

E Unum Pluribus

- a tale of The Big Diss

Installment Three

A Novel by Robin Andrew

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

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Minor line on Feed One once I got home early the next morning: last privately-owned geostationary satellite had re-entered the atmosphere that night and burned itself to fundamental particles. With all low-earth orbital hardware (except the interferators, that is) already bumped into re-entry, this meant there was no longer *any* commercial activity in space, only military.

Given the number of hunter-killer satbots we're told are up there – autonomous, intelligent and eager to shoot down anything not hatched from their own nest – it appears that space really is, once again, 'the final frontier.'

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Thing was, when I passed on to India what I'd learned about converting a nolo, along with deTroyer's claim he'd recently done one overnight for some militia dudes, she really and truly could not have cared less.

"No one's going to listen to that kind of technical-talk in a County court, Jack. They don't care who could've done what or when or any other factoids you think you may find tomorrow."

My mouth must've made some sound that indicated disbelief, because the bluntness of her advice rose in tandem with its volume.

“Jesus, Jack – you really that naive? This isn’t about that kind of evidence, that kind of proof; *it’s about what people will believe*, and I’m telling you: when they’ve got one of their own lying dead and your rat-friend scooped-up at the scene with a hot weapon within reach? End of the day, that’s all that matters.”

Reminding me once again that Kaolin County’s legal system also didn’t use the term ‘defendant,’ M Billacerkowicz pointed out that ‘the Perpetrator’ was up for Murder With Intention, so unless India could get the court to accept some sort of bargain, hanging was “the best we can hope for.”

And no, I didn’t ask what was the worst.

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Lying in the dark and cold a few hours after that midnight, trying to imagine how I’d present India’s assessment to a youngster stuck in a dump under the eyes of CA33’s stunted-development a-holes - a youngster who was soon to be exiled or hung (‘or worse...’) despite what seemed to me like clear evidence of innocence - I was reminded of something Dunc had said once, back when my adolescent self-pity had complained that working hard and following rules never seemed to pay off as much for me as breaking all the rules did for other folks.

“It’s not enough to just *not* be a troublemaker, kiddo,” he’d advised me. “Sometimes you got to be a trouble-*solver*...”

Climbing out of bed, I wrapped a blanket around, woke-up my office machine and prowled it for another option. What with breaks for the zatz and bathroom, clicking around for insights into REaders and their books, and repeatedly pulling up Mutt's mug shot to wonder again what was calling me from behind those angry eyes, office lights had begun to sparkle the street-cam view on my window-sims by the time I uncovered an intriguing bit of legalese. Had no illusion that what I'd found was anything to do with justice, but it did appear to have a decent possibility of success, viewed through my blossoming contempt for the Kaolin County legal system.

Corollary to Duncan's wisdom: 'and sometimes, to be that trouble-solver, you need to be a little bit of a trouble-*maker*.'

When I called Du early that morning to share my idea, she was less optimistic.

"You'd be putting a lot on the line, Jack," she pointed out, unnecessarily. "Plus, peeps are gonna think it's kind of sick; given Vincent was your sister and all."

To which I readily admitted I'd never loved my sister like other peeps professed to love their siblings. Our relationship was more...searching for an analogy, what I came up with was a pitcher and a quarterback: you don't deny the other's value or their right to play the game they play, but you're quite happy to watch the years roll by without ever setting foot on the same field.

When Du pivoted, wondering whether the County regime would abide by their own rules once my scheme flashed a giant a middle-finger in their face, I was even less concerned. As much as our rural neighbors strutted their superiority to either Burrows or Center, it was Muni's trade-agreements that ensured offshore customers honored the export

contracts those farmers and ranchers depended on to live anything above a bronze-age lifestyle. Backwoods got more than it gave in that respect, was the thinking around Center, so I was pretty confident there wouldn't be any pushback from County politics so long as I could show my plan was solidly grounded in their own adopted laws.

After which, I put my faith in the modern office - off-site, self-supervised and flexible work hours.

In other words: once Du failed to punch any fatal holes in my plan and agreed to make a quiet inquiry with Human Resources about the mechanics, I turned off the window and went back to bed where, despite knowing that all around me Center was accelerating to daytime pace, it was not that which kept me from getting any more sleep. No, what had my brain buzzing as I pounded the pillow in vain search of unconsciousness, was my own anticipation of the expression Mutt's face would flash in my direction if this new plan actually succeeded.

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Court day dawned, hot and dry as a childhood Fourth of July - though the calendar claimed we were barely into February.

As India B's. comments had reminded me, fact that Mutt's pre-cycler crew were all Burrow rats and the milits who came down on them were citizens of Kaolin County had

meant from the start that Mutt's fate would not be adjudicated under Muni's legal system, with all its fussy checks and balances. Aside from Center's lack of a stake in the case, all parties were well aware that going down that road would've stretched the matter out for years and blown their budgets.

Once Burrows Oversight had conceded the accused was one of theirs, they'd argued for her to be tried under the Default Legal Code prescribed for Burrows cases between parties sworn to different loyalties. Counties rejected that (just as they'd rejected the REaders advocate's suggestion of a rather medieval-sounding 'Test of Wills' based on a scene in some book they revered), and so, after much wrangling and strong-arming by both sides, a Muni arbitrator'd decreed the trial would instead be run as a Kaolin County court case under the rules the County's Council had adopted (Version 3.2b of the Streamlined Common Law for Small Sovereignties, authored by the Missouri States Legal Services Foundation and available to any sovereignty by paid subscription). Which also explained why Mutt's share of the proceeding was in the hands of a *Counties* Rep/Con, for anyone who was clever enough to wonder about that (I wasn't...). Anyway, once Oversight had its citizen back on its own dirt, there was no way were they going to hand her over to Counties for a trial out in the boondicks, so their get from the negotiation was that the proceeding would take place on Burrows' ground, with everyone from Counties granted free-passage and a warrant of safety while onshore.

With the venue and legal system decided, the big event had been set for a Saturday morning, seeing as how Burrows' Common Court Facility (previously the Loveland City Metropolitan Justice Center, until that municipality gave up its ghost three years into the Diss), was fully-occupied every weekday with dockets from the six Burrows. As the

appointed hour approached, a phalanx of battered yellow school buses pulled up, escorted by a dozen Oversight officers on their distinctive orange electric scooters. Kaolin court personnel stepped cautiously out of the first bus, then grew more confident as their numbers were swelled by an assortment of camo and flannel disgorged from the other buses to stare, goggle-eyed, at the exotic-looking rat-crowd jeering from behind rows of wooden sawhorses. All of which had me thinking the look I'd chosen that morning might've been a mistake for this event. Was far too late to go home and change though, so I just held my head high as we all passed through a screening-point set up by the Army of Allah of the Sunrise Realm (under contract to Oversight; reimbursable by Muni as an interjurisdictional-event cost). A of A were typically-efficient, so things were only half an hour behind schedule when the Judge entered Lincoln Hall, a movie-set-perfect walnut-paneled shoebox with Romanesque perches for the Judge, court staff and witness, carved oak tables and chairs for the opposing teams and a sturdy-looking jury box. A monumental railing separated all of that from rows of pews jam-packed with press and spectators, the latter of whom had arranged themselves wedding-style: victim's peeps one side of the aisle, 'perpetrator's' the other. My request for a seat at the perp table got no warm and fuzzy from M India B., so I was left to find a seat among the unwashed, eventually squeezing into a space three rows behind where Mutt sat, hands cuffed, feet manacled and dressed in the same clothes she'd pulled from the bug-bag days before, but with fresh bruises visible on her neck and forearms and one cheek blossoming brightly. Apparently, she and the Protectors' squad were still working through their bonding process.

Shortly, the County's Judge entered through an understated door behind the bench, looking very convincing in graduation gown and black Stetson with a crisp crease. Expression neutral at first, it had settled into a practiced scowl by the third time her Bailiff -

a sadly-weathered wrangler in stacked black jeans and hoodie under a leather biker vest with Kaolin County seals front and back - called for the crowd to ‘settle down and shut your friggin’ holes,’ after which admonition, the Judge took the reins.

“Hear ye, hear, ye, hear ye,” she called out, looking slightly embarrassed at the archaic intro which her reading suggested must be required procedure. “By the Grace of God and the Labor of Our Own Hands, this room is now Kaolin County territory, and this County Court is now in session, Judge Judith Cavanaugh presiding.” Checking the file on her bench, she read out, “The case of Court versus Bethany Anne Joan’s...

“Is that a typo?” the Judge abruptly challenged the clerk seated behind her left shoulder, and when the clerk shook her head to indicate it was not, tossed her own in wonderment before continuing. “Bethany Anne *Joan’s* is held Perpetrator of the crime of Murder With Intention in the death of Vincent Shirley, also known as Shirley Vincent, also known as Vinnie VidiVICCI, also known...ahhh, enough of that. Pursuant to Article three-point-one-point-two-point-seven of the code governing this Court, fact the accused is not a resident of the County means she’s got no peers here...I mean, there...no, here dammit - here! So this will be a bench trial.”

When that last bit produced a murmur of confusion in the spectators’ ranks, her honor explained it meant no jury. After letting the concept sink in for scant seconds, she invited ‘the Authority’ to state its case and for the next half hour or so, the County’s prosecutor rattled off their allegations against Mutt. Her presentation of witnesses took even less time, as there was only one, a uniformed milit of the Kounty Kiingsmen who went by ‘Harrier’ (“No Ma’am, it’s just Harrier”) and described his squad’s return from an overnight training exercise to find the house where they bunked completely dark and an unknown number of

unknown hostiles inside it. When another of the squad flipped the main breaker and the lights suddenly came on, there was a burst of action ('sausaging,' was Harrier's expression, before Judge Judith directed him to use a laymen's term) then lights out again, with multiple shots fired. When the lights came back on for good, Harrier had found Mutt (whom he pointed out to the courtroom, at the Judge's request) standing over the gravely wounded Vincent with an assault weapon in her hands. That was the climax of the Prosecution, and much as I'd come to expect from my conversations with India, the climax of *her* role as Mutt's Rep/Con came only a few moments later, with M Billacerkowicz standing up and asking Harrier if he'd actually seen Mutt point the weapon at anyone, heard the weapon fire, or watched Vincent fall to the ground in consequence of any such events. Receiving responses in the negative to all her questions, India turned to the judge and announced her defense had been completed.

"The hell?" Mutt shouted, rising as far off the hardwood bench as her restraints would allow, but before she could say anything else one of the Bailiff's security crew had pressed her back down as we all heard India hiss at her to shut the hell up. Our side of the bleachers was still processing the slenderness of that 'representation' when Judge Judith continued as if the protest had never happened, addressing the room with another canned procedural speech - one I had been eagerly anticipating thanks to my late-night research.

"Pursuant to Article seven-point-six-point-three, of the laws governing this Court, once all testimony has been heard, and prior to deliberations and sentencing, Victim's kin and creditors are entitled to speak before the court." When she asked if anyone wished to do so, I stood up, waving my right hand for good measure, and was directed to state my name and relationship to the Victim, then speak my piece.

“Jack Shirley,” I called out, extra-loud to make sure everyone heard the names correctly. Something I’d long ago learned to do, and especially important since my appearance that morning was tailored to Center Court’s highly-traditional expectations - a point which Mutt had just then noticed, judging by the cocktail of surprise and amusement widening the eyes that’d swung my way as soon as she heard my voice.

“Vincent...the deceased...was my sister,” I explained, at which point the crowd buzzed a bit, quieting back down as I continued, prominently flashing a sheaf of notes I didn’t actually need.

Our parents being dead, I informed them all - with much stopping and starting and plenty of ‘ums’ and ‘ahhs,’ to humanize my presentation – her remaining family (me) was going to save this Court and the hard-working women and men whose taxes paid for it, a lot of time and bullsh... “and *expense*,” I corrected myself, in response to the Judge’s eyebrow-raise at my initial choice of words – “by accepting an offer of Compensation in Lieu.”

At which point the Burrows side of the congregation flared into a bonfire of ‘WTF,’ ‘she ain’ even been convikt yet!’ and the like, which was immediately countered from the County side by a storm along the lines of ‘ignorant rats!’ and ‘she’s here, ain’t she?’ to which both the Bailiff’s staff and the Judge’s gavel banged enthusiastically. “For anyone who might be unaware,” Cavanaugh admonished the Burrows contingent once all that noise had subsided, the Streamlined Common Law avoided redundancy and waste by combining both criminal and civil aspects of a case into a single proceeding. Thus, in a murder (to use one example her tone suggested had been chosen at random) if the victim’s family agreed to civil compensation for their loss – ‘Compensation in Lieu’ was the term of art, or CIL - the Court

was bound to accept that agreement in place of proceeding any further with trial, verdict, sentencing or punishment.

“Whatever any of you may feel about this,” she stated sternly, “it’s the law governing this Court.” After a brief exchange with India about my eligibility to represent Vincent’s family, she then asked the question that was likely on the mind of nearly everyone in the room, to which I replied that the family of Vincent Shirley was prepared to accept CIL “in the amount of eighty-five Omacoin.”

You’d have to’ve been deaf to miss the outrush of breath at that. Not only the amount, but also the specification of payment in Omacoin. Issued by the Sovereign Bank of Omaha and backed by the full faith and credit of Berkshire Hathaway, Omacoin appeared shortly after the Federal financial system imploded and was, by this time, easily the most-widely accepted of the new commercial currencies, making this offer especially appealing. Herself unimpressed by that detail, Judge Cavanaugh quickly rang down her gavel and turned to India B, who broke off the whispered conversation she’d been conducting with Mutt through all of this. The principle of such a deal was clearly no surprise to Billi-skinny-wits, just as I was not surprised by the tone of regret with which she answered my proposal.

“Perpetrator appreciates the victim family’s offer, but unfortunately she does not have funds to...”

“Hold on,” I challenged, loudly enough that everyone was sure to hear my words. “You don’t know that.” Our ensuing intercourse lasted no more than ten seconds, India stretching and hissing in my direction as she demanded to know what T. F. I was up to and why T. F. I had not shared whatever it was with her and me responding calmly that the quality of her representation to date was all the reason I had needed to keep her in the dark,

before Cavanaugh gaveled the two of us back into a semblance of order so *she* could demand to know why T. F. the victim's next of kin was addressing the Perpetrator's Rep/Con in such familiar manner.

"I work for an investigative office," I began, "part of the Outside Comptrolling Division of Muni – I mean, The Municipal Corporation of..."

"We know what Muni is, dearie," the Judge cut me off. "What we need to know is, are you the Victim's family or are you part of the Perpetrator's representation?" I had a semi-convincing speech prepared for that one, but never got to use it, as Mutt chose that moment to rise up as far as she could given her clanking chains and provide a second contribution to this pivotal event of her lifetime.

"F'n A she is," the young REader barked at the Judge. "Just-jack is my f'n accountant' ain' 'e!" With which she sat back down and flashed me a beta of that same semi-smile I'd been obsessing over ever since first encountering it back at the Blue Bunny.

Pretty sure that wasn't what satisfied Judge Cavanaugh, nor was it my court outfit, which I'd bought from an upper-classman years ago in anticipation of moot court events for school and never had the heart to chuck after my course of study got derailed. Its chalk-stripe suit and ruffle-collared blouse topped with brunette wig done up in a French-twist would've been considered uber-respectful at a Center Court proceeding but landed way over the top here. More likely, what moved the Judge was my quick confirmation that I was in possession of a cashier's check for the proposed CIL payment, which I then flourished out of my purse like some down-market magician exposing his rabbit in public. Whatever the clincher, Judge Judith moved quickly to her next concern, grilling me on whether I, being the victim's next of kin, had considered this matter fully. After all, if the settlement was

accepted and paid, the Perpetrator would be freed immediately, with no trial, no jail time, no other fine or payment and no conviction on her resume. Once I'd satisfied on that, she asked, almost as an oversight, who it was that had offered this generous compensation.

"A friend of the accused," I answered carefully.

"And does this friend have a name?"

"E prefers to remain anonymous, your Honor," I advised, with equal care.

Several more lines of back and forth ensued, after which Judge Judith, in all her regal splendor, pronounced the Court unwilling to accept a Compensation in Lieu settlement without knowing who was doing the compensating and gave me one last chance to answer the question before resuming the trial.

"Jack Shirley," I announced then, before adding, for good measure. "Me. I'm a friend of the accused, and I have a certified check here to pay the compensation."

Her Honor's eye sockets scrunched a bit as she processed the idea anyone would pay good money to set their sister's killer free, then burst wide open once she realized I was actually proposing to pay that blood money to myself. Which dawning was accompanied by a swelling surf of sound as others in the room caught up with her, putting all the pieces together to visualize those precious Omas passing from my purse to the court, then back into the same purse while Mutt walked out a free person. One side of the room thought that was just the cleverest way to screw it to Counties, while the other side sounded like they'd just been given an un-planned vasectomy - sans anesthetic. By the time Judith and the bailiffs had calmed it all down, the Judge had come up with her own clever wrinkle.

"In that case, Miss or Mister or Ms Jack," she addressed me, making obvious her refusal to use Center's neutral M, "be aware that, using the discretion allowed to me under

Article one point four, point A, Administrative Practices, *this court will be retaining twenty-five percent of any Compensation in Lieu amount to cover its administrative expenses and overhead.*”

Which was, to put it scientifically, a great big suck. It hadn’t even occurred to me the County would want a cut of the CIL cash (du-uh!) and my entire plan hinged on getting back every one of those precious Omas so I could redeem the assets I’d pawned to raise them. Flustered, I managed to request Judge Cavanaugh allow some time for me to consider my options. Maybe Her Honor was curious to see what I would come up with, or maybe she was just ready for a lunch break but whatever, the Baliff soon announced a half-hour recess “for the Perp team to get their act together.”

“Thirty minutes, ladies and gentlemen,” she broadcast, tossing a scowl around the room before landing it on me, “and the rest of you, as well.” Bang of the gavel, and she left the courtroom, signal for everyone else in the place to jabber and jostle and scramble into various exit streams. Unable to get to an aisle through the press of bodies, I swung my stockinged legs as discreetly as possible over the backs of two benches and one railing to reach India and Mutt, flashing my coldest snake-eye to press back the Defender grunts and Lincoln Hall staff slouching security around her.

Fortunately, the time it took to get there had given me a chance to gather my thoughts, so rather than a bunch of pleasantries, I launched right into M. Billacerkowicz’s outraged face, pointing out that this was only happening because she’d admitted that no amount of evidence I might uncover was going to help her not-a-client. Explained how that

had catalyzed me to research what *would* affect the outcome, which was when I came across the CIL provisions and concluded they were my best chance to save Mutt's pointy little head. Told also how I'd then asked the shareholders' credit union how much I could borrow against my muni Share, and quickly found they were not allowed to accept a sole-Share as collateral - apparently voluntary-disenfranchisement fell into the same financial category as securing a loan by pledging both kidneys. On a hunch though, I'd visited a pawn shop over in the industrial zone, where they were far less squeamish. If I couldn't pay back their loan within thirty days, they'd have no problem finding some newly-arrived refugee to do so, in return for acquiring all my Shareholder privileges (guaranteed employment, korp-provided housing, subsistence allowance, Center voting rights, free medical care, physical security, legal-system protection... the list went on and on). Handing over Duncan's wristwatch, an ancient thing of little practical value but more than a little sentiment since I'd removed it from Pris's still-warm wrist, rounded their offer up to 85 Omas.

“ ‘e ‘ad it all fig’red, di’n she?” Mutt exclaimed, her attempt to slap India on the back curtailed by a jangle of chains.

“Yeah,” replied the Rep/Con without enthusiasm, face brightening a heartbeat later as she added, “until Her Honor raised the ask.”

Was just explaining to Mutt how getting back only seventy-five percent of the pot meant I'd be unable to redeem my Share and would lose everything, when the Lyfe in my purse buzzed to indicate an incoming work-related. Took me a moment to think how that could be, out here in Burrows, but then I remembered the courthouse was an Oversight facility so must've been fitted with Muni groundnet. Sure enough, origination code on the message showed it came from Center, but not my workplace. Didn't recognize the name - M

S. McGhonegal - but couldn't miss the 'highest-priority' color coding and 'confidential; vid or vox required' flag, meaning I could not respond to the hail in the middle of that scrum.

"Can't believe this crap," I scoffed, "but I need someplace private to take a call." With apologies for interrupting our confab, I asked India if maybe she could use her status as head of the 'Perp team' to get me someplace private so I could deal with this and get back to the business at hand.

To her credit (in more senses than one, as it turns out), the R/C rose to this occasion, grabbing a uniform by the arm and commanding – no other word for it – *commanding* him to "find my esteemed colleague here someplace private so we can get this clown show over with.

"Please."

Mutt, for her part, seemed unconcerned with the interruption, just grinned wider than ever as she looked me over from hair to heels and back again.

The next few minutes were a blur: exiting the courtroom to navigate the jam-packed lobby, then following officer Coates down, around, across and through various hallways, ante-rooms and vestibules until she key-punched me into a closet-sized cubicle signed "COUNSEL CONFERENCING - 15 MINUTE LIMIT." Once inside, my call connected immediately, as if the other end had been waiting for it.

"Illicit Affairs," was the first response, a department I had heard of before, though it'd always struck me as more appropriate for a memoir than an arm of government. Regardless, I identified myself and that I was responding to a hail from their comm site, at

which point I was immediately connected not with McGhonegal eirself, but a ‘senior aide’ by the name of Alamani Oduor. A decidedly-baritone aide, which was decidedly uncommon in Center.

“Understand you’re under some pressure, M Shirley,” e went on. “Your fund-raising hit a bit of a speed-bump?”

Was not really surprised someone’d been able to observe my efforts to fund the CIL offer; even an intern in OCD knew Muni had access to whatever financial info it wanted. My surprise was that anybody’d cared enough to follow my piddly transaction. Oduor addressed that very point though, when he (and my ears had quickly concluded this threshold-pushy personality would choose ‘he’ if we ever got on a more familiar basis) allowed that the Commission on Illicit Affairs had an ongoing investigation into Counties’ use of those CIL provisions. Higher-ups believed resolving criminal charges in return for payment ‘tended to unbalance the scales of justice,’ as he put it with a chuckle, so they were always interested in situations such as mine. I was considering correcting that possessive – it was Mutt’s case, after all, not mine - but didn’t get the chance.

“I’ve also been watching the courtroom security output,” Oduor offered, surprising me once more. “Imagine Judge Judy’s new ask is an unwelcome development?”

When I admitted it was more of a total shaft, I learned that Illicit Affairs had a solution to offer. Official records informing them that I’d received my Share (and all its many benefits) in compensation when Muni seized our family home to expand the moat after Priscilla’s death, they’d determined Treasury was also carrying an outstanding account-payable representing Vincent’s equal share of those proceeds. Her funds’d been gathering dust (and interest) while she was off in the ozone, but given her recent decease – which

Oduor had the professional detachment to voice as if it were a welcome coincidence – I could file a claim on the balance as her next of kin. Processing that would take a while, but given the circumstances, Illicit Affairs was prepared to advance me enough against said payable that I could increase my CIL offer. That way, the deal could go down, they could make a test case out of it and I'd still get enough coin back to redeem my Share - *even after deducting for the court's gift*. Concluding, Oduor proposed to have a binder for the entire new amount delivered to Lincoln Hall by optical-drone for me to present to the bailiff when court resumed session. When I mentioned my experience that really, really good news is generally accompanied by at least a little of the bad kind, e chuckled again.

“Not sure it qualifies as ‘bad’ news, Shirley, but the CIL payment will be tied up until we get a formal judgement against those County creeps, so you’ll be at risk on your pawn for a month or three. Not great, but hey, your young friend’ll be free - and isn’t that all you really care about?”

Feeling rather giddy by that point, I heartily agreed.

Which, in retrospect, was perhaps the most enlightening part of one very enlightening conversation.

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All of that, plus finding a place to pee and freshen up my face, took to within a few minutes of Cavanaugh’s thirty, so I hustled back through the halls, where I had the great

satisfaction of replying ‘no-comment’ to the pox of microphones thrust in my face as I butted through to the Perpetrator’s table and shooed a CA33 guard out of the chair next to Mutt’s just as the Bailiff was announcing Judge Judith’s return. Together, they gaveled, whistled and cajoled the crowd back to order before she locked eyes on India.

“Representative Billacerkowicz,” she began. Have you and Miss Jack...”

“*Shirley*, your honor,” I blurted, instantly regretting the informality. “M Jack *Shirley*,” I corrected my correction of the Judge’s misidentification, and watched as her honor chewed on that for an instant before spitting it back at me.

“M Jack,” she offered stiffly, as if it were some great concession. “Have *Perpetrator’s team* got a response to the victim’s kin’s offer – *your own offer, that is* - of settlement?”

Well, if there had been disorder in that court before, it was nothing to what happened when I replied that we – and yes, it felt pretty good to use that term – *we*, had agreed to increase the CIL amount to cover her administrative fee, and that the funds would be delivered shortly via drone, at which point the other shoe fell, in the form of a uniformed officer of the Kiingsmen who had been silent through the earlier proceedings but now stood up and protested energetically that as battle-brothers of the dead warrior, they should be the ones to decide a thing like this.

“Nobody asked how *we* feel about that rat buying her way out,” he shouted, to the grunts and cheers of his fellow grunts, who had now lined up along the back wall, looking quite formidable in their muscle-shirts and body-armor, despite no weapons being permitted anywhere inside the court complex. “That little piggie scribbles one of our own and gets to walk? How the hell you expect that’s gonna go down with my boys?”

Looking back now, I can see the seed planted in that moment and what it grew into, but all I felt at the time was a sense of relief as Judge Judith – my new bestie, now that she’d abandoned scruples in favor of rubles – commenced to school the Kounty Kiings on how the blood money practice had precedents stretching at least as far back as the Old Testament.

Suspect Her Honor would’ve gone on forever if the entire room hadn’t been distracted a short time later by a noise from one of its windows, marking the arrival of an official Muni drone. Super-Fi model with echo-enhanced navigation, it hovered outside the glass, red light flashing and notification buzzer buzzing metronomically. Unfortunately, that blast-proof aperture could not be opened, so there was a further delay while I rushed to the front steps and beamed it in with my Lyfe’s flash-laser function. By the time I got back inside and handed the envelope to India, who handed it to the Bailiff, who handed it to the Clerk, Judge Cavanaugh was just finishing up her master course in the history of ‘wergeld’ by pointing out that arguably the most consistent thread through all the centuries and geographies of blood money’s legitimacy had been that it was the kin of the deceased - not the state, the court or any other entity – who got to decide whether to accept blood money in lieu of other justice.

“Much as we respect your service, warriors, it’s time for you to stand back and stand by. An offer having been made on Perp’s behalf, and victim’s family having accepted said offer; and said funds having been delivered...?” to which quizzical pause she received a nod from the Clerk who’d examined the envelope’s contents, “I declare this case resolved, and Bethany Anne Joan’s – with that damned apostrophe – who is no longer considered a perpetrator and shall not be so referred-to in any official or public manner – is free to go.

“As are we all,” she finished, with a mighty clap of her gavel.

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“Was’n ever convinced there was no such thing as magic – or ‘Mad-zheek,’ like some o’them call it - but yessiree, M’a... way they got that Joan’s kid off? Rikki S. is a believer now. Damn sure, ‘e is.”

Words of Reckard Strom, 31, Electronic Security Manager, morning shift, Municipal Waste Administration Offices, Burrow Two, in vid clip shown that evening on Feed Three’s *News of the Day* featurette, and widely reposted on various other NewNet sites.

Act Two

Happy as I was with the outcome of Mutt's trial, moment the proceedings ended my mind was filled with an image of the kid back on the streets of Burrows, besieged by publicity hounds and Feed-farmers; hungry hacks eager to transform some micro-edit of her story into a quote that fit whatever legend they believed would gin-up more eyeballs for their paymasters' messaging. Hounded and followed everywhere, unprepared to resist the onslaught, sooner than later she would slip and utter some innocent words that'd shape-shift under the glare of attention and make her out a fool, an agent of some other sovereign or, worst of all: a threat to the status quo. Anything but what she actually was: the innocent victim of whoever tricked that REaders crew into pre-cycling that particular house on that particular night.

"Come on," I whispered, grabbing an elbow as soon as the cuffs and shackles were off. "We gotta get you away from all this."

The look on Mutt's face was half resentment and half dizzied-incomprehension as I dragged her out the same door the Judge had taken, then hustled through a tangle of conference rooms, interconnected offices and private toilets till we found a door marked EGRESS ONLY. As hoped, that led not toward the front of the court building but the rear, where we encountered only a few outliers of the crowd I was certain must be thronging the front steps. Was easy enough to muscle Mutt past those few hacks as the Ryde I'd Lyfe-hailed pulled silently to the curb, hatch rising in welcome even as it was gliding to a stop.

Once we were safely inside, I told the car to circle round to the front of the complex

and directed Mutt's eyes as we cruised by the courthouse.

"See that?" I bristled, waving a hand at the snake-ball spilling across its forecourt and into the street, pointing out especially the County milits now brandishing weapons they must've retrieved from those innocent-looking yellow buses. Even as we gawked, one of them elbowed another who quickly raised his long gun in our direction. "That's your life if you go back to it. You want that?"

"N..." The girl's mouth started to form a word but all it produced was a puff of air, a gape and a moment of thought, then a plaintive, "So where...?"

"My place."

"Center?" Mutt scoffed. "Bullsh'. Nev' le' me in."

Fortunately, by that time I had a plan, though it would take some quick keying. Directing the vehicle to pull up the next time it sensed an open-access NewNet point (which turned out to be an imitation Starbucks plastered with banners for the new Carbo-zatZ infusion drink some korp's product development team had pulled out of their nether regions), I Lyfed into the admin folder for a low-profile Division case on which I'd recently been entering document scans. That being still an open investigation, was easy enough to add Mutt to the 'persons of interest' list, then exit over to another site and apply for a Temporary Entry Permit in her name as a 'data collection resource,' listing OCD as the party responsible for her behavior inside Center.

Logging-off as quickly as possible to minimize risk of being tickled, I settled back while our Ryde nosed its way through Burrows side streets like a mouse on a mission.

Must admit, I'd never given much thought before to our system of borders and

checkpoints. Secure in my Shareholder ID and work connections, I was happy believing all those peeps and hardware were protecting me. It was only when I noticed Mutt's expression as we slowed for Plumas Portal, our vehicle's chosen route back into Center, that I considered how intimidating it must be to those on the other side of the equation. 'Enemy,' Mutt's face said, 'danger, danger,' and I caught a whiff of how coming up against a bunch of uniformed and body-armored bodies brandishing lethal weapons could make an outsider feel small and naked. She seemed to settle down a bit when I displayed the permit in her name on my screen, and when the moment came our ruse worked a charm, guards chatting obliviously to one another as they swished a wand around the vehicle's empty freight compartment and underparts before waving us through the portal, a low-volume facility for official-use only – one more minor stretching of the rules which I hoped to blush my way around, in the unlikely event it ever came up.

—

Cruising out the other side, I saw Mutt's expression change once again, confirming my suspicion that she'd never been in Center before. Kid's eyes were not small to begin with, but now they seemed to take-over her entire face as they studied the Shareholders strolling well-dressed and carefree along sidewalks empty of litter or sleepers, the storefronts full of brand-new merchandise, the well-spaced flow of shiny-clean vehicles moving the best-of-the-rest from one place to another in quietly-efficient choreography.

Descending the ramp underneath 421 Greenspan Way was like diving under water,

outside glare replaced with cool LED glow, busy sidewalks swapped for pristine white-concrete wall panels and steel-mesh storage cages stuffed with residents' surplus possessions now that the parking spaces were no longer needed for personal vehicles. Ryde let us out in front of the elevators then scuttled off to whoever and wherever was its next call as I pressed my palm to a wall-sensor and held my breath. We were in luck, as the door of elevator number three slid smoothly open, extracting a sharp inhale from Mutt.

"No elevators out in Burrows?" I joked, instantly regretting how smug it must have sounded. "I mean..."

"Yeah; ge' wha' y' mean," she countered bitterly, before shifting into a dead-on imitation of Center superiority. "Yes, actually I *have* seen one of those before, M'a - *I just can't believe yours is so small...*"

Quarter of an hour later we were sitting in my room enjoying the view – actually a pair of vidscreens recessed into the partition and framed-up to look like windows, they could display any content I programmed from my desk machine. A cheap amenity installed when the building was converted from no-longer-leasable office-space into three-hundred and seventy-six 'pied-a-terre flats,' the euphemistic term employed by the Redevelopment Authority to convince Shareholders they were getting a great deal on what were really code-minimum living-modules stacked inside the building's grid like Jenga blocks, mine being one of the less-desirable hall-side locations, meaning no actual exterior wall or windows. Still, it was clean, climate-controlled and secure.

For mellowing effect, I'd chosen to display a tropical beach scene (with matching surf sounds), and had opened a bottle of synthetic wine, my tumbler-full well on the way to being

emptied while Mutt was hording a chilled Pepsi™ like it was some ancient artifact dug out of an un-touched tomb. Didn't seem time yet to talk about her future, so I'd been going into more detail about what I actually did at OCD – boring, painstakingly detailed work, not well paid (at least by Center standards, though I realized that was highly relative, hearing Mutt's snort at my hint of self-pity). What really got her attention though, was when I ran through all my machines: desk model with widescreen for work, book for on-site, the LyfeMachine she'd already seen me palming virtually non-stop, plus dedicated micro-machine incorporated into the unitary-kitchen appliance and finally my linked-function wearable (several-generations out of date and no longer functioning except for pay-as-go, but worn for image and in the faint hope an operating system update might someday be made available).

“Never be without a machine,” I repeated the slogan, though it was clear from her expression that that particular PR campaign had never reached Burrows. Nor a lot of other stuff I took for granted, judging by her next question.

—

“Y'ain' worrie'?” she asked, a hint of mischief blending into the serious expression her features had assumed. “You n' me? Here? 'lone?”

“Worried about what,” I laughed, “that you're going to assault me or something? Murder me and make off with the family jewels?” Turned out that was closer than I realized.

“I c' ju'scream,” she suggested, then let out a screech that would have raised the

entire neighborhood if those modules hadn't been so well-engineered for auditory privacy.

"Or get me a 'ttorney t' say you try sumpin' – an' me jus' a chil' n' all... My word 'gains' you? Toast."

So, I thought; even in Burrows they were aware how far Center's legal system leaned to defend the unempowered. Clearly didn't know about vaulting a record though, which I then explained to her: how anytime two persons were alone together, either or both of them had the right to record (audio only, of course; this was not an invitation to creeper-dom) and post it to the common vault for use in their defense should they ever need it.

"...security system started recording the minute you walked in here," I pointed out.

"Suck me," was all she said, deflating visibly before lowering the brim of her cap to shield her face.

Audio only, I repeated, then detailed how my system was set to sense a second person in the unit, identify us both from Center's voiceprint database (hers had certainly been uploaded from the Ryde by that time) and start a secure recording, periodically uploaded to a vault-cell which would be accessible only via court order with signed and witnessed authorizations from both recorded parties. Which would only happen if one of us charged the other with some offense: coercion, aggression, any higher form of assault. If both of us believed we were in the right, we'd each authorize opening the cell and the recording would be entered as evidence. If either of us refused to authorize, that'd be entered as a Material Circumstance and probably lead to a summary judgement against em. Either way, the existence of the vaulted tape acted as a virtual third person in the room, breaking the 'your word against mine' tie.

"Shi-i-i'."

By this point, I'd realized that particular word dragged off in that particular tone meant Mutt'd had enough of whatever topic it applied to.

"You want to go out?" I offered, as an alternative, and saw her eyes brighten several degrees. "See what Center is really like - not the myths your Burrows cousins are always spreading about us? I could change into something more..."

"No way!" Mutt cut in, shifting syntax again as she looked my court mode up and down for the umpteenth time, before drawling out, slyly: "I rather like you this way, M Jack Shirley. We run into any trouble out there, it'll be *me* gets to save *your* girly-ass-gravy."

—

Center was showing-off that Saturday evening, the blocks south of the old Silver King Casino (now the Clarendon Reserve Hotel for Intersovereign Travelers) pulsing with off-the-clock shareholders enjoying its mixed-grille of supper clubs (top-tier korp staff and offshore visitors only, thank you), white linen restaurants, wine bars, brew pubs, multi-ethnic food courts, dance dives and music dumps. We hit a decent sampling of them all, in decreasing order of cleanliness and respectability, before Mutt admitted she was beginning to fade, having downed at least six different cocktails, chowed on simulated Salvadoran food and Lebanese, been chatted up by both masc and fem (as had I) and shut down every one of their advances with a glance (much more effectively than I ever could've). Staggering up the sidewalk to my building's front lobby, we surely looked exactly what we were: a pair of

unpracticed amateur imbibers whose evening'd run away with them. Heads whisper-close one moment then bursting apart in laughter, limbs bumping one moment, then hands pushing away before tapping and brushing on a forearm (my fingertips on hers) or shoulder (her palm on mine at least twice).

Or butt: as in her hand grabbing a goodly gob of my right cheek before being jerked back and pressed to her lips in innocent-eyed mime of 'oops I can't believe I did that.'

Soon's we were back inside my place, I drifted into the bathroom and gathered a few things, then did the same from the closet. Seeing the question in Mutt's eyes, I explained that with these places so carefully downsized to house just one person, residents who weren't using their flat on a given night would often post it as available to any other resident who had a guest of the non-intimate variety (for a fee of course, this being Center). Given that I knew my way around the building and she did not, I folded-down my wall-bed, gave her instructions for brewing zatz in the morning and headed toward the door, saying to tag me whenever she got up.

"I'm always up," Mutt shot back in her best imitation hairy-warrior growl before flopping rearwards onto the bed and collapsing into her own persona to ask how the fu she was supposed to tag me? I apologized for forgetting she didn't possess any machine that would work in Center. Any machine *at all*, she corrected, effortlessly skewering another of my privileged assumptions. Apologizing again – I seemed to be doing a lot of that around this girl – I showed her the strokes that would bring my desk-size to life so she could send me a verbal.

Heading down the hall to call an elevator, I looked over my shoulder and saw her in

the doorway, slouching one shoulder against the jamb like she owned it as she cast a plastic smile my way. ‘Yeah, you go,’ girl seemed to be saying, ‘I’ve got this place covered.’

Riding the elevator, I wondered if she’d stay up a while before heading for sleep, or let it wait till morning. Either way, I was certain that by whatever time she tagged me tomorrow, my home and possessions would hold very few secrets from Bethany Anne Joan’s.



Next morning, I was just coming-to in the familiar surroundings of someone else’s identical flat on the second floor and feeling the lust for zatz, when my Lyfe alerted an incoming voice connection. “You limp-necked son of a Center slut,” the caller began, without identifying herself, though I knew immediately it was India B., so incensed she hadn’t even bothered routing the call through a private number. Didn’t have to listen long to her ranting before deciding I needed another side to the story, so I promised to look into it and stabbed a finger to shut her off in mid-obscenity.

Truth be told, a part of me was not surprised to hear something had hit the fan: ever since that call with Oduor at the courthouse, some sub-routine deep down in my brain had been wondering what the *real* story was - why Illicit Affairs’d been so ready to help me – and Mutt, of course.

Still hadn’t heard from said Mutt by the time I’d showered, dressed and made myself

myself, so hustled my butt upstairs and crept quiet as a dead battery into my own room where I started a beaker of zatz by the light of the kitchen clock and sat down to tap out some inquiries on my Lyfe. Du responded immediately (claiming ignorance), W-J responded not at all, but my message to Oduor got voxed back in seconds. What he had to say explained India's indignation, and more. Only as our conversation was ending did I realize I'd placed the machine on the counter out of habit, so it had automatically gone to speaker and was fully-audible to the guest now sitting up in her (my, actually...) bed just a few feet away. The look of distress on Mutt's pillow-creased face when I called for the lights to come on made me glad she'd missed India's earlier abuse as I fixed her a zatz and settled on the edge of the bed to fill in what she'd missed.

Turned out that tale Oduor'd told me during our courthouse call about his office's interest in my payment scheme had been a soft-peddle. More than just being philosophically-opposed to the CIL rip off, someone up their organization's ladders had already concluded the practice deserved to be slapped-down. When Oduor'd described Judge Judith's extra ask, his bosses saw a perfect opportunity to activate a sting they'd been considering, with Mutt and me as bait.

The binder he'd sent me was legit enough, but with a little wrinkle: the coin it documented had all been digitally-tagged with a bogus conversion factor so they would trade at three-tenths of a tenth over current value - *for as long as they circulated*. Assumption was that the creeps wouldn't notice the different rate, or if they did they'd dismiss it as a rounding error in their favor and ignore it. Illicit Affairs, on the other hand, could use its sovereign-privilege access to OmaCoin's verification services to identify any transaction at .003 above

current value and so follow the CIL money wherever it migrated to.

Sure enough, there'd been five such disbursements within two hours after the trial ended. One to my account number that I'd given the Court, though not for the original eighty-five Omas it should have been. No, I'd somehow ended up with slightly shy of 64, after one payment to the County Court's operating account, one to the County Sheriff, one to Judge Judith herself and, most illuminating, another delivered straight into M India B's personal account. Had taken Oduor only a couple of minutes to document all the transactions, append a timeline and a digest of the official valuation factors at the posting time of each transaction, and submit the whole shebang on letterhead under his boss McGhonegal's signature to Sovereign Bank of Omaha. By the time anyone woke up the next morning, all five accounts were frozen pending fraud charges, *to be adjudicated not in Kaolin but in Muni's legal system* since the fraudulent transaction had been funded out of Center.

"So, no," I explained to Mutt, as we sipped our hot brown chemical-water while watching the Feeds obsess over the morning's traffic conditions at various Inner Limit portals, I was no longer the least bit surprised India had broken-crude on the phone.

"Sucker was counting on a cut of the profits; instead, she's up on charges in Center Court, as well as being deeply into the doghouse with her greedy-ass buddies out in Kaolin. Not a happy morning-wake-up."

"Ef'n A, Jack," Mutt laughed, flashing a convoluted finger-gesture in my direction, presumably some Burrow-dweller's seal of approval. "Ef'n A all over ya."

—

Keeping to that financial update theme, in between their usual traffic reports the Feeds that morning were abuzz with reports the New York Stock Exchange was making another bid to resume operations.

Bit of background on that:

When the Diss began, one new sovereignty after another refused to acknowledge the discredited Federal court system, or those of their fellow new sovs. One consequence of which (unintended or not) was to effectively *tear up every contract or agreement between parties not co-located within any single new sovereignty*. At first, it was just a few hard-liners seizing the opportunity to renege on contract terms or cease payment on loans, but once word got around, the practice spread quickly, rendering a cascade of other businesses incapable of paying *their* debts, dividends or payrolls. With both commercial and personal lending suddenly in deep doo-doo, liquidity and values of all paper assets went off the cliff, wiping out a majority of the nation's retained wealth in the blink of a quarterly statement and instantly tanking demand for luxury items - plus plenty of other things once imagined as necessities: deodorant and dry-cleaning, for example, along with dozens of medical specializations (orthodontics, dermatology, plastic surgery, psychotherapy...) and the entire new-car and tourism industries. Within sixteen months the stock price of the average Fortune 500 company had dropped by nearly seventy-five percent and spikes in computerized-trading volume forced the NYSE and other exchanges to shut down time and again until they finally announced a suspension of operations "until market conditions stabilize."

Out of all businesses, customer-facing operations which generated daily cash flow had the best odds of surviving, with fueling stations, convenience stores, food trucks, second-hand shops and especially vice-vendors (alcohol, cannabis, cigarettes, gambling, hard drugs and sex) becoming the new blue-chips and their owners the *neuvo* ‘nouveau riche,’ while white-linen restaurants, fashion retailers, convention centers and a hundred other enterprises scrambled to reinvent themselves as far down the price-scale as they could possibly dive.

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Speaking of starting over from scratch; later that morning (or mid-day, more like, given how much Mutt was enjoying the comfort of my bed) I got a lesson on what it meant to be a REader. ‘People of The Books’ was another name her friends sometimes went by, but whatever they were called, I learned that they were all committed to the truths believed to have been revealed in a series of popular novels from back around the turn of the millennium. Skeptics claimed that that source made REaders’ beliefs somewhat less than serious, but there was no such issue in the minds of the faithful.

“They no’ *kid* books,” Mutt spluttered when something I said made her think that was what how I viewed the best-sellers, of which I had read a couple, though never been a huge fan. “They grown-up as any other shi’ - bu’ not ‘holy books,’ neither.” REaders, she went on, were well-aware the books had been written by an ordinary human being (ordinary, that is, in the sense of not divine or supernatural; they did consider him a visionary; a conduit for

truth). They were most assuredly not ‘the word of God,’ she elaborated, because there *was* no bearded old man behind the curtain of the REaders’ universe (and very few bearded peeps among its followers either; the Books’ ideals unappealing to those whose facial hair defined their image of self just as thoroughly as they believed their muscles should dictate the reality of everybody else’s world).

No, REaders tended to be bookish types (a quip Mutt appreciated far less than I’d hoped when dropping it into our conversation). Generally thoughtful and quiet, they believed the extraordinary popularity of The Books was itself proof they had authentic meaning. A meaning, she explained, that was right there for anyone to see, at which point she flashed me the home-crafted tattoos on her hands and I saw what I’d previously failed to recognize beneath the confusing elaborations of their pseudo-gothic script: **M, A, G, I, and C**, one letter on the first segment of each digit from pinkie to thumb. Bottom of the letters toward the wrist on the left hand so the bearer was constantly confronted with the word, bottom toward the nails on the right hand, so they appeared right side up to anyone else.

“Magic,” she informed me, with all the precision of some geek-cult inductee reciting the pledge they’d been given at the start of Hell Week, “is the gift of this millennium. And REaders are unlocking it. For me, for you. For everyone. For forever.”

Didn’t think much about it at the time, but looking back now, I’m quite certain of this one thing: despite being on such familiar terms with REaders’ beliefs; despite how convincingly she sold their faith and virtues; despite even the ink embedded in her flesh, throughout that entire conversation, Mutt always referred to REaders as ‘they.’

Never ‘us,’ never ‘we.’

Not once.

—

I did have to do some office work that day; make up a few of the hours I'd been spending on Mutt's affairs. Not about to let her roam Center unescorted, I handed over my book-size machine and let her graze all the classic vids available with my Shareholder-level NewNet access – way more than she'd ever had access to out in Burrows. That - and another can of precious Pepsi™ - kept her happily occupied for a good while. Eventually though, she did come up for air. And back to the present.

“You got a guy?” she called across the room between sips of the soda, which she'd been savoring like some nectar of the gods; rolling its sweet chemicals around inside her mouth to prolong the neural stimulation it was so carefully formulated to provide.

“Aac-chew-ally...” I began, then realized I'd reflexed into some sort of weird self-parody; head and eyes rolling like a seasick puppy, hand coming up from my lap as I drew out the word's syllables. Damn.

“Yes, I do have someone,” I began again, after re-setting to just-the-facts mode.
“Richard.”

Another snort of derision. As if the very way I'd spoken the name told her street-smarts everything they needed to know about our on-again off-again ‘relationship’ - a word I silently reminded myself not to use in the ensuing conversation.

“*Definite* guy,” she muttered, mostly to herself, then came back to me, full-voice.

“Hefe?”

“Maybe someday,” I admitted, going on to explain that Richard *was* on a path to boss of something, but was currently doing his mandatory public service. Unsure what she might’ve heard out in Burrows, I gave a quick run-down on the requirements for an upper-management career path in Center: three to five years higher ed followed by two years community service in one of five designated arenas – military & security, health & lifecare, commercial productivity, community welfare services (the lowest of the bunch, in Center heirarchy), or the highest calling (to the Center-minded) - humaniculture.

“Lemme figure,” Mutt interrupted, miming deep, deep thought. “Richard - not Rich, Richie, Rick or Dick; means yer grunt’s use’ t’ doin’ what ‘e’s told’, so... kiddie-care!”

Tried to hide my pride as I acknowledged that, yes, Richard was fourteen months into internship at a child-rearing center serving korps’ executive-level personnel. Living on site, working long shifts caring for other peeps’ children, plus taking a full load of credits in developmental psychology, nutrition, hygiene, pediatrics and even ob/gyn care.

“Not that he’s going to be a doctor or anything,” I cautioned, “it’s just part of how they...”

“Make a wom’n out of ‘im?” Mutt quipped with a broad grin. It was a familiar jab; the charge that Muni’s culture and leaders, by making sure females had as much access to power as men have traditionally enjoyed, had reduced their men to domesticated pseudo-feminine drones...

—

No one who knew the history would deny that Center tilted a touch toward the fem. Consequence, conceivably, of the fact that four of the five largest korps'd been headed by fem CEO's at the time Confluence went sov. Nor was that ratio surprising in itself; by the time of the Diss, university enrollment was approaching two-thirds fem - and graduation rates were even more lopsided, with the most uneven proportions at the most 'elite' schools (though by those days calling anything 'elite' was asking to be investigated). Still more important (in my own bumble opinion), was the role played by one Eira ferch Dwelyn, founder of Ferch Technologies, the most vertically-integrated and locally-resourced of our industries. A leading voice during Confluence's ascension out of the post-Diss chaos, story I'd heard was that Dwelyn's name and look were inherited from a several-times-great grandmother who'd been fancied by the First Mate of a schooner plying the Atlantic triangle-trade. Hauled back to his Welsh-coast home, she'd spent the remainder of her life in a bondage some degree less onerous – arguably - than the one from which he'd 'rescued' his new wife. Regardless of whether that legend was true, Muni's most-senior board member had been an inspiring figure in those early years; tall, graceful and poised, capable of dominating any debate with an eminence that few could resist. (Had been, that is, until e was reportedly incapacitated by an unexplained illness, more than a year before.)

In any case, and for any number of reasons, initial drafts of Confluence's founding documents had used fem pronouns as all-inclusive; another reason for the misconception (and the troll names tossed about by our system's detractors : feminarchy, ovagarchy, menarchy - *no-men*-archy...). Offering Shareholders free communal child-rearing hadn't

hurt the impression either, since it facilitated even more birth-mothers continuing in careers than was already the norm (pre Diss economics having rendered single-income households unsustainable for most). ‘Better education plus the ability to accumulate years of experience has always been a reliable recipe for advancement,’ as the PR pushers preached it, so, yeah, the top ranks of Muni were mostly fem.

Which was one reason why, even if one of our own would never dare voice the ‘make your men into women’ slur out loud, I was not really surprised that a Burrower would. Seeing that I was not laughing though, Mutt back-peddled. “Yeah, I know that’s a ‘zaggeration,” she admitted, in the most credible apology I’d yet seen pass across her features. Not an attitude she could maintain for long though. “He going the full Monty?” she felt compelled to add, with a smile and a twist of her mouth that voiced volumes.

“Of course not,” I shot back. Immediately ashamed of the knee-jerk and what it said about my own unresolved prejudices, I went on more calmly. No, Richard was not about to change his body, nor - despite anything they might believe out in Burrows - was such a thing required for Center males to get ahead.

When Mutt countered that she’d heard the stories and seen the images, it only got my back up more as I pointed out that was simple probability. Some percentage of any large population experienced body/mind discrepancies, that was a fact, even in Burrows (“but not in f’n Counties,” Mutt interjected with a half-guilty, half-serious sort of chuckle) and some percentage of any population had what it took to grow into leadership positions, so it was no stretch to expect that some peeps would pass through both those filters. “Unless you just assume that transpersons can’t possibly have what it takes to be leaders,” I pointed out.

“Hell, no,” Mutt shot back. “Anyone’s got the balls to get their junk remodeled is *definitely* a leader by me.”

Fact she didn’t ask how any of that applied to me, I chose to take as a compliment.

Richard, I did point out before abandoning the topic, had chosen Humaniculture for the experience and growth it offered. His choice had nothing to do with being masc or fem or any other pre-wrapped personality category.

(Still, it *had* begun to concern me, that so much of his time lately was being spent with babies and mother-or-others. Even his so-called ‘free’ time.)

—

Big Feed item that afternoon was – cue the ‘surprise’ sound effect – spokeswoman for the Okoyamban government was accusing *the Swiss banking system* of corruption! Seems the money minders were refusing to turn over funds deposited by the previous oppressors of Okoyamba’s West-African populace on grounds that the new rulership was not a legitimate sovereign because the Okoyamban People’s Army had taken over from the last government by force of arms. Easy for the Swiss to say, being several thousand miles away; African Union and every neighboring country had recognized the OPA almost immediately after its rag-tag flood of volunteers surrounded and overwhelmed those predecessors, a mercenary junta funded by a Panama-based corporation deeply committed to engorging its Swiss

accounts through exploitation of the territory's deposits of rare-earth battery resources.

Given how often the Swiss were refusing to release funds to new sovereigns though, and the rumors of how far their international banking business had collapsed, there was widespread speculation they'd been living out of other people's pockets and probably didn't have the funds to disperse even if they wanted to.

How the mighty have fallen!

Speaking of news, my not-quite, sorta and just-for-the-moment roommate had some curious reactions when we bumped into coverage of her own story on the Feeds. Professed no interest in what the heads had to say about her background (vagrant, disruptor, welfare princess and grifter being some of the kinder names she was called) or their legal analysis (the typical carefully-staged arguments over both her actions and how their consequences had been determined) but certainly perked up whenever any image was displayed. Her own mug shot received a long-drawn 'shi...', while anything showing her in shackles and cuffs got a snort of proud defiance. The one shot of India B arguing her lackadaisical defense engendered a visible slow burn and muttered curses, while views of me standing up to negotiate the CIL process with Judge Judith brought a smile to her face every time. Did my best to take that as sign of rough affection, but one member of my cranial committee was fairly fearful she was actually finding me faintly ridiculous.

As for the reaction her acquittal was generating out in Counties, I have to admit neither of us paid much attention to those reports, high as we were on the relative comfort and serenity of even my bottom-tier Center lifestyle.

—

Was cheerfully listing some of those shareholder perks to Mutt when our earlier conversation took on a new relevance, thanks to Richard showing up at my door!

Once my initial fluster wore off, I recalled his visit had been agreed to a week or so before and I'd definitely logged it in my calendar, which should have reminded me an hour earlier via every machine in the flat (it was just one room, for dog's sake!). Later I'd check back and confirm an event had been entered, but later deleted. Perhaps when Mutt was getting intimate with my tech while I was sleeping peacefully, four floors below?

However it occurred, the situation left me no way to avoid them getting acquainted, especially as Mutt had shifted into pseudo-Center marketing mode.

"Jack has told me so-oo much about you, M Richard," she said, sidling over to shake his hand, "and I'm thrilled to make your acquaintance."

Have to also point out that by this point she'd been into my drawers (not those; the ones built into an alcove beside the bathroom doorway) and helped herself to some clean clothes. True to form she'd stuck to basic black in leggings and a cami-top (sans bra, allowing her girls to roam freely, which I noticed Richard noticing right off). Have to admit my clothes flattered her considerably more than the old polyester sundress I'd thrown on did

me, which, along with whatever intimacy Richard read into the wardrobe sharing, may have contributed to his frostiness as I explained who and why my house guest was.

“How long you going to be staying?” he asked Mutt, who took his bluntness as cue to relax back into type.

“No eye-deer,” she shrugged, before heading out the door to “check ou’ tha’ fancy roof place y’ tol’ ‘bout. Le’ you two ge’ a ‘quainted ‘gain.”

Well.

Soon as she’d left, Richard proceeded to give me an earful on the dangers of harboring a criminal. When I pointed out the terms of the CIL settlement meant she was no longer any such thing, he countered that by my own admission she’d come into Center under false pretenses. And that she could have any number of other compromising chapters in her file, besides consorting with a known disruptive group.

“Disruptive? REaders?” I practically laughed at him. From what I’d learned so far, they were just a bunch of idle minds cuddling-up inside some dead author’s imagination to avoid dealing with the scummy realities of Burrows life. “Have you got any idea what it’s like out there?” I challenged, memories of my recent forays fresh in mind. The congestion, the noise; the bad air and worse smells; the lack of basic necessities and abundance of cutthroat competition for work that barely paid enough to live on? Dead-end living for people officially classed as citizens but who got none of the Muni benefits we Shareholders took for granted.

Which is when I got another lecture on just how comprehensive a Humaniculturist’s education is. How he’d already taken (and excelled in, I should remember...) high-level

courses on Muni's administrative and budgeting processes. On the sociology of our new sovereign too, including detailed economic analyses for Center, Burrows and Counties. He could recite me statistics if I wanted, for just how few hours the average rat actually worked and how much of their keep was paid for by Center - which meant by hard-working Shareholders like him.

"And you too," he pointed out for good measure before suggesting it might be time for me to consider the potential costs of getting in bed with this kid (speaking metaphorically, he insisted in response to whatever face I'd just made, though why that particular metaphor should slip through his lips at that particular moment, was not so conclusively addressed).

"Do you have any idea how closely we apprentices are watched?" he asked, in a tone that answered his own question in the negative so he could proceed to enlighten me. Aside from observation by the instructors during every class, and twice-weekly evaluation sessions with an assigned mentor, there were vid-cams monitoring every crib (using that word in the Humanicultural manner, i.e., whatever place a carer and their charges occupied for whatever time and activity, apparently unaware the term was also commonly used to denote the most sordid of brothels). Add to that the communal living situation – sleeping in-crib when shifts required it, and in a Carer's Dorm when not - and there was zero chance his association with me had flown under the radar. Or that my association with an allegedly-violent accused murderer would either.

"I don't believe you even realize what you're risking here, Jack," he said as he gathered his things, our intended dinner-out and night-in tacitly cancelled by circumstance and acrimony. "She gets into any more trouble, it'll definitely put you under the microscope,

and if you lose your position we're going to need my career even more. Have you considered that?"

It was only when he opened the door to leave that either of us learned Mutt had been standing right outside it. Pretty sure she couldn't've heard us through its heavy metal construction, but that didn't stop her from having an opinion once Richard exited, she entered, and the door was closed again.

—

"So this Richard – 'e kin' of a prick, eh?"

Which, as I write it down now, seems pretty harsh. And abso-tively out of line coming from a person I hadn't even known a month before yet had risked my financial future to help out of a jam and had then brought into my own home where she messed with my machines so she could 'accidentally' cross paths with the most significant other in my life, and yet... And yet, what I felt at that moment was a great big flush of relief that I could burst into laughter with this edgy young thing instead of really considering any of what Richard had said - or why he had chosen to say it.

"Screw Richard," I sputtered once we'd both come back to earth, "let's get our stinkin' butts out of here." Because despite my attempt to laugh them off, the fears he'd planted in my room had taken root, transforming what had previously been a safe little hobbit-hole into a sucking whirlpool of questions, among which was whether Mutt's

maneuvering to meet him meant she'd been thinking more about my romantic life than I'd ever imagined she might. Denial, once embarked upon, seemed the safest course, so I grabbed my purse, shut off the lights and followed my devious new friend to the elevators.

—

The Clever Monkey, fantasized re-imagining of an Instagram-popular hangout in some South Sea tourist destination, was a famous (locally, at least) relic of pre-Diss theme-branding. Originally intended as prototype for an entire chain of identical money-rakers, I'd been thrilled to visit the place as a teen, so was doing my best to point out its high-tech effects and immersive environment to Mutt as we shuffled along a velvet-roped maze while waiting to get in. Fascinated at first by the monkeys scampering around the roof beams, my charge seemed a bit deflated when she copped to the fact they were not real. Got back on keel right fast, tough, quipping that it was just as well they were only holo; that way they wouldn't be pooping and peeing on our heads.

Hers wasn't the only disappointment on this viewing; soon's we got inside, my eyes were drawn to scuffs of white plastic where shoes had worn down the rustic 'plank' flooring, and gaping gaps where pre-fabbed plastic wall panels had been bowed by their own weight. Shiny grey grime had colonized crevices and corners, and I could hear a distracting mechanical buzzing in the audio each time we moved from one speaker zone to another. Fortunately, Mutt seemed not to hear that, listening raptly to the narration as we shuffled past

monitors hyping the club's creation - all laser-scanning, AI engineering and computer-controlled 3-D-printer prefabrication.

I missed a bit of narration then, as an overburdened server came by hawking drinks in slightly-worn polyethylene coconuts; Mutt thrilled to accept a rum with authentic Coke, while I ventured something called an Arak Attack in hopes of silencing my Richard-induced demons. Drinks which were well on their way to empty by the time we reached the front of the line and were led into the dramatic main space, dim and cavernous thanks to fake-rock walls punctuated with clusters of broad-leafed tropicals in perpetual plastic bloom. Beneath the arching limbs of enormous fiberglass 'Banyan trees' our guide we wound us between crammed tables lit by electric 'torches' to skirt the throngs crowding an enormous circular bar, their shouted conversations thrumming in competition with the percussive electronica that passed for 'local' music. Once we'd been seated I pulled-up the rest of that promo vid on our faux-rattan table's integrated sales machine so Mutt could catch the climactic close-shot: a founder's hairy-knuckled finger clicking-in the command that fired up the entire Clever Monkey facility. Narration claimed they'd let the first people in only four hours after assembly of the interior was completed, without even testing to see that it all worked.

"Pretty pluckin' sure of themselves, back then," was Mutt's reaction to the boast, and suddenly I was on the defensive.

"But it worked," I pointed out, waving at the illusion all around us - and hoping she hadn't noticed the flaws that I'd caught. "Just like our korps' tech keeps everything else in Center working, not to mention generating offshore income so we can all have food and a roof, when there's nothing but chaos outside."

Well, I guess that last bit came off like a diss at her world, because it unleashed a

passionate riff on how Center ripped-off Burrowers – and Counties too. Hiring their peeps to come in and work for just exactly as long as their labor was needed, whether a month or a day or an hour. Paying ‘em for precisely the time they were producing – not the hours it took to get in and out of Center, to set-up for work or clean-up after. Food and bathroom breaks exactly to the law, and at the end of the day sending ‘em back to beyond till it needed them again.

“Grinds ya’ down t’ a-solute zip, m’a,” Mutt ragged as our server – a Burrows commuter no doubt, allowed inside for eir shift only to be bused out as soon as e’d served eir employer’s need – brought another round of drinks and a plate of MadeMeat ‘wings’ I’d ordered through the tabletop. Paused her rant long enough to pick up a wing and switch her verbal code to match my ears, before continuing. “And all the while you pretty-city people are living off what *our* work produces. No wonder once in a while some banger gets ripped and flings a rock at yer windows.”

I’d heard all those arguments before, of course; anyone had, who paid attention to the Feeds. Heard the counter-arguments too, every time a Board of Directors seat came up for election, but Mutt quickly lost interest as I quoted them back to her. Was far more occupied by watching a couple of fems dancing together beneath a sky of ever-changing disco lights. The smaller of the two was clearly out of it, rubbing her hands on the other one’s buns like they weren’t in full view of two hundred strangers, but the partner’s expression suggested she didn’t mind. My eyes must’ve been suggesting something too, as they followed Mutt’s to the pair, because my young charge suddenly broke a smile and slapped me on the shoulder.

“Ye’ gon’ star’ drooling,” she roared, “ye’ don’ shu’ tha’ mouth.” Took a deep draw on her cocktail and a cock of the head before continuing. “I may be starting to get a handle

on you after all, *man*.”

“It’s M’a, if you don’t mind,” I snapped, not pleased to be dissected when we should’ve been relaxing into the Monkey’s party atmosphere. “Don’t stuff me in any of your Burrow boxes.”

“Well, yes. Of course, M,” Mutt came back, pointedly precise in her pronunciation, but just as quick and hard. “Wouldn’t want me to know who I’m dealing with!

“What’a be the fun in tha’?” she muttered to herself, rising up and barging through the crowd to join that dancing couple, one hand on a shoulder of each, fitting to their rhythm in an instant and receiving in return a smile from the taller and more-nearly sober of the two.

I sipped and munched for a few minutes, gratified to see how quickly my escapee grew visibly bored with her new partners, then felt a flush of resentment when the petite fem, who had seemed so out of it before, grabbed Mutt by the glutes and planted a bold smurch on her lips, much to the umbrage of her companion. Two of them made it up quick enough, though, and were back into clutch-mode by the time Mutt had covered the distance to our table and snatched up her coconut, smiling down at me like she’d just scored a big point in some game I hadn’t even realized we were playing.

Not wanting Mutt to get too comfortable again, I hit SETTLE on the tabletop, charging the tab to my ID (and doubling my usual tip in honor of our little social-justice debate).

The Clever Monkey’s Lair - aka ‘overpriced souvenir shop’ - was an unavoidable increment of the exit path and painfully bright as Mutt insisted on examining its bobble-heads and logocrap, but my attention was more taken by a glossy talking-picture booklet

titled *End of the Clever Monkeys?* Skipping to its final page, I heard that within twelve months of this first location's opening, trade and border disputes due to the unfolding Diss prevented MonkeyCo from sourcing new 3-D printers, resin or software updates, making it impossible to repeat the club's manufacturing process. As a result, the establishment in which we were standing was the last of its kind. "An enlightening parallel with the great extinctions of the Mesozoic Era..." the souvenir's Marlboro-voiced audio-narrator wondered ominously, "or just poor timing?"

"Who the clever monkeys now?" Mutt cracked over my shoulder before I could shove the audio-book back into its rack.

We took in three or four other clubs after that, each one working hard to be totally unique and ending up feeling very much like all the others - flashy and loud and past their prime. Made it back to my place before two AM – Mutt finally showing some sign of human limitations when the elevators refused to work and we had to climb nine flights to my place. Kid was not too tired, though, to toy with me as I scanned my Lyfe to find out what rent-a-bed I'd been booked into for what was left of the night.

"Still playin' tha' game?" she whispered, breath sweet with rum and sugar as a fingertip traced the small of my back – palpable enough I first felt it as intentional, but soft enough I could convince myself in the next heartbeat that it had been an accident - one of the 'waiting to happen' variety – at which point I smiled a weak one and hurried out the door before either of us could investigate any further.

—

Sleep was slow in coming that night, as my brain searched and searched to recall what it was had originally attracted me to Richard. The security I felt with him around was certainly on attraction. Wanting to recapture how safe and certain the world had seemed back when Duncan was still alive - and Priscilla's mind still firing on all cylinders. Would like to think my masc-friend's sense of purpose was a bigger draw; how deeply he believed in what Muni did for its peeps, and how sincerely he wanted to contribute to that. A mission I maybe felt worth supporting? Time goes on though, and after enough of it, the urge to serve can merge into the need to lead which then evolves into the conviction that you know better than anyone else what needs to be done about everything and suddenly serving begins to look a lot like ruling.

(It was Richard who found me my apartment, btw, after weeks of badgering me to move out of the place I'd been sharing with two old school friends he said were a bad influence...)

—

Dramatic news the next morning: Les Estates General du Quebec had invaded the Alliance of Eastern Seaboard States once again – this time with heavy armor and land-based artillery. Claimed it was a 'proportional response' to the Alliance blockading the St. Lawrence River to divert shipping to its own ports instead of the Frenchies'. Seaboard (a

recent hook-up between several of the original thirteen ‘states’ which was said to operate sort of like the old Continental Congress) tried to excuse the blockade with some flak about unidentified guerrilla forces monkey-wrenching their overland transport corridor but truth be told it was all just business-as-usual: two old-boys’ clubs trying to prove who had the biggest and the hardest while the unsung masses got caught in the crossfire. Plus ca change....

Feeds referred to what they called ‘Federal’ officials shuttling back and forth in hopes of negotiating a cease fire – rare indication that a downsized and humbled Uncle Sam might still be lurking somewhere out there. I’d heard rumors before that too, about several still-intact States being involved in a joint resuscitation attempt, maintaining a shared military structure while coordinating trade policies and non-aggression pacts with both EUs and any other sovereigns not completely co-opted to the PRC, Kimpire, Russkiy Mir or Hindia. Still promoting the idea as the U. S. A. (having reportedly concluded ‘The Reunited States of America’ was too downbeat and ‘The Newnion’ too Madison Avenue), this alleged conspiracy did not rate a motto yet, but that hadn’t stopped one Feed-head from smugly suggesting that ‘We Are Not Yet Dead!’ would be a good contender.

None of that movement had reached this far west though, so the only way our neck of the woods would be involved in the Quebec affair was if Muni decided to lend-lease some Players to either of the sides – or both. Could mean deployment for thousands of grunts, which is classed as a home run: Muni gets revenue from whomever they fight for, Players get deployment bonuses and real-life (and -death) experience, plus the korps get to charge medical-services fees on any casualties either side’s managers deem valuable enough to ship here for reconditioning.

Sounds like winners all the way down, if you think the way our execs do.

—

Given our little pre-bedtime flutter, I wasn't surprised next morning, when Mutt's curiosity finally got the better of her. To her credit, she was reasonably polite, though the effort came across as mostly just awkward, which I put down to her lack of prior experience with being either reasonable or polite, rather than to her having any actual inhibition about the specific topic she was raising.

"So, uh...yr' - *your* - name really is Jack, right? Na' short fer...like, Jackie, maybe, or Jack-a-lynn?"

"Nope. Jack is just Jack."

Kid pondered that for a moment, took a sip of Pepsi™ and smooshed it a couple laps around the inside of her mouth before swallowing, slowly, with deep concentration.

"Jack's a nickname!" she came back; proudly, like the student who suddenly realized she knew the answer to the teacher's first question on the first day of a new class. "For John. So yer really a John!"

"Yeah, Mutt. I'm a john," I drawled back, sounding the words deep-down in my chest and gruffing them up like I was hawking beer or pick-up trucks. "Just like all those 'johns' you met growing up in the Fu House, right?"

That got the smile I was hoping for. Not embarrassed, quite, but trending in that general direction.

“Is jus’... Shi’, grl...” she interrupted herself, “You firs’ come see me: tigh’ pants ‘n soft face’n’all? I fig’red you f’r some swishy boy sort. Then I see y’ in court tha’ day, ‘n ever since, all girly as...shi’ M! I don’ kno’ *who* you are.”

Like I said; no surprise we’d ended up there. Ever since the first time I saw her smile, a part of me had wanted to get closer to that dangerous blend of feral-cat and playful kitten, and getting close always raises questions. Though I’d been hoping maybe with her backstory - Fu House and streets and squat and all - Mutt wouldn’t feel the need for words. No such luck.

Once the question does come up, I’ve always got a choice to make before responding: long story or short? Experience has taught that the long story (which starts at first memories and continues past tomorrow), is almost certainly *not* what they’re after.

No, in general, I’ve found shorter is what they’re after.

“ ‘Who I am’ is all of that, dude! I’ve gotta deal with some warriors who think they’re the baddest bad in town? I let their eyes tell ‘em I’m no competition. Going in front of some Judge whose whole life is making rules for other peeps to follow? I pick a look that says ‘I *love* to follow rules.’ And when I don’t need anything from anyone, when I’m with friends or on my own, I play with every toy that’s out there - light and grace and color and touch and flow and flash... If you call that looking ‘all girly’ or whatever, then *that’s* who I am.”

The grunt that little speech received, I took as indication the short answer wasn’t

going to cut it for this audience. Recalling Mutt's earlier diatribe about how dividing people into us/them binaries led to all things evil, I dove in there, pointing out that the he/she boxes were no better than any other boxes because 'person' and 'human' *have* no gender. Moved on from there to explain my rationale for calling the images I adopted 'boy' mode and 'girl' mode: that those words felt more fluid and open and, most importantly, avoided claiming the title of Woman or Man without the years-slash-decades of challenge and struggle some peeps felt they'd had to endure in order to earn those. By that time though, it was clear my interrogator was in no mood for philosophy.

"Bu' which are y' really?" she challenged, with more heat than curiosity.

"So," I countered, matching her intensity and raising it several degrees: "What you really want to know is 'what's between my legs', right?"

"No!" Mutt protested before exhausting all her impatience in a single huff. "'S jus'..." A shift in the chair, shouldering herself away from me, then another shift, back to full frontal. "Yeah," she admitted, accusingly. "We're friends now...maybe. So, yeah, I kin' a' need t' know what you are - the real you?"

"As if I knew!"

(Honestly, I wasn't trying to make fun of her question, but the glare I received suggested that's what she'd heard, so I immediately doubled back.)

"*Of course* I know what's inside my own pants; but I also know *that* isn't who I am. Day to day - hour to hour, minute to minute - hell, even in the same instant, I 'am' and I 'am not,' and everything in-between. Best I can do is be straight and not deny it. Anyone who

can accept that about me – see me as simply a person, not either a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’ - I hold close and dear. Anyone who can’t is... is as alien to me as I guess I must be to them.”

—

Which seemed to end the discussion, until late in the evening, as I was wrapping up a last bit of work before heading off on my nightly self-exile. Out of the blue, Mutt slapped down the graphic novel I’d bought her and circled back to the topic of the day, venturing “can I ask you a question?” in the no-big-deal kind of mumble that always triggers me into a reflexive roadblock.

“Whatta you wanna know?” I drolled back.

“If we...,” she stumbled. “Was to...like, ge’ ‘involve,’ ‘r somethin’?”

“Sex?”

“Yeah,” she admitted, with a shy reluctance I found especially touching, given where she’d spent her childhood!

“So...what...?” I began. “You want to have my baby?”

Mutt looked like she’d just sat in something foul. “No, I...ahh...NO!”

“Oh, I get it, you were hoping maybe *I* would have *your* baby?”

Which, by the silence that followed and the expression on her face must’ve confused her as much as angered, so I moved-on-back a square.

“I’m a person, you’re a person. If we know each other and like each other, and we want to play together - and neither one of us is hoping to make a baby - what does it matter what flavors we are?”

Silence for a while, and not the comfortable kind, so we sat a bit longer, me staring blankly at the documents I had open on my desk machine, Mutt looking off into space with the graphic lying idly in one hand, till suddenly she piped up again.

“Your Richard?” she started in gently - for her - and when I grunted that I was listening, continued. “He know what flavor you are?”

“He knows if he wants babies he’s not getting them from me,” I shot back; one version of the stock answer I’d given over the years to similar inquiries from acquaintances, friends and soon-to-be-ex friends.

For whatever reason, that seemed to end the discussion.

—

Was only later that evening, after I’d locked myself into another familiar-looking home with the unfamiliar smells of someone else’s foods and toiletries and bodily processes, that I checked messages and found one from Oduor. Wouldn’t normally’ve called back at that hour, except I figured any geek foolish enough to follow the words ‘call me’ with ‘**ANYTIME**’ in all-caps and boldface deserved what they got.

“This about the money-shuffle?” I asked after we’d traded some predictable jibes about which was the real night owl between the two of us.

“Not exactly,” was the junior exec’s answer, followed by a caution that his news might be a bit upsetting. Once I’d assured him I was sitting down (a lie - I’d been lying down, but had gotten up again as we talked and was now prowling around searching this

other person's flat for a clean pillowcase), he advised that the Kounty Kiings were well and truly pissed about Mutt getting off.

"Was aware of that, thanks," I offered, shouldering my Lyfe to my ear as I checked the bathroom drawer where I store linens in my identical layout. "Must've been when I saw them flashing long guns as we rode away from Lincoln Hall." Not to mention when I got a back-charge from RydeKorp for what was labelled on the reference image as 'POSSIBLE BALLISTIC IMPACT DAMAGE (oblique).'

And that was *before* the money had been seized, Oduor pointed out, prior to sharing something I *didn't* already know.

"That night at that house, Jack? When the folks who'd set up the pre-cyclers for a fall learned their goons had killed that lady, Grace? They realized instead of branding REaders as petty criminals their stunt was going to make a martyr of her. Couldn't have that, of course, so they decided they needed a casualty on the KK's side."

"You're not going to tell me they killed my sister just to slant the feeds," I warned, my nascent anger changing to confusion when he answered with a chuckle.

"Not to worry, even these people aren't that cold," he assured me. "Truth is, we have no idea where Vincent was that night – but she certainly wasn't in that pre-cycle house." Sig-int, he explained, in reference to some unspecified intelligence which Illicit Affairs had recently acquired, confirmed that the murder Mutt'd been charged with was a total fabrication, as were those images Etienne had so readily handed over to me. Since the REaders hadn't actually off'd anyone, whoever was in charge decided to have the KK militants fake a death and, assuming rightly that none of the real goons would be willing to permanently disappear so they could slap his name on their imaginary casualty, they needed

another identity. Vincent's had been pulled from an old Missing Persons list.

“Must've thought he – they hadn't realized yet that this particular 'Vincent' was fem! – must've thought 'he' was a good choice because 'his' only living relative was some insignificant intern in a dead-end of Muni's bureaucracy.”

Aside from resenting that characterization, and aside from a frisson of relief my sister was not actually dead, I was mostly thrilled that this meant the KK goons no longer had any reason to come after Mutt. To which Oduor countered that the KK's were not about to admit they'd been playing along with such a dumb lie. No, since everyone in Counties already 'knew' that one of their brothers had been killed and the killer let loose on a technicality, they needed to keep up the pretense by evening the score, else their manhood would be worth less than a perforated condom. And “we,” which I guess could have referred to IA, MSS or all of Muni and the korps, could not afford to piss off Counties at the moment - for reasons the P. A's tone made clear he was not about to share with me.

“Bottom line, the Kiings are hotter than ever to put this episode behind them, which cannot be good for your girl, 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...

TO BE CONTINUED IN INSTALLMENT FOUR

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