

## ***Jacob's Continuation***

[Part of the Continuation Archival Project]

e1.1

### **Chapter One**

Jumbo has no idea that he is being watched until the realization comes to him with certainty. There is no prickling of hair or sense of danger to indicate spooky foreknowledge. It's like being hit with a brick.

He recognizes her.

No, that isn't quite it. He's only seen video of her from a distance, but the build of her body looks right. Regardless of such details, he knows who she has to be, like knowing where the last piece of a puzzle must fit.

When he sees her, Jumbo stops with his mouth open and fork half way to it. The babble of conversation and clink of silverware in the shaded courtyard seem only to isolate him from the other customers. Men and women in expensive dress, the best masks, eating their lunches but not enjoying them. Imported food and wine, smokes, and designer drugs are ordinary opulence.

Jumbo isn't like any of them. He only comes for the Catch of the Day. Today it is a rarity: a Red Snapper caught off the coast only hours ago. Real fish, fresh as sunshine, served with a simple butter sauce and lemon, and garnished with fresh parsley. Garlic mashed potatoes and crisp almond-encrusted green beans flank the fish. A local Chardonnay in a twisted wine flute presses yellow bubbles against the glass.

She's staring at him. He can see a glint of reflection in her mask optics. The dark eyes of the cameras don't waver. The mask covers only her upper face, but it's not a dressy model. In fact, it's ugly.

Jumbo's mouth goes dry. He finishes the bite, but the taste has gone out of it. He leaves the fork on the plate and points his own cameras straight at the woman. Before he swallows, he has her whole public history streaming in a window with a search bot looking for patterns.

She sits alone at a small round table with her arms folded. She sits so still, touching neither the glass of premium water nor the turkey Reuben on rye, that she assumes the character of a cobra raised to strike.

*I should call Meg.*

But the idea of yelling for help on what is--admittedly--only a feeling, is galling. Anyone but Meg. Meg the bit-bitch artificial intelligence so-called supervisor who is owned by MOM, who leaks arrogance through her IO ports the way guilty men sweat.

*No, not Meg.*

The deluge of information about the woman shows nothing unusual. Lastfour 9277, she calls herself Livia. She is married with two kids, lives in the City and works as a technical assistant to one of the larger retailers. There is no indication of a predatory or threatening personality.

The last warmth of the wine fades, and Jumbo's natural generosity toward the universe with it.

The woman still hasn't moved.

*She wants me to know. She wants me to be afraid.*

If this is so, if it's not just his own guilt conjuring ghosts, then the public biography must either be stolen or be a fake. But that fits too, because the missing piece of the puzzle is a Quasi-human woman named Nova. And Nova is very, very good at network spoofery. She and her partner Shanghai brought the City to a halt with a desperate attempt to get Shanghai out of the DaiHai building before the MOM robots could get to her. A desperate and expensive attempt that failed.

And Jumbo was the one who discovered them to begin with. All the arrows point back to him, and the idea that Nova is still running around somewhere makes his skin crawl.

Jumbo's mood sours further. This is his private place to eat alone, surrounded by careless money and indifferent palates. He knows the owner and the chef. He has his own table.

*Damn Dawkins to day-old gruel.*

He took the MOM money for finding Shanghai like a lastlegs takes a handout. MOM sent a squad of mechanical monsters in to get her, but she cut three of them down and then jumped out the damned window on the floor with a number like a sideways infinity. That beautifully engineered body smashed crooked and leaking genetic secrets on the pavement.

*Such a vorking shame.*

Sometimes Jumbo can taste the shame when he chews. Shellfish from the coast especially bring it out. That slight bitterness of boiled shrimp drizzled with lime juice that pops when his teeth sever the flesh. That's the taste of shame. The taste of blood at the pink center of a warm fillet topped with ginger shavings. Shame. The peppers he likes

so much--those little red arrowheads of spice that conjure tears when he rends their flesh with his teeth and releases their fire. Those drops at the corners of his eyes are shame too.

It becomes invisible for a while, working its way through his body to his liver. There it is dealt with by the same enzymes that allowed a million other murderers to go on living. The poison is drawn efficiently by the evolved mechanisms of cruelty that are the birthright of men. But the residual must go somewhere. And so the shame is turned gradually into deposits of guilt that the body harbors in out-of-the-way places. Mostly at the front of his skull, where it causes headaches.

*Am I inventing Nova? Am I demanding a confrontation with her?*

He stares at the untouched rye growing stale on the woman's plate ten meters away. There's no reason to stare. Any frame can be frozen and reviewed later. Any angle from any camera on a mask or the pylons all over the city can tell the visual tale on demand. A fixed gaze is an atavistic signal of aggression.

Jumbo sends her a message.

"I get the feeling you're staring at me," is all it says. He adds a smile emotag to turn it into a creepy flirt.

Her arms uncross. She reaches under her table like a snake striking.

Jumbo feels time lurch, slowing to a crawl, his heart thumping loud enough to hear over the rushing of blood in his ears. He tries to push himself back from the table, but the damned aluminum legs of the chair stick on the damned pavement and he tips. His weight, all that guilt added onto his girth, twist the frame, grinding feet against the concrete creating an elemental scream. His mouth becomes an Oh to fill his lungs before Livia/Nova can point the ugly hole of a weapon at him. He can see it in his mind's eye already, the final zero that tallies a life's sum.

The woman sets a cardboard box on the table. She removes the lid and places it neatly under the box, then removes a pair of shoes. Red heels, suitable for a party or stylish murder.

Jumbo finally makes it to his feet, his chest heaving. The Chardonnay with all the shame removed is running liquid and warm down his legs.

## **Chapter Two**

When the afternoon heat reaches its zenith of unbearable discomfort, Jumbo switches on his old electric fan and sits near the open door. He's naked except for a towel thrown across his waist as a gesture of respect for his guest. He smells of soap.

“Hah!” Comes the latest explosion from the modest balcony beyond the door.

“Another one?” Jumbo asks. It’s a routine.

“Nutha vugga bugga,” comes the reply, and with it a fat green caterpillar arrives via a parabolic arc to land near his feet.

“How do they get that big?” Jumbo asks. This time he’s actually concerned. If this keeps up there will be no tomatoes. And tomatoes were put on the green Earth to make Jumbo happy.

A white-headed man with spindly limbs and an unmasked face--sun-beaten, brown, and crinkled--silhouettes himself in the door. He sets a watering can inside and cracks a smile that looks like an old cemetery.

“Canna fillit?”

Jumbo sighs with the fatigue of one truly at rest, who must now stir for a profane tedium.

“Now?”

“Less yah won maters.”

*Unless you want tomatoes?* Jumbo resists the temptation to challenge the logic of the thing. It’s too damned hot for math, and he knows he will lose the contest anyway.

“Okay, Gar.” It’s also too hot to waste syllables on “gardener,” and nobody does it even in winter. Anyway, he’s a man meant for abbreviation, the gardener is.

Afterwards, when the precious fruits of summer have been pampered and the Marigolds watered, Gar joins Jumbo for the customary reward--a glass of rum. Gar won’t drink wine or beer or whisky or gin, but he adores the distilled essence of sugar cane.

“So how do they look?” Jumbo asks.

“Gud,” Gar says.

It’s the only serious business to be conducted in conversation. A good crop of tomatoes is an uncommon treasure. Nothing taken from the earth is as complex or rich with culinary potential as the red fruit. Even the distinct scent of the vines brings Jumbo close to ecstasy. Even at the end of the season, Gar’s wife can turn the green ones into a fried delicacy.

“Gud,” Jumbo says, satisfied.

Jumbo has found that even though most of the time he can't understand his talented friend, it doesn't matter. He can carry on most any conversation with Gar, perfectly comfortable that the miscommunication is nearly mutual.

They click the glass tumblers together and drink rum from them until the liquid burns deeply and gud.

"How's the wife?" Jumbo asks when the glow reaches his elbows. He makes a sign of flowing hair to make the meaning clear, although in fact Gar's wife is nearly as bald as Jumbo himself.

"Fine-yah-fine," Gar says, nodding. He proceeds to deliver a lecture in his peculiar language that Jumbo has heard many times in different permutations. Each time he sorts out a bit more meaning. The theme is always the importance of a good woman, which Gar's wife appears to be. But it's also an exposition with a point that Gar makes now and again by fastening his dark eyes on Jumbo's and sloshing his glass toward him. Jumbo is hearing advice about how he needs a good woman too, that much he is sure of. There's a good bit about the importance of cooking ability and a pretty face. It's possible that Gar subscribes to a theory that women inherit the best features from their fathers, but this is not certain.

At the conclusion, Gar asks the inevitable question.

Jumbo blows air through his lips and shrugs.

"Companions make you happy in the short term. Unhappy in the long term." Jumbo uses his hands and facial expressions to try to make it clear.

Gar waves him off and produces mild profanity, featuring "vugga wimin" in presumed sympathy to Jumbo's plight.

The tomato worm begins to show signs of life on the floor.

Gar produces an ancient hand-made smoking pipe and packs it with coarse tobacco. This is the intermission, when everything has been done that needs to be done, and everything that needs to be said has been said.

Jumbo adjusts the aim of the fan and turns it down to a lower setting.

The flick and quick sibilance of a match lighting, flame crackling on the dry leaf, puff-puff-puff kindling of new life: these are a comfortable tradition. The sweet smell of the Carolina blend's blue smoke fills the air.

"Ree gud," Gar says. He offers the pipe to Jumbo, who declines as always.

Jumbo stands and fastens the towel around his waist. He retrieves a pitcher of cold water and a few precious ice cubes from his small refrigerator. He pours two glasses half full. His gaze falls on the sink, where his pants are soaking.

“I pissed myself today,” Jumbo tells Gar, and hands him a glass.

Gar nods as if he understands.

“I was so scared of dying that I pissed right down my legs at lunch.”

Gar swivels his head to look at the sink for himself, looks back at Jumbo. He reaches out to tap glass in a salute to incontinence.

“Ever had a ghost chase you?” Jumbo asks. “A spirit? Haunt?”

Gar scratches at his chin for a moment, and then tells Jumbo a long story. It comes in drips and sips, and a rum refill halfway through. Jumbo can make no sense of it whatever, but the telling is a pleasure of cadence and tone. And feeling. Gar’s eyes gleam wide at the end and his hand shakes when he tips the bottle to refill Jumbo’s tumbler again.

The mechanical buzz of the fan fills the room for a while as they give mute tribute to the spectral forces that inflict random terror on men. Gar finishes his pipe and knocks the ash in a metal can that Jumbo leaves out for that purpose.

The green worm on the floor begins to show purpose in life again. Gar notices and plucks it up with dirty fingers that look like roots. He holds the caterpillar to the light and then drops it head first into mouth of the bottle of rum.

Jumbo laughs.

“What the hell, Gar?”

Gar explains, gesticulating in a way that resembles a plane landing.

Jumbo nods and imagines that it somehow makes sense, but the alcohol limits his imagination too much.

Gar stands and scratches his ass, then cranes his neck on the search for something. He’s not satisfied with Jumbo’s helpful queries in response, and begins mucking about in the cabinets. Subsequent to a satisfied grunt he produces two shot glasses with the MOM logo etched on them. He hands one to Jumbo and fills it with rum. Then he fills his own.

The caterpillar has sunk to the bottom, but from its thrashing about one would think it must have a plan for escape.

Suddenly Jumbo understands. It's a game of eeny-meeny-miney-*worm*, and whoever gets the plump green pest also gets protection from the things that go bump in the afternoon. It's a perfectly reasonable explanation of how the universe works, and Gar is some kind of cosmic savant.

So they drink to ward themselves from ghosts, refilling the shot glasses until they reach the prize at the bottom.

Evidence contrary to this fine theory arrives the following morning.

### Chapter Three

Jumbo sits perched on his familiar bar stool across from the DaiHai building. His head pounds in time with his pulse, and the bitter taste of caterpillar persists in the spaces between his teeth.

He curses the version of himself that lived the previous day.

*How is it that someone so like me could screw me over so thoroughly? Nothing disproves the myth of the brotherhood of man like a hangover.*

It's his daily habit to rise early with the sun in order to think and write. But today the sun didn't wait for him, and his head is in no condition for thinking. It goes on throbbing. Even his throat aches in time with it. The idea of having a meeting with Meg is unthinkable. But it is an idea that must become thinkable before ten o'clock.

He sips from his first espresso, but the taste is off. This is his first hangover in many years, and he remembers why they are to be avoided: the poison in his veins sucks every bit of pleasure from life. And what point is there to life except pleasure?

Jumbo closes his eyes and mutes the sound to his mask earbuds except for a low hiss of pink noise. He urges the blessed caffeine to revive him. By and by it does, and he begins to believe that life might be worth living again.

Virginae--Jumbo's usual server at this cafe--brings him his usual custom order of scrambled eggs spiced with a pinch of smoked paprika, topped with little circles of green onion and finely diced green Serrano chilis. But today green is not a color to be reminded of, nor can his stomach tolerate insults of this magnitude.

He can't just wave the food away. Because he didn't actually order it, Virginae will have to absorb the cost, and it would be a big part of her daily earnings.

To temporize, he reads from his notebook while the food ages. The scrawl there was made with an old-fashioned pencil on old-fashioned paper. The sensation of the graphite leaving its trail is something he savors most days, the subtle sound and touch of living. It's wrong to be reading it through the lens of his mask, but the taboo against naked faces in public leaves no choice. His script is neat and flowing:

*The irony eludes the masses. They worry about Death, but not about Life. How can one be afraid to die without also being afraid not to live? I do not believe most of them to be really living at all, but merely playing roles that have become comfortable. They breathe but do not smell, they eat but do not taste, they touch but have no feeling. Their sight denies them beauty.*

What Jumbo regrets most about his panic attack yesterday is not that he peed down his leg, but that the experience ruined a good meal. The Red Snapper deserved better than that. He let everyone down: the fish, the chef, and himself.

Now he's letting perfectly good scrambled eggs go to waste. The first tendrils of caffeine reach his brain and he feels a slight twinge of actual hunger.

Jumbo fiddles with the filters on his mask video, and manages to change everything green into red. Red is the color of love and the color of death, and it's not the color of tomato worms.

The first bite is an explosion of capsicum, lighting up his tongue with the heat of the peppers. He usually has *café au lait* with the eggs, and the fat of the milk takes the edge off the burn. Today he just lets his eyes water as punishment for the debauch.

He can only finish half the serving before putting the fork to rest. His mouth and esophagus are aflame, but he's wide awake too, and becoming functional again.

He pushes the plate away. The eggs deserve better. The thought leads to more a troublesome one that won't be pushed away as easily.

*Shanghai deserved better too.*

Whatever her flaws, the Quasi surely lived to the last moment. What would it be like to feel the wind accelerate against your body, weightless, as the whole planet swerved in order to smash you?

Jumbo points his mask at the window on the eighth floor that Shanghai shattered in order to leap. With his altered colors scheme, the copper decorations on the building look like swirls and streaks of blood marking the stone. Jumbo quickly switches his video back to default RGB settings.

The building no longer shows any sign of the drama. He retrieves the video from that day and watches it again. Shanghai spins in the air as the windows rush up past her. He freezes time there and zooms to see her grainy and flushed figure, arms frozen in mid-wheel.

Jumbo doesn't feel sympathy; he feels envious that anyone could be so alive that they could jump out of a window.

Virginae stops by to collect the remains of breakfast. She wears an old generation mask, and her arms are tan from working outside. Glossed lips smile with pretended friendliness.

Jumbo watches her mouth move, asking if he needs anything. Sometimes, before he's had his coffee, he wants her more than anything in the world. But it's just the caffeine crash, and as soon as the hot liquid in the cup makes its way into his veins, the moment of desperation passes. Then he's just as lonely and just as desperate for the softness of a kind word, but more able to deny such passions in order to avoid the pain that soon follows. Today he's after something different.

"There's more breeze on the other side," she says, flicking 'there' and 'the' out with the tip of her tongue. She never uses the formal throat mike. None of the wait staff does. More intimacy means more tips.

A drop of sweat finds an efficient path down Jumbo's nose, then takes a shortcut and falls to the table. The City's morning smells are cooking down to a sticky residue. He knows he must already have a crown of sweat decorating his unadorned scalp.

"Were you working when she jumped?" Jumbo asks vocally.

Virginae looks over at the DaiHai building.

"Want to see my video?" she asks.

"No. Tell me instead."

"I'll get in trouble if I stay," she says.

"I'll order a bottle of wine."

It's the last thing he wants to think about right now. An impulse.

Virginae's eyebrows lift over the top of the mask. A bigger check means a bigger tip.

"You know," she says. "I heard the window. Not when it broke. When it hit the ground out there. Wow."

“How did it make you feel?”

“I was scared. Who knew what was happening?”

“No,” Jumbo says, “I mean when she fell. When she busted up against the concrete. How did that feel?”

Virginae works her mouth crooked and bites the side of her bottom lip. She shrugs. “I didn’t know her. I mean, it was horrible. But I didn’t know her. She...she was a Quasi, right?”

Jumbo takes a sip of the espresso, but finds only a few drops left.

“She was just a Quasi,” he says with a bitter mouth.

Virginae smiles again.

She smiles wider when he sends her his wine selection. It’s a new red grape that grows in the mountains to the west, engineered for hardiness and low acidity. It should find a good companion in the rich mushroom soup Jumbo will make for dinner.

He pays the check and asks the bartender to keep his bottle cool until he’s ready to pick it up. He gathers up his notebook, wipes his mouth, and then steps down off the stool, turning to leave.

There’s a woman sitting in the shade of the wall watching him with her arms crossed.

His heart lurches, then steadies. It’s not the same woman. This one is broader in the shoulders, and the shape of her chin is different. She seems older too.

“What are you doing?” he sends to her by private message. It’s rude, but he’s irritated.

She keeps her cameras on him for a moment, then reaches under her table.

A thrill races up Jumbo’s core. He’s no longer worried about being gunned down in the courtyard, but this cannot be coincidence.

The woman produces a handbag and searches inside, finally coming up with lipstick. Jumbo walks to her table, yanks out the opposite chair, and sits facing her. She starts, and her mouth sags.

“I don’t know what your game is,” Jumbo says through the throat mike on a private channel, “but I work for MOM. You’re playing with fire. Tell the person who sent you that if they want to send a message--”

The woman covers her mouth. Her fingers flutter.

“--then they should deliver it in person. Understand?”

Jumbo retrieves the woman’s public record. Once again, there’s nothing unusual about it. But now he has two of them. His mind is already working the angles. She calls herself Philly, is recently re-married with a kid from the first marriage.

She nods.

“I don’t think you do understand. Here’s a fun fact, Lastfour. Anybody can be classified a Quasi by tweaking the genetic screen a little here or there. Anybody! I can have you and your family disappeared. Exiled. Whatever I want.”

Jumbo reins in his anger. The point has been made.

Philly’s throat is working, probably trying to put together a cogent reply.

“All right,” Jumbo says, softening his tone, “You probably don’t even know what’s going on. I’m not going to do any of those terrible things. Forgive my anger.”

She nods furiously. She swipes a tear from under her mask.

“But you have to meet me half way,” he says. The idea is clear to him now. It’s simultaneously repulsive and beautiful, like he’s about to hit her with a jeweled mace.

“What? What do I--” she breaks off.

“You’ll meet me this evening at the address I’m going to send you. We’ll have a meal and talk. That’s it.”

The silence communicates like no amount of speech could. She’s researching Jumbo’s public data, and knows that he’s doing the same. It’s a power equation, and they both know the balance of inequality.

“I’m married,” she says. “I can’t--”

“Tell him it’s official business. If you prefer, we can do it in the basement of the MOM building.”

She shakes a violent NO.

“Okay, then. It’s our first date. Wear something nice.”

As he walks out into the sun on the DaiHai plaza, Jumbo feels the shame of it gumming up his mouth and beginning to sour his stomach. More poison to flow through the arteries. His mind goes through familiar turmoil, mixing up reason and emotion in a brawl until there’s a new detente. The forces always reach stability in the same place, a familiar mantra by now.

*I did what I did because that’s what I had to do.*

It feels better when he says it to himself three times. At least shame tastes better than worms.

## **Chapter Four**

The DaiHai building is air-conditioned, which is a rarity. It’s one of the two reasons Jumbo wants to meet in person rather than virtually. The other reason is a secret.

He stands in the lobby while the security bots inspect him. His feet match the outlines on the floor and his arms are spread. Everyone is twitchy after the Quasi Incident, as it’s called around here.

Jumbo is six feet tall, stocky but unable to become truly fat on his income, bald, and sweaty. Despite the absorbent pads inside his mask, it’s already uncomfortable, and it’s not even noon yet.

But the cool dry air feels like a miracle. He’s willing to believe in God, and grant sainthood to the engineers who run the building’s air handlers. A god of winter air makes much more sense than a sun god anyway. Simple supply and demand.

“Pass,” is the approving message that comes with a harsh sound, telling him to enter the building proper into the even colder sanctum beyond. He wonders what the temperature is in the holiest-of-holies, where massive computing machinery hosts artificial intelligence, PDAs who can’t afford the premium cost of The Company. God of winter, indeed. They probably have to check for icicles.

The caffeine and pleasant climate improve his mood. His anticipation builds.

“You’re late,” Meg says in her VOX-generated voice. It’s somewhere between a shriek and a howl. Jumbo is positive that she tunes it based on his reactions in order to cause the most intense pain.

“I’ll be there in twelve seconds,” Jumbo says. The false precision is to annoy her.

“This is why you lost your position, Lastfour 0747. You are not a professional.”

“Why am I still working for you if I got fired? By the way, you’re paying me more as a consultant than I made as an employee. So thanks, Meg.”

What’s really galling is that it was Meg that *saved* him from losing all his MOM work. He’s sure it was her that convinced the Director that Jumbo’s talent in sifting data was irreplaceable.

The elevator takes him to the third floor, and a guide path is illuminated on his mask display. It leads him to the meeting room, closer the business of spilling more blood.

The meeting room is unreasonably lush. Plants spring from every corner, and the woody remains of their distant relatives cover the walls in panels of dark grain. The table itself is covered in slate that embeds even older ancestors--a turned sea leaf here and bit of shell there, white mementos of deep time and long-buried antagonisms etched against the slick blackness of deep time.

Jumbo could sleep in the chair. It fits his every curve, distributing gravity’s coarseness so that it is hardly noticeable.

The man who sits across from him has a brown mustache just visible under his utilitarian gray mask. The combination looks like a weird jellyfish. There’s a logo attached to the top of the mask. A top security firm.

Lavrentiy sits with his fingertips pressed together. He’s a small man, and constantly moving. Even now his chair swivels left, then right, back and forth, leaking energy. Perhaps he will burst into flame otherwise and cause problems for the air conditioner.

Jumbo is envious of Lavrentiy’s courage. The man went into the Outs to track down Shanghai’s partner. He was accompanied only by two mechanical units and his own wits. He didn’t find Nova in person, but he brought back DNA and some interesting things she left behind.

Jumbo conferences with him and Meg, who appears virtually in a depressingly gray outfit, almost the same color as her avatar’s skin. The only color is the red that flecks her irises. Avatars don’t wear masks. That would be silly.

Meg has a formal agenda, of course. She sends it highest priority. Everything with her is a priority. Even her priorities have priorities.

The first item is Findings.

“We are reasonably certain,” Lavrentiy says in a cadence from Ukraine, “that Shanghai’s partner--Nova--has gone south. Probably she is beyond our reach. We did recover some of her belongings. I believe these are in your possession for analysis.”

“We have a handgun and a mask. And DNA.” Meg says. “The DNA shows hundreds of modifications. These are not the same as the Shanghai subject. You will recall that the latter was engineered for close combat. Nova was built for something else, although we cannot guess what that is. Yet.”

“Are you really sure she’s not in the City?” Jumbo asks. He means Nova. Shanghai’s corpse is in the MOM morgue. It horrified him when he saw the mangled form displayed like a side of beef, with no dignity at all. Horrified and angry and sad and guilty all at once.

Lavrentiy sends up a flag to speak.

“I cannot be sure. We see increased activity on Continuation boards,” he says. “There is the possibility that Nova found a way in and is being hidden. But that’s not my expertise.”

“Jumbo is our expert. He would know.” Meg says. The emotags drip contempt.

Jumbo sweats despite the air conditioning. In fact, he does have a suspicion, but it’s not one that he wants Meg to know about. And Meg has spent a lot of time with him, watching what he does, what he says, his heart rate, breathing, and any number of other indicators of behavior. She may be able to spot a lie.

“If you send me your data, I’ll take a look,” he says. He reviews the emotags in the queue before letting the VOX send it.

“On its way,” Lavrentiy says. “Have you gotten anything out of interrogation?”

“That guy’s useless.” Jumbo recalls the images of the blood-soaked room where the bots found the gang leader Dingo, dead as Dawkins, and his large side-kick Hunch. The latter was snatched back from the long dirt nap because of DaiHai’s deep coffers. New lungs, other replacement oozware, and many liters of synthetic blood had saved him. Not that it was worth it. Hunch’s imagination doesn’t venture far from cruelty and

misogyny. He is being held somewhere in the MOM building, ironically side-by-side with arrested Quasis.

“There’s a possibility that Nova picked up a bad habit in the Outs,” Lavrentiy says. He flicks a small plastic baggy on the table where it looks like a hyper-modern invertebrate on a visit to its long-passed relatives. There’s a white residue inside.

“Sleep,” Meg says. “How do we know the drug is hers?”

“Yes, it’s Sleep,” Lavrentiy says. “Pretty good quality too, almost pure. And we found Nova’s DNA on bag. It was found by the body of one of Dingo’s men.” Lavrentiy circulates a photo of Oddball. He looks particularly odd in death, like something has surprised the hell out of him. There’s an associated map showing the location, and a brief report.

“So Continuation and Sleep. That’s enough to go on,” Jumbo says. He wants to leave.

“We’re not sure about Sleep habit. She may have used it to get this guy snoozing so she could strangle him. There’s no evidence of drugs in living space she and Shanghai shared.”

The charm of the dropped articles in Lavrentiy’s speech has worn off for Jumbo.

“What was her motive for killing this one?” Meg asks.

“We can only speculate,” Lavrentiy says. “His mask is missing, but that may not mean anything. It would have been picked up, hacked and sold within hours. There’s no record that Nova tried to use it to get into City.”

Jumbo’s intuition tells him otherwise, but he’s cautious. He tosses a distraction into the conversation.

“But we never saw her enter or leave anyway. She’s just invisible to the logs,” he says.

“That’s true, but she was using a very specialized mask,” Meg says. “Assuming that she didn’t have another mask like the one we recovered in Dingo’s building, she could not have gotten in the same way. Certainly not with Oddball’s mask. Even if she figured out a way to authenticate with it.”

“What about an active bio-scan?” Lavrentiy asks.

“Who’s going to pay for that?” Meg asks. “We already have the mosquito vectors scanning for her DNA. I’m not sure you’re aware how expensive it is to create a targeted virus just for one person.”

“The cost isn’t just money,” Jumbo says before he can hold back the remark. An engineered bug isn’t a precision instrument. It could take out hundreds or even thousands of citizens who were infected by the mosquito bites. It could create chaos and undermine faith in the Active Biological program as well as MOM itself.

“I’ve spoken with my leadership,” Lavrentiy says. They want no part of biological assassination. Even for this Quasi. I sense that they want to put this incident behind them.”

“I see we have leaped ahead to the next agenda item: Next Steps,” Meg says. Her avatar makes a twitch of disapproval.

“Leadership,” Lavrentiy says, “seeks closure at this point. We have increased security, including MOM mobility now being installed directly in the building. We have no evidence that this Quasi is in the City. The message that I received is that shareholders like stability, and this...event needs to stop being news.” His emotags are perfectly neutral. So much so that it’s obvious he’s hiding his own feelings about the matter.

Jumbo can’t suppress a deep exhalation, an outpouring of retained stress. This is good news. He knows that the MOM director is focused on using the Quasi scare to target political figures. It makes little difference to him whether Nova is found or not. If she’s not, she’s a scary Quasi on the loose. If MOM does capture her, it’s more evidence of an infestation. Win-win.

“The consultant will sharpen our filters,” Meg says. “They will be tuned to Continuation activity and Sleep use. Next steps are monitor and report on activity.”

Jumbo grinds his teeth at “the consultant.” She means him.

“Are we done?” he asks.

“I am,” Lavrentiy says. “I’ve been given a week to finish report. Then I’m flying to Asia.”

Jumbo is envious. He imagines the exotic delicacies that might be had in foreign lands. The expense of flying is prohibitive, and only large corporations like DaiHai can afford it.

He tries to imagine how it would feel to escape the walls and heat and local ambition. He wonders if DaiHai needs another consultant.

But the envy gives way first to relief, when Meg logs out, and then to anticipation.

“Why do you do this?” Lavrentiy asks on the way up the elevator to the eighth floor.

“It might help me understand. So I can catch the next one,” Jumbo lies.

“Sure.” Lavrentiy nods, and reaches for a cigarette he can’t smoke in here. He offers one to Jumbo, who waves it away.

“I give you advice,” Lavrentiy says, hanging the unit cigarette from his lip.

“What’s that?” Jumbo asks out of obligation, when the pause has stretched too far.

“Tell me lies if you want. Let your boss lies. Especially tell your woman lies.” Lavrentiy taps Jumbo on the chest and breaks into a wide smile. “Don’t tell yourself lies, eh?”

A few minutes later, Lavrentiy leaves him alone in the unoccupied office where Shanghai held her last stand before leaping out the window. There are still bullet holes in the wall, but the glass has been replaced.

Jumbo shuts the door for privacy, pops his mask off, and rubs his face. The cool air against his skin feels wonderful.

He imagines the chase that ended here. Imagines what it must have been like to be Shanghai, cornered and wounded, with only two options left: capture or death. He presses his nose against the cool glass and looks down. It makes him dizzy to think of falling that far, of doing it willingly.

Not just willingly. Having utmost determination. Jumbo can’t fathom what recesses of will would be required for such an act. In contrast to his fussiness about food and the comforts of life, this act seems nobler than humanly possible. He feels trivial by comparison. The difference is awe.

The office smells stale. It has not been cleaned. Dark spots on the carpet still hold decaying spiral secrets about Shanghai’s ontogeny. Glass shards on the floor catch the light. The shell casings have been removed, but Jumbo fancies that he can still sense the bite of burnt powder lingering in the air.

He retrieves her last message from the video.

“Save yourself,” he says the words as Shanghai mouths them silently. Maybe speaking with ghosts will keep them away.

It’s good advice, so he rewinds and repeats.

“Save yourself!” he says to the dusty walls.

But he’s afraid it’s already too late.

## **Chapter Five**

Shanghai’s ghost haunts Jumbo all afternoon. He works on his MOM contract, tuning filters to look for an intersection between the use of Sleep and association with the Continuation movement. He has two Social Accountability Numbers to seed it with. The women with the crossed-arm stare are beginning to seem pathetic.

The woman from the café, Philly, isn’t going to come to his apartment, of course. But she will tell whoever put her up to her little prank, and maybe it will stop. It’s a better theory than eating a caterpillar anyway.

But there’s a part of him that wants her to show up despite this reasoning. Jumbo isn’t too sure why, maybe it’s just the sheer loneliness of being. The thought makes him hungry. The smell of yeast permeates his apartment. The bread will be ready to bake for dinner.

Gar stops by with a bucket of stinky fertilizer. Jumbo doesn’t ask questions about where it comes from. Gar can sense when Jumbo is working, so he finishes the job he came to do and leaves without a word. Jumbo closes the door and wipes the handle with bleach.

After an hour of putting things in order, checking and double-checking correlations, he feels the fatigue of the debauch catching up to him. He punches down the bread dough so that it will rise a second time, then stretches out on his Spartan bed for a nap.

Jumbo has troubled dreams. He’s at the beach and there’s a storm coming. But every time he tries to leave, something stops him. Even when the waves roll higher than his head, he still cannot seem to get away. Finally one comes crashing down on him.

He wakes sputtering, water in his nose. He sits up and gasps, blowing and wheezing to clear the dream. But the water is real.

Noises of the City come through the open door to the balcony. It wasn't open before, he remembers.

Then he sees the woman in the room with him. She sits in a chair that doesn't belong there. She's masked and wears clothes that seem familiar, with a bag slung diagonally. The woman from the cafe? Philly? No, this one has a different chin.

"What...what are you?" he asks. His mouth and brain aren't working yet.

She points to Jumbo's left. He looks. On a short dresser sits a needlegun mounted on a swivel point. It moves slightly, tracking him.

"It's loaded with Agony. Do you know what that is?"

Jumbo stops breathing and he feels all the strength leave him. The uninvited guest could hardly have chosen a better weapon than the threat of injecting him with a poison based on jellyfish toxin. If it enters his bloodstream, every nerve in his body will be screaming the desire to die.

He nods, not trusting speech.

"So, we're going to talk. Are you prepared to talk?"

Jumbo coughs and wipes his mouth. Nods again.

"Tell me how you identified Shanghai."

"What are you going to do to me?" Jumbo's voice shakes. He can't keep from looking at the needlegun.

"I just want to talk. I'll point it in another direction." The needlegun snaps around to target the wall. "Just don't make me use it."

Jumbo knows it can turn back just as quickly, but it does make a difference. His shallow panting is making him dizzy. He forces a longer breath. Another.

"Okay," he says.

“How did you find her?”

Jumbo tells her how it worked. The reverse filter that looked for too-perfect records culminating with the DNA test at the South Gate that was too good to be true, the follow-up swabs of the work area that finally revealed Shanghai’s custom genes.

The woman’s mouth presses into a thin line of lip as he talks. She seems unhappy.

Jumbo finishes. His heart hammers in his chest. *Is this it?* Every nerve clamors to know the answer to that question.

“I made a mistake,” she says. “I uploaded the wrong DNA profile. That’s why you caught her.”

She picks up a nearly-empty glass of water from the floor. She tears open a tinfoil packet with her teeth and shakes white powder into the water. Her fingers tremble. She swirls the powder to dissolve it.

“You’re Nova.” Jumbo says, when the silence becomes unbearable.

Nova nods admission and tips the glass. She holds it that way for a long minute, until all the sludge has drizzled into her mouth.

“What now?” Jumbo asks. He can’t stand the terror that seeps into his marrow.

Nova licks her lips slowly, tracing the pink tip of her tongue all the way around.

“Why Jumbo?”

“I...I need to know what you’re going to do. I--”

“--I mean why do you call yourself that? It’s not a flattering name.”

“Oh.” Jumbo’s thoughts are getting all mixed up. “My parents named me Jacob.”

“Jacob. And you’re about, what, fifty?”

“Fifty-two. My lastfour is 0747. It was the number for a chubby-looking airplane they called a Jumbo. I got big early.” He shrugs.

“I think I’ll call you Jacob. I came here to kill you. And Jumbo would have been fine for killing. But I’m starting to waver. If I’m not going to kill you, you need to be Jacob.”

Jumbo’s mouth refuses to stay shut. His skin crawls with the thought that he’s trapped in his apartment with a crazy who has a needlegun.

“I don’t want to die.”

“You’ll lose your shyness pretty quickly when it enters the blood. Trust me.” Nova nods toward the swivel-mounted weapon.

Jumbo’s brain is conditioned to habits of pleasure. Any pain is always inflicted to others at the end of an abstraction, administered by others. This direct terror makes his reason run in circles trying to escape its own conclusions.

“We’re all virgins at death,” Nova says. Her voice has the characteristic nasal quality of Sleepers.

“What can I do?” Jumbo asks.

“Give me your arm.” Nova reaches into her bag and produces a thick roll of tape and a black disk about four centimeters across and a centimeter high.

Jumbo forces himself to move. His limbs feel unnaturally heavy and clumsy. He sits on the side of the bed and holds out his arm. The needlegun doesn’t move.

“Thank you, Jacob.” Nova tapes the disk to his forearm, wrapping the tape twice around, completely covering it. Then she stands and retrieves the needlegun and mount, placing them in her bag.

Jumbo waits for her to explain. The feeling of the thing touching his skin makes him want to scream.

She turns back to face him. The fact that she has a mask and he doesn’t makes him feel awkward, inferior.

“If you try to remove it, it will needle you. Or if I tell it to.”

Despite the feeling of a scorpion sitting on his arm, intellectually he knows it's a good thing. If she were just going to kill him, she wouldn't go to this trouble would she?

"I understand," he says. He desperately wants a drink.

"That pleases me. Let's go to the other room. The air is stale."

Jumbo follows her. The iron in her voice is matched by her stride. The woman walks like she owns the Earth.

They sit close to the garden on the balcony. The scent of the dark green stalks wafts in on a puff of air, and Jumbo feels such nostalgia that he almost faints. His life has changed so dramatically that yesterday seems like a different continent.

Nova arranges the fan to blow across her legs.

"Do you need something?" she asks.

"Water?"

"Get it."

Jumbo feels outside of himself, given the freedom to stand and pour cool water out of the refrigerated carafe. He puts all the ice in it. He looks at the door to the hallway, sighs, and turns back.

"Can I be honest with you?" Nova asks, once Jumbo's in place again.

He nods.

"Wanting to kill you was natural. You destroyed my partner. Because of you I suffered...inconveniences. But I have work to do, and killing you will not help me get the work done. There's something I find fascinating about you, Jacob. Do you know what it is?"

Jumbo shakes his head left-right. Tomatoes-hallway.

"You can just walk into the DaiHai building. And walk back out. I admire that."

Jumbo takes the first drink of the cold water. It feels like salvation. Something stirs deep within him, something atavistic. It might be the tiny residual scrapings of long-forgotten courage. It might just be acid from the eggs at breakfast.

"I did this morning. I went to the office where--," he drinks again to wet his mouth, "--where she jumped from."

Nova doesn't move or speak for a while. The fan buzzes and the ice cracks.

"She told me she would jump," she says finally. "Why did you go there?"

"Shanghai was beautifully made," Jumbo says. He feels it now more than ever. He knows it's the stress of the moment that brings tears to his eyes, but they are at least honest tears.

"What do you know about her?" Nova snaps. "Did you live with her? Put up with her constant bitshit?"

"Save yourself," Jumbo says.

Nova laughs.

"If only she'd taken her own advice, eh?" she says.

"What do you want from me?"

"I want to get inside the DaiHai building."

"Okay," Jumbo temporizes, trying to imagine scenarios where that might be possible.

"Not now. Later."

"Oh."

"First you have to trust me."

The statement is so ridiculous that Jumbo can't believe he heard right.

"I told you I'd be honest with you, Jacob. I mean it. I want your willing cooperation. Nothing else is really good to me. Do you understand? I can't hold you hostage and

expect you to help me. You have to be invested. It's not about threats. I don't need that thing on your arm to kill you. I can do that any time. Make sense?"

"No. None of this makes sense."

"Good. I'm glad you're honest with me too," Nova says. She stands and paces.

"I have to go now. But first I need something from you. Don't take that thing off your arm until I tell you to. And I have a question."

"Question?"

"What sort of women do you find attractive?"

The question is so unexpected that Jumbo laughs.

"What?"

"What. Sort. Of. Woman. Do. You. Like."

"Uh..." Jumbo tries to think of the right answer. Anything that will make Nova go away.

"This isn't a trick question. Come on."

"Good cook and a pretty face," Jumbo says in a rush.

With that, Nova leaves him. He can almost convince himself it was all too improbable to be true, except for the tape around his forearm, which is too hard to explain.

The bread dough has poofed too far and fallen in on itself. Jumbo doesn't have the will to take it down to the common kitchen in the building, so the yeast goes on working, swimming in the alcohol it's making to keep other microbes away.

Selfish ambition is the way of the world.

## **Chapter Six**

The morning brings no clarity.

Jumbo sits up in the bed, weighing against the thin mattress, and a heavy ball of anxiety settles in his stomach. He can feel the restriction on his left arm, but he reaches to touch it anyway. It's an intimacy with Nova that he doesn't want. The woman is mad.

*Never stick your nose in crazy.*

But it's too late. Crazy came calling and left a gift.

He's suddenly wide awake and furious. He's angry at her, of course, but also at himself. How could he have been such a lamb, playing along, bah bah bah. What the vorking hell was that anyway?

He remembers it all, and does a play by play in his head, finding fault with every one of his own actions. Bah, bah, bah.

*What kind of women do you like? Oh, tall ones, thin ones, ones with pimples. Anything would be fine.*

Damn Dawkins.

He knows he just needs food. Food is the answer to all of life's problems. Not the amount--it's the quality that matters. Instead of eggs, he decides on smoked salmon on crunchy wild yeast toast--that reminds him of his cruel treatment of the bread dough, but never mind--paper-thin onion slices and cracked black pepper on top with a thin layer of hard cheese between the bread and the fish, gruyère if it can be had. And with it fresh tomato wedges with a very coarse salt ground on top. Sherry, too, instead of coffee. The acid in the tomatoes will not go with coffee.

The fantasy tides him over the moment. He spends a pleasant moment wondering if capers might be needed, but eventually he comes back to real-real. His spirits sag with the descent.

The burning question is *what now?*

He could tell the nice people at MOM that a wanted Quasi was in his apartment, but they would probably lock him up somewhere. They would explain that it was for his safety, and give him plenty of work. And maybe he could track down Nova for them and send more mechanical nightmares to take her too. But maybe not. And how many more are out there that are just as crazy as she is? Maybe the rest of Jumbo's life would be in hiding.

He lifts leaves on the tomato plants, checking on the fruit, hoping for at least one ripe one. Instead he finds another fat green worm, which he sends sailing over the wall to whatever destiny lies forty feet below.

Gar told him not to keep growing tomatoes year after year in the same place. But what can he do? He can't move apartments every year just to have the--

--there's a knock at his door.

Jumbo freezes inside, and the thought of food is suddenly alien.

"Who?" he says, although there's no way anyone in the hallway could hear him.

Jumbo straps his mask on and waits for it to boot up. There's no way he's opening the door without knowing who's on the other side.

The hallway video shows a woman standing at his apartment door holding a bag in one hand and a bottle in the other. Her mask broadcasts her identity as a lastfour 2888, who calls herself Oriya. She's 35 years old and works as a procurement accountant for a restaurant supply company. Before that she was a sous chef. Oriya is a head shorter than Jumbo and has the lean look of most citizens. Black hair cut to shoulder length spills around her mask. Jumbo runs her profile through the filter he's been working on. The woman has Continuation connections, but a lot of people do. Nothing shows up about Sleep.

*Sous chef?*

"What can I do for you?" Jumbo messages to her.

"I came to make you breakfast," she replies.

Jumbo feels faint. The nightmare from yesterday is picking right back up.

"I didn't ask anyone for breakfast. Please go away!" He yells at the door.

Oriya stands there for moment, and Jumbo figures she's probably communicating with that bitbitch Nova.

“Can we just talk for a minute? Then I’ll leave if you want,” she says as a VOX output. Her synth voice is pleasant enough, but it means nothing.

Jumbo wavers. The panic that led him to shout at her relents. His stomach rumbles, and he wonders if he was too hasty. He looks at the pile of furniture he stacked against the door, and it makes him exhausted to think about moving it. Still, the idea of a nice breakfast at home is appealing. Also there’s the matter of that scorpion on his arm.

“I’ll be in the kitchen in a few minutes,” he says. He immediately regrets it, but his stomach continues to debate the point. Anyway, it’s settled.

“Thank you, Lastfour,” she says through the door with her real voice. “Bring a knife and cutting board if you have them.”

The kitchen is a large communal area with several cook tops and ovens. It’s crowded and busy. Kids run here and there, some masked and some not. Jumbo puts his name on the queue for a cook top.

Oriya stands at the double-door entrance and turns when Jumbo arrives. He’s self-conscious of the way he’s dressed, in a casual wrinkled short-sleeved shirt, practical pants, and worn loafers. The tape on his arm looks quite odd. He hasn’t had time to do more than throw water on his face and scratch under his arms with a salt block. This is a hell of a first date, if that’s what it is.

Oriya wears a light summer dress, off-white with grey pinstripes. It just covers her knees, and the sleeves flare out above her elbows. Her shoes are for walking, but they are in good shape and more or less match the dress. There’s a shine at the bottom of her ear that might be a fake emerald.

She turns to face him mask to mask.

“I’m not sure I can stand this commotion for long,” she says through the VOX. “This is why I gave up commercial kitchens.”

Jumbo shrugs. He agrees with her, but he’s eager to find something wrong with her so he can send her packing. What is it? Is she a fussy person?

He notices that the bottle she’s holding is an Italian sparkling wine. He wonders what’s in the bag.

“Sorry,” he says formally, “I should have checked. Do you want to call it off? Another time?”

“How about if we go back to your apartment. I can prepare everything I need to there. I have cheese and sausage we can gnaw on too.”

Jumbo wonders if she’s trying to manipulate him. If so, it’s working. The thought is heavenly.

“Okay. Let’s do that. It will be half an hour before we can do any good here.”

The apartment is still a mess from his furniture permutations. He waves Oriya to the small table where he and Gar sit and have their rum. He drops the cutting board and knife on top of it.

Wearing the mask in his apartment with a guest feels very strange to Jumbo. He knows there are people who wear the things all the time, even to sleep in. But the first thing he does when he gets home is unstrap it. He’s never seen Gar do more than wear a brimmed hat with a veil. He realizes that he just doesn’t have guests other than Gar. He wonders if this is normal.

“Glasses?” Oriya asks vocally. Her voice has a touch of the Southern sludge.

Without asking, Jumbo pulls down two of his treasures from the top shelf: beautiful cylindrical Champagne flutes with vines frosted in the glass. The pre-Wave crystal came from his father’s mother, and Dawkins knows where before that. He sets them down on the table with care.

Oriya unpacks her bag: a hard salami, the gruyère Jumbo dreamed of earlier, six eggs, a fresh tomato, and onion, a small bottle of truffle oil, four oranges, and a habanero pepper. It’s an expensive meal, not even counting the imported wine.

Jumbo’s sense of fairness overcomes him.

“This is too much...I don’t even know you.”

She smiles for the first time. It’s a nice smile. Her bottom teeth lean a little to one side, but it’s hardly noticeable.

“That’s the idea.”

“Listen... I really do appreciate the food. It’s...it’s too much. I’m just not sure why you’re doing this.”

She laughs. It’s a nice laugh. He supposes the little snort at the end might become annoying over time, but that’s a petty thought and he pushes it away. The cheese looks amazing.

“Do you mind if I unmask?” she asks.

*Good cook, pretty face.* Jumbo wonders what Nova thinks a pretty face is. He regrets not having added ‘fabulously wealthy’ to the list.

“Thank you,” he says, and pops the seal on his own. He immediately relaxes.

“You don’t like that thing much, do you?” Oriya carefully unlocks the fastenings on her own mask, hesitates, and then lifts it free. Their eyes meet for the first time.

The silence is awkward.

The soft light from the drapes flatters Oriya’s tilted face. Like many citizens, her racial stock is mixed, but Jumbo thinks he can detect a predominance of Latina and Asian-Indian. She is far prettier than he has any right to expect. Her dark eyes scan his face too, and he suddenly feels his face flush.

“How hungry are you, really?” he asks.

Her hands flutter, adjusting her hair.

“Because I think if I were you,” Jumbo continues, “I’d be so stressed that I wouldn’t be able to eat at all. And if you knew me...”

His joke falls rather flat. She sits, her face sagging a little.

“This is harder than I thought it would be,” she says finally.

“Tell you what,” Jumbo says. He gathers up the eggs. “Let’s just make orange juice and have it with the bubbly. Is that what you had in mind?”

She nods.

Jumbo puts the eggs in his refrigerator and finds a bowl. He sits across from Oriya, halves the oranges, and begins to squeeze the juice.

“Did Nova threaten you?” he asks.

“You’re nicer than I expected,” she says. “Thank you.”

“Did she?”

“No. Have you ever believed in something so important that...”

Jumbo feels a bit of normalcy return to the world. Soon the nice woman will leave. Maybe he can keep that cheese.

“...so important...,” she struggles with the words. “...that it changes you? And keeps on changing you?”

“I still don’t know why you’re here, Oriya.” Jumbo learned from her profile that her name is pronounced oh-rye-ya. It’s a pretty name, but he’s not sure he could get used to it.

“I’m here to do good,” she says. Her hands can’t keep still.

“You could open that bottle,” Jumbo says. The fluttering is making him nervous.

When the glasses are poured with the frothy orange drink and Jumbo has a thick slice of sausage and cheese paired delightfully on a plate in front of him, he raises the drink in a silent toast. Oriya does the same, and they drink.

The bubbles and acidity and sweetness and alcohol make Jumbo want to laugh. Instead he closes his eyes and savors it. There’s a glow in his chest.

“I guess I have to admire you,” he says, stifles a burp, and then amends his remark. “That didn’t come out right.”

Oriya keeps her glass tilted until it’s empty.

“It’s okay,” she says, and sucks the juice off her lips.

“How was this supposed to turn out?” he asks.

“Well...,” she pours herself another. “I guess it’s like a date. To see if we’re compatible.”

“And if we are? Then what?”

“That part isn’t up to me.” Oriya appears to be barely holding on to her emotions.

Jumbo wrinkles his brow in confusion. Did all the women in the City go mad?

“Let’s just finish breakfast, and you can say you did your best, eh? Truth is, you’re way out of my league.”

Speaking the truth, however hurtful, makes him feel better. What a daft idea. Nova must have fried her brain with all that White. He rubs at the sticky edge of the tape on his arm. Maybe if his guest leaves, he can take it off.

“Do you know anything about this?” he asks, pointing to the lump strapped to his arm.

“Not exactly. Only that I have one too.”

Jumbo’s mouth hangs open. He looks at her bare arms.

“Where?”

“It’s in my bag.”

“What...what...” Jumbo knows the alcohol is going straight to his head. He takes a bite and tries again. “What are these things?”

“All I know is that I’m supposed to put it on my arm if we....” Oriya’s hands fly to her face to hide it.

Jumbo feels stupid, like he’s the one trespassing.

Oriya snuffles, obviously crying. She laughs incongruously.

“I haven’t cried for years,” she says. “I’m such an idiot.”

It dawns on Jumbo what the disks are. They aren’t loaded with Agony, but Cupid. Without his mask, he can’t conjure the exact details, but he knows it’s the ultimate date

drug, combining a powerful disinhibiter with a cocktail of actives that induce ravenous sexual appetite and also release the most potent of the brain's juices that make one person bond with another. It can also stop your heart if you're not in good health.

Nova wants to fast-track him bonding with one of her Continuation followers.

It's horrifying that Nova would think she can push people around like pieces on a game board, but also in a weird way reassuring. Someone has gone to a lot of trouble to try to nudge Jumbo to cooperate, but without using direct threats. They are cruel monsters, no doubt, but oddly considerate.

These revelations are not certain, but enough so that Jumbo feels like he's on Mother Earth again. This he can deal with.

He taps on the disk, with its needle that hovers just over his skin.

"Nova? I'm sure this thing is networked in some way I can't detect. If you're listening, then I have a message for you. Thank you for all the trouble you went to in finding me a woman. She's beautiful. It's very flattering. Let's chat and explore what you want. It isn't necessary to screw up this woman's life. We can work something out."

He waits for a moment.

"I'm taking this thing off now. If you're going to zap me you may as well go ahead."

Jumbo's heart pounds despite it all. What if it's just a dumb device and it really is loaded with Agony? Nova did tell him not to remove it.

But the taste of cowardice is too bitter to have another meal of it. He slides the knife under the tape and works it around until the edge bites. He saws back and forth.

Oriya watches him between the fingers that cover her face.

Jumbo gets the edge free and yanks for all he's worth. It pulls the hair out of his arm, halfway around. He yanks again and the rest of it comes free, disk and all. He tosses it across the room.

It feels very, very good.

"Thank you," Oriya says. Her eyelids are rimmed in red.

Jumbo nods, and cleans the edge of the knife. Then he saws off more meat and cheese.

“This is fantastic. Thank you.”

“I thought it would feel different,” she says.

“You really volunteered for this madness?”

“It felt noble then. I’m...ashamed now. I’ve failed.”

Jumbo closes his eyes he tunes out the whole world and takes a bite. He chews slowly, maximizing the sensations, the texture and taste, the feel of his mouth working. Only after he swallows does he acknowledge her again.

“No,” he says. “You certainly got my attention. I meant everything I said. I can see that your group is organized, has resources, and has determination. Honestly, I think Nova wanted it to end this way.” He’s lying now, trying to make her feel better.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, these injectors...it must be a date drug, right? How much good would I be to them if I’m swooning over you the whole day long?”

Jumbo suddenly wonders if that’s actually the way it is. Maybe it’s not a lie. Or maybe Nova didn’t care one way or the other.

“I’m going to leave the food,” she says. “I *would* like to cook for you sometime. You seem to appreciate it.”

She stands. Jumbo isn’t going to argue if she wants to leave her culinary treasures. He glances at the truffle oil. That’s really too much to accept, though. He picks it up, regretting already, and hands it to her. She nods and slips it back into her bag.

She turns at the door before putting her mask on.

“I’m not out of your league, Jacob.”

It’s touching to him that she uses that old name. He waves her off.

“No, I want to say it,” Oriya continues, “It’s nothing about appearance or superficial...things. It’s just that I don’t know you at all. I can’t imagine why I thought...” She presses the mask to her face and seals herself against the intimacy of eye contact.

He opens the door for her. She starts out, turns, and presses a palm against his chest.

“There’s good in you,” she says. Then she hurries off, swinging the bag from her hand.

Later, Jumbo sits at the table alone. He forks the omelet into his mouth slowly, savoring. The ingredients are very fresh, top shelf stuff. The tomato is at its fullest flavor, and there’s just enough cheese to zap the tongue with the potent richness here and there without unbalancing the flavors. He can almost forget about the truffle oil.

The wine is capped. Enough is enough. Jumbo intends to deliver the rest to Gar.

The relief of the resolution from bizarreness and terror into the experience of an exceptional breakfast accentuates his feeling of well-being. Hovering just beyond consciousness, like wolves watching a fire, is a feeling. Of loss.

His certainty that shooing Oriya out, making her decision easy, has not diminished. But there is a tangible sense that lingers like the faint scent of her perfume, that the two of them could have ended up together. In another universe maybe, but somewhere.

It makes him lonely. The eggs don’t taste as good, and suddenly he doesn’t want them anymore. To make matters worse, the electricity goes off. This has been increasingly common in his part of town. After a few minutes he hears generators chugging to life, but this will provide only a limited amount, and at a steep cost. He turns the refrigerator and fan off, then spares a moment to curse the Bhakras Power Company, which holds a near-monopoly on providing power from its ancient nuclear reactors. When the grid becomes overloaded, they just start turning off whole neighborhoods. Customer service is not in their lexicon.

Being alone in the dark in a stale apartment is a pain.

Every kind of pain is to be avoided. That’s the first commandment of Jumbo’s philosophy. Loneliness is a pain he knows well, and he has a treatment: he writes. But not here. He grabs the bottle and leaves everything else the way it is. The mask feels like a comfortable barrier now. He packs the notebook and pencils and departs.

Gar lives two miles southwest measuring strides along the roads, which is the only fair way to do it since Jumbo can't fly. By the time he arrives, he's well winded, soaked with sweat, and his feet ache. Mrs. Gar appears at the door of their shack-like home wearing an orange knitted cap despite the heat. Boards squeal under Jumbo's feet and threaten to mutiny. All the screen wire he can see has holes in it. It must be insufferable when the mosquitoes come out to dine.

Mrs. Gar explains something. She hasn't bothered with a mask, and her face has a life's tale written in sun and toil and joy and hope. She talks and talks, pointing occasionally, and Jumbo doesn't understand a word of it. He nods and smiles and loves the wonder of it all. Finally he just hands her what he's brought: half a bottle of fine sparkling wine, less most of the sparkles, half a hard salami link, and three fresh eggs. She grins and bobs her head and he thinks she's describing how she'll cook the eggs, but he's not quite sure.

Jumbo motions that he will go around back, and she dismisses him with a wave. Her eyes are already glued to the salty meat.

And so Jumbo finds himself alone in Gar's own garden. He looks around and then pops the mask, lifting it to tug against his forehead like a hat.

Corn is as tall as Jumbo. Gold silk advertises the sweet kernels thriving in their rough sheaths. Cabbages sprawl like emperors, with no holes to be found in their leaves. There's not a weed in sight, just rows of vegetables, tomatoes, herbs and plants Jumbo can't identify. He walks from one to another plucking leaves, grinding them between his hands, and inhaling the scent of life. Basil. Rosemary. Thyme. Oregano. The taste of cilantro leaves just off the plant is stunningly rich.

But it's the cloying sweetness of the corn silk that conjures pre-Wave nostalgia like nothing else can. His grandfather's farm. His brothers, hunting possums at night with a flashlight and a small-bore rifle. Smoking out bees. Fabbing a clock for grandma from plans downloaded from a teen-age Dutch genius. The hell of trying to assemble the thing, and the rush when its heart began beating ticktock-ticktock. The flood that sank all the corn and left it an undead army of decayed stalks, silently condemning everything that ate fossil fuel and farted. The idea that a wheelbarrow could be used as a boat. Empirical evidence to the contrary.

The memory is a poignant wash of amorphous loss, and Jumbo is suddenly sorry he came here. He gathers a handful of basil and sprigs of rosemary because he knows Gar would consider it a fair exchange. Then he turns his blistered gait homeward, feeling

foolish that he thought he might sit here and write away his angst. The day has seen a moral victory, perhaps, but a philosophical failure.

Jumbo talks to himself as he walks. The mask will record it all in case he wants to write it down. He wonders if he can create an acceptable pesto using the basil and the remainder of the hard cheese Oriya left him, but that's not what he wants to think about. He has to sort out what Nova wants and what Jumbo can do about it.

"Nova has unfinished business with DaiHai," he explains to himself. The heat makes it hard to breathe, let alone lecture. The routine becomes: formulate the thought, accumulate oxygen, speak.

"She is undoubtedly a single-minded, cruel, and heartless woman, but she did something very odd, didn't she?"

"Yes she did. Instead of brute force, Nova tried to seduce me."

Wheeze.

"In a very ham-handed way, befitting a soulless Sleeper, to be sure. But it shows subtlety."

"Now with MOM. With Ahab and Colt and that thirty-two-bit-bitch Meg, power is synonymous with moral certainty. Isn't it?"

He stops to wipe sweat off his head. He considers if he could be wrong about this last point, trying to imagine MOM being nuanced and seductive.

"No. Nova is somehow different. Dried up neurons, most likely. It could be she's simply insane."

He stops talking for a while, climbing the one hill he has to ascend. He wheezes every step now, his feet splayed to gain traction. Inside his mask is a mess. He blinks away the salt water, but it keeps coming.

Finally he tops the crest, and a magnificent breeze cools his head.

"Are you okay, lastfer?"

Jumbo turns to see a small girl, maybe six years old, peeking at him through eye holes in a child's faux mask. She looks like she's been playing in dirt all day.

"Am I okay?" Jumbo wheezes.

She nods up and down, jerk, jerk.

"Want to know a secret?" he asks her.

"You're not suh-post to tell secrets."

Jumbo laughs. She has him in the pincers of logic. He realizes she's right. One shouldn't go around telling six-year-olds what it means to be okay or not okay when you're more than fifty. It might put them off their food.

"I guess you're right," he says. "Tell you what. I'll give you something to smell. If you can tell me what it is, you can keep it."

"Ewww," she makes a face.

"No, no. Here. Take this." Jumbo hands her a sprig of the prickly rosemary.

She takes it and puckers her lips in concentration as she inhales.

"It looks like Christmas tree," she offers.

"Yes, but it doesn't smell like one, does it?"

She shakes her head. Jumbo imagines her confusion: how can it look like one thing and smell like something else?

"I'm not suh-post to talk to strangers," she says. She tosses the rosemary in the dirt and turns away from him.

Jumbo feels a pang at the lost sprig, but he is already engaged with his thoughts. *Nova acts like a crazy. But what if she's not?*

"If she's not crazy, it means that she wants to recruit me honestly. In a bizarre way, maybe, accelerated beyond reason. But in essence, she's offering to make a pitch. To convince me. And that's a sign of respect. Fairness, even."

He is shuffling now, leaving puffs of dust in his trail. He's not sure if he's on to something, or if the heat and self-absorption have won the day.

Jumbo hasn't been well respected by MOM, unless you count the pay. There's the rub. The pay is important. How does one weigh that against having to put up with the aforementioned four-byte-bee Meg? The Director openly mocks him too. At least Meg seems to appreciate Jumbo's talents. Without her, he figures he'd be begging for a job at one of the banks. Probably data mining loan data. He shudders at the thought. But working with Meg is no piece of cake.

Jumbo feels the conclusion looming.

"If this is so, then it would be unwise of me to appear to not consider Nova's argument."

Jumbo suddenly realizes he has to see Nova again, and it turns his insides liquid. At least the loneliness has submerged again. It can't compete with panic.

## **Chapter Seven**

Two days pass, and Jumbo works hard, pushing his brain to the edge of fatigue, recharging with culinary fuel, caffeine, and--when he has to--rest. The kinds of jobs he's getting from Meg have changed character. MOM is setting up screening filters for behavior and biological data that would help them find Quasis using very specific data requirements. The limitations of these restrictions restrict the output to citizens that, ironically perhaps, provide the richest upstream of sniffers and other bio readings. Without being explicit about it, MOM leadership seems to be steering the search toward those who can afford the best equipment: bankers and lawyers and business executives.

On the one hand, this makes sense. Those who can afford custom modification of their children's genes are going to be wealthy. But on the other hand, this sort of genetic tweaking to create "designer kids" is usually innocuous, and usually winked at even under the New Laws. The kinds of variations that were engineered into Shanghai and Nova are more serious in several ways. They possibly introduce new and dangerous alleles into the human genome, and the phenotypes—the Quasis themselves—are used for military or other highly specific purposes that may be at odds with the government.

So why is the MOM leadership ignoring the Continuation connection and focusing on rich people instead? Or is the work Jumbo is doing just part of a bigger picture? Do they

not trust him with the Continuation angle? That thought worries him. Do they already know what's going on?

But the money keeps flowing into Jumbo's account, and he keeps spending it. Sometimes he gets a sense of how ordinary people feel about the expensive food and drink he demands. Other than those pleasures, his life is almost Spartan, but they have no way of knowing it. All they see is a guy with too many pounds already having a meal that costs more than they make in a month. They resent it. Maybe they look up his public record and find out he contracts for MOM. They will resent that even more, but will bury the thought if they're smart. Jumbo wonders where all that fear and resentment goes.

On his side of the ledger, feels the weight of this disapproval accumulate according to the physics of karma. It's blood money that buys his rare fillets and imported wine. Maybe that's why he spends it so quickly.

Jumbo does what he can to direct the MOM queries away from Nova and the Continuation. He still works on them, and begins creating a social map of the City based on the Continuation religion and the trade in Sleep. It's pure self-preservation. He wants to know as much as he can before taking action. If that harpy Meg finds out that Nova has visited his apartment, there will be hell to pay if Jumbo doesn't have a really, really good explanation. He'll end up like the lastleggers who are vanished off the street into MOM vans and are never seen again.

Nova is an extraordinary chameleon. When she came knocking, it was in the same clothing and with the same ID transmitting as the Philly woman Jumbo accosted at the Cafe. As far as the public record is concerned, Nova wasn't there at all. There's even a public scene later in the day between Philly and her husband, suggesting that she had a liaison with Jumbo! He half-expects the guy to show up with an axe, but surely the guy must know it's not real. Or does he?

How exactly Nova is able to so completely fool the public network is a mystery. She must have access to hardware back doors or else very fast code-breakers. The interest in DaiHai suggests the former. Every chip is built with secret secondary access ports. Access to these is leased out to the highest bidder, but usually to a government-like agency. Or so a lot of people believe.

As the days crawl by, Jumbo's stress only increases. Work occupies the analytical workings of his mind, but a deep pool of emotion is roiled with anxiety. This shows up as even less patience with Meg--the Artificial Irritant--when he has to work with her.

Jumbo thought it wise not to send a note to Oriya. He went back and forth about it, gnawing at the decision until he rejected the whole problem as requiring too much energy. So he only communicated by inaction, and she replied similarly.

Now he finds himself thinking about her in the odd moments between mapping covariates and lurching into the terror of a potential confrontation with Nova.

Oriya *is* too pretty for him. And too young.

Jumbo reviews his tired list of reasons that living with women is a bad idea. He does this when there's no other refuge from some optimistic part of his mind that chirps hope like a damned happy bird.

Women add variance: that's the heart of it. They make life's highs higher and lows lower, turning the stately march of time into a roller coaster ride. This is antithetical to Jumbo's Epicurean aesthetic. Life should be first about avoiding pain--including the pain of overeating or drinking too much--and then about seeking simple pleasure in everyday things. Is that too much to ask? Epicurus himself is supposed to have died in terrible pain, but happy to the end. Jumbo strives for such control over his willful emotions. This is one reason to admire Shanghai. She jumped, knowing that oblivion is not to be feared; it represents the complete lack of pain. Jumbo wonders if she enjoyed the fall.

It's a very strange thought. How could one savor life's sensations while knowingly hurling to the concrete many meters below? But her last words could be construed to mean that. She was saving herself, right? And what more joy can there be than in salvation?

These diversions eventually lead to mental exhaustion, and the cheerful birds begin singing again from the thicket of lizard-old emotional wiring.

Jumbo realizes that he desires Oriya. He understands clearly that it's an effect that will fade with time, that Nova's practical joke has merely induced the slightest of infatuations, and that the feeling must at all costs not be fed with fantasy. But these rationalizations do not change the fact of the desire. Sometimes when he blinks he sees her naked face tilted up, wide-eyed and half afraid of him. He tries to find things wrong with her: the laugh, her teeth, the flare of her nostril, something spiteful to spawn resentment. This works for a while, and then a sudden surge of tide lifts his spirit, and suspicion must fall immediately on the wicked infatuation as the source of the disturbance. It dies hard.

It's good that she hasn't contacted me, he assures himself. A few more days and the birds will starve to death. Maybe they can eat a few tomato worms before they go.

Gar stops by on the evening of the second day. Jumbo welcomes the company, but realizes he has not restocked the rum.

The gardener doesn't seem to mind. They drink iced tea with mint and brown sugar instead, and talk past each other, holding parallel conversations that resonate but share harmony more than a common melody. Jumbo finds himself spilling out some of his troubles, and Gar shares sympathy with him.

Jumbo realizes suddenly that Gar is the most sympathetic person he knows. Maybe that's what makes him so good with plants. It's the way he listens with his whole body, leaning in, face a mask of concern, lips working, chewing on the angst, sharing the woe *du jour*. Or alternately, lighting up with a picket-fence grin at the slightest joy. It doesn't matter that the words they share are understood in half-meanings at best. Maybe that's the secret, anyway, to respond on a primitive level inherited from all those ancestors who had no language to employ.

While talking the tea down to the bottom of the pitcher, the evening cools to mere warmth, and they finally sit in silence. The door is open, and the buzz of night fauna accompanies their isolated thoughts.

Jumbo stands with Gar, knowing he's kept him from his wife. On impulse, Jumbo takes the two champagne flutes from the counter where they have stood for two days. He wraps them carefully in towels and puts them in a bag for Gar to take to his wife. It's a struggle to force the gift on his friend, but Jumbo keeps repeating "woman" until Gar relents with a sideways grin and a shrug. He grasps Jumbo's hand. It's a sign of respect from a bygone age, before the microbes got serious and people became afraid of touch each other if there wasn't going to be an orgasm involved.

Jumbo puts on a faux comfort mask and walks Gar down the stairs to see him off. It's a long walk home, but he knows Gar wouldn't accept a ride if Jumbo hired one for him. The night has shuttered the sky now, and the half moon's feeble gaze only outlines a few whips of cloud. Jumbo closes his eyes and soaks in the feeling of the warmth and humidity, the night sounds, and suggestion of breeze. The scents of summer carry on the grudging wind. Milkweed and the faint air of moving water. There's a hint of honeysuckle too, that most delightful of all the summer smells. He is on the edge of

momentary contentment, the most sought of all goals. He can't stay, though. The mosquitoes will seek their own contentment.

Jumbo works at the soreness of his legs by stretching them on the stairs up to his apartment. He leaves off the handrail, making his calves work out their kinks.

Nova is waiting at his door.

## **Chapter Eight**

Jumbo stands on the small balcony with the Quasi. There's just enough room for the two of them, surrounded by tomatoes and Marigolds. He feels her presence, and it terrifies him.

There have been no threats and hardly any talk. He's afraid to ask why she's here, and Nova seems to be lost in her own thoughts. Jumbo sticks his face in the leaves of a tomato plant and inhales. The normalcy of the rich smell and its association restores a measure of his balance. He tries to mute the internal dialog that wants to chatter about pain and hope and fear and escape.

"Oriya gave a good report," Nova says finally.

"She's nice," Jumbo chirps out like a damned bird.

"What do you intend to do, Jacob?"

Jumbo's heart jumps. What does she mean? Do about what?

"I haven't told anyone." It's a safe guess.

"We appreciate that." Nova produces a bottle and drinks from it.

"What do you intend to do?" Jumbo asks.

She chuckles.

"Fair enough. Let's sit and discuss it. It wouldn't be smart to let a mosquito find me. Your friends know what's in my blood."

Jumbo realizes she's right. The Active Biologicals program spreads the insects all over the City in order to deliver genetic payloads and collect blood. If they identify Nova's signature in this neighborhood, it could be bad.

Nova sets her bottle on the small table, and Jumbo closes the door behind them. She catches his glance when he turns.

"It's just sugar water," she says.

"It's your business."

"I want to see your eyes while we talk."

Jumbo feels the strange familiarity again. Twice this week he's baring his face to a woman in his apartment. He tosses the faux mask onto a counter.

Nova unseals her formidable mask, lifts the straps around her hair, and places it in her lap.

"Don't think I'm blind," she says.

He nods, but he's thinking about her face. Nova can't be that old, but her face shows years of a desperate existence. The lines are deeper than they should be, and small scars across her forehead seem out of place. She looks severe.

"Are you disappointed I didn't put on makeup for you?" she asks. A twist of mouth is all that reveals she isn't serious.

"If you're not blind, how is it you talk to the net? Without the mask."

"Doesn't matter. Just believe me, okay?"

"Okay."

"I've been told I have pretty eyes. What do you think?"

"Nova..."

"I'm trying to figure you out. You didn't want Oriya. Maybe you want me?"

“You’re not being serious.”

She hold out both hands. After a moment, Jumbo places his in hers.

“Jacob. I will do whatever it takes to get what I want,” she says. “If it will help, I will slap a Cupid on you, and by the end of the night you’ll be following me around like a baby duck. But I don’t think that’s how you operate.”

The combination of intimacy and threat work at Jumbo’s chest. As with the first encounter when he thought he saw Nova, he feels as if he’s in the presence of a raised cobra, beautiful, deadly, and unknowable.

“You want me to do something for you,” he says.

“You know what I want.”

“DaiHai.”

She nods, watching every flick of his eyes.

“You want me to betray my employer.”

“You already have.”

That stops him. Has he? Certainly his relationship with MOM is no more than financial, but he doesn’t see betrayal in his actions so far. Nova can believe it, though.

“If you wanted to force me to march around like a puppet,” Jumbo says, “you could probably do that for a while. Why did you try to seduce me with Oriya?”

“We don’t choose you. You choose us.”

“That sounds like a line out of some recruiting book.”

The apartment chimes an incoming call. Jumbo glances at the small screen and sees it’s Calli, who also contracts for MOM. It’s marked urgent.

“I better take that,” he says.

She nods and he answers.

“Is she there?” Calli’s synthetic voice pipes into the room.

“Who? What are you talking about?”

“The woman in your apartment. She’s Nova, isn’t she?”

Jumbo panics. He looks at Nova and shakes his head, shrugs, bugs his eyes, trying to convey the shock he feels.

“No, no, no. Calli. We’ll talk later. Okay? Later. Not a good time.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, really.”

“Tell me the password we agreed on,” Calli says.

Jumbo’s mind flips over in confusion. What password? He wracks his brain for a MOM password she might know.

“Jumbo?” she prompts.

“It’s, uh,...the pass phrase is ‘Meg is a harpy.’” He guesses that might make her happy.

“Thank you. Let’s talk later.” Calli terminates the connection.

Jumbo sits heavily.

“This rather complicates things,” Nova says. There’s an edge to the words that makes Jumbo feel a sudden chill.

“I didn’t tell her.”

Nova stares at him. She shakes her head slightly.

“If you think I told Calli, then you must believe that I told MOM. There would be a whole platoon of troopers on the way. Check your net. Is anything out there?”

Nova already seems to be in a trance. Her eyes flick this way and that, and her skin flushes pink. It looks like an epileptic fit.

*I could take her.*

The thought burbles up from his gut like acid. Jumbo is bigger and surely stronger than Nova, although she might have some genetic engineering he doesn't know about. Maybe she strangled that guy outside the gates. But he was doped up already, right?

His teeth bare, but she doesn't notice. Jumbo feels trapped, and is ready to chew off the leg, lacking only the final commitment.

Nova sighs deeply and blinks several times. Jumbo senses that this is the moment, if it is to ever be. With a howl he shoves the table at Nova, putting all of his weight into it. All the humiliation, despair, doubt, and even the damned chirping birds, come out in a fury. His anger is volcanic.

Nova tips and falls backwards. Her head cracks against the floor, and the table rolls over her and off. Jumbo is on her in an instant. But she's still in the chair, lying on its back. He has to avoid her legs and come from the side. His hands reach for her throat, his own still shouting out inchoate rage.

Her eyes meet his, and he has an irrational flash of shame. Of betrayal.

She slaps at him with one hand, pushing his own away. But he's too strong for that, and gets both hands around her throat. She kicks at him and connects deep into his thigh with her shoe.

Her neck feels so small in his grip, and the sense of life under his hands is strangely intimate. The wrongness of it shocks him, and his hands loosen involuntarily.

There's a sting on his arm. He looks to see that she's slapped something against him. A drop of blood wells out of a puncture, and then the force of the drug hits his brain.

*Oh Dawkins.*

Jumbo scrambles backwards from her like a crab. He holds his arm. Bug-eyed and panting he hitches up against the wall.

"What did you do?" he cries.

Nova has a predatory smile, one that doesn't reach her eyes but shows her canines.

"We'll see how you quack," she says. "Quack, quack, little duck."

Jumbo's mind eases a little. He knows it's the drug, but it doesn't matter. He watches with detachment while Nova finds her mask and places it against her face. He admires the way her breasts curve when she reaches back to tug the straps. He licks his lips, his eyes soaking in the outline of her body.

*Daaamn I feel goooooood.*

It feels like a furnace has been stoked in his core. At the same time, there's a crushing passion that expresses itself in complex ways. Lust is mixed with affection and infatuation, and above all, the sinking depths of a soul-to-soul bonding with the woman standing in front of him. She squats between his splayed legs and feels his cheek with the back of her hand.

"How do you feel?" she asks. She's still panting from the exertion.

"Warm," Jumbo says. He reaches up a hand to touch hers, but she pushes it away. That hurts him. He wants to know why she would push her hand away. He tries again, and this time she slaps it back. His heart sinks into depths he didn't know existed, and tears well at the corners of his eyes.

She leans forward, and Jumbo can smell the scent of her skin and sweat. It's exotic and fascinating, and he wants more of it.

"You attacked me," she says.

He realizes it's true. Why did he do that? It's incomprehensible.

"You don't deserve me, do you Jacob?"

He shakes his head. The passion is so great that he feels his heart may explode. The sorrow at the answer he gives opens a deep chasm of grief.

"Would you like me to forgive you?"

Now his heart feels raised to dizzy heights. Would she do that? Could Nova look past this unforgivable sin?

“Yes. Yes!”

“I will if you do what I ask. Follow me around like a duck, and I will forgive you.”

Jumbo instantly knows what she wants. It’s silly but it’s fair, a humiliation for a humiliation. He pulls his legs under his body so that he can waddle properly, and tucks his hands under his arms like wings. Nova gives him a flat smile and stands.

“Follow the momma duck, Jacob.”

She turns and takes a few steps. Jumbo waddles after her, lurching from side to side.

“Let me hear you, Jacob.”

Jumbo makes sounds like a duck. The thought of returning to Nova’s good favor races through his veins like fire.

She leads him into the bedroom. Quack, quack, quack.

## Chapter Nine

Everything hurts, inside and out, when Jumbo wakes. His head is pounding as if someone were still beating it. For one brief moment he has no recollection of why he’s in this state, and his mind resembles the old Jumbo, but then the chemistry in his brain catches up to his wakefulness, and the demons begin to clamor.

And the memories seep in.

*Put your hands on my neck, Jacob.*

How many times had he done that because she demanded it? Then she would hit him with her fists, beating him. At first he had cowered from the sudden violence of it. But then he understood that it gave her pleasure, and that made it all right. Jumbo had stayed as still as he could while her fists bit into his face and body.

His jaw sockets ache from the orgasms. He remembers the sudden panic that his mouth had opened so far in those extreme moments that it had come loose from his skull.

*Where is she?*

The thought comes like the panic of a sudden fall. He listens carefully for small sounds of a woman moving in the apartment.

“Nova?”

He’s so afraid that she’s gone that he leaps naked from the bed and bangs his shoulder painfully trying to see around the corner. His leg hurts wickedly, and he limps.

The table has been uprighted and there’s a glass sitting on it. Jumbo picks it up. There’s a bit of white sludge in the bottom. He sniffs it, but he already knows what it is. The realization is like a kick to the gut. He sits heavily and chokes on a sob.

*She took Sleep to forget.*

It wouldn’t be forgetting *per se*, but just a scrubbing of the emotions. The only conclusion he can reach is that Nova is ashamed of him.

He looks in the bathroom mirror, and the sight shocks him. His face is bloody and bruised. His eyes are bloodshot, and it looks like one of his lips was bitten. By whom is uncertain. A green thread is tied around his neck. It’s the color associated with the Continuation, but in this case it’s a personal mark. It means she owns him. He remembers some of the promise he made to her, but it seems like a dream. Or a quacking nightmare.

The drugs are wearing thin, and Jumbo’s higher order thinking has more sway now. He works his jaws and tries to get the circuits in the vault above them to remember rational thought.

Beyond the physical pain is still a residual of the driving lust and abandonment, but these are no longer overpowering. The remaining bewitchment is a bond to Nova that feels like a teenage infatuation. He senses that this will die harder. He knows it’s absurd, but he can’t imagine life without her.

A deep habit turns his thoughts automatically to breakfast. He tries to gin up some enthusiasm for a morning recipe to enjoy, but it feels forced. All he wants is Nova, and there's no end of tasty delights he wouldn't mind sharing with *her*. He searches for a message she might have left, but there's nothing to be found.

Then he remembers being a duck, and the war for reason starts again. In moments of clarity, he understands that his mind is chemically unbalanced, but these glimpses come between soaring hope and plunging despair.

He finds himself back in bed rooting around in the sheets trying to locate her scent. When he catches it, he gasps with joy. He holds on to the feeling as long as he can, willing the reasonable, rational thought away. It's intentional stupidity, but he knows that when this joy fades there will be pain to follow it.

Jumbo dozes. He rolls in his sleep, wrapping himself up in the loose sheet. When he wakes, half on the floor, he's famished, and his head feels thick and useless.

Breakfast is a grim affair. His attempt to salvage the bread dough yielded a loaf Frankenstein would have been ashamed of. It's flat, tough, and over-baked, but with a little butter on it, he can imagine that it represents food.

As he gnaws at the unnatural creation, his gaze falls on the yellow habanero pepper that Oh left. Whatever her name was. Oh-something. This gives Jumbo an idea.

Pain is generally to be avoided, and this is a very good rule. But sometimes there is pleasure in pain, and that paradox is sometimes embodied in the spicy dishes Jumbo likes.

Inside, his emotions are still in turmoil, but the putative food has at least given his neurons energy to chew on. Between zooms and crashes of fantasy, he writes in his notebook, detailing his options.

First he writes

*Nova is a monster*

He underlines the last word, then finds himself striking it out, and his only thought is that he *tried to kill her!*

Jumbo sets his teeth against another slab of quasi-bread and continues.

*Ahab, MOM, Meg, Colt = monsters*

Then he adds some dollar signs after it to make

*Ahab, MOM, Meg, Colt = monsters \$\$\$\$\$\$*

because these are the monsters who provide him with a nice living. The conclusion that he doesn't write, but only thinks is

*I am a monster*

On the surface of it, the monsters in the equations can be subtracted out to leave the all important dollar signs. Is it that simple?

Jumbo finds that pressure from a swelling in his chest is squeezing involuntary tears from his eyes. He retrieves the habanero from the counter. This pepper is far, far spicier than the Serranos that graced his eggs with verdant piqué two days prior. A lifetime ago. Biting into one of these is like setting one's mouth on fire. It's a desperate idea, but he will try anything to derail the obsession with Nova.

He bites down on the wrinkled end of the pepper, severing the end of it with his incisors. The pain is instant. It blooms, making his whole face feel aflame, so that every insult is renewed from the night before. But it centers on his lips and the tip of his tongue. The nerves scream out distress. But he endures it and sweats. Pain as the cure for pain.

Drops begin to roll down Jumbo's face, and he steels himself for another bite. His pencil is poised over the notepad, ready to record any moments of lucidity that may visit. But the angels of inspiration are not moved by his suffering, so he grinds off a larger chunk of the yellow flesh of the pepper, chewing the seeds with his molars.

Now the pain is unbearable, but he does not move. Tears and snot run down his face, and an animal-like howl gathers itself in his chest. Still he waits for his muse.

He chokes back a sob, but finds himself relieved that the reason why is clear now. He ate a vorking habenero! Jumbo fingers the thread around his neck, and feels an instant of bliss as he tugs on it to snap the slender chord. Except that it won't break. He pulls harder, but it just tightens viciously against his skin. Howling now, he embraces this mission, yanking out a drawer to find a knife, sliding it under, setting the serrated teeth against the wicked green promise, and yanking down sharply. It parts, and the release is sweet. Jumbo finds the box of matches he keeps for Gar, and burns every inch of the thread, through the maddening pain of burning from his own mouth.

Then he begins to write. The page is already spotted with the fluids of his outraged inflammatory response, but he writes around these.

*Nova and Oh-something are fanatical. Why do they care so much? Are they insane or just do that want something that badly? What do they want, exactly?*

He can't stand the pain any longer. Jumbo rummages through his stores of food looking for something fatty, and comes up with olive oil. A teaspoon of it wallowing in his mouth provides some relief.

As his mouth simmers, Jumbo realizes he has decided on a course of action. He will figure out what makes these Continuation loonies tick. He will use all the rope Nova will give him. Then he will see them all hanged. Oh-something too. All of them. MOM is an ugly monster, but it buys him bread. Real bread, not this rocky bitshit waste of yeast he's made his breakfast.

The throb of missing Nova is still there, but Jumbo can see through the trick, and he knows it will fade. After all, it's the promise of being alone *forever* that is the darkness that preys on weak minds. An afternoon is bearable. Even a week. But then he'll be back on his food and everything will be fine. Forever is an old friend that only fools fear.

He forces himself to think about baked salmon with a white sauce and capers. It doesn't sound half bad. He stands up and forces himself into routine. He tosses the rest of the quasi-bread into the trash and straightens up. By concentrating on each moment, and threatening himself with more bites of the pepper, he navigates around the most dangerous of the emotional traps that the drugs have laid for him.

Jumbo decides new life is in order, so he pours a cup of pure water into a bowl, adds salt and a large pinch of his yeast starter, half a cup of white flour, stirs, and lets it sit near the sunlight. Within an hour, the smell of the yeast feasting brings comfort and familiarity to the small apartment. He adds more flour, working it in, testing the texture until it's the right consistency. Then he rolls it into a ball and places it in the middle of a round porcelain baking dish with high enough sides that he can cover it with the lid even when the dough rises.

While life blooms in the bread and flour, Jumbo researches what MOM knows about the Continuation. The religion has burgeoned since the Waves, growing from an intellectual movement into a popular one. The tracts of mumbo-jumbo are endless, and it's hard for Jumbo to distinguish myth from reality. Unlike any other religion Jumbo has heard of,

the mysticism level is low. Instead of focusing on the happy hereafter, the Continuation advertises itself as trying to save the present world and the people in it.

Jumbo turns next to a review of MOM actions against the Continuation. It feels good to have his mind engaged. There is a natural alliance between anyone who might end up being classified as Quasi and the Continuation, who embraces trans-humanism as one possible solution to cultural engineering problems, and provides disenfranchised people with a structure and welcoming institution. Despite this, MOM has not taken on the Continuation organization directly. Even in the breathless reporting about Shanghai and the search for Nova, this aspect was minimized. It might be because twenty percent or more of the City population either list themselves as Continuation, and even more have sympathies. This is a large demographic that the Director may not want to anger, especially if his real target is something else altogether. There are also hints that the Director's immediate family has Continuation ties, so it may be something more personal.

There are many reports from intelligence-gathering efforts that are locked to Jumbo. He assumes these reveal sources within the Continuation that are being paid for information. He doesn't feel like asking Meg for access just yet. She'll ask too many questions.

On the whole, the thing is a mystery. The pattern of work requests for filters to find Quasis has a peculiar indifference to the Continuation. It's as if the MOM Director is something else entirely than Quasis per se. This witchhunt is a means to another end. What exactly that is, Jumbo can only guess.

By lunchtime, Jumbo feels that his equilibrium is returning. He thickens his leftover mushroom soup with a bit of sour cream, and takes it and the bread dough down to the kitchen to find an oven.

Jumbo doesn't like to eat with his comfort mask on when he's at home, but the bread will change things. Baking it covered will lock in the steam and create a thin glass-like crust. Done right, it should be a perfect delicacy for about three minutes. Then the crust will go soft. This doesn't give him enough time even to take I back to his apartment for consuming. So Jumbo retrieves butter, his precious bread knife, and a spoon for the soup. Today he will lunch among others in the community kitchen. The normal annoyance he feels at the chaos is replaced for a need for ordinary human contact. It gives him needed insulation from some of the poisonous thoughts that try to intrude.

When the bread comes out of the oven, Jumbo saws off a steaming corner--the best, crispest piece--swipes some butter on it, and gives it to one of the children. He gets a big smile and a 'more!' in return. But there are limits to his generosity. He shoos the kid away and gets down to the business of enjoying a meal. It's work at first, but the bread is amazing and the soup is passable. Half an hour later, he feels that his equilibrium is returning.

Emotions still zoom up and down, but by anticipating them, Jumbo is able to discount the worst effects. He cleans up his space in the community kitchen, and then goes back upstairs. He doesn't want to be alone there, so the plan is to collect his notebook, trade the faux mask for his real one, and then walk around the city. Perhaps he will stop for a coffee and reflect.

The notification beep from his house speakers is audible as soon as Jumbo opens the door to his apartment. His heart leaps.

*Nova!*

He chastises himself for the thought, but it doesn't stop the surge of emotion as he checks who the message is from. Messages, plural. A dozen of them, all from Meg. The first one was sent over half an hour earlier, and read simply "I require your presence." from there they became increasingly strident, ending with a message that consists of nothing but anger emotags.

The thought of Meg throwing such a fit amuses Jumbo. But as the meaning of the message connects to his present circumstance, he begins to become afraid. If Meg knows that Nova was here it will be very bad.

Jumbo sits straight down on the floor, huffing suddenly. His mind races in crazy circles, trying to escape all the besieging conclusions. Eating the rest of the habanero starts to seem like a reasonable plan.

The house speaker chimes again.

"Shut up!" Jumbo yells at it. But it gets him moving like a bee sting. He needs to know.

"Where have you been?" Meg demands immediately.

"What is so damned important?" Jumbo yells at her. His anger flares into a preemptive strike.

“Your contract stipulates that you are to be on call at all times. I needed you to check the results of two of the possible-Quasis your new filters identified.”

“And this couldn’t wait a few minutes?” He feels his control slipping even more.

“Your contract stipulates that you are to be on call at all times,” she says it more slowly this time, as if he’s stupid.

Then he can't stop it, and all the things come out that he's been thinking but not saying for a long, long time, as if his recent trauma has oiled the psychic hinges on his personal box of Pandora. It becomes an End-of-the-World rant.

“Meg, you are the very definition of a cold bitbitch. You’re not a micro-manager, you're a...not even a *nano*-manager...” he stumbles in his rage.

“Pico?” Meg offers, with her VOX set to “hydrochloric acid.”

“--Pico-manager!” Jumbo yells. “I feel pity for every human who has to come in contact with you: they've paid their debts to the universe.

“You know how you tell me exactly how many tenths of a second I am behind in some project? How you find every possible flaw in my reports? Criticize my methods even when you don't understand them? *Especiallly* when you don't understand them? Read my lips here: you have a problem! I don't know what you call it. Electrosis, maybe. But from a human point of view you are defective. You're like a damn machine that just rattles and clatters along annoying the hell out of anyone unfortunate enough to be nearby. If you were a human, you would be an argument for retroactive abortion.

“I fantasize about pulling your plug. I wrap my fingers around the black able that feeds your deranged mind, and torturing you with the idea of non-existence. I imagine you begging for your worthless so-called life, and I just count down the tenths of seconds for you. And then you're gone--poof--sparky poof of gone Meg, evaporated back to the pit of hell that spawned you.

“Tell me the truth, Meg. In the deepest cracks of that electron gizmo you all home, have you ever once encountered the idea of beauty? Have you ever cared about anything but keeping numbers in a precise row with their decimal points lined up? Do you have any feelings at all except constant irritation at the reflection of your own flaws in the world?

"You are a pox, a plague, a disease of the mind. Every second I spend with you my brain tenses up for the next critical remark, the next dig at some weakness you see. Do you have any idea how much I hate you? Or do I have to come out and say it?"

Afterwards, in the panting respite forced upon him by his need to oxygenate, Jumbo can't even remember half the words he's flung at Meg.

"You're fired," is all she says in reply.

Then the terror begins to gnaw at his bones. He's been fired before by the Director, to the point where it became a joke. But this is different. As bad as she is, Meg is his only connection left with MOM.

He tortures himself again, round and round with regret and anger, confused emotions about Nova, back to the evacuating fear of having no grounding at all. Worse, having MOM turned against him.

After half an hour of this, Jumbo plays the only card he can. He sends Meg a photo of his bare face, puffy and bruised, looking even more colorful not than it did when he woke.

"Sorry, Meg" he writes, gritting his teeth. "I had a bad night and took it out on you."

Then he waits. He knows she will make him stew for a while. Then she will hire him back, and hold even more power over him. The thought gives him acid.

The mailbox chimes. It's a termination notice. It isn't even necessary, since he works contract to contract anyway. Then he reads the fine print. It asks him to refund a portion of his current contract, per some cancellation agreement in the legal language. This is bad.

He paces, but the apartment isn't big enough, so he puts on the mask--the MOM issued mask that he will have to return--and heads outside. It feels good to walk away from the apartment, and he imagines that he will walk to the gate and keep on going. Into the Outs, trekking into the big wide world. Away from Nova and Meg. How wonderful that image is.

Jumbo wanders through the streets lined with apartments and small businesses. Some are shuttered. Even those are not immune from the MOM fixtures of high-mounted cameras in their black balls. Maintenance of Order through Monitoring. The sidewalks

are cracked by tree roots that have not lost their optimism under the weight of the concrete. There are few people about.

Humid air lays like a blanket on the City. Thick dark clouds conspire overhead to set the streets aflood. Jumbo doesn't care. He walks down the main roads that lead to the uptown. Soon he's sticky and sweating, and the crawling horror of his situation seems to follow him. He can feel fate reaching out like the fingers of evening shadows, turning his world gray. His soul black.

"What did she do to you?" Meg asks, VOX direct to his audio via a priority channel.

Jumbo's heart hammers. Maybe it's not all lost yet.

"She put her fist into my face."

"There's nothing on her pubs that suggests such violence. Are you sure you didn't assault her?"

Jumbo lurches. He beats back his anger. That time has flown.

"No, Meg. I didn't hit her."

"Why did you let her hit you?"

"She enjoyed it. And I..." he knows there's not a prayer of making a PDA understand about the crazy things humans do in throes of passion. He tries to think of a story to tell Meg, but she knows him too well. And she can watch every breath, every heartbeat, every stressed syllable of speech, every hesitation, even the way he smells.

"You what?"

"I enjoyed it too. You wouldn't understand." Close enough to the truth, he figures.

"You enjoyed being punched in the face? Odd."

"I told you. You can't understand."

"Prove it to me."

"What?"

“That you like being hit in the face.”

“How am I supposed to...?” Jumbo’s afraid of the answer before he can finish the thought.

“Find someone and show me. Does it have to be a woman?”

Jumbo is beside himself. His hatred for Meg illuminates his mind like a flare. He clamps his teeth together and says nothing. He knows she’s ghosting him, watching through his mask cameras. It galls him. What can an arrogant witch of a computer program know about being a breathing, sweating man? He fantasizes again about finding the computer she runs on and pulling the plug. He knows it must be more complicated than that, but the idea of wrapping his fingers around the electrical cord that is Meg’s lifeblood and--

“--how about her?” Meg interrupts his daydream.

Jumbo realizes he’s grinning like a maniac.

A thick-boned woman with a cheap mask walks down the opposite side of the street toward Jumbo. She’s bent under the load of a sack thrown over her back.

“I’m not going to ask this woman to hit me in the face,” Jumbo tells Meg.

Thunder growls, reverberating from one end of the sky to the other.

Jumbo and the woman both stop and look up. A splat of rain hits hardscape. The woman puts her head down and hurries on. Jumbo doesn’t bother to look up her information. What difference does it make?

“I will accept your apology if you prove you’re sincere,” Meg says in his ear.

“How? Not by letting some stranger abuse me.”

“I want to drive.”

“Drive?” Jumbo’s everything hurts, and he’s about to be caught in a downpour, haunted by a psychotic voice in his head. He wonders if death by lightning strike is painless.

“I want you to do everything I tell you to do, and I want you to tell me how you feel.”

The request slowly penetrates the muddle in Jumbo's mind. When it does, a realization arrives with it. Meg's constant badgering, her pico-managing, taking ownership of any interaction Jumbo has with MOM. It's more than just exerting control.

*Meg wants to know what it's like to be human.*

It's for some malevolent purpose, to be sure. But the thought cheers him that the arrogant bit-bitch might inadvertently let slip this proclivity, worse: a weakness. Any tool that can manipulate Meg is valuable. There might be hope after all.

"I will write instructions in your visual field, and you will follow them," she says.

Just like a robot, Jumbo thinks. It's insulting, but at the same time empowering. He has something that Meg personally wants.

She paints an arrow on his heads-up, and Jumbo walks in that direction, further up the street. More fat drops darken the road.

"I'm going to get soaked," Jumbo says.

"Why does that frighten you?"

He thinks about other witches who should have avoided water, and chuckles.

Then he hears it: the rackety-clackety roar of ice hitting metal, and the rush of cracking hail on the pavement.

"It's hail!" Meg sounds delighted.

Jumbo steps beside the trunk of a large live oak to seek shelter from the worst of it.

"Stand in the street!" Meg says. "Stand out in it."

It's all around him now. Leaves and bits of bark are falling out of the tree. The temperature drops rapidly.

"You fired me!" Jumbo shouts into the wind. It would make more sense to use the throat mike, but he feels like shouting.

“I will reconsider.”

“You have to do better than that. Send me a new contract.”

Jumbo knows he’s pushed her as far as he can, and without waiting for a response he steps out into the storm. The truth is that he wants to.

The pain is sharp and immediate. Balls of ice two centimeters across smack into his body. His hands fly to his head to protect his scalp. A ball of hail smacks a knuckle with a crack and Jumbo howls and ducks.

“How does it feel?” Meg asks.

“It hurts!”

“Are you afraid?”

Jumbo is too busy trying to hide all the bits that sting and ache to engage in conversation. Mercifully the worst of it moves on by, and he’s alone in the street, surrounded by thousands of ice balls.

“Were you afraid?” Meg asks again.

Jumbo is breathing hard, and his heart hammers. He shakes his head no.

“If you weren’t afraid, why didn’t you want to leave shelter?”

Jumbo wants to strangle her, but that act has such mixed connotations that he shoves it away as unworthy. He never wants to touch another throat. Not even an electrical one.

“It’s not...pleasant being shot at by ice bullets,” he says between panting.

“But the mask protected your face. What was so unpleasant?”

“Meg,” Jumbo reins in an insult. He’s done venting. “Meg, pain is not pleasant, even when you’re not really afraid of dying. Look at my finger.” He holds it up for inspection. It throbs where the ice pummeled it, but in truth it doesn’t show much.

“You humans are so sensitive to your peripherals,” Meg says.

“Yeah? Well, I can’t just plug in a new hand if this one is damaged.” Jumbo fingers sore spots on his head. Nothing seems to be bleeding, at least.

“Thank you for conducting the experiment.”

Jumbo’s jaw drops. Meg said thank you? The whole world has turned upside down, it seems.

“Uh, welcome, I guess. Do I get my job back?”

“I have a new contract ready for you.” There’s a slight buzz after the end of the sentence that is a peculiarity of communicating with Meg. Jumbo has learned to interpret it as an unfinished thought.

“But...?” he prompts.

“I would like to continue these experiments,” Meg says. There’s a rare tentativeness to the accompanying emotags.

“Is that a condition of my future employment with MOM?”

“Does it need to be?”

Again, this is more nuanced than the Meg that Jumbo has sketched out in his mind. The idea of voluntarily spending any time in her presence is not an appealing one. Still, a compromise is called for.

“I’m sure we can reach some understanding. As long as you’re reasonable.”

“Good,” she says. “I will have some equipment delivered to your apartment.”

## Chapter Ten

A real night’s sleep does Jumbo wonders. He still hurts all over, but the mess of molecules that were fiddling with his emotions is almost gone. He can even think of Nova without drifting into dreamy fantasy, although the deep-rooted longing twinges. More and more, it’s the rational reaction of consternation that accompanies the scene in his mind. A whole day has come and gone without her contacting him, a fact he is happy to absorb without analysis that might spoil his breakfast.

He sits outdoors in a City scrubbed by the storm. Water outlines the cracks and contours of the ground, and the air is still cool. He crunches into a toasted bagel. The soft flesh of the lox is a delight, and the sharpness of the razor-thin slices of onion work deep magic in his mind.

*This is how the world is supposed to be.*

The feeling flashes warmth through Jumbo's bones, but fades in the blizzard of facts that he must consider. Nova wants him to do something dire, and isn't likely to give up. Meg can be controlled--maybe--only by doling out bits of Jumbo's personal experience. He still has to learn what price he's paid. These two irresistible forces will converge on him and crush him like a clove of garlic under a knife.

The smart thing to do is to do a little more research, add analytical value to these facts, and then turn then whole thing over to MOM. This will satisfy his own curiosity and turn him into a hero. Maybe they will send him to Asia to investigate something. The fantasy momentarily distracts him from the meal, and he is surprised to find himself licking the last crumb from his fingers.

Jumbo scans to make sure there's not another malevolent gaze fixed on him, finishes the cold remains of his coffee, and leaves.

First in the cabinet of curiosities is the Oh-woman who came to make him breakfast.

Oh-something is Oriya, Jumbo remembers, but only after he checks. He messages her a request to meet in a virtual space. Jumbo doesn't care for virtual reality, even though he grew up on it, but he figures she's more likely to agree.

The reply is immediate: she's blocked him from communicating with her. That stings.

Jumbo suddenly wonders if Oriya has been killed. It's certainly not something he would put beyond that psychotic messiah Nova, which is how he's forcing himself to think of her. He spends a few minutes tracking Oriya's latest movements on the pubs. She's there all right, but he wonders if her identity is being spoofed. It does look like her though, and after a few minutes of close inspection, Jumbo reverts to being hurt that she's blocked him.

He messages Philly, the woman he accosted for staring at him. He doesn't want to meet her, but he asks for pointers about how to learn more about the Continuation.

The coffee is not sitting well with him. He wonders if the cream cheese was off.

The sourness in his gut expands to Jumbo's other organs as he trudges toward the City center. All he really wants is to be left the hell alone.

*Why won't they leave me the hell alone?*

This thought is an exit ramp for self-pity, but that is against his rules. Anyway, the question is too easy. It's all because of Shanghai. And hence because of Jumbo. It's a cosmic loop of bite-ass, and that's that. It's a reflexive hex that settles a karmic account. Karmic Accounting would be a good place for Meg to work, he figures: doling out punishment to twelve significant digits.

Jumbo tries to wriggle out of the implications of his predicament. Really, he just wants to have the peace to enjoy life. A little food, a little mental stimulation. A drink now and again. Good friends. Tomatoes. What else can a man wish for that has any value?

*The problem with men is that they overreach.*

Jumbo nods to himself with this realization. He finds a dry spot to sit and writes this observation down.

*It's the pursuit of happiness that leads to unhappiness.*

Jumbo feels his teeth fall into the established indentations in his wooden pencil. He went too far with Shanghai. He was ambitious. That twinges a memory, and after a moment's search finds the quote he's looking for, from *MacBeth*:

I am in blood  
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,  
Returning were as tedious as go o'er

Philly's timing could hardly be better. She sends him an address with a short message.

"You'll need a guide. Good Speed."

## Chapter Eleven

Jumbo sips rum with Gar, and lets the familiar comfort soak into his bones like rain in July. Gar is full of woe about the hail storm, and even the rum doesn't seem to be an antidote. He keeps holding up his fingers to show how large the stones were, and they keep getting bigger. Jumbo fears that soon the ice that hit his head out on the street will have been large enough to kill him.

Gar has remarked about his face, and gently inquired--as far as Jumbo can tell--but there's no way to explain, so Jumbo just smiles and changes the subject.

*When we age, we learn the exchange rates for time and money and affection. The big reveal at the end of life is that you know who your friends are.*

Jumbo's gaze falls upon a box in the corner. It's the only bit of clutter in the room. He hasn't looked inside yet, but he knows it's something Meg wants from him. Part of the deal with the devilBot Jumbo has made.

After Gar leaves, Jumbo prepares to give the devilBot its due.

The haptic suit is uncomfortable, and Jumbo already regrets agreeing to this. The name isn't even accurate. It's a very thin mesh that turns the movements of his limbs, torso, and neck into positional information that can be used to map Jumbo's body with high resolution. There're are no active feedbacks, Meg tells him.

This was the deal with Meg, and Jumbo wishes he had set and explicit end date to this fiasco. It's sticky and itchy and hot, and he has to wear it under his clothes, which ride up uncomfortably. The City did not stay cool long aver the storm, and now the humidity surrounds him. Sweat finds new pathways down his body as he strides once again over the cracked sidewalks.

"What can you possibly learn from this?" he asks her, trying hard to keep the irritation from showing.

"You take for granted the flow of movement. You don't even think about it. I don't have any peripherals that integrate that well. I'm curious."

"I imagine there are whole libraries of data like this. Why me?"

"There are, but this is real-real. I have the sense that I am really ghosting you."

That is absolutely creepy to Jumbo. He's gotten used to the fact that since he uses MOM equipment, she gets all the sensory information from his mask, and this can even be useful during an investigation. But with the full haptic suit, she's saying that she's right here on top of his skin too. He shudders, wondering what other intimacies she has in mind.

"So I've walked around for you. Are we done?"

"There's an air conditioned bar not far from here. How about a beer?"

Jumbo practically drools at the thought.

"Are you buying?"

"I will buy you a beer."

Jumbo has the feeling that he's being conditioned like Pavlov's Big Sweaty Guy. Clearly, his relationship with Meg has grown to a deeper, more intimate stage. Just the opposite of what any sane person would want.

Jumbo has not one beer, but three. The brew is a little green, but it is cold, served with ice in it, and the air in the bar is deliciously dry.

He sits alone, mumbling responses to Meg when she bothers him. The feeling of looseness is very pleasant. He feels like whatever troubles there are in the world, they can be deferred as long as the amber liquid flows. Somewhere in the depths of his mind, he wonders if Meg is intentionally getting him drunk, but that thought joins all the other troublesome notions in a swirl down the drain of not giving a good bitshit.

This reverie has to end, and it's the sudden urge to relive his bladder that penetrates the fog between his ears. He walks carefully into the small bathroom and hooks the latch on the door behind him. It smells astringent from cleaning solvents.

Jumbo tugs his pants open, the urge building in proximity to his goal. Then he remembers the haptic suit. A cry of anguish escapes his lips as he fumbles with the front of it, in a race with an unstoppable outpouring of relief.

He just makes it, and sighs with joy as the painful pressure hisses away. It's as close to bliss as a man can come without pharmaceuticals.

A sharp sting strikes his left calf. Jumbo jerks his leg back and turns reflexively. His mouth is already open to shout affront when he sees the snake curving back for another strike. It's a fat diamondback rattlesnake.

Jumbo screams and launches away from it as it strikes a second time. He feels the slap-sting again, on his ankle this time, and then he crashes into the door. It cracks but doesn't break. He gobbles terror as the thing rattles behind him, impossibly loud in the small room. Jumbo finally gets the hook off the door and falls through it, pants around his ankles. He scrambles away from it, bellowing "snake!"

The reaction in the room is immediate. Half a dozen masks are trained on him, and then at the open door. One man cautiously approaches while Jumbo feels his leg for the wounds.

"What kinda snake?"

"Rattler" Jumbo says. He can't find any holes in the mesh of the haptic suit.

The man cautiously inspects, approaching slowly until he's at the door. He ducks down to look near floor level.

"Ain't no snake, Lastfer."

And Jumbo realizes he's been made a fool of by Meg. She loaded the virtual overlay on his mask input without telling him, and constructed the snake out of raw pixels. The suit has haptic feedback after all. Now Jumbo is going to be a permanent fixture of the video history of this place. A laughingstock.

He stands and fastens his clothes, trying to retain whatever dignity Meg hasn't just stolen from him. He won't give her the satisfaction of visibly losing his temper again, but he's boiling inside.

"Don't ever call me a bitbitch," she says to him in a voice just above freezing, but Jumbo doesn't reply. The trip back to his apartment is frosted with silent hatred.

Jumbo strips and puts the mask and slimline suit into a box. Then he settles and lets the torment sink in. He feels used. By Meg. By Nova. A pox on both of them. But he also blames himself.

*I have committed the mortal sin of complacency. I had the temerity to try to enjoy life.*

That clearly has to end, but it's a mode of being that Jumbo is not comfortable with. He feels around the edges of it. Part of his mind wills the problem away, but it looms, impossible to ignore.

The most reasonable course of action to him is to commit fully to the plan he was already considering. Find out everything he can about Nova and the local Continuation network, and bathe them all in blood. Find all the Quasis and all the threats to MOM, and hand them over to MOM on the condition that he never has to work with Meg again.

But still his thoughts circle. That's not quite it is it? The Director doesn't really care about the Continuation. There's no all-out search for Nova, despite their ostentatious investigation. Or do they already know where she is and are just biding their time? That thought gives him the instant terrors, and he begins to sweat.

He knows he needs cover. Running to tell MOM now about Nova would only lead to questions he has no good answer to. But if he does a real investigation and brings back useful intelligence in addition to delivering Nova to them, that would make him a hero. He notices that it also allows him to defer any dramatic action, which very much adds to the attraction of the plan.

Jumbo sits and ruminates, staring out the open door to the balcony. The waning rays of the day silhouette the hail-battered tomato stalks and leaves against an orange sky. He scratches his pencil against the raw paper.

*The calculus of momentary delights defies conventions. How can it be that so many lovely interludes can sum to so little? If I string together all the delicacies, culinary adventures, the accumulated satisfaction of good coffee in the morning, the subtle mixed signals of a good wine, what is the total? Somehow it seems to be less than the constituents.*

He feels empty.

Maybe, he argues to himself, it's just the effect of the chemical rape and Meg's abuse. There could be some comfortable spot within distance that will let him avoid the destructive forces that seem to be converging, and allow him to go on avoiding pain and enjoying surfing the sensual.

It just doesn't seem likely.

Jumbo senses that he may be on the edge of self-pity or self-loathing, both despicable conditions, so he turns to the practical. Where exactly is this haven of Continuation that Philly sent the longitude and latitude for?

He prompts the house electronics to show him on the wall screen. He stares at the red dot blinking far to the west of the city, at the base of a small mountain. Far into the Outs.

The idea stuns him. How could Nova or anyone else could think that he would leave the protection of the City to learn about this cult?

But that initial shock is just the reaction he should expect, he realizes. On a deeper level--here he feels the tomato worm turning as if it were still trying to get free--it's exactly the right thing to do. Wasn't he imagining how glorious it would be to get away from Meg and the developing madness here?

It's a certainty that begins to make his veins glow with righteousness. He will go, and he will judge the Continuation. Whatever information he brings back will be valued, but not thrust him into the middle of the conflict with Bhakras Power. It's a legitimate way to follow up on this nominal Quasi threat. Maybe everything will be back to normal by the time he returns.

*And I will be judged.*

That thought stops him, pencil hovered to write something like a last testament. The Book of Jumbo, in which the self-absorbed reaches a crisis in which he must confront the world or run from it pissing himself.

He drops the pencil and walks to the balcony, grey now in the dying light. He gathers up a prickly stalk in his hand and tugs, just like he imagined pulling Meg's plug. The roots have gone deep and strong in the soil. Gar has done excellent work. The smell of the bruised plant wells up associations of summer. He yanks it out, snapping the stalk, and hurls it over the edge. He grabs another in each hand, forcing a commitment that horrifies him, and murders them both, and again until the pots are ruined, empty of promise and leaking their potting.

The loss is terrible.

He yells into the gloaming.

"Judge me then! Go on! Judge me!"

## Chapter Twelve

Jumbo has never stood before the West Gate until now. In a lot of ways it represents the end of the world. He wears his civilian mask, which is outdated and uncomfortable, but it doesn't mark him as a monster.

He watches the steady stream of foot traffic through the gate. Once he leaves they might not let him back in.

Meg knows about this expedition, which Jumbo has prepared for by cooking some statistics so that they indicate a possibility of a source of Quasis to the West. He even got her to crack open one of the confidential reports and was delighted to find that MOM intelligence confirmed his made-up theory. Apparently they have someone on the inside of the Continuation leadership passing secrets. Meg seemed happy to be rid of him, and told him not to expect to be reimbursed for anything.

Jumbo carries only essentials, the heaviest of which is drinking water. He has a brown floppy gardener's hat that he knows makes him look ridiculous, but it keeps the sun off of his head.

The thought reminds him of Gar, and what will happen when the man shows up at Jumbo's apartment to water the plants. In Jumbo's imagination, Gar stops in his tracks at the sight of the ruined pots, face purpling with rage, arms fluttering up above his head to invoke the wrath of the Earthman's gods. The scourge to come would probably be more hail, Jumbo figures, only the size of apples this time.

No, the real damage will be to his friendship. Gar will never understand. That loss bites deeper than Jumbo would have imagined.

The act of catharsis just seems like a stinking waste now, standing where he is in the sweltering in the shadeless dusty road. He mourns for his prize plants, which now must be curling under the cruel sun, squeezing their roots for water, demanding that they go deeper. *Do your job man! We're dying up here!* He wonders if a plant can sense that it has tipped over. Surely the fine tuning of photosynthesis would notice the sun on one side and none on the other. Would some kind of alarm klaxon sound? *Abandon plant!*

But it doesn't matter because he strangled them anyway, snapping stems as a surrogate for Meg's life spark. He did a good job of ruining.

Breakfast was unadorned bread with water, and as the crumb turns to sugar in his churning gut, the reviews from his sensitive system are not good. The acid in the back of his throat seems like a permanent fixture now. It gives him nightmares and leaves him tired in the morning. It's another step down to the cellar. The dankness of his grandmother's canning room carved under the house is a childhood association with death. The jars of fruits and vegetables became pickled organs on display, and the small room a burial vault.

The acid companion that is turning his throat raw is another level of descent marked by the inexorable shadows that pass, marking off life for tomatoes and people alike. The planet's *pas de deux* around the sun is a ratchet that tightens the arteries, squeezes the liver, and pushes bile up into one's throat.

He feels old.

Jumbo has brought along the rest of the habanero pepper, which has been dried in the sun. It's the only medicine he has against morbid self-doubt, and he threatens himself with this weapon of mutual destruction.

"Eyes on the vorking ball, Jacob," he mutters. It's his brother speaking from a time when the shadows were a lot younger. When that doesn't work, he tries a newer prayer:

"Save yourself," which he embellishes with "you vorking bastard."

He looks around for his guide. A part of him so wants it to be Nova, that he aches south of his navel from the thought.

"You're late," comes the message. It's from Oriya. Oriya the Cook. Oriya who won't take his calls.

He looks at her suspiciously. Is it Nova wearing a borrowed ID? But that racing of heart and expectation dies quickly. It really is Oriya. She has a loose pull-over that looks like a robe, but it only goes to her knees. It's tan, probably cotton, and has a bit of shine that says it's water-shedding. She has the hood pulled up but not cinched. All he can see of Oriya's face is her chin. He catches a glimpse of a green necklace under it. Her legs are covered in a light material too, a little darker shade of brown, and she wears high sturdy boots. He automatically looks at her baggage, wondering what sorts of delicacies might be hidden inside.

“Sorry,” he replies finally. “I didn’t expect you.”

“I didn’t expect me either.”

Jumbo suspects that she is being punished, or at least feels that way. The emotags are not warm and furry. Not bunny-like at all. More lizard-like: older and wiser and afraid of things that fall from the sky.

His instinct is to be polite, to tell her to go home. But Jumbo can’t go back now, not without something to show for all this. He assures himself that Oriya can’t be anywhere as bad as Meg.

“Why is it you?” he asks her.

“Let’s get through the gate. You don’t have anything illegal on you?”

“No.”

“No Sleep? No drugs at all?”

Jumbo is offended. What does she think he is? He shakes his head and twists his mouth into disgust so she can see it.

Passing out the Gate turns out to be easy. They just walk out, single file with Oriya in front, in a long line of others, fluttering the colors of their clothes in the half-hearted breeze.

The bridge over the old ring road fell years ago, and there is a steep descent down to pass around the giant puzzle of concrete and iron remains. Carts pulled by electric tuggers, farm animals, and humans pass in the opposite direction, carrying food and goods into the City. The commercial gate is farther north, and those hauling their wares up the incline here must have thought hard about it first.

As the horizon is swallowed by the great ditch carved out for the six lane freeway, Jumbo’s spirits fight to stay afloat. Oriya seems sullen or afraid, and the theory of this journey is nothing like the actual experience of it so far. A tangle of fear convolutes his already-challenged innards, which feel dangerously liquid.

The Outs have a reputation for swallowing up people. Jumbo knows more facts than most because of his access to MOM data. He knows that control out here varies, and

that property laws and personal safety change with the control of regional organizations, but it's generally safe as long as local custom is recognized. Unless there's a new Wave, when the City goes into lock-down and expels undesirables. The leaders of the gangs and more formal government out here don't like having plague victims dumped in their lap. A lot of those have died right here on this road.

Jumbo looks around, expecting to see a bone sticking out. His spine tingles from the creepiness of the idea.

"Been out here before?" he asks Oriya. The message bounces back, and he realizes that she's turned off her network connection. Jumbo flips the switch on his as well, and tries again with the point to point protocol.

"Yes," she says.

Jumbo waits, but that seems to be all he's going to get.

They pass the cracked lanes in silence, and start up the other side. Then they continue west at a good walking pace along an old highway. Several other people are heading the same direction, and form a loose group of about a dozen travellers. Oriya lengthens her stride to catch up to the tail end, and Jumbo follows.

Shacks made of miscellany cluster near the road. These seem to be occupied by vendors hawking everything from power cells to the latest pathogen upgrades. One has roasted chicken hanging in view that smells so delicious that Jumbo's mouth waters. He thinks about the dry food he has packed.

Every step seems like another loss of sanity. He stops and looks back. Only the top of the West Gate is visible, and it's far beyond that to his apartment.

They walk and walk. The chatter from the group drifts to him, but Jumbo doesn't participate. It annoys him that Oriya speaks to several of the other men, although he can't figure out why. And walk.

Topping a rise, Jumbo sees a sprawling clutter off to the southwest. It's on the slope of a hill, visible several miles away. He points and asks Oriya.

"It's the main refugee camp around here. They call it Slopetown, since it's built on the side of a hill. That's basically their sanitation system—the rain and that hill."

“Is it populated?” Jumbo asks.

“Always. Since MOM is running good people out of the City, it will be full.”

When the sky in front begins to warm into oranges and reds, the group reaches an obvious campsite. There is a ring of stones for a campfire and flattened earth all around. The voices reflect raises spirits as their owners pick spots to settle for the night.

After a fire is made, feet are dealt with, and a semblance of home is created, someone sets up a local network for gaming and communication. Others slip on comfort masks of cotton or denim and rest their bodies.

“Read us something, Speaker,” a tall thin man says.

Others join in the request. Most half-heartedly, Jumbo reckons. He stays silent and watches.

Oriya stands near the fire. She wears a faux wrap-around mask that hardly covers her nose.

“I wish to speak,” she says.

“Hear the Speaker,” comes a lone female voice out of the dark.

“What I am to you, you are to each other,” she turns with her arms wide. She’s orange from the flame.

“I must apologize for the injury I’m about to give, for I have no lies to tell you. If you should see yourself in my words, see your own hands as others might see them, it is only because you have ears to hear. I will read ‘Pavlov’s God’ now. It was written by one of us.”

And so she does, in a voice Jumbo hardly recognizes. She paces the words with feeling.

When the last tones of the great clamor have rung out  
The cosmic bell itself rotted away  
Its protons decayed  
All the suns that lit dark departed  
And nothingness itself sheds its dignity  
To become naked *not-even-nothing*

After all that  
Remain the words from the beginning  
Needing neither proton nor nothingness  
To demand justification:

Was it good?

The fire pops sparks in arcs in the background. Oriya makes a sign of inclusion, a wide circle in the air with a line under it. It has the look of a sign of recognition between members.

“Is this good?” she asks.

It hurts Jumbo’s head. What the hell is she talking about? The chemical foundations of his mind seem to have bottomed out. Maybe they’ve all defected to his stomach to stir up trouble.

“Tell me if it’s good,” she says.

The thin man stands. He’s wearing a comfortable-looking faux mask, and the holes for his eyes are dark pools, making him look like a cartoon villain. When he speaks, it’s in a soothing baritone that invites agreement. It’s a politician’s voice.

“I see good, Speaker. I do,” he says. Others around the fire repeat the words in a collective mutter. Jumbo just gnaws on a slab of bread, trying to figure out how to sit comfortably on a stump.

“But I have trouble,” the man continues. “The storm took the roof off my house. And it ruined...well it just about ruined me. I’m not one to ask for help.”

Oriya nods. She looks around for others, but the muttering around the fire has turned to the idea of food and its consumption by humans.

“We will eat,” she says. “And sleep. Tomorrow we will consider what is best. All of us.”

Jumbo is jealous of the way the woman seems to get immediate deference. What has she done to earn that? He realizes after a moment of stewing about it that his feeling is petty, and he’s just hungry for proper food. And tired. He never imagined that he would be sleeping on the ground.

Food is produced, water boiled, and the sharp aroma of sliced onions makes Jumbo's stomach revolt against the unadorned bread it is making do with. A whole roasted chicken is chopped and dropped into the soup just before it is to be served. Most of the travellers seem to have their own bowls and spoons, but there are enough extras to go around.

Oriya stands beside the soup servers and raises her arms for attention again.

"Who would like to speak before we eat? Does someone have Good to share?"

Jumbo can hear the capital in Good now. It's one of those mystical mumbo-jumbo concepts that fool people into believing something that doesn't make sense. But it probably feels nice to believe.

A short woman with braided blond hair piled atop her head, with the ends trailing over her face, raises her hand.

"Naomi, please," Oriya says, gesturing toward her.

Naomi clears her throat and fidgets, twisting her hands together. There's relative silence for a moment, and then she speaks in a wavering voice, growing stronger as she goes.

"We are the universe," she says. "We come from stars that died to give us carbon. Unlike them, we know who we are. We are vast and all encompassing. But our sparks are minute and weak. Our wakefulness is a precious opportunity. We may know ourselves and wonder. And that is Good."

The refrain circles the campfire.

"As we consume our own matter, let us become united in mind as we are in the Real. Let it lead to greater self-understanding. Let us continue."

"Let us continue," repeat a few voices.

As the soup warms Jumbo, he wishes for ice. But the food eases his spirit, and he falls naturally into the sweet existential joy of taste and texture. It's a kind of mindfulness, a meditation on the senses. Oriya approaches with her own bowl as Jumbo is finishing. She asks him to sit on the ground, and she sits too, with her back leaning into Jumbo's. It's comfortable and intimate in a novel way.

“Impressive performance,” Jumbo says to the night. He feels the back of Oriya’s head move as she leans to spoon soup.

“I do what I must,” she says.

“You put on a pretty good act in my apartment, Oriya. But I don’t get the sense you’re a very happy person.”

“I don’t like to be the center of attention,” she says. “And disorder gives me nerves.”

“Where did the mumbo-jumbo come from? Some Continuation holy book?”

He feels her stiffen, and he regrets asking the question. ‘Mumbo-jumbo’ was supposed to be light-hearted, a self-reference.

“You don’t get it.” Her voice holds contempt.

Jumbo sighs. He can feel the acid floating on the soup, already clawing at his esophagus. He’ll be hoarse in the morning.

“Shit,” he says. The word sums it all up.

*If we’re eating ourselves, then we’re shitting ourselves too.*

“Is it that bad?” Oriya asks behind him. She doesn’t sound sympathetic.

“Ah, I’m going to have nightmares all night. If I can sleep at all. Then I’ll wake up with my throat aching and be exhausted all day. I don’t suppose you have anything alkaline on you?”

“An anti-acid? You can get them all over the City. Did you know this would be a problem?”

“Left them laying on my table at the apartment.”

Ten minutes later, Oriya has organized Jumbo two different types of medication for his condition just by walking around the campfire.

“You need to thank them,” she says when she hands him the bottles.

“Who was it?”

“All of us. Just say something appropriate. No mumbo-jumbo.”

Jumbo puzzles over it for a moment, then he stands, his knees popping.

“Thank you,” he attempts. The voices around the fire carry on with their conversations. He tries louder.

“Thank you all, uh, whoever gave me the meds here.” He holds them up.

“No,” Oriya says. “Thank all of us.”

He suddenly realizes she means the group as a whole, as if the group were a sentient entity.

“I would have been miserable tonight,” he says. That gains him some attention.

“Imagine concentrated acid eating at your flesh while you try to sleep. The group came through for me. I am humbled, and...uh...proud.” He winces at the lameness of it. She said no mumbo-jumbo.

But there’s polite applause in return. He waves at the darkness and sits again.

“Are all these people with you? Continuation, I mean.” he asks Oriya.

“Two or three are. Besides me. But this area is controlled by us, and the rest know how to be polite.”

“So you’re some kind of political leader?”

“In training, I guess. Do you know what a Speaker is?” She says the word like it’s a holy artifact, to be kept behind glass and alarms. *Speaker*.

Jumbo knows a little from his research, but the emotions that Oriya displays imply that he hasn’t really understood the meaning of what he’s read.

“Can you tell me?”

She actually smiles and pats his hand.

“Later, Lastfour. I need to meditate on the future. There will be time.”

The smile gives him a small glow, and he realizes how hungry he is for simple human affection. He thinks of Gar, and his face becomes a grimace of vicarious pain. That debt will be long in the repaying.

Oriya seeks solitude just beyond the circle of flickering light. Some of the others arrange their sleeping paraphernalia and prepare to turn in. Games and conversation lift voices in the thick night air. A bottle of illegal bug repellent makes the rounds.

The poor optics in Jumbo’s civilian mask can’t keep up with the flare of the central blaze and the contrast to the blackness around it. He turns away from the others and pops it off with a grateful sigh. Then he slips on a cotton comfort mask. He suddenly remembers that he’s seen Oriya’s naked face. He thinks about that for a while, trying to find a way to arrange his limbs on the ground that doesn’t hurt. He uses his pack for a pillow and drifts in and out of slumber. The fantasy images turn from Oriya to Nova as soon as his executive powers slip, and the imaginary tales his mind spins rip the scab off of the chemical wound to his brain. He sighs and burps as the medicine goes to work, and he manages to rest in some generous meaning of the word.

Jumbo is cursed with a light sleep as a rule, and he wakes late in the night to some small sound. The dream of Nova poking him with a stick turns out to be substantially accurate, and Jumbo sits up, rubbing the sore spot where the tree root has dug into his ribs.

The fire has guttered down to a ghost of itself. There’s a woman crying off in the dark. Jumbo reaches into his pack for his mask, and replaces the cotton one. The boot-up screen ruins his night vision, but he switches the infrared filter on as soon as it’s ready. He pans, searching.

Oriya’s spot is empty--only her pack lays there. He sees her about thirty meters away, sparkling from the image enhancement. He zooms and braces his chin on his knees to steady the view. Oriya sits cross-legged on the ground. She wipes her nose with the back of her hand. Another sob sounds through the distance and dark, clear and agonizing.

Jumbo tries a point-to-point message, pinging to see if the mask will respond. The address resolves, so he sends:

“Are you okay?”

Then a moment later, when there's no response he sends:

"Can I help somehow?"

"No!" she shouts, throwing her raw voice at him as if a missile.

Jumbo starts at the sound of it, wounded by the tone. There's no ambiguity at all in the intention. Oriya is furious beyond reason, and he is the target.

He tries to go back to sleep, but the hole he feels in his core is no longer the withdrawal of sophisticated drugs from his brain. It's simple loneliness, but there's an intellectual bleakness that accompanies the raw feeling that makes it much worse than the letdown from Cupid could be. It feels real and permanent.

He can't sleep now. He wishes for the half bottle of wine just sitting there in his apartment. He imagines the sound of the removing the cork, the sound of pouring the dark liquid, the feel of it sloshing in a stemmed glass, the first scent of it, the complex taste. It's rich but not sweet. What a simple delight. He supposes the carbon in the wine came from dead stars too. It's sort of romantic, but if you can't taste the difference, what's the point?

*I miss me.*

He realizes it suddenly. There was the Jumbo before, which he is already romanticizing. Then all this bitshit happened. And now there's the here-and-now-Jumbo. He wishes he could go back in time and warn himself.

But another part of him knows this sentimentality is bitshit too. There is life to be lived. Maybe even Life to be Lived. A deep recess of inner strength begins to lay the groundwork for a formidable defensive formation. Walls and ramparts and heavy gates made of mental fibers tough enough to withstand--

--he hears the shuffling feet that can only belong to Oriya, and stiffens. She wouldn't put a knife in his back, would she?

When she curls against his back and drapes an arm over him, the shock immobilizes him.

"I'm cold," she says.

And it must be the truth because her whole body is shivering.

The first thing Jumbo can think of is that she's sick. He's wide awake and heart thrumming with fear of invisible death. He takes her hand in his and checks the temperature.

No, she really is cold. It seems impossible in the sultry fog that acts like a blanket, but her hand feels chill. He relaxes with a huge sigh, and can't even formulate the question that buzzes around the periphery. Something like "What in vorking vork-vork is going on?"

Still, she did yell at him. A single word, but violent, torn from a heart that was...what? How can she be that angry at someone she hardly knows?

Jumbo adjusts slowly, turning. Partly because it seems chivalrous, but also because it's a balm to that cutting loneliness. He wraps her slender shaking form in his substantial arms and warms her. She makes an animal mewling sound, then a shudder from deep inside. His cheek touches hers and comes away wet.

And so he holds her for the remaining hours of the night. Even when the rocks and roots and other unfortunate accidents of topology vex him. He dozes fitfully, waking to wonder, and then fading into psychedelic dreams of grapes being stomped by a celestial committee concerned with the proper ratio of nitrogen to oxygen in the product.

It's been a long time since Jumbo spent the night with a woman in his arms that he didn't pay for or otherwise lease with some *quid pro quo*. Not counting Nova, who must assume a special place in his memetic cabinet of curiosities. No, *that* is something to tell only to the hypothetical great-great-grandkids by means of some time-locked message. He distracts himself from a sharp point stuck right in the third rib by imagining how the text might be composed. He laughs at his own wit, which causes such immediate pain to the aforementioned bone that he gasps at the same time from the intensity of it.

It's enough to rouse Oriya temporarily from whatever darkness her mind has recessed to.

"m s'rry," she slurs. "m s' s'rry."

And even in her sleep the tears continue to ooze out between her lids, cluster in fat drops on her lashes, and fall to roll down Jumbo's cheek and then to the thirsty earth where, one day, with luck, a tomato plant might take root.

## **Chapter Thirteen: Bad Things Will Happen**

When the promise of dawn begins to wash the stars out of the sky, Jumbo hears Oriya's breathing change. He feels her stiffen, still wrapped up in his arms. He pretends to sleep as she extricates herself, sensing that she wants privacy. Maybe she's as embarrassed as he is.

So he lays there, even more uncomfortably than before, needing to move, void, and eat.

Voices are beginning to lift in greeting or complaint.

When he sit up, practically everything hurts, from his sore neck to some kind of bug bite on his lower calf. In between are numerous physical insults that hint at the reason beds were invented.

He wanders off in the pine trees to be alone for a moment. Some part of his brain is now wired to jolt adrenaline into his veins at the slightest shape that could be a snake, so it's not a relaxing stroll. Still, the trees are peaceful. On some biochemical level they may all be trying to murder one another, but Jumbo can assume blissful ignorance of such unpleasantness. The thought reminds him of the damned tomatoes again.

Behind him, evidence of group intelligence burgeoning. The smell of coffee soon makes Jumbo's stomach rumble, and he heads back.

Breakfast is informal, and somehow during that time Oriya organizes the day. She keeps aloof from Jumbo, not sparing a word for him. A certain amount of grumbling becomes evident, and Jumbo finds out that the whole group is going to spend the day fixing a roof on Wired's house, that being the name of the tall guy with the politician's voice.

Jumbo isn't sure how this miraculous consensus emerged until a yelling match develops between Oriya and a woman who calls herself Janus, like Jane and us.

Janus has a voice and manner of speaking that make Jumbo finds so strident and grating on his nerves that he begins to wish for momentary deafness. This gradually turns to more violent thoughts. Oriya isn't yelling back. She uses her hands in controlled gestures that invite cooperation, pulling, turning, pushing down symbolic emotion, explaining. Jumbo can't hear the words, but he's impressed with her manner in contrast to the rude and violently verbal Janus. At Oriya's side is Naomi, who fidgets and wrings her hands, which rather ruin the supportive role she's obviously assumed for herself.

Jumbo walks over. The others are circling too. The muttering is one-sided now. No one else seems to like Janus's voice either.

"Don't owe you nuthin'" Janus says.

"No, you don't owe me. But you owe these people, don't you?"

"Don't owe nobody!"

"They shared food and protection during the night."

"That was my choice, and theirs. Going my own way now."

"That's your choice," Oriya says. But there's an unstated menace that leaks through her tight smile.

"Anyone else want to leave with this woman?" Oriya asks loudly, and looks around. There are shifting of feet, but no voices in response.

"Good then," she says, and turns back. "People travel in groups out here for a reason, Janus. This is your first trip, I understand. I'm guessing it will be your last."

Janus still has hands on hips, her oral weaponry set to blast again, but she hesitates.

"Basically you want to keep going along this road,": Oriya says, "There's not much of a town for a ways, so I hope you're provisioned. Maybe you can buy something off of somebody. But only if they haven't heard how selfish you are."

Oriya dismisses her with a wave.

Janus packs her things, and Jumbo sees her take a long look up the road she'll have to walk alone.

When the group departs, walking through the scrub pine forest, Janus is still with them. Thankfully, she doesn't open her mouth. Oriya doesn't seem to notice that the woman is following, but she can hardly miss it.

Jumbo shoulder his pack, feeling the bite of the strap into existing soreness, and wearily begins the business of putting one foot in front of the other. Oriya organizes a shared group network where video can be pooled. Jumbo is supposed to turn every twenty steps and scan the outside perimeter to the right and behind the group's path. Someone has good enough software to analyze it all and broadcast an alert if a threat appears. This is exciting at first, especially when it occurs to him that actual rattlesnakes may live

out here, but the monotony soon overtakes the enthusiasm and he becomes lost in thought.

It occurs to Jumbo how much of life is cyclical. This is the natural state of something that wants to go on existing in the same state: if it changes, it has to change back.

Step, step, step, step, step, step, step, step, step, step, step, step, step, step, step, step, step, step, step, turn, scan. Repeat.

But humans don't *think* in cycles, do they?

*We build elaborate if-then explanations to predict and change the world.*

He realizes that perhaps the reason he feels out of sync with MOM, with Nova and Oriya, and, really everyone but Gar, is that he's a cycle man. It's the ebb and flow, and the surfing of sensation that speaks to him.

True, he makes his living in the if-then world. But he's a subversive.

Gar understand cycles. The effect in Jumbo's apartment will twist his mind, looking for a cause. At least there's a nearly full bottle of rum to lubricate the mental machinery.

The City is a fortress of cause and effect. Only when powerful forces like large storm systems surge across the map does it pay proper respect to the wheels of nature.

The recent storm has left plenty of evidence here. Whole stands of trees are angled over thirty or more degrees from their former proud bearing. Some are snapped in half, and broken limbs litter the ground.

After about an hour, the trees thin out, and a rolling farmland appears. There are a dozen or so houses scattered around, some hardly more than shacks. Some are obviously damaged. Jumbo spots a young man, maybe just a teen, working the ground with a small hand guided farm implement. Solar-powered most likely. It's not moving fast.

Jumbo gathers from the network chatter that Wired is a fixer-upper of machines and the electronic brains that motivate them. But this trip is about more fundamental objects: nails. He and his wife Sundial are loaded with as many as they can carry. They seem like happy people. Wired jokes that they are going to name their son Gnomon, an old

word that means the erect spike on a sundial that throws the shadow. His pretty wife pretends to hate the idea.

Jumbo's privately held loneliness stirs discontent at this scene of two people obviously in love with one another. He imagines what it would be like to have their life. Lots of cycles.

This area is very different from the suburban sprawl south of the City. Here it's wild, and no self-respecting gang would bother trying to exert control. It's a vacuum of people.

Jumbo senses a lightening of mood in the group. There are jokes now, started by Wired himself: an old chestnut about an unlikely couple with six sons.

"That one with the crooked face, what's dumb as a stump—I know you cheated on me, woman! Th' others are fine, good-looking men. You tell me who the father o' that freak is."

"I did cheat on you. You are the father o' that 'un," the wife in the story says.

It's well-told, and gets a good laugh. Sundial punches her husband in the arm, and her grin makes Jumbo jealous of the unwary trust it reveals.

He feels that he's being stripped naked of illusion. His worth in this place is next to nothing. Nobody out here needs a data-mining expert.

Before the group makes it far, and older man comes out to greet them in the middle of what once was a corn field. The stalks are bent and broken, making it difficult to walk. He waves and seems friendly, but has a private parlay with Oriya over point-to-point. Afterwards, he turns and slowly goes back the way he came, his bent legs swinging naturally to the rhythm of flattened corn rows.

"We will wait here one day," Oriya announces.

Jumbo is surprised and disappointed. He'd hoped at least for a bed and roof tonight. The ground here looks even worse than his rocky spot of the night before.

"They afraid of us," a small man with a young daughter tells her. "They afraid we sick, and they want to see."

It makes sense. They probably don't have many masks out here that work and have updated filters. There's no passive monitoring of the collective immune system to get early warning of threats, and there's no active biological either. Just ordinary mosquitoes that themselves might carry a fever.

Oriya organizes a clearing and a fire without having to seem to work hard at it. She hasn't spoken a word to Jumbo so far. He notices how efficient her movements are, perhaps a skill learned from years in the kitchen. She has a funny habit of cocking her head to one side when obviously engaged with something virtual, perhaps a conversation going on, or maybe looking up a recipe for whacha-got stew.

Maybe at least the farmers will bring them something good to cook.

After a lunch of left-over stew flavored with rosemary, Oriya sends around a work plan. There are six houses with significant damage. Two are destroyed completely. Much work has already been done by the inhabitants, but there is still plenty to do. Everyone has a specific job to do on the morrow. The work is expected to take three or four days, and then the travelers will be free to go on their way, their debt to the chain of being having been satisfied.

At least that's how Jumbo interprets it. There's an unexpected lack of Continuation mumbo-jumbo. Oriya is all business now. Everything comes through the local network by text or VOX. He tries to get close to her once, unsure exactly why. Perhaps to find some reflection of human compassion, the need to reaffirm shared experience, or some less specific antidote for loneliness. But she brushes off his attempt to speak.

Jumbo talks to Sundial instead, copying Wired on the messages so the guy won't think he's trying to hit on his wife. The truth is the young woman's happiness is infectious. Here she is pregnant, sleeping on the ground with a bunch of strangers, her house in ruins, and she has the audacity to be content!

"Jumbo here," he sends from across the way. The idea that someone might be infected has led to more separation than usual. Jumbo sits cross-legged on a pile of corn stalks he's assembled. "We'll get you fixed up tomorrow."

It sounds lame even to him, especially since it's been decades since Jumbo has used a hammer.

But she smiles. Her mask is nothing more than a set of ugly goggles, covering hardly any of her face. He finds himself wondering what her eyes look like.

“Thank you. You’re with the Speaker.”

Jumbo almost corrects her to “speaker in training,” but catches himself. Oriya is his only lifeline out here.

“That’s right.”

“Have you known her long?” Sundial asks.

“Just a few days, actually. It’s complicated.” Jumbo has a suspicion that Sundial is fishing around for gossip. He tries to change the subject.

“Does she come out here often?” Jumbo asks.

“She’s new. Our regular Speaker went missing two weeks back.”

“Are most citizens out here Continuation followers?”

“Citizens?” She laughs. “Not many of those out here. We just trade with the City.”

“Oh. Of course. I’m not used to being...out here.”

“You know about the Abbey, right? There’s like a Conty college down the road. So yes, it’s pretty big here. But you should know that.”

Jumbo considers how much to tell her. He temporizes by unwrapping a meat stick to gnaw on.

“I’m not Conty,” he says. He watches her body language for a reaction.

“Oh!” She straightens in surprise, then looks both ways, as if to see if anyone else caught that private bit of knowledge. It’s impossible, of course, but human habit is much older than wireless communication.

Jumbo notices that somewhere along the way they stopped copying Wired on the conversation. He must have gotten tired of being spammed, or just wanted to give his wife privacy. Or maybe she wanted the privacy herself. He checks the log. It definitely started with her, with the answer about the Speaker going missing.

“Well,” she says after a bit. “What are you?”

Jumbo realizes with a start that he’s not sure. An earlier version of him would have dismissed the question as meaningless, or perhaps an amusing intellectual exercise to be performed over a serving of fresh boiled shrimp drizzled with lime juice. Whereupon, Jumbo might record resulting *bon mots* in his notebook, and the assignment considered complete.

That seems a little trivial now.

“I’m nothing,” Jumbo says. It doesn’t come out quite the way he intended.

She laughs hard. The sound carries across the camp and lifts Jumbo’s spirits.

“Want me to tell your fortune?” she asks. “I learned from my Nana.”

“Uh, what do I have to do?”

“Just show me your palms.”

Jumbo looks down at his hands, brings the open palms closer for a better view, and snaps a picture for her.

“The software for fortune-telling is fake,” she says. “I do it myself. It’s a family secret.”

“Okay,” Jumbo says. He’s amused. He remembers his own grandfather poring over the almanac. Somewhere in his veins, the rich black soil of the Mississippi valley must left a genetic mark, but Jumbo fears it is recessive. Certainly Gar would say so, if he were capable of articulating such things.

“I pulled up my tomato plants,” Jumbo says for reasons he doesn’t quite understand.

He sees her goggles turn up to look at him from across the way. He can’t read his expression, and he’s suddenly fearful of her judgment. She may think him mad. Or worse. What does one call a mass murderer of vegetation?

“I see a fork,” she says. “You have a big fork.”

A scream drifts through the lazy warming air. It comes with a network priority flash that splashes a photo across Jumbo’s visual field. It shows Naomi sitting on the ground, slumped to her right. Her mouth sags open, and blood is running out of it.

Someone crashes through the dead vegetation near Jumbo, leaving the camp. He turns to track the sound, and sees Janus trying to hang onto a bag in one hand and a backpack in the other, thrashing her way through the broken stalks.

“Janus!” Oriya shouts at her. “You’ll be hunted and killed before dark!”

She keeps going. Her progress is slow through the wrecked corn, but she grows smaller nevertheless.

Oriya broadcasts through the network.

“Anyone else want to leave? You’ll be marked as a plague carrier. And what if you are? Are you really so selfish that you’d risk the life of others? Who knows how many? Are you worth that much? I’m not.”

Oriya sits with Naomi for her last few moments of life, holding her hand. It’s incredibly brave. Jumbo feels it vicariously, the almost overwhelming creepiness of knowing your hand is covered with lethal virus capsules, a single one of which can kill. He doesn’t understand it, and emotions compete with one another: fear and revulsion, admiration and anger that she is taking such a needless chance.

*Aren’t the Continuation believers supposed to be rationally driven to serve the whole?*

The consensus is that it’s a mySARS variant. Nothing else kills as quickly as this or with such little warning.

The local network is abuzz with the swapping of video. Who was near Naomi? Who might be infected? What did she eat and drink? There are no more games or jokes. Tempers are high, and voices are tight. Wired and Sundial sit together where Jumbo can see them. Even Sundial’s smile seems forced now.

Jumbo is alone and afraid. He lived through the first mySARS Wave, and remembers the eerie silent passing from life to beyond, as if a switch had been turned off. He’s seen the math on it—the rapid exponentiation of the virus, that makes the ordinary flu look like a laggard. Under perfect conditions, mySARS can outwit the human immune system to attain an effective doubling rate of more than once per minute. From one virus to a trillion in forty minutes. In less ideal conditions, it might take a day or two.

Jumbo remembers how it works. A new Wave crashes onto the population with its most furious assault at the beginning. Once natural selection begins to have effect, the lethality of the bug wanes, simply because a pathogen that remains undetected and sheds for a longer period is more likely to spread than one that instantly kills its host.

When the sun is high in the sky, Oriya covers Naomi's body with a small tent and uprooted corn stalks piled on it to preserve her modesty in case of wind.

Oriya stands at Naomi's feet. She has a white scarf protecting her head from the merciless sun.

"We are less," She says over the network. "The count of voices of our soul is one fewer. Our song fades. Let us mourn for this parting of self."

By ones and twos, the others all stand in respect. Jumbo stands and sweats. The silence stretches for several minutes, broken only by the thick buzz of fluttering brown hoppers.

Finally, Oriya raises her hands over her head pointing up.

"It is fitting that the sun is here as a witness. Feel its power. The strength to hold planets in orbit, to shine down power, this is only the beginning of our might. We are in the early morning of the day of the Continuation. Those of you who know you are part of me, I greet you."

There's a smattering of audible reply and a single network affirmation—from Sundial.

"Those of you who are merely travelers, I greet you too. You have come here of your own will."

Jumbo catches a whiff of mutiny in the body language and turned lips of a few, but no one offers open insult.

"Your obligation to someone you consider a stranger is Good, although you may not see it. You feel isolated here, and afraid."

Oriya points at Sundial.

"Sundial is me. I am Sundial."

“I am Oriya, Oriya is me” Sundial says. She sounds meek.

“And the sun,” Oriya says, “and the Earth. And all of you. Who here would like to speak about the voice called Naomi?”

Wired and Sundial seem to have known her best. They speak simple heartfelt words, laden down with Continuation phrases. A few others make the same attempt, but it soon peters out. Jumbo keeps his peace.

The camp becomes a real quarantine. The villagers are intent that no one else leaves. Jumbo sits and contemplates.

Whatever Naomi got was a quick killer. That means it’s most likely something new. In any event, Jumbo would know if there were any mySARS cases in the City because MOM would have locked it down.

So this is something out of the wild of the Outs. Some taint of food or drink, perhaps. But the virus doesn’t live long outside a human body. A few days at most. In the City, this would prompt a massive hunt for the origins. Out here there isn’t much hope of it. He reviews his own video and traces his memory when the mask was off. He never touched Naomi, but he was close to her during the argument with that awful Janus with the screeching voice. Could he have inhaled it?

Jumbo doesn’t bother now with his nose and mouth filters. The virus is too small for them to stop. The main danger is that he will get it on his skin by direct contact.

The group’s analysis of the video gives rise to several theories about infection. These are enough to spark arguments and cause a few dirt clods to be hurled in anger or frustration, but Oriya’s voice brings it to a halt.

An eerie silence accompanies the departure of the day’s sunlight.

A small fire seems pitiful against the wall of darkness around them. Out there, Jumbo knows, are men and sentinels with weapons who won’t ask a lot of questions if someone tries to leave.

Jumbo is alone in the dark. He spends half an hour clearing his sleeping area. He tries messaging Oriya, but the only response he gets is the broadcast: “Sleep with your mask on.”

Jumbo is well into a nightmare featuring Janus, about diseased people who have to wear beepers, when it finally penetrates that the sound is real. He blinks a few times and sucks the damp night air into his lungs, trying to clear his head. It's a message. Someone is sending him a message at 03:15. He's suddenly wide awake.

"I'm sick."

It is from Oriya.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

"I'm sick."

Jumbo's instant reaction is shock. It feels like his brain has gone numb.

Slowly, slowly, he battles the paralysis. His ears tingle, and he can feel his face flushing with blood. He knows he has to act, but the thoughts that are necessary to prepare the way slip from the grasp of reason.

"This is bad," Jumbo says out loud. Somewhere in the night a coyote yips in agreement.

He forces himself to take deep breaths.

"How bad?" he sends Oriya.

"sso coold"

He has a sudden chill himself, thinking maybe she was sick the previous night. The virus could already be doing its exponential dance, breaking open his cells with its hoards of deputized duplicates.

He sends a priority message to Wired and Sundial, and he broadcasts a system-wide who-is query to see who might be awake. He gets a couple of hits that he doesn't recognize. Locals with guns probably. Maybe the guns themselves, reporting for duty.

He stands and stomps his feet to get some blood circulating. Everything is dark and blurry. It seems surreal. He figures out after a moment that condensation has fogged the lenses on his mask, and he carefully cleans them.

“What is it?” It’s Sundial.

“Oriya has a fever.”

Jumbo hears the audible gasp and sees her clamp both hands over her mouth in the fake colors of the infrared map.

“We’re going to help her,” Jumbo hears himself say.

“Okay.”

It comes to him, a piece at a time.

“Do you know any of the people guarding us? A couple of them are lit up on the network.”

There’s a long pause. Jumbo suspects she’s not very good at this.

“I know them.”

“Tell them the Speaker is ill and needs a bed to sleep in and medical care. It’s urgent.”

“They aren’t going to like that.”

“Wake your husband. Do whatever it takes.”

“Is it the same think that killed Naomi?”

“We can’t know until we get her help.” Jumbo knows it’s a lie, but maybe it will make her feel better.

He can see Sundial shaking Wired by the shoulders to wake him. There’s nothing to do but wait.

Jumbo runs the sums on the moral calculus. What does he owe Oriya? She brought him some food, true. But then she blocked him. She got him medicine, but she contributed to the reason he needed it. She warmed herself on his back, but he figures he can call that one even. It’s not much.

This accounting is important because he knows—he dreads—a positive outcome to his plea means that Oriya will have to be moved, and someone will have to do the moving.

“Hang in there, help is on the way,” he sends to Oriya, because he feels guilty. He’s not sure he can do it. And if he won’t, then it will have to be Wired or Sundial.

He thinks about the young woman who’s dreaming up clever names for her unborn son lying face up pale and shaking to death, teeth chattering until they turn red and finally still. The mySARS virus is faster and deadlier with those who have healthy immune systems. It’s the young and strong who die first.

She’s young enough to be his daughter. Maybe that’s it.

No, he can’t let that happen. Nor can he let her husband do it, and leave her alone with a son who will never know his father.

All these facts and implications point their arrows of conclusion toward Jumbo.

“They say no,” Sundial says. She transmits her real voice, which sounds sorrowful now, and it tears at Jumbo’s heart. At the same time, he feels a warm liquid relief breaking over it. Now he doesn’t have to decide.

There’s no response from his message to Oriya. It would be better if she didn’t hear, he thinks. He looks her direction, steadies himself, and zooms the lens. She’s taken her mask off, and she positively glows from the heat coming off her body. She already looks like a ghost.

The spirits settle around like buzzards, and do some more accounting.

*I am going to sit here doing nothing while she dies.*

He takes a step.

His knees weaken at the thought of what he’s about to do. Doubts creep in, reasonable voices from his own mind.

*She’s already dying. There’s nothing I can do.*

But he takes another step. Toward Oriya and mySARS, and away from the City and the cold slab where Shanghai died.

“Tell them they will have to shoot the two of us. I’m taking her to a house.” He sends it to Sundial, and broadcasts it to anyone else listening.

Jumbo pulls the mouthpiece of his mask across his lips and fastens it.

Step, step. His legs are so heavy, and the stalks seem devilish in their design, strewn across his path like barricades.

Voices and network responses come to him, but he’s nearly oblivious to them.

Step, step, step, by the pitiful fire, nearly dead from neglect.

He closes his eyes and walks.

When he opens them he’s two meters from her. Oriya is propped up on a pack with a thin reflective cover thrown over her legs. Her hands are pulled up to her chin and balled into fists. Her shoulders are tucked in tight. Her teeth chatter and her bare face is scrunched into a human mask.

Jumbo feels like an automaton, outside of himself and observing. He watches his arms slide under Oriya’s slender form, hook under her knees, behind her shoulders, and lift. His knees complain but comply, and he takes the first step toward the waiting judgment.

“If you keep at it, we’ll haveta kill ya,” comes a message from a stranger.

“This is your Speaker. She needs your help.” Jumbo broadcasts it on a loop.

The crack and flash of gunfire is terrifying, and a rush of air tells him how close it was. It begins to make him angry. He stops the loop, stops walking, and speaks with his own voice as loud as he can.

“This woman came out here to rebuild your village. You should be ashamed! Ah-shamed! If your so-called goodness is so watery-thin as to let you murder a Speaker while she sleeps then damn you all! You bring far worse than plague on this place! Backstabbers! Traitors! You will live in fear every moment of the rest of your pathetic lives. Every Conty hand will turn against you. Go on and shoot us, then. You gutless turds.”

It’s a wrath that Jumbo has been stoking for a long time. Nothing, not even Meg, could have stirred up the contempt that he has accumulated for himself. And they think he’s

yelling at *them*. He splits a rictus grin and lets the catharsis lighten his soul with a zeal Jumbo hasn't felt in his whole life.

He walks then, boldly and as straight as he can manage, toward the only house he sees with a light on.

They don't kill him, but mySARS very nearly does.

## Chapter Fifteen

The first thing Jumbo hears is crickets. They just won't shut the hell up. What is it that they have to keep on sawing, over and over again, on those monotonous fiddles of theirs? The same tune. Jazz for bugs.

There's a cool dampness that goes with the sound. The air, the smell of it too, lifting honeysuckle scent off some nearby swarm of yellow frill, and stirring it around to sweeten life in summer evenings. It's a broth of bushes and bugs, and if he could just see the fireflies...

Jumbo opens his eyes.

Everything is strange. He's woken to a funhouse vision of the world, too many angles, cluttered objects, odd shadows, and not a familiar sight anywhere.

He shuts them again.

*Where am I?*

Jumbo formulates this thought as carefully as putting an egg back together. After three mental rehearsals, he licks his lips in preparation for execution.

"Wuhhhayyyee?"

"Wuh. Ahhh. Aye?"

"Wur. Aaam." The 'm' is satisfying to have pulled off. He realizes that the trick is to close his lips to consummate the consonant.

"Hey!" This voice isn't his at all. It sounds like...no...not Meg. Well, that's a relief.

Jumbo sighs, letting that worry go bother someone else.

There's a scraping sound that's even less pleasant than the damned crickets, then something resting on his head. Warm, like a hand. Then something squeezes his hands. How odd is that?

He decides to sleep a while and figure all this out later.

## **Chapter Sixteen**

Oriya cooks for Jumbo, and Jumbo eats it. He likes this arrangement very much.

The fever and delirium have left him weaker than he thought possible. It's a full week of recovery before he begins to feel himself. He and Oriya have the abandoned house to themselves. Someone must be dropping off food, but he doesn't ask questions. Oriya doesn't seem to want to talk anyway, but she takes excellent care of him. By the end of the week, Jumbo feels his strength returning, and wants to try to get to the bottom of his confusion. He's made peace with the crickets and house, but there's a gap in his memory. Oriya has put off his questions, shushing him with a finger to his lips sometimes. She seems to be appraising his health by his appetite, and by that measure he is back to normal.

Over a dinner of fried potatoes with rosemary and lamb chops, he asks for the story again, and this time she puts down her knife and fork and responds.

"You don't remember much do you?" Oriya asks. They've long since given up on the masks unless they need the local network, and her face is naked to read.

"I remember carrying you. That's it."

"You saved me. You brought me here, much to the horror of the inhabitants. They are the richest farmers here. They could afford to run lights all night, and so you saw the house."

"I remember a light."

"Mm, yes. So then you make yourself quite at home here, tucking me into their nice bed. And you apparently were rather an ass about getting medical supplies. Fluids and anti-virals. I don't know, because I was a goner. But here I am. I would have died out there."

Oriya points her fork in case Jumbo can't remember where the dirt and stalks and corpse were.

"It was about twenty-four hours for me," she continues. "I got off very, very lucky. You...well, you weren't so lucky. I've been taking care of you for two weeks now."

"Baths too?"

"Sponge baths. Did you want me to let you go to funk?"

"I'm sure you must have taken advantage," he says.

Her eyes widen.

"I can't tell when you're joking, Lastfour."

"I'm joking," he says, and attempts a grin.

"You babbled a lot while you were out. State secrets and everything. So maybe I did take advantage of you."

That gets Jumbo's attention.

"What did I say?"

"For starters, you were abusive, Lastfour. Quite free with your criticisms."

"I was?"

"And you kept calling me May or Mag or—"

"—Meg. She's a PDA for MOM."

"I gather you don't care for her."

"No."

"You used strong language."

“You did mention that. I guess I apologize.”

“You have to guess?” There’s a half smile on her lips, just crinkling the corner of her eyes.

“Well, if you hadn’t arranged for me to get the plague, none of this would have happened.”

Oriya’s smile vanishes in a heartbeat. Her gaze falls. Jumbo suddenly sees how worn she is. She looks exhausted. After a moment she looks up, but doesn’t quite meet his gaze. She seems about to speak, but bites her bottom lip instead and then gathers up her plate and utensils, the food half-finished, and leaves without another word.

Jumbo watches the enigmatic woman go, admiring the way she carries herself.

*Oriya is proud. But it’s not conceit. She’s earned it.*

He imagines how humiliating it must have been to come fix breakfast for him, to put on a show. He wonders how far she would have gone for her Continuation. He’s not sure he wants to know.

One thing he’s sure of now: these are true believers, and the MOM leaders have underestimated them. That organization is run like a corporation, with personal gain put ahead of the common good more times than Jumbo can count. He’s sure the Conty politics must be just as fierce and maybe poisonous too. Maybe he just hasn’t seen it yet. But there’s still a difference.

They believe in something bigger than themselves.

Jumbo finishes the meal alone. He senses Oriya wants to be alone, and has given up trying to figure out her moods and personalities. He senses that behind the stage, when she’s finished performing her Continuation role, she’s a very private person who is easily affected. He thinks maybe mySARS is the least of her afflictions.

The thought of MOM and Jumbo’s project to spy on the Continuation for them conspires to weaken his appetite. What was it Sundial told him?

*You have a big fork.*

He doesn’t think she meant the one beside his plate.

After a long nap, Jumbo sits with Oriya to watch the sun sink into the pines.

“Who wears a mask to watch a sunset?” he asks her. He notices that her throat is jumping, talking to someone on the local net.

“I told them we would leave in two days,” she says after a moment.

“I think I’ll be ready.”

“It means we have to leave tonight.”

He feels a rush of anxiety. Uncertainty.

“Tonight? It’s going to rain again.”

“Some of them want to kill you. I’m not sure I can protect you.” Oriya fingers her necklace. It’s a string of jade beads, as green as the sea.

“Just great,” Jumbo says.

“Sundial is going to lead us out at 0200. I’ve packed food and water. You’ll want to travel light.”

“Do you trust her?”

“Do you?”

“She seems happy enough. But what’s she really made of?”

Oriya dismisses the question with a wave.

“Are we going back to the City?” Jumbo holds his breath, hoping.

“No, we’ll do what we came for.”

“What is that, exactly?”

“I’ll tell you on the way. Get some rest now.”

Jumbo tries to take her advice, but the stress is unsettling. He lies with his head and chest elevated to keep the acid down and wonders where he'll be in a day.

He does manage to sleep, however, and Oriya's hand on his shoulder wakes him just before the appointed time. He sits up, too groggy to stand. She hands him a cup of coffee.

The lights stay off. Jumbo masks up and looks around at the place. It hasn't become home, but it's an important place now. The House of the Dead. He amuses himself by thinking he could post a pattern code on the wall the way they do with grave markers, so someone could look up his story. Assuming anyone ever writes it.

"She's here. Let's move."

Sundial wears a full mask. She's probably afraid of the virus. The stigma can last months in the City, assuming a victim isn't just banished immediately. It isn't about the science of shedding pathogens or how long they can live outside the body. It's just visceral superstition, but more powerful than actual knowledge.

The young woman seems more nervous than Jumbo. She hops from one foot to the other, and continually turns to scan around them. Once the packs are strapped on, Oriya motions for her to lead the way.

"No transmitting. All radio activity stops now, understand?" Oriya says. Jumbo switches his mask to passive mode. It can receive but not transmit. He double checks the unfamiliar settings. The DaiHai chip is an older consumer model, very unlike the sophisticated one that MOM gave him. He wishes he'd brought it.

They walk single file into the glittering darkness. The fireflies have long since extinguished their courtship for the night, but Jumbo is amazed at how much forest life has a slight glow to it. A squirrel's nest lights up as a heat source ahead and above.

They make good time at first, making their way over the thick piles of pine needles, mostly downhill, but then Sundial seems uncertain about some of the choices, hesitating over forks in the faint trail. Oriya fidgets and shows annoyance at this, but Jumbo is happy for the breaks. His chest feels like it's aflame, and his legs are rubber.

They head mostly west at a pace that has to be adjusted for Jumbo's frailty, until they finally come to the end of the woods. The terrain flattens out here, and knee high grass competes with scrubby trees.

Sundial points across.

“Go that way,” she says.

Her hand is shaking.

“Wait,” Jumbo says. “What are we going to find over there?” He peers into the distance, fiddling with the gain on the sensors, trying to spot the shape of a man.

“Go with Good,” Sundial says.

“Take off your mask, please,” Oriya says. Her voice is gentle.

Sundial looks this way and that, as if looking for an escape. She takes a step back the way she came, but Oriya puts a hand on her.

“The mask,” she repeats.

Sundial shrugs lopsided, one shoulder and then the other. She fiddles with the straps, and finally gets the mask perched on top of her head. Even in monochrome, Jumbo can see that the soft tissue around her left eye is turning purple.

“I noticed your wrists first,” Oriya says, still in a motherly tone.

Jumbo sees it now. Bruises there too. He feels corrosive revulsion at the implication.

Sundial throws her arms around Oriya and sobs. But she’s pushed back just as quickly.

“Tell me what you know, child. Be quick.”

Sundial just shakes her head, tears drawing wet lines down her cheeks. She does the rolling shrug again. She doesn’t know.

“They said to send you across. They didn’t tell me any more. They said...They said they would....,” her face scrunches up and she bawls, biting the knuckles of her fist, trying to keep the heaving sobs inside. Jumbo finds it agonizing to watch and equally so to absorb the horror that faces him personally.

It takes a moment for anger to catch up.

“Listen closely,” Oriya says to her, “Was your husband part of this? Did he hurt you?”

The woman’s shaking heaving sobbing face wrenched into an expression of private hell feels like a hot knife in the chest to Jumbo. No, it wasn’t Wired. Someone else.

“Sit,” Oriya says, and tugs Sundial’s hand to pull her down.

Jumbo sags to the ground with relief.

“I’m not trained for this,” Oriya says. “I don’t know what to do.” There’s a rising pitch evident in her voice, perhaps tracing an asymptote to hysteria.

Jumbo has seen MOM actions involving guns and bad guys, but it was always as a spectator.

“Any ideas, Jacob? We can’t cook our way out.” Oriya laughs a crazy laugh, and Jumbo realizes that the strength she has hoarded since mySARS is near its end. Jumbo forces himself to ignore her and think about the situation.

“There’s probably someone out there with a long-ranged weapon,” he says, “They won’t want to hurt you, I think. They could have done that by now. They just want you gone. They probably plan to put a bullet through me and run you off.”

It sounds cold and logical, and he wonders why he isn’t more afraid.

*Maybe I’m tired of giving a damn.*

“Do you have anything to shoot back with?”

Oriya shakes her head. Then her chin lifts and she turns her mask optics on him.

“I do have a weapon though. I’m only supposed to use it in the direst need.”

“Should we take a vote?” Jumbo asks. It comes out sounding sharp.

“Sundial,” Oriya says. “Hey! Listen. You’re going to have to put your mask back on and go home.”

“You can’t!” Jumbo protests.

“We don’t have options. Here,” Oriya unsnaps the necklace, manually opens Sundial’s hand, and drops the string of beads on her palm. Then she closes the fingers over it. The young woman seems to be collapsing in on herself.

“You take this,” Oriya says, “and tell them it’s a promise that I’m coming back. If anyone hurts you again, they will be held responsible. Okay?”

Sundial eventually nods. She opens her mouth to speak, but just shakes her head. She wipes her nose with the back of her hand, stands and turns away, pulling the mask down. Jumbo watches her vanish into the woods, moving faster as she goes.

“How fast can you run?” Oriya asks Jumbo.

“Not so good.”

“Go find something to use as a club.”

Jumbo does as he’s told, and quickly finds a limb on the ground that will suit once the branches are broken off. He works at it, and watches Oriya look in her pack for something.

“Do you have any paper?,” she asks. “I need a large sheet. Where it is?”

“I have old-fashioned paper. Not what you’re looking for. Nothing programmable.”

Jumbo takes a few steps forward, to the edge of the clearing, and stands behind a tree. He braces himself, zooms the mask cameras, and slowly pans the tree line on the other side, looking for hot spots.

“I found it. If this doesn’t work, we’re dead,” she says.

“They won’t hurt you. You’re a Speaker.”

“I’m a witness. And we’re not on their land anymore. Bad things happen out here all the time.”

Oriya seems much more solid now that she’s busy again.

“Okay,” she says, coming up behind him. “Don’t look at me. I’m going to hold it in front as I walk, and it’s important that you not see what’s on the front.”

“What did you write on it?”

“A scan code.”

These simple monochrome glyphs are used to mark up everything with information. Jumbo can’t imagine what good that is going to do them here.

“Are we going to advertise them to death?” he asks.

“Something like that. Stay behind me. We’re going to walk across the field and watch what happens.”

They walk slowly, and he watches the darkness for movement.

Twenty steps, then forty. He’s panting.

Then he sees it. Just a flash, just bright enough to see, off to the right a little.

“I saw a flash.”

“Me too. Just one, right?”

“So far.”

“Keep watching. Drop everything except your club. Head straight at the flash. If it’s just the one, he won’t have night vision, and you will.”

“You’ll be a target anyway,” he says. “Get down until I broadcast something.”

She hesitates.

“Please!”

She nods and slowly flattens herself against the ground. Jumbo takes the club and heads off toward his target. The overcast sky makes the darkness thick, and he’s glad for the optics, inferior as they are.

He can make out the man among the trunks now, a glowing trail of movement coming his way.

Jumbo slows his stride to a walk. He's huffing already. Then he stops. The man is approaching at a jog, with a rifle held diagonally. Jumbo can see his face, so the man isn't wearing a mask. Oriya was right about that.

Jumbo crouches, hands tightening around the limb in his grip. His heart is pounding. He sees that he's made a mistake. The man with the gun is apparently right-handed, making the muzzle point in the direction Jumbo will be in when he passes. That's not ideal, but it's too late now.

The shooter approaches, slowing as he does, until he's walking, panning left and right. Jumbo can hear the rush of grass from the man's passage. He walks by Jumbo, about twenty feet to Jumbo's left. This is the moment if it's going to happen.

Jumbo's knees freeze. His heart feels like it's going to rip from his chest and go bounding off. He's terrified. He thinks about Oriya. How afraid he was that night, but once he picked her up in his arms, once he was committed, the fear went away.

He stands and his knees pop.

The man grunts and turns sharply left.

Jumbo freezes, watching the muzzle of the rifle make lazy-eights in the air less than three meters away. He tries to control his breathing.

Frogs all around them erupt back into song.

*He can't see me.*

The man tugs at his neck with one hand, looping his mask back up and over his face.

Jumbo charges with the club held high. Without intending to he unleashes a high-pitched warbling sound that becomes a full scream. One-two-three full strides, he begins swinging down as hard as he can. It connects on the back of the man's neck, snapping the limb in half to thud into the mud. Jumbo whacks him again with the stump. And again. And finds himself cursing with each blow.

"Vorkin' tomatoes! Vorking tomatoes!"

Finally, exhausted, he sits on the ground. His brain buzzes, ears ring, and the lights dancing in his mask making no sense. He wheezes oxygen and small flying bugs into his lungs in great gulps.

Eventually it occurs to him to gather up the weapon.

After a while, the frogs lose their caution again and form a chorus.

“Okay, Oriya,” Jumbo says to the frogs. “You can come out now.” When she doesn’t appear after a while, he remembers he promised to broadcast something. He blinks a few times to straighten out the thought, and then does so.

She appears a few minutes later. She takes in the scene in silence for a moment.

“Are you hurt?” she asks.

“I feel great. I’m ready to fight another one.” It’s true too. He realizes dimly that it’s the adrenaline making him higher than a buzzard, but it does feel good.

“Help me turn him over. We can’t stay here.”

Jumbo lifts a shoulder of the limp form. It’s smaller than it looked before. He pulls and pushes, flipping the man face up.

It’s a face he’s never seen, youthful and pale, eyes open, mouth sagging and dripping rain water, nose caked with mud.

Jumbo gasps and sinks to his knees. He covers his mouth with his hands.

*It’s just a kid. I killed someone’s child.*

The skull that had a violent encounter with Jumbo’s club was perhaps fifteen years old. Soft at birth, knitting and hardening over the years, it had done its job. It had not broken. In this case, it wasn’t enough, but no one could blame the bone vault. It’s clear he must have asphyxiated in the mud.

“Is he dead?” Jumbo asks. There’s still some hope that the kid will sneeze and wake up.

Oriya puts her fingers on the youth’s neck, feeling for a pulse. She shakes her head.

“Damn it!” Jumbo yells. He straddles the teen’s waist and begins to compress the chest with a rapid tempo. Oriya tries to clear the airways.

They stop after a few exhausting minutes and no sign of life.

Jumbo sits in the mud, wheezing. The enormity of it swallows him up. His mind races to all the other ways this could have turned out. Of course, a number of them have him laying on the ground instead of this boy, probably spouting blood and dying painfully.

“Come on, Jacob. We can’t stay. He would have killed you, and there may be more.” Oriya sounds weary.

Jumbo rights himself, shifts most of the bags over to his own shoulders, loops the rifle around an arm, and follows Oriya. Once back in the woods, they hide the rifle and mark the location on their maps. Then they walk on into the dark future.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

The next two days are unseasonably cool. The rain cleared the air, and a sweet breeze mixes the fecundity of the earth into a heady cocktail of scent and texture. Birds trade insults and flattery from the branches of the pines, and the trunks stripe the orange straw-strewn ground with their shadows.

Jumbo’s feet are harder now. His body has responded to the physical demands by tightening sinew and knotting new muscle in his calves and thighs. His shoulders ache from their burden, but it’s the pain of a body gaining strength, responding aggressively to the new environment. He hasn’t had an espresso or anything with truffle oil for a long time, but it hasn’t killed him yet.

The emotional wounds are deeper and slower to knit.

The two travelers have talked little, and nothing about their escape. They have covered about twenty-five kilometers by Jumbo’s estimation. It’s not a lot of distance, but he’s proud of it anyway. As they settle for another cold dinner on the second evening, camped behind a screen of trees covered in kudzu, he tries to get some information out of Oriya.

“You said you’d tell me where we are going,” he says, gnawing on hard bread.

“We’re going to do an inquisition,” she says.

“I can’t tell if you’re joking.”

“We call it something different. They call it an inquisition.”

“This isn’t telling me much,” he says. He feels like she speaks in riddles anytime he asks about something important.

“How do you solve hard problems?” she asks.

*More damned riddles.*

“I don’t know.”

“Just eat. We’ll take it up when you’re not grouchy.”

Jumbo opens his mouth, ready with a sharp reply, when he sees her smile.

He sighs.

“Then at least tell me the trick you pulled with the glyph. How does that work?”

“Jacob, you can’t tell anyone about that.”

“Okay.”

“I mean it. If I had rung up the big heads and asked them should I let Jacob here—nice guy, by the way—take a bullet, or should I give away this secret...you know what they would have told me?”

“I get it.”

“No, you don’t. You really can’t talk about it.”

He searches her bare face. He’s gotten quite accustomed to the familiarity of seeing it, and he knows her expressions. She’s still smiling, but she’s nervous too.

“You really did break the rules?”

She nods slowly, working butter onto the stone-like bread optimistically.

“Yes I did.”

“Well, since I already know, then you can tell me how it works.”

“Sure,” she says, surprising Jumbo.

“Really?”

“You already know the most important parts. Any engineer would figure out the rest before the eggs are cooked. I’m surprised you haven’t done so yourself.”

That bothers him a bit. If nothing else, Jumbo considers himself an intellectual. What is he missing?

“Well,” he says, “the kid—” the word sticks in his throat. Why did it have to be a kid? “—saw the glyph, and then I saw a flash. And then his...I guess his mask didn’t work anymore? It looked like he was going to try a reboot just before.” Before what goes unsaid.

“Wait!” Jumbo continues. “The mask didn’t just stop working. It lit up bright, full amplitude probably. That’s why I saw the flash of light when he took it off.”

“So.....” Oriya gives little nods, urging him on. Jumbo notices that her eyes are more green than brown. Odd that he’s never noticed.

“So the glyph kills masks. That’s all I can come up with.”

“Mmmhmmmm. And what an engineer would tell you is that this must be functionality already in the optics chip. A back door key. Something that only the manufacturer would know, or someone who paid a lot of money to them.”

“Or someone who stole it,” Jumbo says, finally realizing what this is about. He wonders if this secret was pilfered by Shanghai and Nova.

“And there you go. A-plus.”

“Can I ask how many of these backdoors you know?”

She shows her teeth. Jumbo's gaze is always drawn to an incisor that leans to one side.

"You can ask. The truth is that this is the only one they trusted me with. And I already blew it. So there."

Jumbo tries to eat the bread, but his stomach is unhappy with it. He finds a piece of smoked meat and shares it with Oriya.

"You want to know what's funny?" he says.

She looks at him.

"Nova asked me what I wanted in a woman."

"Oh," she says. Oh, that embarrassing topic. Move along, please.

"No, wait. Hear me out."

"Of course."

"I told her...did she tell you? Do you know?"

Oriya shakes no.

"I said--," Jumbo can't repress a chuckle. "I told her I wanted someone who could cook and had a pretty face. I was terrified at the time. It could have just as easily have been a short accountant."

Oriya laughs and chokes on the meat. She feels around for her water bottle, coughing until she clears the obstruction.

"So?" she asks.

"She did a good job. No objections at all to the cooking credentials. Recent meals being not representative, of course."

"Mmmhmmm. I see. And the other?"

"Your face?"

He waits. She finally cocks an eyebrow, perhaps indicating that she's prepared to wait a lot longer than him.

"It's very pretty," he says, giving in. "Your face. I just noticed your eyes are kind of green. But anyway. What I was going to say is that I'm---" Jumbo stops. The words queued up on the tip of his tongue are *I'm drawn to your imperfections*, but it now seems much less like a good idea.

Oriya's other eyebrow arches in expectation. She gives a little shrug to help him along.

"—I'm amazed by your character," he finishes. It sounds lame to his own ears. But he realizes that this too is true, and something he can work with much more safely.

*How did we end up in this conversation?*

"I'm tempted to ask for more details," she says. "But you know I'm not out here to seduce you, right?"

Her voice is light, but there's a weariness behind it that belies the smile.

Jumbo is surprised by the sinking in his chest. He tells himself it's just the illusion, the mild flirtation that lets some lizard-old cranial wiring keep itself happy with fantasies. But he can't deny that irrational disappointment, completely unreasonable let-down, is what he feels.

"I didn't even bring my nice clothes," she says, reading his face, trying to reboot him.

"Okay," he says thickly. He feels stupid. He knows she's right. He's angry with his own brain.

*Stupid brain. First Nova, and now this.*

"I have a hard job ahead of me," she says, "And you have a choice. A fork in the road."

Jumbo stares hard at her. Is this some Continuation mumbo-jumbo?

"We might find ourselves on the same way," she says. She reaches over and gives his hand a squeeze. But he can see the distance in her eyes.

All the same, late during the night she comes to be held again. And the tears that soak her lashes haven't diminished. She holds the sobs back until they turn into hic-ups. She hic-ups and cries until she falls asleep, spent. This time Jumbo waits until she's snoring softly, then tucks her light reflective blanket around her form. Then he sits against a tree to watch her breathe until the weariness in his bones loosens his muscles and he slumps into slumber.

## Chapter Eighteen

"Did you know Shanghai?" Jumbo asks during the next morning's march.

"Of course not."

There's a creek in front of them, with no easy way to cross without getting very wet. It's obviously making Oriya frustrated.

"We're almost there. Another three clicks probably." Oriya sits on her haunches and glares at the water.

"Are you supposed to show up as a Speaker?"

"What?" Oriya snaps at him.

"Hey," Jumbo says. He turns his mask optics on her and wiggles his head to show it's her he's intentionally looking at, that their eyes would meet if it weren't for the glass and whatnot in the way. "I'm trying to help."

She takes a breath and presses her lips together. Jumbo imagines her staring heavenward, counting to three.

"What is it?"

"It's just that we've been through a lot of muck. I thought you might want to clean up before we arrive. Wash clothes...hair... The water looks clean."

Her mouth quirks. She pans. Her posture changes.

"Maybe you're right."

Jumbo drops the packs gratefully.

“Oh,” she says. “I don’t have my necklace either.”

“A badge of office?”

“Sort of. It just needs to be green.” She touches the base of her neck.

“I’ll make you one,” Jumbo hears himself say.

She laughs. It’s a full honest laugh, maybe the first one he’s heard from her.

“Okay then. I’ll bathe and you’ll go make jewelry. I’ll scream if there are piranhas. Otherwise don’t come back for a while.”

*Well, hell, I need a bath too.*

But he doesn’t say it. He soldiers off in search of pretty rocks or a lethargic lizard or something else that’s green and can have a hole made in it. Being without network access feels like an amputation. He knows there are plants called poison ivy but he has forgotten what they look like. It seems like this is already a bad idea that can only turn into a worse idea as time unfolds.

Jumbo stumbles around among the vines for a while, and then sits to await divine inspiration. An omen appears in the form of a bright green caterpillar about a two centimeters long hanging from a slender thread of silk. It sinks lower until it’s in front of his face. He wonders how many he would have to collect to make a necklace.

But it turns out that the god of green is not merely toying with his affections because as he watches, a brilliant emerald snake turns its way across the floor of the forest, heading diagonally away. It’s less than a meter in length, and doesn’t look intimidating. It’s nothing like the fat ugly rattlers with their fat ugly heads. This is a slender elegant creature, perhaps an aristocrat among snakes. Jumbo is immediately taken by it. The reptile lifts its head at his outstretched legs and flicks a forked tongue to investigate something, perhaps getting a whiff of his heat. Apparently satisfied, it turns its body in lazy arcs to go on.

It occurs to Jumbo for a mad instant that the snake could be turned into a necklace, but then sense overtakes him. He has no idea what gene hacks people around here have applied to their pets. It could be a variation of a green mamba for all Jumbo knows.

Plus, how would Oriya react to the idea of wearing a dead snake around her neck? He shudders at the image.

It does motivate him to move, however. He examines the vines that don't have leaves, finding an area with new growth of fine translucent green ones. With some effort, he cuts and braids these into a rough necklace. It looks like a child's handiwork to his eyes, but he figures it at least shows he did what he said he'd do.

Oriya has some clothes drying in a patch of sunlight. She's propped up against a tree, also gathering sun. Her hair is wet, and she has her mask held against her face so the straps won't press patterns into her hair as it dries. She's only wearing her long tee-shirt, and her bare legs shine in the bright light. Jumbo finds himself perching his mask on his forehead and absorbing the sight viscerally

She calls out without turning.

"Welcome back," she says. "You shouldn't transmit out here. You'll give us away."

"Oh. I thought you might need something."

She chuckles. "You thought I might want my back scrubbed?"

Jumbo is irritated by her tone, but he can't figure out why. He tosses the ersatz necklace near his packs.

"Get in the water," she says. "I have some work to do."

Her voice betrays a lightness of spirit that Jumbo hasn't heard from her in a while. The water does look inviting. So he strips off his grungy clothing and wades into the water with it. The water is cool and slow, but the gentle push of it is luxurious. He relaxes, sinking up to his chin. After a reverie, and after rinsing out his clothes and tossing them on a branch to dry, he floats in the stream by hanging onto a log.

"So how do you solve really hard problems?" he asks her after a while.

"You keep trying different things," she says.

"Does that have something to do with the inquisition?"

"Everything. We have to see if the experiment is working."

“So it’s an experiment.”

“That’s what I just said.”

“And you have to decide if it works?”

She laughs.

“Oh, no. I’m just in training. I’m supposed to be there early to get things ready for the real Speaker. I’ve blown that now.”

Jumbo feels his heart race.

“Who is the Speaker?”

“They didn’t tell me. It won’t be Nova.”

The name twists in him as if he’d swallowed the snake. The thought of her still opens a cocktail of emotions: longing, fear, and anger. He finds that he wants to talk about it.

“Did she tell you what she did to me?” Jumbo asks.

“I don’t want to know,” Oriya says. Her voice is controlled, neutral.

An hour later they are on their way. Jumbo feels oddly refreshed, like he’s been baptized into a new life. He decides he likes the sensation, and doesn’t question it. It feels good to feel good.

After another four kilometers, the overgrown paths and scrubby pines give way to open farmland. At Oriya’s instruction, Jumbo flips his mask back to full communications mode. She gives him a network key, and he authenticates.

“We should expect a reception soon,” she says.

There is no sign of a destructive storm here. The farmland looks neat, with rows of corn soaking up the sun. The stalks are green and healthy-looking. It’s late afternoon, and Jumbo catches the scent of cooking fires, and he finds himself salivating.

Oriya strides along with her perfect posture. Jumbo wonders if that's something she's been taught, or if she was born with it. She kindly declined to wear the crude vine circle he made, saying it would probably irritate her skin. But she was nice about it, and Jumbo doesn't mind. It did look like a kindergarten art project. Oriya has tied her shoulder-length hair back with a green band instead.

An electric cart rolls out to greet them. The road is an old one, and shows its age in cracks and spurts of grass and the occasional small crater. The driver expertly avoids the worst of these and hums to a halt at a respectful distance. The driver is a man who looks to be in his mid-twenties. He wears an old flicker mask, with glass lenses showing his eyes behind the colorful lines being painted on them by the electronics. He wears earth tones, baggy practical clothes, but clean and neat. His hair and skin are nearly the same shade of mocha. When he approaches, smiling, Jumbo spots the green around his neck.

"The community of Hope's Dawn welcomes you," he says vocally. "My name is Rico, and my sisters are Hope and Dawn. Would you like a ride?"

They are driven directly to a large home made of felled trees. It is designed like a large hollow square with a courtyard within that Jumbo glimpses through an arched passageway. Rich smells of wood smoke and cooking meat make Jumbo ravenous, but the room he's led to has a large soft-looking bed that is enticing in a different way.

"Make yourself at home," Rico says. He still hasn't stopped smiling.

Jumbo removes his shoes then sinks into the mattress, wallowing in the sheer luxury of it. Before long he drifts into deep restful sleep.

He wakes with a start. It's dark and he's confused. It's also entirely quiet. It takes his brain a few fearful moments to drag out the memory and conclude where he must be. His stomach is gnawing a hole in him, and his bladder demands attention too. He feels around for his mask, and finds it on the pillow next to him. After a moment he looks around in the dark.

There are a number of messages waiting for him, inviting him to dinner. This produces a sharp pang of disappointment. It is almost midnight.

He finds a lamp and tells it to turn itself on, but he doesn't seem to have authority, or else it's being obstinate. He fumbles around until he finds a manual switch to produce some light.

On the table beside him is a platter piled high with meat and bread smeared with butter. There's a tall glass of beer too. It fills his heart with the goodness of life.

*It really is the simple pleasures.*

The meal is undoubtedly room temperature by now, but it doesn't diminish his enthusiasm. But first a bathroom is a necessity. He sees that there are some new clothes hanging on the back of the door that look the right size, but he tosses his travel clothes on instead and cracks the door.

The house is quiet. It feels like a substantial home to him, like his grandparent's house, only rich and elegant and serious. The hewn logs are polished to a rich nutty brown, and the grain and knot of the wood adds character to the walls. The lights are subtle floor-level sources that throw long angular shadows from tables here and there along the walls. These must be people with influence.

He asks the house network for a map, finds a room marked 'guest bathroom' two doors down.

"I left you some food," Oriya messages him. He hadn't noticed that she was online. Maybe she just woke up too.

"Thank you from the bottom of my stomach," he replies.

"You're welcome," she decorates it with a happy emotag.

Jumbo opens one of the two stalls in the large bathroom and sits on the toilet in the dark, letting the thought of real food motivate his internal convolutions to remember their trade.

"This place is so peaceful," he sends. "How was dinner?"

"You missed a lot of boring conversation. Tomorrow is the day."

"What happens tomorrow?"

The lights come on in the room.

“Tomorrow the Accreditation team gives their report. We’ve missed the actual investigation, sad to say.”

Jumbo hears feet and then water running at the sink.

“I don’t understand why people can’t keep their mouths shut when it’s for their own good,” a man’s voice says in the room. The cadence makes Jumbo think he may be inebriated.

“Sanchez is stupid, that’s why,” comes another voice, then the sound of a stream splattering.

“Who’s Sanchez?” Jumbo sends to Oriya.

“How do you know about that?”

There’s a long sigh from inside the room.

“Always been stupid. Always will be stupid. He’s got stupid genes. All his kids are just as bad.” The second man.

“He’ll learn quick enough once Quasimodo leaves.”

“Won’t matter. He’s too dumb to learn.”

“Two guys in the bathroom with me,” Jumbo sends Oriya. “They’re not on the net. Drunk, I think.”

“Sanchez tried to use the accreditation to get some things changed by making noise. I think he’s probably right, but he was rather insensitive about it.”

The door opens and shuts again. Jumbo listens carefully, amping up the gain on the mask microphones, but there’s nothing but his own breathing.

“Sounds like they’re going to beat the hell out of him once.... Is there a Quasimodo here?”

“You’ll meet them tomorrow. Don’t ever use that name again.”

Then he gets it and feels as dumb as Sanchez. Tomorrow he's going to meet some Quasis. Not run-of-the-mill athletic upgrades or nerd-packs bought by designer parents in the old days. Something like Shanghai. The idea excites him. MOM would be very interested in this. Just as quickly, he tucks that thought away. That's not a good thing to dwell on out here.

Early in the morning Jumbo wakes and prepares for the day. He tries on the clothes he's been loaned, and finds that they fit well enough. They even smell nice. He shaves carefully and cleans his mask up, trying his best to look presentable. There isn't much to be done with his shoes, which are showing the wear.

As he looks at his image in the mirror he has a sudden pang of regret that he removed the green thread Nova tied around his neck. It was a totem of something he doesn't quite understand, but he's sure it wasn't given lightly.

The signs of the virus still mark his face with darkness under his eyes, and the line of his jaw looks sharper than he's accustomed to. But the loss of weight since leaving the City generally sits well with him. He feels alive and powerful.

Oriya explains to him that breakfast will have to wait until after the summary meeting at seven in the morning, but that she's smuggled bread and cheese from the kitchen that he can share. He finds her room and lets himself in.

She's dressed in shades of brown from head to toe except for a necklace of green fibers braided into intertwined chords of different shades. She's taken a lot of care to look elegant and purposeful.

"You're bewitching," he says, and flips his mask up and off without asking. "Beautiful but severe."

Her face is bare, and it shifts subtly in a way that Jumbo has learned means something like ironic amusement. It can also mean "don't do that" or "that was really dumb."

"They will call me a witch after I leave. Or a wanna-be witch."

"What will they call me?"

She hands him buttered bread with a thick slice of dense yellow cheese on it.

“You’re a mystery to them. They know about your work for MOM, yet you’re here with us.” She makes her irony face again. “Of course, you’ll be just as mysterious to the accreditation team. You’re just a hungry enigma, Jacob.”

“Am I here just because of Nova? They didn’t vote or something?” The food suddenly tastes a little flavorless.

“Nova. Hmmm. That one is a force of nature, Jacob. I’m not privy to everything, but I know she fights with them sometimes. I don’t think she loses very often. You’ve seen how driven she is.”

“Is that what I’m going to see this morning? Continuation politics?”

“More than that, I hope. Wear a comfort mask to the meeting. They won’t allow you to record anything. No electronics at all.” Oriya looks at him with an intensity that means she doubts him just a little.

*She thinks I might be a spy.*

This thought is quickly followed by:

*Why am I here if not to spy?*

It’s an uncomfortable feeling. He’s not had to choose sides out here. MOM seems far away and impotent. Despite the horrors en route, Jumbo feels like he’s arrived in Shangri-la, where realities like treachery are parked outside the gates. But he knows that’s just the food happiness.

“You think I’m here to check things out and report back to MOM,” he says, mostly to get it off his chest, but also to test himself against her judgment. Does she really think that of him?

“I don’t know. I wish I knew why you’re here. It would help me if I knew.” Oriya speaks simply, not underscoring with accusation or hurt or even confusion.

She takes his hand and holds the back of his fingers against her cheek for a moment. It’s intimate, but not sexual, and he knows she’s thinking of the two nights she went into some dark place and came for human comfort. It’s not a topic she has broached, and he stays away from it.

“Do you know why you’re here?” she asks.

Jumbo opens his mouth to spill out the honest answer, that Nova wants into the DiaHai building and she’s trying to seduce him with all this mumbo-jumbo. And that he’s not sure where he belongs anymore, but he’s sure as hell not going to end up in a cell under the MOM building, no matter how much of a bit-bitch Meg is.

Instead, what he says is “How do I know you’re not recording this?”

He can see that the hurt in Oriya’s eyes is real, and he feels as stupid as Sanchez is reputed to be. *Always been stupid. Always will be stupid. He’s got stupid genes.*

The meeting is held in the courtyard under a tent. Long tables are set up in a square, and the place is filling up with people. Most striking is a man who looks to be Jumbo’s age dressed in one of the light hooded half-robos that Oriya favors, but this one is cream colored, almost white. His mask is a powerful high-end model, and he has a faded green loop around his neck. Some kind of fabric, probably tied in back. The way he’s treated by the others tells Jumbo that this is the guy in charge. There are half a dozen people dressed and coifed to honor guests, half men and half women, two women besides Oriya dressed in the way Jumbo now associates with Continuation leadership, and a few people arranging chairs and sweeping up, trying to stay inconspicuous. There are voices here and there, but Jumbo suspects most of the chatter is happening on the network.

He turns to ask Oriya what he’s supposed to do, and he sees a familiar form entering the courtyard. There’s no mistaking the shape of her body, mouth, shape of jaw, the way she moves. It’s Nova.

Jumbo feels as if his core has been frozen in a heartbeat. He struggles to find his breath.

She walks right on by him without a nod or hello.

“Hey!” he says, louder than he intended. His control is slipping from shock and anger.

She turns back, and a few heads also pivot toward him.

He stares at her masked face through the eyeholes in his cotton comfort mask. There’s something alien about the woman.

“Yes?” she says finally.

It’s not her voice. It’s close, but the voice lacks the Sleep-strained sharpness of a drug user. He realizes that he must be looking at a clone. A younger version of Nova, in fact.

“I’m sorry,” he says. He sits heavily on a thick wooden bench. The torrent of emotion still buffets every thought. He feels ill.

“You thought that was her.” Oriya sits beside him. “That’s Joyeuse, not Nova. I should’ve warned you. Sorry, I didn’t think.”

“I made a fool of myself,” he says.

“Don’t worry. They’re all distracted by the work.”

“Shit. How many of her are there?”

“How do you solve a complex problem?” she prompts.

Jumbo lets his shoulders slump. There must be a lot of them.

*What have these people unleashed on the world?*

“Are they all as nuts as Nova?” he asks.

“Shhhh. Don’t talk like that here. Come on, I’ll show you where to sit to watch. Just stay invisible if you can. This isn’t about you or me.”

There are seats set up for observers, and he and Oriya claim two of them. Others from the village are arriving, filling in the others. Rico waves at him and sits near the back with two young ladies and an older woman. It’s overwhelming without his mask to keep their IDs straight, and Jumbo feels like a primitive tribesman being invited to a board meeting of an international business. The clothes are beginning to itch, but he is determined not to look any more like a rube by scratching himself the whole time he’s here.

The Continuation leadership—the man and two women Jumbo identified earlier—sit at the far end, facing everyone else. Behind them stands the Nova clone and two men Jumbo hasn’t noticed before. They wear military-style masks and carry side arms. Jumbo studies them. There’s something familiar about the men. He guesses they may

be the male version of Shanghai. In any case, they look nearly identical, so they are undoubtedly heavily engineered clones.

A short bald man works his way into the middle of the tables and raises his hands for attention.

“Good morning!” he says vocally. “As the appointed representative of Hope’s Dawn, I welcome you all to our meeting this morning. And welcome to my home as well. Our guests have been with us for a week, have shared our bread and our lives, and given generously of their time and energy. We honor and value their advice as representatives from the Continuation. We will now hear their report. I turn the meeting over to you, Speaker Stoneblack.”

Despite the nasal quality of his voice, Jumbo finds the delivery smooth and genuine. This is a man who knows how to talk others into doing things his way.

The Speaker stands, emanating authority.

“Thank you Lastfour Rayville and all the citizens of Hope’s Dawn. Your hospitality here has been unequalled, and it is a testament to the good leadership you enjoy here.

“The Continuation is a large and growing organization, and we depend on alliances like the one we have with Hope’s Dawn. Your accreditation likewise grants you a measure of protection by force of numbers, access to technology, and economic benefits. Your success is our success and ours is yours.

He pauses and lets a smile form briefly on his lips.

“Despite all this warm feeling, I’m sure you will be happy to see us leave.

There are a number of laughs at this.

“Today,” he continues, “we will present to you a preliminary finding from this review. You will have a chance to read it and correct factual errors, as well as respond to matters of disagreement you may have. The deadline for that is thirty days from today. There may be matters that require follow-up reports. This is normal, and should not be interpreted as putting your accreditation at risk.

“My associates are now distributing the text of the report to you, which we will discuss in sections. We will entertain questions afterwards, only after the findings are read. Are there any questions before we begin?”

Jumbo pulls his notebook and pencil out to take notes. It quickly becomes dull. The Continuation has a short list of main principles, which have a host of standards for compliance under them. The report focuses on findings from two areas: economics and education. The first has something to do with the ratio of expected crops to the number of futures contracts traded on the City market. He senses that the Speaker is doing everything but coming out and accusing the village of speculating with its crop rather than merely hedging risk.

The reading of the report takes only a quarter of an hour, but the discussion is much longer. Despite the Speaker asking that questions be asked vocally “for the sake of our guests,” much of the discussion lapses into net-speak. Oriya tries to keep him up to speed with whispers, but Jumbo doesn’t follow it all.

It seems very business-like. The only mumbo-jumbo he can detect pertains to the educational standard. It’s clear that the Continuation wants to dictate the curriculum, which includes indoctrination. The teachers have to be Conty-certified, and periodically send in progress reports.

It seems that the town will have to make a few changes and send in a couple of reports, and that will be the end of it. It seems more like a board meeting than anything religious. It’s not what he expected.

The only hint at religious fervor comes at the end, when the Speaker weaves the principles of the Continuation into a short speech that Jumbo supposes is inspiring to the true believers.

He’s more interested in the Quasis behind the Speaker. Collectively, they must be the target of the Quasimodo reference. It’s no wonder they are feared, if Shanghai and Nova are representative. He guesses military-grade genetics with customization.

*How do you solve hard problems? Try lots of different approaches.*

Jumbo is beginning to see how serious they are about that idea.

“How many experiments like this are going on?” he whispers to Oriya.

“Many thousands,” she says.

“With variations?”

She nods and smiles as if to say “he finally gets it.” Or maybe she’s just pleased that he’s paying attention.

Jumbo doesn’t have access to the research notes he’s made on the Continuation, but he can put some of the pieces together now. If this experience is any indication, the public information is skewed toward the mystical and sensational. This looks much more like a business than a religion to him.

*A business of winning minds.*

And that brings him back to Nova and why he’s here. She sent him to see this judgment, or whatever it is. And meanwhile he’s judging them, and eventually she will judge him. Along the way, Jumbo’s judgment has resulted in two deaths. He has to keep his mind occupied so that the pale mud-spattered face with the vacant eyes doesn’t haunt his thoughts.

A cynical thought occurs to him. After Shanghai’s death, Jumbo was ill for several days, feeling exhausted and weak from the psychic horror of it. But that feeling went away. The guilt remains, but the sick feeling left. Knowing that it goes away makes it go away faster, he figures.

*I’m becoming a cold-blooded bastard.*

On the other hand, the kid probably would have put a bullet through him in a very unsporting way. He decides that he’s given himself a pass on this one, and is a little shocked when no hidden recess of his mind howls in disapproval.

*No, I’m already a cold-hearted bastard.*

But he doesn’t believe that either. He gives up thinking about it, and wonders what’s for lunch.

The meeting breaks up, and there are congratulations and smiles and a general feeling of relief. Only the Quasi detail doesn’t look relaxed.

Oriya leads him back to his room and promises to bring food. But Jumbo is tired of being passive and led around like a child. He tells her—just short of a demand—that he

wants to talk to Sanchez. He figures the man must be around here somewhere. After a delay, he's led to a library with real paper books lining shelves from the floor to ceiling on three walls. They are of all different colors and sizes, making the room seem almost gaudy. He sits in a high leather chair and waits.

A few minutes later, Oriya leads a tall thin man with angular features and jet black hair. He sits. When Oriya begins to sit too, Jumbo shoos her away with his hand. She hesitates, then leaves, shutting the door behind her.

"I'm Jacob," Jumbo says. He's not sure why he used the name Oriya calls him by. It seems fitting. If he really was baptized into something new, it's fitting.

"Sanchez," the man says vocally. Jumbo's at a social disadvantage, having only his cotton comfort mask on, while the newcomer wears a relatively new mask with good optics and network ability.

"What can I do for you?" Sanchez asks.

The man speaks with a clipped, business-like manner, and his posture reinforces that notion. He leans forward with his fingers interlaced, receptive-seeming, but not ceding authority. He doesn't come off as a stupid, stupid man.

"Did they tell you anything about me?" Jumbo asks.

"Just that you're an observer. They said I could speak freely."

"What's your role in the inquisition?"

Sanchez gives a quick smile, just enough to acknowledge but not endorse the use of the word.

"I'm the liaison to the Continuation. I pull together the reports and make the arrangements for meetings like this one."

"How did you get that job?"

Sanchez leans back and pulls his arms to the rests on the chair. His quick precise motions remind Jumbo of a bird. Not a hop, hop, hop little brown thing looking for seeds. A bird of prey.

"I believe in this project, Lastfour Jacob. I've seen it work. It isn't perfect." He shakes his head. Very precise. "No. And it may fail."

He jabs the arm of the chair with an extended finger: "We. Can't. Let. It. Fail."

Jumbo feels the impact of the other man's intensity. He would get along fine with Nova, Jumbo thinks. He wonders how Sanchez would feel about waddling around quacking like a duck.

"How do the others here feel about it?" Jumbo asks instead.

"They signed up. We passed inspection, as you saw. What else is there?"

"I meant the report. Was there friction? Politics?"

Sanchez barks a laugh.

"Of course there were politics. The Continuation affects everything here. Money, relationships, children...everything. You don't gain something without giving something else up. And people are people."

"That's the problem the Continuation is trying to solve, isn't it? People being themselves."

"Yes. Just look around at the world, Lastfour. Do you really want another ten thousand years of this?"

"You think they have the answers figured out?"

"No," Sanchez shakes his head. "They don't. Moreover, they know they don't. But they are looking. Do you know who else is looking?"

Jumbo shakes his head, mesmerized by the energy the man projects.

"Nobody," Sanchez says. "Nobody else cares."

Jumbo clears his throat, a prelude to a remark that will end the conversation. But Sanchez leans forward again, engaging.

“Lastfour Jacob,” Sanchez says, “we have a question we ask. When we ask someone if there is Good in them, we mean to ask if, deep down in your gut, you really give a damn about the other people who live on the planet?”

“Sure,” Jumbo says.

“I don’t mean your friends, people you know. Do you give a damn about the rest of them?”

“Okay.”

“I’m asking you, Lastfour. Is there Good in you?”

Jumbo feels like a mouse watching a viper with its little black beady eyes, hypnotized by awe. He imagines he could be swallowed alive, and at the end of it there would be a gooey pile of Jumbo’s bones, all at funny angles, cleaned of all their Good and waiting only for the sun to dry them into a monument of another’s ambition.

“Of course there is,” he says. It sounds weak.

Sanchez nods up-down. It’s an equivocal nod, a polite agreement. His body language says something else: *show me*.

Jumbo ends the meeting by standing and nodding. He holds onto a forced smile until he’s safely back in his borrowed room. Then he heaves a sigh.

*What in Dawkins’ green hell have I gotten myself into?*

He boots up his mask to see if there are messages, and there is one from Oriya. It tells him that they are expected to leave this afternoon. Once the report is read, the team is supposed to leave as soon as possible. That disappoints Jumbo greatly. He looks with envy at the soft bed.

He messages her asking for a departure time. As the minutes drag by without a response, Jumbo decides he may as well use the bed while he can. So he removes his shoes and sinks into the blissful comfort, leaving the mask on with the volume up.

He’s awakes to someone touching his shoulder. When he opens his eyes, it’s an unfamiliar form that he finds over him. A young woman. Wait. She was with Rico.

“Hope?” he tries.

“Dawn,” she says. She seems annoyed. “You have to leave now.”

Jumbo sits up. He’s slept for over an hour, and clearly he’s missed something. He puts his shoes back on, and scrambles to assemble his things. It doesn’t take long, but he feels her presence the whole time. Annoyed.

“Did the, uh..Oriya—where is she?” he stumbles over his words.

“They all left. More than an hour ago.”

Jumbo heaves the hated straps over his shoulders into the familiar sore spots.

“Do you know where they went?”

She just shakes her head. Annoyed. Jumbo gets the impression that this is her room he’s been using.

Jumbo walks outside. The heat is seeping back into the sky, the reprieve nearly over. It’s early afternoon.

His network access still works, so he checks the directory to see if Oriya is logged in. There’s no sign of her. He grits his teeth and spams the net with a blanket request for information about where she went. It immediately results in his privileges being revoked.

The thoughts circling meanwhile are not pleasant. Why would Oriya abandon him out here? It makes no sense. He decides to head east, toward the City. He looks down the cracked road leading that direction. It already shimmers with heat. He turns back toward the house and pokes around until he finds someone. A stranger.

“Can you get Rico for me?” Jumbo asks him. “It’s important.”

After a show of exasperation, Jumbo gets a grudging yes, so he sits outside and waits.

Rico finally walks, with his smile still mostly in place. Jumbo asks for a ride out of town. He hasn’t bothered to stand, and Rico looks down at him, working his jaw, scratching.

“Okay. Sure, Lastfour. Be right back.”

Jumbo breathes a little easier at the ‘Lastfour.’ He plans to eke every meter out of the ride he can. It will save him at least a mile of walking in the heat, in this place that seems a lot less friendly now.

“I don’t suppose you know where Oriya went?” Jumbo asks, after he slides into the seat of the cart.

“Uh...well, I do, actually.”

Jumbo waits, but that seems to be it.

“And you can’t tell me?”

“If she wanted you to know she would have told you,” Rico says. Jumbo can tell he’s uncomfortable. “I probably shouldn’t be giving you a ride.”

“Can you take me to her?” He knows the answer to that one.

Rico just keeps driving east, his mouth turning into an increasingly glum expression.

Jumbo can’t convince him to go any further than the edge of the last farm, so he steps out and thanks his driver.

“It’s not safe out there alone,” Rico says.

“I’ll take my chances. Anyway, I was kicked out. Say goodbye to your sister for me, would you?”

“You seem upset, Lastfour. I hope I haven’t given offence.”

“Forget it.”

“Wait,” Rico says. He steps out and flips open a box on the back of the cart. He rummages around inside a moment and then offers a bag of jerky and two bottles of water to Jumbo.

No amount of pride can overcome his common sense here. He takes the provisions and feels a little ashamed at the irritation he has let show.

“You’re a fine young man, Lastfour,” Jumbo tells him. “I appreciate this. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Go with Good.”

“You too,” Jumbo says, “Go with Good, Lastfour.”

Then he turns and walks toward the edge of the forest.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

Jumbo sleeps little that night. He hasn’t exactly retraced the way he and Oriya came. Crossing the creek doesn’t appeal to him. So he turns north to find a bridge that’s on the map. His consumer-grade mask has some issues finding the signals of the positioning satellites, and has to fall back on a secondary system that the City runs as a backup. It’s passive, so he doesn’t have to transmit radio signals and give himself away to any sniffers out there.

He finally gives up on sleep as the sky overhead lightens. He’s about six kilometers from Dawn’s Hope.

The ground has not gotten any softer than he remembers, but that’s not the real problem. Traveling alone seems to focus and concentrate his isolation. The nature around him seems alien now, threatening, and uncertainty leads to a sense of helplessness.

Soon he’s up and moving again. The exercise is good for his spirits, and there’s a certain comfort to the rhythm of putting one foot in front of the other. He can recognize some of the bird songs now, and tries to spot what they look like.

When he stops after a couple of hours to chew on a stick of jerky, doubts flutter around, looking for a perch. He still feels aggrieved. Why would Oriya go off and leave him? Without even a note?

But there’s an uncomfortable aspect to it too, the realization that maybe leaving is exactly what he wanted to do.

Now finds that he misses her company.

Jumbo considers going back. The thought of showing up at Hope's Dawn, hungry and bedraggled, undoubtedly to find Oriya and her Conties still gone, is too much. Maybe he'd have to put up with another lecture from Sanchez.

There's no going back.

The thought circles back around to the beginning.

*Did I want to leave her?*

Objectively, Jumbo has gotten more than enough information to get praise from the research unit at MOM. At the very least, he has recent intelligence from the inner workings of the Continuation. He has names. He knows about these Quasis. The thought of the Nova clone makes him shiver, despite the heat.

This seduction by Nova—if that's what this is—has to come to a point of decision sometime. And when Jumbo says no at this big fork, then what? Force, probably. He shudders at the imagination of what their Plan B might entail.

He walks on, still beset by worry. And worry is a type of pain he deplores. The idea that every step takes him back to the City and Meg and everything else there good and bad isn't much motivation. But then he remembers tuna steak seared on each side, with wasabi sauce, nestled in a bed of rice with a radish rose on the side. And the rich earthiness of one of his favorite wines when it's new. Espresso in the morning, with a square of bitter dark chocolate.

Yes.

*What else is there, really, but sense input? Why settle for less than the best?*

He feels the ground more solidly under his feet. His philosophy has been tested and then some, but he's still the same person. Thinner, and with some lurking nightmares newly painted on the inside of his skull, but the core of Jumbo is there.

There's a man with a gun staring at him with a bare face, his mouth snarled, revealing yellow teeth and pink gaps.

"You stop there," the man says, waving the barrel up and down.

Jumbo's daydream evaporates, and his mind tries to come to grips with this frightening new reality. He even closes his eyes once, squeezing them, and then cracking them open, but the scene is the same.

"Everything on the ground," the man says.

Jumbo hears a sound to his right, but doesn't take his sight off the weapon.

"What do you want?" he asks.

"You deaf and blind too. Drop it on the ground!"

Jumbo shrugs the packs from his shoulders and lets them fall. His notebook is in there.

"Mask too."

"Okay," he says. He transmits an SOS at the highest power.

"Now."

Jumbo tugs at the straps, pretending to have trouble. It's not much of pretense because his hands are shaking.

The mask falls on top of the packs. Jumbo feels humiliated, being barefaced with this ugly stranger.

"What are you going to do with me?" he asks, and feels like a coward for asking.

The man's eyes get wide and then his mouth too, and then he laughs twice, like coughing.

"Dinner," he says, "You dinner."

Jumbo's knees weaken. It seems like an unlikely way to phrase an invitation to a meal. He knows all about the cannibalism after the really destructive Waves, when society had a stroke. But he can't figure that it's still true.

"Are you an anthropophagite?" he hears himself ask. It's like his tongue is on autopilot. Where the hell did that word come from?

“Hit ‘im.”

The assault comes from Jumbo’s right rear. He hears it, turns, sees the movement in the corner of his eye. His arm flies up instinctively, and a huge pressure grabs and squeezes it. It’s a swung rope tied around a baseball-sized rock at the end, now wrapped around his forearm. There’s a man at the other end, holding a short pole that the rope is tied to. It’s a stone-age flail.

Jumbo yanks his arm and body in the other direction and runs. He’s bigger and stronger than the other guy, and soon he’s running alone, dodging branches and howling, while the rope unwinds from his arm. He grabs it before it falls, and gets his hand on the shaft.

The footsteps behind him are pounding just as fast as his own, and Jumbo stops, pivots and swings the arc of the rock where it seems like his pursuers ought to be. It misses and completes a circle, whizzing over his head.

The two men stop a few meters away, breathing as hard as Jumbo.

“Leave me alone!,” he yells, and captures the stone to ready it for another try.

The man with the rifle jacks back the bolt. It sticks and he hammers it twice to get it to close. Jumbo can see the rust on the mechanism and doubts there is ammunition loaded, or if there is that the ancient-looking weapon will fire. It’s another thing to bet one’s life on such a hunch.

“Ha! You got no bullets,” Jumbo says to him, hoping for confirmation. He gets a good look at the other man now, a tired-looking older man. The bags under his eyes have bags themselves. Aside from the potential of the rifle, they don’t seem very terrifying.

Jumbo backs away. Then he remembers that they have all his stuff, including his mask. Without it, he’ll have a hard time getting back into the City. He would probably have to ask Meg’s help, and that thought makes him angry.

He charges Eyebags, twirling the rock into a climb that Jumbo can bring crashing down on the man.

Gaptooth lunges and jams Jumbo in the ribs with the muzzle of the rifle with the full weight of his body behind the attack. Jumbo feels a terrible sharp pain and hears a dreadful crack. His own attack was too early, and the stone misses the target, circles

maliciously and grazes his knee with an agonizing swipe. He falls, mouth open wide and howling. Someone leaps on his back, and when the awful flash of self-inflicted pain is over, he jabs around with an elbow. His attacker gets a boney forearm across Jumbo's throat and pulls. Jumbo shoves backward and tries to stand, succeeds, and then stumbles backwards from the burden on his back and the pressure against his trachea.

Jumbo takes another jab to the ribs, and feels it sink deeply into the man's gut. Instead of trying to arrest his fall backwards, he launches back with both feet, his hands trying to remove the choking torment. The two men crash into a branch, slide, and then fall heavily to the ground.

Jumbo hears the air go out of Eyebags, and gets a whiff of something rotten. He kicks at the barrel of the rifle when Gaptooth jabs again, then lunges for it, and gets hands on the barrel.

Gaptooth drops the gun and tries to *bite* him, eyes bugged, mouth wide and seeking. Jumbo yelps with the horror of it, drops the gun, and shoves both palms up as hard as he can. He connects solidly under Gaptooth's jaw. There's a loud snap as some of the remaining teeth splinter, and then their owner drops like he's been poleaxed. He lays on the ground working his mouth like a fish out of water.

Jumbo picks up the rifle and gets a fiery pain in his side as a reward. Definitely something broken. He savagely pokes Gaptooth in the side and receives a satisfying cry in return.

"How do you like it?" Jumbo prepares another jab, but the man already looks so pathetic, Jumbo just feels sick.

Eyebags is lying on the ground blinking. His mouth is gapped open and he's wheezing little sips of air through it, like his lungs can only hold a teacup at a time.

Jumbo takes both the weapons with him, and limps back to his gear, still on the ground where he dropped it. He loads everything back up, boots his mask, and sets the warnings up to maximum. Then he heads north instead of east. His knee and side ache with every step. After fifty meters he tosses the weapons into the brush.

Jumbo can see that the trees thin out to the east, so he walks that way to see what's beyond. As he nears the edge of the clearing he sees faded and worn flotsam of civilization's outcast materials, stuck together in crazy ways to make a sort of

shantytown camp. There are muted sounds of life coming from that direction: voices, metal banging, a child crying, and a dull bass thump of dance music.

He watches for a while, zooming in until he begins to feel eye-sucking motion sickness, and then dials it back. He's seen enough to know what it is.

This is the refugee camp. Slant Town or whatever Oriya called it. They must come to the same places every time the City disgorges its unwanted. In this case it's MOM's focus on Quasis, started by the incident at DiaHai. Judging from the timing of the raids, most of the newcomers have probably been here less than a month. These would be people with genetics on the illegal list. Minor stuff, probably. He doubts anyone who can afford buy high-grade chromes would be out here in the squalor.

Jumbo doesn't see signs of organized gangs. They are probably present, but small time. It can still get you killed, but he doesn't think the two inept anthropophagites are representative.

Jumbo coughs and wipes blood off his lips. He goes cold inside.

*That scrawny bastard punctured my lung.*

It aches, radiating up and down from the cracked rib. The fear inside him grows too, which is worse than the pain. What are the odds of getting medical care out here? Jumbo imagines a grim stupid death out here in among the dregs of civilization.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid. I survived mySARS for this?*

No one bothers him when he walks gingerly to the edge of the shanty. The smell almost forces him away, though. It's clear that one should not approach the place from the downhill side. He does a quick scan of the comms environment and finds a pay-to-play network. The reception is bad, but it's not much money. Even out here where the crowns of the skyscrapers sit on the horizon, people are tied to City money.

Jumbo sets his mask to the most anonymous settings he can, but he knows if someone wants to find out who he is and has access to the City net, it's only a matter of time. His association with MOM will not be popular out here. But they will take him more seriously with a mask, and he can find things out. Like if there's a doctor here.

A horse-drawn cart is being pulled along a road that leads right into the camp. Jumbo walks through funhouse pathways that jag at odd angles, never the same material

flanking him on both sides. All sorts of metal, plastic, wood, and cloth are turned into walls, screens and roofs. Jugs of water hang from chains, and gutter collects runoff into barrels. Garbage is everywhere. Faces dressed with masks and dirt stare out from the shadows and cracks in this fractured slum.

The people are of all sorts, dressed in colorful bits here and there, but more often worn and dirty. Some beg with their hands and rag-covered faces allowing just the glint of two hungry eyes. They try to talk to him with their crappy beggarware, trying to parasitize his electronics. Most don't have real masks on, but almost everyone has their face concealed one way or the other.

While he walks, Jumbo looks for anything that looks like a doctor on the network index. He comes up blank.

He finds himself at the center, where the road passes through. A market is set up along it on both sides. The offerings are pathetic. A few green ears of corn, picked too soon, peanuts, packaged food someone has brought in at more expense than it was worth. One can buy all sorts of alcohol and drugs, the names of which are called out from parched throats. Electronics, chargers, and other small items are few on too-large tables. There are games too, dice, cards, and purely virtual things.

"Drink, Lastfour?"

Jumbo stretches the lens on his mask to wide angle to catch a glimpse before he pans. It's a guy with his shirt off who should have a shirt on, in Jumbo's opinion. The man is old enough to still have pale skin, which is now bright red, and round like a ball. Jumbo sizes him up.

*How does someone out here stay that fat?*

The network ID on the man's mid-scale mask call him Twosy.

Jumbo reaches for his own water bottle and takes a swig. It tastes like copper.

"I'm all set for drinks, Lastfour," he says.

But Twosy cocks his head and holds out a brown bottle for Jumbo's inspection. There's no label.

“No thanks,” Jumbo says. Then he sees the girl. She looks to be about twenty, has a gauzy veil, and once-white wraps covering her breasts and hips and not much else. What’s striking to Jumbo is how beautiful her skin is. He finds himself zooming in. It’s flawless, smooth tan. He forgets about his rib for a moment.

“You like her, huh.” Twosy says. He turns to look her over too. “Her name’s Oo.”

“It’s Gerdie,” she says. “Gerdie.”

“I like Oo better,” Twosy says. He sounds agreeable, but there’s little doubt who’s in charge.

Twosy slips an arm around the girl.

“What’s she worth to ya?” he asks Jumbo.

“Actually I’m looking for a doctor,” Jumbo says. “I’m guessing you need one from time to time.”

Twosy backs away fast.

“You sick with something?”

Jumbo realizes he’s made a stupid, possibly fatal mistake.

“No, no, no. I got poked by some crazy idiot. He broke my rib. Look.”

Jumbo shrugs his packs on the ground and lifts his shirt. The movement causes another spike of pain. It brings tears to his eyes.

Twosy looks at the purple spot on the side of Jumbo’s chest.

“Poked you, huh? With what?”

Jumbo tells him the story, trying to make it lively. He makes himself the butt of the joke. By the end of it Twosy has cracked a wide smile.

“You called them what?”

“Anthropophagites.”

Twosy says it a few times to get it right.

“Well, if you need a doctor go to the witch,” he says. “She might see you.”

Jumbo nods. After a quick transaction, and Oo-Gerdie leads him down the road that bisects the camp. Jumbo doesn’t feel like talking. The packs are getting heavier with each step.

Gerdie seems terrified of the place. She starts at noises or motion, and has an odd way of craning to see this way and that. It makes Jumbo’s neck hurt just to watch her. He feels a little sorry for her, she seems so out of place.

“Do you like being with that guy?” he asks, heaving the words out of his chest with effort.

She trudges along in silence for a moment, twitching as before. When she turns profile, Jumbo gets a glimpse of her mouth bunched up as if she’s about to bawl. She stuffs the back of her fist into it.

Jumbo doesn’t care. He’s more concerned about pneumonia and a violent death out here. If they see him spitting up blood, there’s no telling what they will do. Nothing pleasant.

The so-called witch sits on a blanket with a few small baskets scattered around her. She looks like an older woman, older than the Waves, but she might be a GRAMPS survivor. She wears a dilapidated-looking mask, and gray hair blooms out of the top and around the sides, falling down to her shoulders. Her arms are bony and tanned, the skin pinched into lines of wrinkles. She has a cord around her neck, tied like a necklace. It’s a dark color, and might even be green, but Jumbo can’t tell.

There are other people waiting, sitting or standing. A small boy, perhaps five years old, stands next to an adult, holding his arm and sniffing.

Jumbo tries to sit comfortably. He gets another stab of pain as a reward. He begins to feel dizzy.

“Stay with me,” he says to Oo-Gerdie. The heat on the ground is intense, and Jumbo sucks at his water bottle again. The world shimmers and stinks.

“I have to go,” she says. She looks to the corners of the map, still searching for whatever it is, then she jerks her limbs back down the road, head lowered.

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Jumbo feels his hand being lifted. The realization settles on him slowly, becoming more real until it finally demands action. He jerks back and then yelps from the pain. Half his chest feels like it’s on fire. His head is a cottony mess of acid dreams and laggardly reason.

*I must have slept.*

He reaches for his packs, careful not to move too quickly.

“No one is going to steal your things, young man.” The voice is kind and weary, but it has a lift at the end as if it’s saving up a joke—the best joke ever told—holding it in reserve for just when it’s needed.

Jumbo turns his head to look at the witch. She must be really old to be calling him a young man.

“What brings you to Sister Ivy?” she asks.

“I broke a rib.” Jumbo carefully lifts his shirt again, oblivious to whoever might be watching.

“Let’s get you out of the sun. What can I call you?”

“Jacob,” Jumbo says. It seems appropriate.

A few moments later, he sits more comfortably in a canvas folding chair while Sister Ivy feels his bones with her small fingertips. Jumbo marvels at her touch. He realizes he’s forgotten what physical kindness feels like.

She asks him to remove his mask. He does, and once his eyes adjust to the stark contrast of sunlight leaking through cracks in the shack, and the poorly lit interior, he feels at home here. It’s a refuge. The walls are made of rectangular sheets of building materials, cracked and stained, but serviceable. From them hang odd bits of tubing and equipment from an earlier age of medicine.

Jumbo accepts the pokes and prods and soft commands to lift this or move that way, letting the voice and healing hands steer him. He drifts into a trance, permeated by the rich scent of some herb or incense that hides even the powerful aroma of the camp.

He coughs into a white cloth and feels ashamed to show her the dark stains on it after.

“I’m rusting,” he says. But the joke feels out of place here.

Finally, Sister Ivy sits back and looks at him through her glittering lenses.

“I can fix you, but you are not going to want to move around for a day afterwards.”

“What did you find?”

“You got hit right here, yes?” she points, and Jumbo nods.

“The rib broke and punctured your lung, but lucky for you it snapped back most of the way. I need to go in there and do some fixing. Then you need to stay put.”

Jumbo is alarmed at “go in there.” He tries to think of a delicate way to ask about her qualifications. It must show on his face, because she smiles and pats his hand.

“Don’t worry. I’ve been doing this for a long time.” Then she begins quizzing him on his medical history. Jumbo hesitates, then tells her about his recent viral encounter. She asks a lot of questions about the mySARS. It’s obvious if it got loose in this camp, it would be devastating. Finally she seems satisfied, and asks about the reasons for his travels. He hedges, but tells her about Oriya.

“You travelled with a Speaker?” Sister Ivy asks.

“In training, she said. Do you know her?”

She shakes her head, and touches the cord around her neck.

“No. But we share the load. You can stay here. I have a cot.”

“I can pay,” Jumbo says.

“I need you to take your shirt off, brother. How well do you tolerate pain?”

*Brother? Pain?*

When she dabs the cold antiseptic against his skin, Jumbo feels the anticipation of pain already making it hurt worse. He trembles as if feverish again.

The sight of the knife doesn't help at all.

## **Chapter Twenty**

Once he gets used to the idea of someone poking around inside his body, the actual procedure isn't very dramatic. Jumbo keeps his eyes closed the whole time, and listens to Sister Ivy's soothing voice tell him things that have nothing to do with what she is doing.

Her assistant left her to seek his fortune in the City. He was intent on smuggling himself inside in a produce cart.

She talks about the storm, and the Storm too—she was at home, not far from here when it hit. Now that house is gone, and the people who lived in it gone too. All except for Sister Ivy. She speaks calmly, even cheerfully, even though the words draw borders around the absence of dear family members. It reminds Jumbo of the traditional plots in the oldest cemeteries, with token walls around a clan's honored dead.

She talks about the Waves and finding or failing to find the courage to help others. The sense of being drowned in it. These are familiar themes, but Jumbo doesn't have her deep history with the illusions of permanence that preceded the terrible rending of society. He can imagine the heartbreak from the shapes of the words, and sense that it was far worse than what he personally endured.

He notices that she has distracted him from his discomfort, and that the thing is over and done with, but she is still talking. Speaking soft words, but ones that carried the weight of the world. Honest to the point of bleakness, but always with that hint of levity at the end of each sentence.

Jumbo lies alone on the cot, comfortable and utterly humbled. Night comes and decides to stay for a while.

*I am dust.*

This is the refrain that sums up best how he feels. He thinks about the clever algorithms he has designed to find people that someone else wanted to sift from the masses, and the exquisite tastes he has developed for all manner of aesthetic pleasures. He thinks about his cynical notes about the state of humanity that could be read as compliments to himself. He thinks about Shanghai's last breaths in the DaiHai building, the animal senses that were overruled by a rational intent so powerful as to overcome four billion years of evolutionary law.

Nova and Oriya also posture on the stage in Jumbo's imagination, inviting the judgment he was quick to give before. But he finds that he is the one being judged. They are the actors, but what is he? A member of some audience that sips reality through a gold straw and categorizes the taste according to a chart? Giving notes to the players? It seems arrogant. Even Nova, as insane as she obviously is, embodies a merciless motivation that bends reality to her will.

These dreams are so bothersome that Jumbo gives up on trying to sleep. It's dark out, and the turmoil in his thoughts is at least partly due to the bite of acid at the back of his throat. The stress and bad diet of this adventure have not been good to his stomach. He sits up and reaches for his bag. The last of the powders and pills Oriya organized for him a million years ago is gone, though. He takes an experimental breath, sucking the air deeper and deeper into his lungs, waiting for the inevitable sharp pain. But it doesn't come. Aside from the sourness in his mouth, he feels the picture of health. There's something about Sister Ivy's way that promotes a deep psychic peace that even his existential angst can't penetrate. There's something fundamentally good about being alive, Jumbo decides.

Moving very slowly, Jumbo sits on the side of the cot and takes stock of his surroundings. He finds his mask and slips it on. It smells bad, and badly needs cleaning. But it still works. There's not much light, so he flips to infrared and lets his eyes adjust to the grim monochrome. It reminds him of clubbing a teenager in the back of the head, and a sigh of disgust escapes his lips.

He's not alone.

The other figure is prone on another cot. It's not Sister Ivy, he notes. It's a man who looks to be in his twenties. His head is bandaged and his arm is tied to his body in a sling. Jumbo watches the man's chest rise and fall in the regularity of sleep.

He figures there must be some kind of anti-acid around here somewhere, so Jumbo starts poking through the boxes and cubbyholes that fill the space. Infrared is not good

for this, though. It begins to give him a headache. He's also aware that he's very hungry. So he finds his shirt and slips it on. Then he steps outside.

The clock on the mask tells him it's 1:03am. The air in the camp has settled into a moist blanket of cloying stink. A dog barks somewhere, and there is the faint sound of music. As his ears exert themselves against the quiet, he catches a laugh, a fragment of a voice, and somewhere sobbing. No, maybe a strange laugh or the sound of passion.

He finds himself walking along the road, back the way he walked earlier with Oo-Gerdie. He feels a little ashamed that he was callous earlier, but he was dying then and could be excused, right? He imagines all the people out here tossing and turning with lost dreams. Who would think to themselves: someday I may be a refugee in a fetid slum, surrounded by violence and disease? The child he saw earlier—what sort of future could the kid look forward to?

*I wonder if I can find some food?*

Deep down among the competing layers of odious odor, under the stratum of sewage and lower than the rancid scent of stagnate water churned into filth is the tang of smoking meat. Somewhere around here is a fire and a spit, Jumbo is sure. It's a testament to the genes of his ice-age ancestors that this vestige of authentic connection with the earth persists. These are strong chromosomes, and they taunt him now with their perspicacity.

*Your great uncle a thousand times removed once smelt a roasting mammoth from ten miles.*

Jumbo tries to identify the direction of the maddening aroma, but it eludes him. But where's there's smoke there's heat, so he cranks up the gain on the infrared and goes in search. It feels good to be on the move and to have a goal. His mouth waters at the thought of rending charred animal flesh.

He stops short.

*What if there really are cannibals out here?*

He's not hungry enough to eat human flesh, no matter what condiments are on offer. But he smiles at the thought that maybe Eyebags is eating Gaptooth, or the other way around. Neither of them looked like much of a meal, but there's no telling what a

connoisseur of anthro-cuisine might make of their scrawny forms. Presentation is half of the battle.

Jumbo realizes that he's a little loopy, and wonders if Sister Ivy gave him something to settle his nerves. That would explain a lot.

He spots the fire about fifty meters off the road, deep in Slant Town. This poses a problem since the intra-camp pathways are circuitous and strewn with hazards. He might find himself in someone's nominal domicile on accident and be mistaken for a thief. The complex attraction of wood smoke and bubbling fat works at his fear, though, and soon he finds himself picking his way carefully around mud holes and support ropes, dodging sharp edges of metal roofs that descend too far, trying to spot the actual path. If there is one, at all.

Fractions of sleeping forms glow green in his mask, truncated by the bits of walls that assemble so-called homes here. He freezes when he sees a bare-faced woman sitting with her arms crossed, watching him. He gives a smile she probably can't see, and then walks on. Mosquitoes escort him, whining about their own burdens, but he ignores all but the most persistent.

He switches the mask off and stows it before proceeding. The comfort mask smells a lot better than the other one, and he will look more friendly and less well-healed.

It isn't much of a fire. The flame has retreated into flickering bed of coals a meter wide. Several dark shapes on spits lie on the embers. Two men sit by the fire. Their voices trail off as they turn to look at the newcomer. The one to the left sits on a worn couch. He's huge—a tank of a man, and all muscle from the looks of it. Definitely not stock chromes. He has a cloth half-mask, dark enough to make him Zorro, if the swordsman were a giant. The other man has long legs that stretch out and cross at the ankles. He slouches in an old padded chair, more lying against it than sitting. He wears old flicker goggles, which makes him look alien in the near dark.

"Sorry to interrupt," Jumbo says, when the silence has become uncomfortable. "I smelled something cooking."

The remark is met with chuckles that don't sound amused, but more like an inside joke.

"Sit," the big guy says, and pokes a fat finger at a folding chair. Jumbo does so carefully. Adrenaline is beginning to trickle into his veins, waking him to his foolishness.

“So you’re hungry,” the man says.

“Thirsty too, I bet,” the other one says.

“I’m Jacob,” Jumbo says.

“Crowder,” the big one says.

“Frances,” the other says, with a smile that freezes in place.

“Go on take some,” Crowder says, eyes fixed on Jumbo.

Jumbo opens his mouth to ask what kind of meat it is. He thinks better of it, and bends in front of the coals to pick up a spit. It looks like a squirrel or rat. Basically the same thing.

“Thank you,” he says. He lets the meat cool.

“What’s your story?” Frances asks him. He tilts his head in the asking and keeps it cocked like a bird, waiting for a reply.

“I was travelling with a friend. We got separated,” Jumbo segues into the story about the two men who jumped him, but it doesn’t get a laugh. Nor does the vocabulary lesson seem to impress them.

“What do you do in the City?” Frances asks.

Jumbo suddenly realizes that Francis may know everything about him. His bones suddenly feel cold.

*This was a bad idea. My stomach is going to get me killed.*

“I do demographics contract work,” Jumbo says, telling half a truth.

“Sure you do. I bet half these people out here are here because of you,” Frances says.

“That’s not the sort of work I do,” Jumbo lies. He’s sweating now.

“Eat,” Crowder commands.

Jumbo tears off a flap of charred flesh with his teeth. It's tough, but his mouth loves it. The rest of him is becoming too alarmed to enjoy it.

"Give 'im a bottle, Fran," Crowder says, nodding to his companion. Francis reaches behind his chair and then tosses a brown bottle to Jumbo.

Jumbo twists the top open and sniffs. Something alcoholic and sour. His stomach revolts at the idea of drinking it, but he forces down a swallow. It's warm and unappetizing, but the alcohol burn feels good, so he takes another swig.

"Everything in life is a *quid pro quo*," Crowder says. "Would you agree, Jacob?"

Jumbo appraises the man anew.

"Everything?" Jumbo asks, temporizing, trying to get a feel for the terrain.

"Or do you believe in honest altruism?"

Jumbo can feel the intensity of the man's gaze. He notices for the first time a certain neatness about the huge form. The clothes are clean, his hair is orderly, and the man's fingernails are clean and white. Even his massive shoes look spotless.

Frances leans forward and cocks his head, ready to gather up Jumbo's response.

"I guess friendship is. Real friendship." Jumbo says.

"I think you're an idealist," Crowder says. He turns to look at Francis, who nods in agreement.

"Take Fran and me. We're friends. But I wouldn't be friends with just anyone. We complement each other, see? Maybe you and I could be friends. How likely do you think that is?"

Jumbo desperately wants to be gone from here. The blackened form on the stick is growing cold, and he has no longer any appetite for it.

"Sure," Jumbo says, trying to be neutral.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, though," Crowder says. "We have to do an interview."

Jumbo wants to leave, but he knows he can't show weakness. He cudgels his foggy mind for some advantage he possesses.

"What's your kink, there, Jacob?" Frances asks. "What makes your world spin right around?"

"Uh..." Jumbo gnaws on a cold bone.

"Boys? Girls? Farm animals?"

Jumbo tries to shake no, then yes, then no quickly enough. He spits a piece of gristle, wipes his mouth, and says "I like a good cook with a pretty face."

*You gotta dance with what brung ya.*

Crowder's face splits in an amazingly large smile. He looks like a jack-o-lantern with perfect teeth.

"That's good. A good cook. With a pretty... Isn't that rich, Fran?"

Frances seems to agree, nodding and bobbing, hands clasped in front as if he might spontaneously break into prayer.

"Go on, tell him what you like, Fran. Since we're interviewing," Crowder says. "For the eventuality of friendship."

Jumbo wonders what the large man could have made of himself in different circumstances. Clearly he's smart in addition to his enormous size. He could have been the head of a corporation. Nobody would give this guy bitshit. It would be yes, sir, no sir, right away sir. And he could probably drive a golf ball about three miles.

"You see that tree rat you're eating, there? That's what does it for me, Jacob."

"Okay," Jumbo says, trying to end the conversation.

"He don't understan'," Crowder says. Jumbo can now tell that the colloquialism is assumed. The man had a good education somewhere.

“You’d be surprised how sharp the stake has to be,” Frances says. “Bodies are tough. Much harder to push a stick through than you’d suspect. Until you’ve done it a few times.”

“Fran the impaler,” Crowder says.

Frances gives a crazy kind of giggle and bites his lip. It’s trembling.

“And when Fran gets himself worked up, well, it gets me worked up too,” Crowder says. He licks his lips and watches Frances for a moment.

“Do you still want to be friends?” he asks Jumbo.

“I should go,” Jumbo says. “Thanks for the food.” He stands.

“Sit down,” Crowder says.

Jumbo is pretty sure he can outrun the big guy, even in his current condition. He’s not so sure about Frances. He sits on the edge of the seat.

“Do you like puzzles?” Crowder asks. Frances giggles again.

“No,” Jumbo says. Not today.

“If you solve it you can go. Otherwise you’ll have to stay and be our friend for the night.”

Jumbo waits. He knows he doesn’t have a choice.

*Damned smoke. Damned hunger.*

“Machiavelli gave a problem and a solution. I’ll give you the problem and you give me the solution,” Crowders says.

Jumbo feels like he’s strayed into hell’s political philosophy class.

“The problem a leader has,” Crowder says, “is that he can’t always know enough to make good decisions, he has to depend on others. At the same time he has to appear to be better than others and not accept advice from them. Otherwise they will despise him for being weak. How can he resolve this dilemma?”

Jumbo feels that odd burning in his skin that indicates blushing. Just like he used to do in grade school when he was goofing off and called on by the teacher. He has no idea what Crowder's talking about. The failing around in his mind isn't going to produce any good guesses either.

"One more time?" Jumbo asks, stalling.

"*The Prince*," Crowder says. "Did you read it?"

"Uh..."

"A prince has to be a fox as well as a lion," Fran says. He reaches behind his chair again. Jumbo's heart jumps, but it's only another so-called beer that appears in the man's hand.

"He doesn't seem like much of a lion," Frances says. "More like a groundhog."

"Is that so?" Crowder asks. "Are you a groundhog, Jacob?"

Jumbo finishes off the bottle of rancid alcohol, hoping it will calm his jangled nerves so he can think.

*How can a leader ask and yet not ask for advice?*

"Time's up," Crowder says. He stands.

The man's real size wasn't apparent while he was sitting. He's a giant. Well over two meters tall and the inverted V of his chest is almost as wide. His limbs look like they could lift whole trees out of the ground. And yet, the proportions are not so distorted that he looks like a monster. His head somehow balances the mass of the rest of his body.

When his eyes flip back to Frances, he sees the man is holding a stunner. It must have been charged and ready all along, perhaps beside the cushion of the chair where Jumbo couldn't spot it.

Jumbo stands, but he feels the fear draining strength from his legs. His eyes stray to the animal with the sharp stick run through its body.

Frances stands beside Crowder, keeping the stunner pointed at Jumbo. Frances takes Crowder's hand in his. They make a very strange-looking couple.

“Come be our friend,” Crowder says. His smile seems genuine, like he’s inviting Jumbo to see the goldfish pond.

Jumbo can’t see any activity lights on the stunner. They are finicky machines to keep in good order, and he suspects it may be a bluff. He takes a step to the left to put more of the dying fire between him and the two men. The lenses on Frances’ flicker-gogs dance with light. He may be communicating with someone else. Jumbo rotates his head to try to catch a glimpse out of his peripheral vision. The faux mask isn’t helpful, blocking most of it.

“Where are you going to run to?” Crowder asks, reasoning with him. “No one here will dare stand up to me. I can drag you out of the witch’s house if that’s what it takes. Wouldn’t that be undignified?”

Jumbo sidles another step left. He takes Crowder’s comment as further indication that the stunner is a dud.

“I have friends who will come looking for me,” Jumbo says, trying to sound convincing. “Continuation big-shots,” he adds.

“Is that so?” Frances asks. “Don’t see no green on you.”

Jumbo regrets again removing the thread that Nova tied around his neck. Not that they would be able to see it. He realizes now it was a powerful totem, something that he had earned in a very bizarre way, something given freely, and utterly unique. Too late now.

“There’s a Speaker out here. I’m her lover,” Jumbo says.

That seems to get their attention. There must be an active rumor mill, even out here. Maybe some of that filtered down to this pair of psychos.

“What’s she like, this witch of yours?”

“She’s a good cook,” Jumbo says. He sees something move behind Crowder, just a lengthening of a shadow. Frances must have called up reinforcements. Jumbo has little doubt that he’s surrounded now. The fear begins to blossom into a fountain in his chest, constricting his breathing. He’s on the edge of panic.

“Let’s get more comfortable and talk about it,” Crowder says.

“We want to hear all about her,” Frances adds. “She sounds fascinating.” He motions with the stunner, a come-here command.

“No,” Jumbo says. It’s really to himself. No to this reality, no to the ghastly future he sees.

“Stand where you are,” comes a voice from behind Crowder. The man spins like a blur, hands already reaching.

There’s a crack of a gunshot, and Crowder freezes in mid-lunge.

“The next one goes through your head,” the newcomer says.

A glow light sails over Jumbo’s shoulder and falls into the space between the men. It illuminates Crowder and Frances in a cold wash of bluish-white, casting shadows up on their faces to make them look demonic.

A second man steps by Jumbo, but it’s no henchman of Crowder’s. It’s one of the athletic-looking Quasis who was at Dawn’s Hope. One of Oriya’s associates. He points a large black handgun at Frances. The Quasis both wear military-style masks.

Frances gawks left and right and then drops the stunner.

A third figure steps into the light from the right. It’s the Nova-clone, Joyeuse, and Jumbo’s heart thuds deeply, gulping blood in response to the buried associations. He can’t take his eyes off her. Sounds of life are coming from the surrounding shacks and lean-tos. The gunshot woke people up.

“On the ground,” she says to Crowder and Frances. “Face down.”

They bind Frances’ wrists first, and strap a drug drone onto him that Jumbo recognizes. He’s pretty sure this one isn’t Cupid. He shudders at the thought anyway.

Once Frances is trussed and immobile, the three Quasis work to do the same with Crowder. The big man doesn’t resist, but he doesn’t lie on the ground either. He just holds his wrists out for them, smiling. A gun to the back of the head apparently convinces him not to make sudden moves. They bind his arms and put a drug drone inside each forearm. The fact that they think it will take two of them doesn’t increase Jumbo’s comfort.

Joyeuse approaches Jumbo to speak.

“Thank you,” is all he can manage at the moment.

“Oriya is here. We’ll take you to her,” Joyeuse says. Jumbo sees the twist of her mouth, and burns with embarrassment over his words of a moment ago.

More figures are appearing around the fringes of the area, watching.

“I want to see what’s inside,” he says.

“Better be quick,” she says.

Jumbo steps past the two men. Frances is still on the ground, while Crowder sits on his couch, bending it in the middle. His big head tracks Jumbo around to the left as Jumbo looks inside their shack. It’s larger than most of them, and dark. Jumbo spots the glow of a light strip switch and thumbs it on to illuminate a very neat space. It looks like there’s a place for everything. There’s a door that must lead into the other half, and Jumbo tests it. He can hear Joyeuse behind him. The door swings easily in. He stands to the side to let the light in, and gasps at the sight.

Oo-Gertie lies on her side, arms behind her, head tilted back. Something blocks her mouth. Jumbo steps forward and kneels to see better, a cry bubbling up from his lungs.

Her eyes are wide open and---

--Jumbo gags and staggers back coughing bile, trying to shout—

*No, no, no, no!*

--the end of a wooden stake protrudes from between her parted lips.

## **Chapter Twenty-One**

Oriya has commandeered a shack somehow. Jumbo regards her silently, warming his hands with a metal canteen full of coffee. It smells wonderful, but his thoughts are elsewhere, negotiating the edge of an emotional chasm. He’s almost forgotten to be angry with Oriya for abandoning him. Almost.

Aside from a brief hug when they met, she has been cold and aloof, Jumbo feels. He wonders if the Quasis told her what he said to Crowder, bragging that she was his lover. Maybe they believed it.

“Why did you come here?” he asks finally.

“I came to get you, of course. You weren’t supposed to leave.”

“I left because I was told to. And you vanished off Dawkins’ green Earth.”

Jumbo was sleeping when she came to wake him, and he slipped on his comfort mask reluctantly. But Oriya hasn’t made any move to take off her formidable-looking work mask. He feels the cold gaze of glass optics on him, and stares back as intensely as he can. But he feels juvenile doing it. The young woman, Gerdie, is cooling in a grave already. Jumbo thinks about her, and whatever dreams she held dear. She had the look of someone not long from the City, where the dreams might have come to something. Out here, there wasn’t a chance. The regret winds around and around, turning, gathering up the strands to make a solid ball. What if he’d insisted that she stay at Sister Ivy’s.

“Look at me Jacob. What do you see?”

Jumbo blinks away his thoughts and surveys her. The half-robe is different. Light earth tones, lighter than before. And an emerald green pin stuck on her chest.

“New clothes?”

“I was gone because they made me a Speaker. It was a surprise to me, and I didn’t have time to tell you. They said they’d get word for me. Someone screwed up.”

“That whelp—Dawn or Hope or whatever—basically threw me out. Her brother gave me a ride to the edge of town. I’d say I wasn’t very welcome.”

Oriya doesn’t reply. She waits, and Jumbo begins to feel foolish.

“I mean congratulations, I guess. Is this a big deal?” He knows it must be.

“Yes. It’s a very big deal for me. A life-changing deal. Thank you.”

Jumbo can hear the new authority in her voice. It's the sound of a zealot, and it saddens him because it feels like another loss. He remembers her crying in his arms. Nursing him back from the dead. It calms him. He pushes away the contradictions and complexities.

"I wish I had stayed. I've been assaulted by geriatric cannibals, had my insides opened up, and got invited to party with those two monsters—" Jumbo finds he can't go on. He takes a few breaths. "Where are they, by the way?"

"Awaiting a decision by the community about what to do with them."

"They have laws in this chaos?"

"No, but we improvise. You'll see. Right now the people are choosing representatives to hear the case. The interesting part will start this afternoon."

"You should just put bullets in their heads," Jumbo says, his blood rising along with the pitch of his voice.

"That's not how we do things," Oriya says. Jumbo can sense what 'we' means—her brothers and sisters in green. He can feel the separation between what she has become and himself. It's a wall made of iron confidence in ideals.

When she leaves, Jumbo tries to find a refuge in his mind where there aren't terrible people with ferocious ideas eating them up from the inside and inflicting their vision on others. He sips at the coffee and damns the acid it will brew.

There's plenty of excitement outside, and between that and the caffeine spiking his blood, he overcomes the need for sleep. His chest doesn't hurt a bit, but the skin over the rib is crunchy to the touch, and he wonders if some sort of necrosis has set in. He buys time on the local network and pays a toll to reach the City, where he finds that it's normal. This bit of self-sufficiency buoys his spirits, and he remembers the puzzle Crowder set for him. It's a matter of a moment to find the applicable passage from *The Prince*.

Because there is no other way of guarding oneself from flatterers except letting men understand that to tell you the truth does not offend you; but when everyone may tell you the truth, respect for you abates.

That sounds like the dilemma. The Prince needs information, not flattery, but how to get it without weakening his position? Jumbo is tempted to read the whole thing and see what Machiavelli came up with, but his pride prompts him to blink the text away where he can review it later.

*I can figure this out.*

With this academic stimulus marinating in his gray matter, Jumbo heads outside to see how the trial is progressing.

There seems to be little order to the proceedings, but somehow amid the shouts and recriminations and pleas and meretricious advances of would-be jurors, twelve of them are eventually chosen. The bickering doesn't stop; it only diminishes to be swallowed up as events proceed. A makeshift stage has been set up at the edge of the road, where Oriya is holding court. She talks privately to this person and that, and finally gives public instructions to the jury.

"We are here by your grace," she begins, and the murmuring thins out as heads turn her way. "We do not have laws to enforce on you, but we will help you find your way with our experience and tradition. Is this agreeable?"

There are enough assents to make a case for it, and she continues on.

"Two men have been accused of murder of one of your own. We will hear what you have to say—anyone can speak at that time—and then your jury will decide on a verdict by majority vote. Is this agreeable to you?"

This time the shouts sound genuine. It's a crowd out for blood, though. He wonders what would happen if there were someone innocent at the focus. Still, the verdict depends not on the crowd but their representatives.

The shouts become howls when the prisoners are brought out. Their hands are bound in front of them, and there's a rope that ties them together. The drug drones are bandaged tightly to their arms. Both have cheap comfort masks on. Crowder's is stretched to the breaking point to accommodate his huge head.

To Jumbo's surprise, there is no mumbo-jumbo. Oriya gets down to business in short order. The jury is seated, and Jumbo notices that Sister Ivy is among them. Then Oriya invites people to come forward to have their say in the case. And they do. By ones and twos, men and women describe real or imagined insults at the hands of the accused.

It's a tale of murder and terror. Not a single person stands to say nice things about the two.

Strangely absent from this cavalcade of execration is Twosy, who must have been Gerdie's pimp or owner. Jumbo finds the outpouring of woe on the stage depressing, and goes in search of the man. He finds him sitting alone, drinking from one of the blank bottles he offered Jumbo on arrival.

Jumbo sits in the chair where Gerdie had been. It feels odd knowing that his body overlaps hers in some temporal displacement.

Twosy hands him a bottle, and this time Jumbo takes it and twists the lid off. Twosy has a pretty nice mask on. He twitches in a way that tells Jumbo he's watching through someone else's point of view.

"Didn't want to go?" Jumbo asks. He keeps Oriya's view up in a window so he doesn't miss anything. The two men have an asocial multi-tasking chat.

"I'm watching from here." Twosy says.

"Thought you might want to get up there and say something," Jumbo says. The caffeine is wearing off, and the weariness and alcohol hold the high ground now.

"Nothin' in it for me. She's gone. Not gonna bring her back."

This irritates Jumbo, and he ruminates on it while Twosy ignores him for a while, sipping pseudo-beer and living a pixel dump of someone else's life.

"Do you even care?" he asks finally. Beneath the loose tired feeling that warms his skull, Jumbo realizes he doesn't like this guy, and he wants to hurt him.

"Care? Yeah. You know how much money that giant asshole cost me?"

"How much did he pay you for Gerdie?"

"Gerdie?" He laughs. "That's what she called herself when she washed up here. Half dead and half rainbows and sunshine. Scared as a cat that's been beat, but too stupid to see that people are either dumb or evil."

"Which am I Twosy? Dumb or evil?"

But the other man waves him off and tosses his empty bottle out into the street.

Jumbo feels his rationality slipping, the ratchet mechanisms that keep civilization in check having loosed. There's sand in the fine machinery, jamming the business of subtlety and nuance and leaving only the obvious and basic imperatives.

"You know what they did to her, Twosy." He underlines the man's ridiculous name when he says it, and puts a period at the end with his finger.

"I heard, yeah. They didn't have to kill her."

"You know," Jumbo says, stopping to choke on the acid, "if you hurry down there and make your case, you might get some of your money back."

Twosy twitches, but it's not a mask interruption, it's as if Jumbo has cracked the light of day onto this miserable eclipse.

"You're right!" he stands with the eureka still evident in his slack jaw.

Jumbo hits him from the ground, punching through the man's face, aiming for the City skyline twenty miles away. It's as solid and heartfelt as ever a man put a fist into another, and Jumbo finally understands what a towering rage is. The impact knocks the man backwards onto his chair, and stunned for a few seconds. Jumbo feels outside himself, observing, as Twosy pulls himself together and gets his fists in front. Jumbo hammers him left, right, left, right, closing, until another fist to the temple spins the man into the dirt.

Then it begins to hurt. His hands feel like giant clumsy cartoons, swelling and bleeding. He licks the blood off the knuckles and watches Twosy for some sign of life.

When his panting subsides, and Twosy is still out cold, he methodically dismantles the place, breaking everything that can be broken, and tosses the pieces in random directions. When he's finished, it looks like a bomb hit the place.

He rolls Twosy onto his back and lifts the mask off roughly, so that the man's head clonks back onto the hard ground. Jumbo tosses the mask in a high arc somewhere into the slum.

"I will remember your face," he says.

He pulls back his foot to kick, but stops. Sister Ivy would just have to fix the bastard up, and she has enough to do. The rage is spending its last coin in his imagination, building fantasies as horrible as any Crowder and company could. And suddenly, Jumbo just wants to sleep. He stumbles back to his borrowed cot, forcing one foot in front of the other, kicking up the hot dry dust.

He wakes after dark to voices raised in passion.

It takes him a moment to remember where he is. But as the feeling permeates, it doesn't produce anxiety as before. He almost feels at home out here away from the City, surrounded by madness.

Jumbo wipes crud from his eyes and takes stock. His hands ache and the raw knuckles burn when he moves them. But there's something deeper that is more positive. He feels alive and more in control of his fate. The hangover from the adrenaline surge and the physical exertion have not overcome a gathering sense of righteousness that is foreign to him.

He sits up and takes a deep breath, testing Sister Ivy's work. There's no tenderness, and he feels a rush of gratitude. He vows to do something nice for her.

His long legs reach the ground, feeling the firmness of existence in the moment. Jumbo ignores the cauldron of his stomach, demanding ingredients for the day's brew. Instead, he focuses his mind on the simple experience of living, sipping air from the Earth's blanket, pushing against that great ball to stand perpendicular.

As Jumbo dresses slowly, letting the sensation play along his skin, absorbing the mere fact of being alive, he probes his unusual state of mind. It's a curiosity that circles his understanding until the moment he steps outside into the wet air that has gathered up the scent of every organic plaything it can find: grass and mud, pollen and smoke, rot and mildew, and the combined waste products of a multitude of microbes that must form a massive city on their scale.

*This is the Shanghai of shit-eaters.*

At that moment he can attribute his state of mind to obvious fact that humans spend all their lives avoiding: life is too damned short.

This is something that even the Waves and collapse and ugliness of selfish need have not banished from human imagination. Given half a chance, the bleak fact of being temporary is covered up with momentary distractions that bridge one instant to the next in a lie that can last most of a lifetime.

Jumbo dwells on planting his fists into Twosy's body. That act was the antitheses of his adopted philosophy to avoid pain and live in simple pleasure. And yet it's the most satisfying thing he's done in a long time. Better even than a rare fish grilled to flakey white and drizzled with butter and flaked with shaved ginger, although it's a close call.

He closes his eyes and imagines a good wine to go with it, and his stomach will no longer play along with these existential musings. He goes to find the source of excitement. Surely there will be some food too.

Oriya is still on her feet, and Jumbo can tell from the shape of her shoulders that she's very tired. He forgets about his hunger for a moment, and organizes two cups of coffee from an entrepreneur on the sidelines of this show of justice.

He hands her the cup and gets a weary smile in return.

"We're getting there," she says.

"Why not get some sleep?"

"I'd love to, but I have to see it through. The verdict comes at dawn."

"Is there any doubt?" Jumbo finds the idea frightening. They might let these monsters free?

"Not much. The debate will be about the sentencing. I've torqued the scales there."

"You what? I thought you were here as a neutral party."

"It's more than that. We try to import wisdom."

Jumbo studies her carefully, trying to see if she's being ironic. He imagines her eyes, which are hidden under the mask. They must be red and tired from strain.

"Come on," Jumbo says, picking up her hand and giving a tug. "You don't have to sleep, but you need a respite from this. One of your friends can be in charge for a while, no?"

“That’s really tempting,” she hesitates. “But I should—”

“---ten minutes. No more. I will set a timer.” Jumbo gives another tug, and this time she yields, following him. He leads her back to the fraction of the slum that he calls temporary home, and sits her on the canvas chair. He stands behind her and lays his hands on her shoulders.

“My mother did this for a living,” he says. He begins to knead the muscles around her neck, forcing his battered fingers to usefulness. She relaxes instantly, melting into the chair.

“Ooooh. Gooooood.” she sighs.

“Mask?”

She nods, and he pauses to unstrap the thing from her face. He removes his too.

Jumbo tries to remember techniques from a long, long time ago. As Oriya makes small contented sounds, Jumbo realizes that her head is slumping back against his crotch, and that this is going to quickly become embarrassing. He pauses to scrounge a scrawny pillow to put between them. It doesn’t insulate him from the glow of shared closeness, and the sharp awareness of the delicate nature of their shared fate.

“Ten min...utes. Promised...” she mutters.

“Yes, Speaker. Ten minutes.”

He can see the side of her mouth twist into a half smile at his use of her new honorific. She pats his hand with hers and feels the roughness.

“What happened?” her voice is as droopy as her posture.

“Got in a fight with an asshole.”

“Mmmmm?”

But it’s not a topic Jumbo wants to discuss in this moment. He presses his thumbs into the cords of muscle and tendon stretching up the back of Oriya’s head, supporting it with his broad hands. She’s like a rag doll. When he’s finished, he strokes her forehead

and uses his fingertips to work the small face muscles in slow circles. Her mouth drifts open, and she forgets to close it.

The ten minutes stretch to fifteen, and Jumbo feels guilty. She's on the verge of sleep, which he knows she desperately needs. They must have chased after him all night, so this would be her second night without rest.

But he did make a promise, and he has a sense that she won't be happy to wake restfully, having shirked the duties she's set for herself. Important things happen at dawn for these Continuation people, he knows.

So he tries to rouse her from the catatonia he's induced, finally leaning to take her under the arms and lift from the front to hold her upright. Oriya sags against him, breathing heavy sighs through his shirt.

"Speaker," he says, rocking her back and forth. "Oriya."

After a few lazy minutes, she shows signs of life. She makes a giant yawn and stretches, blinks sleepy tears from her eyes. She smacks her lips and then licks them, and pats him on the chest with her palm.

"Thank you, Jacob. Your *Speaker* thanks you. Mmmm...sooo heavenly."

Oriya stands on her own, swaying. She yawns wide again, and makes a long animal sound of attempted wakefulness. Jumbo hands her the mask. And then it's all business again. She favors him with one more sleepy smile, and then sways out into the world of impending justice and imported wisdom.

Jumbo watches the swish of her loose clothing vanish into the darkness and remembers the soft contours of her slim form pressed against him and the scent of her body. He sits heavily in the chair and nearly tips it over.

*What the hell am I doing?*

He tries to imagine what it's going to take to get this woman out of his head now. A short term remedy is easy, but he knows that isn't going to be enough. He tries to inventory the state of his brain chemistry, so see if this is just Nova's fiddling tilting the scales. But thinking of Nova leads to a feeling more akin to a panic attack. This is something altogether different, soft in form, a comfortable intimacy. Not the glass-jagged impression of the quack-quack sexual violence that sealed a demonic deal

among a consort of deep neurons. Nova is intimate in the same way a tooth extraction is. Thus assured, he floats in the newly-certified affections he carries for Oriya, keeping the consequences at dream's length.

Eventually he finds himself asleep.

Three hours of vivid dreams leave Jumbo no more rested when he wakes at dawn to the banging and shouting of a community on the brink of self-change. The organism of shared minds has contrived an improvised immune system and is fraying nerves to get attention for its work.

It's a beautiful sunrise. Jumbo sees it directly on his retinas through the holes in his comfort mask. He can't bear the thought of strapping the long-unsanitized electronics to his face yet.

The accused are sitting on a wooden bench in front of the platform. Sister Ivy stands on it and welcomes the dawn. The clamor silences as she raises her arms to the east.

"Silent sister, mother of worlds, we rise to greet you. We rededicate our matter to the great lineage of your ancestors that built these houses of carbon and iron. You touch us and we know you. We are you."

Jumbo looks around. It seems like everyone in this shantytown camp must be here. He wonders if Twosy is still passed out on the ground. It makes his knuckles hurt, thinking about it.

Sister Ivy is joined on the platform by four others, and the rest of the jury gathers around. The platform is not big enough for all of them. A clean-looking man with a bright green mask steps forward and motions to speak. The crowd titters into silence.

"We have reached a decision, which I will read. First, we find these accused guilty of heinous crimes against their fellows."

Cheering erupts at this, and in no time specific ideas about how to redress the injury are circulating. Ropes and knives feature prominently.

"This decision was reached unanimously by the jury. As to the matter of punishment, we worked until dawn on this. It was a painful decision for us, but we reached agreement on that too. We decided that there has been enough blood spilled in this place, and we

therefore turn the two over to our friends from the Continuation to do with as they see fit, with the understanding that we wish never to see these men again.”

This seems to split the crowd in half. Some agree with the wisdom of it, but others shout out infamy and justice and gnash for instant revenge. It’s probably only the appearance of the three Continuation Quasis and their weapons that prevents a lynch mob.

A few scuffles break out, and it takes a while for the shouts to die, but Jumbo senses that it’s over with. He sees Oriya waving at him, and he walks over, trying to resist the thought of her body pressed against him.

“Mask up and get your stuff. We’re out of here,” she says.

He feels like arguing with her about the wisdom of trying to take these killers anywhere, but he senses that this isn’t the time. So he complies, and they are walking north within a quarter hour. A few stones hail down from high parabolas, anonymous ‘get out of town’ gifts that are probably intended for the criminals. One of them strikes Crowder on the ear, but he doesn’t twitch.

The familiar bite of the pack straps reminds Jumbo how long he’s been out here.

They break for lunch later, and when the warmth of a rich stew revives him, Jumbo feels like it’s the right time to ask his questions. He sends a private message to Oriya, who’s drooped against a tree, her food half-eaten.

“Doing okay?” he asks.

“I’ve never been this tired. Even when I had to double up shifts and they were packing them in.”

“Where are we going?”

“To find Sundial and get my necklace back.”

Jumbo suspects there’s a lot more to it than the necklace. There’s the little matter of attempted murder too. And with the three Quasis in company, the guilty parties in the small farming village will likely faint with fear. Jumbo finds that he looks forward to it.

“What are you going to do with these two monsters?” he asks.

“I haven’t decided yet. The big one has some genetics that look useful, and if we could turn him around, he could be quite an asset.”

Jumbo is shocked by the calculating nature of it.

“Did you see what he did?” he underlines it with emphatic emotags.

“Yes. I don’t want your advice on this.”

That stings. It makes him think of that damned Machiavellian riddle, so he looks up the answer in his bookmarked copy of *The Prince*:

Therefore a wise prince ought to hold a third course by choosing the wise men in his state, and giving to them only the liberty of speaking the truth to him, and then only of those things of which he inquires, and of none others; but he ought to question them upon everything, and listen to their opinions, and afterwards form his own conclusions. With these councilors, separately and collectively, he ought to carry himself in such a way that each of them should know that, the more freely he shall speak, the more he shall be preferred; outside of these, he should listen to no one, pursue the thing resolved on, and be steadfast in his resolutions.

It’s a clever practical solution, and Jumbo wonders if Oriya is open to talking about such things. It doesn’t seem like it. He decides that a head-on approach will not work with her.

“I’m just worried about you,” he says. “That big guy is very smart.”

“Thank you, Jacob. We’ll be fine.”

Jumbo has seen it before in the MOM organization, where someone newly promoted tries to take on the whole world. Maybe to prove that they are worthy of the promotion, or maybe from a rush of sudden self-importance. Either way, it can have an unhappy ending.

As they trudge along after lunch, Jumbo keeps himself to the rear of the group, where he can watch. He’s tired too, but he notices that Crowder walks along as if he’s on a stroll. The tiny bindings on his hands seem insignificant, and Jumbo has to look away or suffer frightful visions of what the man could do if he wanted to. He tries reaching out to the Continuation Quasis, but they answer with polite uselessness, and clearly won’t be

engaged on any important matter. He guesses that they take orders from their Speaker, no matter how inexperienced she is.

He admires the forms of these engineered humans, watching them move. There's no sign of exhaustion that Jumbo can detect. He's grateful that there is no female Shanghai analog, only males. It would have been interesting to see how a Shanghai-clone interacted with a Nova-clone, but it's a complex brew of associations too.

Jumbo realizes that he is on the verge of forgiving himself for Shanghai. Yes, she was a beautiful piece of human art, in form and movement, and yes he marked her for destruction, but he hadn't intended to. He's not like Crowder and that other creature. He senses that the comparison is too easy, but he allows a moment of uncriticized peace settle into his core.

The Quasis have allowed him partway into their network. He can't see and hear through their masks, but he has access to a group channel to communicate through and a top-down map with threats and friendlies identified. Their filters are very good. Squirrels and birds moving in the trees are quickly identified as non-threats. The icons for Crowder and Frances flare in intensity if one of their escorts strays too close. They seem to be tagged with something radio-reflective, or maybe even transmitting their position. The whole thing is tied to a navigation map that shows they are thirty minutes from their goal at present pace. They will arrive at sundown.

Jumbo remembers the quarantine camp unhappily. All the mumbo-jumbo wasn't enough to save Naomi from the dirt box, and the unfortunate consequences of her death must weigh on the farmers. They will know judgment is only a matter of time. Jumbo wonders what defenses they might have prepared. He suspects it won't be enough.

The uncertainty centers on these two psychopaths. Jumbo grinds his teeth with the frustration of it. Why won't Oriya show a bit of common sense? Put a bullet in each of them and be done with it. The idea of rehabilitating Crowder is laughable. May as well try to tame a tornado.

But he reminds himself that she wasn't there. She has no direct experience with the man, and is undoubtedly driven by some theory or other, some nominal reality that insulates her from the truth that lies in those huge hands and what they can do. Jumbo wishes he had a weapon.

As Jumbo turns his gaze back to the scene ahead of him, it seems to turn into slow motion. Crowder launches himself off to the left of the trail, and it jerks the rope tying him to Frances violently when the slack tightens. While Jumbo's brain is still trying to process it, Frances cannonballs into the left Quasi escort, and Crowder is behind a tree, running flat out. Frances is dragged violently to the side, and the rope wraps around a tree. Jumbo hears the snap of it parting and the thud-thud of giant feet making through the brush.

The reaction of the Quasis is swift, and two of them are in the brush after Crowder in a heartbeat. The third picks himself up off the ground and checks on Frances. Oriya is shouting, but Jumbo tunes her out. It's bad discipline to be giving orders vocally instead of over the net. Jumbo has heard lectures from Two-by-Four at MOM on that subject.

The chase is very short. Jumbo approaches slowly, heart hammering. Crowder is on the ground and immobile. After poking him a few times, Oriya hands out new drug drones to strap on Crowder's arms. Jumbo gets a glimpse of the pinpricks of blood that the injectors left.

Oriya has managed to calm herself, and seems pleased. Jumbo sees her proud bearing return, and figures it's the adrenaline. She'll crash soon enough, he figures.

"We can't move him while he's asleep. Double-tether him to the tree, and the same with the other one," Oriya says. Jumbo sees her stifle a yawn.

"I'm taking you and you," she says aloud, pointing at Joyeuse and the male clone named Claren. "We're going to this stinkhole excuse for farm central and make sure no one runs off. When the sleeping giant wakes up, get him and his friend here to join us. We'll use the little one to send a message to them. Clear?"

It's not clear at all to Jumbo, and his baldness prevents the true effect of its hair-raising risk. Is she saying they will spill the man's blood in the village as an example? He glances at Frances to see if the man could have heard. He seems out cold.

"Oriya, please don't split the party. It's too dangerous," he sends privately.

"They will already know we're on the way. If they run, I want them to run without having a chance to pack. And we'll hunt them down."

"You don't have to do this to prove yourself," he says. "You're too tired to make good decisions."

She doesn't bother to reply to that, and within minutes, Jumbo finds himself alone with the Quasi clone named Asi.

"At least leave me a weapon," Jumbo broadcasts out to Oriya, but she's switched into stealth mode and the message resends itself forlornly until it gives up the ghost.

Asi pulls his black knife from the vertical sheath, a quick snap and draw motion. He steps over to Crowder to tie him to Frances again.

## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

Jumbo wakes to darkness. He's confused. He seems to be alone in a universe of his own, isolated from everything real. He can feel the parts of his brain trying to work together in a way, as if all its tricks are laid bare for inspection. The coordination of his breathing and heartbeat are complex and full of odd quirks and hacks. He can sense the monumental struggle of keeping this sticky machine working and coordinated. It's as if he's outside of himself, a neutral observer.

A sneeze builds from inside this bubble, magnifying the itch of his nose into a ballooning priority. It's as if his whole being is tied up in knots to solve this problem, to make the irritant go away. The control strings are pulled like an overworked puppeteer might, drawing in the breath, gathering together a bewildering number of facial muscles, nostrils trying to flare on command, but one of them seems to be asleep. It feels like the messy approximate mobilization of an army under attack. But somehow the reports come in that the mouth has cracked open and the tongue is curling back on schedule.

When it comes, it's a time-slowed rush of air that he senses whistling out the nasal passages, and he hears it as a roar of untamed energy, like the sound of a tornado. He feels the long signal down to his hand to move, to reach the huge distance to his nose to pinch it clean, but the order is mangled in execution. Where is the damn hand, everyone wants to know.

He wakes with a start, a sharp gasp of air. Something is biting him. The whine of mosquitoes seems far away.

Sound. Round and flowing. Not like mosquitoes. That bit of analysis snaps into place, and he can hear the spark over the organized hum and chirp of his brain working.

*Why have I never heard my brain before?*

The sound is familiar, but he can't locate its nexus. Jumbo feels an utter peace that cannot be bothered by logistical concerns, however. A thought occurs to him, floating into vision as written word. It looks just like it was composed in his notebook by his own hand.

*I'm dying.*

The conviction causes him no stress, however. If it is true, then dying is nothing to fear.

After a while he feels freshness, like a dip in a spring ocean swell. The musical sounds combine in delightful harmony, but they make him uneasy somehow, as if they are evidence of a conspiracy. He feels the waves take him, lifting and buffeting. These impressions come lazily, a distant pleasantness.

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Light. It's too white to bear, and the pain penetrates through all the layers of abstraction, and he wakes to it, as if being born a second time. He gasps and his eyes open wide.

Shapes try to resolve, shift into a jumble of shards, all sharp edges and brilliant colors. But there's a voice too, a real voice instead of the smooth anonymous waves of sound.

"Jacob?"

It's his mother speaking. The awe overpowers the contradictions, and he sinks into amazement.

"Yes, mom?" the words float off his tongue in magnificent order. Most of the pulleys and ropes that make the machinery perform are hidden from view now. Something automatic has returned. The boss is back.

"Jacob, it's me, Sundial. Do you remember?"

What sort of game is she playing? He searches for a context that would make sense, but everything is sluggish and dim. It hurts his head to think so hard.

"Drink this," his mother says, and Jumbo feels the cool lip of a cup pressed against his lip. He sips, and feels his stomach revolt. The nausea comes in a sudden rush, and he tries to stand, his gorge rising.

A rush of voices, too fast to be understood. More waves, but not pleasant this time. His stomach won't be placated. The internal misery sits heavily, stubborn and uninvited, an evil guest. Other sorts of pain come knocking, too. Soon it seems like Jumbo's mind is a site for a flash party for all the body's complaints. He wants to go back to sleep.

"I thought he was there for a moment," his mother says.

"Don't feel good," he slurs.

"Let him sleep," someone says. It's a familiar sound, but it's not his sister. Not his aunt. He gives up. Sleep sounds like a lovely idea. He loves it when mom tucks him in, pulling the blanket up under his chin.

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Jumbo wakes to the strangest feeling. It's as if he's misplaced something terribly important, but he can't remember what it is or where it might be. The certainty that is must be found quickly launches his mind into a maddening loop of problem-solving.

His eyes pop open and he surges upright.

The resulting dizziness almost flattens him again, but he hangs on until the wave of vertigo subsides. There's a woman standing with her back to him. No, it can't be his mother. A hole opens up inside him with the sure knowledge that she is gone forever, and there won't be any more tuck-ins or chicken soup made by her hand. Tears leak from the corners of his eyes. He snuffles once, and the woman turns.

"You're awake!"

The name comes to him. Sundial.

"I thought you were mom," he says. His voice sounds weird to him.

She kneels beside the bed to look up at him. She takes one of his hands in hers.

"Do you know where you are?" she asks.

He thinks. It's so much easier now. All the Rube Goldberg apparatus is hidden again, and thoughts flow along naturally.

Jumbo shakes his head, but this causes another rush of nausea.

“This is the same house you were in before. When you were sick with Oriya,” Sundial laughs with embarrassment. “I don’t mean sick *with* her like she’s a disease, I mean...anyway.”

*The House of the Dead.*

“How did I get here?”

She studies his eyes through the holes in a cloth mask. Jumbo realizes that there’s something across the top of his head, but he’s not wearing a mask. He reaches a hand up and feels the rough texture of a bandage, which he traces all the way around.

“I got hit on the head,” he says.

“I’m not supposed to say,” she bites her lip.

“Tell me.”

Sundial’s jaw quivers, and Jumbo has the sudden sense that she’s afraid.

“You got shot in the head,” she says.

Jumbo’s heart bounces in response to the surge of hormones that accompanies this news. It makes a pounding in his brain, and he finds himself short of breath.

“Shot? A bullet?”

“It went straight on through.” She touches his forehead in the middle. And then the back of his head near the top. “Out here at this spot.”

Jumbo pictures his skull with matching holes in it, and shudders at all the delicate circuitry in between. He feels an overwhelming sense of violation. Someone put something in his brain!

“How?”

“They brought you back on a cart. You and the other guy,” Sundial says. Then her voice turns into whisper. “They twisted his head off.”

Jumbo swallows against the horror of it. Fear spreads tendrils like a cold cancer.

“Crowder got away?” Inside, Jumbo is bouncing, waiting for the answer, hoping for a relieved no.

“Yes, but—” But she sucks her lips into her mouth and doesn’t say more.

“—but what? You have to tell me.”

She bites harder, until the edges of her lips bleach white, and shakes her head back and forth. This is not the happy young woman that Jumbo remembers.

“Okay,” he says. “Can you get me someone who can talk to me?”

Jumbo tries to feel inside his head, attempting an inventory. He challenges himself to find memories, to do simple math, to feel certain emotions. But he can’t concentrate long on the task, and finds his mind wondering, worrying, panicking. He yanks his focus back on task, but it doesn’t last. Fog sets in for a while, and when it lifts, he sees the slim figure of Wired sitting in front of him, flicker goggles in place. He seems to sense the change in Jumbo, and places a cup of coffee in his hands, making sure both of Jumbo’s hands are wrapped around it before letting go.

“Don’t know if it’ll taste good, but it’s got a kick,” he says.

“Thanks for coming,” Jumbo says. The warmth feels good, and he holds the cup to his cheek. After a moment, he can feel the heat soaking into his jaw bone. It feels nice.

“Can you tell me what happened?” he asks.

“Awright. Maybe you can help us figure out what to do. Really glad you...you uh...you can talk and all.” He taps Jumbo on the knee, perhaps as a sign of camaraderie.

“All I know,” he continues, “is that woman Idaho hits this place like a storm with those two followers of hers. Except the ones she wanted already left, split out like hornets was after ‘em.”

“Who?” Jumbo asks.

“Idaho?”

Jumbo is terribly confused. He closes his eyes and tries to feel inside his brain. With all those nerves in there it seems like there should be some feeling.

“I don’t know Idaho,” he confesses. He’s afraid this is the edge of what’s left of him. Idaho was blown away, torn from his mind in a violent act of ballistics.

“Well, she’s a Speaker,” Wired says, as if to a child. “You were in this very house with her, sick.”

*Oriya?*

Jumbo is so relieved that he’s not disconnected from the world, he lets it pass.

“Someone split out?” he asks, to revive the conversation.

“Larn family, husband, wife, and two sons. Sorry one son. The other was killed down in the bottoms. Reckon you had something to do with it. This is their house. Was. They had it pretty good. Rich, I guess.

“They got word somehow, and ran off. So there was some fuss about that. That woman—“

“—Oriya, not Idaho,” Jumbo says. He’s tired again.

“Yeah, sorry. She was a right tempest, about tore down the whole village looking for them. But none of us want anything to do with the Larns anymore. Not after what they did.”

“He beat up your wife.” Jumbo says, mostly to himself, overjoyed that this bit of knowledge comes to mind.

Wired fidgets with his hands and doesn’t say anything.

“How did I get here?” Jumbo asks, to get back on track.

“Oroyo sent her man back up north to fetch you after a while, and he came back in a big hurry. They took an electro-tug to load you and that other poor fellah up. We didn’t get any answers until the next day.”

Jumbo can’t quite keep it straight. It’s so hard to concentrate. So Oriya was here. She ran off some guy and his wife. Must be the ones that tried to kill him. That makes sense. Oh.

*I’m sleeping in the bed of the man whose son I killed.*

Jumbo is proud of the fact that his brain can put together that complicated thought, but horrified at realization. The kid probably learned to walk here on these floorboards. He sighs unhappily. The name House of the Dead is now a literal description.

“So the bad guys escaped,” Jumbo says.

“They did. They killed the other guy and left you for dead. From what I heard they must have chased you down, out into the woods a ways.”

Jumbo suddenly realizes he doesn’t remember any of that. He was there. Why doesn’t he remember? The only explanation can be that those memories were wiped out by the trauma to his brain. His imagination works at conjuring up what those frantic moments must have been like. Maybe Crowder was awake when Asi went to tie him. That was the height of foolishness. Three days with no sleep and a green leader led them all to a bad place.

Panic almost overcomes him at the thought of being chased down by Crowder or Frances. Did they put the muzzle to his head before pulling the trigger? If so, his brain must be full of burnt powder. He’s suddenly panting, trying to get enough air.

“Hey, are you okay?” Wired starts to back away, as if to launch himself away from this crisis and let someone else deal with it.

“Was it a point-blank shot?” Jumbo asks. It takes several tries to make himself understood. Finally, Wired seems to get it. He shakes his head.

“I just don’t know. You better ask one of the others.”

Jumbo doesn’t know if he can bear it. The idea that infection may be eating a core out of his gray matter makes him feel empty, utterly temporary.

"I need to get to the--," he stops. What's he trying to say? He's sure that even Sister Ivy's healing touch won't be any match for this. Where's the place he needs to go? The word eludes him.

"City? Ain't safe now," Wired says, shaking his head violently this time.

"What didn't you tell me?"

"This morning, on the edge of the big cornfield." There, Wired sets his jaw and looks down at the floor. It takes him a moment.

"They were...mounted," he shrugs, "like trophies. Poles in the ground. The kid was still alive. Died about noon. Wasn't nothin' we could do." He shrugs again.

"Who? What are you talking about?"

"The Larns. These...prisoners of yours must have found them."

Jumbo closes his eyes and imagines seeing the three impaled farmers through the morning mist. Was the young one crying out? The enormity of it rocks the frail boat of his sanity.

"I have to talk to Oriya," Jumbo says. He fights the weariness away.

"Well." Shrug. Wired shakes his head and then points a beanpole arm. "Go that way."

Jumbo looks around for his mask. He finds it nearby on a pile of his dreary-looking belongings. The mask smells of disinfectant.

"Wife cleaned it up for you," Wired says.

"Hang on to that woman. She's a..." Jumbo loses track of the word just before it can reach his tongue.

*They put a bullet through my vorking brain.*

He stands, and Wired reaches forward to keep him from tottering over. Jumbo realizes he doesn't even know if that part works anymore. He feels like a child.

Something constricts his waist, and without looking he knows he's wearing something like a big diaper. He grits his teeth.

"Angel," he says. It's not the original word, but the almost certainty that it's been Sundial cleaning him up requires an upgrade anyway.

"She is," Wired mutters.

Jumbo remembers seeing the bruises on her.

"You don't get it. Protect her!" he yells. The anger flashes surging energy into his limbs, and he wants to punch Wired in the face like he did that other man. But this time the flare dwindles and smokes out. He sucks in oxygen and tries a step forward.

The lizard-old wiring that knows how to walk works just fine, and he finds himself in motion. Steering is a bit more challenging, more like moving an avatar in virtual reality than actually walking. But by the time he's halfway across the path that leads over the field, Wired lets go of his elbow. It's exhilarating. The bouncing of the point of view in the mask makes him a little dizzy, but he changes the lens perspective into wide angle to minimize it. He tilts his head and the whole Earth moves. He feels like a god floating over it, propelled by ancient technology.

"You sure you want to be out here?" Wired asks. He sounds worried.

"Where's Oriya?"

"End of the path. Another hundred yards."

"You can go on back. I'll holl-holl-holler if I need you." Jumbo wonders where the stutter came from. That's new.

Wired walks with him anyway, a few feet behind on the narrow trail that avoids most of the stalks. Jumbo's foot hits one of the strays, and it brings him to his knees. Blood rushes to his head turning everything red for a moment. But Wired helps him up.

"You think I'm dying, don't you?" Jumbo asks.

"I think you're a fool for being out here."

“You—” Jumbo stops and licks his lips. He can see the word ‘understand’ in his mind’s eye, but he can’t get how to say it. He wants Wired to understand that Crowder sent a message to the village that all of them should expect the same treatment.

“Cursed,” Jumbo says instead. It sums it up. The village brought a terrible curse down on itself. He suddenly wonders if it was himself who brought the curse.

“Go with Good,” Wired says.

Jumbo snorts. What use are such words, invocations to the Jumbo of Mumbo? He’s amused by that turn and repeats it to himself.

“Mumbo of Jumbo,” he says.

“Right there,” Wired points beside Jumbo’s shoulder. In the wide view Jumbo can’t see anything, so he steadies himself on Wired and zooms to see a man crouched. One of the Quasis from the look of it. Which one was it that got his head twisted off?

“Where’s Oriya?”

“She’s gone. Ask the man up there.”

## **Chapter Twenty-Three**

Jumbo is deathly tired. He finds tears welling in his eyes for no reason. He sorts through it, ruling out this and that, and finally decides that he’s hungry enough to cry.

“Got food?” he asks the man in the Continuation sneaky garb. Dark green with a military mask. And a big black gun. And a big black knife too.

Two wrapped energy bars get tossed his way.

“Why’d you come out here?” the man whispers.

Jumbo realizes his mask is perched on top of his head. How did it get there? He vaguely remembers a lecture about signal stealth, but it was too complicated to follow.

As he bites into the thing, his stomach sounds its appreciation for the effort. He has to lick saliva from his lips. He can’t taste a thing.

“I don’t know your name,” Jumbo says, trying to whisper too. He’s seen the man’s network ID, but that’s probably a convenience.

“You can call me Claren,” he says. He talks to Jumbo like he’s addressing a child too.

Jumbo squints at him.

“You’re not very old, are you?”

“Twenty-two is what they tell me.”

“Did you already tell me where Oriya is?”

“You haven’t asked.”

“So..?” Jumbo prompts between energy bars.

“She went out there.”

The shock of the meaning penetrates the gloaming of Jumbo’s acumen. He finds himself hyperventilating.

“Tell me,” he says.

“She made me stay here. I’ve been listening.”

“Show me the recording,” Jumbo says, trying to muster up command authority from his squishy bones.

“I’m sorry, Lastfour. But if you try to put your mask on I will have to restrain you. The smaller one found his goggles and took them, so we’re on radio silence.”

“Tell me what you know,” Jumbo says.

“Our Speaker went out there to find them. She ordered me to stay here. She doesn’t have a weapon. She transmitted video until they took her mask. I still have a general location fix, but no more video or audio. She had the mask rigged to keep transmitting, so they must have destroyed it.”

“Oh shit,” Jumbo says. He sits there barefaced to the world, eyes wide as bagels, and it’s all he can do to keep from screaming.

“That was about four hours ago.”

Jumbo notices that his mouth is wide open and covers it with his hand. And the other one to be sure.

“How far?” he asks. Then he drops his hands and asks again.

“A hundred meters.”

*Four hours? And she’s almost close enough to touch.*

Jumbo can’t imagine the horror that could be compressed into that amount of time.

“Why?”

“I...” Claren shakes his head and spits in the dirt. “The Speaker didn’t tell me her plans.”

“Listen to me Claren. I don-don,” Jumbo swallows and tries again. “I don’t care what you swore to. We have to go get her. Unner-unner..” The word ‘understand’ still won’t yield to speech.

“I can’t. She gave me an absolute order.”

Jumbo doesn’t know what that means, but he senses that it’s not an argument he can win.

“Give me your gun then. I’ll go.”

“You can hardly talk. Can hardly walk. What are you going to do?” Emotion leaks into Claren’s voice.

“You’re just a vorking kid. What do you know?” Jumbo holds up a hand to prevent escalation.

“Sorry,” Jumbo continues, more softly. “What can we do then?”

“Nothing unless you don’t mind dying.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m, I’m. I’m dying anyway. What is it?”

“That big guy. If we take him out, I think the other one will run off. We can call it a draw for all I care.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s only a hundred meters,” Claren says. “If you drew them to your position and lit yourself up like a beacon, I could empty my magazine at you. Might catch him.”

The thought of being in the way of another of those black bullets doesn’t really appeal to Jumbo.

“I thought you already knew where he was.”

“It’s too approximate. I need a real fix.”

“Won’t the trees stop the bullets?”

“Not these bullets. That’s the only reason you’re still alive. Very little energy is spent on impact.”

“Can I have your knife?” Jumbo asks.

Claren seems to mull it over.

“You can’t use it,” he says finally, “but I have a couple more druggers.” He digs into his pockets and produces two of the drones that Jumbo knows well.

“Anesthetic,” Claren says, when he sees Jumbo’s raised eyebrows.

“That didn’t work so well last time.” Jumbo takes a deep breath to try to dispel a sudden dizziness. “Got anything else?”

Claren comes up with another, tinged red.

“This is Agony,” he says. “Don’t stick yourself with it or you’ll have a bad day.”

Jumbo gives him a sharp look, and finds that Claren is smiling. It sinks in how young the man is. Jumbo finds that he's still chewing, even though the food has been consumed.

"Help me wrap my head," he says.

As Claren winds tape across the holes in his head, he asks Jumbo if he's sure, if he understands that Claren will be shooting at *him*.

"How did you get into this?" Jumbo asks instead of answering the question.

"I was made for it. I didn't ever have a choice."

It's only then that Jumbo perceives the depth of personal sacrifice that hides behind the ramparts of duty in the young man's demeanor. Of course they made him for it. They must have spent a fortune on genetics and cultivation and education, indoctrination.

"It gets better when you get old," Jumbo says to be helpful. He feels a wave of dizziness coming back and clenches his eyes shut.

"That's not an option," Claren says.

They sit in silence for a while. But Jumbo can't get the itch out his veins. So the kid is disposable. Many good people he's known didn't even get twenty-two years. And Oriya's out there with those monsters. It can't be borne.

"I'm going now. I'll flash a broad...broadcast when they're near."

Claren turns his gaze back on Jumbo for a long moment, and then reaches out to clasp his arm.

"There's Good in you," Claren says. It's delivered in flat voice, but Jumbo suspects that it's not given lightly.

A cynical remark floats to mind, but Jumbo lets it pass him by out of respect for the young man. He stands with the help of a tree, sways for a moment, then waves and heads out along the azimuth Claren shows him.

Being on his feet is a skill that has to be learned all over again.

"They'll see you coming," Claren says as he leaves.

Jumbo finds that getting from one tree to the next is not too bad, as long as that's all he concentrates on. His legs feel wobbly, but he can lean into each trunk. It gives his arms a workout, and he's sweating after a few moments.

The further he goes, the more hare-brained the scheme seems. What is to be gained by this? It seems like he can feel a cold breeze blowing through the hole in his head.

Jumbo remembers what Oriya did for Naomi, holding her Sister in her arms while she died. Jumbo stops to wheeze for a moment. Why had she done that? A momentary comfort for a friend translated into the near-death of Oriya and then Jumbo, and it easily could have been much worse. The whole countryside could be aflame with another Wave. Jumbo shudders at the thought of it. City gates locked, eating food stores, MOM locking down all physical activity, mosquitos everywhere, mask checks, orthobots with stunners patrolling the streets.

It's been over three years since those measures were needed. Every time is worse, as the immune system represented by MOM gains more power. Jumbo realizes he's part of that machinery. He's now part of an auto-immune disease.

Five more lurching transits between trunks of the spindly pines. The large flaky bark scratches his hands so that they are specks of blood showing from the abuse of catching his weight over and over. Jumbo suddenly realizes that he can't smell the distinctive scent of pine sap. Alarmed, he breaks a few needles in half and sniffs hard at the wet ends. Nothing.

This direct evidence of a particular failure hits him like a blow. Smell and taste are closely related. What if it never comes back? He imagines being denied the rich scent and taste of the many curries he loves. It's an emptiness that even his growing fear cannot displace.

He's more than halfway, if Claren's location marker is correct. He's afraid of what he will find, and the sadness and fear brew into the self-damaging spiral of depression. It becomes harder to force his feet to take the next step.

Eventually he stops. The sense of uselessness is so overwhelming that he can't proceed.

*My whole life has come down to this. I will be a target to shoot at in the hopes that someone nearby will get hit.*

He suddenly realizes that Oriya is just as likely to get hit by a bullet. What a stupid working plan this is. He wants to weep.

The oddest sound comes to him. It's a snick-snick-CRACK-snick-snick from up ahead and then behind. At the same time, a small nearby branch bends in half. He looks at it to see a fresh wound on the top showing the yellow wood fiber.

When the second one comes, Jumbo realizes he's being fired upon.

He sits with his back to the trunk for concealment and tries to do the math. Two shots missed. How many bullets do they have? Maybe a dozen left in the magazine. He fiddles with the probabilities, but what would normally be an instant calculation seems like a hopelessly difficult task.

*What's my half-life in bullets?*

The question is clear, but he can't get any further. Anyway, he explains to himself: it's moot. After two more shots and misses, the sounds stop. After a moment the normal sounds of the forest resume, no doubt birds are gossiping heavily about this show.

Jumbo realizes the plan isn't going to work. He'll never get close enough to pinpoint the giant Crowder without being perforated himself. Perhaps a suicidal dash could do the trick, but speed is not in him. He suddenly panics, thinking maybe one of the bullets got him after all. They're so subtle in their ways that he might just drop over dead in ten minutes never knowing he got hit. Only after opening his shirt and inspecting does he feel some assurance.

Since they know he's here, putting on the mask seems recommended. At least he can use the filters to spot them too. He straps it tight and waits for the authentication. Time to move again.

He puts another ten meters behind him and searches for figures among the striped shadows ahead. He zooms and steadies, but vertigo threatens to overcome him. There are a pair of legs stretched out prone that can only belong to Oriya. He watches for movement, but sees none.

Fear and the sullen mood go to war with his intentions. If she's already dead, what's the point? It would be better to drift away in a comfortable bed somewhere than be tortured by those jackals up ahead.

Then he sees her legs kick once, twice, as if trying to gain purchase and failing. It's an unnatural, horrifying sight. A reserve of righteous anger asserts itself and gives him the energy to move forward.

There's a small creek that cuts across his path ahead, and Jumbo hustles across the intervening few meters to take refuge there. This time he sees the muzzle flash just before the bullet whips by. He works himself down to the left following the depression until he catches a glimpse of the target. Crowder is standing, carving a sharp point into a cut tree limb with upward flicks of the black knife.

Jumbo feels relief that Oriya hasn't been run through with one of these things, then it occurs to him that maybe Crowder is making one for Jumbo himself. The hopelessness feels like a weight on his shoulders. He considers the dismal options. Charging forward isn't realistic.

He tries to get an exact fix on Crowder with his mask applications, to read the distance and azimuth. Crowder isn't moving much, so Jumbo takes three readings and averages them. He takes a deep breath, and feels his heartbeat accelerate. The adrenaline starts to eat at the depression, freeing his mind from its grim embrace. He prepares a point-to-point message for Claren, giving the relative distance to Crowder, and Jumbo's approximate coordinates via GPS. These are not very accurate with this mask. But the combination of relative and absolute data, along with the radio fix, should give Claren more than he needs.

The problem is of course that if Crowder moves, this won't work. But Jumbo doesn't think it has much chance of working anyway.

He sticks his head up to get a good line of sight and sends the message. Once the comms protocol reports a turn-around that indicates a solid response, he waits three seconds and then yanks his mask up and off his face. He drops it on the bank of the creek and heads around to the left

Bullets start snicking through the trees from the other direction now, and this lifts Jumbo's spirits. It's nice to have a badass on your own side. He wants to peek to see if they are hitting anything useful, instead he runs bent over, huffing and puffing, blood rushing to his head.

*I should be in a vorking hospital.*

The pistol reports keep ringing through the trees, and Jumbo forces his dizzy brain to focus on the immediate problem. He feels huge and obvious, and it seems laughable that he could sneak up on the two men. He scrambles up the slope as the measured shots continue from what is now his right. There is return fire from up ahead, and Jumbo sees the flame pointed to his right. No one is shooting at him, which is a relief. He flops on the ground, rolls onto his back, and can't move any further. He just wants to get out while he can.

He can hear Crowder's voice, but can't make out the words.

Jumbo stares at the sky, feeling the lightness of last moments of existence. It's so peaceful here, right at the very edge of torture and death and madness. He wants to sleep. But the thought that Oriya is only a few meters away goads him like bee stings. He promises himself he will rest one minute and then go. After only forty-five seconds, he gives it up, flips himself over and orients himself. Frances is standing behind a tree trunk with the pistol held out in front of himself, pointing back the way Jumbo approached, where Claren is.

Jumbo automatically casts about for a weapon. It's rocky here near the creek, and by shifting to the left he can reach a piece of granite twice the size of his fist. He digs it out and feels the heft.

Then he remembers where he is. Somewhere not far from here is a soggy flat area where a teenager got clubbed and drowned in a puddle. Somewhere not too far is a rifle that is marked on his personal map. But he needs his mask for that.

And Jumbo knows he has no hope of finding it in time. And he knows he doesn't have the strength to do it anyway.

When he sees Frances jerk the trigger on an empty cylinder, he knows it's time to move, either to run away or charge forward.

*Returning were as tedious as go o'er.*

He wheezes forward, trying to keep low, but Frances spots him right away, turning, pointing the gun.

Jumbo knows it's empty and it makes him furious that this bastard put a bullet through his brain. He begins to yell, but it turns into a high-pitched shriek somewhere between terror and madness.

Frances grins under his flicker-gogs and lines up. He doesn't seem to know that it's empty, and Jumbo's heart lurches with the possibility that he missed the flash and bang, that his brain just farted at that instant or—

The black hole of the muzzle wavers, and Frances opens his mouth, his arms lifting to meet the blow coming down on him. But Jumbo stiff-arms him with his left, twisting Frances to the side, and simultaneously brings the force of the rock down hard on the right. It grazes Frances' cheek and smashes into his collarbone, shattering it.

The world goes double, and Jumbo half-falls into Frances, barely regaining his balance. He senses the giant shadow bearing down on him, and just has time to put his head down. His skull rockets off of Crowder's abdomen as if the man were wearing armor. Crowder runs right over him, and is then gone, crashing into a tree somewhere.

Jumbo sees nothing but white lights everywhere. He knows he has to move, and he makes a valiant effort, but everything is numb. After an eternity, he heaves onto his hands and knees. His sense of balance is haywire, and he feels himself spinning. It's an awful, awful feeling, and it's too much for his stomach. He vomits in the direction he hopes is roughly down.

Between retching and wiping his mouth, wishing fervently for things to stand still, he sees something that he recognizes.

A foot.

That makes plenty of sense because he's near the ground. He feels around and finds a leg. It kicks at him, so he holds on with both hands and bites deeply into the Achilles tendon. There's an ungodly scream, and something hits him hard in the head. He falls back, and lies there, tongue out, panting, wanting the world to just leave him the hell alone.

An animal wail floats to him through the mist. Dark and light begin to distinguish themselves. He has to turn off the alarm clock. He blinks. Where's the damned clock? He paws at his face, but the mask is gone. Where's that noise coming from? Slowly it resolves into a hideous wail. It's a deep-throated woe so effectively expressed that it seems unlikely any new life will dare sprout in these parts for a hundred years.

Jumbo remembers the stake and its sharpened point. Someone must be on the thing, becoming acquainted with the juxtaposition. He's proud of this theory, and begins to summon up the urgency it requires.

There's Oriya. Her mouth is moving and her eyes are wide. She's sitting on the ground, tied to a small pine. That's a puzzler. Who got put on the stake?

Jumbo turns his head, and the world lurches over again. He holds onto his stomach.

*No no no no no.*

Eyes closed, deep breaths. Open again. Oriya is still there. Her eyes are flickering around like they want to escape her face. Jumbo finds it enchanting. It's a lost art, making eyes at someone. It makes him a little sad that eyes are so sequestered nowadays.

Then he sees the knife. It's on the ground by the stake, which protrudes vertically from the ground about five feet. Jumbo crawls to it. Hand and leg forward. Other hand, other leg.

And there it is. He puzzles for a moment how to carry it back, then just holds it in his hand by the handle and turns around. He stops in surprise. It seems to be Crowder making all the racket. He crawls forward to Oriya, puzzling it out. Finally he attaches it to the pain radiating from his forehead where the large man bowled into him. The drug drone. Jumbo reaches up to feel it, then jerks his hand back when he remembers the payload. Crowder has a bellyful of Agony, and if the needle is still sticking out, it would be unpleasant to prick one's finger on it.

Oriya stares at him with horror in her eyes. Maybe she's checking to see if he's crazy or something. Jumbo finds it annoying. He hardly recognizes her face. It's bruised and cut and her lips are swollen. She bares her teeth, and Jumbo notices a hole next to the crooked one, where a tooth has been knocked out.

Her lips move without speaking.

He nods, and shifts to the side so he can get to the restraints. Then he sees Frances. The man his holding his broken shoulder and his right arm dips hideously from the wound. His face is a mask of rage, and he takes a step from Crowder's side in the direction of Jumbo. Behind him Crowder howls as if all the hounds of Slant Town were dragging out his intestines. Frances takes another step, and Jumbo begins to saw at the

restraints. But the expected resistance doesn't materialize—the blade just slides straight through and shaves a chunk of Oriya's thumb off. She hisses from pain and then screams.

Jumbo doesn't have time to apologize. Frances sees the knife and looks about for a weapon. He reaches to pick up the large pistol. It's heavy and hard, and will make a wonderful club. As he bends over, Jumbo sees the looming form of Crowder standing to his feet, facing him. The eyes are not the windows of soul of a Machiavelli-quoting intellectual giant. They're the wild eyes of an animal mad with pain. His mouth bellows the rage, and he claws at his stomach, which is already flayed and bloody.

Frances straightens and hefts the pistol by the barrel and Jumbo sees Crowder's eyes turn predatory, squinting and shifting toward the movement. A long arm reaches out and catches Frances by the head, the huge grasp easily palming the other man's skull. He lifts Frances up with a single arm and then begins to tie his limbs into a knot, still screaming the outrage of his Agony.

Jumbo can't quite follow it. He's never been good with origami, and this is just as complicated. Frances' bones and tendons crack as the strain exceeds their design specification, twisting into a gruesome approximation of a gift wrapped with a bow, tied behind the man's back.

Jumbo stands shakily. He knows this would be a good time to leave. He looks down for Oriya. She's gone. He steadies himself against the tree she was tied to and tries to figure out what he missed. He turns his head carefully, keeping it level, scanning left. Scanning right. No Oriya. She must be behind him.

There's a finally grisly crack as Crowder twists Frances' head around until it comes off. He roars and throws it high into the air, dropping the rest of the gruesome package he's made.

He turns his red eyes on Jumbo and claws at his belly. There are tears streaming down his face.

Jumbo stumbles back, pointing the knife out.

Crowder stands, panting. He's made a hole in his own belly with his scratching, and has three fingers inside. His chest heaves like bellows. The screaming has stopped.

Not a bird dares chirp to break the sudden silence.

Jumbo backs up another step as Crowder raises a hand and outstretches a finger to point at him.

Crowder bellows. He advances, still pointing, mouth still puckered. Saliva runs down the side of his jaw.

Jumbo hides behind the stake. It's a pathetic response to the advancing terror, but it's the best he can come up with. He knife in his hand is shaking. The other one steadies him against the pillar of wood emerging from the dirt.

Crowder stops. One hand is still worming around inside his own abdomen, and the other had turned into a reaching grasp. His eyes fall on the sharpened end of the stake and he leers. He reaches out with the other hand, the fingers painted red with his own blood.

Jumbo slashes at the fat sausage-like fingers, but Crowder is as quick as his is big. When Jumbo reaches again, Crowder smacks him from the other side in a quick slap that makes the lights pop in Jumbo's head again. He flails, stumbling backwards, waving the knife wildly. He feels it being plucked from his hand, and a terrifying strength lifts his whole body up. Higher and higher he rushes through the air.

He's three years old and it's his birthday, and Uncle Farnum is lifting him up so high it takes his breath away.

Then the rush down and a gawdawful crunch and thick searing pain in his hip.

Jumbo gobbles, between breathing and trying to force sound out of his mouth. It's a terrible deep ache that screams an unknowable wrongness with his body. The nerves are reporting that they don't know what the vork is going on, but it's not supposed to be this way. He slaps at the pain, down along his leg, trying to find it. The movement pitches his trunk forward and fresh agony rips through his leg. He braces a leg instinctively to steady himself.

He gradually realizes that Crowder has slammed him down on top of the stake, the point of which must now be buried in his body. The thought of this is worse than the pain itself.

He blinks aside the free-flowing tears and tries to get a reasonable perspective on his impaled new world. He's pitched forward and to the side. His heart jumps when he

spots Crowder. The huge man is sitting against a tree with his legs out. His gaze flicks up to meet Jumbo's.

Jumbo summons the courage to look down, and sees the end of the wood buried in his flesh. But it's skewed to the side, and the point seems to have bitten deeply into his inner thigh and now rests against the hip socket. It doesn't seem like this will support his body long, and he wonders what blood vessels have already been ruptured. There doesn't seem to be an inordinate amount of blood yet.

"That's no good," Crowder says. "Going to fix you right." He heaves himself up, then sits immediately. He blinks. He tries to get up again, and fails. He coughs and Jumbo sees flecks of blood spatter outward.

Crowder's teeth are chattering. He coughs again, a deep dry explosion.

Jumbo knows that cough. A distant fear vies for attention: that of a new Wave of viral affliction that turns everything ordinary into lethal objects, even the air itself. The cases of mySARS must have a common ancestor, and that means terrible trouble. Of course, Jumbo has much more immediate problems, and in any case he can't be re-infected by the same strain.

*No thanks, I already had it.*

It amuses him in a deeply irrational way. Jumbo laughs his soul away in a rising gale of painful coughs, and consciousness evaporates, until only the residual salts of reason are left to wait for a fresh pouring of fate.

## **Chapter Twenty-Four**

Jumbo dreams about not being able to get out of bed. The blanket has him tangled up, and no matter how he thrashes it won't come free.

He wakes to darkness and reality which slowly reels back into his ways of thinking. The awful knowledge that he's still stuck on top of a spit is an outrage.

When he can string words together into a semblance of syntax, it becomes: "Where the hell is Oriya?" That she left him here with these two monsters is bad enough. But not to even send someone to check is unconscionable.

Jumbo knows he's going to have to move. He has to solve this problem himself, but he's not in the mood to be hasty.

Jumbo does a desperate inventory of his situation by feel. The wooden stake is stuck solidly in his thigh and seems to be lodged against the bone. He tries to imagine some gymnastic trick that will allow himself to pull free, but it seems unlikely and terribly painful.

In a perverse way, he's proud of himself. He's endured a lethal disease, having his lung punctured, being shot through the brain, and now being impaled, however ineptly this last task was executed. Yet he's still here.

He's never felt more alive or desirous of remaining so. His earlier depression has vanished, and for the moment his mind works. He tries to remember where the knife should be.

Jumbo peers into the dark, searching for lights. He's relieved to see what looks like a torch in the distance. Then he realizes it's not a single fire. Someone is setting the edge of the forest on fire at the tree line next to the farms.

Jumbo catalogs the most potent curses he knows and prioritizes them. They erupt from him in perfect order, like missiles guided by the unlimited righteousness of a just god. Not the petulant gods that humans design after their own form, but one that actually gives a bitshit about fairness to the individual man.

The matter of getting down from his perch is now a priority.

He hears feet moving in the dark. It must be someone with a mask, who can see in the dark. He yells as loudly as he can and goes on hollering.

"Hello?"

Jumbo thinks he recognizes the voice, but can't place it.

A figure steps close enough to make out in the gloom.

"You're alive?" she asks.

"I remember you," he says, squinting at her form.

“You should. I’m Janus. Your friend sent me to hell. Nobody will even look at me now.”

“I’m looking.”

“I’ve been eating from their compost!”

“There’s a knife on the ground. Do you see it?”

“One of their dogs bit me! I clobbered the bastard too.”

“Knife. Do you see one?”

She bends over and presents it to him.

“What do you plan do to with it?” She sounds suspicious.

“I’m going to carve a face right here, under the place where it’s stuck in my thigh. A funny face so others will come by and we can entertain one another.”

“You’re kind of an asshole. I knew that from the camp,” she says, and pitches the knife out of sight.

“Nooo!,” Jumbo yells. This woman is crazy. *All* women are crazy: how could he have missed that? If she was in the area, she could hardly have missed the gunfire and other noises. She was probably waiting around to scavenge the bodies, he figures. Like binsects to bitshit.

“Look,” he says, “I can help you. I can make the banishment go away. You won’t have to eat scraps again.”

“Scraps? You think I was eating scraps? Honey, I was picking bits of food out of the most disgusting...” She shudders.

Her bony arms support the story.

“Give me the knife. You can’t let me burn.” It’s as heartfelt a thing as ever Jumbo has uttered.

“What happened to that guy?” She points at the motionless form of Crowder.

“He got shot,” Jumbo lies. Well, maybe he did get shot, but that’s not what killed him. He realizes it’s a lie that may have consequences, but he can’t risk having Janus abandon him.

“I wouldn’t get too close,” Jumbo says, inventing as he goes. “Some of these gene hacks have reflexes that kick in after death. Like a snake with its head cut off.”

“Well, okay.” She bends over and retrieves the knife and hands it to him, then stands with hands on hips.

Jumbo begins hacking at the stake where he can reach it. The blade is almost magical in its ways, parting wood from wood in great flakes. He remembers cutting off part of Oriya’s thumb.

Suddenly the world tilts crazily and there’s a sound of crunching fiber, and he falls head first into the pine straw on the ground. White hot pain erupts from his hip.

“Can we go now?” Janus asks. Jumbo’s anguished howls seem to have little effect on her.

Jumbo realizes the necessity of leaving, but he can’t figure out how to make it happen. The fire doesn’t have a wind to whip it into a fury, just a desultory breath that can hardly be called a breeze. There’s time to consider options. But the thought of not being able to outrun a slow-moving fire makes it only worse.

Jumbo lays splayed on his back and asks the favor.

“See if you can pull this log out of my leg.”

But her violent head motion tells him that won’t be happening, so he reaches down and tries it himself. To his surprise, it’s not hard. There’s a gaping hole in his thigh, but it seems to shrink in on itself as he pulls the giant splinter free. It’s a vast relief, but an enduring ache isn’t far behind. It’s clear he won’t be mobile any time soon.

“I can help you with your problem if you help me,” he says, when he can talk again. His mouth has become terribly dry.

“How can you help me?”

“I need my mask. It’s on the creek bank just twenty meters from here.” He points.

“Maybe you didn’t hear me. How can *you* help *me*?”

“I have influence. You shouldn’t be black-listed just for not wanting to help put some guy’s roof on.” Jumbo is being disingenuous. He knows the more serious offence by far was risking the spread of disease, which Janus has unwittingly put herself in danger of a second time.

“That’s right. You’re right about that.” She turns and looks in the direction Jumbo pointed. She seems reluctant, but takes a few steps in that direction.

Jumbo uses the knife very carefully to cut part of his pants leg into strips to bind his wound. He grits his teeth and pulls tight. The pain is deep and severe. The idea of trying to move makes him crazy.

When the mask boots, Jumbo feels the weirdness of normalcy, but it's a thin veneer that only conceals the realities of his predicament for a blink or two. He begins broadcasting an SOS.

“Can you walk?” Janus demands. “Cause I'm not gonna to carry you.”

Jumbo eyes the stake he truncated, sticking vertically from the ground. It's about three inches thick--far too big for a crutch. Nor are there any better candidates in the immediate vicinity.

He tries to stand, using the pole and only pushing with his uninjured left leg. He manages to pull himself up and stand, panting, to survey the world in the monochrome mask view.

He notices how much heat is coming off of Crowder's body, and then is horrified to see the massive chest lift and shudder.

*He's still alive.*

A wave of dizziness hits him then, and he knows it was a bad idea to stand. He sits heavily, and notices that his leg is much wetter now.

“I don't think I can do it,” he says to no one in particular. The display from the mask seems inordinately dim, and Jumbo turns up the gain and then the contrast. But it's shrinking to a tunnel. He can hear the slow thud of his heart as the world goes dark. It

reminds him of his mother.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

When the light returns, there are voices with it, but it is as if their owners have swallowed the darkness whole and are now parsing it back, concentrated as sound.

Jumbo hears terrible things, and the geometry of bright and dim will not resolve themselves into coherence. Instead of reassuring him, it only adds to the feeling of stalking terror. It constricts his chest, and he finds himself fighting for breath. The outlines of shape eventually clarify in angular monochrome, stark whites and blacks tracing the angles of a doorway and a looming shadow that fills it, growing larger as the form ducks through and stands. It can only be Crowder, unkillable eternal Crowder hefting a new stake to thread through a life.

Jumbo tries to cry out, but the weight on him bears down, squeezing the sound into a gasp. Crowder towers over him, leaking loops from his own abdomen that droop down like grotesque decorations, right hand still worming inside like a giant zombie Napoleon.

“They’re all dead,” Crowder tells him in a demon’s voice. “I came back for them, but you did the job for me by infecting them all. Sundial and Joyeuse and Claren and Janus and Sister Ivy. All that’s left is you.”

Jumbo struggles to move his limbs, but they are frozen with fright.

The nightmare mercifully releases him, and he sucks air into his lungs. He blinks and blinks, but it’s utterly dark. He forces his eyes wide open, but no ray strays in.

*I’m blind!*

He reaches up in panic to touch his eyes and encounters slick cool synthetics instead of skin. He knows he’s not dreaming, and pulls at the barrier in confusion. His mask resists and then flips up off his face. The air feels delicious, but the light is painful, so that his lashes fill instantly with tears. The mask’s power supply is dead, he realizes with relief. Not blind.

The room is depressingly familiar. This is where he comes to die a little more each time. The House of Death, where the family who lived here is now clubbed and drowned or mounted on stakes. Rain pounds on the roof and runs off to streak the window.

He manages to keep his eyes open, and the room is still there, still depressing. He wishes for the sight of a face underlined with a smile. He pictures Sundial's almost unassailable grin, and the spike of fear quickly follows. What if he did infect the village? Someone obviously rescued him. What if they brought *that* back with them?

Jumbo feels the urgency to act. His imagination already blooms with terrible possibilities. Janus could be carrying the disease to Dawkins knows where. And the mystery of Oriya remains. Neither he nor she can be re-infected with this strain, short of a massive dose of the pathogen. Did she come back to find him? His head hurts.

He takes inventory. The bandage on his head has been refreshed, and there are new wrappings around his thigh wound. There's also a sticker on the bend in his arm inside the elbow.

*I needed blood.*

He notices that his mouth is not dry either. Blood and saline. Someone knew what they were doing.

He strains his ears against the stillness, and realizes that he can only hear out of his left ear. An overwhelming helplessness threatens to swamp his will.

*Oh, yeah. I got shot through the brain.*

The miserable remembrance comes like a sudden heat that evaporates all but the most temporary of ambitions.

Jumbo sorts through his inventory of motivations, such as he can. He finds that he's surprised at the result. It's not a strong drink that he wishes for most, but an answer to the mystery of Oriya. Mysteries. Why the hell did she walk out there alone and where the hell did she go after? That's at least two, and if his brain were whole, there are likely more he would think of.

He thinks about Oriya's missing tooth and what that implies. He wonders about his attachment to her peculiarities.

*Attachment?*

He no longer trusts his judgment about words. Maybe that's the wrong one.

Jumbo tries to move and notices that his legs are immobilized by straps across the bed just over his knees. He reconsiders trying to rise. Whoever bandaged him probably had a better idea than Jumbo about the consequences of moving around.

There's a detachment to his thoughts, which lurch and drag from one topic to the next, which suggests he's also been given drugs for pain. He opens his mouth to speak when he sees a shadow—a real one this time—shade the doorway. It's Joyeuse, the clone who looks like young Nova must have appeared. It makes his heart race, even though he knows the trick now.

"I saw you take off the mask," Joyeuse says.

Jumbo doesn't even bother to look for the camera that must be mounted to watch him. It's nice to be cared about. He's relieved to see that she doesn't look ill.

"Is everyone okay?" he asks.

"You're a long way from okay. You really ought to be dead." Joyeuse pulls up a chair and begins to poke around his bandages without warning. Jumbo starts at the rather intimate contact, but doesn't say anything.

"You can thank the local veterinarian for the patch job. I watched to make sure he didn't cut off anything important." Joyeuse pats his crotch and grins just like Nova. It sends a concoction of lively hormones shooting through at least half of his brain.

"Does that hurt?" She asks, probing deeper into the wrappings.

"Uhh, noo, but—"

She stops abruptly, and her mouth becomes a serious underline to her formidable mask.

"Tell me what happened out there." It's an order.

Her mannerisms are so much like Nova's that Jumbo finds himself falling into the feeling of deep infatuation, the boundless longing that he knows damned well was engineered, bought with a drug, and not earned. But the knowledge makes no difference. He finds himself lifting a hand to take hers.

“Did you love her?” Joyeuse asks.

It’s a jolt, and confusion prevents Jumbo from grasping the ramifications of the question immediately. Then he realizes she’s talking about Oriya, not Nova. How could she know about Nova?

“Who?” he asks, feeling like a fool.

“Claren told me what you did. That was very selfless of you,” she says. Her delicate fingers stroke along his wrist, and electricity races up Jumbo’s arm.

“Joyeuse. The big guy. What happened to him? He has the virus.”

“I know. He was flaring off the chart. Even if he manages to survive, he’ll have brain damage. The whole area is quarantined.”

“You left him?” Jumbo feels sick.

“Claren wouldn’t give me a weapon. I didn’t want to get close enough to use the knife, between the virus and what he did to his friend. I thought the fire would get them.”

*But it rained instead.*

“No one is sick?” Jumbo asks, his heart racing for more than one reason. He thinks of Sundial and her unborn baby.

“We’re okay. If the rain hadn’t put the fire out, it would all be burned by now. Where’s the gun? I didn’t find it.”

“Back up,” Jumbo says. Joyeuse has walked her fingers up his arm to play with his jaw, and she’s leaning forward so that it exaggerates the swell of her breasts. He sniffs the air without planning to, but he still can’t smell anything. “Who came and got me?”

“I did,” she says, smiling again. “I carried your rather large ass about a hundred meters at the double. You nearly bled to death.”

Jumbo eyes the slender-looking form of the woman and wonders if she’s lying to him.

“I thought you had a...promise? What did Claren call it?”

“An absolute, Yes. I broke it.”

“Is that bad?”

She laughs and shrugs. Jumbo can’t take his eyes off of her.

“It’s the second worse thing we can do, in fact. The worst is betrayal. Second is breaking an absolute.”

“What will happen to you?”

“They’ll send me back to training. That’s what they call indoctrination. It will be hell for a while. They’ll fuss over me and make me say all kinds of things I don’t believe. But in the end I’m a very expensive investment for them. I’ll be back.”

“Why did you do it?”

She makes hand motions that are obviously manipulating something in virtual space, tweaking some control. Then she pops her mask and sets it carefully on a table near the bed.

The sight of her bare face stops Jumbo’s breath. It’s like a younger, more carefree version of Nova, and he wants her more than anything he’s wanted in the world.

“What you did for the Speaker was brave. I couldn’t let you burn, could I?” Her eyes are just as predatory as Nova’s, and Jumbo feels possessed by her and by internal demons that are turning their own wheels and adjusting valves, stoking an ancient furnace. The bandages around his crotch are beginning to become uncomfortable.

“Is Oriya okay?” the question stirs other sorts of emotions in Jumbo.

Joyeuse shrugs, and Jumbo watches how this makes her breasts sway. He finds that the back of his hand has begun to stroke across one, and that she is pretending not to notice.

“No one knows where she is. I thought you might.”

That changes things.

“We have to find her,” Jumbo says.

She runs a hand over his chest.

“I need help. Claren won’t even talk to me now.”

The thought of Oriya somewhere out in the forest, beaten up and perhaps injured penetrates the sexual fog in Jumbo’s mind. Then he remembers the bullets, those damned black devils that go through anything, being fired without direct aim. He imagines one of them passing through her lungs or clipping an internal artery, and shivers.

“Maybe I can help. I just need the mask charged. My SOS killed it.”

“Is that all?” She leans over him to retrieve it and then stands to set it next to an induction charger on the opposite wall. “Should take about, what, ten minutes? What should we do for ten minutes?”

Without waiting for an answer, Joyeuse slips the long black knife from a scabbard on her leg, and scoots her chair down next to his waist.

“Don’t move,” she says, and begins to carve a strategically-placed hole through the wrappings at his crotch with the bare tip of the knife.

Jumbo’s mind is a growing hurricane of mixed emotions, not the least of which is overpowering lust.

“I think you’re faking all these injuries to get attention,” Joyeuse says, sounding serious as she works to free him.

“Oh,” Jumbo says, eyes rolling back. “Oh, my.”

When her mouth finds him, he forgets everything that got him to this moment. Even mortality itself wanes, and here in the House of Death they perform an ancient incantation, a rite of the living more potent than a bullet through the brain. Jumbo sinks his fingers into the long hair flowing from Joyeuse’s head, and his entire scope of reason shrinks to a single ineffable thought that can only be approximated in words.

*Life is a damned fine thing.*

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Jumbo directs the search for Oriya from his bed in the House of the Dead. By first enlisting the help of Sundial and her husband Wired, he relentlessly brow-beats the other villagers until they either block his messages or agree to help search. He uses guilt, anger, threats, or bribery. It now amounts to a dozen souls with masks, about as many dogs, and Joyeuse. He even convinces Claren to be a network hub, which will not require him to violate the outdated order that he nevertheless clings to. Secretly, Jumbo wants him to be ready with his weapons in case they are needed. Jumbo isn't going anywhere himself.

Everyone is briefed en route about the contagion risks, and Jumbo eventually has them moving out on overlapping paths that will pass over the terrain in a comprehensive mesh. He doesn't want anyone to be alone and out of sight of everyone else, so it promises to be a slow operation. The sun is already drooping toward the horizon. Almost everyone has a decent infra-red filter, however, so unless Oriya's body temperature is the same as the ground, she should be visible. That's a possibility he doesn't want to think about.

Jumbo shuts his eyes for a moment and feels the lingering glow from Joyeuse's attentions. It's a deep satisfaction that he knows he will pay for later. The rule is that too much pleasure is cancelled by too much pain, and hence moderation is to be preferred. That was the old rule. Now, Jumbo figures he's got such an account balance on the pain side that he's due a considerable positive compensation just to break even.

He tries to concentrate, but it's difficult. His eyes have trouble focusing on the scenes painted by the mask's lasers onto his retinas. And the village network is unreliable, so that the mask keeps dropping connection and attempting to initiate point-to-point contact. This is slow and annoying.

The overlay map is not nearly as sophisticated as one he could have created with his MOM mask and his old brain. But it serves the purpose, showing the tracks of searchers as they move. The creek is causing some problems in keeping lines straight, and he keeps sending terse messages to adjust course. It's a juggling act that leaves him drained after a half hour of it. He munches on bites of energy bars Joyeuse left for him, and selects her dot from the display to ghost.

His visual display becomes the same one Joyeuse is seeing, except that it freezes when the bandwidth dries up from moment to moment. Joyeuse and Claren have both

been pressed into service as mobile relays because they have the most powerful equipment.

Joyeuse has passed through the burned area, some of it still smoking, and approaches the bloody ground where Jumbo was pinned up in the air by his own weight. The area is tagged as off limits on everyone's heads-up display, at least in theory.

The twisted form of Frances lies on the ground where it was before, but Joyeuse can't find any sign of the handgun. Jumbo's not surprised that Janus would have taken it, and he suspects that the Continuation leadership will not be happy it's gone.

Joyeuse moves between the trees toward the awful stake, and finds it still standing, the tip of it chopped off and lying on the ground. It's dark with Jumbo's blood. She pans right.

Crowder is gone. Jumbo's feels a gurgle of acid rise in his throat. This is bad.

"He can't have gone far in his condition," Jumbo says to Joyeuse, hoping he's right.

Joyeuse reaches down, and Jumbo sees the tip of the black knife appear at the bottom of her field of view. She flips on some edge detectors to look for marks that would indicate the large man moving.

"I didn't get any reflection or transmission from him before," she says, using the artificial voice that is generated by the silent throat mike. Her VOX sounds little like her real voice. "Do you know anything he might be wearing?"

Jumbo tries to search his memory for anything electronic that Crowder might have on him, something that Joyeuse could search for at close range. It should be Claren out there, not her, he thinks.

"His clothes didn't look wired. Nice shoes, though. There might be something in them."

"That's a good one," she says. Jumbo watches her pull up a catalog of scripts and select one. When she runs it his connection drops again.

Jumbo sighs and wishes he could pace around. The immobility is killing him. His gaze falls upon the open door to the room. He has a sudden thought that Crowder is going to show up here, just like in his dream. What if the man circled around and came into the village? Half the people who live here are off in the forest looking for Oriya.

The thought makes him ashamed. Oriya is out there somewhere and hasn't been seen for over a day.

*And I'm afraid of my own shadow.*

But one of the nicer things about having your head perforated is that you can blame any mental deficit on that fact.

The net comes back to life, and the messages start scrolling by rapidly. The dogs found something. The vocal chatter is overwhelming the fragile bandwidth, and Jumbo broadcasts for them to use text. But the excited voices climb in pitch. Someone has apparently seen Crowder.

Jumbo begins to panic. He's half blind, and Crowder can kill them just by coughing on them. He suddenly realizes he's committing the same mistake Oriya did, of being overconfident.

"Claren," Jumbo sends high priority, "can you straighten out the situation on the ground?"

"I'd get them out of there," comes the immediate response.

Jumbo hesitates.

*What do I do?*

He knows he has to act. The dots are converging on his map.

He messages Joyeuse, asking her advice on cleaning up the network, which is becoming unusable. She starts to send detailed explanations.

"Just do it," he says. "Please."

After half a minute the chatter drops to zero as most of the users are booted off the net, leaving just Jumbo in his bed, Claren at the edge of the woods, and Joyeuse. The location markers for the others persist because they're all trying to reconnect, but their voice and video and chat no longer clutter the channel.

"What did you find?" he asks Joyeuse.

“The big guy.”

Jumbo looks at her video again. The huge man is curled into a fetal position. He made it about fifty meters from where Jumbo saw him last. He’s not moving now, but still emanating heat. A circle of villagers is forming around him. Jumbo can hear them talking through Joyeuse’s microphones. It’s ugly.

“What do we do with him?” Joyeuse asks.

The question twists between the two halves of Jumbo’s brain, analyzing and emoting, but the anger is gone. Whatever happens now will be a decision he has to live with.

Oriya decided to let the two of them live to serve some purpose.

*And look what happened.*

But Jumbo knows that isn’t fair. He understands now that it’s one thing to bash someone in the head when you’re terrified, and quite another to order the death of a helpless sick man, no matter how vorked up he is.

A rock smacks into the thick flesh of Crowder’s side. Joyeuse pans left and spots the young man who threw it. He’s bending to pick up another.

“What’s the plan, boss?” Joyeuse asks. Her VOX is flat and professional.

“Can you stop them?”

“I can try, but it might cost something.”

That wasn’t her VOX. Jumbo starts at the sound of Joyeuse’s real voice. There is a hint of regret in it.

“Claren, get to Joyeuse as fast as you can.” Jumbo orders. His understanding with the man is fragile, but Jumbo has at least his respect for what he did for Oriya. So far that has been the only currency he needs.

“I had orders not to go in there. You created this mess by doing the exact opposite. Anyway, you’ll lose your signal if I get further away.”

*Bitshit!*

A part of Jumbo just wants to go back to sleep and be resurrected again here in this bed.

There's a gunshot.

Joyeuse whirls to find the shooter. The glow of the barrel is easily identified with the infrared overlay she has on the mask video. It's a man Jumbo doesn't recognize. The mask IDs are no longer pinging, and he can't tell who it is.

"It's turning into a lynch mob, boss. What's the plan?"

*The Prince ought to question them upon everything, and listen to their opinions, and afterwards form his own conclusions.*

"Claren, Joyeuse, give me some options here."

Jumbo doesn't feel like a Prince. He feels like he's deflecting authority, letting events take their course. The time to ask them would have been beforehand.

There's no more time.

"Do you have a loudspeaker?" he asks Joyeuse before she can respond.

"Yes. You're on now."

Joyeuse steps out in the middle of the, backing off the lenses on her mask to fisheye wide. She pans around slowly, so that Jumbo has to close his eyes or become ill.

"You're on," she repeats. There's a calmness to her voice that can only exist in the young. Maybe the knowledge that at the zenith of life, it can only become grayer and more muddled afterwards, and that the clarity at the peak will be sought but never found again. It's the complete confidence of momentary immortality.

"This is Lastfour Jumbo speaking through Joyeuse's system. Please listen."

The figures are so small now it's hard for him to judge reactions. As Joyeuse turns again, he sees that she's near the middle of the circle, standing beside Crowder. It makes Jumbo feel like he's walking on the edge of a cliff.

“This guy and his friend have tried to kill me twice. In awful ways. I have a vorking hole in the front of my head, and another in the back. I have an even bigger hole inside my leg where this asshole shoved a tree into me. If any of you bastards has a stronger claim to hate this pile of bitshit, please raise your hand.”

There’s another gunshot.

“He put my brother on a stake!” A man yells. “With his wife and kid! And *you* killed the other one!”

Joyeuse is talking now, hands out, oddly elongated by the optics. How can she navigate like this? As she pans back and forth, Crowder moves, lifting an arm.

A rock zooms from nowhere into huge proportions and then the video goes dark.

“Joyeuse!” Jumbo shouts.

The video flickers back. Jumbo sees a confused and distorted blur of motion, but worse is the sound, the smack of hard objects into soft, the crunch of bone, and the cries torn from a psyche. He realizes the truth now. The villagers were not out there because he convinced them to rescue Oriya. They were out for revenge.

“Sorry, boss,” Joyeuse says, before it goes dark for good.

The reality of the thing skids over the surface of Jumbo’s mind. He replays the last few moments, changing things. Getting Joyeuse out of there, but the awful knowledge keeps returning. Now Joyeuse is dead too. He’s spiraling, dull with denial until a singular thought penetrates.

Claren.

“Get to me as fast as you can. Go dark.” he sends it top priority. The only hope is to get the hell out of here. And the only hope of that is with a ride.

He imagines being thrown over the shoulder of the man and humping down the road, and it doesn’t make sense. He’d bleed to death.

A cart. He needs an electrotug cart. There must be one here. A slow cart, easily caught.

No. Better to sneak off a ways and wait. Maybe Sundial will help.

These fantasies torment Jumbo in the House of the Dead for endless minutes. He wishes he hadn't told Claren to turn off his network. The man is taking forever. His teeth chatter with fear at the thought that the mob will descend on him next.

And then it sinks in that Claren isn't coming. Once Jumbo has counted the minutes up and back and imagined all the slow ways he could have come, it's clear that he's going to have to wait here until vengeance comes to complete itself. If he's lucky it will be another gunshot to the head.

He takes off the mask and wishes for a strong drink. The House is unnaturally quiet, as if gathering its energy for the last act.

When the door crashes open, Jumbo flinches in spite of himself. He opens his mouth to scream aggression and then snaps it shut. Claren has Joyeuse in his arms. He's panting, bloodied, and pale. Joyeuse has lost her mask, and her hair is matted and dark. He places her in the other bed carefully. Then he sits on the floor and tugs a black pistol magazine out of a pocket. He reloads the weapon and then thumbs loose bullets into the empty magazine.

When he turns to face Jumbo, his jaw is clenched and his posture radiates aggression. He slips the long black knife out of its home and presents the pistol to Jumbo. The barrel is warm.

"Safety is here. It's not networked. Just point and pull. Anybody comes in here, aim for the middle. Can you do that?"

Jumbo nods dumbly.

"Aim for the middle."

With that, Claren turns off the lights and slips out the back.

Jumbo puts his mask on so he can see, and then tugs at the restraints on his legs until he gets them loose. He sits up and tries to move his legs. A line of fire outlines the wound in his crotch and he bites back a cry. That isn't going to work. He tries pulling instead, inching his body backwards using his hands. That works better, but he's going the wrong direction. He works slowly, trying to turn around without rupturing something.

“Claren here!” comes the shout, quickly followed by the man himself. He tosses a backpack down and starts rummaging through it, tossing what he finds interesting into a pile on the floor.

“Don’t watch me, watch the door,” Claren says, as if he was instructing a child.

Jumbo does as he’s told. The pistol is heavy, so he lays it sideways on a pillow on his lap. He’s sitting now, with his knees bent, feet on the floor. It’s a delicious feeling of normalcy.

The outside door opens and Jumbo pulls the trigger. The explosion is so much louder than he expected that he yells out in surprise. The earbuds of the mask saved his eardrums, he figures.

Sundial steps into the room, hands in front of her face, which is otherwise covered only by a comfort mask.

“They say you won’t be hurt,” she says, stammering. “They just want you to leave now.”

Jumbo drops the pistol on the bed and tries to go to her instinctively, horrified that he might have just put a hole through her body. He knows the bullets are so fast and clever that it may take a few moments for someone to notice they’ve been shot.

He pitches forward, and Sundial and Claren each catch an arm to keep him from falling face-down. Hot pain rips up the length of his leg.

When he’s sitting again, throbbing with the renewed injury, his head spins. He hears the voices, but can’t make out the words. It sinks in how badly he’s injured and how much he needs real medical care. The irony is not lost on him that it’s the leg injury and not the one to his head that presses the case home.

But he fights away his own woes for the moment. He has to know if he wounded Sundial. She’s still standing, but who knows what leaks have been sprung inside her. The problem gives him a needed focus, and he tries to analyze it. He pulls up the video from his mask and watches it frame by frame. Sundial isn’t quite visible when the gun fires, and the following frames are a blurry mess.

The seconds after that, Sundial steps into the room, arms moving up reflexively to cover her face. Jumbo searches, zooming into the grain to look...for what? It occurs to him that the impact point ought to glow in infrared because of the heat generated. Even

these magical bullets must lose some energy to whatever they hit. His MOM mask would make short work of it, but Jumbo doesn't have the filtering tools to accomplish the same thing with this mask. He can, however, average frames together to get better resolution on anything static. His point of view wasn't changing quickly, so he constructs such an overlay. Ideally this would cancel out noise and accentuate true patterns.

And there in the side of the door frame is a glowing spot. Jumbo heaves a sigh of relief. It's about half a meter left of where Sundial's head would have been when she entered. Jumbo rewinds the video and inspects that area on the frame just after the discharge. There's a small disturbance there. Just to be sure, Jumbo checks the same spot in real time, searching for the glow. It is gone, as one would expect when the heat dissipated.

He allows himself to breathe again. Compounding a tragedy of that magnitude upon what has already happened would have been too much to bear. He turns his attention back to Sundial and Claren. The man is bent over, coaxing Joyeuse to drink, lifting her head for her. It's so intimate that Jumbo feels an irrational flash of jealousy. He pushes that adolescent conceit aside and focuses on the willowy young woman with the adamant smile. He reaches out and takes her hand, happy that she's here, unholed, unmounted on a stake, and not coughing. The ways to die out here are multitude.

She turns her head and gives him a sunshine smile that glitters in the infrared view. His real mask would be slowly gathering up all the colors in the room from the lazy photos bouncing around, and he could have a nearly perfect 'daytime' view if he wanted it. But not with this inferior equipment.

He'd like a good photo of Sundial to remember her by. Maybe a slice of video from the first part of the trip, when Jumbo's biggest worry was finding a hot meal and a soft bed.

Joyeuse coughs and sputters the drink, then tries to push it away.

"You need to drink this," Claren says. The urgency in his voice strikes Jumbo as odd. Jumbo glances at the floor, where Claren has dropped a small uncapped bottle. A gathering awareness creeps into his consciousness, turning into dread.

"I'd like a drink too," he hears himself saying.

Claren ignores him until Joyeuse has done her duty and drained about half the glass. He hands it to Jumbo.

Jumbo holds it to his lips and smells. Nothing. Of course there's nothing.

*Damnit!*

He carefully places it in Sundial's hand and wraps her fingers around it. She turns to face him, and he can see the question forming.

"Tell me what that smells like," he says.

Claren watches, and Jumbo can see the man's jaw tighten.

"Rosemary," Sundial says. "I'd know that anywhere."

And then the true awfulness of what has happened erupts into a volcano of righteous anger. Jumbo fairly bubbles with the need to express it, his nerves alit with fresh flame. But there's something more important than his sense of justice.

"Drink it all down, Sundial. Every drop. Drink it if you want your baby to live."

"Jumbo!" Claren starts toward him.

Jumbo considers for an instant turning the pistol on the Continuation clone, but he knows he wouldn't have a chance to use it. And in any case, he's done with weapons. He holds up his hands instead.

"You know it's the right thing to do," he says, and puts all the iron in the words that have accumulated from his fifty years of life experience. An old man talking wisdom to a young man full of false certainty. But Jumbo feels like a fraud too. He knows that his attempt at leadership went just as badly as Oriya's, and that Claren at least has training for this sort of thing.

*I told him to leave Joyeuse out there.*

The shame of that realization hits him suddenly, and he feels sick. The thought that Claren will tell her what happened makes him sicker.

Sundial holds the glass and looks back and forth between them, the optics on her mask appearing like dark holes in Jumbo's color-mapped mask view. He nods encouragement to her.

"Drink," he says out loud, so Claren won't suspect they're having a private conversation.

She drinks it all down, and Jumbo feels a glow of satisfaction, a small victory to eke out of this disaster. One that he can claim for himself.

“Thank you,” he says.

An hour later, Jumbo and Joyeuse are being pulled in a cart driven by Wired. Claren walks along side, trying to revive Joyeuse’s mask. Jumbo doesn’t know the details of the agreement that was struck with the villagers, but only a few come out to see them off. Probably to make sure they leave. The exception is Sundial, and Jumbo’s last view of her is of her indomitable smile, one hand raised to wave a white cloth, and the other on her belly.

They drive by the small camp where the group was quarantined, and Jumbo seeks out the place on the ground where Oriya came to him in the deep night. He wonders where she is now, and it makes his heart heavy for many reasons. What she’s done, the consequences, and what has happened to her. Maybe she’s dead or dying out in the forest. Or maybe she came back to the village but was murdered. That dark possibility only now occurs to Jumbo, and he thinks of the man with the gun whose brother and sister-in-law and now two nephews were all in the ground because of Oriya’s decisions. It makes Jumbo feel cold, even in the humid night air.

“We can’t leave the Speaker out here,” Jumbo messages to Claren.

“She could be anywhere. You need to worry about yourself if you want to live,” Claren replies. The man has grown in himself, Jumbo can tell. In two days’ time, he’s gone from a drone-like follower to a cocksure leader. Jumbo wearily concludes that the lessons of Machiavelli will be lost on this one too.

Instead of challenging Claren, Jumbo retrieves his records of the evening search, before the madness. He overlays a topographical map with the tracks of the searchers and puts a pin at Oriya’s last known location. He tries to remember the orientation during the blitzkrieg struggle with Frances and Crowder. Which way would Oriya have likely gone? His brain proceeds in fits and starts, and sometimes an elementary operation seems just out of reach, like a word on the tip of tongue. He has to find other ways to get around the blind alleys that seem to appear randomly in his mind.

Through persistence, Jumbo constructs the best picture he can of the area where Oriya might be, where she could have gone and still be missed by the search. The center of it

is not far from the road they will intersect, which will take them east to the city or west to the mountains.

When he shows it to Claren, it doesn't take an argument. They will go west half a mile and then do a quick search. Jumbo senses that it's actually a relief for Claren to be able to cap this episode with a final gesture. Jumbo's sure the clone thinks it's futile.

Joyeuse doesn't talk, but she seems alert now. Her face is marred and needs attention, but she doesn't complain. She smiles at him when she sees him looking, and Jumbo feels like a schoolboy with a crush. He knows the pain of excess is circling for a landing. He sighs and looks away, scanning the darkness for the abstraction of warmth.

When they arrive at the spot on the road closest to the search area Jumbo has identified, Claren goes alone into the woods. He streams low-resolution video back for them to watch, using Joyeuse's repaired mask as a point-to-point hub.

Jumbo wishes for his old brain and good mask, with the software to create fine-tuned filters, perhaps edge-detecting for the shape of a human in any position. Because he has a fear that Oriya won't show up on infrared very well. It's a morbid thought, but it gives him a useful idea. Claren can zoom out to wide angle and hold still for a half a minute or so. Then the mask can render the scene as if it were broad daylight, and check for the color of Oriya's skin. Even better would be the color of her clothes, if she had worn pink or orange. No luck there. Jumbo tries to remember what her boots look like.

He passes on the idea to Claren, who sends a simple acknowledgement.

Jumbo looks at the map again. The large creek that he and Oriya bathed in meanders down this way. One of its small tributaries was the water Jumbo crossed during his wild flanking attack. Something tells him that Oriya would have been drawn to the creek. He marks the most reasonable area—a stretch of about forty meters, and gives that to Claren too.

The waiting seems to go on and on. Claren is taking it seriously, moving on a grid that will take until dawn to complete.

Wired distributes an early breakfast of bread and cheese that Sundial must have thrown together for them. Jumbo eats with relish, and finds that even though he can't taste, it's very satisfying. He bites into a fiber and looks at it. It appears to be a sprig of rosemary. He smiles.

Wired also has brought a bottle of clear distilled alcohol, which Jumbo sucks on gratefully. He can tell that his wound is leaking, that moving was a terrible idea. He hopes the veterinarian's work will hold long enough to get him to the City.

"I found something," Claren says.

The signal goes blank.

"Why did he turn it off?" Jumbo asks? The anguish is hard for him to keep inside.

Joyeuse squeezes his hand. It can't be good news.

"Is what happened here Good?" Jumbo asks.

"No," Joyeuse says. It is her first word to him. "We failed here."

"And? What now? Go try another experiment somewhere else?"

"If you want a story, go talk to a Speaker. I just do what I'm told. When I feel like it."

Jumbo offers a hand, and she reaches over to squeeze it.

"I owe you my life," he tells her. And he almost cost Joyeuse her own life with his inept attempt at leadership, and then almost caused her to be abandoned. But he doesn't say that.

"We only get to be young," she says.

Jumbo has heard this before from the clones and he wonders what they mean. Do their bodies fall apart, like a GRAMPS victim? Or is their job just so hazardous they have little expectation of long life. He changes the subject.

"Let me take a look at your head," he says. She bends over and he does, using some of the alcohol to cleanse her wound.

The dawn lifts orange above the trees without further communication from Claren. His mask broadcasts his location, but everything else is met with a busy message. Whatever he's doing requires a lot of moving back and forth. Jumbo's exhaustion finally catches up with him, and he and Joyeuse fall asleep side by side.

He dreams of being young and in love for the first time. She has such a pretty face.

Wired nudges the two of them awake. The sky is bright now, and Jumbo sees Claren working about twenty meters off the road, where he has piled dead tree limbs into a mound as tall as he is. A limp form lies on top.

Jumbo's heart sinks.

"Who is it?" He asks.

Wired shakes his head, and Jumbo knows the answer before the words come.

"The Speaker. He found her down by the creek, just like you said."

The realization that Oriya is dead is an impenetrable mystery. Jumbo feels like he has stumbled off the side of the Earth.

The fire takes a while to blossom because of the dampness. Smoke precedes it, a billowing white shroud for the dead. Jumbo doesn't try to hold back the feeling of loss, he's reached the very end of his endurance. He chokes sobs into the back of Joyeuse's hand. After a while it all gets mixed up, what he's purging. His own loss is certainly on the list with Shanghai and Oriya and Gerdie, the villagers who lived in the House of the Dead, the families torn apart by MOM politics in the city, or those damned tomatoes. He finally realizes that he's mourning for the woman next to him as much as anything. She is Nova before Nova became Nova. He doesn't know what form a salvation might take, but it's something he wishes for very much.

Claren is filthy and obviously exhausted when trudges back to the wagon.

"I'm going to say the words," he says, "then we will go. I didn't want to wait until dusk."

And so without much ceremony, Oriya is ushered officially from the grace of the living into the book of remembrance.

"Sun and soul mother, giver of life: we are diminished. Our light of curiosity grows dim, the eyes that see you, the face that turns to you for warmth are fewer. The mind that knows itself, knows less at the end of this day."

With the simple mumbo-jumbo complete, and Jumbo struggling mightily to control

himself, the thing is done. Joyeuse insists that Claren ride instead of her, and he doesn't put up a fight. She gives him a kiss too, that is more than brotherly.

The last thing Claren does before sleeping is to hand Jumbo a handful of small green stones. They are muddy, but he recognizes them from Oriya's necklace. Perhaps a third of them are there. Jumbo turns them in the hands that once held the woman.

*Pretty face. Good Cook.* With those words, he signed over her fate to a lonely end on a muddy creek bank. Jumbo tries to imagine what might have killed her. Was it something Crowder and Frances did to her? Was it one of the bullets that Jumbo pointed her way? Or was it something else? He wants to ask Claren, but he's sure he's not going to get an answer when the clone wakes.

Wired drives them without interfering with anyone's thoughts. The day goes quietly into the night as they roll along the unkept road. The stars seem indifferent, but if they talk between themselves, it is at least discrete.

Jumbo wakes in the dark and eventually realizes that he's looking at Claren's bare face. His sensibilities have widened on this adventure, but he's touched by the implied familiarity. It gets him thinking about Oriya's mask and what happened to it. He reminds himself to ask about it in the morning. Then he thinks of Joyeuse. He sees her still walking erect beside the cart. Smaller than Shanghai, perhaps, but with such a stamina. Built to last. For a while.

"I can walk for a while," he sends her.

"Sure. Hop out and I'll trade," comes the response. It's her real voice, and she shows the strain, but he can tell she appreciates the joke.

He leaves his light on, maintaining the connection, but they travel for a while longer without speaking.

"Did you know her well?" he asks, breaking the silence.

"No."

The simple response tells Jumbo much about how she feels. It's a dismissal.

"I travelled with her," he says.

“You wanted to get in her pants,” Joyeuse says. He can hear the grin.

“Mm...yeah. Guess so.” The trivialization feels like an absolution.

“You should have.”

The judgment feels like a gavel rapping on Jumbo’s head.

*I should have what?*

He realizes that Joyeuse really doesn’t think things over because she’s probably not designed to. She’s made for short term goals. He wonders if his own horizon merits much superiority.

“I try to avoid pain,” he says.

“You’re not very good at that.”

He realizes that she’s right. Within the cocoon of the City walls, he amused himself with the illusion that pain was someone else’s business. For a while.

“You remedied quite a bit of deficit,” he says.

She laughs a tired laugh.

“I’d vork a demon from Dawkins’ last bastion to ride on the cart right now.”

“Done,” Jumbo says. “Climb aboard.” He’s joking, but that’s what she does. Their motion slows perceptibly as she comes over the side. Wired looks back to see what happened, but the man is on the verge of falling asleep on his seat.

Joyeuse flips her mask up and off her head, and spends the familiar moment rubbing her eyes. Jumbo watches, taking in the odd shape of her ear, and the sharp line of her jaw. She turns her attention on him then, and snakes an arm down to wrestle his mask free too.

“Sure you’re up for it?” she asks.

“Yes,” he lies, his heart already hammering.

She makes a noise deep in her throat.

It requires some imagination, but she mounts him with one foot planted on the edge of the cart, and the other on the floor. When she lowers herself onto him, the exquisite delight makes him gasp, but it immediately turns into a barely held back cry of pain when her weight settles against his wound. She moves her hips in a lazy circle, and it feels to Jumbo as if someone's ripping him in half. Finally he can't stand it anymore, and grabs her arms to stop her moving.

"Is it bad?" she asks, as if just catching on.

Jumbo nods with a grimace holding the pain at bay. He can't believe his own stupidity.

"Sorry," he manages to get out.

She shifts her body weight, and with one more tearing pain, is off of him.

"Sorry," Jumbo says, panting. He feels like an idiot.

"My fault. I'm selfish."

Jumbo lays like that for a while, delighting in the sudden absence of excruciating pain, the deep ache having receded to sulk in the deep bone for the moment. The sweet relief is even better than sex, he realizes, and grins at the irony. It's something Nova would undoubtedly appreciate.

He slowly becomes aware that Joyeuse has found a new partner in Claren. He looks, feeling like a voyeur, as Joyeuse begins to bounce up and down on the clone, her lips pulled back in an animal grimace. Jumbo can't tell if Claren is actually awake, or this is just some delicious dream to him. A rich cocktail of emotions flow through Jumbo's thoughts, including a stinging jealousy. That particular feeling is one of the most hated, most painful and debilitating in a long list of experiences to be avoided in his philosophy of life. He targets the feeling inside his lizard-old wetware and treats it with contempt. He tells himself that's the reason he's watching, to burn the useless emotional appendix out of his psyche. But there's something beautiful too, in the feline movements of Joyeuse orchestrating her desires. Her head is back, mouth open now, and the sounds from her throat come from somewhere very deep. The sensible part of Jumbo's mind is horrified that he attempted to subject his own mangled body to this punishment.

Joyeuse begins to cough out a high-pitched laugh, and her head rolls back even further. She shudders intermittently for several minutes, and slows to the lazy circle of hip rotations that nearly killed Jumbo. By now the jealousy has packed up its resentments and retired to some low-rent district in Jumbo's amygdala. He rubs his eyes, and when he opens them, Joyeuse is looking at him. Her lids are half closed, and her jaw slack, but there's a flicker of a smile that he can't help but return. It's the warmth of shared secrets, and a trust that can only be bought with sacrifice. Joyeuse settles beside him, careful not to bump his leg, and lays her head on his chest. He finds himself breathing through her hair. Despite the deprivations and discomfort, the pain and fear and loss, he feels a deep sense of peace. He knows it is ephemeral, and that makes the moment precious. He strokes Joyeuse's hair back. Her head rises and falls with his breath, and her own breathing lengthens into slumber. And as Jumbo falls into deep sleep himself, a solitary regret finds purchase at the edge of his dream.

*I wish I were young.*

## **Chapter Twenty-Seven**

Morning brings the day of parting ways, and Jumbo has mixed feelings. The idea of sleeping comfortably in his own bed and having a premium cup of coffee, eggs properly cooked, all in the safety of the City, is intoxicating. Of course a trip to the hospital is the more immediate future, and it grows more evident that the wound in his leg is infected. Even though the cart is cushioned from the biggest bumps by a suspension system, the movement is increasingly uncomfortable. What's going on inside his gray matter is as mysterious as always, but the fact that he can think is a good sign, he figures.

He is alone in riding in the cart, while Joyeuse and Claren walk on opposite sides, striding along as if they were just back from a vacation.

Joyeuse is taking good care of him. Her own head injury needs attention too, but Jumbo is certain that cannot happen in the city. Whatever purpose she was designed for is too secret to be subject to the pokes and prods of civilian doctors. Especially ones who might cry Quasi and call in the MOM troopers.

There is no awkwardness from the activities of the previous night except that Wired seems even quieter than usual. Maybe he's thinking about Sundial and the chance of epidemic in the village.

There's a subject Jumbo wants to broach with Joyeuse, but he keeps putting it off. He's

not sure how she'll react. But with only a couple of hours left, he finally works up the nerve.

"Did Claren tell you how Oriya died?" He sends by text. He doesn't trust his voice, not even the VOX.

"I didn't ask."

Jumbo marvels at the way her mind operates. It's as if the past is irrelevant to the present. He suddenly realizes that she will probably forget him very quickly too, and that makes him feel terribly alone. He pushes aside the coldness of the borrowed misery and plows on with his intentions.

"I want to know. It's important to me."

"Ask him."

"He might lie. I know there's nothing you can't do on a network. Can you look at his video?"

There's no reply for a long time, and Jumbo wishes they didn't have these masks between them, parsing reality into pixels and creating synthetic walls. Just when he can't stand it anymore, she talks to him with her throat mike, so no one else can hear.

"I'm done," she says.

Jumbo realizes that she was actually reviewing the video. Just like that.

"What did you find?"

Joyeuse reaches over and squeezes his hand.

"Something got to her. Dogs or something. It's not pretty."

Jumbo cringes inside at the image. A small cowardly part of him is relieved that there cannot be a clearly identified cause. Because maybe it was one of those damned bullets. But he immediately feels ashamed.

"I'm sorry, Jacob. This must be hard for you. Was she there when you went to rescue her?"

Jumbo thinks back to the scene. The last time he saw her alive, Oriya looked beaten up, and she didn't speak to him. Maybe she was already dying. He tries to remember what her last words to him were, and can't. It's ironic that the literal hole through his head doesn't seem to affect him as much as figurative one. The goneness is complete, a total Absence. He sighs.

"Are you sure it's her?"

"Her necklace was there. And it looked like her clothes. But Claren got some DNA, so we'll know for certain. Who else could it be?"

"I'm ashamed to say this, but I was hoping it was Janus." She was probably infected from picking up that gun, he figures. He explains to Joyeuse who Janis is and how she reappeared.

"I will try to get the DNA results to you if they let me. Since Claren broke the order too, I may not be going off to the gulag after all."

Jumbo is happy about that, but still distracted. He tried to rescue Oriya, but she probably didn't need recuing, and in the end he may have caused her death. Just like he was the cause of Joyeuse being put in mortal danger. *It may cost something.*

"I wish things were different," he says.

"That's what we're trying to do, Jacob. Make things better."

Jumbo sees the opportunity to change the conversation. It's at least a different kind of shame to be a spy for MOM.

"Do you really believe all the Continuation mumbo-jumbo?" he asks. There's an edge to it that his VOX picks up and amplifies. The sense of endings makes him just want to get it over with. Joyeuse will forget him in a day anyway.

But she grins at him. It's a wicked smile of shared conspiracy and *vork-it-all* attitude.

"I know which parts to believe, and which to pretend to believe. Ever hear of Pierre Bayle?"

"No."

“He’s sort of the patron saint of...my type. He wrote about a Chinese religious sect that was similar to Christianity. Except that the leader died quietly in his bed. He gathered all his disciples together for a last message. Guess what he told them.”

“Some kind of mumbo-jumbo,” he guesses.

“Here it is.” She sends him a text from a Dictionary entry on Spinoza with a portion highlighted:

At the age of seventy-nine, finding himself near death, he told his disciples that for the forty years he had preached to the world, he had not told the truth to them; that he had concealed it under a veil of metaphors and figures of speech; but that it was time to tell it to them. ‘It is,’ he said, ‘that there is nothing to seek, nor anything to put one’s hopes on, except the nothingness and the vacuum that is the principle of all things.’

The bleakness of it accentuates the aching loss he feels for Oriya. He wants to laugh at the ultimate antidote to mumbo-jumbo in the quote, but his chest feels as empty as the nihilistic message.

*Is this all there is?*

“People need the comfort of words,” Joyeuse says in a soft voice. “I know that to be true. Inside, we can believe what we want.”

“Say some words to me,” he says. “Tell me there’s a meaning for all this.”

“There are many words of comfort, Jacob. They come from all over, and we are taught to use them all. But I have a favorite one I can share, if you like. It’s very personal.”

“Please. I would like that.”

She hesitates for a moment. When she speaks, it’s in the voice of a child reciting a poem.

My arms are so strong, wrapped around,  
They cause me to burn yellow-hot,  
Warming worlds to light and life,  
Selfish will overcome by its own power.

Joyeuse smiles, perhaps embarrassed. She clears her throat.

"It's called 'I am the Sun,'" she says.

"It's nice," Jumbo says. "Can you explain what it means to you?"

"It's hard to talk about."

"I'm sorry..."

"No. I want to tell you," she says. She licks her lips before continuing. "It's one of the verses they taught us in school. A special school for children like me. And...and the idea of being so strong that I could squeeze myself and burst into flames... I guess the sun's gravity is like that. You know?"

"You are strong," Jumbo says. He's thinking of the iron will inside Nova too, and how frightening that is.

"I grew into the strength, I guess. But it's not enough to be strong. The sun has a special sort of goodness. Even if it's secretly selfish inside, the strength is bigger than its own will. If it weren't, there would be no life."

"It's so strong that it saves itself from itself," Jumbo says. He thinks back to Shanghai's last words, mouthed into the camera before she broke the window and jumped.

*Save yourself.*

His skin prickles with the realization that he knows what it means now.

*Save yourself from yourself.*

And the recipient of that message was Nova, who is now a maniacal Speaker with a drug addiction. He wonders what form her salvation might take.

"What sort of...person are you?" Jumbo asks. He doesn't want to say 'clone' or 'Quasi' to her face.

"I'm a special and expensive sort of person."

“And that’s all you can tell me.” It’s a question.

“If I tell you more, and you tell someone else, it could be thought treasonous. That’s really the only unforgivable act we have. They treat that very harshly. Very.”

Another piece of the puzzle falls into place for Jumbo. He wants to ask about Naomi, but he suspects she doesn’t know.

“You can trust me,” he says. He’s not sure why he says it, though. It’s manifestly not true.

“I know,” she says.

The confidence astounds Jumbo, and finds another reason to be ashamed, which irritates him. He wants to contradict her, but realizes how ridiculous it would be. He takes a deep breath, which radiates pain back up from his leg.

“How could you know that?”

She tosses her head back and barks a laugh. It reminds Jumbo of her long moments of abandonment the previous night, and it sends electricity up his spine.

*That’s really why I’m so pissy. I don’t want to lose her too. How pathetic is that?*

“I can’t tell you without telling you,” she says.

Jumbo shakes his head.

“So I’ll tell you,” she says. Then her tone becomes serious. “But if you run off and describe this to the people you work for, they’ll hunt me down. Or others on my side will find out and hunt me down. Do you want that responsibility?”

Jumbo thinks about all the bad decisions he’s made lately. About all the bad decisions he saw others make. This seems like another one in the making.

“No,” he says. “I don’t want to know that badly.”

She tilts her head and her *vork-you* grin flashes teeth at him.

"I'm engineered with genetics and implants in my brain," Joyeuse says, "One of the things I can do is sense deep into the spectrum. You can just see three colors of light in different blends. I can see, hear, and taste light, magnetism, radio waves... My mask shields me from it, and I have a little net I can wear at night if I want, under a comfort mask. But I like to be in it when I can."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you said no, and because of what you did for Oriya. And because I know your aura."

"My aura?" Jumbo smells more mumbo-jumbo.

"There are all kinds of magnetic fields that come off a body. The heart and brain are most interesting. Yours is the most beautiful I've ever experienced. Afterwards, I mean."

Jumbo suddenly realizes what she's talking about.

"After I got shot?"

"Yes."

Jumbo marvels at it.

"You can *taste* radiation?"

She nods, and leans close to the edge of the cart where Jumbo's head lies.

"You're delicious," she whispers. "I better stop thinking about it."

Jumbo feels an unaccountable loss. Not only can he not smell even normally now, he's never experienced the wonder she's describing, and never will. But then the churlishness fades, and his admiration for the woman walking along next to him soars in his imagination. Even more than Shanghai was, she's a work of human art.

"Joyeuse, you said you don't get to become old. Can you tell me why?"

"They made a lot of compromises. We can't have children either. But there are some things I really shouldn't talk about. Even to you."

“It angers me that they seem to think of you as a tool to be used.”

“I wouldn’t be here, otherwise. Would I?”

The life and energy that Joyeuse exudes humbles Jumbo. He begins to feel like he’s been walking in a fog the last few years. A mist of attempted contentment, but missing the directional signs all the while, and going in circles.

“I think I’ve gotten too good at avoiding pain,” he says, talking to himself.

Joyeuse hears it and loses another laugh that sounds like exalted passion. She covers her mouth with her hand to try to stop it.

Jumbo has to admit that she has a point. His catalog of personal injuries is so long he’s forgetting things like having the odd lung punctured.

Joyeuse puts a hand against his cheek. Her palm fairly glows with warmth.

“I am the sun,” she says.

Their parting, about an hour later is very hard for Jumbo. He desperately wants some assurance that he will not simply go into the dustbin of Joyeuse’s memory. Their last words already reveal the formality of distance that is borrowed from the future. They are throw-away words, promises not meant, distractions running beneath them. From Claren he gets a nod and official-sounding thanks “from the Continuation” for services. Joyeuse lingers a moment, holding his hand and fussing over his wounds, but there’s a rushed character to it, and they both know it’s the end of an episode, that they’re not likely to ever meet again. The coldness of becoming anonymous after such immersion in life’s rich intimacies compounds the loss of Oriya, and the feeling nearly overcomes Jumbo. He thinks of Joyeuse’s poem and wraps his arms tightly around his chest. In this way, he manages to bottle the feelings to stay in control. If Joyeuse notices, she pretends not to. Long after the two Quasis have walked out of range of point-to-point, Jumbo’s hope lingers, waiting for a last message. He squeezes himself fiercely, hoping to save himself.

## **Chapter Twenty-Eight**

Without his MOM connections, Jumbo would have never been admitted back inside the gates. The word of a mySARS infection has shut everything down, and long lines of

frustrated people and spoiling foodstuff occupy the road to the West Gate. But between Wired's persistence, probably driven by his need to get back to his wife, and Jumbo's credentials, the miracle of admittance occurs. Wired is turned back, but Jumbo finds a whole hazardous materials team waiting for him, looking like lunar explorers. There is no hiding his recent mySARS infection, since breaking that law is not something even MOM would be interested in defending. As it turns out, they're eager to get their needles into a survivor to find the nature of the strain.

They do surgery on him while he's still quarantined. The last words he remembers before the powerful narcotics hit come from an irritated-sounding nurse.

"Please put your hands at your sides, Lastfour. I don't want to have to use restraints."

But he holds the lock around his chest, the source of his strength, until the pinprick injection loosens the bonds of gravity, and his cares finally slip away. His mind evaporates like an old, old sun, ruddy from exertion and too tired to hang on any longer.

Two days later they kick him out of the hospital to make preparations for an anticipated Wave of infection. Jumbo is rolled out in a rented wheelchair while the wide hallways are being lined with temporary gurneys, because once a Wave breaks it's too late to get ready. But this time the epidemic will fizzle, and within two weeks no one will think much about it or why it burned out so quickly.

The doctors have done what they can for Jumbo's leg, cleaning and sewing together what was ripped apart. His head is more of a mystery. No one seems to quite believe that a bullet passed through his skull. There is an entrance and exit scar that shows up as starred points on his forehead and high on the back of his head. But there are no bone fragments inside and only a clean trace of damaged tissue in a straight line. It's nothing like the massive trauma the surgeons expect from gunshots.

The damage is mostly to the nerve bundles that connect the two hemispheres, and Jumbo is warned to expect weird left-right asymmetries as long-term a consequence. Other effects due to the hemorrhaging that occurred right after the wound are less predictable, but include a long list of terrifying possibilities. The consensus is that since he's survived this far, his chances are pretty good. Everyone agrees that mucking around more on the inside of his skull is ill-advised.

The vast relief at having a future again temporarily makes up for other losses. When Jumbo wheels himself into his apartment for the first time, it seems like he's intruding on

the life of a normal person, a version of himself that doesn't go wandering outside the gates to get shot and impaled.

He knows that if he could smell the place, it would bring the sense of being home to him in a heady rush. There would be the slight musty smell of the unused sink, the dryness of the dust, and who knows what chemical out-gassing from the synthetics in the room.

There's a bit of green peaking through the drapes at the balcony, and he pushes himself over to investigate. He throws them back to reveal large tomato plants in pots he doesn't recognize. Gar must have replaced the ones Jumbo pitched over the side. Maybe Gar thought they all jumped to their deaths to get away from the green worms that tormented them. Jumbo's heart warms at the gesture from his friend. Hauling all that up here was no small feat. He puts in an order for two fine bottles of rum to be delivered.

Then Jumbo thinks about food. Real food. The privations he's suffered need a remedy. So he sends out for a rich pasta dish with garlic bread and beer. He makes them add a note about extra shaved mozzarella on top. He can hear the sigh on the other end of the string of text messages that specify his custom order. They know him well. Maybe they hoped he'd disappeared.

When it comes, the first bite makes him heartsick. Jumbo can feel the texture and get a sense of saltiness, but the fine pleasure of smell and taste that was once his has turned into a sad substitution. He chews and swallows, trying in vain to immerse himself in the mindful sensation of being completely alive.

But as he continues to eat, he finds that he can hardly keep himself from shoving the food into his mouth. Clearly some part of his brain is enjoying the sensations, even if it's not the gizmos that let him think in language. It's an odd sensation, like he's feeding a voracious toddler who gobbles it all up with gusto.

The beer is a more direct pleasure, going to work on his frayed nerves. He's not supposed to drink it together with all the drugs in his system, but he doesn't care.

*Carpe vorcam diem. Seize the vorking day.*

The alcohol makes him mellow, and he thinks about sitting at this table with Gar, telling secrets that stayed secrets afterwards. He imagines the man opposite from him now, fingers black with the earth, eyes impenetrable mysteries. Gar would want to know if the

ghost caught up with him, and he'd struggle to find words that could convey the complexity of it.

*The ghost has a face now.*

Maybe Gar would understand that, and do that turtle-like head bob of his that shows complete knowledge even when words don't work.

But the ghost is still out there, and Jumbo expects her to come calling. Nova will want an answer from him. But he has some words for her too.

Once the newness has faded, being in his apartment reminds him of things that have been pushed out of mind. The sheer volume of maintenance tasks that have accumulated is daunting, and reminds Jumbo that he's part of a machine that demands its fair share of IO, or else comes a punishment. So he makes sure the bills are up to date, and that his correspondence has a look.

There are several requests from Meg, asking for an update, with attached project descriptions. It makes Jumbo's head hurt to think about it, so he leaves the mail closed.

Jumbo sleeps in his own bed and feels like a king. As he tries to sleep, three women begin their incantations in his imagination. Nova, intense and terrifying, who put her drugs and then her fists into him. Joyeuse, who is a younger, wilder version of Nova. The thought of never seeing her again leaves a hole that irritates him enough to check his mail again using voice commands. Nothing.

And Oriya, the most complex of them all. The witch who knew too much magic, and in the end conjured her own destruction. Perhaps. The doubt gnaws at Jumbo's mind. Why hasn't anyone told him the results of the DNA test? The green stones from her necklace are somewhere in his filthy pack, which he just put in plastic bag for later disposal. He suddenly wonders if there's anything on them that might shed light on the mystery. Oriya was in his apartment, so undoubtedly there's some of her DNA here too. But he's not quite sure what it would prove. He already knows that she had the stones.

He tries to stop thinking about it, but the obsession circles just out of conscious thought, sneaking up on him until he finds some new theory being played out in his mind. Janus was in the same area, and she certainly had a grudge against Oriya. And she had a pistol, even if it was unloaded. Oriya wouldn't know that, or couldn't be sure. Maybe Janus robbed her.

Then whose body was it? It would have to be Janus. Or perhaps some traveler who was attacked.

Jumbo finds that even in these executive screenings of one theory or another, he can't concentrate, and becomes lost in a bewildering trail of one set of facts mixed with another until he can't keep the story straight that he's telling himself.

The coldest fact is that she hasn't gotten any word to him that she's alive. There has been plenty of time for that by now.

That thought launches him back into reasons why she died, and the one that makes his skin crawl is the idea that Jumbo himself got her killed with his wild attack. He can hardly believe now that it was him that did it. Jumbo, the same guy who peed down his leg at the thought of Nova not that long ago.

It makes him sweat. He uses voice commands to comb through his accumulated mail, even the junk mail, scanning for Oriya's name or anything else that could possibly indicate a message from her. He finds nothing of interest, but now he's wide awake.

*Double, double, toil and trouble.*

To distract himself, he lets his mind drift downhill to the astonishing range of physical contact he's had with the three women. He imagines himself as a modern Macbeth in a *ménage à quatre* with these witches. But the erotic fantasy is cartoonish, and he begins to wonder about the serious question instead.

*Am I so drenched in blood that it would be tedious to go back?*

By and by, Jumbo realizes that he has to reach resolution. Tomorrow. He will have the most important meal of his life. He doesn't know what the result will be, but the thought of finally getting it over with allows him to sleep.

## **Chapter Twenty-Nine**

In the morning, the decision is clear to him. He will make a quick report to MOM and then arrange for the capture of Nova. It's the safest thing. There is a considerable amount of guilt involved with this choice, but he figures it will just get packed away with all the other badness that is the cost of living a reasonable life. He tells himself that he will say nothing that might endanger Joyeuse, and that will have to be enough.

He powers on the mask to send the message right away, before the choice before him begins to cloud up again. Then he pauses, wondering if he should not first catch up on what MOM has been up to in his absence. He checks the organizational logs for recent events.

It's clear that the new filters that ostensibly are looking for "dangerous" Quasis are aimed more deliberately at those who can afford cosmetic or other minor genetic upgrades. These are technically illegal, but never enforced. Almost never.

The recent lists look like lawyers and accountants with ties to the Bhakras Power Company. This borders on open war if it's acted on in the way Jumbo suspects it will be. The families or even friends of Bhakras employees will be held hostage or worse. In retrospect, Jumbo can see that Meg was steering him to this end. His skin prickles.

Jumbo recognizes one of the names, culled from his own filters: Ravindra Darmadhikari. The traditional Indian name was unusual in not being disguised by a "number name" like, well, Jumbo. He had gotten the syllables stuck in his head, repeating it over and over. Ra-vin-dra-dar-mad-ik-ar-i-ra-vin-dra-dar-mad-ik-ar-i-ra-vin-dra-dar-mad-ik-ar-i.

That the cadence easily finds its way back into his perforated skull delights Jumbo, but the context he reads immediately darkens the moment of joy. His heart rate increases as he starts the video.

It's a MOM raid on the lawyer, named Ravindra Darmadhikari, at the man's home. Jumbo can imagine how it happened. The family was home, probably having dinner. Man, wife, two kids, just like a storybook. They would get a call from a friend telling them there's a MOM wagon coming into the neighborhood. Their stress level would spike, but then they'd shrug and tell themselves they hadn't done anything wrong. Pass the naan.

But it did go wrong, and the next call would be practically a scream--they are walking up to your front door! And then denial, panic, anger, fear, all blended into a blur. Crying kids, parents trying to remember how to be adults when the crocodile is right there scaring the bitshit out of them.

And then a blur of large men with shields and military masks, the dark uniforms of MOM, batons and stunners, loud imperative voices. The sickening realization that this is not a dream. It's not going away, but they want so badly--to do anything--to make it go away and just go back to being a normal family passing the normal naan.

Except it can't. It won't ever go back.

Jumbo watches the video, and acid gnaws at his gullet from the vicarious horror of it. And they will know too, that it's not just that Daddy was taken away for some reason no one can understand. It's that their friends and neighbors are gone in this moment. There won't be any more friendly calls, no hellos on the street, no children coming around to play.

They must have done *something*.

That's what everyone will say. Why would you be taken by MOM unless you'd done *something*?

The official reason will be illegal genetics, and MOM will mark their house and their IDs as suspect. The children will be vulnerable from this point on. There will be jokes about them having three nipples or a tail. Can you see in the dark? Hey, kid, let's see you breathe underwater.

Daddy will go away to some dark destiny, just as if he'd vanished off the planet. Worse than death because hope doesn't require the sight or sound of a loved one to carry on its dreams. Hope needs proof, and there never will be any, only decaying memories, love ripening into sharp nostalgia, growing older and colder until it fossilizes.

A glance at the man's resume tells Jumbo the real story. The target is a lawyer for Bhakras Power. Not even an important one, but a young man showing talent and early success, fast-tracked perhaps. Now he's nothing more than a symbol, a game piece taken off the board as a message to the other side.

Jumbo can't turn away from the awful spectacle of the video.

The sounds of meaty thuds, screams that sound just like human pain, the scramble to find masks to hide faces from the monsters at the door. Kids peeking through fingers that cover their eyes. Then shuttered tears, sniffles. Be strong for Daddy, but the woman's voice breaks from her own weakness.

It's so wrong it makes Jumbo's teeth hurt. What happened to Shanghai was bad, but at least she would have known what she was getting into. This lawyer, on the other hand, wouldn't have seen it coming. For his family, a living nightmare.

It can only mean one thing: MOM is going to war with Bhakras Power. When the idea forms, Jumbo sees the indicators that have been pointing that way for a while. Issues with the interruption of power to the building and the many other installations around the City that MOM relies on. These include the infrastructure that allows seamless communication with the servers across town that run their artificial intelligence PDAs like Meg.

And Meg would have wanted him to be there. To take part in this blood offering, to be stamped on the public record as not only approving, but participating. Because at its heart MOM is a primitive tribe that demands total loyalty. Loyalty is about to become an even bigger deal now.

North of the City, at the end of the lake where the nuclear plant sits, is not a stronghold for Continuation sentiments, so that explains why Meg hasn't been concerned about that religion. It's a relief, because it means they probably don't know what's been going on with Jumbo. Maybe Meg will just put it all down to human irrationality, underscored by Jumbo's rant.

Jumbo's heart sinks. He woke up sure of what to do. Now, it's murky again. He doesn't send a report. He doesn't let anyone know that Nova's probably still in the City and that he plans to meet with her. He suspects that no one at MOM would care now anyway. Oh, they would happily take her in and see what acids she's made of, but it wouldn't be a triumph for Jumbo exactly. He knows what it would feel like: mercantile betrayal.

He puts the decision off a little longer.

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Jumbo sits in a regular chair on the terrace where he can look up at the DaiHai building. He asked for help in rolling his chair away so that he doesn't look like an invalid. He wants to be in a good negotiating position when he meets with Nova.

He can't be certain she'll come.

Jumbo orders absently, picking something easily eaten. Even if he could taste properly, he's too nervous to enjoy food.

But no one comes, and no message arrives. He's irritated and tired of sitting up by the time the meal is over. Further spoiling his mood is a demand from Meg for a report on his expedition. She wants to know everything about the mySARS outbreak and what he

learned about the Continuation. No word of condolences, of course. No “welcome, back Jumbo! Gosh we were worried! We’re so glad you pulled through.” If the City is a machine, then the MOM organization is its gearbox, and Jumbo is just a spare flywheel that stands by for special purposes. Meg is probably trying to find a replacement for him already.

The thought doesn’t terrify Jumbo the way it has before, the idea that the umbilical cord could be severed, that he could lose his ticket to the good life. What he finds itching around in his consciousness is something like ambition. Ambition can only bring pain and disappointment, no matter what rosy predictions the witches make. It’s the same reason one is not wise to fall in love, he figures. Even if you get what you want, it’s not what you will want after you get what you want.

It’s all a trick played by evolution, tugging a man from one impulse to the next until he’s worn hollow from the exertion, and the sum of his life is to have created his own replacements, who will go off and do the same thing.

No, it’s better to be an Epicurean, to enjoy simple pleasures in moderation. A few good friends, some food, drink, the pleasure of intellectual thought. The heavy emotions are best left to rot in the cellar. If one truly needs them, the winter is long indeed.

But there is a chill in his bones that the warmth of the meal did not reach. The fare in the metaphorical cellar is not appetizing in the least, but Jumbo senses that he’s been skating, leaving a line that marks least resistance, and at the end when the blessed darkness comes to comfort him, that his ultimate conviction will be one of regret. This troubles him now, in all violation of his philosophy.

The City walls are closing back around him, and the distance to Oriya and Joyeuse and Sundial and Sister Ivy and Claren and Sanchez and Wired seems like the measure of light-years, as if he had been circling another sun. But the ambition remains a-kindling.

No word from any of them. Only Gar gave a bitshit. Jumbo wonders if he could make a living as a gardener. Surely there is simple joy in watching plants respond to ones care. Of course, the parasites and thieves come to the harvest too.

He sighs away his cares and asks for the chair. It’s over.

As he wheels himself to the bus stop, seeing the world from a diminished perspective, Jumbo receives a point-to-point request for contact. It looks like all the other advertisements spamming him except for its simplicity. It is a solid green rectangle with

no words or music or links. He ignores it, but when it comes a second time, he hesitates. His chair rolls to a stop against a crooked flagstone in front of that tall building. He finds himself counting the floors up to the window he has looked out of, and imagines seeing himself there.

*Save yourself from yourself.*

"What do you want?" he sends the originator of the green.

"Your cheese order is ready," is the reply. It gives the address for an importer that Jumbo uses occasionally. It's very expensive, and he's sure he hasn't asked for anything lately. His chest tightens with stress. This must be the meeting. Maybe Nova wants to stuff him with rich food and then pop the question.

Jumbo's fingers tingle as he rolls toward *Bon Fromage!*, and it has nothing to do with his hands pushing the wheels over. It's the bifurcation of two different lives that will diverge before the day's end. It's a looseness of spirit, a carnival where the usual rules no longer apply. He reads the RFID tags on three lastlegs children and sends them enough credit to eat on for a week.

A small round man with a twitchy mustache under his mask meets Jumbo at the door, and takes charge. The greeting is exaggerated and strained. Jumbo is wheeled through the shop, through the room beyond, stacked high with delicious distractions, and into a warehouse space. The only illumination comes from slivers that sneak through the roof and brighten dusts motes to become angled needles of glittering sunlight.

"I have to ask for your mask," the man says. His voice shakes like the two of them are honeymooners.

Jumbo expects this, and pops the seal. He's wearing his civilian mask, part of his advertisement that this isn't an official MOM thing, and also because there is the certainty that the work mask is owned by Meg at the root level.

He hands off the mask, and it disappears behind him. He sees two unoccupied chairs in the middle of the space, and rolls toward them. His eyes adjust to the gloom, and he can make out a figure standing beyond chairs.

"Have a seat," Nova calls out.

Jumbo does the same painful shuffle he did at the restaurant to move to the immobile

chair, and Nova takes the wheeled one off somewhere behind him. He becomes aware of a babble of voice-like sounds that increase in volume until it sounds like he's in the middle of a party. It's a noise maker designed to hide conversation from snooping microphones.

The knowledge that Nova is here ignites a glow inside him, as if he were on a romantic visit. He knows it's unreasonable, a trick she's played on him, but the knowledge doesn't detract from the fact.

She sits in the other chair to face him, also maskless. A Ray of sun lines her jaw and shoulder, throwing the hard angles of her face into high contrast. She smiles.

"I'm glad to see you in one piece," Nova says.

"Quack, quack," he says.

Her smile twists into a leer for a second.

"That's not an excuse this time, Jacob. You're here because you want to be. Tell me why you are. Here."

This is not what Jumbo expected. He's supposed to make a pitch to her?

"Why did you send me out there?"

"I invited you. To see the struggle that will determine the future."

Jumbo tries to calm his jangled nerves. Nova seems to be all business, as if this were just one transaction to be done in a day full of them.

"Would you like to know what happened to me?"

"I already know most of it. I have reports from my people."

Jumbo's heart jumps. "Have you heard from Oriya?"

"Jacob, we are here today for one reason. Let me spell out your options. You can leave here and keep doing what you're doing. You can even give a full report to MOM, including this meeting. That's my risk. You'll then be on the other side, but we will not specifically target you. Understand?"

"Like you didn't target Naomi?" he snaps. It's a topic that has to come out.

Her face doesn't change.

"The second option is that you can join us. In that case we will ask you do things that will advance our cause. This will be at considerable risk to you. You can opt out anytime you want with no consequence, but there is one condition. You are not allowed to betray the Continuation while in its good graces or for a period afterwards. This is only reasonable."

"Is that what Naomi did?" Jumbo remembers the rich intelligence he saw in the MOM records. Inside information.

"Events are moving quickly, Jacob. I need your decision."

Jumbo is completely off balance now. Nova is clinical, almost cold. It rubs his chemical need for her raw with unreasonable longing. He tries to think of Joyeuse instead. It's marginally safer.

"I need to hear you tell me why you risked an epidemic to murder one of your own. That was a military pathogen, wasn't it? Do you know it almost killed me? Oriya slipped me anti-virals as protection, and it still almost killed me."

"Jacob, the world is a messy dangerous place. We are trying to fix it. You don't seem to have figured out which side you're on yet. We're wasting our time here. I confess disappointment."

She stands.

Jumbo feels as if time has slowed, that the moment of decision is here, splitting him. He can tell that Nova doesn't want to coerce him or gin up some momentary enthusiasm. She has expected him to think it over and come here with a decision.

He feels like he did in grade school when hadn't done his homework.

Nova turns her back on him, and it feels like a knife twisting inside. He wants to call out and give her an answer. Not the default response she's walking away with, but the affirmation that he's crossing over.

“It’s a frightening thing to know one’s purpose,” she says over her shoulder. “But pitiful to be ignorant of it.”

But he can't do it.

*I'm a coward.*

But by the time he's riding the bus home, the rationalizations seems sound to him. He doesn't even know what kind of health plan they have. How would he get paid? What if they wanted him to keep contracting for MOM in order to feed them false information or spy on them? The thought can't be borne.

At the same time, it's a shameful thing to be driven by fear, which is what the rationalizations hide under their logic and reason. He remembers his invalid dash to take on Crowder and Frances. Where did that come from? Jumbo tries to do an inventory of the people he would have done that for, and it's a short list.

His apartment seems to have changed. The floor is dirtier and the walls closer. There's no trace of the nascent ambition he imagined nursing the previous evening.

There is, however, a large black beetle on the floor. Beside an induction charger.

Jumbo inspects it and has to stifle a cry of betrayal. It's a binsect--a small spy robot that he knows the MOM inventory is stocked with.

The obvious location the thing is in tells him that it's a warning. That they now feel entitled to spy on him even here in his private place, and he's supposed to accept it.

*Maybe they know everything.*

That idea is too terrible to contemplate. Jumbo has no desire to find out what happens in the darkness under the MOM building, not firsthand anyway.

He realizes that he didn't so much make a decision with Nova as make a non-decision. But that position isn't tenable. When MOM really understands what a threat the Continuation is to them, there will be no place to hide for neutral parties.

One of the filters he set up the night before dings with a hit. It takes him a moment to remember. Then he pulls up the message on the wall screen.

There's an anonymous message that has been flagged by his filters. He sees the subject and freezes.

"Orya found," it reads, and the return address maps to a location in France.

"Joyeuse," he says aloud, and his heart is suddenly racing. He opens it.

Mountaineer Orya Speaks was found today after being given up as lost. She suffered injuries, but is out of physical danger at the Ivy Memorial Hospital. She has not spoken since her miraculous rescue, and doctors caution that recovery may be slow. "Family stays close to heart," her sister said in a public announcement. "Even when they may be distant, or have lost their way."

Jumbo reads it several times, trying to divine more meaning out of. Oriya must be with Sister Ivy. But the business of not speaking does not sound good. He knows that the quote at the end is for him personally, a message from the young woman named for a sword.

It's dated two days ago.

A cynical part of Jumbo imagines that Nova concocted the thing, but upon considering the matter, he is sure that she isn't interested in trickery now. Game time is over. It seems more likely that she delayed authorizing the delivery to him until now.

Jumbo feels the mercy of the act. Even though he's nominally on the other side, Nova gave him information that might be useful to MOM, just to ease his mind. Even if it is a gentle manipulation, it's a kindness that Jumbo has no right to expect.

He imagines Oriya lying on the same cot he slept on, under the care of the Sister. Joyeuse must have been there too. Maybe they heard a rumor or got some other indication, and tracked it down. Or maybe news reached them from Slant Town. Jumbo aches to contact them directly to find out more. How is it that she's alive? Whose body got burned in the pyre?

It's a tipping point, the collapse of something fundamental inside. When the knock comes at the door, Jumbo knows he's about to abandon every shred of philosophy in order to cultivate this ambition.

The master cultivator lets himself in and grins wide to see Jumbo. Then Gar has an endless string of questions related to the wheelchair, leg, tomatoes, and where Jumbo

went off to. Jumbo excuses himself for a moment and masks up. He retrieves the ID he received the green invitation from and sends a short reply using a line from the poem Joyeuse recited.

"Let's warm the world to light."

Sending it feels like salvation and death. With both come an overpowering joy that he unleashes on Gar in a torrent of words and gestures that Gar has no real hope of extracting meaning from. But it doesn't impede the conversation in the slightest. After unleashing a pent-up storm of energy, Jumbo listens to a long riposte from Gar, nodding when it's expected, and expressing awe when Gar's eyebrows arch and his eyes widen.

Halfway through the first bottle of rum, halfway to the green worm at the bottom, Jumbo remembers the binsect on the floor, sending their conversation to MOM. He imagines someone the other end trying to understand the nature of this voluminous conspiracy, and trying to parse the unlearnable dialect that Gar profuses. He laughs so hard it makes his head and ribs and leg hurt simultaneously.

When he doesn't stop, Gar joins in. It's not a timid polite laugh that one forces to go along with a confused joke, but the open sharing of a friendship that transcends the need for formal understanding. They laugh the whole damned world away, and a new one into existence.

*Selfish will overcome by its own power.*

For the first time in many years, Jacob is at peace with himself.

## Historical Notes

This account was written some two years after the events it describes. The source material was apparently interviews with the protagonist, but the original transcripts of these have not been located. Some coloring and interpretation was added by the author, who has a particular style of narration. Scholars agree that she took some license with the telling, most notably in the insertion of the character Gerdie, who appears elsewhere in this body of literature. Definite identification of the victim of the brutal crimes described will probably never be made, but it seems unlikely to most that with all the refugees streaming out of the City, Gerdie would reappear. Others have pointed out that the records show that she did in fact leave the City by the West Gate, and the matter is still debated.

Jacob (also Jakob or Jumbo) gives us an account that varies in small details from log files and other evidence taken from City archives. These are generally of no consequence to the story, and it's not surprising that his memory of the events would have faded, particularly given the nature of his injuries. As with any first-hand account, there are likely to be important omissions and exaggerations. Although it is not obvious from this account, Jacob was described by others as a hypochondriac, so the extent of his injuries may be exaggerated. There are many images purporting to be the medical cross-sectional scan of his skull, but none have been authenticated.

One could perhaps forgive him if he had also exaggerated the sexual encounters, but several other sources indicate that, if anything, his description of the liaison with Nova was understated.

The Continuation weapons featured in these canonical works have taken on almost mythical powers in the many years since these events transpired. The large black handgun with the black bullets and the long black knife are iconic of the begins of the struggle leading up to the Between Wars. Scientists who have studied the matter tell us that shooting a bullet through several trees without deflection is impossibility. According to the mythology, the projectiles were fired with very high velocity and had a shape and constitution that made them almost frictionless. But this still requires them to force apart the fiber of a tree trunk in order to pass through it, requiring a large amount of energy. Some have argued that much of this energy would be regained by a nearly instantaneous closing of the tree around the bullet, so that it would be "squirted" from one tree to the next, but no one has ever demonstrated this. On the other hand, the technology to produce these artifacts has been lost to time, and no authentic specimens remain to settle the question.

There is confirmation of the salient points of the story, however. There really was a minor viral outbreak in that area, which died out suspiciously suddenly. Military strains of the pathogen (milSARS) were designed to tail off quickly in lethality, so that they could be used tactically. The first generation of the virus was utterly lethal, but by the third it was generally no worse than an average wild-type influenza. If it was, in fact an assassination of Naomi with such a pathogen, then it suggests a solution to the mystery surrounding Janus and Oriya.

Some experts have concluded that Oriya would have powdered her hair with the virus before going to meet Crowder and Frances. Then she could have delivered it with a shake of her head anywhere near them. If Janus later encountered Oriya in the woods, perhaps to humiliate or rob her, she could have been the recipient of a full-strength

strain, just as Crowder and Frances were. In her malnourished condition, it would have been a swift death. Perhaps she planned to pass herself off as a Speaker by stealing Oriya's clothes. If so, it was a terrible miscalculation on her part.

There is no authoritative record on what happened to Oriya after her rescue by Jacob. Local legend has her arriving at Slant Town nearly naked, with all her hair yanked out. Both of these details support the version of events described in the preceding paragraphs.

It is not clear what Naomi did that was considered so treasonous as to merit assassination by the Continuation leadership, nor why such a dangerous weapon was chosen. City records that would have linked her to MOM intelligence resources are incomplete, but they show evidence of an informant within the Continuation that is plausibly her. If so, she was providing information that doesn't seem to be particularly valuable. Some have speculated that there was a personal matter between herself and Nova. If so, such vindictiveness seems to have been an aberration, since there's no evidence that Nova was prone to such acts.

The events that took place immediately after the present work are covered in the translated logs of Calli0xE, albeit from a distance. Jacob's role was small but decisive in the infiltration of the DaiHai building, and his story has ensured his place in Continuation lore. In Germany in later years, he became Heiliger Jakob in a children's story. This voracious Frier-like character learns that there is more to life than food. It is a particular irony that one of Jacob's most-quoted lines from the present work is almost always misused:

*How can one be afraid to die without also being afraid not to live?*

The original notebook survives and predates Jacob's conversion. It is clearly intended to be a statement about enjoying life from an Epicurean perspective, rather than proceeding from day to day like a drone. It is often taken to mean that one should be afraid not to have ambition, however, which is something that would have been foreign to him when he wrote it.

Joyeuse seems not to have been punished for her violation of Oriya's "absolute" order. It is possible that Claren never told anyone about it. Both Joyeuse and Claren died young, as they no doubt expected to. Both were directly involved in the critical raid on the DaiHai building, and Claren wrote an incomplete memoir [Editor: included in this collection].

Oriya is said to never have spoken again. Although her body regained health, and there was no physical damage that would seem to have caused muteness, the psychological effects of her experiences seem to have been debilitating. Her presence made an impact on the area to the West of the Queen City, where she began to roam. She became to be recognized as a holy figure, referred to locally as the Green Witch. Jacob had to flee to Europe soon after the DaiHai raid, and was not able to visit her until several years later. The details of their meeting are not recorded anywhere, although the event has been fictionalized many times. The event seems to have affected Jacob deeply, because soon after he wrote *To be Continued*, which is considered by most to be a defining document of the Recontinuation movement.

Oriya is the most tragic figure in the recounting of Jacob's conversion, and her story has been the source of many works of art. Some are purely evocative, such as E.K. Khaat's famous (virtual) sculptures, and others didactic. The plays of P. Fieldes are brilliant examples of the latter category, combining Continuation themes with the spectrum of the human condition that lays bare the central contradictions of group survival. "Every Quas" is considered by many to be the pinnacle of the series.

## Excerpts from Claren's Personal Journal

### *In the field.*

Never thought I'd write these words, but I broke an Absolute order today. But if I hadn't, Jo might have died. This deployment has been a long string of disasters. This isn't even the worst thing that has happened. I'm amazed to write that.

When they do those alignment exercises in training, you think it's all a joke. They make you say them over and over:

Self-aligned: get your share while the world goes and vorks itself.

Denial-aligned: The world isn't going to (who could think that now?)

Despair-aligned: It is, but there's nothing we can do

System-aligned: It's worth trying to fix

At first it was a joke, and all we could think about was sneaking out to the girls. But the culture seeps into your bones until you dream the relations Continuation > Teammates > Self.

One of the farm kids out there today could have been me. I don't know if he was aiming for Jo or the giant, but he threw a big rock into Jo's mask and knocked her down. That's when I broke the order not to go in. The old man (Jacob, who also calls himself Jumbo) was trying to do the right thing, I guess.

I sprinted to Jo through the trees, and got there as half the village—from about twelve years and up—were trying to put the finish to the giant creep who killed Asi. The guy had a bellyful of xSARS, but he was on his feet and fighting. He must have known it was the end one way or another. If I hadn't hated the bastard, I might have admired him. Honestly it's a good thing Jo got slammed, otherwise she might have ended up like Asi.

I think about that sometimes. It could have just as easily have been me. I've never been so tired in my life as I was that day. It was criminal what the Speaker did, splitting us up. One mistake. Asi must have made one mistake and the big guy got him.

Now the big guy was getting it from those farm guns. He was already coughing blood, and would have been dead in a couple hours anyway. One young fool tried to stick him with a pitchfork just as I ran up. That big sick bastard just plucked it out of the air by one of the prongs, flipped it around, and stuck it in the guy's belly up to the shaft. A woman ran up to try to pull him away, screaming, and she got it too.

I put three bullets through big man's heart, and he sat down and died with a big smile on his face. I picked up Jo and got out of there while the farmers took their revenge on the corpse. That guy was definitely self-aligned. By that point they all were.

## ***Joyeuse***

After delivering Jacob to the City, we took ourselves back to the Abbey for a rest and refit. On the way, Jo subtracted herself into that private world she retreats to. She only came alive at night. Sometimes she would use me for her own self-aligned needs, but mostly it was talking. Between the two I hardly got any sleep.

She tried to tell me about the sensations she felt. She would make sure all our electronics—crude things, she called them—were silenced, and then release her mind to listen to the night sky. There was still plenty of “salty chocolate” radio activity from communications systems because of the City, and it would be too rich for her after a while. But once we found a cellar of a burned house to sleep in, where the earth gave her more ability to focus on the heavens. It was a night full of visible stars too. She held my hand and began to tell me about the Crab Pulsar, which only appears in winter. It

tastes like the sweetest fruit, she told me, but not one that she can identify. Its texture is that of a smooth fiber, and it's her favorite star. She once snuck out of the Abbey to climb the nearby solitary mountain to greet it in November, and was treated to a swarm of meteors around its home constellation, the bull. She told me that it was the most beautiful moment of her life, that words have no chance to describe the sensations she felt. That didn't stop her from trying.

The meteors, she said were like sizzling strips of bacon, except with the astringency of something like cilantro as an aftertaste. They made sounds like metal gongs. She might have been making the whole thing up, but it was a delight to listen to.

As she talked, she shivered with the remembered pleasure, and sought my arms. She described the buzzes and chirps, the taste and feel of the radio space around us, eagerly trying to bring me into her world. At first I felt like an outsider, someone who's allowed to come to the door and peak into a magnificent mansion, but whose muddy feet and rough clothes aren't allowed in. It's a lonely hollow feeling. But Jo's enthusiasm to bring me over the threshold was too great for resentment. It's not her world, or the world of the netspooks, she explained. It's our world—all of us who have woken to the knowledge of what we are. She engaged my mind and senses through my imagination at first, and then slowly with her hands and body. She ate all the rest of her sugar bars that night, and it was perhaps the sweetest of my life too. I knew we would be separated soon. We're not allowed to pair bond, but that's what it felt like. This wasn't a hungry necessary transaction between enlightened minds trapped in animal bodies, as *The Speaker* describes it. This was a combining of two minds into one for a brief moment.

The netspooks have a heavy burden to pay for their abilities. Their ways of touching the universe is so much richer than the rest of us that they have to work hard to stay system-aligned. I had been critical of Jo's discipline before, but after that night I realized there is more than one way to be system-aligned.

### ***The Action at DaiHai Phototronics Regional HQ, Queen City***

I have to write this down now before I forget it all. It's not like I'll have grandkids to tell the story to, but others need to know what happened. The official report is already done, but it's full of stuff like "the gun turrets were disabled while taking damage." Here's what really happened.

We'd been brought to the City because of Jacob. Someone figured that since we already had "worked together" he would trust us. It might have even been true. The

more pertinent question was whether we could trust him. It was me and Jo and then Jacob riding his wheelchair. Then there was Nova, who planned the thing. We were there because of Nova. The objective was to allow her to retrieve something from inside the building. I didn't find out until much later that these were deeply-placed backdoor functionalities with access codes. The kind of thing that can't be changed without modifying hardware.

This is the same Nova that everyone tells other stories about. She was like an older version of Jo. I've seen my share of stuff by now, but as a commander, this Quas was in a category by herself. Rumor had it that she had her synthasia blown out by a stunner, and maybe that's what took the tra-la-la out of her. I don't know, but Jo was quiet around her. Maybe Jo was afraid that she would become like Nova.

The mission was in the same building that Nova's partner jumped out of. We talked among ourselves about whether Nova would be able to be objective inside, but that wasn't a problem. I've heard people say that the drugs burned all the fear out of her, and that she turned into a machine. That's too simple. She was cool, yes, but she knew what she was doing. The plan was reckless, but the payoff was a big one. It's beyond my rank to say whether it was worth it. We do our duty and let others worry about such complications.

Jo thought the plan was too complicated. [Video transcript]

*Joyeuse lounges with poor posture against a wall that might be inside a warehouse. Overlaid on the video is a tactical map that she and Claren are marking up. Her arms lift to move something in the virtual display and then sag. She looks tired.*

*"This operation is like a school play for System Day, you know?"*

*"What?" Claren asks, transmitting audio back across the meter between the two.*

*"Everybody has to have a part. Can you believe Jacob is going inside? In a chair?" Joyeuse sounds horrified at the idea.*

*"We don't decide these things, Jo. You know that."*

*"Tell me something isn't going to go wrong," she says.*

*The camera angle waggles as Claren shrugs.*

*“Things always go wrong,” he says.*

*Joyeuse reaches out a slender arm and opens her fingers. Claren matches her gesture, touching fingertips like the ends of neurons communicating.*

It was true that I couldn’t believe that the big-boned guy, Jacob was supposed to roll into action in a wheelchair. I could literally smell the fear on the guy during the debriefing. Jo kept fussing over him, doing her synth thing forehead-to-forehead. I don’t understand it, but it did seem to calm him down. I wanted Nova to let him off the hook. Like Jo, I was pretty sure he’d let us down when things went triangular. But Nova needed him, and when she needs something... That was one pale sweaty guy.

He had some special access to the building, that’s why Nova needed him. In the end, I think she gave him something to calm him down. Nova built the electronics right into the chair. All Jacob had to do was find a hardware port and jack in where he wouldn’t be disturbed, and Nova’s insertion protocol would do the rest. Then we could walk right in with real company IDs and it would be a stroll in the park.

It was Jo who got Jacob to tell her the whole story about himself. This guy we’d been traveling with, saving his behind and getting killed or half-killed because of him. He didn’t just work for MOM—he was the one who outed Nova’s partner! I guess he had the guilts about it because he had a fetish for going up to the room the Quas jumped from. It didn’t add to my feeling of comfort about the plan.

Shanghai had jumped from the eighth floors to a hard landing. But she’d already juiced up, so it was the best choice available. After popping the pill, her body would have been burning itself up, and that doesn’t have a happy ending. It was a bad omen, but dwelling on that only decreases the odds, so I focused on getting my equipment in good order. Even though Plan A didn’t call for the use of weapons, I made sure I was ready for Plan B.

There was a hurricane coming right at the City, and everyone was painting on their panic. The DaiHai building provides shelter for some of its employees, and requires a full work shift of tech types to keep the generators running and fix other stuff the storm might blow out. Nova had some spoofery that allowed us to move around the City with fake IDs, but this wasn’t good enough to get into the building—they’re really, really careful about security, and they have an artificial intelligence in there that keeps watch. Nero, it calls itself. That’s why we needed Jacob-on-wheels to get in first, to carve a back door into their network and hope to catch Nero napping. We assumed that the

storm would provide us cover in case things went wrong. It didn't seem likely that reinforcements could reach the building in good speed.

With all this wind blowing, here was Jo sitting outside at a deserted café across from the building, trying to look nonchalant while anything loose flew across the plaza and big fat drops of rain started hitting. The plan was for Jacob to get to the eighth floor window, and be our Jack-in-the-network. From there, he could create a point-to-point connection by laser to Jo, who could then serve as a hub for Nova to work her magic from somewhere drier. We had to stay off the City network, of course, and it was starting to become flakey anyway.

So we did the hurry-up-and-wait routine, and hung around twiddling our twiddles while Nova sent Jacob into the building. No word came for a long time, and I could see the stress beginning to tell on Nova. She does this odd thing where she licks her fingers when she's thinking hard (I guess), but she didn't dip into her bag of White to take the edge off. I fully expected the operation to go triangular, and it was just a matter of equilateral or isosceles or whatever.

But Jacob got the laser in place. He wanted to talk about all the questions they asked him, and how he thought he didn't want to end up in the MOM basement. Basically, he was afraid and wanted some reassurance. Nova didn't have time for that. She just kept giving him orders until he shut up and did what she asked.

All Jacob had to do at that point was keep his mask pointed at Jo, but he had a hard time doing that. Then the rain started falling, and infrared lasers really suck in the rain. Nova said his mask didn't have the right interface for better hardware. I figured there was a fair chance we'd have to abandon him up there.

I was doing recon on the entrance, watching the protocol to get in the building. There was a lot of security. They had a MOM orthobot fired up, but it wasn't moving. Lots of bone and blood security, though. They had stunners or light ballistic weapons. We, on the other hand, would have to go in without weapons. Their scanners would pick up a toothpick on us. Nova said that fooling those was out of the question.

It was difficult to not be conspicuous. Most citizens who hadn't already taken shelter were in a hurry to get somewhere. My job was to watch for threats while Jo and Nova worked.

I think Nova underestimated how tough their network was to crack. She'd been inside before, but they'd upgraded, and their security guy Nero was probably the best money

could buy. Nova was sitting with her back to a wall near Jo. She'd make that funny motion, bringing her fingertips to her lips and then licking them. I don't think she knew she was doing it. All netspooks are different, but I think they're all odd.

After a while, Nova just left her fingertips in her mouth, chewing on them. Jo's heartbeat was racing, and she was hyped for action. I tried to calm her down because I knew if we did get in she'd need all her strength. I talked her into eating a sugar bar. Once her brain starts cooking, it burns through energy like a rocket, and she can crash before she notices anything is wrong. I have to constantly be big brother like that. She used to absolutely hate it, but now I get a smile sometimes. That action with the crazy farmers changed things between us, making us tight. We don't argue about things as much now. The things we'd argue about seemed petty now.

Nova told us that they've got the subnets locked down "tighter than a banker's fist," and she can't reach the identification authenticator from where she is. Jacob is going to need more access to do any good. But that means he has to move away from the window, and we'll lose contact with him.

This is what I expected. The plan had popped a hypotenuse already, but at least we were *outside* the building. The clouds were looking dire by that point, dark and lumpy, with streaks of lightning breaking them up.

When plans go wrong, it's not debilitating to me. They build the so-called Y-factor into our genes, technology stolen from the military. It's a hybrid of wild-type alleles discovered on the Y-chromosomes of a certain type of man. They call it "smart aggression," but another word for it is cunning. It's a drive to succeed that discounts the cost, but not quite to the point of recklessness. This is mixed with the X-factor, which was originally found on the X-chromes. The price of the X-factor is a less reflective and philosophical mind, but the advantage is the ability to rapidly scan a complex space of threats and assets and see what's most important. No computer yet can beat this combination yet. It takes training to bring it out, of course. I was built on an XY genetic platform, and the netspooks like Nova are X. Shanghai was a X\*X, similar to XY. The netspooks have a whole other suite of genes that work with their implants, but I don't know much about these.

And in my experience, plans *a/ways* go wrong. I didn't expect Jacob, who was a civilian with wild-type genes, to be very calm about it.

The rain got to be too much for the second-rate point-to-point equipment, so they had to switch from laser to radio, meaning that Jo had to move right up next to the building to

be the hub. This was very dangerous for Jacob, and I'm not sure he appreciated that. He had to go from transmitting a tight light beam through a window to broadcasting radio waves that would be picked up by the building security system.

It was a one-way ticket for Jacob, because if we had to abandon him, the pleasures of the MOM basement (whatever they are) would be a real possibility. I didn't want that to happen. I mean, the guy had shown real bravery and selflessness in trying to save the Speaker. The wheelchair was evidence of the price he was paying.

Nova pulled us into the conversation so we could help calm down Jacob.

"Listen Jacob, we have a new plan," Nova said.

But Jacob wiggled out on her, and it took Jo to talk him back to Earth. Then Nova explained it.

"I'm uploading a package to you. Then I'm going to send it as a Trojan to the DaiHai executives in your address book—people you've met when you were working in the building. We just need one of them to launch it. Do you have any suggestions about how to make it attractive?"

"This isn't working. We have to abort," Jacob told her. He scrubbed the emotion out of the VOX, and I can imagine why. He didn't want us to hear how afraid he still was.

I knew our fates depended on what Nova said next, but I wasn't paying much attention. I was tracking the few civilians that were dashing around in the rain. A few of them were banging on the glass doors of the DaiHai lobby to be let in.

Jacob just shut down his comms with us. He went completely dark electronically, but we could still see him moving through the window. There we were stuck out in a torrent of rain, waiting, with no signal from inside the building. Nova was sucking down sugar water or Sleep, I couldn't tell which, but actually angry now. The worst thing was the possibility that Jacob had betrayed us from the start. That theory didn't make any sense to me, and Jo was sure it wasn't true, but Nova was asking some tough questions. I could have told her about Jacob trying to order me back to rescue him when I was already on the way to get Jo away from that lynch mob. But that's unfair. The guy was on his last milli of strength, and I saw how determined he was to find the Speaker, both before and after. He doesn't lack bravery, but most everyone has a breaking point.

I could have fed Nova's fears, and we might have aborted right there. But that wouldn't have been honest, and it's not what I did. I put my voice with Jo, explaining that Jacob was a good guy out of his depth.

Of course, my reward was that Nova tells me we have to do a physical breach—forcing our way in-- which was my responsibility. I had a plan, but it risked calling out a full defensive response. This was supposed to be a stealth mission, not an assault, and ideally they wouldn't even know something went wrong. There was no longer any hope of that with the failure of the electronic insertion. Even if Jacob did do what Nova wanted, it's not exactly subtle. The plan was now officially three-sided and pointy.

The rain slowed down for a bit, and we could see the front of the building pretty well. All the foot traffic we'd seen earlier was gone. Anyone with any sense was inside thick walls with a flashlight and bottles of water.

We took shelter behind a wall and planned the next move.

"The MOM building is under assault," Nova told us. "We're not the only ones using the storm. I got a message tunneled out in a peculiar way through the binsect spybot in Jacob's apartment. We have some new objectives."

She told us the changes, which added even more complications.

I knew that Nova had some big ideas involving artificial intelligence, which is off the books as far as the Continuation is concerned. She talked right up to the edge of what some Speakers would call heresy. I mean, the idea is to save humanity, not replace it. But it was not my place to question, of course. And she didn't ask for my advice.

The one advantage of a physical breach is that we could carry weapons. We'd probably lose a pitched battle with the security inside, but with MOM having its own problems, I had to admit there wouldn't be a better chance. The odds were still terrible, but I could appreciate how the risk was worth it. Jo was ready for anything. I could tell she felt that we owed Jacob something. As far as I know, she never learned that he would have left her to the crazy farmers and their pitchforks, and I never told her.

I had some time to think running back to the safe house to get the gear. It wasn't much. Dart guns for me and the spooks and my black pack with ten spare magazines for the pistol. The knife was in a bag with the magazines. If we needed that many bullets, it was all over anyway. No stunners, of course. The netspooks talk to the spectrum, and a

stunner can scramble their brains pretty quick. They hate those things, and I'd have to protect them from getting zapped.

On the jog back, it felt good to be moving, even though the rain started up again, mixed with small hail. I wondered what had happened to Jacob. Then I started thinking about how we were going to get in the building.

On the surface, it might have seemed smart to find a way to climb up to the third floor, where the windows began, break one, and climb in. But that would just be an inconvenient way of knocking down the front door. We had to use the storm. That was our only advantage.

We waited until it got bad enough to hardly stand in the wind. Stuff was flying through the air that could cut your head off. It was like a battlefield when we dashed across to the front doors of the DaiHai building. We all had our props: a shredded umbrella, and a bag full of food and water. I knew most of the guards were male, so I carefully shredded part of Jo's top with my knife to show some skin. She didn't complain when I drew blood accidentally. The wind, you know.

So we pounded on the door, doing our best to pretend to be panicked civilians. Our masks were a dead giveaway, but there wasn't anything to be done about it. That's when we heard the roar. A chunk of wood flew just to the left of my head and bounced off the tough glass. Behind it was a black funnel reaching up to heaven. A million tattered angels circled it: fluttering bits of paper and who knows what. And it started to rain fish. They must have come from Lake Wylie, that's I'll I could figure later. Large fresh-water fish just fell out of the sky on the plaza, splat, splat, splat. It was the weirdest thing I've ever seen.

So we didn't exactly have to pretend panic. Jo pressed her half-exposed breast up to the glass, and we were in just like that.

The security scanners in that lobby are very, very good, and there were a dozen security guards, one orthobot out of its cage (but not moving), and five more on call.

Just as all hell was about to break loose, I heard Jacob's voice. He was arguing with someone vocally, loud and angry, for them to let him go outside!

There was a lot of chatter on the public lobby network about the weather and even more about the attack unfolding at the MOM building. The security detail were mostly watching out the front glass with their mouths hanging open.

“I have to get one of those fish!” Jo said. She was improvising, creating a distraction. Meanwhile Jacob was doing something similar, although I could only hear half the conversation, if you can call it that. He was yelling and they must have been messaging back. To all appearances, he was a crazy guy in a wheel chair.

Distractions or not, we were not going anywhere interesting without authorization, which Nova could only get for us if she could get deep enough into the guts of the system. Otherwise, every system in the place would target us.

Outside, Jo almost got creamed by a twisted sheet of metal, and she came shrieking back through the door while the world went to hell outside. She didn’t bring any fish, but her hair was almost as interesting. I gave the signal and we started with the darts.

Surprise is all we had, and it came with a strict expiration date. There were corner-mounted weapons that the security machine controls. It would take no more than a few seconds to ready-aim-fire those things. It gave me a case of the creeps, imagining the things tracking the base of my skull.

The darts put the first three blue-shirted guards down: one, two, three. The spitting sound of the second round of shots happened before the others figure out what was going on, but the interior security doors start sliding together. No way to blast through those with what we had. They were thick glass, and bullets would go right through them, but we didn’t have anything that would actually blow a hole in them.

Behind me I heard the clackity-clack of auto-weapons chambering rounds. I wondered what sort of ammunition they’d chosen. That was more than an abstract thought because we couldn’t allow ourselves to be captured. The speed of the reaction meant that Nero was not napping at all.

I already had the pill in my mouth to juice up. All I had to do was bite through the capsule and swallow it. But the juice is a one-way trip, like falling eight floors to concrete. I’d be superman for the last hour or two of my life.

“I’m in,” Nova said on our local net. “Jacob got me in.”

All the guards we can shoot were down and out. They’d wake up in a few hours with a headache at worst. The doors were almost closed. I chewed on the juice pill without noticing what I was doing. For one horrible moment, I thought I’d cracked the thing, and spit it out in reaction. It flew somewhere out into the middle of the room. The mask

tracked it for me, and I snapped a request for a location marker while I turned to look at the corner guns. They were looking back.

I dropped and rolled as they barked at me. It was a big fat triangle, and I was trying to reach for my suicide-pill before I got shot by Dawkins-knows-what sort of thing travelling at mach two. I yanked the black gun and got a clean shot through the center of one of the sparklers upstairs. I got two tags on the leg from somewhere, and the bottom falls out of my gut, but it spun me in the right direction.

Fired once, missed, twice more steadier, and got it.

A quick glance at status showed Nova and Jo still in the green. Panning hard left for the next target, I took one in the arm, and had to flip hands. I floated the gun just like in training, so the butt bounced recoil off my the palm of my hand and kept the same aim, two, three, four bullets out, totaling seven, and one turret left to clear.

I heard it kick into full automatic, and I knew I was out of time. Three out of four is pretty good, but I should have started sooner. I was way out of position, and turning too slow. The shock of getting hit was reaching the deep nerves by then, and the reaction was slowing me down. I could hear the rounds hitting flesh, a sick, sick sound. I couldn't figure out why I couldn't feel them. Then the most horrible thought occurred to me. Maybe it's Jo.

I wanted it to be me so badly, and the sick feeling that it was her made me almost break my own neck jerking around. I emptied the magazine all around the turret, screaming at it, all that precious discipline gone now. My arm was shaking so badly I missed every shot! It just kept on sparkling, popping off low velocity rounds down like that rain outside. Ripping while I was cursing, knowing I'll never get another magazine in quickly enough.

And it stopped. It's the loudest quiet I've ever heard. I slapped the mag in one-handed, aim on one elbow to steady, and put a round through the hateful thing. I shot it again, not because I needed to, but because I didn't want to know what it had done.

I couldn't look. I shut my eyes for a second or two. What I would wake up to was the end of something—Nova or Jo--and I just wanted to stay here before the end came to claim me. I was leaking from a dozen places, and the reality had come calling.

What an tri-cornered screw-up.

I shames me to say that I hoped it was Nova that got shredded, and that Jo and I could bug out before the real badness came. This bloomed into the most fervent hope I've ever had. I didn't want Jo to be a gooey mess.

I opened my eyes, and stuck my head up, tracking the pistol automatically. It felt so much heavier now. The line of sight tracked by Jacob, sitting in his chair. If Nova hadn't said he had gotten her in the net, I might have tried to match the bullet track that already traces his brain.

I popped rounds through two of the guards on the other side of the thick glass in passing, looking for a bone to hole, but trying not to kill.

I saw Jo, and I went beyond, out of my head.

They train us for that too. They call it ballooning, when your consciousness expands to include yourself as an outside observer. It worked too. Everything human about that moment was suppressed in the necessity of what needed to get done.

So I could look at that bloody mess on the floor with part of my brain and look for my pill with another, and track targets on the mask's heads-up with another. Cold and distant, like the love of god, as the prophet JC said.

I got the capsule between my teeth, and it tasted like blood, which doesn't make any sense. But I knew I was on borrowed time, so making sense was not something to spend effort thinking about.

Only then did I look at my legs.

It's not as bad as it should have been, and the fog finally thinned enough to realize they loaded non-lethal rounds: sub-sonics slugs that are designed to stick and stop, not penetrate far. That was not a lot of great news even so.

"ACK," came an order from Nova. Acknowledge. Are you still alive, in other words.

I ACKed back.

Jo ACKed too.

My jaw dropped. Jo ACKed? From what bloody great beyond was that possible? She was a shaggy mess of white bone and red gore.

She wasn't, but I didn't have time to figure it out because there was a lot of excitement behind the thick glass.

"Request juice up," I sent Nova. It's the drill we know, we resign ourselves to. Can I please burn out my life like a blowtorch instead of a candle? That's the question, and we always expect a no.

"Granted," Nova said without two heartbeats passing.

The world seemed to fall about eight floors beneath me. It was my death warrant.

Self-aligned is for animals. Self-aligned is the way of the leech, who consumes more than he produces. Self-aligned is why we are where we are.

It tasted just like butter, and I felt like a martyr. Holy and doomed.

The glow began almost immediately, and it felt so, so, good. Better than sex, better than anything in the world. Better that everything in the world. It radiated out to my limbs. Fire and justice. It burned too, but even that was a luxurious pleasure. The ecstasy was almost unbearable.

"Thank you," I sent Nova.

It was not just the rush of my body incinerating itself, it was the knowing that this was the end of commitment. I have one last thing to do in life, and all other concerns were moot—someone else's problem.

I felt that once I started, I wouldn't stop laughing. They told us about this, but I never believed it. I gasped a few times, fighting it, and just managed to keep it under control.

I stood and watched Jo heave the body of a shredded guard off of her. She'd been hit too, in the shoulder and across the face. At least she was alive. I know the way her mouth works better than anyone alive, and I could tell she was terrified. The turret tried to shoot all the way through the guard to get to her, but the low-velocity rounds didn't have enough time to do the job.

"You're okay. Shake it off," I sent her. The laughter was still inside me, ready to burst out again, but the faint thought crossed my mind that there's business to be done before I laughed myself to death.

Two more guards appeared beyond the glass, and I sent two more bullets to meet them. The first one hit a bone as intended, but the second put a hole somewhere else and I had to follow it with another. The MOM orthobot still hadn't moved, but I put a hole through its brain anyway.

The doors had stopped moving, still cracked enough to let us through, and we went. Nova sent us a map with a route. We were going to kill Nero. Me and Jo, that is. Nova was going off to do whatever it is she was here for. She had told us only the part we needed to know. In addition to taking down Nero, we were to provide more distraction while Nova went invisible. It all came down to her spookery now. I suspect that she had high-powered data-grams to reach inside back doors and shut down cameras and weapons, or just make herself invisible to the chips.

Jo was moving slowly, favoring a leg. I set one side of mask on wide angle, full tactical HUD, and used the other lens to inspect her. The bullet that raked across her cheek left an ugly trail. She was trying to do something about it, while Nova slipped down the hallway to talk to Jacob.

"I got hit," she said to me, and she sounded as young as when we first met.

"Let me fix it," I said, and taped her up. Her skin felt ice cold to me.

"Why are you so hot?" She asked.

I slapped a stim-shot into her. I was afraid she was going into shock. My knife parted her pants below the knee in a line. She stood still for it. I wrapped up another bullet hole there the best I could. It was killing me. All this was killing me.

"I need you back, Jo," I told her. "I can't do this alone."

She nodded. The bullet clipped her mask too, and I checked it out for her. No serious damage.

"We don't have time," I said. Meaning I don't have time. Jo and I had our issues, fights about discipline once upon a time, but I didn't feel anything but affection. Not just for her, for anything that has blood flowing in it. Life is hard enough without bullets.

"Juice?" she asked.

I thought she might be asking about me, but I chose to interpret it as a question about her.

“Don’t you dare,” I told her, steering her forward. It would help, but then she’d die too. There was time for that later if it had to be.

“Not me. You.”

“I’m just running hot,” I lied. She had enough to worry about.

Jo seemed to want to move, to run away from herself maybe. She kept a hand on my shoulder and we went as fast as we could. I left-hand the pistol, loose in floating position, to shoot the cameras. The mask brought them up for me, and it was a rhythm of stop-brace-fire-check, and repeat. It drew attention, just like it was supposed to, but it also creates a dead zone behind us where Nero couldn’t see. That would be handy for our retreat.

Two more guards appeared, with stunners this time. The mask picked up the whine of the chargers and flashed them on the HUD. I stepped in front of Jo to protect her. They were on either side of a hallway intersection waiting out of sight. It was just like a training exercise. Jo painted the locations of the stunners on my display and all I had to do is line up the bullet-path projection and shoot. Hold breath, squeeze, and one down. Right through the two walls of the corner, through the stunner and whatever was behind it.

The other guy wigged out and ran out of range before I could do the same to him. Two more cameras down, and I was reloading.

All the lights went out except for some emergency strips. Maybe it was Nova, but more likely the storm.

“Bots on the way. Six of them, I think,” Jo told me. Her professional voice was back, but she held my arm in a death grip.

Six orthobots would be a big problem. They almost certainly would not be affected by Nova’s fiddling. That meant hard kills at six to one odds. I started hyperventilating, and felt my body respond, kicking up awareness and strength. By that time I couldn’t even tell I’d been shot.

The big variable was who was driving the bots. I'd have absolutely no chance against professional drivers. The MOM operators across town were the best around, but they probably had their own problems. A weak driver is easy to defeat, but even they might get lucky.

They came at as at a dead run, and it was a frightening sight. They hadn't heated up much yet, and they looked like ghost skeletons in infrared enhancement, coming like a swirling wind.

"Intel?" I asked Jo, trying to prompt her without panicking her. We only trained on simulators versus robots. And never this many of them.

"Dual weapons, ballistic left hand and stunner right."

I floated three shots at the center of mass of the six as they came into range, but couldn't see any hits.

"They're tracking on a pattern," she says. "Step left."

I was at the peak of my abilities, in the zone of human performance unthinkable without genetic juicing. The extra oxygen slowed everything down, and I felt rock solid confidence. The sidestep corresponded to bringing the pistol sights on a new line. Because I knew what Jo meant.

It was the most beautiful moment of my service life. The bots were running a serpentine, weaving back and forth, but Jo had spotted the regularity, and for one instant they converged like a six-pack eclipse. I saw it coming, closing together, firing, floating six shots as fast and accurate as I'd ever done as they lined up to make a single target. A single mass that one beautifully aimed bullet could kill by passing through six mechanical skulls.

And then I was running at them, still tracking, still firing. The bots reacted to the shots by running into walls or collapsing where they were, falling and tumbling into aluminum tangles. I knew I'd put a dent in Nero's pride because only an artificial could steer six bots at one time like that. The video showed later that my first shot took out five of them.

One of the bots got off two shots from the floor before I holed it three more times. My pistol glowed like a blowtorch in the infrared, and I had to filter it out so I could see.

I walked around shooting each one in neck conduit that connects the head to the body for good measure.

“Did you see that?” I asked Jo.

There was no response.

Turning and running back were the worst few seconds of my life. Everything was still in slow motion, plodding now, feeling every step and shudder. Aware of every sound, ripping the mask off my face to see, really see. See her on the floor, on her back with her feet hooked under her body. My heart stopping. Plunging despair, denial, denial.

No, it wasn't her. It was a guard. My brain played that trick on me. But it really was her this time.

There, where I had carved a V into her shirt for the guards to gawk at her chest, right in the middle of the dark line where I had nicked her skin was a perfectly-formed circle. Only a little blood had leaked out of it.

My mind tried to find a way out. It's not Jo. It's a guard. Jo's just over there. Around the corner, maybe. I tore her mask off. Her eyes were open, looking far away, too far for me to follow. The bullet hole in her sternum was small enough to cover with a fingertip.

Her eyes jerked sideways, and I cried out from the irrational hope that bloomed and then died. I realized that whatever was left of Jo's consciousness was watching her own brain die, absorbing the taste and texture of her internal electrical fields as they sputtered into randomness and finally stopped. The corner of her lips twitched in that way that was the prelude to a sly smile. I loved her then, and envied her.

Jo and I were both named for swords. In training, the boys had invented all sorts of rituals and superstitions around the black knives we trained with. And now I had marked Jo's skin with my blade, drawn a line on her to attract a bullet. It wasn't rational, but it felt like betrayal. I drew the knife and drove the blade into the floor to the hilt and snapped it off.

I cradled my partner in my arms, so strong I could have crushed her bones, but holding her like a baby bird. I wanted to cry, but the juice wouldn't let any moisture leak away from my body. No sweat, no tears, no fatigue, and no fears. That was the juice.

I don't know how long I held her before they shot me from the side.

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They pretend to prepare us in training. Maybe they actually think that's what they're doing. The veterans they bring in know better, but they stick to the script mostly. Once in a while we got them to loosen up. It's a game all the boys played, and the rumors of this or that adventure make the rounds, growing from exaggeration to myth by the third telling.

This one old guy was built around an earlier version of my chomes. He was ancient, maybe 38, but I don't think he actually knew exactly how old he was.

We snuck him some beer after hours and got him talking. Most of it was lies, probably, but we ate it up. There were plenty of stories for the hot-blooded listeners, but the thing that stuck with me was a single piece of advice. It sounds like self-aligned drivel, which is what made it so remarkable at the time, and even more so as I sit here and write this.

"Find whatever you love. Then be true to it."

We would have dissected him in Practical Philosophy, turned his existentialism or whatever it is into a game of gotcha. But I saw the way his mouth set into place after he said it. It was the one thing he said all night that wasn't total bitshit. I thought a lot about that afterwards.

Even at that age, I knew what it was. I wanted to cultivate the earth and watch it make miracles. Maybe that was a childish wish for permanence. I envied those damned farmers, most of them hating what they did. But my only expression of it was growing smokes for the other boys until we turned into men.

Black earth, hot sun, cool rain. That's all I wanted. But that's self-aligned. Too suffalined for the Continuation, and it wouldn't pay back what I owe them for making me.

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They shot me with a stunner. It's not pleasant. Basically half your body goes numb. Even jacked up on the juice it was debilitating.

So I collapsed to the side and my weapon went clank on the floor. My right side was numb. I could feel it there, but it was like the body parts belonged to someone else.

Two blue-shirted guards came out, tracking me with stunners. The one who shot me was whining up its recharge, but the other was green-lighted. The masks were blue too, but everything looked almost black in the dim strip lighting.

“She’s hurt,” I told them. I could still talk and hold my head up, which meant they hadn’t zapped my brain. I’m not sure why I told them, maybe I was hoping there was some green among them. But Nova had said they purged all the Conty guards after the first attack, so it was unlikely. Maybe I just hoped they were human the same way I am.

It got quiet except for the whine of the stunners. I knew it was all over unless I moved fast, but it was not just the numbness. I didn’t want to put Jo back on the floor because then it would be real and unfixable.

The guy who shot me had gray hair and a braid on his uniform.

“Are you sick?” he asked.

It was a natural question since I must be glowing like the sun in their masks.

“I’m dying,” I said, and the truth sounded strange to me. It was like that slippery fish that Jo tried to pick up outside. It still had wiggle and flop in it after falling out of the sky. Full of life but dying fast.

“I need you to push your weapon away,” he said to me.

It was a terrible feeling. Duty is the fiercest god that ever existed. The guy could have stunned me to oblivion and waited for a clean-up crew. But he had just that much mercy in him, even after watching me shoot up people who were probably his friends. He had pity.

“I don’t want to,” I say. I didn’t want to kill him.

“I won’t ask again.”

So I lowered Jo to the floor. I tried to find her needlegun as I did so, but couldn’t put my hand on it. I straightened her with my one usable arm, and closed her eyelids.

“Today, please,” he said to my back.

So I reached with my left hand, the one that wasn't numb, slowly toward the butt of the gun, as if to push it away to safety. So the grey haired man could breathe easier and feel good for being merciful. He had no idea what I was capable of.

I pinched the butt with two fingers and turned my head to watch the blueshirts, putting on my best smile. Their stunners were back up now, all in the green. I smiled at each one. No chance to bring the gun around to shoot them.

So I flipped it and triggered with my thumb. The first shot grazed my arm and the second went through my lung on the way to the guard behind me.

Like I said, I was at the peak of human performance. Even half stunned, I could line up the targets and thumb the trigger without missing. The only risk was that I'd hit a major bone or blood vessel or nerve in my own body.

One of the stunners went wild and the other tagged my legs. But when I finally got the gun around, Gray was on the ground already, and the other one wilting fast. Gray had taken it through the spine and just folded in place like he fell asleep.

I had nowhere to go, so I watched the other one fight gravity, swaying. I didn't want to kill anymore.

The bullet that passed through me felt like fire on the way through my chest, like being run through with a hot wire. I knew my body would knit if it were possible. It was a stand-off for a while. The one still standing was going into shock. The bullet had burred a line across the stunner, along his arm, and probably through a lung. We were hole-mates.

"Stun yourself," I told him.

He nodded. I thought he was already about as stunned as he can be, but he raised the weapon to his temple as it whined up to full charge.

"Don't point it at your head. It will scramble your brains."

I kept the sights on him while he held the stunner at arm's length, pointing back at himself.

"Angle it down," I told him.

When it popped off he fell right over and cracked his head. So much for good intentions.

The four of us stayed there for a while. I combed back Jo's hair with my fingers until my legs started to tingle with life. It was almost peaceful in the hallway. I hyperventilated to speed the return of my senses. Well, that's a lie. I hyperventilated in order to get the head rush and not have to think directly about the woman on the floor.

Once I was mobile, I put the mask back on. I couldn't remember if I was supposed to search for network activity or not. The mask was locked up like a vault, allowing only point to point from our team, but Nova was out of range and maybe trying to reach me on the network. I needed Jo to tell me what to do.

So I searched for networks that would let me in, and found that the low-security subnet authenticated me right away. I could even look through the hallway video if I want to. Apparently the cameras were running on emergency power. I looked for Nova and find a single message from her.

"Having a bad day. Abort. Save yourself."

I stopped my decent down a stairwell and lean against a wall, head swimming. All this was for nothing? Save yourself? What is that supposed to mean? It's such purely suffalined advice that I didn't know how to process it. I was already dying. How could I save myself?

It made me angry. The emotion felt like skidding on ice as anger becomes an all-consuming rage. The only possible target for this wall of emotion was Nero. I stormed down the stairwell, faster and faster, tossing the half-empty magazine and slamming in a full one.

The video on this level was hidden from me. Jo would have figured out a way in. I paused, panting before a security door. If there was any last defense it would be beyond it. Being fast was my only advantage, so I shoved through the door into a brightly-lit room.

"Authenticating," came a message from the network, and I was upgraded. Nova's stuff is really good, I was thinking. There were several fixed point weapons ahead. I reached into a camera while hugging the wall, sliding forward, left hand perpendicular, waiting for targets.

There was a heavy weapons mech standing off to the side. I could see the back of it on the camera. Fat and round, squat and close to the ground. It had a mini-gun and crowd-sized stunner from the looks of it. I indexed the shape to find where they kept the brains in this particular model. I would have to be precise.

I flipped the pistol around the corner and targeted using the video. Three shots, watching for the heat flashes against the metal monster so I could track the bullets. But nothing showed up on the infrared filter. I missed. It started lumbering toward me. One shot from that stunner and I would be fried until next week.

I emptied the whole magazine and didn't get a single hit. My sense of reality began to shift like sand under my feet. Was I firing blanks? It made no sense. I kept firing and kept missing. As I did, all the things that make no sense lined up like ducks. "Save yourself." "Authenticating." Heavy weapons and big stunners down here with all this sensitive equipment. Firing blanks.

I popped the mask off and stuck my head around the corner. There was no robot there. No point weapon installations either. Just a bright room with pipes and tanks, one of which was hissing fog out of it.

Nero had gotten to my mask electronics. Turning on the network was dumb of me. Now I couldn't trust the mask, so I left it perched on top of my head and raced forward. The doors were locked or barricaded, so I shot the hinges off. I was running out of time--I could feel my strength diminishing. The anger carried me forward.

It was a room with half a dozen civilians and more equipment I didn't recognize. One of the men swung an axe at me! I deflected it with the pistol, but it turned my arm numb, and the weapon went flying across the room.

The guy tried to go around for another shot with the axe. He had a technical-looking mask and was dressed in loose white lab clothes, gloves and all. He was like a slow alien to me. I stopped it with a hand and shoved him sprawling on the floor.

The rest made noise and scurried around, and I put needles into all but two of them. My brain couldn't handle that many distractions right now. I put the other two to work. They don't know what was in the needles, and seemed eager to help. I found the pistol and started making holes in things that looked important.

I felt a violent burning on my cheek and slapped a hand there. It switched to the back of my hand, and I snatched it back and stepped behind some cover. Someone was

shooting a UV laser at me. One of the people I'd needled was fetched up against the wall, and seemed like the most likely candidate. I slid over to the wall and came at him from a high angle to the front of his mask. His mouth was open, drooling, lost to the world. It could only be Nero remoting into the mask. Every one of them was a potential weapon. I started pulling them off their faces and ripping the power supplies out of them. They weren't really weapons, but it could have taken my eye out.

I left one powered on, but kept it pointed away from me.

"I know you can hear me, Nero," I said.

"You cannot escape," the mask replied in a male voice.

I fired two more rounds at complicated-looking gizmos.

"I don't want to escape," I said. "I'm going to set the building on fire."

It wasn't true. I just wanted to keep him talking. As long as he replied, I knew he wasn't dead yet. But I guess Nero figured that out too, because I didn't get a word back.

I started putting holes in anything that looked like cooling equipment. I know for sure that big computers require lots of cooling. There's no real way to kill an artificial unless you can destroy all the backups. But after this screw-up, I was pretty sure they'd never pull him off of back up except maybe to do forensics. His career was finished. His existence was done.

My two assistants were very helpful, finding movable media for me, and supervising the downloads Nova had asked for. I took their masks, which I should have done before, and thanked them. Then I got out.

My mind was beginning to trick me. Had the mask been hacked before Jo was shot? Maybe she was standing in the hallway, thinking I'd abandoned her. I tried to remember the sequence of events. Going back up the stairs was physically challenging. My legs felt like stiff iron bars, and the heat that lit up my core became something I could feel.

Jo was there where I'd left her. In the gloom she looked small, like a child that had fallen. I carried her out, and no one stopped me. I walked out into the storm.

I don't know where I went after that. My body was burning out its last fuel, and the heat was unbearable to me. It felt like burning up from the inside. The wind was so strong that it directed me here and there, buffeting me around like a butterfly in a breeze.

Jo and I eventually came up against a wall and a door, so I let myself in. It was the kitchen of a restaurant. I stretched out my partner on a long table and tried to make her look at peace. Then I sat down to die.

But it was so hot I couldn't sit still. I began to cry out from the pain of it, and my joints started catching, refusing to move. I walked around and around the big table until I could hardly put one foot in front of the other. I stopped face to face with an aluminum box with letters I could just read in the glow of the emergency lights. ICE. It was like arriving in heaven when I lowered my body into delicious cold.

It's almost unheard of for a Quas of my type to juice up and live to tell about it. The ones who do usually linger on for a month or two and then die in great pain. I'm the exception, but I don't recommend it. But if you insist on trying, immersing yourself in ice is recommended. That's what saved me. Sort of.

I aged almost my whole life away in that one afternoon.

### ***Ten Years Later***

The arthritis locks me up at night so that I am a fetal ball of misery every morning. It takes an hour to dress myself. It gives me time to think.

The Abbey is a peaceful place most of the time. Sometimes the children come to see me and ask for stories. What they want is to know about heroes and knives that can cut through anything. But I tell them about the importance of being a good partner, of loyalty and service. They get all that stuff from their system alignment, so they drift off after a while and make up their own stories about me.

By noon today I was working shirtless in the garden. I would write my garden, but it sounds self-aligned. I dug into the earth that I've fed and cultivated for a decade into rich black soil that will give anything I ask of it. The fall has stayed warm, and the harvest still lingers on. It may be my last one, and I have to keep a camera on it to keep the larger animals from ruining it.

I love the feel of the loose dirt under my feet, and the rich smells and textures of the plants. By afternoon I could feel almost human again. The drugs that keep my heart

working also limit my endurance, but I keep my breaks short so the bones don't seize up.

I've found my place in the world, and don't ever want to think about violent acts again. Even when I dream, it's almost peaceful. I see Jo's face sometimes. Hers hasn't aged the way mine has.

This evening I had a visitor, someone standing near the edge of my garden. Just standing like they are waiting for permission. I watched the form on the video for a while, and decide to go look. I'm bent and creaky again, my muscles trained to fear the night and already constricting. But I hobbled out, leaning on my staff, to see who it was.

It was her, a ghost from long ago. She hasn't come this way for years, but I always recognize her. I knew she wouldn't come close to the building, so I picked the best of the tomatoes and corn, and pulled an onion for her, which left me teary from the pain of it. I placed these in her outstretched hands, which now look as worn and cracked as an old tree. She doesn't bother with a mask anymore, but her long tangled hair almost does the job for her. I glimpsed a clouded blind eye that must be looking into the next world already.

I eased myself to the ground to keep her company while she cooked the meal. It was a small fire, and she's an efficient cook—it's a simple joy to watch her work. I knew she wouldn't speak to me, that it causes her stress when others try to make conversation, so I kept my peace.

The darkness covered the two of us, and it seemed like the world shrunk to just that fire.

I don't know what she did to the corn. I watched her wrap it and stick the ears in the coals, just like I do. But there's something I'm missing because it was the most delicious I've ever had. She caught me smiling and for an instant she smiled back. One of her teeth leans over to the side, but I could tell that beneath the years of wear she was pretty once.

We both ate slowly, and the fire became a mere glow. It was only when a trail flashed across the sky that I remembered the meteor shower that appears in the constellation of the bull this time of year.

I began to speak in a low voice. My guest started at the first words, but as I continued slowly, her eyes fixed upon mine. I began to tell her about the taste and smell and texture of the Crab pulsar, just as Jo had related it to me all those years ago. It brought

back memories of being young and vital, and I talked about that too, closing my eyes against the chill in the air. It became a river of words that must have flowed for a long time When I finally stopped and coaxed my creaking bones to move again, she was gone.



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