

E Unum Pluribus

- a tale of The Big Diss

Installment Four

A Novel by Robin Andrew

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

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CONTINUED FROM INSTALLMENT THREE

...so we suggest the two of you keep a low profile for a while," he advised, before closing with what I can only guess was an attempt at humor.

"Maybe pick up a set of those books the REaders think so much of. Find out what all the fuss is about."

—

The Books.

Or, 'those damned books,' as plenty of peeps have called them over the years. Epithet being meant literally by some; those religious types who thought it was a sin when any other metaphysics got half as much press as their own one-and-only.

The Books, Mutt explained to me that afternoon as we grazed the galleries of MoCHA (officially: the Museum of Corporate Holdings in Art, a quasi-public, quasi-cultural, quasi-educational institution widely understood to have been established by the controlling Shareholders of several high-cap korps so they could show-off their personal art collections at the public's expense), The Books were not to be taken literally. There was not really a parallel world embedded inside ours, where things we considered magical were utterly normal and everyday. No college where the magically-gifted could learn how to cast spells, no cabal of undead shape-shifters angling to take over the world and wipe out

everything good and decent. From what she'd gleaned off of her squat compatriots, the stories were all a giant metaphor; a stand-in for the millennia-old struggle against entrenched systems that empower the large, loud, dominating few to rule over everyone not as strong (or strong-willed, or just-plain vicious and single-minded) and make life a hell on earth for them.

MoCHA was out in Burrow One, in part of what had once been the Southside Mall - until its concourse and shops were consumed by anti-mercantile arson one blazing-hot Black Friday morning. Hoping to arrest the neighborhood's slide into slum-dom, the CEOs chose to house their gift to the masses in the shell of the Macy's which had anchored the mall's eastern extremity; ninety-four-thousand square feet of free-admission white-box galleries displaying art which most of the local residents found incomprehensible. Idling around my flat that morning I'd been amazed to discover Mutt had never heard of the place, much less visited it, so after a quick check of Division records showed no flag on her temporary travel pass, we'd headed out. Excited talk of the impending rain-event – our region's first in seven months, if it materialized – surrounded us as we elec-trolleyed to Mission Gate, after passing which we strolled a few long blocks beneath leaden skies to MoCHA's Shareholder-priority entrance and were soon happily wandering its mirror-polished concrete floors, insulated from Burrows' entropy by the building's windowless shell.

Only the ninth and final volume of The Books was meant to be taken literally, Mutt continued as we stared at an exhibit of drawings and photos, all that remained of a gigantic mirror-polished jelly bean fantasia that had stood on Chicago's lakefront until it was destroyed in an opening stanza of the Battle of the Great Lakes. My melancholy at the Cloud

Gate's end was nothing compared to REaders' despair that the fabled ninth novel was not available for them to read and revere; though once the establishment had realized its potential impact (the Faithful claimed) there'd been no chance any publisher would issue it. The writer was paid off to the tune of many-millions (look up his net worth if you have access to the open-net, and ask yourself: how else would any *writer* get that rich?). As result, all the public knew for sure was that the final book was not a continuation of the same story-line, and was set not in the same vaguely-recent time period, but somewhere in the near-future. Had a new protagonist, too, the rumors said, possibly fem this time, but whatever the gender, it was someone who'd bring the story into the real world and change it forever.

“That book ever come to light,” Mutt predicted, in a manner suggesting this again was more a statement of creed than a thought of her own, “it’ll blow the lid off the entire anti-magic conspiracy.”

Till that happened, as I’d already learned from my own research, REaders contented themselves with parsing the books they did have; sifting through the stories for bits of universal truth. Drafting thick commentaries about this or that incident, or how some character’s powers had changed, which they supposed could be signposts to the real source of those powers. Assembling spreadsheets of clues to determine which emotions triggered real magic and which could squash it into impotence. Graphing every action of the story’s villains to generate the curves that would reveal what led them to become avatars of evil.

Mutt and I were following an enormous canvas by then, acres of fabric covered both sides in slashes of orange, green and purple clashing loud as a heavy metal anthem, its length draped and twisted through great wounds where the ceiling of MoCHA had been torn away

to expose the trusses of the old department's store roof. '*Worlds Me Oyster*,' a placard on a nearby wall entitled the piece, with some curatorial flah-flah about how the artist had enlisted the building itself into the art, just as choosing one's path from room to room enlisted viewers in the creative process by allowing them to construct a unique variation of the work that they would experience.

“Whol’ot easier,” Mutt muttered, “wouldn’ i’ be? If cac was jus’ the cac it is – ‘stead-a always‘posed t’ be sum’n else?”

Bethany Anne Joan’s; if you hadn’t been so damned sharp and prickly, I would’ve wrapped you in my arms just then and smothered your fucking face with mine.

—

By 4 PM, I could see Mutt’d had enough of pondering MoCHA’s overvalued-abstractions. Since we were out in her territory, I asked if she knew where we could go for something more tasty than the prescription nutrition provided in Muni’s dispensaries. “Get myself introduced to the Burrows’ best by an expert,” was how I phrased it, but as with so many of my ideas, Mutt seemed baffled by this one.

“Ain’ you got free vict back a’ yer place?!” she pointed out. When I replied that was true, but a person still wanted to try something new now and then, she threw a withering scowl before reminding me I’d said I was broke until Oduor’s little payment scam played itself out.

“Well, yeah,” I admitted. “Technically. Doesn’t mean I can’t swing a night out,

especially at Burrows prices.”

“Does in my world, Center-girl,” she shot back before adding - softly enough I had to concentrate to make it out - “ ‘n my worl’, ‘broke’ is broke - no if an’ or but.”

Asking a museum staffer about alternatives to the dispensaries’ subsistence meals was marginally more effective and the place she pointed us some steps above a hole in the wall – though it would certainly have benefitted from one of those to bleed out the heat, steam and noise of its unseparated kitchen. On the other hand, being well-enclosed had some benefits given the gale rising outside, its wind-whipped cloud cover a symphonic exercise in variations on the theme of ‘graphite-gray’. Forecasts over the past week had warned of an atmospheric waterway approaching from the coast and reports from NorCal that morning had featured dramatic flooding and mud slides.

As with air-conditioning, I never saw a menu in the restaurant (if you could even call it that), just a fem in a smock behind an unfinished plywood counter who scanned my ID three times before accepting that its credits were legit, then spouted something unintelligible towards me which my young friend explained meant they were ‘doing fish bowls’ at the moment. While she negotiated price and waited for the food, I braved side eyes from the other patrons to grab a vacant stretch at one of the communal tables. Few minutes later Mutt arrived, using the battered bottom half of a pizza box as tray for a meal which turned out to be reasonably edible: chipped plastic bowls swimming with noodles and onions and a sort of greens I’d never encountered before, plus a few chunks of faux-fish protein coated with something crunchy and a stack of soy-tillas to roll up and dip in a cup of creamy something whose citrus-tanged pepperburn stopped just the homey side of outright pain. The fruit-

flavored drinks Mutt'd ordered (after scolding me that the bottled water on offer would be just local-source in re-filled bottles) were sickly-sweet but did their job. I'd guess they contained a local tequila-synth, but whatever it was, we were already having a grand time dissing the art we'd been viewing when that first round was followed by an unrequested second (which I put down to the protracted negotiation Mutt'd held with the mistress of the greasy counter). Result: we were both pretty loose by the time we salmoned against the current of incoming customers and out to the street to find the air had acquired a tang of shorted electricity, darkness fallen heavily and the forecasted weather actualized into a steady shower. Half the peeps around us were scurrying from shelter to shelter in hope of staying dry, the other half wandering around with their faces lifted and mouths open to take in the unfamiliar phenomenon of potable water being given away for free.

Must've been my fifth trip out to Burrows, and yet that evening in that particular neighborhood was the first time I actually began to warm to any part of them. Called Nueva Yucatan due to the number of new arrivals it'd absorbed after Hurricane Ivanka decimated that coast, the enclave's sidewalks carried a cheerful chaos of forms and colors and energies. Sturdy old women in long, layered weavings decorated with lace and embroidery, heads hiding from the rain beneath shawls that spoke of the villages they'd had to leave behind. Shiny-skinned men with wide brimmed hats and offspring on their backs – arms wrapped around neck and legs in the crook of arms as their chubby faces cringed at peals of thunder. Adolescents hustling about on serious purposes only they knew: agile young fems clustering close to one another as they ogled from the wild young mascs laughing at the storm, both daring it to get in the way of their getting to know you dance. A hundred other 'types' as

well, the wind's noise enough cover that each could be themselves despite the pressing presence of so many others.

Predictably, Muni's 'municipal' power soon shut off, so I found Mutt taking my hand as we navigated stretches of darkness between pools of private-power illuminating whatever their proprietors were offering: an alcohol dealer's fortified vending portal, an open doorway offering beds by 'la hora.' One dim and busy storefront was plastered with imitation ration cards and a scrawled legend reading 'ALIMENTO EXTRAOFICIAL' - an off-record food market, Mutt explained, for Burrowers who needed to avoid the legal dispensaries - and could afford its steep premium. Middle of the next block, strings of illuminated plastic shrimp and crabs claimed a stretch of sidewalk for an outdoor taqueria, patrons huddling beneath its dripping tarp as their conversations and clanking silverware competed with mariachi musica courtesy of the establishment's bicycle-powered generator, its sweat-faced peddler glaze-eyed and distant. Farther on, flaming torches flanked a double-door entry beside which a veritable costume-party pressed eagerly against a velvet rope, impatient as the raindrops grew fatter and more numerous by the minute. The raucous clatter of that crowd was drowned out a few steps farther on, where a pair of opened windows shared a party's joking laughter and off key singing with the entire sloshing street.

My dress and pumps felt about to melt as our soaking went on, a vulnerability which would've freaked me out on any other night on such unfamiliar streets, but the Mutt whose arm had wrapped itself around my waist had a way of warding off troublemakers – it was actually fine sport to track the eyes of approaching dudes: scanning me with arrogant smirks before a glance at my companion composed their expressions into 'couldn't-care-less' and rendered stillborn the wisecracks I'd've otherwise endured.

Still a good idea to be wary of the Players though, always and everywhere. Worked-out and bulked-up in unit colors, they roamed in packs, oblivious to the rain as their careless crowding made clear who really owned the streets. It was a relief then, as Mutt and I caught scary vibes coming off an approaching trio of black-clad warrior types, to have a pair sporting bright yellow ‘GUARDIA la VECINDAD’ sashes over their own dark vests and cargo pants come barging in from behind us and strike a martial pose. Densely inked on awesomely ripped arms and necks, these sudden saviors bore insignia proclaiming their unit the ‘Cantis de Coba’ and an unmistakable aura of confidence despite being outnumbered. Even more telling; while the Player milits brandished their nolos as badges of authority, the Cantis carried no visible weapons – meaning their confidence might come from machetes sheathed inside pant legs, an array of throwing stars and smaller blades stashed in every pocket, or even lewie pistols holstered in the small of their backs. Whatever the hidden hardware, just the thought was apparently enough to give the gamer crew pause.

Stepping back as the rough boys paced and postured at each other, we did our best to blend into the crowd that had congealed, watching and listening as they traded trash-talk until, with the barest shrugs of concession, the Players turned tail and strutted off.

‘Lethal trumps legal,’ my guide quipped with a quick squeeze of my hand as we started moving again, on what I hoped was the last few blocks of our walk under what by then had become a steady downpour. Darting and stumbling from overhang to awning without ever losing physical contact, we navigated two more blocks before turning onto Cheney Way, a side street which was truly nothing to look at - as in, ‘nothing’ lit, ‘nothing’ open, ‘nothing’ playing music and ‘nothing’ moving along its pavement except torrents of

whitewater rushing toward a whale of a puddle that had already swamped the entire intersection ahead and would soon crest its curbs. Was about to ask Mutt if maybe we'd crossed some invisible border; left the Nueva Y. for some rougher no-peeps' land, when a bulky tactical appeared out of the drench. All in black from boots to helmet visor, he tore my friend from me and shoved her face-first into a brick wall, one arm twisted high enough behind her back that I could hear a gasp of pain.

“The fu...?” she spit with what little breath could escape, by which time two more dudes had materialized. Neither as tall nor as wide as the first but identically attired and equipped, I realized as one of them spun me round and pinned me against the slimy wall that these were the same three we'd seen the local Guardia chase off, just minutes before. Must've been tailing us all along and circled back to make the snatch, two of them holding us and the third surveying the street in both directions for anything that might interrupt their dirty work.

“Not a sound,” whispered the guy at my back and when I opened my mouth to speak, pushed up on my left elbow, sending a wave of agony through shoulder and neck.

“Don' fuck w' her,” I heard Mutt spit out then. “She Center, ya' dogeholes! Ya' don' fuck w' fuckin' Center.” That earned her a slap to the face but bought also an instant of freedom for one of her arms. Cheek pressed against the wall, I glimpsed through one squinted eye how her hand wrenched the milit's gun barrel down and around, levering his torso off balance and allowing her another small degree of release which she used to kick one of his knees hard into the bricks. Their tussling forms became indistinguishable for a bit, but once the third milit joined in, Mutt went down in a heap,

“That right?” hissed the tact behind me, as his fellows continued to punch and kick

her for long enough to reestablish their pride. The thug's words dripped with sarcasm, so close I felt hot breath inside my ear and the chilly runoff from his visor sluicing down my neckline. "You Center?"

"*You don'... wan' her...*," Mutt sputtered from inside a fetal curl, "Iss me y'all wanna do!"

"Right, bitch," I heard the first attacker agree, then more scuffling and hitting before my attention was monopolized by a bee-sting sensation in the side of my neck and a wave of chill rolling from there toward my toes. Felt myself crumble like a stack of dominos as the cold rebounded up to my skull and next thing I knew was waking up to the worst ice-cream headache ever, soaking wet and alone in an alley in a deluge with my dress above my waist, knickers below my knees and no sign of Mutt or the tacticals, whom I concluded even as I clawed my way to something resembling vertical had to've been representatives of the Kounty Kiings, following the very script Oduor had warned me about.

"Mother fuckers!" I spat to no one, inflicting on myself a fit of coughing that made my ribs crackle like an empty chips-bag being crumpled for the trash-can dunk. "Fucking mother-fucking fuckers!"

Took me two hours to get home once I figured out where it was I'd been dumped - Ryde's system so overwhelmed by peeps trying to get out of the rain that it never responded to my hails, and every other mode of common transport either appallingly overloaded or

shut-down completely for fear of zapping someone if the rising waters reached their high-voltage power gear. Even so, there *were* deaths; Feeds the next morning tallying nearly thirty, including six poor souls who'd set up housekeeping in a nice shady culvert during our perennial dry season, then ended up drowning when the flash flood sluiced them and all their worldly goods deep into the city's storm drain labyrinth.

Oduor, Lt. Etienne, Alliyah, Du, Zoonie, even Richard - an hour after reaching home I was dried-off and medicated enough to put calls or messages out to every one of them and others too, begging for direction, advice, a name: anything I could pursue to puzzle out where Mutt might be. Between attempts, I scoured the Feeds for mention of an incursion into Nueva Y., but other than the storm news, there were just the typical reports of Players battling in residential districts despite the weather and drunks picked up for stupidity. NewNet had nothing fresh posted under any of the kid's names either, which meant our attackers were not enforcing any Muni warrant - if there had been one, every search keyed to her name would've been answered with a 'request' for the searcher to report to the nearest MSS location and explain their interest in a known offender.

The written that I got back from Lt. Etienne was less than no help.
"E's not in my book anymore," it read; hook-up code for 'I am totally turned-off by that a-hole and don't want anything more to do with him/her/em/them/it. Forever.'

Alliyah was equally blunt, reminding me the Joan's girl was not on my case list, not in our office's jurisdiction and not to be the subject of any more office resources.

“Let me put this in the clearest possible terms, Jack,” her vox message began, the diction sharp as a razor’s edge. “She’s none of our business - OCD’s business, my business, or yours - and I do not want to hear her name from you, ever again.” The single word that followed was new to my ears, so I ran the audio through a steno-app to be sure. Turned out it was Mandarin, Weiss-Jabar’s native tongue. The two Hanzi characters that came up on-screen were still no use against my ignorance, but their Pinyin approximation provided what I needed.

“Lijie,” it told me she’d said; meaning, to ‘understand.’ From the rising inflection she’d given it and the sharp accent on the second syllable though, I gathered that the word’d been meant as a question and the question as its own answer. Like when the heavy in some ancient gangster film jabs his stubby finger in a trembling citizen’s chest and growls ‘*Capeesh?!*’

“You got a lot of nerve, Shirley,” India B. enunciated carefully when I finally dipped low enough to vox her. “Three people above me have gone silent since your little bait-and-switch, and we’ve got Muni lawyers raking over every Center-related case Kaolin Court’s handled since we went sovereign, so don’t expect any sympathy from out here.” Not long after that though, she came back to me with a written. From a personal address. Encrypted too; and not at ‘privacy’ level, like you’d use to connect for an evening or a one-banger. No, this double-bounce-back, third-power-secure message said she’d be willing to help me - *if* I’d make sure my Division’s administrators knew she’d done the right thing. My X in the ‘AGREED’ box was answered minutes later by a restricted-address vox-call during which India tearfully informed me that everyone out there was accusing her of feeding me the idea

to use that CIL loophole. Once she'd vented enough to settle down, I learned it was indeed the Kounty Kiings who'd attacked us and put me under, after which they'd smuggled Mutt out of Burrows and across the moat and locked her up once more – only this time it was in one of the Kaolin County Sheriff's Department's own official cells! "No more jail/bond bullshit..." India read out to me from some inter-office message she'd received, adding that the colorful language was a pretty good indication of how due-process was likely to go on Mutt's new charge of Accessory to Murder during Commission of a Felony. Basically, the R/C explained, they'd pinged her again for the same killing I'd already put myself into the poorhouse to get her off of, only now, since the 'Accessory' charge represented an affront to the legal system rather than the victim, there was no option to buy-off the supposedly-deceased person's family, just the sky-high probability of a death sentence.

India hadn't given me much, but knowing the girl was out in Counties did suggest an angle of approach, and one that made me glad Priscilla had taught us kids to keep our word. Dialing an actual land-line number was a trip down memory lane and it rang forever before being picked up, but as soon as we connected I felt like I'd connected with family.

"Jack, honey," Ma Parker roared cheerfully. "Been hoping I'd hear from you again." Good manners never having gone out of fashion in Ma's world either, we chatted on for several minutes before getting down to tacks. Yes, she'd received the assortment of hair colors I'd shipped to her and was thrilled with the results, but no, she hadn't heard about the Kounty Kiings re-capturing their number-one most wanted peep until I told her. Ma's

reactions got a lot more measured as I explained my relationship with Mutt, then took an even deeper dive when I described her captors' tactics. Followed by a sheepish "Oh, yeah," when I asked if she knew where the Kaolin County jail was located.

"Been there myself," she chuckled. "More times than I'd care to admit, even just between us chickens." To avoid my getting lost or stranded again, she recommended I catch the InterCounties bus system's route B47 at Middle Limit Checkpoint 4b (making sure to board a Local). Better still, if I let her know what run I was on, she'd might even be able to meet me at the Sheriff's. "Just to make sure they treat you right. After what you told me 'bout your previous encounter."

IC's bio-fueled buses may pollute less than the old gray doggies did, but they're still slow and smelly and leave a raw taste in your brain, especially when they set you down on the broil of broken concrete surrounding Kaolin County's Public Works compound, a good two miles to the lonesome side of Ashcroft rather than in the town itself as the directory address had led me to expect. And, with not a single Sheriff's vehicle in sight, just a trio of high-water pick-ups accented in various tones of primer and oxidation. That raw taste only intensified when I entered the hulking concrete-block building and found myself in an airless waiting room lined with bolted-down benches upon which four barely-drinking-age milits had draped themselves, wearing Kounty Kiings regalia and squints copied from years of watching blood-soaked vids and shooter-games. Steel-guitar licks and a honky-tonk lyric sounded from somewhere behind the several closed doors leading off in various directions.

"Look who we got here," one of the crew gloated, stomping a boot on the floor and slapping a knee with the hand not fondling his assault rifle. "Damned if it's not that 'f'n

accountant' we met over in rat-land. How's it hangin', sweetheart?"

Can't say I was surprised to find that particular crew on duty. Expected it in fact, on the assumption they would not trust anyone else to guard their prize now they'd got her back. Can't say I was surprised by their cocky attitude either, or the contempt I heard in that 'sweetheart;' I know well what dudes like them think of peeps like me. Had counted on it, in fact, when I'd dressed to push their buttons; shiny black yoga tights disappearing into biker boots; leather jacket with plenty of zippers and buckles exposing a thin white t-shirt, and a green fedora pulled low over one eye. Also why I smiled so broadly as I asked if by any chance it was one of them who'd done such a good job re-arranging my clothes that night.

"Weren't nothing personal," offered the second from the left, close-set green eyes and sparsely bearded cheeks flashing a sly grin toward his fellows as he rose and took a wide-legged stance by the doorway labelled 'HOLDING.' "Just wanted to see who you are when you're being yourself." Laughter followed, and smiles all around, just as I'd imagined they might. Flashing come-play-with-me eyes and swaying my limited assets as best they could manage, I drifted in his direction, broadcasting what a good sport I was via welcoming arms held wide and mouth in provocative pucker. Soon as I was in range though, instead of planting the implied kiss on his scruffy cheek, I smacked my two open hands full-hard over his two ears and watched those green eyes go all googly trying to pop out of their sockets. As hoped, boy's hands came up toward the sites of pain, leaving a wide open path for a knee to the groin which brought the hands right back down again, making way this time for a stiff palm to the nose, at which point, he did what any sensible soul would do in such a circumstance; telescoped down to the floor in agony over the dilemma of which body parts to comfort first.

“Nothing personal,” I offered. “I just wanted to see who *you* are when *you’re* being yourself.” Two of his compatriots seemed to get the joke, but the third was apparently not the humorous type, as his left hand was nearing a holstered handgun. That being a fairly-predictable event, I was already reaching down to grab my victim for a human shield when the unmistakable sound of a round being chambered filled the room and caused us all to face the same glass door through which I’d so-recently entered.

“I wouldn’t,” warned the file-on-steel soprano emanating from a halo of flame-red waves punctuated by the black and gaping barrel-end of a pump-action shotgun. When the handgun holding milit opened his mouth to protest, the drawl dropped an octave and lost any pretense of softness. “Some fool teach you to talk back to an angry mother with a shotgun?” Ma Barker growled, and when he shook his head, went on. “The fifth, son; show our visitor how well you listened-up back in home school.”

Twisting his mouth like something’d gotten stuck between his teeth, the would-be warrior, who I guessed to be about seventeen years old, scanned his buddies for assistance. Even had the temerity to try me, but finding no help from any quarter, dropped the gun hand to his side and rolled his eyes before reciting like the good schoolboy he may once have been.

“Honor thy father and mother.”

“...and thy mother,” Ma prompted, which was when I realized why that young milit’s features seemed so familiar to me, as her son rolled his head twice more, mumbling the magic words while his squad-mates covered their mouths to hide an assortment of gloating grins. “Y’all can get on out of here, now,” Ma suggested soon as he was done, shaking the freshly-dyed locks away from her face as she pointed the shotgun heavenward and removed

the chambered round. “Prisoner ain’t gonna need any of your guarding long as me and my buddy Browning’r around.”

That was all the hint those boys needed to seek out new positions in the great outdoors, allowing Ma the chance to fill me in on Gideon, her fourth son (out of nine total children she’d birthed, raised and “schooled in the ways of the Lord”) who had been inducted to the Kounty Kiings’ ranks a mere two months earlier. Also on how scarce Sheriff Santos and his deputies had been since the Kiings took over their jail. Assured me the junior militia would behave themselves now they’d seen the two of us getting on so well, though she would still not be leaving the station until I caught the next bus back to Burrows. Those bases covered, Ma stepped behind the Duty Officer’s counter and got started brewing up some zatz, then slapped her forehead in pantomime of having just remembered something important.

“Yer girl’s prob’ly at the end of the line,” she said, pointing to the ‘HOLDING’ door and tossing me a heavy ring of keys she’d prestidigitated from somewhere behind the counter. “Might be a bit worse for wear, I’m sorry to say, but you can assure her there won’t be any more of that, here on in.”

‘End of the line,’ in this case, was a steel door set into a cinder-block wall, with one slotted opening at eye level and another down at the floor, each of them equipped with a heavy slider to seal the occupant off completely. Its interior, once I figured out which was the right key and hauled the door open, was maybe three coffins wide and a coffin-and-a-half in length, concrete walls and ceiling as hard and sheer as the blade of an axe, floor the same only more scarred and scraped and soiled, with several smears of dried-blood figuring prominently in its color scheme. Same music I’d heard outside ricocheted harsh off all those

hard surfaces but at twice the volume, forcing its way directly into the brain, as did the laboratory-bright lighting, the mingled smells of sweat, piss and excrement and the chest-clenching reflex that comes from inhaling significantly more carbon and far less oxygen than recommended by the human body's operating specifications.

Worse for wear turned out to be an understatement, as Mutt pulled herself up from the cell's cast-in sleeping ledge with all the agility of a new-born giraffe getting to its feet for the first time. When I offered sympathy, she tried to laugh it off.

"Puckers go' plen'y back," she pointed out with pride, refusing to let me examine the clumsily-bandaged cheek or the three fingers on her left hand that were taped together, the gauze around them ranging crimson to black and back again. A bit of prodding got me the story: how they'd toyed with her on the street before knocking her out, no doubt with the same stuff they used on me. How she'd come-to in here, and not seen or heard from anyone for what seemed like hours until one of the Kiings came by with some tepid water and a convenience-store first aid kit – provided on a strictly do-it-yourself basis, as happened. Since that time, she'd been left pretty much to her own devices, slops-tray slid through that bottom slot in the door with no notice, lights left on all night, paper for the open toilet doled out like it was spun-platinum, and two-step tuneage droning at volume, 24/7. Like me, she'd been informed that the Sheriff's staff had moved elsewhere for the duration. Which, she had been assured, would not be long.

"Judge 'posed t' be ready end a week, 'ever that is," she shared, admitting she had no idea what day this was. Captors had made clear the verdict was all arranged in advance - there'd be no Center-slickers calling hail-Mary plays in *this* courtroom. "Not a crotch-hair's

width of light between the Kiings and Kaolin County's leadership on how it was all gonna turn out," was how they'd put it, so if she had any peace to make, she'd better make it quick.

Mutt's mood of despair eclipsed any interest she might've had in the little I could – MSS's institutional silence about her predicament, my growing suspicion there must be more behind her prosecution than one imaginary warrior getting scribbled in the line of duty. Made no difference who was behind things, she pointed out convincingly, when we had no way to fight back, regardless.

Once we'd shared those bits, neither of us could think of much more to say. Guess I'd been so excited to find out where she was – and to get my petty little revenge on mister scruffy-beard - I hadn't really considered what to do once I got that far. It was almost a relief then, when I could legitimately say it was time to go; to run the gauntlet of Kiingsmen before stagnating on the return bus for a couple more hours. Said I'd be back tomorrow and Mutt acted like it was the least important thing in the world to her, though by now I knew how little weight to give that. Kid'd had years of no one caring what she cared about, the hell she was going to let on to me what that might be now.

“Food?” I offered, “I could bring something better than what they've been giving you?

That prospect brightened the kid's mood enough, she admitted some reading material would also not be the worst thing in the world. Gave me the names of two comics she liked, and the numbers in each series that she'd already blitzed through, then admitted she'd take whatever I could come up with.

“Anytin’; yeah? Get my head out a’ my own hole. ‘Fore I bore myself t’ dead,

know?"

Outside, I found Ma was making good use of the office's intake counter, sorting through some mismatched bits of paper and transcribing their recipes onto stiff new cards that fit inside a small file box she showed me out of her carpet bag. Said it was a project some of the ranch womwn were doing. "Get everybody's favorite family recipes down on paper, clean and clear so's you don't have to decipher great-granma's old scribble." Permanent ink on acid-free cardstock, she added, good to last a couple hundred years in a closed file or drawer. Eight copies they were making, to send to eight different relatives in eight different sovereignties across the former fifty. A legacy, she called it, for the mothers of Ashcroft. Be remembered maybe for something more than how many boys they shipped out to fight in God knew where, for God knew what.

"Speaking of boys," she chuckled as I headed for the door. "You don't need to worry 'bout those ones out there. I put the fear of Ma into 'em, big time. You come back to visit, they'll give you and your friend all the space you need. Gonna bring some decent meals for her too; do something about the music and lights at night." Paused there and looked me straight before coming back in a tone so dog-damned earnest it still gives my shoulders a shiver every time I think of it. "Not for me to say what she did or how she pays for it, but till she does? How she gets treated says a whole lot more about us than it does about her."

—

As if all that didn't make for a sleepless night once I got home, I had to roust myself bright and early next morning thanks to a late evening missive from W-J directing me to

Ryde out and retrieve hard-copy of a signed-and-witnessed deposition for some OCD investigation. Had only gone a few blocks when the vehicle's display beeped three times before announcing: 'Bundling instruction received...anticipated impact on service, 210 seconds.'

Nothing too surprising really, Division's regular account was non-exclusive, so it was always possible there'd be another passenger in the Ryde when it picked you up, or that it'd pick someone up along the way. Sometimes even pick-up and drop off before you reached your destination, although that was unusual; the double stops would have to be damned-quick to avoid the five-minute max. delay allowed before your trip got comped, and the company's protocols were way too cost-conscious to comp trips very often. Most times, you'd lose a minute or two diverting to pick up a passenger, and then they'd lose a minute or two to divert (as *they* saw it) from their itinerary to drop you off. Vehicle efficiency went way up though, for any mile it was carrying more than one fare, so non-exclusive accounts paid a lower monthly than exclusive, even though RydeKorp got more revenue – hash tag: everybody wins.

Pick-up location for my 'bundle' was mid-block in the alley back of Water Street, where stood a person well to the weary side of fifty, leaning heavily on a cobalt-blue stick bearing the characteristic woven-textured look of carbon fiber but whose tip and handle had the self-effacing gleam of casually neglected silver. Movements as e climbed in were slow and complex, one leg not playing well with the rest of eir body, but this peep's manner made clear that whatever was wrong with the leg represented merely an inconvenience, not the full extent of eir capabilities. There was nothing timid or apologetic about this obviously high-placed Shareholder; eir finely-tailored skirt suit making that blatantly obvious, even as I

cautioned myself to keep imaging em in formal pronouns till I got a definite cue for any preference).

“I understand you’ve been visiting that person,” e offered as our vehicle merged into traffic and picked up speed. Totally casual; like asking about the weather or the price of soy-bev, though the fact e seemed to know who I was and where I’d been was definitely not run of the mill information, Ryde use being theoretically anonymous. ‘Only the invoice knows where you’ve been,’ said one of their ads, ‘and it’s not talking!’ Nobody’s foolish enough to really believe that, of course; if their system can game out the most efficient route for every rider at every moment, then it has got to be totally aware of every ID and destination, and once that data is in any korp’s possession, it’s not going away without a fight. Which thoughts flashed only briefly, as my attention was mostly concentrated on figuring out whether or not I knew this person, whose faux-friendly chatter was no more fazed by my stare than by eir own faux pas of violating what should have been a polite silence:

“Some deep doo she’s in, I’d have to say.”

Closer look just reinforced my first impression that this was not your typical Ryde-jacker. Perfectly-shaved fade around a tightly wound center-knot, equally-perfect eyes that would’ve taken me half an hour to paint, on top of a suit that certainly draped like real silk, difficult as that was to imagine. No briefcase, or visible devices, so probably had an implant that communicated with a Lyfe in the flashy little clutch e was holding, which meant upper tier Muni Admin at the least, if not a Korp executive. Way higher up than me - or W-J even – so the less said, the better, I decided, which brought to mind the alien-killing detective in one of Duncan’s fave old vids; the guy you only ever know as K, which is the name I decided to use for this peep as I tried to imagine why a Shareholder of such heft would be hopping a

lift with me on a workday trip to the Clerk/Notary.

“These REaders of hers,” e was saying, “are weeds. Not thistles; though they are rather thorny. And hard to get rid of. Not spurge either – I’ve always loved that name, by the way, don’t you? Anything named ‘spurge’ cannot be good. But REaders...*your* REaders? They’re like dandelions. And you know what makes dandelions so insidious, don’t you?”

Taking the question as rhetorical, I turned my face straight forward and waited. Women like this – and my mind by now had made itself up that e would most-certainly prefer she/her, seeing as how every word from those ruby lips seemed meant to tease me into submission. But however they present, I’ve found that persons accustomed to power and its exercise tend to say their piece regardless of whether you show any interest or not, and true to form, though I gave no encouragement, K plowed on.

“Your dandelion is one of the first flowers of spring. Every other plant still forming their little shoots below the surface, or slowly peeking out tiny tips of new leaves; grass may still be brown, but the dandelions? Those mother fuckers are already flowering! Dead center of the skunk-rotten remains of last year, out pops a bright yellow flower. Not big, not all that expressive, the entire purpose of those little flowers is to dry out and let loose a couple of hundred time-bombs that’ll kite away and plant themselves in any bit of soil they can find. The dandelion, you see, has stumbled upon the secret to dominion; reproduction first, and survival a distant second. Take every chip you’ve hoarded through the barren times, plop it all down on the square labelled ‘procreation,’ and your species will be around when all the others are only memories.”

Interesting thesis, I had to admit, though only to myself, as the Ryde gave up on

traffic-clogged 27th Street and made a hard right onto Ashleigh, another blow to our timetable. The delay though, gave my companion time to elaborate her point.

“Your REaders: they do not care about individual success, or even individual survival. Like all fanatics, they believe their cause is more important than any one person’s future. They will do whatever they can to recruit more new believers because that - for an idea - is the best form of reproduction. If one or two of their leaders need to die to gain sympathy, no problem. If an entire - what do they call their cells, their branches, their...?”

“No idea,” I answered, reluctant to help her out even that much.

“An entire *concentration* of REaders goes down,” she continued, casually demonstrating that she knew more about Mutt’s associates than I did. “That’s just fine if it gins up enough publicity to recruit another hundred. So don’t pine for your girlfriend, Jack. ’Spite the fact your little Oma-coin sting guaranteed those County folk would come after her all the more blood-thirsty,” K offered in mock sympathy, “at least she’ll have the satisfaction of dying for a cause.”

As if my companion had timed her speech to the second, the Ryde cushioned to a stop in front of one of MSS’s many field offices, recognizable by the six-foot tall polychromed crest lodged above its doors. Hydraulics hissed as the hatch flapped up and K stepped awkwardly out, turning once she was fully vertical and stable, to flash a wink as her cane prevented the door from shutting.

“This is where I get off, M Shirley comma Jack. And if you place any value whatsoever on your own future, it’s where you will do the same.”

“Four minutes nineteen seconds net increase over initial travel time commitment,” the Ryde advised as its hatch closed and forward motion resumed. “Variance within tolerance. No concession due.”

A second night of sleepless void-staring had me feeling like the undead when I dragged myself vertical nest morning, only to find the big topic on the morning feed shows was a report from a zombie office of the SSA! (When Social Security and its related programs were terminated, some enterprising staff had managed to acquire a few of its vacated office spaces along with their obsolete electronics. A minuscule snippet of what the Social Security Administration had once been, and only in the largest pop-centers, but contract work for large employers and a few sovereignties that took their custodial responsibilities more seriously than average was keeping a handful of deep-state technocrats in victuals.) Now, one nest of them had crunched a herd of numbers to reveal that overall life expectancy in the lands formally known as the lower forty-eight had dropped by seven and a half years since the Dissolution.

Naturally, Muni put out a counter-statement that for Shareholders it’d actually gone *up* by almost six years, and that the more dismal report was just a marketing effort by some die-hard deep-staters to drum up business. Naturally, Muni’s denials only made me more curious. Using my office access to look a little further on NewNet, I located an abstract of the zombie’s numbers, broken down to where you could see how the data varied, from some of the New Confederate sovereignties where expectancy was down even further (footnote said

their leaders claimed that was because so many old or sick persons had moved there to escape socialist takeovers in their previous sovereignties – or for the climate), to the Eastern Seaboard where it was pretty much unchanged. Another footnote pointed out that GREATER TEXAS! was a special case (isn't it always?!?) because it'd sacrificed so many sons to the Battles, but after that the state's birth rate had rebounded off the charts, so it was unlikely their leaders needed to worry. Muni's korpsite had its own numbers to back up their claim about Center's residents, but interestingly didn't say what the expectancy was for Burrows. Still, if Shareholders were living six years longer and yet the average of the total pop was down by seven, even an intern could see the percentage decline for Burrows had to be pretty steep to make the numbers work out.

Not exactly encouraging, if you were a Burrower.

Have to admit, that ride with K had me obsessing over just how closely I was now being watched. To be on the safe side, I chose to start that Saturday with a long run in style-dead jock mode - baggy gray shorts with a ten-inch inseam (always love a good chafe...), saggy cotton tee over a curve-flattening spandex tank, handheld water bottle and the whole look topped off with a mud-brown trucker cap. So obscured, I headed first to the north side of Center, where there was no Inner Buffer (i.e., no Burrows) and - as far as I'd been ever able to determine - no camera monitoring a gap in the fence below a defunct freeway ramp arching across a steeply eroded runoff channel. Runners in the know used the spot to access

a spiderweb of bootleg singletrack lacing the moat. Scuttlebutt said the watchers had to be aware but were choosing not to act – some nostalgic ultramarathoner in the top ranks was the most credible rationale I’d heard bandied about.

Once through, I chose a well-used single-track heading west, then an offshoot veering south, so as to draw a wide arc around town and within the hour found my sweaty self approaching a pair of active rail-lines leading into Burrow One. Followed those until they neared a stretch of wall which was part of the moat’s inner perimeter and where I found a subtle line of foot-packed earth veering off into the remains of an old grain storage complex, hopefully avoiding whatever surveillance the rails themselves were subject to at the Burrows’ perimeter. A short scramble over tumbledown brickwork and rubble in the shadows between two grain silos led to an even more narrow gap between warehouses which spit me out onto a side street inside Burrows, from which I easily reconnected with the rail lines - those same lines I’d followed the first time I visited the Mutt girl’s squat, where my plan was to pick up that reading material she’d requested.

And where I learned just how effective my end-run had not been.

“You take a big chance; cruisin’ ‘roun’ the moat like that,” chided a voice over my shoulder as I set foot on the first step up to Jungleland’s back door. Turning, it took me a couple of beats to recognize the speaker, what with eir cross-cultural hand-me-down wardrobe and butterfly-shaped blue sunglasses. Voice was what eventually tapped my memory, identifying this as Connie, the tight-lipped squatter who’d led me to Mutt’s cubicle on my previous visit. Not exactly the person I’d thought of when K implied I was under surveillance.

“Your very-stylish little birdie *said* her minions were keeping tabs on me,” I puffed. Connie, to her credit, answered my scorn with sympathy.

“I wouldn’t trust that little birdie,” e advised. “Or any peep has minions.”

Before I could respond, e launched into a convoluted diatribe about what kind of creeps would use the threat of surveillance to dampen my curiosity. Eir opinion? Self-important hold-overs from the pre Diss era still hoping to resurrect a regime that shared their particular prejudices. Was obvious to me that e was referring to some of Muni’s higher echelons, though no names were mentioned.

When I added that another little bird had told me Mutt’s own peeps - ‘you REader geeks,’ I may have phrased it, unfortunately - had had a hand in laying all this trouble on the kid’s plate, it got the squatter’s back up even more.

“And have your avian acquaintances informed you,” e countered, “who got the Kiings to go along with that BS about it being your sister got eirself killed that night?” Seeing no answer in my eyes, e smiled a cold one. “Same peeps’re trying to scare you away, Jack. They never intended you’d actually get Mutt off - and once you did, they had to go with Plan B: loose the warrior dogs. Knowing full well those bastards’d move hell and earth to get her back behind bars, plus tried, convicted and executed - *if* they manage to keep their pistols in their pants that long, that is; don’t just decide to do the job themselves and have it over with.”

Well, Connie’d gotten my attention enough by that point that I agreed to a drink of something cool in return for listening to the rest of whatever e had to say. Got my attention even more when e dropped hard-coin on the counter of a food truck and our cups came out of its curtained rear filled not with zatz, but iced real coffee – strong and fragrant enough I felt

more endangered open-carrying than on a public sidewalk than by the fact Connie'd somehow known to head me off outside the squat despite my round-about approach.

What I needed to understand, e explained as we perched on a pair of cockassed old office chairs generously provided in the alley behind that food truck, was that some people e referred to as 'reacts' had gotten fed up watching where events were headed. REaders were convinced, in fact, that these reactionaries had set up the entire altercation between Grace's crew and the Kiingsmen.

"There's some powerful peeps in Center," the thesis went, who wanted to put a stop to our semi-democratic sovereignty's social-evolutionary ways. Get Confluence back to the old 'God & country,' 'family & prayer' way of life so we could all be great again. Saw The Books as corrupt and blasphemous, yes, but even worse: potential competition. Which was why that precycle party had been set up for a fall, so the status quo forces could make a big deal of it: stage a show-trial with Grace as the centerpiece and by the time it was over, REaders'd be disgraced and dismissed as just another criminal gang. Forgotten in a year.

As best Connie (and some obscure 'friends' e mentioned but did not identify, though Oduor's name came quickly to my mind) knew, lewies and body bags had never been in the plan. Once those showed up to scramble their scenario and the watchers selected Vincent's ID from the missing-persons heap in hope of getting it back on track, someone had the bright idea to notify her humble next of kin. Connie was unsure why anyone would've thought that was a good idea - maybe hoping for a grieving/outraged sibling they could celebritize to improve the odds of conviction? - but whatever the rationale, the robes-and-bibles faction got off-centered again when my interest in Mutt turned positive, thanks to which they were now operating under plan C (or D, or however far down the alphabet they'd gotten by now).

“Point is, Jack: you and Mutt’re caught up in something much bigger than who shot who; bigger’n Kaolin-farking-County or its boy-band of brothers. One side wants to make an example of Mutt, other side don’t want them to get away with that, Kiingsmen’re aching to prove they won’t be dissed, and none of them give a good dog-damn what happens to the two of you.”

“And you do?” I asked,

“We care about The Books, Jack,” Connie answered proudly, “as you’ll all see soon enough,” after which e seemed to catch emself, head drooping, voice going breathy, like a person who’d suddenly realized e was talking too loud for the room. “But for now... Look, Jack - you’ve been a good friend to Mutt - are you willing to help her out just a little bit more?”

All of which explains why I was not totally surprised to hear my doorbell ding early next morning, scant hours after my worry organ had finally run down enough to give sleep a chance. *Was* surprised though, when cracking the door revealed a rare fem-presenting Player standing there, head-to toe unit-colors topped by a brown leather flight-jacket with a cartoon image of a drooling carnivore on the left breast. Bead of sweat sliding down one rosy cheek told me the elevators must’ve been out again.

“Connie said you were ready to help,” she began and that, on top of sympathy for the nine flights she’d just climbed, was enough for me to open up and drag her inside before any of the neighbors caught sight. Once I’d taken care of my morning plumbing needs, girl filled

me in without even waiting for a cup of zatz. Compared to the visions of hero-hood yesterday's ask from Connie had raised in my mind, it was a bit of a put-down to learn the details of the highly-confidential mission for which I'd been recruited.

"Mutt needs some products, Jack. Has a really painful time of it every month; cramps, migraine, the whole shebang... Damned warriors won't lift a finger to help her out. She asked 'em for pads; they gave her a roll of toilet paper. Asked for something to relieve the pain - they just made a joke of it - told her they'd be happy to 'give her some relief,' the dump-holes."

Went on to say that Mutt's friends credited the guards' lack of action more to embarrassment than anything else. No way was one of those tough dudes going to march into a dispensary and charge his chit for a pack of maxi-pads. Which was where my visitor and unnamed others had decided I could help, since the CA33s already knew me and would never imagine I was any kind of a threat (thanks for that vote of confidence, Connie...). I show up with a purseload of feminine products, they might give me a raft of grief about it, but paw through the actual objects and get a bunch of girl-cooties on their Call of Duty hands? Not likely. At which point she dug into a magazine pouch on her heavy-duty web belt and handed me a shrink-wrapped package of dispensary-branded sanitary pads.

"Besides," the Player continued as I turned the package over in my hands, Readers had their own ways to deal with pain, far more effective than store-bought chemicals. The package was sealed just like from the factory, she assured; guards would find nothing wrong with it even if they did have the balls to check, but when Mutt opened it up, she'd find one of the pads had a little black mark on it, and inside, a packet of herbal powders to help with her pain. The few other items she handed me were equally innocuous and had their own hidden

uses, which she politely declined to divulge.

“Tell the guards you’re bringing her feminine-supplies. Let them see it all, squeeze things, shake ‘em. Only, when you give it all to Bethany, be real clear: say we knew she’d need a little help, *and make sure she knows to open the pad that’s got the mark on it*. You’ll do that for us, Jack?”

“Us?”

“For Bethany, Jack. She trusts you. Will trust you even more when you tell her this comes from Vera. Through you, through me, through Connie, but she needs to hear it loud and clear: *this comes from Vera*.”

To be honest, I was a little put out, as I stuffed the items in a drawstring tote for my next visit, that somehow Mutt’s peeps at the squat knew what she needed when she hadn’t said word one to me about it. Then again; my ambiguity sometimes gets in the way of real connection. Girl in Mutt’s position’s got plenty of reasons to be wary, and all the more so when she’s dealing with someone who makes a point of not fitting reliably into either column A or column B.

—

“Do you even know who this is you’re mixed up with?” Stephanie Two Crows Fighting asked during my recovery run with her and Austen later that morning, in a tone that made clear she was quite certain I did not. Fortunately, Two Crows – who had made clear on first meeting that she was happy to be addressed as such, along with she/her; the use of ‘they’

and ‘them’ beside the plural in her name having caused serious confusion when she’d briefly tried it out years ago – was more than happy to remedy my ignorance.

Back near the end of the 50-States era, Steph recounted, several of the earliest followers of The Books had made themselves difficult by applying for conscientious objector status with the Selective Service System (the old ‘draft board’ that’d been kept alive in case the poo-bahs ever decided to reinstitute conscripting males for military service). Claimed that their ‘faith’ abjured the crude weaponry employed by armed services. To make application, they’d cobbled together some IRS paperwork, and thus was REaders officially born. What was most significant though, happened after that, when Selective Service refused to recognize that REadership was actually a religion. Old Constitution was still being paid lip-service at that time, despite how it had been twisted and misshapen by the originalists, and there was still a serious overabundance of attorneys, many hungry for a headline-worthy issue on which to build a practice for themselves. One such, by the name of Rainbow Tyge, took the REaders’ case on contingency and sued the Selective Service for violating both the First and Fourteenth Amendments in that refusing exemption to any group claiming to be a religion amounted to *establishing* all the ones whose requests were being accepted. Unfortunately, Tyge went on to write that if those REaders’ application was not granted, the only proper remedy would be for the courts to strike down all religious exemptions, permissions or allowances in the entire body of Federal, State and local law; a fairly broad case of lawyerly overreach. Fortunately (for *whose* good fortune Two Crows meant that part, I’m not at all clear), the case was still working its way through lower courts when Wyoming and Texas (this was back before that silicon prairie began insisting on being identified as GREATER TEXAS! in all public citations) joined California and Rhode Island in declaring

free-sovereignty and the subsequent quick-fade of Federal authority made the entire Selective Service issue moot.

Tyge's legal maneuver, though, was sufficient for REaders to be branded in the era's news coverage as the latest front in a long-running 'war on religion,' which in turn got them outlawed in several of the new theocracies. Muni, as a self-avowed pluralistic sovereignty, initially seemed a safe refuge, which was why some REaders had gravitated here, but once Vikki Raley was elected COO three years earlier, the friction had started up again, Raley being very anxious to establish her God-fearing bona-fides in offshore markets (not to mention our own Counties). For a time, Shareholders openly identifying as REaders were even *compelled* to do their years of public service with Defensive Industries and followers out in Burrows to enlist in Players, neither of which requirements applied to adherents of the old-line faiths.

As Steph was finishing that primer, Austen jumped in. Said she was plus-one'd recently at a high-tier supper-club and overheard an angry exchange among some korp-heads on how to deal with upstart new beliefs, and suddenly what Connie'd told me seemed a lot more credible. Whoever it was that was out to smear REaders had decided Mutt was a soft point of attack and if I kept palling around with the kid, chances were high I'd be sucked into the same vortex.

If I hadn't been already, that is.

Speaking of things that suck, as we were all stretching out and cooling down, Two Crows asked if we'd heard about the fire out in Burrow Six last week. News has been scarce, Feeds saying only that an illicit vodka-still exploded and its operator was killed, but Hieronymus'd told her in the elevator the evening before that dozens had died and hundreds more been un-homed. Apparently, owner of the building where it started had been too cheap to subscribe to fire-protection, so there was no initial response. Owner of the building to its north had paid tribute to the Famiglia B6, but when the fire threatened her structure, it turned out the Famiglia had sub-let its firefighting equipment from the Sheraton Gardens Guards and couldn't get it to the fire because the Guards' firehouse was on the other side of Mercer Avenue, which was totally gridlocked at that hour. Bldg. to the south subscribed to Eastern Fire Protection Services, but they would only water that one building, so the fire got a free pass for an hour. Fortunately, there were enough Famiglia bldgs. in the rest of the neighborhood that once they got the borrowed equipment on-site they wet-down everything on the facing sides of all four surrounding streets and so confined the destruction to a single block.

Now that the sun was coming up and Steph'd told us where to look, I could see wisps of dirty, grey steam still smoldering up through the less-dense but almost as dirty-looking particulate haze of a typical Confluence winter morning.

Sunday workouts making for a late start, it was well past noon by the time I finished dressing to distract and rushed off to catch another B47 bus to visit my Kiingsman friends in

Ashcroft.

As planned, the guards were seriously attentive to my high-hemmed and low-cut club-girl mode, but their interest went flaccid the moment I started to explain what I was bringing into their jail. One dude did stick with me a bit, unlocking the cell door and looking on as I handed over the package of pads, so I made a point of explaining loudly to Mutt how I'd tried to anticipate exactly what style and flow capacity she'd prefer, at which point the goon huffed a loud one, turned on his embarrassed heel and hurried away as Mutt and I fell into each others' arms for a giggle at his expense.

I may've held on a titch longer than the moment deserved, hoping she'd get the message she was not forgotten, but while the kid didn't struggle or snarl, there was no yielding either. Mutt remained Mutt; self-contained and distant as she unwound from my arms to perch herself on the sleeping ledge and dig through my deliveries, questioning up now and then from beneath one raised eyebrow. Despite the piped-in country-honk having been dialed down now, I still bent close as I whispered that the contents came "all the way from Vera," and clocked a glimmer of recognition at the name before resuming normal volume and changing topic to why she'd been picked up this second time and what the future held.

Depressing as those questions were, a small voice inside of me was jazzing the entire time on how good it felt to be there. Between those visits to the Blue Bunny and the brief days of freedom we'd shared, I'd grown downright fond of this kid. Had always assumed she wouldn't feel the same about me, but something must've sprouted, because we ended up talking without a stop, right until Gideon delivered her official evening nutrition, a grilled-cheese on home-baked sourdough (thanks, no doubt, to Ma Barker) which we shared bite-

for-bite, sitting shoulder to shoulder on the ledge as we debated precisely how many percent better Counties' authentic goat's-milk cheese was than the mushroom derived synthetic we'd both gotten used to in Burrows and Center.

Conversation flowed like water from there, me eventually stretching out on the ledge with my purse for a pillow, her sitting cross-legged on the floor. Our banter barely even paused when a smirking jailer stopped by collect the dinner trash – *and let me know I'd just missed the last bus home!* All my hours spent lying awake since the Mutt-knapping must've caught up with me sometime after that, along with the plain pleasure of us being together again, because I'm ashamed to admit I drifted off, waking up some hours later to find a serious kink in my neck, the lights turned way, way down (thanks again, Ma), and Mutt scrunched into the far corner of the cell, staring daggers at some wrinkled piece of paper she was holding. Hearing me move, she startled, rushing to fold the thing up and slip it into the package of pads and the next I knew she was straddling my suddenly tense torso on hands and knees, and the very next thing after that was her lips on mine with an eagerness I hadn't experienced since adolescence. But what I felt most intensely; what I could not have ignored even if a full-scale invasion had been raging right outside our six- by nine-foot sanctuary, was the gentle brushing of her breasts across my own, the clearly-intentional soft on soft even as her pelvic region descended to mash itself, weighty and warm, across my lower abdomen. A four-alarm fire of intimacy hitting me right where it counted most.

“Whoa, horsy,” I protested, and was rewarded with a flash of that rare Bethany ‘Mutt’ Joan’s smile - though this time, the mouth was stretched a titch too widely, exposing teeth pressed hard against lower lip and pushing the corners of eyes up toward temples in a hint of demented disagreement. Like no matter how happy the majority of her was, some small

sovereign-state within her mind had not signed on to what the rest was offering.

“You been sleepin’,” my friend-with-sudden-benefits offered, voice as dead candid as it’d ever been, “and I been thinkin’. ‘Bout all th’ shi’ – all the things you tol’ me, like whether you are this or are not that. ‘Bout how, if I were hones’ inta you, nonna tha’ would matter?”

So, I thought: all my preachy polemicizing had come back to haunt? But just as I was concluding the girl intended to teach me to keep my big mouth shut, I learned she had a different lesson in mind, perched there on my groin and plowing ahead in the chopped-off lingua I’d first associated with her lips.

“ ’cided I don’ need’a kno’ nuthin’ ‘bout wha’ you ‘r or ‘r not.”

A deep inhale and a switch from smile to dead-serious glare announced ascendance of that other persona I’d encountered from time to time, the omni-competent survivor of the Fu House and Burrow streets, Blue Bunny Motel and whatever cac first the CA33 and now the Kaolin Kounty Kiings had dished upon her, as my favorite accused murderer shifted codes to make her intentions perfectly clear even to silly Center ears like mine. “I have decided, Jack Shirley, that this Mutt is going to go to town on you tonight, whichever and whatever way that means for the two of us, and it’s going to be magic.”

Have to admit, I was tempted. Would not have believed it if you’d asked me a few

weeks before. Not even a few days before; but in that moment, after spending idle hours together in Center, after probing each other's minds and dissecting events and roaming MoCHA and the streets and getting ourselves mugged on a Singing in the Rain sidewalk; after finding her safe (or at least, alive) and seeing the way she took it all in stride, there was nothing I would have liked better than to get my bones jumped by this tough young thug who possessed, to be blunt, an abundance of animal appeal.

In my admittedly idiosyncratic opinion.

No, it was not for lack of attraction that I held back. Not for the difference in our ages either, though that gave me some pause. Nor was I worried our kindly Kounty Kiings keepers would be watching. From the level of concern they'd shown to date, I guessed the chances of us being caught 'in flagrante' were about as good as the chances of us receiving a visit from the King of England – even if there had still *been* a King of England.

No, what stuck in my head was back in Lincoln Hall, when I'd stood up and proposed that little CIL detour and then Mutt had informed Judge Judith I was part of her team: "she my f'n accountan' m'a." In that moment, I'd assumed a sort of duty to her - right up there beside the court-appointed India B (though considerably more diligent and effective, at least in my own mind). Ever since, I'd been imagining myself as Mutt's defender and she'd gone along; trusting and confiding in me. How quick is too quick, my internal oversight-board challenged, to go from that position of trust, to funning each other's brains out?

Didn't voice all those meanderings, but putting even only that last one into words was enough to shatter the moment and bring back Mutt's trademark glower of grievance.

“Been tellin’ me all time y’ don’ worry ‘bou’ shi’ li’ tha”” she shot back, her life’s story ringing clear in every truncated word. “Been actin’ like you so good and open ‘n’ all - no hang-ups or prej-isses; but soon’s I come on, ‘s all f’n ‘xcuses!”

What flowed from there was predictable enough for a telenovela: pleading and coaxing, accusations and defenses. Only part of it really worth remembering was the revelation of our respective sexual histories. Mine omnivorous, though not as promiscuous as my ambiguity might suggest, thanks to the general population’s preference for clearly-defined quarry, but hardly circumspect either. And hers: surprisingly vacant.

“Seen all them,” she launched-off, and I could feel an ancient anger in the sturdy legs I was holding now, feel it vibrate as I refused to let her go, even though we both knew my answer was ‘no.’ “Fu House men – f’n hungry and pushy. ‘They got the credits, they call the shots,’ is what trades learn; day one.” (‘Trades’ being another of her words for the women on the brothel’s firing line whose experiences belied Muni’s claim that licensing sex work had made their jobs safe and hygienic; “barely a step removed from any other salon service.”)

“They see me growin’ up, changin’? T’ them pricks, i’s jus’ puttin’ fresh meat on the counter.” Lucretia had tried to protect the child, insisting Mutt would not follow her into the trade, but Mother, I learned now, had other ideas. Very day young Bethany Joan’s had turned legal under Confluence’s statutes governing Intimate Recreation Facilities, the proprietress had convinced the kid to get bathed and dressed up for what she said would be ‘your very special birthday party,’ never mentioning that her cherry had been pre-sold at auction for a serious sum. Lucretia, who claimed she’d known nothing of the plan,

nevertheless watched silently as her daughter was lured into a cake-and-candles decorated rec. room where she discovered the successful bidder waiting, but the teen stiffed him before he could stiff her – dumping the contents of an ice bucket onto his masculine attributes– and found herself (im)politely booted from the premises. Had not seen the private side of a male since. Nor Mother, Lucretia, or anyone else worth opening herself up to.

Until tonight, that was, and no matter how I tried, I could not get her to explain the sudden change of heart. Nor would she say why so urgent. Only that now, finally, and with me, she was ready to see if maybe there was something more to it all than power and force and getting fondled into helplessness.

None of which, I found myself repeating, made a difference. Older, in a position of trust and power over the other's future (even granting that said position was officially-unofficial). Her being entirely constrained by captivity while I was free to come and go and do as I pleased.

“Later,” I offered in an effort to console. “After we get you out of here; you get your life back...”

“Later,” she hissed through gritted teeth, and knowing she cared nothing for whether the boys in the hall would hear, I wondered again what it was she did suddenly fear so much. “Y' a' talk li' tha'; ya rich Center snots. ‘Later’ don’ mean nuthin ou’ hea’...” An expansive sweep of the arm indicated the cell, the Counties, moat and Burrows and, if I was following her point, the entire world excepting only the foolish fantasy we called Center. Our supposedly-safe and secure vault of rationality and enlightened new ways. Our language too,

which she put on again, as readily as I put on one of my wigs. "Out here, 'later' is when someone new comes along to dish you a bigger load than the load you're carrying already. 'Later' is when your crew get to clean up from you getting blasted till there's nothing left but grease and grit and a few dirty rags. Later is for rich and soft and warm and full and safe and so many things this life is not. You want 'later,' M'a?"

Unwinding and lifting herself off of me, a single stride took Mutt to the farthest point in the cell. Arms clasped across her chest, she made a show of squeezing down into the concrete corner; barely out of arm's length but far enough to make the point even if two middle fingers hadn't been showing me the way. "Give you all the 'later' you can handle, Jack Shirley. Righ' outsi' tha' door."

—

And I went.

Banged on the plate-steel and barged through as soon as it opened, with absolutely no conviction whether I had just done the wrong thing for all the right reasons, or the right thing for a host of reasons I seriously could not believe I actually believed in.

—

Kiingsman who opened the door got a serious kick out of telling me the first commuter bus wouldn't be by for over two hours – and pointing out a steel bench by the roadside where I was welcome to hang out till it did. Whatever thoughts I chewed over during those frigid early morning hours are thankfully lost in the ozone of mess-transit: waiting in the dark and chill for headlights, squeezing in among the standees struggling to bank a few more winks before the searchlights' bright glare woke us all as we approached the Burrows checkpoint. Waiting again for a Burrows bus that would drop me where I could board a Center trolley and finally stroll safe and privileged into my building and its one operating elevator, only to be reminded how much more welcoming its cab had felt when our two bodies occupied it together. By the time I closed my own door behind me, regret was not an emotion but a high-pressure front coursing inexorably over and through mind, body and spirit.

Barely any time later, I woke to find my clothes twisted and sweat-sogged, lights still on and make-up smeared across both face and pillow. Took a moment for reality to come back: the cell, the talk, the arguing and parting, surprise that I had slept at all after all that...and then the sound that had awakened me: Lyfemachine bleating as it was set to do each morning, breathlessly eager to share the Feeds on my chosen areas of interest. Normally, I can't wait to catch up, scanning headlines even as I sit and drain the overnight waters, but that morning...? That morning the world was already too much with me, too many thoughts still buzzing around my head to admit any new ones. Only after I'd thrown clothes off and robe on and started the electric kettle for a cup of instant zatz, did I drag my Lyfe across the counter, tapping carelessly until a headline, algorithmically-selected based on my

previous searches, did what headlines are designed to do - caught my attention and stomped the pedal on my adrenal glands right down to the metal.

“MURDER SUSPECT DIES IN DETENTION,” the words advised, and reading those nine syllables rendered me a new person. Before any scrolling confirmed who, what, when or how, I was introduced to the massive stone - the boulder, the mountain, the continent - of regret I’d now be carrying around, in memory of my parting moments with Mutt.

Act Three

Crumbled into in my favorite (i.e., my one and only) armchair, facing my (electronically simulated) window currently featuring its default view of reflections on some anonymous glass facade somewhere to suggest that that was what I'd actually be seeing if I had an actual window to stare out of, I replayed those final minutes with Bethany Anne Joan's – her: all shouting and pouting, rejected and resentful, and me: so full of my own self-righteousness, so dog-damned focused on my own virtue I missed our one opportunity for...

Feeling the thoughts churning inside, I decided they needed to be said out-loud. To someone, anyone, even if he might be the least appropriate audience in my world.

“Hola, Jack!” was Richard’s cheery response to my vox hail. “How’s it goin’?” “You haven’t heard - seen, I mean?” My voice wavered; cracked. “About....” To his credit, Richard immediately recognized that something was very wrong. I could even picture his face, its instant transition from jovial nursery-tender to professional life-coach as he plied me with probing questions. Could imagine his concentration as I described the headline that I’d seen, even as I was keying in a query to bring up the rest of

the story – “...found in her cell, hanging from the light fixture...”

“Geez, Jack,” he offered, loading the words with sympathy. “You must feel terrible.”

Which is when I exploded. Demanding to know why *I* should feel terrible about a death under such circumstances. Even if *was* a suicide, as the reports were so transparently implying. Certainly being kidnap-arrested, beaten and locked-up (a second time!) for a crime we knew she hadn’t committed was sufficiently-foul play to make any kid wonder whether their life was worth living - so why was Richard trying to make it my responsibility? Like *I* had gotten Mutt into all this mess - when I’d actually done my best to get her out of it, hadn’t I? Done everything I could to show her a different life in Center, be her friend, her confidant, right up to the end, right up to that one final ask and...

Oh, yeah. There was that.

Steph Two Crows, for all her normally-supportive nature, was also surprisingly unsympathetic when I fell into a commissary chair beside her a short time later and tried to unload my newly-guilty conscience.

“So let’s get this straight: a healthy, capable and – you’ve already said it yourself - attractive, young woman takes the last train to nowhere’sville just because you decline to shag her?” Hadn’t told Steph exactly what words had been tossed around between us, but any peep who’d been around as much as her didn’t need a play by play to call the penalty.

“Got a pretty high opinion of ourselves, haven’t we?”

“What else could it be?” I argued, to which Steph had a ready answer.

“What if the girl’d already decided to take the short way out?” she challenged me.

“Imagined she might as well get laid once before hitting the highway - see what all the fuss was about? Maybe you just happened to be the last-chance Texaco on her short-cut to the everlasting.”

When I repeated that the kid’d never given any sign she was headed in that direction, Steph considered for moment, then nodded a change of direction. Agreeing that peeps with the cojones I said Mutt projected don’t usually lose their will to live because of one social setback, she admitted that the whole thing made no sense.

“And if what The Man is saying makes no sense,” my wiser friend pronounced, coal black eyes locked hard upon my own, “then maybe The Man is blowing smoke. In which case, girl, *your job* is to find out what *really* happened – is that not correct?”

Back at my room, after showering off, learned another curious fact from a Feed Seven filler piece about events back east. Apparently, some number of New Confederacy citizens - no one seemed to know how many – had been spotted in dead of night climbing onto freight trains headed west. Which would not ordinarily have been newsworthy: given the limited availability of commercial air travel, unreliable fuel supply for interstate car-tripping and the deathly risks entailed in cycling or hiking across lands subject to prolonged drought relieved

only by monsoons, scavenging drifters and paranoid militiamen, hopping a freight was one of the least-worst ways for hoi polloi to travel any serious distance.

So this wouldn't've rated Feed time at all, except that, instead of the usual few hobos squatting on platforms between cars, there were now dozens of persons lining the rooftops. The reports that first day offered no explanation, treating it as one more sideshow curiosity to amuse Shareholders breaking-fast in our ivory-toned-plastic towers.

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Switched-off the Feed and began getting dressed while pondering Steph's injunction to find out the truth for myself. First inspiration? Hop in a Ryde and head out to Counties. Find the doctor who'd signed the death certificate and pump 'em for answers. A great idea which, it turned out, was a non-starter.

“County Coroner, you mean,” India B. corrected me harshly on vox before sharing that that would be one Blix Edwards, an on-line-educated funeral director from Extees, a blip on the map that sustained its marginal economy by supplying groceries, tools and western-wear to the surrounding ranches and any bootleg truckers who passed through it on their runs between sovereignties. Apparently, India’s office wanted to talk to him just as much as I did, but the fellow was unavailable, wife advising he’d gone up north to an Association of Municipal Mortuary Administrators conference, bragging to anyone who’d listen that he’d received an all-expenses-paid invitation to fill in for some speaker who’d fallen ill. The Kaolin County Sheriff, G. D. Santos, who claimed he’d known Edwards for thirty years as the straightest of arrows, had told India the Coroner called him a day after leaving to bitch

that when he got to Boise he couldn't find a single trace of said MMA conference, but that after he raised holy hell at the hotel he'd been booked into the manager'd made it up by offering him use of a backwoods hunting cabin he had access to, somewhere up in the Sawtooths. Blix being one crazy-eager elk hunter who sometimes went off for weeks at a time leaving the coroner-cases to pile up, there was no telling how long he might be gone - your typical, totally-responsible, Counties public official. A typicality made manifest when the Sheriff announced *he* was heading up to Idaho himself to find the truant and bring him back, though India suspected the real plan was for Santos to bag his own protein reserve before the two headed home together.

So, no joy there, and since it was my day to docent at the Department, that left me facing seven hours of showing confused Shareholders what forms to fill out and which line to stand in, all the while pondering how long it could possibly take two adult-male County officials to find a couple of elk in a million acres of roadless wilderness, particularly if either one of em'd had the presence of mind to bring along an adequate supply of beer and/or the hard stuff.

Flopping back at the flat after a day like that, you've got to love listening to the evening news: only drug that can take me back to when Vincent and I were kids, lying on the living room rug, belly-down in boredom as some bigwig sold us what a great job Muni was gonna do running Confluence, only for her to be rebutted in the next segment by Eira Dwelyn reciting statistic after statistic to prove the official had been full of fecal matter.

Politics evolve, species die out - and nations too, don't we know - landscapes desiccate and burn or flood to mud or get swallowed up by oceans; transmission transitions from radio to TV to cable to Internet to NewNet-via-ground-grid but the talkers still spin us the maximum conclusions from a minimum of facts. Feature more fem faces than masc these days, praise dog, but they're still the same primped and pasteurized personas; nothing permitted that might narrow the audience-appeal as they read endless copy in middle-American English long after middle-America has gone to ground and that other nation that lent its name to their patter has shrunk to a pittance of its former potency.

My evening, then, was spent jumping from one Feed to another, pausing and playing back to get every word straight. "The mystery remains..." passed for a clever lead-in, and the stories were even less creative; interchangeable rehashes of the few known facts:

With Blix Edwards out of town, reporters repeated, the prisoner's remains had been placed in a walk-in cooler – not exactly a secure facility, being located inside a barn on a former gentleman's-ranch now occupied by the Coyote Crew, an unaffiliated warlord outfit suspected of rustling beef they then butchered and sold to any party that could muster up sufficient coin and transport. No coroner on duty meant no Death Certificate yet, so no determined cause of death; and probably no examination of the body – unless one counted the Kounty Kiings' own lookie-loo, which my past experience suggested might have been more personal than professional.

As was the reaction when I tried another path to track-down the skinny.

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“I’m telling you, Shirley: back off,” Alliyah W-J cautioned, and not gently. “No more pushing your nose into things that are none of your business. No more chasing after this Mutt character or her REaders posse. You got off easy back at Placement, you might not be so lucky this time.”

Which, I must admit, caught me off guard, coming from my workplace supervisor. All I’d done was vox her to ask if I could use Division account to book a Ryde out to where Mutt’s body was being held (my personal account having now been frozen as consequence of the CIL affair), and here M. Weiss-Jabar was, bringing up one of the worst days of my life?

Years ago, last week of the school session and every pers in our level on edge as we waited to learn where the Placement algorithms had assigned us for further study. Not really *everyone*, I should say, as there were plenty of (mostly) guys who had no interest in anything other than Player Service. No more grinding through on-line lessons and comprehensive exams; just grab yourself some colors and let the competition begin. With a steady per diem and no complex responsibilities, ‘F-N-A,’ was what they called it; like if you asked one of those boys what he was going to do after graduating, he’d just smile and you’d reply, ‘f’n’ A!’ because that smile meant he was out of the classroom and into the brigades. But for the rest of us, nearly all of the girls plus those guys who had dreams of anything greater, it was pins and needles waiting to see whether your evaluation had come out high enough to admit you to one of the focus tracks you’d preferenced, and if not, where the algorithms had steered you to instead.

I’d checked the boxes for policing, security, criminal science and law - basically

every available line of study that related to crime and punishment. (From the first day I was told Duncan had died, it'd seemed like the most important job in the world to me: finding out what happened when no one was watching.) Had taken all the courses prescribed for those tracks and done well at them. Not quite top of the class, I admit, but top quarter at least. My assigned mentor, Ryska Malz, a mid-level administrator seconded from Legal Solutions to counsel students considering careers in related fields, had told me I had a decent shot, so when her face appeared on my machine during Placement Week, it was a total surprise to see the sad-sack expression and feel my stomach drop out. The words were just dressing, an attempt to hide the sourest taste of disappointment I'd ever felt.

“I’m really sorry,” Ryska began, before launching into some rote jabber about the complexity of the Placement process and the impossibility of giving every student the track they were hoping for. “Just a matter of supply and demand,” she pointed out, the invocation of those sacred principles an explicit indication that there was no arguing with the results: all the legal and enforcement slots had been filled by higher-ranking candidates, as she now claimed she’d always feared they would be.

“So what’s left,” I asked, dreading the answer. “Production organization? Capital projects administration?”

“No, no,” Ryska laughed, relieved to have gotten past the (for her) worst part. “You’re such a killjoy. Always seeing the empty half of the glass!” Went on to make it sound like a triumph that I’d been tracked to Financial and Administrative Services, where I could have a bright future helping other Shareholders navigate the bureaucracy. Direct them to the right division and office, make sure they connected with the proper persons – which, it was instantly clear even if never actually stated, might very well be any of those same

persons who'd just beat me out for the careers I'd been dreaming of!

None of which was bothering me by the time of Mutt's demise. I'd gotten over it long ago - or so I thought, until my office supervisor M Weiss-Jabar had suddenly brought it up again, and at a moment when I was already feeling vulnerable.

"Th' fu...?" I blurted out, only slightly startled to hear a bit of Mutt coming from my mouth. "The fu has Placement got to do with anything?"

'Truth is the bottom line for everything...'

Old words I remember from somewhere. As if there's one single line that's true about any topic when reality is, in reality, mostly a scribble of lines all looping and crossing and crossing-out each other till you have no idea which one is true and which ones are just trees blocking the forest. Which was exactly where I found myself as Alliyah explained that my career path hadn't really been determined by my grades at all, or by how hard I worked or what classes I took or what instructors I messaged up to in just the right way; not, in fact by any of the things my advisor had told me had done the dirty (nor even some silent prejudice against my gender offending ways, as I'd sometimes tried to rationalize it). No, I was about to learn, my life's course had hinged on words I'd never heard and never even knew existed.

"Male biological parent," W-J dictated to me then, from a document she said had recently been forwarded to her machine without being requested, which in a paper-pusher's world made it all the more credible.

"Duncan Shirley," the day's reading continued, instantly filling my mind with the

image of a towering figure in khaki utility-pants and matching shirt, brown leather belt studded with little burnished-leather pouches holding a flashlight, a multi-tool and a goofy little flip-phone as he popped open a beer on the back deck one early evening while Priscilla was getting dinner ready. The warmth radiating from his mass of muscle and bone; scents of sage and crushed sandstone from his boots and slightly-sour something from the salt stains on his shirt, this person capable of anything I could imagine – pack up our whole lives in a borrowed truck, then drive it and us across the emptiness they call the Great Basin, fixing its worn-out mechanicals by the side of the highway when it broke down – several times. Clean the trash out of a broken-down house on the outskirts of nowhere and turn it into a home for the four of us. Show up one day with a bunch of new ‘friends’ to erect a big pre-fab shed out back and fill it with all kinds of pipes and pumps and dog knows what else, in-between driving off to work at all hours of the morning and night.

“Independent irrigation specialist,” Alliyah recited, droning out my warm memories. “Implicated in Bowman conspiracy, case listing 219.338.5492: unauthorized diversion from adjudicated watersource. Charged with Legal Code XXVIII.6.d.3.i: Water-theft of One Hundred Acre-feet per annum or Greater, a capital offense. Proceeding: Municipal Central Court 220.475.3476 (in absentia). Verdict: Convicted all charges (in absentia). Resolution: Subject deceased in course of apprehension. File closed.”

Back again in time, to thirteen years old me, sitting at the picnic table on our back deck, scuffling food around a plate while Pris fretted. Another evening Duncan hadn’t made it back in time for the dinner she’d fixed. Another evening Vincent was out catting around with her own crowd; by then we’d all given up expecting her to call and tell us when she’d

be back. The phone rings, Pris scoots her bench back. The hard screech it makes on the boards before her Skechers shuffle through the screen door and I hear her saying her name to whoever is on the other end. Sudden intake of breath as she listens, then “What?” in a voice that sends a sharp shining shiver up my spine, then “NO!,” and then a lot more ‘no’s. “No no no no no-oooo,” as she goes down hard, not even making it to the chair an arm’s reach away, just crumbling and sliding down the kitchen wall till she splats on the floor with the phone in her hand as the voice on the other end pleads: “Mrs. Shirley? Mrs. Shirley? Mrs. Shirley....”

What Pris told me later, once she’d collected herself enough to speak, was that Duncan had been found dead, shot several times in a field of alfalfa where he’d gone to repair an irrigation sluice that’d been jiggered. Modified to divert a portion of the rancher’s rightful allocation to a covert pumping-station where water-rustlers filled tanker trucks with liquid-life they then sold by the gallon to whichever parched desperates would pay the highest rate. That he’d been shot by thoughtless animals who didn’t care he had a wife and children to support; who valued their money above all else.

Which, I’d just been informed, was a pack of lies and my father a convicted water thief.

“Female biological parent,” the document continued, telling me nothing I didn’t already know. That Priscilla had once been a distinguished (but not tenured) assistant professor at Arroyo State University, a minor voice in the minor field of Rural Sociology until some parents objected to her bringing in actual living, breathing queer people (!) to comment on essays composed by her undergrad students. (Absolutely none of whom would

otherwise have ever imagined themselves to be queer, according to the heart-broken parents who complained.) How the ensuing publicity had gotten her disciplined, probationed and eventually coerced into resigning rather than be fired, after which she moved with her family (us) to another state (here), failed to find employment in her profession, suffered a ‘breakdown’ following the disappearance-cum-death of her husband, became addicted to prescription anti-depressants and finally succumbed to an early stroke which the medical examiner said had been brought on in part by the drugs and in greater part by the poor quality of care she received from relatives (me, in absence of any insurance or social services that would’ve provided for a more-professional setting).

“Siblings, one.” Alliyah W-J’s voice read on, bringing me back to the present. “Shirley, Vincent Jane. Reliably identified as member of Jefferson Patriots, a red-listed terrorist organization. Considered Level 5 security risk. Current whereabouts: unknown.

“Conclusion: candidate Shirley comma Jack presents security risk precluding admittance to any professional track involving access to classified materials or siloed knowledge. Tier Three or lower Administrative track placement permissible, pending continued good behavior and no further negative indications.”

So, the real reason I didn’t get into law enforcement work? Real reason I never *would* get anywhere higher than being the eternal-intern in Outside Comptrolling: my father was a water pirate, my mother a junkie and my only sister a terrorist on the run. Lyrics to a country song couldn’t have said it better.

“Any posting conditional and revokable, without cause,” Alliyah’s reading from the sacred text concluded solemnly.

Well.

Greenest intern would know what that meant; ‘step out’ a line, The Man come and take you away.’ Good reason to give up and give in.

The very thing Priscilla used to tell everyone her little Jackie was constitutionally disinclined to do, but exactly the thing that W-J was now directing, in the clearest of terms.

“No, you may not use Division transit to chase some wild conspiracy you’ve made up and no, you may not go out to that place on your own nickel either or there will be hell to pay. Any part of ‘*without cause*’ you do not understand?”

That was the end of our call - and maybe the end of my innocence - but not the end of the issue, thanks in part to two little words she’d so carelessly employed.

—

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...

TO BE CONTINUED IN INSTALLMENT FIVE

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