

I-Land

by

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“The Populists and The Coalition ”¹

Corporations inherently tend toward greater profit and power. They seek and have always sought any pathway – legal or illicit – to consolidate economic control over their ambitions. A natural corollary to this aim is the pursuit of that legislature which will augment such control. History records this pursuit occurring as far back as the 17th century, in fact very shortly after the actual birth of the corporation.

By the 21st century in the United States, this funneling of power included not only the legislature but also the judiciary branch – a full two-thirds of the functioning government – which aligned the interests of both government and corporation to an unprecedented degree. Additionally, the dozens of remaining corporations agglomerated until only a handful of authentic players remained in the multinational field. A relatively new corporation named Illiex arose during this telescoping concentration of power. Through its frenetic innovation and uncanny market sense, Illiex soon became the preeminent mega-corporation across the fields of technology, media, and telecommunications.

*Simultaneously, it became more apparent that both sides of the antiquated Liberal-Conservative spectrum of political debate were mere departments of a single, corporate-controlled discourse, one that ignored reality and left authentic critical thought in the cold. A new group took shape within the morass of political bickering, formed by people on both sides of the traditional Left-Right divide. Their ideals were populist in nature and, so as to reflect it, they chose *The Populists* as their name.*

*Recognizing that they could not hope to effect any substantial change unless they unanimously agreed on a target for their efforts, *The Populists* developed the Rational Platform*

¹ Excerpted from Jensen, Frida, The People's Anthology of the 3rd Millenium, 2nd edition, Ch. 2.

– a list of priorities comprising suggestions from all of their members, organized in a way that the most pressing matters would be addressed soonest. Uniquely, they forged a compact to work toward only the top priority at any given time, thus creating a simple system by which one specific political issue received the full and unwavering attention of tens of millions of energetic and capable individuals. In response to corporations' disproportionate power over their human subjects, the first item on the Rational Platform's agenda was the abolition of corporate personhood.

There had also begun a national, parallel effort against corporations, perpetrated by anarchical groups and fostered through social media. Around the same time that The Populists developed their Rational Platform, these anarchist stunts grew to include vandalism and violent corporate sabotage. As government suspicions grew regarding the timing of the anti-corporate attacks, The Populists publically and repeatedly disavowed them, pointing to their charter as proof that they were utilizing only legal means to pursue their agenda.

To what extent the two movements – anarcho-terrorism and populism – were actually linked is as unclear now as it was then; despite The Populists' protestations, mutual sympathies certainly existed between the two groups. Verifiable, however, is that the Illiex-controlled media portrayed the two groups as essentially one and the same. This allowed corporations and the government to use wholly new levels of persecution against both 'domestic terrorists' and the nascent Populist politicians.

The first domino to fall was the open admission of domestic spying by the National Security Agency, its reality no longer suppressed as a dirty secret. Under the extant Espionage Act of the 20th century, combined with the early 3rd-millenium precedent set with the selective suspension of habeas corpus, conspirators were imprisoned indefinitely. Any mention of certain

key words – e.g., ‘attack,’ ‘anarchist,’ ‘Populist,’ ‘Illix,’ ‘corporations’ – was sufficient to place one under suspicion as a conspirator. Furthermore, the President, a former Illix executive, authorized drones by executive order to surveil her own citizens, of which the practical result was targeted airstrikes against suspected ‘terrorist’ cells in the U.S.

These measures roused the antipathy of a large segment of the Libertarian-oriented populace which had hitherto remained outside the fracas. Because they tended to be well-armed, it took only a spark to ignite them into frenzy. That spark went flying in a drone attack on April 8, 2054 which decimated one of the Libertarian-linked anarchist cells, along with their civilian family members. This attack, now known as the McMinnville Massacre, precipitated the Second Civil War.

The details of Civil War II are discussed in Chapter 3, but certain remarks are relevant to the history of The Populists. When the Libertarian-fueled skirmishes coalesced into a nationwide conflict, one to which the anarchists eagerly affixed themselves, The Populists were left with two options: align themselves with the disparate anti-corporate forces; or refuse to fight and voluntarily accept persecution, imprisonment and slaughter at the hands of the gubernocorporate alliance. The majority of the remaining Populists opted for the former course. The resulting anti-corporate force adopted the name Anti-Corporate Coalition (A.C.C.), shortened in popular usage to simply The Coalition. Its members called themselves ‘ACCtors’ (pronounced ‘actors’), eventually to be written using the lower case: ‘acctors.’

The practical result of Civil War II was to initiate the massive urban destruction that would characterize the next century. The process was compounded by the effects of Climate Change (see Ch. 1), and the gubernocorporate use of biochemical weaponry, leading to the fragmentation of the United States into its current five provinces (plus unincorporated

territories). This fragmentation was ultimately mirrored on a global scale, with causes outside the scope of our tri-millennial North American perspective.

When the Coalition dissolved after its defeat, the best of the Libertarians and anarchists became the Midlanders of today, opting for a homesteading life out-city. The worst of them became the marauding bands that currently stalk the Feudal Zones in Appalachia, the Southern Confederacy (a.k.a. Dixieland), the Everglades, and the vast Western Territory. The Populists who did not join with either the homesteaders or the warlords remained in hiding. Their name was eventually simplified to “The People.”

I.

The cold of the portico's marble floor seeped through Mohsin's pants as he knelt before a dented can of murky water. The first rays of dawn illuminated the surrounding pillars, though the light had yet to reveal the filth that encrusted them. Mohsin removed a piece of folded paper from his pocket, then nimbly pinched the base apart so that it resembled a small boat. He placed it on the surface of the scum water before him and felt for a match in his pocket.

He looked around to see how the rest were doing. Two dozen forms were similarly crouched throughout the portico, kneeling as if praying before their own dilapidated vessels. Looking down the great steps to the small plaza, he saw the five demolitionists working in a ring in the middle of the expanse, laying the explosives.

Looking back to his neighbors on the terrace, Mohsin saw they awaited him. Their confidence lifted his spirits. He flicked his match alight and glanced up again. Within seconds, the rest of his companions repeated his movement.

Turning back to his can, Mohsin saw the yellow-tinged whiteness of his little boat floating still, like an island, upon the opaque water. The match glared off the surface's oily film, and he noticed with brief cheer the beautiful flash of a rainbow prism as the flame approached its destination. It touched the upper point of his origami form, and the first tendrils of smoke curled up, followed by a small blue flame that quickly yellowed.

And it shall burn, he thought. Just as I-Land shall burn.

He waved the match out and rested on his heels, surveying the scene around him once more. In the dawning day, the dark blobs dotting the portico were in various stages of completing the same seditious candlelight vigil. One by one he could see their faces lit yellow

by the matches. Seconds later a strengthening glow emanated from the can in front of them, and they resumed their vigilance.

Mohsin rose and now saw most of the others crouched like gargoyles next to their small offerings, watching him. He jerked his head over his shoulder and turned around, feeling them follow him down to the plaza.

At the bottom of the stairs he spun and gazed back up at the hulking palace. He never could have imagined how magnificent it would look, despite its disrepair, despite everything noxious it represented. It was difficult to control the exhilaration of being up here, finally among them. But Mohsin, uniquely adept at controlling himself, inhaled deeply and relaxed.

A huge flag hung in front of the eight columns of the portico. It was notable in the growing light for its pristine condition against the mossy, mud-caked columns of the deteriorating building to which it was affixed. It had a crisp black border upon a blood-red background, with a thick, stark white band running horizontally across the middle. In the center and taking up most of the flag's space, occluding the white band and red background, was a royal blue circle with a black triangle in the middle, staring down like the great eye of a serpent.

Underneath the sinister banner, his soldiers stood before him: the People. They were an army of dark ghosts, clad in identical brown-mottled, hooded *camonchos*. Only their varied pants dispelled the uniformity, with various shades of gray, brown and black emerging from beneath the ponchos. Some of them wore hats beneath their hoods in the cool autumn air, either knit wool or the type of brimmed fedora that recalled a near-ancient past. Their faces were tired and dirty, the men mostly unshaven, but they looked upon Mohsin with quiet strength, a strength confirmed by their Fringes, those rings of light that each of them exuded, the fields of energy

that only Mohsin could fully detect. He surveyed them with satisfaction before signaling to Esmeralda.

She was still atop the stairs, directly beneath the flag, holding a long pole with a wad of cloth wrapped around the end. She flicked a match alight and touched it to the swaddled end of the pole, whereupon flame engulfed the rags with an abbreviated *whoosh*. Mohsin turned to monitor the explosives crew – they were crouching around the packages in the middle of the plaza – and spun back in time to see Esmeralda tickling a corner of the flag with her flame. Smoke whispered from the cloth just before a small blue flame licked at the corner. It spread steadily and morphed through the spectrum of colors from blue to aqua to a black-tinged yellow.

She was lowering the pole when something invisible hurled her backwards against a column. Upon impact her arms whipped backwards, the lengthened torch sailing through the air beneath the portico. Only when it toppled clumsily to the marble floor did Mohsin realize what had happened.

“Evasive!” he yelled. “Evasive! Remember your routes!” He skimmed over the squads in front of him and spun back to the still-toiling explosives force. “NOW!” he screamed.

As if in punctuation, the sirens of I-Land jolted awake with an otherworldly wailing.

He jerked to his right and found Guaré crouched with the four others before their packets of explosives. The Captain’s brown bowler tilted precariously on his head as he shook it back and forth. Not time enough to set the charges, he was saying. *No matter*, Mohsin thought. *All that matters is escape*.

“NOW!” he screamed again. The People immediately bolted in opposite directions, toward both corners of the Palace.

As he joined the group with Guaré, running toward the east corner, two more soldiers dropped around him, fallen like Esmeralda by strangely silent projectiles. *Where are these shooters?* he thought wildly. He searched as he ran but saw nothing except a black, bounding shadow in his periphery. On trying to look closer the shape dissolved down a shadowy street on the southeast corner of the plaza.

The sirens came from large speakers mounted on cornices at every block. Next to them were tiny cameras and small, red flashing lights that whirred continuously as the warning shrieked. Every five seconds a staccato, robotic message interrupted the alert, just as loud but not as piercing: “ATTENTION CITIZENS: ASSUME POSTS AND AWAIT FURTHER ASSISTANCE.”

Mohsin ran alongside the hulking Amadou. The fear on his face did not suit his tall, muscular frame. They were ready to turn the corner at the end of the front stairs when Amadou, in his rich baritone, yelled, “Claws!”

Around the corner were small metal platforms that looked like trapdoors in the ground at regular intervals next to the buildings. In acquiescence to the alert, Citizens were already filing out of the building across the street from the Palace’s flank. A couple of them had already stepped onto their designated platforms.

Mohsin watched one woman down the street, not one of his People, step onto the plate. A large metal rod sprung vertically out of the trapdoor and rose along the woman’s back. When it had reached shoulder level two arms unfolded from the rod and quickly enveloped her, locking her in place. Out of the sides of the pole-tip extended four finger-like metal clamps that held her head firmly in place. From the very top of the pole a screen rose and arced down in front of her face, covering it from Mohsin’s view.

“ATTENTION CITIZENS: ASSUME POSTS. . .”

The pole had a speaker on it that calmly repeated itself amidst the blaring of the siren. As he ran by each Claw, Mohsin picked out the same message playing simultaneously on a repeated loop: “This is an Authorized Detention. Please await official assistance. If you have any concerns about your detention you may address them to the appropriate authorities.”

As Amadou yelled, one of the comrades in front of him stumbled and tripped as he ran, landing on a nearby platform. Before he could rise the Claw sprang forth and ensnared him. As the arms closed the pole raised him up to a standing position, limiting his movement to a few centimeters in either direction. He had managed to raise one arm above the pincers in his effort to escape and was now frozen half-sideways, one arm over his head. As Mohsin passed him the man looked at him around the side of his screen, terrified.

“Strength,” Mohsin said loudly, reaching to touch him as he passed, consciously willing him that very strength. Before fleeing he could already feel the relaxation that his gesture effected.

The Citizens continued to file out of their buildings, plodding into the Authorized Detention Devices, stepping placidly onto their metal plates. Each of them was a nondescript shade of gray as Mohsin sped past them. The ones that had already been locked up waited in place, remnants of sleep clouding their pacified faces. Most of them hadn’t even had time to put in their I’s for the day.

As Mohsin and his crew stormed past, the Citizens’ eyes widened, but the Claws restrained their heads, keeping them from watching the fugitives for more than a moment. All the Citizens faced outward, away from the pole, arms by their sides. One or more children huddled around many of them, either gripping their parents’ immobile hands or holding onto the

metal pole. The younger children looked terrified, the older ones bored. Mothers were permitted to hold infants in their arms. The Claw regulated its pressure according to the shape of the immature cargo.

The detained members of the People, contrarily, were locked in tortured positions, sideways or backwards, arms at unnatural angles, faces grimacing in pain. They struggled in vain, their awkward poses divulging their guilt.

“ATTENTION CITIZENS: ASSUME POSTS. . .”

Mohsin repeated Amadou’s warning in a gruff yell: “Mind the Claws! Middle of the street!” Those kin who hadn’t already now heeded his call, moving away from the platforms to the middle of the street.

Suddenly Mohsin heard a revving motor followed by screeching tires. He looked back over his shoulder to see a police tank skidding to a halt at the corner of the Palace and the plaza. Thick, black metal plates coated its sides and roof, and its three pairs of wheels were as tall as his waist. The back door popped open with a hydraulic whine and a squadron of armored I-PF officers jumped out and gave chase. They were clad in the customary black, with heavy vests, rifles, and helmets with dark visors, each one resembling a mini version of the black metal tank as they trickled out like spawn. Each sported a miniature I-Land flag in a patch on his chest.

How did they get here this fast? Mohsin wondered. Too fast. Doesn’t make sense. He had been caught off guard too many times already this morning.

A speaker mounted on the I-PF tank came to life: “HALT TERRORISTS! ENEMIES OF THE STATE! ENEMIES OF THE STATE!”

“ATTENTION CITIZENS. . .” droned the building-mounted sirens.

Pounding footsteps and the riotous whining of the megaphones drowned out the personalized squabble of the dozens of ADDs as Mohsin flew by. The clanking of police gear now pursued him, weaving through the street.

At the end of the block, another tank careened toward them. He willed himself to ignore the intimidation that the massive vehicle aroused, like a rampaging bull but ten times as big. He worried for the rest of his soldiers' mental states if the tanks affected him so. He knew fear could derail their best intentions.

The bull pulled up at the intersection half a block in front of them. More than a dozen of its spawn gushed out and formed a line to block the end of the street. They spread their legs and squatted slightly, bracing for impact, rifles in front of them.

Mohsin saw the most advanced members of his crew hesitate, looking back toward him, their Fringes brightening in fear. He accelerated to a dead sprint and yelled, "Stay strong! They will not shoot! Forward! Break through!"

The foremost members surged in response. The first two arrived at opposite ends of the police line and met the awaiting rifle butts. One of them crumpled to the ground in response to a vicious hit to the head. The other, Guaré, took the brunt of the blow with his forearm and spun off in the opposite direction beyond the I-PF, heading down the street behind the Palace. Two officers raced after him and the line of agents thinned.

The larger mass of Mohsin's crew arrived at the line and barreled into it. A few officers took a shoulder to the gut and toppled onto their backs. The ensuing rebels, Mohsin included, attacked the empty spaces in the line, leaving the other officers grasping at air.

Most of the People broke through, but now I-PF swarmed everywhere, their black suits materializing out of the shrinking shadows. The low-grade foreboding he had felt since

Esmeralda's fall now grew amid the chaos. He kept sprinting, making for the end of the new block. *Left, right, left*, he thought, reviewing his evacuation route. Several pairs of feet pounded the pavement around him, the metallic clank of their gear keeping time. Hollow echoes reverberated off the nearby buildings.

“HALT TERRORISTS!”

“ATTENTION CITIZENS: ASSUME. . .”

Indeterminate yells and screams punctured the steady rhythm of the footfall. To his right a Sister was getting brutally slapped in the face and thrown against a wall. Over there was young Rodi, barely old enough to shave. Two officers were on him, one shackling him while the other kicked him in the ribs.

Some of the commotion carried over to the silent Citizens in their ADDs. Some of the cries were theirs as police threw their targets savagely toward the walls. Mohsin saw his man Jengo get tackled mercilessly from the side. A nearby Citizen, unaware, took the brunt of the hit as the hurtling mass of Jengo and officer whipped into her legs, clipping her left knee backwards. Mohsin grimaced at the sound of bones snapping like a dead tree branch. The previously sedate Citizen shrieked in a banshee shock of agony, her children scattering to avoid the hurtling combatants. Mohsin ran on.

“ATTENTION CITIZENS: ASSUME POSTS. . .”

“HALT TERRORISTS! ENEMIES. . .”

He still had Amadou running by his side, big and loyal and comforting. *Left, right, left, hole*. At the end of the block Mohsin grabbed Amadou's collar, tugging him to the left in accordance with their route.

But immediately around the corner waited a large, black-masked officer, his arm raised high with a truncheon. Before they could change course he jerked his hand down, clubbing Amadou over the head with a *thud*. Mohsin's comrade collapsed like a glass pane under the blow.

Mohsin, recovering from the shock of the officer's apparition, quickly cocked his fist and swung at the masked face. But the man was quick and dodged the strike; in an easy motion he grabbed the flailing arm and brought it in a smooth arc out, down, then up behind Mohsin's back. The officer put his shoulder into Mohsin's back and mashed his face into the brick wall. Mohsin struggled and the agent jerked his arm upward, shooting pain from the wrenched shoulder. Mohsin grunted and winced but did not yell.

"You mask your pain well, terrorist," the officer breathed into Mohsin's ear. "Stop moving if you want to keep your arm."

Mohsin felt the cold grime of the dirty brick as it scraped his cheek. The coldness mirrored his own inner chill. How could so simple an exercise have deteriorated so fast? What had they failed to take into account?

No, he thought, scrunching his eyes closed and reopening them. *Nobody needs my despair*. He steadily transformed his fearful chill into an inner calm.

"Do what you will," he finally responded to the agent, his voice emotionless.

He felt a shackle clamp onto his wrist. The officer trapped Mohsin's free hand and joined it to the manacles behind his back. The man was much larger than Mohsin – large and strong like a bear but clearly more agile. He kept Mohsin pinned to the wall with an implacable hip while he lifted Amadou to his feet. He leaned the now-semiconscious fugitive against the

wall in order to handcuff him in turn. Then he grabbed both of them by the chains and pulled them off the wall.

“Move,” he said, shoving them back toward whence they ran.

“ATTENTION/HALT CITIZENS/REBELS!”

Mohsin considered fleeing – at least one of he or Amadou could break free if they struggled in unison – but the swarms of I-PF made such an enterprise futile. He mused at their sad parade down the middle of the street between four rows of trapped Citizens. The Cits stood silently at attention in front of their homes, shops and offices; it was I-Land’s modern-day version of a public shaming. Yet it was questionable how many eyes actually saw the detainees, despite the ostensible exposure of their capture.

Some of the Cits, frozen in front of their screens, attempted meek glances around their devices as the captives came into view. But most stared straight ahead, oblivious, silent sentinels, drugged and groggy in the early morning light, voiceless witnesses with nothing to testify. Some of them whimpered, either scared or injured, an occasional Citizen casualty of the violent clash. Most of them made no sound – the ADD was capable of reporting them for insubordination.

Only the children saw everything, with nothing to shield or distract their vision, not yet. Only they saw the alleged shame of these prisoners in its plenitude, though they comprehended it not. Mohsin knew well that what came next wouldn’t be public – I-Land didn’t broadcast the torture cells and the extrajudicial murders.

The escort neared the group of officers from the second tank, the one that had briefly intimidated Mohsin as it bowled toward them. It had now been joined by a third. A few other

detained People were around and inside the van. Mohsin was pleased to see that a significant amount of his force, perhaps half, had escaped into the sewers.

He turned to the bear of an officer that escorted him. Signaling with his head to the imprisoned Citizens at the side of the street, he asked, “Is it not wrong that these people must suffer for something I have done? That they lose their liberty for you to capture me?”

He steeled himself to be hit for his impertinence, standard recourse for I-PF toward their captives.

The officer did not hit him but responded in a monotone, “They bear witness to the consequences of your terrorism.”

“But is it not wrong, I ask!” Mohsin hissed. A fiery anger supplanted his chill. “These are innocents, your fellow Citizens. Your Brothers and Sisters. They have done nothing, yet they stand here scared and hurt by Illiex, by *you!*”

The officer said nothing for several seconds. Mohsin was normally loath to permit his emotions to rule him, but he was now too tired and defeated to stop himself. Despair worked on him despite his wishes. But in the silence awaiting a response, Mohsin resigned himself to his arrest, to his torture and eventual execution. The heat of his anger subsided as he did so. He was calm once more.

Finally, the officer’s voice pierced his calm. Even had he not heard the words, the tone of the voice would have shocked Mohsin with its humanity. The voice cracked as it said, “I had to tell my men to hit them. I can’t believe I gave that order!” The words burst out like a repressed river through a crack in the dam.

Mohsin felt goosebumps swarm his body, even down through his shackled hands. His eyes welled up. He looked to Amadou and saw that the big man’s big, white eyes were wide

with astonishment, mirroring his own. Neither of them had ever engaged an officer in conversation. None of their training or experience had equipped them to deal with this. For I-PF, freely associating even with the so-called “low” Citizens was subject to strict discipline. But this breakthrough in sincerity, in emotion, and with detained terrorists? Unimaginable. Mohsin struggled to comprehend it.

But he forced himself to respond, trying to muffle this shock of which the officer must have been aware. He said, pleasantly surprised at the self-control his voice evinced, “Then you see, Brother, what else could I have done but what I did? How could I not have done it?”

He turned his head to face the officer and looked not at an agent but a man. For the officer had lifted his visor and his vibrant eyes returned the prisoner’s gaze.

Mohsin was dumbfounded. Staring at the human face of the I-PF officer further disoriented him. He felt his hatred soften by a degree, and for the first time he fully understood – he *comprehended* – why they kept themselves always masked.

But there was more, something even more anomalous: his Fringe. It was not the dark green and yellow that Mohsin normally saw among I-Land officers. It was not even the gray void of the Citizen. There was gray here too – how could there not be with the anguish evident in his voice – but there was another color beneath it, pervading it, tinting the entire aura like a colored lens held in front of a bulb. It was blue, a color he had seen only once before on a Citizen, one that had eventually become one of his People.

Looking past the Fringe, Mohsin honed in on the man’s expansive face. His small nose and close-set eyes made the rest seem broader than it actually was, but also childlike, with an innocence and goodness pervading it. Mohsin looked into the officer’s eyes and they were indeed eyes, not I’s; they were missing the unmistakable glow of the mandatory computerized

lenses. Mohsin had to look again in confirmation – he had never before seen a Citizen without them. But it was also true that there was another light in those eyes, not the artificial glow of the I-Lenses but a natural spark that conveyed intelligence and love.

Apparently assured that the detainees had received his revelation, the officer flipped down his visor and ordered Mohsin, “Face forward, detainee!”

He launched Mohsin with a shove toward the police tank. Mohsin would have fallen had the man behind him – *Yes, the man, not the officer* – not held him by the collar. Under his breath their captor said, “Pay no mind. Trust me.”

There was too much conflicting input even for Mohsin. He decided to trust, a decision as much of exhaustion as any particular faith.

Their man escorted them to the back of the van where a policeman guarded the door. “Space?” he barked.

“S’ enough fer now,” the guard said with a snort, opening the door.

The man pushed Mohsin and Amadou into the back of the van and they fell forward onto the floor. The benches were taken up by five other People. The leader looked quickly among the familiar faces and smiled when he saw Guaré.

“Appears that luck has abandoned us today,” his captain said.

Only Mohsin could detect the fear in his Fringe. Guaré excelled at donning bravado for the common soldiers, and at suppressing his true feelings in service to his care-free persona. There was only the faintest note of anxiety in those mischievous eyes that always aroused such tenderness.

“We shall see,” Mohsin responded.

The back doors of the van closed and Mohsin raised himself to listen at the back window, sealed only by a metal grill. He heard his man addressing the van's guard.

"You are relieved of your duty at this van."

"Sir, Sarge ordered me t'keep my post here n'matter what."

"Officer, I have been charged by Strauss himself with an exceptional mission. If your Sergeant has concerns you can explain that Captain Betancourt countered his command on Chairman Strauss's authority."

"Captain, sir, m'sorry. I didn' recognize you with yer headgear."

"There's no need to see my face when you can plainly see my stripes, officer."

"Yessir."

"Am I to understand that the keys are in place?"

"Yessir."

"Very well, carry on with the concluding sweep."

"Sir."

The guard clanked off while the captain stepped to the open driver's door and sat down. Through the cabin wall Mohsin heard the vehicle's automated system request identification.

"Good morning, Captain Betancourt," the soft male voice spoke.

"Morning, Cal," the officer answered. "Manual operation please."

"For you, certainly. You may go."

The officer switched the van into gear and began to move. Mohsin lowered himself to the ground and leaned against a pair of legs behind him, he couldn't see whose.

He looked up at Guaré and smiled. "Quite the contrary, friend. It seems that extraordinary luck has found us today."

Guaré raised his eyebrows and his bowler hat lifted at the gesture, catching Mohsin's attention. How did he still have that silly hat? But Mohsin said nothing and instead stared at the floor of the van, revealing his state of mind only through a tight-lipped smile that stretched, barely, to his eyes.

Captain Betancourt weaved slowly through the middle of the streets, tapping the horn when approaching any of the several lingering police groupings. The officers turned to him, saw his stripes, and resumed their lingering.

Containing his excitement was one of the toughest things he had ever attempted.

Everything was more vivid as he drove. His heart had finally ceased pounding, but the adrenaline worked on him now in a different way. He was hyper-alert, seeing, smelling and hearing things that he never noticed in his daily life. He saw the Citizens still lined up on the sides of the street in their ADDs – the so-called “Claws” – and felt a profound sadness for them. He had long understood the injustice of the security measure, but never had he empathized so strongly with the common Cit that suffered through it. They would be there for the better part of the morning, until the investigation was satisfactorily concluded. He spit out the window as he thought about it.

“Where are you going, sir?” Cal spoke out of the dash.

“Don't worry about it, robot,” he said.

“There's no need for attitude, sir.”

Betancourt rolled his eyes but controlled himself.

He refocused on his surroundings, gobbling up everything with his heightened senses. He kept taking deep breaths, to the bottom of his lungs, to regions hitherto untouched by fresh air.

As he crossed the river heading southwest, exiting the lockdown sector, the streets cleared of Citizens and the buildings both shortened and thinned. He was leaving the downtown area and seeing more obvious signs of neglect. Never, now that he had finally taken a step outside of it, had I-Land looked so dilapidated, so utterly decrepit and rotten. In addition to more broken windows and crumbling structures, the crawler grass began to make its presence felt on the buildings and sidewalks. He had to begin watching for encroaching patches on the street of that perfectly manicured lawn, at times slowing to maneuver the van around them. After years of arduous searching he wouldn't want to rescue his treasure just to drive them into a sinkhole.

Gradually he exited the city proper and entered the industrial zone, its nondescript factories lining the roadway, each one pumping their particular variety of infinite, smoky vapor into the air. They tainted the breeze on his face with an acrid odor, but its disgusting pungence satiated him still. Besides, the wind felt too good to close the window.

Sprinkled among the factories were the smokeless ACs: long sheds of either metal or plastic, depending on the product. *There's meat*, he thought as he passed a metal one. *Pigs? Cows?* But these facilities thinned out as well and he finally came to a permanent roadblock set up in front of a large waterway, manned by a specialized segment of the I-PF.

“Approaching I-Land's limits, sir,” Cal spoke through the stereo.

“I can see that, thanks.” But despite his sarcasm he was beginning to give himself over to his excitement once more. There was only one official outside. As soon as Betancourt slowed and showed him his stripes, the young officer waved him on.

The land across the Moat was wide open; he was the only vehicle on an uninhabited highway. The rolling expanse was broken in the distance by two huge power plants. The bigger one, with ten cooling towers, was to the right of the Eastern Roadway and the smaller, six-tower plant was to the left.

There was little out-city other than the power stations. The principal plant life was the predatory crawler grass. He noticed scorch marks on the shoulder of the road where it had been burnt back, in order to keep the road safe for the Nukers. A charred accusation that nothing, not even genetically modified grass, can be perfect.

Several minutes later he pulled onto a side road where an abandoned gas station marked the minor intersection. He continued back for another several clicks before stopping in the middle of the road. Betancourt turned off the van and exited the vehicle, shedding his helmet but holding onto the rifle just in case. He walked to the back of the thick van and took a deep breath, giving himself one last chance to contain his joy.

Exhaling, he opened the rear doors. The detainees squinted in the sudden daylight. After the clank of the door everything was silent. They just looked at him. Some of them were scared and some were obviously angry.

Betancourt looked to Mohsin and felt a wave of love sweep over him. After so long he had finally found him, was looking at him and talking to him, smelling him and breathing the same air. It was true.

Finally Mohsin spoke, and everything after felt surreal, Betancourt responding automatically, too stunned to consider his own words.

“What will you do with us?” Mohsin asked.

“I mean to help.”

“You mean to join the People?”

“Yes.”

“I know your name, Capt. Betancourt. You have overseen unpardonable actions against fellow human beings.”

“I have done much in the name of I-Land and my own safety.”

“And yet you decide now to betray your I-Land. Why?”

“It’s not now that I’ve decided, it’s only now that I’ve found you.”

Mohsin was quiet but for his eyes. It was the thin man in the funny hat who spoke next. Betancourt knew from his intelligence that it was Mohsin’s captain. He tried to keep himself from marveling. That little more than rumors and hearsay should materialize into *this* was a nearly unbearable elation.

“You know nothing,” the hatted man said, puncturing Betancourt’s joy without ceremony. “We carry no papers and exist outside of your database. We are the anonymous People, the Unsurveilled, defenders and stewards of the human spirit. We live for all and die unknown.”

Betancourt paused for a moment, for the first time considering his response. He passed through a broad range of emotions, from reverence to glee to annoyance to pity.

“What you say is mostly true,” he finally replied. “Except I know that you are Guaré, and that this man is your beloved Mohsin. I have searched for one or both of you for over a decade, ever since I knew without doubt what I was. I searched when everyone told me you no longer existed. I searched knowing that despite not having met, I belonged with you.”

Guaré glanced down at Mohsin but the leader still stared at Betancourt. It seemed like he was attempting to decode him.

Then Mohsin spoke, “I look into your eyes and they are real ones, not I-Land’s demented mimicry – you have removed the artificial spark of the I-Lens. Yet I can also see the intelligence of your naked eye, a glint that the most perceptive of us cannot miss.

“There is also something only I can see: your Fringe. It cannot lie – you are one of us, whether you have accepted it or not. If you have, then you can be a great help. If not. . . then still, we have no choice but to do as you say. We are completely in your power.”

“You will have to tell me later about this ‘Fringe,’” Betancourt said. “But meanwhile I release you.”

Betancourt stepped forward as he removed a key from his vest pocket. Mohsin pivoted around and waited as Betancourt unlocked his manacles. The Captain then gave the keys to his former prisoner, who proceeded to unlock his comrades. Each freed detainee rapidly stood up and sprung from the van, Guaré first, followed by the black, towering man who he had clubbed. Betancourt averted his eyes.

Guaré was the first to speak as Mohsin continued unlocking the prisoners. “Sir, you must understand we cannot trust him. He has served I-Land for too long, and anyone who does so is corrupted. We must take him now!”

Despite his outward calm, Betancourt tightened his grip on the rifle. He listened to the man in the bowler but never pivoted his head from the crouching leader.

“We will not,” Mohsin said, looking not at his partner but at the pair of hands in front of him.

“You know what he is capable of,” Guaré pressed. “His very humanity has been compromised by his proximity to Illiex, by what he had to do in order to gain their graces. It’s as likely that he is an agent of theirs as a defector, likelier even.

“You speak of the glint in his eyes,” Guaré continued. “That which separates People from Citizen. But what of his other I’s, the I-Lenses, even if he removed them for now? What of his OBARD? What of his CaPLs? All of these prove he is beholden to them. In many ways it is already too late. Even without a visual, his Bard has already recorded and transmitted everything since your capture. They now have voice-prints on all of us, and names to match some of them.”

Guaré finished with a glare and Betancourt felt anger of his own surging within. He turned to Mohsin and saw the leader awaiting a response. After an effort to calm his anger, Betancourt replied.

“As tacit approval of the rampant corruption that runs through the highest ranks of our government, a corruption of which I am sure you are aware —” He paused, some bitterness seeping into his voice as he looked to Mohsin and then Guaré. “. . . Officers above a certain rank are given the authority to disable their recording devices. That is how I am permitted to remove my I’s; very few of the higher officers wear them anymore.

“As for the Otic Broadcasting and Recording Devices,” he said, pointing to his ear, “High-ranking officials are given implants behind the ear to override them. I am fairly certain you’ve never seen these.”

He turned his head and pulled his right ear forward, showing a small black device sticking out of his skin. “For privacy,” he continued, “Most of us keep our I’s and Bards off the majority of the time, as I have mine now. Thus the blackouts in the database for certain Citizens do not raise suspicion.”

He looked to Guaré and saw his lingering skepticism.

“Believe what you will,” Betancourt finished, slightly squinting his eyes at Guaré and immediately regretting it.

Mohsin turned to Guaré. “I know of your security concerns, and I know of the indoctrination that the Citizens endure. I know of its insidious influence. But I also know what I have seen and heard. Only I have seen his Fringe, but even you can see his intelligence. Hear his speech; it is closer to ours than to Citspeak. They are my own good senses and I trust them. I ask that you do the same. But it is the Council who should decide this.”

He turned back to the last shackled woman and finished unlocking her cuffs.

Betancourt saw Guaré rubbing his first and second fingers against his thumb in slow circles as he thought. A crisp breeze blew along the road and carried a distant stench of manure.

Guaré exchanged a glance with the tall black man standing next to him, the one Betancourt had clubbed. He then looked to Betancourt, who returned his gaze, daring him to further protest. Guaré looked back to his friend and the tall man nodded to him, his eyebrows raised. Betancourt saw that the tall man was hesitant but couldn’t disavow Mohsin’s words; he was honest and had to admit reason when he heard it.

“Very well, sir,” Guaré said, looking back to Mohsin.

“I can see you are not totally convinced, Brother,” Mohsin said, lowering himself from the van. “But you show grace in your acceptance.” He gripped Guaré’s shoulder and smiled. Guaré reached his hand up to cover his leader’s and smiled reluctantly. Betancourt felt like a voyeur.

Mohsin dropped his arm and turned to Betancourt. “I have questions for you.”

“Certainly.”

“How was I-Land’s response so quick and precise? How were they able to overwhelm us? And how were there snipers placed beforehand?”

“Snipers?” Betancourt thought. “No, there weren’t any snipers. There were the RCATS. . . Remote Controlled All-Terrain Sentinels. The robots have been developed since you were last active. We call them Cats because they look like headless panthers. Four-legged, runners and jumpers, surveillance and weapon capabilities. They alerted us before you even started and set off the alarm when we were already on our way.”

“But how was your force so coordinated? After fifteen years of inactivity we were counting on surprise.”

“There have been rumblings in the Nink Zone. You can’t hope to conduct business there without arousing the interest of I-Land’s informants. It is largely how I learned of you as well.”

Mohsin said nothing for a moment, looking off to think. Slowly he turned back to Betancourt. “Surely you have a plan for what happens next,” he said.

“I do, sir.”

Betancourt looked around at the group gathered at the back of the van.

“We are eight altogether,” he said. “We have exited the city by the Eastern Roadway and are currently 30 kilometers from the Palace of Justice. I can drive us to wherever you need to go to get back home.”

“Who among us is Navigator?” Mohsin asked the group. A young girl immediately raised her hand. “Your name?”

“I am Kelly,” the girl said.

“Very good. And where is our nearest entry point?”

Kelly responded immediately, almost mechanically, “At 15 kilometers along the Eastern Roadway there is an entry at the intersection of Old Highway 162. The outermost rail satellite has nearby access.”

Betancourt watched the rapid volley of conversation in astonished silence.

“Thank you Kelly. Captain, I believe you have our destination, and we once more enter into your power.”

Betancourt nodded and Mohsin turned to his group.

“People, we have been released from bondage and certain death by the former Captain Betancourt. Let us board the police van once more, this time by choice. And let us remember how we last entered it and to whom we owe our freedom.”

The group responded in unison, “Praise be to freedom, that the human spirit may know it.”

“And praise be to the Captain,” Mohsin added.

The group looked to Betancourt, and he felt the warm rush of blood in his face. A few of them bowed slightly and he had to look down to avoid their gazes. The tall man with Betancourt’s bump on his head nodded to him without a shred of ill-will.

They reentered the van in rapid succession. Betancourt lingered by the doors of the van, waiting for Mohsin as he entered last. He was still having difficulty believing he stood in this man’s presence. Mohsin was neither shorter nor taller than Betancourt had expected, nor was he particularly handsome. But he had a way that commanded your attention and even your allegiance, a calm self-assuredness. Betancourt felt anxious next to him, even moreso now than during Guaré’s polemic. He caught the eye of the leader but did not say anything as Mohsin was about to board.

“Are you feeling well, Captain?” Mohsin asked, seeming to guess at his anxiety.

“I feel okay, sir,” he said. “I suppose I’m nervous for what comes next.”

Mohsin gripped Betancourt’s left forearm with his left hand as he placed one foot onto the rear bumper of the van. Just by his touch Betancourt suddenly felt calmer and more confident. A wave of relaxation washed over him and his eyes widened. Was this man a wizard? Mohsin only smiled as he watched Betancourt’s reaction. Betancourt continued staring, puzzling over how Mohsin did it. The man was more than anyone on I-Land had imagined.

Mohsin spoke, “What comes next will not be nearly as difficult as the choice you have already made, my Brother.”

“That’s the second time you’ve called me ‘Brother,’” Betancourt said. “But the first time you meant it. I have dreamt of the day when I would hear you say that to me.”

“I meant it the first time too. I always mean it.”

He began to raise himself into the van, but Betancourt held him in place.

“You truly think my defection makes a difference?”

“It already has,” Mohsin said. “These people would be on their way to death if not for you. . . But we discuss that later, with the Council.”

He stepped up into the rear of the van and sat on the seat closest to the door. Though his touch lifted, the transferred calm remained.

Betancourt was closing the door when Mohsin leaned forward and nodded his head to him in confidence. The captain paused.

“Besides,” the leader said. “The worst that may come is arrest, torture and death. Bad, sure, but certainly a nobler end than any Citizen could hope for, no?”

He leaned back onto his bench and nodded.

Pondering this possible fate, Betancourt enclosed his new Brother and the rest of his adoptive People into the I-PF van. He approached the driver's door, wondering and distracted.

“On Automatic Detentions”²

The Automated Detention Device (ADD), commonly known as the ‘Claw,’ is a poignant manifestation of I-Land’s total dominion over the individual. With a design as crude as it is effective, its most impressive aspect is, surprisingly, the propaganda campaign that led to its wholesale acceptance among the populace.

Toward the middle of the 22nd century, post-Civil War II, when unrest and crime from its own Citizens (as opposed to the exiled Populists) began affecting sales, Illiex was forced to once again escalate its suppression of subversive activities. Without exerting the official letter of the law, I-Land initiated the practice of ‘locking down’ entire sectors of the city, dependent upon where the ‘terrorist’ activity was located. This created, in effect, short-term Martial Law, or temporary states of siege. These measures were not difficult to justify with the Citizens, who were anxious at the anti-corporate attitude spilling over from the Non-Incorporated Zone.

The lock-down practice quickly gained acceptance and became I-Land’s standard operating procedure during any anti-corporate activity. The expense and fallibility of this method, however, remained problematic, in that massive amounts of ‘manpower’ were required, and because even with significant personnel they could neither account for all Citizens nor suspects.

The prototype of the modern ADD, created primarily to address this problem, was a simple screen atop a pole, all of it mounted atop a metal platform. Citizens were required to check in at these stations during a ‘subversive event’ in order to register their presence and innocence. Failure to register resulted in an I-PF interrogation.

2 Excerpted from Jensen, Frida, The People's Anthology of the 3rd Millenium, 2nd edition, Ch. 5.

For a time, this method worked to I-Land's satisfaction. The expense of installing thousands of devices throughout the city was offset by both the added security and the decrease in police force. But unfortunately, certain zealous Citizens began to display an alarming tendency for vigilantism during these emergencies, interfering with standard I-PF procedure. Ill-advised attempts to impede escaping criminals in aid of the pursuing I-PF resulted in unintended casualties. By the third Citizen death, I-Land executives commenced to reevaluate their system.

The solution they developed was simple and relatively cost-effective, requiring the addition of a few metal pieces in order to restrict the movement of the Citizen at the arms and head. With the enhancement to the ADD prototype, Citizens would now be immobilized throughout an emergency event.

Though initially off-putting in its vague resemblance to a cage, Citizens were eventually convinced in favor of the updated design. It remains unclear whether persuasion was achieved primarily by executive appeals to their safety, or by the coercive threat of incarceration. Thus were born the 'Claws' as we know them today.

II.

At the front of her class, Frida Jensen waited. Twenty-odd students sat in mismatched chairs before her, most of them trying to avoid her gaze. Some sat at beat-up tables in the damp, brick-lined room, but most had to make do with notepads in their laps. The room was a brighter yellow than most of the other chambers below ground, but only because Frida had demanded sufficient light for the younglings to read. None of them were venturing an answer to her question.

She insisted, “I know history is not the most interesting subject for you, but it is an important one. What happened next? Ping?”

“The War.”

“Yes, Ping, the War did happen relatively soon after the Rational Platform. But before that, what was the response to the newly-formed Populists?”

Anil, an older student, interjected, “All hell broke loose, pardon my language ma’am.”

Some of the other kids snickered. Frida felt a brief urge to do the same, but only briefly. With the slightest sigh to herself and an eye-roll hidden behind closed eyelids, she summoned her inner schoolmarm.

“I do not pardon your language young man,” she said. “You are too old to be speaking in such ways, and it is high time you began to assume the responsibility of appropriate, human communication. If you want to speak like that, you can do it on the surface.”

She signaled upward with her head and eyes. Anil looked down, face aflame. Frida softened her glare and turned to the rest of the class.

“That goes for all of you. The younglings can be excused for the time being, but the rest of you should be warned: your sloppy speech and slang shall not be further tolerated. It stops here and now. As abstract language is the primary tool that separates humanity from other animals. And so shall it be treated: with care, respect and precision.

“Meanwhile,” Frida continued, directing Anil once more, “Would you care to elaborate?”

He shook his head. It was a shame he had to feel so bad; she would have to address it later.

“Anyone else?”

A younger student, Yusef, raised his hand. Frida signaled him.

“People started attacking corporations, and the media people started going crazy, and then they passed laws against The Populists, and then the evil corporate bastards started the assassinations.”

“Hold it right there, Yusef,” Frida said. “I appreciate your enthusiasm, but who can explain the problem with Yusef’s speech, besides the obvious vulgarity?”

Isa raised her hand, a small, dark girl who was timid about everything except knowing the answers to Frida’s questions.

“Yes?” Frida asked.

“We must not use such insults when we talk about I-Land, Illiex, or any opposition.”

“And why not?”

“Because they are not evil or bastards, and we must speak Truth.”

“*Neither evil nor* bastards, Isa. And why must we always speak Truth? Everyone.”

The class responded in unison, “Without Truth there can be no Freedom, and without Freedom there can be no Justice.”

Yusef smirked and some other boys rolled their eyes. Unperturbed, Frida turned to Yusef, addressing the whole class through him.

“When you call our opponents such things as ‘evil bastards,’ you dehumanize them, just as they do us. For them it is a way to self-justify hunting, torturing and killing us. We must never settle for doing such to them, for these are monstrous and inhuman actions. Such insults make up the first step down a long path toward barbarism. This is the meaning of our mantra: ‘Dehumanization breeds inhumanity.’

She looked around her class and continued, “The Truth is that our opponents are fearful, greedy *human beings* who are convinced that we are terrorist agents and must be destroyed at all costs. They persecute us out of hatred, but mostly out of fear. While defeating them will be difficult, since they greatly outnumber us, we can nonetheless hope for a freedom of our own one day, on the surface. It is my goal to teach you about this Freedom and how to achieve it.”

She noted with satisfaction that most of the students were still listening to her.

“That will be all for today. You may gather your things and leave. Anil, please speak with me for a moment.”

Turning to her desk to gather her notes, she was startled when the exiting students began to shriek behind her. She swiveled back to see the edge of a bowler hat peeking through the doorway.

“Guaré!”

The kids gathered around him and Guaré smiled grandly, his bowler tipped slightly forward on his head.

“Good morning to my little Brothers and Sisters. Are you learning much from Madam Jensen?”

He looked up to Frida and nodded in deference. She smiled back, even though she detected a grim note in his glance. Still, she felt tears welling in her eyes. She couldn’t help getting sentimental over his safe return, even if it made her feel foolish.

“Yeah! – Yes! – Always Guaré!” came the responses.

“It gladdens me,” he said. “Please allow Madam Jensen and myself a moment to speak alone.”

The excited chatter now gave way to grumbling. The younglings vacated the room as Guaré worked his way in. Anil made his way from Guaré to Frida’s desk and she looked up at him from the papers she was organizing. His eyes were slits looking at the floor.

“Anil, I want you to know that my words were not personal.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“It is true that you need to put more effort into your speech, but I only pretended to be angry. The other children need to understand. You are an older student and certainly do not need to hear how to speak from this grandma, right?”

She saw a small smile on his lowered face.

“No, you do not need that, but you *do* need to model for them. You see that?”

He nodded, raising his eyes momentarily.

Guaré approached and jovially wrapped his arm around Anil’s shoulders.

“Come, youngling who is now not so young!” Anil blushed at the attention. “Citspeak is for the littlest and the surface-walkers. Surely you want to improve your discourse, to be respected among People, to serve with *us*?”

Guaré raised one eyebrow on the last word, and Anil's eyes widened in turn. The youth was smiling now.

Frida stifled a chuckle, saying, "Very well Anil, thank you for listening."

He nodded to her, still smiling. Then he turned and nearly pranced out of the room.

After watching him go she turned back to Guaré, smiling at him once more.

"That was kind, Guaré, and very helpful. You have a good feel for the younglings."

"Only natural – I still feel like one myself."

She stood up and approached him, taking his forearms in her hands and kissing him on the cheek.

"Praise be unto your safety," she said with a warm smile.

Guaré's smile faltered.

"We were not all so favored."

She felt her own smile waver and her heartrate increase.

"How many?" she asked, imploring with her eyes.

Guaré's joviality had evaporated. His speech was slow and measured, his emotions controlled.

"We expected a basic response at most," he said. "A delayed one. But the speed and extent of their reaction surprised us. They had new weapons too, a type of ground sentinel we'll have to prepare for next time. They mobilized at least three vans, and one of them left half-full of People."

Frida looked down and swallowed, her cheer at seeing him now vanished. It had been so long since they experienced these casualties.

“It is hard,” she said. “But it had to be done, no? This protest was necessary?” She scrutinized his face as he responded.

“Our announcement was necessary, yes, if not wholly successful. Mohsin says that their response forms an integral part of our Grand Strategy. In the initial stages of resistance, losses are to be expected, sometimes heavy. We are considering these losses heavy, given our expectations. But they are light relative to our numbers.”

Frida took a deep breath and straightened up, straightening her sweater as well.

“You have names of the detained?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“I was hoping this afternoon’s tentative Assembly would prove unnecessary,” she said, almost to herself. Despite her renewed composure, she felt a gloom gathering around her.

“I admire your hope,” Guaré responded. “But we must not let it blind us in these times.”

“Of course not,” she said, speaking louder while turning back to her desk. “Do not confuse my wishful thinking for sentimentality. Nor shall I require any lessons on sound state of mind.”

“Never, Madam,” Guaré said. “You have helped so many accept our reality, above all myself. It was on your counsel that we created the Fund for the Lost.”

“I need no flattery,” she said, waving him off. “Daniyah was not disappointed, I trust?”

“No, Amadou returned safely. . .” he said. His lingering tone indicated more.

She turned back to him and waited. She was upset at the situation and this toying of his annoyed her more. She knew it wasn’t fair – the situation was no fault of his own – but she felt no desire to restrain her irritation. She was tired, of a sudden.

He continued, “Something happened of some significance. Mohsin has called an emergency Council meeting to address it.”

Frida briefly cocked her head. He returned her gaze with a small smile at the corners of his mouth. With the same slight sigh and hidden eye-roll that she had given just a few minutes ago to Anil, Frida turned to her desk and finished gathering her things.

“Alright, let us go,” she said.

As they exited the room and she closed the door behind her, she asked, “Would this be considered a positive or a negative occurrence?”

She turned to Guaré in time to see him deliberately straighten his hat. “I do not venture an opinion at this stage. An interesting one, at least. . .”

“You have my attention.”

Frida and Mohsin walked together through the dark passageways of their improvised tunnel system, a largely forgotten network that was just substantial enough to provide living space. The rate of decay was slow so far down in the cool, thin-aired depths; it had plateaued at a condition that was just tolerable.

As they walked, Frida subtly but firmly slowed Mohsin from his customary briskness. She transformed his stride into a leisurely amble, glancing at Mohsin in time to see him smile. She felt like a mother enjoying an idle promenade with her son, however unsightly their environs.

“It is good to see you too, Frida,” he said. “Is your request to meet the Captain nothing more than an excuse for a stroll? Exercise perhaps?”

She laughed and patted his arm. “I am relieved that you made it back, my Mohsin.” Her face grew serious. “But so many did not.”

“We lost 11, and some good ones. I watched young Rodi get taken, and Esmeralda.”

“The mother?”

He nodded.

“Her children?” Her mind had immediately gone to the woman’s eldest, Frida’s star student Isa. A chill touched her.

“... Will be taken in by a surrogate, of course,” Mohsin said. “To be settled at the Assembly of Mourning.”

“Such a heavy loss. . .”

Again the gloom she had felt with Guaré prodded her heart.

Mohsin said, “But perhaps a worthy one, given our encounter with the Captain.”

“You trust him.”

He nodded. “I have a strong feeling about him.”

“Any details?”

Mohsin thought for a moment. “Nothing definite, beyond our immediate plans concerning his release today. But the feeling is similar to that surrounding our Eche.”

Surprised, she looked at him. A warm glow blossomed upon her with mention of the young girl. It served as a momentary shield from the settling gloom.

Mohsin still talked, “Not so strong as with her, but the same feeling of predetermination, as if we are meant to find him and his role will be significant – indeed it has been already. He

can be very valuable to us by causing mischief on the surface. But you and the Council will be best for developing a specific blueprint.”

“With your input of course.”

“Of course, and Guaré’s,” he said. “But my feeling is based on my first impressions of him. Finding a Citizen without those electronic cataracts was strange, and seeing his blue Fringe was amazing, but it was more than that, even before I saw his face; you could hear the pain in his voice. As he dragged us back to his tank I spoke to the injustice of the Citizens being detained in their Claws. Even knowing its futility I spoke, I could not help myself. And he responded, he replied to me like a broken man; Amadou heard it too. I have not met one – not even kin – who can fake such emotion. Such actors do not exist anymore on the surface.”

She took this in as they walked, nodding slowly with eyes straight ahead.

“Very well,” she said, turning to him. “And your plans for today?”

“We will need your advice, but only assuming that the Council approves our collaboration.”

“Very well.”

They arrived at a weathered door. The crude jamb was wedged into a rough-hewn hole in the side of the passage. Mohsin opened the door into a small, dingy room a little bigger than a closet. The blindfolded captain sat on a cot underneath another dim yellow light. Frida was surprised at his size; even seated he was almost as tall as her. She paused at the door, glancing at Mohsin, and entered.

“Good afternoon,” Frida said.

“Madam,” Betancourt responded.

“Please excuse our rudimentary security measures.”

“The blindfold? I understand completely. No offense taken. I should be the one seeking *your* forgiveness.”

“Can you show me this disabling switch Mohsin speaks of?” she asked, leaning in to peer over the top of his head.

Betancourt lowered his head and pulled his right ear forward, revealing a compact black box the size of a small beetle. At its top was a small light, glowing red.

Frida furrowed her brow at Mohsin.

Betancourt said, “The light indicates functionality, so it turns on when in use.”

She snapped her head back to Betancourt. Had he intuited the reason for their extended silence, or perhaps heard the rustle of Frida’s clothes as she turned to Mohsin? Such sensitivity would corroborate Mohsin’s high regard. Or it could be mere coincidence. . .

Mohsin clarified, “Meaning it is currently disabling the recording activity of your ears?”

“Exactly. It’s powered on and interrupting OBARD transmission.”

“And where does its energy come from?” Frida asked. “Can the batteries expire?”

“The batteries charge inductively, the most unfortunate side effect of living on the surface, from a personal standpoint at least. There’s no escaping the charging pads, so it’s almost impossible for them to run out of battery. Even should I die, they’d live on for hours.”

Mohsin asked, “So you have to take the pill too?”

Betancourt patted one of his chest pockets. “Carcinoma-Prevention Lozenge, ‘A CaPL a day’ and all that. . . Yes I’ve already taken today’s.”

He spit the words like venom, but Frida was not taken in by his bitterness -- that could be faked. She was also distracted by the mention of that odious catchphrase – she always frowned when she heard it. Though minor in the vast sea of their abuses, I-Land’s sinister appropriation

of the pre-technological “Apple a day” truism had always struck her as one of their most egregious offenses. Only when Mohsin spoke did she realize how sidetracked she was.

“What if the red light indicates it is off, and you are recording right now? What guarantees us that you speak truth?”

Betancourt’s response was immediate: “Nothing.”

The quick reply counteracted Frida’s previous distaste. His clear, immediate sincerity and the absence of excuses restored him in her esteem.

“But as you already said back in the Council, young sir,” she intervened, turning to Mohsin. “In that case we are already defeated, because they know or will soon know everything, and will send more behind him.”

Mohsin nodded with half-closed eyes. She knew his looks well. This one said, “Naturally,” and, “You are wise for saying it” and also a bit of, “Have I not already explained this to you?”

Frida looked beyond him, thinking to herself. After several seconds, she reached forward to slide off Betancourt’s blindfold. He looked into her eyes and she smiled down at him.

“You truly are the Two-Sparked One, Mr. Betancourt. . . one artificial and one innate. I am Frida. You may call me that, or Madam Jensen.”

She took his left hand in her right, then turned to Mohsin and said, “Please leave us.”

“Of course.”

Mohsin opened the door and slipped out of the small room.

Frida turned back to Betancourt, sitting down next to him on the cot. He shifted his massive frame to face her. The first thing she noticed were his eyes, which contained a

remarkable benevolence. His large, open face and innocent air combined with his size to resemble a gentle bear. She immediately saw everything that Mohsin had perceived.

“In my various decades I have met only a handful of your kind before,” she said.

“Citizens-turned-People. None ever with your age or rank, however. What concerns me most about you – as I am sure it will concern the rest of the Council – is this question of how you have managed to hide yourself for so long on the surface, and at the same time as you ascended to a post of such power. We have enough sources on the surface, in the Non-Incorporated Zone, to know that this feat is both rarely accomplished and horrifically punished when discovered.”

“Detention and indoctrination,” he said, nodding. “And should that fail, then torture unto death. But that is only for late developers, you know. With the young it’s different.”

“I have heard of these would-be People, but only stories.”

“They almost always catch them in time for simple indoctrination. It doesn’t take much at that age.”

“And you were one such youngling?”

“I was not the brightest of the sparked ones, as you call me, not by far. Perhaps saved only by that. . .”

“Go on,” she said.

“There were four of us in my grouping at primary. Our academy was one of the better ones, not an SBT. But a school’s academic rigor both depends on and encourages I-Land’s watchful eye. Ours was in the Oasis itself, the first one actually to be located in headquarters.”

“Yes, they look for the best-run academies to implement their most intensive Citizenry programs. And the lesser schools? Are those the SBTs?”

“School-by-Terminal, largely ignored by Illiex. The SBTs can churn out a prominent Citizen or two every decade, but most of their students are destined for a menial life. The HiVos – the, um, rich, educated citizens – ‘High Volume Consumers,’” he clarified in response to her confused look, “They always recognized that; they always demanded human teachers for their own children, face-to-face. Anything else was inadequate by even a minimal standard. Thus the division into high- and low-volume consumers, HiVos and LoVos: the SBTs produce only laborers and soldiers. . .

“Anyway,” he said, shaking his head a bit, “There were four of us non-conformists. The smartest two wouldn’t let us be seen together almost at all, but the fact that we existed and knew of each other still made us a force. It gave us confidence and security.”

“And this is normal? For there to be so many sparked ones per grouping?”

“Four is many, but one or two is quite common.”

“We understood that I-Land had been more successful with their breeding program.”

“You have believed what Illiex works hard to make us believe. The truth is that intelligence and consciousness is a persistent trait. Everyone is born with it, and it must be weeded out in the younglings. Genetics determines how easily it can be suppressed. But in many ways, it becomes more stubborn the more it is persecuted.” He nodded to her: “Your own doctrine endorses that much. Are we not tending as a species toward more intelligence, and higher consciousness?”

When she didn’t respond, he continued, “One day our leader, Carlson, simply didn’t attend morning roll call. He never came back. The next day, his best friend and our second most capable, García, told us of his fate. He could only guess, of course, but he had seen Carlson questioned by an Observer the previous day.”

“They had removed him for indoctrination.”

“Remediation, it is called,” he said, nodding. “A week later, I saw him in another grouping as we switched shifts in the cafeteria. I tried to call his attention but he looked at me without seeing me; his eyes were dead.” Betancourt paused. “Later that week, they took García, and I knew my time would come shortly if I didn’t do something to avoid it. Whether it took them another week, a month or even longer, I would eventually reveal myself to those who had been trained to guard against our kind.”

“But that day never came?” she asked. “Or it did, and you were able to withstand the remediation? I cannot believe that – it is said to be impossible for the young.”

“It is, quite,” he said, nodding with a disheartened expression. “No, I never had to resist indoctrination. Instead, I devised a way to evade detection.”

Betancourt paused again. As she looked at him questioningly, his wide face suddenly went slack, the eyes instantaneously transforming. Whereas he had been gazing at her with warm recognition, he now appeared to not see her, as if his eyes had lost focus and were now staring through her, at a point just behind her head. The life that had coursed through the iris and seemed to dance around the darkness of the pupil was now extinguished. The eyes that gazed at her now were dead. They were the eyes of a surface-walker, the lifeless regard of a Citizen. A shiver washed down Frida’s back.

“Good heavens,” she said, reflexively recoiling from him.

Just as quickly, the light returned, his face regaining form. Gentle affection replaced the zombie-like fog in his eyes. He reached out, gripping her softly on the upper arm.

“Sorry to upset you,” he said with a tentative smile. “I thought it would be quicker to show you.”

Frida just stared, a hand partly raised to her mouth. “You learned how to mute yourself?” she asked.

He nodded, with a curl of his lips. “The most difficult part was training my mind to partially deaden itself,” he said. “The eyes portray what is happening in the mind behind them.”

“But nobody can do such a thing. . .”

“I’m glad I didn’t know of its impossibility before the attempt,” he said, his smile now less tentative but sincerely humble. “I might have lost heart.”

She stared at him wide-eyed for a moment, then slowly smiled with him. “You can do it at will?”

“Yes, but not for very long stretches,” he answered. “The danger is that I stay in the fog for too long and struggle to find my way out.”

“But how on earth did you accomplish it?”

“Mostly with observation and simple awareness,” he said. “By that age, all sparked ones realize that the major difference between other surface-walkers and ourselves, besides the obvious inherited traits, is the amount of time we spend with portables. We four were interested in other things besides the little screens.”

“And this was before they began fitting for I-Lenses so young. . .”

“The age was still thirteen, then, yes,” he said. “I was fortunate there. I could still avoid constant contact with them, and didn’t yet have my I’s, so the Observers had no way of knowing where I was looking.”

“So your training. . .”

“Well, we had both noticed the obvious difference that marked us from the typical surface-walkers. We made a concerted effort to conceal ourselves by immersion in our screens.

Unfortunately, Lewis did his work too well and eventually indoctrinated himself; not at first, no, but after several months of the same thing, the difference in his demeanor was obvious. I tried to warn him because I had found a means of escape, in a manner of speaking.”

“Which was?”

“Instead of looking at the screen, I looked at a point just beyond it, or just to the side. Eventually, I settled on looking at the image without focusing my eyes. It required a patience which I had to build up over many weeks, but on some level I understood that every minute practicing went toward saving my soul. I found that even right after finishing a session, I could snap my mind directly back into place without any ill effects. On the other hand, engaging for even 10 minutes with the terminal would impart a certain numbness.”

“A superhuman effort for a young child,” she said, studying him in awe.

“It was difficult, but I am merely human,” he said with a small bow. “Somehow even that young, I knew how important resistance was. Even so, I had only solved half the problem. While I could superficially avoid looking like People, I could not hope to avert my eyes from all Observers forever, in order to hide my true nature. I had to learn how to dampen that spark, and that is where simple logic and naïveté aided me: I reasoned that because it was the engagement with the programming that ultimately initiated the descent toward the dead stare of the Citizen, all I had to do to imitate them was engage with a small amount of programming, one to two sessions at a time to start with.”

“And you built up your tolerance.”

“Essentially, yes,” he said. “It was dangerous, and more than once I found myself skirting wholesale envelopment, but I was always able to pull myself back in time.”

“Brilliant,” she said, hoping he wouldn’t be offended by her quizzical expression. But she couldn’t avoid showing how impressed she was.

“I have come across similar things said about you in my research,” he said, again bowing. “The Anthology, after all. . .”

“Although I have never faced such dire circumstances as those,” she said. “So we shall never know who is the more brilliant, I am afraid. But in speaking of research, you bring up my second troubling question. How could you have found us when, for all intents and purposes, we have been extinct going on twenty years? How could you have known of Mohsin and Guaré? Have the People’s efforts at hiding been so clumsy and ineffectual?”

He shook his head. “Not at all, Madam. Not for a typical Citizen. Even some of the I-Land elite have accepted stories of your demise, though there is still an apparatus in place for the unlikely case of your reappearance. . . the same apparatus that your people encountered this morning, unfortunately.”

“Yes. . .” she looked down, then raised her eyes. “But that does not explain your own success.”

“The story of that success is a long one,” he said. “It involved much time in the Non-Incorporated Zone and out-city, with your contacts there. In the Nink it involved persuasive techniques that I’m not proud of, topped with threats should they disclose my line of questioning to anyone. But there is quiet hope percolating in both places, present to a perceptive eye. It’s an exciting moment for many, and in recent months I’ve known it was only a matter of time. I’ve been ready.”

She smiled, shaking her head minutely for a moment.

“But enough small talk,” she said as she did so. She moved her hands from her lap to the cot and pushed up to standing. “I am convinced not only of your sincerity, but also of your extreme value as a Brother. Come, Betancourt, it is time for you to meet the rest of the Council.”

She walked to the decaying door and opened it for the Captain, who stood up and exited before her. Mohsin awaited them in the hall. He quietly turned to lead them down the passageway. Betancourt looked curiously around him, taking in the dank grime of his new home beneath the surface.

Bringing up the rear, Frida watched in silence as he wondered, a smile still resting on her lips. And she wondered as well: at him, at Mohsin, and at their undoubtedly altered future.

Once seated before the five members of the Council, Frida in the middle, Betancourt scanned the grimy room. It was an antechamber lit with decaying ceiling installations, a space dimmer than the room he came from. Caged yellow lights flickered at intervals on the damp walls. It was a small room about triple the size of his holding cell. He guessed that the time and effort needed to carve it out of the earth was too precious to waste on extravagance. But still, there was something amusing about such grand designs being launched from such a humble dungeon.

“I would like to make clear that I remain skeptical of your motives,” the wild-haired woman said to Betancourt as soon as he and Mohsin sat before the Council table.

Her unruly hair ballooned around her face in a black, curly mass. Betancourt couldn't figure out how seriously he was supposed to take her.

“Nonetheless,” she continued, “We have taken a vote and I have lost, so I conform to the opinion of the Council.”

“I appreciate your sincerity,” said Betancourt, deciding that she was serious. “If there is anything I can do or say to alleviate your concerns, I am at your service. You are. . .?”

“Madam Washington, Mr. Betancourt. And it is doubtful that you can be of service to me, sir,” she said. “Unless you can convince me that you could not have faked your supposed spark as easily as you have faked being a Citizen.”

Betancourt looked toward Mohsin at his side. A small part of him wanted help, like with a parent. But he dared not act on it.

It seemed that Mohsin read his mind, for he responded, “Madam Washington, his intelligence is not the proof, the proof is the Fringe I have seen. I saw an aura unlike any other Citizen. Only down here have I seen such before. It is unheard of to counterfeit such a thing.”

“Until now, being able to imitate the dead eye of the Citizen has also been unheard of,” she said, looking squarely at Betancourt. The harder she looked at him, the colder he felt.

Then she turned to Mohsin, “But I did not speak to begin an argument, sir. I merely wished to state my mindset in the open, so as not to remain an. . . unknown adversary.”

“I appreciate your sentiment, and your grace in disagreement,” Mohsin said, bowing his head slightly. Betancourt repeated the gesture toward the lady, careful not to take his eyes off her as he lowered his head.

“But now we move on,” Frida said. Betancourt was grateful for the intervention. “We have much planning to do,” she continued.

“Perhaps not so much,” Mohsin said. “The Captain and I have discussed potential operations while awaiting your deliberation. It seems that we both had similar, if not identical, ideas on how best to utilize his service to our cause.”

“Go on,” Frida said.

“Essentially, we continue as normal,” he said.

Frida frowned. “Explain,” she said.

“We have already developed our Grand Strategy,” he said. “And the Captain agrees it is sound.”

“Then of what use is he?” Washington asked. “He will be little more than a rank-and-file Brother after all?” It brought back feelings of childhood to hear them talking about him as if he weren’t there.

“Not quite,” said Frida, beginning to smile in apparent understanding.

Mohsin continued, “We will continue essentially as normal, but we have important advantages now. For example, the Captain has agreed to serve as our eyes and ears on the surface. He will return there and continue as normal, reporting to us at regular intervals concerning the ongoing operations and plans of I-Land. He can provide us information on their new weapons systems, for which we are obviously underprepared given today’s events.”

“That’s more like it,” said a white-bearded man who looked Indian, seated on the end opposite Madam Washington.

“Additionally, when the time soon comes for our major deployment, Capt. Betancourt will act as chief saboteur at our principal target. This will both ensure our access and free up dozens of People to focus on the lesser targets.”

“That is a benefit, indeed,” said another woman, this one sleek-haired and Asian. “Even my colleague, skeptical though fair, will acknowledge that.” She glanced at the Washington woman, who nodded. Betancourt watched everything with new eyes.

Mohsin paused before continuing. He glanced at Betancourt before saying, “The final difference is more major. As I have explained, our plans will remain essentially the same, but this morning’s events necessitate certain alterations that could significantly accelerate the intended schedule.”

The Councilmembers looked confused. A couple of them glanced to Frida, who only stared stoically at Mohsin.

“Go ahead,” she said.

“It may have occurred to you that Capt. Betancourt will need an alibi, to explain where he has been for so long, and how he can account for the loss of a group of People that were last seen under his command.”

“Easy,” said the Indian man. “He executed them.”

“Yes, Sir Chatterjee, that is relatively easy,” Mohsin said. “However it still leaves a suspicious gap in time.”

Betancourt added, “It also violates one of the most basic I-PF policies of interrogative torture.” He was relieved to finally be able to contribute to the discussion.

A pause in the chamber.

“You require information in order to make your actions credible,” said Frida finally.

The rest of the Council turned from Betancourt to Frida as they pondered her words.

“Yes, Madam,” Betancourt said. He felt more at ease now – they were listening to him seriously, almost as one of their own. He continued, “The challenge is to give them accurate,

sensitive information that, for our safety, will not be overly useful.” He tried to control the thrill he felt at including himself with the People.

“Or that could conceivably be used to our advantage,” Mohsin offered.

“So what can we afford for them to know?” asked the Indian man, Sir Chatterjee. “Our entire strategy so far has rested upon secrecy and surprise.”

“I presume you have come up with something?” Madam Washington added.

Mohsin spoke, “It has occurred to us that the Captain can offer them our 15k-Chairman entrance, since that is where his vehicle has been parked this entire time.”

“Parked, logged by the onboard computer and certainly seen by the sentinels,” Betancourt added.

Washington leaned forward and said, “So you give them this entrance and then what? We prepare tea for their arrival?”

Silence ensued, in which Betancourt stifled a snort. He liked her despite the antagonism, but she also frightened him. Still smiling, he said, “You could call it tea if you like. . .”

“That entrance is adjacent to the Dragona property,” Mohsin clarified. “We can easily contact them and muster enough firepower to dispatch the investigative team they send.”

“How many will that be?” Madam Washington asked.

“I estimate three squads at most,” Betancourt said. “Plus sentinel backup.”

“You speak so casually of attacking over two dozen I-PF officers,” Frida said.

“Not just attacking,” Betancourt said, turning to her. “Neutralizing.”

Frida asked, “How would you expect I-Land to react to such a massacre?”

Washington sat back from the table and looked behind the Council at the far wall. She seemed ominous, lurking back there, waiting to pounce. But Sir Chatterjee broke the silence first, no longer as relaxed.

“Are you serious?” he nearly shouted. “You mean to escalate this into total war!”

Betancourt took a breath, thinking of a response, but Mohsin handled it. “War is coming sooner than later, regardless,” he said.

The wild head turned back, quiet and calm. She asked, “But tomorrow? The day after? Speak plainly -- this is the time frame you speak of. How soon can we have the final operation ready for deployment?”

“If I may,” Betancourt said, attempting to slow the conversation. Too many people were speaking too fast of things that were too important.

“The I-PF has suffered similar setbacks out-city before now,” he said. “Not in a long while, and not quite that many, but they’re accustomed to skirmishes with the Midlanders. That’s why they don’t dare retrieve the missing van as we speak. They have a better arsenal, but not by much if you except the autobirds. They will not react too hastily. Also, the ambush will be completely explicable as an unrelated coincidence. Midlanders will take the blame, not People. Midlanders will also bear the brunt of the pushback, probably several days later. As I said, it has been a long time since I-Land has had to worry about anything out-city.”

“And I suppose they shall eagerly accept *our* punishment without complaint,” Washington replied, as calm and intractable as ever.

“Madam,” Mohsin began. “You well know that Dragona’s people do not need a compelling reason to fight I-PF. And as for pushback, they can hold their own. Also, we have helped them plenty in the past. Our entire campaign is with their welfare in mind.”

“Then I presume you will ask their permission before setting this plan in motion,”

Washington responded.

“Naturally. Daniyah can run them the proposal as soon as we finish here.”

“And if they refuse?”

Betancourt said, “The backup alibi will be false, unverifiable information about our location and future plans. I-Land is not yet aware of the People’s generalized location; vague tellings of the tunnel networks would pique their interest. But honestly, it isn’t likely to much impress my superiors -- I just disappeared with half of the only detained terrorist cell they’ve seen in almost two decades. I’d face discipline as a result, or heavy suspicion at the very least.”

“Allow me to summarize, Mr. Betancourt,” Washington said, now leaning forward.

“You have come to help us, but as a direct result of your ‘help’ we are compelled not only to irrevocably alter our Grand Strategy – a strategy, as you so helpfully put it, almost two decades in the making – but also to risk our security and that of our allies, all in order to compensate for your somewhat clumsy method of contact.”

Betancourt was proud of the control he exercised in his response. “That is fairly accurate, Madam, though I take issue with your characterization of my methods.”

Mohsin cut in, “I would remind The Council that the newfound sophistication of I-Land surveillance apparatus—”

“There is no need for a reminder,” Frida interrupted. “We are faced with a less than ideal selection between two undesirable alternatives. Both options, however, are preferable to having you, Guaré and all the others in I-Land’s custody, which is exactly where you would be if not for Capt. Betancourt.”

As she finished she glanced to Madam Washington, who calmly returned her gaze.

“Thank you, Madam,” Betancourt said, exhaling with a relaxing surge of gratitude.

“Unless gaining access to us was the sole purpose of their rescue,” Washington said, still watching Betancourt. Her harassment was beginning to anger him.

“That matter has already been discussed and decided, Madam,” Frida said, referring to what must have been a meeting before Frida came to him. “Let us not waste time discussing it again.”

“Shall we vote?”

It was the sleek-haired woman sitting between Frida and Washington who offered the proposal. The Councilmembers – or ‘Councilpers’ as they were called down here – murmured to each other and nodded their agreement. All except for Washington, who still sat quietly, apparently brooding. She worried him.

“Second,” Sir Chatterjee said.

“All in favor of the plan as laid out by Mohsin, pending approval by Dragona’s people?”

Four hands raised, followed some seconds later by Madam Washington’s. Betancourt exhaled when he saw the dark fingers raise above the wild curls. He hadn’t realized he was holding his breath.

“Then we can leave the rest up to you?” Frida asked Mohsin.

“We always welcome the Council’s wisdom,” Mohsin said.

“Yes, but you, Guaré, Dani, and now Capt. Betancourt, as our chief tacticians, seem more than capable of planning these operations. As you have in the past.”

“Yes, Madam. We will inform you when the time of action approaches.”

“We are all grateful for your work, sir,” she said as Mohsin rose. Betancourt quickly followed his lead.

“And you, Brother,” Frida said, looking at Betancourt. “We are grateful for your allegiance.”

“Hearing you call me ‘Brother’ is reward enough, Madam.”

“As you will,” she said, dismissing him with a nod and a tiny smile.

Mohsin bowed slightly to the seated Council, and Betancourt aped the gesture. They left the Council Chamber, Mohsin easing the door shut behind them.

Guaré awaited them outside the door, along with the tall black man that Betancourt had clubbed over the head. They curbed their conversation as Mohsin and Betancourt exited. Seeing his victim upclose unnerved Betancourt, but the tall man looked at him with kind eyes.

“Please forgive me for earlier,” Betancourt said to the man.

“I owe you thanks for the lives of these Brothers and Sisters,” he replied. “A bump on the head is a small price to pay.” He held out his hand. “I am Amadou, and you will honor me by considering me in your service.”

Taken aback, Betancourt extended his arm and felt the warm, strong grip enfold his hand. Amadou smiled even broader when their hands touched.

“Amadou,” Mohsin said. “Excuse the interruption, but we need Daniyah to hurry to Dragona. Guaré has relayed the message to you?”

“Yes, sir.” He dropped Betancourt’s hand and nodded to Mohsin. His solemnity was almost comical to Betancourt, but his earnestness was above mockery, somehow too pure. The big man loped off down the passage, in the same direction as Betancourt’s holding cell.

Mohsin signaled down the passageway behind Amadou, and Guaré began walking ahead of Betancourt and Mohsin. Mohsin placed a hand on Betancourt’s shoulder and squeezed lightly.

“That went well, I believe.”

Betancourt was surprised to hear it, but relieved. As far as he was concerned, if Mohsin said so, it was true. But he asked, “Isn’t it troubling to have Madam Washington against us?”

“She is not really against us,” Mohsin said. “That is her way. Someone on the Council always finds a way to remain skeptical in the face of good sense. Usually it is she or Sir Chatterjee, although he usually occupies the opposite extreme.”

“Okay.”

“Think of her as an ally,” he continued. “That is how we work. We have enough faith in each other to trust the many, even when an individual has reservations. Madam Washington could very well help us sometime in the future.”

“I believe you,” he said. “It’s funny, because that’s almost exactly the opposite of how we work on the surface. We are forced to trust the few, even when the many know better.”

“I know, Brother, I am aware.”

Relaxed now, Betancourt noticed his strange surroundings. The passage they walked through was crude, hewn directly in the earth and reinforced at intervals with wooden beams. It was circular, about three meters in diameter. There was something strange in the symmetry of it, and in the faint scent of motor oil.

He turned to Mohsin and asked, “What and where are these tunnels? And how is I-Land unaware of them?”

“They are old mining tunnels that we have repurposed, expanding and integrating them to I-Land’s sewer system. We are far below and east of I-Land now. Certain passages even farther away connect us with the fringes of Atlantis. You are familiar with our transport system I think.”

Betancourt recalled the metal cart they had helped him climb into on the way here, and the metal whirring of wheels as they glided on it, the wind flapping at his hair.

They passed the entrance to another tunnel, this one roped off. “Why is this blocked?” Betancourt asked.

Mohsin came to a stop in front of it. Guaré slowed and turned around.

“There are certain passages that are no longer safe to transit,” Mohsin said, pointing up at the ceiling. Betancourt saw dark green clumps like tufts of unkempt hair peeking around the corner of the junction into the small passageway. He took two steps toward them and his squinted eyes widened.

“I saw the crawler on the roadway out here,” he said. “But I didn’t believe it could be down here too.”

“How would a surface-walker know?” Guaré asked.

Mohsin looked at him with a stern eyebrow.

“But I should have,” Betancourt said. “If it causes sinkholes on the surface, it only stands to reason. . .”

Mohsin said, “You know from the sinkholes that crawler grass doesn’t just grow into itself and create an impermeable layer, as the genetic engineers eventually realized. It begins to grow down, into the ground, displacing soil and whatever else is in its way.”

“But so far down?”

“See for yourself,” Guaré said, signaling to the musty rope.

Betancourt stepped up and peered into the passage, no longer lit by the yellow lights now that it was defunct. As he waited for his eyes to adjust, he noticed that over his head the curved ceiling was covered in the genetically modified grass. In some places it had grown so thick that

he could have bumped his head on it, probably getting nasty cuts in the process. As his eyes slowly adapted, a large mound materialized out of the darkness. It was a pile of rubble – he could dimly see a hole in the ceiling above it. The hill was taller than him and blocked almost the entire width of the tunnel.

“Good lord,” he said.

“We do not typically worship that particular lord down here,” Mohsin said, taking his arm and leading him once more down the smaller passageway. Guaré fell in behind them. Betancourt looked down at the ground, trying to conceive of what the engineers had unleashed.

“We have lost People in the collapses,” Mohsin continued. “We have gotten better at prevention, shutting down a passage before it becomes structurally unstable. But occasionally we do not see it in time, or the tunnel is too vital, and we use it for one day too long.”

“How could it not have occurred to me?”

“I am sure you had other things to worry you in the meantime,” Guaré said. His sarcasm didn’t penetrate Betancourt’s preoccupation.

“Citizens lost their lives, too, at the hands of the crawler,” Mohsin said. “For instance in the depths of the holes, or in the rubble of collapsed buildings.”

“But it certainly looked good, once upon a time. . .” Guaré muttered.

Betancourt did not begrudge him his bitterness. They walked several paces in silence.

“I already despised I-Land,” Betancourt said finally. “But I see new outrages like this and fear for humanity. . . not just here but everywhere.”

Mohsin chuckled and patted Betancourt on the shoulder. Betancourt somehow felt better just at his touch.

“You must be more hopeful now, now that you are down here with us,” Mohsin said. “In fact, you would not be here if you were not.”

“If you insist,” he said, looking up. “Where are we going now?”

They were approaching a small rail car that was poised on twin tracks at the junction of another passage. Mohsin walked straight up to the car and swung one leg over to stand inside.

“You remember this, right?”

“I was blindfolded the first time.”

“Now we go to the farm. I must introduce you to somebody very special.”

“From Expulsion to the Present Day”³

By the middle of the 22nd century, various international and domestic crises, not least of which was the Second Civil War, had left most of the developed world isolated with a severely compromised infrastructure in varying gradients of diminished communication (See Chapter 3). In this aftermath, Illiex, the principal remaining mega-corporation, continued to consolidate its power on what remained of the United States eastern seaboard. Internal and external circumstances aligned to clear a path for their takeover of the most powerful remaining urban center in the eastern United States, where their East Coast headquarters already resided. Whatever implicit control the corporation had exercised in the now city-state soon became explicit and constitutionally enshrined, as they formally united themselves with the refugee federal government after the destruction of Washington, D.C. in the early 22nd century.

With the official, non-hostile takeover, 'I-Land' was formally adopted as the name of the new capital. It had heretofore been used informally by functionaries and Citizens in mischievous allusion to the implicit control that the corporation enjoyed over the city. But now Illiex recognized its value in branding, and using the full force of their surveillance and discipline apparatus they vigorously curtailed whatever derogatory meaning the name once possessed. Simultaneously, Illiex applied its considerable marketing and public relations expertise to reinvent the name as a symbol of the stalwart permanence of their new mini-empire. Essentially, they were able to successfully market themselves as the only enduring entity of our new, cataclysmic era.

It was at this time, at almost precisely the middle of the 22nd century, that the iconic 'Island' flag design was created to great fanfare. I-Land psychologists have hypothesized that

3 Excerpted from Jensen, Frida, The People's Anthology of the 3rd Millenium, 2nd edition, Ch. 4.

its popularity owes largely to the psychological vacuum generated when the classic 'Stars & Stripes' of the U.S. became geographically obsolete. Indeed, the colors of 'Old Glory' were deliberately recycled for this purpose into a new, vaguely reminiscent design.

That Illiex's manufacturing and research infrastructure remained unscathed amid the world's destruction was perhaps the single defining factor of our times. Because Illiex could continue its techno-manufacturing with only minor interruptions, dominance of the technology and media sectors was assured. Even without growth, maintaining status quo amid the rest of the world's devolution automatically enthroned Illiex as the world's supreme technological power. In effect, the global title meant little, as there was no compelling reason to continue interacting with the fractured outside world. But the market conquest did afford I-Land a decisive propaganda victory in addition to useful political capital, which it was then able to barter with the newly assimilated federal government.

Combined, the legal takeover and its continued technological prowess led to certain practices in the city becoming virtually universal – e.g., the fitting of I-Lenses and the implantation of the Otic Broadcasting and Recording Devices, commonly called 'Bards.' In fact, the only Citizens who refused to wear the ubiquitous technology were those holdovers from Civil War II who still harbored anti-corporate sentiments. It surprised few when use of these devices became prescribed by law, as a tool of rooting out these subversive elements.

Those that refused the mandated technology were given a choice at this time. They could compromise their values by abiding the new law, or they could leave I-Land. Those who stayed in violation of the law could be prosecuted under the 20th century Espionage Act, with penalties ranging from imprisonment and its accompanying subjection to scientific experiments – euphemistically termed 'Forced Research' – to death. Illiex, on the few occasions that it

acknowledges these events, refers to them as the '22nd Century Synergy,' or just 'the Synergy;' the People, however, call this event what it was for them: the Expulsion.

Those that left I-Land largely constituted two categories. The much larger of the two groups was the Midlanders, generally holdovers from the early 21st century Libertarians and 'Tea Party' (see Chapter 2), plus the mid-21st century Populists. Many of them, in search of a less restrictive environment, had already emigrated to the surrounding countryside by the time of the Expulsion and were able to help with the orientation of new refugees. Exiles unwilling to continue overtly resisting I-Land's influence were quickly adopted by the extant Midlanders, even given small pieces of land on which to create a homestead.

Because living outside the protection of I-Land's borders meant exposure to the raids of Appalachia and Dixieland marauders, an integral aspect of life 'out-city' comprised construction of a defensive arsenal, which, for fear of I-Land itself (and their infrequent raids), many of the Midlanders had long since undertaken. Thus did the well-armed Midland Militias arise.

The second category of I-Land exiles became the People, joining with the politically-active remnants of The Populists. Unwilling to surrender their ideological struggle, even out-city, they gradually increased the intensity of their protests, which now required incursions into the fortified city-state. They took up residence at certain homesteads in the Midlands, as well as in the archaic tunnel network beneath the city, formed by both sewer and subway. Soon they were regularly mounting small-scale subversion and resistance maneuvers, usually executed with the help and guidance of Midlanders. A tenuous alliance between the two groups established itself in this way.

The frequency of resistance expeditions accelerated, culminating in the assault on the Citadel in 2163, known to the People as the First Attempt. People forces were routed by I-Land Police Forces, and I-Land retaliation in the following days was severe. The People's position immediately beneath the city and at certain outposts in the Midlands became untenable. In a crisis of strategy, People leaders determined that the human cost of waging ideological warfare outweighed the potential benefits of subverting I-Land's rule, especially since I-Land's influence was relatively contained in their self-imposed quarantine. With these considerations in mind, it was decided to indefinitely suspend People activities, initiating a period of dormancy that has lasted until today.

Since then, I-Land has further consolidated its power. Requiring more territory for its growth model, it began encroaching upon the agrarian federation of Atlantis to the east, where Remote-Controlled Airborne Sentinels began semi-regular excursions in the late '70s. As well, media reports from both governments indicated an incipient dialogue concerning affiliation, an occurrence which Atlantis appeared reluctant to pursue. I-Land's persistence, as well as their sentinel flights over Atlantis territory, began to foster a menacing undertone to the discussions.

At this point, the People determined that a serious deterrence, a Second Attempt to the First Attempt of '63, must be devised and implemented in order to prevent I-Land's takeover of the only other nearby bastion of Western Civilization. This brings us to the present day.

Cayla's voice breathed in Srena's ear while a gentle, red light pulsed behind her closed eyelids. "It's time to wake up Srena. . . It's time to wake up."

Srena Franklin, eyes closed, reached to her nightstand-charger as she surfaced from sleep. Her fingers landed upon the sleek metal surface of the inductive pad and crept along it until they encountered a smooth case. She plucked the case from the table and flicked it open with a thumb. She removed two small lenses connected by a thin, translucent strap.

Only then did she open her eyes. She quickly placed the I-Lens and blinked several times to activate them. The display lit up, proclaiming it to be barely six in the morning. She must have a meeting today, to be awoken so early.

"Good morning, Srena," Cayla said through her Bard. "It's nice to see you."

Srena flipped the covers off, swinging her legs off the side of the bed at the same time. She stood up and stretched.

"Don't forget to make your bed, Srena," Cayla told her. Eyes still groggy behind her lenses, Srena turned around and straightened the sheets.

"And remember your pill," Cayla continued when she finished. "'A CaPL a day keeps the doctor away.' I placed water on your nightcharger."

Srena looked over to her raised charging pad and saw the glass of water there with a small red and orange capsule beside it. She popped the pill in her mouth, took a swig of water and swallowed. She was barely awake.

"You're a good girl," Cayla crooned.

Proceeding into the bathroom, Srena slid off her shorts and sleeveless tee. She said, "Cayla, water," and the shower clicked on.

In her ear she heard the small dings of the mandatory news as words and photos popped up on the left side of her screen.

“Item: This morning, 11 rebels have been killed amidst violent resistance following a terrorist act. . . I-Land forces report that peace has been restored with only minor. . .”

As she felt the warm water wash over her, Srena lowered her head, touching chin to chest. At the movement, her Bard’s volume diminished to a barely audible din. Her mind floated away from the news; she felt relieved to live outside the affected zone. An ADD would have been terrible in the middle of the night.

“Item,” the news feed continued, “I-Land Financial Ministry reports economic growth for the most recent quarter at 3.4%. This will allow for a 10%. . .”

“In neo-national news, Houston reports that Texarkana has requested immediate aid from Mexas against joint forces of marauders from both the Western Territory and the Southern Confederacy. Talks are in place between the two provinces to seal the Non-Incorporated corridor linking the West to the Confederacy and Appalachia. . .”

“On the east coast, Atlantis continues to consider I-Land’s generous offer of security aid against Appalachian and Swampland bands. I-Land spokesmen have reminded Atlantis that refusal of such a generous offer could be construed as initiation of hostil. . .”

She was able to ignore most of the daily reports by focusing on the sensation of the warm water against her skin. Listening to such things bored her anyway, and her mind drifted. The dings, however, always jarred her back to Cayla’s silky voice.

After the news finished, her personal messages began, signaled by a softer tone that reminded her of a magic wand.

“Mrina F. wants to know if you have lunch plans for today. . . Your mother is still waiting for your reply on next month’s vacation. . . Captain Marcus Betancourt wondered where you were last night.”

“Time?”

Her inquiry caused the enlargement and centering of his photo in her lenses. She felt warm as he looked at her with a knowing smile, with those deep, brown eyes that gave her a funny feeling. His personal data, rank and eligibility accompanied his photo to the side as always.

“10:34pm,” Cayla responded. “Would you like to answer?”

“No thanks.” She would see him at work. “Music,” she said, lifting her head. “An soap.”

She held her hand under a dispenser on the wall. A small puddle of blue liquid dropped into her hand. At the same time, her message stream terminated and the playlist on her lenses opened up.

“Keep photo,” she said, and the picture of Marcus came back, occupying the space left free by her playlist.

She looked downward, scrolling until she found the new Streetz song. It highlighted when she focused on it and started when she blinked firmly, the driving beat swelling in her ear.

She said, “Shuffle.”

Srena finished her shower dancing, a relaxed smile at the corners of her lips and the image of her boss dancing before her eyes.

Andrea Echeverry laid the machete on the sparse grass beneath the midfield oak. She flexed her bare hand, thumbing the callouses and feeling the cramped muscles sigh in relief. She eased herself to the ground and retrieved the nearby water jar. Looking back across the field, she took a deep breath, willing her respiration to slow. Then she lifted the jar to her lips and took a swig, savoring the coolness that filled her parched mouth and ran down her throat

Andrea's brother and father continued on the pedal-combine, mowing the expired corn stalks in the small field. The homemade machine approached the tree with its *shucka-shucka* juddering, both men pedaling with determined faces.

"Resting already?" her brother Henry called as they passed her. His exertion showed itself in red splotches on his cheeks and forehead.

"Starting so late?" she snapped back.

She saw her father, Orlando, smile from behind Henry. His skin was too weathered to show the splotches, but she could see the muscles and veins in his neck bulging under the strain of his labor.

Andrea looked over the exhausted field to her family's compact cabin under the gray sky. It was chilly, but she was warm from the effort of working: one hour before breakfast and two hours since. She naturally rose earlier than even her father, and couldn't pedal the combine by herself, so she had started on the individual rows, chopping stalks one by one with her blade. It was tedious but rather relaxing after a while, once she found a rhythm, rocking from plant to plant with smooth forestroke and backstroke. She enjoyed practicing the strokes right-handed when her dominant left tired. She relished the challenge.

As the *shucka-shucka* faded to her right, she noticed smoke rising from the stone chimney. She inhaled deeply as she thought of her mother preparing lunch in the kitchen's wood stove. She could even smell the salty stew. She took another draught of water and held it in her mouth.

While still gazing at the house, a dark object flitted across the sky. It was only a slightly darker gray than the clouds above, quite difficult to see against the dreary sky. She swallowed the water at once. It appeared to be nothing more than a gliding shadow, ephemeral, a momentary undulation that rippled through the low cloud cover, barely more than a flashing disturbance in her field of vision. But she knew what it was.

"Autobird!" she called to the men.

Both of them looked to her, the combine coasting to a stop shortly after they ceased pedaling. Following her eyes, they turned toward the cabin.

"Don't see it," Henry replied, turning back. "Come on, Pop," he said, straining by himself to resume pedaling.

"Nor do I," her father said, turning back and helping Henry.

The combine shifted forward, then picked up speed, the faint *shucka-shucka* trailing back to her again. Andrea rose to her feet and walked toward them, following behind the machine. She was careful not to move too fast. That would look suspicious.

"But I trust your eyes, Andrea," her dad called back. "You've always seen those things better than any of us."

She smiled as she approached them from behind, his words dissipating her annoyance. And she knew he had said it for precisely that reason.

"That's the second one in three days," she yelled, getting nearer.

“But we’re not doing anything wrong,” Orlando responded.

“They’re coming more often,” she said, pulling even with them.

“What does that mean?” Henry asked.

Andrea looked to her father and raised her eyebrows. He stopped pedaling once more.

The combine paused.

He said, shrugging, “Maybe something, maybe nothing. Paranoia on both sides.”

“We’ll have to report it,” she said.

Her father looked at her silently, then backhanded Henry on the leg to start pedaling again. They chugged off in the combine. She didn’t care how her dad felt about her growing involvement with them – they still deserved to be apprised of the goings-on up top.

And something about the increase in autobirds seemed ominous to her. It might not be their problem *per sé*, but it could certainly affect her family, for example if I-Land decided they shouldn’t be left alone after all. She wasn’t sure if her dad was sincerely untroubled, or if he was just pretending for her and Henry’s sake. She had a hunch it was the latter, and her hunches were usually accurate.

She walked back to the stately oak and stooped to pick up her machete. She began to walk toward the beginning of the far cornrow when she heard Ali barking. She snapped her head up and turned to her father, who was already looking at her from halfway across the field. He nodded over his pumping legs.

She broke into a run, dodging between stalks and hopping over rows, all the way down the stretch of field to the west side of the house. Alvero, their large sheepdog, was leashed to the stone well over there. They had built a simple roof over both the well and a nearby concrete slab

housing a grate in the ground. Upon approaching the shelter she heard the jangling of a chain. Someone shook it from the improvised storm drain below.

Andrea jumped onto the concrete pad surrounding the grate and stomped twice on the metal. The sound stopped. She jumped down and ran several paces away from the well before stopping to pivot around. She searched the bleak sky for several seconds. No signs of the automated sentinel.

Satisfied, she jogged back to the grate and stomped three quick beats onto the metal. The chain jangled briefly. It went taut, then slack, and a moment later the grate was pushed open from beneath. She saw a black hat shift back and a hooked nose protrude from beneath it. The eyes were crinkled in a smile.

“Guaré!” she said, crouching down and smiling back.

“Hola Eche,” he said. “Good to see you.”

“And to be seen.”

“What was the problem?” His smile faded as he asked.

“Autobird a little while ago,” she said. “They’re getting to be too often, almost daily.”

“Come,” he said, signaling downward.

He descended and she took hold of the grate. It took both of her arms to pull the grate completely open and lower it to the concrete pad. Looking up, she saw her brother and father continue down the rows, trampling and cutting the browned stalks, their backs turned as the combine moved in the opposite direction.

She sat down on the concrete to dangle her legs down the hole, then found the embedded rungs in the side of the storm drain. She stepped down three steps, turned herself to face outward, then continued down to the bottom of the shaft.

Guaré awaited her with Mohsin, and another man behind them. She hugged Guaré and came to Mohsin, feeling her heart begin to pound as she looked up into his beaming face. He embraced her gently, squeezing her, her face against his broad chest. She closed her eyes at the ensuing warmth, the gooseflesh running up and down her arms. Just as gently he released her and she let go in turn, opening her eyes.

She stepped back and looked at the man standing back in the shadows, trying to recognize him. She could see that he was large and strong, but now that her eyes were adjusting she realized he was strange to her. He almost looked as if . . . was that the red-white-blue on his chest? I-Land flag? She shot a glance at the brothers.

“This is our newest Brother,” Mohsin said.

He had this way of cutting off confusion, of addressing it before it was spoken. It frustrated and comforted her alike. She turned back to the man.

“How do you do?” she asked, barely moving her mouth while eyeing the hateful flag.

“Captain, this is Eche,” Mohsin said. “This is the one we have told you about.”

She lowered an eyebrow at Mohsin. What reason had he to talk about her with this CorPo?

“Eche, this is Captain Betancourt,” Mohsin finished.

“Just Betancourt,” he said, as she continued to gaze at him. His smile made him look harmless and bumbling.

“Very well,” Mohsin corrected. “This is Betancourt, a captain of I-Land Protective Forces.”

Eche scowled, her eyes slits. Betancourt averted his own.

“Then the uniform is genuine?” she asked Mohsin, still watching Betancourt. “I assumed it was counterfeit, or hoped anyway.”

“A long story,” Mohsin said. “But he saved our lives this morning. And as you can see by his eyes, he is one of us.”

“I can’t see his eyes in the dark,” she said, puzzling over the incendiary association. “But if you say so. I assume the hypocrisy of that flag he’s sporting has been explained to him? That the triangle used to be a star?”

“Trust us,” Mohsin said. He tended to ignore sarcasm.

She looked at Guaré and he nodded slightly, with one raised brow. Mohsin began speaking to Betancourt.

“Eche and her family are Midlanders, as they have refused the implants and chosen exile from the city proper. Yet they are not the libertines that I-Land depicts. Certain of the Midlanders help the People, and Eche’s family is surface kin to the lower Brothers and Sisters. Unlike most Midlanders, her family sympathizes closely with the People –”

“They might as well join us,” Guaré said, jabbing Eche with an elbow.

She kept her eyes on Betancourt.

“We’re basically kin that didn’t want to give up fresh air and talk so fancy,” Eche said to Betancourt, smiling despite her suspicion. His fidgeting pleased her.

“Among other things,” Mohsin said.

“I see, I think,” Betancourt said.

“You will in any case,” Mohsin said. Then to Eche, “We have come to introduce you to our newest collaborator – you will be working together on the surface. But we could also use a report, especially given today’s events. What news have you?”

Eche thought to herself, then turned to Mohsin, finally removing her eyes from Betancourt.

“We continue as always, but there’s more surveillance. They’re worried about something.”

Betancourt interrupted, “Rumors are coming from the Nink with more frequency. They have reached more ears than just mine.”

Mohsin thought for a moment, looking at him, then turned back to Eche. “How much more surveillance?” he asked.

“Autobirds were doing weekly flyovers, but now they’re almost daily.”

“They have no visuals to suspect?”

“Course not: the antenna’s in the silo and the stores are in the cellar.”

“We send for them soon. Are they still in good supply?”

“Naturally.”

“They’re responsible for your food supply?” Betancourt interrupted again.

Eche looked over, jolted from her flow with Mohsin.

“They and others like them,” Mohsin responded. “We depend on them for vegetables and grains. Meat and dairy we obtain from our sheep below the surface.”

“You keep sheep? On what?”

Guaré answered, flashing a devilish grin, “We have bred them to eat the crowler.”

“How proud you are!” Eche teased. She turned to Betancourt and said, “By ‘we’ he really means *we*.” She pointed a thumb at herself. “As in: my family helped them again.”

But she stilled her mouth; there was something distasteful about including this outsider in their repartée. She looked at Guaré and he tipped his bowler to her.

“That’s amazing,” Betancourt said.

“It has been a great help to us,” Mohsin said.

“Allowed us a break from jerky, for one,” Guaré said.

Mohsin turned to Eche and asked, “But you have not seen any ground patrols?”

She scrunched her eyes and shook her head.

“Of course not, the CorPos aren’t stupid. We leave each other alone or else.”

Eche looked at him for another moment, something dawning on her. Cocking her head, she asked, “Are you expecting a ground presence?”

He paused, mouth open. Being annoyed with Mohsin was unknown to her, yet here it was.

“We have the right to know,” she said.

He spoke carefully, “We should expect an escalation in tactics, especially after today’s operation.”

“Yeah, we heard on the radio,” she said. “I’m sorry for your losses.”

“Our losses,” he said. “Yours too.”

She didn’t respond to that cracked can of worms. Instead she asked, “Did Dani go?”

The thought popped into her head and out of her mouth before she could restrain herself. Mohsin smiled and she blushed immediately. Her irritation was redirected from Mohsin and toward herself. But it faded as Mohsin spoke and she thought more of Dani.

“No, we could not risk all our best soldiers,” he said. “Amadou joined us and returned, gratefully. You will get another chance yet to see Dani.”

Eche smiled to herself. It had been so long since she had seen her. A more pertinent thought occurred:

“Are you sure about calling so much attention?” she asked.

Mohsin nodded slowly.

“A good question,” he said. “But it is the path the Council has decided upon. First is misdirection by small-scale disobedience. Any possible raised awareness among the Citizenry is a byproduct. Soon comes the real assault. Actually, sooner than we had planned, after today.”

“What do you mean? It’s already harder for us to mobilize up here.”

He looked her straight in the eye. “Eche, we need to prepare for a fight.”

His words hit her like a punch.

“What? When?”

“Maybe today, whenever the I-PF decides to act.”

She continued to look at him in silence, eyes wide, waiting.

He explained, “Betancourt was there this morning, and he saved us. He is now a traitor to I-Land, though they do not yet suspect. He needs an alibi for bringing his police tank back without any detainees. He has to provide them with actionable information.”

“And what’ll that be?”

“He will give them our entrance across from Dragona’s land. Dani is explaining to Dragona as we speak, but we need you to make contact as well, to help him coordinate forces.”

“For twenty to thirty police,” Guaré added.

“Plus sentinel backup,” Betancourt said.

Eche shook her head at the bombardment of information. But after a few seconds her furrowed brows smoothed and she smiled.

“Is that all?” she asked, finally feeling sincere about her smile. “A good, old-fashioned CorPo-hunt.”

“A little more serious than that,” Mohsin said, placing his hand on her arm.

Her heart picked up again. She looked down, glad he couldn't see her face in the dark.

“We can expect retaliation,” he said to her. “Dragona can expect heavy retaliation.”

Her words were little more than a whisper: “The thought hasn't scared him yet.”

“Maybe not, but you need to understand that this will most likely mean the initiation of the final phase. Your family too.”

She looked him in the eye. “You've prepared us for that already, so what's new?”

“Just be ready sooner,” Guaré nudged at her side.

“We have prepared you, yes,” Mohsin said. “But you need to fully *comprehend* it. You need to understand what it means, and be willing to make the appropriate decisions as a result. Specifically for *you*, young Sister, a time of decision could fast be approaching. You could be of great service to the People. Great service.”

His stare bored into her. She could only maintain it for a moment, before she had to look down. The gaze probed inside her, all the way inside, too far.

Halting the probe, he continued, “Besides today, we are unsure of how much help we will require. In the meantime, the best aid you can give is to continue with the corn and vegetables. Soon we will have to get a last shipment from you, and then we will have to shut down the route entirely. We have already been working toward hiding the entrance to your storm drain.” He took her hands and said, “We are getting close, Eche, but we have to expect it to worsen before it improves.”

She dropped her hands. “Ok, so now?”

“Spread the word, little Sister” Guaré said. “Then await contact from Betancourt.”

She looked at Betancourt. He offered his meek smile once more. Didn't he know it made him look like a fool?

"That's all?" She spoke out of the side of her mouth, still watching Betancourt.

"That is all," Guaré replied.

"But how am I to contact?" Betancourt asked.

Mohsin held out two slips of paper, one to each of them.

"These are your contact IDs."

Betancourt looked at the number on the paper, confusion registering on his face.

"But she has an ID? Those are only for Citizens."

"We have a lot of things that are only for Citizens," Eche said. "How do you think the People find out what's going on? We receive all I-Land signals at our farm and transmit them to the Council."

Mohsin spoke, "There are other Midlanders who do the same, some far better, though none perhaps as directly helpful as the Echeverrys. Anything you need to say to us, you send to Eche. Any instructions you receive from Eche are assumed to be ours. She has our complete trust, as I believe I have already conveyed."

"Very well."

"Be careful, boys," Eche said.

Betancourt extended his huge hand to her and she briefly allowed him to wrap hers with it. She turned to Mohsin, who was beaming at her like a proud father. It made her cringe inwardly, that he still considered her a child.

But her resentment melted away as he stepped closer to her and enveloped her body in his arms. His touch made everything else unimportant. Not just his touch – his attention, his mere

regard. She soaked herself in his embrace, gripping his back with her hands. When she felt his pressure slacken she released him.

Guaré's hug reminded her of her brother and father combined. He didn't have the same magic as Mohsin, but his love for her was evident and reciprocated. He rustled her hair and she shook his hand off with a grin. But he lingered and the humor faded from his face, a rarity. He leaned in and whispered in her ear, "Take care of yourself, little Sister. It won't be long now."

She closed her eyes and stepped back, then turned toward the shaft of light where the surface world pierced down to these tunnels. She stepped forward and pulled on the chain, hearing the familiar jangle. Ali began barking up on the surface, followed by three short stomps on the open grate.

At the sound of the all-clear she climbed up the storm drain. Her father was there, offering his hand. She grabbed it and pulled herself out of the shaft. They both picked up the grate and lowered it, setting it down with a short metallic *clank*.

Her father stood up and looked at her, waiting. The chilly wind rustled his thick, graying hair. Had it been windy before? She tried to think back to just before the meeting, not very long ago but now foggy in her head. She couldn't remember.

Still her dad waited for her to speak. He rubbed his beard, short and thick and grayer than his hair.

"It's going to happen soon," she said, turning from him to look across the field. "We need to talk to Dragona."

"Now?"

"For today, possible attack."

"How many?"

“Maybe thirty, plus autobirds.”

She heard her father exhale slowly in a semi-whistle.

“I’ll help Henry get ready,” he said.

She looked at him sharply. “You’re going to let him?”

“A better question is would I even be able to stop him. After last time?” he said. He stepped up beside her to gaze into the distance himself. “Better for him to fight with my blessing than without. Seems like it might bring some kind of luck, if there is such a thing.”

“I think there is,” she said, now watching Henry in the field, resting beneath the oak.

“We need to prepare as much food for pick-up as possible. Won’t be seeing them after that.”

“Could have guessed as much,” he said, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“They have a Citizen with them, a police officer,” she said, glancing at her dad and seeing him raise his eyebrows. “He’s supposedly kin now, but Guaré’s skeptical. We’re supposed to work with him when he contacts us.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, we’ll have to be careful.”

“We can decide for ourselves, when the time comes.”

“Always.”

He put his arm around her shoulder. They stood together on the concrete pad, looking away from the house, over the field. The gray sky cast an oppressive pall over the expanse. Dead cornstalks littered half the field like skeletal herons in a dismal marsh. A flock of geese flew over the house and continued on their left, breaking the ghostly stillness with their impatient honking. Henry now got up from his rest with a machete, working solo, as Eche had worked.

He raised the blade and brought it down in strong, rhythmic bursts, the *thwacks* softly pulsing to them from a distance.

Orlando took his arm from Eche's shoulders and stepped off of the concrete, taking her hand and pulling gently toward the rest of their morning's work. She was relieved he hadn't broached the matter that occasionally distressed them both, the topic that almost invariably arose following a meeting with the People. She loved him more for it. She loved them both.

He was still pulling her gently to the field. Eche lingered a moment, then ceded to his tug.

Bobbing to electronica, Srena busied herself on her desk-terminal in front of the door marked "Capt. Betancourt." Her eyes drifted again, from the spreadsheet toward the archway at one end of the high-ceilinged hall. She shook her head and frowned, forcing her eyes back to work – he was a captain and could do what he wanted. She smiled to herself, remembering last night's missed phone call.

Her music aborted as an announcement commandeered the Bard's stream. The low-grade buzz of quiet activity ceased almost at once. Srena raised her head, in synchronization with every agent and secretary working on the open floor. She then looked back to her terminal, where the warning scrolled across the screen.

Cal spoke in her ear, using his cheerful voice. She liked when he was friendly.

“This is a public reminder. Due to the terrorist action this morning, I-Land remains on high alert. Please be aware of any suspicious activity, and report it immediately to I-PF. Thank you for your cooperation while this threat is in place. . .”

She stopped listening halfway through and stared off across the workspace. Beige cubicles divided the open room into honeycombs of bustle. The other personal secretaries had the same premium placements as she did, in front of the offices lining the common area.

The same alert had sounded every half-hour since she awoke, so she could ignore it. Just one more routine to execute on auto-pilot. In the midst of ignoring it, Srena vaguely wondered what kind of terrorist action had been carried out. She hoped someone would have some information. She turned back to her computer as her music faded back in.

After working a few more minutes, an abrupt buzz in her ear informed her it was breaktime. She rose from her desk, along with a handful of others sprinkled about the room that had the same breaktime. A couple of the other personal secretaries got up from their peripheral stations, adjusting their skirts as they stood. One of them had wavy red hair. As Srena’s gaze lingered there, her I’s automatically zoomed in on this face, reading its features in a yellow grid. A profile emerged from the left side of the screen with a picture and data: Helen Michaels, I-PF Secretary, Age 32, Residence – Oasis.

Helen waved with a smile, causing a bar at the side of her profile to glow yellow. Helen pointed toward the break room and Srena nodded, making her way across the black linoleum floor. The profile faded from Srena’s I’s two seconds after she ceased looking at Helen.

Helen gripped Srena’s arm as they met at the entrance to the break room. They continued in, stepping onto the raised metal floor that indicated a charging pad. Upon entering the room,

the battery icon on her lens blinked three times. A chime sounded in her Bard. The battery began to cycle from empty to full.

“Y’won’ believe wha happen t’me,” Helen said, as they filed in line at the coffee machine.

Srena raised her eyebrows. On her I’s, faint blue points appeared at the downward corners of Helen’s mouth and at the shape of her arched eyebrows. As her Bard analyzed the tone of her voice, the bar at the side of Srena’s screen changed from yellow to dark green. Meaning Helen was now more agitated than happy.

“R’memmer tha’ one guy?” she continued. “Really boy’s more like’t. He came t’pick me up lass night’n ol-time jeans! Tha’ reminds me, there’s a great sale at Bertram’s. . . Oasis, C-North! Y’know where? B’can y’imagine? Had t’tell him. . .”

Just as Srena’s attention was wandering, Helen stopped and looked up to the right. Srena was used to these interruptions by Helen’s I’s.

“Oh, s’another one! Hold on.”

“Ok.”

Helen continued looking up to the right, her eyes darting back and forth as she read a message. The blue spots in Srena’s I’s continuously analyzed Helen’s facial points, now determining that she was concentrating. They communicated that to Srena by turning the bar purple.

Approaching the coffee machine, Srena heard Helen murmur a response behind her. Twenty seconds later, Srena took her coffee over to the gray granite counter, where she set it down and leaned backward against the cool counter.

Beyond the news items filtering across her field of vision, Srena was vaguely aware of her coworkers in the room, situated similarly, most of them staring vacantly off to the right or left as they handled personal business on their I's. Their gloved hands wiggled and pulsated as they manipulated the private content on their individual screens. Occasionally one of them said something to a neighbor, and that person responded. Srena didn't know them – she hadn't looked at any of them long enough for her I's to present their profiles.

She was not finding anything captivating on her own feed, instead browsing music videos, when Helen approached with her coffee. When Srena focused her eyes on Helen, the music video dimmed to the background of Srena's visual field as Helen's profile resurfaced. The volume of music in her Bard lowered automatically.

"Thiss'ns another story," Helen said, eyes still focused on her screen and browsing with slight flicks of her head. "Great dresser, not a bad kisser either."

"Ja go shoppin yesterday?" Srena asked.

"S'great sale at Bertram's!"

At the mention of the store, a scroll of coupons began to unroll itself from the top of Srena's I's. She scanned them as they paraded slowly from top to the bottom.

"Ja wanna go today?" she asked, after perusing the coupons.

"Can', brother's kid."

"I need some shoes."

Three different alerts appeared on Srena's screen, with offers at various Oasis-located shoe stores.

"We're goin t'the 3B," Helen said. "B'you should see tha' sale!"

In the meantime, Srena came across an item. A police van had been seen leaving I-Land shortly after the terrorist attack. It had gone out beyond the nuclear facilities. Automated sentinels confirmed that it had stopped, but I-PF could not retrieve it for fear of a Midland terrorist cell. Srena had paused at seeing ‘terrorist attack,’ but she lost interest once she saw it had nothing to do with the action in the city.

“Srena!”

“Oh, huh?”

“What about the Cap’n?”

Srena blushed.

“Ja see’m?”

“No, but he –“

“Didn’ see’m? Tha’ captain, th’balls! Dudn’ he know what it means fer you? Mine takes me out couple times a week. Yer lucky if you c’n get laid once a month!”

“He did call.”

“Call, pff. Tha’ don’ help with raises. Leas I get t’see mine few times a week, not like yours.”

“B’s’not like that.”

“Honey s’always like that. Y’need t’see’m *more* fer yer *raises*. I see mine leas . . . th’balls! Dudn’ he know what it does t’ya?”

When Helen got on a roll it was difficult to follow everything she said.

“I don’ know,” Srena said. “Think he’s differen.”

“Differen’, I’ll say. I see mine leas twice a week, can’ give . . . puts some effort in’t. Some of em do that, make it art. More’n you c’n say fer mosta th’pigs roun here.”

Srena's eyes widened.

"Don't talk like that!" she hissed. "You'll get'n trouble!"

"Let'm," Helen scoffed. "They'll probably laugh emselves outta their headphones, cause they know I'm right. Anyway, wha' c'n they do t'the best ass around? Think they'll give *these* up?" She grabbed her breasts in emphasis.

"Helen!"

"Don't be such a schoolgirl," she said. "Juss cause y'got a real casablanca. . . M'tellin you though: a leas mine. . . Look honey, we know what we are, right?"

Srena looked down. As she did, the music video brightened and came again to the forefront. It had a topless girl gyrating in leather pants. Srena couldn't help admiring the perfectly formed breasts.

"Hey, y'there?" Helen asked her.

Srena tried to remember the question.

"Y'know what we are, right?" Helen repeated.

"I guess so," she said finally.

"B'what else about the Cap'n? Come on, spill it!"

Srena looked back up at Helen. The video faded once more.

"He tells me things, too."

"Th'best ones make you feel special, thass terrific. I had summa those too, real casablanca. Hey, where's he at anyway?"

"I'm not –"

“Those officers juss come'n go as they please, don' they? Makes y'wonder, don' it? But I'm tellin you,” Helen said, slowing down slightly. “He should be takin y'out more. If y'wanna raise. . .”

“I don' really –“

“Ooh, looka this!”

She swept her gloved hand from her brow toward Srena. An image slid down from the top of Srena's field of vision.

“Simal, New Year's Eve concert. Y'wan'?”

“I'm not sure, I'll have t' –”

“S'right here at Oasis!”

“Where else? But I'll –”

“Oh, c'mon, ooh look!”

She swept again and a swooping fight poster obscured the concert bill in Srena's I's. Two menacing groups of armed thugs, faces covered in tattoos, glowered at each other from opposite sides of the poster.

“GangWars pre-show *an* intermission! Whajasay?”

“I don---“

“C'mon, it'll be fun! Promise?”

“S'too far away, I'll have –“

“A leas' half-promise, ok?”

“Ok.”

She refocused her eyes toward Helen and smiled, but Helen was busy with her I's, her wavy red hair falling down in bunches around her face as her eyes scanned back and forth. The grid and profile re-emerged on Srena's I's, the MoodBar turning purple again.

On a strange whim, Srena looked beyond the MoodBar and studied Helen's face, but without her I-Lens profile, using her own eyes instead. It felt odd to examine her face so closely; she didn't usually look directly at her friend. Now she saw the skin around Helen's eyes and mouth, where the foundation was caked over her wrinkles. From afar the makeup seemed to work, but up close the blemishes were embarrassing. The Trainers weren't kidding when they warned secretaries about being done by their thirties.

The breaktime buzz jarred Srena from her inspection. She waited a moment to say goodbye, but Helen had something going on her I's. After several seconds waiting, Srena picked up her coffee and filed out of the break room behind several others, all heading back to their workstations. A chime sounded in her ears when she exited the room; her battery was suspending its charging.

The three men stood before a thick, steel lattice that opened onto a gradual decline toward the river. The end of the runoff drain was large enough for a small car to fit through, though the gate wasn't wide enough. The police van was parked above them, beyond the overhang. The skies through the grating looked to be clearing in the midday sun, though any amount of light would have dazzled Betancourt after so long underground.

He stood at the gate listening to the briefing from Mohsin, whose face was dark in the backlight from the surface world.

Betancourt asked, “How will your men know to spare me?”

“You shall be the highest ranking officer on the offensive?”

He nodded.

“Then it should appear natural for you to stay back at the vehicles, once you lead the I-PF to the gate. We shall instruct Dragona to spare the vehicles. He shall be pleased to find use for the one you leave behind.”

Betancourt could hear but not see Mohsin's smile. He nodded to himself; it sounded solid.

“This is where we part, for now,” Mohsin said. “You know what to do, and how to contact us.”

“Yes sir.”

“And how are you feeling now?”

Betancourt stopped. Over the last few hours, since his isolation, he had been so intent on absorbing the new information that he hadn't stopped to examine himself.

“Good, I think.” He nodded once, definitively. “Good company gives me heart.”

“Indeed.” Mohsin smiled.

“But. . . I can't help feeling that few share your generous attitude toward me.”

His eyes flicked to Guaré, who chuckled.

“Guaré is my most trusted Brother,” Mohsin replied. He placed a hand on Guaré's shoulder, continuing, “He is a good skeptic, which I highly value, but not an unreasonable one. Right, Brother?”

Guaré said nothing, just raising his eyebrows to accompany his slim smirk. The gaunt face, prominent nose and crooked hat were those of a jester. But beyond the sarcasm, Betancourt saw benevolence in his expressions. Betancourt could handle the caustic skepticism if he knew there was good will backing it. And if he knew that Mohsin oversaw it.

“It’s just a shame you have not gotten to see his humor,” Mohsin said, smiling at Guaré.

“And Eche?” Betancourt probed. “She didn’t much like me either.”

Mohsin cocked his head and rocked it a few times slowly as he thought.

“Eche. . .” he said, “Eche is young yet. She shares our Brother’s skepticism, but exceeds him in youthful defiance. Also, living on the surface she has more experience with your specific organization, you must understand.”

Betancourt nodded and stepped toward the light behind Mohsin. Mohsin put out a hand to stop him, then stared at him hard, a stare that Betancourt could now see, having moved to Mohsin's side. It was uncomfortable in its sudden intensity.

“But make no mistake,” he said. “She is no enemy of yours. She is perhaps your greatest ally. . .”

Betancourt furrowed his brow, but then relaxed as he saw Mohsin was finished. He turned to Guaré and held out his hand. Guaré took it with a small smile.

“I hope you can aid us,” he said.

“Of course.”

“It would be most difficult to forgive your betrayal.”

He smiled as he said it and raised those sarcastic eyebrows again. A glint in his eye gave Betancourt pause.

“Of course,” he murmured.

Betancourt stepped to Mohsin, offering him his hand. Mohsin clasped it and gripped his forearm as well. At the touch, Betancourt felt that same sense of well-being flow through him. It was becoming familiar now, though it still confounded him, like Mohsin was funneling energy through his hands and into Betancourt – from where, he couldn't imagine.

“It has been a true pleasure,” Betancourt said, almost gasping.

“Perhaps moreso for us,” the leader responded.

His look said he knew what Betancourt was feeling and didn't begrudge him his staggered reaction.

Guaré opened the gate and Betancourt walked through after a lingering glance to Mohsin. The overhang protruded several paces from the gate, creating a mini-cave. Betancourt was striding toward the edge of it when Guaré called above the clanking of the locking gate:

“Look out for autobirds.”

At the edge of the overhang, Betancourt looked around in the bright gray sky, seeing nothing but trees. The day wasn't clearing up so much after all. He scrambled up the side of the embankment and trotted over to the van. As he got in the front door, he put his helmet on and flipped the mask down, in preparation for the inevitable reintegration that awaited him. He didn't want to show his eyes, not now and not in twenty minutes when he arrived at I-Land's border. He didn't yet want his eyes and mind any less vivid than they were at this instant.

He surveyed his surroundings with that vivid vision, savoring it. The overflow storm grate emptied out into one of the unnamed rivers that flowed in front of a farming property on a humble, two-lane road. Betancourt wondered what the local designation for the river might be. There was a small forest off to the left side, opposite the overflow.

He was not too far from the city limits, but far enough that none of his colleagues would have followed him. He presumed the nearby Midlanders were only tolerating his presence due to an agreement with the People.

Still, he was surprised at the environs. It was not nearly as wasted and chaotic as the Cits learned as children. He had seen some crawler grass on the way, but it was limited to roadway shoulders. On the private properties, such as the one up the hill in front of him, the invasive growth seemed to have been controlled. If all the countryside was this lush it would be a nice life out here. There were fall crops dotting the fields on the way up to the house, and large trees interspersed the pastures, no crawler in sight. The farmhouse up the hill was in good repair, with smoke rising from the chimney. It would be how Eche's house probably looked too, however many clicks away, in a direction indiscernible from underground.

Betancourt turned on the van and pulled back onto the road, heading to the Eastern Roadway. He turned west and accelerated on the cracked pavement. As the fields and trees flew by, he saw the first developments start to dot the horizon. He could glimpse one of the nuclear mini-cities off to the right. Even with their semi-permanent habitants he didn't consider them true developments. But he enjoyed the calming solitude of the drive. He had so little chance to be alone during the daytime. How pleasant it would have been to take this drive on a regular basis.

He came to the outpost that marked the entrance to I-Land. This time there were several more officers milling about. Betancourt suspected the reason for the increase but felt no anxiety over it – he had weathered worse. Plus he had all the proof he needed in the pile of bloody clothes in the back of the van; these dupes wouldn't know sheep's blood from the real thing. He

pulled the van up and one of the officers, a sergeant, came to the driver's side. The agent saluted his captain. Betancourt returned the gesture.

“Sir, I've been ordered to ask about th'missing police van.”

The sergeant's solemnity amused Betancourt.

“Missing van? What missing van?”

The sergeant skipped a beat, then said, “This van, sir. The van that left the city.”

“Well, sergeant, I'm confused: does it look like it's missing?” Betancourt heard the mockery in his own voice. He fought the urge to laugh outright.

“Well. . . no sir. What I mean is, th'officer on duty reported you leaving, then the sentinels picked up th'van parked for a while. . . it was on th'news after the terrorist attack this morning.”

“So you're asking me about a missing van that is clearly not missing, is that right, Sergeant?”

Silence. Betancourt imagined the sergeant's eyes bouncing from side to side behind the black visor as he pondered his response.

“Well, yessir,” he said finally.

“Does that make one goddamn licka sense to you officer?”

“Can't say sir, but –”

“You can't say? It either does or it doesn't, Sergeant.”

“I mean to say, s'above my rank, sir. I'm following orders.”

“I am aware of the concern it may have caused,” Betancourt said, adopting more formal vocabulary for effect. “You can tell your direct superior that I have been in full command the

entire time, that there is certainly no ‘missing van,’ and that all possible threats have been neutralized.”

“B’sir, yer wanted fer questioning.”

Betancourt paused for a beat, thinking to himself. He knew what that meant because he had seen it used on others, dozens of times. But he couldn’t pause too long; that would show weakness.

He responded, “Of course, that is entirely acceptable. Please inform your superiors that I will be available for questioning in my office at headquarters, after I’ve breakfasted. Thank you, officer.”

“B’s—“

Betancourt pressed his foot down on the accelerator and left the officer behind at his checkpoint, before he could finish objecting. It was stupid of them not to have lowered the gate. It allowed him to leave before he heard the sergeant order his detention, giving him plausible deniability. And there was no chance a lower officer would be impertinent enough to issue an alert after such rough treatment by a superior. This one wasn’t sharp enough to be suspicious anyway. None of them were.

A hundred yards from the road was one of the ag-compounds, this one a meat plant with a metal roof. He wrinkled his nose at the foul stench wafting from it, choking anybody or thing unfortunate enough to happen by. Now passing it, he began to chew his lip. As a human with a conscience he regretted bullying the sergeant. The kid was more pathetic than anything else; he hadn’t deserved the abuse. With a half-shrug he sighed. All for the sake of appearances.

“The Philosophical Justification for Violence”⁴

Violence as a tool for revolution has long been analyzed and pontificated upon, yet seldom have serious systems been established to determine either its efficacy or moral legitimacy. Thus it is easy to proclaim, as did Rousselin during the 18th century French Revolution, that ‘Vengeance is the only source of liberty, the only goddess we ought to bring sacrifices to.’ But such proclamations, while invigorating, have remained difficult to prove.

The practical results of the French Revolution, unfortunately for Msr. Rousselin, now provide a compelling case-study for the inadequacy of absolute violence in effecting revolution. Briefly, revolutionary leaders channeled popular rage into a flood of violence that washed away the exploitative aristocracy. In this they succeeded, yet only to soon after succumb to the same violence they had sponsored in what became known as the Reign of Terror. Almost immediately, legitimate violence against unjust rulers became unjust itself. The masses rebelled indiscriminately and reflexively against anything that might resemble hypocrisy; they were easily manipulated into doing so by whichever faction had most ready access to a public platform. As 20th century political philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote:

The experiences of the French Revolution . . . left no doubt that the multiplied strength of a multitude could burst forth, under the pressure of misfortune, with a violence which no institutionalized and controlled power could withstand. But these experiences also taught that, contrary to all theories, no such multiplication would ever give birth to power, that strength and

4 Excerpted from Jensen, Frida, The People's Anthology of the 3rd Millenium, 2nd edition, Ch. 12.

violence in their pre-political state were abortive. The men of the French Revolution, not knowing how to distinguish between violence and power, and convinced that all power must come from the people, opened the political realm to this pre-political, natural force of the multitude and they were swept away by it, as the king and the old powers had been swept away before.

Yet in cautioning against the indiscriminate use of violence, Arendt does not address the question of whether violence is ever justified in a political or revolutionary battle.

Other 20th century writers were somewhat less nuanced. Existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, alleges that only through violence can one 'rediscover his (sic) lost innocence,' that only violence can 'efface the marks of violence.' Frantz Fanon, the 20th century psychologist-author of one of the most notorious revolutionary screeds, says that 'this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called into question by absolute violence.'

These powerful statements are seductive in their implacability, but a lack of subtlety begs further inquiry. Even Fanon himself alludes to the benefits of moderation, belying his original advocacy for absolute violence. Later in the same famous tome, for example, he laments that after liberation, 'The atmosphere of violence. . . continues to dominate national life.' He considers violence utile at the same time that he unequivocally avows its evilness.

These two opposing perspectives carry us little closer to a real understanding of the efficacy and legitimacy of violence. Arendt exudes an implicit distaste for such savagery, while Fanon and Sartre, in their exuberance, put too little thought into the practical complexities of the issue.

Algerian philosopher Albert Camus, in his book The Rebel, approaches the question with more subtlety and insight, immediately recognizing that an indiscriminate advocacy of violence will inevitably lead, in the event of the movement's success, to something very similar to the

French Reign of Terror. Yet he also acknowledges the necessity of violent acts of rebellion in the face of injustice.

In his historical tracing of the rebellious sentiment, Camus weaves his way to an extremist faction of the Socialist-Revolutionary party in early 20th century Russia. Camus labels these men and women the 'fastidious assassins' due to their highly selective use of violence. They avoided incidental casualties at all costs, even aborting missions when it became clear that innocents would be injured. As well, the assassins eagerly surrendered their own lives in the wake of the assassinations, recognizing that they could not legitimately maintain the right to live after taking a life. For Camus, these 'fastidious assassins' represent the zenith of moral violence, as we allow him to further explain for himself:

Necessary and inexcusable – that is how murder appeared to them. Mediocre minds, confronted with this terrible problem, can take refuge by ignoring one of the terms of the dilemma. They are content, in the name of formal principles, to find all direct violence inexcusable and then to sanction that diffuse form of violence which takes place on the scale of world history. Or they will console themselves, in the name of history, with the thought that violence is necessary, and will add murder to murder, to the point of making of history nothing but a continuous violation of everything in man which protests against injustice. . .

But the extremists, with whom we are concerned, forgot nothing. From their earliest days they were incapable of justifying what they nevertheless found necessary, and conceived the idea of offering themselves as a justification and of replying by personal sacrifice to the question they asked themselves. For them, as for all rebels before them, murder is identified with suicide. A life is paid for by another life, and from these two sacrifices springs the promise of a value. . .

The assassins strove to reconcile the two poles of violence – its necessity and its intolerability – and found their answer in the murder-suicide tandem. Camus determines that

death on both sides of a struggle – and voluntary on the part of the rebel – can uniquely serve as midwife for the incarnation of a higher value such as Freedom or Justice. And just as Camus famously wrote that ‘Absolute freedom mocks at justice,’ and ‘Absolute justice denies freedom,’ less known are his succeeding thoughts concerning violence:

The same reasoning can be applied to violence. Absolute non-violence is the negative basis of slavery and its acts of violence; systematic violence positively destroys the living community and the existence we receive from it. To be fruitful, these two ideas must establish final limits.

Camus, moreso than any other analyst of violence and rebellion, probed deeply and rigorously for a position of moderation in both extremes of the Violence v. Non-Violence dichotomy. He refrained from wholesale condemnation or approbation, using his keen intellect and strict philosophical discipline to parse the matter as conclusively as had yet been done.

In deference to these strenuous efforts and towering intellect, and to the cold moderation endorsed concerning violent political struggle, this is the position that the People have adopted: to emulate in practice and spirit, when circumstances of injustice and enslavement demand it, the adored 'fastidious assassins' of Albert Camus.

IV.

Srena was typing – but mostly worrying – when Captain Betancourt entered the floor. Messages from the Major inquiring of the Captain’s whereabouts had begun to arrive every 15 minutes. Official concern over his absence distressed Srena almost as much as not being able to provide adequate answers to those officials. So she was simultaneously relieved and annoyed when a large man strode casually into the main room and the facial-rec grid on her I’s identified him as her captain.

“Captain, everyone’s been lookin fer you!” she hissed as he approached her desk.

“Including you?” he said softly.

Srena blushed. According to MoodBar, the Captain was happy and relaxed.

“Srena,” he said louder, with his official voice. “Please accompany me in my office.”

He opened the door to his office and walked in, leaving it cracked. Srena got up from her terminal and followed him, closing the door behind her. An acrid odor like dead things made her recoil.

“Whass that smell?” she asked, putting her hand to her nose.

“What smell?”

“I don’ know, but s’bad!”

“I’ve been out-city. Who’s looking for me?”

“Major Wilson.”

“And you?”

He stepped closer to her and put his hands on her waist. She obeyed him, but almost retched at the odor. She turned her head up and to the side in search of fresh air.

“I was worried,” she said. “An when I don’ know where you are it makes me look bad!”

“I’m sorry Srena, don’t worry. Take your lenses out.”

“Now?”

“Or close your eyes, whichever you prefer.”

She closed her eyes and he kissed her, lingering on her lips while he encircled her with his arms. She loved those big arms when they were wrapped around her. The smell made it unpleasant, but the longer he kissed her the less distasteful it became. She kept her eyes closed until he pulled away. Now she was excited.

“Does that make you feel better?” he asked.

“It does.”

She reflexively juttred her chin upward, to raise the volume of the new song on her Bard. As she did so, the blue points of the facial-rec registered the dissipation of the Captain’s smile. His MoodBar changed from yellow to green.

“Do you have to fiddle with that right now?” he asked.

“Don’ be upset,” she cooed. “S’my favorite anit reminds me a you. Juss came on right now, amazing timing right?”

“Yeah, amazing,” he said, moving to his desk and looking over his terminal.

Srena looked out the window over the gray city as the beats filled her ear.

“S’like I see these signs all the time. . .”

“Oh? Like where?”

“Well, like th’song juss now. S’m favorite anit reminds me a you. What a coincidence, amazing timing, right?”

She turned back to him and he raised his eyebrows while scanning through the screen.

“Mm-hmm, and what else?”

She bit her lip while she thought.

“Well, I can’ really remember righ now. . . but I know there'r more.”

The Captain sat down at his desk. He looked up at her with his hands crossed in his lap, swiveling the chair from side to side.

“And what are the signs telling you to do?”

“I can’ tell you,” she said, looking down and blushing.

“Why not?”

He was doing it again. Why did he always have to talk about these things, things that nobody talked about? And out in the open, like it was normal? It was so uncomfortable!

“S’juss no’ right,” she said. “I know my job. I know what I am. I know my limits. I understan’n accept it. Thass my job. I know what I am.”

He looked up at her with a curious gaze that she didn’t understand. The MoodBar interpreted it as a pale red sadness. But that couldn’t be right: he wasn’t frowning or crying. It was a good program, but sometimes MoodBar just didn’t know what it was talking about, especially regarding the Captain. For some reason he confused it, just like he confused her.

“You ‘know,’ eh?” he said. “Well, as long as you know all that, you’ll be absolutely right.

Srena scrunched her eyebrows as she tried to figure out what he meant, but then she heard the refrain from her song and began to smile. She closed her eyes and bobbed her head, mouthing the words. When she opened them a few seconds later, the MoodBar was green again.

“Sir, don’ be upset! S’m favorite anit reminds me a you! Anyway, where’v you been all morning? Why ja go out-city?”

He took a deep breath and the green became paler.

“Did you hear about the terrorist attack?”

“Oh my goo’ness! An all this time we thought they’re done! Were you there?”

“I was coordinating the counterterrorism response.”

“Wha s’tha mean?”

“I was catching terrorists.”

“How many ja get?”

“Enough,” he said, looking down.

She shivered as she thought about those monsters roaming their streets again. They hadn’t had to worry about them for years. She was lucky never to have to go outside.

“They scare me. I thought we’re done with em.”

“Lots of people thought that.”

“B’that was hours ago. Where’v you been?”

“I was in charge of one of the detainee vans. We had to unload it at the Bureau. . .”

He kept talking but she stopped paying attention. She couldn’t follow all of his words. When she saw him stop, she responded with one of the universal platitudes they taught the secretaries.

“Well I’m glad yer okay,” she said. “Was it dangerous?”

“They were unarmed, so no, not very.”

“Oh thass good. B’s still, scary! S’been so long! Why can’ they juss leave us alone?”

He shrugged. He wasn’t saying more, so according to her training it was time. She sauntered to his desk and plucked out her I’s. Her music cut off, which always jarred her a little, but she was expert at controlling her reaction. The Captain rolled backed from his desk and

swiveled the chair toward her. Willing herself to abide the strengthening stench and the loss of music, upholding her plastered smile, she sat down on his lap and put her arms around his shoulders. He smiled up at her. It was strange not having a MoodBar to turn yellow as he did so.

“You look nice without your lenses,” he said. “You have pretty eyes.”

“Oh, they’re kinda borin. Aleas’ with the I’s I can change colors when I want.”

“There’s that.”

He turned away from her and didn’t say anything more. That close up, she noticed crinkles around his eyes, just like she had seen with Helen. His didn’t have makeup, and they didn’t make him look pathetic. They looked nice, sort of sad but they also made him look kind. She liked them. It was funny that she hadn’t noticed them before.

Her mind wandered and she was dying to know what he was thinking. At least MoodBar gave her something to go on, even if it was wrong about half the time, especially about the Captain. And what else is wrong? Terrorists. That reminded her.

“But isn’ it stupid not t’bring guns to th’terroris’ attack?”

He turned back to her. It looked like he had forgotten she was there. She hated when he looked like that.

“Maybe they didn’t plan to hurt anyone,” he said.

“B’tthen it wouldn’ be a terroris’ attack.”

“A good point. . .”

“Y’know what I wish? I wish there’s some way to juss get rid of em all! So long without any bother from em. . . Why won’ they juss leave us alone?”

The captain gently lifted her off his legs and spun his chair back to the desk. She stood up and straightened her dress.

“Maybe they want to be left alone too,” he said.

“B’we *were* leavin em alone, fer like, *years*. Everyone was happy!”

The Captain leaned toward her like he was going to tell her something important. *Uh oh*. She hated when he tried to say important things. He always just ended up confusing her, then got upset when she didn’t understand. She tried not to think about it, to focus on his words. He always got upset when she didn’t pay attention.

He asked, “Srena, have you ever thought that these people are human as well? That they have the same ultimate desires that we have? That they’re like us?”

She scrunched her eyebrows again as she finished putting her lenses back in.

“B’they’re no’ like us,” she said. “They’re dead-eyes, an they live unnergroun. We live up top. They hate technology an nice things. They wanna destroy us. They wan everyone t’be as bad as them. Ugh, I wish there’s some way t’juss get rid of em! Why won’ they leave us alone? An after all this time?”

She was getting worked up. Her head tilted slightly to the right as she picked up the sound of her song once more. It relaxed her. She heard the Captain sigh.

“Of course,” he said. “It’s good that you remembered.”

“Wait. . .”

She snapped her head around to look at him.

“That was a test, right? You’re tryin to tess me weren’ja?”

“You’re really smart,” he said, looking back to his terminal. The MoodBar popped up as she studied him. It was being wrong about his sadness again.

“I’m lucky they gave you to me,” he said.

Srena beamed at her captain, thinking how stupid the MoodBar was if it couldn’t even process his words correctly. She wondered if she should tell somebody about that. It was clearly a glitch. But they were smarter than she was, so surely they were working on it. . . Her Bard buzzed and she looked up toward the ceiling. She jerked her head once to answer.

“Capt. Betancourt’s office. . .”

A female voice recited, “Major Wilson calling for Captain Betancourt.”

“Yes ma'am,” she said. The captain looked up.

“He’s right here, shall I connect you?”

“Please.”

“Very well, one moment.”

Srena made a series of hand-twists and finger-flicks to connect the call through the portable terminal program on her I’s. A moment later the captain’s terminal sounded.

“S'the Major,” she whispered.

“Please leave me.”

“Yessir,” she responded.

His face was blank but the MoodBar glowed purple. He couldn’t be worried though. . . stupid MoodBar.

She turned and exited his office, the faint remnants of his romantic compliment still painting her face.

The doors slid open with a hydraulic *whoosh*, and Betancourt stepped into the upper lobby, his boots clapping on the black marble floors. Carla Booker, the upper floor secretary, sat across the open space at her desk, scanning through items on her I-Lens display with a gentle ticking of her head.

Betancourt stopped at the counter overlooking the desk and waited for her to notice him. Studying her worn face, he could see the remnants of the beauty that had won her this post, the same beauty that left his fellow officers, years later, still recounting her exploits among themselves. Even so, judging from appearances, her accrued goodwill would soon expend itself, and she'd be put out to pasture like the rest of the over-age secretaries. And it would have nothing to do with her penchant for ignoring supplicants; it was a cold matter of updating décor.

He cleared his throat. "Good afternoon, Citizen Booker."

She refocused past her lenses. Her head came to rest. She tilted it as she noticed him. She couldn't help looking at him alluringly; her ingrained training dictated as much when confronted with any officer. But at her age it was unbecoming. Betancourt stifled a shiver of disgust.

"Captain Betancourt, how are you?"

"Good, thank you. The Major wanted to see me."

She flicked her head to the left and waited. Then she said, "Yes, Major, Captain Betancourt is here. Want me to send him in? . . . Want me to join?" She raised her eyebrows to Betancourt, but her smile vanished upon hearing the Major's response. "Okay," she said.

She signaled to her left and said, "You can go."

Betancourt headed down the hallway to his right. The walls were dark gray granite, lighter than the black floor. He passed three doors at regular intervals before coming to the Major's.

He paused outside the door to look down at his hands. By envisioning his palm through the back of his hand, the top surface became fuzzy. He felt his face slacken and his eyelids droop by a degree. He was ready. He knocked at Major Wilson's door, resolute for the encounter.

"Come in," a gruff voice spoke.

Betancourt opened the door and stepped in. Maj. Wilson's office was sumptuous, with floor-to-ceiling windows on the back wall and two large planters housing a variety of palm. It suited the rough elegance of the medium-sized man that stood before him. A mirrored wet bar decorated the left side of the room, to which Wilson now indicated as he asked, "Would you care for a drink?"

"No, thank you sir. Still a little early for me."

"Enough said," Wilson replied with a small wave of his hand. As he turned to his desk Betancourt scrutinized him. If he was surprised at Betancourt's irregular activity, he was hiding it well. "Please sit," Wilson said. "You don't mind if I partake?"

"No sir," he said while complying.

Major Wilson sat down in his chair and leaned back with one leg crossed over his knee. "Cal, bourbon ice."

Betancourt turned to watch the wet bar, where a mechanical arm pushed a glass beneath a spout. Three cubes clinked into the glass, followed by the trickle of amber liquid. Once poured, the arm scooted the glass onto a square countertop standing in front of the cabinets. The counter-

cart rolled over to the desk and the Major, still leaning back, plucked up the glass. The counter then returned to the bar.

Betancourt looked down at his hands again, to defocus his eyes anew. He then lifted his head to meet the Major's gaze.

"Now, the business this morning. . ."

"Yes, sir?"

"That was somethin, wasn't it? Out of nowhere, and we were ready for em too, thanks to the RCATS. . . It's good in a way, to finally see some real action again." He took a sip of his bourbon and stretched his mouth on the swallow. He leaned forward. "Now you know you have some flex with me, Marc."

"Thank you, sir."

"But you'll still have to answer some questions when you raise the kind of eyebrows that you raised today."

"About the van, you mean?"

Wilson put his leg and glass down at the same time. The black eyebrows under his gray hair inched toward each other. He leaned forward, the warm gruffness in his voice turning frosty.

"I mean about a van full of terrorists, at the first sign of activity in years, disappearing without authorization and returning three hours later, empty of bodies."

"Understood, sir," Betancourt replied, calm and relaxed, his face still slack. "Allow me to explain."

"By all means," he said, taking up the glass and leaning back again.

“You are aware of my temper, sir. . . Sometimes I get a little heated.” He pretended to be ashamed, looking down, shrugging his shoulders, playing with his hands.

“I’m aware of no such thing.”

“It’s been a problem since childhood. I’m sure my file mentioned it.”

“I couldn’t recall.”

“Anyway, sir, I know these bastards. I saw em in ’63 at the Citadel. I know what they’re capable of. I know how low they are.”

“You don’t have to remind me, Captain. That’s why we assigned you to the task force in the first place.”

“Of course, sir,” he said. “So you can understand how I acted today.”

He breathed heavily out his nose. “You’re going to have to help me understand.”

Betancourt looked back at his hands, then up again. Slack eyes, slack mouth – the continual self-check was second nature. He amped up the Citspeak while slipping into his uneducated brute persona.

“Y’see, I already hate em. I already wanna punish em. Then, t’make it worse I saw’t they’re doin today.”

He paused and the Major raised his eyebrows, waiting, trying to stay skeptical. But despite himself he was enrapt, clearly sympathizing. Betancourt took heart but kept it hidden.

“Th’way they’re tauntin the Cits, hittin’m as they run by, tryin a hurd em. On toppa that disgrace in the plaza. Then I caught two a the dead-eyes – kid’s play trappin’m, pathetic. But they dared insult me. *Them* insultin *me*.”

“I’m aware of their impertinence.”

Betancourt saw him being won over, despite his cold professionalism.

“Juss saw an opportunity to put em in their place, s’I took it.”

“Lying to an officer to commandeer an official vehicle is quite a bit more than ‘taking an opportunity,’” Wilson said, leaning forward again.

Betancourt felt a slight wince at the corner of his mouth, but quickly reined his face back to impassivity. He looked down again to re-glaze his eyes.

Wilson continued, his voice rising, “You used Strauss’s name! Did you stop to think in your red-eyed fit what would happen to you should he find out? Let alone the rest of the Board? And did you not stop to think, that maybe at the first capture of these insurgents in over 15 years, that more people than just yourself should decide what to do with em?”

Betancourt played to the half-hearted anger. “H-Has he found out sir?” he asked, looking up from beneath his brow. “Strauss, I mean?”

“No, he has not,” Wilson said, relaxing slightly. He took a sip of his bourbon. “And he won’t, as long as I’m satisfied. So satisfy me.”

“I . . . I got carried away sir,” Betancourt said, looking into his hands, sobering his speech.

“Damn right you did.”

“I had to make em pay.”

“Marc, I worry that you’ve gotten too close to this.”

Betancourt looked up sharply and his slack face tensed. There was kindness in Wilson's voice, which should have put him at ease. But you can like the mode of transport and hate the route at the same time.

Wilson continued, “It’s one thing to have a passionate officer aiding the cause, but it’s quite another to have a loose cannon flouting protocol at the most sensitive moments.”

“I understand sir.”

“I don’t have many officers as capable as you,” Wilson continued. “Your scores are almost off the charts. Almost too high, actually.”

Betancourt looked at him, his dazed eyes turned sharper, analyzing. But the Major was looking down at his terminal, now frowning as he talked.

“But you can’t allow these flights to negate that capability. We didn’t even get a proper interrogation in! What if one of em knew something? How could you, a captain, not think about that? And what in god’s name are you so smug about right now?”

Becoming more comfortable with each of the Major’s words, reading the telegraphed absence of censure, Betancourt had relaxed back into his chair, a small smile propped up on his slack face.

“Well, sir, I’m glad y’mentioned the interrogation, sir.”

“You mean you got something?”

“T’be honest, sir, I’m a little disappointed you think I woulda skipped the best part. Why ja think I been gone this long? Juss had t’get in a quick execution fore my two-hour breakfast?”

“Goddamnit Betancourt, you better tell me what the hell you mean already.”

“I got tactical, logistical, and geographical on those dead-eye sewer rats, sir.”

“Well I’ll be. . .”

“Yes you will sir. Sector H-12, specifically, already verified it myself, a remote flood overflow on the outskirts. And more. I found where they been this entire time, why we haven’t seen em at all.

A quiver in Wilson’s mouth betrayed the emotion he was trying to control. Betancourt paused sadistically, until Wilson widened his eyes to urge him on.

His smile grew. “They been down below, where we knew em t’be from before, but further below, and further out.”

“What are you saying?”

“The old minin tunnels, even deeper down.”

“Mining? What mining was there? Unless. . .”

“I didn’t ask sir,” Betancourt said, easing off the Citspeak as his task was essentially completed. “They just said mining.”

“Incredible,” Wilson said, mostly to himself. “So deep, but it makes sense. . .”

“When ja wanna get a party out?”

The Major thought to himself, looking off. “I’ll have to consult with the Chairman,” he said. He looked back at Betancourt. “You say it’s remote?”

“Only one household in th’immediate vicinity. Shouldn’ be able t’offer much resistance, even if they do wanna challenge.”

Wilson nodded and said, “That sector’s raided against the Nukers before, but never with any real nuts. I’ll keep it in mind.”

Betancourt almost felt bad about deceiving an otherwise capable officer. He liked Wilson. Under different circumstances he would have considered him almost an uncle.

“You’ll keep me in the loop on this, sir?” he asked.

“I’d say you’ve earned that much.”

“Thank you, sir.” Betancourt rose from his seat. “With your permission, sir.”

Wilson, staring off in the distance, refocused his eyes on Betancourt.

“One more thing, Captain.”

“Yes sir?”

“Assuming this information checks out, we can forget about today’s reckless comportment.”

“Thank you sir,” he said, bowing his head to the Major.

“But I can’t shield you from any further noncompliance,” Wilson said, his voice frosting over once more. “And I wouldn’t want to either.”

Betancourt lifted his head and found the Major staring directly into his glazed eyes.

“I understand, sir. I am grateful for your assistance in the matter.”

“Good day, Captain.”

“Good day, sir.”

Dani glanced at Amadou as he hacked at the crowler. She saw the long, dark arm raise up, the muscles tensing as he sharply lowered it. His familiar odor occasionally drifted toward her, as reassuring as it was pungent.

She thought back to yesterday’s Assembly, to the crushing sadness and rage she had felt. But then her mind inadvertently traveled back just further, to her joy at greeting Amadou upon his safe return. She blushed, the anger she recalled from the Assembly transferring to herself; it was unforgivable to dwell on personal happiness when so many others had experienced the opposite.

She brought a hand up and rubbed the small pink spot behind her ear, the only memento from her previous life. It was a scar in the form of a raised patch the size of a pea. Blushing always made it itch, as did anything else that increased the blood-flow to her face. She looked to

Amadou again and thought of the crack he would make if he had seen her touch it just now. He with his nail-biting and she with her scar-rubbing, like clockwork. She picked up her chisel and re-joined him in his labor.

Depending on the maturity of the crawler, they worked with machetes, pickaxes or large chisels. This patch was thick, having intertwined its tendrils to create a solid green shield of tough roots and stems. Though each leaf of the grass wasn't much tougher than a waxed shoelace, the compact density of a fully mature plot yielded no easier than hardened clay. Cutting strand-by-strand with a machete could take hours. On this parcel, Amadou wielded the pickaxe and Dani a hammer and chisel, brushing off the bits of earth and rock that were embedded in the roots, tossing the foliage into the cart behind them.

They had been arguing again, the same discussion as always. She loved him but lost patience at times. It frustrated her even more that he didn't terribly mind, that he didn't somehow punish her for her unjust insolence.

"Then don't know Sir Jones's mind?" she asked.

"I told you," he said between swings, "I was not in the Council Chamber, and I did not ask Brother Mohsin. He speaks little, both he and Jones."

"And Guaré?"

"He was not in the Council either, so he knows only what Mohsin reveals. But he does speak much to me. You would achieve more with Xia."

"Then I'll ask her after this cartload."

"Very well. And until then, we can enjoy each other in peace?" He paused to smirk at her. He could make "shut up" sound so loving.

She smiled at him. "Very well."

Again their reunion flashed into her mind, bringing a warm rush of happiness. She always got anxious when they were parted, such that they were both in the habit of awaiting the other's return, no matter how small the journey. And this operation had been the first time since they had partnered that one of the People's forays included a real element of danger. Accordingly, both her dread at his departure and her joy upon his return had been greatly magnified.

They were both sweating by the time they filled the cart with chunks of crowler. Wordlessly, they pushed the cart down the passageway to the main channel, their shoulders brushing as they stepped in unison. Dani leaned her head lightly onto Amadou's shoulder and he squeezed her close to him with an arm around her waist. It was awkward as he pushed the cart with the other hand; she felt him straining. A silly, wasteful gesture that she loved just the same.

When they got to the sheepfold, Xia was transferring the animals from one pen to another.

"Greetings, Xia!" Dani called.

"Greetings, Sister and Brother!" Xia responded with a grin.

She pulled the cart from them and took it around to the side of the pen, where she upended it into a trough that spanned both sides of the fence. The gray sheep shuffled over to the trough and began nibbling on the harvested grass pieces. Amadou and Dani made their way to the fence and leaned on it. Xia hugged Amadou.

"Good day, my Sister," Amadou said to Xia. "I'm happy to see these sheep once more."

Dani saw a brief shadow flash over Xia's warm gaze. The smooth skin of her child-like brow gathered into a frown.

“You are indeed lucky,” she said. “Guaré told me how lucky, a stroke of wonderful fortune.”

“Which did not, unfortunately, touch all of us,” Amadou responded, head down.

“Yes,” Dani said, jumping in quickly. “But you are safe, and those who love you are grateful for it, and there is nothing immoral in our gratitude, not while we recall the grief of the mourners and also mourn them ourselves.”

“You speak Truth, Sister,” Xia said.

“What more has Guaré told you?” Dani asked.

Xia looked down with a smile, her black hair dangling over her shoulders.

“You know my feelings on discussing these things with him. I’m satisfied just having him safely in sight for awhile.”

“Yes, I know, I’ve seen it before and been nauseous as a result,” Dani said.

“Sometimes I think maybe you and Guaré would be better suited to each other,” Xia said with a smile. “You could endlessly discuss these matters of great import, never pausing to bother with the human costs of your devotion.”

Dani glanced up at Amadou, who smiled upon her, he as unsuited for sarcasm as Xia.

“Your Guaré and I are too similar the one to the other. While we love the tactics and politics we both appreciate our respites as well. Besides, he’s busy enough with both you and ‘Dear Leader.’ And besides again, while you may enjoy your thin cornstalk, I prefer my towering oak.”

She wrapped her arms around Amadou’s thick waist and squeezed him tight, grinning as the color rose to Xia’s face.

“But since you are similar, you know that he doesn’t discuss business with his lover,” Xia responded. “Or if he would I won’t let him.”

Amadou spoke to Dani, “I go back to work.” She raised her head to him so that he could kiss her cheek before wheeling the cart away. Nobody else was around yet Dani nonetheless stepped closer to Xia and spoke softly.

“But you know, Sister, that this most recent incident is far from routine. And you know something of my interest in the events.”

Xia averted her eyes. “Dani, you know how hard these things are for me. I didn’t ask and Guaré didn’t offer.”

“I am sorry Sister, I did not mean to pain you.” Dani brushed a dangling strand of hair back behind Xia’s ear. She hugged her, wrapping the waifish body in her powerful arms. “I’m grateful for your patience, and I’ll stop bothering you.”

She felt Xia squeeze back.

“Just one more question,” Dani said upon releasing Xia, unable to help herself. “I know they met with our above-ground Sister. Any news? It’s been so long since we’ve seen each other – I miss them.”

Xia shook her head. “He only told me was that we should expect things to worsen soon. That alone is more than I want to know, but as he says: the shock of not knowing would be much worse. Sorry, but you can learn more elsewhere.”

She turned back to the sheep. For a moment they both watched the animals methodically chewing the crowler.

Then Dani said, "I'll go elsewhere." She turned from the sheepfold and began walking away from the crowler harvest. "Much love to you, Xia," she called over her shoulder. "Tell Amadou I left on business."

"Of course," Xia called. "Take care, Sister!"

Her back to Xia, Dani smiled at the irony of her request.

Terrence Jones stroked his gray mustache while sitting in a chair in his quarters. He watched Dani with a gleam in his eye. The yellow light overhead cast a golden reflection off his shiny scalp.

"Simply put, Sister, the Second Attempt will commence at last," he said.

"Yes, but what are the details?"

"The Citizen will lead I-PF to the Dragona entrance, where they will be neutralized. Subsequent moves will depend upon I-Land, though I do not anticipate much time elapsing."

"But when?"

"We know as much as the Citizen, which is nothing yet. But potentially at any moment."

"But why hasn't Mohsin requested me? Can he suspect?"

"Restrain yourself, Daniyah. If Mohsin and Guaré have not requested you or yours for this skirmish, there is good reason. Besides, you are needed for more important things."

Dani squinted her eyes slightly, turning away from Jones. She knew of those important, boring things he wanted her to do, and she tried to avoid the topic.

"And what's your opinion, sir? Of the Citizen? I know that Guaré doesn't care for him."

“Guaré does whatever his man requests,” Jones said with a wave of his hand. “His opinion is of no import.”

“And you?”

“Mohsin’s arguments are sound, so why not believe in good faith? We waste too much energy by worrying and overthinking, especially when you and I can better occupy ourselves with our own preparations.”

“Then you have secured the weapon?”

“That will be your task. Dragona will let you know how to get it.”

She nodded, then asked, “And we have no ally on the Council?”

His head pivoted back and forth as if on a swivel. “Nobody else has the stomach for it. I need not ask to know.”

They stared at each other for a moment, from one side of the cell to the other. Dani broke the silence, “And what of my above-ground Sister? Any discussion?”

He sat back in his chair.

“What, Eche? She will liaison with the Citizen. Honestly, it’s time you grow past this fixation of yours.”

“It’s not fixation, but love and faith. You know what the Echeverrys did for me. And you know what Mohsin thinks of her.”

Jones rolled his eyes, “Frankly, I lend his thoughts on her little importance. He’s not, after all, infallible, and she is, after all, just a girl.”

He lazily glanced around the room as he spoke, apparently bored with the subject. Annoyed by his blithe dismissal of her adoptive sister, Dani scrutinized him, trying to decide if

his features were more regal or lecherous. By the time he looked back to her she had erased the scowl from her face.

“Then there is nothing left but waiting. Still. . .” She dropped her head.

“There is to do what hopefully you have never stopped doing: preparing others and enlisting more.”

Again, that which she had wanted to avoid. She sighed, “I’m no politician. . .”

“Then send them to me,” he said with a gentle smile, patronizing her like the father she never had. “But the young ones respond better to you. I am just one more balding elder.”

“Not ‘balding’ but ‘bald,’ yes I know.”

“I know that you know,” he said, rubbing his scalp with a chuckle. “So by all means send me the older ones. The fates know I like talking. At this stage, I’m good for little else.”

“You will have done much good when we’ve finished,” Dani said, rising. “You will have kindled the movement that rekindled the divine evolution, a process left sputtering for centuries.”

“Hark, Daniyah, for you do have the gift eloquence, of the so-called politician’s work,” he smiled. “Those are exactly the words you can use in recruitment.”

She reached reflexively for her ear, which told her she was blushing.

Jones continued, “Once you believe that the People are the stewards of the human spirit and their consciousness, the only hope for divine evolution, you acknowledge that *our* future and *humanity’s* future are one and the same. A threat to *us* is a threat to *humanity*. Thus, we must nullify any threat, for the sake of humankind.”

Out of politeness she practiced patience as he repeated what she already knew. Inwardly, she was antsy to begin moving again. Her need for constant action was one of the few holdovers from her Citizen days.

Still he lectured, “From that standpoint, it is quite easy to see that no nullification is more certain than total destruction of the threat. *Total destruction without mercy.*”

She went cold at his intonation of the four words. There was something familiar about the sound of them, but not pleasantly so. She stopped herself from lingering on it. Scratching her ear once more, she focused on his message instead.

“If the People as a whole are not prepared to perpetrate total destruction, then a small group within the People must help them. Once you understand this, once you *know* it, then persuading others becomes quite a matter of course.”

He paused and she turned to go. Still he continued and she turned back. *And he’s supposed to be the silent Councilper*, she thought.

“But do be careful how much you share at the beginning. We don’t want to scare them, nor reveal ourselves hastily. Think of it as sowing the seed. Only *you* must be the direct perpetrator.”

Me and perhaps one other, no matter what he thinks of her.

He took Dani’s hand in both of his, nodding to her with the following words, “I have much faith in you, young Sister.”

“And I you, Sir Jones,” she said, smiling. She gently withdrew her hand and turned toward the door again, opening it.

“The few we already have, tell them,” Jones said. “Tell them, ‘Soon.’”

Despite Sir Jones’s tiresome rambling, Dani closed the door much less anxious than when she had opened it.

Mohsin crouched with Guaré and ten others behind a large iron plate that stretched nearly the entire width of the flood canal. He stood up to examine the ten meters between the plate and the iron gate at the end of the tunnel, the same at which Betancourt had left them the day before. He nodded to himself; their position was sound. The shield, taller than a human, had slits cut periodically along its length at head level, space enough to rest the muzzle of a rifle.

Mohsin beckoned Guaré. The two of them walked around the plate toward the gate at the mouth of the tunnel. He could see the midday shadows underneath the trees, directly outside the lip of the tunnel. He nudged his companion and Guaré cupped his hands to his mouth, emitting a sharp whistle a moment later. From outside the tunnel a response came, not as loud as Guaré's. It sounded like a pigeon.

Guaré grinned at him. They made their way back to the shelter.

"It seems some city-birds have come to help us," Guaré said, as they joined the others crouching behind the plate.

"I hope they are fiercer than they sound," a woman at the end of the barrier replied. Mohsin smiled – Gloria's wit was a good sign.

Mohsin stood up to inspect his soldiers. He liked their glows, full of grave determination. There was no reason to be afraid, and indeed they were not.

"Remember," he said, "you have been chosen for your accuracy, to minimize the harm to Dragona's people. We will not shoot blindly, but rather wait until our targets collect at the mouth of the tunnel. They will seek shelter once Dragona attacks, and then we'll be able to shoot freely toward the sides. We do nothing until then. You wait for my command."

He was proud to see the squad listening and nodding at appropriate times. He had more youth than he wanted, but this was a delicate operation and required the best markspers.

“Once we hear the engines we are silent. Until then, be at ease.”

He sat down next to Guaré as muttering arose from the rest of the men and women. He looked at Guaré, who raised his eyebrows, that impish grin on his face. Mohsin chuckled, allowing himself to relax slightly under his partner’s influence.

“You seem satisfied with yourself, Brother,” Mohsin said.

He raised his eyebrows again. “Oh you know: subversion, capture and release for yesterday. Ambush today. At this rate I’m dying to see what tomorrow brings.”

“An unfortunate choice of words, and I do not think you’ll be left wanting. Brother,” At this Mohsin paused and held out his hand. Guaré grasped it around the thumb and squeezed tight. “While I still have the chance to say it: it has been an honor to serve the People with you.”

He saw a flicker of hesitation in Guaré’s eyes.

“Surely that’s premature,” he said. Mohsin knew it was difficult for him to drop his jester act.

“In all seriousness, Guaré. Who knows when we may have another chance.”

He continued looking at Guaré, willing him to comprehend the significance of the moment. He felt his partner’s grip relax, but held his hand firm. Still he gazed, knowing the uncomfortable effect of his regard, compelling Guaré to respond to it. He was impressive to hold Mohsin’s gaze this long. It spoke to their relationship.

Finally, Guaré broke down into sincerity. His gaze dropped and he said, “Yes, Brother. The honor has been equally mine.”

Mohsin nodded. He waited a few seconds before releasing Guaré’s hand.

“Very well,” he said. “Now we wait.”

At that moment the faint rumblings of an engine swelled in the distance. Both he and Guaré held up their hands and looked at each other.

“Just as the Citizen said,” Guaré whispered.

Mohsin smiled. “. . .Which only surprises one of us.”

He stood up and signaled to the task force. They all rose, taking their positions at one of the slots in the metal wall, resting their barrels in the openings. The sound of an engine became louder. It separated into two different vehicles. The crunch of gravel under tire joined the sound of the revving motor. Mohsin felt his heart begin to accelerate. He glanced at Guaré, saw him rubbing the fingers on his non-trigger hand in circles.

The crunching of gravel ceased. The engines shifted into idle.

“Keep in mind,” Mohsin said quietly to the group. “They cannot see us in the dark. Do not let fear lead to folly.”

The doors began to open and the first feet pound gravel, then the forest floor. As more feet joined, the force began to sound impossibly large. The time it took for them to jog from the vans to the mouth of the tunnel was interminable. Mohsin managed his anxiety with slow respiration.

Finally, the first black-suited I-PF officer appeared at the end of the tunnel. He ran across from left to right and took a crouching position on the far side, pointing his gun into the darkness. Most of his body was obstructed by the concrete ring of the tunnel. His visor was transparent and had a powerful flashlight attached, illuminating the darkness to almost the foot of the metal shield.

It was strange seeing him there in reality, after so much planning and preparation. Mohsin had seen such officers just yesterday, but in a chaotic context that allowed little time for substantive observation. Now, however, in this moment of calm, all of their training had led to this point, and here were their targets, unknowingly observed, appearing finally in their sights. Their ignorance was almost pitiable. It would have been, were there not something absolutely sinister about their presence here, out-city, where their jurisdiction had no rightful claim. Their footfall was profaning his doorstep.

Others filled in around the lead agent, moving back from the opening and positioning themselves behind trees. They were somehow not as fearsome as Mohsin had expected. They aroused much more loathing than fear, with their full black uniforms, interrupted only by the I-Land flag's blotches of red, white and blue.

The last officer positioned himself on the opposite side of the tunnel from the first. They paused. Mohsin and the others watched them, silent. *Two dozen*, he thought, also as Betancourt had told them. He thought of Guaré at his side and hoped he had noticed.

After the I-PF movement stopped, Mohsin heard only the muted breathing of his Brothers and Sisters. His shoulders tensed as he awaited his opponent's action.

The first officer there, apparently the sergeant, reached onto his belt and unhooked a small canister. In the silence they could hear even the rustling of his uniform. He reached across his gun to remove the pin. As he hooked the pin with a finger, a small object dropped onto the forest floor with a rustling thud. It landed directly amidst the I-PF agents.

With a thunderous clap, the dropped object exploded, bursting the silence and everything else. The officers had barely time to snap their heads around to the sound. The blast sent the

nearest five men catapulting outward in a flash of fire. Dirt and leaves flew after them, the rest of the officers scattering in every direction.

“Hold!” Mohsin whispered fiercely in the immediate aftermath.

He had seen some of his squad tense and aim their weapons, but the officers were not yet in position. He squinted to discern their locations among the lingering smoke and dust.

Gunfire started, short popping bursts that seemed to spit up from the ground. Two more agents fell, moaning. Two more grenades dropped from the sky, landing among the regrouped officers with the same rustling thud. Seconds later they exploded as well, with the same ferocity, throwing dirt, leaves and Cits in multiple directions. Mohsin saw a small sapling slashed almost clean in two. He watched with detached wonder as it sagged to the ground. He was calm among chaos.

Only after this initial onslaught did the officers begin to return fire. The sergeant yelled orders, desperation piercing his voice. “Above us! In the trees! On top of the tunnel!”

Mohsin watched them aim upward and begin firing over the mouth of the tunnel and into the trees, every which way, almost half of them with their backs facing the tunnel. The booming of their guns sounded much louder as it reverberated down the length of the tunnel, each staccato burst sounding like a small cannon. The burnt smell of gunpowder curled around the barrier.

The twelve remaining agents didn’t make for a challenging hunt. Mohsin looked on with surprised disappointment at the slowness of their reaction, their utter lethargy. Three more dropped as Dragona’s people continued to fire down. The rest continued to swing around wildly, almost spinning in circles.

Finally the sergeant yelled out, “Cover! Take cover under the lip!”

Mohsin looked at Guaré. He had his eyebrows raised, mouthing, “About time!” Mohsin smiled tightly and turned back toward the action.

The nine remaining officers were now under the mouth of the tunnel, split evenly between the two sides. Protected from Dragona’s men, they crouched with their backs to the People, spying out toward the forest in an attempt to locate their hunters. The firing stopped.

Mohsin and his squad waited with rifles ready. The trigger had a flimsy resistance under his finger. Looking through the sight at the end of his barrel, he centered it on the back of the sergeant’s neck. He took a breath while waiting for the sergeant to be still. Finally his target settled, and Mohsin immediately squeezed the trigger. His rifle exploded, followed by a smacking red splotch on the sergeant’s neck. He toppled to the ground.

The other People opened fire, the tunnel transforming into an echo chamber of thunder and lightning. After the first few shots, the officers began to turn around, but only in time to meet the bullets face first. Ten seconds later, the remainder of the I-PF force lay motionless on the ground at the mouth of the tunnel.

Outside the tunnel, they heard a change in one of the idling engines. The motor switched from park to drive. The roar of the acceleration was muted after the gunfire, but they heard the violent spray of the gravel as the wheels skidded around. The motor revved again; they heard it get higher and farther as it sped away.

“That would be our Captain,” Guaré said, breaking the silence.

“I hope so,” Mohsin replied. “Wait a few seconds, Brothers and Sisters.”

They waited in the silence reborn, the absence of noise almost as shocking as the previous explosions. They waited a full minute, breathing heavily. Then a pigeon called.

“Guaré,” Mohsin said. His man whistled.

Moments later a short, stocky man clad in brown and gray appeared at the mouth of the tunnel, picking his way among the fallen black heaps. He was paunchy but muscular, and he still had more pepper than salt in his hair. The stubble on his face threatened to swallow his heavy mustache. He made his way to the gate and stood before the iron bars.

“Y’there?” he growled.

“Where else?” Mohsin replied, grinning to himself.

He trotted out with Guaré to meet Dragona. At the gate he extended his hand through the metal. Dragona shook it firmly. The roughneck was grinning as well. Mohsin held a finger to his lips as he unlocked the gate. He motioned Dragona to enter and they walked back toward the barrier.

“Their OBARDS still have transmission capabilities while the batteries are charged, even if their carriers are defunct.” Mohsin explained. “We thank you for the assistance, Brother.”

“S’that all? Hardly put up a fight!” His voice was short and gruff, but with a buried humor.

“Praise be unto our safety. Are you all well?”

“Th’missus got nicked, but not half s’bad a she’s had.”

“I’m relieved. And sentinels?”

“Two ‘at we c’n see, still flyin round out there, but I don’ reckon they’ll give us trouble now. Have this weird thing agains’ bombin their own dead bodies. Goddamn silly-ass hypocrites.”

He spat tobacco juice on the ground and nodded to Guaré. They all came to a stop halfway between the gate and the metal barrier.

“Did you see the Captain?” Guaré asked.

“S’that was him, yer save-yer huh?”

“Maybe not that far, but I believe him a help,” Mohsin said.

“Play-acted the part alright, looked scared’s hell! High-tailed it outta here, left us r’very own tank!”

“Can you use it?”

He scoffed, “Sure we c’n find sump’n a do with it.”

“Well, have it, and the weapons, for your trouble,” Mohsin said.

“And the CorPos?”

“We will handle them after dark; you’ve done plenty for us already. Wait until the sentinels go before you move out.”

“Don’ need you t’tell me that, sonny.” He punched Mohsin on the shoulder, a twinkle in his eye. They started back toward the entrance.

“Of course not,” Mohsin said, smiling. “But be prepared, Brother Dragona. I-Land’s response will not be light.”

“Neither’ll ars,” he said. His grin had a menacing aspect. He even enunciated more for effect. “You think this was impressive, sonny, well these here are just ar kiddie guns. Didn’ even hafta break out th’big boys.”

“I have no doubt,” Mohsin said, stopping several meters short of the gate. “Just be ready, and spread word.”

“Willdo.”

“We will communicate later.”

“Give a holler,” he waved, turning around.

Guaré accompanied Dragona to the gate, letting him out and locking it behind him. Dragona picked his way through the corpses and plodded off with his short, powerful stride. Something about his departure was sad. As crude as he could be, Mohsin loved Dragona – there was no ally more loyal. He suspected Dragona felt the same, though his masculine pride would never let him admit to sentimentality. But it was possible to be too casual, and Mohsin had a vague presentiment that I-Land's response would surprise Dragona.

He turned back toward the tunnel, Guaré following him. When they got back to the plate, Mohsin called to his squad, "Well done, Brothers and Sisters. Let us return."

The women and men got up and walked off into the darkness. Mohsin and Guaré waited behind them, then began walking slowly in silence.

After a few moments Guaré looked to him and asked, "What do you think, Brother?"

Mohsin smiled; his friend had a gift for reading his mood. But it frustrated him too – Guaré idolized him for his supposed telepathy, while all the time possessing the same nascent talent himself. He only lacked time and practice to develop the same powers. And faith in his abilities – that above all.

Mohsin didn't immediately respond. He just walked in the darkness with his head down, his boots echoing on the packed floor. Up ahead, the first yellow lights appeared on the side of the tunnel to light their way.

"A moment of doubt, no more," he said finally.

"What do you doubt?"

He thought some more, considering the appropriate phrasing. Now that the brief battle was over, he felt a kind of exhaustion, both mental and physical.

He spoke, “We have good strategy, you and I and the Council, and now Betancourt. We are good planners. But I worry about what comes next. I don’t feel it can be adequately planned for.”

There was a moment of silence as Guaré ingested his words and digested their meaning. Finally he asked, “You worry about I-Land’s response?”

Mohsin took several steps in the last stretch of darkness. “Yes,” he finally said. “I fear it will be worse than we imagine.”

“On Gender Equality and Neutrality”⁵

An offshoot of the Language Preservation movement of the mid-21st century was the eradication of sexist language in speech. To be sure, this movement commenced at least a full century before, yet decades would pass before it gained popular acceptance. At the same time, the movement's scope both broadened and strengthened, addressing areas of speech that had hitherto remained unexamined.

For just one example, the term 'feminism,' which supporters of the movement had previously embraced (although with increasing reservations as the word became stigmatized), came to be seen not only as outdated but as the misnomer we consider it today. After all, 'feminism' does not concern female superiority, as the name can be argued to imply, but rather equal access to justice for all genders. Thus it was appropriately re-labeled 'genqualism' as a helpful abbreviation for 'gender equality.'

The suffixes '-man,' '-woman' and '-person' were even more ubiquitous than the problematic 'feminism,' and it can puzzle one to learn how prolonged was the process of deducing an adequate solution to what now seems a simple problem. For some time, everyone was given the suffix that their gender merited, such as 'policeman' for a male and 'policewoman' for a female. Genqualists, however, correctly remonstrated that not only did the default term – in reference to a non-specific police officer – almost invariably revert to the masculine '-man,' but that even should one attempt to remedy the situation by defaulting to 'policewoman' in these non-specific cases, one would be just as guilty of gender preference, even if in the opposite direction.

5 Excerpted from Jensen, Frida, The People's Anthology of the 3rd Millenium, 2nd edition, Ch. 6.

Some genqualists argued, nonetheless, that defaulting to the '-woman' suffix was appropriate as a temporary corrective, given the centuries of language infiltration by the '-man' suffix. Most, however, acknowledged the problems concerning precision of language and difficulties in public relations that would result from this universal adoption. Thus it was eventually decided to unequivocally replace all gender suffixes with '-person.' As cumbersome as it was, this was perceived to be the clearest, most equitable, and least objectionable solution.

Awkwardness of language, however, remained for some years, until the emergence of a simultaneously simple and elegant solution. The originator is unknown, perhaps due to the rapidity with which it was adopted – for within a decade, the suffix '-person' was simply shortened to '-per,' gaining single-syllable brevity while maintaining gender neutrality. This resulted in words such as '-policeper,' 'spokesper,' and, in the People's case, 'Councilper.'

This occurrence is one of the few cases in which non-standard speech has created a genuinely original and useful modification to traditional language, clearly the fairest and most concise solution. Accordingly, The Populists of the day eagerly adopted it as best practice.

V.

Betancourt squeezed the steering wheel of his personal vehicle, feeling the resistance of the hard rubber as he grinded it with his hands. He was back on the outskirts of town headed toward the Moat, out-city, familiar terrain after the last two days.

Traffic on the street was thin as always. He knew that the few with personal vehicles had no call to bring them out this far, and the trucks coming from the ACs had already finished their day's transport. He was mulling over the significance of the chat he had just had with Major Wilson and didn't notice arriving at the Moat until the guard waved him to a stop.

He slowed the car and rolled down his window, letting brisk autumn air invade the warmth of the cab. A breeze was blowing from the city outward, carrying with it the fumes from the ACs.

"I don't envy you the scent, officer" he said to the agent that leaned into his window with visor up. Betancourt brought out his badge and flashed it to the agent.

"Y'get used to it, sir. Business?"

He took a moment to look the agent up and down.

"You get to know a captain's business these days?"

"Sorry, sir, s'juss with all the activity lately I got orders t'be extra careful."

"So with all the activity I'm not allowed any. . . activity. . . of my own?" He raised his eyebrows at the agent. "Understand?"

The agent looked at him blankly for a beat and then smiled sheepishly.

"I guess I do sir. Y'know a place out there? Wow, I hadn' heard! Those Midlanders muss be sump'n else, huh sir?"

“I’ll say this: they may not be the cleanest but they sure are feisty, if y’go for that sorta thing.”

“Hot damn, I’d sure be happy t’know where t’go.”

“Not this one, officer, I keep her t’myslf. But I can ask her bout some friends if yer interested.”

“You’d do that fer me, sir? Thanks!”

“Juss between you and me, y’hear? But it may not be til another shift, cause this could take a while. Insatiable.” He pumped his eyebrows again.

“Insash – what’s that?”

“She can’t get enough, officer. Use yer imagination.”

He smiled and backed away from the window. “Well I sure wish you th’bess, sir. Enjoy!”

“You c’n be sure I will. Good evenin, officer.”

“G’night!”

The charged young agent lifted the gate and waved the Captain through. Betancourt rolled up his window and accelerated over the bridge, crossing the Moat.

“Insatiable,” he muttered to himself, shaking his head. It was too easy to outwit these poor idiots; thus it was the accidental eloquence that would eventually give him away. His façade was showing signs of strain under all the recent pressure.

He pulled his terminal out and checked the coordinates. He hadn’t seen Eche’s place from the surface so he was curious to see the landscape. The setting sun in the distance offered a warm glow to the utopian expanse, with rolling fields outlined by sparse groves of trees. Even the crawler on the road’s edge seemed to soften up in the orange light.

He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled, allowing his thoughts to wander. For as long as he could remember he had only been able to truly relax while by himself. And in the last days he had been alone precious little.

The map directed him to turn off of Chairman Ave.; he pulled to the left. Trees, mostly pine, closed in around him and cut off his view of the fields. The road began to wind and he crested a hill, after which appeared a small gravel driveway. His terminal beeped at him so he turned in, winding along the gravel path through a thin forest. It reminded him of earlier that day, when he had driven the I-PF agents to their death. He tried not to think about it.

The trees thinned further and opened up onto an expanse around a mild hilltop, where a house, barn and silo sat scattered over a couple of acres. A dog's bark emanated from behind a carport at the end of the gravel drive, just beyond the house. Eche waited there with an older, bearded man.

Betancourt pulled up next to them and turned off the car. He opened the door and emerged, at which the dog barked even more ferociously. It was a hairy thing tethered to the well out back.

"Quiet, Alvero!" the older man yelled. The dog ceased barking, with one final "Uff" of protest.

As Betancourt approached, he noticed that Eche was wearing the same thing as yesterday: work jeans and a long-sleeve shirt with heavy boots. The difference was seeing her in the light. Her nebulous mass of hair was now distinguishable as a dark, reddish-brown mane whose chaos was loosely organized into tight ringlets. Her eyes were a vibrant green that matched the surrounding pines. He had barely seen her face in the dark, but now he could see just how young she was, edges still rounded, years from the angular sleekness of womanhood.

The sternness of her brow, however, imbued her with maturity. While not beautiful, she still held a strange power over him.

The man next to her was middle-aged and stout, with a beard as thick as his woolen sweater. He wasn't as tall as Betancourt but few were, and he looked to be about equal in strength, at least in his younger years. Betancourt nodded to Eche and extended his hand to the man.

"My name is Marcus Betancourt."

"Orlando Echeverry," he said, receiving the handshake.

Betancourt wasn't used to people looking at him as they did now, with such naked suspicion. He had grown too accustomed to the fearful gaze of the Citizens. Here he felt under a microscope.

"I almost didn't recognize you without your uniform," Eche said. She smiled coldly.

"Even us bad guys get to relax sometimes."

"Yeah. . . so. . ."

"So business, I guess?" Betancourt said. "I'm going to have to cease activity for awhile. My superior is not exactly suspicious, but he's sufficiently worried about my 'incompetence' over the last two days to make it impossible for me to do anything else any time soon. I won't be trusted with much for the time being. Any further slip-ups would be conspicuous."

"I suppose that's the best possible scenario," Orlando said.

"I agree."

"You getting two dozen of your men killed is more than just 'incompetent,' is it not?"

Eche stared evenly at Betancourt and he felt an uncomfortable heat creep up his neck and into his face. He saw Orlando shoot her a glance.

He pretended not to notice the insinuation, saying, “In this case I could play it off. I got information from the terrorists, but it must have been a first line of defense that we stumbled onto. I followed protocol. It was all over before we knew what was happening, two minutes tops. Mohsin and Guaré will tell you the same if you don’t want to take my word,” he paused, finding himself glaring at her. “And as far as I-PF is concerned, better one surviving senior officer than all dead.”

“I see,” she said, nodding and pressing her lips together. “A truly chivalrous code they keep. And how was that for you, leading your friends to death?”

“Well,” he looked off to the side, buying time to calm himself. “I suppose I don’t really consider them friends. I haven’t ever felt like one of them, if you care to know. I know where my allegiance lies, whether you believe me or not.

“Besides,” Betancourt continued when nobody immediately responded, speaking as much for his sake as theirs, “I’m not sure Citizens know any longer what ‘friendship’ is. Friendship requires caring, does it not? There’s little caring in I-Land. Friendship requires love, no? I have yet to experience that either. Citizens know only mindless self-interest, like insatiable babies in adult bodies.”

He paused after again uttering the word “insatiable.” He couldn’t remember ever using it before but now he’d said it twice in an hour. The influence of the People and their high-talking ways already in effect, perhaps?

He chuckled bitterly to himself and continued, “Even what they call ‘love’ or ‘affection’ is constrained by what’s most convenient for each individual. In any case: if we are at war then casualties are to be expected, and better casualties on I-Land’s side than yours, no? Anything

else you'd like to know, Sister?" He couldn't prevent a flash of mockery from seeping into the last word.

"I think not, for now," Eche replied, apparently unabashed.

"Okay then," Betancourt said. "And what of casualties for the People? Was anyone hurt?"

"A minor injury to Dragona's wife, but she's okay," Eche said.

Orlando added, "'Ain' got nuthin' on birthin', I believe were his exact words."

Betancourt smiled despite his mood. "That's good news at least. I can't think of how it could've gone any better. Contact has now been established and there is no suspicion, just two dead I-PF squads."

"A noble price," Eche said in a tone that sounded much like a taunt. Betancourt ignored her.

Orlando intervened, "What next then? What news from your end?"

Betancourt sighed, "Unfortunately I'm not going to be well informed over the next few days. I'll have to build trust again. All I know now is that the reprisal will be big. They can't let 24 dead men go without punishment."

"We don't need you to be able to guess as much," Eche said. Betancourt slowly bit down on the inside of his bottom lip as he looked at her.

"But what form will it take?" Orlando asked.

He glared at Eche a moment longer before turning to her father. "I think anyone with known ties to the People is in danger. I'm not sure if they have anything on you, but they definitely have Dragona's name from his arms-running. Neither he nor his acquaintances are safe. They're not above coming after the Midlanders to force the People's hand. They may not

even fully know of the link with the People, but they're tensed enough right now to violently stamp out any perceived spark."

"Midlanders know how to fight," Eche said.

"You haven't seen I-Land truly fight," Betancourt said. "You Halfies haven't been worth taking out since the Expulsion, 'Live and let live,' and all that. But you haven't seen the recent propaganda in-city. I have. With every passing day, week, month, you're painted as more Them than Us, more People than Cit. If they decide your continued existence is an unacceptable threat to their investment, they will attempt to destroy you. And nobody in I-Land will care."

"Let them try," Eche said.

"Don't be foolish, Andrea," Orlando said to her.

"We know how to take care of ourselves," she replied. "That's the whole point of what we do, how we live."

"I'm just explaining your enemy's mindset," Betancourt said. "*You* have called them such for awhile. The only difference now is that the feeling is becoming mutual. Wisdom dictates that my warning be considered and passed along."

He spoke the last sentence directly to Orlando, who nodded.

"Come Andrea, that's enough."

He put his arms around her shoulders and guided her a few paces from Betancourt, where he began talking to her gently.

Betancourt stepped back to his car and opened the door. "I'll contact you if I find out any more news. Until then, please be careful. And tell Mohsin that I await further instructions."

Eche glared at him and Orlando offered a brief wave with kind smile. "Thank you, Captain," he said. "Sincerely."

Betancourt smiled to him and got back into his car. He turned the vehicle around and guided it down the rocky driveway.

Trying to bait me, he thought to himself, shaking his head. *She's got no idea*. And then, as he pulled out into the road heading toward the main avenue: *I hope she's not too stubborn to believe me*.

“Your behavior was uncalled for,” Orlando said softly, lowering his arms from Eche’s shoulders.

His eyes were not so soft and she turned from them. She’d known he would say that.

“We don’t know anything about him, dad,” she said. “Just that he maybe wants to help us. But how can we trust that? Guaré doesn’t.”

“Guaré doesn’t trust much from what I’ve seen. Besides, we know he’s willing to risk his safety to bring us news.”

“What has he risked? The only thing he risked was the lives of his men!”

“And the suspicion of his superiors.”

“All we know is that ever since he appeared, shit has gotten real heavy real fast.”

“Watch your language, Andrea.”

“Sorry, dad, but you know I’m right.”

“Maybe,” he said, pausing. “But I still think that it’s worth giving the benefit of the doubt to any Citizen – nay a policeman – who treats us as human beings. That’s pretty unique right there.”

“Policeman, pff,” she said. “They lost that distinction even before Grandpa was born. They’re CorPos – no legitimacy in my eyes, nor hopefully in yours. And now he’s the kind of guy who will turn on his partners at the drop of a hat. Do we need someone like that helping us?”

“That’s supremely unfair, daughter. He did that for the People, because he believes. Because he wants to help. You of all people should have compassion for such pretenses. You couldn’t help but recognize that as you bullied him, yet you bullied him anyway.”

Eche looked down, not saying anything.

“Anyway,” her father continued, “My point stands: until we have stronger reason not to, we should trust him. If Mohsin has decided it, that should be good enough. Heavens, you’re normally trying to convince me to buy into Mohsin’s jargon!”

He was silent for some seconds, and she raised her gaze from the ground in time to see a new look in his eyes. “What is this really about, Andrea, your animosity?”

“I just don’t trust him.”

“You mistrust him beyond reason, you’re allowing your emotions to better you. It’s Dani, isn’t it?”

She closed her eyes and sighed, but didn’t respond.

“What happened to Dani is past, and Mr. Betancourt had nothing to do with it.”

You can’t know that, she thought, but kept her mouth shut.

“I’m happy that you found a sister in Dani,” he continued. “But you can’t wage her wars for her, nor should you carry her poison within you. And until you’ve calmed down, Andrea, you should not be making any decisions. I know what you’re thinking. . .”

Of course you do.

“I’m going to help fight,” she said. “You heard him, you want to trust him: we’ve gotta get ready. Either way, I have to go down to tell Guaré. I mean to stay there and help fight.”

Orlando sighed and bowed his head, eyes closed. “We’ve talked about this, daughter. Their religion’s not for us. Even if it appeals to you, how can it replace all of this?” He swept his hand outward. “Nature and the outdoors can be a religion too. So can family and home. Why on earth join them now of all times, right before the most intense fighting in generations?”

She pursed her lips as she waited for him to finish. Then she responded, “You raised me to be independent and think for myself. That’s the entire reason our family self-exiled, right, the legacy you’ve tried to pass on?”

He stared back without responding.

“Well I’m as near an adult as I might ever be, and it’s my decision. If you’re going to let Henry fight, you can’t stop me from doing it too. And if I’m an adult I can choose where I want to fight. Hell –” She saw him wince and corrected herself, “Heck, you know what they say makes sense, you know it’s not *religion*. You can feel that humanity’s building toward something better than this, that we’ve got to move forward. You can feel the rut we’ve settled into, I’m talking as a species.”

“I don’t think about those things,” he said, head shaking. “We’re homesteaders. It’s not our place to get mixed up in all that. ‘Live and let live.’ I think about providing happiness to my family and that’s all.”

“Then what did we do with Dani? That wasn’t getting mixed up? We’re a part of this and you know it.”

He shook his head with a small smile. “That was ‘live and let live.’ We had to help Dani live. We love her now, yes, but that was all at the time.”

“But they’re *not* letting live, not I-Land, it’s not in their nature. They created this monster city and now they’re gunning for Atlantis. . . where will it stop? And the People wanna do something about it. And I wanna help.”

“If that’s your decision, you know I won’t withhold my blessing.”

“I wish you’d help too. They could use a strong, wise man like you. You could see Dani again. Nothing would make her happier.”

He was quiet for a moment, looking at his hands. Then he looked up at her and said, “I think our place is right here. We love the land too much, and we’re not deep thinkers like you. Frankly I don’t know where you got it, your mother I suppose. . .”

“I don’t know how you can pretend not to see it,” she said, shaking her head as she looked at him, tears in her eyes. “You don’t have to think deeply to know it’s true.”

He returned her gaze, steadfast, “I’m sorry to disappoint you, darling. Don’t judge me too harshly. Please send our love to Daniyah, we do miss her dearly.”

She hugged him suddenly, clenching her eyes closed. “I love you, dad.”

“And I love you. Always have, always will.”

“. . . But I gotta run. I gotta go warn the others.”

She unhooked her arms from his neck and stepped back, looking down now.

“You won’t be coming back then?”

A sob fell on her, like an owl swooping in the moonlight. But she suppressed it, clenching her eyes shut and then blinking back tears. She smiled and looked up.

“Of course I will! I don’t need to move out, do I?”

“I guess not,” he smiled (*Did he see me crying?*) “I’ll keep dinner warm for you then.”

“Thanks dad. Close the grate behind me.”

“I will.”

She paused at the edge of the carport to survey the sky. Satisfied, she jogged over to the well. Alvero welcomed her with wagging tail. She went to him on the concrete pad and scratched his chest. He wagged his tail stronger and stretched up to lick her face. She kissed him on the nose and, cheered, turned to the drain. She heaved the grate open and rested it upon the concrete. Then she climbed down the rungs, up to her chest.

She looked over at her father, who was still watching her. The urge to cry welled in her once more and Eche knew it to be a little corner of her heart breaking. It was the first time she had ever felt anything like it. She flipped her father a wave and he held up his hand goodbye.

“Simple, huh? I would have liked to have been there,” Dani said. “You should have invited me along, Brother.”

Something about teasing Mohsin gave her great pleasure. Perhaps because she sensed it was such an unusual experience for him. Perhaps she was just showing off for Eche. She looked at the little sister with love, running her eyes over the familiar curls. How long it had been!

“It was not a party, but a mission,” Mohsin said. “And your skills lie elsewhere than markspership.”

Dani laughed. “There are worse shots than me.”

“And better,” he replied. To Eche, he said, “Then we are on our own for the time being, says the Captain?”

“Yes, sir,” Eche responded, Dani listening with pride. “He just wanted to make sure I warned you about the danger. He’s very worried about I-Land’s retaliation.”

“Me too,” Mohsin said.

The three of them were walking through tunnels, heading again toward the Dragona entrance that had seen much action in recent hours.

“I have to say, sir, he worries me,” Eche continued. Dani perked her ears. “Can we really trust someone who would betray his own side like that?”

“It seems you have stumbled upon the inherent conundrum of a double agent,” Mohsin replied. “The betrayal of one side inevitably arouses the suspicion of the other.”

“It doesn’t arouse yours? You, Dani? You have no love lost for the Citizens.”

She looked to Eche but flattened her lips when Mohsin spoke first.

“Dani is in a unique position to feel compassion for Capt. Betancourt. She once had a Bard just like the Captain. She only recently stopped her CaPL regimen. You could call her a traitor as well.”

Dani felt him look to her and she in turn nodded her agreement at Eche, touching the scar behind her ear as emphasis.

“A roundabout way of explaining that I understand your concerns but don’t share them,” he said. “I trust the Captain. Remember, I know him better than you do.”

“I know, it just feels strange. . .”

Tell him, little sister, Dani thought with pleasure. Keep resisting.

“Change is hard, always,” he said. “But the ability to adjust is one of the most valuable that exists.”

Dani heard an opening.

“Funny that you should mention the value of adjustment,” she said. “I seem to recall many a disagreement between us on that very topic.”

Mohsin looked at her but did not respond. She hated how inscrutable he could be. Instead, he turned back to Eche.

“And you have something else?” he asked.

Dani looked to Eche, confused. Eche averted her eyes and they walked in silence for a few moments. Dani understood: just one of Mohsin’s “feelings.” She rolled her eyes in the dark.

Eche spoke, “I . . . I told my father that I wanna join you, I mean join you down here,” she said.

Dani looked at her sharply, eyes widening. She imagined the pain Orlando must have felt when Eche told him. Her heart went out to her surrogate father. At the same time excitement grew inside her. How long she had desired to have her sister by her side, abetting her.

“And your father said?” Mohsin asked. Was that eagerness Dani heard in his voice? Surely it wasn’t a chink in the armor of his famous self-possession.

“He prefers me at home but won’t stop me.” Nobody said anything so she continued, “I’ve wanted it for a while, you know. I *belong* with the People.”

“As you always have, and as you are. You have been with us this whole time, and a great help you have been, moreover, in your *present* role.”

Dani glowered to herself. Mohsin knew her value; this was what he had been waiting for. What was he playing at?

“But I’m ready to do more,” Eche replied. “I don’t wanna be just your farmgirl, I want to be a soldier. I can do more.”

“Why not, Brother?” Dani intervened. “You can certainly see her desire and her energy. She would fit well in my company.” Dani winked at Eche behind Mohsin’s back.

“We shall see,” he said. “I shall discuss it with Guaré when he returns with your family’s food.” He emphasized the last words as he looked at Eche, reminding her of her role. Dani rolled her eyes again.

The yellow lights on the tunnel walls stopped and the stone tube darkened in the full night. The darkness bred silence among the three; they instinctively moved to the side of the tunnel to grope their way along the cold wall. Dani could smell the gunpowder from earlier.

They continued down and brushed against the iron shield that had been placed in the middle of the conduit. Several steps more and they arrived at the gate, which Mohsin unlocked. Here, underneath the scent of gunpowder, Dani also detected the metallic tinge of blood.

It was dark and moonless, the clouds cloaking the stars. There was a faint glow up the hill to their left where Dragona’s house stood. They walked in silence, the gravel and dead leaves crunching under their feet as they crossed the road. On the other side, they entered a small grove of trees that sat at the bottom of the hill. Away from the despoiled tunnel entrance the cool night smelled fresh, of wet earth, mixed with a hint of wood smoke from Dragona’s chimney.

Mohsin stopped suddenly.

“Wait,” he said, holding up the women with an arm.

“What is it?” Dani said. A stealthy attention replaced her relaxation.

“Something’s wrong. . .”

“Autobirds?” Eche asked.

“I don’t know, maybe.”

They looked up but the cloud cover was too thick. A faint whining in the air could have been a far-off car. They were at the edge of the clearing and could see Dragona's house on top of the hill, the windows a warm yellow color. The night was silent apart from the whining motor that now seemed to grow louder.

"That's an autobird for sure," Eche whispered. "Maybe multiple."

In the brief second that they stood paralyzed at Eche's realization, another sound abruptly joined the whining: a *whoosh* like a howling wind.

Dani's eyes widened. Mohsin shouted, "DOWN!"

But before they could move, the left side of Dragona's house exploded in a flash of white-yellow fire, the chimney tumbling down, the roof collapsing. One second passed as the three knelt down at the edge of the grove, looking toward the pyre that used to be a house. Then the delayed boom blitzed them with a deafening crack, slamming them onto their backs.

Two more whooshing sounds joined the explosion's echo and the middle of the house exploded, blowing bits high up in the air and out over the field. Two more cracks of thunder jolted them, though Dani now had her hands over her ears.

Between them and the house a softer explosion went off among the orchards, not as violent or loud but twice as bright. Dani sat up and saw flames shoot out in all directions. They continued to spread with a crackling sound.

"Napalm," Dani said, looking at the other two, who were now sitting as well.

"Let's go," Mohsin said. And they ran.

Dani heard at least two explosions behind them as they went, probably the remnants of the house being destroyed. But they were singularly focused on getting back to the tunnel. Dani

followed Mohsin in the grove, moving from tree to tree. As they crossed the road the sky around them roared and suddenly ignited. A searing heat collided with them from behind.

“Found us!” Mohsin shouted. “Quick!”

They ran through the last strand of trees before the mouth of the tunnel and entered into the gateway that Mohsin had left open. The women ran behind the iron shield as Mohsin closed and locked the gate.

Dani looked back at Mohsin through one of the shield’s gunholes. Just as he was turning to flee, a bomb crashed at the end of the copse closest to the road. Dani stared wide-eyed at Mohsin’s silhouette against the yellow sun behind him. He was running toward her, the dark shadows of his pumping legs outlined in the approaching inferno. She cringed as the flame shot toward them and gained on Mohsin.

He made it to the edge of the iron plate just as the flaming fireball shot past it. Diving to the side, he landed flaming on the ground between the two women, his back and leg on fire.

“Get the camoncho off,” Dani said, ripping at his chest. “You get his pants. Use yours as protection.”

Mohsin only grunted as the flames licked hungrily.

Dani took off her camoncho and saw Eche do the same. Mohsin helped unbuckle his pants and Eche pulled them off, while Dani rolled him over and hauled off the camoncho. They flung the flaming garments away from them and sat up, huddled behind the iron plate.

Delicate bluish flames lined the walls around them and continued a good ten meters back, not quite to the lights on the walls further down the tunnel. A soft crackling surrounded them, strangely reminding Dani of the Echeverry’s fireplace, though the two places were unlike in every other detail she could imagine.

They sat there, breathing heavily, shoulders heaving, fire crackling. Eche reached out to pull herself up on the iron and cried out, “Ahhhh!”

Dani looked to her, concerned.

“Stupid!” Eche said, cradling her singed hand as she continued to crouch. She looked at Dani and shook her head with impatience. Dani smiled in relief.

They inspected Mohsin but he told them he was alright. His shirt was blackened in the back but the fire had not broken through to his skin, which was merely red from the heat. His left leg showed blisters. He lay back, reclining on one elbow as he aired out the leg.

“Disinfectant is all I’ll need,” he said.

“So this is the reprisal Betancourt warned of,” Dani grunted.

Mohsin nodded and swallowed thickly.

“You still want to join us?” he asked, looking at Eche.

Dani turned to Eche and saw her looking down at her burnt hand. She nodded slowly, his words sinking in. But suddenly she snapped her head up, eyes wide. She jumped up and stared down at them.

“I gotta check my family! If this is what they did to Dragona. . .”

Dani’s eyes widened in turn as Eche’s fears invaded her consciousness. She jumped to her feet.

“Go, quickly,” Mohsin said. His face betrayed none of the urgency in his voice. “Not you, Dani.”

Why not? She had been on the verge of running off with Eche.

“I need your help,” he said.

Eche sprung off at a sprint and Mohsin called after her, “Guaré will still be in that sector. He will help you, if he can.”

The flames on the ceiling illuminated Eche in a hellish halo before she passed through the fire and continued on into the darkness of the tunnel. They both stared after her for several seconds. Dani tried not to think about what might have happened to her surface family. She turned to Mohsin whose face, far from inscrutable, now showed a pensive sadness.

“You know what this means,” Dani said.

“I know.” He looked at her and nodded.

She stood up and held out her hand to Mohsin. He took it and let her help him to his feet. She saw him wince as he stepped with his burnt leg, but the limp quickly smoothed out as he walked. The flames around them were already dying down and they could step around the metal plate and go back toward the gate.

The lip of the tunnel provided them shelter and fresh air as they stood before the gate, staring out at the singed hellscape before them. Trees aflame and the ground blackened in the orange light, smoke hovering like mist over the forest floor in all directions, tingeing their nostrils. What had been a peaceful night chorus was now overwhelmed by the snaps and sputters of flame as it consumed the plantlife. Still, the crackling gave Dani a strange comfort, perhaps with the memory of the Echeverrys and perhaps for some other, unknowable reason.

“You can wait here for the flames to die down,” Mohsin said. “The sentinels won’t stay for long. After a prudent wait, check the house for survivors.”

“And the cache,” she said, amid her warm glow.

He paused. “Yes, you should check for the arsenal as well, but our primary concern is humans, not arms.”

She didn't respond, not paying attention, hypnotized by the hellscape.

"Is that understood?"

She stared at the warzone, her brow dancing like the flames. The destruction was total and it was horrible. Good people, their allies, were dead. So why did she sense a smile at the corners of her mouth? Why was she relaxed and comforted standing before this annihilation, as she had once been after escaping I-Land, while sitting in front of Eche's fireplace?

"Is that understood, Dani?" Mohsin repeated, louder.

"Oh, yes, sir," she said, glancing at him. She allowed the smile to form in order to reassure him, only half-hoping he would not guess its true meaning.

"I sense something in you, Dani," he said. She stiffened to attention and smoothed out her smile. "It worries me."

"Oh?"

"We both know where we stand on our. . . philosophical disagreement," he said. "If you are planning something rash, I beg you to consider the consequences. Consider the stakes of our evolution."

She looked back out to the fire.

"Trust me, sir, I have nothing but our evolution in mind."

"Yes, but I speak of not only the People's evolution. The evolution of *all*."

"Yes, sir."

She restrained herself from hypnotization, now watching the flames with calculation. And she understood her newfound comfort in these flames: for this was the commencement. The flames were the beginning of the endgame, and also its irrefutable justification. But *her* endgame, not his.

“I must go with Eche to check on Guaré,” he said, and she felt him back away from her.

“Check the house when it’s safe. Get others to help you if needed.”

“Yes, Brother.”

He turned and jogged down the tunnel away from the gate. Dani stood there, looking out. Playfully, she touched the iron gate and quickly withdrew her hand when she felt its incredible heat. She imagined she could feel the hissing sound of her skin as it singed, but she saw no marks in the orange glow upon her skin. She continued to stand before the gate, watching and waiting in front of those cleansing flames.

Eche had never run so fast in her life. Pumping her legs endlessly, the burning in her lungs outstripped the pain caused by the jagged smoke in her throat.

She arrived at the little rail car and jumped in. She grabbed the lever and pushed as hard as she could, straining against the heavy inertia of the still car. As she built up speed, her screaming legs reveled in the reprieve but her upper body soon took up their cause. Her breathing grew more ragged until she was flailing at the lever, throwing her torso forward on the downstroke and dragging it up on the reverse.

She didn’t know how long she went but it burned all over, arms-legs-lungs-throat-eyes. Everything burned so completely that she collapsed over the side of the car in utter exhaustion, laying her head on one shoulder, eyes facing forward down the tracks over the sound of squeaking wheels. The car coasted to a stop in front of two figures trotting toward her and waving their arms.

“Ho, little Sister,” one of the figures called. Guaré.

He trotted up to the car and pulled her out. She gave herself to him, draping her body over his shoulders. She stumbled alongside him, letting him half-drag her toward the flood drain.

“Tell me, are they okay?”

She looked at him but he didn’t respond. Only then did she realize that an unnatural glow illuminated the tunnel. She looked around in confusion. An orange radiance flickered about the tunnel walls.

She looked wide-eyed at Guaré. For the first time she noticed he was hatless, his black hair mussed, dark smudges on his bony cheeks. He looked wrong without his bowler.

“Your hat,” she said. He touched his head, apparently surprised at the revelation.

“Guaré, please.”

“You must not go up there,” he said.

“Please.” She was crying now.

“Don’t go, little Sister,” he said, holding her to him. “Wait here.”

A sudden burst of energy surged up from Eche’s feet, tensing her muscles as she straightened up, like a wilted plant receiving a miraculous, instantaneous draught of water.

“NO!” she roared, and shoved Guaré.

He fell stumbling back several paces, then steadied himself. There was no retaliation, just watching. She could see the pity on his face, and she wanted to throttle it out of him.

But she recognized her freedom and sprinted toward the shaft, forgetting him and her exhaustion both. She launched herself at the ladder, skipping every other rung as she scampered

up. She didn't at first notice how warm the rungs were, nor how they got progressively hotter the higher she climbed. She didn't notice the agony forming in her hands as she got to the top.

Only when she touched the grate at the very top did she recoil, screaming in pain and holding her hand. Her palms were burning and the convecting heat from above was baking her entire head. The grate was too hot, she couldn't move it. Eche looked around with desperate ferocity, calculating, uncowed in the face of futility. Her eyes landed on her shirt and she clawed at it, tearing it off, using it to wrap her arm. She braced herself.

With a deep breath and clenched jaw she drove her left elbow into the scorching metal. Her cushion immediately began smoking and Eche felt a searing pain over her entire forearm. A hiss sounded as her arm got hotter.

The grate lifted but slowly, and she jammed her head into it in support. There was no mistaking the sizzling sound as the grill now singed both arm and head. The smell of burning hair assaulted her. Still she pushed, rolling her face into the grate to salvage the crown of her head.

A scream erupted as she felt her face branded, "AHHH!"

She stepped one rung higher and raised her right hand to assist, now scorching her palm. Her forearm was blistering and her hair felt afire. Sensing the tipping point, she heaved with all points of contact and felt the grate crash over, clanging onto the concrete pad.

Eche vaulted herself out of the hole and stood under the shell of the well's shelter. The only remnants of the roof that had protected the grate from detection were the charred, smoking posts on each side of her. The blessed relief of the heat's absence on her scorched body was obliterated by a horrified shock upon seeing her decimated house. Her home was no longer there.

In its stead was a pile of bricks where the chimney had been, then an outline of the walls with humps of smoldering rubble in the middle. The barn and silo were completely engulfed in flame, the fields either ablaze or already charred. The sizzle of vapor and crackle of rippling flames pummeled her eardrums. In her shock Eche didn't realize she was suffocating on the venomous smoke until she began to violently cough.

She doubled up coughing and saw the well where vapor was still steaming out. Then something else caught her eye, a black chain attached to the base of the well. In growing horror she followed the length of the chain and saw it end on a smoking, four-legged smear of black and red: Ali. He looked utterly alien without his hair.

Eche's coughing turned to retching as she realized the fumes she was inhaling were from her dog. She kneeled down on her knees and vomited onto the charred earth, burning her palms even further as she supported herself on hands and knees. The acidic stream brutalized her raw throat.

Prone and heaving, she consciously fought the instinctive reflex to lift her palms, to save them from the pain of the baking earth. Suddenly she wanted to feel it. She wanted to punish her body. She deserved it, she and no one else. As the heat battered her hands, a tiny cold knot alit inside her chest.

"Eche," Guaré said behind her. "I'm sorry." He touched her naked back.

She shrunk out of his reach and stood up, ignoring him, instead puzzling at the coldness. She wasn't crying anymore. Her face felt of stone.

"There's nothing to be sorry for," she said, continuing to survey the damage. "Help me look."

With a brief glance, Eche saw the pain her response caused him. The cold inside her pulsed.

Eche set off toward the house and Guaré hustled to keep up, tripping over occasional debris. He skinned his shirt off and tried to hand it to her but she ducked him. He eyed her from behind and badly wanted to attend to her wounds – her head alone looked monstrous and her arm was no more than raw streaks of red and black. But her demeanor confused him. When he had realized what happened at her home he had expected many reactions from his little Sister, but not this.

She headed toward the far side and Guaré circled in the opposite direction, scanning the smoking rubble for bodies. He had to pick his way carefully around smoldering wreckage, weaving in and out in an effort to get close enough to the ruins.

On the far corner of the house, near the tumbled chimney, he nearly bumped into Eche as he searched the rubble. She stood still, studying a spot a few paces away.

Eche cut a demented figure in the glow of the burning fields. She was a nightmarish creature with arm and knees blackened, standing there topless but simultaneously sexless. One side of her head was burned clean of hair, a red and black mess smeared in its wake. The left side of her face bore an oozing grillmark.

But the look in her eye disturbed him even more. It was an absence, a vacated space where life had once sparked, the same detachment that allowed her to stand so casually half-naked before him.

Guaré followed her regard and saw a blackened skeleton half-buried under a timber. A few feet away there were two slightly smaller remains lying face down.

He felt tears come to his eyes and looked away. The only sound for several seconds was the hellish hissing and crackling of the dying fire.

“We always passed the cool evenings near the fireplace,” Eche said, after a moment.

Unsure, Guaré put his arm around her. This time she let him, resting her mutilated head upon his shoulder. He brought the shirt up and wrapped it around her from the front.

“I am so sorry, my beautiful Sister.”

He clenched the corners of his eyes in order to rescue the tears that hung there. He wanted to say the perfect thing that would make her feel better, that would lighten the mood, but his cleverness had abandoned him. All he wanted in that moment was to care for Eche, to heal her, to make sure that nothing ever hurt her again.

Eche lifted her head abruptly. Her eyes were dry and empty.

She spoke, “Makes my decision pretty easy, right?”

Her tone, as lifeless as her gaze, chilled him even with the baking heat at hand. She walked away, toward the well. Guaré stood before Eche’s razed house, watching her pace off, making no effort to stop her. He then gazed upon the ruins, felt the void that he had seen in Eche’s eyes, and he mourned.

“On Origins and Destinations, Pt. 1”⁶

. . . At one time humankind lived with the self-unity of animals, with that same utter lack of self-awareness. Perhaps self-consciousness is one of the essential distinguishing marks of humanity and thus we were not yet truly human. Regardless, back in that historic age, something happened to us, to humans. It could have been a genetic mutation, or maybe it was the birth of agriculture or the creation of language and the alphabet, as has been argued. Perhaps it was a mixture of these factors, but something certainly happened. This ‘happening’ is represented in the best-known story in all of Western Civilization: the Fall from the Garden of Eden.

Before, we ‘felt no shame,’ according to the Old Testament of the Judeo-Christian Bible. We existed in a state of complete harmony, like the animals, which is to say ‘in ignorance.’ But by eating a forbidden fruit we gained the ‘knowledge of good and evil,’ and afterward were cursed. No doubt as to what this knowledge entailed can exist after you look at the classic image from this story: whereas before Adam and Eve ‘were both naked’ with ‘no shame,’ they afterward stand before God with leaves over their genitals. No conceivable image could say more clearly that this ‘knowledge’ as stated in the Bible was the very same phenomenon that we now call ‘self-consciousness.’ The Fall of Adam and Eve – of humanity – is the story of the birth of self-consciousness.

And let us be clear: by ‘self-consciousness’ we are describing the awareness of ego, of ourselves as something separate from the nature that surrounds us. It is the separation for the first time between body and mind. Thus the consequence of our ‘Fall,’ or ‘God’s punishment,’ if you will, was the loss of unity with ourselves and with our environment.

6 Excerpted from Jensen, Frida, The People's Anthology of the 3rd Millenium, 2nd edition, Ch. 9.

But the story goes further, if so inclined. For example, one could consider the Fall a necessary, natural, and actually inevitable development in human history. Millennial biologists and their antecedents, when the entire idea of evolution was still considered debatable, were quick to point out that it is an aimless mechanism, without an ultimate destination. In the spirit of reconciliation between science and religion, we the People respectfully disagree.

If one looks at human lives and evolution from a spiritual perspective, with the 'goal' being Heaven, or Nirvana, or Valhalla or the 'Great Awakening,' or any number of other names given for inter-culturally analogous phenomena, then one must recognize the Fall as a necessary event. This is because it is impossible to arrive at the 'true knowledge' necessary for enlightenment through ignorance. If it were possible, we could have done so as simple animals, when we were already self-unified. In that sense, we had already arrived at the destination. But it was necessary to first travel through consciousness and intelligence, through this break with ourselves. And ultimately, it will be necessary to make the conscious decision to forget this entire illusion of separation.

It is helpful to think of the question along the lines of certain versions of ancient Hindu mysticism, as follows: the goal of God in creating life was to try to forget its Godhood, to experience That-Which-Is-Not-God. Verily, it would be the only experience foreign and unattainable to an omnipotent being. In essence, God, out of boredom and in solitude, attempted to play hide-and-seek with itself. It was done by breaking off miniscule pieces of the Godhead and injecting them into our world, in the form of life.

God partially completed this Forgetting with the creation of plants and animals. A living world was created in which the organisms had no idea that they were but tiny pieces of God, incognito. But it was only a partial achievement; because these beings were unable to even

imagine a God, they were naturally in no danger of discovering that they themselves were God. For the supreme power, it would have been akin to playing a trivia game with toddlers – an empty victory.

With the birth of early human, God was nearing the Forgetting more completely. Organisms could now conceive of a God, and they were beginning to distinguish it from themselves. They could recognize spirits – traces of God – in all the things of earth. But they still lacked sufficient capability to ever wonder if they could possibly be God as well. Since everything else had a spirit, it was logical to them that they too had similar spirits, smaller and infinitely weaker versions of the great Thunder Gods, or the all-powerful Sun Spirit. Unbeknownst to them, they were on the right track, yet still too ignorant to fully comprehend it.

But finally, with the birth of self-consciousness and the modern human, God fully completed the Forgetting. For the first time humans were able to imagine God as a completely distinct entity, and we could imagine our entire lives as a great struggle to get closer to that remote divinity.

We had finally arrived at the furthest point possible from true self-knowledge, and we were thus finally primed to begin the great journey back. It was like a game that could not begin until all the prerequisites had been dutifully satisfied, or to use our hide-and-seek analogy: humankind had finally finished counting to one hundred while God had gleefully run away to the most obscure hiding nook conceivable.

Now that we are at the furthest distance from true self-knowledge, from knowledge of our own secret identities as individual Gods-incarnate, all we need to do is forget this foolish self-consciousness, this ego, in order to return ourselves to the sacred heart of the Godhead. The hiding is over, and it is time to start seeking in earnest.

VI.

Helen's screech sounded in her ear. "My god, these seats'r amazing!" She looked to the other three. "Aren't the seats outta this world?"

She appeared normal, but the dark green MoodBar on Srena's facial rec-grid insisted she was either sad or worried. Srena looked at her eyes and saw a strange intensity, a sort of wildness, that she didn't know how to interpret. It must mean "sad."

They were following Helen's date, the good dresser-kisser, about halfway up the mound of seats directly in the center of the Oasis Coliseum. Srena preened at Helen's compliment; Captain Betancourt's position allowed him the choicest selection for any engagement. Arriving at their row, Helen's date filed in first, followed by Helen, Srena and the Captain. They sat down amidst the humming crowd, people milling around them, chattering and laughing. Vendors scaled the stairs hawking drinks and snacks.

Srena frowned at the Captain. He was being very quiet tonight. She didn't know what she had done to displease him, but she'd have to try extra hard to cheer him up. She inhaled sharply, a smile replacing her frown, when she remembered she had put on her best undergarments; that was lucky. She scanned her playlist to find a happy song. Once selected and at a reasonable background volume, she was ready to direct a pleasant conversation. She turned to Helen's date.

"So. . . Roy? S'that yer name?"

He looked over and smiled, "Thass right. Srena, right?"

Srena's facial rec said: "Roy Haroldson, Biotech Research, Age 40, Residence: Sector 6."

Not even in the Oasis!

“Yeah, thass it. So Roy, ja come often?”

“Haven missed one in years. Kinda seems like a civic duty, don’ja think?”

Roy was looking at the Captain so Srena turned to him as well. But the Captain ignored them, scanning the crowd, tired according to MoodBar.

“I saw one a little while ago.” Roy paused, thinking. “Oh. . . who c’n remember, they all blend together. B’the best one I saw was a cancer!”

“Cancer? How’d they do that?” Srena asked.

Roy leaned forward excitedly, according to the bright yellow MoodBar.

“It was a woman, she’d hidden her husband’s CaPLs. She’d mash em up and give em to him in ice cream every night cause he didn’t like th’taste, b’she juss stopped doin it. Said she couldn’t stand him anymore. By the time he noticed, the cancer too far gone.”

“Oh my.”

“Yeah, crazy story huh? Notcher typical PJ. Imagine what they came up with: they wheeled her out here, all lumpy, covered in tumors, taken the pills away a month before. She’s screamin sump’n awful. . . leas her husband got morphine in th’end. Then they juss started cuttin into’m, the tumors, blood’n other stuff squirtin out, sump’n black, just disgusting. It was pretty exciting.”

“Ugh!”

“Yeah kinda disgusting, b’the crowd loved it. The most amazin PJ I ever saw hands down. We c’n only hope for sump’n so great tonight.”

Helen had been scanning on her lenses but suddenly turned to Roy and said, “I haven been in years b’they’re so excitin’n fun! S’sump’n you c’n feel good abou, right? I mean ya don’ feel bad fer enjoyin it, right? No’ like some other stuff they have here. Oh, hold on—”

She turned her head back toward the arena floor and resumed the darting of her eyes, moving her hand to manipulate the items with her glovelink. She actually looked pretty in the dim light, not like yesterday at work.

Helen turned back to them. “Y’know one’a the things I like most? When else ja get everyone lookin at the same thing, 'n at the same time, ya know? Even concerts don’t do that, s’so neat! People even lay off the lenses! Neat!” She giggled.

“I use’ta come as a kid,” Srena said. “B’they gave me nightmares so I stopped. My parents kep tryin but I screamed.”

“M’nephew tries ta do that too,” Roy said. “Seems kinda childish if’ya ask me. They let him alone though, can’t say I agree, I mean he’s already eight.”

“I thought about goin again when I got older,” Srena said. “All my friends did, but I couldn’ make myself. Sump’n about it juss seems. . . strange, no?”

“*Strange*, dear lord!” Helen said. “What could be strange about sump’n’t everyone’s been doin fer years? Decades even!”

“I juss mean –”

“What could be strange,” Betancourt interrupted, “about seeing justice administered?”

Srena snapped her head to him. He waited, studying her.

“Does justice make you uncomfortable?” He spoke slower than the others, with less Citspeak.

“No, n-not at all, Captain,” she said. “It was juss. . . juss sump’n of mine. . . sump’n childish, like Roy said. Childish.”

“I should think so,” he said, turning back to the crowd. “You’re not a child anymore Srena. You should start acting a little more grown up.”

“I hear round th’office tha’ she acts *plenty* grown up when the doors’r closed, Cap’n. . .”

Helen said with a devilish grin, raising her eyebrows at Betancourt.

He turned slowly back to Helen and looked at her for a moment. Then Srena couldn’t believe what he said:

“And I hear around the office that you’ve been having trouble with a loose, or shall we say, a *subversive* tongue. . . that you perhaps need to take better care of your words.”

Helen’s eyes widened and she turned away from Betancourt.

“Subversion is quite a serious offense, Helen,” the Captain continued, his voice even and slow. “Even for Citizens with. . . *assets*. . . as important as yours.”

His eyes slid down to her cleavage and slowly back up.

Helen blushed deeply and glanced at Roy, who was occupied with his lenses. She looked back to Srena, who shrugged at Helen with a questioning glance.

Helen whispered to her, “S’nothin,” but the MoodBar said blue-for-scared.

“Wh’happened?” Srena whispered. “Ja get in trouble?”

“No, they juss *talked* t’me,” she said, tittering a bit. “S’*nothin!* Even *they* said I’ll be fine. . . I juss need t’quiet down a bit.”

“It’s good advice,” Betancourt said softly.

“Why didn’ ja tell me?” Srena asked.

“Oh, s’nothin. . . Forgot.” She shrugged and smiled at Srena.

“Oh less be happy, please,” Srena said, turning to Betancourt. “Less be yellow!” She placed her hand on his arm. “Out together on a fun night at th’PJs, shouldn’ be too hard t’*enjoy*.”

“Whad I miss?” Roy asked, coming back to the conversation from his lens. “Had a quick message, ‘pologies.”

The lights dimmed and a wave of excited gasps fell over the crowd.

Helen asked Roy, “Whas on th’program t’night?”

“Mugging and a rich-rape.”

Srena felt Betancourt lean forward slowly, looking at Roy. “The legal term is ‘aggravated rape,’” he said.

“Oh, yessir, certainly,” Roy said quickly.

“I’m sure you’re aware that the term ‘rich-rape’ has subversive undertones.”

“Yessir, abs’lutely. Juss slipped out, y’know, bad habits,” he said, smiling. Srena was informed that he was nervous.

“Aggravated rape is a capital offense due to the social *importance* of the citizen, not their wealth. There have been plenty of justice administrations due to child rape, for example.”

“Rich children, maybe,” Roy mumbled. Srena heard him but the Captain seemed to have missed it. She felt the counterbump as Helen jabbed Roy with her elbow.

Helen changed the subject, “I’ve never seen a rape, heard about em though.”

At the floor of the coliseum, a sleek, tuxedo-ed man strolled out under a spotlight. She couldn't tell which designer it was from that far away. He was holding a microphone in one hand. When he stopped in the center of the floor the remaining buzz of the crowd ceased totally.

“Welcome, fellow Citizens,” he boomed, “to the Public Administration of Justice!”

He waited politely for the crowd’s applause to subside.

“As always, I am your host, Reed Flowers!” More applause. “While our lovely home viewers relax on their couches, I remind our live audience to adjust their I’s to the I-BN channel so that *everyone* will be able to get slo-mo and play-by-play. Go now.”

He paused to allow them to navigate their way with glove gestures to the I-BN stream. Srena twitched her head and waved her fingers to the appropriate station. She looked up and saw the crowd overrun by the same motions.

“And now, October’s PJs promise to be exciting as you-know-what!”

Srena looked over at the Captain. His eyes were half-closed. On her other side, Helen was gripping both her and Roy’s arms.

“We have two despicable felons who deserve worse than what they’ll get tonight.”

At this point he paused and leered from one side of the audience to the other.

“But then again,” he continued, “We don’t want to go. . . OHHHHHHverboard . . . DOOOO WEEEEEE?”

“YEEEEEEAAHHH!” the audience responded at their cue.

“Okay, okay, well maybe *some* of us do, and I can’t say I blame yas. . . But I’m sorry to say it juss wouldn’t be *right!*”

“AWWWWWWWW. . .”

“So instead, I-BN, in collaboration with your I-PF and The Bureau, has done the right thing, the *fair* thing . . . And at the same time they’ve had the mighty fine consideration a lettin *you* watch. . .”

“Yeah, consideration. . .” the Captain muttered.

“What was that?” Srena asked. She had zoned out during Reed’s standard spiel.

“Nothing,” he said.

She looked at him, worried. She didn't understand what he meant but the way he said it frightened her. His whole manner did. MoodBar didn't have much of an opinion on him. It had a hint of purple but was mostly gray for "unconfirmed."

"And so," continued Reed, "without further ado – that means 'Right now!' – less bring up our first candidate! Now remember, for you newbies in the audience, keep quiet as long as possible. As always, the candidates don't know why they're here, so the longer they're in the dark, the better your entertainment! Don't spoil it for the rest of the crowd, folks! And now. . . Boys, the Administration Site!"

Reed flung his arm to the side and light banks lining the ceiling and walls ignited, illuminating the floor of the arena with a scintillating glare. A door simultaneously opened in the high walls of the arena floor, a large door the width of an airplane hangar. An industrial truck rolled out, towing a huge platform the size of a large house.

Atop the platform was a massive gray box the size of an office building. Srena knew that inside was an artificial set, like in the 3Bs, crafted to resemble the streets and alleys of the Nink Zone.

While the truck wheeled the set out to the center of the floor, a giant 4-way Jumbotron lowered from the roof of the coliseum, the screens blinking on. They showed the top of a hooded figure, sitting on a stool in a small room. The feed switched to another camera showing one of the alleyways on the set. The same images flashed on a small window in Srena's I's.

The detail of the set was impeccable: street lights, dirty bricks caked with grime and mud, sewer grates in the ground, graffiti on the walls and trash cans with random bits of litter strewn about. At the far end of the alley a masked man in a dark trench coat and fedora was leaning against the wall. The camera switched again to another street view, this one empty.

The Jumbotron continued to scroll through various cameras that had been arranged throughout the set. Finally it cycled back to the hooded man in his small room. The truck came to a final stop and they saw the hooded man jerk forward slightly.

Silence ensued. As the seconds mounted, Srena tensed further and further forward in her seat, clenching the armrests tighter. She felt Helen's fingers digging into her arm. The customary I-manipulating twitches and finger waving of the audience members gradually ceased, creating a moment of pure anticipation.

The audience gasped audibly when the prisoner's door opened. An I-PF agent, unarmored but for helmet and mask, stood before the prisoner. With a sure movement he grabbed the top of the prisoner's hood and snatched it off. The prisoner jumped at the physical contact and snickers were heard in the audience. The agent removed the prisoner's earphones and motioned for him to stand up. Cautiously, the prisoner got to his feet. He looked young to Srena, a skinny man with short black hair and sunken eyes. He stood there in his prison uniform: gray slacks and jacket over a white shirt.

"Francisco Romano Córdoba?"

"Y-yessir?"

"There was a mistake in your case. You're free to go."

A pause.

"Wh-what? R'you serious?"

"Here'r yer belongings."

The agent raised a small sack and opened it up for Francisco. The prisoner, confused, began rummaging through the bag, occasionally glancing at the officer, taking out a stack of

clothes, his wallet, a lighter and an older model terminal. The audience watched the entire exchange silently, on both the giant screen and their own I's.

“Belongings include payment fer yer prison labor. Total compensation placed in yer wallet.”

Francisco opened his wallet, exposing a thick pile of banknotes. The camera zoomed in on the wad as he leafed through it.

“R’you serious?” he asked. “How much’s this?”

“S’enough fer yer labor. Any problems, file a complaint.”

“No, no problem! I juss can’ believe’t, s’like ten thou!” he said, continuing to leaf through the bills.

“S’yers. We’ve transported you to a safe’n secret entry to I-Land. If you have no further questions, yer free t’go.”

“They tol’ me there’s some sorta game’r sump’n. S’that what this is?”

“I don’ know what they tol’ ja, pal. Yer free t’go.”

He signaled through the open door with his arm and stood there, waiting for the prisoner to move. Francisco looked suspiciously at the officer. His eyes narrowed.

“I know what this’s,” he finally said. “Seen’t in the 3Bs. Y’juss waitin fer me t’leave s’you can shoot me fer ‘scapin! I know wha ja doin man! I ain’ goin nowhere!”

The officer waited two seconds before responding: “How bout I shoot you if you stay, you Noncon slum-rat?”

The agent raised his gun and pointed it at the prisoner. Francisco shrunk back and raised his hands up, dropping his clothes on the ground.

“Kay, kay, I give! I do wha' ja say. No prob!”

Looking at the officer with one arm raised, Francisco slowly crouched down and picked his clothes off the floor. Then he stood up, cautiously skirted the officer, keeping him always in sight, and backed through the open doorway. He was still backing away when the officer reached through the door and pulled it shut with a metallic *clang*.

Francisco stood there, slowly lowering his free hand. But still he watched the door, perhaps waiting for it to open once more and unleash a hail of bullets. Finally he turned around and began to walk down the fake alleyway, muttering to himself.

“Goddammit, tryin t’trick me, gonna shoot me b’what can I do? Shoot me if I stay, shoot me if I go. Fuck’d either way. Fuck.”

He stopped muttering and started to walk a little faster now. He took out his wallet and looked at the bills.

“Goddamn, leas I c’n be rich fore I die.” He closed the wallet and stuffed it into his jacket pocket. “Coulda’t leas lemme put on m’clothes, fuckers, fuckin CorPos.”

Srena looked to see the Captain’s reaction to the slur. He didn’t.

Francisco reached the end of the alleyway and looked both ways before choosing left. The Jumbotron simultaneously cut to a split screen, one side showing the prisoner in the new alley, the other showing the dark hooded man still relaxing against a wall in an unknown street. Francisco’s footsteps echoed in the artificial cityscape.

As he reached the end of the second alley, Francisco came into view on the right side of the split screen. There were gasps throughout the crowd as they realized what it meant. Francisco, hearing noise through the insulated ceiling of the box, looked up momentarily in confusion. The crowd hushed at once, and he resumed walking.

When he reached the T-intersection, where the masked man waited around the corner, Srena had almost chewed a hole in her lip. She had to remind herself to breathe. Francisco happened to look left first, the direction opposite the masked stranger. When Francisco turned around and saw the man leaning against the wall directly behind him, he jumped back.

“Jesus Christ!” he screamed, dropping his clothes once more.

“Well well well, what have we here?” The man asked in a gravelly voice. He stood a head taller than the convict. “Looks like someone lost his way.”

“Aww, no man, I juss got outta prison,” Francisco said, his voice trembling faintly. “They released me. I was juss tryin t’figure out where I’m goin.”

“Juss released, huh? That means s’payday, huh?”

The man pushed himself off of the wall and stood straight, looking even bigger now. He took two steps toward Francisco and stopped.

“S’quite the coincidence, y’know, cause I could use some money m’self.”

Francisco’s eyes widened and he backed slowly away. The man kept pace with him.

“Where ya goin buddy? Dinja hear me? I said,” and he took out a knife, “I could use summa yer money. All of it, actually.”

“Naw man, come on. Gimme a break, I juss got out!”

He was still backing away and the masked man was still stalking slowly toward him. Srena was still digging her fingers into her armrests and Helen still had a death grip on her arm. The man took a few steps to Francisco’s right and the prisoner compensated toward the wall of the alley, backing right up to it.

“A break, huh?” the stranger said. “Yeah, we c’n see bout that. I’ll think about yer break after you gimme your money. How bout it?” He now had the knife a few inches from Francisco’s chest.

The question hung in the air for a few seconds, nothing happening. Then Francisco slumped slightly, as much as he could with a knife pinning him to the wall. His shoulders sagged and he hung his head to the side. He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out the wallet, and offered it to the masked man. The man plucked it from Francisco's hand and momentarily lowered the knife to peek inside. He whistled.

“Payday indeed! Hooooo!” He whistled again, then put the wallet into his own coat pocket. “So much fer th’money,” he said. “Now, bout that break.”

At this point he brought the knife even closer to Francisco, nestling the point against his throat.

“Wh-wh-what’r y’doin, man? I gave you th’money. Ain’ go’ nothin else!”

“Got a little sump’n else, alright. Y’see, guy like that, walkin around with a pocket fulla tha’ much money, makes me think he’s rich, y’know?”

“Rich?! I ain’ rich man, I ain’ got shit! I juss got outta jail! Look’t my fuckin clothes!” He pulled at his jacket.

“Yeah, I don’ like rich people, man, *ya dig?*”

On the last two words the masked assailant changed the inflection of his voice, raising the pitch to a nasally whine. He made his voice sound like Francisco’s. The prisoner’s eyes widened. He looked around, at the walls and the ceiling, for the first time fully taking them in. He looked back to the stranger’s face, perhaps realizing for the first time what his mask meant.

“Hey, I . . . I know. . . hey man, I know wha this is. I know wha s’goin’ on!” He was still looking around, but now more frantically, feeling the walls. “This ain’ real, man! I know wha this is! This’s a PJ!”

The crowd erupted at their cue, into a deafening cheer. Helen and Roy were as loud as anyone, but Srena couldn’t put her heart into it. Though she clapped, she was straining to smile, and glancing at Helen to make sure she didn’t notice. She looked at the Captain and saw him just sitting there, impassive.

The onslaught of noise shocked the prisoner even further, and he panicked. Srena could almost see his brain work over the question until he realized the meaning of his statement, the meaning of the noise. He made a sound that was a mix of a whine and a squeal.

“Oh Chris’ it’s a fuckin PJ! Oh Jesus fuckin CHRIST!”

The crowd quieted when he began to talk. The masked man just stood there, hovering over him, the knife inches from his throat, giving him time to process, extending his misery for the crowd's enjoyment. Francisco started to feel around the walls, sidling down the alley. He turned around with his face to the wall and began looking for an exit, inching his way slowly along. The masked man followed him down the alley, the knife at the back of his neck. He said nothing and did nothing to force his hand. He just sat there, hovering, waiting, inevitable.

“No man, you don’ have t’do this,” Francisco said, suddenly wheeling around. “Y’don’ need my money, y’don’ wanna take it, y’don’ wanna kill me, s’juss your *job*, man! We c’n juss stop this and I go back t’jail, kay? I don’ mine, I swear! Please God I swear!”

At this he dropped down to his knees and grabbed the man’s pants. “Please, man, I learn my lesson, I swear to God.”

The attacker just stood there, watching Francisco cry onto his pants. Finally, he said softly, back to his gravelly voice, “Th’guy you killed begged too, didn’ he?” He paused. “He didn’ swear t’God, but he sure as shit begged. And wha ja say to him? He ear-taped it, ya know? On his Bard? Y’remember wha ya said?”

Francisco looked up at him and shook his head through his sobs.

“You said,” and his voice dropped to a rough growl, “*I love it when they beg.*’ Then you slit his throat. An thass what I’m gonna do now. Thass justice.”

The masked man snatched Francisco’s hair with one hand. Francisco was barely able to begin raising his hands for protection before the assassin dragged the blade across his throat. Blood gushed out of the split as Francisco finished bringing his hands up a half-second too late. Srena closed her eyes at the sight of the blood.

The crowd roared, raining food and liquids down onto the arena floor in a fit of elation. Peeking from her half-opened eyes, Srena saw the masked man on the screen drop his knife, step away from Francisco and saunter away. The condemned lay on the fake ground, bleeding to death, trying to talk and unable.

“And that, ladies and gentleman,” Reed exclaimed, suddenly back on the arena floor, “is HOW WE ADMINISTER JUSTICE!”

The ravenous crowd screamed the catchphrase on cue and bellowed even louder. Reed waited several moments for them to quiet down. On the screen, dark I-PF agents emerged from mysterious closets to retrieve the corpse and weapon. Four agents carried off Francisco’s body, hanging like dirty blankets between them. Two agents remained at the scene, cleaning the blood.

“So wha ja think, folks, did we surprise him?” Reed bellowed.

“YEEEEAAAAHH!”

“Did we scare him as good he did his own vic??”

“YEEEEAAAAHH!”

“Y’think he learned his lesson?”

Reed was just as ravenous as the crowd.

“YEEEEAAAAHH!”

“WAS THAT JUSTICE, FOLKS??!!”

“YEEEEEEEEAAAAAAHHHHH!”

The crowd’s frenzy was palpable. Srena was lightheaded from all the noise and heat of the people around her. She couldn’t distinguish Helen and Roy’s screaming from the rest of the mob, but one look at their faces told her all she needed to know. It was all too much for her.

“Are you okay?” Betancourt leaned in to ask Srena, looking at her curiously.

Coming back to herself, Srena realized she was leaning so far forward as to nearly fall out of her seat. There was a red blinking light on her lens that indicated her vitals were off. She opened her clenched fists and saw accusatory scarlet crescents in her palms, where her nails had bitten in. She quickly closed her hands again and looked up at the Captain.

“Yes, I’m fine.” She tried to smile.

The Captain was still looking at her. She couldn’t make out his expression. Concern? Bemusement? MoodBar was no help – it said he was excited and even happy. How she hated his mysterious looks sometimes!

“We can go if you need to.”

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t. . .”

“I was only teasing earlier,” he said so that only she could hear. He raised her chin, forcing her to look into his eyes, then said to her, very slowly, “I understand.” He seemed to be trying to look deep inside her as he said it. “Do you understand me?”

Her music was distracting her and she shook her head briefly to rid herself of it. “Oh yes. . .I-I mean. . .thank you. . . Y’really don’ mind?”

His smile was strange. Him and his strange smiles! But MoodBar turned yellowish when he did it. Yellow and green at the same time?

“I don’t mind,” he said. “Come on.”

As they talked Reed had been introducing the following administration, the aggravated rape. A small chamber was being wheeled out and another hooded figure was displayed on the overhead screen.

Srena turned to Helen to explain their departure and stopped short. The light banks from the arena floor caused Helen’s physical features to stand out even amid the yellow grid and MoodBar of Srena’s I’s. The pallid glow gave Helen a ghostly aspect as she stared transfixed at Reed. Her widened, hungry eyes intensified the sinister air, less a neutral phantom and more a malevolent ghoul.

Srena tentatively tapped her on the arm. Reed was still speaking on the specifics of the case, “. . . after a concert. . . innocently walking. . . predatory sexual assault. . . despicable. . . cowardly. . .”

Helen didn’t react to Srena’s touch, so she had to nudge her again a little harder. Helen pivoted her face, eyes still cloudy with an eerie sheen, a small half-smile flitting across her lips.

“The Captain’n I’r steppin out.”

The same gleam in her eyes, Helen nodded to her and turned slowly back to the arena. Srena sat watching her for a second, feeling a subtle discomfort but unable to elaborate it to herself. She stood up and walked to the aisle, where the Captain awaited. She glanced up at the Jumbotron and saw the door of the prisoner's closet open, an I-PF agent entering.

The hooded man sat up straight as the officer removed his hood. The screen flashed to a street within the set, showing the same masked man – or maybe it was just a clone – leaning casually against the wall. Srena averted her gaze and unintentionally met the Captain's. He was studying her.

“You ready?” He held his hand out to her.

“Yes, please.”

The car ride was silent but the Captain kept glancing at her. So much was jumbled up in her head – she didn't know what to think about him or anything else. She tried not to, amping her music instead. Eventually the vitals warning on her lens extinguished. But it was only when she entered his semi-familiar apartment that she could relax to a degree. The unaccustomed luxury calmed her.

“Cal, lights, dim,” the Captain said upon opening the door.

Soft yellow lights faded on throughout the living area. The Captain guided her to the sofa with his hand on her back. His touch made her feel suddenly safe and comfortable, but something else as well: a warmth, a heat running through her body, a tingling emanating from his hand on her back.

She was so excited that when they sat down together on the couch she turned toward him and kissed him forcefully.

His surprised lips were slow to respond, then gradually began to reciprocate. But abruptly he pulled back. Eyes closed, she leaned in further, but he restrained her with hands on her upper arms. She opened her eyes, confused.

“Don’t you think we should talk first?” he asked.

She blinked. The music in her Bard that had swelled alongside her surging hormone levels gradually receded.

“Talk about what?”

“You were upset back there. At the Oasis. Disturbed. Why?”

“Oh, that?” She smiled and looked away. “I wasn’t upset, that wouldn’t be polite. That’d be childish. An howja know anyway? Y’don’ even have yer I’s in!”

“I was watching you,” he said. “Hold on.”

He walked over to the wall and pressed a button. A faint blue light ignited, lining the ceiling. At once the facial-rec and menu lining her peripheral vision vanished. Her music ceased altogether.

“I liked that song,” she whined, eyes half closed.

“We need to talk.”

“You talk too much. Why can’ y’juss use me like the other girls?”

He didn’t respond for a moment, sitting down at the other end of the couch.

“Is that what you’d like?”

“Mmm-hmm,” she nodded dreamily.

She thought of his hands on her, caressing, rubbing.

“You’d like me to fuck you, huh?”

“Oh yeah.”

“How’d you like it?”

“However y’want. I’m here fer you.” She began to undo her shirt.

“I wanna do it rough, s’that okay?”

“Any way y’want, baby.”

Topless, she stood up and lifted her skirt slowly, swaying back and forth.

“I wanna punch you in the face. S’that alright?”

She halted momentarily and looked at him, suspicious. He'd never wanted it rough before. Why would he say that? She began to sway again, cautiously, turning around to show him her backside. She knew he liked her ass.

“It’d hurt, but I’d do’t fer you.”

“Okay, and then I can cut you while we’re fucking, okay? And I’ll probably want to beat you unconscious. Woulja like that?”

She stopped swaying and turned around, lowering her skirt.

He continued, “An after I finish I’ll probably hate the sight of yer mutilated body, so I’ll probably juss bang your head agains’ the floor til it’s smashed like a melon. Until yer dead.”

A chill swept over her and she crossed her arms over her breasts, frowning.

And still he talked, (*Why?*) “Then I’ll prolly fuck yer dead, mutilated, head-smashed corpse just fer the fun of it, an afterwards I’ll cut yer tits off fer souvenirs fore I dump yer body in the Nink. No one’ll care, yer just a LoVo. Woul-ja like that?”

She glanced at the door before looking back to him, trying to ignore her burgeoning horror.

“C’mon, woul-ja like it? S’what yer for, right? S’all you are, right? A fuck-slave? *My fuckslave?*”

His eyes sparkled beneath lowered brows. She was so confused. Why had he shut off MoodBar? It was so mean of him.

“I . . . I thought you liked me,” she finally whimpered.

“Are you ready to talk?” He held out her shirt. The sparkle in his eye was gone, his eyebrows normal again. She accepted the shirt and sat down at the other end of the couch, far away from him. She eyed him, holding her shirt up to cover herself.

“You see that, how you’re covering yourself?” He signaled to her shirt, switching out of the LoVo dialect. “That’s because you know what I just said is *bad*, that it’s wrong. You feel it in your bones. . . . No matter how much you say or how much you think that you exist just to pleasure me, part of you knows it’s not right.”

She just stared. Why did he have to talk so smart all the time?

The Captain sighed. “Look, I didn’t mean it, okay? I was trying to prove a point.”

She spoke slowly. “Why would you say those horrible things? Have I upset you?”

“No, Srena. Look, I know it’s hard for you to understand. But believe me that I would never hurt you. I was just. . . .” He looked up. “I was playing, okay? Just playing.”

“Playing?”

“Just playing.”

She sat up a little straighter, considering. He was handsome again, sexy. He looked like himself. Slowly she began to smile. It did sort of make sense.

“I think I see,” she said.

He smiled too, encouraging her. Oh, he had the most wonderful smile!

“Yes, I see now.” She dropped the shirt. “It was juss an act.”

The Captain nodded with a smaller smile. “Yes, an act.”

She stood up, facing him. Then she began to speak slowly. “Oh, you naughty, naughty boy. . . You bad, raping, murdering boy.”

Srena began to sway again, slowly, just as the warmth returned slowly. The Captain stared up at her from the couch, eyebrows furrowing.

“Someone got ideas at the PJs, huh? R’you gonna admin me? Are ya? Do I need justice? Or’m I gonna admin you?” She began to lift her skirt again.

The Captain grabbed her arms from the couch and pinned them to her sides, holding her still.

“Stop it right now,” he said.

“Oooh, rough huh?” She squirmed, flaunting her breasts into his face while he sat in front of her. “Thass how you wan’t, huh?”

But before she could rub his face with her breasts, the Captain let go of her arms and stood up. Before she realized what was happening he swatted her with a breathtaking smack, square on the jaw. Srena reeled to the floor, raising a hand to the stabbing sting. The sound of the slap reverberated in her ears.

She looked at him with tears welling up. He had never mistreated her before. What were these mindgames? She didn’t deserve this!

“I’m absolutely serious,” he said, towering over her, voice booming. He had never seemed like such a giant as he did now. “Believe me, there will be no fucking right now. Or ever again if you don’t listen to me, right now. You are going to put on your shirt this moment

and we are going to talk. And that's all we're going to do. You are going to listen to me and try to answer my questions as best you can. Get up. NOW.”

She lingered a few moments on the floor, her questioning glance slowly melting away. Her cheek throbbed. He held up a hand and she accepted it after a pause, allowing him to help her from the ground. He lowered her to the couch and once more handed her the shirt.

“Put it on.”

He waited while she did it. Finished, she sat up straight and looked at him, hands crossed in her lap. He was back to normal. He was even handsomer than she remembered, now that he was worked up. It was funny how the facial-rec could keep her from actually looking at him.

“Now,” he said. “I’m sorry for hitting you but you gave me no choice. You are going to tell me exactly how you felt tonight while we were watching the PJs. I know what I saw, and I know I’m right, but I want you to say it, goddamnit. You’re going to say it out loud. You’re going to admit it.”

He sounded angry but she couldn’t be sure without MoodBar. She looked at him for a moment.

“I . . . It . . . it was hard fer me t’ watch.”

“Clearly,” he nodded. “Why?”

“I don’ know. . . I juss. . . I didn’ feel good. It didn’ feel good.”

“Why not?” He leaned forward.

“Why does’t matter?” She spoke faster now, not caring anymore. She was confused and exhausted. It didn’t matter. “Why ja always ask weird questions? Why’r y’so weird? Why can’ y’juss be normal?”

He sat back, looking at her for a moment. Then he said quietly, “So you’d prefer me to be like one of Helen’s pigs, is that it?”

“Yes! Sometimes, I mean.” She looked down to her side and began playing with her hair. “Juss why ja have t’be so strange all the time?”

“How do you mean?”

“With yer questions and yer looking at me. . . an you refuse t’wear yer I’s! Why?”

“None of the officers wear I-Lenses, you know that.”

“None of em wear em *all the time*, b’they still wear em. You don’ wear em at all. S’strange,” she said, shaking her head.

“I’m smarter than them. I don’t need them.”

“You are smarter.” She smiled at him. “Yer different.” Then she shook her head again. “I don’ know, mostly I like that I think. I like knowing yer not like th’rest. B’yer so weird mosta the time, it juss confuses me!”

“You should try taking your lenses out more often. You know you can when we’re together. And at home before bed and after you wake up. Why not try?”

“‘Life without I-Lens s’life without.’ You know that, Captain.”

“If you mean I’ve heard the catchphrase, you’re right. . . but slogans aren’t automatically true or right. We get to decide for ourselves.”

“B’who wouldn’ want their I’s? I remember my 10th birthday, waitin fer the fitting. Th’countdown that school year, our graduation party. . . So happy! Our month’s party was th’best by far in the whole class, there were five-a us. It was like ten Christmases rolled into one.”

She paused as she looked at the reflection in the window, remembering her joy. In her reflection she could still see the little girl she had been; the smile was the same.

“I still have th’ graduation trophy our school gave out t’ all the new Citizens.”

“There are plenty of people who don’t want them,” he said.

She came back to herself, then thought for a moment.

“Y’ mean terrorists, donja? Why’r you always talkin bout terrorists lately?”

“Not just terrorists. The Midlanders as well. They left because they didn’t want your I-Lenses. Why would they do that?”

“Because they’re stubborn an ungrateful for all I-Land gave em. Lots of em’r terrorist-lovers.”

“I remember the same lesson from my own schooling. . . But Srena, think: try and imagine what *they* might have thought. They’re people, with the feelings of people, like you and me. Do you really think they said to themselves ‘Let’s be stubborn and ungrateful.’”

“Wha ja mean?”

“I mean don’t you think they might have had other reasons for refusing and for leaving?”

“Don’ see how they could. Why’d they leave this? Not only the I’s but everythin. . . The Oasis, the food, the music –”

“Many of them make their own music, and all of them raise their own food.”

“But it doesn’ tase like those juicy Steakhouse steaks. ‘Nothin’s juicy as a Steakhouse steak.’”

“You’re speaking in slogans again, Srena. Speak for yourself! Those Steakhouse steaks are made from sick cows raised in pens smaller than your closet.”

“Who cares? Thass juss what I’m talkin bout! Y’ask all these questions and want t’talk bout all these unhappy things. Nobody talks bout that!”

“Maybe they should.”

“Why can’ y’juss be happy?”

“Are you?”

“No, not right now. Not when y’talk like this.”

“But other times?”

“When I see you I am. When y’kiss me. When we fuck.”

He grimaced. “Do you have to talk about it like that?”

“Well thass what’t is! Thass what I’m trained for.”

“They don’t talk about it like that out-city.”

“Wha do they call it, sheep-fucking?”

The Captain bowed his head and didn’t say anything. Then he looked up and just stared at her, stared into her eyes again, like he had done at the Coliseum. She looked away.

“Ugh, why ja gimme those looks? They really creep me out.”

“Why?”

“S’like yer tryin t’see inside me.”

“I am.”

“Y’see? Nobody else does that! That makes you weird an strange an confusing. Will you turn th’jammer off now?” She nodded toward the blue lights in the ceiling that were part of the terminal-jamming frequency coursing through the apartment.

“No, why? Are you getting antsy?”

“No.” She followed his gaze and realized she was jiggling her leg rapidly. She stopped it. “I juss wanna hear my music again.”

“You see? You don’t take your lenses out because you can’t stand to. You got the Scrad just like that bastard from the PJs. Henry was his name.”

“I don’! B’sides, Helen’s much worse than me.”

“Faint praise,” he said.

Srena didn’t understand and thus didn’t say anything.

“Look,” he continued. “You wanna know why I look at you like that, why I try to see inside you?”

She took an angry breath and nodded with tight lips.

“It’s because I sense something in you. You’re not like the other girls. You’re special.”

“Really?”

She looked down, feeling herself blushing. Then back into his eyes. Those eyes, so strange and wonderful.

He nodded. “And that’s why I talk to you about these strange things, because I see that you can handle it. That maybe even you’ll start to understand it some day. For god’s sake,” he chuckled, “Do you think I could talk to Helen about these things?”

She laughed too. “Oh sir.”

She moved next to him on the couch and leaned her head on his shoulder. He put his arm around her shoulders and squeezed.

“I love it when y’tell me those things. You make me feel so good. An I know – Helen tells me – that mosta th’ officers aren’ so kind.”

She felt him stiffen and take his arm away.

“No, you don’t understand.” He lifted her off his shoulder and looked at her straight on. “I’m not telling you that to be romantic, or make you feel good or anything. I’m telling you because it’s *true*. For some reason you don’t believe me, but if you like me as much as you say you do, you need to trust me.”

When he spoke for so long she couldn’t follow him. She heard him sound angry again as she started glancing around the room.

“Listen to me. LISTEN TO ME!”

She turned back to him with eyes wide.

“Or I’ll smack you again, heaven help me.”

She reached a hand up to touch her cheek, which was clearly swollen now.

“Right now you’re nothing,” he said. “You weren’t trained to be anything but a jizz-trap. You’ll never be more than that. You’re not even a High Volume Consumer. You’ll be an officer’s cunt until you’re too old to get em up, and then if you’ve been good enough you’ll become a teacher for the new cunts. That’s all you can ever hope to be. Is that about right?”

“Sometimes yer so mean t’me. I don’ understand why. I think you like me and you say these nice, beautiful things b’then yer mean. I don’ –”

“Shut up.” He waited a few seconds to make sure she wasn’t going to continue. “That’s just the first part. That’s the bad news. I tell you that so that you’ll understand what comes next. Here’s the good news: I see *more* in you. There’s this tiny little spark in you that nobody else has. . . that’s why I picked you out of all the other girls in the first place. Are you still with me?”

She nodded.

“Now if you let me help you, we can take this tiny little spark that I see in you, and we can blow on this spark and turn it into a flame, and from that single flame we can make a bright,

shining fire, and you can be *more* than just a fuck-machine. You can be more than a LoVo, or even a HiVo. You can be a real person. That's why I say you're special. Do you understand me?"

"I think so," she said, nodding at him sincerely, eyebrows raised. She didn't fully understand, but it certainly sounded like he was being nice again.

"Thank the heavens. So you want to be more than a fuck-machine?"

"Yes but. . ." She was almost too scared to speak; she didn't want to accidentally anger him again. "But isn't it dangerous?"

"Dangerous?" He was leaning forward again, talking fast. He was almost excited. "Of course it's dangerous, but the important thing is to try." He took her hands and squeezed them.

"But. . . I mean. . . I won't get burned?"

"Burned? What do you mean?"

He cocked his head and looked at her with those beautiful, kind eyes.

"I mean, you talked bout startin a fire in me. Wouldn't it burn me? Will't be very painful? I mean, I'll let you do it if you think it'll help. . . if you promise you'll keep bein nice t'me. . . I juss wanted t'know. . . will there be an extinguisher?"

He released her hands and leaned back, then just sat there looking at her for a long while. By his eye movements she could see him scanning her entire face. She had said something wrong but she didn't know what. Oh goodness, she hoped he wouldn't be mean to her again.

Finally he turned away from her, facing out from the couch and leaning with elbows on knees. He bent his head down and propped it up with his left hand, now facing away from her.

"No," he finally said, after a long while. "It won't be painful, Srena. You won't get burned. I promise."

“Oh thass wonderful,” she said, smiling again and sliding closer to him.

She wrapped her arms around his torso and hugged him, laying her head on his back. After several seconds, almost automatically, she began caressing his abdomen softly. Even while he was hunched over she could feel the massive muscles of his stomach. She felt herself getting excited, the warmth all over once more. Her hands made lazy circles closer and closer to his waist, finally arriving at his groin. But just when she firmly grabbed his penis he rose, shrugging out of her embrace and standing up.

“I’ve gotta go to the bathroom,” he said, looking down on her without an expression she could decipher. “Go into the bedroom and get yourself ready.”

She smiled at him with heavy eyelids once more. “Yessir, m’captain!”

He turned from her and headed to the bedroom. Srena followed him slowly, undressing herself as she went. She dropped her shirt on the floor, then removed a breath freshener from her bra. She smoothly slipped it under her tongue and unzipped her skirt with the other hand, letting it slip from her hips. She stepped out of her heels but kept her underwear on – she knew he liked to take it off himself. She shuddered slightly in anticipation and hugged herself to stop it. Things were so lovely when he was nice to her!

She sat down on the bed to wait for him, listening to the running water in the bathroom. Her eye was drawn to the nightstand, where the top drawer stood ajar. It was strictly forbidden for secretaries to snoop, but she saw something that momentarily disturbed her. Opening the drawer, she saw a book and gasped. She looked sharply to the bathroom door then back at the drawer. She bent closer to read the cover: The Re—

“Can I help you?”

She jumped up and gasped again. The Captain stood naked in front of the open bathroom door.

“You have a book!”

He looked from her to the drawer and back, several times. Finally he settled his gaze on her.

“And what of it?” He straightened up as he said it.

“I never seen one. They’re not allowed!”

“Not for normal Cits, of course.”

“No’ fer anyone I thought! All books’r converted t’screen so there’s no need fer th’old ones.”

“Not all books have been digitally converted, only those approved by I-Land, and most of those were altered so that only the originals have the true text.”

“B’t hass because’re terroris! Thass why they’re not allowed.”

“You’re going to tell a captain of the I-PF what he can and can’t do? Of course officers can read books if they’d like.”

She looked at him more closely than she ever remembered doing. His calm gaze was absolutely inscrutable.

“I’m not sure. . . everyone always tol’ me there’s no good reason for readin a non-dig. Juss illegal reasons.”

“Sure, for normal Cits. I’m no normal Cit though. . . I know,” he said, raising a finger into the air as he left the room.

She heard a click and all of the sudden her music came back on, the lens lighting up the corners of her vision.

“Woulja like yer music now’t we’re done talking?” the Captain asked.

Srena smiled automatically at the sound of the first note. “Oh yeah. . . wooonderful.” She melted back into the bed.

The Captain came over to the bed and pushed the drawer closed with his leg. At the sound she looked over and frowned slightly. She would have to remember to ask Helen about that, to make sure. Of course she would remember. . .

She felt his hands on her stomach and moaned, arching her back. But he didn’t lean in to kiss her like normal. He just lay there, looking at her body as he groped it, rubbing his hand up her stomach and squeezing her breast. He was squeezing it still, squeezing it hard. Too hard. She recoiled with a sharp inhale.

He eased off, kneading her breasts hard but not quite painfully. Then he wrenched her over onto her stomach and began massaging her bottom. Somewhat taken aback at the rough treatment, it took Srena a few seconds to surrender herself to the new position. But his hand still felt good, just a little harsher than she preferred. Then again, her preferences weren’t primary, and she still had all the techniques they had taught her in training. She began raising her hips to meet his hand on the downstroke, lifting her pelvis as she arched her back. His hand found its way down into the crevice between her cheeks, reaching further, touching her vagina, already warm and moist, almost ready.

He rubbed it gently, then harder, then hard. Too hard again.

“Ow,” she said, frowning back at him.

The look on his face was strange again, inscrutable. He didn’t respond to her cry, except to slightly diminish the pressure of his hand. Gradually she was able to relax again, moaning now-insincerely to please him and to coax herself back in the mood, just like they taught.

Abruptly he got to his knees and grabbed her underwear, ripping it down so hard it made a tearing sound. Before ripping it cut into the front of her hips, hurting her, but she kept her mouth shut, biting her lip and closing her eyes. He positioned himself between her legs and lifted her hips back toward him, fully exposing her bottom.

Before she was over the pain, or aware of the sudden movement, he entered her without hesitation or finesse, her insides not fully primed. She inhaled sharply but made no other sound. This was the least pleasurable fuck she'd ever had with the Captain, but it wasn't her place to complain.

Gone were the sensitive caress, the curious hands and wandering mouth, the kisses over her entire body, the foreplay. Mounted behind her, the Captain thrust in an unvarying rhythm for what seemed like a very long time. He spanked her, something he had never done, starting out once or twice but then doing it with greater frequency the closer he got to finishing, faster and harder. Through her fake screams of pleasure Srena was reeling inside, alarmed and confused at this change. What was happening?

No matter how hard she screamed, the Captain didn't make a sound, nothing besides the smack of his thighs on her buttocks, or the slap of his palm on her ass. He was cold and rough, and he came with an explosion of thrusting even faster and harder.

When he was done he rolled off of her and went into the bathroom without a word or a caress. Srena lay there, her pussy sore and throbbing, her ass stinging, both of them hot from the abuse. The rest of her was cold. She quickly got under the covers, huddling away from the bathroom, not saying anything when the Captain returned to bed.

The whole experience was so bewildering that she only now realized that her favorite song had been playing the entire time. Srena made some quick head movements and turned the

volume up. Then she set up her cue for sleepy music and closed her eyes. The screen of her I's faded out after its five-second delay.

Within minutes the Captain began to breathe heavily, but it took Srena over an hour to fall asleep. So much had happened tonight, most of it bizarre and disturbing. While she didn't exactly want to think about any of it, her mind took a long time to settle. When she finally fell asleep, the Captain had begun to snore.

That night Srena dreamt of fire.

PART II

“On Origins and Destinations, Pt. II”⁷

The biological view of human evolution is the natural corollary of the aforementioned mystico-religious interpretation. Though serious scientific inquiry into the matter was effectively aborted after collateral damage from Civil War II devastated global infrastructure, a general consensus had already established that humankind originated from Lower East Africa, in the region then comprising Tanzania and stretching as far north as Ethiopia. This is where was determined to have lived 'Mitochondrial Eve,' the genetic matriarch of every single modern human being.

From this and corroborating evidence, the majority of evolutionary biologists and archaeologists supported the 'Out of Africa,' or 'Recent African Origin' theory, stating that modern humans migrated out of Africa and either absorbed or displaced existing sub-human species – Homo neanderthalensis and Homo heidelbergensis in Europe, Homo erectus in Asia, Denisova hominin in Australasia, etc. – as they spread across the globe.

Conveniently for our purposes, evidence from the scientific community supports our ideas concerning the biblical Fall and the evolution of human consciousness. For just as the Fall implied a false perception of separation from the divinity in our previously unified (though ignorant) selves, so did the human species divide as it exited Africa, from – for our purposes – a singular tribe into multiple distinct factions. In other words, the interior, metaphysical separation of our mind from our true divinity was mirrored by an exterior, sociological division.

7 Excerpted from Jensen, Frida, The People's Anthology of the 3rd Millenium, 2nd edition, Ch. 9.

This is corroborated anecdotally with a cursory glance at the culture of former Ethiopia, where physical features encompass the entire breadth of modern humans: the dark skin and full lips of Africa; Aryo-Caucasia's high forehead and thin nose; the orbital epithelial folds characteristic of Asiatics, etc. It is indeed difficult to overstate the importance of this historical fact. For if true, if every single human being, every one of us, can accurately point to East Africa as our ancestral land, it means we are literally members of the same family, and that the divisions we perceive between us are as false as the one we perceive between ourselves and God.

Let us briefly revisit the question of our metaphysical evolution, where the goal is attainment of higher consciousness – of 'enlightenment,' for want of a common referent. It must be emphasized, however, that this is not a simple progression, nor a cycle, but rather a return, almost as a boomerang; recall that we have already employed the hide-and-seek metaphor to describe the way in which divinity has apparently abandoned humanity and must now be found as part of a cosmic entertainment.

With the goal of metaphysical evolution in mind, that of a conscious return to unity, we are then prepared to understand the corresponding goal of biological evolution, which must entail a corresponding return to unity, but now on the biological level. In other words: whereas all of ancient humanity descended and divided from the ancestral 'Ethiopian,' so must all of modern humanity unite in a return to a 'New Ethiopian,' to a humanity that is multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and multi-racial. The idea goes part and parcel with the metaphysical re-attainment of conscious unity. Indeed, we contend that only when people have attained such a raceless ideal – that of the 'New Ethiopia' – will they be physically habilitated for conscious reunification with the Godhead.

Therefore, racial equality and intercourse are fundamental tenets of the People.

VII.

In the dark, Eche lay awake but senseless of time. Pain and numbness were all she knew. Minutes turned into hours and her sleep bled into dreams and back into consciousness, then drifted off once more into the limbo between worlds, cycling back and forth until she no longer knew if she had been lying there for one week or one night, or perhaps forever. Her arms and hands – even her burnt knees – throbbed under the bandages. Her head felt like a stubbed-out cigar butt, the raw soreness stretching from the crown of her head to the front of her face. The dull yet powerful ache made true rest impossible.

A soft knock interrupted her purgatory. The dim yellow light peeking under the door slithered up the wall as the door slowly cracked open. It was just wide enough to reveal a long-haired silhouette.

“Are you awake?”

Dani.

“I’m not sure if I ever slept.” The flatness in her own voice soothed her.

“Can I come in?”

“Yes,” she said. “Leave the light off.”

The serpent of light ballooned cartoonishly as Dani opened the door and stepped into the room; it shrunk again as she re-closed the door. Dani approached Eche’s cot and sat down next to her hips. Eche turned her head away and winced at the pressure on her wound.

“How are you feeling?”

“Like shit.”

“Eche, I’m so sorry.”

“I know. You’re sorry. Guaré’s sorry. Mohsin’s sorry. Everyone’s sorry. Good for them.”

On top of all she had suffered, too she must suffer the same pointless conversations over and over again, the same empty platitudes. How tiresome. How she hated it.

After a moment Dani said, “You’re entitled to your bitterness, and you’ll continue to be entitled for some while. But sooner or later you’ll find it better to channel your anger into something more. . . productive.”

Eche didn’t say anything for a moment. She slowly turned her head back to Dani.

“You’ve come to tell me to move on? Are you serious? It’s been how long?”

Dani held up her hands to ward off the verbal attack. “I tell you to do nothing, especially not the very next day.” She lowered her hands. “I just wanted you to know that when you’re ready, I’ll be waiting. I wasn’t joking with Mohsin when I requested you for my company.”

“Yeah? What’s so special about your company?”

“I don’t need to bother you with those details right now.”

She moved to raise herself from the cot.

“No really,” Eche said, reaching for Dani’s arm. She was suddenly interested despite herself. She heard the tone of her voice change without consciously willing it.

“I wanna know.”

Dani looked at her for a moment, then relaxed back onto the cot. She looked to the floor and said, “There’s nothing different about my company, except that I lead it. I think we can help each other. There’s an. . . alternative mission I could use your help with.”

“Alternative mission? What’s that?”

Her expression gave away nothing. “I can fill you in later, when you’re ready.”

“Why me?”

Dani cocked her head, obviously considering how to respond. It made Eche more suspicious.

“Well, emotional investment for one. You know my story, so use your imagination. Any soldier can follow Mohsin’s orders, or Guaré’s. . .” She chuckled. “The majority are automatons, sheep, no different than *their* LoVos.” She looked up. “But you have more than just a philosophical reason to care, at least now.”

“So my family getting cooked alive makes me eligible?”

Distantly, Eche heard the sarcasm drip back into her voice. It was strange how everything was suddenly happening at a remove, like she herself was a half-second behind her body’s actions.

“You were a candidate before, as I told you. Loss is no prerequisite. Direct experience with I-Land is sufficient, witnessing their atrocities and abuses. Not even that is necessary, just a certain passion. You’ve always had that passion for Justice and Truth. You’ve always been the truest of Sisters, since I’ve known you. After all, you were the first Sister I met.”

Eche felt herself blushing and was immediately angry for being so pliable.

“It’s a nice pitch,” she said, regrouping.

“Call it what you will.”

“So this is like a secret army you’re putting together or what?”

“Not an army, just a few of us. We can’t trust our plans to just anybody.”

“But me yes? What are they? Does Amadou know?”

Dani cocked her head slightly again, but the backlighting made it impossible to discern the look on her face.

“Amadou. . . Amadou,” Dani said to herself. Eche could hear the smile in her voice. “You know my love for Amadou, little Sister. He’s been my saving grace since even before my arrival down here. He did as much work as your family to heal me, probably more. . .” She turned, staring at the far wall. “But his mind is not for such things. He neither wants to know, nor is he capable of comprehending. That purity is one of the reasons I love him.”

“Then your plans would taint him? They’re impure?”

Dani lifted a hand to her ear, fingering that scar. How Eche had loved that tic of hers all those years ago, in her childhood, when Dani had taken refuge in their house, when their positions had been reversed. She had loved it just as she had loved the singularly cocked gait of her dog. But all that was burnt out of her now. Now she observed the gesture dispassionately, as a remote datum. It aroused nothing in her other than curiosity, being as it signified Dani’s apprehension.

After a moment of silence, Dani chuckled through her nose. Eche understood it immediately as false bravado.

“You speak in the language of absolutes, little Sister, while reality is much grayer. As an outsider until recently, you wouldn’t know,” she began. “But there are certain among us who believe that the People’s strategy does not go far enough in its offensive against I-Land.”

“I don’t understand.”

“We present a united front, but there are tensions behind that front – tensions the extent of which even certain leaders are not aware.”

She paused but Eche said nothing, just stared. A strange feeling began to rumble in her stomach, and the little cold knot that she had felt yesterday – could it have been only yesterday? – again pulsed. It was her to turn to feel apprehension.

“As you know, as you believe – that, after all, is what makes you true People – we must overthrow I-Land to release humankind from its shackles, and cast it once more into the stream of divine evolution of consciousness.”

“Yes?”

“Mohsin is only the first to fully evolve in this way, but eventually those like him. . .” She paused, a strange smile playing at the corner of her mouth as she regarded Eche. “. . . They’ll be the rule rather than the exception. That is the next step, bringing us that much closer back to the godhead.”

“I know all this. They’re my beliefs too, why I’ve always desired to be with you.”

Dani ignored her. “But often overlooked, or ignored,” she continued, “In this talk of evolution, is the fact that for evolution to occur, for the strong to advance, the weak must die.”

The feeling in Eche’s stomach became an anxious foreboding. She felt her body slowly tense.

“Accordingly, my mission is the annihilation of the weak.”

Chills overcame Eche. Her heart began to pound. She breathed, “Annihilation of the weak. . . the Citizens? Tasked by whom?”

“By one of the Council.”

“Just one? And the rest?”

Dani raised her eyebrows but didn’t answer.

Long seconds passed and Eche just stared at Dani, who betrayed no emotion, neither hesitation nor uncertainty. Eche appraised the ramifications and Dani, perhaps recognizing this process, continued.

“I became convinced of the rightness of these actions by remembering what I have suffered at the hands of I-Land, the I-PF, even everyday Citizens. You too have that experience to draw upon, lamentably.”

Eche looked over at the wall across from her cot, trying not to hear the words but unable to escape them. Was this her sister, talking of these things? The feeling that originated in her stomach now pervaded her entire body. Her arms began to tremble and she struggled to keep her head still.

“Think of it Eche: what do those people deserve? Not people, no. . . they’re robots, automatons. Do they deserve to continue living as eating, breathing, fucking machines, nothing more? They enjoy nothing but superficially, they’ve forgotten how. I lived there and I know.

“They’re not happy unless wired. The moment they experience actual reality is the moment they become unbearably anxious, searching frantically for a way to distract themselves once more. If they’re so desperate to escape from reality, let us help. Let us help them and let us make our help permanent.

“It’s not life that those robots experience; it’s consumption. It’s no accident that Citizens are separated into High Volume and Low Volume *Consumers*; it’s the only thing that matters to them. They consume strange abominations to keep their bodies running, and they consume screens to keep their minds buzzing, and the screens in turn consume their brains. There’s no living or *being* on I-Land, there’s no enjoyment of reality. There’s only consumption.”

She paused, perhaps waiting for Eche to say something. But Eche couldn’t speak. She was still looking at the wall, trying to control her shaking body, trying to unhear every word her sister spoke.

“I take it back,” Dani continued. “‘Deserve’ is the wrong word. Whether or not they ‘deserve’ life or death is irrelevant, because killing them would be an act of mercy. It would be merciful to them, and of benefit to us.”

Eche, from her supine position, slowly turned back to Dani. Her body, trembling with tension, suddenly relaxed in a frigid wave. Once more she experienced the time lag between herself and her body, the body acting independently of her will. She felt her lips parting, her tongue flexing, her vocal chords tightening, all as if in slow motion, all of their own volition, but not hers.

“I don’t know,” they said, and Dani cocked her head. Eche looked upon her own actions and words strangely, shocked and confused by what she uttered at the very same moment she was saying it. It was as if she was observing herself from atop a precipice, at any moment poised to tumble over the edge, for what reason she could not fathom.

“I disagree,” a part of her continued. “I kind of liked ‘deserve.’”

The word lingered in the ensuing silence and she watched Dani’s slow comprehension reflected in a gradual smile, a small, humble expression, very unlike her habitual arrogance.

But Eche wasn’t much in the mood for smiling. She continued to watch as Dani picked herself up from the cot and moved toward the door. At the door, Dani turned around.

“Rest well, young soldier. We need you strong.”

As she closed the door, part of Eche, the same part that had watched helplessly as her body took control, wanted to scream for Dani to stop, to wait. It wanted to tell Dani that she wasn’t an agent of genocide, that she wouldn’t do it, that she couldn’t, that Dani would have to find someone else.

The other part was cold and numb, and more satisfied than she had been since walking to Dragona's house the previous day. That part of her loved Dani, her soul sister for life. It was grateful for the opportunity she offered. It rejoiced at finding a guardian so soon after losing her family. It clung to Dani as the only residue of that other life.

The tension now completely dissolved from her body, Eche rolled onto her right side, her back to the wall. She closed her eyes and fell asleep almost instantly. She did not dream.

Srena waited peacefully in her Claw, distracting herself with the pole-screen that hovered in front of her face. The ADD's metal arms helped calm her, counteracting the anxiety produced by the abrasive sirens and periodic announcements: "ATTENTION CITIZENS: ASSUME POSTS. . ." In his stern mode, Cal wasn't nearly as pleasant as usual.

She was able to ignore most of the discomfort from the rough pincers. The consternation she had felt at the device's casual brutality during her first automatic detainment was now only a faint current buried deep within the middling stream of her awareness.

Srena bit her lower lip with clenched fists as she watched the screen's footage of the I-PF quelling a riot; it titillated her no matter how many times she saw it. Judging by the outdated I-PF uniforms, this specific riot must have taken place before the attack on the Citadel. She would have been too young to remember. But she had already seen this one countless times and lost interest well before the video faded out, replaced by the standard news feed.

The theme music for the PJs surged through her Bard as the logo whooshed onto the screen. She smiled to herself when she realized they were going to show the highlights from last

night's performance. She felt almost famous, like she was somehow a part of the news just from having been there.

But as her mind flitted from the exhilaration of the PJs to the encounter at the Captain's flat, Srena's smile morphed into a frown. Dwelling on the Captain's behavior, she barely even heard Reed Flowers's voice. It was strange that she hadn't really pondered it until now.

She knew that last night had been disagreeable, yet she continued to feel a strange comfort in the Captain's presence, even in her memory of him. There was something she could feel yet not see, some secret waiting to be revealed behind his enigmatic eyes, some key he seemed to possess that he could share with her in order to unlock some. . . what, exactly? What could he unlock in her?

She didn't know, though it felt important, this something-that-could-be-but-wasn't-quite. How could she find out? How could she ask the Captain if she didn't even know how to describe it? Did she even want to ask him after last night?

That was the most confusing part – that somebody who gave her this feeling of security and well-being could do to her what he had done after the PJs, could treat her like that. The portion of his gaze that imparted the safe feeling to her had been occluded, his abrupt manner unlike anything she had ever witnessed in him. At the same time there was something strange about it, almost mechanical, like he didn't really believe what he was doing.

That's it, Srena told herself, that wasn't really him doing that.

But why then?

Maybe she could ask Helen if it was normal. And about the book too. Helen had enough experience to know these things. That's what she would do.

Her screen distracted her just in time to see the second mobile closet being wheeled out onto the Fulcrum Arena floor, just at the moment that she and the Captain had exited.

Srena closed her eyes so that her I's would have time to black out before the aggravated rape was shown, but she couldn't lower the volume; Cal's detention protocol overrode her Bard controls. And now the lack of visuals highlighted the audio feed even further. She couldn't avoid hearing the details of the justice administration.

"I still remember my first like it was yesterday. . ." Reed said, just like last night. "Our candidate tonight is a NonCon who tortured an abused a Cit fer his own perverted pleasure. Let em do what they will in the Nink, I say. B'leave ours alone!"

The feed cut to the recorded administration.

"Lookin pretty tonight, ainja?" a gravelly voice said.

"I—I—I don' wan no trouble mista," a tremulous voice responded.

The feed cut again and Srena abruptly heard the gravelly voice grunting rhythmically, and the whiny voice screaming, "Oh god! Oh god please! I'm sorry! Please stop I swear I'm through!"

Srena was clenching her teeth in a grimace and trying to raise her hands to her ears. She winced further as the metal clamps bit into her upper arms. The man's scream was maddening and the gravelly laughter on top of it almost made Srena cry out herself.

It ceased suddenly. Srena remained clenched for three seconds before she dared open her eyes. When she did the metal arms of the ADD began to release, the pole-screen drawn up as it was retracted. She was free.

She took a small step forward and a deep breath inward. The announcement was finishing as she exhaled, ". . . If you have any concerns about your detention, you may address

them to the appropriate authorities. Thank you for your cooperation during this time of insecurity.”

The cramping in Betancourt’s stomach worsened the farther out-city he got. He would have liked to have blamed his breakfast, but he had only eaten an apple.

The only things standing in the landscape around him were the monstrous cooling towers to either side of the roadway. Where other structures had been – distant homesteads and independent agricultors – he counted at least a dozen plumes of smoke marring the cloudless sky. They seemed small in the distance but he knew their true size. He knew they had consumed everything in the vicinity. He knew what they meant.

The blue sky felt like a cynical taunt this morning, a false proclamation of good things to come, a transparent assurance that those dark splotches smeared over his field of vision were of no import, that everything was just fine and that here, why don’t you just go ahead and turn up the volume of (insert-latest-hit-song) while you check last night’s (insert-preferred-programming) recaps?

He had trouble focusing as he drove his personal vehicle toward the rendezvous. Once more he had been able to easily and automatically navigate the last checkpoint. But now his thoughts were split between Srena and the People, between his old and new life.

He was ashamed at his behavior with her the previous night. She hadn’t deserved his abuse – it wasn’t her fault. He hadn’t been strong enough to act righteously. But he got tired of being a goddamn saint all the time, patient and caring, waiting for her to figure it out.

He had lost most of his hope last night. She seemed physically incapable of thinking about certain topics, the indoctrination was that good. Perhaps with more time one-on-one, more conversations like last night, he'd be able to get through. But when? How? Time was one of many things he didn't have in abundance these days, and the investment was all the more difficult after an evening with her insufferable friends. Roy, that pissant.

She was really just a personal crusade of his. She didn't matter in the long run. He was more disappointed in Srena than he had thought possible, but there was more important business at hand. He needed to focus on his real troubles for the sake of Mohsin and Eche and Frida, for all of his new kin.

What would this meeting even look like? The anxiety contributed to his scattershot thought. He was sure to face more hostility than ever before. He would have to outdo himself with compassion and docility. Take whatever they gave him and control his anger. He couldn't let them get a rise out of him. Kill em with kindness.

Really, though, he was avoiding the thought of one particular person. He knew what had probably happened to her, and how she must be feeling. He knew she would probably blame him, that she would probably. . . but no, he couldn't go there, not yet. A fresh cramp seized his stomach. He grimaced over the steering wheel.

As he got to the turnoff he noticed the geyser of smoke on his immediate right, still several clicks in the distance, and with it a flash of anger for not seeing or thinking of it sooner. He knew whose house it would be. He had just been too distracted to consider it before now.

He drove along the dirt road and began to see soot on the trees around him. The smoke got thicker until he finally pulled up near the storm drain – the drain that had been his original

entry into this new world just a few days ago. Up the dark hill beyond the blackened, branchless trees, he saw the smoldering ruins of what had been Dragona's compound.

Betancourt turned off his vehicle and opened the door. Stepping out, his foot sunk into a blanket of ash covering the ground. The vegetation had been incinerated in a wide swath beginning at the opening of the storm drain and stretching across the road, up the hill to the former farm. The woods were eerie in their silence; the smell of burning invaded his nostrils. He couldn't even distinguish one burnt scent from another, just the smell of Burnt. For several moments he stood there, surveying the devastation, as the cramping in his gut intensified.

A sharp whistle from the direction of the flood drain interrupted his vigil. Arriving under the lip of the drain, he encountered four people awaiting him with solemn faces: Mohsin, Guaré and two women. One of them had reddish-brown hair and a statuesque face with a haughty expression. He hadn't yet met her. The other was smaller and recently injured, her head and arms mostly covered in bandages.

Nobody said anything to him, they just stared. Guaré was inscrutable as always, but emitting the same vague hostility as the first time they met. Only Mohsin appeared even moderately open to his presence. After several moments he could no longer meet their gazes.

His apology, "I'm so sorry," altered nothing of their silence.

Then Mohsin reached out to clasp his shoulder. Finally Betancourt was able to look up with wet eyes. Mohsin nodded – it seemed just for him – then dropped his hand back down.

"Are there any survivors?" Betancourt asked.

"A few. One family that can be counted on to help us."

Betancourt looked to Guaré and withered under his gaze.

"Eche's family?"

“I survived,” said the disfigured woman. The cold of her voice was skin-shriveling.

He looked at her for a second time, trying to make her injured face. He examined the bandages on her hands, running up her left arm. Then on her head and face, and the stubble where her hair had been. She carried with her like a shroud the smell of burnt hair; surely he imagined it. His face relaxed into a gape as his confusion dispelled.

“Eche!” He took a step toward her and reached out. She stepped back and he halted.

“Your family?” he asked.

She didn’t respond verbally but he now realized she was glaring at him. Probably had been the entire time.

“Eche I’m so sorry.”

“You already said that,” the haughty woman answered. Her well-defined, proportional features granted her a weird nobility.

He looked directly toward this new person for the first time, failing to fully disguise his quick surge of annoyance.

“Not to her, not personally,” he said. She didn’t respond.

Mohsin interceded, “Betancourt, this is Daniyah, another commander in our ranks. We call her Dani. Eche will be joining her company.”

Betancourt looked to Eche, who stood passive and emotionless. Dani regarded him with a tiny smirk that made him far more uncomfortable than the petty personal offense she undoubtedly intended. He saw malice in her. He looked back to Mohsin, unsure if he should express his concern. Returning his gaze, Mohsin cocked his head faintly before turning and walking toward the edge of the lip. The others followed, Betancourt tailing them and wondering at Mohsin’s minor limp.

They arrived at a modified rail car on the very edge of the overhang. It was twice as long as the tunnel transport. Instead of metal wheels it had large, all-terrain rubber tires.

At the very edge of the overhang was a pile of blankets, mottled brown, green and gray in color. Mohsin picked one up and handed it to Betancourt, the others retrieving their own. Betancourt was surprised to see a shiny metallic layer on the underside of the brownish cotton. The entire garment was thick, yet incredibly light. Unfolded, it could cover a fully-grown adult.

“Drone protection,” Guaré muttered to him. “Top is for the vids – not as useful now that everything’s black. The lining and air pockets for the infrared.”

Betancourt’s sincere fascination at the technology was secondary to the solace he felt by Guaré still speaking to him.

“Where’d you get this?”

“Dragona had just about everything, not far behind your people in terms of technology.”

He slipped the blanket on, camo-side up. A moment later his head popped out the hooded center of the poncho. Betancourt chose to ignore Guaré’s loaded meaning as he donned his own camo. *Your people, he said. Meaning not one of his People.*

“Where are we going now?” he asked instead.

“Salvage the cache.”

Guaré walked over to the cart and draped another poncho over the entire vehicle. He then grabbed a long metal handle at the far end and began pulling it toward the road. They all bunched around the cart. Mohsin swept his vision across the sky. When satisfied, he started out wordlessly. The rest followed, Betancourt helping push in the rear.

They crossed the road and rolled the cart up the hill. Steam still seeped from the blackened earth as the roots continued smoldering underground. The cushion of soot muffled the crunches of their feet on the forest floor.

A species of hell, he thought.

It lacked only the agonized cries and searing heat to polish off the portrait. The absurdity of the cool morning breeze and the perfectly blue sky against the singed landscape suddenly struck him as inordinately funny. He felt a laugh bubbling forth and stifled it without a sound, convulsing slightly at the effort.

Don't lose it.

Again Mohsin paused. The others watched him as he watched the sky. Again he lead them onward.

Atop the rhythmic pulses of their footsteps nobody spoke. The silence oppressed Betancourt. He wanted to talk to them, to explain, to excuse, but he couldn't think of anything he might say that wouldn't sound utterly inane. The two women were clearly aligned against him, nothing to be done there, at least not at the moment. Guaré, though fair, had never liked him; Betancourt couldn't reasonably expect him to act more congenially. So the only person who could alleviate his discomfort was Mohsin, too good a leader to get distracted in the name of moral support. Betancourt despised himself for his neediness.

Guaré stopped abruptly at the edge of the copse separating the road from Dragona's pasture. Head down, Betancourt bumped into the back of the cart before stepping back to look around.

Mohsin looked upward once more before bending down at a metal door in the ground. He touched it with the back of his hand, then walked around to the handle and lifted it with a

small grunt. It clanged open and the others gathered around the opening. Below, Betancourt could see the beginnings of shelves lining either side of the chamber, the edges of crates on the shelves. Mohsin and Guaré descended the steep wooden steps into the chamber while Dani removed the poncho cover from the cart. Before he disappeared into the chamber, Mohsin looked to Dani and pointed to his eye.

Dani stepped back and looked around the copse. The only noise was the faint hissing of the smoldering underbrush. She tapped Betancourt on the arm and pointed down to the repository.

“They’ll need help,” she said.

Betancourt went down a few steps before he saw the edge of a crate appear out of the darkness. It tilted up and thrust into his thigh. Grabbing hold and lifting, he backed out of the hole and saw Mohsin appear from the darkness on the other side. They set it down in the cart.

“One box is missing,” Mohsin said as he straightened up.

“What?” Dani responded.

He nodded. “An empty space lined by dust.”

Dani thought for a moment, her eyes moving in all directions. Betancourt watched her and saw Mohsin doing the same.

“Dragona must’ve taken it out for the ambush, or for protection afterward.”

Mohsin nodded slowly. “Possibly.”

She asked, “You think that’s why you’ve been jumpy?”

“Jumpy? I don’t see it that way. I feel something strange, something off. That could be it, or it could be something else. It could be more than one thing, which hardly seems fair at this

point, but is still possible. The only way I have of knowing is to prepare for all eventualities. You call it jumpy. I call it cautious.”

He turned and headed back down to the cache.

Betancourt studied her until she turned to him, raising her eyebrows. “And?”

Now it was his turn to smile.

“He knows you’re hiding something. Even I can see it, and I don’t enjoy his gift. The only question is why doesn’t he confront you? Well, not the only question. There’s also, ‘What’s in the crate and what are you planning to do with it?’”

Eche looked quickly to Dani and he chuckled.

Dani’s gaze, meanwhile, had not wavered from Betancourt. “You certainly don’t wait to meddle, do you, Citizen?” He did not react and Dani continued, raising a hand to scratch at her ear. “He doesn’t confront me because he needs me, and he knows me well enough to understand that shaming me would be counterproductive.”

“And you exploit his generosity.”

“We all do what we feel necessary.”

A “Here!” from the bunker interrupted them.

Betancourt jumped toward the opening and met the second crate halfway down the stairs. Mohsin rose once more from the cellar and looked once more toward the sky.

“Have you seen any birds?” Betancourt asked. They set the new crate down on top of the first.

“No, which causes more concern. I feel a small alarm, difficult to explain but something my condition allows me to feel, these generalized impressions. It is only half the battle, however, as the impressions must be intellectualized in order to serve us.”

Betancourt accompanied him as he walked slowly back to the stairs.

“Can I help in any way?”

“Just keep your eyes open,” he said softly, leaning toward him. “I know about her, but there is another threat I have yet to identify.”

“Yes sir,” Betancourt said. A warm rush pervaded him at Mohsin's confiding in him. He descended again.

Betancourt turned to see both Dani and Eche eyeing him. He said nothing, just turned back and awaited the next crate, which soon appeared out of the hole. Betancourt grabbed it and saw Mohsin perform his ritual sky-scan.

The leader said, “Now with the smaller crates. You can come down and help after this one.”

They placed it into the half-full cart. Betancourt was sliding his hand out from beneath when he felt a gentle grip on his shoulder.

He looked up, jarred at the unexpected contact. Mohsin stared at him, one finger to his lips, as if Betancourt had sprouted a tumor on his face. Betancourt glanced around but nothing was happening; Dani and Eche were looking outward from the cache, away from them. He turned back to Mohsin and scrunched his eyebrows together in a question.

Mohsin pointed behind Betancourt's ear to his otic interruptor, the little black box. He mouthed, “It works when the light is on?”

Betancourt nodded.

Mohsin, very slowly, shook his head back and forth, his eyes never leaving Betancourt's.

Betancourt didn't move. His eyes widened to match Mohsin's. Mohsin glanced down for a moment and then back up.

“How much is down there?” Eche asked.

She straightened up when she saw the looks on their faces.

Mohsin raised the same finger to his lips. “Enough,” he said to her. While she watched he pointed to his ear, and then to Betancourt. Thinking for a moment, Eche finally nodded, her eyes widening in turn. Glancing back at Betancourt – the blame she shot at him in that glance cut him as well as any blade – she walked over to Dani, who was still looking away. Eche touched her shoulder and whispered into her ear. Dani whipped around to look at Mohsin and Betancourt.

Mohsin held up his hands in a waiting gesture.

“Come on,” he said to Betancourt. And he waved him down to the cache with him.

Mohsin stopped him halfway down the stairs and mouthed, “I will create a scene. After we come out. Let me and Guaré out first. To explain.” A pause as he let the instructions sink in. “You’ll run. Take the camoncho.” He tugged on his poncho. “Show it to them, a gift. After, contact by your line. Understand?”

Betancourt nodded.

He mouthed again, “Second threat now clear.” He raised an eyebrow and smiled grimly with a sigh. Betancourt was stupefied.

Mohsin turned around and the captain followed him down. He felt like a prisoner being led to the gallows. It was a concrete-laid bunker with a row of metal heavy-duty shelving on either side. It extended back about five meters. A small light bulb in the back of the vault offered dim illumination. There were still several long crates the size of those already extracted, but most of the remaining parcels were smaller cubes. Mohsin pointed to them and Guaré got his

and headed past them to the stairs. Mohsin and Betancourt turned to a shelf and looked at each other.

“Sorry,” Betancourt mouthed, his face burning in shame.

Mohsin extended his hand and Betancourt went to shake it. Mohsin instead grabbed his wrist and they grasped each others’ arms thus. Again, for the third time, Betancourt felt a wave of something at Mohsin’s touch, something rejuvenating. Tears arose in his eyes, a physical manifestation of the gratitude welling inside him. He didn’t deserve this compassion anymore.

Then Mohsin released him and turned back to the package, picking it up and releasing an emotive grunt. Betancourt waited while he headed up the stairs. Then he picked up his own box and shuffled toward the comfort of daylight.

They stood there all of them, looking at him. He felt as one condemned in front of a firing squad.

He carried his crate to the cart and set it in. Guaré quickly covered the lode with one of the ponchos. Mohsin said, loudly, “Wait.”

Betancourt turned to find Mohsin standing before him, emotionless and passive.

“The light on your ear, it’s extinguished,” he said. “That means. . . you’ve been spying on us this whole time!”

Betancourt didn’t say anything, he didn’t know what to say. It was bizarre: he could hear the rage in Mohsin’s voice but saw no facial manifestation.

“I told you he was not to be trusted!” Guaré said.

“We can’t let him escape!” Dani enjoined.

Betancourt, swiveling his head between speakers, finally settled his gaze back on Mohsin. The leader was mouthing, “Run!” with successive head feints. The captain looked around once more. He turned and fled.

“HEY!” Guaré shouted behind him. The tramping of feet pursued him.

“GET HIM!” Mohsin growled.

Bounding through the burnt trees and across the road, he heard objects hitting the ground around him. He turned and saw them running after him but lagging significantly. In five seconds he was through the blackened stand and racing up the incline to his vehicle. He could hear them yelling faintly in the distance but he didn’t look back until he yanked his car door open and collapsed into the seat. His adrenaline had him caught up in the pantomime; he forgot he wasn’t actually in imminent danger until he glanced back to the road, where he saw the group cross it with the cart as they yelled toward him half-heartedly.

Taking a deep breath, he turned on the car and pulled back onto the road away from them, his rear wheels skidding, spitting gravel as he swerved to the left.

As he raced along the Eastern Roadway his mind was a boiling stew of random thoughts and images bubbling up, only to dissipate just before achieving comprehension.

Mohsin’s silent speech. . . Major Wilson listening at a terminal. . . Eche’s scarred visage. . . Dani’s glare. . . Guaré’s bowler. . . Srena huddling on the far side of the bed. . . Burning trees. . . Frida smiling. . . Reed Flowers. . . Dead officers . . . Autobirds. . . Roy. . . Mohsin. . . Eche. . . Strauss. . . Wilson. . .

Srena-Guaré-Wilson-Burning-Dani-Smiling-Fuck-IPF-Mohsin-Terrorists-Admins-ClawsLensMusicStubbleBloodEyesBlackenedRancidCrawlerATTENTION—

Betancourt stomped on the brake and swerved to the shoulder. With the car barely stopped on top of the encroaching crawler, he threw the door open and jumped out.

He sprinted around the car and ran out toward the barren field, away from the road. He kept running as hard as he could – away from the car, away from I-Land, away from the People – and now he was panting, gasping, but he kept running. Five seconds, ten passed and now his legs were burning because he hadn't run like this since his last physical training module almost a year ago and he never ran like this except for during his yearly trainings so it was really rather ridiculous for him to expect to be able to just run, to sprint for an entire minute in one direction. He kept running but was now flagging, a stabbing in his side on top of the burning in his legs and lungs.

The pain felt good. Anything felt good right now. He needed to feel something physical, something real, not the deception and the planning and the conspiracy, the abstractions that were drowning him piecemeal. He needed to feel something fully and totally, even something disagreeable, as long as it wasn't the maddening incompleteness of these fluttering thoughts and images, these ephemeral ideas that never solidified into anything, that just kept bubbling forth and disappearing in the cauldron of his mind. He needed to focus his brain on one single thing, just like he had taught himself decades before. He had lost that sanity recently. He needed it back.

Betancourt gradually slowed down and pulled up, bringing his hands to his hips. Eyes closed, he let his head flop back, opening his throat to the sky to gulp down the restorative air. He brought his head back up and looked out over the landscape with fresh eyes, still panting.

The crawler's perfect green stubble across the field imparted a sense of order, in wild juxtaposition to the feeling of abandonment left by the apocalyptic smoke plumes. The only

signs of civilization were the pristine cooling towers a few clicks away. The sky remained a piercing blue, pure. But he didn't feel it mocking him anymore. Now it was consoling him instead, supporting him with its purity.

What would he do now? He had been discovered and was now alone, cut off from everyone. Scratch that – he was *still* alone. He had always been alone, never a true Cit and not yet accepted as People. Ultimately nothing had changed. Except now his imminent death wasn't purely theoretical. But nothing major had changed except that the People were now compromised, and it was totally his fault.

“AAAAAGH!” he yelled as loud as he could, yanking his hair.

He balled his fist and looked for something to hit. Only the flat, perfect crowler lawn around him. He drew his arm back and pummeled himself in the thigh as hard as he could, repeatedly. A deep pain overwhelmed the burning of his oxygen-starved muscles. It was beautiful; he was able to express his rage and punish himself at the same time, a two-for-one.

How much had I-Land heard? He reviewed everything they had discussed at the meeting, thankfully not much. He smiled bitterly as he remembered his childish complaints against their silent treatment. Silence was safe. I-Land would know about the cache but not an exact coordinate, and they'd know about the camo. That would mean the People might not get all the arms out before it got bombed.

They'll just wait until nightfall, he realized. That should solve it.

But still, what if that wasn't the first time his Bard had been overridden? What about his meeting with Eche? What had they even discussed. . . god it seemed so long ago. Mostly self-incrimination, little in terms of information about the People, as far as he could remember. So if

they had heard that, he'd be dead for sure, but they'd be okay. Still. . . despite his solitude he cringed once more at his incompetence. He headed back to the car, walking now, calmer.

That takes care of them, now me.

He'd be questioned for sure, but it was still uncertain how much they knew. Or why they had been listening, for that matter. He'd have to assume that today had been the first time. The alternative would leave him hopeless.

How could they suspect? Or was it just a routine scan, a service check, not even human ears on the other end? But certain key words would be passed along anyway. "Cache" and "sentinels" were surely among those. Dragona's name too, probably. So humans would hear it eventually. Cal was even better than human, after all. Was there any way he could play it off as espionage? A rogue undercover mission? It might work. He had already primed Wilson to expect an overzealous misstep or two. Could he come out of this with a reprimand and a reassignment? Possible.

The web of crawler crunched grudgingly under his feet. Untreated it grew into a thick mesh that made it almost metallic, an unnaturally hard, green surface growing straight out of the ground. Out of and into.

That was it for I-Land, they should be taken care of. But something else bothered him, a nagging feeling that lingered from the meeting. Of course, he had arrived at the meeting already sick to his stomach from guilt and commiseration. But something had happened to worry him even more. His discomfort at the silence had been more than childish exasperation; it had been colored by an indistinct presentiment of menace.

A shroud had blanketed the meeting, a tension whose focal point had been the two women. Their antipathy had been palpable, but not only toward him – that would have been

understandable. He had also sensed their antagonism toward Mohsin. And though he felt it from Eche, she had not been its fount; that was Dani. She had clearly revealed it in her brazen response to his question: “We all do what we feel is necessary.” But it had been apparent before then: in the way she evaded Mohsin and lied about the boxes, in her glares and smirks, in her flaunting of Eche like she was some deformed trophy.

She had stolen weapons and was planning to do something that hadn’t been sanctioned by Mohsin, or, presumably, the Council. She was dangerous, a renegade, and she was going to corrupt Eche, if she hadn’t already.

Mohsin had to know. Was he really that naïve? Betancourt had thought more highly of his Leader. In the years he spent searching for him, he hadn’t imagined him with such a glaring weakness, so hopelessly optimistic. Recklessly optimistic. Maybe he knew something Betancourt didn’t?

But really it was the dissension itself that unnerved him. Beyond Mohsin’s potential failings, this wasn’t what the People were supposed to be like. This wasn’t why he had sought so hard to join them. Was he being childish again? Was it just his preposterous idealism? Maybe. On the other hand, if the People themselves couldn’t present a unified front against the abuses of I-Land, how could they ever hope to succeed in their struggle? He felt a burning need to interrogate Mohsin.

Back at the road, Betancourt leaned against his car with his arms resting on the roof. He surveyed the desolate roadway. His pulse and breathing began to normalize at last. The thought of his next meeting with Major Wilson arose. He smiled to himself as he imagined it. What was the best way for a trapped double agent to defend himself? Braggadocio.

“On the Criminalization of Printed Books”⁸

At the turn of the millennium, when electronic tablets first became popular for use as reading devices, supporters of traditional books generally scoffed at the idea that one could prefer reading a screen to a page. This attitude shortly transformed into one of worry as the devices’ popularity began to call into question the economic viability of the traditional book market. While bibliophiles were ultimately correct to worry about the future of the printed word, they were mistaken on the grounds for its demise. They feared that the market would wither due to shrinking demand, but demand actually rebounded during a backlash against screens in the 2020s. Enough people loved turning a page, and enough worried about the attentional effects of digital reading, that a reduced yet vibrant market for traditional books was assured.

What bibliophiles had not foreseen were the full ramifications of the network-limiting laws, which at the time seemed to be a separate and unrelated issue. In the beginning of the 21st century, these laws were widely interpreted as ‘land-grabs’ by the giant telecom corporations of the day, allowing companies to control internet content by facilitating or impeding access as was most profitable. Predictably, this led to the further homogenization of internet content.

In only a matter of decades, however, more dire repercussions became evident. As fewer corporations came to control internet content, their financial interests converged as well. In effect, the internet became a vast bulletin board for either corporate marketing or worthless inanities – usually the latter and frequently both. The only substantive messages allowed were those promoting capitalism and conspicuous consumption, directly or otherwise. Any critique of corporatism, no matter how mild, found itself blockaded to the point of extinction behind

8 Excerpted from Jensen, Frida, The People's Anthology of the 3rd Millenium, 2nd edition, Ch. 6.

mysteriously hyperactive firewalls, slow server speeds and erroneous error messages. These critical viewpoints gradually disappeared under what is now called the Internet Embargo.

As many books contain messages, and many among those messages are democratic and humanistic, books themselves were significantly affected by this de facto censorship, at least in the realm of electronic reading. No longer could one find the novels of Orwell and Huxley online, nor the philosophies of Arendt and Camus. Philosophy in general was universally blacklisted (a miniscule financial sacrifice considering the lack of demand).

In the aftermath of the Embargo, not only was the reading system divided (electronic v. print), but so was the content – market-friendly v. market-adverse. Certain books and authors became available only in print, and these books grew harder to find as the largest publishers blacklisted them at the behest of Giant Telecom. After decades of whitewashing internet content, so favorable was the sentiment toward corporations that those who sought these ‘socialist’ books began to come under suspicion. Not only was it difficult to find a book in print, but by the end of the 21st century one’s character was liable to be impugned for even attempting it.

In this environment, and in the wake of the Second Civil War that ravaged the country, it was a small step to declare printed books ‘subversive’ and criminalize them outright. ‘Attempt to procure’ and ‘Possession’ were accepted as probable cause for search and seizure relating to espionage and terrorist activities. The majority of Citizens accepted the criminalization as a matter of course, since their own intellectual development was now being purposely stunted by the enterprises that controlled all consumable content.

In the end, then, the ‘demise of the book,’ was due not to simple market preference, as millennial bibliophiles first dreaded, but rather to an updated, sophisticated and organic version of the classic censorship popularized most famously in Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 . . .

VIII.

Eche glanced at Dani as the four of them sat before the Council. Mohsin was recounting events and Dani seemed to be staring at the table in front of her. Eche wasn't sure how she was supposed to act in one of these things; she didn't want to mess stuff up too bad before they got a chance at the real action. She still felt the remnants of her racing heart from the faux-chase a little earlier. It felt good to move around after convalescing for almost a day, like a cat stretching after a nap. It had even distracted her from the throbbing of her burns.

When she looked back to the Council, the long-haired Asian woman was scrutinizing her. Eche immediately straightened herself in the chair and averted her eyes downward, her face warming. She suppressed a surge of animosity toward the peeping woman.

“And what do you propose?” Madam Jensen asked when Mohsin had finished.

“The truth, Madam, is that our position has not been terribly compromised, relative to where we stood yesterday. No critical information was divulged. We have taken appropriate precautions to secure the remainder of the cache. It is true that we may not be able to depend on Mr. Betancourt's aid —”

“May not?” the dark, white-bearded man interrupted. “You mean you would consider meeting with him again after this?”

“I will consult with my captains concerning the feasibility, Sir Chatterjee. But as of now we have no reason to suspect that Mr. Betancourt has deliberately betrayed us.”

“Deliberate or not, he is tainted. . . twice tainted!” Chatterjee responded with a peculiar lilt in his voice. “We don't know if his interrupter has been disabled before now! We don't even know if even he was honest about it in the first place.”

“Sir, I have felt no threat before today. He has met on just one other occasion with Eche, and I instructed her specifically to verify the safeguard.”

“But still,” the wild-haired woman took over.

She had hair like Eche’s, or like Eche used to have.

“You speak deceptively when you talk of a ‘compromised position’ relative to yesterday. To be clear, your statement is technically accurate, but a more appropriate question would be: how compromised is our position relative to when Mr. Betancourt presented himself?”

Eche liked this woman. She liked her wild black curls and the intelligent gleam in her eye. Her skin’s cinnamon hue made Eche envious next to her own charred pallor. But mostly Eche liked how she challenged Mohsin.

“As far as I can tell,” the woman continued, “the practical results of Mr. Betancourt’s ‘aid,’ as you call it, is that we have accelerated our Grand Strategy beyond what was tactically advisable and suffered the extermination of virtually all of our surface-walking allies. I have yet to see what we have gained in return.”

Mohsin replied quietly, “I believe, Madam Washington, that we can gain still. Moreover, I beg to differ on your assessment of the circumstances. While my own life might be a rather petty reward, there are six others whose names were not read at the last Assembly due to Mr. Betancourt’s direct intervention. This is not an insignificant contribution, no matter your skepticism concerning future benefits.”

Eche scrutinized Washington for her response, but the woman gave no outward reaction. She merely paused before uttering, “Point taken, Brother.” A concession, but also a maintenance of strength.

“As is yours,” Mohsin replied.

Frida resumed, "What remains, my kin, is to determine the future course of action. Sir Chatterjee's point strikes me as well-founded. I do not see a secure manner in which we can trust Mr. Betancourt's aid going forward. Even if we consistently check his hearing device, we cannot be assured that he is not being otherwise tracked in some unforeseen way. I believe we must proceed without him and propose a vote on the subject."

"Second," the sleek-haired lady spoke as she wrote the item down on a paper in front of her.

"All in favor?" Frida asked.

Five hands raised.

"Then let it be."

"With your permission," Mohsin said. "I would like to continue consulting with my officers to devise a way in which we can securely contact and utilize Mr. Betancourt's position."

Sir Chatterjee spoke, "As long as you review it with us before implementation, I see no problem." As he said this he looked to his colleagues, who were assenting with nods.

"Very well, sir. Thank you."

Eche glanced down the line of Councilpers. When she got to the bald, mustachioed man at the end, she found him already watching her with a smirk. He raised an eyebrow and cocked his head to her. Sir Jones, of whom Dani had spoken. She looked back down, blushing once more. His approval made her feel stronger, but it felt as yet unearned. She relished the moment when she might prove her worth.

"That leaves us still to determine our immediate plans," Frida said.

Eche looked to Mohsin, who appeared to be resolving something to himself. With a small sigh he spoke.

“Sirs and Madams, I believe the hour has arrived. As many different ways as I consider the matter, I cannot determine a better time than now to initiate the final operation. At no point will we have a stronger element of surprise. And by attacking as soon as possible, we will be able to strike before they can complete their preparations. Assuming that they know something will occur, it convenes us to preempt their arrangements as soon as possible. I am open to discussion on the matter.”

The Council sat silently for several seconds, considering Mohsin’s words.

“But are we ready?” Washington asked.

“It is not ideal, but we can be sufficiently prepared.”

“How soon?” the smooth-haired woman asked.

“The first phase of the Final Stage can be ready for tonight, with the second phase to follow tomorrow.”

His face betrayed nothing. She noticed that both Dani and Guaré continued to look unflinchingly ahead. Once more facing forward, she saw the Council exchanging glances among themselves. Sir Jones, however, appeared to be trying to communicate with Dani.

“The lack of immediate dissent indicates the soundness of my opinion,” Mohsin said finally.

“You are the chief strategist amongst us,” Frida responded. “It is our place to advise you, no more. The moment when our advice is exhausted is an appropriate one for a vote, which I now propose.”

“Second,” Sir Chatterjee said.

“All in favor?”

Four hands raised, and then, slowly, Madam Washington's as well. She stared at Mohsin as she did so. Then, when her hand was fully raised she looked at Eche. A jolt like static electricity ran through her at the glance. But Eche held her gaze until Madam Washington looked back to Mohsin.

"Then let it be," Mohsin said. "Are there any further matters to discuss before beginning preparations?"

"Council?" Frida asked. Each member shook their head individually.

"You may be dismissed. May fortune smile upon you."

"Upon us all, Madam."

Mohsin rose, his comrades after him. Eche followed them out the door, where they convened in the outer passage.

Without pause Mohsin addressed Guaré and Dani, "You two must inform each of your companies; prepare kin for evacuation tomorrow. I will inform the other captains. All captains to meet at midday to review plans, with appointed task force meeting 30 minutes later. Any questions?"

Dani shook her head, but Guaré asked, "What about the rest of the cache?"

Mohsin responded without pause, "To be fully discussed at midday, but you will be charged with overseeing its collection after nightfall."

"Yes sir."

"Dani, your night should go smoothly," Mohsin said, turning to her. She nodded. "The rest of us will undoubtedly meet a significant challenge, and rise to it. The element of surprise is our greatest ally."

Mohsin raised his hand to Eche's shoulder, saying, "You do what your captain tells you, understood?" Eche nodded, trying to figure out how far his meaning went. She felt him prying as well. He held her gaze until she had to look away. Suddenly she felt a discomfort in her stomach.

"Midday, then. Go."

He turned and trotted down the passageway, followed by Guaré. Eche began after them, but Dani grabbed her arm.

"We have business first," she said. Then, with a jerk of her head, "Come."

Dani pulled her in the opposite direction. Eche trailed her for a full minute, to a small room off the side of the passage. Dani glanced behind them and quickly opened the door, pulling Eche into the chamber. She turned on the yellowy light and closed the door.

"We wait here for Sir Jones."

"Doesn't say much, that one, huh?"

"I've only been in a few meetings but I've never seen him say anything. He just votes with the majority. That way he stays inconspicuous."

Eche looked around the spartan room but saw nothing revelatory, only damp bricks housing a small bed and a writing desk with chair.

The feeling in her stomach persisted, though the sensation remained weak. She couldn't understand why a simple comment from Mohsin should cause it. That relentless gaze. . .

She only knew that as much as she admired Dani, Mohsin's presence diminished her. Most people were weirdly enhanced by his attention. As a farmer she couldn't help recalling manure on the soil. But somehow that same presence made Dani's authority wane. Was there something fallow in her ground? The feeling in Eche's stomach worsened.

She realized she was staring off at one of the walls. She turned and found Dani watching her from the bed, clearly amused.

“Dear Leader certainly arouses one’s sympathy, does he not?”

Eche looked at her for a moment, considering a response while trying to decipher the feeling in her stomach. She sensed that Dani’s bemusement was teetering on a fulcrum between mockery and cruelty. She was easily capable of both.

“I suppose,” Eche said finally, looking away and sitting next to Dani on the bed.

“As does Sir Jones,” Dani said. “You’ll see.”

Eche was grappling with another sensation as well: that of outgrowing her mentor. Since Dani had crash-landed into her home, she had seamlessly become Eche’s big sister, a role imbued with authority over little Andrea, automatically eliciting her admiration. Now, however Eche was finally detecting flaws beneath the burnish.

The door opened and Sir Jones entered quietly. His tall, strong frame dwarfed the room around him. He was fit despite his age, with a decided stoop.

“Good morning, Sisters,” he said without looking to them.

He took the seat from the desk and placed it in front of the bed.

“Good morning, sir,” they both said, almost in unison.

“This is the Eche then,” he said, sitting on the chair. “It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Eche noticed a mischievous shine in his eye that somehow put her at ease, like he was letting her in on an exclusive joke. She took a deep breath and smiled.

“No need to be shy, little Sister. We are all friends here.” He smiled graciously toward Dani. “What’s more, Daniyah and I are grateful to be able to count on your assistance.”

“I’m still not clear on what exactly you want me to do.”

“In time, Sister, in time. As long as you trust Daniyah and follow her orders, you will be doing all that we ask.”

Something inside her bristled.

“I was already going to do that,” she said. “Honestly, I’m kind of sick of feeling like your mascot. If you’re going to drag me around with the star treatment, I should know what my actual role will be, right? Maybe I should ask the Council what I’m supposed to do?”

Sir Jones chuckled and gave Dani a patronizing glance.

“I should not have expected anything less, given all I’ve heard about you. In fact you remind me quite a bit of Daniyah when she first got here.”

Eche shrunk back from the flattery, just waiting.

“Is there anything else you would like to say?”

“Look, sir, I don’t know what we even have to talk about here. I’m with the People because my family is gone, and I’m with Dani ‘cause I wanna kill some Cits. What else do you really need to know?”

Sir Jones raised his eyebrows and nodded. “Okay then. Well I’ll tell you why we’re meeting if you would like to know. There are two reasons. First, I need to verify you before you can do anything for us. And I do mean *anything*.”

“So verify me already and let’s get on with it.”

“Before we get on with it you should know that I’m losing patience with this act of yours.”

His smile vanished and the spark in his eye grew brighter. Gone was the wise, kindly grandfather. His face transformed, revealing a ferocity that was even menacing. There was

something else of which Eche caught the briefest hint, so brief that it barely broke the barrier of her consciousness: for a moment the gleam in his eye carried a tinge of malevolence, the desire to harm her.

Jones leaned forward in his chair, elbows on his knees, using his left hand to gesticulate with deceptive casualness. “It was perhaps funny at first, sure. . . Cute? Why not?”

He continued forcefully, “But having the same desires and goals does not excuse all else. Simply put: if you go out there with your insolent, belligerent attitude you are a liability to our mission. And if you think for one minute that I am going to permit such a liability, then your ignorance clouds your judgment. So before you can ‘get on with it,’ you shall first need to get with it, period. I do not care if your whole body is in bandages. Do you understand what I say to you?”

Eche lowered her eyes to the floor, scowling. A shameful heat flashed across her body. She was sick of blushing this morning. Her ire was aimed at herself, her own weakness for feeling shame, but also at Sir Jones, for scolding her like a little girl. And how clueless, to think she was acting like this because of her appearance! She wanted to laugh in his face but held her tongue.

“Good,” he said. He leaned back in his chair. The smile resurfaced at the corners of his mouth. “Now, the second reason we are meeting is because, given the recent decision of the Council, D Company has some strategy to discuss. That should be obvious enough.”

“D Company is my company,” Dani said.

“Of course,” Sir Jones said. “Do please ask questions if any of the jargon confuses you.”

Eche heard the jovial tone return to his voice but it no longer put her at ease. The kindly grandfather had returned, but she had seen the ogre behind the mask. She continued to look at

the floor, at his feet. She wondered about him – if such a menacing tone lurked beneath that grandfatherly exterior, what else might lurk in those depths?

Turning back to Dani, he asked, “How far along are preparations?”

“We are readier than the rest,” Dani said.

“Ah yes, the advantage of secrecy: both more vigilant and more meticulous. Personnel?”

“As discussed, most of my soldiers will be following conventional orders. Tonight we do not deviate from the master plan. Tomorrow night I will have my select force on the alternative task with me, but even they are aware only that they’re following my orders. They do not suspect that my orders aren’t part of the general plan. Moreover, none of them accompany me in the final stage.”

“Weaponry?”

At the word, Eche slightly cocked her head without going so far as to lift it.

“In place. Mohsin noticed the missing box, but I was able to convince him that Dragona took it before the raid.”

Eche looked to Dani out of the corner of her eye. She really believed that, but Mohsin hadn’t seemed at all convinced to Eche. Was Dani really that naïve?

Now that her embarrassment had faded, she noticed the feeling in her stomach returning. She suddenly missed the comfort of Mohsin and Guaré, their casual jesting, their brotherly affection. It had all changed now with this new pressure, it was all different than just a few days ago, before. . .

“Very good,” Sir Jones said, tugging Eche back to the present.

“What are these weapons we’re going to be using?” Eche asked.

Dani responded, “Dragona had weaponry capabilities that he never told Mohsin about.”

Jones added, “He knew Dear Leader would not have appreciated their. . . applicability, shall we say?”

Eche continued to look questioningly. Jones nodded: “Trust me.”

“Just know that it shall guarantee us absolute success. Not just ‘us,’” he said, indicating those present in the room. “But the People as well.”

And again with that flashing gleam in his eye.

The remainder of the drive calmed Betancourt. He practiced his concentration and deep breathing. His heartrate was under control. He needed to be at his most level-headed in order to convincingly deceive.

As he waited in the upper lobby with Ms.Booker flicking through her lens items, he thought back to his previous conversation with the Major (*Was it just two days ago?*) Wilson had wanted to believe him that day. The Major liked him but wouldn’t hesitate to turn on him in the name of duty. Betancourt mentally reviewed his talking points.

“Captain Betancourt? The Major will see you now.”

“Thank you Ms. Booker.”

He got up and strode down the hall, still carrying the camouflage poncho in his hand. He hesitated only long enough to fix a smile on his face, before opening the door and stepping into Wilson’s office.

Wilson looked up from his terminal with a serious face.

“Good day, captain.”

“You coulda let me know you were gonna listen in,” Betancourt said. “Almos got me killed! B’wait’ll you see what I got fer you now. . .”

“Oh?” The Major was going to be tougher this time.

Betancourt strode over to the desk and handed him the poncho.

“They got some high-tech stuff. This camo keeps em hidden from our birds. I ran away before they could rip it off.”

Wilson received the poncho without comment, fingering it. He felt the cotton, patterned side, then turned it over and ran his hands along the metallic lining.

“Fascinating,” he said. He put the poncho on one corner of his desk and leaned back.

“And?”

Betancourt felt his smile waver, but he consciously revived it, his eyes just out of focus to simulate a foggy gaze. He turned around and found one of the two chairs to sit in, opposite Wilson’s desk.

“And? An massive intel. First off, what a job you guys did on that homestead out there. Looks like the apocalypse passed by. You got em completely demoralized. Y’shoulda seen the looks on their faces. Boohoo!” He laughed.

“We would have seen the looks on their faces if you had thought to put in your I’s.”

Again Betancourt paused, his smile becoming more strained.

“Don’ make it sound like I didn’ think a that.” He chuckled again. “There’s no way they woulda let me around if I had my I’s in. They know they record. That’s how I got in n’the first place. Gave em this whole story bout how I don’ like the lenses and never have, that I sympathize with em, you wouldn’ believe the crap they swallowed.”

“It does sound like there is a lot of crap being swallowed these days.”

“Meaning, sir?”

“Well, for instance, there is the ‘crap’ you fed me two days ago about the fate of the passengers in that van. You know, the ones you allegedly tortured and killed but who are now clearly alive and communicating with you.”

Betancourt sat there with his smile frozen. He saw Wilson searching his face, trying to read the subtext. *Shit. Don’t hesitate. . . don’t hesitate.*

“Oh that?” he said, now laughing nervously. “Well sir. . . I didn’ know how t’explain at the time.”

“You explain with the truth. I thought I made that clear enough the last time.”

“The truth is two things,” Betancourt said, picking up speed. “First, I wasn’ sure you’d approve.”

“Approve of what?”

“This little plan a mine, this plan yer seein now cause you spiked my Bard.”

“You’re going to have to explain more.”

“That brings me to the second reason, which is that I wanted it to be a surprise. . . y’see I figured that would impress y’ more, maybe raise my chances fer promotion.”

“Son you’re quite a ways – a dangerous ways – from promotion, unless you tell me right now what you mean by all this mischief.”

“But sir, donja see?” He held his hands out as if showing off a magic trick. “I went undercover!”

By this point Wilson was leaning forward with elbows on his desk. He frowned and looked down briefly, then back up at Betancourt, who for his part was sitting there with a dim, well-meaning grin. Underneath the grin, his body tensely awaited the response.

“Undercover?”

Betancourt nodded.

“Without orders?”

Again he nodded, this time with a guilty shrug.

“Alone?”

Another nod.

“I see.”

Silence.

After several seconds, Wilson leaned back into his chair, saying, “That is certainly a bold idea, young man.”

Betancourt’s smile grew wider. He took a deep breath, not too loud.

“Completely unorthodox, of course, and sure to be frowned upon,” he added.

Betancourt looked down but maintained his smile. He was old hat at the guilty schoolboy routine.

“But there’s a lot to be said for that level of initiative,” he concluded. “That’s the stuff of real leaders. Not just lower officers, I’m talking high command.”

Betancourt looked back up with a raised eyebrow. Wilson was looking over his head and off into the distance, appearing to consider a weighty decision.

“I like it.” Wilson nodded with lips pursed, looking back to Betancourt. “I’m going to run it by Strauss, but he generally defers to the officers with direct experience in such matters. You understand?”

“Yes sir.”

Now Betancourt had to try to restrain the smile from overwhelming his face.

“Of course it will depend on the intel you’ve achieved. You said it was ‘massive intel,’ correct?”

“Yes, I have the location of one a their arsenals and details –” Wilson cut him off with a wave of the hand and a shake of the head, his lips pursed once more.

“Not now, captain. In due time. I trust you on that. I’m just letting you know for when you file the formal report.”

“Of course, sir.”

“In the meantime, this will mean a big move for you, moving up with the big boys.”

“Yes sir.”

“And not just for you, for your girl as well. . . what’s her name. . . unless you’ll be looking to upgrade? Lots of officers prefer to switch it up after a big promotion.”

Betancourt hesitated. This was too fast to be real.

“My girl? Oh, you mean Srena? Oh no, no sir. I’m quite pleased with her. I would expect her to accompany me, if at all possible.”

“I see,” Wilson said, nodding. “In that case, we should call her up to see how she’d like it, the chance to move up. Make sure the lady approves.” He winked.

“Oh no, I’m sure she’ll be thrilled—” Again Wilson cut off Betancourt with a wave, looking down to his terminal and pressing a button.

“Yes, Ms. Booker, could you please send in Ms. Franklin? Thank you.”

He looked back up at Betancourt, smiling. A bland, vacuous smile.

Betancourt furrowed his brow. “But, she’s already up here?”

Wilson, with the same bland smile, raised his eyebrows and brought his hands up in a wait-and-see shrug. Betancourt’s smile dissipated as he tried to make sense of the proceedings.

Someone knocked lightly at the door. Wilson called, "Come in!"

Srena walked in. She nervously tucked her sleek blonde hair behind her ears. When she saw Betancourt she smiled and appeared to relax. She was tall and slender and beautiful.

Betancourt averted his eyes, in memory of what he did to her last night.

"Good day, Ms. Franklin." Wilson said.

"Good day, sir." She looked to Betancourt. "Good day, Captain."

"Srena."

She walked over to the chair next to Betancourt, but Wilson held his hand out to her, backing his chair up.

"Oh no, no my dear. That won't do. Do sit over here with me." He patted his lap.

"Capt. Betancourt, you don't mind sharing a bit, do you? It's sort of a tradition we have up here on this floor." The same bland smile.

"Not at all, sir."

Srena's surprise appearance, in addition to Wilson's odd behavior, unnerved him almost totally. He was beginning to feel like a lab subject.

Srena walked over to Wilson with the same timid smile as before, but appearing much more comfortable now that she had some idea of the expectations. Her training was a safety net into which she could easily relax. Betancourt watched her twitch a hand to select a mood-enhancing song on her Bard. The glow in her I's reminded him of one of the seniors with cataracts.

Wilson put a hand on her waist as she sat down on his lap. With the other he began to caress her leg, moving his hand up her thigh beneath the skirt.

“Ah yes,” he said. “I can see why you’re partial, captain. These legs are an endless joy.”

He waited and continued caressing. “Oh, there’s the end!” Srena twitched.

“Indeed,” Betancourt said, to fill the silence.

“So do you want to tell her, or should I?” he asked. He took his hand off her leg and began to unbutton her blouse.

“Oh! B’right here, Major?”

He smiled back and continued unbuttoning, exposing her bra.

“Naughty,” she said, squirming softly in his lap. Betancourt looked away, not sure if he felt more nervous or jealous.

“Yes, my dear, you see. . . I guess you won’t mind if I tell her, Captain?”

Betancourt shook his head. Wilson was lightly tracing his fingers along her torso, as absentmindedly as he might scratch a dog.

“Very well then. You see dear, it appears you will be joining us soon on this floor.”

Srena stopped moving and looked at Betancourt. Whatever spark of interest her eyes might contain was clouded by the glow of her I’s.

“You see, you must get used to all of us officers – at least some of the time – if you’re going to be up here.”

“S’this fer real?” She was writhing again in his lap with a dazed smile, looking drugged.

“Yer just puttin me on, tryin t’turn me on?” She whispered, “S’workin!”

“Oh no, quite serious,” he said. He traced his fingers along her legs and hiked her skirt up to better access her thighs. “Unless you can think of some reason to object?”

“Object, whass that mean?”

Betancourt interrupted, this time without his forced Citspeak. “It means some reason we shouldn’t be promoted.”

She gazed at him, the cloudy cataracts underscoring her confusion. Slowly she began to talk.

“No, I can’t thinka anything. Th’Captain’s wonderful an I think he’s a great captain. I’m so happy all the stress is payin off!”

“Stress?” Wilson asked.

“Well yeah, s’juss been strange lately, I mean stranger than usual.”

Wilson cocked his head.

“In what way do you mean, darling?”

He was now patting her thighs softly. She looked like a little kid on her uncle’s lap, her semi-nudity a demented perversion of the caricature.

“She just means how stressed I’ve been the last couple of days over this assignment,” Betancourt said, catching Srena’s eye when she looked to him. “Right Srena?”

“Well I guess,” she said. “B’you’ve always been strange. S’always been strange, right Major?”

She smiled at him, her murky eyes half-closed.

“Oh yes, of course,” Wilson said. He pretended to be thinking, looking to the ceiling and shaking his head. “Now, remind me of all those ways he’s strange,” he said, looking back to Srena with a grand smile.

Wilson’s obvious playacting was beginning to alarm Betancourt, as was the conversation’s trajectory.

“Oh you know. . .” Srena responded with the same flirty smile.

“I do know, my dear, but I’m sure you have some stories that I haven’t heard, just as I have some *you* haven’t heard.” He touched her on the nose. It wasn’t even good playacting – it was trite. “How about we swap stories? Doesn’t that sound fun?” She giggled.

“Well, I don’ know. . .” she began to talk. “S’always so serious, an always lookin at me funny, an always wants t’talk. Lass night he got mad at me cause I wasn’ talking enough to him, I juss wanted t’fuck.”

Betancourt winced at the word, but Wilson was still looking at Srena.

“My, that is strange, especially with such a cut as you.”

He turned to Betancourt with raised eyebrows but his smile was no longer vacuous. It had a sinister glimmer.

“He wanted t’talk bout why I didn’ like the PJs. I didn’ know an he got mad at me cause I didn’ wanna talk about it.”

“Those admins can be quite uncomfortable, can’t they my darling?”

“Totally! An what more’s to say bout it?”

“Mm-hmm, and what else?”

“He never wears his I’s an tells me I shouldn’ wear mine. He even disables em when I go to his place. S’so annoying!”

“Does he now?” Again he raised his eyebrows at Betancourt.

Betancourt stared back, expressionless. His innards were roiling but his exterior was strangely relaxed. He was already experiencing resignation.

“Then there’s that time – I guess all a this was lass night, now that I think about it – but I saw a book in his bedroom.”

Betancourt's eyes widened as his body tensed. He willed Srena to look at him but her foggy eyes gazed off into a corner of the office as she recounted. Slowly, every muscle poised, he raised his hands to the arms of the chair. He might be able to spring up and dash before Wilson could raise any alarm.

Wilson slowly turned his head to Betancourt. With his raised eyebrow he shook his head. "Don't dare," that shake said. "Don't make it harder than it has to be."

Betancourt lowered his hands back to his lap. The physical relaxation resumed. His mind turned icy. He sat back in the chair, now a mere observer of his fate.

Wilson turned back to Srena, the smile returning.

"A book? My, but that is very naughty indeed."

Apparently satisfied that he had made his point, he no longer shot ironic glances toward the captain.

"Thass what I said!" Srena responded. "B'Captain tol me that officers are allowed. I didn' know."

"In certain cases, I suppose. . ."

"Hey, wait a minute," she said, straightening up. "You said you were gonna tell me some stories too. I've told you lots, now s'yer turn."

"I'll get to some stories, but first a question my dear: can you think of any reason to question the Captain's loyalty to the I-PF, and to I-Land? Any reason he shouldn't be promoted?"

Betancourt rolled his eyes and snorted.

"Oh no, not't all," she said. "I think he'll make a wonderful Major!"

"And me a colonel?" He smiled at her.

“I think you’ll be a great colonel, Major!”

“Wonderful. Go ahead and fix yourself up, darling.”

He patted her on the thigh to indicate she should get up. She began to button back her blouse.

“Captain,” Wilson said. “Is there anything you would like to say before your formal interview with Chairman Strauss?”

Betancourt stood up, glaring at Major Wilson, his inner terror encased in icy numbness.

Wilson returned his gaze without apparent emotion. They studied each other for several seconds. Finally, Betancourt broke the silence.

“Enough with the crap, Wilson. Let’s just call it an interrogation and get it over with.”

Wilson nodded solemnly.

“Very well, captain.”

He stood up behind his desk and pressed a button. A side door open and four black-clad I-PF agents marched into Wilson’s office, surrounding Betancourt. Srena screamed, trying to cover the rest of her exposed chest.

One of the officers jerked Betancourt’s arms back and placed the manacles around his wrists. It reminded him of his first meeting with Mohsin. *So that’s how it feels*, he thought. But he stared at Wilson the entire time, the Major not betraying any emotion.

“Officers, please escort Capt. Betancourt to the IIUs.” Then, to Betancourt, “For what it’s worth, Captain, Ms. Franklin gave us little we didn’t already know from her Bard. You can’t hope to keep these things secret for long, not when you involve a LoVo.”

“It was a lovely charade, sir, all in all. Well done.” Betancourt was surprised to find himself sounding more sincere than sarcastic.

“I regret that it paled in comparison to yours, a truly . . . *bravura* . . . performance.”

Betancourt glanced toward Srena, who was watching him with a shocked mask of confusion, still covering her chest. He looked her in her cataract eyes. Not her eyes, her I’s. He hated them. He wanted to hate her too but couldn’t; she was too pathetic.

The officer shoved Betancourt from behind. “Move.”

“I remind you, officer, that for the time being he is still a captain. You shall treat him with respect,” Wilson said.

“Thanks for that,” Betancourt said as he headed toward the door, still watching Srena.

She looked hopelessly ignorant and scared, like a child seeing her parent die.

He stepped through the doorway into the adjoining passageway, now a prisoner instead of an officer, a terrorist instead of a Citizen. He tried to avoid thinking about the coming torture.

He heard Srena wonder after him, “Does this mean we don’ get th’ promotion?”

Gently, the door clicked shut behind him.

*“On Bureaucracy and the Individual”*⁹

All institutions tend toward entrenched corruption. This anecdotal – and scientifically unverifiable – observation has been borne out perfectly and endlessly since the dawn of civilization. Foundations and organizations of any kind will, given enough time, always become bureaucracies. Bureaucracies, in turn, will become bloated and inefficient at best, and byzantine and corrupt at worst. Either way, they fall somewhere on the scale of ineffectuality.

In their purest form, true good works stem from an individual effecting change in her or his immediate surroundings, without the buffers of organization and bureaucracy. These good works are inherently small-scale and local in their impact. Once an effort to organize these works is undertaken – in order to focus or magnify their effects – one must remain relentlessly vigilant to stymie the creeping bloat of bureaucracy before it can gain a foothold. No matter how vigilant the defender, however, the battle is ultimately a losing one.

Using a hypothetical scenario, one can imagine a ‘perfect foundation,’ one that could avoid these inherent bureaucratizing pitfalls. Such a foundation would be intrinsically humble in scope, for with too grand a mission the struggle against bureaucratization would be lost before it was begun. The ideal foundation would have as its sole aim nothing more and nothing less than perpetuating the above philosophy, namely: bureaucracy is to be avoided at all cost, for the individual is the only pure source of betterment.

Such a foundation would most likely need to charge a fee in order to cover basic operating costs, although it could conceivably be sustained by direct food and shelter accommodations from the community. Were there a fee, it would be inversely proportional to how many students were enrolled, and all surplus would be either refunded or distributed to a

9 Excerpted from Jensen, Frida, The People's Anthology of the 3rd Millenium, 2nd edition, Ch. 11.

pool of needy applicants. In this way the foundation would serve a dual purpose: education in the definitive method of welfare, and direct distribution of welfare to the needy.

Alumni of the program would be charged with an individual mandate to serve the most unfortunate among us. They would be free to do so however they saw fit, yet remain unbestowed with any special powers or prestige. They would be able to trust only in their own will and ability to effect change. In this way, the philosophy is one of empowerment of the individual; everyone would, ultimately, become a leader in their own realm, and with their own mission.

It is with this idea in mind that the People's Council was created. It is kept intentionally small and has little power. It cannot bequeath favors or goods upon any specific individual or faction; it can only design policy in the best interest of the People. Councilpers receive not compensation; their posts are gained through popular nomination and maintained through unanimous approbation.

But the Council and the People are not the ideal foundation described above. There exist unavoidable levels of hierarchy and organization that will tend toward corruptive bloat, equal to all other foundations. For this reason we must maintain a healthy balance between vigilance and flexibility, between openness to new circumstances and deference to our roots.

IX.

Trodding upon the packed earth floor of their recently completed tunnel, past trusses and support beams, guided by the beam of the LED attached to his rifle, Mohsin felt good.

His feeling wasn't based on blind optimism or unrealistic hope, or even anything tangible. He was not one to engage in overconfidence. His attitude was due rather to an absence: the lack of cautionary presentiments of the kind that had plagued him that morning. Those had been resolved; he now knew the cause of both. One of the signals was still an issue that he thought could be advantageously resolved. The other was a problem that lamentably could not be remedied, but the damage of which had been limited as far as possible.

Regardless, both issues had been identified and the latter issue, Betancourt's unwitting surveillance, was closed to further tampering. Mohsin was able to divert his attention toward more pressing matters, without the nagging sense that he had failed to fully account for some eventuality. The absence of indefinite warnings – his kin would cite them as evidence of his telepathy – allowed him a rare moment of alert relaxation.

He permitted himself to think about Betancourt as he walked. Compassion was his primary feeling. Beyond the horrific fate that he suspected Betancourt would suffer, he well knew the shame and dismay that the Captain must have felt upon failing his new family. But he would soon have more pressing matters to occupy him. Advancing through the tunnel, Mohsin closed his eyes and sent a blessing to Betancourt:

May you suffer with strength and grace. May you maintain awareness of the noble cause of your sacrifice. May you remember that seven kin have you to thank for our lives.

When he opened his eyes, his light beam fell upon the end of the passage. He looked back at the rest of his task force and nodded to Guaré behind him.

“Approaching,” Guaré called.

Turning around to backpedal, Mohsin attempted to spot the last of his 30 soldiers coming down the tunnel. Kelly, the navigator, was behind Guaré. Behind her, Gloria and Minjay pushed a cart with three of Dragona’s crates. The rest walked in pairs behind the railcar. They all carried small submachine guns on straps across their chest.

A capable group, he nodded to himself.

The terminus of the tunnel widened into a small chamber in which most of them comfortably fit. Above them, ladders reached up into six individual shafts that had been hewn into the dirt, a couple of meters separating each one.

Gloria and Minjay left the cart several paces away from the opening. The others skirted it to await final instructions. Minjay and Guaré unloaded the crates onto the ground in front of the cart.

They all looked to Mohsin, who in turn stood watching them with a trace of a smile. He was able to see faint glows about their heads and shoulders, a deep green that stood out clearly from the black of the tunnel. It was yellow at the edges. The light was quite different than that of reflected LEDs, or of the yellow tunnel bulbs; it was the Fringe. Frida called them “auras” and cited his perception of them as evidence of his special abilities. Mohsin, more instinctual than analytical, knew only that the color and size of these Fringes portended well for their mission. His soldiers were confident and anxious to engage. He had chosen them well.

“You know what moment has arrived,” he began. “You are about to occupy a very special place in North American history. You will perpetrate the largest insurrectionary action

since Civil War II of the 21st century, and since Civil War I before it. Proceed mindfully over the course of the rest of the evening; tonight marks the first phase of the People's Second Attempt. You are members of a proud tradition that counts among its ancestors not only the founders of The Populists but also those of the United States itself. While the members of D Company will execute a parallel operation in relative safety, I cannot say the same for our own task force."

He paused and looked several of his personnel in the eye, examining their apparently unchanged Fringes. The mask of courage he saw on the preponderance of faces further fueled his confidence. He continued.

"You have each been hand-selected from our four companies because of the exemplary skill, intelligence and courage that you have demonstrated since beginning your service. Not all of you have the same level of experience, but the veterans will welcome and respect those less experienced as equals, in faith and knowledge that each has been chosen with good cause. Now, separate into your squads, mine in the center, Guaré's to my left, and Gloria's to my right."

The soldiers separated into groups of ten at their instructed places. Mohsin signaled to Guaré and Minjay. They approached the crates and opened them in a matter of seconds, revealing long pieces of black metal and plastic composite.

"Designated soldiers: claim RPGs, grenade launchers and artillery."

Nine soldiers walked to the crates, Minjay and Amadou leading them. Among the selected items were three sleek rocket-propelled grenade launchers the size of a human arm, and three assault rifles with grenade launching attachments below the barrels. The three soldiers who did not collect a weapon stocked their knapsacks with RPG ammunition. Each squad received

one of each weapon and an ammunition stockpile. Mohsin supervised the collection and glanced once more at his watch.

“Very well,” he said. “The hour rapidly approaches. Each squad will split in half and take two of the shafts to the surface, five soldiers per shaft. Kelly will relay my countdown for throwing grenades.” He paused to survey his soldiers once more.

“There are two towers apart from the control tower, at opposite corners of the airstrip.” He signaled with his hands, forming a human “Y.” “We only have a direct line of fire on one of them, which will be to our immediate left as we exit the shafts. Gloria’s RPG personnel –”

He paused, dropping his left arm and searching for the indicated person. Then he made eye contact with Shiori, of Gloria’s squad.

“Shiori’s task will be to immediately neutralize the nearest tower following detonation of the grenades. You are comfortable with the targeting mechanism?”

She nodded, shifting her weight rhythmically from one foot to the other.

“Use caution when emerging from the shaft after the primary explosions.”

Another nod, impatient. Mohsin suppressed a wider smile.

“The other two RPG personnel – Amadou and Minjay – exit the shafts with the rest of the force, find position immediately inside the fence and neutralize the other towers as soon as humanly possible. Amadou, you are my gunner and responsible for the control tower. Minjay, the opposite guard tower is yours. If those towers stand, especially the guard towers, our task becomes immeasurably more difficult. Aim true, and ammunition personnel. . .” He looked to the three with knapsacks. “You do not leave your RPG’s side unless a bullet dictates it.”

Among the six soldiers being addressed the only response to Mohsin’s words was Minjay’s slight narrowing of eyes.

Mohsin continued, “We lack specific intelligence on the number of officers at the airstrip. But we can be reasonably sure they’re not significantly greater than our own force. We do have to be aware of these new menaces, the RCATS, which may or may not be present. We have yet to see them clearly, but they are fast and precise – if you see black metal in motion fire with all prejudice. Meanwhile, I-Land’s greatest weapons are our targets, so once we announce ourselves we proceed to hangars at all possible speed. They’ll be scrambled within seconds of the first explosion.

“Do not spend bullets without a target in sight – they’ll only reveal your position. And do not, for any reason whatsoever,” he said, slowing down to emphasize his point, “pass in front of the automated sentinels. Even grounded, they can target and fire upon you. Get as close as you can to ensure their destruction. We expect five per hangar. Are there any questions?”

He looked around and saw the same calm demeanors – the same confidence reflected in their Fringe – that presided at the beginning of his discourse.

“In ten minutes, those of us who are returning should be back in the tunnel. We as a group will not be unharmed. The captains and I will occupy ourselves with the fallen and instruct you accordingly. Be prepared. Once you finish your hangar, return to the tunnel, and once in the tunnel you make haste back to our base. Do not linger near the shafts – they will have been compromised. Kelly, if a black mask descends one of the shafts, fire without question. Understood?” She nodded.

Now he said to them all, knowing it would sound almost magical that he should so precisely perceive their moods:

“This relaxed poise you feel now. . . maintain it and we will succeed. You make me proud. You will continue to do so tonight. Godspeed Sisters and Brothers, and Godspeed People. Now, to your tunnels!”

Mohsin, eyes shining, turned and grabbed the ladder behind him, which serviced one of the two middle shafts. Behind him the three squads split themselves and individuals began climbing the shafts next to Mohsin. Guaré mounted the ladder directly to his right and Minjay, Guaré’s RPG man, at the far end.

“Godspeed, my leader,” he heard Guaré call softly, before he disappeared up the shaft.

Mohsin wanted to call back for him but didn’t. He wanted to chide him again for his idolatry. He wanted to proclaim yet again, to all of the People, that he had done nothing to be better or more special than any of them, that all of them could be leaders, that anyone could do what he did, if they just possessed the strength of will, or perhaps the good fortune. But now was not the time for such philosophy. He let Guaré alone, satisfying himself with the challenge of fulfilling his best man’s expectations.

He relished the claustrophobic stench of dirt as he climbed. At the top of the shaft he gently lifted the wooden board that constituted the ceiling, raising a slab of earth a hand’s-width in the air. Spying out, he could see the wire fence only a few meters away. No patrols – it was guarded only by razors and electricity. He looked down his shaft and saw four Brothers and Sisters below him on the ladder, while a fifth, Kelly, too young to accompany them in combat, looked up from the ground.

Mohsin checked his watch and looked out the shaft to his right and left, counting the other notches of raised earth. On his immediate left he saw a pair of bright eyes peering out from a mass of darkness: Amadou. Guaré’s impish regard greeted him from the right.

Back to Amadou, who was still watching him, he signaled to the control tower 50 meters distant. His gunman stuck a dark thumb barely out of the shaft.

Once more he checked his watch. It was time.

“Kelly,” he called down, “Ready for the count?”

“Ready, sir.”

“On my mark,” he said, revising his watch. “Have soldiers prepare grenades and Shiori the rocket.”

Kelly called to the other shafts from the ground, “Prepare grenades! First guard tower, prepare rocket! Ready to commence countdown!” He never would have imagined an adolescent with such a commanding voice.

Mohsin reached to his own belt to grab two grenades, a crate of which Dragona had gifted them some months before with the commentary, “They’re old, but they’ll do the job.” He remembered the exchange with melancholy and gratitude.

Mohsin pulled the pins out of each grenade and looked a last time to his watch. He waited several seconds, five, then ten, until finally he yelled, “Mark!”

From below, he heard Kelly begin, “Counting! Ten, nine, eight, seven, six. . .”

Mohsin raised his lid to the height of his head saw his people doing the same to each side.

“ . . . Four, three, two, one, GRENADES!”

Releasing the levers and feeling them spring open, Mohsin backhanded both grenades the short distance to the fence, pulling the lid closed as he ducked back down into the shaft. Only the sound of his forceful breathing occupied the interval between cause and effect.

He counted silently to himself, *One. . . two. . . three—*

A sound like muffled cannonfire, brief but powerful, trembled the shafts, bringing small clumps of earth raining down. Each new percussion swallowed the preceding. A couple of them were loud enough to have been two or more simultaneous explosions, an aural kaleidoscope.

His pulse accelerated. Standing on the ladder's uppermost rung, earth continuing to trickle onto his hair and shoulders, he awaited the sound of Shiori's rocket. Then it came, the soft *whoosh* of the RPG – it almost sounded gentle – and he launched himself out of the shaft and into the newly disturbed night.

The acrid smoke stung his eyes and nostrils. He hopped to the side of the hole, allowing the rest of his squad to follow him out while he searched the fence for breaches. He flinched as an explosion interrupted his survey, and looked back up in time to see the flames from the guard tower swell and recede in the wake of Shiori's attack.

Turning back to the fence, he could now see five different breaks big enough for a person. The barrier had even been completely severed in one spot off to his right.

Electricity, nullified, his brain registered, as if checking off an item on its agenda.

“Amadou, eleven o'clock!” he called, indicating the nearest opening.

Amadou reacted immediately, followed by his munitions. In the short space of five seconds, Amadou stationed himself inside the fence, aimed his RPG, and fired at the control tower. Mohsin didn't wait for impact before sprinting himself to the fence. Around him he both saw and felt the rest of his soldiers doing the same.

Mohsin was now single-minded: his prevailing thought to get to the center hangar with all possible speed. The sound of the control tower exploding under the point of Amadou's RPG reached him only peripherally. In the meantime, he was scanning the airfield for I-PF officers,

only now beginning to dribble out of the hangars and the remains of the control tower. An unimpressive response.

He took aim at a group of three in their black helmets, familiar and hateful, scurrying out a side door of the central hangar that was his assignment. Clenching his jaw, he squeezed the trigger, *pop – pop – pop – pop –* all three of them toppled to the ground. He dimly realized that they were the first shots fired.

Running to the same side door, he saw the main hangar doors sliding open. *Scrambling already!*

Without diverting his course he waved his arms at the big doors, trusting that behind him the rest of his squad would see where to direct themselves.

Other shots were being fired now; he couldn't keep track of either sender or receiver. Arriving at his side door he fired three more shots – *pop. . . pop. . . pop* – one into each of the fallen officers' necks, assuring that no amount of armor would save them.

Mohsin no longer thought – he reacted, confidently relying on his instincts, trusting his body to respond appropriately to whatever threat it sensed at any given moment. As a falconer might unhood and let fly her bird of prey at the moment of the hunt, he now unleashed with calm assurance all of the senses that he had spent years honing.

At one time a part of him, witnessing the harmonic convergence of all his senses into a symphony of action, would have marveled at his own skill, dipping shamelessly into the pool of self-satisfaction. But years of not just habituation, but also direct instruction in shame and modesty, had quashed any such notions. Complacency was a childish luxury that neither he nor his kin could afford. Instead, he trusted and he reacted. He trusted, he reacted, and he directed

all of his attention and all of his being into sensing the external stimuli that constituted the task at hand.

On auto-pilot, Mohsin removed two grenades from his pockets, pulled the pin from one, threw it inside the door, de-pinned the other and threw it into the hangar in the other direction. He crouched down and scanned the field for other agents to shoot, in the delay before detonation. Something he saw chilled him, causing a momentary hiccup in his concentration.

During this lapse the *booms* of his two grenades sounded; the concussion shook him off balance. He braced himself with one arm on the ground for a brief moment and looked back up. It was still there.

Out the side door of the hangar across the tarmac, a disturbing shape bounded. There was no other word for it – it neither walked nor ran nor even moved, it bounded and sprang. Apparently made of black metal, almost as big as a pony, it had a ridged and rounded body with four appendages, each leg comprising two rods connected at some mechanical knee, bent backwards in the manner of any four-legged mammal. Mohsin wasn't close enough to see what the thing had at the end of its legs, but whatever it was gave it incredible agility.

It bounded with precision from one spot to the next, like some sort of bionic antelope. Its silence added to its horrific stealth and dexterity. It paused, and a small explosion erupted from an unseen opening at the front of the body, where the head should have been. Perhaps it was the lack of head that really disturbed Mohsin. All it had instead was a strange red light atop its awful metal body.

So these are the Cats, he thought, raising his gun, hating it instinctively.

It was no more than a stone's throw away, headed toward the front of its hangar, flank exposed. Mohsin fired: *pop-pop-pop*. It was close enough that he could hear the *clanks* as

bullets entered the robotic body, silver-gray flowers instantaneously blossoming on the black robot skin.

But the impact of the bullets didn't budge the RCATS one centimeter. Mohsin felt a sudden, terrible impotence, like in dreams where no amount of leg-pumping propels you away from your pursuer. The beast pivoted with two small bounces until it faced him. It bounded toward him.

Mohsin's eyes widened and he quickly, instinctively, found the Cat's red light in the sight of his gun. He waited for it to stop, for that pause before the shot. He would only have a moment.

It continued run-jumping, cutting the distance between the two hangars. Its silence made the approach even more terrifying. Mohsin rarely felt fright as near as he did now. He bit down on his lip and forced himself to wait.

Then it came. At the end of a bound there was no succeeding bound. The muzzle of the gun – he could see it now, extending from a small opening in the pseudo-chest – pointed right at him. His trigger-hand squeezed. As his gun fired, the red light atop the RCATS shattered.

The nightmare creature collapsed at once, gun firing as it fell. But the angle was off – Mohsin heard the bullet enter the hangar wall above him. Safe. But the mission remained.

Still without thinking, Mohsin sprang up and into the door of the hangar, barrel raised, first left then right. It was eerily silent inside, in the aftermath of the explosions. There was another one to his left; it disabled the first sentinel trying to leave the hangar. To his right, one of his grenades had struck true – the nearest drone emitted rippling smoke, blown almost into two pieces. There were only two other sentinels in the hangar, one at the back to his right and the other attempting to exit behind the first. No other officers or RCATS were visible inside.

More relaxed, he jogged almost to the back of the hangar. Careful to stay out of the path of its guns, he approached the sentinel at its headpiece, the bottom half of which was encased in tinted glass. About the length of three men with the same wingspan, the only clues to its true menace were the three machine guns, one hanging from each wing and one from beneath the tail. The mass destruction of its rockets and bombs were secreted inside. Mohsin himself towered over it; its smallness seemed strange for a machine of such storied terror.

An explosion from behind informed him that this was the last active sentinel in their hangar. Distantly, he heard other *pops* and explosions, but his attention kept him from distraction. He retrieved two more grenades from his pocket and pulled the pins. Placing one on top of the strange machine, he released the lever. Quickly he placed the other on the ground beneath the dark glass. Releasing it in turn, he spun and ran.

Just at that moment he heard a sound: the mechanized whirring of a motor and ball bearings. The gun on the nearest wing pivoting, targeting him.

How fast they respond, he thought in the painfully silent moment before the gun started firing.

But the thought was swallowed by the deafening *BRUM-BRUM-BRUM-BRUM* of the machine gun. The roar made a mockery of his semi's trifling *pops*.

He had seen it quick enough to swerve out of the way on his retreat. Bullets skipped across the pavement just past his feet.

BRUM-BRUM-BRUM.

Running in a zig-zag pattern he fled toward the wall of the hangar behind the plane, trying to out-pivot the gun and buy himself time.

The gunfire was cut short by the loudest explosion yet. The force carried Mohsin over his feet, into a dive. He skidded on the ground, his hands skinned. In the ensuing silence, he looked back and saw the remains of the drone in a pile on the ground.

He turned back, blinking his eyes heavily. Smoke filled his eyes, the corrugated metal of the hangar walls confusing him. He tried to push himself up. Black edges encroached upon his field of vision. On his knees, he clenched his eyes shut, bringing one hand to his head and the other to the ground, steadying.

Arms under his shoulders, lifting him up.

“Are you alright, sir?”

It was Tomás, who had distinguished himself during the civil disobedience three days before. His words were muffled in the aftermath of the blast.

No, not his words, my hearing.

“I think so.”

He patted himself on the torso and legs but felt no outward signs of injury. He was dazed; he had lost his single-minded focus, albeit momentarily.

“I think we’re done, sir,” Tomás said, his voice now louder.

“Yes, let’s return.”

Mohsin started at a trot and then gradually picked up speed. At the front of the hangar he saw the rest of his squad – seven soldiers – huddled around a form on the ground. The persistent daze was beginning to dissipate.

Without looking, Mohsin called from afar, “No stopping, grab him and go. Get our two strongest men.”

The act of giving orders lifted him further out of his fog. It allowed him to refocus his attention. Approaching the group, Mohsin realized that his hulking sergeant was not among the soldiers.

He asked, "Where is Amadou?"

"He's here, sir," Ping called, using her hand to show him the body on the ground. "The autobird got him."

The remainder of his fog evaporated at once, his attention diverted to the body on the ground. He involuntarily slowed, looking at the body and then back at Ping. He turned back to the hangar door and picked up speed once more. He knew he couldn't stop at the group, lest his emotions overwhelm him.

Coldly, he ordered, "Three men carry him, another get the weapon. We must move. Now!" He managed to keep his voice from breaking.

Mohsin didn't look back to assure that his orders were carried out. Running across the tarmac, he saw crumpled masses at infrequent intervals. Most of them wore those hateful masks.

He didn't look to verify how many of his Brothers and Sisters had fallen. That would come later, when the rest were in safety. He had the feeling he had lost three or four, and his feelings were usually accurate. Hence the adulation of his kin. . . He grimaced at the thought.

Losing ten percent of his force was better than he had hoped. But seeing Amadou there, one of his best. . . Imagining his dead face, his forever-closed eyes, he wondered at the sacrifice.

Up ahead he saw the hole in the fence, and beyond it the tunnel to safety. His attention relaxed at the conclusion of the mission. He concerned himself now with scanning the tarmac for sudden problems, while the rest of his kin returned. He stationed himself at the shaft and a thought crept into his mind.

It was a disagreeable thought, but he knew not to resist it. These thoughts and feelings, however repugnant, had to be acknowledged and examined, as a scientist would an unfamiliar organism. They had to be learned and grasped so that the appropriate response could be devised.

This thought involved Daniyah. He conjectured on the effect Amadou's death would have on her. And for Mohsin, feeling something – oftentimes even guessing something – was almost as certain as making it true.

As they had discussed with the Council, the other day's ambush at the Palace, followed by Betancourt's rescue, had caused a forced advancement of their battle schedule. This advancement, like the pebble in the pond, created a ripple, affecting other situations both big and small.

One of the direst casualties was that Mohsin had irretrievably lost time to work on Dani, to persuade her against her basest impulses. He didn't know exactly what she was planning, but he knew it was wrong. Or he knew that on some level *she* thought it was wrong, which amounted to the same thing.

This morning he had still thought there enough time between today and tomorrow night to convince her against it, but *this* made *that* hope all but impossible. Amadou's death would fuel her bitterness and cloud her rational thought. She would now be impervious to reasoned argument. He didn't fault her for it, but the outcome was certain to be ugly.

On a less important plane of perception, he was aware that all of his other soldiers had returned. He turned to the shaft and lifted the lid. Descending, rung by rung, a foreboding premonition took root in his gut. Both his body and his mood lowered simultaneously. His heart and mind, just hours before relieved of the burden of these ominous presentiments, were now laden once more.

Somehow he must solve the Dani dilemma. He needed to prevent whatever she was planning, but he also needed her skills as a commander, if at all possible.

The thought that had been circling him finally landed squarely on the airstrip of his perception. It was the most important thought of all: whatever happened with Dani and her plans, the most essential objective was to prevent her from corrupting anyone else.

“Andrea,” he said to himself.

He arrived at the bottom and saw the three soldiers waiting with Amadou’s body. Mercifully, his face was turned away. They looked at Mohsin, questioning.

“Pack the crates and load them into the cart. Then load our Brother on top.” He avoided looking them in the eye as he said it.

And while barely seeing the people and things that passed before his eyes, a manner of being highly uncharacteristic for the always-conscientious leader of the People, Mohsin made a vow to himself. He pledged that Eche, her salvation, would be his personal mission, second only in importance to the greater mission against I-Land itself.

“Are you alright, sir?” Guaré asked, stopping in front of him, concerned.

Mohsin refocused his eyes onto his second. He smiled and nodded. He indicated the cart with his head, where Amadou’s body now lay. Guaré stepped forward to identify it. Mohsin didn’t wait for his reaction.

“How many accounted for?” he asked Kelly, turning to his side.

“I counted 27, including you and Amadou.”

Three or four, he remembered.

“Guaré, are we ready?”

“Yes sir,” he said, just having seen Amadou’s face. His own mood was now grim.

“Any more officers?”

“No more that I could see, sir. All three towers destroyed.”

Mohsin nodded in mock satisfaction. The news now seemed trivial.

“Let us return then. Help me with the cart.”

He and Guaré walked over to the cart, where Amadou’s body lay, half-sitting. Mohsin aimed his light at the ceiling so as not to have to watch Amadou’s closed eyes for the entire march back. Still, the lack of Fringe in front of him was just as glaring an absence.

Passing Minjay, Gloria and Shiori, who were assigned the rearguard, he and Guaré began to push the cart down the dark tunnel.

With effort, Mohsin brought his attention back to the previous matter: Andrea.

Yes, Andrea, my secondary mission. First: I-Land. Second: Andrea.

At the words a strange feeling overcame him, walking with Guaré at his side, a feeling like something was wrong with the statement. Struggling to place it, he glanced at Guaré, who watched him with concern. Seeing his face devoid of mischievous cheer was unnatural; it bereaved him further.

“Do not worry, brother. I’m saddened by Amadou’s loss, no more.”

“Allow me to help you, if possible.”

“I will if I can.”

Meanwhile, in just the course of that short exchange Mohsin suddenly understood. He straightened perceptibly. That strange feeling regarding Andrea. . . With surprise and a welcome hint of mirth, Mohsin identified the error in his thought.

Andrea may not be my secondary mission, but the primary? Could it be?

Wondering to himself, Mohsin pushed the cart with more vigor. Guaré glanced at him. Mohsin felt his man's suspicion, and his comfort.

Eche crouched next to Dani in an alcove at the top of a long shaft. Dani had explained the months it had taken to create the entryway, to accommodate their plans for the original Illiex building.

Three other members of Dani's company – *No, my company now*, Eche thought – were interspersed throughout the same platform, in various states of activity. There was a Marco, a Nasim, and another woman whose name she couldn't remember.

Occupying the rest of the alcove, awaiting their deployment with an oppressive silence, were approximately two dozen tubs of nitroglycerin.

There was a continuous bustle of activity as the other three soldiers rigged the tubs with ropes, one after another, and guided them on a round dolly while two others – Raj and Samuel – hauled them up from above, then placed them on another dolly to transfer throughout Illiex's sub-basement.

They operated in silence, using hand motions to communicate. The only sounds were the gentle *thuds* of tubs hitting dollies, the squeak of the pulleys and the low *whirr* of wheels on concrete. Dani supervised and with her, Eche.

Eche barely noticed the dull pain of her wounds anymore, not after a full day in their company. She was thrilled to finally be *doing something*.

She was antsy. Waiting in her crouch, with quickened pulse, she periodically took deep, invigorating breaths, the breaths of one savoring the air, savoring the present moment, the breaths of one recently reawakened to the glories of life. She kept looking about wide-eyed – at the alcove, at her companions, at the explosives.

Her glee threatened to engulf her. The grin she could suppress, but a bubbling in her belly loomed constantly. It wasn't like the cramps she had felt over the last two days, the ones that seemed to arise whenever a disturbing phantom crept into her thoughts. This sensation was pleasant. The tiny spasms in her stomach reflected the simple urge to giggle with joy, an urge she feared might erupt into maniacal laughter if she weren't careful.

She vaguely knew the manic upswing in her mood to be an unhealthy evasion, that it perhaps portended something grim. But it was the other part of her that recognized this, the part of her she was currently ignoring. It was the side of her that had wanted to scream to Dani from the cot, to stop her and tell her there was no way she could help her, no way she could become a fellow exterminator. It was the side of her that was causing the bothersome stomach aches. It was the part that was injured, that was weak and scared and didn't want to hurt anybody. It was the part that just wanted to be left alone, cowering, licking its wounds. It was the coward in her.

That side of her was buried now, buried deep beneath a pile of ash and bone. . .

She grayed at the thought; she wouldn't go there. Every time her mind wandered back to that charred ground, her entire physical self rebelled in a crescendo of anxiety. She shook her head once as if flicking a bug away. The vexing notion flitted off and a fog like a black curtain enveloped it, sealing it off from view. The coldness returned.

But as a preying serpent stealthily cracks the surface of a murky swamp, another thought surfaced into her newly cleared mind. She didn't fear this thought like the other – it wasn't

nearly as dangerous to her emotional stability. Still, its niggling threatened her barely concealed glee.

Ever since emerging from her brief convalescence, Eche had noticed the special treatment she was receiving. Not just from Dani, Guaré and Mohsin, but from everybody she came across. The looks from complete strangers among the People. . . the space they gave her as she passed them in close quarters. . . the way the Council had regarded her. . . Not just Jones but Washington too. It would have made sense, given her (*Don't say it!*) trauma, if they were treating her like she was made of delicate crystal. But it was different from that. They were treating her like she was some sort of oddity, apart from all of them.

Of course I'm apart, she thought. I'm not yet People, I'm still an initiate.

But it went beyond simple wariness around a newcomer. She detected something else in their treatment, a note almost of deference. Guaré had always treated her like a sister, not just a Sister of the People, but a flesh-and-blood sibling. The affinity had always existed between them. And Mohsin could make anyone feel like they were the most special person in the world; that was simply the power he held in his gaze and his attention. It didn't mean anything.

But Dani's attitude toward her was strange. Eche observed Dani while she thought about her. Dani, in turn, observed the activity of her company, where fifteen drums remained to be hoisted to the sub-basement.

Why, since Eche's (*No!*) disaster, did Dani insist on accompanying her at all times? Surely not for anything Eche had to offer. It didn't seem to be to protect Eche either; Dani wasn't shy about asking her to lift boxes or carry gear, injured hands be damned. Dani never even mentioned the. . . (!) episode.

It actually seemed fear-based, strangely enough. Dani seemed afraid to let Eche out of her sight. But why? What could Eche do if not around her?

She felt tantalizingly close to an answer, like she was blindfolded and turning over an irregular object in her hands, all but able to identify it. Her concentration was still off, however. After several seconds she had to shelve the mystery for another occasion.

There was also Frida. She had heard so much about the Council and the de facto Chairper, but their meeting before that morning's Council session had left her baffled.

"I've heard many. . . interesting things about you," Frida had told her with a smirk, her eyes twinkling. She had then exchanged a brief glance with Mohsin, who for his part was beaming like a proud parent.

Frida hadn't even mentioned the (*don't*) incident, hadn't apologized or offered condolences. She hadn't wondered how Eche's injuries felt, or given anything like what could be considered a *normal* response to a suffering stranger. It would have even been callous, yet. . .

Yet she had also perceived at once that Frida was not the sort of person to commit such oversights. She was of the type who weighed words carefully, who only said what was intended, and said it with total conviction and sincerity. A person like Mohsin. Eche didn't know how she knew, she could just tell. She had always been perceptive when it came to people.

Even with Betancourt she had been perceptive like that. She looked down briefly, a flash of guilt surprising her. She ought not to have treated him so poorly.

Just as she could tell with Mohsin, and with Guaré, and with Frida that they were good, whole people; just as she could feel it; just as she was beginning to feel that there was something wild and dangerous in Dani, something ingenuous in Sir Jones; in that same way she had known that Betancourt was good and sincere, a true ally.

Then why was I so merciless with him? She paused and cocked her head, thinking for a moment.

Well, I ended up being right, didn't I? Didn't he almost ruin it?

She had been right. Despite what she knew were his best intentions, she had remained suspicious of his insurmountable affiliation, skeptical that he could outrun his association with such a corrupt, insidious presence. And this morning's events had proven her suspicions well-founded. She remembered the dismay on his face. She saw it before her, right there on the platform while the others worked.

Poor Betancourt.

She straightened up, a puzzled look on her face.

Where did that come from?

Tenderness for the Captain? The same man who had endangered their mission, endangered their entire existence? The same who would be responsible for any further casualties, should anything malfunction in their hasty alterations? The same who had been too stupid to realize that in his zeal to help the People, he had borne their very destruction on his person? The same man who was most singularly responsible (*Not there. . . don't!*) for *their* deaths too. . .

A cold, blank, steeliness supplanted the image of Betancourt's shocked face in her mind. It smothered the rumbling in her stomach that she only now noticed – it had been forming for several minutes but she was too lost in thought to sense it. She looked around the alcove, saw Nasim and the woman lifting one of the few remaining tubs onto the dolly.

He deserves what he gets, she thought. Nothing but a menace – to them, to her, to himself. An accidental menace was still a menace. Anyone who didn't recognize it was a weak-kneed apologist. Including her, if part of her felt that way.

Her eyes narrowed and she shook her head in disgust at herself. Any troublesome thoughts she had been entertaining now slunk away, submerging into the fog that she would not penetrate.

Who cared what kind of treatment she received from her new family? That she had people looking after her at all was the most important reality. And she repaid them with suspicion over their motives? She ought to repay them with hard work and devotion. She had a task at hand, and she was going to perform it to the best of her ability, just as she had her entire life. And she was going to succeed. And they would be satisfied with her. They would see that their efforts and patience had not been in vain.

“If you're done daydreaming,” Dani said at her side, “We've got a mission to complete.”

Eche turned her head to find her captain staring at her with mild curiosity.

“They're raising the last tub now. Wait here while I check the detonators.”

Dani stood up on the platform. The bottom of the last tub disappeared through the square opening in the ceiling.

Still unused to living life below the surface, it was difficult for Eche to grasp that the ceiling of her new world was only the sewer drain of another. There seemed something mythological in it, or multi-dimensional. The entire enterprise struck her as an stealing into heaven from below.

A strange image came to her, piggybacking on the mystical sentiment as one kaleidoscopic picture crystallizes out of another. She saw lava propelled from the earth's depths

to the outer crust, then exploding out of a volcano's mouth, covering the surface in molten rock and ash. She could almost feel the heat of this vision; she watched the magma wash over the streets and the buildings of I-Land.

At this moment she felt that, even moreso than the People, even moreso than Dani or Guaré or Frida or Mohsin, that *she*, Andrea Echeverry. . . Eche. . . *she* was the propulsion force that was set to launch her beautiful fire up to the surface, to unleash it. . . to ignite *their* world aflame, as they had ignited her own. She alone was the force, as mysterious and unyielding as the inner workings of the earth.

“What are you smiling about?”

Dani was standing over her on the alcove, breast heaving after lowering herself back down the drain.

“Nothing.” She purged her smile.

“Time to go.”

Eche stood up and went to the ladder at the edge of the platform. She felt Dani's eyes on her still. She wanted her to quit staring. She was tired of being stared at.

“Help us with the blast shield,” Dani said.

Only then did Eche realize that Nasim and Samuel were also waiting on the widened ladders, on opposite sides of the adulterated shaft. She looked at Nasim next to her, almost forgetting where she was. He smiled to her, his eyes directed down. Behind them she heard a metallic grating and turned to see Dani and Samuel dragging a thick metal sheet from one side of the platform. They stepped down two rungs and hefted the sheet above them at the same time, passing it over to Eche and Nasim.

Eche hurried to lower herself, in order to avoid the sheet hitting her head. She turned around on the ladder, her back against the rungs, using both arms to lift the sheet. She winced at the pressure against her wounded hands. Only yesterday they were searing on baking metal.

The metal sheet passed over her, inches from her head, her arms straining above her, again just like yesterday. The weight was almost more than she could handle. And the pain. It reminded her of the struggle to lift that near-molten grate. In a blink, the odor of smoke invaded her nostrils. The crackle of flames deafened her. She felt her hands searing all over again on the metal.

“Aah!” she cried, clenching her eyes shut involuntarily. Her strength evaporated. The metal sheet dipped closer to her head.

“Eche,” Nasim grunted, straining to pick up the slack.

She opened her eyes and saw him straining to hold the sheet up on his end. The snapping sounds quickly faded. The smell and the heat disappeared.

She looked at the lid they were shifting, saw that it wasn't at all similar to the drain cover. It was solid metal, not grated. It was cool to the touch. It couldn't cause the grill marks that she had on her hands and arm, on her scalp and face.

“Please,” Nasim said, faltering.

Once more she pushed against the lid and took up the slack she had let loose. The sheet rose again and they continued to slide it across the shaft until it covered the entire opening. The four of them lowered the shield to the platform, sealing the shaft from the drain pipe with a soft *clank*.

“You okay?” Dani said to her from the other side of the shaft.

“Yeah.”

She looked briefly at Dani to see if her captain suspected what had happened to her. She didn't.

"My hands still hurt a lot, that's all."

Dani nodded. "That's my fault. I shouldn't have had you doing this, not so soon. I'm sorry."

And yet you did. Why?

"I can handle it."

They all turned around facing the rungs, beginning to lower themselves. Nasim let Eche go below him.

"How much time do we have anyway?" Eche called out to nobody in particular.

"Enough," Dani replied.

They continued their descent. The shaft was long, at least three times as long as the storm drain at her farm. . . (*no. . .*) her former home. After arriving at the sewer floor, Dani led them a short distance down the tunnel until they arrived at another vertical shaft, this one narrower, allowing only one person at a time. Samuel started down, followed by Nasim, at Dani's indication. Eche followed Nasim. Soon they were all in the darkness of the shaft.

This one was even longer; it felt endless. Had she really climbed all this way on the approach? And just to accompany Dani? To serve as compromised assistance in the most menial of tasks? When they finally arrived at the bottom, in a much bigger tunnel that Dani told her had once been used for gas mining, the rest of the company greeted them with nervous smiles and nods.

"It won't be long now," Dani said. "Move away from the shaft. West," she said, signaling. "You three stay with me, just in case." She pointed to Eche and the two men.

At the far end of the group Eche saw Marco, the navigator, and the woman that had been on the platform with them. They began walking at a steady pace, away from the shaft.

Now that she had descended once more into the darkness, with its moisture and its smell of earth and grime, Eche felt her anxiety increase correspondingly.

She was already breathing heavy from the work of lowering herself down, compensating for her wounded hands with her shoulders and back. She still felt the adrenaline flowing, her pulse racing, perhaps even faster than before. Everything they had been working for tonight was building toward a crescendo, internally as well as externally. She didn't know how much longer she could wait.

C'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon. . .NOW.

As if on cue, a clap of thunder roared from above. The walls of the passage trembled. Pebbles, earth clumps, and loose pieces of mortar tumbled from the ceilings, showering the ground with debris. Almost to a person, the soldiers of D Company shrunk down reflexively, shrugging their shoulders and covering their heads with their arms. But they walked without pause.

The thundering subsided, but the trembling continued for several seconds. The ground convulsed at strange intervals. More dirt and stones, larger now, fell from above with each shudder. Gradually the shaking lessened. Eche could hear a loud alarm blaring in the distance.

"Feels like something big came down," Dani said at her side. An outbreak of cheers and whoops infested the company.

Eche didn't hear her. She was thinking back to the volcano, to the fiery explosion that would erupt from the underworld, a destructive force of which she would be the causal agent.

Let my fire rain down. . .

And despite the heat of her vision, despite the heat she knew was ravaging the city less than a mile above them, despite the heat of her blood rapidly pumping through her sweating body, Eche felt cold.

“The Legacy of Hydraulic Fracturing”¹⁰

The natural gas mining technique of hydraulic fracturing, derogatorily referred to as 'fracking,' became prevalent in the late 20th century, as traditional mining methods declined in effectiveness. As the technique became publicized there grew a debate over its toxicity to both humans and the environment. The debate may now seem quaint to modern historians as the matter has long been laid to rest.

We are not concerned with this debate, however, as much as with the byproduct of the hydraulic fracturing phenomenon as it relates to the People; for one of the principal side effects of hydraulic fracturing was immense tunnels at a depth of one to two miles beneath the earth's surface. These were used by the drilling companies to inject chemical-enriched water into the surrounding earth at extreme pressures, in order to loosen gas deposits in the soil. From the vantage of hindsight, these tunnels are the chief legacy of the enterprise, and the only one certain to last beyond one or two centuries more.

The 'fracking' tunnels relate to the People thusly: in the decades leading up to the Expulsion, Midlanders appropriated the abandoned drill-wells surrounding the city. They used them largely for storage, easily adapting them with rungs and rudimentary elevators in order to descend their significant depths into the earth. These appropriations were apparently unmonitored by I-Land.

Furthermore, when the first Populist party members – the People's antecedents – began to abandon the city and link up with the Midlanders, they saw value in these tunnels and began adapting them further: laying rails for ease of transport; excavating connector tunnels to form a network; even arriving, through their excavations, at the bottom-most reaches of the I-Land

10 Excerpted from Jensen, Frida, The People's Anthology of the 3rd Millenium, 2nd edition, Ch. 7.

sewer system, thus gaining unprecedented, concealed access. These People-prototypes understood better than any the ramifications of I-Land's maneuvers; they prepared alternative arrangements in anticipation of an imminent moment of reckoning.

This moment came subsequent to the First Attempt, which marked the end of the insurgent period following the Expulsion (see Ch. 4). In the aftermath, I-Land persecution of People and associated Midlanders became omnipresent and relentless. Their already-tenuous position above ground became untenable. With preparations in place and improvements ongoing, the move underground was virtually inevitable.

At the time of publication, the People have lived underground for almost two decades. A small group of the youngest generation has only experienced sunlight at fixed, medically-prescribed intervals. The only reminder of the original use for the People's current home is the faint smell of petroleum, one of the chemicals used in the fracturing process. The other chemicals – known toxins and carcinogens among them – have either rendered themselves inert through fixation with the soil, or long since leached into the water supply and flowed away. And thus we now live, awaiting the day when we can safely and justly return to the surface.

X.

Betancourt stared at the I-Land flag, that black triangle sitting like a pupil in that blue eye. It was less than a hand's-breadth from his nose, the only interruption on the white wall in front of him. A white wall that was really a white door that opened up onto a hallway of other white doors. White doors behind which stood other suspected terrorists and subversives. He closed his eyes to shut out the whiteness; the flag's triangle remained even through his closed eyelids, the only unique image in his closet burned onto his retinas.

The white door was actually a series of white, opaque windows mounted into a frame that served as a door. The windows, at varying heights along the door – and correspondingly along the length of his naked body – could only be opened by a switch from the outside hallway.

Inside the Closet, after unknown hours under the glaring light that never extinguished, Betancourt's thoughts were beginning to wander among the whiteness.

He had long known of the Individualized Interrogation Units. He had often lamented the fates of the unfortunate captives subjected to their torture. He had never, however, been in a position to marvel at such length over the ingenuity of their design.

It was, in fact, the size of a very small closet, completely white but for the flag and four small pieces of black material on the window at waist level. He had unsuccessfully attempted to pry these pieces out. The space was just big enough for him to stand with arms at his side. There was not space enough to raise his arms nor turn around. Despite the aching of his feet and legs, it was at least physically possible to sleep while leaning against the wall of your choice. The helmet they had given him even augmented the comfort of such a position, with its hard shell over cushioned padding. It was like having a pillow wrapped around his head.

Strange that they should provide me with something that helps, he had thought about the helmet.

Sleeping was prevented every 15 minutes by the harsh knocks of the Cal unit. Whatever you wished to say about artificial intelligence, you could not accuse it of lacking punctuality. You could ignore Cal as he casually rolled down the opposite side of the hallway, banging each door thrice with one of its various appendages. The walls were sufficiently insulated to keep the muted thumps just beneath the conscious registers of a dozing brain. But as soon as he was five or six Closets down, there was no way to remain unconscious. Even if he was somehow still dozing when Cal got to his Closet, the rough whacks on his door – *TatTatTat* – instantly jarred him awake.

By privilege of his (*former*) position, Betancourt knew there were even different sized Closets for different sizes of people. There were very few fat terrorists, but there was a Closet waiting should one ever be caught.

The view of the door button was quite a nifty feature as well, and cruel. It was in plain view but completely out of reach, placed just a few centimeters above the detainee's head on the right wall. To think that just by pressing it, the bolts holding the door in place would electronically retract, as Strauss had demonstrated upon his admission. . .

Of course the button was only a stupid gimmick. It was easy to see that reaching it was impossible – ignoring it was a no-brainer after a minute or so. Then again, after enough time standing beneath the constant light, unable to rest or sleep, blinded by the white, the black triangle singed into your mind, your brain tended to gloss over the obvious and the factual, over reality. It tended to reach, to stretch for connections and possibilities and hopes that your rational self knew better than to entertain.

You tried to resist it, either out of pragmatism, or pride, or some other futile justification. Nonetheless, your eyes eventually began to inch upward and to the right. You'd catch yourself several times. You'd scowl and perhaps jiggle your head in an attempt to shake some sense into yourself. Maybe you'd even bang your head a few times against the window-door, just to interrupt the monotony. But inevitably your eyes would return to their destined target, up and to the right, like a billiard ball on a fixed table. You'd be looking at the button before you even realized your eyes had been inching there all along. You'd be looking at the button like you had momentarily passed out and the button itself had resuscitated you.

Then it was pretty much over. Once you were looking at it, there was only one way it could end. You'd consider for several seconds, maybe as long as a minute. You'd weigh all possible maneuvers, and you'd think:

If I stand on my tiptoes, maybe I can jump. . .

Betancourt attempted to bend his knees, but before he lowered himself even a smidge the confines blocked him: both his knees in front and his tailbone in back struck the walls. It wasn't nearly enough leverage for the required spring. It was the third time he had fallen prey to the delusion. Third or fourth, he wasn't sure.

He straightened once more and closed his eyes, marveling again. Almost as quickly he shook his head, his eyes regaining focus. He scowled, thinking. His only remaining method of control was the ability to plan and categorize.

What forms of torture have they used so far? Isolation, Sleep deprivation, motion restriction and physical cloistering, sensory exhaustion . . .

From somewhere down the hall, a human wail began. It sounded half-hearted at first, most likely from exhaustion, but it gradually built in force over the course of several seconds until it was an outright scream of agony. Goosebumps flared all over his skin.

. . . *Psychological*, he added to his mental list.

The professional-grade insulation between walls and doors made hearing such sounds much worse. You never heard footsteps, or doors opening, or even loud conversation coming from outside your Closet. That's how completely they sealed off each individual prisoner. With that in mind, you knew that any screams you *did* hear must be amazingly loud.

How many screams am I not hearing? How many grunts and moans that are too faint to penetrate? This was the natural follow-up thought.

Betancourt sighed. He was already rattled, and it was only Phase I.

A soft click piercing the womb-like silence of the cell gave Betancourt a start. It signified the opening of one of his windows. This was the head-level window, their way of saying they were about to talk.

Time for Phase II.

The opening of the window removed the flag from his immediate visual field, replacing it with a smaller flag from the door across the hall. The only other perceptible change occurred with the air quality. There was a freshness that touched his face, a slight coolness. The opening provided an outlet for the stale air of his cell, even a slight draft. It was a welcome change, despite the hallway's muddied scent of multiple bodily excretions.

“Mr. Betancourt,” a deep voice crooned.

It was a warm and melodious voice, even cheerful. After his aural confinement, the harmonious tones of the voice penetrated his ears and filled his head like a warm balm.

Betancourt felt goosebumps again, this time pleasurable. The Chairman.

He could still only see white, with the comparatively miniscule dash of the flag's red, white, blue and black.

Taking a deep breath and exhaling, he asked, "Then I'm no longer 'Captain'?"

"Oh no," Strauss said, chuckling softly, somehow giving Betancourt the urge to chuckle along with him. "No, those days are behind you I'm afraid. You're not even a Citizen any longer. You're a terrorist, no more, no less. In fact, I'm only using your name out of a . . . kind of nostalgia. . . for our former affiliation. I can stop if you would like."

His voice intoxicated. The casual certainty with which the words emanated from his mouth disarmed Betancourt, worked to persuade him. He didn't know how much of the effect was Strauss's legitimate power of speech and how much was Betancourt's own sensory deprivation. He paused to collect himself, to remind himself with whom exactly he was dealing. This was the man who, for all intents and purposes, ran the show.

Betancourt finally responded, "So then I can call you a 'sadistic bastard' without fear of reprisal?"

"Tsk, Tsk. . . You are free to say whatever you want, Mr. Betancourt. In fact, the more you say, the better off you'll be. But I will say I'm. . . disappointed. . . with your attitude. I expected more from a man of such talent."

Betancourt blushed, looking down, then just as quickly raised his head with a glare, angry over his shame.

“I suppose I should feel flattered at the honor of a personal interrogation by Strauss himself.”

Strauss paused for a moment, apparently considering.

“You could allow it to inflate your sense of self if you so choose, Mr. Betancourt, although I’m not sure your terrorist friends would approve. . . You know as well as I that the specific circumstances of your. . . defection. . . require the most vigilant attention at the highest levels.”

His unsettling manner of pausing between words allowed him, unchallenged, to wrest control of any conversation. The pauses were a manner of taunting his fellow conversant, as if by deliberately controlling the pace of what you heard, he was thereby controlling your every action. He who commands the rhythm commands the message. Betancourt had to channel his annoyance, supplement it with reason.

He responded, “In order to defect, one must first be enlisted. But I was never a member of your tribe in anything but name. Better to call me ‘resister,’ it’s only that now you’ve discovered it. Your fault, not mine.”

“Interesting. . . I now hear those notes of terrorist speech in your discourse. How. . . eloquent. Of course we in the high command are. . . capable. . . as well, in that respect.”

“The speech you consider terrorist is only a manifestation of intelligent thought. No reasonable person can regard intelligence as ‘terrorist.’”

“On the contrary, Mr. Betancourt – any reasonable person would have to recognize intelligent thought as the most dangerous state of awareness for an existing power.”

“Perhaps for an abusive power, but not a just one. We are concerned with the wellbeing of humanity, not that of your power.”

“Yes, yes, freedom, equality, fine things those.” Betancourt heard a rustle of clothing, indicating a shift in position. “But Mr. Betancourt, I didn’t come here for a friendly debate, however much I may enjoy the . . . sparring. For obvious reasons, we must get the interrogation under way.”

He sped up his pace of speech, producing a corresponding anxiety in Betancourt, the building of a tension that would resolve he knew not how.

Strauss continued, “To that end I have decided to abbreviate Phase I. (I wonder if your basic knowledge of our procedures will serve more as a blessing or . . . a curse?) In any event, we will begin Phase II with some external incentive for you to tell us everything you know. . . as quickly as possible. Cal: specimen.”

Betancourt heard another click, followed by a slight cooling at groin level. Two closed windows interrupted the open spaces at his groin and head. He looked down. In a small space between his chest and the wall, he saw a clear box project into the Closet, on the end of a metal pole. There was a light brown spot in the middle of the box. The plastic touched the naked skin of his upper leg, right in the crevice leading down from his hip to his genitals.

“This is one of the . . . natural relics. . . of our region,” Strauss began once more. “It proved surprisingly resistant to the general destruction committed by your kind during the War for Democracy, even becoming more potent it seems. With a little help, of course.”

Betancourt opened his mouth in rebuttal, but a new sensation stopped him short. Directly above the steady pressure of the plastic box against his groin, Betancourt felt the soft, tentative prickle of tiny points as they felt their way along the new terrain of his skin. The pressure of the box receded but the tiny pin points remained. They slowly began to creep up toward his waist,

one and then two at a time. Betancourt concentrated to control his breathing. The window at his groin closed.

“Now you can certainly try to kill it with your hand,” Strauss continued in his song of a voice. “If at all possible I would suggest you do so when its mouth is not facing your skin, because these sorts of highly venomous creatures almost always get in one last bite before they’re . . . hopelessly smashed. You and yours actually have that in common with this little fellow.”

The points crawled past his waist and continued to his left side, toward the crack where his arm met his torso.

“They prefer dark of course, preciously scarce in your . . . current environment. . . It will probably elect for the closest approximation: an armpit, a groin, maybe under the chin. The moisture will not be agreeable, but the best available choice in an . . . unpleasant environment, I imagine.”

As the creature approached his armpit, Betancourt tried to move his arm away from his body to allow it more space. The creature immediately froze. He realized he was sweating. He wondered if he shouldn’t just smash the thing right now and get the bite over with. That would be better than fearing it for the next several hours.

As if able to see him, or at least hear his thoughts, Strauss said, “I would not recommend moving much, or at all. These are very shy creatures and will try to run away, barring which they will, of course, have to defend themselves in the only way left to them. Bites did not used to be fatal. . . before. . . but their venom has improved with age, like a wine maybe. Still, a strong man like yourself would most likely survive, depending on the bite's proximity to vital

organs. But still, they're quite painful and often. . . disfiguring. The bite would leave you rather. . . compromised."

Betancourt, distracted from Strauss's discourse by his personal difficulties, had frozen as completely as the insect, if that's what it was. He tried to restrict his breathing but gave it up when his breaths began to emerge in small, shuddering gasps, far more violent than his normal respiration. He tried to relax, allowing himself a deep breath. The creature began to move again, toward his left armpit.

"The real difficulty, I'm afraid, enters the equation very shortly, when we begin our other. . . interrogation techniques. It will be quite difficult to resist sudden movements at that time. The spider might very well fear for its life. . ."

Strauss paused, as if purposely giving Betancourt a moment to ponder. And Betancourt did consider the two paths unraveling themselves before him. As he was now understanding it, he could choose either immediate, certain pain, or prolonged terror and *likely* pain. It only took him a few seconds to decide.

He took a deep breath, and quickly pivoted his chest toward the left wall, squeezing his left bicep against his side at the same time. He heard nothing, but soon felt a satisfying wetness against his side and arm. But two seconds later a dull pain formed in his side, directly under his armpit. Within seconds the ache escalated into a searing sting. Betancourt inhaled sharply.

"Ahh," Strauss said. Through his pain, Betancourt imagined him smiling. "I thought you might decide that. All the best ones do. It bodes well for the entertainment value of our session, though perhaps not for the. . . information you will provide."

He didn't sound remotely disappointed.

Betancourt felt tiny, aching waves radiating outward from the bite. They reached as far as his nipple in front and his shoulder blade in back, encompassing his entire armpit.

“We had, of course. . . taken that course of action into consideration,” Strauss finished. “Cal: specimen.”

The window at Betancourt’s feet opened up and another box poked in. It hovered over his right foot for a moment. Betancourt noticed what felt like a fly landing on the top of his foot near his ankle. It did not immediately move. The box withdrew and the door closed.

Biting his lip, Betancourt closed his eyes, as if in prayer, focusing on his breath for several seconds. When he opened his eyes again, a camera was peering into him from the hallway. It quickly retracted.

Moments later, Strauss said, “According to Cal, your wound has an unfortunate proximity to the heart, which will serve to spread the venom faster. A second bite would be. . . not good. . . let us say.”

The new spider began to crawl up his leg. The light prick of its legs created an irritating tickle; he had to tense his leg in order to disregard it. The stinging in his side, meanwhile, did not appear to be worsening. He could get used to the constant throbbing.

“Let’s consider the stage set,” Strauss crooned. “The faster you give us information, the faster we can end your interrogation.”

“You mean the quicker you can kill me.”

“If you insist on speaking it aloud.” He sounded amazingly upbeat. Betancourt pictured him twiddling his thumbs. “I don’t need to hide the truth from you of all people, Mr. Betancourt. Your choice at this. . . moment. . . comes down to a simple decision of how long your life will be. . . and how much pain it will contain.”

“There is a question of right and wrong, sir, that might be considered. It being wrong to help you against my people, no matter how much pain you may cause.”

He didn't know what prompted him to use an address of respect to Strauss.

A soft chuckle answered him. He could imagine a patronizing look on Strauss's face, as if in response to a child naively questioning him about the nature of god.

“So now they are your ‘people,’ yes? The People are your people. Well we shall see, I suppose. I must warn you though – in my experience. . . pain. . . Mr. Betancourt, knows no morality.”

Betancourt did not immediately respond. An idea had occurred to him. He lifted his right leg as far as it could go, which meant he was standing on his right toes, his knee touching the window in front. The spider, which had crawled behind his leg to his calf, reached the pit in back of his knee and paused. Betancourt waited, breathing regularly. The spider appeared to be resting.

Strauss continued, “Now, you can be kind enough t—”

An immense, distant blast cut him off, followed by a deep rumbling, both aural and tactile. The building trembled around them. A metallic rattling wafted down the hallway, accenting the ominous rumble.

Betancourt moved his head toward the window, trying to see out in the hall. He saw only white and the flag. *An earthquake. . . But no. . . the first sound was an explosion.*

The rumbling continued. The building lurched. Suddenly, the side of a well-manicured gray head stumbled into view. Strauss righted himself before Betancourt could see even the skin of his forehead, much less his eyes. Just that corner of hair, that flattened cowlick. Betancourt was unreasonably satisfied to see Strauss knocked off balance. He didn't have much; he had to

grasp at whatever small victory he could find. Then came an unexplainable need to see the man's eyes. What could they look like, the eyes that belonged to that impossibly penetrating voice?

Gradually, the rumbling subsided. All he felt was a slight tremor in his feet, which soon tapered off as well. Silence resumed its rightful place in the IIU.

"It seems, Mr. Betancourt, that we shall have to delay Phase II once more," Strauss said.

His voice still had that warm, syrupy tone, but there was a noticeable edge to it now. The gloss had worn off in a spot or two. It forwent its usual pauses, a minute change that carried significant weight. Betancourt smiled to himself upon hearing it: another small victory.

"Do make yourself at home in the meantime, and I wish you and your small friend the best of relations." You could hear the hurry.

The window closed with another soft click. It took Betancourt several quiet seconds to process the new development. He was alone and had gained a reprieve of who-knows-how-long.

Mostly alone, he corrected himself.

He didn't allow himself to get too excited, but the delay gave him a chance to enact his plan without possible discovery. It was impossible to think or do anything while Strauss was talking to him. That voice. It hypnotized. *The goddamned snake-charmer. . .*

And even if he had been able to focus enough to accomplish his goal, they would have noticed and tossed in another. Now, unmonitored, he had both the time to work and the solitude to benefit.

Betancourt still had his right leg raised, creating a slight overhang to entice the spider. It was still stationed behind his knee. He carefully, as a test, lowered his right hand to the top of his knee. Plenty of give. He could definitely reach.

He paused for just a second, inhaled, then quickly reached his hand behind his knee and swiped downward, as if flinging muck from his fingers. He hit and dislodged the arachnid from his leg.

The slightest *tack* sounded from the Closet floor.

Like a maniac, Betancourt stomped his feet all over the floor, in rapid and rhythmic bursts. He left no surface untrampled. He stomped for a full minute, counting to himself as he did it, as if he was jogging in place or dancing. If he didn't kill it at least it wouldn't have a chance to bite him. It only briefly occurred to him how foolish he probably looked, nakedly stomping in place. But he felt no ironical smile encroaching upon his set jaw.

Slowing to a stop at the end of his exercise, ready for the investigation. He had to slide his feet on the floor and hope not to poke the spider's living body. Just a couple of centimeters would tell him, without risking too much. He slid his left foot forward slowly, bit by bit. He held his breath unconsciously.

He felt nothing on his left foot.

Slowly, he inched his right foot forward. He hadn't moved it even a millimeter when he felt something. Gingerly, minutely, he lifted his foot into the air. He didn't dare breathe. He focused all his attention onto the bottom of his foot. It hovered in the air and he felt nothing. Slowly, gradually, he lowered it to the floor. When it touched he could finally exhale. It was wet, the soft squish of broken spider on the bottom of his foot.

Betancourt relaxed his entire body, his shoulders sagging and his bottom resting against the back wall. He closed his eyes and let his head fall back with a bump. He didn't raise it, just left it there, resting as much of his body as possible. His heart pounded in his chest. His pulse

boomed in his ears. The bite throbbed in his side, but the physical pleasure of his relief overwhelmed the pain, one ocean wave swallowing a lesser one.

“Alone,” he said, eyes closed.

“All alone,” he said with his next exhale. He repeated himself on each exhale, “All alone.” Gradually he regained his composure.

“All alone,” he continued with his mantra. It was not a lament but a prayer.

In his periphery, he heard the muted *tat-tat-tat* of the Cal unit making its rounds.

Do I wait here? Do I go to them?

Sighing, Dani shifted her weight between feet, fidgeting at the head of the dark passage. She knew they were still on schedule, that they weren't to return until around now, but anxiety pervaded her, the same anxiety she always felt when parted for any significant length of time.

No shots at least, a good thing. . . Most likely.

As she approached the end of their passage, her biggest apprehension had been that she would hear distant gunfire funneling down the long tunnel toward her, a sign that the battle had followed her kin into their retreat.

She snorted and shook her head to herself. Being reduced to this damselesque sniveling was ridiculous, even pacing now! She halted herself, but smiling all the time. She enjoyed worrying; it meant she had someone to worry over.

Dani perked her head at a faint sound. Footsteps crunched down the tunnel, too distant to see their source.

Her deliberation vanished. She left the dim yellow light of the old passageway and entered the darkness of the new one, starting at a jog to meet them. Relief welled within, multiplying with the satisfaction of her own mission. Worry, soreness and exhaustion slipped away. Even the insidious burden of her own mini-rebellion retreated for a moment.

After only a few seconds, she saw the dim light of a headlamp rounding a slight bend in the tunnel. The footsteps resounded enough that she could now hear them over her own. Lots of footsteps, good news.

“How go you, People?” she greeted.

She heard various murmurs in response: “Accomplished. . . Fairly painless. . . Minor casualties. . .”

By all accounts a success. Pleasure surged within her.

Finally nearing the first of the group, she stopped near one of the hundreds of support beams, in order to allow them passage. The unilluminated faces offered no clues as to identity; she instead searched for the biggest among them, for those hulking, rounded shoulders that stood a head above everyone else. Out of impatience she began walking her way down the line. She was too preoccupied to smile or greet the returning soldiers, and it was too dark to see if they even noticed her.

At the end of the line she turned around, quickly scanning the retreating group for her giant. She couldn't have missed him. Even if she did, he would have jumped to her. But then she saw another light a little further back. She hadn't noticed Mohsin or Guaré either, so maybe they were all bringing up the rear. She waited for them and soon heard the wheels of the cart they were pushing. A few seconds more and a light shined on her face.

“Daniyah,” Mohsin said.

The cart slowed and came to a stop.

“It went well then?” she asked, smiling and moving toward his voice. “It seems like just about everyone is back.”

Strangely, he paused before responding. Also, something queer was lingering in her mind about the way he had said her name; it was as if he had been unpleasantly surprised to meet her there. Not only had she never witnessed something like it, but she had never even imagined him capable of such a failure in tact. Also, that he was surprised at seeing her meant he had forgotten that she always awaited Amadou’s return, no matter when or where. But Mohsin *embodied* mindfulness and grace. Forgetfulness and artlessness were alien to him. Something was off.

He finally spoke, “Almost everyone. . .”

She now noticed Guaré’s bowler atop the man at Mohsin’s side. Their stopping the cart was strange too, and the way they just stood behind it, waiting. They treated it like a shield, or a barricade. Her disquiet grew.

“But Daniyah. . .”

Over a dim protest within her, the cart drew her eyes. She saw an irregular, rounded form protruding from the bin. But they had only packed the angular crates on the way there. She had witnessed it herself, upon seeing them off.

Precipitously, Dani felt the oncoming presence of a truth that would at any moment shatter her. That she did not yet perceive its detailed contour afforded her a temporary reprieve, but time ran short. The tranquility of her entire world now lay on its deathbed, on the verge of being ripped from her, its demise already foreordained. She knew it. She sensed it. She could do nothing but helplessly stand by to witness its expiration.

Mohsin had stopped talking as she neared the cart. In his trailing off she recognized his familiar tact. She was now only a few steps from the vehicle, close enough to identify the rounded shape as a head. Feet stuck out the other end. Large feet.

Dani stopped and closed her eyes, then immediately tried to open them but couldn't. She stood there, eyes clenched, breathing through her nose, her shoulders starting to heave with each breath. There was gunpowder in the air. Knowledge of the truth crept further with each successive breath, like a giant arachnid slowly wrapping its legs completely around her mind. She perceived it in the minutest detail.

"Please," she said, eyes still closed, shaking her head slowly.

"I am sorry, my Sister," he said from her side.

She felt hands on her shoulders. How had he gotten to her side without her hearing it? It made no sense. But the full realization clobbered her, overwhelming her thoughts. An abrupt pain stabbed her in the gut and she fell to her knees, retching. Her stomach convulsed, heaving pungent, burning stomach acid into her mouth; she vomited at the wheel of the cart.

The gurgles and grunts of her retching punctuated the tunnel's silence. The disgusting noises lingered in the darkness, devolving into coughing and spitting, relentless and interminable. But suddenly a wail erupted and cut off everything else. No words, only a primal yell, a howl of pure anguish. Dani replaced the mess of physical sounds with one supremely emotional. Her yell devolved into hysterical sobbing. On her knees, head in hands, her back heaved as if bucking an invisible rider.

She neither knew nor cared for anything but this cruel, smothering emptiness. She had never known such pain, for she had never known such loss, for she had never known such love. The only person she ever truly *knew*, with a knowledge and trust that merged their two separate

wills into one. He who had found her and saved her from the verge of self-destruction, he to whom she owed all. He who was no more.

She threw herself back onto her rear, her back slamming the wall of the tunnel. She wept into the fold of her arm, and felt the hands seek her out again, caressing her, trying to comfort her. She flung them away, willing herself to continue weeping, desperately asserting her own solitude. Nobody could help her bear this pain; it was hers. It was all she had left.

As her weeping softened, a new thought brought it to a final halt. She lifted her head and stared between Mohsin and Guaré at the opposite wall.

Those responsible will pay. All of them.

An ensuing chill helped her compose herself. She looked up at the two Brothers crouching next to her. Lights approached from the direction of the battlefield, momentarily swinging down to illuminate them, before pivoting back to the tunnel. The lights passed by the cart, one of them hesitating, but Mohsin waved them on. He turned to Dani.

“I know how painful this is for you,” he said.

She snorted. “Of course you do, you see all, don’t you?”

“I suffer with you. Not as much as you, but I can help, if you allow it.”

“Nobody helps me, nobody but *him*,” she waved her head at the cart, then suddenly averted her face when her eyes crimped.

Be strong, damn you!

She relaxed her face and turned back to them, still panting to control her sobs, still spitting venom.

“How much have you ever suffered?” she asked. “You’ve never known a loss like this.”

“Take care with your words, Daniyah,” Guaré now spoke. “You’re not yourself.”

She heard the anger in his voice, saw Mohsin raise a hand to calm him.

She smiled spitefully. “B’you already know how I’ll react, donja? Isn’t that yer great gift? Some gift it is when you can’ even stop this! Sump’n’t actually matters!”

“I’ve never implied that my gift is omnipotent,” he responded. “But yes, I can sense things beforehand, and I can see your Fringe, and I can hear your lapse into Citspeech, something you do when distressed and on the verge of acting rashly. And I can draw the appropriate conclusions, hence my concern.”

The accuracy of his observations further enraged her. The smug serenity. . .

“An what’ll you do with all yer concern? Nothin! You can’t stop anything’r change anything! Th’only thing that changes anything is *that*.” she signaled vaguely to the cart with her hand, unable to look. “A bullet or a bomb. . . Too stubborn t’even see it.”

“I will not admit that with which I disagree,” he said carefully. “But you’re mistaken in that I can indeed do something right now. Given your emotional instability and the potential for insubordination, I can relieve you of your command for tomorrow’s operation.”

As her eyes widened, he continued, “I did not want to address this right now – God knows it to be the worst time imaginable – but you must understand the full ramifications of your words.”

She only glared at him for many seconds, seconds that stretched into a full minute. With effort she exerted control, taking deep breaths, using the fresh, subterranean, gunpowdery air to cool down the heat of her anger.

“If you did I would never forgive you,” she said coldly. “You already know that, right?”

“I do,” he said. “Yet there are things more important than your feelings toward me.”

“And I could find my way around it, you know as well?”

“You could try, just as I could try to prevent it. That’s a chance I am willing to take.”

She was silent, considering. She hated him totally at this moment. She hated his logic, his calmness, his self-righteous confidence. She hated that he could see her hatred, no matter how calm she remained on the surface. Quickly she tried to avoid thinking of it, searching instead for something to mask it.

She summoned her self-pity, an easy fix as it was inextricably bound up with her current devastation. She thought of how alone she would be without Amadou. She looked up to the cart, saw the loose frizzes of his hair poking out of the top of the cart. She consciously dwelled on her loneliness, until it overcame her.

Tears filled her eyes. She had to suppress her satisfaction from detection by Mohsin. In the very next moment she began to hate herself – already she was exploiting Amadou's demise. *That didn't take long, you sociopath.* Her self-hatred brought more tears with it, these ones unaccompanied by gratification.

Outwardly, piteously, she asked, “What do you want from me?” She was looking at the ground now, wiping her eyes, yet she felt him looking at her, gauging her.

He said, “I need you, to the greatest extent possible, to be the same you have always been, the Daniyah of old. I need you to be calm, collected, and reasoned, and to make healthy decisions for yourself and for the People. Can you do that?”

She cried a bit more, slowly looking up.

“I can try,” she said in the same doleful tone. She needed to be careful not to overdo it. “But can we talk later? I need to be alone. And if you’re not satisfied at our next meeting I’ll cede my command voluntarily. Consider it a promise.”

She noticed that Guaré turned from her to Mohsin to convey his skepticism. But Mohsin ignored him. It took all of her self-control to suppress the wave of triumphant contempt that surged in her at this snub.

She looked to Mohsin with tears in her eyes, pleading silently.

“Very well, Dani. Of course that’s fair, and I’m relieved that you’ve controlled yourself so admirably. Will you come now, or do you need a moment?”

“I’m ready now,” she said.

He stood up, offering his hand along with Guaré. She took them and they lifted her gently to her feet.

“Please, just one moment of privacy,” she said, signaling to the cart.

They walked a few steps off and turned away, conferring in low voices.

She approached the cart cautiously, equally repelled and attracted. As she moved closer, the tight black curls of his hair gave way to the ashen skin of his forehead, then to his closed eyes and peaceful mouth. He looked asleep, no more.

The grief welled up once more, after being suppressed during the arduous dispute. Genuine tears filled her eyes, displacing the remaining false ones onto her cheeks, where they trickled down, eventually dropping onto Amadou's frozen chest.

“My Amadou,” she murmured, caressing his face.

What do I do now, my savior? You’re not here to help anymore, though I badly need it.

She picked up his dark, heavy hand and brought it to her mouth, kissing it, then placing the pale, rough palm to her cheek. It smelled of dirt and metal. She closed her eyes at the familiar touch. It wasn’t yet cold, and she imagined he was sleeping. More tears sprung up when she couldn’t make herself believe it. She opened her eyes and looked at his dead face, then

gently lowered his hand, replacing it at his side. Her tears tapered off. A cold rationality replaced them.

There was no salvation this time. He couldn't help her. So what would she do?

Her lips curled into a tight smile. She could kill them all.

Dani quickly looked up, to see if Mohsin might have sensed anything. Thankfully his attention was still diverted. She consciously slackened her face into a frown, temporarily abandoning her cynical calculations. She welcomed the grief back, wrapping herself with it to cloak her true state.

Looking at his face once more, true mourning broke through her contrived shroud. She kissed her hand and placed it on his forehead.

“Goodbye, my love,” she said softly. Then, closing her eyes, she mouthed as if in prayer, “Forgive me my weakness.”

She stepped away from the cart, turning to the two men huddled in front of her.

“I'm ready,” she said, shuffling past them with her head down.

They cut their dialogue and returned to the cart. Walking down the dark tunnel to the dim yellow light, Dani presently heard the squeak of the wheels behind her as they started it rolling. The squeak grew into a steady whirring, a pathetic noise joined only by their footsteps, amidst the silence of the funeral march. Thus they returned home, Dani leading her husband's procession, Mohsin and Guaré the pallbearers.

In the dark of her cell, Eche lay on the cot with her pain. The damp, quiet blackness served as a sensory deprivation chamber. She could neither see, nor hear, nor taste anything. Only the musty smell of mildew tickled her nose. But for significant sensation, touch was her sole communicator, thus limiting her perception wholly to the raw throbbing of her hands and arm, and to the dull ache spreading over half of her skull. The absence of further stimuli magnified her suffering.

In Eche's family, at her mother's behest, they had all developed an individual meditation practice. The ultimate aim had not been enlightenment or nirvana, but rather a quieting of the mind through brief, regular observation of one's thoughts. Eche's brother had routinely tried to avoid it, usually without success. But Eche had faithfully performed the task, as she would any other daily maintenance, until it became as ingrained as bathing. As a result of her habit, Eche now took an opportunity to meditate with her pain, to observe it and observe her thoughts around it.

It was curious that in the two days since her injury she had not once experienced the whimpering self-pity that would have been considered "normal." Eche discovered that she didn't even mind the pain, nor did she want it alleviated. On the contrary, she was almost eager for it. She wanted to wallow in it. Not in the sense of feeling sorry for herself, or nurturing her own victimhood, but in a visceral way. She wanted to feel as much physical pain as possible. She wanted to relish it. She did not permit herself to probe deeply enough to wonder why.

Eche knew that she could escape her pain, or at least a large part of it, by simply rising from her cot, exiting her cell, and joining her company at breakfast. . . by participating in the daily goings-on of the People as they prepared for evacuation and the final operation. By rejoining humanity, to distract herself with the mundane stimulation of daily living. The light,

the noise, the aromas. . . everything would divert her attention, thereby diminishing her pain's intensity. Instead she lay here, wallowing.

Dani had come for her – Eche could only assume out of desperation, to keep her in sight – but Eche had bluntly refused to see her. “Leave me alone!” she had snapped, shamefully enjoying Dani's chagrin.

But her refusal had not been merely spiteful. There had also been a sincere yearning behind it, this yearning for her own, unshareable pain. She needed to feel it, to attend to it, to nourish it. She could not let it go uncultivated.

She thought of her pain as a quilt, in danger of wearing through. Only this blanket wore out incredibly fast, in a matter of hours or days. She had to remain vigilant, patch it meticulously, in order to wrap herself in it. It was a blanket for keeping cold, not warm.

This need had inspired her to participate in activities even when her wounds were still tender. Mohsin and Guaré advised her to rest, but she refused. She was not sure why they had allowed her to refuse, as she was both their charge and their subordinate. But so it had been.

Eche had asked herself yesterday why Dani allowed her to participate, knowing the extent of her injuries. But at the same time she didn't dare question it aloud nor dwell on it when Dani mentioned it herself. She didn't want to call attention to the absurdity; she might abash them into using good sense.

She no longer entertained the question of why they were treating her as special, because it no longer mattered. Given the information she had, their treatment made no sense. Given that she did not believe the leaders of the People behaved nonsensically, the only logical conclusion was that she was ignorant of information that would explain her treatment. If nobody had volunteered such information as of yet, then they did not yet intend for her to know. She was

okay with not knowing for now, because she assumed she would eventually find out. She knew how to wait; patience was one of her virtues.

She would exploit the special treatment to beg onto duty tonight. After aggravating her wounds and almost injuring Nasim the night before, there was no reasonable excuse for allowing her further participation. She should evacuate with the rest of the non-combat personnel. But her weird privilege would help her – Dani wanted her as close as possible, thus she would not report Eche’s inadequacy to Mohsin. With Dani’s backing, she could do whatever she wanted. And right now she most definitely wanted to wreak havoc up there, surfaceward.

Her volcano materialized before her in the dark. In strange relation, her feeling of coldness grew. With her meditation she observed the cause-effect relationship. She envisioned wrapping her blanket of pain more tightly around her.

A light knock on the door interrupted her meditation. “Go away,” she said, still lying on her back, staring up into the darkness.

She heard the latch click. The darkness dissipated as the door cracked. The lighter it got the less pain she felt. Eche raised herself onto her elbows, wincing at the pressure on her left arm.

“Can’t you hear—”

“Andrea Echeverry,” a voice boomed. “You will cease this at once!”

The commanding voice exploded the quiet of her cocoon, cutting her short, mouth open mid-sentence. Mohsin.

“Such hateful, immature behavior does not become you,” he finished.

Without warning or permission, he reached up and turned on the dim yellow light. She closed her eyes against the brightness. After several seconds she opened her eyes beneath her

shielding hand. A brief flash of Mohsin's eyes caused her to blush; she quickly turned to the wall. The new pressure on her head created its own wave of pain. She closed her eyes to commune with it.

The door clicked shut.

“A difficult moment for you,” he said. She felt his weight settle onto the cot, exactly where Dani had sat yesterday. “But the time has come to put childish things aside. It’s a difficult moment for all of us, and you will be a significant piece of our struggle.”

She could not shut out his voice, no matter how much she wished to. Her meditation was over, the darkness vanquished, her solitude violated, the pain-blanket ripped away. But she wouldn’t have to converse with him. She remained silent.

But strangely, despite the interruption in her meditation and thus the waning of her agony, she became aware of a new discomfort. . . it was that same gastric discomfort, the feeling which had begun to grow dreadfully familiar over the last few days. An uncomfortable warmth accompanied the sensation.

Mohsin said, “There will be a time for grieving, proper grieving, and I vow to help you through it as best I can. But now is not that time. I regret your youth and inexperience; they’ll make your grief more treacherous. But you’re strong enough to overcome. There is an ability in you of which I know you are aware, whether or not you have fully recognized it.”

The feeling in her stomach grew steadily as he talked. It was a dull heat that radiated like a tiny ember in her belly. It was now competing with her wounds for supremacy over her attention. She opened her eyes and stared at the cement walls.

“I have come to talk with you personally because much depends upon it, and there’s little time left. I bring news as well: our operations last night were successful. Your company

brought down the original Illiex headquarters, and our task force destroyed their sentinels. The first phase of our final action is successfully completed. Are you hearing me Andrea? No more autobirds.”

Her only reaction was to close her eyes once more, in a vain effort to ward off her burning innards.

“Retribution will be swift and sweeping. Tonight. We are evacuating non-militants to a safe zone far outside I-Land. You don’t need to help in this or anything else, but I need you to be ready.”

“Ready for what?”

Her voice was a mere croak after so many hours without words. Hearing it surprised her, as if some foreign entity had betrayed her vow of silence.

“In case of need.”

She said nothing for a moment. The feeling in her stomach now dwarfed the pain in her head and limbs. It loomed there, threatening to break her.

Finally, she turned her head halfway to Mohsin and said, “I’m going with Dani.” Her voice was stronger.

He nodded in the corner of her vision. “I thought you might want to.”

“And?”

“You know I won’t prohibit you, despite—”

“Why?” she interrupted. “Why won’t you stop me? I’m a cripple, I’m weak and pained. I’m a detriment to everyone and everything. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Because,” he said slowly, thinking. “I feel that, starting now, you are to play an important role in events to come.”

Her upset stomach was making her nauseous. She felt on the verge of vomiting, or defecating, or both. She felt sweat break out on her face.

“What events?”

She now turned to look at him, her eyes pleading.

“Andrea, I speak of the course of history. . .” His eyes met hers, the warm understanding reaching out to her. “I speak of the history of the People, the Coalition, everything. I speak of the Anthology. I speak of human history.”

He smiled and she saw sadness in it. Softly, he finished, “Andrea. . . as grand a figure as you imagine me, at least that grand you too shall be.”

As he spoke his absurd, prophetic rhyme in the dim light, she imagined she saw a brightness about him, a vague, bluish glow. Was he the source of the heat she was feeling? In the next moment he looked in eager excitement just above her head.

“You see it, then, can it be?” he said, talking to himself as much as to her. “Can it be so soon that you perceive the Fringe? Can you also feel it?”

As she watched him, the blue glow surged lazily from his body toward her. The warmth in her belly, the cause of her distress, was now a burning, unbearable but somehow not painful.

Only an arm's length separated them. Before she could react, the brightness surging from Mohsin spanned the short distance. He studied her intently, concentrating, as if this was all independent of his control.

As soon as the wafting glow touched her, in the chest, she felt the very same sensation of warmth, but coming from the outside. Her own warmth, that inner ember, radiated from her gut and this new one, Mohsin's, touched her near the heart. Mohsin's heat was less intense, yet it transmitted something else, something immeasurably stronger, something that overwhelmed.

When his glow reached her, when she felt that added warmth – separate from hers but somehow combining – a swell of benevolence and well-being stunned her. She saw it and felt it, a bright blue glow enveloping her, a warm ecstasy coursing through her body, coating her very essence.

Goosebumps broke out all over her skin. Her body relaxed completely, arms dropping untensed to the cot, her head falling back as she closed her eyes. She basked in it, unthinking, basking her soul in this glow as a lizard basks in the sun.

Mohsin spoke softly, soothing her, “That feeling, Andrea, is love. Pure love that I feel for you, as my truest Sister. Love that I can transmit to you directly, without words, and that only you are capable of fully receiving. Because you also possess my gift.”

She could hear him but barely process the words. In addition to the sight and feeling of Mohsin’s contact, there was a faint sound like a choir humming. She had heard the chorales of the classic masses on her dad’s old records, but these voices weren’t human. And there was a smell that permeated her nose. It was an amalgam of everything she had ever loved. . . the fireplace, her father’s pipe, her mother’s soup, springtime gardenias and pear blossoms, the smell of ozone after a rain, the pungent tomato and basil of her garden, Al’s dirty odor. . . all combined so that she recognized each at once, without distinguishing any one in particular. It penetrated into the very bottom of her lungs, so greedily did she inhale it.

She perceived simultaneously with all senses that which most pleased her. *No words exist. . . not for this.* Her eyes filled with tears, brows wavering. Her jaw trembled – she couldn’t contain it. This impossible feeling of rapture was going to explode out of her.

Amid the gentle, joyous pulsating of Mohsin’s unbearable offering, she turned back to the wall and sobbed. She didn’t bother to cover her face. There was no shame with him, not now, not ever again.

He placed one hand on her back, the other on her hip. His every gesture showed care. He embodied gentleness and love. This was why he enhanced the people around him. This was why Dani seemed diminished next to him. Love illuminated all, and consequently so did he. He revealed one's true nature.

“Now you see,” he said quietly.

He spoke leisurely, meandering, allowing her to relish the new sensations. His narration gradually transformed into explanation.

“You see how I see. The powers that our people speak of regarding me. . . they're nothing supernatural. They are simply heightened perception. We see people comprehensively, not only hearing their words, or watching their smile or frown. We notice the minutest details and thus know them more intimately, even moreso than they know themselves.

“You've always had a feel for people. I've heard you say it. You form quick impressions and are almost always proven correct. That's how it begins, or at least how it began with me. We pay more attention and can predict behavior with greater accuracy. Through practice you can develop this to new levels of awareness. Frida understands this, but few others. She's developing her own skills. Though she doesn't have the natural gift we do, she progresses.

“The others prefer to ascribe our ability to some mystical origin, to exalt us. *We* know that it is both a gift and a skill to be improved. The challenge is to convince them, convince them *truly*, so that they know it in their bones. But most importantly, our way of seeing and feeling. . . it's proof of our evolution, proof of the evolution of humanity, of its imminence, its inevitability. Once you accept that, you cannot possibly be at a loss as to your actions.”

She absorbed his Truth as it washed over her.

“Now that you know it, now that there’s no uncertainty, you must cultivate it. You must practice and develop. Everything will depend on your progress. And you must be wary. You must be wary of. . . certain others, who would manipulate you to their advantage.”

“Dani,” she said.

“Dani is good, you have seen it too. But she is confused and she holds much anger within. Amadou did not survive our assault.”

Eche turned to Mohsin in alarm, tears still dampening her cheeks. Mohsin shook his head in confirmation.

He continued, “I told her personally, and she is agitated, behaving erratically, still imagining that she can be shrewd with me. With me!” He laughed without malice. “Whereas I once believed her persuadable, that’s no longer so. I will need you to be on guard against whatever she is planning.”

“What do I have to do?”

“You have to stay open and cultivate your ability. You’ll know when action is needed. You have to be you, that is all.”

“That’s why you’ve been letting me participate, despite my injury.”

He looked up for a moment, considering. “Perhaps, though I didn’t know at the time. But yes, I think you must be right. You’ll learn to trust your instincts as I trust mine. You will not always know why you decide certain things, only that they feel right to you. If you stay open, your instincts will guide you straight and true.”

They were quiet for several moments. Eche still felt an afterglow from the blissful feeling Mohsin had gifted her. She could still see the aura around him, blue and faintly pulsing, as if breathing. Her wounds throbbed but softly, like background noise, easily tuned out. She

took a deep breath and found herself able to breathe to the depths of her lungs, her chest unburdened by tension or worry. She smelled the air for the first time, truly smelled it, with its sweet mixture of earth, body odor, and an acrid tinge she couldn't identify.

Finally, tentatively, she queried, "But Mohsin. . ."

"Your name for me shall be Roldán."

Her eyebrows contracted. She didn't say anything for a beat.

"I . . . never knew your first name."

"Few do. And none use it. You will be the only one, that the others may learn it through you."

She didn't know why but at once she felt that it was right, that it must be so. As quickly as she accepted it, she continued with her troubling thought.

"Roldán. . . how have you let Dani and Sir Jones get this far? How has an opposition come to be within the People. Isn't that what we're fighting against?"

He sighed but was still content.

"As you will learn, Andrea, I could hardly have prevented them even had I wanted to. Certain forces will always emerge to oppose any movement or idea. It's the way of nature, of life, the universe. The People fight not against opposition in general, we fight against oppression. In the fight against oppression there's always a danger of becoming an oppressor yourself. A rebel is one who demands freedom for herself and her like. But absolute freedom includes the freedom to kill. That is the freedom in which I-Land believes. A true rebel must recognize a limit to freedom. That limit, that line we must not cross, is murder without retribution. A true rebel must be ready to sacrifice herself in payment for the life she has taken. The path of true rebellion is very narrow indeed, and easy to stray from."

He paused and cocked his head.

“You know what they plan?”

She looked away and said, “I don’t think they trust me enough to tell me yet.”

He nodded to himself.

“A healthy opposition helps you recognize and adapt to this tendency to slip from the righteous path, but that is a *healthy* opposition. Jones’s opposition has devolved from such a state. Sir Jones was useful and quite effective in times past. But his dogmatism has corrupted him, as does any dogmatism, as does any absolute. Dani is not to blame, not ultimately. But we are all of us accountable for our actions, just as she will be held accountable should she do something shameful and immoral. Something irrevocable.

“And that,” he said, with a gentler tone, “is why you must help her. You will be helping not only the people she plans to harm, but also the People, by preserving the integrity of their cause. But mostly you will be helping her. You must prevent her from doing something from which her conscience will never recover. Actions like those. . . they are how villains are made.”

He reached down and turned her head with a finger on her chin. “You can be her salvation, Andrea.”

Eche looked back at the wall, feeling Mohsin’s other hand as it rested on her back. She consciously perceived all of her body’s sensations, taking inventory. The burning discomfort in her stomach was gone. Her wounds hurt but no longer overwhelmed.

As she was taking stock of her physical sensations, she noticed a small coldness take root inside her. It wasn’t in any way the same as the numb masochism she had cultivated over the last two days. It didn’t originate in her head, the result of her suppressing all painful emotions.

This coldness was in her stomach, supplanting the earlier warmth. She wondered at it briefly and finally recognized it. Perhaps it was immaturity, or simple recklessness, or a lack of awareness amid the bustle of activity and the tension of crisis. But whatever it was, she had never consciously identified the emotion before. She had never been able to observe it so matter-of-factly. What she felt, in such a singular form, was a sharp, frigid pang that conjured up images of a deep, red-tinged abyss. It was fear.

“Observations and Questions Around Technology”¹¹

For the purposes of discussion, consider technology a monolith, or one umbrella term, synonymous with Progress. The technological advances or ‘progress’ that led to the steam engine in the 19th century were but an earlier rendition of those that fostered the internet at the turn of the millennium – members of the same family tree, separated only by epochs. That they take such startlingly different forms from one century to another is a matter of evolution; but whether one calls these advances ‘Progress’ or ‘Technology’ is semantics.

Convenience the chief quality that all technological advances have in common, since even before a stone was first fashioned into an axe. All progress is born from a human desire for convenience, or as master 20th century thinker George Orwell explained it, ‘to save work.’

The convenience was at first physical: wheels easing the strain on our muscles as they dragged objects; pointed instruments requiring less physical effort to maim than blunt ones; a telegraph system replacing hours on horseback, etc. First we eased our physical exertion, and later we began to ease our mental effort: recording with abstract symbols to convert memory into the relatively permanent, silent state known as ‘writing;’ the printing press saving not only the arms of transcribers but also the mental necessity of memorizing passages out of rare tomes; the millennial ‘search engine’ essentially eradicating the need for memory at all, etc.

But the achievement of convenience carries with it an important shortcoming; for the organ that technology relieves of its customary work soon begins to atrophy. Muscles loosen, softening into fat. Tendons and bones become thin or brittle. Thus our forerunners experienced a global epidemic of obesity beginning in the 20th century, something that would have been inconceivable one hundred years before, amid much greater, habitual physical exertion.

11 Excerpted from Jensen, Frida, The People's Anthology of the 3rd Millenium, 2nd edition, Ch. 10.

Mental deterioration is similarly evident. First lost was the oral tradition, our ability to memorize and transmit epic stories, myths and poems. Centuries later, the recitation of shorter passages and poetry dwindled as well. Even later, language itself began to deteriorate (see Ch. 6), and people ceased remembering almost anything, relying instead on computers and the internet. In other sectors, features such as the computerization of automobiles dulled our very reflexes and instincts as much as they built trust in new technology.

Certain commentators sounded a warning bell early on, indeed even before the commencement of the 19th century Industrial Revolution. The aforementioned Mr. Orwell was one of the most strident critics, as evidenced by the following excerpts:

The tendency of mechanical progress, then, is to frustrate the human need for effort and creation. . . Why, for instance, use your hands at all – why use them even for blowing your nose or sharpening a pencil? Surely you could fix some kind of steel and rubber contraption to your shoulders and let your arms wither into stumps of skin and bone? And so with every organ and every faculty. There is really no reason why a human being should do more than eat, drink, sleep, breathe and procreate; everything else could be done for him (sic) by machinery. . . the logical end of mechanical progress is to reduce the human being to. . . a brain in a bottle. . .

. . . In tying yourself to the ideal of mechanical efficiency, you tie yourself to the ideal of softness. . . what is usually called progress also entails what is usually called degeneracy. . .

. . . [In] daydreams of the future . . . are Men Like Gods. But why should they be? All mechanical progress is towards greater and greater efficiency; ultimately, therefore, towards a world in which nothing goes wrong. But in a world in which nothing went wrong, many of the (godlike) qualities. . . would be no more valuable than the animal faculty of moving the ears. The beings. . . are represented, for example, as brave, generous and physically strong. But in a world from which physical danger had been banished – and obviously mechanical progress tends to eliminate danger – would physical courage be likely to survive? Could it survive? And why

should physical strength survive in a world where there was never the need for physical labor? As for such qualities as loyalty, generosity, etc., in a world where nothing went wrong, they would be not only irrelevant but probably unimaginable. The truth is that many of the qualities we admire in human beings can only function in opposition to some kind of disaster, pain or difficulty; but the tendency of mechanical progress is to eliminate disaster, pain and difficulty. . .

At root is the counterintuitive phenomenon of human beings training themselves away from their ingrained habits, instincts and strengths, and toward a blind trust in the conveniences of technology. It might be presumptuous to regard the trend, as Mr. Orwell does, as either 'good' or 'bad.' But even if Mr. Orwell was overreacting when he compared technology to a drug ('useful, dangerous and habit-forming'), to be accepted only 'grudgingly and suspiciously,' it is warranted to consider some logical questions that are raised in the face of this indisputable phenomenon, questions such as:

Given the apparent degradation of human beings, both physically and mentally, what is the logical end of this technological progression, in terms of human ability? If unknown, how may we learn it? If we do know the end, is it an agreeable one? And: if it is disagreeable, what may be done about it?

XI.

Betancourt, eyes bleary, shivered in his Closet amidst the fetid smell of vomit. Swaying, he tried to concentrate on anything other than the agony of the wound in his side.

The pain was dull, but the relentless itch was excruciating, especially since he couldn't scratch it. He had found that out when, moving his right arm across his body, he had attempted to rub gingerly around the wound, probing. He had soothed it momentarily, blessed relief, but only until a small piece of skin sloughed off after his fingers ventured too close. Too exhausted to be horrified, he had flung the necrotic flesh to the ground with the same flicking motion used hours before on the spider.

That had been after the fever and nausea, but before the vomiting and joint pain. He only recognized the latter because his shoulders and elbows now throbbed steadily as well. If not for those limbs, which had no reason to ache, he would have continued to assume that the torment encompassing his hips, knees and feet was the result of his endless standing.

He had expected Strauss to return sooner, but they left him alone for the rest of the night. He deduced the hour by the timing of the bomb, which had to be the work of the People and therefore had to have been perpetrated in the dark of night. It must be morning now, so he had been there almost a whole day.

Only a day, my god.

He was actually lucky in that they hadn't moved to Phase II when they originally planned. He had gained a reprieve from the real pain. Before the spider bite began to seriously affect him, he had spent considerable time and effort wracking his nerves over the torture to

come. At some point he had decided it was a ridiculous waste of time and had given into his pain, focusing all his attention on the bite.

He laughed to himself and immediately winced as the pain stabbed even deeper into his side.

It amused him, this idea of *trying* to focus on the bite, as if it were something to aspire toward. As if it wouldn't happen of its own accord. As if the pain, itching, and nausea wouldn't gradually expand, to mercilessly overpower every other pitiable sensation in the tiny confines. As if it wouldn't become omnipresent and unavoidable. As if he wouldn't now give anything to think or feel something *besides* the spider bite. Well, almost anything.

He was still proud of his stubbornness. He knew he could hold out longer against the torture. They would have to cause a lot more pain for him to assist them against the People. And they would. Again, he chuckled.

How insignificant was a spider bite? If you told someone that their torture would consist of being unable to rest for a day in a brightly lit, solitary confinement, their only maltreatment being an insect bite, they'd scoff. Is that all? Yet the amount of torment arising from such a trifle was astounding. Through the torment, he finally understood the purpose of the helmet they had given him – It was to keep him from bashing his tortured brains out against one of the suffocating walls.

“Wonder how many interrogations it took for *that* to be an issue,” he said aloud. “I’m guessin one.”

He had also begun to talk to himself.

“But at least it keeps my mind off the button.” Now cured from its spell, he shot a scornful look at his old nemesis, up and to the right.

Because he was now talking aloud and his ears were more familiar with noise, it didn't jar him when the waist-level window clicked open, the one with the black material interrupting the white plain. It didn't open to the side like the others, but rather swung down from the top, like an oven door opening outward. He was in the oven, apparently. Before he could process the sudden change, metal pinchers reached into the Closet and clamped around the wrist of his left hand.

Too shocked to resist, Betancourt observed his hand get pulled through the window and smoothly threaded under the two strands of the looped black material. The black straps then tightened, one around his wrist and one higher up, where his fingers began. They fastened Betancourt's hand to the window with no give. His palm now rested on the platform created by the open window, fingers dangling off the front edge.

Everything happened silently, but the sudden movement of his arm triggered the pain in his side. He grunted as a wave of it washed over him. After a few seconds he was able to ponder the new development.

The palm of his hand rested upon chunks of drying vomit. It had gone everywhere when he finally succumbed to the nausea. At the sight of his hand surrounded by the filth, Betancourt had to stifle a weak impulse to retch once more. Otherwise, however, his fingers were enjoying an almost glorious freshness of air, dangling in liberty. He smiled in relief at the coolness of the hall air. It bathed his hand, arm, and torso. It alleviated the stench to which he had grown accustomed.

"Mr. Betancourt," that melodious voice sounded, muffled slightly by the barrier between their heads.

Betancourt indulged in some impertinence: “I missed you, Strauss. Where you been?” He snorted, failing to completely stifle his laughter. Strauss waited for him to stop.

“I imagine you have, though I doubt you will feel that way for. . . long.” Those pauses again. “I had to attend to a set of. . . unfortunate. . . circumstances. I trust you have not minded the delay? It certainly seems that your wound may have occupied a. . . significant amount of your time. It’s not looking very good, I must say.”

“Oh no, old man. Doesn’t feel good either.”

His giddiness had worn off and he was grim again, focusing by a titanic effort on what was coming.

“And how much of your time did that explosion occupy?” Betancourt asked. “I trust nobody was injured.”

“The terrorists are remarkably clean most of the time. They appear to have an aversion to civilian casualties, quite. . . noble, I must admit.” Betancourt smiled to himself at the praise.

“Of course, what you know and what the citizens hear are two different things, ya filthy liars.”

“You and your way of phrasing things, Mr. Betancourt. . . All for the greater good, as they say.”

“Whose?”

“But there you go again, doing your best to drag me into one of your dialogues. The only thought of. . . importance. . . is that they will be punished, and very soon. Nothing else matters.”

“If you say so. But I say they’ll come for you, and you’ll be sorry. They’ll come straight to the Oasis itself. . .”

“Oh?”

“. . .Oasis. . . how do you even call it that? An oasis is in a desert, not on an island. It makes no sense.”

“Of course it doesn’t, Mr. Betancourt. But that’s not the point. The point is how does it *sound*? Because that is the. . . only thing that matters to the average citizen. Does it sound. . . nice? Does it sound vaguely reasonable? They don’t question beyond that. It’s quite a beautiful thing.”

Betancourt was speechless. It was an open secret among the more capable Citizens that naming I-Land’s vast central complex “The Oasis” was utterly nonsensical. But hearing Strauss brazenly admit it was shocking.

“For a Citizen,” Strauss continued. “An island means sand, which is also in a desert, which has oases, which are the source of. . . life. . . and comfort and all things good. Our Oasis is just such a place for them, whether it. . . makes sense or not. They don’t care about mixed metaphors, or thematic consistency. . . I quite assure you.”

“Breathtaking,” was all Betancourt could utter.

“Perhaps,” Strauss said. “It’s a word that might be equally applied to our coming interrogation. . . .” He said it like a man cracking his knuckles before an unpleasant task. “And so now we come to it, Phase II. . . .”

Betancourt heard a mechanical whirring. Two tools jutted partially through the window into view. One of them looked like a pair of thick scissors. The second was an odd-looking rod with an exaggerated tip, like a screwdriver run over by a steamroller.

“For such an occasion, Cal is equipped with a bit of the old millenium – the wire cutters – and a bit of the new – the cauterer. We also have a syringe just in case, but you seem much too. . . hardy. I don’t anticipate needing it any time soon.”

Betancourt's heart rate increased, despite best intentions. He worked on his breathing. He did not want to give Strauss the satisfaction of his broken composure.

"Really, we've had some amazing technological achievements in these last centuries," Strauss continued. "But ultimately there's only so much a microchip can do, no matter how small, without. . . treading over the same well-worn path. Why complicate things? Maybe it's a bit. . . messy, but simple brutality is usually the most effective technique, don't you find?"

"I wouldn't know. I'm not a sadist."

"Oh you can stop it with the names already, Mr. Betancourt." His continued joviality contradicted the annoyance of his words. "You know as well as I do that it's a matter of. . . simple expedience. When playing for the winning team you will do even. . . disagreeable. . . things to keep the streak alive."

"The best winners are the ones who enjoy what it takes to win."

"I can't disagree with you on that."

Betancourt imagined the malignant glimmer in his eye. He only had to hear the voice to be sure it was there.

"So, Mr. Betancourt. . ."

There was a sudden whirr of robotic activity and he felt the cold metal blades on the top knuckle of his left pinky finger, just below the nailbed. Betancourt leaned back as far as he could, to be able to see out of the window. He could barely see the tool at the end of his hand.

"The moment has arrived. You can begin by telling us everything you know. The more talking you do. . . the less cutting we do."

"I'll tell you nothing."

"Very well. Cal?"

At once the metal cutters clamped down on his finger and an excruciating pressure suddenly mounted on his pinky. He had barely enough time to wince open-mouthed before the tendons and bone gave way with a *snik*. In the flash before pain registered, it sounded to Betancourt like cutting a carrot.

Agony followed. He clenched his eyes shut and opened his mouth to scream, head back. But he stifled it, expelling nothing more than a pained gasp. Eyes watering, he looked back down and saw blood gushing forth from the tip of his finger. The throbbing pain matched the frequency of the gentle spurts of blood.

“We wouldn’t want you to lose too much blood,” Strauss crooned. “Cal.”

Betancourt heard and saw the cauterer lower into view, the deformed point now red hot. He tried to jerk his hand back but the strap was immovable. Then he tried to ball his fingers into a fist, but the top strap prevented him from lifting his hand at all. The red-hot tip neared his finger, like a snake gingerly approaching wounded prey. Then the cauterer lunged over the last short distance to press decisively against its target.

He couldn’t help screaming this time.

The sizzling flooded the Closet as his blood boiled off. He writhed uncontrollably, banging his head against all four walls. Thin tendrils of smoke wafted up through the portal. The searing agony in his newly-ravaged nerve endings was beyond any pain he had ever felt.

With his free hand he lashed out at everything at once, whipping it against the three walls, clawing at his own leg. He choked on the smoke and retched all over again, whether from the smoke or the spider or the pain he didn’t know, or care.

The cauterer vanished, taking the worst of the pain with it. Betancourt could breathe once more. Hunching against the front wall, he gasped and panted over his mangled hand.

“Bad, is it?” Strauss sounded almost compassionate. “Yes I would imagine so. But still, have heart, there’s always a . . . way out.”

Strauss’s words had the opposite of his intended effect. All at once, Betancourt stood up straight. The tears in his eyes had spilled over onto his cheeks, but he cut his gasps short. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. He consciously forced his body to relax, the muscles in his shoulders and neck slackening. Only then did he notice the rejuvenated pain of his bite wound, aggravated in his fit of agony. He stared straight ahead at the I-Land flag in front of his face, the only thing he could focus on that wasn't his own pain. Something about it soothed him.

“That was one knuckle on one finger,” Strauss said. “With three per finger and two per thumb, that makes 27 more knuckles on your hands alone. With your other nearby . . . appendages, we have around 30 more of these procedures. That’s not counting your feet.”

Betancourt, who was staring resolutely ahead, felt a frigid point against his penis. He hadn’t heard the whirring over Strauss’s words. He immediately jumped back, but his bottom slammed against the wall. He looked down in time to see Cal retract the soiled blades.

The pain in his finger was dull now, albeit intense. The amputation had so overwhelmed the nerves that their threshold was adjusted. His side was the same as it ever was.

“As many cuts . . . or as few . . . as you’d like,” Strauss finished.

Betancourt stared down with wide eyes at the spot of blood left on his penis from the dirtied cutters. He closed his eyes, head down, and breathed deeply once more. He raised his head on the exhale.

He didn’t stop to weigh his options or consider strategy. He also didn’t attempt to resist what he knew was coming. The only thought running through his head, standing out even from

the cacophony of pain, was his need to do the right thing, and to do it with all possible composure.

Betancourt lifted his right hand, stuck it out of the window, and plopped it down onto the vomit-covered black straps on that side of the shelf. He edged his fingers under the loosened straps and slid his entire hand under it, until it was positioned identically to the other hand.

“Let’s get on with it,” he said.

“Very well, Mr. Betancourt.” He imagined a smile playing at Strauss’s lips. One of arousal. The strap tightened over his right hand.

In the dark, Mohsin inspected his three captains with a gleam in his eye. He was pleased by their demeanors, both visible and ethereal.

Except for hers, of course, he thought, beholding the gloom that Dani exuded. Her gray Fringe was outlined in a dark green that flashed yellow. Flecks of red and orange appeared and dissolved randomly and continuously. He frowned at the evident turmoil.

But it wasn’t enough to dishearten him, for it was both unavoidable and insured against, now that Andrea was back. And despite Dani’s antagonism, he was pleased to read the green and yellow in her: determination. He thought she would at least be reliable in carrying out his orders. He just wished he knew the extent of her extra-curricular plans.

“Gloria will send word in a few minutes,” he whispered. “You know your assignments. Remember the alarms and the need for haste. If captured, it’s imperative that prisoners assure no other kin are within range.

“Remember the code words. More ammunition is ‘bullets,’ not ‘ammo.’ And heed your navigators on placement of the packages. Avoid destruction of civilian areas at all cost. Timers synchronized and set to forty minutes.”

“We know this,” Dani whispered. “We’ve been over it.”

Regarding her calmly, Mohsin answered, “I would be remiss not to remind you once more, just as you would be remiss not to remind your companies. Have you questions?”

The captains were silent.

“You know the import of what we do tonight, in this Second Attempt,” he said after a moment. “You heard the speech I gave to your soldiers before we came up here. I can see in you strength and confidence. I know you have imparted the same unto your women and men. I see success before us. I have no forebodings.”

He paused, looking to Minjay, Guaré and Dani in turn. At Dani he shot an ironical, questioning glance, at which she lowered her eyes.

Mohsin continued, “That doesn’t mean it will be easy. Despite the diversion, we can expect heavy resistance. We’ll be in the heart of I-Land and we can be assured that they’ll defend it with zeal. Our company and Dani’s will bear the brunt of it. Beware their new machines, the Cats. We’ll lose many, probably some of the best, and maybe some of us standing right here. But when we succeed. . .”

He paused, looking up and taking a deep breath. He could actually feel a hint of the overwhelming joy that it would inspire.

Coming back to himself, he said, “When we succeed, our losses will have obtained a purpose most glorious. They will be sweet, not bitter.”

Mohsin deliberately turned to Dani with his last words. She didn't lower her eyes this time. The white flare of anger he saw beyond her steely demeanor would have been imperceptible to anyone besides Andrea and him. The yellow pulse revealed she was proud at having hidden it from him.

Turning back to the other two, he put his hands on the outer shoulders of Guaré and Minjay, with Dani sandwiched between.

“That's all, Brothers and Sister. Get your soldiers in position and await my order. Godspeed.”

Minjay and Dani left in opposite directions while Guaré stayed with Mohsin. They were in a passageway about five meters wide, all three of their companies lined up on the far wall. The three companies totaled around 150 men and women, stretching the width of their Great Hall.

Facing Guaré's company, Mohsin watched to his left as Minjay began to approach his soldiers, reminding them of orders. To his right, Dani was doing the same. The soldiers stood and approached the nearest of the four shafts that interrupted the ceiling along the passageway.

Mohsin tried to make out Andrea in the dimness, but she had covered her white bandages. From a distance it was difficult to see an individual's Fringe – in a group they melded into a generalized blur – but next to Dani in the greenish blob of collective Fringe, there stood a dark form with more red and orange than the others.

There she is. Do not fear, Andrea.

“What goes with Dani?” Guaré asked him, unaware of his quiet search.

Mohsin turned to his man.

“You saw it too?”

“I saw you.”

“Ah yes,” he sighed. “She’s planning something extra, something unapproved. She carries pain in her heart.”

“You haven’t considered relieving her?”

“Only briefly.”

“She’s that valuable?”

Mohsin paused, considering.

“She’s a good soldier and her company loves her. But no. . . I suppose she’s not that valuable.”

Guaré waited and Mohsin could almost hear the would-be sarcasm: “Then what keeps you?” Even if what he imagined wasn’t the precise phrase on the tip of Guaré’s tongue, Mohsin knew the sentiment was identical. Such was his gift – that which let him stun his companions by responding to their unasked questions.

“Each of us has a part to play, Brother,” he said. “I’m not sure that Dani’s role has been completely written, but if it has then there are supporting players who must have their own chance to take stage, to correct her errors as they may.”

He turned from surveying the soldiers, both seeing and feeling Guaré’s confusion.

“Whether we succeed or fail, you will presently understand. Trust.”

Guaré’s brow smoothed over, the purple fading from his Fringe.

“Prepare our company if you please.”

Guaré approached the two rows of soldiers standing a few paces away, and gave quiet orders. The soldiers began to file toward the shaft, those in front starting up the ladders. At

opposite ends of the passageway, Dani and Minjay's companies were already positioned. The second one up each shaft carried a heavy machine gun.

Mohsin's radio crackled softly in the silence. A female voice came on.

"Hen to Hawk," he heard Gloria's faint whisper.

"Go ahead," Mohsin replied.

"Two platoons I-PF in Great Hall, more filing in. Inspecting heat source and conferring."

Mohsin looked to Guaré and nodded. Guaré waved to Minjay and Dani, who had both been watching. Standing at the shafts, they issued prep orders to the breachers.

Guaré called up at the nearest shaft, "Ready on my command."

Mohsin depressed the call button and asked, "And the tunnels?"

"At least two other platoons, maybe more," Gloria responded. "But their exits are sealed at my signal."

"Then at your mark, Hen, fire at will. Godspeed."

"And you, sir. Very well." A pause, then a crackle. "Hen firing in three, two, one, over and out."

Despite knowing the distance that separated them, Mohsin imagined he heard the faintest traces of rapid gunfire, now occurring many clicks away, beneath them to the east.

He raised both hands to the side of his head and, after a pause, lowered them in a quick chopping motion. The captains relayed his signal with a brusque "GO!" Metallic clanks rang down from above.

Two seconds later a shrill alarm erupted, drowning out all sound, all thought. Mohsin saw some of the soldiers flinch at the onslaught of noise, but the lines nevertheless inched forward, the soldiers scurrying up the ladder as quickly as pace allowed.

“Godspeed, Mohsin,” Guaré shouted.

Even had Mohsin not seen the orange in his Fringe, Guaré’s anxiety was etched on his face. Mohsin reflexively experienced the urge to calm him.

He placed his hand on Guaré’s shoulder and smiled.

“It’s time.”

He brought his head close to Guaré and touched foreheads, sending a conscious flow of confidence and comfort. He felt the shoulder loosen and in his periphery saw the orange fade, replaced by the prior dark green. Now his Fringe once more approached a black confidence. Mohsin stepped back.

“Ready for some exercise?”

Guaré nodded.

“Let’s go.”

Eche wondered if he saw her. He looked in her direction, but she doubted he could tell her from the others. If he could see her, she wondered if he could sense her fear.

After their conversation, she had finally exited her cocoon of a cell to get some food. She had spent the rest of the day, predictably, with Dani. Yet a new peace had accompanied her as well. She no longer saw her chaperone as a hindrance. She understood Dani and loved her. She was still afraid, but it was comforting to comprehend the motives driving her adversary. That was the gift that Mohsin – no, Roldán – had shown her: the ability to see people as they truly were.

It was as if Roldán had unlocked a door within her, a storeroom of knowledge that she had always vaguely sensed but somehow never truly grasped.

She was able to assist Dani throughout the day using the smallest portion of her will and effort, saving the remainder to experiment with her newfound perception. She didn't see the Fringes everywhere she went, as she had with him, although she could sense them if she concentrated long enough. Before she perceived the Fringe, however, she clearly discerned the person's state of mind – upbeat or down, worried or relaxed.

In practicing, she finally understood the extent of her inborn sensitivity to others. She had always been able to rapidly assess a person's mindset, almost automatically. It often led her to say things and react in ways that created an awkward discomfort.

While it seemed plain to her, the people she reacted to were never prepared for someone to respond to their unspoken thoughts and feelings, oftentimes feelings of which they were only vaguely aware, if at all. They reacted with embarrassment, with anxiety, sometimes even with malice. Acknowledging the sentiments aloud made them uncomfortable, not only because propriety required such things to be discussed in the strictest and most intimate of confidences, but also because the sentiments themselves caused them shame. Eche could never understand why.

For the longest time this had confused her. Why should someone feel shame over something negative that all people feel at one time or another, a natural and comprehensible human emotion? And why should voicing what everyone sees cause such discomfort? Why should people feel awkward over the explicit acknowledgment of such an obvious and understandable emotion?

Only in the last couple of years had Eche begun to understand that the feelings she perceived were *not* obvious to all, that *not* everyone saw them, and that by suppressing mention of their feelings, people could pretend that they didn't exist. She understood that she had been thwarting their unconscious goal by raising their thoughts to the conscious level. Of course they would resent her for it.

On her own, then, she had adapted her approach. She had stopped giving voice to her impressions, despite being certain of their veracity. She even began to doubt their veracity at times. Yet when she acted as if her perceptions were true, the results always corroborated her intuition.

As a routine, she began to skip ahead one or two steps in the process of comforting others. Instead of lamenting aloud with a person, she could merely give them a compassionate glance or a hug, or state to them some indirectly related thought that would undoubtedly console them. When someone was masking their anger she did not have to explicitly rebut them, but could instead behave toward them – and even subtly encourage others to do so – in precisely the way that would disarm their ire.

She found she was able to comfort people in more trivial ways as well. For instance she could always see from her mother's movements and irritability exactly when she was getting warm in the house. At such times, Eche would invariably proceed to open the nearest window, complaining herself of the stuffiness. Or she might say – coincidentally as far as her mother was concerned – that she was going for a glass of chilled water; she wondered if her mother might like some as well. People's responses to her perception-based actions soon erased all doubt.

These were the things she now understood with all her being. She understood the full extent of her capabilities and the explanation behind them. Mohsin (*Roldán*) had given that to

her. She also understood that the abilities she had exhibited until now were only the bare minimum of what she would be able to do. Thus it was with vigor that she had launched herself into further developing her skills over the rest of that day. It was also a way to distract herself from her recent calamity.

A definite freshness and cheer had colored her behavior since her palaver with Roldán. She felt as if she had been operating her body at a distance over the last two days, like it was an open mold from which she had somehow withdrawn, retracting and compressing her essence into the tiniest of ingots. She had experienced everything at a remove, from within her tiny shell. Only now did she feel that she had rejoined herself fully, crossing the space between inner being and outer perception, melting and pouring her essence wholly into the mold of her body, rejoining reality once more.

Dani had reacted to the change in Eche's behavior at first with confusion, then with mild alarm. Preoccupied with her own struggles – *Poor Amadou*, thought Eche, *Poor Dani* – she had behaved toward Eche with irritation and aloofness, a mood exacerbated by Eche's strange new cheer.

Only toward evening, as preparations grew intensive, had her captain become comfortable with Eche's altered attitude. It seemed Dani ultimately determined that it signified Eche's compliance. Dani's blinders – comprising a mixture of dogmatic arrogance and angry self-pity – kept her from ever supposing that Eche's new attitude meant just the opposite.

Eche observed the entire chain of Dani's feelings toward her with bemusement at first, the same bemusement with which she observed everyone throughout the course of that day's practice. Later, however, she began to pity Dani. Eche pitied her for her ignorance and for her intransigence. She pitied her for the broken mess she had been when she first landed in Eche's

life, and the near-broken mess she was now. Eche pitied her beforehand for the sense of betrayal she would soon feel.

“You don’t have to come up there with us, you know,” Dani said, bringing Eche back to the present.

She was still gazing down the passage toward Roldán, who was about to enter the shaft himself behind Guaré. To her amazement, she could already hear a smattering of gunshots up above.

Dani followed Eche’s gaze, then smirked at her.

“Already working his charms on you too, huh?”

Eche glared at her without responding, pretending more annoyance than she truly felt.

“I’m coming,” she said.

“Now’s the time then,” Dani said, placing her hands on the ladder. “Stick with me, okay? You’re my cover.” She began her ascent.

Eche remembered her thoughts from just yesterday, when she had enviously observed the doorway into the upper world. She was now crossing the threshold from her world into theirs, stealing into heaven. She felt ready and excited; the volcano was forgotten. She climbed.

Nearing the opening, she heard more gunshots: *pop. . . pop.* She was totally unprepared for what the sub-basement of the Oasis would look like. She had never even been to I-Land, and had only heard stories about the Oasis, but anyone who described it was sure to impress upon her its gargantuan size. Not only was it the tallest, biggest building in I-Land, but it towered over what had been biggest before it. They had described it as six or seven of the tallest buildings smashed together, melded into a monstrous mountain of steel, glass and concrete. It was

probably bigger now, since whenever they ran out of room they merely added onto the sides, leveling entire blocks of city when the center needed to expand.

She could barely imagine such a mass, and that only the exterior. Much less could she imagine the interior, which had also been vaguely described to her through a combination of hearsay and faint recollections. All agreed that it contained everything: whole neighborhoods and malls, office buildings and hospitals, arena and concert hall, even a university. Obviously it contained their targets as well, the I-PF, I-BN and BBB.

Yet despite knowing all this, being well-versed in lore of the Oasis's gigantism, understanding rationally how miniscule she was in comparison, when Eche peeked her head into the dim emergency lighting that painted the huge chamber red, she was absolutely dumbfounded by its size.

They emerged near one end of the sub-basement, in the center of a wall about a half-klick long. But looking out from the wall, it seemed to go on forever; it had to be at least the size of their 20-acre field at home. A concrete field. The far wall was dim in the distance, a red, pulsating blur reflecting the emergency lights.

Huge, square pillars with doors at their bases punctuated the open vastness, spanning the space from the ground to the ceiling two stories above them. Catwalks traced black lines across the gray ceiling, clung to them like ivy, originating from the tops of the columns.

We're supposed to bring this down? she thought. *Impossible.*

Pop – pop. . . pop.

The gunfire brought Eche back. She scaled the last rungs and sprung out of the drain. She ignored the pain in her hands as she abused them. Crouching next to the opening, she found Dani a few meters away.

Eche saw swarms of black figures running in various directions, throwing echoes of clapping feet and jangling equipment. She swung her weapon from her back and searched for a target, searching for the shiny black heads and the I-Land patches that offered the only real contrast between the two competing groups of soldiers.

But most of the heads were covered in the dark wool caps of the People. Real human faces loomed below them. Several squads of I-PF agents had entered the sub-basement from the staircases within the columns, but the People had already killed or subdued them. The plan to draw them out of the Oasis must have been effective. Or the People really had them surprised.

In the distance she saw a weird four-legged robot that was huddled near one of the pillars. It looked about the size of Alvero, her sheepdog, but it was black. It must have been one of the new Cats. Bright flashes sparked from its chest, but it recoiled and fell as three of the People closed in, firing.

The whole chamber was now strangely quiet, interrupted only by feet, metal and grunting. There was also the occasional yell for “ammo,” which she knew was a squad leader calling to their explosives personnel to place a bomb at a specific site. They were spreading throughout the room and systematically rigging the columns. Dozens of kin were crouched in a loose circle around the drain openings, facing Dani and awaiting her command.

“Seen enough?” Dani called. Eche turned and saw she was grinning. “Ready?” Eche nodded.

Dani turned to the adolescent at her side – Eche remembered his name being Marco – and asked him something that Eche couldn’t hear. In response the navigator re-checked his map and pointed to a distant column.

“Let’s go,” Dani called, starting off. Eche and Marco followed. “D Company, move!” she shouted. At once the crouching soldiers stood and moved at a jog in the same direction.

“Ammo!” Eche heard.

She turned to her right and saw a soldier, not of their company, with a large duffel bag. He approached a column where a navigator stood examining a map and signalling. Without hesitation, the soldier affixed a small, tan rectangle, only a bit bigger than his hand, to the base of the column where the navigator signaled. Both of them then entered the column through the door and jogged up the steps.

She kept running. It was anticlimactic – just running and nothing else. Infrequently she passed dark, indistinct forms on the ground. Most of them had the I-PF masks on, and she saw one other of the defunct robots, bigger by her side than it had looked from a distance.

Eche looked to Dani and noticed her determination. Marco led them both. Concentrating on him, practicing her skill, Eche could sense an eagerness about him. She couldn’t yet see color, but she could see a dark envelope around him with a brighter outline. She didn’t understand how she knew that a dark Fringe was good, but she did, and felt no need to question it. The rest of the company had fallen in behind them. No officers disturbed them.

The burning in her legs reminded her that she was still recovering from her sprint through the tunnels two days ago. How long ago it now seemed. She no longer turned away from the memory of that day. She could face it without wanting to flee. But now the burning in her legs and lungs occupied her attention.

Blissful, quiet darkness, where no pain exists. You float, your body absolutely relaxed, your breathing slowed, so much so that on one of those deep, lung-expanding inhales (*tattattat*) you feel as if you might keep inhaling forever, deep into the bottom of your lungs, to the bottom of your stomach, to the bottom of your feet, beneath your feet and through the floor, deep into the earth, continuing downward, farther, your conscious self amazed that you can still be inhaling, floating yet also sinking as you breathe deeper (*tattattat*), such relaxation as you haven't known in perhaps your entire life, where everything conscious melts away, everything forgotten (*TatTatTat*). . . where you are – forgotten. . . what you're doing – forgotten. . . what they've done to you –

TAT-TAT-TAT

Betancourt jerked awake as the Cal unit passed his Closet. His bloody, burnt hands were still strapped to the miniature platform. The open window-shelf permitted entrance to the full volume of the robot's banging. It was a tribute to his exhaustion that Betancourt had been able to doze all the way until Cal arrived at his own cell. He opened his eyes just in time to see a silver-black flash disappear to the right of his hands.

He didn't know how long it had been since they left him after the last amputation. He had been leaning his head on the front of his cell, against that hypnotic insignia, trying as hard as he could to pass out. If swooning was something you could try to do, he undoubtedly would have succeeded by now. His body was begging to be unconscious, screaming for it, screaming like his hands were screaming at him, like his feet and legs screamed from standing, screaming like the raw, gaping wound in his side was screaming. And to think he had been on the verge of forgetting it all. . .

He still had two and a half fingers on each hand.

“That’s still a full hand of fingers if you add ‘em together,” he slurred to himself, gently wiggling his as-yet-untouched digits. “Two and a half, left. . . two and a half, right.” The nausea and feverish exhaustion made it difficult to enunciate clearly.

He almost laughed at hearing the tally so matter-of-factly, as if the amputation of minor appendages was perfectly routine, even comprehensible. Laughter was his only answer to the bizarre world that had swallowed him, where bidding farewell to small pieces of yourself became a common, abrupt, repeatable occurrence. He knew that his macabre humor hinted at impending mental collapse. In moments of greater clarity, he dragged himself back to the pain he was feeling over his entire body.

After each pinky, there was only so much extra pain he could register. It was torture every time they cut off another knuckle, and literally searing agony when they burned it shut, but it now only echoed the memory of those first few times. The novel became routine. A torturer couldn’t hope to sustain that level of sensation; a tortured body numbed itself.

He had blacked out once. The adrenaline shot they used to revive him still had his heart speeding. He vaguely worried about them moving onto. . . other areas, but there was plenty of suffering to hold his attention for the time being.

He had done well so far, he knew it. He hadn’t said anything to them since the first knuckle. He didn’t plan on saying anything. Just keep his mouth shut. He also knew, however, that they would soon change it up. They would debut a completely new horror. Most of the terror was not knowing what came next. Allowing him to habituate to a routine, however agonizing. . . it did him a favor.

“Strauss’ll get bored with these games,” he muttered, half-asleep once more. He just hoped he would be able to maintain his strength.

But he wrinkled his nose at the lingering odor of his burnt flesh. The smell mixed with the stench of his dried vomit to create a nauseating blend. As he was already queasy from the spider bite, the burnt odor brought his revulsion to new heights. His stomach was sore from retching. The little that remained in his stomach after the amputations he had long since vomited onto his trapped arms.

Out of boredom, he studied the pieces of vomit mixed within the dark, thick hair of his arms, trying to identify the particles. And at that very moment, at the top of his peripheral vision as he examined his arms, Betancourt's world inverted.

In a split second, the white of the hallway switched to a brilliant red-orange. His breath caught. The starkness of the change impressed him: it was the first large-scale he had seen in over a day. How strange that a place so white and sterile should suddenly be awash in this tawdry color.

One second later – barely enough time for him to cock his head, or release his caught breath – a piercing siren deluged him, shattering his tranquility. The blaring alarm was all the louder for how it juxtaposed with the previous silence. His head must surely implode beneath the volume of the rapid trilling.

Betancourt leaned his head back as he had on the first knuckle: eyes clenched, mouth open in a soundless scream. . . or maybe he did scream, but was unable to hear it over the alarm, such had it displaced everything, even his pain.

Two seconds later, Betancourt reopened his eyes, authentically surprised that his head had not caved in. The alarm still sounded, his arms were still red and the tint bled into his Closet, giving everything a fiery hue. He heard running footsteps out in the hall. Two flashes of black passed his Cell, running from right to left.

The sounds and the color and the movement invigorated him. He felt his pulse accelerate even over the effects of the synthetic adrenaline. His eyes widened as he wondered what could cause such an emergency.

Could it be them?

He realized with sheepish amazement the extent of his ignorance regarding the People. He had never even discovered their plans. He had little idea of their full capabilities and none whatsoever of their immediate ambitions. It was entirely possible that they were here now. But the idea of rescue was something so alien to him that he almost feared it. His world's inversion continued. Along with the change in color and the change in noise, he also had to wrestle with a change in fortune – that he might actually live.

Closing his eyes slowly, without quite knowing how it happened, Betancourt felt a wave of calm wash over him. He became an island of tranquility amidst the tempestuous sea outside his Closet. With a small, tired smile, he allowed himself to hope.

“Worship, Past and Present – An Anecdote”¹²

For hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, one of the Appalachian mountains in western North Carolina was worshipped by the Cherokee tribe of Native-Americans. They called it Elseetoss and revered it as a great spirit that inhabited the tallest mountain for leagues in any direction. It was surrounded by broad valleys of the most fertile soil, and abundant wildlife. It was, in many ways, a mountain paradise for the native inhabitants of North America.

Their adulation of the mountain was a religious view that now seems quaint to modern observers, mostly because our science tells us that a mountain cannot be alive, at least not in the anthropomorphic sense (i.e., the sense valued most highly by human science). Yet those same observers ignore that our modern, scientific civilization looks with equal reverence upon the same mountain today. The evidence is plain enough: a huge telecommunications antenna protrudes from the mountain’s peak.

How different, truly, from the Native-Americans’ ‘primitive’ idol worship is the act of erecting, tending to, and depending upon an immense artificial object for one’s daily functioning? Is the latter not also a form of devotion, and indeed, prayer? Do not each peoples’ high priests maintain their idols with analogous offerings?

Verily, there exist only trifling differences between modern and ancient worshippers of the same locale. One difference is that the ‘civilized’ folk manufactured a physical object for their worship – a phenomenon known biblically as ‘idolatry.’ Conversely, Native-Americans had only an ephemeral spirit to worship, which, ironically, the Bible considers less sinful.

A second difference is the actual object of worship; whereas the earlier people revered a great mountain spirit, symbolized by the mountain itself, the modern object of worship is

12 Excerpted from Jensen, Frida, The People's Anthology of the 3rd Millenium, 2nd edition, Ch. 10.

technology, symbolized by the gigantic, radiating, metal tower. When comparing the two objects of worship, certain questions are warranted, such as:

Which of these two gods – the ancient or the modern – is nobler? Which is more worthy of our praise? Which confers more upon its devotees?

Which is most likely to enslave them?

XII.

They waited at a landing on the stairwell, chests heaving among the red lights and screaming siren.

The stairwell flashed a bright yellow, with a detonation several stories below. The roaring pulse funneled up the stairs. As tendrils of smoke drifted upward, Mohsin looked to Guaré and saw the same understanding reflected in his eyes. An explosion meant “Person down.”

“How many remain?” he asked his captain.

“Count off, start at top!” Guaré yelled upward.

The company filled two flights of stairs, one above the landing and the other below. The soldier standing at the next landing up opened his mouth and Mohsin could see the “One!” but couldn’t hear over the siren.

He began to hear faint yells as the count-off travelled down the stairs, barely distinguishable above the wailing alarm. Only when the yells reached the stairs immediately above them could Mohsin discern the numbers. He was disappointed to hear how low they were.

“Seventeen!”

“Eighteen!” from Kelly the navigator, standing next to them on the landing.

“Nineteen!” called the man immediately below their landing.

The numbers faded beneath the blaring alarm once more. A few seconds later, the final count was relayed back to them from the landing below.

“Thirty-seven!” reported the soldier below them.

“Thirty-nine, then,” Mohsin said, turning to Guaré.

“Did you expect such resistance?” Guaré asked.

“Something of the sort,” Mohsin responded, thinking. After a moment he said, “Okay, fifteen each on this floor and the next, the rest come with us to the roof. One bomber per floor. Do we still have three?”

Guaré turned to the stairs. “Explosives, sergeants, pre-SENT!”

One woman and three large men with duffel bags hurried to the landing.

Only one sergeant remaining . . .

He looked to Guaré. “Who do you trust to take a floor, besides your sergeant?”

Guaré surveyed the stairs and Mohsin saw his eyes settle on someone. “Fanila,” he called, pointing. The young woman descended, joining the others near the landing. Looking over them, Mohsin realized he was well-acquainted with one of them.

“Fito,” he smiled to the man with black, curly hair. “It heartens me to see you.”

“And I you, sir. Always.” He smiled back with a twinkle in his eye. Mohsin knew Fito as a ceaselessly cheerful worker and soldier, a devoted Brother.

“You will come with me, Fito. That is, if you would do me the honor.”

“You have the honor backwards, sir,” he winked.

Their yelling contradicted the intimacy of their speech. Indeed, the sudden cheer Mohsin felt at seeing Fito flushed away his mild disappointment. It felt like a good omen. He clasped Fito’s shoulder and watched his Fringe glow deeper and darker. His hand still on Fito’s shoulder, Mohsin turned to Guaré.

“One bomber per floor. Count off fifteen for this floor, then take the rest up to the next and count off fifteen more. The remainder you bring with you to the roof, understood?”

“Aye.”

“Kelly, you come with me to the top, but you will not come outside. Understood?”

She nodded solemnly.

What courage. He marveled for just a moment at the young girl, before inspecting his women and men. Their energy was dampened. He frowned at the sight.

It was more difficult to discern in the red light, but he had learned early that you don't necessarily need to see a color in order to read one's Fringe. Sometimes it wasn't a color but an absence, a subtle vacuum of light and color around a person, giving the distinct impression of gloom. It could be due to any number of emotions, all of them at root negative and pessimistic. More worrying were the bright flashes of red and orange fear that permeated some of them. At this point half of his soldiers were in a healthy, dark green condition, with touches of yellow excitement. The others existed in this state of semi-dejection. He decided to alter his order.

“Amendment,” he said to Guaré. “I will count off the soldiers, and you will go with Fito and the rest of the soldiers to the roof. Kelly,” he said to the navigator, “your orders stand but with Guaré, and not me. I will join you directly.”

They both nodded as he looked to each of them in turn.

“Now,” he said, and the three of them left. The soldiers on the stairwell above squeezed to the wall to let them pass.

Mohsin turned to the four people left on the landing, two sergeants and two bombers. He was pleased to see that the new soldier Guaré had selected – promoted to sergeant in combat, as it were – was one of those with the deepest, sleekest Fringe. Guaré definitely had the gift for perception, if only he would trust himself to fully develop it. If only he would cease his idol-worship. . .

One of the bombers, however, was particularly gloomy. He was tall but not as wide as Fito, with brown hair and light green eyes. Mohsin turned to him.

“Your name, brother?”

“Flynn, sir.” He would not meet Mohsin’s eyes.

“You are performing admirably, and I thank you for it,” he said, clasping Flynn’s shoulder much as he had Fito’s.

Almost immediately, Mohsin saw his Fringe revive, the thin, dark outline around him dimly filling with the green of pine trees. As the color began to faintly illumine, the man looked up and smiled tentatively. Mohsin always experienced a reverent awe at how so simple a gesture could affect somebody that profoundly.

“You will go with Fanila,” he said to Flynn, then turned to the others on the landing. “Place the packages on anything that looks important. Once the ammo’s exhausted, make all haste back to the basement. Gunners,” he called.

Fanila signaled to two soldiers immediately below them, a man and a woman, both their Fringes flagging. They quickly ascended to the landing and Mohsin looked both of them in the eye before squeezing their shoulders, one with each hand.

“We’re almost done here, Brother and Sister. You’ve honored us all with your efforts tonight. Will you continue to honor us by breaching this door?”

They looked to each other and nodded. As if in response to their assent, color vivid color invaded the bright void in their fields of energy. Mohsin hid his satisfaction as they turned from him.

He then looked to Fanila and Flynn, who both had weapons in hand. Mohsin nodded to Fanila, then signaled to the soldiers below to follow.

“On my count,” Fanila called. The others on the landing turned their backs to the door.

“Three, two, one, GO!”

Shots rang out and the door flew open. The soldiers below quickly filed onto the landing and through the door. Shots exploded from the room: *pop-pop. . . pop-pop-pop.*

Four, five, six. . . Mohsin counted inwardly, standing by the door on the opposite side of the gunfight.

Outwardly, he greeted, nodded to, touched, looked at, or smiled to every single soldier who passed him on their way through the door. He did not turn to look them through the door, to observe their Fringes in order to ensure his verbal, physical and ethereal encouragement was working its effect. He didn't need visual confirmation.

When he had sent fifteen of his People to fulfill their mission, he looked to the remaining sergeant and bomber on the landing. With a jerk of his head he led the rest of them up to the next floor, excitement and happiness rising in his chest.

“Where are we?” Eche asked, panting and looking around.

In addition to Dani, she was with the same crew as the previous night: Nasim, Raj, Samuel, and the woman whose name she now knew was Regina. Raj was their bomber.

They hadn't gone far. She was thankful for the unexpected stop just two flights up from the sub-basement. Running across the wide expanse below, her legs and chest burning, she had

realized how foolish it was to think she could automatically keep pace with these trained, seasoned soldiers.

As far as she could tell, they were still in the basement. After blasting through seven agents and two doors made of metal and bulletproof glass, they were in a sleek, gray lobby with metal tables and computer banks. Several glass-walled rooms adjoined it, all of them filled with banks of terminals, lab equipment, and even cages.

The alarm was somehow muffled. Maybe the people who worked here didn't need to know about it? Either way, Eche was grateful at the reprieve.

“Bureau lab, come with me. Raj, rig up the ammo.”

“Lab for what?” she asked, though she vaguely knew.

Dani smiled at her without answering. She led her to the end of the small section, to a thick, metal door, apparently to some kind of vault. It looked impregnable.

Dani removed three small, metal half-spheres from one of her pockets. Each about the size of a plum, they resembled dark seashells. One by one, she twisted each of the shells until a click sounded. She then stuck them to the door and wall around the bolts. She grabbed Eche and walked her back ten paces.

“Avert your eyes,” she said to Eche, before calling out for everyone, “Fire in the hole!”

Eche looked down at the ground and turned away from the door. Five seconds later she heard a loud, hissing sizzle from behind her. The entire room brightened as the sizzle intensified, until she was standing in a shockingly white light, bright as sun. It shined for several seconds and then gradually faded. When it died, she felt a tug on her sleeve.

“Let's go.”

She turned to the door and saw a hole the size of a large dog melted into it. Dani approached and, crouching down, peeked quickly through the breach. Satisfied, she turned her attention to the hole itself, patting the edges. Assured it had cooled, Dani climbed through without a word. Eche followed her captain.

The vault was smaller than the outer chamber. Two sides were lined with lockers and the other, on the far wall, with a freezer that glowed blue-white in the dim light. The siren was even quieter here, such that they could speak in low tones without being drowned out.

“Where did you get those things?” Eche asked, as Dani approached the freezers on the back wall.

“The oven flares?” she responded casually. “Most people don’t know everything Dragona was into. He was almost as well stocked as I-Land.”

Dani was distracted while searching for something through the transparent door. Eche saw her touch her left ear and look down. It was not her habitual scar-scratching. This was the other ear; she was apparently listening.

“You have a radio too?” Eche asked. “Is that Mohsin?”

Dani smiled to herself and raised her head.

“Not quite,” she said. “Kind of the opposite, actually.”

She looked at Eche to gauge her response.

Controlling her expression, Eche asked, “What does Jones have to tell us?”

“Just checking in,” she said, turning back to the freezer.

Almost at once her eyes widened and she grinned. She lifted her wrist to her mouth and said softly, “Got it.” She opened the freezer door and grabbed the small vials in front of her, placing them gently in a shoulder bag.

“Doesn’t that seem strange to you?” Eche asked. “His monitoring?”

She didn’t stop collecting vials, just shook her head in annoyance.

“It *is* strange, Dani. It’s suspect. You know it. It means he doesn’t trust you.”

Finishing with the vials, Dani closed the door, glaring at Eche. Without trying, Eche saw a flash of white pulse from the top of her head.

That’s what anger looks like. Anger’s white?

Eche almost lost track of her thoughts by gaping at the novelty. Dani’s was the first Fringe she had seen in such detail since Roldán.

Abruptly, Dani turned and stalked back to the door. It jarred Eche back to her duty. She had to try reasoning.

“Think about it Dani: why wouldn’t he trust you? If you’re his most trusted captain, his right hand, why would he doubt your abilities? Your loyalty?”

Dani put one foot through the vault door and bent over as if to stick her head through the hole. But before she disappeared behind the metal she looked back at Eche, staring. Dani sized her up, running her eyes from head to toe. Then, silent, she ducked through the door.

“It can only be his own disloyalty,” Eche called as she went. “You know it: he’s not to be trusted.”

She spoke the last words to the sole of a foot as Dani lifted it out of the vault. She cringed at how lame her argument sounded. She would have to do much better, much more, if she hoped to stop what was coming.

The siren shrilled, light bathing his wrecked body in red, and still Betancourt hoped.

Still his hands tormented him, but the intensity of the original cutting and burning had dwindled to a lesser ache. Though they were agonizing by pre-Closet standards, they were merely irritating with his new, heightened threshold of pain, an unexpected benefit of his torture. That adjustment was now one of his greatest allies for survival, as he somehow relegated the pain to the background, side by side with the excruciating alarm.

He hadn't heard footsteps for a good while now. Before, he would have been tense with anxiety at the sudden change in his environment, straining his muscles, rocking back and forth, desperate to know what was happening.

But apart from the occasional stab of pain, the calm still gripped him. He rested within that calm, finding a tranquil space. He went so far as to drop his bottom in order to relax his back, spreading his weight between his bottom on the back wall and his knees on the front, pulling back on his hands so that the straps bit into his wrists.

He winced, though, as the position caused him to stretch his left arm, and with it his wounded side. The throbbing had plateaued by now, but it continued unabated, radiating pain. His fever and nausea were at least as bad as ever. He worried about the wound's size, and its discoloration. If the poison spread to his heart or lungs he was in trouble. Yet he only worried briefly; the calm beckoned him as the pain of the stretch diminished.

The distant sound of gunfire wafted down the IIU hallway. . . *p-p-p*. . . *p*. . . *p-p*. . . He turned his head to the left and slowly stood back up, shaking each leg in turn.

No, it's not distant, not if I can hear it. . .

The ceilings and floors were so insulated that there was no way the sound came from a different floor. It had to be on this floor. And not only on the floor, but just outside the door, in order to be heard in here.

P-p-p. . . p-p-p-p-p-p . . . p. . . p-p. . .

All at once the door opened. Seconds later, footsteps sounded near his cell. A black blur flashed across his window, followed by a deafening blast that overwhelmed even the wailing of the siren, desecrating the insulated confines of the IIU, a blasphemer in a sacred temple.

A thud sounded to his right. Betancourt didn't hear it as much as he felt the vibration in the floor. Then nothing, for several seconds. Betancourt held his breath, unable to relax enough for a simple exhalation.

He heard and felt the mechanized click. The master bolt in his door being withdrawn. The door he was partially pushing into gave way.

Slowly, tentatively moving his aching legs, Betancourt stepped into the hallway. Because his hands were still connected to the platform in his door, he couldn't move around it. He had to pivot while facing it, his view of the end of the hallway obstructed.

Still, he was out. He looked to his right and saw other doors being poked open, other naked, disfigured bodies emerging on both sides of the hall. He couldn't bring himself to look at their faces; they were mere effigies of emaciation, skin-colored blurs that represented nothing more than a nightmare. His nightmare.

He felt someone's hands.

They were black gloves, I-PF gloves, on top of his own hands. Which meant more torture was coming, more amputations, more pieces of himself that he would be forced to shed.

His shoulders slumped, but only for a moment. The black triangle of the I-Land flag stared at him mercilessly from the back of his door. Irrationally, he tried to re-enter his closet, tried to pull the one-eyed door shut against the malevolent hands. He heard screaming, even over the deafening siren. The hands fought him, preventing him from reversing. In his weakened state he was no match.

Still he struggled, leaning back with all his weight, pushing in vain with his wasted leg muscles. The straps dug into his wrists. The burning in his side flared in a gust of blackness that rushed across his sight. Still the bad hands held.

Finally he could tolerate the pain no more. He gave up, coming to a stand once more, resting his head against the eye on the door, his own eyes closed. The screaming suddenly stopped. He realized it had been his own.

But no. These weren't gloves that worked on him. It wasn't leather he was feeling. It was the warm, damp touch of sweaty skin. The hands were gloveless. They were human. Betancourt opened his eyes to verify. He saw human hands on top of his own. They were black, yes, but they had light nails. Black and naked and human.

Slowly understanding, he watched as the human hands found their way to the bottom of the platform. He felt as the straps slackened on his wrists, as his hands slid off the platform and dropped to his waist. He felt himself stand alone, wavering, suddenly and strangely without the support of any nearby walls. He saw as the door moved away from him, opening his view onto the world once more.

He saw the man standing there, a black wool cap barely restraining the dark curls of his unkempt hair, a simple man dressed in a ragtag uniform of brown and dark gray. He saw

kindness and love in the tears of the man's eyes. He felt some of the man's tears fall down upon him.

He tried to lift his hands but couldn't. He wanted to tell the man that he didn't need to cry, that he was okay, that everything was going to be okay. His relief had an unexpected soporific effect, presenting an irresistible urge to sleep at once.

"It's okay," he felt his lips move, his eyes barely remaining open, not knowing if anything came out.

He looked down and saw the water from the tears dripping onto his stomach, onto his hands, his poor, ruined hands. He felt the water and it seemed like too much water, too many tears for just this one man. That's how he realized they were his own.

He looked back to the man, smiling and weeping. Suddenly, Betancourt could no longer do anything, neither maintain his balance nor his open eyes, and so he rested.

On the roof of the Oasis, the alarm's assault receded. It still blared, but without walls to ricochet it. They were liberated from their aural torture.

Mohsin saw that each of his Brothers and Sisters experienced the same surge of relief upon stepping into the cold night. The weakening of the siren was only part of it. Equally invigorating was the fresh air after the stale interior atmosphere, the openness after the suffocating confines, and the return to the natural world after the rancid artifice of I-Land's headquarters. It was that they – the rebels, the terrorists, the People – stood now atop the entire command center of I-Land. As yet only a symbolic victory, it was still an inspiring one.

But as the wind whipped, his burgeoning exhilaration faded. Even the cool, fresh air no longer cheered him. He had a premonition.

Mohsin scanned the roof. Fito was placing a package on one of the half-dozen satellite dishes, each about two humans in diameter. Mohsin looked over to the tower, the only target still unrigged. That tower represented the primary communication system for the whole city-state. It reached almost twenty meters up, adding at least three stories to the oppressive pinnacle of the Oasis.

The others, Guaré included, stood with arms ready, yet there had been no resistance. That was what troubled him.

There had only been token gunshots below, as they sent their squads onto the two I-BN floors. Meeting themselves no opposition on their way to the roof, Mohsin was troubled that I-Land should do nothing to protect one of its most vital strategic points. It was true they had eliminated the sentinels, and that they had drawn the weight of the forces out of the Oasis and into their underground on a wild goose chase. Yet there was still something awry about the ease of their mission, not just tonight's but all of them over the last two days.

As if in mischievous answer to a misguided prayer, a faint sound materialized in the bottom registers of his consciousness. It was low, in deep contrast to the high stridence of the alarm. It was rhythmic and fast, a hacking sound.

“Chopper!” he called.

Guaré and the others started at his warning, crouching down in preparation, but before they could do anything the chopping surged and swallowed the banshee wail of the siren. All at once the helicopter burst over the ledge of the roof. It hovered in front of them, swaying smoothly back and forth, like a hornet.

There occurred a frozen moment, surreal, in which Mohsin looked from his crouching soldiers to the black-windowed hornet hovering in front of him, the hypocritical bastardization of the I-Land flag etched above the black, shaded windshield. It was a moment in which sound faded and the chopper congealed in mid-air, a moment in which his mind thickened and set, too stunned to think, too dazed to calculate his next move. It was a sliver of time so brief and ephemeral, yet one in which Mohsin was absolutely present, as firmly planted as a great tree in a flood. As he watched the copter in this frozen state, a yellow-white flash flowered out of one of the dark metal tubes on the side of the aircraft. It was beautiful and silent; Mohsin stared at it in wonder. And would have kept staring, had the machine gun's roaring thunder not shattered his reverie.

He spun even as the first bullets hurtled by him. The guns spit bullets almost at random, decimating the concrete around and behind him, glancing off metal and flesh. The rest of the People fled toward the shelter of the satellites.

“Take cover!” he called. “Behind the dishes!”

In front of him, Guaré was clutching his leg in the process of collapsing, the cannonfire still thundering. Before Guaré's knees touched the ground Mohsin grabbed his collar and catapulted him to his feet, almost throwing him the short distance to cover.

They made it behind the last satellite, furthest from the door and closest to the immense tower. Mohsin dropped Guaré to his bottom, looking at his face long enough to see the bullet wound wasn't serious. His head looked incomplete without the bowler that had slipped off when he got thrown. Mohsin peered down the row of satellites toward the rooftop door and saw only three others. The gunfire had tapered off now that they had cover, but they didn't have much time.

He glanced at the tower and immediately thought of Fito. Fito and the bombs. His heart sank when he glanced back down the row and didn't see the huge man. Peeking around the side of the dish, he saw the giant body lying motionless atop the duffel bag, between the dish and the roof's edge.

He coldly barred the tide of grief that encroached upon his pensive shore. *Business first*, he reminded himself. *Fito's memory later*. The business was that there was no way to get to the bombs and then to the tower before the helicopter destroyed him. Mohsin was still as he thought, only his eyes darting around: to the convex backing of the sheltering satellite, then to the tower, then to Guaré and back.

Grenading was all that remained. He felt his pockets, then looked to the tower, examining its base. The pyramidal tower had a square base five meters to a side, the four corners bolted into the concrete. Each corner comprised four thick metal bars arranged in a smaller square, big enough for a person to climb inside. The small square's four posts were reinforced with crossing beams. Mohsin wasn't sure one grenade per base would be enough. He would have to test.

In one of his glances back to Guaré, the wounded captain caught his eye.

“What do you mean to do?” Guaré called.

“Grenades. Give me yours.”

Guaré paused a beat before reaching into his pockets. Mohsin loved him more for not protesting, though he suppressed the feeling as coldly as he had his grief.

“Can you cover me?” Mohsin asked, referring to his wound. Guaré nodded.

Mohsin looked over to the next dish, where a scared woman watched him. Seeing her fear reminded him he felt none of his own. *As it should be*, he thought.

“Jackie!” he yelled. He wasn't sure if she'd be able to hear over the incessant chopping. “Cover me! At Guaré's signal!” He pointed to his gun and then to the chopper to illustrate. Jackie nodded.

“Pass it on!” Mohsin ended, pointing behind her to the others. She turned and started yelling to the two others at their adjacent dishes.

When he turned back to Guaré, two pinless grenades greeted him, one in each of his captain's hands. Silent, he took them into one hand, careful to hold the armed levers in place. Guaré reached back into his vest pocket and extracted his last two grenades, removing the pins from each one in turn.

“Will four be enough?” he asked upon giving over the last two.

“Not sure,” Mohsin said, two armed grenades in each hand. “I'll test the first leg with one and the second with two. By the time I get to the third I'll know about the first. I have my own here,” he finished, patting his chest.

Guaré gazed at him and Mohsin knew his thoughts.

“The tower will shield me,” Mohsin said. “Don't mourn me yet, Brother.”

Guaré nodded but stopped short of smiling. He swung his gun around and turned to peer beneath the rim of the satellite. Once positioned, he glanced back at Mohsin and gave one final nod. He aimed and started firing. The steady *pop-pop-pop* of his gun initiated a chain reaction down the line of satellites. Mohsin took off.

The machine gun didn't start firing until he had almost reached the first leg, the first blasts kicking up concrete just behind his feet. By the time he placed the first grenade in the middle of the square formed by the four metal bars of the feet, the bullets were glancing off the metal of the tower. The rapid shearing of small on larger metal generated a *shing* that reminded

Mohsin of blade-sharpening. The streaking wind of the bullets, however, dissipated any such illusion.

Mohsin ran to the second leg with the distinct feeling of small objects buzzing by him. He tried to maintain focus, ignoring the distracting whines with their tiny jet streams. The *shings* of the glances, the *pings* of the direct metallic hits, the *thwacks* of bullets lodging in concrete behind him – they created a minuscule symphony around him, over the chopper's background *basso* and the machine gun's rhythmic drumming.

He dropped two grenades into the small square of the second leg and immediately reached into his pocket to take out another. The tower was now between him and the chopper, but the aircraft was quickly buzzing over to skirt the obstacle. He'd be exposed in another ten seconds.

As he approached the third leg, furthest from the dishes, closest to the edge of the Oasis, the first grenade exploded, the shock wave knocking Mohsin a step to his left. Huddling behind the third leg, he waited for the smoke to clear, trying to control his pulse. He stared, willing the fumes to clear, but just as it finally thinned enough to reveal damage, the other grenades went off to his right, throwing him to the side.

For one second his upper body dangled tantalizingly unprotected in front of the chopper's machine gun. The helicopter was now only several dashes away, above him. The mechanized machine gun bellowed continuously. Shots whined past his head. Mohsin snatched himself up and squeezed behind the leg. The chopper was too close; he'd never be able to reach the last leg before getting slaughtered.

Looking down at the grenades, and without thinking too long on it, he took one of them out of his right hand and released the lever. Amid the chaotic cacophony of whirring rotors,

scattering bullets and silvery ricochets, he counted calmly, *One, two, three*. With a stiff-armed overhead sling, he hurled the grenade at the helicopter.

There was another surreal moment, one of those same congealed instances when, from behind the leg of the tower, Mohsin watched the grenade bounce off the blue painted circle of the I-Land flag atop the chopper's black windshield. It lazily resided into the dark night. For a split second, as he watched the rebound, dismay and surprise seeped onto his face.

But on the rebound, an arm's length from that abominable flag, the bright flash of detonation abbreviated his panic. The vehicle veered sharply to the right and down, entering a spin. Mohsin was free.

With renewed confidence he looked back to the first two legs. The second one was completely destroyed, a wide gap between the four metal bars and the concrete base. At the first leg, two of the bars were completely severed, the twisted ends curling in different directions. Two bars remained. So there was his answer: he'd have to use two on the last legs to be sure.

There was a relative peace following the destruction of the machine gun. That void, along with the explosion of the grenades, momentarily deafened him to the chopping noise that remained. But only for a moment – As he pulled a pin out of a grenade and placed it with the other in the third leg, he realized there was another helicopter approaching.

Trying to ignore it and mostly succeeding, Mohsin took the last two grenades out of his pocket and approached the fourth leg. By the time he pulled the pins, however, the new helicopter had appeared over the lip of the building, boldly bucking Mohsin's attempted disregard. But it was still far, all the way at the other end of the satellite row, near the stairwell.

They are too late, he thought with satisfaction. He placed the last two grenades.

Mohsin stood up in time for a ravenous bite like a hatchet-blow in the front of his left shoulder. The force of it twisted his body around. He dropped to the ground, and only then did the bullet's corresponding explosion reach his ears – the chopper's thunder was back. He reached his right hand around to the wound. Pain. His hand came away painted red with blood.

The grenades at the third leg exploded with an earsplitting roar, throwing him again to his left as he tried to raise himself. Dazed and deaf, he lifted his head. His eyes widened as he looked at the last two grenades a step away from his face, ready to explode at any second.

Bringing his feet under him, he sprang up, ignoring his shoulder's shrill protest. He staggered back to the dish in the semblance of a run, concrete spouting around him in asymmetrical fountains as the helicopter's cannon targeted him. The tower's fourth leg exploded behind him, sending him stumbling the last several steps, barely able to maintain his balance.

He arrived behind cover, where Guaré was still shooting out the other side of the satellite. Panting, Mohsin patted him on the back with his good arm. The thin man swung around quickly, alarmed, but relaxed upon seeing Mohsin. He got to his feet with labor.

“I told you not to grieve,” Mohsin yelled.

Guaré grinned back, but only for a second, because his face abruptly morphed as something above Mohsin's head caught his attention. The smile stretched vertically, the cheeks lowering, as his eyes opened wide in a mask of dismay, something very much like what Mohsin's face must have reflected as he watched the rebounding grenade. There was a flash of vivid red fear in his Fringe, even brighter than fear – utter terror.

“Run!” Guaré yelled, pulling Mohsin toward him, toward the other dishes and the stairwell.

Mohsin became aware of a creaking sound that had been hidden by the deep booming of the rotor and the machine guns. It was impossible to know how long the sound had been there, but it had the feel of something ancient, something eternal. It now grew stronger, raising over the fierce chopping of the helicopter.

The sound was hesitant at first, perhaps unsure of its own ferocity, but as Mohsin started behind Guaré toward the stairwell, it gradually and steadily rose, until it became a tortured metallic screech. They had barely moved three steps when the shriek culminated in an earth-shaking crash beside them.

Mohsin had only enough time to turn his head before something giant smote him from behind. An immense weight landed on top of him, bowling him over from one instant to the next. He toppled to the ground, his head whipped back, air ejected from his lungs. Ribs snapped upon impact, and a torturous pressure wedged his head between the ground and the giant. The mass of the fallen tower lay atop him, crushing him slowly.

His chest was void of air. He wheezed desperately but could negotiate no space to breathe. No amount of stunted thrashing soothed the sudden burning of his lungs; no means of ragged inhalation compensated for the oxygen trampled out of him. Above all there was the weight, the tyrannous weight of the tyrannous tower, which might crush him if he didn't strain his pecs, his arms, his back, his neck in resistance. But the pain. . .

"Ughh," he grimaced, unable to utter anything else with the little air remaining to him.

"Mohsin!" he heard Guaré. "Help!" his captain yelled, amazingly loud over the chopping sound.

Unable to move his head, Mohsin saw the gray metal of the tower laying over him. Feet came into view, dirty boots, and then another pair. He saw the stances widen and felt a brief

vibration on the metal that covered him, the vibrations transmitting minor jolts of pain throughout his head and body. The legs in view strained; a second later Mohsin felt a glorious relief in the unrelenting pressure atop him. He drew a full breath into his burning lungs, the organs singing the the sweetest psalm of gratitude. He exhaled and inhaled again, greedily.

The metal lifted more, accompanied by human groans of inhuman effort. Mohsin was unable to fully comprehend, instead awash in the euphoria of oxygenation. In the midst of the alleviation of pain, he felt hands on him, on the other side of him. They pulled him backwards. It hurt when they did, somewhere behind him. But he didn't complain, because of the oxygen. Air in his lungs and removal of the tower, his giant oppressor, made complaint impossible. He would not die squashed like a bug, his juices exploding out of him. Nothing else mattered.

Slowly, the hands on his backside dragged him, sluggishly removing him from beneath the fallen tower. The concrete scraped against the right side of his face, and it hurt sublimely. He could still see only the two pairs of flexing legs, watch them as they beautifully strained, hear their owners yell in magnificent exertion. Then he was free.

Someone turned him over, gently, lovingly. He stared up at Guaré.

"You're alive!" he said, almost weeping.

"The other chopper. . ." Mohsin tried to remind him. "We must leave."

A loud clang sounded behind them. The whole roof shook. Two other men appeared above him as well, further away than Guaré, too far to make out.

"We got the chopper," Guaré said. "They followed your lead, sir."

"Ahh, wonderful," he said, smiling. The chopping still echoed in his ears. Then he grew serious. "Still, we have little time."

"Can you walk?"

He tried to sit up but grimaced in pain.

“Not right now. . . can you carry me?”

“Not me, but they can,” he said, looking to the other two. “Willie, Espinosa, can you be gentle?”

“Of course, sir.”

One of the two men bent down and gathered Mohsin under his armpits. The man wasn't as big as Fito – *my Fito!* – but he was capable. With some help he hauled up Mohsin and slung him over his shoulder. Pain blackened the edges of his vision, a scream bubbling at the back of his throat. Guaré, seeing the agony in Mohsin's face, put a hand to his back in panic.

“Don't worry, Brother,” Mohsin panted. “I'll survive.”

Guaré relaxed minutely as he was spun from Mohsin's vision. The laden porter marched toward the door, his jarring steps eliciting a hissed inhalation from his charge. The Brother – whether Willie or Espinosa, he didn't know – responded by altering his gait to a controlled padding. *Praise be*, Mohsin thought.

“Just take care of the explosives,” Mohsin called to Guaré as he was carried off.

Then the stairwell door closed behind him, sealing him from the cool night air and the openness of the roof. He hadn't even had a moment to appreciate their success. He left the pinnacle of their victory and entered once more into the hellish red light and infernal wailing of that alarm, in the claustrophobic confines of the Oasis. The hell they must cross before at last returning home.

When they emerged onto the stairwell from the lab, Eche saw the rest of D Company descending back to the sub-basement from above. Other forms accompanied them, these not black, but pallid. Naked bodies.

Eche looked in confusion, then began to examine them more closely.

“Are these. . .”

She spoke to no one in particular, but in front of her Nasim turned his head halfway around and nodded.

“I-Land detainees, mostly our own captured. Those not with us before will surely be with us now.” She could barely hear him over the siren.

He turned back and his face suddenly brightened. “Rodi!”

Eche saw a thin young man – a boy, really – being escorted. He looked up, eye still dazed, and smiled blissfully at Nasim. The peaceful countenance stood out starkly against his physical appearance: missing teeth, bruised body, one eye swollen shut.

After the man-child passed down the stairs, Eche turned back to the procession. It was a strange mix of the victorious and the funereal, a quiet exuberance bulging beneath a mournful solemnity. Eche knew from the briefings that their mission was with the Bureau, but she had no idea what that entailed. Now it made sense: a rescue mission.

Another Brother had draped over his shoulder an unconscious, naked body in hideous condition. Through the gaping wound in its side she could see the white patches of two ribs. As she scanned down to the head she suddenly recognized him.

“Wait!” Eche called.

The Brother stopped and looked at her quizzically.

Eche approached the body and bent down. The head, hanging down by the soldier's waist, had the same close-cropped brown hair. Then she saw the unmistakable jaw, the same close-set eyes. Even while closed she recognized them. He looked dead, hanging there totally limp.

"Is he alive?"

"Barely I think. He was delirious when I found him, screaming, fighting. He passed out."

She focused her attention on Betancourt, concentrating. After some seconds she could make out a faint glow around him, a black calm.

"Nasim!"

He was still in front of her, looking as if he were ready to jump into the downward procession. He turned around with patient attention.

"Nasim, can you accompany them?" she asked, signaling to Betancourt and the soldier.

"Certainly, Sister."

She straightened, suddenly overcome with a flood of solemnity. She spoke to them both.

"This is Betancourt, the former I-PF Captain. His well-being is a priority second to none. Use his name and mine to expedite passage, understood?"

"Yes, Sister," Nasim answered. "Quickly, Fred."

They both went down the stairs with renewed vigor. Numbed with the shock of seeing Betancourt (*poor Betancourt*), Eche continued surveying the procession. An anomaly roused her attention as she scanned up the stairs.

Amid the current of shadowy soldiers and pale refugees moving inexorably downward, one person stood resisting the natural course of her surroundings. Not only did she resist the

current flowing against her, but it looked like she was preparing to climb even higher. She was carrying Raj's duffel. Dani glanced down at Eche, seemingly amused. She raised her eyebrows slightly and cocked her head.

Eche could still see the energy field around her, though it no longer showed white anger. Now it was a strange gray hue, essentially colorless. But it was simultaneously volatile, transmuting continuously, tiny flashes of purple and orange swirling like leaves in a dust devil. It was beautiful and terrifying. Such turmoil boded imminent danger for oneself or others. Somebody like that needed help.

Dani winked at her, then started up the next flight of stairs. Eche ascended after her.

As she bounded up the stairs the pain set in once more, her legs like old tin abandoned for days in the rain. The People bustled around her with their stomping feet and clanging gear, their smell of blood and gunpowder. . . it was nearly overwhelming.

At the next landing, the door was swinging shut, the last soldier from D Company just having exited. She hesitated for a moment but heard footsteps above and continued. When she reached the mid-story landing three gunshots exploded in the echo chamber of the stairwell. Eche dove immediately for the wall, whimpering after landing on her raw arms. Peeking up, she heard a door swing open upstairs. She rose and launched herself up the next flight.

Can I really be fearing an attack from Dani? she wondered as she bounded upward. Her split-second reaction to the gunfire betrayed a new wariness with her old friend. Something inside her was already prepared for a perilous confrontation.

At the top of the landing, she grabbed the bullet-ridden door and yanked. It opened onto a long, many-doored hallway. It could have been like any one of the People's passageways below ground, except for being pristine and sterile, bathed in that pulsating red. Dani was

halfway down the hall, jogging away from her. She appeared utterly casual, making no attempt to escape. For just a moment Eche stared down the hall, seeing the tunnel lengthen in front of her, a dark spot with a faint gray outline in the center. The siren muffled all other sounds.

Eche started after her, sprinting as her legs allowed. She watched Dani approach the end of the passage, then slow down and kneel next to the duffel. Eche pulled up next to her just as Dani extracted a metal tube from the bag.

“What is this?” Eche asked, huffing.

The memory of the gunshots lingered in her bones. Without thinking she had stopped three long paces from her captain.

“What is this?” Dani repeated, dumping a canister out of the metal tube. “What do you think it is?” The canister was a little larger than a canning jar.

“I think it’s something you’ll regret.”

Dani had started taking the vials from the lab out of her shoulder bag. She lay them gently on the floor in twos and threes. Her aura was still swirling between purple and orange on the gray backdrop, with an occasional flash of that white anger. How did one approach such tumult? Eche looked down, willing herself to think as fast as she could.

“Me? Regret? No, I think not.” Dani paused in her arranging, her hand again coming to her left ear. After a few seconds she spoke into her watch, “Arming launcher now.”

Still Eche thought frantically, trying to register Dani’s actions as well as her response, trying to figure out how she could negotiate such treacherous footing. She remembered Mohsin’s – *no*, *Roldán’s* – words from their earlier meeting: “You have to stay open. . . you will know when action is required. . .”

Even while absent, Roldán helped relax her, to restore her confidence.

“You will though,” Eche said then. “You know you’ll regret it. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but eventually you will. You know it’s wrong.”

Another flash of white, brighter this time. She glared up at Eche.

“Wrong to cull these sick cows? These human batteries? No, you have me quite mistaken. I perform an act of mercy.”

“You cannot act out of mercy and anger at the same time,” Eche said softly. She was now reacting, not analyzing. “Your fury’s impossible to mistake.”

I even sound like him, she thought in amazement.

The speed of Dani’s pulsating energy slackened momentarily, then picked up again at almost the same pace. She returned to her task.

“We can call it ‘merciful fury,’ as a compromise, shall we?” she said out of the corner of her mouth.

Dani pressed a button on top of the canister. Two hatches on either side opened silently, exposing the empty chamber. Dani picked up one vial and studied the canister, slipping the head of the vial onto one of the many needles in its interior. She looked back to Eche upon completion.

“You sure you want to stick around for this? Nasty stuff I got here. . . dangerous.”

She picked up another vial and carefully placed it next to the first inside the canister.

While studying Dani’s Fringe, attempting to decipher the volatile swirl of purple and orange flecks, Eche suddenly saw an entire scenario unreel in front of her. It materialized just as suddenly as Roldán’s words moments before, an imaginary scene of a confrontation between Dani and herself. She couldn’t hear the words, but she could see the heated exchange, the

resulting actions. But suddenly, and with a sensation of crushing depression, Eche realized that the scene wasn't imaginary at all. It wasn't some fantasy; it was what must happen.

Eche took a deep breath, then reached behind her and swung her gun around, aiming it at Dani. She clicked off the safety.

Dani looked up at the movement. Her brow momentarily contracted but then it smoothed out and she smiled.

“That’s your answer? You’re going to shoot me?” Sweet, sarcastic Dani. Arrogant Dani.

“You know I can’t let you go on,” Eche said.

It was strange to say these words to any other human, let alone kin, let alone Dani, her captain and savior, her Sister and sister. But she felt a new command occupy her voice and her attitude, a calm feeling of inevitability. The faith in her vision gave her the strength of a moral conviction.

Eche continued, “You’ll either stop, leave it here and return with me, or I’ll have to neutralize your threat.”

Dani countered, the formal speech reflecting her emotional distance. It was strangely cold amidst the heat of her white wrath.

“You think I’ll abandon months and years of planning just because you wave a gun at me? You’re young yet – you disappoint me.”

She placed one more vial in the canister.

“Let me ask you,” Eche said, “Why did you insist on having me with you, even today, after you saw my change, when you knew I felt this way?”

“Why? You can guess, no?”

Dani waited for a signal of understanding in Eche's gaze, which must have remained blank, as Eche had no idea.

Dani continued, "You would legitimize us. We had to convince you. Mohsin has enough idolaters. Not everything's as peaceful and loving as he wants you to believe. There's a reality to be addressed, a rough reality. You'd've legitimized us. Still can."

At this, Eche heard a note of sweetness in her voice. It was the same sweetness of the young woman that arrived at her doorstep all those years ago. The same plaintive gaze. The gray of her Fringe brightened into a pale blue. A shadow of heartbreak fell over Eche, as it had at the farewell with her father.

Eche spoke with mournful pity, "You couldn't see after this morning that I'm forever with Roldán? Wasn't it obvious?"

"Roldán?" She scoffed, turning back to the canister. "No, I couldn't. Not everyone's blessed with your talent."

Appeal to vanity, occurred immediately to Eche, out of nowhere.

"You have talent too, Dani. You know it. It's why your soldiers look up to you and why Roldán still gave you the chance. You think he didn't know what you planned? Why would he leave you in charge when he knew you designed this catastrophe? It proves your worth, that he allowed you such freedom."

"Mohsin knows nothing."

She continued working, her aura unchanged, the appeal deflected.

"Just like he knew nothing about the box you stole from Dragona's cache, right? Come, Dani, you're not as foolish as that."

Dani looked up, glaring, white tinged with purple flaring up around her.

Shame, humiliation, confusion, Eche recognized, struggling to maintain focus. Her new skills were too fascinating.

“Doesn’t matter,” she said, looking back down. “Sa tyrant, nothing more, a loving tyrant.”

Eche paused, thinking to herself. The white faded and a light purple remained, very dim, so translucent in places it appeared to be almost a vacuum. Apathetically, dazed, Dani continued to place vials in the canister. Only a few remained.

“You don’t have to do this,” Eche pleaded. “You know it’s not right.”

“I know what Sir Jones tells me,” she said, almost spitting, white flaring all around her once more. “Everything’s simple when he says it, makes sense, follows logic.”

“The worst atrocities can be utterly, beautifully logical,” Eche said softly. “But you know it’s not right. . .”

“I know nothing, not anymore. I know nothing and I have nothing, not Amadou, not your gift, not your Mohsin – Roldán. . . this is my lot.”

Her Fringe died down once more to an oppressive gray vacuum. There was no turmoil now, just a gray, depressed void, tinged purple with confusion.

“You can have the gift too,” Eche said. “It’s possible for everyone. Some are stronger than others, but I can show you. Dani, you can be happy again.”

“This is my lot,” Dani repeated, muttering, putting the last vial in and closing the canister. Picking up the tube in one hand and the canister in the other, she rose from her knees.

“Then you know mine too,” Eche said, raising her gun.

“So be it,” Dani said.

She turned away from Eche and approached the door. Her Fringe contracted and dimmed. Eche knew she was unreachable.

“Please stop,” Eche said, tears welling in her eyes. “If not for me or for you, then for my father. He loved you. I love you.”

Dani put the canister in the tube and placed her empty hand on the door. She turned her head so that Eche saw her profile. Smiling sadly, she pushed on the door.

Eche took one step forward and fired three shots. The blasts made her jump. They reverberated throughout the long hall.

Dani cried out and collapsed to the ground, settling onto her back. Undeterred, Eche took two quick steps and in one motion bent and swiped the launcher out of Dani’s hands. With the same hand, she wiped the tears from her cheeks.

Dani made no sound. She stared passively at Eche, her face devoid of any affect, a completely different visage than Eche had ever seen on her sister’s passionate face. It haunted her.

Trying to avoid the eery gaze, Eche slipped the gun off Dani’s shoulder and skidded it across the floor behind her. Then she removed her captain’s pistol and knife. Eche used all her force to lift Dani up to her feet. Dani staggered, wincing and grunting. She supported herself on the wall. Eche winced and grunted alongside, but from her own pain.

Then, without even wondering how she could possibly do it, just reacting, as Roldán had told her she must, Eche squatted. She pressed her shoulder into Dani’s stomach and hefted the long woman over her back. She didn’t stop to consider that she had not the strength to do so. She never entertained the thought that her wounds prevented such exertion. Thus the thought, unentertained, slunk away, rejected.

She thought none of this. She thought nothing at all. She just trusted herself and reacted. She simply *was*. And so trusting herself, so reacting, Eche walked resolutely down the hall with Dani over her least injured shoulder. Neither of them spoke amid the red light and the piercing alarm.

“Allegory of ‘The Tribe’”¹³

There is a story known simply as ‘The Tribe,’ author and copyright unknown. It is the story of a family living in a time and place also unknown, though we are given to understand that the events occurred long ago, in some foreign land.

Both story and tribe commence with the partnering of a woman with a man. She exudes beauty and compassion, with deep, knowing eyes, and an elegant, erect stature. The man, somewhat younger, is similarly magnificent, squared face still softened by youth, and a rough, boundless strength coursing through his body, indeed seeming to flow out of the earth itself.

The man’s energy and familial dedication lead to remarkable productivity. He tirelessly utilizes his surroundings to fashion the most comfortable, secure abode for his family. He is careful, however, to work in concert with nature, paying respect to the living things he uses, refusing to exploit resources past the subsistence needs of his family. He and his wife are content.

Four children are born. The first two are boys, followed by twin girls. They are well-loved by their mother, and their father is fair. The eldest resembles the father with his strength and features, although he feels a stronger kinship toward the realm of ideas than toward the physical earth. In his adolescent restlessness he departs his family, in search of a deeper understanding of the world.

The second son inherits his father’s sense of industry, but not his strength. He is sickly, and physically debilitated as a result. His father, though just and reasonable, cannot hide his disappointment with the second’s physical incapacity. The boy, though not tending as naturally to an intellectual life as did Eldest, is forced into the realm of the mind by his physical

13 Excerpted from Jensen, Frida, The People’s Anthology of the 3rd Millenium, 2nd edition, Ch. 1.

shortcoming. He learns to observe and ponder; these ponderings colored most by his paternally inherited inclination toward productivity. Yet resenting his father's lack of compassion, the boy grows antagonistic toward the Patriarch, and bitter.

Second-Son begins to see failure in his father's activities. The way the man tills and plants is awkward, due to the refusal to exploit animal labor. Prosperity is forsaken through self-limited harvests and misplaced respect for the animals' lives. Everything could be done more efficiently, he explains to his father, who only shakes his head and becomes colder toward this second son, condemning him for his rapacious personality.

The Matriarch becomes sad with the degeneration of their relations, growing older than her years would imply, her formerly regal posture stooping. The twin girls, quiet, beautiful and wise like their mother, perceive all but recognize their powerlessness. They support their father, in allegiance to his reverent treatment of nature, yet they love their brother, albeit with growing mournfulness. When the girls come of age they are married to good men of low standing, one of whom lives at the head of the next valley, and the other on a distant plateau.

Some years later a drought devastates the land. Tensions between Patriarch and Second-Son, steadily rising since the boy's adolescence, reach a crescendo. Second believes they could have avoided hardship with shrewder management of their resources, whereas the Patriarch proclaims an inevitability in the ways of nature, and a need for faith and forbearance. The Matriarch, bowed by years of strife between the two men, remains silent, aiding each of them as far as she dares without rousing the ire of the other.

The Patriarch one day happens upon his son sucking blood from the neck of a freshly-slaughtered goat. Though parched, the family has been able to survive the drought on the scant water available up to this time. The father has expressly forbidden the son's multiple proposals

to harvest moisture from their ailing flock. Thus, outraged at the disobedience as much as the desecration, the father pummels his son, then ties the animal's carcass to the young man's prostrate body. Upon awaking, the father informs his son that he must either wear the rotting cadaver in perpetual penitence for his sin, or leave the house forever. The young man needs but a second to decide, and he leaves.

That night, however, Second returns. With the same knife he used to slaughter the goat he slits the Patriarch's neck, watching with satisfaction as his father's life gushes out onto the dirt floor. Second takes possession of both home and land. The Matriarch, bent now spiritually as well as physically, can offer no resistance; she becomes her son's slave. She refuses, however, to partake in the bowls of animal blood that her son provides daily – perhaps instinctively, perhaps in deference to her husband's memory.

Second, sensing further opportunities, travels to the next valley to check on his sister, offering them assistance in exchange for access to their grazing lands. Halting rains have begun by this time, but Valley-Sister's family of many children has suffered deeply; they eagerly accept his offer. At this time Second takes a wife and starts his own family.

Some years later, the rains resumed and the flocks replenished, Second's production has expanded such that he must employ workers to help him. He keeps a storehouse for grain surplus and a curing house for preserving meat and skins. Off in the valley, there is a quarrel in which Valley-Sister's husband protests Second's increasing sequestration of their land. In response, Second compels an indebted neighbor to murder his brother-in-law, cowing Valley-Sister into silence. Second attempts to contact his other sister on the distant plateau, in order to offer a similarly exploitative arrangement, but Plateau-Sister's husband turns him away roughly.

Second-Son's own children grow up. His oldest possesses admirable work ethic, strength and courage, but Second disdains her lack of intellectual ambition. The middle child is somewhat more clever and takes after his father's amorality, but he is born half-blind and is therefore less useful. The youngest child, a girl, matches her father's ingenuity and industriousness, while adding her own notable physical hardiness to the mix. Only her grandmother, the Matriarch, realizes how much the girl favors the original Patriarch-her-grandfather. But this inwardly righteous nature of the little girl is starved; she is spoiled by Second's amorality and grows in his mold, learning nothing of her grandfather or her resemblance to him.

Around this time, the original eldest brother, returns to the area with his own family. During the course of his wandering and truth-seeking, Eldest has founded a religious faith; he returns to his native land accompanied by legions of spiritual followers.

In their reunion, Second's now-habitual suspicion and cynicism overpower any remaining filial sentiment; he suspects Eldest of wanting to seize his rightful property. Eldest's overarching benevolence is negated by the offense he takes at his brother's disrespectful treatment. He cannot defuse Second's suspicion, and he cannot forgive what he sees as a poisonous lifestyle and lack of morality. Their informal quarrel soon escalates into violence, begetting gradually a battle by proxy. For soldiers, Eldest employs his fanatical followers, while Second gathers a mercenary force made up of indebted, serf-like neighbors. The battle is bloody and interminable.

During the bloodshed, Second's children mature and depart. The eldest daughter he marries to a brute from the far-off land near Plateau-Sister. His myopic son he dispatches, with several mercenaries, toward an unexplored forest to the south, whence stories drift of the Patriarch's kin possessing great riches. His youngest daughter, tiring of Second's exacting

control, sets out on her own, ostensibly following Blind-Son to the unexplored territory, for similar reasons. She persuades her grandmother, the Matriarch, to accompany them, with promises of a better life.

Ultimately, Blind-Son finds his riches in the unexplored territory. But he is too unsure of himself to take full advantage; he naively obeys his father's demand to send the wealth back. Youngest Daughter, however, cunningly cuts off communication with her father, in order to develop her own land in the forest, exploiting its riches for herself. Second attempts retribution, but his attention is occupied by the children of Valley-Sister, who have finally united to buck his ruthless exploitation. He and Youngest arrive eventually at a distant reconciliation – indeed, he is inwardly proud of her craftiness.

But the Matriarch is now even worse off with Youngest, her granddaughter, than she was with Second. The girl puts not only her but Blind-Son to work, coercing them through the mercenaries whom she has cleverly bribed. Moreover, she discovers a path through the forest to the far-off plateau where lives her aunt. Youngest reinitiates contact with Plateau-Sister and, unknowingly following in Second's footsteps, makes an exploitative arrangement where her father could not.

Her father, meanwhile, has mellowed with age. He and Eldest forge a tenuous truce after their battle claims Second's wife and Eldest's daughter. He retires, and in his retirement is able to resume his youthful pondering. The more he thinks, the more he understands his father the Patriarch, and the more he regrets the cruelty that has characterized his own life.

Youngest has no time for such sentimentality. The Matriarch, with a desperation fostered by decades of abuse, begins to poison the household's food, sickening her granddaughter and

killing two of Youngest's children. Youngest eventually relents and leaves her grandmother to her own devices on a derelict corner of their land.

Blind-Son she still exploits, though couching it in such terms that the insecure man believes himself to benefit. She hears ill bodings from the plateau where her aunt and sister live, even including a threat from her sister's family over Youngest's territorial ambitions. But overall the rumblings are mere annoyances. Youngest will not hear the appeals of her father which, ironically, are now the same of her grandfather. Indeed, unhappy with the limited amount of land she possesses, she begins exploring territory where her uncle's religious followers have settled, effectively rekindling the long-dormant battle between Second and Eldest.

The story of 'The Tribe' as originally created ends here, without resolution. There have since been other renditions and distillations, but the account presented here is a summary of the original. The tale met with little fanfare upon its release, largely overlooked as neither notably artistic nor particularly relevant. As there was no profitable motive to maintain its publication, and its very vagueness was suspect as potentially subversive to I-Land, it was not digitized when print became outlawed.

Thus the People are perhaps the only group of humans to prevent its obliteration. We do so in recognition of its true significance, which we feel uniquely privileged to have ascertained. For the story of 'The Tribe' is no mere story; it is nothing less than the concise, elegant and definitive history of humankind.

XIII.

Yawning, Srena stretched in bed and blinked her eyes open.

The sun shone through her 12th floor window, the glassy gleam of a neighboring building greeting her sleepy eyes.

While reaching lazily for her I's on the bedstand, she flinched as if brushing against electricity. She raised herself onto an elbow and looked around her bright bedroom.

What's wrong? Something strange. . .

It took her several worried seconds to realize what it was: silence. For the first time in her adult life, her alarm had not wakened her.

She reached up to her ear, curious. But realizing there was nothing to manually adjust she quickly looked to the bedstand. She grabbed her I's, slipping them on with a practiced motion.

The startup I-Land flag gave way to an error message: "No Network Available." The screen remained a pale blue, tinting her entire field of vision; an alien, shattering occurrence.

Puzzled, her alarm mounting, she slowly raised her head. Her clock; she snapped her head around and saw it was already past ten o'clock.

"Oh my. . ."

She jumped out of bed and ran to the shower.

"Cal, water," she probed, hesitating, scared of confirming her fear. Nothing happened.

Is it the power? She tried the bathroom switch. The light came on.

She turned on the water and shivered while waiting for it to warm up. It was spooky being in her bathroom without any sound. The pipes groaned as the hot water began to pass

through them. The hissing of water out of the showerhead seemed particularly loud. She bit her lip and rubbed her hands together, her eyebrows scrunched. She stood there a while, the water running, anxious and puzzling over the strange morning.

Coming back to herself, she disrobed and stepped into the shower. The hot water felt nice. At least her apartment programming was still working. It felt really nice. She relaxed underneath the gentle spray.

She had never noticed how the water was so blue. What would make it that blue? But then she remembered the error screen on her malfunctioning lenses; it was coloring everything she saw. She took the lenses off, then opened the shower door to leave them on the sink. Now the water was transparent against the beige tile backing.

She absent-mindedly picked up the squeeze soap and squirted it onto her sponge, then passed it over her body, working the soap into a lather.

Such a strange day, she thought. I hope they're not upset.

She had already been nervous about her first day under her new boss, Major Wilson. Now, after her lapse, her stomach felt a little upset. She didn't want to start their relationship by displeasing him. He seemed nice, but she didn't feel the same warmth that she had felt with Marc. Somehow it didn't feel like he would be so understanding.

And what of Marc? What have they done with him?

Srena had begun to wonder that many times over the last two days, but she had never let herself continue down that path. It had been easy to distract herself with all of the new orders and requirements involved in her move, in addition to the normal stimuli provided by her screen and her Bard. Now, however, she found herself not only missing him, but without anything to distract her from the thought.

She remembered sitting in Major Wilson's office, one minute excited at the rough sexiness of the Major's treatment, the next surprised and embarrassed at her semi-nudity in front of the common foot-soldiers, then shocked and confused when she realized those soldiers had actually come for her Captain.

She had tried to listen, to understand as much as possible when the Major addressed her personally, but she never paid attention in a conversation between two superiors. She wasn't supposed to and really didn't care to anyway. It bored her. So she had no real idea what the Major and the Captain had been discussing when they were interrupted by the coarse lackeys.

She remembered hearing "interrogation" and "IIU," which she knew were bad things. But she didn't exactly know what they entailed, nor how they applied to the conversation. She wasn't meant to know; those things weren't part of her training.

But if that's where the Captain was, there was definitely something wrong about it. She vaguely knew that it involved suffering. And why should he suffer? He wasn't a bad person. Thinking all this, she frowned.

She remembered the look he had given her as they escorted him out. MoodBar was so unhelpful with the Captain. She wasn't good at deciphering looks herself; that's what MoodBar was for. Consequently, she didn't know what the Captain's look meant, but she thought he had been trying to tell her something. Maybe if she thought about it long enough. . .

Her mind wandered. She looked at her surroundings, felt the water once more. She hoped the Major wasn't too upset. She was too easily distracted without a Bard to keep her on task. The Major had certainly seemed excited to make her his new assistant. He had talked about "Betancourt hoarding the goods."

Remembering her tardiness, Srena hurriedly rinsed the soap off. She then turned off the shower and dried herself. Rushing, without thought, Srena dressed and left the apartment for work. The more she convinced herself that she had already displeased the Major, the more frantic she became.

Ragged, wrecked, and incomprehensibly pained, Betancourt lay. Laying was all there was.

He faded in and out of consciousness, alternately sweating and shivering from fever. He was delirious and raving when awake, and drank fluids when he wasn't retching. But Betancourt defied all expectations of what he ought to feel, for he did not suffer but rejoiced.

He lay and cherished the respite: for his legs and his knees, his hips and back. He lay that entire first morning following his rescue, his conscious mind wholly occupied with the blessed relief of horizontal rest.

He saw Eche, Guaré and Frida at various times as he faded in from the pale netherworld of his unconscious. He saw their smiles and felt their hands on him, gentle hands gingerly touching his shoulders, or head, or face.

He wanted to apologize to them and brag to them, to thank them and beseech them. He had passed through the Closet and held firm. It was true he did not know how much more he could have withstood; but that he did so at all was sacrosanct. It was true that he probably could not have shared anything that would have damned the People or their mission, but he had withheld every last morsel of inconsequential intelligence nonetheless.

At one point, Betancourt was aware of being lifted and moved, down dark passageways, dim yellow lights passing him by, dreamlike. Guaré stood over him, in addition to the faces of other men he didn't know. Someone called for Mohsin. . . maybe him.

Other times, he ventured forth into a pale fog, away from fever and nausea, away from the throbs of his side or the ache in his maimed hands, clipped like the wings of a caged bird.

On such ventures he was conscious of nothing but peace; it was strange that he should be conscious of it, rather than simply asleep and dreamless. He felt as if walking in a white void, pale and opaque, with only his thoughts to accompany him. It was similar in its brightness to the Closet, but everything else was a contrast. It was open as opposed to confined, restful as opposed to grueling. It was equally devoid of sensation, but peaceful for it, as opposed to torturous.

If he searched long enough in the void, he thought he saw something in the distance, a dim something that was shockingly dark against the white fog. There were times when he barely waded in and sensed it close, and other times when he lay and wandered in the bright fog for what seemed like hours without a hint of this formless entity.

This distant darkness aroused both yearning and repulsion. A crushing anxiety accompanied it, a certainty that it would destroy him, that it would be unbearable and break him. There was a deafening screech as well, a noise that seemed to come from all sides of him, a sound so loud and hateful that he felt it would cause his head to burst (reminding him of the alarm from the Closet. And with it, a pressure that felt like it would slowly shear him in two.

Another part of him, however, gravitated inexorably toward it, relaxed and confident, understanding the unspoken attraction and quite welcoming it. His physical self cringed in

horror, bracing itself as his mind wandered toward the entity. His entire body was like a burning cramp that could enjoy relief if only it could unclench.

At one point he did unclench, entering the darkness, though only instantaneously. In that brief moment he experienced the dark pleasure and warm comfort of infinite peace and understanding, a feeling exponentially stronger than that accompanying his physical relaxation.

But just as quickly his body clenched again; it tightened up and doggedly retrieved his mind from that formless entity, casting him back into the white void, the dark shudders of ecstasy a fleeting memory amidst the pale, vague, relaxed meandering, the shadowy spot behind him all but forgotten.

After this occasion, he woke up lucid for the first time since exiting the Closet. A peaceful residue accompanied him, a vague, bodily memory of that momentary darkness. He looked around curiously, saw the stonework of his cell, and was vaguely comforted at the dark, damp, grimy environment. He knew what it meant, that his delirium had transmitted traces of reality.

How curious was his pain. Where was the agony that he remembered? Certainly not here. The pain he now felt – the throbbing in his side and the aching of his fingers – was only a far-off echo of yesterday's memory.

He realized there were people watching him. He focused his attention with effort. He was touched to see the concern on their faces, and still more, curious. Eche, Guaré and Frida stood there.

It seems like there should be someone else. . .

A hand on his forehead: Frida's.

“The fever has broken,” she said, looking at him strangely. Everything was so strange!
“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Mmm, wonderful,” he said.

Frida glanced at Guaré, then off to the side, to Betancourt’s left. Betancourt turned his head lazily, smiling. He found another face over there, looking back at him, smiling.

Was it a mirror? No, this one had black hair and a bloody, swollen face covered in bandages. Was his face swollen? Did he have bandages? He reached up with effort and touched it. It was strange how much effort such a simple movement required. He felt annoyed, like he shouldn’t have to be bothered with such gestures.

Why was he moving his arm? Ah yes, his face. His face was intact. No bandages. And what was the significance of that intact-ness? Yes, the mirror that he was checking. No, this was no mirror. He was looking at a different person from himself.

He saw the other mouth open and heard noises come out. Words. He marveled at them, that this strange pattern of sounds could emit from one being’s mouth and be immediately comprehensible to another being’s ear. Was it not the most amazing phenomenon ever known to humanity?

But wait, he thought, attempting to overcome his confusion. *There is meaning in these words. . . must concentrate. . .*

“My Brother,” he finally understood the man to be saying. It was Mohsin. “How happy I am to see you again.” Betancourt remembered that he loved this man.

He vaguely remembered that overwhelming rush of love he had felt toward this man, the goosebumps, the heat filling his body. He tried to summon it again, but it remained stuck somewhere deep inside him. Still, though, he summoned a smile, a big one, even with sincerity.

“You’ve suffered much,” Mohsin continued.

Betancourt nodded. He tried to move his mouth. “All over. . . all over now,” he finally spoke.

“Yes, Brother, your suffering is over.” Behind Mohsin’s smile he saw something else. Something in his attentive eyes.

Betancourt recalled the basic etiquette of conversation. It was courteous to reciprocate such interrogatives. He asked, “And. . . and you?”

Mohsin laughed, waving a hand over his body.

“Myself physically? I’ve been better. But otherwise I’m overjoyed, Brother, for we’ve succeeded in our immediate mission.”

Succeeded? Mission?

There was a dim memory of something that Mohsin and his people had been going to do. Then he remembered. It was from just last night! Or the last time he was conscious. . . Explosions, gunfire. . . A rescue, ah yes! Betancourt smiled.

“That’s. . . wonderful. . .” he said. “Everything is alright, then?”

Mohsin’s smile faltered and he glanced up at Frida, then back to Betancourt.

“Well, what is ‘alright’ after all?”

He paused, apparently waiting for Betancourt to remember. Betancourt felt slightly sheepish for his clumsiness, and also for not caring too much about it.

Mohsin continued, “We meant to disrupt I-Land, and we have, although apparently not as much as we had hoped. . .” He looked back to Frida.

“Oh?” Betancourt said, trying to be polite.

“Our friends to the south, the ones that have shared with us their technical knowledge. . . they’ve detected a continuation in I-Land’s operations, an alternate facility out-city, adjacent to their nuclear power. It’s not yet fully operational, but it will be soon.”

“Then you’ve failed?”

Betancourt realized his faux pas immediately, even before the pained look on Mohsin’s face. He had referred to the People as “you” and not “we.”

“No,” Mohsin said, smiling graciously. “We have not. We’ve crippled them, decimating the I-PF facilities and personnel. Nor can they easily replicate the research and production of the Illiex technology, and we’ll be able to strike again before they can. They’ll have the network up again – soon, if not now – and satellites with some sentinels, but the end is soon for them, and their imperial designs on Atlantis are crushed.”

He now seemed to speak to the others in the room as much as Betancourt. “It’s true that we perhaps expected more from our final solution. But it’s impossible to deny that we are gaining the upper hand.”

“I see,” Betancourt said, though he did not. It was impossible for him to be concerned about any of these queer goings-on. He wondered if his detachment was observable.

“But enough of us,” Mohsin said.

It seemed to Betancourt that Mohsin recognized the impossibility of his caring. Strangely, it seemed that Mohsin himself shared the detached outlook in certain ways.

“What of you? You’ve suffered terribly.”

Betancourt looked down at his body for the first time. A blanket came up to his chest, but he felt the bandage on his side, sensed that it hurt significantly though he felt little of it. He saw his arms lying atop the blanket, stretching up to the vicinity from which he observed, yet he

could not make himself believe that they belonged to him. Bandages covered the ends of his hands.

“I . . . I have,” he said. Then he thought back to how it had happened to him. He remembered somebody. “Strauss. . . Strauss did this to me.”

“Strauss himself?” Mohsin paused, thinking. “That means he may have been there when. . .” He looked up to Frida.

“He told me the strangest thing,” Betancourt said, as if recalling a dream.

“What was that?” Mohsin asked, turning back to him.

“The last thing I said to him. . . I said, ‘We are not meant for this.’ I meant humans, I think. . .”

He trailed off, looking up to the ceiling as he exercised his memory.

“Yes? What did he say?”

“He laughed at me. . . He laughed like I was a silly child and he said. . . what was it?” He continued to stare at the ceiling. “He said, ‘We are meant for whatever we decide. There is no other meaning.’”

Betancourt paused for a minute, thinking. Then he turned back to Mohsin and asked, “Is that true?”

Mohsin shook his head, water in his eyes.

“No, it’s not true, Brother, not as he meant it. But it is true in another sense: we do have the power to decide. We have the responsibility as well. And we have the responsibility to decide that we are meant for more than I-Land pretends. Remember: praise be to Freedom, that the human spirit may know it.”

The words sounded familiar to Betancourt, but he was tired now. So much talking on such trivial topics. He struggled to keep his eyes open. But he nodded so as not to disappoint Mohsin. He still remembered his love, even if its expression now felt mechanical.

“Yes,” he said, closing his eyes. “I remember now that I disagreed with him.”

“Betancourt, my Brother,” Mohsin said.

Betancourt opened his heavy eyelids. Mohsin smiled at him, his eyes moist and searching, all over Betancourt’s face and head. Betancourt saw the sadness behind Mohsin’s smile.

“I thank you on behalf of the People,” Mohsin said. “And I wish you peace. I love you as a Brother and as a human. May you return to us, strong and ready, when your time comes.”

“Yes,” he said, pleasantly confused by the words. “That will certainly be nice.”

He closed his eyes and drifted off once more into the whiteness. Almost immediately he came across the dark shadow; this time felt no compunction at approaching it. Turning to it, embracing it, he felt the flood of well-being pour over him, the comfort and peace enveloping him like a warm bath. It was the pleasure of Being in all its simplicity. It felt like pure goodness. It was Love. It was Essence.

He realized how mistaken he had been the entire time his body resisted. The dread he had felt at the crushing of his corporeality, the unbearable screeching in his ear, the imaginary pain he must suffer at some theoretical breaking point: all had been an intricate illusion, his self’s attempt to terrify him into the preservation of ego.

Relaxed and unclenched, however, there was nothing but a simple release, followed by a drop into ecstatic Being.

Immediately upon release, everything that existed in the pale fog was forgotten. The pain, the exhaustion, I-Land, the People, his Brothers and Sisters, their trivial discussion. Their love, not the capital-Love of this Essence but the lower-case-love of their corporeal affairs. . . all of it vanished, sublimely forgotten.

Eche watched in shock as Frida lifted her fingers from Betancourt's neck. Even as Frida shook her head, with tears in the corners of her gently closed eyes, Eche couldn't believe it.

She hadn't even gotten to talk to him, to apologize, to thank him, anything. In his last moments he hadn't even remembered she existed. It was as if none of them had existed. She had just stood there, more horrified every second with the wrongness of his demeanor, that he should care so little for something that had meant so much. His blasphemous apathy.

But she hadn't just been horrified, she had been alternately enthralled by the piercing black field of energy that surrounded him, somehow more brilliant in its blackness than anything she had ever seen. Perhaps more beautiful, too.

And then there had been the revelations from Roldán. Spending all her time at Dani's bedside upon their return, she hadn't been privy to the news from the south. It had to be Madden he was talking about. Eche had never met their group, but her reputation exceeded even Dragona's.

It was one devastation on top of another: hearing of their failure from Roldán at the same time that Betancourt's beautiful black Fringe was forever extinguished. She was too shocked

and dismayed to cry. She just felt numb, a similar numbness to that which had worked on her like poison after her family's death.

Nobody said anything for several minutes. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Guaré with his head down. Frida stood beside him in a similar position. Roldán gazed at Betancourt still, his closed fist to his mouth, apparently trying to maintain composure.

Finally he looked to Eche, his unbandaged cheek wet but smiling. "You saw it?" he asked. She nodded, cold.

"That was calmness magnified unimaginably, the welcoming of death. It is rare, and certain. . . manifestations. . . can be disturbing. But we have all been blessed to see it. It is a lesson from the other side, rare indeed."

She looked to Betancourt and saw his closed eyes and peace-filled face. The shadows under his eyes were oddly faded, his face almost more lively now than when he had been just now talking, in his robotic way.

"He was the most human of us all," Roldán said, his gaze lingering. "Without consciously knowing why, without anyone to teach him, he intuited the needs of the human spirit and fought to defend them, completely alone, in circumstances far more daunting than our own. He must be remembered as such: the most human of us all, the most courageous."

Roldán turned his head back to a neutral position, raising his left hand to his neck as he stretched it. He groaned. Frida raised her head at the slight sound, then turned to Guaré and Eche.

"Let us gather helpers for Brother Betancourt," she said. "And allow Mohsin his rest."

She turned toward the door of the small room. They followed her to the exit. At the door, Mohsin called, "Andrea."

She looked back. He had a playful smile.

“It occurs to me that now we truly are twins; I have a matching birthmark to yours.” He gently touched the scrapes covering the right side of his face.

Eche forced herself to smile. It was true, and yesterday would have caused her to blush, but now she didn't care. She turned away.

She barely noticed the dim yellow lights of the passages that had taken her so long to get used to. She walked in a fog, looking at the feet of Frida and Guaré in front of her, trying to assimilate. She had slept a little after the operation but still felt exhausted to her core. Too much had been happening. She wondered apathetically if she might pass out. The thought barely interested her.

“Are you alright, sister?” Frida asked.

Frida had stopped, apparently because Eche herself had stopped. She was looking back on Eche, concerned. Guaré halted a little beyond Frida, and now came back to Eche, offering his arm.

“I . . . don't know,” Eche said. “So much has happened.”

She began walking again, entwining her arm with Guaré's. Frida embraced her about the waist.

“Much has happened, and much will continue to happen,” Frida said. “You must rest. We have time now for that, at least.”

“But time how, if what Roldán says is true?” She looked at Frida intently and saw that it was. “Doesn't that mean we have to act again, right now?”

“No, child, you misunderstand,” she said, smiling softly. Her calm manner reassured Eche, just before her words further agitated her. “Deep down, we hoped that this would be the

end of I-Land,” she continued. “But it was just that: a hope, a dream, fantasy. Not one of the Council imagined it would be so easy.”

“Then we’ve failed. All our work, all our sacrifice, and nothing is changed!”

They continued to walk down the passageway, Eche not knowing their destination. Perhaps they were just walking. After several seconds of thought, Frida spoke.

“I do not fault you for your confusion, Eche, but neither should you fault us. History may appear an endless cycle to you but that’s only partially correct. It would be easy to see the result of our struggles and conclude that nothing is changed. It would be easy to remember similar struggles in the past, similar revolutionary movements – The Coalition in Civil War II, the Arab Spring, 20th century Latin America, pre-Napoleonic France – and conclude that true change is impossible, that entrenched corruption will always persevere, or that it will always be followed by more corruption. But we *are* progressing, just as Mohsin said. You and he are proof of that progress. I have seen the progress myself, through my own practice. Guaré has as well.”

Eche looked to him but he did not return her glance. He just continued his steady pace, a small gleam in his eye.

Frida continued, “It is belief in that progress, that evolution, that makes you, formerly a Midlander, into us, one of the People. We *are* evolving, through development of a higher consciousness, just as our ancestors evolved through development of tools, or through the miracle of language. If you consider those beliefs for even a moment, you cannot easily doubt.”

The mere reminder of the People’s tenets replenished her confidence somewhat. She *had* considered all of this many times in the past, and she *had* already decided it made sense. But doubt remained in the face of these present complications.

“But if we’re so close, and we’re progressing, don’t we have to keep pressing now, now that they’re weakened? Don’t we have to finish them off?”

“Come, Eche,” she responded kindly. “Even in your few years of awareness you know the level of planning invested into these operations. We have gravely wounded I-Land and interrupted – perhaps permanently – their intended annexation of Atlantis. Even if you only knew it to be the months of your involvement and not the years it actually took, could you honestly expect us to reflexively invent something now? Would your prudence allow it?”

Eche blushed.

“Don’t worry, sister,” Frida said.

She gathered herself, saying, “Then what? We do nothing? We let them rebuild?” Eche spoke slowly, thinking as she went. “I recognize the . . . progress that we’re undergoing, on an intellectual and spiritual level. But that progress is purely individual. At most it’s only a small group of us. How much can we truly evolve when this monolith stands in our way? It stops the progress of all humanity.”

“Take care, child, for you begin to echo the sentiments of your wounded Sister. Would you then have total annihilation for them, for those of this ‘monolith’? If so, why did you bother stopping her at all?”

Frida gave Eche a moment to consider.

“No, you already decided for yourself on the immorality of such destruction. It’s one thing to defend ourselves from a proximate threat, but it’s quite another to take preemptive measures against a theoretical one. Such fearful thought leads to the development of a monolith like I-Land in the first place.”

Eche walked and listened. She knew not how to respond, yet she felt something in her rebelling at the line of thought.

Frida must have sensed it, for she continued, “You consider I-Land to be permanent, but just three times your life-span has provided me a perspective which leaves me certain to the contrary. Child, if you had seen all of the ways in which this world has changed, even since your birth, you would stand in awe. And you would be as grateful as I at the turn of our present events, for we have proven beyond a doubt that I-Land is fallible.”

They continued walking. The hallway seemed interminable, but Eche didn't mind. She felt at ease with Frida. She wished for nothing more than to hear her talk.

“Allow me to repeat to you a lesson,” Frida continued after a few moments of silence. “It is the first history lesson that I give all of my students. It's a lesson on tumbleweeds.”

Eche looked at her with knitted brow.

“And that is the same look I get from my students when I mention it, but no matter.” She waved it off with her hand as she briefly laughed through her nose.

“History, my Eche, is like a tumbleweed, an old plant that you haven't seen, one that is native to the western parts of this continent. Its seed pods are a big jumble of parts, larger than a watermelon, and they move like this,” she paused to make circles in the air with her finger while she moved her arm from one side to the other. “Thus they move as they bound from place to place, propelled by wind. Hence the name ‘tumble.’”

“Well, history is like this movement. It does go in circles, which you have undoubtedly sensed, and correctly so. But that is not all, for it also moves laterally. It is a vector – it has a defined direction. So while the circles are easy to detect – the patterns, the recurring wars, the despots, the empires. . . the recurring errors and failures – it's often quite natural to ignore the

overall direction in which the tumbling circles are traveling. It's the bouncing, jostling, flipping violence of the cycles that calls one's attention."

Frida continued, "We're approaching the end of a cycle now. The devolution of our once proud country into five isolated provinces should be evidence enough, and that same pattern has been repeated worldwide. The collapse of the Roman Empire is now taking place on a global scale, and it's due primarily to humans refusing to take responsibility for themselves. They are in essence attempting to abdicate their own humanity, the folly of institutionalized infantilism.

"But on a smaller scale, what we are seeing with I-Land is what always happens when old ways die out and new ways replace them. The old ways are inherently entrenched, and can only be altered with immense effort. When one attempts to remove them, there is incredible resistance, and when one begins to succeed there is a final thrashing about that must take place, as with any wounded animal that has little hope of escape.

"Thus it is with traditions as well. Or we can compare it to fire, if you prefer: like the violent sputtering of a flame under the first drops of a forthcoming flood certain to douse it. That is why life now is so difficult for us, and that is why it could become more difficult before it gets better. But that it will get better is hardly up for debate."

Frida, who had been looking straight ahead as they walked, lost in her visions of history and drama, now looked at Eche as she finished.

"You tell all of that to your students?" Eche asked.

"That last piece I tailored for you, but they quite enjoy the tumbleweed analogy."

She nodded. "It's good."

"But something weighs upon you still."

Eche didn't immediately respond, thinking of how to phrase it. She was distracted by the echoes of their footsteps in the dark passage.

Finally, she said, "I can't help thinking that if our work is not yet done, then it's quite discouraging – demoralizing – that Roldán cannot now lead us."

Frida stopped and consequently stopped Eche as well. She looked at Eche in sincere surprise. "You continue to misunderstand," she said, now looking disappointed. "It's to be expected I suppose; you're so young, and still new to us."

Eche, confused, said, "But how can he lead if he can't walk?"

Frida started again, turning forward and looking down the passage. Eche watched her face in skeptical confusion, now even more puzzled to see the beginnings of a smile.

"You must begin to better trust your instincts, my Eche," Frida said finally, looking to her out of the corner of her eye.

"I don't. . ."

"No, I know it is not fair to expect so much of you immediately, and especially after undergoing such stress, so I'll explain. But I preface it thusly: starting now, you must cultivate more confidence in your abilities, the same confidence that Mohsin has. Confusion must become a thing of the past for you; it must be replaced by quiet certainty. Like his."

"You're tormenting me."

"And I'll stop," she said, barely stifling laughter. "Regarding your question on Mohsin's role, it so happens that we have an opening on the Council for just such an esteemed member of the People. So he will certainly not stop leading us, thus you need not worry on that account."

Eche understood. "Sir Jones?"

“I came upon him communicating secretly with Dani during the final operation. I partially overheard his conversation and, combined with your account, it was the evidence we needed to confirm our strong suspicions and banish him permanently.”

“Banishment?” she asked, faltering. “From the Council or from the People?”

“From both. It may sound cruel to you, and we’ll certainly welcome your thoughts on the matter in the future, but it’s the most just punishment we have yet ascertained. We must not allow him to infect the People with his bitter, I-Land-like animosity. Yet he has done much for us in the past, and execution would wrongly deny those contributions.

Eche didn’t know what to think and didn’t say anything.

After a few moments Frida reminded her, “That comforts you then, about Mohsin?”

Eche shook her head twice, first to clear it and revive her stream of thought, and then in disagreement.

“No offense,” Eche said after gathering her thoughts, “But leading from the Council is not the same as leading in the field.”

“But what would you have him do? Roll about in a wheelchair, gun in lap?”

“That’s precisely it,” Eche said, getting frustrated. “He can’t do it and we need him to. I feel we’re lost without him.”

Frida stopped once more, again stopping Eche with her. “Unfortunately, you’re not the only one who feels that way.”

She looked to Guaré. Eche turned in time to see him lower his eyes to the side.

“But that’s where my preface comes into play,” she continued, fully smiling now. “Did you not hear me say that you must cultivate the same confidence as Mohsin? Do you still not comprehend my meaning?”

She gazed at Eche, lingering. Perhaps in response to that gaze, or perhaps because only then did she begin to fully understand, Eche suddenly perceived the creeping sensation she had felt with Roldán just yesterday.

It was that same feeling of intolerable and unsustainable bodily discomfort, a discomfort that cannot continue and must either cease immediately or lead to total destruction. It had actually led to a kind of destruction for her the previous day, to her complete breakdown and rebirth.

“My goodness, child,” Frida continued, shaking her head in amused disbelief, eyes shining as Eche looked back at her alarmed. “Have you not yet realized that you are years younger than Mohsin was when he first developed his gift? Do you not see that you stand to be even more powerful than he? Who do *you* think will be our leader now?”

Eche felt a chill run up her back and down her arms. The intolerable feeling rapidly escalated, relentlessly building to a seeming impasse, a bottleneck where something had to cede.

The crescendo spilled into an unexpected euphoria. Frida’s Fringe pulsed into view, and Eche stared at it wide-eyed. It partially illuminated the hall where they stood, drowning out the yellow light in their immediate vicinity. It was a brilliant blue, as blue as Roldán’s had been. It was filled with love for her. Tentatively, Eche turned to Guaré and saw the same blue glow, the same love not only around him but in his eyes. He smiled to her.

“Me?” she said, to no one in particular.

“Eche, my child, it has *always* been you. It was just a matter of time. Just like history, and progress, and evolution are inevitable, *you too* were inevitable. . . Now, you understand?”

Frida began walking again, pulling Eche behind her, dazed.

“But you must rest, for we have much to discuss when you are able and ready.”

Eche heard her only superficially. She understood but still didn't fully comprehend. They continued, Frida talking, almost prattling.

“Yes, so many things to decide, and you will be part of the decision. . . Remember your confidence and your instincts, you must trust them. . . Guaré will of course be there to guide you. Who better than your Brother in arms and in spirit?”

Eche looked to him and he smiled at her, patting the hand which rested forgotten on his arm. Their Fringes hovered around them, indeed lighting Eche's way down the passage, a brilliant blue that faded to green and black at the edges, touches of calmness and assurance.

Still Frida spoke. “And of course Mohsin and myself, we shall guide you too. . . We'll be patient but firm. . . You will have to push yourself. . .”

Finally, they slowed as they approached a door. Guaré opened it and turned the light on inside. Frida guided Eche into the room and sat her down on a cot, still talking to her.

“We already have an offer from Madden's people to join them. . . We have to decide if we want to stay here or join forces. . . not as simple a decision as it might seem – the road to Charlotte is uncomfortably close to Appalachia. . . And then there is another group that they speak of, further away, but to the south, on a less dangerous road. . . We have yet to contact them directly, but Madden assures us they're sincere. . . Freedom-fighting from Jekyll Island does have a pleasant irony. . . But that's quite enough for now. You must rest.”

She gently laid Eche back on the cot and went to the door. Switching the light off, she turned around and stood in the door with Guaré, watching her. Their blue Fringes imparted a ghostly shadow as the yellow lights lit their backs.

And all at once Eche understood what the glow meant. It wasn't love, it was too grand to be explained that way, and too simple, both of them at the same time. It was more than that and

less; it was their essence, its outer layers peeled back, glowing in its purest form. And this color of essence, the purest most beautiful feeling, was the same color for everyone, because everyone's essence was the same, coming from the same source. It wasn't love, and it wasn't just essence. It was the fountain of every living thing. It was God incarnate, broken into fragments, inhabiting each of them. It was the People's philosophy come to life.

"Rest well, Dear Leader," Frida said. Guaré reached up and tipped his hat to Eche. They closed the door.

Eche lay in bed, staring up into the blackness. She felt a warm tingling throughout her body, and she slowly began to smile to herself. She stretched her hands above her and was amazed to see a glow encompassing them. Her own Fringe, blue like theirs.

END