

E Unum Pluribus

- a tale of The Big Diss

Installment Five

A Novel by Robin Andrew

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

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CONTINUED FROM INSTALLMENT FOUR

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Watched another interesting Feed feature that evening, about what was starting to look like a middle-American Hajj. Sources in Milwaukee, Pittsburg, Knoxville, Tallahassee and a dozen other exotic locales had shared footage of trains departing their sovs with peeps peppering the tops of their cars. Funny thing though: trains arriving at our Middle Limit from those same sovs were stripped clean, not even the usual Kerouac/Cassidy-wannabees, the recreational hobos out to see the world, such as it still was.

Best guess by the talking heads? The cling-ons were self-departing before the trains got this far. Probably hopping off when their rides slowed through some narrow canyon, or creeping away at night when locomotives stopped until the sun's rise brought the distributed-solar network back up to full voltage.

As to what those folks were doing once they hit the ground, our oracles claimed to have no idea, a claim that my inner French-judge would've scored as Nerve: 10, Credibility: 0.

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Called in sick the next morning, not expecting anyone to believe it; I was just that dead set on following up an early-morning brainstorm.

With both Coroner and Sheriff inaccessible, I'd realized during first cup that the county jail was my best go-to for information. Realized also that I could use W-J's specificity as excuse in the event she tried to ding me for going there, since the jail was not, strictly speaking, 'that place' she had so pointedly placed out of bounds.

Person I reached at Kaolin County's information number confirmed Sheriff Santos was still absent, though his deputies had repossessed their jailhouse and were holding my favorite Kounty Kiings crew there as material witnesses. They weren't answering the phones, she warned (no surprise, given the persistence of the Feeds' reportorial shark-pack), so the only way to make contact was analog. The ride out on the B47 bus was long and sticky, my co-riders grim and resentful thanks to the a/c being out of service. In other words, nothing worth mentioning, *except for one momentary glimpse as we departed Burrow Four transfer station for the Middle Limit*: a two-story brick box on a quiet side street that had 'ADAMSON PROFESSIONAL BUILDING' cast into its concrete pediment and a weather-blasted billboard bolted on below. 'MOTHER JO 'S HO SE O FU ' was enough to confirm I was looking at bit of Bethany Anne's personal history, but it was the faint shadow of an upper case 'N' completing the word 'FUN' that gave her story a new credibility for me.

My 10 AM arrival at the jailhouse was met with something less than enthusiasm, deputies as numbed by boredom as their four detainees were by the prospect of being indicted any day for negligence (or worse) in the care of their (now ex-) prisoner. The decision to show up in mega-serious charcoal businessman suit with slicked back hair and spit-shined ass-kicking oxfords helped convince the deputies I had a right to question their prisoners on Mutt's behalf, and may also deepened the Kiings' collective gloom once we'd

all gathered in an interview room.

“All of us on M Joan’s’s legal team,” I began, stretching the reality in several directions, “know you did your best to keep her safe.” Stomach squirmed a bit at that false flattery, but I pressed on. “We just want to get the best picture we can of what happened; see if there might be some sort of extenuating circumstances.” Earnest, the big bruiser who I’d concluded on my earlier encounters was not so much their leader as a blunt object the rest of ‘em liked to hide behind, asked what the hell ‘extenuating’ meant, so I tossed off some high-sounding verbiage about the jail-bond contract, laced with big words like ‘fiduciary duty’ and ‘ultimate liability,’ by the end of which they seemed to be paying attention. Except Gideon Parker that is; he was studiously avoiding eye-contact with me, no doubt afraid any trouble he caused would get back to Ma and this time she’d do more than ask him to recite another of the fab ten. Softest point of approach, I concluded, was the stooped and fidgety acne test-case who’d given his name as Strider - “with a y”- and whom the others all glanced away from when I asked who had found the prisoner.

“So, what,” I asked Stryder’s florid face, “you looked in the door and saw her hanging?” A shrug, a muttered something that might have been ‘I guess,’ and might equally well have been ‘I’m a mess,’ and when I tried to clarify by asking what was the first thing that went through his head, Stryder showed his creative side.

“First thing?” he repeated, then took a break to examine the floor in front of his boot toes. “I’m fucked,” he offered eventually, looking up from beneath scant eyebrows as the lower part of his mug struggled to suppress a grin. His compatriots laughed – loudly - giving me to suspect they might not have been as worried about their legal situation as I’d hoped. Having established that introspection was not the kid’s strong suit, I asked instead what was

the first thing he had *done*.

“Pull ‘er down, a course.” Again, the group chuckle. This was turning out to be a total laugh riot for the guys. I, on the other hand was starting to get hot beneath the necktie, but determined not to let it show.

“How? I mean, did you cut the, uh - the whatever it was she was hanging from? What was it anyway, a rope, a belt, a...?”

When Stryder seemed confused by the question, the dude they called Ignats smoothed both hands up and down one leg, bringing his buddy’s memory back to life. A pair of black tights, Stryder confirmed it had been, looped around the ceiling light and jammed into its metal flange. When I asked how he cut them, Earnest jumped in and from there it was the two of them, double-teaming their version of the facts.

“Didn’ cut ‘em, M.”

“Didn’ have anything to cut ‘em with – Sheriff don’t ‘llow no knives around jail.

“Pulled it, I did. Felt it give, so I put my weight on and the light comes right down so her feet were on the floor and I could work on the noose”

“Wasn’t a noose, shit-for-brains...”

“Well, the part that was around her neck, I got that untied...”

“Untied?” I pressed Stryder directly, and heard my growing irritation leak into the words. “Couldn’t you just slide it loose...”

Sensing trouble, his comrades rose to the kid’s defense. The loop around her neck wasn’t all that tight, they pointed out in overlapping tidbits, but it wasn’t a sloppy-loosey thing either, so they had no choice but to untie it. Took forever, somebody explained, which was no biggy since they already knew she was gone.

“*How* did you know?” I asked, doing my best to forget who we were talking about so I could continue to play the objective interrogator. “How did you know she was dead?”

“We-e-ll...” Stryder hung onto the word for a long, long time, like he was thinking very carefully, before blurting out, “she wasn’t fucking breathing, for one thing,” at which the crowd roared again, reminding me that I was talking to four guys who thought a dead woman was cause for laughter, which is maybe what sent me off the rails.

“Was she *‘fucking’* anything else?” I asked, very softly and very, very intently: “Did you *‘fucking’* mess with her?”

No one spoke, and no one moved either, as first one set of eyes and then the others danced away from mine. Not going away to anywhere in particular; just bouncing all over - like that game where you toss a ball around a circle till someone shouts ‘stop’ and whoever has the ball in their hands loses... This game, it was Hot Dog, the blached and stooped runt of the litter, who caught the ball, Ernest’s eyes settling on him for just half a beat too long.

“You dirty...” I started in and was across the room before any of us knew how I was going to end my trash talk. Got one decent slug at the left side of his face before the others pulled me off, someone shouting I should “act like a lady, bitch,” the others cursing Hot Dog for putting them all on the line.

I remember some ‘it was only,’ kind of comments too, as the deputies burst in and an octopus of sturdy arms carried me, horizontal and writhing, out of the room. What kind of ‘only,’ I wonder now, were they claiming it was: ‘only a joke,’ or ‘only a kiss,’ or ‘only one of us,’ but not the entire posse? Not that it mattered to me. Matters, rather. Thoughts like those don’t go away.

One more ‘it was only:’ it was only after I’d waited an hour on a bench in the sun and dragged my sorry ass up the steps of the next bus home and one of Sheriff’s men had tossed in behind me a grease-stained paper bag he said contained the leftovers from Mutt’s cell (“don’t say Kaolin County never gave you anything”) that I began to understand the significance of what I’d learned. Because, I realized as my bus began rolling, if the light fixture Mutt was hanging from was really so fragile that Stryder could pull it out of the ceiling to get her down, then it was hard to believe it would’ve held if her weight had fallen against it (not that the Jail’s ceilings were tall enough for a fall that would kill you anyway, in my admittedly uninformed estimation).

No fall to break the neck, and a noose he couldn’t slip loose, *suggesting it wouldn’t’ve slipped tight, either*. Whatever else was going on here, I was ready to bet serious Omacoin Mutt hadn’t expired from hanging at all. Besides which, given the universal conviction that her upcoming second trial was going to end in a death-sentence there didn’t seem much upside for any of the Kaolin County faction to risk offing her beforehand, which left me feeling a different kind of anger and a different kind of sick by time the bus got mired in Checkpoint Five’s end-of-day congestion. Those ‘herbal powders’ hidden in the package that fem player had delivered for me to bring to Mutt? That cac could’ve been anything at all, and if *it* had anything to do with Mutt ending up dead, guess who’d been the one handing it to her.

Staring out across the jam-up of battered vehicles hoping to enter Burrows, idly scanning the sidewalk encampments my bus cruised by once it was finally allowed through, my mind kept going over things, and the more it did, the less I wanted to ever look myself in the face again.

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“Reports out of Kaolin County confirm that the body of accused murderer Bethany ‘Mutt’ Joan’s is missing...”

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Wait! What?

Have to admit, I almost missed that part of the Thursday edition of the *Your Morning Juice Show, with Lisa Leese and Catty Price!* Was still in bed, half-awake since around 4 AM and desperately seeking serious sleep when my desk machine, faithful to its programming, sprang to life and started spouting the least-repulsive of the morning talk shows. I’d managed to ignore items about weather impacts on the rice-price index, fast-fashion wars in Southeast Asia and whether So Cal’s film industry had finally come up with a way to resume distribution beyond their sov’s borders, when the name reached my ears and quaked me awake.

Seconds later, I was up, dashing naked to the counter where I keyed in a query that confirmed what I’d heard, bringing-up vid of clenched County Deputies ramparted behind microphones as they attempted to convince the world this was a simple administrative error and would be straightened out momentarily. Crawl-line over the footage though, indicated the clip had been shot hours earlier, as had another, of head-lanterns illuminating

uniformed shoulders and arms sliding open the door of a barn and entering the walk-in cooler it housed: sides of mammal hanging from ceiling hooks, shelves jammed with butcher-papered parcels in every size and shape and one long shelf, counter-height and big enough for a (smallish) person, which was decidedly, entirely and profoundly - empty. One William Moritz, identified as spokesman for Kaolin County, explained that yes, the body had definitely been placed there, among the deer quarters and elk haunches the absent Coroner was storing for hunters who didn't have space in their own refrigerators, and yes, a person whose name he was not free to disclose had signed for it and was responsible, but no, he had no idea who had cut the padlocks and taken away the remains. Also a 'no:' there had been no post-mortem performed before it disappeared. Wouldn't've been even if Coroner Edwards hadn't gone AWOL, Moritz protested.

"It's not like...like what you see in vid programs - cutting 'em open and examining their entrails and all? County can't afford that sort of thing, hunh? Not when the cause of death is clear."

Moritz assured the camera that the body had been examined enough to know that it was not breathing and had no pulse. 'Investigators,' whom he also declined to specify, had seen the bedsheet (!) torn and twisted and wrapped around its neck, put one and one together and gotten one hundred: a perfect score for team Death By Self-inflicted Cerebral Hypoxia. The Court had really just been holding the remains till someone claimed them, so the fact they had been misplaced – or possibly picked-up and cremated already, he admitted in answer to a reporter's interjection, before immediately dispatching a downcast deputy to contact every funeral home in the county about *that* possibility - was hardly the big issue everyone was trying to make of it.

Aside from the Kiings' knotted tights having now become a bedsheet and aside from the Sheriff's previous claim he was waiting for Blix to return and do an autopsy; aside from every other changing piece of official doublespeak, what really got me going that morning was the speed with which the powers that be wished to write this death off as self-inflicted. If Mutt had been one of their warriors, it seemed to me, there'd be all sorts of questions asked, arguments alchemized out of thin air, conspiracies conjured out of rumors; maybe even an honest search for facts. A young fem though, a burrow-rat with no legal place of residence, no authorized occupation and no kin prepared to screw up their faces and cry on camera? Easier just to put it down to emotion and self-loathing. Didn't actually say the word 'hysteria,' that females-only fabrication that goes far out of fashion, but the ease with which the system accepted its own verdict made the implication plenty clear; even now, and even here, in this hallowed haven of enlightenment we called Confluence.

So, yeah, no surprise the general public would swallow that line, given all they didn't know about the story. Me, on the other hand...

I didn't know whose weapon killed who at that recycle house. I didn't know who falsified the Work Order, or even if Zoonie was right about it being a fake. I didn't know if some shit I'd smuggled into her cell had killed Mutt, or if she'd been hanging from a pair of tights or a bedsheet when they found her, and I didn't know who took her body from that meat locker or where it was now, but the one thing I was now certain of, despite not having a shred of forensic evidence for it, was that Bethany Anne 'Mutt' Joan's would not have taken her own life. And, and most especially, certainly and unequivocally would not have done so

because this halfling intern from Center had or had not agreed to get jiggy with their respective private parts.

The kid was way too real for that. Light years too sure of who she was to act out that bullshit fairy tale.

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All morning, as hands and eyes attended to office tasks, a portion of my mind raced, searching for a loose thread I could tug on to unravel the mystery of it all and so, mid-afternoon found me once again running the moat's trails to arrive at the loosest thread I'd come up with –Jungleland - where I found Connie at an antique foot-powered sewing machine, busily mending a torn shirt in a corner cubicle filled with piles of well-used clothes. A rainbow of thread spools littered what had once been some Dilbert's desk, alongside a stack of garments neatly folded, a hand-printed price tag stapled to each of them.

"We can understand you being upset about what happened to Bethany," e offered over the old machine's rattle and hum. Had only glanced at me once, as I entered the room, and after that eir eyes stayed fixed to the work and her voice monotone, the cordial persuasiveness of our last encounter no longer on display.

"Bethany's life - the one you knew – that was already over, Jack. Minute she agreed to go on that pre-cycle run? Boom. Over."

Muni was scared, Connie claimed with world-weary objectivity, the syllables and sentences coming out in fits and spurts as eir fingers knotted and snipped threads before

folding the shirt. Scared of all the clans and gangs and factions in the Burrows. Scared of the battalions of Players their own administrators'd organized and financed and who, if they ever stopped brawling with each other and formed up ranks behind any one idea or leader, might cease to be a useful heat-sink for surplus masc energy and become instead a juggernaut bearing down on Muni itself.

For those and other reasons, forces within the korps had begun actively manipulating events out in Borrows.

“That riot last March?” I wondered as Connie jotted a number on a price tag and stapled it in place. Seemed to me there might be some connection, and Connie was more than willing to supply it. REaders had it on good authority that what had been reported as a riot was no spontaneous disturbance but a staged excuse for MSS to sweep the Burrows, pulling in key actors from four factions that were agitating against Confluence's Shareholder system, with its distinct tiers of unequal citizenship, representation and rewards. Those four were only the latest, it seemed, in a string of citizen activities Center had ‘minimized’ recently, and the REaders movement, for all its goofy absurdity – ‘in korps's minds,’ e emphasized, words beginning to flow more readily now despite the pins and needles pursed between eir lips for ready access – REaders was on the lucky-list, too. Not because it had all that many followers, Connie admitted, though there were many more in other sovs (which was news to me!). And not because their beliefs were having any practical impact, either. There were no REader alchemists converting desert gravel to gemstones they could hawk for enormous profit, no magi casting spells to make security agents spontaneously combust before they could effect an arrest, no truth-potions forcing politicians to disclose the real intent behind their public statements. No, the best eir sources could offer was that MSS had

targeted REaders solely on the basis of its potential appeal to future populations.

“Algorithms,” Connie mouthed distastefully while stapling a price tag to another skillfully-mended flannel. Behavior-modelling projections suggesting REaders could grow exponentially if it ever got enough publicity. If its followers managed to demonstrate their ‘Madjic’ had real-world effects, the projections indicated, it could sweep disaffected communities everywhere. There were packets of REaders all over the world, e claimed, with evident pride. The Books had been published in scores of languages after all, and the cinema and vid versions had been mega-popular themselves starting years before the Diss.

“Little seeds of Readership all over the world,” Connie pointed out, then repeated herself, relishing the words like rare bites of real-cacao chocolate.

“All.

“Over.

“The world.”

Back at home that evening, mulling over my own angst, found myself longing for Richard's steady voice. Eager to hear his reactions to it all and the suggestions I was sure he'd offer (and that I'd never've been able to come up with myself but once I heard him spell them out would realize I should've done).

Humanicultural professionals, as peeps in his trade prefer to be called, can be super-sensitive about being interrupted on duty, but fortunately I had a convenient (if weak) excuse: a toddler-care smock I'd found when folding-up my bed a few weeks before, so stuck that in a bag and hitched a trolley over to Kids' World (a nickname one must be very careful not to utter while on its campus, knowing the level of monitoring child-rearing institutions employ). An admin aide who I'd talked-up at the reception after Richard's first-year Commitment Ceremony remembered me and was disarmed enough by my gush over her new hair that she agreed to bend the rules a bit, pointing me toward the staff break room, where I found my oracle playing Hearts with a trio of future 'mother-or-other' persons. The expression that flashed across Richard's face when he clocked me was not welcoming, but being a professional caregiver he recovered quickly, joking excuses as he folded cards and scooped up his winnings. Made a show of taking time to serve us two reconstituted watermelon juices from the break-room fridge before leading me by the elbow out onto the grounds where, he whispered, we could talk more privately, shielded by squeals and wails from the surrounding age-segregated and securely-fenced playgrounds. I could tell he was distracted, but the training a nurturer receives is so other-oriented, I knew there'd be no point

asking what was on *his* mind until he believed I'd downloaded everything that was on mine, which included:

I loved my father, Duncan, very much.

But then he went off to work one day and never came back and we had no idea why and that was worse than anything I could ever imagine (up till then).

I loved my Mother, Priscilla, very, very much.

But then when she learned Duncan had been killed, she changed into this whole other person (which I know I have no right complaining about because many people would say I'm always changing who I am *but that's only who I look like or who other people say I look like and inside I'm always me even if who 'me' is doesn't exactly fit what some people expect a 'me' to look or be like*).

And anyway, getting back on subject: I loved my sister Vincent too (sort of; she didn't make it easy), but after Priscilla turned into somebody neither of us recognized, Vincent became even more difficult to live with until - fortunately for everyone - *she* chose not to live with *us* anymore and disappeared off the face of the earth and then, after Vincent left, Priscilla slid further and further downhill until I was pretty much nursing her 24/7 until she died and after that the silence was deafening until I was accepted into Center and got an education (more or less) and a job (sort of) and ten years or something like that passed like pages blowing off a wall calendar in a really, really bad movie but then...where was I? Oh, yeah:

And then I learned Vincent'd been murdered and because of that I started getting to know this Mutt creature so I could find out WTF! but then I learned Vincent hadn't been

murdered after all and was really and most sincerely lost in the ozone which felt as if she had ditched me yet again (strike two) and even though I didn't like Mutt when I first met her, after a while I started to like her a little and once we spent time together in Center I began to feel kinda' close to her and then when she was back in jail I really, really missed being with her and when I visited her there and we laughed together it released something in me that had been wound too tight for years and years and *that* was a big fluffing surprise and then she came on to me like a house afire and I told her 'no' and walked away, after which it felt like I might've made the biggest mistake of my life and now I hear that she's dead too ("*Strike three, and...you're outta here!!*") and on top of all of that being proof that everyone I ever love is going to leave me ("except you, Richard, of course") I thought maybe there was some serious sewage going down because Mutt was murdered and the entire fudging government was covering it up and...

"... 's all kin' o' scary," I concluded, noticing only after the words passed my lips how strangled and tangled they'd been pouring out and that my eyes were dripping so much my face probably looked like a lesser Jackson Pollock canvas. Don't know if it was that which set Richard off so bad, or the substance of my blather, but something clearly had.

"No kidding it's scary," he tossed back at me, sounding more like an aspiring big cheese than I remembered ever hearing before. Went on to point out how many rules I'd broken so far: unauthorized use of office research tools, charging personal trips out to Burrows - and even Counties! - on a Division account, smuggling contraband into a criminal-holding facility (I thought it was sanitary napkins, I interrupted, keeping up the pretense even

with my closest closest), providing investigative and maybe even ‘legal’ services I was not qualified to offer; the list went on and on.

“You *should* be scared, Jack,” he concluded. “I know I am.”

“That’s sweet R., but you don’t need to worry about me...”

“You?!” he spluttered, and then it came pouring out. How everything I said or did was about me – *my* parents *my* sister, *my* new best friend (hunh? I’d never called Mutt that...), *my* run-ins with MSS and *my* agonizing over maybe having caused a congenitally-foolish girl to do something permanently-foolish. Through all of which I’d shown no concern for what my extracurricular activities might mean to *his* career. He’d already been questioned about connections to REaders, his ‘friends out in Burrows’ and, most recently, his contacts with recreations in general and Joan’s place in particular - a very dicey association for someone pursuing the nurturing profession.

“Don’t you realize Muni has eyes and ears, Jack? That every conversation you have is noted? Even if they’re not supposed to record *what* you’re saying, they know *who* you talk to when and where and for how long and it’s all logged and data-based. Even us. Here. Now. Better believe I’ll be called-in tomorrow and asked to explain why you showed up unannounced...”

“I brought you your stupid smock,” I shouted, grabbing his hand and shoving into it the sticky, smelly bundle pulled from my bag, careful to make the move as graphic as a puppet pantomime for benefit of those hidden cameras I now pictured behind every piece of glass or shiny object’s reflection.

To his credit – or more likely, the credit of his training - boy didn’t rise to my anger. Infuriatingly, his voice softened and settled to a near whisper as he shared the real reason

behind his fear. Richard, it seemed, had recently come to a momentous decision and submitted his application to become licensed as a Proxy Parent, necessary precursor to entering a lifelong contract to nurture and be responsible for a child of his own, up to said child's emancipation at 22 years of age. No matter he could never bear a child; the Proxy Parent Program was specifically intended to serve those cases where a child's birth-mother was not available, able or eager to take the reins – nor that he was unmarried. The old ways, he'd realized during a first-year History of Nurture course, were absolutely nuts: you needed a license to drive a car or get married, but any two idiots with the right gonads could make a baby and have the legal right to screw up its life for eighteen years and counting?!

“They got it exactly backwards,” he crowed again now. “Like: ‘we’re gonna set up roadblocks for adults who’re eager to make a revocable commitment to each other, but no barrier at all against hormone-driven adolescents making the most irrevocable commitment of all – creating a new human life!’”

Have to admit I had nothing to say to that. So far away was it from the issues and events that had been filling my mind those past weeks that I could barely believe we were having the conversation, much less react to what he was saying. What did come through though, in Richard's delivery and resolve, was that we – as in the two of us having any sort of meaningful relationship – were over. No way could he be associated with me from here on out and no way, frankly, did I want to hitch my wagon to a malemother; a person whose loyalty would always be to his child (or *children*, Richard having not made clear just how far he intended to go down that particular primrose path).

Of course, any further talk about Mutt and me, or REaders, or puzzling behavior by our masters or their minions, was out of the question, as was any discussion about ‘us’ (or

how the end of ‘us’ brought my doomed-relationships score to a perfect one-hundred percent!). A couple of feeble congratulations to him, a few even-more feeble wishes for my safety, then Richard headed back to his game of Hearts and I to the exit (where I was checked to make sure I was not sneaking any infants out in my pockets, just as I’d been searched on entering for any sharp or swallowable objects, recreational drugs or children’s literature of questionable cultural content).

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Early next morning, one mystery was solved - up to a point. Feeds all bubbling about why no one from Muni had been seen joining the great transcontinental rail migration. Answer? The migration was headed *here*.

Not Center though, nor Burrows, nor even Counties. No, the flotsam and jetsam of every other sovereign seemed to be gathering somewhere in the farthest reaches *of our eastern moat*, go figure. Most barren and benighted sector of a barren and benighted landscape: sand and cobbles stripped of everything suggestive of survival, and yet there were scores of souls arriving daily, erupting a sea of tarpaulins and tents, solar stills sucking vapor from the morning air to get them through another day of desiccation. The ‘Black Rock City’ references were catching-on big time: grass-roots communality growing where no grass could survive, all of it dependent on the planning and finance of some unseen and unknowable hidden hand...

Question I didn't hear any of the Feed-heads asking though, was how all of that got across the Muni's Outer Limit to even enter the moat? I mean, everyone knew security was weak out there, looser than from Moat to Burrows and nothing compared to getting from Burrows to Center, but even so – coupla' thousand 'Rainbow People' or whatever just slipped through unnoticed?

Gotta think someone's gonna pay for that one. Big time.

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Long interview a few minutes later on *The Shareholder's Daily*, panelist Wysong Trudently questioning a person who claimed to be a REader's honcho ("remoting in from the REaders' lovely new Librum" – which looked to me like a windowless conference room pimped-out with lamè draperies and gilded furniture borrowed from the old Golden Bonanza Casino). This 'prophessor' was quite different from the REaders I'd met out in Burrows: clad in a silken silver robe patterned with celestial-looking symbols, fingers be-ringed and wrists be-braceleted; eyes bright as beacons and head bald as a crystal, she projected quite the marketable spokes-image as she dove into a clearly-prepared schpiel.

"Muni tells you they provide critical medical services to other sovereignties and that's where their revenues come from, right? Do not believe it!

"True," the guest continued as if in response to a flashing close-shot of Trudently's professionally skeptical face, our korps's laboratories produced drugs and sophisticated

therapeutic treatments, but not for illnesses or diseases. Their biggest selling products were *anti-aging* therapies used to prolong the lives of Earth's richest, including many of its most brutal oppressors. And for those too young to indulge in calendar-lust, korps' marketeers offered the world's most effective weight-management: gene therapies individually-engineered to make a body rearrange its own fat cells so every son or daughter of an ultragarch was assured of a sleek and shapely silhouette. Then there was 'follicular management.' More genetic engineering, this time to remove unwanted hair permanently with no more icky shaving and waxing. Or, add hair where it *was* wanted: make baldness optional for all and also give anyone the perfect mustache with no need to ever shave the rest of his (or her) face. Not to mention their highly-advanced plastic surgery, eminently practical when one needed to disappear and start anew in a far-away sovereignty!

“That's what pays for all your Center comforts: pandering to the whims of despots and monopolizers wherever they are. Those planes you see flying in and out of your airport in the daylight hours are the 'takers' of the world using their takings to make themselves more beautiful.”

Which was where Trudently shut the REader down, camera cutting back to a canned desk shot as she recited a grand, iron-clad disclaimer of anything and everything her guest had said on Feed Four's graciously korp-funded air, then segued expertly into a festive announcement that Eastern Seaboard had signed a trade deal with New Confederacy. What made it festive was that the deal meant northbound cotton shipments could resume any day and since Center had reciprocal trade agreements with the Seaboard sovs, we should soon see an influx of natural-fiber textiles, allowing top Shareholders to replenish their stock of high

thread-count linens. A lot of execs would sleep easier for that, Trudently winked, dog bless ‘em, one and all.

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Final headline for the morning was an unconfirmed - and every Feedface made a point of repeating that part – an *unconfirmed* report that the migrants out in Moat were holding read-ins! Gathering in clusters beneath whatever shade they had created and following along while someone read to them from an actual pulp-and-ink book. One older fem who’d snuck into Burrow Three for first-aid supplies (said she was a midwife and confirmed that, yes, there had been at least three births out there – cue the Woodstock comparisons, all you ancient-history buffs) claimed the crowds were anticipating some sort of festival in the coming days. Said it was gonna be the largest spontaneous gathering west of the Rio Mississippi since Burning Man’d petered-out that last year, due to the threat of mass executions by The Inquisitors, a gang of biker-commandos whose PR release said they were ‘riding west to cleanse the earth of Satinizers’ (sic).

As if that reminder of vigilante tendencies were not enough to make all good Shareholders wary of cultists streaming in from across the former 50, new footage showed their largest readings were happening under the shelter of *an old Federal flag*. Estimated at four-hundred feet long, a sidebar claimed it had flown at one of the Superbowls and also been hung from the Golden Gate (though years before that bridge was destroyed during the battles). Anyway, they’d erected several dozen telephone poles and draped the flag between them; one breathless participant claiming ten thousand people could share its shade and the

acoustics were so good every one of them could hear a person reading in a normal voice.

What little I know about how sound waves work, that sounded like pure magic to me, all right.

—

Fed up with facing the Feeds, turned attention to my Lyfe, only to find a written from W-J, directing I meet her at the office, in a project-room Division'd set up for a new case involving 'a substantial quantity of hard-copy' that needed to be collated, scanned and tagged. Perfect sort of dumb and dusty work to dump on OCD's perpetual-dogsbody and reason also for me to spend a few minutes putting together a manual-labor-dude outfit expendable enough for hours of sweaty scrounging and shuffling but tasteful enough to maintain my boss's respect (such as *that* ever was).

The room number in Alliyah's message indicated second-basement level, and signage down there led me a merry chase along dim corridors punctuated by scores of doors, several bearing warning of hazardous contents. Farther I walked, more I wondered, and by the time I arrived at the designated number, it took a long pause and a deep breath while I worked up the courage to turn the door handle. Unlocked, the heavy slab swung freely open, revealing no Alliyah Weiss-Jabar, no project-room arranged with whiteboards and tables and boxes of documents and no sign of the promised grunt-work, just an empty and echoing void of bare concrete walls and exposed concrete beams above a polished-concrete floor. In a single swiveling armchair at its center sat a peep I'd met only once before. In a Ryde. During a perfectly-timed diversion from an errand on which I'd been dispatched by the same Alliyah

W-J who'd sent me here.

Hazardous contents, indeed.

"Sorry about dragging you all the way down here," the specter I'd mind-named 'K' began, speaking with absolutely zero trace of regret as she tapped a final entry into her Lyfe before slipping it into one pocket of a champagne-colored pantsuit and casting a scowl at my vintage Kirkland painter-pants and Ozzy Osbourne tour hoodie. "It isn't all that easy to have a private conversation these days."

Which I took to mean that even an exec who could orchestrate our classy little Ryde encounter, fabricate a summons in the name of a senior Division staffer and requisition this unlikely meeting-place inside a secured Muni facility had to be concerned about surveillance. Not the most-surprising info I'd ever received, but worth storing away for future reference, which I did as she went on.

"We know you went out to Kaolin County after M Weiss-Jabar specifically told you not to."

"She told me not to go to 'that place,'" I pointed out, per my pre-rationalized self-justification plan. "A clear reference to the Coroner's barn. Never said anything about any other places."

"Splitting hairs, sweetheart. Hairs you cannot afford to split," she advised, allowing only the briefest of pauses before dropping another shoe on me.

"We also know you and Richard are having some disagreements lately," she offered, in a tone that made clear 'their' interest did not arise out of sympathy. "He has very good instincts, that fiancé of yours."

“Richard is not my fiancé,” I offered as levelly as I could, though even to my ears the words came out defensive. Abashed by that vulnerability, I countered; asking who she was and why we were meeting in a dungeon when I was certain we both had more important things to be doing.

“Oh, my little darling,” K answered, one side of her mouth rising up to signify an affection she clearly did not feel. “There is *nothing* you could be doing at this moment that is more important than hearing me out.” Identifying herself as Janet a’Lago, “several levels north of Lt. Etienne in our mutual responsibilities to protect Muni,” she launched into a summary of the challenges presented by subversive new movements such as REaders, along with the political realities which dictated someone be punished when the feeds report a citizen of Confluence (“even a Counties milit”) being killed by an illegal weapon. Paused there for effect, before segueing into the menu of ways in which my recent activities were detrimental to the common good, how my life was going to change if I failed to redeem my pawn and so lost my Shareholder privileges and then, just in case those predictions had not been sufficient to make my insides curdle and my spine tingle (they had), paused once again to indicate she’d reached the dessert course: what would happen if I didn’t back off, immediately.

“How well would you fare, Jack, if you woke up one Saturday night, alone and unclothed on the doorstep of a backroad beer joint in some swampy red-blood sovereignty? Those boys see how many varieties you’ve got on offer, they’ll have a ton of fun before it’s time to dispose of whatever’s left.”

Letting that last sink in, a’Lago rose slowly up from the chair, assisted by the same

elegant cane she'd wielded during our Ryde together. Bad leg or no, she was surprisingly quick to reach where I still stood, just inside the door, and despite the chin-raise required to meet my eyes as she leaned on her stick, there was no trace of weakness in her manner. Confidence for sure, arrogance perhaps, but mostly just power, raw and ready and eager for the wielding.

"We are in complete control Jack Shirley - as you will soon be reminded - and we say: you're done poking your parts into things that don't concern you.

"Lijie?" she concluded, eyes locking on mine for several seconds before turning away to shuffle out the door, whose slamming echoed around the concrete vault for what seemed a very long while.

Second time I'd heard that word recently; so I no longer needed a translation to understand its threat.

Or its implication that my oh-so-helpful boss Alliyah W-J and this a'Lago person were somehow joined at the lips.

—

Making my way back to street level after that little audience, palms sweaty and heart pumping, every face I encountered seemed ominous, every corner and doorway a threat. Half expecting to be arrested any second, I made a point of heading the opposite direction from home, then ducking abruptly into a shoe shop, through whose stockroom I exited into

an alley before making left turns at four consecutive intersections, checking sidewalks and reflections for any sign of a tail. Utterly-amateur tradecraft I'm sure, but it helped slow the slide-show of doom which a'Lago had so capably projected into my imagination.

Had pretty much regained control of my nerves by the time I climbed five flights of stairs (all three elevators being out of order; again!) and locked the door of my room behind me, enormously relieved to be back in my own space, just as I'd left it except for the faintest whiff of chemistry in the air. Mentally filing that olfactory question for future pursuit, I filled the kettle and put it on to boil, craving the reassurance of a hot cuppa - right up until the moment I opened the upper cupboard to grab a favorite mug and encountered instead a pile of underwear. Like a character in a cartoon, I slammed the door and stared at it, feeling the sweats return in spades. Opened it again to confirm the neat stack of lacy pastels, then proceeded frantically to open every other cupboard. Sleepwear on the dish shelf, toothpaste and deodorant in the silverware drawer, shirts, tops and blouses down below where there should have been saucepans and a casserole dish, refrigerator racks crammed with dresses, and my bathrobe in the freezer. Breaths came short and fast as I stumbled to the coat closet, which opened to reveal a pile of slacks and skirts dumped on the floor while bras, camis and tank tops had been hung on the closet rod. Don't remember how I got back to the dresser, but do remember finding dishes and packages of food and drink and even frozen stuff melting in its drawers, by which time the kettle was screaming almost as loudly as my thoughts were. After dashing to shut that off, I moved more-warily toward the bathroom's closed door and took a deep breath before turning the knob, pushing it open and discovering the source of that odd olfactory warning I'd dismissed. The little room's ceiling, previously as beige bland as its walls and floor, was now the deep, rich red of raw liver, with leggy

trails of same coursing down the walls like blood off a fresh kill. Trembling, I opened a drawer beside the sink and sure enough, there was my silverware; knives and forks and spoons all carefully sorted by size and wrapped with little paper bands like you sometimes used to see on silverware set-ups in a mid-level restaurant. Compared to the sly off-handedness of a'Lago's threats, this assault was crystal clear: whoever had entered my home had known I would be away and for how long, and also commanded sufficient power and resources to re-make my world in any respect that suited – or amused - them.

Shakes, shivers, rubbery knees and all, it probably took me all of three minutes to grab a large tote and dump in a few bathroom items (from the kitchen now!) and whatever favorite clothing came readily to hand. Went back to the bathroom for a pair of running shoes I'd noticed peeking out from underneath the hairy mess of my wigs blobbed in a corner of the shower, then stuffed the shoes in the tote along with a long blond and a brunet bob that had always made my heart smile. Last thing that caught my eye as I made a final scan of what had been my home? That paper sack containing Mutt's 'effects': so crumpled and trash-looking, the intruders must've thought they were being ironic stuffing it in the microwave. Guilt being a vengeful god even under this level of duress, I grabbed that as well. Lyfe was already in my purse and other machines obviously confiscated, so it was not a heavy load I carried out the door and down the fire stair, noting from the indicator lights that all three elevators were now working, the one time that I definitely was not going to risk boxing myself into any of 'em.

—

Kept walking once I reached daylight; that furious-fast headlong kind of walk where feet pound to match your emotions. Not going anywhere in particular; just away.

Two blocks on, attempted to reach Richard on Lyfe, but he didn't pick up. At four blocks I was on my fourth attempt and had almost worked up the nerve to leave a message, but by then breathing and thoughts'd settled enough that a wiser voice reminded me that particular SOB was no longer my go-to. Reminded too, that roaming open sidewalks in mid-day was no way to hide from whatever was going on.

Glancing around, caught the familiar façade of TakeZatz, a bagel and bev hangout occupying the storefront of an obsoleted branch bank. Knew from past visits it was a non-korp operation, making it maybe less-intensively surveilled and also as good a place as any to couch while pondering who I might reach out to now. Who I knew that would appreciate the violation I felt from knowing that someone – anyone - had the power to invade my life and rearrange it at will just to send a message which was suddenly the weightiest weight I'd carried away from my flat: we know you, we can get to you, *and we can do whatever we want with you.*

—

Interesting factoid overheard while on line for my brew: latest reports from the moat claimed the folks arriving there were building something.

Something big.

Like, six-story-building big.

Like – dare I say it? – Burning Man big.

Feed on the hearest monitor once I found a seat was flashing images of what those Burners used to do, and they were amazing! Flying-saucer teahouse big enough for four levels of sipping rooms, Lucky Cat statue forty feet tall with its waving arm powered by the sun, labyrinthine log-fort birthed out of a John Ford movie by way of Anish Kapoor and Tim Burton.

Current edifice, when the vid revealed some grainy footage of it, looked to be less fanciful, but still impressive. Estimated over sixty-feet tall, cobbled-up of railroad ties and wooden beams scavenged from who knew where, it shouted Mayan monument: a roughly-stepped pyramid with a double-wide staircase front and center, leading to a room-sized platform just below the pyramid's pinnacle and, at center of that platform, a mirror-black pedestal I guessed to be the size of a small bed.

Words 'sacrificial altar' were studiously avoided in the closed captioning, but yeah, that was exactly what it looked like.

—

By the time my nerves had settled to a simmer, hunger was calling, and by the time I'd finished off a millet-flour bagel and a second zatz, the caf was emptying out, leaving me feeling conspicuous. Settling-up with the digital table, I headed to a rest room to mine my tote, switching painter-pants to yoga tights and tee shirt to tank-top under a flowy linen vest.

Tucked my ginger locks under that long blonde wig I'd rescued from the shower and upped my make-up to soap-opera level. Adding an N-95 for good measure, a glance in the mirror suggested I might have a prayer of confusing MSS's facial-rec long enough to get a step ahead of them – long as it was a quick step.

Walking again, one block this way, two blocks that and then an alley or two, made my way over to Center's EaDo neighborhood, so called because it lay to the east of Donner street. More pertinent to my purposes, it was also where my running buddy Austen worked at her rare, old-school style gig: regular hours, on-site and in-person, so the odds seemed good she'd be there now and could maybe spare a few minutes to hear my fear and bounce back an inspiration or two. Bonus point? Austen's employer, Visible Elements Solutions, was notoriously independent due to its profit-making power, which meant I might even get in and out of there without being instantly reported back to K or anyone else who had suddenly become interested in all things Jack Shirley.

Austen's home-away-from-home, Care Center Northwest, was built pre Diss but in the contemporary style: surrounding sidewalks lined with concrete bollards to hold truck bombs to a damage limiting distance from windows that nonetheless were mirrored, sealed and blast-resistant. Two parts bio-lab, four parts automated pharma-factory, and one part ultra-luxe spa for offshore cosmetic refugees, the first feature inside its doors was a fixed-barrier maze to space out traffic for a security check. Held my head high despite cringing inside at what the uniformed guard might make of the weird assortment she pawed through in my tote, then stood tall as an automated front desk took my temperature to guard against transmissibles. Desk attendant raised an eyebrow at my claim of a 'personal emergency,' but agreed to forward a message to Interventional Aesthetician Austen Villalba before directing

me to the clinic wing's 'CLIENT AWAITING LOUNGE,' a high-ceilinged space with jungle-like greenery, tinkling water features and a pastel rainbow of cushy-couch clusters to cosset those awaiting discharge of a client (apparently, there were no 'patients' here...).

Sipping ginger-tea delivered unrequested by a runway-handsome aide in lavender scrubs, distracted myself with a table-top introduction to therapies offered on the floors above - the tab for facial hair alone pulled down pages for over a dozen available services, from waxing and threading to laser treatment, electrolysis, focused pharmaceuticals for follicle deadening/activation, site-specific hormone delivery mechanisms and the piece de la resistance: personalized genetic reprogramming. Was idly eyeing a holographic projection illustrating comparative effectiveness, permanence and 'investment level' for each approach when Austen arrived. Fully dolled for her workplace, the sweaty-betty buddy I knew and loved made an awesomely-effective advertisement for her korp's 'aesthetic' services, picture-perfect face and form flattered by a pale peach jumpsuit, the tiny VES logos woven throughout its silken fabric shimmering like stars in a vestal's fondest vision.

"You shouldn't have come here," were the first words I heard, hissed in my direction as her buttocks settled a careful distance from mine, barely perching on the edge of the sofa's cushion as if anticipating a very quick departure.

Which is where I broke down and started gushing again. Four weeks, it had been now, since that first message from MSS. Two of them spent dealing with Vincent's departure from my life and Mutt's arrival in it, with Lieutenant Nousheen Etienne and the garbage-raunch of the Blue Bunny and then India B and Judge Judith's deceit, followed by the five day reprieve of our happy getting-to-know-you in the seeming safety of Center before being slapped right down again – literally - and my newest friendgirl kidnaped, jailed

and dead and now today my life turned inside out by threats and pranks from Janet a'Lago and I had no idea who else.

For a moment, Austen's therapeutic training seemed to rise to the occasion as she spoke softly, in an almost-meditative rhythm. Counselling me to step back and breathe deep. To organize my thoughts so I could formulate a productive plan for moving forward. When I pressed on though, asking if she'd seen or heard anything at our building that morning, anything that might indicate who had been in my place, another character arose, sideling in with the same easy grace she always exhibited in our early morning runs.

"You need to decide what you really want here, Jack." It wasn't in my interest, she pointed out in a voice so soft I had to lean close to hear it, for me to keep obsessing over the fate of some outlaw Burrow-rat I'd never heard of a month ago. It would be much wiser, my emotional masseuse emphasized, to focus on my own well-being, stabilize my lifestyle and seek a better understanding of ...

"What I need to understand..." I tried to interrupt, but got no farther before Austen ran me over. If I didn't stop chasing conspiracies, she hissed, I'd be fair game for whoever was trying to scare me off - in which case, anyone connected with me could be in the same sort of trouble.

"What we here at VES do for our intersov clients isn't just vanity-vending, Jack. It's an enormous responsibility; the flag-bearer for all of Confluence's export industries and the critical revenue they generate. Our services are every bit as essential to Muni's existence as hard manufacturing; it's a calling that demands the highest standards of trustworthiness, discretion and... Christ, I'm probably going to get grilled at my next review just for talking to you here, now."

Which basically blew my cool. Erupted any thought of taking the yogic middle-way into fiery pieces flying toward every extreme they could find. Credit where credit is due: I did not slap her smug face, though that was certainly among my first impulses. Nor did I castigate her for pimping pricy cosmetic services in a sov where I'd seen Burrow folk waiting in line for a drink of clean water. Instead, I simply stood up and swiveled head and eyes in a deep scan of our surroundings. Judo-leveraged my own vision to focus my opponent's attention on the wealth and waste of this place as they had now become clear to me; the fine furniture and faux landscape, the pretty bodies and pristine uniforms and silent climate control a perfect reflection of the multiple tiers of privilege and profit that allowed us Shareholders to live high despite our city-state being perpetually under threat, our entire fractured world perennially at war with its many, many selves.

"Fu you and your job and everything connected with it," I hissed, deliberately loud enough to attract attention. "Go on back to your beauty salon, Austen, I hear a pro-biotic mud-wrap calling your name."

—

Once outside, resumed my same furious walking, eyes scanning every passing face with anger and suspicion. A dozen blocks deeper into EaDo, the effort-induced energy deficit had worn my agita down enough that I could do what threatened losers on the run have done for generations: duck into a nearby bar to ponder their troubles over a glass of mildly-poisonous tranquilizer.

Your typical Center drinking establishment would not have served my purpose that day, though; they're uniformly well-lit, open and cheerful so as to allow productive use of even one's leisure hours. Fortunately for my mood, despite EaDo's industries being highly-automated, their bot-lines still required some human minders and those peeps still sustained a few old-style watering holes like the one I was fortunate to stumble upon. 'The Dirty' was cozy, dark and open for anonymity. A perfect place in which to drink-off the pressure and aggravation endemic to serving as cog in a relentless machine - though being part of Center, it's fittings were still fully-machined: set your butt on a stool and a screen in the counter lit up to pander the management's preferred profit-makers and then, the second you put in your order, up came a sub-Feed channel chosen for the user-profile most-closely associated with whatever drink you'd ordered – and no doubt factoring in the impact and speed of your finger-taps as well. My order for a double single-malt, tapped in a particularly brutal staccato, apparently indicated some sort of aggression issue, so I got the *STATE of OUR SOV ALERT!!*, a running summary of inter-sovereign relations and security issues. Top item: a wee-hours incursion alarm on the western edge of Burrow Six. Had turned out to be a pack of feral canines chasing one of the moat's remnant mule-deer into the fence, but by the time security'd gotten a drone out there and back and then downloaded its vid, a Players battalion had been mobilized, roads closed and several thousand people'd had their morning zatz ruined by believing they were in danger of imminent death.

Amusing, but the item that really got my attention was about a disturbance in Burrow Four that the AI writing the crawler put down to generic 'anti-social elements.' Vid-clip was carefully edited, I'm sure, but not so tightly as to remove all the 'BOOKS' and 'MAGIQUE' placards the disturbers displayed. Just how much trouble those REaders were actually

making, that little snippet did not disclose. Normally, I could have gotten more detail using my office access, but my authentication wouldn't work on a public machine, so without the ones stolen from my flat, it was almost like I was deaf, dumb and blind.

Not deaf, dumb or blind enough to miss the signals coming from just beyond my left elbow though, where a thickly-stubbed he-male about ten years over my age had settled in and was rapidly draining the first of three bottles of Bud the bartender'd lined up in range of his beefy hands. Feeling his eyes on my body and face, I nodded the minimum of polite acknowledgement and turned back to my counter-display.

"That's a serious Scotch you've got there," he offered anyway. To the guy's credit, he had a gentle voice and a pleasant tone which made the words come off more sympathetic than belittling, so I bantered back that it had not been the best of days. Or weeks. Or months, to which he raised his second bottle in my direction, tipped his head and took a swig in sympathy. Sensing he was interested in getting better acquainted, I did what I've learned to do sooner than later in those sorts of situations.

"I'm Jack, by the way," I stated bluntly, extending a hand to shake.

Which he took, wrapping his fingers gently around mine without the deep palm-to-palm contact of a man-shake and accompanying it with one of the many wildly differing responses I've learned to field at such a point: "Unusual name for a lady."

"Actually," I answered, with direct eye contact and a tone that rose from deep in the chest, "it suits me just fine." At which point I watched his eyes screw a quarter turn tighter as the gears behind them ground to a crawl. "Just so there's no misunderstanding," I added, before taking a drag on my own drink.

Never did get the gent's name, because right about then he remembered an errand he

needed to do before heading home to the family. Not surprising, and nothing I take personal; it's definitely better to put the issue out there before anyone's inner beast has grounds to feel misled. Unfortunately, the burly gent on the other side of me must've taken it all in, as the side-eye knives he and his two drinking buddies started throwing my way told me it was time to pay-up and drink-down while the sidewalks were still sufficiently populated to hope for some communal eyes on my getaway.

Not that I had any better idea where I was headed after The Dirty than I'd had when I closed the door of my ravaged residence hours before, but given the number of windowless walls, padlocked gates and overfilled, rusting, smashed or tipped-out trash bins EaDo featured, I soon decided anyplace else was preferable.



OCD's offices were quiet as I let myself in, which was to be expected. I'm sure there was someone of our staff working somewhere, either holed-up in their flat, on-site of a case, or sitting in a zatz-shop with a portable. Just not here, in our nominal office, in the waxing hours of a Friday night, which is why I'd decided to head to the office after putting EaDo in my rear view.

Too paranoid to turn on any lights, I navigated instead by the pale bio-luminescent egress arrows set into the floor, courtesy of Muni's souped-up building-safety code. Made my way through the warren of cubicles to the coffee-kitchen and opened the fridge in search of something to wash the funk out of my mouth. The new *KORP KOKE* was apparently making a big splash, judging by the many cartons of it, all marked with their owners' initials

in hopes of still being there when they came back thirsty. Various milk-impersonators too: soy, sesame, sorghum and, for those both lactose and gluten intolerant *and* also octo/ovo/animal benevolent, the 'Impossible' variant.

A red and black can came to hand; energy drink of the obsessive, but I quickly put it back - wired enough by events, I still might want to sleep someday. Settling for an anonymous bottle of water, I took a seat in the same confer-pod I'd shared with W-J almost a month before and tried to imagine the possible motives for whomever'd invaded my humble abode. One, it was a random burglary: except that Center had virtually eliminated such crimes years ago - with every ediface wired up the wazoo you'd be ID'd before you got inside the door, and if you ever got out said door, MSS could follow you from hallway camera to lobby monitor to a thousand street-view cams. Be just like one of those classic vid-games, your little blinking avatar making its way through the maze that is Center, with gobblers approaching from every side. Click left, click right, click any way you want with all your might and yet the gobblers counter every click and keep getting closer and closer until 'DING,' you're gobbled up.

So, no burglary. Number two then: it was a search, and one they wanted me to be aware of. Thing was, I had nothing they needed to search for. The only evidence I held had come from India or the public record, so no need for MSS to steal my copies. Maybe someone knew I'd contacted Zoonie and they wanted to locate em, but again, anyone who could get in and out of my place like that didn't need to pilfer an intern's personal papers to locate a techie who free-lanced for the major services...

On and on, down memory lane until I came to Connie and whoever was behind her, the mysterious 'Vera'. The one contact I'd made that might not be traceable through normal

channels and also, fortunately, the one person for whom my room would have yielded no address, no photo, no evidence whatsoever. Maybe the searchers were hoping I'd have her data stored on one of my machines, or scrawled on a Post-It – which made me laugh even as I thought the thought: did anyone even have Post-Its anymore? Were they still being manufactured somewhere offshore, smuggled out to whichever sovs could afford to exchange food or spare-parts for something so useful and yet so trivial?

A noise at the door of our suite woke me from that digression. Ducking down, I heard it swing open, then a soft scuffing of soles followed by the squish of rubber sound seals as the door was closed again. Carefully. Whoever had entered seemed as concerned about making noise as I was about being discovered. Eyes just above desk level, I glimpsed the back of Du Huei's head, her elfin frame and cobalt bob unmistakable even in the dim. Saw her beeline to a cubicle on the window side and set something (purse?) down before heading for the same place I'd started – the kitchenette.

Calculations ran through my head in quick-time. No, I did not want to chat with Du and have to make up some explanation for what I was doing here, at this hour, in the dark, and yes, I was (thankfully) confident I had not left any visible trace in the kitchen. Placing my water bottle in the very farthest corner of the bubble's plush carpet, I pulled off my shoes and took them in one hand, wrapping the straps of my tote around the other. Stockinged feet made only the softest hushing as I scurried in a crouch, out of the bubble and down the row of cubicles, taking the long way to keep as much distance as possible between me and Du, who must've put something in the microwave, as I heard a start-up-beep, and then its cooling fan. A modest hum, but still loud enough to give me some cover. Had made it nearly to the rear exit and was rounding the last cubicle in speed-crouch when I crept smack into my co-

worker's knees, just as the microwave dinged 'done.'

"Out to get some worms, early bird?" she joked as I stood slowly upright, smoothing my clothes for no good reason. It was only Du, after all. Co-worker and sometimes confidant. No one to fear; except for the absurdity of her being in the office at this hour. An absurdity which was explained as I followed her back to the kitchen, where her water was now hot enough to drop-in a tea-bag.

"If you hadn't realized before Jack, I guess you know now that you're being tracked," she scolded, hopping the bag up and down by its little string. "At least since the day you keyed-in your conclusion that the work order those REaders'd received was fake. If not before."

That 'before' made me think of W-J's call and the dossier she'd read to me. Rather than agreeing that proved I'd been on Muni's radar for years though, Du dismissed it as soon as I brought it up, calling our boss an authoritarian hack who would say or do anything her like-minded superiors asked of her. Pointing out that I had no assurance the allegations Aaliyah had voiced against my father were true or even if she was actually reading them from any official document, she reminded me what we both did know: that someone with wide access and high-level clearance was currently keeping tabs on everything I did.

When I asked who would bother to do that (besides her, apparently, seeing as how she'd showed up here and now!) it launched an earful. According to sources whom Du would not identify, the fake precycle authorization had originated several levels up Muni's heirarchy as part of a scheme to discredit REaders. Later, when one of their surveillance-nets discovered I'd discovered their trick, they'd started keeping watch on me. When I told Du about the mess in my room, she agreed MSS was probably behind that too, though they'd

likely used an outside contractor, given the self-promotional flamboyance with which its contents had been rearranged.

“Point is: if they believe you’ve got something to hide, Jack, it’s just a matter of time before they pick you up and start interrogating. Our advice is to leave Center; head for someplace easier to get lost in.” When I protested I didn’t know enough to be worth interrogating she smiled and offered to help me on that.

“We don’t know where your girl’s remains are – condolences btw, we know the two of you’d gotten close – but we do know that a delivery van left the Coroner’s ranch an hour after dark on the day they went missing.” That van was electric, she added, so not from Counties, and a van of the same model, but with different signage and logos, was recorded entering the moat from outside about an hour later. No record of either van after that, but the smoldering remains of a similar vehicle were found next morning in a ravine under the old southbound interstate. Given there were multiple sets of tire tracks approaching and leaving, best guess was the body’d been transferred to some other vehicle for smuggling into Burrows.

“You head out there, Jack, you just might be able to look into those whereabouts. Quietly, that is.”

With that, Du reminded me of the late hour and how long I’d already been in one place. Advising me to ditch my Lyfe, which could easily be tracked, she proceeded to reach around, pull up the back hem of her skirt and tuck it inside the waistband of her underwear, like it’d gotten caught there the last time she used a rest room. If our building’s security were as professional as usual, she explained to my baffled stare, they’d be so distracted switching cameras to follow her panties to the elevators and out the lobby, they’d never

notice me heading down the back stairs.

“Good luck, Jack. We’ll be in touch to hear what you find out.”

Who was meant by ‘we,’ and how they’d be in touch, were not discussed.

—

Once I'd gotten a few blocks away from the office, took a minute to duck into an alley. Despite Du's advice, there was no way I was going to throw away my Lyfe, but the dogged thing's got a sealed case, so no way a lay-person could remove the battery or SIM card like they do in old vids. Settled instead for powering it all the way off and shoving its now-dead weight deep among the mess in my tote.

Despite the best efforts of both Defensive Industries and MSS, the Limit that seals-off Center from the rest of Confluence is not as hermetic as they like to have us believe. Is less a ‘barrier,’ really, than a membrane. Sure, the usual checkpoints boast plenty of guards and monitoring devices, but those are only the most visible routes, the designated thoroughfares via which ordinary persons like Burrow migrants have to enter and exit and get their files timestamped if they hope to get paid for the work they do inside. There are also other, less-well-advertised pores that don't justify the expense of a full checkpoint. Those are monitored by hired muscle - paid for by whichever korp wishes to avoid their someone or something having to wait in line with the unwashed masses. Those proprietary gates, I'd learned in the course of my grunt work at Division, were ripe for gaming, if one knew how to

go about it.

“Some help?” I slurred out, approaching the rolling steel gate that dead-ended DeSoto Place, a narrow and litter-pocked side street half-way around Center from OCD’s offices.

Stepping into an alley along the way, I’d removed tights and socks so my legs were bare, then stepped through the neck of a stretchy zip-top from the tote, pulled it up around my hips and tied the sleeves in back to look enough like a body-con mini that it might fool a fool in poor light. Stuffed the socks where they’d turn my bra into a push-up and zipped my jacket halfway open to draw eyes to the resulting fullness. Tangling up my blonde wig for more distraction and checking reflection in the window of a parked car, confirmed it might all pass for some late-night clubbing look - on a dark sidewalk or in a grainy video.

Zig-zagging through streets nearly devoid of traffic at that hour, crossing my steps for a bit of runway slink, I was gratified at the reactions to my ratty new look. Was silent and quick to move along though, when a squad of over-served youngsters caught sight of me.

“Yo, dudes - you see what I see? Over there?”

“That a lady or a...”

“That’s no lady.”

“Fuck me...”

“Bet it would!”

Laughter echoed across the intersection as I sped up to turn the corner and leave their gaze behind.

Nearing DeSoto’s gate, I dove deeper into character, slapping a palm three times hard

against one side of my face to bring up some color. Arching my spine like a personscored and struggling to salvage eir self-esteem, I stirred a pinch of hip motion into a hearty helping of late-night stagger and stumble as I approached the gate. After rattling it ineffectually with both hands, I kicked the heavy steel, then spun in a circle while clutching that foot in pain and was rewarded with a rusty scrape as a door in the brick wall to my right swung open, silhouetting a bulky body in the blue-light glow of security monitors.

“Tough night?” a husky voice inquired, its tone more of amusement than of challenge.

“Bastard kicked me out,” I mumbled back as I rubbed the reddened cheek and twisted my neck as if to shake off the effects of a recent blow. Let em think I’d been hit – or worse; any bit of empathy could only help. Which it did, as I found myself trading small talk with a hulking sixty-something in steel-toed boots, green-duck uniform pants and maroon windbreaker with Four Aces Logistics logo on prominent display, along with an embroidered name badge over one chest pocket. Old stories still being the most believable, this ‘Konstantina’ made sympathetic noises to my hard-luck tale of a boyfriend who resented my independence, but still insisted e could not open the gate to let me go crash at my sister’s place in Two. Every operation of that gate was auto-logged, e growled, and had to be enabled with a user code. Worth eir job to run it for a stray like me, but then eir tone softened and I thanked my lucky stars it was a fem of any stripe who’d pulled this particular graveyard shift.

“Got a truck coming soon,” the guard offered, before spitting a bit of chew onto the ground beside my feet. “Ya’ wait over in the corner there, I might take my time checking them through - hang around the driver’s window, wander my light around inside the cab...

Driver gets chatty to ease my suspicions, who knows what might glom-on to his roof or hang off the back door hardware and then slide on by without me noticing? Know what I mean?”

Hour or so later, the sun was caressing the horizon as I stood outside the door of Mutt’s squat, explaining to a sleep-eyed skin-head that I was tight with Mutt and she’d said I could use her nest if I ever needed a flop. The pucker of the skinner’s mouth told me that was a lame story given my current character, but after a bit more scrutiny she admitted recognizing me from my earlier visit and let me in after all, locking the door securely behind.

(Note re: that ‘securely.’ Once inside the squat, I found Mutt’s cubicle uninhabited, but not intact. Books and magazines still in their places with bright shiny faces, supplemented by dozens more dumped in at random, but that stack of precious machines? Gone as a Gold AmEx card. Guess there are limits to every form of loyalty, even among followers of The Books.)

—

Once I’d gotten a few hours’ sleep, squatters were happy to fill me in on the latest wrinkle from out in the moat: the Outer Buffer Gathering (which was how the Feeds were all referring to it, with a consistency that seriously suggested instructions from above) was ‘definitely not an incursion.’ Possible reason for the Feeds’ unanimity? By law, an ‘incursion’ would’ve required immediate neutralization, a step our leaders were apparently unprepared to take as yet, perhaps due to the abundance of fems, children and geriatrics in

the images which had so far reached public eyes. Could not have been a ‘demonstration’ either, because that would beg the question of what they were demonstrating for or against. ‘Gathering’ was innocuous enough the authorities could just observe and analyze for time being, though they did announce mobilization of two Player Brigades (who were thrilled to temporarily swap their nolos for lewies), and one unit from Defensive Industries’ Coordination Command, plus support personnel. Put another five divisions of Players on reserve as well; confined to quarters to ensure immediate response if they should be ordered out.

One commentator my new squatmates brought up on an ancient wall-size monitor (in between the daily power shutdowns) did remark about the asymmetry of those preparations. Four thousand semi-trained and twitchy-fingered Players, or close to twenty thousand if they eventually called up those reserve divisions, against a reported two to three thousand civilians with no visible weapons; ill-organized and probably not in the best of health after riding hobo-style across a continent and then camping in the desert for days?

‘Better safe than sorry’ seemed a significant understatement.

—

Spent the next two days getting acquainted with my new family, many of whom’d arrived too recently to’ve known Mutt (though all had heard of her, that reputation being the only reason her nest was still unappropriated by the time I arrived). Were mostly friends or

acquaintances of long termers, recruited to fill in after some previous occupant decided to leave – or simply failed to return, as I’d learn was an all too common occurrence out in Burrows. Jungleland was safe (compared to other Burrows options), clean (ditto) and offered the emotional support of a casual community. Some residents had outside work that kept them fed, a few were secretive as to what hidden resources supported their idleness but most pitched in - as I quickly began to do - at the used-anything bazaar which occupied the former club across the hall. Stocked by scrounging abandoned houses and burnt-out buildings (and pre-cycling forays like the one that’d gotten Mutt in trouble, though usually far-less dramatic), the jumbleshop brought in enough credits to finance communal meals and also met many of the squatters’ other needs through right of first-pick (after the truly-valuables had been snuck into Center and consigned through a registered vintage-shop – where some may even’ve been sold to me in my previous circumstance!). All in all, a marginal but tolerable existence, so long as you didn’t mind the constant buzz of REader-speak coming from the core of devoted followers – a buzz which helped my own learning-curve veer quickly toward the vertical.

“Absolutely!” I heard one of my new housemates shout in reaction to an interview on *This Afternoon in Confluence* with a fem who said she’d seen a vid of a REader in the Florida Federation who’d been inside her house when Hurricane Winston hit. Gal’d put all kinda spells and charms around the house to keep it safe but then the wind commenced to howling and the place started shaking like a pinata while her and the kids scrunched down in the bathtub, scared to death with their arms around each other. By the time it was over, the storm’d torn the entire roof right off the house. Tore away all the outside walls too, and the

whole garage and the neighbors' house and RV and all, *but it never touched that bathroom*. Fire Department's rescue crew showed up and found that mother and her kids dry as a bone inside its walls, surrounded by acres of death and debris.

"Magic saved our lives," the homeowner was said to have said, and this guest on the Feed repeated it all. Right on camera. Said she'd be happy to give the survivor's full name and hometown and everything, at which moment the program cut to commercial.

"I mean, that *was* in Florida Federation," the squatter called Sybily testified to the rest of us. "But still, it was on a feed so you gotta believe. There's ever a tornado coming round here, I'm setting every charm and spell I can find. You bet your ass I am."

Show's next segment involved cooking a raft of ingredients no squatter could ever afford, so most of the peeps I was watching with moved on to speculating just how Madgiq might accomplish its 'miracles.' Fact none of them had a decent answer made little dent in their faith.

"Madgiq is part of the natural world folks," argued a pasty-faced youngster who had been Olivia O'Donoghue until she found The Books but now went by Madgmax. No one should be surprised that it was just as complex and difficult to predict as plenty of other natural features – changes in the weather; the eruption of a volcano, impact of a meteor or the directions in which mutation and evolution would take a disease or an entire species. Just because humans couldn't readily control Madgiq didn't mean it was any less real or useful. "Hell, some of the realest things we got, we can't control ourselves doing – yawning, crying, falling asleep..."

"Waking up when you don't want to," chimed the fem who'd shouted at the Feed

interviewer.

“Getting old, or sick...” Sybily offered.

“Finding someone you like and getting them to like you!” muttered a Players-refugee who we all knew had a crush on Syb.

“Losing five pounds - back in the day,” quipped a voice from behind me, sending the entire common space into groans at the trivialities we’d once had the luxury to worry about.

Eager as these advocates were to chatter about such things, none of them had two words on the topics that interested me most: what’d happened to Mutt in her cell that night and where the hell her body was hanging-out these days. When I pressed the issue, suggesting to a gaggle that maybe some hard-cores’d snatched the body in hopes of using magic to bring her back to life, I learned that that was a non-starter.

“No,” a geeky young shemale answered, with a quickness that made clear e had been considering the same possibility emself. Life, M. DeSimone Oh reminded me, was not a *thing*: you couldn’t conjure up a life any more than you could 3-d print a fire and expect it to give off heat. You could paint *a picture* of a fire, make *a model* of it out of plastic or data, but that would never *be* a fire. Same with life – it was a *process* that *arose*, when the conditions were right.

“It’s not that Madgiq doesn’t have enough power,” Oh summed up. “It’s just recognizing process verse substance.”

A difference I’d be pondering again, and soon, as things turned out.

More helpful was another of the new residents, a scruffy Player's deserter they'd nicknamed 'Jackal' because of the SLAVERING JACKALS colors she'd been wearing when she arrived. Had quickly traded the lot of them for a less-conspicuous look – a change of mode I like to think was the reason it took me so long to recognize her as the same person who'd brought Mutt's 'supplies' to my room exactly seven days earlier.

"Hell no," Jackal spluttered, when I foolishly implied that this squat was the extent of REadership in Confluence. "Every Burrow's got its own Concentrations," which she went on to explain was how the faithful'd begun referring to any group of themselves (point for Janet a'Lago!). 'Concentration,' because deep thought and focus was how a person could tap into the magic inside of them, and also because any number of believers imaging and focusing together could 'concentrate' their Madgik together for greater effect.

Jackal herself was from Burrow Two, where she'd gotten sick of being teased by her fellow warriors for holding on to some of the religious ways she'd been taught as a kid; calling out dudes for cursing, refusing to go with recreations, not taking the drugs the others all used to mellow down between gaming sessions and mock battles. Being neither tough enough nor cruel enough to recruit her own pack of minions to fight back, she'd eventually gotten fed up. Walked out of barracks and into an old school building next door that had been taken over by a bunch of folks who looked kind of wimpy but had always smiled warmly as they stepped aside to let her squad pass them on the street. Quickly learned the

folks called themselves REaders. Despite claiming to be the movement's headquarters for all of Confluence, they admitted they could not keep her safe living next door to the unit she'd deserted, so sent her across Burrows to this squat while she decided out what to do with the rest of her life, which so far seemed to consist of finding a bridge between her old beliefs and this new one she'd stumbled into.

All the old religions, Jackal would now tell anyone who cared to listen, credited their God (or Gods) with creating life. Heck, that was exactly what theology was invented to answer: where did I come from and why am I here? And why you? And most especially: *why that asshole who just did me dirty?* The famous faiths answered all that, oh yeah, but according to Jackal's new understanding, the answer they gave – 'God did it' – was no answer at all because 'where did *God* come from' and 'why is *God* here?' were *exactly the same unanswerable questions* except with a proper-name put in place of the old pronouns. REaders, she was proud to announce, dispensed with the name 'God' and admitted what existence really is: impossible to explain but happening to us nonetheless. Admitted that life is - to use the word that's been applied to supposedly-impossible phenomena for eons - Magic.

(Or 'Majic,' 'Majyk,' 'Magique' or 'Madgiq,' that last being the spelling their movement seemed recently to have settled upon in order to make clear they were referring not to witches and wizards or creaky old parlor tricks but something truly other. A force which exists beyond and all around our ordinary experience. The inexplicable original miracle from which everything else flows.)

"So, REaders is just another religion?" asked Mrs. Malia, the only resident I ever

encountered who still used that old formulation, perhaps because *Mr.* Malia had still been alive when the demise of Social Security forced them to sell their house for a pittance and live off the proceeds. When that ran out, they'd come here to squat and he'd passed away soon after, so now she lived on, alone but forever a Mrs.; the enduring half of a life once wonderful.

"NoNoNoNo," Jackal shot back. The old systems, she enthused, they brought the gods they created down to their own level by giving them not only names and personalities (and sometimes even sex!) but worst of all: emotions – vanity, anger, jealousy, ego, grudges. All the human failings God was supposed to save us from in our own mortal struggles.

"What's different about REaders," a young squatter I'd heard referred to as Ivy chimed-in, "is that Madgiq isn't a 'who,' it doesn't 'feel' things. Madgiq don't care what this or that little bag of biochemicals is thinking or saying or doing."

"Madgiq is way too big for that," Jackal put in, to which Ivy voiced the capper.

"Madgiq," this preternaturally placid pre-teen advised with utmost conviction, "just is."

—

Squat crew were Feeding again during the hours of power next morning, when one of

the commentators suggested maybe our korps' executives were not taking this 'gathering' thing seriously enough. Feed Three'd put out a series of still images they said were taken by a vis-nav drone prowling to max range beyond the eastern edge of our moat. Fuzzy and indistinct stuff, but if the enhancements were to be believed, the images showed scores of armored military vehicles approaching via the old interstate, coming from direction of the Great Salt Waste. A retired MSS colonel they brought in for commentary opined that no responsible commander would send a force across that kind of distance without extensive support and sure enough, the InterSovRail syndicate soon acknowledged that a 9000' long heavy-freight of undisclosed ownership and contents had been prioritized across various rail lines (to loud protests from the major commercial carriers). Projections suggested the train would hook up with the highway transport column where Interstate crossed rails, a few miles outside a little burg called Humbe. Chatter on the train said it was made up of fuel and water tankers, camo-tarped flatbeds and boxcars presumed to be full of rations and ammo.

Oh, and some white-painted refrigerator-box cars whose sides and roofs bore crimson stars with a golden cross in the middle of each one.

Needless to say, these reports had caused a bit of a stir: center honchos rushing to meetings, Burrow councils convening to debate where their loyalties lay. Counties being Counties, they'd been suspiciously quiet, though they did issue a call for all registered milits currently serving within 500 miles of here to return home, asap.

'Piss blood and shit fire,' Ivy lip-read the Colonel muttering during a hasty bleep-out, 'this does not look good.'

—

Closer to home, squat-mates' philosophical ramblings were great at educating me about REaders, but about Mutt's death (and my possible complicity in it)? Not so much. Which is why, the Tuesday after arriving at the squat, I decided to head over to Two and visit that so-called 'HQ' Jackal was always talking about. By that point, I'd bartered away my Center-issued wearable – accessing the credit account stored on it would certainly have given away my location, but there were plenty of sharp-eyed kids in sidewalk kiosks ready to take it in trade for a bootleg Burrows equivalent they called a 'Chit,' an anonymous finger-sized fob pre-loaded with a considerably smaller credit balance. Asset erosion aside, the exchange at least allowed me to safely rent a bike from another kid at another kiosk for the ride over to Two.

Found the place easily, taking up what had been the Admin offices of a surplussed public-school whose classrooms were now housing scores of recent refugee arrivals. As 'HQ' implied, their warren was bustling, full of peeps scuttling from space to space in great urgency, or conversing in huddles that went silent as soon as I poked my head around a corner or inside a doorway. After maybe my fourth such rejection, a busy bee in Hello Kitty-patterned medical scrubs smiled in recognition of me and broke out of a group head-scratch to lead me down a narrow passage to a cracked-open door on which someone had Sharpied 'VERA'S PLaceE.' Inside, I found a stocky grey-hair in brilliant batik caftan at a stand-up desk piled high with legal pads and file folders, tapping messages into a latest-edition LyfeMachine. Sensing my presence in the doorway, this fem I assumed to be Vera turned

around and gave me a clinical look-over before speaking as if to continue some ongoing conversation.

“You’ve no need to feel guilty, Jack,” she began, in a voice that blended weariness and sympathy in roughly-equal measure. “The supplies you delivered *did not* kill her.”

“Then...”

“You helped us save her,” I was interrupted, as my new acquaintance crooked one finger toward a frightened looking masc who’d just poked his head around me. Handing him a stack of files, another motion of eir finger sent the fellow off at a jog.

“Save her?” I jumped in almost before the fellow had cleared the door. “Well, you didn’t do a very good job. Do you and your ‘us’ even know where her body...”

“There were people who wanted Bethany gone,” she hissed, loud enough to be heard above the surrounding bustle but soft enough I almost didn’t register the unexpected use of Mutt’s given name. “Other...let’s call them ‘factions.’ They think they can stop...what’s coming.”

When I asked what that might be, the hesitations became even more prolonged, the words more warily chosen. A ‘celebration,’ she suggested one could call what was coming. A chance for REaders to regain the ‘momentum’ they had lost after Grace’s death. To be reminded of the power they could generate if they worked together to break free from the death-grip of old, tired establishments.

“You’ll see, Jack,” she assured, even as she ushered me out of the office and made to shut its door, which motion caused her sleeve to drop back and expose for an instant the wearable clasped round her left wrist. The Center-issued wearable, that is; a rose-gold colored, premium-cost, latest-generation descendant of the very device I’d ditched two days

before.

“And it will help,” Vera added encouragingly. “I guarantee you’ll feel better after you see what we’re pulling out of our collective hats. Who knows, it might even make a REader out of you.”

—

No one else at ‘HQ’ would tell me any more than Vera had, each spouting some version of the party-line that their reticence was for my own good, and after an hour of such shut-downs I was ready to break some eggs. Adopting my best ‘intern on a mission’ face and posture, I made my way back to where I’d earlier noticed an old machine idling on a piece of plywood laid across the slop sink in a janitor’s closet. As hoped, no one appeared to notice when I squeezed in and tapped a key to wake the devil, then typed-in the string of characters penciled on the wall above the monitor (still? these days? you’d think peeps’d know better!). What came up next ‘bout blew my mind - not the familiar NewNet search-page I’d expected, but a colorful bit of graphic nonsense above a window inviting me to ‘Search Poodle or type a URL.’ Apparently, something very much like oldnet was still running offshore, and these folks had found a way to tap into it!

Once I realized what I’d found, I was off, accessing all sorts of stuff that would never be allowed on NewNet. First search result for ‘readers/news’ linked to a spreadsheet documenting scores of incidents where persons identified as REaders had been harassed, detained or violently attacked (with sometimes fatal results) in various sovereignties. Not just the former fifty, btw: Cuba, Brazil, Gulf-states, Europe (both the Eastern Association

of... and its smaller splinter, the Western Union of...), Russkiy Mir, Singapore, African Union, the list went on. Nothing from the PRC or Kimians yet but - as a footnote pointed out - it was not likely we'd hear about incidents there if they had occurred, and in any case, the upshot was clear: there were way more magic-heads than I'd ever imagined, in way more places around the world. Anywhere those books had been read, it seemed, or the film versions viewed, the seed of Madgiq had sprouted and gotten itself posted and liked and reposted on whatever media were alive in that space. Spark on a puddle of petro, feedback on a tower of Marshall amps, whatever analogy you wanted to use and whether or not you agreed it was enough to call 'a movement,' *something* was definitely happening and it was frightening peeps in power - and drawing pushback.

I'm sure I'd have found more to chew on, but that was as far as I got before a mega-pierced baby-face in razor-slashed tartan pants and faded black hoodie reached into my closet and popped the cord off the monitor I was studying. One look at eir scowl was enough to tell me I'd worn out my welcome, so I made for the exit and hopped another rent-a-bike home.

Not, however, without nabbing a stack of printouts that'd been serving as shim to level-up the borrowed machine's keyboard.

—

Once back at the squat, I climbed into Mutt's hammock to see what kind of light my pilfered prize might shed on this whirlpool that'd been sucking at my shoes since I first set

feet inside the Blue Bunny.

Hermeneutics of Madgiq Science was the title of one corner-stapled document, filled with cross-outs and marginal notations. Over the course of nearly twenty pages it recapped how something called ‘chaos science’ arose from the study of phase changes (gas to liquid, liquid to solid...) and how that had led to equations explaining previously unpredictable systems and phenomena: the mechanics of fire and flames, the swirling of water in rapids, configurations of clouds under various weather conditions and even the formation of galaxies and stars in celestial nurseries. Next came a section on particle physics, where random motion at quantum scale within individual particles and atoms transformed energy into macro-scale matter and thus to every ‘thing’ we see, feel, hear and experience – including space/time itself. Madgiq, this author postulated, manipulated that quantum-scale energy transformation in much the same way more-familiar devices manipulate energy in the visual wavelengths. Just as a mirror can reverse or invert an image, or a curved reflector stretch, bend or distort it, so Madgiq can re-shape matter. Just as a lens can make a light source appear larger, smaller, clear or cloudy so Madgiq can transform energy and events. And, in the same way technology can take in rocks and water and oil and plants and even sewage and spit them out as food, fuel, solvents, plastics or astonishingly-focused pharmaceuticals, so a sufficiently powerful and competent practitioner of Madgiq can create any desired object or phenomenon out of the raw materials that surround us.

On the actual mechanisms for making Madgiq do all that, however, the document was silent. Disappointed, I turned to the next item, a more concise screed, but untitled, undated,

unsigned and apparently still in an early stage of editing. “Question:” challenged its first line:

...why are the rulers of so many sovs ~~so~~ desperate to stamp us out? How does our belief in Madgiq constitute an attack on any other religion?

Answer: it doesn't. But every new belief that comes along makes it that much more difficult for the old beliefs and their fan-boys to dictate to the rest of us, and ~~dictation~~ dictating is what organized religion is all about, and has been from the start.

The document went on like that for several pages before concluding the reason so many new sovereigns ended up as theocracies was that it afforded their rulers an exponentially greater level of control over their subjects than would allowing them real freedom of belief. That was accompanied by marginalia in red pencil pointing out it was actually secularists who took the first official step into the Diss and another in blue arguing they only did that because the Union was about to be co-opted by religionists. Instead of submitting, they decided to split (literally). The next paragraph outlined some impenetrable logic connecting Marx and Beaudelaire and the theoretical origins of race before the unknown author concluded that:

Money is power, sex is power, race is power, so is it any great stretch to understand that religion is power too? REaders ever get big, we'll be a threat to any and all of the old ways, so yeah, it's no surprise they're doing everything they can to stomp out our embers

before we can blossom into a flame.

None of what the document said was a revelation, even to little ol'me, who tended to live with my head in the proverbial sand on such things. And it still didn't answer my question: why someone with fingers on the levers had gone from targeting REaders in general to murdering Mutt, in particular. Kid with no authority, no inside knowledge, nothing anyone else should have wanted. Because, despite what I'd heard and seen, I was now as sure as sunrise she had not offed herself. Not that rat, in that cage, on that night, and not without a much-better reason than any I'd heard so far.

—

Which thoughts eventually propelled me to take a hard look inside that paper sack of 'effects' I'd been handed as I left Kaolin's jail with my tail between my legs. Had cared enough to bring it with when dashing from my room, but since that day it'd lain in the darkest corner of my (previously Mutt's) little squat-nest. Opening the sack now revealed a pitiful legacy: that black and gold cap she'd been so proud of, its headband groaty with sweat and soil, brim shiny with finger spooge; fleece jacket of mine she'd been wearing the night she was snatched, collar now stiff with dried blood. Toothbrush and paste I'd brought her in jail, along with the packet of sanitarines from Vera through Jackal. An empty cellophane sleeve from one of those pads was there, along with a similarly sized cardboard square - like tights or hose are sometimes wrapped around inside their packaging - suggesting one bit of what the Kiingsmen'd told me might actually be true: that Vera and company had substituted

a pair of hose for one of the pads so neither the guards nor I would realize I was sneaking in such lethal lingerie. Minorly interesting, I admit, but nothing compared to what fell out as I fanned through the pages of her comic-books: a paper envelope cut down to the same size as the cardboard, with traces of powdery grit clearly visible inside. Along with a flattened triangle of paper that, when I squeezed its still-damp edges, bulged open to become a cone-shaped cup - *fashioned out of what looked for all the world like a fragment of the same pages I'd caught Mutt reading when I woke from a nap during the final hours of her life.*

Suddenly on full alert, I darted down to the table the squatters used to prep meals and dug through its random cac-piles to find a halfway-clean zip-lok. Placing both envelope and funnel inside, I zipped the baggie tight and breathed a sigh of hope because, with any luck, that powdery grit might be enough for a proper lab-tech to tell me exactly what sort of 'herbs' I had delivered to my friend just hours before she was found deceased.

Knew where I'd be headed, first thing in the morning.

—

Approaching Zoonie's place, first hint something'd changed was a bright new sign screwed to one wall inside the building's lobby: WALLEE ENGINEERING WORKS – SUITE 301. Zoonie's greeting when I announced myself through the also brand-new intercom was friendly enough in its words, but the wariness in eir tone surprised me, though not as much as what was revealed once I made a shortened climb and opened the shiny new stainless steel door of 'Suite' 301. Where eir previous space had been a chaos of scavenged

furnishings and equipment, its new incarnation sported rows of matching modular shelving holding plastic tubs and equipment cases with the manufacturer's labels still attached. In place of the previous lab's hodge-podge of folding tables was a long steel workbench with industrial-style overhead lamps casting brilliant light on laboratory-glassware in multi-armed mad chemist configurations along with half a dozen electronic instruments I didn't recognize. Two lab-coated figures worked silently along the far side, and a vacant stool nearer the door suggested my old friend had just stepped away from a loudly-humming glass-walled box sporting multiple gauges and dials and a pair of those outside-to-inside rubber gloves you shove your hands into so you can manipulate whatever's inside the box without exposing fragile flesh to insult. Spiral ductwork winding up to the ceiling and over to the outside wall suggested hazmat or bio-badness must be involved.

Seeing my open-mouthed stare, Zoonie put up an apologetic front, but eir pride showed through.

"Got a new client," e offered, eye's proudly roaming the flashy new digs as if to convince emself they were real. "On retainer, actually, for one of the korps. They set us up, call when they need something worked-on. Meantime, we get to use all these nice toys for whatever I want."

Congratulations were well received, but when I explained what I was hoping for, it turned out that new client's 'whatever you want' had some strings attached.

"Non-compete clause, I'm afraid," Zoonie said sadly. Gave em total freedom to work on any ideas e dreamed up emself, but no outside requests. "So much industrial espionage these days," the explanation went. Anyone could turn out to be a competitor for eir new sugar-daddy and whatever they might pay just a bribe to get inside and steal the top-secret

tech e and eir staff (Zoonie, with a staff?!) might be developing for these wary new masters. Much as I pleaded, my old friend remained unmoved.

“Sorry Jack, but even if I hadn’t signed that agreement, I wouldn’t be able to help you after what happened to that prosecutor out there.”

Which was when I learned that India B’s. body had been found that very morning, duct-taped and weighted-down to the bottom of a livestock-watering basin on a ranch half a mile outside the Kaolin County line. First report Zoonie’d read said ‘signs of torture,’ and even though later editions left out that detail, it had clearly put the fear of dog in em.

Despite my differences with India, I was devastated to hear she’d met such a fate - in between periods of pondering whether Zoonie’s sudden prosperity was just a coincidence, or else evidence that someone had gone to an awful lot of expense to prevent em from giving me any more assistance. Not to mention, if that really was the case: what the fu made Mutt important enough for anyone to justify that expenditure - and possibly this newest killing?

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Late next afternoon, found myself outside a different laboratory in a different Burrow talking with a much more-accommodating mastermind - my newest new-best-friend, as would turn out.

Had arrived there thanks to Panuta Santuso, a physician’s assistant I’d met almost a year before when visiting a korp-sponsored medical-aid organization to pick up paper for a

pro-forma Division audit. Panuta and I had gotten together a couple of times after that and seemed to have something going - till the day she confessed she really wasn't comfortable getting deep with a gender-offender. Was very gentle about it and apologetic, and her body language'd already warned me what was coming, so we parted on the best of terms - with just enough guilt left on her side of the table that I felt OK messaging out of the blue (and from a public address...) to ask a favor. Turned out she *did* know someplace outside Center that might be capable of analyzing what I described as 'a questionable herbal supplement' I'd come across.

Compound Factoring Labs occupied a tidy market niche, providing plant-based medicines to Burrow residents, most of whom had no access to the modern pharmacology we Centerites took for gratis. Located out in Burrow Four, its ex-Tesla dealership quarters had a guerrilla-tech vibe: xeriscape medicinals growing in vertical gardens up its exterior walls, retail lobby a greenhouse for tropicals planted inside old auto tires, with salvaged airliner seats for its customers butts and a trio of fashionably-pierced advocates lurking behind a service counter cobbled out of salvaged plumbing pipe and randomly rusted sheets of corrugated steel roofing. Asking the most eager of them how to get an iffy street-purchase checked for safety, I had the good fortune of being directed to one of the lab's owners; a slightly-older-than-me fem sporting a supremely-confident attitude and a lab coat of many-colored stains over her sturdy frame. Immediately whiffed from the clinical appraisal in her eyes and the gentleness in her words that Annika-Liese Ashanti was at least not put off by my particular brand of special-sauce – a welcome contrast to Panuta's backing away. Once we'd breezed through the requisite politesse, it turned out not only did CFL's lab have a full mass-spectrometry setup (purchased at auction when the old state-college system was

liquidated), but Annika was due to babysit an overnight run of their essential-oils extraction process that very evening. If I was willing to make a dinner-dash to the nearest victuals dispensary, she'd be willing to do my testing in between monitoring the extraction equipment, and could probably have my results sometime the next morning.

Hour or so later I had a stomach full of cafeteria quality gumbo and a spinning head from listening to Annika's riff on Muni and the korps – which made my own recent suspicions sound like nursery rhymes. “Of course,” she commented, when I professed surprise at the hardship and need I'd discovered everywhere in Burrows, “that's the way Center wants it.” Hunger and insecurity were the best means, she argued, to make sure their affordable labor remained affordable. She was also fully aware that the old internet was still alive offshore, claiming our leaders had *chosen* to limit their citizens' information flow via Newnet - just like they *preferred* the public to believe there was no easy way to get around the interferators' radio-frequency scrambling (?!). As for targeting REaders and framing Mutt for the shooting? “Would not put anything past those B-school bullies,” she offered, given the pressure they were under to increase sales of korps products and services to offshore sovs – many of whom were decidedly less tolerant of new ideas than Confluence's articles of incorporation professed us to be.

“Scapegoating,” she pronounced with disgust. “An ancient sport; but it never goes out of style.”

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Between Annika's political jaundice and my recent experiences, no way were we going to entrust the results of her analysis to any electronic communication, so 10:30 next AM I was back for Ashanti to make a show of giving me the new-client tour around CFL's production facilities (including the cavernous Cybertruck service bays, now grow-lighting hundreds of hemp plants to fuel CFL's most profitable product, korp-branded gummies the Burrows' administrators dispensed freely whenever and wherever its residents threatened to become restive). My cover-story established, she coyly informed her co-workers that the two of us were heading out for a zatz, which we then sipped during a slow-motion stroll through what had once been the dealership's inventory lot, now home to ranks of solar panels and four atmospheric-moisture harvesters, all essential components of CFL's operations, given the unreliability of Burrows' utilities.

"You were right to wonder what had been in that envelope," Annika confided as we walked. Her analysis of the residue revealed it was mostly bicarbonate of soda – a common medium for pharmaceutical compounding (and completely useless for menstrual pain, as even I was well aware). Far more interesting were the trace ingredients found along with that base - atropine being one. Widely-used in emergency medical situations, it slowed a subject's heart rate, impeding tissue degradation and allowing more time for other therapies to be applied and take effect. "Hardly a household treatment for cramps though," she wisecracked before moving on down the list.

Much more intriguing was Tardihadilax, an enzyme isolated from one of the most resilient organisms known to science. Able to survive long periods even in the vacuum and cold of space, Tardigrades had been posited as a vehicle by which life might have been

seeded from galaxy to galaxy, zillions of little beasties hitching rides on comets which originated as planet-fragments sent ballistic by meteor impacts on exo-planets thousands of light years away. Where such a component had come from, Annika could not say, though it might be possible to synthesize if one had access to a genome sequencing and splicing lab (i.e: the substance had korp fingerprints all over it). Finimorpinotine had also shown up, another obscure enzyme that was suspected as a factor in cases of catalepsy, the nervous disorder sometimes mistaken for death, where a person becomes insensitive to any pain and stiffens into a state readily mistaken for rigor-mortis.

“Got that much done before my extraction run finished,” Annika offered with a sly sideways glance to see if I had any idea where she was headed, “so I took a look at that other bit of paper that came with the envelope.”

“A page from volume Four of the REaders’ holy books,” I interjected, proud I’d taken the time to study that improvised drinking cup before handing it over and so could contribute that a piece to Ashanti’s puzzle. Proud that is, until she smiled broadly and began to pantomime a detailed explanation of the control module on an air-to-water synthesizer in case anyone was observing us. “Yeah, that’s what it looked like,” she agreed, except when she’d put it under a microscope, everything was wrong. Paper was not mass-printers’ roll-stock, but ordinary 20-pound office-supply sheet goods, and when she magnified the printing, it was clearly sprayed-on - not pressed in by the kind of high-volume printing equipment used back in the days of hard-copy book publishing. That led her to analyze the ink and conclude it came from a cartridge-fed multi-function copier/scanner; same sort of machine someone might have access to in their place of business (or even their own home, back when ours was the land of milk and honey.)

Curiosity officially tweaked, she'd scanned the scrap to digitize the writing on it, then run the result through a text-recognition program (a co-worker's personal toy, not part of her lab's gear). That analysis confirmed that the characters, space and punctuation marks on the fragment did not appear in that sequence anywhere in Book Four. Nor, in fact in any of the series' other volumes. By then, Annika said with pride, her conclusion was solid.

"Whatever document that scrap came from was a fabrication – a very intentional effort to conceal something. So what I'm asking you, Shirley," she continued with a disarming combination of come-to-me smile and watch-your-step scowl. "This isn't really about some iffy party purchase, is it?"

Which is when I spilled. Have to admit an urge to impress her; to get on the good side of one so clever and capable. Not to mention *utterly* hot: glorious bouffant hair as tightly-curved as nature intended, but pricked with golden highlights to match the unexpected amber of her eyes, and an animaline grace that screamed '*I'm alive and loving it.*' In minutes I'd told her where the paper had come from and what the milits claimed they had found when they'd entered Mutt's cell - and pretty much every other thing I had begun to suspect, based on the findings she'd given me so far.

"The words were a message," I suggested. "Instead of using some kind of a code to send instructions to her in jail, they hid them in plain sight."

"Bingo," Annika shot back, not an expression I was familiar with, but clear enough given her delivery and this context. One of the torn-off phrases ended in letters that could have come from 'apparatus,' the next with the word 'timing,' and below that, one reading 'regular check-in s-c-h-e...' suggesting '...d-u-l-e' had been cut off. Between those clues and her substance analysis, Annika surmised the message had carried instructions for Mutt to

administer a mix of powdered pharma that I had unknowingly delivered. When I suggested another bit that ended in ‘...a-g-e’ could have been the last letters of ‘dosage,’ Ashanti agreed, before pointing out it could equally-well have read ‘courage.’

“Would take plenty of that,” she continued as we walked on, voices low and heads bent close enough that our shoulders met from time to time. “Imagine: first you rig some...uh... sling sort of a thing, to hang your weight from the ceiling, then carefully knot the neck part so it’ll look tight but won’t really choke you – you hope! Then, some specified amount of time before the guard is scheduled to check-up on you, you choke down a few sips of water stirred up with some unknown scroat that looks like floor scrapings and then, before the scroat can send you into a coma, you step up onto whatever there was...”

“A concrete sleeping ledge,” I offered, fitting my words into the rhythm of her excitement...

“...put your head in the loop and just when you sense the effects coming on, pull your feet free and panic as your entire weight yanks on your neck. And then – again, hopefully - you pass out and hang there until a guard looks in and starts thinking up excuses, pronto.”

Would’ve taken a helluva nerve, I agreed. Trusting your life to whoever wrote a bunch of instructions smuggled in a pack of sanitary pads (which I was now confident had never been in demand; one more deception by Vera and her friends to suck me into their plotting). And trusting too, that nothing would happen to your comatose ‘corpse’ before your friends could get their hands on it and watch over your recovery. In answer to my next question, Annika suggested the catalepsy might last up to twenty-four hours.

“It’s not as rare an occurrence as it sounds,” my new personal-bio-physicist blithely assured. Click around for a few minutes, even on NewNet, and anyone could find the story

of a supposedly-deceased grandmother coming ‘back to life’ after more than ten hours in cold storage. Another one recorded a man pronounced dead from poisoning and 15 hours later he suddenly woke up, sending the morgue staff screaming out of the room. Funeral home workers preparing to embalm a corpse getting the scare of their lives when the body bag starts kicking and grunting: do we need any more? Peeps mistaken for dead’ve been common enough over the ages that the old-time sailors - when they’d stitch up a body to bury it at sea? They always ran the last stitch through the victim’s nose: one final opportunity for the pain to wake him up before he was on his way to the bottom of the sea.

“Even life and death issues are rarely as black and white as peeps like to make ‘em out,” Ashanti concluded, proudly summarizing where her investigation had led us.

My own thoughts though, were not so sanguine. ‘That last night?’ they carried on. The way Mutt had suddenly come-on to me? It was now clear that Two Crows had been one half correct: the poor kid really *was* afraid she might die, though not because she was trying to. In which case, I really could have been her last shot at some human warmth in a way-too-short lifetime of being used and abused.

No wonder her anger had burned so hot when I came down with a sudden case of principles!

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TO BE CONTINUED IN INSTALLMENT SIX

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