

E Unum Pluribus

- a tale of The Big Diss

INSTALLMENT TWO

A Novel by Robin Andrew

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

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CONTINUED FROM INSTALLMENT ONE:

...the girl seemed confident as she handed my Lyfe back with a warning.

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

—

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

“My guess?” he whispered, leaning close as if to keep things confidential, though there were only a few-dozen residents scattered around the vast dining space at that hour. “The IR is about to become the IRP.” The finality with which he offered that tidbit, fork stirring a mug of steaming zatz before he picked it up for a loud slurp, made clear what a big deal this must be.

Nowhere near as on top of world affairs as Heir, I did at least know that the IR, or Indo-Rus alignment, was not so much an entity as a tendency; a semi- and only

sometimes-reliable sympathy of goals and means between the powerful Republic of India ('Hindia' to its detractors; but never to its face) and the Russkiy Mir Federation (as the Soviet Union's reincarnation had become known since our own leaders' savaging of NATO allowed Vlad the Inhaler to snort up all three Baltic states). There'd been hints for some time that the two powers were considering a more formal arrangement, speculatively referred to as the Indo-Rus Pact, hence the IRP acronym. Aside from linking the sub-continent's ever-growing labor force and info-tech to the northern empire's resource-extraction behemoth, this was no doubt intended to give them more heft in dealings with the PRC now that it had inked free trade and technology-sharing agreements with Kimpire, the Islamic Republic and Brazil.

"Hindians've been among my best customers," Hieronymus added sadly, popping a bit of soy-sausage into his mouth to be chewed as he continued. "They get all the way into bed with Vladimir, they'll have to toe his line on anything gay or trans. Still," he offered, running a finger around his plate to harvest the last traces of grease and salt as he countered his own argument, "...it could create plenty of opportunities - for the right kind of people."

Making a quick exit on excuse of a pressing deadline, I assured myself that Heir's 'right kind of people' remark was not a dig at my in-betweenism, so much as an expression of concern for his own future. True, the Russky's were famously narrow-minded; if they had any say in India's business relations after such a coupling was consummated, queer persons would be the last candidates for marketing to their nearly two billion combined purchasers. I was pretty sure Hieronymus would be OK, though.

He held no secrets among friends but had obviously identified young and taken every advantage of Muni's medical services, so I was confident his offshore clients had no idea they were bellying up to the bar with a fe-man.

Between having taken Friday afternoon off to enjoy the CA33's hospitality at the Blue Bunny and needing to address two new asks that had come in while I was doing so, my Saturday turned into a workday, meaning it was early evening by the time I set out for the Mutt girl's home, that 'squat' she'd referred to with such pride. Having experienced Burrows on that first visit, I thought I was prepared for its chaos and disorder as my Ryde (billed once again to Division's account, thank you, M Weiss-Jabbar) generated a route out Alta Gate into Burrow Six, then along Midland Avenue, a major commuting corridor we found to be majorly congested even on a Saturday evening.

Where before I'd seen only fraying and decay, our slower progress this trip allowed me to notice something different: a creeping counterattack of new insertions, organic and opportunistic - like mold consuming an unmaintained bathroom. Any space that had previously been empty – a parking lot surplussed when its building was repurposed, safety buffer around a powerline tower, triangular sliver of space in front of a concrete retaining wall – all had now been colonized. As my Ryde detoured two blocks over to Grand in hope of escaping the congestion, the infilling intensified, with every

second cross street to the west bariered and occupied by bandit buildings. Boxy and nearly windowless, their walls had been held a foot or two out from the old curbs, leaving narrow gutters as full now of trash and stagnant fluid as the airspace above them was with a spiderweb of cables pirating juice and signal from legitimate buildings. One, two, even three stories tall, these make-do mansions were cobbled out of concrete block and corrugated steel at best, plywood and tar-paper more often, and universally slapdash. Those piles of demolition debris I'd noticed on my first trip? I realized now they'd been *stockpiles* – salvaged wreckage waiting to be re-used!

The only professional-looking new constructions were spaced four or five blocks apart; featureless single-story bunkers with Confluence's sovereign seal and bold 'MUNI-SANI' signs above their entrances, long lines of fidgety customers evidencing a pressing demand no free-market effort would ever have met. As did the even longer lines at the adjacent SafeWater dispensers - though I knew it had taken a cholera outbreak three summers back to spur our korps to fund either of those interventions.

Maybe it was the hour, I thought, as the vehicle's display updated our route almost continuously, or possibly the gaping pits and rutted dirt-patches where pavement had been ripped up and never replaced, but the farther we went, the slower my vehicle's progress became until eventually the blue triangle indicating our location on the vehicle's display was surrounded in every direction by pulsing red gridlock. "Security forces report a disturbance blocking roads around selected destination – deviation from schedule unavoidable and not calculable," my interface announced without sympathy or alternative.

"Pedestrian mode?" I asked, and a yellow line appeared on the map, winding

crazily through its jumble of buildings jammed jowl to cheek. “Exterior environment unsafe,” the interface advised. “Dangers and threats exist which are neither displayable nor quantifiable – and not subject to compensation.” Snapping an image of the dash display on my Lyfe, I told the car I was willing to chance it. Pressing a thumbprint to accept the screen’s disclaimer of liability, I hit the hatch release and stepped out into the teeming mass of metal and humanity. Heat radiating off combusting engines intensified the still-torrid dusk as I squeezed sideways between fenders and bumpers till I could skirt a barrier and join the sidewalk parade, instantly aware of how boldly I stood out.

Inspired by Mutt’s aesthetics, I’d costumed in ripped and sagging black jeans, oversized denim work shirt and a classic black and silver RAIDERS cap, but was still too well-coordinated, too recently laundered and just too damned innocent-looking to really blend in on these lean streets.

Darkness was coming down quickly as I followed the map image on my machine, dodging and weaving through the oblivious multitude, my ‘excuse me’s’ and apologies lost in a boiling rainbow of languages and emotional states. A boil of the olfactory sort as well: my nostrils assaulted by the reek of stagnant gutters, stank of sweaty bodies and the omnipresent grace note of petro-machine exhaust. Was grateful then, to have all those temporarily papered-over by an open shop door’s outbreak of incense, its reprieve cut short as I stumbled over a sidewalk-sleeper wrapped in rags and a skunk of stale piss. Moments later that aura too was replaced, this time by the primal-trigger pheromones of charring meat emanating from an alcove where sooty flames licked from holes punched around the top of a steel-drum grille.

Not far past that, I glimpsed the disturbance my Ryde had warned of: pedestrians

filling every space between vehicles log-jammed into an intersection. Flashing light-bars of MSS vans faced a dense and central clump of humanity that seemed to pulse and churn from within. A bullhorn hollering over the chaos told me some citizens were headed for lock-up tonight, if not emergency medical care. Wanting no part of that, I made the turn indicated on my machine's map to stutter-step through the rubble of a burned-out mid-block shell to get around the melee.

Spit out through a jagged hole where the shell's rear entrance must've once lived, I reached a set of railroad tracks, their right of way carving a crisp arc through the grid of city streets. Whatever safety-buffer had once existed either side of the rails was now crowded down to almost nothing by a festive enclave with a personality all its own. Ramshackle but brightly-colored huts, sun-bleached tents and teetering sheds serving as shop stalls all pressed to within a few feet of the rails, their abundance of customers, residents and who-all coming and going loud and carefree as could be, crisscrossing the railroad tracks at will. The sun was decidedly down by that point and the dark windows overlooking it all confirmed Muni power'd been shut off for the night, but this trackside marketplace was a bazaar of light and color: gas and kerosene lanterns glowing with amber flames, the scattered hum of generators powering strings of miniature lamps encased in plastic novelty shells - chili peppers, baby ducks, palm trees and Santa Clauses. One stall even featured fluorescent tubes hung vertically from overhead wires like glowing swords of Damocles about to drop. The space was filled with sound as well; music competing with chatter and argument, random commands shouted and obscure complaints shared, their polyphony punctuated by the clanging and chopping of kitchens in full swing as the unfamiliar aromas of their output set my mouth to watering. Skirting

one cluster of peeps, I glimpsed between them the hellish glow of a pit of coals, hissing, and sizzling in the vacant space between two hovels whose forms were outlined in flickering pinpricks reflected off bits of broken mirror dangling from their eaves.

Not far beyond, I reached my map line's end. The set of corroded steel steps leading up to a battered concrete landing would've been a total headscratcher, if not for a graffiti-style logo splashed across the two-story brick box it backed. Multicolored and shadowed for 3-D effect, highlighted in reflective silver that glistened with borrowed light, that sign must've been twenty feet across. With its middle chopped out by a freight door's being rolled partway up, '***Jun and***' was all I could make out, but enough to bring to mind those characters Mutt had typed into my machine: 'Jun and ail I.' Even so, I was still not sure this was my destination till I noticed a much smaller sign beside the door. '**AIL I – Us Fron or**,' that one said, some of its utilitarian block letters peeled away and others faded to oblivion, but what was left confirmed my vehicle's software had brought me to the right place. '***Jungleland***,' must've been the name of a bar or club once located in the building. As for '**NAIL IT**', whose management had once directed customers to '**Use Front Door**'? Normally I'd've been intrigued by a mani-pedi parlor with such a feisty moniker, but the fact Mutt hadn't known enough to just give me the names of the two businesses suggested neither was serving its public these days. Regardless, her info had been sufficient for Ryde's vis-nav system to get me here and that was enough for me now to brave squint-eyes from a quartet of hoodie-huddled loiterers sprawled on the steps as I made my way over, through and round 'em to

scoot beneath the freight-door's bottom edge.

Once inside, borrowed light revealed a receiving area nearly filled by stacks of boxes and piles of bags spilling out old clothing and housewares. A narrow aisle led me through to a central hallway at whose far end the building's glazed front entry cribbed enough light from the front street for me to make out one door on the left with 'STORE' slashed across it and, to the right past the foot of a narrow staircase with railing patched and crooked, a second door, lit from the other side and bearing the words 'THere be **MAGIC** Here,' in crimson lettering at eye level and 'YOU'VE BeeN WARNED,' below. My first two knocks went unanswered but after a third the door was opened several inches and a young fem face appeared, silhouetted by weak light from within.

Negotiations followed as I explained that I was neither warrior, thief nor cop, but a friend of someone who lived there, receiving in return the dull shirk and grunted "Yeah?" of a practiced skeptic at just the moment I realized the loiterers from outside had followed me in and were now clustered uncomfortably near my back.

"She tol' me t' tel ya,'" I offered then, feeling cheeks flush with embarrassment as I imitated my favorite jail-bird's sheared-off speech: "Mutt sez: anyone mess 'er nes' gon' be groun' beast when she ge' back."

Despite how foolish I felt pronouncing them, those turned out to be magic words, as the fem cracked a grin of tolerant sympathy, the door opened wider and I was admitted into what was recognizably a defunct beauty salon, storefront windows painted out to shield from the street its jumble of mis-matched sofas, chairs and tables supporting at least a dozen bodies in various attitudes of conversation, reading, dozing and sleep.

The announcement I'd used the name of their fellow squatter brought those

denizens to attention as I was led to the most open part of the space, where a strip of plywood laid across several hair-washing basins supported an improvised kitchen of camp stoves, water jugs and ice-chests. Turning up the single light source, a hissing gas lamp dangling from the old ceiling grid, my escort revealed a gathering that defied easy categorization – a few young fems looked still to be in school years, two others were around my age and at least one was clearly closer to my grandmother's. The only two persons I read as masc would both've been ready for retirement if the whole concept of 'retirement' hadn't been put out to pasture by the upheaval of recent years. Overall, my impression was of an over-extended family, and given the variety of complexions and features, a family related by something other than blood. All told, there must've been twenty sets of eyes and ears on me by the time I finished explaining where Mutt was and what she faced. As independent and alone as the prisoner had portrayed herself, the sighs and expletives my story elicited suggested these folks were plenty concerned about her predicament.

Once I'd exhausted the little information I had (and admitted I couldn't answer most of the questions they threw at me), a lantern-jawed androgynous I heard addressed as 'Connie' took it upon herself to lead me back out the door and up the stairs to where some ex office spaces had been commandeered for communal living. Tarps and blankets draped cubicles whose desks now sported sleeping bags, backpacks, duffles and other worldly possessions, while stretches of open wall had been decorated with cartoons and graffiti and assorted mystic-looking symbols – pentagrams and triangles, rainbows, stars, skulls and others I had no name for. In all that chaos and disorder, the tiny room to which I was led stood out like a crisply ironed shirt in a basement-bar's mosh-pit: scores

of paper-age books filled a tall shelf unit, sorted by hard or soft bindings and size before being carefully aligned with every spine facing out and every title reading right-side up. Graphic novels, comic books and zines, too, had been grouped and bundled and formed into towers that leaned against one another for support, while along the farthest wall lurked stacks of pre-diss electronica including what must've been the holy grail of a scavenger's life: easily a dozen golden-era 'laptop' machines (!), their coiled power-supplies and other gewgaws spilling from a half-crushed Bunker's Box perched on top of them. Grinning at my confused expression, Connie made a crack about 'Mutt's life's savings,' then rummaged behind the tallest tower of Mutt's hoard and came out holding a white plastic bag with handle loops tied tightly, its big red bulls-eye logo abraded just short of oblivion.

"Bug-bag," e announced proudly, handing it over before guiding me back downstairs, where several folks crowded the front hall of their little enclave.

"Tell Mutt to keep on believing," Connie said as another squatter unlocked the hallway's front door, which she advised was used only rarely, out of fear too many comings and goings might bring unwanted attention to their squat. That said, she made a remark that drew a dissonant chorus from the crowd stretching back into the salon/common room. Like the closing of a public prayer, each voice in its own emotion and accent so they all added up to some sort of grand power-mumble; only here they weren't saying 'Amen,' or even 'God Bless.' No, these folks - who I just then realized must belong to that 'Faithful REaders' movement that was all over the news lately - were saying something I'd not heard before. "Trust the Magic," they called out three times,

every voice intent and earnest

‘Trust the Magic?’ I muttered as I headed off down the murky street toward home. Who did they think they were kidding?

As if that was going to help a kid with a one-way ticket to her own murder trial!

—

Thing that began to trouble me as I made my way home and ended the day? It was way too easy. I mean, Lt Etienne’d said the girl had no recorded address. The warriors holding her’d said they had no idea where she lived; even the County charge sheet had a big bold blank-o-rama in the ‘ADDRESS’ box. Had no one even asked the question, I wondered, or had she shut them all out only to open-up to me – and if so, why T F?

—

“It’s none of your business, Jack. And you know it...”

So said one of our running crew, Austen, when I shared my thoughts Sunday morning after forty laps around the roof of our building (run *inside* the safety fence erected when the building was converted to residential use; Muni valuing our physical safety perhaps, but possibly just focused on avoiding wrongful death claims...). A decidedly-fem resident of the twelfth floor whom I’d met when I saw her moving-in on a

day the elevators were kaput and with whom I'd bonded with during the subsequent sweat-fest, Austen was also an early bird who insisted we get our miles in while the fiery-furnace that rules our sky was still low and its potential to impact her complexion negligible.

“If she’s not going to tell you what happened with your sister, then forget about her. I mean, you’ve been known to pursue some dicey prospects, Jack, but a burrow-squatter up on a murder charge? Sounds like way more trouble than she could possibly be worth.”

I tried to explain there was nothing romantic about this, and nothing sexual either. “I mean, this kid’s actively working to make herself as unattractive as possible. Maybe that’s what I want to get to the bottom of: why someone with a face that could launch all sorts of ships is trying so hard to deny it.”

Which was when Austen gave me her version of a lecture I received at least twice a year from one friend or another: how I needed to realize that a girl can’t afford to shine her light toward any face she doesn’t one-hundred-percent know and two-hundred-percent trust. How even a friendly half-grin at the wrong person or the wrong moment can suck you into a relationship you don’t want and can’t hardly get out of. Or worse: get you slut-shamed, assaulted, raped or killed.

“Been known to happen, Jack,” Austen wrapped up, squirting a water bottle down the back of her neck. “Even in Center, it still happens, so out in Burrows –hell yeah with yucks on top. ‘No-woman’s-land’ out there. Counties too, girl, which means you’d better be very, very careful if you go any further with this curiosity. Peeps out there get an idea how many sides of the coin you flip to, things’re gonna get real, real fast.”

—

“These REaders people...” Lalia Kende-Silver instructed as e wagged a finger at the other hosts on an archived episode of the 775 *CONSIDERS* program I pulled up later that morning (while sipping a mug of soy-bev with a dash of Flavor-all espresso powder in memory of the real thing). Kende-Silver was explaining how the Faithful REaders and their magic were getting more attention than a lot of other cranks lately, because their claims seemed to threaten the ruling factions in some other sovs.

“What they’re saying is that people all through time have believed in magic, but whenever any group got big or settled enough for things to get political, the control freaks among them realized if they gave that magic some special name they could claim it as their own. Thousands of years and hundreds of cultures: the top peeps in all those different places made up their proprietary lists of gods and whenever something happened they couldn’t explain, the honchos said it was ‘The Gods,’ and then the leaders put their own words into the mouths of those Gods to tell the other peeps how to behave. Then later, when some of the new religions changed it up by saying there’s only one God...”

At which point Emerald Legat, the show’s token mascu-ingenu, cut in and completed the REaders’ argument that “...they still all credited their version of The One with the same magical powers as the old oracles had been claiming for *their* entire cast of gods.”

Someone must’ve signaled them then that it was time to break because Demos

Hassan cut in to lob the zinger before they went to the ads.

“These ‘REaders’ folks say, why not cut out the middle-men and accept the plain truth – that Magic with a capital ‘M’ exists. Always has and always will and that’s what you should believe in and where you should be looking for help and hope and all.”

The in-studio audience was not happy about that, I tell you.

Any more than I was happy about chomping sorghum toast at breakfast – I cannot wait for the day when the korps’ purchasing folks source us some real wheat-flour again. Gonna put-in for a loaf of fluffy old white bread; soft and perfect as a marshmallow - speaking of which: all the foods and things we can’t get any more, but there’s still plenty of *marshmallows* on the dispensary shelves? What’s up with that!

Amazing how quickly we accept what we know we cannot change, I thought two hours later, as another Ryde rattled its way through Burrow Six to the Blue Bunny. On my personal account this time, which meant the system dispatched the dirtiest, most dysfunctional vehicle available; condition of said leftovers declining visibly from month to month. Only so much even the cleverest techs could do to keep the hardware tip-top when all the bits and pieces had to be sourced from other sovereignties – making said bits and pieces anywhere between scarce and totally-unavailable. This particular rig had a habit of stopping unexpectedly to re-boot its nav system and then, once it established

where it was, inching along for what seemed like forever till the safety protocols all proofed-out and authorized it to resume normal operations. I had sympathy; felt like that most mornings myself, but folks on the street around us were less tolerant - honking or slapping the bodywork while screaming what I assumed were not the kindest words in their respective languages.

Was a relief then, when it dropped me at the curb outside the Blue Bunny's parking lot, driveway being newly-blocked by the carcass of a yellow mini-van with 'Airporter Long-Term Parking' graphics. Was 'Long-Term' parked now, for sure: up on cinder blocks with wheels gone and nose stripped bare from the windshield forward, like a meatball hoagie after the first big bite. Mister Broom Handle was nowhere to be seen this time, just two other camo-dudes still navigating the slings and arrows of adolescence – apparently guarding a girl-murderer didn't demand the crew's top dawgs any more than it merited a real jail cell. Inside rm. # 223 I found the scene unchanged except for somewhat-taller stacks of trash and a heightened aura of decay. Getting no smile of recognition from the girl, I tossed the bug-bag on the bed next to her and set myself carefully into the soiled armchair beside the window.

"They went through it," I advised as she began to paw the contents. "Guys outside. Grabbed some energy bars, I think - and the folding knife."

"Shiiii..." the girl hissed, and as much as she looked like she could use some good snack, I got the feeling it was the knife she would be missing most. And the scrip tokens, of course; I'd seen one of the guards pocket a handful during his quick search. "Don't look," she ordered, standing up from the bed to extract a large wad of fabric from the bag. Which was when I realized just how small this kid was – shorter than me by a head, and

slight as well. Tiny enough but still tough enough to've made a gymnastics coach's mouth water, if only her seed had been planted in some kinder, gentler universe.

Turning away toward the (relatively) fresh air filtering in around the plywood window's gaps, I heard zippers zipping and fabric rustling, then a quashing-sound as her blood-stained coverall must've landed on one of the trash piles. More rustling as I assured the girl she had nothing to worry about, changing clothes in front of me. "I'm not like those guys out there..." I began before being harshly interrupted.

"Do' kno' wha' yer like, 'n' don' care. Turn roun' now."

My brain farted there for a bit, trying to decide if that last was an offer - '*you can turn around now*,' or actually the rude command it sounded like to my Center-grammared ears. Different vocabulary, I'd been expecting; slang and slurs, obscurities and obscenities, but the shorthand way this kid parsed-out bits of words took some getting used to. The pretentiously-enunciated "*If you really want to...*" that followed, on the other foot, was clear enough, bringing me instantly back to around age thirteen, when I'd hated everything about my own body - and hated even more the ways people looked at it. How I looked at it myself, really. Wishing I could exist without any body at all, just online and inside my head, and never see or be seen again. Turning to look, I quickly confirmed we had that much in common, judging by her chosen costume - black-satin ball-shorts that fell below the knee, tall black socks and matching plastic slide sandals, the only relief to all that midnight coming from a t-shirt whose short sleeves hung well past her elbows. White when it was born, the fabric'd been printed all over with some logo I didn't recognize, in black and gold and silver so metallic that even in that room's gloom it glinted like a jewelry store display case. Topped off with a sweat-stained cap in

matching black and gold and sitting sideways on her head. Just like Vincent, I thought immediately: full-on rejection and chuck the consequences. Not that my own straddling lines was that much better, maybe. To each eir own, and all that that implied.

A quick exchange of ‘lookin’ good and ‘thanks’ broke enough ice to be followed by some cursory bullshit about what I had done since my last visit and Mutt’s sarcastic remarks on what she had imagined herself doing: flying out to Miami for the weekend, a day at the mall, scuffling with the guards (maybe not imagined) and biting an ear off one of them (I tried not to imagine). We shared a few giggles there, which gave me the courage to ask a question I’d been pondering for some time.

Ever since the Diss had shattered the illusion of police as a nonpartial public service (in fairness, that model had survived for over two-hundred years; longer than most well-intentioned social experiments), survival in Burrows depended on either paying fees to a private security service or else having someone’s muscle at your back. The services were OK for those with deep pockets, but for the vast majority, it was basically back to earlier centuries, when belonging to some tribe had been the third necessity of life - less acute than air and water (maybe), but somewhere ahead of food and shelter. Thus, one of the first rules we Center dwellers picked up about Burrows was that every person out there had to belong to someone or something that would fight for them when – not if - necessary.

Might be who you worked for (if you had steady work) or your big extended family (if you were lucky enough to have one of those), or some other social unit: gang,

church, even the building you lived in if it held enough residents to generate a credible crew of its own. Some neighborhoods were solid enough to serve the purpose: who you were was the same as where you lived, like in those ethnic clusters that had avoided dilution – I'd heard there was a multi-block enclave of super-Orthodox refugees from the Battle of Brooklyn that had its own banks, schools and legal system. Some other religious precincts were rumored to be even more effective at protecting their own, Sharia law being little understood by outsiders but universally feared, if you cared about keeping yourself yourself.

All of which is to explain the question I'd been itching to voice. "What's your tribe?" I asked gently, thinking to break the ice, but instead got caught off guard when the kid affected not to understand what the hell I was talking about. Tipped her head and furrowed her minimal brows in a mime of total bafflement.

"It's just..." I flustered. "I mean, isn't that how it is in the Burrows? Everyone belongs to a tribe or a..."

"Yeah," she drawled, head shaking sadly as she tossed that grudging lifeline. "cep' nobod' ever call i tha'. '*Your tribe*,' " she parroted, the words coming out as some absurdly baroque proclamation, writ all in caps and lit up by a spotlight. Say what you will, the kid had a sense of humor when it suited her. 'Specially if it made me feel the fool.

" 's just .. who you are. Yer a Western Avenue Brother, or a Kick-Ass Kompany cowboy. Sixth Street Skraeling or a DS49 Elect. Sendero Luminoso Dos, Haras al-Jamhurry, Army of Karttikeya Fourth New Wave, Sheraton Gardens Guards, Costco

District Defender or... ef' in whoever it is, M'a. It's yer peeps."

Which was about the longest continuous speech I'd yet heard from her and whether it was the subject or my feeble attempt to understand her world, or just the accumulation of minutes we'd spent together, I felt a flashing frisson of something crumbling, some edifice that previously had stood between us. An opening-up that softened my image of her and made me suddenly certain that this person could not be the cold-blooded killer the legal-beagles were making her out to be.

A sensation that continued when she flipped the script, asking me who the ef *I* belonged to, and what I did when I wasn't coming around to bother her.

"Forensic accounting," I explained, taking pains not to sound too full of myself. "It's a sort of hide and seek. Someone suspects something fishy, we comb thru the fish's financials for anything that smells rotten. Find a stink? We work out who's been playing what game, and make them pay. Don't find anything? Might mean the books are clean; or might just mean they're better at hiding than we are at seeking." Fact was, that didn't happen very often, though I chose not to brag about it. Between all the forms and schedules a Muni business had to submit on a regular basis and Division's ability to search volumes of data with a few clicks, it was probably more difficult to fudge now than ever before. Most of the irregularities our investigators found were amateur graft,

some low-level grunt skimming small amounts over and over hoping someday it all added up to something that was worth the risk. That left a pattern though, and our tools were great at detecting patterns.

What I did not explain that day, and maybe should have, was my place in all of it: the lowly Intern.

And not Intern like ‘do good work for a few months and we’ll give you a real job,’ the way I’ve been told that word was once used. No, ‘Intern’ at OCD those days meant e/she/he who does what no one else wants to be bothered with, deals with what no one else wants to deal with. Lowest point on the pissing post, and staying there - in my case - forever. Of all the persons in our forensic accounting team, I was far and away the least-involved in any actual investigation. Making a vat of zatz? Good on it. Fetching four cups of the vile brew for participants in a meeting to which I was not invited? My territory again. Troubleshooting the scanner when a paper document had jammed inside its inscrutable enclosure? All mine. And running rafts of paper or an unlabeled storage device across Center when data had to be kept off our comms because an investigator was unsure who might be monitoring them for what? My wheelhouse, again.

Finding out who committed what crime and where they stashed the proceeds? Not so much.

None of which was I going to share with that prisoner, that day. Wouldn’t have enhanced my hard-nosed-detective image, I reasoned, which was the only card I could play to pull out of this Mutt character whatever it was I was hoping to pull. Omitting the

inconvenient truth also helped *me* believe that image too, btw. Because one thing my work has taught me: the most important thing when you're telling lies is believing them yourself, even if only for the time it takes to say the words.

“Bore-ing,” the prisoner proclaimed as I rambled on about generally-accepted accounting principles. Picking up a graphic-novel that’d been in the bug-bag, she leafed through its pages, their flashes of bold color and large-font exclamations catchy even to my eye. Yeah, compared to that, what I’d described must’ve sounded pretty dull - which was actually one of the things that’d kept me going after my own dreams died: once I got over my self-pity, I’d discovered I *appreciated* tedium. Tedium was an escape, it turned out, and who didn’t need an escape when your entire world had been collapsing since before you could remember. OCD’s work had rules you could rely on and a clear path from one task to another, and the feeling when I watched my co-workers pull a case together was worth all the demeaning errands and paper cuts. Would be even more worth it, I told myself, if I could copy some of their hacks to pull together Vincent’s story. If I could trace the lines of that one, find out why my sister was in that house that night and why what should have been a routine bust had escalated into a cac-fest, maybe I’d end up with something worthwhile out of all this mess.

“Jack?” a voice sounded softly, somewhere outside my day-dream.

“*Just-Jack?*” the voice tried again, reframing my own words to get my full attention. “This Mutt di’n’ shoot that bit’.”

“That *bit’* was my sister,” I shot back, allowing myself a tone of self-pity. Burrowers see themselves as underdogs, that Cultural Summary had advised, and the

more they understood you as a power figure, the less cooperation you were likely to get from them. If Mutt saw me as a victim here too, instinct told me, it might bring us a little closer.

“Sorry,” she offered, sounding the tiniest bit like she might actually mean it.

“Sorry you killed my sister?”

“No. Sorry I call your sist’ a bit’.”

“Apology accepted,” I said, aiming for sincerity this time.

“Wasn’ a ‘pology. Jus’ ‘sorry’,” she answered, matching my sullenness and raising it a notch.

“There’s a difference?”

“ ‘course there’s a duckin’ diff! Don’ know nothin’, do you?”

“I know you’re in here for killing her, and I know Vincent could be a bitch sometimes. Most of the time even. Which is why I haven’t had anything to do with her in years.

“Still,” I added, when the girl didn’t rise to those small reveals. “Security Service tells a person their only sister’s been murdered; person’s bound to have some questions.”

“Yeah?”

“Like what was she doing out there?” I offered, becoming well and truly pissed the kid was making this so difficult. “That would be a decent place to start.”

“I’m Mutt, f’ wha’t’s worth,” she detoured, eyes disappointed and accusing. “No’ tha’ ya e’n bother t’ask.”

Like I was the one being fracking anti-social!

Swallowing that resentment, I explained that I already knew her name. Had gotten it from her mug shot: “You’re Bethany Anne Joan’s,” I explained proudly, which is when I got the second lengthy speech in our brief acquaintance. From a young age, I was informed, the residents of what she called ‘the Fu House’ had taken to calling her ‘Mutt’ for the random way she’d first crawled and later toddled around their workplace, darting between the legs of recreations and recreators alike, poking her nose around half-shut doors and into just about any other place it did not belong. Mutt, also, for the complexity of her mother’s heritage and the mystery of her fathering. Once she ran off to the streets, that was how she’d introduced herself to the characters she met there: not ‘Bethany,’ not ‘Anne,’ and a big ‘truck off’ to anyone who forgot it.

Which might have been the end of my involvement with any of this. Should have been the end of it, really, because I was not finding a lot to like about this burrow rat (another nickname I found she wore with pride, btw). Petulant and mired in self-defeat, she talked like a dealer and smelled like a dumpster and refused to give me any trace of what I’d hoped she might. Would have been the end, really, except for one little moment after I stood up to pull on my jacket, which I’d thrown off in the heat and closeness of that motel hell of a jail cell.

“Guess I’d better go then,” I mumbled as I struggled one arm through the mess of the windbreaker’s bunched-up fabric.

“Give those Players ‘nother chance t’ throw their shade yer way?” she asked as my second arm failed to find its hole, the words several notches more sympathetic than any that had come before.

“Yeah, well...” I offered, twisting around and dropping a shoulder in hopes of forcing my fist through the tangle but instead managing only to wrap the jacket more tightly around myself. And pulling up a shirttail too, which left me feeling even more exposed, dog-damn it. “That’s the way it is sometimes,” I stalled, embarrassed by my clumsiness. “When you’re not exactly one thing or another.”

Hadn’t thought about what I was saying; it was just an expression I’d picked up somewhere, and found useful now and then to bring myself down a notch. Turned out to be the right expression though, as the kid looked out from under those sketchy eyebrows, bruised mouth curling into semi-pseudo pre-smile at the dawning of an insight she couldn’t help but enjoy, any more than she could avoid that enjoyment peeking through.

“Little bit o’this, little bit o’ that,” she crowed, pleasure welling enough to turn her speech into something proper and her smirk into a smile. “A little bit of everything and never quite enough of anything, M’a? Yer a stinkin’ mutt, too!”

Thing was, when she called me a mutt, it wasn’t a slur like I’d’ve taken it from any other peep who’d just met me. No, from her it was one-hundred percent compliment; fair praise and a declaration of acceptance; but even more affecting was what that smile confirmed *-that this person was animal handsome*. A knockdown-dragout natural-

attractor, if she'd only ever let it show. Growing up in a recreation house though, and then living in Burrows among the Players and the gangs, the clans and warriors and bangers of every shape and size, it was no wonder she'd fabbed herself a shell to hide in. Day and night, M'a, day and night; because walk around her world with that true face showing and she'd be red meat to every testosterone-burning carnivore on the sidewalk. And showing that side to me, calling me a mutt like her? Well, that was about as high a compliment as this young woman could give. As needful a plea, too, as she was likely to ever make; and as good an invitation as I'd received in a long, long time.

None of which occurred to me in the moment, of course. In the moment, all I could manage was a noncommittal half of a smile and an even weaker "maybe I'll come see you again," as I grasped at the doorknob with two fingers of the same hand that was trying not to drop my tote, the other limb still twisted halfway behind my back, imprisoned in its jacket sleeve as my stumbling feet threatened to tangle me down to the floor. Too late, I realized the door was locked - of course, this being a jail, after all (sort of) – and heard myself shouting for the guard even as I kicked the offending panel, desperate to get out of that room; out and about and as far away as possible from this creature with her suck-you-in smile and the dueling ways it made my insides feel.

—

No bread at the commissary two mornings later.

Not even those damned sesame-sorghum bricks!

Couldn't begin to say how many times that'd happened before. Feeds alleged it was a worldwide issue: wheat and rye crop-yields down even farther than the cost of agri-ceuticals were up. No rice either, seeing as Muni'd stopped accepting shipments because of e-coli contamination – inspectors believed the paddies were being fertilized with human waste. Kind of a back to the future thing; how it was done for centuries, and mostly not a problem for the local consumers whose guts already harbored the same growies as their goop, but bag-up the end product and ship it anywhere else, you were exporting giardia or cholera.

Or worse...

Bananas too, were off the shelves: 'supply chain collapse' being the mantra for that one. 'Cascading incremental disruptions,' was another line the Feed-heads uttered to explain why we seemed to be heading back toward the way things were for most of human history: if ya' didn't pick it or kill it within a coupla' days' walk, ya' didn't get to eat it.

Didn't help our meal planning that many familiar foods no longer existed even where they used to be local. No such thing as Delicious apples anymore due to varietal blight. Navel oranges wiped out by aquifer draw-down, Albacore tuna and every kind of cod fished to extinction, and 'filet of sole' might as well've been a part of your shoes for all you could find of *that* delicacy (though one of the korps' subsidiaries was rumored to be gene-printing small quantities for a private dining room in one of Center's executive suites...). Phenomenon wasn't really new of course, humans'd been wiping out one

species or another since before there was history. What was different in our century though: there used to always be someplace you could move on to, some new species you could find to exploit, but not so anymore, what with all the habitable land already inhabited, plus some of that going extinct as well – entire nations wiped off the map! Sure, they were just tiny economies that'd never amounted to much (GDP-wise, that is), and even less since tourism'd died out. Still, on a marble that's two-thirds covered with undrinkable water and the other third overrun with primates primed for endless mating, how much dry land could we afford to lose?

Interesting, also, how our language had evolved as our eyes'd gotten opened. Seventy or eighty years back, a few crazy Jeremiahs preached about ‘ozone holes,’ which gradually widened into talk of ‘global warming.’ Eventually, those same issues got rechristened ‘climate change,’ then later dubbed the ‘Anthropocene extinction’ in hopes of convincing the masses how devastating it all would be. When that failed for sounding too elitist, ‘eco-degradation’ and ‘climate disorder’ got bandied about for a time before being eclipsed by ‘climate collapse’ and ‘geo-devolution.’ ‘HHR’ – Human Habitat Reduction - never caught on and so now, between overheating and ocean rise, malhydration and disease and the Diss and de-globalization and the EM blockade and The Battles - the river of bad news is so big and so wide, there’s nothing in the dictionary that really says what we need to say.

So yeah, maybe ‘The Weirding’ *is* the best we can come up with, these days.

—

My parting moment with Mutt was not so easily encapsulated, though. No, that one had sunk roots inside my head, deep enough to make me wonder about the skimpy bits of evidence India'd shared, among which was a Work Order for pre-cycling a property on the outer edge of the Outer Limit. She'd even gone so far as to suggest the document supported Mutt's crew having a right to be in that house when the shooting started. Not that it would get the kid off, she hemmed, but it might lubricate the plea-bargaining process.

Twenty-minutes into a rooftop run that Tuesday morning, something clicked. I generally follow the 'don't look a gift horse in the mouth' policy, but in the moment, sweat beading off the tip of my nose and a muscle on the inside of my right thigh threatening mutiny-by-means-of-cramping, it occurred to me that a gift horse with bad teeth can actually prove a pricey proposition. And a piece of exculpatory evidence served to the perp's team on a platter, when the prosecution was doling-out everything else with a doll-house teaspoon, might bear a good mouth-looking, once I got myself fluffed, buffed and duffed enough to start the day.

Fortunately, while forensic accounting has not given me much exposure to criminal evidence processing, one thing it has taught me about is documents. Who put what on paper - and when, where, why or how - goes to the heart of what we do, so I've

spent plenty of time scanning, copying, tabulating and cross-referencing boring forms not unlike that Work Order, a standard cover-your-ass issued by Muni’s Office of Acquisitions entitling a contractor (‘The Faithful Junkers’) to remove and dispose of whatever they wanted out of a house that was about to be demolished to enlarge the moat. All the ‘i’s, I quickly found, were dotted, all the ‘t’s crossed, and it was signed and dated. A quick directory search confirmed the signer’s name matched that listed on the Muni staff directory for one of several Deputy Managers of Acquisitions so: so far so good.

“Don’t just look at an image as an image,” I recall faculty assistant Ineo Abo saying, when she was instructing our Level 1 Evidentiary Analysis class. “Look at every bit of data in it and every bit of data *about* it.” When I followed that advice, what jumped out was the revision date on the image file – four days *after* the date filled in below the signature line. Several innocent and plausible explanations came to mind, along with the equally-plausible explanation that someone had been having way more fun with this document than a municipal Work Order was ever supposed to deliver.

Fortunately, even a forever-intern in my Division has access to some fun software tools carelessly left lying around, one of which was a data-matrix analyzer, capable of graphing each byte of a file’s data to compare its location in the storage sequence with its position in the document encoded in that file. For a totally original document, one generated in a single sitting, that graph would show a few big clusters. In a fill-in-the-boxes form like this Work Order, you’d expect to see a similar assortment of large clusters and then several smaller ones reflecting insertions to complete the form, but for the document India’d given me, what the analyzer spit out looked like target practice; those initial major clusters shot full of holes and a whole bunch of random-sized

splotches representing contiguous information with non-contiguous storage addresses.

Conclusion: this file had seen a lot more action than just filling in the blanks, though how or why the matrix could not say.

Considering that, along with some rapid-fire screen-flickering I'd noticed when first opening the document, led me to another workplace toy, a graphic-display analyzer. After adjusting several settings, I hit 'INITIATE' and watched the display flicker again, but a bit more slowly as the utility recorded a screen shot at each discontinuity in the display routine. Switching to an even slower slideshow mode, I was able watch the herky-jerky waltz from an original document filled out for one date and one address to a totally different one that matched the time and place where Grace and Vincent had been killed. Practically the only important information that stayed the same from early to end was the Deputy Manager's name, title and signature.

Conclusion – someone'd copied an old document and modified it in order to place the pre-cycle crew in that house that night, getting two people killed and another an indefinite tour-de-slammer. Follow-up questions might include who did that and why, but my curiosity at the moment was more about why whomever it was hadn't taken any of the easy routes to flatten the document or export it as an image so as to hide the evidence. And even more curious, why the prosecution team would willingly hand that information to me when they'd withheld nearly everything. Follow-up conclusion: I was not the first person to realize this thing was fake and the prosecution actually *wanted* this form presented on Mutt's behalf so *they* could shoot it down in court, making the poor kid look even more guilty!

Demands of life and all, I had to put the evidence files aside then and spend a few hours on legitimate office tasks. Have often found the drudgery of the mundane allows some higher-level processing center to keep working away in the backwoods of my mind and so it was that morning, as a third conclusion gradually made itself known: the efforts to stack this deck had started *before* the raid, not after. Which, I realized after staring unproductively at my work-screen for some time, probably meant it wasn't even targeted at Mutt ('sorry kid, it's nothing personal!') - but at the entire REaders crew.

Hate when that happens: you think you've found a simple answer to a simple question and then you realize all you've done is make every other damned question more complicated!

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"REaders? Yeah, I've heard of them. Geeks get so wrapped up in those books of theirs, they think it's real. Magic? Revelations? Get back to work!"

Karenda Long, 34, interviewed during a Sunday Brunch import-shopping event at the Royal Windsor supper club on concourse level of the CENTER CENTRE ("SO AWESOME – WE NAMED IT TWICE!!") commercial complex, in a clip linked to a NewNet investigative report on '*Subcurrents in Shareholder Spirituality.*'

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That little Feed-tease popped up as I was tunneling NewNet to learn some more about my new friend's friends. Hardly current, it'd been recorded just two days after the 'Fifth-Burrow round-up' happened - not the first time MSS had swooped in and captivated a bunch of Rats, but one that'd been splashed-about more extensively than most.

Official story was, a clutch of un-careered young males from Burrow Five had refused to be tracked into Players service. Claimed that as members of the Faithful Readers they had more effective means of defense than physical violence and so should not have to train and qualify on stealth-shooter sims in order to get their per diem. They'd stalled the queue outside a food dispensary on Logan Street, causing a huge crowd to back-up outside, when two matte-black vans screeched to a halt and a bunch of no-insignia tacticals poured out, nabbed a dozen of the slower-moving protesters and drove off. After which, those kids just disappeared into the system - no records, no explanation. If a couple of bystanders hadn't been quick enough to take Lyfe vids of the incident (and foolish enough to post them), the entire event might never have been reported.

Newsheads on the Feeds pointed out the rats had no legal case to make, since they weren't part of any recognized religious establishment. If they had been - if this 'REaders' group'd been registered, with a documented and accredited doctrine of nonviolence, the kids would've had an argument for exemption, but as it was - just saying you believed something *yourself*? In the words of the reader on Feed Three, "that way lies chaos."

Kids' supporters felt different though, as was clear in a clip of a skaggy young rat in a full-frontal one-shot featuring the '*MAGIQ RULES*' slogan on his t-shirt as he snarled, "we don't have to parrot anyone else's superstitions to know what we believe." Newshead quickly pointed out that that use of the word 'superstition' in ref to religion would itself have been a Federal offense punishable by time and money back before the Diss. Which fact, along with a few degrees tilt of the newscaster's head and an incremental shrug of one well-tailored shoulder was enough to dismiss the rats' argument completely, before the 'head closed the segment with a genial "Have a productive shift."

"Din' see no one blown 'way," Mutt assured during my third visit, her level tone telling me it wouldn't have been any big deal even if she had, though a moment later her face deflated as she remembered this was my sister she was talking about. "Fu me for a fool," she added consolingly. "One sec, 'm load-n'-lock 'n some war-yer, nex'ec ahm down the groun' an' a foot's in mah face. Neva' saw no blood r shit on the wall, li' your pic' show. Damnshoor!"

I'd listened for an hour as she explained the precycle gig, how five REaders from her squat had travelled after dark in a borrowed delivery van, carrying tools, flashlights dimmed with red plastic and two borrowed nolos ("gotta' look the look, M'a, if yer goin' ou'si' th' fence"). How they'd arrived at the location listed on the work order and were happily stripping it of anything they could use, sell or barter when they heard boots entering front and rear of the house and the world erupted into a mayhem of movements

glimpsed and weapons drawn. Startled confusion as the lights came on to blind them (despite the Work Order saying utilities'd been turned off weeks ago), and then mega-massive confusion when they went dark again, sounds bouncing off walls and carrying through doorways so it was impossible to tell who was shouting and shooting from where or at what. Despite all that chaos and despite my repeated attempts to shoot holes in her story, nothing I said could shake the kid's adamant assertion that she had not killed the warrior later identified as my sister – or any other. Had glimpsed a couple of them in the scramble, wearing desert-dirt camo with lots of gold-crown insignia – colors later identified as livery of the Kaolin Kounty Kiingsmen, a tiny band of wanna-be warlords based out in Counties. Mutt had raised a weapon, sure, seeing theirs. Might even have pulled the trigger; she wasn't saying no to that but she wasn't saying yes either. About the killing though, Mutt Joan's was as certain as blame flowing downhill.

“No f’n way M’a,” she repeated. “ ‘s a flunkin’ nolo, M’a! No flunkin’ way a nolo kill any one – I mean, tha’s wa’ makes it a nolo, ri’?”

“What about magic?” I shot back, my pseudo-professional detachment slipping a notch. “You were with a crew of REaders that night, and REaders are all about magic right? Maybe you cast a spell on that nolo, made it shoot real fire?”

Look I got with that little outburst would've made a glacier melt - if they hadn't all melted years ago. A disbelieving stare that said I might just be the absolute dumbest shiny-bright Center-dwelling bobblehead this girl had run-across in her entire twenty-plus-or-minus-one years.

“You...” she said after a moment, adopting the proper-speak she could perform so effectively when it suited, “have obviously gotten me confused with some other Bethany

Anne Joan's."

Following which, I was treated to a half-hour-summary of Mutt's life since leaving the Fu house at age fifteen, starting with two months in Player training - which ended when she was discharged as an Incorrigible Insubordinate for repeatedly rejecting the personal attentions of higher-ranking troops and training staff. Months more sleeping rough around all six Burrows, cadging whatever food she could and doing whatever work she could drum up (*except recreation*, she insisted, with enough venom to poison a horde of horny warriors). Wandered hungry into a REaders outreach lecture because a flyer posted on a cracked-glass storefront said they'd be serving zatz and fauxnuts, then woke up the next morning to learn she'd fallen asleep during the lecture and had to be carried to another room so her snoring didn't drown out the words of a big-wig, top-dog major-domo of the Faithful REaders whom she would later come to know as Grace.

"Took me in, Grace did," Mutt admitted, with a straight-up attitude and careful speech that made clear there'd been some real respect between the two of them. "Never tried t' make me anything I wasn't, M'a. Said I could stay in their squat long's I wanted to. Eat their food, piss in their pot..."

When I pressed-on about 'The Books' and their supposed magic, she laughed, dropping back into the street-style voice and persona I'd first met.

"Don' b'lieve none a tha' shi'" she scoffed. "Neva' seen none'a i' work. Na' f' me. Na' f' anyone else, neither."

Which led me to thinking, as I gathered up my bag to head back to Center. If it wasn't magic that explained how a kid with a non-lethal weapon had killed Vincent, it

must be science - or at least her dowdy stepsister: technology. I mean, India'd said it was Mutt's weapon that delivered the fatal round, and that the weapon's on-board vid sealed the deal. If I wanted to help the Mutt at all, I needed to find out if that equation really added up as neatly as it was being made out to.

Checking out a fake work order had been right up my alley – words and numbers, paper and ink - but weapons and vid-tech were something else entirely, and way outside my wheelhouse. For that, I'd need someone who understood firearms and electronics and could show me how they worked. Or didn't. Fortunately, I happened to know just such a person. That she was an over the top narcissist by the unlikely name of Zoonie Wallee might've been a career-quasher in the old days, but in our post-Diss era of shortages and make-do, performance trumped presentability all day long, so Zoonie was getting by just fine, thank you M'a.

Much as the Diss had messed with the Former Fifty, btw, it was hardly a party for the rest of the globe, either. Not right off, of course; peeps in other nations had issues of their own to deal with, despite U. S. politicians' perennial refusal to recognize that fact. Whole world kept on keepin' on as we tore Uncle Sam's house to shreds, many of them gazing with amusement, some even glee. Only later, after the dollars stopped flowing where they'd come to be relied upon (not as big an effect as we might have imagined) and Uncle's hand was no longer around to manipulate events to its own advantage (somewhat greater effect), did axes start falling in distant places: a rebellion in southeast

Asia got squashed with prejudice and this time there was one less Security Council vote in favor of sending in peacekeepers, embargoing the strongmen's accounts or shipping aid to the decimated citizens; a hurricane hit the Caribbean, and now there were a few less warships delivering fresh water and medical supplies, one less deep-pocket offering loans to help rebuild the devastated tourist economy and far fewer disposable-income Yanks to fuel that economy as it struggled to back to life; and on and on.

On the other side of the coin, North Korea got a big economic break as US-led sanctions fell apart, so the latest in its succession of Dear Leaders decided to re-draw its borders a lot wider and this time around there was no POTUS willing to risk her political future on a fight between neighbors halfway around the world. Soon enough, the Kimian Empire was behaving like a Silicon Valley unicorn, financing its scale-up through worldwide sales of nuke-tech as it competed with cross-town rivals the Russkiy Mir Federation and New Ottoman Sultanate to see who could sign up the greatest number of vassal states in the shortest time.

Which last was just one in a spate of rebranding exercises as nations met and merged, settled old scores and molded new blocs and BRICs, replacing existing animosities with mutually-beneficial associations as they snuffed their citizens' nascent impulses toward self-government with little or no international interference.

Summary For Analysis: within a decade after passage of the Twenty-ninth Amendment, every world map and every annotated globe was obsolete, every international institution neutered or on hospice care and several billion more people's lives down-shifted from silent desperation to the noisy sort.

So, yeah; what looked like a dark age in the Former Fifty could be seen as a renaissance for some other players – generally the ones who ‘played’ the roughest, meaning this new Enlightenment did not bring much sunshine to the peeps who ended up under the thumbs of the new top dogs.

(Dogs got thumbs? Who knew!)

“Fundamental telltale of a nolo verse a lewie, my friend. Unmistakable, even in crappy images like these on-board recorders produce. Nolo rounds carry a low mass, rapid deceleration load, shaped to create a frontal pressure wave so they blow themselves up just prior to impact and splatter flashy residue all over the target. Lewie’s are more discrete: they keep it together long enough to make an itsy-bitsy teensy-weenie little entry wound that leaves the near side of the target pretty pretty.” Zoonie Wallee paused for a moment, allowing that characterization to sink in before delivering what e seemed to think was the punch line. “Not so much on the exit side.”

I’d once imagined Zoonie got eir name from how e talked, oblique and off-centered, but e swore it was legal, not a nick. Not that it mattered; under any name, e was the best resource I knew to establish whether what I’d been told about Mutt’s role in all this made any sense.

Two of us went back a ways, to my early hopes of a career in real law

enforcement. Met during an introductory course on basic criminal statutes, the spring before our class would get tracked, both hoping to get into the Academy of Justice: Zoonz was accepted, I was not. Which is why, after a brief interlude of anger, questions, unsatisfying answers and binge drinking, I ended up in the accounting silo and Zoonie at the academy, from which e graduated to intern with Major Crimes before being selected for a scene-of-crime unit - something like the old CSI vids we all watched as kids, but with far fewer cases to keep them busy, thanks to Muni's success in crime-deterrence. Resulting comfy pay grade and lopsided time-to-tasks ratio accounted for the live-work space e'd invited me to when I messaged: a fifth-floor walk-up in Mutual Villages, Muni's failed attempt to address the refugee-induced housing shortage during a brief cash-rich window in the early days of korpdom. Following the Shanghai model, they'd cleared four square blocks of Burrow Three just outside Mission Gate and started construction on eight identical 24-story housing towers. Got as far as the fourteenth floor on one, progressively less-far on each of the others, before the financing evaporated, so now the towers stand like thistles in a fairway, facades completed up to whatever level each tower had reached before the funds stopped flowing. Upper floors plumped-out with scaffolding and shrink-wrapped in blue polyethene weather-seal, they looked for all the world like a cluster of unclaimed door prizes. Whole shebang sat vacant for four years till some bright light got the idea to fire up a minimum of utilities and populate the enclosed levels of each building to help address Burrows' chronic bedroom deficit.

Just the neighborhood for a nonconformist tech-head who didn't mind stairs and the occasional drip from leaks above to use eir housing-allowance to establish a home away from prying eyes.

Zoonie's wet dream of a play-space turned out to be the highest occupiable level of Tower Seven, partially roofed by the slab originally intended as its sixth floor, partially open to the poly-wrapping, which glowed during the day with an azure-tinted version of daylight and gave em plenty of headroom for whatever e chose to build, shoot or fly in eir spare time. Solid steel doors to both stair towers bore more locks than a street-parked delivery bike, wise protection for the forest of shelving crammed with techno-toys and the long tables cluttered with instruments and tools I couldn't of begun to name - but hey, what did I know? Zoonie was the expert in hardware - though it turned out that expertise was not what paid-off on the evidence I'd forwarded to em.

“So, the images certainly prove your victim was hit by a lewie,” e announced while tacking a bedsheet over a stretch of unpainted drywall before clicking a keyboard and stabbing a stubby finger toward the improvised projection screen. “This is the first shot they gave you: full frontal of your victim in assault helmet, night-vis goggles and hoo-rah camo face-paint. Copious dye splatter overlay; but no entry aperture so clearly been tagged by a nolo. Note also, the pristine background wall with partial view of this distinctively-homey and distinctly-amateur seascape in driftwood frame and these two poorly-spackled nail heads at the upper left. And this,” another finger-tap brought up a different image, “is the second shot showing a later time-stamp and no target, just your textbook head-wound splatter decorating that same wall. Time signature says there’s two frames missing in between...”

At that point I must've made some sound indicating ignorance, because Zoonie detoured to explain that weapon-cams recorded only 12 frames per second, to hold down

the volume of data they had to store, though it made ‘em kinda jittery when you played ‘em back. One frame to the next is about .08 second, so timestamps a quarter of a second apart meant two missing frames in between...

I made another sound to indicate I’d caught up, then went on to say maybe India had skipped the shots that actually showed Vincent taking the hit because that would be too painful for me to see. Why I was making excuses for her, I guess you gotta put down to some deep self-confidence issues, which Zoonie caught right onto, allowing with a sarcastic toss of eir head that what I’d suggested *was* possible - or else maybe the County’s administrative hierarchy had held a multi-day conference and agreed unanimously that sharing those’d be an unfair invasion of the decedent’s privacy - before instructing me to look at the background as e toggled quickly between the two photos and tell em what I saw.

“Definitely the same wall,” I replied proudly, pointing out the identical painting in its identical frame, even the same lumpy nail-heads up near the corner.

“Now this is where all my tech comes in totally superfluous,” Zoonie said with a chuckle, “and the old cerebrum shines, because the minute I saw those two images, my internal processor sounded its ‘logic failure’ alarm.”

It was all about perspective, e explained at the kind of length Zoonie loved to impose upon lesser mortals. The human brain knows it lives in a 3-D, 360 degree world, e pointed out, but the eyes can only view a narrow segment of it all at any given moment, so we’re constantly building and updating an internal virtual-model of the reality that’s all around us. To do that, our foremothers’ brains evolved an incredibly-precise geometric intuition, which is how we know the right distance to move a hand along

exactly which vectors when we reach for a cup of zatz – which example which might not sound all that impressive, but how about the one where a baseball player’s brain instinctively calculates the trajectory of a pop fly and tells her just where in all three dimensions it’s gonna be and at what instant so she can run full speed straight into a wall and still stick her glove up in just the right place and at just the right instant to catch it, *three-hundred feet from where it left the bat at ninety-plus miles an hour - on a haul-ass windy day?*

‘Perspective,’ I was about to learn.

“First photo, every feature on the wall appears an eensy-bit smaller or larger the farther it is from the center of the image. How much smaller or larger in every different direction is determined by what angle the imaging device was looking, compared to the flat plane of the wall. Second shot, Wallee-brain detected that objects to the left of center get smaller even quicker than in the first, objects to the right, larger.” Not that e thought it all through like that, Zoonie admitted with admirable false modesty, just that eir brain detected it and raised the alarm. What it meant though, after e’d overlaid the two images to confirm eir intuition, was that the second shot was taken at a shallower angle to the wall, meaning its imaging device was located about two feet to the right (and three feet behind) of the one which took the first shot. Ergo: two photos recording the view from two different weapons, and the smearing in the splatter pattern was consistent with a hit from the angle of the second shot, not the first.

“So,” my old classmate concluded, switching off the projector. “If that first shot is of the victim, and your prosecutor tells you it came from your perp’s gun, then that second shot actually proves she did not fire the fatal lewie round.”

Excited as I'd been about determining the work order was faked, that particular info hadn't made much impact when I'd shared it with Mutt the day before. Zoonie's new analysis of the shooting, on the other hand, got her attention bigly, when I showed up again at the Bunny.

"F'n A!" she gloated, head snapping proudly as if it'd been herself who'd done the figuring. "What'd I tell you, Jus'Jack - day one? I did not shoot that girl. No flakin' way, no' never."

"Well," I pointed out, "the first image says you *did* shoot her. Just not with a lewie!"

"Shi..." she began, letting the word trail off in recognition of defeat and as the sound died, she flashed an expression I'd not seen before. Accusation and resentment toward me, yes, but layered with self-doubt and even the tiniest bit of disappointment that her cocky defense had not scored as high as hoped, and in the combination I could glimpse an admission (to me if not herself), that tough-guy Mutt Joan's might actually care one least little bit what JustJack thought of her.

Like I said before: flash your soft underbelly like that, out on the streets of Burrows? Buy a girl a world of trouble.

As it was, that little breach of radio-silence opened the taps enough for Mutt to share with me an opening episode of 'Tales of the Fu House' while we dug into a carton

of GoodasReal frozen desert (the other carton having gone to the CA33 grunts to buy their continued good cheer and cooperative attitude...). I soon learned my friend referred to her birthing parent as Lucretia because she and all the other recreations saved 'Mother' for the matrona de-casa - the same casa that had given Mutt her last name when Lucretia refused to reveal her sperm-source and the infirmary clerk decided since the womb was effectively the property of a rec-house named 'Joan's,' that was the name its output should bear. What did Mutt know about the fathering client? Only that it was definitely *not* Lucretia's special regular, Ibat, chief among the many exemplars who'd led her daughter to swear-off men. Ibat was just another lesson in a Fu House girl's education, Mutt claimed, along with lips and tongue (as in, 'the many uses of'), sweet words (as in, to cover up for sour deeds), and make-up (normally a marketing tool, but also used to cover up evidence of the sourest deeds). Those were the kinds of education preferred by Mother, who had no use for the virtual-schooling Lucretia pinched scrip to buy for her easily-bored child.

"Virt is where I learned to talk straight anytime I want," Mutt pointed out proudly. Avatars showing her how to manipulate lips and tongue and breath to make the proper 'esses' and 'tees' and, even more importantly, how to put the right words into proper sentences so they'd have meaning to peeps with money, instead of being one more excuse for them to ignore whatever a poor and fem rat had to say. Kid was good at it, as I'd already heard, and liked the power it offered. "M'a: if I could have beamed myself into Lucretia's old machine and sat down in one of those virtuous classrooms, you bet I would've."

Instead of which, Ibat, who regularly proposed to take them both away from it all

(usually just before turning angry and physical, inflicting bruises but rarely blood, though leaving deep scars regardless), had eventually begun sniffing around the offspring of ‘his woman’ until one time the kid opened her mouth and chomped into the crotch of his designer knock-off sweatpants. Fabric was too thick for teeth to do more than frighten, but the message still came through and from then on, houndawg kept his tail between his legs around the puppy.

Was mutual agreement then, for Bethany - who’d already become Bett - to now became ‘Mutt,’ a foul-mouthed runt of indiscernible gender which never seemed to wash or change its clothes and hissed or spat as necessary to discourage customers’ interest. One predictable result of all that was the mother’s loss of income and status as Ibat gradually took his trade elsewhere. Another was Mutt’s professed lack of interest in men – any sort, for any purpose. She’d seen enough, she told me, to ‘just say no’ to them all.

“I can work with ‘em, JustJack. I can share a squat with ‘em - hell, I’ve lived my entire life in Burrows that’re swarming with the boys your Center dumps here ‘cause it’s got no better use for ‘em, but I don’t ever trust a man, and don’t recommend anyone else should, either.”

Which, I’m embarrassed to admit, was the first time I actually saw the Player brigades for what they really were: a dumping ground for surplus masculinity. Would still be a while before I fully appreciated the callousness of that calculation; at the time I was more interested in getting to know my young friend (and yes, this was also around the time I began to think of Mutt as a friend, not just a person-of-interest in Vincent’s

story – which story had seriously receded in my ranking of priorities). Was also about then that the ease with which she spouted Center-speak got me wondering if it might be a better indication of her potential than the rat’s patois I’d struggled to decipher in our first meetings. Being good at switching modes or codes, after all, doesn’t mean one of your identities doesn’t run a little deeper than the other.

Or ‘others,’ for some of us.

Anyway, hearing her spout about men and power set me to asking how she got along among the REaders crowd.

“Not a problem, M’a,” she decreed, sticking an entire hand into the GoodasReal carton and running two fingers round the bottom to get the last bit of melted corn syrup ‘cream’ and anonymous additives. “Those kind of game’s’re not REaders’ thing anyway. They’re not so...I mean: Madjic’s about a different kind of power.”

Related factoids: far as Mutt had seen, the leaders of this REaders thing were *all* fem. ‘Prophessors’ they were called - never ‘witches.’ Too many dire associations, apparently, with that word. Had no ‘covens,’ either, no ‘Lodge’ or ‘Chapter’ you belonged to, in fact no formal organization at all. Also, no specific name for the regular rank and file: ‘REader’ was fine, or ‘follower,’ or ‘the faithful.’ Or just ‘us.’ No, coming to Magic didn’t take over your life like some cult things did; you were still who you were before only, inside of yourself, you’d gained a little extra strength. Confidence. In fact, if there was one idea binding all REaders together, that was it: that the simple fact of believing made regular life more tolerable, even after our new and improved governing

system'd turned out to be just another variation on the same old trip.

“Throughout recorded history, regardless who grabbed the big power, it’s been the same story,” she pronounced, in what sounded like a regurgitation from one of the many free lectures she claimed to have attended. Take hold of the big stick and the first thing they did was divide everyone into ‘with us’ or ‘against us.’ Tag every peep as either a true believer or a heretic, a patriot or a traitor, red-white-and-blue all-American or a terrorist - or a godless communist or whatever label the stick-holders were using in that time and place - if you weren’t a hundred percent on board with everything they wanted to do, then you were the evil enemy and it was their sacred duty to destroy you – which, I recognized as she spouted on, was exactly the attitude that had given us the joy of Diss and the bloody deep cac-hole we were in right then...

“*But we don’t put a label on people who aren’t REaders,*” Mutt continued, practically shouting with pride. They weren’t called infidels or heathens or anything else; they were just not REaders. “We know it’s the putting names on people you don’t agree with that allows you to treat them like garbage – I mean, once you announce that another person is gonna burn in hell for who they are or what they say, it kind of sours the relationship, don’ it?”

Despite the ‘we’ in some of those comments, I never got the feeling Mutt was a true believer herself. Never talked about magic like it was an actual thing; useful, or practical. Seemed to me like she was mostly there for the belonging; had found a brood who let her be herself and had her back regardless.

(Hadn’t had Grace’s back quite enough though; a little actual-magic might’ve

helped on that one...)

In contrast to Mutt's enthusiasm, when I told India B. about Zoonie's ballistic conclusions, she laughed in my face (virt-face, that is, since we were on a vox call, not same-space).

“Perspective, shmerspective,” she countered. “Fancy shmancy way your friend has, of dressing up the fact your girl moved around a bit as she was shooting. Perfectly understandable in a firefight. Proves nothing at all.”

Fact that Mutt's weapon was a documented nolo but the splatter came from a lewie, was no more impressive to the R/C.

“Ask your techie friend,” she suggested in a tone disturbingly like to the one Richard'd picked up during his residency with the toddler age-group. “How hard would it be to convert a nolo to fire lewie ammo? See what e says to that, Jack, and let me know if you still think you've got grounds for dismissal.”

Well, hmm...

Wallee knew a lot about a lot of things, but when I called to ask her about

converting a nolo to a lewie, she claimed (uncharacteristically, I'd recall later) to have no idea. Claimed also that she had no idea who *would* know and was, if I didn't mind her being frank, not interested in discussing what would certainly be a violation of the Lethality-Reduction Act, one of the first policy measures issued by Muni after it took up the contract to govern our little city-state.

Which left, I concluded, nothing but the classical approach - asking around. And given the impossibility of doing anything like a weapon conversion in Center without being detected, the place to ask was Burrows. Preferably, dirty Burrows, meaning the darkest corners I could find, and the Players who hung out in them.

For cover story, I went back to childhood, to a memory of Duncan taking Vincent and me into the hills to teach us how to handle a gun. His was old, a 'rooger' or some such name that he said with almost reverence, like it symbolized way more than just what factory had made the thing. It was for hunting, he said, not combat (additional words that clearly meant a lot more when he said 'em to me than when I write 'em down) meaning it had to be more accurate than fast. Which was why it had that bolt-thingie you had to pull back every time you shot it, to slide the next bullet into place. I managed that part ok, but not so much the shooting. First time he got me pointed at a target he'd set up and had me pull the trigger? That big noise, that close to my face and at the same instant of getting punched in the shoulder by the back end of the gun? Scared me so much I almost peed myself! Would've sworn *I* was the one getting shot. Made my hands shake so's I could barely get the bolt to move and when I did and it was time to pull the trigger again, I just couldn't do it. Like my brain knew what was coming this time and wouldn't let my

finger do that nasty to myself again. No way, no how.

Sister Vincent was all-in though, when it came her turn, and quickly got a rhythm going – aim, fire, bolt, aim fire, bolt, aim... like she was trying to go through as many bullets in as little time as she possibly could. Duncan laughed at that, but I could see it was a proud laugh. Even more proud when she slowed down and focused on the target. Said his ‘number one daughter’ was a natural, and right then it was plain something had changed between him and her. And him and me.

And me and her too, I guess, though that part didn’t hurt nearly as much.

So anyway, I headed out to Burrows again to ask any Players who’d talk to me whether they knew someone who could work on my father’s old gun. Tossed in ‘rooger’ and ‘bolt-action with a five-round magazine’ and any other words I could remember, so it’d sound like I knew what I was talking about. Claimed my old man’d kept it hidden when Muni came to get everyone’s lewies, and now I wanted to get it converted to nolo so I could give it to my 10-year-old nephew who was already jonesing to become a Player himself.

Fact I didn’t actually have the rifle to show them may have hurt my cred a bit, plus when I first went out I adopted a work pants and bowling-shirt look - the chummy ‘dude with grease under the fingernails’ approach - which did not work at all. Don’t know if my soft hands set off their cop-alarm or my heavily-plucked brows generated some other siren, but any case, I got myself creeped out of half a dozen dingy game-rooms and food courts in a very short time with nothing to show for it but a set of finger-shaped bruises above the elbow where one wise-guy’d tried to prolong our conversation.

Next day I changed tactics, hitting the south side of Burrow Five in full Girl in a Country Song mode: Daisy Dukes and a lace trimmed halter topped off with Friday Night make-up plus a little shyness, a little nervous giggling and a lot of ‘I don’t know what I’m even trying to say?’ inflections. That act was mostly successful in proving how hard it is to get clear of some guys once you’ve gotten their attention.

Needing a better approach for my third outing, I considered going full concealment, but decided a burka would either get me run out of town (if the Players I ran into were ‘merica-first types), or else swept-up as bride material (if they were of a more fundamentalist persuasion). Finally settled on a scuffed-up cowboy-in-from-the-counties look complete with three-o-clock shadow (stubble or stipple? I’m not telling), a big wad of chewing gum and a mumbling-out-the-side-of-the-mouth reticence I hoped would be as un-inviting as it was non-threatening. Had approached several squads that morning with no more luck than before, till I hit the back lot of a defunct filling-station now calling itself ‘Arcade 211,’ which a tamale-cart pusher had told me was ground zero for the squad protecting an enclave of ocean-rise refugees from the Jersey shore. Found two Players there, sharing a vape-break in the shade of an improvised troop carrier, one of those jacked-up and blacked out passenger vans they paint to look like real military vehicles. I’d already learned to look for ‘KEEPS’ patches on the men’s chests, meaning they’d participated in the Physical Games; present-day reincarnation of gladiatorial combat involving real weapons and injuries including, for those who lost out in the culminating rounds, the lethal sort. Used that as an intro to my story; along with offering them a pack of flavored vape cartridges I’d brought along, flavors being easy for me to get in Center, but rare as a three-piece suit out in Burrows. Biggie – and yes, that’s what

the smaller guy said his name was (and the other was Locker; M'a, I couldn't make this pox up if I tried!). Anyway, Biggie said he might know a guy who could help me if I had legit credits to spread around, but he'd have to check with his man before giving me any info, so maybe - a gleam starting to sparkle beneath his cave-deep brows that suggested interest in whatever he imagined was underneath my feeble disguise - I'd give him my details?

Was trying to decide what info I could share that'd allow him to get back to me on my question without allowing him to 'get back to me' in any other sense, when my eyes fell on a sticker pasted near the troop carrier's number plate. Subsequent rapid change of conversational direction resulted in Locker butting in to say that 'Howard's Conversions' was a place out in Weld County that retro-fit old guzzlers with AC motors and DC battery packs to turn them electric (make 'em into 'trans-trucks' he phrased it, with a raised eyebrow I took to mean he thought he was being clever at my expense).

Figuring that sounded like just the sort of folks who'd know about converting weapons, I shifted gears again, Lyfed an image of the sticker and took myself away from Biggie and Locker as far and as fast as I could. Once I'd made a safe distance, searched around for an unsecured groundnet node and had a location for Howard's pulled up before I was even on the trolley back to Center.

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Wasn't till Wednesday I could get the Ryde system to reserve me an extended-

range vehicle with the contextual vis-nav required for a trip out to Counties (interferators having consigned GPS to the dust heap of history so it could cozy-up with a five-cent cup of coffee).

Soon as the vehicle picked me up, I opaqued its windows and asked the interface to let me know when we were close to whatever moat access it had selected for the route. Having seen plenty of Burrows lately, my time passing through them was better booked to office tasks so as to defray some of this trip's cost, which I feared might blow the limits of W-J's budgetary latitude. When the interface announced we were nearing the Middle Limit, I switched the glass back to clear and was introduced to Checkpoint Number 5, an expanse of color-coded barriers funneling traffic to several sets of gates in a tall, razor-wired fence. Surrounded by sandbagged shacks and parked personnel carriers, the maze was lorded over by four large guard towers from whose catwalks weapon-toting milits gazed in slouching boredom. Line of vehicles waiting in the smoldering heat to be allowed into Burrows from the moat was long and loud, but there were only a few heading out and my Division ID greased the process so it took almost no time till an MSS officer triggered the gates that allowed us out into the uninhabited wastes.

One thing to understand about our Outer Buffer - the moat - is that it does not resemble any storybook castle's alligator-filled trench. Geography and land-use've decreed a more-varied configuration (though few individuals really know exactly how varied, all but the crudest maps having been classified during the Battles and remained so ever since). To the west of Center, for example, there's not much flat land before the

foothills rise up and it's easy to see that the fenced zone there is just a couple hundred yards wide, our defenses focused more on controlling the steeply-rising ground beyond that through a generous application of land mines, drone surveillance and laser-guided munitions.

East of our old city's main business district, many square miles of ancient floodplain were home to scores of industrial and freighting operations clustered along rail spurs. Pre Diss, that low-rise sprawl was creeping farther and farther out, but when Muni took over the chaos, its planners drew a line - the Middle Limit - that captured all the businesses they deemed essential. For at least ten miles outside that line, everything had by now been levelled to dirt so a potential invader would be exposed long before they reached any asset worth attacking.

To the north, the old freeway provided a ready line of defense, the steep ridges and narrow washes beyond it making approach from that direction a serious tactical challenge, but this was also where the moat was closest to Center and there was no Burrow to buffer it, so that northern perimeter was very heavily surveilled and staffed.

The southern segment had been most difficult to establish, since the old suburbs sprawled for miles, full of homes and businesses, schools and other services too widely-spread to defend. Muni's mid-level managers made a guess at how much the population had shrunk during the post-Diss rioting and the subsequent brain drain (to China, UAE, Dubai and any other regime offering a passport and reliable private-property rights), not to mention raging wildfires and repeated virus outbreaks. Made another guess as to how much density the new realities could make peeps accept and on the basis of all those wild-ass guesses they drew their fat-pen line about seven miles south of Center and then

employed draconian economic and legal tactics to ‘encourage’ every suburbanite outside the line to relocate inside of it. Since that time, the administration had been progressively levelling buildings and tearing up roads from the Middle Limit outward to create the southern moat, yards wide in the beginning but into the miles now and still being refined in hopes of someday satisfying the military minds.

Result was, soon as my Ryde cleared the fence-line it took the only remaining roadway through a desolation of decaying asphalt, scraped-off floor slabs and slowly slumping retaining walls. Here and there tree trunks with their limbs amputated stood sentinel over humps of ash where combustible debris had been dozed into piles and burned. Speeding up whenever the pavement allowed, the vehicle braked abruptly each time its sensors detected a settlement-crack or blast damage ahead, slowing more smoothly for obstacles visible from a distance; derelict vehicles, drifts of tumbleweed and the occasional concrete-rubble slalom course intended to slow down any invader and make them easier to pick off.

Eventually, our progress was slowed to a crawl by a maze of concrete construction barriers funneling traffic to another checkpoint, this one flanked on each side by armored vehicles bristling with large-caliber gun barrels and laser comms emitters. The Ryde stopped and popped its hatches, at which point a uniformed Defensive Industries regular approached. Barely glancing at my ID, she played me a recorded waiver of responsibility, took a thumbprint confirmation of acceptance on her armor-cased machine and wished me good luck as she tapped a code into the Ryde’s exterior access pad authorizing it to venture out where Muni and MSS, Oversight and

even DI would be of little help - as I'd been pointedly reminded when I booked the trip.

From there, in every direction lay Counties; sparse in population and even more sparse in organization, land of loud-voiced libertarians and feuding clans, back-to-the-earth communes and back-to-the-sword warlords – little understood but widely acknowledged as essential to the rest of us for their farming and ranching, their mechanical know-how and their resource-extraction operations. Essential enough, in fact, for Muni's incorporation documents to bend over frontwards in hopes of working together – with formal provisions for commerce and transport, mutual defense, accommodations for one another's divergent legal systems, and a host of other concessions that kept us all paddling in more-or-less the same direction without either side feeling like they'd lost that all-important 1776% self-determination factor.

Within minutes, navigating by comparing our visible surroundings to a data base of images pre-loaded for the trip, my Ryde was moving west along a decaying asphalt two-lane, slowing now and then to weave around washouts and wreckage in a landscape reminiscent of battlefield photos from the early world wars. Charcoaled trunks and stumps stood out against faint sprinklings of green, subtle hints a natural landscape might someday recover, though the man-scape showed less resilience. Down one rutted dirt turn-off a blackened fireplace and chimney stood sentinel over a concrete slab piled high in char and ashes. Behind a fence farther on, remnants of two walls formed a corner, a lingering triangle of roof cantilevering precariously from their top edges.

Sobering as the extent of fire's destruction was, it couldn't hold a cancel to the battle debris. An old gasoline station's pumps had been sheared off and scattered like firewood, one end of the nearby building looking good as new while the other two thirds had vanished completely, their place taken by a giant crater where a bomb must have come down, or an underground petro-tank gone up. Further along, at a crossroads signed THORNEVILLE, POP. 768, a knot of shops, small motel and several houses were all pockmarked with bullet holes, glass shattered and roofs torn open, while just beyond the intersection two Humvees and a minibus with traces of U. S. Army markings lay torn and twisted, blackened like beer cans tossed into last night's campfire. Deep gouges in the asphalt evidenced where something even heavier had been dragged or dozed off and across the shoulder to disappear downslope, the only sign of cleanup from whatever had happened there. The next hamlet we passed was even worse; levelled to rubble and charred a uniform black that gave no indication what sort of weapons had done the job – not that it made a great deal of difference, to those who had once inhabited the forsaken place.

A change in rhythm interrupted contemplations of fire and war as my Ryde slowed, turning in at the rutted dirt drive of a two-story wood frame house which had needed a paint job thirty years ago, and was still waiting. As I wondered if there'd been some navigational error, my vehicle bumped and swayed around the house to stop before a cluster of barns, sheds and shacks that shouted 'dying-ranch.' Glancing around, I made out some weathered words on the gable-end of the largest barn, painted in the same text style and three-color graphics used on that van's sticker and in a photo now showing on

my dashboard monitor's image. 'HOWARD STEEL FABRICATIONS' seemed close enough to that 'Howard's Conversions' sticker I'd imaged back in Burrows for me to hop out and wander around the far side of the largest structure, from which point I finally saw confirmation this was my destination: a row of trucks with hoods and fenders neatly-removed, backed up by at least an acre of wrecked and rusting hybrid and electric vehicles, their bodywork torn open like gutted game. A shout into the big barn's open doorway brought me face to face with a stoop-necked grandpa sporting a nicotine-streaked Santa Claus beard and orange-camo suspenders straining to hold up the dirtiest pair of khaki slacks I'd ever seen, their legs stuffed haphazardly into rubber mucking-out boots that mirrored the deep green of his eyes.

Unlike those Players back in town, Howard Núñez was happy to talk to me. Probably didn't hurt that the mode I'd adopted for our encounter included an uber-flowered prairie-schooner of a dress and babushka-style scarf to suggest my ignorance of trucks and guns were natural side-effects of spending my life barefoot and in the kitchen. However he read it, I soon learned more than I ever wanted about electrifying a drive-train (hint: replace the transmission with a dynamo to convert the petro engine into an on-board generator, fabricate custom brackets to insert an electric motor in place of the differential, wire all that up to the battery packs out of two old Priuses [Prii?], install a few reprogrammed control components and what'd started life as a low-mileage/high emission half-ton truck could pass inspection as a Muni-legal electric vehicle).

"Don't really meet the in-tent," my host admitted coyly, spinning that last word to illustrate how little he thought of such regulations, "but you walk the walk and talk the talk; those keyboard-clowns can't do much about it."

Howard being as easy to listen to as anyone I'd ever met, and the patch-lit shadows of his barn filled with such an amazement of oily, rusty and dusty artifacts that it was quite some time before I actually got around to asking him about weapons. By which time, I'd decided the old coot's plain-spoken attitude deserved the same from me and so abandoned the screenplay I'd prepared and went straight to the truth.

"I've got a lady-friend, in jail for shooting a milit," to which Howard clucked and huffed and said that was never a good place to start a story.

"Well," I continued, "she didn't do it. At least not intentionally," and proceeded to explain how Mutt was adamant her crew'd never carried any weapons but nolos. How India said the Brigade milits had put calipers on the weapon found where they'd captured Mutt and confirmed it had the larger bore and chamber that would allow it to use lewie ammo, so I was hoping he could tell me: was it really possible to convert a nolo into a lewie - was that even a thing?

"Not a hard job, neither," Howard chuckled, "if you got the right equipment." For a second my insecurities wondered if that was a wisecrack directed at my anatomy, but that wariness evaporated as he limped across the barn and sat down at a cluttered steel desk holding an ancient tower-style machine and vacuum-tube monitor. Typing two index-fingers on a grimy keyboard, he moved a puck across a pile of papers like a squirrel in search of nuts till eventually an image flickered into view; a chest-high and coffin-long contraption with chromed rails and travelling heads, hoses and nozzles and catch-pans, wheels to turn for adjustments and a bank of switches and lights to control it all.

"That's a deep-hole boring and reaming machine," he explained. "If you had one

of those, and a couple hours to spare, yeah, you could make a nolo take some caliber of lethal load.” Those machines were scarce though; he’d bought-up several machine shops over the years, waving a hand at the messy miscellany of lathes and cutters and routers cluttering half the barn’s floor, but never had the chance to pick up one of them. Only local shop he knew had one was a guy over in Long Valley; Howard sent jobs to him now and then.

I got that other guy’s name and address, along with some directions - of the ‘left at the giant cedar tree’ and ‘right at that shot-up sign’ sort - to get me there, and was making to leave when Howard fixed a jaundiced eye on my country-girl mufti and twisted his mouth into silent disapproval before asking if I wasn’t really some slicker out from Center, as my ‘tin taxi’ suggested. When I admitted as much, it was like I’d flipped one of the levers on that boring machine; he just started drilling into me.

“ Y’all’re makin’ a helluva mess,” he began, then listed a few of the things he saw wrong with Muni’s approach to governing: high-paid paper-pushers making decisions for people whose lives they couldn’t even imagine, fancy-pants with fancier resumes telling regular folks what they could and could not think or say or believe. Pointed out that our Burrows contained way more people going hungry than we had living the high life in Center and sooner or later all those people would get fed up and take the korps down and we’d best not expect anyone from Counties to show up to stop it. They had their own to take care of, and were doing it just fine, thank you, “so if I was you – which I am definitely not, young lady or whatever you call yourself – I’d forget about one crummy shooting. Hell, people get shot all the time; why you think God gave us guns? No, I’d not spend another minute trying to figure out who killed one more wanna-be warrior

looking to make ‘iself a hero and concentrate on how to save your blessed Muni and anyone out of it you truly care for.”

Thing was, Howard Núñez said all that with such quiet kindness, with so little animosity and not a sliver of contempt, that his words stayed in my mind the entire time it took for me to voice-direct the Ryde to my new destination, over roads I could swear had not seen a sniff of maintaining since before the Diss. Took me many attempts to rephrase Howard’s directions into words the electronics would understand, then several wrong turns and one near-collision (with a slow-moving tractor pulling a folded-up piece of equipment that looked to me like the world’s largest egg-beater) before we ended up at a collection of sheet-metal sheds beside a weedy little airstrip many miles farther out into Counties. This, according to its faded signs, was L’ron deTroyer’s enterprise: ‘DT MACHINE WORKS (AND BALLISTICS).’ Main business (whenever one of Muni’s production-management teams called): machining parts and assemblies to repair or re-configure the automated production lines that allowed our korps to remain productive with the absolute minimum of permanent labor. Sideline (for the long intervals between those lucrative jobs): sourcing spent cartridge casings and slugs from shooting ranges for many miles around and melting down the latter to turn the former into customized high-performance ammunition for the military-surplus M-16s and other AR variants L’ron’s many customers carried.

Along with basic gunsmithing.

All of which I soon concluded must be a viable business model, judging by the

cleanliness and order of his shops, the up-to date desktop machines on his desks and the busy worker bees I observed shuttling around his stacks of shipping crates, many sporting prominent MSS or DI logos.

Taking some advice from my new best buddy Howard, I didn't tell deTroyer right out that I was looking to convert a nolo, seeing as how that would be totally illegal, even in Counties. Said instead that I had an old Winchester 1885 that had been in the family for years (and which Núñez'd told me used an obsolete 32 caliber rimfire load with nearly identical dimensions to nolo rounds). That was clearly talking L'ron's language, as he jumped right in.

"Can't get any ammo for it, right?" The machinist's smile was broad and wide when I nodded. "Hell yeah, I can fix that. Bore it out to a 357 magnum, you can shoot 38 Special rounds; get those anywhere." He'd done a few such jobs over the years he said, at which point I squirmed a bit of embarrassment before admitting I'd put-off arranging this gift till way too late – nephew's graduation was this coming weekend and all, so if I could get the gun to him tomorrow, how quickly could he have it done?

"Funny you should ask," he said with a squint and a sideways spit of chew that showed he hadn't bought a word of my story and couldn't care less why I'd bothered to make it up. "Last conversion I did? Few weeks ago? Overnight job for a couple of local rejects who wanted a nolo made lew. Jokers didn't care a whit they got charged three times what I'd usually ask, so yeah, you want it bad enough, just show me what you got and I can have it shooting jiz by next day, long's you pay in some kinda credits I can actually spend."

Or petro, he added, after he'd quoted a price and I said I'd better get back on the road to fetch the weapon. "Gas or diesel don't matter to me. Either one's good as gold these days," were the last words I heard as the hatch closed me in and the Ryde started moving.

Trying to retrace our steps back to Howard's place so the nav could reset and find its way back to the barrier checkpoint, I had to manually select one choice from a probability matrix the interface generated at every decision point as it and I both struggled to correlate its stored landmarks with the visuals around us. Result? I got us thoroughly lost, though I did have the edifying experience of passing through one surprisingly prosperous burg complete with restaurants, truck dealers, acres of new housing subdivision and two fueling stations whose signs proudly offered 'Gas,' 'Diesel,' Bio-Fuels' and 'NO CHARGING HERE!'

When the nav system finally did get a definite position based on a pedestal sign beside the ruins of Rural Fire District 4's Watson Divide substation (bombed or burned, I could not tell, but definitely defunct) it brought up another problem: apparently all my meandering had drained the battery more deeply than projected when I first proposed extending our journey out to deTroyer's place. With the extra appetite of headlights soon to be added, the system calculated we wouldn't make it to the moat without a recharge. Best the software could come up with was to head toward a place labelled 'Hole in The Rock' that was listed as having a charge-station, but when I asked how long that would

take, the screen displayed another matrix which told me - as best I could understand - that we'd either get there with less than two percent of charge remaining, or we'd not make it there at all, in which case the vehicle would pull into a 'conditionally safe' place to put itself to sleep and begin sending distress signals using power from a small auxiliary battery. Of course, that distress system had been engineered on the assumption there'd be GroundNet within fifty yards to pick up its signals; being out in Counties, there was close to zero chance of that. And no assurance how friendly anyone might be, who did happen to pick up the hail.

Sure enough, twenty-eight minutes later the vehicle rolled to a stop along a dirt road shouldered on the right by a steep embankment and on the left by an even-steeper slope down to what appeared to be a dry stream bed.

"The time is five-fourty-seven PM," the system announced, while displaying a sketchy map showing no sign of commerce or habitation anywhere near the blue triangle representing the vehicle (and me...). "Doors will now open to allow egress," it added helpfully, before advising that it was about to enter hibernation so as to conserve 'minimal administrative functions' until an external power source was connected. "Have a nice trip."

Stepping out, I propped my tote in the doorframe so at least the software couldn't lock me out completely if it auto-closed, which it did try to do soon after, alarm beeping indignantly at the obstruction for a feeble few seconds before giving up and going fully to sleep.

Only then, as I stood alone listening to the quietude of no-city, did the novelty of

my situation begin to sink in. Living in Center, there were days upon days upon weeks that I never went out except to trade one interior for another, with at most a couple blocks' walk or a few minutes trolley-ride between them. Even when you were out of doors, Center was hardly an encounter with nature; the greatest environmental threats there being sweaty pits or maybe a little solar-rouge on the cheeks courtesy of those reflective glass walls all around. Must've been ten years since I'd found myself out in a natural landscape, at the mercy of heat, cold, hunger, thirst and whatever else might come along.

Least I didn't need to worry about getting a sunburn here – not for another 12 hours or more. Cold *might* become an issue though, I realized, as a current of heavy mountain air flowing down the creek-bed investigated my clothing for access to flesh. I'd been educated well enough to know climate change didn't mean hot temperatures everywhere all the time but it was, nevertheless, striking to be reminded how abruptly temperatures could drop once you ventured beyond the waste-heat microclimate that Center's buildings generated around themselves.

After dark.

In January.

Under a sky that was clearing very nicely, thank you, now the sun was down.

And what a sky! If you ever bothered gazing up from Center streets after sunset what you'd see overhead was neither dark nor starry, more a generic absence; a featureless nothing washed out by the brighter glare of lighted windows and 24-hour signage. Here, by contrast, the heavens were a presence you could not miss; expansive

and intriguing and freckled with pinpoint stars, reminders of a universe we city-dwellers talked about now and then but rarely got to meet.

Eventually managing to pull my eyes away from all that infinity, I studied the hillside to my right; its star-shadowed bulk looming almost vertically from the edge of the narrow roadway. To the other side, I could make out no more of the wash than a shadowy tumble of boulders threaded by hints of sandy streambed, winding and braided in frozen memory of whenever water had last flowed along it. Beyond that, darkness without detail stretched up and up to where the stars started, silhouetting a ridgeline I could just make out as it rose and dipped and rose again to stretch off in both directions, with not a structure or a light to be seen.

Hardly dressed for a hike, and with no idea where I'd hike to if I had been, it seemed best to stay with the vehicle. Testing the hatch, I found I could - with some effort - raise and lower it, so climbed in to settle for the wait. Sleep not likely under the circumstances, I'd resorted to reviewing some information-policy directives stored on my Lyfe when, maybe an hour past full darkness, a gentle buzzing caught my ear. Insect, I thought, and even swatted a few times at it before realizing the sound was coming from outside my vehicle. Forcing open its hatch, I heard the buzzing grow louder, pulling eyes upward while my body shivered at the evening's chill. As my pupils adjusted to the darkness, they detected movement in the sky across the wash; a small patch of deeper darkness eclipsing first this star and then that as it moved from left to right, its sound now identifiably more mechanical than bio. Some sort of drone, I guessed; just the thing an isolated stronghold might use to keep eyes on their perimeter. For a minute or two, I listened as it continued down the wash with no sign of having registered the Ryde or me,

then disappeared, leaving only the crickets' song behind as I ducked back into the relative warmth of my vehicles.

Some unknown time later, my dozing was interrupted by a different noise: coarser and less uniform, the very un-Center revving of a small petro-engine. Bouncing off the landscape, the sound grew louder till it was no longer one voice but two; rising and falling and sputtering over and under one another. Turning in my seat, I caught a dim glow out the rear glass which quickly brightened, resolving into two pairs of glowing red eyes, bouncing and jostling as they approached me. Rapidly.

Every Shareholder had heard dark tales about County dwellers; their insularity and distrust of outsiders; resentment of our wealth and luxury and contempt for much of what we call progress, and they call weakness. Heard how quickly their reactions default to anger and its first-born child: violence. Stories enough that I pulled my tote out of the way and let the hatch close firmly, reassured by the snapping click of its latch. One of those minimal 'administrative functions' I guessed, that the AI had been hoarding power to maintain. Whatever; any level of security would be welcome, if the carbon-cowboys were about to descend upon me.

Note about those petro buggies and the politics of climate:

Prior to the Second Administration, the old Fed had arguably been attempting to get serious about emissions. Not serious enough to entertain a carbon tax, of course, or

even a cap-and-trade market, but enough to toss a few of our collective dollars at carbon-neutral power and a few more in the direction of grid upgrades that would get all those newly-renewable megawatts from wherever they were being harvested to where they could be consumed. Rest of the world was way ahead of us, but still held out hope the great-guzzler would catch up eventually, so it was a blow to them when the many offspring of the former fifty became free to set their own priorities. The two Californias and many ocean-facing new sovs remained in the game, maintaining green(-ish) policies that'd been in place before the splits, but sovs with the largest underground petro reserves were inherently opposed to giving up the fossil-fuel habit. What ensued, then, was a crazy-quilt of prohibitions and enticements, whatever progress 'green' sovereignties dictated in their domains being pre-mooted by coal-power plants reactivated in the southeast, refineries expanded along the gulf and drill rigs springing forth on millions of acres of ex-Federal land now open to suggestion. Muni, true to its market-modulated value system, outlawed burners completely in Center, restricted their use in Burrows (though enforcement was vanishingly sparse) and agreed that Counties be allowed to regulate per their own priorities. Hence the nickname 'carbon cowboys' for our cousins out there.

Once it was clear we disunited States were not about to pull our weight, other nations began to reconsider the cost of their own commitments, and within ten years the international conversation had largely shifted from slowing the degradation of humanity's native habitat to triaging which artificial infrastructure could be saved and fighting over who would profit from replacing what could not. Needless to say, the wealthy and

powerful won bigly in those activities. Those most directly affected by the changes, on the other hand, were generally too pre-occupied with survival to participate in the spoils-stakes.

Other than their un-woke means of transportation though, I needn't've worried about my mid-night visitors: turned out there wasn't a cowboy in the bunch, just three women from a ranch whose acreage spanned this stretch of road and whose security measures included sending up a drone every dusk, inertially-guided and pre-programmed to sweep their perimeter for interlopers. Once it got back, they'd downloaded the surveillance record, noted the heat-signature of my vehicle and hopped on a couple of mules to investigate - 'mules' being what they called the bio-Diesel-fueled little four-wheelers they rode. One of the three riders came over to my window and yes, she did have a handgun on display, but once her flashlight had roved across me she holstered it, hollering to the others - whose silhouettes bristled with tactical gear - that 'this one' wouldn't be giving them any trouble, and she'd do the talking while they kept an eye out. For what, she didn't say.

"Aren't you a precious thing," the woman remarked as I raised the hatch a few inches, ready to pull it down at any sign of trouble. "Used up all your juice, I imagine?"

Short, she was, but not small. May've been called 'petite' once, but the years had done what they will do to a working woman, granting her a more substantial outline to go with a voice that strongly-suggested its owner did not tolerate backtalk. Thanks to which,

we quickly covered where I was and why and moved on to what to do about it, beginning with one of her companions attaching a tow strap to a hook they'd uncovered in the Ryde's front bodywork.

“Open up,” the my visitor directed as they were doing that, and when I hesitated, elaborated. “That thing won’t steer itself, you know, not without power. There’s roll-control inside the dashboard there - but I’m guessing you don’t know about that, do ya’ darling? Probably don’t know how to drive a’tall, am I right?” Seemed to get quite a bit of satisfaction when I shrugged agreement. “City-peep,” she murmured, but without real venom, as she slid in and the smells of aged leather and desert dust brought me a sudden flash of Duncan after a long day, though overlaid with specifics of this person’s own world. Coffee breath at this late hour, plus something sweet and a bit flowery, and a little farther down beneath all those, a slight reminder of hard labor slanted with a ferrous tang that spoke of female’s places, despite her appearing past the age. Head cocked and eyes elsewhere, the woman fingered a seam below the dash screen till a small panel dropped down, revealing two plastic toggles. Pressing one at a time would slow the wheels on either side, I learned, giving her some control over the vehicle’s direction, and pressing them both down together would provide a semblance of braking. “Limit the damage to body and soul if we should find ourselves sledding down a steep and rocky incline,” she suggested, with a raucous rattle.

Minutes later we were off, one buggy towing the Ryde, the other trailing behind with lights out. “Watcher,” my companion called that one: “Holding back all dark and quiet, ready to strike if any assholes jump out of the brush and try to attack us helpless

damsels.”

Not that Ma Parker (as she had introduced herself) was anywhere near helpless. I learned that quick enough when she laid out her situation – self and two daughters and a few more daughters-in-law sharing the family compound as they tended near a hundred head of cattle and a dozen head of offspring while all the males old enough to throw a punch were off in their different directions.

I never got a handle on how many sons, sons in law or other males were attached to Ma, but it seemed a bundle. Two of them worked petro: i.e. driving a tanker truck sov to sov, sticking to the backroads to avoid tariffs and bribes so as to actually make a profit by the time they got their load to wherever the going-price was highest. Some others'd signed on to one or another militia or gone offshore to sovs that paid for their arms in some currency they could send home to help with the feed bills. Her oldest had made it to Knight of the Second-Degree of The Templars of The Nusades – a wild-bunch of Holy-Roman fanboys on perpetual mission to ‘take back’ Constantinople (Istanbul, to the rest of the world), re-consecrate the Hagia Sophia and monetize the endless supply of ultra-low sulfur petro their investors believed lay buried beneath the Thracian Peninsula - before getting himself wasted in the Second Battle of Gallipoli (Gelibolu, to those who actually live in the room where that particular farce happened). After which, the next in line took up and off to avenge his ‘sacrifice.’

“Lonnie’s been helping them assemble their new invasion force for two and a half years now, over in someplace I can’t pronounce,” Ma muttered, with a throttling mix of pride and trepidation that left her eager to change the subject.

“That your real color you got there?” she asked, clearly doubtful of the carrots

and beets spikiness exposed when my scarf'd slid off during that earlier attack of the naps. When I admitted it was 'helped along a little bit,' she smiled one of those tight little sideways smiles that say so much. "Used to get mine done, too. Before. Sally Root was her name - if you can believe that? Called her place The Mane Station too, like a horse's...That girl truly loved a play with words! Passed-on years ago, though," her voice trailed off.

"Your hair is beautiful Ma, thick and...

"Can't tell if its gray or white or what anymore," she interrupted, determined to deflect any attempt at compliment. "Used to be a sight, though: flaming-bright and bold, just like Bonnie or Reba. Hair like that; people see you coming a mile away. Take notice. Sally kept it that way for me, when it started to go, but now?"

Turned out Counties didn't have niceties like hair color on their shelves those days. Center's procurement managers were pretty good at getting around the rat's nest of inter-sovereign trade and tariffs, but not so Ma's little corner of Counties. Just one more thing that'd broken-down over the years.

Talk of things breaking down made me think about what hadn't died yet; the simple kindness these gals were showing to me. When I attempted to thank Ma for treating me so well, despite my probably falling outside her regular social circle, she wouldn't hear of it.

"You're a human being, aren't you? One of God's children, just like anybody else, and Jesus tells us to love every one of those. That's what matters to me, sweetheart. Helping you out's just another opportunity for me to do a little of His work."

Ma talked a lot more as the mules putted under starry skies above: about getting old and going gray and wondering how the hell you could be that person you saw in the mirror each morning when inside you were still the one you'd always been: fast and fun and full of ideas you couldn't wait to act on. Flaming red hair was the least of the losses, she claimed at one point, but the way the words tapered down to nothing told me it was an important 'least.'

"I tell you what, Ma," I offered, late in our time together. "When I get back to Center, I'll get you the brightest, boldest red hair color I can find. You just tell me how to send it to you, and I'll do the rest. "

Ma Parker hemmed and hawed then, politely declining my offer, but if I learned one thing about County folk that night, they are sensible persons, so in the end she did what any sensible person would do when given permission to scratch an itch. Pulled a note-pad out of the breast pocket of her chore coat and wrote down 'Mavis Parker, Parker Family Ranch, CR 24, Kaolin County, C/S of Confluence' and an actual *telephone* number – with area code and all! I held that note in my hand the rest of the ride, warmed and reassured by it. Only when a neon glow announced we'd reached the 'Hole in the Rock' fueling station/convenience store, did I slip the paper inside the tote I'd been gripping like a life-preserver the entire journey.

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...

TO BE CONTINUED IN INSTALLMENT THREE

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