overnight trip (sleep deprivation being one of the primary physical skills the kid-care syllabus cultivates, just like in the good ol' days, when rearing kids was an ad hoc seat-of-their-diapers role performed almost entirely by amateur bio-parents in the off-hours from their paying jobs).

"Not that I want to only do Care; I still want to see how far I can go in Sovereign Admin. and all... But if I could blend that... have a family and keep them with me...with us,

I mean. Assuming I had a partner who was OK with that,” he offered, clearly hoping I’d jump at the chance. Which I did not, partly because I was nowhere near any kind of commitment with Richard, but mostly because the entire ‘kids’ issue had never created even a blip on my personal radar until he brought it up. Plenty to do, thank you, without that on my plate, and no real pining after the additional mommy-vote a Primary Parent is entitled to cast in the interest of each child for whom they are awarded legal responsibility.

So I changed the subject, gently introducing my summons from Security and what I had been told about Vincent’s demise, which turned out to be just the thing to move the conversation away from his kiddie minefield and furnish us a neat relationship moment. ‘Sister, death of,’ might even’ve been a chapter in the syllabus, I thought, as Richard shifted instantly into nurturing-counsellor persona, probing me for feelings I hadn’t yet realized I was feeling, urging a deep examination of resentments he hinted I might’ve been hiding from myself for years. It was sort of a defense mechanism then, when I lied and said I was already planning to visit this Joan’s person and see what she could tell me about why in hell Vincent - our family’s uber-rebellious black sheep self-deportee – had ended up in a firefight with a crew of Burrow rats scrounging vacant properties for paper books, out-of-date electronica and other relics from The Great Before.

“Excellent idea,” he greased, as if I had just cracked a thorny calculus problem with the help of my genius instructor (him). A perfect chance to explore my feelings of loss and to make peace with my sibling-history before consigning it to the past so I could properly focus on my own future. “And not the distant future,” Richard added ominously, before allowing that he had a lot of prep to do before boarding the minibus which would deliver him and his minions across town to the museum.

All of which is to say that by the time my tired head hit the pillow hours later, I was fully committed to seeing where the other four-fifths lived: Burrows.

—

My Division-staff level access paid off first thing Friday morning, when a NewNet search using the charge sheet's case number informed me the low bidder on the prisoner's jail/bond had been the Second Brigade of CA33. Short form for the Cardinal Avenue and Thirty-third Street Protectors, a Players schola out in Burrow Six, which meant that whatever hole their commanders chose would become the girl's home until some Counties court system confirmed her guilt and determined the appropriate punishment.

Only took fifteen minutes on hold with Oversight and another modest inflation of my job description to convince a citizen liaison specialist to disclose where that hole was, though given my ignorance of Burrows, the address meant nothing to me as I climbed into the Ryde vehicle that pulled up outside my building, smack-on the pick-up time I'd been given.

—

A couple more background items may be helpful for this journey...

Regarding transportation: even before the Diss, petro-vehicles and private ownership were clearly on the way out, between their association with climate change and the growing understanding of their true costs to both owners and communities. Post Diss, those sovs with

oil beneath their feet also tended to prioritize their products for local use over distribution on the open market. The resulting patchwork of fuel availability pretty-well decimated the long-haul trucking industry, a loss which was semi-addressed via increased railroad activity (once the railroads' owners had the bright idea to electrify their rolling stock and strip-farm millions of solar panels along all those right-of-way miles Uncle had awarded them practically for free, back in the glorious eighteen-hundreds).

With interstate commerce suffering severe mobility impairment and supply-chain challenges further skyrocketing the operating costs of even non-petro vehicles, ride-sharing quickly became the norm. End result, virtually everyone in Center subscribed to one of the autonomous-car services, my go-to being RydeKorp, since that was who OCD used for official purposes.

'Players,' 'schola,' 'nolos' and 'lewies' are somewhat more-complicated:

Early in its second term, the last Federal SecDef decided to enhance esprit de corps among the armed forces' by reassigning personnel on the basis of cultural origin and then stationing homogenous units as near as possible to the populations from which they hailed. Whether intentionally or not, those policies eased the way for many federal units to shift their allegiances once the Diss came along, providing an instant military capability for those new sovereignties lucky enough to have established bases within their territory. When the korps claimed sovereignty over Confluence's little slice of the economic cosmos though, it didn't contain a single military installation or resident unit to rise to that occasion.

Our leaders did, however, inherit a large population base including some whose skill sets were directly useful for revenue generation and many others well-suited to the service

industries necessary for the generators operate at maximum efficiency. The problem was what to do with the rest of the new realm's peeps; particularly the ones too independent, too impatient, or too pathologically-dominant to fit into the sort of lean and mean organizational matrix dictated by contemporary corporate economics. Given the higher percentage of female personalities who chose to pursue knowledge-based occupations, plus the increment of female persons eager to assume family-centered roles -whether due to the traditional leverages of romance, social competition, familial pressure, clock-ticking, and religion, or to the newer pitch of parenting as 'a service to the greater good' – the remaining truly-surplus population weighted very-heavily masc.

With the carrying capacity of spectator sports intrinsically limited by the skill pyramid and euthanasia/eugenics off the table (even for our bottom-line oriented leaders, those were bridges too far) senior management settled upon the same solution rulers have been employing for millennia: groom those idle young men into armed service of their overseers. Suiting Confluence's business-school background though, management ruled out an industrialized military structure with all those expensive bases, weapons systems and multi-layered command structures, instead allowing the unemployable to sort themselves into groups of their own choosing ('scholae' was one title used, perpetuating Roman misuse of an ancient Greek term). Every urban-gang splinter group and every ethnic-, racial- or religious-identity group was encouraged to sign up their young toughs and then given just enough funding per head to keep them on board but volatile. Each of these self-styled militias, whether in Burrows or out in Counties, found itself supplied with insignia and caps to identify its acolytes and in return for a minimal allowance of scrip their members spent work-shifts in virtual training, competing on a pyramid of computer games (thus the generic

reference to all of them as ‘Players’). Command and control as well as tactical content of the games were provided by Defensive Industries, a less numerous but far more professional consulting firm formed by several korp execs who happened also to be retired military officers, its sub-contract executed before the ink had even dried on Muni’s own commitment to manage the sovereignty).

Which is how roughly eight percent of Burrows’ populace ended up roaming streets and public spaces in combat-drag in squad, platoon and sometimes even company sized bands. Their training prioritizing unit cohesion and competition, hostile encounters were common, sometimes erupting into ad-hoc wargames played out in Burrow streets and buildings which was why, in a holdover from the old legal system’s pretense of corporate responsibility, Players were normally restricted to carrying ‘nolos’ – non-lethal shock-wave weapons left over from a pre Diss push for humane policing tools. Despite that limitation, injuries, maimings, disablings and even deaths were regular events. As far as the authorities were concerned, such consequences added realism to the Players’ training and so were classified as ‘collateral’ rather than ‘criminal’ damages, with correspondingly lower rates of compensation or penalization.

If any.

Out in Counties, on the other trigger-finger, there had never been any such thing as a nolo; folks out there carried lethal weapons (‘lewies’, in the vernacular), seeing as how they were regularly employed to harvest any protein vessels that wandered into range. And, also because County folk regularly found themselves up against hungry rovers jealous of their

assets or probing-patrols from other sovereignties. Which meant the shootout which took Vincent's life must've been quite a lopsided battle, at least until one of the Burrows crew somehow got hold of a lewie and started firing back.

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Soon as my Ryde's hatch closed, the vehicle made a U-turn across four near-empty lanes and began winding through Center's pristine streets to the Inner Limit, the heavily controlled separator of Center from Burrows. Initially no more than an administrative designation on some planning commission's map, the Inner Limit had quickly evolved to first a string of concrete vehicle barriers, then temporary fencing, then permanent, and by the time we're talking about it consisted of pre-cast concrete wall panels tilted into place to connect the bricked-up walls of buildings along Center's perimeter into a continuous barrier. Sandor Gate, one of the few public paths through the Limit, was recognizable from blocks away by its traffic back-up, but as a livery vehicle flashing a laser-comm ID, my Ryde was entitled to take the priority lane, sluicing through the sea of pedestrians and vehicles lined up for exit-inspection to where an automatic parting of gates sucked us into a dead-lock cage. Only after the inner gate had closed behind us and a stack of red lights had each turned green to indicate their negatory scan results did the outer gate open, spitting the Ryde into another empty lane, this one defined by tall steel pickets and coils of razor wire as we bypassed the even-more-extensive jam-up of persons and vehicles waiting to get *into* Center; my first glimpse of the full-immersion cac-show that is our Burrows.

Almost immediately, my attention was drawn to a swirling of the crowd on our left

where I caught a glimpse of uniformed figures, their arms rising with dark objects in hand to swing suddenly downward toward something hidden by the shifting wall of other peds eddying past, faces expressionless and eyes locked rigidly on the backs of the peeps in front of them. Was still putting together what that glimpse might have represented when a sudden abundance of beeps and buzzes reflected an interface near panic as the priority lane ended and my vehicle dove into a morass of moving flesh and metal. Elec-trucks and van-pools were certainly part of it, their all-over graphics hawking whatever enterprise had ponied up for the eye space, but far more abundant were open vehicles of every sort: motorbikes and scooters, old-school bicycles and creatively-crafted heavy-haulers with bulbous tires, their metalwork cages and racks loaded with bags and boxes and jugs and mammals. Even foot-scooters and skateboards braved this maelstrom, in which my Center-new and Center-clean Ryde stood out like an un-sore thumb on a laborer's hand, everything around it being worn, rusted, parti-colored or duct-taped together.

Another difference from Center Traffic - virtually everything out here was still piloted by a human organ (though *which* organ seemed to vary, depending upon which gender-type was occupying the driver's seat). Between the unpredictability of human decisions, the mix of modes and the dearth of traffic control or enforcement, any road rules or lanes that once existed on these pavements were now no more than suggestions, vehicles angling and merging impulsively as they jockeyed for advantage. Bigger the vehicle, the more slowly it progressed, while the smallest flitted like insects; cycles, scooters and gyro-lectric unicycles slotting into gaps and veering around clumps - when they weren't poaching pedestrian space by slaloming the concrete barriers meant to separate metal from mortal. All this on a pavement whose width had been reduced by every sort of encrustation glimpsed in

an urban planner's worst nightmare. Curbside parking spots that once served shoppers had been claimed by sedentary shipping containers, stacks of construction trash, trailers and RVs with the cement blocks and jury-rigged repairs of long term live-ins. Sidewalks had been throttled to within an inch of unpassable by the random placement of every-sized kiosks serving what appeared to be a thriving black-market. There were makeshift outdoor living rooms as well, furnished with lawn chairs, torn sofas and grotesquely stained recliners but even those were outshone by sprawling encampments of tents, tarps, blankets and cardboard, some of which stretched half a block or more, their few visible residents looking terminally bored as they sucked from giant bottles of neon-colored beverages or half-concealed cigarettes (yes, really, cigarettes! Despite certain loss of medical access if caught on camera!).

Muni'd never sprung for a door-to-door census, so it was impossible to be sure, but estimates I'd eyeballed around the office suggested at least three times as many persons called Burrows home now as in the old era. Crammed into maybe half the real estate by the moat's constricting limit, that made for a population density six times what the neighborhoods were built for, so no wonder every square-foot of space seemed jammed with humanity. And what a humanity! DRAB – 'DRessed As a Boy' might be a style choice to me, but here drabness was its own world, with easily half the horde clad in those scrubs-style suits of mottled grey material that muni's Fabrikorp subsidiary advertised so proudly. Fibers savaged from every sort of textile waste and felted ('*by a Patented Proprietary Process!!*') into a universal ('*and PERFECTLY DURABLE!!*') fabric requiring zero offshore resources, the blandness of those suits rendered wearers somewhere between interchangeable and

invisible. Not that there weren't exceptions, as my style-obsessed cortex quickly noted, gaze flitting wherever some bargain basement bit of finery popped out. Here a multi-patterned vintage look and there the extrovert-flair of a gaudy purple trench coat; up next, a touch of boudoir flagrancy in lace-trimmed satin while scuttling by came an unseasonable coat-over-jacket-over-sweater-over-whatever look that screamed 'loose grip on reality;' they were all spice to the mix. All subject, as well, to a random frigid scanning by the many uniformed and uniformly unfriendly-looking Players in various concoctions of camo and fatigues and faux-prison wear that announced their de-facto authority over the rest of us.

A lot to take in, which is maybe why it took me so long to catch on, but as the blocks coasted by, even I could not miss the real unifier: *this Burrows population was a mirror held up to the persons I knew and lived among*. Where Center-folk wore prosperity like a full-coverage foundation, Burrowers radiated 'broke.' As much as our comfortably-spaced pedestrians glowed with health and energy, Burrows' tight-packed horde were branded by adversity – faces filled with weariness and worry, bodies bent, bowed or simply exhausted, with limps and twists and badgered limbs and shuffles encumbering some, canes and crutches and wheeled appliances enabling others. And as much as Confluence's public pronouncements proclaimed indifference to ethnologic origins, anyone with eyes could see that a wide majority of our Shareholders were descendants of Euro-Western industrialization. Burrows residents, on the other foot, bore the marks of true inclusivity: their features and complexions suggesting countries, cultures and continents perennially short-ended in the march to the modern. Where we Center dwellers exuded the dividends of generational success, the great mass of Burrower residents were visibly engaged in day-to-day survival;

their aspirations denied, ignored, bested and abused so regularly for so long that quiet desperation was less a literary reference than a state of being.

Even the graphics along these streets proclaimed them a less blessed realm; the clever corporate logos and choreographed signage of my familiar Centerscape replaced here by amateurish banners and placards, pasted-over layers of handbills, and folk-art styled murals advertising unfamiliar shops and brands and even business models. Every window of ‘Marty’s Burka’s’ had been papered-over, but that did nothing to discourage the flow of draped forms I witnessed going in and out as my Ryde waited for a traffic clot to dissolve. A storefront titled ‘Mercado Costa D’oro’ seemed abandoned, the concrete in front of it littered with broken glass and trampled cardboard boxes, while ‘SIMPLY SEWING’ was doing a very brisk business, its stubble-jawed customers and the chrome-encrusted Chrysler cruiser parked prominently in front of it hinting that ‘SEWING’ might be cover for some completely different trade. Other pronouncements were totally unintelligible to me – languages and alphabets and pictograms whose origins I could only guess at – and would probably’ve gotten wrong if I’d tried. ‘Innocent School of English’ was one amusing exception, stenciled on plywood above a narrow gap between two sagging buildings whose pock-marked brickwork and torn yellow window-shades suggested anything but innocence lurked at the top of the murky staircase up which the sign invited passing peeps.

The closer look that facade encouraged made clear that *most* of the buildings out here were past their use-by dates. At the corner of 12th and Fisher, one entire wall of a three-story apartment block had fallen down - whether from neglect or The Battles, I couldn’t guess, but either way it’d buried the sidewalk in bricks and jagged bits, a row of scrap-lumber saw-

horses looping pedestrians out beyond the curb to get around the rubble while a second row attempted to shield them from the moving mass of vehicles. A patina of trash overlaying the debris suggested it had been there for some time, though a trio of ragged children pulling out bricks and chipping off mortar with hammers to place them in careful stacks suggested it might not be there forever.

At intersections, the sidewalks clogged-up even more completely: peds piling tighter and deeper till the lights changed (where any lights were working). The most adventurous peds just crossed whenever they liked, boldly dodging into gaps I'd've sworn hadn't been there until they were occupied, and once one of those acrobats had forced traffic to stop for him (always seemed to be a 'him,' I gotta say) the rest of the crowd would take the opportunity to follow, leaving the crush of hardware fuming till some momentary slowing of the ped parade allowed vehicles to surge forward again, making up time until the next obstacle asserted itself.

Among all that crowd and hustle, my eyes found smaller vignettes to ponder. That pair of fems and one masc lounging against a wall in the shade of a sorely-weathered barfront, I guessed to be casual recreations – 'hookers' or 'street walkers' in pre-Dis language, though you'd never use those slurs today, except as part of a history lesson. I'd heard such independents still existed; some pre-existing condition of law or health forcing them to free-lance rather than joining one of the many legal houses for which Burrows was known. Likewise, the languid and arrogant boys draped across stoops or perched in shadowed alcoves, scanning the street in every direction as they guarded peeling doorways. Lookouts, I assumed based on Feed features I'd watched, for pharma-dealers hiding inside,

raking in scrip by dispensing bootleg-medication to users who couldn't get it through the dispensary system - or else the truly-screwed: those unlucky souls whose habits demanded even more relief than their subscription meds afforded. I'd listened through enough election fodder to know that as much as legalization had reduced the demand for street meds, it had not entirely eliminated the issue.

One more moment: a clamor of hard-faced young mascs swirling up from behind my traffic-jammed Ryde, slapping hands on its sheet metal so the inside rang like a drum. Players, they were; six gym-inflated forms sporting identical caps, bandannas and fingerless gloves, flashing heinous grins into my windows to demonstrate that I was as much prisoner as passenger; autonomous vehicle providing precious little real autonomy this far from the besieged enclave that Center amounted to, in their map of the world.

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So intrigued was I by the spectacle of Burrows street life, I didn't realize we'd reached our destination till my vehicle abruptly swerved across the path of an approaching truck piled tall with bent bicycles, folded bed-frames, crushed trashcans and other metallic tripe. Narrowly missing the junker's front grille (no bumper there - maybe donated to the load it carried?) we darted past a tall sign whose concrete piers rose from a patch of dirt I imagined might once have constituted a flower bed. 'BLUE BUNNY MOTEL' the sign touted, its painted letters and background faded to pastel and beyond.

The car made several sharp maneuvers around obstacles in the parking lot before cushioning to a stop and opening its hatch to admit my first hit of the Burrows soundtrack.

Took a moment for my brain to identify the grumbling and spitting and revving – I hadn't heard petro-fueled traffic in so long. Horns honked above the din as well (a decided 'no-no' in Center), while somewhere out of sight a siren struggled to make itself heard, while somewhere off-stage obscure music played, its bass-beat surround-sounding the scene as I turned toward my vehicle's dashboard.

"This is it?" I asked.

"2274 Thirty-Third Street, Burrow Six, Southeast," the interface confirmed without emotion. "Delivery completed. If further service is desired, please provide supplemental instructions. Alternatively, please clear aperture. Closing in five, four, three, two..."

Jumping out just in time, I was nearly felled by the outside air; fiercely hot and infused with oily petro-exhaust and a dusty grit that made the membranes of my nose twitch. For better or worse, those olfactories were replaced almost immediately by a puff of sweet spliff smoke wafting over from a bruiser who'd appeared in the entrance to the motel's office, its spider-webbed glass door leaning sadly against the wall nearby. Heavy-booted ankles crossed and one arm raised high to grasp the header, his slouching form filled the doorway completely, blocking any thought of entry. A 'warrior,' I guessed he'd call himself, judging by the head-to-toe fashion choice of desert-sand camo.

And the long gun draped diagonally across his chest.

"Help you?" the warrior asked with a sly grin before placing the blunt back between his lips and sucking till his cheeks formed hollows of dark disdain.

Myself, I'd dressed-down for the occasion, in snappy khaki slacks picked up from a consignment store (as are nearly all my looks) and buttoned-up polo shirt over a binder

borrowed from Rex Stout, the drag-king who lived two floors up from me. Finished the character off with a sun-bleached navy windbreaker whose loose fit further disguised my proportions, a well-scuffed pair of boat shoes and a knit beanie pulled low. Between all of that and a face I'd long ago learned could swing either way, I was hoping the Second Brigade jailers would read me as some swishy Center queerboy (or whatever the current slur was in their lingo), and be snickering behind my back at this very moment. Which was fine with me.

Definitely safer than the alternative, I'd decided, in a neighborhood like this.

After handing over a six of bottled water to the doorman (as suggested by the 'Cultural Summary of Our Burrows' chapter in Muni's online *Manual for Official Interactions with the Public*), I told him my name and who I was there to see. Smokey flashed a look of couldn't-care-less, then tossed some unintelligible remark into the shadows behind him, after which a second camo mannequin squeezed out the doorway, looked me up and down a time or three and grunted that I should follow him. Down the face of the building he led, then around to a flaking steel stairway whose sagging treads shook and rang at each fall of the milit's heavy boots. Bags of trash spilling across the second-floor landing oozed a jungle of odors, hastening my steps around to the rear of the building, where another narrow walkway overlooked more broken asphalt and a collection of vehicles in various stages of disintegration. Following my guide, we passed a succession of plywood-patched windows and sun-blistered doors, a few of which hung open to reveal headsetted milits hunched intently before raging vid screens. Stopping at a door boasting a shiny new heavy-duty lockset, my guide spoke something at the shirtless lug reclined in a plastic chair nearby,

boots crossed on top of the guardrail, weapon resting comfortably on the prominent dome of his belly. That sentry gave me his own thorough examination - head to feet and back up to crotch before landing on my chest – shared a snort of amusement with my guide, then wagged his head as he dug into a cargo pocket to retrieve a chunk of rusty steel with a bright brass key twist-tied to the hole in one end.

“Your nickel,” he offered, dropping the artifact at my feet and sharing a leer with my guide as I bent to pick it up. “No deposit required,” he added, as if that were a major concession, then went back to examining the inside of his own eyelids as my guide strode heavily off. Fumbling key into doorknob, I twisted them both, producing a blackboard screech of metal on metal as the door swung inward to reveal the conditions their captive was enjoying.

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Which conditions included: hot thick air that screamed ‘locker room’. Feeble light eeking round the window patch’s misfit edges to highlight the few remaining shards of glass and, in the relative brightness of the nearest corner, a single armchair with dark smears marking where hands and heads had rested over the years. A bed with no linens taking up most of the space, its single side-table swarmed with take-out food containers and crumbled wrappings. Crushed corpses of several large cockroaches marking the walls (confirming the scurrying sounds I’d registered as the door opened). And, though I couldn’t see into the

bathroom, a sewage smell from its cracked-open door suggesting that no housekeeping had been done in there lately. Kid's captors no doubt preferred to spend their time sunning on the walkway - when not fighting digital foes on screens so they could lock-down another hit of per diem.

That last of which just goes to show, I had a better idea of those Players' personal priorities than I did of my own as I heard the door being pulled shut and locked behind me. Curiosity about the obscure personal history W-J's research had turned up for Etienne's mug shot was one motivation I could try to claim for myself; investigating the circumstances of a midnight shooting another. A show of respect for the sister I'd long ago given up for lost at least sounded a little more admirable, so let's pretend to believe that was the motivation for me ever laying eyes on the prisoner inhabiting that mattress's multi-stained and multi-torn ticking, her shoulders propped against a battered faux-wood headboard, hands stuffed deep in pockets to broadcast ambivalence towards my arrival.

Rail-thin and even younger-looking than me, with a syrup-toned complexion paled and freckled across the nose and cheeks, this object of my daydreams radiated way more confidence than I'd've been able to muster under the circumstances. Hair slick with sweat and chewed-down fingernails showing traces of dark enamel, she was dressed to fit Lieutenant's Etienne's night-raiding accusation: black boiler-suit littered with scuffs, tears and visible mends. Multiple piercings up the rim of each ear – chunky bits that looked home-made - and some scraggly ink on backs of the fingers I glimpsed when she freed a hand to scratch at herself before stuffing it back in its pocket.

“I'm Jack,” I offered, in a voice calibrated to present no challenge, offer no offense.

Couldn't tell if it worked or not as the girl continued staring straight through me, looking just as alone as if I'd never entered.

"I'm not a cop." No reaction.

"Not here to bust your balls." Nothing.

"I'm just Jack," I offered. "No title, no rank. Not anybody's warrior," and that at least got a reaction: a huff of derision at the absurdity of anyone who looked like me having anything to do with warrior culture. One point of agreement established, one brick to build upon.

"It was my sister," I added, "that got killed? And I want to..."

"Y'talk t'much," the girl muttered softly, her four words whittled down to barely two as if it was less the speaker's job to make herself understood than the listener's to decipher the intent. At least she'd spoken, I reminded myself, and with enough relevance to suggest her mind was all there; not so flipped-out by what she'd been through that she'd run away inside her own head.

"Sorry. I've never talked to a prisoner in a jail before."

"Nev' been one 'fore," the kid slurred back, making every effort not to acknowledge she was being witty. "No' much'a a pluck'n jail, y' ass' me."

That was a decent hook, I sensed, a stepping-off point for me to rattle on about how different this was from what I would have expected either, growing up among echoes of the pre Diss world. Back when everything was official and there was still such a thing as 'the police.' When Burrows was just the spread-out skirt of a city that hadn't yet become Center, and Counties was 'the countryside.' Careful not to lock onto her face, I nevertheless got a sense the kid was content to let me ramble as much as I pleased. Was just getting close to the

present when something hard pounded on the door.

“Put yer clothes on girls,” a jeering voice commanded. “Man coming in.” Without pause, the knob turned and the door opened on the massive milit who’d been blocking the motel office’s entrance, weapon gone but now brandishing a length of broom handle in his ample paw. “Aw, yer decent,” he quipped sadly, before snapping back to hard-ass mode. “Time to go ‘*Jack*.’ You’ve had enough girl-talk for one day.”

Just before I reached the door, a thought occurred. “Anything I can bring you?” I asked the stone-faced figure, who had never changed position on the bed. “If they’ll let me back, that is?” I added towards Mr. Broom-handle, whose face brightened theatrically at the question.

“Oh, you can come back *any*-time, Jack. Pretty boys like you are always in demand out here...We eat ‘em for breakfast.”

“Bug-bag,” the girl announced sharply, the words and her laser-focused eyes acting about five percent as an answer to my offer and the other ninety-five percent as challenge to mister broom-handle’s over-supply of attitude. Even locked in a filthy motel-prison and accused of murder and even toward a milit twice her mass, the kid asserted a level of independence I would struggle to feel on my best day. You had to appreciate that, I realized. Though not the disdain that raked me when I asked what a ‘bug-bag’ might be.

“At my squat; ask anyone,” she offered, suddenly enunciating her words in much the same way I’d heard Richard do when one of his toddlers seemed at a loss to understand; though being some years past toddler-hood, I at least knew what a ‘squat’ was. When I asked where I’d find her particular example, she motioned for my machine and thumb-typed some characters that looked to me like total gibberish. With no service out here, it would be while

before I could tell if ‘Jun and ail I ’ would be any help, but the girl seemed confident as she handed my Lyfe back with a warning.

“Firs’ thin’ you tell ‘em ‘ere,” she instructed intently. “Mutt says: ‘anyone mess ‘er nes’ gon’ be groun’ beas’ when I ge’ ba’.’ Got it? Should b’nough t’ get ya’ in and ou’ wi’ yer skin still on.”

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Ducking down for breakfast the next morning, I ended up in conversation with Hieronymus Martinez, a pumped and bearded fourth-floor resident who worked Inter-sovereign Sales at one of the korps and so was always obsessing over the latest political scuttle. The PRC, he advised me, between forkfuls of the cook’s signature yellow scrambled protein, had announced they’d be making an announcement later that day...

TO BE CONTINUED IN INSTALLMENT TWO

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Epigraph quotation credits:

Alexander Hamilton, Federalist No 29, 1788, as quoted by Bernard Bailyn in *To Begin the World Anew*, A. A. Knopf, NY, 2003.

Sam Houston, at the time a U. S. Senator from the State of Texas is credited with use of this particular phrasing in the Wikipedia entry catalogued as ‘Lincoln’s House Divided Speech.’ While Abraham Lincoln is widely remembered for the similar language in his 1858 speech in Springfield Illinois, the Wikipedia entry reminds that variations on the phrase and concept have been used by numerous others over time, all the way back to the Gospels of Mark (3:25), Mathew (12:25) and Luke (11:17). Appropriate to the genesis of this novel, Wikipedia further records that Elbridge Gerry, a notable though not widely known participant in the USA’s founding, made a similar observation during his opposition to the nation’s earliest two-party system, in 1810.

James Gleick, *Chaos – Making a New Science*, Penguin Books, The Penguin Group, NY, NY, 1987, 1988